

The End of a 1,200-year-old Ban on the Eating of Meat

Removal of the Ban on Meat The Meat-Eating Culture of Japan at the Beginning of Westernization

Introduction

In March 1854, the Tokugawa Shogunate concluded The Treaty of Peace and Amity between the United States and the Empire of Japan followed shortly by peace treaties with various Western countries such as England, The Netherlands, and Russia. 2004 marks the 150th anniversary of this opening of Japan's borders to other nations.

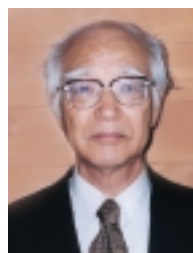
The opening of Japan's borders, along with the restoration of political power to the Imperial court, was seen as an opportunity to aggressively integrate Western customs into Japanese culture. In terms of diet, removal of the long-standing social taboo against the eating of meat became a symbol of this integration. While there are cultures throughout the world that forbid the eating of beef or pork for religious reasons, the social taboo against the eating of all types of domestic livestock once seen in Japan is unique. However, this does not mean that meat was never eaten by anyone in Japan. Taking era, region, and social class into consideration, quite a number of people ate meat. We must look at history to understand the diverse relationship between the Japanese people and meat.

Markets and the National Environment

When traveling to Europe, the first thing I do is to take a look at the food markets. There is nothing like a market to see how the people from that community live. I realize that

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The history of Japan's food culture began with the import of the rice culture during the Yayoi Period (200 B.C.–250 A.D.) and developed, with the introduction of foreign food cultures, into what we now consider Japanese cuisine during the Edo Era (1600–1867). This Japanese cuisine was influenced by the opening of Japan's borders and the changes that occurred with introduction of Western food cultures. Western-style restaurants began opening in Nagasaki at the end of the Edo Period. With the opening of Japan's borders, Western food cultures began to spread from port cities such as Yokohama, Kobe, and Hakodate. In 1870, the Tsukiji Seiyoken Hotel opened in Tokyo. Soon after, Western dishes such as curried rice, pork cutlets, and croquettes, adapted to suit the Japanese palate, became popular. At the end of the Meiji Period (1868–1912), the refining of sugar and flour launched the food-products industry, introducing a wide variety of new ingredients. The introduction of *ramen* and *wantan* after the Great Tokyo Earthquake of 1923 made Chinese cuisine very popular for its low price and delicious flavor. It was at this time that the number of restaurants began to increase and become popular so that ordinary citizens could finally get their first taste of foreign foods. These foreign dishes were served as individual side dishes to steamed rice. In this way, Japanese, Western, and Chinese cuisines were combined in a unique way to create a new Japanese food culture.



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I'm in Europe with my first step into the market. More than half of the space is taken up by meat and dairy products. The meat stalls are quite a sight with not just prepared cuts, but also the brains, livers, kidneys, ears, feet, and even tails of cows, pigs, and sheep. This is where the world of genuine meat eaters differs from that of Japan, where only beautifully laid out cuts are ever seen, let alone eaten.

The development of a meat-eating culture is traditionally measured by how completely the animals are utilized in cooking. Based upon this rule of measure it is clear that the Japanese are not, even today, true meat eaters. Japan can be considered a fish-eating culture given the fact that every part of the fish, from the head to the intestines, is eaten.

The livestock-raising and meat-eating culture which developed in the center of the ancient Eurasian continent spread to the east and the west. While that wave continued far to the west to encompass the continents of Europe and North and South America, it only continued as far as the



Kidneys (left) and hearts (right) in a Paris butcher shop (Shukan Asahi Hyakka 2, "Sekai no Tabemono")



Internal organs combined at the customer's request (Shukan Asahi Hyakka 2, "Sekai no Tabemono")

Korean Peninsula to the east, never reaching the islands of Japan.

Without domesticated livestock, the European food culture and agricultural methods would never have come into existence. The typical European village landscape consists primarily of wide pastures, grasslands, and grain fields.

This is the inevitable outcome of the northern latitudes of Europe: Helsinki at 53°; London at 51°; Paris at 49°; and Rome at 42° latitude.

At 36° latitude, Tokyo is on the same latitude as Gibraltar.

The low temperatures of Europe do not naturally support the cultivation of crops. Therefore, vegetables were not the mainstay of the diet that they were in Japan. A new European culture developed in which the products of farming were fed to livestock, while the people partook of the products of the livestock such as milk or meat. On the other hand, the typical Japanese landscape is made up of rice paddies. The fact that rice is the staple of the Japanese diet was in fact dictated by nature and the Japanese climate. Moreover, the islands of Japan are blessed with abundant marine resources. With no need for meat, a community with a diet of rice and fish was born.

Ancient Meat-Eating Customs and the Prohibition of Meat

A meat-eating culture did exist in ancient Japan. In the primitive hunting and gathering age, meat from wild animals was an important part of the diet. One historical Chinese reference notes that the earliest residents of Japan did not eat meat when someone died. The reference goes on to describe the people in that warm climate as eating vegetables year round; as having a fondness for sake; and as living to an age of between eighty and one hundred years old.

Even the ancient emperors hunted regularly, eating both the meat and entrails of their quarry. One well-known historical work, *Manyoshu*, contains a song describing how useful deer meat and entrails were to the emperor. *Nihon Shoki*, one of the oldest histories of Japan, includes a passage about an emperor who loved hunting and a *namasu* (traditional dish of raw fish and vegetables) made from wild fowl. It seems there was even a special employee of the Court responsible for preparing wild fowl.

Pig farming also existed. The *Kojiki*, the oldest history of Japan, includes references to wild boar herders. It further reports that the well-known emperor, Shomu, kept forty wild boars in his fields. During that period, it was also common for

civilians to sacrifice oxen and fowl as offerings to the gods with prayers for favorable weather conditions or an abundant harvest. In this way, meat became a link between the gods and the people.

The introduction of Buddhism in the mid-16th century brought about important changes to the ancient meat-eating cultures. Buddhism teaches reincarnation. It teaches that after death, existence continues and that dead people go to one of six difference places, including heaven or hell. Of these six places, people can also be reincarnated as people, or even as insects or animals. Therefore, humans should avoid killing



Fowl (crane) and fish (carp) preparation during the Muromachi Period (1333–1573). (Shukan Asahi)

any living being as those beings may be the reincarnation of your parents or grandparents.

In April of the year 675 A.D., the Emperor Tenmu prohibited the killing and the eating of meat throughout Japan. This ban prohibited the eating of beef, horse, dog, monkey, and chicken during the busy farming period between April and September. The ban included the farm animals that lived together with the people, as well as monkeys, which were considered very close to humans. It did not, however, prohibit the eating of wild birds and animals. For approximately one hundred years after this ban was initiated, succeeding emperors had to reinforce the law again and again. This seems to indicate that the law was not very well observed.

Milk and dairy products were introduced by naturalized Japanese in the Asuka Period (552–645AD). After

introduction, pastures and cattle farms could be found throughout Japan until the Heian Period (794–1185). Milk and dairy products were even paid as tax to the Imperial Court. One well-known book from the Heian Period, *Engishiki*, instructs owners of milk cows to feed their cows 3.6 liters of beans and two handfuls of straw a day during the milking season. In addition, the Imperial Family seems to have consumed quite a bit of milk, as 5.4 liters of milk were provided for them everyday. Various dairy products, including cream, butter, and a product known as *daigo*, were also available. Although *daigo* is completely unknown today,



Hyakka 103, "Sekai no Tabemono")

and can't even be described, the word continues in the Japanese language as *daigomi*, meaning "the best part". A poem from the Heian Period, describes the dinner table of a very beautiful woman as being made of gold with silver platters of cold quail soup, hot duck soup, salted wild goose, bear paws, rabbit spleens, and chicken heads.

However, as times progressed, the Buddhist bans on the killing of domestic animals and the eating of meat, the idea that meat was corrupt also spread. One mythical story reports that in the 9th century, the god of the fields became angry because the people had been eating beef. The god sent a plague of locusts to destroy the crops. According to the Heian Period's *Engishiki*, a person who ate the meat of a domestic animal had to fast for three days. In the following Kamakura Period (1185–1382), however, the order from Ise Shrine demanded a

fast of one hundred days for eating the meat of domestic or wild animals. Further, anyone who ate with someone who consumed meat was ordered to fast for twenty-one days, while anyone who ate with someone who ate with someone else who consumed meat was ordered to fast for seven days.

During this period, the eating of beef or horse meat was unthinkable. Later, when Jesuit missionaries met with the famous warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Hideyoshi questioned them harshly about their custom of eating beef and horse meat despite the fact that the animals themselves are so useful.

Christians and Meat Eating

Francis Xavier came to Japan with other missionaries in 1549 to propagate Christianity. Having received some preparatory information prior to going to Japan, the missionaries learned a great deal about the Japanese diet, including the fact that the eating of beef was considered a taboo, and that the people believed that drinking milk was basically the same as drinking blood. Therefore, so as to prevent any ill feelings on the part of the Japanese people, Xavier decided firmly against eating meat. However, by maintaining a strictly Japanese diet without meat, milk, butter, or olive oil, the missionaries soon found their health failing.

Christian missionaries found favor with the lords of Kyushu and the Yamaguchi region at the southern tip of Honshu. In the domains of those lords who converted to Christianity, Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines were destroyed; Buddhist monks were banished; and the ban on meat was frequently disregarded. The Christian lords apparently loved the beef, pork, wine, and bread later introduced by the missionaries.

It seems that the lords were not the only fans of meat. Reference in *The Jesuit Mission Press in Japan* to an extravagant Easter dinner notes that because Easter is a great celebration, approximately four hundred Christians were invited to the feast for which a cow was purchased and cooked with the meat with rice. It would appear that everyone enjoyed the banquet tremendously. This dish, still eaten and considered a local specialty of the Oita region, seems similar to the well-known dish from Portugal and Spain known as paella. A passage in a book published in 1653 notes that people from Kyoto, who were very fond of beef, referred to beef as *waka*, which is apparently derived from the Portuguese word for beef, *vaca*.

The introduction of Christianity to Japan, therefore, can be said to have aided in the lifting of the ban against the eating of meat. Beginning in Kyushu, the bottom of Japan's major four islands, where the Christian missionaries were most widely accepted, the eating of meat slowly spread throughout Japan.

Meat in the Edo Era

The revival of a meat-eating culture in Japan was influenced by Christians as well as trade with other foreign countries and developed over a number of years. However, with the prohibition of Christianity and Japan's nearly complete and self-imposed isolation that occurred with the establishment of



A scene from a famous kabuki play (Kabuki Koen; Tamagawa-za Kokuritsu Gekijo, 1819) the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1615, a primarily Buddhist culture was reinstated. In 1687, the fifth shogun restored the ban on meat eating with even stricter constraints, which went so far as to prohibit the killing of animals. However, people managed to find ways to continue eating meat, despite the broader and stricter ban. Not only were domestic livestock such as cows and horses eaten, but wild game and fowl became a rather common, if not frequent, part of the Japanese diet at this time.

In villages and towns not blessed with good agricultural conditions, wild fowl and game became an important part of the diet. Seventy percent of Japan's land is mountainous. This not only makes farming difficult, but it helps to sustain large populations of wild animals. Agriculture in these areas required the building of fences, the posting of guards at night to prevent animals from eating crops, the killing of raiding animals with both traps and guns. Farmers in these areas waged a constant war against wild animals. In a country that strictly regulated firearms, it was not uncommon for farmers to have access to more guns than local militaries.

Hunters also made their homes in mountain villages. The meat obtained by these hunters was not only eaten by local villagers, but was also transported to city markets for sale. The Yotsuya district of Edo (Tokyo) was known as a



Momonjiya, a store specializing in wild animal meat during the Edo Era (Yuzankaku Shuppansha, "Zenshu Nihon no Shokubunka Dai Hachi-kan")

hunters' town. In 1760, the meat of wild boar, deer, fox, raccoon dog, wolf, bear, otter, and weasel was sold in specialty stores with names such as Kedamonoya, Momonjiya, and Yamaokuya in Edo's Kojimachi district, which became synonymous with markets for wild meat.

The meat from wild animals was also considered medicinal. "Listen to the charlatan at the Kedamonoya" was common advice at the time, as people believed in the restorative powers of wild meat. A cookbook from 1643 states that venison can be used in soups, broiled, or dried; the meat of raccoon dogs can be grilled on skewers or used in a kind of *miso*; wild boar meat can be used in soups or grilled on skewers; rabbit meat can be used in soups or broiled; otter meat can be grilled or used in thin broths; bear meat can be used in broths or grilled on skewers. With references to both the Kojimachi district and wild meat in a number of poems of a type that are often satirical in nature, as well as cookbooks like the one mentioned above, it is clear that meat was being eaten despite the ban placed upon it.

With excavation of the residences of Edo Period lords, the bones of wild animals are commonly found, and it is thought that the animals were eaten. Even the shogun eagerly participated in hunts for deer and wild boar. The cranes taken by the hawks that the shogun used on his hunts were promptly delivered to the emperor in Kyoto. A village in present-day Gifu Prefecture is known to have held a serow (similar to a wild goat) hunt at the end of each year. The meat taken during the hunt was then used to make a large stew eaten by the entire village on New Year's Eve.



A painting depicting a banquet at the Dutch Residence in Edo.

Medicinal Foods, Beef, and Pork

Although beef was not sold even at shops that specialized in wild meat, it seems to have been widely eaten. Cow bones that appear to have been used in cooking have been excavated from the site of the seat of the powerful Kishu Clan in present-day Chiyoda Ward in Tokyo. The Hikone Clan annually sent gifts of fish preserved in *miso*, dried meat, and beef pickled in sake to the shogun, the Imperial Court, and other lords.

Whenever the shogun requested beef from the Hikone Clan, packages were sent using two separate routes to assure the arrival of at least one of the packages. These packages were marked for the shogun's use to receive particular care and attention and, despite containing beef, were labeled with the name of a medicine. At the time, beef from Hikone was considered a rare and highly valued gift. Hikone beef is even rumored to be at the root of the assassination of a chief minister of the Hikone Clan when he stopped giving gifts of beef.

A recipe of a family of the Sendai Clan describes using beef and burdock juice to make the soup with the special honor of being served as the first dish. However, those who ate the soup were considered unclean for 150 days. References to the eating of beef have also been found in the diaries of samurai families living at the end of the Edo Period. One of these



Dejima, Nagasaki (from scrolls portraying the Chinese and Dutch in Nagasaki)

states that beef was offered as a special food for the elderly. It seems that the eating of beef, however, was not limited to the upper-class samurai families. At the end of the 18th century, beef that had been thinly sliced, boiled, and sun dried was widely sold. With the slaughter of two or three to ten cows per day, for an annual slaughter of between three and four hundred cows to meet the demand for this jerky-style meat, it appears that the common citizens also enjoyed eating beef. Milk and dairy products, which had not been a part of the Japanese diet since the end of the Heian Period (794–1185),

made a comeback during the reign of the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune. In 1727, Yoshimune received three head of white Indian cattle (Brahmans) as a gift from the Dutch. He turned the cattle out to graze in government-owned pastures at Mount Mineoka in present-day Chiba Prefecture. During the Kansei Era (1789–1801) the number of Brahman cattle had increased to seventy head, and between four and five hundred Brahmans could be found in Japan at the time of the Meiji Restoration (1868).



White cows (Brahmans) were presented to Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune, signifying the beginning of dairy farming in Japan (from the Dairy Farm Museum at Rakuno no Sato, Chiba Prefecture)

These white cows from India were used as milk cows. Since milk could not be transported as far as Edo, cows giving milk were transported to Edo, milked, and then returned to Mineoka. The most common product made from the milk was called *raku*. Sugar was added to the milk and the combination then boiled and formed into blocks of approximately 100 grams. These blocks hardened to the consistency of soap and shavings were either eaten or added to tea. Large quantities of *raku* were rumored to have made the forty concubines and fifty-five children of the eleventh shogun possible. As *raku* production increased, it was sold to the general population for approximately one day's salary per 100-gram block. A particular medicinal ointment was also developed from the baked manure of white cows that had been fed mugwort. This ointment was made exclusively for the shogun and his family.

In addition to increases in the consumption of beef and dairy products, pork consumption also rose. An economic report from 1859 notes that there had been tremendous growth in the number of people raising pigs over recent years. The report goes on to say that pork is extremely delicious; even more so than the meat of any wild game. A recommendation to remember that the meat of the white pigs from the Satsuma Region (present-day Kagoshima) is especially good, and that a lot could be learned from those farmers. In a record of his travels around southern Japan, one traveler comments on the number of fat, black pigs to be found around Hiroshima. He compares their number to the number of dogs one would find in the city.

While it was well known at this time that the Chinese used a great deal of pork in their cuisine, the Japanese found it very disconcerting to imagine the legendary Chinese beauty, Yang Kuei-fei, eating a pig. Perhaps the most notorious consumers of pork during the Edo Era were members of the Shinsengumi, a special police force established toward the end of the

Tokugawa Shogunate. It is said that the official Shogunate physician visited Shinsengumi headquarters and examined seventy to eighty members. When he found that most of them were suffering from lung disease brought on by malnutrition, he ordered them to buy a pig, feed it the leftovers from their own meals, and then butcher and eat the pig to improve their own health. The Shinsengumi members eagerly did as they were told.

Bans on Killing and Eating Meat

A record from the Tempo Era (1830–1844) describing the prosperity of Edo notes that when the feudal lords passed in front of wild game shops such as Momonjia at the end of the Tokugawa Shogunate (Edo Period), they were disgusted by the filth they saw there. In addition Kikue Yamakawa, the daughter of a junior samurai of the Mito Clan, emphasized in her autobiography that meat was certainly not a part of the diet.

At best, meat was considered a special food with medicinal or restorative powers and most people never even tasted meat. The bans on the eating of meat and killing of animals had permeated the heart of the Japanese and become socially accepted ideas. A government decree required people who had eaten serow, wolf, rabbit, or raccoon dog before visiting a temple or shrine to repent for five days; those who had eaten pork or deer meat were required to repent for sixty days; and those who had eaten beef or horse meat were required to repent for one hundred-fifty days. The ban on meat eating was most strictly observed by the common people of the time. When they did prepare meat, they did so using a separate cooking fire outside the house, and then refrained from looking directly at their household Shinto or Buddhist altars. The bans were customarily observed most strictly before Buddhist services with not only meat, but even fish consumption being forbidden.

Although the number of shops selling the meat of wild animals increased in Edo during the early and mid-1800s, negative public opinion regarding this increase was also strong. One famous classical scholar of the Tempo Era (1830–1844) lamented that with an increase in Dutch studies



Even today, a service is performed annually to honor fowl slaughtered for human uses (Sanjo Danohorin Temple's Tori Kuyo-to) photograph by the author.

came an increase in the number of people who ate meat. The scholar people claimed that the corruption threatening to overwhelm the homes of Edo had angered the gods, who expressed their displeasure with an increase in the number of fires.

At the root of the revolution at the eating of meat was not only the idea that it was unclean, but also Buddhist teachings that prohibited the useless destruction of life. Until fairly recent times, the Japanese had not killed

any living creature indiscriminately. In fact, until the 19th century, Japan was the only nation in the world where not a single indigenous species had become extinct. Even those such as hunters, fishermen, and restaurant owners whose profession demanded the killing of animals mourned the loss of life and held memorial services for the animals they killed. In mountain villages monuments were erected for the game and fowl killed, and sacred mounds can be found in fishing villages all over the country. There is even a monument in Yamagata Prefecture dedicated to trees and plants. Many of these traditions continue even today, as evidenced by the large memorial erected by the local poultry industry in Kyoto, and where annual services are held to honor the slaughtered chickens and other fowl.



Dog-and-bull fights were just one of the popular past-times that were cruel to animals in England at the beginning of the 19th century (Hi-rodo Jikan no Seikatsu-shi; Libro Port Co, Ltd.)

Europeans who believe that meat is a natural gift from God have difficulty understanding this aspect of Japanese culture. Furthermore, at the time of the Edo Period games involving the abuse of animals were all the rage in the West. The famous author, Natsume Soseki (1867-1916) even gave a lecture on the subject. He told his audience that though Westerners greatly value morals and treat farm animals such as dogs, cows, and horses well, it has not been so long since they enjoyed themselves with very cruel games using animals. Among these so-called games were contests in which dogs fought bulls and bears; dogs were allowed to be bitten to death by mice; and attempted to hit chickens with sticks. These practices were prohibited by law in England in 1820. When Commodore Perry arrived in Japan, his crew members were astonished by the number of wild birds that flew to the ship. With no fear, the birds perched on the mast or landed on the deck only to be shot by the crew. When the Japanese witnessed this behavior, they were stunned and exclaimed, “What savages!” It is said that a clause was later added to the treaty between Japan and the United States strongly recommending that Americans follow the Japanese law prohibiting cruelty to wildlife.

Westernization and the Promotion of Meat Eating

It wasn't until the westernization of Japan during the Meiji Period (1866–1912) that the Japanese were finally able to overcome the centuries of social taboo against meat to enjoy it freely. However, the taboo was deeply rooted and not

easily forgotten. In an attempt to westernize Japan, the Restoration government made various efforts to remove this deep-rooted taboo.

In the fall of 1871, Tsukiji Gyuba, a semi-private meat company specializing in horse and beef, began an advertising campaign with the following statement by Yukichi Fukuzawa:



A gyuunabe (thin beef stew) restaurant of the Meiji Period (Shukan Asahi Hyakka 103, "Sekai no Tabemono"; Tokyo Kaika Hanjo-shi; Hagiwara Otohiko, 1874)

First of all, a common excuse for disliking meat is that since cows and pigs are so big, butchering them is unbearable. Which is bigger, a cow or a whale? No one is against the eating of whale meat. Is it cruel to kill a living creature? Is it not cruel to slice open the spine of a live eel or to cut the head off a live turtle? Are beef and cow's milk unclean? Cows and sheep eat only grains and grasses, while the boiled fish paste found in Nihonbashi is made from sharks that have feasted on drowning people. Although soup made from black porgy [a marine fish common in Asia] is delicious, it is made from a fish that eats the human excrement discarded from ships. And while spring greens are certainly fragrant and delicious, I expect that the urine applied to the plants the day before yesterday has soaked into the leaves completely. Does beef and milk smell bad? Don't pickled fish organs also smell bad? The fermented and dried jack-fish meat certainly smells much worse. And what of the pickled eggplant and *daikon* radish made using the method introduced by our ancestors, by which insect larvae are combined with the rice *miso* used to pickle them? Isn't the issue based more upon what we are used to and not used to? Beef and milk provide a great deal of nourishment and are extremely good for the body. They are basic ingredients in the diets of westerners. We Japanese must also open our eyes and begin to receive the benefits to be had from beef and milk.

The diet of the Emperor, which included meat, brought about a large turning point in social views toward the traditional taboo against eating meat. In 1872, the fifth year of his reign, the Meiji Emperor broke the 1,200-year ban on

meat eating by celebrating the new year by eating meat. The fact that the emperor ate meat of his own accord encouraged Japanese citizens of every social class to also begin eating meat. Moreover, 1872 saw a change in religious laws, as Buddhist monks were also permitted to eat meat.

However, opposition also remained strong. In the early morning of February 18 of the same year, ten monks attempted to break into the Imperial Palace. Guards at the main gate shot five of the invaders, killing four and seriously wounding another. The remaining five were arrested. In order to maintain the emperor's authority, the news was not publicized in Japan. However, a British newspaper, *The Times*, reported the event as an attempted assassination. The monks claimed that since the arrival of foreigners in Japan, a large number of Japanese had begun eating meat and that this was destroying the soul of the Japanese people. They also threatened the emperor, stating that they would not stop, even if it meant killing him if he did not meet their demands and expel the foreigners, institute a national religion that combined Buddhism and Shintoism, and return to a feudal system.

Amid the efforts of both the national and prefectural governments to westernize Japan in all aspects including its diet, anti-meat-eating movements arose throughout the country, forcing many butchers into bankruptcy. For example, one prefectural government made the following declaration in 1872:

Although beef is a wonderfully nutritious food, there are still a great number of people barring our attempt at westernization by clinging to conventional customs, whether because they don't want to eat meat themselves, or because they are afraid to appear impure in the eyes of the gods. Such action is contrary to the wishes of the Emperor.

By educating the public in such ways, meat eating gradually returned and spread throughout Japanese culture. This was the first step in the westernization of the Japanese food culture.



A portion of the article describing the February 18, 1872 incident in *The Times* (Tokyo Shimbun Yukan May 14, 1988 edition; from The National Diet Library)

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