

ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHINESE IN KENYA AND THE FUTURE OF CHINESE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The present study is on attitudes towards Chinese language and culture as witnessed at the University of Nairobi's Confucius Institute. The study was designed to investigate and report on language attitudes of the learners of Chinese at the university. Chinese has been taught at the University of Nairobi for over ten years now and so it is important to know how its learners feel about it to be able to plan forward. The research was carried out in the field, and data was collected by means of a questionnaire and interview schedules from a purposively selected sample besides participant observation. The study set out to identify the most prevalent language attitudes towards Chinese language and culture by the University of Nairobi community, especially those who enroll in Chinese language classes. From the most prevalent language attitudes towards Chinese the study aimed at determining the future of Chinese in Kenya and by extension Africa. The Social Psychological theory and the Communication Accommodation Theory were used in this research. The findings of the study are that Kenyans will opt for Chinese because of the instrumental reasons like visiting China and oppose it on aspects of integration. Overall, given the capital power of China, China is here to stay.

Key words: Language attitudes, Chinese, Kenya, University of Nairobi, Confucius Institute

1.1 Introduction

The study of language attitudes is important for sociolinguistics because it can predict a given linguistic behavior in multilingual communities like the ones obtaining in Africa (Obiols 2002, Melander 2003, Leong 2014). Thus, language has a social function, both as a means of communication and, as a tool of identifying social groups. It is the second component of language function that is of importance to this paper.

From a psychological point of view, attitude is defined as a mental state of readiness to respond to something based on past experiences and influencing behavior toward a specific object (Allport 1953). Attitudes are to be found simply in the response people make to social situations. The term attitude therefore is used to refer to a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object, or issue and in this regard Chinese language. Language attitudes are feelings people have about their own language or the language of others. Thus, language attitudes can be positive or negative although some may even be neutral language attitudes.

Language attitudes bring out judgments of the quality and prestige of languages depending on the knowledge of the social connotations the languages possess. In this case therefore, use of some languages would end up being expression of social preference which reflect an awareness of status and prestige accorded to the speakers of that particular language. This is the essence of the present study on Chinese language attitudes.

The present study aims to examine attitudes by the University of Nairobi community towards Chinese language and from it draw conclusions on the future of Chinese language and culture in Africa given the relationship between language and culture. The research questions for the study are:-

- (i) What are the most prevalent language attitudes towards Chinese language and culture by the University of Nairobi community?
- (ii) Do Kenyans who enroll in Chinese language class demonstrate more positive attitudes towards the Chinese language and culture?
- (iii) From the most prevalent language attitudes towards Chinese language and culture by the University of Nairobi community, what is the future of Chinese in Kenya and in Africa as a whole?

1.2 Rationale

It is a historical fact that Africa as a continent has had a long history of relationship with China (Masta 2009). Before Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal began in 1415 to carry out the plan of sending two or three ships every year to discover the African coast beyond Cape Nam, the Chinese admiral Zheng He, commanding a fleet of 300 ships and over 20,000 men, had sailed across the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea and had the eastern coast of Africa in 1405. While the Portuguese called the Africans they came across pagans for not believing in Christianity and even enslaving them, the Chinese proved disciplined and only paid Africans friendly visits. This is the spirit of Confucian cultural ethos.

When a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, this increases the probability of its obtaining its desired outcomes through attraction. In the Sino-African case, the conceptual realm of Western universal values such as liberty, democracy, and human rights has been replaced by the Confucian values of brotherhood, benevolence, virtuous rule, harmony, loyalty, and reciprocation. Such soft power is exercised by Chinese diplomats and entrepreneurs (Nye, 2004). Due to this state of affairs one question comes to mind: What is the future of Chinese language and culture in Kenya in particular and in Africa in general given that the two components are taught by the Confucius Institute at various universities in Africa including the University of Nairobi?

This study is time and again making reference to the University of Nairobi, especially in regard to the Confucius institute and aims at making general conclusions on the topic of attitudes towards Chinese in Africa after using respondents from Kenya for a number of reasons. One, Kenya, Uganda and Egypt are some of the few African nations that have had one of the longest history of interaction and educational exchange with China. Two, Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi was launched as the first Confucius Institute in Africa in 2005. His Excellency, the present of the Peoples Republic of China, Mr. Hu

Jintao and his Kenyan counterpart Mr. Daniel Moi entered into a government to government agreement to have linguo-cultural exchange.

Through the Confucius Institute, the University of Nairobi in Kenya and Tianjin Normal University in China have established a collaborative link which includes the exchange of students and lecturers. Chinese lecturers teaching the Chinese language and culture at the University of Nairobi while the University of Nairobi lecturers teach Kiswahili language and culture at Tianjin Normal University in China. Besides, the programme of standard Chinese is an acclaimed language course in Kenya with its integrated focus on the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The training helps the learners of Chinese language and culture to understand how the language works grammatically and how it is used in real life situations.

In the spirit of Confucianism, Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi has been giving yearly scholarships that develop through the link between the Kenya government and that of the Peoples Republic of China. From the year 2006, over 200 Kenyan students in Confucius Institute have had an opportunity to study on scholarships in China. Chinese scholarships are not discriminatory for today a sizeable number of Kenyans majoring in Journalism, business, international relations and many other subjects that require language and culture are also taking courses in Chinese to suit their specialization.

Due to the fact that the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi has close relationships with the Chinese government, organizations and companies and always acts as a link for the schools, institutes and establishments between Kenya and China, in August 2016 the Director of the Confucius Institute in Beijing Languages and Culture University in China while at the University of Nairobi promised to strengthen partnerships with the University of Nairobi through more training programmes, educational conferences, international cultural festivals, and African youth forum among other issues. The Director also commended the University of Nairobi for being one of the world class universities where the Confucius Institute has been successful. She further commended the University of Nairobi for being one that has fostered exchange programmes for students and promotion of Chinese language and culture.

With this kind of involvement in the spread of Chinese language and culture in Kenya and Africa as a whole, the study of Attitudes towards Chinese language and culture was justified. The result of the study will guide language policy makers and planners in both Kenya and China to know which areas of the language and cultural issues to give more or less emphasis and with what socio-economic and political result.

1.3 Theory

The present study has employed two theories, namely the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and Social Psychological Theory.

The Communication Accommodation Theory was originated by Giles although it had been applied in earlier researches by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977). This is a theory that describes a positive or negative language attitude found between communicants in their communication. This theory is used to explain especially the attitude shown by individual speakers towards the listeners in a conversation

There are two important sociolinguistic concepts in CAT, namely convergence and divergence. As convergence and divergence are found in individual people's language attitudes as seen in communication, the concepts are best classified as individual phenomena. Convergence refers to the positive attitude shown by a speaker towards the listener by adjusting the features of his or her language so that he or she is understood and accepted. For example, a mother may adjust her voice when talking with a baby so as to create baby-talk or motherese as a form of convergence.

Divergence as a CAT component is a concept reflecting a language attitude that takes an opposite direction from the convergence. It refers to separation shown by a speaker from the listener's language. A separation

from a group of people who speak the same language is more likely to be found when the separator holds an outsider's attitudes towards the group. The separation is demonstrated through the language and often takes place for some different social, political and cultural background.

From the concepts of convergence and divergence as spelled out in CAT, there emerge two other concepts of in-group and out-group that have been used in this paper. This Communication Accommodation Theory was useful to the study especially in reference to the methodology section on participant observation.

The Social Psychological theory by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1985) was used in this study because in studies to do with language attitudes, the concept of motivation is important. According to this theory, there are two types of motivation: instrumental and integrative motivation. In as far as instrumental motivation is concerned, the knowledge of a language is considered as a passport to prestige and success. In this case, the speaker /learner considers language as functional. An instrumental attitude is identified when the learners study a language in order to fulfill only material needs, but does not have the need of being part of the culture related to the language. Learners who are less motivated in practicing the language outside the classroom are often less interested in understanding the culture of the native speakers of the language.

On the other hand, if a learner wishes to identify with the target community, to learn the language and the culture of the speakers of that language in order to perhaps to be able to become a member of the group the motivation is called integrative. An integrative language attitude is an attitude which is characterized with some desire and behaviours of the learners' to integrate themselves with the language being learned. Learners with this attitude not only learn a language to have a proficiency in it, but also wish to know, imitate, or adapt themselves to the culture related to the native speakers of the language.

1.4 Methodology

To measure attitude toward a language and its speakers, there are two methods that are usually applied: direct and indirect method. This study has used the direct method of data collection on the subject of language attitudes towards Chinese language in Kenya. The study used the direct method where respondents were given a questionnaire to fill in as far as language attitudes towards Chinese are concerned. Interview schedules were also used in data collection besides follow up questions being asked on issues that did not clearly come out in as far as attitudes towards Chinese are concerned. Data collection procedure also involved participant observation and all these procedures produced good results for the study. The application of various techniques together helped the research to retrieve more information regarding respondents' attitudes towards Chinese language and culture and their actual behavior towards this language (see Wu 2005).

The clearly thought and constructed questionnaire had sections that included background information on the respondents besides specific items that tested attitudes on Chinese language and culture. The questionnaire was prefaced by brief instructions about the task, and a statement that informed and sought consent for the researcher to use their responses for the study. Confidentiality of the respondents was assured, and the questionnaire items were such that they asked open ended question so as to give respondent freedom to give their attitudinal orientations to the best of their abilities. In conducting of interviews, interviewers asked questions to which the responses were to directly state the interviewees' language attitude. The questions were structured in a manner that they were interrogative such as Will you study Chinese at this university instead of a language like Kiswahili? It is such a question that would elicit follow-up questions.

A total of 50 respondents were used for the purpose of this study. The respondents who were of both gender, and who were enrolled in Chinese classes at the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi, were purposively selected. The age range of respondents was between 18 years and 71 years which is the normal age when students are recruited in the institute and when they retire from the university respectively. May it

be noted that the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi teaches Chinese to fresh students, continuing students, and even members of university staff.

Data on attitudes towards Chinese language and culture as given by the study's respondents was carefully sampled and grouped by the researcher with the help of research assistants. This grouping helped the researcher to know the traits and trends in the respondents' attitudes on particular items of the questionnaire and interview schedules as far as attitudes towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya so as to in-far the future of Chinese in Kenya and Africa as a whole. The attitudes were analysed using simple statistical procedures.

1.5 Results and Discussion

1.5.1 Attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya

In order to get attitudes towards Chinese language and culture, a questionnaire and interview schedules were prepared, and follow up questions were also asked to respondents whose responses were not very clear. Using a Likert scale, respondents were asked whether they agree with statements such as the following :

- (i) I like speaking and writing Chinese.
- (ii) My children should learn Chinese
- (iii) Chinese will benefit Kenya and Africa in general in business, education, and diplomacy.
- (iv) Chinese will have a superior status in Kenya and Africa in the future.
- (v) In Kenya, and in Africa generally, Chinese is more important than all other languages in use.
- (vi) Language and culture are intertwined. Please rate you liking for Chinese culture specifying aspects of Chinese culture that you know.

From the respondents used in this study on language attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya, two divergent attitudes emerge: positive and negative. When the variable of age was tested it emerged that age is not a factor when it comes to attitudes towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya. Both the aged and the youthful respondents did not rate Chinese language favourably due to its complex structure and writing system. There was a general feeling from respondents from both sides of the divide as far as age is concerned that the language is impossible to learn. This finding from the study is interesting in that it contradicts the belief that children are superior to adults in second or foreign language learning (Usman 2015). However, when the language attitude of youthful respondents differed from that of adults towards Chinese it was because of the need to enhance their own cultural identity, to identify with each other, to exclude, and to invoke feelings of admiration from those who cannot communicate in Chinese. In such a case, youthful respondents had positive attitudes towards Chinese language and culture because of integrative reasons. These youthful respondents went in for Chinese for personal growth and cultural enrichment. Such respondents demonstrated a desire to have more cultural contact with the Chinese hence showing favourable attitudes towards it and its speakers.

Although age was seen as not being a factor in the attitudes Kenyans have towards Chinese given its structure, gender was. Respondents reported that female learners of Chinese are better than their male counterparts. Because of their abilities in the learning of the language that their male counterparts see and treat as complex and impossible, attitudes of female respondents towards Chinese and particularly on this item of the questionnaire was positive. One reason for the difference in the ability to comprehend Chinese by men and women respondents which in turn leads to variation in Chinese language attitudes has to do with learning styles. In conversation, men have a report style while women are more interactive for they have a rapport style that is more concerned with building and maintaining relationships.

About the importance of Chinese as a language in Kenya and in Africa in general, the respondents rated it very high. Some of the respondents had been beneficiaries of short term scholarships in China and so

believed that without the language they would not have gotten the opportunity to catch a flight in their life time. There was an argument to the effect that Kenya has over history emphasized the use of English in education system and yet very few Kenyans, if any, use the language outside her borders. In this regard, there is positive attitude towards Chinese in Kenya but as far as instrumentalism is concerned. This positive attitude towards Chinese in Kenya cut across all the variables tested in this study. This positive attitude towards Chinese was because Kenyans will want to speak the language in a wide range of social situations and even fulfill professional ambitions. Here the communicative value of Chinese is assumed and this motivates Kenyans to learn Chinese language and culture to acquire proficiency in it. In this case therefore the learning of Chinese language and culture is treated as linguistic investment (Lightbown and Spada 2006).

Respondents for the present study were both formal students at the University of Nairobi and university employees who were interested in learning Chinese language and its culture. Both groups differed on some issues as they agreed on some on the topic of language attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya in particular and in Africa in general. Youthful and university enrolled respondents were more tolerating in their attitude towards Chinese culture than their university employee respondents. When it came to issues like smoking in public and feeding on dog meat, the youth argued that Chinese did not feed on weed but cigarettes. Still, what is so negative in feeding on dog meat yet very positive in feeding on chicken meat? Elderly respondents were hesitant to appreciate Chinese culture because as one of them openly confessed, "You cannot teach an old dog new tricks". This statement appears to be both positive and negative towards Chinese culture.

Just like the questionnaire, the interview schedule had an item that interrogated the future of Chinese language and culture. An overwhelming majority of respondents (over 80%) observed that Chinese language and culture were in Kenya and Africa to stay. The reason for this kind of attitude emanated from the fact that the Chinese are a great source of employment in Kenya. Since most Chinese do not comprehend and speak English or Kiswahili, Kenyans will be forced to learn the language, not for integrative purposes, but for instrumental ones. Despite this very positive attitude towards Chinese by Kenyans, there are aspects of Chinese culture that respondents reported as negative and can jeopardize the future of Chinese in Kenya and Africa as a whole. Chinese smoking habits, spiting habits and their pagan nature goes against the culture and values of most Kenyans. Still, Chinese goods whose quality is questioned are flooding Kenyan markets. If the same attitude is transferred to language and even education that is offered by Chinese universities, then the attitude towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya and Africa is negative. Still, the Chinese are undercutting Kenyans in the textile industry, promulgating labour abuses, and violating human rights (Spring and Jiao 2008). Due to the fact that language and culture are intertwined, Chinese culture in Africa cannot be taken for granted.

Asked whether Chinese is another symbol of linguistic imperialism, most youthful respondents (over 80%) strongly objected. In essence, the youthful respondents have a strong desire to learn Chinese because they believe mastering Chinese will help them find lucrative employment in mushrooming Chinese businesses in Kenya. Nevertheless, respondents strongly denied the feeling of not being Kenyans by embracing the learning of Chinese. "After all, we learn English in our school system right from class one. Does that make us less Kenyans or more westerners?" asked one respondent. This attitude indicates that Kenyans learned Chinese for its own sake rather than only for fulfilling instrumental goals.

1.5.2 Factors Affecting Attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya

Besides the positive and negative attitudes towards Chinese language and culture discussed above, there are several factors influencing the attitudes. In this section of the paper we discuss these factors. First, is the

issue of prestige and power of the language. In Kenya, an enthusiasm to learning Chinese language and culture is not uncommon. A few respondents were of the view that learning Chinese language and culture will correlate with the declining Kenyan national loyalty of the learners. However, in general, most respondents were of the view that the enthusiasm on learning Chinese is not always correlated with a negative attitude toward the national and cultural feeling of the learner. Although Kenyan learners of Chinese language and culture showed that they had great attraction towards Chinese language and culture, they kept holding a strong Kenyan identity and language loyalty.

The second factor is the historical background of Kenya and China. There is a somewhat negative attitude towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya because of history. Kenya is a multilingual nation whose national language is Kiswahili and the official languages are Kiswahili and English. Besides, foreign languages like French and German have been in use in Kenya for many years now. Due to this plethora of languages with varied language roles, there is a feeling that introduction of another language in the name of Chinese is to Kenya and Kenyans a linguistic burden. To avoid this linguistic burden, some Kenyans felt they could do without Chinese. This in itself is a negative attitude that is based on Kenya's linguistic history. This view is possibly strengthened with some complicated contemporary cultural disputes between Kenyans and Chinese when it comes to issues like belief in God and eating culture. Whereas Kenyans are notoriously religious, Chinese do not believe in God. When it comes to eating culture, the two nations are at variance. For example to the Chinese dog meat is a delicacy while to Kenyans it is taboo.

As mentioned in the rationale section of this paper, the history of Kenya and China has not always been negative. China has had a long history of diplomatic relationship with African nations Kenya included. For example, as of 2009 China surpassed the United States of America as Africa's largest trade partner (Ferdjani 2012). Besides the field of commerce, education has over history become a great component of the Sino-Africa relation. In the field of education and through the Confucius Institute, many Africans have benefited from scholarships from China. Because of this great benefit, many Kenyans have a positive attitude towards Chinese language and culture.

The third factor has to do with social and traditional factors. In a triglossic society like Kenya where languages are accorded status and domains of usage, the fact that English is the **H** level language in Kenya is considered a better form than Chinese. In any case, even given the quadriglossic and pentaglossic nature that Kenya as a linguistic entity is headed into, Chinese as a language does not currently feature anywhere on Kenya's linguistic scene. This means that as far as language status is concerned, Chinese does not feature much in Kenya. One reason for this state of affairs is the fact that in Kenya Chinese does not have any legal status as a language. This in itself creates a negative attitude towards Chinese language and culture. Despite this fact, there are Kenyans who feel all is not lost as far as language status is concerned. The economic power with which China has entered Africa cannot be taken for granted for historically economic power is a recipe for linguistic power.

The Chinese language internal structure contributed to the attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya as reported in this study. People often show positive attitudes towards learning and using a language whose grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary are relatively easy to learn. A negative was encountered towards Chinese language because its tonal structure is complex and has an orthographic system that is not easy to grasp. A single Chinese word like *{ma}* may have as many as four meaning depending on the tone employed in its articulation. Worse still, morphosyntactically, Chinese is an isolating language unlike most Kenyan languages that are agglutinating in nature. This difference in structure makes Chinese a difficult language to learn and this plays a role in shaping language attitudes towards Chinese. In spite of this kind of attitude from mainly older respondents towards Chinese there are those who are keen to learn the language. This kind of attitude is mainly associated with youthful respondents who believe that there is nothing impossible on earth

provided others have already done it. Thus, language attitudes towards Chinese as far as its structure is concerned were both positive and negative.

Code-crossing also emerged as a factor that shaped attitudes towards Chinese language – and by implication culture – in Kenya. Code-crossing is a sociolinguistic term that is used to describe how a foreigner struggles to use a target language in communication. In this study therefore we use the term code-crossing to mean uses of Chinese language by Kenyans who learn it as a foreign language. In the Kenyan case code-crossers are thus not regarded by native speakers of Chinese as members of the Chinese in-group although they try to speak like members of the speech community. This kind of linguistic name-calling that creates camps of in-group and out-group can in itself lead to negative language attitudes and indeed it did evoke negative attitudes towards Chinese language and culture.

In the Kenyan context, linguistic capital as introduced by French linguist Bourdieu is a factor in the influencing of attitudes towards Chinese language and culture. This is because linguistic capital makes speakers of Chinese to enjoy respect and authority. Those Kenyans with high linguistic capital speak Chinese for the language is in Kenya treated with certain social expectations for speech and interaction. Taking Kenya as a market, Kenyans go for Chinese with a certain anticipation of profit.

Another factor that played a role in the attitudes the respondents had towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya was social class. The learners' social class is a factor that influences achievement of people learning a second or foreign language like Chinese in the Kenyan context and can in turn lead to attitudes. The study found out that high social class Chinese language learners tended to perceive competences in the language more positively than the lower class Chinese language learners (refer to Gardner 1977). In this study on language attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya, learners from higher social status expressed the view that they have more chances of meeting native Chinese speakers through travelling, attending meetings and conferences, or other gatherings. Due to this, learners of Chinese who were mostly university employees value Chinese language and culture more favourable than those from the lower class. This was so regardless of the ages of the respondents.

Related with the above factor is that of Chinese language learning context. A language learning context can either be formal or informal. The two contexts can affect and indeed did affect the speed and level of Chinese learning in Kenya. In Kenya, the Chinese learning context is formal since learners mostly learn the language and culture in the classroom setting. Campus setting is different from the informal setting in its approach to Chinese language learning. Some lecturers give more time to the language, others provide more motivation, and others may stress one language skill rather than any other. Here mixed attitudes towards Chinese language in Kenya are evident. Of course motivation is a very important factor in second or foreign language learning, but at the expense of other factors mentioned above.

The last factor that the study identified as influencing attitudes of Kenyans towards Chinese language and even culture can be simply put as language status. Guided by works by Ammon (1991) and Reagan (2002), a number of variables have been listed as determinants of this social factor to language attitudes. The present study has only identified and used those that to it appeared relevant. First is the issue of numerical strength. Speaking of numbers, there could be many Chinese in Kenya now. However, these numbers in themselves do not matter in as far as Chinese language and culture is concerned. May it be known that Chinese as a language has about 54 varieties and some of them are not even mutually intelligible. What this state of affairs means is that only Standard Chinese that is called Putonghua and that has Mandarin as its base is taught at the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi. Even with the rising numbers of Kenyans interested in learning Chinese, only one lecturer is sent to the institute from Tianjin Normal University at a time. Likely, pioneer Chinese language and culture learners have joined the institute as tutors but even as this happens we should forget the language attitude that comes out of code-crossing. Still, the study did not

establish whether these tutors are trained in pedagogy. At this point it is good to look at the role of a language teacher in influencing learners' language attitudes.

We have already mentioned that Chinese does not seem to have any legal status as a language in Kenya. Still, the geographical distribution of the language is not very clear. Unlike a language like Urdu that is found in urban areas of Kenya, it is difficult to place or even locate Chinese. Further more, although Chinese has an established literary tradition, its orthography is difficult and complicated. All these criteria to do with how language status and language attitude work against Chinese pointing to the fact that Kenyans have a negative attitude to it on this ground.

1.6 Conclusion

As is evident from the theories used in the study, this research was along the dimensions of prestige and solidarity towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya. The result of the research on language attitudes towards Chinese language and culture in Kenya has shown that reward that goes with a language makes it respected in Kenya (Mukhwana 2014). Chinese is respected in Kenya because the language opens the doors for education, business and overall social mobility. Knowledge and use of Chinese by Kenyans is thus considered as a passport to prestige and success. The learners of Chinese language and culture consider the learning and speaking of Chinese as functional. The need to integrate did not feature in attitudes towards Chinese in Kenya. This is because learners of Chinese in Kenya did not learn the language to identify with the Chinese as a people. The issue of Chinese culture sparked controversy for it was not wholly embraced. Learners of Chinese feel uncomfortable when they are heard by other Kenyans speaking to other Kenyans in Chinese. Besides feeling uneasy, they lack confidence when speaking Chinese. Kenyan languages are considered superior and the speakers of Chinese were not praised by their families for associating with Chinese culture.

Overall, because instrumental motivation, which has to do with more immediate or practical goals, is derived from a sense of academic success and job placement, the use of Chinese in Kenya and in Africa in future is envisaged.

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