Influence on the Construction of National Image Through Cultural Contact: China's National Images in French People's Eyes

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Abstract

This survey emphasizes the French's changing point of view of China's national image through their own experiences and cultural contact based on the qualitative research methodology. All the interviewees are divided into 2 groups, and their answers are compared to draw a conclusion on the construction process of China's image. Before coming to China in person, the French carry already fictions and imagination on China. After their stay in China for some time, their images of China change enormously according to their experiences in China. China is no longer a fugitive and abstract name. The image of China is built around them gradually.

Key words: National image; China; French people; Imaginary image; Qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China (China, hereafter) is the country examined in this case study. For French people, China's national image has experienced dramatic changes during the past few decades. Their first impression on China comes from a lot of literary works. And the stories gave many Europeans their first impression of the life and culture of the people in China. Besides fiction and imagination, there are still some elements in people's mind, and this foreignness results in dualism which reveals the basic characteristics and rules of foreign image building. In fact, the appearance of a new image of China and Chinese people is connected with each individual's experiences. And at the same time, the new representation will tell people what to do, which can make them respond to different practical activities relevant to their lives.

It's meaningless to talk about China's image without the participants' own experiences, as the continuous change and development of the China's image and Chinese people. Without their own experiences, we can only list some simple examples on China's new image rather than knowing the reasons for its existence and its driving force of growth. Getting to know the "who is who" is not always easy, so in order to let French get a comparatively overall look at China's national image, we need to know French people's life in China, including their dilemma as well as their emotions such as happiness and sadness. It's very likely to totally understand a certain nation's social appearance only by observing people's real life in that certain country.

Every French living in China has their own story, and each story can be written as an exciting book which is full of pleasure, anger, sorrow or joy. French people visit China in person with a beautiful dream, and gain a much more positive view of it than they expect as time passes by. We will analyze French people's life experience in China from the following aspects.

1. DEFINITION OF NATIONAL IMAGE

The book by Wenhu Guan *The theory of national image* is one of the earliest works focusing on national image

in China, which gave the definition of national image as

> a synthesis that deals with the overall perception of a certain nation hold by external publics and internal publics, including the nation itself, the action of the state, all kinds of national activities and achievements. National image has its great impact and a sense of cohesion, and it stands for the nation's overall strength. (Guan, 1999, p.23)

He also points out: "The national image is the representation of the state power and ethos, as well as the most important intangible asset of a sovereign state" (Ibid., p.23). This definition is formed by the national and international public's perceptions and judgments, not only stands for a certain nation's internal or external image, emphasizing its comprehensive image, its great impact and its overall strength, seeing national image as a very important factor in international relations, along with a very important asset of a sovereign state.

Jinan Liu's definition goes like this:

> The national image is an impression and a comprehensive judgment that a person holds of a given country, mainly reflects in the foreign countries' media. National image plays a very essential role in international relations. Positive and negative country images can impact a country's international influence, its economic interests and power on the international stage. (Liu, 1999, p.25)

This definition focuses on a mass media, emphasizing the images formed in one's head about a foreign country and its own international image plays a crucially important role for successful international relations.

Actually there isn't a clear concept of national image in western countries, but many researches about it have been done, just haven't been set forth as theories. The related research achievements presented as its synonyms such as "reputation", "prestige" and so on scattered in all kinds of articles. Kenneth E. Boulding, a very famous American economist, was the first one to propose the concept of "national image". He went deeply into this topic from the perspective of philosophy and psychology in his article "National images and international systems". He pointed out: "It's this fact that national image is basically a lie, or at least a perspective distortion of the truth, which perhaps accounts for the ease with which it can be perverted to justify monstrous cruelties and wickednesses" (Boulding, 1959, p.122). Here, Boulding emphasized national image did not equal national truth, and he reminded those researchers who were doing the research of national image of not falling into the disorientation.

According to Boulding's theory,

> the relations among states can be described in term of a number of different dimensions. There is, first of all, the dimension of simple geographical space.... That is a certain area of the globe. A second important dimension of the national image is the national image is that of hostility or friendliness.... Another important dimension both of the image and of the 'reality' of the nation-state is its strength and weakness. (Ibid., pp.123-125)

Boulding always thinks the second dimension is mainly relevant to the national image and he discussed the relationship between the national image and international relations from this dimension. He also emphasized the importance of value system which played a large part in the formation of the national image. Apart from that, he refers that

> stable friendly relation seems to exist mainly between strong nations and weaker nations which they have an interest in preserving and stable hostile relations between adjacent nations each of which has played a large part in the formation of the other. (Ibid., p.125)

Hans J. Morgenthau, one of the major twentieth-century figures in the study of international politics, interprets that nation-states are the main actors in international relations and that the main concern of the field is the study of power. Morgenthau emphasized the importance of the "national prestige", and in *Politics Among Nations* he wrote that "the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power" (Morgenthau, 2004, p.5).

The power shows the country's international position and enlarges the country's international influence. The country's power depends on its overall strength, especially its military strength and political strength. So for quite a long time, the prestige of the country is stable, as the power of the country is comparatively stable. "Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim" (Ibid., p.31). Although the national prestige in some ways is similar to the national image, but he emphasizes the role of power, and therefore different from the national image.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study mainly employs the qualitative research methodology. Traditional researches on image normally employ the quantitative research methodology, such as questionnaires or statistics, which provided us with a large number of valuable materials on China's images. However, the quantitative research has its own weakness.

> The quantitative research study the social phenomena based on a certain assumption, and calculate the relations in relevant variables so that we can get a conclusion that is "scientific" and "objective"; while the qualitative research is tied to practical social phenomena, learning how people think according to researchers' firsthand experience. The researchers can give the "contextualized", and "intersubjective" explain in the raw data. (Chen, 2000, p.1)

In order to cover the shortage of the quantitative research, this study is more inclined to apply the qualitative research, learning certain people's microscopic behaviors, comparing their words with their actions, and seeking for the explanations of the behavior. Qualitative research pays more attention to "the person's point of

view, mental states and meaning construction". What's more, qualitative research "can trace the process of change as time passes by", which we can learn the person dynamically and thoroughly.

Through the discussions with interviewees, this study gained the firsthand source, which was sorted out and analyzed. Gradually we could understand each participant's desires and motivations that govern their behavior that they may not be aware of. Each interview lasted for about one or two hours. Before the interview, the outline was listed, and was adjusted constantly according to the participant's realities.

The completed investigation materials are then sorted out, correlated and analyzed. The investigation time span was about four years, from 2008 to 2012. The participants, altogether 54, in this case study were divided into two groups and both of them were French. One was those who had never been to China, named Group I, 29 participants; and the other was those who had lived in China for at least one year, named Group II, 25. All participants were chosen by their certain social class, including gender, occupation, age and family so that this case study can show varieties of different people's perception.

3. IMAGINARY CHINA

There are all kinds of coincidence and fantasy in history, such as Christopher Columbus' discovery of America. He was deeply influenced by Marco Polo and his amazing experiences in China. His strong will lead him to find his imaginary empire which was described as a prosperous and flourishing country in Marco Polo's book. Of course, he didn't want to explore the undeveloped primitive tribe at all. He met some Indians in America and always believed that the continent which he found was the exact empire of China and these Indians were Chinese. He asked the Indians to present him before the emperor of China. As we all know now, he was given audience with the chief of the tribe. Similar to Columbus, French people's national image of China is based on their imagination of its geographically relevant information, while the images of Chinese cities meet with their imagination of China.

3.1 Imaginary Chinese Cities

Just as Chinese are only interested in some certain cities in France or Europe such as Paris, Marseille, Berlin, Rome and so on, the French can name only a few big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, along with Hong Kong in China except that they are very interested in China or very familiar with Chinese geography.

[If you were to get the chance of visiting China, which city would you choose?]

Maybe Beijing and Shanghai, because these two cities are the most celebrated. I have no idea about others, I will look at the map first, anyway. (I, 20, female, student, 20Y)[1]

These three cities have their own distinct features. Beijing is the capital city of China for eight dynasties. Shanghai is the biggest coastal city in China, as well as the economic center, traffic center, technology center, industry center, finance center, convention center and shipping center. Hong Kong's unique history brings it closer to the West. As a former English colony, Hong Kong has been influenced deeply by the West, both in its culture and economy. After World War Ⅱ, Hong Kong was named as one of the four Asian tigers along with the rapid development of its economy and society. What's more, it has even become one of the wealthiest and developed regions in the world. Hong Kong, the ideal location for a unique blend of "East meets West", is also the important shipping center in the Asian-pacific region and in the whole world.

Therefore, these three cities can represent China for those French who have never been to China. The abstract of China's national image turns into the concrete cities, whose history, culture, customs, or economy represent the overall image of China.

3.1.1 Beijing: The Political Center and Ancient City With Rich Culture

First of all, Beijing is the capital city and the center of politics, economy and culture of China. But for many French, the first impression on the political center is cold. So Beijing is an apathetic political city in their eyes.

[If you get a chance to go to China, where will you go?]
I think I will go to Shanghai, because... I prefer to choose Shanghai rather than Beijing, because Beijing is an apathetic city for me.
[Why is Beijing apathetic?]
Because it is a very powerful city, the capital, and meanwhile it is a Northern city. (I, 1, male, student, 20 Y)

Beijing lies in the North of China, a region of ice and snow. And her special political position makes her outstanding in the world. Comparing with common capitalism in the Western world, Beijing is socialism. Although it is criticized severely by the outside world, Beijing still keeps on her unique developing road sternly. As these two systems are very different, the Western mainstream media and the public see China with stereotype preconceptions: Beijing is like a rigorous leader, governing her own giant empire by sending the order mechanically.

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[1] Every sentence by the interviewee is marked by a tag at the last. The tag "(I, 20, female, student, 20 Y)" means that this interviewee is in Group I, number 20, female and her profession is a student; 20Y means 20 years old.

3.1.2 Shanghai & Hong Kong: International Metropolises

Shanghai is known as an international city mostly because of its history and economy among other reasons. Shanghai holds an irreplaceable position of importance in the world, much less Asia. Shanghai also supports people and companies all over the world looking for suitable positions.

French people consider shanghai internalization, which means they think it's a city closer to western culture. If China's image is of the classic oriental culture, veiled with mysterious colour. Then Shanghai which connects the East and the West can be seen as an open window that uncovers the riddles of the East. If the French wish to understand China without unease or discomfort, they should start from Shanghai.

In our impression, as to Beijing, Shanghai is the more international, because Tintin has been to Shanghai. (I, 1, male, student, 20Y)

In the "Adventures of Tintin", Tintin goes to China on an adventure. In the comic, Tintin met with a series of exciting adventures in Shanghai, which draws westerners along the trail Tintin once walked. To the French, a trip to Shanghai would be just like Tintin's, full of wonder and mystery. What's more, even back then, Shanghai was one of the most famous cities in the world.

At the same time, Hong Kong, the embodiment of successful Chinese development, had also drawn the French's attention. A flourished and international city that displays China's achievements scored in reform is easy for the French to become accustomed to.

[If your were to study in China, where would you go?]
I would choose a city with good economy, like Hong Kong, because everyone I know that has been to China has been to Hong Kong. I also choose Hong Kong because I haven't really given the question much thought. If I was to actually go, I would do some careful research. (I, 6, male, student, 21Y)

It's a known fact that Hong Kong's economy is just as good as any developed country. Hong Kong's unique history brings it closer to the West. In the eyes of the French, Hong Kong is easier to approach and its language is easier to accept. In general, French are apt to accept Hong Kong and Shanghai because these 2 cities are both international. As a former English colony, Hong Kong is closer to the West in both ways of life and language. Developed China is heavily reflected in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

3.2 Image of Poverty

Mainland China and Hong Kong give off different impressions to the French. Going to mainland China to French feels like taking a trip back in time, where one would unintentionally be reminded of China's poverty image of long ago. This is also an attraction to the French, seeing such contrast in one country and in one society, and they often awe as to how both are to co-exist. It's a contradictory image, but it is just this contradictory and unitary country that has so many differences from France's society.

If I were to travel, I wouldn't just want to see the city, I also want to experience the countryside. I believe there are two Chinas: modern China, and an undeveloped, impoverished China. (I, 2, male, student, 20Y)

The image of China that French have can be classified like the person interviewed above states: modern China and impoverished China. Modern China is easily seen in China's cities, where are filled with skyscrapers and large mansions; whereas impoverished China must be sought out in the countryside, where people plough and weed for three meals a day. China's contrasted image is often shown in western mainstream media, so many French wish to view such a contradictory, diverse China image. At the same time, they gaze such kind of China in awe.

3.3 Image of Fear

China's image causes the French to fear. The theory of "China threat" was put forward long ago. China and Chinese cause fear not only to the French, but also to the entire Western world.

I believe this is a country to be feared. (I, 8, female, student, 21Y)

Why does China imply such fear?

Let's go back to some phrases related to China haunting French. My stepfather often says, it's never wise to anger a Chinese, because if one day they rise, we will fall. Chinese are hard-working, and wish for little. They haven't been developed yet, but they can develop quickly through western trade. In the meanwhile, politically the communism is a frightful idea. Warning taken from the former Soviet Union, communism is frightening.... (I, 8, female, student, 21Y)

From her descriptions, we can see that she fears China becoming powerful, in economy or politics, which scares the French.

The theory of China threat has existed for a long time. In the 19th century, Napoleon said: "when China wakes, the world shall quiver". Later, the famous "yellow peril" fallacy spread across the whole Europe. In 1895, the German Emperor Wilhelm II invented and advanced the "yellow peril" in public and ordered his court painter Hermann Knackfuss to paint his imagination of "yellow peril". The painting was named "yellow peril" where seven angels represent the seven western countries

separately such as Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Austria and Russia. The angels hold spears and shield while standing on a cliff, right above their head a cross. On the other side of the cliff, there is a disfigured cloud floating in the midair. The image of the Buddha rides on a dragon which sits in the center of the dark cloud of flames around them. Some articles and literary works on 'yellow peril' publicized yellow peril like Chinese people would bring a threat to them or impaired their interests. They just tried their best to make their aggression on China reasonable.

Such a giant dragon like China is sure to frighten France. Alain Peyrefitte was a French political figure who had a long career in public service. He was Minister of Information, Minister of Education, and Minister of justice as well as another 5 divisions. He was not only a famous politician but also a famous scholar. He has never stopped writing and has already published more than 20 books. Outside France he is probably best known for his book *The Trouble with France* which addresses the question of whether there is something unique to the French character that has caused some of the country's peculiar recurring problems. His another book translated as *When China Wakes, the World Will Quiver* places objectively China's construction and development, and also expresses French people's worry while facing rising China from his own observations and experiences. This fear is so strong that Benoît Saint Girons compares Chinese to Martians in his book *1.2 billion Martians*. In his book, he describes Chinese all kinds of bad habits. Although he himself admits the matter is much exaggerated, there is no denying the distaste that French people have, looking down on Chinese.

Today, what frightens the Westerners is that China is becoming more and more powerful, and more and more involved in international affairs, so much that the West can no longer ignore China.

[Why so frightening?]
Because she develops so quickly. You can feel there is undeveloped potential we know. Today there is no way for you to avoid China. (I, 8, female, student, 21Y)

The fear of China, has planted in history, and spreads like China's expanding power. It also comes from the clear fact that China is no longer something France can avoid.

3.4 The Identity of China's Story

People can also gain some superficial characteristics of China from Chinese story books. However, stories in books can not show entire China. On the contrary, people might be aware of China without reading story books. It's a complicated process to form the representation of China, with a wide range of sources as well as affected by changeable factor. The French draw the materials of China's representation chiefly from Chinese traditional or modern myths and legends. Besides, some foreign stories which are considered to be Chinese and their personal experiences provide them with fresh materials. All these materials enrich their images of China. The French tell Chinese stories and their own stories as well.

There is the similar situation in astrology. It's very complicated. I have no idea whether Chinese take actions according to the zodiac. Do Chinese observe the star image every night? (I, 1, male, student, 20Y)

This French participant doubts the truth of the stories which cause his anxiety about the source of the story. Whereas, he casts the stories he read before on the realities, considering that is the real life of Chinese.

Actually common French don't classify the nationality of the stories. They just take the stories for granted and think the stories reflect this certain nation's characters. We have found an interesting phenomenon: A lot of stories are considered to be Chinese stories, but in fact they are not.

Chinese stories are often seen in children's books. The reason why I like Chinese stories is because they always end with a moral sentence. I like such kind of endings very much. (I, 4, female, primary school teacher, 40Y)

The Fishman and the Golden Fish is a worldwide famous fairy story which was written by Pushkin, a very famous Russian poet and novelist. But most French take it for granted as a Chinese story. This French drew a conclusion to Chinese stories based on this Russian story: Chinese stories always end with a moral sentence which can help educate people. As a matter of fact, "moral" in French people's mind is somehow like "philosophy" or "wisdom" of life, not only just the moralization function. Although Chinese stories are replaced by Russian stories, it doesn't do harm to the image of Chinese stories. As we all know, it is difficult to change patterns once they form. For example, the image of China appears by a certain pattern, and even you change the content, it is still considered to be Chinese pattern. Taking the Russian poem T*he Fishman and the Golden Fish* as an example, people create some words related to China's image such as morality, wisdom, or Zen. China's image is no longer the pure one, because its source is mixed up with other cultures. But China's image becomes pure imagination in French people's mind, which is set up in the context of French pattern. From this point, we can see that grafting Chinese image gets much purer.

4. CHANGES OF CHINESE IMAGES THROUGH CONTACTS

As there are various reasons for the French to come to China, it is no doubt that they will meet with different situations. Similarly they will be shocked by what they

see as soon as they arrive in China: Chinese real image makes them feel surprised, confused and puzzled. With such a strong impact, some abandon their point of view of original Chinese image, some deepen it.

4.1 A Sense of Space: "Vast", "Crowded"

French people's first impression on China is its big cities, twice or three times bigger than their cities.

Everything is large, and I feel strongly enough about its large constructions, and tremendous culture shock. (II, 6, male, software engineer, 25Y)

Comparing with French cities, Chinese cities are totally different except for its visual bigness, including its giant constructions and immense street scene. Numerous skyscrapers give people a visual illusion as if they stay in America. "Huge" means some kind of tension that makes people feel lost or confused. The disruption of their customary sense of space causes the disruption of their sense of direction.

In addition, on my way to work, the only thing I can feel is the streets' bigness. It's difficult for me to tell the right from the left, because they are quite similar besides huge. (II, 13, female, teacher, 33Y)

In general, "huge" is related to the space, but it will bring depression to people if it refers to population. When the French face the situation of a sea of people in China that they have never seen before, there is no doubt that they will get shocked with fear. Even local Chinese can't bear such kind of big population during holidays, much less the French. The first direct impression on China is its bigness and its large population for the French.

Another shock comes from the fact that we cannot see any other foreigner than our own in the street of China. Seeing this, we know that we are in China now without doubt although we haven't got used to seeing a sole race gather so much. (II, 3, female, director of a cultural organization, 30Y)

The huge differences between China and France make the French shocked and scared. As we know, even if in each sole race region of France, there is living the great amount of hybrid race such as black, white, Asian and Arabic, only the density lowers some. The great amount of sole race brings them pressure.

4.2 Strange Language: The Chinese Is Everywhere

There is no doubt for the French to get shocked as soon as they arrive in China as they know nothing about Chinese language, besides signs in English can seldom be seen in China. Without words' guild, it's very likely for them to be out of place.

What shocks me most is what I can see is Chinese, without any reference, which makes me completely lost. (II, 2, male, engineer, 33Y)

Words to human are like water to fish. We get so used to living in a world of words that we always ignore its importance. Only if we live in a totally strange environment can we realize its existence. Another similar example is only if you are drowning can you realize you are breathing. Although character is a kind of symbol system created by humans, it has become human beings' living environment apart from its communicative function.

When the French leave their familiar home and then enter a completely unfamiliar country—China, without any reference, without any familiar characters, which are just like walking in the forest, knowing nothing about the way ahead, only getting lost easily. Strange Chinese characters take the place of familiar French words, and all these Chinese characters mean nothing for them. So that is why they fear so.

4.3 Modern and Poor: "Very Modern"

China's modernization surprises the French. As a lot of French hold an idea that China is a very undeveloped country, maybe it still stays in Qing dynasty or Chairman Mao's time, of course they get shocked deeply when they see the real China.

My first shock is to see the city of Guangzhou a very modern big city, an extremely clean and up-to-date airport, whereas the French airport cannot deserve these two words. (II, 4, female, housewife, 40Y)

French also gives some more examples to prove China's modernization such as maglev train running in Shanghai.

China is extremely large, densely populated and modern. Of course, I mean Shanghai, where maglev trains run. (II, 9, male, manager of an organization, 27Y)

China's modern image is derived from the modern technology and the modern life style, besides the disappearance of the normal expression of poverty in people's mind. For example, bicycles can be seen all over China, which was the French people's original impression on China. However, today gliding past a honking rush-hour traffic jam on the busy roads, it is hard to imagine this was once a Kingdom of bicycles.

This is a very developed city, modern, no bicycle, totally different from what I imagined before. (II, 4, female, housewife, 40Y)

There is a very closer relation between the modern image and the traditional image. In fact, I believe they

make it each other possible, and both should be fresh and clean. Comparing with traditional cities, modern cities should possess the high-tech and many skyscrapers.

4.4 Beautiful Scenery: "Gorgeous"

A lot of French can enjoy the view of China as soon as they reach China, which forms the part of their first impression on China.

The view of Guilin City makes people heart-shaking. (II, 2, male, engineer, 33Y)

Beautiful scenery is not just only relevant to the scenic spots, but is more related to the individual's own experiences at a certain time.

When I landed at HK, I remember I got shocked. On my way to the hotel by coach, I saw the setting sun, so brilliant. (II, 7, female, interpreter, 32Y)

4.5 The Body Feeling: A Nasty Smell

The "climate in China" is not a topic people can avoid as it is much closer to people's life. So new comers are always sensitive to the local weather.

I didn't get a good impression. The weather was hot and humid. I went in late may, or early June, with about 23 kilograms worth of luggage. When you breathe outside, you will feel slightly repulsed. In China, the environment is poor and the air smells. I am already used to it, but I still remember my disgust upon first arriving. (II, 12, male, project manager, 28Y)

An impression of China is not completed without its environment. Hot, wet, with an untold smell, along with one's heavy luggage, is what this Frenchman remembers most clearly. Here, impressions and experience are closely related. Going to a new country for the first time is bound to feel strange and disoriented. So he quickly explains the environment difference by saying "In China, the pollution is bad. There is obviously smells". Although personal experiences differ from person to person, the explanation is influenced by China's image.

I thought it was a hot day, a hot day should have blue sky, but I saw greyish yellow pollution without any traces of white clouds. This is not the environment I imagined. I never thought the pollution was so bad. It makes people uncomfortable and it makes we disappointed. (II, 3, female, principal of a cultural organization, 30Y)

The Chinese environment indeed is polluted, but the French believe it is polluted to an overly dramatic level. In all, a trip to China is an adventure for the French, because when in China, one is easily faced with culture shock.

The first time is an adventure. Everything is huge, skyscrapers are everywhere. (II, 12, male, project manager, 28Y)

The first time a French goes to China, reality will shatter their impressions. The impression of China is built upon reality and imagination, and it is often built in times and shocks. Every time a French travels to China, a new impression is made every minute, which offers collides with the original impression.

CONCLUSION

Many French believe they come to China unprepared, but in fact, more or less they are influenced by the French society. Although they may not know much about the country of China, or may be filled with prejudice, but living in a society is sure to influence one in some ways, and slowly one will accept the society's "common sense", that is the original popular iconic image of China.

An experience in China will become one of their fond memories, precious and warm. Even though they meet many difficulties in China, the satisfied and curiosity are eventual bound to overcome any fear or annoyance. So, if given another chance to stay in China, a second trip is an easy and highly forward choice. And the second time around they are often already prepared to live longer. If the first time was a chance, the second time they must be sure and confident.

Last but not least, to formulate the national image of China, the differentiation of different groups' own characteristics should be paid more attention to. A certain group's psychological patterns need to be complied with since exotic image acts as the group consensus. This foreignness results in dualism which reveals the basic characteristics and rules of foreign image building. At the same time, the change of the national image based on the culture contact also need to be paid more attention to, as much more colorful side images of a country can be represented during the process of this change, which can help us learn the national image more clearly.

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