

“The Other” in *Story of Your Life*

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Abstract

“Other” is a concept formed relative to “self”, referring to all people and things other than self. Western philosophers believe that the “other” is a prerequisite for the “self.” Subject consciousness cannot be established without the “other” in consciousness. The formation of the other takes place in the relationship of binary opposition. One party uses force, language and ideology to exercise hegemony over the other party, making the other party lose its right to speak and be marginalized, thus becoming “other”. The concept of “the other” has been widely used in feminist, post-colonial and other research fields. In his novel *Story of Your Life*, Ted Chiang uses “alien” as a metaphor for the Chinese image of “the other”. The image of China as the “other” reflects the complex mentality of the West towards China. In general, although the novel embodies the author’s cultural and ethical reflection to explore the equal communication between different civilizations and build a community of human destiny, the author’s orientalist imagination is hidden deep inside.

Keywords: Ted Chiang, *Story of Your Life*, the other, post-colonialism, orientalism

1. Introduction

Ted Chiang is one of the most famous contemporary science fiction writers. With only a few works, he has won almost all the science fiction awards in the United States, including the Hugo Award, Nebula Award, Locus Award, and Campbell Award. The science fiction novella *Story of Your Life* is arguably Ted Kang’s masterpiece, winning the 1999 Sturt Gold Medal and the 2000 Nebula Award. In 2016, *Arrival*, a science fiction film based on the novel, was released, sparking heated discussion about the book and Ted Chiang.

Liu Chunyan and Wang Linlin analyze the application of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in *Story of Your Life* from the perspective of linguistics. Ge Xiaoshi analyzes the metaphor and narrative in the novel, and probes into the conflict and integration of Eastern and Western civilizations. Xu Gang explains the deconstruction of Eastern philosophy, reveals the intention of Remembering the Story to resist the Western hegemonic culture and its values, and advocates the universal values of mankind through the literary discourse of Eastern philosophy. Based on the theory of cultural symbiosis, Shen Mengxuan reveals Ted Chiang’s ideal of cultural symbiosis as an American Chinese by analyzing the cultural conflicts in the story. This paper will analyze the Orientalist thought hidden behind Ted Chiang’s open and inclusive attitude towards heterogeneous civilizations from the perspective of other theory.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Development of “The Other” Theory

“The other” is a concept formed relative to the “self” and refers to all people and things outside the self. Whatever is external to the self, whatever form it takes, visible or invisible, perceptible or imperceptible, can be called “the other”.

The concept of “the other” is mainly derived from the theories of Hegel and Sartre. Hegel’s analysis of the relationship between master and slave shows that the appearance of the other is essential to the formation of my “self-consciousness.” For the master, the slave is “the other”, and because of the existence of the “other,” the subject’s consciousness is established and its authority is established.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that “the other” is a prerequisite for “the self”. Subject consciousness cannot be established without “the other” in consciousness. Only by projecting oneself out and becoming aware of the existence of the imaginary “the other” can the existence of the “self” be confirmed. The “gaze” of the other is an important factor in the subject’s construction of the self. Gazing is a process of materialization,

induction, definition and judgment of the other. Being stared at often means being objectified and, in this process, the subject “I” becomes the object “I”, which is dominated and controlled by the consciousness of others (Zhang, 2011, p. 119). The fundamental reason for the effectiveness of the gaze of the other is that the gaze reflects a psychological relationship of power, that is, the gaze of the gazer is higher than the object of the gaze, and the gaze of the gazer makes the object of the gaze produce the psychology of “I should do this and not that”.

In the *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas argues that the other is unknowable to the self. We cannot determine whether the other is conscious or not, and whether his consciousness is exactly the same as ours, nor can we judge whether the actions and words of the other reliably reflect the consciousness of the other. Therefore, the other has an alterity entirely outside the self. It is this alterity and unknowability that gives the other a sense of mystery, and any attempt to define it is to domesticate or “colonize” the otherness within the other. At the same time, in the face of others, the self will feel a certain threat, and have the impulse to incorporate and control others (Zhang, 2011, p. 120).

2.2 *The Other and Post-Colonialism*

The concept of the other was first applied by feminism to the criticism of the patriarchal society, that is, to criticize the patriarchal system for constructing women as the other. De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*. Man is the first sex, and woman is the second sex, and man can think and define himself without woman, while woman’s existence depends on how man defines it. The man is The One, and the woman is The Other. Feminist discourse on the “other” goes deep into the universal thinking of society and human relations. To a large extent, it applies to the description of East-West relations. Therefore, the concept of the other is widely used by postcolonial critics to analyze imperialism and the oppressive relationship between empire and colonies.

“The other” is a very important concept in the postcolonial critical theory. The other is an indispensable opposite to construct, establish, confirm and consolidate the self-image of the colonists. In the context of postmodernism, the “self” is the West, and it is also the colonizer who controls the right to speak, and the colonized is “the other” for the colonizer. Post-colonial criticism is to explore and excavate deeper social, historical and cultural connotations through social criticism and political criticism, through the elimination of certain established prejudices and concepts in western capitalist society, and through the analysis of the image of “the other” and its distorted and excluded status.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said showed that imperialism is not only aggression and conquest by force, but also a discourse construction of Western superiority. Western colonialism enabled the West to acquire vast overseas colonies, and carried out cruel plundering of the colonies (Edward, 2019, p. 51). At the same time, these actions have provided the West with a great deal of imaginative, stereotypical and untrue knowledge about the East: East stands for silent, lascivious, feminine, oppressive, dictatorial, backward, while the West stands for civilized, open, masculine, democratic, rational, moral, progressive. The accumulation of these knowledge gradually formed “Orientalism”, which dominated the knowledge about the East in the Western academic circles. But as Said pointed out, in Orientalist discourse, “the East” is not a natural reality; it is a concept artificially constructed by the West. In the eyes of Westerners, the East is “the other”, a closed, mysterious, ignorant and uncivilized world. The East has lost the initiative of discourse from the very beginning and has become an object of description, and in the process has been unconsciously “otherized”. Orientalism has become a powerful theoretical weapon for the West to expand its hegemony over the Eastern culture.

Bart Moore-Gilbert argues that Orientalism helped the West establish hegemony over the East primarily by arguing that the East was “the other” who inferior to the West and actively reinforcing the West’s image of itself as a superior nation (Bart, 2007, p. 31). Occidentalism holds that European nations and cultures are superior to all non-European nations and cultures, a “collective mindset” that constantly separates “us” Europeans from “them” non-Europeans. Under this conception, the East exists not only against the West, but also for the West. The East is not a free subject of thought and action, but an object to be judged and observed by Western colonists. What Orientalism implies is a relationship of hegemony and domination, as well as a process of materialization of the Orient.

As Homi K Bhabha states in *The Other Question: Stereotypes and the Colonial Discourse*: “The purpose of the colonial discourse is to analyze the colonized as ethnically degraded populations in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and guidance” (Homi, 2006, p. 321). One term to describe the colonists’ behavior is “otherization.” The British critic Elek Boemer said that otherization is “colonialism’s construction of the other according to the needs of so-called civilization, which is used to justify his deprivation of the native people” (Elleke, 1998, p. 21). Postcolonial theorists “see this as a fundamental problem in the colonization

process.” “The colonized nations are always presented as inferior: less human, less civilized, little children, primitive men, savages, beasts, or rabble; And the reference is always higher and expanding Europe.” This was a “self-legitimizing mechanism” for imperial expansion.

2.3 Summary

The concept of the other has deep roots in Western philosophy and is widely used in postmodern Western literary criticism. Because it implies marginal, inferior, oppressed and excluded conditions, the concept of the other has a kind of “universality” in literary interpretation, gender studies, ethnic studies, and post-colonial studies. It is not only a powerful tool for contemporary thought and new cultural history writing, but also an important tool for theoretical construction and specific criticism of many Western literary theories.

3. Novel Analysis

3.1 Introduction to the Novel Plot

Story of Your Life is a science fiction novel by Ted Chiang that centers on a linguist and a physicist trying to communicate with aliens. The arrival of the alien “Heptapods” scares the government, and while they are preparing for war, they also send linguists—Louise, the heroine of this article—to try to communicate with the aliens. Louise studied the language and pronunciation of the aliens in the dialogue with the Heptapods, and found that their language is completely different from that of humans. Every word symbol they write is a whole sentence representing human beings from beginning to end, that is to say, aliens must have understood the whole picture before saying this sentence. The novel is based on linguistic theory to reveal the possibility of communicating with aliens. The secondary line of the story is that the woman who is obviously unmarried and has no children, but after learning the alien language, clearly “see” the story of her daughter’s life. In other words, Louise also acquired the ability to “predict the future” of the aliens after learning their language.

3.2 Main Theme of the Novel

The difficulty of language communication between human beings and aliens lies in different ways of thinking. The core theory of the novel is language absolutism, that is, language determines thinking. The alien writing is very similar to Chinese hieroglyphics, the difference is that the alien writing does not rely on words with independent meaning to express the meaning, but all the words that need to be expressed are unified in one word, the more complex the meaning, the more complex the word. Our language is linear, our world is connected by time, yesterday is the past, tomorrow is the future, yesterday’s cause has tomorrow’s effect. Causality forms our world view, and linear language determines linear thinking. But for extraterrestrial civilizations like the Heptapods, their language is non-linear, and the past and future are parallel and exist at the same time, so causality is not valid.

The novel uses a two-line narrative, one line is the heroine’s communication with the aliens and learning their language, and the other line is the heroine’s memory of her daughter. Both lines go forward, and readers can only understand that she has learned the alien’s thinking and can understand the future at the end of the story, so the narrative form of the novel forms a loop. In the heroine’s narrative, the author explores the philosophical conflicts between determinism and causation, free will and foreknowledge of the future, and gives his own answer: Everything that each of us does, whether subjective or objective, whether intentional or not, is to complete our “time loop”. In the novel, when Louise asked her daughter to read the book for her, her daughter said in disgust that you know the story, why should I read it to you? Louise said, “Because I want to hear you read.” The heroine knows that she will face the pain of losing her daughter, but she chooses to accept and cherish it. In the face of fate, what we can do is to accept it calmly, regardless of birth and death, joys and sorrows, what we have to do is to embrace every moment of the future.

4. “The Other” in Fiction

Ted Chiang used use “alien” as a metaphor for the image of China as “the other”.

Levinas believes that the whole Western philosophical tradition is a process in which the self constantly digests the other, absorbs the other, constantly incorporates the other into self-consciousness. If the words and deeds of others are incomprehensible to us, the easiest solution is to classify and discard them as vulgar and inferior. It is also a process of constantly using oppressive strategies to incorporate, assimilate, and domesticate others, a process in which the self exercises subjective violence against others. In order to define the other, Western philosophy has tried to suppress the other from the very beginning.

Since its establishment, Western culture has been seeking the imaginary “the other” as the opposite of the subject. The colonial era has come to an end, while the main problem of colonialism has not disappeared in Western

society, which has been replaced by other hidden forms. And the concept of Western countries looking for “the other” in modern society has never disappeared.

Alien is the core image in science fiction, and the alien in science fiction is usually a life form with highly developed science and technology and breakthrough appearance. In science fiction, aliens can be regarded as both a metaphor for the objectification of human beings and a reference to “the other” as opposed to the self. Therefore, aliens have become an important tool for some science fiction writers to express their postcolonial critical thoughts. Science fictions seem to be far away from the audience’s real life, but in fact, they are closely related to the survival and development of human beings, and even the value of human life. Science fiction is only the surface, the inner discussion is still the “human” problem.

Ted Chiang used “alien” as a metaphor for the Chinese image of “the other” in science fiction, and this statement is not sensationalism. More than ten years ago, the movie *District 9* is an earth story under the cloak of science fiction. The alien “Prawn” in the film alludes to human beings, who have created them according to their own moral, emotional and social values, and the behavior of human beings towards the Prawn alludes to the atrocities of history. The movie story is more of a colonial metaphor. Why did the Pilgrims go on a killing spree against the Indians hundreds of years ago? Why did the Germans commit genocide against the Jews? Why did the Japanese commit such unforgivable crimes in China? “Pigs”, “Worms”, “Prawn” and so on are the former’s derogatory terms for the latter. It is precisely because of the dehumanization of the alien race that they can kill with such brutality that they feel justified. To them, killing an alien is no different than killing a dog or a pig. In this film, the audience does not see the human part of the former. That’s why viewers, after watching *District 9*, tend to favor the Prawn over the government troops. The “alien” of the army to the “alien” in the movie is the “otherization” of imperialism to the colonies in the real world, and the Prawn are the people living in the colonies.

Aliens are the “other” in the ethnic group in science fiction, and science fiction can set this “other” as indigenous people or colonists as needed. When aliens occupy the Earth and control mankind, they may allude to the invasion and assimilation of the colonists to the indigenous people; When aliens are treated as alien, discriminated against and controlled by the Earth people, they may allude to problems such as racial discrimination and segregation in the real world.

On the surface, *Story of Your Life* describes the science fiction story of aliens visiting the earth, but on the deep level, it actually reflects the image of China’s rise from the Western perspective. Heptapods suddenly visits Earth, causing global panic. The alien Heptapods has a more advanced scientific and technological civilization than human beings, and they understand human beings, but human beings know nothing about them. They look strange, unlike anything humans have ever known about aliens. Their mystery and power aroused the curiosity and alarm of the U.S. government. In order to understand the aliens’ intention to visit Earth, the army sent linguists to decipher the alien language and try to communicate with the aliens. In this process, linguists gradually show great interest in their language and way of thinking in the communication with aliens, and acquire their way of thinking after learning their language. And the U.S. government builds military bases ready to go to war with aliens. These two attitudes show the ambivalence of Western society.

According to Levinas, the mind of the self is already constructed according to the other. Then the Western imagination of the “other” image in a foreign country can reflect on the creation of their own “self” image. The alien Heptapods in the novel is to some extent a metaphor for China. On the one hand, under the influence of Eurocentrism and orientalism, the image of China in the eyes of the West is ancient and mysterious; On the other hand, with the development and rise of modern China, the Western society began to feel nervous and anxious, and promoted the “China Threat”. The author creates the mysterious and powerful image of the Heptapods, which actually depicts the Westerners’ impression of modern China. The ambivalent attitude of the American government towards the Heptapods in the novel reflects the tangled mentality of the United States towards China. While trying to communicate, they treat the “other” more with a vigilant attitude. The root cause of this practice is the long-term suppression of “others” by Western centrism. In the novel, the American government is afraid of being controlled by aliens, but in reality, it is precisely the United States that implements hegemony over other countries. In the film *Arrival* adapted from the novel, China has instead become a fanatical warlike, arbitrary hegemonic country, almost triggering a war between the earth and aliens, which is very ironic.

The author portrays the role of the heroine, who successfully communicates with Heptapods, which shows the author’s curiosity, openness and appreciation of different civilizations, and also reflects the author’s emphasis on communication between different civilizations. He uses alien as a metaphor for the image of China as “the other” in his science fiction novels, which actually depicted the Westerners’ impression of modern China deep inside

their hearts. The mystery of China aroused the curiosity of the West, while the power of China made them deeply anxious. Because when they become powerful, they suppress other countries and races, and they take people away from themselves, they take it for granted that China will suppress “others” after its rise.

5. The Author’s Orientalist Mentality

5.1 *Dispelling Mother Country Culture—West-Centrism Thought*

The novel deals with the clash of civilizations. Many people consider Ted Chiang’s Chinese identity and believe that he takes the personal experience of ethnic minorities as a starting point to advocate understanding and tolerance, respect and equality between civilizations. However, this is not the case.

Ted Chiang wrote an article in *The New Yorker* called *Bad Character* about his views on Chinese characters. He believes that Chinese characters are an obstacle to the popularization of culture. Chinese characters are ideograms, and unlike phonetic languages, which require learning a small number of letters to read a normal text, Chinese requires learning 3,000 characters to achieve the same effect. Because of the lack of pronunciation, writing Chinese characters is more difficult than reading, and people can only memorize the shapes by rote, so even highly educated people can easily forget the writing of Chinese characters without writing them for a long time. In addition, Chinese characters can only be text input on computers and mobile phones through the conversion of pinyin. He even believes that because the popularization of Chinese characters is difficult, the popularization of ancient Chinese culture is low. If ancient China invented an alphabet language similar to Pinyin, it would greatly enhance the popularity of culture. Most importantly, he believes that if China does not use Chinese characters, phonetic language will make ancient documents less readable in modern times, and therefore Chinese culture will no longer focus on tradition. He thinks this will help China embrace new ideas instead of being rooted in tradition, making it easier for China to accept new ideas and adapt to modernization. The whole article is full of prejudice and antipathy caused by his lack of understanding of Chinese characters and Chinese culture.

It’s hard to believe that these are the views of Ted Chiang. He set the characters of the alien Heptapods as ideograms much like Chinese hieroglyphics, and he showed his curiosity, openness and appreciation of heterogeneous civilizations in science fiction, but in real life, he denied the Chinese characters so simply and brutally. He was ignorant of any other input method for Chinese characters other than pinyin, and he attacked the low prevalence of ancient Chinese culture, without mentioning that illiteracy rates in medieval Europe were even higher, with ordinary people unable to read the Bible, and even many Kings unable to read. As for the idea that Chinese characters hinder cultural innovation, it is also a kind of historical nihilism that wants to dissolve Chinese history, just like Hegel’s view of China as a stagnant empire—“history begins in China, but China is outside of history.” As mentioned above, the West has been looking for “the other” and suppressing “the other.” They do not want to understand the East, and the easiest solution is to generalize and discard it as vulgar and inferior. This is what Ted Chiang did to Chinese characters and Chinese culture—to regard them as vulgar, to think that China should abandon Chinese characters and use English—such a process is a process of subjective violence by the self against the other.

Although it seems that the author uses very different ways of thinking when writing science fiction and thinking about real problems, in fact, his attitude has never changed. If he deliberately avoided Asian faces or Chinese elements in his novels to avoid being labeled a “Chinese writer,” then this essay reflects a deep-seated orientalist mentality that has persisted in the United States and the West. From this point of view, although the setting of Heptapods really has the flavor of hieroglyphics, it is probably only the author’s oriental imagination of exotic customs, which may be the source of the author’s family background of Sino-American cultural integration has left a hidden imprint on his creation, or the author is influenced by the Western stereotype of China. Ted Chiang set the alien characters as having the charm of Chinese characters, and Hollywood films set the Chinese people as women wearing cheongsam, both of which reflect Westerners’ orientalist imagination of China, and they are essentially no different.

Ted Chiang took it for granted that modernization equated with Westernization, and that if China wanted to innovate, it would have to abandon tradition and cater to the West, abandon Chinese characters and use English. This is a typical Western-centric thought. He did not identify with Chinese culture because of his Chinese cultural background, but catered to the imagination of Western society, reflecting his desire to dissolve the characteristics of his native culture and immigrant ethnic identity.

5.2 *China Threat—Another form of Orientalism*

In the eyes of Westerners, China has undergone an image transformation from “conquered woman” to “China

Threat”.

Westerners have a fantasy in their minds of beautiful, petite oriental women who fall in love with them without complaining and even die for them, although this woman can be a geisha in Japan or even a prostitute in Hong Kong. Westerners use romanticism to engage in oriental fantasies, or they only like and acknowledge the East in their fantasies, from *The World of Suzie Wong* to *Madama Butterfly*, are typical Western fantasies of oriental culture. From the oriental perspective, the cultural slot points inside these stories are very much. *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Gordon, an American writer who admitted in interviews that he had not met a real geisha before writing the book, is also full of this extreme fantasy of Japanese women derived from white Westerners.

Sardar quotes *M. Butterfly* as an excellent illustration of orientalism is an illusion originating in the West. Mr. Kao fell in love with Ms. Song because she played *Madame Butterfly* on stage, a love story about a Japanese woman who waited for years for the United States navy, selflessly gave up, and then committed suicide. Because of empathy for this story, Gao Rennu regards Peking Opera actress Song Liling as the ideal “oriental woman” in his mind, though Song Liling has hinted that the female roles in Peking Opera actors are usually played by men. From beginning to end, Gao Rennu loves not the “woman” in front of him, but the illusion of an oriental woman in his mind. It’s like the ignorance and romanticization of the West projected onto the East.

The source of this illusion is deeply rooted, and closer to the arrogance and self-deluded pity of the so-called developed and civilized nations. In *Orientalism*, Said proposed that orientalism itself is a completely male field with sexism glasses. Women are usually the products of the illusion of male power, and they represent the endless desire, unconditional and willing to sacrifice love. Orientalism is a fiction of Western thought, an exaggeration of the East and the imposition of it on the East. In the case of men’s fantasies about women, the East in the West’s eyes is supposed to be submissive and gentle.

According to Ziauddin Sarda, orientalists construct the East as a passive entity that can be loved, abused, shaped, contained, managed, and destroyed (Ziauddin, 2005, p. 9). In contrast to the expectation of its own development and growth, the West hopes that the East can stick to its traditions and remain backward in civilization. What’s more, so-called orientalism reflected the colonialists’ exploitation of the peoples of Asia and justified the reasons for their conquest.

With the increasing rise of China’s comprehensive national strength, China is no longer the image of a woman who loves Western men without complaints and regrets. Western society begins to exaggerate the threat of China, and even believes that China will eventually become the hegemon who rules the world. Western anxiety about the “China Threat” is projected in literature, forming an overly distorted image of China—a powerful, hegemonic political image that poses a threat to others. However, the China Threat in the new era of the West is actually a repetition of the Yellow Peril and another manifestation of orientalism.

In modern history, due to historical factors and the need for the development of imperialism, the ultra-nationalist theory of “Yellow Peril” is rampant in the Western world. Yellow Peril first defames the Chinese nation and holds that the Chinese nation is the most inferior nation created by God. It then propagated the threat to Chinese civilization, warning that “the yellow belt will take over the earth.” It can be seen that the Western attitude is very contradictory, they suppress China and fear China at the same time, and they hide their fear in contempt. The West vilify China in order to rationalize its exploitation and oppression of China, and fear China because they feel the power contained in Chinese culture and Chinese people. Under the influence of Occidentalism, they do not accept or believe that China and the West can have equal and peaceful exchanges. These are all manifestations of orientalism in the West.

In *Story of Your Life*, the author uses aliens as a metaphor for China, and the alien Heptapods uses characters similar to Chinese characters and has a higher dimension of civilization, and their arrival causes human panic. The U.S. government sends linguists to try to communicate with the seven-limb barrel, while at the same time, they are building military bases ready to go to war with aliens. The image of China in the West has changed from a petite woman “eager to be loved by white people” and “willing to sacrifice for white people” to an alien with a strange appearance and higher intelligence and civilization. This change reflects the development and power of modern China, and the Western society feels nervous and anxious. They begin to publicize the “China Threat”, which is actually a repetition of the “Yellow Peril” and another manifestation of Orientalism. Both are linguistic violence and suppression of China as “the other” from the perspective of Western centrism, who do not want to see the rise of China. In addition, in reality, it is the United States that implements hegemonism and power politics in the world. The West regards itself as others, and believes that China will suppress other countries after its rise, and their imagination of the image of the foreign “other” reflects their own image. "

In general, Ted Chiang’s description of the image of China is ultimately the imagination of orientalism. The

image of China as the “other” reflects the complex mentality of the West towards China.

6. Conclusion

The theory of the other emphasizes the respect and understanding of others, which is in conflict with the construction of the image of the East by Western centrism. Occidentalism usually emphasizes the superiority and advanced nature of Western culture, and regards other cultures as secondary or backward. This concept has greatly influenced the West’s construction of the image of the East, making the East seen as the “other” that needs to be dominated and shaped by the West. In addition, Occidentalism often regards the East as a single whole, ignoring the diversity and difference of the East. This concept may lead to stereotypes and misunderstandings of the East, making the East labeled and stereotyped in the eyes of the West.

Ted Chiang’s imagination of heterogeneous civilization and postmodern society in science fiction is of positive significance to the exploration of equal communication among different civilizations and the construction of a community of human destiny. However, his description of the image of China is the imagination of orientalism. The image of China as the “other” reflects the complex mentality of the West towards China.

Therefore, in order to eliminate the negative impact of Western-centrism on the construction of the image of the East, we should deconstruct Western discourse, export Chinese stories to the West, and make the West respect the individual differences and diversity of the East, and recognize the uniqueness and value of the East. We should engage with others in an equal, just and inclusive manner to build a relationship of mutual trust, cooperation and win-win results. In this way, we can truly eliminate cultural conflicts and achieve global cultural diversity and prosperity.

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