

## **Scholarism and Hong Kong Federation of Students: Comparative Analysis of Their Developments after the Umbrella Movement**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to examine the features of, and difficulties in, the development of Scholarism and Hong Kong Federation of Students after the Umbrella Movement (2014). This article first introduces the emergence of both organizations, aiming to provide the necessary background to their features, notably student activism, politicization, and issue-based reasons in launching campaigns. This is followed by an analysis of the difficulties faced by both organizations with reference to leadership, orientation, organizational capacity and networking, as reflected in the disappointment and disillusionment of a significant number of participants during the movement. The article then moves on to investigate the possible methods adopted by both organizations to consolidate their strengths in light of the above weaknesses, focusing on

the buttressing of accountability and reform. In conclusion, the reorganization of student power is of key concern during the process in face of the increasing political intervention of the Beijing authorities and political decay of the Hong Kong government.

**Keywords:** *Scholarism, Hong Kong Federation of Students, Umbrella Movement, anti-national education campaign, student activism, leftists, non-violent resistance*

## 1. Introduction

Without doubt, student activism in Hong Kong has played an important role in making the Umbrella Movement of 2014 possible. In retrospect, student activism has constituted the political developments, which can be traced back to the early 1970s due to the protection of the Diaoyu Islands (釣魚台列嶼), and then the Sino-British talks about Hong Kong's future in the 1980s, as well as the outbreak of the student movements in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1989, student activism manifested in promoting "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong" with self-determination, and then criticizing the Beijing authorities' military suppression to terminate the democratic movement. However, student activism was at a low ebb from the 1990s to 2003 with the approach of the Hong Kong returning to China in 1997 and the heyday of Tung Chee-hwa 董建華's administration. After the July 1st rally in 2003, social protests were reactivated but student activism was not virtually impactful until the anti-national education's movement in 2012.

In relation to the Umbrella Movement, Hong Kong's political future, notably democratization and the defense of civic rights, are two major concerns. Two leading student organizations, namely Hong Kong

Federation of Students (香港專上學生聯會) and Scholarism (學民思潮), have made their active engagement during the course by making a proposal of introducing civil nomination of candidates on the selection of the Chief Executive in 2017 in order to challenge Beijing's manipulation of the entire nomination process, organizing campaigns to promote the ideas and gain popular support, assisting in the referendum on June 22, 2014, and involving themselves in the occupation of Chater Road after the July 1st rally.

This article begins with the introduction to Hong Kong Federation of Students (HKFS) and Scholarism, aiming to provide the background information on their growth and development during the critical period between 2014 and 2015 when the government put forward the proposal for the selection of the Chief Executive in 2017 under Beijing's domination and orchestration. Secondly, this article is intended to compare the development of both organizations during and after the Umbrella Movement in order to evaluate the changing strength in terms of leadership, organization, mobilization and networking in connection with the government's suppression and challenges by other social forces in the name of localism. Thirdly, prospects of both organizations in face of post-Umbrella Movement's period will be analyzed in light of orientation, organizational strengths and development in face of the unforeseeable political developments.

## **2. Scholarism: From Anti-National Education Movement to Political Reforms**

The formation of Scholarism, under the leadership of Joshua Chi-fung Wong 黃之鋒, can be attributed to the emergence of new social movements in Hong Kong since 2007, including the demolition of the Queen Pier (皇后碼頭), the construction of the high-speed rail between

Hong Kong and Shenzhen in 2010-11, and the introduction to national education curriculum in 2011, in which the government deliberately ignored the public outcry and distorted the public opinion using the mainstream media. As Wong said:

When I was fourteen, there was a campaign in Hong Kong against building a high-speed rail link to China. That was in 2009–10, and caught my attention. I read the news about it, and followed the arguments on the internet but as an observer, not a participant. The turning point for me was the announcement in the spring of 2011 that a compulsory course in ‘Moral and National Education’ would be introduced into the school curriculum over the next two years. In May, I founded an organization with a few friends that we were soon calling Scholarism, to fight against this. We began in a very amateur way, handing out leaflets against it at train stations. But quite soon there was a response, and opposition built up. This was the first time in Hong Kong’s history that secondary-school pupils had become actively involved in politics. We opposed the new curriculum because it was a blatant attempt at indoctrination: the draft course hailed the Communist Party of China as a ‘progressive, selfless and united organization’. Secondary-school students didn’t want this kind of brainwashing. But they also didn’t want an additional subject of any kind, on top of their already heavy course loads, so even those who didn’t care much about the content of Moral and National Education were against it, and came out in large numbers on the demonstrations we organized.

(Wong, 2015)

Two points should be noted in examining the formation of Scholarism. First, the establishment of Scholarism can be identified to be issue-

oriented; in other words, the primary goals are (1) the abolition of the official curriculum with indoctrination and hegemony in understanding Mainland China, and (2) to recall and reiterate the importance of the youth in caring about and even engaging in the introduction to the curriculum, instead of holding passive, indifferent and submissive mentality. In other words, Scholarism has gone beyond a purely interest group caring about educational affairs, but a political group aiming to recall the importance of civic empowerment in shaping policymaking and consultation using direct actions. Second, targets of the anti-national education campaign are not only students and teachers, but the general public, as the dominating curriculum can be understood as the symbol of indoctrination and domination through the institutional and policy channels, and as a step toward the mainlandization of Hong Kong: an official imposition of values, beliefs and judgments of Mainland China on the Hong Kong people, especially the young generation. The launching of hunger strike in August 2014 can be seen as the height of the movement, arousing public sympathy and support. As a result, the government decided to shelve, but not abolish, the curriculum. This campaign has therefore achieved a partial success.

After the anti-national education curriculum, Scholarism decided to actively engage in the political consultation in relation to the selection of the Chief Executive in 2017, including the organization of signature campaigns near the exits of major MTR (metro) stations, writing and publishing commentaries, and collaborating with other civil society and political groups such as League of Social Democrats ( 社會民主連線 ), Neo Democrats ( 新民主同盟 ), People Power ( 人民力量 ). When the PRC issued a declaration on August 31 emphasizing that the PRC has an unconditional and full domination in determining the political future of Hong Kong, Scholarism intended to further the action by launching the class boycotting with HKFS.

### **3. Hong Kong Federation of Students: From Pro-Beijing to Defending Local Interests**

Established in 1958, the Hong Kong Federation of Students is originally a pro-Communist organization organized by university and college students. Before the 1980s, most of the members were advocating the idealistic and utopian approach of the Communist movement in China under the influence of Beijing's propaganda. However, the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 followed by the death of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 led to political disillusionment. During that period, they supported the nationalist movements, such as the protection of Diaoyu Islands, and the commemoration of May Fourth Movement (1919), and September 18th Incident (1931) due to Japanese aggression. In the 1980s, they actively organized themselves and expressed the assertive ideas on Hong Kong's future after 1997. They also supported the Tiananmen Square students' protests in 1989. During the 1990s, they were mainly engaging in challenging the official violation of civil rights under the Public Order Ordinance. After the handover in 1997, they were active in organizing protests at some of the key scandals in relation to the government, including the official intervention of public opinion programme at the University of Hong Kong in 2000, and the engagement of the July 1st rally in 2003. Since the 2010s, they have been involved in the campaign defending social and political rights, including the support of the labor strike in the container port of Kwai Chung (葵涌貨櫃碼頭) in 2013. During the campaign of the consultation of the Chief Executive Election Method in 2017 from 2013 to 2015, HKFS supported the Occupy Central as the political expression against the undemocratic and illiberal proposal put forward by the Beijing authorities. At the same time, it joined other civil society groups so as to buttress the societal and political force in connection with pan-democratic parties in the

Legislative Council (立法會). The HKFS has regarded the Occupy Central as an echo, of which Hong Kong people should determinate their own destinies, as Alex Chow 周永康, the chairperson of the HKFS, said:

Class boycotting and the possible occurrence of civil disobedience are the manifestation of “resisting the order (from Beijing) but not accepting the destiny”. In face of the National People’s Congress resolution, our future will be manipulated because the governments are endorsing their own proposal. We must realize that we should pay a cost by capturing and determining our future.

Class boycotting is made because the youth is discontented with the current situations of society. Class boycotting is a moral calling, anticipating that different people and generations of the society can stand up for achieving self-determination of destinies, and are willing to pay the cost. It is not possible to expect that the appeal to the dictatorship is working ...

Occupy Central, it is definitely; however, the next step of Hong Kong is still being pended. Class boycotting provides us the opportunity to reflect upon the future of Hong Kong.

(Chow, September 18, 2014)

The above view has shown the determination of the HKFS in framing the movement as an important move to redefine our own destinies, meaning that whether Hong Kong people can determinate their own future, own destinies, or unduly being dependent on mainland China under the unfounded promise of “One Country, Two Systems” (一國兩制) without fulfilment in a faithful and thorough manner.

Overall, Scholarism and HKFS are two student organizations emerged in two different generations, but this does not mean that they

share the political aspiration, goals and then take actions divergently. As mentioned above, both of them support the practice of genuine democracy by advocating that the selection process of the Chief Executive should be accountable to the public, open and reject the political screening based on loyalty, affirmation and stance.

#### **4. Student Activism after the Umbrella Movement**

During the Umbrella Movement, both organizations were involved in the occupation, assisting in the organization of activities in order to arouse the public concern. For example, they were invited regularly in the occupation area of Admiralty to share their views on the attitudes toward the Beijing authorities, SAR government and pro-government media. Some of the HKFS leaders were invited to join the debate with the government officers in October; however, it turned out to be fruitless in terms of pushing the government to address the demands of the protestors, including the termination of the pseudo-consultation, the removal of undemocratic political programs with political screening and discrimination, and the re-launching of a genuine consultation. At the same time, Scholarism and HKFS members went to the occupation areas in Mong Kok (旺角) in order to collect the views of participants on the developments and prospect of the occupation. However, members of HKFS were criticized as being incompetent in leading and radicalizing the movement. In relation to Scholarism, they were responsible for campaigning on streets and online platforms. When they realized that the occupation achieved so little in pressurizing the government, they decided to terminate the occupation in December by withdrawing from the occupation area in Admiralty (金鐘), while the police was successful in restoring order and terminate the occupation in Mong Kok in late November.

After the end of the occupation period in December 2014, both student organizations are facing different problems in terms of orientation, networking and organizational capacity. In Scholarism, the orientation and prospect in face of the post-Umbrella Movement era is of concern. In other words, it would remain as a student organization, or transform into a de facto political organization. In the case of HKFS, it has faced the problem of maintaining the networking with student unions, given the fact that some radical activists in the name of localism, criticizing the incompetent and unrepresentativeness of HKFS in leading the movement, launched a campaign intending to delink HKFS with student unions at different tertiary institutions. As a result, student union at the University of Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist University have delinked with HKFS after the referendum. It is undoubtedly that the solidarity of HKFS has been affected adversely, as it becomes difficult to organize, lead and mobilize large-scale and sustainable action on campus.

Hence, a comparison between the HKFS and Scholarism after the Umbrella Movement shows that while the former has faced the delinking crisis with student unions in local tertiary institutions, the latter seems to be able to preserve its organizational solidarity and political influence despite the emergence of other professional groups defending democracy.

## **5. Differences in Positioning during the Umbrella Movement**

First of all, during Umbrella Movement, despite the fact that the Umbrella Movement was not an outcome expected by both the HKFS and Scholarism, due to their decisive efforts before the Movement, they were in the leading role in the whole Movement. After the Decision of Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on 31st August

2014 about the Political Reform of Hong Kong (the August 31st Decision), from the preparation of student strike in late September and the action of regaining the Civic Square at the end of the strike assembly, the HKFS and Scholarism gained reputation and influence for leading the Umbrella Movement by rallying the social power before the whole Movement. Though they were not influential in other occupied areas outside Admiralty – Mong Kok and Causeway Bay (銅鑼灣) – they were regarded as the only two organizations which were accountable enough to mobilize large number of people and bargain with the government.

If we compare the role of the two student organizations in detail, we could see that the HKFS indeed performed to be more important in the leadership throughout the whole Movement. During the student strike, the HKFS had performed as a more influential organization than Scholarism as there were more responses from university students than those from secondary school students. After the outbreak of the Umbrella Movement, the members of Scholarism generally got less media exposure than the members of the HKFS. For example, in the television live negotiation with government officers on 21st October 2014, only the members of HKFS was invited to negotiate with the government but not the Scholarism.

The sharp leading role of HKFS throughout the whole movement brought more criticism to the HKFS about the failure of Umbrella Movement, especially for their fatal mistake made in the Escalation Action in the night of 31st November 2014. They were blamed that their incomprehensive planning and irresponsible leadership of Escalation Action put all the protesters on frontline in danger. The failure of Escalation Action finally became the turning point of Umbrella Movement that popular morale was almost drained after so. The whole movement ended without any achieved demands. This finally became

one of the motivations of the wave of quitting HKFS.

However, the differences in the role during the Umbrella Movement could not fully explain why the HKFS and Scholarism would be different in development after the Umbrella Movement. It could not explain why the HKFS was seriously destroyed while Scholarism could still survive and not be discredited much after the Umbrella Movement when both of them were supposed to be responsible for the failure of leadership in the Umbrella Movement. Their differences in accountability and response towards reforms also shaped the variety of their development after the end of the Umbrella Movement.

## **6. Differences in Accountability of HKFS and Scholarism**

The impacts of the structural differences of the two organizations can be analyzed in terms of accountability. Despite their similarity as a student organization, the most fundamental difference between the HKFS and Scholarism was that, the HKFS was financially and institutionally accountable to university students, while Scholarism was just a spontaneous organization founded by a group of students. Financially speaking, HKFS's sources of funding are from the membership fees from members of the Students' Unions of universities. Institutionally speaking, treating themselves as a platform representing universities in Hong Kong, all the committee members of the HKFS, whether they be the representative committee, standing committee or the secretariat committee, are indirectly elected from the members of the Students' Unions of universities. On the contrary, Scholarism is not accountable to any specific groups, and it is not going to represent any groups of people. Its sources of funding are also mostly from donations. Therefore, during the wave of quitting HKFS, "The HKFS does not represent me!" became the most symbolic slogan, as the HKFS kept saying that it was

representing the college students, while its members from the Students' Unions of University are not involved (or not realized that they can be involved) in either its decision-making process or its election of the committees.

Though both the HKFS and Scholarism are institutionally exclusive and lack transparency towards the public, their differences in accountability shaped their fate after the Umbrella Movement. The advocates of the referendums of quitting HKFS argued that the whole election system in HKFS lacks transparency, as the election of committees in HKFS does not involve the massive university students but only by the representatives in the Annual General Meetings of HKFS, while those representatives are mostly selected from volunteers, but not elected from members of each university. After the Umbrella Movement, the failure of the Umbrella Movement led to the realization of these problems within the election system of the HKFS. Despite HKFS's claim that it represents its university members, its election system went the other way round. Though core members in Scholarism also worked as a coterie that they are mutually elected only by their own members, due to their differences in accountability, the members of HKFS could trace the responsibility of the failure of the Umbrella Movement through the institution of HKFS, while Scholarism only had to be responsible to its members.

## **7. Differences in Their Responses towards Reform**

Besides their differences in accountability, facing the criticism of the failure of the Umbrella Movement, because of their structures, they had different response towards possible reform. For the HKFS, during the wave of quitting HKFS, many of the committee members of HKFS promised that there would be reforms for the HKFS in order to persuade

members of student unions at different tertiary institutions to vote against the motion of referendum about quitting HKFS. However, due to the diversified wills in reform among different representatives and the requirement of full consensus in every main decision, the reform did not have much progress until this moment despite the setup of a chapter review panel among the HKFS just after the wave of quitting the HKFS. But in the case of Scholarism, the whole structure was changed after the General Meeting of Scholarism in May 2015. After the change, members of Scholarism were much easier to become the executive members, as all the committees are mutually elected without any threshold in nomination.

Having reforms in the HKFS is much more difficult than in Scholarism due to their functions. As a platform of all Students' Unions of tertiary schools in Hong Kong, the HKFS insisted on full consensus in main decision-making due to its principle of non-interference with all university members, while Scholarism did not work as a platform representing any groups of people but a student organization targeting secondary school students. Therefore, the HKFS was much more difficult than Scholarism to make immediate response to criticisms after the failure of the Umbrella Movement.

## **8. Differences in Relationship with Different Non-Conservative Blocs**

Both Scholarism and the HKFS had close relationship with different non-conservative blocs. Traditionally speaking, the HKFS has great linkage with social activist groups as well as traditional pan-democratic parties, notably the Democratic Party (民主黨), Civic Party (公民黨) and Labour Party (工黨). Also, the HKFS has a long history in cooperating with civil society groups and social activist organizations.

Of course, the cooperation tends to be issue-based, of which autonomy of such groups are understood and respected, thereby maintaining mutual collaboration and cooperation when it is necessary to call for direct action. Also, after completing the undergraduate education, some of HKFS ex-committee members have worked in such pan-democratic parties as Democratic Party, Civic Party and Labour Party or leftist political groups like the League of Social Democrats as well as the Neighbourhood and Workers Services Centre (街坊工友服務處). Therefore, the localists have accused that HKFS is under the manipulation of the pan-democratic parties through personal networking and influence of such ex-committee members. However, such an assertion is purely speculative without substantial evidence, with the purpose of demoralizing and discrediting HKFS. In addition, HKFS also had strong institutional linkage within the social activist groups. Through the exemption of rent and daily expenses, HKFS financially supported the Social Movement Resource Centre (SMRC) run by the “autonomous 8a” (自治八樓), an autonomous unit which was previously subordinated to HKFS but declared to be delinked with HKFS after its unilateral declaration of autonomy in 2006 (*Inmedia*, Hong Kong, 9th March 2006). In retrospect, the “autonomous 8a” aims at preserving the materials of social movements collected and kept by the previous sessions of the HKFS committee. With many ex-committee members of HKFS being its members, the “autonomous 8a”, in an attempt to collaborate with the university students and the society, uses the SMRC as an arena to organize various activities to promote human rights and anti-globalization objectives, as well as against official manipulation of city planning (*Apple Daily*, Hong Kong, 2nd April 2016). The institutional relationship between HKFS and the “autonomous 8a” reflects why HKFS has been chronically regarded as a hotbed of the traditional social activist bloc. But for Scholarism, as a

new student organization emerged after the anti-national education curriculum campaign, despite its cooperative relationship with the traditional social activist power, it is also quite inclusive towards the new social activist power. Members of Scholarism consist of supporters of different non-conservative political blocs, not only the traditional social activist bloc, but also the new localist activist bloc upholding the idea of “bravery resistance” and Hong Kong independence. However, it should be noted that “bravery resistance”, to a certain extent, is only a political myth and illusion circulated in the online platform in order to attract those who regard themselves as losers of the Umbrella Movement, and it is unable to derive a concrete and substantial proposal to engage in contentious politics in face of political dominance and intervention of the Beijing authorities and local pro-Beijing social and political force, such as the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ( 中央人民政府駐香港特別行政區聯絡辦公室 ) which is the de facto powerholder in Hong Kong, Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong ( 民主建港協進聯盟 ), and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions ( 香港工會聯合會 ). For example, whether and in what ways violence and even terrorism should be considered and adopted to demonstrate its “bravery” and resist the Beijing authorities in a workable and sustainable manner.

After the Umbrella Movement, their relationship with different blocs also determined others’ attitude towards these organizations. One of the criticisms of the HKFS, especially coming from such a new localist activist bloc who distrusts, and is hostile toward, the pan-democratic force and civil society organizations, was that, they are “getting too close” to the pan-democratic parties and civil society organizations, who have been labelled deliberately and discriminatorily as “conservative” social activists who “blindly” upheld the ideas of non-

violent resistance. Additionally, they do not focus on the discussion of sovereignty as well as identity issues in Hong Kong, which seems to be a groundless prosecution as the previous discussion of these two issues are swept under the carpet by the localists (Malte, 2015). Critics in the wave of quitting HKFS, mainly coming from the localists, argued that the HKFS could neither represent and make prompt response to the dissent among the basic student members of different tertiary institutions because of its inefficient representation and executive system nor adopt so-called “new” ideas in social movement because of its close relationship with “traditional” activists. This reflected that their tight linkages with traditional activists had become the burden of the HKFS in carrying out reform as well as responding to the criticisms from new activists, notably the localists, after the Umbrella Movement. From a critical analysis, the emergence of the localists challenging the HKFS, to a certain extent, aims to dismantle the HKFS, and then capture the political discourse and networking of the youth by establishing their own groups and promoting such aspirations as “bravery resistance”, making constitution by the people, and separation of China and Hong Kong. However, its fatal blow is that such localists cannot make a concrete proposal in achieving the above aspirations. Most importantly, they are regarded to be opportunists and pseudo-pragmatists, deploying the online media to insult the democrats and their supporters using hate language and personal attacks, and to promote affective politics which is discriminatory toward the new immigrants and tourists from mainland China.

## **9. Future of the HKFS and Scholarism**

After the Umbrella Movement, both the HKFS as well as Scholarism had their own difficulties in their development. For the HKFS, instead of

the questioning of creditability (especially among the frontline activists) after the Umbrella Movement and members of the tertiary institutions after the wave of quitting the HKFS in early 2015, it also needs an organizational reform in the executive structure as well as the election system. The HKFS has to not only look for a more efficient decision-making process and mobilization, apart from the strengthening of the communication with members, but also a new orientation of HKFS – that it needs to rethink how to further the engagement in the future social movement with other social and political parties based on its original role: as a platform of tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. The current system seems to be bureaucratic and bulky as a platform for all tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and irresponsive towards the students as a student organization. There should be a groundbreaking way to reorganize the HKFS, student unions and university students so that power can be acknowledged and exercised definitely. Ideally, university students can mobilize themselves and can be mobilized, through the coordination of student unions, and then HKFS as a leading force that aims to challenge the authorities. There is a quotation about the HKFS during the wave of quitting HKFS:

“When the HKFS exists, the bound of tertiary college will exist; but even when the HKFS disappears, the bound of tertiary college will also still exist.”

– Chan Ho-tin 陳浩天, the advocate of quitting HKFS campaign  
at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong

This quotation reminded all Hong Kong student activists in universities that, despite the previous importance of the HKFS in many social movement and tertiary education issues, the ultimate goal of reform is not to keep the wholeness of the HKFS, but to reorganize student power.

However, Chan does not define how such a bound can be problematic and seems to be incompetent to initiate proposal on how student power can be rejuvenated and recaptured without HKFS after the Umbrella Movement. In other words, he is only attentive to dismantle the linkage with, and the disappearance of, HKFS only. However, he may not understand that the dismantling of the HKFS without alternatives only leads to the fragmentation and powerlessness of student movements. Indeed, the assertion of initializing reform discussion under the wave of quitting the HKFS seems to be illusionary, and the demoralization and powerlessness of university students remain. During this period of ups and downs, the intra- and inter-institutional networking and solidarity and the rejuvenation of political activism of the youth in face of political intervention and decay under the Beijing authorities deserve the attention and take the initiative.

For Scholarism, though it does not have to worry about the problems of accountability and over-bureaucratized system that the HKFS is facing, it still has to face the problem of its sustainability. Its popularity relies quite heavily on Joshua Wong, the founder and convenor of Scholarism. This makes it so hard for Scholarism to sustain its reputation without Joshua Wong. Besides, it is also facing a problem of sustainability in manpower and succession, as joining Scholarism is no longer an attractive and main way for new students to participate in political issues. Secondary and tertiary students of the new generation can participate in social movements as individuals or they can join some other organizations with specific topics to follow, for instance the Hong Kong Language Studies (HKlangstudies) concerning the issue of Putonghua as the Medium of Instruction (PMI) in teaching Chinese, or new localist political groups, such as Hong Kong Indigenous ( 本土民主前線 ) as well as Youngspiration ( 青年新政 ). Hence, Scholarism has to find a way to sustain itself and make choice between continuing to be an

issue-based student organization without any sharp political ideology or transforming into another kind of political activist group. In this connection, Scholarism has announced the suspension of its operations on March 20, 2016, making way for the formation of a new student group and a political party, as its statement said: “A highly political Scholarism made us hard to get into schools to educate and organise secondary school students; as a student group it is hard for Scholarism to handle a self-determination movement which will last for dozens of years.” (*Hong Kong Free Press*, 20th March 2016)

## Notes

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