

Development Experience and Post-Print Reference of Think Tanks in the Beijing-Shanghai Region

Authors: Li Xin

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Beijing and Shanghai are the regions with the densest distribution and highest development level of think tanks in China. Studying the development patterns and characteristics of think tanks in the Beijing-Shanghai region has important reference significance for promoting the construction of modern think tanks with Chinese characteristics. [Method/Process] Through field visits and discussions with selected typical think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai, this paper analyzes aspects such as management architecture, research capacity building, talent introduction and cultivation, operational capacity, and external exchange and communication. [Results/Conclusion] Different types of excellent think tanks in the Beijing-Shanghai region have distinctive management architectures, strong ability to control research quality, broad thinking and rich means for talent cultivation and think tank operations, and strong external communication capabilities. The development experience of think tanks in the Beijing-Shanghai region can provide beneficial reference for Chinese think tanks to improve their product quality and operational level.

Full Text

The Development Experience and Reference of Think Tanks in Beijing and Shanghai

Li Xin

Institute of Management, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, Chengdu 610071

Abstract

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holds important reference significance for promoting the construction of modern think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

[Method/Process] Through field visits and discussions with selected typical think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai, this paper analyzes their management structures, research capacity building, talent introduction and training, operational capabilities, and external exchange and communication.

[Result/Conclusion] The management structures of different types of excellent think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai each possess distinctive features. They demonstrate strong control over research quality, broad thinking and rich means in talent cultivation and think tank operation, and powerful external communication capabilities. The development experience of think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai can provide beneficial reference for improving product quality and operational levels of think tanks across China.

Keywords: think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai; research capacity building; talent training; think tank operation; think tank communication; development experience; development enlightenment

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Author Bio: Li Xin (ORCID: 0000-0002-3757-2139), Assistant Researcher, Institute of Management, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, Ph.D. in Management, E-mail: star200201@163.com.

Beijing and Shanghai represent regions with high-level think tank development in China. According to the “2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” released by Dr. James McGann of the University of Pennsylvania in January 2018, seven Chinese think tanks ranked among the top 100 globally, with six from Beijing and one from Shanghai [1]. Among the 25 first-batch national high-end think tank pilot units announced by China in December 2015, 22 were located in the Beijing-Shanghai region [2]. Since the state proposed strengthening the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics, institutional reform has become the central task of think tank development. Under the guidance and support of local party committees and governments, think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai have launched a new round of development, with many focusing on improving research standards and strengthening operational management, actively exploring and practicing institutional innovation, and leading numerous industry development forums that have elevated the think tank sector to higher levels. Overall, Beijing-Shanghai think tanks have taken the lead in institutional innovation nationwide, with many ideas and practices worthy of reference and promotion. Through field visits and discussions with typical party-government, academy, university, and social think tanks in the region, and through in-depth exchanges with think tank managers and researchers on development concepts, institutional construction, and management methods, the development experience of Beijing-Shanghai think tanks holds important reference value for improving the overall development level of think tanks across China.

1 Think Tank Management Structure

As actors influencing decision-making, the internal structure of think tanks not only affects the optimal allocation of resources such as talent, funding, and information, but also influences their ability to efficiently integrate resources to fulfill social functions [3]. Management structures vary significantly among different think tanks due to institutional factors: party-government think tanks and academies have relatively complete organizational structures; university think tanks, relying on university faculty resources, tend toward networked operations; and social think tanks focus their management structures on business development, with streamlined service departments for personnel, finance, and administration.

Party-government think tanks such as the Development Research Center of the State Council (hereinafter referred to as “DRC”) and academy think tanks such as the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (hereinafter referred to as “SASS”) have relatively rigorous and large-scale management structures, comprising research institutes and centers organized by discipline and research field, with detailed functional divisions that include party affairs and labor union departments. Within institutional constraints, Beijing-Shanghai think tanks have made beneficial explorations to enhance operational capacity. In 2013, SASS divided its former Research Affairs Office into two departments: the Research Affairs Office and the Think Tank Construction Office, with the latter focusing on think tank-related research for the central government and Shanghai municipality, as well as planning for the academy’ s think tank development, aligning with the national high-end think tank pilot construction tasks. SASS also established a Think Tank Research Center composed of full-time staff dedicated to think tank research. The establishment of SASS’ s Think Tank Construction Office preceded the issuance of the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” (hereinafter referred to as the “General Office” Opinions) by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council by more than a year, demonstrating the region’ s emphasis on think tank construction and its prescient understanding of this important trend.

Universities in the Beijing-Shanghai region attach great importance to think tank construction. Fudan University has a dedicated four-story think tank building with advanced facilities and décor resembling European and American universities, housing several think tanks including the Fudan Development Institute (FDI). FDI operates as a platform-based think tank, comprising nine domestic research institutions including the Financial Research Center, Communication and National Governance Research Center, Contemporary Chinese Social Life Data Center, BRICS Research Center, Shanghai-Hong Kong Development Joint Institute, Social Science Data Research Center, China Insurance and Social Security Research Center, Yangtze River Economic Belt Development Research Institute, and Shanghai University Think Tank Research and Management Center. It also operates three overseas China research centers

(Fudan-UC San Diego, Fudan-Europe, and Fudan-Monterey Tech China-Latin America), and organizes forums such as the Shanghai Forum, Chinese University Think Tank Forum, Fudan Development Forum, Oceania Forum, and Shanghai-California Innovation Dialogue. Additionally, an Academic Service Center handles all academic consulting, management services, and administrative meeting coordination for the institute. FDI's management structure is highly clear, with research institutions as the main body and administrative service organizations structured around research and conference activities to provide support. Its research institutions primarily rely on Fudan University faculty, operating in a networked, project-based model. Another university think tank, the Tongji University Institute of Finance and Economics (hereinafter referred to as "Tongji Finance Institute"), exemplifies an expert-led model. Centered around Director Shi Jianxun, it has assembled a group of young and middle-aged faculty from Tongji's School of Economics and Management. While the institute covers multiple research directions, it does not establish corresponding research centers. It employs management personnel responsible for think tank management, coordination, and services, without a large administrative logistics department, resulting in a highly streamlined management structure.

Social think tanks streamline their administrative and logistics systems in their management structures, emphasizing research departments to facilitate core business operations. The China Center for International Economic Exchanges (hereinafter referred to as "CCIEE") is a non-profit social organization registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, with a members' assembly and board of directors; daily operations are presided over by the board's executive bureau. CCIEE's internal departments include the General Office, Strategic Research Department, Economic Research Department, Industrial Planning Department, Exchange Department, Information Department, and Innovation Development Research Institute, with an organizational structure centered on research departments supplemented by administrative and external exchange service departments. Shanghai Fuca Think Tank (hereinafter referred to as "Fuca Think Tank") operates as a corporate think tank with a structure comprising: a Theoretical Research Center responsible for research and analysis; a Financial Information Center handling economic forecasting and high-level internal reference products; a Consulting Center managing consulting business; a Research and Development Expansion Center responsible for new product development and market expansion; and an Administrative Management Center overseeing finance, personnel, and legal affairs. The company's organizational departments are clearly structured around think tank business, prioritizing research, production, and marketing, with only one department handling administrative and personnel management. This concise, flat structure minimizes redundant staff and reflects the pragmatic approach of social think tanks.

2 Research Capacity Building

Research capacity constitutes the core competitiveness for think tank survival and development. Excellent think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai have gradually explored and formed relatively mature management systems in research topic selection and quality control. Both national-level think tanks like DRC and social think tanks like CCIEE emphasize selecting topics that address current hotspots while maintaining a long-term perspective, ensuring focused and forward-looking research directions. University think tanks place greater emphasis on aligning topics with scholars' expertise to fully leverage university talent advantages. In terms of research quality control, Beijing-Shanghai think tanks maintain high research standards through institutional strengthening and professional development, with some establishing dedicated quality control systems for policy recommendations.

2.1 Topic Selection

As a national-level think tank, DRC handles topics assigned by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, as well as self-initiated research projects and collaborative topics. Its selection process balances pressing current issues with long-term, far-reaching subjects such as the “new normal,” climate change, and green development, demonstrating DRC's ability to “take a high and long view.” DRC's self-initiated projects include three categories: major, key, and tendered topics, with tendered topics primarily open to its own researchers, effectively aligning the center's research orientation with individual expertise. The Tongji Finance Institute advocates the principle that “think tanks are all about topic selection,” carefully choosing directions such as national development strategy, financial market regulation, market reform, RMB internationalization, and new urbanization for in-depth research and policy advice, based on researchers' expertise and interests. In addition to commissioned topics from central and local governments, CCIEE annually funds 10-30 self-selected topics using investment returns, with the academic committee first discussing and preliminarily determining annual research topics before board approval. Topics are categorized as domestic, international, or cross-cutting, with international issues ultimately serving China's decision-making needs, maintaining a domestic orientation.

2.2 Quality Control

DRC ensures research quality through institutional mechanisms, establishing a three-tier review system involving research groups, research departments (institutes), and division leaders, with all manuscripts undergoing plagiarism checks and substandard work strictly prohibited from external distribution. Research report abstracts require approval and signature from DRC leadership following substantive review, not merely procedural approval. DRC also emphasizes field research, insisting that no report can be produced without investigation, ensuring that research reflects actual conditions and provides targeted policy recommendations. SASS employs three bodies to oversee research quality: the

National High-End Think Tank Council, the Academic Committee, and a senior expert group composed of retired specialists, with the council and committee discussing and determining project leaders for important topics to ensure quality. For special reports, SASS has established a “two-review” system involving initial editorial review of topic selection and format, followed by anonymous expert external review, significantly improving report quality. The Tongji Finance Institute attaches great importance to research quality. According to Director Shi Jianxun, to demonstrate the highest research standards, he personally undertakes all research and policy recommendation writing, once spending two months revising a key sentence in pursuit of excellence. In recent years, the institute has had seven policy recommendation reports receive instructions from national leaders, with numerous others receiving instructions or adoption from State Council and ministry leaders. Considering the think tank’s scale, these achievements fully demonstrate its high research caliber.

3 Talent Introduction and Training

Talent constitutes the most critical resource for think tanks, whose development depends on a relatively stable team of outstanding personnel and the ability to scientifically and rationally select, deploy, utilize, evaluate, and train talent [4]. As the region with the highest level of economic and social development in China, Beijing-Shanghai boasts dense concentrations of high-quality talent. Think tanks in this region enjoy unparalleled advantages in attracting talent, with diverse recruitment channels and rich talent cultivation methods.

3.1 Talent Introduction

DRC benefits from the enormous advantage of a national-level platform, strongly attracting outstanding talent. However, as some research departments are public service units, recruitment must follow civil service procedures with staffing quotas, limiting autonomy. Beyond research tasks, DRC undertakes numerous policy evaluations, interpretations, and document drafting assignments with high quality requirements and heavy workloads, occasionally straining personnel resources. Consequently, DRC collaborates with external experts to expand research capacity. SASS recruits full-time researchers while also flexibly introducing specialists without occupying permanent positions, offering corresponding titles and benefits to leverage experts for disciplinary development. FDI fully utilizes Fudan University’s multidisciplinary strengths, with researchers primarily drawn from university faculty—including both distinguished senior experts and vibrant young scholars—supplemented by visiting scholars and postdoctoral fellows with shared interests. Notably, FDI has specially recruited a think tank operations team to assist experts in refining and writing policy recommendations, significantly improving output efficiency. The Tongji Finance Institute’s researchers mainly come from the university’s School of Economics and Management, with additional external and part-time personnel. In the future, the institute will merge into Tongji University’s National Institute for Innovation

Development as a key component, planning to recruit experienced internal reference writers from national news agencies and actively introduce researchers from top domestic think tanks based on development needs. Additionally, it plans to leverage Tongji University's platform advantages to recruit postdoctoral fellows for think tank research, selecting outstanding talent to strengthen the research team. CCIEE primarily recruits through social channels, hiring both recent graduates and individuals with government experience, with all researchers holding master's degrees or above, the vast majority possessing doctoral degrees.

3.2 Talent Cultivation

DRC cultivates and develops talent through research projects. Its self-initiated tendered topics include both projects for associate researchers and above, and youth projects for young researchers, fostering new talent and promoting 梯队建设. DRC also employs temporary postings and training for talent development, with broad posting channels including assignments from the Organization Department, Doctoral Service Teams, Western Support Programs, and Xinjiang aid cadres, enabling researchers to broaden perspectives, understand government operations, and identify real economic and social issues. DRC collaborates with internationally renowned universities such as Harvard and Cambridge to send researchers for approximately six-month visits, enhancing research capabilities and global perspectives. Additionally, DRC has explored a senior researcher system to cultivate talent through mentorship. SASS organizes "Special Report Training Workshops," inviting leaders and experts from the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee Research Office and related institutions to teach special report writing skills, requirements, hot topics, and workflows, improving researchers' writing capabilities. In recent years, SASS has also conducted national condition surveys, enabling researchers to grasp first-hand information. Fuca Think Tank has designed a nine-level promotion pathway from trainee to chief researcher, with exceptional talent demonstrating fast output and client satisfaction receiving accelerated promotion. Fuca primarily cultivates talent through "learning by doing" in research projects, with weekly brainstorming debates at the *Economic Forecast* publication topic selection meetings where researchers express viewpoints, challenge each other, and fill gaps on hot topics, helping identify weaknesses in thinking and research while simultaneously improving oral expression skills.

4 Think Tank Operation

How to transform researchers' findings into useful think tank products, provide high-quality and efficient services to party committees, governments, enterprises, and institutions, and use conversion revenues to continuously strengthen the think tank tests every organization. Excellent think tanks in Beijing-Shanghai possess strong operational capabilities, launching quality products adapted to market demands while supporting researchers in continuously creating superior

products through internal evaluation and incentive mechanisms, forming a virtuous cycle of “producing good products—expanding revenue—producing better products.”

4.1 Business Development

SASS integrates funding from multiple sources including national high-end think tank construction funds, special fiscal appropriations, and its own think tank construction fund to support operations, annually undertaking national and Shanghai-related research topics, some self-funded. Research findings and policy recommendations can be submitted to the central government and Shanghai party committee and government through three types of special reports including the *Shanghai New Think Tank Special Report*. Additionally, SASS’ s Think Tank Research Center has organized translation work, rendering more than ten foreign think tank works into Chinese, making a significant contribution to China’ s think tank research field. Fudan University provides annual operational and personnel funding to FDI, though the institute secures most of its funding through self-raised channels such as the Shanghai Forum and collaborative projects. FDI serves as a platform providing services and coordination for think tank work, with specific research conducted through its subsidiary research centers. For instance, the Communication and National Governance Research Center currently conducts research in four areas: online social mentality, international public opinion, online governance, and cybersecurity. The center collaborates with the National Bureau of Statistics on statistical research regarding China’ s online social mentality, partners with Zhejiang International Studies University on public opinion research such as China’ s image in G20 countries, maintains long-term cooperation with the International Department of the CPC Central Committee and other departments, undertakes projects with multiple units including the Taiwan Affairs Office, and participates in the Internet Governance Think Tank Alliance, providing strong support for party committee and government decision-making. Currently, the research team at the Communication and National Governance Research Center is relatively stable, and brand effectiveness continues to...

4.2 Performance Evaluation and Incentives

DRC maintains strict evaluation measures, including performance assessments upon individual project completion with rankings published on its internal network, while public service department personnel undergo annual evaluations according to civil service management regulations. SASS fully integrates think tank functions such as receiving leader instructions, participating in decision-making consultations, and media interviews into performance evaluation and professional title assessment, stimulating researchers’ vitality in providing policy advice. Regarding funding, SASS has designed comprehensive allocation systems for special funds and horizontal projects that reflect the value of think tank research. SASS has also made beneficial explorations in professional title

assessment within the “revolving door” mechanism, allowing qualified civil servants entering SASS to be recognized as specially appointed researchers or associate researchers with corresponding benefits, with formal transition completed later. University-affiliated think tanks at Fudan, Tongji, and other institutions are evaluated by their respective universities and departments. Currently, universities increasingly emphasize think tank construction, with Tongji University and its School of Economics and Management offering rewards for leader instructions and other achievements, recently increasing reward amounts, though think tank functional achievements have not yet been fully integrated into the professional title evaluation system. At Fudan University, professional title evaluation criteria are determined by individual colleges, with some beginning to incorporate think tank achievements into evaluation systems through conversion mechanisms. CCIEE’s researcher evaluations emphasize practical performance such as obtaining leader instructions and completing projects, with less weight given to theoretical research like published papers. Fuca Think Tank conducts two assessments for new employees at three and nine months to confirm their readiness for formal research responsibilities. Annual evaluations of Fuca researchers focus on the quantity and quality of research reports and contributions to company publications like *Economic Forecast*, while also examining academic contribution, client feedback, and project completion, combining quantitative and qualitative indicators for comprehensive judgment. Outstanding researchers have been promoted to director-level positions and begun leading teams within approximately one year.

5 External Exchange and Communication

As China’s political, cultural, and international exchange center, with Shanghai being a globally influential international metropolis, excellent think tanks in the Beijing-Shanghai region possess broad vision and strong brand and communication awareness. In domestic exchanges, these think tanks enjoy platform advantages, with many large-scale domestic think tank exchange activities initiated by Beijing-Shanghai organizations. Particularly noteworthy are the large-scale, high-level, and wide-channel international exchange activities conducted by these think tanks, serving as important platforms for China’s “track-two diplomacy” and playing a leading role in enhancing China’s international discourse power.

5.1 External Exchange

CCIEE has consecutively hosted multiple editions of the “Global Think Tank Summit” attended by world-class think tanks and former political leaders from multiple countries, becoming a grand intellectual gathering for global political and think tank communities to jointly pursue development. CCIEE has also co-hosted global governance forums with the UNDP China office and organized series such as the China-US Business Leaders and Former Senior Officials Dialogue and China-Japan Business Leaders and Former Senior Officials Dialogue

with relevant US and Japanese organizations, building platforms for exchanging ideas and viewpoints between Chinese and developed countries' business communities. Additionally, CCIEE co-organizes national high-end conferences such as the China Economic Annual Conference, enjoying high reputation in the industry. FDI has taken the lead among Chinese university think tanks by establishing overseas China research centers, also hosting multiple editions of large-scale international forums including the Shanghai Forum, Chinese University Think Tank Forum, and Oceania Forum. Fuca Think Tank annually hosts the large-scale "Fuca Forum," inviting prominent political and business figures, significantly enhancing its visibility and attracting corporate clients.

5.2 Think Tank-Media Cooperation

CCIEE co-produces the "Economic Monthly Talk" program with China National Radio, monthly inviting government officials, experts, scholars, and entrepreneurs to discuss domestic and international economic hotspots, with discussion results compiled into the *Economic Monthly Talk: China Think Tank Economic Observation* book series published annually. Additionally, CCIEE has signed cooperation agreements with media outlets including *Guangming Daily*, institutionalizing think tank-media collaboration. Fuca Think Tank cooperates with *China Business Network* on live-streamed programs such as "Depei on Trends," featuring content closely aligned with economic and social hotspots with unique insights, novel formats, and broad audiences, utilizing platforms like Tencent Video and Ximalaya for secondary dissemination, enhancing communication effectiveness.

6 Experience and Reference for China's Think Tank Development

China's vast territory features significant variations in regional economic and social development levels, resulting in different think tank development environments. As the regions with the highest economic and social development levels, Beijing and Shanghai's think tanks enjoy advantages in talent, financial resources, markets, and platforms that may be difficult for other regions to replicate, and some specific operational management practices may not be easily transplanted. However, the development trajectories and exploratory experiences of excellent think tanks in Beijing-Shanghai can provide guidance and inspiration for other think tanks in establishing future development directions, with their development concepts, professional methods, and operational thinking worthy of study and reference.

6.1 Solidifying Basic Research

Excellent think tanks in Beijing-Shanghai annually produce numerous high-level innovative achievements, not by hastily chasing hotspots, but through distillation and sublimation based on solid foundational research, with many results

stemming from long-term tracking and accumulation. Only after understanding and grasping the principles and laws of economic and social development can targeted policy recommendations be proposed. These think tanks emphasize integrating academic research with real-world problems and long-term development in topic selection, reflecting think tank research characteristics with certain foresight. University think tanks such as Fudan and Tongji effectively combine research directions with faculty expertise, avoiding forced or fabricated research directions to 迎合潮流. This approach better leverages faculty's long-term research accumulation to produce high-level think tank products. According to experts at FDI's Communication and National Governance Research Center, the institution focuses on long-term advantageous field research; after producing well-received works, an increasing number of institutions and projects have sought cooperation, establishing a strong product brand reputation.

6.2 Emphasizing Talent Cultivation

Some excellent think tanks in Beijing-Shanghai consistently invest considerable funds and human resources annually in self-initiated research projects, even establishing special youth projects to help young scholars grow. In talent introduction, institutional think tanks in the region have actively explored effective alignment in compensation and rank to attract outstanding talent. Other regional think tanks can strengthen talent team construction, particularly leadership development, with greater investment and more flexible policies based on their financial resources, talent markets, and institutional contexts, building core competitiveness. Currently, many second-tier Chinese cities attract talent through household registration, subsidies, and housing benefits, creating favorable external environments for think tank talent cultivation. Think tanks should seize this opportunity to introduce corresponding measures and gain advantages in talent competition.

6.3 Gradually Advancing University Think Tank Construction

The primary difference between university think tanks and party-government, academy, or social think tanks lies in that universities are educational institutions whose functions emphasize teaching, with research focusing more on basic and academic studies. Additionally, management mechanisms, evaluation systems, ideological awareness, and operational mechanisms pose challenges for university think tanks [5-6]. Our field investigation and interviews revealed that university assessments of teaching, papers, and projects create significant pressure for faculty, particularly young teachers. Even outstanding professors under 40 who have become doctoral supervisors admit that transitioning from academic to think tank research is difficult, requiring young scholars to carefully consider such shifts. Following the issuance of the General Office Opinions, universities in Beijing-Shanghai have strengthened the weight of think tank functional achievements in assessments, gradually incorporating some think tank outputs into annual evaluations and professional title systems, while increas-

ing rewards for think tank achievements. These institutions deepen “Double First-Class” university development without disrupting teaching and research rhythms or overcorrecting, using think tank practice to 反哺 disciplinary construction and promoting mutual, orderly development. Tongji University and other institutions’ approach of integrating resources and attracting top external think tank talent to strengthen high-end think tanks provides a feasible solution for universities rich in faculty resources but facing problems of small, scattered think tanks and insufficient think tank-oriented talent.

6.4 Strengthening Think Tank Operations Team Construction

Think tank researchers, as the primary creative force behind products, receive considerable attention, while operations teams often receive relatively insufficient recognition. FDI’s experience in operations team construction offers valuable reference: beyond handling administrative affairs and external liaison coordination, FDI has organized capable personnel to equip think tank experts with research assistants who refine and process experts’ oral ideas and viewpoints, translating specialized academic language into policy recommendation language, effectively easing difficulties in transitioning from academic to think tank research and improving conversion efficiency. FDI has also designed promotion pathways such as policy researcher ranks for research assistants, providing various learning and training channels including temporary postings, helping stabilize the operations team and supporting the continuous growth of research assistant personnel.

6.5 Enhancing External Publicity and Exchange

Think tanks in Beijing and Shanghai place great emphasis on external communication, which greatly benefits expanding research horizons, broadening networks, and enhancing discourse power. For market-oriented social think tanks, hosting large-scale events also presents excellent opportunities to attract potential clients. Other regional think tanks can host various activities such as summit forums, seminars, and dialogues based on their product positioning and research expertise, participating in think tank exchange events to expand cooperation opportunities. Establishing institutionalized cooperation channels with media and utilizing mobile internet, live streaming, audio-visual products, and other means to enrich publicity forms can enhance communication effectiveness. Designing communication products for different audiences—including government, academic peers, enterprises, institutions, and the public—and providing targeted services while embedding brand image into communication carriers can increase think tank influence.

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