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Cross-Cultural Echoes of Women: A Review of Zhao Shuqin and Lei Ziyi's *British Influence and Chinese Women's Literature in the Past Century*

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Abstract: The modern transformation of a century of Chinese women's literature has always been closely linked to the influence of Western literary trends, which has profoundly influenced the creative practice of contemporary Chinese women writers. Co-authored by Zhao Shuqin and Lei Ziyi, *British Influence and Chinese Women's Literature in the Past Century*, after making a general overview of Chinese and British women's literature with a reasonable layout, selects six pairs of writers for case comparison, systematically sorts out and interprets the enlightenment and nourishment of British literature on Chinese women's literature over a century, as well as the subjective construction and creative innovation of Chinese women writers in the process of accepting such influence. Based on the book's structural arrangement, case selection, discussion methods, research perspectives and value orientation, this paper attempts to evaluate its academic value and innovative significance in the fields of women's literature and comparative literature, so as to provide reference for subsequent cross-cultural women's literature research.

Keywords: Women's Literature; Feminism; Comparative Literature; British Literature; Contemporary Chinese Literature; *British Influence and Chinese Women's Literature in the Past Century*

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标题: 跨越中西的女性回音: 评赵树勤与雷梓燊的《英国影响与百年中国女性文学》

摘要: 百年中国女性文学的现代转型始终与西方文学思潮的影响紧密相连, 深刻影响了中国现当代女性作家的创作实践。赵树勤与雷梓燊合著的《英国影响与百年中国女性文学》, 以合理的布局对中、英的女性文学进行概括性综论后, 选取了六对作家进行个案对比, 系统梳理并阐释了百年间英国文学对中国女性文学的启蒙与滋养, 以及中国女性作家在接受其影响的过程中的主体性建构与创作创新。本文结合该书的结构编排、案例选取、论述手法、研究视角及价值导向, 试评析其在女性文学与比较文学领域的学术价值与创新意义, 为后续跨文化女性文学研究提供参考与借鉴。

关键词: 女性文学; 女性主义; 比较文学; 英国文学; 中国现当代文学; 《英国影响与百年中国女性文学》

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The evolution of Chinese women's fate can be described as a magnificent transformation from a subordinate "other" to an independent "self". A century ago, such a transformation would have seemed unimaginable to Chinese women. Over the course of this century-long journey, Chinese women have passed down their legacy from generation to generation, drawing strength from this continuity to struggle and advance toward a common goal, pouring in immense effort and sweat that cannot be simply measured or described in words. The literary realm has undoubtedly served as a vital breeding ground for this transformation, and Chinese women's literature has been an indispensable catalyst in this process of metamorphosis.

Chinese women's literature did not emerge until the early 20th century, a fact that inevitably meant it would be influenced by its predecessors as a latecomer to the field. As a representative of the West with advanced ideas and a rich cultural heritage, Britain—though geographically distant from China—significantly bridged the cultural gap between the two nations through its great literary achievements and diverse intellectual currents, exerting a crucial influence on modern and contemporary Chinese women writers.

Comparative studies on women's literature in China and the United Kingdom had already yielded some significant findings by the late 20th century. In her 1997 study, scholar Xu Yingguo systematically categorized the different stages of women's literature and feminist literature in both countries. Drawing on a series of persuasive historical examples, she defined key related concepts and clarified many previous misinterpretations of feminism. At the same time, by comparing the origins, developmental foundations, and core trajectories of women's literature in both countries, she revealed the essence of feminism and the practical significance of women's literary practices (Xu Yingguo, 1997, p. 96-101). In 1999, scholars Zheng Yi and Chen Juan also conducted a forward-looking comparative study and discussion of Western feminism and Chinese women's literature. They focused on analyzing the trends in women's literary creation that emerged in modern and contemporary Chinese literature under the influence of the Western women's liberation movement and feminist thought. Notably, British authors were cited far more frequently than writers from other Western countries. In their study, the two scholars also pointed out the fundamental differences between the women's liberation movements and the development of women's literature in China and the West, elucidating the unique developmental path of Chinese women's literature formed under Western influence, as well as its reciprocal value to world women's literature (Zheng Yi & Chen Juan, 1999, p. 13-17). At the time, such research played a pioneering and enlightening role in comparative studies of women's literature in China and the UK. Concurrently, an increasing number of Chinese women writers began to engage in literary creation that served as an "echo" of this heterogeneous literary culture from the UK.

Nevertheless, at a time when globalization is deepening, intellectual exchanges across the globe are becoming increasingly frequent, and cultural and literary barriers between the two countries are gradually weakening, although some scholars have explored the relationship between British influence and modern and contemporary Chinese women's literature in their research, the domestic academic community has produced very few comprehensive monographs systematically examining this relationship. Previous scholarly works on this topic have largely focused on systematic explorations of the broader subject of Chinese women's literature: for instance, the co-authored work by scholars Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, *Emerging from the Surface of*

History: A Study of Modern Women's Literature, comprehensively traces the process of establishing Chinese women's discourse and the history of the development of the spiritual gender of the female population (Meng Yue & Dai Jinhua, 1989). Subsequently, scholar Qiao Yigang's *Low Murmurs, High Songs: A Study of 20th-Century Chinese Women's Literature* provides a macro-level examination of the overall framework of Chinese women's literature prior to the dawn of the new century, revealing the intrinsic connection between the modern evolution of Chinese women's literary studies and the shifts in thinking, broadening of perspectives, and renewal of methodologies within the field of literary research (Qiao Yigang, 1998).

Professor Zhao Shuqin, who has long been dedicated to the study of modern and contemporary Chinese women's literature, used her keen literary intuition to identify a vast field ripe for exploration. Consequently, she co-authored the literary monograph *British Influence and Chinese Women's Literature in the Past Century* with her doctoral student, Dr. Lei Ziyi. The book was officially published by China Social Sciences Press in October 2025. Comprising 207,000 characters, the book systematically traces the century-long history of Chinese women's literature under the influence of British literature through concise and powerful prose. Aside from the introductory chapter, concluding remarks, bibliography, and afterword, the book consists of ten main chapters. For a monograph spanning a century, the book is concise in length. However, drawing on their extensive literary experience and exceptional writing skills, the authors employ a structure that integrates historical and thematic perspectives, select unconventional case studies, balance detail and brevity in their arguments, adopt multidimensional and interdisciplinary research perspectives, and prioritize a return to local contexts. Through these approaches, they present readers with an outstanding work that is neither fawning nor didactic, yet remains engaging and informative. Working in tandem, the two authors have jointly produced a work that can be described as "excellent" in both the fields of women's literature and comparative literature, which is a response to the challenges of today.

1. Structural Organization: "Broadening Horizontally, Delving Vertically"

The book consists of ten main chapters divided into two parts: "Chapters 1 through 4" form the comprehensive overview, while "Chapters 5 through 10" comprise the case studies. As the authors note, the book as a whole adopts a perspective and writing strategy that "broadens horizontally and delves vertically" (Zhao Shuqin & Lei Ziyi, 2025, p. 19). In the comprehensive overview section, the book primarily focuses on the fertile ground in which the tender sapling of modern and contemporary Chinese women's literature has gradually flourished—namely, the specific era, society, and historical context—and examines how, within this historical

context, British literature served as a catalyst, propelling modern and contemporary Chinese women's literature from its nascent stages toward maturity. Moving from macro-level overviews to micro-level interpretations, it is precisely thanks to the intellectual nourishment accumulated in the earlier general overview that the case studies of specific authors in the latter half can branch out, ultimately growing into a towering tree with lush foliage.

The key point of comparative literature is not about “comparison”, but about “interpenetration”. A genuine, professional scholar of comparative literature must situate their research ontologically within a comparative framework, systematically achieving an internal interpenetration between two national literatures or between literature and other related disciplines (Yang Naiqiao, 2002, p. 111). The comprehensive introductory section of this book elevates the work's focus from a superficial “literary comparison”—which merely seeks similarities among literary works of different categories or nationalities—to a multidimensional and profound “comparative literature” that embraces a comparative perspective integrating East and West as well as past and present, draws upon the cultural nourishment of both East and West, and builds a substantial knowledge structure spanning both traditions. The book begins by exploring the roots of Chinese and Western cultures, traces the history of Sino-British cultural exchange, and broadens its research perspective to the entire historical horizon to investigate the origins of the literary affinities between China and Britain. In particular, multifaceted factors—including social revolutions, invasions and wars, cultural movements, and literary trends—that span political, economic, social, and cultural spheres provide authentic and compelling historical evidence for why modern and contemporary Chinese female writers have come to admire and draw inspiration from British literature, deriving literary nourishment from it. At the same time, readers, having followed the author's footsteps to uncover the roots of this connection, do not stop there. Instead, they trace the historical trajectory to further explore how modern and contemporary Chinese women writers have been influenced by the brilliant constellation of British women writers to construct their own gender discourse; how they opened a novel artistic window amidst the tide of British modernism, demonstrating avant-garde creativity in their writing techniques; and how, by being active in both China and the UK, they produced works of women's literature imbued with cross-cultural imagination. Consequently, the structure of the comprehensive overview is not merely a simple introduction to the historical context in which the stories unfold. Rather, it represents the author's academic reflections and an intrinsic insight into the literary expressions of both China and the UK. This insight constitutes a research perspective that is both multifaceted and logically coherent, which establishes a scientific theoretical foundation and a profound historical context for the comparative case

studies in the latter half of the book, ensuring that the overall structure is not confined to the superficial level of literature but is firmly rooted in the real-world context upon which literature depends.

2. Selection of Case Studies: Classic Yet Original, Diverse Yet Distinctive

In the section on case studies of specific authors, the book presents comparative discussions and analyses of six pairs of Chinese and British female writers, namely: “Ling Shuhua and Katherine Mansfield”, “Eileen Chang and D. H. Lawrence”, “Zong Pu and Thomas Hardy”, “Zhang Jie and Charlotte Brontë”, “Can Xue and William Shakespeare”, and “Wang Anyi and Agatha Christie” (Zhao Shuqin & Lei Ziyi, 2025, p. 2-3). Among them, the six Chinese female writers all share deep connections with British literature. Compared to other female writers of their time, they possess more international life experiences and broader literary perspectives, making them standout figures among the female writers of their era. The names and works of the six British writers, meanwhile, are household names worldwide and truly remarkable among the classics. Yet the pairings and combinations of these 12 writers in this book are highly distinctive and thought-provoking. The author’s selection of British counterparts for the six female writers may appear random and independent, but it is in fact based on an internal classification system. Beyond the influence each writer received from their respective counterparts, the author also considers factors such as the writing differences stemming from the gender divide between Eileen Chang and Lawrence; the shifts in perception arising from the generational gap between Can Xue and Shakespeare; and the clash between serious literature and popular fiction exemplified by Wang Anyi and Agatha Christie. Through these diverse case comparisons, the author strives to uncover underlying feminist connections.

The innovative nature of this comparative study is particularly evident in the choice of Shakespeare as a point of comparison for Can Xue. In previous academic research, scholars have often compared Can Xue to the Western writer Franz Kafka, even hailing her as “China’s Kafka.” Some scholars argue that the intensely personal voice and the bleak, absurd, and nightmarish world depicted in Can Xue’s works have long been difficult for readers to understand and accept. She seems to lack kindred spirits in the vast expanse of China, yet she regards Kafka, from a distant land, as her soulmate (Zeng Yanbing, 2013, p. 85). It can be said that when Zhan Xue’s name is mentioned in comparative literature between China and the West, the most representative label associated with her is almost certainly Kafka. However, the author of this book takes a different approach, uncovering the deeper and more subtle connections between Zhan Xue and Shakespeare, and conducting a comparative study of the two. It is also worth noting that the book does not force a utilitarian

equivalence between Can Xue and Shakespeare. Instead, it meticulously contrasts and elaborates on the profound commonalities evident in their literary explorations of human nature, their interpretations of the core of the human spirit, and their inner self-judgment. By achieving a heterogeneous fusion of ancient and mysterious Eastern culture with modern Western civilization, the book presents readers with a brand-new path in the literary realm that few have ventured upon. This innovative approach to research is not only worthy of recognition but also provides a practical, actionable model for future works of comparative literature seeking to broaden the scope of case selection.

3. Stylistic Techniques: Balanced Treatment of Detail and Multi-layered Depth

Throughout the book, when discussing the characteristics of writers or their works, it is inevitable to mention relevant literary works. However, the book covers a large number of writers, and the number of related works is countless. If the author's works were simply piled up without any consideration for logical connections or the aesthetic flow of the text, the result would inevitably be tedious and tedious for the reader. Therefore, the author must strike a careful balance in discussing the content or influence of these works. Fortunately, this book does not neglect this aspect of careful consideration throughout its analysis. The overall discussion not only focuses on balancing the level of detail in explaining the works but also extensively employs the technique of categorical analysis to support its arguments from multiple perspectives.

Typically, in order to provide as many concrete examples as possible to support their arguments, authors must accumulate a vast amount of reading across various national literatures. One consequence of this extensive reading is that the examples become overly complex and diverse. Nevertheless, in this process, the author must not only select representative works but also provide a foundational interpretation of each one. If the discussion of every work were overly detailed, the book's volume would reach an intimidating scale. Therefore, throughout most of the text, the author selects relevant works and distills their central themes; in some instances, certain content is even covered in a single sentence. However, this extreme condensation is not merely intended to reduce the length of the text; rather, it is designed to enable readers to grasp the author's central ideas more quickly and precisely. Furthermore, this highly condensed approach is generally combined with thematic categorization throughout the book, resulting in a narrative that is concise, clear, and logically rigorous. In Chapter 5, to elucidate the portrayal of women in marriage in Mansfield's works, the author lists 13 of her works, yet the section occupies less than a single page. This is because, after categorizing these portrayals into three types, the author selects only the plot elements from each work that best represent the

characteristics of that specific category. For instance, when presenting arguments regarding the “Conservative” category, the author cites two works—*The Day the Doll Was Born* and *The Turkish Bath*—but merely highlights the tragic fate of the wives in these works, who “ultimately lose their freedom and even their lives due to constant childbearing” (Zhao Shuqin & Lei Ziyi, 2025, p. 104). Though brief, this statement clearly presents to the reader the shared conservative traits embodied by the female characters in both works. In the discussion of the other two categories—“the Awakened” and “the Rebels”—the author similarly adopts this “commentary-style” method of summarizing content, using clear, forceful, concise, and decisive prose to present to the reader three female portraits that share the same gender yet possess vastly different personalities and intertwined fates.

At the same time, however, the author devotes considerable space to the discussion of certain works, striving to exhaust all relevant materials to substantiate their significance. This approach, which centers on individual works, stands in stark contrast to the situation described above, as the author’s intent has shifted—the focus of the discussion has moved from independent synthesis to the presentation of historical facts. This approach is vividly illustrated in the statement emphasized in Chapter 1: “In the 1950s, the Chinese literary scene evaluated British works through the lens of Soviet aesthetic tastes, and the translation and introduction of British literature closely followed the Soviet approach” (Zhao Shuqin & Lei Ziyi, 2025, p. 33). Taking the translation and study of *The Gadfly* in China as an example, the author meticulously traces the historical context of the book’s first publication in China, its multiple print runs, and its consistently high circulation. The author also presents readers with evaluations of the work by relevant female writers in the field and mainstream publications, even detailing the revisions made to *The Gadfly* prior to its publication in China. However, this emphasis on such details does not imply that these works are inherently more significant than the more general works mentioned earlier; it merely reflects a difference in the authors’ focus. It is precisely because the authors flexibly shift their focus, and employ a rich, multi-layered approach—combining detail with brevity, linking specific points to broader contexts, ultimately resulting in chapters that are neither verbose nor redundant, yet retain intellectual depth.

4. Research Perspective: Gender as the Thread That Connects All Things

Based on close textual analysis and a review of the literature, this book delves into the latent and subtle connections between British literature and modern contemporary Chinese women writers from a gender perspective, thereby revealing a series of shared psychological traits and literary influences. The creative

connections arising from this gender-based research perspective are directly reflected in the thought-provoking titles the author has crafted for each chapter. Rather than adhering to traditional symmetrical aesthetics, these titles exhibit a distinct irregularity. The kind of irregularity embodies the diverse and flourishing creative achievements of female writers across the vast literary landscape, as well as their creative philosophies unbound by external constraints. At the same time, this further highlights the individual differences and subjective agency of these Chinese female “recipients” as they absorb knowledge and internalize the spirit of British literature, the “source”.

In literary dialogue within a comparative framework, there are two core elements: the influencer and the recipient. While there are similarities between the two, there are also differences. A tension exists between the two sides, which can be regarded as a fundamental characteristic of literary dialogue (Yang Naiqiao, 2002, p. 129). The research perspective of this book precisely captures the literary tension between British writers and modern contemporary Chinese female writers, radiating outward from a gender-based framework to encompass various dimensions. In Chapter 5, titled “The Spirit of the Highborn”, the author explores the literary connection between Ling Shuhua and Mansfield. Building upon the implications of this title, the author examines their shared era, similar social backgrounds, comparable life experiences, and common literary mentors to uncover the literary commonalities between these two female writers. Although the analysis ultimately concludes that the two share numerous points of resonance and alignment in literary taste, thematic focus, and stylistic techniques, it does not overlook the subtle differences in their writing attitudes. That is, due to her relatively smooth life journey, Ling Shuhua often adopts a culturally reserved and implicit approach in her writing, tending toward subtlety; Mansfield, on the other hand, having lived at the epicenter of the women’s liberation movement and having left her family at an early age to lead a nomadic life, adopts a more resolute and unrestrained stance toward female awakening and rebellion in her writing. In contrast, in Chapter 6, the author selects two seemingly unrelated writers: Eileen Chang and D.H. Lawrence. The difference in their genders inevitably leads to distinct gender-based divisions in their writing, and the fact that they hail from different countries and cultural backgrounds likely exerts a profound influence on their creative work. Yet the author strives to find the “common ground” amidst these “differences”. Starting from the premise that both Eileen Chang and Lawrence stood at the “intersection of tradition and modernity” in their respective eras, the author explores the modernist tendencies evident in their thematic concerns and value systems—namely, their portrayal of the human spiritual crisis and the sense of disillusionment with modern civilization. Moreover, both authors, independently of one another, adopt a female perspective to depict the tragic

consequences faced by women due to internal or external factors, as well as the decline and resistance of women in a harsh patriarchal society. It can be said that, in terms of its research perspective, this book takes gender as its starting point, repeatedly navigating between two distinct literary traditions, seeking “differences” within “similarities”, digging “similarities” under “differences”, finally weaving for readers a kaleidoscopic literary web of diverse forms and endless variations.

5. Value Orientation: Subjective Priority and Adaptive Absorption

As the book is titled *British Influence and Chinese Women's Literature in the Past Century*, taken at face value, it implies that no matter how much space the book devotes to discussing and evaluating British literature, the ultimate focus must return to the local context of “Chinese feminism”. In her research, scholar Jin Li reflects on the need for Chinese scholars to construct an autonomous knowledge system when conducting research on foreign women's literature. She further points out that when reading Western feminist literary theory or foreign women's literary texts, we must fully recognize their “heterogeneity”. We must engage in serious cultural reflection on foreign women's literature; we cannot simply adopt ready-made Western theories for interpretation, nor can we explain them entirely according to Western models and perspectives. Otherwise, such criticism of foreign women's literature will inevitably remain superficial and fail to truly represent the stance and value judgments of Chinese women (Jin Li, 2025, p. 56). This “sense of clarity”, demonstrated in such learning and borrowing, is precisely the academic quality this book must possess when conducting comparative literary studies between two cultures that are relatively distant and mutually heterogeneous. Through the whole book, it can be believed that whether in terms of writing style, logical structure, or the elevation of values, the author has deliberately incorporated this autonomous value orientation of “returning to the local” into every section of the content, truly achieving a focus on “self” and applying it for “self.”

The logical structure of the book's general overview largely follows a sequence that emphasizes British literature in the early sections and Chinese women's literature influenced by it in the latter sections. Consequently, the value orientation of “returning to the local” is relatively clear and explicit for readers in this section. For instance, in Chapter 2, which examines the construction of gender discourses in China and the UK, the book firstly describes the profound and powerful influence of British women's literature, then discusses the guiding role played by relevant British female writers in the emergence of feminist consciousness among Chinese female writers, and finally introduces the topic of the establishment of a unique feminist discourse in China's New Era. Overall, this logical progression from “foreign” to “local” flows very smoothly

in this section. Nevertheless, in the chapters dedicated to comparative analyses of specific authors, maintaining this balance of perspective appears to require greater effort. This is because an argument that begins with the “influencer” to illustrate the “recipient” can easily blur the distinction between primary and secondary factors. Readers often fall into the psychological inertia of the “influencer” as the overarching premise, casting the “recipient” into a vast shadow that obscures the unique light emanating from the latter, ultimately eroding their agency. Yet this book demonstrates an exceptionally objective and clear-headed approach in handling this issue. In Chapter 7, the author reveals the deep literary connection between Zong Pu and Hardy through Zong Pu’s early personal experiences and self-reflections. At the same time, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of Hardy’s strengths in creating atmospheric settings and employing narrative perspectives, highlighting his mastery of blending setting and emotion with storytelling. When the discussion returns to the Chinese writer Zong Pu in the latter half, the book avoids merely highlighting his imitative admiration for Hardy. Instead, after demonstrating their similarities, it emphasizes Zong Pu’s unique consciousness—her ability to internalize Hardy’s techniques and achieve innovative breakthroughs. For instance, when discussing the two authors’ use of narrative perspective, the book emphasizes that Hardy “primarily employs an omniscient narrative perspective, interwoven with limited and purely objective perspectives, thereby forming a distinctive Hardy-style narrative style” (Zhao Shuqin & Lei Ziyi, 2025, p. 150). Influenced by Hardy, Zong Pu similarly employs a multi-layered narrative structure centered on an omniscient perspective. However, the book also highlights Zong Pu’s narrative innovations built upon this foundation: her novels not only feature the interweaving of multiple narrative perspectives but also employ rapid shifts in narrative viewpoint centered on changes in point of view, as well as a narrative that expands spatial dimensions (Zhao Shuqin & Lei Ziyi, 2025, p. 153). Therefore, in this “localization” endeavor, the author does not aim to present a superficial imitation but rather an ideal state where “1+1>2”, ultimately achieving the goal of enabling local female writers to construct an autonomous female discourse under the influence of foreign literature.

British Influence and Chinese Women’s Literature in the Past Century spans a century, focuses on the Sino-British context, and centers on gender, placing British literary trends and the modern transformation of Chinese women’s literature within a framework of cross-cultural dialogue. It can be described as a systematic, comprehensive, and highly innovative academic monograph. Scholars Zhao Shuqin and Lei Ziyi adopt an approach that “broadens horizontally and delves deeply vertically”, through the selection of classic yet unconventional case studies, a balanced and nuanced narrative style that combines both broad overviews and specific details, a gender perspective maintained throughout, and a clear, self-aware local stance, they provide

a research paradigm and theoretical perspective worthy of emulation for the study of Chinese women's literature and cross-cultural comparative literature. The book moves seamlessly between studies of influence and parallel studies, unfolding a literary dialogue within the dialectic of "similarities" and "differences". While highlighting the intellectual enlightenment and artistic nourishment that British literature has provided to Chinese women's writing, the book also emphasizes the agency and creativity of Chinese women writers in the processes of reception, transformation, and reconstruction. It powerfully reflects the spiritual journey of Chinese women over the past century as they moved from being "the Other" to becoming "the Self," and its academic value and significance in literary history are self-evident.

Of course, as a monograph of limited scope that must cover a century and span two nations, the book still leaves room for further exploration. For instance, it focuses primarily on classic authors who have had a profound influence on the literary world, while devoting little attention to the more diverse and younger generation of female writers from the late 20th century to the present. At the same time, the book could benefit from more detailed theoretical analysis and textual interpretation regarding the internal shifts and controversies within British feminist theory across different historical periods, as well as the issues of misinterpretation, misalignment in reception, and localization following its introduction to China. Yet these areas for further exploration are precisely the valuable entry points this outstanding work offers to the academic community.

Overall, *British Influence and Chinese Women's Literature in the Past Century* resonates across East and West through its solid scholarship, clear logic, and objective, lucid gender consciousness. It is not only a faithful account of a literary history but also a solemn affirmation of the subjectivity of Chinese women writers, laying a solid and expansive foundation for future academic research into cross-cultural women's literature that is both deeper and more multidimensional.

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