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The Application of Domestication and Foreignization Strategies in the Rendition of Chinese Literature

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the dimension of Chinese-English translations. More specifically, the rendition of Chinese literature into English. The study grounds itself in the concepts of domestication and foreignization. These are major strategies in the field of translation, which are normally applied to culture-bound items. Whether a translator considers fluency and instant intelligibility the most important qualities of a good translation or uses a more conservative strategy to preserve authenticity, both strategies make sense. The translator either preserves the source text as much as possible and minimizes the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers (domestication) or deliberately retains a degree of the original's foreignness (foreignization). The present study sought to evaluate the translation of culture-related items found in Cao Xueqin's classic, *红楼梦* (*A Dream of Red Mansions*). Several English versions of this literary work were used for comparative analysis. Among the findings are instances of relative equivalence, departures from the source text, and errors resulting in some loss of meaning. To some extent, the target texts also lack the overall aesthetic value of the original. This study and its findings are relevant to educators and students in translation and scholars engaged in translational research. To date, there exists an unfortunate lack of published research similar to this study's focus and design.

Keywords: Chinese-English translation, domestication, foreignization, literature.

归化和异化策略在中国文学翻译中的应用

摘要：本文重点研究汉英翻译的维度。更具体地说，是将中国文学翻译成英文。该研究以归化和异化的概念为基础。这些是翻译领域的主要策略，通常用于与文化相关的项目。无论译者将流畅性和即时可懂性视为优秀翻译的最重要品质，还是使用更保守的策略来保持真实性，这两种策略都有意义。译者要么尽可能地保留原文，尽量减少外文对目标语读者的陌生感（归化），要么刻意保留一定程度的原文的陌生感（异化）。本研究旨在评估曹雪芹经典著作《红楼梦》中与文化相关的项目的翻译。这部文学作品的几个英文版本被用于比较分析。调查结果包括相对等价、与源文本的背离以及导致某些意义丧失的错误。在某种程度上，译文也缺乏原著的整体审美价值。本研究及其发现对从事翻译研究的教育工作者和学生以及从事翻译研究的学者具有重要意义。迄今为止，遗憾的是缺乏与本研究的重点和设计类似的已发表研究。

关键词：汉英翻译、归化、异化、文学。

1. Introduction

Hong Lou Meng, Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions* [1] is arguably one of China's greatest literary masterpieces. It represented one of the nation's *Four Great Classical Novels* and was first printed in

1791. The novel is remarkable for its richness in characters and its detailed observation of 18th century Chinese society. The reader, Being steeped in cultural elements and colorful narrative, is transported across the splendor, sophistication, sins, and destruction of a

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society still governed by imperial rules and complex societal norms. Cao himself was a member of an eminent family that had traditionally served Qing dynasty emperors. Readers can experience both innocence and darkness and a range of emotions associated with 18th-century Chinese society through the book.

The rationale for the present study is twofold. First, Cao's work is still very much prized in today's China. It is considered significant by literary scholars who continue to study its varied dimensions to extend our existing knowledge base. Another reason is due to our initial examination of the translated versions. A cursory look indicated possible departures of various degrees from the original's intended meanings due to domestication and foreignization strategies.

Translating culture-related items (CRIs) can be a challenge, which can be viewed from different perspectives. Firstly, CRIs at the text level tend to be tackled within the contexts of contrastive rhetoric and contrastive pragmatics, drawing on elements such as deixis, presuppositions, implicatures, and coherence. Secondly, CRIs at the lexical and semantic levels, such as those concerning customs, traditions, attires, and cuisines, are normally tackled within the taxonomies of cultural categories. Finally, translating CRIs can be a daunting task because they are usually allusions, especially in literary work.

This paper offers a discussion regarding the treatment of CRIs in Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions*, framed within the core goals of translating such items – that of adaptation to produce a target text which seems normal, familiar, and accessible to the target audience (domestication), and that of preserving the features of the source text as much as possible (foreignization).

It is also noteworthy that there is a lack of existing research similar to the present study's focus and design to the best of the researchers' knowledge. This study and its findings are also expected to benefit educators and students in translation and scholars engaged in translational research.

2. Related Literature

2.1. Background

Cao Xueqin is a familiar name in many households in China. Long considered a prized piece of Chinese literature, *Hong Lou Meng* has been translated by different translators. The first attempt at translating it into English was by Robert Morrison in 1812. He translated part of a chapter.

Known also as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Story of the Stone*, *A Dream of Red Mansions* is believed to be semi-autobiographical, depicting to some extent the rise and fall of Cao's own family as well Qing dynasty. Up until 1971, only hand-copied manuscripts were available. Its influence was

considered pervasive by the late 19th century, so much so that reformer Liang Qichao felt compelled to attack it with *Water Margin* [2], another literary masterpiece.

According to Zhang [3], Cao's work came out in print in 1791 in its present 120-chapter version, with the final 40 chapters attributed to Gao E. Zhang noted that it remains one of the most beloved literary works in Chinese history. Cao died of illness before completing it, and when copies of the unfinished manuscript were put up for sale in a Beijing temple market, they were met with great demand and sold expensively.

Cao Xueqin was well-versed in Chinese poetry and classical Chinese. Lexicographers made use of *A Dream of Red Mansions* to establish the vocabulary of Standard Chinese/Mandarin.

Cao's prose is deemed difficult to translate because of colloquial and literary language and variations of classic poetry. Wong [4] highlighted that *A Dream of Mansions* is a challenge, even to the most resourceful translators. The process of rendering it into another language is likely to be more complicated and problematic compared to rendering other literary works.

2.2. Translation

The translation is an activity that involves comprehending a source text in one language and producing a target text with equivalent meaning in another language. The objective is not to cause a loss of meaning. Gains in meaning are generally considered desirable. Essentially, a translation process is supposed to produce equivalence (between the source text and the target text) to ensure that both texts convey the same message, considering a myriad of elements. For instance, culture, context, the grammatical rules of each language, stylistic norms, and phraseology.

Baker [5] viewed translation strategies as unfixed and cautioned that there is no ideal solution for transferring a thread of information in one language into another. She pointed out the following: "It is virtually impossible, except in extreme cases, to draw a line between what counts as a good translation and what counts as a bad one. Every translation has points of strength and points of weakness, and every translation is open to improvement" [5].

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the German philosopher, and translator felt that there were only two ways to translate; in his lecture, *On the Different Methods of Translating*, he noted that the translator either moves the reader to the author or the translator moves the author to the reader [6]. These notions underlie the heart of the translation trade.

Schleiermacher observed that Chinese translation scholars have already been communicating the idea of assimilation as early as the 1930s, an idea that continued to grow markedly. That is supposedly the outcome of several factors: China's policy of opening

its doors to the outside world and the people's increased interest in other cultures, particularly Western cultures. For the field of translation, this naturally means retaining more linguistic and cultural foreignness [6].

2.3. Domestication and Foreignization

In addressing cultural variations, one can rely on two primary strategies: domestication and foreignization. Domestication refers to a translation strategy based on the target language's culture; the translator searches for acceptable expressions in the target language to minimize the oddity of the source text culture and make a translated text much more comprehensible. In contrast, foreignization is a strategy that prioritizes the source text culture. The translator seeks to preserve the source text's authenticity and "flavor" as much as possible. This approach of staying true to the source text is considered a conservative approach.

Ghazala [7] in his work on English-Arabic translation, explained that his 16 procedures for handling cultural items are explicitly arranged from best to worst. The best is to utilize a cultural equivalent. The worst is to use glossaries or footnotes, which he labels as "a bad, poor, boring and hence inadvisable procedure of translation, which should be avoided wherever possible" [7].

Domestication is a technique that conforms greatly to target text standards. On the one hand, it facilitates understanding and is useful for encouraging some degree of intercultural communication. On the other hand, it is also viewed as problematic because it can be construed as a technique that favors dominant cultures. According to Venuti [8], when the language and message from a weak culture are translated into the context of a strong culture (particularly English), these will be adapted and made to comply accordingly. So apart from the fact that domestication can make cultural communication easier, it can also act as an agent of domination when used in excess. Furthermore, domestication can be applied in extremes in various manners. For instance, Venuti elaborated that since ancient Rome, those who translated into Latin deleted cultural markers, added allusions to Roman culture, replaced Greek poets' names with those of their own, and passed off translations as texts originally written in Latin [8].

Foreignization is essentially adherence to foreignness. It is a means of preservation, a form of fidelity to the source text. Some quarters see this technique as according value to the source text culture. That is termed "*yihua*" – respect for source cultures in translation [9]. Interestingly, "*yihua*" refers to faithfulness via retaining a source text's linguistic and cultural features. However, for Venuti, unfaithfulness can also be considered a form of foreignization because deviations in certain specific ways can result in the

translated version appearing stranger, more alien, or more foreign than the original [8]. In addition, "*yihua*" involves the notion of respect for source cultures, but Venuti did not advocate the act of valorizing every element of foreign culture. For Venuti, the translation process is about looking for similarities and never removing dissimilarities. As aptly put forth by Aldanani [10], a good literary translation offers its readers insights into foreign cultures. One should not rob another of a new and informative experience. It is about striking the right balance between comprehensibility and offering readers a glimpse of something novel. Within this argument, it is perhaps more fitting to suggest that since language and culture interweave, the translation process may essentially be considered a form of cultural communication; translators should be bilingually and biculturally competent.

Newmark [11] opined that the translator, as a craftsman, has to possess extensive knowledge of the foreign language that would allow him/her to determine how far he/she can depart from linguistic norms. Due to the possible influence of linguistic and cultural factors on the translation process, we predicted problems and constraints in rendering CRIs in the selected text. That is large because the source and target languages are not sufficiently similar to express culturally-themed elements adequately. Secondly, there is a lack of equivalence for some lexemes. Denotative and connotative meanings can also be very different in these languages. Lastly, cultural background, exposure, and understanding are considered possible variables for translational problems or inappropriate.

2.4. Framework

The present study is grounded in Venuti's theory of domestication and foreignization [8]. To put it in Venuti's own words, the former refers to "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values, bringing the author back home." In contrast, foreignization refers to "an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad"[8].

Venuti proposed domestication as a strategy that involves translating to less foreignness and suggested going against this tradition by embracing resistant translation (i.e., foreignization) [8]. The form of foreignization recommended makes visible the presence of the translator by underscoring the foreign identity of the source text and shielding it from being overshadowed by the target culture.

The following depicts the conceptual framework of the present study:

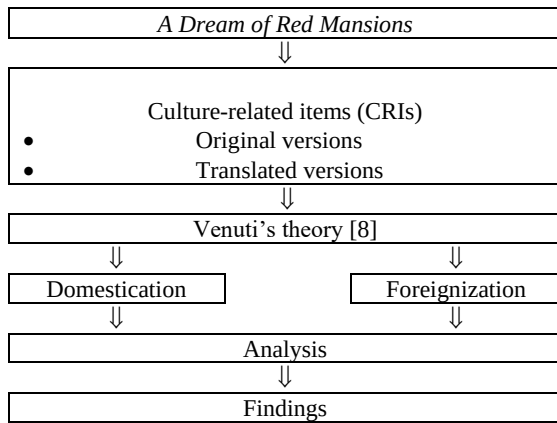


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of the present study

3. Methodology

This study employed the comparative-descriptive approach relevant to translation research, and purposive sampling was utilized in corpus selection. This form of non-probability sampling is recommended for these reasons: 1) to attain better alignment between sample and research objectives, and 2) to improve research rigor and trustworthiness of data and results.

Concerning corpus, we referred to Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions* (original/source text) and several English translations (target texts) of this literary classic.

The original version was examined for CRIs. Examples of these were extracted and mapped against their counterparts in the translated versions. Each rendition was analyzed based on its conveyed, keeping in mind its local and global contexts.

4. Results

The names of the characters in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are rather remarkable. For both Western and Chinese readers, many of them can be difficult to pronounce:

- 水中月 [shuǐ zhōng yuè] [*Moon in the Water*]
- 镜中花 [jìng zhōng huā] [*Flower in the Mirror*]
- 百花之蕊 [bǎi huā zhī ruǐ] [*Core of Hundreds of Flowers*]
- 万木之汁 [wàn mù zhī zhī] [*Juice of Thousands of Woods*]

It is conceivable that this oddity may lead to linguistic and cultural misinterpretations [12]. Before delving further into this, it is important to provide some background on the Chinese naming system.

A Chinese name usually consists of one or two characters for the surname and one or two characters for the initial name. In general, each character in a name holds a meaning, indicating a certain type of quality or expectation. When translating Chinese names into the Latin alphabet, the most common method is transcription, which entails transferring the

characters' pronunciation using a specific transcription system, such as *pinyin* (China's official system).

In the case of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, comparisons between the original and translated versions revealed some inaccuracies and a general preference for literal translation.

Given that they are translated, these names will appear rather unconventional and perhaps even quite strange to non-Chinese audiences. Due to the highly unique characteristics of Chinese names, verbatim translation is not typically preferred anymore when translating Chinese names into Romance languages. It is also worthy of note that when a translator opts only to transfer the pronunciation of names (for example, 教学光彩 [jiàoxué guāngcǎi]), the target text readers are essentially deprived of learning the meanings behind them. Another example is 甄士隐 [zhēn shì yǐn]; the harmonic meaning of this name is *to hide the real thing and leave it behind*. According to scholars, the term 士隐 [shì yǐn] is derived from *The Book of Rites*, which states that the way of the gentleman is "to be hidden" (essentially, a gentleman's way is to conceal himself from the truth). Some elements cannot be written out explicitly in Chinese, so they are sometimes written.

True to its nature as a literary classic, the source text is rich with CRIs. The cultural load allows the text to help readers more vividly imagine the characters, plot, and scenes that it offers. Among the more interesting examples is this: 海神 [hǎishén] [*the divinities of the sea*]. There is an instance of the use of an exclusive term from Chinese mythology, 龙王 [lóngwáng] [*Dragon King*]. That denotes the deity of water and rain who lives in a palace underwater. That is an example of the translator attempting to adapt a cultural element as much as possible to the backdrop of the target culture via the use of a well-known mythological character. *King of the Ocean* was utilized as well, 海王 [hǎi wáng].

The stamp 印 [yìn] of the commander used to be given to high-ranking generals for identification and to symbolize legitimate military power in ancient China. We observed the use of 指挥官印章 [zhǐhuī guān yìnzhāng] [*seal of the commander*]. That is a form of domestication that allows for comprehensibility and retention of the "flavor" of the original, both of which can facilitate the reader's imagination and enjoyment of the text.

Yang [13] mentioned the phenomenon of 文化干扰 [wénhuà gānrǎo] [*cultural interference*] – that is, elements of the target culture appear in the source text. In this case, it is sensible for translators to use expressions already known to the target audience or community.

Also interesting is this: 菩萨 [pú sà] (in Mahayana Buddhism), which denotes a person who can reach nirvana (a state of peace and happiness) but delays

doing this because of the suffering of other humans. There is also the use of an exclusive term from Chinese mythology, 女娲 [nǚ wā] [*Goddess*], the ancient female emperor of myths and legends. The former can be considered quite familiar to English-proficient readers of Asian descent. The latter can likewise be similarly viewed but may perhaps have a wider reach in terms of comprehensibility.

Concerning units of measurement, the Chinese use 里 [lǐ] for distance and 斤, which is *catty*. These are normally domesticated into *miles* and *kilograms*, which is inaccurate because one *li* is about a third of an English mile, whereas one *catty* is only about 600 grams. However, in terms of religious expressions, one notices a preference for foreignization, as can be seen with the Buddhist expression 阿弥陀佛 [ē mí tuó fó] (a transliteration from Sanskrit meaning *infinite wisdom* or *infinite life*).

The term 殒天 was originally used to refer to the death of an emperor in ancient times but was later used to refer to the death of any wealthy or distinguished person. It is observed that there is a difference between a translation executed by an Eastern translator and one executed by a Western translator. That is likely due to disparities in sociocultural background. For instance, from the Eastern perspective: *The Old Master's ascended to Heaven*. Western perspective: *Sir Jing is dead*. The former is more euphemistic, while the latter is very direct. The use of domestication makes it easier for comprehension, whereas foreignization permits the reader to experience an essence of Chinese culture and propriety.

There are also other cases of inaccuracy, as can be seen in the phrase 给了他的灵魂 [gěile tā de línghún] [*gave his soul*] being changed to 展示自 [zhǎnshì zìjǐ] [*to present himself*] which is not accurate and devoid of religious content. Over-domestication poses a problem as well, as observed in this case of character description: 村姥姥是信口开河 [cūn lǎo lǎo shì xìn kǒu kāi hé] [*an old village woman tells tall stories*]. 姥姥 means *grandmother* – but in at least one translation, it is noted that no specific noun is used. This rendition is considered too broad and carries little accuracy.

The term 达司马 [dá sīmǎ dasima] denotes a very high military post that existed in many of ancient China's dynasties. An error is observed in the case of the term being understood as 照顾马匹的人 [zhàogù mǎpǐ de rén] [*a man who takes care of the horses*] and rendered as 马厩的主人 [mǎjiù de zhǔrén] [*Master of the Stables*]. That is probably due to the 'dasima's third character – 马 [mǎ] [*horse*]. It has also been translated as 皇家马厩的主人 [huángjiā mǎjiù de zhǔrén] [*Master of the Royal Stables*]. Unfortunately, a court-awarded, powerful military post has been understood as nothing more than a chief looking after horses. This

error could be due to ignorance of ancient China's history.

We find that it is fair to point out that Cao Xueqin's work exhibits a blend of fiction and reality. We see historical figures and characters invented by the author—for example, Cao's fictitious characters with pirate names. A case in point is of one character who changed his name from 真教之光 [zhēnjiào zhī guāng] [*Brightness of True Instruction*] to 教学光彩 [jiàoxué guāngcǎi] [*Luster of Instruction*] after receiving a government reward for leaving behind his criminal ways. The exact reason for this is not known but can perhaps be attributed to a common cultural or traditional (or even superstitious) practice in ancient China.

On the topic of names, we see a duality of accuracy and inaccuracy within the context of meaning conveyance. One of the female characters' names (司棋) was incorrectly translated as merely *Chess*. However, the rendition of 平儿 [píng ér] into *patience*, via some degree/form of foreignization, demonstrates an understanding of Chinese culture and the macro context of the plot. 平儿 was ill-fated, but she was able to be considerate, which can be summed up as having the virtue of patience in Chinese culture.

Within the context of complex Chinese, *A Dream of Red Mansions* has a peculiar passage worth examining. It concerns the proclamation issued by Emperor Jiaqing. It is entirely an invention by Cao Xueqin, created based on Cao's concept of the Chinese imperial style, specifically regarding prolixity and euphemistic language which the author described as 褪色的修辞花朵, 给人一种相当烦躁的威严 [tuìshǎi de xiūcí huāduǒ, jǐ rén yī zhǒng xiāngdāng fánzào de wēiyán] [loosely translated as *fading rhetorical flowers that lend a sheen of mockery to majesty*]. Linking this back to the issue of translation, one can imagine the challenge that comes with translating such "rhetorical flowers", especially with Chinese itself being such a complex language to grasp and understand fully. Today, we can fairly consider Cao's language to be both cultured and archaic. Because of this, it also presents problems for translators, which in turn results in translations that do not demonstrate fidelity to the original.

Considering the difficulty of translating an imperial edict in archaic Chinese, detecting errors or inappropriate things is natural. However, it is not always impossible to find instances of accuracy. For example, the phrase *men who tread on bread* was translated meaningfully into *men who brutally squandered the gifts of Heaven*. Another instance is the translation of 穿着内裤描绘凤凰和龙的男 [chuānzhuó nèikù miáohuì fènghuáng hé lóng de nánrén] [*men whose underwear the phoenix and dragon are depicted*]. The Qing dynasty strictly prohibited commoners from wearing any attire with

such depictions. Breaching this law was a great offense and can end very badly for the accused.

Furthermore, it is observed that translators applied the "dui'ou" structure in their renderings. That is a rhetorical figure widely used in classical Chinese prose/literature; it is a form of parallelism that comprises phrases paired with the same number of characters, the same semantic structures, and coherent meanings. We also see rhythmic expressions used. These produce a sense of rhythm in the text and can sometimes evoke emotions in the reader. In order to achieve these, the translators had to deal with constraints, specifically in terms of lexical choices, so that the symmetry of the "dui'ou" rhetoric could be brought forth. Omissions are also noted.

Translations of the last part of the edict show considerably more fidelity to the original. The correct pronouns were preserved in context, such as *Zhen*, which emperors traditionally used to refer to themselves as a symbolic reflection of their leading position. Imperative and descriptive expressions such as *cruel*, *fair*, and *victorious* have generally been rendered well, with minimal inaccuracies.

Before we end this section, it is fitting to state much poetry in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Different translators have held different opinions regarding the translation of the poems in this classic, and we present the following excerpt from Chapter 27 as an illustration:

- 花谢花飞飞满天
[huā xiè huā fēi fēi mǎn tiān]
- 红消香断有谁怜?
[hóng xiāo xiāng duàn yǒu shéi lián?]

The Eastern perspective by Yang Xianyi is as follows:

- *As blossoms fade and fly across the sky,*
- *Who pities the faded red, the scent that has been?*

The Western perspective by David Hawkes:

- *The blossoms fade and falling fill the air,*
- *Of fragrance and bright hues bereft and bare.*

Yang's translation appears to retain more of the imagery and structure of the original. For instance, the original contains 谁, which Yang maintains as *Who*, expressing the verse's sorrowful sentiment. Hawkes shifts the focus and omits the personalized imagery of 谁, opting to express the same sorrowful sentiment through the use of *bereft* and *bare*.

5. Conclusions

Two primary conclusions can be drawn from our observations. That is an effort to examine the extent to which classical Chinese literature can be successfully translated or rendered into another language. This language shares very few similarities with the source text language. What makes things more complicated is the fact that the Chinese used is largely archaic. That is

problematic for translators because the distance and disparity between the source and target languages are wider and varied.

Our conclusions are as follows: There are instances of relative equivalence, unfortunate departures from the source text, and errors resulting in some loss of meaning. To some extent, the translated texts also lack the overall aesthetic value of the original. On the whole, the preferred approach is domestication, with some translated items appearing very easy to comprehend for target language readers. Making *A Dream of Red Mansions* easy to comprehend falls in line with efforts to promote Cao Xueqin's work and, as a natural consequence, the sharing of knowledge about China's history and culture. Its English translations have caught the interest of different segments of society, including younger readers who are keenly interested in Western literature and art.

In our modest opinion, it is advisable to strike a better balance between domestication and foreignization in future translations. That will not only facilitate comprehensibility but will also allow readers the opportunity to learn something new and to widen their horizons.

Translating CRIs is complex. However, this does not imply that such items are necessarily impossible to translate. Rather, it only implies that translating every aspect of a CRI can be extremely difficult and that different strategies must be applied on a case-by-case basis.

When a translation process involves two very distinct languages and cultures, it is likely fraught with complexities. That is because translation can never be an act in isolation. A good translator must consider many variables – accuracy, possible loss of meaning, lexical richness, syntactical effect, culture, and the reader's experience of the text. In essence, an effective translator is multiskilled and able to balance between comprehensibility and authenticity.

As mentioned, there is a paucity in terms of published work similar to the present study. As such, this study's findings are of value and significance to the domain of translation studies. They add to and diversify the present knowledge base that we have (concerning the translation of CRIs within the context of two very diverse languages). This study is not without its limitations. First, its scope is only on CRIs, although other items are also worthy of scrutinization. Second, it relies on Venuti's framework alone instead of including other frameworks for augmentation. It is hoped that these can be adequately addressed in future research.

Additionally, we recommend that future studies extend the present to include other translated (non-English) works so that richer comparisons can be made and more broad conclusions can be drawn. Within the larger sphere of CRIs and translation, we recommend including various text types, apart from novels. The

acclaimed works of more contemporary Oriental writers should be considered. That will not only expand extant knowledge in the area but may also benefit other research efforts, especially those dealing with intertextuality and lexicalization. Finally, scholars may also choose to research CRIs and translation from the perspective of education and training.

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