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## Becoming as Suffering: A Genealogy of Female Suffering in Chinese Myth and Literature

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**Volume 21 Issue 5 (September 2019) Article 12****Peina Zhuang and Jiazhao Lin,****"Becoming as Suffering: A Genealogy of Female Suffering in Chinese Myth and Literature"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss5/12>>Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.5 (2019)**Special Issue ***Suffering, Endurance, Understanding***. Ed. Simon Estok, Douglas Berman, and Frank Stevenson<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** In their article "Suffering as Becoming: A Genealogy of Female Suffering in Chinese Myth and Literature," Peina Zhuang and Jiazhao Lin undertake a comparative study of three Chinese mythical and literary novels: the Chinese myths of Chang'e, Ding Ling's *Miss Sophie's* (1928), and Bi Feiyu's novel *The Moon Opera* (1999). They focus on the point that the characterization of all three women (or female personae) is centered on their common act of taking some sort of medicine. However, they also historicize and politicize these three texts, setting them respectively in the contexts of the establishment of patriarchy in the Han Dynasty, the spread of colonialism at the beginning of the 20th century, and the sexual revolution that began with China's Reform and Opening Up in the 1970s. In this way, Zhuang and Lin delineate an encompassing, trans-historical genealogy of Chinese female suffering. Thus, rather than seeking a single model of female suffering in this context, they approach the issue genealogically. Here they make three main arguments. First, an emphasis on the ethical and political aspects of suffering distinguish Chinese female suffering from the female suffering found in most western cultures. Secondly, disease and death always seem to be closely associated with, indeed even to signify or symbolize, Chinese female suffering in Chinese myth and literature. However, the essence of this suffering may paradoxically be found in both the disintegration and the integration of political practice and ideology. Thirdly, far from this suffering being something essential, having a concrete form, it is rather a process of *becoming other* within the wider, more encompassing cycle of political destruction and reconstruction.

**Peina ZHUANG and Jiazhao LIN**

### **Becoming as Suffering: A Genealogy of Female Suffering in Chinese Myth and Literature**

A historical survey of suffering will quickly show that there are many types of suffering, both male and female, around the world. Of course, as Long (143) points out, "in western theism in general and in the Christian tradition in particular, the religious problem of suffering is closely connected with the doctrine of creation." In Christian mythology, Christ was thought to be the son of God, but he had to suffer for all mankind before his resurrection. Indeed, although animals also suffer, we may think of suffering especially as a human problem or human situation: of course, as humans ourselves we most easily sympathize with other human beings. We will naturally think of the suffering of all the poor and starving people around the world, especially but not only in cities.

We will also tend to be most aware of human female suffering, since mothers must suffer through pregnancy and childbirth, and they generally bear the main responsibility for taking care of their babies and young children, though fathers may "take care" more indirectly by earning money outside the home. Indeed, many ancient cultures will tend to have mythical women heroes who endured great suffering for the sake of their families, villages and tribes, but here we will focus on ancient Chinese culture and myth. In Bi Fei-yu's *The Moon Opera*, we see the suffering of the mythical Chang'e (5th century B.C.) as well as of her modern counterpart, Xiaoyan Qiu (1990s). Chinese history is in fact filled with cases where primitive beliefs and religions, as well as authoritarian politics, have various kinds of negative impact on the bodies of females. This paper therefore looks at a mix of the mythological texts focusing on Chang'e, in particular Ding Ling's autobiographical novel *Miss Sophie's Diary* (1928) and Bi Feiyu's novel *The Moon Opera* (1999).

These texts develop around a female persona who has been afflicted by some kind of disease, and who takes some sort of medicine as a way to allay the pain and/or to become immortal. Moreover, all these texts came into being during transitional periods in China's history when the problem of female suffering was coming to the fore. Thirdly, a genealogy of the female protagonists from Chang'e to Xiaoyan Qiu will make it clear that each woman's suffering is not essentially a physical affliction but rather a psychic one, a sort of mental wrestling with the current forces of social and political deconstruction and reconstruction, forces closely linked to sexuality as well as to patriarchy and colonialism.

We will first look at a series of mythological texts focusing on Chang'e, a Chinese household moon goddess. Although there are of course several versions of her story, in what is apparently the earliest one she steals a magical elixir from another goddess, the Mother of the West. Her tendency to steal things distinguishes Chang'e from other goddesses in China's divinity genealogy, including her antagonist, the Mother of the West, who was born to be an immortal and was thought to have preserved the elixir as a symbol of immortality. In other words, Xi Wangmu's immortality was (is) self-evident, while Chang'e had to commit theft in order to become immortal. This story, or plot, had already been set forth in such very early documents as *The Storehouse of All Things (Guizang)*, supposedly written in the era of the legendary Three Wise Kings and Five August Emperors (30th to 21st century B.C.). The earliest myth of Chang'e goes as follows: "Chang'e was said to have stolen the elixir of immortality from Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West. She reportedly consumed it, then flew to the moon and became the spirit of the moon" (Yang 88).

Lacan's discussion of the "mirror-stage" may help us to "psychoanalyze" the myth of Chang'e. Lacan, as we know, speaks of the infant's early mirror-stage, at six to eighteen months, as "a particular case of the function of the image, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality" (4), and so he defines the mirror stage as a "drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation - and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (4). Thus we may say that Chang'e represents the ancient Chinese people's mimicry of Xi Wangmu, an immortal "I" and/or a Lacanian self-other image in the mirror. For Chang'e wants to become a better "I," where Lacan calls this self-identifying behavior "the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity, which will mark . . . the subject's entire mental development" (4). As we will see in later manifestations of Chang'e and other feminine figures in Chinese literature, the woman's "fragmented body" continued through her long process of self-identification, one which calls for the subject to become someone in a (the) mirror or in a (the) fantasy.

Becoming immortal, then, constitutes the first phase of Chinese female suffering, but this kind of "religious appeal" does not last very long. It is easy for us to assume that Chang'e is born out of

primitive people's fear of bodily death, which gives rise to their need to escape physical or bodily destruction through some form of spiritual transcendence. Thus, ancient peoples may have thought that only if they did not need to die could they escape all forms of suffering. However, this logic does not seem to work (or to have worked) in the case of Chang'e. Even though her earliest narrative already gives her eternal life, the subsequent rewritings of her tale continue to depict her as a forlorn, fugitive woman in the moon.

One of these rewritings is recorded in the *Huainanzi*, an ancient Chinese text consisting of a collection of essays compiled by Liu An, King of Huainan (139 B.C.). Here we may be surprised to see that Chang'e's story has been reconfigured: the ancient, succinct script has become an extended drama filled with didactic and ethical proclamations and condemnations: "Yi got the elixir of immortality from Xiwangmu, but Chang'e stole it from him and consumed it. Then she flew to the moon. Yi was very disappointed but could not recover the elixir" (Yang 88).

In some other versions, "Chang'e is said to metamorphose into an ugly toad after she escapes to the moon. This is usually interpreted as her punishment for stealing the precious elixir and forsaking her husband" (Yang 88). The sharp differences are easily discernible. In contrast with the first version, later versions present us with a crucial modification: the antagonist Xi Wangmu, a female goddess, has transformed into Yi, Chang'e's husband. Thus Chang'e, a woman in pursuit of becoming immortal, has become a transgressive wife who has betrayed her husband for her own purposes. This alteration may be based on the belief that suffering is not a spontaneous activity, but rather involves interpersonal interactions.

Malpas and Norelle argue that "to attend to suffering is to attend to the fundamentally ethical character of the human" (1). Perhaps then this rewritten myth leads us to "face the essentially ethical dimension in which *human being* essentially moves" (1). Thus the later narrative of Chang'e has been set within the context of a conflicting ethical relationship and ends with a no-win situation: Yi, the husband, is deprived of the capacity to become immortal, and Chang'e is left feeling sad and lonely, lamenting her endless tragic life in the Vast Cold Palace heaven. We sympathize with this Chinese woman-goddess who is now forced to live in solitude, with no support from her family, and we also know that if she escapes from her isolated world it will bring disaster upon the family.

How to explain this transformation? From the perspective of aesthetics, we may want to look at the Confucian redefinition and reshaping of primitive religions, a redefinition and reshaping which transform religious ecstasy into political "practical rationality." Li Zehou coins the term "practical rationality" in order to articulate this decisive turn in Chinese aesthetics. He says that Confucius "redefined primitive cultures, rites and music by bringing them into the domain of 'practical rationality', meaning the rationality we use and depend upon in our daily lives, our human relationships and political concepts, instead of viewing rationalism as an abstract and abstruse theory" (45). In this way he made possible the emergence of Confucian humanism and Chinese tradition that "concentrates on guiding the emotions toward real interpersonal relations . . . . not the relationship of humans with the gods or the environment.....Human emotions were diverted from their alien theological objects and from idol-like symbols, and instead found expression and satisfaction in the practical psychology and ethics of social life" (46).

Becoming immortal is replaced by becoming ethical via political campaigns which had been initiated long before, but peaked in the Han Dynasty. The Han Confucian movement culminated in the adoption of a national policy of "rejecting the other schools of thought and respecting only Confucianism" ("*Bachu baijia, duzun rushu*"), and thus emphasizing the legal and ethical codes of marital relations in the Han Dynasty, with its already very different political climate from that of the period of the Three Wise Kings and Five August Emperors. With its widespread adoption of Confucianism, the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and its imperial authority allowed the patriarchal system to be fully practiced and strengthened through its new ethical codes and domestic policies. In particular, the principle of the Three Cardinal Guides (*san gang*, "the ruler guides his subjects, the father guides his sons and the husband guides his wife") and that of the Five Constant Virtues (*wu chang*, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity), where the latter controlled the behavior of women, were advocated. We know this from the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu Fanlu)* by Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BC), a well-known philosopher who theorizes the politics of gender like this:

All manner of things inevitably have their complementary opposites, such as upper and lower, early and late, pleasure and anger, cold and hot, Yin and Yang, wife and husband, minister and ruler. All such combinations derive from the ways of Yin and Yang, each one of a pair operating with and affecting the

activity of the other. The alternation of Yin and Yang is seen in Yang's positive action and Yin's adherence to the void, thus demonstrating heaven's preference for Yang over Yin. (Loewe 246)

Thus, the male-female relationship becomes interwoven with the theory of Yin/Female and Yang/male. It was in these new Han dynasty social and ideological settings that the myth of Chang'e was rewritten so as to emphasize blind obedience to the trinity of ruler, father and husband, where any form of disobedience would lead to punishment and calamity. Against this political background, then, the Chang'e myth was established as a negative example, one that would give women an unequivocal ethical lesson. It aimed at admonishing those women who were likely to be disloyal to their husbands and disruptive of the traditional husband-based family structure. Thus even though Chang'e succeeds in escaping from impending doom, she remains mired in the well-established system patriarchy where the female's top priority is "becoming a wife."

Now we come to another turning point in Chinese history, one which has also had a significant influence on contemporary Chinese womanhood. Instead of being forced to become a loyal and virtuous wife, the woman in Ding Ling's *Miss Sophie's Diary* had to become truly "Chinese" during a crisis involving her national identity.

Sophie is also depicted by Ding Ling as a woman who contracts a serious disease, pneumonia. She complains about this illness which hinders her from developing a romantic relationship with Ling Jishi. In order to recover from it she must take Chinese medicine, just like Chang'e. Again, a disease which may even carry the threat seems to thwart the aspirations of a heroine.

What role does pneumonia play in the suffering of Sophia? To answer this question, "we need to pay more attention to the social construction of suffering in particular contexts, whereby social construction applies both to the experience of the one who suffers and to the interpretations others place on their suffering" (Hudson 171). We immediately see why Sophie must suffer from a lung disease when we remember that Ding Ling was writing in a chaotic time, the earlier 20th century, a time when a weak China was suffering from random invasions and continual exploitation by western powers. According to Brennan, "suffering is commonly seen as a burden endured by the individual. Suffering can also be a collective experience. Wars, pandemics, natural disasters, famine and civil unrest can all contribute to national, continental or indeed global suffering" (264). So the individual suffering of Sophia could further be interpreted as the collective suffering experienced by her motherland, as testified to by the frequent reference to disease in literary works by leftist writers like Lu Xun and Ba Jin.

For instance, in Ba Jin's novel *Cold Nights* (1947), Zeng Shusheng leaves Wang Wenxuan, her sick husband, and turns to Chen Fengguang simply in order to live a happier life. Taking the political and social backgrounds into consideration, it is not difficult to assume that the disease and other forms of physical suffering at that time were politically and ideologically motivated, as a warning to an already-benumbed Chinese society. Yet why would it be this feminine image, this image of a woman that must take on the responsibility of waking up a benumbed and weakened Chinese society?

Deleuze and Guattari's description of "becoming woman" as a form of "introductory power" is extremely helpful in answering this question. In their philosophy of becoming, they say that "all becomings begin and pass through the becoming-woman" (340). Reviewing this point, Pelagia Goulimari argues that this description reminds us of "feminism's historic responsibility to keep this way open to its own and other minoritarian movements, to its own and other subordinate points, so that 'woman' sheds its quality of being a universal referent and becomes a multiplicity of collective reference-machines and machines of expression" (103). Sophie is then a symbol of this sort, a reference-point with which a nation, including both its female and male inhabitants, identified itself in the face of foreign intrusion.

A review of the historical situation will be helpful in helping us to better understand Sophie's historic task. Looking back on China's history, we may find that despite the changing dynasties the patriarchal tradition was not really shaken until the beginning of the 20th century, when China first really encountered the West. Yen Fu (1854-1921), a pioneering modern theorist of "Chinese backwardness," argues that "China has enjoyed the political form of the military state since the Ch'in, but its natural development had been stunted by the continuing influence of 'patriarchal' Confucian cultural norms, absolutized as a code of ritual morality" (Fairbank 336). But in 1895 China witnessed a humiliating defeat at the hands of its neighbor Japan, which led to an overhaul of its traditional ideology. Now at last it began to open up to the West and to introduce western ideas which promoted the eliminating of national, racial, and sexual barriers.

This state of political uncertainty or even chaos in China led to Ding Ling's creation of her protagonist Miss Sophie in *Miss Sophie's Diary*. With the breakdown of traditional patriarchal rules,

Chinese women at last found it easier to cultivate in themselves the strength that their nation needed in order to establish a clearer identity. Instead of "becoming a wife" as in the old days, she had to "become Chinese." Thus what bothered Sophie was above all the political, cultural and psychological crisis which befell China at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her suffering, in this novel, is seen in her conflicting affections for two men, Ling Jishi and Wei-di (literally "Wei- Younger-Brother"). On the one hand, she is attracted to Ling Jishi whose given name "Jishi" means "handsome man," and who is depicted as an overseas Chinese who has the beautiful appearance that Miss Sophie adores. Ling Jishi's passions are for "the Debate Club, playing tennis matches, studying at Harvard, joining the foreign service, becoming an important statesman, or inheriting his father's business and becoming a rubber merchant. He wants to be a capitalist..." (Ding 68).

Here we note that all of these elements Sophie adores are connected with the West. That is, the female author has given this male character a more or less Western identity. To appreciate the extent to which Ling Jishi is an embodiment of western values and western power, we need to look at his counterpart, Weidi, who is described as an unpleasantly sentimental "little brother." Sophie loathes him because he often "curled up in the corner of the chair, as tears from God knows where streamed openly, soundlessly, down his face" (Ding 54). On the other hand, Sophie also abhors Ling Jishi because he is a "cheap, ordinary soul" who likes "nothing more than spending money in a brothel, squandering it on a moment of carnal pleasure, or sitting on a soft sofa fondling scented flesh, a cigarette between his lips, his legs crossed casually, laughing and talking with his friends. When it is not fun anymore, never mind, he just runs home to his little wife" (Ding 68).

Weidi and Ling-Jishi form a dichotomy which may be analogous to that of the China-West duality, and potential antagonism, at the beginning of the 20th century, when Chinese intellectuals felt that their national identity had been cast into doubt. Such formulas as "Chinese learning for the fundamental and western learning for practical use" (Zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong) began to appear, bringing to the fore the issue of China's perhaps long-overdue westernization. Thus it may seem that Sophie's choice between these two men is in fact a choice between the elegant West with its "cheap soul," and a weakened traditional China with its honest and reliable side. This novel can thus be interpreted as a political allegory, one that reveals a new source of suffering—China's potential to become a Western colony, a potential already embodied in the complex character of Ling Jishi. In a word, Sophie suffers less from her disease than from her cultural anxiety in the face of "becoming Chinese" again, after her country's cultural-historical ego has been completely crushed.

Finally, let us turn to another, more recent example of Chinese womanhood and how it has suffered, even if the constraints of patriarchy are no longer so explicit as they used to be. The new era of "Opening and Reform," beginning from around 1978 Chinese women have begun to face a new predicament. While they are no longer plagued by such patriarchal constraints as foot-binding, forced marriage and the duty to have babies (especially sons), they are now expected to be something like the equals of their male counterparts, in terms of working hard outside the home and having successful careers. Here Bi Feiyu's protagonist, Xiao Yanqiu, in the novel *The Moon Opera*, set in the late 1990s, is a case in point. Xiao Yanqiu struggles to embrace an exalted image of herself by playing Chang'e on the opera stage, after twenty years of sinking into a state of oblivion, a single woman immersed in the dullness of doing housework. That is, instead of becoming a wife, she desires to establish her own career by "becoming Chang'e." This looks like an historic moment of gender emancipation in the long historical struggle of the Chinese female, because Xiao Yanqiu is not compelled to become a wife (and mother), but can be what (or who) she herself wants to be.

Xiao Yanqiu's aspiration echoes the enforcement of China's Opening up and Reform Policy, an historic event which represents "a key transitional period between the Cultural Revolution era constructions of gender and those that were to follow" (Brownell 331), with marked changes not beginning to appear until the late 1980s, and picking up speed in the 1990s. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, females have been encouraged to work and even compete with their male partners. Their relationship with men has been "set within the framework of socialist conjugality upheld by the 1950 Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China, which promoted a relationship of equality and companionship without regard to gender" (Brownell 337). Xiao Yanqiu in Bi Feiyu's *The Moon Opera* is just such a competitor, one who must strive with one of her students in order to get to play a leading role in an opera. But the question remains: Can women's new rights with regard to their education, employment and sexuality really eliminate their suffering? Or, put in another way, is their suffering really erasable?

By "becoming Chang'e," Xiao Yanqiu must in fact wage a campaign against her own obese body by taking medicine. In fact she did not have any serious disease, and did not even notice that she was

much fatter than she used to be until she got the opportunity to once again step out on the opera stage. In fact it was this stage and the "gaze" of the audience that make her "disease" possible in the first place. The author says that "she roamed the streets aimlessly, stepping on her own shadow. But then she stopped, looked around, distracted, and glanced down absent-mindedly at her shadow, short and squat in the early afternoon sun, almost dwarf-like" (Bi 17). In order to be fully competent to play the opera role of Qingyi, she "registered to see a doctor in the urology department" (19-20). Thus her own obesity subjected her feminine body to hospitalization, to staying in a medical institution.

In her endeavor to lose weight, "she was not losing weight so much as clawing it off, with earnestness and considerable pain. It was a battle of stealth, devoid of gunpowder, but producing significant casualties nonetheless. Her body was now her enemy and she carpet-bombed it with an avenging madness, all the while closely monitoring the situation" (Bi 170). However, her treatment of her own "disease" constitutes only a small part of Xiao Yanqiu's suffering. She spends much of her time "training," during which she senses, or feels, various techniques imbued with the politics of surveillance and discipline seeping into every movement of her body, permeating her gestures, regulating what she can sing, prescribing how she can sing better than others. Besides reshaping her own body, the effect of this "becoming" manifests itself, more importantly and implicitly, in the aesthetic discourse that is developed around the figure of Chang'e.

Foucault says that "the chief function of disciplinary power is to 'train'" (170). He takes the ideal figure of the soldier as an example to show that bodies can be trained to be docile. Likewise in the case of Xiao Yanqiu, an opera performer, her intense training penetrates gently into her smile, her complexion, and into every move of the other performers. The most important thing is "to speak the lyrics," because "songs are the primary element of Peking Opera. To speak the lyrics is commonly called narrating an opera. The performer atomizes the narrative, turns it into countless fragments and details and transforms the character's emotion, be that anger, happiness, pain, or melancholy into a word, a smile, glance, or a flinging of the water sleeves" (Bi 40). Or in the words of Foucault, such performers as Xiao Xiqiu "transform themselves, change themselves in their singular being, and make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (10-11).

Training and supervision are hardly the form of power/suffering exercised on Xiao Yanqiu's body; pregnancy/abortion as a form of sexuality is a still more powerful one. In his discussion of family, sexuality and power, Foucault distinguishes sovereign power from disciplinary power. Sovereign power, he says, is grounded either in a blood-right or in blood-conquest (*Psychiatric* 43), and Taylor explains that "sovereign power regularly reaffirms its authority through a ritual that refers back to this original event of bloodshed or blood-right" (203). In fact, bloodshed does come in the form of abortion in the case of Xiao Yanqiu. In preparation for a rehearsal for the *Moon Opera*, she is worried that her performing career will be doomed if she throws up on stage because she is pregnant. Thus she chooses to take abortion pills as a way out, and Bi Feiyu calls our attention to this bleeding as it takes place during the operation: ". . . . around noon, the pearl slid from Xiao Yanqiu's body. With the bleeding the pain stopped (64) . . . . it had only been five days since the abortion, which, though medically induced, had caused much bleeding" (67). Here we may see this bleeding, this female blood, not only as a result of an abortion but also as the way the sovereign power of a family (in particular of a husband) reaffirms its control over the body of the female by referring back to events of "bloodshed or blood-right."

Now we come back to the question as to whether female suffering can be ended if women are given the right to self-determination in terms of education, employment and sexuality. The answer provided by the novel is negative, as we see in the author's description of Xiao Yanqiu's failure to catch up with her performance:

Xiao Yanqiu walked out into the snow and arrived at the theater entrance, where she stood beneath a streetlight. She glanced at the snow-covered street, counted a beat, and waved the bamboo flute. She began to sing.....and suddenly there was a crowd at the entrance, causing traffic to stop. More and more people arrived, crowding the street, but nothing, no one, made a sound. The people and cars seemed to have been blown to her on the wind, falling soundlessly like snowflakes, but Xiao Yanqiu was oblivious to it all. (74)

What is striking in this final tragic scene is the protagonist's ironic illusion of, and isolation among, "others." The Chang'e who has been elevated up to heaven is now pushed back into the dust, a fragmented ego standing there forlorn in the snow.

Here we have outlined the genealogy of Chinese female suffering as it is epitomized in three characters or personae from Chinese myth and literature. Having recognized and analyzed how diseases such as pneumonia and obesity are involved in the expression of suffering, we were led to believe that suffering is a condition characterized by some element of physical pain. However, further investigation and analysis suggest that we cannot equate suffering with physical pain of whatever form because, as shown by the Han Dynasty's rewriting of the character of Chang'e, even such a spirit as Chang'e, living up above in the heavenly moon, can suffer from nostalgia and from everything that seems better when we are looking back at it.

In fact the Latin root of the verb "suffer" is related to "sub" ("under," "beneath"), as if perhaps we felt the force of suffering as something weighing or pulling us down—perhaps the way we might feel a dictatorial king or emperor or government pushing down upon us, or the way a woman might experience the weight of the man who is lying on top of her. Or even, though this would be harder to imagine, the way a fetus might feel as it lies there trapped inside the mother's womb, or even as, nine months later, it emerges from it. On the other hand, as we stand on the earth and gaze up at night at the beautiful full moon, we (whether female or male) are the ones far beneath it, and yet far from suffering we gaze up at it in pure delight, and wonder at it as if it were a goddess.

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