

# Tin Bangka Island: The Scramble between England and Dutch in Palembang Sultanate

*by Annada Nasyaya*

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**Submission date:** 23-Nov-2023 02:55PM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 2236793459

**File name:** Artikel\_Timah\_Bangka\_Dr\_Farida\_and\_Helen.pdf (484.44K)

**Word count:** 5032

**Character count:** 26459

*Tin Bangka Island: The Scramble between England and Dutch in Palembang Sultanate*

**Timah Pulau Bangka: Perebutan antara Inggris dan Belanda di Kesultanan Palembang**

Farida Ratu Wargadalem\*, Helen Susanti  
History Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher and Training  
Sriwijaya University

Surel: farida\_wd@fkip.unsri.ac.id, helensusanti@fkip.unsri.ac.id

\*Correspondency Author

**Abstract**

*Tin is one of the world's important commodities. The Sultanate of Palembang is the owner of the world's largest and most important tin industry, namely Bangka Island tin. During its development, the Bangka area became the target of the two biggest Asian imperialists, namely England and the Netherlands. In such conditions, the Palembang Sultanate as the owner of the Bangka tin mines had to deal with these two forces. Tin became a dilemma for the Palembang Sultanate because, with the presence of tin, the kingdom became the richest kingdom in the Malay World. However, on the other hand, the Palembang Sultanate area was the target of the two imperialist nations. As a result, conflict occurred between England and the Sultanate of Palembang and between England and the Netherlands in the Palembang area. This article aims to reveal these conflicts by explaining the various efforts made by the two nations to achieve their goals, dealing with the Sultanate of Palembang which defended its main property rights. By using the Historical Method, various conflicts and crises that took place in Palembang will be highlighted. In expressing this research, archival data, contemporary newspapers, online archives from official websites, and the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia were used. The results show that tin was a vital object in the struggle, and the Palembang Sultanate was in a position as subject and object. England succeeded as the winner after the Dutch surrendered in 1811, while the Sultanate of Palembang had to accept defeat and a split in the kingdom, which was the beginning of a prolonged conflict.*

**Keywords:** *England, Tin, Palembang Sultanate, Netherlands*

**Abstrak**

Timah merupakan salah satu komoditi penting dunia. Kesultanan Palembang adalah pemilik industri timah terbesar dan terpenting dunia, yaitu timah Pulau Bangka. Pada perkembangannya, daerah Bangka menjadi incaran dua imperialis terbesar Asia yaitu Inggris dan Belanda. Dalam kondisi demikian, Kesultanan Palembang sebagai pemilik tambang-tambang timah Bangka harus berhadapan dengan dua kekuatan tersebut. Timah menjadi dilema bagi Kesultanan Palembang, sebab dengan adanya timah, maka

kerajaan tersebut menjadi kerajaan terkaya di Dunia Melayu. Namun, di sisi lain, daerah Kesultanan Palembang menjadi incaran kedua bangsa imperialis tersebut. Akibatnya terjadi konflik antara Inggris dengan Kesultanan Palembang, juga antara Inggris dengan Belanda di wilayah Palembang. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan berbagai konflik tersebut, dengan memaparkan beragam upaya yang dilakukan oleh kedua bangsa demi mencapai tujuan, berhadapan dengan Kesultanan Palembang yang mempertahankan hak miliknya yang utama. Dengan menggunakan Metode Sejarah, akan diangkat berbagai konflik dan kemelut yang berlangsung di Palembang. Dalam mengungkapkan penelitian ini, menggunakan data arsip (ANRI), koran se zaman, arsip *online* dari website resmi, dan Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia (Perpusnas). Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa timah menjadi objek vital dalam perebutan tersebut, dan Kesultanan Palembang berada pada posisi sebagai subjek dan objek. Inggris berhasil sebagai pemenang setelah Belanda menyerah pada tahun 1811, sementara Kesultanan Palembang harus menerima kekalahan, sekaligus terjadinya perpecahan di kerajaan itu, yang menjadi awal konflik berkepanjangan.

**Kata Kunci:** Belanda, Inggris, Kesultanan Palembang, Timah

### **Introduction**

Tin has become a mainstay commodity on Bangka Island. Apart from the main product tin, there are also pepper, gambier, and rattan which further enrich export-import activities on Bangka Island (*De Sumatra Post, 03 Juli 1912*). The islands of Bangka and Belitung are among the best tin-producing islands in the world and one of the largest. Therefore, even though there are other natural resources, tin has become a special identity for Bangka Island, because not all islands have large and good tin content like Bangka Island Field (Darwance et al., 2018). The existence of tin which is excellent is also inseparable from the great benefits of tin in the industrial sector, for example for connecting cable devices (Sintaro et al., 2022).

The existence of tin has existed since prehistoric times in the archipelago, continuing during the Sriwijaya era (X century AD), because tin was a commodity that was traded as far away as Canton, China. In the 15th century, Mahuwan, who at that time was part of the expedition carried out by Cheng Ho, also recorded about tin. The Portuguese also recorded the tin trade in Melaka which was imported from the Malay Peninsula and the East Coast of Sumatra Island. In 1662, an English private trader (Lock) first traded tin. In 1639, the Dutch made a contract with Aceh to purchase tin. Thus, it means that tin has long been one of the traded commodities (Wargadalem, 2017).

In the XVII century, Bangka had been part of Palembang since the time of Sultan Abdurrahman (the first Sultan), marked by the marriage between the Sultan and the daughter of the ruler of Bangka. Meanwhile, the first contract between the Palembang

kingdom and the VOC occurred in 1641 which stated that the VOC was allowed to trade in Palembang. The contract was renewed in the following year, 1642, which stated that the VOC was allowed to monopolize the pepper trade in Palembang. After tin was discovered in 1709/1711, the trade monopoly developed into the tin trade. The VOC had the opportunity to monopolize the tin trade when there was a dispute in the Palembang Sultanate between Prince Anom and Jayawikrama in 1719. Jayawikrama won the war with the help of the VOC. After ascending the throne, Jayawikrama had the title of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin I. In return for his favor with the VOC, the trade contract between the VOC and the Sultan was renewed in 1722 with the provisions that the Dutch VOC could establish a lodge at the mouth of the Aur River and exercise a monopoly on the tin trade (*De Nederlander*, 09 November 1912).

Several studies that touch on tin have been conducted by several researchers (Groot, 2016), (Heidhues, 1991), (Akmal Azmi et al., 2023), (Ibrahim et al., 2022), (Zubir, 2015), (Bassett, 1989), (de Bougainville, 2017), (Lewis., 1970). However, research that specifically discusses why and how the conflict occurred between England and the Netherlands when fighting for control of tin on Bangka Island is very lacking and has not yet become a complete study. Therefore, this article will fill in the gaps in the narrative about the "struggle" for control of tin on Bangka Island carried out by the British and Dutch during the Palembang Sultanate which occurred in the period 1810 to 1818.

## **Method**

The research was carried out using historical research methodology (Kuntowijoyo, 1995., Gottschalk, 1983., Schneider, 1963). The research stages begin with determining the theme, looking for sources, carrying out source criticism, and interpretation, and finally carrying out historiography of historical writing. The author searched for sources in the form of archives (especially newspaper archives), books, and articles. Several archives were found in the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia in Jakarta, the National Library of the Republic of Indonesia in Jakarta, the Al-Wasthiyyah Library, the Palembang City Archives Library, and the South Sumatra Regional Library. Apart from that, other sources can be found on platforms *online*: kitlv.nl, tropenmuseum.nl, jstor, scopus, and delpher.nl. The writer should criticize the source carefully, one of which is by comparing one source with another source. From source criticism, the author begins to compile an interpretation, mapping a series of facts and events obtained from various sources that have passed the critical process. In the final step, the author carried out historiography or historical writing related to the research theme, namely regarding the power struggle between the British and the Dutch over tin in the Palembang Sultanate 1810-1818.

## **Discussion**

Tin on Bangka Island, was first discovered in 1709/1710 in the Belo area, Bangka (*Provinciale Drentsche En Asser Courant*, 09 Juni 1868). In 1711, Bangka tin began to become

known and increasingly developed in the following periods, especially during the reign of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin I. Seeing the development of tin mining, the VOC (*Dutch East-India Company*) which is a company from the Netherlands also has the desire to control the tin trade. This effort was successful after Prince Jaya Wikrama (Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin I) with Dutch assistance succeeded in becoming the winner in the family conflict in the Palembang Sultanate. For these services, Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II was willing to renew the contract with the VOC (in 1722) which contained the VOC's right to monopolize tin and establish a Loji on the Aur River (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, 01 Juli 1912*). The Bangka tin delivery contract carried out by the Palembang Sultanate and the VOC began on 02 June 1722 (*De Nederlander, 09 November 1912*).

Before monopolizing trade in Bangka, VOC (*Dutch East-India Company*) - Company from the Netherlands, has had extraordinary power in Malay lands after successfully conquering the Strait of Malacca in 1641. The Strait of Melaka is the main entry route to the Malay Archipelago and the archipelago in general. VOC They tried to monopolize the trade in tin, gold, and pepper as well as import cloth from India which had a high selling value at that time (Lewis, 1970). When they succeeded in getting a cooperation contract with the Sultan of Palembang, this strengthened the VOC as the largest trading company from the Netherlands.



Figure 1. Pile of Tin in Belinjoe, Bangka, 1911

Source: KITLV 94494, <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:925758>

Thus, 1722 was the starting point of the VOC's involvement in tin in the Palembang Sultanate. Leads are shipped in boxes (See Figure 1) weighing 2 pounds. The amount of tin supplied in 1717 reached 500 to 600 piculs per year. 1721 increased to 3000 pikul per



year. In 1735, the number was almost 6000 pikul, shipping continued to increase until it reached 20,000 pikul in 1760. In fact, in 1775, shipping reached 30,000 pikul per year (*De Nederlander, 09 November 1912*). During its development, tin became the most profitable commodity for the Palembang Sultanate and the VOC. The presence of tin made the Palembang Sultanate the richest sultanate in the Malay world until the 19th century. Palembang's charm with tin finally made other nations want to share in the benefits, especially England.

### **British occupation of the Palembang Sultanate**

Since the British took control of Penang in 1786, the British intensified their illegal trade in pepper and tin (illegal for the Dutch because there was an agreement between the VOC and the Sultanate). England gave much greater prices. The VOC bought at a price of 8 ringgit per picul while the British bought it at 16 ringgit per picul (*Woelders, 1975*). Thus, the rulers of the Palembang Sultanate became increasingly enthusiastic about selling tin to the British. Through this illegal trade with England, the Palembang Sultanate enjoyed or obtained greater profits. The illegal trade carried out by the British had an impact on Dutch companies (VOC) where shipments continued to decline, 1798 it only amounted to 15,000 piculs, and in 1801 it was only around 1000 piculs (*De Nederlander, 09 November 1912*)

Meanwhile, by conditions in Europe where a coalition war was going on, France occupied the Netherlands and established the Bataf Republic in 1795, so the King of the Netherlands, Willem V fled to England (seeking protection). Since then, he issued an order that the Dutch colonies (including the archipelago) be handed over to England. At that time, the Netherlands had been controlled by France and the archipelago under Daendels 1808-1811 and continued by Jansen in 1811 (Marihandono, 2005). That is why Governor General Lord Minto was based in Calcutta to control the archipelago (current Indonesia). To make this happen, Lord Minto appointed Lieutenant Governor Thomas Stanford Raffles, who at that time was based in Melaka, to take steps to make this wish come true.

Raffles tried to do everything he could to control Tin by weakening Dutch authority. Apart from that, the most important step that Raffles took at that time was to approach the Malay kings, especially the Sultan of Palembang. Raffles issued promises to Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II that if Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II succeeded in expelling the Dutch from his area before the British succeeded in conquering Java. So, Palembang will be free from all the provisions that have been made with the Netherlands (independent/not bound by contracts). However, the Sultan had not found a definite reason why he had to expel the Dutch, so in the end, he continued to stall for time until SMB II finally received news that Batavia and other areas had been controlled by the

British. The Dutch ruler, Jansen, withdrew to Central Java (*De Sumatra Post*, 03 September 1938).

After knowing, the Sultan took action to raid the Sungai Aur Plant (the Dutch place) on September 14, 1811, and the Dutch suffered defeat and surrendered to Sultan SMB II (*De Sumatra Post*, 27 Juni 1921). September 18, 1811, the Tuntang agreement was carried out in Central Java, which marked the end of Dutch rule in the archipelago. When Raffles sent an envoy in November 1811 to take over Dutch rule in Palembang, the Sultan refused, because of Britain's promise (Raffles), that if the Palembang Sultanate won against the Dutch before the British took control of Java, then Palembang would be free from the terms of the contract with the Dutch and the Sultan had defeated Netherlands before the Tuntang agreement was carried out (Wargadalem, 2017). From 1811-1816 the archipelago was controlled by Britain (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 01 Juli 1912).

When the Sultan refused, the British envoy could not accept this. There were tough negotiations until England demanded that Bangka as a tin producer could become its territory. However, the Sultan still rejected this, because tin was the mainstay commodity of the Palembang Sultanate. Because the Sultan refused, the British carried out a military expedition in April 1812. Finally, the islands of Bangka and Belitung were handed over to the British with full sovereignty and the British flag was raised there. Since then, the Palembang Sultanate has also been controlled by the British. Since then, the British government moved the center of the Sultanate's power in Palembang around Tandjong Kalean (Kelian), but because the environmental conditions were unhealthy, it was moved to Rangam Baroe because the location was too far from the sea, the position was moved to Muntok (*De Nederlander*, 09 November 1912).

If the center of Dutch power was in Palembang, then the center of British power was in Muntok. The defeat of the Palembang Sultanate was caused by betrayal by Prince Adipati who was the younger brother of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II who supported the British. The fall of Palembang to the British caused Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II (SMB II) along with his family and followers to retreat to the Bailangu area (currently in the Musi Banyuasin area) and the British appointed Prince Adipati as Sultan of Palembang who resided in the Kuto Besak Palace with the title Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin II. However, SMB II did not just sit there, he assembled forces in the Bailangu area to take over the Palembang Sultanate again. So, when there was an attack from Palembang which was a combination of Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin II's troops and British troops, a war broke out in the Bailangu area. During the war, the British were under the leadership of Smitsar, but during the war, Smitsar was shot in the stomach and died at Tanjung Kelian, causing his troops to retreat. Because it didn't work, since then, they have blockaded Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II's territory in Bailangu so that they

cannot get various commodities from Palembang, which is the center of trade (*De Sumatra Post*, 03 September 1938).

When there was a change in Resident of Palembang with the election of Resident Major William Robison, it was Robison who established cooperation or communication with Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II so that SMB II could return to Palembang City and return to the throne at the Palace. Meanwhile, his younger brother, Sultan Najamuddin II, abdicated the throne in 1813. However, Robison's efforts were rejected by Raffles, so SMB II abdicated again and Sultan Najamuddin II returned to the throne and ruled until 1818. Meanwhile, SMB II remained in Palembang but did not have a position or power as a Sultan (Wargadalem, 2017).

In 1814, the Treaty of London occurred, which was an agreement between England and the Netherlands, that England handed over Bangka and the surrounding islands to the Netherlands, and in exchange, England got the region of Cochin, South India. But Raffles, who was the British representative, did not want to leave Bangka until 1815 by continuing to stall for time. Based on a decision from the central region (England), Raffles was replaced with John Pendel until 1816, John Pendall also did not want to give up Bangka, but in the end, Bangka was handed over to the Dutch in 1816. British rule in Muntok started from 1812 to 1816 (*De Sumatra Post*, 03 Juli 1912). Raffles himself was withdrawn to London and then reassigned as Lieutenant Governor in the Bengkulu region until 1818, which was the only British territory in the archipelago at that time.

### **Sales System and Production of Bangka Tin**





**Figure 2.** Illustration of the Bangka Island Tin Mine, 1911

Source: KITLV 94494, <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:925758>

Bangka's tin sales system from 1711-1812, Bangka was divided into several districts, each under a high-level warden called *Teko*. In addition, there are also *Kongsi*. *Kongsi* is below *Teko* and was tasked with providing various equipment, tools, carpenters, and craftsmen needed for the mining process. *Kongsi* also distributes rice, oil, salt, and clothing to mining workers. Each *kongsi* employed clerks, archivists, and other officials (*De Sumatra Post*, 03 Juli 1912).

The delivery of tin took place due to the intervention of the Sultan of Palembang who had entered into trade agreements with the VOC. Mining can be carried out with the Sultan's approval. The trade contract that was carried out required that Bangka tin be sold through VOC intermediaries. People feel that they cannot enjoy Bangka's natural tin products, so there are people who smuggle tin in the sense of not selling tin through the VOC (Darwance et al., 2018).

**Table 1.** Total Bangka Tin Production, 1812-1815

Year	Total Production (Pikul)	Percentage Increase (%)
1812	10.000	-
1813	7.300	-27%
1814	19.150	+162%
1815	25.200	+32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>61.650</b>	

Source: *De Nederlander*, 09 November 1912., F. Wargadalem, 2017.

Based on Table 1, it is known that in 1813, total tin production decreased by 27% with a total production of 7,200 piculs from production in 1812 which reached 10,000 piculs. In 1814, there was an increase of 162% with total production of 19,150 pikul. The increase continued in 1815 with a percentage increase of 32% and a total production of 25,200 pikul. The significant increase in 1814-1815 could have occurred as a result of the administrative decisions carried out by England which began in 1812 by making agreements, eradicating illegal trade, and making more rational agreements with tin miners. The miners received 6 Spanish dollars per picul of tin. To increase tin production in Bangka, the company recruited employees from Canton, China in 1813 as many as 1887 new workers with wages of \$30 per (*De Nederlander*, 09 November 1912). Tin workers or miners come from native Bangka, China, and people in the archipelago in general.

Chinese people were brought to Bangka to become tin miners. While Europeans became experts (Latham, 2017., Ibrahim et al., 2022). Especially from 1812 to 1813, there was a decline, because England was still adapting to the new tin mining environment, The old system is still used with the existence of a "kongsi" which was responsible for the "teko".



Figure 3. Illustration of the Tin Smelting Factory in Bangka, 1931  
Source: KITLV 50956, <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:699740>

**Table 2.** Total Bangka Tin Production, 1812-1815

<b>Year</b>	<b>Income (rupees)</b>	<b>Expenses (rupees)</b>	<b>Profit (rupee)</b>	<b>Profit/income percentage</b>
1812-1813	684.966,74	420.809,84	264.156,90	39%
1813-1814	931.113,40	567.967,40	363.146	39%
1814-1815	1.593.929,38	740.558, 24	853.371,14	54%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.210.009,52</b>	<b>1.729.335,48</b>	<b>1.480.674,04</b>	

Source: Wargadalem, 2017.

Based on Table 2, Bangka tin profits from 1812-1813 reached 261,156.90 rupees. In 1813-1814 profits reached 363,146 rupees. Meanwhile, in 1814-1815, profits reached

853,371.14 rupees. The total profit obtained by England from 1812-1815 was 1,480,674.04. It can be concluded that England made a large profit on the tin commodity, even tin alone could cover all the expenses incurred by England. This is one of the strong reasons why the British and Dutch tried to establish power over Bangka because Bangka had a product that could increase their wealth. For the Dutch, the Bangka tin mine is a true gold mine for the Netherlands (*Arnhemsche Courant*, 14 November 1874).

### **British and Dutch conflict in the Palembang Sultanate**

The Dutch re-occupation of the Palembang Sultanate left British "traces" which were considered by the Dutch as a thorn in the flesh. Several Dutch residents who ruled in Palembang were unable to reduce the conflict in the Palembang Sultanate. It was clear that the people of the kingdom were divided into two, namely the people who submitted to Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin II who was in power at that time, and the people who remained loyal to supporting Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II who in their eyes was still the legitimate sultan. As a result of this division, the interior areas often experienced chaos, both because of differences in support between the two sultans, and because they rejected the policies of Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin II which were considered to be suffering for the people. For example, Sultan Najamuddin II distributed land in the interior of Palembang to his supporting nobles, resulting in the exploitation of the population by some noble groups, as well as the implementation of *tiban-tukong*, namely the buying and selling pattern that was determined by the Sultan. Previously only a few were affected by this system, but during the time of Sultan Najamuddin II, it was increased, which meant burdening the people (Kemp, 1900). Various policies that made people miserable caused feelings of "rejection" of the sultan to grow stronger.

Being aware of such conditions, The Dutch authorities in Batavia decided to send someone who was experienced in government, namely Muntinghe. This character immediately took the right step, namely "dividing" into two (June 1818), namely between Sultan Najamuddin II and Sultan Badaruddin II. This policy was strongly opposed by Sultan Najamuddin II, therefore he asked for help from the British (Raffles) in Bengkulu (When the British were leaving Palembang, he promised that Raffles would help the Sultan if he felt "threatened". Muntinghe knew about this action of asking for help, so Sultan Najamuddin II was imprisoned and his remaining half of power was handed over to Sultan Badaruddin II. Meanwhile, when Raffles received a letter requesting protection from Sultan Najamuddin II, he saw an opportunity to return to Palembang. On that basis, Raffles sent troops under the leadership of Captain Salmond. The troops brought by Salmod were partially left in the Muara Bliti area led by Haslam, and together with selected troops headed for the capital Palembang, arriving there in early July 1818. This

was the beginning of an open conflict between the Dutch and the British (*ANRI, Bundel Palembang No.67, The Asiatic Journal, Pebruari 1819*).

Muntinghe was faced with very difficult conditions. Negotiations after negotiations went tough until finally an agreement was reached that Salmond and his troops would be sent back to Bengkulu via the Batavia sea route. Muntinghe's special treatment towards Salmond and his troops was able to melt Salmond's heart so that he was willing to leave Sultan Najamuddin II's palace and leave for Batavia. Is the problem solved? What about the troops left by Salmond at Muara Bliti The troops were very dangerous, so Muntinghe decided to repel them himself. Muntinghe's departure with troops to the location of the British troops was quite a long journey because Muntinghe was very worried about the Dutch presence in the Palembang Sultanate, which was still consolidating amidst the chaos in various regions of the kingdom. Efforts to expel British troops were the main priority, and this effort had not been successful it was faced with an "embarrassing" problem for the Dutch, namely the confrontation between British troops under the leadership of Haslan and Dutch troops led by de Groot. The condition of the Dutch troops was weak and their numbers were small. When the British troops insisted on heading towards the capital, de Groot insisted on refusing. Finally, they agreed to negotiate it with their respective troops. It was at that time that de Groot decided to "retreat" to Palembang, and was unsuccessfully pursued by British troops. In these conditions, the Dutch were very hard hit, so Muntinghe decided to chase by force of arms to expel the British troops from the territory of the Palembang sultanate (Wargadalem, 2017). The long conflict over the Palembang region, especially Bangka, took many "victims", namely the fall of Sultan Najamuddin II, and the rise of Sultan Badaruddin II, Muntinghe's concentration was only focused on the Palembang Bengkulu border area, so the capital was neglected, so Sultan Badaruddin II consolidated to fight, so that war occurred in June 1819 and Palembang won. Bangka Tin brought the Palembang Sultanate to prosperity and fame but also brought it to ruin until this great Kingdom was abolished in 1825.

### **Conclusion**

Bangka tin has become a mainstay commodity on Bangka Island and has attracted world attention. Tin is sought after because of the various benefits contained in tin, especially its benefits in industry. Bangka tin is also one of the best quality tins in the world. Therefore, the British and the Dutch VOC wanted to invest their power in Bangka and monopolize the tin trade. The conflict between England and the Netherlands involved the Sultan of Palembang who was the ruler of the Palembang Sultanate, including Bangka at that time. Various agreements and even wars occurred because of the desire to control tin. Further research on this theme still needs to be carried out in the future to enrich the existing narrative. Constructive criticism and suggestions can also be submitted to the author to continue to improve the research results that have been found.

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