



What Intellectual Shift Do We Need  
in a Time of Planetary Risks? Inspirations  
from Symbiosis in Life Sciences  
and the Notion of *Gongsheng/Kyōsei*

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CONTEXT AND INQUIRY

We live in an age of crises, some of which are planetary in scope and existential in nature. These include extreme social and political divisions, the looming global economic recession, lingering pandemics, climate change-induced extreme weathers and natural disasters, and more recently nuclear war threats in the ongoing hot war in Europe. So far, very few globally coordinated and effective efforts have been taken to address them. Worse still, a zero-sum mentality continues to shape and drive the “great power” contests, and as such, trade and financial sanctions, weaponization of currency, ideology and technology have taken the center stage of global geopolitics of late. We continue to lead our lives as if we were all independent and self-contained entities, with clear boundaries between “us” and

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“them.” We firmly believe in unconstrained human agency with which we freely define and redefine who we are and take action or inaction as we see fit to advance narrowly conceived personal, group or national agendas.

Recognizing the increasingly deteriorating planetary condition, the co-editors and contributors to this book would like to contend with this framework of segregated thinking and put forward different perspectives on the accepted notions about what counts as an individual, whether our perceived self-sufficiency can withstand challenge, and how we are related to each other and to the rest of nature. In the process, we hope to tap into intellectual resources of the East and West, humanities and sciences, and identify globally shared ideas, which may guide humanity to reset our self-perception, our relationship with “others,” and help us better understand and address planetary scale challenges.

To that end, we would like to introduce the notion of *gongsheng* or *kyōsei* (共生 in both written Chinese and Japanese *kanji*), which has been used in China and Japan to translate the ubiquitous biological phenomenon of “symbiosis” discussed in life sciences. It has also been broadly used in social, economic and political contexts to refer to the conception of the world as consisting of mutually embedded, co-existent and co-becoming entities. So, what is symbiosis and what is *gongsheng/kyōsei*? How are they related to each other? What are the philosophical origins of *gongsheng/kyōsei* in the East Asian context? What implications can we draw for novel thinking about planetary challenges we face, and how can they inspire new thinking and action in dealing with the rapidly deteriorating planetary condition?

### *Symbiosis and Symbiogenesis in Life Sciences*

“Symbiosis” is a Greek-inspired term coined by the German microbiologist and mycologist Heinrich Anton de Bary in 1878 to describe a biological phenomenon of the “living together of two or more different organisms,” in various relationships such as mutualism, parasitism and commensalism.<sup>1</sup> Modern life sciences research has found that symbiosis is ubiquitous—it exists in the world of plants, insects and animals, and it also underscores the relationship between human beings and the rest of

<sup>1</sup> Francisco Carrapico, “The Symbiotic Phenomenon in the Evolutive Context,” in *Special Sciences and the Unity of Science*, ed. Olga Pombo et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 116, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2030-5>.

nature. In recent decades, symbiosis has become a core principle of the contemporary study of biology, supplementing if not entirely replacing the essentialist concept of “individuality” in various branches of biological studies.<sup>2</sup> This has led to many biologists calling for a different definition of human being. For example, biologists Karmyar M. Hedayat and Jean-Clause Lapraz, after surveying how human organisms are intermingled with organisms around the human body, concluded that, “[t]he human being, more accurately, is an epiorganism consisting of both the human being proper and the commensal flora.”<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary microbiologist Liping Zhao, a contributor to this book, echoed this call for a redefinition of human being. Zhao first challenged the conventional notion of “organs,” which generally refer to well-defined units of a living organism with designated functions, such as heart, lungs and livers. Their state of well-being determines the state of health of the living organism. Based on his extensive gut microbiota research, Zhao noted that everyone has gut flora, which is indispensable for maintaining the individual’s health. In addition, similar to the conventionally defined organs, gut flora can be transplanted between living organisms. So, from medical and well-being points of view, it only makes sense that we group gut microbiota together with other organs and include them in the anatomical structure of the body. This would alter the definition of an organ. However, different from other organs, the boundary of one’s gut flora is not clearly delineated. Zhao noted that “[w]e might even say that this organ extends out of our body and into the bodies of the people in the environment closest to us.” So, from this point of view, we not only should revisit the definition of an “organ,” but also challenge the notion of boundaries when defining an organ and consider including symbiotic flora, as exemplified by our gut microbiome, in the biological definition of a human being.

As all-pervading symbiosis continues to challenge the notion of classical individuality, scientists have also introduced the notion of a “holobiont” in the study of behaviors of organisms and their evolution. A holobiont is an assemblage of a host and many other organisms living in or around

<sup>2</sup> Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 87, no. 4 (December 2012): 326, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668166>.

<sup>3</sup> Karmyar M. Hedayat and Jean-Clause Lapraz, *The Theory of Endobiogeny* (San Diego, CA: Elsevier, 2019).

it, which together form a discrete ecological unit through symbiosis.<sup>4</sup> In this framework, some biologists claim that almost all development is co-development, whereby multispecies grow and adapt in tandem with each other—that is, in symbiosis with each other.<sup>5</sup> This way, “natural selection” in an evolutionary process is more about nature selecting “‘relationships’ rather than individuals or genomes.”<sup>6</sup>

In the field of evolution theory, the idea of symbiogenesis, literally “becoming by living together,” refers to the crucial role of symbiosis in major evolutionary innovations. It has been viewed as a curiosity in the scientific community until recent decades.<sup>7</sup> One of the most vocal proponents of the symbiotic evolution theory was Lynn Margulis (1938–2011). Margulis’s symbiogenesis theory was based on her research on the emergence of eukaryotic cells from endosymbiosis. Her research revealed that “out of prokaryotic-prokaryotic symbiosis emerged eukaryotes. Out of prokaryotic-eukaryotic symbiosis emerged more competitive eukaryotes. And out of eukaryotic-eukaryotic symbiosis emerged multicellular life.”<sup>8</sup> In her later work, Margulis went on to argue that symbiosis has been a primary force of evolutionary innovations. In summarizing the key debates involving evolutionary theories of symbiogenesis and Darwinism in recent decades, biology philosopher Shijian Yang noted in this book that Margulis believed that the prime source of evolutionary novelty was not random mutations or natural selection, but symbiosis. Yang further explained by quoting Margulis that the role of natural selection was simply to act as a filter for extant species.<sup>9</sup> While Darwinian evolution

<sup>4</sup> Lynn Margulis and René Fester, eds., *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 142.

<sup>6</sup> Scott F. Gilbert et al., “Symbiosis as a Source of Selectable Epigenetic Variation: Taking the Heat for the Big Guy,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 365, no. 1540 (February 27, 2010): 672–673, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2009.0245>; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Carrapico, “The Symbiotic Phenomenon in the Evolutive Context,” 113.

<sup>8</sup> Bradford Harris, “Evolution’s Other Narrative,” *American Scientist* 101, no. 6 (2013): 410, <https://doi.org/10.1511/2013.105.410>.

<sup>9</sup> Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origins of Species* (New York: Basic books, 2003), 72.

theory speaks of species-by-species, self-organized evolution, predator-prey antagonistic struggle and the survival of the fittest, the symbiosis hypothesis centers on the dynamic encounter between an organism and its environment, multispecies entanglement and co-evolution.

In Yang's view, the debate between the two seemingly opposing schools of thought on evolution is reflective of two scientific traditions and two views of nature. While those who stick to the general conceptual framework of Darwinism are the loyal followers of the mathematical scientific tradition with a mechanistic view of nature, the school of symbiogenesis championed by Margulis has been heavily influenced by the natural history tradition with an organismic view of nature. In recent years, some scientists have begun to reconcile the differences between the two schools by proposing a framework of collaboration whereby both cooperative and competitive activities contribute to the maintenance and transformation of a system. Under this framework, Yang noted that in a holobiont, two sides of the symbiosis (i.e., cooperation and competition) are closely related for most of the life cycle, thus forming an integrated organism. This integrated organism can be regarded as a unit of natural selection. Therefore, Yang concludes that cooperation and competition actually constitute two different perspectives in analyzing the living world and that they are "not antithetical but complementary and interconnected."

This commonsensical conceptual framework of cooperation and competition comports with our experiences and observations about the human society and our relationship with nature. As a result, symbiosis and symbiogenesis theories in life sciences have in recent decades provided much support and intellectual inspiration to ecological and environmental studies as well as social and policy analyses across the globe.

### *The Notion of Gongsheng/Kyōsei in Contemporary Japan and China*

As noted earlier, "symbiosis" in life sciences has been translated as *gongsheng* in China and *kyōsei* in Japanese, sharing the same two characters (*kanji*) "共生". The first character "*gong*" (or "kyo") 共 means commonality, sharedness and togetherness whereas "*sheng*" (or "*sei*") 生 means growth, production, thriving, living and emergence. Both characters date back to more than 3000 years ago, and each has been used in ancient classics, poems and literatures, but the combination of the two words into a

term of “*gongsheng/kyōsei*” was rarely referenced in ancient pre-Qin classics. The term, however, appeared in many writings and commentaries of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist classics and history annals in later historic periods. The term appearing in these writings had the meanings of co-survival, co-growth or co-mingling.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary Daoist philosopher Xia Chen pointed out in her contribution to this book that there are over 50 references to the term *gongsheng* in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE - 220 CE) Daoist classic, *The Scripture on Great Peace* 太平经 (*Taiping Jing*). In this scripture, similarly, *gongsheng* refers to the co-creation of all beings, humans included, by the primordial *qi* or co-growth and prosperity of human beings, creatures and other natural surroundings.

As if emboldened, and certainly partly inspired, by the development of modern life sciences around symbiosis, the terms *kyōsei* and *gongsheng* caught on in both modern Japanese and Chinese societies, respectively. The modern notion of *kyōsei* has had a long history in Japan. Many traced its modern origin to Benkyo Shiio’s *Tomoiki* Buddhist Association, beginning in the late 1920s and lasting until after World War II, which promoted teachings of self-independence and a symbiotic and harmonious social life amid a disintegrating social order during and after the world wars.<sup>11</sup> In post-industrial Japan, the notion of *kyōsei* took on new meanings. Under the backdrop of economic boom and bust cycles, environmental degradation and social dislocation in the industrialized Japan, social and political analyses inspired by the notion of *kyōsei* bloomed in Japanese society, from academia and business organizations to social movements.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary philosopher Tsuyoshi Ishii pointed out in this book that the term *kyōsei* has become a common part of modern Japanese vernacular since the 1980s, and others have also viewed it as a

<sup>10</sup> For example, *gongsheng* in “桑穀共生于朝” referred to the natural phenomenon of commensal plants, i.e., two different tree species growing into each other. *Gongsheng* in “羊肝共生椒食之，破人五脏” in 《金匱要略》 (*Jinkui yaolue*) referred to co-mingling of food ingredients of different textures and tastes, thus producing conflicting energies. See databank of xueheng.net.

<sup>11</sup> Kishō Kurokawa, *The Philosophy of Symbiosis* (New York: Academy Editions, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the growth and development of *kyōsei* thinking since the 1980s in the context of public philosophy in Japan, please refer to Shinsuke Yasui 安井伸介, “Public Philosophy and the Thinking of *Kyōsei*—Diversity Theories in Modern Japanese Political Thoughts 公共哲学与共生思想:现代日本政治思想中的多元论,” *Taiwanese Journal of Political Science* 政治科学论丛 90 (December 2021): 1–34.

“key concept of the twenty-first century.”<sup>13</sup> *Kyōsei* inspired broad-based discussions around issues of political diversity, social justice and women’s rights. As Ishii noted, “Regardless of the differences that existed between oneself and others (differences of gender, body, nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, religion, political views, economic status and so on), one still has to co-exist and grow with others.” In 2002, Ishii together with Yasuo Kobayashi and Takahiro Nakajima, fellow Japanese philosophers known for their expositions of public philosophy, co-founded a research center dedicated to the development of an international philosophy around the notion of *kyōsei*. At its core, the new institution was calling for a reconstruction of human subjectivity (人类主体的建构). In recent years, the discussion of *kyōsei* philosophy is no longer featured prominently in public debates in Japan. This is because, according to Ishii, this notion has been broadly assimilated into the thinking and practices of many aspects of Japanese life including educational institutions, corporations and social policies.<sup>14</sup>

The hotly debated *kyōsei* in the 1990s in Japan has also caught the attention of Chinese scholars. Since the mid-1990s, translated and introductory works on *kyōsei* discussions in Japan began to appear in China.<sup>15</sup> Almost effortless and instinctively, the contemporary notion of *kyōsei*/*gongsheng* has been quickly absorbed into the Chinese society. Today, the

<sup>13</sup> Contemporary Japanese philosopher Tatsuo Inoue noted that the widespread use of “symbiosis” in philosophical, social and political contexts in Japan, quoted in Yoichi Kawada, “Buddhist Thought on Symbiosis—And Its Contemporary Implications,” *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, 2010, 92–93, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Author’s conversation with Japanese philosopher Tsuyoshi Ishii. See also Lai Shi-San 赖锡三 and Mark McConaghy 莫加南, “The Current World and Across Straits Tension in Urgent Need of the Philosophy of *Gongsheng*—In Conversation with Takahiro Nakajima 共生哲学对当前世界、两岸处境的迫切性: 与中岛隆博教授的对谈,” *Reflexion* 思想, July 28, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Shinsuke Yasui 安井伸介, “Public Philosophy and the Thinking of *Kyōsei* – Diversity Theories in Modern Japanese Political Thoughts 公共哲学与共生思想: 现代日本政治思想中的多元论,” 4. Earlier translated or introductory works on the discussion of *kyōsei* in Japan include (i) *The Idea of Kyōsei: Modern Interaction, Kyōsei and Commonality* 共生的思想: 现代交往与共生、共同的思想, by Ozeki Shuji 尾关周二, trans. Bian Chongdao, Liu Rong and Zhou Xiujing (Central Compilation & Translation Press, 1996); (ii) *New Gongsheng Thought* 新共生思想, by Kisho Kurokawa, trans. Qin Li, Yang Wei, Mu Chun-nuan, Lü Fei, Xu Suning, Shen Jinji (Beijing: China Architecture and Industry Press, 2008); and (iii) *Fusion and Symbiosis—Japanese Philosophy in the East Asian Context* 融合与共生: 东亚视域中的日本哲学, by Bian Chongdao (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2008).

term *gongsheng* is ubiquitous, and its meaning is viewed as plain and self-explanatory. The *gongsheng* narrative has been widely adopted in social, economic, business, environmental, ecological, ethnographic, medical and linguistic contexts. The term has even entered the Chinese Communist Party's official document of the 20th Party Congress concluded in October 2022, in which “harmonious *gongsheng* between humanity and the natural environment” (人类与自然的和谐共生) was cited as one of the goals of the Chinese-style modernization.<sup>16</sup> While the notion of *gongsheng* hasn't been much discussed in the contexts of political diversity or social justice as in the case of Japan, Chinese scholars have extended the notion to wide-ranging areas such as international relations, sociology, environmental studies, ethnography, medical practices and business practices, some of which I will discuss later in this Introduction. Some Chinese scholars have also developed educational curriculums and textbooks on *gongsheng* teachings for use at high schools and universities.<sup>17</sup>

### *Structure of the Book and Note on the Translation of Gongsheng/Kyōsei*

Without doubt, *gongsheng/kyōsei* has been viewed as a highly desired framework of thinking in social, economic and political contexts in both China and Japan. It reflects a deep cultural and psychological construct of East Asian societies, so much so that people rarely pause and reflect on the philosophical origin and foundation of this notion. This book represents a modest effort in helping address this lacuna. In Part II of this book, we will explore the intriguing parallels between the biological phenomenon of symbiosis and long-held worldviews and social practices of *gongsheng/kyōsei* in East Asia, which emphasize relationality and mutual embeddedness of all beings and the resulting ethos of “live and let live.” Scholars of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism share their thoughts on the philosophical origins of the thinking behind *gongsheng/kyōsei*. In Part III, we will examine ways in which notions of symbiosis and symbiogenesis revolutionized the studies of contemporary biology and evolution of life in recent decades and how the notion of *gongsheng* has been

<sup>16</sup> Xi Jinping, “Report at the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party” (Xinhua News Agency, October 25, 2022), [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content\\_5721685.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm).

<sup>17</sup> For example, Ren Weibing, *A Reader on Philosophy of Gongsheng* 共生哲学读本 (Jinan University Press, 2016).



manifested and applied in broader contexts such as environmental ethics, multispecies ethnography, international relations and traditional medical practices. Finally, in Part IV, the book will end with contributions of two European convivialist intellectuals, Alain Caillé and Frank Adloff. Convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei* have been widely viewed as the functional equivalents in Japan and China although our European friends may be skeptical. I will explain the parallels and differences between convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei* later in this article. But in a nutshell, philosophical foundations for *gongsheng/kyōsei* and convivialism are different, but they are concerned about the same global crises and share many ethical and policy aspirations.

Before I go on to address key points arising from the chapters of the book, a note on the English translation of *gongsheng/kyōsei* is in order. As noted earlier, early commentators of *gongsheng/kyōsei* were much inspired by the development in the contemporary study of biology around symbiosis, as a result, *gongsheng/kyōsei* in social and political contexts has also been translated as “symbiosis” and *gongsheng/kyōsei*-ism as “symbiosism.” However, as chapters of this book will show, the scientific term “symbiosis” simply cannot express the rich philosophical and ethical connotations contained in the term *gongsheng/kyōsei*. Also, biological symbiosis on its own does not express ethical judgment or value preference. In the two workshops we convened in Beijing in 2021 and 2022 on the topic of *gongsheng*, participants including all the contributors of this book agreed that we should just use “*gongsheng* or *kyōsei*” in social, political and geopolitical contexts and avoid equating biological symbiosis with the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei*, which implies mutual embeddedness, co-creation, co-generation and co-existence in broader contexts.

However, the term *gongsheng/kyōsei* is still foreign to most members of the international intellectual community. To facilitate understanding and inspired by the term “human becoming” (rather than human being), contemporary Japanese philosopher Nakajima translated “*kyōsei*” as “human co-becoming.”<sup>18</sup> As we will see in later discussion, the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* truly speaks to planetary issues and has gone beyond the human sphere. For this reason, editors of this book suggest dropping “human” from the translation. As a result, for convenience’s sake, we will use “co-becoming” as a rough translation of *gongsheng/kyōsei*. But

<sup>18</sup> See note 4 of Tsuyoshi Ishii’s chapter of this book.

in most cases, we will use *gongsheng* or *kyōsei* in the hope of introducing this important notion into the global discourse on planetary philosophy.

To make things even more complicated, the term “convivialism,” coined by Alain Caillé, the leader of the European intellectual convivialist movement, was translated as *gongsheng*-ism or symbiosism (in Chinese characters 共生主义). As my later discussion will show, philosophical foundations of *gongsheng/kyōsei* are different from those of convivialism, particularly at an ontological level. It is more appropriate in my view to translate convivialism as the doctrine of co-existence or co-prosperity, in Chinese characters 共存主义 or 共容主义. This way, we can clearly distinguish between the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* and that of convivialism in European, and Chinese/Japanese languages.

This is just one of many examples, which illustrates the difficulty of translating concepts across disciplines and across cultures.

## PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS OF THE NOTION OF GONGSHENG

Philosophical origins of the notion of *gongsheng* in the East Asian context are two-fold. One is the native Chinese philosophical traditions, which include teachings of *Yi Jing* 易经 (Book of Changes), Confucianism and Daoism. More specifically, the thinking behind the contemporary notion of *gongsheng* can be traced back to the ancient propositions of the Unity-of-Tian-and-Man 天人合一, Oneness-of-All-Beings 万物一体 and *shengsheng* 生生, which are themselves mutually embedded and closely related. The second intellectual source of the *gongsheng* thinking is Buddhism, which was introduced into China in the first century and has since been firmly cemented into the Chinese intellectual tradition. Buddhist’s notion of co-dependent origination 缘起 (i.e., the Buddhist principle of cause and effect, referring to the multiplicity, mutual causality, superposition and inter-penetration of causes and effects) has profoundly shaped the East Asian thinking on the symbiotic and interrelated planetary existence. I will address them in turn in the sections below.

### *Influence of Native Chinese Philosophical Traditions*

(a) *Unity-of-Tian-and-Man*: The word “*tian*” in Unity-of-Tian-and-Man occupies a central place in Chinese philosophy and popular cultural constructs since ancient times. Depending on the context, *tian* (which

has often been roughly translated as “heaven” or “heavens”) could mean the supreme sovereign of the cosmos, the natural and experiential environment in which humans flourish and perish, or the ultimate truth or laws of the cosmic order in a metaphysical sense.<sup>19</sup> The thinking behind Unity-of-*Tian*-and-*Man*, centering around the relationship between *tian* and human beings, first appeared in the Spring Autumn Period (770–476 BCE), the most consequential historic period in the development of the native Chinese thought, and then entered the imperially sanctioned learning through the efforts of the then most influential Confucian scholar-official Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE). The notion finally took shape in Song Dynasty (960–1279) thanks to the efforts of Neo-Confucian scholars, such as Zhang Zai 张载 (1020–1077), Cheng Yi 程颐 (1033–1107) and Cheng Hao 程颢 (1032–1085).<sup>20</sup> Interest in this notion continued to captivate the imagination of Chinese thinkers for many centuries since then. It is without doubt that the Unity-of-*Tian*-and-*Man* is one of the most foundational propositions of the native Chinese philosophical traditions,<sup>21</sup> and it sets a basic tone for Chinese philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

What does this thinking entail and in what way it can inspire and inform today’s notion of *gongsheng*? First of all, human beings are creations of *tian* and remain primordially related to *tian* even after their emergence. In the case of Daoism, *Dao* occupies an even higher ontological status than *tian*. Daoism postulates that *Dao* gives rise to *tian* and earth 天与地, and that human beings are also part of the creations. The ultimate creative force being *tian* or *Dao*, human beings are a mere one kind of many creations. If we take *tian* to mean nature or the cosmos circling us, we have been part of it *ab initio*. Human beings can only flourish if we follow the laws of the cosmos, and we should strive to attain

<sup>19</sup> Zhang Dainian, “An Analysis on the Thinking of Unity-of-*Tian*-and-*Man* in Chinese Philosophy 中国哲学中的‘天人合一’思想的剖析,” *Peking University Journal—Edition on Philosophy and Social Sciences*, no. 1 (1985).

<sup>20</sup> Zhang Dainian (1985); Liu Zhen, “The Thinking of Unity-of-*Tian*-and-*Man* Revisited and Implications for Ecology 重思天人合一思想及其生态价值,” *Philosophy Studies* 哲学研究, no. 6 (2018).

<sup>21</sup> Yueh-Lin Chin, “Chinese Philosophy,” *Social Sciences in China* 1, no. 1 (March 1980); Yu Ying-Shih, *Between Tian and Man—A Study on Origins of Ancient Chinese Thought* 论天人之际——中国古代思想起源试探 (Zhonghua Book Company, 2014), 152.

<sup>22</sup> Yu Ying-Shih, *Between Tian and Man—A Study on Origins of Ancient Chinese Thought* 论天人之际——中国古代思想起源试探, 153.

proximity or complete (re)union with the cosmic order. Among the classical traditions, Confucianism is known for its humanistic concerns and places much more emphasis on human proactivity. Daoism also accords a special position to human beings for our ability to modify our actions to be in tune with the rhythms of the cosmic laws. But these traditions have premised such human proactivity on respect and awe for the laws of the cosmos rather than placing humans apart from, above, or in opposition to the rest of nature.

Secondly, although human beings are creations of *tian*, we don't become stand-alone or self-contained entities after the creation, but rather we remain a part of, and intricately entangled with, *tian*. In fact, there are no clear boundaries between all forms of beings and the fluidity is such that it would be hard to claim a self-contained and autonomous agency for any form of existence. Some theories on the relationship between *tian* and human beings have gone even further to postulate that human beings and *tian* are of the same structural construct and follow the same cosmic rules 人副天数.<sup>23</sup> Proponents of this line of thinking would argue that natural phenomena are also reflective of, and parallel to, human minds, and *tian* is able to award or punish humans by favorable climatic conditions or natural calamities as appropriate. Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianist scholar Cheng Yi 程颐 went even further by noting that *tian* and humans are of one in essence, therefore the narrative on the unity of the two is redundant (天人本无二, 不必言合).<sup>24</sup> So, at an ontological level, "*tian*" is not external to human beings, and they are of the same origin, the same make and structure, and the same essence.

While this theory of aligning human beings fully with the structures and vicissitudes of the natural phenomena has lost its intellectual appeal in modern times, it continues to be influential in popular Chinese thinking. To this day, when encountering unprecedented natural calamities, many people would regard these as manifestations of retributions for heinous misdeeds by unrepentant humans.

(b) *Oneness-of-All-Beings* (万物一体): Related to, and explicit in, the notion of Unity-of-*Tian*-and-Man is the discussion relating to oneness or the same ontology 一体 of all forms of beings, humans

<sup>23</sup> Zhang Dainian, "An Analysis on the Thinking of Unity-of-Tian-and-Man in Chinese Philosophy 中国哲学中的‘天人合一’思想的剖析。”

<sup>24</sup> Zhang Dainian, 5.

included. In his contribution to this book, contemporary Confucian philosopher Genyou Wu explained how the proposition of Oneness-of-Consummate-Persons-and-Things (仁者与物同体 *renzhe yu wu tongti*) or Benevolence-of-Oneness 一体之仁 (*yiti zhiren*), a core of the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism contributed to the thinking of *gongsheng*. In Wu's analysis, Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian scholar Zhang Zai's theory of foundational *qi* 气本论 (*qiben lun*) and his idea of "universal camaraderie" of all beings 民胞物与 (*minbao wuyu*) were considered as a basis for the thinking of *gongsheng* and related ethical aspiration. Zhang Zai extended the Confucian doctrine of benevolence to the broader cosmic realm to include creatures and other forms of beings. He famously wrote that "[*tian*] is my father and the earth is my mother...that which fills up nature I regard as my body, and that which directs nature I consider as my capacity to resonate. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions."<sup>25</sup> The metaphysical basis for this camaraderie thinking is the theory of *qi*, according to which, all things are made of, formed and animated by *qi*. According to Qian Mu, the late master of Chinese classics and history, *qi*, is the indivisible infinitesimal unit of matter, which is the common substance for all things in the universe. In addition, *qi* is always active and dynamic.<sup>26</sup>

Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian scholars first used the notion of Benevolence-of-Oneness to emphasize the sense of oneness as the moral basis for social care and people's livelihood 博施济众.<sup>27</sup> Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472–1529), a Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucian scholar-official, expounded the proposition further by introducing the more metaphysical notion of *liangzhi* 良知, translated as "innate knowing" or "innate knowledge," referring to the transcendental and naturally endowed essence of all forms of beings. In this context, Wang notes that human *liangzhi* are the same for creatures and other things and we were all originally of one.<sup>28</sup> While Wang, like all his predecessors in the Confucian school of

<sup>25</sup> Jung-Yeup Kim, *Zhang Zai's Philosophy of Qi: A Practical Understanding* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Qian Mu, *Discourses on Chinese Thoughts* 中国思想通俗讲话 (Beijing: Jiuzhou Publishing House, 2011), 74.

<sup>27</sup> Chen Lai 陈来, "Oneness of All Things: Wang Yangming Thoughts in His Later Years 万物同体——王阳明思想的晚年发展," *Guangming Daily*, February 6, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> "The innate knowledge of man is the same as that of plants and trees, tiles and stones. Without the innate knowledge inherent in man, there cannot be plants and trees,

thought, emphasized the uniquely endowed human capability and thus moral obligation to bring about cosmic flourishing, the oneness notion nonetheless extends the care above and beyond human-centric concerns. After surveying classical texts of Confucianism, Daoism and Mohism, the late Princeton University historian Ying-shih Yu marveled at the amazing convergence on the ontological thinking of oneness of human beings, creatures and the rest of nature among these otherwise different schools of thoughts.<sup>29</sup> Reflecting a general scholarly consensus, Yu attributed this convergence in large part to the universal *qi*, from which human beings, creatures and the rest of nature emerged and such co-emergence manifests itself in the essential *Dao-qi* cosmic whole. In Yu's framework, the *Dao-qi* whole is the equivalent of *tian*.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, oneness also emphasizes the outlook of the whole, which consists of dynamically interactive, isomorphic, mutually embedded and co-becoming parts.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary Confucian scholar Lai Chen noted that "oneness of all things in the universe" 万物一体 (*wanwu yiti*) is not only an ontological statement, but also an aspiring high-level realm of human accomplishment.<sup>32</sup>

(c) *Shengsheng* (生生): The third notion from the native Chinese philosophical thinking which has shaped and informed the contemporary thinking of *gongsheng* is *shengsheng*. *Shengsheng*, invariably translated as birth, growth, creativity and vitality, was featured prominently in *Yi*

tiles and stones. This is not true of them only. Even Heaven [*tian*] and Earth cannot exist without the innate knowledge that is inherent in man. For at bottom, Heaven, Earth, the myriad things, and man form one body. The point at which this unity is manifested in its most refined and excellent form is the clear intelligence of the human mind. Wind, rain, dew, thunder, sun and moon, stars, animals and plants, mountains and rivers, earth and stones are essentially of one body with man. It is for this reason that such things as the grains and animals can nourish man and that such things as medicine and minerals can heal diseases. Since they share the same material force [*qi*], they enter into one another." See Wing-tsit Chan, translated with notes, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings*, (Columbia University Press, 1963). (王阳明, 《传习录》, "人的良知, 就是草、木、瓦、石的良知。若草、木、瓦、石无人的良知, 不可以为草、木、瓦、石矣。岂惟草、木、瓦、石为然, 天地无人的良知, 亦不可为天地矣。盖天地万物与人原始一体, 其发窍之最精处, 是人心一点灵明, 风、雨、露、日、月、星、辰、禽、兽、草、木、山、川、土、石, 与人原只一体。故五谷禽兽之类皆可以养人, 药食之类皆可以疗疾。只为同此一气, 故能相通耳。)

<sup>29</sup> Yu Ying-Shih, *Between Tian and Man*, 36; Yu Ying-Shih, 166.

<sup>30</sup> Yu Ying-shih, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Chen Lai 陈来, *Ontology of Ren 仁学本体论* (Sanlian Publishing House, 2014), 30.

<sup>32</sup> "以天地万物为一体既是境界, 又是本体" in Chen Lai, *Ontology of Ren*, 33.

*Jing*, which is the intellectual foundation of native Chinese philosophies including Confucianism and Daoism. Ancient sages who contributed to *Yi Jing*, basing their observations on the ebb and flow of natural forces and the vicissitudes of human affairs, postulated that *shengsheng* is the universe's fundamental attribute and all things therein. The highest and greatest capacity of nature's vital force is *sheng*, i.e., the force of giving and maintaining of life.<sup>33</sup> In this spirit, some people would translate *shengsheng* as "live and let live." Contemporary Chinese philosopher, Thomé Fang 方东美 (1889–1977), translated *shengsheng* as "creative creativity." He explained that *shengsheng* signifies universal life forces, denoting cultivation, striving for success based on a thorough understanding of the laws of nature, ceaseless creation, coping with perpetual changes and finally accomplishing continuity and eternity.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, *shengsheng* is about universal life and creative force immanent throughout the universe and in all things therein, including humans, creatures and plants.

Savoring the vitality of life in the daily environment holds strong aesthetic and poetic appeal for the Chinese literati. An oft-told story concerning Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017–1073), one of the most celebrated Neo-Confucian scholars during Song Dynasty, is telling. Friends asked Zhou why he did not weed the grass outside his windows. He replied, "aren't they trying to grow and persist just like us (与自家意思一般)?" Zhou appreciated the tenaciousness of a humble life form, savoring his camaraderie with other life forms and reveling in their *joie de vivre* displayed by nature. This aesthetic and poetic sentiment toward other life forms and a desire to be at one with nature has found ample expression in paintings and poems throughout the Chinese intellectual history. These idiosyncratic literati sentiments remain highly valued by today's educated Chinese as they scramble to salvage moments of serenity and internal reflection in their otherwise demanding and hectic modern lives. So, in the minds of the Chinese philosophers, the commonality which brings together all forms of beings is this life force and quest for survival, continuity and thriving. All human values shall be framed with this fundamental notion of *shengsheng* in mind. As a corollary to this notion, life and all

<sup>33</sup> 天地之大德曰生 (The greatest attribute of *tian* and earth is giving and maintaining life), in *Yi Jing* 易经 (Book of Changes)-*Xi Ci II* (Great Treaties II). For a complete translation, see Richard Wilhelm, trans., *Book of Changes* (Penguin Books, 1989).

<sup>34</sup> Thomé Fang 方东美, *Sheng Sheng Zhi Mei* [The Virtue of *Sheng Sheng*] (reprinted by Peking University Press, 2019), 47; Fang, 128–30.

other living beings should be respected and cared for. Living, life-giving and life-maintaining are the highest form of virtue.

The idea of *shengsheng* is also manifested throughout classical Daoism, as contemporary philosopher Jun Gong points out in his essay on Daoism and *gongsheng* in this book. When Laozi talked about all things are co-created simultaneously 万物并作 (*wanwu bingzuo*), Jun Gong regards this as “a clear reference to the meaning of *gongsheng*.” Laozi’s notion of *gongsheng* not only speaks to the origin of the natural environment, but also highlights the all-pervasive phenomenon of co-creation and co-existence in social and political contexts. *Gongsheng* points to the common origin and mutual inclusiveness of all things, and it should be the foundation of political philosophy of “unconstrained (absolute) equity” (荡然公平 *dangran gongping*). Another ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE), on the other hand, depicted, in one of his characteristically imaginative and poetic parables, an ideal world of the “age of perfect Virtuosity” (至德之世 *zhide zhishi*) where humans can take a stroll with beasts and climb up a tree to observe life within a bird’s nest without startling the creatures. This is a world where the spirit of “live and let live” prevails, dualities are extinguished, and humans and beasts are natural friends and peacefully co-exist. Similar to Buddhist teachings which will be discussed below, Jun Gong reminds us that in the thinking of both Laozi and Zhuangzi, the discussion of *gongsheng* is merely a means to the end, which is the ultimate comprehension of *Dao* 悟道 (*wudao*). As such, they were both highly skeptical of the utility of outward knowledge seeking and intellectual investigation in bringing people closer to *Dao*. Instead, they both preached searching inward to seek transcendent consciousness to be in union with *Dao*.

In sum, the propositions of the Unity-of-*Tian*-and-Man, Oneness-of-All-Beings and *shengsheng* are mutually embedded and inter-penetrating. While Unity-of-*Tian*-and-Man speaks to the shared and relational cosmos in which human beings, creatures and plants were co-created and subsequently co-habit and co-exist, the notion of oneness focuses more on the same origin and ontology of all beings. Finally, *shengsheng*, depicting the live energy of all living beings and the ethos of striving to be in harmony with nature, becomes a human ethical aspiration for all times.



### *Influence from Buddhist Teachings: Doctrine of Co-Dependent Origination*

As noted earlier, *gongsheng* as a term appeared in many Buddhist writings in ancient times. It often appears in the context of discussing cause and effect and co-dependent origination. Japanese scholar Yoichi Kawada pointed out, “The wisdom contained within the concept of dependent origination is that all people and all living things are interconnected, and it is within this concept that we can begin to see how the Buddhist ideal of a symbiotic society can be made a reality.”<sup>35</sup> Contemporary philosopher Ishii, on the other hand, explained a different source of Buddhist influence on *gongsheng/kyōsei*. He noted that Benkyo Shiio, the influential Japanese Buddhist monk, educator and social reformer in the twentieth-century Japan, traced his *kyōsei/tomoiiki* thinking to Master Shan Dao 善导 (613–681), the founder of Pure Land Buddhism, which preached that all living creatures be reborn (together) in the Land of Pure Bliss (愿共诸众生, 往生安乐国).

The doctrine of co-dependent origination states that all forms arise in dependence upon others<sup>36</sup> and that such forms are constantly changing. Peter Harvey in his *An Introduction to Buddhism* explained that according to this doctrine, “all things, mental and physical, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions, and cease once their conditions are removed: nothing (except *nirvana*) is independent.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Jun Gong in his chapter on Buddhism and *gongsheng* declared that “co-dependent origination is simply *gongsheng*.” However, he reminded us that the discussion of co-dependent origination and thus *gongsheng* in the Buddhist teaching only speaks to the phenomenal world. Ultimately all forms we perceive and observe in the phenomenal world are “inextricably linked to the structure of consciousness and the mind,” which give rise to the phenomenal and mental worlds of all sentient beings. The fact that we have the perception of the ever-changing forms of the phenomenal world is because we are ignorant (*avidya* in Sanskrit and *wuming* 无明

<sup>35</sup> Yoichi Kawada, “Buddhist Thought on Symbiosis,” 92–93.

<sup>36</sup> 阿含经, “此有故彼有, 此生故彼生, 此无故彼无, 此灭故必灭。” “That being, this comes to be; from the arising of that, this arises; that being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases,” in Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism—Teachings, History and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 65.

<sup>37</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 65.

in Chinese), failing to understand the true nature of the universe, which is formless and has no beginning or end, no birth nor death. Therefore, “*gongsheng*” in Buddhist teachings is related to description and deconstruction of the phenomenal world. Its true intention is not to derive moral lessons or ethical rules for the human sphere. Instead, the core of Buddhist teaching is to guide all sentient beings to engage in internal practice and reach *nirvana*. As Jun Gong noted at the end of his essay, in order to be free from *gongsheng*, “we must withdraw consciousness from the external illusory world into our inner hearts” and through the process of transforming knowledge into transcendental wisdom, we can be free from the world of ceaseless *gongsheng*.

In conclusion, philosophical traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism all contributed to the modern notion of *gongsheng*, which speaks to the conviction and the worldview of mutually embedded, co-existent and co-becoming entities. The notion of *gongsheng*, shaped by these traditions, behooves us to question the validity of the notion of an individual being a self-contained and autonomous entity and reminds us of mutually embedding, co-existent and entangling planetary relations. It also inspires within us reverence and care toward creatures, plants and other co-inhabitants and even inorganic things in the natural surroundings.

### *Differences, Competition and Collaboration: Integral Parts of Gongsheng/Kyōsei*

However, a *gongsheng* or symbiotic way of living in harmony with each other does not mean living without frictions or competition. Nor does it call for uniformity of all beings. True to the original meaning of its biological equivalent, *gongsheng/kyōsei* by definition implies the living together of different yet connected beings. The underlying assumption of the word “*gong*” in *gongsheng* is about bringing together different things, and it has often been used in connection with co-creation, co-generation or co-living of myriad things 万物 (*wanwu*) in Chinese classical texts. According to Jun Gong, “Zhuangzi believes that *gongsheng* is all about respecting the very nature of a thing, its diversity, its otherness.”

In his exposition on *kyōsei*, contemporary Japanese philosopher Tatsuo Inoue also pointed out that:

The contemporary meaning of symbiosis does not include the desire for individuals to merge together around a single mindset, but rather, to aim for a mutually creative co-existence wherein individuals respect, but also maintain a certain distance from each other...a symbiosis is the co-existence of unlike components, and the right to be different is accepted by the members of its community, which is fundamentally different from assimilation into one like-minded entity.<sup>38</sup>

Another contemporary Japanese philosopher Nakajima emphasized the importance of “mutual critique” 相互批判 in realizing the ideal of *kyōsei* in discourses of national and international politics.<sup>39</sup>

While differences enrich and spur mutual learning, they may also lead to tension and competition. Contemporary Confucian philosopher Genyou Wu pointed out that the “symbiotic world of *qi* is not a realm of serenity and calm; it includes what is known as “attacking and seizing” (“攻” 和 “取”), i.e., the various struggles among people and animals in the world”. But then how should one deal with the tension and competition in a world of *gongsheng/kyōsei*? This is where the “harmonizing” process becomes critical. The term “harmony” 和谐 (*hexie*) has been much misused or abused in the realm of China-related political statements and commentaries. It is worth noting though, contrary to the usual understanding, heterogeneity and tension are inherent in the state of harmony. It involves an integration of different forces and is about coordination, transformation and growth. It also refers to a process where learning, absorbing, merging and transformation take place.<sup>40</sup> This is akin to the process of making delicious and efficacious *geng* (羹 thick soup in Chinese cuisine) or decoction as depicted in Lili Lai and Judith Farquhar’s chapter in this book. According to them, the medical cooking process is a process of combining different varieties of ingredients, which needs to be “slow cooked over a fire; the work of harmonizing involves not only flavors but the heat of fire and the moistening of water.” Therefore, being in symbiosis or *gongsheng* with each other would start with respecting and appreciating differences, followed by mutual learning and absorbing,

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Yoichi Kawada, “Buddhist Thought on Symbiosis,” 94–95.

<sup>39</sup> Lai and McConaghy, “The Current World and Across Straits Tension in Urgent Need of the Philosophy of Gongsheng – In Conversation with Takahiro Nakajima 共生哲学对当前世界、两岸处境的迫切性: 与中岛隆博教授的对谈。”

<sup>40</sup> Li Chenyang, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* (London: Routledge, 2014), 9.

reorienting, and adjusting each other and finally leading up to something which are mutually penetrating, mutually embedded and collectively transformed. This process is complex and involves give-and-take, sacrifice, self-restraint, learning and benefiting from others. In addition, the symbiotic harmonizing process is ceaseless, without a beginning or an end.

**GONGSHENG/KYŌSEI: A PROSAIC FACT, A COMPOSITE  
PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT AND AN INSPIRATION  
FOR ETHICAL LIVING BY HUMAN SPECIES**

Modern studies of symbiosis and microbiome have revealed to us a world of multi-organisms living in a superimposed manner—we are not just living side by side; we are mutually embedded and inter-penetrating. For scientific research purposes, scientists need to disentangle and isolate these intertwined organisms. But they increasingly recognize that the old method of reducing to the smallest “individual” unit—being it a cell or a gene for observation and analysis—skews the perception of reality because no “unit” exists, moves, changes, transforms in isolation. The artificial “individuality” may stunt or even obstruct the process of understanding the world. As a compromise, life scientists’ working assumption on the unit of analysis has changed to a “holobiont,” which in Shijian Yang’s words, is the “symbiotic complex formed by a multicellular animal/plant organism and the microbial community living inside its body.”

The strong indications of relationality among beings, the ever-changing nature of all living things and the holistic view of the living world embedded in the contemporary study of symbiosis and symbiogenesis struck a chord in the minds of East Asian thinkers, who quickly and effortlessly connected the biological symbiosis to the deep and long-standing intellectual traditions of holism, relationality and the common origin and equity of all things. These traditions found their strongest expression in notions of Oneness-of-All-Beings, Unity-of *Tian*-and-*Man* and *shengsheng*. In times of rapidly advancing science and technology, scientific findings come with prestige and a tremendous power of persuasion. The fact that East Asian philosophers and thinkers in the social and political spheres enthusiastically embraced the notion of biological symbiosis and started engaging productively in social and political analyses of *gongsheng/kyōsei* is most telling. Evocation of *gongsheng/kyōsei*

has become so common that the Japanese philosopher Kobayashi made plain that *kyōsei* is simply a “mundane, prosaic fact,” not a “mysterious, metaphysical ‘truth’” (cited in Ishii’s article in this book).

*Gongsheng/kyōsei* being so prosaic and commonsensical in both Japanese and Chinese societies, people rarely doubt its validity and positivity. Having gone through the philosophical origins of this contemporary notion above, let me briefly summarize below philosophical and ethical implications of *gongsheng/kyōsei*.

First, the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* challenges and enriches the hypothetical and classic view of individual being an autonomous and self-contained entity. Biological facts and life experiences reinforced by the East Asian philosophical traditions have shown that the self-contained and autonomous individual is a fiction, a point often forgotten by or lost on people. From the microbiome point of view, we are connected to our parents and people close to us from the day of our conception. This connectivity gets multiplied and superimposed with others and the natural surroundings after our birth. It is impossible for us to disentangle from this endless and ceaseless web. This led some biologists cry out that “we have never been individuals.”<sup>41</sup>

From a social relationship point of view, we were never independent either—we are born into an entangled family and social relationships from day one. All our actions and thinking have been shaped by or in response to others, who in turn, are being shaped by us in the process of interaction and communication. In this ceaseless process of interaction and communication, we learn, adapt, transform and collectively cement our mutual embeddedness and mutual inclusion. This thinking has been reinforced by the metaphysics of the common origin and the same ontology of all things in the three dominant East Asian philosophical traditions, namely Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. In a nutshell, **individuals have to be defined, conceived and treated in a web of relationships from day one. Relationality is the essence of humanity and human society.** Any philosophy, politics and policy conceived with particular individual person, individual group or individual nation alone should be viewed with suspicion. Instead, any philosophy, politics and policy should at all times consider their lateral impact on other connected persons or things including foreign nationals, neighboring communities, adjacent

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert, Sapp, and Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life.”

groups, non-core persons, non-human species and the natural environment. This way of approaching the concept of human beings will surely come into tension with, and as a result, enrich, the mainstream definitions of the individual or personhood, and the general understanding of the supremacy of national interest. Then, how should one reframe tension and competition in a symbiotic world?

This leads to the second aspect of the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei*, which speaks to differences throughout the symbiotic process. **We have never been lone individuals, but we each have individuality, which make us different from, but related to, each other.** Similar to the biological world, *gongsheng/kyōsei* won't exist if there are no differences among the beings. Differences bring friction, competition, confrontation and struggle. But they also spur learning, adaptation and transformation. In fact, these seemingly opposing reactions to differences are many sides of a prism. Differences should not be framed as irreconcilable and binary conflicts because, after all, we are all derived from the same source and are mutually embedded into each other. Just picture the *yin-yang* symbol in your mind—*yin* and *yang* have never been two starkly opposing forces. The seed of *yin* is embedded in *yang* and the seed of *yang* is embedded in *yin*; such seeds are agents for change and they fuel movement and mutual transformation. Ethical lessons to be drawn here are multiple. First, differences are to be appreciated and engaged with. They offer a source of learning and a point of reflection, and they provide a driving force for change and transformation. Second, in the grand scheme of things, there is no such thing as zero-sum game, and all forms of beings are derived from the same source and as planetary beings we are mutually embedded and in the same boat. In this spirit, competition in the human sphere needs to be conceptually reframed. Competition should be framed not as a zero-sum game, but a process of learning and adapting and collective transformation. Thirdly, in a competition informed and shaped by *gongsheng/kyōsei*, the maximization ethos of capitalism such as profit and value maximization will be moderated. Instead, we should practice the virtues of modesty, self-restraint, empathy and compassion.

The third aspect of *gongsheng/kyōsei* is the spirit of *shengsheng*, which is about growth, life generation and the ethos of “live and let live.” The process of *gongsheng* is not linear nor one-directional. It is not about achieving an ultimate end goal of a certain perfect state, but a constant process of life generation, growth, perishment, transformation and recreation. The highest form of virtue is to give life, enable growth and vitality,

and promote creativity and continuity. Universal camaraderie between all forms of beings advocated by Neo-Confucianism and Daoist notions of planetary wealth of focusing on biodiversity and abundance of living things are most instructive for the contemporaries.

The fourth and last point to note about the notion of *gongsheng* is that under all three dominant philosophical traditions, achieving a state of *gongsheng* doesn't represent the highest form of wisdom in the world. While *gongsheng* explains and describes the phenomenal world and human beings need to be reminded of the interdependence of all beings and strive in harmony with each other, in both Daoism and Buddhism, the *gongsheng* narrative is a mere means to the end, which is the ultimate comprehension of *Dao* or realization of enlightenment (*nirvana*).

### GONGSHENG IN BROAD CONTEXTS

The notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* has been broadly deployed in both Japanese and Chinese societies. As noted earlier, the notion of *kyōsei* was prominently featured in the Japanese public philosophy movement in the 1990s and was used to counter right-wing nationalism and imperialism and for advocating political and social diversity in the Japanese society. In contemporary China, the broader application of *gongsheng* concept presents a different landscape, with different emphases and orientations. I will name but a few below.

#### *Ecological Anthropology—From De-Gongsheng to Re-Gongsheng*

Ecological anthropologists Jun He and Weijia Zhou, in their contribution to this book, pointed out that “one of the core tasks of ecological anthropology is to observe and reveal how humans live in symbiosis (*gongsheng*) with nature.” They traced the history of intellectual traditions of distinguishing nature from culture, humans from natural environment in the twentieth century and noted that only in the recent two decades, ecological anthropologists have converged on the ideas of symbiotic (*gongsheng*) relationship between humans and nature and between ecological environment and human society. Thanks to time-honored practices informed by ancient philosophical and cultural traditions, He and Zhou noted that ecological anthropology in the Chinese scholarly context “has always discussed culture and environment, humanity and nature as a whole.” They cited several successful examples in China's southwest region where

biological and cultural diversity flourished symbiotically. Unfortunately, the general reality on symbiotic co-prosperity of human beings and other non-human species has been grim particularly in the recent decades, as the pursuit of economic growth has been at the commanding height and rapid industrialization and globalization occurred at a breakneck speed. These economic developments are often made at the cost of the symbiotic and ecological balance. He and Zhou characterized the process of environmentally destructive economic growth as “*de-gongsheng*” (de-symbiotization 去共生). Recalling the ideal of the symbiotic world, they are calling for a *re-gongsheng* (re-symbiotization 再共生) in our thinking and action and retune ourselves to the balance between growth and nature.

### *A Gongsheng-Inspired International Relations Theory?*

International relations theorists in China found much inspiration in the notion of *gongsheng* and imagined an international order with *gongsheng* as its foundational concept. Contemporary international relations theorist Xiao Ren, in his contribution to this book, traced the history of the development of *gongsheng*-based international relations theory in China. Ren himself is a pioneer in this highly generative theoretical creation process. Having reviewed the long history of interactions between China and other smaller nations in the pre-modern East Asian region, Ren and his colleague Changhe Su noted that, in the long history of East Asia, while there was no equality of states of varying sizes in the modern sense of the term, there had been in general long periods of regional peace. Ren and Su recalibrated the “tributary system” as a *gongsheng* (symbiotic) system whereby there were “multiple centers and overlapping intersections that allow each country in a region to be secure in its position.” In this order, the smaller states accorded deference and respect to the large ones, and the latter in turn fostered and protected smaller states, with each performing their respective roles in the ritualistic order of *tianxia* 天下 (all under *tian*). Methods of exchanges among these states included tributary trade, voluntary migration and shared legitimacy. Drawing inspirations from this *gongsheng* system, Su and Ren identified “relationship” (*guanxi*) as the core notion for a symbiotic international relation. In mutually reliant relationships, Xiao Ren opined that the size of a country becomes secondary since large and small countries depend on each other for survival. Therefore, “relational and not causal power is the prime



factor at play.” They further argued that a sound international system should be about nurturing and protecting these relations and seeking harmony out of differences, and that the end goal is co-existence and co-growth, i.e., *gongsheng*, not confrontation, subjugation, or elimination. This is indeed a fascinating and innovative deployment of the concept of *gongsheng* in the field of international relations. But in what way this *gongsheng* thinking would influence the current Chinese foreign policy and how China would project its power in a symbiotic international relations would be some obvious questions needing further debate and discussion.

### ***Gongsheng-Informed Healing Practices***

The notion of “*gongsheng*” has been used by Lili Lai and Judith Farquhar to characterize the practice of harmonizing flavors in Chinese medicine, as in cooking, which “express a world of natural powers and expert embodiment that goes far beyond mere tastes.” As noted earlier in this Introduction, ancient medical texts were among the first to use *gongsheng* to describe medicinal use of the fusion of different food ingredients. The notion and practice of “food-and-medicine-have-the-same-source” date back to antiquity. The term “harmony” has often been used in connection with *gongsheng*, as “harmonizing” precisely refers to the process of *gongsheng* whereby different and often seemingly contradictory elements adjust, adapt to or merge into each other, thus producing a coherent and dynamic equilibrium. It is no exception in the context of the traditional medical and healing practices whereby the fusing of ingredients with different qualities and flavors to make decoctions is the key. As noted by Lai and Farquhar, the making of decoctions “needs to be slow cooked over a fire; the work of harmonizing involves not only flavors but the heat of fire and the moistening of water.” This vivid description of the “slow cook” process also applies to many of the social and political negotiations characterized by *gongsheng/kyōsei* in the East Asian context.

Interesting to note is that the entire healing process is also that of a *gongsheng* (symbiotic) process involving the bodies of doctors and patients, the quality of the plants and the skills and experiences of selecting and combining medicinal herbs. The less obvious point relates to the doctors’ bodies and ways in which they influence the entire healing process. In Lai and Farquhar’s words, “the quality and flavor of drugs are not self-evident. ‘Knowing’ them requires not only the doctors’ own bodily perceptions but also a considerable period of rather experimental

clinical application.” So interestingly the traditional medicinal and healing practices have intriguing personal and collective perspectives, operating in *gongsheng* (symbiosis) with each other. In Lai and Farquhar’s words, “By harmonizing the world’s myriad heterogeneities, it gives specific character to the Chinese experience of *gongsheng* (symbiosis) and coexistence.”

### SHARED IDEAL AND COMMON ETHICAL ASPIRATION? CONVIVALISM AND THE NOTION OF *GONGSHENG/KYŌSEI*

In many of the *gongsheng/kyōsei* discussions in China and Japan, references have often been made to the intellectual movement of convivialism, which began in 2013. The term “convivialism” has been translated as *gongsheng* in China and *kyōsei* in Japan. Indeed, this is probably how the first connection between the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* and convivialism occurred. Alain Caillé, who coined the word “convivialism” and is also one of the founders and key spokesperson of the convivialism movement, expressed skepticism on the claimed parallels between the two notions because he fears that much would have been lost in the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural translations.

Caillé considers convivialism first and foremost a political philosophy, which inherits and sublates (*aufheben*) modern political ideologies of liberalism, socialism, anarchism and communism. In addition, it is the result of decades of theoretical work within the framework of La Revue du MAUSS (Movement anti-utilitariste en science sociale) founded by Caillé and his friends. As explained by Caillé, convivialism is a “philosophy of the art of living together by cooperating or opposing without slaughtering each other,” and it encompasses six principles, namely, the interdependence of humanity and nature, common humanity, common sociality, legitimate individuation and finally creative opposition. Recognizing the multiplicity of environmental, moral, political and geopolitical crises besetting humanity and the human society, Caillé and his fellow convivialists also hoped to use these convivialist principles to counter the dominant ideologies of utilitarianism, neoliberalism, and the runaway rentier and speculative capitalism. Instead of these ideologies, convivialists affirm relationality and interdependence as the essence of human existence and refuse all *a priori* discrimination based on skin color, gender, religious affiliation or ethnicity. Further, they cherish human attentiveness and the sense of obligation toward others and champion the plurality of ideas and

the spirit of cooperation. Finally, they are against the *hubris* of unlimited economic and financial growth and advocate the virtue of self-restraint.

Another convivialist sociologist Frank Adloff, in his contribution to this book, explores the complex relationship of cross-pollination between life sciences and sociology in history and attempts to seek new directions of sociological studies by developing a generalized theory of gift and biological symbiosis-inspired cross-species cooperation. The gift theory, which was first developed by Marcel Mauss, the intellectual hero of the convivialist movement, and later expounded by the French MAUSS created by Caillé, postulates that “central dimensions of human action cannot be explained in either utilitarian or normative terms, but rather in terms of the gift.” Exchange of gifts represents a “surplus of spontaneity, unconditionality, freedom and commitment that cannot be attributed to self-interest or normative commitment.” Convivialists recognized that this idea of gift relationship does not comport with the liberal idea of the autonomous and self-contained individual. Rather, it manifests the complex and superimposed web of relationships of interdependence. It is precisely the strident individualism and associated capitalist ethos of seeking and maximizing wealth that the intellectual movement of convivialism seeks to deal a blow head-on.

When thinking about inspiration social scientists can draw from the contemporary study of biological symbiosis, Adloff seems to be particularly in favor of multispecies study in contemporary biology, which ascribes *a priori* meanings and significance to other forms of life. Convivialists have been calling for a “methodological animism,” which advocates treating non-human beings “as if they had subjectivity regardless of whether it can really be ‘proven’ scientifically.” This is when the theory of the gift comes in. Under the “methodological animism,” non-human beings can be recognized as gift givers. By establishing a gift relationship, Adloff argues, by paraphrasing biologist Andreas Weber, “material substances as well as meanings are exchanged, and in this exchange, subjectivities become intertwined and intermingled in the form of new alliances.” Adloff ends his analysis by “advocating looking animistically at nature from a sociological perspective” and proposes to use the “methodological animism” as a starting point to move away from dualistic ontology and for new sociological theory building.

When reviewing the principles of convivialism and convivialist ethical aspirations, one can’t help but notice the striking parallels between

convivialism and the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* although their differences are also obvious. Here is what I see as the parallels and differences between the two notions:

### *Classical Notion of an Individual Reconsidered*

Caillé conceives convivialism first and foremost as a political philosophy intending to replace the current dominant ideology of neoliberalism. It does tackle the foundational notion of neoliberalism, i.e., the conception of an autonomous and self-contained individual, by affirming the profound interdependence of humans and between humans and nature. Convivialism proclaims that relationality and sociality are the essence of humanity and human society. Although coming from very different philosophical bases of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* is based on an ontological assumption of a primordial connectivity and oneness of all forms of beings. Confucian ethics has taken this primordial relationality into the social and political spheres using the clan structure and family relationships as the meta-prototype for social and political governance. While modernization and Westernization in the past 150 years have infused the narrative of liberal values of individualism, free choice and self-determination into the global public and political discourse, people in the East Asian societies continue to be deeply shaped by the time-honored values and practices in their personal, familial, social and even political lives. They have been constantly oscillating between the world of modernity and that of ancient cultures. When confronting with excesses of modernity and a world with increasing material wealth but steadily declining morality, it is only natural that people began to seek inspirations in their age-old notions and ways of living. What is most interesting here is that when East Asians look back to their millennia-old notions to seek inspiration to counter excesses of modernity, that is where they encounter like-minded European convivialists.

### *Acceptance of Ideological Diversity and Pluralism as Theoretical Foundation*

Another characteristic of convivialism is what Caillé calls the “principled acceptance of theoretical and ideological pluralism.” Diversity and differences are also the underlying assumptions of *gongsheng/kyōsei*. As noted earlier, only where there are different forms and qualities of entities can

we talk about “*gong*,” i.e., togetherness, mutual complementariness and mutual embeddedness. Entities of the same qualities and forms lead to the thickening of the sameness that is not *gongsheng* or symbiotic with each other. In fact, differences and plurality are a source of vitality and creativity under both convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei*. In this sense, both convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei* recognize diversity and pluralism as the start and the end game—we do not seek uniformity or impose conversion. We savor, appreciate and learn from differences. A corollary of this profound ideological pluralism and diversity is the spirit of “live and let live,” which is crucial for a philosophy of living together.

### *Anthropocentrism Challenged*

Concerning about destructive forces of climate change and environmental degradation, both convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei* advocate moving away from the dualistic thinking of nature versus culture, human versus animal spheres and share the strong tendency against the destructive anthropocentrism. The thinking of “universal camaraderie” between humans and other living things or even non-living things runs deep in all three traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. Animistic notions and practices continue to figure prominently in both Japanese and Chinese cultural psychological construct, albeit to varying degrees. That is why the convivialist proposal of “methodological animism” and what Adloff calls the “re-enchantment of the world” are particularly endearing. While the East Asian approach to non-human beings and even non-living things revolves around the common origin of all beings, thus the “universal camaraderie,” the convivialist approach is to endow or assume a certain degree of subjectivity to non-humans. Different approaches notwithstanding, the resultant ethical aspiration of promoting multispecies co-prosperity is the same.

### *Shared Sense of Care for Others, Ethos of Cooperation and Virtue of Self-Restraint*

Caillé was rightly concerned about equating biological symbiosis to convivialism as the former merely speaks to the natural phenomenon of different organisms living and evolving naturally and spontaneously. While both convivialism and the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* are critical of the unbridled anthropocentric modernization and attempt to put humans

back to nature, so to speak, both would agree that human beings, being endowed with the most advanced level of consciousness as far as we can see, have the disproportionately destructive power to change the natural surroundings. As a result, human beings ought to be the guardian and protector of the planetary ecosystem. So, to reset our mindset and the ethical framework molded by centuries of human-centered development and growth strategy and the capitalist ethos of cut-throat competition, glorification of self-interest and maximizing material wealth, we clearly can't let human nature take its course. Instead, we should adopt, in Caillé's Kantian style words, "the categorical imperative of controlling *hubris*, whether in the economic domain, but also in the domain of power or of technoscience." Therefore, it is critical that we bring to light and celebrate communal spirit, universal camaraderie among all forms of beings, spontaneity, cooperation, care for others and the virtue of self-restraint. These are also an intrinsic part of humanity.

I hope I have sufficiently dispelled Caillé's skepticism on the parallels between convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei*. But there are indeed differences between the two. Apart from the differences in philosophical foundations noted above, three other points stand out. The first relates to convivialist principle of legitimate individuation, according to which each individual has been given the ability to develop their individuality to the fullest without harming that of others. Different from extractive individualism, Caillé noted that the principle of legitimate individuation only recognizes the value of individuals who affirm their singularity in respect for their interdependence with others and with nature. While the notion of *gongsheng/kyōsei* does recognize and celebrate differences, there is nonetheless a general shortage of intellectual resources for robust individuality or personal rights against the authorities, and thus there may be much to learn from this notion of legitimate individuation and related practices. Arguably, Daoism—and Zhuangzi in particular—offers the most valuable intellectual resources for individuality and spiritual freedom. But the notion of freedom (自由 *ziyou*) in Zhuangzi's thinking is transcendental. It is about rising above duality and all trappings of human or non-human worlds and about the absolute freedom of the heart-mind. It is not about personal rights or freedom vis-à-vis a particular social

or political structure.<sup>42</sup> So when it comes to individuation in modern context, perhaps there is much for convivialism to offer to the East Asians. The other point of difference relates to convivialism's principle of creative opposition, which attempts to balance the confrontational and destructive politics often seen in today's democracies with other convivialist principles of common sociality, common naturality and cooperation, in a spirit characterized by Marcel Mauss as "opposing each other without slaughtering each other." As Caillé points out, open and blunt confrontation in the East Asian societies would be much frowned upon if not downright despicable. How opposing views, particularly against political authorities can be creatively expressed and engaged in political and social spheres, remains a big cultural or political challenge particularly in China. While the parallels between notions of convivialism and *gongsheng/kyōsei* form a basis for dialogue and mutual intellectual reinforcement, the differences will spur reflection, learning and adaptation. In this sense, a symbiotic interaction between the two notions will be productive and meaningful on the global stage.

It won't be complete if I don't point out the third and last point of difference between the two notions. It is that in the East Asian philosophical context, the narrative of *gongsheng* is a means to the end, which is the ultimate comprehension of *Dao* or realization of enlightenment. In all three traditions, personal self-reflection, self-rectification and constant searching inward have been featured prominently. The ultimate means of eliminating sufferings and struggles is to raise peoples' collective consciousness and be in union with the transcendental essence of all beings. Convivialism, on the other hand, is a political philosophy, as Caillé emphasizes. It has little or no discussion on metaphysical or transcendental pursuits.

To finally conclude, we live in a world with mounting risks of a planetary scale. It is time that East and West join hands in fleshing out a philosophy befitting our time and the planetary condition. The notions of *gongsheng/kyōsei* and convivialism are clearly a good starting point for this effort. It is a worthwhile cause which is long past due, even before we were told by scientists that we have always been living in a symbiotic world.

<sup>42</sup> Meng Peiyuan 蒙培元, "Ziyou Jinjieshuo—Zhuangzi [Zhuangzi's Realm of Freedom] 自由境界说——庄子," in *Meng Peiyuan Quanjī [Complete Works of Meng Peiyuan]* 蒙培元全集 (Sichuan People's Press, 2021).

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