

The Copycat of Wikipedia in China

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COPYCATS OF WIKIPEDIA

Wikipedia, an online project operated by ordinary people rather than professionals, is often considered a perfect example of human collaboration. Some researchers applaud Wikipedia as one of the few examples of nonmarket peer production in an overwhelmingly corporate ecosystem.¹ Some praise it as a kind of democratization of information² and even call it a type of revolution.³ On the other hand, some researchers worry about the dynamics and consequences of conflicts⁴ in Wikipedia. However, all of these researchers have only analyzed the original and most well-known Wikipedia—the English Wikipedia. Instead, this chapter will provide a story from another perspective: the copycat of Wikipedia in China. These copycats imitate almost every feature of Wikipedia from the website layout to the core codes. Even their names are the Chinese equivalent of *Pedia*. With the understanding of Wikipedia's counterpart we can enhance our sociotechnical understanding of Wikipedia from a different angle.

Wikipedia is considered an ideal example of digital commons: volunteers generate content in a repository of knowledge. Nevertheless, this mode of knowledge production could also be used as social factory,^{5, 6} and user-generated content may be taken by commercial companies, like other social media. The digital labor and overtime work of the volunteers might be exploited without payment. Subsequently, the covert censorship and surveillance system behind the curtain can also mislead the public's understanding of the content. In this sense, the Chinese copycats of Wikipedia provide an extreme example. This chapter focuses on how Chinese copycats of Wikipedia worked as a so-called social factory to pursue commercial profits from volunteers' labor. Due to commercialization, these copycats also suffered more self-censorship and vandalism than Wikipedia itself.

China is one of only a few countries, along with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia, to ban the service of Wikipedia for a long period of time, and thus it acts as an extreme example of global Wikipedia. To date, research on Wikipedia's performance in China has stressed the cultural effects⁷ or the proposed effect of network position on the contribution behavior of the editors.⁸

Chinese Wikipedia was established in May 2001 along with twelve other language versions of Wikipedia, a few being Esperanto, French, and Japanese. However, since it did not initially support the proper display of Chinese characters, no content was available. The first Chinese-language page was written over a year later in October 2002. On November 17, 2002, the English article for computer science was translated into Chinese and became the first encyclopedic article. In the later years, the Chinese Wikipedia communities kept working on the conversion between the orthographic representation systems: the Simplified Chinese system used in Mainland China and Singapore, and the Traditional Chinese system used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. In the beginning, most articles on the Chinese Wikipedia were translated directly from the English version. By November 2, 2012, the Chinese Wikipedia contained over six hundred thousand articles.

Due to the Chinese government's Internet regulations and policies, the Chinese version of Wikipedia is constantly banned via the so-called Great Firewall. The Great Firewall is officially named the Golden Shield Project, which is a censorship and surveillance project operated by the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China. The project was initiated in 1998 and began operation in November 2003. Technical methods such as IP blocking, DNS filtering, URL filtering, packet filtering, and connection reset are applied to prevent Chinese Internet users from accessing censored content. These regulations and policies make it difficult for a Chinese Internet user to access the Chinese version of Wikipedia. At the same time, a number of Chinese Internet enterprises have developed their own copycats of Wikipedia, such as Baidu Baike and Hudong; some of them have gained more popularity than the original Wikipedia. These copycats have completely different aims than Wikipedia and therefore apply different policies on editing articles. There are at least two major differences between Wikipedia and its Chinese copycats: first, the copycats are commercial projects even though they claim to be free to use; and second, they apply a censorship system for the submission of edited articles. The system itself is undertaken without public knowledge, as the word *censorship* does not appear in the introductory pages of these copycats, like similar censorship systems in practice by the Chinese media industry.

The first copycat of Wikipedia is Hudong, which was founded in 2005. Later it changed its domain name to baike.com (the Chinese pronunciation of the word *encyclopedia*). As of January 2013, Hudong had more than seven million articles, five hundred thousand categories, 6.8 billion characters, and 7.21 million pictures. Another copycat, Baidu Baike (or *Baidu*, meaning “encyclopedia”), was developed by a Chinese search engine. Baidu is very successful in terms of the number of articles and number of visitors. Since its test version was

created on April 20, 2006, the encyclopedia had grown to more than ninety thousand articles within three weeks, surpassing the number of articles on the Chinese Wikipedia. On April 21, 2008, Baidu Baike released its formal version. As of January 2013, Baidu Baike had more than 5.8 million articles; it has more articles than the English Wikipedia.

Both Baidu Baike and Hudong claim that they are the largest Chinese encyclopedia. If only analyzing the total number of articles, Hudong might be the largest online encyclopedia in China. However, when examining the number of registered users and page views, Baidu Baike surpasses Hudong.

COPYRIGHTS OF THE COPYCATS

Whereas Wikipedia is covered under the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL), Baidu Baike and Hudong are fully copyrighted by their owners, and contributors forfeit all rights upon submission to the encyclopedias. Baidu Baike's copyright policy also shows its ambition for a commercial future. In the "terms of use" section of its help page, it states that "by adding content to the site, users agree to assign *Baidu* rights to their original contributions." It also states that "users cannot violate intellectual property law, and that contributions which quote works held under the Creative Commons and/or GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL) must follow the restrictions of those licenses." However, on the bottom of each page, without a single exception, the copyright information "©2013 *Baidu*" is displayed, contradicting Baidu's own terms of use. According to the terms of use, either users who publish articles on Baidu Baike or the original copyright holders should own the copyright of the articles on Baidu Baike; however, the copyright "©2013 *Baidu*" shows that Baidu actually owns the copyright. Wikipedia has criticized Baidu Baike mainly for violating the GFDL. Wikipedia even set up a page listing up to 1,891 articles plagiarized from Wikipedia on Baidu.

In the Hudong encyclopedia, the situation is rather similar. To publish their content, contributors agree to release their writings through a perpetual royalty-free license stating that the information is not free for reuse on other websites.

THE PYRAMID OF EDITORS

To edit articles in Wikipedia, it is not required to be a registered user. In contrast, both Baidu Baike and Hudong require a user to register before becoming an editor. Hudong also allows users to log in to the encyclopedia through other Chinese social media websites. While Wikipedia only requires a username and password to create an account, both Baidu Baike and Hudong require either the user's email address or mobile phone number.

Another system Baidu Baike uses is the ranking system to encourage user participation. There are fifteen ranks for the users, and credit requirements must be met to increase users' ranks. By contributing to the Baidu Baike encyclopedia, users can earn certain experience credits and wealth credits. For instance, creating a new entry earns five credits for both experience and wealth. Experience credits can be used to increase user rank while wealth credits can be used in Baidu's other commercial services to download documents from its online library. Baidu's online library is a user-generated content platform containing over seventy million electronic documents in .doc, .ppt, .pdf, .txt, and .xls format. In the user manual, Baidu clearly states that wealth credits could be exchanged in another form in the future. Baidu recently announced its own virtual currency scheme, and even though the credit earned in Baidu Baike cannot be exchanged or transferred into virtual currency, users can privately exchange their credits in Baidu's other commercial projects. For example, since June 2012, wealth credits could be used to exchange small gifts in the online Baike Shopping Mall. The gifts range from tools such as nail clippers to an iPod. In this sense, the volunteer editors for Baidu Baike earn a salary; they do not work in vain. This credit system is more than a monetary reward system. It also forms a hierarchical pyramid, which stratifies the power of editing and modification on Baidu Baike. It seems similar to the system of Wikipedia, although its function varies. If a user's credit is more than 2,500 and 85 percent of his entries have passed the auditing process, he can join the core user team. The process occurs through manual auditing from the editorial team at Baidu. The core user teams chosen from volunteer users are called "tadpole teams" and category editors who need to accumulate certain credits but receive additional editing powers, rewards, or gifts from Baidu, and more privileges such as less censorship. Currently, there are about 150 "tadpole teams." Members of "tadpole teams" have a special logo marked on their ID and their own online workspace in the Baidu Baike personal center page. However, these personal pages are similar to Wikipedia user pages where users can create personal workspaces. Similarly, Hudong has its own hierarchical system for its registered editors with a more complicated credit calculation system. There are nineteen experience ranks for editors and ten ranks for users based on their credits. Apart from the system itself, Hudong also promotes certain rewarded tasks for registered editors. For instance, in July 2013, users were rewarded for adding items about food and cooking. When editors complete or correct certain entries they are awarded gifts such as an Apple iPad. Interestingly, both Baidu Baike and Hudong use the ancient titles in imperial exams or ranks of nobility in imperial China as their titles for different ranks of experiences or credits.

Blocked Wikipedia and Locked Baike

While we cannot claim that the blockage of Wikipedia in China is an intentional arrangement by the Chinese authority⁹ to promote the development of copycats of Wikipedia, data shows that the creation of copycats is related to the blockage of Wikipedia.¹⁰ As discussed earlier, Wikipedia was not blocked when it was first introduced in the Mainland Chinese newspaper *China Computer Education* on October 20, 2003. Originally,

the coverage of Wikipedia was rather positive. The block began on June 3, 2004, which was the fifteenth anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Afterward, the Chinese Wikipedia refused to restore service with self-censored content. However, on June 22, 2004, the Chinese Wikipedia was unblocked without any explanation, and not long after that it was blocked again. The English and Chinese Wikipedia have been blocked and unblocked several times since then. As of 2012, both the Chinese and English Wikipedias are accessible in China with the exception of political articles. If a Chinese IP address tries to access a “sensitive” article (including searching), the IP address will be blocked from visiting Wikipedia for several minutes. Some researchers believe that the blockage of Wikipedia coincided with the launch of its Chinese counterpart. This has led many observers and users of the Chinese Wikipedia to speculate on the plausibility of coordinated efforts by the Chinese government and Baidu to transfer their actual and potential users to Baidu Baike, be it for political or economic motivations.¹¹ During the time Wikipedia was blocked, a “Night Edition Warning” was established in Baidu Baike. The official editor manual of Baidu Baike states that it will not encourage users to spend their sleeping time editing content. Based on this warning, Baidu Baike ceases to update article submissions from 23:00 to 8:30 in Beijing time (Greenwich Mean Time + 8). In this way, Baidu Baike can use a manual audit process.

Baidu Baike applies a strict censorship system for the submission of articles. The content edited by ordinary users will appear publicly after the audit from internal staff is complete. The audit time varies from several seconds to several hours depending on the rules for different categories. Generally, political issues will be strictly audited. In fact, when editors input their articles, a filter is available that is linked to a sensitive word list that functions like most other user-generated-content websites in China. Any text containing these sensitive words will not be submitted successfully. According to Baidu Baike, articles or comments containing the following types of content are removed: pornographic, violent, horrible and uncivilized content; advertisement; reactionary content; personal attacks; content against morality and ethics; and malicious, trivial, or spamlike content. The official explanation attempts to ensure neutrality and avoid disputes within entries, but the details of the rules show the explanation’s absurdity. For instance, there is a rule against “hostile attack against government organization and officials.” Apparently any negative mention of government officials will be censored under this rule. Similarly, “malicious evaluation of existing national system” is also considered improper and will be deleted.

Even though there is no public list of which articles have been censored, there are several different and well-known types of censorship used in these two encyclopedias. For example, some articles have a locked page with China’s official version of information. More sensitive entries are entirely absent from the encyclopedia and China’s Internet completely. Generally, those that are absent include highly sensitive events in China’s political discourse such as historical articles for the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square Event, articles about Tibet and East Turkey, and the Taiwan independence movement. The biographies of all the communist leaders except Zhao Ziyang are locked. The article about Zhao either does not exist or users are unable to access it due to Zhao’s support for the demonstrating students in Tiananmen Square in 1989. A similar situation occurred for articles about Falungong, a spiritual discipline, which first appeared in China in the 1990s and was announced to be a heretical organization by the Chinese government in 1999. There is no public blocking policy; however, there are technical web services, such as www.greatfire.org, that allow users to test whether a website or a web page is blocked in China. If an IP address searches for articles containing any of the so-called sensitive words while visiting Baidu Baike, the IP address will be blocked from the site for several minutes, in a process similar to the Wikipedia IP address block. If there is a list of sensitive words, the list is dynamic and changes according to the situation. In December 2012, before the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, articles for Zhao Ziyang, the former Communist Party leader, became accessible through the creation of an official version.

Another category of locked articles has nothing to do with any of the criteria above; these articles are related to Baidu interests. For example, articles about Baidu as a company, Li Yanhong (Baidu’s top executive), and Baidu’s business partners are locked, so that the negative information about Baidu and its business partners will not be added. Apparently, censorship is not only politically oriented but also operates under a mixture of political pressure and the operator’s own commercial interests.

Hudong applies a censorship system as well, but it is slightly different from Baidu Baike’s system. Baidu Baike’s censorship is used before the submission of an article, whereas Hudong’s censorship occurs after the submission of an article. In either case, the users of the online encyclopedia read censored content.

Vandalism and Spoof

Even though Baidu Baike applied a censorship system, which appears to the public as a magic box, users receive their own revenge through vandalism and trolling. Some researchers believe that Wikipedia trolls are one type of hacker involved in creating these problems. The activities of trolls challenge online communities.¹² In the cases of Baidu Baike and Hudong there is no public report about hacking against them, but there are intentional acts of vandalism such as adding and editing spam. In particular, there is a special type of vandalism—some users submit spoofed articles, which involve parody but without revealing its intentions. Unlike vandalism and spoof, which are equally apparent in Wikipedia, Baidu Baike suffers from less vandalism but numerous instances of spoof. There are intentional spoofs for obvious political and social reasons and unintentional spoofs, resulting from misquotation.

The early media coverage of the spoofed Baidu Baike articles appeared on April 7, 2008. The entry for *Chengguan* (literally the urban management officers) was spoofed because of its notorious reputation for abuse of power and violation of human rights. *Chengguan* was defined as “mafia against the vulnerable groups.” On May 28, 2008, after American film actress Sharon Stone commented on the Chinese earthquake as “karma,” the entry about her on Baidu Baike was edited to describe her as a “hooker.” Entries such as *civil servant*, *professor*, and *expert* have also been spoofed based on their negative representation in the Chinese mass

media.

During 2009, the Chinese government initiated a special operation against so-called vulgar Internet content. A series of websites were publicly criticized for their vulgar content, and about eight hundred Chinese websites with porn content were closed. At almost the same time, the entry *ten mystical creatures* appeared in Baidu Baike. The so-called magic creatures are actually fugitive animals with names vaguely referring to Chinese profanities using homophones; for instance, Grass Mud Horse (literally means “fuck your mother”) and French-Croatian Squid (phonetic translation of “fuck you”). After the deletion of ten mystical creatures from Baidu Baike, parodies such as the “*Baidu 10 Legendary Weapons*” and “*Baidu 10 Secret Delicacies*” appeared. Those words were rapidly absorbed into popular culture; even the Internet censorship initiative became a new article in Baidu Baike, River Crab (literally means “harmony”).

In the case of Baidu Baike, there are vandals and trolls with a purpose; some of them are highly nationalistic or sexist, as in the case of the Sharon Stone entry. Some, like the case of Chengguan, are based on Populism. Spoofed articles like these, and especially those containing political content, were deleted after a media report. The aim of these kinds of vandalism and spoof is not against Baidu Baike, but a symbolic resistance against the censorship system itself.

The spoof and vandalism on Hudong is even worse than what is seen in Baidu Baike. As we discussed above, Hudong applies a censor-after-publication system rather than Baidu Baike’s censor-before-publication system. Therefore, the spoofed content without politically sensitive information will continue to appear on Hudong for a relatively long time. For example, some famous spoofed articles still appear in Hudong after media coverage, even after Baidu Baike deletes them. The famous “Grass Mud Horse” is still an article on Hudong as of now with only a minor deletion of direct satire against authority.

The major difference between how the copycats and Wikipedia deal with vandalism and spoof is that there are also unintentionally spoofed articles on Baidu Baike and Hudong. It is not new for Baidu Baike and Hudong to face the problem of vandalism and spoof. However, it is significant that in recent years several reported misquotations of spoofed Baidu Baike entries appeared in the Chinese mass media. Some of them are so ridiculous that it would be common sense to view them as spoof. However, with support from the online encyclopedia the mass media trust the quotes. Some spoofed articles on the online encyclopedias developed into news events. The two most famous spoofed articles are “High Speed Rail Magic Box” and “Yuri’s revenge,” which are described in the next paragraph.

Since 2010, a parody of the scientific journal article titled “High Speed Rail” has been circulated. It is about a magic box leading to disasters that appeared in a BBS (Bulletin Board System) named MITBBS set up by a group of Chinese overseas students in the United States. In the article, a fictional professor named Zhang Shimai (literal translation of Ten Mile, which is a clear ironic reference to high-speed rail) from the Institute of Earth Environment Chinese Science Academy appeared in an interview and strongly opposed the high-speed rail system in China. Zhang’s style of speech imitated a famous opponent of the Three Gorges Project, Professor Huang Wanli. In Zhang’s words, due to the so-called *Xiaerxiefu force* (a coined name with Russian pronunciation in Chinese) and the Stephen King effect, the high-speed rail system is extremely dangerous. This article spread in the Chinese cyberworld rapidly and was finally added into the Baidu Baike article for the high-speed rail. The Institute of Earth Environment Chinese Science Academy publicly announced that this so-called professor is not a member of the Academy. The original author also made an announcement admitting his improper joke. *South Daily*, one of the leading newspapers, reported these announcements as well. However, there has been no correction or amendment to the high-speed rail article long after these announcements. Other Chinese online encyclopedias cloned this article as well.

On July 23, 2011, two high-speed trains traveling on the Yongtaiwen railway line collided on a viaduct in the suburbs of Wenzhou, Zhejiang province in China. The two trains derailed each other, and four cars fell off the viaduct. A total of forty people were killed, and at least 192 were injured, twelve of which were severe injuries. An investigative journalism report of the collision in one of the leading Chinese national newspapers, *First Finance Daily*, quoted an article from Baidu Baike (which included information on the Stephen King effect) in their coverage. After the readers of the newspaper reported this error to the newspaper, the part containing spoofed entries was immediately deleted from the official website. After *First Finance Daily*’s competitors reported this scandal, Baidu Baike modified the spoofed entries, but as of now Hudong has kept the spoofed article.

A more recent scandal happened on February 2013 in a documentary produced by the National Central Television station about the Prague Spring. The narrative mentioned that the Russian invasion is called Yuri’s revenge. Audiences reported that Yuri’s revenge has nothing to do with the Prague Spring and is actually part of an extension package for the famous video game *Command & Conquer*. The national station admitted that they referred to Baidu Baike during the production of the documentary. In the historical records of the article on Prague Spring, the spoofed content of Yuri’s revenge has been edited several times. Initially this article contained absurd content such as cloned soldiers, which were deleted, but the name “Yuri’s revenge” was untouched until mistakenly quoted in the documentary.

The frequent appearance of these unintentional spoofed articles in Baidu Baike and Hudong are attributes of their systems. As we mentioned above, the hierarchical system, commercial rewards for editors’ participation, and vague copyright requirements contribute to these issues. In fact, the editors are encouraged to mass-produce new articles. Through this encouragement the chance for spoofed articles increase massively. Some editors even try to copy and paste news reports or other popular content from the Internet to coin new articles for more credits and higher ranks. Although the auditing policy of these copycats seems stricter than Wikipedia, the auditing focus is only for political issues and “sensitive words.” In comparison, spoofed articles that are indirectly related to political issues are easily accepted and published.

If the mass representation of spoofed articles is due to the personal pursuit of commercial benefits such as credits and gifts, Baidu Baike and Hudong's potential ambition to commercialize the encyclopedia project is even more suspicious.

There is no hard evidence that Baidu Baike and Hudong insert third-party advertisements in their projects, but there are examples of commercial events created as articles in the Baidu and Hudong online encyclopedias. For example, when searching some typical phrases used in Chinese advertisements such as *welcome to friends* in any of the Chinese online encyclopedias, thousands of entries containing either advertisements or product placement will appear. Even spoofed articles can survive in the online encyclopedia for years. According to its editorial manual, Baidu Baike and Hudong made efforts to ban advertisements within their articles, but advertisements and product placements seek every possible opportunity in these encyclopedias, and publications on online marketing include marketing techniques or search engine optimization skills for Baidu Baike entries. There are articles for companies, products, or advertisements with links in the content or references. It is easy to find a commercial service that adds an advertisement to different Chinese online encyclopedias on taobao.com, an equivalent of eBay in China.

The most controversial articles, with regard to advertisement, appeared in the medical area. According to a media report,¹³ on December 6, 2012, an obstetrics and gynecology doctor claimed in his microbiology page that he found the entry for cervical erosion H contained mistakes. He spent hours correcting it with his own professional knowledge, but his edition didn't pass the auditing of the official editor. Ironically, a private hospital successfully edited the entry with an amendment of its product placement. In the 185 historical records of the editing of this entry, quite a number of edits were deleted because of advertisements, but within minutes new advertisements were added. It appears that different hospitals deleted the competitor's advertisements but added their own. For instance, the entries for *lupus erythematosus* and *condyloma acuminatum* have long been a battlefield between hospitals.

After the mass media¹⁴ reported this scandal, Baidu Baike officially announced that "Baidu Baike will keep its public service commitment and that all medication entries will be free of any charge."¹⁵ They will promote what they named the Rainbow Project. Under this new project, all the medical entries of the encyclopedia will be locked to general editors. Only registered doctors who are authorized by Baidu

Baike have access to edit the medical entries. There are about forty thousand locked entries. If the entries are edited by authorized doctors, this will be marked on the entry, otherwise, there will be a warning stating "this entry is not confirmed by professionals, the authorization is in the process, and the content is just for reference only." Ironically, until March 2013, even the entry causing the initial trouble—*cervical erosion*—still contained the name of a certain hospital providing medical treatment. This situation is worse than it used to be since the article is locked under the Rainbow Project and the commercial information within the article cannot be deleted. Another result of the Rainbow Project is that the partners cooperating with Baidu Baike can easily put their own advertisements into the entries. One of the partners of Baidu, Good Doctor Online (www.haodf.com), a commercial website for medical information, has been authorized to publish medical entries under the Rainbow Project and created numerous entries, such as one for gout. Advertisements of hospitals and doctors were placed on the right side of the entries as a part of the authorized information.

Digital Commons or Social Factory?

This chapter does not merely condemn the misuse of the Wikipedia "mode" by the copycats of Wikipedia. The copycats of Wikipedia in China could be considered a typical and extreme example of how social factors change the localization of certain Internet services such as Wikipedia. The challenges that the digital commons face can only be understood through their particular political, economic, and social reality.

Wikipedia is frequently quoted as a typical example of the "shining beacons of a commons based Internet and a political, networked public sphere."¹⁶ What also distinguishes it from other cooperative social media is that "the exploitation of free labor is substituted by voluntary user labor, the profit imperative by nonprofit organizations, the provision of advertising by common knowledge accessible to the world for free, and depoliticized content by a certain degree of political information and debate."¹⁷ Many political economists condemn cooperative social media as a "social factory"^{18, 19} while praising, if not deifying, Wikipedia as a "digital commons."²⁰

In the case of Wikipedia's Chinese copycats, both Baidu Baike and Hudong keep their distance from the ideal "digital commons" and embrace the concept of a social factory. The products of voluntary user labor are stamped with the trademark ©2013 *Baidu* or ©2013 *Hudong*. The limited salaries received by users are exchanged for gifts such as an iPod and iPad.

In some ways, these copycats are even worse than a social factory. A factory pursues profit through exploitation under the market rule. The copycats of Wikipedia keep a balance between market force and political power, taking advantage of both of them.

As an online encyclopedia, Wikipedia promotes knowledge accumulation and distribution. In contrast, the censored articles on Baidu Baike and Hudong narrow the audience's perspective on politically sensitive topics. Again, the copycats' hierarchical

system of editors promotes article creation through copy and paste without proper references, while the censorship system completely fails in increasing the quality of the encyclopedia. This chapter describes how incorrect information, originally circulated by the copycat online encyclopedias, moves to mass media, and then finally to the public.

Unlike Wikipedia, its copycats Baidu Baike and Hudong keep most of their strategic plans, such as the details of the censorship system and potential commercial prospects, a secret. We only know a little about their operating mechanisms by comparing the differences between the copycats and Wikipedia. Research on Baidu Baike and Hudong does not only increase our knowledge about the political economy structure of contemporary China's Internet circumstances, it also provides a local perspective to envision global phenomenon and challenges the conclusions drawn from taken-for-granted facts.

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