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Language Hierarchy, Buddhism and Worldly Authority In Yunnan, Laos, etc.

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an independent scholar of Pali (巴利语),
the canonical language of Theravada Buddhism.



巴利语
专研云南老挝泰国
柬埔寨斯里兰卡等地之
碑文和贝叶经文



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Lecture Room
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Language Hierarchy, Buddhism and Worldly Authority In Laos, Yunnan, etc.

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§1.

When Cambodia gained its independence from France, a concerted effort was made to replace French loan-words with ancient-sounding neologisms: new Cambodian words were coined through the combination of Pali parts.¹ This reflects a tradition that can be traced back through several centuries of adapting the unfamiliar syllables of Pali and Sanskrit into more indigenous-sounding forms; it also reflects a unique era of optimism when European colonialism seemed to have come to its end—an optimism that proved to be painfully brief. In the past century, the ancient, dead language of Pali has had a rather lively role in mainland Southeast Asia: it has not only been used to expunge French words from Cambodian, but also to expunge Thai words from Lao, and Lao words from Thai. While Pali is an equally foreign language to all of the countries and cultures concerned, it has retained its status as a touchstone of cultural authenticity for all. This paper reflects on the basis of that sociolinguistic perception in more tangible relations of authority.

§2.

For a European audience I think it is quite necessary to clarify that groups of the same language family are not naturally inclined to peace, and language difference does not necessarily entail genocide. Recent studies by Volker Grabowsky² have shown us just how bitterly various closely-related and overlapping ethnolinguistic groups have contested their kingdoms' territories in Northern Laos (the *Tai Neua* and *Tai Lue* are an instructive example); when one of the main stakes of war is the enslavement and looting of the losing side, this antipathy is little wonder. This suffices to say that common language classification is not an indicator of ethnic harmony. The mode of dominion that broached ethnic differences is rather more surprising. I would here quote a primary-source description of how this worked in the 1890s, a time when Thailand was trying to exert its dominion over indigenous peoples who had previously had more to do with the then-fallen powers of Southern Laos and Vietnam:

[In the tiny villages near Lao Bao] They tell me that the Siamese who are occupying their country have given the following orders: to take a census of persons of adult age (with an eye to imposing taxes); to go twice annually to [the principality of] Ubon to swear allegiance before the governor or, remaining at home, to drink sacred water that will be brought to their villages by the heads of the Siamese posts... and to trade only among the chau or with Siam. [...] In addition, they have a superstitious fear of this oath because of the paraphernalia surrounding it. All the civil servants and Siamese soldiers are gathered in a temple. They lead forth the headmen who are to take the oath. The monks chant prayers. A secretary or a monk reads the text of the oath; the headmen repeat it and process before the kha luong (Siamese commissioner), dipping their fingers into a cup filled with water from a river into which have been plunged arms [sic?] and powder and which the monks have

¹ Jacob, 1993, p. 155 *et seq.*

² e.g., Grabowsky, 1999; he has been prolific in the decade since, cf. his more recent contributions to: Goscha & Ivarsson (eds.) 2003, and Harris (ed.), 2007.

*cursed for those who fail to observe the submission ordered them. They then prostrate themselves before the King's portrait, and each man drinks a cup of the sacred water during which the monks recite verses in Pali. [...] Finally, he distributes pewter betel boxes... decorated with illuminated portraits... of the King and Queen of Siam. This is, perhaps, a measure that should be imitated by us [viz., the French!]*³

The incoming Thai conquerors were trying to extend their territory to what is now the Vietnamese border just as the French were trying to expand their empire in the opposite direction: thus, we have this description from a man who is trying to understand the social structure of authority in order to place his own side at the head of it. In this scenario, we have Pali as the bond of fealty between feudal master and local chieftain. The same written record documents that the Thai side had set up stone border-markers as part of their frontier policy in the same disputed region (it is possible these inscriptions were also in Pali; they were in Thai letters, but are reported as having been illegible to the Frenchman). The presumption of the Thai conquerors was that Pali would be respected, or at least feared, as both the legal and religious language of their conquered peoples, as if it were the common heritage of the continent as a whole: to some extent, the French presumed this, too, in establishing their own tradition of Pali scholarship in Phnom Penh, to produce a Pali canon under French patronage, to thus identify their own rule with the top rung of the language hierarchy.

§3.

What I would indicate with the term "Linguistic Hierarchy" is not symbolic, but an aspect of worldly authority as real as bureaucracy or police brutality: an exclusive emphasis on symbolic aspects of social structure has resulted in commonplace and almost mystical distortions in European scholarship on Southeast Asia. This is a problem that goes back to the bad old days of history written in the French Colonial tradition, but has continued through several stages of adaptation down to the present. In a paper of 2008, I drew attention to the fact that a very recent work of sociology had entirely omitted any mention of slavery or feudalism, and evaded any study of the extant legal texts, to then argue that pre-modern Southeast Asia was neither home to "oriental despotisms" nor to "bureaucratic states";⁴ such an argument rests wholly on the assertion of symbolic aspects of kingship as providing a sufficient picture of social structure, while

³ Lemire, 2008, p. 29-30 (the source is speaking in the present tense of 1893). This account could be compared to indigenous sources as diverse as the 1563 Dan-Sai inscription (*viz.*, describing a ritual to seal the border agreed upon by the kings of Thailand and Laos) to the 11th century "oath of fealty" sworn to Cambodia's King Suryavarman I (and immortalized in stone, cf. Sharan 2003, p. 156, reproducing Majumdar's earlier work).

⁴ The sociology alluded to is: Rehbein, 2005. My own earlier paper argued that the "thesis" that Southeast Asia had no borders prior to the arrival of Europeans was rather too convenient for European Imperialists (who openly sought to re-draw the map of the sub-continent) and that more recent support for such "theories" had continued to ignore palpable evidence to the contrary (e.g., stone inscriptions and indigenous, written history, etc.).

excluding other evidence. Indigenous legal texts are indeed pre-requisite evidence in evaluating the extent to which a government was "bureaucratic" or even "despotic" in any given period. I must add that these sources cannot be treated as value-neutral artefacts, either: on that continent as on this one, the laws have been written by conquerors (along with most of the stone inscriptions). It is appealing to pretend that the importance of Latin is the result of some ideal represented by the language itself, yet the relationships between language strata have (in fact) been defined and re-defined through a history comprising war, slavery, feudalism, religious authority and revolution. My point here becomes obvious when we turn to cultural examples that are no less alien, but less glorified: the significance of having a Francophone police force in Quebec means that the Québécois do not have to fear being interrogated in English. The question of what language we write laws in is not symbolic: the Québécois do not want to live in fear of police and administrators who speak the language of their conquerors. Meanwhile, the speakers of Cree, Ojibwe and other languages indigenous to Canada definitely do live in fear of interrogation from police officers speaking exclusively the languages of foreign colonists. I may mention that the law of England is also written in a foreign language: that of the Norman French.

§4.

At roughly the same time as the Norman conquest of England (1066) India was conquered by Islamic armies, from North to South, starting in the year 1001. The campaign of religious persecution that ensued resulted in the fractured map of the Buddhist world that we have today—with far-reaching effects for Pali in Southeast Asia. The incineration of the Buddhist homeland in Northern India was prelude to a long period of warfare. India was largely consolidated under Islamic rule by the 1340s, though the last Hindu area to resist Muslim dominion fell in 1565 (in the far South). While it may be appealing to pretend that Sri Lanka was spared this devastation, the island was in fact at the nadir of a sequence of wars during the same period. There was a war to expel Hindu armies of occupation (the Chola Dynasty) from 1065-70, then a devastating civil war from 1114 to 1153; thereafter, the island was again conquered from the Hindu mainland in 1215. I recently put together an encapsulation of this history for an audience of Chinese academics,⁵ in part to demonstrate why it is that Pali manuscripts found in Southeast Asia are historically significant at all: there were already several centuries of warfare (with aspects of religious persecution) that had enfeebled the island prior to the Portuguese conquest of the lowlands in 1505, and prior to the incineration of Buddhist manuscripts in the highlands by King Rajasingha (a Hindu by conversion, ruling 1581-1592).⁶ This centuries-long process of material devastation and religious persecution had reduced Sri Lanka to being an importer of Pali manuscripts from the Southeast Asian mainland; the island

⁵ This forthcoming article (2009?) is titled: 巴利文的消失: 一个实用的指南, and will appear in the Journal of Ethnic Minority Studies published by Yunnan Nationalities University (云南民族大学).

⁶ For an alternate account of Rajasingha the first, cf. Strathern, 2007, p. 183 *et seq.*

was then attempting to recoup its lost cultural heritage while under foreign dominion. From the opposite perspective, the Southeast Asian mainland had lost both the source of their religious texts and the source of their interpreters.

§5.

The scenario for Southeast Asia's "dark ages" is thus much simpler than the equivalent for Europe, as it was first constructed by Henri Pirenne:⁷ Theravāda Buddhism had lost both its Jerusalem and its Rome. A string of civilizations along the Mekong suddenly had nowhere to look for their religion except to themselves. Much of the "mystery" supposed for the ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism over Hinduism in this period seems much less mysterious in this context. How could Cambodia have possibly continued to import its eclectic mix of Indian religions, when they ceased to be exported from India? On the other hand, how could Brahmanical Hinduism have continued if cut off from its sources? The last Sanskrit inscription at Angkor (called K300) is within the reign of a king who ascended the throne in 1327. While the speculative history of the wars between Cambodia and Thailand at this time may be fruitful in explaining the history of Thailand, this cannot explain the disappearance of Sanskrit in Cambodia, whereas the history of what was happening in India at precisely the same time simply does. From 1336, the Southern Sultanates were pressing into the Deccan, assailing the defensive "Bloc" of Vijayanagara—the last foothold of resistance against the Islamic-ruled North. While neither Hinduism nor Mahāyāna Buddhism entirely disappeared from the Indian subcontinent, in this period they ceased to operate as the flourishing export industry that the Kings of Cambodia had become accustomed to. Writing in 1944, R.C. Majumdar was impressed with the range of Sanskrit verse and grammatical constructions he found in Cambodian inscriptions, and pointed out a few places that definitely allude to the Sanskrit Grammarian Pāṇini.⁸ The rapid disappearance of such Sanskrit scholars suggests to me that they were just as much visitors from India as Majumdar himself; the scribes did not represent a separately sustainable school of grammar, nor a language that had a reading public who could continue in literary production when cut off from India. The Cambodian and Indian timelines would thus seem to coincide: Pali was of increasing importance in Cambodian loan-words from the 11th century onward,⁹ and after the last known Sanskrit inscription of 1327, Theravāda Buddhism somehow gained ascendancy (and then a near-monopoly) in the century or so that followed.¹⁰ We need neither attribute the cause nor the effect of this change to the "Tai" people, who were then actively invading and migrating into much of what we now call Thailand. The incoming Tai had no source of Buddhist tradition other than India, Sri Lanka, or, more directly, the adjacent kingdoms who had already "purchased" this culture from the same (such as the Cambodians themselves). This sort of assumption

⁷ Pirenne, 2001, *scil.* a thesis famous since its first publication in 1937.

⁸ Majumdar, 1944, p. 88 *et seq.*

⁹ Jacob, 1993, p. 151

¹⁰ I note that Vickery, 2004, interprets an inscription of 1308 as the first appearance of formal, royal patronage for Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia (see esp. p. 5).

should be obvious, but has been utterly obfuscated by nationalist histories: the official history of Thailand, even in its most recently-rewritten form,¹¹ claims that India's emperor Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries directly to "Thailand" and that the Thais therefore have their own Buddhist tradition dating back to antiquity. Apart from the fact that this is false, there were no Thais in Thailand in the 3rd century B.C.; at that early date, apart from the arrival of the Champa on the coast of what is now Vietnam, all of mainland Southeast Asia was ethnically and linguistically an unbroken "Mon-Khmer block".¹²

§6.

I would now like to move from the relatively vast scale of language migrations (that we tend to imagine from the bird's eye view of the cartographer) to the situation on the ground looking up. While I have very broadly compared some language relationships between continents, it is important to remember that the different language families within Southeast Asia are far more alien to one-another than English is to French, and more alien than French is to Latin. All of the languages on the Southeast Asian mainland are more estranged from Pali than English is from the same: neither Cambodian nor Lao nor Burmese is an Indo-Aryan language (nor Indo-European); moreover, each of them belongs to a family separate from the other two mentioned. This situation is, naturally, somewhat baffling to Western scholars, and ever since Edmund Leach we have been wrestling with the problem of the thoroughly-mixed yet deeply-divided map of languages native to Southeast Asia. Leach proposed an ecological theory of language geography, arguing that the different forms of agriculture and family structure suited to the climates found at various elevations were more enduring than ethnic or linguistic distinctions.¹³ This is entirely false, but has been extremely influential, down to the Lao government's own classification of ethnicities by "altitude" and ecological niche, rather than by language family. Leach's error relied on (firstly) conflating the Shan with the Kachin and other fundamentally different groups and (secondly) disregarding all evidence for historical waves of migration to then treat the variegated population he found as all equally indigenous. This brings us back to the great truth that not all tribal peoples are indigenous and not all indigenous peoples are tribal.¹⁴ What is everywhere known but nowhere in the national interest to broadcast is that the Mon-Khmer are the indigenous people of the sub-region, and the other language

¹¹ So far as I know, the most recent attempt to re-write Thailand's official history is on permanent display at Bangkok's N.D.M.I. (National Discovery Museum Institute), and is politely posed as a challenge to earlier modes of nationalist pseudo-history associated with Prince Damrong and Luang Wichitwathakan.

¹² Vickery, 2005, p. 14; NB the advent of Champa culture on the mainland is dated very roughly, within a range of a few centuries.

¹³ Leach, 1973; cf. Tambiah, 2002, p. 122 *et seq.* The latter provides a critique of the former, but, in my opinion, remains entirely too flattering, e.g., as to the classification of the Shan.

¹⁴ The trajectories of the Akha, Lisu, Hmong, etc., all provide well-documented examples of this from the most recent few centuries (which is "not to mention" migrations of sub-groupings within the Tai language family, also illuminating, e.g., the Tai Dam and Phuan).

families now present arrived in later migrations that are not terribly mysterious and certainly are within recorded history. As one rare admission of this in official discourse, I noted with some astonishment that the new museum of ethnic minorities in Luang Phabang (Northern Laos) says that the Mon-Khmer are the original inhabitants of Laos (with still-tribal groups like the Khmu given as examples of this indigenous ethnos): the National Museums of Thailand, by contrast, are always very careful to evade the admission that the Thais are not indigenous to the nation now named after them.

§7.

I do not mean to suggest that language hierarchy is something that exists in the minds of men as a constant, oppressive presence: it is only when some crisis arises that we turn our attention to it, and become aware that we are beholden to a set of definitions stretching back over centuries of precedent. When someone stands accused of a crime, suddenly the meaning, origin and validity of such terms leaps to the fore, emerging from a world more often governed by tradition, obligation and informal cultural assumption. In our own language: who questions the precise meaning of a "tort" until they stand accused of it? Moreover, who in government took interest in the precise definition of "torture" before they were defending themselves against such indictments? Both terms are bad Latin, as mispronounced and re-defined in Norman French, with the real meaning only remotely related to etymology. The various canons of civil law in Southeast Asia drew their ultimate authority from analogy to the Pali Vinaya: I say "analogy" because, unlike other religions, the rules only concern the conduct of monks, and it usually takes quite a lot of imagination to construe any salience to worldly concerns such as a fair divorce settlement or a disputed inheritance. For persons in authority, the presumption is that they are conversant with the higher language and are working down to the local dialect. In the religious sphere, the storyteller is supposed to work from source-text to gloss to sermon, and in the administrative sphere the judge or lord is supposed to work from rule to precedent to application. This creates the powerful illusion that the rule itself exists as something inviolable apart from the mere conspiracy of men in power: the accused is expected to look up at the definition of his crime as something that existed from time immemorial, and that he cannot negotiate with, as the laypeople are expected to look up to the interpreters of their religion: the source text is both incomprehensible and above reproach. Of course, when the people in authority are illiterate in the sacred language, the ritual (to justify their prerogative) carries on just the same.

§8.

Historically, laying claim to this Pali authority was a game that almost anyone could play. Perhaps the best known example is the annexation of the Shan States by the Burmese, who, in so doing, forced the conquered to come into conformity with their own recension of the Pali canon; the re-assertion of Pali orthodoxy played a role in the re-assertion of Burmese dominion in the latter half of the 16th century. The creation of Central Thailand's own Pali orthodoxy (and the process

of subordinating the outer provinces to it) is a history that started late and still continues to this day; the French imperial project of creating a Cambodian Pali canon was to counter the threat of Thai influence and Thai annexation, a possibility demonstrated by Rama IV's reform movement (that extended beyond Thailand into both Laos and Cambodia) and by Thailand's occupation of Battambang. Inasmuch as these competing language hierarchies all intersect at the top, they are all comparable: they appeal to the authority vested in a particular edition of the Pali canon, with various layers of formal and informal diglossia, translation and adaptation descending therefrom (i.e., down to and including popularized forms such as operas and mural paintings, apart from the legislative uses already alluded to). In the 20th century, Communism has offered a more extreme challenge to these language hierarchies, while trying to retain other elements of Theravada Buddhism. In Laos, Communism was very much preoccupied with the relations between other language groupings (highland, lowland, etc.) in part because their victory over the Americans and Royalists had indeed come about through carefully managed inter-ethnic coalitions. Their solution to the riddle of Pali heritage was simple: completely eliminate written law, and completely vernacularize Buddhism. In the absence of written law, the traditional structure of village authority was thus given new scope and power in revolutionary Laos: local "headmen" or tribal leaders would rule in accordance with custom or their own sense of justice, and with the sentiments of the Communist Party, primarily known through the medium of radio. This may seem like a lot of scope for personal initiative, but the local leaders were largely appointed from the revolutionary heroes available for the task, who knew both the appropriate dialect and their "marching orders" as veterans of decades of war. Laos has more recently retreated to a system of free markets and written laws, but much of this neo-traditional system of local authority continues in the countryside. In one remote village I visited, a father had formally requested permission from the chieftain to murder his own son; this is clearly illegal, but the man who told me the story felt it was moral, because of the son's supposedly evil ways. Permission was granted, the murder committed, and, subsequently, both the father and the "headman" were called in, questioned, and given some kind of lenient sentence by more formal, legal authorities; formal recourse to such higher courts did not exist before roughly 1991, though I must imagine that interventions were made *ad hoc* by various Communist Party organs before that time. Alongside the ideal of a society without written law was the notion that Theravada monks would continue to exist, but without Pali: the vernacular chanting that was insisted upon by revolutionaries failed to supplant the old language, but instead became an adjunct to it. The form of traditional authority remained, but was incorporated into the structure of Communist social control. As of 2006, roughly 35% of all students in Laos are being educated in the monastic system.¹⁵ I must re-iterate: that is not 35% of male students, but 35% of

¹⁵ This percentage is of my own calculation, working from detailed figures distributed in a Lao Department of Education Report (2006); I do not believe the statistics were ever published in English, but they were intended to be, and are certainly public information (many such reports and pamphlets are shared with U.N. agencies, at conferences for charities, etc., in Vientiane, and are thus available but lacking publication data).

all pupils, of all ages and both genders. That alone indicates an enormous and highly influential role for Buddhist institutions in Communist Laos. Almost nobody learns to read Pali, but many learn to pretend that they can.

§9.

This outline of the situation in Laos is starkly different from the re-organization of society that took place in Yunnan to the north, or Cambodia to the south: it is extremely difficult to generalize about the interactions of Communism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia. My first inspiration in writing this lecture was the situation of the northernmost peoples of the "Tai" group who are now comprised as part of Communist China, because they stand at the midst of several competing claims to authority, each entailing its own language hierarchy. Chinese "frontier policy" has been to divide ethnic groups according to its own borders: the "Jingpo" of Yunnan were declared different from the Kachin who exist over the other side in Burma, with the difference between the two being neither language nor ancestry but the Sino-Burmese border. The "Tai Lue" and other groups formerly referred to as "Chinese Shans" were given the two identities of "Dehong Dai" and "Xishuangbanna Dai"—and each had a new writing system defined for it by the Chinese government. Many would gloss this new writing system as a tool to erase the "feudal" and Buddhist past, creating a purely vernacular syllabary, incompatible with Pali; however, I would instead impute the motive to the same frontier policy aforementioned. Simply, the Chinese are trying to create ethnic units that are distinctly and uniquely a part of Chinese territory, in contrast to the contiguous peoples on the other side of the Lao and Burmese borders.¹⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, of course, the policy on Pali was simply to incinerate piles of religious manuscripts (destroying anything reminiscent of feudalism, including much that was secular). The current course of "cultural rehabilitation" is actively fostering monastic schools under Communist Party control, and also venturing into indigenous language revival projects—even in collaboration with notorious Christian Missionary groups such as S.I.L. (the Summer Institute of Linguistics).¹⁷ Much as the Chinese have established an official church for Chinese Christians, with its headquarters in Beijing rather than Rome, the new policy of relative religious liberty has necessitated an official Theravada Church, where the decisive authority is in the Chinese language and answerable to Chinese political authorities. This is one of many subjects mentioned today that would merit a separate lecture (or a separate panel) to discuss fully. What I would here draw attention to is that the plurality

¹⁶ It should be needless to add that the relationship between orthography and ethnicity is tenuous at best (as even the relationship between written and spoken language requires careful scrutiny in the sub-region), and that language reforms of this kind are undertaken cerebrally, with clear political motives, not as an unexamined cultural reflex. For a European example, cf. the 19th and early 20th century assertion of a single system of orthography to unite Serbs and Croats in one nation (*viz.*, Yugoslavia), and the more recent dissolution of this system into two distinctive (written) languages.

¹⁷ For book-length treatments as to why S.I.L. is so infamous, see: Colby & Dennett, 1995, and Hartch, 2006.

of language hierarchies (within Theravada Asia) allows an interesting degree of religious choice between orthodoxies. In Dehong, Yunnan, monks who were officially part of the Chinese Communist curriculum were "secretly" making use of educational materials from Shan State, Burma, and learning something of both Pali and Buddhism from Shan and Burmese sources. The most compelling reason for this choice was the incoherence and incomprehensibility of the texts the Chinese Communists had managed to produce; even in the simple storybooks I saw that were part of official minority language revival policies, there were obvious errors of syntax that had a source no more difficult to explain than that the authors' first language was Chinese (and, very likely, they were not in a position to admit their limited ability in the language now under their administration). I was very briefly able to review a translation project that attempted to render "Dai" minority texts into Chinese, and even very simple words in Pali were transcribed phonetically—because the persons put in charge of the translation could do no more. The transliteration of the old, Pali-based script into the new, government-created script was one of the implicit purposes of that edition (fully 100 volumes long)—as part of the creation of a separate ethnic identity for the "Tai Lue" of Jinghong (*viz.*, the Xishuangbanna area of Yunnan). A general introduction by Dao Shuren (repeated at the start of each volume) carefully explains that while the contents of the manuscripts reproduced are Buddhist, they do not in any way contradict the principles of Marxist dialectical materialism, nor the development of our unique form of socialist economy with Chinese features, etc.—with a very different message for the reader to infer.

§10.

What I have called "Language Hierarchy" is used to describe social relations in terms of what is known and obeyed. While this framework may be inapplicable to some social contexts, it is at least revealing for some others. In England, even the most trivial legal claim requires the employment of lawyers. Why? Because lawyers can read the law. Already in the critiques of Jeremy Bentham (in the 1770s) this is described as a language hierarchy: a legacy of the Norman Conquest that preserves privilege for some, and is a massive waste of time and money for everyone else. This is neither unique nor peculiar to England: the legacy of a conquest a thousand years ago is still evident in the inscrutability of the laws to the people they govern. Social inequalities and cultural attitudes produced by conquest ensue long after the event of war itself: English law remains a mix of broken Latin and Norman French because there is a social elite that believes the law ought to be written that way. What Jeremy Bentham saw as flaws are instead valorized by the supporters of the legal system as if they were part of the beauty of the language itself: relations of authority are thus aestheticized—and so, become invisible, except when a crisis calls them into question. Sociolinguistic attitudes of this kind are rarely questioned and so are even more rarely susceptible to change.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time.

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