
Stakes of Authentic Culinary Experience: Food Writing of Tang Lusun and Wang Zengqi

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ABSTRACT

Tang Lusun (唐魯孫, 1908-1985) and Wang Zengqi (汪曾祺, 1920-1997) produced their food writing in the form of familiar essays, respectively, in the late martial law period of Taiwan (the 1970s and 1980s) and the early reform era of China (the 1980s and 1990s). This article examines their essays, especially those on Republican Beijing (Beiping) and wartime Kunming, to explore how narratives of autobiographical, individual culinary experience can develop into sharable or comparable social experience addressing the historical rupture of 1949. Shifting the focus of the theoretical notion of authenticity from the self to the individual's phenomenal perception and the contested arena of social communication concerning historical memory, this article shows that literary practices such as the generic feature of the I-narrator in the familiar essay, the textual construction of chronotopes of food, and (re)publications across the Taiwan Strait have shaped and reshaped "authentic culinary experience" in their texts in response to changing power structures, social interests, and affective needs of the reader.

KEYWORDS experience, food, authenticity, chronotope, memory

In his 1936 book *My Country My People*, essayist Lin Yutang (1895-1976) states: “No food is really enjoyed unless it is keenly anticipated, discussed, eaten and then commented upon” (319). This highlights culinary experience as the result of the interplay among multiple practices centering upon food: expectations and imagination of the food before the act of eating, and description and evaluation afterwards that produce a narrative of the experience. What is learned symbolically is interweaved into the bodily experience of eating, which then undertakes the meaning-making—and mediating—process of recollection, selection, and reorganization before a narrative comes into being.

Food as a medial object in literature is famously exemplified in Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), in which the little madeleine cake triggers off the I-narrator’s memory. Recent interdisciplinary research on material culture acknowledges the significance of material objects not just as “sources” but also as “agents and mediators” bringing researchers closer to emotional and sensorial experience as well as embodied social relations in the past (Gerritsen and Riello); while literary criticism explores how objects both function as symbols in the story and contribute formally to the structure of the literary text (Marshall). Food is, however, different from other material objects in that it is perishable, hence its frequent connections with memory and nostalgia. Its materiality is gained rather through the (re)enactment of culinary practices—eating, cooking, and dining—and through the practices of culinary culture—food/recipe writing, publication, and reading (no matter in which media form). The latter group of practices record and relay what happened in the kitchen and at the table, transmitting—and oftentimes transforming—experiential, practical, and historical information about food.

This article examines the food writing of essayists Tang Lusun (1908-1985) and Wang Zengqi (1920-1997), especially their familiar essays about culinary experience in Republican China (1912-1949). Tang was a descendent of Manchu nobility related to the imperial family who grew up in Republican Beijing, which was renamed Beiping after the Northern Expedition in 1928. He moved to Taiwan in 1946 and lived there for the rest of his life. Also in 1946 Wang Zengqi, who came from a well-off genteel family in Gaoyou of Jiangsu province, left Kunming, where he had studied Chinese literature since 1939 at the National Southwestern Associated University, or *Lianda* (1938-1946), a wartime university formed by merging Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Nankai University.

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From 1950 on Wang would spend most of his life in Beijing, which regained its name and status as the capital in 1949. In the meantime, Taiwan shifted from a borderland and ex-colony to the location of the Republic of China (ROC) and a front of the Cold War. Kunming, which Wang did not revisit until decades later, receded into a borderland city after the war.

The shifts of space and power associated with the authors' individual life experiences and the historical rupture of 1949 found their way into the authors' essays that remember and reconstruct Republican China through the I-narrator's culinary experience, in particular that in Beijing and wartime Kunming. Both started their food writing in their sixties, respectively, in Taiwan of the late martial law period (the 1970s and 1980s) and Beijing of the early reform era (the 1980s and 1990s). The drastic political, social, and cultural changes in their circumstances have impacted on their writing, while their republications across the Taiwan Strait in the 1990s and posthumously in the twenty-first century have repurposed the texts to cater to new power structures, social interests, and affective needs of the reader.

All these make a comparative study of Tang's and Wang's food writing an interesting case with which to explore how narratives of autobiographical, individual experience in the literary genre of the Chinese familiar essay (*xiaopinwen* or *sanwen*) can develop into sharable experience in the social communication of memory. With its claim to authenticity, this remembered experience in circulation strives for acknowledgement as historical memory (Assmann), which can further serve as cultural and political argument (Sabrow and Saupe). Looking into the construction and stakes of authentic culinary experience in Tang's and Wang's food writing in terms of literary genre, textual construction of (intersected) chronotopes of food, and republication trajectories, the following analysis shows that the theoretical notion of authenticity can be productively applied to examine the complex relations between experience and memory, between what is expressed and what is expressible in the narrative of experience, and between public consent on what is considered authentic and public discontent that articulates itself by bringing in and legitimizing new contents and techniques of the authentic in social communication in different historical contexts.

Authentic Experience and the Chronotope of Food

Michael Pickering approaches experience as "an intermediary category coming between ways of being and ways of knowing" (18), which is simultaneously raw data and an analytical category that conceptualizes and organizes the data, and ultimately gives it the quality of narrative (19). If Pickering calls attention to the

meaning-making process of experience from “a subject’s immersion in a flow of action, observation or feeling where the meanings of events, encounters, episodes or states of being are relatively inchoate” (27) to a coherent and evaluative narrative, then Martin Jay, from a linguistic-philosophical perspective, advises us to see in experience a mediating process which situates it “at the nodal point of the intersection between public language and private subjectivity, between expressible commonalities and the ineffability of the individual interior” (6-7). Therefore, there is always a part of experience that gets lost or eludes the (various versions of) “post facto recounting” (6-7), when individual experience transforms into a socially intelligible and sharable articulation.

For this reason, “authenticity” seems to find no place in the scholars’ discussion of experience as a meaning-making and mediating process. As a matter of fact, Pickering brushes aside “authenticity” as essentialist in his theorization of experience. Nevertheless, he hesitates to make a hard distinction between first-hand experience as situated experience and second-hand experience as mediated because, as he argues (resonant with Lin Yutang’s comment on culinary experience), one’s contact with (mass) media products may influence him/her “in an immediate and direct way” and “what is experienced symbolically” is becoming “increasingly entwined with what is experienced through our own sensory perception” (24). Pickering thus puts into question an irreducible, unified subjectivity (the self) that underlies one’s individual experience as authentic and acknowledges the phenomenal nature of the perceiving subject’s experience that interweaves what is experienced symbolically and sensorially. In doing so, Pickering opens up, inadvertently, the possibility of revisiting “authenticity” as an analytical category by moving it into a more complex and dynamic phenomenal world. Authenticity in the formulation of cultural ethnographer Phillip Vannini and sociologist J. Patrick William is “an affective, cognitive, narrative, and self-reflective experience” (6). Vannini and William further argue that authenticity is the result of social communication, “an *emergent* product of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication,” denoting the “*standards and techniques . . . through which people build a shared agreement over what is to be considered authentic*” (12; emphasis added). In other words, “authenticity” is normative yet fluid: it sets the boundaries of what can be considered as authentic and how to achieve it, which at the same time are liable to contestation. The shift from the irreducible and unified self to the individual’s phenomenal perception and the contested arena of social communication in the notion of authenticity therefore puts “authentic experience” at stake: there are constant negotiations between what an individual feels and perceives, what is expressed, and what is expressible in its narrative; and contestations keep taking

place over what is authentic and what counts as legitimate, convincing techniques. It is therefore important to consider different narratives, the “contradictions, ambivalences and silences” across them, and even the subject’s “heavily skewed” self-definition of an experience (Pickering 28).

The two essayists’ accounts of culinary experience in Beiping and Kunming are heavily colored by their emotions and values at the time of their recollection and writing. These places in their texts thus should not be viewed as natural and neutral geographical categories, but rather as space in the artistic chronotope theorized by M. M. Bakhtin:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterize the artistic chronotope. (84)

The notion of chronotope emphasizes “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). Beiping and wartime Kunming are therefore spatiotemporal constructions pointing at a specific historical era in Tang’s and Wang’s food writing. I further specify Bakhtin’s notion into “chronotope of food” to locate the foodstuff and culinary practices that constitute the I-narrator’s culinary experience in Tang’s and Wang’s essays in these spaces. The chronotope of food offers a venue where negotiations and contestations underlying the construction and stakes of authentic experience can be discussed in terms of food, space, and history.

Tang Lusun wrote his essays at a time when the ROC was going through upheavals in international relations and inner politics, including its loss of the UN seat and the rise of pro-democracy demonstrations challenging the legitimacy of the Kuomintang’s (KMT, or the Nationalist Party) authoritarian rule. It was also a historical moment, when the hope of the KMT retaking the mainland from the Communists was becoming slim. Intellectual elites—especially those so-called *waishengren* (mainland refugees entering Taiwan around 1949)—felt themselves stuck in the “median” state of the exile, “a state of being caught between adjusting oneself to a new home and retaining one’s faith in the possibility of returning to one’s old home.”¹ As a result, they started to rethink their earlier view of Taiwan

¹ For the “median” state, see Edward W. Said’s 1993 article, “Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals,” quoted in Hsiau 173.

as an exile destination (Hsiao). The prospect of never being able to return to the mainland generated an intensive longing on the part of the *waishengren* for the lost homeland “China” and the past associated with it, which manifested itself, among others, in the nostalgic wave of writing culinary Beiping in the 1970s and 1980s, set off by Tang Lusun’s 1974 essay “Chi zai Beiping” (“Eating in Beiping”), originally published in the supplement of the pro-KMT newspaper *United Daily News* (*Lianhe bao*) (Chen Yu-jen).

If culinary nostalgia is “the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food” as defined by Mark Swislocki (1), then Wang Zengqi shared it with Tang in that the chronotopes of food constructed in both authors’ texts reveal a strong sense of displacement and loss, albeit for different reasons. Wang Zengqi, who had floundered in various political movements in Mao’s China, did not start to write essays on culinary culture until 1981.² His food writing, with its conversational style, humor, and enthusiasm in the everyday life, is very different from the didactic essays of Mao’s China, which made him a “rediscovered” essayist embodying a literary continuity across 1949 on both sides of the Strait. A notable portion of his food writing is located in wartime Kunming, where he spent seven years as a college student at *Lianda* and to which he kept harkening back with nostalgia in post-Mao China. These texts arguably anticipated—and the republications of both authors eventually participated in the making of—the so-called “Republican Fever” (*minguo re*) that emerged in late-1990s mainland China, when the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) relaxation of its control on history and memory of Republican China resulted in diverse but generally idealizing portrayals of it in the twenty-first century.

Recalling Personal Experience in the Familiar Essay

Food writing by authors such as Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), Liang Shiqiu (1903-1987), and the abovementioned Lin Yutang constitutes a noteworthy part of the modern Chinese familiar essay that arose and boomed in Republican China. Lin Yutang and Zhou Zuoren identified late Ming essayist Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610) and his notion of *xingling* as sources of new literature, which, in their interpretations, express the author’s true thoughts and true self (Qian 128-40). Lin furthermore translated the genre *xiaopinwen* into “familiar essay” and thereby integrated into it the British literary tradition of the familiar essay, whose foregrounding of

² His first essay on food “On Grapes” (“Guanyu putao”), an essay in the style closer to popular science, was published originally in *Anhui Literature* in 1981. See Wang Zengqi, *Wang Zengqi quanji* 3: 167-75.

the authorial self has its root in the Romanticist idea of locating authenticity in the self (Natarajan). The first-person narrating voice in the modern Chinese familiar essay therefore claims the authenticity of personal experience and individual emotion by conflating the I-narrator with the essayist based on their shared biographies and by fashioning its own spontaneity of emotional flow and lack of purpose with its informal, conversational style.

Although he was preceded by a few authors in the 1960s, Tang Lusun was regarded as a milestone of food writing in Taiwan for his influence on other authors and for his prolific output as well as detailed descriptions of food and culinary experience (Chen Yu-jen 47-48). He published ten essay collections with several publishers during his lifetime and two posthumously in 1985. All of his books have been reprinted repeatedly in Taiwan and republished in mainland China since 2003. Tang assured the reader of the veracity of the information in his food writing by emphasizing his own sensorial experience and his sincere attitude of writing. His commentators, most of them literary elitists originating from the mainland, suggested that it is his Manchu aristocratic family background, his amazing memory power and sophisticated culinary experience, and not least his use of language (the Beiping dialect), that combined to authenticate the content of his essays as experiential knowledge.

In his "Brief Introduction" to *Guyuan qing* (*Recalling Homeland*), Tang Lusun declared his intention to keep his food writing away from grand topics: "When selecting materials [to write], I stick to a little principle, that is, I would comment on neither national events nor contemporary personalities."³ Though eating and drinking were idle topics, the essayist would like to try his best to present the reader with truthful information:

The ancients said: "There is nothing without sincerity (*bu cheng wu wu*)." Things are valued for their pureness and authenticity (*chunzhen*). I write with my own hand about what my own tongue has tasted, which should be more trustworthy and to the point than hearsay. (1-2)

Chen Jiying (1908-1997), one of the founders of the anti-communist Chinese Literary Arts Association (*Zhongguo wenyi xiehui*),⁴ claimed that Tang was a legendary figure with incredible memory power (2). Tang was viewed as a gourmet,

³ All translations of quotations from Chinese sources are my own.

⁴ The Chinese Literary Arts Association was founded in May 1950 with the support of the Nationalist government. It implemented the official cultural policies, especially those of anticommunism with the goal of recovering the mainland. See Yeh.

ethnographic essayist, and ethnographer who was able to record in vivid detail what he had experienced. Tang's friend Xia Yuanyu (1909-1995), a Beijing-born biologist and essayist who was similarly impressed by his strong memory ("Xu," Tang, *Zhongguo chi de gushi* 4), guaranteed the reader that "what is written in Tang's books is either what he had experienced personally or what he was told face to face by reliable acquaintances" ("Xu," Tang, *Nan bei kan* 12). Assuming the credibility of seeing, hearing, and remembering one's personal experiences, Xia affirmed the information in Tang's texts as historical knowledge:

His sources are solely his personal experiences. Possessing a powerful memory, he does not forget what he has seen and heard. He does not need to look for primary sources to write up his essays, but what he writes down will serve as primary sources for future generations. ("Xia Yuanyu xu" 2)

In the same preface, Xia also called attention to Tang's "flowing and humorous Beiping dialect" (2), highlighting it as a linguistic sign of the essayist's profound knowledge about Beiping. In another preface possibly written in the 1970s or 1980s, Xia Yuanyu advised the reader to use Tang's works as textbooks to learn the national language (*guoyu*) ("Xu," *Nan bei kan* 12), which defined the mainland as the lost part of the "country" and the content of Tang's essays as knowledge about this country. Seeing Tang's essays as "records of the everyday life in the past," Xia claimed that they "would evoke the personal memories of the older generations while helping young people to increase their knowledge so they would know their own country better" ("Xu," *Nan bei kan* 13). Chen Jiying also affirmed Tang's food writing for its value as historical and ethnographical knowledge: "Most importantly [this book] can bring back the lingering memories of those who are in the middle-age or older and offer young people abundant knowledge" (4).

Tang Lusun, Chen Jiying, and Xia Yuanyu, as Chen Yu-jen points out, were powerful cultural producers at the time who occupied privileged literary platforms and possessed extensive publishing resources. They therefore formed a network that echoed and endorsed each other's writings (55). Tang's narrative of his culinary experience in Beiping was acknowledged as a faithful recollection of historical facts and the Beiping dialect as the standard written language that textualized these facts into historical knowledge. By privileging Beiping culture as the norm of national culture, Chen and Xia developed a political argument out of the authenticity of Tang Lusun's narrative to support the ruling KMT's ideology and policy of retaking the (lost) "country" from the Communists. Tang was by no means unaware of the ideological implication of his food writing when he ended

the 1978 “Brief Introduction” with the following sentences: “If [my] food talk can elicit one’s memory of the homeland and then inspire his ambition of recovering the native soil, then I have not written in vain these years” (*Guyuan qing* 1-2).

Power structures and social interests, which Jan Assmann considers “active in shaping and framing individual memories” (111), play no less a role in Wang Zengqi’s remembering of *Lianda* in wartime Kunming, albeit in a different way. In contrast to Tang Lusun who enjoyed a high social status and literary connections with the powerful in the martial law period of Taiwan (1949-1987), Wang had had some bizarre brushes with power in mainland China: from 1950 till his retirement he had worked as a writer and literary editor on folk culture and Peking opera; he was denounced as a rightist between 1958 and 1960, and then investigated after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) for working with radicals to create model operas (*yangbanxi*). As the eight-volume *Complete Works of Wang Zengqi* show, he did not publish essays between the turbulent years of 1958 and 1978.

Talking about Kunming in post-Mao China, Wang wrote in a 1991 essay: “I stayed in Kunming for seven years. Chronologically, Kunming is my second hometown. I travelled there as a young man and since then have never left it. My attachment lies not just in its landscape” (*Zishu* 171). His lingering attachment to Kunming, as many of his essays attest, lay in *Lianda*, which had molded him, in Wang’s own words, “into such a person and such an author—not another sort of author” (*Zishu* 88). Wang Zengqi claimed (wartime) Kunming as a hometown, in which he became who he was. As an essayist he resorted to his own autobiographical experience to authenticate his I-narrator’s stories about *Lianda*, which demonstrate what Wang phrased as the *Lianda* ethos: democratic thoughts, independent thinking, and academic freedom (*Zishu* 95).

Lianda and, in Wang’s memory, the Department of Chinese Literature, accommodated what John Israel calls a “stellar faculty” (96). In several essays, Wang portrayed a colorful gallery of scholars with very different academic approaches, personalities, and political leanings: Wen Yiduo (1899-1946), Shen Congwen (1902-1988), Zhu Ziqing (1898-1948), Tang Lan (1901-1979), Liu Wendian (1889-1958), to name a few. Wen Yiduo, for example, was recalled with great fondness. He taught late Tang poetry by interpreting the poems in terms of late Impressionism and declared that drinking hard while knowing by heart the poem “Li sao” (“Encountering Sorrow”) would be the signature of a *mingshi*, or distinguished scholar with no official post (Wang 4: 357). Wang Zengqi was skeptical of his political engagement (which would ultimately result in his assassination by KMT secret agents in 1946), but Wen nevertheless visited him amicably and debated with him over the issue (*Zishu* 172).

With experience of such a respectful and affectionate professor-student relation, Wang Zengqi recalled that the whole *Lianda* had an atmosphere of “democracy, freedom, and openness” (Wang 4: 355). He enjoyed maximum freedom of learning at *Lianda*: he was allowed to spend the whole night reading, and even smoking, in the department library (Wang 4: 359). From his perspective as a student, he remembered how *Lianda* was quite lax in holding the monthly “spiritual mobilization meeting,” a compulsory program of the KMT’s “partyized education”: Mei Yiqi (1889-1962), the educator and physicist who took over most administrative duties of *Lianda*, was more concerned with students’ health (cholera) than the party ideology; students were absent-minded at the meeting while the preparation was negligent—Wang noticed once that the national flag, which was part of the ritual, had thirteen rays of the white sun—instead of twelve (*Zishu* 91,107). As John Israel shows, the intellectual tolerance and freedom from red tape and ideological indoctrination did not come automatically. To ensure a liberal education that gave “students a wide base of knowledge that they could build on keeping with their own interests and strengths” (96), Mei Yiqi had to repeatedly negotiate with the KMT and work with power at different levels to resist the imposition of “partyized education” and promotion of utilitarian goals at the expense of the humanities and law (75-77).

Wang Zengqi’s writing of his individual experience as a *Lianda* student does not have to—and cannot possibly—cover all historical aspects of *Lianda*. Furthermore, when he wrote about his experience in the essays, he did not necessarily articulate everything fully. As a matter of fact, Wang often created performative gaps between what is expressed and what is (not) expressible in his essays to put into question the authority of the I-narrator’s words. The awkward and vague formulation about himself as cited above—“such a person and such an author—not another sort of author”—is a case in point: he did not explain what “such” a person or author is, nor what “another sort of author” is. What may appear to be a casual comment in a spontaneous flow of the I-narrator’s utterance in fact demands prior knowledge and a close reading from a careful reader. Another example is his 1984 essay “Kunming de yǔ” (“Rain of Kunming”), which starts with an abrupt sentence: “Ningkun asked me to do a brush painting for him which should highlight the characteristics of Kunming.” The I-narrator then proceeds to talk about flowers, trees, mushrooms, and fruits in Kunming’s rainy season and seems to have forgotten (Wu) Ningkun (1920-2019) in the remainder of the essay (Wang 3: 376-79). What appears a negligence in the essay may well be a performative silence—as a symptom of trauma and fear—that foregrounds the textual gap pointing at what is glaringly unexpressed: who Wu Ningkun was and what was his relation to

Kunming. As Wu's excruciating autobiographical work *A Single Tear* records, he studied English at *Lianda*; in 1951 he quit his doctoral study at the University of Chicago to accept a teaching position at Yenching University in Beijing, a decision that threw him into repeated persecutions in Mao's China. When Wang Zengqi published the essay in 1984, Wu had been rehabilitated and would soon be on his way to the U.S. to visit his children (Wu ix). This knowledge about Wu Ningkun, which connects *Lianda* with the post-1949 years in mainland China, would complicate what otherwise appears to be the I-narrator's nostalgia for his youth in Kunming. Indeed Wang Zengqi mentioned in his essays many—but all briefly—*Lianda* students, among them Wu Ningkun, his lifelong friend and linguist Zhu Dexi (1920-1992), and also Wu Nasun (Nelson Ikon Wu, nom de plume Lu Qiao, 1919-2002), the author of the novel *Wei Yang Ge (Never-Ending Saga)*, which was later published and became tremendously popular in Taiwan. It would be interesting to speculate whether the reason why Wang Zengqi understated *Lianda* students was that their various life trajectories later on both sides of the Cold War would be too sensitive a topic for him, who had learned to be cautious about what he was allowed to remember in his essays and what was not.

Both Tang Lusun's and Wang Zengqi's familiar essays take advantage of the generic expectation of the I-narrator in the familiar essay to authenticate the author's accounts of autobiographical experience. Whereas Tang resorted to other authenticating techniques such as the statement of the author's sincerity and other commentators' endorsement of veracity, Wang exercised performative silences and ambivalences in his texts. This difference shows that the way the I-narrator remembers and articulates his individual experiences was largely shaped by the author's life experience under the authoritarian state—particularly his encounters with political power—and the social contexts in which he carried out the acts of remembering and writing. Their chronotopes of food constructed with their mnemonic cities of Beiping and Kunming, respectively, are underpinned by culinary nostalgia of different nature, even though their culinary memories do intersect in a way in Beijing.

Food in the Mnemonic Cities of Beiping and Kunming

In Tang Lusun's essays, Beiping is referred to as the hometown (*guxiang*) and the former capital (*gudu*). In both cases, it is a place associated with *gu*, an adjective denoting something bygone, something that existed in the past but no longer does. Republican Beijing was where Tang had spent the first half—and perhaps the best time—of his life; hence the hometown. The former capital of the ROC, on the

other hand, should rather be Nanjing; therefore, naming Beiping the “former capital,” as David Der-wei Wang argues, demonstrates less a lament on dynastic changes (Beiping was the former capital already in the Republican time) than an awareness of multiple historical implications that Beiping stands for (75). Indeed, recalling Beiping ambiguously as the former capital shows the author’s general sense of displacement of time and space. Perhaps more revealing is his shaky—and displaced—idea of the “country” (China) in association with this former capital.

Tang Lusun repeatedly wrote about the festival celebration of the Chinese New Year in Beiping, in which he provided abundant historical and ethnographical information about the preparation and consumption of festival food, such as *Laba* congee, *jiaozi* dumpling, *migong* (a sweet fried food for worship made from flour, egg, and malt sugar), and homemade dishes, as well as culinary practices that were tightly interweaved with religious beliefs, social norms, and political rituals.

All families in Beiping—no matter rich or poor—were frugal all year round, said Tang Lusun, so they felt they could reward themselves during the Chinese New Year (*Suan tian* 69-73). The festival started on the eighth of the twelfth month (*laba*) and did not end until the eighteenth of the first month in the new year. In an essay entitled “Tantan guxiang de niansu” (“On the New Year Customs in My Hometown”), the I-narrator describes his visual and olfactory memory of the festival consisting of food, incense, and flowers: apples and five bowls of *migong* were arranged for the gods and the Buddha, while five sorts of dried fruits (longan, lychee, red dates, chestnuts, lotus seeds) were for the ancestors. “When the cold fragrance [of flowers] mixed with the auspicious scent of Tibetan incenses, they produced a graceful and solemn smell, which was exactly the smell of the Chinese New Year” (*Tianxia wei* 186). This description of personal experience—for example, Tibetan incenses—illustrates how the Han Chinese New Year customs were combined with the Manchu religious rituals in Tang’s family. His Manchu background, in turn, validates his knowledge about the imperial practice of cooking and distributing *Laba* congee to high officials in the Qing dynasty.

Laba is believed to be the day of the Buddha’s enlightenment, and eating *Laba* congee has been a widespread culinary practice in the Chinese Buddhist tradition. As Tang tells the reader, distributing *Laba* congee to worship the Buddha was a political ceremony that was believed to have come into being during the Kangxi emperor’s reign (1661-1722) and ended when the last emperor was driven out of the palace in 1924. It was a strictly ritualistic practice expressing the imperial gratitude for the officials’ service: the empress inspected the quality of the ingredients (various grains, dried nuts and fruits) beforehand; the cooking of congee began

exactly in the midnight and lasted till the dawn; eunuchs were sent out to distribute the congee in a special pot as imperial grace—and were able to garner handsome sums of tipping; and families of the chosen officials would prepare their own congees—and in addition some vegetarian dishes—to return the favor of the emperor. *Laba* congee in Beiping, in Tang’s eyes, boasted similar ingredients and meticulous cooking methods as those of the imperial congee and was therefore the finest in China (*Lao gudong* 213-22; *Tianxia wei* 16-17).

Tang referred to Beiping not only as “hometown” or “former capital,” but sometimes simply as “northern China” (*beifang*), betraying the awareness of his standing point in Taiwan. *Jiaozi* dumpling is a new year food shared by all ethnical groups in northern China, but Tang’s narrative emphasizes the way *jiaozi* was eaten in Beiping. For the first five days of the Chinese New Year Beiping residents only ate *jiaozi*, and those on the first day must be vegetarian. The reason was that gods came down from heaven to inspect the human world on this day and those families eating vegetarian *jiaozi* would be considered frugal and virtuous and thus get blessed. Thus, frugality remained the major culinary principle even during the New Year celebration.

This principle was also applicable to Tang Lusun’s fairly well-off family, except that they did prepare some dishes to serve with *jiaozi* when receiving guests. In the New Year socialization, a special ingredient—pheasant—was presented by the “old inhabitants of Beiping,” who knew where to hunt it in winter (Babaoshan in the western suburb of Beiping), as a gift to the host. According to Tang’s family recipe, the pheasant would be sliced and scrambled with a local pickle made from zucchini and soybean paste. Then, as culinary etiquettes required, the pheasant would be served with the *jiaozi* dumpling to return the favor of the guest (*Suan tian* 72-73).

Combining his personal experience with what he heard and probably read (e.g., the practice of *Laba* congee in the imperial court), Tang Lusun created a chronotope of food colored by the narrator’s strong identification with Beiping. In his texts the political powers, religious beliefs, ethnic groups, social norms embodied in food and culinary practices in Beiping were entwined and porous, defying a rigid historical periodization between the last dynasty and Republican China. It thus allows a sense of historical continuity through the I-narrator’s mundane culinary experience, especially that of the Chinese New Year.⁵ The essayist’s act of writing about his experience situated in the mnemonic culinary landscape of Beiping, on

⁵ The governments of Republican China had indeed tried two decades (c. 1912-1934), yet in vain, to abolish the festival in favor of the New Year’s Day in the Gregorian calendar. See Xin and Zhang.

the other hand, foregrounds precisely the historical rupture of 1949 that geographically displaced him to Taiwan and psychologically dislocated him from his hometown and his “country.”

The sense of displacement brought about by the rupture of 1949 permeates the chronotope of food in Wang Zengqi’s essays, as shown in his 1987 essay “Kunming cai” (“Kunming Cuisine”), which locates the cuisine in the essayist’s personal memory of wartime Kunming:

This essay . . . is not written for the local people of Kunming. . . . Rather, it is written for myself. I have left Kunming for a good forty years, but cannot forget Kunming cuisine. (*Wu wei* 36)

The I-narrator thus discusses Kunming food in a dialogue with his own memory, when he is displaced from wartime Kunming spatially and temporally. Like his cooking of a Kunming dish at home in Beijing (fresh corn kernels scrambled with ground meat and green chili) (*Wen yu hua* 165), the author’s repeated act of writing about culinary practices at *Lianda*, with its constant negotiations between his remembered experience and the way to articulate it, is an important way to enact his nostalgia for a modern liberal education and tolerant campus culture that China had never seen before and has not repeated since then.

Wang Zengqi mapped his college years through the *Lianda* campus and several streets around it in the city of Kunming. *Lianda* moved to Kunming in 1938; its New Campus, which was its main undergraduate campus including students’ dorms, classrooms, and the main library, was completed in 1939. Built on a stretch of land where graves used to stand, the New Campus was located in the North of Kunming city (*Zishu* 105). South of the New Campus were Fengzhu Street and Wenling Street on the two sides of the West Gate. Together with buildings the university borrowed from local schools, the campus and its nearby streets occupied the northwestern corner of the city, which is called “the Latin Quarter” in Nelson I. Wu’s novel *Never-Ending Saga* (131), comparing its lively student life in the library, teahouses, noodle shops, and at the snack hawkers to that on the Left Bank of Paris. Poverty, death (bombing), and inflation typically plaguing wartime are transformed into culinary tales of extraordinary personalities (both professors and students) and fond memories of delicious, subtropical produce and the care-free Bohemian lifestyle in this mnemonic space.

According to Wang Zengqi (*Zishu* 93-94), (at least some) students—most probably Wang himself included—could afford to eat in restaurants in the southern part of the city at the beginning of their study, where they tasted local specialties

of chicken, beef, pig's knuckle, and eggs. But soon they would run out of money and had to content themselves with noodle shops on Wenling Street and teahouses on Fengzhu Street in their "Latin Quarter." He often accompanied his professor Shen Congwen (1902-1988), one of the most important authors in modern Chinese literature, to eat rice noodles with eggs and tomatoes on Wenlin Street, where the favorite beef noodle shop of Wu Mi (1894-1978), a Professor of English, also stood. In the time of roaring inflation Wu would listen to the owner explain the reason for raising prices. Once he found it plausible, Wu would handwrite the list of new prices for the shop (Wang 5: 31-36). On both Wenlin Street and Fengzhu Street there were more than ten teahouses, where *Lianda* students "steeped themselves" (*pao chaguan*) for much longer time than the locals, studying, socializing or, like Wang Zengqi, observing people. He wrote his first stories in a teahouse in his sophomore year. One student put his toiletries in a teahouse so that he could spend the whole day there reading (*Renjian* 113-21).

Those small, dirty teahouses provided a haven for poor students to stay and study books and the human world, but when they used up all their money, they landed in the school canteen, subsisting on "a diet of the coarsest quality of rice and a sprinkling of vegetables" (Israel 11): the most common supply included coarse rice often mixed with sand, woodchips, mouse feces (humorously named "eight-treasure rice"); and beans cooked in salty water and tasteless konjac jelly (*Zishu* 93). The poor quality of the food did not dampen the young students' good appetites and mood. Wang remembered eating sweet potato as fruit: "It has an earthy taste, but that is why sweet potato is sweet potato. . . . It is precisely this earthy taste that leads me to recall sweet potato, Kunming, and our days as poor students—very happy days they were." The female students "munched carrots while discussing the poems of Christina Rossetti and the novels of the Brontës" (*Zuofan* 89). Kunming food in Wang's recollection, whether the waxberry which was dark red in color and table-tennis in size, or the light yellow-colored, sweet and juicy carrots: everything seemed to taste better than their sort in other regions (Wang 3: 376-79; *Zuofan* 89).

Even bombing appears less threatening because it is remembered in terms of food. The novel *Never-Ending Saga* mentions that *Lianda's* teaching time was designed to avoid the Japanese' bombing during the day: "The classes started at 7 am and ended at 10 am; then they resumed at 2 pm and lasted till 5 pm" (140). When the air raid siren rang, *Lianda* students would walk through the northern door of the New Campus and chose a grave there as shelter. Meanwhile, peddlers of malt candy and roasted pine seeds, who also ran for life there, could still do business with them (*Zishu* 118-23). There were even students defying bombing—and one

of them did that for food. Zheng Zhimian (1921-), who later became a professor of physics, was willing to risk his life to slow-cook lotus seeds with rock candy in the student dorm when the stove was at last free (Wang 6: 307-08).

In Wang Zengqi's essays Kunming food and the culinary practices of students and professors on the *Lianda* campus and the streets nearby embody a campus culture of optimism, amiability, and tolerance. Wartime Kunming thus epitomizes a time in the author's life that he held dear. Wang's idealization of his culinary experience in Kunming during the hard time of the war reveals his nostalgia for *Lianda*, a nostalgia longing for the past, but also one articulating critique. In his 1992 essay "The New Campus" (Wang 5: 390-97), Wang Zengqi makes it explicit that "freedom" is the reason why *Lianda*, which existed for only eight years in the war, was able to produce more talents than those brought out by Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Nankai University in the next thirty years.

Beijing, where Wang Zengqi wrote most of his essays, is not Tang Lusun's Beiping, yet there are always interesting moments of intersection that put the two essayists' food writing into dialogue, bringing to light connections, contradictions, and lapses in narratives of experience about such historical and social ruptures as 1949.

In a couple of essays (*Zhongguo chi* [1976] 45-52; *Da zahui* 229-33), Tang Lusun talked about "dishes-in-box" (*hezi cai*), a special take-out food offered by butcher shops in Beiping. He quoted directly from a Beiping native whose family used to operate a butcher shop as a reliable source on the food: originating from the cooked meat taken by Manchu aristocratic men on their hunting trips, dishes-in-box was an assortment of cooked meat—seven to fifteen kinds depending on the price—delivered in a lacquer box to the client. After enumerating major restaurants serving dishes-in-box in Beiping, Tang focused on Jinbaozhai, a restaurant owned by a Mongolian in the northern part of the city, because presumably it had had the longest history and served the most authentic dishes-in-box. The culinary authenticity manifests itself in its distinctive ethnic features: they used only beef and lamb in the box while serving smoked pork chops extra; and their lacquer boxes were larger and higher, whose decorative themes were hunting scenes in the Gobi instead of dragons, phoenixes, and auspicious words typical of restaurants operated by the Han Chinese. Hearing that Jinbaozhai closed down after the war, Tang Lusun lamented that "dishes-in-box" would possibly become a term buried in the past.

In fact, it may have disappeared even sooner than he thought. In early-1950s Beijing, when Wang Zengqi saw the writer Lao She (1899-1966), a Beijing native of Manchu ethnicity, have "dishes-in-box" delivered to his home, his reaction was

surprise. “Dishes-in-box had disappeared for years. We didn’t know from where he ordered this. Even those vermilion-colored round lacquer boxes with carved patterns and small partitions would never be seen any more,” so recalled Wang in his 1990 essay (*Wu wei* 98). In an earlier version of the story written in 1984, Wang specified the size of the boxes and their contents: “The flat round vermilion-colored lacquer box had a diameter of more than three *chi* [approximately 1 meter] in whose partitions there were finely sliced ham, dried duck, cooked pig’s stomach and tongues, etc.” (Wang 3: 345). Lao She was able to get the dishes-in-box, either because he knew where to find it or someone was still willing to do it for him. Wang records in this anecdote how he witnessed cultural and culinary continuity—personified in Lao She—in the city. In comparison with Tang Lusun, Lao She’s connection with Beijing/Beiping crossed social classes and was therefore robust enough to survive the rupture of 1949—but not the more radical and violent one of 1966.

Republished and Repurposed

When talking about the significance of material objects, M. W. Conkey argues that they “are not, and have not been, just caught up in an ever-shifting world but are actually creating, constructing, materializing and mobilizing history, contacts and entanglements” (364). Not only the food (re)enacted through culinary practices but the medium that records and recalls these practices also counts as such an object, whose materiality (book design, print runs, prefaces, etc.) plays a role in eliciting the reader’s expectation and interpretation. Essay collections of Tang Lusun and Wang Zengqi have been repeatedly republished, in their lifetime and posthumously, locally and across the Taiwan Strait. The changes in their materiality as well as in the texts (i.e., censorship) have recontextualized and repurposed the culinary experience in the texts to cater to the social interests and affective needs of readership under new historical and cultural circumstances.

Different from Tang Lusun who published his essays first in newspaper supplements, that is, as light, entertaining literature, Wang Zengqi’s food writing appeared in major national and provincial literary journals in 1980s China; only when China’s cultural sector was commercialized in the mid-1990s did he publish his essays in newspapers and magazines. In other words, many of Wang’s essays made their first appearance as serious literature that participated in renewing the literary genre *sanwen* in post-Mao China, when individual expression of the I-narrator was legitimized and valued as authentic and real for its “personal sincerity” (Laughlin 279). The literary style of Wang’s essays and his professional contact with Nieh

Hualing (1925-), a well-connected Taiwan *waishengren* writer based in the U.S. who invited Wang to her International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1987 (Wang 5: 252-59), may have facilitated the publication of a collection of his early novelettes with Unitas Press in 1988, shortly after the KMT lifted its martial law in 1987. After this Wang Zengqi hosted a column “Culinary Culture” (*Yinshi wenhua*) in the literary journal *Lianhe wenxue* (*Unitas: A Literary Monthly*) between 1993 and 1994 and contributed eight essays.

These publications were part of the efforts of Taiwanese intellectuals who introduced authors in the Sinophone sphere, especially those from the mainland, to reflect on literature’s relation to history, memory, and ideology and to promote tolerance and pluralism in the post-martial law period.⁶ Wang Zengqi addressed his Taiwanese readership as “fellow countrymen in Taiwan (*Taiwan xiangqin*)” (“Tiji”), but he was aware that this readership’s experience with literature, food, and China paralleled yet differed from that of mainlanders: they had suffered similar political, social, and cultural controls of an authoritarian state but had been on the other side of the Cold War; their perception of “China” might appear similar yet was fundamentally different from that of most mainlanders in the post-Mao era. Wang obviously had this Taiwan readership on his mind when he chose the eight essays, which focused on two aspects the Taiwanese reader might be interested in and relate to: the everyday life in Mao’s China and literary pluralism.

For a readership whose contact with mainland Chinese culture had been extremely limited,⁷ stories about food in Communist China were new. When Xia Yuanyu wrote his preface to Tang Lusun’s 1983 *Stories of Chinese Eating*, he contrasted Taiwan’s booming culinary culture with its precarious political situation: “Taiwan is in its prime time of the Way of Eating despite the fact it is on the verge of war” (3). In Wang Zengqi’s essays “Malingshu” (“Potatoes”) and “Koumo” (“Zhangjiakou Mushrooms”), originally published in 1987 and 1988, the author related his experience as a rightist exiled to the institute of agricultural science in Zhangjiakou near Inner Mongolia from 1958 to 1961, a period covering the famine years in the wake of the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Wang’s narrative manages to convey, without self-pity, a balanced account of hunger and joy of the everyday life in the Mao era. He enumerated many varieties of potato cultivated in the research institute and then talked about how his family had enjoyed the whole bag of purple-skinned potatoes for several days, which he deemed most tasteful among

⁶ Bianjishi baogao (“Words from the Editors”): “Wenxue yimin” (“Migrants of Literature”), *Unitas* 5 (1994), page not indicated.

⁷ The same can be said on the mainland side. In the 1980s and 1990s, many Taiwanese literary works were republished in the mainland, some with authorization and many without.

all the varieties and carried all the way to Beijing. Similarly, out of the single dried white Zhangjiakou mushroom that he brought back to Beijing the family cooked a bowl of soup, which everyone found to taste better than the chicken soup.

If stories about the everyday life in Mao's China opened a small window onto the other side of the Cold War, then Wang Zengqi's essays that extend his culinary knowledge about food history and geography to argue for the tolerance of literary diversity may resonate well with a Taiwanese reader's recent memory of the martial law. The essays "Wuwei" ("Five Flavors") and "Kugua shi gua ma?" ("Is Bitter Melon a Melon?") compare the culinary diversity to literary pluralism and argue that one's taste, culinary or literary, is acquired and can be diversified. The bitter melon, a vegetable mainly consumed in southern China, for example, had come to be accepted by Beijing inhabitants.

In comparison with the (re)publication of Wang Zengqi's essays in Taiwan, the republications of Tang Lusun's works in Taiwan and mainland China have left a more complex trajectory of repurposing and at some point merged with Wang Zengqi's works in the "Republican Fever." Among many editions of Tang's works in Taiwan, the twelve volumes published by Dadi Press in 2000 are noteworthy because they were put under a new rubric: *Aesthetics of the Everyday Life* (*shenghuo meixue*). The brief biography of Tang Lusun, which appears in each volume, portrays him as an ethnographer and gourmet with a noble family background whose writing demonstrates an elegant aesthetics of the everyday life (*Zhongguo chi* [2000] 16). This point is endorsed by the preface of Lu Yaodong (1933-2006), a historian and culinary essayist, to this edition. Written in 1999, it reframes Tang's food writing as follows:

At the beginning it bore his unbearable homesickness, which would fade out over time. The alien place has become homeland, and there are no differences between the South and the North, the indigenous and the foreign. (10)

Writing this in the rising sentiment of Taiwan's de-Chiangification (*Qu-Jianghua*),⁸ Lu recuperated Tang Lusun's essays, especially those published in the late 1970s, from their complicity with the KMT and identification with its political ideology. The republication of Tang's texts under a new, apparently apolitical rubric promoting the middle-class pursuit of an elegant lifestyle has facilitated Tang's entry into the literary history of Taiwan,⁹ and the notion of aesthetics of the everyday

⁸ For a discussion of Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in the de-Chiangification movement, see Matten.

⁹ *Taiwan yinshi wenxuan* (*Selected Food Essays from Taiwan*, 2003) edited by Jiao Tong, for example, lists Tang Lusun as a Taiwan essayist.

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life seems to anticipate the Movement of Aesthetic Everyday Life in Taiwan (*Taiwan shenghuo meixue yundong*, 2008-2012) financed by the Taiwanese government, which intended to connect an aesthetic understanding of the everyday life with building Taiwan communities and cultural citizenship (CCA).

Dadi Press sold the rights of Tang's works to Guangxi Normal University Press, which published Tang's works in simplified Chinese version in 2004 and then in 2013.¹⁰ The publication of Tang's works joined in the "Republic Fever" in post-Mao China, to which Wang Zengqi's posthumously—and repeatedly—republished essays also contributed. The "Republican Fever", in its acknowledgement—to the extent of idealization—of the academic, educational, and press freedom in Republican China and the KMT's achievements in building the national identity, international relations, and economic development, turned out to question the CCP's political legitimacy (Zhang and Weatherley). Its strong tendency of depoliticizing Republican China does not provide any justified approach to history, but rather, like the chronotope of food in Wang Zengqi's texts, articulates a discontent with the lack of freedom.

The book designs and prefaces of Tang Lusun's food writing in mainland China evidence this depoliticizing tendency. The cover design of the 2004-2005 edition of his collected works features pre-modern household objects such as bowls and a lamp, creating a reference to culinary knowledge. The prefaces include Lu Yaodong's 1999 one mentioned above, one by renowned writer of historical novels Gao Yang, and one by the author himself. Only one book includes a preface of Chen Jiyang whereas Xia Yuanyu's prefaces have been completely taken out. The author's preface specifically stressed his wish to remain apolitical: his principle was to write solely about the "pleasure of food and travel," with no intention of discussing "current affairs" or evaluating historical/political figures. Tang ended his preface by suggesting that his peers write some "harmless essays" to "kill time" ("Heyi" 9-11). This preface, which was presumably written between late 1983 and his death in 1985, probably betrays Tang's resignation and fear that prohibited him from discussing anything other than the "harmless" topic of food. When Lu Yaodong alluded to Tang's apolitical principle in his preface, he reinterpreted it as a sign of Tang's flexibility as a "contented and self-sufficient man" (6).

The 2013 edition of Tang Lusun's works was published in the pocket size with hardcover and stripped of any prefaces. The back cover blurb of *Zhongguo chi* (*Chinese Eating*), for example, is a quote from Tang's contemporary essayist and

¹⁰ In 2003 Tianjin-based Hundred Flower Press published *Zhongguo chi de gushi* (*Stories of Chinese Eating*), which is probably the first simplified Chinese version of Tang Lusun's works. Xia Yuanyu's preface remained yet was partly censored in this version.

friend, the Beijing-born Liang Shiqiu: “Not only is Mr. Tang knowledgeable, but he writes [his essays] in the authentic Beiping dialect, so people from Beiping find his writing so endearing and full of flavor” (*Zhongguo chi* [2013]). Also on the back cover are the titles of the twelve books by Tang, which are placed under this description: “A feast from Republican China, and a tasty history of Republican China.” Now the “authentic Beiping dialect” and the culinary experience it authenticates serve a different purpose from that in Xia Yuanyu’s prefaces, which set Tang’s texts as a model for the Taiwanese to learn the “national language” and to gain knowledge about the lost “China.” Here the “authentic Beiping dialect” represents an anachronism that poses Beiping as a dehistoricized and sentimentalized “former capital.” By cutting its intricate relations to the current Beijing, this anachronism makes Beiping and its associated Republican China consumable.

De-politicized as the authors wished, claimed, or were/are marketed, their texts have nevertheless suffered censorship in the process of republication, which recontextualized the culinary experience in them. Tang Lusun’s essay “Beiping shang fangan de jueqiao” (“Tips of Dining out in Beiping”), for example, ended in its earliest version (1976) with this passage:

What I have mentioned above took place at a time when people were affluent and food and produce were abundant. Now the mainland is occupied [illegally] by Communist bandits. Ration coupons are needed to obtain food and meat is nowhere to be seen the whole year round. The tips of dining out. . . . There is no need to talk about them any more. (81)

This ending full of Cold War vocabulary and mentality has disappeared in the 2000 edition in Taiwan and, naturally also in those published in mainland China. In Tang Lusun’s essays, the I-narrator cherished the memory of *miancha*, a seasoned millet porridge that served as breakfast in Beiping. In Wang Zengqi’s hilarious story about an official during the Cultural Revolution, *miancha* in the Beijing dialect also means a muddleheaded person: the *miancha* official was not literate enough to read aloud the newspaper or Mao Zedong’s poems correctly to his non-communist colleagues in the compulsory study sessions. “Yet,” as the I-narrator groaned resignedly in the end of the essay, “he was nevertheless a Communist Party member” (*Wu wei* 170). This story about *miancha*, first published in 1997 and then 2005, may seem quite unproblematic in post-Mao China. When the essay was republished in 2014, however, the last paragraph about the *miancha* Communist was taken out, perhaps a not insignificant sign of tightened censorship in current mainland China.

Conclusion

Looking into the authors' different ways of approaching culinary experience—that is, what experience and how it is remembered and expressed in their narratives—and their republication trajectories, this case study explores the complicated and changing relations of experience and memory to power structures and their functions of addressing social changes and affective needs of their readers. As practice of culinary culture that recalls and records the I-narrators' personal experiences of eating, cooking, and dining, the food writing of Tang Lusun and Wang Zengqi bears the brunt of the historical rupture of 1949 and the authoritarian rules on both sides of the Taiwan Strait; the texts, their receptions, and the process of re-contextualization betray strong longings for historical, cultural, and literary continuities on the part of both authors and readers.

The analysis of the construction and stakes of “authentic culinary experience” in Tang Lusun's and Wang Zengqi's familiar essays on food, especially their texts on Republican China, furthermore, demonstrates how literary practices at different levels (genre, textual construction, and re/publication) participate in the meaning-making and mediating processes of generating a narrative out of an individual's phenomenal experience and bringing narratives of autobiographical, individual experience into the contested arena of social communication as shareable and comparable social experience. This article, unfortunately, does not have the opportunity to consider the aspect of gender-specific culinary experience, a blind spot that this author hopes to address in future research.

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**Stakes of Authentic
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