Cultures of change: appropriate cultural content in Chinese school textbooks

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This chapter addresses the cultural appropriacy of curriculum change. The common notion of 'context' is critiqued for emphasising the cultural 'problem' of the 'non-native speaker' Other. Instead we propose a critical cosmopolitan approach which appreciates the positive contribution of hitherto unrecognised non-Western cultural realities. When asked about their English language textbooks, Chinese secondary school students reveal their inner cultural realities. These realities are cosmopolitan, transcend diverse urban and rural settings, present a route to the students becoming 'intercultural people', even though they may never travel to English speaking countries, and indicate what makes textbook content authentic and truly communicative.

Key ideas and concepts

The innovation described in this chapter is an ongoing, large project, which is still very much at the research stage. It concerns the cultural content of Chinese secondary school textbooks and research to establish what might be meaningful and authentic for students. Based on interviews with students we argue that a long established 'native speaker' model of ELT and an equally long-standing view of culture, both as curriculum content and as a construction of language learners, have influenced the secondary school curriculum in such a way that it has been taken away from the 'real worlds' of Chinese students.

The chapter is set within the broader context of a developing understanding that what is meaningful to English language students, especially in state educational settings, has continued to remain hidden beneath the paraphernalia of ELT professionalism, and has often been expressed in the non-formal aspects of classroom life (e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday, 2005). This lack of recognition of English language student experience has been linked to the politics of how perceptions of culture have been falsely constructed within the academy and in everyday life to marginalize non-Western realities (Kumaravadivelu, 2007). This lack of recognition has resulted in a false impression that East Asian students are not able to be self-directed, critical or creative because these attributes are not encouraged by collectivist cultures. There is a growing body of research which counters this 'collectivism' theory and indicates that East Asian students have no problem being as independent in their views and actions as anyone else given the opportunity (Cheng, 2000; Clark & Gieve, 2006; Grimshaw, 2007; Kubota, 1999; Ryan & Louie, 2007; [page 44 ends here] Tran, 2009). Where they appear otherwise it is more because of the strictures of particular educational or classroom régimes, including the

high scrutiny and management of talk found in Western classrooms, than with an underlying cultural deficiency (Holliday, 2005, pp. 63-84, 94).

The critique of the way in which the culture of students has been mis-constructed also connects with a broader movement towards a critical cosmopolitan view of culture which refutes national cultural profiling (Holliday, 2011). Indeed, this chapter demonstrates that the students interviewed are way ahead of established simplistic views of culture as surface artefact and tradition. *Even* if they come from what might be considered limited rural experience, they possess a highly sophisticated cosmopolitanism which demands a greater complexity of cultural content in their textbooks and classrooms. As promised by Stuart Hall (1991a, p. 34), they speak from the margins and claim the world.

Case study

Background and context

China has started to implement its new 2010-20 *National Mid-&-Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan*. The strategic goal is to develop each student as a 'whole healthy person' with mental, physical and social-well beings, with an emphasis on values, attitudes, ideology, cognitive, affective and interpersonal skills. The students' critical thinking skills and creativity are also described as one of the strategic goals.

Within primary and secondary ELT, meeting these humanistic goals has been a real challenge. Dramatic changes in materials and methods in the last decade to meet the 2001 National English Curriculum (NEC) have been led by new authorised textbooks which advocate Task-Based communicative teaching (TBLT). The books have been criticized (Zhang, 2007), particularly with regard to the cultural awareness component.

The ideology which is widely accepted among the Chinese schoolteachers is that teaching culture means developing students' awareness of the English native speakers' cultural norm. In the 2000 version of the NEC, 'culture' is defined as 'the target language countries' history and geography, local people's features, natural conditions and social customs, living habits, behaviour norms, arts and literature as well as values and ideology'. Most of the tasks therefore concern Western urban life, with the assumption that most Chinese students will sooner or later go to English speaking countries to live or study. In recent years, some Chinese elements have also been added, such as Chinese traditional festivals and typical Chinese food. It is believed we think mistakenly that this is intercultural communication.

In order to assess the appeal and appropriate content of such textbooks (which are mainly published by international publishers in English speaking **[page 45 ends here]** countries and adapted by Chinese publishers), a study was conducted in big cities, small towns and rural areas in ten provinces in China from 2007-2010. This involved classroom observations and 20 unstructured interviews with teachers and students from junior and senior high schools which might be considered 'in the middle' and did not include key schools in urban areas or the most undeveloped areas. Students aged 14 to 17 were randomly selected with an almost equal number of males and females, and interviewed in focus groups of seven to nine. Some students had started to learn English from age nine and some from twelve.

The interviews revealed a wide variety of opinion about learning culture and the value of English education. One of the problems both teachers and students reported was the thematic content which in turn reflects how ELT professionals perceive cultural awareness in China and its influence on English education. The following are some findings from the study.

Problematic native speaker topics in rural areas

One set of interviews was conducted in a school in the suburbs of Zhuhai, which is only 25 kilometres from the downtown area. (Zhuhai is close to Macao and is one of the most developed areas in South China.) The teachers explained that some of the topics in the textbook were very unfamiliar to the students, such as touring other countries, fast food, and cooking, – for example, 'how do you make a banana milk shake', 'the brand I like'. They said the students therefore have nothing to talk about in class. They explained that most of the students are from local farmers' families and have never been to other places in China, and even have no ideas where the Great Wall is. They painted a picture of parents in the villages who have sold their land, become rich overnight, and do nothing but gamble with cards and other traditional games, of families who seldom use computers or read magazines and newspapers, and of children who believe they can live a good life without going to school. They said that both students and their parents needed to be educated about the values of life.

Students, especially those from rural areas (more than 65% of the students population), said they have no experience of cities and found it difficult to engage with urban life topics such as 'asking the way' and 'planning a trip to Europe', or concepts like 'turn left at the third block' and 'two traffic lights'. A senior high school girl from a Zhejiang mountain school asked: 'Are these textbooks written for us?' Then, she answered the question herself: 'Not'. The small village she lives in has no restaurant, no traffic light, only a muddy road.

This supports McKay's (2003, p.10) observation that 'whereas it is possible that target cultural content is motivating to some students, it is also quite possible that such content may be largely irrelevant, uninteresting, or even confusing for students'. One of the tasks in the textbooks asks students to talk **[page 46 ends here]** about their weekend activities, with the examples, 'go to see a movie, go to an art museum, or go to piano lessons in a coaching school'. However, our interviews revealed that students at a countryside school in Jiangxi, a central province in China, go to pick bamboo shoots, mushrooms in the mountains or go fishing for food during the weekend. They have to cook for themselves as their parents have left home to get money in more developed areas. There is no cinema in the town, which is 30 kilometres away from the village. Another task in a primary textbook is to teach ten year-old-kids to order pizza in a fast-food restaurant. A visit to a school in Yunan revealed that there was only one dish of boiled cabbage in a big pot in the school kitchen, but the textbooks introduce all kinds of food and asked students to role-play their choices of what they prefer to eat in the school canteen. This has some negative impact on the students as they think that society is unfair and complain about being born in poor families.

Devaluing the home culture

Students do learn the differences between the cultures of Chinese and English speaking

countries from the textbooks. When students from a national poverty county in Jiangxi province were asked what else they learned from English classes besides the language itself (grammar, vocabulary, etc.), they answered 'culture'. When asked for detailed examples, they said: 'People in foreign countries do not ask people's age. When you praise someone they say thank you instead of saying something modest'. 'Not like Chinese, foreigners do not ask about your private things'. When asked which way they preferred, they said (in a low voice), 'English culture'.

Students from Beijing seemed to enjoy the stories in the textbook. Observation of a primary school class in downtown Beijing revealed that the students could express themselves clearly and fluently in English. The reading passage was about a girl from a poor Cuban family; she lived in a shabby house and did not have enough food to eat. After immigrating to the US, she became a famous singer star and a very rich lady. The teacher asked what students wanted to do in the future. One boy said: 'When I grow up, I do not want to go to university but to make big money in the future'. Another boy said: 'I think going to school is boring and I want to go to work as soon as possible'. We do not suggest that these lessons have direct influence on students thinking but, as one of the observers commented afterwards, the reading passage was 'propaganda'. This may relate to what Ellis (2003, p. 332) refers to as 'the hidden socio-political messages' in the tasks.

Also, some teachers only seemed to ask students to accept the culture norm introduced in the textbooks. One male junior high student from Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi, in north China, said: 'We are students and we can only accept the reality and the ideas as we are not mature enough to challenge the ideas in the textbook, so we had better just follow what is **[page 47 ends here]** written in the textbook'. English teaching may also have impact on student identity choice. He concluded: 'When we learn English, it is a totally different culture. Since we learn English and use it in the future, the ultimate goal is to change ourselves into another person and behave like English speaking people'.

What are students interested or not interested in?

The teaching of intercultural communication embeds in functional dialogues some popular culture, such as going shopping, talking about weather, introducing people, ordering food, and table manners. However, most of the students interviewed expressed their dissatisfaction with these functional conversations. Students in Taiyuan and Kunming, the capital city of Yunan in the southwest, rated as second grade in economic development, both said that interpersonal communication topics simply involve dialogues with fixed expressions and recycle the same things with different grammar structures. They said nobody would use them in everyday life and repeat the same things. They thus found them very boring.

When asked why they did not want to speak English, some students expressed their frustration. Students from Guilin, a tourist city of Guangxi, a western province considered as less developed, said: 'We can only use a few daily conversations, such as greetings and asking about the weather. We soon lose interest since there is nothing new for us to express ourselves. What we do want to say are not in the textbooks'. One of their teachers said: 'there are few topics that the students really enjoy reading. The texts do not seem to touch the hearts of the students'.

Some students from Beijing laughed at the topics about weekends because most students attend coaching school on weekends and they have as heavy workload as they do during week days. The reality of Chinese education is still under the pressure of test-driven instruction and students do not have much time to enjoy weekends. It is reported that 85-90% of the urban students go to tutorial classes in their spare time, where they are taught more adult material so that they can take the tests to prove their level of English and be enrolled into better schools.

The need for guidance in life and 'real-world' meaningfulness: love, politics and life skills

What do students want to talk about? Some students in different places expressed their ideas about this. They said that they like something meaningful for their lives, including stories which may give them guidance for their futures. They also enjoy songs and sports, movies and literature. Students in Yunnan reported that they like to talk about movies, food, things they want to do in the future, politics, comments about China by **[page 48 ends here]** people from other countries. They prefer topics on friendship, love and life skills. Some students like to listen to the BBC news about China. They also like popular music, and sports.

The teachers from Shanxi reported that students have strong pressure from their families and like classroom topics which help them to deal with and talk about this pressure. They like the topics such as violence, because lots of students have experienced robbery out of school. When the teacher taught a love poem, they were surprised how much the students simply loved to read it. The students are mature enough to think about their life and the future and want to share their ideas, feelings and talk about it in class. One student from Hongsibao, a small town in Ningxia, a Hui minority Autonomous Region in North China, said:

> I want to read something deeper, underlying the surface of life, sophisticated with philosophy. Even some fables could give me enlightening in life. For example, if I go out and meet up some problems, how can I solve these problems? I do not like to read something that just describes a 'beautiful life' and recites it, which is far away from our own reality.

A teacher from Beijing also mentioned that she gave students some supplementary reading materials and one of them is on school bullying. She thought this topic may be too serious for students. But students simply enjoyed reading it and had a good discussion. A female student from a senior high school in Suzhou, in central China and considered one of the most developed cities, said: 'I like to read articles about other countries on how their people solve certain problems, about their worries and concerns, their way of life, such as the ones in *Reader*' (a very popular Chinese magazine which carries some articles about the life of famous heroes, touching stories, mottos and jokes).

Students from a Kunming in Yunnan senior high school complained that they do not have time to read enough to acquire new knowledge, and were therefore not so interested in everyday domestic things:

> We can't talk about anything, even in Chinese. We need something more complicated, new things happening in the world, things to keep us up with current society, new things we need to be exposed to.

When they were asked if they have chances to speak to English speaking people, one student said: 'Yes, once I just came up and said "hi" to them. But I couldn't express more complicated ideas when the talk continued'. A girl from Jiangxi rural area school said: 'I want to exchange ideas on how to deal with our parents and teachers on the phone with my classmates in English, so my parents won't understand what we talk about'. **[page 49 ends here]**

The above interviews provide evidence that students like to learn about social and personal issues rather than simply about topics concerning English speaking countries. Richards (2001) cited Morris (1995) about a curriculum perspective which develops 'knowledge, skills, and attitudes which would create a world where people care about each other, the environment, and the distribution of wealth, tolerance, the acceptance of diversity and peace' and 'social injustices and inequality would be central issues in the curriculum' (p.118). Thus, communication is only one goal of learning English and the development of students' awareness of their own personalities and social roles, responsibilities, sense of self-confidence and self-realizations should also be pursued, as Candlin proposed in the 1980s.

The innovation: to set up socio-cultural goals in the curriculum

The interviews shed much light for our rethinking of the goals of ELT in the Chinese context. The authors believe there is a need to reconceptualize the purpose and content of culture teaching in the curriculum. First, we need to rethink the purpose of English education for schools. We propose to teach socio-culture, cognitive and thinking skills through the learning of English, rather than 'culture'. Social-cultural goals include interpersonal relationships, ways of thinking, life-styles, attitudes toward life, society, politics, and economics. Students in classrooms need to exchange ideas about these topics (Cook, 2007) so that 'the language loses its predominant position' (Yalden, 1984: p.18).

Thus, English education will set up three independent and integrated goals. We may call this 'a multi-goal approach'. A multi-goal approach is to develop new perceptions of reality in Chinese society and the rest of the world, so that students may experience cognitive and affective changes in their world view, and have a better idea of what their goal is in the future and behave differently in the light of such perceptions. They may learn to develop a critical eye and different perspectives for seeing the world, and adapt new cultural norms and personalities. More familiar topics which are relevant to their life should be included in their textbooks, so that the students in both rural and urban areas have something to talk about, and textbook writers will have to think what should be selected as appropriate content in terms of tasks (Breen, 2001; Candlin, 2001).

The culture component in the curriculum may be replaced with social-cultural thematic content which is not limited to popular culture, but can also include ideology, world views, values, beliefs and socialization. Intercultural communication should not be perceived as a way of imposing 'native speaker' cultural norms or of forcing students to accept and imitate 'native speaker' normality, but instead as a means for learning how

to become a multicultural person. Thus, students would not necessarily take in the cultural norms of the English speaking West, but learn how to be tolerant, **[page 50 ends here]** learn other cultural perspectives and express their own or develop 'a third culture' (Kramsch, 2009). Curriculum designers need to take the values of ELT, the Chinese reality, educational goals, teaching and learning environments, and students' future needs into consideration in designing the ELT curriculum for Chinese schools.

Reflection: understanding and combating the influence of native-speakerism on ELT

It seems that from the curriculum to classroom reality, the ideology of English education in China is influenced by 'native-speakerism' (Holliday, 2005), which believes that the ultimate goal of English language education is to help students to communicate with 'native speakers' of English and that the culture of English speaking countries should be the norm for ELT. Within this ideology, the purpose of teaching is to help cope with the problems of a so-called 'real-world' which is perceived mistakenly to be the context in English speaking countries. The 'native speaker' language is considered as the only model. Most of the task content reflects daily life, beliefs, values and attitudes of Western countries and intercommunication is to help learners to understand target language speakers' way of thinking.

This native-speakerism does not only appear in the curriculum and the textbooks, but also in language teaching research and journal articles. According to a survey by the National Association of Foreign Language Education, Chinese Educational Society (Gong, forthcoming), between 2005 and 2010, 95% of journals published in the Chinese mainland for school teachers on the teaching of culture refer to 'intercultural communication' as introducing the cultural norms of English-speaking countries. Only one article compares Chinese culture with Western culture, but each comparison concludes with comments on the inappropriateness of Chinese culture.

Such ideas about English language teaching and cultural norms are challenged within the notion of English as an international language (EIL) from political, cultural, local appropriateness, and economical perspectives (Pennycook, 1989; Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Rajagopalan, 2004; Cummins & Davison, 2007). The increasing growth in multicultural and multidimensional communication is challenging traditional single culture values (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) and some recent mainstream SLA research is being criticized as being unable to capture the complexity of language, the language learner, the processes of language learning, and learners' multiple identities from sociocultural or sociohistorical perspectives (Okazaki, 2005). Others also challenge the ideology of native-speakerism for imposing Western culture and values onto other countries, under the heading of 'linguistic imperialism' (e.g., Phillipson, 1992). Kumaravadivelu (2003) also points out that the special purpose of developing learners' ability for 'native speakers' of English may result in the individual voice and the cultural identity **[page 51 ends here]** of the second language learner becoming hopelessly marginalized. This leads us to rethink the purpose of ELT and the objectives in the curriculum.

The interviews also help us to understand why some students seem very passive and keep silent in the English classroom. The students may want to express themselves in

the classroom, but simply have nothing to say because the content is not what they are familiar with or not what they are really interested in. This is an example, to some extent, of 'hidden realities' (Holliday 2005: 85ff), where:

> while it is certainly the case that when going into classrooms in many parts of the world, students will *appear* to be lacking in autonomy, it is false logic to assume that their outward behaviour in these particular institutional settings reflects their internalized perceptions and abilities. (Holliday, 2005, p. 86, original emphasis)

We need to redefine some of the popular terms which have been interpreted in different ways, such as 'real world', 'appropriate language use', 'authenticity' and 'negotiation of meaning'. What are the 'real world tasks' for Chinese high school English learners? Apparently, some of the tasks for students are far away from students' real world. Distinguishing the difference between 'competence' and 'capacity', Widdowson suggests that the communicative language teaching is not defined, 'as it usually is, in reference to native speaker norms of knowledge and behaviour. The contexts which make instances of the possible appropriate as communication do not have to be replications of native speaker realities' (2007, p.218).

The appropriate purpose of ELT as a school-subject.

Moving away from the desire to assimilate English learners within a native-speakerist ideal requires a rethinking of the appropriate purpose of ELT as a school-subject, especially in those countries in most Asian areas where most learners seldom have chances to use English for interpersonal communication in their daily life. In a discussion of task-based language teaching, Candlin points out that:

> Targets for language learning are all too frequently set up externally to learners with little reference to the value of such targets in the general educational development of the learner. Because we are concerned with language learning, it is very easy to forget that we should be equally if not more concerned with the developing personalities of our learners. (Candlin, 1987, p.16-17, original emphasis)

According to Cook (2007), the goals of ELT can be divided into two categories, external goals and internal goals. External goals refer to actual **[page 52 ends here]** language use outside the schools and internal goals relates to the educational aims for the schools itself. The former focuses on how students benefit from language teaching regarding language knowledge and skills; and the latter emphasizes students' overall mental development as a qualified citizen, for example, their personality, way of thinking and tolerance of other cultural experience.

The English education program as school subject should give emphasis to students' cognitive development and critical thinking skills so as to educate a generation with both international and national visions. They are multicultural citizens who are not only able to communicate with people about their own and other cultural realities but also able to express their own views and opinions (Alptekin, 2010). Besides, they can think

and reflect critically from both their own perspective and other perspectives and can even effectively solve problems such as misunderstandings and conflicts in communication (Álvarez, 2007).

Nunan (1999) points out the need for language education to develop generalized capacities in learners and points out the possible problems of teaching English as a foreign language, 'not because there is any likelihood that they (learners) will actually use the language, but because it will foster the development of cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and intercultural skills, knowledge, and attitudes' (p.155). We believe these are the key value of English language education for schools in which English is a school subject.

It is true that each year, many Chinese school students go abroad to study and the number has increased dramatically in the last ten years. For such students, interpersonal communication skills are very important as they may have to assimilate into the society they live in which is their reality and their 'real world'. However, the number of students going abroad to study only comprises a small proportion of the student population. The situations presented in textbooks are not the 'real world' of most students, especially those students in rural areas. The students' 'real world' is their inner-world, their knowledge world and their future world.

Rethinking 'intercultural communication' teaching

In recent years, much has been published on the study of intercultural communication and it is time to abandon the traditional concept of 'culture' teaching in foreign language education. First, culture does not only refer to the popular culture of eating habits, food, clothing, or festivals. Indeed, reducing cultural identity to such things is considered by many to be essentialist, demeaning and patronizing (Hall, 1991b, pp. 55-56; Holliday, 2011, p. 82; Kumaravadivelu, 2007, p. 109). Neither is it something which is fixed inside national cultural boundaries. Following Max Weber's social action view of society, culture can be described in terms of: **[page 53 ends here]**

> Categories of cultural action: global position and politics (how people position themselves with regard to foreign others within a global order), statements about culture (what people say about their culture), cultural resources (what people draw on, in particular situations, from national or other cultural realities), and underlying universal cultural processes (cultural strategies shared by everybody). (Holliday, 2011, p. 24)

These categories embody a strong sense of personal cultural trajectories within which individuals form their cultural realities through the particular histories they develop through life (Holliday, 2011, pp. 49ff). There is some relationship here with Scollon & Scollon's cultural categories of ideology (history and worldview, e.g., beliefs, values, and religion), socialization (e.g., education, enculturation, acculturation), forms of discourse (e.g., functions of language, non-verbal communication), and face system (social organization, e.g., the concept of the self, ingroup-outgroup relationship) (2001, p. 138). Obviously, culture takes in many concepts of values, worldviews, ideology, social relationships and organizations, self-identity and popular culture. It is essential to foster students' ability to be tolerant, open minded and to learn positive concepts of social values

rather than being narrow minded or subservient to foreigners and worship foreignness blindly and to be deprived of national dignity.

Sticking with an emphasis on cultural differences may not only bring some negative perception about students' own culture and develop essentialist stereotypes, but it may result in frustrations and even insult. Once, one of the authors was visiting an American testing company and an American lady wanted to meet him at the company's café at five o'clock; but she did not show up until almost one hour later. When asked why she was so late, she said: 'Isn't it you Chinese who are usually late for a meeting?' When asked who told her this, she said her husband is a Chinese from Taiwan!

Also, Chinese society is changing quickly; the current culture in the urban areas is quite different from what was 30 years ago. 'Chinese culture' has changed dramatically in the last 30 years in terms of living and eating habits, daily greetings, communication, transportation, clothing, ways of thinking, perception of values and even language. If one goes to the department stores in the regional capital cities in China, one will find there is no big difference from cities in most industrialized European countries. Perhaps it is true to say that there is much greater cultural difference between urban and rural areas within China than between Beijing, Shanghai and other big cities in other countries. In China, Chinese scholars frequently engage in controversial debate about the core feature of 'traditional Chinese culture'. Thus, it is not necessary to differentiate 'cultural differences'. Second, the current practice of ELT in Chinese schools does not seem to meet the goal of education in that the students, despite their critical tone during the interviews, tend to behave as passive receivers of the facts and repeat the formulaic expressions. From the interviews, one may find what Clark described is true:
[page 54 ends here]

> Reconstructionist approaches all seem to imply that learners have to learn to recreate the exact speech pattern of the target language community. Learners tend to be asked to learn stereotypical language. They act out particular roles, but do not seem to create what they say and do. In real life, however, the roles that we adopt are functions of the interactions we engage in, rather than static possessions. The language we use originates from deep roots in our personality, rather than from predetermined scripts. If we do not have practice at making the necessary links between the deeper processes of our cognitive and affective make-up and whatever language tokens are available to us, we may never learn how to mould the foreign language to our own ends. (Clark 1987, p.38)

However, we are not suggesting that there should not be an introduction to and discussion of values, ideology or history and geography. What we suggest is an abandonment of the traditional ideology of intercultural communication which comprises a one-way information transfer and emphasis on cultural differences. There are commonly accepted values, such as honesty, responsibility, social justice, peace and human rights which are also stated as requirements in the Chinese educational plan, though different people may have different understanding of what these concepts really mean. However, this gives the student the opportunities to develop 'critical culture' ability and to become a 'multicultural person' (Alptekin, 2010). This is more likely to realize the goal of

development of 'a whole person' perused in the Chinese educational reform and development plan.

Conclusion

This chapter reports a piece of research which forces us to look deeply into the feelings and wishes of primary and secondary school students in a variety of locations in China. These students take us into their worlds, which in many cases we have not previously seen or appreciated. They present themselves as sophisticated and cosmopolitan young people who, despite the massive pressures placed upon them, have genuine interests in exploring the world. They open up exciting challenges for making the English curriculum more adult and authentic. They also help us to shake established views about culture in ELT, and confirm recently expressed theories about culture as a moving, creative force which can be shared and owned in a multiplicity of ways. **[page 55 ends here]**

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