


Hollywood and Shanghai Cinema in the 1930s

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**Abstract:** In his article "Hollywood and Shanghai Cinema in the 1930s" Adrian Song Xiang argues that Hollywood films provided a repertoire of images Chinese filmmakers of the 1930s adapted to their films. Xiang analyses Yu Sun's (孙瑜) 1932 film *野玫瑰* (Wild Rose), whose leading female character Xiaofeng was adapted from Hollywood actress Mary Pickford's iconic rambunctious teenager screen persona, particularly from the 1922 film *Tess of the Storm Country*. The modernist connotations of *Tess'* teenage girl character were changed in the process to meet Chinese cultural and political needs. Xiang's analysis suggests an adjustment in the history of early Chinese cinema to account for Hollywood's complex legacy.

## Adrian Song XIANG

### Hollywood and Shanghai Cinema in the 1930s

The influence of Hollywood on early Chinese cinema has been increasingly studied recently. Questioning a nationalist narrative that portrays Hollywood's dominating presence as simply economic imperialism and a source of moral corruption, scholars in both the U.S. and China have begun to study the ways Hollywood films may have played a role in the early development of Chinese cinema. Zhiwei Xiao argues, for instance, "given the fact that American films made up more than 85 percent of the cinema programs during the Republican period, a fuller understanding of Chinese film history will have to consider the Hollywood dimension" (Xiao 56). Thus as Republican Chinese narrative filmmaking began in early 1920s, it was already very much in the shadow of classical Hollywood films. Its calculations, whether to find uncharted territories or to use Hollywood as the role model, had the latter in mind from the very beginning. As Xiao puts it, because "the cinematic style and narrative strategy of the narrative film productions [in Republican China] were developed in a conscious effort to compete with American films for Chinese audience," studying the reception of Hollywood films in Republican China "is a prerequisite for critically assessing the native filmmaking legacy and provides insights into Chinese cinematic aesthetics" (Xiao 56).

The influence of Hollywood films on Republican Chinese filmmaking was extensive, ranging from genre and subject matter to directorial and performance styles. In one area it was particularly pronounced: Chinese actors and actresses were often compared to popular Hollywood icons for the purpose of promotion (see Xiao 58-59). Thanks to the popularity and high visibility of Hollywood stars — partly achieved through such aggressive business practice by US-American distributors and contracted Chinese exhibitors as flooding Chinese fan magazines with photographs and gossip of Hollywood stars — the easiest and surest way to promote a Chinese actor or actress was to compare him/her to a familiar Hollywood star. Hence we see nicknames such as "Greta Garbo of the Orient," "Mae West of the East," the "Chinese Jackie Coogan" after the well-liked child actor in Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), or to compare the Chinese heartthrob Yan Jin to Rudolph Valentino (Xiao 58-59). But the "piggybacking" by Chinese actresses and actors did not stay on the superficial level of promotion in the press. It went to the very heart of the creative process, to how characters in Chinese 时装剧 (contemporary costume drama) were designed both narratively and iconographically. Images of modern men and especially women from Hollywood films were adapted into Chinese film narratives which dealt with the traumatic experience of Chinese modernization. Chinese flappers with their iconic bobbed hair, for instance, did not only appear in advertisements, but appeared also in Chinese films in the 1920s as symbols of problematic modern mores (Zhou 115-22).

My interest is to inquire into the processes of the above-mentioned adaptation: how were the figures from Hollywood films worked into Chinese films, and how did their meanings change during the process? This inquiry is made difficult by the fact that not only have the vast majority of early Chinese films been lost, there is also little documentation available about the making and reception of the films involved. One exception is Yu Sun's (孙瑜). 1932 film *野玫瑰* (Wild Rose) with Renmei Wang as the female lead. Wang's character Xiaofeng was adapted from Hollywood star Mary Pickford's iconic screen persona of a rambunctious teenage girl in the 1922 film *Tess of the Storm Country*. Through close textual analysis of these films, I discuss the process of adaptation and argue that the recuperation of the modernist potential of Pickford's screen persona was essential for Sun's film.

Like other well-known Hollywood actresses, gossip about Pickford, her biography, and her nicknames appeared frequently in Chinese media in 1920s and early 1930s. Pickford's popularity can be gauged by the attachment of her name to the Chinese actress Minghui Li, member of the important Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe (Jones 73-104). Entering the movie business in late 1920s at the age of fifteen and small in stature, the "Chinese Mary Pickford" played mainly tomboy or boy roles. As her films have all been lost, it is difficult to determine whether she was given the nickname because Pickford's screen persona inspired her characters or because of superficial likeness. According to one Chinese filmmaker from the 1920s, she was given the nickname because her screen persona was "innocent and lively" and therefore was "somewhat similar to Pickford" (Dai 301; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). After Li, two more actresses were cast in the mode of Pickford's

screen persona. Renmei Wang and Lili Li were younger members of Bright Moon, which by then had become a part of the Lianhua Film Company and after appearing in a series of films Sun directed for Lianhua in early 1930s including *Wild Rose*, *小玩意* (Little Toys) and *体育皇后* (Queen of Sports), the two became major stars. It was no accident that more than one member of Bright Moon resembled Pickford's screen persona. One of the first and few all-female song and dance troupes China, Bright Moon's training produced young performers who were physically fit and lively in personality (R. Wang 27-84). As Renmei Wang remembers Li, the latter's film career was in some respects an extension of her stage career where she "danced in a short jacket and short skirt, barefooted and with short hair" much to the chagrin of conservative forces in society (45). Wang as a member of the dance troupe likely danced in a similar way and caused just as much controversy on stage (see Jones 73-104). The adaptation of the Pickfordian persona was therefore not just the result of the fame of or fascination with a Hollywood icon. In the case of Wang and Li, it was also not a case of superficial resemblance but the convergence of two performative trajectories. Wang and Li were discovered by Sun, who encouraged them to simply play themselves (see MacDonald 53-54). They became famous for playing "wild" rural immigrant characters which in Sun's cinema was a critique of the corruption of the city and for embodying 健美 (healthily sexy young women) thought to be compatible with the goal of nation building (Macdonald 55-57). That the two actresses became the embodiment of this type of modern Chinese woman is evidenced by a still from Sun's 1933 film *小玩意* (Little Toys), a low-angle shot accentuating Li's strong bare legs in shorts which was widely circulated in the popular press (Zhang, Zhen 270). The star discourse, however, all began with Sun's adaptation of Pickford's iconic screen persona for Wang in *Wild Rose*.

*Wild Rose* combines elements of the urban immigration narrative and what I call the "seduction narrative," both of which were popular in Chinese cinema in the 1920s and 1930s. It tells the story of a teenage country girl named Xiaofeng who lives with her fisherman father in a hut in the countryside near Shanghai. Jiang Bo, scion of a wealthy family in Shanghai and an artist, tires of his urban bourgeois environment and escapes to the countryside to paint. There he meets Xiaofeng and is soon captivated by her "wildness" and rustic vitality unspoiled by the city. Xiaofeng is taken by Jiang as well. After a fire destroys her home and kills her father, Jiang brings Xiaofeng to Shanghai with him. In Jiang family's grand Westernized home, Xiaofeng fails disastrously to blend into the Westernized bourgeois guests end disastrously and is thrown out by Jiang's father, a severe patriarch. Jiang rebels, breaks with his family, and moves with Xiaofeng to live with his working class friends, billboard painter Xiao Li and newspaper seller Laoqiang in their dismal ghetto dwelling. After trying and failing to make a living as an artist, Jiang becomes a billboard painter as well. In the face of adversity and the harshness of urban proletarian existence, Xiaofeng, Jiang, and their friends exhibit high spiritedness to transcend their impoverished environment. I note here that the youthful characters' high spiritedness juxtaposed with naturalistic depictions of poverty is a trademark of Sun's films and influenced later films such Muzhi Yuan's 1937 *马路天使* (Street Angel). *Wild Rose* does not end in a clear happy end although the film's ending suggests the ideology of social realism where life is successful when social commitment is achieved: winter comes and the friends are beset by unemployment and illness. To make things worse, Jiang and his friend Xiaoli end up in jail after Xiaofeng picks up a wallet dropped by a drunkard. Xiaofeng begs Jiang's father to bail him out and in exchange promises to never see him again. Jiang returns to his family but keeps searching for Xiaofeng who hides in the countryside working in a sweatshop and eludes him. At the end of the film, however, the two meet unexpectedly in a patriotic rally and join the voluntary army together. *Wild Rose* romanticizes the countryside as a contrast to the city in the form of Xiaofeng, a creature who is "wild" or unspoiled by urban life, full of unrestrained energy and innocent. It is a reworking of the established seduction film genre, which began in mid 1920s. In the typical seduction films, for instance, a wealthy dandy (or woman) seduces a poor woman (or man). As these films usually offer a cynical view of the experience of urbanization where rootlessness, economic polarization, and the danger of glamor are the main features, the romance always ends badly. Sun's films are one of the few bright exceptions to the rule by introducing romantic characters such as Jiang who are idealistic rebels and Xiaofeng who maintain their innocence after migrating to the city.

The narrative and stylistic contributions of *Tess of the Storm Country* to Wild Rose are striking. Pickford plays the title character Tess, a teenage member of a poor fishing community squatting on the land belonging to the wealthy and tyrannical patriarch Elias Graves. Conflict breaks out when Elias tries to evict the squatters. At the same time, however, a romance develops between Tess and Elias's son, Frederick, who unlike his father is friendly to the squatters. Their romance is doubly threatened when Tess's father is falsely accused of killing one of Elias's henchmen during a dispute and when Tess takes in the illegitimate child of Elias's daughter Teola, who, being afraid of the scandal throws herself into the lake and is rescued by Tess. Unaware of the truth, Frederick thinks that the illegitimate child belongs to Tess and doubts her character. The crisis is resolved when Tess brings the dying baby to church and "demands, despite Elias's scorn, that the baby's be baptized. She performs the act herself just before the baby expires, and Teola claims her child just before dying herself. The deaths of Teola and his grandson lead to a change of heart on the part of Elias, who eventually deeds the village to the squatters, and to a reconciliation between Tess and Fred" (Jacobs 187-88).

Both films begin by portraying the female protagonist's daily life showcasing her "wild" qualities and their iconographies are strikingly similar. Both sport luscious long hair, wear tattered clothes and are bare-footed. Both are portrayed as being irrepressible, irreverent and hyperkinetic. Tess enters dozing in a boat underneath a cabin perched half on land and half on water. Xiaofeng similarly enters in a boat underneath a hut perched half on land and half on water. When Tess sees her father coming back on a fishing boat, she runs to the boat, throws herself onto him, tosses away his hat, tousles his hair, shakes him back and forth and kisses and embraces him wildly. Xiaofeng's action toward his father is less wild and intimate; nonetheless it stands out for not conforming to the Confucian code of behavior. Still in the boat, Xiaofeng hears her father cursing inside the hut because she has hidden his alcohol. Climbing in through a window on all fours, Xiaofeng laughs at and cajoles him, slaps him on the shoulder, scratches his chin and ends by demanding a smile from him, thus reversing the parent-child hierarchy. When one of Elias' henchmen tussles with a squatter, Tess launches herself onto him like a human canon ball and fights tooth and nail (with a touch of exaggeration meant to showcase her feistiness). When a lascivious fish merchant to whom Xiaofeng's father owes money accosts and tries to molest Xiaofeng, she deliberately runs along a ditch and pushes him into it with her body. Xiaofeng is also shown to be the leader of village children (as is Li's character in *Little Toys*). She leads the children in both practical jokes and mock military drills. As a topical reference to the 1932 War of Shanghai, which concluded shortly before *Wild Rose* was made and which swept the Chinese film industry based primarily in Shanghai into patriotic fervor, Xiaofeng demands a vow of patriotism from each child (although not without comic touches) (on Shanghai cinema, see also Zhang, Ling <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2226>>).

The rambunctious teenage girl was Pickford's iconic and enduring screen persona and she achieved international fame starring in "screen adaptations of several classic children's novels and stories" with "long, backlighted blonde curls ... Tattered-Tom clothes, a sometimes smudged face, and with no visible breasts ... Pickford's little-girl roles established her as the highest paid, most idolized, and most powerful female in the entertainment business" (Tibbets 51). Contemporaneous to other types of modern womanhood such as the daredevil heroines in adventure serials (see Singer 205-46) and "authored by women who were social, cultural and educational reformers," Pickford's characters represented a new type of the US-American girl: "Whereas hitherto a character like Little Eva had been the exemplar of Victorian sentimentality — the child whose greatest act ... was to die a saint... [the new US-American girl] had the good sense to develop into a normal, healthy child ... [characterized by] being practical, high-spirited, independent, and, above all, an imaginative creature determined to confront and cope with the adult world's miseries and inequalities" (Tibbets 52). As a result, "out of the passivity of the Cult of True Womanhood was emerging the activism of the Ideal of the REAL Womanhood — or, more specifically, the 'Ideal of the REAL GIRL' ... where young females were encouraged to be practical, productive, and physically fit" (Tibbets 52).

Gaylyn Studlar, however, argues that Pickford's screen persona mixed emancipatory meanings with Victorian ideals of womanhood: "The image of the eroticized child-woman is familiar throughout the work of D.W. Griffith, where it has often been associated with Victorian ideals of femininity. Pickford's hoyden shares much with that ideal and with Griffith's child-women, but her characters'

physical assertiveness and determined mind-set tend to obscure these fundamental commonalities" (54). At the same time she provided an emancipatory respite from Victorian womanhood, the eroticized child woman brought reassuring viewing pleasure to conservative male viewers. A Pickford character can be simultaneously a rambunctious child and a "sweet" young woman in the making. That is the reason why Pickford was promoted as the US-American sweetheart in contemporary press and moved the poet and film critic Vachel Lindsay to dub her the "divine doll" (Lindsay qtd. in Studlar 39). Studlar further argues that the rambunctious girl is often normalized into a more restrained womanhood through an act of illness or injury (38).

This complexity can be seen clearly in *Tess*. Tess's feistiness is a ritualized performance piece and serves mainly a decorative function and its connotations of rebelliousness do not have a significant narrative function in the film. Soon after the set piece is over in the very first segment of the film, Tess becomes all sweetness in the presence of Frederick, fretting about taming her wildness for the better-washed and more refined wealthy young man (this is similar to the "taming of the shrew" already a notion in Shakespeare [see, e.g., Vasvári <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1209>>]). Tess's sweetness is more important thematically and narratively than rebelliousness as it makes the cross-class romance possible. Frederick is not a rebellious character. Although he mildly disagrees with his father's attitude towards the squatters, he does not rebel in the way Jiang does by leaving home and living in the ghetto. Equally important, in the second half of the film class tension gives way to a moral crisis as Tess adopts the illegitimate child by Frederick's sister Teola and hides the truth from everyone including Frederick in order to protect Teola. Frederick is offended morally and turns away from Tess. In one early scene in the film we see Frederick teach the illiterate Tess about the Bible. This is a pivotal scene not only because it hints at the moral issue to emerge but also because the narration develops towards an ironic revelation that it is the "wild," uneducated Tess who turns out to be more "Christian" than any member of the refined Graves family. In the film's climatic scene, Tess baptizes the dying illegitimate child herself in the church against the vehement opposition from the congregation. She is placed alone near the altar in a slightly lower-angle shot, which makes her seemingly tower over the Graves.

Like Tess, Xiaofeng also goes through a process of normalization or growing up into adulthood and social norms. This takes the form of recognition of the power of the status quo, role reversal and self-sacrifice. When winter comes and Jiang falls ill, Xiaofeng assumes the role of the caretaker. When Jiang lands in jail for being falsely accused of stealing, Xiaofeng goes to Jiang's father and begs him to take Jiang back and in exchange agrees to never see him again. What follows is a familiar melodramatic sequence. On the one hand, Jiang searches far and wide but fails to find her. On the other hand, Xiaofeng works in a sweatshop and hides from Jiang. Her action is accompanied by close-ups of her face showing suffering and longing, which emotions mark her entrance into adulthood. The melodramatic affect is also achieved through space: In the scene where Xiaofeng comes to beg Jiang's father to take him back, the camera is placed behind Jiang's father at the near end of a grand and deep hall. Unlike in previous seduction films where Western style grand halls are meant to inspire admiration, here the depth of field makes the space intimidating. Xiaofeng approaches from the far end and is made smaller by the distance between her and the patriarch and camera. When she leaves, she moves away from the camera to the far end. As Xiaofeng has promised to never see Jiang again, her walk towards the far end of the hall is all the more poignant. Last but not the least, the hall has a pair of large doors lit from behind that dominate human figure that stand before it and in dark.

At the same time, Xiaofeng's normalization is delayed and mediated by the romantic group — Jiang and his two working class cronies — that surrounds her. Although normalization takes place eventually, the "wildness" is sustained for two thirds of the film and is narratively and thematically central. The characters' superiority to their environment is entirely the result of the exuberance of their youth. Once Xiaofeng's "wildness" is showcased in the first segment of the film, it sets the tone for the behavior of the rest of the characters throughout the first half of the film. Xiaofeng, Jiang and their friends are so feverishly high-spirited that they seem to be impervious the harshness of their urban proletarian existence. They meet every obstacle with a Boy Scout-like salute — which we first see performed by Xiaofeng and her friend in the countryside in the first segment of the film — that instantly transports them to their own youthfully carefree realm. When Xiaofeng and Jiang move in

with their friends, they deal with the poor living conditions by joking about the amazing feat of so many families crammed into a single house and cite what appears to be a popular doggerel explaining how the space is divided and utilized to the maximum. Jiang jokes that their new attic apartment is just like the attic where he lived in Paris when he studied painting there. This sequence ends with physical comedy: the four friends shove each other, spill ink, and ruin the dinner of the landlady's family below when the ink falls into their bowls through the leaky floorboards. The next two sequences push the contrast between the harsh environment and exuberant spirit to the highest pitch. In the first sequence, Jiang paints a portrait of Xiaofeng and calls it "wild rose." After trying and failing to sell it, Jiang returns home dejected by the double blow of not only hitting a dead end as an artist but also being unable to find an audience in the city for Xiaofeng's "wild" beauty. Xiaofeng and their friends comfort him by concluding that his failure is due to people's inability to appreciate the painting. Jiang then leaps up and declares that he will become a billboard painter like Li, and the four friends exchange the Boy Scout-like salute. This scene points to another film from which Sun drew significant inspiration besides *Tess*. In Frank Borzage's 1927 *Seven Heaven*, the self-reliant optimism of a lowly street sweeper helps an abused girl regain her self-confidence, and the two create a bubble of domestic bliss insulating them from the harsh reality of the ghetto. Cinematically, flat focus and soft lightening creates a sense of the two being insulated from the rest of the world (Lamster 43). In *Wild Rose*, the incandescent optimism and the solidarity of the couple and their friends similarly insulates them from their harsh environment in the middle section of the film. Cinematically, shallow depth of field, tight framing — the friends huddle together tightly framed by the narrow staircase — and spot lighting, which leaves the background in darkness, trains the audience's attention closely on the main characters. This is, then, the cinematic way by which Sun could sustain his unique combination of "realistic," grim depiction of poverty on the one hand and an atmosphere of optimism on the other. In the next sequence, we see the four eating when Jiang and Xiao take a lunch break from painting billboards. They call their food by the names of the most expensive dishes they can think of. The entire segment consisting of these two sequences is narrated with a lengthy series of tracking shots of the four walking with linked arms. Placed ahead of the four actors and switching between close-ups, medium close-ups, and long shots, the mobile and dynamic camera not only captures but also accentuates the cheerful expression on their faces, their bodies making big strides forward, and the path that extends in front of them. The road beneath their feet changes from smooth asphalt to rough broken chunks as they walk on and Xiaofeng leaps across the puddle on the arms of two others. A superimposed title reads "Like four kids, they linked their arms, and laughingly and bravely they walked on their road of life."

While Hollywood films provided Chinese filmmakers with visual repertoires of modernity from which to draw, their adaptation was enabled and shaped by specific conditions and responded to specific needs. Sun's adaptation of Pickford's screen persona continued a practice that began in the 1920s and brought it to a new height. Photographs show that Wang's training and her appearances and performances in the shows of the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe paved the way for her appearances and performances in the film (Wang, Renmei 27-72). Sun, who studied filmmaking in the United States from 1923 to 1926 (Sun 68-72), used the resources from Hollywood films to an extent unmatched by his predecessors and transformed an existing film genre. At the same time, the meanings of a US-Americanist screen persona underwent changes and reinterpretation in the new discursive environment. The crux of the issue is the "healthy sexiness" of Wang's and Li's characters. While with their lustrous hair and long bare legs their sexuality was undeniable, it was legitimated by the label "healthiness," which can mean both robust and decent in Chinese. They were less risqué than some other types of modern women on Chinese screen such as Chinese flappers with the iconic bobbed-hair also adapted from Hollywood films (Zhou 115-22). Their sexuality was further legitimated by Sun's linking it to the leftwing cause, broadly defined, as well as the urgent cause of national defense. When faced with criticisms from communist film critics that his films were naively romantic, Sun defended himself with his "body discourse": "Only when we have strong bodies would the Chinese people have the fighting spirit and youthful vigor needed" to face imperialism and social ills (Li and Hu 330). He wanted to impart to his audience the message that the oppressed "recognize the fact that though oppressed and in pain, they are powerful and need not despair" (Sun qtd. in Lu 300).

Sun's cinema fully reveals the complexity of Hollywood's legacy for Chinese cinema. This complexity can be gauged by comparing *Wild Rose* with another film made also in 1932, *三个摩登女性* (Three Modern Women), directed by Wancang Bu and scripted by the veteran playwright, film enthusiast, and underground communist Han Tian. *Three Modern Women* has been considered an important film for the history of Chinese cinema. Tian's ambition was no less than to turn the prevailing trend on its head by redefining "the term *modeng* by divesting its connotations of urban leisure, consumerism, glamor and decadence" and investing it with a new image of someone who is "politicized and desexualized" (Zhang 262). In the film three different kinds of modern women are proposed, of which only one is approved. The first is a dreamy fan of the male protagonist, a movie star. So devoted is she to him — and by extension the entertainment business — that she kills herself when he rejects her love. The second is a *femme fatale* with all the right trappings — fashionable dresses, cars, mansions — and voracious sexual appetite. She is in love with the movie star but abandons him and runs away to Hong Kong with a rich businessman when war breaks out. The third is a professional woman, a telephone operator. Ascetic and progressive, she rejects the male protagonist's hedonistic lifestyle and social circle and is devoted to the betterment of the working class and to national defense (Zhang, Zhen 261-64). It can be argued that this telephone operator is the first of many revolutionary Chinese women to appear in Chinese films throughout the Republican and communist periods.

In the present context, the significance of film lies in its judgment on the other two kinds of modern women in the film. *Three Modern Women* in fact relies heavily on previous Lianhua seduction film productions for narratives, characters and settings including *银汉双星* (*Two Stars of the Milky Way*), about the affair of between two movie stars that shows off art deco motif-filled spaces signifying modern taste and *粉红色的梦* (*Pink Dreams*), which chronicles the seduction of a male writer by a *femme fatale* and features the woman's beautiful, modernist apartment (for plots summary see Zhang, Zhen 258-61). It simply joins the two films, puts a negative value on their characters and adds a revolutionary character. The film has been lost, but extant stills suggest that it keeps much of the look of the two previous films as well in its depiction of bourgeois life. More to the point, the "negative" modern women from all three films also bear the imprint the flappers, *femme fatales* and "new women" who are caught between traditional roles and new freedoms in Jazz Age Hollywood films, especially those of Cecil DeMille (Higashi 87-116; Jacobs 180-216). Modern Chinese women characters adapted from them in Chinese films of the 1920s and now 1930s serve as the result of cultural, moral or political "othering" around which narratives of modernity are spun (for the notion of Hollywood as the culture and political "other" of Chinese cinema, see Wang, Yiman).

In conclusion, Chinese filmmakers participated in the transformation of the Hollywood legacy to meet new political needs in early 1930s. Although *Wild Rose* did not have an explicit revolutionary message, it was a much greater departure from previous seduction films than *Three Modern Women* cinematically. If Xiaofeng was a "progressive" or "positive" character, it is not because she possessed any conscious Marxist ideology. Rather, it is because Sun was successful in uniting various, sometimes conflicting strands of modern Chinese womanhood in his character.

Note: The above article is a revised excerpt from Adrian Song Xiang, *The Seduction Film: Shanghai Cinema, Hollywood and Chinese Modernity*. Ph.D. Diss. Chicago: U of Chicago, Forthcoming. Copyright release to the author.

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