

US Navy and Chinese Navy: Partners or Rivals?

Written by Wang Yinghui

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WANG YINGHUI, APR 14 2011

The answer to the question at hand seems to be evident: rivals definitely, how can they be partners?

Observing the relationship between the two navies, frictions and confrontations at sea tend to be the main trend in the new century, even leading to crisis in the South China Sea and Yellow Sea several times. This trend seems to have intensified in recent years, with the two militaries breaking up communications, and with the US performing joint military exercises with South Korea and Japan successively at the end of 2010, despite China's strong and consistent opposition. The Chinese Navy's fast modernization effort also aroused worries and concerns among China watchers in the United States. On the other hand, there have been few signs for cooperation between the two navies, not to mention the prospect of becoming "partners."

However, China has neither the intention, nor the agenda or capability to challenge the US supremacy in the Asia-Pacific area and globally. The Chinese Navy's strategy retains the modest goal of defending its coastal areas, and protecting its sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This also suggests that if the two countries, and their navies, could view each other and treat each other in a more positive and constructive way, partnership building would be possible. On the other hand, the rise of the Chinese Navy as a regional maritime power is perhaps inevitable, and the US should acknowledge such a rise and seek cooperation with China to maintain regional security and stability. Regardless, there are several ways for both countries to break the stagnation, and start cooperation, such as by beginning amongst insensitive such as non-traditional security issues.

Naval Frictions and Rivalry

The two navies witnessed several major maritime clashes in the past decades. The first attracted world attention in 2001. In April 2001, a US spy plane collided in the air with a Chinese fighter jet off Hainan, killing one Chinese pilot and forcing the American plane to make an emergency landing at a Hainan air base. China released the 24-member crew after the US expressed regret. In the following years, it was also reported that in 2003, 2004 and 2005, in China's EEZ in the Yellow Sea and East China Sea, the Chinese Navy frequently encountered surveying ships, reconnaissance ships and electronic espionage ships of the US Navy.[1]

A recent incident happened in March 2009, when USS Impeccable, an unarmed US Navy surveillance vessel was surrounded closely by five Chinese ships in international waters 75 miles (120 km) south of the Hainan island on "routine operations." US Pentagon officials complained that Chinese ships "harassed" the US Ship, and the Chinese Navy's "increasingly aggressive conduct." [2] The MFA strongly refuted the US allegations as "totally inaccurate", and the PLAN claimed that the ship was a spy ship and violated Chinese Law and infringed upon Chinese maritime territory. [3] According to Rear-Admiral Zhang Deshun, Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA's Navy, US navy's surveillance near Chinese maritime territory had been consistent, but this time "it is too close". The rhetoric from both sides was confrontational and fierce.

The "Yellow Sea Crisis" (*Huanghai Weiji*) was another major conflict between the two navies or even the two countries at large. The entering of US aircraft carrier into Yellow Sea was always strongly opposed by Chinese

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government, which was regarded as a threat to China's security. As early as in 1994, while USS Kitty Hawk carrier strike group entered Yellow Sea cruised along Chinese territorial waters border, it encountered China's submarine, and caused the confrontation of fighters from both countries. The second crisis was a more recent one. After the Cheonan Incident, a planned military exercise between South Korea and the United States was postponed from June to July first, because of China's strong opposition. China even conducted six-day, live ammunition exercise in the East China Sea off China's coast, which was seen by US as a deterrent act. However, China denied such reports.[4] Later the United States declared that it would not carry out the exercise until the next year. However, after Yeonpyeong Incident, the USS George Washington joined the exercises both with South Korea and Japan in December, despite China's strong verbal opposition.

Therefore, the frictions have been centering on whether the US has the right to conduct military-related activities, like joint exercises, surveying, reconnaissance or even spy activities in China's EEZ zones. Ma Xiaotian, the Vice Chief General of Staff pointed out at Shangarila Dialogue that "the high intensity of surveillance and reconnaissance of US Ships and aircraft in East China Sea and South China Sea constitutes one of the three barriers in Sino-US relations." [5]

The underlying reason for the continuous frictions is the different understanding of the function of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and different interpretation of some articles in United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (*UNCLOS*). According to the Chinese side, under international law, Chinese territorial waters extend to 12 nautical miles (22km) off its coast and its (EEZ) extends to 200 nautical miles. In China's understanding, EEZs and other jurisdictional waters are zones in which outside interference is an unwelcome intrusion into domestic security issues, and a region in which its national maritime power should dominate.[6] Therefore, Chinese military thought that Chinese ships were exercising their legal rights," and is strongly against Washington's military moves in China's EEZ in the South China Sea.[7] However, the United States maintains the point of "freedom of navigation" and takes EEZs as a public zone for any activity. While the maritime laws so far has no specific articles concerning "military activities" in EEZs, the conflict seems to be a never-ending debate without answer, and remains a very sensitive issue easily leading to conflict.

This issue is not only a difference between a modernist power and a postmodernist power. People can argue that China is oversensitive to its sovereignty and overacted on the issue. However, the US intention can also be seen not as simple as just to navigate normally around the area. Its concern over China's military buildup, and the mistrust between the two countries contribute much to the friction and confrontation at sea.

With continuous friction at sea, naval cooperation between the United States and China seems infrequent and insufficient, especially compared with comparison to that with other countries on both sides. Overall, between 1985 and 2006, PLAN naval vessels visited 18 Asian-Pacific nations, 4 South American nations, 8 European nations, 3 African nations, and 3 North American nations.[8] In 2003, the PLAN conducted its first joint naval exercises during separate visits to Pakistan and India. Bi-lateral naval exercises were also carried out with exercises with the French, British, Australian, Canadian, Philippine, etc.[9] The US Navy has also held numerous exercises with its allies in the past few years. However, major exchanges between the two navies were only limited to the U.S. Navy missile destroyer USS Fitzgerald's presence at an international fleet review in April 2009 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the (PLA) Navy.[10]

Recent China's Naval Development: a Threat?

China's military modernization effort, including its naval modernization, has caused growing concerns among US high-level military officials and China watchers. Admiral Michael Mullen, the Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, stated in June 2010 that he had "moved from being curious to being genuinely concerned" about China's military programs.[11]

For many China watchers, China's military "opaqueness" poses many uncertainties in forecasting its intentions, and trajectory in its development, and also is a source of greater suspicions in American perception of China. In the maritime perspective, there are two conflicting views concerning China's naval development. Will China adheres to

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its “littoral defense”, or does it harbor the ambition to become a “blue navy” and compete with US Navy for global maritime hegemony?

At the turn of the century, there seems much evidence as well as the tendency that PLAN began to transition to an off-shore defensive strategy that entailed more out-of-sea operations away from its traditional territorial waters.[12] Overall, between 1985 and 2006, PLAN naval vessels visited 18 Asian-Pacific nations, 4 South American nations, 8 European nations, 3 African nations, and 3 North American nations.[13] From 2003 onward, the PLAN has conducted its joint naval exercises with Pakistan, India, France, British, Australian, Canadian, Philippine, and United States navies.[14] An era-making event was in December 2008, when the PLAN dispatched a task group consisting of two destroyers, and one supply ship to the Gulf of Aden to participate in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. Since then, China has maintained a three-ship flotilla of two warships and one supply ship in the by assigning ships from the South Sea Fleet or East Sea Fleet to the Gulf of Aden on a three monthly basis.

In the mean time, although China has not published its maritime doctrine or definitive document concerning the PLAN priorities or strategic transition, there have been calls in some proposals and scholar’s articles calling for PLAN to become an ocean-going blue-water force. For example, in the NPC and CPPCC Annual Session 2009, there were representatives urging the PLAN to go from “coastal waters to oceans,” and to improve its “capability and level of warship building.” Hu Yanlin, the former political commissar of PLAN, also called on the PLAN to have its own aircraft carriers and contended that there was nothing to be worried about the neighbors’ concerns, as China’s major neighbors all have carriers.[15] Huang Jiaxiang, the Political Commissar of the South Sea Fleet, which shoulders the main responsibility of safeguarding South China Sea sovereignty, indicated that the PLAN will focus on training on the high seas and to improve real-battle training capability, and will combine the coastal training in the adjacent water with operational training in the distant waters.[16] According to Geoffrey Till’s analysis of some PLAN’s documents, the Chinese Navy has the ambition to “move forwards from inshore waters (Jinan) to “green waters (Jinhai) with a prospective move later to the bluewaters of the “second island chain”.[17]

Not only that US is concerned about China’s ocean-going ambition, it is also very anxious about its real capability, especially on the ability in the area of Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs), Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCMs), submarines and aircraft carriers.[18] At the top of the submarine component of the overall threat are the 8 new kilo-class diesel-electric submarines from Russia that were recently delivered to China. DF-21D is believed by American experts as a missile that can penetrate even the most sophisticated defense system American carriers may have.[19]

The United States is concerned with China’s increasing anti-access and area-denial capabilities for the Taiwan scenario. In addition, US observers also believe that China’s military modernization effort, including its naval modernization effort, is increasingly oriented toward pursuing additional goals not directly related to Taiwan. The PLA Navy’s investment in platforms such as nuclear-powered submarines and progress toward its first aircraft carrier has gone well beyond its preparation for Taiwan contingency.[20] Some observers also claimed that China may be building, or may want to eventually build, a series naval and other military bases in the Indian Ocean—a so-called “string of pearls”—so as to support Chinese naval operations along the sea line of communication linking China to Persian Gulf oil sources.

US observers admitted that PLAN’s capability has limitations in such areas as sustained operations by larger formations in distant waters, joint operations with other parts of China’s military, C4ISR systems, anti-air warfare (AAW), antisubmarine warfare (ASW), MCM, a dependence on foreign suppliers for certain key ship components, etc.[21] However, they are concerned that although PLAN has weaknesses, it may be sufficient to perform certain missions to China’s national interests. Moreover, as China’s navy expands its capability, it may be able to perform a wider array of potential missions.[22] As the US DOD concludes, that China is likely to be able to “project and sustain large forces in high-intensity combat operations far from China until well into the following decade.”[23]

Interpreting the US Perception of China’s Navy

From the above analysis, it seems that both US Navy and Chinese navy see each other as competitors, or rivals, and confrontation is likely to loom large in the future. Such a point of view is popular among high-level officers in the US

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Navy.[24] This is also very logical looking from real political, and geopolitical perspective, as there is doomed to be conflicts and contention between a rising power and a established power in the same region. As the only hegemony in the world, US does not want any other country in the world to challenge its preponderance. Similarly, as the only “global navy” in the world that has pervasive presence in international high seas, US Navy does not want any other navy to challenge its notion of “freedom of navigation” and maritime supremacy. Therefore, China’s assertiveness in its EEZ in East China Sea, its distrust of US role in safeguarding SLOCs, and its strong claim in Spratly Island, all challenged its hegemony or maritime interest.

There is another very practical or pragmatic assumption that US Navy takes Chinese Navy as the “imaginary enemy”: to obtain more share of military budget. Having not been involved in major wars in the past 20 years, the US Navy’s many grand Naval building project have either suffered from great budget constraint or were simply cancelled. The *Seawolf* class attack submarine was canceled as early as 1995. The production of *Zumwalt*-class destroyer (DDG-1000) was originally planned as 32 ships, but was progressively cut down to two. The CG(X) program, also known as the Next Generation Cruisers, was also canceled in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. The 313-ship fleet plan is being reviewed stringently for its feasibility and budget affordability. In comparison, US Air force and Army, for their substantial roles and fantastic performance in Gulf war, Kosovo War, Iraq war and Afghanistan War, both secured large share of budget for its development. Therefore, it is urgent for US Navy to engage in something that is considered worthy enough to have its rightful bigger share. Its repeated exercise in the Yellow Sea, apart from deterring DPRK and countering “China threat,” can be seen as serving as a demonstration of its continuous importance. Therefore, “Chinese Navy’s threat” is a component of “China threat”, which will help the US Navy in promoting its profile and gaining higher position in the military. In fact, it is now admitted that many U.S. military programs for countering improved Chinese military forces would fall within the Navy’s budget.[25]

On the one hand, the United States wants China to become a responsible stakeholder in support of international security objectives, which implies a need for greater naval capability to operate out of area. On the other hand, improved PLAN operational capabilities potentially pose a greater military threat to the United States and its allies, especially Asia. The United States has to reassure its allies that it will remain present in the region as a hedge even as Chinese military capabilities improve.

Real Picture of PLAN: Modest Naval Strategy and Limited Capability

In fact, in a broad sense, the Chinese Navy now has neither the capability, nor the intention to become a rival of the US navy. China is traditionally a continental power and the Navy, in the several decades since it was established in 1945, undertook a subordinate role in collaboration with the Army. Though in recent years there has emerged arguments that China is developing into a “blue-water” navy and has formulated its “blue-water navy strategy”, the Chinese navy remains a coastal defense force in its function and its “coastal defense” strategy remains unchanged officially.[26] China is preoccupied with its economic development and territorial disputes with Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, the navy’s priority of safeguarding the territorial integrity in its missions will be a long term task over decade to come. Furthermore, China has so many domestic problems and challenges in its periphery, that it could not realistically put competition with US, including in the maritime arena, on its agenda. On this point, Holmes and Yoshihara are right in arguing China “has more to think about US”, and “will not leap at blue-water options until its more pressing security concerns are resolved.”[27] Robert Ross also denied the “rivalry” theory through a geography point of view. He foresees some level of rivalry between China and the United States but it is “significantly tempered by geography”.[28] Basically, he believes geography will usher in a period of peace and stability. The rationale is that the power structure in Asia will be a stable “bipolar” one, “characterized by Chinese dominance of mainland East Asia, and U.S. dominance of maritime East Asia.”[29] In his perspective, Beijing will have to assume a long term stable strategic status quo on its land borders to divert substantial resources to naval power.

In capability, Chinese Naval ability is fairly limited at present despite the US deep concern. China does not have any outpost naval bases abroad, which is necessary for out of area operation. As to weaponry and platforms, the major part of China’s naval combatants and equipment is rather outdated. Furthermore, China still lacks power-projecting capability. Though China’s conventional and nuclear submarine development, anti-ship ballistic missile capability, and development of aircraft carriers always riveted US attention, there is still huge gap compared with the US Navy.

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In modernization level of naval assets, PLAN is even inferior to that of Japan and India. China itself also openly acknowledged that it lagged far behind US navy in capability and will be unable to compete in the many years to come. Even the western scholars like Yung and Rustici who closely studied the PLAN capability concluded that China is “not close to developing into a global military power” and its equipment “woefully inadequate.”[30] The PLAN is expected to be able to conduct noncombatant contingency operations and low intensity conflict operations by 2020, but is far from becoming “a global military power with a robust power projection capability.”[31] Also according to Yung and Rustici, China, constrained by technical challenges and prohibitive costs, will at most construct a “second order fleet” for “coastal-water defense.” And in ability, China could not provide sufficient power to challenge US supremacy.[32]

In its operational capability, China’s navy is still failing to conduct exercises needed to develop its full potential capability. It continues to operate in the “brown” and “green” water rather than “blue” water for the most part. The escorting mission in Gulf of Aden, though enabling PLAN to experience more and learn more, does to provide experience that will be directly transferrable either to a Taiwan contingency or an out of area major combat operations.

Looking from the cultural perspective, China is generally an inward-looking power. Some Chinese experts points out that, looking from history, the stronger China became, the more inward-looking it became.[33] A typical example is Zheng He’s maritime expedition voyage in 14th century. His fleet reached South East, East Africa and Arabia. He went to so many countries without thinking of conquering one. And after this extraordinary feat, China turned its back to the sea and continued its continental development, and concentrated on its own matters. Even Ross admitted that China is a satiated power and feels little need to challenge the United States in the high seas.[34]

Many China skeptics may ask the question: what if China seeks to protect its Sea Lines of Communication, and exploit seaborne energy resources? It can be argued that China can seek alternatives, such as greater coal consumption and pipelines to Central Asia, to ease its dependence on seaborne energy imports. They are also concerned that China might wage a war against Southeastern Countries to seize Spratly Islands. The fact is that, though China retains its claim over the disputed Islands, it now adopts the policy of “shelving the dispute and jointly developing the resources.” Therefore, in this area, it does not, and will not in the near future, threaten US interest in this area.

Tentative Initiatives of Building Partnership

Chinese scholar Wang Jisi once commented that the two navies play key roles in avoiding grave conflict in the future between the US and China. And quite a few Chinese scholars tend to think that the Western Pacific, which is not so broad, will become a “sensitive zone” in testing the relationship between the “rising power” and the “hegemonic power.” Trade wars and dispute on human rights issues are dwarfed compared with frictions at sea between the two navies, which at times lead them to the brink of war.

Neither the US Navy nor Chinese Navy want to compromise their grand strategy. The United States wants to maintain its hegemony in Western Pacific, while the Chinese Navy is determined in military modernization and safeguarding its maritime interest. Now the two country’s “psychological sea boundaries” meet at the Western Pacific. However, on the other hand, China does not intend to challenge US hegemony. Even when decades later, when Chinese Navy develops its capability significantly and narrows the gap with the US Navy, and even China’s desire for larger maritime space expand, they need not necessarily become rivals. The US and China, being more interdependent economically and politically, need each other’s cooperation. The two navies can cooperate in both traditional security issues, like jointly maintaining regional stability, and cooperating in nontraditional security issues like tackling maritime terrorism and piracy. Based on this common understanding, there exists an opportunity for cooperation and even for the building of a partnership between the two navies.

Although the cooperation between the two navies has been insufficient in the past years, there has been a willingness for the two sides to start an engagement with each other. China’s Defense White Paper of 2008 also said the PLA Navy would cooperate with foreign counterparts to deal with non-traditional security threats. Academic

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meetings have also been held to address common maritime concerns with Chinese scholars.[35]

One effort requires of the two navies is to enhance mutual political trust and understanding. The US, as the much stronger force, takes more leverage and initiatives in boosting the relationship. The United States, actually, could change its way of thinking, trying to acknowledge the rise of China, which is an inevitable historical regularity, and should also accept the development of its navy. The United States should have a broader mind to understand that China, with its development of naval ability and economic interest, need a larger maritime space. On the part of China, as the variant that cause fluctuation of the naval relationship, should put itself into the shoes of America, and try to mitigate stimulation to the United States.

A workable mechanism should also be established for the two navies to conduct dialogue concerning issues of common concern, especially in emergencies. So far it has been fortunate that each time, the crisis or severe tension does not escalate into a war. However, given the frequent occurrence of similar frictions, a long-term dialogue should be conducted to enhance communication and diffuse difference. A workshop held in Newport in July 2009 discussed different perspectives held by the United States and China on the legitimacy of foreign military activities in a coastal state's EEZ.[36] For example, a maritime hotline could be established between two naval leaders, or regular conferences between the officers from two armies in different levels, and between scholars from two countries could be held, so as to conduct dialogue and ease tension when any emergency should arise. For example, Beijing and Washington held two days of maritime security talks in October 2010 in Hawaii, which serves as step to the thaw in military relations over the previous ten months.[37]

Another issue is to make a good start on less sensitive areas. The cooperation between the two navies should start at some issues that are not so controversial and contentious, such as non-traditional security issues like anti-piracy, crisis management, disaster relief and environmental protection. Also, if the real cooperation between the two navies is hard to be initiated, it can start from coastal guard cooperation or maritime cooperation. For example, China once sent personnel to be trained at US coastal guard schools, and US Coastal Guard has established high-level communication with several maritime enforcement sectors. A special and encouraging cooperation was that USCG and China's Agencies of Marine Fisheries Law enforcement conducted two joint search and rescue exercise in 2006 and 2007 in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

China's Navy and the US Navy are neither partners nor rivals at the moment, but the tendency is taking on a competitive look. To avoid rivalry and enhance the opportunity for partnership, the two navies need to further their engagement with each other to improve mutual understanding, and to ensure timely information exchanges when emergencies happen.

Considering the scale of Chinese and US militaries, and the scale of the two economies, which are large enough to influence the East Asia region, or even the whole world, both countries are aware that confrontation does no good to either side.

However, because of the deep mutual mistrust from both sides, especially the US concern over China's military build-up, friction and cooperation will coexist in the development of the China-US naval relationship. Only when their political mutual trust reaches a high level, can the two countries' military relationship really stride forward. If not, it will only continue as it has been over the last 30 years, in a stop-and-go cycle. Whether the US and Chinese Navies can avoid conflict and seek cooperation depends on the strategic wisdom of the leadership of both nations.

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *China’s Navy 2007*, Washington DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, p. 115.

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[14] *Ibid.*, P. 116.

[15] “Chinese navy urged to go from coastal waters to oceans,” *News.xinhuanet.com*, Mar 7, 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/07/content_10963412.htm.

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[17] Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 325.

[18] Ronald O’Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress,” 23 Dec 2010 , Congressional Research Service, 7-5700. pp. 7-17.

[19] Mihai-Silviu Chirila, “DF 21D – the Carrier-Killing Missile”, *U.S. News*, Aug 6, 2010.

[20] Ronald O’Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress,” p. 5.

[21] DOD states that “China continues to rely on foreign suppliers for some propulsion units and, to a lesser degree, fire control systems, cruise missiles, ship-to-air missiles, torpedo systems, sensors, and other advanced electronics.”

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(2010 DOD CMSD, p. 44.)

[22] Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," p. 3.

[23] 2010 DOD CMSD, p. 33.

[24] For example, Adm. Robert F. Willard, head of the U.S. Pacific Command, called the PLAN's modernization "aggressive," and Senator Jim Webb of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee declared that only the "the United States has both the stature and the national power to confront the obvious imbalance of power that China brings" to situations such as the claims to the Spratly and Paracel islands.

[25] Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, 7-5700.

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[27] James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese naval strategy in the 21st century*, Routledge, New York, 2008. p. 7.

[28] Ibid. p. 113.

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[31] Ibid.

[32] James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese naval strategy in the 21st century*, P. 114.

[33] See, for example, PLA Gen Zhu Chenghu's Interview in a TV program *Dialogue*, CCTV 9, 9 Jan 2001.

[34] James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese naval strategy in the 21st century*, p. 36.

[35] For example, in March 2010, a conference entitled a "Dialogue on Maritime Strategy," sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation was held in Beijing between US Naval War College scholars and Beijing University scholars. <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2010/04/naval-war-college-faculty-engage-with-chinese-scholars-and-navy-at-peking-university/>.

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Written by: Wang Yinghui
Written at: Nanyang Technological University in Singapore
Written for: Geoffrey Till

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