

History, Practice, Limitations, and Prospects: Anthropology in China

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Abstract

Anthropology in China has a century long history. This article examines its origin, development, practices, and limitations throughout history briefly. It is argued that the history of anthropology in China has always been influenced by the state politics; its ups and downs has been determined by the state policy, and thus lacks academic autonomy. In the era of reform-open, however, Chinese anthropology received its spring. Several fields of new were developed along with international anthropology; the discipline has produced many PhDs. Many universities and colleges have established their own programs or departments. There are some problems, however, are underneath. Nonetheless, all negative conditions would push Chinese anthropologists forward to learn more, strengthening theoretical and critical thinking and searching for new subjects and new problems.

Key terms: anthropology, ethnology, history, China, state, ethnic minorities.

História, Prática, Limitações e Perspectivas: Antropologia na China

Resumo

A antropologia na China tem um século de história. Este artigo examina brevemente sua origem, desenvolvimento, práticas e limitações ao longo da história. Argumenta-se que a história da antropologia na China sempre foi influenciada pela política do estado; seus altos e baixos foram determinados pela política estadual e, portanto, carece de autonomia acadêmica. Na era da reforma aberta, no entanto, a antropologia chinesa floresceu. Vários campos novos foram desenvolvidos junto com a antropologia internacional; a disciplina produziu muitos PhDs. Muitas universidades e faculdades estabeleceram seus próprios programas ou departamentos. Existem alguns problemas, no entanto, subterrâneos. No entanto, todas as condições negativas impulsionariam os antropólogos chineses a aprender mais, fortalecendo o pensamento teórico e crítico e buscando novos temas e novas questões.

Palavras-chave: antropologia, etnologia, história, China, estado, minorias étnicas.

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This essay is an extension of the project called the Global Survey of Anthropological Practice (GSAP), which was carried out by anthropologists in different countries under the leadership of the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA).¹ The CAS (the Chinese Anthropological Society) received the task of this survey, but for some sensibility under the political condition the questionnaire was distributed to “the friend circles”, a popular social self-media called WeChat. It turned to be very informal. Its result was of course unexpected as one can imaged. As instead, for preparing the GSAP panel of WCAA in Brazil, July 2019, we had to collect data through personal contact and literature survey, which resulted in this essay.

This essay examines anthropological practice in China, especially in recent decades. After a brief description of the history of anthropology in the country in the following pages, I provide a discussion of the general practice of anthropology in China. I argue that the practice in question has always been impacted by current politics, both before and after 1949. This is a legacy or a tradition from early generations of Chinese anthropologists. However, comparing the discipline before and after 1949, we note that political approaches are quite different. As to anthropological practice in China today, I argue that anthropology has been in an awkward position in China because the system of higher education in China is still highly centralized. This situation is an obstacle to the development of the discipline in China, even though revitalization of anthropology in China was already taking place in the first part of the 1980s. Despite some obstacles, anthropology is increasingly welcomed and getting popularized in the country. In recent decades with contributions from those who were trained in foreign countries, Chinese anthropologists have engaged in many programs, from theoretical to applied. Therefore, the progress of the discipline cannot be underestimated.

A Brief History of Chinese Anthropology

Anthropology as a discipline was introduced to China before the 1920s. In the very beginning, books by Lewis Henry Morgan, Edward A. Westermarck, and Michael Haborandi were partially translated and published as series in newspapers or as book chapters. In 1916 SUN Xuewu published an article entitled “Summarization of Anthropology.” This is possibly the first time that the name of anthropology was made known to the public. This article, however, is basically a description of what anthropology was at the time and how it was coming about in the West (see Chen, 1985: 3).

¹ For this essay, I did not use any part of the questionnaire. Much material used in this essay was collected through a survey of the literature. I, however, have contacted more than 20 anthropologists or ethnologists at several elite Chinese universities in different venues. I have interviewed them and I paid attention to their suggestions and the information they provided. I did not get detailed information about the job market but, given my impression and the information I had, chances for students who study anthropology are quite good. Most of them go to work with media agencies or other organizations that are regarded as part of the cultural industry; some of them become self-employed doing what they like to do. There are many going on to graduate schools to get higher degrees. As to Ph.D.s, as far as I know, over 90% look for jobs in universities, and almost everyone ended up with positions there. Though this situation seems bright for anthropology, we cannot ignore the fact that China produces less than 100 Ph.D.s in anthropology (sometimes much less) and is not currently set up to produce more.

Today, scholars in general agree on that the founder of Chinese anthropology should be CAI Yuanpei. His article “On Ethnology” (*shuo minzuxue*) was published in 1926. In this article he argued, ethnology is a discipline focused on investigating ethnic cultures, recording and comparing them. Being trained in Germany Cai tended to make a distinction between anthropology and ethnology but argued that the two shared a lot in common. Nonetheless, he pointed out that culture (*wenhua*) concerns ethnology more. Since he was the first to systematically introduced ethnology and anthropology, he has been recognized as the founder of Chinese anthropology.

Started in 1927, with the Republic government settled down in Nanjing, institutes related to anthropology were established. From the early 1930s on, there were a few anthropological institutes established in China. Two institutes considered to be the most important in the history of this discipline in China were, respectively, established in 1930. One was the Research Institute of Social Sciences, in which ethnology was one of its four divisions (or, departments so to speak) and CAI Yuanpei was the head of this division. The other one is the Institute of History and Philology, Academic Sinica. Anthropology was the fourth division established under the leadership of LI Chi, an archaeologist and Harvard Ph.D. in anthropology. Several programs were then established. This includes anthropology programs in universities such as Peking, Sun Yat-Sen, Zhejiang, Xiamen, Fudan, Zhongyang (Central University), and Sichuan.

Before these programs were established in the late 1920s, however, a few scholars had already carried out field research. YANG Chengzhi, Fritz Jager and SHANG Chengzuo went to Guangxi. These Sun Yat-Sen University scholars carried out their research project among ethnic minorities in Guangxi Province. Many projects were carried on later, too. Scholars from Zhongyang University and Institute of History and Philology did their ethnographic research projects among the indigenous people in Taiwan (LIN Huixiang), Heilongjiang (Lin Chunsheng), Hunan (RUI Yifu), Yunnan (TAO Yunkui), among several others (see Chen, 1985; Wang, 1999).

Scholars in north China did their ethnographic research among the majority Chinese (Han), for which they called “community study” (*shequ yanjiu*). Before the rise of community study, however, influenced by Sergei Shirokogoroff, a Russian ethnologist teaching at Peking University, a couple of them (FEI Xiaotong and WANG Tonghui) went to study the Yao in Guangxi.

For the scholars of this camp what a community means is different from that of Ferdinand Tönnies. According to Tönnies, a community means a face-to-face society tied by blood or geographic condition. But for these scholars a community is actually a segment belonging to a larger society. Such a conception was borrowed from the Chicago school of sociology. In the late 1930s and early 40s, Robert Park and Radcliffe-Brown visited Tsinghua University in Peking (Beijing) respectively. Radcliffe-Brown was a colleague of Park at the University of Chicago at that time. Both of them suggested to Chinese scholars to use the concept of community in their study (Wang Mingming, 2016).

Since scholars in the southern and northern parts of China had different subjects (minority vs majority), they were divided into camps (Wang Jianmin, 1999). The northern camp was under the leadership of WU Wenzao, a Columbia University Ph.D. in sociology. Most scholars of the north did their doctoral study in the U.S. and the U.K. Because of this background they had close connections with anthropology and sociology in these two countries. Interestingly, quite a few of the leading scholars in the south had their doctoral degrees from France, under the supervision of Marcel Mauss, such as LING Chunsheng, XU Yitang, and YANG Kun, among others.

The southern camp was more often engaging in projects required by the state. What concerned the state then was the frontier which, in Chinese, means regions connecting with neighboring countries. Ethnic minorities have largely lived in these areas. So, the study of ethnic minorities reflects the fact that sovereignty was the priority of China as a modern state and that it wanted information on people living at its borders, such as their

livelihood and other social conditions, for example. In contrast, the northern camp was not so involved with the state agenda. It paid more attention to issues such as people's livelihood, the rural economy, and social change. What they did was pragmatic, engaged, and theoretical.

Shortly before and after the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) the issue of frontier policy (*bianzheng yanjiu*) turned out to be a hot topic in both camps. What was conspicuous at that time was the debate on the unity of the Chinese people--"Chinese nation is only one" (*zhonghua minzu shi yige*). The debate attracted several nationally known scholars. Anthropologists in this debate argued that China was a country of multiple nationalities and that the government should emphasize this. Nonetheless, as FEI Xiaotong, a student of Malinowski, confessed later on, he didn't realize that addressing the Chinese nation as only one mobilized people to revolt against the Japanese invasion (Fan Ke, 2019: 159).

After 1949, anthropology, ethnology, and sociology came to be regarded as bourgeois disciplines (*zichangjieji xueke*) and were quickly abolished as part of a movement to restructure higher education system in 1952. Following the Soviet model, many anthropologists and ethnologists became incorporated in a field under the name of ethno-study (*minzu yanjiu*). In addition, other anthropologists and ethnologists were assigned to other disciplines such as history and language. Many famous scholars were sent to a newly established college, the Central College (now university) for Nationalities (*Zhongyang minzu daxue*).² They were all asked to do research on ethnic minorities. Since the majority of the population of ethnic minorities lived in the frontier areas, this reality, again, concerned the state because the issue of sovereignty was centered in the process of state-making at that time.

Anthropology did not return to universities in China until the post-Mao era. A sign of such reconstruction was the establishment of the Chinese Anthropological Society in May 1981. Several universities, such as Xiamen and Sun Yat-Sen, were resuming anthropology programs. Anthropology started to develop again. From 1981 to 1983, three anthropology departments were established, respectively, in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sun Yat-Sen University, and Xiamen University. This was the other sign that anthropology was being restored in China. However, for some reason, currently in mainland China, only two universities, Sun Yat-Sen University and Xiamen University have maintained a 4 fields style of American anthropology. Most elite universities in the East China have anthropology or ethnology programs one way or the other. Most other universities have a few anthropologists working in different schools and departments. In addition, there are more than 23 schools, universities or colleges, for nationalities (*minzu yuanxiao*). Each of them has its own team of anthropologists (see Fan Ke and ZhangYunan, 2020).

Practice, after 1949

After the establishment of the PRC (the People's Republic of China), in the 1950s, there were two projects carried out under state supervision: ethnic identification (*minzu shibie*, 1953-1987) and the investigation of ethnic sociohistory (1958-1964). The ethnic identification campaign amounted to a categorization of populations along ethnic lines. The reason for such a categorization was the huge engineering of state-making at the time. The state wanted to have all levels of government bodies include ethnic representation so that it could present a state of all people. However, such a representation would not be achieved if no categorization of people was carried out. But what caused the state to carry out this campaign was a result from the 1953 state census. It was the first state census after the Communists attained power in 1949. One problem encountered in this census is that more than 400 identities appeared. To the state, this was technically unacceptable. It was just too many.

² China has its own preferential policy toward national minorities. Considering that most national minorities are classified as economically and culturally "backward" (*luohou*), the state has established a particular system of higher education in order to help them. Some universities or colleges were established particularly for students from ethnic minorities. However, they have also accepted students from the Han majority.

Accordingly, the central government decided to group them. This is the reason that ethnic identification came about. In the end, more than 400 identities were incorporated into 56 *minzu*. Ethnic configuration of present-day China was thus changed and fixed (Fan, 2012, 2016).

The other campaign, the investigation of minorities' sociohistory, was initiated and carried out between 1958 and 1964. This was a political task also assigned by the state to scholars. For the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the PRC (1949-59), the central government wanted to show its achievements in all aspects, including how and in what ways ethnic minority people's livelihood was improved under the leadership of the Chinese Communist party. In addition, policymakers decided to carry out a preferential policy toward ethnic minorities. To do this, they would need to know the stage of social evolution of every separate ethnic minority (a concept borrowed from the Soviet Union). For these purposes, the central government decided to have an exhibition or display in the National Palace (*minzu wenhuagong*). The government of every region was asked to collect data. Several thousand scholars were involved into this project.

As a result, this investigation collected a lot of data in terms of ethnic minorities' social structure, subsistence, and livelihood, producing a systematic knowledge about ethnic minorities in general. Such a situation never happened in the historical past. However, since this knowledge was produced within the framework of Marxist's-five stages of social evolution (primitive, slavery, feudalism, capitalist, and socialist),³ it was hampered by a lot of wrong information, misunderstanding, and even misrepresentation. Two projects in question also resulted in many publications that appeared in print before the Post-Mao era. Almost all scholars with a background in anthropology, ethnology, ethnohistory, linguistics, and even sociology had to work in these projects and had no individual choice. Such research is obviously very ideologized, but ironically it did lead something considered to be positive to come about:

First, at least the basic situation of China's ethnic minorities, though not perfect at all, are known by the public at large. This is a new thing. Second, and this lasted for years, the two projects in question actually provided opportunities to train anthropologists and to hire more scholars to do ethnographic research as well.

Starting in 1978, "reform-open" policy was carried out, leading to changes taking place in Chinese society. Against this backdrop, anthropology resumed its position but with many new characters. Let me summarize these changes from 1978 to the present as follows:

1. Although ethnic minority is still the emphasis in ethnological and anthropological studies, Scholars have paid more attention to the complexity of how each separate *minzu* has been connected—interweaved—in the construction of Chinese nation, and how the Chinese nation could be seen as a unity in diversity.

2. Revisiting old ethnographic sites was hot throughout almost two decades from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Several scholars returned to sites of ethnographic studies done by scholars of earlier generations, either Chinese or foreigners. For example, ZHUANG Kongshao (2000) revisited the site his advisor wrote an anthropological novel about titled *The Golden Wing: A Sociological Study of Chinese Familism* (Lin 1948); ZHOU Daming (2006) went to the site in which D.H. Kulp did his ethnography (Kulp, 1925); many times, FEI Xiaotong went back to the village he did the fieldwork for his famous book, *Peasant Life of China* (Fei, 1939), PAN Shouyong (2004) did research in a village Martin Yang wrote about in his *A Chinese Village: Taitou, Shantung Province* (Yang, 1945), and so on.

3. Nativization of anthropology (*Renleixue bentuhua*) became a hot topic to people in the academic enterprise by the middle of the 1990s. Some scholars felt that there were a lot of Western terminologies imported from outside China and, therefore, worried about the subjectivity of Chinese scholarship (see Xu Jieshun, 2001).

³ Marx never outlined social evolution as such. The five-stage doctrine was first outlined in chapter 4 of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, edited by a Commission of the C.C. of the C.P.S.U.(B), authorized by the C.C. of the C.P.S.U.(B.)1938 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1951).

Later on, scholars came to agree on what scholars should deal with as questions and problems. But I think that no matter where terminologies and theories come from, as long as they are helpful, we should use them.

4. In recent years, some scholars have explored the concept of civilization, sometimes called the anthropology of civilizations. They want to have a better understanding of cultural complexes within a civilization, looking into “hybrid phenomena” as something able to surpass the social system (see Wang Mingming, 2015).

5. HIV and its social impacts became a social issue in China by the middle of the 1990s, and anthropologists have followed these issues and done some significant studies in this area (SHAO 2016, 2006; ZHUANG Kongshao, 2007, among several others).

6. Identity politics is a topic for students of anthropology that is completely new to anthropologists in China. Although the state social policy toward ethnic minorities has benefitted the people and assigned them identities along with ethnic lines, it has awakened people’s self-consciousness and identity politics thus takes place. This is a paradox of ethnic identification based on categorization of populations along with ethnic lines. Not only does it alert people to think about who they are, some of them thinking they could be separate nationalities, or *minzu*, while others may manipulate their identities as assigned by the state in order to collect symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990) for their own good (FAN Ke, 2015). Some ethnic elites think that the identity their people have from the state could be wrong and that they should belong to another nationality. And some argue that they should be different nations, thereby subscribing openly to national separatist movements (see FAN Ke, 2019).

7. Globalization and its consequences have received a lot of academic attention. Students focus on migration, either domestic or trination. Mobility itself has become a subject of research. There is much theoretical discussion and ethnographic examination on this subject (see FAN Ke, 2015, DUANG Ying, 2020, MA, Guoqing 2016, among others)

8. Accordingly, anthropology of tourism has become a subdiscipline in anthropology of China. Many students study cultural or ethnic tourism, arguing about the authenticity of ethnic culture or cultural heritage is (PENG Zhaorong, 2005; SUN Jiuxia, 2007).

9. Anthropology of education is a relatively large field. The development of this field is certainly a consequence of a social policy that favors ethnic minorities. Students want to find why, after this policy was carried on for so many years, level of education in minority areas is still much lower than elsewhere and how such a situation may have anything to do with culture (TENG Xing, 2017, 2006, among others).

10. The frontier study is also hot especially among those who are teaching in universities located in minorities areas. I have, in fact, written several articles criticizing the problem in this field (for example see FAN Ke, 2016, among others) but I am not alone.

11. Medical anthropology has had very good development in recent years (see JING Jun, 2010). Professors JING Jun and PAN Tianshu were important in this field. They did their Ph.D.s at Harvard. They have engaged in several issues such as psychological health, aging, and hospice care in China. In recent decades one of their Harvard supervisors, Arthur Kleiman, visited China quite often. In addition to delivering lectures, he has also trained Chinese scholars inviting them to Harvard as visiting scholars or exchange students. Lai Lili (2016) has done good research, analyzing how hygiene, sociality and culture are interconnected in contemporary rural China. ZHANG Wenyi looks into how Christian prayer has its role in animal sacrifice by examining healing through states of consciousness among the Kachin in a south China village (ZHANG, 2016).

12. Many scholars are carrying out projects that are more applicable and practical such as aging, spiritual health, and public health. The leading scholars in this part are JING Jun, a Harvard returnee based in Tsinghua University and PAN Tianshu, also a Harvard returnee from Fudan University.

13. Rural issues have traditionally concerned anthropologists in China and in numerous other countries. Today, anthropologists treat issues in question as a problem of development. Many scholars argue that rural

issues are unseparated from the process of rapid urbanization pushed by the governments of different levels, as they are so demanding to rise GDP.

14. Nuclear anthropology is now an important program at Fudan University. The leading scholar is JING Li. His team has published some articles in journals such as *Nature* and *Science*. WANG Chuanchao, one of JIN's students, has built a laboratory at Xiamen University. He and his team have published quite a few excellent articles and one of them was published in *Nature* this year (See WANG, 2021).

15. Overseas ethnography is now being advocated by a few scholars, especially GAO Bingzhong of Beijing University. Several Ph.D. students have done their dissertation research in foreign countries. However, this tendency seems congruent with an atmosphere that is so-called "rise of China," a slogan officially supported the government and intentionally heated up years ago. Nonetheless, going abroad for field study has been pushed forward by many younger scholars, no matter whether or not they like this slogan.

16. Anthropology of Disaster is now also a hot topic after China has suffered several natural disasters especially since the last decade of the 20th century. Anthropologist LI Yongxiang (LI Yongxiang, 2012) in Yunnan, started to study in this field and has brought many scholars to work on this issue. Since the COVID -19 pandemic, anthropologists are also engaged in research related to this pandemic. But what problem is, the governments of different levels only wanted to have things that could show their performance. It is not an overemphasis to say that the government knows the problems and discourage research on what the state selected to do or favors to exercise in the current pandemic.

Limitations

Anthropology has gained its popularity due to at least two facts: (1) ongoing scholarly exchange between China and abroad over last decades, and (2) the fact that publications in Chinese have reached a level never accomplished before. But there are still limitations, too, because of the social political conditions:

1. The discipline has not yet had its appropriate position in the official curriculum, because of the structure of disciplines in the system of higher education. Because the state ministry of education is an apparatus controlling all resources for education, how to allocate these resources is, to a great degree, still highly "centrally planned." This is the reason why the disciplinary categorization (xueke huafen) has been established. Based in the categorization of disciplines all disciplines are arranged in a hierarchical structure. Except for a few disciplines considered to be the first division (yiji xueke), all others are secondary. As a consequence, for the secondary disciplines, chances such as getting funding, setting up graduate programs, and hiring faculty members are much less than for the "first division."

Figure 1. The structure of social sciences in Chinese higher education system

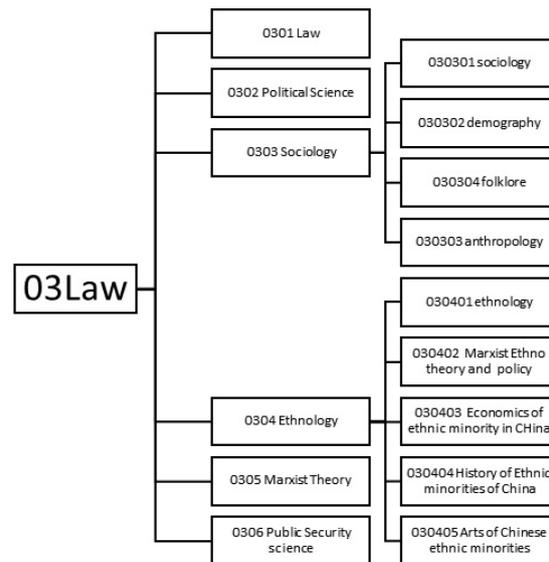


Figure 1 shows that in the structure of the disciplines of the social sciences, which are all under the category of the law (faxue men),⁴ there are four first divisions, and anthropology is subordinated to two of the first ones, sociology and ethnology. Such a position makes anthropology marginal in the overall education curriculum (FAN Ke and ZHANG Yunan, 2020).

2. Because anthropology is not a discipline in the first division, most anthropology programs are not allowed to have undergraduate students (in China, whether or not a discipline is allowed to have an undergraduate program is related to favorability in the job market). Currently, there are more than 20 universities having anthropology programs but only a few of them have anthropology departments that are allowed to have undergraduate students. Others are only for graduate training. This situation limits the growth of anthropology students.

3. Since several tragedies have happened in a few ethnic regions and their complexity in politics and international relation can be significant, the government has increasingly strengthened its domination in these areas. Writings related to these areas and subjects such as religion or ethnic issues are frequently censored by the government. For example, works on religion are deemed unfavorable by the government, so they have to be inspected seriously before publication. The same goes for works on border issues, minority life and politics, and citizenship. Unfortunately, most of these issues are what anthropologists in China have traditionally engaged.

4. The state is organizing publication of textbooks for all disciplines and anthropology is, of course, not exceptional. All of these textbooks get put under the title of “Marxist Engineering” and downplay any influence from Western academia. This is certainly a limitation to the development of anthropology in China.

5. There is also limited financial support for anthropology in China, and there are few professional anthropology journals. I consider this to be an important factor preventing anthropology from further progress in China.

⁴ There are several phyla, and law is listed third. This categorization of disciplines is a legacy that has been maintained since the era of the Republic, even though there are a lot of differences under each phylum.

Prospects

Though the development of anthropology in China is not as smooth as in many countries, there are some good things happening in recent years.

1. Because of self-media (WeChat, for example) so popular among people, a huge space opens to anthropology. All anthropology programs in China register their own platforms, through which people can present their own research, exchange information, and publish or not publish. Anthropological knowledge has been brought to the public as something attractive to younger students. Application for anthropology programs of different levels are increasing every year.

2. A number of anthropologists are carrying out projects involving practicing or applied anthropology outside universities, in institutions taking care of the elderly, social charity, and business.

3. MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) becomes a way to deliver lectures, which is favored by college students. Anthropology lectures are highly welcomed. This is an important way to attract students to enter the fields of anthropology.

4. Because the state strengthens its control and censorship in publication, many anthropologists spend more time training themselves theoretically. There are a lot of discussions in contemporary China on recent developments in anthropological theory, such as “ontological turn,” for instance and, in the meantime, there are significant articles published in China (see ZHU Xiaoyang, 2021, 2015, among others). Accordingly, I argue, this could be a juncture for Chinese anthropology, a moment to grow to be a much-matured discipline, since scholars would learn to be more able to raise questions and write things more theoretically, and scholars in anthropology could deal with social problems with more sophistication.

In sum, the current situation in China is not so positive toward anthropology, but it indeed may lead Chinese anthropologists to learn more things. The world has been changed a great deal. Even though the state in China puts a lot of pressure on academia, scholars are able to use their skills to make themselves grow and mature, and the whole discipline will certainly accomplish more, one could say achieve maturity, in terms of academic matters.

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