

Swedish East India Company and trade in tea, 1731-1813.

Lecture presented

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‘But when the opening [of] a Trade with East-Indies... brought the price of Tea... so low, that the *meanest* labouring Man could compass the Purchase of it;--when the Connection which the Dealers in their Country had with many *Scotsmen* in the Service of the *Swedish Company* at *Gottenburg*, introduced the Common Use of that Drug among the *lowest* of the People;--when *Sugar*, the inseparable Companion of Tea, came to be in possession of the very poorest Housewife, where formerly it had been a great Rarity;--and thereby was *at hand*, to mix with Water and Brandy, or Rum;--and when Tea and Punch became thus the *Diet* and *Debauch* of all the Beer and Ale Drinkers, the effects were suddenly and severely felt.’

Duncan Forbes (1744), *Some considerations of present state of Scotland*. Edinburgh¹

Introduction

The quote of Duncan Forbes catches in a very concise form the three key issues that interlink the Swedish East India Company with the great transformation of consumption patterns in the eighteenth century. First, it traces the linkage between the Swedish East India Company and spreading of tea-drinking culture among the ‘meanest labouring Man’ and the ‘lowest of the People’. Second, Forbes indicates that this business has to do with the many Scotsmen—he could add, interlopers—who settled in Gothenburg, the seat of the Swedish company. And third, the quote also points at the tea’s important role in the change of eighteenth-century drinking culture. This change had very serious impact on consumption of drinks. It might be connected to decline in consumption of traditional cold beverages (beer and ale) and increase in drinking of coffee, tea, and consumption of sugar, rum, brandy, punch that went hand in hand with the new drinking culture. In addition, the quote stresses the linkage between tea drinking and sugar consumption. The sugar economy (production, trade and consumption) is often perceived as a driving factor of economic change in the colonial world even and industrialization in the late eighteenth century.²

I will argue, in accordance with Duncan Forbes’ words, that the Swedish East India Company (SEIC), in fact, played a very important role in this transformation. SEIC was one of the leading European suppliers of low-quality and low-priced tea and so it really facilitated spreading of tea drinking among lower classes in England. Re-exports of tea carried by the SEIC is, to a certain extent neglected, but crucial aspect of the SEIC’s activities—at least in Swedish research of the Company.

There is a quite extensive Swedish literature on the history of the SEIC, but the major part of it concerns the ‘exotic’ character of the enterprise: the SEIC’s expeditions to China, perceptions of China and Chinese influences in Sweden, Swedish scientists taking part in the SEIC’ voyages, etc. The Company is seen as a spectacular adventure, nevertheless without broader impact on the Swedish society or economy; and a small and insignificant actor in comparison with the British, Dutch and French chartered companies.³ Paradoxically, in the English literature is the SEIC viewed more seriously, as a big trader in tea and so a competitor of the English East India Company (EIC).⁴

¹ Quoted in Mintz 1985 p.114

² For the broad discussion of sugar’s importance see Mintz 1985.

³ For the most useful overviews of the SEIC’s history see Nyström 1883; Kjellberg 1975; Konickx 1980; Åberg 1988; Åberg 1990. On Swedish perception of China see Nyberg 2001.

⁴ Cole 1958; Gill 1958; Gill 1961; Kent 1973; Mui 1984.

Business strategy of the Swedish East India Company

The Swedish East India Company (*Svenska ostindiska kompaniet*) was established by a charter of 14 June 1731, given to the Stockholm merchant Hindrich König & Company.⁵ The charter included monopoly rights for all Swedish trade in the East Indies, circumscribing a vast geographical area east of the Cape of Good Hope. In practice, and in spite of the name, the company was engaged more or less exclusively in trade with Canton.

The practical reasons for the limitation of trade were other companies. Sweden entered the East India trade rather late, and in a period when the competition between the established giant companies and their respective countries became harder. The Swedish company had been seen by the British, French, and Dutch as reincarnation of the recently abolished Ostend Company. Therefore the established powers did everything to hinder Swedish trade in the East Indies. Already the first expedition, sent to Canton, got in troubles with the Dutch. The vessel *Friedericus Rex* was forced to stop in Batavia in January 1733, but the vessel was soon released and could complete its voyage with any problems. It was very profitable expedition.⁶ The second expedition, of the vessel *Drottning Ulrica Eleonora*, ended in much more serious incident with the British and French, the so-called Porto Novo Affair of 1733. This vessel was supposed to go first to India, to acquire goods desired in China, and then continue to Canton—in a manner typical for the other East India Companies. However, on the vessel's stop in Porto Novo in India the cargo was seized and part of the crew imprisoned by the British and French. The incident became a big diplomatic affair between Britain and Sweden, we will return to it later on. After Porto Novo Affair the Swedish vessels almost never stopped in India.⁷ Of the 132 expeditions sent to Asia during the SEIC's existence (1732-1813) 124 went exclusively to Canton. A Swedish Canton Company should be more proper name.

One of the reasons why the Swedes traded almost exclusively with Canton was the character of the Chinese foreign trade. In difference from other parts of Asia, and not least in contrast to the nineteenth century, the European trade with China was shaped according to the Chinese trading rules. The only port in which the Chinese authorities allowed the trade was Canton, and business was carried out by a group of privileged Chinese merchants. On the other hand, the Chinese did not hinder small European actors to participate in this privileged trade. Thus, even small companies, such as the Ostend, Swedish, Danish, Prussian companies were allowed to trade. In contrast, in the Dutch East Indies and India the big European companies achieved more efficient monopoly control.

The second reason of the Swedish presence in Canton was simply the fact that the demand for Chinese commodities was rising fast in Europe. Trade in tea, silk, chinaware was one of the most lucrative parts of the eighteenth-century long-distance trade and the rapidly rising part. Especially trade in tea rose rapidly and the old companies appeared being rather slow in adjusting to the new demand. Thus the Dutch company (VOC) that in the seventeenth century was living on monopoly of spices adjusted only slowly to the shift. For example, instead of buying tea directly in Canton, the Dutch purchased their tea from the Chinese merchants in Batavia, which deteriorated quality as well as extended the tea's journey to European consumer.

Tea became the Swedish company's specialty. Between the 1730s and beginning of the 1780s it became one of major European suppliers of the new beverage. On the one hand, the focus on this commodity made the company extremely profitable, when the demand and prices were

⁵ Kjellberg 1975, between pp. 40 and 41

⁶ Kjellberg 1975, p. 44.

⁷ Gill 1958; Kjellberg 1975, pp. 50-55

high, but also extremely fragile on the other hand, when the situation changed. After 1784, when the British increased imports of tea and decreased duties, the tea price collapsed and the foundation of SEIC's profitability disappeared. The company survived for another three decades but just as a paper enterprise.

The SEIC also was extremely focused enterprise: it traded almost exclusively with one single port—Canton, and specialized very much on one commodity—tea. This concentration is linked to another feature of the SEIC. In comparison with the traditional companies the Swedish one was a minor enterprise. It sent out between one and two vessels annually, in the best years three vessels. It had no colonies, no trading stations, and so no military and administrative staff in Asia. An average annual staff, including the crews might be about 250-300 persons. Until 1753 each voyage was organised as an independent venture, each shareholder and employee receiving his share of profit after the return of the vessel. First in 1753 the company's capital stock became a permanent capital stock with transferable shares. From the 1760s the SEIC also had a house and stores in Canton, with two supercargoes staying there.⁸ This might be compared with huge British, Dutch and French investments in staff, fortifications, military capabilities, shipping, etc., in the East Indies. Just VOC had in the eighteenth century between 100 and 150 vessels in service and a staff in Asia of some 20,000 employees (crews excluded).⁹

Another typical feature of the SEIC's operation was focus on foreign markets. The seat of the company was Gothenburg Sweden's major port on the west coast. According to the 1731 charter Gothenburg was the point of departure and arrival of the SEIC's vessels and the return cargoes were also sold on public sales in Gothenburg. Major part of the return cargoes were then re-exported to other countries, mainly to the Dutch Republic, the Austrian Netherlands and France. It is difficult to get exact share but a comparison of taxed SEIC's imports (consumed in the country) and duty-free re-exports indicate that less than one-tenth of SEIC's imports were consumed in Sweden.

Trader in tea

As mentioned above, tea was the SEIC's predominant commodity. It consumed about 50 per cent of cargo space in the early period (1739-42) but, as tea was the most profitable commodity, its share increased to between 80 and 90 per cent in the 1750s and 1760s. The second important Chinese commodity was chinaware, occupying some 10-18 per cent of cargo space in the 1730-67 period. Combination of heavy chinaware and light but space-consuming tea was especially suitable in balancing cargo; in addition, chinaware did not smell.

The Swedish imports of tea started with rather modest volumes. In 1739 the Swedish company imported about 160 tons of teas. But in the mid-century the average was between 500 and 600 tons annually.¹⁰ Such volumes were very substantial in at least European context. Table 1 indicates that the Swedish share in Canton's tea trade varied between 10 and 20 per cent. Together the Scandinavian companies (Danish and Swedish) imported between one-fourth and one-third of European tea. The Scandinavian shares were extremely high in the course of conflicts between great power (1756-63, 1776-83). The significance of the Danish and Swedish tea imports is confirmed in contemporary correspondence.¹¹

⁸ Müller 2003, pp. 31-33.

⁹ Gaastra 1991, pp. 86-87, 118

¹⁰ Konickx 1980, pp. 451-452

¹¹ Kent 1973, p. 117

Table 1: Exports of tea from Canton (annual averages in *picul*¹²)

Year	EIC	English trade aside	France	Dutch Republic	Denmark	Sweden	US	Total
1719-25	6891		1340					12745
1726-33	8239		3924	2985	587	531		18854
1734-40	10399		7107	6474	5290	4700		33970
1741-48	14863		8006	15133	13248	10457		61707
1749-55	22983		14466	21074	12800	13405		88042
1756-62	24332	245	2104	16441	16192	15567		75746
1763-69	50547		17636	28546	16857	15389		128975
1770-77	51105	1157	27342	34818	19975	19052		153449
1778-84	56640	1725	14871	18720	28422	25792	432	155884
1785-91	135381	1874	4704	30625	10866	16104	9451	213284
1792-98	147357	1450	1650	9985	11899	9454	21335	204084
1799-1806	203133	3564	711	286	11351	14132	47995	284123
1807-13	206996	3427					28415	238838
1814-20	224971	11316		1521	500	1530	57047	296885

Source: Dermigny, Louis, *LA Chine et l'Occident. Le Commerce at Canton au XVIIIe siècle 1719-1833*, tome 1-2, Paris 1964 , p. 539

The table also shows that tea imports between the 1730s and 1780s increased six-fold. Nevertheless, in the whole period 1719-1820 the tea trade increased by a factor of 23. Trade in tea was also one of the most rapidly increasing sectors in long-distance trade. This would not be of interest if, in parallel, this trade did not account for a very significant share of total foreign trade, state fiscal revenues, and at the end rising share of consumers' incomes.

It is apparent that Sweden with its rather small and poor population could not consume 10-20 percent of European imports of tea. Majority of the tea was soon after SEIC vessels' arrival sold in public sales at Gothenburg and re-exported abroad. The re-exports were great in comparison with Sweden's total foreign trade.

¹² 1 picul=60.5 kg, Konickx 1980, p. 442

Table 2: Sweden's total exports and re-exports of Chinese commodities

Year	total exports (mil d.s.m)	re-exports of Chinese commodities (mil d.s.m.)
1738	7.1	1.4
1739	7.0	2.1
1740	6.5	1.3
Year	total exports (rixdollars)	SEIC's re-exports (rixdollars)
1777	3326895	1608898
1778	3155546	1645159
1779	3486439	1955505
1780	3250760	1919852
1781	4809924	2793428
1782	4866226	4064862
1783	4146924	1485490
1784	5041979	902664
1785	5162752	681113
1786		1506132
1787		1016659
1788	4862177	849085
1789	3675092	413523
1790		599313
1791	6668763	335468
1792	6664098	353328
1793	6631590	404961
1794	6761416	558951
1795	7567693	232224

Source: for 1738, 1739, and 1740 see Koninckx, Christian, *The First and Second Charters of the Swedish East India Company (1731–1766)*. Kortrijk 1980, p. 405; for 1777–95 see Nyström, Joh. Fr. *De svenska ostindiska kompanierna. Historisk-statistisk framställning*. Göteborg 1883, Statistical Appendices; Kommerskollegium, *Årsberättelser om utrikeshandel och sjöfart*, Riksarkivet Stockholm.

The figures are astonishing if we are aware that Chinese commodities were carried by two vessels annually, while cargoes of iron, tar pitch and boards were carried by hundreds of vessels. The discrepancy between the limited staff and small tonnage employed by the SEIC in comparison, for example, with employment in iron industries and trade is one of the reasons why the SEIC's activities as insignificant in general. Nevertheless such large re-export values had to have strong impact on Sweden's balance of trade, the country's capacity to import other commodities, and not least on the exchange rates of Swedish currency.

Who did buy the SEIC's re-exports and at which destinations were the Chinese commodities going? The preserved data on sales from Gothenburg indicate that the majority of re-exports went to Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Hamburg, Middelburg, Ostend, and French ports. Occasionally the British destinations appeared. However, the trade with England was illegal, therefore only destinations outside of English jurisdiction proper were mentioned (e.g. Channel Islands, Isle of Man). The Netherlands functioned as a huge redistribution hub not only for the Swedish but also for the Danish, French and of course Dutch companies. From the Netherlands then the cargoes of tropical products reached consumers all over Europe.

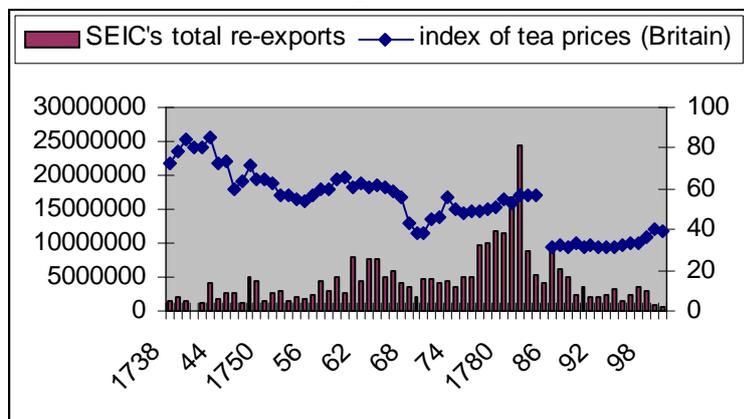
In spite the English East India Company's monopoly a significant share of the Swedish-imported tea ended in British cups, even if this is difficult to reveal in the Swedish official figures. Neither private correspondence of tea dealers provides much evidence. Many merchants settled in Gothenburg carried out their re-export trade in cooperation with Amsterdam, Gent and Antwerp financiers, also the same men who invested in the SEIC's voyages. But their correspondence does not unveil smuggling traffic to Britain.¹³

It is broadly accepted view that Britons became already by the first decades of the eighteenth century greatest tea-drinkers in Europe and, thus, Britain became the major destinations of tea. The data on the Canton tea trade also indicate Britain's crucial importance. However, tea market in Britain was circumscribed by EIC's monopoly, and by very high duties, both doing English tea expensive; duties might double the original prices. This situation made tea extremely vulnerable for smuggling; in fact, tea was perceived as the typical smuggle goods. Only the upper prise qualities of tea were supplied by the EIC; the cheaper qualities were smuggled.

The British authorities estimated the volume of smuggled tea in the 1770s at between three and seven million pounds (1,350-3,000 tons) annually.¹⁴ Much of this arrived from Sweden. Goodricke, an English diplomat, noted that by 1760 only English dealers, also not other dealers buying on English account, bought about 800,000 pounds (c. 350 tons) of tea annually at the Gothenburg auctions.¹⁵ The Swedish re-exported tea also made substantial share of the tea consumed in Britain and the SEIC's business was strongly dependent on the British market.

Figure 1 shows that the re-exports of Chinese commodities followed closely the price movements on the British tea market. The SEIC re-exported larger quantities of Chinese commodities (tea) when prices moved up and declined its business when the market deteriorated.

Figure 1: SEIC's total re-exports (d.s.m.) related to index of tea prices in Britain (1728=100)



Source: for SEIC's total re-exports see table 2, and for index of tea prices see Cole, W A, Trends in Eighteenth-Century Smuggling. The Economic History review, vol 10, no 3 (1958), p. 410

The variations in SEIC's re-exports were also linked to the international situation. A crucial precondition of Swedish trade in China and re-exports of Chinese commodities was namely

¹³ Müller 2003, pp. 40-44.

¹⁴ Cole 1958, p. 396

¹⁵ Kent 1973, p. 119 (note)

Sweden's neutrality in the major British-French conflicts. Thus, we may notice large increase in re-exports (and the China trade) during the Seven Years War (1756-63), with a serious decline by the late 1760s and in 1770s. The SEIC had again some very good years between 1776 and 1784. Especially the 1780-83 years were exceptionally good, as almost all countries with significant Asian trade were engaged in the American War of Independence. Sweden and Denmark stayed neutral and their East India companies profited enormously in that situation. In 1778-84, the Scandinavians accounted for over one-third of all tea trade in Europe.

However, the end of the American War of Independence marked also the end of profitable Swedish China trade. First, the British government reduced the duties on tea imports from 100 to 1.5 percent, by Pitt's Commutation Act. The act's effect is clearly visible in the tea price index (figure 1). Second the EIC more than doubled tea imports (see table 2). The final blow to the Swedish tea trade was the French Revolutionary Wars that closed for the Swedes redistribution hub in the Austrian Netherlands and Dutch Republic. In addition, the Americans opened its own rapidly expanding trade with Canton (table 2).

The story of success and decline of the SEIC's trade shows that this was very different enterprise in comparison with the chartered companies of the Dutch Republic and Britain, and also in comparison with other Swedish chartered companies. Formally the SEIC held monopoly rights on all Swedish trade with the East Indies, however the Swedish market was insignificant in the company's operations, and there were no Swedish interlopers who could infringe on the monopoly rights. Instead the company should be seen as an interloper in a profitable Asian trade, an interloper operating under the Swedish flag and charter and under the royal protection. As an interloper it could utilise the profitable niches that the regulated trade left. However, the basis for the SEIC's success disappeared at the same moment as the big actors and great power governments closed the niches. This, however, does not mean that the SEIC had no impact on the general East India trade or that it was, from a Swedish point of view, just an off-shore company, without any significance for Sweden. As Duncan Forbes noted already in 1744 the cheap teas imported by the Swedish company had profound impact on spreading of tea-drinking culture in Scotland, and apparently also in England. It is more difficult to trace the SEIC's influence in Sweden's economic development. The issue will partly be addressed in coming section.

Scottish, Flemish or Swedish company?

The account on the SEIC's business strategies above shows that it had very much a character of niche interloper. The foreign involvement in the SEIC might also be perceived as another evidence in it. First, there was a significant share of foreign capital invested in the enterprise, mostly of Flemish and British/Scottish origin. Second, in the first decades the company employed many experienced foreigners as supercargoes, officers and seamen. Again, the Scottish and Flemish element among the employees was especially strong. Third, in its operations, the company used merchant networks based in the Austrian Netherlands. The banker and merchant houses of Gent and Antwerp organized transfers of money from the Netherlands to Gothenburg to Cadiz. Then, the same houses used the same channels to transport the tea and other commodities from Sweden.

All this shows the SEIC as a successor of the Ostend Company. The Ostend Company, based in Ostend in the Austrian Netherlands, opened the trade with Canton already in 1718 and, as the SEIC afterwards, they focused almost exclusively on trade in tea. The Ostend Company became during the short period of its being a very serious competitor to the Dutch and English companies. For example, in the 1718-29 decade, the Ostend Company and the EIC imported

same amounts of tea (about 7 mil. pounds each).¹⁶ Consequently, the diplomatic pressure of the Dutch and British governments on the Austrian Emperor was the major cause of the Ostend Company's final dissolution in 1731. The abolishment of the China trade from the Austrian Netherlands was a condition for the Dutch and British recognition of Maria Theresia succession rights.

In addition to the Flemish investors (the Proli, Moretus, Maelcamp, de Pret families) there was a number of Scottish and English mariners and merchants who either earlier got in troubles with the EIC or they left Britain after the South Sea Company's failure. One of these men was Colin Campbell of the well-known Scottish kin. After the South Sea Bubble, in which he lost substantial money, he moved to Ostend and became a supercargo in the Ostend Company. In the late 1720s, when the operations of the Ostend Company already were suspended, he got in contact with Niklas Sahlgren of Gothenburg. The SEIC foundation in 1731 was result of a co-operation between these two men, even if Campbell is not much visible in the SEIC's first documents. As we saw above the charter was issued for Hindrich König & Co. The reason was quite simple, it was important to hide for the British authorities the connection between the SEIC and the interloping British subjects. Campbell himself became a Swedish citizen and nobleman.

The Scottish/British factor was especially important as regards the manning of the SEIC vessels and this became also one of the big issues in the mentioned Porto Novo Affair. The British authorities accused the Swedish company for employing the British subjects, which was forbidden. As the British secretary of state, Harrington, noted after the Affair:

'It is plain that little or none of the cargo [of *Ulrica Eleonora*] belonged to Swedish subjects, and those who were taken and chiefly concerned in the trade were Englishmen, formerly servants of our East India Company, and natural born subjects of His Majesty, acting against their laws, and the allegiance due to the Sovereign.'¹⁷

There is a list, dated at 1740, of all British subject employed by the SEIC. The list was made in connection to the diplomatic settlement of the Porto Novo Affair. It includes 42 names of British subjects, more or less obviously of Scottish origin. Especially among the supercargoes in the first expeditions the British dominance was overwhelming. Even after 1740, the merchants of Scottish origin were engaged in SEIC's trade, mainly as investors and purchasers of return cargoes, but their share among SEIC's employees declined. The Swedish supercargoes learned from their foreign colleagues and due to the time the Swedes replaced foreigners. In the second half of the eighteenth century there were only few foreign employees in the SEIC.

The Flemish aspect did play role mainly as concerns investments and organization of sales. Looking at the SEIC's early period the big Flemish houses accounted for about a half of the capital invested. For example, in the expeditions of *Drottning af Sverige* and *Stockholm*, the Flemish investors paid for 40 per cent of subscriptions. And as late as during the 1766-86 charter they accounted for 26.2 per cent of investments in the SEIC.¹⁸

Despite the importance of Flemish and British/Scottish money in the SEIC and the know-how in East India (China) trade we cannot characterise the SEIC as an off-shore enterprise. The foreign influence was important and crucial for the SEIC's success in an early period, but it

¹⁶ Degryse 1994, p. 486

¹⁷ Gill 1958; p. 56.

¹⁸ Konickx 1980, pp. 289, 131

weakened in the course of time. The Swedish merchants increase their ownership in the SEIC, even if they even after 1750 often acted as fronts for foreigners. Perhaps even more important was replacement of foreigners in the SEIC's staff. In rising degree crews, naval officers, and supercargoes were recruited among Swedes.

The increasingly Swedish character of the company entailed also that the profits made in the trade stayed in Sweden, being invested in other sectors. A typical career of a successful Swedish supercargo was to return after a couple of profitable voyages to Canton and settle in the country as landlord. Such a supercargo invested most probably in iron works, perhaps in fishing industries, textile manufactures and many other economic activities—in addition to the SEIC's shares.¹⁹

The SEIC had an important impact on the shipbuilding sector in Sweden, even if the number of vessels built was not very large. Almost all SEIC's vessels were built in Sweden, mainly in Stockholm's shipyards. This represented a huge accumulation of resources, manpower and not least useful know-how. The Swedish *Chinamen*, as these vessels sometimes are called, belonged among the largest and most efficient in Europe.²⁰

Consequently, in spite of the limited number of people engaged, there were many linkages between SEIC and different sectors of Sweden's economy. Because it is very difficult to quantify the SEIC's total impact we may conclude with a statement that the SEIC's activities had significant outcomes for Sweden's total economy and that the SEIC played a role in Sweden's integration within eighteenth-century Atlantic economy.

Nevertheless, the most significant aspect of the SEIC's history is its role in transformation of British and European drinking culture. The data on trade indicate that the SEIC was a large supplier of tea in Europe. It is apparent that the Swedish, and Danish tea re-exports went in huge quantities to Britain, the leading tea drinking nation in Europe. There is also evidence that smuggled teas were significantly cheaper and so encouraged tea drinking among the lower classes. Most probably the tea drinking should not reach such spreading so rapidly without the tea imported by the SEIC. The SEIC also helped to make Britons a tea drinking nation.

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¹⁹ Müller 1997; Åberg 1988.

²⁰ Konickx 1980, pp. 153-179, 444-449

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