

# The Moulding of the Silent Immigrants

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The Moulding of the Silent Immigrants: New Zealand Born Chinese (NZBC)  
 Presented at Auckland University of Technology Chinese Centre, 15th May 2002  
 Wong Liu Shueng

The Labour government apology, offered to the Chinese people who paid the Poll Tax, and to their descendants, for the impact of that law upon the lives of those families was fitting, timely, welcomed and appreciated. Critics have raised concerns that the government has become over-apologetic. Others argue that before long they fear that apologies will be sought for any and all forms of deprivation. In the context of the Poll Tax and the laws that followed, this is very unlikely to be a precedent to follow. Obligations under UN conventions, accountability to mother countries, global economies, and population mobility are but some of the factors which have a sobering effect on governmental processes. But most of all, surely we as a nation can learn from the experiences of the past, that we can all become watchdogs of racist legislation and behaviour. Such conscious activity allows for the incorporation of a racism awareness into the cultural values of this country. The descendents of the early Chinese immigrants have been in dialogue with the government and opposition parties for the past 9 years, not because of our present circumstances, but because the passing of the Poll Tax law that targets the Chinese is fundamentally wrong. Racism can never be used as a way to distance ourselves from others because they are different or to increase the division between intercultural rival groups. This paper addresses the issue of the Chinese response to the discriminatory laws of the past. It goes some way to explain how the external environment moulded us into model minority status. It is a first step, for we in the Chinese community must continue to seek understanding of ourselves and educate not only ourselves but also the widest possible group. We need to explain why we have become the 'model minority'; so we all can move on. It suggests that the present environment is time for us to update our thinking and break out of that mode.

But first, some historical data. Five main issues stem from the Poll Tax Law (1881), which can be categorised into:

financial restrictions/penalties  
 denied rights to a democratic process, or acts of non-belonging.  
 control over the lives of the Chinese  
 treatment of the Chinese  
 stereotyping as the 'model minority'; and its strangulating effects.

## Financial restrictions/penalties

The Certificate of Registration fees and Poll Tax are two of the most blatant examples of financial penalties for the Chinese. In order to remain in New Zealand, immigrants had to register in order to be able to prove that they had already paid the Poll Tax. In 1882 the fee was reduced from £1 to 2/6d (2.6d = 1/8th of £1) for all immigrants, except the Chinese. For them it remained £1. Later in 1892, it was abolished for all immigrants the Chinese continued to pay £1.

The second example is the much-publicised Poll Tax of 1881 when the fee of £10 was established; later in 1896 it was increased to £100. Estimates of the value of £100 have been equivalent to between one and ten years of income. For those Chinese who eked out a living, £100 represented more like a lifetime of savings. Those who were unable to save this amount of money, or who were not able to mine sufficient gold, or set up a successful business, were forced to suppress their need to return home and continued to live in a land that blatantly and openly made them feel unwelcome aliens ensuring an overwhelming sense of non-belonging. My great uncle (that is, my grandfather's brother) arrived here with his hair in the style of a queue &ndash; that distinctive shaven front portion of the head and the long plait hanging down the back. His life, without children or his wife, meant that he moved from relative to relative, with some time in Wellington on his own, always searching for his place, and somewhat lost in a world of never belonging. His wife waited for his return to China all her life. When I was 6 years old, he told me that one day he would go back to China to die. At the age of 92, true to his own mantra, Great Uncle, who had never been on an aeroplane, flew to China to die, a man who had in fact lived in China for 23 of his 71 years of life. How come? I have over time come to realise that the treatment of migrants by the host nation establishes a relationship between two groups. No immigrant expects an easy ride; all know that it will be a struggle. Only the brave leave, but it seems that in 71 years, even through

the persistence of time, my great uncle, was never able to establish a sense of belonging and trust for New Zealand. Conversely, he lived a life of compound anxiety, paranoia, emotional trauma and self-alienation to be relieved only by the ultimate sense of escape, to return to his homeland. Denied rights to a democratic process, or acts of non-belonging. This leads on to other aspects of non-belonging. In the history of the Chinese, they have been denied the right to vote, the right to be on juries and therefore a part of the judicial system, stand on local bodies, or work in the public service. These were relaxed in 1952, only 50 years ago. Such a history not only places these visibly different people psychologically on the outside, and in a place distance from political involvement or commitment to the processes, which govern their lives. Denying rights to a group means its members have no voice to determine their own lives and this in turn ensures that they become self reliant. Failure to be involved in sport, in community groups, in consultations with the government, or in local body focus groups, all stem from the need to be over self-reliant connected to the drive for financial and family security.

Today, I keep hearing the different parties of our democratic process calling for NZBC to get involved, encouraging them to have a voice, and I sense the genuine puzzlement as to why the call has not been taken up. There are so few examples. On the political front, in the mid 1960's, Ron Waishing ran for a Labour seat in the National stronghold of Franklin and failed miserably. In the late 1960's, Raeburn Ah Chee was a National Party candidate in Mangere and was unsuccessful. Historically, in local bodies there was greater success for George Gee and my father Bill Wong while currently, Molly Ngan Kee and Virginal Chong are a few examples of New Zealand born Chinese who have been elected into local body leadership representing their own electorates. Representing who, is an interesting boundary of whether one is inside or outside of any given group. Virginia Chong is a current community board member of Auckland City and has spoken to me of the struggle to be seen as representing all the peoples within the boundaries of the Balmoral Ward, instead of being seen as representing the Chinese only. One wonders when the Chinese will be seen as part of the community rather than the perpetual foreigner.

Control over the lives of the Chinese

Self-reliance is perpetuated when the target group has little control over their lives. While the Chinese may not have liked the limits imposed on laundry and shop opening hours, the restrictions to entry of Chinese women into NZ has had a lasting effect on the lives of all of us descendents. From the earliest days to 1891 there were only 18 Chinese women, and even in such a small population, the lowest numbers reached 2 in 1874. Certainly, between 1896 and 1913 the number did not reach 100. In 1921 there were only 273. In 1925 restrictions became even greater when the already small quota totally excluded women to be admitted into NZ. The role of family cannot be overstated. It is the role of all Chinese women to produce children for the clan of their husbands. It is the role of the males to keep the clan going. In a bachelor society this must have weighed heavily on the minds of those men. For many, separation drove them to be single minded about saving enough money to return. When wives were no longer able to gain entry into NZ, the population numbers of Chinese reduced by one sixth.

For those choosing or forced to stay, sending money home to fulfil one's obligations to family in itself was an uphill battle. Many men, having married in China, left and never saw their wives or children again. While wives and girls were seen as a luxury and beyond financial means to bring to NZ, their passage alone an exorbitant extra, sons often came to work in a family business in order for those in both countries to survive. I think of the sons who were separated from their mothers, and the daughters who were separated from their fathers. I think of how many of us never got to know our aunts and uncles who remained in China. Most painful of all, were those whose relationships with their brothers and sisters withered and died with natural death. They are the gaps that we in New Zealand have never been fully explained.

Yet some of the most difficult hardships were those of the childless wives left in China, who, living with their husband's clan, were harshly treated because they did not bear children for the next generation, not even workers in the form of girls. They were often seen as a burden on the family, another rice bowl to fill. When funds were not available from their husbands, many of these women were reduced to begging.

To make life more difficult in New Zealand, non-Chinese women married to a Chinese lost their British nationality. This would surely have been a strong deterrent towards the ideal that love conquers all. For these reasons, it is not surprising that men wishing to stay in New Zealand often made liaisons with Maori women. Both come from family orientated values, structured cultures, and expressions of culture through food and care, quite similar to each other.

Still on the subject of marriage and families, one wonders what governmental thinking was behind the 1921 legislation that made marriage between Chinese and Samoans illegal. Equally cruel, has been the non-recognition of New Zealand citizenship of New Zealand born offspring of Chinese nationals and their wives who in 1938, were allowed to join their husbands as refugees from the Sino-Japanese war. In 1952 these NZBC gained the same recognition as other New Zealand born nationals and thankfully some common sense prevailed. Closer to the present day, in 1954 Chinese men were able to bring their wives, mainly from Hongkong, back into New Zealand, yet those NZBC women who chose husbands outside New Zealand were unable to do likewise until 1965. For this reason there is a sector of Chinese women who broke cultural ranks and married Pakeha men, enduring a wide range of reactions from their families because the wider Chinese community desperately

strove to use a united identity to protect themselves against racism; a defence mechanism against their own powerlessness

### Treatment of the Chinese

This brings me to the fourth point about the treatment of Chinese. Another barrier, along with the Poll Tax, were the English language tests. While other non-British immigrants were able to read in their own language, Chinese were singled out to read in English. I am somewhat puzzled how anyone could make sense of these passages. There is a difference though between being forced into a skill development that no one else has to acquire, and being treated by the host country as a criminal. Being fingerprinted way back in 1900 suggests that all Chinese could be treated as criminals. Protesting on behalf of the Chinese in NZ, a letter written by the Chinese Consul in 1920 to the NZ government states that "the treatment of fingerprinting, and the paying of Poll Tax as being inhumane and barbarous, and they (the Chinese) consider it treats them as animals." Taking dignity from people, no matter who is targeted, is the bleakest side of racism.

The Chinese themselves are a practical and realistic lot. A letter written by a group of Chinese, in Melbourne in 1888, and I would suggest that the contact between the Melbourne and NZ Chinese appears to be well informed, describes the attitudes of the Chinese by stating that "the Chinese are peaceable, industrious and law abiding people, and that (we) are not insensible of, nor ungrateful for, the protection of wise laws justly administered&hellip;what (we) do complain of (are those) laws that have been strained and tortured to oppress (us), &hellip; or to inflict harsh treatment &hellip;. Such laws incite and encourage the ignorant portion of the population to outrage and show contempt and hatred to our countrymen. . ."

My point is, that by passing laws no matter where in the world, that supports racism, the government legalises racism and legitimises the making of Chinese as open targets. Esther Fung tells of her grandfather who walked the streets selling his wares making a living, and while doing so, carried a bucket to place over his head in order to avoid the flying objects hurled at him. In my own history, children would hunt me down to pelt me with stones, if I was ever alone. Such unfriendly acts of public ridicule reduce people to the status of second or third class citizens, while victims struggle to find ways to live in such fearful environments. I have sometimes been quoted for what is called my "grandfather stories." Several years ago, in the height of a political campaign where the Chinese race card was used to draw votes. I happened to be invited to participate in a TV1 current affairs programme, the interviewer being the newly appointed CEO of that organisation. There was, of course, a wide range of people with a wide range of views present. A Pakeha woman got up and said something like "My Grandfather told me, that this is a Garden of Eden, and I want to keep it that way. As far as I am concerned, why should I share it with them (the Chinese)?" Once I got over the blatant xenophobia, I thought about the messages of my own grandfather. They were not about the landscape, nor the appreciation of space, nor the claim of finding God's Own. My grandfather passed down to me, as grandparents told many of my generation of NZBC, something like this: "Granddaughter and Grandsons, when you go out in the world, be very careful. Do not do anything that might bring attention to yourself. Do not create waves, or stand out like tall poppies. Do not speak out, but gain respect through diligent work habits and accomplishment. And most of all be cautious." Such strong messages from the past, have grown out of some of the history presented here and might explain the nervousness and apprehension of the NZBC when there was a tripling of the Chinese population in 1991. Unsettling the host nation, as did the Asian Invasion incident in 1993, brought on a nervousness that the living environment in New Zealand would again become an unsafe place, something that NZBC had worked diligently to avoid through "absorbing racism" and tactics which aimed at invisibility. These include the use of English language names, the wearing of western clothes only, or not speaking one's native tongue in public. Much harder and more complicated techniques include not reacting to racism, sometimes even joining in racist behaviour to separate the self from the collective others, or behaving like a model minority, where self alienation becomes expressed as being better than the best, acting in known ways acceptable to the host nation or having to constantly manipulate one's own identity to ensure acceptance. These are behaviours of assimilation.

Let me now examine the host nation's attitude. The governments of the past, whether rightly, wrongly or appropriately for the time, legislated to keep Chinese from entering NZ, isolating the Chinese population from mainstream NZ. This has meant that those Chinese were forced to send money home to their families, and were thereby criticised by mainstream NZ for not settling and investing their resources into this country. Human beings not only need support and family as all people in the world but they need to take responsibility for their own families. Today that same criticism has been levelled at new immigrants who, having been overwhelmingly unsuccessful at being employed NZers, return to their home country and financially maintain their families in NZ. To those in NZ, visibility is the cause of racist attacks, so once again, rightly, wrongly or appropriately for the time, the Chinese spread themselves spread through the length of NZ thereby reducing opportunities to build a focus settlement like the Chinatowns in Sydney, San Francisco and other large cities. Where there were larger

settlements, Chinese schools were set up for children to attend Chinese language classes after NZ school hours. In 1920, the government would no longer grant visas to Chinese teachers, further pressuring the Chinese to lose their mother tongue.

Assimilation was without doubt the motivation in 1949 when a Member of Parliament when explaining about the amendment to the immigration law to reduce the quota of Chinese into NZ stated "This Bill is the result of a deep seated sentiment on the part of the huge majority of the people in this country that this Dominion shall be what is called a White NZ." Later in 1951, the way to naturalisation was to prove the four criteria: primary loyalty to NZ, complying with the normal requirements of naturalisation, renunciation of Chinese nationality, and a lifestyle closer to the NZ way of life than the Chinese way of life," categorically forcing Chinese to live a double life of assimilated selves in the public arena and Chinese behind closed doors. Little wonder, so many 3rd, and 4th generation NZBC suffer the embarrassment of language loss, or cultural discomfort, of wondering what is a Chinese identity. Little wonder then that when middle class new immigrants arrived in NZ and boldly spoke their own language in public, and wrote signs in Chinese characters on their trucks and other service vehicles, that many NZBC were torn between wanting to be an ostrich or secreting sighing with relief that there was a mechanism at last to free themselves from the shackles of assimilation.

To move away from an assimilated model, many things must change. Firstly, NZBC need to be much more public about their Chineseness, to be able to value their own culture deeper than the superficial gestures of food, lion dances and clothing. Chineseness is a feeling, non-comparable; for the Chinese born in NZ are different from those Chinese who were born in China, Hongkong, Taiwan, Australia, America etc&hellip; The environment of our birth, the political and social pressures mould each of us into the people we are today. So why should we be the same? We are Chinese because it is our heritage, because in the texture of our lived lives, there is something that is for each individual inexplicable, except to say, this is Chineseness. I would argue, the quality of that flavour is not greater or smaller. It should never be a noun, making self into a vessel that has more or less. Instead Chinese is a verb, a lived reality, an action in one's life, a way of being, of doing, of expression, a process, a journey and most of all, a feeling. Chinese is our emotional connection to the past.

The host nation has a role to play as well. I am suggesting that the stereotyping of Chinese needs serious examination. Firstly, an examination of the term Asian is unlike Maori, Pakeha or Pacific Island is different because there are acknowledged differences between Ngati Whatua, and Tainui, or between the Irish and the French or between Nuiean and Samoan. That collective term Asian represents the third largest group of people in New Zealand. Such a term is essential and acceptable to describe the big picture of who lives on this land. But it is time that the term Asian is unbundled by the host nation, for we who live inside these groups do not have the same sense of collective sameness as the ill informed. Secondly, the history of settlement by the Chinese is very much based on the notion that we are here as 'added value' to a colonised nation. This implies selective consent from the host nation, so we are able to share our food at food festivals, arrange for a Lion Dance at an occasion, set up a historical display in Queenstown each and every event being of benefit to New Zealand as a whole. My suggestion is that unless the 'added value' criteria is lifted Chinese in New Zealand will continue to have live as a model minority rather than as New Zealanders. We would all sigh with relief if everyone, including our own community, could take a deep breathe on this one, and put aside this cultural preciousness and expectations and let us not be the unconscious group to blame when the economy goes wrong etc. We are tired of hearing about how we detract from value by taking up places in scholarships, or taking jobs that supposedly other Kiwis want. We are tired of not being given recognition in statistics, and being lumped together with Others. Quite frankly, we are tired of being the exotic other and immersing ourselves with the host nation when it suits. As the third largest ethnic group in New Zealand, I believe that our previous path of the least resistance will only be changed when we have a sense that the host nation is not so fickle; that at one moment you like us because the majority of New Zealand thinks we bring money into New Zealand, and then blame us because our visible difference makes you uncomfortable.

To have a voice, is a partnership. A voice cannot develop unless the host nation wants to listen.

In closing, I would like to summarise by saying that the collective history of living in New Zealand, has denied the chance for the host nation to know Chinese. For this, we NZBC have a task ahead. There is much to be understood about ourselves and our history in New Zealand. The recent apology is a fine example of awakening us to timely self-education, and so many of us have still to understand this history. But there is a great deal more to learn. There are records to be searched, oral histories to be recorded, stories to be written and shared, photograph collections to be collated and expanded. We need to tell the stories of life in the gold miners huts, life in the opium dens, or behind the clouds of steam in the laundry. Equally, there are stories to be told about life behind the crates of apples, and inside the offices of professional Chinese. Each of us is a walking historian, and I urge each one of you to record, write, or somehow tell the stories of boy meets girl at those wonderful Chinese weddings, or what went on at those meetings of association which Chinese formed for fellowship. There are endless stories told around the table when we used to prepare those time consuming, labour intensive, delicious morsels that in memory still make our mouths water. This is the time to stop whispering amongst ourselves and to claim our own history, through our own voice. Nobody else can do this for us. This is our task, our responsibility. Then, and I believe only then, will we be able to connect with the political machinery of NZ, and walk with heads tall representing New Zealanders regardless of their ethnicity.

Poll Tax (1881) and its implications

year

Chinese males

Chinese females

Total Chinese

Discriminatory laws

Restrictive measures

Reaction -Chinese and others

Use of Chinese to NZ

1865

Chinese miners in Victoria invited to Otago goldfields by Otago Dunedin Chamber of Commerce

1867

1213

6

1219

1871

2637

4

2641

1872

Chinese labourers were brought in on short term contracts to build NZ's railroads (Otago)

1874

4814

2

4816

1878

4424

9

4433

1881

4995

9

5004

Chinese immigrants Act -Poll Tax £10  
Gaming and lotteries act

1 Chinese per 10 tons of ship  
Suppression of the Chinese playing fan-tan, pa-ka-poo as illegal (repealed 1977)

1882

Aliens Act amendment act

Fee for naturalisation reduced from £1 to 2/6 (2s 6d) except for the Chinese

1883

John Ah Tong and other Wellington Chinese protested about paying the £10 poll tax until the population reached 7,000

1886

4527

15

4542

1888

Chinese Immigrants act amendment act 1888

1 Chinese per 100 tons per ship  
Naturalised Chinese exempt from immigration restrictions

Auckland, 21 Chinese protested against the Immigration Act being raised from £10 to £100

1891

4426

18

4444

Petition Wong Choi Fong and others for the amendment of the Chinese Immigration Act 1881

1892

Aliens Act Amendment Act

Naturalisation fee of 5/- (5s) abolished

except for Chinese &ndash; fee £1-2-6d (22s)

1895

Sun Kwong Lee plus 8 others petitioned  
against the Chinese

the Legislative Council not to pass further oppressive legislation

1896

3773

86

3859

Asiatic Restriction Act &ndash; Poll tax £100  
Refused the Royal Assent. Chinese Immigrants  
tax £100

Act Amendment Act 1896 passed instead &ndash; Poll

1 Chinese per 200 tons  
Poll tax raised from £10 to £100  
Introduction of reading test for non

British immigrants (in own language)

1898

Old age pension Act

denied Chinese the old age pension

1900

Certificate of Registration for those wishing to return to China &ndash;  
fingerprints required for identification purposes

1901

2885

78

2963

Opium prohibition act

search warrant not required to search Chinese homes

Three petitions by the Chinese wanting prohibition of opium in New Zealand (1900-1904)

1904

fingerprints in ink + photograph on back of Poll Tax certificate

1906

2515

55

2570

1907

Chinese Immigrants Amendment Act 1907

Chinese to have a reading test of 100 words of English chosen at random

1908

Denied right to naturalisation  
Denied right to enter into the democratic system

Denied right to sit on juries  
Denied right to vote  
1917 stand as members of local bodies (1926)

Restrictions to work

1912 denied right to work in the Public Service  
denied right to be employed as engine drivers  
denied right to work as flight engineers

allowances

1898 no old age pension (1936)  
1926 no family allowance (1938)

Includes to local-born Chinese

Petition of 736 Chinese sent to King protesting Chinese immigrants Amendment Act 1907

1910

Factories Act Amendment Act 1910

Trading hours restrictions laundries  
shop hours

1911

2542

88

2630

1916

2017

130

2147

Military Service Act 1916

NZBC liable for conscription

1917

Registrations of Aliens Act 1917

Aliens to register, includes all aliens, not just Chinese

1920

Immigration restriction act amendment                      act 1920

All non-British immigrants to have                      a permit to enter New Zealand. Chinese Consul arranges a quota of 100 permits a year for Chinese. Includes 25 permits for women.

"This Bill is the result of a                      deep seated sentiment on the part of the huge majority of the people of this country that the Dominion shall be what is called a white                      NZ" &hellip;and "Act for the total exclusion from NZ of the Chinese."

Chinese Consul wrote a letter of support                      for the Chinese in NZ (including the NZBC)

1921

2993

273

3266

Samoa Act 1921 Marriages between                      Chinese and Samoans in Samoa prohibited.

1923

British nationality & status of                      aliens (in NZ) Act 1923  
NZ women marrying Chinese men lost                      their British citizenship, leaving these women with no nationality (repealed 1946)  
Children will also be Aliens

1925

Women from quota of annual permits

1926

2927

447

3374

Zero quota for Chinese  
Stopped granting permanent residence permits to Chinese

White NZ League &ndash; Pukekohe because of the potato blight, Chinese blamed

1932

Returned Service Assn call to have all Chinese and Indian immigrants sent back home (repatriated)

1934

Poll tax waived

1935

10 permits a year issued to wives of                      NZBC

1936

2432

511

2943

Pensions Amendment Act 1936  
Introduction of Chinese right to pensions                      in NZ.

1938

Social Security Act 1938  
Chinese entitled to other benefits                      (1938)

1939

Fees Chinese permanent residents to bring their wives and children to NZ for two years as war refugees.  
£200+ £500 (bond)

1942

Aliens land purchase regulations 1942

Non-naturalised Chinese unable to purchase land for duration of the war

1944

Abolition of the Poll Tax

1945

3414

1526

4940

1946

Wives of Chinese who were British subjects were to keep their British nationality .

1947

Permanent residency granted to Chinese  
under this concession &ndash;  
50 permits to Chinese men of 20 years

on temporary permits &ndash; 478 Chinese were granted PR  
residence to bring wives and children to NZ

1949

Chinese teachers denied permit to come into NZ to teach in Chinese schools.

Military training to include NZBC males

1950

Permits for wives and children of Chinese permanent residents abolished

1951

3633

2090

5723

Introduction of Chinese right to be  
Reintroduction of naturalisation under

primary loyalty to NZ  
comply with normal requirements  
renunciation of Chinese nationality  
closer to NZ way of life than the

naturalisation (1943 USA, 1947 Canada, 1960 Australia)  
4 conditions

for naturalisation

Chinese

150 permits to wives and children of  
plus 10 for local-born.

Chinese permanent residents, Annual quota of 50 entries a year,

1952

Quota system of permits abolished

1954

first, Chinese permanent resident men, were  
and married in HK.  
Chinese naturalised women were unable

able to bring wives into NZ as long as they were naturalised  
to bring Chinese husbands into NZ (abolished in 1965)

1956

4026

2705

6731

1957

1961

4013

3611

8524

1964

Immigration Act 1964

Relaxing of the strict exclusion policy

1965

Narcotics Act 1965

Abolition of entry into homes occupied

by Chinese without a search warrant was abolished.

1966

5700

4583

10263

1971

7025

4583

12818

Policy allows entry of some Chinese professionals

1974

50 single Chinese men came into NZ to relieve acute shortages in (Chinese) market gardens.  
Further relaxing of restrictions on Chinese immigration

1976

8081

6779

14860

1981

8649

8004

16653

1986

9903

9600

19506

Review of immigration policy 1986  
Same condition for all immigrants.  
Introduction of Business Immigration Policy (BIP)

1991

18750

18939

37689

Points system for entry into NZ

BIP replaced by BIC

1996

39624

42696

82320

2001 240,000 (includes all Asians male & females )

Wong Liu Shueng

12th March 200

Wong Liu Shueng was born in Carterton, where her father's family first established a fruit shop in 1896. Her earliest ancestor came to New Zealand in 1865 when Joe Lo Keong arrived as a merchant. He was naturalised in 1882. His wife, Maltilda arriving in 1873. This couple are Liu Shueng's maternal grandmothers adoptive parents.

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