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The Formation and Significance of the "Ritualized" Structure in Han Yu's Poetry: Centered on Three Poems

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Abstract: This study investigates the formation and literary significance of the ritualized spatial structure found in select poems by Han Yu, a leading figure of Mid-Tang literature renowned for his grotesque and bizarre poetic style. While conventional Chinese poetry typically adheres to the linear Qi Cheng Zhuan He pattern of beginning, development, turn, and conclusion, certain works by Han Yu depart from this norm by adopting a ritualized spatial configuration. Through close textual analysis of three representative poems—Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng, A Poem on the Mountain Blaze at Luhun, and The Southern Mountain—this research demonstrates that their structural organization bears formal resemblances to mandala spatiality and ritual procedure. However, rather than serving purely religious functions, these ritualized structures are repurposed toward political allegory and spiritual transcendence. The analysis reveals three defining characteristics that distinguish the ritualized model from nature-based linear structures: spatial priority over temporal progression, the presence of an active participatory subject, and a culminating destination oriented toward spiritual transformation. By situating these formal features within the broader context of Esoteric Buddhist influence and the Mid-Tang literary movement of writing poetry as prose, this study provides a structural explanation for the distinctive qualities of Han Yu's grotesque and bizarre style. Ultimately, the findings illuminate the formal innovations of Mid-Tang poetry and contribute to a deeper understanding of how ritual spatiality was adapted into literary composition during this pivotal period in Chinese literary history.

Keywords: Han Yu; ritualized structure; mid-tang poetry; esoteric buddhism; spatial form; poetic style

1. Introduction

Han Yu's 'grotesque and bizarre' poetic style has long been a focal point of scholarly discussion. Observations from historical records indicate that, after the Yuanhe reign, prose writers adopted stylistic features characterized by unconventional expression [1]. Another assessment notes that Han Yu pioneered a distinctive literary approach, establishing a recognizable stylistic lineage. However, previous studies have largely focused on such dimensions as grotesque imagery, harsh and forceful diction, and the tendency toward the unconventional, paying insufficient attention to the structural particularity of Han Yu's poetic composition.

Late-Qing scholar Shen Zengzhi was the first to examine Han Yu's poetry through the lens of certain esoteric religious traditions. In his *Miscellaneous Notes from the Sun-Sea Chamber*, commenting on two works—'A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun' and 'Visiting the Qinglong Temple'—he made two critical observations: first, that 'Visiting the Qinglong Temple' exhibited a condensed formal structure relative to the former; second, that both poems displayed spatial organization comparable to certain ritual diagrams used in traditional East Asian religious practice. With these remarks, Shen identified a structural homology between the two poems and pointed to the distinctive spatial organization of Han Yu's verse [2]. His insights opened a new direction for

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understanding Han Yu's poetics. However, the notion of such ritual diagrams remained for him a descriptive metaphor rather than a fully elaborated analytical concept.

Further advancement came from a study titled 'Image, Ritual, and Literature: A Brief Discussion on Mid-Tang Esoteric Buddhist Art and Han Yu's Grotesque Poetic Style.' This research translated earlier intuitive insights into concrete visual comparisons and remains to date the most systematic discussion of the relationship between Han Yu's poetry and traditional ritual diagrams. Throughout the analysis, however, a cautious stance was maintained, noting that most of the evidence consists of indirect associations derived from the broader cultural milieu of the era and analogies between visual forms, lacking documentary confirmation of direct engagement with specific ritual practices or canonical texts. Consequently, the analysis restricts itself to formal structural similarities, rather than positing causal influence or deliberate appropriation [3].

Building on the above research, this paper systematically develops 'ritualized structure' as an analytical concept in poetics [4]. Unlike earlier approaches that focus primarily on visual-spatial correspondences, this paper attends to the overall structural logic of the poems—namely, how Han Yu organizes poetic space and advances meaning through a procedural sequence (invocation—response—manifestation—enlightenment) rather than seeking parallels at the level of imagery alone. Within a methodological framework of parallel comparison, this paper addresses three questions: What forms does this 'ritualized' structural logic take in Han Yu's poetry? How does it fundamentally differ from the conventional Qi Cheng Zhuan He pattern? And what does this structural feature contribute to our understanding of Han Yu's 'grotesque and bizarre' poetic style?

2. "Ritualized Structure": Conceptual Definition and Esoteric Buddhist Reference

2.1. Defining "Ritualized Structure"

"Ritualized structure" refers to a mode of poetic organization in which imagery and poetic space are arranged according to a procedural sequence, forming a progressive pattern of "invocation—response—manifestation—enlightenment." This concept emerges from close textual analysis of Han Yu's poems—including *Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng*, *A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun*, and *The Southern Mountain*—rather than from any external theoretical framework [5]. Its core features can be understood along two dimensions: spatially, the poems follow a deliberate procedural arrangement rather than a natural temporal or spatial progression; functionally, the poet assumes the role of a ritual participant, and the poem's culmination signifies spiritual transformation rather than mere expressive closure.

It should be noted that the term "ritualized" draws a descriptive metaphor from Esoteric Buddhist ritual culture to characterize a structural feature, without implying that the poetic structure originates directly from Esoteric Buddhism. The validity of this concept rests on its capacity to accurately describe a recognizable and recurrent structural pattern in Han Yu's poetry, rather than on any claim of genetic or source-critical derivation [6].

2.2. Structural Reference from Tang-Dynasty Esoteric Buddhist Ritual Scriptures

Esoteric Buddhist rituals constitute systematic frameworks of practice aimed at achieving religious objectives through disciplined procedures and symbolic operations [7].

Ritual texts from the Tang dynasty—including comprehensive manuals associated with the Mahāvairocana tradition, recitation guides linked to protective dhāraṇī practices, and esoteric compendia detailing efficacious rites—typically adhere to a consistent structural sequence: entry into consecrated space and declaration of intent (invocation); emergence and embodiment of sacred power (response); unfolding of an integrated cosmological vision (manifestation); and transformative realization of ritual purpose (achievement). This sequence functions ritually rather than descriptively: it constructs sacred order intentionally, positioning the practitioner not as an observer but as an active agent whose existential condition—not merely intellectual understanding—is fundamentally altered [8].

Comparing Han Yu's poetry with this ritual structure serves not to establish historical derivation, but to highlight parallels in spatial organization, thereby offering a methodological framework for discerning the distinctive formal logic of his poetic composition [9].

3. Han Yu's "Ritualized Structure": Three Forms

3.1. *Linear Four-Stage Structure: Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng*

Traditional landscape poetry pursues the fusion of scene and emotion, where scenery serves as the stimulus and vehicle for feeling. In Han Yu's ritualized structure, however, natural scenery is no longer a mere aesthetic object but is sacralized into a divine manifestation [5]. Although the poem describes a visit to a mountain landscape, it fully presents the ritual process of invocation—response—manifestation—enlightenment: the opening lines, "I came just in time for the autumn rains / the air was dark and hazy, no clear breeze," establish an obstacle and provide the occasion for the ritual; then follows "I concentrated and prayed in silence, as if there were a response," which obtains a response; after that, a miracle occurs. The specific manifestation of the miracle is: "In an instant the clouds were swept away and the peaks emerged / looking up, they appeared abruptly, propping up the clear sky." The poet ultimately achieves a transcendent realization: "Amid apes' cries and bell tolls, I lost track of dawn / the bright cold sun rose in the east." At this point, the mountain is no longer a geographical feature but a sacred presence with willpower that responds to prayers. This aesthetic effect endows natural scenery with a solemnity and mystery beyond ordinary experience—the reader does not merely "see" a mountain but "witnesses" an epiphany.

The poem *In Praise of the Daoist Girl Xie Ziran* also presents this same linear four-stage structure. It recounts the legend of the Daoist girl Xie Ziran's ascent to immortality in broad daylight, borrowing and reconfiguring traditional ritual forms while following the textual pattern of invocation—response—manifestation—enlightenment [10]. The invocation stage depicts the female Daoist cultivating the Way: "She lightly regarded her life and studied its arts / thus she was on Mount Jinqian," explaining the practitioner's renunciation of the mundane world and entry into mountain cultivation. Then, in the response stage, anomalies appear: "Focusing her mind, she moved spirits and monsters / elusive and hard to put into words," and "One day she sat in an empty room / clouds and mist arose around her." The manifestation stage presents the visual spectacle of her ascension: "Eaves and rafters briefly flickered and faded / five-colored light interlaced and linked." However, unlike the earlier poem, the enlightenment stage shifts to critical reflection: "Human life has its constant principles / men and women each have their proper relations," and "Whoever diverges from this Way / has abandoned his own person." The concluding lines—"The past cannot be undone / a solitary soul embraces deep grievance"—frame the narrative outcome as a cautionary resolution grounded in ethical coherence. Han Yu, known for his commitment to Confucian moral philosophy and his critical stance toward certain religious practices, employs this structural framework to foreground normative human values. By adopting the formal logic of ritual discourse only to redirect its meaning, the poem advances a literary argument centered on ethical responsibility and social harmony.

3.2. *Spatial-Layered Structure: The Mandala-Like Organization of Imagery in a Poem on the Mountain Fire at Luhun*

A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun has long been a primary focus of scholarly attention in studies of Han Yu's distinctive poetic style. From a structural perspective, the poem can be divided into three layers according to its textual sequence and categories of imagery. The outer layer consists of natural imagery—"tigers, bears, elk, pigs, apes, and monkeys," "water dragons, alligators, turtles, fish, and giant salamanders," "crows, kites, eagles, pheasants, geese, and rocs"—which gathers together an assortment of beasts, water creatures, and birds. The middle layer consists of ritual implements and ceremonial objects—"red banners, crimson flags, purple pennants," "officials of flame and

their entourage in vermillion caps and trousers"—which elaborately depicts musical performances, ceremonial processions, and divine engagements. The inner layer consists of the governing or unifying section—"in a dream I communicated with the Supreme Emperor, my face covered in blood," "the Emperor bestowed the nine rivers to wash away tears of grief"—where the Supreme Emperor's judgment and reconciliation preside over the entire poem. These three layers of imagery interlock and govern one another from the outer to the inner, forming a complete hierarchical spatial order. Unlike the linear four-stage structure of *Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng*, *A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun* presents a spatialized, hierarchical structure, yet it shares the same "ritualized" characteristics: the arrangement of imagery follows a predetermined order rather than a natural temporal-spatial logic.

The poem also demonstrates the function of the "Supreme Emperor" as a unifying force. The progression—from natural subjects to various deities, and finally to the Supreme Emperor—finds a structural parallel in the Womb Realm Mandala of Tang-dynasty Esoteric Buddhism, where the outermost layer features natural subjects, the inner layers contain bodhisattvas and Mingwang, and the center is occupied by Vairocana Buddha. Although the poem does not explicitly state it at the end, the harmonization of elemental forces and the Emperor's reconciliatory act imply the reestablishment of cosmic balance and the completion of the ritual. The reader does not follow a single narrative thread but is instead invited into the center of a sacred space, where divine forces converge from all directions. This reading experience resembles ritual participation—the reader is not a bystander but a "witness" placed within the mandala. The aesthetic effect is one of immersive presence and immediacy, even carrying a certain dizziness and solemn weight. The ritualized structure is not limited to these two poems; similar patterns can be found in other works such as *Mountains and Rocks*, though with less direct connection to Esoteric Buddhist visual culture.

3.3. *Dual Structure: The Fusion of Yijing Hexagrams and Mandala in the Southern Mountain*

The Southern Mountain exhibits a dual structural reference [11]. On the one hand, it draws on the hexagram logic of the Confucian Book of Changes (Yijing), invoking four specific hexagrams—Bo, Gou, Li, and Kuai—to articulate the mountain's dynamic emergence. On the other hand, it employs a panoramic spatial logic through an expansive cataloguing device, using fifty-one instances of the character *huo* ("or") to transform Mount Zhongnan into a sacred space transcending ordinary perception. The opening lines—"I have heard that south of the capital / lies this range of mountains... I try to marshal my words to grasp it / but one thought leaves ten thousand gaps"—establish the occasion for the poem, functioning like the vow-making that precedes a ritual, thereby legitimizing the poet's creative endeavor. The subsequent passage—"I once climbed a high hill to gaze / the peaks, though towering, seemed weak and soft like wine"—describes the poet ascending to observe the mountain as its contours gradually emerge, marking a sympathetic communion between human consciousness and natural form. Then follows the sequence of fifty-one *huo* characters, which unfolds the mountain's appearance across the four seasons, together with the four Yijing hexagrams that collectively manifest its majestic, ineffable presence in a mandala-like panoramic presentation. Finally, "by chance I glimpsed its deep pool... the year before last I was banished / and through exploration I encountered it here" links the landscape description with the poet's experience of exile ("the clouds lie across the Qinling range"), completing a spiritual transcendence—the ritual's fulfillment and realization. The poet's banishment forms a spiritual resonance with the mountain's manifestation: the mountain is not a place of withdrawal from worldly engagement, but a site of insight attained after ritual completion. What the reader gains is not merely empathy for the poet's circumstances, but a cosmic sense of order—chaos is harmonized, obscurity is clarified, and illumination arises from the east. This constitutes a profound spiritual consolation, grounded in classical cosmological understanding rather than transient emotional response.

3.4. *Shared Features of the Three Forms: Core Characteristics of Ritualized Structure*

Synthesizing the analysis of the three poems, we can distill the core characteristics of the "ritualized structure."

First, procedural fixity. Although the three poems address three different subjects—a mountain visit, a natural phenomenon, and a travelogue—they share the same structural framework: beginning with adversity or invocation, proceeding through response or manifestation in the middle, and concluding with enlightenment or reconciliation. The function of each stage is distinct, and their sequence remains stable, not arbitrarily altered by changes in subject matter. This stands in contrast to the open, adaptive structure of traditional landscape poetry, which takes shape according to the object and shifts with emotional response [12].

Second, spatial constructedness. In all three poems, space is not discovered but deliberately arranged. In *Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng*, Mount Heng appears in response to invocation; in *A Poem on the Mountain Fire at Luhun*, natural imagery is arranged in hierarchical layers from outer to inner; in *The Southern Mountain*, Mount Zhongnan is transformed into a panoramic schema through cataloguing. Space serves the ritual procedure, rather than the procedure serving space.

Third, the subject's participatory role. In each poem, the poet directly intervenes in the narrative through the first-person "I," but this "I" is not merely an experiencer of events but an officiant of the ritual. In traditional landscape poetry, the "I" often remains a hidden observer; in Han Yu's ritualized structure, however, the "I" assumes a functional role within the structure.

Fourth, a distinctive transformative orientation. It has been observed that *A Poem on the Mountain Fire at Luhun* constitutes a meticulously constructed system of allegory. The intense natural phenomenon is awe-inspiring, yet the poem transcends mere description. Within the poem, elemental imagery functions symbolically: the ascending luminous force evokes expansive influence, while the countervailing aqueous element reflects enduring scholarly values [4]. The interplay between these forces guides a movement—from adversity to enlightenment, from disorder to coherence, and from personal displacement to inner resolution—culminating in the spiritual transformation of the subject, rather than the formal closure of the text.

4. The Ritualized Structure and the Traditional Qi Cheng Zhuan He Pattern: A Comparison

The conventional Qi Cheng Zhuan He (beginning—development—turn—conclusion) pattern in Chinese poetic tradition reflects the worldview of 'unity of heaven and humanity' (Tian Ren He Yi), projecting natural cyclical processes onto poetic structure—the poem unfolds in parallel with the seasonal progression of growth, maturation, decline, and dormancy [13]. Its defining characteristics are threefold: temporality—the text follows a linear sequence through beginning, development, turn, and conclusion; naturalness—the structural logic arises from natural rhythms or emotional flow, aiming for seamless, unobtrusive artistry; and closure—the poetic process culminates in textual completion and full realization of its aesthetic conception.

At a deeper level, the traditional Qi Cheng Zhuan He pattern and the 'ritualized' structure operate according to fundamentally distinct organizing principles. The former originates in natural phenomena and spontaneous emotional movement; its spatial conception emphasizes openness and adaptability, conforming flexibly to subject matter; its temporality follows an irreversible linear course; the author remains implicit within the structure; and its ultimate aim is aesthetic fulfillment of the text. In contrast, the ritualized structure begins from procedural prescription and symbolic spatial construction; space is arranged according to a fixed, hierarchical framework; time manifests as a repeatable, stepwise sequence; the author assumes an active, performative role akin to a ritual officiant; and the objective shifts from textual completion to the subject's inner transformation [14]. One prioritizes organic emergence, the other intentional design; one foregrounds objective representation, the other subjective

cultivation. Together, they represent two complementary yet contrasting structural paradigms in classical Chinese poetry.

5. The Poetic Significance of the Ritualized Structure

The above analysis demonstrates that poems such as Han Yu's *Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng*, *A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun*, and *The Southern Mountain* indeed share a "ritualized" structural pattern distinct from the conventional Qi Cheng Zhuan He. If this observation holds, it carries implications that extend beyond the analysis of individual poems for understanding both the generative mechanisms of Han Yu's "grotesque" style and the trajectory of formal experimentation in Mid-Tang poetry [15]. The following discussion proceeds from three angles.

5.1. *The Expansion of Poetic Function: From "Expressing Aspirations" to "Transformation"*

"Poetry expresses aspirations" (shi yan zhi) is the oldest and most enduring definition of poetry's function in Chinese poetics. Within this tradition, poetry serves as a medium for conveying inner feeling and intent—whether articulated through the classical formulation "those who hunger sing of food, those who toil sing of labor," or through the canonical assertion "what resides in the heart is aspiration; when given voice in words, it becomes poetry." The function of poetry lies in rendering internal "aspirations" into communicable language. The poem reaches its purpose upon successful externalization; the reader's reward is empathetic understanding and resonance with the poet's emotional and volitional state [16].

The ritualized structure suggests an additional dimension of poetic function. In *Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng*, the poet opens with invocation and concludes with enlightenment. What unfolds across this trajectory is not emotional catharsis but a shift in the poet's inner condition—from obscurity to clarity, from difficulty to transcendence. Thus, the function of poetry extends beyond expression to encompass transformation: it does not merely convey meaning but enacts and guides a spiritual progression at the structural level. Within this ritualized framework, poetry moves beyond documenting a scenic journey to offering the reader linguistic participation in a contemplative process. As the reader follows the poem's sequential movement, the outcome is not intellectual comprehension of the poet's emotions but an experiential approximation of witnessing. In this manner, poetry acquires a ritual dimension that surpasses lyric self-expression.

5.2. *The Expansion of Formal Resources: From "within Poetry" to "Beyond Poetry"*

Another poetic significance of the ritualized structure lies in revealing Han Yu's practice of "writing poetry as prose" at the structural level. This practice has traditionally been understood as introducing prose syntax, structure, and function words into poetry—a primarily linguistic phenomenon. Yet when extended to the structural dimension, it takes on another meaning: Han Yu not only borrowed syntactic features from prose but also appears to have drawn organizational principles from cultural forms external to poetry—including the procedural logic of religious ritual and the spatial organization of visual art.

The formal resources of traditional poetry derive predominantly from the poetic tradition itself. The Qi Cheng Zhuan He pattern, for instance, represents a distillation of poetry's internal structural principles, its authority grounded in long-established usage. In contrast, the procedural logic underlying the ritualized structure lacks precedent within the poetic canon; instead, it reflects an organizational mode borrowed from ritual practice—an external source. This suggests that the legitimacy of poetic form may originate not only from inherited convention but also from broader cultural practices. Observations regarding Han Yu's engagement with contemporary monastic visual art indicate that his experimentation with structural innovation may have been informed by such cross-modal experiences. Further scholarship has noted structural affinities among image, ritual, and literary composition in Mid-Tang Esoteric Buddhist contexts [9]. The present analysis complements these insights: Han Yu's "writing poetry as prose" operated

not merely at the level of prosodic and linguistic innovation, but also through the incorporation of extrapoetic organizational logic.

5.3. A "Structural" Explanation of the Grotesque Poetic Style

This brings us to the central concern of this paper: wherein exactly lies the "grotesqueness" of Han Yu's poetry? Previous explanations have focused primarily on what he wrote: grotesque imagery, vividly intense scenes, obscure diction. The discovery of the ritualized structure, however, suggests that Han Yu's "grotesqueness" also resides in how he organizes the world he writes about.

When readers encounter a landscape poem, they expect a fusion of man and nature, a natural flow of emotion. This is a horizon of expectation grounded in everyday experience and emotional logic. What Han Yu's ritualized structure offers, however, is a sequenced procedure that unfolds not as the natural extension of daily experience but as an artificially constructed, ritual-like order. The structure itself constitutes a frustration of readerly expectation, and this sense of arrested reading is precisely the structural source of the "grotesque."

It has been observed that Han Yu incorporated terrifying, repugnant, barbaric, and chaotic elements into the world of poetry through the force of art. This judgment captures the "force" at work in Han Yu's imagery and subject matter. The discovery of the ritualized structure further reveals that this "force" operates not only on the selection of materials but also on their organization. Han Yu not only dared to write about "terrifying" content, he also dared to frame it with an unconventional structure. When *The Southern Mountain* deploys fifty-one repetitions of the character "Huo (or)" to present the countless facets of Mount Zhongnan in a near-frenzied panoramic schema, the reader's shock derives not only from the mountain's grandeur but also from the structure's audacity [10].

Thus, the ritualized structure can be regarded as a third dimension of Han Yu's grotesque poetic style: if the grotesqueness of imagery constitutes the first dimension (what is written about), and the grotesqueness of language the second (the words used), then the grotesqueness of structure is the third (how what is written about is organized). These three dimensions together form a complete picture of Han Yu's "grotesque and bizarre" poetic style. The significance of the ritualized structure lies in providing a structural explanation: Han Yu's "grotesqueness" is not disorderly monstrosity, but an ordered, analyzable, and rule-governed construction of poetic space [8].

6. Conclusion

This paper, centering on three representative poems—Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng, A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun, and The Southern Mountain—and through structural comparison with Tang-dynasty Esoteric Buddhist liturgical texts, has revealed the existence of a "ritualized" spatial structure in certain works of Han Yu. This structure follows a procedural logic of "invocation—response—manifestation—enlightenment," characterized by hierarchical, centripetal spatial organization, the poet's participation as a ritual officiant, and a telos oriented toward spiritual transformation rather than textual completion.

The study identifies three manifestations of the ritualized structure in Han Yu's poetry: the linear four-stage structure in Visiting the Temple of Mount Heng, the spatial-layered structure in A Poem on the Mountain Conflagration at Luhun, and the dual structure integrating Yijing hexagrams and mandala in The Southern Mountain. Despite their differences in manifestation, the three forms share four core features: procedural fixity, spatial constructedness, the subject's participatory role, and a transformative orientation.

Compared with the linear, nature-based logic of the traditional Qi Cheng Zhuan He pattern, the ritualized structure exhibits a fundamental paradigmatic difference. The former is rooted in the cosmology of "unity of heaven and humanity," aspiring to organic emergence without trace of artifice; the latter embodies a deliberately constructed order, where space serves the ritual procedure and the structure itself becomes a carrier of

meaning. This difference is not merely technical but reflects two contrasting poetic conceptions: whether poetry should "imitate nature" or "construct order."

The poetic significance of the ritualized structure can be understood from three perspectives: functionally, it expands poetry from a vehicle of "expressing aspirations" to a ritual act of "transformation"; formally, it introduces structural resources from outside the poetic tradition, embodying Han Yu's practice of "writing poetry as prose" (yi wen wei shi) at the structural level; and stylistically, it offers a structural explanation for Han Yu's "grotesque" poetic style—the "grotesqueness" lies not only in striking imagery and forceful diction but also in the very way he organizes his poetic world. Thus, "structural grotesqueness" may be regarded as a third dimension of Han Yu's poetic style, together with the grotesqueness of imagery and language forming a complete picture.

It should be noted that this analysis is mainly confined to three representative poems and does not warrant the claim that the ritualized structure is a pervasive feature of Han Yu's entire oeuvre. However, these three poems suffice to demonstrate the existence of such a structural type worthy of attention. Its distribution across Han Yu's other works and its developmental trajectory remain subjects for further investigation.

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