The Pagoda in Flux: A Critical Visual History of San Francisco Chinatown

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1. Introduction

In *San Francisco – A Cultural and Literary History*, author Mick Sinclair (2004) claimed that San Francisco is "a rare part of the U.S. where eccentricity is more prized than conformity" (Sinclair, 2004, X). The pagodas, a late arrival to this culture of non-conformity, conform surprisingly well to the city as a dynamic whole. The American pagodas started in Chinatown, and the American Chinatown began in San Francisco. The flying eaves of a phone booth, the green restaurant tiles, the bell tower over an AT&T store, and the red overpaint of a new-year theme—all the disparate details extend beyond the pagoda as a format and point back to it as a form. Ubiquitous, volatile, and commercially available, the pagoda has acted as a constituent of an international city constantly shaped by Sino-Western contacts. The pagoda became the media of the city for community building for the Chinese diaspora.

The first section of this article places the pagoda back in the ocean of symbols and images—visual culture. This social observation accounts for the pagoda's prevalence in popular culture and scrutinizes the pagoda as the product of different social processes and their theories. The second method is the art historical survey. Within the case study of the pagoda, and indeed many types of pagoda, the survey traces the origin and changes of the pagoda from India to China to America. Textual and visual analysis to discover meaning and context alternate in a rhythm to tell a coherent story of the pagoda across the two continents. Historical materials serve to support and challenge the ideas drawn from the first method and complement them in concrete ways.

This article demonstrates how migratory a form the pagoda has become throughout history. In retrospect, the pagoda originated in India as a Buddhist burial mound, then it was imported through missionaries to China proper and adapted formally and ideologically for the Sinicization of Buddhism in China, thus rendering it a powerful and volatile vehicle for channeling new ideas and affecting social changes. Under its layered skin, the immigrants from China have imbued the architecture with the shifting potentiality of negotiating economic interests, racial antagonisms, political freedom, and cultural autonomy by appropriating and, later, dis-appropriating a highly fluid identity of the pagoda and the community it overlooks in the gusty winds of San Francisco.

2. The Pagoda as the Ubiquitous Form in the Context of San Francisco

There is no official document about the exact number of pagodas in San Francisco for several reasons, but a Google search with "pagoda" would easily generate over 1,500 results showing pagoda-like structures in the Bay Area. Although the 1906 earthquake demolished most of the archives and material evidence of Old Chinatown, we could still feel its ubiquitous presence in the cityscape of San Francisco by taking a trolly tour from Market Street. However, it is imperative to point out that the great number of pagodas does not generate a monolithic presence of one form, one community, or one culture.

Two prominent examples of this heterogeneity are Sing Fat (Figure 1) and Sing Chong (Figure 2). Sing Chong was built in 1907 and Sing Fat in 1908 (the two brands were established and built in the 1850s and 1870s, but they were rebuilt as Orientalist architectures only after 1906). They served as "Oriental" art stores. In the design of the earliest pagodas,

Figure 1. An early illustration of the Sing Fat Building/pagoda. American Antiquarian Society. Source: https://www.teachushistory.org/nineteenth-century-immigration/resources/sing-fat-company.

Figure 2. An early illustration of the Sing Chong Building/pagoda. American Antiquarian Society. Source: https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb900006cd/?brand=oac4.

the emphases on function and commerce were clear, while the other parts of the story remain ambiguous. Some would also speculate that the design of Sing Chong and Sing Fat was geomantic, judging from its peculiar location at the street junction. Nevertheless, more obvious and important is the influence of these pagodas. As more similar architectures sprouted, the style, "San Francisco Chinese," also started to grow in influence and popularity in America, leading to its ubiquitous presence today.

In *The History of Forgetting*, author Norman Klein (1997) adopts the term *Social Imaginary*, and he explains this concept in one phrase: "A collective memory of an event or place that never occurred but is built anyway" (Klein, 1997, 33). If the early pagodas were built by Chinese merchants and white American architects, their forms must have been drawn from the collective memory of these two distinct groups of immigrants and settlers but is their memory reliable or imaginary? With more than 1000 pagodas standing in the Qing-dynasty Canton, it is highly possible that the merchants brought with them the *imago* of a pagoda, what scholars define as "an idealized image" from a particular event, and again, in *The History of Forgetting*, Klein (1997) explains that "the *imagos* are preserved inside a mental cameo frame as fiction itself" (Ibid.). This statement highlights the volatile nature of the *imago*, which moves as the context (frame) moves, thus making the pagoda project a social imaginary. This connection resonates strongly with the actual physical journeys the merchants undertook and commissioned a fiction based on their *imago*-s of Chinese pagodas.

However, the Chinatown pagoda is more than the fragmentary imagination of some Chinese expats because it was also imagined, even more effectively, by Ross & Burgren, the American architects. It is inevitably also shaped by their Orientalist imaginations. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) highlights identity, and according to his conception of Orientalist identity: "human identity is not only natural and stable, but constructed, and occasionally even invented outright" (Said, 1978, 331). Is the pagoda merely a social imaginary created from an invented identity? Furthermore, it would be a meaningless trope to assume that the Chinese merchants' imagination of their homeland pagoda will be more accurate and "authentic" than the architects' without exploring the grounds and ways for the Orient to make their own history that is "authentic" and "inalienable," which are questionable terms themselves.

3. Methodology and Literary Review

In studying the pagoda, some scholarship on Chinatown turns to the concept of Skeuomorphism, which derives from design language and describes "interface objects that mimic their real-world counterparts in how they appear and how the user interacts with them" ("Skeuomorphism," n.d.). This framing brings the design concepts of prototype and material into our discussion. Specifically, we ponder: How is the Chinatown pagoda a Skeuomorph? What is the Skeuomorph's relation to the previous question of authenticity? According to *Skeu the Evolution: Skeuomorphs, Style, and the Material of Tangible Interactions*, Gross et al. (2014) regard "Skeuomorph" as "an ornament of design on an object copied from a form of the object when made from another material or by other techniques" (Gross et al., 2014, 54). However, what if the ornament and the allusion to another material are crucial to the being of the new product? After all, this inquiry can still return to the relationship between functionality and style, but not empirical authenticity.

As a solution, the article also develops a comprehensive formulation of Skeuomorphs: "Skeuomorphs are evolutionary, but their use may not be entirely unselfconscious" (Ibid., 54). Based on this new formulation referred to as "the self-conscious evolution," the Chinatown pagoda involves both unconsciousness "driven by an attempt at exact replication" and self-consciousness driven by "a desire for renovation" (Ibid., 54). For example, the Ross & Burgren architects might have attempted to make a precise replica of Chinese "originals," but this "failed" attempt inevitably became a renovation in the new context. This situation also implies the intertwined relationship between style and function (allusion to wood material and Chinese culture) and the premise that this relationship is socially formed and changeable.

This ironic nature of Skeuomorph inspires us to "relate function and form in a way that brackets off casual needs": the concrete or steel materials of the early American pagodas

did not require the use of this Indo-Chinese architectural form, but the merchants and architects still decided to make a pagoda that might require extra knowledge and efforts (Ibid., 55). Another unique quality of Skeuomorph is that it also reveals the temporal-spatial connection between different forms and materials to form a genealogy. However, a transition from one to another is not only formal but also a social question that conditions the development of this genealogy.

The Trademark Pagoda Tower (Sing Chong) on Grant Avenue emphatically shows how a trademark functions in modern culture. The pagoda shows, at the most visible place of its front wall, an intricate trademark, a symmetric symbol consisting of two opposite-standing dragons flanking a circle above an octagonal Tai-Chi diagram of the universe, making the entire pagoda a trademark, perching on the commodity. However, it may be one element away from a commodity: history. A commodity is not considered or valued for its history often deemed as an inalienable gift. Although we tend to understand history as a gift, it can also acquire commodity identity and value, and reversely, the history of the commodity is not meaninglessly about fetishizing only but about exchange and movement. To further understand how the pagoda sits in this spectrum, we can adopt the following two frameworks.
The first framework, "commodity history," encourages us to treat the pagoda as a commodity and flesh out its history. In *A Trail of Precious Goods: Colonial Latin American Commodity History*, Dr. Joan Bristol (2013) argues that tracking its history of production and consumption can be an effective strategy in studying the formation and deconstruction of socioeconomic systems "through the lens of goods" (Bristol, 2013, 949). One system is nationalism. Correspondingly, the cultural composition of the Chinatown pagoda exemplifies the Chinese American identity in the making.

However, history should also reflect on itself. In *Critical Anthropology*, Michael Taussig (2012) reflects on the phenomenon and danger of commodifying history in the previous scholarship, thus introducing another framework: history as commodity (Taussig, 2012, 227). Taussig's critique responds to the process of "commodification." He argues that commodification has developed to such a degree that even the inalienable aspect of history has taken on some qualities of a commodity: it can be exchanged for monetary value. This development also speaks to the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism: the idea that "inanimate things (commodities) have human powers able to govern the activity of human beings" ("Marxism and Alienation," n.d.; Marx, 1992 [1844]). This fetish enabled the pagoda, as a social imaginary, to be built into reality for American consumers. While the discussion here emphasizes the differences between commodity and history, it also reveals how the two converge in San Francisco Chinatown. In this way, the transnational history of the pagoda would come in as helpful in determining other factors not purely speculative but factual.

4. Findings and Discussion

As previously emphasized in the text, the pagoda is a multivalent vehicle for community representation, and its role in history and theory should be both examined. The author focuses on both the historical journey the pagoda undertook before its diaspora into America and the modern transformations it witnessed as a result of this diaspora based upon the qualities of the Chinese original. Its repercussions in Chinese American visual culture will also be investigated in relation to this background emerging from our textual and visual analysis.

4.1. The First Pagoda

The origin of the pagoda can be traced back to the stupa (3rd century BCE) in India. The stupa, "a dome-shaped monument," was used as a ritualistic monument to "house sacred relics and writings" ("Stupa," 2022). Although many scholars believe that the Chinese pagoda was not a form native to China proper, the popularization of this form, starting from 2-300 AC, was indebted to a series of local factors that were entrenched in pre-Buddhist ideologies and traditions. Many elements of the stupa are not strange to China. Based on Buddhism, Ching (2011) believes that "a stupa is a cosmological diagram linking the body of the Buddha to the universe" (Ching et al., 2011, 177). The balustrades are often carved with "reliefs and medallions depicting scenes and events of Buddhist significance," and the processes of reincarnation and nirvana, a Buddhist afterlife (Ibid.). The belief in an after-

life and cosmological concerns also existed in Chinese tombs, reflecting pre-Buddhist cosmology and values.

One prominent example is Lady Dai's Tomb. The archaeological finds of Han tomb no. 1 at Mawangdui in Changsha are highly relevant to our discussion. Like the stupa, Wu Hung (1992) believes that Lady Dai's Tomb defines a cosmological world consisting of different realms and layers that a deceased person would go to (Wu, 1992, 112). Not coincidentally, Mount Kunlun became an important and sometimes the anchoring symbolism among these realms. Before Buddhism, Kunlun was broadly regarded as a destination for the afterlife and where Taoist immortals reside. It also represents the "West End" of the pre-Buddhist cosmology in China, wherein the universe was understood as a round celestial canopy covering a square-shaped chess board.

In Buddhism, cosmology appears different, and its interpretations were translated into variegated forms of stupas in India. The vertical (or cakrav��a; Devanagari) cosmology arranges the worlds in a vertical pattern, with different planes at multiple heights. Although this structure deviated from the pre-Buddhist Chinese cosmology, the stupa reminded one of Mount Kunlun, and the early Buddhist art in China showed a localized interpretation of the stupa and its symbolism. Eventually, the pagoda became the twofold representation of Mount Kunlun and Mount Sumeru in Chinese Buddhism.

4.2. The Symbolization of a Foreign Form

Qiyun Pagoda, the first historically recorded pagoda in China built in 68AD, demonstrates the start of symbolization and how this symbolization developed. According to the *Supernatural Stories of Qinyun Pagoda in White Horse Temple*, a 12th-century document, Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han dynasty visited White Horse Temple in 69AD, and the Indian monks in residence inquired him about a protruding mound southeast of the temple. The Emperor recalled a supernatural story about this mound, and the monks instantly recognized the mound to be one of the nineteen sites where King Asoka placed the Buddha's relics. Xiao and Ren (2014) write that, pleased by this connection, the Emperor decreed the architects to build an Indian-style pagoda on the mound and named this nine-story (about 106 meters) building Qiyun Pagoda, meaning "cloud is the limit," describing its height (Xiao & Ren, 2014, 11).

Qiyun Pagoda reflects the early Chinese interest in Buddhism. According to Wu Hung (1986) in *Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art*, this fandom seemed to be primarily "inspired by the appeal of Buddha as a foreign deity" (Wu, 1986, 264). Although the pagoda would stand as the representation of the Buddha's body, it could also appear as the body of domestic and foreign deities alike. In this context, the pagoda readily became the object of symbolization and a freeway of welcoming Buddhism into native ideologies and practices. As an architectural novelty, the pagoda became an indispensable element in the growing edifice of Buddhist worship in China, and later it was incorporated into Taoism and other native practices. However, the pagoda was still heavily associated with the elite class and religious connotations during this time. Attracting emperors and aristocrats, the Chinese pagoda became the main object for a series of symbolizations, foreshadowing its de-symbolization after 1000AD, which built the foundation for its overseas journey to repeat this process.

4.3. The De-symbolization of the Chinese Pagoda

After the Tang dynasty, the pagoda witnessed a distinct process of de-symbolization, a process of shedding old symbolism and taking on the new. In the *Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, John Kieschnick (2003) explains the symbolism in Chinese Buddhism by pointing out that the development of symbolism is defined by "the tendency toward symbolic drift," a result of "the tenuous nature of the relationship between a given object and its symbolism" (Kieschnick, 2003, 154). Accordingly, it was hardly surprising to see the rapid de-symbolization of the pagoda as a "symbolic drift" (Ibid.). However, the de-symbolization of the pagoda is not the decay of the object's ability to act as a symbol but the obverse. After the Tang Dynasty, the pagoda had already broken away from Buddhist symbolism and acquired new meanings, a result of the devastating warfare among the military elites and the maturing Imperial Examination to have produced more officials and intellectuals from modest back-

grounds.

Sinicization seems to define the pagoda's development as de-symbolized from a Buddhist stupa and acquiring the new status as a folk space. Alternatively, Dr. Mircea Eliade (1958) proposed that the de-symbolization might also be evaluated through a different model, that of "degeneration" (Eliade, 1958). Kieschnick (2003) applies this model to studying Buddhist symbolism and explains that "what begins as a sophisticated attempt to comprehend ineffable sacred truth through the mediation of symbols inevitably undergoes degradation as lesser minds reinterpret symbols in their day-to-day lives" (Kieschnick, 2003, 155). Accordingly, this drifting process can be further regarded as a decay in quality and originality.
Eliade's model enables us to see the "rationalization" in the possible early interpretation of the pagoda as an embodiment of Mount Kunlun and Buddha as a foreign deity. However, we would rather call this process "de-symbolization" instead of "degradation" or "infantilization" because the later architects and civilian sponsors gave the symbolism of the pagoda more depth and breadth in terms of how and why it should be built. Quality should not simplistically equate to originality. These later pagodas speak to a broader spectrum of interests and people.

The Old Chinatown and its early pagodas can be traced back to an artistic convention originating in Canton, China, the Lingnan Style. A detailed look into this connection might also help us understand the diasporic character of the pagoda even before its physical arrival in America. Within 19th-century China, then during the Qing dynasty, the Canton area epitomized the Sino-Western tension, which was further intensified after the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 and the consequent ceding of Hong Kong to Great Britain. Canton certainly became the first beneficiary and victim of this history. It is hardly coincidental that the early Chinatown architecture exhibited striking elements of the Lingnan Style, a dominant style to summarize Cantonese architecture before the 20th century.

In the book *Old Chinatown*, written by Arnold Genthe (1913), the Victorian shopfronts and restaurants, then predominantly wood and brick structures, started to be transformed by Cantonese elements (Genthe, 1913). Figure 3, a photograph from Genthe's book, shows a Cantonese-style balcony from the Street of Painted Balconies. Additionally, the other name of "Chinatown," "Ton Yan Gai," a name more often used by the immigrants themselves, meaning "the Street of Tang People," stems from the Cantonese history of Sinicization, which reminds one of what happened to the pagoda. It was a unique process through which the Austronesian indigenous peoples of Canton were absorbed into Chinese culture by south-bound immigration, cultural assimilation, and political expansion in the Tang Dynasty.

The Lingnan style is a result of this Sinicization. Tang Xiaoxiang (2011), an architecture scholar, also defines Cantonese architecture as a form born from the intimate contact between Western and Chinese forces through the three stages of historical processes: self-adaption, localized choice, and integration and renovation (Tang, 2011). In this process, Cantonese architecture evolved to have the following artistic aspects, summarized by Xianqiong Liao and Feifeng Zhong (2019): decorative art, decorative color, and technical craft, which were highly influenced by "the characteristics of Lingnan traditional cultural elements, including the emphasis on commerce, openness, compatibility, pluralism, innovation, pragmatism, hedonism and intuition (less abstract concepts and reason, more sensibility, interest, plot, image novelty, and ordinary citizen sentiment)" (Liao & Zhong, 2019, 72). The density and contrast of colors are also highlights of Cantonese architecture, which were brought into the design of Chinatown pagodas for climatic and auspicious reasons.

4.4. The Old Chinatown

Old Chinatown, often periodized between the 1850s to 1906, developed the early conditions for the later pagoda-like architectures to emerge. From 1852 to 1879, the Chinese population in California grew significantly from 22,000 to 71,000 (Sinclair, 2004, 150). With the incoming immigrants, Phillip Choy (2012) points out that "hundreds of imported prefabricated wooden houses were added to the City's housing inventory" to satisfy the increasing need of the burgeoning population (Choy, 2012, 30). A New York journalist, Bayard Taylor, wrote that "Chinese carpenters

Figure 3. A Photo of A 19th-century Photo of the Street of Painted Balconies from Arnold Genthe's Book *Old Chinatown*. Genthe, A. (1913), *The Street of Painted Balconies* [Painting]. Private Collection. Source: Genthe, A. (1913). *Old Chinatown* (pp.47). Mitchell Kennerley.

put up at least seventy-five houses imported from Canton" (Ibid.). However, the expansion of the neighborhood was met with hostility, a result of racial politics. In such tension, the Tonk Tong Opera Company erected their own imported theater, the Mandarin Theater, and this pagoda-like "novelty" soon became a must-see for tourists to San Francisco in the 19th century (Ibid., 151). Unlike Sing Chong and Sing Fat, the theater is prefabricated and imported in its entirety.

As the Chinese started to congregate in the city center and near today's Financial District, they shifted from importing materials and lodgings to renovating and recycling the local resources. At this stage of development, the pagodas were still rarities incomparable to the dazzling presence of "painted balconies," which can be found in almost any Chinese household, presenting a festive spectacle. These visual elements can be regarded as a continuum of Lingnan architecture later incorporated into the pagodas. For example, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the combination of yellow and green is a dominant feature in Cantonese temples and courtyards. Another spotlight is the intricate rendering of the surface. The pictorial patterns for carvings and paint often follow the undulation of the building and form a unique dialogue with the structure itself, a Lingnan-influenced feature shared by the Chinatown pagodas.

4.5. From Duality to Abstraction

In Anthony W. Lee's seminal book about San Francisco Chinatown, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco*, Dr. Lee (2001) observes that many texts and images about the matter cannot escape from being "caught between two modes of apprehension" (Lee, 2001, 62). According to Lee, "Chinatown is both horrid and pleasing, appallingly dirty and strikingly colorful, ridden with social vice and packed with aesthetic virtue" (Ibid.). Many accounts can exemplify this duality. They include the so-called "Chinatown images," a product and instrument of larger sociopolitical agendas, and rendered Chinatown a "contested terrain," according to K. Scott Wong (1995), torn apart by two extreme feelings (Wong, 1995, 3) of pleasure and horror.

The new pagoda would serve as a creative and functional solution to resolve the duality of Old Chinatown by introducing abstraction. The most significant difference between the old ethnic slum and the new pagoda complex lies in the degree of abstraction. Compared to the overwhelming disunited details jutting out from Arnold's book, Sing Chong looks like a clean abstracted painting exorcised of any specters of duality. There is no duality here: the "horrid" and "pleasing," and even the picturesque was further flattened. This process of abstraction continued in the following decades. The changes in mapping San Francisco also mirrored this shift in the pagoda (and Chinatown residents) to become increasingly abstract and iconized, if not an intentional effort in cartography.

This process also teases out the questions around "abstraction." By abstracting both architectural and human forms, this "difference" is flattened and minimized, thus challenging the binary construction of "us" versus "them" and making impossible the colonialist narrative based on alterity. However, the pagodas can be read as decorative as well. At least Sing Chong and Sing Fat, with their schematic colors and Orientalist motifs, seem to fall into Greenburg's (2017) critique on decorative art (Greenburg, 2017, 24), but these architectures were never built initially to be appreciated in galleries or palaces. Afterall, the pagoda came to be the intersection of art and craft, thus here breaking down, according to Elissa Auther (2004), the artificial divisions of gender, race, and sexuality (Auther, 2004, 362), which divide them.

Indeed, the pagoda has adequately captured the curiosity of the readers and left some dramatic effect. However, it is still questionable that this form remains superficial without transcending the "decorative" by breaking out of a "hallucinated uniformity," like a Jackson Pollock painting by dramatizing the surface while expressing "pure" humanity (Ibid.), but the humanity of whom? To further investigate this, we would have to see through the abstract surface of the pagoda and examine its engagement with artists and the community.

5. Concluding Remarks

The pagoda in Chinatown is contemporary visual culture par excellence. If the pagoda is a ubiquitous form, its ubiquity is not to be counted but felt out. If it is a social imaginary, it

Figure 5. Yun, G. (1928). *Chinese Man in Hat* [painting]. Collection of Li-lan. Anthony W. Lee, Source: Lee, A. W. (2001). Picturesque Chinatown." In *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (pp. 231, 5.14). University of California Press.

was built from an imaginary existence of something, but the Chinatown pagoda has existed for so long that it became the basis for new imaginations. It even stops straddling between commodity and history because the two are increasingly converging in our time. The pagoda is about ownership, the right to own access to Buddhism, to a foreign culture, to history, to economic success, or to appropriation and dis-appropriation. If we return to the question of "abstraction," we often neglect a critical aspect of how abstraction happens: the power of producing and mediating abstraction.

It was not only the Western gaze that got to decide what and how to abstract but also the "objects" of this gaze. Yun Gee was the first known Chinese American artist who was born in Chinatown, lived extensively in the place, and wherein set up his studio and painted his neighborhood as an insider. *Chinese Man in Hat* (Figure 4) is a portrait of a Gee's Club member. On both sides of the central figure are Chinese verses. The first line on the left reads: "I am thinking, thinking of me, I am thinking of me." The first line on the right reads: "Who creates, creates whom, who creates whom" (Lee, 2001, 231). The lines also remind one of the inscribed poems on the prison walls by the Chinese immigrants from Angel Island, an internment camp of Chinese immigrants during the Exclusion period. This abstract portrait suggests Gee's growing sense of himself in Chinatown and of his community in seclusion (Ibid., 235). In the Cubist-inspired brushwork of the picture, we see certain deviance in the abstraction of the figure—the abstraction starts to speak for itself. Gee's paintings created a fissure in the Orientalist abstraction of Chinatown and set the subject-object relationship in tension for critical reflections. This process of abstraction was imbued with a strong sense of identity and subjectivity, unseen in the earlier abstractions. As the pagoda was increasingly encoded into the Chinese American identity through abstraction, or simply an abstract yet strong presence, this identity also started to grow out of the architecture, just as the man in the portrait speaks beyond the frame.

Chinatown is built out of necessity, but it revolves around performativity and ownership, just as in the history of the transnational pagoda. Today's Chinatown still acts as an ef-

fective media of the City, where the pagoda constantly produces and reproduces the old and new symbolism. However, the migratory journey of the pagoda is also strong evidence of the great possibilities within the entanglement of cultures and desires in every diasporic community. In the age of Metaverse and Non-fungible tokens, we cannot feel more anxious about our ownership of history and culture. Yet, I believe that by allowing ourselves to connect the disparate points of the past, we will begin to grasp the possibilities of the future. We shall never become strangers to ourselves, and instead, we should become the residents of the pagoda and look from there.

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