

From Institutional Constraints to Discursive Practices: Paradigm Evolution and Ecological Reconstruction of Community Education Policy in China

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Abstract: Existing research on community education policy in China predominantly adopts a descriptive approach to policy text analysis or focuses on policy instrument allocation, failing to adequately reveal the dialectical interaction between institutional constraints and discursive practices, and leaving unaddressed the deep mechanism of 'ecological reconstruction' in policy evolution. This study constructs a dual analytical framework of 'institutional constraints–discursive practices,' integrating Scott's three-pillar model of institutions and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, to systematically examine the evolutionary logic of China's community education policy based on twenty-one national-level policy documents. The findings reveal three stages of evolution: the institutional establishment period, characterized by regulative dominance and passive acceptance practices; the institutional expansion period, marked by the strengthening of normative constraints and negotiated practices; and the institutional deepening period, featuring the construction of cultural-cognitive constraints and participatory practices. The interaction between institutional constraints and discursive practices exhibits a dialectical logic of 'constraint–negotiation–reconstruction,' with four groups of structural tensions constituting the endogenous driver of ecological reconstruction. This study provides a theoretical tool for moving beyond the 'institution–discourse' dualism and offers a Chinese case for international research on policy discourse and implementation.

Keywords: Community Education Policy, Institutional Constraints, Discursive Practices, Ecological Reconstruction, Paradigm Evolution

1. Introduction

As a foundational institutional arrangement in China's lifelong learning system, community education has undergone a profound identity transition over the past four decades. From its initial positioning as a marginal policy experiment in the late 1980s to its current status as a core component of national education governance, community education policy reflects not only the cumulative process of institutional text production but also, more fundamentally, a structural transformation in the relationship between state institutions and social discourses. The central government has issued over twenty policy documents directly related to community education, collectively forming an increasingly comprehensive institutional framework that encompasses policy orientation, organizational structure, operational mechanisms, quality assessment, and digital transformation.

However, the intensification of policy texts alone does not fully capture the depth of this transformation. What is at stake is a more fundamental shift in how community education is conceptualized, legitimized, and practiced—a shift that involves not only changes in institutional constraints but also, and more importantly, changes in the discursive practices through which policy meanings are produced, disseminated, and consumed. It is precisely at the intersection of institutions and discourses that the inner dynamics of policy evolution can be most fruitfully examined.

The existing literature on China's community education policy has made significant contributions to mapping the terrain of policy evolution. Yao & Song(2021) delineates three stages of policy development and identifies a progressive orientation toward lifelong learning^[1]. Hou & Shang(2018) provide a comprehensive overview of the forty-year trajectory, highlighting achievements and persistent problems^[2]. Ding(2018) focuses on the historical evolution and future prospects from the perspective of policy experimentation^[3]. Sun(2019) examine policy implementation blockages through

the Smith model and the multiple streams framework, respectively^[4]. Yu (2022) provide a systematic review of the literature from 2010 to 2022, identifying theoretical shallowness, lack of international perspective, and methodological limitations as the three major weaknesses of existing research^[5].

Despite these contributions, a critical gap remains. Most studies treat policy texts as objective representations of institutional reality, neglecting the fact that policy texts are themselves discursive constructions that both reflect and shape power relations. Furthermore, the relationship between institutional constraints and discursive practices is either ignored or treated as a unidirectional causal relationship, rather than as a dialectical interaction. As a result, the deep mechanism of "ecological reconstruction"—the process through which institutional and discursive changes co-evolve and mutually constitute each other—remains inadequately theorized and empirically under explored.

This study aims to address this gap by constructing a dual analytical framework of "institutional constraints-discourse practices" and applying it to the systematic analysis of China's community education policies. The core research question is: how does the interactive relationship between institutional constraints and discursive practices drive the paradigm evolution of China's community education policy? Four sub-questions guide the analysis: (1) What are the three stages of evolution in institutional constraints, and what are their respective characteristics? (2) How have discursive practices transformed correspondingly across these three stages? (3) What is the dialectical logic of the interaction between institutional constraints and discursive practices? (4) What are the structural tensions in the current "institution–discourse" ecology, and what future scenarios do they point to?

2. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Methods

2.1 Institutional constraints: a three-dimensional analysis

The concept of "institution" in this study draws on North's classical definition: institutions are "the rules of the game in a society" or, more formally, "humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." North distinguishes between formal institutions (such as laws, policies, and contracts) and informal institutions (such as norms, conventions, and culturally embedded cognitive frames)^[6]. However, North's formulation does not fully unpack the multidimensional nature of institutional constraints. To address this limitation, this study adopts Scott's three-pillar model, which operationalizes institutions into three analytically distinct but empirically intertwined dimensions^[7].

The regulative pillar refers to institutions that constrain behavior through explicit rules, directives, and sanctions. In the context of community education policy, regulative constraints are manifested in policy texts that prescribe "what must be done," "what is prohibited," and "how compliance is monitored and sanctioned." The regulative pillar is the most visible and enforceable dimension of institutional constraints; it operates primarily through administrative authority and legal power.

The normative pillar refers to institutions that prescribe role expectations, value standards, and normative objectives. Normative constraints go beyond mere behavioral regulation; they define what is desirable, legitimate, and appropriate. In community education policy, normative constraints are manifested in policy texts that articulate the value of community education, the responsibilities of various actors, and the normative goals of policy intervention (such as "promoting social harmony" or "meeting residents' learning needs").

The cultural-cognitive pillar refers to institutions that provide the shared cognitive frames through which actors understand reality, define problems, and legitimize solutions. Cultural-cognitive constraints are the deepest and least visible dimension of institutions; they operate through taken-for-granted assumptions, shared meanings, and institutionalized cognitive schemas. In community education policy, cultural-cognitive constraints are manifested in policy texts that shape how community education is understood at the level of fundamental concepts—for example, whether it is understood as "social governance," "public service," "lifelong learning," or "active aging."

The three-pillar framework is particularly suited to this study because it allows for a differentiated analysis of how different dimensions of institutional constraints evolve over time and how they interact with discursive practices. Importantly, the three pillars do not change simultaneously or at the same pace; regulative constraints may change rapidly through policy issuance, while cultural-cognitive constraints may lag behind or resist change, creating structural tensions that drive further institutional and discursive reconstruction.

2.2 Discursive practices: a three-dimensional analysis

While institutional theory provides the analytical tools for examining constraints, it does not fully capture the dynamic, contested, and meaning-making dimensions of policy processes. To address this gap, this study introduces the perspective of discursive practices, drawing on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) ^[8] and Foucault's theory of discourse and power ^[9].

Fairclough's CDA operates on three interrelated dimensions: the textual dimension (the linguistic and rhetorical features of policy texts), the discursive practice dimension (the production, dissemination, and consumption of policy discourse), and the social practice dimension (the relationship between discourse and power, ideology, and social structure). This study adopts and adapts Fairclough's three dimensions into an analytical framework of discursive practices with three components.

Discourse production refers to the question of who has the legitimate authority to produce policy discourse, what discourses are produced, and through what institutional channels. In the context of community education policy, discourse production involves not only the drafting of policy texts by education authorities but also the production of interpretations, commentaries, and local adaptations by grassroots practitioners, social organizations, and community residents. The question of who is legitimated as a discourse producer is fundamentally a question of power.

Discourse dissemination examines how policy narratives are conveyed, which discourses are amplified through official channels, and which are marginalized or silenced. Dissemination pathways encompass the formal administrative system, official media, academic publications, and increasingly significant digital platforms. The dissemination patterns reveal the power dynamics of policy discourse: who controls the channels, whose voices are heard, and who is excluded.

Discourse consumption refers to how policy discourse is received, interpreted, negotiated, or resisted by various actors. This dimension is particularly crucial for understanding policy implementation, as policy texts do not enforce themselves; they must be interpreted and implemented by grassroots actors whose interpretations may align with, deviate from, or actively resist the intended meaning of the policy text. Thus, the concept of "discourse consumption" captures the positive, meaning-constructive aspect of policy implementation.

2.3 Dialectical logic of the dual framework

The core theoretical proposition of this study is that institutional constraints and discursive practices are not separate analytical domains, nor is their relationship unidirectional. Rather, they exist in a dialectical relationship of "constraint–negotiation–reconstruction."

In the constraint-dominated phase, institutional constraints (particularly regulative constraints) are strong and relatively autonomous; they shape the space, form, and content of discursive practices. Discursive practices are largely reactive, and the feedback loop from discourse to institution is weak or blocked.

In the negotiation-emerging phase, institutional constraints begin to loosen, creating discursive space for negotiation. Discursive practices become more active; grassroots actors begin to interpret, adapt, and occasionally challenge policy discourse. The feedback loop from discourse to institution begins to function, and some discursive innovations are incorporated into revised institutional constraints.

In the collaborative reconstruction phase, institutional constraints and discursive practices enter a state of mutual constitution. Institutional constraints (particularly cultural-cognitive constraints) deeply shape the cognitive frameworks of discursive practices, while discursive practices actively participate in the reconstruction of institutional constraints. The boundary between "institution" and "discourse" becomes increasingly porous, and policy evolution is driven by the continuous interaction between the two.

2.4 Data and methods

This study employs a mixed methods approach, integrating text analysis, discourse analysis, and diachronic comparison. The primary data sources consist of 21 national-level community education policy documents published over the past three decades, selected based on the following criteria: (1) issued by central government agencies (the State Council, the Ministry of Education, or joint agencies);

(2) with community education as the direct and substantive focus; (3) possessing policy implementation significance rather than being merely symbolic.

For each document, the study conducts a three-dimensional coding of institutional constraints (regulative, normative, cultural-cognitive) and a three-dimensional analysis of discursive practices (production, dissemination, consumption). The coding is both deductive (based on the theoretical framework) and inductive (allowing new themes to emerge from the data). The coded results are then subjected to diachronic comparison to identify patterns, transitions, and critical junctures in the evolution of institutional constraints and discursive practices.

It should be noted that this study analyzes national-level policy texts as the primary data source. While this approach has limitations in capturing local variations and grassroots discursive practices, it provides a systematic and comparable basis for mapping the macro-evolution of China's community education policy and for identifying the broader institutional and discursive patterns that shape local practices.

3. Diachronic Evolution of Institutional Constraints and Discursive Practices

3.1 *Institutional establishment period : regulative dominance and passive acceptance*

The institutional establishment period spans from 1988, when community education first entered the national policy agenda, to 2011, before the major policy shift of 2012. During this period, community education policy was characterized by strong regulative constraints, weak normative constraints, and virtually absent cultural-cognitive constraints.

The regulatory dimension of institutional constraints overwhelmingly dominates. The 1999 Action Plan for the Revitalization of Education in the 21st Century marked a pivotal moment in policy advancement, as it formally incorporated community education into the national lifelong learning system. However, the regulatory framework remained unchanged: community education was positioned as a supporting component of the lifelong learning system, and its implementation continued to be primarily driven by administrative directives.

The establishment of the first national community education pilot zones in 2001 further consolidated the regulatory framework. These zones were required to meet specific standards, undergo mid-term evaluations, and pass final inspections—all processes organized and implemented by the central education

Normative constraints, while present, were subordinate to regulative constraints. Policy texts began to include value-laden expressions such as "community education should serve community residents" and "community education should enhance community civility." However, these normative statements were framed as top-down policy requirements rather than as bottom-up value consensus. The normative "should" was derived from, and subordinate to, the regulative "must."

Cultural-cognitive constraints were virtually absent during this period. Policy texts did not provide a coherent or compelling cognitive frame for understanding what community education was or why it mattered. At the grassroots level, community education was commonly understood as an "extension of school education" or a "tool for social governance"—understandings that were derived from existing cognitive schemas rather than from policy discourse. The absence of cultural-cognitive constraints meant that community education lacked a stable and widely shared meaning system, making it vulnerable to marginalization when policy priorities shifted.

Corresponding to the dominance of regulative constraints, discursive practices during this period exhibited the characteristics of "passive acceptance." In terms of discourse production, the subjects were almost exclusively education administrative departments at various levels. Policy texts, official interpretations, and implementation guidelines were all produced within the administrative system. Grassroots practitioners—including community workers, social organization staff, and residents—were not recognized as legitimate producers of policy discourse. When local innovations occurred, they were framed as "pilot experiences" to be reported upward, rather than as independent discursive contributions.

In terms of discourse dissemination, the pathway was strictly top-down along the administrative hierarchy. Policy documents were transmitted from the central government to provincial governments, then to municipal governments, and finally to district and street-level implementers. Official media

played a secondary role in disseminating policy discourse, but their function was to amplify official discourse rather than to provide alternative interpretations. There were no institutionalized channels for bottom-up or horizontal discourse dissemination.

In terms of discourse consumption, grassroots actors primarily "received" and "implemented" policy discourse. The dominant mode of consumption was passive execution: understanding the "spirit" of the policy and carrying out the required tasks. There was little room for interpretation, negotiation, or resistance. When local actors did innovate, they typically framed their innovations as faithful implementation of central policy, thereby seeking legitimacy through discursive alignment rather than discursive contestation. The overall pattern of the establishment period can thus be characterized as one of strong institutional constraints and weak, passive discursive practices.

3.2 Institutional expansion period : strengthening of normative constraints and negotiated practices

In 2016, the "Opinions of the Ministry of Education and Eight Other Departments on Further Promoting the Development of Community Education" was issued—the only national-level document with a similar title that provides overarching guidance for community education. This document introduced several significant institutional innovations: integrating community education into the community governance system, establishing a joint conference mechanism for community education, advancing its digitalization, and encouraging social participation in delivering community education services. These innovations reflect a more diverse and flexible regulatory approach: the state began governing not only through direct directives but also via institutional arrangements that facilitate coordination among multiple stakeholders.

Correspondingly, the regulative mode began to shift from "command–control" to "guidance–incentive." Modal verbs in policy texts changed from predominantly "must" and "should" to "encourage," "support," and "guide." Assessment methods shifted from administrative acceptance inspection to exemplary district selection and quality evaluation—a shift that retained regulative force but softened its mode of deployment.

Cultural-cognitive constraints began to emerge during this period. Policy texts increasingly employed cognitive framings such as "lifelong learning," "learning society," and "learning city." These framings were not merely normative aspirations; they began to shape how policymakers, practitioners, and researchers conceptualized community education. The cognitive frame of "lifelong learning" provided a more compelling and future-oriented meaning system for community education, connecting it to global discourses on lifelong learning and enhancing its policy legitimacy. However, it should be noted that the cultural-cognitive constraints of this period were still largely "top-down" cognitive frames; they had not yet been fully internalized by grassroots actors or translated into changed practices.

The changes in institutional constraints created expanded space for discursive practices, which began to exhibit the characteristics of "negotiated practice." In terms of discourse production, the subjects began to diversify. The establishment of joint conference systems at various levels provided an institutional platform for multiple actors to participate in discourse production. While education authorities still dominated discourse production, the legitimacy of other actors' discursive contributions began to be recognized. Local community education experiments and innovations started to generate their own discourses, which were sometimes picked up and amplified by higher-level policy discourse.

In terms of discourse dissemination, bidirectional interaction began to appear. The selection and recognition of "national community education experimental districts" and "demonstration community learning centers" created channels for grassroots discourse to flow upward. Local innovations were summarized as "experiences" and disseminated through official platforms, academic conferences, and professional journals. Policy discourse was no longer a unidirectional flow from center to periphery; it became a networked flow in which local discourses could influence central policy discourse.

In terms of discourse consumption, the most significant change was the emergence of interpretation and negotiation. Grassroots practitioners began to interpret central policy discourse in light of local conditions, sometimes redefining community education in ways that better fit local needs and resources. For example, in some urban communities, community education was interpreted as a platform for community engagement and social capital building; in some rural areas, it was interpreted as a vehicle for agricultural technology dissemination and rural revitalization. These local interpretations were not merely passive receptions of central policy; they were active negotiations that adapted policy discourse to local realities. In some cases, local negotiations fed back into policy revision at higher levels, creating a discursive feedback loop that began to influence institutional constraints.

3.3 Institutional deepening period: construction of cultural-cognitive constraints and participatory practices

The institutional deepening period, beginning around 2021, represents the most recent and most profound phase of policy evolution. This period is characterized by the explicit construction of cultural-cognitive constraints, the institutionalization of multi-participation, and the digital transformation of both institutions and discourses.

The defining feature of this period is the shift from normative to cultural-cognitive constraints. Recent policy documents repositioned community education as a "foundational link in the national lifelong learning system." This repositioning was not merely a change in policy emphasis; it represented a fundamental reconstruction of the cognitive frame through which community education is understood. Community education was no longer conceived as a standalone policy domain or a community-level service; it was reconceptualized as an integral node in a system that connects early childhood education, school education, vocational education, higher education, active aging education, and lifelong learning. This systemic cognitive frame required corresponding changes in institutional arrangements—changes that were manifested in a series of institutional innovations.

First, cross-domain linkage institutions were established. Policies began to require institutional mechanisms for linking community education with active aging education, vocational education, and digital literacy education. The "learning outcome certification and transfer system" was proposed as a key institutional innovation to enable learners to accumulate and transfer learning outcomes across different educational domains and providers. These cross-domain institutions represent the institutionalization of cultural-cognitive constraints: they require actors to think and act across traditional administrative and sectoral boundaries.

Second, digital empowerment institutions were constructed. The digital transformation of community education was not merely a technical upgrade; it was an institutional reconstruction that reshaped the cognitive and practical landscape of community education. Digital platforms became not only tools for delivering educational content but also institutional infrastructures for policy dissemination, discourse interaction, learning outcome recording, and cross-domain coordination. The policy discourse of "digital empowerment," "smart learning," and "precision services" began to construct a new cognitive frame in which community education is understood as technology-enabled, data-driven, and personalized lifelong learning service.

Third, multi-participation institutions were deepened. Policies explicitly encouraged social forces, market entities, and community organizations to participate in community education provision. The "purchase of services" mechanism was institutionalized as a way to leverage non-governmental resources. The discourse of "co-construction, co-governance, and sharing" became a normative and cognitive framework for understanding the governance of community education. These institutional changes reflected and reinforced the shift toward cultural-cognitive constraints: community education was no longer the sole responsibility of the state; it was a shared endeavor of multiple societal actors.

Corresponding to the deepening of institutional constraints, discursive practices in this period exhibited the characteristics of "participatory practice." In terms of discourse production, the subjects became significantly more diverse and participatory. The construction of cultural-cognitive constraints required the participation of multiple actor groups in discourse production. Cross-departmental policy discourse began to show collaborative features: documents jointly issued by multiple government agencies reflected the integration of previously separate policy discourses. Individual learners also gained new channels for discourse production: the "learning outcome certification" system enabled learners to produce discourse (in the form of learning records and certified outcomes) that could be recognized and validated by institutional systems.

In terms of discourse dissemination, the pathway was transformed by digitalization. Digital platforms became the primary infrastructure for policy discourse dissemination, enabling multi-directional, real-time, and interactive dissemination. Policy discourse, academic discourse, practice discourse, and user discourse coexisted and interacted on the same platform, creating a complex and dynamic discourse ecology. The digital dissemination pathway also enabled new forms of discourse amplification and mobilization.

In terms of discourse consumption, the most profound change was the reconstruction of the consumer's subjectivity. Learners were no longer merely "consumers" of policy discourse; they became "producers" of discourse. Through digital platforms, learners' learning records, evaluations, and

demand expressions constituted new data and discourse that fed back into the policy system. This feedback loop was not merely informational; it was constitutive of new institutional arrangements. The boundary between "discourse consumer" and "discourse producer" thus became increasingly blurred, reflecting a deeper transformation in the power structure of "institution–discourse" interaction.

4. Ecological Reconstruction: Interaction Mechanisms and Future Scenarios

4.1 Evolutionary trajectory of "institution–discourse" interaction

Based on the diachronic analysis, this study distills a three-phase evolutionary trajectory of "institution–discourse" ecological reconstruction, corresponding to the three periods of policy evolution.

Phase I: Constraint-dominated interaction. In this phase, institutional constraints (primarily regulative) are strong and autonomous; they shape the space, form, and content of discursive practices. Discursive practices are passive and reactive; the feedback loop from discourse to institution is weak or blocked. The discourse ecology is characterized by administrative command, low participation, and weak feedback mechanisms.

Phase II: Negotiation-emerging interaction. In this phase, institutional constraints begin to loosen, creating discursive space for negotiation and innovation. Normative constraints strengthen, providing value frameworks that legitimize multi-participation and grassroots innovation. Discursive practices become more active; grassroots actors interpret, adapt, and occasionally contest policy discourse. The feedback loop from discourse to institution begins to function. The discourse ecology shifts toward institutional negotiation, with medium-level participation and initially formed feedback mechanisms.

Phase III: Collaborative reconstruction interaction. In this phase, cultural-cognitive constraints are explicitly constructed, reshaping the cognitive frames of all actors. Discursive practices are empowered by institutional arrangements to actively participate in institutional reconstruction. The feedback loop from discourse to institution is institutionalized. The discourse ecology is characterized by multi-participation, high-level interaction, and institutionalized feedback. Policy evolution is driven by the co-evolution of institutions and discourses.

Beyond these three empirically observed phases, this study proposes a fourth, aspirational phase: symbiotic co-evolution. In this ideal-typical phase, institutional constraints and discursive practices form a fully symbiotic relationship. Institutions provide the legitimate framework, resources, and boundaries for discursive practices; discursive practices provide the innovation, feedback, and legitimacy for institutional adaptation. Achieving this phase requires addressing the structural tensions in the current ecology.

4.2 Structural tensions and future scenarios

The current "institution–discourse" ecology faces four groups of structural tensions. These tensions are not merely problems to be solved; they are the driving forces of ecological reconstruction. Each tension points to a future scenario of ecological reconstruction.

Tension 1: The contradiction between the "systematization" demand of cultural-cognitive constraints and the "fragmentation" reality of discursive practices. The lifelong learning system construction regulations require a cross-domain, integrated cognitive framework. However, discursive practices remain fragmented across different government departments, regions, and population groups. This fragmentation makes it difficult to implement the systematic cognitive frame at the grassroots level. *Future scenario: Cognitive framework integration*—building cross-domain policy experiment zones and digital cognitive platforms to gradually align the cognitive frames of different actors.

Tension 2: The contradiction between the "equity" demand of normative constraints and the "inequality" reality of discursive practices. Normative constraints have established "universal benefit" and "accessibility" as core value standards. However, discursive practices are characterized by significant inequalities in participation. *Future scenario: Discourse empowerment*—empowering the discourse production capacity of vulnerable and underrepresented groups to reconstruct the power structure of discursive practices.

Tension 3: The contradiction between the "standardization" demand of regulative constraints and the "differentiation" reality of discursive practices. Standardized regulative constraints may fail to

accommodate local differentiation. *Future scenario: Differentiated regulation*—shifting from "one-size-fits-all" standardized regulation to "baseline + flexibility" differentiated regulation.

Tension 4: The contradiction between the "technology empowerment" demand of digital regulations and the "digital divide" reality of discursive practices. The digital divide means that technology empowerment may actually exacerbate existing inequalities. *Future scenario: Digital inclusion*—promoting age-friendly design, offline-online integrated dissemination, and digital literacy training to ensure inclusive technology empowerment.

5. Conclusion

This study constructs a dual analytical framework of "institutional constraints–discursive practices" and applies it to a systematic analysis of the evolution of China's community education policies over the past three decades. The research identifies three stages of development: the institutional establishment phase, characterized by regulatory dominance and passive acceptance practices; the institutional expansion phase, marked by intensified normative constraints and negotiated practices; and the institutional deepening phase, defined by the construction of cultural-cognitive constraints and participatory practices. The interaction between institutional constraints and discursive practices follows a dialectical logic of "constraints–negotiation–reconstruction," forming the underlying driving mechanism for the evolution of policy paradigms.

The findings of this study have important implications for policy makers. First, policy makers should recognize that institutional constraints and discursive practices are interactively rather than unidirectionally related. Policy design should therefore create institutional space for discursive negotiation, feedback, and participation. Simply issuing regulative directives is insufficient; policies must also address normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions to achieve deep and sustainable implementation. Second, policy makers should pay serious attention to the four groups of structural tensions identified in this study. These tensions are not peripheral problems; they are central to the future direction of ecological reconstruction. Policy design should proactively address these tensions by embedding mechanisms of cognitive framework integration, discourse empowerment, differentiated regulation, and digital inclusion. Third, policy makers should promote the shift from an "institution-supply-oriented" paradigm to a "discourse-empowerment-oriented" paradigm. Empowering multi-actor discursive practices is not merely a democratic aspiration; it is a functional necessity for the adaptive governance of complex lifelong learning systems.

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