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EMMA CHOI LORETO COLLEGE MARRYATVILLE

THE SYM CHOON FAMILY: SUCCESS AGAINST THE ODDS OF THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY

National History Challenge 2021



The Sym Choon Family: Success Against the Odds of the White Australia Policy

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Abstract:

Despite Australia's modern multicultural society, there are periods in our history of oppression on the basis of culture. The Sym Choon family's significance in overcoming the barriers of racism and the White Australia Policy, cannot be denied. The use of primary sources allows critical thinking and understanding of their legacy.

Word Count: 996

"Every voice raised against racism chips away at its power. We can't afford to stay silent." Reni Eddo-Lodge: Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race.¹

The Sym Choon family were among the first of these said 'voices' in South Australia.

Present-day Australia has embraced multiculturalism by following a method of integrating different ethnicities. Yet, for the majority of the nation's early history, a racist view of society drove immigration policies, and limited immigrants to those who qualified under the White Australia Policy.

Six separate British colonies joined in 1901 to form Australia – following the footsteps of the anti-Chinese legislation in response to the Gold Rush immigrants, securing a 'white' Australia was priority for the newly federated country and government.²

Thus, the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, also known as the White Australia Policy, became one of the first Commonwealth Laws passed subsequent to Federation. Its purpose was restricting non-white immigration to Australia. Prospective migrants were required to succeed the dictation test, consisting of fifty words in any European language – this enabled immigration officers to exclude those not of preferable origin, without being explicit. ^{4 5}

All 'non-white' people previously residing in Australia were required to apply for a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test (C.E.D.T.), permitting them to leave and re-enter Australia without being subjected to it. Each member of the Sym Choon family were obliged to apply for this during the 1920s, when they travelled to and from China and Hong Kong on business.⁶

¹ Eddo-Lodge, R 2017, Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race, Bloomsbury Circus, London.

² The federation of Australia n.d., Parliamentary Education Office, viewed 18 August 2021, .

³ Fung, P 2015, The Significance of the First Anti-Chinese Legislation in Australia, viewed 18 August 2021, https://peril.com.au/topics/politics/anti-chinese-legislation-in-australia/.

⁴ National Archives of Australia n.d., The Immigration Restriction Act 1901, Australian Government, viewed 18 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/immigration-and-citizenship/immigration-restriction-act-1901.

⁵ Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

⁶ Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

With an adopted first name, 'John' Sym Choon is an early example of chain migration. Having arrived in Australia in the early 1890s, and settled in Unley, Adelaide, he began a career as a hawker, purchasing produce from the East End markets and using his handcart to sell it door-to-door. With the money he gathered over eight years, Sym Choon was able to transport his wife, So Yung Moon, whom he married in 1888, from Dongguan, southern China, to Adelaide. ^{7 8 9} Accordingly, Sym Choon played a substantial role in family reunification.

Together, while residing in Rundle Street, they initiated a business – *Sym Choon & Co.* – which became a successful supplier of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and fireworks. These humble beginnings were the first steps leading to generations of entrepreneurial pioneers in the Sym Choon family. ¹⁰ ¹¹

The five Sym Choon children had opportunities from an early age to pursue a career in commerce. For instance, in 1921, 'John' Sym Choon applied for C.E.D.T. in order to travel to Hong Kong for business purposes, over a duration of twelve months. He had two children he was 'desirous of taking home to China with him, namely Gladys Sym Choon... Robert Kitchner General Gordon Gum Foy ['Gordon'] Sym Choon'. However, it was necessary to submit compulsory materials such as character references, providing evidence of one's 'credibility'. ^{12 13}

The said references were largely positive concerning the Sym Choons. Statements regarding 'John' affirmed he was 'a desirable citizen', as well as being 'of good character and [a] reliable man of business'. Additionally, Gladys had evidently excelled academically throughout her education, being 'an extremely bright student, much above the average in intelligence... her progress has been most

⁷ Gladys Sym Choon a thoroughly modern business leader and an exotic style setter in Adelaide from 1920s n.d., viewed 23 August 2021, https://adelaideaz.com/articles/gladys-sym-choon-a-thoroughly-modern-business-leader-and-an-exotic-style-setter-in-adelaide-from-1920s.

⁸ Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

⁹ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resourc

¹⁰ Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

¹¹ Ibid National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family

¹² Ibid National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family

¹³ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/report-interview-sym-choon. (Appendix: Source 2)

creditable'. Gordon Sym Choon, again, was confirmed to be a 'well-known ...bright' young man. $^{14\,15}$ $^{16\,17}$

Clearly, despite restrictions rooted in discrimination, the Sym Choon family thrived, being exempt from the White Australia Policy's Dictation Test, generating their own momentous history.

Two Sym Choon brothers, George and Gordon, were profitable businesspersons in their own right. Although they engaged in a somewhat public feud, over a woman of Chinese descent from Western Australia that So Yung Moon arranged for George to marry, nonetheless with whom Gordon eloped, they were respected businessmen. ¹⁸ Both ran lucrative businesses – that were, interestingly, rivals – and established 'reputations' in the community.

Gladys and Dorothy Sym Choon were women of Chinese descent in mid-1900s Australia. Hence, they found themselves in a disadvantaged position in society. However, they faced these challenges with indisputable courage and tenacity.

In 1926, Gladys, along with Dorothy, founded *The China Gift Store*. They used their Chinese heritage to their advantage – selling imported products from China, including napery, embroidery, and ornamental china. It resulted in instant success. To this day, the shop remains an Adelaide icon, reopened by Joff Chappel and his partner Razak Mohammed as a contemporary fashion boutique. Named *Miss Gladys Sym Choon*, it preserves its initiator's historical contributions as a female of foreign culture.¹⁹

¹⁴ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, . (Appendix: Source 1)

¹⁵ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-accompany-migration-application-symchoon>. (Appendix: Source 4)

¹⁶ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, . (Appendix: Source 1)

¹⁷ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-robert-sym-choon. (Appendix: Source 7)

 $^{^{\}rm 18}$ Kirkman, T 2021, pers. comm., 18 August.

¹⁹ Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

The White Australia Policy impacted Gladys and Dorothy considerably through constantly meeting immigration officials' demands and unnecessary processes when re-entering Australia. Despite being born in Australia, they were required to undergo applications for the C.E.D.T. Dorothy Sym Choon, in particular, was outspoken with her opinions regarding this matter.

In 1923, Dorothy and So Sung Moon, her mother, intended to leave 'Adelaide by train about 24th February 1923' and proceed 'overland to embark on the S.S. 'ST. ALBANS' at Melbourne for China 1/3/23'. Dorothy's submitted passport, mandatory for the C.E.D.T., entailed information details such as her profession and physical appearance. She and her mother were additionally instructed to imprint their left and right thumb impressions. Dorothy 'objected to having her thumb prints taken and did not anticipate any trouble whatever as she was well known in Sydney and Melbourne'. This event reflects her personal resolve and significance in confronting prejudice. Additionally, their exemption demonstrates that occasionally, economic 'success', assisted in overcoming the discrimination-based bureaucracy in that time. Through their commercial 'significance', they challenged the White Australia Policy effectively. ^{20 21 22}

The last vestiges of the Act came to its conclusion in around 1973. The Sym Choon family story is significant, and is relevant historically in challenging discrimination and bureaucracy. This is reflected in the Sym Choon family's feature in a 2018 Adelaide Migration Museum exhibition, and the inclusion of Dorothy's portrait in artist Peter Drew's 2017 'Aussie Poster' series. ²³ ²⁴ The Sym Choon family's success is noteworthy, in leaving a legacy that continues to 'matter' today.

(Appendix: Source 5)

²⁰ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australian-born-chinese-women-object-thumbprinting.

²¹ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resources-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/extract-dorothy-sym-choons-passport-application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test. (Appendix: Source 6)

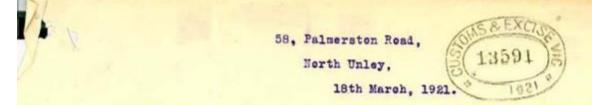
²² National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australian-born-chinese-women-object-thumbprinting. (Appendix: Source 5)

²³ End of the White Australia policy n.d., National Museum Australia, viewed 25 August 2021, https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/end-of-white-australia-policy.

²⁴ Peter Drew Arts n.d., viewed 26 August 2021, https://www.peterdrewarts.com/>.

Appendix: Sources

SOURCE 1: Character reference to accompany migration application for Sym Choon and Gladys Sym Choon²⁵



To Whom It May Concern,

I have known Mr. Sym Checn for about fafteen years, as a keen business man and a desirable citizen.

During the last two years his daughter, Gladys, Mas heen a member of the Commercial Classes under my charge at the Adelaide High School. She is an extremely bright student, much above the average in intelligence, and her progress has most creditable. She passed the Junior Commercial Examination of the Adelaide University with honours last year, and is now studying for the Senior Commercial Examination.

Her personal character is excellent.

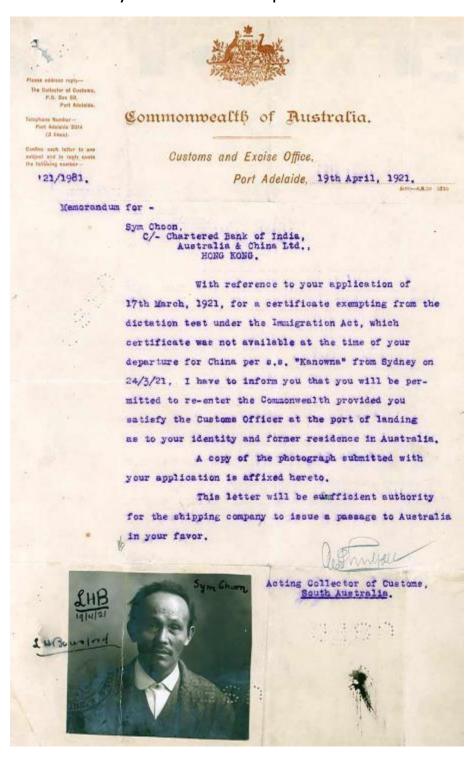
²⁵ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, .

SOURCE 2: Report of interview of Sym Choon²⁶

-4	COMMONWE	ALTH OF AUSTRALIA.	S. AUST. C. & E.
and the same	CUSTOMS AN	D EXCISE OFFI	CE.
		AUSTRALIA.	
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	2. At shown to the res	tached photos and refe pective writers and ve	erences have been erified.
	past twelve year	have personally known s in business at Rund e of good character.	applicant for the le Stfeet, and
		has two children he : hina with him, namely	
	Gladys 8	ym Choon, born Arthur Dec. 18,	Street, Unley,
	bor	itchner General Gordo n September 24th. 1910 laide.	
	Birth Certificat	es and references att	sched.
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²⁶ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/report-interview-sym-choon.

SOURCE 3: Sym Choon's exemption from the dictation test, 1921²⁷



²⁷ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, .

SOURCE 4: Character reference to accompany migration application of Sym Choon²⁸

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No.				507.0
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ale	Haspr		Manager.	
	2/1/2/21			
		- Section 1		

²⁸ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, .

SOURCE 5: Australian born Chinese women object to thumbprinting²⁹

M.B. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

23/391

CUSTOMS AND EXCISE OFFICE.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

MINUTE PAPER.

7H-3.72 9093

Subject:

Immigration Act 1901-1920.
Application for C.E.D.T.
Mrs. So Sym Choon (Chinese) and her daughter Dorothy Sym Choon Australian born Chinese.

The Collector,

Herewith C.E.D.Ts for signature.

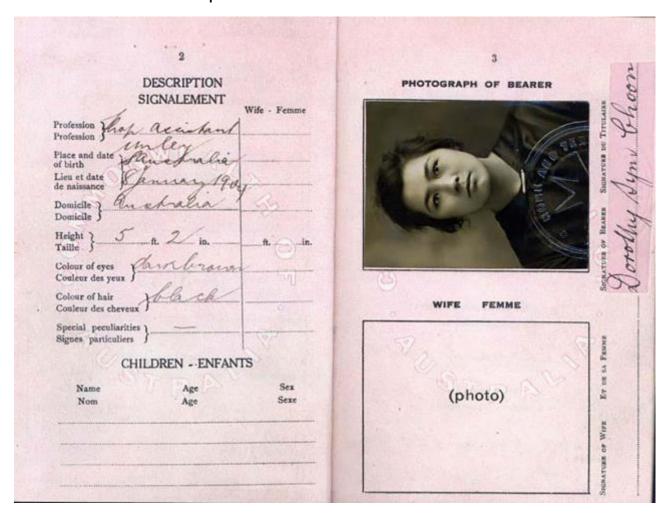
- 2. Mrs. So Sym Choon and Miss Dorothy Sym Choon intend leaving Adelaide by train about 24th February 1923 and proceeding overland to embark on the S.S. "ST. ALBANS" at Melbourne for China 1/3/23.
- 3. They have been instructed to call on the Collector of Customs, Customs House, Melbourne, for their certificates. Fees paid Receipt No. 88661/2 of 8/2/23.
- 4. Miss Dorothy Sym Choon was informed that it would be advisable to have her left and right thumb impressions on the C.E.D.T. to save her any trouble should she require to land at any other port in the Commonwealth, but she stated that she certainly objected to having is her thumb prints taken and did not anticipate any trouble whatever as she was well known in Sydney and Melbourne.
 - 5. Taxation certificate attached.

9/2/23.

Senior Boarding Inspector.

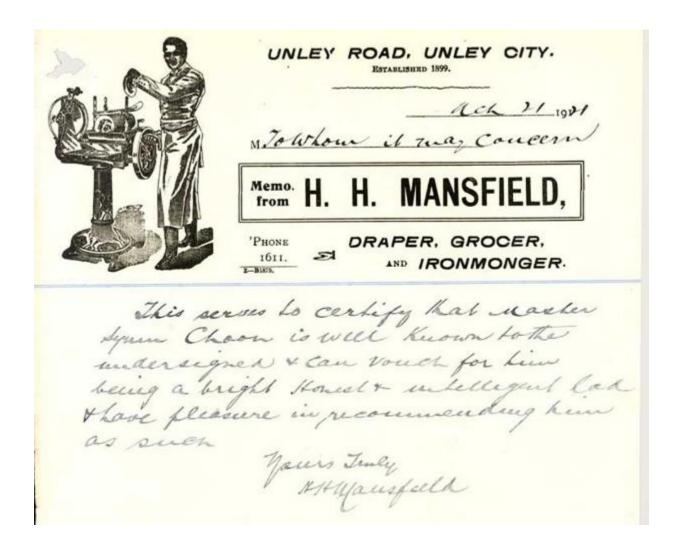
²⁹ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/australian-born-chinese-women-object-thumbprinting>.

SOURCE 6: Extract from Dorothy Sym Choon's passport – application for Certificate of Exemption from dictation test³⁰



³⁰ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, .

SOURCE 7: Character reference for Robert Sym Choon³¹



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³¹ National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/character-reference-robert-sym-choon.

SOURCE 8: Application for certificate of exemption from the dictation test under the Immigration Restriction Act pg 1 of 2^{32}

CUSTAMS 4 XCH
6 0198:
Form No. 22.
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.
IMMIGRATION ACT 1901-1912.
100
Adelarde 17th. 1921
March 17th. 1921
Sus,
I beg to apply for a Certificate under the Immigration Act
1901-1912, Section 4 (s), and Regulations, and I forward herewith a
Statutory Declaration in support of my application.
I wish to visit Hong Hong . China for twelve months
I attach two
and six unmounted photographs of myself (three full face and three profile).
7 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
I undertake and intend not to bring with me or to introduce
into the Commonwealth on my return to the Commonwealth any
relative who is not possessed of an unexpired or unrevoked certificate
excepting him or her from the provisions of paragraph (a) of section
3 of the above Act, and I also undertake and intend not to be
directly or indirectly privy to the bringing to or introduction into the Commonwealth of any such relative.
If my application is granted, please intimate the fact to me at
the above address,
Yours faithfully, Pym Choon THE COLLECTOR H.M. CUSTOMS, at Sort Adelaide . J. Aus.
THE COLLECTOR H.M. CUSTOMS,
attorthdelaide. J. Las.
NOTE.—The Statutory Declaration should set out the length of residence in Australia,
and should verify all documents accompanying the application, and should be in the form required by the "Statutory Declarations Act 1911."
A 100118105—G16805.

³² National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test-under-immigration-restriction-act.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA DUT AUSTRALIA

do solemnly and sincerely decla	re that the answers to the following questions
are true:-	
. Of what nationality are you!	1. China
2. Where were you born, and when ?	2. Hong Hong
When did you first come to Australia?	3. about 28 years ago
Mhere have you lived since you came to Australia? (State places and period of residence in each.)	gos 10 years at Unley rest of time Euce at Adel
5. Have you ever been absent from Australia since your original arrival? If so, state—(a) on how many occasions; (b) for what period on each occasion, giving date of departure and return.	5.40 -
7. What is your present occupation? r. What other occupations (if any) have you carried on since you came to Australia?	8. Green grocer and Supotter of and importing trelling Groceries
Act 1911 conscientiously believe in every particular. Beginning of declared at Ade. Declared at Ade.	declaration by virtue of the Statutory Declarations ving the statements contained therein to be true laide the day of March 19.21.
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Title of preson before whom inclaration is made (a).	Justice of the veace

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Cover Image

National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 13 August 2021, < https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/society-and-culture/migration-and-multiculturalism/dorothy-sym-choon-portrait-application-certificate-exemption-dictation-test>.

Primary Sources

Archives

Carfora, N, Dale, A 2018, Sym Choon: changing fortunes in White Australia, Panel proofs, Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia.

Annotation: These panel proofs were used in the 2018 *Sym Choon: Changing Fortunes in White Australia* exhibition, and were obtained through emailing Natalie Carfora and Corinne Ball, curators at the Migration Museum that had key roles. This source was extremely effective being both reliable and detailed, and provided a basic foundation for the research essay.

Chinese periodicals and newspapers 1995-2001 (simplified characters) 2002, National Library of Australia, viewed 20 August 2021, https://www.nla.gov.au/asian-accounts-of-australia/periodicals-and-newspapers.

National Archives of Australia 2004, Sym Choon family - CEDT [certificate of exemption from dictation test], Australian Government, Adelaide, viewed 12 August 2021, .

Annotation: This primary source from the National Archives of Australia proved to be particularly useful due to the direct insight it provided into both John and Gladys's characters. It clearly demonstrated the esteem and good reputations they had earned in the Adelaide community.

Interviews

Bowler, M 2021, pers. comm., 16 August.

Kirkman, T 2021, pers. comm., 18 August.

Annotation: This interview was conducted via phone. I spoke with Tony Kirkman, a co-manager at the current Adelaide shop *Miss Gladys Sym Choon*, who had conducted research for a paper a few years prior regarding the Sym Choon family. He supplied previously unknown details such as George and Gordon's feud over marriage.

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