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Refereed Article

A Queer Momotaro under the Postcolonial Pacific: Reading *The Membranes* Alternatively

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Abstract

In this article, I read *The Membranes* (1996, 2021) as a postcolonial subversion of the Japanese folktale Momotaro, an interpretation alternative to the dominant reading mode that interprets the novella exclusively as science fiction. Examining the novella's reader reception of its English translation, I suggest that the dominant reading mode in English-speaking communities tends to overlook the author's speculation upon the reshuffling of global order and the postcolonial parable of Taiwan refracted by the protagonist's birth story. While the dominant interpretive mode contributes to the great success of *The Membranes'* translation, I argue that this mode eclipses the story's postcolonial parable and constitutes an inverted form of "the time lag of allegory" identified by Shu-mei Shih as perpetuating the power asymmetry between the West and the non-West in global literary studies (2004). A reading that contests this mode is due. Published in Taiwan in 1996 when the gates had just been thrown open to eclectic borrowing as well as genre and gender subversion—as Taiwan ended its 39-year long martial law period in 1987—the novella projected a nationalistic as well as queer speculation from the author Chi Ta-wei—in a postapocalyptic world where humanity has relocated underseas (and where heterosexuality is abnormal), Taiwan exerts a huge regional influence, dominating Southeast Asia. Certainly a counterfactual, this fantasy likely gratified Taiwanese readership back then and can still strike a profound chord with its people now—as the island continues to be a politically inchoate state. With the birth story of its protagonist Momo (punning on the Japanese for "peach") as its main plotline, *The Membranes* is allegorical of modern Taiwan, especially of its modern origin. This article provides an alternative reading strategy to emphasize this novella's cultural specificities. It shows that underneath its sci-fi and queer trappings, *The Membranes,* at a deeper level, reflects Taiwan's anxiety as a small and inchoate state as well as its story of modern origin.

Keywords: translated Chinese literature; Taiwanese literature; queer literature; science fiction (sci-fi); geopolitics in Asia; world literature; environmental disaster

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Introduction

Published in 1996, *The Membranes* was a product of its context. As Taiwan ended martial law in 1987, the 1980s marked the start of Taiwan's globalization (Liao 1996). The English translator of *The Membranes*, Ari Heinrich, who visited Taipei after the end of the martial law period, witnessed Taiwan's rapid globalization, reporting that Taipei in the 1990s was "a place where youth culture seemed to combine a bottomless appetite for foreign popular culture with an unaccustomed freedom from supervision" (2021: 139).Within academia, scholars, with PhD degrees from US universities, eagerly appropriated postcolonial theories and queer theories from the West to contemplate basic notions of ethnicities, genders and sexualities (Liou 2015). The result was that a discourse on gender and queerness became dominant, replacing the discourse on ethno-nationalist identifications in the 1980s (Lin 2006: 105). The 1990s was also an era of social movements, with the lifting of martial law heralding sweeping democratization, civil groups of diverse ideologies and political agendas rushing to vie for public attention, with LGBTQ activism among them. *The Membranes* refracted the cultural milieu of Taiwan in the 1990s. It is unapologetically queer with its light-hearted satire of an inverse gendered order where heterosexuality is the love that dares not speak its name. This theme of queerness is not only coeval with the boisterous queer activism of the 1990s but also captures the avant-garde-ness of the author, who introduced queer theories in his zine *Ise Margin* (*Daoyu Bianyuan*) and ingeniously translated "queer" into "ku'er" (lit. cool kid) (Chen 2005). Its eclecticism reflects Taiwan's rapid globalization in the 1980s. The story is voraciously eclectic, alluding to world literature such as Shakespeare and *Journey to the West,* to mythology and folktale such as *Momotaro* and *Mahabharata*, to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (and Visconti's 1971 film adaptation) and more.

Twenty-five years later, *The Membranes* was translated into English within the series "Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan" (hereafter: MCLT) published by Columbia University Press. Beginning in 1997, MCLT was sponsored by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation to publish modern and contemporary literature from Taiwan (Diao 2008: 131). By 2025, it had published 25 titles, including short-story collections, poems, and novels. As CKK states in its goals of establishment, its sponsorship aims to "make Chinese culture (*zhonghua wenhua*) an indispensable legacy to human civilization" (Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation 2026). MCLT was sponsored with this vision. The systematic English translation of Taiwanese literature started in the 1960s when USIS sponsored anthologizers Lucian Wu, Nancy Ing and Nie-hua Ling to translate authors from "Free China" at the high tide of the Cold War (Chen 2016: 25) In the 1980s, as Taiwan experienced a localization (*bentuhua*) movement, the English anthologies of Taiwanese literature began to bear "Taiwan" in their titles and by the 1990s, anthologizers no longer treated Taiwanese literature as a branch of Chinese literature (Chen 2016: 84). Publishing its first translation in 2000, MCLT in part reflected this acknowledgement of Taiwan's

cultural autonomy and in part reflected the ideology of its coordinator, Wang Der-wei. Appropriating Andre Lefevere's notion of the professional, Chu suggests that the naming of MCLT and its selection is deeply influenced by Wang's ideology and poetics, which casts the titles more or less in a "post-loyalist" light (Chu 2009).[1] Chang, on the other hand, uses Wang's notion of Sinophone literature[2] to make sense of MCLT's selective criteria and to explain the rationale of the series' naming (2015: 89–90). Both Chang's and Chu's studies show that MCLT positions works from Taiwan within (Wang's rendition of) Sinophone literature while acknowledging these titles' cultural specificity. While the series' positionality might be discernible when examining its titles in total, seen individually, the publications do not explicitly reflect this positionality. Compared to other titles such as Zhong Lihe's *From the Old Country: Stories and Sketches from Taiwan* (2014), the short-story collection *The Last of the Whampoa Breed: Stories of the Chinese Diaspora* (2003) or Yao-Chang Chen's *Puppet Flower: A Novel of 1867 Formosa* (2023)—all bearing cultural or regional markers—*The Membranes'* title alone makes it seem to stand apart from the series' positionality.

1 "Post-loyalist" (hou yimin), a term coined by Wang Der-wei, refers to writings that refract a psychological state fixating on, mourning for or haunted by regimes or dynasties overthrown, replaced or no longer legitimate.

2 While both Shu-Mei Shih and Wang Der-wei attempt to pluralize Chinese literature by their renditions of the Sinophone, their characterization of literatures in Sinitic scripts produced outside of China and these literatures' relations to China, culturally and historically, are very different. From a postcolonial angle, Shu-Mei Shih's rendition of the Sinophone treats China as the metropole of an empire and has sought to expose its colonial and imperial power by giving voice to literatures at the margin of the empire. Wang Der-wei's notion of the Sinophone moves in an entirely different direction, aiming to underline the global circulation and network of literatures in Sinitic scripts outside of China. In his rendition of the Sinophone, China is treated more as a cultural motif that literatures outside of China inevitably respond to, and in their responses, do not necessarily entail any decolonial implication or attempt.

Fig 1. Number of Goodreads Ratings for MCLT Series Titles

Publication date	Author (editors)	Title	ratings
2000	Wang Chen-ho	*Rose Rose I Love You*	67
2000	Cheng Ching-wen	*Three-Legged Horse*	17
2000	Chu T'ien-wen	*Notes of a Desolate Man*	235
2001	Hsiao Li-hung	*A Thousand Moons on a Thousand River*	166
2000	Chang Ta-chun	*Wild Kids: Two Novels about Growing Up*	64
2001	Michelle Yeh and N.G.D. Malmqvist (eds)	*Frontier Taiwan: An Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*	16
2002	Li Qiao	*Wintry Night*	28
2001	Huang Chun-ming	*The Taste of Apples*	72
2003	Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang	*The Last of the Whampoa Breed: Stories of the Chinese Diaspora*	10
2003	Chang His-kuo	*The City Trilogy: Five Jade Disks, Defenders of the Dragon City, Tale of a Father*	40
2003	Li Yung-p'ing	*Retribution: The Jiling Chronicle*	8
2005	Shih Shu-ching	*City of the Queen: A Novel of Colonial Hong Kong*	28
2006	Wu Zhuoliu	*Orphan of Asia*	263
2006	Ping Lu	*Love and Revolution: A Novel about Song Qingling and Sun Yat-sen*	6
2007	Zhang Guixing	*My South Seas Sleeping Beauty: A Tale of Memory and Longing*	44
2007	Chu T'ien-hsin	*The Old Capital: A Novel of Taipei*	74
2008	Guo Songfen	*Running Mother and Other Stories*	20
2011	Huang Fan	*Zero and Other Fictions*	42
2014	Zhong Lihe	*From the Old Country: Stories and Sketches from Taiwan*	7
2015	Yang Mu	*Memories of Mount Qilai*	4
2015	Li Ang	*The Lost Garden: A Novel*	64
2016	Ng Kim Chew	*Slow Boat to China and Other Stories*	31
2017	Wu He	*Remains of Life: A Novel*	41
2018	Yang Mu	*Hawk of the Mind: Collected Poems*	12
2021	Chi Ta-wei	*The Membranes*	8025
2021	Lo Yi-chin	*Faraway: A Novel*	22
2023	Yao-Chang Chen	*Puppet Flower: A Novel of 1867 Formosa*	15
2025	Zhang Guixing	*Elephant Herd: A Novel*	16

Sources: Goodreads.com

On the website *Goodreads.com, The Membranes* has been rated 8,025 times with 1,444 reviews, far exceeding the rest of the series (see fig.1).[3] Insofar as *Goodreads'* rating system suggests, *The Membranes* ranks as the most rated story in MCLT's series.[4] There are several factors that affect *The Membranes'* surpassing popularity in relation to the MCLT series. One major factor is its playfully gender norm-bending elements as well as its concomitant "queer-friendly" message implied by the original place of its publication. Since Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage in 2019, it has actively presented itself as "the most LGBTQ-friendly country in Asia." This claim was soon adopted by liberal international media and is likely to become one of the dominant impressions about Taiwan for the international community. *The Membranes*, the English translation of which appeared only two years apart from

3 The calculation was conducted in January 2026.

4 Though one could not derive the sales of copies from the rating (and it's always difficult to quantify the actual reading times of a book), The Membranes' more than 30 times higher number of ratings than other titles in the same series suggests that the novella's English reception has surpassed its series' presupposed market positioning.

Taiwan's passing of same-sex marriage, would likely remind readers of Taiwan's progressive values with its transgressive gender politics. In turn, the queer elements in the novel might attract readers who are interested in this impression of Taiwan and who are aligned with the sexually progressive values projected by this novella from Taiwan. The previous publication history of translated queer literature from Taiwan might also have paved the way for *The Membranes'* popularity. Both Li Ang's feminist sensationalist novel *The Butcher's Wife* and Pai Hsien-yung's gay classic *Crystal Boys* were translated into English in the late 1980s while Chu T'ien-wen's avant-garde queer novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* was translated into English in 2000. And even more relevant, Qiu Miao-jin's now-cult lesbian classics *Notes of a Crocodile* and *The Last Words of Montmartre* were respectively translated into English in 2017 and 2014. Wen-chi Li has observed that Qiu became widely popular on Amazon.com and Goodreads among a global readership who found Qiu's lesbian struggle relatable to their experiences (2022). This history of translated queer fiction from Taiwan would also contribute to *The Membranes'* visibility.

Yet another factor contributing to the novella's popularity is that it is predominantly read as science fiction or speculative fiction. Its sci-fi elements appear to contribute to its great success at being read as a piece of world literature, or more accurately, as a piece of global popular literature. Mark McGurl asserts that in the age of Amazon, every fiction, for the real-time demand of reader-cum-customer, is genre fiction (and even for the market of serious literature, literary fiction paradoxically acquires the status of a genre too, as Amazon establishes an imprint for it with the name Little A) (2016: 449, 460). With Amazon and Goodreads categorizing *The Membranes* under the categories of science fiction and speculative fiction, its "genre-fication"—regardless of how the novella is in fact genre-defying—makes it easy for readers of popular literature to find it. One should also note that in contrast to other titles in the series, *The Membranes* seems very unambiguous for its categorization on Amazon. A quick survey suggests that, for instance, *The Taste of Apples, My South Seas Sleeping Beauty, Orphan of Asia,* and *Notes of a Desolate Man* are categorized within the sections "Asian" and "Fiction," with no further subcategories to indicate their plausible literary genre while the categorization for *The Membranes* is apparently more specific, even suggesting it contains "themes of homosexuality." Concomitantly, the "speculative turn" in contemporary cultural production as well as criticism might also aid *The Membranes*' reception in the Anglophone world. Amie Parry has noted that starting at the turn of the millennium, particularly in the field of African American literature, "para-literature" (science fiction, fantasy and horror) has served as a proto-theoretical intervention for researchers to rethink a range of issues intersecting racism with neoliberalism and capitalism (2019: 23). In the arena of cultural production, she marks the global popularity of Octavia Butler's Earthseed series (1993, 1998) and the Swedish journalist Stieg Larsson's immensely successful *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series (2005–2007) as part of this speculative turn. This interest in the subversive and critical potential of para-literature also spreads to Sinophone studies, as

contemporary Chinese science fiction and its subsequent film and Netflix adaptations—not least thanks to Liu Cixin, Hao Jingfang, and Stanley Chan—seizes researchers' attention. The term "Sinofuturism"[5] was in turn coined to respond to this "craze for science fiction" (*kehuanre*). And it is little surprise that as a writer of science fiction and a researcher, Chi (along with the queer scholars Howard Chiang and Ari Heinrich) would launch a special issue on "queer Sinofuturism," exploring the synergy between queer criticism and speculative arts (2020).

Unsurprisingly, the commentaries on Goodreads dominantly interpret the story in terms of science fiction, as the story is marketed this way. The blurbs on its cover refer to the story in terms of science fiction and position its author as a science fiction and queer writer. Calling the story "science fiction" (Kim Stanley Robinson 2021; Mingwei Song 2021) and "cyberpunk" (Susan Stryker 2021), the blurbs appear to steer readers' attention to its sci-fi elements. Examining the professional book reviews published in the same year of the novella's translation, the reviews invariably situate the story in the genre of science fiction.[6] It was dominantly lauded for its "prescience" as the story's descriptions of capitalism, surveillance, fitness tracking and artificial intelligence suggest. In the blurbs, it is praised for its "prescient echoes of modern life," "presciently foreground[ing] issues" and "appear[ing] far ahead of the current new wave of science fiction" (Publishers Weekly 2021; Susan Stryker 2021; Mingwei Song 2021). Reviewers seem to agree with this tone setting, highlighting the author's innovative speculation on gender fluidity (Berlastsky 2021; Der Marchi 2021; Lapointe 2021) and technologies (Cantrill 2021; Hoo 2021). One reviewer even expresses surprise in finding that the novella was written in the late twentieth century (Deeter 2021). While the context of the novella is duly introduced—the background of martial law, Taiwan's rapid globalization and the author's pioneering role in introducing queer theories and writing queer fiction, very few reviewers seem to find it necessary or productive to produce readings that might render the story legible as a refraction of some historical, cultural or political specificity concerning the country in which it was embedded.

In "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," Shih identified five intersecting modes for mechanisms of recognition that render the West as the subject of recognition and the non-West as the object awaiting recognition (2004: 17). One of the modes is the "time lag of allegory" that renders all texts from the third world potentially suitable for national allegorical reading by first-world researchers, provocatively proposed by Fredric Jameson (20). Reading *The Membranes'* English translation dominantly—almost exclusively—as prescient science fiction constitutes an inverted form of this "time lag of allegory." While the reviewers of *The*

5 Sinofuturism is a contested term; its meaning unfolding and various. For discussions on its variant meanings and its theoretical muse Afrofuturism, see Fan-Ting Cheng's "Fashioning A Taiwanese Queer Narratology: Yang Shuang-zi's Blooming Season as Mê-kak Tactic" (2020) as well as Chi Ta-wei's "Lô-hàn-kha-á" as Surplus: Queer Sinofuturisms in The Great Buddha+" (2022).

6 See the appendix for the book reviews.

Membranes' English translations have not belabored themselves by imposing any national allegorical reading on the story, their assertion of the text's prescience—often accompanied by a tone of amazement—points to an inversion of the supposed belatedness of modernity ascribed to texts from the third world. If, as Shih has observed, the temporal gap between the literal meaning and the allegorical meaning of the text is where the politics of recognition are at work and should be critiqued (21), then claims of prescience are a sign of the technologies of recognition at work. By suggesting the text is prophetic and relevant to the contemporary world, critics not only legitimize *The Membranes'* entry into world literature but suggest the text's value lies in its predictions concerning our contemporary world. As Shih reminds us that allegory is only one kind of interpretive form, reading *The Membranes*' English translation exclusively as a prophetic allegory of our present world threatens to reduce the complexity of the story.

On the other hand, the local commentaries, while noting the sci-fi elements of the story as well, have not seemed to find the text ahead of its time but have sought to read it as a satirical critique of its situated time and space. Chang has read the text's post-apocalyptic setting as an eco-criticism of Taiwan's environmental catastrophe in the aftermath of its economic boom in the 1980s (2003: 118), while Lin argues that the text sought to subvert the heteronormative world-building by Zhang Xiguo and Huang Hai, the paradigmatic Taiwanese science fiction writers in the 1980s (2006: 98). More importantly, the local commentaries have noted the text's eclectic allusivity, its pastiche and parody reflecting Taiwan's rapid cultural appropriation from the first world in the late 1980s, and how such rapid processes of cultural hybridization cast doubt on Taiwan's cultural autonomy and its political sovereignty (Chang 114; Lin 104). In contrast to reviews of the English translation that mark the text's postmodernist style as unproblematically and laudably avant-garde, local commentaries suggest the stylistic avant-garde-ness was symptomatic of Taiwan's postcolonial and newly globalized position within the global economy of knowledge and culture production. This layered response from Chi, reflected by the text's style and its brain-in-a-vat conceit, appears to be "lost in translation," or, while the technologies of recognition grant admission to *The Membranes,* the author's response to Taiwan's postcolonial positionality appears to be ignored.

Reviews from the first world have mostly ignored the author's speculation upon Taiwan's reshuffled position in the global political and economic order—that Taiwan in the story has become a dominant player in the South China Sea. Such ignorance profoundly points to what is lost when this text from the third world travels to the first world—the third world author's half-satirical, half-sincere aspiration for a more or less fair reconfiguration of the world order is conveniently dismissed. Dwelling upon the author's speculation over Taiwan's regional power and its postcolonial subversion of the Japanese folktale *Momotaro*, this article responds to this blind spot in the first-world commentaries. It shows that underneath its sci-fi and queer trappings, *The Membranes,* on a deeper level, reflects Taiwan's anxiety as a small and inchoate state as well as its story of modern origin. By

examining *The Membranes*' worldview, as well as its intertwined allusion of *Momotaro* with *fentao* (peach splitting), a euphemism for homoeroticism in classical Chinese literature, the article shows that *The Membranes* is allegorical of modern Taiwan's genesis. Further, to suggest the text's sci-fi elements are locally specific, the article revisits the passages on the queer protagonist's sexual initiation with the android Andy to show that Chi's queer sensibility envisaged a new mode of human-android intimacy, not only expressing a prevision of our present day increasing contact with technology, but also anticipating the Taiwanese government's effort to integrate technology into everyday life.

Synopsis of The Membranes

The Membranes is set in a postapocalyptic world where humanity has relocated to the bottom of the ocean due to ozone layer depletion. Human beings cohabit and cooperate with androids, which assume the roles of their loyal companions, amorous lovers, military machines and organ donors. The protagonist, Momo, a 30-year-old renowned beautician in T-city (a thin disguise for Taipei) in New Taiwan is anticipating a visit from her long distant mother on her birthday. On this significant day, lots of flashbacks resurface for her. She recalls her own birth as recounted by her mother: on a fine spring day, her mother is on an excursion with her girlfriend. The two come upon an intoxicatingly fragrant peach tree, climbing to seize the most gigantic peach on it. Out of the peach comes Momo. Momo also recalls her childhood friendship with an android named Andy. Confined with her in the aseptic room at the hospital, Andy becomes both Momo's sexual initiation and eventually her organ donor. Every part of Andy is transplanted into Momo so that she survives. The demise of Andy continues to haunt Momo and in moments of melancholy she gazes at her body, into which Andy has been incorporated. She is left to question her own identity: is she Andy, or Andy her?

The episode of her mother's visit brings readers back to the narrative present. Momo meets her mother only to find out her reality is nothing more than a series of simulacra programmed by her mom. Momo turns out to be a brain grafted onto an android—an iteration of the classic "brain-in-a-vat" conceit. Her whole body in fact did not survive the surgery, leaving only her brain and her mother was compelled to lease it to an enterprise that employs Momo to repair androids; thus the illusion that she is a beautician tending to clients' skins. To save Momo's brain from boredom, her mom has tirelessly fed simulacra to her. However, the unsettling truth is that, day after day, Momo exists solely as a disembodied brain mechanically repairing androids on the assembly line. By the end of the story, the reader is left with an unpleasant aftertaste that everything they have read so far has been merely simulacra.

A Postcolonial and Queer Momotaro

Darko Suvin has characterized science fiction as a genre of cognitive estrangement, which distances readers from their familiar empirical environment so that they may

look afresh. This estranging effect enables Chi to rationalize his speculation about what seems to be hard-wired in the geopolitics of the Pacific and, in turn, to couch a counterfactual account of Taiwan that temporarily suspends readers' disbelief. Shortly after introducing Momo and her surroundings, the narrator turns to introduce the world of the story, a reshuffled global order following humankind's undersea migration. In this reshuffled global order, "New Taiwan," in which Momo as a New Taiwanese resides, wields significant economic and political influence over its neighbors:

> The "proportion principle" arrived at was not based on population size or geographic area of land occupied prior to the great ocean migration, but was rather determined by a nation's relative political, economic, and military power. Although France had previously occupied territory smaller than the size of Algeria, the undersea New France occupied six times the size of undersea New Algeria. A full three quarters of the vast Pacific Ocean territories was therefore distributed among only the United States, Japan and China […]
>
> And New Taiwan? While its Pacific territory allotment was hardly satisfactory in size, it was the envy of the rest of the South China Sea. New Taiwan established itself as the financial center of (undersea) Southeast Asia, a key player with unrivalled regional influence (2021: 25).

As the text sets off its plot with the great migration of human beings into the ocean, it suggests that only a planetary-scale apocalyptic disaster might trigger a reshuffling of the global order. By suggesting that this reshuffling is only possible in an estranged setting, Chi pokes fun at Taiwan's strenuous effort at vying for global standing and economic power. Since the PRC replaced the ROC as the legitimate member of the United Nations in 1971, followed by the United States' withdrawal of diplomatic ties from the ROC in 1979, Taiwan has been striving to gain the upper hand over other states in the Asia Pacific region. Eerily, when Taiwan's attempt at regional dominance is extrapolated in the story, its surge in power is narrated in an apparent colonial scenario, vividly parodying the colonial expansions of Europe, the US, and Japan between the nineteenth century and WWII. By linking Taiwan's dominance over Southeast Asia to the global memory of colonization, as sardonically evoked by Algeria's colonized history, the narrative cautions its readers, especially Taiwanese, to be mindful of its economic expansion into Southeast Asia, though it indulges its reader in this possibility. Furthermore, as Chi selects Southeast Asia as the target of economic expansion, this choice reminds one of Taiwan's Southbound Policy, [7] which uncannily echoes Japan's imperial

7 The Taiwanese government has been promoting economic investment in and diplomatic ties with South and Southeast Asia since its era of economic boom in the 1980s, but the more forceful and more fruitful effort occurred when Tsai Ing-wen assumed the presidency in 2016 and proposed the New Southbound Policy (NSP). While one of the key goals of the NSP is to shift economic reliance from China to South and Southeast Asia, the most tangible result that Taiwanese citizens might experience from the old and new southbound policies is probably the importation of migrant workers from Southeast Asia, which began around the late 1980s.

expansion into Southeast Asia during the Pacific War. By reconfiguring Taiwan's economic expansion into Southeast Asia in colonial terms, the text thus renders Taiwan's ambition for regional power problematic. In this way, the text suggests that "New Taiwan" is perhaps no different from any colonial predecessors; more ironically it turns out to uncannily resemble its former mother country—imperial Japan.

If New Taiwan is a cautious parody of how a former colony might be no different from its colonial power when the opportunity arises, the casting of Momo is a postcolonial parody of Japan's entrenching imperialist figure, Momotaro—the Peach boy.[8] Recounted by her mom, Momo is born out of a gigantic peach and is born to lesbian parents:

> […] a long, long time ago, Mommy had taken a trip with a friend [Tomie; Mommy's lesbian partner]. They were walking along hand in hand in the hills when they came to the base of a peach tree at the top of a knoll. The peaches gave off a mesmerizing scent: to smell them was to go limp with ecstasy. Not worrying about pesticides or being accused of theft, Mommy's friend asked Mommy to let her stand on her shoulders. With a little teamwork, the pair plucked the biggest peach of all. It was as big as a human head. Mommy was delighted. She told her friend: "In China there's a legend that 'peach splitting'—when you share a peach with a friend—is the mark of an extraordinary friendship, the kind that other people wouldn't understand. Let's share the peach and bless our friendship!" And so, according to Momo's mother's story, the two women split the peach with a knife…never anticipating that, as soon as the knife broke the skin, a shrill wailing cry would burst out of the peach. […] Mommy's friend explained that according to an ancient Japanese legend, there was once a little boy who had been born from a peach, and his name was Momotaro the Peach Boy. Since "Peach" was pronounced "Momo" in Japanese, it was decided: she would be Momo […] Momo took a certain pride in the romance of her genesis (Chi 2021: 2–3).

Momo's genesis is made of intertwined cultural allusions—one part of her DNA comes from the classical Chinese euphemism for male homoeroticism "peach splitting" or *fentao*[9] and the other comes from the Japanese folktale, *Momotaro.* The

8 While there are many iterations of Momotaro, a standardized version of it might be told as follows: a long time ago, a huge peach floated on the river. An old lady caught a glimpse of it while washing clothes by the river. After bringing the peach home, the old lady cut it in half. A baby, bursting into tears, sprang out of the gigantic peach. Amazed by this divine miracle, the childless couple name the male infant "Momotaro." Having grown into an adolescent, Momotaro decides to embark on a voyage to the isle of ogres. On his voyage, he recruits a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant, which later help him fight the ogres in return for his millet cakes. Under his leadership, Momotaro and his animal army break into the ogres' fort and take them down one by one until they all surrender to Momotaro. Returning home with the treasure plundered from the ogres and with the chief ogre captured alive, Momotaro and his animal army are welcomed by his parents and villagers.

9 The original story of "peach splitting" is found in *Writings of Master Han Feizi*, a collection of philosophical and political essays by Han Fei during the Warring States (BC 475–221). The story features the Emperor of Wei and his beautiful male courtier, Mizi Xia. The two were walking in an orchard, where Xia plucked a peach and took a bite from it. Tasting the juiciness and sweetness of the peach, Xia could not resist the urge to share the peach with the emperor, a gesture defying the etiquette at

euphemism is recast into an idyllic excursion of lesbian parents who give Momo a mythical birth.[10] Hinged upon the trope of peach, the narrative melds the Chinese euphemism with the Japanese tale of Peach Boy, thus subverting the two allusions at once. On the one hand, the Chinese allusion is made more erotic and markedly feminized and on the other hand, the "divine" or miraculous origin of Momotaro—legible as a suggestion of the divine origin of Japanese ethnicity—is deprived of its ethnic superiority as Momo is born as a "bastard" to the Japanese mother and the Chinese mother.

Chi's conspicuous allusion to the Japanese folktale seems to raise some concern for self-imposed re-colonization; that is, whether this allusion betrays the author's self-imposed re-colonized mental state during his writing. In a critical correspondence, Jane Park raises such suspicion, to which Chi responded:

> Jane, your "criticism" caught the huge difference between Taiwan and Korea regarding Japanese colonization. […] It has been common among many readers in Taiwan to overlook the political/imperial implications of Japanese cultural products and legacies. […] I did not choose to use the *Momotarosan* allusion when I wrote the novella. Rather, the allusion happened to me. I was subject to it, overlooking the political when I was busy with creative writing (2020: 68).

Chi's autobiographical confession—that the allusion impinges upon his mind—attests not only to Chi's—and by extension Taiwanese—habitual and less critical amenability to Japanese culture than Korean people, but also to Taiwan's multi-layered cultural hybridities. While Chi's confession might be adduced as an uncritical laxity towards the colonial legacies from Taiwan's Japanese occupation period, as Park observes, this article shows that a postcolonial reading of the allusion is more enabling. As local commentaries on *The Membranes* suggest, its variegated cultural allusions must be situated within Taiwan's rapid globalization and its Third World positionality. In Stuart Hall's seminal essay "When was 'The Postcolonial?' Thinking at the Limit" (1995), he addresses the fraught relationship of post-colonial states to their previous mother countries within an interconnected globalized network of politics and economy. Hall proposes a postcolonial approach that takes into account the conundrum of the Third World vis-à-vis the colonial legacies left by imperialism and perpetuated by globalization—an approach that first-world critics, when reviewing *The Membranes*, have not adopted. To Hall, a productive postcolonial approach "reads 'colonisation' as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural 'global' process, producing a decentred, diasporic, or 'global' rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives" (247). Accordingly, the article argues that the best way to read *The Membranes'* allusion to Momotaro is

the time. Xia in his later days was executed for this gesture. Peach splitting then became a euphemism for male homoeroticism over time and as *The Membranes* is translated into English, the erotic connotation peach carries in the Anglophone world further adds piquancy to it.

10 The genesis is also legible as a modern allegory of IVF. Momo's genesis thus updates the classical euphemism with a modern sensibility and, more significantly, envisages an alternative form of family departing from the heterosexual norm.

not as a self-imposed cultural recolonization, nor as an ingenious expression of postmodernist eclecticism, as reviews from English-speaking communities might suggest, but as a subversion of the jingoistic and masculinist Momotaro narrative.

A history of Momotaro's imperialistic implications should be articulated, as it is precisely these implications that Chi's postcolonial Momotaro seeks to subvert. As Japan in the first half of the twentieth century began its colonial expansion into East and Southeast Asia, a spate of narratives and representations of heroic figures for colonial purposes were generated. Among them, Momotaro stands out. Tierney explains the rationale for choosing a folktale figure for Japan's early twentieth-century imperialist expansion discourse. Since Japan's isolation policy, *Sakoku*, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), Japanese people had been instilled with "an insular mentality" that prevented them from building strong naval forces and having a combative spirit towards their surroundings and beyond (2010: 110). Consequently, historical figures that might be exploited for colonial conquest were scarce. Intellectuals between the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth centuries thus turned to Japanese folktales in search of models for colonial conquerors. This revival of interest in folktales well suited Japan's imperial agenda, because it showed that "Japanese imperialism was not simply an imitation of Western empires but an inalienable part of its cultural heritage" (2010: 110).

The renaissance of folktale studies led Iwaya Sazanami (1870–1933), Japan's father of children's literature and whom Japanese endearingly call "Uncle Iwaya" and "Uncle Fairytale," to reiterate Momotaro's story, and in turn render it emblematic of Japan's expansionist fantasy. Iwaya published his iteration of Momotaro in 1894, exactly a year before Japan defeated Qing China in the first Sino-Japanese war and acquired its first colony, Taiwan. His publication was apparently a huge success, as he published 24 further volumes of the *Japan Folktale Series* in subsequent years. As David Henry suggests, as an education reformer once serving in Japan's Ministry of Education and a professional *koendowa* (oral folktale) artist, Iwaya was conscious of instilling a military and patriotic character into Japanese youths by means of his expansionist adaptation of Momotaro (2009). Distinct from its iterations of the Edo period, Iwaya's *Momotaro* explicitly utilizes honorific terms for the sovereign, frames the locale of the story as the modern state of Japan—instead of an ahistorical and unspecified village—and relocates the isle of ogres overseas, which indexes Japan's colonial venture abroad (2009: 219). Collectively, Iwaya's adaptations of *Momotaro* render apparent Japan's imperial ambition at the time, and children's literature was a powerful and expedient medium for Japan's imperialist self-fashioning.

The Momotaro narrative continued to serve colonial purposes well into the Second World War period. Studying Japanese propaganda manga and animation about the Pacific War, Kyu Hyu Kim explicates how the well-known wartime animation, *Momotaro umi no shinpei* (Momotaro's Divine Navy), exploits the plots of defeating ogres and recruitment of animal armed forces in the folktale. In this animation,

Momotaro assumes the role of a military commander on a gigantic vessel preaching to wild animals such as elephants, crocodiles and rhinoceros—with their perceived exoticism and tropicality to Japanese eyes symbolizing Southeast Asian peoples—and eventually defeating a hellish British army caricatured as ogres (2017: 105). One of the classic scenes shows that these animals, once clamoring and disorganized without any leadership, have been brought into unity and civility as they sing the first line of Japan's *gojuon* (50 sounds), "a-i-u-e-o", against the backdrop of tropical prosperity symbolized by paddy fields, rows of banana trees and sugar canes. By allegorizing the Co-prosperity Sphere agenda as a civilizing and messianic mission of wild animal domestication, the message of the scene could not be clearer—with the salvation of Japanese empire, epitomized by the figure of Momotaro, Southeast Asian peoples would be transformed from barbarians to civilized subjects. The figure of Momotaro thus recalls a long history of imperialist and expansionist legacy that can be traced back to at least the early twentieth century.

While the figure of Momotaro comes to represent the imperial militarism of Japanese empire, the isle of ogres, which the peach boy with his animal army vanquishes, comes to represent the empire's vassal states and intended colonies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nitobe Inazo (1862–1933), a prominent Japanese agronomist who was appointed to head the Sugar Bureau by the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan in 1901, fervently dedicated himself to mapping the mythical isle of ogres onto real-life geographical locations. In his 1907 treatise "Momotaro no mukashibanashi" (The Folktale Momotaro), Nitobe traced the supposedly real-life referents of the isle of ogres, including the newly acquired colony Taiwan, in terms of Japan's history of territorial expansion:

> Regarding the island of the ogres, it is a general term for the islands of the South Seas. In the time of Tametomo, the boundaries of Japan did not extend beyond the eight provinces, and Hachiojima was the island of the ogres. […] Thereafter, people called the Ryukyu the island of the ogres. Now, however, the Ryukyu has become part of Japanese territory and the Ryukyu people have begun to learn Japanese […] With each step we take southward, the isle of ogres is displaced even further south.[…] Until 1895, Taiwan was the island of the ogres. Now, more than a decade after we have occupied the island, many Japanese still regard it as the island of the ogres […] because of our differences in language and customs. The Momotaro of today will expand and conquer islands of ogres much further south. As for the treasures of the islands, they are naturally the products of the tropical zone […] The war booty that Momotaro brings back to Japan […] are the tropical products that he supplies to his home country.[11]

It is obvious in this passage that Inazo naturalizes Japan's colonial venture into the South Seas by crudely historicizing the isle of ogres throughout different periods. Further, by tactfully excluding Hokkaido from his picture of territorial expansion, Inazo is able to make the naturalized claim that Japan "always" ventures into regions south of it (Tierney, 2010: 118). Taiwan, Inazo points out, was the new isle of ogres.

11 The translation was modified from Robert Tierney's.

The supposed barbarity of its people and its southern location relative to Japan justifies Japan's acquisition of Taiwan and persuades his readers to venture further south. That Taiwan was the new isle of ogres appears to have been a common trope at the turn of the last century. David Henry also found that an 1895 manga in the boys' magazine *Shoen Sekai* (Boys World) depicts Momotaro holding onto a treasure trove of ogres dearly, symbolizing Taiwan's sugar-cane industry (2009: 222).

Amusingly, if Taiwan was once imagined to be the isle of ogres in the colonial cartography of Japanese imperialism, then the New Taiwan in *The Membranes* becomes a new isle of ogres. Chia-rong Wu's investigation has shown that the term "isle of ogres" or *guidao* reappeared on Taiwan's internet in 2009 and soon became a self-styled moniker for the island of Taiwan (2016: 23). This self-styled moniker underscores the wry and mordant sense of humor of its citizens, highlighting a self-reflective and ironic criticism of Taiwan's perceived shortcomings on the fronts of politics, welfare and unsurprisingly its global standing. However, *guidao* also delivers a sense of resilience among the self-styled habitants of this isle of ogres. If Taiwan is indeed a *guidao,* then apparently its "savageness" or otherness is key to its survival. Chi's appropriation of this trope then anticipates this popular discourse of *guidao* and should be cast in the same light. Momo is not only a bastard child of heterogeneous origins, but born in New Taiwan, she is indigenous to the isle of ogres, twice removed from the Momotaro narrative.

Rather than functioning as a mark of inferiority, the otherness of the isle of ogres becomes, in Chi's reworking, the very condition that enables an ethics of care and connection. *The Membranes* casts Momo as a skincare beautician who craves touch and yearns for intimacy. As a solitary beautician confined in her own studio, Momo has been indulging herself in massaging patrons' bodies in her sessions. Momo's technology allows her to enjoy vicariously every sensation that her patrons have experienced through their skins:

> Every stimulus experienced by Tomie Ito's body was recorded like a sound. […] With this playback function, Momo knew everything that happened to the bodies of Tomie Ito and her clients. With her M skin synced to the computer, she could experience:
>
> Last weekend. Midnight. Tomie with a young woman and young man. Hurtling past the protective atmospheric membrane and swimming naked in the sea above…the three of them swimming past the Mariana Trench to the coral reefs of the South China Sea and embracing amid a school of fish…then transforming into bubbles.
>
> Oh, what a lovely sensation—
>
> Momo sighed. Everything. She felt the ecstasy of the encounter in every pore of her body. (58–59)

What Momo experiences is not only an epistemological transfer but an ontological immersion into another human being through the interface of skin. What Momo

indulges in is the transfer of sensorial stimulation that blurs the boundary between self and other—an ultimate fantasy of ontological intimacy. If we know and feel in exactly the same way that other people know and feel, are we still ourselves? This ultimate dissolution of self-other divide departs radically from the folktale and its later imperialist and propagandistic appropriations. For one thing, Momo repairs rather than conquers. She takes pride in taking care of human bodies, not colonizing or killing them. As an inhabitant of the isle of ogres, Momo's task of repairing rewrites the memory of being annexed and occupied. Additionally, her technology of care brings sociality rather than alienation. If the imperialist iteration of Momotaro is operated upon the principle of hierarchical opposition—demarcating civilized/savage, north/south and Japanese/non-Japanese, among others—then Chi's Momo, with her strong fantasy of ontological immersion, is operated upon the principle of radical sameness. If Momo's fantasy threatens to eliminate any ontological difference, it nonetheless reflects a desire to sympathize with others. Even Momo's true profession is an irony in relation to the folktale and its imperialist mobilization. If the Momotaro narrative is used to glorify conquest and territorial expansion, then Chi's postcolonial Momotaro shows the inhumanity and boredom of the war, as Chi ironically reveals Momo to be nothing but a disembodied brain that endlessly repeats the dull task of mending military machines.

At the level of narrative structure, more fundamentally, Momo's genesis subverts the Momotaro narrative by rendering its origin culturally and ethnically hybrid. As suggested above, Momo's genesis partakes of two heterogeneous cultural resources. One strain of its DNA comes from the entrenched colonial legacy of Japanese occupation and the other comes from the ubiquitous influence of Han Chinese culture. As such, the text rewrites the Japanese folktale into a genesis of its colony. The episode where Mommy, Momo's Chinese mother, eventually falls out with Tomie, her Japanese mother, allegorizes the antagonistic tension between China and Japan at the turn of the century. Strikingly resembling Momo's lineage, modern Taiwan is an adventitious child to these two mothers—born at the historical juncture of 1895 at which Qing China agonized over giving it up and later raised by the hand of the Japanese colonial government that modernized it. Momo, evoking Wu Zhou-liu's iconic national allegory *Orphan of Asia*, is abandoned by Mommy (China) and occasionally patronized and nurtured by Tomie (Japan). It is bemusing to note that at end of the story when Mommy reclaims Momo, Momo's brain begins to broadcast a haphazard series of oneiric images initially programmed by Mommy but now appearing to mutate and take on lives of their own. The last line of the story ends with Mommy's evocation for her returning daughter, "Momo, we can go home now, Mother said, You haven't been home in so very very long" (136). However, Momo's oneiric images show that she stands amidst the foggy canals of Venice, reluctant to step forward. Despite a dearth of agency, this "brain in a vat" does have volition and autonomy. In this vein, the ending is allegorical of Taiwan's retrocession to the nationalist government in 1945—while the Republic of China considers it a moment of long-waited heartfelt reunion, Taiwanese people were unsure about the change of

hands and did not have much to say about their fate. The text's most palpable postcolonial subversion thus derives from Momo's hybrid origin, allegorical of modern Taiwan.

Make Love to Androids

Even the sci-fi trappings that seem to be a parable of the contemporary world, without explicitly entailing any regional or geopolitical characteristics, can arguably be read as an expression of Chi's precocious awareness that Taiwan was in the process of establishing itself as an island of technology in the 1980s.[12] The story's abundant speculations about technology anticipates both its pervasive presence and the degree of familiarity with which technologies have since become integrated into everyday life in Taiwan. One recent notable example might be Taiwan's mask distribution app during the Covid pandemic. Interconnected with a stock system that tracked the quantity of masks and a map system that located pharmacies providing masks, the app notified its user to purchase an allocated number of masks at her convenience. The app in turn contributed to Taiwan's remarkably low casualty rate during the Covid pandemic. Another example might be the Taiwanese government's continuous ambition to maintain its position as one of the top-tier suppliers for semiconductor chips. As of 2023, in the section of "Important Policies" on the official website of Taiwan's Executive Bureau, the government asserts that Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing and testing capabilities ranks first globally and that the state will continue to invest heavily in this industry. The unparalleled importance of this industry is further reflected by the colloquial epithet that Taiwanese designate to their largest semiconductor enterprise, TSMC, as the "sacred mountain that protects the country" (*huguoshenshan*). Sardonically deifying TSMC as a protective national bulwark against economic vulnerability, Taiwanese people's reliance on as well as pride in its advanced technology is evident.

Momo's relation to technology dramatizes such reliance to the effect that it blurs the ontological boundary between human beings and the technologies surrounding them. The story's dramatization is achieved by dint of two intertwined motifs, sacrifice and eating. It blends the two motifs together to produce a cannibalistic effect, which brings ethical awareness to the seemingly uncritical openness to everything technological in the story. However, the tone is not entirely somber, at least not throughout. The story in fact entertains a possibility of a human-technology continuum by eroticizing it. Momo's sexual initiation, intriguingly, is with her organ donor, Andy the android. The narrative depicts Momo's sexual exploration in a playful, light-hearted manner:

> While they were quarantined in the ward together, Momo could hug and kiss Andy without fear of catching anything, because Andy had been completely decontam-

12 Taiwan established its first science and technology park in Hsinchu in 1980.

> inated using a high-heat disinfection process. For the first time Momo felt an emotion stronger than "need." Before, she felt "need" for Mother, but now that Andy was in her life, Momo longed only for her.
>
> So much so that Momo even wished she could get inside Andy's body, and have Andy get inside of hers… She didn't quite understand what "sex" was yet, but she fantasized about "eating": she wanted to eat Andy up until she was in her belly, and she wanted Andy to eat her up too. Little Momo thought that if they ate each other up, even just a bit of flesh, then she and Andy would really become one person, and Andy would never leave her like Mommy (45).

Chi ingeniously casts together the motifs of eating and sacrifice in this act of sexual initiation. Little does Momo realize that what she is fantasizing about for now—a total integration of the other in erotic-cum-gastronomic pleasure—would soon turn grotesque. Here, through the intertwining of the two motifs, eating and sacrifice become a synecdoche for the act of sex, and the narrator apparently takes delight in this seemingly innocent but erotically charged scene of bodily exploration or, as little Momo prefers to term it, "to eat her up." In this way, the author's coupled motifs not only recall the Freudian model for the development of sexuality, capturing a primordial stage where oral pleasure is indistinguishable from erotic pleasure, but more significantly, it foreshadows the cannibalistic effect that the "organ harvesting" of Andy would bring.

As readers and Momo soon horrifyingly realize, "to eat someone up" can in effect assume a literal meaning. As Andy is specifically built to be Momo's organ donor, her whole body is, figuratively speaking, to be consumed by Momo. Without Momo's consent, Andy is then entirely transplanted into her.[13] Chillingly, Momo realizes the transplant surgery has turned her childhood fantasy into a grotesque satire:

> Momo loved being with Andy, but not like this. She loved the togetherness of reading with Andy, but even if she was now reading literally through Andy's eyes, it could never compare to that feeling of togetherness. […] Now, even though she and Andy had been fully merged—like coffee with coffee creamer, where she was coffee and Andy was the powder—she couldn't talk with her anymore. […] After her surgery, a voice sometimes emerged from deep inside her. Was this an after-effect of the surgery, or was Andy murmuring in there? […] Had Andy died inside her? Was Momo's body an android grave, the spectral voice of Andy's spirit echoing in her mind?" (84).

What readers might find fun and pleasurable in the previous passage has now become deeply disturbing. While the motifs of eating and sacrifice in the previous passage are squarely and safely registered in the domain of sex, where to have sex is to give our body up to others and to let other people enjoy it, in this passage the motifs are taken as matter-of-fact and are transposed into the domain of organ

13 This is a simulacrum programmed by Mommy. The transplant surgery is botched in reality and Momo's whole body is infected except her brain.

harvesting. Through the protagonist's inner monologue, the author strikingly asks a series of provocative questions to our seemingly unwitting integration with technology and he questions to what extent such integration might become exploitation if one day, as the story envisions, technologies around us take on a sentient dimension. Further, as Momo's sexual initiation with androids suggests, in this technology-infested world where our contact and touch with technology is increasingly more frequent than that with humans, is it not possible that human beings might develop erotic sentiment regarding technologies some day? In this way, Chi radically challenges our anthropocentric notion of intimacy. Moreover, while in the Japanese folktale, Momotaro is driven to cast out the other in the form of ogres, in Chi's version, the other in the form of androids becomes uncannily close to us to the extent that the self is inseparable from it. By registering the other in the everyday realm, the author offers an ambivalent response to the all-encompassing integration of technology. Technology, as the mundane but radical other, appears tantalizingly attractive, promising a more enabling future for humanity, but as the author's questions suggest, such integration might slide into disintegration.

Conclusion

The Membranes was originally published in 1996 and was translated into English in 2021. The 25-year gap between the two versions attests to the operation of the technologies of recognition. Comparing local commentaries with those from the first world, this article notes that while readers from the first world and from Taiwan were equally amazed by *The Membranes*' speculation about technologies and its subversion of heterosexual norms, Taiwanese critics were keenly aware of the author's refraction of the local reality and pointed out that the story's eclectic allusions as well as its postmodernist style must be situated within the context of Taiwan's rapid globalization in the 1980s. Local critics' interpretations of *The Membranes* reflect their positionality as researchers from the Third World, contemplating the asymmetrical relation of knowledge and cultural production between Taiwan and the first world in the 1990s.

The Membranes' dense sci-fi elements, its futuristic setting, and speculation about technologies have made it relevant to the contemporary world, which contributed to its great popularity when it was translated into English. Yet this great popularity does not take into account the work's positionality as a text emerging in the Third World. This article is an attempt to render this positionality visible. It reads *The Membranes* as a parable of modern Taiwan that captures its condition of being caught between the haunting shadow of colonial history and the pressure from dominant geopolitical forces, while still striving to repair the colonial trauma—even as the novella simultaneously interrogates Taiwan's obsession with technology and its pursuit of global standing.

Adopting a postcolonial approach, this article moves beyond the dominant reading mode in the English-speaking community that interprets the story as science fiction.

It reads *The Membranes* alternatively by arguing that it is legible as a queer and postcolonial subversion of the Momotaro narrative, centering on its casting of the gender-crossing protagonist Momo, who descends from Chinese-Japanese lesbian parents. While Momo's origin might seemingly raise suspicion of authorial self-colonization, her professionalism and queerness show a writing back to the empire. Rather than chauvinist and belligerent, Momo mends and cares, and ironically perceives herself to be a beautician—its everyday aestheticism and consumerism an anti-sublime inverse to the grand ideal of ethnonationalist supremacism configured by the wartime Momotaro. Moreover, as Momo's love for the non-human far exceeds her love for humanity, the figure of Momotaro is further dehumanized. Momo's alterity questions the boundary between organism and inorganic entities, as not only her desire for androids shows but also her brain-in-a-vat conceit suggests. For a Momotaro born in the futuristic Taiwan, she is not only queer and technophilic but also radically decentered.

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