

Macro Factors Determining Transition of Vietnamese International Students Mobility

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Abstract

With constant increasing in numbers of students studying abroad, Vietnam is on the way to become one of the largest contributors to the world's international student mobility. The overall picture was changed from several thousand students sent to the Eastern bloc during the cold war to about 200,000 students currently studying in Japan, Australia, US, Europe etc. This paper reviews the factors that affect the transition of trends and mobility of Vietnamese international students in the modern time. By examining related studies and literature, we demonstrated that transition of studying abroad in Vietnam is not subjectively resulted by decision of the students themselves or of their families, but it is strongly influenced objectively by external determinants including cultural, social, political, foreign relation, economic, educational factors in the country. The results found five macro factors that influence the transition trends of Vietnamese international students over time, including number of students, study destinations, career after graduation and impact on society.

Keywords: Study Abroad, International Student Mobility, Push Factors, Vietnam

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Introduction

International student mobility has become a trait of globalization. The question of why students take their education overseas has been a long-time topic for many studies conducted in various settings and circumstances. There is no conclusive theoretical framework for factor-determinants to the study abroad. Some studies use the background of the Theory of Planned Behavior to create a model that predicts study abroad intentions (Goel et al., 2010; Presley et al., 2010). Other studies classified the factors influencing demand for study abroad into internal factors, which related to individual's motivation and perceptions, and external factors which come from surrounding environment (Chemsripong, 2017). Other research looking at political, economic, social, cultural, educational factors (Liu & Wang, 2008). The most common theory for investigating the study abroad destination outcome is the "push-pull" model, which sees international student mobility outcome as the result of push and pull factors. Push factors are coming within the source country and urge students to go abroad for study. Pull factors exist in a host country, or in a particular host university for attracting international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In this paper, we take a particular setting of a country and investigate the push factors at macrolevel, which tent to be related to historical context and its transformation through out the whole process to reach the current magnitude.

Vietnam is a country located in South-East Asia which has a long history of being influenced by global powers before setting itself on the path of fast-growth economic development during the last several decades. Economic reforms launched in 1986, have brought Vietnam a rapid economic growth, transforming the once among the poorest nations into a lower middle-income country (WB, 2021). Fairly integrated with global economy, the Vietnamese economy has been suffered by the Covid-19 pandemic but has still shown remarkable GDP grew by 2.9% in 2020. This economic development provides Vietnamese youths with more opportunities for study and working abroad. In fact, more and more young Vietnamese students go abroad for study remarkable during the last 30 years. Along with economic growth, recently, number of Vietnamese students studying abroad increases drastically (Tienphong, 2020a), making it on the path to become one of the top sending countries. However, economic growth has permitted increases in the scale education, but the current education system could not meet the actual needs (London, 2011). Regardless of economic achievements, education sector is not capable of producing skilled workers. Education reforms often end in crisis. Education sector's performance could result in broad implications for the country's social, political, economic, and cultural development.

Vietnamese students going overseas for study has been recorded since the end of 19th century (H. C. Nguyen, 2013; Welch, 2010a). Since then, for more than a century, process of study abroad of Vietnamese students has been slowly evolved with significant differences in magnitude and destinations between the periods. Many studies already have showed that the mobility of Vietnamese students to western and Asian countries has been shaped by political and socio-economic changes in Vietnam, as well as by global factors and factors in the host countries.

It could be observed from the past that the Vietnamese studying abroad outcome has been not always subjectively resulted by decision of the students themselves or of their families, but it is strongly influenced objectively by external determinants including cultural, social, political, foreign relation, economic, educational factors, and policies in the country. There is still little understanding about in what circumstances these macro factors have influence on the study

abroad outcome and whether Vietnamese young people could choose to challenge their education overseas instead of study in their home country as an individual decision. This paper is aiming to explore the factors at macro level that affect the study abroad outcome of Vietnamese international students in the past and present, and the implications of these factors in the outbound and return flow outcome.

Method

This paper analyzes the literature collected from official documents issued by the Vietnam government, including the Ministry of Education and Training (hereafter referred to as MOET) etc., research papers published in English, books published in English, research papers published in Vietnamese, Vietnamese public media, new articles, study abroad forums and internet sources. Basically, study abroad could be a matter of any level and form of education, but in this paper, we look at study abroad as the flow of Vietnamese people to a foreign country in pursuit of a higher education degree, including both undergraduate level and graduate level. We used the proposed framework as shown in Figure 1 to sort out the macro and micro level factors from the literature sources. From the data found, we analyze qualitatively to exclude the global factors and pull factors from the host countries and higher education institutions (hereafter referred to as HEIs). We also exclude micro level factors related to individuals and close circles of family and friends. We consider only macro level push factors from the sending country perspective. Finally, we propose five macro factors that have influenced outbound student mobility and revise the reference for each factor.

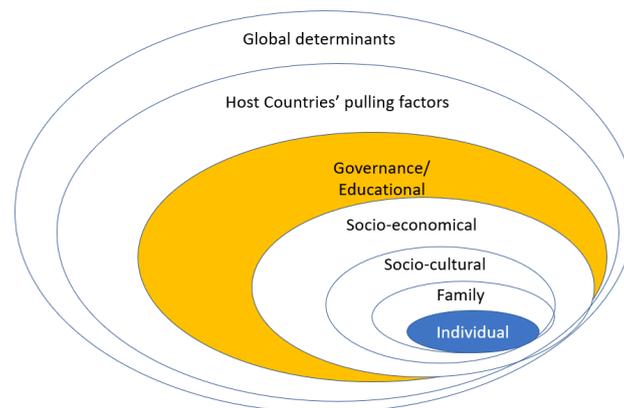


Figure 1: Layers of Push Factors for Study Abroad

Figure 1 shows our proposed conceptual framework of determinants of study abroad outcome. Factors such as globalization, trade, immigration, global human resource, domination of English etc., are listed as global factors, which also could be seen as pull factors that draw the students out from the sending country. Host country's pulling factors are the items specific to a particular host or a group of such, such as bilateral trade, economic partnership, diaspora of immigrants etc., in connection with the sending country. The factors exist in the sending country are of particular interest in this paper. The first group of factors of interest are the ones related to education governance and policy such as laws, strategic plans, national program, enforcement of plans, government funding, government scholarship, encouragement study abroad by study abroad centers, quality assurance of local tertiary education. The second group of factors of interest are the socio-economic factors such as two-child policy, small family, elderly population, economic growth, formation of high-income class, formation of returnee diaspora, increase of foreign investment and international companies, higher salary level of foreign companies etc. Besides, the

socio-cultural factors, which are related to common belief and behavior of the society, such as Confucianism, degree-driven mentality, xenophile mentality, income-driven mentality etc. are also the factors of interest. The factors at individual and immediate circle of people such as study motivation, looking for new experience, intention for immigration, family income, numbers of siblings, having relatives studying abroad etc. are excluded from the scope of this paper.

Results

Determinants of Study Abroad Outcome Prior to 1990

No records have been found about Vietnamese studying abroad before 19th century. Some traces could be found about the Vietnamese student outbound during the French colonization mid-19th century to 1954, when the Geneva accord put the end to the French domination in Vietnam. During this period, study abroad motives had been under influence of political factors and ideological factors, rather than by individual motivation, and study destination of study are often a power opposite to France, such as Japan, China, or Russia. Notably, the Dong Du (east bound) had been the first major movement in the 1905-1908 led by Phan, a nationalist, who tried to counter the French domination by renovating the political management through the technological support from Japan. The movement ended up with sending 200 Vietnamese students to study technology and military science in Japan (Nguyen, 2013), but later failed to continue. Later, some other study abroad movements had been started in relation with international communist movement during the early 20th century. Some groups of students had been sent to China, another groups to Russia for studying Marxism and military studies, laying foundations for establishment of communist parties later (Vu, 2008). Nevertheless, most talented students and students from wealthy families were attracted to France (McConnell, 1989).

After the Second World War, Vietnam had been divided into two countries. The north established foreign relations with socialist countries and others such as Sweden, India, etc. The government selected excellent students with upright political and family background (Vasavakul, 1994), then students were sent to study abroad with scholarships by the socialist countries. This pattern remained the dominant feature in the international student mobility in the north during this time. The USSR was the biggest destination with an estimated number of 40,000 Vietnamese graduates during the Cold War (Nhan Dan, 2021). In contrast, the south could gain better access to domestic higher education (Dommen, 2001). In addition to France and the USA, the south sustained foreign relations with other capitalist countries, and the best students were sent to these countries via inter-governmental scholarships. The Colombo Plan - the best-known sponsorship program was started since 1950, Australia, USA, UK, Canada, and New Zealand became the major destinations in this plan (Colombo Plan, 2021). Again, political, and ideological factors had continued to be determinants for study abroad in north Vietnam during this period, while the south had taken more liberal policy to allow private study abroad. After the reunification in 1975 until the end of the Cold War, the study abroad situation had been continued in the way it had been implemented in the north, sending students to socialist countries with the government's screening and scholarship.

Since 1986, Vietnam started economic reform known as the open-door policy and adopted a market-oriented socialist economy (Thayer, 1999). After the dissolution of the socialist bloc, Vietnam stopped to send students to ex-socialist countries in 1991 by governmental treaties. Sending students overseas has become the government's strategy to improve human capital

for industrialization since the late 1990s. Since then, trend of study abroad had followed the new education policy, open for students to apply for foreign government and private scholarship, or on own expenses, in addition to Vietnam government scholarship. Students also could choose more diversified destinations for study, mainly in the western countries.

Current Situation of Vietnamese International Students Abroad

There is no official government statistics about the transition of Vietnamese international students over years. However, ad hoc estimation was found from various sources. Some secondary sources specified the number 63,703 in 2006 (Kuroda et al., 2018), 40,000 in 2006~2007 and 130,000 in 2016~2017 (Vo & Shi, 2017), and to 200,000 in 2018 (L. H. N. Tran, 2019).



Figure 2: Estimated Number of Vietnamese Int'l Students in 2019~2020.

Figure 2 shows number of Vietnamese international students according to estimation from the MOET in Mar. 2020 (Tienphong, 2020a). Accordingly, there are about 190,000 Vietnamese students abroad, of whom about 40,000 in the European region (UK 12,000, Germany 7,500, France 6,500, Russia 6,000, Finland 2,500, Italy 1,100, Netherlands 1,000, Spain 600, Hungary 550). About 50,000 are in America (US 29,000, Canada 21,000), over 32,000 are in Oceania (Australia 30,000, New Zealand 2,500). In Asia there are about 70,000 (Japan, China, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore). In Africa there are only 50. Other sources mentioned about 200,000 students abroad hallmark in 2018 (Ashwill, 2018b). Top five host countries for Vietnamese students worldwide are Japan (73,389, 2017); US (29,788, 8-18); Korea (27,061, 4-18); Australia (22,565, 7-18); and Canada (14,095, 2017). In total 155,180 in the top five countries above, 57% of them in East Asia (Ashwill, 2018a). In 2018, number of Vietnamese students ranked 2nd in Japan, 4th in Australia and 6th in the US.

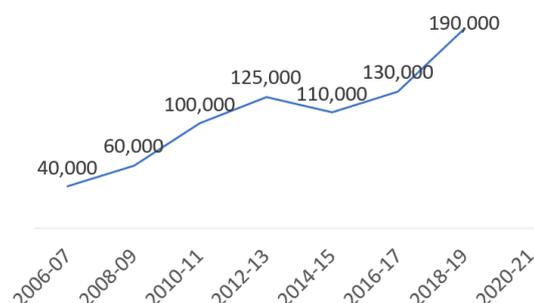


Figure 3: Transition of Vietnamese International Students

Figure 3, which combined data from MOET and other sources, shows the rapid increase in number of Vietnamese international students, which reached 5-fold for a 15-year period, after a plateau from 2012~2016, the curve becomes very steep during the last several years until

the outbreak of Covid-19.

Macro Factor 1: Unmet Demand for Higher Education

Until 2019, Vietnam has 237 HEIs, including 65 private institutions (MOET, 2021). As the National College Entrance Exam has been abolished since 2015, the admission to HEIs will be based on the high school GPA and results of the secondary graduation examination. According to MOET, in 2019, 887,173 students took high school grad examination, among whom 653,000 applying for college (74%). These students, together with other examinees were competing for the total admission capacity of 489,637 slots for college admission, 7.5% increased to the previous year. This number revealed that annually, about 400,000 high school graduates do not continue to study in colleges. According to some estimation, Vietnam has low college enrollment rate of 185 students/10,000 populations. College enrollment rate among 18~29-year-old population is 28.3%, much lower than surrounding countries such as Thailand at 43% (Tuoi Tre, 2019). These data show that there is a gap between the increased need for college education among population, and the admission capacity of the HEIs.

Interestingly, as shown in Figure 4, the total college enrollment is slightly down during the period 2013~2019. In the breakdown, there is a slightly increase in the private sector, while it decreases in the public sector (MOET, 2021). Interestingly, although an increase in college education and increase in total college admission capacity, the actual enrolled number is decreased. This phenomenon could be explained by the increased preference of students to choose study abroad. On the other hand, Vietnam applies the two-child policy since the Cold War and achieved a population growth rate of 1.14% per year during period 2009~2019 (GSO, 2019). This fact explained that population growth could be a partial reason for increasing need for higher education. In short, the gap in quantity between demand for college education and domestic supply represents one of the determinants for students to look for study abroad.

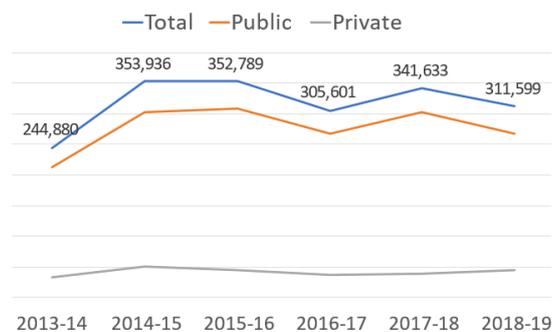


Figure 4: Transition of College Enrollment

Macro Factor 2: Inadequacies of Domestic Higher Education

Higher education in Vietnam has undergone a long transition process from Soviet model towards a western-styled system (Welch, 2010a). There are still gaps between national goals and actual achievement. Decentralization is still not far progressed and as the HEIs are not given enough autonomy from MOET. HEIs are suffering from shortage of qualified faculty (Lam, 2013; London, 2011; L. T. Tran et al., 2014; T. B. K. Tran, 2014). Too many ineffective changes and reforms (Harman et al., 2010; Lam, 2013), along with outdated curriculum and unnecessary subjects, unavailability of programs in English, shortage of well-qualified teachers, unreasonable salary for faculty staff, increasing cost for study/tuition fees etc. are

the challenges which make the domestic education less attractive. Many students could not find the program they want to study in domestic settings. In terms of internationalization, Vietnam's higher education is still lags in many aspects, including low number of inbound students, non-internationalized campus environment, shortage of international exchange and cooperation, shortage of English programs, lack of quality assurance standard among the other things (Dang & Glewwe, 2018; Harman et al., 2010; T. B. K. Tran, 2014; Welch, 2010a). Another challenge is that higher education in Vietnam is overwhelmingly undergraduate level. In 2005, only 3% of new students enrolled at graduate courses (Hayden, 2010). In 2019, this ratio is increased to 7.6% (MOET, 2021). Although attempts to strengthen research capacity of HEIs, only 1 university of Vietnam are placed in top 1000 by THE, and another two in the 1000+ (THE, 2021). Only about 25% of the professors are active in research (Dang, 2020). In the lack of a consistent world-standard research institution within the country, many students must seek a graduate education outside the country.

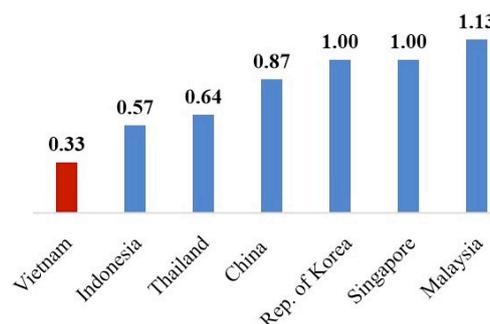


Figure 5. Public Expenditure (% of GDP) for Higher Education in 2016

It had been reported that despite expanded in number, the quality of higher education had not met the market demand. Domestic graduates, who lack of skills required by the market, struggled to get employed. Among about 200.000 college graduates per year, only 50% could find employment, and merely 30% of them are on the right specialty (T. B. K. Tran, 2014). Despite ambitious plans, the actual public expenditure on higher education is inadequate. Vietnam allocates about 5% of public spending on education sector, but only 0,33% of spending is for higher education. Figure 5 shows the rate of expenditure on its higher education lagged behind the other countries in the region (Vietnamnet, 2020), and there is no evidence that a workable strategy has been developed to finance the growth of the system and its quality (Harman et al., 2010). In short, the gap in quality between demand for college education and domestic supply represents one of the determinants for students to look for study abroad.

Macro Factor 3: Social Norms and Mentality

In its long history, Vietnamese value, and respect intellectuals and respect education. Like in China, this “love to study “(hieu hoc) tradition is strongly influenced by Confucianism (London, 2011). Parents encourage and give the most priority to fund the children to study, as well as to ensure their children to enter the best schools. On the other hand, long history of isolation has influence on the mindset of people to prefer foreign made over local products. This xenophile (sinh ngoai) mentality is not different towards foreign education (Giao Duc, 2019). During 20th century, before and during the cold war, gaining a scholarship to study abroad had been considered as an outstanding achievement not only for the student himself but for the whole family. Before the end of the cold war, foreign-degree returnees have had a high chance to become a high-ranking official. This mentality is not changed yet even

nowadays. In the most positive variant, excellent students are encouraged to get a prestigious scholarship for study abroad to gain knowledge and skills, research ability and modern work style in developed countries, then return and contribute to the country's development. In case the students are not very bright to compete for a scholarship, they are still encouraged to study abroad if the parents are stable financially. In case of poor families, sometimes students are encouraged to go abroad doing parttime jobs and side business for repaying the cost under the form of loan. Parents see investment in study abroad is a long-term investment to the child to ensure the best, long term social and economic benefit. In short, the tradition of respect education, the mentality of foreign degree preference, in addition to non-preference perception towards local education together define social norms towards study abroad.

Macro Factor 4: Economic Factors

After the cold war, Vietnam took decisive changes its foreign policies to befriend with all countries follow the course of global integration (T. B. K. Tran, 2014), (Bui, 2016). GDPs growth has well reflected into increased family income, which is the main source to fund for studying abroad of the children (WB, 2021). A boom of foreign investment and foreign-owned companies has led to higher chance for employing student-returnees with higher salaries (Hirasawa, 2019). The open economic market in Vietnam brings better economic conditions for Vietnamese. The well-off families hope children can enjoy the sound educational environment in developed countries through studying abroad. Number of middle-class families, who can afford funding for a study abroad is increasing firmly. Some parents even send children to study abroad since they are in junior high school because they think it is better for children to learn languages and adapt to foreign countries (Vo & Shi, 2017). Raising of domestic tuition fees is also a factor to make students consider study abroad (RFA, 2021). Nevertheless, low-income families also consider economic perspective of study abroad with emigration intention. In short, from economic perspective, study abroad becomes more affordable while domestic education becomes more expensive may drive more students to choose study abroad.

Macro Factor 5: Government Policy and Scholarships

Since late 1990s, MOET started to actively promote study abroad, which at first focused on countries like US, France, UK, and Russia, then later expanded to other countries such as Australia, Germany, Singapore, and China. MOET allowed public and private channels to support study abroad information, encouraging students to seek scholarship or to choose self-funding. Students can access information through internet or through consulting centers. MOET even established its subsidiary center for promoting study abroad (CIEC, 2021). MOET advocated establishing the Vietnamese international student groups, to provide a platform for overseas students to exchange with each other. Not only for admission, but administrative procedures for going abroad also had become eased. These study-abroad policies have great influence on students who have intention to study abroad. Open door policy since 1986 allowed all private sector to develop in concurrent with state-run sectors. In the field of education, since late 90s', private universities and foreign-owned universities such as RMIT are permitted to operate (TT, 2021). Although having more options, as shown in Figure 3, total domestic enrollment seemed slightly decreased, while private domestic enrollment is slightly increased, in the contrast of drastically increased number of students overseas.

The government's commitment to send students overseas had been realized by numerous scholarship schemes. It needs to look at three major scholarship programs managed by MOET. Project 322 had been implemented during period 2000~2010 to fill the gap for sending students to study abroad after 1991, with total budget approximately USD 50 million. The project finished with 4.590 students sent (among which 2.268 sent for doctoral study, who supposed to continue their previous position at public institutions. The project was criticized for ineffective management of students who dropped out or not returned to their workplace and get their education cost refunded. Moreover, after returning to previous workplace, many of them could not work effectively, facing problems such as reverse work culture shock, low salary, poor funding for research which forced many of them to leave government job (Vietnamnet, 2011). Project 911 had been planned for implement the education human resource plan 2011-2020, according to which by year 2020 Vietnam's HEIs need 75,800 lecturers (30% doctoral, 50% master's degree), starting from only 14% of lecturers have doctorate in 2011. With the budget of VND 14.000 billion (approximately USD 600 million), this ambitious project set a goal for producing 20.000 doctoral holders, half of whom to be trained abroad. Unfortunately, this project had been stopped by government in 2017, with total enrollment rate in 2016 of 20%. It was criticized for unrealistic planning due to lack of feasibility study, low standard of domestic doctoral "incubators", and inability to get refund from the students who dropped out abroad etc. (Nguoi Lao Dong, 2018). Project 89 is the new scholarship program planned for period 2019-2030, in which HEIs are authorized to manage funding and student recruitment. This project is ambitious again with the goal to train 10% of HEIs' teaching staff (~7300 lecturers) for doctoral degree, 70% of whom to be trained abroad (Vietnamnet, 2021). In short, the government effort is one of the decisive factors, especially for staff of public sector to get degree abroad.

Discussion

International student flows are often characterized as having a "South" to "North" polarity (Shields, 2013), especially to English-speaking countries. However, some evidence suggests that growth rates in incoming students to Asia has dramatically outpaced that of established destinations (Welch, 2010b). In the case of Vietnam, the same pattern could be seen clearly by the outbound flow. Negative correlation between economic prosperity in sending countries and the volume of international student flows (McMahon, 1992) was not found in case of Vietnam, where economy is growing by 6~7% per year, but outbound number of students is still on increasing trend. In case of Japan as a host country, relative size of Vietnam's economy is increasing, however, outbound number of students is increasing too. It may need further analysis about how the identified macro factors contribute to these patterns.

Students with government scholarship consist of about 5%~10% of total student number are required to return to their previous workplace. A major part of students, who are on own expenses or private scholarship, usually don't want to return home. For the former, some think they may get government promotion while others think it cannot meet their requirements in working conditions to return home to work because of the low living standard and poor treatment. At present, there is no effective policy from government to attract overseas graduates to return. A MOET survey indicates 70% of self-funded overseas students are willing to work in a developed country (Vo & Shi, 2017). Study has shown that 100% of international graduates want to stay in the host country to study and work, regardless of their economic status (Pham, 2019). The same study specifies that returnees face difficulties after returning. What they learn abroad cannot be applied to their work in

Vietnam. It may need further analysis about how the identified macro factors affect the returnees.

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic has made tremendous global impacts to international student mobility. It has impact also on Vietnamese international students, as some students had to discontinue study plan, while others could not outbound (Laodong, 2021; Tienphong, 2020b; VOV, 2021). While Covid-19 seems to be a macro factor that strongly affect the mobility, the evidence is still insufficient, so we leave it to a future investigation.

Conclusion

Vietnam is on the way to become a major contributor to the world's international student mobility. This paper reviews the push factors that affect the outbound trends of Vietnamese international students in the modern time. By examining related studies and literature, we demonstrated that transition of studying abroad in Vietnam is not only resulted by decision of the students themselves or of their families, but it is strongly influenced objectively by layers of determinants. This paper shows that Vietnam's outbound trends for higher education has been affected by many factors throughout history. Up until the end of cold war, political and ideological factors were the dominant force for driving students to study abroad. Recently, the situation is influenced by more diversified factors, which could be grouped into five macro factors as suggested by the results of this paper: (1) unmet demand for higher education; (2) inadequacies of domestic higher education; (3) social norms and mentality; (4) economic factors; (5) government policy and scholarships. These results show that there is an increasing need for study abroad pushed by multiple factors. These factors, together with external pull factors could influence the outbound mobility over time, including number of students, study destinations, career after graduation and impact on society, contributing to diversity, multiculturalism and internationalization and regional development.

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