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# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

**Volume 10, Number 2 :: November 2011**

*An electronic journal published by*  
The University of San Francisco  
**Center for the Pacific Rim**

# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

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Volume 10, Number 2 • November 2011

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## **The 'China Alternative'? Chinese Counter-Norms and China's Offensive and Defensive Soft Power**

Hyun-Binn Cho, *University of Pennsylvania*

### **ABSTRACT**

To assuage fears of a 'China threat,' analysts have suggested that China now increasingly supports and adheres to international norms and institutions. Yet the possibility that China can promote counter-norms through the international system has rarely been considered. Similarly, as Chinese influence has grown particularly in regions such as Africa and Latin America, it has not been clear what characteristics this increased influence has taken. Together, these two pictures present a case for a 'China alternative.' The question is how to best conceptualize and evaluate this. This essay does so by differentiating between 'defensive' and 'offensive' soft power. The former refers to China's policy to attract others through reassurance, such as the idea of 'peaceful development.' The latter refers to China's policy to attract others to a 'China alternative,' such as through 'no strings attached' aid or counter-norms such as the 'Beijing Consensus.' The effects of these policies have not only been non-trivial: this essay importantly argues that the use of defensive soft power by China to reassure others has masked the extent to which China has simultaneously used its offensive soft power to quietly promote a 'China alternative.'

### **Introduction**

Central to the increasing attention on China has been debate over the 'China threat.' It is by now a familiar story that China's unprecedented economic growth has led to an increase in Chinese influence that could pose a threat to the international system. But consider two logical extensions. On the one hand, with its economic growth, China has re-orientated its foreign policy to become increasingly cooperative, and even supportive, of the multilateral institutions and norms of the international system. For instance, China not only entered the WTO in 2001, it increased its membership in international governmental organizations from just over 30 in 1986 to 53 in 2009, more than doubled the number of international arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation treaties that it has joined between 1990 and 2008, and increased its UN Peacekeeping forces from 5 to over 2,000 between 1990 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> As a result, some analysts have suggested that China is not a revisionist power, and the about face in its foreign policy has been accorded to the socialization affects of international institutions and US engagement policy.<sup>2</sup> But is this the end of the story? The possibility that a 'successfully engaged' China may promote Chinese counter-norms through the system and come to change international norms and institutions via an opposite causal arrow has rarely been considered.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, an extension of China's increase in economic size has been an increase in opportunities to flex its new-found influence. As economic size and political power has grown, Chinese economic interests around the globe have grown too, and this has led to an increase in cases where China's influence can come at the expense of the U.S. or other major powers. Such concerns have arisen particularly as regards the Latin American and African continent. The question is: what is the actual *content* of this increased Chinese influence? What *characteristics* does it have?



These two stories of China potentially promoting counter-norms and the characteristics of China's increased influence in developing countries, pose two perspectives of a 'China alternative' that need reconciling. This essay first aims to provide a clearer conceptual framework to analyze these issues with reference to the popular 'soft-power' discourse surrounding China. Second, upon this framework, this essay aims to create a more coherent picture of China's soft power and counter-norms in China's foreign policy. Lastly, it aims to evaluate the viability of a 'China alternative.'

### ***China's Offensive and Defensive Soft Power***

Joseph Nye's concept of 'soft power' can most readily be understood in terms of the power to attract. In his own words, he defines it as follows: "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies."<sup>4</sup> For instance, if we think about US soft power, we can think of McDonalds, baseball, or freedom of speech. Similarly, when we think about Chinese soft power, we may think of Beijing Duck, pandas, or Confucianism.

But the concept becomes less clear when it comes to explicating the relationship with foreign policy. When doing a cross-database search on the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database - the largest and most comprehensive database for Chinese journals and periodicals - there are no academic articles containing the English word 'soft power' in their title before 2000, 15 between 2000 and 2005, and 467 between 2006 and 2011.<sup>5</sup> The 'Chinese soft power' discourse has met no less success outside of China, most notably through works such as Joshua Kurlantzick's book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*.<sup>6</sup> Yet as more authors have used the term, it has come to include everything from 'Neo-Confucianism,' to 'peaceful rise,' to 'no strings attached' foreign aid. This makes it analytically blunt. For instance, if part of China's peaceful rise is due to its cooperation in multilateral institutions, has it enhanced its soft power? If it aims to use international institutions to socialize others to its values, is it also enhancing its soft power? And if it gives out aid to African states with 'no strings attached,' is it promoting its soft power too?

An important first distinction can be made between 'offensive' and 'defensive' soft power. If, as we saw earlier, Nye can define soft power broadly as 'the power to attract,' then China's policy of 'reassurance' can be located as a form of promoting 'defensive soft power.' For instance, in 2003, it promulgated the idea of 'peaceful rise' to let it be known that its rise would not threaten others<sup>7</sup>; in 2004, the government quickly retracted this concept and renamed it to an even less threatening term 'peaceful development' because 'rise' was too distressing for some; and in recent years, it has come to promote the concept of 'win-win' to characterize joint-cooperative efforts with other countries. As Avery Goldstein has argued, a central objective of China's current grand strategy has been to reassure other countries of its benign intentions and this has been in large part a reaction to the 'China threat' debate.<sup>8</sup> Since the ideas of 'peaceful development' and 'win-win' aim to promote an attractive image of a benign and friendly China, they can be seen as defensive soft power resources. They attract through defense. Similarly, the promotion of such resources can be seen as defensive soft power policies.

In contrast, 'offensive soft power' can be seen in terms of China's policy to promote a 'China alternative.' Here we can classify China's promulgation of the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,' 'New Security Concept' and 'Beijing Consensus' as examples of China's efforts to promote 'offensive soft power.' These political ideas not only convey key Chinese understandings of their own foreign policy, they challenge existing political ideas abroad and provide potential alternatives to them. For instance, the 'Five Principles' promulgated in 1953 advocated a hard-line interpretation of the idea of non-interference, which provided a justification for China to later reject calls by other states to improve its human rights record. The 'New Security Concept,' espoused since the mid-1990s, calls for a departure from 'Cold War mentality' and hence US bilateral alliances, and has been pivotal in China's cooperation with ASEAN as it resonates with their idea of 'cooperative security'<sup>9</sup>. And the 'Beijing Consensus,' coined in 2004, symbolizes the benefits of limited economic liberalization, thus providing African and Latin American countries with a tempting alternative to the 'Washington Consensus.'<sup>10</sup> The idea of the 'New Security Concept' or 'Beijing Consensus' are thus offensive soft power resources that attract others by providing an alternative. The promotion of such resources can be seen as offensive soft power policies.

A second distinction, however, can be made within 'offensive' soft power: those which promote potential Chinese counter-norms and those which do not. For instance, as China's increasing economic ties with Latin America and Africa has led to increasing Chinese interests and influence in these regions, China's 'no strings attached' foreign aid and 'red-carpet diplomacy' has served to bolster public opinion in these regions and enhance China's attractiveness at the potential expense of the 'West.' China's 'no strings attached' foreign aid refers to China giving foreign aid to countries without requesting any political favors in return such as the improvement of democracy in the recipient country; 'red-carpet diplomacy' refers to China's lush treatment of leaders of the developing world when they visit China. Although both policies include material incentives, because money is used to enhance the image and attractiveness of China rather than as direct payment for a transaction with another country, they can both be seen as soft power policies. But neither of them is aimed at promoting new or alternative sets of norms and ideas. Rather, it is the very absence of an imposing ideology that is the distinguishing character and poses a 'China alternative.' On the other hand, the promulgation of Confucian and Chinese culture in these regions through Confucian Institutes can be seen as a form of promoting Chinese counter-norms.<sup>11</sup> According to the Hanban website, by the end of 2010, there were 691 Confucian Institutes and Confucian Classrooms in 96 countries, of which 23 Confucian Institutes were in 16 African countries.<sup>12</sup> These Confucian Institutes not only aim to attract others to Chinese principles and values, adherence to such principles and values can provide an alternative way of life from what is regarded as the norm in the 'West,' such as the value of 'harmony.'<sup>13</sup> Therefore, we can see that offensive soft power has two faces: The first face does not speak of norms, such as 'no strings attached' foreign aid, Chinese cuisine, or Chinese martial arts, while the second face is very much concerned with and actively promotes alternative norms, such as the 'Five Principles,' 'New Security Concept,' and 'Beijing Consensus.' As some authors have recently claimed, '[t]he New Security Concept allows China to claim prestige as a norms entrepreneur.'<sup>14</sup>

### **The Impact of China's Counter-Norms**

Having distinguished 'offensive' from 'defensive' soft power, and Chinese counter-norms as a form of offensive soft power, to what extent are counter-norms relevant? Have Chinese counter-norms been able to gain acceptance in a reverse process of engagement through international institutions, and even change them?

Ironically, the most successful case of Chinese counter-norms to pervade and change international institutions has been in the area that has traditionally been appraised by the pioneers of the study of international norms – human rights. As Andrew Nathan claims: '[i]nstead of being on the receiving end of human rights influence, the Chinese government is increasingly able to blunt the impact of human rights on its domestic rule and *shape the international regime's norms and institutions to its own preferences.*'<sup>15</sup> For instance, China has not only been claiming that human rights is a matter of internal affairs, consistent with its Five Principles of 1953, but that human rights should be judged relative to the cultural context and level of development of the country. In the mid-1990's this idea found resonance with the 'Asian Values' debate in Southeast Asia. More recently, China created a non-Western coalition of states in the UN Human Rights Commission that was able to block Western-sponsored resolutions, causing Secretary-General Kofi Annan to reorganize the commission into the new Human Rights Council in 2006.<sup>16</sup> Although this was not the result of offensive soft power alone, it demonstrates that Chinese counter-norms can gain significant adherence among developing countries and that China can push for change in the international system to reflect its own norms. These examples not only counter the rosy picture of China being merely cooperative and supportive of multilateral institutions, it shows that China can also use the cooperation and support available through the system to promote its own ideas and interests that can in turn shape the system.

Chinese counter-norms have also been bolstered by new Chinese-led international organizations. A prime example is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO first began as a multilateral forum called the Shanghai Five in 1996, which included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The main purpose of the forum was to cooperate on border control and military issues. With the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, the forum was upgraded to an official organization named the SCO, and the agenda expanded to include broader security, economic, and cultural issues. Importantly, the SCO was a result of China's efforts to promote its 'New Security Concept.' *China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept* released by the foreign ministry in 2002 states that:

It is the common call of people to discard the old way of thinking and replace it with new concepts and means... The new security concept is, in essence, to rise above one-sided security and seek common security through mutually beneficial cooperation... To this end, China has placed great importance on and taken an active part in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)... *The SCO is a successful case of the new security concept.*<sup>17</sup>

China has therefore not only been able to promote counter-norms to change existing international institutions, it has been able to create new ones that can, in turn, further promote Chinese counter-norms. And while there are several international institutions that exclude western countries, as the SCO has been conducting joint-military exercises in 2005, 2007, and 2009 with China's global influence growing, there has been increasing attention on the maneuvers and motives of

the SCO.<sup>18</sup> Now the SCO interacts with the United Nations, European Union, and ASEAN and it has recently invited countries such as Iran as observers. The U.S. was rebuffed as an observer in 2005 and still stands as an outsider.<sup>19</sup>

Another example is the Boao Forum – the now largely successful Chinese take on the world-famous European economic forum, the Davos Forum. The forum gets its name from the location it is held – an island in Hainan Province in southern China – and was inaugurated in 2001 to promote regional economic cooperation and exchange of economic ideas among global government, business, and academic leaders. In 2003, China used the Forum to promote its defensive soft power by launching the idea of ‘peaceful rise’ through the Forum.<sup>20</sup> With the subprime mortgage crisis and the ensuing global economic crisis, China increasingly used the Forum to argue that 1) economic liberalization should be gradual, 2) there should be a new global financial system, and 3) although the US pressures China to reevaluate its currency, this is ‘a matter of national sovereignty.’<sup>21</sup> These statements not only challenge the ‘Washington Consensus’ of open markets and transparency, by avoiding issues over democracy or human rights, the Boao Forum creates a picture of an economically successful China that did not have to fully liberalize its economy, thereby showcasing the success of the ‘Beijing Consensus.’ Finally, in 2011, President Hu gave a speech at the Boao Forum titled “Towards a Common Development and a Harmonious Asia” which emphasized the concept of harmony. Thus, the Boao Forum has been another platform for China to promote its counter-norms.<sup>22</sup>

### ***China’s Foreign Policy and its use of Offensive and Defensive Soft Power***

The motivations behind China’s counter-norms, defensive soft power, and offensive soft power can be understood as part of China’s larger foreign policy. First, a crucial motivation for Chinese *counter-norms* is China’s domestic security. From Beijing’s perspective, western norms of ‘liberty,’ ‘democracy,’ and ‘the freedom of opinion,’ pose critical challenges to China’s domestic political stability by triggering a process of ‘peaceful evolution.’<sup>23</sup> This concern explains why China has been particularly forceful with the promulgation of counter-norms in the human rights regime. But China also needs to counter foreign norms through original and globally successful Chinese norms so that it can satisfy its increasingly proud domestic audience. This need relates to China’s global status. Not only can China use such counter-norms to gain adherence as a global ‘trend-setter,’ a more successful China will rear a more ambitious Chinese public, and a controlled promotion of global counter-norms will serve as a form of ‘pragmatic nationalism.’<sup>24</sup> Therefore, if domestic security is the top priority for the ‘Fragile Superpower’ as Susan Shirk argues,<sup>25</sup> the importance of counter-norms in China’s grand strategy can be seen in tandem.

A second point related to the first is China’s use of *defensive soft power* to create a stable regional and international environment. China’s soft power policy of reassurance aims to create an amicable regional and global environment to sustain its economic growth. This policy, in turn, also helps domestic stability. But importantly, China’s use of defensive soft power also masks the extent to which it is simultaneously promoting its offensive soft power. The simultaneous use of defensive



and offensive soft power has been central to China's use of soft power in its foreign policy and this bifurcated strategy is often overlooked when observers analyze whether and to what extent China is a 'revisionist' or 'status quo' power.

Third, China's use of *offensive soft power* in the form of 'no-strings-attached' aid and 'red-carpet diplomacy' is not only crucial in promoting a 'China alternative' to the West, but also in creating a 'PRC alternative' to Taiwan. China has used its foreign aid and investment to woo countries in Latin America and the South Pacific to sever ties with Taiwan and diplomatically recognize the People's Republic of China.<sup>26</sup> Thus, we can see that another defining characteristic of China's offensive soft power policy is that the 'no strings attached' aid to developing countries often attaches the condition of diplomatic recognition.

In this light, we might want to take more seriously China's ambitious proposals to promote the idea of 'harmony' as a new universal norm. As Mingjian Li notes:

"In modern history, Western civilization, epitomized by science, individualism and materialism, pushed for industrialization but caused many problems in the process... Traditional Chinese culture, which stresses 'giving priority to human beings' (*yi ren wei ben*) and 'harmony between nature and humankind' (*tian ren he yi*), could provide alternative approaches to these problems, thus putting Chinese culture in a more advantageous position in the post-industrialization, information era."<sup>27</sup>

If Chinese counter-norms have thus far been mostly successful in 'niche markets' such as with specific groups of developing countries, these norms aim to provide an alternative to the 'mainstream.' As Kurlantzik points out, President Hu's statement that 'Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world,' reveals 'a conviction that other countries desire his culture, just as the American leaders have always evinced.'<sup>28</sup>

### **The Viability of a China Alternative**

But how viable is a 'China alternative'? Some China observers such as Bates Gill and Joshua Kurlantzik are skeptical.<sup>29</sup> First are the arguments that China has many problems at home, such as poor labor standards, environmental degradation, and corruption that pose a limit on China as an attractive alternative. In this way the argument is that sooner or later people will become more aware of China's failures at home, which will lead to their disenchantment. Second is the argument that the China alternative has not been proven and is still a work in progress. For instance, the 'Beijing Consensus' model, although successful so far, still has to prove itself over the long-run. In this sense, success will bring success. Third is the argument that Chinese foreign policy lacks legitimacy. Here it is claimed that China's candid relationship with tyrannical rulers of countries such as Sudan delegitimizes China, as does its lack of democracy and human rights. Fourth is the argument that China simply lacks the resources to compete in the 'soft power' market. Despite hosting the largely successful 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai Expo, little has come out of China that provides a competitive alternative to lasting household names such as Coca Cola, Nike, or Starbucks. This argument is all the more poignant when seen in terms of the influence that Japanese and Korean popular culture has in Asia; an area that China still lags far behind, despite its cultural heritage and economic and political weight. These arguments provide a belittling picture of China's soft power and counter-norms.

Yet the above arguments can themselves be criticized. First, the argument that China's domestic troubles debilitate China's soft power seems to be holding onto the wrong end of the stick: to lessen such concerns will be a primary reason why China would be interested in increasing its soft power. For instance, those who follow Major League Baseball or the Billboard Charts of the US around the world may be more willing to overlook the shortcomings of the US government and its policies. It is said that many people in the former communist bloc who had access to American pop culture began to form more favorable opinions of the US. Second, that the lack of legitimacy in China's foreign policy will lead to a decrease in China's soft power fails to realize that a change in what is deemed 'legitimate' is precisely the objective behind promoting counter-norms. This limitation is therefore a result of a failure to distinguish between soft power and counter-norms. Third, the argument that China lacks soft power resources compared to soft power giants like the US fails to recognize that as large as the influence of the US is, its mistakes will have a much larger negative impact than that of China. This may in turn play into the hands of China's soft power. For instance, in demonstrations around the world against the Iraq War broadcasted on TV, it was not uncommon to see people attack US-branded shops in the streets such as McDonalds or Starbucks. The metaphor that even a peacefully rising Chinese elephant will be able to trample the grass can be applied oppositely to US soft power. In this regard, since the US can also promote its soft power around the world to compete with China's soft power, the viability of a 'China alternative' is not entirely decided by the Chinese.

### **Conclusion**

The viability of a 'China alternative' is not a foregone conclusion. Neither is the prospect of a 'China alternative' entirely new: China has been promulgating counter-norms since at least the Mao era (1950s to 1970s). Yet how this has changed with the change in China's foreign policy, how it functions in China's foreign policy today, and what political motivations underpin them are poorly understood first-steps that are needed to understand the policy of a 'China alternative' from Beijing's perspective.

By conceptualizing and distinguishing offensive and defensive soft power, we can see that the change from revolutionary Maoism to a much more cooperative posture of the 'New Security Concept' has made China's offensive soft power more palatable to the average global citizen. Yet these offensive soft power policies now also coexist with defensive soft power policies such as the promotion of 'peaceful development,' which masks the extent to which China has continued and perhaps even stepped-up its efforts to promote its offensive soft power. Underpinning these policies is a strong political motivation to promote counter-norms for domestic stability, promote defensive soft power for external stability, and promote offensive soft power to woo countries to isolate Taiwan. Focusing exclusively on China's improved cooperative posture in multilateral institutions and failing to recognize these offensive soft power aspects of China's foreign policy can therefore give a misleading view of China's intentions. China is neither a 'revisionist' state in the sense of being bent on taking-down the US; nor is it purely a 'status quo' state in adhering to the international system to maintain its position. Rather, China ap-

pears to be using the international system to quietly promote a 'China alternative' with its offensive soft power policies of 'no strings attached aid' and Confucianism on the one hand, while reassuring others with its defensive soft power policies on the other. The viability of this 'China alternative' is not a foregone conclusion, but it needs to be assessed by recognizing China's strategies more clearly. This paper has sought to provide a framework for such an analysis.

### Endnotes

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2. For instance, see Alistair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?' *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003 Spring); Johnston, 2008; Thomas Christensen 'Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy Towards East Asia,' *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006 Summer).
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4. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York, Public Affairs, 2004). pp. x.
5. See the China Knowledge Resource Integration Database website <http://211.218.126.222/kns50/index.aspx> (Accessed August 14, 2011); Also see Mingjian Li, 'China Debates Soft Power,' *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2., 2008, pp.290-291. According to the author, the number of articles in the China Knowledge Resource Integration Database containing Chinese variations of the word 'soft power' in their title rose from 69 between 1994 and 2004, to 416 between 2005 and 2007.
6. Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, (New York, Yale University Press, 2007.)
7. Zheng Bijian, former vice-chair of the Central Party School, is often given credit as the first person to espouse 'peaceful rise' as a policy of China in a speech entitled 'A New Path for China's Peaceful Rise and the Future of Asia' given on November 3, 2003 at the Baoa Forum. In the speech, he says that "China's only choice is to strive to rise and, more importantly, to strive for a peaceful rise. That is to say, we have to work toward a peaceful international environment for the sake of our own development and at the same time, safeguard world peace through this process of development." See *China's Peaceful Rise: Speeches of Zheng Bijian 1997-2004*, The Brookings Institution, Luncheon Speech 'China's Peaceful Rise' handout, 2005. pp. 15. Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2005/0616china.aspx> (Accessed August 14, 2011).
8. For instance, see Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, (California, Stanford University Press, 2005). pp. 203. Goldstein suggests that central to China's current grand strategy has been its efforts to reassure others.
9. Amitav Acharya, 'How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,' *International Organization*, Vol. 58. (Spring 2004).

10. Joshua Ramo, a foreign analyst, first coined the term 'Beijing Consensus,' not the Chinese government. See Joshua Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus*, (London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004).
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13. See Paradise, 2009; Li, 2008. pp 292.
14. Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to US Primacy,' *International Security*, Vol. 34 No. 4. Spring 2010. pp. 82.
15. Andrew J. Nathan, 'China and International Human Rights: Tiananmen's Paradoxical Impact,' CEF HK Conference paper second draft, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010. Emphasis added.
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20. *Financial Times*, July 8, 2005, 'The Road Obscured' by Mark Leonard.
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22. For the full text of the speech, see [http:// shanghaiist.com/2011/04/17/hu-jintao-speech-boao-forum.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2011/04/17/hu-jintao-speech-boao-forum.php) (Accessed August 14, 2011).
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26. Tamara Renee Shie, 'Rising Chinese Influence in the South Pacific: Beijing's Island Fever,' *Asian Survey*, 2007 Vol. 47, Issue 2, pp.307-326. Emphasis added.
27. Li, 2008, pp. 292. Emphasis added.
28. Kurlantzick, 2007, pp. 118. President Hu's statement was made in 2003.
29. Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, 'Sources and Limits of Chinese 'soft power',' *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 2., 2006. pp. 17-36.

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