

# The Jesus Family in Communist China - Part 1

by Dr. D. Vaughan Rees

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*Dr. D. Vaughan Rees explores the resilience and faith of the Jesus Family in Communist China, highlighting their community structure and the role of children in their spiritual life.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 5:3, Psalm 119:105, Psalm 127:3, Proverbs 16:3, Proverbs 22:6, Isaiah 41:10, Ephesians 6:4, Ephesians 6:18, Colossians 3:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:16

**Topics:** "Christian Persecution", "Faith Communities"

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## Description

Dr. D. Vaughan Rees shares his experiences at MaChuang, a Christian center in China, where he witnessed the remarkable faith and dedication of the Ye-Su Chia-ting community. Despite Communist pressure, the community thrived, showcasing God's providence and protection over generations. The indigenous movement's commitment to prayer, truth-telling, discipline, and dedication to God from a young age is highlighted, emphasizing the transformative power of Christianity in their lives. The organization of the Home of Jesus reflects a self-sufficient, industrious, and prayerful community, where worship, work, and fellowship are intertwined seamlessly.

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## Transcript

MaChuang and the Ye-Su Chia-ting When Communist pressure forced the China Inland Mission hospital at Kaifeng in Honan to close early in 1948, the leaders of the Ye-Su Chia-ting -- the Home, or Family, of Jesus -- asked me to go North to Shantung province, to their centre, MaChuang. They wanted me to attend some wounded who had been gathered under their care. We evacuated from Kaifeng and flew to Shaihai. In the company of Heng-shin, one of the leaders of the Je-Su Chia-ting, I then went North to MaChuan, the centre of this indigenous movement.

While I was there attending to the wounded, the Bamboo Curtain came down, and I was compelled to stay there for nearly two years. If the account I give here of my experiences seems too perfect an account of weak human nature, then you must magnify the grace of God in them. I can scarcely say less than I am about to say. I would not withdraw any of it, or say anything else than that this is an inadequate account of a most exceptional and enthralling experience. p15 This Christian centre, by God's providence, was prepared for by the present leader's great-grandfather more than one hundred years ago, although, as a pagan he had no knowledge that he was carrying out God's purposes.

At that time, when a Chinese wished to sell a field, he placed a wooden stake in it, with an intimation to that effect written thereon. Anyone who picked up that piece of wood indicated by so doing his intention of

buying the field. The great-grandfather of Mr. Ching, the present leader, who was apparently very poor, was returning across the fields to his home one evening. Night was coming on, and in the dusk he stumbled over a piece of wood. firewood was scarce, so he picked it up and carried it home.

As he could not read the characters, he did not realize it was an offer of sale. Next day the owner of the field traced his piece of wood to Mr. Ching's great-grandfather, who was much perturbed to find himself liable for the piece of land. Chinese custom held him fast, and he had to scrape together enough money to pay the bill. That piece of land passed down through four generations and is now the headquarters of the Ye-Su Chia-ting. It was about three acres but through additions has now grown to its present size of forty to fifty acres and supports about five hundred people.

My journey with Heng-shin to MaChuang lay through scores of country villages so squalid that they are really beyond the conception of folk at home. It was a region in which trees were not plentiful, and my attention was attracted by a line of unusually fine trees in the distance. Through a gap I could see the roof of a large building. Heng-shin pointed to it and said, "That's our chapel!" p16 He passed the time during the rest of our slow journey across the plain telling me incidents in its building.

Local workmen could not cope with many of the problems involved in erecting a building capable of seating a thousand people. The roof was the biggest problem of them all. Chinese tiles are set in a matrix of lime and mud, spread about two inches thick on an enormous mat of woven bamboo. This mat was the problem. Try to imagine a stiff sail of sufficient size to cover a large church. It was all of one piece and woven without seam throughout. A hundred or more workmen, supporting the huge mat on their shoulders, moved by word of command up a specially erected frame.

There had to be no wind. But, to the consternation of all, a wind sprang up when the workmen were only halfway up the frame. The heathen present gloated, the Christians feared and prayed. As anticipated and feared, the wind lifted the ungainly thing clear of the shoulders of its bearers. There was a gasp of dismay, followed immediately by a cry of joy, It had descended exactly in position on the frame of the church. Angel hands could not have done it better. Conversation equally pleasant and informative whiled away the time until we reached a quagmire.

"This bog has troubled the district beyond living memory," said Heng-shin. "We are planning to mend it." While I was staying at MaChuang the plan was carried out and the bog was spanned by the best stone bridge in the district. Our mules eventually managed to drag their cart through. Now we could see our destination more clearly; houses and buildings could be seen through the dense growth of p17 trees. Suddenly a score or more children burst through them, determined to be the first to welcome us.

It was a lovely sight; they sang and danced and skipped as they ran. Tears came into my eyes. What a contrast to the poverty and squalor of the villages we had been passing through that day! I wondered at the variety and taste of their clothes. The grown-ups followed, walking in groups slowly and decorously as only Chinese do. They were all dressed poorly; no one dare do otherwise in Communist China. Their children's clothes were the outlet for their love of the beautiful. No greater contrast to them could be imagined than the filth, grime and rags of the village children we had seen on our way.

We entered the village through the dense barrier of trees. What heavenly wisdom their planting twenty or more years ago had been! The Communists hate walls. Most of the villages and towns in China were walled, but now most of these old defenses have been removed, often with dynamite and gun-fire. There must be no secrecy and no privacy, the Communists say, but their promise to prevent robbery has not

materialized, "Freedom from poverty will do away with sin" was their slogan.

The Christian villages need privacy, and they need protection. Who but God knew that only trees would do for this? So years ago, at the inception of the work, trees were planted very closely in a broad belt all around the village. They grew slowly and almost unnoticed. Now they formed an impenetrable wall, with some of the trunks a foot across. Immediately when the Communists came to power, they made the felling of trees illegal -- this was part of their p18 p18 IMAGE

new agrarian policy -- and so no zealous official dared touch these. The gateway into the village is a gap in the trees. The houses and gardens of the enclosure cannot be seen from the outside. Only the church roof can be seen through a gap where some of the trees have died. The cleanliness, order and apparent wealth of the community make all this necessary. It looks like one of the well-ordered foreign compounds once so common in China. p19 I could not help remembering Wesley's lament over his poor converts.

"How can I prevent those lately converted to Christ from becoming wealthy? The wasteful become frugal, diligence replaces sloth, and the loveless becomes loving. How can such people remain poor or indigent?" So it is in China, and this is one of the problems of the Homes of Jesus. "We cannot make all the improvements we would wish," said Mr. Ching to me one day. "As it is, the surrounding villagers are jealous of the progress we have made, and some of them would destroy us, if they could.

Imagine if the passers-by could see freely into our compound! Their cupidity would be aroused at once." Foreign pigs and a modern pigsty, a big Hereford bull and milch cows immediately met my eyes as we entered through the wall of trees. In Chinese villages glass is a rare curiosity. Here it is used in all the fowl houses. Electricity in China is unknown except in the big towns. Here the rooms have electric light, and over the big central well is an electric pump. In spite of the shelter of the wall of trees all their best machinery is hidden in the most unexpected places, hidden from prying and jealous Communist eyes.

As each new improvement was made, it was carefully camouflaged. The Communists are not the only ones who are adepts at conducted tours. While I was with them, these Christians showed the Communists only what they wished them to see, and invariably only the second-best was shown. They felt no need of window-dressing, a practice so common behind the Iron Curtain. It was Heng-shin's job to conduct the sightseeing p20 Communists around. There were many things and places they never saw.

They were never taken into the machine-shop; I saw them being led past it on several occasions, when I chanced to be there. On one occasion they were being conducted under the trellised vines, and it was obvious that they were very interested in the hanging bunches of grapes. Suddenly one of them said to Heng-shin, "How do you prevent your people from stealing the grapes?" They had made stealing on their communal farms punishable by death, and yet stealing went on. The question was pressed, "How do you stop it?"

It was obvious to them that stealing was a thing of the past here, for there were the luscious bunches hanging as evidence. Heng-shin answered simply that if anyone had the Lord Jesus in his heart, then he would not steal. The tomtit, so the Chinese say, builds a secondary nest to deceive the cuckoo. These Christians had learned from nature's book and were always conspicuous in the secondary and less important places when the Communists arrived. I wondered when I was there, how much longer this would go on.

Indeed, it was not long after my departure that the cupidity of the Communists got the better of them. The Christians had a recognized birdcall which resounded all around the village when strangers arrived; their big dogs also gave tongue. (Believe it or not, they all believed that these dogs knew who was born again and who was not! Mr. Ching told me of one of their brethren from an outlying home who was dreadfully upset because the dogs had growled at him. "He confessed there was something wrong in his life and that he had grown lukewarm, and the dogs p21 knew it.") Immediately on the warning note each took up his prearranged place unnoticed.

Only once during my stay did I see any group of Communists break through the atmosphere which seemed to surround and protect these people. The hand of God, the quiet dignity and confidence which pervaded this place, subdued even the most truculent. Why should God-hating men stand for ten minutes with bowed heads while grace was being said? And ten minutes was a short grace before meals by their normal standards. They all prayed aloud, each as he or she thought fit. The invited Communists sat at a separate table. THE CHILDREN AT MACHUANG

The children's nurseries were a never-ending source of wonder to the Communists. They gave their greatest interest and closest attention to them. It was obvious that they

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p22 knew the importance of child indoctrination. I think what amazed them was the strictness of the discipline, and the responsive obedience and happiness of the children. Our modern psychologists seem to think that self-expression is a modern invention and sign of progress. No, the heathen world has used it ever since it became heathen; that is one of the marks of its heathenism. Why do the Chinese, on becoming Christians, immediately reject self-expression for themselves and their children?

The children were a joy to behold, and a testimony to the Communists above everything else in these God-honouring communities. Astonishment softened the most outrageous Communist, when he saw these little ones at mealtimes. In place of his own greed and disorder, each waited for the other. As each plate was filled, each little one began to pray, and continued with its head bowed and eyes closed until the last was served. Then chopsticks or spoons were raised and the meal began.

I have watched a hundred children at prayer and failed to find a wandering eye. I might mention four things that were novel to me: 1. There was a complete absence of toys and there were very few organized games. 2. The emphasis was placed by the teacher on singing. 3. The children were dedicated from their tenderest years to the deeper things of Christ. 4. The little boys and girls up to the age of six or seven all bathed in the open together. In reading Wesley's Journal some years ago, I was particularly struck with the fact that there was no provision made for organized games among the children of his Kingswood schools.

Remarkable indeed is it that I should p23 meet the same system among these Christians in China, for none of them had read Wesley's Journal. They are producing the same fruit as Wesley produced; for it is a historical fact that Wesley remade England in the eighteenth century. This is a controversial point, especially in these days of such emphasis on sport. The fact remains that I saw in MaChuang among these Chinese Christians perfectly happy, disciplined children, who seemed to have no need for ordinary physical culture and games.

They turned work into play. They delighted in clearing up yards, gathering sticks, husking maize and carding wool, when they were not at their books. I watched them catching locusts and caterpillars; their teacher was with them, and a lesson in Biology was the result. When they were husking maize, I noticed that roast chestnuts were handed round. Some of the girls spun cotton with a distaff, some knitted. As far as I could see, there was always something for them to do; they were never idle.

Not infrequently, I saw them, led by Helen Tso, engage in impromptu dancing on the threshing floor. Nothing is more delightful than to see children play and dance spontaneously. Games came naturally to these children, who bubbled over with joy. These children with their entirely natural way of life gave me a vision of The New Jerusalem, full of "boys and girls playing in the streets." My next point is their singing. Have you ever heard children under ten years sing from the tonic sol-fa?

Have you ever heard children younger than this sing "Cwm Rhondda" in three parts? In the evening under the willow trees a few chords on my mouth organ would bring the children in a body, ready for any well-known choruses p24 (translated of course) and choruses of their own, until called to bed. What to me were classical and difficult Chinese hymns, these children learned in a trice. Action songs were learned by little ones, who could scarcely toddle, and were sung on special days to a crowded chapel.

Children from villages around were not forgotten, and on occasion were given the opportunity to show what they could do. As I observed it all, I could not but notice what a force for good this Christian community was, what an uplifting force, what "light" and "salt" to the district around. This is surely what Christianity does for us, this is the fountain from which we have drunk, and how often we do not recognize it. The worldling is a remittance man drawing on capital which is not his.

Our civilization owes what it has to Christ Jesus. Now we pass to my third observation. The children were dedicated to God from the beginning of their little lives. Our godparents mean little to us, It was not so with them; a real responsibility was assumed by them which was not easily cast aside. "What are you going to be when you grow up?" I asked Chia-an, a little girl of four. "I'm going to found a Home for Jesus, and be the Chia-Chang (Head of the Home)." "Where?" I asked.

"In the United States!" Next I asked a six-year-old boy, "And what are you going to be, Tao-chyen?" "I'm going to be a preacher and preach Jesus." "But how will you earn your living?" "I shall be a stonemason." p25 Not one of these children had any other object in life than to preach Jesus, not only throughout China, but in all the world. The leaders of this movement are not at all afraid of what we call making the children lopsided. If ever there was a single eye to God's glory, it is here.

"This one thing I do" is their watchword. Can it be wrong? From what I saw I am sure that it cannot. God will not let them down. Go ahead, you dear Chinese Christians! I want to be like you. You have filled me with enthusiasm and thrilled me. You have shown me how needy I am. The next point I made was the mixing of the sexes. This is regarded as wholly natural until the age of six, then separation is absolute until marriage. These people are made of the same stuff as you and I. I have listened to cases requiring disciplinary action, and have listened to betrothals being discussed and marriages being arranged.

How closely they approximate to Victorian ideals! Weak, effete human nature seems to need and even craves discipline. The male needs self-control; the female needs innocence and protection. In their schools there was no such thing as education in matters of sex. The fear of God and obedience to His commands came first; matters of sex then fell naturally into their right relationship. The fear of God, they said, was the only safeguard, the one and only answer to the question of sex.

Knowledge was no safeguard. Sexual education, in the nature of things, could not be timed aright. If given too early, it was not understood, and if too late what was the use of it? Innocence and the fear of God would save a maiden. Discipline, self-control, and fear of God were the safeguards of a man. A childless marriage caused questioning, but large families were deplored. They considered that the love of husband and wife is first a matter of sexual attraction; later, husband and wife love because it is a command, "Husbands love your wives."

Thus they said, "We love one another as husband and wife because we are commanded to do so. Then remarkably, we find that it is so. Our love is then not the pawn of our passions." THE ORGANIZATION OF A HOME OF JESUS

All of these Homes of Jesus had a basis of industry and farming which made them self-sufficient. But they were not concerned with industrial rights; they needed no other incentive than service. They looked on labour as a sacred trust, which was to be done for God. They had realized that not only is by far the largest part of mankind engaged in food production, but also that it is basic for all human life. So they seemed to have hit upon the right relationship of agriculture to industry and the arts and crafts.

First and foremost is agriculture. Is the idea of setting out to be an "industrial nation" not then basically unsound? They would say it is. Since labour is a sacred trust, to do one's best is to add interest and zest to one's work. The sanctity of labour is sufficient incentive. There was no need for such artificialities as five-year plans, production drives, and forty-hour weeks.

The centre of one of these Homes of Jesus was the chapel with its elders, pastors, and deacons. This was the apex of the pyramid. The base was, as I have said, agriculture. Then upon this was built various departments, which in MaChuang were carpentry, bootmaking, bakery, smithy, machine shop and electrical department, stone masonry, p27 schools and kindergarten, outside relations' department, financial department, printing, and bookbinding.

In MaChuang their livestock consisted of horses, mules, one blind donkey, cattle, pigs, geese, fowls, ducks and rabbits. The kitchens were large and well arranged, and all the utensils were made and cast in the blacksmith's department, even the large steam pressure cooker.

#### PRAYER AND WORSHIP AT MACHUANG

The chapel was the centre of their life of busy activity. Prayer always came first. Everyone went straight from bed to the chapel at 4 a.m.; each began to pray aloud as soon as he or she arrived; the hubbub was indescribable. This praying in unison is normal for all their times of prayer. Our training and background make praying in unison confusing but it is not so with them. One only has to see a Chinese school, where every scholar shouts his lesson in his own way and time, to understand the difference.

This method has much to commend it, for the timid are encouraged, thoughts become definite, and petitions concrete. At about 5 a.m. there was normally a break for an address or testimonies. There followed "the morning watch," another period for prayer, which might continue until 8 a.m., when breakfast was taken. Then the day's work began. The leaders prayed again at 9 a.m. and I used to join them. The meals were often seasons of prayer. Grace might take a quarter of an hour.

Each department began its particular session with prayer, and as usual everyone in it prayed aloud in unison. Usually someone in the audience, or perhaps a leader, summed up by praying alone, and that

ended the prayer session. p28 Will such a routine become monotonous? I did not find it so and the others did not seem to either. Everybody seemed refreshed. After the day's work, everyone gathered in the chapel, and the day's recreation and entertainment began. Prayer was again much in evidence.

I asked one of the leaders if it were not confusing, when all prayed together. He looked surprised at my question, and then asked, "Confusing to whom?" I did not reply! Once again I found how wise and to the point many of their replies were. This was markedly so when they were dealing with truculent Communists. The church had been used all day as a place of work, and so the ropemaking and weaving which had been commenced there in the morning might continue right on through the evening meeting.

The Communists, I might say, found no fault with this, and it was one of the many points in which their moves were anticipated. Daily life and work in MaChuang was shot through with the sound of singing. The hymns were an expression of the zest Communist planning could never produce and were for the most part an expression of their experiences. I used to make a daily round of the departments and my interest was particularly aroused by their theme songs written on the blackboard in each department.

These were modified or added to, until at last the complete product was printed in preparation for the hymnbook. Their daily thoughts, their aphorisms and their struggles, all have a place in these hymns. The Encyclopaedia Britannica says that there are more than half a million hymns in English. Here we see, in miniature, the powerhouse by which such a volume of praise, aspiration, and prayer is initiated and maintained. Groups of ordinary folk in p29 China, who like us have been filled with enthusiasm from on high, sing their praise of Him who died for them.

Mr. Fraser of Yunnan once said to me, "Music is the language of Heaven." So it is. "When I have Jesus, my heart bursts into song," they say, "how can we keep from singing?" Hearts that had forgotten how to sing have learned the secret again. I want now to describe a special evening meeting, which has stayed in my memory. The lighting was good; all were at work, and one of the senior members was on the platform. There was to be prize-giving, I was told, so sweetmeats had been prepared, and various types of fruits, nuts, and small cakes, beloved by the Chinese.

These were eaten as the meeting proceeded. Several hymns and psalms were sung, all without books. This, the normal procedure, used to try me a good deal, since, although I had a book, no numbers would be given out. My neighbours used to help me. "This is No. 57," someone would whisper. "That is Psalm 39." Most of the hymns had tunes composed by the Chinese, but there were also translations of some of the greatest English hymns, for example that glorious one by Charles Wesley: "And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood?"

They had a marvellous aptitude for putting the Psalms to metre, and the result reminded me of the Scottish psalmody. Nearly all they sang they knew by heart. Prayer then began and went on for some time, until all the prayers seemed to be summed up in one, and that one closed the prayer time. The chairman then asked all the old men over seventy to come to the front seats. He announced that after they had p30 received their prizes there would be testimonies by visitors from outlying Homes.

Someone whispered to me that there were Communists present in the meeting. "Tonight's prize-giving is unique," said the chairman. "During the summer months the blow-flies have been very bad. Each of our older brethren was given a fly swatter and asked to keep a record of the number he killed. Prizes are to be given to the first three." The old men now stood and gave out their numbers. I was apparently not the only one surprised at the large numbers given, for suddenly a Communist got up and said, "Surely you cannot

believe what they say.

How do you know they are telling the truth ?" Obviously the numbers were true, for none took advantage of the other. And what amazed the Reds was that everyone seemed to believe what they said. In private conversation afterward, the Communists further expressed their amazement, and admitted that such a scene would have been impossible in their own meetings. Again we had the same old question, "How do you make people tell the truth?" This question took on new significance when I came to know more about Communist "brain washing."

Their technique is devilish psychological torture. How had these Christians done it? The chairman then gave a short talk on "Christ the Life and Christ the Truth." "Truth is a Person," he said. After this the testimonies began; there were sixteen in all. Each one who testified was given carte blanche as to the time he or she spoke. The Chinese are tireless in matters like this. The meeting began at 5 p.m., the testimonies at 8.30. I left for bed at p31 2 a.m. The meeting ended at daybreak.

Everyone was refreshed and had a thoroughly enjoyable time, though obviously the normal routine was not followed the next day. I cannot remember whether this held the record for long meetings. The Chinese are good trenchermen where meetings are concerned, and "eat" long and enthusiastically. Sleep did not take long to "bind up the ravelled sleeve of care," but my last thought was of the truth-telling old men, and their testimony to the Communists. I cannot close this section without telling something of their meal-times.

It was at these that I met many of the leaders of outlying churches and homes. "This is Mr. Hwang from East Village," said Mr. Ching, introducing him. "He was converted last year and has now started a church in his village." I looked at Mr. Hwang. He was obviously an illiterate country man. We shook hands; he had the knotted hands of a farmer. "And this is Mr. Liu," continued Mr. Ching. Obviously Mr. Liu was an educated man. "He is the headman of their village," I said to myself, for he came from the same village as Mr.

Hwang. "Mr. Hwang saved Mr. Liu's life," said Mr. Ching. Again I found myself thinking that it was probably a case of a farmer willing to sacrifice his life for his landlord, something not uncommon in old China. The facts proved to be otherwise. After the church was founded by Mr. Hwang, Mr. Liu, the scholar, joined. Their church offended the Communists in some way. All the members were marched out and Mr. Liu was chosen to be shot. "But he is not the leader, I am," said Mr.

Hwang, "therefore I am the one to be shot." He continued to claim p32 his right as he followed the group to the place of execution. The Communist officer laughed at Mr. Hwang's dialect. A laugh in China means much. This one meant that Mr. Liu came back from the laws of death and was freed. On such trifles hang the issues of life and death What a season of delight meal-times were! Everybody was so happy and enthusiastic. I was always given an honoured place though I did not deserve it, and in everything I was dependent on them, a true "rice Christian" if ever there was one.

The boot Was now on the other foot, and how they appreciated it! It was gratifying to me, too. No more could I be taunted with making "rice Christians" in China, for I was now one! This was indeed a restoration of their "amour propre," that "face" which is so dear to the Chinese. I remember the off-repeated words of Mr. Hoste, of beloved memory! "Remember, Doctor, the Chinese are an imperial people." With Mr. Ching, everything Chinese was best. Their IMAGE

food was the best, their history was the longest and their women made the best wives. It followed therefore that there was no foreign flavour in their Christianity. It was theirs and was exclusively Chinese in every way. How wonderful is Christianity that it can thus adapt itself! Mr. Ching and I clashed occasionally, but seldom seriously. The following incident was not serious. We were eating cobs of maize. "Try some butter on it and a little salt, that is the way we eat it," I said.

"We Chinese like the natural flavour, we do not like to cover it with anything else," was his reply.

The next day we were eating cucumber; the Chinese like sesame seeds with cucumber, so I waited my chance. "Try some sesame on it," said Mr. Ching, passing the seeds. He had forgotten the passage of arms of the previous day.

I was ready and replied, "We British like the natural flavour, we do not like to cover it up." There was a roar of delighted appreciation at my hit.

Besides all this, meal-times were also a time of social intercourse, and the time for taking stock of growth. The visitors were invited to sup, and there one learned of new groups that had been formed, of new districts opened up. There one also learned of the trials and sufferings of those undergoing persecution.

Mr. Chang sat down with us one day and was introduced to me as another who had been through the valley of the shadow of death. He walked with bowed back and a bad limp. He had been condemned by the Communists to be beaten to death.

He could give me very few details of his accusation and trial, chiefly because of his confusion of mind. The executioner, p34 having tied him up and commenced the torture, stopped and said, "I am like Jesus, aren't I? For I have the power of life and death over you. If you admit that I am Jesus, I will let you down."

Mr. Chang, in recounting his sufferings, said that, although he was scarcely conscious, he turned his head to his tormentor and said, "You are the Devil." This remark, spoken with almost his last breath, saved him. For the executioner was laughed out of countenance by the Communist soldiers standing around. He threw down his bamboo, and went off in a huff, leaving his victim hanging. A soldier undid the thongs and Mr. Chang crawled away.

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