

Revolution and counterrevolution under colonial rule

And Now?

Ngô Văn

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Introduction

Viet-Nam: 1920–1945. Révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale is an impressive document of Vietnamese social history from the period of 1920–1945. It has nothing to do with the mystification of the “heroic resistance” led by Ho Chi Minh against the American army during the sixties, for reasons of both chronology and style.

The autobiography of Ngo Van, a Vietnamese militant in the communist opposition since 1932, deals with another era: the one that spanned the period between the first national liberation movements of the 1920s up until 1946, with the defeat of the December insurrection and the beginning of another Thirty Years War. From his lucid perspective as a Trotskyist militant, as an eyewitness to the events, he sets forth a detailed account of the struggle of the workers and peasants to improve their living conditions under French rule, and the vicissitudes of a militant communist movement that was repressed by Stalinism. By virtue of its abundance of information about strikes, occupations, demonstrations, organizations, and publications, Ngo Van’s book has become an indispensable document for those who want to understand the Vietnamese social movement of that time, as well as a valuable source for anyone who would seek to write an unofficial history of Ho Chi Minh’s communist party under the dominance of Stalin, and for anyone who would attempt to write the history of the Fourth International in Indochina.

The historical account begins in the twenties with the first nationalist movements among the student emigration in France as well as in Vietnam, in order to provide the background for the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, under the leadership of Nguyen Ai Quoc, who later took the name of Ho Chi Minh, a representative of the Comintern. The thirties were years of economic crisis and social unrest followed by severe repression directed against workers and peasants. It was during these years that the Indochinese section of the Left Opposition, which split from the Third International with the intention of participating in the founding of the Fourth International, was constituted.

The victory of the Popular Front in 1936 sent shock-waves throughout the colonial empire. The widespread occupations movement of the French workers had an impact on the colony: action committees were formed in a generalized wave of workplace occupations, until the Blum-Moutet government issued a decree granting some concessions to the workers (prohibiting the employment of children under the age of 12, special treatment for pregnant women, a minimum wage) that paralyzed the movement which, ultimately, was unable to subvert the apparatus of colonial rule. The communist party was legalized, and it fought against the Trotskyists (this was the period of the Moscow Trials), who would not escape the wrath of Stalin.

With the signing of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in August 1939, the scene changed. In September, Nazi troops invaded Poland and the armed forces were mobilized in France and Indochina. The communist party was outlawed. Under the Japanese occupation the communist party once again used the anti-imperialist rhetoric of 1935 against the French empire. During this period, famine and the struggle for survival wracked the cities and the countryside. The Viet Minh was formed and Ho Chi Minh established relations with the Americans and De Gaulle, and led the Viet Minh to power in 1945 after the victory of the Allies. An insurrection took place in Hanoi in December 1946 which was finally suppressed by the French army. Ho Chi Minh then took the path of guerrilla struggle: this was the beginning of a new Thirty Year War with its succession of horrors and massacres.

In the last chapter of his book, Ngo Van takes a look at present-day Vietnam and asks what kind of victory it is that exchanged one set of masters for another: the Vietnamese bureaucracy that rules the so-called “Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” which comes from the educated middle class, master of the Party-State. It is this chapter that we now present.

The Andreu Nin Foundation

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And Now?¹

Listen, you have ears to hear with!
Think, you have a brain to think with!
But you do not believe!
You do not believe in anything!
You have no faith!
You only have faith in your own power!

Ret Marut, a/k/a B. Traven

The victory of the “heroic little people”—what victory?—was due to the fact that the war in Indochina took place in the context of the cold war between the Sino-Soviet and American blocs. Without Russian arms and Chinese aid in the form of weapons and advisors, Dien Bien Phu would not have been conceivable, nor would the later U.S. defeat, in the second stage of the war, have been possible.

After this “victory,” have the Vietnamese belied Pierre Herbart’s warning that “In this struggle whose outcome is so doubtful, [if] they win, that is, [if] they expel their foreign masters, they will elect other masters from among their own ranks, and exchange one servitude for another”?² No, they have instead confirmed his warning, and without even having the choice of electing their new masters.

As for the heroism that individual freedom of choice is supposed to inspire, what would it mean to the droves of “little people” who were led to their deaths at Dien Bien Phu? One thinks of Isaac Babel when he noted in his diary in 1920: “these unfortunates make one sad, they are no longer men, they are only columns.”

Ho Chi Minh’s party did indeed win the war, but did the Vietnamese people win anything but their servitude, to use the word made famous by La Boétie?

In Indochina, the militants of the Fourth International fought to rally the coolies (Chinese workers) and the poor peasants and workers for the world proletarian revolution, as the only force capable of providing a “real and complete” solution to the national problem and to the agrarian question as well as for their advance towards socialism. They fell in battle against the colonial reconquest and above all they fell victim to the systematic extermination campaign ordered by a Ho Chi Minh who, as a good disciple of the master of the Kremlin, could not tolerate their intransigence with respect to the class struggle, their rejection of any kind of alliance with

¹ The final chapter of Ngo Van’s *Révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale*. Originally published in Spanish in the magazine, *ETCÉTERA*, which permits the reproduction of its articles.

² Pierre Herbart, *Ligne de force*, Paris, 1958, “Folio” p. 26.

the bourgeoisie and the landlords, and their internationalism that was opposed to Stalinist nationalism.

The proletariat—not very numerous, and with hardly any revolutionary consciousness—was incapable of grasping the reins of the liberation movement, and millions of peasants brought the Stalinist party to power, paying a horrible price in deaths and suffering, so as finally to be drafted and enslaved by the national bureaucracy (*quan lieu*, literally “mandarinate”), as the labor power that was necessary for the primitive accumulation of capital ... to benefit a layer of profiteers.

As for “national independence,” the country was still dependent, transformed into a satellite of the so-called Soviet empire, and embroiled in the confrontation between the two great “communist” Party-States for hegemony in Southeast Asia: its full-fledged “communist army,” equipped by the Russians, overthrew the “communist” Pol Pot, who was supported by the Chinese, and occupied Cambodia for ten years (1979–1989).

The Vietnamese bureaucracy, this new ruling caste (or class or oligarchy) of the so-called “Socialist Republic of Vietnam,” having emerged from the “educated middle class,” and having become the master of a hierarchical Party-State, has merely replaced the bourgeoisie and the landlords as exploiters of the proletariat and the peasantry.

The working class is still numerically weak, and the new mandarinate exercises its dictatorship over producers who do not have the collective ownership of the means of production, or any time for reflection, or any possibility for making decisions, or self-expression, or the right to strike. Bureaucratic order reigns alongside poverty and social inequality, with its repressive military-police apparatus, and its “nomenklatura based on sinecures and careerism.”³

Beginning in March 1956, after Khrushchev’s report on the crimes of Stalin, a few poets and writers made themselves heard and shattered the apparent consensus. In their publications they attacked the “shop foremen of the arts and letters,” they insistently demanded democratic freedoms, they denounced the policy of social control embodied in the *hồ khâu* system of district registries that subjected residents to constant surveillance, they criticized the abuses, the unjust seizures and arbitrary nature of the agrarian reform program that was then being implemented and which was just beginning to be seriously challenged by a series of explosive reactions.... Perceiving that it was being held up to public ridicule, the power structure snuffed out the opening of the Hundred Flowers of spring and autumn: on December 15, 1956, Ho Chi Minh signed the decree that prohibited any kind of opposition publication under the penalty of imprisonment, with a maximum sentence of forced labor for life.⁴

³ G. Boudarel, *La Bureaucratie au Viêt-nam*, Paris, 1983, p. 32. Concerning the Hundred Flowers campaign and agrarian reform, see, by the same author: *Cent Fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Viêt-nam (1954–1956)*, Paris, 1991, p. 9 et seq.

⁴ The wave of dissent broke out in the spring of 1956 with the publication in the anthology entitled *Giai Pham* (“Beautiful Works” or “Works of Spring”) of the poem, “Mister Clay Jar,” by Le Dat:

“The fate of those who live to be a hundred years old,
Is precisely that of a clay jar.
The longer they live, the more they decay,
The longer they live, the smaller they become.”

These four verses, which earned Le Dat years of reeducation by way of labor in the steel mills at Thai Nguyen, refer to the “old father of the nation” (a title that Ho Chi Minh had coined for himself), and ridiculed the professional altar boy To Huu, the State-sanctioned doyen of Vietnamese arts and letters and the author of this masterful work:

“Long live Ho Chi Minh,
The lighthouse of the proletariat!
Long live Stalin,

In November, a serious peasant revolt shook the bureaucratic order in Nghe An, as a result of unrest unleashed by a decidedly arbitrary agrarian reform program: 15,000 innocent people were executed, according to a report compiled by the Ministry of the Interior in 1956, which was discovered in 1961 in the Hanoi archives; that is, an average of five executions for every one of the 3,014 village districts affected by the reform. The estimate of the total number of people who were shot is around 50,000. The number of peasants imprisoned or deported is certainly far in excess of the latter figure.⁵

In 1975, after the unification of the country, the agrarian reform would be just as disappointing in Cochinchina. Demonstrations like those carried out by the peasants of the Mekong Delta and the Plain of Reeds testify to the injustice of the reigning oppression. A brutal program of collectivization decimated the sharecroppers and in many places peasants, instead of buffaloes, were harnessed to carts. The brutal expropriation of the merchants and industrialists and the new regulations on fishing provoked economic chaos and led to the exodus of more than a million

The great eternal tree that harbors peace in his shade!
Kill, kill again, let your hands have no rest for even a minute;
So the paddies and fields will produce rice in abundance,
So taxes can be promptly collected.
So the Party will endure, we constantly march with the same courage,
We adore President Mao, we worship at the eternal shrine of Sit-ta-line (sic) [Stalin].”

The anthology *Giai Pham* would be suppressed, and at that time another young poet, Tran Dan, who had also lost respect for the father of the country, was imprisoned and, while in jail, attempted to commit suicide by cutting his own throat.

In the autumn of 1956, the dissident movement openly confronted the power structure. The journal, *Nhan Van* (“Humanism”) was first distributed on September 20, and would be suppressed on December 11, after the publication of its sixth issue. Other periodicals, such as *Dat Moi* (“New Lands”), *Tram Hoa* (“A Hundred Flowers”) and *Noi That* (“Straight Talk”) were also prohibited. Depicted as murderers by the spineless scribblers of the official press, 476 “saboteurs of the ideological front” were, starting in 1958, subjected to “ideological rectification” therapies (*chinh huan*), forced to submit written self-criticism (*kiem thao*), an act of self-accusation that would be extended to public confession: some were deported to labor camps in the harsh regions of Viet Bac (northern Vietnam) or to the agricultural zones on the Laotian frontier, others were sent to cooperatives to “be reeducated by way of labor” (*hoc tap lao dong*). Inquisitorial methods—copied from the Chinese—used to extort confessions during the campaign for “ideological rectification” drove some of the detainees to suicide: in the newspaper, *Cuu Quoc* (“National Health”), we are told of one young man who went to the forest to hang himself, and another who took a razor to his own throat; the latter, even after his death, would be expelled from the party (see To Hoai, cited on p. 113).

Even the philosopher, Tran Duc Thao, upon returning to Vietnam (after having been a contributor to *Temps Modernes*, the Sartrean journal), where he taught at the University of Hanoi, would be forced to confess his “revisionism” and sent away for forced labor on a farm, to take care of cattle. The lawyer, Phan Koi, 73 years old, and the writer, Truong Tuu, a Trotskyist sympathizer, refused to perform their self-criticism. Thanks to their great prestige they were spared spending time in prison. The first was sent to Chiem Hoa (Tuyen Quang), the second was dismissed from the university where he taught, and his wife was deprived of her small business, their only means of livelihood.

The campaign of repression ended in January 1960 in a witch trial: Nguyen Huu Dang (former Vice-Minister of Propaganda under Ho Chi Minh) and Luu Thai Yen (Thui An, a female author), in prison since 1958 for refusing to confess, were each sentenced to fifteen years in prison; Tran Thieu Bao (Minh Duc), the printer of the journal *Nhan Van*, was sentenced to ten years, Phan Tai and Nguyen Chi to five and six years, respectively, for “espionage.”

Hoang van Chi, *Tram hoa dua no trên dat Bac* (“A Hundred Flowers Open at the Same Time in the North”), Saigon, 1959.

Bon *Nhan Van-Giai pham truoc toa an du luan* (“The Humanism-Beautiful Works Gang Faces the Court of Public Opinion”), Hanoi, 1959.

Hoang ngoc Thanh, *Tieu thuyet mien Bac* (“The Writers of the North”).

⁵ Le Chau, *Le Viet-nam Socialiste*, Paris, 1966, pp. 122–156.

people, including numerous fishermen from Ca Mau and its vicinity. Social dissatisfaction was so great that internal criticism of the Party was made public.

According to *Le Monde Diplomatique* (April 1989), Tran Van Giau wrote, in *Tuoi Tre* (“New Era”), on October 27, 1988, in Saigon:

“Why have we, revolutionaries and resistance fighters, created such a bureaucratic State? The province of Thanh Hoa alone has more government officials than the entire colonial apparatus of old Indochina. How can the peasants allow such a State to exist? I am more than 70 years old, and I have never in my life seen peasants as impoverished as they are now: they have nothing to eat after the end of the harvest. The reason for this is that they allow the continued existence of a State that is as oversized as it is ineffective.”

In 1989, Le Quang Dao, a member of the Central Committee of the Party and the President of the National Assembly, declared:

“The dictatorship of the party has replaced the dictatorship of the working people as a whole ...; the result is a totalitarian regime based on privilege ..., a regime of social injustice that is driving the people to revolt.”⁶

Thus, the so-called socialist Party-State, the party of the new profiteers, has become the apparatus of rule over and subjection of the proletariat and the peasantry. The exploited will only be able to free themselves by attacking this omnipresent bureaucracy and by destroying this State. A State never disappears on its own, it does not gratuitously dissolve its army, police, jails, laws and institutions. Now as before, it is inexorably the perfect instrument for the rule of one class over another. “The existence of the *state* is inseparable from the existence of *slavery*” (Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article: ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’,” originally published in *Vorwärts!*, No.63, August 7 1844).

In October 1991, Bao Ninh’s *Noi Buon Chien Tranh* (“The Horror of War”)⁷ was published in Hanoi; it recounts the terrible ordeal he experienced between 1959 and 1975 in the 27th Brigade, until the conquest of Saigon, when no more than ten men survived out of its original complement of five hundred.

“The survivors went on living but their ardent hope ... was unfortunately not realized... Look around, and all you will see is the ordinary, coarse and violent life of the post-war years.... As if the masks worn during the last years of the war had fallen and people showed their true, hideous faces. So much blood spilled—for what?”

While the narrator does not condemn the war, without which “there would be no peace,” he does not condemn the desertion of his friend either, the anti-hero who explained his decision before abandoning the struggle:

“I am not afraid of dying but to kill continually as I am now doing, is to destroy what is human in us.... Do you remember the battle of Play Can in 1972? Do you remember the spectacle of the corpses that covered the battlefield? We were splashing around in blood.... So many pigs take advantage of the war while the peasants have to undergo the heartbreaking experience of leaving their elders behind with the sky as their roof and the earth as their bed ... for me, none of this makes any sense.... Killing: I have done too much of that.... Shame? I see nothing glorious in spending your whole life fighting.”

⁶ Dai Doan Ket, December 8, 1989.

⁷ Bao Ninh’s book was published in English translation in 1994 under the title, *The Sorrow of War*, translated by Phan Thanh Hao [American translator’s note].

In November 1991, Bui Tin, the editor of *Nhan Dan*, the organ of the Central Committee of the Party, while on a mission to Paris, broke with Hanoi's previous silence on the issue and provided testimony concerning the political and economic crisis in his country:

"The current situation of the country is of great concern to everyone in Vietnam.... Bureaucratic, irresponsibility, egoism, corruption and fraud have spread under the insolent reign of privileges and prerogatives.⁸ What is still deeply and firmly rooted in the Communist Party of Vietnam, is Stalinist and Maoist tendencies that are simultaneously feudal and peasant-based, idealistic, paternalistic and authoritarian, extremely conservative and corrupt, completely alien to democratic ideas"⁹ (What democratic ideas?).

Russian aid (petroleum, steel, fertilizers, cotton, etc.) came to an end, Chinese aid is only conceded in exchange for submission; the bureaucracy, backed into a corner, issues appeals to foreign capital and the Planning Committee engages in debates on the "market economy."

Regardless of the problems that must be addressed, we now know that what they called "communism" was not communism, in Vietnam and in the USSR, in China and in the satellite countries, it was nothing but a ghastly, criminal simulacrum, a state capitalism, a species of economic-political monster administered for the benefit of a greedy and unscrupulous bureaucracy. This communism, "really non-existent" communism,¹⁰ has concealed with its fallacies the chains of a new servitude.

More than 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Lao-Tzu, in the *Tao Te Ching* ("Book of Change and Virtue"), had already denounced the debasement of language in China: "The words that are used today do not express what is real (Ming ke ming fei chang ming)."¹¹ And Confucius, in his *Dialogues*, recommended to his disciples that they should "rectify names" (zheng ming),¹² and banish mystifying terms. Today's political language is rich in such terms. What aberration led to the use of the expression "national communism" by certain historians to describe the regime that was unjustly and joylessly built by Ho Chi Minh?

Nowhere in the world has the Marxian "utopia" propitious for the development of each person and open to a rational world society, without classes, without capitalism, and therefore without exploitation or national antagonisms, found the road to its realization. Stalinist, totalitarian nationalism, with its oppression, its calumny and its murders, has merely distorted the image; it can have nothing in common with "an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all," a union of free men who work with the means of production held in common and allocate, on the basis of a concerted plan, their numerous individual forces as a single force of social labor.... "The total product of our community is a social product. One portion serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another portion is consumed by the members as means of subsistence. A distribution of this portion amongst them is consequently necessary. The mode of this distribution will vary with the productive organisation of the community, and the degree of historical development attained by the producers.

⁸ Vietnamese Chronicles, October-November 1991.

⁹ Thanh Tin, Hoa Xuyen Tuyet, Irvine, California, 1991, p. 162.

¹⁰ Maximilien Rubel, "Really Non-existent Socialism," *Le Monde*, September 17, 1986.

¹¹ Literally: the name that expresses the real is not the one that is commonly used. [Two English translations of this opening passage of the *Tao Te Ching*, notoriously problematic for translators, are: 'Names that can be named are not changeless names' or 'The name that can be named is not the eternal name'—American translator's supplemental note.]

¹² See: Louen Yu, *The Dialogues of Confucius*, Vol. XII, 3.

We will assume, but merely for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities, that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour time. Labour time would, in that case, play a double part. Its apportionment in accordance with a definite social plan maintains the proper proportion between the different kinds of work to be done and the various wants of the community. On the other hand, it also serves as a measure of the portion of the common labour borne by each individual, and of his share in the part of the total product destined for individual consumption. The social relations of the individual producers, with regard both to their labour and to its products, are in this case perfectly simple and intelligible, and that with regard not only to production but also to distribution.”¹³

The Berlin Wall has fallen, the so-called Union of Socialist Soviet Republics has exploded; the second death of Marx has been proclaimed by the majority of the intellectuals. But the turn to so-called liberal capitalism, that is, to the “glacial waters of egoist calculation”—is it consistent with the aspiration of the oppressed for social emancipation, in associations in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”?

As for Ho Chi Minh, who claimed to be a follower of Marx and Lenin, he was not, but followed, under the orders of the Moscow bureaucracy, the political line laid down by his master Stalin, right down to the most disgusting details.

Thus, during the forties, he gave himself the nickname of Bac Ho—“Uncle Ho”—and signed his manifestos aimed at the peasants with this intriguing name, which benefitted from the aura of sanctity conferred upon family relationships in traditional Confucian society.

When he was in power in Hanoi during the fifties, he gave himself the name of Cha Ho—“Father Ho.” In his autobiography, which he wrote under the signature of Tran Dan Tien, *Accounts of the Active Life of President Ho*, a monument of self-adoration, we read:

“President Ho Chi Minh does not want to talk about his own life (p. 5)... A man like our President Ho, of such virtue and modesty and concerned with so many affairs, how could he tell me about his life? (p. 7)... President Ho was born in 1890 ... in Nghe An (p.8)... We have other great historical patriots. Phan Dinh Phung, Hoang Hoa Tham and so many others. But it is our President Ho who has finished the job (p. 139)... The people call President Ho the ‘Old Father of the Nation’—*Cha gia cua dan toc*—because President Ho is the most faithful son of the Vietnamese fatherland” (p. 142).¹⁴

In his Last Will and Testament, the “Old Father of the Nation,” who died on September 2, 1969, recommended that no big funeral should be arranged to commemorate his passing:

“I request that my body should be burned, that is, cremated (*hoa tang*)... My ashes are to be divided into three parts: one part for the north, one part for the center, and one part for the south. My compatriots from each zone will choose a hill where the urn is to be buried. For my tomb, there is to be neither gravestone nor bronze statue, but only a simple house, spacious and shady, so that my visitors can rest there. It will be necessary to devise a plan for planting trees on and in the vicinity of the hill. Each of my visitors can plant a tree as a memorial... Maintenance of each site will be entrusted to elderly persons.”¹⁵

To maintain the worship of his remains, old people are assigned the task of taking care of these hills for the short time of life that is left to them!

¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume One, Part I: Commodities and Money, Chapter One: Commodities.

¹⁴ Tran Dan Thien, *Nhung mau chuyen ve doi hoat dong cua Ho chu tich*, Hanoi, 1969.

¹⁵ *Vietnamese Chronicles*, nos. 6–7, Paris, 1989.

After the death of Ho Chi Minh, the Hanoi bureaucrats had his corpse embalmed. Thus, his personality cult was perpetuated by the veneration of his mummy on display in a mausoleum. In his time, Stalin devised the same scheme for Lenin's remains (we can only imagine the sarcasm that Lenin would have expressed with regard to such an idea); today, in Moscow, they are putting an end to this fetishism: what will happen in the future with the Embalmed One of Hanoi? Some day "the world (of the exploited and oppressed), conscious of its suffering will sweep away the ten thousand iniquities," as these two verses of Phan Van Hum say:

*Chung nao thien ha hai minh kho,
Muon su loi thoi tuc khac thanh.*

This is our hope and our conviction.

A change will take place when the new outcasts of the earth embrace as their own, once again, the song of their predecessors from sixty years ago:

"There is no supreme savior,
No god or caesar or tribune,
Producers, we will save ourselves.
We will decree our common salvation...."

"And no one will be deemed to be above anyone else" (*doc ngang nao biet tren dau co ai*, Kim Van Kieu), having come to understand that:

"All this havoc, this misfortune, this ruin, descends upon you not from alien foes, but from the one enemy whom you yourselves render as powerful as he is, for whom you go bravely to war, for whose greatness you do not refuse to offer your own bodies unto death. He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? What could he do to you if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plunders you, if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you, if you were not traitors to yourselves?" (La Boétie).¹⁶

¹⁶ Etienne de La Boétie, Discourse on Voluntary Servitude.

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The last chapter of Ngo Van’s book, *Revolution and Counterrevolution under Colonial Rule*, first published in French in 1997, denouncing the Stalinism of Ho Chi Minh’s repressive party-state, depicting the disappointing consequences of the triumph of the counterrevolution in Vietnam with the “victory” of 1975 when the enormous sacrifices of the Vietnamese peasants resulted in merely the exchange of one set of rulers for another, and quoting the Vietnamese author Bao Ninh: “So much blood spilled—for what?”

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