

**Peeling Prawns:  
Singapore Media and the Recovery of the Asian Feminine <sup>1</sup>**

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For more than two decades Singapore has experienced falling birth rates, decreasing marriage rates, delayed marriage and childbirth, and an increasing incidence of divorce. Women's refusal of conventional gender roles has become all too obvious. The use of the labour of women, and their education as part of the agenda to create a skilled workforce (Hill and Lian, 1995) in the post-independence period, has created a "Graduate Woman Problem" (Lyons-Lee, 1998). Women's autonomy in the workplace, the large number of unmarried women, and the exercising of economic and personal power outside the confines of the family, is inscribed as an unfortunate and negative consequence of modernization, increased gender equality and exposure to Western culture. In a sophisticated late capitalist political economy a New Singapore Woman emerges. She is the perfect product of Singapore culture — the productive, well educated, smart, consumer-oriented, Chinese woman with discretionary spending power; the ideal consuming citizen. This new gender equality has provided an expanded space for the production of a new kind of Otherness.

A discourse of masculine anxiety arising from this focuses on the loss of gender hegemony and the putative threat to the nation and family. It has resulted in pejorative inscriptions of women. Singapore women are, it is argued, too assertive and aggressive — "more like Xena than Barbie". One interesting manifestation of this discourse has been the

“Peeling Prawns” debate. This paper will examine this issue as it appeared in the daily press and consider male anxiety about loss of gender hegemony, nostalgia for an essentialised femininity, and attempts to recover the Asian feminine.

A useful theoretical frame through which to view this discourse is Bhabha’s formulation of the conceptual binary “the pedagogy and the performative” (1994). What he means by this, put simply, is what is expected of people in terms of behaviour consistent with the demands of the continued unity of the nation, and what people actually do — everyday performance. For Bhabha the vacillation between the two modes engenders the conditions of the ambivalent signifying system that constitutes the nation. The nation is always ambivalent and suffused with what he terms “transgressive boundaries and ‘interruptive’ interiority”. The pedagogical agenda of the nation in Singapore includes the political control and use of women’s bodies as a resource for the purposes of production and consumption, represented as national and family duty; the performative is the myriad individual forms of resistances to this. For Bhabha the nation is an irredeemably plural modern space, and individual performative acts become sites at which the pedagogy is contested and where the struggle for meaning might take place. Forms of the performative can fracture the pedagogy. The mass media are sites for the masculinized pedagogy of nation, but their very mass public exposure means they can be invaded by the discursive intervention of the performative.

Heng and Devan (1995: 196), point to Singapore’s pathological preoccupation with reproduction of the unified nation predicated on Chinese male supremacy. The “New Singapore Woman”, so called in the daily press, offers a challenge to this supremacy and to national unity. For Bhabha, “the political unity of the nation consists in the continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space ...” (Bhabha, 1994: 149). Paranoia arising from a perceived threat to a masculinized political unity must be continually displayed and displaced. Indeed, Jardine (1985) has asserted that: a climate of sustained paranoia exists whenever the regulation of the mother’s body serves as the ground for a monolithic national ideology. If marriage and having children are defined as national goals (Singapore Government, 1991) recalcitrance in that area can be construed not only as irrational, but also as antinational.

The national desire is for women who are both modern and inexorably tied to the mode of reproduction of the family. But this has created a paradox. Writing in the Straits Times Jason Leow expresses masculine desire in the context of this paradox:

Men want “babes”. That’s a code word for “gorgeous bodies without brains”. Well, no, actually, it’s more true to say that Singapore men want babes ... I’ll provide an anecdote to show that I’m not alone in thinking that men here dig babes. Make that

babes with boobs. No, make that babes with boobs, without brains. Last week, at a café sipping smoothies to wind down from work, I eavesdropped on four men who looked to be in their 30s ... all of them had victory tales to tell.

Women seem to fall into their laps. Not just any women, but pretty ones who are below 30. And “cannot be graduate”, one of them declared. “Woah, these university women. Buay tahan! <sup>2</sup> ...

Pity the graduate women. It’s no wonder they form the crux of Singapore’s Great Marriage Problem. But it’s not any graduate women. It’s those who show their intellectual mettle — unabashedly and with delight — whom the men shun. A university degree is a symbol of a woman’s braininess. It is also a warning for men to not let their egos be walked over by her. So if she’s really smart, she’ll know how to keep her brains under lock and key.

As one very accomplished colleague, single and graduate put it: “The trick is to be so bimbo you don’t even know how to operate the washing machine or turn on the oven. I’ve been laughing at those columns recently by my female colleagues, lambasting the stupidity of the finalists in the Miss Singapore/Universe pageant. Why mock their poor English and shallow answers, their dumb silence in response to difficult social questions, their ah lian <sup>3</sup> manners?

What if, just what if, they are showing off what Singapore men like? Quite likely these bimbos ah huays <sup>4</sup> — if that’s how you want to view them — won’t have problems getting hitched and settling into a warm family life with three healthy kids and a loving husband. They will bask in the glow of the Great Singapore Family. Not the mocking graduate women, though, I bet. So guess who’s laughing her way to the church alter? (Leow, 2001).

Such a statement reflects not only wishful thinking, but also resentment, and not a little anxiety. Jason Leow’s desire for a wife who is brainy “but keeps her brains under lock and key”, and who has the right anatomy for childrearing, is also the desire of the nation. One is reminded of Alice Jardine’s proposition that a man’s response, in both private and public “to a woman who *knows* [original emphasis] (anything) has most consistently been one of paranoia” (Jardine, 1985: 98).

On April 21, 2004, in a speech to the Third Session of the China Scientists Forum on the Humanities, Beijing, Lee Kuan Yew lamented the disruption to the family and the nation caused by the development of modern female subjectivities. “Three generation households are

going out of fashion because of high rise living in apartments in Singapore”, he was quoted as saying, and this was “partly because Singaporeans speak English, but also because Singapore women have been given equal rights”. It is these equal rights, a consequence of being “more Westernised in their social habits than the Chinese in Taiwan or Hong Kong”<sup>5</sup> that has led to the very serious social disruptions facing Singapore today:

Singapore women are now as well-educated and earning as much as men. This has altered the husband-wife relationship and affected the nature of our society. The result has been higher divorce rates, more single-generation families, less grandchildren in each family and fewer three-generation households.<sup>6</sup>

It is a lamentable, but inexorable consequence of the modernizing process, and could not, even in the future, be perceived as anything other. The “Graduate Woman”, invented as a category of Otherness, is inscribed as a recalcitrant being who defies the normative and the pedagogical.

Graham, Teo, Yeoh and Levy (2002) point out that in the attempted “Asianization” of Singapore through the “Asian Values” debate, the ideological contradictions become all the more stark because what is meant by the “traditional values” the government wants women to maintain, has not been clearly articulated (Graham *et al*, 2002: 65). This leaves them all the more vulnerable to individual interpretation. Xie Wen interpreted the problem as a loss of the both Asian-ness and femininity: “We will continue to ... lament the passing of the Asian and feminine in our women” (Xie Wen, 2001 [a]).

The reversal of historical constraints on women has resulted in the failure of women to provide the discursive conditions for the phallic national story; they have failed to perform in the “theatre of omnipotent fathers” (Heng and Devan, 1995). This generated a protracted debate about “hard”, “aggressive” and “unfeminine” Singapore women which appeared in the pages of the *Straits Times*. Sumiko Tan said:

But gender equality has come at a price for Xena-type<sup>7</sup> females. When I look at the successful (okay, aggressive) women around, almost all are either still single or have tattered love lives. Can it be that while men are comfortable around confident, articulate female colleagues, they would rather not share their beds with these forceful, argumentative types? (Tan, 2001).

Debord’s work shows us that the representation of the political economy of modernity is an immense accumulation of spectacles (1995). For Debord, the spectacle is a unifying force, a sector where all attention, all consciousness converges, the locus of illusion (Debord, 1995:

12). If it represents the social relationship between people mediated by images (Debord, 1995: 12), then, if these relationships are in contestation, the spectacle may also represent disunity. If the spectacle contains “the oldest of all social divisions of labour, the specialization of *power*” [original emphasis] (Debord, 1995: 18), and that power is challenged, the spectacle may also be the site for disruption of power, the place where voices, otherwise unheard, can emerge. In Singapore the spectacle of masculine anxiety, played out in the pages of the *Straits Times*, has also been the site for emergence of a challenge to masculine power in the form of the “New Singapore Woman”.

Public discussion about the New Singapore Woman reached a pitch of near-hysteria in 2001 when *Straits Times* writer Xie Wen began a weekly column in the *Straits Times* called *He\*Mail*. His first posting included the following:

I am tired of our women always putting us down. Somebody has to stand up for our rights, so it may as well be me. Guys, do you hear that awful whining noise in the background? No, it's not from our fighter jets rehearsing National Day routines. That dreadful din is the collective whining of our ungrateful, unappreciative women folk ...

This is about the New Women who may have local boyfriends/husbands, but who hassle these poor guys constantly with plain silly demands based on some misguided notion of what a modern, Westernised man is supposed to be like. Women who pressure their husbands on the basis of some media-distorted notion of what their lives are supposed to be like as fulfilled women ...

Just a week ago, I overheard in a wine bar this bunch of SYGs (silly young girls) going on ad nauseam about how unfair life was towards women. Huh? Which time warp were these girls caught in? Where did these girls come from? Could they possibly be Singaporean? Unfortunately, they were.

Let me tell you about unfair, little girly. That's when girls were beaten for going to school. That's when women were forced to marry against their wishes. That's when widows were burnt on funeral pyres along with their deceased husbands. What exactly do Singapore women have to complain about? I would like to hear them translate their whining over the abstract into concrete grievances.

... the next time one of these silly girlies mouths off about how Western men respect women more, somebody please check if she sees any correlation between this respect and the much, much higher rates of sexual assault against women in many

Western countries compared to Singapore. You could even compare domestic violence directed against women, if she wishes.

Or can their grievance be over the dozens, no hundreds, of men whose cars hog vast areas of no standing zones at peak hours ... to await the arrival of their little Empresses? Do you see that in New York? In Sydney? In London?

Guys, the awful truth is that Singapore men have become a race of unappreciated and exploited good providers and unpaid chauffeurs. But we wouldn't mind that if they didn't bitch so much.

It's time we spoke up. We are becoming disenfranchised, meek supplicants in their world ... Man, I am angry (Xie Wen, 2001 [b]).

The perceived threat to the masculine self, articulated by Xie Wen, is a threat to the national self. References to Western men as one of the sources of women's recalcitrance, speaks of anxiety about the invasion of difference, not just gender difference, but racial difference.

Xie Wen, emboldened by letters of encouragement, continued:

Guys, hands up, please — how many of you have heard these New Singapore Women complain that local men are uncommunicative? Yet, when we try to tell them how we feel, the more aggressive of them jump down our throats. Indeed, the Storm Troopers of the Feminist Brigade (STFBs) would clearly like to shut this column down — and run me out of town for good measure.

You would probably say these women are insecure about the tremendous gains they and their sisters have made in just 30-plus years. But I suspect that this is a bit nastier than that. This is about continued dominance — by this wall of feminist noise — over the conversation on gender issues. This is about their sense of entitlement to say pretty much whatever they like about men, and their right to, figuratively speaking, scratch your eyes out if you so much as utter one “politically incorrect” word in public.

... we have noticed how Singapore women are demanding — and generally getting — the best of both worlds. That is, they demand and get gender equality ... But there is no way I am going to put up with this new, and rapidly growing “in-your-face” pop feminism that comes from reading too many articles about men's sexual performances; whether “size matters” and whether we can deliver a quality orgasm

... it's not as if we have never heard women talking crudely and publicly about men's bodies and their performances (or lack thereof) ...

They can through the sheer force of this wall of feminist noise define it "ungentlemanly", "politically incorrect", or just plain "rude" for one man to write publicly and say what many say privately.

Big deal: We will continue to e-mail one another, talk in pubs, and lament the passing of the Asian and the feminine in our women (Xie Wen, 2001 [a]).

The *He\*Mail* column continued to disclose the high level of anxiety associated with discourses generated by women:

Guys, one of the biggest 'cons' pulled on the Singapore Man is the myth of male superiority and privilege — a hoax that now disadvantages a gender that has already been brought down several pegs over the past few decades ...

And their recently-acquired assertiveness turns into something quite aggressive — the trendy 'in-your-face' and totally graceless pop feminism of their TV heroines from shows such as *Ally McBeal*, sans the humour...

They are quite oblivious to the fact that growing numbers of Singapore men now feel cornered, threatened and short-changed ... Singapore men are not unique in having been brought down a peg or three — this is a global trend among developed countries ... (Xie Wen, 2002 [a]).

Xie Wen's desire is to maintain the sanctity of traditional gender relations and prevent discursive intrusion which might disturb their meaning. For this reason he must try to repossess an essentialized Asian-ness and the feminine of past ages of national time when the boundaries between Singapore and the outside world, and between men and women were clear. He must also lay some blame on Western culture, and globalized feminism, which allows him to ally himself with a globalized offended masculinity. Xie Wen's columns confirm Bhabha's assertion that maintenance of the illusion of the political unity of the nation requires continual displacement of anxiety about its irredeemably plural modern space (Bhabha, 1994: 149).

The loss of masculine hegemony must seem almost complete to a number of Singaporean men such as Xie Wen. For him, and others, the performative emerges as manifestly hostile to the pedagogical, creating neuroses and panic. These quotations,

circulating in the public sphere, are articulations of deep unease, if not distress, over a failure of normative performativity.

Kenneth Paul Tan has noted the stereotype of masculinity in Singapore:

... the universal stereotype of masculinity persists and hinges upon the image of the male as provider and protector of the family. He is primordially aggressive, and in modern life, motivated, competitive, daring, and achievement oriented. He is analytical, avoids sentimentality, and approaches situations as problems requiring solutions derived from rationality and industry. He is also individualist and independent (Tan, 2001: 96).

Most of these qualities are now attributed to the New Singapore Woman. Nicholas Fang, writing in the *Straits Times* noted the similarities between men and women:

... after all, the new woman is closer to the stereotypical male in many ways. She's financially independent, socially aware, well-educated, and thanks to female contraception, sexually liberated as well (Fang, 2003).

If women are pragmatic, aggressive, businesslike, materialistic, demanding, and so on, they are, in effect, eschewing the behaviour traditionally expected of women — the maternal, the gentle, the acquiescent — in favour of performing like men.

In a discursive terrain in which successful and assertive women are often constructed as less than feminine, and inscribed as the culprits in a crisis of masculinity, women can be re-feminized and rehabilitated as more acceptable to potential husbands. One attempt to recover an idealized Asian feminine past can be found in the public articulation of imagined, idealized female subject positions associated with the issue of “peeling prawns”. It apparently began its discursive life when *Straits Times* writer Xie Wen claimed that Singapore men have become “yuppie puppies”, and find themselves in the grip of loud, graceless, overly materialistic women “complete with their pashmina shawls and Prada/Gucci/Armani ensembles” (Xie Wen, 2001 [c]). Comparing these putatively opinionated, grasping and emasculating Singapore women with other Asian women he wrote:

But that is not how women relate to men elsewhere — not even in Malaysia ...

“Malacca, brother, Malacca”, that’s my buddy ‘Evil Eddie’s’ recommendation. “You take them out for a RM100<sup>8</sup> seafood dinner with a few bottles of beer thrown in, and they’re happy”.

...I have observed the way so many of these very attractive Malaysian girls would hold their partners arms over dinner and feed them. And look so totally contented! (Compare that with the sullen faces over S\$300 ... meals in Singapore!) Never mind that the ride home is a Proton, not a Mercedes.



And a well-travelled friend of mine, ‘Parry’, says this of Singapore and Chinese women: “I say Singapore women are no match for their Chinese counterparts because the latter know how to be feminine without being fawningly subservient, do take care of their male friends’ feelings and are not out to put them down as if they need to prove something. A Chinese girlfriend will, without asking, peel prawns for you at dinner, without even being self-conscious about it. She will not regard it as lowering herself, or pandering to the male chauvinist ego”.

Well, Parry, I have to tell you though — there are still Singapore women out there who will peel prawns for their men, and who do know when not to interrupt conversations they know nothing about. But buddy, they have unfortunately become somewhat unfashionable within our elite ‘grrrrl’ circles ... Well, I know attractive, financially independent, professional Malaysian, Filipino and Japanese women in Singapore who still know how to flirt with men, be every bit the coquette, or pamper their men when they sense that it ‘works’. And at the end of the day, who’s complaining when it works? (Xie Wen, 2001 [c]).

Sumiko Tan reported in her column on a friend’s view of Singaporean women:

My friend is a Singaporean in his early 50s. Although he has had his fair share of girlfriends — mostly Singaporean — he has never married. Recently, he began dating women from China. Clearly, they have made a big, and positive impression on him. One, in particular, is not only young, but also ‘stunning’ and plays a mean guzheng<sup>9</sup> She can not only read the Chinese calligraphy scrolls in his apartment, but also provide the context and stories behind the poems, whereas we Singapore girls burst into giggles trying to decipher the scrawls. And she’s not a university graduate. Women from Malaysia, especially those from Sabah and Sarawak, my friend observed, also out-score Singapore women in the family/gentleness stakes. They are also content to be housewives, tending to kids, while their Singaporean husbands work. And when the men come home, these women will not bombard them with 101 questions about their day (Tan, 2002).

She reported on one man’s response to Xie Wen’s columns. He said:

Local women don’t cut it ...

He even gave his rating of women in Asia: “Malaysian gals are friendly and down-to-earth. Thai gals have grace and are charming and caring. Filipino gals have talent and are devoted. Indonesian gals are also charming and musically talented. Japanese gals have grace and spunk. Vietnamese gals are also graceful and devoted” (Tan, 2002).

This statement reads like an inventory of available women and their commendable qualities. It essentializes Asian women and demands of them the preservation of tradition in the face of modernity. An attempt to recover a submissive Asian female past, demands that she have

knowledges to support this essentialized past (reading Chinese poems, playing guzheng), but will not exercise a voice which intervenes in the discourses of men. The listing of Asian women and their characteristics as if they were consumer choices, commodifies women and inscribes them as resources to be deployed in the text of self-legitimation of masculinity. In addition, the correct pedagogical position for women is the role of mother. While both parents will earn money to provide food, it is the mother on whom you rely to prepare your food for you without question. Everybody except the mother herself wants someone to do the messy jobs such as peeling prawns.

When Xie Wen recommended to women “a bit of prawn-peeling to improve relations with men” (Xie Wen, 2002 [b]), he ignited the imagination of both men and women in Singapore. His *He\*Mail* column apparently provided a place of narrative authority for men to express resentment and anger, and to identify the idealized Asian woman — charming, submissive, graceful and caring — as the saviour of a wounded masculine ego.

The issue also generated a counter-narrative of the sort that, to paraphrase Bhabha, evokes and erases the totalizing boundaries, both actual and conceptual, of gender difference, and which disturbs those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities (Bhabha, 1994: 149). Ong Soh Chin, in an articulation of the sense of alienation of the national feminine subject wrote: “Let’s declare a truce”. She contests these resentful inscriptions of Singapore women, and the essentializing female stereotypes which have been invented in an attempt to secure the boundaries of male identity:

Okay, so the whole world seems to be at war. And Singapore — benign, complacent and smugly docile — has not been spared.<sup>10</sup>

... At home, in this newspaper, the past few weeks have also seen some pretty intense debate about mundane things like prawn peeling and Singaporean feminists ... What appalls me are the easy and irresponsible generalizations that inform a column like *He\*Mail* ... I find the underlying assumptions in Xie Wen’s columns — that certain liberated Singaporean women are unfeminine, whiny bitches; that feminism is a western concept that no longer has a place in Singapore; and that women can be discussed like cattle, differentiated by their manner and country of origin — highly offensive. In support of Singapore men who prefer the charms of less demanding, non-Singaporean women, he offers the sterling example of his friend ‘Evil Eddie’, who recommends: “Malacca, brother, Malacca. You take them out for a RM100 (S\$48) seafood dinner with a few bottles of beer thrown in, and they’re happy”. Of course, he has also given us the now-classic stereotype of Chinese women as a nation of prawn peelers. I find these categories demeaning (Ong, 2002).

Xie Wen's response:

Yes, I am the Osama bin Laden of the gender "war", or so some women would have you think. Ms. Ong Soh Chin's column last week alleged that I was driving wedges between Singaporeans at a time when the Government was trying to build racial harmony ... Although it was way over the top, the aggressiveness of the column did not surprise me. Indeed, various female and feminist writers have been stepping up pressure on any man bold enough to disagree with their ideals on gender relations ... Effectively, these women have taken it upon themselves to set the out-of-bounds markers for gender discussion in Singapore. And, in doing so, they intimidate politically those who beg to differ ... they will fight with breathtaking viciousness to deny anything that mirrors the reality of how large numbers of men think and speak in private.

Meanwhile, in women's magazines and on TV, there has been a growing trend towards the trivialization of men. It is supposedly harmless, fun stuff. But with every article and sitcom, there is the reinforcement of the right of women to mock men — it's fun, duh! The reverse is, of course, sexist. Out of the mainstream media, it gets worse — it's patriarchy this and that; it's oppression of women; it's how disadvantaged women are in Singapore.

... He\*Mail started in the middle of last year as a result of a lunchtime challenge from a senior journalist friend — a dare to give a voice to what we knew were common Singapore male concerns hitherto confined to private conversations. And these concerns revolve around the loss of femininity that has accompanied the attainment of equality.

But equality does not necessarily require the blurring of gender differences, the surrender of what I described in an early column as the power of yin and yang. What many local men are increasingly disgruntled about is the bloody-minded refusal of a growing number of Singaporean women to indulge men in the smallest of feminine gestures.

Note how a few lines in one of my columns about the peeling of prawns — which was intended as a metaphor for a quid pro quo in gender relations — had kicked up such a storm.

... the way some women continue to lash out at men, long after the battle for equality has been won, is simply alienating Singapore men.

...Masculine thinking is to be mocked as "oafish", to be exorcised at the earliest opportunity ...

Singapore men have shown amazing equanimity in the face of tremendous change over a very short period of time. Appreciate that. This is the last column of Xie Wen (Xie Wen, 2002 [b]).

Xie Wen's appeal to women to indulge men in "the smallest of feminine gestures" is an indication of desperation in the attempt to recover the stereotype of the submissive, feminine Asian woman; his reference to yin and yang appears to be an indication of his desire to sustain the fantasy of gender asymmetry, and clearly bounded, gendered worlds.

"Peeling prawns" may be a symbol of the "feminine Asian woman" for some Singaporean men, but also invites a discursive intervention because its very ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations. It shifts narrative authority from men who want to tie women to traditional roles, and into the imagined community of women who contest these stereotypes. The "peeling prawns" debate is one of a series of discursive moments in Singapore which articulate masculine anxieties about the collapse of certainty, centred on the unsettling of male hegemony and the myth of immutable gender difference. For Bhabha, this could "demonstrate that forces of social authority and subversion or subalternity may emerge in displaced, even decentred strategies of signification" (1994: 145). The "peeling prawns" debate, far from recovering the Asian Feminine, has created a new space for the intervention of the performative in the pedagogical. The interpellation of Singapore women as less than Asian, less than feminine, has created "more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended referent" (Butler, 1993: 122).

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<sup>2</sup> Buay Tahan: a hybrid Hokkien-Malay term meaning: I can't stand it; can't take it.

<sup>3</sup> Ah lian: unsophisticated Chinese girl; usually denotes a "lower class" girl.

<sup>4</sup> Ah huay: interchangeable with ah lian.

<sup>5</sup> *Channel News Asia*, April 21, 2004 <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/data/pdfdoc/20040421.htm> (Retrieved November 20, 2004).

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<sup>6</sup> *Channel News Asia*, April 21, 2004 <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/data/pdfdoc/20040421.htm>  
(Retrieved November 20, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Xena is a character from a television show called “Xena. The Warrior Princess”, who is known for her combative skills and Amazon-like behaviour.

<sup>8</sup> RM100 (Malaysian Ringgits) was, at the time of writing, worth approximately (Australian) \$34. The point being made is that it’s a cheap meal.

<sup>9</sup> Guzheng: Chinese string instrument, similar to a harp.

<sup>10</sup> A reference to the arrest in Singapore of 13 men suspected of having links with Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network.

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