

Reimagining Women's Struggles in China: Bridging Cyberfeminism and Sinofuturism

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Literature Review	5
Methodology & Discussion	7
- Archival Research	
- Case Studies	
Conclusion & Future Work	14
References	17
Acknowledgements	21

Abstract

This paper explores the paradoxical challenges faced by contemporary Chinese women, revealing a stark contrast between the state's rhetoric of gender equality and the harsh reality marked by declining labor force participation, oppressive societal expectations, and a falling fertility rate. Utilizing Cyberfeminism, the paper delves into labor and reproduction issues, proposing solutions like inclusive technologies and radical approaches to artificial reproduction. Sinofuturism is employed to analyze China's future, emphasizing the contradiction between high-tech aspirations and traditional gender norms. The paper suggests the state's emphasis on reproduction and reluctance to address women's suffering stem from a fear of disrupting the existing patriarchal system. The proposed kinetic installation project visualizes these complex issues through a system of humanoid robots creating human "babies" in an assembly line, highlighting the human input required and drawing from China-specific settings. The project prompts critical questions about sustaining economic growth without women's emancipation and the future implications of perpetuating gender discrimination in society.

Keywords: Chinese women, Chinese state, Cyberfeminism, Sinofuturism, Reproductive labor, Artificial reproduction, Digital technology

Introduction

Contrary to the slowly improving condition of gender equality in the economy, China has been experiencing a continuously dropping rate of women's labor-force participation, unemployment, and income since the 1990s (Dong 205; World Inequality Report). Such a phenomenon seems ironic with the state's promise to promote gender equality in the economic, political, and cultural realms and its famous slogan "Women can hold up half the sky" which is said to empower women in the workplace (State Council). Simultaneously, with the dropping fertility rate which has urged the state to introduce a series of policies including the three-child policy and allowances for child-delivering, Chinese women are also facing pressures from the state and their families to get married, "return to their traditional domestic roles", and have more children (Yang 2022). The dual pressures of the inability to be treated equally in the workplace, juxtaposed with the increasing societal expectations for women to commit stereotypical gender roles of childbearing and caregiving, frame the main struggles that women in China are now facing.

Under such circumstances, this paper aims to address and provide potential solutions to these issues faced by contemporary Chinese women by adopting some key ideas from Cyberfeminism, particularly focusing on its critics about how contemporary technologies have shaped and can potentially subvert the oppressive labor environment as well as technologies' potentials to liberate women from reproduction through technical means, and Sinofuturism, which provide diverse perspectives of looking at how China is or could be transformed by technologies through a futuristic lens. Through close analyses of relevant theories of Cyberfeminism and Sinofuturism, together with case studies of related artworks, this paper will conclude with a potential media art project that prompts the question: Can the current rate of economic growth valued by the state sustain without the emancipation of women?

In the following sections, I will first frame the struggles that contemporary Chinese women face in the literature review section. And then in the methodology section, I will adopt both archival research on Cyberfeminism and Sinofuturism and case studies of two relevant artworks to better understand and provide solutions to the issues identified in the literature review section. Finally, I will end the paper with a brief conclusion and a proposal for a media art project.

Literature Review

Ever since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), women's emancipation in China has been largely shaped by state feminism -- feminism led by the Chinese state and characterized by theorizing and conducting women's liberation movements consistent with the state's political trends (Yang and Zhou 70-71). Due to the patriarchal nature rooted in China's Communist Party (CCP) (Yang 11), Chinese women are thus never truly liberated and are always confined to what the CCP thinks is 'good' for the country, which often falls short in addressing the real underlying gender discrimination that Chinese women experience.

The issues that Chinese women face in contemporary times are problems left over from history. In the Maoist era, the CCP developed a series of gender-leveling measures for "women's emancipation", including guarantees of all legal rights to women in the political realm and encouraging women to enter the labor force and guarantee equal pay under the slogan of "women can hold up half the sky" in the economic realm (Yang and Zhou 70). Though it seems that Chinese women have been liberated with high levels of female labor force participation and legally equal rights, as continuously emphasized by official media (Chinese Communist Youth League), underlying issues regarding the contradiction between women's traditional reproductive labor roles and women's labor in the workplace is never addressed. As some studies have emphasized, "[w]omen's emancipation in China has focused on the public sphere", contributing to women's participation in the public workplace (Yang and Zhou 70). However, gender norms in the private sphere rooted in Confucian values that emphasize women's devotion to domestic labor are never addressed, intensifying women's double burden both in the public and the private sphere (Dong 204). Such issues regarding women in work were never seriously addressed by state feminism as the country has been through Reform and Opening-up and entered a more recent Xi Jinping era as women's rights affairs are further marginalized. A series of measures have led to an even harshening environment for women at work and further forced Chinese women back into the domestic sphere: previous welfare services reducing women's domestic burden such as child care are cut off with the erosion of permanent state employment and welfare provisions; women are disproportionately laid off from state enterprises during the industrial restructuring (Dong 205); the loosening up of the one-child policy without systematic protection of women in labor have disadvantaged women in seeking jobs (Li, et al. 14); the All-China

Women's Federation (ACWF, the only legitimate state institution that governs women's affairs) and Xi himself have rhetorically emphasized women's roles of looking after their families, projecting societal pressures on women to commit their stereotypical gender roles (Yang 9). In other words, with the double pressures of reproductive labor and labor in the public sphere unresolved, contemporary women in China face even more contradictory pressures: on the one hand, inability to make the life that they themselves desire by finding a job; and on the other, have and take care of their families as desired by the state.

Besides the societal pressures on women specifically in the workforce imposed by the state policies, the harshening labor environment itself that reinforces intensive workloads and long working hours further burdens contemporary women. For example, the "996", the increasingly common schedule of working from 9 AM to 9 PM, six days a week, is a great example to look into the life of these overburdened women. Though without much academic attention, a group of young women working in big IT companies (such as ByteDance and the Red Book, a desired job for many young people seeking high income and decent social status in China) on social media sarcastically call themselves "female data workers (数据女工)"¹ to illustrate the factory-like, dehumanizing work environment that they experience. Though most of the time optimistic, some of their social media posts have indicated an inability and/or pressures to balance their lives (caregiving, pregnancy, marriage, etc.) and work due to the intensive workload, highly competitive work environment, and long working hours. In other words, the intensive work culture that is emerging recently in China has also, and perhaps more severely, impacted women in terms of the dual burden of domestic reproductive labor and work.

In addition to the pressure of work, reproduction is also intertwined with the above-mentioned issues. As the state has witnessed an unprecedentedly low fertility rate in China and has become increasingly concerned about the potential of failing to maintain continuous economic growth, a series of policies and measures including the two-child/three-child policy and other rewards on births. Though some measures are taken to address "benefits and protections for working mothers", the historically rooted traditional gender roles in domestic labor are still not addressed and even reinforced by Xi's consistent rhetoric on "traditional Chinese family values". Simultaneously, underlying issues of the lack of affordable social

¹ This word is commonly used for female participants of fandom culture who devote much of their time in making the data of their idols look good in academic and in news rhetoric. However, I'm more interested in the particular group of "female data workers" as described in the paper.

welfare services and increasing economic pressures also perpetuate the dropping fertility rate (Dong 207-208). Frustrated by their insufficient measures in understanding the real societal issues, some local governments even ascribed the flattening fertility rate to the increase in women's education, saying "As women's education level increases, it will lead to fewer or no births" (Jiangsu Statistical Bureau). Such an absurd argument indicates that Chinese women's true needs and struggles are never valued by the state; rather, they are seen as mere reproductive machines behind the fertility rate that could be incentivized through concessions in policies.

In summary, the struggles of Chinese women are a set of intertwined challenges arising from the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, the demanding work environment, and the dehumanizing focus on women's reproductive bodies. These women confront a dual burden, marked by the lingering tension between reproductive responsibilities and involvement in the public workforce, exacerbated by heightened work demands, extended hours, and societal anticipations. All of these factors underscore a stark disjunction between the policies dictated by the state and the authentic needs and challenges faced by women in contemporary China.

The reality seems quite dystopian with the patriarchal "Big Brother" constraining Chinese women's possibilities to gain emancipation from traditional gender roles and intensive work. However, in this paper, I hope to carve a solution to women's liberation by appropriating what the CCP values most - economic growth empowered by advanced technologies.

Methodology & Discussion

To arrive at the aforementioned solutions, I will first adopt an archival research method to look into the Cyberfeminist theories to see how technologies could be used for women's liberation-a discussion often neglected by Chinese feminists-and Sinofuturist theories to investigate how the contemporary or future landscape of China might be appropriated. Then, to better frame a viable plan for an artistic project, I will conduct case studies of two relevant artworks to better visualize the final proposal.

Archival Research

Labor and Reproduction in Cyberfeminism

As argued by Susanna Paasonen, Cyberfeminism is a theory without a clear, collective definition and is open to unlimited possibilities for improvements and diversities (335-336). It

could be generally framed as a “feminist appropriation of information and computer technology on a both practical and theoretical level” that focuses on “critical analysis and rethinking of gendered power relations related to digital technologies (Paasonen 335)”. Broad as it is, I will mainly focus on reoccurring and important themes of labor and reproduction in the broader Cyberfeminism framework to compose a relevant deeper understanding of and solution to the struggles of contemporary Chinese women.

In terms of labor, Cyberfeminism has emphasized “the tension between the political economy required to mass produce the infrastructure of the Internet and its reliance on the exploited labor (Daniels 105).” The “exploited labor” categorized by Cyberfeminism includes both low-skilled workers, especially women, people of color, and Third-World people, and seemingly privileged women in high-tech industries or using high-tech machines (like computers, robots, etc.) (Daniels 105; Haraway 44; Cuboniks 21). According to this literature, the former, primarily characterized by Third-World female workers in microchip factories, experiences the most harshening labor environments (lack of welfare, long working hours, and dehumanizing working conditions) and remains the most vulnerable group of workers. Though promised with the liberation of work brought about by new technologies, they mostly faced with job loss and economic decline due to the shifting political economy. Similar situations exist in China as well. In China, there is a large group of rural-to-urban female workers who work primarily in microchip and textile factories. Similar to the hardship described by Cyberfeminists, these workers experience “a heavy physical workload, high quantitative demands, long working hours (10–12 h per day), lower income, insufficient protection from social security agencies and poor labor protection (Zhu, et al. 1-2).” Simultaneously, for the latter, Haraway explicitly emphasizes the “homework economy” in which the “New Industrial Revolution” has made vulnerable the previously privileged White male workers, further endangering women’s traditional roles and calls for the restructuring of the family’s labor division (Haraway 39). In such a scenario, even privileged White females are made more vulnerable with the loss of family wage and the transition of their own jobs to be more capital-intensive. Though stemming from the analysis of the U.S. in the 1980s, Chinese women nowadays are also facing a similar situation. With the state’s emphasis on digital transformation in the economy and robotization in production (People's Daily; Ministry of Industry and Information Technology website) as well as the recession of the economy, Chinese women are experiencing a further decline in family wages

and the transformation of their own jobs. Simultaneously, more and more women are forced off the labor force due to the rising unemployment rate and gender discrimination in recruiting. In response to these exploitative labors mediated by new technologies, Cyberfeminists have proposed relatively vague solutions such as reconstructing technologies to be more inclusive and exploitation-free (Cuboniks 21) and emphasizing different societies' "different relations to digital technologies" and the fact that they are "embedded in present-tense, material, embodied lives rather than imagined cyborg futures (Daniels 109)." However, such a general methodology is not sufficient to cope with the current complex issues faced by contemporary China. But Daniels' emphasis on social realities rather than vague "imagined cyborg futures" is inspiring for me to look further into real-life digital technologies and their relations to the people in China locally through Sinofuturism.

Besides public sector labor alone, some Cyberfeminists also address the importance of liberating reproductive labor. As Cuboniks stated, the current economy relies on the sacrifices of women in "either withdrawing from the economic sphere... or bearing its burdens manyfold (79)." Such observation resonates with Chinese women's struggles of maintaining traditional gender roles in the household and working in the public sector as described previously. Cuboniks ascribes such stereotypical nuclear family units to the dominant economic cycles that isolate women from the public sphere and men from domestic lives and proposes a new model of an economy that "liberates reproductive labor and family life" and new models of familiarity "free from the deadening grind of wage labor (79)." Though still relatively vague, the rejection of the Confucian model family ideal emphasized by Xi which perpetuates the traditional family structure could be argued in the context of China.

In addition to labor, measures of liberating women from reproduction are also widely discussed in Cyberfeminism. As Haraway argues, since our world is already modified and reshaped by tremendous microelectronic and biotechnological politics, reproduction is no longer deemed "natural" and bounded by the traditional ways of sexual reproduction and the traditional structure of families (30). Instead, the cyborg, or the modification of our bodies brought about by digital and biotechnical technologies, could help to liberate women from reproduction. Such imaginations of technological means in women's emancipation from reproduction could be traced back to Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*. In the 1970 book, she argues that technologies of artificial reproduction would ultimately liberate women from reproductive work

and it will truly liberate women from their gender roles only if the decision of not having children, or having children through artificial means is as legitimate as traditional childbearing (Firestone). Such radical means of reproduction are further discussed by many Cyberfeminists and feminists about their potential ethical issues and potential of liberation. For example, though not identified as a Cyberfeminist per se, Merve Emre argues that though Firestone's imagination of artificial reproduction succeeds in denaturalizing women's reproductive role and providing empowerment and political emancipation to women, the individualized real-life experiences and difficulties faced by women who have encountered artificial reproductive technologies should be valued when discussing the true emancipatory effect of these technologies (11; 13-14). Returning to the context of China, artificial means of production such as IVF are still marginalized under the Confucian ideology, and the more "natural" way of reproduction is still dominant. Drawing inspiration from feminist discussions on the potential of adopting technical means in emancipating women and the radical argument about using biotechnology to have men pregnant instead or have women pregnant without the participation of men by limited Chinese grassroots radical feminists, I'd like to introduce more radical artificial means of reproduction to the larger Chinese feminist discourse to potentially strike the existing issues around reproduction faced by Chinese women and the state's dehumanization of women as a tool for reproduction in its rhetoric.

In conclusion, Cyberfeminist theories have enabled a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the struggles of Chinese women in terms of public sector labor, reproductive labor, and reproduction. However, as described above, the solutions that are given by Cyberfeminist theories are relatively vague and need more engagement with the landscape of China apart from the feasible adoption of artificial reproductive technologies. Thus, in the following section, I'll look further into Sinofuturist theories to have a better understanding of how technologies in contemporary China or their imaginations might contribute to the liberation of Chinese women.

A Sinofuturism for the 2020s

Sinofuturism is also a theory without a specific definition. It is constituted of diverse theories and practical artistic expressions stemming from different perspectives, including Western oriental views of China as a mysterious yet increasingly threatening figure perpetuated

by dehumanizing work and copycats (Conn and Seta 345; Lek); illustrations of China as an AI-like machine that improves and survives through repetition which disseminates its mode of perpetuation to the world (Lek); political or scientific fictional envisions of the future in important historical times like Liang Qichao and Lu Xun (Conn and Seta 347); and artistic expressions that use or depict Chinese advanced technological landscapes (Conn and Seta 351-352). All these different theories and practices are to me legitimate depictions of contemporary China and/or its future.

As described by Lawrence Lek, Chinese society works and progresses through a repetition of its own existing system, categorized by intensive computing, copying, gaming, study, addiction, labor, and gambling. Such a system “does not care about a dramatically better future, as long as it survives. It must replicate itself; it does not matter if it manufactures the greatest product in the world, as long as the engine keeps running (Lek).” Seen from the lens of Chinese women, the reason why the state continuously emphasizes the need to increase the fertility rate without seeing or seeking to resolve the underlying issues is because of its (economic) system that relies on the replication of intensive labor. For the state, it doesn’t matter if such perpetuation of the labor-intensive mode of production is sustainable or if it’s leading to a better future, it is applicable as long as the previous system keeps working. Seeing from a more radical perspective, the reason why the state refuses to acknowledge the suffering of women and continuously oppresses women’s expressions of their sufferings (Dong 206-207) is because the change of women’s status and embracing feminist activism would ultimately overturn the existing system that is inherently patriarchal and oppressive for Chinese women.

In addition to the depiction of Sinofuturism by looking at contemporary Chinese society structure and how it might persist, Sinofuturism also consists of depicting China’s future based on the societal realities of China, including China’s relation to the world, its political, economic, cultural changes, and the critical historical moment that it resides. For example, Liang Qichao, in the face of the semi-colonial state China is in and the rapid reform and the urgent need to seek new cultural and political norms led to his depiction of a utopian China “in which individuals live in harmony with themselves and the state” and “actively envisioning and shaping the society that engenders them in his 1902 novel “The Future of New China”. In contemporary China then, it’s the depiction of China’s future based on Xi Jinping’s envision of the “China Dream”, “a collective hope for restoring China’s lost national greatness (Conn and Seta 349)”. These

contemporary Sinofuturist depictions rest in the grand narrative of China becoming an influential and non-hegemonic country that reinforces mutual development with other countries with, of course, the technological advancements in China. Seeing from a more grounded view in present-day China, this imagination is slowly becoming reality through the states' "Belt and Road Initiative" and, more relevant to this project, the digitization of the economy and roboticization of industry, which is said to promise subversive potential for the future of China with advance technology and rapid increase of economy (People's Daily; Ministry of Industry and Information Technology website). However, ironically, under the grand narrative of the great "Chinese Dream", women are suggested to devote to their "family virtues and personal integrity", highlighting women's domestic roles. Such ironic juxtaposition of the high-tech futuristic depiction and the traditional gender discriminatory domestic roles that women are urged to commit seems to frame a quite dystopian future for Chinese women. Thus, in my project, I'd like to visualize such a shocking juxtaposition of advanced technology and traditional gender norms to address the absurdity that the state is reinforcing.

Case Studies

As mentioned in the previous archival research, both Cyberfeminism and Sinofuturism have a rich history of artistic expression. Thus, in compensating for the overly abstract and theorized analysis of the two theories, I will conduct close case studies of two artworks, each belongs to the realm of Cyberfeminism and Sinofuturism to better visualize the artistic project that I'm proposing in this paper.

Hair Salon TV



Figure 1 - Nancy Paterson, *Hair Salon TV* (1985)²

In this 1985 Cyberfeminist artwork “Hair Salon TV (Figure 1)”, artist Nancy Paterson conveys a complicatedly intertwined issue of the optimistic envisioning of technology liberating women from housework and the reality of women passively accepting technology that may or may not fulfill the previous promise. In the artwork, Paterson installed three color monitors with found videos related to women and technology that radically transcend their lives (“women and domestic technology; women and technology in the workplace; and the role of women in scientific research and technological development (SISEA)”) on three hair salon chair, stylized as the chrome helmets.

What interests me the most about this artwork is its use of juxtaposition and abstraction of certain symbols to convey complicated, interwoven concepts. In the artwork, Paterson adopted relevant videos of women and technology and juxtaposed them with the settings of the hair salon. Here, she abstracted one of the important elements of her concept - technology that transcends women’s lives - to videos of women interacting with technology; simultaneously, she abstracted another key element of her concept - women’s traditional roles - to stereotyping hairstyling settings. Such brilliant juxtaposition and abstraction of symbol will be adopted in my project as well, as I aim to address a similarly complex concept of Chinese women’s hardship in both public sector work and reproduction/reproductive labor. I thus will juxtapose the two main elements - productive work and reproductive work - by simultaneously abstracting productive work as repetitive work on an assembly line and reproduction/reproductive work as delivering/producing babies.

² Image from: <https://isea-archives.siggraph.org/art-events/hair-salon-tv-by-nancy-paterson/>

RMB City



Figure 2 - Cao Fei, RMB City (2009-2011)³

RMB City is a Sinofuturist artwork by artist Cao Fei (Figure 2). It consists of a series of videos and performances inside an online virtual world in the game Second Life. In this virtual city, Cao incorporates surrealist appropriation of landscapes in China, such as the Oriental Pearl Tower, the panda, and the statue of Mao. Simultaneously, as illustrated in her video “Live in RMB City” along with this virtual city, this city operates under a certain “societal system” that Cao reinforced herself. For example, the city lets the mayor serve the people and the people govern their own city. Through a parallel, yet different construct of the virtual version of China’s city, Cao questions the authoritarian power and the state and the potential harm that the rapid urbanization of China might bring about.

My interest in this artwork comes twofold. First, I’m amazed by how she made possible the easy association between urban China in reality and her virtual one while reinforcing her concept of the urbanization of China by appropriating and artistically altering the iconic landscapes in China in a chaotic way (smoke coming out, the statue of Mao drowning, and other building inclining). If I were to adopt such a method in my own project, I would thus identify the key visual elements that could represent the characteristics of the overly industrialized China. Based on analyses in the Sinofuturism section, I would thus adopt the image of a computer or the use of code or AI and humanoid robots to represent the digital transformation in economy and robotization of production that the state is reinforcing.

In addition, I’m also interested in how Cao satires the state’s slogan “serve for the people (为人民服务, wei renmin fuwu)” and its inability to fulfill its promise through reconstructing the city that actually does “serve the people”. In the context of my project, I thus would like to satire

³ Image from: <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/rmb-city-201286/>

the state's seemingly harmonious and gender-friendly rhetoric of constructing "family virtues" and ensuring women's participation in the labor force (Xinhua; State Council) through a speculative imagining of a future China where women's productive work were to be producing women through artificial reproductive technologies.

Conclusion & Future Work

The paper explores the paradoxical challenges faced by contemporary Chinese women, juxtaposing the state's rhetoric of gender equality with a reality marked by dropping labor force participation, oppressive societal expectations, and a declining fertility rate. Drawing from Cyberfeminism, the paper delves into labor and reproduction issues, proposing potential solutions such as inclusive technologies and radical approaches to artificial reproduction technologies to liberate women. Sinofuturism is employed to analyze China's future, highlighting the contradiction between high-tech aspirations and traditional gender norms. The paper suggests that the state's emphasis on reproduction and reluctance to address women's suffering stem from a fear of disrupting the existing patriarchal system.

Stemming from previous analyses of contemporary Chinese women's sufferings and potential solutions provided by Cyberfeminism and Sinofuturism, and simultaneously drawing inspiration from the two case studies, I thus propose a kinetic installation project that constitutes multiple humanoid robots creating human "babies" in an assembly line-like working environment through computing. To be more specific, the whole system would only function with the input of the audience, symbolizing the humans that are employed to make an industrial system function. Simultaneously, the whole system of "baby" production with robots is functioning through a set of coding schemes yet to be developed. Simultaneously, as discussed earlier in the paper, to visualize the context of China, I will draw visual inspiration from China-specific settings of robots (Figure 3) and working environments (Figure 4 and Figure 5). As for the details of the production of 'babies', I draw inspiration from both Cyberfeminist imaginations of artificial reproductive technologies and the currently-in-question technology of artificial womb in theory and to visualize this setting (Figure 6).

Through this project, I aim to put into question: can the current rate of economic growth be sustained without the emancipation of women? What would China's future be like if we were to perpetuate the current gender-discriminatory structure of society that aims to advance technology upon oppressing women with dual productive labor and reproductive labor?

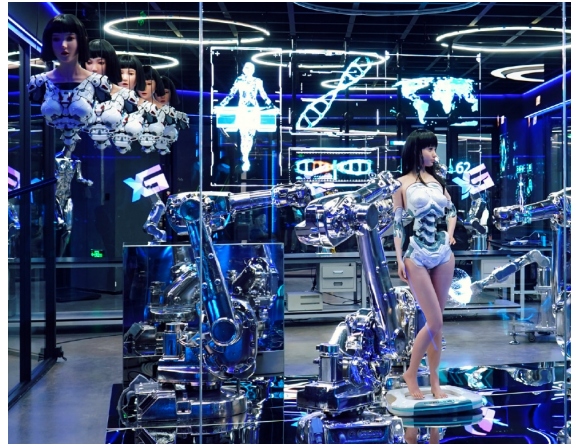


Figure 3 - EXROBOTS⁴



Figure 4 - WALEANDYOU, 2022, 工作VLOG | 广告AE的外号是数据女工 🍌 🍌



Figure 5 -Assembly line worker

⁴ Image from: <https://www.exrobots.net/>



Figure 6 - Artificial womb⁵

⁵ Image from:

<https://www.tue.nl/en/storage/biomedische-technologie/de-faculteit/news-and-events/news-overview/07-04-2022-without-gasping-for-air-safely-in-the-artificial-womb?twclid=25tqn5s56cyexwe35oao4nfr58&cHash=a1427e72b373259c0b9d5c3b29fea269>

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