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Wherever We Find Friends there Begins a New Life: Tagore and China

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Abstract

Tagore made a deep impression upon the Chinese culture and society. In 1923, the Jiangxue she 講學社 (Beijing Lecture Association) invited Rabindranath Tagore to deliver a series of talks. The Jiangxue she Association was established in September 1920 and represented one of the many institutions that came to life in China during the May Fourth Movement. Since then, almost all of his works in English have been translated into Chinese. He came to China just when the latter was beginning her Renaissance and his visit certainly gave a great impetus to this new movement. His poems of *Stray Birds* and *The Crescent Moon* have created new styles of prosody in the new Chinese poetry. A Crescent Moon Society (for poetry) and a Crescent Moon magazine were started immediately after this event by Hu Shi 胡适 (Hu 2002: 90). During his visit, Tagore raised two basic questions, one about the relation between tradition and modernity, and the other about the usual identification of modernisation with Westernisation. Since the May Fourth Movement, China has also been concerned with these questions and Chinese intellectuals have come out with different answers. These questions, however, were important not only for China but for India as well. Such debates and the revaluation of various answers represented the most important condition for a consolidation of new ideologies, which formed a political basis for the changing societies of both countries.

Keywords: Tagore in China, Chinese translations, intercultural interactions, modernization, westernization, the May 4th Movement

1 Introduction: China and India at the Doorstep of the 20th Century

During the first half of the 20th Century, most of the Asian countries were confronted with specific issues of colonialism and modernisation within a framework of new,

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globally defined economic and political trends (Meissner 1990: 11). In China as well as in India, these issues naturally afforded a rethinking of traditional values (Yu 2001: 22). The requirements of the new era, determined by changes in elementary social conditions, demanded their reevaluation. This reevaluation represented the most important condition for a consolidation of new ideologies, intended also to form a political basis for the changing society and for its new economy (Rošker 2008: 27). A look at the cultural and intellectual responses to colonialism in Asia, especially in India and China shows this contrast to be conspicuous. Colonialism successfully determined the terms of discourse in India but failed to conclusively shape the discourse in China. Let me begin with a short exploration of the reasons behind this divergence in the struggle over terms of discourse in India and China.

After the decline of the Empire and the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, Chinese thought developed in the spirit of confronting Western ideas while simultaneously attempting to modernize the autochthonous Chinese philosophical tradition (Peng and Cheng 1999: 121). Most of the Chinese intellectuals of the period followed the aim to adopt Western technology (applicability, 用) while simultaneously preserving China's own essence (體). In addition to this group, whose approach can be epitomized by their slogan “preserving the Chinese essence and applying the Western sciences (中學為體, 西學為用)”, two more radical currents began to take shape among the Chinese intellectuals of this period. The first of these advocated a complete elimination of the Chinese tradition and complete Westernisation of culture and thought (全盤西化), while the second advocated a renewal and rebirth (復古主義) of the tradition in the form of a new, leading culture (中國本位文化).

Politically, the period of the First Republic was still characterized by a profound crisis and general instability. Under the guise of parliamentary democracy, governmental policies were determined by authoritarian ambitions and power struggles among rival generals. With the start of WWI, the Chinese became witness to the bankruptcy of European political theories as the major Western powers entered into a protracted spiral of devastation and bloodletting. These events naturally dampened the previous Chinese enthusiasm for progressive European thought, and those who had seen in Western philosophy and science the most advanced stage of human civilization were profoundly shaken by this development (Peng and Cheng 1999: 121).

The demands for a sweeping reform of thought and culture that had emerged from the various rejections of the outmoded Confucian tradition (Chan 2000: 250) finally exploded in the so-called May Fourth Movement (五四運動). This movement, which began on May 4th, 1919, with student demonstrations in the Square of Heavenly

Peace in Peking¹, would come to play a crucial role in the cultural, political and ideological modernization of Chinese society. Its main publication *The New Youth* (新青年), which had been founded by Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 in 1915, soon became the most influential journal of its kind for a new generation of Chinese intellectuals. The spirit of the new China was expressed in its demands for the abolition of obsolete Confucian thought and conservative structures, which were seen as hindering the free development of individuals and society. It also advocated equality between the sexes and free love², and the end of economic and political domination by the privileged classes. For the New intellectuals, these demands formed the basis and precondition for a more equitable distribution of the material and ideal resources of Chinese society. All these demands were naturally connected to the need for fundamental changes in the general mentality. *New Youth*, for example, published its articles in colloquial language (白話), thereby giving a major impulse to the gradual abolition of ancient Chinese (文言) as the only acceptable form of public writing. Ancient Chinese was an archaic language which differed radically from modern Chinese, and could only be learned through the lengthy and costly process of a classical education. The exclusive use of ancient Chinese, which was only accessible to the tiny minority of the privileged classes, resulted in the vast majority of the Chinese population being completely cut off from any form of written culture, even if one were not completely illiterate. The so-called ‘colloquial movement’ (白話運動) thus became a cornerstone of the new Chinese culture. This spiritual offspring of the May 4th Movement first manifested itself in the flowering of the new literature, which was produced by the so-called New intellectuals and deeply influenced by Western literary forms and canons. This new literature differed greatly from traditional literary production, not only in terms of language, but also in its contents and subject matter (Peng and Cheng 1999: 121).

In India, however, the situation was completely different. British rule in India claimed the role of a ‘civilizing mission’. It established institutions of the state which included civil service, judicial magistrates, police and clerks for managing the organization of society. It introduced European educational system to promote European ideas of arts and sciences. Imposition of English language through the educational institutions and operations of governmental machinery and especially in the realm of culture and media finally shaped the terms of discourse in favor of the interest of the colonial power. Indigenous institutions of politics, economy and culture

¹ The direct cause of this demonstration was the decision of the Versailles conference to cede the Chinese Shandong province to Japan.

² These demands did not signify a sexual revolution based upon promiscuity, but only the free choice of marriage partners, as opposed to traditional weddings based upon agreements between different families or clans.

were by no means ideal. They were also arenas of struggle as evident in the course of many uprisings and cultural and religious reform movements. But the colonial regime subdued these struggles and declared its view of the world as modern, scientific and rational, and thus a bearer of advanced civilization. That it had a specific class, race and ethnic basis and was subject to struggle in Europe itself was not conveyed to the colonial society.

The struggle against the colonial imposition continued to erupt from time to time in India but it lost the battle each time. After the May 4th movement and especially through the writings of Lu Xun and others and through the political struggle during the anti-Japanese War, the centre of discourse was moved in the direction of the common people of China.

Unfortunately, in intercultural research, it is still common to project elements of the contents and forms of discourse largely determined by the dominant political (and thus also economic) power upon the object being considered (Mall 1996: 23). Despite the tendency towards openness and an interdisciplinary approach, the discourses of modern science and the humanities are still predominantly determined by the paradigmatic network which serves the interests of the 'New World'. The relation between India and China, however, has been unique in the history of the world. The fact that for thousands of years, not a single conflict between the two immediately neighbouring countries erupted is in itself almost inconceivable. Moreover, instead of displaying brutal force, India and China had exchanged their cultures and civilizations, religions and philosophies. (Shen 1999: 1)

Somebody may attribute this to the sky-pointing barriers of the Himalayas. But no explanation would be complete if it ignored the peace-loving nature of the two great peoples in the East, which is the real and fundamental reason underlying the fact. For aggression is the symbol of barbarism, which has long been cast away in these two nations; and without this brutal symbol, clash can never occur. (Shen 1999: 1)

2 Tagore's Visit to China

Evaluating the impact of these intercultural contacts and exchanges has proven difficult. Unfortunately, the periods when Fa Xian 法顯, Xuan zang 玄奘 and Yi Jing 義淨 went to India, and Kasyapa Matanga, Kumarajiva and Bodhidharma came to China, were not everlasting. After the Song Dynasty, the Buddhist culture in China was hampered by the interposition of superstition and degenerative forces, while its existence on the other side of the Himalayas had long been discontinued. Given the fact that the link between the two countries at the time chiefly depended upon

Buddhism, and taking into consideration that Buddhism had died out in India, the Chinese culture was severed from the Indian one. In the later centuries, specific political developments additionally prevented any close interactions between India and China. It is therefore not surprising that in the last six or seven hundred years both countries knew very little about each other in any respect. Their old friendship was not resumed until 1924, when the Indian poet and thinker Tagore came to China (Shen 1999: 1).

The *Jiangxue she* 講學社 (Beijing Lecture Association) invited Rabindranath Tagore in 1923 to deliver a series of talks. This Association, established in September 1920, was one of the many institutions that came to life in China in the wake of the May Fourth Movement (Tang 2002: 18). Its main objective was to invite foreign scholars and to arrange lectures by them for Chinese intellectuals (Das 1989: 1)

The Association had earlier invited John Dewey (1859–1952), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Hans Driesch (1862–1941). They spoke to a limited number of scholars, but their lectures were more or less well received and Russell certainly made a great impression on Chinese intellectuals. The invitation to Rabindranath Tagore, however, created an unprecedented uproar which eventually culminated in strong hostility against him as well as against Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), President of the Association, by the radical student circles and some ultra left-oriented political leaders. (Das 1989: 1)

Thus, interest in Tagore notwithstanding, there were voices in China – and many in number – that clearly were not impressed by the global stature the poet had by then attained. It was a sentiment that did not come as a big surprise, for the visit quickly revealed the existence of a group of Chinese intellectuals not quite ready to accept Tagore as the voice of his country owing to the perceived passive role he had adopted in the struggle for Indian independence from under the British colonial rule. And how did the Bengali poet deal with such questions? He told one gathering of Chinese men of letters that he was first and foremost a poet; that he was not a philosopher or a prophet. He had obviously been riled by what he thought were pointless attacks on his ideas of life. And it was men like Mao Dun 矛盾 who made him feel that way. The Chinese wrote in the journal *Juewu* 覺悟 (The Awareness): “The poet-saint of India has arrived at last. No sooner did the noble poet dressed in a flowing saffron robe and a red cap set foot in Shanghai, the gateway of Western imperialism, than he was welcomed with thunderous applause.” (cf. Sun 2007: 112)

In spite of several conflicts, he made a deep impression upon the Chinese people, especially on the intellectuals (Sun 2007: 89). He loved China and was loved by the Chinese. In his works, Tagore presupposed the universal nature of all forms of learning. This presupposition is also evident in his views on the confrontation with

Western thought, and he was one of the earliest exponents of intercultural relativism, stressing the need to overcome culturally determined prejudices and valuations in intercultural discourses. His search for most reasonable interactions between different discourses was much more complex and subtle than it first appeared. Since his first visit, almost all of his works in English have been translated into Chinese, one after another. He came to China just when the latter was beginning her Renaissance and his visit certainly gave a great impetus to this new movement. His poems of *Stray Birds* and *The Crescent Moon* created new styles of prosody in the new Chinese poetry. (Shen 1999: 1) A Crescent Moon Society (for poetry) and a Crescent Moon magazine were started immediately after this event by the late Mr. Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 and Dr. Hu Shi 胡适. During his visit, he toured all the big cities in China to the extreme south, and wherever he went, he was cordially welcomed and anxiously asked to deliver speeches on Indian culture and civilization. During this visit, he negotiated with Chinese cultural leaders on exchange of scholars and professors (Shen 1999: 1). In his speech *China and India*, he made it very clear that the central aim of his visit was to re-establish peace and friendship between the two countries.

The most memorable fact of human history is that of a path-opening, not for the clearing of a passage for machines or machine-guns, but for the helping the realization by races of their affinity of minds, their mutual obligations of a common humanity. Such a rare event did happen and the path was built between our people and Chinese in an age, when physical obstruction needed heroic personality to overcome it, and the mental barrier a moral power of uncommon magnitude. The two leading races of that age met, not as rivals on the battlefield, each claiming the right to be the sole tyrant on earth, but as noble friends glorying in their exchange of gifts. Then came a slow relapse into isolation, covering up the path with its accumulated dust of indifference. Today our old friends have beckoned to us again, generously helping us to retrace that ancient path, obliterated by the inertia of forgetful centuries and we rejoice. (Tagore 1989: 3).

Sources of information about the Chinese response to Tagore are divergent and varied. A few publications from the Visva-Bharati at that time, however, offer valuable information about the poet's sojourn in China. Four years after the death of the poet, Kalidas Nag edited a slender volume, *Tagore and China* (1945). Leonard Elmhirst and Kalidas Nag, who accompanied Tagore to China, both maintained diaries – they are, however, still not available to general readers. The most detailed and valuable work on the subject can be found in the revised version of the doctoral thesis of Stephen Hay, an American scholar. It was published under the title *Asian Ideas of East and West* (1970). The main idea of this author is that Tagore went to China to propagate an ideal of the Orient, an ideal of one Asia and the agenda of spiritualism which could, in his opinion, serve as an effective alternative against Western materialism. According to Stephen Hay, Tagore did not realize that the idea of the Orient was a gift of the

western Orientalists, which was more a myth than reality (Said 1995: 98). All Asian countries, especially the present and former colonies, had their own versions of the 'Orient' and Tagore's idea of Asia was different from that of the Chinese. According to Hay, Tagore's idea of a spiritual rejuvenation of Asia was critically doubted by most Chinese intellectuals. The younger ones rejected his ideas with crude vehemence and the elder ones with gentle indifference (Das 1989: 2).

Thus, various interpretations of his visit differ in ideological, as well as in respect to their content. Thus, it is very difficult to present a clear and objective overview of this event. First of all, it is by no means easy to locate all the lectures that Tagore delivered in China, since most of them are available in abridged or in distorted form. Some of them were reproduced in the *Visva-Bharati Bulletin* and *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*. The majority, however, are to be found in Tagore's *Talks in China*, published soon after his return from China in 1924 (Das 1989: 2). His impressions of the great neighbour come across with a fair deal of enthusiasm:

Can anything be more worthy of being cherished than the beautiful spirit of Chinese culture, that has made them love the things of this earth, clothe them with tender grace without turning them materialistic? They have instinctively grasped the secret of the rhythm of things – not the secret of power that is in science, but the secret of expression. This is a great gift, for God alone knows this secret. I envy them this gift and wish our people could share it with them (Tagore 1989: 10).

Some of his researchers (cf. Das 1989: 3) allege that Tagore's knowledge of China was not confined to a superficial acquaintance with Confucianism alone. During his visit, he also wrote: "I had in my mind my own vision of China, formed when I was young, China as I had imagined it to be when I was reading my Arabian Nights, the romantic China, as well as the China of which I had caught glimpses when I was in Japan" (Tagore 1989: 4).

Before departing to China, Tagore told the journalists that when he received the Chinese invitation he felt that it was an invitation to India herself, and as her humble son he felt he had to accept it (Das 1989: 4). He hoped that his visit would re-establish the cultural and spiritual links between the two cultures: "We shall invite scholars and try to arrange an exchange of scholars. If I can accomplish this, I shall feel happy." (Tagore 1989: 5)

These words were not only pleasantries; they came perfectly naturally to the man who had always nourished great love for China and who visualized a centre of learning where the whole world would meet as if in a nest (Das 1989: 4).

3 Reception of Tagore's Literature in China

According to Sisir Kumar Das (1989: 3), many articles that appeared during Tagore's visit to China in different newspapers and journals are difficult to locate, some of them are already lost or destroyed. A volume entitled *Lun Taige'er 論泰戈尔 (On Tagore)*, containing many articles on Tagore written by various Chinese scholars and political activists during the period between 1921 and 1924, published by the Institute of South Asian Studies of the *Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan 中國社會科學院* (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) at Beijing in 1983 provides interesting materials. Das points out that the long article by Ji Xianlin 季羨林, the Director of the Institute and an eminent Chinese Indologist, also the President of the Comparative Literature Association of China, seems particularly valuable as it gives a scholarly analysis of the factors responsible for the controversy surrounding Tagore's visit. According to this author, the main reason for the conflict and its implications was the inherent duality in Tagore's work and philosophy (Das 1989: 3). On the one hand, Tagore was doubtless an anti-imperialist and intensely patriotic; but on the other, he was also a religious poet and a mystic (Das 1989: 3). His poems and songs did inspire the Indians in their struggle against foreign rule, his poems and short stories indeed breathed a universal spirit, but Chinese intellectuals also strongly felt that his writings were full of escapism, which they considered to be a dangerous and misleading path, unable to lead oppressed people out of the current crisis.

Still, Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China in 1924 must have been a moment of realisation for him. There were those in the country, scholars as well as students, who saw in him an august presence already made famous by the Nobel Prize for literature. Soon after the news of the award of the Nobel Prize to Tagore reached China in 1913, various Chinese scholars described Rabindranath Tagore as a great poet and thinker, wholeheartedly dedicated to his motherland and to the welfare of the mankind (Das 1989: 2). Many young Chinese who were studying in the USA, England and in Japan, were very familiar with his writings. Many eminent Chinese thinkers of that time, such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Hu Shi 胡适 and Xu Zhimo 徐之末, also read Tagore in English when they were abroad. Naturally, many young Chinese, who stayed in their own country, but could read English also came under the spell of the *Crescent Moon*.

Tagore's works were translated into Chinese as early as in 1915 and his first translator was Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, one of the founders of the Communist Party of China. In the second issue of the influential journal *Xin Qingnian 新青年* (New Youth), edited by him, Chen published translations of four poems from Tagore (Nos. 1, 2, 25 and 35) with a note that he was a mystic but also a mentor of the Indian youth. (Das 1989: 3)

In 1916, the oldest and most widely circulated Chinese journal *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志 (*The Eastern Miscellany*), also published one of the lectures of Tagore delivered in Japan. This talk might have created an impression in China that Tagore was a sharp critic of modern Western civilization and a man of spiritual temper (Das 1989: 3). But on the other hand, other aspects of Tagore's thought could not be totally unknown to the Chinese reading public as:

several young writers of promise had translated his poems, short stories and plays. *Gitanjali* was translated, though not the whole of it, and published in various journals (apart from the *New Youth*) by Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎, Zhao Jingshen 赵景深, between 1920 and 1923. In 1923 Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎 published his translation of *The Crescent Moon*. Its publisher, the Commercial Press, came out with a second edition of this translation the following year which competed with another translation of the same book by Wang Duqing 王獨清 published by the Taidong Press of Shanghai. (Das 1989: 4)

Translations of Tagore's stories began to appear in Chinese magazines at the latest from 1917. *Funü zazhi* 婦女雜誌 (Women's Magazine) published two stories of Tagore, *Home Coming* and *Vision* in 1917. *Chuti* was translated three times before Tagore visited China, and *Kabuliwala* was translated six times; four of the translations appeared in journals before 1924. At least four plays – *Chitra*, *Sannyasi*, *The Cycle of Spring* and the *Post Office* – one novel (*The Home and the World*) and two volumes of essays (*Personality* and *Nationalism*) were available in Chinese translations (Das 1989: 4).

Although it is difficult to obtain detailed information about all the translators, some of them, such as Wang Duqing 王獨清, Xu Dishan 許地山, Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, and Shen Yanbing 沈雁冰 (more well known as was Mao Dun 茅盾), belonged to the most promising writers of the time. Wang Duqing (1898–1940), one of the founders of *Chuangzao she* 創造社 (The Creation Society), has studied in Paris and was a fine poet. Xu Dishan 許地山 (1893–1944), primarily a scholar and famous essayist, studied Indian philosophy first at Oxford and then he visited India in 1925 to study Buddhist philosophy and Sanskrit. Many of these literati were professors at the best Chinese universities. Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898–1958), for example, belonged to the founders of the *Wenxue yanjiu hui* 文學研究會 (Society for the Research of Literature). He was also the chief editor of *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (The Fiction Monthly) and belonged to the most popular writers and a scholars of Chinese literary history. It is important to remember that *Xiaoshuo yuebao* with which Mao Dun 茅盾 and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 were associated, published at least eight

stories, three plays and a large number of poems of Tagore – many of them translated by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, – before 1924. (Das 1989: 4)

According to Tan Chung, it was not at all surprising that Chinese poetic geni should have focused their attention on Rabindranath Tagore. The main reason is to be found in the fact that Tagore won the Nobel Prize for his masterpiece in poetry. His *Gitanjali* and *The Crescent Moon* won ovations in the poetry circles across the world, including Britain then considered to be the leader in modern poetry. Besides, this Indian poet was a fellow-Asian, therefore his symbolism was easier to understand and was more attractive to Chinese writers.

Tagore's example of being a writer of a humble, defeated culture raised to the fore-front of world literature was all the more inspiring to those who were searching for a new form of Chinese poetry in order to create a new Chinese culture so that the nation could keep abreast with the modern world. Moreover, Tagore's visit to China in 1924 and the 'Tagore wave' created by this visit also contributed to the writers' enthusiasm in emulating Tagore (Tan Chung 1989a: 1).

4 New Friends and New Prospect for the Future

With Tagore's visit to China, much interest was aroused both in China and in India for the revival of Sino-Indian cultural collaboration, and many private, as well as official agendas were realised in this direction (Shen 1999: 3). Here, we have to mention the exchange of research scholars between the two countries, the establishment of scholarships by the Chinese government in India for Indian students to study Chinese history and culture, the opening of departments of Indian languages in at least three universities in China, Sir S. Radhakrishnan's visit to China at the invitation of the Chinese government in 1945, and the exchange of missions of various subjects of science (notably, agricultural and medical).

If one day the cultural relationship between our two countries can reach the same extent as in the glorious days when Buddhism entered China, let us not forget Gurudev, for he was the pioneer and the very symbol of this revival of international cultural collaboration (Shen 1999: 3).

According to Sisir Kumar Das (1989: 18), Tagore raised two basic questions when visiting China. The first question referred to the relationship between tradition and modernity, while the second was connected to the usual identification of modernisation with westernisation. China was deeply concerned with both questions, especially since the May Fourth Movement. Many Chinese intellectuals came out with different answers or solutions. The majority of the new intellectuals were very critical of their own Confucian tradition; in their opinion, the essence of the ancient Chinese

civilization was responsible for China's material degradation. Therefore, it was most natural to them to question its relevance. If, on the other hand, materialism was so degrading, as claimed Tagore, his audience had a right to ask for the ways and means to reduce human suffering.

Tagore did not give any practical programme, nor could he convince anyone how to reconcile the spirit of the ancient culture with the forces of modernisation. He only intensified the crisis by raising questions. These questions could be ignored for some time, but not for all time. These questions were important not only for China but for India as well. "I have done what was possible – I have made friends", said Tagore before leaving China (Das 1989: 18).

He surely continued to do what was possible for him and devoted much of his energy in the last years of his life to furthering Sino-Indian contacts. Thus, *Cheena-Bhavana* (Institute of Chinese Language and Culture) was founded in 1937 at Visva-Bharati University. It flourished under the guidance of Tan Yunshan 譚雲山, who was a native of Hunan 湖南 province and a school-mate of Mao Zedong 毛泽东. In 1940, one of the most well known Chinese artists, Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 came to Santiniketan.

Tagore urged Indians to learn the Chinese language and history and painting to live up to the spirit of the symbolism he witnessed in China: an Indian monk accepting offerings from a Chinese (Das 1989: 6).

It is surely of utmost significance that six months before his death in 1941 (Das 1989: 20), Tagore celebrated the day he was given a Chinese name in a poem concluding with the sentence: "Wherever we find friends there begins a new life."

Such recognition of the possibility to co-create and to co-form our world is, as indicated indirectly by Rabindranath Tagore, closely linked to the relations of which we all form a part. This recognition, however, is not conditioned only by the understanding of relations as such, but also by the conscious acceptance of relationality as the basis of human existence (Rošker 2008: 389). The permanence and the transience of relations which make up our lives can be accepted as a crucial axiological challenge facing us. Their heterogeneity, multifariousness, reliability and questionableness can be seen to lie at the core of our changing the world, and thereby imparting meaning to it. In such insights one can detect the courage to change our common world. In this sense the new, challenging life can also help us confront differences by transcending the frameworks of deep-seated, ingrown prejudices.

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