The road of life starts out unmarked, as if one is wandering in a mist. Only each person emerges from his own inner mist and reveals the luster of his spirit, the timbre of his personality. His life thus takes on a unique course and shape, which the person has no awareness of while living it. As he is unaware, the real self appears. Only after the fact, when one looks back, on a life’s journey, can there be a story. Such is the mystery of life.
I grew up in a small county in Shandong province called Qixia. Part of the Jiaodong peninsula, it was hilly country with a climate of four distinct seasons. Qiu Changchun used to say, “I’ve traveled far and wide, but little I’ve seen surpasses little Qixia. In a world of unrest, here you can find rest. In a time of dearth, bountiful earth.” My village lay on a plain surrounded by hills, and behind the village was the ancestral burial ground of the Mou clan, enclosed with a brick wall and occupying a considerable area. Among the villagers, the site was known for its scenery. Aspen trees rustled in the wind. Pines and cypresses gave the landscape a lasting green. The graves, with their broad slabs set against a rich grassy carpet, looked grand. Moss grew here and there, and every so often came the long, sharp cry of a crow.

Ever since I was a child there was to me something mysterious about the place. I felt refreshed and relaxed whenever I went there. It had a special air, a natural fit with my being. I didn’t understand why this was so at the time, nor did I know what the feeling was. What hint, regarding the orientation of my life, was it offering? Everywhere else, the summer heat was stifling; here, a cool tranquility—the feeling one had upon entering a deep, ancient cave, or glade, with echoes from distant times. But it didn’t feel desolate, as in a desert, or cut off, as in a dense forest. The link to the past that the place evoked did not belong to the realm of nature; the delight was of a different order.

It was Qingming, the day in spring for families to visit the graves. As if in a hurry to blossom, clusters of yellow flowers with long stems had sprung up all over the ground. Pieces of burnt paper offerings floated in the air, transforming into butterflies perhaps. Wine was poured, also as offering. The descendants of the buried stood in rows to pay their respects. At that moment one witnessed the flow of life, without hindrance, connecting the living with their forebears, with the gods, and with the cosmos. Unlike at a burial, absent here was the sadness of a life-and-death separation. There wasn’t any wailing or sobbing. With the passage of time, the emotional upheaval stirred up by death had come into eternity’s embrace, dissolved into a calm acceptance and feeling of endearment. Thinking of their ancestors’ final rest, human beings were able to find rest—and also to experience eternity, partaking in the eternal flow of life as they were joined, through ritual, with the departed souls.

The occasion called for purity and solemnity, but there was joy as well, brought on by the springtime scenery—a joyous sight that was pure and sacred, harmonious with the solemn grace of the evergreens and with the felt spiritual presence of the forebears. There wasn’t any of the melancholy that spring could sometimes provoke. The joy, the delight, was inseparable from the deep link to the past that the place offered. Here we contemplated the lives of our ancestors—who they were, what they did. We told stories of the old and spoke of the young, and what a restful time we would have. When I was a child I’d go on such visits to the graves with great enthusiasm, and I always came home from the experience much elated.
Leaving the burial ground, I once again entered nature’s domain—beautiful springtime that belonged solely to the world of the living. In this radiant state of nature, my own natural being was stirring, about to spring forth. From the pure, sacred light at the ancestral graves—the flow of life in its restful eternity—I landed back into the earthly existence of nature. All this was to me undifferentiated, all part of a youth’s wandering.

The day before Qingming was known as Hanshi, established in memory of Jie Zhitui.¹ Literally “cold eats,” Hanshi is the one day, in some places two, preceding Qingming when it’s the custom to abstain from warm meals. Hanshi could be a very appealing time; I won’t talk about its exact meaning, but just what I felt as a child. When village folks observed Qingming, or Hanshi, or any such special day in the calendar, they always did so in that celebrate-as-it-comes manner. The day has arrived, the occasion has arisen. Other people had done so in the past, and are doing so now. To do so, to do so, is what human beings do. Past and present, chain unbroken—harmony to me and you. A village celebration always felt so blessed, with people’s goodwill and happy emotions filling the air, and at the same time so easygoing. And going with that festive mood, feeling it along with others, was what I did—that way of feeling along actually gave one a richer taste, as well as a healthier outlook, of the whole affair, more so than if one had focused on its exact meaning. If there needed be a meaning, then it should come by way of a story. Tell the story, join the festivities, and share your goodwill—this way a blessed, joyous atmosphere would prevail. I had often longed for that cordial quality in human affairs. It always felt natural for me to participate in it—in an emotion so unforced, so uncomplicated, so simply so. I’d just feel along with others, my attention undivided. Simply feeling along, I’d feel my spirits soothed.

Around the time of Qingming and Hanshi, the days were limpid with the rays of spring. There was, at the edge of our village, a wide river bed. In the summer, when it rained incessantly, the hills suddenly seemed to burst at their seams and the river would overflow. But if the rains stopped, it would as quickly recede to a clear, shallow stream—which, during spring, was what you’d mostly see. Then the sands on the riverbanks felt soft as silk. The willows waved in the breeze, as if they were waving farewell as the mulberries stood stoically by. Meanwhile, the cuckoos’ calls hastened the season’s passing. When it was time to feed the silkworms, I often went along with my siblings to pick mulberry leaves. On the sands I’d roll or lie down, basking in the bright sunshine. There wasn’t a cloud anywhere for miles, and watching the birds flying high above, I couldn’t contain myself for joy.

Yes, that must be life’s most hopeful, most carefree season. No restraints on one’s freedom, no rules of right conduct—not that I consciously knew of the absence of restraints or the presence of such rules. It was a state of unknowing bliss, or mist, and I was an unknowing child wandering in this blissful mist. This misty existence was natural—part and parcel of a person’s growing up—just as the glorious scenery surrounding me was natural. I inhaled the vital energy of the universe and sailed through
the life of a wandering, unknowing youth. The birds’ singing, the sands’ softness, the mulberries’ shades of green, the running stream running, the floating clouds floating—all these sights and sounds blended into one, becoming a lullaby of nature. I drifted into sleep. I had returned to the quietude of the blissful mist—undifferentiated, unknowing, unformed.

This hopeful, carefree existence, whether in action or quietude—how long will it last? How long can one stay in that natural stage of life and keep feeling so carefree? And at what point in one’s development does that way of being become mere indulgence and indolence? Of course, as a child I didn’t engage in that line of questioning; I had no such awareness, except that I felt most relaxed in that natural setting. Also, a nameless feeling would come upon me—here I was, alone, running through me was a feeling forlorn yet not forlorn, all run into one. I had a strong sense of this, this forlorn-yet-not sentiment that was misty and undifferentiated like the stage of life it was part of. The differentiated “I”—my individual self—hadn’t yet emerged, so I didn’t feel particularly lonely, but, at the same time, not being in the company of fellow human beings I couldn’t help but feel a little desolate. Still, the desolation never amounted to a terror-instilling sense of nothingness. I was spared from feeling all forlorn, which seemed passive, involuntary—it was so only because the self was indistinct. And unlike the poets I didn’t see birds and flowers, hills and rivers greeting me as if they were my pals (I’m afraid this whole life I’ve missed out on such poetic sentiments). I never felt that way—which was an active way of feeling; I wasn’t blessed with that gift of imagination. That I didn’t feel all alone and bereft was simply because my individual self was yet to emerge.

As there wasn’t a clear-cut sense of self [but a misty one], things unfamiliar didn’t appear totally alienating, or “other,” to me. This kept me feeling quite content—this misty sense of forlorn-yet-not-forlorn, which was over and above the feelings of familiarity and strangeness that my surroundings had provoked in me (not that I’d gone beyond those feelings, as there wasn’t any progress, any development of self).

On a day brightened by splendid sunshine, people in the village couldn’t wait to get their turn on the swing. The whole village would get together and build a sturdy communal one, or every family would make its own simpler version. My family wasn’t particularly interested in such pastimes. My father, who was rather stern, didn’t think much of fun and games—those things that, to him, were children’s interest, women’s business. So the adults in my family got a little lax when it came to the pursuit of leisure. If the grownups wouldn’t make us one, we kids would make our own. I got together some friends, and all by ourselves we hauled a few pieces of wood, found some strands of tattered ropes, and with a shovel started digging holes in the ground. We mounted the wooden pillars, then added the ropes and a board, and we were in action! Even though our swing didn’t get us very high up in the air, we were so proud of it—we had built it ourselves, for ourselves!
At the time, figuring things out by myself and making things with my own hands gave me a special joy of self-sufficiency. No, I wasn’t particularly handy, nor was I gifted in technical matters. Things that demanded intricate technical skills didn’t interest me and would in any case test my abilities. To be given instructions and commands would also kill my interest. If someone tried to teach me a task, showing me how every step of the way, I’d feel very uneasy. All signs of intelligence would vanish from me, and I’d turn totally passive like deadwood. The zest in me suppressed, my source of inspiration blocked, I’d be at a loss. Should I use my right hand, or my left? In fact, I felt I had both my hands tied. This showed that I wasn’t at all the adaptable type, and I lacked the kind of responsive wit that was bound to please. Follow the way the wind blows. Make myself go where they go. Change myself to suit others. I can never do any of that.

My temperament in this regard, my inability to perform as told, has been the same since. All my life I have taken just two exams. The first time—to get into secondary school—was a perfunctory exercise, and I barely passed. The only other time, for university entrance, I got stuck solving a mathematical problem, but at the last minute I figured it out—not really methodically, and not because I’d studied it before. I never spent much time preparing for exams. Later in life I would come to regard them as a shameful practice and being subjected to them a great humiliation. I often thought, if I’d lived in the days when one’s station in life was determined by the civil service examinations, I wouldn’t even have made it to the Xiucai [lowest] level. Making up poems by the rules, smooth-talking one’s way to the top—of these I was by nature incapable. Really, I was so poorly endowed with the kind of smart intelligence one needed to function, not to say succeed, in the world. But even as a child I enjoyed figuring things out by myself and creating things with my own hands.

This interest of mine stemmed from an inner drive, a desire to make things, and it had no practical purposes. In an unrestrained atmosphere, where there was no one giving me instructions or even hints, I’d tackle a problem from start to end, following the trail of my own thoughts. This gave me an incredible, inexpressible joy. In moments like these I was both steeped in concentration and freed of common concerns.

This inner interest was completely self-sufficient. To make something I’d use materials I found lying around, discarded stuff for which I’d find a new use. I often could take disparate things and concoct a connection for them, adapting them to a new purpose—which showed that when it came to material objects, I didn’t care much about their intrinsic properties and intended functions. That was because my interest lay not so much in the objects but in figuring out, in my own mind, how to form something, in my own way—an aesthetic interest that found expression in the act of constructing, of giving shape to something. And because it was constructive, such interest couldn’t roam too far and be capricious; it must follow a line of reasoning from start to end. So step by orderly step I’d think through a problem and would see to it that, finally, something was formed. The process gave me a profound
joy, a feeling of really living, which, experienced every step of the way, could only be understood by the person involved. It was a self-contained inner universe—this interest had the power to permeate one’s being and create a harmonious flow within. Whenever I got deeply engaged in the process, I became so engrossed, so lost in my thoughts that everything else was blocked out, yes, as if my eyes had turned blind and my ears deaf, and I suffered a beating because of that.

One time, I was about six, in midsummer when it was very busy on the wheat fields, my mother got sick, and my father rushed home to take care of her. He then told me to deliver something to the fields, and to hurry. It so happened I was toying with a puzzle that had for some reason absorbed all my attention. I must have mumbled a “yes” to what he said, but in a second I’d totally forgotten about it, as if he’d never given me the instruction. From his room my father called out a reminder—again, it didn’t register. I heard a sound. Its meaning, its content I also heard. ... instinct, I sobbed as I felt my father’s stern rage, and at that very moment I was suddenly awakened from my indulgence.

As no one else but I knew about this self-contained inner universe, my father thought there must be something wrong with my hearing. So he tried some tests on me and was satisfied that I was normal. I never told him the real reason behind my “deafness.” Of course I heard everything, which I’d also instantly forgotten because I was absorbed in the puzzle. I often kept to myself things that I understood completely yet couldn’t articulate to others, so it became for me a kind of silent suffering—the predicament of not being able to explain myself yet knowing full well people would misunderstand. Even today I still find myself in this kind of situation. This may be a sign of self-confidence, in that I have no need for people to understand me, but it can just as well be my lacking enough courage to express myself.

The way I indulged in a self-sufficient, constructive interest showed a strong intuition on my part. Yet this strong intuition remained, at the time, in the realm of non-awareness—that state of undifferentiated, unformed being—and would often find different ways to express itself.

Early summer was when the wheat fields turned into a sea of billowing yellow. All of nature seemed to be flowering, their fairest forms in full view, their growth in full swing. Whereas in Qingming the luminous beauty of spring was everywhere apparent, now the picture had become quite different. The weather made people drowsy and daydream-prone. After lunch the grownups would rest, smoking a pipe or napping in the shade. The children, unaware of fatigue, didn’t care to rest. Yet they too took their cue from the dreamy mood and spent their days aimlessly—dashing about in all directions, digging
tunnels, climbing trees, running along walls, around corners, playing hide-and-seek. There was a pond in our village; the fish in it lingered near the surface as if they were sunbathing. I’d place a piece of pork rib in a basket, then let it down into the water, and in no time droves of little fish had swum into it and were splashing and jumping in agitation. Seeing this made me very excited. I pulled out the basket and poured its contents into a bucket. The translucent creatures with their jumpy movements appeared all the more lively against the listlessness in the air. I did this again and again, until the rib had lost its flavor and was attracting the fish no more.

Outside the village, about two miles from the pond, stood a grove of pear trees. The pear blossoms were in bloom, peering from luxuriant foliage so tightly laced it made the grove rather airless, as sunlight pierced through the gaps between the densely grown leaves. I’d stride along the paths between the rows of trees, winding my way, meandering. Inside the thick wood I couldn’t tell if it was ever going to end or if I’d find my way out. The leaves were lush and verdant, the flowers resplendent in pearly white, the bees buzzing in their flight, as the butterflies, so buzzing with energy. This was life stirring under the surface, still to emerge from its amorphous state, still undefined.

There is a poem by Cen Shen that goes, “The warm breeze of spring has arrived overnight, prompting the pear blossoms to bloom with all their might.” The poem describes the scenery at the frontier, past the Great Wall, as it also says, “When the north wind sweeps across the land the pale grass bends. Beyond the border as soon as the eighth moon the snow descends.” It’s tough terrain—cold, deserted, and vast—but the literary mind has attributed to it a kind of allure, a rugged grace, a primitive grandeur. On this frontier land if you look far, the view is hazy and indistinct, boundless and empty, as if the land and sky are one. But it will come alive in an instant, as countless feathers flutter in the sky, only they aren’t feathers but falling snow. The frigid air is forbidding, and the vast landscape makes one’s existence seem trifling. Even so, this expansive, elemental setting has the power to inspire, to lift one’s spirits and anchor one’s being: Tuned to the universe, joined with the earth—that’s all it takes, to reach the heavens, to roam this earth.

Here, back in the pear grove, which had me well hidden, were flowers I could smell and see—how truly alluring this was! But no, not quite. One wasn’t so much charmed as overwhelmed by this abundance of life, of life creating life, life rich and robust—though my own self, still ensconced in a dreamy, misty state, had yet to reach out and burst into shape. Where I was, was sweltering rather than briskly cold, lethargic rather than dynamic—not a landscape of strong, sweeping contours but a state of procreative chaos. I finally escaped, returning to the airy and sunny atmosphere of the village. I took a deep breath in the open air and felt awake again.
Oh to be wide awake—which wasn’t so easy come late spring, early summer. On the one hand, poets tell of “the longings of spring that won’t let go—going to sleep is impossible!” On the other hand, “spring comes with long, longer days. May waking up be delayed, and delayed!” Desiring to sleep, to stay sweetly asleep, but can’t—that’s precisely what the Chinese call “spring passion” (chunqing), a kind of stirring of desire, or awakening love, best realized in our romantic literature. Especially in the land south of the great Yangtze River, a region of charming scenery that changed with the seasons, almost anywhere could have inspired in the literati the sentiment of spring longing, a sentiment deeply felt but subtly expressed.

Take, for example, the elegant, sparingly beautiful lyrics of “Garden Dream Interrupted” in the opera Peony Pavilion: “So that’s the way it is—where fragrant flowers grace, it always gives way to fallen wall, empty well. Sweet dreams just make it harder to face one’s fate. Who can tell—which blessed soul will have wishes come true? Oh the beloved’s heavenly scent; the years flow by, flowing away. Look! The rising mist is hiding the garden boat. The wind slices into the rain. Through the silk screen her longing gaze dwells and dwells on this scene of spring changing.” These lines epitomize the amount of attention dedicated in Chinese literature to the expression of spring passion. They’re refined and refined, and refined some more, until just right—the depiction of youthful yearning reaches a pinnacle in these lyrics.

Then, almost two centuries later, the author of The Dream of the Red Chamber continued the feat—in fact quoting those lines—and devoted many a chapter to capturing the amorous mood of spring. The budding love of the novel’s young characters is hinted at in their back-and-forth bantering, set to the luscious backdrop of the Grand Panorama Garden. The result is a heightened emotional effect—tender and sinuous, intricate and intriguing—rendering spring passion all the more palpable, precise, and, yes, beautiful. “Shielded by bamboo like phoenix tails still, so still; then a brief breeze, the leaves like dragon tongues trill and trill—this is Villa Xiaoxiang.” What we have here is beautiful springtime infused with adolescent desire, as we are beholding the scenery with the novel’s hero, Jia Baoyu. “Gestating these feelings all day long, hovering between half-asleep, half-awake,” says Lin Daiyu—the novel’s heroine who lives in Villa Xiaoxiang—to and of herself, and overheard by Baoyu. What we have here is adolescent desire induced by beautiful springtime. That phrase alone, as uttered by Daiyu, sums up spring passion, its bottomless yet restrained romanticism.

This feeling, this longing, belongs to “life in itself” [it arises in that stage of life when one is still contained within one’s self]. And from when the feeling arises it then grows into a kind of “torment,” a word that comes closest to describing the heart wound, the pain of longing. Hence in Chinese we say “tormenting spring” (shangchun).

Yet this passion that we associate with “tormenting spring” must be distinguished from romantic love, that is,
the love in “being in love.” The latter is directed at an object. It comes about when a life goes beyond the self to reach out to another life, offering one’s self to the other and discovering one’s self in the other. A lover’s love follows a specific trajectory—it has an aim, a destination. The self finds in the other a place to rest, an end to one’s wandering. In contrast, “spring passion” (chunqing) has no destination; it just hovers about—a vague, but pervasive, anguish. “Spring will soon come to pass, frets the fair lass. Sadness fills her young heart, all adrift alas!” Feeling all adrift is the sad predicament of romantic longing. Whereas in romantic love, love that is reciprocated, a path leading to the beloved is opened up, and spring passion passes from a state of anguish into a state of harmony—there is somewhere to rest. If in this harmony the lovers form a union, a partnership in marriage, one’s passion can then come to a complete restfulness. There is, finally, somewhere to nestle down, a context for exploring constancy and rightness in a relationship.11

But back in the state of awakening desire, one feels life stirring and whirling inside. One longs to reach out but can’t, to reach someone but can’t. The passion that is a pathway to another can only stay within oneself. This is life in its original, most potent stage, life swirling in a primal chaos. The literati of China were particularly attuned to this blurry emotional landscape of a young life, particularly adept at depicting its melancholic beauty. It’s a melancholy that arises out of nowhere—sadness filling the young heart without a cause.

This sadness has no orientation—it is not directed at anywhere or anyone—and it is no sorrow. In Chinese we say “sorrowful autumn” (beiqiu) but never “sorrowful spring” (beichun), only “tormenting spring” (shangchun). Autumn causes one to feel crestfallen because everywhere there are signs of decay, bleak evidence of an approaching desolation. Thus inspired by the natural process of life, the sorrow in “sorrowful autumn” has an orientation—it is pointed toward something. Whereas spring passion is life at its original, most potent stage, life swirling in a state of chaos, so the torment that comes with this passion is not directed at anything—a forlorn sadness rather than a mournful sorrow. Ouyang Xiu says in his “Ode to the Sounds of Autumn”: “Yi, the sound of summer, means ‘to slay.’ When things are overgrown, it’s time to prune, to purge. Shang, the sound of autumn, means ‘to hurt.’ When humans grow old, it hurts, it makes you grieve.”12 The autumnal lament of Ouyang Xiu also has its orientation—it’s pointed toward the natural process of decay.

Spring passion hurts too, but its pain comes from the loneliness of one wandering in a mist, aimlessly. Indeed, the background of this torment is both the joy and frustration inherent in burgeoning life, life still contained within itself. The forces of life abound—one feels them gyrating inside—but they have no outlet. One’s mind is spinning with thoughts and feelings like a thousand threads, but they have no target. There is no arrow, no straight line coming out of the self. It’s as if each thread of thought or feeling wants to leap out but can’t, and instead it turns around and becomes a circular line. These circular lines intersect and overlap, coiling together into an endless
spiral—thereby forming the whirlpool of life, life thriving within one’s self, self that is still unformed, is forming.

Spring is the season when life is at its most vigorous and tender, when all things in nature are budding and growing. Such growth does not follow a linear course; the creative current of life, a fusion of primal energies, moves around in a maelstrom—as does spring passion. If the passion were let out in a straight line toward an object, then it would dissipate and be “longing” no more. Swirling in a whirlpool, pent up and having no outlet—that’s spring passion and, yes, what’s tormenting about it. The young characters in The Dream of the Red Chamber, who are just budding into the prime of their youth, walk right into the radiant, wooing beauty of springtime and have their adolescent love aroused; the sensitive ones among them surely suffer torment. When the Chinese say “spring passion” (chunqing), the word “spring” refers to life’s amorphous beginning—that’s the sole meaning of the word in this context, yet how richly meaningful it is.

The joy and richness of life is what this aimless passion, this inexplicable pain, signifies. A whirlpool of primal energies, awakening desire pervades everything but is itself nothing. “Thunders roar and then comes the downpour, everything filled to the brim. The universe is coming into being, a state of chaos and darkness. It’s time to establish one’s rule—won’t be peaceful.” (From the hexagram Zhun in The Book of Change.) A raging thunderstorm vividly describes primeval life, life coming alive—literally, “the heavens are under construction.” The phrase, “time to establish one’s rule,” speaks to the need for finding an outlet for one’s passion, a way to attain harmony, while “won’t be peaceful” corresponds to the “but can’t,” the torment without a cause. Yes, spring passion is found in these ancient lines—“Thunders roar and then comes the downpour...”—just as much as in these from our romantic literature: “Flowers falling, profusely falling, like a spell of crimson rain”; “The beloved’s heavenly scent; the years flow by, flowing away”; and Lin Daiyu’s “hovering between half-asleep, half-awake.” One’s sadness is filled to the brim, about to overflow, but has nowhere to go, to flow to.

Now, when the mind turns from dwelling in this melancholy to contemplating the transient nature of things—the poets’ lament that good times never last—an extra step has been taken. A concept has emerged from the self, darted out. And the sorrow that results from this concept is extra to—not part and parcel of—the thriving life that’s associated with awakening desire. In lamenting life’s impermanence one has gone beyond the torment of spring longing. That torment belongs only to life still contained within itself—sadness filling to the brim but has no outlet.

We usually consider marriage as the death of romantic love, as delivering love not just to the altar but to its grave. But, really, falling in love is itself a conclusion, a kind of death. Only “spring passion” (chunqing) represents life and is the most beautiful. It’s the beauty of primeval life, the beauty of primordial formlessness. This passion that signals life is both everything and nothing: it pervades everything but lays claim to nothing. Yet it can easily turn
into the nothingness of existentialism—the feeling that there is no “ground” to life, that life is void. Spring passion is “groundless” too—all adrift alas!—but it’s also gushing, full of life. Whereas the terrifying sense of emptiness is what’s called “feeling of realization” (jueqing), which leads one onto the path of enlightenment.

What I’ve just done is to elucidate, in retrospect, the misty, confused emotions of my youth. I had of course no such awareness then. That I’m now talking about spring passion (chunqing)—a hovering feeling that has no object or orientation—is in part to make it clear that those inner primal forces were significant in my development. It’s also to distinguish between the life-filled passion and the harrowing, hollowing “feeling of realization” (jueqing) that is part of enlightenment. Indeed, these feelings are about “existence,” what it is to really exist, to truly live. They are the two most meaningful emotions to have from living “life in itself.” And, without understanding “life in itself” and “life that has left itself,” a person will not truly realize life’s hardships, the full range of its truths.

The hazy emotions of my wandering days never did amount to the torment of spring passion. I wasn’t particularly sensitive in my nature; no, I didn’t have such delicate or refined sensibilities. Still, a sprightly, mischievous, and highly intuitive child must have felt, stirring inside him, the primal forces of life, which in turn must have affected him in a significant way. Even for a country boy, this whirlpool of life forces could give rise to the sentiment of spring passion, its vague, pervasive anguish. Yet, in his interactions with the wild any such anguish was often diffused, transmuted into a kind of daze—dreamy days spent daydreaming and just fooling around. The experience of “tormenting spring” (shangchun) thus turned into a dreamy, dallying existence, autumn would arrive without bringing on any sorrow.

Spring’s torment should normally not contain any element of autumnal lament. When such element does exist, the life stirring inside must be frail. It’s as if the whirlpool, lacking a centrifugal, cohesive force, cannot be held together and has subsided into a stream, the current of life flowing away, slipping away. This ebb in a person’s life force makes it easier for his or her sensitive soul to emerge—the heart to become unhinged. Then, when autumn arrives life will feel insubstantial and rootless (it feels so to the sensitive soul, which has now emerged), and the result is “sorrowful autumn” (beiqiu). “Tormenting spring” energizes, whereas “sorrowful autumn” is life enervated. If instead the life contained within the self is robust and resilient, solid and sound—if the whirlpool is held together by a strong cohesive force—the heart will stay fused with the life forces and so won’t be susceptible to “sorrowful autumn.” Fall comes. The sky, clearer than ever, looks suddenly higher, and the drier air feels crisp. The stifling heat has dissipated. Nature’s growth has also abated. The scenery of saturated abundance now appears refreshed, crystal clear. One feels consolidated in spirit, and instead of life seeming insubstantial and rootless, as when the heart is unhinged, it too is consolidated. The brimming but aimless spring passion is now transformed into a dynamic force, ready for work.
Fall is the busiest season on a farm. “Collect in autumn, collected in winter,” people would say. “Collecting in autumn” (qiushou) refers not only to the harvesting of crops, but also to the gathering of life (gathering up one’s life force or the forces of the cosmos, with no hint of “sorrowful autumn.” A farming family such as ours gathered up the forces of life to attend to the gathering of crops, the work of life. Everybody labored hard at harvest but was happy at heart, while my body was made strong by the strenuous work. At the age of fifteen I already had the strength of an adult and could carry a huge load of grain on my back and walk quite a distance. My father was very proud of me. Behind my back he’d often brag about my endurance and agility. He reckoned I’d make a good farmhand.

At the time I felt very happy when I was working on the fields, especially during harvests. I realize now that my interest in such work had nothing to do with any “attachment” on my part—any urge to accumulate or to possess. No, it didn’t derive from the desire for material things. Instead, it was a form of self-gratification through the act of constructing, of bringing some tangible thing into being. From planting the crops in spring to harvesting them in autumn, the work of a farmer is, not unlike making things by myself, an orderly process. It involves a series of operations that must be followed through to get results, and with results come a sense of gratification and completion. Farmers know of these feelings from “collecting in autumn”; “sorrowful autumn” they don’t experience. That’s because the life in them is strong and sound, and in their collecting they feel collected inside.

And when the whole process is done they feel satisfied, from having done something by themselves for themselves. Here the word “done,” though suggesting completion, also signals life’s continuation; instead of life slipping away, it goes on, the cycle continues.

Life can only reach the level of “sustaining itself” by going through “collecting in autumn.” Otherwise, if “tormenting spring” is followed by “sorrowful autumn,” one’s life force will surely wane and wither away. The brimming vigor of spring passion must go through the process of gathering for it to return to, and thus sustain, itself. A self-sustaining life is then ready to become “collected in winter” (dongcang). Winter returns to the earth, beckoning the human spirit to return too, to put down its roots. From that point on, the soul of a person takes precedence—the spirit illuminates. One is no longer driven by the dynamic growth of natural life. From the domain of “life,” where one’s life force rules, one enters the realm of the spirit, of the mind. This is what, besides the meaning of storing up, “collected in winter” signifies.

All winter long my energy went into all sorts of lively pastimes. Ice-skating, kicking a shuttlecock or hitting a ball, even playing tile games—all could count me in. In the evenings I’d join others around a fire, keeping myself warm, listening to the farmhands tell their tales. I also enjoyed sitting next to a gathering of old men and watching them drink wine, in a wayside inn in the middle of nowhere. The inn was a highway rest stop my father used to run, having inherited it from his father. As the sun was setting on the ancient road, horses and mules that had
traveled for miles with heavy loads appeared from the north and the south, casting long shadows in the diminishing light. Drovers of goats and calves were also brought in, prodded along by the herdsmen’s calls. At the time, I especially loved listening to the riotous clatter of the horses’ hooves, the rumbling that announced their arrival. It sounded so grand and mighty. Yet, as it was near the end of the day, the might wasn’t at its mightiest—a subdued, dusky grandeur it was. After trekking such distances, they were eager for a good night’s rest at the stables. Men and beasts were all exhausted, all eager for rest.

The stirring sound of hooves clattering, the last round of herding calls—you could hear in them an unmistakable elation, the joy of having come upon, at the end of toil, the comforting glow of respite. You could sense a definite haste as well, one last rush before the journey’s end. Tired, men and beasts couldn’t wait to return to rest. “West wind, ancient road, lean horses,” so the lyrics go, the weary seeking rest at a wayside inn—life has always been so, from time immemorial. There was in this temporary respite an eternal quality; though lasting only a night, it felt timeless. And no matter how humble the folks were, this was a moment of eternity. When those who labored for life tending livestock came into our inn and sat down for their drinks, getting relaxed over simple meals, talking about this, that, and whatever, it seemed that they too had arrived at that eternity, the peace that all humans partook in while at rest. The highway to heaven couldn’t be more heavenly than that.

Deep into winter there was at long last some idle time on the farm. Operas were a popular pastime, staged not just as tribute to the gods, but as entertainment as well, part of the cycle of work and rest in village life. Theater in remote countryside was of course not so refined, the acting and singing passable at best, the overall effect a little vulgar and crude. Still, the actors managed to show off the style and dash of their tradition; their stage movements followed strictly what it prescribed. Traveling everywhere, the actors were a worldly breed. The dramas they enacted always reflected the workings of human nature but were never without a moral core—ought-to messages for our relationships. They invariably involved people happily meeting, sadly separating; people being loyal to their rulers, filial to their parents, faithful to their spouses, and honorable and just to their fellow human beings. When a story was presented from start to end, as in the full-length shows—performing just a single act was quite common in Chinese opera—an appropriate conclusion was called for. That is to say, appropriate in moral, human terms, like killing off the mean minister, or reuniting everyone to live happily ever after, the standard “full-circle” ending. Kill the bad guy, so people wouldn’t feel something was amiss. Complete the circle, so they would feel fulfilled—things that ought to be are indeed so. Yes, these are our most basic emotions, as primitive as they come; yet they are also eternal, part of our timeless humanity.

Before every performance there was an opening act. A dull-looking fellow would come onto the stage and start reciting some epic. As he droned on, recounting the deeds of legendary kings from way back when, the audience lost
patience. No one listened to this history sung in monotone, no one but me. This man had always seemed amusing to me. He’d go on and on until the actors were all decked out and ready, and then he’d wrap up his act with this announcement: “‘Tis no place for me to stay, a visit backstage I shall now pay.”’ And off he went. I thought this was so comical, but dignified too. The way he sang of the past with a lighthearted attitude, serious but not so serious—what humor!

Among the opera characters the popular favorites were the great general Guan Yunchang and the model judge Bao Wenzheng. Guan was my favorite. I liked too the “dressed-to-be-deft martial fellows” [so-called because they wore short jackets that allowed easy, quick movements], characters like Lin Chong, Wu Song, Huang Tianba, and Yang Xiangwu. But none of them could command my attention like general Guan, when he walked onto the stage in his full regalia—a glistening green robe, a nobleman’s hat, a crescent-shaped sword, a long beard, and red paint on his face—his singing accompanied by soaring flutes. Every movement, every pose conveyed a remarkable presence, a notch above the rest (operas featuring Guan were all carefully choreographed). Upon his appearance, the stage took on an atmosphere of greatness, with physical and moral authority emanating from it. It was as if the scene before you had suddenly lit up, prompting you to sit up, pay attention, your whole being rising to the occasion.

In all of traditional Chinese theater, the Guan operas are unsurpassed in their uplifting power—we see a man living up to the ideals, his humanity fulfilled, and we feel cleansed. It doesn’t matter whether the real Guan Yunchang was in fact that inspiring. Certainly the way in which he’s written about in The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms doesn’t command quite the same effect. And no other types of performance—not the movies, not the modern plays—can convey that image, that presence. This ability to inspire is the strong suit of traditional theater. Just this quality is enough to make it timeless, to keep what’s ancient fresh through the centuries. As a child I was so enamored of the operas about Guan; my mind would literally be transported to another realm when I was watching them. There were times I’d even carry my own sword, or just a stick, and imitate his poses.

As for the martial fellows, such as Lin Chong and Wu Song [both characters from The Water Margins], I liked how they looked so nimble and fit, handsome and free. Their vigor and agility gave them an elegant, streamlined presence, the opposite of fussy. Their stage appearance had none of those trappings of wealth and status, no flowing robes with flared sleeves, no long, drawn-out processions, nothing that spelled success in the eyes of the world. Instead you could imagine their graceful figures climbing to the mountaintops, crossing rivers and lakes, traveling to the edge of the earth. No, they would never be trapped by society’s snares. Hardy, agile, and carefree—what a refreshing, invigorating impression they made! In these martial fellows we were given a graceful symbol of life, a vivid expression of character—character most upright, life most directly, honestly lived.
One winter, a circus came to town. It was bitingly cold, and the snow was faintly falling. Without a tent or stage, the circus folks just marked out an area on the village square, and banging the gongs they began their act. A girl who looked about thirteen appeared on horseback and rode once around the makeshift ring. She had the nimble, fit physique of a rider. In the frosty air her cheeks had turned rose-red, her features looked all the more fresh and clean—a ruddy beauty she was. She reminded me exactly of the martial fellows, the same graceful presence, yet there was something feminine, something delicate and touching about her. Right away I developed a crush, though at the time I didn’t understand what this feeling was. My father, being so stern, didn’t approve of his children indulging in this kind of roadside entertainment. But I stole away anyway, as if driven by an unknown force, and saw the circus several times. And every time, the moment the girl appeared I’d get this strange feeling. Happy, I also felt tender and protective toward her. It was only later, in my recollections, that I figured this might be love. Gone in a flash, this was the only time in my life when such sentiments came to life. Never again did I experience this kind of pure, innocent love or this tender feeling that was part of the romance.

These, what I’ve described so far, were the rays of light that emerged from the mist of my wandering days, the natural stage of my life. One by one they came through the mist, from their source in a mysterious, fathomless abyss. Every such ray represented some state of mind; each offered a clue to the full picture of my life. Together they formed the background of my consciousness and shaped the course of its development. If one were to retrace the paths of these beams and bring them back to their source, one would reach that abyss and get a glimpse of the mystery of life, of life in its formless, misty, and mysterious state. These rays of light were symbols of what happened when my forming self came into contact with the world—they were like breaking waves visible upon hitting the shores, chiming bells audible upon being hit by an outside force. Yet environment alone did not determine why these particular waves and sounds emerged; why these, and not others, couldn’t all be explained by circumstances. Such is the mystery of life, the mystery of personality.

These waves and sounds that emerged—how my forming self resonated with the outside world—invariably took on one or the other of the opposing aspects of my personality. One side of me was attracted to the clear and luminous, the pure and sacred; it yearned for order, tranquility, and rest. The other side—disturbed and anxious—dwelled in the misty and mysterious, the desolate and forlorn; it inclined toward chaos and confusion. These two aspects were a source of conflict in my life. If I’d gone with these tendencies and let my life develop naturally, I might have become a man of the wild, or a simple, honest farmer, or an innkeeper, a horse trader traveling the world, yes, a wanderer. But I didn’t do so after all. I took a detour.

In the old days, parents must try to get at least one of their children properly educated. Usually, in a farming family such as ours, the eldest son would take over
running the farm. The second son would go into business. The life of books was left for the third. By the time I was growing up, things were going better for my family, thanks to the way my father had managed its affairs, so I was sent to school to get an education. The idea of burying myself in books did not really excite me then. I didn’t have it in my mind that I was necessarily meant for the path of learning or for what that path would lead to. My desire was to become a farmer, living a life of the earth, or one of those lonesome horsemen, tending their stock in the wide open country.

People used to say, “The scholar’s calling—that’s unsurpassed. All the world’s a lower class.” The way my young life had been left no room for such thinking. In fact, even as a kid I had little regard for the village teachers and the frail-looking, gown-wearing scholars. I entered elementary school when I was nine, and during that period of about three years I tried to be a good student, working hard and showing respect for my teachers. But deep down I always felt there was something not quite right about them; their manners struck me as affected, unnatural. Back then I didn’t know that what I felt was disgust. Only later did I realize I had a real loathing for the learned kind, their learned air so destitute of spirit and gusto, so unappealing. They lacked the power, the charisma, that came from living life to the fullest. I didn’t like the long gown that they wore. I preferred instead the farmer’s short cotton jacket, sturdy and unpretentious in comparison. Or what the horseman would slip on—how striking the sight, as he flipped the flap of his jacket to the right and tied it tight at the waist! Dashing too was the wanderer who came and went wearing “no silk robe, nor fine shoes, just a tattered fur coat.” These were the moods and styles that captured my fancy. I realized that education was important, yet I also had a feeling for horizons beyond, and broader than, book learning.

Education isn’t the only path to an outstanding life—something I’ve always believed in, then as much as now. Yes, even now, when I can more or less be considered an educated person. Still, I have no tolerance for smug academics, those professors who never for a minute forget their membership in a distinguished profession. I especially despise people who, these days, go about their lives as intellectuals—self-identified and self-satisfied—but who in fact know not a thing. Their decadence and arrogance disgust me. Their minds are fixated on one thing—their professional pursuit (word games). They’re always mindful of who they are, their social status, and all other kinds of existence they look down upon. Incapable of coming to terms with life in its full, broad scope, they are blind to life’s mystery, blind to the richness of human character, the richness of human values. They use their rigid, dried-up intellect to prop themselves up and shut themselves up in their own world, which is lifeless and impoverished. Propped up they sure are—hanging in midair, cut off from the earth, from water, wind, and fire. They are empty, devoid of all elements of life. Within their confines they engage in petty intellectual pursuits, so to proclaim each other authorities of the field. That’s what the Chinese call, “like fish in a pond gone dry, spitting at each other to stay alive”—a state of affairs not far from death.
Yet, in the end, I too took the path of learning.

Getting educated was for me a detour. The natural development of my natural life was interrupted, its course diverted. Confucius once said that, at fifteen, he set his heart on learning. The way my young life had been wasn’t leading straight to that path. Learning was a bend on the road, causing my natural life to change direction. My misty existence turned into a kind of “non-existence,” one in which life was indirectly lived.

In this realm of non-existence, a person’s life is no longer aligned with “life,” but serves instead the search for abstract truths. Such mental pursuits, unlike existential activities that have a direct bearing on life, eat up one’s life force and direct the self outward, onto a network of concepts removed from life and suspended in the ether of abstraction. One’s existence seems suspended as well, hanging in a void, as the self continues to be projected outward. This is life externalized. Meanwhile, the truths that are the object of the self’s projection become ever more detached from life, emerging as their own entity. An incessant cycle: Life becomes more externalized, further removed from real existence; the concepts become more divorced from concrete reality, congealing into the formalistic truths of the realm of non-existence, where one now dwells. Life has left itself.

And so the rays of light from my wandering days were now bent, deflected. The facets of my personality were no longer developing naturally, directly, but they were still there, determining what caught my attention in my intellectual journey. All the same, the beams were bent. I’d embarked on a life of learning, of searching for abstract truths, of non-existence—life that had left itself. If, instead, those rays of light were to emerge unfettered, what they would represent was life powerfully expanding but still “in itself.” Life would expand outward, directly from its roots, which it never relinquished and to which it could return at any moment. Firmly grounded in existence—not suspended in a void, not straying from its natural path—this was the life of a primitive man, a man of the wild. And though lacking the sheen of learning, the clarity of logical truths, that kind of living could manifest rich character and luster. Such manifestation was nothing more than the expansion of natural life—something was revealed, only without the awareness of how or why.

On the road of life, learning starts off as a bend, with many more bends ahead, many zigzags. The more learned one becomes, the more turns life will make. Turn after turn, life turns further away from itself. Turn after turn, life finally returns to itself—non-existence blended back into existence. The journey is complete. Which sounds so simple. Yet in reality it’s a long, long sojourn. Next, I will describe my life after that bend, the zigzag way it developed, away from itself.
Translator’s dedication:
To my parents, whose love and support make this possible.
Special thanks to Esther Su and Hu Yi-hsien,
and to John MacGregor and Suzanne Baizerman.
Translator’s Notes

The pinyin phonetic system is used throughout. Most pinyin letters sound like their English equivalents. "Q" is pronounced as "ch," "zh" as "j," "z" as "tz," and "c" as "ts." A person’s name in Chinese is written with the family name first, e.g., Mou goes before Zongsan, and Ouyang, a double-character family name, goes before Xiu.

1. The term Mou uses in the title of this chapter, as well as in its first sentence, is hundun—a term that he repeats throughout the text. (The title is “Zai hundun zhong zhangcheng,” which literally means “growing up in hundun.”) Hundun comes from the Zhuangzi, a Daoist classic attributed to the philosopher of that name (c. 369-286 B.C.E.), and is a king’s name from a fable told in the book’s seventh chapter. The king Hundun starts out formless. The story tells of his death after being given the seven openings for eyes, ears, mouth, and nostrils. Form has killed him. Hundun thus stands for a primordial state of being—unformed, unaware, undifferentiated. When Zhuangzi was translated into English, Hundun was rendered by different writers as No-Form, Primal-Dark, or Chaos.

In Chinese, hundun has become a term of common usage, indicating a state of confusion, of being opaque and amorphous. For example, hundun was used by Chinese translators of the Bible to render the “without form” in the opening verses: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void…”

I have decided not to give hundun a single translation. While in Chinese Mou’s repeated use of the term flows quite naturally, in English the repetition can be deadly. I have rendered hundun in different contexts as “wandering” (not the least because it sounds like the term’s Cantonese pronunciation, wandun), “wandering in a mist,” “misty existence,” “unknowing bliss,” “that primordial undifferentiated state of being,” and so on. What of course have been sacrificed are the impact of the term’s repeated appearance and the compact force of its two rhyming characters, hun and dun. (The word “wandering” is commonly used in English translations and studies of the Zhuangzi, the first chapter of which is entitled “Xiaoyao you,” literally, “a carefree trip”—examples are Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu, by Victor H. Mair, and Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi, edited by Roger T. Ames.)

2. The first paragraph is the only place where I use the masculine pronoun “he” for the subject “a person”—something not done in Mou’s original text, where in this instance he uses the neuter pronoun qi. Elsewhere, inserting pronouns into the English translation is often necessary as they are freely omitted in Chinese sentences, which make sense even without a subject.

For the first paragraph, I really have no better justification for using the gender-specific “he,” rather than “he or she” or even “one,” than that it sounds best—I don’t want to sacrifice that audio appeal—and, also, that Mou is here introducing his own life even as he’s making a universal philosophical point.

I’ve generally avoided this gender-specific language. In one instance, Mou himself spells out “his or her sensitive soul,” which I’ve kept in the translation (see page 11). The pronoun “one” is used throughout to indicate a general human condition. (Indeed, a switch in pronouns occurs between the first and second sentences of the opening paragraph—from the general “one” to the specific, individual “he.”) Sometimes I also use “we” or “you” to indicate a general perspective, again for audio appeal.

3. Qiu Changchun (1148-1227), also known as Qiu Chuji, was the founder of the Dragon Gate Sect (Longmen Pai) of the All Authentic Way (Quanzhen Dao or Pai), one of the two major branches of Daoism. He was the principle disciple of Wang Chongyang, the founder of the All Authentic Way. Both Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan—the first emperor of Yuan, the Mongol dynasty in China—hailed Qiu as a Daoist saint; Genghis Khan even met him in person. Qiu was originally from Qixia, as was Mou.

4. Jie Zhitui was an official who lived in the dukedom of Jin during Chunqiu, the Spring and Autumn Era (c. 722 to 481 B.C.E.). He served under Duke Wen and followed him into exile for nineteen years. When Wen returned to the throne he neglected granting Jie land in recognition of his loyalty. Seeing this as a breach of li (proper rite, respectful
behavior), Jie left public life and lived as a hermit in the hills. Wen recognized his mistake and summoned Jie to return, but he refused. In desperation the duke set fire to the woods surrounding Jie’s house to force him out. Jie stuck to his isolation and died in the fire. Legend has it that to commemorate this resolute man, Wen decreed only cold food be eaten—thus no fire used—on a certain day of the year, usually the day before Qingming, and Hanshi (literally, “cold eats”) was established. The actual origin of Hanshi cannot be verified; the story of Jie Zhitui is one that people most often refer to.

5. For over a millennium (587-1905), the keju system—exams for a series of civil service ranks—selected scholar-officials from, at least ideally, all strata of Chinese society. A family’s fate could change overnight if a son took the top honors. The system was dispensed with only when the Manchu rulers of China’s last dynasty, the Qing, made a desperate attempt to modernize.

Candidates were tested on their knowledge of the Confucian classics, on how well they could cite the texts, which they had learned by heart, in composing essays with eight set sections, the bagu wen. In modern Chinese the term bagu has become synonymous with “square,” as in “he’s so bagu!” Such strict formalism was what Mou found so distasteful, and couldn’t conform to.

The highest rank someone could reach was the Jinshi. Xiucai, the lowest, had ceased to exist after the Tang dynasty (618-907), but survived as a label for “educated person,” as well as a general term for students in local schools.

6. Cen Shen (c.714-770), a poet from the Tang dynasty. Having served many years as an army official, Cen was especially skilled in depicting scenery at the frontier, where he was stationed.

7. The term Mou uses here is yinyun, a term that in both its alliterative effect and philosophical origin is similar to hundun. Used in The Book of Change (Yi Jing or Zhou Yi), it describes the creation of all things through the fusion of cosmic forces. The Book of Change is an ancient text of divination attributed to King Wen of Zhou (c. 1150 B.C.E.); it’s been passed down through the centuries with ten commentaries believed to be written by Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.). The term yinyun comes from one of these commentaries.

Here, I translate yinyun as “life creating life,” the syntax conveying a circular, yin-yang motion. Also, later in the paragraph, I’ve rendered hundun as “procreative chaos” to underscore what Mou is getting at, and to echo yinyun.

8. Peony Pavilion (Mudan Ting) is one of the most well-loved librettos in Chinese opera, and “Garden Dream Interrupted” (Jing Meng) is its most performed segment. Written in 1598 by Tang Xianzu of the Ming dynasty, it tells a miraculous love story. When touring a beautiful garden, Du dozes off and dreams of falling in love with Liu. Her dream interrupted, she’s taken ill with sadness and dies. Three years later, Liu chances upon Du’s self-portrait and becomes smitten by her beauty. Du comes back to life; they fall in love and live happily ever after.

The lyrics that Mou cites are quoted in Chapter 23 of Cao Xueqin’s The Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou Meng). The lyrics, their beauty, take the heroine Lin Daiyu by surprise, and she becomes deeply moved—see the next note.

9. The Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou Meng), also called The Story of the Stone (Shitou Ji), is considered the greatest novel, maybe the greatest literary achievement, in Chinese. It’s a tour-de-force synthesis of prose and poetry, of deep sentiment and dazzling wit, of the mystical and the everyday. Sadly, when the author, Cao Xueqin of the Qing dynasty, died in poverty around 1764, not yet fifty, this work was unfinished.

The story revolves around the aristocratic Jia family, whose fortunes and eventual decline closely resemble that of the author’s own. Among the huge cast of characters, each with his or her own personality, are Jia Baoyu (the “stone” referred to in the title) and Lin Daiyu, mythical types whose romance forms the novel’s core.

The lines that Mou quotes are from Chapter 26.

10. Here, Mou introduces the philosophical phrase “life in itself” (shengming zhi “zai qi ziji”), which is very likely derived from Kant’s “Ding an Sich” (thing in itself). The phrase is unique to Mou and appears several times in this chapter, as does its opposite, “life that has
left itself” (shengming zhi “li qi zi jī”), which he later introduces on page 11.

In Mou’s usage, the noun “life” (shengming) has a life of its own. As the subject of a sentence, it can stand in for “a person” and take on predicates that usually go with a personal subject—it has a “self.” An example appears in the next paragraph: “[Romantic love] comes about when a life goes beyond the self to reach out to another life.” The Chinese original has “life goes beyond itself to reach another life,” a construction that may seem mystifying in English.

In this passage, Mou quotes from The Book of Change (Yi Jing), specifically the four words that make up the whole judgement of Qian, the first of the sixty-four hexagrams. Qian stands for the active (yang) principle in Daoist cosmology, and the four words—which can be interpreted as attributes of Qian—are yuan, heng, li, and zhen.

In the translation, yuan is rendered descriptively as “life in its original, most potent state.” Heng—which can be understood as “successful”—I’ve translated figuratively, rendering it as “path” and “pathway,” as I want to convey the sense of hengtōng, meaning “unobstructed.” Li is rendered as “the state of harmony,” and zhen as “constancy and rightness in a relationship.”

Mou weaves the four words into the text beautifully, using them like shorthand to describe—very concisely—the evolution from spring passion (chunqing) to romantic love (aiqing) to getting married (jiehun). Spring passion corresponds to yuan, romantic love signals the movement to heng and li, and marriage is zhen. Translated, the Chinese text’s shorthand quality is lost.

12. Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), a literary figure and historian from the Northern Song dynasty. As a royal cabinet minister, he supported the reformists in literature, he called for a lucid style and edifying contents, against the flowery trends then prevailing. Hailed as number one among the “eight major writers of the Tang and Song,” he co-authored The New History of the Tang (Xin Tang Shu), wrote The New History of the Five Dynasties (Xin Wudai Shi), as well as essays and poems that all have a natural, flowing style.

13. Zhun is the third hexagram among the sixty-four in The Book of Change (Yi Jing). Its placement is significant, as it’s the first to follow the Qian and the Kun, the yang and yin principles. Zhun thus stands for the beginning of life, the moment of creation, when the cosmic forces are joined.

14. Guan Yunchang (? to 219), also known as Guan Yu, was a military hero from the final days of the Eastern Han dynasty, when it was disintegrating into the three kingdoms of Wei, Shu, and Wu (hence Sanguo, the Three Kingdoms Era, 220-280). Guan was a general who served under Liu Bei, the leader of Shu. When he was taken captive by Liu’s rival Cao Cao, the leader of Wei, Cao tried to lure him into his camp, but without success. This show of loyalty defines the Guan legend for generations to come. Not only is he commemorated in opera and in The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms (Sangō Zhi) by Chen Shou (233-297), as Guan Gong he’s a deity in folk religion.

Bao Wenzheng (999-1062), also known as Bao Zheng, was a legendary judge from the Northern Song dynasty. His impartiality—in the face of power and privilege—is celebrated in Baogong An, a Ming dynasty book of a hundred of his cases, as well as in various popular novels and dramas.

15. Both Lin Chong and Wu Song are characters from The Water Margins (Shuihu Zhuaan), one of the four major novels in classical Chinese literature. The book covers the colorful lives and heroic deeds of a hundred and eight martial fellows, among them a few women, who, to escape persecution and personal misfortune, have taken refuge in Mount Liang. The events took place in the final days of the Northern Song dynasty (early 12th century). The author was either Shi Naian or his student Luo Guanzhong—both lived in the late Yuan, early Ming period (14th century). Lin Chong, having been an army general, is a leader among the group. Wu Song is always remembered for his courage and strength when he fights a tiger with his bare fists.

One of Mou’s favorite books, it inspired him to write an essay, “The World of The Water Margins” (“Shuihu Shijie”), which is collected in Life’s Learning (Shengming de Xuewen) [Taipei: Sanmin, 1970].