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A MARGINALIZED TRIBESMAN BECOMING A DIPLOMAT: A NARRATIVE APPROACH ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the researcher used a storytelling as a research tool to give an insight on a life of a Karen tribesman who has spent over 10 years preparing himself to pass the challenging examinations to become a career diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. The researcher investigated the subject's ethnicity, education, motivation, and English language study. A series of interviews was analyzed for their contexts, an adaptation from Gary Barkhuizen's narrative research supported by documentary research on psychological impacts from visualization, self-motivation and socioeconomic of the marginalized people. This longitudinal study includes the researcher's reflexive personal commentary throughout the article as he has observed the subject's life continuously for over a decade. The finding resulted in the reassurance of strong intrinsic motivation, goal setting and the pursuit of higher education and skills that lead to the subject's success.

Keywords: Tribesman, Diplomat, Narrative approach, Marginalization

Introduction

In this article, I narrated a life of Tiger (pseudonym) who was miraculously among 35 new diplomats who successfully passed the challenging examinations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOF) in 2022. There were over 3,500 testers hopeful to work in this elite position, a certain path to station at the Thai embassies overseas. All successful

testers were no doubt highly intellectual in this country with excellent background of family and education, from inside and outside the country. Tiger has the poorest background in almost everything compared to others but he managed to obtain high scores in the demanding tests of English language, international affairs and a series of interviews by high-ranking MOF officials. He is an exceptional Thai you do not meet often in the country of 70 million. That is the reason I chose him to be the main cause of this research so that it may serve as the lesson learned for others who want to follow his footstep in having the right mindset, learning habits and self-motivation.

The researcher would like to share with the readers what has driven an underprivileged man like Tiger to push himself this far and enable him to succeed in life. What has he experienced in the past that formed his positive mindset? What learning habits did he adopt to hone his needed skills for the international relations arena? Through the set of interviews with Tiger and long-term observation of his life, the researcher found some critical answers worth sharing with the public so that it may serve as a good lesson for teachers, parents and researchers.

Research Objective

This research aimed to study a human history so that it helps answer how a marginalized tribesman with all life's limitations can become a professional diplomat in Thailand.

Literature Review

Marginalization takes place when some groups of people are pushed to the edge of the society. They usually lack the opportunity to access the same resources as the local people do. Tiger's life was seen in this report as representing a struggle of those marginalized people in Thailand where there is the mixture of about 70 ethnic groups in total. Those are 24 groups of ethnolinguistic Tai peoples, 22 groups of northern Khmer origin, 11 groups of hilltribes, 3 groups of Malay, the Hmong-Mien, and the longstanding immigrants of Chinese and Indians (Draper, 2019). Looking at the numbers, there are 13 million Thai Isan or Lao origins, 9.5 million Chinese descents, 1.5 million Malay Muslim, 1.4 million Khmer, over 920,000 highland indigenous groups, and about 10,000 sea nomad groups (Minority Rights Group International, 2022). Among all the hilltribes, 47% is the Karen, the largest tribe of all (Trupp, 2014)

Tiger grew up as a Karen tribesman in Ratchaburi province, a border next to Myanmar, about 100 kilometers west of Bangkok. It is not uncommon to see the Karen in all parts of Thailand nowadays. About 5 million Karen are still living in Myanmar's Kayin State, south and southeast of the country, amount to 7 percent of Myanmar's population (Australian Karen Foundation, 2022). The Karen tribe in Thailand are mostly self-contented with their simple life in the forest, doing small farming and hunting just for family consumption. However, some new generations are now seeking better education and economic opportunity in the lowland cities of the kingdom. Up on the mountainous areas, thousands of them are still lacking the basic infrastructures including roads, clean water, hospitals and schools. All these are driving thousands of the young Karen to look for jobs in the big cities (Pawa, 2021). Tiger is one of them.

With limited education and professional skills, those young Karen have to do the jobs the local Thai do not want to do. It is called the 3-Ds meaning dirty, difficult and dangerous (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Thailand's economy is growing and it desperately needs the huge workforce to feed the lucrative business of fishery, factory, construction and household keeping. Immigrants from Thailand's neighboring Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia are also welcome to fill these job vacuum. Tiger ended up being a night watchman in a luxurious housing estate in Bangkok. Knowing that higher education is a road for more income and life's opportunity, he enrolled in a weekend non-formal school.

It is very rare to see the ethnic minority in Thailand to hold high positions in the government organizations or gain wealth in business. They are marginalized by the limitations on educational background, family wealth, working permits, language and, on many cases, the Thai citizenship (Bundidterdsakul, 2019). In the past, the government and the public opinion viewed the hilltribes as the troublemakers, forest destroyers or the drug dealers (Trupp, 2014) but this label started to fade away. By the nature of Thai people, they give the high value on education. Once you have a university degree, for instance, it will be easier for you to get a good job, no exception to the minority and the hilltribes. Tiger must have strong faith in education as he had struggled to finish the basic primary school from his village. Then he had to work and supported himself for a weekend school, the program provided for the marginalized people like Tiger thanked to the Ministry of Education.

Indigenous Peoples' Foundation for Education and Environment (IPF, 2018) and Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples Foundation have studied the problems of the most vulnerable 10 indigenous groups in Thailand comprising Mlabri, Kow (Umpi), Bisu, Chong, Yakoor, Saek, Moken, Moklen, Urak-Lawoy, and Mani. It was found that the common problem was the rights of nationality, land and access to natural resources, including the recognition of their identity. The causes were pointed to the weakness of indigenous traditional institution in using and maintaining indigenous knowledge; and the impact from the enforcement of state authority.

Monmuang et.al. (2017) studied the educational development in Tak province, Thailand, and found that the number of students enrolled in the bordered region was uncertain. The rate of dropout students was high due the family movement from place to place for economic reasons. There was a lack of teachers. The promotions of local wisdom activities relevant to the way of life were discontinuously managed.

Aung et al. (2012) studied the health concern and the changing lifestyle of 298 rural Karen villagers in Tak province, Thailand, and found that the Karen hilltribes are increasingly exposed to risk factors as a result of urbanization, leading to hypertension and cardiovascular disease including diabetes, smoking, sedentary lifestyle and excess alcohol use.

Tienboon, P. and Wangpaka-pattanawong, P. (2007). Studied the nutrition and health conditions of 158 Karen hilltribe children, aged 1-6 years, in 3 villages of Chiang Mai, northern Thailand and found that the malnutrition is still high. All of them had low lean body mass and fat mass. Nearly all children suffered from either upper respiratory tract infection, skin infection, scabies and diarrhea. Also, nearly all of them had scaly and dry skin over their chest walls and legs. About 10% of children had either angular stomatitis or bleeding per gums or bow legs with their implications for micronutrient deficiency. About 10% of them had vitamin deficiencies such as B2, C and D.

Trupp (2014) studied the ethnic tourism in northern Thailand and found that the tribespeople of the Akha and Karen have changed their lifestyle for economic capital from the visiting tourists. They would wear traditional dress to please the tourists and get some money for a photo taken. They would sell jewelry they bought from the factories but the tourists thought it was handcrafted by the tribeswomen. The hilltribes also initiated a business by

collaboration with tour-guide companies in the cities so they would bring more tourists and income to the villages.

The success of Tiger would certainly ignite the fighting spirit of the Karen for better socioeconomic capital in the society. It is easily seen from the interviews that Tiger was driven by the Karen identity which he openly felt proud of where he was from. While other marginalized people may feel that they have all limitations of the world, Tiger's growth mindset made him believe that the intelligence can be developed. Like other winners, he embraced the challenges and persisted in the face of all setbacks. He also finds lessons and inspiration in the success of others (Dweck, 2016). Tiger was clearly moved by the intrinsic motivation as he saw the challenges as a drive to move forward, not the external products, pressures or rewards (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It is this drive from within that the researcher would like to know and share with the readers.

Conceptual Framework

Barkhuizen (2016) has interviewed a Tongan ESL teacher who immigrated to New Zealand and summed up her interviewed stories for the analysis with the topics: *Who, Where* and *When.* In this paper, I have adapted Barkhuizen's concepts for the analysis with ***Who, What, Where*** and ***How*** in order to emphasize Tiger's personal strategies to deal with his life in order to grow intellectually and economically. The ***How*** will elaborate Tiger's mindset and self-motivation that made him different from most people; hence, it made him distinguished, and presumably attracting positive energy from the people he is associated with. The conceptual framework for this report can be drawn as follows.

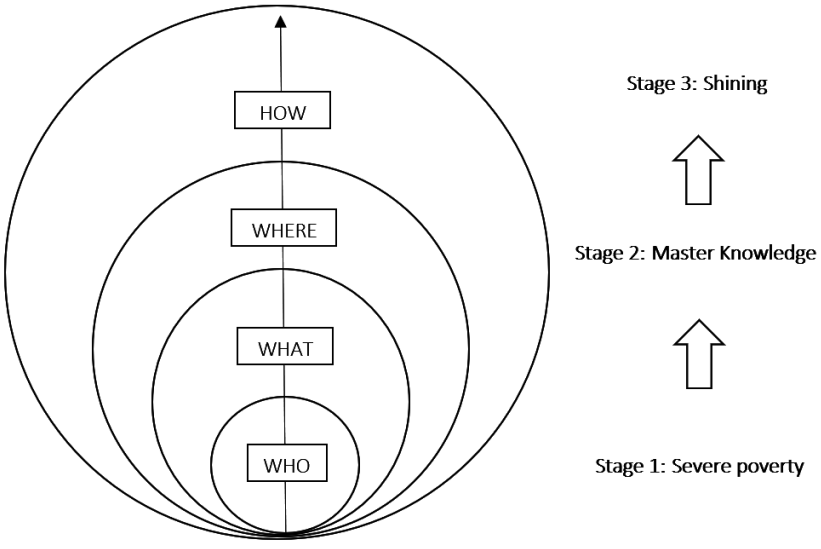


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

A narrative research method for this study was adapted from Gary Barkhuizen (2016). The semi-structured interview questions were validated by three experts before using with the subject. The data was obtained from a series of interviews and analyzed for the content, supported by documentary research on socio-economic background of the marginalized and relevant concepts and theories. The researcher visited Tiger's family in Ratchaburi Province and observed the authentic lifestyle of the local Karen. Since the research was based on an individual life, it was shown to the subject for approval.

By the narrative research approach, there are naturally three stakeholders involved, which are the researcher, the narrator (Tiger) and the readers (Barkhuizen, 2016, p.660). The narrative research can be defined as collecting and analyzing the accounts people tell to describe experiences and offer interpretation (Overcash, 2003). In this study, all narrative accounts are from Tiger alone. I made the interview with Tiger 3 times in both face-to-face and online chatroom between January-July 2022. I grouped the 40 questions I asked into 7 sets covering Tiger's early life, education, previous jobs, English self-study, motivation and mindset, success and failure and the MOF examinations. Tiger would give details about his life like we did for story-telling and I wrote down the notes as we did not use sound recorder. He kindly rechecked this report prior to the publication.

Research Results.

Who: It is important to know the originality of Tiger's life since his birth. It will make us understand why Tiger's mindset about life is different from others. It is to answer who he really is and who he always wants to be. The feeling of being a Karen tribesman never left his heart. He seemed to be proud of his ethnicity and I heard him kept saying this word many times at every time we met. Besides, it is the notion that he accepted his real identity of where he comes from. Tiger speaks Thai with a thick accent indicating that he did not use Thai as mother tongue. Thailand is full of multicultural people from many ethnicities including foreigners from around the world and the local people naturally and welcomely tolerate the differences of linguistics, religions, races and traditions (Draper, 2019).

"When I was young, I helped my parents on all labor works including farming corn, feeding pigs, cutting woods and hunting animals in the forest. All my friends in the village were doing the same thing. We went to the town just to buy necessary things. From time to time, volunteers from the town would come to donate clothes, toys and food to the children in the village. I admired them and wanted to be like them ... that they gave things to others and made the children smiles. I knew that when I grew up, I would help others."

"At one time, I watched a TV news and saw the debate at the United Nations. The international arena captured my heart very deeply and I started to dream about it. I wanted to work in the international relations. And I know, to do that, I need higher education."

Tiger's motivation was genuinely formed in line with the intrinsic type where he was driven internally by the drive of high success, not for the external sudden rewards. (Legg, 2019). The internationally related scenes on television has touched the young Tiger's heart deeply.

Tiger's family background of poverty and hardship has formed his mental strength and strong determination to achieve higher in life. The deep feeling that he wants to work in an international organization becomes a drive in his heart that he kept focusing on opportunity in that direction. When he went to school, he already knew that he has to master English language. While the wealthier families in Thailand sent their children to the tutoring school to upgrade the language proficiency, Tiger has to work at night time and study by himself at his limited time and resources. When he later managed to enter the college under the sport scholarship and touched

the formal education again in years, he wholeheartedly enjoyed learning in the classroom and reading in the library. His curiosity to learn is tremendous that all teachers love him.

"I knew that I needed a degree to achieve my dream. I tried everyway and everywhere to go to college and I eventually went to [omitted]... to study Business Administration. I took scholarship from a sport program of the college and also took student loan from the government. My English advanced a lot during these four years, thanks to the international teachers there."

I met Tiger for the first time in this college while I was teaching there in 2011. He enrolled in one course with me and he read several books I had authored. We chatted from time to time and I suggested him to read English language news everyday and come back to discuss interesting issues with me. Tiger said, *"I read news more than my textbooks as I wanted to learn about international relations. I love to know about the current events and discuss the news with my teachers. I also love to read autobiographies of the world's leaders. I normally read a book each month. Most books are related to international relations."*

During the semester breaks, he still had to work to find some little income by being a night watchman, gas station attendant, or doing other labor works in factories. However, he said he already formed a strong habit in reading news and books in English. He was always seen carrying a newspaper all the time. Tiger's reading habit was distinguished because most of his Thai friends do not usually read, a tradition that still puzzled most local academics (Khaosod, 2019).

Tiger Starts to Lead

What: During the college years, Tiger had participated in several charity activities and student competitions. He won several speech contests, an ASEAN-quiz contest, a Toastmaster contest and many more. He co-founded the Toastmaster Club in the college and became its first president. He co-established the Payback Club where he and other volunteers would go to teach English for children in the upcountry. The Payback Club has been operating for almost 10 years and he is now still supporting his team as its secretary.

"My childhood dreams started to take shape clearer at the college as I had opportunity to practice English everyday and also had chance to do volunteer works in communities. Moreover, I was so lucky

to be surrounded by high thinking teachers who gave good advice very useful to my future life."

Where: Tiger received a scholarship twice from non-profit Asian Children Charity-ACC (Korea-Thailand) for a leadership training in South Korea and he once gave an interview to a local TV. Later, he was appointed a member of a committee to select other teenagers for the same training in Seoul. ACC also financially sponsored him for his MBA at a university in Bangkok.

"What I lacked in my childhood, I tried to grab it all in the college, especially the chance to master English language. I gave my full credits to the college years and to my teachers that helped shape my life. Without the college life, I wouldn't come this far. The college also sent me for the internship at American Chamber of Commerce where I had chance to meet many dignitaries and famous people from many countries. My dream became true everyday."

He once coordinated with friends at several embassies and sought donations to build a church and a children playground at his village. The villagers referred to him as a 'teacher' to show respect for his selfless contribution to the community. Young Karen teenagers started to follow his footstep and looked for ways for higher education. When the Karen children asked him to bring them to tour Bangkok, he managed to bring them to visit temples, a university, a TV station and museums. Tiger knew that a short but rare trip like this would ignite the children's curiosity and eagerness to explore the world beyond the mountainous village life.

"The Karen are very shy to expose themselves to the outside world. I want to show them that it is alright to explore the world and dream about the future. The children will one day bring out their potentials and realize what else they can do in life. I was helped much by many people and now I just want to help a little."

I once visited his family in Ratchaburi and met his parents, other siblings and some relatives. His father is an active helper in the village. He might have inherited the leadership personality from his father and saw his father as a role model. His continuous contributions to his village and the Thai public must have attracted the interest from many powerful people, hence earning him good connections with various organizations.

At the Embassy

Where: Tiger was accepted to work in an embassy of an Asian country as a translator/interpreter. He worked there for 5 years and learned a great deal

about international relations. He tried to learn everything at the embassy and put a lot of effort to master the knowledge of international affairs. The ambassador traveled a lot in Thailand and he would go with the team to provide assistance and learn on diplomatic protocol and other functions. The experience at the embassy helped pave the way for him to enter the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a young diplomat.

"I first had a hard time adjusting to English accent of the people at the embassy. I then searched Youtube for practicing my listening skill for this particular accent. I put my whole effort to learn so that I can work more comfortably with all the diplomats there. I also read seriously every night to update myself on the embassy affairs and that I felt like I can help them work more smoothly in Thailand."

"I was assigned to many important projects during my 5-year experience at the embassy. I think I have done all of them with my full capacity for the embassy's interests."

The embassy job allowed him the opportunity to contact high-ranking officials in several ministries and also at a government level. Tiger received good advices from these people about international affairs and he also learned from these luxurious experiences a few Thais can only dream of.

Mindset & Character

It can be said that Tiger's hard life in childhood made everything look easy for him in the following years. Compared to the laborious agricultural life he did all those years on the mountain, the struggling work-and-study life in the city seemed less difficult. However, Tiger's actions, decisions and habits have reflected his perspectives on life and the world. Countless numbers of the young Thais are endeavoring to pass the government examinations to become an elite career diplomat, but they cannot reach the goal. But Tiger did and he is willing to share some parts of his personal life on this paper so that others can learn something from him.

"I am not an ambitious person. What is in my heart is that I just want to be better than myself yesterday. I just want to know what I can do and what I can't. When I was young, I set my goal and when I am older, the goal becomes clearer and clearer. While people may only see my successes, but I touched the failures and difficulties in life many times as well."

How: Tiger elaborated that he once failed to pass the IELTS scores required to study in England. He obtained 6.5 instead of 7.5 as the scholarship demanded. In later

years, his English was so advanced that he almost touched the perfect scores on all four skills of English tests by the MOF. Also, he failed to pass the MOF examination the first time he took several years ago.

Like others, Tiger has passed through some organizational conflicts which he chose to ignore and focused on his immediate responsibilities. Confrontation was not his nature, a natural gift that all diplomats admire. While human conflicts may drive some of us crazy as we do not know how to solve the problems, Tiger put all efforts to the works at hand and self-development.

"Nobody can hurt you without your consent. I've seen haters and jealousy people. They will hate you no matter how good you are to them. I tried to see the positive sides in them and I always found one or two. I do not waste time and energy with negative thoughts. I know that I have a mission ahead of me to complete and I would focus on that mission alone. Not other things else."

It is without doubt that the focus on the responsible target will lead us to the success. However, it is easier said than done because most of us are still struggling to adjust the focus at one goal while having so many distractions all around us everyday.

"For all my working life in the international relations, I was trained to be a good listener. By listening to others, you already opened your heart for new ideas. What brings the success to my life? Well, I don't know. I think I am not special and I am like other people. ... For me, there are several qualities combined. You need to have strong integrity; you need to develop your knowledge everyday. I also invested my energy and time a lot on English language. I love to challenge myself all the time. And without higher education and opportunity, you will not go high. Many of my childhood friends lack these two so they have to live by what they have. I am trying to achieve my goals, partly because I want to tell the children in my village that they can achieve high like everyone else. They just need higher education and opportunity. I want to help them. I've always believed that education will help transfer us from nobody to somebody."

Results Conclusion and Discussion

Conclusion

This narrative research was made to analyze the life of a Karen tribesman whose lack of socioeconomic capital did not deter him from seeking a higher achievement. Tiger is a marginalized Karen representing the limitations that many of our lives

have in common. He believed in higher education and has been honing necessary skills to move him towards working in the international arena. Tiger is now a career diplomat, a dream and the impossible job reserved only for the intellectual Thais. The vigorous self-training on vast reading and English language for over 10 years helped him pass the challenging examinations of the MOF. Tiger's mindset and academic skills have played a major role in driving him to achieve his dream. While he kept saying that everyone can do the same, I do not believe it. You need to apply many strategies combined to move forward in life like he did. One thing that taught me from this report: if you set a clear goal in life since early age and you kept reminding yourself everyday, you tend to be closer to your life goal everyday as well.

The early life of Tiger was full of hardship in agriculture and animal hunting, which all experience he received became the foundation of ***Who*** he is – the man of iron heart, driven by the intrinsic motivation, rather than the extrinsic. He was not driven by the external products or any social pressures. (Ryan and Deci, 2000). It made him strong and became the drive force in his mindset that he has to achieve his life's goals, or else he has to go back to the laborious farmland again. With limited resources, he sought out educational opportunity from primary school up to MBA. The poverty naturally brings deficits to most people but some developed psychological responses to their circumstances or may have developed strengths that enhance their ability to cope with challenges in their lives (Frankenhuis and Nettle, 2020) Tiger fell to this category. It is the matter of ***What*** and ***How*** he did all the way from the beginning to the success of life he is having now.

The ***What*** has shown that he came out of the mountain and worked in the menial workforce as a night watchman, a factory worker, a gas station attendant, and several more, to make the ends meet and to save enough for a weekend school. Tiger surely possessed the growth mindset as he strongly believed he could achieve higher in life. This was reassured by Dweck (2016) that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. He shied away from the fixed mindset that most losers imbedded in themselves. The belief in self-development helped move his life forward everyday. Tiger's growth mindset reshaped his behavior to the better path and it changed his habits at the daily basis as well, resulting in the different results to suit his expectation (Abinger Institute, 2017). The ***How*** indicated that Tiger has applied self-motivation tactics for himself. He

visualized the success of himself in the future that he is working there at an international arena, the same picture he saw on TV when he was young. He felt closer to the success while doing the visualization that it gave him the driving force internally (Szente, 2007).

The ***How*** also reflected when Tiger experienced the organizational conflicts that were pulling him down to the circle of envy, hate and gossiping in the office. Instead, he chose to focus on the immediate tasks given to him and put the great effort to complete the jobs. This is the reassured concept of Circle of Influence (Covey, 1999) that the proactive people would focus on their responsibilities, not the office politics which will only drain out their energy. Besides, the personal habits of 'sharpening the saw' at daily basis will only bring Tiger's life up against all odds. The 'saw' for Tiger here is the strong reading habits and the daily practice of English language. Sometimes in his life, he might fail to achieve some goals but his endless effort is the answer to all the success in life (Kristina, 2018). To push his life up, Tiger must go beyond his comfort zone. Instead of spending the hardly-earned money on materials, he spent it on books and English language newspapers. By moving himself out of the comfort zone, he already moved a little closer to his success (Goggins, 2018).

The ***What*** he has in his heart also reflected the Growth Mindset that any failures in his life started to act as the stronger motivation to move forward. This is opposite to the Fixed Mindset where people would feel deterred to go further in life. The later people would look down at themselves and tried to stop themselves from any growth (Khamkhong, 2021).

The ***Where*** Tiger chose for himself was to be surrounded by the high-thinking people. At the college, he would come to discuss political or international issues with the teachers. That made him see the differences of ideas for the same issue. The key to outstanding performance and fulfillment - in both work and life- is the ability to surround oneself with outstanding people (Araoz, 2014) because it is where you learn new ideas

Tiger's life can be summed up in three stages as indicated in this report's conceptual framework. His early life as a young tribesman can be simply described as ***Stage 1*** where he experienced severe poverty and, also where he has shaped his mental strength in order to encounter all kinds of life setbacks. ***Stage 2*** was during the time he sought out education, in both formal and informal, in order to achieve his life goals. He studied seriously everyday

especially on English language and the issues of international relations. The master of knowledge helped him pass all necessary examinations. ***Stage 3*** was the shining of his success where he can look back and feel good about himself, especially for the fact that he is now a career diplomat, the job he always dreamed of. Moreover, he already set a good example for other children in his village who are of the same Karen tribe. Tiger also completed a number of community service projects including the construction of a children playground, educational camps and many more.

Limitation: The researcher has used Tiger's life as a prime target for this study. All data from the set of interviews was personally reflected by the subject alone. Some facts and information might be left out for security and personal reasons.

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The researcher gave full credit to 'Tiger' – a new diplomat at MOF who cannot reveal his identity but he gave time and energy to help on this report, for the benefit of all readers.

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