(1) Back cover draft

China and the world entered a period of social, political, intellectual, and cultural crisis at the turn of the twentieth century. China, finding itself on the weak side of numerous conflicts, was swept into calamitous turmoil. In the late 1920s, as the crisis intensified, an innocent boy from rural China named Mou Zongsan went to Beijing, where disruptive forces feeding the tumult converged, to attend pre-college classes at Peking University. In the ensuing thirty years, with war scorching the land around him, through personal suffering and struggles, he observed, learned, reflected, and lived to develop himself into a serious philosopher. Later, Mou would become arguably the most important Chinese philosopher of the twentieth century.

This autobiography recounts the philosopher’s development against the backdrop of the social and political events and intellectual currents of his turbulent time. It weaves social-political commentary and philosophical contemplations in a narration of personal experience. While movingly recalling the bright side of life—a worry-free childhood in a tranquil farm village, unconditional friendship in difficult times, uplifting inspiration from a teacher with authentic character, a soulful awakening by a remote chant heard in a quiet night—it also honestly reveals a darker side of life—the pull of the world of the senses, self-righteous rancor harbored against those who wronged him, anger and irreverence directed at certain well-known figures, and dejection that overtook him when the world around him crumbled. But above all, it shares with readers a genuine, unending existential quest. The philosopher’s vigilance for “being” leads him to exclaim: “Just let the feeling of nothingness … float without any lingering resistance! … Have nothing, only this suffering, only this fear, only this sadness!” Vigilance for “being” is vigilance in solitude. The deepening of nothingness turns into absolute commiseration—the commiserative enlightenment that unifies the subjective and the objective sides of reality into one.

With his own religiosity engaged by this deep existential enlightenment, Mou, in the final chapter leaves the account of his factual life behind and turns to philosophizing on “commiseration” by way of evaluating Christianity and Buddhism, infusing the autobiography with a distinct philosophical flavor. In this philosophical evaluation, what he deems lacking in Christianity and Buddhism in terms of commiserative enlightenment, he finds in Confucianism. This autobiography thus marks Mou’s launch into thirty more years of philosophizing about Confucianism and underscores the importance of existential experience in motivating his very original Confucian moral metaphysics.

***About the author***

Mou Zongsan (1909-95), a leading figure of New Confucianism, made important contributions to the modern renaissance of Chinese philosophy by broadly engaging ideas from both the East and the West. The *Complete Works of Mou Zongsan*, published in 2003, consists of 33 volumes.

(2) Esther’s Notes

I had the good fortune to have Professor Mou Zongsan as my master thesis advisor in 1976, when he served as a visiting professor in the Philosophy Department at National Taiwan University. Although writing a thesis under the guidance of such an original thinker was not always smooth sailing, my struggle was also a blessing in disguise. To be sure, I benefitted greatly from his tutelage in philosophizing in those years, but I also got to know him as a person with whom I forged a long-lasting teacher-student relationship.

When I first met Professor Mou, he was sixty-eight years old. I observed him to be very relaxed. He conducted his life in a deliberate fashion but at a leisurely pace. He practiced a ritual of setting aside quiet, “eyes shut” time to marshal his energy before giving a lecture and to unwind afterward. He was not picky about food, but he took time to evaluate and appreciate even a simple meal. He thought it important to have unrushed conversations on wide-ranging topics, from observations on daily life to current events, from popular literature to philosophy. He also went to theaters with his students to enjoy live performances of Peking and other provincial operas. After watching a performance, he shared his impressive and rich knowledge of the subtleties of Chinese opera with us to deepen our appreciation of this traditional art form. Although his major works had already been published at the time, his philosophical thinking and writing on highly abstract and difficult issues continued without interruption. Yet he seemed to be at ease with the ordinary pleasure of life, totally unaffected by his intense intellectual work. I thought this to be a gift of his natural temperament, but that does not jibe with the image of a stern and intense teacher his older students passed on to us. My curiosity grew about what this accomplished philosopher was like in his younger days.

With the publication of *Autobiography at Fifty* in 1988, my desire to know more about the younger Mou was satisfied. I instantly fell in love with this book. I found a moving account of the bright side of a life: a worry-free childhood in a peacetime farm village that was well anchored by tradition and communal support, the forging of unconditional friendship in a difficult time of war, an encounter with a teacher who provided uplifting inspiration with his authentic character, the triumph of finding enlightenment in oneself after relentless pursuit of knowledge and truth everywhere. But I also found an honest account of the dark side of a life: a struggle to secure a basic living in wartime, falling to the pull of the senses when feeling the emptiness of life, not being above harboring self-righteous rancor against those who he thought wronged him, expressing irreverence and anger toward so-called academic authorities, and feeling totally dejected when witnessing the crumbling of China’s political, cultural, and societal structures. I saw a suffering and struggling young Mou. I could also see how a very intense person would emerge as the middle-aged Mou, a person who felt a desperate urgency to do something for the culture and country he loved. This intense Mou I envisioned would not have enjoyed any prolonged period of relaxation, in stark contrast to the relaxed Mou I met later in his life. I felt happy that this very sincere, intense person could live to be in a peaceful present to enjoy life in an ordinary way.

Of course I was also thrilled to read his own clear account of his early philosophical learning and development in Chapter Four. Although his dissatisfaction with the lack of foundational discussion of logic by Russell and other philosophers of logic and mathematics was the reason he moved beyond the study of logic to the study of Kantian philosophy, I could trace his difficulties in understanding the ontological character of Kant's “understanding” to his deep immersion in logic in his early studies of philosophy. Although expressing great joy about finding a great philosophical soul in Kant to begin his “genuine entrance into the realm of philosophy” (page 100), he only grasped Kant’s “logical,” not the “real” (or ontological, according to Heidegger), use of “understanding” at that time. He would discover his own mistake through many years of continual, thorough study of Kant, including painstakingly translating Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and *Critique of Practical Reason*. Mou’s later book, *Appearances and Things-in-themselves*, reflected his correct interpretation of Kant's “understanding.” In 1987, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of the Cognitive Mind*, Mou succinctly explained the misunderstanding of Kant contained in that book and the needed correction. I translated this preface and appended it at the end of Chapter Four (page 117) to clarify the misunderstanding of Kant (pages 107–112) in that chapter.

The difficult life during wartime described in Chapter Five helped me understand why the professor I met led a simple life and enjoyed simple pleasures. The urgent concerns expressed for his country, and the mince-no-words denouncement of certain people and ideologies, also recorded in this chapter, showed me an intense, passionate side of Professor Mou that I did not recognize at the time of our acquaintance. More importantly, Chapter Five records the experiences that, as Professor Mou says himself in the chapter, refocused his attention from discursive reasoning back to practical life. Only this time, the attention to life transcended the self—it took instead the form of commiserative feeling toward the objective world. Vigilance for “being,” when directed entirely inwardly at the self, ends in nothingness. Vigilance for “being” directed toward the objective world through commiserative feeling, but emanated from the pure nothingness confronting the subjective self, on the other hand, ends up breaking down the subjective-objective barrier, elevating commiserative feeling to commiserative enlightenment, making commiseration itself the fundamental reality (the substance) of all things. This is the philosophizing of his existential quest Professor Mou offered in Chapter Six.

The Professor Mou I knew expressed great respect for universal religiosity in human beings and the wisdom of the major religious traditions in human civilization, despite not having too many positive things to say about organized religion. It was not surprising for me to see Professor Mou philosophizing on “commiseration” by way of philosophically evaluating Buddhism and Christianity, two major religious traditions, but it was still new for me to find that the highly speculative metaphysics I read was motivated by essentially Mou’s own “religiosity,” which emerged from genuine existential experience in the difficult times of his life. Mou’s “religiosity,” if it is appropriate to call his “commiserative enlightenment” by this name, however, is distinctly Confucian. He writes in Chapter Six that neither Buddhism nor Christianity truly realizes “commiseration” in the sense of unifying the subjective and the objective. Buddhism mistakes realizing objective equality, or objective suchness and emptiness, as commiseration and thus only leaves out the subjective, without unifying the subjective and the objective; Christianity eliminates subjective ability in order to turn unreservedly to the external God. Only Confucianism’s unending quest of *ren* (humanness, humanity) in accordance with Heavenly mandate is true “commiseration.” Chapter Six thus marks Mou’s launch into philosophizing about Confucianism in the thirty plus years after he turned fifty. To me, the *Autobiography* offered a very accessible way to understand Professor Mou’s speculative metaphysics.

Being partial toward the *Autobiography at Fifty*, in 1992 in a casual conversation in Hong Kong, when responding to Professor Mou’s lament that I did not participate in the transcription of the *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy*, in addition to promising to launch a project to translate the *Nineteen Lectures* into English, I hinted at translating the *Autobiography* as a second project. When I actually initiated the project, upon hearing the news relayed by Hu Yi-hsien (a fellow student of Mou), Professor Mou commented: “But it is very difficult!”

Difficult indeed it is, but FSCPC had the good fortune to retain Dr. Lu Ming-yeung for the translation. Ming-yeung has a strong command of both Chinese and English. More importantly, Ming-yeung holds very high standards for the quality of his work. All of us at FSCPC were excited to see the three beautiful chapters he produced. However, with his high standard for quality compelling him to acquire adequate knowledge of the philosophical works Mou alluded to in Chapters Four through Six before penning the translation, and with many competing demands of his life, Ming-yeung had to give up translating Chapters Four through Six. Compelled by my commitment to Professor Mou, despite knowing that I possessed no capability to match Ming-yeung’s prose, I picked up the translation of Chapters Four through Six. Readers are forewarned of the adjustment to different styles they must make from reading the first three chapters to reading the last three. Hopefully, thanks to the improvements Leslie Cheng made to the early drafts and the line editing Jeffrey Hoffman gave to the final draft, the plain, direct translation of Chapters Four through Six adequately express what Professor Mou intended.

This autobiography perhaps is more philosophical than literary, but clearly it is not intended to be a typical scholarly work that must provide detailed elaboration of ideas. This posed a challenging choice of the amount of annotations to be added to the translation. On one hand overburdening readers with too many footnotes may distract them from following the narration with a more literary take; on the other hand throwing an unexplained technical term, person, or historical event at the readers would have made it difficult to follow the flow of the writing. I hope I have struck the right balance in the amount of annotation included.

As Professor Mou said himself in Chapter Two, his writing tends to be judged “obscure” (page 34). He made a suggestion that the degree of “obscureness” of a writer’s work may be a function of a reader’s patience and open-mindedness. More patience and open-mindedness from a reader is likely to reduce the seeming obscurity of a work. English translation is likely to only accentuate the obscurity Mou suspected to be in his writing, therefore this translator, being partial to the value of the philosophical ideas behind Mou’s writing, highly recommends that readers apply patience and open-mindedness to overcome her failings in the translation in order to reap the benefits of Mou’s profound insights embedded in this autobiography.