



The Publishing and Distribution System of Japanese *Manga* and *Doujinshi*

Hadi Akbar Dahlan¹

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Abstract

The popularity of Japanese comics or better known as *manga* had reach worldwide. The production of *the manga* had also led to the creation of derivative products such as animated series and *doujinshi*. However, most readers outside Japan accessed these media in a translated format that is published independently from the original publisher. As such, many of the readers might not know the distribution system of the original media. In this paper, we discussed the distribution of *manga* and *doujinshi* in Japan. These include discussions regarding the general overview of the *manga* industry, the different types of published *manga* and *doujinshi*, as well as their distribution system. Lastly, this paper also discussed briefly what is the unique characteristic of the Japanese *manga* and *doujinshi* industry.

Keywords Publishing industry · Conventions · Publisher · Japanese *manga* · *Doujinshi*

Introduction

Japanese comics or better known as *Manga* is now known globally. The consumption of *manga* by various people had led to the popularization of selected Japanese culture. However, since *the manga* is an original work in the Japanese language, the consumption of Japanese *manga* for most international readers is via translation. This consumption of *manga* by international readers could be via translation by either a publisher (translated through proper channel with the original publisher in Japan) or fan translation (bordering on illegal translation works) [1].

Alternative to *manga*, *doujinshi* is another derivative work that may or may not derived from a *Manga* series. *Doujinshi* is also a graphical work like *manga* but may

✉ Hadi Akbar Dahlan
hadiakbar1591@rocketmail.com

¹ Department of Biotechnology, Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka University, 2-1 Yamadaoka, Suita, Osaka 565-0871, Japan

or may not follow the mainstream *manga* publication standards (in terms of artistic expression, panel distribution, printing standard). *Doujinshi* creators are usually artist that not only appreciating a particular artwork but also actively engaging in communicating and monetizing their works [2]. One similarity between *doujinshi* and *manga* is that these graphical works were also consumed by the international readers via a similar translation route of *the manga* mentioned above. One difference is that since *doujinshi* is a self-publishing work in Japan, most probably translation of *doujinshi* is via fan translation (that might be not approved by the original creator).

Works describing and discussing the translation works and issues of fan translation of *manga* (and *doujinshi*) including “gatekeeping” of *manga* distribution has been discussed elsewhere [3–6]. However, there are very few literatures about the distribution system of *manga* and *doujinshi*. The objective of this paper is to describe the distribution and circulation of *manga* and *doujinshi* in Japan.

The *Manga* Industry and Type of Published *Manga*

Based on published report, Japanese *manga* market is an industry constantly worth over 3000 million yen since 1991 [7]. Figure 1 shows the *manga* market trend of *Manga* (*tankoubon*), *Manga* magazines and digital *manga* from the year 1991 to 2020. The term *tankoubon* means standalone book and it can be regarded as the Japanese term for a paperback book. From the graph, we can see that trend of *manga* books sales is constantly in demand throughout the years. However, the trend of *manga* magazines is decreasing throughout the years. This is especially observed in the year 2020 which is probably due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The data start to record the digital publication in 2014 and from the data, the presence of digital *manga* will further reinforce the *manga* industry in the coming years. This also shows that *manga* readers are starting to change their mode of *manga* consumption from paper magazines to digital form, at least for serial *manga* series.

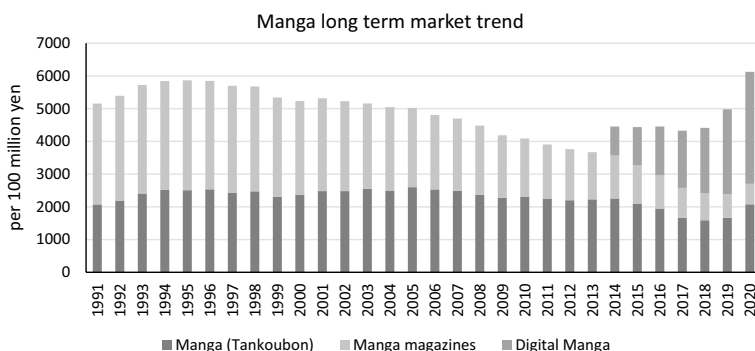


Fig. 1 Trend of the *manga* market trend for *Manga* (*tankoubon*), *Manga* magazines and digital *manga* from the year 1991 to 2020

As we mentioned before in the graph, there 2 types of *manga* publication in general: *Manga* magazines and *Manga tankoubon*. The first, *Manga* magazines are a magazine that collects several episodic *manga* series in a published issue. One famous example of *manga* magazines is *Shonen Jump* (Now known as *Weekly Shonen Jump*). However, there are many types of *manga* magazines being published in Japan. The various types of *manga* magazines are published according to their target market. For example, *Shonen Jump* is marketed toward Male teenager readers, while another *manga* magazine named *Super Jump* is marketed toward young adults (*Seinen*). Therefore, there are many *manga* magazines published aimed toward specific demographic and each *manga* magazines contain a collection of various serial *manga*.

Although not officially claimed, such a publication strategy aims to persuade a reader who wants to read a specific *manga* series to always buy the *manga* magazine where the specific *manga* series was published. To make matters complicated, the 2 examples mentioned; *Shonen Jump* and *Super Jump* are published by one publisher; Shuiesha. There are many *manga* publishers, and each publisher published its specific *manga* magazines. Wikipedia had a record of *manga* magazines complete with the publisher, demographic information [8].

The next *manga* type discussed in Fig. 1 is *Manga tankoubon*. *Manga tankoubon* are collections of a specific *manga* series. Usually, a *manga tankoubon* is a collection of specific *manga* series from *manga* magazines. But there are also *manga* stories that are directly printed into *manga tankoubon* or a *manga tankoubon* that collects serial *manga* from online-only serialization (from a personal blog or comic websites). The latter is usually termed as comic essay. Like *manga* magazines, the *manga tankoubon* are published by various publishers. Since *Manga tankoubon* is published by an officially registered publishing company, the *tankoubons* are considered as an official publication record for the *manga* creator. Currently, there is a digital database that published the records of all published *manga* and such effort had contributed to new technology and applications in the field of Information science [9, 10].

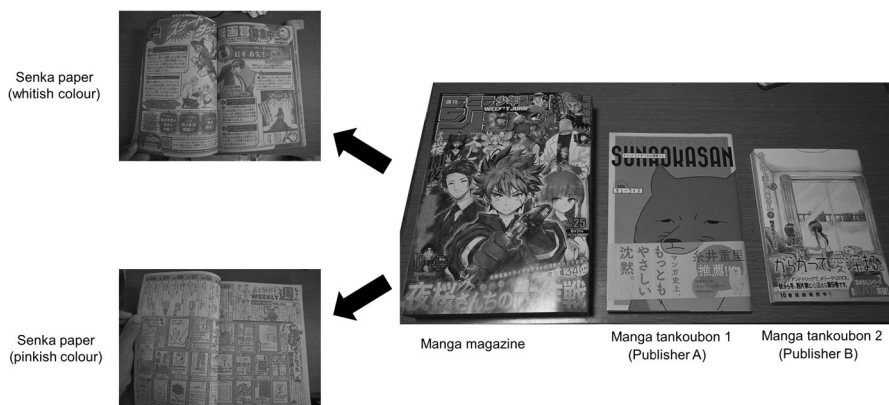


Fig. 2 Example of different types of *manga* published

Since all publishers have their practices in publishing *manga*, the type of paper used for printing in both type of *manga* is also different (Fig. 2). The type of paper reflects the price of the *manga* (for both *manga* magazines and *manga tankoubon*). *Manga* magazines are printed on recycled paper called *Senka* paper. The *Senka* papers are usually de-inked papers. Because the quality of repeated de-inked papers will deteriorate (the paper will become darker), *senka* papers are usually coloured to disguise the deteriorating quality (Fig. 2). The reason why *manga* magazines used the *senka* papers is that *manga* magazines are printed on the premise that they will be disposed of as soon as they are read. Therefore, the publisher used *senka* papers to keep printing cost low.

As for *manga tankoubon*, these are published in various format (according to the publisher's own internal standard). Regardless of printing size, the *manga* is printed on normal white papers (Fig. 2). However, these kinds of papers will become yellowish with time (or if without proper storage). Therefore, some publishers use higher quality white paper that can prevent that. The type of paper used is reflected in the price of the *manga tankoubon*.

Manga Distribution Channel

Although not commonly discussed elsewhere, it is interesting to observe the distribution channel for both physical and digital *manga*. Figure 3 shows the distribution channel for both physical and digital *manga*. The figure was based on collected information from presentations from peoples in the Japanese publishing industry [11–14].

For distribution of physical copies, the *manga* are sold through various channel. Prospective readers can buy *manga* from bookstores, convenience stores or even online. However, the *manga* listing differs according to locations. Smaller shops (such as kiosks at the train station) and convenience stores usually only sell a very small and selected listing of *manga*. These listing of *manga* are only from major popular publishers and even then, they sell famous *manga* titles only. This is the reason why people can purchase “One Piece” *manga* almost everywhere but might be

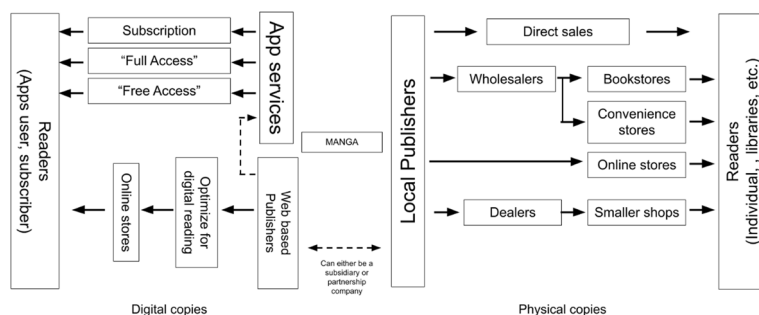


Fig. 3 General distribution channel for both physical and digital *manga* in Japan

difficult to purchase a lesser-known *manga* series from *manga* corner at convenience stores.

Larger listing of *manga* can be seen at major bookstores. Examples of major bookstores in Japan include Tsutaya, Kinokuniya, Maruzen & Junkudo to name a few. The listing of *manga* in these bookstores are extensive to the extend they might occupy a whole floor or dedicated sections only for *manga* books. The sections within the *manga* section might be divided according to the audience (shounen, shoujou etc.) and arranged the *manga* listing according to publisher's name. However, for more complete listing, readers can choose to purchase directly to the publishers usually via online web stores.

Some publishers have also converted the printed serial *manga* to digital format. Some *mangaka* only produced their *manga* digitally and distributed it via digital platform only. Since the type of paper is irrelevant in digital format, the access to *manga* differs. The access to digital *manga* differs according to the digital platform.

A digital platform could be a basic website with access to a database of digital *manga*. Access to these digital *mangas* could be monetized via a subscription model. For example, a publisher might produce a *manga* magazine in a digital format. The only way a reader to access is to subscribe to the publisher to read the digital *manga* magazines.

Besides the normal subscription model, there are also “free access” model where the earlier or selected chapters of a *manga* series is freely accessible. However, subsequent chapters require readers to pay some fees. Another variation of “free access” model is a “ticketing system” where readers are required tickets to read an episode. The method to obtain tickets might be by playing an online mobile game (which are included with the app itself). These are standard model for digital platform. Example of “free access” model is *Manga ONE*, a digital *manga* app by *Shogakukan* and *MANGA plus*, a digital *manga* app by *Shueisha* for an international audience.

However, there are also digital platform that are only image hosting with free access for all readers (certain digital platform requires registration). I termed this model as “full access” since readers can read the whole published serial *manga* to the latest episodes. One example of “full access” model is *Manga Tounshoukan Z* [15] which provide full access reading of all listed *manga* in the website. The *manga* listing in this website also includes old and finished *manga* series as well as out of print *manga* series. Contrary to “free access” model, majority of *manga* in the “full access” model is published only in digital format. However, if a digital *manga* in the “full access” is popular, it could be republished to physical copies as *manga tankoubon* by a publisher (possibly unrelated to the company that host the digital platform).

Besides the *manga* app, there are also digital *manga* that had been formatted with common digital e-book format. In this case the digital *manga* is sold akin to digital *manga tankoubon* instead of the episodic model mentioned above. These digital *manga* are usually sold at online marketplaces such as Amazon and Kindle or from the publishing company itself. One interesting to note is that this kind of digital format had appeared as earlier as the year 2000 [16], but the popularity of reading

digital *manga* only start to increase during the rising use of *manga* mobile applications in the late 2010s.

“Layers” of Publishing Companies

The discussion regarding the general distribution route of *manga* seems to indicate a linear network between *manga* creator and *manga* publishing company. However, the route to publication for each *manga* type actually involves several publishers. These several publishers are usually from the same parent company, but each publisher is responsible for the publication in a specific format.

For example, a parent company might handle the editorial and communications with the *mangaka* for the publication of a *manga* series in a *manga* magazine. Another subsidiary of the company might be focused on publishing a *tank-oubon* format of the *manga* series. Then, another subsidiary company might focus on distributing a *manga* series to the digital format. There are hundreds of publishing companies in Japan. Each of these companies might have different type of “company layers”, depending on the size of the company and the “strength” of their *manga* series. Considering all of these, it is no wonder that *manga* industry is a very big industry in Japan.

Doujinshi—The Manga Alternative

As we discussed above, the *manga* industry is a big and complex industry. It is understandable that there will be artists that do not share the perspective to conform to the various publishing standards employed by the *manga* industry. With this, these *manga* creators might pursue another path, which is by producing *doujinshi*.

Doujinshi as mentioned in the introduction section meant self-published works. However, the author needs to mention that *doujinshi* does not necessarily mean self-published *manga*, but various works that are self-published. This might include, musical works, illustrations, games and many more. But for the sake of this article, the author will focus on the self-published *manga* aspect instead of the overall *doujinshi* concept.

It is also very difficult to discuss types of *doujinshi* because there are no standards to conform to for *doujinshi* products. Unlike *manga*, the printed paper, the dimensions, quality of the artwork entirely depending on the creator’s choice. However, it is commonly agreed that there are some common *doujinshi* types (in terms of dimension or printing quality) if the creator distributes them through the same distribution channel. This might include printing on a printing shop specializing in *doujinshi* publications or marketing their works at *doujinshi* shops. These will be discussed in the next section.

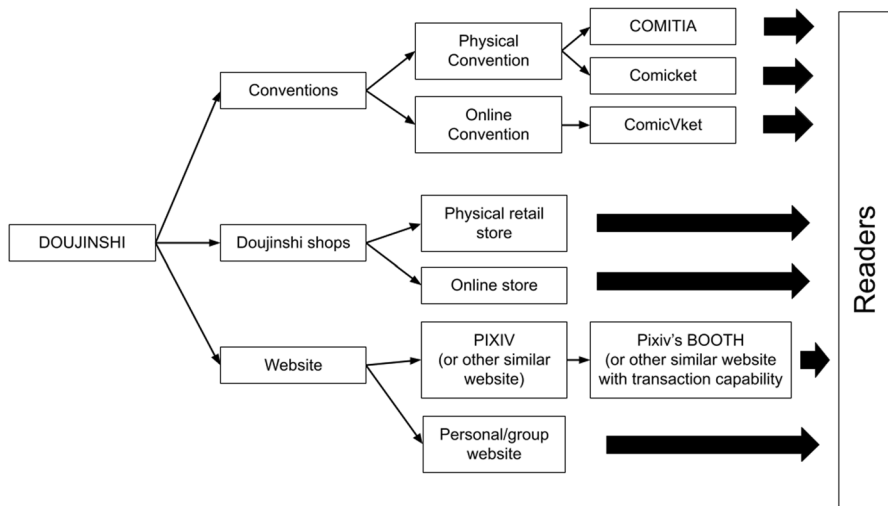


Fig. 4 General distribution channel for *doujinshi* in Japan

Distribution of *Doujinshi*

Although it is a self-published work, the distribution of *doujinshi* is also complex but organized. Figure 4 shows the general distribution path of *doujinshi*. The advent of printing technology for personal use in the early 1970s led to blooming *doujinshi* production by many aspiring artists. Not soon after, a huge convention serving as a marketplace for these *doujinshi* started to be organized [17]. These conventions became one of the popular distribution channels for *doujinshi*. There are many conventions, but the major conventions include Comiket and Comitia. The creator (individual or groups) will create, print, and sell their works directly to fans at these conventions. It is important to note that the convention only prepares the venue and basic facilities to nurture interaction with fans for the creators [18]. Everything else is at the expense and effort of the creator (marketing, printing materials, cash changes etc.). Recently, due to the global pandemic, a virtual convention aptly named ComicVket was organized. ComicVket is a virtual convention where fans can participate and buy digital *doujinshis* in virtual reality [19]. This is the first virtual event for such a convention and could be an alternative to real conventions in the future.

Besides conventions, creators can sell their *doujinshi* at shops. However, bookstores only sold books that are from registered commercial publishers. Since *doujinshi* are not commercial publishers, their work is not sold in bookstores. Instead, there are specialize bookstores (or *doujinshi* shops) that only sold *doujinshis*. These bookstores initially opened as a domestic *doujinshi* mail order service but then it grew to chain bookstores all over the country. Some bookstores only sold *doujinshi* (Example: “Comic Toranoana”) while there are shops that not only sell *doujinshi* but also commercial merchandise from registered animation companies (Example: “Animate” stores). Besides physical stores, the *doujinshi* bookstores also have online

stores like normal online bookstores. Although there are not much-published data regarding the online *doujinshi* bookstores, it is possible that the increasing demand for *doujinshi* leads to online *doujinshi* bookstores. However, not all *doujinshi* creators (individuals or group circles) joined the conventional way of *doujinshi* distribution system. Some *doujinshi* creators choose to distribute their creative artworks themselves. This includes setting their online marketplace or even negotiate to sell their artworks at selected locations. Some websites also include online payment system to sell their products directly to fans [20].

Doujinshi creators can also market their artwork products via digital art platform. One example of famous digital art platform in Japan is Pixiv. The function of PIXIV is similar to Deviant art and Artstation. However, Pixiv is much more focus toward creators in Japan (due to its user interface language). Pixiv also has much more service integrated for creators in Japan such as printing on demand service as well as delivery service. Such service is part of Pixiv Booth services.

Other Factors that Make Japanese *Manga* and *Doujinshi* Distribution System Unique

After discussing the distribution system of *manga* and *doujinshi* in Japan, then we can realize that the distribution system is unique. We will now summarize the unique points of the Japanese *manga* and *doujinshi* distribution system. We will also discuss several more points that were not mentioned before due to being unrelated to the topic discussed previously.

The Bookstores Corporation Strive to Improve Publishing Industry

We seldom heard about bookstores that create an impact on the publishing industry. Usually, it is publishing companies that make an impact on the publishing industry. For example, the challenge faced by J.K. Rowling in publishing the first Harry Potter series (by Bloomsbury in the United Kingdom). But in Japan, bookstores are the ones that develop the publishing industry [21]. The Japanese bookstore was among the earliest to established information retrieval service. This includes the continuous development of a database system for published books. This is useful for the publishing industry because it is not only useful for logistic application by bookstores and publishers but also by writers and customers to search for books [21]. We can guarantee that *manga* and *doujinshi* creator as well as *manga* and *doujinshi* industry also benefited from this system.

One of the major feature of Japanese publishing industry is the consignment selling system [21]. This means that bookstores can return unsold books and magazines to the publisher. However, this also means the logistic operation of book distribution is very complicated since many books are being published annually. In the *manga* industry alone, many *manga* magazines are being published at a different rate (some are weekly, some are monthly and so on) by different publishers. Because of this, the Japanese publishing industry, especially between bookstores and

publishers is always experimenting with new logistic systems [22]. We can be sure that *manga* titles are also included when testing an experimental logistic system.

Quick Adoption of New Local Systems by All Players in the *Manga* and *Doujinshi* Industry

Japan has several unique public systems that greatly convenience everyone. One example is Japan's convenience store. The concept of the convenience store was not initially a Japanese invention. However, the concept evolved when Japan adopted the concept [23]. The Japanese convenience store (regardless of the company) has a wide variety of personal services. This includes store pick up services, pay-at-store services, booking systems (for a wide variety of items, including products or tickets to events). This convenience system was quickly adopted by business entities in Japan including those in the *manga* and *doujinshi* industry. Convenience store in Japan is ubiquitous and almost every store can perform all the personal service. As such, a fan that lives far from the city can purchase *manga* or *doujinshi* online and received it at the convenience store near them.

The printing service provided as part of the personal service at convenience store also benefit *doujinshi* creators. As alternative to printing shops, *doujinshi* creator can print their *doujinshi* at the convenience store [24]. Although limited by printing machine available at the stores, *doujinshi* creators can plan their designed printed copies beforehand because all the printed options are listed at the website. Similarly, *doujinshi* creators can also utilize the convenience store as delivery service as well as store pickup service. This is a convenient logistic system for *doujinshi* creators.

The *Doujinshi* Convention

As mention before, *doujinshi* convention is organized quite early after the introduction of personal printing machines for personal use [17]. However, these *doujinshi* conventions do not only serve as a marketplace, but they grew to become an institution representing the *doujinshi* community. One of the convention organizers, Comicket had defined itself as a “space” that functions to accommodate anyone who wishes to participate and accept all forms of self-expression [18]. This statement of upholding creative freedom by a visible entity surely enables more artist to experiment, practice and produce more creative artworks. In fact, many famous *manga* creator starts from producing *doujinshi* [17]. Therefore, we can boldly say that *doujinshi* convention is a nurturing ground for budding *manga* artist.

Can this System be Replicated Elsewhere?

Based on the discussion, it seems impossible for this system to be replicated elsewhere. This because the system in Japan is embedded with the Japanese society itself. For example, the convenience store's personal services, the rapid publication of *manga* magazines, the distribution system ensures maximum reach to customers.

Although some aspects of the system have been replicated outside Japan, the magnitude and/or opportunities for the artists are simply different when compared to the ones in Japan. The current system is deeply oriented to the taste and needs of local artist and their fans. This results in high support and rapport by the community itself.

However, there is one weakness of this Japanese distribution system and that is the difficulty to officially translate a *manga* series or *doujinshi* from the Japanese language to a foreign language. This because the foreign entity that tries to obtain rights/permission might need to go not only to the bureaucracy of the layers of companies but also the creator themselves. Furthermore, not all Japanese publishers or *doujinshi* creators' group are able to enter communications with foreign publishers. This might be due to the size or preparedness of the company or simply not the current objective of the company itself. Alternative to official translation, the fan translation of a *manga* series usually only performed on popular *manga* series published in major *manga* magazines or selected based on the preference of the fan translator themselves. Regardless, the author believed that the main market of Japanese *manga* and *doujinshi* were aimed toward the Japanese population and not a foreign population. Therefore, the Japanese *manga* and *doujinshi* distribution system is already sufficient for their market and operations.

The term impossible only applies if we wanted to replicate the “Japanese” distribution system. The distribution system in Japan is an industry-developed from decades of cultivations of local talent and fans. The industry was also created for the Japanese population while welcoming foreign talents. It is still possible to replicate the system if the local comic industry elsewhere is focusing on developing and cultivating its own local talent. In other words, local industry outside Japan should not aim to replicate major points of the industry directly. For example, starting up a publishing company without networks or support of local artists and fans or trying to publish and sells a parody works to the mass. Some concepts and art philosophy from the Japanese *manga* and *doujinshi* industry are simply foreign to other culture. Instead, the local industry should start by replicating small aspects of the Japanese *Manga* and/or *doujinshi* industry. Some examples of this aspect include organizing conventions, facilitating small distribution of local zines to bookstores or shops, or even developing a local online marketplace for local creators. Any local industry that is starting such an endeavour should be proud and aim to continue to strive because their effort will be a steppingstone for the future.

Conclusion

The distribution system of *Manga* and *doujinshi* in Japan is unique. This because the system is a systemic system that involves various levels and details. This includes developing a distribution channel that maximizes reach to the audience to decide the type of paper for a different type of publication to ensure cost-effectiveness for publishing. The *manga* and *doujinshi* industry also adopt a local public system for the convenience of the readers. For example, the personal service at a convenience store in Japan can be utilized not only to order and pay for *manga* and/or *doujinshi* but

also to deliver and received as well. Another aspect that makes the industry uniquely Japanese is the active presence of various factors contributing to the development of the industry. This example includes the organization of the *doujinshi* convention. The *doujinshi* convention not only served as a major distribution channel of *doujinshi*, but also become an entity that upholds creative freedom for the creators. Therefore, the whole *manga* and *doujinshi* distribution system is very complex and hard to be replicated elsewhere. However, that should not be the aim of comic publishing industry outside Japan. The lesson to be taken here is to identify possible aspects to replicate from the Japanese industry and continuously developed it locally for future generation.

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