The Art of War or The Wedding Banquet?
Asian Canadians, Masculinity,
and Antiracism Education

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Ongoing debates about Chinese masculinity could broaden antiracism educa-
tion, whose hegemonic Black/White paradigm of race relations and "model mi-
nority" stereotyping of Asians currently often exclude Asian North Americans.
Juxtaposing Ang Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* with the viewpoints of Asian
American feminists such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Asian American male
revisionists such as Frank Chin also points to problematic essentialist ideas of race
and masculinity and zero-sum notions of power. Antiracism education should
increasingly employ Foucauldian notions of power, ruptures within "commun-
ities," and the fluid character of identity.

Les débats actuels au sujet de la masculinité chez les Chinois pourrait élargir les
horizons de l'éducation en matière d'antiracisme dans la mesure où le paradigme
hégémonique Blancs/Noirs des relations entre les races et l'application du stéréo-
type de « minorité modèle » aux Asiatiques excluent souvent à l'heure actuelle les
Nord-Américains d'origine asiatique. La juxtaposition du film *The Wedding Banquet*
d'Ang Lee aux points de vue des féministes américaines asiatiques comme Maxine
Hong Kingston et de révisionnistes américains asiatiques de sexe masculin comme
Frank Chin souligne en outre l'existence d'idées essentialistes problématiques
de race et de masculinité et de notions de pouvoir engendrant une situation de
gagnant-perdant. L'éducation antiraciste devrait faire appel aux notions fou-
cauldiennes de pouvoir, aux ruptures au sein de « communautés » et au caractère
fluide de l'identité.

Although Asian Canadians comprise one of the earliest and fastest-
growing immigrant groups in Canada, there is a dearth of research on their
education. Most glaring is the absence of critical discussion of race and
racism in relation to their schooling. Chang (1998) recounts a New York
Hmong teen's lament that Khallid Muhammed's Million Youth March was
aimed at unifying African Americans with only Latinos, Arabs, and Native
Americans. "Why are Asian Americans excluded?" he asked. Antiracism
education in Canada has also largely overlooked Asian Canadians.
  Antiracism education is defined as a proactive approach to education
that critiques the material and social impacts of racism and aims to trans-
form structural inequities. It posits that students' educational experiences

are mediated by and situated within social relations of unequal power. In antiracism discourses, race is seen as salient in reproducing inequitable outcomes for many racial minority students. The absence of Asian Canadians from debates about antiracism education is inextricably linked to the context within which antiracism education emerged and the prevalent view of Asians as "model minorities."[1]

Antiracism education in Canada emerged in the 1980s, largely in response to the failure of multicultural education — which celebrates *cultural* differences — to respond to the needs of Black students. Continued low academic achievement and high dropout rates among Black students led Black parents, academics, and community organizations to argue that multicultural education fails to deal with systemic and structural racism endemic to the school system (Bramble, 2000; Dei, 1996; James & Schecter, 2000). Recognition that other groups also face racism in schools led to a broadening of antiracism. However, the focus on racism's negative effects on students' educational experience and the dominant view that Asian students do extremely well at school position Asian Canadians outside, or on the margins of, debates about antiracism education.

Antiracism education in Canada is dominated by a Black/White paradigm of race relations that situates historical and contemporary narratives of racial minorities in the shadows of the Black/White encounter (S. Lee, 1996; Omi & Takagi, 1996). Although antiracism education in Canada has broadened to consider a range of minority groups, the Black/White paradigm ignores the attempted genocide of First Nations people and the central role of Chinese labour in the formation of the Canadian nation state.

Antiracism education has been criticized for tending to reify essentialist notions of "Black." Although antiracism criticizes multicultural education for celebrating differences while perpetuating racist practices, it tends to see ethnic and racial categories as absolute (Yon, 1999a). For example, invoking "the Black community" suggests a homogenous undifferentiated population without ruptures, distinctions, contradictions, or tensions (Bramble, 2000; Gilroy, 1992; James, 1999; Yon, 1999d, 2000). Such innocent fantasies oversimplify the dynamics of race and racism and their interrelations with other forms of oppression (such as sexism, classism, and heterosexism) and ultimately limit curriculum theorizing in multicultural and antiracist pedagogies (Yon, 1999b).

The task for antiracism education, Britzman (1997) suggests, is to render itself "inconsolable by engaging with what it excludes, namely the complex and contradictory debates within communities over how communities are imagined and are made subject to their own persistent questions" (p. 36). The debate among Asian American feminists and revisionists about Asian masculinities is helpful for critically engaging with difference within

communities, a project that antiracism education needs to take up. The debate centres around representations of Asian masculinity. Revisionists such as Frank Chin desire images of Asian men as warriors, whereas feminists like King-Kok Cheung and Maxine Hong Kingston criticize such desires as patriarchal and essentialist.

What is at stake in antiracism education might be expanded by making problematic Asian masculinity. Doing so on the one hand challenges an oversimplified, zero-sum notion of power common in antiracism education and on the other hand invokes Foucauldian notions of power. Power understood as zero-sum exists in a quantifiable and limited amount in society, and individuals and groups can compete for it. In a Foucauldian analysis, power is inseparable from the power/knowledge of discourse; it is more diffuse, chaotic, contradictory, and multidirectional (Yon, 1999a). The antiessentialist postmodern Chinese subjectivities in Ang Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* (1994) can serve to unsettle Chin's revisionist zero-sum understanding of power. To build on the Hmong teen's question, why and how might Asian masculinity figure productively in the project of antiracist pedagogy?

ALL-OR-NOTHING DECLARATIONS OF WAR: EMASCULATING ASIAN MEN

Questions about the relevance of Asian American dynamics in the Canadian context must precede asking why and how images of Asian masculinity might contribute to antiracist pedagogy. The Black/White paradigm of race relations and the Asian "model minority" discourse common in the United States prevail in Canada; these nations are strikingly similar in their historical and contemporary relationships to Asians. Both enacted exclusionary laws and head taxes that prevented Chinese immigration, disenfranchised Asians until the late 1940s, and during the Second World War, interned Japanese residents, many of whom were born in North America. Both recruited cheap male Chinese labour from Guangdong province during the late 1800s and early 1900s for railway construction and other burgeoning industries and for the service sector, in restaurant, laundry, and domestic work (Li, 1988). Both nations also vilified, feminized, and pathologized Asian masculinity in popular and legal discourses and so disciplined, regulated, and punished Asian North Americans (Pon, 1996). More recently, both have promoted the view of Asians as "model minorities" and changed their immigration policies to lure immigrants with investment capital from countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore (Mitchell, 1997; Ong, 1999). So in both countries these dynamics have contributed and continue to contribute to our understanding.

Liberal democratic nation-states such as the United States and Canada

also share a forgetting of the history of racism and western imperial projects central to their formation and ascendancy (Lowe, 1996). The making of the Canadian nation-state is inseparable from gender, race, and class relations that through racism and sexism exploited and subordinated non-Whites in Canada (Ng, 1993). Among the earliest groups subjected to the exploits of capital over labour were the Toisanese- and Hoipingnese-speaking Chinese male railway workers recruited from Guangdong Province in China. They proved indispensable to building the Canadian and U.S. economic infrastructures, yet faced harsh institutional and popular racism that, for example, barred them from bringing their wives and families to join them in North America and gave rise to the Chinese "married bachelor" societies of the early 1900s (Ng, 1993; Okihiro, 1994).

Portrayed as the "Yellow Peril," "heathens," and "unassimilable celestials," bachelor "Chinamen," according to these popular discourses, had an essence that made them vile, womanly, cowardly, and cunning (Pon, 1996). This essence was immutable, inheritable, and "raced" as "yellow," "Asiatic," or "Mongoloid" — ultimately all reasons to marginalize and discipline the Chinese in Canada and the United States by the force of the law and the popular media. Relegated to "Chinatowns," married bachelors were objects of both fear and repulsion for White society. Discourses of fear abounded, portraying Chinese men as perpetually lusting for White women and luring them with offers of opium into the backs of Chinese laundries and restaurants to rape them (Pon, 1996).

Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong (1974) argue that popular Western culture has historically portrayed the Asian male as "contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage and creativity" (p. xxx). It has been argued that this emasculation was rooted in the larger society's fear of miscegenation between White women and Chinese men. Popular cultural images, such as Fu Man Chu and Charlie Chan, portrayed Chinese men as emasculated, effeminate, and fiendish and thus helped allay fears that White women would be attracted to Asian men (Okihiro, 1994; Pon, 1996).

Out of this historical emasculation of Asian males has emerged one of the most notable ruptures in Asian North America, one that focuses on Chinese masculinity and femininity. It is seen in Chin's (1991) renowned critique of Maxine Hong Kingston. His scathing attack on her best-selling book *The Woman Warrior* (1976) accuses her of pandering to White society's racism and perpetuating the emasculation of Chinese men.

Kingston's autobiographical novel charts the epistemological evolution of a Chinese girl born in Stockton, California and raised by Toisanese-speaking, working-class immigrant parents. Weaving Chinese myths and legends with autobiographical reminiscences, she shows the young girl's

struggle to bring to voice not only herself but a community of Chinese American women (Cheung, 1993). Growing up Chinese American, the young protagonist is caught between an immigrant Toisanese culture of patriarchy and misogyny and the racism and sexism of the larger society.

According to Chin (1991), Kingston succeeded by employing common racist stereotypes of Chinese culture as utterly misogynist and Chinese men as effeminate. He contends that her book appeases the White desire to affirm that the United States saves victimized Chinese women from the hideous patriarchal Chinese civilization. He also takes issue with her reworking of traditional Chinese myths and legends, calling her renditions "fake," not "real." For example, he opposes her reworking of the legend of Fa Mu Lan, the cross-dressing Chinese woman warrior who disguised herself as a man to join the military and avenge her father's death.

Chin and his co-editors (Chin, Chan, Inada, & Wong, 1974) committed themselves to rejuvenating "real" Asian classics of the heroic (male) tradition and restoring the lost manhood of Asian men. Their sequel (Chan, Chin, Inada, & Wong, 1991) celebrates traditional Chinese and Japanese heroic classics such as *The Art of War, Romance of the Three Kingdoms,* and *Journey to the West,* works that invoke a fabled history of the martial expertise of Chinese male warriors and outlaws. According to Wei (1993), Chin aimed not only at countering the emasculation of Asian men and the "defilement" of Chinese classics but also at its "chief culprit," Kingston:

Dedicated to restoring the lost manhood of Asian American men, Chin is adamantly opposed to anyone who aids and abets their cultural castration. For him, the chief culprit in this process has been Kingston. He accuses her of being an "assimilationist who caters to all the stereotypes," calling her writing "border town whore talk" and those who enjoy her work . . . "ignorant or racist or both." (p. 69)

The effort of Chin and his co-editors to use the heroic tradition to restore the lost manhood of Asian men can be understood as an attempt to exercise agency by replacing negative images of silence by supposedly positive ones depicting outspokenness. Members of racial minority groups in Canada and the United States who have grown up to recognize the power of verbal assertion often repudiate silence in order to claim agency (Cheung, 1993). However, like an all-or-nothing declaration of war against racist Chinese stereotypes, these repudiations of silence fall into the trap of merely reaffirming the prevalent western, patriarchal, binary perspective, this time on speech and silence (Cheung, 1993). In the West, speech is often championed and equated with assertiveness, masculinity, heterosexuality, agency, and intelligence. In contrast, silence is pathologized and associated with negatives: passivity, absence, femininity, and lower levels of

competence (Cheung, 1993; Kumashiro, 1999). Embracing the heroic martial tradition can therefore be regarded as empowering and positive only by patriarchal and Eurocentric monolithic norms of masculinity. (It also pays little attention to the inequalities, hatreds, and casualties implied by martial supremacy.)

Antiracism activists often use a strategy of empowerment that implies a suppression of difference and contradictory subject positions within social groups (Yon, 1999a), as we see in Chin's substitution of positive for negative images and his desire that Kingston not articulate Chinese men's misogyny. By associating such articulation with racism, Chin implies that innocence and positive images of Asian Americans are the solution to racial oppression. Accordingly, new caricatures, like Chin's images of Chinese male warriors, replace old ones (Yon, 1999a).

The trouble in Chin's new caricatures of Chinese masculinity lies in their naïvely erasing Chinese men's contradictory position — oppressed by racism themselves but also oppressing Chinese women. Chin affords no space to engage with such contradictions.

Chin and his co-editors strategically invoke a nationalistic identity for Asian Americans, specifically Asian American men, which implies that the authentic Asian is defined by stable, immutable cultural attributes (as in Chin's denouncing of Kingston's reworking of the Fa Mu Lan legend). Strategic essentialism — the strategic deployment of identity (Spivak, 1990) — often mandates the suppression of differences within groups as a means of resisting racism (Yon, 1999a). But the conception of Asian masculinity for which Chin argues entails erasing ruptures within Asian North American communities and, by extension, evades its own involvement in perpetuating a range of desires, anxieties, and social hatreds.

Cheung (1990) points out that Chin's critique of Kingston involves homophobia and championing male domination over women:

In Chin's discussion of Fu Man Chu and Charlie Chan and in the perspective contrast he draws between the stock images of Asian men and those of other men of colour, one can detect not only homophobic but perhaps also a sexist preference for stereotypes that imply predatory violence against women to "effeminate" ones. . . . In taking whites to task for demeaning Asians, these writers seem nevertheless to be buttressing patriarchy by invoking gender stereotypes, by disparaging domestic efficiency as "feminine," and by slotting desirable traits such as originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity under the rubric of masculinity. (p. 237)

So Chin's quest to restore the manhood of Asian men is plagued by limitations embedded in monolithic, stable, normative, and naïve categories, leaving little room to grapple with how different, particularly heterogenous, conceptions of Chinese masculinity might be valued and affirmed.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE POSTMODERN CHINESE MAN

In contrast to Chin's monolithic, stable, and normative notions of masculinity, Taiwanese film director Ang Lee explores heterogenous masculinities in *The Wedding Banquet,* a film about a gay Chinese American man, Wing Tai, who at the prodding of his White lover, Simon, decides to marry a Chinese woman, Wei-Wei. Both Wei-Wei and Wing-Tai are eager to fake this marriage so that she can obtain American citizenship and he can appease his parents, who are pressuring him to marry and produce grandchildren for them. The movie depicts in comical fashion the complexities and tensions when Wing Tai's parents, who do not know that he is gay, arrive from Taiwan for the upcoming wedding and stay in the same home as their son, his fiancée, and his male lover.

Wing Tai is no longer the working-class, American-born, Toisanese-speaking Chinese of urban Chinatown so often featured in the writings of Chin, his colleagues, and Kingston but a Mandarin-speaking Taiwanese professional with good business sense and a Mercedes Benz. Whereas Chin embraces essentialist identity categories, in this film there are no racial, cultural, and social absolutes. For example, by the film's end Wing Tai has made love to both Simon and Wei-Wei, thereby destabilizing the social categories of heterosexual and homosexual and eluding a stable identity category premised on rigid notions of sexual orientation. Emphasizing cultural and racial hybridity and fluidity, Simon, the White male lover, speaks more Chinese than Wing Tai, stir-fries better than Wei-Wei, and is a superb critic of Chinese calligraphy. Like Kingston — who asks in the early passages of *The Woman Warrior,* "what is Chinese and what is Chinese American?" — Lee questions the limits of rigid essentialist racial classifications.

Unlike Chin, Lee articulates increasingly postmodern representations of Chinese men. The movement of Chinese people and ideas between Taiwan and the United States makes globalization and diaspora central. Globalization refers to specific conditions at the end of the twentieth century, but the idea dates back several hundred years (Yon, 1999b). Its present form is characterized by a dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state and the concomitant rise of neoliberal, supranational organizations that promote the unrestrained and rapid movements of transnational capital, including information, commodities, and visual images (Ong, 1999; Yon, 1999b). Attendant on this condition is the increased movement of people, especially between North America and the Asian Pacific rim (Ong, 1999). In fact, the Taiwan-based parents' ability to fly to the United States on a moment's notice to attend their son's wedding presents Wing Tai with his humorous dilemmas.

Gilroy (1996) has written about the exciting, pleasurable possibilities in recognizing diasporas as not unidirectional but chaotic, not ensconced in mournful victimization in exile, loss, and forced separation but full of resistance, transformation, and perpetual motion towards new possibilities. *The Wedding Banquet* epitomizes the new possibilities and pleasures when "dispersed people recognize the effects of spatial dislocation . . . and embrace the possibility that they are no longer what they once were and cannot therefore rewind the tape of their cultural history" (Gilroy, 1996, p. 22).

In contrast, Chin's attachment to the nostalgia of an ostensibly more glorious time for Chinese men, a time of male warriors, highlights the misguided hope of "rewinding the tape" of cultural history. There is a simulacrum of "mournful victimization" detectable in his lament for onetime warriors now reduced to Fu Man Chu and Charlie Chan. *The Wedding Banquet* itself critiques in tragicomic fashion a clinging to Chinese masculinities and by-gone days of martial glory. While the newlyweds, Wing Tai's parents, and Simon are dining at a Chinese restaurant following the impromptu wedding at City Hall, the Taiwanese restaurant owner recognizes Wing Tai's father as a great military commander for whom he once worked as a chauffeur. When the owner learns that this dinner constitutes the wedding banquet, he berates Wing Tai in an impassioned soliloquy for disrespecting the great commander with so subdued an affair. Paying homage to the former military man, the owner declares that the "commander will not lose face in America" and offers his establishment for a proper wedding banquet. The father smiles gloriously while Wing Tai grimaces painfully.

The film's complication of masculinity and the related ruptures within the category *Chinese* emphasize what contemporary cultural work calls "new ethnicities" (Hall, 1988). New ethnicities entail a recognition of the heterogeneity that characterizes any particular ethnic or racial group and the end of innocence or the end of the innocent notion of an essentialized subject. Engaging rather than suppressing difference, it acknowledges the complexity and diversity of subject positions and recognizes that the representation of race cannot be disengaged from class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Hall, 1988; Yon, 1999c). Juxtaposing the desires, anxieties, and masculinities of the father and the restaurant owner with those of Wing Tai, Lee engages differences within communities to show often painful but exciting tension and possibility.

However, Ma (1998) draws attention to the film's problematic emphasis on globalization and its implications for rupture and difference. These, he argues, appeal strongly to Western audiences and satisfy a White middle-class bourgeois penchant for seeing global capitalism as without evils such as poverty and racism: "As globalization radically transforms

demographics and politics, not much currency is now allotted by the homogenized consumerist culture to a desperate, uncompromising clinging to the past" (p. 156). An interracial gay relationship in which the White partner speaks more Chinese and stir-fries more often than the Asian is tolerable, even pleasurable, then, as long as structural inequalities attendant on globalization are ignored.

Chin's investments in a glorious masculinist past are mired in a political and cultural economy that no longer matches the corporate agenda of globalization, for "postmodernist symbols for late capitalist culture" are increasingly hybrid and shun "excessive nationalism and nativism" (Ma, 1998, p. 157). The younger Chin's politics emerged at a radically different time. He came of age at a time of acute student activism. Riding the wave of Black consciousness, like so many young Asian Americans, he was electrified by the Black power movement and inspired by its vision and desires, and, ostensibly, its brand of nationalisms (Chang, 1998). Contesting class oppression and American imperialism was central to the movements of the day, and strategic essentialisms abounded (Wei, 1993). Like Kingston, who came from a Toisanese pioneering family not many years removed from the nadir of anti-Chinese racism and exploitation in the United States, Chin often depicts working-class Chinese American subjectivities in America's early Chinatowns, where the spectres of racism, classism, and, in the works of Kingston, sexism, are never far removed.

In contrast, Ang Lee portrays upper-middle-class, Mandarin-speaking, Chinese subjectivities at a radically different time from *The Woman Warrior.* Today, Asian immigrants with investment capital are sought by the very countries where earlier Asians were vehemently loathed (Mitchell, 1997). Thus, as Lee erases casualties of globalization, he differentiates himself from the American-born writers discussed in that his presentation of Chinese masculinities is not burdened by racism and classism. To understand the strategic essentialism of the revisionist project of Chin and his co-editors, it is important to bear in mind that for these fiery, youthful, and highly politicized Asian American men, a critique of White supremacy and class oppression mattered.

ANTIRACISM EDUCATION AND ASIAN MASCULINITY

Although White supremacy and class mattered to Chin, sexism did not. His presentation of Asian masculinity reverts to a monolithic depiction of Asian men as martial heroes from classic Asian tales. His stinging attack on White supremacy and his opposition to the cultural castration of Asian masculinity gloss over the complex dynamics of gender, class, and power struggles and differences among Asian men and women. In portraying

Chinese men as resilient survivors of White racial animosity, he denies the power afforded to Chinese men to dominate women, children, and Chinese men of lower-class status.

Chin's strategy can be read as strategic essentialism. In recognizing the sociopolitical context out of which the effeminization of Chinese males was born, he embraces a limiting binary conceptualization of Asian masculinity: Asian males must be presented as effeminate or as masculine, one representation must be sacrificed for the other to exist. For Chin, presenting Asian males as masculine means embracing the martial tradition, in which women are often dominated by men. In this way, Chin shuts off critical engagement with issues of sexism. More fundamentally, he promotes a problematic engagement with power as physical strength, as evidenced in the martial tradition, and zero-sum. In a zero-sum framework, the empowerment of Chinese women usurps power from Chinese men.

The problems with zero-sum power are among the most pressing reasons to link the problematizing of Asian masculinity with antiracism education, the concern of this article. Problematizing Asian masculinity invites us to ask how antiracism education conceptualizes power. Yon (1999a) asserts that, like multicultural education, antiracism education is framed by the idea of a majority culture and the proliferation of minority cultures. The majority culture is understood to possess the most power, and each minority culture has less, the amount varying from one to another. Power is zero-sum and depends on one's group. So, even with a definition of racism as "power plus prejudice," aimed at calling attention to the inequality of power implied by the majority/minority cultural paradigm (Yon, 1999a), antiracism education still manifests a clinging to innocence, despite its important emphasis on power. For example, reminiscent of Chin's inability to tolerate difference and contradictory subject positionings, the idea that racial minorities possess little or no power in a racist society has led some who identify themselves as members of a racial minority to assert that, as they are relatively powerless, they cannot be engaged in acts of domination. Similarly, strategic essentialisms, which erase differences within communities, sometimes cite as justification the need to overlook intragroup ruptures in order to gain power from the majority. These dynamics have often prevented antiracism movements from grappling effectively with more complex notions of power and the ways minorities themselves perpetrate social hatreds and acts of oppression, including racism.

The tendency of some proponents of antiracism education and male revisionists like Chin to cling to innocence points to a need to conceptualize power not as zero-sum but as a "problematic of circulation working through and within various channels and everyday networks of social

actions" (Yon, 1999a, p. 30). Contesting the zero-sum understanding, scholars have pushed for a view of power as Foucault (1980) understood it, not as something that can be "held, taken, or alienated" (Smart, 1983, p. 81) but as inseparable from the power/knowledge of discourse and its *power effects* (Ong, 1999; Yon, 1999a).

Conceiving power in this way is crucial to understanding present-day race and racism in Canada and the United States and getting beyond the paradigms of Black/White race relations and majority/minority cultures. For example, conceiving power as not zero-sum makes space for examining how individuals caught up in discourses that operate to racialize them also respond to those discourses to resist their regulative forces (Yon, 1999a). Such an understanding of power and agency permits us to begin to see how Kingston's novel challenges the emasculation of Chinese men by articulating a sympathetic grasp of how silences cannot be understood outside discourses that valorize speech and pathologize silence. Thus, Kingston says her understanding of power does not imply that anyone is innocent or that either Asian men or Asian women lack agency to respond to these discourses. This suggests for antiracism education a range of questions that include how individuals (for example, Asian males) experience, negotiate, resist, and/or transform the various discourses that regulate, discipline, and punish them and, as the gendered tensions of Asian North America suggest, how males are at the same time implicated within discourses that discipline, punish, and regulate their female counterparts in the name of masculinity.

NOTE

1. The "model minority" discourse that emerged during the Cold War era and gained prominence in the 1960s in the United States highlights the educational and occupational success of Chinese Americans. Presenting Asians in direct contrast to African Americans, who were mobilizing for civil rights, it implied that "trouble-making" minorities should model themselves after Chinese Americans with their hard-work ethic, docility, and willingness to assimilate (R. G. Lee, 1999; S. Lee, 1996; Osajima, 1988).

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