

CHINA'S SOFT POWER:
CAN CHINA MAKE THE GRADE?

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Abstract As China is rising in the international sphere, its use of soft power can help influence other countries to perceive this as a “peaceful rise” (Nye et al. 8) and therefore secure a foundation for China as a global political actor. From the definitions of soft power provided by Joseph Nye, Hongying Wang and Ye-Chung Lu, we can extract four broad categories that a country must succeed in in order to manipulate soft power effectively: institutions, ideology, foreign policy and culture. With this in mind, it is important that we explore the effective use of China's soft power to increase its international legitimacy. To do this, we broke down the four tenets of soft power and examine how the PRC leadership utilizes each one to increase its international legitimacy. The conclusion was that China was in fact wielding soft power effectively to increase its legitimacy, but the questions regarding how organic this soft power is shows limitations for China.

China's Soft Power: Can China Make The Grade?

While most of the modern world perceives the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an economic powerhouse, the Chinese government continues to shape its foreign policy to be more than that; the government wants China to be a world leader. It is well known that China, in its 4,000 years of history had exceeded goals in social, political and economic developments, it has yet to be seen the influence the country will gain in the modern world. Despite being the second largest economy in the world, China is still home to more than 150 million people who live below the poverty line (Wade 2011). This disparity exemplifies the paradox of China's international stance; while some observers would like to regard it as a developed nation; China still receives aid from the Western countries due to its simultaneous status as a developing nation. The status of China's economic standing is just one question among many in determining its legitimacy as an international actor. Luckily for the PRC, however, its legitimacy as an international leader does not seem to hinge on its "hard power," that is, economic and militaristic leverage, but instead is represented through its use of "soft power."

The term "soft power" was coined by Professor Joseph Nye in the 1970s and currently has multiple definitions. Originally, Nye had a broad definition of "soft power" as a country being able to get other countries to want what it wants (Nye 166). While a perfect summary, Nye later narrowed this definition to be "the attractiveness of its [the country's] culture, its domestic political and social values, and the style and substance of its foreign policy" (Wang and Lu 426). In their article "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: a comparative study of China and Taiwan" Hongying Wang and Ye-Chung Lu explain soft power: *"This attractiveness rests on intangible resources, such as culture, ideology and institutions, which could help legitimize a given state's power and policy in the eyes of others.* By combining these two definitions, we can extract four broad categories that a country must succeed in in order to manipulate soft power effectively: institutions, ideology, foreign policy and culture. With this comprehensive definition in mind, it is important that we explore the effective use of

China's soft power to increase its international legitimacy. To do this, we will break down the four tenets of soft power and examine how the PRC leadership utilizes each one to increase its international legitimacy. For clarification purposes, Taiwan is not included in the study. Moreover, the time period is focused on the PRC from the 1970s to the present. As the PRC is rising in the international sphere, its use of soft power can help influence other countries to perceive this as a "peaceful rise" (Nye et al. 8) and therefore secure a foundation for China as a multilateral political actor.

To begin to understand how China's leadership uses soft power, we will begin by examining its interaction with international institutions. This interaction is key to determining how other nations perceive China; it is a question of, "Does this country work well with the current international institutions?" China's government has been doing considerably well working with international institutions and attempts to appeal to them. Within its own geographic region, China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have become increasingly diplomatically engaged; the PRC has even been included in the group "ASEAN + 3" (Gill 22). The PRC created a free trade area for the members of the organization, which has "become a cornerstone of China's new foreign policy in the region" (Gill and Huang 22). Moreover, China joined the Southeast Asia Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which was a choice the PRC used to increase its diplomatic relations with the nations that surround it (Gill 22). It is also increasing its relations with the East Asia Summit (EAS)- a group focused on increasing trade between the nations of the region (Lum, Morrison and Vaughn 4). What this increase shows is how China's leadership is using international organizations to gain favor from countries in its own area; by molding the interests of ASEAN to fit its own (such as the economic free trade zone), it gains a formal influence in the regional arena.

China's government has not limited itself to regional organizations. As a member of the UN Security Council, China has sent the second most (arguably- the most) soldiers to UN peacekeeping missions, attempting to secure its place as a peaceful nation (Lum, Morrison and Vaughn 4).

Additionally, it creates international organizations to increase its legitimacy in a given region. For example, China created the China-African People's Friendship Association (CAPFA) on November 28, 2011 (*China-Africa friendship* 11/28/11). Moreover, China is investing in institutions such as an Office of Public Diplomacy, which was added in Foreign Ministry in 2010 (Shambaugh 2010). China's State Council Information Office is utilizing exchange programs to use media and gain some more ground in a world run by the internet (Shambaugh 2010). It is also attempting to use media sources to outreach to the public. These media sources can be seen as multinational institutions as they span their influence worldwide. The Chinese government invested \$8.7 Billion in its publicity work on some of the biggest news agencies in the country, such as Xinhua News, which has become a major source of news for people in Africa and has a global audience of 125 million people (Shambaugh 2010). By investing in both international organizations, multinational corporations and news agencies, China is successfully using these institutions to increase its diplomacy and influence throughout the world and thus increasing its soft power. There are some limitations, however. While the Chinese government attempts to appeal to institutions, some nongovernmental multinational organizations stray away from China because of its human rights abuses (Gill and Huang 29). Despite this, it holds that China does help increase its legitimacy through international organizations, as it has diplomatic and economic ties with many.

Foreign policy is a complicated, yet vital tenet of soft power. It can either be influenced by or directed by soft power (and of course, there are some cases where it is a mixture of both). In the case of China's leadership, we can see that soft power, for the most part, directs foreign policy; the leadership attempts to increase its soft power through its foreign policies (Lu et al 2). We can look to three aspects that help define how effective foreign policy can be in light of soft power: how the PRC's leadership treats impoverished nations, how militaristic it is and how credible the policies are. These three are the most important because they form the relations between other countries, and these relationships are fundamental to determining how influential soft power is.

Initially, Joseph Nye explains that the most powerful nations are those that do not neglect “Third World” countries (Nye 166). He goes on to explain, that in terms of the United States specifically that its neglect of Third World countries would reduce its ability to affect their policies (Nye 166). What this indicates is the importance of attention; if attention is given from “stronger” countries to “weaker” ones, then the “stronger” ones can help ensure that both countries have similar interests and thus increase its soft power. China is growing in this area; its ability to shape the actions of other states is rooted in its foreign aid, trade and investment (Lum, Morrison and Vaughn 1). Due to its economic prowess, China’s government is able to expand its influence by distributing investment. In fact, China is considered an “economic patron” in the poorest areas of Southeast Asia and takes on foreign aid to countries that other nations deem too big of a challenge, such as Myanmar (Lum, Morrison and Vaughn 5). That trend has continued up to this date. For example, on November 28, 2011 China vowed to continue both diplomatic and economic ties to Myanmar, reminiscing on the past relationship (Chinese Vice President Vows). The PRC has had a lasting relationship with Myanmar and this has left a Chinese influence on Myanmar. What this commitment indicates is that the PRC’s leadership refuses to give up on the countries that others perceive as a waste of money and time and secures its position as an international leader. This aid also reveals the Chinese government’s commitment to stabilizing the global economy; positioning itself as a type of economic Atlas of the world.

The second area of foreign policy is for the international community to interpret the policy as more diplomatic than militaristic. The Chinese government has made it a point to master this view, as its leaders generally do not want to be seen as a threat to other states because they want to be seen as having a peaceful rise. The government looks to its history to inspire a diplomatic feeling; it often looks to Zhou Enlai’s “graceful diplomatic style” that allowed China to regain its international “face” (Lu et al 5). Despite his colleagues’ commitment to stoicism, Zhou Enlai was able to foster more intimate dialogues due to his charismatic nature. Ever since the PRC’s leadership began attempting to repair its

economy it has attempted to do so in a passive way. Some aspects of China's foreign policies are seen as diplomatic when compared to the policies set forth by the United States; many countries view the United States as intrusive. The PRC, on the other hand, does not have such strict rules for aid. Professor Ezra Vogel explains that many countries are tired of interference by the United States so while the PRC turns a proverbial blind eye to many human rights violations, those countries prefer that policy as opposed to interference (Nye et al 16). Even in terms of foreign aid, the PRC does not have the same restrictions as many other international powers do; it does not place conditions based on human rights situations or how open the markets on which allows China to make ties with many states that western countries cannot touch (Lum, Morrison and Vaughn 5). These diplomatic connections push China ahead of many states; if desired, China has the ability to shape their policies as it has economic and political leverage. This ability has been particularly helpful in terms of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, while it vows economic and military ties with the often-isolated country, it is able to have greater influence over the DPRK's nuclear disarmament talks (China Vows Closer Ties). By going where many developed countries will not, the PRC helps elevate its international status as a mediator and spans its influence to more developing areas.

The necessity of credibility concretes the previous two aspects of foreign policy. Other states must view the actor as credible in order for that actor to be persuasive and thus have soft power (Keohane and Nye 90). The PRC is gaining international credibility by good diplomatic policies when ending its disputes with other countries; showing that it is an "adult" country. Out of its twenty-three territorial disputes with other governments, China has settled seventeen and has offered "substantial compromises...usually receiving less than 50% of the contested land" (Huang et al 22). By resolving its land disputes in a diplomatic fashion, the PRC was able to secure its position as credible; others may interpret the PRC's leadership as taking actions that are beyond their own national interests. This integrity is also exemplified through the Six-Party Talks with the DPRK as the PRC often puts aside its

interests to focus on mediating the conversation. The PRC is being seen as a responsible cooperative power in the international system (Gill and Huang 25). This approach allows other countries to line up their interests with those of the PRC's; the PRC can use its soft power to be a mediator and a legitimate actor in the international system.

There are some perceived limitations regarding the credibility of China's approach to international issues. Due to China's policy of not interfering on other states, the Chinese government does not cut ties with brutal dictators (Gill and Huang 28). Some international leaders perceive China's leadership as putting diplomatic relations above ethics. For example, China has stood contested with the "Western" stance of the Syrian situation. The Syrian President Al-Assad continues a vicious crackdown of Syrian citizens who have been protesting peacefully and Western powers continue to denounce the Al-Assad regime while demanding his resignation and imposing sanctions on the country. The Chinese government, on the other hand, has remained "neutral" all while denouncing the killing of civilians; China has not called for Al-Assad to step down. The government also abstained while the United Nations promoted a resolution denouncing the human rights violations against the Al-Assad regime ("China Critical"). Even in the most obvious, violent human rights violations the Chinese government fails to take a definite stance or interfere with the process, leading other nations to view the PRC as a less credible, less ethical international leader.

Beyond remaining neutral to human rights conflicts, the Chinese leadership has been known to celebrate brutal dictators. In Zimbabwe, for example, China wants to expand mining and infrastructure projects. The Chinese Foreign Ministry even called Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe "a famed leader of the national liberation movement in Africa" ("China Urges Zimbabwe"). It is this cooperation with a known "evil" entity that creates suspicion among Western nations. These policies also weaken the long-term soft power of China. When regime changes under these dictatorships happen, the new governments turn their backs on those countries that helped the old regime oppress. Joseph Nye clarifies

that while the Chinese government supports President Mugabe, the average person of Zimbabwe may not think kindly of China (Lan et al 23). There is one more credibility argument that is more obvious: democracies are suspicious of non-democratic states. China is not a democracy (Lan et al 21). At the end of the day, while China does not neglect Third World countries, they are perceived as legitimizing the corrupt governments that dictate them, and therefore their credibility is undermined.

One of the most important aspects of soft power is making the country's culture and ideology attractive to other countries (Nye 1997). The goal is to make your culture an international norm (Nye 1997). The expansion of a culture can be even more significant than governmental structures as it signifies how popular a country is. In order to truly have soft power, your culture must be desirable to others and therefore allow them to embrace your societal norms. For example, the Chinese students participating in Tiananmen Square Protests during 1989 were using United States culture as an influence; utilizing the Statue of Liberty as an icon despite the government's protest against US interference (Lu et al 4). This use of a social symbol was an example of how United States soft power was supervening what was going on in China at the time; despite the Chinese government's desires, it could not stop American societal influence.

Chinese scholars have highlighted culture as a crucially important aspect of China's power; they see "cultural competition as an increasingly vital part of international competition" (Lu et al 4). Keeping this in mind, the Chinese leadership has made special attempts to increase the influence of its views. China must effectively use their culture as an international influence in order to increase their soft power. It has used its history as a springboard to do this. Due to China's historical background, it has "cultural splendor" (Gill and Huang 18). This historical culture has always been attractive to the world (Lan et al 7). The length of its existence has created deeper and more complex histories between the states in the world and China. China's government is able to use this as a relation-developing tool. Cho and Jeong use the Opium Wars as an example of how China's history can increase their soft power:

“For example, if Chinese officials selected a fragmented historical memory of the 19th century Opium Wars (an intrinsic part of China’s history) and reconstructed the prolonged conflict as being a common memory of Western imperialist invasions in Asian history, there is a good possibility that many Asians would share in this Chinese historical memory. Thus, taking advantage of its history and cultural legacies, China can attempt to increase its soft power by creating common, imagined identities and values for Asians. This is possible because Chinese civilization and history transcend mere representation of a single national history. In this sense, the civilization of China, one of Asia’s ancient suzerains along with India, is China’s greatest soft power assets”. (Cho and Jeong 470)

This quotation indicated that China is able to wield soft power from its history and how powerful that power can be in increasing cultural influence. The fact that China is an ancient civilization allows it to create stronger bonds with other countries. China’s “modern” culture is being spread through film and the Confucius Institutes, however. As David Shambaugh explains in the New York Times on June 7, 2010, hosting the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai was a good move by China; Chinese films and literature are growing in global popularity (Shambaugh 2010). What these social events mean is that China’s culture is becoming increasingly desirable, which is a necessity for wielding soft power.

The Chinese government is increasing this desirability through education. The Confucius Institutes are gaining leverage in the international community. Wang and Lu argue that the emphasis on harmony due to Confucianism makes the culture more appealing; it is opposed to the self-centered views of Western culture (Lu et al.). Therefore, when people think about the Confucius Institutes they do not immediately equate them to an expanding Chinese influence; instead they think about an institution aimed at increase the peace. This perception is beneficial to both actually expanding Chinese influence and maintaining the “peaceful rise” that Chinese leaders want. These Confucius Institutes are teaching students throughout the world about Chinese culture; they are aimed at reducing the misconceptions many people have about Chinese society. The goal is to teach the Chinese language, promote “culture exchange” and facilitate business exchange (Paradise 648). As of 2008, there were a total of 326 Confucius Institutes in over eighty-one countries (Paradise 651). What this expansion shows is that there has been an escalation in the desire of students to learn about Chinese culture and language, if only for

business purposes (Paradise 655). For example, Ding Anqi from the School of Chinese Language and Literature in England said that the Confucius Institute helped “promote a positive image of China among typical Germans who formerly had to rely on local media to get a vague and usually negative impression” (Jia 11/20/11). The PRC is working diligently to expel the negative images it might be portraying to societies in other countries. By focusing on this aspect, it aims to increase its soft power. It seems like this effort may be working because there has been an increased international interest in Chinese culture. This increase can be exemplified by the exceedingly popular HSK test, which is the equivalent to a Chinese TOEFL test. The HSK had a growth in its first ten years that is equivalent to what the English TOEFL test had in its first ten years (Gill and Huang 18). This signifies two phenomena: the increasing amount of foreign students studying in China (Gill and Huang 18) and the increasing popularity/necessity of the knowledge of the Chinese language. Through these trends, we can see that the Chinese culture is gaining in popularity, meeting the necessity of a desirable culture for soft power.

Chinese leadership is attempting to combat cultural hurdles that act as limitations to the PRC’s soft power. First, China’s leadership admits to not being good at selling its culture to others; while the term “made in China” appears on most products worldwide, China has no societal trademark icons such as Mickey Mouse that is recognizable to other societies (Gill and Huang 27). The vast amount of diversity in China might explain this absence. According to the CIA World Factbook, the Chinese population stands at 1.3 billion and has over 15 nationalities, over 8 languages (and even more dialects) and is greatly spread out throughout the country. It is difficult to unify such a large, diverse population under one simple trademark or brand.

China may be promoting Confucius as a main symbol of the Chinese culture through the Confucius Institutes; while Confucianism lacks the visual finesse that many American symbols embody (such as Mickey Mouse, apple pie, and so forth) it also promotes a deeper message than these visual

symbols. Confucius gives a notion of harmony, history and excellence. Through the increasing popularity of a more powerful symbol, the Chinese culture is spreading to other areas and this symbol is helping the Chinese government combat against the negative perceptions put forth by other cultures.

Confucianism is not the only deeper symbol that encompasses the Chinese culture. Taoism is another Chinese cultural tier. While better known as religion, Taoism is developing into a “way of life” that is becoming better known in the Western world. During October of 2011, China hosted a high-profile International Taoism Forum in the United States. China’s senior leader Jia Qinglin urged the 500 participants of the forum (from over 20 major countries) to explore the essence of Taoism and to know the Chinese culture in a better light (“China Promoting Taoism”). This forum is another attempt by China to expand its culture to the rest of the world. Much like Confucianism, Taoism is a more resonant symbol of the Chinese culture that allows the Chinese government to have more soft power.

These attempts have an element of shallowness to them, however, that seems to give an artificial sense of soft power. As Nye explains, the dispersion of culture is not done by the government making it desirable; but rather is suppose to be more of a natural progression that highlights the rise of popularity of the culture. In this way, the Confucius Institute and the International Taoism Forum are a top-down project done by the Chinese government to increase its influence. Therefore, the rising popularity of these institutions may not be a genuine representation in the rise of popularity of the Chinese culture in and of itself. On the other hand, the rise of foreign exchange students and those using the official Chinese language may indicate a genuine rise in the popularity of Chinese culture. The world polls highlight this mix; David Shambaugh goes on to report that the “most recent BBC/ Globescan poll of 28 nations showed that China’s global image remained mixed. Only in Africa and Pakistan is it consistently positive, while in Asia, North America and Latin America is it neutral to poor. Across Europe it is strongly negative” (Shambaugh 2010). Therefore, the general Chinese culture may be desirable to countries that have had that historical relation with China but in nations that lack this deeper

relationship, China's soft power has limitations.

The discussion about Chinese culture brings about another aspect of soft power that China may be limited in. The Chinese notion of soft power is slightly different than that of Joseph Nye's; some Chinese scholars add "national coherence" to the definition, which refers to the orientation of the population toward unity and cooperation to achieve national goals (Wang and Lu 430). As discussed, there is a great amount of diversity in China that gives the perception that China lacks the national coherence it is looking for. This is not to say that the population lacks coherent goals but rather that the perception of national coherence is more important to soft power than actual national coherence. China does not seem to have this national unity; it lacks a symbolic "face" to the rest of the world. Beyond this, China has a number of territorial and sovereignty issues that leave others to question how much soft power China truly has, if one aspect of soft power is national coherency. Joseph Nye brings about the controversy surrounding the Taiwan Strait as an obstacle of China's soft power (Cho and Jeong 454). Due to the controversy about whether or not Taiwan is in fact party of China, it seems as if national coherency may weaken China's soft power. Moreover, the fact that China's history is so complex allows for holes in what counts as national heritage and limits China's soft power. For example, the controversy regarding the ethnic lineage of Koguryo, an ancient kingdom that is located between China and the DPRK, has a particularly big impact on the limits of China's soft power in Korea (Gill and Huang 29). When China attempted to register some Koguryo artifacts as a World Heritage site, Koreans saw this in a negative light (Gill and Huang 29). This shows how the question of "What is included in China's national history?" can directly change soft power; because there are questions of what China's national coherency entails, it can be perceived as imposing on other countries; decreasing its soft power.

One aspect of culture that Nye highlights is the need for openness to other cultures as well. It is not enough to export your culture among others; you must also receive immigrants and have a sense of "internationalization" that raises soft power (Nye 170). While this openness to other cultures plays a

smaller role in soft power than the spread of one country's own culture, it is imperative to analyze how receptive China is to other cultures. President Hu Jianto has claimed that China is accepting of culture exchanges (Gill and Huang 19). If one visits the Xinhua News website, there is a "culture exchange" portion on the webpage (xinhua.net). One attempt by China's government to increase cultural exchanges is the five-day "Culture Festival" in Heihe City, located in the Heilongjiang Province. This festival is meant to delve deeper into the cultures of Russia and China ("China-Russia Culture Festival"). This festival is a demonstration that signifies China's government is attempting to deepen its societal relations with Russia. Even bigger than these festivals is the Shanghai Waigaoqiao Free Trade Zone (WFTZ), which is the National Base for International Cultural Trade. It is a 3,000-square-meter bonded area and has more than 80 cultural trade enterprises and institutions ("China's First International Culture Base"). These examples give the perception that China is in fact tolerant of other cultures, meeting this part of soft power.

While its culture plays a key role to China's soft power, China's political and economic ideologies are very important as well. While Joseph Nye considers economic prowess as a "hard power", China has turned its economic ideology as part of its political and cultural ideology; it has become a model that many other countries value. Russia, for example, wants to restrict democracy while opening up the economy to let more capitalistic methods in, as are Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (Gill and Huang 28). What this example shows is how influential the Chinese economic culture is; China has created a system that others wish to replicate. In this way, its economic prowess becomes less of a hard power and less about wielding economic leverage on other countries. Instead, its economic model becomes part of China's soft power because it becomes desirable to others to have the same type of society China has progressed into. These models of economic development are a source of soft power for China (Wang and Lu 395).

This model has gained so much popularity that it even has a name: the Beijing Consensus (Gill

and Huang 20). The term “Beijing Consensus” was created by Joshua Cooper Ramo and refers to the idea that the economy need not be uniform in its style; there is no need to be wholly capitalist or wholly socialist but rather should be based on a country’s own situation (Gill and Huang 20). Ramo brings a three tier idea of what the Beijing Consensus encompasses:

“The First states that China’s development model is based on innovation, the second states that China’s development model considers sustainability and equality as top priorities, the third states that China strives for self determination in foreign policy. The Beijing Consensus, like the Washington Consensus, includes not only economic but also political, social, and diplomatic issues.” (Cho and Jeong 462)

These tiers show how the economic model does not stop at economic theories but rather brings in political and cultural ideals. It creates a version of China that China is able to sell to the rest of the world and it is this desire, as already discussed, that gives China a strong sense of soft power. China increases this power by denouncing the phrase “Beijing Consensus” which is intended to impose the “Washington Consensus”. The Chinese government explains that “it does not want to raise a different banner that competes with the Washington census” (Wang and Lu 440). By rejecting this phrase, the Chinese government gives the perception of China’s peaceful rise. While the PRC leadership denounces the phrase, it does not deny that China has had a much different path toward economic and societal modernization and that this path may be very helpful to nations still on the path of modernity (Wang and Lu 440). This creation has been successful; this path has been a model not only for developing nations but ones that are as developed- if not more- than China. For example, the Indian government has claimed that China ought to be used as a model for trade and Brazil has sent representatives to China to see exactly how China has developed (Gill and Huang 20). These are fellow BRIC states those perceived to be on the same level as China in the international sense.

The fact that China’s government has denounced the term “Beijing Consensus” is quite interesting; this resistance of a new model both helps and hurts its soft power. By intentionally denouncing a potentially threatening circumstance, China’s government has tried to prevent the loss of

its soft power to the United States. On the other hand, China is often critiqued as being too much like the West; because it is adding more socialist ideals, some scholars are deeming the Beijing Consensus to be less of a new model and just a better version of an old one. In fact, some have gone so far to call the Chinese economic model as the “great emulator of the West (Gill and Huang 27). Even if this argument is disregarded, the economic model includes corruption (Gill and Huang 27) and includes human rights violations as risks involved (Lan et al 9). This perceived replication may mean that this is not an ideal model for economic development; perhaps a more modern Western model can be more attractive. The attractiveness of the Western model limits the persuasiveness of the economic ideology of China and thus restricts its soft power models to developing, more corrupt states.

After analyzing the different aspects of soft power such as the desirability of culture, the attractiveness of foreign policy, national coherency and credibility, we have seen that China has successfully met the different tenets. While the Chinese government does limit its soft power by continuing its human rights violations and praising harsh dictators, this limitation does pose as a large obstacle to soft power. All in all, China is excellent at wielding soft power to increase its influence throughout the world. Rising popularity of its culture and overall demeanor exemplifies the span of this rising soft power. While China may be limited to influencing developing nations, its soft power is allowing it to gain foothold in the international community as a leader and power.

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