Research on the Authentic Self in Eastern and Western Cultures: A Relational Perspective

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Abstract

The authentic self reflects the degree of consistency between an individual's behavior and their internal states such as values, beliefs, and needs, and can be divided into trait authenticity and state authenticity. After differentiating the authentic self from related concepts—including self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, self-consistency, integrity, and sincerity—and reviewing existing theories in this domain, this work proposes cultural differences in the manifestation or realization of the authentic self: specifically, the authentic self in Western cultures is driven by autonomous motivation, whereas in Eastern cultures it is driven by relational requirements. Future research may take "relationalization" as the phenomenological field and Confucian traditional thought as an intellectual resource, investigating theoretical construction, social phenomena (e.g., emerging online social platforms, social change), and incorporating specific research methodologies (such as cross-cultural comparisons and methods that highlight situational variations).

Full Text

True Self in Eastern and Western Cultures: A Relational Perspective

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Abstract: The true self reflects the degree of consistency between an individual's behavior and their internal states such as values, beliefs, and needs, and can be divided into trait authenticity and state authenticity. After clarifying the similarities and differences between the true self and related concepts—including self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, self-congruence, integrity, and sincerity—and reviewing existing theories in this field, this paper proposes that cultural

differences exist in how the true self is expressed or realized. Specifically, the true self in Western culture is driven by autonomous motivation, whereas in Eastern culture it is driven by relational requirements. Future research can take "relationalization" as the phenomenological field and Confucian traditional thought as intellectual resources, exploring theoretical construction, social phenomena (such as emerging online social platforms and social change), and integrating specific research methods (e.g., cross-cultural comparisons, methods highlighting situational variations).

Keywords: true self, authenticity, autonomous motivation, guanxi, Confucianism
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In recent years, with the rapid development of Chinese society, people's living environments have become increasingly pluralistic and open. Everyone plays multiple roles, needing to switch between different identities, and some even hold jobs that require "performing oneself." One might wonder, "Does this action come from the real 'me'?" or "When they act that way, does it come from the real them?" Western society views the true self as a stable experience that emerges when aligned with individual autonomous motivation, an experience that influences interpersonal interactions (Baker et al., 2017), intimate relationships (Chen, 2019), sense of power (Gan et al., 2018), well-being (Schlegel & Hicks, 2011), and life satisfaction (Liu et al., 2016). Research on the true self can be traced back to the humanistic psychology era and has since developed into a mature research trajectory.

The essence of the true self may not differ across cultures—regardless of cultural background, everyone experiences a certain feeling when their words and actions align with their own standards. However, the pathways through which the true self is expressed or realized may vary culturally. As a contextual factor, culture can substantially shape human experiences and feelings, to the extent that even the same individual's true self may differ significantly across situations (Lenton et al., 2016). From a cross-cultural perspective, Western societies, influenced by individualistic culture, pursue independence and autonomy. Eastern societies, particularly East Asian societies (referred to as "Eastern" in this paper), are deeply influenced by Confucian relationalism (Menon et al., 1999), where people place greater emphasis on relationships. How, then, is the true self realized or expressed in Eastern societies? This paper examines the true self in Eastern and Western cultures from a cultural-difference perspective, organizes its existing concepts, theories, and developments, and further elaborates on the characteristics of true self realization in both cultural contexts. Centered on a relational perspective, this paper provides a novel viewpoint for true self research.

1. Distinguishing Concepts Related to the "True Self"

1.1 Origin and Development of the True Self

The term "authenticity" originated from the Greek word "authenteo," interpreted as "a power, having control over oneself," though this definition has sparked considerable debate. By the late eighteenth century, based on early forms of individualism, people began exploring the ethics of authenticity (later also translated as "genuineness") (Taylor, 1991). Early ethics emphasized a moral view of "goodness," but later ethicists began to consider that following one's inner self might be more important, and the concept of authenticity thus began to develop. In psychology, James (1890) distinguished between the "I" and the "me," and Mead (1934) subsequently elaborated on their differences and functions from a functionalist perspective, which had a significant impact on social psychology research. When the "I" begins to reflect on the "me," self-reflection emerges, followed by the consideration and judgment of whether the self is authentic.

Early explorations of the true self tended more toward philosophical speculation, lacking empirical research. It was not until Kernis's (2003) research on the true self that systematic conceptualization began. Kernis (2003) defined the true self as an individual's ability to express their genuine thoughts and values in daily life, comprising four components: awareness, unbiased processing, action, and relational orientation. These four points cover the cognitive-to-behavioral process of the true self, though they are not conditions that must be simultaneously present for the true self to emerge. For instance, an individual with high awareness but low behavioral expression may still experience or exhibit the true self.

A widely accepted view holds that the true self arises from individuals' autonomous needs and reflects the degree of consistency between behavior and internal states such as values, beliefs, and needs (Wood et al., 2008; Chen, 2019). The concept of the true self developed from Western researchers' discussions, reflecting the Western philosophical tendency toward subject-object dichotomy, extending from external control over the environment to internal control over the self. The pursuit of the true self also embodies the Western value of seeking an autonomous, stable self.

Currently, the true self is primarily divided into two types: trait authenticity and state authenticity. Trait authenticity is a stable and persistent trait tendency within an individual (Fleeson, 2001), whereas state authenticity refers to the authentic experience an individual has in a particular situation (Sedikides et al., 2017). Regarding their relationship, a study using the day reconstruction method found that trait authenticity only weakly predicts state authenticity (Lenton et al., 2016). Therefore, state authenticity and trait authenticity can be considered two distinct types of the true self (Lenton et al., 2014).

1.1.1 Trait Authenticity Concept. Early humanistic psychologists treated the true self as a trait, laying the theoretical foundation for trait authenticity research. For example, Maslow's "self-actualization" and Rogers's "fully functioning person" both studied authenticity as a stable personality tendency. Trait authenticity, as a personal quality developed throughout one's life, is manifested when individuals act in accordance with their values, beliefs, and internal needs, unaffected by the external environment. Fleeson (2001) defined trait authenticity as "a person's basic tendency toward a range of emotions, cognitions, or behaviors," reflecting stable individual differences, and thus it can also be called dispositional authenticity. Individuals high in trait authenticity tend to believe they possess the same identity regardless of environment or role (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Many early studies showed that consistency of self-concept across different environments is related to feelings of authenticity. For instance, English and Chen (2011) found that among college students, low cross-situational self-consistency was associated with low authenticity among European American students, though their cross-situational self-consistency was actually significantly higher than that of East Asian American students. This sense of authenticity likely stems from stable personality traits—a feeling more inclined toward trait authenticity.

Measurement. The most commonly used measure of trait authenticity is the Authenticity Scale adapted by Wood et al. (2008) from previous related scales. This 12-item scale includes three factors: (1) Self-Alienation, referring to the degree of alienation between autonomous awareness and authentic experience (e.g., "I feel as if I don't know myself very well"*); (2) Authentic Living, where behavior or emotional expression aligns with autonomous psychological states such as emotions, beliefs, and cognitions (e.g., "I live in accordance with my values and beliefs"); and (3) Acceptance of External Influence, referring to the degree to which individuals accept others' influence and believe they must meet others' expectations (e.g., "I always feel I need to do what others expect me to do"*). Items are rated on a 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) scale.

1.1.2 State Authenticity Concept. State authenticity refers to the feeling of alignment with one's true values, beliefs, and so on in the current environment or behavior (Sedikides et al., 2017). State authenticity can vary with context and thus can also be viewed as fluid authenticity. It emphasizes that this sense of authenticity is current (Sedikides et al., 2017), momentary (Lenton et al., 2013), or a feeling of being one's true self when one's behavior at a particular moment aligns with core traits and abilities (Strohminger et al., 2017). Unlike the stable, continuous nature of trait authenticity, state authenticity is a fleeting feeling that can arise anywhere and anytime. Although people often report feeling authentic, many inauthentic feelings also exist. For the same individual, the experience of authenticity varies greatly across different environments and roles. One study even found that within-person variation in authenticity across situations is three times greater than between-person variation (Lenton et al., 2016). Compared to trait authenticity, state authenticity research focuses

more on individual differences in authentic self across environments and roles. Based on the characteristics of state authenticity, researchers have further found that positive emotional states help elicit the authentic self (Lenton et al., 2016; Fleeson & Wilt, 2010), and that state authenticity also enhances well-being, meaning in life, and other life indicators (Sedikides et al., 2017; Thomaes et al., 2017).

Measurement. Research on state authenticity focuses on its immediacy and state-like nature. It typically measures an individual's true self in a specific situation or state, such as using the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM; Kahneman et al., 2004; Lenton et al., 2016), where individuals evaluate authentic events from the previous day to analyze their state authenticity. Some studies use scales to measure current-state authenticity; for example, Thomaes et al. (2017) used a six-point State Authenticity Scale with three items: "Today I was my true self," "Today I acted authentically," and "Today I was 'real' or authentic." Items are rated on a 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree) scale, with higher scores indicating greater current authenticity.

1.2 Related Concepts of the True Self

Research on the true self often involves similar concepts. Some can reflect the true self to a certain extent, such as self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, and self-congruence. However, other concepts are essentially different from the true self, such as integrity and sincerity.

Self-Knowledge. Self-knowledge is the foundational condition for the true self to emerge. Most of the time, people feel they clearly know what their true self is like. However, numerous studies indicate that individuals' self-knowledge is biased and partial (Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Often, behavior is driven by unconscious forces, and individuals may not know what they have done or understand the reasons for certain actions, making it difficult to judge these behaviors as expressions of the true self. Yet this does not mean these behaviors are inauthentic. Regarding whether self-knowledge is necessarily related to the true self, some scholars argue that self-consistency equals authenticity, regardless of clear self-knowledge (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). Others believe that judging whether one is authentic requires clear self-knowledge (Wood et al., 2008). After all, one must first have a self and know that self before possibly experiencing the true self.

Self-Concept Clarity. Self-concept clarity is a key prerequisite for the true self. It refers to the degree to which the content of one's self-concept (e.g., perceived personal attributes) is clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable (Campbell et al., 1996). When individuals have a clear definition of their qualities, a clear and unified identity, and an understanding of what their true self should be, they can experience the true self in certain environments. During development (especially adolescence), the clearer one's self-knowledge, the better one's psychological adjustment when dealing

with negative emotions or problems (Parise et al., 2019). Self-concept clarity is a further development of self-knowledge; only when individuals have a clear understanding and defined personal characteristics can they begin to contemplate authenticity.

Self-Congruence. Self-congruence is an important component of the true self. It refers to the degree of fit between an individual's behavior and their attitudes, beliefs, values, and other aspects (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). The self consists of various independent self-attributes, and the true self is the expression of the same self-identity across different environments. Jongman-Sereno and Leary (2019) view self-congruence as an important component of the true self. Many studies suggest that the true self involves behavior consistently aligned with beliefs, values, and internal needs, creating a stable, unchanging sense of authenticity. Self-congruence has two meanings: First, consistency between behavior and internal psychological states such as values. When behavior aligns with one's values, the true self can be felt. This aspect of self-congruence has been recognized by many scholars and has generated measurement items such as "Even when others criticize or reject me for it, I try to act in ways that are consistent with my personal values" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and "I always stand by my beliefs" (Wood et al., 2008). Second, self-congruence also encompasses cross-situational or cross-role consistency (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). As Westerners pursue independence and autonomy, who a person is does not change with roles. This is supported by cross-cultural research showing that Westerners exhibit higher consistency than Easterners when playing different roles (Church et al., 2014). In true self research, self-congruence is an important component. With self-knowledge and a clear self-concept, individuals clarify their authentic qualities, and when their behavior aligns with these qualities, the true self may be triggered.

Integrity and Sincerity. Integrity or sincerity is not equivalent to the true self and may be fundamentally contradictory concepts. Integrity refers to behavior that aligns with one's values and moral views (Alliger et al., 1996) and can be seen as an expression of authenticity (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). However, integrity does not equal authenticity. A person's values and moral views may themselves violate social norms; if they act according to these values in ways that do not meet social requirements, the behavior may express the true self but the person would not be high in integrity. The same applies to sincerity. Individuals with high authenticity may not necessarily experience high sincerity, and those who act inauthentically against their values may still show high sincerity to others. The key distinction is that authenticity is self-referential, while sincerity is mostly an interpersonal performance in interactions with others (Erickson, 1995).

2.2 Self-Verification Theory

Self-verification theory posits that once people have ideas about themselves, they seek to verify these ideas from others. When others' evaluations or un-

derstanding match their self-perceptions, people feel authentic (Swann, 1990). Thus, people (especially those with strong self-definitions) hope to validate their self-views through relationships with others. Here, scholars focus not only on authenticity driven by internal needs but also on the development of the true self within relationships. Others' views received during interpersonal interactions prompt individuals to engage in self-reflection and strategically manage self-presentation. In this process, individuals' self-views are validated from various aspects. When others' views align with self-perceptions, individuals easily experience feelings of authenticity, further clarifying their true selves. Self-verification theory has been embraced by many researchers of the relational self (e.g., intimate relationships) and relational authenticity. Verifying oneself in a partner relationship—feeling that one's partner truly knows who we are—benefits relational authenticity, producing good relationship quality and high well-being for both parties (Brunell et al., 2010).

Further research suggests that relational authenticity comes from feeling close to one's ideal self in a relationship (Gan & Chen, 2017). This interpretation is similar to the Michelangelo phenomenon, where good intimate relationships can help partners approach their ideal selves (Drigotas et al., 1999). Compared to Western culture's independence and autonomy, Eastern societies emphasize relationship maintenance, and people are more inclined to see themselves as social selves. Self-verification theory may thus provide a strong theoretical foundation for Eastern true self research.

2.3 Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory, rooted in existential-humanistic psychology, is an empirically driven theory centered on human motivation and development. It emphasizes that behaviors driven by motivation satisfying internal needs better reflect the true self (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) includes three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and divides motivation into autonomous and controlled types. Autonomous motivation plays an important role in true self research and is widely applied. When individuals' autonomy needs are satisfied, autonomous motivation is triggered, and resulting behaviors are considered more authentic. From a self-determination perspective, authenticity can be assessed by determining the degree to which people choose a course of action for internal reasons rather than external pressure (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2019). Self-determination theory and the humanistic perspective both start from the internal self. Humanism emphasizes knowing the self and focuses on self-actualization, tending toward philosophical speculation; self-determination theory breaks down the self into detailed components, proposing basic psychological needs and motivational divisions from a deeper perspective, revealing how to create external environments that satisfy basic needs to trigger authentic behavior.

Self-determination theory, particularly its sub-theories related to autonomy, pro-

vides a strong theoretical foundation for Western true self research. For individuals in Eastern culture, autonomy needs involve not only internal psychology but also the relational environment. Chinese people's true self differs from Westerners', a difference that is not only cross-cultural variation in self-congruence but also a fundamental distinction between independent and relational self-views.

3. Cultural Differences in True Self Expression

Integrating true self research, differences exist between Eastern and Western cultures. Westerners pursue autonomy and self-value realization; the true self is driven by autonomous motivation, and individuals tend to judge their authenticity based on stable traits such as internal needs and motivations. The more common Eastern true self is driven by relationships based on hierarchy and closeness. Individuals can autonomously integrate into different relational contexts and act appropriately, thereby experiencing the true self. This true self satisfies both individual needs and contextual demands, resonating with Confucian emphasis on "sincerity." When individuals appropriately express themselves while considering relational harmony, this ideal state better fits the Eastern traditional meaning of "being one's true self" (Sun & Chen, 2018).

3.1 Autonomous Motivation-Driven True Self in Western Culture

Western culture focuses on the "individual." Here, the individual is an entity centered on its own trait needs (Yang, 2015), tending to be described as a trait-based self-concept (Cousins, 1989). Westerners' true self focuses on the self-realization of traits such as values, attitudes, and beliefs (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2016), representing authenticity driven by autonomous motivation based on one's own traits. Satisfying individual autonomy needs generally triggers autonomous motivation, producing authentic behavior. External factors (including interpersonal relationships) may force individuals to develop more controlled motivation, reducing spontaneity and autonomy, thus causing them to hide their true selves from others.

Autonomy means the individual is the originator of action, and that action aligns with their own values and goals. This sense of self-driven action is crucial for the true self (Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Actions stemming from the true self are autonomously initiated but not necessarily independent of the external environment. As long as external factors align with autonomous motivations such as personal values, authentic behavior can also arise autonomously. Van den Bosch and Taris (2018) studied employees' true self at work through self-report methods, confirming that individual autonomy needs help trigger authentic feelings. Fischer and Boer's (2011) meta-analysis of 63 societies also supported the view that authenticity is triggered by autonomous motivation, regardless of whether the behavior conforms to social norms.

Since individual autonomous motivation is the criterion for judging the true self, some behaviors that appear authentic may not be, such as rebellious and inde-

pendent behaviors. First, rebellion as a reactive behavior may spontaneously express capacity when treated unfairly, but it is not necessarily a reactively endorsed behavior (Van Petegem et al., 2015), and thus may not stem from the true self. Second, independent behavior is not necessarily authentic, while dependent or interdependent behavior may be authentic. For example, independence not autonomously endorsed is inauthentic, while autonomously endorsed dependent behavior can be authentic.

The autonomous motivation-driven true self originates not only from individual autonomy but also from autonomy-supportive environments that facilitate authentic behavior. From a self-verification perspective, when behavior in interpersonal interactions is recognized or supported by others, it strengthens self-affirmation, making individuals more willing to show their true selves. For example, in LGBTQ+ individuals, assessing family and friends' acceptance of coming out reduces the likelihood of hiding the true self when autonomy support is received (Ryan & Ryan, 2019). However, if significant others react negatively to coming out, it frustrates autonomy needs, leading individuals to hide their true selves (Ryan et al., 2015). Research extending these findings to other authenticity domains shows similar results: autonomy support promotes parent-child relationships (Bureau & Mageau, 2014). In autonomy-supportive environments, individuals' autonomy needs are further enhanced, making them more willing to express their true selves (Ryan & Ryan, 2019).

The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, or a feeling of being constrained or controlled (Ryan & Ryan, 2019). When autonomy needs or support are lacking, external control makes individuals more constrained and inauthentic, stimulating controlled motivation and potentially triggering defensive reactions (Lynch & Sheldon, 2017). In controlled environments or when feeling controlled, individuals tend to hide themselves, affecting both experienced authenticity and quality of life. Power-related research also supports that controlling environments or feelings hinder self-expression. When situational roles match power, individuals are more willing to express themselves (Chen, 2019), and high-power individuals have higher self-concept consistency and authenticity (Kraus et al., 2011). Low-power individuals consider many external factors when expressing themselves, their expression constrained by the external world, making them more likely to hide true thoughts and resulting in less authentic expression.

The autonomous motivation-driven true self reflects the degree of consistency between behavior and self-traits such as values and beliefs (Chen, 2019). Although Western scholars mention that the self is a collection of various self-attributes, Westerners tend to believe they have the same identity across situations—that the true self is stable and consistent. Cross-cultural research shows that Asian Americans' self-descriptions in specific relational contexts are less consistent than European Americans' (English & Chen, 2007), and Westerners show higher consistency than Easterners when playing different roles (Church et al., 2014), demonstrating the stability and consistency of the Western true self.

3.2 Relationship-Driven True Self in Eastern Culture

Eastern culture focuses on social contexts, highlighting the characteristic of "guanxi" (relationship). Individuals grow up in a relationship-centered environment (Fei, 1985), and the existence and maintenance of relationships become internalized into Eastern individuals' autonomous cognition. While Western authenticity stems from satisfying autonomous trait needs, Eastern individuals emphasize satisfying relational needs at the cognitive level. Regarding self-views, Easterners depend more on and value others' expectations and evaluations within social relationships (Zhai, 2004), making relationships part of the self (Yang, 2015). It can be said that the Eastern true self feeling is partly based on relational autonomy needs and can change with relational contexts, but it may also be constrained by complex relationships.

Establishing and maintaining relationships is a common phenomenon in Eastern or, more familiarly, Chinese society. In different social contexts, individuals form relationships with others through different normative identities. These relationships form a network structure centered on the self, from near to far, with distinctions of hierarchy and closeness. As Mr. Fei Xiaotong described in his "differential mode of association," our pattern is like the ripples created when a stone is thrown into water, with the individual as the center of the circle and the ripples as the formed relational connections (Fei, 1985). Because people play different identities, there is not just one circle; people adjust their behavior according to changes in time, place, or relational context. In this network-structured relational circle, relationships are inevitably not entirely equal. From Fei's (1985) earliest classification of "insiders/outsiders" to the more complex interpersonal relationships developed in recent online environments, all reflect the hierarchical and closeness distinctions in relational structures (Yang, 2015). For a mature Easterner, these relationships may not constrain the self but rather serve as pathways to realizing individual authenticity. Individuals autonomously mobilize different "relational circles" (Fei, 1985) across contexts to achieve authentic feelings and satisfy role-corresponding identity norms.

The relational self refers to the feelings, goals, and behavioral expressions we develop toward specific people in specific social contexts (Andersen & Chen, 2002). In different contexts, interacting with different people triggers different identity characteristics, and people define themselves according to specific relational contexts (Chen, 2019). Especially for Easterners, numerous relational circles generate a series of relational selves. When people can autonomously mobilize corresponding relational selves in different contexts to produce behavior that integrates into the current situation, such self-presentation conforming to social contextual norms may be more readily accepted. When self-expression behaviors align with culturally prevalent self-expression norms, they enhance individuals' authenticity perception and feelings of being their true selves (Kokkoris & Kühnen, 2014). Eastern individuals particularly value harmonious relationships with their surroundings and are willing to integrate themselves into social relationships (Yang, 1995), which is itself a value for Easterners. Therefore,

when individuals can appropriately express themselves while considering relational harmony, they may enhance their authentic self-experience. For example, research found that behavioral changes or adjustments made for close others were considered expressions of the true self by Taiwanese Chinese participants (Sun & Chen, 2018).

If existing research shows that the true self in typical Western cultural contexts is driven by autonomous motivation—that is, authenticity comes from the alignment between action and one's own values, attitudes, and beliefs—then in typical Eastern cultural contexts, authenticity must consider relationships, that is, the impact of individual action on relationships. If loyalty and filial piety are both an individual's values, then conflict situations between them test individual authenticity. Whether individuals "conceal for family" or "uphold justice at the expense of family," they cannot experience complete authenticity. This is the challenge that life contexts bring to Eastern individuals. Thus, how to "not let down either the Buddha or the beloved" becomes a dilemma for Easterners.

4. Summary and Outlook

Research on the true self has accumulated substantial results abroad, developing a relatively systematic and mature framework from concepts and theories to empirical studies. Domestic research on the true self is also gradually emerging. This paper reviews domestic and international literature on the true self, introducing the autonomous motivation-driven true self based on Western individuals and the more common relationship-driven true self in Eastern contexts, and further explores the true self under multiple and complex relationships based on existing research in simple relationships.

4.1 The True Self in Relationships

Viewing the true self against a background of diversified social contexts, everyone has a need for authenticity, yet authenticity varies from person to person. From a cross-cultural perspective, the common Western authenticity stems from the autonomous satisfaction of individual trait needs; the common Eastern authenticity is an experience driven by relationships, where the true self varies with context or relationships. Compared to authenticity obtained by satisfying one's own internal needs, how can the true self be realized in different relational contexts? For individuals in relational contexts, some behaviors based on relationships also stem from internal motivation and meet autonomy needs. For example, Thomaes et al. (2017) found in diary studies that authentic self-experience comes from autonomy satisfaction under kinship or competence needs. However, others and relational groups external to the individual may affect autonomy judgment through opposing role-playing (Yang, 2008), and vertical relationships are harder to autonomously accept than horizontal or more equal relationship systems (Chirkov et al., 2003). Moreover, for individuals in relationships, inconsistency between internal thoughts and external interpersonal expression is not necessarily inauthentic expression. For example, "white lies"

are an authentic expression of being sincere inside and shaped outside (Ryan & Ryan, 2019). In other words, maintaining authenticity in complex relational contexts is relatively more difficult. Current research on the true self in relationships focuses only on simple dyadic equal relationships, such as intimate relationships (Didonato & Krueger, 2010) and ally relationships (Plasencia et al., 2016). So how do individuals realize the true self in vertical or more complex relational contexts?

In Western tradition, individuals pursue satisfaction of personal values, beliefs, and other autonomous needs, with self preceding others or the relational unit as the norm. Even in relational contexts, individuals treat the self as a primary independent entity rather than a role player in a relationship. Thus, when individual needs are prioritized and realized, authentic self-experience naturally emerges. However, in Eastern, especially Chinese, society, relationships and individuals coexist simultaneously, and relationships are not merely simple dyadic equal relationships. "Relationalization," as a cultural particularity of the interdependent self establishing group-self relationships in Chinese society (Yang, 2015), coexists with the individual. The individual is a unified entity of selves that exist in various relationships, each indispensable, 镶嵌 (embedded) into a whole through relationships (Yang, 2015). Moreover, this relational embedding has a hierarchical and closeness-based differential layout. From this perspective, the true self should be approached from a relational orientation, not existing in an atomic individual vacuum detached from relationships, but considering the impact of authentic self-experience on the relational environment.

Confucian traditional thought provides abundant intellectual resources for realizing relationship-driven authenticity. For example, Confucianism emphasizes that behavior should "originate from emotion and stop at propriety." However, Confucian thought does not demand absolute obedience to relationships such as the Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues but advocates living freely without overstepping boundaries. The five relationships (ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, friend-friend) based on "benevolence, righteousness, and propriety" reflect the vertical or equal relationships between small and great selves. Confucianism does not use these relationships to constrain the self but instead advocates pursuing self-realization as "the gentleman seeks harmony but not uniformity" (Huang, 2014). That is, maintaining independence while uniting and cooperating with others to satisfy true overall relational harmony and achieve self-value (Yang, 2015). Drawing on Confucian thought, people can achieve the true self by satisfying the need for harmonious social relationships. Thus, individuals can experience authentic feelings in relational contexts.

4.2 Future Development of True Self Research

This paper has analyzed true self research in Eastern and Western cultures. As mentioned, Western individuals' true self is based on satisfying their own trait needs, while Easterners' common true self is relationship-driven. The common

true self in both cultures (especially the West) has many research results in individual and simple relationship contexts, such as positive effects on well-being (Thomaes et al., 2017), life decision satisfaction (Christy et al., 2017), meaning in life (Schlegel et al., 2011), and relationship quality (Brunell et al., 2010). Based on this, future true self research can extend to multiple and complex relationship contexts.

First, theoretical construction of the true self. As summarized, the true self arises from satisfying individual autonomy needs or relational needs and can be analyzed from individual or relational orientations, but maintaining authenticity in complex relationships is relatively difficult. Tracing back to the self itself, unlike the West's pursuit of free and independent selves, Easterners focus on selves engaged in social relationships (Yang, 1995). Self-actualization in satisfying harmonious social relationships is the most authentic and universal need, such as dealing with people under the considerations of face and favor. Like "game" based on rational actor interaction and "strategy" when bound by relationships (Zhai, 2014), or inner love and external marriage (Zhai, 2017), authentic self-experience is also influenced by relationships. Especially in Eastern contexts, behaviors and behavioral adjustments made due to relationship closeness are also considered expressions of the true self (Sun & Chen, 2018).

Second, true self research on emerging online social platforms. The true self based on individuals or relationships has relative stability or variability, making online social platforms good comparative tools for studying authenticity. We can examine individual or relationship-based true self across different platforms and cultures. The true self based on individuals is selectively presented on social networking sites (Kim & Lee, 2011), affecting life satisfaction (Niu et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2016) and loneliness (Xu et al., 2017). How, then, is the relationship-based true self presented and affected on social platforms? Influenced by relational (friend) circles, individuals' self-disclosure may differ across platforms, affecting their online authentic self-experience. For example, a recent qualitative study showed that in some ritualistic interactions with false elements (e.g., "praise groups"), authentic and inauthentic emotions intertwine (Sun, 2020). Moreover, the true self in complex relational contexts can be tested through new media platforms. In work environments, for instance, individuals simultaneously have equal colleague relationships and vertical superior-subordinate relationships, making authentic self-experience relatively difficult. The true self is influenced not only by relationships themselves but also by power dynamics (Wang & Li, 2018; Berdahl & Martorana, 2006; Kraus et al., 2011). Thus, questions such as how employees' true self affects group identity and social identity, and subsequently performance, achievement motivation, and corporate culture identification in superior-subordinate or colleague relationships, can be studied using data from corresponding platforms.

Third, the true self under social change and pluralistic complexity. Cultural mixing is a new trend in global cultural interaction (Peng et al., 2017). Developing countries may treat foreign culture as a driving force for social modernization

and more readily accept cultural mixing (Chiu et al., 2015). As a rapidly developing country, China has experienced cultural mixing affecting rapid social change. Social environmental transformation brings convenient physical mobility while also presenting new challenges such as trust and peer support (Xie et al., 2019). Social transformation makes people's networks more heterogeneous and loose, reducing their binding force on individuals (Yang & Peng, 1999). Influenced by global trends, the autonomous motivation-driven true self—a psychologically important theme for Westerners—has also emerged among Chinese youth. How will this mix and develop with the true self under complex relationships in traditional Chinese society? As society transforms, is maintaining authenticity in complex relationships gradually becoming less difficult? Future research could longitudinally track changes and effects of the true self based on complex relationships in Chinese society, such as impacts on interpersonal interaction, peer support, trust, and individuals' own identity and social identity.

Fourth, cross-cultural research on the true self. In such pluralistic cultures, people's views on cultural differences are not simply rejection or integration. Culture brings dynamic influence, interacting with situations (Hou & Zhang, 2012). People may retain different cultural characteristics in memory, retrieving different cultural information in different situations to show adaptive behavior. Although Westerners have more trait-based self-descriptions, when given social situational roles, East Asians show more trait-based self-descriptions (Cousins, 1989). Can we then assume that trait authenticity may also appear in Eastern participants? Or might it be the inner true self that Easterners conceal, with relational contexts just promoting its external expression? This paper suggests two feasible future research paths. On one hand, we can conduct Western-style research—assuming our self is the same as Westerners', using action-value alignment as the authenticity criterion. On the other hand, we can start from a more fundamental angle—theoretically constructing, as proposed in this paper, a relationship-driven true self to study authentic self-experience during relational harmony or conflict.

Fifth, methodological inspirations. Currently, Western individual-based true self research mostly uses questionnaire measurement because the individual-based true self is a stable, consistent psychological experience arising from internal traits or needs, making questionnaires reliable. However, the relationship-driven true self can change with relational contexts and tends to be reflected through evaluations of others' authenticity, requiring more flexible measurement tools. For example, using situational simulation materials to measure authenticity (Sun & Chen, 2018). Future research could develop more situational materials to create suitable experimental materials for testing authenticity and simulate different situations based on differences between individual and relational authenticity to study true self priming at individual or relational construction levels.

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The English abstract below is preserved as originally provided:

True self in east and west from Guanxi perspective

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Abstract: The true self or authenticity refers to the consistency between individual behaviors and internal states (e.g., values, beliefs, and needs), including trait authenticity and state authenticity. Cultural differences in the true self was proposed by comparing with relevant concepts (e.g., self-knowledge, self-concept clarity, self-congruence, integrity, and sincerity) and reviewing existent theories. Specifically, the true self is driven by autonomous motivation in the Western culture, while it is driven by Guanxi requirements in the Eastern culture. Future studies are recommended to further explore the true self from the "guanxilization," integrating the traditional Confucian thoughts into theoretical construction and understanding toward new social phenomena (e.g., emerging Social Networking Sites, social changes), as well as advancing research methodologies (e.g., cross-cultural comparison, methods highlighting situation variations).

Key words: true self, authenticity, autonomous motivation, Guanxi, Confucianism

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.