

Viewpoints of Intercultural Communication in the Media as Seen through the Researchers' Collaborative Work

Tanaka Kyoko, Education Center for International Students
See Eng Teong, Graduate School of International Development
Chang Chiao-yin, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Iida Rie, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Kariya Mariko, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Kurimura Kiyoko, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Kuroda Yoko, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Matsumoto Tomoko, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Mizutani Ayako, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Takemoto Junichi, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Wang Rui Xue, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures
Yamada Chisato, Graduate School of Languages and Cultures

1. Objective of the Research

We can define “intercultural communication” as exchange of messages between members of different cultures. As such, all types of media involve and offer elements of intercultural communication since media consist of the senders and the receivers in different environments with different backgrounds and, thus, different cultures.

Our research aims to consolidate the viewpoints of intercultural communication by analyzing the current media contents. The research group members with expertise in languages and/or cultures and with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, introduced the current media contents and collected the impression and opinions of the receivers and then analyzed them from the viewpoints of intercultural communication.

In this way the characteristics of intercultural communication, whether obvious or otherwise not so apparent from the text of the media contents, and the possible interpretations given by different media receivers would be made plain.

As such, our research would hopefully contribute some insights to media research and education.

2. Method

Twelve researchers, comprising mainly graduate students aged from their 20s to their 60s of the Graduate School of Languages and Cultures, the Nagoya University, who come from four different locations in Asia, participated in the research from October to December, 2007. We used some of our class time (90 minutes per week over 11 weeks) of the Intercultural Communication course for the discussions of the research.

Each researcher chose some newspaper cuttings, articles, comments, news reports or other materials taken from any media source (e.g. newspapers, magazines, television or radio programs, articles on the Internet and so on that are deemed reliable and authoritative) in the world that were considered academically interesting and relevant from the viewpoint of intercultural communication. Each researcher would cite all or the most relevant part, or describe the contents. If the contents were written or described in any language other than English, translation or a summary in English would be provided. The contents and their translations, if applicable, were given to the other participants acting as the media receivers.

The participants who read the contents would write a report about their impression and opinions as the message receivers. All the participants exchanged their opinions with the researchers in the class and, finally, each researcher would analyze the reports, discussions and previous research results of the relevant topics and summarize them.

This article is the summary of all the analyses made by the researchers.

3. Presented Media

The media presented ranged from a movie originally filmed in Japan and subsequently re-made in the Hollywood to articles published in foreign newspapers and journals.

The following is a list of the titles of the materials presented:¹

- “Shall We Dance?”, a movie originally filmed in Japan in 1996 and re-made in the US in 2004
- “A Cruel Story in Japan”, a journal article written in French and translated into Japanese, *Courrier Japon*, April 2006
- “Momofuku Ando”, an English article published in *TIME*, November 16, 2006, Hong Kong

- “Competition in the Job Market” and “Taiwanese Boss Turns His Company into a *Kabushikigaisha*”, two Taiwanese articles written in the Chinese language and published in *Common Wealth Magazine*, Volume No.381, September 25, 2007, and ET today.com, September 22, 2007 respectively
- “South Korean Hostages Face Cool Welcome Home” and “For Japanese Hostages, Release Only Adds to Stress”, two English articles published in *The Daily Yomiuri*, September 1, 2007 and *The New York Times*, April 22, 2004 respectively
- “Exterminating the Homeless People with Rat Poisons—Causing a Booming in France”, a Japanese article published in the *Asahi Shimbun*, August 24, 2007
- “Dream Weddings of Japanese Couples in Paris”, a French article translated in Japanese, *Courrier Japon*, October 2007
- “Japan Whaling to be Aussie Election Issue”, an English article published in *The Japan Times*, November 10, 2007, and “Pro-whalers’ Stand Hard to Swallow”, published in *The Australian*, November 6, 2007
- “Get on the Bus: An Asian Neighbor’s View of Japan”, an English article published in *The Japan Times*, October 21, 2007
- “Japan Needs Global Leaders: Headhunter”, published in *The Japan Times*, September 19, 2007, and “Breaking the Glass Ceiling”, *The Washingtonpost.com*, May 8, 2003, and “Foreign Execs Coached through Local Game”, *The Japan Times*, September 10, 2003

4. Intercultural Communication Viewpoints in the Media

The impression and opinions of the participants go to demonstrate that if there are media receivers with different cultural backgrounds, there are a variety of interpretations for the same media contents. The experiment was carried out to look at the whole range of perspectives of interpretations and categorize the main viewpoints of intercultural communication. To cover the vast areas of communications, our analysis will be presented here in accordance with the way Shaun Moores (2005) analyzed the media and communications, namely, time and space, relationships and meanings.

4.1 Time and Space

4.1.1 Time: Past, Present and Future

The article in the TIME magazine on Momofuku Ando, the inventor of instant noodles, commended him for his great achievement but at the same time ironically de-

scribes the Japanese people's hardworking lifestyle by which even the time for meals is sacrificed. In this context, focus may be turned to people's preference or orientation towards the present and the future. Hofstede (2002) states that some cultures are more long term-oriented while others may be considered more short term-oriented. In a relatively long term-oriented culture, like the one in Japan supposedly, hard work and persistence are encouraged for the benefit of the future. This characteristic is not contradictory to, but indeed in line with, fast food—the instant noodles. What the people of the short term-oriented culture feel strange about turns out to be making sense in another culture which focuses more on the future.

This does not mean, however, that people with relatively long term-oriented culture take risks for the future. Their persistence and steady efforts are part of their day-to-day life which Moores (2005) describes as “routines”. Routines give “constancy of the surroundings, everyday social world.” (Moores, 2005:10) Importance should be placed in the future but with predictability, without unexpected elements. This is what Hofstede and other researchers call “uncertainty avoidance”—another cultural trait.

Uncertainty avoidance can be clearly observed in the articles about the Japanese and South Korean hostages. The hostages, after their release, had to apologize to the people of their home countries for having caused troubles. According to Storti (1998:140), Japan is placed at the end of “the most skeptical country” towards uncertainty in the continuum chart, for which “there is a good reason for the way we have always done things.” Concerning the same hostage incidents, the general public's negative reaction towards the hostages was criticized by people of a different culture. The then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, for example, commented that “if nobody was willing to take a risk, then we would never move forward.”

All the above was concerned with the time orientation towards the present and the future. Now our focus will move to the opposite pole of the time continuum in one's life: the past.

People have memories of the past, through direct or indirect experiences. Referring to the articles on the Japanese and South Korean hostages, despite the modernization and industrialization in both countries, the people seem to remain gripped by Confucianism, by which it means they are supposed to know their “place” in the society and should play their “role” accordingly. In the article “Get on the Bus: An Asian Neighbor's View of Japan,” the conversation of the Chinese

tourists, on the other hand, shows that their image of Japan was deeply influenced by the past. They travelled to Japan to know the real Japan. Their wish to overcome the distressing memories of the war and instilled image of Japan is manifested in a young Chinese woman's words in the article: "All Chinese have heard about Japan for a long time—in relation to the war. Or that the Japanese are cruel, or that they're proud, or that their country is really developed. The Chinese want to see it for themselves." In contrast, in the article entitled "Taiwanese Boss Turns His Company into a Kabushikigaisha" it is described how the general manager of a famous supermarket brought the Japanese style of business management back to Taiwan, having studied and worked in Japan. His experiences, acquired when he was young, had given him strong guidance that continued to influence him in his career. His manner in keeping his own past experiences, as reflected on the present, is another way to face the past and the present.

While the past creates traditions, it is the traditions that bridge the past and the present. In the article on whaling, the Japanese Government stressed that "whaling is a traditional and cultural right," but the Australian media asserted that "traditional whaling seems to reside in that realm of mythical reality that characterizes so much of what's called tradition in Japan." When a tradition is questioned, there may be no definite answer for, as Moores (2005:15) states, traditions are needed, and the necessity for traditions in modern cultures had even led to their "invention." It is difficult to give up the traditions, once formed and perceived, and to adapt to changes brought about by international pressures.

Time, as a whole, makes people get used to differences and overcome possible discomfort caused by them. Regarding the article entitled "Exterminating' Homeless People with Rat Poison," our analysis shows that the French people have over time become more used to living in a multicultural society and they were quite tolerant to diversity. This tolerance was observed towards the minorities and people with diverse lifestyles, including the homeless people. In France, many activities to support the homeless people are carried out. As the article mentions, the mayor's decision to use rat poisons in order to drive the homeless people away from the city was severely criticized. Our observation moved to Taiwan too, where many foreign companies experiment setting up businesses in China. Through different business styles depicted in some of the articles, it was observed that the Taiwanese people gradually became used to working in intercultural settings in comparison to those people who have newly entered a similar kind of multicultural envi-

ronment.

The emphasis on different time phases is also reflected in the policy of the Eva Air, a Taiwan-based airlines company. It is said that the company policy is to hire people as young and as fresh as possible so that the company may “mould” them to meet the present and future challenges. The company would rather not have people with work experience from other companies, despite the possible benefits that may be brought about by such experiences.

The media offer the viewpoints that there are cultures in which the people see the future through predictable day-to-day efforts, and cultures in which the people focus more on the present while taking their chances in meeting new circumstances in the future. Further, the long history and the people’s own experiences in the past bear influence on the way one thinks and behaves. Time can make people get used to differences or gripped in a certain frame of mind and behavior.

4.1.2 Space: Extensionality, Direction and Division

In the article “Get on the Bus: An Asian Neighbor’s View of Japan,” a Chinese tourist said, “Japan is a small country. We Chinese are coming to save the Japanese economy.” A question then arises as to whether the geographical size of the place to which some people feel affiliated and its history which these people perceive as their background can give them a sense of significance or, to the opposite, triviality. Begley (2006:145) states in relation to the Egyptians that a long history of civilization leads them to place high value on traditions. Therefore, they pay high regards to people who can recite details about their family tree way back to the past four or five hundred years. Physical appearances, on the other hand, like the height and weight of a person, are considered important codes of nonverbal communication. (Andersen, 2006:252) The extensionality, whether historical or physical, can and does influence people’s values.

Direction is another important factor of communication. Storti (1999:91) states, “[t]he dimension of communication on which cultures differ the most and the one affecting more aspects of the communication dynamic is the matter of directness.” The two poles of this dimension are the direct communication style and indirect one, though there are other communication styles of different directional effects, like circular and linear. (Paige, 2002:125) In the movie “Shall We Dance?” these two poles were clearly observed. In the Japanese original version, the leading actor and his wife sat down back-to-back, after his secret of commuting to the dance school

was revealed. They did not look at each other and it was only upon being urged by their daughter did they face each other and talk. In the American re-made version, the leading actor ran after his wife and tried to talk to her face-to-face. His wife, however, became furious and berated him vehemently.

Direct communication is used most often amongst people who lead a more independent life and have fewer shared experiences. Such people need to spell things out and be more explicit –to say exactly what they mean rather than suggest or imply. With the indirect communication style, people are expected to “guess” what is not said from the situations or context. The Japanese culture is often categorized as one of the high context cultures (Storti, 1999:99), where the ratio of unstated cultural assumptions, supposedly shared by the members of the cultural group, is higher than the other kind of culture—the low context culture.

Direct and indirect communication aside, when it comes to intercultural conflicts in a multicultural setting, the possibility of such conflicts may turn out to depend on the very kind of setting. It was observed that in the case of business settings, there is less likelihood of such conflicts as businesspeople tend to share common goals in accomplishing some business projects while the opposite tends to be the case in a casual setting.

Among the questions within the notion of space, division and distance are other important elements. Power distance, economic distance, gender, differentiation between public and private life and so on, are factors that should not be overlooked.

In the article “A Cruel Story in Japan” the author is an English language instructor from England. He was proud of his position as a native English teacher and did not want his fellow countrymen to come to Japan to give private lessons for a small fee, even at a time when the English language schools no longer paid good salaries as before. He identified himself as a foreigner and native English teacher, totally different from the Japanese. In the circumstances in which native English speakers were nearly “worshipped” in Japan, as the article points out, the author held a clear division of status, according to his perceived hierarchy.

In the articles about South Korean and Japanese hostages, elements of power distance can be observed. Individuals went to Iraq in spite of the warning of the government which is considered higher in status. Members of high power distance cultures are expected to perform their ascribed duties responsibly more than members of low power distance cultures (Gudykunst, 2005:10), thus, this apparent

challenge to the government must have brought criticisms.

In the articles on whaling, one of Japan's contentions was cultural imperialism of the West. The position of the anti-whaling countries was, in part, interpreted by the Japanese Government as arrogance or, in some occasions, the product of racial discrimination. Power distance was perceived to play an important role in the conflict. In the movie "Shall We Dance?" the division between the public life and the private life was remarkably different. In the Japanese original version, the leading actor did not take his wife to the dance party, nor did he introduce his dance teacher and friends to her. His ballroom dance world and the conjugal life did not meet at any moment. In the American re-made version, in contrast, the leading actor took his wife to his dance teacher's farewell party and danced with her delightfully. In some cultures, the division between the public and private lives is sharp, while in others it is not.

Stereotype also creates divisions among people and their surroundings. Stereotypes are "simplifications that prevent people from seeing individuals as they truly are." (Berger, 1999) They are "hard to change as they often serve as self-fulfilling prophecies: Adu-Gyan *et al*, 2000; Bennett, 1998; Brown, 1995. (Lillhannus, 2002:3-4) Stereotype forms the people's view of the world and once the stereotype is formed there is a clear division between one and the other. The article "A Cruel Story in Japan" describes the Japanese people's strong tendency to believe that native English speakers are the only people who teach correct English. Due to such stereotype, not only the so-called non-native English speakers but also the Japanese people themselves have to suffer. The latter are caught in a perpetual trap of "learning the correct English," to little avail. The article "Foreign Execs Coached through Local Game" implies some stereotypes of both Japanese and American business people. Loyalty to the company, collective responsibility and gender discrimination are some of these stereotypes which can serve to impede the newly arrived business people's integration into the local culture.

Stereotype, however, is not necessarily the product of the society as a whole. Rather, it is the individual who is the first, key person in interpreting a culture before the society does.

4.2 Relationships and Meanings

4.2.1 Interaction

In the movie "Shall We Dance?" very different types of people's interaction were

observed. The leading actor's wife in the Japanese original version, for example, emphasized more on her role as a wife than her feelings as a human being. Instead of asking her husband about his strange behaviors, she always accomplished her role as a housewife, and when his secret was revealed she did not blame him but, instead, apologize to him for her suspicion. In contrast, in the American re-made version, the wife berated her husband's secret for which he, after apologizing to her, tried to convey how much he loved her by a surprising move. Strong, role-oriented behaviors with vague and complicated ways of emotional interactions are contrasted with the straightforward emotional outburst over the fixed, given roles. The former tendency can be seen in the articles about the Japanese and Korean hostages. Words of apology and appreciation, whether of the real feelings or not, are keys to repairing the once deteriorated relationships with the public. In this sense, the public's criticisms were made partly due to the reckless behaviors of the hostages, which were deemed contrary to their given roles as the citizens.

Reverting to the article on the homeless people in France, our observation goes to the interaction between the general public and the homeless people. In France and in many other countries we have stayed or visited, the homeless people talk to the people around them, asking for help, while in Japan, the homeless people seldom interact. The latter usually look for necessities themselves silently and they seem to live their life separated from the society. If they want to convey some messages to the public, they place some writings in front of them which say something like "I am homeless. Please help me with some money," without saying a word. Communication between the homeless people and the general public aside, verbal communication among strangers also seems virtually nil in Japan.

People's interaction with their group of affiliation can be analyzed from the articles on the hostages. In these incidents, the Japanese and Korean people seemed to place more importance on the individuals' duty towards the group. The individuals fulfill their duty to the group first and then the group, in this case the government, assumes the reciprocal responsibility. The criticisms of the governments' attitudes in the incidents show that for other people an individual decision should come first and the group is supposed to be responsible to serve the individual.

Hierarchy influences people's interaction. In contrast to the pre-determined stable hierarchy in some cultures, it was observed in the article "A Cruel Story in Japan", that hierarchy actually exist in multiple ways, even among the English teachers in this case. The native English speakers who speak Japanese and other

languages are in the top of the hierarchy, followed by native English speakers with knowledge of the Japanese language, and at the bottom native English speakers who speak nothing else but English only. This hierarchy itself forms part of another broader hierarchy that is made up of white Westerners, non-white Westerners, Asian English speakers, Japanese and others. This kind of hierarchy is a result of the people's admiration for a certain culture, stereotypes or economic/power distance. The English teachers interacted among themselves and with people of other status in an attempt to balance their own status in the broad map of hierarchy.

The relationship between people and the nature is another element worth examining in the context of people's interaction. Reverting to the whaling issue, from the articles alluded to it was observed that Japan has a long history of whaling. Japanese people ate whale meat in the past and consumed every part of it without any waste in their daily life. Whaling was perceived as a way of living their life in harmony with the nature. In the anti-whaling people's point of view, eating whale meat sounds barbaric and cruel. Whales are considered a symbol of the nature to be saved and protected by the anti-whalers. The notion "How can you save the Earth if you cannot save the whales" received a huge welcome from many Western countries. (Morishita, 2006) Though in this whaling issue, there are many other factors to be considered, like environmental, diplomatic and commercial ones, at least as Condon (1980:139) points out, there are different beliefs in the relation between people and the nature. In some cultures, the people perceive themselves as a part of the nature. If some creatures in the nature are culled, it is done as part of the whole circulation of the nature provided all the resources drawn from such creatures are given their full usage without any waste, like in the case of whaling as it is perceived in Japan. In other cultures, the people feel that the nature is subject to their life, to be controlled, protected or saved, as seen in the opinions of the anti-whalers.

A person's relation with his religion is a question that stems naturally from his relations with the nature. In some cultures, religions govern the people's life and in some others, Gods exist in every creature, while in others, people are worshipped as Gods. (Condon, 1980:140) In the article "Dream Weddings of Japanese Couples in Paris" it is stated that many non-Christians young Japanese celebrate their weddings at churches in Paris. Among the members of the churches some critics have emerged to query why non-Christians come to Paris just to receive "blessings," and they complained that their churches might be transformed into "theme

parks” for Japanese tourists. In the said phenomenon, apart from such factors as commercialism and economic distance, we can observe the vast difference in the concept of religion. Religion is an important base of people’s life in some cultures, while in others it could be perceived rather as a superficial part of the people’s life, romance or fashion.

4.2.2 Identity

When talking about people’s identity, collectivism and/or individualism of the culture to which the people are affiliated was often raised. “Collectivism refers to the broad value tendencies of a culture to emphasize the importance of the ‘we’ identity over the ‘I’ identity, group obligations over individual’s rights, and in group-oriented needs over individual wants and desires.” (Ting-Toomy, 2006:367) Thus, “a person should be loyal to these groups, so that the groups will return the loyalty in times of need.” (Hofstede *et al*, 2006:35) On the other hand, “individualism refers to the broad value tendencies of a culture to emphasize the importance of individual rights over group rights.” (Ting-Toomy, 2006:367) People identify themselves as themselves or with the groups to which they are affiliated strongly. In the article “A Japanese Hero Momofuku Ando” the New York Times announced the death of Ando first, admiring him as an individual who invented the instant noodles by himself, while the Japanese media did not take Ando’s death as important news. The writer for the New York Times ironically analyzed the Japanese collectivism, which works to veil an individual’s character. Hofstede’s report on the intercultural research shows that Japan has the highest place in collectivism among selected 40 countries. (Pribyl, 2000) Although it is dangerous to define Japan as such, we can query whether Momofuku Ando could have devoted his time and efforts to his research and development had he worked in a Japanese company.

In relation to the articles published in Taiwan about Japanese working culture, discussions were made about a successful example of adapting Japanese business models in Taiwan. The owner of one of the main international airlines in Taiwan gathered his employees and made them feel they could count on each other. He asked them to quit eating meat for half a year while he himself quit it for good, since in Taiwan vegetarianism is deemed doing a good deed to the other creatures. They sacrificed their individual desires for the group’s sake and a collective sentiment was instilled. He always tried to educate his employees to make them feel that the company’s crisis is also the employees’ and made a big success. This attitude is

sometimes interpreted as paternalism in the strata of hierarchy that is observed more commonly in the collectivistic culture.

In the movie “Shall We Dance?” the difference between collectivism and individualism was also observed. In the Japanese version, the leading actor’s life was tough and he was a tired lackluster salaried man. He did not want his passion for dancing to be revealed for the fear of prejudice against a middle-aged man’s embarrassing desires. So long as he remained an employee of the company with a certain status and a stable social and family life, he should not have individual desires. In the American re-made version, the leading actor had a good job and happy private life but wanted to keep his passions for dancing secret because of the sense of guilt that he wanted more in spite of his seemingly satisfied life as an individual.

4.2.3 Meanings: Values and Significance

The virtue of collectivism is also compared with that of harmony. Storti (1999:138, 141) introduces the concept of “key to productivity” by which he shows what kinds of behaviors and relationships between the workers and their bosses are rewarded in the workplace. According to his survey, Japanese business culture places great importance on the harmony of the people, while in other cultures, the productivity, results and outputs are evaluated. This cultural trait may be called “process-oriented” in contrast to “outcome-oriented” as seen in the article entitled “Taiwanese Boss Turns His Company into a *Kabushikigaisha*.”

In the article “A Japanese Hero Momofuku Ando” his efforts were highly evaluated in the American context: the fact that he had invented some convenient food might notably be announced in an outcome-oriented culture. In other cultures like in Japan, documentary programs usually focus people’s attention on the suffering and difficulty the personality went through, something that attracts the audience. Even if a result turns out to be undesirable, they may not be criticized so long as they gave their best efforts and did what they could in the circumstances.

Process-oriented culture, though focusing on the process rather than the outcome, can be “achievement-oriented” too. In the latter culture, a process is considered important when it is made towards an achievement, with self-discipline and without complaints. The efforts of Momofuku Ando were later evaluated in Japan too because he suffered many failures but did not give up. He continued his efforts

during the process all the way till the invention. Contrary to the culture, which may be called care-oriented, quality of life is often sacrificed for the achievement. Though Scheneider (1997:43) categorizes these different orientations as “task-oriented *versus* relationship” and “achievement *versus* social welfare,” we would term them as “outcome-oriented *versus* process-oriented” and “achievement-oriented *versus* care-oriented.” The process of efforts, with day-to-day predictability, is then continued for the benefit of the future. This process forms an important part of the long-term orientation that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

In the article “Breaking the Glass Ceiling” it is described how working styles made a difference when it comes to job promotion. In the company referred to in the article, steady and sincere efforts in respecting and following the superiors did not seem to be as highly evaluated as in other companies with a different culture.

5. Conclusions

Media offer various viewpoints of intercultural communication. Through the analysis of different media contents published in different cultural contexts, some of the viewpoints were made plain. When inter-correlating them according to time, space, relationships and meanings—the factors that constitute media and communication—the following are the observations and insights that we have gained.

Concerning time, in some cultures one of the time lines (e.g. the past, the present or the future) is more important than the others, and the way one links to the others varies from culture to culture. Regarding space, different directions and directness of people’s communication styles and the extensionality of their background, as well as divisions and separations, were suggested in terms of intercultural communication.

Relationships vary on a large scale depending on the culture. Interactions among people are sometimes more role-oriented and at other times emotion-oriented. In some cultures verbal communications are emphasized in contrast to the lack of them in other cultures. Individuals’ duty towards the group is considered vital in contrast to the group’s responsibility towards the individuals. Some cultures have more fixed hierarchy and status, while in others the people try to maintain a delicate balance among multiple hierarchies. Values and meanings avowed to the attitudes towards life are also quite different depending on the culture: some people emphasize the outcome rather than the process while others attribute more virtue

to the process of making an effort towards achievement, even with sufferings, than caring for the quality of life.

6. Remarks

Though diverse media contents with texts in several languages (English, French, Japanese and Chinese) were covered this time, the majority was from the English and Japanese media. If the diverse researchers' backgrounds and capacity had been made to their fullest extent, more contexts and languages might have been covered. This experiment is worth another try for another significant and interesting research in future. As Gudykunst (2005:25-26) points out, as one of the issues to be addressed in future theorization of intercultural communication, there is a strong need for research and theorizing in indigenous languages, other than English.

In an intercultural community like the one we are lucky to have here in the Nagoya University, the possibilities are there to create opportunities for developing research in diverse languages, in the context of cultural varieties. There is no better alternative than taking advantage of this environment for researchers' further collaboration.

Note

¹ For the original or translated texts, please contact the authors.

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