

## LIFE ON ITS WAY, AWAY FROM ITSELF

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### Chapter Two of Mou Zongsan's *Autobiography at Fifty (Wushi Zishu)*

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Translated from the Chinese by Ming-Yeung Lu

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I left my village at fifteen to go to high school. The town, where the school was, was really not so different from the village—the same cultural habits, similar natural setting—yet I felt not only had I left home, I'd gone a long way away. Which wasn't that off the mark. From a snug existence at home to communal living at the school, there had been a marked change indeed. Looking back, I realize this was a first, and irrevocable, step—no more the togetherness of family life, no more the naturalness of village life.

My family, my village, the customs of its people, the geography of the land—I'd lived in harmony with all that

for fifteen years, like a young plant standing firm with roots deep in the ground, while all the while growing, growing up. One with my surroundings, I never felt I should be somewhere else or somewhere else in time, the way an exile, a sojourner would feel. That harmonious setting was an anchoring presence emanating stability, constancy. I was immersed in that setting, my life was merged with it, taking on its qualities: an existence anchored and secure, stable and unchanging. But change did come. The oneness with my surroundings, the sense of having an anchor, a stable core in my life—all was temporary. I left and began my sojourn. Looking back, I realize that only life in that harmonious setting—an undivided whole—could be considered real living: one lived in a manner that was appropriate to one's stage in life. For me, I only really lived, so to speak, during my childhood and early youth. When I started high school my life took its first step, its first turn, away from itself.

Though it shouldn't be considered real living, this sojourner's existence is, in the broad sense of the word, "life." However, it's life at its own expense, a drain on one's life force. One goes after an object outside of one's self, in constant pursuit of something beyond the basics of life. Whereas real living is living for living's sake, engaged in the activities that sustain life—life immersed in itself. Only a farmer leads such existence, what I call "life in itself." Most of us live the other way—"life that has left itself"—devoted to things that sap one's life force rather than consolidate or create more of it.

The Chinese have always extolled the ambition of their sons, who are likened to flying arrows, outward bound. True, one should go far and aim high. Most of us subscribe to this ideal, which, lofty and worthy as it is, is already pointing us to the kind of living that consumes life. That said, not all of us can be farmers, doing the work of life; not all of us can stay forever at the stage of "life in itself." Life must also leave itself, even though that is moving into "non-existence."

Living a kind of non-existence is indeed a contradiction—life in conflict with itself. Even if we don't dwell on this contradiction [seemingly a contradiction in terms] the fact remains that "living as leaving" is what causes the suffering in our lives. Is this suffering worthwhile? Is there, through the twists and turns of "non-existence," a way back to "life in itself"? Is there, apart from being a farmer, another way of engaging in existence, another approach to "life in itself"? These are the ultimate questions one must face up to if one is serious about life. But a person won't understand their full import by observing and analyzing life from afar. No amount of theorizing in a vacuum, or clever insight for that matter, can give one a feeling for reality, the reality that is life. That kind of awareness comes from the existential process, the actual practice of living—and so will the answers.

At first, new to high school, I had to work hard to keep up with the lessons. But I managed, if only just so. In English and mathematics I actually did quite well, not because I had a knack for those subjects. The rural areas were just then opening up, taking in ever so slowly the

changes in the air. English and mathematics were beyond most students, and they showed little interest. Because I actually put in some effort, I came across as more capable. Gifted I wasn't. I could more or less follow the lessons in mathematics, even found the subject fascinating, but I didn't have a mathematical soul, the kind of unclouded mind that could detach itself from everything and function in pure logic. When it came to languages—Chinese and English, and Chinese in particular was taught as literature—I was slow in appreciating their literary qualities (and slower still in using them skillfully as tools). My attitude was, I was sent to school to learn, so I should try my best. I must learn the linguistic symbols and through them absorb the contents of what I was reading. That was how I reached the level of proficiency I then had.

So for me learning languages was more about becoming literate than literary. I could sense the beauty of the poems and passages I read, but my appreciation came from a general sensitivity toward the beauty of things rather than a strong literary awareness. That is to say, I wasn't appreciating literature as literature, literature in itself. To do so—yes, be really into it—is to enter its realm, becoming immersed in it, one's life merging with it. One's life being "in itself" when it's in literature—this is what it means to have a literary soul, which after all I don't.

Even studying Chinese, my native language, was an uphill struggle. Most of the time I was just trying to keep myself from lagging too much behind—again, this was because, not being a literary soul, I didn't have an innate talent for literary skills. Besides, every language is a

distinct symbolic system with its own structure and syntax. To learn a language is to become familiar with its mechanism, the way its component parts work together. Or mechanisms—more than one—for even though modern Chinese, when written, resembles everyday speech, there is still a gap between the spoken and written forms. And that is not all—there is furthermore a big difference between the modern, colloquial way of writing and the classical, literary style that was taught in my school. Classical Chinese bears little relation to the spoken and has its own grammar and vocabulary. For someone who'd just left behind an earthy, natural existence in the village, the mechanism of this stylized form seemed like a whole other universe, extremely difficult to enter.

In fact, I found it hard every step of the way. Learning to speak properly, then to write properly—each involved a different set of rules and demanded great effort on my part. I talked the way village folks talked, which wasn't really adequate speech—the vocabulary was limited, a sentence often incomplete. That somehow the meaning got through had a lot to do with the speaker's tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures, which at best would give an impression of simplicity and honesty. But the village dialect lacked a coherent grammar after all. If it were written down—as a set of linguistic symbols without the supporting elements of tone of voice, etc.—it wouldn't constitute a self-sufficient language system, a functioning mechanism. For this country boy to communicate adequately, I had to learn such a mechanism, adopting the grammar of standard speech. It was hard.

And even harder when I learned how to write, first in classical and later on in modern Chinese.

The swirling life force of my wandering days I must now channel into learning those mechanisms, one by one. This experience—the way my amorphous existence had to be molded, adapted for the task—would leave a very deep impression on me.

My high school was in many ways still very traditional. An old-style scholar was assigned to teach us Chinese. He taught mostly by having the class recite together selections from *The Best of the Ancient Classics*, over and over again, until we committed every word to memory. The point was to drill into our minds the conventions of classical Chinese. But I never really got it; I never fully internalized that mechanism. The attributes of literary, educated writing—the art of its phrasings, the power of its expressions—didn't make a deep impact on me and become my attributes. In the years since high school I would occasionally make up a phrase or two in classical Chinese—yes, almost by instinct, thanks to the education I had received—but it was never done as an attempt at literature, that is, as literary composition according to literary conventions. I have never excelled in writing or fancied myself as a writer. If anything, I've always had a strong distaste for people who care too much about literary flavor. They linger at every turn of phrase, savoring it and appraising its aesthetic quality—such pretension disgusts me.

What bothers me is the learned air they put on, quite distinct from a true literary temperament, which I haven't either. For me, studying the classical literature was a struggle indeed, but just dealing with current Chinese was no simple task. First, I must learn to talk intelligibly. I mentioned before that village folks spoke a kind of raw language—well, a village kid didn't even have that down pat, and in front of strangers I'd become all flustered and tongue-tied. Being away from home meant that I needed to acquire a set of basic speaking skills and start talking like people in the town. Still later on, when I continued my studies in Beiping [what Beijing was called at the time], I had to start writing in modern, colloquial Chinese, which presented another challenge: the so-called vernacular prose was modeled on the Beijing dialect, close to but different enough from what was spoken in my province. Challenge upon challenge, mechanism upon mechanism—to take on each one involved some deliberate effort on my part. Nothing came naturally. Nothing was easy. I remember that already in high school my classmates could read the popular novels written in the vernacular; I was the only one who couldn't. The more complicated works, like *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Water Margins*, I only began to comprehend when I attended the pre-college classes at Peking University [the official English name of Beijing Daxue]. Until I got to that big city I wasn't familiar with newspapers, and reading them was a new and not so easy experience for me.

Nothing, none of that, came without effort, for the amorphous existence from which I emerged, that unformed, undifferentiated state of being, had nothing.

The general knowledge that today's urban youth take for granted—what to them is common sense—was missing in me. Such knowledge, which people naturally absorb through constant exposure, has never had a place in my life. Every bit I knew I had acquired by devoting energy and attention to the task. It was a process not of natural absorption but of conscious learning, that is, using up my life force to accumulate knowledge. Now, this piecemeal approach, instead of giving me a well-rounded body of knowledge that was an undivided, harmonious whole, yielded awkward pieces that jutted out here and there. For every part that was sticking out there was next to it a recess, a gap—for every area of knowledge I gained there was another that I missed. What I knew, acquired through conscious efforts, was necessarily limited by those same efforts. The areas to which I'd devoted my attention I knew quite well, the ones I didn't I knew nothing about. An integrated set of knowledge I never had; what I had were fragments, disjointed bits and pieces—the inevitable outcome of conscious learning.

One's consciousness can only extend so far, covering some areas, missing others, and one ends up knowing fragments—this, I've come to realize, will surely be a source of misery during the course of one's life. Indeed, all my life I've felt the lack of what most people consider common sense, general knowledge—I'm very good in certain things, hopeless in others.

Before we move on to my student days in Beijing, I want to briefly go back to my experience with classical

Chinese. The mastery of it remained a mystery to me, yes, as if there was a secret way, only I couldn't find the way in. Often, when the teacher gave us a writing assignment, I'd stare at the blank page and no word would emerge. I did feel a strong urge to compose, as I had strong intuitions for certain moods [feeling joyful at the ancestral burial ground, for example, or forlorn when I was alone in nature], but those feelings, and the urge to express them, were trapped inside me. One time, our class was assigned the open-ended "A Trip to..." as essay topic; for once I managed to express myself. But when the teacher read what I'd written, he judged it only in terms of language—the phrasing, the wording—and couldn't see beyond the words and appreciate their source—my intuition, my urge. "Obscure," he remarked. As he put it, a topic such as this required lucid descriptions of scenery, with occasional embellishments in the form of lively details. Well, being clear and direct I wasn't, nor did I include enough concrete details—what I'd written was, I'm sure, quite "obscure."

I used a phrase, "lonely willows hanging on to the setting sun," which I had read somewhere but couldn't recall where. Deeply touched by its beauty, I borrowed it—quoting from past literature was a common practice in classical composition—to describe a scattering of trees bathed in orange light. (Only later did I realize the phrase comes from the famous opera, *The Western Chamber*, and the original reads, "How I wish, lonely willows, you could hang on to the setting sun [so this moment would last forever].") My teacher said that the phrase didn't make any sense. It did to me—I had understood the phrase intuitively and could picture in my mind the mood it

depicted, and I felt confident using it. The teacher was indeed mistaken about the phrase, but he was right in calling my prose “obscure.” The cause of being obscure was none other than the strong intuition I’ve just mentioned. That intuition had permeated my wandering days and was part and parcel of my amorphous existence, that whirlpool of energies and emotions; it continued to inform my character and came through in what I wrote.

It still does. Today my writings are still called “obscure” and not understood by most people—few have that same sensitivity, which isn’t strictly literary, or have it at that intensity. When people read something they want to understand it right away, and when they don’t they get a little resentful. Remarks like “obscure” and “meaningless” are often tossed my way. I have a suggestion for all of us, that we all be a bit more patient, more open-minded, as there are indeed many things we don’t know—one shouldn’t always use one’s [subjective] self as standard, acting as “Mr. Know-It-All,” arbiter of the merit of everything.

At nineteen I moved to Beijing, the political and cultural center of China. I’d gone even further away from home this time, plunging into city life just when the nation was entering a new era. That summer I got into the pre-college classes at Peking University; in the fall, the National Army, advancing from their base in the south, captured the former imperial capital and renamed it Beiping [“Peace in the North”]. Thus ended the rule of the Beiyang warlords, who from Yuan Shikai on had controlled the northern part of China. Power was now

consolidated in the hands of the military men from the Huangpu Academy, and for the moment the Republic of China, which had been established seventeen years earlier, in 1911, was a unified country. A new era had begun, one with many—and more—troubles ahead.

I arrived in Beiping in the spring of 1928 still quite naïve and ignorant, barely aware of the events taking place. I heard that Wang Guowei had committed suicide the previous summer, drowned in the lake at the Summer Palace, and Liang Qichao had gone into hiding. A preeminent figure in classical scholarship, Wang devoted the latter part of his life to studying ancient history and deciphering the script on the oracle bones, contributing greatly to our knowledge of Chinese antiquities. But in his delving into our civilization’s past he never got to the core of the matter—he never did put his finger on the pulse of Chinese culture and come into contact with its true vitality, its life. Wang was also one of the first to venture into the world of Western thought, yet there too he failed to grasp its fundamental character, the spirit behind its evolution. At a time when Chinese civilization seemed caught in a struggle for survival, the mandarin intellectual was lost, unsure of the way ahead for both his culture and his own life—indeed, lacking the faith that there was a way. Had he lived, Wang certainly wouldn’t have aligned himself with the republican forces hailing from the south. In despair, he opted for a swift exit. That kind of self-regard—the self-styled elegance of a refined tribe—was typical of scholars of Wang’s generation; the breadth of vision, depth of conviction needed to face the issues of the day they just didn’t have. How could the culture survive?

How should one live? The momentous changes that prompted those questions only exposed how cut off from the vitality of Chinese culture—its spirit, its life—they actually were.

As the National Army made its way north, the democrat statesman Liang Qichao was living in seclusion in Tianjin. A commanding presence on the political stage since the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, Liang again showed his mettle when in 1913 he and his student, the military governor Cai Songpo, effectively forced Yuan Shikai to abandon his monarchical dreams [the young Republic was saved and Yuan died in shame]. That Liang had the capacity to navigate the treacherous waters of Chinese politics was undeniable. Yet his vision had been for the most part a political one, its scope limited to contemporary affairs—a cross-sectional analysis missing the root of the matter. The main solution Liang had offered concerned our form of government—the change to a constitutional monarchy for the Qing dynasty and, later on, the adoption of a constitution for the newly formed Republic. In this regard he represented a much-needed democratic consciousness in Chinese politics. But, as he himself had come to realize, to bring about democracy in China, under the circumstances of the time, would take enormous effort—a close-to-impossible task—and political vision alone was not enough. Deeper cultural, historical issues were at stake. The life of the culture was at stake.

So, around 1920, Liang retired from politics and turned to academic life, devoting his last years to classical scholarship. Despite his progressive views, as a scholar he

would stay within the intellectual tradition of the Qing era. The Manchu court and its milieu had had a profound impact on him; it was, after all, the reform-minded Emperor Guangxu who recognized his talent and made him a minister [Liang's teacher, Kang Youwei, was the emperor's close adviser]. The kind of scholarship that became dominant during the Qing was textual studies, philological research (*kaoju*). This stagnant tradition was a travesty of Chinese cultural life. But Liang didn't seem to realize that. What was a misdirection, resulting from the suppression of the Chinese people and their spirit, their vitality, he took as the true path. What was the true path, extending from the ancient sages and taken up by the great Confucian thinkers of the Han and Tang and, later on, Song and Ming eras, he never embarked upon.

As long as his mind remained beclouded thus, Liang couldn't have picked up the broken thread that was the grand heritage of Chinese thought. His scholarly works showed he had the same philological orientation as members of that refined tribe—intellectuals patronized by the court—and, like them, he had had no contact with the true vitality of Chinese culture. His *Method of Historical Research* was banal and superficial. In the end, the scholarship did nothing to enhance the political vision; instead, it betrayed a mind of insufficient caliber, lacking in cultural insight and philosophical depth. Meanwhile, his political vision, an outgrowth of his political experience, remained rootless, isolated from the life of the culture—in short, a dead end.

Liang was a talented man, clever enough to grasp how momentous the changes taking place were and, in response, advocate for a form of government that would fit in with the times. But when it came to finding the way ahead for both his culture and his own life, he was clueless.

The seventeenth year of the Republic, 1928, was a watershed moment. Not only did the campaign led by the National Army—what came to be known as the Northern Expedition—bring down the Beiyang warlords, it marked the end of a whole intellectual and political milieu. Gone was the intellectual dominance by scholars steeped in the philological tradition of the Qing—their self-conscious gentility and enervated thinking were, like themselves, remnants from the imperial era. But gone, too, was the political consciousness, the democratic spirit, of those who fought for change, people like Liang Qichao, Sun Yat-sen [the great revolutionary] and Yan Fu [renowned translator of English writings]. Their ideal of a republican, constitutional government turned out to be just that—a superficial and fleeting vision.

The National Army's taking Beijing brought about a situation very similar to what would happen twenty years later, when the Communists were closing in on Nanjing [the seat of the Nationalist government]. In either case, it was might against might. In neither case, there was any real peace in sight. The party lines might be different, but essentially the two events were accomplished along the same line—that of revolution by force—and neither paved way for lasting order and stability, ushering in a period of

grand peace. In 1928, I had only just emerged from the misty, wandering existence of my youth; I had but a general impression of the country's turmoil. By the end of the Civil War, I was approaching middle age; what I felt—distinctly—was a deep pain. Though my subjective state had changed, the objective situation gave me the same feeling each time, that there was something wrong about this.

The Northern Expedition was in fact a joint effort of the Nationalists and the Communists, so it wasn't an achievement that belonged solely to the Guomindang [also "Kuomintang," the Nationalist Party], which by that time had become a mixed bag. Back when it was formed from the revolutionary forces that overthrew the Qing dynasty, it was a purer organization with a purer purpose. In 1924, it adopted the strategy of working with Soviet advisers and admitting members of the Chinese Communist Party into its rank—a move that certainly gave it the kind of military strength it didn't have before. Nevertheless, its principles were compromised. The Guomindang would later abandon its United Front policy, purging the party of Communists, then fighting them for the control of the country, but it never again came to a clear understanding of what it stood for, yes, its very reason for existing. To this day the Guomindang, while continuing its opposition in Taiwan, has yet to reaffirm—really affirm—its principles; it remains confused about its true mission. Is it fated to be just that—a party of transition, not the one to bring about real peace?



For the party members, an impressionable youth was a prime target to be wooed and worked on aggressively. Though I found these people rather odd, part of me was drawn to their ideas and lifestyle, which broadened my horizons and made me feel inspired as never before. Still, something about them just didn't seem right. At the time, revolutionaries of every stripe—including the Nationalists—subscribed more or less to the dialectical materialism that was the Communist Party's official doctrine. Not that people really understood its full philosophical import. Their embrace of it—and many did embrace it as the objective truth—was practical: dialectical materialism offered what to them was a realistic explanation of China's social ills. For the Communist Party, it justified overturning the existing political and economic order. The Guomindang wouldn't go as far; nevertheless that way of thinking was pervasive there. One time, I overheard one of my classmates, a party member, accuse someone of being an idealist—as opposed to a materialist—and that he was wrong, therefore, about whatever they were discussing. I was taken aback. Why was idealist thinking necessarily erroneous? Even then I had the doubts that kept me from becoming as convinced as many were of the infallibility of the materialist view.

Going hand in hand with this materialism was a very strong class-consciousness. Before the party would admit a new member, they must check how much property, how many acres of land, the family owned. Only those who came from small farms and poorer backgrounds made the cut. This was economic determinism, pure and simple—an inability to look at fellow human beings in a balanced

light, undistorted by an agenda. For the Chinese, judging a person on the basis of character had long been the conventional wisdom—indeed, throughout our history so much had been said and expounded on personal integrity, self-cultivation—now, all at once, that humanist idea seemed to have been discarded, replaced by an unnatural ideology.

Where I came from, among the country folks, we didn't normally make moral assessments of people based on acreage. Whether they were well off or not, peasants had always occupied a special place in Chinese society. In fact, many of the scholar-officials who ran the country had come from peasant stock—though they weren't toiling in the fields anymore, someone of their kin might be or had been. To them the vast rural hinterland, beyond being a source of sustenance, was where they could find the roots of their own existence, roots shared with the farmers. With feelings of kinship, sympathy, and respect—yes, that was how peasants were traditionally regarded by everyone else in society, by scholars and laborers, merchants and government ministers alike. Nobody, nobody would think of using an inhuman ideology based on economics to create absurd, artificial divisions, stirring up a storm of social discord even where none had existed.

There is a difference, after all, between life lived day in, day out and concepts formed in the head. Human beings being what they are, humanity spans the warm and the cruel, the kind and the brutal. But strife, which is part of life, is not the same as conflicts stirred up by imposing from the outside an inhuman ideology based on

economics; in the latter case dealings between people have been transformed—objectified—into political struggles. At the time, witnessing the activities of the party members, I could sense that something unusual—indeed, novel—was taking place. These people were equipped with a set of abstract ideas, and they wanted life to be lived according to those ideas. I was amazed. Moreover, it was the lives of peasants they wanted to meddle with, and that meant injecting their ideology into the very roots, the very foundation of Chinese society. This kind of thing had never happened before.

Sure, in the past many a battle had been fought, dynasties toppled, in the name of peasants. To the Chinese there was no cause greater and grander than delivering the masses from their misery. But the battle cry of justice was made in the hope of bringing relief, a far cry from using an inhuman ideology to create a wedge among the peasants. Life returning to normal—that was the goal—life lived day in, day out, and not according to a set of abstract ideas. The people were suffering because something had happened to upset the rhythm of their existence and ruin their livelihood. That could be natural disasters like droughts and floods, which brought famines, but often corrupt officials and decadent rulers were to blame—all the same, the disturbance was something that happened within life, as opposed to concepts introduced from the outside. Yes, even when the disaster was man-made, its cause—the corruption and ineptitude of the powers that be—was still part of life, just as it was considered the normal course of things to rise up against those responsible for the suffering.

The immoral behavior of a few had upset the natural existence of many, so redressing that, bringing back normal life, was itself a natural thing to do—a simple matter of justice. But this justice that was a simple, straightforward matter had now become part of an ideology used to incite the masses, disrupting their lives. Ideology as such—ideas ruling over life, theory molding reality—was a recent import from the West, a novelty that, though fascinating, was unsuitable to the Chinese, ill-matched with our usual outlook. Sure, those who stirred things up were not without good intentions, not without a sense of justice; they too wanted the peasants to live better. But their idea of redress was an unnatural one—plain justice distorted by a convoluted ideology into an intellectual affectation wrecking havoc in people's lives. No longer the calamity caused by the corrupt officials of old, here was a new kind of man-made disasters—yes, truly man-made—created by a new cast of characters consisting of youths and party members and intellectuals. This modern-day educated class readily took in what the West offered and, as if to show off a new trick, used those ideas to create conflict, raising Cain.

Part of me was very impressed—as all that was novel to me as well—but I was also disturbed. The ideas and actions of these people struck me as contrary to the harmonious world that I knew growing up—contrary not only to the way life had been in my village, day in, day out, but to what that life meant, its spirit, its truths. I had the feeling that, as they carried on with their agenda, there would be a lot more troubles ahead, and people's lives

would become more and more difficult. That was why I never fully agreed with them, and as time went on I became all the more opposed to their ideology.

Their standard behavior was extreme behavior. They prided themselves on being impassioned and impetuous in their revolutionary zeal, even if that meant acting recklessly, courting danger. So abnormal were those times that to be considered a true revolutionary, a person must show extreme left-wing leanings—you didn't have what it took unless you had the requisite radical traits. Even the ones who didn't behave radically would talk radically. I often heard people saying that so-and-so was a stable and steadfast character, and that was meant as a sarcastic comment—in their minds to be revolutionary was to be the opposite of stable and steadfast.

In my mind, however, any revolution must have an objective theme—some larger purpose that is beyond the subjective, a goal that, once established, will be steadily pursued. Personal enmity is not what a revolution should be about. Yet the activists seemed to have made that their theme—political revolt reduced to a campaign targeting human beings, begetting inhumanity. The far-left tendencies they so extolled were the manifestations of a psychological state dominated by hatred and hostility. At the time I was already aware, if only vaguely, that there should be this objective dimension, but I couldn't articulate what it was, and from the way the party members went about their business it certainly didn't seem they had a clear objective—something to struggle for. They soon found themselves at a loss as to who the target of

their animosity, their hate-filled rhetoric should be. That was because the Guomindang, their party, wasn't like the Communists after all—the latter would wage a full-scale class struggle among the peasants. The Nationalists, whose Nanjing government got off to a shaky start, quickly gave in to the business establishment and urban elite; after that they left the rural elite alone as well and abandoned trying to stir things up among the peasants. Everything remained the same, just as it was. The party members now faced a situation that had little use for their hatred and extreme sentiments.

Many descended into a life of decadence, acting as if they had special status reminiscent of the “banner people” (*qiren*)—the designation for Manchus, the privileged race during the Qing. Like degenerate aristocrats these party members became the embodiment of a most repulsive kind of existence, looked askance at by others. As for that new educated class—the far-left intellectuals and youths who went along and got themselves all fired up—they would stray even further, ending up in excess, their romanticism gone unruly. Some went underground and joined the Communist Party.

Not that I was immune from this romanticism myself. As I said, I did feel inspired by the activists and their ideas—my mind opened up, set free, and aspiring to higher things, yes, as never before. But unlike them I wasn't driven by hatred, nor was I driven to vent it on other human beings. Nevertheless, for the first time since I left my village, the whirlpool of energies, the swirling chaos that defined my natural existence there, had been

tapped and given an outlet, a direction. Drawn to this new world and its novel ways, I got closer and was admitted in as a member “on probation.”

During the summer break I went home—on a mission to get the village folks organized into a Peasants Association. I’d gather people together every night and lecture them on the People’s Rights [one of Guomindang’s Three Principles of the People]. Some nights I’d walk a long way to conduct a meeting in the next village. When the meeting was over, and it was too late to walk home, I’d just find a spot somewhere, anywhere, and go to sleep. The boundless energy, vivacious spirit I had as a kid working in the fields I now applied to political rallying, and I discovered that I was quite good at it, that I had the ability to inspire people and build solidarity. The reason was simple. I was sprightly, sincere, and open-hearted—still the country boy; there was no arrogance or self-importance in my demeanor. And not only that, the country boy had read a few books after all; he had become part of the educated class. In the eyes of the villagers, such a person—one of their own who’d gone on to Peking University—would automatically acquire, upon his return, a certain status and persuasive power.

But very soon I saw how inappropriate it all was. To stand in front of my kith and kin—my elders no less—and address them, with a serious face, as “comrades” was just too objective, too political and formal a way to behave. During one meeting it suddenly hit me—my hollow existence, my life suspended in midair, cut off from its source, becoming all shriveled up. I felt, too, that my

callous behavior had subjected my friends and relatives to the same fate—their lives hollowed out. It was the saddest feeling. Even today I feel a deep shame when I recall what I did, as if I had committed the most outrageous crime. It was the biggest mistake of my life.

I quickly withdrew from those political activities. So what if I let my party membership stay on permanent probation, a membership I didn’t want anymore! It was around this time that the party abruptly changed its direction. The more extreme the members became—and a good many turned decadent—the more alienated I felt. I just couldn’t fit in, nor did I want to.

And yet there was that other feeling I got from being a participant, if only briefly, in this tidal wave of romanticism. My deep shame notwithstanding, I can’t deny the impact that coming into contact with the activists had had on me—my mind opened up, set free, and aspiring to higher things—a feeling that was in itself meaningful, significant. When I first heard the party members call each other “comrades,” the word betokened frankness and loyalty, as well as an extraordinary selflessness—the result of having devoted themselves to the party, their individual lives to a collective entity. That kind of dedication—objectifying one’s existence, imbuing it with the objectivity of a larger ideal—left a very deep impression on me. I felt something, something I’d never experienced during the amorphous, natural existence of my youth; suddenly, among these people, I’d come upon it—this saintly aspect of life. The saintly sages I’d read about when studying the classics, the strong moral

character they had cultivated in themselves, the high level of virtuous living they had attained—all seemed as far-off as the ancient times in which they lived. Now, it was as if the unattainable had been realized, its possibility given confirmation, right before my eyes.

At the time I thought, if their revolutionary-speak was a true reflection of how a revolutionary lived—that is, if one walked that talk—then that person would truly deserve to be called a saint, or at the least a very noble soul. In this respect [a life being transformed] the romantic spirit that had swept many into revolutionary politics was more than a political force, whose impact was felt only in the external world. It could and did go deeper, entering into a person's life, shaping that person's character, arousing one's whole being to fight for one's ideals.

This arousal of the soul—even as it engendered in a party member the resolve to live selflessly—wasn't as pure and saintly a phenomenon as I thought. I didn't realize it then, but afterward it became apparent that behind the pure dedication was a psychological mishmash, that what seemed saintly was in fact a monstrous hybrid. The selflessness that impressed me so had arisen out of a frenzied atmosphere and was fueled by a wild romanticism; it was part of a radical lifestyle scorning all things deemed non-revolutionary (which was different from renouncing everything and being truly free of desire). Indeed, it was as much recklessness as selflessness—an amoral attitude born of dialectical materialism, the kind of “no restraint” that emerged after all petit bourgeois inhibitions had been purged.

In those days, even though not everyone belonged to the Communist Party, its ideology held sway. When it came to women and property, two main preoccupations of the petit bourgeois, the activists showed either no interest or no sign of being possessive. [According to materialist ideology, ownership was sacrosanct in a non-egalitarian society and must be protected, hence the inhibitions, the proprieties; true-blue revolutionaries shouldn't have such hang-ups.] Even if reality might be another story, in their thinking and in the way they talked they seemed to be above it all.

But in rejecting so-called petit bourgeois proprieties, the activists had also abandoned their moral sense. Usually, a person observing those proprieties in a natural, unself-conscious manner retain—without being aware of it—what the Chinese call “the heart that knows righteousness and respect, honesty and honor” (*liyilianchi xin*). Now, this very core of morality, the ethical impulse behind the inhibitions, was gone; the activists had purged themselves of it, the heart together with the habit. The result: an absolute recklessness, the kind created by a crude materialist ideology in an age of romanticism.

This attitude of “no restraint” was at its core a grand romantic passion. From the outset it wasn't moral awareness but fanaticism that gave birth to the selflessness in the party members. What's more, they were transformed by external forces—their souls aroused by political ideals, their radical spirit forged by the party's indoctrination—rather than their own inner awakening.

Not “morality in itself,” the ethical impulse within [which had been purged], but the call to offer oneself to a collective movement, to orient one’s life toward it, was what compelled such total devotion. It was morality of a sort—indeed, of the instrumental sort, morality as a means to an end, much like the honor code gangsters observed to preserve an iniquitous existence.

Of course, when one believes in an objective ideal [a cause greater than the individual], one may dedicate oneself, one’s entire being, to it. But such self-sacrifice, if authentic, cannot be the unrestraint typical of materialism; instead, it must have as its source a person’s spontaneous moral will. True morality springs from the heart—the heart that knows righteousness and respect, honesty and honor. If this core of morality is preserved and nurtured in the first place—as part of one’s inner practice, inner life—then and only then can one let go of egotism and become truly dedicated, sagely selfless.

The total devotion I witnessed during those revolutionary times was nothing like that, so it wasn’t true morality but a semblance of it, it wasn’t true saintliness but the appearance of it. An apparition it was, a chimera of impure origin—good mixed up with evil—and I was drawn to it. I could relate to this reckless selflessness because of the uplifting, liberating effect it had on me; my horizons had been broadened—indeed, elevated—in such company. The fugitive heroes from *The Water Margins*—like Lin Chong and Wu Song—manifest the same heightened, romantic presence, by virtue of their having left the world for a freer existence in Mount Liang. In

reality, though, when unbridled romanticism served a materialist ideology, the result was the very opposite of that uplifting and liberating image—a liberation suppressive and stifling, a closing of the mind supposedly opened up, uplifting ideals that proved morally debasing. With everything reduced to the material, nothing was left but a load of shit. Which no doubt had its appeal, its deceptive charm, like the way a mirage in the desert would come across as salvation, only to mislead the wanderer deeper into confusion.

Coming from my own wandering existence, and still carrying in me the swirling primal energies of my rustic youth, I was easily taken by this glistening mirage, this powerful, if illusory, phenomenon—grand romantic passion in the service of revolutionary ideals. As I said, there were two sides to my personality: one side delighted in order and was drawn to the clear and luminous, the pure and sacred, the other to chaos and confusion and dwelled in the misty and mysterious, the desolate and forlorn. As a child I had often wandered alone in nature, feeling “forlorn yet not forlorn”; now, my affinity for that kind of misty, expansive landscape, emotional as much as physical, prompted me to join the movement. But I never did fit in, for unlike the party members I wasn’t driven by ideology, nor was I driven to impose that ideology on life. In fact, what sustained my participation was an aspect of my personality, an aspect of my life, and I withdrew when I felt that my life, that I, was being molded, forced into conformity with some doctrine. That was something I couldn’t tolerate. Nevertheless, the romanticism in me—which was why I got involved—had also enabled me,

afterward, to discern the romanticism inherent in such revolutionary movements.

This movement wasn't quite over, another had begun—under the banner of the Communist Party. [The Communists, having been expelled from the Guomindang in 1927, with the collapse of the first United Front, split into two factions: one went underground in Shanghai, the other would eventually establish a stronghold in the rural hinterland.] Anyhow, the Guomindang that led the Northern Expedition to success was already a mixed bag without a true mission—no, not the revolutionary agenda it adopted, if only briefly. It was as if the party had caught the ferment of romanticism in the air and for the while operated under a guise that didn't really fit. That radicalism was soon discarded but the Nationalists failed to offer in its stead some healthy, positive attitude essential to building a country.

Sure, they did subscribe to the materialist thinking then in vogue, but theirs was a practical materialism, a decadent materialism—ideology as device rather than as core philosophy or the one true faith. The party never reaffirmed its principles. And so, though it had unified the country, the Guomindang turned feeble as a moral force, and in the larger society romanticism remained pervasive, indeed, becoming for many the standard of truth, the basic attitude with which they approached life and the world. The Communist Party would eventually harness that romanticism and take over the revolutionary banner (revolutionary romanticism had originally come from the Communists; they would claim it once again and manifest

it to the fullest). Unlike the Guomindang, the Communist Party, bolstered by its creed, was to embody fully the radical, idealistic spirit of the day—and this, in the end, was why it succeeded in assuming power. Which was something that happened later, and I'll touch on it in due course.

My association with the Guomindang—and my participation in a revolutionary movement—had ended when I realized that I didn't fit in, nor did I want to. Nevertheless, I was still under the spell of romanticism—only now my swirling energies would be transferred to the realm of ideas, my attention drawn to writings that reflected the same wild, romantic spirit.

I had begun to seek out things to read beyond school, especially writings from the New Culture Movement, born of the May Fourth students' demonstrations in 1919. Suddenly, I felt a channel opening up, my mind exposed to a world of new ideas. It was as if the wandering spirit stirring in me still had sprung forth, going straight at, without any zigzag, Wu Zhihui's pitch-dark worldview and Kuriyagawa Hakuson's "Out of the Ivory Tower." This expansion of the mind, this leap of the intellect, was a direct outpouring of my life force from its swirling, undifferentiated state—indeed, in a manner that didn't involve much differentiating, much reasoning—onto objects that matched its amorphous, roving nature. A book called *Science and The Philosophy of Life—a Debate* caught my attention. Although I didn't grasp all its contents, most of the essays in there seemed to me lackluster, mediocre in spirit. Even the give-and-take between Ding Wenjiang and

Zhang Junmai, who started the science vs. metaphysics controversy, I found dull. An exception was Wu Zhihui's "A Philosophy of Life and a View of the Universe Based on a New Faith," the longest piece in the collection. That I found exciting. A combination of audacious thinking and pointed satire, his prose had character and luster and, therefore, struck me as a real novelty. I was hooked.

Wu's powerful personality, as well as his considerable talent, was clearly on display in that essay. Yes, it was a fierce outpouring—reading it, you could sense his immense life force emerging like a wave, coming toward you directly, without any detour, any zigzag, a wave powerfully undulating, its roar drowning out all voices of mediocrity. I said there was no zigzag because Wu wasn't much of a detailed or discursive thinker—when he did engage in logical maneuvers, verbal acrobatics it was only for satire, to poke fun at established thinking. The appeal of his writings came more from their energy, their expression of primal force. Which struck a chord with me—my romantic temperament matching his, the outpouring of my life force, straight from its amorphous, undifferentiated state, meeting his. And riding on the wave Wu generated, I too looked down on those mediocre voices and felt I could bypass them, indeed, that I'd already gone beyond them. Not that I had understood everything. Their zigzag thinking—part and parcel of why these other authors seemed pedestrian to me—I wasn't yet able to follow, the knotty concepts created by their detailed arguments I couldn't untangle (in truth, the authors themselves knew not all what they were talking about). Nevertheless, under Wu's influence I was confident I'd

gone beyond them—once and for all—and, sure, all these years I hadn't once looked back, that is, toward these [May Fourth era] figures as my intellectual predecessors, my spiritual source.

Wu's influence on me, powerful as it was, was temporary; later on in life I would disagree with every single one of his ideas. At the time, however, his great force of character did impress me so, and in my young mind all those voices of mediocrity had been drowned out by his roar. But it was just that—might, not right, forceful personality rather than reasoned truths. In the end, the outpouring of life force that had lent such luster to his writings produced only a pitch-dark worldview as murky and formless as its source. A strong statement for sure, a powerful expression of primal energies, and one that I could easily appreciate—for my own swirling life force was going outward, reaching for objects that matched its amorphous, roving nature, yes, in a manner that wasn't so thought-out either. Might, not right, was the basis of our meeting of minds.

Afterward I realized Wu's dazzling romanticism was really a failing: while my embrace of his writings was a phase in the development of a young mind, the writings themselves, done by someone of his age and status, only exposed a lack of depth, a poverty in moral character. Wu, despite his talent and imposing personality, had failed to come into his own as a human being. And that shallowness was itself a reflection of the times, a sign that our culture was in dire straits. The Chinese had yet to reach self-awareness as a nation—knowing oneself,



building up oneself [recognizing one's humanity and building upon it]—and until then, the crisis would continue.

How deeply Wu had influenced my thinking at the time was evident from what I'd adopted as my own writing style—wayward in sentiments, coarse in expressions, it was a mess. I would deliberately sound outrageous, even absurd, all the while thinking I was just being forceful and audacious like Wu. One time, my father happened to read something I'd written, and it gave him a fit. He asked sternly what had become of me. Seeing how shaken he was, I became very ashamed of myself. All I could mutter in response was, "That's how people write nowadays." My father, hearing that, said it mattered not this was the trend. "One should follow what is good and change that which isn't. How come you've lost all sense of good and bad?" I knew he was right. And right there and then I came to my senses and became painfully aware of how wrong I'd been. My scattered thoughts and feelings, like some wild horses running amok, were suddenly brought together—my mind becoming collected. A clarion call had sounded, and Wu's voice paled in comparison; my father, with his reprimand, had single-handedly halted the frenzied motions of those wild horses and retrieved my young mind from its wandering in the pitch-dark netherworld of romanticism. The powerfully undulating wave that Wu's writings had conjured up for me suddenly subsided. I felt as if I'd come to a rest stop—my spirit calmed, my energies collected—it was indeed a turning point in my life, one that marked the beginning of another state of mind.

Father was a man of principle who never wavered in his commitment to the right path, for he had a strong sense of roots, [a firm grounding in the moral teachings of our culture]. From start to end he led a disciplined life, an orderly existence. And it didn't start easy. When my grandfather passed away the family couldn't even afford to build him a proper grave. My uncle, the eldest son, wasn't the type to take charge of family affairs, while the other uncle, yet to be of age, was in poor health; father, in the middle, left school and took over the support of his family all by himself—he was eighteen. For a few years he ran the highway rest stop that my grandfather left behind. Every evening, the horses and mules would arrive in droves, and he had to help settle them down. It was hard work, and in the commotion the pressure of getting it done promptly was immense—men and beasts, the herdsman and their charges, were equally eager for rest. Father was physically a robust man, but there was also a great inner strength about him, which you could tell from the intensity in his eyes, as well as the calm, dignified manner in which he conducted himself in front of staff and customers alike. At the time the reputation of "boss number two," as he was called, extended far and wide.

Father often told us that in the beginning he too knew not what he was doing, then one day it all became clear. He said, a person must face the responsibilities of life and go through some real hardships—only that way would one's character be made. I always remember that. He taught his children to check our own bearings: stay close to the ground, your weight on your feet, as if ready

to work—never be flighty like a drifter. He had no use of anything shallow and showy or any of the latest fads. Father was a man steeped in traditional Chinese culture. One of his favorite things to read was the family letters of [late-Qing statesman] Zeng Wenzheng, and at night he often recited to himself passages from the ancient classics; sometimes I stood next to him and listened—his voice measured and calm—and I'd feel cleansed, my soul purified. Father was also never slapdash with his calligraphy—each stroke was in place and gracefully rendered, the ink full-bodied. He told us, "Pay attention to how you write." The characters should convey strength. The ink should never appear shallow. How one writes mirrors the goodness, or the lack of it, one has cultivated and garnered in life.

Father was a man of firm beliefs—the teachings of Chinese culture and philosophy had taken roots in his life. In the way he took care of the family, managed the business—his life at one with the farm, the village, the land and its people, yes, the harmonious whole that was his surroundings—the values praised by the ancient sages had been realized. "Peace with the earth—that is *ren* indeed [that is truly a manifestation of humanity]." When one lived as father did—at peace with the land and its people—those teachings became palpable and real; it was as if they had taken on a concrete presence, the teachings and the living blending into one. My father's life was therefore "life in itself." And in time his beliefs grew firmer still—there was a constancy, a purity of purpose to the way he lived. It was a proactive, constructive existence, a life that sustained life, that paved the way for more life.

Father was living proof that [moral] principles could guide one's way in the world and give our world some order and peace.

The years around 1928 were, however, a turbulent time for the Jiaodong area. Many out there—bad elements of all sorts—took advantage of the chaos and fooled the gullible with promises of protection. Father, who hadn't a crafty bone in him, would have nothing to do with them. Which demonstrated the truth, "Those who are upright remain steadfast and calm, awaiting that which life offers; the small-minded shy not from doing harm thinking they may get away with it." After the National Army had taken Beijing, local party members and bandits got together and wrecked havoc in the countryside. Our family wasn't spared the ordeal. Security forces from a nearby town, in pursuit of this so-called revolutionary army, besieged our village, and my uncle, father's younger brother, was murdered in the mayhem that ensued. The pain I felt was indescribable, and even though the party members did talk about compensation, by then I'd developed a deep loathing for them. Just the sight of their arrogant faces—the way they went around intimidating the village folks, acting like the new ruling class—disgusted me so. I hadn't mingled with them since I gave up being a member on probation. Now I made up my mind to have nothing, nothing at all, to do with them, even if that meant swallowing everything. Besides, my father forbade us to have any dealings with them, including getting even.

Father, by personal example, had shown me a life well lived—yes, in contrast to the superficial intellectuals

of the age, who wallowed in their smug superiority but really had nothing to contribute. None of them had a sense of roots. None lived in a way that was morally accountable to themselves, to the people, to our nation. And so they had nothing to say that was of real worth. They were opportunists who used artful talk to jostle for advantage and against each other, and in their hands the life of our culture had been destroyed. I mentioned earlier a new kind of man-made disasters—these were the men who made them, and Wu Zhihui was among the heads of the gang. Sure, his display of life force was impressive, but it was without foundation or roots. Next to my father, whose life was a testimony to the teachings of our culture, Wu was nothing. Father could single-handedly overcome that powerful wave in all its glory—yes, all that artful talk would suddenly crumble and be revealed as nothing more than a load of shit, and Wu, a fool, a madman.

I hope that all of us would go to the villages and see for ourselves what it is to live “life in itself” and be a testimony to truth. Let us think it through and begin anew living with a sense of roots—and from there become politicians, thinkers, and professionals with a firm grounding [in humanity, in *ren*]. Only then will China be on its way to a brighter future.

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Translator’s dedication:

To my parents, whose love and support make this possible.

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