

Multidisciplinary Perspectives on LAO STUDIES

Edited by Karen L. Adams
and Thomas John Hudak



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Where Did the Oy of Baan Choumhouy Get Their Pot-Making from?

Leedom Lefferts and Louise Allison Cort¹

Introduction

This paper presents research accompanied by a hypothesis regarding one of several ways by which women potters produce earthenware ceramics in a village in Mainland Southeast Asia. Over the past 15 years the authors have conducted an extensive survey of every pottery producing site in Mainland Southeast Asia (excluding Burma). To date (May 2007) we have visited 180 locations in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, one in Malaysia, and two in Yunnan. Baan Choumhouy is a village in the southern Lao province of Attapeau, near the Se Khong (river). The inhabitants say they speak Oy and Lao; fieldwork was conducted using Lao with the elicitation of local words to describe various parts of the production process.

Lefferts has visited Baan Choumhouy three times, in 2006 and 2007, documenting the earthenware production technology used by these women. Previously, in 1997, Cort and Lefferts, together with Prof. Narasaki Shoichi and Mori Tatsuya of the Aichi Prefecture Ceramics Museum, visited Lao villages near the Mekong River and along the Se Don to Salavan (Narasaki, Cort, & Lefferts, 2000).

Research Protocol

Our research protocol has been to visit and record earthenware and stoneware ceramic production in every community where it occurs in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. We also intend to visit locations in Yunnan Province, southwestern China, but we have not yet had a chance to do so. (Lefferts and Cort (2003) includes a comprehensive summary of research and findings through 1998.)

Our research agenda in each community is to study, photograph, and videotape the processes by which women, in the case of earthenware, and men, for stoneware, actually produce the forms for pots. Additionally, we investigate the sources of clay, temper, if any, and its manufacture, included in the clay, firing

procedures, and processes of distribution and marketing of the completed product. However, our main emphasis has been on the actual bodily motions and implements used to form the pots (Lefferts & Cort, 2000).²

This emphasis on bodily motion stems from our realization, as we have gone from site to site, that clays, tempers, and even firing practices often vary widely between closely spaced villages. Women say that they can adapt easily to using different clays and employing different tempers depending on availability. Such observations and assertions conflict with the idea that consistency in the types of materials used to make pots might provide a secure framework for typing them.

We also reached much the same conclusion concerning form and decoration. We have often been told that the women could and would produce any form we wanted and decorate it any way we wanted. Their purposes are summarized as making pots for domestic use and for sale; form and decoration depend on the wishes of the consumer and the making of money traded off against economizing on time on the part of the producer.

Altogether, the above observations and constraints resulted in our focusing on the potter's bodily movements as she produced one or another form, believing that these might be the most consistent and least subject to incidental variation across space and time. We have discovered that the "tools" a potter uses – the wooden, stone, clay, etc., implements employed during the production – are secondary to those of her own body in shaping a form. The body is the fundamental tool, intimately engaged in producing the pot. The potter's employment of her own body results in a form. We believe these motions, of all the possible attributes of a pot, may be the most conservative – least likely to change over time and space – than other attributes.

Our observations of production have also shown us that potters tend to divide pottery production into two segments: production of the "preform" followed by completion of the pot to its final form, including polishing, decoration, etc. We define the "preform" as the initial form a shape takes which then permits final shaping and refinement (Cort, Reith, & Lefferts, 1997). Interestingly, in Southeast Asia the production of the preform almost always results in the final shape of the pot's shoulder, rim and lip. The production of the final form results in producing the pot's body and base.³

The Problem

When we (Narasaki, Mori, Cort, and Lefferts) first visited two villages along the Se Don River, Baan Na Kradao, in Khong Se Don District, Salavan Province, and Baan Bunkham Yay, in Salavan District, also Salavan Province, in 1997, we saw for the first time a production procedure that was quite strange. This process, which we termed Type "C" (Lefferts & Cort, 2003) was unique in its use of a round loop scraper, usually made of bamboo tied together, for scraping the inside wall of the pot (Figure 1).

The pots we saw made were quite large, meant for holding water for cooling or, with a hole punched through the upper side, intended to be used as boiling pots for distilling beer to make liquor. Women produced these large pots in two stages. In the first, the upper half of the pot up to and including the mouth was built using coils placed on a wooden board which the potter turned to keep the side she was working on near her (Figure 2). This board did not have a pivot and was balanced on a short wooden post by the potter. Only the potter's hands were used to shape the pot at this time. This upper half was then allowed to dry, turned over onto the completed mouth, and the 2nd half of the process ensued.

For the second half of the process, the potter initially took the bamboo hoop scraper and scraped and smoothed the inside of the pot (Figure 3). Then she commenced to place coils on the upper half, so as to complete the bottom of the pot from its mid-point. As she did so, she smoothed the inside as well as the outside of the pot. Finally she reached a point where the inward curve of the base required that she start withdrawing her hand that had been used to support the mass of clay. At last, she had only one finger left inside the uppermost curve of the pot, which she then removed and softly patted over the clay using a paddle.

In some cases the preform had a flat clay base resting on the board. During the stage to complete the pot's shape, this base would be expanded and pushed out to form a curved base. The scraping would then take place through the mouth of the pot.

This was a strange technique for us; we had observed women making complete earthenware pots on a board, building with coils from the bottom up (Type B in North Thailand), or, in Northeast Thailand, using a transformative process employing a hollow cylinder to make the rim and expand the body of the pot and then paddling the bottom of the pot closed (Type A) (Lefferts & Cort, 2003). But the Type C process of Baan Na Kradao and Baan

Bunkham Yay reminded us of the production of sculpture, where a work of standing art results from an ill-defined mass.

It was certainly clear that pots of Baan Na Kradao and Bungkham Yay were heavier than those produced by either types A or B; the walls and base of Type C pots were not paddled thin, as we had seen for these other types. The scraping reduced their thickness, but did not significantly compress the pot's walls. This resulted in forms with long downward sloping sides and a distinct carination, ridge, around the side, below which the shape turned sharply inwards. This distinct carination was new for us; we were used to smoothly rounded walls in the North and Northeast Thai repertoires.

The Type "C" technique of earthenware production was made even stranger when the women and men of both villagers insisted that they were Lao and their ancestors had always been Lao. In other words, they averred that the technique they were using was as traditional a technique as the, to us, more common ones we had seen in our trip south along Route 13, or those in Thailand. Thus we were forced to accept that this "new" technique was as basic to Lao ethnic identification as the other techniques we had observed among other Lao speakers.

Continuing Research

Over the years since 1997 we have traveled to a number of different locations, not only looking for production techniques similar to Type "C", but also, and most importantly, defining the total range of observable production throughout Mainland Southeast Asia. However, for our purposes here, we focus on nineteen sites which seem to incorporate the range of variation we have observed in this technique: in Cambodia (1997 & 2007), Vietnam (1998, 2004, 2006, & 2007), Malaysia (1998), and, finally, a return to southern Laos (2006 & 2007). The results that follow detail the information we have collected relating to the issue of Type C production.

Vietnam: Cham – Our first hint of production techniques related to these two Lao villages came when we visited two villages of Cham potters in Bình Thuận and Ninh Thuận provinces along the South Central Vietnamese coast, near Phan Thiet and Phan Rang, respectively. Here we discovered extensive use of a bamboo scraper, as well as the coil method of pottery production. The potter began these forms by placing a flat "pancake" of clay on a support, either covered with a cloth or dusted with ash or sand, and then building the pot up. In one community women used boards on which to form

their preforms, in another the preforms were produced on pedestals. After the potter had produced the preform, including shoulder, rim and lip and allowed the pot to dry, she would then push the clay "pancake" base out while scraping the pot inside.

Generally the pots in these two villages were smaller than those found in Laos, not large jars meant for cooling water or distilling alcohol, but for cooking and ceremonial use. Even though these potters did not use a board on which to make the forms, the general procedure by which they produced the pre-forms, leading up to the production of the final shape, convinced us that we were seeing variations on a common theme shared with the Lao potters we had seen a year earlier.

Peninsular Malaysia: Malay – Again in 1998 Lefferts visited a pottery-making village upriver from Kota Baru in Kalantan Province in northeast Peninsular Malaysia. Here women potters, using a wooden turntable placed on a similar inverted turntable, without a pivot, coiled the preforms of small bowls. They then scraped the inside of the bowls, leaving an extraordinary amount of scrapings on a cloth next to them. The outside of the bowls was scraped into a round shape and, lastly, the overall artifact was polished. The potter did little to push the base of the bowl outwards; scraping produced the base's rounded shape.

There is a record of close contact between the area of Kota Baru and the Cham, perhaps best signified by Kota Baru's appellation as "Mecca of the East." Cham Moslem travelers have often visited northeastern Malaysia; it seems to us that the technology of pottery production we observed in Vietnam could have been related to that of this area of Malaysia.

However, following our Vietnamese and Malay research a huge gap remained, between the potters of Laos and the Cham of Vietnam. Because of other obligations and research priorities, we knew that we would not be able to make connections between these locations soon.

Vietnam: Nghe An – However, before we had a chance to explore in southern Laos or Central Highland Vietnam, Lefferts observed Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) women producing bowls in a manner quite similar to those in Malaysia and among the Cham at the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology in 2004. This Museum, known for its aggressive efforts to expose Vietnamese citizens as well as visitors to the diversity of their nation, has engaged in a comprehensive program of inviting indigenous pottery producers to Hanoi to demonstrate their manufacturing processes. Lefferts had the

good fortune to be present in Hanoi in Spring 2004, when three women potters from Nghe An Province, from the southern part of northern Vietnam, came to the museum.

The techniques he observed on this occasion paralleled those in northeastern peninsular Malaysia. Most important was the use of a bamboo scraper to bring the form's walls to their final thickness and its base to its round bottom (after formation on a flat turntable), resulting in the form's final shape.

With these observations, the dispersal of this type of production had now become the most extreme we had plotted, from Malaysia to Cham communities on the Vietnamese southern Central Coast, to Kinh potters in Nghe An, at the southern border of northern Vietnam.

Vietnam: Central Highlands – One of the areas we had not been able to visit was the vital region of the Vietnamese Central Highlands. This region is known for its ethnic and linguistic diversity, with languages ranging from Mountain Cham (Churu) to Mountain Khmer (Mnong, Ede, Ma, Ba Na, etc.). Stoneware production in this region is non-existent; these people are known for importing large Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao stoneware jars for brewing beer, cultivating prestige, and holding rituals. While little documentation of earthenware production has been published, the use of gourds and baskets for containing water and cooking were known.⁴ We also expected that the inroads of development would make discovery of earthenware production difficult.

With the fine assistance of the staff of the Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology and local provincial museums, we observed production or talked with women who had recently produced earthenware in five communities in Đắk Lắk (Êđê Bih and M'ngong Gar ethnicities), Lâm Đông (Chu-ru and Ma), and Kon Tum (Ba Na) provinces. In these cases we found that the potter tended to produce a preform on a stationary base on a pedestal, placing a lump of clay on the platform and working the walls up and around, using her hands and forming the rim walking backwards and forwards around the pedestal in a circle (Figure 4). Once the preform had been made and sufficiently dried, she took the shape, sat on the ground, and scraped out the inside using the bamboo scraper with which we had become familiar. She also pushed out the flat clay on the bottom to form a slightly rounded, carinated (see earlier I'm wondering if for the less familiar reader, you could define this term when you first use it?) shape. This form could be used to steam sticky rice, holding a

wooden or basket steamer in its neck. Other forms were made, too, with essentially the same process seen elsewhere.

Laos: Attapeau, Salavan, and Champassak provinces – Immediately following our trip to Central Vietnam, Lefferts visited southern Laos, especially Attapeau and Salavan provinces, to locate the distribution of earthenware production there. Because of a relative lack of developmental inputs, this region tends to contain a greater conservation of handicraft than elsewhere. This holds true for textiles as well as earthenware production, although little attention has been paid to earthenware.

Evidence of contemporary earthenware production abounds: earthenware pots with cooling water stand in front of many houses, even on heavily traveled routes. One simply needs to ask where these pots are made. Two locations were pointed out in Attapeau Province, Baan Saphouan, about 30 kilometers north of Attapeau City, and Baan Choumhouy, about 20 kilometers south of the city. Because of time constraints, Lefferts could not visit Baan Saphouan, but Baan Choumhouy was visited. In spite of the late date of this visit, in early May after the beginning of the rains, two women demonstrated how they produced pots. After preparing the clay (temper was not used), they placed a lump of clay on a board and raised the preform's walls. After using all of the clay in the lump, they added coils to raise the sides to the point where the neck, rim, and lip could be formed.

After sufficient drying, they took this preform, which was about half to two-thirds the height of the completed pot, off the board. The part that had been the base was left sticking to the board. They scraped this part off the board, combined it with other clay, and built the bottom on the preform (Figure 5). A bamboo scraper was used to scrape the inside, while a stone was used to polish the exterior.

In this process it became evident that the existence of a base to push out, or the necessity to add one, depended on whether the preform had been made on a board with or without a cloth or leaf cover. If the preform had been made using a cloth or leaf to cover the board, this could be gently peeled off and the bottom pushed out from the remaining clay. If there was no such cover, some major portion of the preform remained stuck to the board and was replaced. When women were questioned why they did one procedure or the other, they responded that this was the way they made their pots.

It was evident that the production techniques seen in Baan Choumhouy related both to the techniques first observed in Baan

Na Kradao and Baan Bunkham Yay on the north side of the Bolovens Plateau, later in the Cham villages in coastal Vietnam, and, finally, most recently seen in the Vietnamese Central Highlands among several ethnic groups. This was partly confirmed by returning for short visits to Baan Na Kradao and Bunkham Yay, in the first of which production continued as we had observed nine years earlier.

Cambodia: northeast – In January 2007 Lefferts visited Mondolkiri, Rattanakiri, and Stung Treng provinces in Northeast Cambodia. In some ways, these are an extension of the Vietnamese central Highlands to the west and many of the same ethnic groups live there as to the east. The research agenda included, as in the Vietnamese Central Highlands, questions concerning stoneware jar use for ritual purposes as well as making beer and earthenware production. Trafficability was more difficult in these provinces than in Vietnam and Lefferts was not able to get to several locations where he was told earthenware pots were produced. This was especially the case in Mondolkiri, where he only received a verbal description with gestures, as opposed to actual production.

Finally, in Rattanakiri, where there is currently much less earthenware production because of the inroads of commercial products through markets, he saw the complete process replicated by 5 older women. Here, a lump of clay was made into a preform on a bamboo slat platform resting on overturned wooden rice mortars, covered with a banana or other large leaf to provide a fairly smooth cover. This was peeled off the clay base to complete the bottom.

Again in this location he observed the use of the bamboo hoop scraper on the inside of the pot, while the outside was polished using a stone that potters inherited from their mothers.

The members of this community called themselves Tampuan. Later, in Stung Treng, he met with Lao and Khmer women – in both communities they said they and their parents had always been members of their particular ethno-linguistic group – who described production in essentially the same terms.

Laos: Attapeau, Salavan, and Champassak provinces: Finally, again, in February 2007 Lefferts returned to southern Laos to pursue jar use and the distribution of earthenware pottery production.

Baan Saphouan, north of Attapeau City, Baan Chuomphouy, again, and Baan Tha Hin, in Sanamxai District, Attapeau Province were all visited. Essentially the same kind of technique occurred in each. The major difference seemed to be that, in Baan Saphouan, cloth covered the board on which the preform was made; thus, when

the form was lifted off, the basal clay remained attached to the walls and was pushed out to form the base (very similar to that found in the Tampuan (see above) village in Rattanakiri Province).

Finally, yet another village, first discovered in 2006 and revisited for an extended period in 2007 in Salavan District, Salavan Province, northwest of the capital, showed production similar to Baan Choumhouy and Naa Kradao. However, these women produced a wider range of forms, including bowls and rice steamers, as well as jars for cooling water and distillation jars.

Discussion

Research that has taken place over the past 15 years has defined a number of techniques by which earthenware pottery is produced in Mainland Southeast Asia. While the reasons for this diversity are unknown, it seems clear that Mainland Southeast Asia may be an important world area showing a great diversity of production technologies.

This paper has documented the spread of one of these production technologies in nineteen villages across a very wide area, currently seen as extending from northeastern peninsular Malaysia to southern northern Vietnam and from Cham sites on the southern central Vietnamese coast inland across the Vietnamese Central Highlands into northeast Cambodia and southern Laos, almost to the Mekong River (Figure 6). There is an equally wide dispersal of this technique across ethno-linguistic groups, including Malay, Kinh (Vietnamese), Cham, Mountain Cham (Churu), Mountain Khmer (Phnong/M'ngong, Tampuan, Ede Bih, Ma, Ba Na, Oy, Sapouan, and Souei), as well as among people who call themselves Lao and Khmer.

This production technology seems to have the following characteristics:

A lump of clay is placed on a turntable, board, or bamboo slat platform, forming a base that remains unshaped during the preform shaping process.

This turntable/board/platform may be covered by a leaf or cloth.

If the piece is large, the potter may make the upper half on this board, using long, flat coils to make the sides, without placing a clay base from which to push up the walls.

The woman potter either slowly turns the turntable/board/

platform or walks around a post on which the board is placed, wedging the clay upwards to form the walls of the form.

She completes the preform by shaping the neck, rim, and lip of the pot.

After letting the preform dry, she removes it from the platform or base on which it has been resting.

If the preform has rested on a leaf or cloth, this leaf or cloth can be peeled from the basal clay so that it can be used to form the base. If a leaf or cloth was not present, the potter will have to shape the base using new clay.

The potter completes the inside, by scraping and smoothing with a bamboo hoop scraper.

While completing the inside, or immediately thereafter, the potter builds the base, either pushing out the clay that is there, or adding new clay to form a curved bottom. Often this is accompanied by scraping out the inside and scraping and polishing the outside.

Finally, the whole is polished and set aside to dry for firing.

We make an assumption that these and other techniques used to produce pots are neither happenstance nor coincidental. We have found out that the bodily motions involved in making these pieces are the result of standardized, informal, apprenticeship-type learning by women from their mothers or neighbors or relatives. The questions come, then, how did this distribution occur and from whence does it come?

In this consideration it is also necessary to reinforce the point that we are looking at women potters. Generally, of the two genders, Southeast Asian women tend to be home- and land-owners; men travel and women stay home, inheriting land from their mothers. It would be reasonable to conclude that, if we are looking at the dispersal of this technique for making earthenware across these distances, we must consider that women would have carried this technique as they have moved as members of groups such as families and communities, rather than isolated individuals.

The wide north-south coastal distribution seems to lead to a hypothesis that it was dispersed by sea-faring families that settled at widely dispersed points. Recent discussion concerning the impact of Cham culture on southern and central Vietnamese culture leads to the assumption that the earthenware production technique observed in Nghe An could be a result of this Cham impact. Perhaps, even, the communities of potters in Nghe An could be Cham remnants

who have adopted Vietnamese language and customs over the centuries (Li, 2006).

The movement inland could document Cham movement and influence through the Central Highlands and into Laos. Ian Baird (personal communication, 2006) suggested that the oral history of the Oy, including their earlier subjection to groups further east, could have led to their adoption of this pottery production technique. It is of interest that, on my third visit to Baan Choumhouy, these people, who had always insisted that they were of pure Lao descent, said that a word they used to referring to jars for making beer was Souei and that, indeed, their ancestors had been Souei.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research report is to suggest that a map of technologies used for living might differ dramatically from those usually drawn of nation-states, politics, languages, or ethnicities.

Often anthropologists and other observers draw boundaries based on what seem to be easily observable and definable characteristics, orally elicited. Today, the theory of the nation-state pervades our consciousness and theory-building. It is not often that a different, contrasting paradigm is developed that provides a basis for reconsidering these fundamental approaches.

This paper presents preliminary results showing that the appearance of an indigenously practiced aspect of technology does not agree with the lines usually drawn on a map, of nations, political systems, languages, nor ethnicities. Much work remains to be done in presenting the documentation for this conclusion and showing that it actually makes sense. However, this preliminary report may lay a foundation for further work on the "cultural" history of the complicated area of southern Laos, northeastern Cambodia, and the Vietnamese Central Highlands.

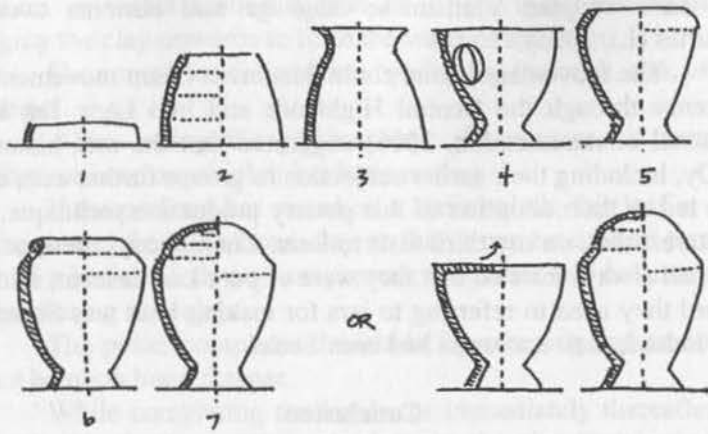


Figure 1. Type "C" earthenware production (Lefferts and Cort, 2003)



Figure 2. Baan Na Kradao potter completing "preform", upper half of form



Figure 3. Baan Na Kradao potter scraping inverted preform



Figure 4. Tampuan potter wedging out walls from clay lump



Figure 5. Baan Chuomphouy potter completing pot base using clay left on board

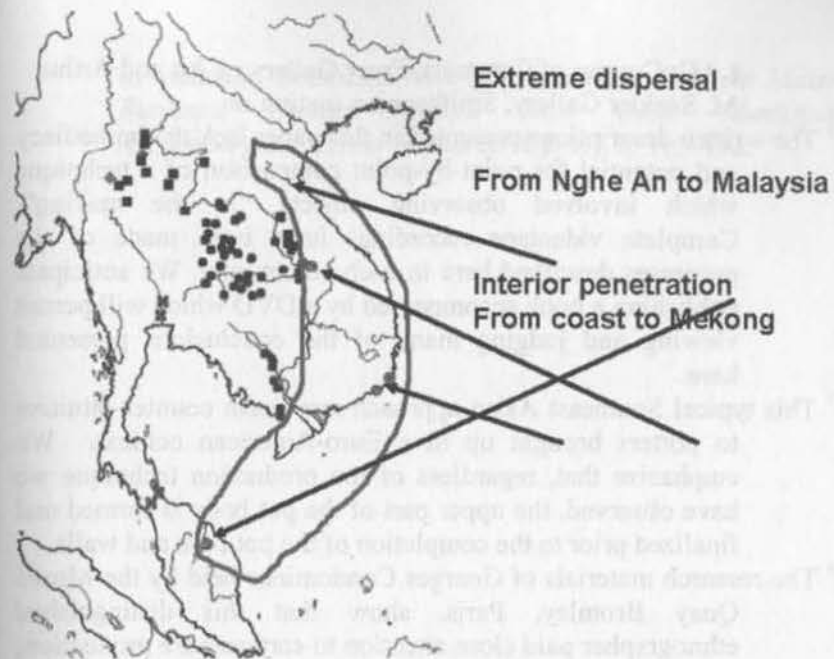


Figure 6. Dispersal of Type "C" earthenware production technique (double circles) (Squares, circles, etc. to west of Type "C" represent other kinds of earthenware production.)

Notes

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¹ Contact: LL, 132 12th Street, SE, Washington, DC, USA, e-mail: LLEFFERT@drew.edu. LL: Research Associate, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution and Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus, Drew University.

LAC: Curator of Ceramics, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

- ² The written descriptions presented in this paper lack the immediacy and potential for point-by-point comparison of a technique which involved observing objects "in the making". Complete videotape recordings have been made of the processes described here in each community. We anticipate publishing a book accompanied by a DVD which will permit viewing and judging many of the conclusions presented here.
- ³ This typical Southeast Asian approach may seem counter-intuitive to potters brought up in a Euro-American context. We emphasize that, regardless of the production technique we have observed, the upper part of the pot body is formed and finalized prior to the completion of the pot base and walls.
- ⁴ The research materials of Georges Condominas held by the Musée Quay Bromley, Paris, show that this distinguished ethnographer paid close attention to earthenware production; however, none of it has been published.

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