

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS
OF SHEN CONGWEN'S MASTERWORK,
BIAN CHENG (BORDER TOWN)

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This essay compares the four published English translations of *Bian cheng* (*Border Town*) of Shen Congwen's novel, discussing personal, linguistic, social, political, historical, and cross-cultural factors that might have influenced the translations and their reception when they appeared, respectively, in 1936, 1947, 1962, and 2009.

Key words: Shen Congwen, *Bian cheng*, *Border Town*, *Frontier City*, translation, dialect, West Hunan, reception, Cuicui, Pearl Buck, Nobel Prize

Shen Congwen's 沈從文 short novel *Bian cheng* 邊城, composed in 1933 – 1934, first published serially in Chinese in 1934,¹ and translated under titles including *Border Town* (my own translation, which I shall privilege in this essay), *The Frontier City*, *Une bourgade a l'écart* (Fr.: An outlying town), *Le passeur de Chadong* (Fr.: The ferryman of Chadong), and *Die Grenzstadt* (Ger.: The frontier city), has for more than seven decades been acclaimed as Shen Congwen's masterwork. That is the view in China and globally.² In China, biographical dictionaries from the 1930s to 1949 commonly (though not always

¹ SHEN CONGWEN (1902 – 1988), *Bian cheng*, first published in the *Guowen zhoupao* 國聞週報. The initial installment appeared on 1 January 1934, yet the final installment bears a note indicating that Shen finished the work only on 19 April 1934.

² I wish to thank Professor Gang Zhou (Zhou Gang 周剛) of Louisiana State University for organizing a panel on the “Global Shen Congwen” at the July 2013 conference of the International Comparative Literature Association in Paris. This essay was prepared for an presented at that venue.

independently, since some dictionaries appear to have copied previous dictionaries) called the novel Shen's *daibiao zuo* 代表作, his "representative" work, pointing evidently to its preeminence in establishing his literary reputation.

There are four English translations, all of which are better than merely competent in rendering the Chinese, and all of which maintain high literary standards. These renditions appeared at wide intervals in time; this affected the nature of the translations, their ability to come before readers in print, and also their reception. The translations are, in order, (1) *Green Jade and Green Jade* ["by Shen Ch'ung-wen"], published in China in the English-language magazine *T'ien Hsia Monthly* (*Tianxia yuekan* 天下月刊), January – April 1936, translated by Emily Hahn³ and Shing Mo-lei (in Mandarin, Xin Molei 辛墨雷, presumably a pen name of Shao Xunmei 邵洵美); (2) *The Frontier City*, published by George Allen and Unwin in a volume of Shen's collected fiction called *The Chinese Earth* ["by Shen Tseng-wen"], 1947, translated by Ching Ti and Robert Payne (Ching Ti now goes by the Pinyin rendering of his name in his native Tianjin dialect, namely "Jin Di" 金隄); (3) *The Border Town*, first published in 1962 by *Chinese Literature*, a monthly journal of the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, translated by Gladys Yang, née Tayler and called Dai Naidie 戴乃迭 in Chinese; and (4) *Border Town*, published in New York by HarperCollins and translated by me. None of these versions includes a translation of Shen's famous preface to this novel,⁴ although the end of Ching and Payne's introduction to *The Chinese Earth* contains a few sentences from it, marked as such. The Chinese preface was first published on 25 April in the *Tianjin Dagongbao* 大公報. Shen's note at the end of the preface indicates that he wrote it the day before.

All the translators, with the possible but unlikely exception of Hahn, knew Shen Congwen personally. Shao Xunmei was a friend, appreciative publisher, and sometime literary sparring partner who had associated with Shen since the late 1920s, when they were confederates in the Crescent Moon Society or Xinyueshe 新月社. Shen most likely knew Shao's American girlfriend of the 1930s, Emily Hahn, whose main job at the time was writing for the *New Yorker*. The future professional translator Yang Xianyi 楊憲益, whose sister Yang Yi 楊苡 had been a student of Shen Congwen's, was invited to teach at the Southwest Associated University or Xi'nan Lianhe Daxue 西南聯合大學 in Kunming

³ Hahn's Chinese name, rendered in Pinyin, was Xiang Meili 項美麗. See the photos in Jinyangwang, 11 October, 2005. Available at <http://www.ycwb.com/GB/content/2005-10/11/content_997084.htm> [cit. 24 Oct. 2013].

⁴ SHEN CONGWEN. "*Bian cheng tiji*."

during the Sino-Japanese War with help from Shen Congwen, although Yang chose to teach at other institutions in southwestern China due to personal reasons.⁵ Xianyi's wife Gladys (who was born in China of missionaries but raised in England; the Yangs first met at Oxford) cotranslated many works of Chinese literature with Xianyi at the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing after 1949. These expert and prolific translators remained close friends of Shen's in the post-Mao era. Ching Ti (Jin Di) was Shen's student at the Southwest Associated University during the war. When Shen Congwen went abroad for the first time to lecture and visit relatives and old friends in America in 1981, he was happy to meet with Ching Ti, who had moved there, and to renew his acquaintance with the English-born novelist, journalist, popular historian, and postwar American professor Robert Payne, who also was in Kunming during the war. Payne taught at the Southwest Associated University and married a daughter of Shen's relative Xiong Xiling 熊希齡. Shen Congwen welcomed my first visit to Beijing in 1980 because I had written my Harvard doctoral dissertation about him and his works. He allowed me to interview him extensively for my literary biography, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, in 1980, 1981 (in Beijing and Hamden, Connecticut), and 1986. I corresponded with Shen and his wife Zhang Zhaohe 張兆和在 the years in between and afterwards, until his death in 1988.

Shen's death, preceded by a severe stroke in 1983, of course prevented me from conferring with him about the translations that several colleagues and I later published in *Imperfect Paradise*, a selection of Shen's stories, as well as my subsequent translation of *Border Town*. In the 1980s I had asked Shen to clarify a few points of West Hunanese (Xiangxi 湘西) linguistic usage and local culture that had bearing on *Bian cheng*. No doubt the most interesting thing I learned about the novel was that Shen viewed parts of it, notably the song about "Gods and Immortals" in Ch. 8, as humorous. Decades later, by which time there was an Internet to consult, I was able to look up some of the more concrete (often popular, not erudite) cultural references in the novel, and discover some cultural misunderstandings and malapropisms voiced by his fictional folk that did indeed suggest a certain playful, humorous, even satiric undercurrent in his rendering of folk conceptions. The fact that his characters' minds were filled not with figures from high culture but anecdotes and lore from popular novels in the old chapter-drive style, and that they even got mixed up about them, was significant social commentary. I do not know whether the other major translators above conferred with Shen at length when they produced their renditions, but certain variances, seeming mistakes, and

⁵ YANG XIANYI. *White Tiger*, pp. 90, 101 – 103.

elisions of difficult passages suggest that they did not extensively collaborate with the author. The Ching and Payne book says that Shen selected the works they translated, of which *Border Town* was one, but they do not indicate that he participated actively in their textual work, and indeed their renditions are the loosest of the four available. Shen knew no foreign languages, so he could not have done any close checking of anyone's final translation texts by himself. Further, so far as I know, Shen's writings do not mention collaboration with translators. He did extensively revise his own works in Chinese. He revised a few works after the 1949 revolution (notoriously, making them more politically correct), and he undertook revisions again in post-Mao times, working from his original versions, for the *Shen Congwen wenji* 沈從文文集 (The works of Shen Congwen). However, his final revisions to the works he chose to include were in my judgment subtle, mostly involving individual word choices.

Today, translation and the theory of it constitute a major scholarly field, actively encouraged above all in the People's Republic of China, which seeks to increase its "soft power" by training new generations of China-born translators. There is already a dissertation from Hong Kong, by Xu Minhui 徐敏慧, now published as a book, comparing English translations of Shen Congwen's many works, including those by me and my collaborators in *Imperfect Paradise*. I confess that my own "method," though surely influenced by multiple conscious and unconscious factors, is basically one of trial and error. In practice, there is a finite number of sensible English sentences into which a Chinese sentence can be rendered, and the number of renditions I can actually think of is still more limited. I try out every possibility I can think of and then select what I think is the best one. I suspect that most translators operate in more or less the same way, though I certainly defend the right of any scholar to study our "methods," point out errors and infelicities in our translations, and even put us into categories. I am, after all, on the scholarly side of the line; Xu Minhui aptly calls me a scholar-translator as opposed to a professional translator. My scholarship is in history and Chinese culture, not translation theory.

Rather than attempt an intensive and definitive comparison of the four translations, I will write as an intellectual historian, as is my most usual practice, pointing out just a few salient differences in the texts, and differences in their reception and the environment in which the translations appeared, along with some speculation about intellectual choices made by the translators (my speculations about my own conscious choices are of course the most reliable, though not infallible), and how these reflect the passage of time and cultural changes in the languages, cultures, and histories of the Chinese writer, his Sinophone readers, and the Anglophone readers his translators targeted. In the

absence of social surveys and so forth, my reflections and conclusions are subjective.

The Translations

The first translation, by “Emily Hahn and Shing Mo-lei,” is by a native English speaker (Hahn) who did not necessarily have advanced Chinese language skills and a native-speaker collaborator or collaborators, including Shao Xunmei, who might or might not be “Shing Mo-lei”⁶. This translation set several precedents that have largely been followed by later translators. The Hahn and Shing translation, and the three that have followed it, have not changed the order of sentences in the original Chinese, altered the paragraph breaks to any major degree, even when the original paragraphs are long, or attempted other notable departures from literal translation of the Chinese; Hahn and Shing’s choice of a new title for the work is their most outstanding departure from the original Chinese text. All the various translations of *Border Town* are highly “literary” – polished and elegant, and in a neutral idiom that ought to suit both British and American readers (the spellings are British,⁷ though some of the punctuations are American in the Hahn version),⁸ without slavishly attempting to follow the word order of the Chinese within sentences. However, the Hahn and Shing translation generally follows the word order of Shen’s original Chinese text more than the later translations do. The translation is, to my taste, a little too close to the original in its word choices, perhaps reflecting a two-step style of translation in which Hahn as polisher was afraid to change too drastically a Chinese trot prepared by her native-speaker collaborator(s). Translations of song lyrics suffer accordingly. Infrequently, a Chinese word or two that the translators evidently deemed superfluous, untranslatable, or unrecognizable is omitted – glossed over as if it did not exist.⁹ Yet Emily Hahn in her preface on the contrary apologizes for

⁶ The final line of the preface to the translation (92) says, “We thank Mr. Zau Sinmay for his invaluable aid and advice.” (Shao spelled his name that way in Romanization.) That the thanks comes from “we” suggests that Shing could be a third person rather than just a pen name for Shao (Zau). Yet, despite the plural pronoun, the preface is signed by “E.H.” alone, which might suggest that the thanking of “Mr. Zau” is in fact a subtle, though not definitive, way of suggesting that “Shing Mo-lei” was Shao.

⁷ The spellings in all the translations but mine are British.

⁸ For instance, periods appear within quotation marks.

⁹ The second sentence of the translation omits Shen’s reference to the old imperial highway nearing the “West Hunan border,” which is no great elision, but see below – the translators seem to have wanted to avoid the idea that Shen was writing about a

adding extra words to the text: “When we encountered a custom or object in the text which is familiar to Chinese but not to foreigners, we have incorporated the explanation *in the text*.”¹⁰ (91, her emphasis) She notes that Shen Congwen’s own prose in Chinese already is “characterized by a wealth of such explanation and he has supplied so many of his own that our three insertions do not stand out.” (92) The provision of cultural explanations in a literary text is standard practice now, shaped by criticisms of many early translations by Sinologists that critics deemed to be excessively literal, and also by the current publishing environment, which finds footnotes disruptive, as Emily Hahn did in her time. Indeed, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, which represents stories and realities of India and Pakistan to a generalized global intended audience, likewise explains exotic terms and customs within the text. And these need not be just for foreign readers, since not all the elements of Punjabi, Maharashtrian, and Gujarati regional culture and linguistics in the novel are necessarily known to all South Asians.

A surprising lapse is the Hahn translation’s failure to identify as terms from chess the novel’s metaphors for the two local methods of courtship as the old ferryman in the novel describes them. A boy suitor may take the straight-line method of going through the rituals of arranged marriage, like a chariot or rook (“rook” is how standard English would render the Chinese, *che* 車, as a chess piece), or, *jumping over* all obstacles, appeal to the girl “directly” (that is, without her family mediating or getting in the way), by singing love songs to her at night to see if she responds. That is said to be the move of the knight, or (to more literally translate the name of the piece in Chinese chess) “horse,” *ma* 馬, or as I translate it, “horseman.” The Hahn translation simply has the ferryman say that “there is a road for carriages and a road for horses.” (279). Missing the chess analogy misses not just the country fellow’s ability to speak figuratively, but also the possible intimation that love and marriage are like a game, a game of high strategy. (The metaphor may be Shen’s poetic invention rather than an established local way of speech, though serenading is a genuine and regionally specific local custom.) The omission of the reference to chess suggests to me that Hahn and her collaborator did not confer closely with the author, despite the native speaker collaborator’s high degree of understanding of nearly all the text, which indicates a well educated reader, but probably not one who played Chinese chess!

border or frontier era. At the start of Ch. 5, where the original Chinese speaks of a custom of girls and boys exchanging songs under the moon, the translation (180) omits the statement in the text that this is a border or frontier custom.

¹⁰ An example would be the explanation of dice thrown to determine who takes the pot in the periodic meetings of mutual credit associations, p. 100.

The most dramatic and surprising change from the original Chinese is the rendering of the title as “Green Jade and Green Jade.” This title is taken from the name of the novel’s heroine, Cuicui 翠翠, as she is called in contemporary Pinyin, or Ts’ui-ts’ui, in the old Wade-Giles Romanization that Hahn and Shing used, except for place names. At first mention in the translation, the heroine is referred to as “Ts’ui Ts’ui, which means ‘Green Jade and Green Jade.’” (95) It is common to change a work’s title in a translation or republication, but to the Anglophone reader, the duplication inevitably suggests something plural. Moreover, “green jade,” *cui*, is written with one morpheme (character) in Chinese, whereas in English it takes two words. To then double it seems, well, doubly infelicitous and not representative of how the Chinese would understand the name, since “reduplicatives” are frequent in girls’ names in that language, without implications of anything plural.

The Ching and Payne translation of Shen’s masterpiece as *The Frontier City* is perhaps the most elegant and literary of the four renditions. It is surely the most concise and least concerned to reproduce every cultural and literary or popular cultural nuance in the original. This is the version that may best persuade the Anglophone reader that the novel is truly great world literature – though the elegance and poetry of the rendition must come from Payne’s command of the English language (like Hahn, he was mostly the polisher in a two-step process) rather than being a direct rendering of the poetry in Shen’s own prose. In a way, it makes the work seem the least “Chinese.” Take, for instance, the passage in Ch. 14 in which Cuicui rises up, in her dream, while being serenaded, to a cliff to pick *huercao* 虎耳草 (lit., “tigers’ ears grass”), or what I render as “the ‘tigers’ ears’ – saxifrage!” Hahn and Shing have Cuicui say, while retelling the dream, that “I flew to the bluff across the stream and gathered a great handful of tiger-ears.” (297) This reflects the closeness to the original Chinese text as Hahn polished it. The Chinese does use the word *fei* 飛 (fly), and the plant name literally has the characters for “tiger” and “ear” in it, though the character for “grass” is omitted by Hahn and Shing, probably because they realized the subject must be a flower, leaf, or morphologically complex plant, not a “grass” in the English-language conception. (There are other local Chinese names for flowers, not grasses that use the morpheme *cao* at the end, e.g., *honghuacao* 紅花草, the Chinese milk vetch.) But the reader of Hahn and Shing rendition might not realize that “tiger-ears” are even plants. They could be fungi or perhaps oddly shaped stones, plant or animal droppings, who knows? Ching and Payne’s solution is to free up the text and have Cuicui speak as a girl who is native in English might: “I was led by the voices along the cliffs of the stream, and there I found the tiger-lilies...” (258) This makes more sense in English and identifies the “tiger ears” as flowers, identifiable

flowers in the average Anglophone reader's lexicon, with established poetic associations. It keeps the Chinese reference to "tigers" (and with it, perhaps overtones of consumption of human flesh, though it would be figuratively – sexually – in this case). The Ching and Payne rendition of course exercises poetic license. The rendition is not so accurate, since the plants in question are not in fact tiger lilies, but a species closer to saxifrage; moreover, the "tiger ear" part of the plant would probably refer to the plant's leaves, not the flowers. (It is my rank speculation, made in a markerless endnote in my translation, that there is a further sexual innuendo, since both Chinese and Westerners who are up on their botany know saxifrage as rock-splitters.)

One cost of the Ching and Payne rendition's elegance is that the translators simply delete a few difficult words, though perhaps because these Chinese words were obscure even to the highly educated Ching Ti (Jin Di), rather than because rendering them would have been too complex. On the other hand, the Ching and Payne translation in *The Chinese Earth* of another of Shen's works, *Kan hong lu* 看虹錄 (The rainbow, or, Gazing at rainbows), is notorious for its excision of the religious framing passages of the Chinese original; their other translations have elisions, too, along with strokes of brilliance in rendering certain of Shen's images.¹¹ However, some of their seemingly idiosyncratic renderings of particular phrases in their *The Frontier City* production clearly come from the prior translation by Hahn and Shing. The similarities are too close to be coincidental. For instance, the later translation speaks of "a road for carriages and a road for horses" (240), just like Hahn and Shing. It took Gladys Yang to correctly "translate" the chess analogy (53). I have, as I acknowledge in the "Foreword" to my translation, benefited from her rendition as well as those of the two teams that also came before me.

Gladys Yang was a highly skilled and practiced professional translator when she completed her version. It has the highest marks for accuracy of any of the three translations from the pre-Internet age; Gladys Yang caught the chess metaphor and rendered the "tigers' ears grass" accurately, if not poetically, as

¹¹ Ching Ti (Jin Di), who emigrated to the U.S. in the 1980s, was my original collaborator in what later became *Imperfect Paradise*, and indeed he originated the idea of a new collection of Shen's stories. It was to be called *New and Old*, though with a rather different selection of stories than those in *Imperfect Paradise*. "The New and the Old," translated by me, was to begin the volume, as it does now *Imperfect Paradise*. I found Jin Di to be a "scholar translator" like myself, only more so; I preferred freer translations. The original project foundered mostly because the original plan was to reprint many stories from *The Chinese Earth* with only minor revisions. However, in 1982, soon after we started, *The Chinese Earth* was already reprinted by Columbia University Press without revisions, except for a new, added preface by Shen Congwen himself. Jin Di and I also became involved in other projects.

“saxifrage.” She does, oddly and misleadingly, refer to the throwing of dice in Ch. 2 not as a method of seeing who gets the pot in an old-fashioned revolving credit association or *yaohui* 搖會 (lit.: “[dice-] shaking society,” as Hahn and Shing realized and transmitted to their readers at perhaps excessive length in a passage of their own creation [100]), but simply as “dicing and gambling” (14). However, she does not say that the sailors “gamble over their share of the profit,” as Ching and Payne say (199), in what I think may be counted as an error. Also, like Hahn and Shing in their translation, Yang speaks of a Mount Xiushan 秀山 in Sichuan, as if it were a mountain rather than a town or county name, though the literal rendering could of course be defended in both translations as a picturesquely literal rendering of what the translators did realize was an urban place name. Yang’s translation evidences the clearest understanding of modern Chinese history, as at p. 10: “The town is garrisoned by a battalion reorganized from the old Green Battalion.” Hahn and her Chinese collaborator, perhaps not aware of the old Qing institution that historians now call in English the Army of the Green Standard (*liying* 綠營), simply elides Shen’s identification of the origin of the troops, as well as the fact that they have been reorganized after the revolution; Hahn and Shing refer to the troops only as “a company of soldiers” (98). Anglophone readers, even bilinguals who know a little Qing history, might simply be bewildered by Ching and Payne’s rendering: “only a company of soldiers, from the Green Army.” (196) At this point my rendition fills in some background for the non-native reader that I think a well educated reader of Shen’s generation might have known – and I do believe “battalion” is correct, not “company”: “a lone battalion of garrison troops reorganized from the Green Standard Army’s farmer-soldiers of yesteryear.” (12) The clarification that they were probably farmer-soldiers is one of my own translator’s additions of the sort for which Hahn apologized in her preface. It applies specifically to Green Standard soldiers of Shen’s and certain other frontier regions in China.

The Gladys Yang translation strikes me as elegant, and it lacks words of British vernacular that would distract American readers, unlike some of her 1980s renderings of 1980s Chinese writers. (Americans do not find British slang in the two Yangs’ earlier, great translations of Lu Xun 魯迅 and premodern Chinese literary works.) Compared to Ching and Payne, the Yang version might be thought more “scholarly,” and perforce perhaps more prosaic. She made one choice that strikes most critics and fanciers of Shen Congwen as odd, however. She translates the novel into the present tense instead of the past tense. The tense of the verbs in Chinese is not marked as it is in more highly inflected languages, and her choice of the present may have been intended to convey a pastoral sense of timelessness. However, the choice of tense is so

distinctive in the Anglophone novel as to be distracting; for better or worse, to many readers, Yang's use of the present tense may seem a method meant to reduce the nostalgic feel of the work and make it seem more modernist. On the other hand, the unconventionality of the tense helps free the translation from criticism that it is the product of a bureaucratic translation factory, as foreign translators who for Chinese supervisors at the Foreign Languages Press sometimes viewed that organization. I do not have a definitive answer as to whether native collaborators or bosses worked on the Yang translation, for good or for ill, nor did I think to ask her, in the 1980s, why Yang Xianyi did not collaborate on this work, at least for attribution.

A point of likely political correctness in the Yang translation is its erasure of terms pointing to the Gelaohui 哥老會 or Elder Brothers Society. Although Mao Zedong himself wanted to summon this secret society to his side early in the revolution,¹² the Gelaohui, like similar secret associations, was generally an enemy and bugbear of China's post-Liberation regime. Yang's rendition thus omits a reference in Ch. 2 to a "*longtou guanshi*" "龍頭管事" (quotation marks are in the Chinese original), which I translate rather literally as "the 'Dragon Head' lodge master," (16), as do sociologists and historians when they speak of leaders of a certain rank in that secret society. Later, in Ch. 3, Shen refers to the *zhang shui matou de longtou dage Shunshun* 掌水碼頭的龍頭大哥順順, which I translate as "Dragon Head Elder Brother Shunshun, now boss of the riverfront" (26). This is mostly literal and would be an obvious secret society reference to those in the know, though they might not connect it precisely to the Gelaohui. As likely from ignorance or lack of interest as "discretion," since the secret society was regional and international interest in it has blossomed only in recent decades, the Hahn and Shing translation simply elides any reference at all to the lodge master (100) at the first occurrence and in the second instance makes a reference only to "Big Brother Shün Shün." Ching and Payne speak of "'dragon-headed' junk owners" (199), which makes the "dragon head" into a modifier, attributes it to the wrong people, and surely would leave the average reader mystified as to its meaning; at the second reference they call Shunshun the dock manager, which is correct, but elides both the designations "Dragon Head" and "Elder Brother" (204). The intimations that Shunshun, a very positive character in the text, belonged to a secret society may have been removed from the Yang translation not just to "protect" the reader from ideological contamination, but also to protect Shen Congwen from the charge that he was celebrating feudalist ne'er-do-wells. The elision certainly protects

¹² MAO ZEDONG. "Appeal to the Society of Elder Brothers."

Shunshun, and by extension the Gelaohui, from charges that they are anything but benevolent. Shen Congwen, like many in his regional army, did have many connections to the Gelaohui among his diverse commanders and even in his family, including an uncle and his own father, though he denied to me during interview that he was a member himself.¹³

The translator and scholar William MacDonald pointed out to me years ago the felicity of translating Shen's title as "*border town*," as Yang has, because, like the Chinese, it conveys broader ideas of being on the edge and being in transition, between life and death, childhood and womanhood (for Cuicui), in a relatively expansive, not simply geographical sense.¹⁴ Gladys Yang was the first to call Shen's work *The Border Town*, and in that I have followed in her footsteps.

I will leave it to others to critique the merits and faults of my own translation, but Xu Minhui is surely right to call me a scholar-translator rather than a professional translator, both in view of my background and my translation style. I try to make my renditions concise, idiomatic to readers of our time, and without regional American peculiarities of style when I can detect them, but compared to the other translations, mine tend to be ultra-inclusive, leaving no cultural detail unexamined if I feel I can accurately explain it. This no doubt makes my renditions wordier than they might be. (To enhance what the editors consider to be readability, my explanations of fine points come as endnotes, and there are no note markers in the main text.) However, I would point out that Shen's masterpiece can be read on two or three levels, even in regard to its cultural references. As a pastoral, it is a universal human story. A reader with only general knowledge of early twentieth century China, for instance, can appreciate many nuances of the text, including the dilemma, the excitement, and the in many cultures still exotic peculiarity of choosing one's own marriage partner. The uniquely peaceful and "normal" condition of Shen Congwen's isolated frontier society might also seem artificial for a novel vaguely set in a warlord era, perhaps, though

¹³ See KINKLEY, J. *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, pp. 29 – 30, p. 40. HAAR, B.J. ter, pp. 266, and 266n17, cites *The Odyssey*, including Shen's denial of his own membership (which I cannot confirm from other sources), but Haar doubts that Shen Congwen himself could have remained outside the brotherhood. Puzzling to me, Haar goes on to say that "The secondary literature (including Kinkley himself!) always describes Ho Lung [He Long 賀龍], Shen Ts'ung-wen and his protagonists as members of the Gathering [Ge Lao Hui]." I have no idea where Haar got the impression that I consider Shen to have been a member of the group. Without more evidence, I can only take Shen Congwen at his word; membership was not automatic, and I always felt Shen to be truthful.

¹⁴ Personal conversation, in the mid-1970s. See MACDONALD, W.L. "Characters and Themes in Shen Ts'ung-wen's Fiction."

some critics might take that to be a polemical observation. Second, the reader who knows the national rather than regional metaphors, songs, and popular novels that appear in the novel, either because the reader is already immersed in Chinese culture or has read my incomplete and surely imperfect endnotes, will grasp even more nuances, and will have still more epiphanies, including, I think, an appreciation of a countercurrent of humor that accompanies the building tragedy in the plot. Third, there is the West Hunanese local color, which may be evident only to Shen's fellow-regionals. However, some of the peculiarities of Shen's text, above all those that lack clear referents (like soldiers releasing ducks for civilians to catch and take home for a holiday dinner), may be Shen's own personal creations.

I explained in my introduction to *Imperfect Paradise* that when I presented, in some instances, first-ever translations into English of Shen's stories in that book, the renditions bore some of the responsibilities of translations of record, requiring inclusiveness rather than concision if only because subsequent translators and readers can easily leave things out that my collaborators and I have elaborated, whereas a reader has no way of adding back things we may have omitted for the sake of elegance and euphony. But my translation of *Border Town* is not the first rendition of this work. Still, I clung to my old habits, feeling that I could achieve a sufficient degree of elegance even while maximizing cultural "education" of the reader (on whether or not this was an aim of Shen himself, read on). Above all, I felt I was in a position to improve the accuracy and inclusiveness of the translation because of the advantages available uniquely to me in my time.

Those advantages include the fact that I had the previous translations to consult; the invention of the Internet; and my ability through email to confer, long-distance, with native West Hunanese informants, and also other scholars. (My work was also the first to benefit from computer word processing.¹⁵) Both of the new communications tools have their limits, as does the person who uses them, particularly when the rendering of a great, and therefore inherently multifaceted and ambiguous work of literature is at stake. Let me cite two examples of the value, and limitations, of the Internet, which have their root in the obscure nature of knowledge and interpretation as such.

¹⁵ Specialists may debate whether the advantages of being able to instantaneously, and therefore obsessively revise one's words, whether as an original creator or a translator, are counterbalanced by a consequent diminution of spontaneity. And of course the consequences for distribution of the finished product are also numerous. Increased speed of production of the print edition is not always one of the consequences, though in my case HarperCollins was comparatively speedy, and in-house editors, general editor Tim Duggan himself, and Howard Goldblatt, the best translator in the business and the profession, all improved my final words.

Thanks to the Internet, a wealth of information (or putative information) about *huercao*, “tigers’ ears,” including photographs of the plants, was newly available to me and anyone else having Internet access. The “tigers’ ears” are evidently a treasured house plant presently in China’s big cities. (I say “evidently” because I simply infer this from websites!) But the pictures reveal different varieties, colors, and leaf patterns. What was Shen thinking of when he chose them to be the plants – indeed, was it their leaves or flowers? – that entered Cuicui’s love-serenade-induced dream? The implications the reader might draw, perhaps independently of Shen’s intentions, might be more various and suggestive than any of the translations have conveyed. Shen confirmed in interview that there are Freudian elements in the novel, and I looked for possible libidinal implications in the touching of the tigers’ ears, but it may take more fertile minds than mine to tease out more interesting implications of the text. Still, when all is said and done, I can say with confidence that, regardless of regional varieties of the plant, Gladys Yang was surely technically right in identifying the plant as saxifrage, and the leaves of some varieties do suggest something of the feline family. Those who prefer elegance and suggestiveness above all else may yet favor the rendering of “tiger lilies” as serendipitous, even if the idea came to the translators’ minds adventitiously.

The other “new tool,” in the absence of frequent visits to China, was current and former West Hunanese informants who were available for inquiries by email, notably my friend Mi Hualing 糜華菱, who did us all the enormous favor of compiling an entire glossary of unique West Hunanese linguistic usages evidenced in Shen Congwen’s works. (This, of course, was itself enabled by the compilation of new, inclusive anthologies of Shen’s works in Chinese, which now allow one to study his vocabulary as if compiling a concordance to the Bible or a Chinese classic. Prior to the 1980s, one could not access most of Shen Congwen’s works in Chinese libraries, even by scouting out their original publications in periodicals.) Once again, however, one encounters ambiguities, and the possibility, even probability, that some of Shen’s unique usages are idiosyncratic, not regional. He was a creator of unique narratives, images, and even words, not to mention syntactical constructions. In analyzing these I am of course confined by my own limited mastery of Chinese, as it was written in Shen’s era and the many eras before it. To be sure, it was part of Shen Congwen’s mission to give us all, Chinese as well as non-Chinese alike, a new eyes and ears with which to appreciate the world as he knew it and as we might hope to know it.

The Context and Reception of the Translations

This brings us to the context of the four translations and the even more nebulous question of their reception. Major social and intellectual changes have of course intervened. There is the turmoil and modernization of China during the first half of the twentieth century; the Communist revolution and the near banning of Shen Congwen's works on both sides of the Taiwan Strait in the aftermath, as well as the at times fanatical banishment of Shen Congwen's kind of literary, social, intellectual, and political views on the mainland. With this came the deployment of shattering attacks on the personhood of individuals based on their guilt by association with certain ideologies and the persons who allegedly held them, and the organization of a great machine purveying mass political culture on the Chinese mainland, at a time when China and the world outside the socialist bloc were intellectually isolated from each other and in a state of enmity. Finally there was the reappearance of Shen Congwen's works and the writer himself (though not as a writer again), at home and abroad, in the post-Mao era, and the reprinting of his old works in Taiwan after 1986. With that came a short-lived 1980s Shen Congwen *re* 沈從文熱, a "Shen Congwen craze" or "fever" among Sinophone readers at home and abroad, amid the reemergence of a broader intellectual discourse, people-to-people scholarly relations, and commercial relations between China and the capitalist world in post-Mao times; forces of rapid global integration in communications and the production and consumption of goods, as Cold War tendencies eased; and the reemergence of a stronger, more independent mainland Chinese discourse in the humanities (sometimes interwoven with, or some might say, infiltrated by, a global Sinophone discourse whose purveyors are more secure in the Diaspora than in China). And now, we have new national and global discourses on Shen Congwen, his writings, and their legacy.

Let us begin by working backwards. Perhaps the dominant discourse in China now is of Shen Congwen as a *xiangtu* 鄉土 writer. The concept itself is ambiguous, since it evokes ideas variously of a literature of rural, regional, and/or native (or politically nativist) sensibilities. I have generally eschewed and even tried to diminish the critical concept of Shen Congwen as a rural, regional, or *xiangtu* writer, for I feel it partakes of a noxious Mao-era (or really, an earlier twentieth-century Chinese intellectual) tendency to pigeonhole major writers for political and polemical purposes. To characterize Shen Congwen's work with a single modifier is to diminish both the diversity and the depth of his literary oeuvre, quite apart from the historical and regional baggage that the term *xiangtu* has acquired in mainland and Taiwan literary debates of the 1970s and 1980s. According to Anglophone literary conceptions, to call a writer a

“regional writer” or a representative of this or that kind of values is automatically to put him or her a rung below the “universal” and “timeless” writer who writes, and yes, educates us, about humanity as a whole. My own *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, by providing so much detail about Shen Congwen's background and his region, may have hastened or even channeled the process of his being designated a kind of regional writer, though I think the post-1980 liberation of intellectual talents in Hunan would have caught up to that line of investigation anyway. Scholars of the You Shui 酉水 (You River) Valley (at Baojing) 保靖 and scholarly “rivals” of the Tuojiang 沱江 River Valley (Fenghuang) 鳳凰, by the time of the new millennium, were already trying to analyze Cuicui as a representative of Tujia 土家 or Miao 苗 culture respectively, so as to claim her for their own microregional culture. Scholars and research institutes in West Hunan, including those of Jishou 吉首 University, have held a place at the forefront of the new Shen Congwen studies, proudly and rightly so, and I think they, particularly as they undertake investigation of regional cultural questions, understand better than anyone the dangers of designating Shen Congwen as a regional writer, since they mean to maintain his national rank. The broader problem of pigeonholing Shen Congwen or any writer is that it feeds into stereotyping within our new mass information culture.

A major question about the translations and their reception, then, is whether they have fed into a discourse of Shen Congwen as a universal literary writer (there can be pigeonholing under this designation, too, as when Shen is proclaimed a pastoral writer); a national (quintessentially Chinese) writer; a regional writer (quintessentially West Hunanese); a rural writer (representing rural values above urban ones); a hinterland writer (representing values and culture from beyond Beijing, Shanghai, and other political centers, including Changsha); a frontier writer (giving a place to national minority culture that is exotic even to most Chinese); or even, at times, an army writer (creating sympathy for the rank and file in the armed forces, though not, in Shen's case, emphasizing martial arts or an exclusively masculine virility). Shen Congwen famously declared himself a country person, meaning, I think, not simply one whose essence was not urban, but more importantly, one who was not sophisticated or “tricky” – though not necessarily antagonistic to foreign influences. The shock value of the crude and barbarous thoughts and habits of his soldier characters in his early “army stories” of the 1920s clearly were meant to “educate” his mostly urban readers about the reality of life in the armies in hinterland China, including its negative side, and at the same time rehabilitate some aspects of values he found in the ranks, in contrast to the urban airs of the old gentry and new commercial elites in Beijing and Shanghai.

Surely he did also celebrate his own region; he intimates that its very prostitutes were purer than prostitutes elsewhere. He may have been trying to educate his urban readers about his region or rural China, and to rehabilitate their reputation in times when print media privileged urban culture.

Border Town can figure in any and all of these critical discourses. What interventions do the translations make regarding the place of the novel? The Hahn and Shing rendition makes perhaps the starkest intervention in these terms, to prevent the Anglophone reader from seeing the novel as partaking of regional or frontier culture, despite the translation's self-conscious efforts to represent *Chinese* culture unfamiliar to the non-Chinese reader, as in its inserted explanations of mutual credit associations, geomancy or *fengshui* 風水, and so forth. Hahn is quite explicit about her intentions in the preface: "We have taken a great liberty with the title, which should be 'The Border Town' or 'The Outlying Village.' [Note the absence even here of the word "frontier." –JK] We changed it because we feel that these titles sound much more Wild West or North of England than Szechuen."¹⁶ (90) More remarkably, as noted above in note 7, the translation simply deletes some of Shen's references to the novel's setting in a border or frontier area. In Ch. 2 Shen writes that prostitutes are found "even" "in this tiny border town" of Chadong, but Hahn and Shing omit the apology because they omit the reference to the border locale (101). (They necessarily mention border customs at the start of the next paragraph.) Their translation thus seems purposely to make the novel represent "China," as a land with its own distinctive culture, while toning down suggestions that Shen is writing about a peculiar, border, or regional culture. Perhaps they intended to diminish any suggestions that it was a "backward," "rough," or "barbarian" culture, like the Wild West – and perhaps even the North of England, to one from fashionable southern realms of that country.

Hahn and Shing thus appear to have intervened to "tame" the border town-cum-frontier city in Shen Congwen's novel. The interventions are subtle, and it can be argued that Shen Congwen himself muted regional or ethnic minority culture in his novel, compared to his other works. There is less dialect than in his earlier works, for instance. Hahn in her preface elaborates on Shen's own "rough" past as a soldier in an area that "urban Chinese" would call "primitive" (87), drawing on his recently published autobiography. But in speaking of his writing, she emphasizes his reading of (despite his alleged rebellion against) classics of fiction, Chinese and Western. This locates Shen Congwen as a global literary author – the creator of a "perfect little pastoral,"

¹⁶ Tianbao 天保 and others have adventures in Sichuan, but Chadong 茶峒 is explicitly located across the border in Hunan! Perhaps the translators thought that Sichuan was more familiar than Hunan to the Anglophone reader.

which is how Shen himself represented *Border Town* in his preface, and he did not avoid the Greco-Roman associations of the genre, for he referred to his work literally as a "little Greek temple".¹⁷ Withal, the Hahn and Shing translation seems to want to elevate Shen's creativity to a high plane beyond his regional origins.

There is another contextual factor in the 1930s that may have influenced the novel's reception, its translation, and even its creation, as I mention in my foreword to my own translation. In 1931, Pearl Buck published *The Good Earth*, a bestselling and at the time unique novel about good, untarnished Chinese country folk. It also has a strong female character. The novel won a Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and was already translated into Chinese in that year. Even before the acclaimed film version of the novel (with non-Chinese actors) was released in 1937, and Buck won the Nobel prize in literature the next year, Buck's major novel acquired a certain global authority to "represent" the character and plight of the Chinese peasant, though the late 1920s and 1930s were generally the era when a wide variety of Chinese intellectuals and rural reformers "discovered" the Chinese countryside and its quiet and enduring denizens. Buck, the child of American missionaries in China, was not ethnically Chinese, though Chinese was her first language, so it was somewhat scandalous to Chinese litterateurs that a novel by a "foreigner" had acquired such preeminence.

As a positive example, Pearl Buck's success in reshaping international images of China's country folk, though the movie version still lay in the future, may have been one among many factors encouraging Shen Congwen to write *Border Town*, and to elevate its ethos to represent rural China generally, by abstracting and homogenizing its local "rural" culture, even as he chose unrepresentative and yet prestigious (in Europe and America) customs such as young people having the opportunity to choose their own mates. It is also possible that the accumulating success and presumed cultural authority of *The Good Earth* overseas encouraged Hahn and Shing to translate Shen's great novel into the language in which *The Good Earth* achieved its international success. To be sure, *Border Town* was already a popular and acclaimed novel in Chinese in the mid-1930s, reason enough for Hahn and Shing to translate Shen. His reputation was at its peak, but the presentation of his bucolic masterpiece in English may also be read, as I suggested in my foreword, as a more "authentic," *Chinese* rejoinder to Buck's vision of Chinese rural life. Both Buck's and Shen's novels make Chinese country folk out to be salts-of-the-earth, culturally unthreatening and morally "pure," with a female heroine by no means inferior to the male. *The*

¹⁷ SHEN CONGWEN. "*Bian cheng* tiji."

Good Earth's plot is far more socially tragic than *Border Town*'s. Shen Congwen's work may all the more be read as a rejoinder to the international idea of China as a land of sorrows and warlord trespasses – a “pastoral” land. The novel can be read as a paean to the “country folk,” to their seemingly anti-gentry customs of self-selection of mates and other forms of spontaneity, and to his region – armed with its hardiness and the national lore of the folk, but stripped of much regional and ethnic distinctiveness, except for nationally generalized customs of regional origin such as the Dragon Boat festivals.

That Ching and Payne titled their Shen Congwen anthology *The Chinese Earth* suggests that *The Good Earth* could not have been far from their minds, either. China was mired in its final bout of civil war in 1947, the year *The Chinese Earth* was published in England, although the work must have been years in the making. The chaos and dislocations of the post-war years might lead one to expect that they began their translation during the Sino-Japanese War in Kunming, if they did not finish it there. There is no hint in the book's introduction that China was about to “change color.” The Ching and Payne rendition, with its further elisions and abstractions, goes a step further than the original Hahn and Shing text in generalizing the local culture and universalizing its portrait of human nature and relations between the sexes and generations. The final product is indeed a work of world literature. Like Hahn and Shing, Ching and Payne in their introduction do obeisance to Shen's exotic and hardscrabble background, but there is little hint of it in their translation. The selections and the words within them tend to diminish regional, ethnic, and army themes.

The Yang translation, surprisingly, appeared after the Communist revolution, though during the period of post-Great Leap Forward liberalization, in 1962. As noted above, it may have been scrubbed for politically incorrect references, but there would have been little to worry about, were it not for the necessity in most of the Maoist era aggressively to embody the party line in all things, with no “middle characters.” Indeed, it was in 1962 that China's literary czars encouraged the addition of middle characters (those with both negative and positive traits) to the dramatis personae of new socialist fictional productions, as Shao Quanlin 邵荃麟 had encouraged. The conscientious Yang translation continues the tradition of presenting Shen Congwen's novel as a work about China's national society, with few indications of regional peculiarities that might be divisive or prone to lead the reader toward bourgeois taste. Few characters in the novel are peasants, but the heroes Cuicui and her grandfather are after all poor country folk, and Shunshun, the local secret society boss lionized in the novel, is said to have participated on the correct, progressive side in the 1911 revolution. It is chiefly in the post-Mao years that Lu Xun's old

xiangtu discourse was resurrected (it had been current more recently in quite unrelated debates about modern literature in Taiwan) to promote the writings of Liu Shaotang 劉紹棠, Sun Li 孫犁, and ultimately “veteran writers” like Shen Congwen who were only then being retrieved from the dustbin of history.

My translation appeared not only after the death of Mao, but also 20 years after the Tiananmen massacre. The idealistic, pluralist, noncommercial connotations that intellectuals might have attached to Deng Xiaoping's 1985 promise of a “second revolution” were long gone, and so were most traces of any Shen Congwen fever, despite continued interest in him in the Chinese academy. Shen Congwen had reentered the literary histories, mostly as a creative progenitor of *xiangtu* literature. One might have expected my translation to place *Border Town* squarely in the *xiangtu* discourse, given my initial geographical and historical interests in Shen, as an ex-soldier and local chronicler as well as a creative writer, and my dedication to inclusiveness in rendering nuances of local culture, aided by my interviews of Shen and the upsurge of research on Shen and his region, often by his fellow regionalists. Although many of my explications of local color are confined to the notes, one might well consider my rendition the one that best makes the case for *Border Town* as a work of *xiangtu* literature, whether that points to the work's attention to rural or peculiarly regional details. But my bent after the 1990s has been to counter the trend to see Shen Congwen narrowly as a *xiangtu* writer, so I have tried wherever possible to bring out the universalism rather than the exoticism of the characters, their surroundings, and their individual predicaments. In my adverse reaction to the uniformity of 1980s – 1990s standard textbook views of Shen Congwen, I in effect have returned to the previous translators' attempts to present the novel as a tale of universal human aspirations and tribulations, whose symbolism is as often the product of Shen's own creativity as it is prone to allude to traditional Chinese or Western figurations. As I have argued above, this novel above all others by Shen is written in a relatively abstract, non-regional mode. Shen Congwen, here as elsewhere, is a shaper and creator of the new National Language (*guoyu* 國語) as an expressive, literary language, shorn of common four-character phrases from both the old classical and “popular” languages (*chengyu* 成語 and *suyu* 俗語), as well as vocabulary and conventions from the Ming and Qing chapter-driven novels and more recent so-called “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” or *yuanyang hudie pai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派 fiction. Moreover, many of the particular cultural references that earlier translators evidently could not fathom and therefore simply omitted, but which could easily be found by me in searches of the twenty-first century Chinese-language Internet, turned out to be characters and incidents from old-style popular novels, sometimes with their lore confabulated or misinterpreted by the

novel's fictional characters. This was likewise easy to learn from the newly developed Internet. But these were characters and ostensible lore from national novels and old wives' tales, not specifically regional ones. Even the local color, then, points to popular culture from urban China and the national grapevine, not exotic regional or ethnic culture. Whether or not the quality of my English prose promotes or demotes *Border Town* for consideration as what the Chinese still call "pure literature" (*chun wenxue* 纯文学), whether as pastoral, tragedy, comedy, novel of manners, or something beyond the usual literary genres, I must leave to more objective observers to decide.

A final, and very important consideration affecting the translated novel's reception, in any era, besides the conscious and unconscious proclivities of the translators, is the general condition of publishing in each of the four eras. There is little or no data on the impact of the first translation, though it was clearly available later on to scholars such as Ching and Payne, even amid the wartime chaos. Published in an English-language periodical of Shanghai, the original venue, *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, has possibly had its greatest impact on Sinologists who have dwelt in the great Chinese libraries of American and European university libraries. I do not know the print run of *The Chinese Earth*, but again, I suspect its biggest impact was on students of China in foreign universities, particularly those who took up modern Chinese literature after 1961, when C.T. Hsia (Xia Zhiqing 夏志清) revived interest in Shen's literature with his *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*. Still, *The Chinese Earth* and its 1982 reprint by Columbia University Press were hardly bestsellers. The 1962 Yang translation of *The Border Town*, printed first in Beijing's journal *Chinese Literature* and reprinted in the same journal in 1981 and again, with three other stories by Shen and an essay by his younger cousin Huang Yongyu 黄永玉, in a 1981 Panda Books edition, must have had a relatively global distribution, but it was still mostly headed for university libraries in the West and assorted reading rooms in other countries. My translation of *Bian cheng* is well known by Shen Congwen fanciers thanks to its presence on Amazon.com and other websites, but it is not a bestseller, either. *Imperfect Paradise* is eclectic enough in its representation of Shen's diverse creative practice that some university courses on Chinese literature in translation have adopted it as a required textbook, resulting in sales of a few thousand copies.

It is of course the commercial market for fiction in English that drives popularity of Chinese fiction in the globalized capitalist world today. The commercial presses typically pick the manuscripts and their translators, basing their choices on presumed economic criteria, including, often enough, fads, and various ways of cutting the cost of having the translation done. The trade market

does not favor most literature in translation.¹⁸ University presses take up the slack, serving academic readers and the scholar-translator producers, who need to publish to acquire tenure. I excluded *Border Town* from my earlier translation project, the one that led to *Imperfect Paradise*, because *Border Town* had been translated before and I had a scholarly interest in “representing” the creativity of a great author in all its diversity. A retranslation of *Border Town* would have taken up the space of several short stories. I later undertook the translation of *Border Town* because a guarantee that it would be published was dangled before me by a major press, under a new series with worthy companion volumes established and superintended by the eminent Howard Goldblatt, and with the expectation (nicely fulfilled) of publicity, expert editing, and an artistic cover. There was even a translation fee, though it was lowered before it came time to sign the contract. Sadly, having sales as the basis also led to the death of the series; it was soon closed, due to economic reasons. I was lucky indeed to fit into a very narrow window of opportunity for publication. My view of the value of the original work and my hope that I could rise to the challenge of doing it justice, regardless of who or how many read it, was of course definitive in my decision to take on the translation task. As professors not just in history departments but also in Chinese departments well know, translation work is seldom accorded much value in the academy.

This survey of the four translations of Shen Congwen's *Bian cheng* is impressionistic and perhaps it is my own interests as a historian that have led me to look above all at the different intellectual, social, and international relations contexts that I believe attach to each of the four efforts. It is interesting now to recall that, because Shen's works were effectively banned for so much of his lifetime in mainland China and Taiwan, and not widely read in Chinese even in Chinese communities in Hong Kong and abroad, Shen's literary reputation was largely in the hands of readers, mostly academic, in the West and Japan. Critics such as C.T. Hsia and Hua-ling Nieh Engel (Nie Hualing 聶華苓) read Shen's works in the original Chinese, but most professors interested in Shen's works were non-Chinese who may have first encountered Shen's creativity through translations. That is no longer true; products of mainland China's own university system, typically armed with American graduate degrees, now dominate America and Europe's publication of articles and books on Shen Congwen and his literature. Meanwhile Shen Congwen, like most

¹⁸ Inexplicably, works written in English to begin with, even when the English sounds like something translated from the Chinese (like the early works of Ha Jin), have been preferred over excellent translations of major authors like Mo Yan.

authors who do not write in English, continues to be known primarily because of attention to him in the academy. Translation of Chinese literature into English remains important if it is to reach a wider public, but the importance of these translations to literary critical and comparative literary opinion seems, at least temporarily, to have diminished.

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