The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang



Critical Perspectives

Edited by Qian Suoqiao

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Qian Suoqiao, editor

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INTRODUCTION

Western Universalism and Chinese Identity: Lin Yutang as a Cross-Cultural Critic

QIAN SUOQIAO

A Cross-Cultural Critic

Lin Yutang (1895–1976) was the modern Chinese writer and intellectual best known to the Western world in the twentieth century. Most of Lin's works were written in English and were therefore accessible to the West. Hailed as a "Chinese philosopher," Lin was the de facto spokesman for China and Chinese culture and played the role of cultural ambassador between China and the United States. In China, however, Lin's reputation went through ups and downs along with the changing political climate. As a representative liberal intellectual, Lin was hailed as a "master of humor" for introducing and translating the notion into Chinese culture in the 1930s, but the use of his name was banned in mainland China during the Mao era. After three decades of Reform, however, Lin is once again one of the most popular modern Chinese writers in China.

Born to a Chinese Christian family in rural Fujian Province in 1895, Lin Yutang emerged as a leading man of letters in China in the 1920s and 1930s. As a top graduate of St. John's University in Shanghai, an Episcopalian missionary institution, Lin was a bilingual writer from the beginning. Lin's promotion and translation of "humor" into Chinese culture caused much controversy in the modern Chinese literary scene, and his middling politics was appreciated by neither the Left nor the Right. Urged by Pearl S. Buck and her husband, Richard Walsh, Lin moved to the United States in 1936. He consequently found himself spending most of the following three decades in New York City, producing some thirty works in English, including a series of best-sellers such as My Country and My People, The Importance of Living, Moment in Peking, and The Wisdom of China and India; these made Lin almost a household name in America. Self-fashioned as

2 Introduction

a kind of world citizen, Lin established himself as an internationally renowned writer and intellectual in the twentieth-century world of letters. He spent his last ten years in Taiwan and Hong Kong, resumed writing essays in Chinese, and returned to his original profession as a philologist by compiling a Chinese-English dictionary of modern usage.

Lin grew up at a time when China was undergoing an epistemic change from tradition to modernity that was characterized by a reevaluation of traditional Chinese values and an embrace of modern Western values. Given his Christian family background, Lin was predisposed to experience with comparative sensitivity the momentum of cultural change that resulted in the so-called Chinese Renaissance. Lin's versatile accomplishments also reflected those of a Renaissance Man. He served as an administrator in short intervals and was a successful educator. He compiled popular English textbooks that helped a whole generation of Chinese to learn English. He was a classicist by training. In addition to being a philologist, he was a commentator on Chinese classical works, biographer of Su Dongpo, and author of a history of Chinese journalism. He also spent more than a decade developing the first Chinese typewriter. As a writer, he tried many genres—he was an essayist, novelist, poet, and playwright. But perhaps what distinguished him from most of his contemporary writers was that he was a prolific bilingual writer in English and in Chinese, as well as a cross-cultural translator between China and America. To Chinese readers, Lin was an exemplary figure of a Westernized Chinese gentleman promoting "humor," while to the Western public at large Lin was seen primarily as a "Chinese philosopher," a wise man from the East. Above all, Lin was a public intellectual. Both in China and America, Lin was politically and culturally engaged as a conscientious critic.

Lin's cross-cultural practices have left formidable legacies in modern Chinese intellectual history. However, despite the historical influence of Lin's literary and cultural practices on modern China and Chinese-American cultural interactions, and despite the sustained general interest in Lin's writings across the Taiwan Strait and around the world, his cross-cultural works are very much understudied. Critical studies on Lin have been rather difficult to undertake because he lived in two worlds—figuratively as well as literally—and produced works both in Chinese and in English, as well as translations between Chinese and English. In a sense, it takes a community of scholars from different cultural backgrounds to engage in cultural critique on Lin's cross-cultural practices. This critical volume, representing the best international scholarship on Lin Yutang studies to date, is a first attempt at a comprehensive study on

Part I. Tradition and Religion: An Alternative Intellectual Path

On Lin Yutang: Between Revolution and Nostalgia

CHIH-PING CHOU

After 1949 in mainland China, the name of Lin Yutang 林语堂 (1895–1976) was first neglected and then smeared; his books were banned for almost three decades. Politically, he was depicted as a collaborator with the Nationalist Party (Guomindang 国民党) and an opportunist overseas. His large amount of anti-Japanese and anti-Communist writings were either ignored or misinterpreted by critics in China.

Right after the May Fourth Movement in 1919, socialism became one of the most popular political beliefs among Chinese intellectuals. Lin was one of the very few who were never mesmerized by this political ideology; he believed instead that democracy was the global trend of the twentieth century.

Lin's most active period in China was during the early half of the 1930s, when he was the editor-in-chief of the three popular magazines *Lunyu* 论语, *Renjianshi* 人间世, and *Yuzhoufeng* 宇宙风. During this time he promoted a style of writing called *xiaopin wen* 小品文, essays with a touch of humor and informality. He was criticized as a hedonist by his contemporaries, including Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936) and Wen Yiduo 闻一多 (1899–1946), as being totally insensitive to the fact that China had recently been invaded by the Japanese.

Members of the May Fourth generation are known for their critical attitude toward the Chinese tradition; in their assessment, Chinese language, literature, history, philosophy, and ethics were all either primitive or inhumane. "Down with Confucius and his sons" (打倒孔家店) and abolish the "man-eating rituals" (吃人的礼教) were two of the most popular slogans in the 1920s.

Lin Yutang was unique among such contemporaries as Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1880–1942), Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962), and Qian Xuantong 钱玄同 (1887–1939). Lin's attitude toward Chinese culture was neither radical nor conservative; he demonstrated a genuine appreciation for Chinese

CHAPTER TWO

Lin Yutang's Unique Adoption of Tradition

CHARLES LAUGHLIN

Consider the following list of English books by Lin Yutang:

My Country and My People (1935)

A History of the Press and Public Opinion in China (1936)

The Importance of Living (1937)

The Wisdom of Confucius (1938)

The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo (1947)

The Wisdom of Laotse (1948)

Famous Chinese Short Stories (1952)

Widow, Nun, and Courtesan: Three Novelettes from the Chinese (1952)

Lady Wu: A True Story (1957) The Chinese Way of Life (1959)

Imperial Peking: Seven Centuries of China (1961)

The Importance of Understanding (1960)

This partial listing of Lin's English-language publications beginning with his first, *My Country and My People*, is meant to illustrate how Lin's self-construction as a native informant to the English-speaking world on China involved his reconstruction of Chinese culture and tradition according to a certain vision that can be distinguished from other modern Chinese visions of tradition (whether or not they were meant for Western consumption). Lin's Chinese writings also consistently support this vision. In addition to these works, Lin published a number of novels in English that were set in modern China, but perhaps they similarly convey the Chinese national character and the essence of its tradition. He brought out books on India and the United States as well, which, from reading *My Country and My People* and *The Importance of Living*, we can see are probably an outgrowth from these works and also comment at length on China's situation and national character.

A Bundle of Contradictions: Lin Yutang's Relationship to Christianity

YANG LIU

Dr. Lin Yutang (1895–1976), in his brief autobiography Memoirs of an Octogenarian, humorously called himself a man with "a bundle of contradictions,"1 which vividly describes the inconsistency in his life and thinking. The metaphor "a bundle of contradictions," I believe, also applies to the relationship of Lin to Christianity. On the one hand, that Lin was born into a Christian family, attended missionary schools, and married Liao Cuifeng, a devout Christian woman, made the influence of Christianity on him almost inevitable, but, on the other hand, he did have many negative views about Christianity and had even renounced Christianity in his twenties.² Lin described himself as a pagan for over thirty years, "while at heart a Christian." He may not be an orthodox Christian in the eyes of the Church, but neither is it proper to regard him as an anti-Christian writer, as some scholars do.4 In this chapter, I will discuss Lin's paradoxical relationship to Christianity through four aspects: (1) his indebtedness to Christianity as the mediator of modern Western civilization; (2) his criticism of the missionaries in China who fail to live what they preach and disrespect Chinese culture; (3) his embrace of Jesus' teachings; and (4) his rejection of Christian dogmas and theology.

Indebtedness: "I Am an American Missionary Product"5

Lin Yutang was born on 10 October 1895, in a mountain village of Zhangzhou City in Fujian Province. His father, Reverend Lin Zhicheng

¹ Lin Yutang, Memoirs of an Octogenarian (Taipei: Meiya Publications, 1975), p. 1.

² For Lin's journey of faith in detail, please refer to Lin Yutang, *From Pagan to Christian* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1959).

³ Lin, Memoirs of an Octogenarian, p. 1.

⁴ See Ma Jia, *Shi zi jia xia de pai huai* [Lingering under the Cross] (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1995), p. 283.

⁵ Robert Hobart Davis, "A Chinese Philosopher Who Became an American Best Seller,"

Part II. Language and Law: Culture and Politics in the 1920s and 1930s

CHAPTER FOUR

Lin Yutang and the National Language Movement in Modern China

PENG CHUNLING

Introduction: "The Enigma of Lin Yutang" and Its Implication

The famous writer Lin Yutang debuted under his new Chinese name Lín Yǔtáng 林语堂 on 20 April 1925, when he published "Gei Qian Xuantong de xin" 给钱玄同的信 (A letter to Qian Xuantong) in the literary journal Yusi 语丝 (Thread of words). Before that, Lin was known as Lín Yùtáng 林 玉堂 among Chinese intellectuals.1 After earning his Ph.D. in linguistics from Leipzig University in Germany, Lin returned to China in 1923 to take the position of professor of English at Peking University. This was the first time that Lin returned to Beijing since he had left China in 1919 for graduate studies at Harvard and Leipzig. Lin first impressed readers with his 1918 article on the Chinese index system in La Jeunesse (Xin qingnian 新 青年) when he had just graduated from St. John's University in Shanghai and was an English instructor at Qinghua College. After returning to China in 1923, he published many articles in Guoyu yuekan 国语月刊 (National language monthly) and Geyao zhoukan 歌谣周刊 (Ballads weekly). However, Lin used his old name, 林玉堂, in all these articles, which belonged to the field of linguistic studies.2 Lin's name change from 玉堂 to 语堂 signified his transformation from a linguist to a writer, one who later referred to himself as "one mind that seeks the learning of the ancient and

 $^{^1}$ Translator's note: the difference between "林玉堂" and "林语堂" is the middle character: "玉" (jade) and "语" (language, speaking, dialogue). They are spelled the same way in pinyin but have different tones. The former sounds more splendid, and the latter more philosophical.

² After returning to Beijing in 1923, Lin also published some articles under his old name, which revealed his interest in literature, for example, "Haina xuanyi" 海呐选译 [Selected translations of Heinrich Heines' poems] (November and December 1923) and "Zhengyi sanwen bing tichang 'youmo'" 征译散文并提倡"幽默" [Calling for translated personal essays and promoting "humor"] (23 May 1924) in *Chenbao fujuan* 晨报副镌 [Morning post supplement].

The "Fair Society" (Pingshe) in the Diaries of Lin Yutang and Hu Shi

CHEN ZISHAN

This chapter investigates the connection of Lin Yutang to the Fair Society (Pingshe 平社) led by Hu Shi in Shanghai in the 1930s by cross-referencing Hu's published diaries¹ and Lin's unpublished diaries² spanning from 1929 to 1930. It is an effort to reconstruct the little-known activities of this liberal intellectual group based on historical materials available yet hitherto unused.

The Aborted Fair Review (Pinglun)

Before we discuss the Fair Society, it is important to first evaluate its forerunner: the journal Fair Review (Pinglun平论). To the best of my knowledge, there has been only one preliminary study of the Fair Review, by Zhi Xiaomin.³ The Crescent Moon (Xinyue 新月) published on 10 March 1929 (vol. 2, no. 1) was the first to reveal that the editorial team of this literary magazine was engaged in setting up another magazine, the Fair Review, with a focus on sociopolitical commentary. The following "Editor's Afterword" was penned by Xu Zhimo:

¹ The surviving diaries of Hu Shi have been published both in mainland China and Taiwan. The quotations used in this paper are from *Hu Shi riji quanbian* 胡适日记全编 [The complete diaries of Hu Shi] (mostly from vol. 5, 1928–1930), compiled by Cao Boyan曹伯言 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001).

² The original diaries of Lin Yutang (Lin Yutang riji 林语堂日记) were written on a small "Category A Free Diary" notebook printed by the Commercial Press, with the name of Lin Yutang printed on the front page. The period covered was from 1 January 1929 to 22 January 1932, with some intermittent gaps. This volume was auctioned in Shanghai in 1997, and again in Beijing in 2009. It is now owned by an unknown collector. The quotations used in this paper are based on a photocopy of Lin's diaries from 1929 to 1930.

³ See Zhi Xiaomin 智效民, Bawei daxue xiaozhang 八位大学校长 [The eight university presidents] (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2006), pp. 55–59.

Part III. Cross-Cultural Travels between China and the West

Lin Yutang's Criticism of Criticism of Criticism: On Self-Expression in China and America

DIRAN JOHN SOHIGIAN

Coming to America: Brandishing the "Cudgels" at Harvard

In 1919 young Lin Yutang arrived with his new bride, Liao Cuifeng, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At Harvard as a graduate student, Lin encountered great debates about the fate of literature in modern America in the wake of mass industrialization. In China, he had already been engrossed in the debates of the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, the latter arising with China's humiliation of seeing German concessions in the Shandong Peninsula ceded to Japan by the Treaty of Versailles.¹ Examined here are the cross-cultural development and perspectives of Lin's ideas on aesthetics, criticism, and self-expression as they unfolded in early twentieth-century China and the United States. Further examined here is the primacy of aesthetics in Lin's thought, an aesthetics that went beyond a narrow study of art forms, technique, artists, and writers, bearing on all human expression, expression as that which makes us human.

In an effort to see Lin's thought from a new perspective and among diverse schools of thought, this study also aims to shed light on an often neglected mode of thought discussed in early twentieth-century China, "intuition"—a once prominent facet of thought that challenged the hegemony of scientific reasoning and scientism, although "Mr. Science"

¹ For a broad biographical study of Lin Yutang with a chapter on Lin's Harvard experience, see chapter 6 of Diran John Sohigian, "The Life and Times of Lin Yutang" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1991). For a different discussion of the topic explored in this essay, see Qian Suoqiao, *Liberal Cosmopolitan: Lin Yutang and Middling Chinese Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), chap. 5. On Lin's Harvard experience, see also A. Owen Aldridge, "Irving Babbitt and Lin Yutang" (1999), *First Principles ISI Web Journal* 1–6 (21 October 2010), available at http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=730&theme=home&page=1&...; originally published in *Modern Age* (Fall 1999): 318–327.

Collaborator or Cannibal? Montaigne's Role in Lin Yutang's *Importance of Living*

RIVI HANDLER-SPITZ

Lin Yutang's Importance of Living, written in English and published in New York in 1937, draws on a range of rhetorical strategies characteristic of the Essays by Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century French philosopher and originator of the essay form in the West. Yet not once in The Importance of Living does Lin mention Montaigne, despite Montaigne's towering stature in Western intellectual history and the formative influence he exerted on Lin. Instead, Lin accentuates his roots in the classical Chinese literary tradition and claims to provide American readers with an authentic image of China. Lin's careful construction of a persona that cast him as the quintessence of "traditional" Chinese culture inhibited him from mentioning Montaigne; for, to have acknowledged this intellectual debt might have compromised Lin's status as "purely" or "authentically" Chinese. Yet Lin's ability to attract Western readers, I argue, rested heavily on his cultivation of a casual essayistic style familiar to Western audiences. Although never explicitly named, Montaigne's presence suffuses The Importance of Living and enables Lin to connect with American readers in ways that subtly complicate his discursive emphasis on his Chinese cultural identity.

I begin by introducing the text and the circumstances under which it was published. Next, I outline the commonalities between Lin's and Montaigne's projects of cultural critique. Further, I highlight several distinguishing characteristics of Montaigne's prose style, notably his conversational tone and his penchant for switching perspectives and causing readers to reconsider their ingrained cultural stereotypes. Last, I illustrate ways in which Lin takes pains to invent for himself an indigenous Chinese literary heritage, even as his writing exhibits many of the same features as Montaigne's.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Genesis and Reception of *My Country and My People*

QIAN SUOQIAO

The New Culture and May Fourth Chinese intellectuals were a generation characterized by Westernization. They achieved their cultural capital through Westernized education by way of studying abroad, mostly in the United States and Europe, or in Japan, and they established their intellectual distinction in modern China by introducing various Western ideas and trends to China. By all accounts, Lin Yutang was an exemplary figure in this Westernized generation of intellectuals. Yet, Lin differs from them all in an important dimension—Lin was the only leading modern Chinese intellectual who also achieved international reputation through his voluminous English-language works, mainly by assuming the role of a China interpreter, introducing Chinese culture to the world. And this all started with the publication of *My Country and My People* in 1935. This chapter offers an account on its genesis and reception across China and the United States.¹

Lin's Connection with Pearl S. Buck and Richard Walsh

As a leading figure of the Westernized group of modern Chinese intellectuals who had studied in the West and returned home, Lin befriended many Westerners of various kinds, usually progressive journalists or activists, residing in China at the time. During the 1930s, Lin was not only the "Little Critic" columnist for the English-language journal *The China Critic*, but also one of the editors for the English-language *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, and served as the English secretary for Cai Yuanpei at Academia Sinica. During the Revolution of 1927, for instance, Lin had known and worked closely with Rayna Prohme, the American revolutionary in China. As an executive member of the China Civil Liberties Union in the 1930s, Lin also

 $^{^1}$ This chapter is a section from my biography of Lin Yutang tentatively titled $\it Lin Yutang: Journey across China and America, 1895–1976 (forthcoming).$

Part IV. Interpreting China and Chinese in America

CHAPTER NINE

His Country and His Language: Lin Yutang and the Interpretation of Things Chinese

JOE SAMPLE

By the time Lin Yutang published *My Country and My People* in 1935, few readers in the United States were familiar with his writings, but most readers had likely seen customs-and-manners books about China and the Chinese, including, most notably, Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics*.¹ Smith's work was the most popular book for foreigners living in China well into the 1920s and was the most widely read American book on the country anywhere until Pearl S. Buck published *The Good Earth* in 1931. But with the publication of *My Country and My People*, Lin became known as the "Interpreter of the East to the West," and over the next forty years he would continue to add to his reputation through numerous best-sellers as well as many English-language magazine columns and newspaper articles.² Throughout that long period, Lin never seemed to struggle to interpret

¹ The titles of most weighty customs-and-manners books do not belie their contents: John Henry Gray, *China*, *A History of the Laws, Manners, and Customs of the People* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1878); Robert Kenneway Douglas, *China* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1899); E. R. Scidmore, *China*, the Long-Lived Empire (New York: The Century Company, 1900); James Martin Miller, *China*, *Ancient and Modern* (Los Angeles: Sanderson-Whitten Publishing, 1900); G. Waldo Brown, *China*: The Country and Its People (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, 1901); and Frank Brinkley, *China*: Its History, *Art*, and Literature (Boston: J. P. Millet, 1902), to name just a few. Other books had similar contents and arrangements though more engaging titles, such as E. H. Parker, *John Chinaman and a Few Others* (London: John Murray, 1901); Archibald Little, *The Land of the Blue Gown* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1902); James Dyer Ball, *Five Thousand Years of John Chinaman* (Hong Kong: Kelly and Walsh, 1906); J. R. Chitty, *Things Seen in China* (London: Seeley, 1909); and E. J. Hardy, *John Chinaman at Home: Sketches of Men, Manners, and Things Seen in China* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1912).

² For a complete list of Lin's works in English, see A. J. Anderson's *Lin Yutang: The Best of an Old Friend* (New York: Mason/Charter, 1975).

CHAPTER TEN

Reconstructing the Image of a Chinese Courtesan for Western Readers: Lin Yutang's *Miss Tu* and His Cross-Cultural Rewriting Strategies

FANG LU

Background

In 1950, Lin Yutang (1895–1976) published *Miss Tu* (Miss Du),¹ an English novella based on the Ming dynasty writer Feng Menglong's "Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger,"² a famous Chinese tragic tale about a courtesan's love and death. For the first time, the legendary Du Shiniang story was brought to general Western audiences.

"Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box in Anger" is said to be based on a real tragedy, which occurred in 1595, during Emperor Wanli's reign in the Ming dynasty.³ Du Shiniang, a top-ranked courtesan in the capital city of Beijing, falls in love with Li Jia, a student from the family of a provincial commissar. When Li spends all his money and is about to be expelled by

¹ Miss Tu was first published by William Heinemann Ltd. in London in 1950. In 1951, it was included in Widow, Nun, and Courtesan (John Day), a collection of three novellas about three marginalized Chinese women that Lin Yutang translated, adapted, and rewrote (this is the version I cite in this study). Widow, Nun, and Courtesan was reprinted by Greenwood Press in 1977 and by Mei Ya Publications in Taipei in 1979. Miss Tu was reprinted in India by Jaico Publisher (Bombay) in 1969. Widow, Nun, and Courtesan was translated into several Western languages: Danish in 1951 (reprinted in 1964), Norwegian in 1952, Portuguese in 1956, and Spanish in 1958. Miss Tu was translated into German in 1964 and reprinted in 1966.

² Feng Menglong (1574–1646) was one of the most important and productive writers and editors in later Ming China. The Chinese version, "Du Shiniang nu chen baibaoxiang" 杜十娘怒沉百宝箱 is collected in *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言 (Comprehensive words to warn the world), first published in 1624. See Feng Menglong, *Jingshi tongyan* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2010).

³ See Lin Yutang's prefatory note to "Miss Tu" in Widow, Nun, and Courtesan: Three Novellettes from the Chinese Translated and Adapted by Lin Yutang (New York: John Day, 1951), p. 183.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Several Worlds of Lin Yutang's Gastronomy

CHARLES W. HAYFORD

How a Chinese spirit glows over a good feast! How apt is he to cry out that life is beautiful when his stomach and his intestines are well filled! From this well filled stomach suffuses and radiates a happiness that is spiritual. The Chinese relies upon instinct and his instinct tells him that when the stomach is right, everything is right.¹

Lin Yutang's effusive declaration, still quoted as an authoritative claim for China's unique food culture, was published in November 1937, just as the Japanese Imperial Army was descending on Nanking.²

The timing of this statement was painfully unlucky for Lin as an especially patriotic Chinese, but sparks questions: How do Lin's writings on food illuminate the political dilemmas and cultural choices of his generation? In China, Lin played the role of "little critic" and wrote on a wide range of topics but little on food or eating. Then he went to live in the West. How did he use Chinese foodways, a traditional, perhaps even "feudal" set of practices, to represent China and to critique modern and American culture? How did China's "unique" foodways come to be of universal or cosmopolitan significance?

Lin Yutang's Several Worlds: Past and Future, East and West

Lin Yutang's generation of so-called returned students spent formative years in the West. Lin himself first studied in the United States during the

¹ Lin Yutang, The Importance of Living (New York: John Day: 1937), p. 46. Hereafter IOL.

² This passage is quoted in, among others, Roel Sterckx, *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 6; and Gang Yue, *The Mouth that Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 33. Kwang-chih Chang, ed., *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 13, quotes a similar passage.

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