

# The “Learning of Life”: On Some Motifs in Mou Zongsan’s *Autobiography at Fifty*

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## Abstract

While the twentieth-century Confucian thinker Mou Zongsan (1909–1995) has left behind one of the most thought-provoking and intensively studied bodies of philosophical writings in modern Chinese intellectual history, his own life and its relation to his philosophy (or “learning”), a theme at the centre of his *Autobiography at Fifty* from the mid-1950s, has so far remained largely unexamined. After some introductory remarks on the context and outlook of the *Autobiography*, my paper turns to the close relation between Mou’s conception of life and his approach to the “cultural life” of China as a nation. In doing so, I examine the notion of a distinctly Chinese (more precisely, Confucian) “learning of life” in his writing and explore the motif of “life in itself” running through the *Autobiography*. I argue that this motif is crucial for gaining a better understanding of Mou’s relation to his teacher Xiong Shili (1885–1968), his own father, the social conditions of his childhood in rural Shandong, as well as his overall approach to subjectivity as a space for articulating socio-political concerns.

**Keywords:** Mou Zongsan, *Autobiography at Fifty*, modern Confucianism, life, subjectivity

## »Učenje življenja«: o določenih temah v Mou Zongsanovi *Avtobiografiji pri petdesetih*

### Izvilleček

Medtem ko je konfucijanski mislec 20. stoletja Mou Zongsan za seboj pustil eno najbolj miselno provokativnih in podrobno proučevanih filozofskih del v moderni kitajski intelektualni zgodovini, ostajata njegovo življenje in odnos do njegove filozofije (oziroma »učjenja«), ki je v jedru njegove *Avtobiografije pri petdesetih* iz sredine petdesetih let prejšnjega stoletja, do zdaj razmeroma neraziskana. Po nekaj uvodnih pripombah o kontekstu in pogledih *Avtobiografije* se članek osredotoči na tesno povezavo med Mou Zongsanovim pojmovanjem življenja in njegovim pristopom h »kulturnemu življenju« Kitajcev kot naroda. Pri tem avtor članka v Mou Zongsanovi *Avtobiografiji pri petdesetih* preučuje pojem izrazito kitajskega (natančneje, konfucijanskega) »učjenja življenja« ter raziskuje motiv »življenja po sebi«. Avtor meni, da je ta motiv ključnega pomena za boljše razumevanje

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Mou Zongsanovega odnosa do učitelja Xiong Shilija (1885–1968), njegovega očeta, družbenih razmer v njegovem otroštvu v podeželskem Shandongu in njegovega celotnega pristopa do subjektivnosti kot prostora za artikulacijo družbeno-političnih zadev.

**Ključne besede:** Mou Zongsan, *Avtobiografija pri petdesetih*, moderno konfucijanstvo, življenje, subjektivnost

*From when I was young, I have felt stupefied and estranged  
by the chaotic concreteness of life.*  
我自幼就是一個於具體生活方面很木然生疏的混沌。  
(Mou 1953, 3)

## Introduction

The twentieth-century Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan's 牟宗三 (1909–1995) *Autobiography at Fifty* (*Wushi zishu* 五十自述) ([1989] 2003), references abbreviated to *Autobiography* below) has yet to attract a significant amount of scholarly attention (notable exceptions are Huang 2017 and Peng 2019). Tucked away in the 32nd and last volume of his bookshelf-filling *Complete Works* (*Mou Zongsan xiansheng quanji* 牟宗三先生全集) from 2003,<sup>1</sup> the *Autobiography* is in many ways a peculiar book, quite different from what most readers of Mou's more systematic philosophical writings are probably accustomed to. The text is made up of six chapters, each bearing an evocative title: 1) “Growing up in Non-Distinction” (*Zai hundun zhong zhangcheng* 在混沌中長成); 2) “The Development of Life as it Moves Away from Itself” (*Shengming zhi li qi ziji de fazhan* 生命之離其自己的發展); 3) “Intuitive Insight” (*Zhijue de jiewu* 直覺的解悟); 4) “Discursive Reasoning” (*Jiagou de sibian* 架構的思辨); 5) “Objective Commiseration” (*Keguan de beiqing* 客觀的悲情); and 6) “The Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī Inquires into Sickness” (*Wenshu wen ji* 文殊問疾).<sup>2</sup>

1 This volume also includes Cai Renhou's 蔡仁厚 (1930–2019) *Chronology of Mou Zongsan's Life* (*Mou Zongsan xiansheng nianpu* 牟宗三先生年譜), an invaluable biographical resource originally published in 1995.

2 The Kierkegaardian theme of “sickness unto death” plays a crucial role in the last chapter, which would merit a study in its own right. Translations of the titles of chapters 4 and 5 were adopted from Lu and Su's translation (see Mou 2015, 81, 117). The term *jiagou* 架構 (literally, “framework”) is a technical term Mou uses in his earlier work to refer both to what he considers to be a number of *a priori* structures of human reasoning as well as to the fundamental institutional and epistemic requirements for the transformation of the Confucian teachings into a new form “outer kingliness” (*waiwang* 外王) which can meet the political and cognitive challenges of modernity

These chapters were written between 1956 and 1957, when Mou was employed at Tunghai (東海) University in Taiwan, and vary considerably in length, style, and compositional structure. As such, despite being interlinked, they can to a certain extent be read as separate essays.<sup>3</sup> The opening chapter for example, which like the second was only published when the *Autobiography* first appeared as a monograph in 1989, vividly evokes Mou's youth in the countryside in Shandong 山東 province and is composed in a dense, poetic, meditative, and at times hypnotic style. By contrast, the fourth as well as large portions of the third chapter read more like a straightforward theoretical summary of his early engagement with philosophers such as Leibniz, Russell, Whitehead, and Kant, closely reflecting the content of Mou's massive *Critique of the Cognitive Mind* (*Renshixin zhi pipan* 認識心之批判)<sup>4</sup> while remaining largely devoid of the sort of personal or intimate details one may expect to find in an autobiography.

Indeed, more generally speaking, readers of Mou's *Autobiography* might end up feeling somewhat disappointed if they pick up this book in the hope of finding a nice collection of lively anecdotes or juicy details about the life of its author. To be sure, the latter are not entirely missing, and we do get some insight into the course of the modern Confucian philosopher's life events and experiences. At the start of the book, we learn of his youth growing up in rural Shandong in the county of Qixia 栖霞 on the Jidong 膠東 peninsula. The first chapter conjures up vivid images of Mou as a child lingering in the ancestral burial ground of his family and participating in the *Qingming* 清明 (Tomb Sweeping) rituals and festivities. We catch a glimpse of a young boy enjoying farm work, constructing a makeshift swing with his friends, playfully luring fish by lowering a piece of pork rib set in a basket into a stream, and hiding away in a pear grove to enjoy the beauty of nature in solitude. In later chapters, Mou describes his student days at Peking University, where he started exploring the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) and encountered revolutionary activists as well as (sometimes less than) encouraging teachers.<sup>5</sup> Mou recounts his

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(see Van den Stock 2016, 334–47). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are the author's.

- 3 The six chapters take up 16, 17, 19, 19, 45, and 55 pages, respectively, in the edition of the text in the *Complete Works*. The account of Mou's life offered in these chapters is not always strictly chronological, especially in the last chapter, which is by far the most sprawling of the whole book.
- 4 The two volumes of the 1949 *Critique* were published while Mou was composing the *Autobiography* (i.e. 1956–1957), which undoubtedly explains his relatively extensive retrospective engagement with this work in his memoir. A translation of Mou's original preface to the *Critique* is appended to the fourth chapter of the *Autobiography* in the English translation by Lu and Su (see Mou 2015, 112–16).
- 5 Mou audited one of Hu Shi's 胡適 (1891–1962) classes on the history of ancient Chinese thought in 1931. Hu's diaries from that time contain a note describing Mou as “very clever, but too abstruse in his thinking” (頗能想過一番, 但甚迂) (in Yu 1995, n. p.). Unsurprisingly, Mou's references to

post-graduation struggles to make ends meet while drifting from one city to the next in search of employment, and talks of his encounters (and occasional conflicts) with important figures such as Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968), Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1886–1969),<sup>6</sup> Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886–1973),<sup>7</sup> Zhang Shenfu 張申府 (1893–1986), Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), Jin Yuelin 金岳霖 (1895–1984), Shen Youding 沈有鼎 (1909–1989),<sup>8</sup> and last but not least his “soulmate” (*zhibi* 知己) Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–1978) along the way.<sup>9</sup>

As the title of the fifth chapter already indicates, Mou’s sense of “objective commiseration” (*keguan de beiqing* 客觀的悲情) is apparent from his pervasive concern over the massive social, political, historical and cultural changes in China he witnessed and lived through (for a comprehensive study, see Peng 2016). However, as Jason T. Clower observes in describing Mou’s overall philosophical outlook and approach:

Mou’s thoughts are intensely *inwardly* directed. Mou’s *Autobiography at Fifty* is extremely revealing in this regard, especially its first chapter, in which he describes himself as a child so absorbed in a solitary “self-contained inner universe” of ineffable, inchoate, consuming emotion that his father suspected his hearing might be damaged [see Li 2002, 5]. The

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Hu in the *Autobiography* as well as in later writings are overwhelming negative and often downright dismissive (see for example Clower 2014, 35–36, 80). One of the immediate reasons behind Mou’s violent dislike of Hu was undoubtedly the fact that Hu had refused to provide him with a position at Peking University after Xiong Shili had asked Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 (1893–1964) to vouch for his jobless young protégé on his behalf (see Li 2002, 34).

- 6 On Mou’s falling-out with Zhang and the “National Socialist Party of China” (*Zhongguo guojia shehui dang* 中國國家社會黨), see *Autobiography*, 85–86, 88–89. Li Shan attributes Mou’s general distrust of party politics to the fact that his paternal uncle (his father’s younger brother) was accidentally shot to death by a local Guomindang militia (a “peace preservation corps”, *bao’andui* 保安隊) in a brawl with a band of “revolutionaries” in 1928 (see Li 2002, 12). Mou himself, however, insisted that his intense hatred of the Communist Party, which far outstripped his ambiguous attitude toward the Guomindang, should not be contributed to any personal reasons or grudges, but rather stemmed from the fact that the ideology of communism had effectively “betrayed our national and cultural life” (背叛了民族生命與文化生命) (*Autobiography*, 106).
- 7 Concerning Zhang Dongsun’s (largely unacknowledged) influence on the early Mou, see Wang 2006, 72–74, 106–7; Suter 2018, 382–90. Two of Mou’s earliest publications were contributions to a compilation of critiques of dialectical materialism edited by Zhang (see Zhang [1934]).
- 8 According to Peng Guoxiang 彭國翔, Mou’s notion of a “third epoch for Confucianism” (儒學第三期), later popularized by Tu Weiming 杜維明, can be traced back to one of Shen’s texts from 1937, calling for the development of a “third epoch of culture” in China (see Peng 2007, 265).
- 9 The less well-known figure of Zhang Zunliu 張遵驪 (1916–1992), grandson of the famous late Qing official and reformer Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), also figures prominently in the *Autobiography* as a comforting and generous presence who repeatedly went out of his way to help his jobless, itinerant, and irascible friend. (See *Autobiography*, 81–82, 86–87)

*Autobiography* is best described not as a historical narration of Mou's relations with people and events in space and time, but as a sort of auto-psychodrama. (Clower, forthcoming)

Since I will return in more detail to some of the complexities of this “inwardness” and what I take to be its dialectical relation to what Mou called “objective commiseration” further on, suffice to say for now that even in Li Shan's 李山 biography (2002) we end up learning relatively little of Mou's personal life, and much more about the intricate vagaries of his thought. To a certain extent, this reflects the rather uneventful course of the philosopher's daily comings and goings. According to Li's account, for a great part of his life Mou got up every day between five and six o'clock, immediately bent over his desk for around three hours even before eating breakfast and, apart from another meal at noon, continued working until dinnertime, a routine he observed all year round as long as he had no pressing teaching or lecturing responsibilities. Mou's only real pastimes or hobbies were playing Chinese chess, watching traditional opera, and taking walks, preferably on rainy days, since there would not be too many people in the streets then (see Li 2002, 158).

As Mou himself notes at one point in his *Autobiography* while reflecting on the “natural village life” (*xiang ju de ziran shenghuo* 鄉居的自然生活) he had to leave behind after his move to the capital as a student:

As I look back, it only makes sense for me to really speak of “life” when referring to these harmonious conditions, with children, adults, and the elderly all leading the lives proper to them. It seems to me now I only really lived during my childhood.

我回想，只有在那諧合的套裏，始可說有生活。孩子是小孩的生活，成人是成人的生活，老年是老年的生活。我現在想，我有一段少年孩童的生活。( *Autobiography*, 17)

Or consider the even more morose observation in another reminiscence dating from a couple of years before the writing of the *Autobiography*: “Up until this very day, I am still a person who hardly has any life at all” (直到現在，我還一個幾乎無生活的人) (Mou [1953], 4). To be sure, these seemingly self-deprecating statements will have to be further unpacked in what follows. In any case, the phrase “A Philosophical Life” in the subtitle added in the recent English translation of the *Autobiography* by Ming-Yueng Lu and Esther C. Su from 2015 is quite well-chosen, not in the least because it already gives us a sense of Mou Zongsan's understanding of the close relation between “life” and “learning”, a topic we will

turn to in the next section. For Mou, personal experience and emotion are anything but empirical obstacles to be cleared away for attaining rational insight. As such, he does not follow the positivist belief that philosophical reasoning requires us to “subtract the subject from truth”, with the truth counting as the “residue” or “dregs” which remains after such a procedure of subtraction (Adorno 2013, 15). As he notes in the preface to his *Autobiography*, at the time of its composition, “my thoughts and feelings were weighed down by the multitude of things I experienced around me, which also led me to gain insight into many truths” (意趣消沉，感觸良多，並此感印證許多真理) (*Autobiography*, preface, 3; translation amended from Mou 2015, xv).

### Life, “Cultural Life”, and the “Learning of Life”

Since the *Autobiography at Fifty* dates back to 1956–1957, when Mou Zongsan was between 48 and 49 years old, and would only be published under its current title when he had turned eighty, it is safe to say that the number “fifty” in the title is not to be taken too literally, but before all else has a strongly symbolic significance. It refers to a well-known passage in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語, 2.4), where Confucius describes the major stages in his life and claims to have come to “know the mandate of heaven at the age of fifty” (*wushi er zhi tianming* 五十而知天命).<sup>10</sup> Hence, the title of the *Autobiography* in itself indicates that the author attempts to situate his life in a much broader context transcending the course of his individual existence. As Huang Kuan-min 黃冠閔 has argued in detail, the *Autobiography* places Mou’s personal life within what he calls a “community of remembrance” (Huang 2017), more specifically, that of the Confucian tradition, which he considered to be the “mainstream within the mainstreams” (*zhuliu zhong zhi zhuliu* 主流中之主流) of Chinese culture (Mou [1963a], vol. 28, 4). Generally speaking, “life” (*shengming* 生命) is not a purely subjective category for Mou and does not primarily have a biological or aesthetic sense, but rather a moral and “spiritual” significance (see Mou 1955, 191; Lee 2015, 57). As such, it denotes something intrinsically bound up with a wider cultural and historical horizon of meaning.<sup>11</sup>

10 And just like the Master himself, Mou also singles out 15 as the age at which he “set his mind upon learning” (志於學), an age which for Mou coincided with leaving his hometown to go to high school (see *Autobiography*, 17).

11 “Life is always vertically positioned [in relation to something transcendent] and has multiple dimensions. If we merely pay attention to the flattened-out expanse available to scientific and technological consciousness, we effectively risk corrupting life and ending up negating ourselves as human beings. The core of Chinese culture is the learning of life, [which means] accomplishing things in the external world and pursuing cognitive ideals by starting out from awakening to authentic existence and allowing such ideals to permeate their genuine source inside of ourselves, so that

Needless to say, the “community of remembrance” invoked by Mou is very much an imaginary construct embedded in a pre-established philosophical agenda, allowing the author to recount his own life story as part and parcel of the fate of the Chinese nation as a whole.

Unsurprisingly then, in Mou’s writings we frequently come across the expression “cultural life” (*wenhua shengming* 文化生命), quite often as something that has come under attack or has been severely compromised and damaged in modern times. This rhetoric of a distorted and damaged “cultural life” became especially prominent in Mou’s writings after he left mainland China, shortly before the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949.<sup>12</sup> In one of his many memorable critiques of the “evil of the demonic path” (*modao zhi e* 魔道之惡) of Chinese communism, in a series of lectures delivered in 1988 at National Central University and National Taiwan Normal University, Mou would continue to declare:

When Tang and Wu rebelled (*geming* 革命), what they removed (*ge* 革) was [the mandate of] King Jie of the Xia dynasty and King Zhou of the Shang dynasty; with the Xinhai Revolution, the Manchus of the Qing dynasty were stripped [of their mandate]. But what was removed with the so-called “Great Cultural Revolution” (*wenhua da geming* 文化大革命)? Precisely your very life itself, it is [we] ourselves who were done away with.

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they can become ideals in the proper sense of the word. This is the whole substance and complete function of the learning of life.”

(生命總是縱貫的，立體的。專注於科技之平面橫剖面的意識總是走向腐蝕生命而成為‘人’之自我否定。中國文化的核心是生命的學問，由真實生命之覺醒，向外開出建立事業與追求知識之理想，向內滲透此等理想之真實本源，以使理想真成其為理想。此是生命學問之全體大用。) (Mou [1970], 1–2; cf. *Autobiography*, 93–94)

Jason Clower notes that “generally (Mou) uses *zongguan* (vertical) in a special sense, to mean continuity of the mundane with the transcendent, which is to say, something trans-historical” (Clower 2014, 40, note 35). In an earlier text entitled “The Singular Entity in Solitude” (*Jimo zhong zhi duti* 寂寞中之獨體), Mou still drew a conceptual distinction between the two most commonly used Chinese words for “life”, *shengming* 生命 and *shenghuo* 生活:

“Life (*shengming*) is an abstract concept derived from actual existence (*shenghuo*), whereas the latter is something concrete. Actual existence is life with the addition of all sorts of rich details, whereas life [as such] is a bare outline stripped of all superimposed trivia.”

(生命是從生活中抽出的一個抽象概念，而生活是具體的。生活是生命上加上花果枝葉，生命是剝落枝葉花果的一個光禿禿的骨幹。) (Mou [1944], 573)

For a detailed discussion of this text, see Huang 2017, 121–26.

- 12 With the exception of two short trips to Shenzhen 深圳 to visit his granddaughter (from his first marriage) when he was already in his old age, Mou would never return to the mainland again, in spite of his growing academic fame there in the 1980s (see Peng 2019, 275). For extensive treatments of Mou’s critique of communism and historical materialism, see Peng 2016, 59–116, 271–340, and Van den Stock 2016, 113–21, 152–80, 276–99.

湯武革命是革夏桀、商紂；辛亥革命是革滿清。‘文化大革命’革什麼呢？就是革你自己的生命，把自己革掉拉倒了。(Mou 2019, 24)

As this passage indicates, for Mou, a life without culture, a life detached from the “cultural life” of the Chinese nation, would merely amount to a biological and material form of existence, devoid of any normative significance. “Life” without “cultural life” leads to the sort of dehumanization and reification (*wubua* 物化) he saw as being symbolized and epitomized by communist China. Conversely, Mou believes that “culture” must always remain closely connected to human existence in all its complexity and manifoldness. In short, life and culture are dialectically related to each other as “concrete universals” (*juti de pubian* 具體的普遍) (see Shi 2019). This becomes quite clear in the following passage from the preface to Mou’s study of Wei-Jin 魏晉 philosophy, *Material Disposition and Profound Principle* (*Caixing yu xuanli* 才性與玄理) (1963b), the first in a series of monumental studies of the history of Chinese thought he started working on after the symbolic turning-point of his fiftieth birthday.<sup>13</sup> Here, Mou writes:

The development of culture consists in the purification of life and the manifestation of reason.<sup>14</sup> However, it is of the utmost importance for humanity to reveal both the positive and the negative aspects of the learning of life. [...] The learning of life can only be entered by relying on authentic existence and authentic emotions. Without these, not only would the learning of life become meaningless, but we would be unable to develop any form of learning whatsoever.

文化之發展即是生命之清澈與理性之表現。然則生命學問之消極面與積極面之深入展示固是人類之大事 [...] 生命之學問，總賴真生命與真性情以契接。無真生命與性情，不獨生命之學問無意義，即任何學問亦開發不出也。(Mou [1963b], preface, 11)<sup>15</sup>

13 As he notes in his *Autobiography* (preface, 3), “after I turned fifty, my life became focused on the pursuit and expression of learning” (五十而後，吾之生命集中於往學之表述). In a later retrospective text, Mou would recall that before the age of fifty, his thinking operated “like a wild horse” (野馬式), in a constant pursuit to “break new ground” (開荒式) (Mou [1974], 209).

14 For Mou, “philosophy” (*zhexue* 哲學) is essentially a “teaching” (*jiao* 教), which he defines at one point as “anything capable of stimulating human reason and providing the guidance human beings need to purify their existence through practical effort to the fullest extent possible” (凡足以啓發人之理性並指導人通過實踐以純潔化人之生命而至其極者) (Mou [1985a], preface, 3).

15 In terms we will further consider in the third section of this article, Mou presents the ascendancy of Daoism during the Wei-Jin period, which he saw as a bridge for the absorption of Buddhism, as a phase in which Chinese “cultural life temporarily departed from itself. [But] it is precisely by taking leave of itself that it replenished itself” (文化生命之暫時離其自己。離其自己正所以充實其自己也) (Mou [1963b], preface, 9).



This link between individual and cultural life is highly significant, not in the least for understanding what Mou called the “learning of life” (*shengming de xuewen* 生命的學問). Tellingly, Mou uses this expression to designate the Chinese philosophical tradition as a whole as well as Confucian teachings in particular. As such, the “learning of life” is as much oriented toward the meta-subject of “culture” as it is toward individual existence, with Mou presenting Chinese philosophy as being animated by a pervasive concern with “life”, in contrast to the Western focus on “nature” and “logic” (see *Autobiography*, 79; Mou [1963a], 5–6; Mou [1983], 16). In effect, Mou would eventually come to claim that since “philosophy” (*philosophia*) originally meant the “love of wisdom”, only the Chinese tradition had managed to preserve its primordial sense as a transformative “practical learning of wisdom” (*shijian de zhibuixue* 實踐的智慧學) (Mou 2019, 52).<sup>16</sup> As he consistently maintained, philosophy should not merely pursue objective “knowledge” (*zhibi* 知識), but should before all else be concerned with “illuminating the self” (*ming ji* 明己) (Mou [1952], 8). By contrast, mainstream Western philosophy had, in his view, degenerated into a sterile techno-scientific enterprise (*kejihua le* 科技化了) (see Mou 2019, 53; cf. Mou [1983], 8). As was the case with many other twentieth-century and contemporary Chinese thinkers, reinventing traditional forms of knowledge within the modern epistemic space of “philosophy” (*zhexue* 哲學) went hand in hand with an insistence on maintaining some sort of continuity between “knowledge” (*zhi* 知) and “action” (*xing* 行), even if such a continuity would need to adopt new epistemological as well as institutional forms of mediation (see below).

In the preface to a collection of essays from 1970 entitled *The Learning of Life* (*Shengming de xuewen* 生命的學問),<sup>17</sup> Mou Zongsan makes it clear that the texts collected under this common denominator are closely related to what scholars now call his “three books on outer kingliness” (*waiwang san shu* 外王三書), namely the *Philosophy of History* (*Lishi zhexue* 歷史哲學, 1955), *Moral Idealism* (*Daode de lixiangzhuayi* 道德的理想主義, 1959), and *The Way of Politics and the Way of*

16 This is the title of a series of recently published lectures from 1988 (Mou 2019) which closely follow the content of his *Treatise on the Supreme Good* (*Yuanshan lun* 圓善論) from 1985. The term “practical learning of wisdom” is a translation of Kant’s expression *Weisheitslehre* in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, usually rendered as “doctrine of wisdom”, to which Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (1829–1913) added the adjective “practical” in his translation from 1889, a version with which Mou was certainly familiar (also see Mou [1985a], preface, 6). The addition of this adjective is interesting and revealing, since “[w]e tend to think of ‘wisdom’ as the opposite of ‘practical.’ Wisdom is about abstract, ethereal matters like ‘the way’ or ‘the good’ or ‘the truth’ or ‘the path.’ And we tend to think that wisdom is something for sages, gurus, rabbis, and scholars—for white-bearded wizards” (Schwartz and Sharpe 2010, 3). For more on the identification of Chinese (and more generally, non-Western) philosophy with “wisdom”, see Van den Stock 2018a; 2018b.

17 This book was not included in the 2003 *Complete Works* due to copyright reasons.

*Governance* (*Zhengdao yu zhidao* 政道與治道, 1961). As was the case for these three works, the “learning of life” is before all else intended to nurture the sort of “historical-cultural consciousness” (*lishi wenhua yishi* 歷史文化意識) that can pave the way toward “authentic life” (*zhenshi shengming* 真實生命) (Mou [1970], preface, 1), and not simply with individual existential problems. For Mou, the “learning of life” is a matter of “bringing oneself and things to completion” (*cheng ji cheng wu* 成己成物) (Mou [1961], 43). Highly telling in this respect is the fact that in the text which opens *The Learning of Life*, a short autobiographical essay from 1953 entitled “On Homesickness” (*Shuo ‘huaxiang’* 說‘懷鄉’), Mou describes his own bitter sense of longing for China and for his native province of Shandong as “a kind of general and abstract, one could even say objective, emotion” (一種一般的抽象的, 也可以說是客觀的情緒) (Mou [1953], 1). He argues that his deep frustration and anger over being exiled from the mainland does not primarily stem from a personal feeling of longing for home, but rather from a concern over the larger historical and cultural developments that have tragically removed China as nation from itself, from its own “cultural life”. Mou thus claims to be trying to capture what he calls an “abstract sense of longing, a longing for the essence of what makes human beings human” (抽象的懷想, 對於「人之為人」的本質之懷念) (*ibid.*, 5) in these pages.<sup>18</sup> Equally revealing is the subtitle of the text “On the Learning of Life” from 1961, after which the essays collected in the eponymous volume were named: “Chinese Thought in the Past Fifty Years” (*Lun wushi nian lai de Zhongguo sixiang* 論五十年來的中國思想). In this essay, ostensibly meant as an overview of the intellectual developments in China since the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, it quickly becomes obvious that what Mou calls the “learning of life” is intended as a counter-concept to what he considers to be the cultural disintegration and political degradation of China under communism.

Bearing the above in mind, it is not surprising that there is a considerable overlap between the philosophical vocabulary Mou uses to describe individual moral

18 “The ideas I have developed [in the past years] are all grounded in an attempt to allow the basis for a system of thought that is able to settle human existence and establish [adequate] social institutions to emerge from the disintegration and degradation of the present age [...] This [task] involves the following three aspects: firstly, clearing the way for the fundamental spirit of democracy in order to establish a guiding course for the establishment of political life; secondly, opening up a path for the emergence of the fundamental spirit of science in order to establish an epistemological system of learning; and thirdly, clearing the way for the fundamental spirit that will allow for the transformation of moral religion [i.e. Confucianism] into a cultural institution, so as to establish a proper course for everyday existence.”

(我所發的那些思想, 完全是想從崩解墮落的時代, 湧現出足以安定人生建立制度的思想系統上的根據。[...] 這裏面含有三事: 一是疏導出民主政治的基本精神, 以建立政治生活方面的常軌。二是疏導出科學的基本精神, 以建立知識方面的學問統緒。三是疏導出道德宗教之轉為文制的基本精神, 以建立日常生活方面的常軌。)(Mou [1953], 5)

self-cultivation and the political project of establishing China as a nation-state, endeavours which are both conceptualized as involving what is known in the Confucian tradition as “fulfilling one’s nature” (*jin xing* 盡性). As Mou put it pointedly: “A people that is unable to establish a state is a nation that cannot fulfil its own nature” (一個能建國的民族，是不能盡其民族之性的民族) (Mou [1961], 38). Or as we read in the *Autobiography*:

Establishing a state is the solemn and sacred task of a people, it is the labour of a nation “fulfilling its own nature”. A nation which fails to establish the state as a political entity cannot fulfil its own nature. In the same sense, an individual who has not managed to fulfil his own nature cannot be considered to be an individual entity with a personality of his own.

建國是嚴肅而神聖的工作，是民族「盡其性」的工作。一個民族不能作到政體建國，便是未能盡其民族之性。亦如一個人之未能盡其性，便不可說是一個人格的存在。) (*Autobiography*, 80)<sup>19</sup>

“Intrinsic nature” (*xing* 性) is thus not only a realm of subjective interiority here, but also refers to the institutional and structural requirements necessary for providing the Confucian “learning of life” with a new objective foundation in modern society. This already shows that the sort of “inwardness” to which a document such as Mou’s *Autobiography* arguably gives us privileged access is not to be conceived of in purely subjective or individual terms, but rather designates a space overlapping with the contours of the political horizon of modernity.

### The Motif of “Life in Itself” in the *Autobiography*: Teacher, Father, Peasant, Child ... and Subject

One of the most interesting expressions of the deep entanglement of subjective existence with the transindividual, “abstract”, or “objective” dimension of “cultural life” discussed above can be found in Mou Zongsan’s transformative encounter with Xiong Shili in 1932, which is described in great detail in the *Autobiography*

19 Cf. *Autobiography*, 79, and Mou [1947], 975:

“If people fail to go through a self-awakening in their spiritual lives, they will not become individuals with a personality of their own. If our whole nation remains unable to experience a self-awakening in its spiritual life, it will never become an individual state.”  
(每個人在精神生活上不能有一番自我的覺醒，他便不能成一個有人格的獨體。全民族若不能在精神生活上有一番自我的覺醒，它便不能成一個國家的獨體。)

at Fifty.<sup>20</sup> When we read Mou’s account, it soon becomes clear that this meeting had a profound and even historical significance for him. He describes being jolted awake by his mentor’s (*yeshi* 業師) “lion’s roar” (*shizihou* 獅子吼) and by “the loud laughter booming out from the core of his belly” (笑聲震屋宇，直從丹田發) (*Autobiography*, 76–77, translation quoted from Mou 2015, 119), and claims that Xiong was the only one who had managed to preserve and revitalize the “teaching of humaneness of the Confucian sages” (*rusheng de renjiao* 儒聖的仁教) (Mou [1961], 44) in modern times. To be sure, this claim is not simply an expression of deep reverence for his teacher, but also effectively places Mou himself within a newly invented “transmission of the Way” (*daotong* 道統). Explicitly excluded from this lineage are the likes of Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990), the rationalist modernizer of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) who had rejected “moral knowing” (*liangzhi* 良知) as a mere “hypothesis” (*jiashe* 假設) instead of following Xiong in recognizing it as a veritable “manifestation” (*chengxian* 呈現) (see *Autobiography*, 78).<sup>21</sup> The following passage from *The Learning of Life* is worth quoting at some length in this context:

Since the start of the War of Resistance against Japan, I received personal instruction from my teacher, the way before me in the blink of an eye [目擊而道存],<sup>22</sup> and was greatly moved and inspired [by him]. Thus, when I witnessed with my own eyes how in the thirty-eighth year of the Republic [1949], the mainland fell into enemy hands and had a deep sense of my own life being ruptured and cut off, I resolved to dredge up our cultural life and open a path for the life of the nation, overturning the distortion that had reigned since the beginning of the Manchu Qing dynasty and channelling the willpower of the scholars of the late Ming period in order to unfold the learning of life.<sup>23</sup> This was the reason I wrote

20 The first part of the fifth chapter of the *Autobiography* was originally published under the title “Me and Mr. Xiong Shili” (*Wo yu Xiong Shili xiansheng* 我與熊十力先生) in the journal *Zhongguo xueren* 中國學人 (*The Chinese Scholar*) in 1970 and reprinted in *The Learning of Life* in the same year.

21 Mou also chastised Feng for “shamelessly banding together with the communists” (*Autobiography*, 79). Hence Mou’s ruthless criticism of Feng in his later works: “The existence of such a book [Feng’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*], not to mention its being universally recognized by East and West as a representative work, shows that Chinese people of this era are so lame that they are a disgrace to our ancestors and a disgrace to the whole world. It is a humiliation for all the people of China.” (Clower 2014, 38)

22 A reference to the *Tian Zifang* 田子方 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.

23 For Mou, the Chinese “learning of life” had in a sense already been radically interrupted with the end of the Ming dynasty (as a rare period of unity between “national life” and “cultural life”) and the Manchu takeover, the only notable exceptions who held this tradition alive being Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), and Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692). See Mou [1957], 73–74; Mou [1961], 41.

my *Philosophy of History, Moral Idealism, and The Way of Politics and the Way of Governance*.

自抗戰以來，親炙師門，目擊而道存，所感發者多矣。故自民國三十八年以來，目睹大陸之淪陷，深感吾人之生命已到斷潢絕港之時。乃發憤從事文化生命之疏通，以開民族生命之途徑，扭轉滿清以來之歪曲，暢通晚明諸儒之心志，以開生命之學問。此《歷史哲學》、《道德的理想主義》、《政道與治道》三書之所由作也。(Mou [1961], 44)

In the *Autobiography* itself, Xiong is praised as a veritable incarnation of the “radiant life of wisdom” (*guanghui zhi huiming* 光輝之慧命) of the Chinese tradition<sup>24</sup> and as a solitary transmitter of the Confucian creed:

in today’s day and age, only he was able to directly connect to and remain in touch with the great life that emerged with the Yellow Emperor and [the sage-kings] Yao and Shun. This “great life” consists in the unity of national life and cultural life. He buttressed the source of human existence and the universe opened up by the conceptual orientation of the cultural life of China in order to expound its principles and emotional content. His learning was immediately both existential as well as cosmological.

當今之世，唯彼一人能直通黃帝堯舜以來之大生命而不隔。此大生命是民族生命與文化生命之合一。他是直頂着華族文化生命之觀念方向所開闢的人生宇宙之本源而抒發其義理與情感。他的學問直下是人生的，同時也是宇宙的。(Autobiography, 92)<sup>25</sup>

Crucially, the direct relation between Xiong’s “radiant life of wisdom” on the one hand and the Chinese tradition as encapsulating the immediate unity of human existence with the very fabric of reality on the other is contrasted with the conceptual mediation involved in the logical and scientific orientation of Western thought.<sup>26</sup> As Mou notes, ever since Kant’s “Copernican revolution”, the kind of “existential-cosmological” knowledge embodied by Xiong has been forced to pass through the epistemological question as to “how it is possible” (*rube keneng*

24 “This radiant life is the sort of life and path Jesus referred to when he said ‘I am the life’ and ‘I am the way’ [John 14:6].” (這慧命就是耶穌所說的‘我就是生命’之生命，‘我就是道路’之道路。) (Autobiography, 80)

25 Mou would later occasionally refer to his former mentor in less than favourable terms. See for example Clower 2014, 39, 47.

26 In a commemorative article, Mou stresses that Xiong should not be mistaken for a “person of culture” (文化人), but rather as someone imbued with a superior kind of “primordial energy” (原始氣) or “savage energy” (野人氣) (Mou [1985b], 298).

如何可能). In other words, such knowledge must now seek to justify itself by means of an inquiry into the cognitive disposition of the subject (*zbuti* 主體) as a knower and adopt a properly transcendental standpoint, instead of simply appealing to "intuitive insight" (*zhijue de jiewu* 直覺的解悟) (the title of the second chapter of the *Autobiography*). In short, from the transcendental standpoint put forward in the Kantian turn toward the subject, "cosmology must be grounded in epistemology" (宇宙論必有認識論為其根據) (*Autobiography*, 92). While Mou concedes that Xiong's thought thus risks appearing as a kind of pre-critical dogmatism, since it departs from the unity of life and the cosmos rather than reconstituting such a unity by starting out from an investigation into its conditions of the possibility, he stresses that the "true countenance" (*zhenxiang* 真相) of Xiong's teaching lies elsewhere. In his view, it is to be looked for in how it reflects the entire Confucian tradition of Fu Xi 伏羲, Confucius, Mencius, and beyond, a tradition within which, Mou argues, the immediacy apparent in Xiong's "cosmological-existential" outlook and the subject-oriented perspective of post-Kantian philosophy "manifested themselves simultaneously in the same instant, being neither separated from nor opposed to each other" (一下子同時呈現的, 既不隔, 亦不對立) (*Autobiography*, 92).

This train of thought obviously foreshadows Mou's later insistence on the primordial status of intuitive knowledge of the noumenal as a non-cognitively constituted relation of the subject to its own moral essence, which should in turn to be conceived of as identical to that of the world itself. However, the unmediated status of life, as always already in some sense identical to the world, is not yet presented here as an "in itself" (*an sich*) waiting to be "sublated" (*Aufgehoben*) through reflexive awareness in a Hegelian sense, as is arguably the case in the complex logic of the "self-negation of moral knowing" (*liangzhi zhi ziwo kanxian* 良知之自我坎陷) Mou had already been tentatively developing at the time. Rather, intuition is still elevated above (mediated) "knowledge" in a somewhat more straightforward or at least more explicit manner. As such, Mou claims:

This is not a matter of groping about after things through understanding, but rather of immediate insight and experience. It might be objected that such insight and experience is subjective, but in this case, what is subjective is at the same time objective. What we are dealing with here is the source of creation and the source of value. It is a question of the foundation of human existence, and not a matter of knowledge. The primordial significance of Master Xiong's learning is to be looked for here.

這不是知解摸索的事, 而是直下證悟感受的事。若說證悟感受是主觀的, 但在這裡, 主觀的, 亦是客觀的。這是創造之源, 價值

之源，人生根柢的事，不是知識的事，熊師學問最原始的意義還是在這一點。(Autobiography, 93)<sup>27</sup>

In order to cast some light on the elevation of the immediacy of “existence” above the conceptual mediation and reflexivity tied up with “knowledge”, it is instructive to consider Mou’s portrayal of his father, Mou Yinqing 牟蔭清 (?–1941), a stern and imposing figure looming in the background of the *Autobiography*.<sup>28</sup> Before meeting Xiong, his own father’s moral admonitions had already caused the young Mou to “wake up with a start” (*jingxing* 驚醒) and managed to deliver him from the “spirit of excessive romanticism” (*fanlan langman de jingshen* 汎濫浪漫的精神) which had temporarily drawn him toward political and revolutionary activism (see below) and the “pitch-black” (*qihei yituan* 漆黑一團) materialist worldview of Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1865–1953) during his student days (see *Autobiography*, 30–31). In effect, Mou depicts his father, a simple and hard-working man who ran a resting stop for pack animals in Qixia, as someone who (very much like his teacher Xiong) embodied China’s cultural tradition, not through his “learning”, but within his very life and conduct. By contrast, Mou understands his own passage to a life of scholarship to involve a movement of “life moving away from itself” (*shengming zhi li qi ziji* 生命之離其自己) (see *Autobiography*, 17–18). Hence, the pursuit of learning and study is not so much continuous with or conducive to existence for him, but rather counts as an interruption and “diversion” (*qu* 曲) in

27 In another passage in the *Autobiography*, Mou approaches such non-cognitive immediacy in more universalist terms, as a characteristic feature of all the great “sages” of the world:

“The primordial creative spirit of humanity relied on a number of great sages: Confucius, Jesus, and Śākyamuni. These great and spirited personalities were all direct and inspired in what they sensed and mysterious as well as straightforward in their understanding, sincere and clear-cut. In their immediacy, they were identical to the way, the light, connected as they were to heavenly virtue. Within the boundlessness [of the world], they showed a ‘sense of what is real’. They had no theories, no systems, or clever conceptual artifice. The only thing they had was this ‘sense of what is real’, a profound love and compassion coming from the very depths of life. That is why Confucius talked about humaneness, Jesus talked about love, and Śākyamuni talked about compassion. These words are not specific terms for conceptual problems, nor are theoretical and discursive notions. [...] Their [numinous radiance, *lingguang* 靈光 and wisdom, *zhizhi* 智慧] open onto learning, but are not in themselves forms of learning. They open onto thinking, but are not a thing of thought. They are a source of creativity, a driving force of culture.”

(人類原始的創造的靈魂，是靠著幾個大聖人：孔子、耶穌、釋迦。這些從人格方面說的偉大靈魂都是直接的、靈感的、神秘的，簡易明白，精誠肯斷。而又直下是生命，是道路，是光，又直下是通著天德的。他們都是在蒼茫中有“實感”的。他們沒有理論，沒有系統，沒有工巧的思辨。他們所有的只是一個實感，只是從生命深處發出一個熱愛，一個悲憫：所以孔子講仁，耶穌講愛，釋迦講悲。這些字眼都不是問題中的名詞，亦不是理論思辨中的概念。[...] 它開出了學問，它本身不是學問，它開出了思辨，它本身不是思辨。它是創造的根源，文化的動力。) (*Autobiography*, 73–74)

28 On Mou’s relationship with his father, see Wang 2006, 85–95; Peng 2019, 271–74.

the natural course of life and a transition into the "non-existential" (*fei cunzai de* 非存在的) domain (*Autobiography*, 15). To such a life "moving away from itself", the portrait of Mou's father offers a clear counterweight:

It seemed to me as if the principles and lessons of Chinese culture had taken root in his very person as well as in the way he managed the household and his affairs, thereby becoming rooted in the harmonious unity of the village, farm, natural surroundings, and local customs. [As we read in the *Appended Remarks* (*Xici* 繫辭) to the *Book of Changes*:] "To be at peace with the earth is humane indeed" [安土孰乎仁], this is the phrase that comes to mind here. These principles and lessons had taken root in his "humaneness of being at peace with the earth", becoming authentic and actual in the process. And so my father's life was one in which life is at home with itself. The principles and lessons of Chinese culture had become internalized within his very life, as a life at home with itself.

我覺得中國文化中的那些義理教訓，在他身上是生了根的，由他在治家謀生的事業中生了根，在與鄉村、農業，自然地理、風俗習慣那諧和的一套融而為一中生了根。‘安土孰乎仁’是不錯。那些義理教訓都在這‘安土孰乎仁’中生根，一起隨之為真實的，存在的。因此他的生命是生命之在其自己的生命。那些義理教訓也隨他的生命之在其自己而亦內在化於他的生命中。(Autobiography, 32)

The expression "life being at home with itself" (*shengming zhi zai qi ziji* 生命之在其自己) calls to mind Mou's attempt to radically rewire Kant's transcendental distinction between appearance (*xianxiang* 現象) and thing in itself (*wu zishen* 物自身, *wu zhi zai qi ziji* 物之在其自己) in his mature ontology. As would later be the case, the domain of the "in itself" already has a normative connotation in the *Autobiography*, instead of merely occupying the position of an epistemological stopgap for the categorically unknowable.

In this context, I think it is highly significant that Mou Zongsan connects the unmediated state of what he calls "life in itself" embodied by his own father with the figure of the peasant and with a rural mode of existence. As he writes:

Genuine life in the proper sense of the word means living as one makes a living and should come down to living within life itself. Only the life of a peasant is a life within the vitality of existence, a life of existence "in itself".



真正恰當意義的生活，生活如其為生活，當該是在生命中生活。唯農民的生活是在生命中生活，是生命‘在其自己’。(Autobiography, 18)

To be sure, Mou almost immediately goes on to add that “we cannot all be farmers, and life cannot simply remain within itself, but must also take leave of itself” (世人不能只是農民，生命不能只是在其自己，也當離其自己) (ibid.), but his portrayal of peasant life as a form of “life in itself” is run through with nostalgia and a sense of bitterness over the “non-existent” direction which tends to lead “learning” further and further away from “life”.

The state of vitality of “life in itself” that Mou attributes to the figure of the peasant corresponds to what the first chapter of the *Autobiography* describes as the “chaotic non-distinction” (*hundun* 混沌) of existence in its most primordial form, still untainted by reflexive awareness. In these opening pages, Mou describes his early childhood as a phase in which subjectivity has yet to emerge and distinguish itself from the external world, and the self apprehends itself as neither the same nor really different from the world in which it is situated. In this state of being “alone yet not forlorn” (*luomo er bu luomo* 落寞而不落寞), the young Mou found himself at one with

the singing birds, the soft sands, the mulberry green, the flowing water, the white clouds racing by, all of this coalescing to form the tranquil piping of heaven.<sup>29</sup> Unknowing and unaware, I drifted into sleep, returning to a state of solitary non-distinction.

鳥之鳴，沙之軟，桑之綠，水之流，白飄來飄去，這一切都成了催眠的天籟。不知不覺睡着了，復返於寂寞的混沌。(Autobiography, 3)

What Mou is trying to capture here is what he calls the “experience of life ‘as it is in itself’” (生命之‘在其自己’之感受) (ibid., 7).<sup>30</sup> Given the historically specific and normatively charged association between rural existence and the notion of “life as it is in itself”, it is clear that the movement of “life moving away from itself”, as coinciding with the emergence of subjectivity from a state of

29 A reference to the *Qiwu lun* 齊物論 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

30 This motif of non-distinction between subject and object or self and world is replicated in Mou’s description of a transformative experience he went through much later in life, when upon hearing the sound of a bell from a nearby Buddhist temple in the middle of the night he suddenly became overwhelmed by a sense of compassion and empathy for all things in the cosmos, so that “there was no inside or outside, everything had merged into one and the same sadness” (無裡無外，全渾化而為一個哀怨) (*Autobiography*, 153).

non-distinction, has an underlying objective and social dimension as well. Or to invoke the Confucian philosopher’s own words quoted above: “what is subjective is at the same time objective”.

There is obviously a strong amount of romanticism and idealization at work in Mou’s image of the countryside of his youth, not unlike what we find in the writings of the important Marxist philosopher and founding member of the Chinese Communist Party Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1889–1928). In a famous text from 1919 called “Youth and the Countryside” (*Qingnian yu nongcun* 青年與農村), Li contrasted life in the countryside to that of the rootless “evil spirits” (*guiyu* 鬼蜮) dwelling in the city, invoking a traditional trope to describe the countryside as the place where the Chinese revolutionary youth should “settle themselves and establish their lives” (*anshen liming* 安身立命).<sup>31</sup> Crucially however, Mou Zongsan’s glorification of the peasant as an embodiment of authentic life “in itself” is intended precisely to criticize the violent subsumption of life under abstract notions in communist ideology, something he referred to as the “catastrophe of concepts” (*guannian de zaihai* 觀念的災害) (Mou [1962]).

In an early text from 1939 entitled “Exhaustively Investigating Heaven and Humanity” (*Jiu tianren* 究天人), the fourth instalment in a series of “treatises on the times” (*shilun* 時論) originally published in Zhang Junmai’s journal *Zaisheng* 再生 (*Rebirth*), we find what would become one of Mou’s many critiques of materialism as a philosophical doctrine and worldview. Invoking the authority of Xunzi 荀子, who criticized Zhuangzi for “being blinded by heaven while remaining ignorant of humanity” (蔽于天而不知人), Mou asserts that something seemingly opposed yet structurally similar is found in the case of materialism, namely “being blinded by things while remaining ignorant of humanity” (蔽于物而不知人). Additionally, in his view, materialism involves the confusion of an abstract explanatory principle (“heaven”) with the concrete reality it purports to analyse and explain (“humanity”), that is to say, what Whitehead famously called the

31 The entire last paragraph of Li’s article reads:

“You young people! Hurry to the countryside! Start work at sunrise and rest at sundown. Plough the fields and you will eat, drill a well and you will drink. Those elders, women, and children toiling in the fields in wintertime are your closets companions, that realm of smoke from kitchen chimneys, shadows of hoes, and chickens and dogs from neighbouring towns calling to each other [see *Daodejing* 道德經, chapter 80], only here will you find a place to settle yourself and establish your life!”

(青年呵!速向農村去吧!日出而作,日入而息,耕田而食,鑿井而飲。那些終年在田野工作的父老婦孺,都是你們的同伴伴侶,那炊煙鋤影,雞犬相聞的境界,才是你們安身立命的地方呵!) (Li [1919], n.p.)

On the broader context of this article, see Gu 1995. For a comprehensive study of the figure of the peasant in the modern Chinese imagination, see Han 2005.

“fallacy of misplaced concreteness”. More specifically, Mou faults materialism for reducing the heart-mind (*xin* 心) to one contingent thing among others, instead of recognizing it as something that “is lodged in the midst of things while dominating them” (寓于物之中而為其主宰) (Mou [1939], 920).<sup>32</sup> For Mou, such a confusion between the explanatory (the “analytical”, *jiexi* 解析) and the ontological (“existential”, *cunzai* 存在) order of things is particularly pernicious when it occurs on the level of social reality, as becomes apparent in the case of historical materialism (Mou [1939], 921–22). In his own technical terminology derived from Kant, in the case of materialism, we are dealing with a “regulative principle” (*jigang yuanze* 紀綱原則) and not with an “constructive principle” (*gouzao yuanze* 構造原則) (later called “principle of realization” *shixian zhi li* 實現之理) (Mou [1939], 922).

In Mou’s view, Marx’s analyses are mired in the form of a false objectivity which analyses society as if it were completely devoid of “human elements” (*ren de chengfen* 人的成分) (Mou [1939], 923), which ironically is more or less the baseline of the critiques of capitalism found in humanist orientations of Marxist thought. While scientific objectivity may require bracketing out and eliminating subjective elements, such a procedure is uncalled for, and in a sense even immoral, when the “object” under analysis is fundamentally constituted through subjective human practice instead of the supposedly autarkic and lawful objectivity of the “material” conditions of existence. This is precisely what the title of Mou’s essay from 1939 refers to, being a truncated quote from the famous passage in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*) in which Sima Qian 司馬遷 describes the historian’s craft as that of “exhaustively investigating the boundaries between heaven and humanity, and connecting the transformations of the past and the present” (究天人之際，通古今之變) (Mou [1939], 924). In this context, Mou takes these celebrated phrases to mean that history can only be analysed by getting to the bottom of human existence, as something ontologically prior to any analytical reduction of social practice to the “objectivity” of the material constituents of existence. This indicates that Mou’s critique of materialism has to be read not as blanket attack on a philosophical outlook, but rather as targeting the privileging of “matter” over “spirit” and the mind more strategically, that is to say, insofar as it coincides with the subordination of human autonomy to “objective” constraints and regularities of the historical materialist type (such as social classes, modes of production, and material conditions of existence). In other words, Mou’s assault on materialism takes place in the context of an assertion and defence of social freedom.

32 The term *zhuzai* 主宰 already figures prominently in the work of Xiong Shili, who in spite of his increasingly radical ontological anti-dualism, maintained a clear hierarchical relation between the mental and material.

As such, Mou seems to approach ideology as a perverted form of continuity between “life” and “learning”, in which the latter threatens to swallow up the former. Generally speaking, it is important to bear in mind that among Mou’s earliest writings we find very empirically oriented and socially engaged texts such as “Where is the Path to a Revival of the Countryside?” (“Fuxing nongcun de chulu he zai” 復興農村的出路何在?, 1934) and “The Economic Condition and Social Situation in Rural China” (“Zhongguo nongcun jingji jumian yu shehui xingtai” 中國農村經濟局面與社會形態, 1935),<sup>33</sup> and that he was deeply concerned with concrete socio-political problems. Hence, the subsumption of the “in itself” by the ideological machinery of conceptual mediation had a very real and disastrous correlate in social and political life for Mou, more precisely in how communist ideology had managed to contaminate the rural population in which he considered China as a nation to be rooted. As he writes concerning the revolutionaries he met during his student days in Beijing:

They had learned to live within [a set of] non-human concepts, which was something quite new and amazing to me. But they also went on to patronizingly impose their concepts on the personal existence of the peasants and allow these concepts to seep into the very root of the life of the Chinese nation, which was something wholly unprecedented.

他們會生活在非人的觀念中了，而且很新奇，這使我有點贊嘆。不僅此也。他們的觀念還光顧到鄉村的農民身上，貫注到中華民族的生命之根上，這在以前是沒有的。(Autobiography, 24)

During a summer break at the university, Mou himself had returned to his hometown with the intention of organizing the villagers into “peasant associations” (*nongmin xiehui* 農民協會) and instructing them in Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” (*Sanmin zhuyi* 三民主義). Mou’s violent opposition to the subordination of “life in itself” to ideology after having overcome his youthful “excessive romanticism” is probably the reason why the memory of this rather modest episode of political activism would never cease to fill him with a deep sense of shame.<sup>34</sup> He describes it in no uncertain terms as “the biggest mistake of my whole life” (我生命中最大的污點), and recalls that as he was lecturing to a congregation of his fellow villagers,

33 See Mou 2003, vol. 26, 741–76, 811–24.

34 Lin Chen-kuo 林鎮國 points out that the “confessional” tone of Mou’s narrative is one of the aspects which set it aside from traditional Chinese autobiographical literature (see Lin 1993, 118).

all of a sudden, I felt that my own existence had become suspended in the void, cut off from everything and sapped of its strength, and it seemed to me as if the very same fate had befallen my elders, brethren, and friends, such a cruel and heartless thing I had done.

頓然覺得我自己的生命被吊在空裏，抽離而乾枯了。我也覺得父老兄弟親友的生命也吊在空裏，抽離而乾枯了，那太冷酷，太無情。(Autobiography, 27)

The “biggest mistake” of Mou’s life was thus one in which “life” is lost in the wasteland which grows from the absence of “cultural life” and the subject no longer recognizes itself as identical to “life as it is in itself”.

## Conclusion

In the above, I have admittedly only looked at a few episodes and snapshots from the much longer story of Mou Zongsan’s life, his *Autobiography*, and his complex intellectual trajectory. In doing so, I have attempted to give some insight into the fraught relation between “life” and “learning” and between the immediacy of the “in itself” and conceptual mediation in his work at large. At the very least, I hope to have cast some light on the historically determinate content of the sort of “life” and “cultural life” Mou would consistently claim to be at the centre of the Chinese tradition of philosophical thought. In my view, the motif of “life in itself” in the *Autobiography at Fifty* is highly significant, since it brings the figures of his first and only real mentor Xiong Shili and his father, as well as his concern over the countryside of his childhood, together within a strongly normatively charged imaginary space, concretely expressed as the idyllic countryside of his youth. It is here, Mou claims, that human beings can discover what a “rooted life” (*shenggen de shengming* 生根的生命) and a “life as it is in itself” (*shengming zhi zai qi ziji* 生命之在其自己) is all about (*Autobiography*, 33). The domain of the “in itself”, while not yet understood in a transcendental sense here, already adumbrates Mou’s later celebration of the non-cognitive disposition of the moral subject, which does not perceive a world of conceptually mediated distinct objects, but rather is at home in its own identity with the world as a value-imbued space. After all, “learning” as a purely rational or epistemological enterprise is not the highest ideal for Mou. The question at the centre of his own “learning of life” would rather seem to be the following: “how can we submit to this non-living life and turn back so as to allow life to return to its being ‘in itself’” (如何能順這非生活的生活扭轉之使生命再回歸於‘在其自己’呢?) (*Autobiography*, 18).

While Mou’s infamous logic of the “self-negation of moral knowing” asserts the necessity of epistemic and institutional mediation in modern society, the autobiographical and historical background of the motif of “life in itself” tells us something about his concern over not letting such mediation corrode and overrun the primordial status of immediacy. In the second chapter of *Wang Yangming’s Learning of Extending Moral Knowing* (*Wang Yangming zhi liangzhi jiao* 王陽明致良知教), a short book from 1954 where we find what is one of the earliest discussions of his notion of the “self-negation of moral knowing”,<sup>35</sup> Mou engages at length with the relation between “knowledge” (*zhi* 知) and “action” (*xing* 行) and discusses the question as to how the (non-cognitive) immediacy of “moral knowing” expressed in virtuous conduct can be reconciled with the kind of conceptual mediation deemed necessary for (scientific and logical) knowledge in modern society. In a particularly instructive passage, he writes:

Knowledge is always constituted within a form of mediation [*qu* 曲], and although this does not keep us from acting as human beings and even as sages,—and we could even say that the flaws<sup>36</sup> that come with such mediation are necessary—we still have to be able to return to the immediacy of the great Way. *We should also remember that with the mediation of knowledge, our life has already become reified. Knowledge must unfold within reification* [...] [However,] when knowledge and action

35 The text of this work had already been published in two parts in the journals *Lishi yu wenhua* 歷史與文化 (*History and Culture*) and *Lixiang lishi wenhua* 理想歷史文化 (*Ideals, History, and Culture*) as early as 1947. The third chapter was later included as an appendix to the first section of chapter 3 of “From Lu Xiangshan to Liu Jishan” (“Cong Lu Xiangshan dao Liu Jishan” 從陸象山到劉戡山) (Mou [1979]), the rest of the book being described as “disposable” (可作廢) (Mou [1979], 218). An even earlier instance of the term *kanxian* 坎陷 can be found in the article “The Yin-Yang Masters and Science” (“Yinyangjia yu kexue” 陰陽家與科學) from 1942 (see Mou [1942], 367). I thank John Makeham for bringing this to my attention. Already in this text, the notion of *kanxian* is closely concerned with the transition from “intuitive observation” (直覺之汎觀) to “rigid analysis” (死板之分解) and with how the “guiding metaphysical principle of [the Chinese] cultural tradition” (文化傳統的形上指導原則), can be (re)connected with and realized within an “immanent civilization” (形下之文明) in the modern world (see Mou [1942], 367, 352). At this point however, Mou still conceived of such an endeavour as involving a reappraisal of the non-canonical currents of ancient Chinese thought such as the School of Names (*mingjia* 名家), the teachings of Mozi 墨子, and especially (as the title indicates) the Yin-Yang school, not as direct precursors to modern science, but rather as “symbols” (符號) for a native spirit of reasoning both conductive to that of science as well as historically related to Confucianism, as the backbone (主幹) of the Chinese tradition. In this context, Mou refers to Zou Yan 鄒衍 (305–240 BCE), traditionally viewed as the founder of the Yin-Yang school, as “China’s Aristotle” (Mou [1954], 356).

36 *Quexian* 缺陷. Notice the (perhaps not entirely coincidental) proximity between this word for “lack” or “flaw” and the term *kanxian* 坎陷, a combination of two trigrams from the *Book of Changes* evoking the image of water flowing into a sinkhole.

become one, the root of my authentic existence will not become reified, and when we earnestly set out to investigate the variety of principles [in the world] and thus give shape to knowledge, although we are dealing with a mediation here, it constitutes a solidification of life, and does not really count as an instance of reification. *This is why mediation must be grounded in immediacy.*

知識實是在一曲中而成的，此雖不礙於為人為聖，或甚至此個曲折的缺陷是不可少的，然而卻亦必須會歸於大道之直。又須知此一曲，我的生活已經是物化了。知識必須在物化中行 [...] 若是知行合一，我的正生命之根并不物化，則即實實落落去研究各理而成知識，此雖一曲，而卻是生命之凝聚，不真是物化。所以曲必以直為根。(Mou [1954], 36–37, emphasis added)

The epistemic inescapability of “mediation” (*qu* 曲) in modern society thus coincides with the “diversion” (*qu* 曲) of “life moving away from itself”, which is not yet affirmed here as a dialectical necessity with the same certainty as would later be the case, but remains subordinated to the immediacy of life and of “life in itself”. Perhaps the whole paradox of Mou’s mature philosophy can already be discerned here: his thought is marked by an attempt to transform the existentially oriented Confucian “learning of life” into a form of philosophy able to serve as an unmediated source of normative guidance while at the same time making space for the institutional and epistemological mechanisms of mediation seen as requisites for successful modernization. Or in other words: an attempt to safeguard “life” against its own ineluctable movement away from itself.

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