

## Forging an Educational Dialogue between Confucius and John Dewey: Liang Shuming's Synthesis of Confucian Education and Dewey's Pragmatism

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### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to uncover a philosophical dialogue between the Chinese “last Confucian” and the American “Confucius.” In order to explore the main issue, this section will focus on several sub-questions: How did Liang Shuming defend Confucianism in response to the challenges of Western civilization during the May Fourth/New Culture period? What did Liang think of John Dewey’s educational philosophy? How did Liang make a connection between Confucianism and John Dewey’s educational thought? How did Liang apply his New Confucian thought and Dewey’s educational thought to Chinese reality?*

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Dialogue, Last Confucian, American Confucian

### 1. Introduction

Unlike most of John Dewey’s Chinese students, Liang never studied abroad during his lifetime. Liang became acquainted with the American philosopher’s thoughts around the May Fourth period. Specifically, in response to an anti-traditionalism thought during the May Fourth period, Liang greatly advocated to retain and reform. Confucianism. Due to his everlasting dedication to practice and the spread of Confucianism in modern China, some scholars called him “The Last Confucian” (Alitto, 1979). In this regard, Liang seemed to be excluded from the mainstream thought of the May Fourth/New Culture era. More interestingly, as the slogan of “Down with Confucius and sons” was spreading within Chinese society, John Dewey surprisingly received the title of “Modern Confucius” from Chinese intellectuals (Keenan, 1971). Coincidentally, when Dewey was appointed to Beijing University as a guest professor in 1919, Liang Shuming was teaching Indian and Chinese philosophy there. When dedicating himself to the Chinese rural reconstruction movement in the late 1920’s, Liang intensively studied Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. During the time of rural reconstruction, Liang wrote the article titled “A Philosophical Foundation of John Dewey’s Educational Idea.” Assumedly, Dewey exerted an intellectual impact upon Liang Shuming. This article aims to uncover a philosophical dialogue between the Chinese “last Confucian” and the American “Confucius.” In order to explore the main issue, this section will focus on several sub-questions: How did Liang Shuming defend Confucianism in response to the challenges of Western civilization during the May Fourth/New Culture period? What did Liang think of John Dewey’s educational philosophy? How did Liang make a connection between Confucianism and John Dewey’s educational thought? How did Liang apply his New Confucian thought and Dewey’s educational thought to Chinese reality?

### 2. Liang Shuming and the Thought of “nei sheng” and “wai wang”

Liang Shuming’s intellectual growth had been greatly shaped by his father, Liang Ji. As a former Neo Confucian official-scholar of the late imperial period, Liang Ji greatly advocated the aspect of “being kingly outside (*wai wang*)” of Confucianism in face of an unprecedented difficult time in China. In short, this aspect of Confucianism strongly emphasizes that Confucian scholars were expected to achieve outstanding accomplishments, which could bring order and prosperity to the entire empire. Following this conviction, Liang Ji believed that all learnings/teachings were futile unless they were beneficial to national salvation (Liang, 1989). Therefore, Liang Ji rejected the classic civil service-oriented examination while supporting new style education (Liang, 1989). In 1906, one year after the ending of traditional civil service examination, Liang Ji sent 13-year old Liang Shuming to a new middle school in the capital of Beijing, where Liang Shuming could learn “practically useful knowledge (*shi xue*)”. Inspired by his father, during the time of his study in the new middle school, Liang Shuming made a decision to dedicate himself to saving the Chinese nation and society (Alitto, 1979).

The idea of “being sage inside (*nei sheng*)” in Confucianism also deeply shaped Liang Ji’s thought. In fact, the philosophical thought of Neo-Confucianism since the Song-Ming period (960-1644) thoroughly revolved around this idea. Compared to “being kingly outside (*wai wang*),” the idea of “being sage inside” mainly focuses on a perfection of individual inner morality, which was regarded by Neo-Confucian scholars as the root of all things. This Neo-Confucian theme resonated in Liang Ji’s mind. As an advocate of “New Reform” during the late Qing period, Liang Ji asserted that a fundamental role in achieving the goal of national salvation was “the purification of people’s heart (*zheng ren xin*).” In his opinion, for Confucian scholars, the development of one’s *nei sheng* should become a requirement for the realization of *wai wang*.” Under Liang Ji’s influence, this intellectual pathway from “being sage inside” to “being kingly outside” also yoked to Liang Shuming’s thought.

In 1917, Liang was appointed to be a philosophy lecture at Beijing University. According to Liang, one of the strongest driving forces behind his acceptance of the offer was to speak about “Confucius” in the University. In November 1918, his father, Liang Ji, committed a suicide. The last essay that was left by Liang Ji indicated that the Neo Confucian scholar sacrificed his own life mostly for the Qing dynasty and Confucian morality. Liang Ji’s suicide further deepened Liang Shuming’s commitment to Confucianism (Liang, 1989). Consequently, after his father died, the core mission in Liang Shuming’s life was to achieve national salvation through the rejuvenation of Confucianism in a modern society (Liang, 1989).

### 3. Liang Shuming’s Defense of Confucianism during the May Fourth Time

One of the most significant themes embraced by the May Fourth/New Culture Movement was to re-evaluate the role of Confucianism in Chinese society. Generally speaking, from Chinese iconoclasts’ perspectives of the May Fourth era, Confucianism became an obstruction for the Chinese nation’s way to her modernization. In their critiques, traditional bonds of the family system, which are based on Confucian/Neo-Confucian morality and virtue, psychologically poisoned Chinese people.

For example, in 1918, Lu Xun published his short fiction, “The Diary of a Madman.” In the story, Lu Xun presented diary entries written by a mad man (in a first person narrative), who wanted to cure his paranoia by reading classic Confucian canons. Satirically, while reviewing the books, the mad man found out nothing except for the Chinese characters “Eat People” displayed between the lines of the texts in classic writings (Grieder, 1970). Here, the word “Eat People” hinted the fact that Confucian ethics was destructive to the spirit of Chinese people.

In the meantime, some influential scholars treated Confucian legacy as a foe to the spreading of modern democratic ideas. For instance, Chen Duxiu, a professor from National Beijing University, echoed Yi Baisha’s argument. He declared that Confucianism had been completely in contradiction with the civilization of modern period. He (1984) pointed out:

*...the theory of ‘Three Cardinal Bonds’ (san gang) in Confucianism becomes a solid foundation of Chinese political ethics. All of the three principles are in interdependence. Therefore, it is impossible to separate any one from each other. The essence of Confucian “Three Cardinal Bonds” is a class system. In this system, the purpose of Confucian ethical code (li jiao) is to establish a hierarchical relationship among the classes of the wealthy, the poverty, the noble, and the rabble. Nevertheless, modern Western political ethics is based on the value of liberty, equality, and independence. This fact, which is in opposition to Chinese class system, becomes a watershed between Chinese and Western civilization. (p.108).*

Apparently, for the majority of modern Chinese intellectuals, Confucianism was treated as a degenerate part in Chinese history, that should be abandoned during modern period. They believed that the yoking of the cultural stock of Confucianism to millions of Chinese people placed obstacles in the way of actualizing the modernization of China. Overall, the May Fourth/New Culture Movement undermined the dominance of Confucianism in the fields of Chinese culture and intellect. Even though its influence on Chinese society still existed, the school of classic thought indeed lost its prestigious status in Chinese history.

In response to the May Fourth Chinese iconoclasts’ attack on Confucianism, Liang Shuming in 1922 published his famous book titled *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*. In this book, Liang attempted to examine the unique value of traditional Chinese culture in the context of world civilization. His writing defined “culture” as a “way of life,” and “life” as the relationship between the individual and his

environment. Furthermore, in Liang's terms, culture has been shaped by "will" (Liang, 2012). Following this statement, Liang categorized world civilizations into three styles: Western culture, Chinese culture, and Indian culture (Liang, 2012). Western culture, in Liang Shuming's eyes, was the prototype of the first stage of the evolution of the world civilization. The cultural system was derived from basic needs and the material requirements of human survival. The "will" of this culture is to look forward to seeking the pleasure of satisfaction, emphasizing reason, utility, scientific knowledge and the conquest of nature, and a life of struggle (Liang, 2012). In contrast with Western culture, Liang argued that Chinese culture should represent the second stage, which takes a middle way, instead of forward or back forward, accommodate in its view of the relationship between human and environment. (Liang, 2012). This cultural type was based on the will's self-adjustment, self-sufficiency, and the cultivation of inner peace. By maintaining a balanced point between their desires and the environment, the Chinese people could achieve great spiritual happiness while suffering material poverty (Liang, 2012). He simultaneously pointed out that Indian people believed that the world is an illusion. Therefore both self-denial and austerity played important parts in this religious practice (Liang, 2012).

According to his investigation, Liang had a way of characterizing Chinese culture as "premature" culture. In his revelation, before developing the first stage of allowing the pursuit of material well-being and rationality, China already fell back on the second stage of having the will to be in equilibrium with nature (Liang, 2012). For the cause of national salvation, China should avoid taking the life of India, learning the idea of democracy and science from the west. In light of the perceived spiritual destruction of Western civilization since WWI, Liang thought only Confucianism could take a responsibility for becoming the teacher of the West (Liang, 2012).

#### 4. Confucianism and Henri Bergson's Vitalism

During the May Fourth period, as foreign ideas competed and interacted with each other in China, both progressive and conservative intellectuals were in search of new cultural stocks to enrich their own thoughts. Through intensively studying the schools of Western philosophy, Liang Shuming eventually found the useful cultural assets from the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941). Briefly speaking, Bergson's philosophy emphasized the importance of "Intuition" in a human being's life, criticizing the belief of supremacy of scientism. In response to scientific determinism, Bergson created the term "Duration" as an entirely qualitative multiplicity, an absolute heterogeneity of elements, which come to melt into one another (Dong, 1996).

As one of the most influential Western thinkers, Bergson's philosophy emphasized the permanent flowing of free will and vital force in the world, as well as opposed the stance of scientism. Therefore, this philosophical approach was widely accepted by conservative Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth period. In particular, the idea of Bergson's Vitalism struck a deep chord in Liang Shuming's heart (Liang, 2012). More importantly, Liang connected Bergson's thinking with Confucian philosophy. For instance, while gaining insight into Mencius's thought, Liang introduced the idea of "Intuition" in Bergson's idea into the realm of Confucian moral education. He (2012) wrote:

*Everyone has an intuition and instinct to pursue goodness. Therefore, Mencius said: 'All people have a heart which cannot stand to see the suffering of others... Why do I say all human beings have a heart which cannot stand to see the suffering of others? Even nowadays, if an infant were about to fall into a well, anyone would be upset and concerned. This concern would not be due to the fact that the person wanted to get in good with the baby's parents, or because he wanted to improve his reputation among the community or among his friends. Nor would it be because he was afraid of the criticism that might result from a show of non-concern (p.134).*

Based on his analysis, Liang Shuming affirmed that as the core ethical idea of Confucianism, the character of benevolence (*ren*) is derived from human intuition. In his explanation, *ren* is an inner state of being, peaceful and full of vitality. In light of this belief, Liang concluded that "the thought of Confucianism completely follows intuition. The most important mission that Confucian scholars want to achieve is to sharpen their intuitions... Consequently, Confucius encouraged people to pursue *ren* (Liang, 2012).

In sum, the yoking of Bergson's Vitalism to the individual capacity of Liang Shuming brought the meaning of modernity to the philosophy of Confucianism in the May Fourth period. By "vitalizing" Confucianism, Liang transformed this classic philosophical system from a "dead" ideology to a spirited philosophy of life. The Confucian logical pathway from "being sage inside (*nei sheng*)" to "being king outside (*wai wang*)" provided a framework for Liang's engagement in reforming Confucianism. In other words, the ultimate purpose of Liang's reformation of Confucianism is not for the philosophy itself, instead to pursue the goal of "*jiu shi* (to save the society)" through "purification of people's heart."

## 5. Common Ground among Confucius, Bergson, and Dewey

Together with yoking to Bergson's philosophy, Liang simultaneously tried to explore an intellectual connection between American pragmatism and Western vitalism. As Liang (1989) stated:

*Although Bergson does not share the same school with Williams James and John Dewey, his vitalism contributed to the development of the two thinker's philosophies. Both thinkers have been affected by the theory of biology, then formed their theories. If one reads over Dewey's works, he will find out where the philosophical root of the American educator's thought located, and what logic he adopted to create such a theory (p.126).*

From Liang's perspective, Bergson's vitalism becomes a way for him to approach John Dewey's pragmatism. In the article "Foundational Ideas of John Dewey's Educational Philosophy," Liang further stressed that there was a strong philosophical bond between his thoughts, and the thoughts of Dewey and Bergson. As Liang (1989) point out:

*There is a continuity between my thought and Dewey's idea. Dewey's theory was based on the field of biology. Likewise, Bergson's thought has a tremendous impact on my thinking. Bergson is a biologist. When elaborating on his own thought, Dewey repeatedly talked about "life (*sheng ming*)" (p.686).*

In Liang's revelation, Dewey's educational idea drew a pathway from the development of individual life (*ge ti sheng ming*) to the actualization of social life (*she hui sheng ming*). Therefore, the New Confucian scholar believed that Dewey's educational philosophy offered insight into the cultivation of "inner growth first," then make a strong connection between individuality and society. To this respect, Liang's way of interpreting Dewey's educational philosophy was in correspondence to a Neo-Confucian formula of "being sage inside (*nei sheng*)" and "being kingly outside (*wai wang*)." That is to say, for Liang, education was supposed to start with the development of inner-self.

## 6. Liang Shuming's Understanding of Dewey's Work

In view of the convictions above, Liang Shuming encouraged the readers to utilize an uncommon way to study Dewey's Democracy and Education. In Liang's analysis, it would be inappropriate for the reader to review the book chapters in sequence. Liang preferred to read chapter four ("Education as Growth") first. He explained that it is worthwhile to consider what Dewey means by "growth." In fact, Dewey's concept of "Education as Growth" aimed to emancipate children's learning from a passive and repressive condition. More importantly, he attempted to offer the general principle of "growth" as the primary criteria to assess the educational value of experiences. For Dewey, the essence of "growth" represents a form of learning that enables individuals to reconfigure their educational experiences throughout their lifetimes. Hence, the idea of "growth" in Dewey's idea is closely connected with an "experience" of the world (Dewey, 1981). When it comes to the idea of "intelligence" and "habit" in the concept of "Education as Growth," Dewey tried to highlight the function of communicable experience and social interaction for the development of individuality.

Nevertheless, while reviewing chapter four in Democracy and Education, Liang explained the terms of "habit" and "intelligence" based on his own stance. As he (1989) argued:

*The primary purpose of Dewey's education is to help people grasp the meaning of human life (sheng ming), so that they can avoid the two extremisms. If they are indulged in intelligence, they will lack of the competence in dealing with current affairs...If they are indulged in habit, they will easily become mechanic, dogmatic, and ragescent. Their life (sheng ming) have been restrained by their habit. As a result, they don't know how to adapt to a new circumstance (p.690).*

Here, Liang obviously believed that the maintenance of the equilibrium between habit and intelligence, addressed by Dewey, depended on the development of individual life (*ge ti sheng ming*). Further, similar to his new Confucian argument, Liang also synthesized the meanings of Chinese characters of “*sheng huo*” and “*sheng ming*” into his interpretation of Dewey's educational idea. The word “life” in the quote of “Education is Life” from Dewey's thought was translated by Liang Shuming into “sheng ming.” Therefore, from his understanding, like “Education as Growth,” Dewey's “Education is Life” is still associated with the cultivation of individual life (*ge ti sheng ming*).

From Liang's understanding, the logic of the remaining chapters in *Democracy and Education* was founded on the chapter four. Obviously, Liang identified individual life (*ge ti sheng ming*) as a foundation for human education. After discussing the significance of chapter four, Liang believed that it would be good time for the readers to review chapters one, two and three. In these chapters, Liang stated that Dewey aimed to explore the connection between individual life (*ge ti sheng ming*) and social life (*she hui sheng ming*).

## **7. Confucianism, Dewey's Thought, and Liang's Rural Educational Practice Rural Educational Reformation by Liang Shuming**

While writing the final chapters of *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*, Liang Shuming was conceiving of how to implement his cultural theory in Chinese reality. As Liang (2012) stated:

*...The philosophy of life of Confucius and Yan Hui can resolve those problems of life anguishing Chinese young people, and eventually open a right pathway for them...Only the restoration of Chinese [Confucian] philosophy of life can revive Chinese people's force of vitality, which is disappearing and lapsing. A real vital force should come from Chinese inner spirit ...Since the May Fourth Movement, some scholars regards the New Culture Movement as the renaissance of Chinese civilization. In fact, this movement is only a result of the rise of Western culture in China...The renaissance of Chinese civilization should be based on the restoration of their own philosophy of life...*

A combination of specific factors shaped Liang Shuming's educational thought of rural reconstruction. First, Liang felt very disappointed in the modern educational system in China, which was blindly modeled on the Western style. Basically speaking, as described in the preceding chapter, the development of the modern school system in China was a result of the imitation of a foreign style of education since the late Qing time. During the period of the May Fourth Movement, Chinese educators increasingly believed the development of a new education system based on the Western model would be a good way to spread the ideal of democracy and science among Chinese youth. John Dewey's arrival further triggered Chinese educators' enthusiasm to introduce an American style school system. Even though Western-oriented Chinese educators made great progresses in the modernization of Chinese education, some wise scholars still proposed sharp critiques of a new Chinese school system. Liang Shuming was one of the critics.

In his article “Brief Introduction of My Thought of Running School,” Liang expressed his feeling of worry about new education. As he (1989) said:

*When it comes to our educational idea, the purpose of our education is supposed to make close friends with young people. To make friends with young people actually embraces the two meanings. First of all, we should help them learn how to take a right pathway. Second, to find out “a right way” refers to not only study a specific knowledge and skill, but also all aspects of their lives (p.778). Nevertheless...current school education only taught students some knowledges and skills at the expense of all things of their lives...how can formal school system help students understand their lives if our education only focuses on regular hour curriculum and subject materials? It is not correct for educators to only emphasize the importance of the*

*acquisition of “knowledge”, ignoring students’ mental and physical growth...In my view, education aims to lead students to view all aspects of their lives, then help them take a correct pathway...the building up of both spiritual mind and lively body are essential to education.*

Here, Liang tended to conceptualize “education” very broadly in order to embrace all items of cultural stocks in human society. Following such a notion, Liang proceeded to elaborate on his educational thought based on the cultural perspective stemming from his work, *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*. According to different cultural approaches, Liang argued that the West and China formed their own respective educational ideals. Western education emphasizes the significance of the development of human intelligence, whereas Chinese [Confucian] education pays considerable attention to the cultivation of human emotion and character instead. While the former aims toward the acquisition of knowledge, the latter directs a student to focus on the lives of human beings.

## 8. Liang Shuming’s Usage of the Educational Ideas of Confucius and Dewey

Together with his application of Confucianism to rural reality, Liang Shuming’s interpretation of Dewey’s educational philosophy also served as the goal of his endeavors in Chinese rural reconstruction. In his critiques of the modern educational system of the Republican period, Liang Shuming regarded Dewey’s educational thought as a cultural asset to “decorate” his own discourse on the rural reconstruction movement. For instance, in order to “justify” his reflection on Western culture, Liang (1989) referenced some ideas from Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*:

*As Dewey thought, although today’s [Western] society is in a great progression, it still embraces a large number of drawbacks. For many people, their relationships have been becoming more and more mechanic...For example, there is no a communication between workers and capitalists.....There is no social consciousness among them. Although they reside in a same society, there are no sufficient social interactions among them. If there was a society, where all people share a common sense, and organize themselves with the ability of reasoning. ... (p.694).*

From New Confucians’ stance of anti-scientism, Dewey’s attack on Western urban society greatly resonated with Liang Shuming’s mind. In his *The Theory of Rural Reconstruction*, Liang repeatedly cited the similar ideas from Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* to strengthen his advocacy of Chinese rural educational reformation. Similar to Dewey, Liang also embraced a critical attitude toward the abnormal development of the urban civilization. He even announced that “during the period of one hundred years, a blind imitation of Western urbanization became one of the most serious factors to result in the destruction of Chinese rural society.” (Liang, 2018, p.152).

Evidently, in the case of criticizing Western civilization, Liang regarded Dewey as his “colleague.”

By intensively studying Liang, we can find out that Dewey’s educational idea left a deep mark on Liang’s thought of rural educational reformation. While engaging in reforming rural society, Liang frequently highlighted the concept of “growth” in his explanation of the implication of his rural reconstruction movement. He (1989) stated:

*...the goal of our rural reconstruction is to establish a social institution. I frequently treat this social institution as a growth...It gradually develop from bud, it starts from tiny thing... It will grow up from rural area, then develop to a big society (p.337)*

In this short paragraph, the logical pathway from individual growth to social development somewhat mirror the influence of Dewey’s idea of “Education as Growth” in Liang’s thought. Moreover, Dewey’s view of balancing school education with social education in *Democracy and Education* also contributed to Liang Shuming’s rural educational thought. In “*Foundational Ideas of John Dewey’s Educational Philosophy*,” Liang disclosed that in Dewey’s educational thinking, school education, and social education are complementary. Liang (1989) stated:

*According to Dewey, social education can correct the disadvantage of school education. The most important thing is to find out an equilibrium between the two styles of education...it is necessary to*

*transform today's school to mini community, make a continuity between the life of school and society, and get rid of certain artificial parts of current school life irrelevant to social reality...school education should embrace the meaning of society, at the same time, it is supposed to be superior to social life (p.696).*

Following this argument, Liang concluded that “Dewey's opinion on human education and societal life is the same thing, just two different words (Liang, 1989,p.310).” More meaningfully, as a follower of Confucius, Liang acutely realized that for both Dewey and Confucius, societal life and human education are in interplay. Consequently, when stating the idea of social education in Dewey's thought, Liang's writing simultaneously put forward the example that Confucius's attempts to create ancient private schools, breaking through the royal court's monopoly over mass education.

## 9. Conclusion

This section examined a philosophical encounter between Liang Shuming and John Dewey. Before approaching Dewey's Democracy and Education during the time of the rural reconstruction movement, Liang strived to develop his system of thought of New Confucian philosophy. While yoking Confucian idea of “being sage inside (*nei sheng*)” and “being kingly outside (*wai wang*)” to him, Liang Shuming was highly motivated by his father to dedicate himself to achieve the goal of national salvation.

During the period of the May Fourth/New Cultural Movement, Liang endeavored to defend Confucianism in response to attacks from Chinese iconoclasts. In an educational encounter, cultural stock can attach to individual capacities in a variety of ways that fall along a continuum from dead relic to living legacy (Martin, 2011). Liang chose to regard official “Confucian ideology” as a cultural liability, which became dead relics to thwart social progress in China. At the same time, he made great efforts to find a living legacy of Confucianism, which was supposed to become a cultural asset in Chinese tradition. While most of the modern Chinese intellectuals embraced the worship of scientism, Liang rejected it as a cultural liability from Western civilization.

Additionally, Bergson's vitalism built up a philosophical bridge between John Dewey's educational thought and Liang Shuming's philosophy of New Confucianism. From the vantage point of New Confucianism, Liang also endowed Dewey's philosophy with the feature of vitalism. My findings further illustrate that Dewey's ideas, such as “Education as Growth” and “the Unity of School and Society,” resonated with Liang's educational thought, together with his great advocacy of Confucian moral teaching. As a result, the Peasant School was a reflection of the combination of the educational thoughts of Confucianism and John Dewey.

From the perspective of vitalism, Liang indeed treated Dewey's educational philosophy as a Western cultural asset, which was in opposition to scientism. He believed that Dewey's philosophy represent the best side of Western culture. Nevertheless, the yoking of the Confucian *ti-yong* formula to Liang set a limitation to his full recognition of the worth of Dewey's educational thought. As a result, Dewey's educational thought in Liang's view, only plays the role of “*yong* (function)” in rural reconstruction. Taking a stance of the superiority of Chinese culture from *The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*, Liang strongly believed only Confucianism can correct the disadvantages of Dewey's educational philosophy. Therefore, it is fair to say Liang only viewed Dewey's Democracy and Education from his New Confucian perspective. While rejecting the belief of scientism, Liang's moral determinism from Confucianism plays a crucial role in understanding Dewey's educational philosophy.

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## Author's Background



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