Synergistic antitumor effect of S-1 and the epidermal growth factor receptor inhibitor gefitinib in non-small cell lung cancer cell lines: role of gefitinib-induced down-regulation of thymidylate synthase

Takafumi Okabe,1 Isamu Okamoto,1 Sayaka Tsukioka,3 Junji Uchida,3 Tsutomu Iwasa,1 Takeshi Yoshida,1 Erina Hatashita,1 Yuki Yamada,1 Taroh Satoh,1 Kenji Tamura,4 Masahiro Fukuoka,2 and Kazuhiko Nakagawa1

1Department of Medical Oncology, Kinki University School of Medicine; 2Department of Internal Medicine, Kinki University School of Medicine, Sakai Hospital, Osaka, Japan; 3Tokushima Research Center, Taiho Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd., Tokushima, Japan; and 4Medical Oncology, National Cancer Center Hospital, Tokyo, Japan

Abstract
Somatic mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene are associated with the therapeutic response to EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKI) in patients with advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). The response rate to these drugs remains low, however, in NSCLC patients with wild-type EGFR alleles. Combination therapies with EGFR-TKIs and cytotoxic agents are considered a therapeutic option for patients with NSCLC expressing wild-type EGFR. We investigated the antiproliferative effect of the combination of the oral fluorouracil S-1 and the EGFR-TKI gefitinib in NSCLC cells of differing EGFR status. The combination of 5-fluorouracil and gefitinib showed a synergistic antiproliferative effect in vitro in all NSCLC cell lines tested. Combination chemotherapy with S-1 and gefitinib in vivo also had a synergistic antitumor effect on NSCLC xenografts regardless of the absence or presence of EGFR mutations. Gefitinib inhibited the expression of the transcription factor E2F-1, resulting in the down-regulation of thymidylate synthase at the mRNA and protein levels. These observations suggest that gefitinib-induced down-regulation of thymidylate synthase is responsible, at least in part, for the synergistic antitumor effect of combined treatment with S-1 and gefitinib and provide a basis for clinical evaluation of combination chemotherapy with S-1 and EGFR-TKIs in patients with solid tumors. [Mol Cancer Ther 2008;7(3):599–606]

Introduction
Targeted therapy in the treatment of cancer has made substantial progress over the last few years. The ErbB family of receptor tyrosine kinases includes the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR; ErbB1), ErbB2 (HER2/neu), ErbB3, and ErbB4 and is important for normal development as a result of its roles in cell proliferation and differentiation (1–3). Aberrant expression of EGFR has been detected in a wide range of human epithelial malignancies, including non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), and is correlated with poor prognosis and reduced survival time (4, 5). Agents that specifically target EGFR are therefore under development as anticancer drugs. Indeed, two inhibitors of the tyrosine kinase activity of EGFR (EGFR-TKI), gefitinib and erlotinib, both of which compete with ATP for binding to the catalytic pocket of the receptor, have been extensively studied in individuals with NSCLC (6–9). Somatic mutations in the region of EGFR that encodes the tyrosine kinase domain have been associated with tumor responsiveness to EGFR-TKIs in a subset of NSCLC patients (10–17). In contrast, achievement of a clinical benefit of these drugs in NSCLC patients who express wild-type EGFR has been problematic.

S-1 (Taiho Pharmaceutical) is an oral anticancer agent composed of tegafur, 5-chloro-2,4-dihydroxypyridine (CDHP), and potassium oxonate in a molar ratio of 1:0.4:1 (18). Tegafur is a prodrug that generates 5-fluorouracil (5-FU) in blood largely as a result of its metabolism by cytochrome P450 in the liver. CDHP increases the plasma concentration of 5-FU through competitive inhibition of dihydropyrimidine dehydrogenase (DPD), which catalyzes 5-FU catabolism (19). Oxonate reduces the gastrointestinal toxicity of 5-FU (20). A response rate of 22% and a median survival time of 10.2 months were obtained in a clinical trial of S-1 in patients with advanced NSCLC not subjected previously to chemotherapy (21). Few severe gastrointestinal or hematologic adverse events were reported. Moreover, a phase II trial of S-1 plus cisplatin in NSCLC patients revealed a 47% response rate and an acceptable safety profile (22).

Based on this background, we examined the anticancer effect of the combination of S-1 and gefitinib in NSCLC cell lines of differing EGFR status. We found that the combination of S-1 (or 5-FU) and gefitinib exhibited a marked and synergistic antiproliferative effect both in vitro...
and in vitro in cells regardless of the absence or presence of EGFR mutations. Furthermore, we assessed the effects of gefitinib on the expression of enzymes that function in 5-FU metabolism, including thymidylate synthase (TS), DPD, and orotate phosphoribosyltransferase (OPRT), to gain insight into the mechanism underlying the synergistic effect of combination therapy with S-1 and gefitinib.

Materials and Methods

Cell Lines and Reagents

The human NSCLC cell lines NCI-H460 (H460), Ma-1, Ma-25, Ma-31, Ma-45, and Ma-53 were obtained as described previously (23). MiaPaca-2 cells were obtained from Japan Health Sciences Foundation. These cell lines were cultured under a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO2 at 37°C in RPMI 1640 (Sigma) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum. Gefitinib was provided by AstraZeneca. S-1 and CDHP were provided by Taiho Pharmaceutical. 5-FU was obtained from Wako.

Growth Inhibition Assay

Cells (2.0 × 10^4) were plated in 96-well flat-bottomed plates and cultured for 24 h before the addition of various concentrations of 5-FU and gefitinib and incubation for an additional 72 h. Cell Counting Kit-8 solution (Dojindo) was then added to each well, and the cells were incubated for 3 h at 37°C before measurement of absorbance at 450 nm. Absorbance values were expressed as a percentage of that for untreated cells, and the concentration of 5-FU or gefitinib resulting in 50% growth inhibition (IC50) was calculated. The effect of combining 5-FU and gefitinib was classified as additive, synergistic, or antagonistic with the Bliss additivism model (24–26). A theoretical curve was calculated for combined inhibition with the equation:

\[ E_{\text{bliss}} = E_A + E_B - \left( \frac{E_A}{E_B} \right) \]

where \( E_A \) and \( E_B \) are the fractional inhibitory effects of drug A alone and drug B alone at specific concentrations. \( E_{\text{bliss}} \) is then the fractional inhibition that would be expected if the effect of the combination of the two drugs was exactly additive. In this study, the Bliss variable is expressed as percentage decrease in cell growth above what would be expected for the combination. Bliss = 0 indicates that the effect of the combination is additive; Bliss > 0 is indicative of synergy; and Bliss < 0 indicates antagonism.

Figure 1. Inhibition of NSCLC cell growth by the combination of 5-FU and gefitinib in vitro. Cells with wild-type (H460, Ma-53, Ma-45, Ma-31, and Ma-25) or mutant (Ma-1) EGFR alleles were exposed for 72 h to 5-FU and gefitinib at the indicated concentrations, after which cell viability was measured with a colorimetric assay. The observed excess inhibition (%) relative to that predicted by the Bliss additivism model is shown color-coded in a drug concentration matrix for each cell line. Yellow, orange, pink, and red, synergy; light and dark blue, antagonism. Mean of triplicates from a representative experiment.
received 0.5% (w/v) hydroxypropylmethylcellulose as vehicle. Tumor volume was determined from caliper measurements of tumor length (L) and width (W) according to the formula $LW^2 / 2$. Both tumor size and body weight were measured two or three times per week.

**Immunoblot Analysis**

Cell lysates were fractionated by SDS-PAGE on 12% gels (NuPAGE Bis-Tris Gels; Invitrogen), and the separated proteins were transferred to a nitrocellulose membrane. After blocking of nonspecific sites with 5% skim milk, the membrane was incubated overnight at room temperature with primary antibodies. Antibodies to DPD, OPRT, and TS were obtained from Taiho Pharmaceutical; those to E2F-1 were from Santa Cruz Biotechnology; and those to β-actin (loading control) were from Sigma. Immune complexes were detected by incubation of the membrane for 1 h at room temperature with horseradish peroxidase–conjugated goat antibodies to mouse or rabbit immunoglobulin and by subsequent exposure to enhanced chemiluminescence reagents (Pierce).

**Immunoprecipitation Analysis**

Immunoprecipitation of EGFR was done according to standard procedures. Whole-cell lysates (800 µg protein) were incubated overnight at 4°C with antibodies to EGFR (Santa Cruz Biotechnology), after which Protein G Plus/Protein A-Agarose Suspension (Calbiochem) was added and the mixtures were incubated for an additional 1 h at 4°C. Immunoprecipitates were isolated, washed, resolved by SDS-PAGE on a 7.5% gel (Bio-Rad), and subjected to immunoblot analysis with antibodies to phosphotyrosine (PY20) and EGFR (Zymed).

**Reverse Transcription and Real-time PCR Analysis**

Total RNA (1 µg) extracted from cells with the use of an RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen) was subjected to reverse transcription with the use of a SuperScript Preamplification System (Invitrogen Life Technologies). The resulting cDNA was then subjected to real-time PCR analysis with the use of a TaqMan PCR Reagent Kit and a Gene Amp 5700 Sequence Detection System (Applied Biosystems). The forward and reverse primers and TaqMan probe for TS cDNA were 5-GCCGCGGTGTGCCCCTTCCA-3 and 5-CCCGTGATGTCGGCAAT-3 and 6-FAM-5-TCCGCGCTGCTCA-3'-TAMRA, respectively. Glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase mRNA were used as an internal standard.

**Statistical Analysis**

Data are presented as mean ± SE and were analyzed by the Aspin-Welch $t$ test. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

**Effect of the Combination of 5-FU and Gefitinib on NSCLC Cell Growth In vitro**

Tegafur, which is a component of S-1, is metabolized to 5-FU in the liver and exerts antitumor effects. We first examined the antiproliferative activity of the combination of 5-FU and gefitinib in six NSCLC cell lines. Five of the cell lines (H460, Ma-53, Ma-45, Ma-31, and Ma-25) possess wild-type EGFR alleles, whereas Ma-1 cells harbor an EGFR mutation (E746_A750del) that is associated with a high response rate to the EGFR-TKIs gefitinib and erlotinib in individuals with advanced NSCLC. We assessed
whether 5-FU and gefitinib showed additivity, synergy, or antagonism based on the Bliss additivism model (24–26). We chose this model rather than isobologram or combination index analysis because it would allow us to evaluate the nature of drug interactions even in instances in which the maximal inhibition by 5-FU or gefitinib alone was too low to obtain a reliable IC50 value. The six test concentrations for each agent were chosen after first determining the corresponding IC50 values. The IC50 values for 5-FU chemosensitivity were not associated with EGFR status and ranged from 7 to 11 μmol/L. The effect of combined treatment with 5-FU and gefitinib on the proliferation of the six NSCLC cell lines was tested in triplicate in a 6 × 6 concentration matrix. Calculation of the percentage inhibition in excess of that predicted by the Bliss additivism model revealed synergistic effects of Bliss > 0 for 5-FU and gefitinib in all of the six cell lines tested (Fig. 1). These results suggested that 5-FU and gefitinib act synergistically to inhibit cell growth in NSCLC cells.

Effect of Combined Treatment with S-1 and Gefitinib on NSCLC Cell Growth In vivo

We therefore next investigated whether combined treatment with S-1 and gefitinib might also exert a synergistic effect on NSCLC cell growth in vivo. Doses of both agents were selected so that their independent effects on tumor growth would be moderate. Nude mice were implanted s.c. with H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 tumor fragments to establish tumor xenografts. When the H460 or Ma-53 tumors, which harbor wild-type EGFR, became palpable (100-150 mm3), the mice were divided into four groups for daily treatment with vehicle, S-1 (10 mg/kg), gefitinib (50 mg/kg), or both drugs by oral gavage over 2 weeks. For xenografts formed by H460 or Ma-53 cells, combination therapy with S-1 and gefitinib resulted in a significant reduction in tumor size compared with that apparent in animals treated with S-1 or gefitinib alone (Fig. 2A and B). Mice bearing Ma-1 tumors, which express mutant EGFR, were treated with vehicle, S-1 (10 mg/kg), gefitinib (3 mg/kg), or both agents daily over 2 weeks. Combination treatment with S-1 and gefitinib significantly inhibited the growth of Ma-1 xenografts relative to that apparent in mice treated with either agent alone (Fig. 2C). None of the drug treatments induced a weight loss of >20% during the 2-week period, and no signs of overt drug toxicity were apparent (data not shown). These results thus suggested that combination chemotherapy with S-1 and gefitinib in vivo had a synergistic antitumor effect on NSCLC xenografts regardless of the absence or presence of EGFR mutations, consistent with our results in vitro.

Effects of 5-FU and CDHP on EGFR Phosphorylation in NSCLC Cell Lines

To investigate the mechanism responsible for the observed interaction between S-1 and gefitinib, we examined the effect of 5-FU on EGFR signal transduction in NSCLC cells expressing wild-type (H460 and Ma-53) or mutant (Ma-1) EGFR. Immunoprecipitation analysis revealed that exposure of H460 or Ma-53 cells to 5-FU (10 μmol/L) for 24 h had no effect on the basal level of EGFR phosphorylation (Fig. 3). We have shown previously that EGFR is constitutively phosphorylated in Ma-1 cells maintained in serum-free medium (23). Exposure of Ma-1 cells to 5-FU for 24 h did not affect this constitutive level of EGFR phosphorylation (Fig. 3). We next examined the effects of both CDHP, which is a component of S-1, and the combination of CDHP and 5-FU on EGFR phosphorylation in H460, Ma-53, and Ma-1 cells. Neither CDHP alone nor the combination of CDHP and 5-FU affected the level of EGFR phosphorylation in any of these three cell lines (Fig. 3). These results thus indicated that 5-FU and CDHP have no effect on EGFR signal transduction.
Effects of Gefitinib on the Expression of DPD, OPRT, and TS in NSCLC Cell Lines

We next investigated whether gefitinib might affect the expression of DPD, OPRT, or TS, enzymes that are major determinants of the sensitivity of cells to 5-FU. We first examined the abundance of these enzymes in the NSCLC cell lines H460, Ma-53, and Ma-1 by immunoblot analysis. The expression of DPD was detected in MiaPaca-2 cells (positive control) but not in H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 cells (Fig. 4A). In contrast, OPRT and TS were detected in all three NSCLC cell lines and their abundance did not appear related to EGFR status (Fig. 4A). Treatment of H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 cells with gefitinib (5 μmol/L) for up to 48 h resulted in a time-dependent decrease in the amount of TS, whereas that of OPRT or DPD remained unaffected (Fig. 4B). A reduced level of TS expression in tumors has been associated previously with a higher response rate to 5-FU-based chemotherapy (27, 28). Our data thus suggested that the suppression of TS expression by gefitinib might increase the sensitivity of NSCLC cells to 5-FU.

The transcription factor E2F-1 regulates expression of the TS gene (29–31). We therefore examined the possible effect of gefitinib on E2F-1 expression in NSCLC cell lines. Incubation of H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 cells with gefitinib for up to 48 h also induced a time-dependent decrease in the amount of E2F-1 (Fig. 4B), suggesting that this effect might contribute to the down-regulation of TS expression by gefitinib in these cell lines.

Effect of Gefitinib on TS mRNA Abundance in NSCLC Cell Lines

The abundance of TS mRNA would be expected to be decreased if the down-regulation of E2F-1 expression by gefitinib was responsible for the reduced level of TS. We determined the amount of TS mRNA in H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 cells at various times after exposure to gefitinib with the use of reverse transcription and real-time PCR analysis. Gefitinib indeed induced a time-dependent decrease in the amount of TS mRNA in all three NSCLC cell lines (Fig. 5), suggesting that the down-regulation of TS expression by gefitinib occurs at the transcriptional level and may be due to suppression of E2F-1 expression.

Discussion

The recent identification of activating somatic mutations of EGFR in NSCLC and their relevance to prediction of the therapeutic response to EGFR-TKIs such as gefitinib and erlotinib have had a major effect on NSCLC treatment (10–17). The response rate to these drugs remains low, however, in NSCLC patients with wild-type EGFR alleles. Combination therapy with EGFR-TKIs and cytotoxic agents is a potential alternative strategy for NSCLC expressing wild-type EGFR. In the present study, we have evaluated the potential cooperative antiproliferative effect of combined treatment with the EGFR-TKI gefitinib and the new oral fluorouracil S-1 in NSCLC cell lines of differing EGFR status. We found that S-1 (or 5-FU) and gefitinib exert a synergistic antiproliferative effect on NSCLC cells both in vivo and in vitro regardless of the absence or presence of EGFR mutation. We chose a gefitinib dose of 50 mg/kg for treatment of mice bearing H460 or Ma-53 tumors. The median effective dose of gefitinib was shown previously to be ~50 mg/kg in athymic nude mice bearing A431 cell-derived xenografts (32). A gefitinib dose of 50 mg/kg has therefore subsequently been widely used in tumor xenograft studies (33–36). The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends that drug doses in animals be converted to those in humans based on body surface area (37). According to this guideline, a gefitinib dose of 50 mg/kg in mouse xenograft models is approximately equivalent to the therapeutic dose (250 mg/d) of the drug in humans. In addition, the tumor concentrations of gefitinib in NSCLC xenografts of mice treated with this drug (50 mg/kg) ranged from 9.7 to 13.3 μg/g, values that were similar to the

![Figure 4.](https://mct.aacrjournals.org) Effects of gefitinib on the expression of E2F-1, DPD, OPRT, and TS in NSCLC cell lines. A, lysates of H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 cells were subjected to immunoblot analysis with antibodies to DPD, OPRT, TS, or β-actin (loading control). MiaPaca-2 cells were also examined as a positive control for DPD expression. B, NSCLC cells were incubated with gefitinib (5 μmol/L) for the indicated times in medium containing 10% serum, after which cell lysates were subjected to immunoblot analysis as in A, with the addition that E2F-1 expression was also examined.
achieved concentrations of gefitinib in tumor tissues of treated humans (34). These observations suggest that a gefitinib dose of 50 mg/kg in mouse xenograft models is appropriate for mimicking the therapeutic dose in humans.

EGFR-TKIs have been shown previously to act synergistically with radiation or cytotoxic agents such as cisplatin, paclitaxel, and irinotecan (38–40). These cytotoxic agents and radiation have been shown to increase the phosphorylation level of EGFR, possibly reflecting the activation of prosurvival signaling, and this effect is blocked by EGFR-TKIs, resulting in the synergistic antitumor effects of the combination therapies. Such a synergistic effect of 5-FU and gefitinib was attributed to 5-FU-induced EGFR phosphorylation in colorectal cancer cells (41). In contrast, we found that 5-FU had no effect on the level of EGFR phosphorylation in NSCLC cell lines. Further examination of different concentrations of 5-FU and different exposure times also failed to reveal an effect of 5-FU on EGFR phosphorylation in these cells (data not shown). These findings indicate that NSCLC cell lines respond differently to 5-FU than do colorectal cancer cells and that the synergistic antiproliferative effect of 5-FU and gefitinib in NSCLC cells is not mediated at the level of EGFR phosphorylation.

Our results indicate that the synergistic interaction of 5-FU (or S-1) and gefitinib is attributable, at least in part, to down-regulation of TS expression by gefitinib. The active metabolite of 5-FU, FdUMP, forms a covalent ternary complex with 5,10-methylenetetrahydrofolate and TS, resulting in inhibition of DNA synthesis (42). TS is thus an important therapeutic target of 5-FU. The amount of TS in neoplastic cells has been found to increase after exposure to 5-FU, resulting in the maintenance of free enzyme in excess of that bound to 5-FU (43–47). Such an increase in TS expression and activity has been viewed as a mechanistic driver of 5-FU resistance in cancer cells (48–50). The development of a new therapeutic strategy that reduces TS expression would therefore be of interest. Indeed, preclinical studies have shown that the down-regulation of TS by antisense oligonucleotides or other means enhances the efficacy of 5-FU (51–54). Down-regulation of TS would be expected to enhance the cytotoxicity of 5-FU as a result of the decrease in the amount of its protein target (55).

Consistent with these preclinical data, an inverse relation between TS expression and 5-FU sensitivity has been shown in various human solid tumors (27, 28, 56–60). We have now shown that gefitinib alone induced down-regulation of TS expression, suggesting that this effect of gefitinib contributes to its synergistic interaction with 5-FU (or S-1) in NSCLC cell lines.

We further explored the molecular mechanism by which gefitinib induces down-regulation of TS expression in NSCLC cells. Given that EGFR signal transduction has been shown to be involved in activity of E2F-1 that regulates the expression of several genes including TS (61, 62), which controls the expression of several genes including that for TS, we examined the possible effects of gefitinib on E2F-1 expression and on the abundance of TS mRNA. Gefitinib induced down-regulation of E2F-1 in NSCLC cell lines harboring wild-type EGFR, consistent with previous observations (63), as well as in those expressing mutant EGFR. In addition, gefitinib reduced the amount of TS mRNA in NSCLC cells, consistent with the notion that the suppression of TS expression by gefitinib is attributable to inhibition of gene transcription as a result of down-regulation of E2F-1. For our experiments examining the effects of gefitinib on TS and E2F-1 expression, we used a drug concentration of 5 μmol/L. The concentration of gefitinib in tumor xenografts was shown previously to be 5 to 14 times that in the plasma concentration of the mouse hosts (34). Daily oral administration of gefitinib (250 mg) in patients also gave rise to a drug concentration in tumor tissue that was substantially higher (mean, 42-fold) than that in plasma concentration (34). We showed previously that the maximal concentration of gefitinib in the plasma of patients with advanced solid tumors had a mean value of 0.76 μmol/L at a daily dose of 225 mg (64). Based on these data, we considered that a gefitinib concentration of 5 μmol/L was appropriate for our

Figure 5. Down-regulation of TS mRNA by gefitinib in NSCLC cell lines. H460, Ma-53, or Ma-1 cells were incubated with gefitinib (5 μmol/L) for the indicated times in medium containing 10% serum, after which total RNA was extracted from the cells and subjected to reverse transcription and real-time PCR analysis of TS mRNA. The amount of TS mRNA was normalized by that of glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase mRNA. Mean ± SE of values from three separate experiments.
analyses of TS and E2F-1 expression. Together, our present findings suggest that down-regulation of E2F-1 and consequently that of TS by gefitinib is responsible, at least in part, for the synergistic antitumor effect of combined treatment with S-1 and gefitinib.

Somatic mutations of \( \text{EGFR} \) have been associated with sensitivity to EGFR-TKIs in patients with advanced NSCLC (13–16). However, although most NSCLCs with \( \text{EGFR} \) mutations initially respond to EGFR-TKIs, the vast majority of these tumors ultimately develop resistance to the drug. In the present study, the synergistic effect of combination chemotherapy with S-1 and gefitinib was observed even in \( \text{EGFR} \) mutant cells. Our findings thus suggest that the addition of S-1 (or 5-FU) to EGFR-TKIs might overcome chemoresistance to EGFR-TKIs and that exploration of the effect of such combination therapy in cells resistant to EGFR-TKIs is warranted. \( \text{EGFR} \) mutations appear to be largely limited to lung cancer, with few such mutations having been detected in other types of cancer (65–67). 5-FU is widely used as an anticancer agent and is considered a key drug in chemotherapy for solid tumors such as gastrointestinal and cervical cancer (68–70). Our present results show that gefitinib suppressed the expression of TS in NSCLC cell lines regardless of the absence or presence of \( \text{EGFR} \) mutations, suggesting that the addition of EGFR-TKIs to a 5-FU-containing regimen might increase the effectiveness of such treatment for solid cancers without \( \text{EGFR} \) mutations. Oral combined chemotherapy with drugs, such as S-1 and gefitinib, may also prove to be of low toxicity and therefore maintain quality of life. Our preclinical results provide a basis for future clinical investigations of combination chemotherapy with S-1 and EGFR-TKIs in patients with solid tumors.

References

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Molecular Cancer Therapeutics

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Takafumi Okabe, Isamu Okamoto, Sayaka Tsukioka, et al.


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