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International Education

Glossary of dramatic and theatrical terms

Cambridge IGCSETM

Drama 0411

Use this syllabus for exams in 2029, 2030 and 2031.



Version I

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Cambridge
Pathway

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Drama and theatrical terms

This glossary is not exhaustive and is intended as a guide to support both practical and theoretical study of Drama for IGCSE. The glossary is in two sections:

- General terms: terms that are representative of those used in mainstream theatre practice
- Specialist technical terms: terms that are used by specialists in lighting and sound.

General terms

General terms	What it means
Acting style	A particular way of acting that refers to different methods and techniques that an actor uses when approaching a role. Styles may include classical, naturalistic, melodramatic, comedic and stylised.
Action	The development of the plot in a play. It includes physical movement, spoken dialogue, non-verbal communication and character interaction.
Actor	Someone who acts a role in a play, using vocal and physical skills to portray a character. May perform on stage, in film or on television.
Analysis	The process of examining how the elements of practical drama relate to each other in performance.
Antagonist	The opponent or adversary of the hero or main character of a drama; one who opposes and actively competes with another character in a play, most often with the protagonist.
Apron	Any part of the stage that extends past the proscenium arch and into the audience or seating area. (See also thrust.)
Arena stage	Type of stage without a frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium, in which the audience surrounds the stage area. (See also theatre-in-the-round.)
Articulation	Clarity or distinctness of speech.
Aside	Lines spoken by an actor to the audience that are not supposed to be overheard by other characters on stage. Allows the audience to have insight into the action.
Atmosphere	Overall mood or emotional feeling created, using production elements such as lighting, sound and music, and the interaction between characters.
Audience	A group of people who watch a performance. The intention of all performance is to engage the audience by conveying a story using a range of dramatic techniques.

General terms	What it means
Auditorium	The part of a theatre, concert hall, or other space where the audience sits. Audience configuration refers to the placing of the audience in relation to the performing space.
Back projection	A method of projecting images onto a translucent screen from behind. Often used for projected scenery or special effects.
Backdrop	A flat surface, the width of the stage, on which a scenic design is painted or projected. It is usually hung upstage of the acting area. Sometimes called a backcloth. (See also cyclorama.)
Beat	A momentary pause or delay in which there is a subtle shift in mood, thought or feeling. (See also pause.)
Black box	A one-room theatre, without a proscenium arch; interior is painted black, including walls, floor and ceiling, and any drapes are also black. Typically used for small-scale studio productions.
Blackout	A lighting cue where all stage lights go off simultaneously. Often used to signal the end of a scene.
Blocking	The path of an actor's movement on stage, including entrances and exits. It is usually decided by the director with assistance from the actor and is noted in the script during rehearsal. (See also staging.)
Body language	Using physical actions and gestures to communicate feelings and meaning. (See also physicality.)
Box set	A set with three walls leaving the fourth wall to be imagined. The box set can represent a real room with doors and windows that work.
Catharsis	The feeling of release felt by the audience at the end of a tragedy. After experiencing strong emotions and sharing in the protagonist's troubles, the audience experiences catharsis when they are set free from the emotional hold of the action.
Character	A person portrayed in a scripted or devised play.
Characterisation	How an actor uses their performance skills to bring a character to life.
Choreography	The organised movement of actors and dancers, often to music.
Choral speech	A group or ensemble speaking together. It often involves combinations of different or contrasting voices to bring out meaning or tonal qualities in a text.
Chorus	A group of performers who sing, dance, or recite in unison. The chorus may also narrate or comment on the action.
Climax	The point of greatest intensity in a play, often forming the turning point of the plot and leading to some kind of resolution. (See also exposition and dénouement.)

General terms	What it means
Cloth	A piece of painted or plain scenic canvas. A backcloth (or backdrop) hangs at the rear of a scene. A floorcloth or stagecloth is a painted canvas sheet placed on the stage floor to mark out the acting area, or to achieve a particular effect.
Comedy	A play that treats characters and situations in a humorous way. Low comedy is physical rather than intellectual; high comedy is more sophisticated, emphasising verbal wit.
Comic effect	Using physical comedy, irony, exaggeration or timing to create humour and maybe make the audience laugh.
Concentration	The actor's focus, also called centring; being fully engaged with what is happening on stage, being in character.
Conflict	The internal or external struggle between opposing forces, ideas, or interests that creates dramatic tension.
Contrast	Dynamic use of opposites or significant differences to create dramatic effect. Examples of opposites are movement/stillness, sound/silence, and light/darkness. Significant differences might be distinct styles or colour of costumes, or styles of dialogue.
Cyclorama (abbreviated to cyc)	A fabric drop hung from a curved or segmented bar, or a curved wall at the back of the stage, upon which light can be cast to create effects.
Dénouement	The moment in a play when the essential plot point is unravelled or revealed, and the tensions that have driven the drama are resolved. (See also climax, exposition and resolution.)
Design elements	A general term to refer to props, costume, set design, lighting and sound.
Designers	The people who create the look of a performance and the sound: the costume designer, lighting designer, set designer and sound designer.
Development	Progression of the plot or conflict in a play.
Devising	Developing an original piece of drama, usually through the collaboration of the actors who will perform it. Devising involves research, sharing ideas, drafting material and practical experimentation, leading to a working outline of the piece or possibly a script. Devising is not the same as scriptwriting, which is when a writer writes a script for other actors to perform.
Dialogue	Speech between two characters. Dialogue may also include non-verbal communication (such as gesture or facial expression) to share ideas and communicate meaning.

General terms	What it means
Direct address	A performance technique where the actor speaks directly to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. This may include asides, narration and soliloquies. Gives the audience a sense that they are watching a performance and prevents them from believing that they are immersed in reality.
Director	The person responsible for deciding the overall artistic interpretation of a performance of a play. Directors work with actors, designers and the production team to bring their vision to the stage. The director will usually decide on staging or blocking and will guide or assist actors in developing an effective performance of their role.
Downstage	A position nearer the audience or at the front of the stage. (See also upstage.)
Dramatic effect	Something that surprises, shocks, excites or engages an audience. For example, a sudden event, use of lighting or sound/music to create an impact.
Dramatic intention	The message or purpose that a creator, director or actor wants to communicate. The dramatic intention underpins every creative decision and determines how the story is conveyed to an audience.
Dramatic moments	Points in a performance that are sudden, significant and may be emotionally charged. Usually, dramatic moments are full of short, sharp bursts of exciting action. They may change how the audience perceives the performance.
Dramatic tension	The suspense, uncertainty and anticipation that hold an audience's attention. A powerful way to create dramatic tension is to put questions in the mind of the audience, which they want to see resolved.
Duration	The length of time that a play or a section of a play lasts.
Dynamics	How a group of performers react and interact with each other. The variations and changes in pace, energy and emotional intensity in a performance.
End on	Traditional stage layout, where the audience faces the stage from one direction. A proscenium arch theatre is end on. (See also theatre-in-the-round, thrust, traverse.)
Ensemble	Theatre-making that focuses on the combined output of a group of performers working together, rather than emphasising individual performances.
Exposition	The sharing of important background details in a play, usually at the beginning. (See also climax, dénouement and resolution.)

General terms	What it means
Facial expression	When an actor shows an emotion or a reaction to something or someone through the expressions on their face. There are seven universally recognised facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, contempt and surprise.
Falling action	The parts of a plot which occur after the climax but before the end. Often part of the resolution and dénouement.
Farce	An extreme form of comedy that depends on quick tempo and flawless timing and is characterised by improbable events and far-fetched coincidences.
Flashback	In a non-linear plot, to go back in time to a previous event. A flash forward would move the action into the future.
Flat	A wooden frame, usually covered with painted cloth, used to create walls or separations on stage.
Focus	An actor concentrating or staying in character. Focus is also how actors and directors point the audience's attention to somebody or something on stage. In lighting, focus is the adjustment of the size, shape and direction of a beam of light.
Fourth wall	An imaginary, invisible wall separating the actors from the audience. Breaking the fourth wall is when an actor directly addresses the audience, breaking the illusion.
Gait	The way a person walks. Actors may adopt a particular gait (such as a swagger, strut or hobble) to help convey a character.
Genre	Types of drama, for example tragedy, comedy, satire, melodrama.
Gesture	Any movement of the actor's body that is used to convey meaning, attitude or feeling.
House lights	The lights that illuminate the auditorium before and after the performance and during the interval.
Improvisation (abbreviated to improv)	Spontaneously and imaginatively creating a character or object in a particular situation/scene through movement and speech. Also, a form of live theatre where the plot, characters and dialogue are made up on the spot, often based upon a suggestion from the audience.
Inflection	The way the voice rises and falls in speech, used by actors to communicate meaning and intention in dialogue. A rising inflection is used when asking a question; a falling inflection suggests a statement.
Intensity	The level or strength of something, for example sound, light, emotion.
Interaction	The action or relationship between two or more characters.

General terms	What it means
Irony	An implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. There are several forms of irony: • verbal irony is when a writer or speaker says one thing and means something else (often the opposite of what is said) • dramatic irony is when the audience know more than the characters on stage • situational irony is a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually happens.
Kinaesthetic awareness	An actor's ability to sense their body's position and control how each body part moves.
Language	In drama, the particular way in which a character speaks. This could include accent, idiom, dialect, vocabulary or phrasing to suggest class, profession, culture or personality.
Levels	The height or the positioning of a character compared to others. Levels can also refer to parts of the set that have been raised or lowered to vary the height of the playing space.
Light set	A situation where no physical set is used on stage. The 'set' is created entirely by means of lighting.
Mannerism	Small habits in the way a character speaks or moves which make their character more believable and helps to show who they are. For example, always adjusting their glasses or tapping their foot when nervous.
Marking the moment	A dramatic technique used to highlight a key moment in a scene or improvisation, for example through slow-motion, tableau, narration, thought-tracking, lighting or music.
Melodrama	A style of play popular in nineteenth-century Europe, relying heavily on sensationalism and sentimentality. Melodramas tend to feature action more than motivation, stock characters and a strict view of morality in which good triumphs over evil. A heightened use of music to underpin the action is central to the impact of melodrama.
Mime	The art of portraying characters, acting out situations or creating narratives through gesture and body movement without speaking.
Mirroring	Copying exactly the movement and/or expression or look of someone else.
Moment	A very brief period of time in which there is a significant change in the drama.
Monologue	A long speech made by one character, which may be delivered alone or in the presence of other characters. Not to be confused with a soliloquy.
Mood	The atmosphere or feeling of a performance, often created by the music, setting or lighting.

General terms	What it means
Motivation	What drives a character to act or feel the way they do. Motivation is about what the character wants and what they will do to get it.
Narrative	The story of an event or series of events told to the audience through a piece of drama.
Naturalism	Style of drama that developed in the late nineteenth century to escape the artificial theatricality of contemporary playwriting and acting. The prime objective of naturalism was to portray reality on stage. Its greatest exponent was Stanislavski.
Non-verbal expression	Communicating feelings, responses or attitudes through gesture, physical movement, facial expression or sounds such as sighs or groans.
Pace, pacing	Pace is the rate of movement or the speed of the action or vocal delivery of the text. Changing the pacing between dramatic moments of conflict and quiet moments of reflection keeps the performance engaging. (See also tempo.)
Parody	A mocking or satirical imitation of a literary or dramatic text or genre.
Pause	A short period of silence or stillness in a performance when the drama is communicated non-verbally. (See also beat.)
Performance space	The space in which the actor can move in full view of the audience. Also known as the acting area or playing area.
Physicality	How performers use their bodies to help communicate a character or an emotion through their physical presence on stage, for example through their stance, gesture or the way they move. (See also body language).
Physical theatre	Using actors' bodies, movement, gesture and dance to tell a story. It can combine many elements such as mime, circus skills and non-verbal communication to create powerful performances.
Pitch	The particular level (high or low) of a voice, instrument or tune.
Plot	The sequence of events of a play or arrangement of action, as opposed to the theme. (See also story line.)
Plot development	The organisation or building of the action in a play.
Posture	How an actor stands or sits to convey information about the character being played, for example having a straight back, slouched, or hunched over.
Projection	How an actor directs their voice out of their body so it can be heard clearly at a distance. This will involve practice in articulation, breath control and support.

General terms	What it means
Promenade	A staging genre in which the audience moves around the performance space(s) in response to the action. This style is flexible and enables performances to take place in non-theatre spaces. In most cases, the actors explicitly or implicitly lead or direct the audience to what they should see.
Prompt	To give actors their lines as a reminder. The prompter is the person who helps actors to remember their lines, they are usually in the wings where performers can hear them.
Prompt copy	Production script that notates the actors' moves, technical cues, scenery changes, use of props, etc. Used by the stage manager to run rehearsals and performances.
Props (abbreviation of properties)	Moveable objects that appear on stage during a performance that are not costume or set. If a piece of set is used in a direct way, then it becomes a prop. For example, a chair is part of the set but if a character picks up the chair and uses it to jam a door shut then at that moment the chair becomes a prop.
Proscenium	A frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium. The proscenium opening was of particular importance to the realistic playwrights of the nineteenth century, for whom it was a picture frame or an imaginary fourth wall through which the audience experienced the illusion of spying on the characters.
Protagonist	The main character or hero in a play, film or novel. (See also antagonist.)
Proxemics	Contemporary term for 'spatial relationships', referring to the physical distances between actors on a stage that communicate the relationship between different characters. Proxemics is also the distance between a performer and elements of the set, which conveys information about character and circumstances.
Realism	A version of naturalism. Language and dialogue, movement and settings would ideally reflect everyday life situations without any sense of artificiality.
Rehearsal	The process of bringing a script to life, during which actors learn their words and designers plan and create the different parts of the production design. A technical ('tech') rehearsal is a run through of all the lighting, sound and set change cues in sequence, often using only fragments of the dialogue. A dress rehearsal is a full performance of the piece, as if to an audience.
Rehearsal process	A structured set of practice or workshop sessions which allow directors and performers to experiment with ideas and select and shape dramatic content in preparation for a final performance.
Repertoire	All the performance texts that an individual actor or company knows well and can perform.

General terms	What it means
Resolution	How the problem or conflict in a drama is solved or concluded. (See also exposition, climax and dénouement.)
Rhythm	In verse speaking, rhythm is the measured flow of words or phrases forming patterns of sound. In performing, rhythm is the tempo, pace or regular pattern of the work. Rhythm can reflect the emotional state of a character or group of characters, or the atmosphere of a scene.
Rising action	A series of plot-related events that create suspense, interest and tension and build towards the climax.
Role	The character portrayed by an actor in a drama.
Role playing	Improvising movement and dialogue to put oneself in another's place in a particular situation, often to examine the person and/or situation being improvised.
Satire	A play in which irony, exaggerated characters and ridicule are used to expose or attack aspects of society, such as foolishness, social snobbery or hypocrisy. Often used to criticise or lampoon political figures or regimes.
Scene	A self-contained unit within a play, with its own structure. Scenes can vary greatly in length, from a single line or action to an extended passage over several pages of text.
Scenery	The theatrical equipment used in a dramatic production to communicate environment or represent a real place. Examples of scenery include curtains, flats, backdrops or platforms.
Set	The physical surroundings visible to the audience, in which the action of the play takes place.
Set designer	The person who designs the physical surroundings in which the action of the play takes place.
Setting	When and where the action of a play takes place.
Sightlines	Imaginary lines of sight that determine what areas of the stage are visible to the audience from any given seat.
Soliloquy	A type of monologue where a character speaks their inner thoughts aloud for the audience to share. The actor is usually alone on stage during a soliloquy.
Sound	The effects an audience hears during a performance to communicate character, context, environment or mood.
Space	A defined area.
Spatial awareness/relationships	An actor's ability to be aware of their position on stage in relation to other performers or scenery. (See also proxemics.)

General terms	What it means
Special effects	Visual or sound effects used to enhance a theatrical performance.
Speech	Spoken delivery of lines by an actor on the stage.
Spoof	A light, good-humoured parody of a particular genre or style of drama.
Stage directions	Written instructions in the script that tell actors how to move and speak. They may also describe the set, lighting and sound.
Stage movement	Where and how actors move on stage, including gesture and posture. Every movement has an internal motivation which conveys meaning to the audience.
Stage presence	The level of confidence, commitment and energy an actor appears to have on stage.
Staging	A general term for the choices made by directors and actors about using or adapting performance spaces. It can also mean the movement and positioning of actors to communicate character relationships and create interesting stage pictures. (See also blocking.)
Status	The power dynamic between two characters. A high-status character might behave in a dominant fashion, a low-status character might behave submissively.
Stock characters	Characters who represent personality types or characteristics of human behaviour. Stock characters are immediately recognisable and appear throughout the history of theatre.
Story line	The plot or plan of action in a play or devised piece.
Structure	The arrangement of and relationship between the parts of a play, such as the prologue, exposition, dénouement, or scenes and acts within a play or devised piece.
Stylisation	The shaping of dramatic material, settings or costumes in a deliberately non-realistic manner.
Subtext	What a character is really thinking or feeling when they say particular words. Subtext is linked to motivation.
Suspense	A feeling of uncertainty about the outcome, used to build interest and excitement in the audience.
Symbolism	The use of symbolic language, imagery, set design or colour to evoke emotions or communicate ideas.
Tableau	A technique in creative drama in which actors create a frozen picture, as if the action were paused.

General terms	What it means
Tempo	The speed at which the action on stage proceeds. Tempo will vary during a play. Often combined with rhythm in dramatic contexts, such as in 'tempo rhythm'. Tempo has a very similar meaning to pace, but it is the underlying pulse, whereas pace is the speed at which events occur.
Tension	The atmosphere created by unresolved, unsettling or dangerous situations that people feel compelled to address. In the theatre, tension may be caused by a threat to a character or confrontation between characters, creating a sense of anxiety in the audience. Alternatively, tension may be created by the tasks or different objectives characters set themselves, making the audience wonder will they succeed, or who will win?
Text	The basis of dramatic activity and performance; a written script produced by a playwright or agreed by a group through the process of devising.
Theatre	The physical building where plays are performed, and the associated business of staging plays involving actors, producers, directors, stage management, designers and marketing.
Theatre games	Exercises involving improvising, set by the director or teacher to achieve a specific objective, such as breaking down inhibitions or establishing trust.
Theatre-in-the-round	An acting area or stage that may be viewed from all sides simultaneously. (See also end on, thrust, traverse.)
Theme	The basic idea of a play; the idea, point of view or perception that binds together a work of art, for example, 'triumph of the underdog' or 'the destructive power of jealousy'.
Thrust	A stage that extends into the audience area, with seats on three sides of a T-shaped acting space. (See also end on, theatre-in-the-round, traverse.)
Timbre	The distinctive character of a voice or musical sound (not including its pitch or intensity), for example a nasal voice.
Timing	Timing has a number of meanings, including: • setting cues for effects and lighting • synchronising two or more things that must happen simultaneously • establishing the pace at which lines will be delivered or the play performed, for example the precise delivery of a line in a comedy to make the audience laugh.
Transition	The movement or change from one act/scene/section or position, state or concept to another.

General terms	What it means
Tragedy	A form of drama based on human suffering that makes the audience feel a mixture of sympathy and horror at the inevitable downfall (usually death) of the protagonist.
Traverse	Form of staging where the audience is on either side of the acting area. (See also end on, theatre-in-the-round, thrust.)
Turning point	A point in a drama when something (such as an incident, conversation, or piece of information) changes the course of events to a new, perhaps unexpected, direction.
Upstage (preposition)	A position further away from the audience on a proscenium arch or end on stage. Older theatres often had a sloped stage so that an actor further away from the audience was slightly higher and could still be seen. (See downstage.)
Upstage (verb)	To upstage is to deliberately draw the audience's attention away from another actor or actors by overacting or doing something distracting. The term originates from an actor intentionally positioning themselves upstage so other actors must turn their backs on the audience to deliver their lines to him or her.
Vocal expression	How an actor uses their voice to convey character.
Vocal skills	Technical, physical skills actors use to control their voice and maximise its impact in performance, such as breath control, projection, pitch, pause, pace and tone. (See also articulation.)
Wings	Offstage areas to the right and left of the acting area on a proscenium or end on stage.
Workshop/workshopping	Active practical sessions during the rehearsal process when the actors, director and production team experiment with the performance material to develop and shape it.

Specialist technical terms for lighting and sound

Specialist term	What it means
Backlight	Light coming from behind scenery or actors to make the actors stand out against the background or create a silhouette effect.
Barn doors	A rotatable attachment fixed to the front of a fresnel spotlight. It consists of two or four metal flaps that are hinged so the beam can be cut off in a particular direction(s).
Battens	Compartmentalised floodlights that are set up to allow colour mixing. Low voltage battens are commonly used as light curtains and for colour washes. Known in the United States (US) as a striplight. These are likely to be used when digital lighting equipment is unavailable.
Bifocal spot	Profile lantern with two sets of shutters, one of which produces a hard edge, and one a soft edge.
Colour filter	Also known as a 'gel', a colour filter is positioned in front of a lantern to change the colour of the light. It is often used where digitally controlled LED lighting is unavailable or unsuitable.
Colour mixing	Stage lighting that combines the effects of two or more colour filters or gels.
Crossfade (sometimes abbreviated to Xfade or XF)	Bringing another lighting state up to completely replace the current lighting state. Also applies to sound effects/music. A dipless crossfade is where increasing light levels move upward evenly to their new state while simultaneously, decreasing levels move downward to their new state.
Desk	The lighting control desk and the sound control desk are the control consoles for theatrical lighting and sound.
Downlight	A light from directly above the acting area.
Flood	To wash the stage with general lighting.
Floodlight	A simple box-shaped lantern containing a lamp and a reflector. It has no lens and is best used for even illumination of scenery or a cyclorama.
Fresnel spotlight	Adjustable spotlight giving a diffused light, created by the construction of the lens with 'concentric circles'. Used with barn doors.
Gauze	A drop made of fabric that seems almost opaque when lit from the front but semi-transparent when lit from behind. Also known as a scrim.
Gobo	Metal stencil placed in front of the lens of a lantern and used to project images or patterns on stage.
Intelligent lighting	Stage lighting with automated or mechanical abilities to enable versatile and complex effects. Intelligent lighting is also known as automated lighting, moving lights or moving heads.

Specialist term	What it means
Lantern	The generic term for a stage light source. Also called instrument or luminaire in the US.
LED	LED lights are an alternative to traditional stage lanterns that use halogen lamps or high intensity discharge lamps. LED lanterns can provide easy variation in colour without the need for colour filters.
Lighting design	The artistic and technical process of creating lighting to focus the audience's attention and/or to create a setting, location or a specific mood or atmosphere.
Lighting effects	The use of key lights, backlights, strobes and fill lights to conjure mood, depth and focus on stage. Projected effects can create specific effects such as fire, rain, snow etc.
Lighting state	The lighting set-up used at any given point in a production creating a lighting 'picture'. A lighting cue is given by stage management which initiates the change from one lighting state to the next.
Parcan	A PAR (Parabolic Aluminised Reflector) lantern is basically a tin can with a lamp inside. The lantern is a sealed beam unit consisting of a lamp, reflector and lens in one. Parcans are available in a range of beam angles. They are used mostly in the live music and exhibition industries but are also used for some theatre lighting applications.
Profile lantern	A focusable spotlight with an ellipsoidal lens that enables a sharp-edged beam of light to be projected. Using profile lanterns in groups can make actors stand out against background or scenery.
Sound design	Sound design is creating soundtracks for a variety of needs. It involves specifying, acquiring or creating auditory elements using audio production techniques and tools. The three categories of sound design are: • functional (for example, practical sounds such as a gunshot to coincide with an action on stage) • atmospheric (for example, using underscoring that may include music but which may also be a soundscape) • incidental, to cover moments of transition (for example, between scenes or to cover the placing of stage props).
Sound effects	Any sound artificially produced to create a theatrical effect. Sound effects can be recorded (for example, birds chirping or a train arriving at a station), or produced live (for example, a door slam or offstage voices).
Stage management	The organisation of the practical elements of a performance, including scene changes, setting of props, lighting and sound cues and calling of actors. The stage manager prepares the performance space and runs the show. During rehearsal the stage manager prepares the rehearsal space and makes notes on positions of items of set.

School feedback: ‘While studying Cambridge IGCSE and Cambridge International A Levels, students broaden their horizons through a global perspective and develop a lasting passion for learning.’

Feedback from: Zhai Xiaoning, Deputy Principal, The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China

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