Dissident Voltaire's Intercultural Drama

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In his Orientalism, Edward Said discredits the majority of, if not all, Western works concerning the Orient. 3 Curiously, this book of largely non-literary nature assigns a crucial role to two plays, Aeschylus “The Persians and Euripides” The Bacchae. It is from them that Said finds two basic themes of what he calls Orientalism: The two aspects of the Orient that set it off from the West in this pair of plays will remain essential motifs of European imaginative geography. A line is drawn between two continents.

Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant. [...] Secondly, there is the motif of the Orient as insinuating danger. (57)

While Said rarely mentions more plays or productions in the book, theatre scholars thereafter have found plenty of examples to support his thesis. Few exceptions, however, have been studied and presented to question the validity of Said's sweeping criticism. As a matter of fact, in the history of Western intercultural theatre, one can find a recurrent counter motif along with the two motifs Said has rightly discovered. This counter motif presents the Orient relatively fairly or romantically, if not accurately. One may argue that those works do not belong to the mainstream Western culture. Certainly, the writers of the counter motif are dissidents opposed to the mainstream. Yet a significant part of what we call the Western canon are from the marginalized dissident in...
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orders this murder, and who promises the murderer an incest for reward" (Besterman 253). In the meantime Voltaire knew the dangerous nature of this play (as did all dissident writers of allegorical works in the twentieth century). After composing it in 1739, he withheld the play from its Paris production for three years, during which time he tried quietly to get endorsement from Frederick and two cardinals, and had a 1741 tryout in Lille, a city far from France's cultural and power center. When the play finally opened at Comedie Francaise on August 29, 1742, the public was deeply divided. One of Mahomet's lines resonated strongly to people under the Christian hierarchy and censorship: “I have nothing to do with men who are bold enough to think for themselves or to look with their own eyes. He who dares to think was not born to believe me! To obey in silence is your only hope of glory” (III, 6). Ultrareligious critics cried loudly that the play was anti-Christian. One of the reasons cited was that the name Mahomet had the same number of syllables as Jesus Christ (Vrooman 131)—a good example of fanatic attacks on dissident works also seen in the twentieth century. Crebillon, the censor of the theatre under the direction of the police, refused to authorize it. And cardinal de Fleury, who had approved the play and then become the first minister, asked Voltaire to withdraw the play. To save the play, Voltaire took an ingeniously measure: he publicly dedicated the play to Pope Benedict XIV. The Pope accepted the ironic honor because he could not liken himself with the fanatic Mahomet. Still, the play was not played again until long after.

Looking back at this typical dissident play, Voltaire was ambivalent about his paradoxical strategy. He once lamented Mahomet suffered because caution had banked its fire, a sad thing in poetry (Besterman 254). But he also said, apologetically, that he was “sorry for having painted Mahomet in more odious colors than he deserved,”
and that was because “great passions and great crimes are indispensable requisites in a tragedy” (Voltaire 1969, 556). From a Saidian point of view, we should criticize Voltaire today for his knowingly insensitive use of other culture’s sacred icon to serve his own political agenda. After all, the 1742 Paris opening was postponed for a few days because there was a concern that a Turkish ambassador in Paris might feel offended.

But how did Voltaire view Muslims seriously? In “An Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations”, he criticized Jacques – Benigne Bossuet, the famous bishop and tutor of Louis XIV’s son for whom he wrote Discourse on Universal History, in a way not unlike that of Said’s. “That eloquent writer”, wrote Voltaire, “in brief mentioning the Arabians, who founded such a mighty empire, and established such a flourishing religion, speaks of them only as deluge of barbarians. […] It might well be wished that he did not completely forget the ancient peoples of the Orient, like the Indians and Chinese, who were so important before the other nations were formed” (Voltaire 1956, 314). Of course it is always easier to give praises to peoples in distance than to deal with them when direct confrontations are involved. In the latter case, Voltaire’s earlier play, Zaire (a.k.a. Zara, 1732), commonly seen as his best play, reveals more about his view of the Oriental because in this play, Muslim characters are depicted in a square conflict with Christian characters.

Many scholars have pointed out Zaire’s debt to Shakespeare’s Othello because it also has a Muslim hero, Osman, Sultan of Jerusalem, mistakenly kill the woman he loves, Zaire. Although jealousy is a major reason for this killing, the play is far less about love and jealousy than about cultural and religious clash. Unlike Othello who is the only Moor surrounded by Christians, Osman stands on his turf, the Jerusalem taken back from the Christian Crusaders now firmly under
Muslim control. Here a line between the two worlds is clearly drawn.

Yet unlike the defeated Persians in the Aeschylus tragedy, the Muslims here are presented as victors and masters, and most Christian characters, Zaire, Fatima, and Lusignan, as war captives and slaves. Moreover, Voltaire does not simply reverse the power configuration to extol the Muslims; he uses the tragic conflict to deplore the exact line that divides people of different religions. Thematically, Zaire is closer to *Romeo and Juliet* than to *Othello*. Osman’s jealousy results from sheer coincidence and mistaken identity (Zaire’s brother Nerestan perceives as her lover), which are trite dramatic ploys. The more profound and inevitable cause behind his killing is Zaire’s father Lusignan’s stiff order that his newly discovered daughter, born Christian and raised as a Muslim, convert to Christianity. This not only defers but will eventually deny her wedding to Osman. In comparison, the Muslims’ views on religious difference are much more flexible and tolerant than that of the Christians. Osman calls his perceived rival Nerestan “the generous Christian,” “the Christians’ hero, that proud son of honor, so famed for his sublimity of virtue, admired, nay envied by the jealous Osman” (IV, 5). He is willing to change the Muslim custom of polygamy to marry Zaire as his only wife. Zaire muses when she is told she must be a Christian:

Our thoughts, our manners, our religion,
all Are formed by custom, and the powe
rful bent Of early years: born on the bans of Ganges
Zaire had worshipped Pagan deities;
At Paris I had been a Christian; here
I am a happy Mussulman [sic]: we know
But what we learn: the instructing parents' hand
Graves in our feeble hearts those characters
Which time retouches, and examples fix So deeply in the mind,
the naught but God Can e’er efface... (I, 1)

Stressing the arbitrariness of religions that divide people, this speech is far more philosophical and less emotional than Juliet’s famous speech about the arbitrariness of a family name that prevents love. These words seem too sophisticated for such a young woman as Zaire whose religious upbringing has been largely homogeneous. Even if Zaire has really been exposed to two opposing beliefs, a statement like this is still beyond her character, and more importantly, her time. That is why this speech is often quoted out of the context as Voltaire’s manifesto on religious tolerance as opposed to fundamentalism. Most Christians, however, did not think that way in Voltaire’s society as well as in the play. Nerestan admonishes Zaire: “He [God] will not suffer your divided heart/ To fluctuate thus twixt Him and a barbarian;/ Baptism will quench the guilty flame, and Zaire/ In the true faith shall live a Christian,/ Or die a martyr” (III, 4). That is the ultimate cause of Zaire’s death. Like Romeo and Juliet, whose two lovers are destroyed by the feud between their two clans that finally make peace, Zaire also ends at a reconciliatory tone. But its blame is not as equally put on both parties as in Romeo and Juliet. Before Osman kills himself over Zaire’s body, he calls to free all the Christians, “Let the poor Christians have whate’er they wish:/ Give them large presents, and conduct them safe/ To Joppa” (V, 10). His last line refers to Nerestan: “Respect this hero, and conduct him safe.” and Nerestan responds: “Direct me, heaven! ‘midst all my miseries, / And all thy guilt, I must admire thee, Osman....”

Voltaire presented the theme of religious and cultural tolerance and reconciliation even more explicitly in Alzire, or the Americans, which he began to write a year after Zaire’s opening, and which opened in 1736. It is yet another, more radical, variation of Romeo and Juliet, almost a reversal of the plot setup. Here the two patriarchs
of the opposing forces, Alvarez of the conquering Spaniards and Montezuma of the native Peruvians, are already friendly with each other at the beginning. But not the young people. Alvarez's son and successor Guzman falls in love with Montezuma's daughter Alzire. Yet Alzire still loves the native chief Zamor who is believed to have been killed by Guzman's murderous troops. Under her father's pressure Alzire converts to Christianity and marries Guzman, only to learn that Zamor has in fact survived the slaughter and now wants her hand and Guzman's head. Alzire grieves over her conversion and marriage so much she does not want to live. Zamor fatally stabs Guzman, but is captured to be executed, along with Alzire. This seemingly inevitable bloodshed is miraculously averted by Guzman's death bed conversion—he not only repents of his brutality and pardons both Zamor and Alzire, but also gives their land back to them. This deus ex Machina—like reversal of fortune, which is obviously too contrived for today's audiences, is nonetheless carefully foreshadowed by a series of clement actions across the enemy line: Zamor has saved the invading Alvarez, who had proved to him as the one just man distinguished from his fellow conquerors. Alvarez tries to save Zamor and Alzire from execution by having Zamor convert to Christianity. Guzman's final pardon is one step further, waving the condition of conversion which Zamor would not accept anyway. While these plot twists all seem too wishful to convince today's audiences, there is one thing in the play that is rather realistic, and revelatory of a prevailing cultural prejudice in the Western world even dissident Voltaire could not be immune against, or defy openly. In the end of the play, Guzman's almost exceedingly generous offer to Zamor is not without ominous motivation: "Observe/ The difference, Zamor, 'twixt thy God and mine:/ Thine teach thee to revenge an injury,/ Mine to forgive and pity thee" (V, 7). This dying man's condescension is heartfelt, not satirical. Voltaire could force his Christian
characters to repent and take some too-good-to-be-true actions, such as returning the newly conquered colony to the natives. Yet he could not help but to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity.

Compared to Zaire, Alzire, or the Americans is a more openly political play. Therefore it had to balance, or camouflage, its dissident message against colonization with an ostensibly mainstream theme. In Alzire both Christians and natives call each other barbarians. Given that Voltaire needed the support from the Christian monarchs and bishops for his plays to be staged, he could not attack Christianity in general. He could only name his ideal people as good Christians and distance them from the bad things associated with Christians, such as Guzman’s cruel treatment of the native Peruvians, and indicate that Christianity can improve itself to become a “true religion.” Unfortunately, the Peruvians’ native beliefs are not given such a chance in the play. They are not seen as containing worthy parts qualified for “true religion.” But in a sense, Voltaire was quite prophetic. What we see today in the world is not too different from what he implied in Alzire: most colonies’ sovereignties have been returned to the natives, but the conquerors’ religions, less cruel than in the early colonial years, have largely remained where they spread to. It was definitely a sad thing for the early natives to have their original gods displaced by their conquerors. But for many of their descendants who are today’s natives in their own lands, the invading religions, such as Catholicism in the Philippines and much of Latin America, have become indigenous religions for generations, thus part of their cultural heritage and often powerful weapons in their struggles against the former conquerors. Now it is better to assess those religions not in terms of their names and origins but in terms of their real content. Voltaire tried to do exactly that, as he wrote his preface to Alzire:

This tragedy, the fable of which is invented, and almost of a new
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species, was written with a view of showing how far superior the spirit of true religion is to the light of nature. The religion of a barbarian consists in offering up to his gods the blood of his enemies, a Christian badly instructed has seldom much more humanity: to be a strict observer of some unnecessary rites and ceremonies, and at the same time deficient in the most essential duties [...] A true Christian is to look upon all mankind as his brethren, to do them all the good in his power and pardon their offenses, [...] (4) For Voltaire, the good Christians in Alzire stand for all believers of “true religion”, just like the Mohammed in his play about fanaticism represents all religious extremists, an unfortunate contrast. In fact, Voltaire did not think that believers of true religion had to be Christians, even though for Alzire’s survival he did not give the Peruvian belief a “true religion” status. His view of an inclusive, if Utopian, “true religion,” which actually applied to non-Western beliefs as well, is better illustrated in his yet another play, The Orphan of China (1755).

The Orphan of China was inspired by a Chinese play, The Orphan of Zhao, written in the Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth century by Ji Junxiang. But Voltaire drastically changed the gist of the original play, replacing Ji’s indignant attack on a brutal tyrant with a rosy eulogy of an enlightened and benevolent monarch. The villainous generalism Tu’an Gu in the Chinese play was a disguised allusion to the invading Mongol rulers who had just crushed China, whereas Voltaire directly portrayed Genghis Khan, the Mongol conqueror, as a humane and romantic man. In The Orphan of Zhao, Tu’an has massacred all family members of Zhao, his political rival, except a half-month old infant who is being hidden. Now he is determined to kill all the babies in the capital city lest the Zhao heir slip away. It takes several people’s willing sacrifice to save the most precious Baby Zhao. In The Orphan of China, Genghis Khan invades China because a woman he
has loved, Idame, has married a Chinese Mandarin, Zamti. After he has won the war, he easily gives up his plan to kill a royal orphan in exchange for Idame’s love. What is most incredible for Genghis Khan, or for any Monarch, is that after Idame refuses him resolutely, he not only accepts his failure to win this woman’s heart, but apologizes to both her and her husband Zamti, the defeated Mandarin, for his invading China:

You’ve done me ample justice, be it mine Now to return it: I admire you both; You have subdued me, and I blush to sit On Cathay’s throne whilst there are souls like yours So much above me, [...] Zamti, be thou our law’s interpreter, And make the world as good and pure as thou art; Teach reason, justice, and morality, And let the conquered rule the conqueror; Let wisdom reign, and still direct our valor, Let prudence triumph over strength; her king Will set the example, and your conqueror Hence forth shall be obedient to your law. (V, 6)

Voltaire’s depiction of the Mongol conquerors’ accepting the culture of the conquered Chinese is not completely unfounded. In history the Mongols caused a violent but relatively short total disruption of the Chinese ways when they first invaded. Once they realized that the Confucian traditions were better than their nomadic ways to rule the Chinese people, they did adopt many Chinese customs, laws, and literature in the Yuan dynasty they created, replacing the Chinese ruled Song dynasty. Voltaire learned about that without a proper context through European missionaries who had returned from China. One of them, a French Jesuit named Joseph Henri Premare, did an incomplete translation of The Orphan of Zhao in 1735. That partial picture seemed to coincide with Voltaire’s search for a model of enlightened monarch. Whereas he used just a little historical materials to create a largely fictitious Mahomet as a negative example of leaders, here he incorporated a little historical background of another non-Western icon.
into his grand imagination to exemplify his ideal leader. In his dedication to the Duke of Richelieu printed before The Orphan of China, Voltaire wrote that

"The Tartar conquerors did not change the manners of the conquered nation; on the other hand, they protected and encouraged all the arts established in China, and adopted their laws: an extraordinary instance of the natural superiority which reason and genius have over blind force and barbarism." (1901 Vol. XV, 176)

This picture, however, is not accurate. Voltaire believed that the Mongols protect all Chinese art because he learned about the thriving drama under the Mongol rule, which is true. But this was precisely the result of the Mongol suppression of Chinese Confucian scholars who were forbidden to take the imperial examination to become officials. They were forced out of their official path to write for the entertainment market in an unprecedented number, hence the boom of the theatre, of which The Orphan of Zhao was one good example. As for the Chinese laws the Mongols adopted, they were used to oppress the Chinese more effectively. That Yuan dynasty is one of the shortest dynasties in Chinese history, lasting only ninety-seven years, is the proof of its rulers' brutality. Whether Voltaire knew this or not, he did not need it for his play. He was determined to present the Chinese model for his true religion. He saw the Chinese religion as the best: "simple, wise, august, free from all superstition" (1965, 85), especially because "superstition seems to have been established in all nations and among all people, except the men of letters in China" (1965, 25).

Needless to say, Voltaire's exaltation made the Chinese religion, if there ever was such a singular thing, sound far purer and loftier than it really was. While Confucius himself was a secular sage and refused to believe in immortals and ghosts, Confucianism institutionalized by the emperors after his death treated him as a god and manipulated his doc-
trines to oppress the people. The Chinese also had Buddhism and Taoism in which many superstitions can be found. Obviously Voltaire did not base his words on studious research of Chinese materials. While he could learn to read and write English quickly on his three year exile in England, he could by no means learn Chinese without devoting most of his life to it. In his crusade against the intolerant French religious fanaticism, he jumped to the Chinese alternative so excitedly he overlooked its other side. (Almost two hundred years later, his countryman Antonin Artaud jumped at the Balinese dance as an alternative to the mainstream French theatre in pretty much the same way.)

In The Orphan of China there is a defeated Oriental force, China, and an Oriental victor, the Mongol Genghis Khan. Yet they both were intended to demonstrate to the audiences at the Comedie Francaise and elsewhere a superior culture in which the victor of overwhelming power accepts the victim's values simply because of its virtue. It is no coincidence that Voltaire gave his highest praises to non-Western cultures in a play written shortly after he was disillusioned while serving at the court of Prussia’s Frederick the Great, who had invited him several times and who he has hoped to be an enlightened monarch. Voltaire emphatically wrote at the beginning of the play, “This piece was produced in Paris, 1755, when the author was in exile” (Vol. XV, 174). Some lines he put in Genghis Khan’s mouth reflected his feelings, e.g. “Are these my promised joys? Is this the fruitit/ Of all my labors? Where’s the liberty,/ The rest I hoped for?” (IV, 1) Other lines were more like admonitions to the monarchs he hoped but failed to reform: “I but feel the weight/ Without the joys of power” (IV, 1) Many of the audience members might see the play just as a cute representation of an exotic culture—they could not tell much difference between the Tartar and the Chinese anyway partly because none of the names sounded Chinese. But Voltaire and his fellow phi-
Losophy took the play's theme seriously. He personally played the role of Genghis Khan at age seventy at his Ferny estate's playhouse to entertain his guest, English historian Edward Gibbon, who considered The Orphan of China his favorite play. Though not impressed by Voltaire's acting "with a hollow broken voice", Gibbon marveled at the event: "Shew [sic] me in history or fable, a famous poet of seventy who has acted in his own plays, and has closed the scene with as upper and ball for a hundred people" (Besterman 432).

Voltaire spent most of his last twenty years in Ferny, a remote French village only a few miles from the Swiss border, which became a site of pilgrimage for many admirers from Paris and abroad. A widely read and produced man of letters, Voltaire was exiled from Paris numerous times before settling in Ferny, for his views defying the religious dogma and authority figures. His struggle against the French authorities bears a great deal of resemblance with those of the twentieth century intellectuals. Voltaire constantly battled censorship, from the early years when he was an unknown student writer to the time when his name was simultaneously arousing to the public and alarming to the censors. Many of his well known works, whether intercultural or philosophical, were prohibited. Some books were printed by clandestine publishers, often in provincial towns away from the power center (Gross, 103). Both the publishers and Voltaire learned to make necessary compromises to get his works through the censorship to reach the public. Voltaire "knew how to use these obvious forgeries cleverly in order to cover clandestine issues of his free-thought works. Whenever one of them was brought to the attention of the chief of police, Voltaire could simply deny his authorship and claim, as in so many precious cases, an unscrupulous printer had taken advantage of his literary fame" (Bachman, 60–61). But those kinds of technical "forgeries" would not work in theatre where everything was on display to
the public. Therefore he had to make thematic compromises, such as using Mohamet to veil his attack on Christian fanaticism and extolling Christian true religion at the expense of the Peruvian beliefs.

In any case, it was the interest of a dissident, of a marginalized person, that led Voltaire to explore non-French and then non-Western cultures and to present them on stage as alternatives to the mainstream culture of his own country. After he was unfairly put in the Bastille and subsequently exiled to England because of a fight with a chevalier named Gui Auguste de Rohan-Chabot, he wrote his *Philosophical Letters* praising England and criticizing France. Though printed and frequently reprinted in French, this book was officially banned by the censors. While in England, he keenly sensed the importance of exposure to other cultures: "The arts are much broader than one may think. [... H]e who knows only his own language is like those who, never having been outside of the French court, think that the rest of the world counts for very little and that he who has seen Versailles has seen everything" (1965, 210). In the same piece he wrote in English, "Essay on Epic", he numerated many examples to show how great differences are among national tastes:

In every country men [sic] have a nose, two eyes and a mouth; yet the collection of features that makes for beauty in France would not do in Turkey, not would a Turkey beauty in China; and what is most admired in Asia and Europe would be considered a monster in the Guineas. Since nature herself is so different, how can one impose general laws on arts over which custom, that is inconsistency, has so much sway? Therefore, if we want to have a broader knowledge of these arts, we have to know how they are practiced in every nation. To know the epic it is not enough to have read Virgil and Homer, just as it is not enough, in tragedy, to have read Sophocles and Euripides. (1965, 213) This manifesto of multicultural arts, however, could not
be carried out thoroughly in the eighteenth century. Whereas Voltaire observed the British, German, and Swiss cultures firsthand, his exposure to Muslim culture was limited, still less his knowledge of how arts were practiced in China, even though he showed great interest in these two cultures and explored them in his plays. Compounding to the lack of experience was the eager desire to present the far-away land. Voltaire knew that clearly:

Most of our European travelers speak ill of their neighbors while they lavish praise on the Persians and the Chinese. It is because we naturally like to reduce those who can easily be compared with us, and to raise in esteem those whom distance protects from our jealousy. (1965, 206)

When he was writing this he had no idea that he would himself also give the highest esteem to the farthest nation he ever portrayed in his drama. Yet for him, it was not jealousy of his European neighbors that led him to praise the Orient, as it was for many exoticists. Voltaire began his cross-cultural studies while exiled in England, France's close neighbor and long time rival, partly as a penalty for offending an aristocrat, partly as his own choice. Unlike many of his compatriots who frowned across the channel, he praised England, thus starting a career of an internationalist engaged in a consistent search in other cultures for alternatives to the French hegemony, which was at the time dominating the European culture and much of the world. While his studies and emulation of the English culture logically extended into his explorations of the Orient, the latter work was done with much less vigor and far more wishful thinking than the former. In talking about the cross-channel work between English and French, Voltaire set quite high a standard:

A poet may be translated by expressing merely the substance of his thoughts, but to make him known well, to give a just idea of his
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language, we must translate not only his thoughts, but all the accessories. [...] His work is a painting from which we must copy exactly the design, the attitudes, coloring, defects and beauties; otherwise you substitute your work for his. (1965, 216-17)

What he criticized here is exactly what he did when the subject was the Oriental. One may argue that his standard was too restrictive for himself even when he dealt with the English material, especially in writing plays based on Shakespeare — another type of intercultural theatre. But the problem appears serious politically only when he meddled with the Oriental subjects. Being a creative writer instead of a professional Orientalist, who would have had to devote his life to the study of one or two Oriental languages and cultures, technically Voltaire could by no means translate Confucius or Genghis Khan or Mahomet. The only thing he could do to promote understanding of, and tolerance to, non-Western cultures was to substitute his work for the original in lieu of faithful as well as enjoyable translations. Did it work? Taken as representations of the Oriental, Voltaire's intercultural plays range from seriously flawed to outrage. Mahomet was way too evil, Genghis Khan way too saintly, to be true to history or to their peoples. But taken as fables with a moral on religious and cultural tolerance, they were successful. With the exception of the allegorical Mahomet, which is a very special case, Voltaire set important examples to counter the then prevalent Chauvinistic practice of degrading the Oriental as barbarians, as exemplified in Bossuet's religious history book. Given the repressive time in which he lived as a marginalized dissident writer, even portraying Oriental inaccurately as heroes or equals was a heroic action in itself. At the very least, Voltaire deserves theatre scholars' attention, if not theatre artists' emulation, when Said's seminal but partial book has made us all but forget the Western dissident tradition that looks at the tantalizing but distanced cultural other with
admiration. To deny this tradition is to cut the roots of Said's work itself.

Notes:

① Translations taken from Stephen Owen. Readings in Chinese Literary Thought. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. P. 406.

② Aphasia, as a medical term, is used here to refer to certain symptom in cultural situation today. That does not mean that some of the Chinese have totally lost their function in speech but what they use as critical discourse are not the one of their own. And what's more, they don't have the sense of it. That's why it could be called as "aphasia".

③ Said softened his position to a certain degree in his later writings, differentiating "acceptable" and "not acceptable" works of Orientalism (Marranca 58). He praised Jean Genet, for example, another prominent dissident engaged in intercultural theatre along the line of Voltaire's. But Said did not see Genet from this perspective. He endorsed Genet largely because Genet personally supported Said's Palestinian cause. Generally Said's critique of Orientalism remains influential.

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