Authenticity and Ethics in Academic Writing and Publishing in the 21st Century

By

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Dedication

To my grandparents – Enci Ge and Ruhai Shi –

who lent me the courage to seek a true human life.

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Preface

Now more than ever, people cannot fully trust that the author on the front page is the sole, real creator of the work. With the rise of professional language services and powerful AI, writing has become both easier and more complicated. As writing evolves from a solitary act into a collaborative project, it raises profound questions about what is real and what is ethical.

Another book on responsible academic writing is perhaps among the least wanted in the market, where publications on this well-trodden topic abound. But this one is different. It will not discuss the standard rules and principles of academic writing and publishing, nor will it prescribe correct behaviors. It cannot be that kind of book. As a largely self-taught learner in the world of research and publication, I am in no position to offer reliably prescriptive advice. Instead, I will offer an account based on what I have witnessed and learned within a rapidly growing system of knowledge production. From my perspective as both a participant and an observer, I will try to make sense of what is going on, drawing from research, reading, reflection, and lived experience.

Promise of the Seal

Growing up in an average Chinese family at the tail of the last century, I practiced traditional Chinese painting as a childhood hobby, spending a lot of time playing with brushes and paint. The most satisfying part came at the very end: when everything is done, you take out your seal, one made of plastic, wood, stone, or jade, and press it onto the paper with just the right force—too little, the image would be faintly visible; too much, it would bleed through the paper. The result is a beautiful name stamp in cinnabar red, a finishing touch that proudly declares the work's authorship. Before I had my own seal, I would draw a seal-like image to stand in for the real thing. At seven, I got my first personal seal when my parents asked a craftsman to prepare one for a piece I was submitting to a national Chinese painting competition. Mine was a delicately hand-carved seal made of plexiglass, engraved with the three characters of my name, along with the character *yin* ("seal"), in the standard *lishu* (clerical script) style.

To me, this is a solemn promise from the author, the one who crafted the work with her own hand and heart. It stands in as a symbol of authenticity and dedication. Though the ancient practice of seal impressions may feel outdated in the twenty-first century, I have always believed that all creative endeavors, however trivial they may appear to others, leave an indelible personal mark on the finished work, a unique signature of meaning that cannot be replicated by anyone or anything.

My First "Publication"

Apart from painting, I developed an interest in poetry in primary school. In the fifth grade, I wrote a four-stanza modern Chinese poem and snail-mailed it to a local newspaper that ran a regular poetry column. It was an environment-themed piece lamenting the loss of nature. An excerpt, in my translation, reads:

> Man must be an only child / he doesn't love to share / and shows tantrums everywhere. / "The sky is mine," declares he. / […] till the last songster fled – / till the last tree fell – / the sky is now empty and ugly – / that is all he's got.

I have forgotten much of the poem itself. But I can never forget the day I received a letter from the newspaper's editorial office, informing me that my submission would be published in an upcoming issue. I could hardly believe it was real.

Weeks later, they sent me a complimentary copy, where I found my poem in the *zhongfeng* ("central seam") section, a narrow strip in the middle of the newspaper, like an extended gutter. This was a common feature in twentieth-century Chinese newspapers, where less significant content was inserted between pages. It was probably the humblest publication one could ever achieve. Nonetheless, I felt a wave of accomplishment, reinforced by a "reward" of 25 *yuan* (approximately $3.00 at the time). "Publishing is fun! And you even get paid for what you've done!" I told my parents, who were not interested in publishing but were amused by my excitement.

Before college, I wrote Chinese poems and essays only occasionally as a respite from my exam-oriented studies in STEM subjects. Once or twice, I won prizes in competitions and had my works published by the organizers. I also received various "rewards" for my publications, including a free Western-style family meal at the first fast-food restaurant in our locality.

A Journey to Find the Truth

My childhood memories convinced me that composing and publishing were profoundly rewarding experiences, spiritually more than materially. The greatest reward is in all the labor that goes into creating something from one's own thinking and experiences and in the delight of sharing it with others whose thoughts and experiences may resonate in one way or another. I never would have thought of the possibility that anyone would willingly allow the fun of doing it themselves to be ruined by someone else.

However, later in college, I was told I was completely wrong. Publishing, I learned, is not supposed to be fun. It is a brutal game where losers perish, and winners are kept too busy to enjoy their glory. It is a sophisticated business that requires specific management skills, and like the business world, it has no shortage of scandals. Realizing my temperamental unsuitability for such a game or business (I am neither feisty nor sociable), I did not plan to get published in the academic world.

Yet, I felt compelled to find an answer to my innocent question: Why the difference? Why did something that once brought me so much joy come to torment so many? Are there any fundamental differences between publishing as "child's play" and publishing as a scholarly undertaking? And why would anyone engage in behaviors that a six-year-old would recognize as cheating?

That is my motivation for this book, which I hope will not bore you as much as some dry, academic handbooks may have bored you. Instead of giving instructions, I invite you on a journey to discover what it means to write as an authentic human being in an age marked by artificial intelligence, and how to make choices as our ethical horizons are continually expanded by new ways of working with text.

Also, if you are like me—writing in a language that is not your native one, a growing reality for many today—this will be a journey to explore the challenges and opportunities for multilingual authors to have their voices heard in our interconnected world of knowledge. My approach is locally informed, based on discourse analyses, interviews, text-oriented ethnographies, personal observations, and anecdotes. It may offer a different reading experience and perhaps a bit more fun. Who knows?

You might wonder how I learned to speak to you the way I am doing now, without, say, having attended an English for Academic Purposes class or spent a single day in an English-speaking country. For one thing, I enjoy languages (English is second to my favorite, Chinese), and I am one of those rare creatures who glean pleasure from reading and writing academic papers. Besides, I was given opportunities during my student years to do “language work” for professors and peers, and I have worked voluntarily as an informal proofreader ever since. To use an updated metaphor, I have been trained as a “human bot” on the “data” from the many tasks I was asked to perform to help others communicate with an audience I have rarely met face-to-face. Yet a more profound reason this communication can take place, despite the supposed barriers of language and culture, is our shared quest for humanness, understanding, and truth.

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Chapter 1

Authenticity and Ethics in Modern Knowledge Practices

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity." Fast-forward to the twenty-first century, and we find ourselves in an era no less conflicted than Dickens's fictional reality. We are surrounded by the best learning assistance modern technology can offer, yet the prospects for the literacy development of the younger generation have never seemed worse. We have invented the smartest artificial brains to mount the pinnacle of engineered wisdom, yet we have committed hitherto undocumented acts of folly against nature and ourselves. We have never so strongly believed in the magic of technological wonders, nor have we so deeply doubted our own ability to do things ourselves.

It is in this very age that we find classic concepts of authenticity and ethics featured in more titles than ever—across books, articles, posts, and multimodal feeds. Despite our disparate contexts, we are seized by a shared, almost nostalgic longing for a pristine time in history when people were simpler and things were more transparent, or for a time even earlier, before awareness of these jarring issues had dawned. However much we have grown weary of the topic, finding it too stale and complicated, we must take an honest look at where we have been before landing in this bewildering moment, and where we are headed in the future of the global academy.

This chapter introduces the concepts of authenticity and ethics in modern academia. The discussion, while necessarily concise, draws on knowledge practices from different times and contexts. It begins with an analysis of a frontline study, showing how the same research finding can be communicated differently to various audiences, with potentially different effects. This case highlights the multifaceted nature of authenticity in creating and sharing academic knowledge, focusing on the roles of language, culture, knowledge traditions, and the practitioners themselves. After exploring these aspects, I turn to the ethical guidelines that academic authors are expected to follow and to situations where these guidelines may fall short in practice. Finally, I juxtapose authenticity and ethics to illustrate how their dynamic and often fraught interaction influences academic judgment, while proposing possible ways to examine murky cases with greater clarity.

A Retold Scientific Study

In 2022, a study published in *BMC Medicine* caught the attention of dairy lovers. The study identified a cancer risk associated with dairy consumption in Chinese adults (Kakkoura et al., 2022). I read about this study in the News and Events section on the University of Oxford's website, where the first author was based. The report stated:

> Overall evidence to date on whether eating dairy products affects the risk of cancer has been inconsistent. Studies on Western populations indicate that dairy products may be associated with a lower risk of colorectal cancer and a higher risk of prostate cancer, but have found no clear link for breast or other types of cancer.* These results, however, may not be the same for non-Western populations, where amounts and types of dairy consumption and ability to metabolise dairy products differ greatly. For instance, in China there is very little consumption of cheese and butter, and the consumption of milk and yoghurt is also far lower than Western populations. In addition, most Chinese adults cannot properly metabolise dairy products due

> to lack of lactase, a key enzyme for breaking down the milk sugar lactose.** (University of Oxford, 2022, original endnote asterisks).

Although this study was conducted in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking University, I found no news coverage on these institutions' official platforms. Nonetheless, the study was extensively covered by various Chinese-language media outlets. One report was found on *Doctor's Voice*, a US-based Chinese-language medical news outlet with a mission to "serve the Chinese-speaking public with international medical information and assistance in seeking medical treatment." Its report described the study as follows:

> On 6 May 2022, researchers from the University of Oxford in the UK, the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, and Peking University collaborated to publish a research article in *BMC Medicine* entitled "Dairy consumption and risks of total and site-specific cancers in Chinese adults: an 11-year prospective study of 0.5 million people." The research, which followed more than 510,000 Chinese people for an average of up to 11 years, found that among Chinese adults, greater daily intake was associated with a higher risk of liver cancer and female breast cancer. (original in Chinese, my translation)

While this Chinese text translates smoothly into English with minimal adaptation, its accessibility for average Chinese readers is dubious. I tested this text on several lay readers, including my English-illiterate parents. Despite their interest in the topic, all confessed they grasped little beyond the stirring title. The author's decision to retain the journal name and paper title in English created an initial barrier. After a few marginally intelligible paragraphs, the text devolved into mechanically translated technical phrases that felt ostentatiously foreign and scientific. Frustrated readers, turning to visual aids for help, found figures and captions left untranslated.

Alongside such "professional" outlets like *Doctor's Voice*, I found more readable coverage on various Chinese-language websites. One article published on Guangming Net, a government-endorsed key national news website, was titled, "The results of a study have found that people who often consume dairy products have an increased risk of these two types of cancer, and the expert response is here…" It opened with a brief overview of milk's health benefits and the study's findings, then introduced a named expert from the China Rehabilitation Research Center to "dispel the myth." In contrast to *Doctor's Voice*'s largely selective translation of the original English paper, this piece used more reader-friendly language (rated "comfortably readable" by my lay reader panel):

> Milk is the most common dairy product in our lives. It is a good source of protein. It is also a good source of calcium in our daily diet. Some people say drinking milk frequently will increase the risk of liver cancer and breast cancer. Is this true? What are the misconceptions about drinking milk? How should we choose the right milk for ourselves? […] Is this truly reliable? First, "drinking milk causes cancer" is incorrect. (original in Chinese, my translation)

Now, if we compare these three second- or third-hand accounts of the original study, we may have some interesting findings ourselves.

First, for the intended readers, while language may likely not present a problem in the English-language report by Oxford (R1), it caused an accessibility issue in the Chinese-language report by *Doctor's Voice* (R2). This intralingual barrier was removed in the follow-up commentary by Guangming Net (R3) with easily understandable Chinese. Here, we see that language, as a medium for encoding and decoding knowledge, can either facilitate or obstruct communication when knowledge is transferred across contexts. The well-intended author of R2 was ultimately undermined by a "foreignized" style of language directed at an audience not yet literate in Chinese academese. Authentic language, therefore, sustains the effective communication of knowledge from producers to end consumers. It serves as the vital medium through which knowledge is constructed and presented, creating a bond between authors and their community. By speaking to both the mind and the heart of its audience, authentic language makes possible genuine understanding and connection.

Second, alongside language and statistics, we read culture. In R1, the author introduced the topic by drawing a clear line between Western and non-Western contexts, using phrases like "Studies on Western populations indicate that…" and "These results, however, may not be the same for non-Western populations…" Statements like "…in China there is very little consumption of cheese and butter..." conveyed that Chinese people do not share Westerners' dairy habits. This cultural note was essential for target readers to understand the study's context and avoid misinterpretation. By contrast, in R3, the description of milk as "the most common dairy product in our lives" and "a rich source of protein and calcium in our daily diet" indicated the widespread use and popularity of dairy in a country that has outgrown the old stereotype of "non-Western" dairy avoiders. Though culture often provides a contextual background, it should not be dismissed, as authentic cultural representations help achieve a truthful understanding of the knowledge and pay respect to its indigenous uniqueness.

Third, beyond language and culture, we see marked differences in the perception and presentation of knowledge. Among the three reports, only R1 cited sources in its endnotes, while R2 and R3 mentioned the title of the published research paper and the journal's name (both in English) without additional sources. Although using references has become standard in contemporary Chinese academic writing, it has not yet been adopted as a norm in popular science writing, possibly due to historical reasons (Li, 2022). Readers accustomed to reference-buttressed articles like R1 may find unsourced writings like R3 to be simplistic and unreliable. Conversely, those unfamiliar with citation conventions may accept an assertive tone without questioning the need for evidence.

A more fluid aspect than language or culture influences knowledge practices and shapes people's ideas about knowledge: what it is, how it is produced, and how it should be evaluated. Such an epistemic grounding builds on a long-standing set of beliefs and practices known as tradition. What is considered valuable knowledge practice in one context may be dismissed in another. Tradition lends an authentic quality to knowledge, yet its slippery definition (Glassie, 1995) introduces complexity, particularly as modern practices reshape our understanding of the past.

Finally, let's consider the author, the knowledge disseminator who reports the study from a chosen perspective. We generally view authors as authentic when they write about what they know and believe to be true. Conversely, authors are deemed inauthentic if they write about what they do not know (fabrication) or what they do not hold to be true (deception of sources and readers) (Lee, 2002). Straightforward as this may seem, our judgment of an author's authenticity is often influenced by the degree to which we trust the source of the information. In the absence of personal knowledge of the author, we tend to associate esteemed sources with "true" knowledge, particularly when the author is affiliated with prestigious institutions (R1) or authoritative organizations (R3).

When knowledge is delivered in a distinctive language, carrying a specific culture and tradition, it elicits responses from readers who draw on their knowledge and experiences. In this example, while dairy detractors may easily ignore the news, passionate enthusiasts may feel alarmed by reports like R1 and R2. Their concern may not be easily eased by the comforting words from the expert in R3, which, without sufficient explanation, come off as unconvincing (simply stating that something "is incorrect" adds little to its truth value). Furthermore, they may recognize from experience that "expert" rhetoric is often more a tactic for an authoritative tone than solid evidence. Those familiar with the "milk gate" scandal, in which the US National Dairy Council allegedly bribed the American Heart Association to promote milk (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, 2019), might draw associations and conclude that the report was crafted to defend dairy industry interests.

Despite our assumptions, there is no definitive way to ascertain what the author actually knows or believes, and therefore, no sure way to discern the truth amid journalistic manipulation. Unlike language, culture, and tradition, which exhibit concrete features in the text, the author's authenticity remains elusive and subject to impressionistic interpretations.

Aspects of Authenticity

As the retold scientific study reveals, authenticity is a multifaceted and conceptually rich ideal. Its kaleidoscopic manifestations of being "real" or "true" (Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 92) are deeply embedded in language, culture, and knowledge traditions, and at the same time, are inextricably associated with the perspectives and actions of its practitioners.

While knowledge is created and shared in diverse modes, modern institutional practices have foregrounded the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge through written texts (Williams, 2010). Contemporary technology has further enriched this practice with non-linguistic resources for multimodal representation. Nonetheless, barring the advent of universal telepathy, the transmission of knowledge with maximal preservation of content and intention from author to audience remains a project of meaning-making that is predominantly reliant on language.

Knowledge practices are essentially a historical and cultural phenomenon (Pinxten, 1992; Lektorsky, 2001), as they are born and bred in specific historical conditions and cultural contexts where particular beliefs and norms take root and grow over time. They are thus more appropriately understood as context-dependent traditions rather than normalized universalistic endeavors, though modern knowledge practices tend to converge to a standardized center. The expanding participation in global knowledge production reveals inherent tensions, particularly across the Global North–South divide (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010), where cross-cultural communication actively intersects with geopolitical relationships (Canagarajah, 2002).

For knowledge practitioners, who in modern times produce knowledge for both institutional and individual purposes (Rhode, 2006), the endeavor is doubly meaningful, for it contributes to their disciplinary community on the one hand and lays the foundation for a professional career on the other. While background and contextual differences create divergences in their perceptions of scholarship, practitioners remain united by a lofty mission to illuminate the world with truth and reason, and to enlighten and advance humanity. This shared vision, however, is inevitably tested by the realities of academic life worldwide, where pressures for alignment and conformity persistently pull ideals and practices apart.

In this era of rapid, far-reaching changes to local and global systems, all facets of authenticity have gained renewed relevance. As knowledge practices become increasingly commercialized (Small & Mallon, 2007; Kezar, 2008) while academic mobility and global participation expand, today’s practitioners are better equipped than ever to communicate across diverse audiences and contribute to multiple knowledge systems. This very position, however, heightens their awareness of authenticity issues when working at the junctures of languages, cultures, and traditions, a process many find challenging, yet one that can reshape their identities and thinking of knowledge and themselves.

Authentic Language

Authenticity is an aged topic in foreign language learning and teaching, where constant effort is made to help learners access and acquire the "real" language without experiencing it in its home environment. No one wants to spend time and money learning a "fake" language, but ensuring one gets the real thing is not always easy, especially when the language is absent from everyday life. Consequently, learning an "authentic" foreign language has become as glamorous an idea as taking a trip abroad. The prevailing assumption is that full immersion in a target-language environment offers the best, if not the only, effective path to fluency (DeKeyser, 2007). For those unable to travel overseas, the second-best options are learning from authentic input (such as books, movies, and other materials from the real and virtual worlds) and seeking authentic interaction (through conversations with foreigners in public or private dialogues with chatbots).

As a linguistic attribute, "authenticity" functions as an external standard against which language is judged as "real" or "genuine." This concept is inherently tied to the judgment of a specific group: those perceived as "born into" the language, also known as "native speakers." For many language learners, the ultimate, almost utopian, goal is to pass as a member of this group, people who likely look, think, and act distinctively different from themselves. For one's language to be granted "authentic," the verdict comes from a panel of self-engrossed foreign judges who gauge your performance by the degree it accords with their own practices and preferences. You may have gained as much knowledge as a grammarian, yet you nonetheless fail if the minutest detail of your performance makes them frown, "That's not the way we use the language."

This external standard is made explicit in testing systems. For example, a brief introduction to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic test on the British Council's website clearly states this ideal:

> The IELTS Academic test is the international gold standard for measuring English language ability in academic contexts, such as universities or colleges. If you want to apply to [sic] an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in an English-speaking environment, you'll likely have to succeed on the IELTS Academic test. (British Council, n.d.)

For millions of IELTS takers every year, this "international gold standard" certifies their English as ready for an authentic English-speaking environment, where they can live out the luxurious dream of being surrounded by the "real" language. Yet for many test-takers without much real-world English exposure, the exam offers "a very different experience," as one senior undergraduate described. A repeat test-taker who achieved an overall band score of 7.5 and gained UK postgraduate admission, she had worked hard with private tutors, simulated talks with roommates, and daily self-practice. Her success, however, came with unresolved anxiety. "But I don't think I can use the language properly when things get real," she admitted, meaning real communication with real people. That ominous doubt first seized her during the speaking exam when the examiner laughed at something she had never intended as humor. "I still can't even tell whether it was my mistake or her mockery."

Lacking an IELTS experience myself, I could hardly imagine what transpired in that conversation, yet I understand the nerve it takes to communicate with total strangers in such high-stakes settings. Working one's language up to meet standards upheld by an unseen audience is challenging enough; the task becomes Herculean when the goal is elevated to being heard with understanding and respect, as is expected in scholarly communication.

Beyond its value for foreign language learners, authenticity is a frequently overlooked virtue in contemporary academic prose. For reasons I will discuss in the following chapter, scholarly authors have cultivated a professional communication style that can create distance from a broader readership. This distanced style has given academic writing a bad reputation, making it a daunting experience across various learning cultures.

Therefore, if we consider an accessible and unpretentious style a desired quality of knowledge communicators, our focus on authenticity extends to the shared writing struggles of authors from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds. In this sense, authentic language is no longer just a goal for foreign language learners turned authors; instead, it challenges all academic authors, native and non-native speakers alike, to get their messages across effectively, both within and beyond their disciplinary boxes.

As knowledge systems interact, the medium of knowledge communication inevitably undergoes change through translation-based exchanges. Some of these changes are subtle, while others can be strikingly radical over time. Recall the marginally readable Chinese article on *Doctor's Voice* we discussed earlier, which is a selected translation of an original English research paper. Although it offers an arguably more faithful account of the original study, its communicative reach is severely limited by its reliance on a foreignized form of the language, particularly for target readers untrained in deciphering translated scientific Chinese. When authors force the English content into a Chinese syntactic framework that follows an English mold, it deforms the language and mars its character, resulting in a text that can hardly appeal to native readers as "authentic" Chinese.

To varying degrees, reconstructing imported knowledge in a local language reduces its authenticity, as the coercive influence of the source language can be overwhelming. Yet, this compromised authenticity often appears to be a small price to pay for the convenience of convertibility. English, along with its coerced non-English varieties, is perceived as an efficient medium for encoding scientific knowledge. Yuan-ren Chao (1892–1982), known in Chinese as Zhao Yuanren,[1] the Chinese-American linguist who championed the Romanization of written Chinese, foresaw this trend with remarkable clarity:

> I remember that when I was assistant editor to Yang Cha'van of the Chinese magazine *Science* in 1915, I felt that the Chinese language was not suitable for natural science. But once equivalences have been set up, translation of science is so easy that more than one centre in America has started with scientific Chinese as one of the languages to try first in their programmes for machine translation. (Chao, 1968, p. 150)

Although many Chinese authors of that time shared Chao's intuition that "the Chinese language was not suitable for natural science," the language has evolved to accommodate various foreign concepts. Chao rightly predicted machine translation to be an immediate solution to the language's unsuitability for scientific communication. Equivalence-based scientific Chinese can easily work with machine trans-

[1] In transcribing Chinese names throughout the book (except the front matter and back matter, where I align with the publisher's convention), I follow the Chinese tradition of placing family names before given names. However, I use the westernized order—given names followed by family names—when quoting text that presents names in that format or when the westernized order has become standard in publications. In presenting my transcriptions, I use the modern *pinyin* system rather than the older Wade-Giles system, except where the older transcription appears in verbatim quoted text.

lation systems, allowing for seamless conversion back into English. This approach has become common practice among Chinese scientists and has recently inspired authors to devise strategies for optimal translation outcomes and improved writing assistance (Sun & Yang, 2023; Zou et al., 2023). However, despite the advantages of facilitated knowledge transmission, we must consider what this machine-translation-friendly Chinese does to the language itself. Is the compromised authenticity of the local language a necessary and reasonable price to pay for acculturation and acceptance into the target discourse? This question will be explored in the next chapter.

Moving beyond the objective understanding of authenticity as a linguistic attribute, a recent perspective connects authenticity to the learner's subjective behavior and lived experience (Will & Pinner, 2023). While the effortless acquisition of our mother tongue often obscures the process of language engagement, we become acutely aware of the distance separating us from the languages we strive to master later in life. Consciously working to narrow this gap, we find that expressing our "true self" in a non-native language, free from the constraints of rules or external influences, remains a formidable challenge. Suppose you are learning Chinese as a foreign language, for instance. In that case, you may only gradually realize that writing characters is an act of constructing lexical units, not doodling abstract images. Then it will take a while for you to align your thoughts with the string of characters that you know mean what you actually want to express, rather than what your textbooks tell you how to express in that situation. This aspect of authenticity is particularly relevant for multilingual authors writing in additional languages; yet, it also applies to any author engaged in the intellectual exercise of wielding a highly specific, and at times peculiar, function of the vastly versatile human language.

Authentic Culture

Beyond its rich linguistic soil, the context in which authenticity is typically and often stereotypically discussed is also rife with culture. In our daily lives, the cultural dimension of authenticity fuels a passionate quest for objects or experiences that satisfy our curiosity and senses. More often than not, this journey becomes an exploratory adventure to uncover the truths behind a legendary or mystified "Other." For collectors, there is an irresistible allure in a piece of handmade jewelry from Saudi Arabia, an exquisite carpet from Iran, or a Talavera vase from Mexico. For a gourmet, the options are tantalizingly endless. Drawing from the country's rich culinary heritage, the Chinese phrase "*yuan zhi yuan wei*," literally meaning "original sauce, original taste," serves as an idiomatic equivalent for the English word "authentic." It applies to local dishes prepared by master chefs as well as to English lessons taught by native speakers.

English teachers often illustrate the meaning of "authentic" with sentences like this: "Luke went to an *authentic* Chinese restaurant in Chinatown in Newcastle for some *authentic* sweet and sour pork but was disappointed because the dish didn't taste very *authentic*." This is a good sentence. But if we assume that Luke is British and may have never visited China, how can he determine that the dish he was served was not satisfyingly "Chinesey"? What is his judgment based on?

When it comes to food, our evaluations tend to be intuitively subjective. We jump to a hasty conclusion about authenticity based on appearance, aroma, taste, and the memories evoked by prior experiences and knowledge. You might have read that Chinese dishes are rich in vegetables and balanced in flavor. Alternatively, you may have heard that Chinese food is sauce-dense, MSG-laden, and unhealthy. Your past visits to Chinese restaurants may have given you a vague sense of what to expect, or perhaps home-cooked meals with Chinese friends have informed your palate. We expect the authentic product from the cultural Other to be refreshingly different from Us, as we crave that taste of otherness. Although the word "authentic" itself sits as a neutral judge of the object it modifies (your next food adventure might reveal the stomach-turning truth about a fancy cheese or change your mind about ill-famed chicken feet), it evokes a peculiar sense of positivity among customers, as if authenticity alone sells.

Authenticity places a "Made in X" tag on cultural products, whether food, films, or books. This geographical indication speaks to the identity of the producer. For knowledge makers, our culturally rich environments nourish our intellectual engagements. We naturally leave traces of cultural elements in the knowledge we produce, which are more visible in some writings than in others. For instance, critical essays on the effects of the French Revolution in post-colonial environments are likely to include more culturally specific details than lab reports on electroactive microorganisms in extracellular environments. Despite modern methods aiming to sanitize the knowledge production process and eliminate messy human contamination, authors typically carry cultural baggage with them as they recount their academic journeys. This personal touch lends a slice-of-life quality to the esoteric narrative, making it easier for readers to extract its moral. One memorable message comes from linguist Geoffrey Pullum in his famous essay "The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax":

> This will not make you the most popular person in the room. It will have an effect roughly comparable to pouring fifty gallons of thick oatmeal into a harpsichord during a baroque recital. But it will strike a blow for truth, responsibility, and standards of evidence in linguistics. (Pullum, 1989, p. 280)

Apart from staying critical of unscrupulously told fun facts about languages, the take-home message from Pullum's words cautions against the destructive force of face-threatening speech acts that aim to bust myths in front of their spreaders. The message carries an elaborate selection of cultural elements, i.e., oatmeal, a harpsichord, and a baroque recital, that evoke theatrical imagery for culturally literate readers. However, for those foreign to this culture, who have never used a measuring cup or attended a musical event, the message is tightly encrypted by cultural codes. The closest they can get, as my discussions with several local authors about this sentence prove, is that this piece was written by a Western scholar with a taste for breakfast cereals and classical music. The message is there, but not the picture, which reduces the impact of this culturally vivid analogy.

Even knowledge produced in the sanitized labs of the natural sciences can carry a cultural tint. Take Thomson's atomic structure, commonly referred to as the "Plum Pudding Model." Like the illusory Eskimo snow vocabulary, this model has emerged as another popular myth, primarily attributed to an enthusiastic follower of the professor who fashioned it in lecture notes with more imagination than precision.

> Professor Thomson suggests [that]…while the negative electricity is concentrated on the extremely small corpuscle, the positive electricity is distributed throughout a considerable volume. An atom would thus consist of minute specks, the negative corpuscles, swimming about in a sphere of positive electrification, like raisins in a parsimonious plum pudding, units of negative electricity being attracted toward the center, while at the same time repelling each other. (Anonymous, *Merck's Report*, 15, 359, December 1906, quoted in Hon & Goldstein, 2013, A131)

The image of raisins spreading in a plum pudding lingers in readers' minds and quickly finds its way into scientific discussions. To fully grasp the simile, readers need to visualize the "raisins in a parsimonious plum pudding." I remember being taught this model in my ninth-grade physics class when the teacher drew a large circle for a *bing* (Chinese flatbread) on the blackboard and then dotted it with what he explained were dried dates (Chinese jujube). At that time, Western pudding was an unknown food item to Chinese people; the loanword *buding* traditionally referred to a sweet, fruity-flavored jelly, while the fruit "plum" entered the Chinese market later as *bulin*. With the spread of imported food and cultural products, textbooks updated their terminology, the original "Jujube Flatbread Model" became the "Raisin Cake Model," and eventually the "Raisin *Buding* Model," though many probably still had not yet taken their first bite to know what "pudding" really was.

Like food adventurers, academics' curiosity about the Other can lead to publishing opportunities. In the early days, it might have felt like placing indigenous wisdom from distant tribes on display in a publisher's menagerie for readers to admire. One local linguistics professor, now in his seventies, recalled his experience of what he called "putting the first Chinese name on a top English journal" during a visiting scholarship at a US university. At that time, he noted, the West had a great interest in China, its history, culture, and language, as little had been published about the country in English. So, "if you could write something in English and submit it to an English journal, even something simple and basic, you stood a good chance of getting published." He himself seized a pioneering chance to open foreign experts' eyes to his original, interesting findings on versatile Chinese verbs (e.g., the Chinese "*chi*," "to eat," goes far beyond the edible, as in phrases like "eat canteen," "eat the moon," and "eat lawsuit"), a commonplace phenomenon in modern Chinese. His paper, like some of the "first-Chinese-name" articles local authors published in international journals, did not look particularly professional by today's standards, yet it satisfied the journal's curiosity. Now that China has become globally known, that interest has naturally died down; publishing in international journals has become more difficult.

We need evidence for the assumption that playing a cultural card gives local authors an advantage in international publishing. Yet, we see multilingual authors drawing from their cultural resources in writings about themselves. For example, in a novel interpretation of a multilingual self system (an applied linguistics concept exploring the polyglot's composite identity), the authors draw on the Chinese *taiji* (the great ultimate) metaphor:

> The constitutive multilingual self (including integrativeness; i.e., Factor 1 and Factor 3) and the instrumental multilingual self (i.e., Factor 2) may be metaphorically understood as operating in parallel fashion through correlative associations in the holistic multilingual self-motivation, within which the two orientations are not mutually exclusive but coexisting and self-organizing. In constant interaction with shifting contextual forces (e.g., the launch of the new L3 program, classroom learning, contextual pressures, and study abroad), the two orientations may change in their relational proportion, cycling back and forth between the dominance of one or the other. (Zheng et al., 2020, p. 794)

Although it is unclear whether this cultural symbol aids readers in understanding the *yin* and *yang* of Chinese students' motivation to learn foreign languages, it is a clear sign that the authors are making an effort to build knowledge with a manifest cultural identity.

Authentic Knowledge

As academics become more aware of their cultural Others, there is a growing recognition of the unique cultural and epistemic contexts of local knowledge practices (Cetina, 2007). Much as we admire the alchemists' quests for the elixir of life, the herb doctors' self-experiments with wild plants, and the divinators' hermeneutics of the unforeseeable future, we have largely moved beyond our ancestors' primitive pursuits. And yet, we may find our actions subconsciously guided by some of our ancestral beliefs, even as we push the frontiers of human understanding.

These beliefs are woven into the foundational tenets of local scholarship, shaping perceptions of what constitutes knowledge and guiding approaches to knowledge practices. Despite the much-sought common ground, what one culture regards as worthy knowledge may fail to impress another, giving rise to essentialist questions like "Does Chinese philosophy count as philosophy?" (Song, 2023) and raising doubts about the validity of inherited practices such as Chinese traditional medicine.

To illustrate the force of tradition and how it may clash with modern practices, let's travel back to seventeenth-century China, when its nascent scholarly publishing industry began to flourish. Feng Menglong (1574–1646) was a late Ming scholar who wrote and published multiple books (Oki, 2016). One of his best-circulated works is *Stories to Caution the World: A Ming Dynasty Collection*. Among the pieces in this collection is "Three times Wang Anshi tries to baffle Academician Su," which tells the story of two giants in China's intellectual history.

As the title suggests, the story narrates Wang Anshi's interactions with Su Dongpo, also known as Su Shi (1037–1101), one of China's greatest poets and writers, who served as a government official during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Wang Anshi (1021–1086), a senior to Su, was also a Chinese poet and government official who initiated a series of reformative policies. Both Wang and Su are among the Eight Great Masters of the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties and are nationally revered for their remarkable literary talents. Feng's narration is based on a popular story about the troubled relationship between these two literati. The climax occurred when, during a visit to Wang's residence, Su accidentally discovered an unfinished poem left by Wang. Upon reading it, he found it to be "sheer nonsense" (Feng,