

From Stereotype to Cultural Representation: Reframing Isan Ghost Figures Through Contemporary Character Design

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Abstract

This creative research examines how contemporary character design can reframe stigmatised representations of Isan identity in Thailand. Historically, Isan — Thailand's northeastern region — has been associated with reductive socio-cultural stereotypes commonly summarised as ignorance, poverty, illness, and drought. Rather than reproducing these perceptions, this study approaches them as socially constructed images and proposes the figure of the “ghost” not as a reproduction of folklore but as a symbolic medium through which marginalisation, memory, and identity can be critically reinterpreted. The study originated from a real-world creative case — a film development project requiring four ghost characters rooted in Isan cultural identity — which provided the practical foundation for broader inquiry into how character design can function as a tool for cultural representation. A qualitative, practice-based methodology was employed, integrating discourse analysis, ethnographic fieldwork in Yasothon Province, and character design experimentation. Four ghost-inspired character prototypes were developed, each positioning external stereotypical markers in deliberate tension with internal traits drawn from lived community experience. In-depth interviews with 20 participants — ten with Isan backgrounds and ten from general audiences - were conducted to evaluate audience perception. Findings indicate that character design can expose and complicate stereotypes, opening space for alternative readings of regional identity. Participants with Isan backgrounds demonstrated deep cultural interpretation, while general audiences showed measurable perceptual shifts when engaging with the characters' interiority. By repositioning ghost figures as forms of contemporary cultural representation, the study demonstrates how creative media can transform marginalised identities into cultural capital with broader social and commercial resonance.

Keywords: Isan identity, character design, cultural representation, stereotype, creative research

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Introduction

The northeastern region of Thailand, commonly known as Isan, is one of the country's most culturally distinctive areas, characterised by rich traditions in language, belief, ritual, and community life. Yet in Thailand's broader cultural landscape, Isan has historically occupied a marginalised position. Representations of the region in mainstream media and public discourse have long circulated around four reductive images — ignorance, poverty, illness, and drought, or in Thai shorthand, “stupid, poor, sick, dry” (โง่ จน เจ็บ แห้งแล้ง) — a discourse rooted in development-era policy frameworks that framed Isan as underdeveloped and in need of remediation (Jiraporn Chanthra, 2021; Pimpakarn Srisawat, 2021). This discourse has proven remarkably durable, persisting in contemporary media through jokes, character archetypes, and narrative conventions that flatten Isan identity into a set of familiar, diminishing signs (Watchiranon Thongthep, 2021).

At the same time, Isan cultural materials have gained increasing currency in Thailand's entertainment industry. The rise of what scholars term “Isan Fever” — the mainstreaming of Isan-inflected films, music, and content since the late 2000s — reflects both genuine audience appetite and growing commercial recognition of Isan's cultural capital (Sainil Somboon, 2021). Films such as *The Undertaker* (สัปเหร่อ, 2023) have demonstrated that Isan storytelling traditions can generate substantial audience engagement and economic value, operating within what analysts describe as a “faith economy” driven by regional belief systems and community ritual (ISAN Insight, 2025). Yet mainstream popularity does not automatically constitute genuine representation: cultural materials can be widely consumed without the stereotypes that constrain their subjects being interrogated or transformed.

This study begins from a concrete creative problem. A film development project provisionally titled *See You a Ghost* provided the research team with a brief: develop four ghost characters rooted in an Isan community setting. The project had a synopsis but lacked developed characters; what it needed was a systematic approach to building character identities that could carry cultural weight without simply reproducing familiar imagery. This practical creative challenge became the entry point for a broader research question: can character design function not merely as a tool for representation, but for the critical reframing of representation?

The ghost figure is central to this inquiry. In Thai cultural imagination, ghosts occupy a liminal space between lived experience and symbolic meaning — they carry memory, mark loss, and embody what cannot be neatly resolved. In Isan specifically, ghost narratives are interwoven with community life, seasonal ritual, and the maintenance of social bonds across generational and geographic distance. The researchers propose that the ghost, precisely because of this symbolic density, offers a productive figure through which stereotyped representations can be made visible and opened to reinterpretation — not by erasing the stereotypes, but by placing them in tension with the interior lives, histories, and cultural textures that such stereotypes systematically obscure.

The study therefore pursues three interconnected objectives: to analyse the discursive construction of negative Isan representations and their role as design material; to develop four symbolic ghost character prototypes that use stereotype as an external surface while grounding interiority in fieldwork-derived cultural knowledge; and to examine how audiences with and without Isan backgrounds perceive and interpret these characters. The paper proceeds through a literature review establishing the theoretical framework, a description of the practice-based

methodology, presentation of the creative and empirical findings, discussion of the implications, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Representation, Discourse, and the Construction of Isan

The concept of representation, as developed in cultural studies, treats images of social groups not as reflections of reality but as productive constructions that shape how groups are perceived, valued, and treated (Hall, 1997). Stereotypes are a particularly condensed form of this process: they fix complex social identities into a small number of simplified, repeated signs, and they tend to operate through binary oppositions — educated/ignorant, developed/backward — that situate one group as inferior to another.

In the Thai context, Isan has been subject to precisely this kind of representational reduction. The discourse of “stupid, poor, sick, and drought” became institutionalised in the language of national development policy following the First National Economic and Social Development Plan in 1961, which positioned the northeast as a problem region in need of external intervention (Jiraporn Chanthra, 2021). This framing persisted in media representations — particularly in films produced by outsiders — through which Isan was routinely depicted as a site of poverty, backwardness, and rural limitation (Pimpakarn Srisawat, 2021, p. 8). The consequence is a representational landscape in which Isan people are rendered through images that reduce rather than illuminate their lives.

Contemporary scholarship on Isan complicates this picture by attending to agency, dynamism, and the active negotiation of meaning. Research on “new Isan” cultural production demonstrates that Isan people are not passive objects of representation but active producers of cultural meaning through language, art, music, and everyday practice (Sainil Somboon, 2021). Understanding Isan identity thus requires moving beyond surface markers — food, clothing, dialect — toward the relational textures, affective registers, and adaptive capacities that characterise life in Isan communities but rarely appear in mainstream representation.

The Ghost as Symbolic Medium

Ghost figures occupy a distinctive position in Thai cultural life. They are simultaneously objects of belief, entertainment, and symbolic negotiation — present in ritual practice, popular film, and everyday storytelling. In Isan specifically, ghosts are woven into the fabric of community life, serving as vehicles for expressing anxieties, desires, and unresolved social tensions.

The theoretical utility of the ghost as a design figure lies in this structural quality: a ghost is by definition a figure of tension, present yet absent, attached to a past yet inhabiting a present. This makes ghosts particularly apt for representing identities that have been reduced and flattened — identities that persist with more complexity than their public images suggest. In this study, the ghost functions not as a folklore creature to be reproduced but as what the researchers term a “symbolic medium”: a design figure capable of holding the tension between an externally imposed image and an internally grounded reality. Ghost stories, across many traditions, are stories about what society has repressed or refused to acknowledge; designing ghost characters from within Isan cultural knowledge uses this logic of haunting as a

representational strategy — the dismissed returns as complex, meaningful, and deserving of attention.

Character Design as Cultural Practice

Character design is a discipline traditionally understood in terms of visual craft: the creation of memorable, functionally effective figures for use in film, animation, games, and related media. Core principles include shape language to communicate personality, colour coding to establish mood and role, silhouette clarity for memorability, and the calibration of internal traits — motivation, history, emotional range — to give characters narrative depth (Tillman, 2019; Kline & Blumberg, 1999, as cited in Jaruwan Pengsiri, 2021). Research on community-grounded character design demonstrates that characters developed through genuine cultural engagement can produce more nuanced and resonant outcomes than those derived from surface-level cultural reference (Jaruwan Pengsiri, 2021; Werat Pinkaw et al., 2024).

More recent scholarship has begun to explore character design as a form of cultural representation with ethical and political dimensions. Characters drawn from marginalised communities carry particular weight: they can reproduce stereotypes or challenge them, affirm cultural capital or extract it. The concept of soft power provides a relevant framework for understanding the broader stakes of this work: cultural products that effectively communicate a community's values, aesthetics, and ways of life can generate attraction and influence through resonance rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). For Isan, character design that successfully translates local cultural capital into contemporary media forms has the potential to reshape how the region is perceived both within Thailand and internationally (Athip Techapongsatorn, 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, practice-based research design integrating creative inquiry with ethnographic fieldwork and audience evaluation. Practice-based research is particularly suited to questions about cultural representation in design because it treats the act of making as a form of knowledge production in its own right, not merely a means of producing artefacts (Sullivan, 2010). The research proceeded in three interconnected phases.

Phase 1: Discourse Analysis and Fieldwork

The first phase involved two parallel streams of inquiry. The first was a discourse analysis of representations of Isan in Thai media and public culture, focusing on the construction and circulation of the four stereotyped images. This analysis drew on existing scholarship in Thai cultural studies and media criticism, examining how these images function as a system of meaning that positions Isan within broader hierarchies of cultural value.

The second stream was ethnographic fieldwork conducted over five days and four nights in Yasothon Province, covering Sai Mun and Thai Charoen districts. The fieldwork aimed to generate knowledge of Isan life not mediated by the stereotyped images identified in the discourse analysis — to access the affective, relational, and practical dimensions of community life that such images systematically exclude. Data collection included participant observation, conversations with community members including a school principal and a traditional healer (Mor Tham), and documentation of local crafts, agricultural practices, and ritual life. The fieldwork revealed a community characterised by practical ingenuity, intergenerational

connection, spiritual resilience, and a sophisticated relationship to environmental constraint — dimensions absent from the dominant discourse.

Phase 2: Character Design Development

The second phase used materials from Phase 1 as design inputs, following a core structural principle: each character's external appearance was designed to reflect the stereotyped discourse, functioning as “the image as seen from outside,” while internal traits — personality, motivation, emotional history, cultural practices — were developed from the fieldwork findings, functioning as “life as lived from within.” This deliberate tension between exterior and interior is the central representational strategy of the study: rather than replacing negative images with positive alternatives, the design approach makes the gap between imposed image and lived reality visible and affectively engaging.

Each character prototype was developed through iterative design, producing an initial version (Version 1, emphasising external and static representation) and a revised version (Version 2, incorporating props, activities, and contextual details from fieldwork). Shape language and colour coding were applied systematically: circular forms and yellow for Nong Tone, communicating openness beneath the “stupid” exterior; rectangular forms and blue for Na Khieam, evoking structural constraint and working-class endurance beneath the “poor” exterior; asymmetrical forms with purple and green for Yai Sa, reflecting bodily vulnerability and spiritual resilience beneath the “sick” exterior; and triangular forms with orange-brown tones for Ta Chum, conveying environmental harshness and adaptive strength beneath the “drought” exterior.

Phase 3: Audience Perception Evaluation

The third phase evaluated audience reception through in-depth interviews with 20 participants divided into two equal groups: ten participants with Isan backgrounds (born in or closely familiar with the region) and ten from general audiences without specific Isan knowledge. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant experience with contemporary media (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Participants were shown each character prototype individually and asked semi-structured questions covering first impressions, cultural identification, interpretation of personality and interiority, comparison with existing Isan representations, emotional engagement, and assessment of contemporary relevance and development potential. Interview data were analysed through thematic content analysis, with particular attention to patterns of convergence and divergence between the two groups.

Findings

The Four Character Prototypes

The four ghost characters each embody the structural tension between an externally imposed discourse and a fieldwork-derived interiority.

Nong Tone

Nong Tone is a fifteen-year-old boy in a school uniform with a pha khao ma at the waist and a bowl-cut hairstyle with two raised bumps — a visual quotation of the “stupid” stereotype. His interiority establishes him as a skilled klong yao drummer whose practical intelligence and

cultural knowledge fall outside formal educational metrics. As a ghost, he continues to move to rhythmic patterns, waiting for the opportunity to perform at the Bun Bang Fai festival — a manifestation of cultural aspiration persisting beyond the limits of institutional recognition.

Figure 1

Character Prototype: Nong Tone — The “Ignorant” Ghost Character, Showing Shape Language, Colour Palette, and Turnaround Views.

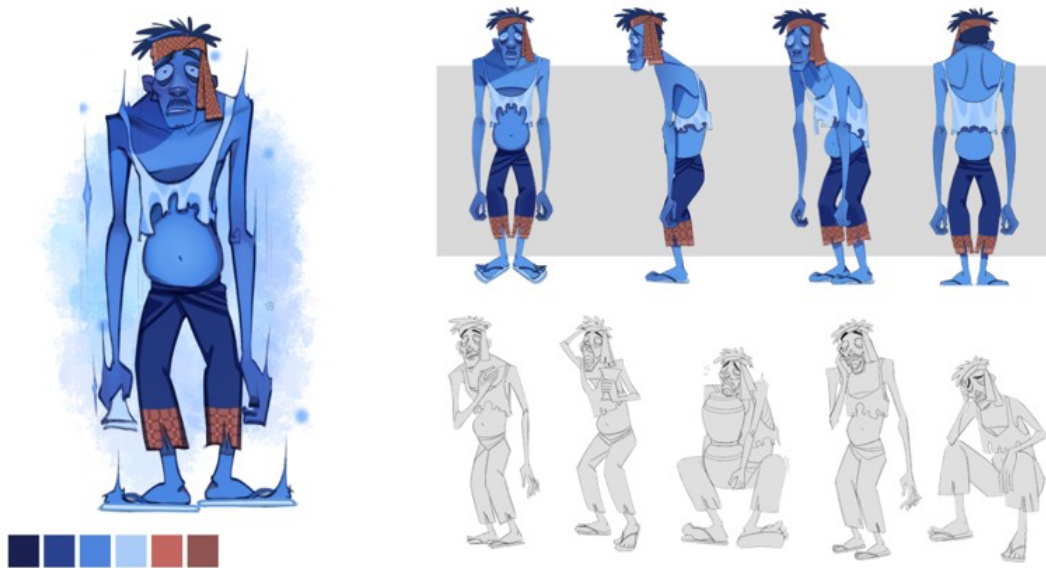


Na Khieam

Na Khieam is a thirty-six-year-old man in worn clothing with a pha khao ma on his head — the visual register of poverty and labour. His interiority, informed by fieldwork conversations about seasonal agricultural labour and the resourcefulness required to sustain families without stable income, establishes him as a figure of profound endurance whose exhaustion is structural, not personal. As a ghost, he remains caught in cycles of anxious activity, seeking the rest and communal participation that his circumstances never permitted.

Figure 2

Character Prototype: Na Khieam — The “Poor” Ghost Character, Showing Shape Language, Colour Palette, and Turnaround Views.



Yai Sa

Yai Sa is a seventy-five-year-old woman in traditional dress with a woven basket and sai sin (sacred thread) at her wrists. The visual markers of age and folk healing reference the “sick” discourse. Her interiority — developed from fieldwork encounters with the Mor Tham healer — establishes her as a figure whose reliance on spiritual belief is not ignorance but a response to genuine gaps in formal healthcare provision, and whose deepest suffering is not physical but the loneliness of children departed to the city.

Figure 3

Character Prototype: Yai Sa — The “Sick” Ghost Character, Showing Shape Language, Colour Palette, and Turnaround Views.



Ta Chum

Ta Chum is a sixty-year-old farmer in practical work clothing with a conical hat and rubber boots. The visual language of weathered agricultural labour references the “drought” discourse. His interiority, drawn from fieldwork observations of water management practices and farmers' affective relationship with their land, establishes him as a figure of hard-won practical wisdom whose experience of scarcity is inseparable from the unequal distribution of resources. As a ghost, he continues to carry water in a leaking vessel — an image of effort without resolution — waiting for the Bun Bang Fai festival as a sign of seasonal renewal. The festival functions as the narrative's emotional and symbolic centre: each character is oriented toward it as the place where cultural belonging, shared memory, and the possibility of rest converge.

Figure 4

Character Prototype: Ta Chum — The “Drought” Ghost Character, Showing Shape Language, Colour Palette, and Turnaround Views.



Audience Perception: Convergences

Several findings were consistent across both participant groups. All participants immediately identified the characters as Isan through visual markers — the pha khao ma was described as the single most powerful signifier of Isan identity across all interviews, followed by the woven basket (kratib), traditional garments (pha sin), and occupation-specific props including the klong yao drum and traditional fishing equipment. The contemporary art style — characterised by clear line work, simplified forms, and accessible colour palettes — was consistently described as “friendly” and “approachable,” clearly distinguishing these characters from the horror-register ghosts that dominate Thai mainstream media. Several participants across both groups independently compared the visual style to international animation and game character design, including references to animated films such as *Hotel Transylvania*. Colour coding was legible to both groups: the blue palette of Na Khieam was widely read as conveying sadness or exhaustion; the orange-brown of Ta Chum as heat and environmental struggle.

Version 2 of each character — incorporating props and contextual activity — was consistently rated as substantially more effective at communicating Isan identity than Version 1 across both groups. This finding indicates that cultural specificity requires contextual and narrative detail,

not merely ethnic visual markers. All participants across both groups expressed interest in the characters' backstories and the question of how each character died, indicating that the interiority embedded in the design was legible and narratively engaging. Participants in both groups identified strong potential for commercial and creative extension, including animation, art toys, digital stickers, merchandise, and social media memes — particularly content addressing workplace exhaustion and contemporary working-class experience.

Audience Perception: Divergences

Significant divergences emerged between the two participant groups in depth, mode, and direction of interpretation. Isan participants demonstrated substantially greater cultural depth in their readings, drawing on personal experience and community knowledge to access layers of meaning not available to general audience members. Yai Sa was identified not simply as an elderly woman but specifically as a “mae kong” or “mae tao” — the kind of elder found at rural temples, whose religious devotion is a form of social service rather than personal piety. Na Khieam was described using the Isan term “hloy” — a culturally specific expression of exhaustion and listlessness that carries connotations of structural fatigue rather than individual weakness. Ta Chum was described as a “luk Isan” figure — an embodiment of Isan masculine endurance — and several Isan participants read his weathered appearance not as stigma but as a mark of dignity and lived experience. Nong Tone's role in the klong yao performance tradition was immediately legible to Isan participants as a specific cultural context, giving the character's aspiration a concrete referent that general audience participants lacked.

Isan participants also reframed the characters' depictions of hardship in ways that differed markedly from general audience responses. Rather than reading worn clothing and exhausted postures as representations of poverty to be pitied, Isan participants described these as accurate reflections of agricultural life — “facts of existence” (ข้อเท็จจริง) that they recognised without shame. Several participants noted the presence of joy and communal celebration — particularly the klong yao performance and the Bun Bang Fai festival orientation — as authentic to Isan cultural experience: “Isan people never stop” was a phrase that appeared in multiple interviews, expressing a cultural value of resilience that the characters' design successfully conveyed.

General audience participants, by contrast, relied more heavily on immediately recognisable cultural signifiers and were more likely to initially interpret ambiguous elements through mainstream stereotypes. Na Khieam, whose worn appearance and exhausted posture were intended to signify working-class endurance, was in some initial responses misread as a drunk, a vagrant, or a foreign migrant worker — interpretations that reflect the persistence of negative social stereotypes rather than engagement with the character's interiority. However, a consistent pattern emerged across general audience interviews: upon engagement with Version 2 and the characters' backstories, initial stereotype-based readings were revised. Participants described this shift explicitly — noting that the characters moved from appearing “pitiable” to appearing “powerful” or “cool” — and several described the experience of recognising that their initial reading had been shaped by existing prejudice. This perceptual shift, in which the design makes stereotype visible as stereotype rather than as fact, constitutes evidence that the representational strategy is functioning as intended.

Both groups provided design recommendations, with Isan participants offering more culturally specific suggestions: the addition of sak yant (sacred tattoo) markings on male characters to convey spiritual authority; more Isan-specific textile patterns (rather than generic pha khao ma) to deepen regional authenticity; and correction of the seasonal inconsistency in Ta Chum's

props, where the simultaneous presence of rice stalks and a fishing net was identified as incongruent with actual agricultural practice. General audience participants recommended clearer colour differentiation between characters and noted that certain props — particularly the klong yao — might be associated with central Thai rather than specifically Isan tradition, suggesting the substitution of the khaen mouth organ or kratib sticky rice container for greater cultural specificity.

Discussion

The findings of this study support three interconnected arguments about character design and cultural representation.

First, character design can function as a form of discourse analysis made visible. By using the four stereotyped images as the external layer of character design, this study does not reproduce the discourse but makes it available for examination. The stereotypes become, in the design, what they always were in social life: imposed images that do not capture their subjects. The gap between exterior and interior — the central design strategy — is not merely a formal device but a representational argument: that the people these images claim to represent are more than the images suggest. This resonates with theoretical accounts of representation that emphasise the need not to counter stereotypes with idealised alternatives, but to expose their construction (Hall, 1997). The fact that general audience participants could narrate their own perceptual shift — from reading the character through stereotype to recognising the stereotype as a lens — suggests that this exposure function can operate at the level of individual audience experience.

Second, the ghost figure demonstrates particular fitness as a vehicle for this representational work. Structurally, ghosts are about the persistence of what has been dismissed — the return of what powerful accounts of reality have tried to contain or erase. Isan people and their cultural lives have been, in a meaningful sense, ghosted by dominant discourse: rendered present only as problems, comic types, or objects of pity. Ghost characters designed from within Isan cultural knowledge — carrying the marks of stigma as their surfaces while expressing rich interiority — enact a reversal of this logic: the dismissed returns as complex, as culturally substantial, and as deserving of attention. The Bun Bang Fai festival, which functions as the narrative anchor for all four characters, reinforces this reversal: it is a festival of communal hope and seasonal renewal, the precise opposite of the stasis and resignation that the “stupid, poor, sick, drought” discourse implies.

Third, the divergence in audience reception illuminates a productive tension in culturally grounded design for broad audiences. Cultural specificity and cultural legibility pull in different directions: the details that make a character deeply meaningful to those with insider knowledge — the term “hloy,” the “mae kong” figure, the sak yant tradition — may be opaque to those without it, while the visual cues that communicate quickly to general audiences may flatten the cultural content that gives the design its critical edge. The study's findings suggest this tension is generative rather than fatal. Characters that reward both surface reading (immediate visual recognition of Isan identity) and deep reading (culturally specific interpretation of character interiority) can serve multiple audiences simultaneously. Version 2 of each character represents a step toward this balance, and the concrete feedback from Isan participants provides a clear direction for further refinement that would increase cultural depth without sacrificing legibility. Finally, the study has implications for practice-based research methodology. The creative case — the film development brief — was not a constraint on the research but a generative condition

for it. It provided a concrete problem with real stakes, demanded engagement with both discourse and lived cultural reality, and produced artefacts that could be empirically evaluated. This suggests that practice-based design research, when structured to require both discursive analysis and fieldwork, can generate knowledge about cultural representation that neither purely theoretical nor purely ethnographic approaches could produce alone.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that contemporary character design can function as a tool for the critical reframing of stigmatised cultural representations. By designing ghost figures whose external appearance carries the marks of the “stupid, poor, sick, drought” discourse while their interiority is grounded in fieldwork-derived knowledge of Isan community life, the researchers produced characters that make the gap between imposed image and lived complexity visible and affectively engaging. Audience evaluation with 20 participants confirmed that these characters can shift perception — particularly for general audiences who initially engage through existing stereotypes — without losing cultural depth for those with Isan knowledge. The perceptual shift documented in general audience interviews, from reading characters as pitiable to reading them as powerful, constitutes evidence that the reframing function is operating as intended.

The ghost figure proved a particularly apt vehicle for this work. Its structural liminality, its cultural embeddedness in Isan community life, and its association with persistence and return make it a productive form for carrying the tension between stigmatised exterior and culturally rich interior. More broadly, this study suggests that creative media — when developed through rigorous cultural inquiry rather than surface-level reference — can transform marginalised regional identities into forms of contemporary cultural capital that challenge rather than reproduce the representations that have historically constrained them.

Future research should extend this work in several directions: testing the characters in animated form rather than as static prototypes; expanding the participant pool to include international audiences for whom Isan is entirely unfamiliar; incorporating the design refinements identified by Isan participants (sak yant markings, more specific textile patterns, correction of seasonal prop inconsistencies); and exploring how the structural design strategy developed here — stereotype as exterior surface, fieldwork as interior foundation — might be applied to other regionally marginalised identities within Thailand and beyond.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

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