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BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHINESE-LANGUAGE PRESS IN AMERICA

Xiao-huang Yin

The one event of the day that made him get up out of his easy chair was the [Chinese] newspaper. He looked forward to it. He opened the front door and looked for it hours before the mailman was due. *The Gold Mountain News* ... came from San Francisco in a paper sleeve on which his name and address were neatly typed. He put on his gold-rimmed glasses and readied his smoking equipment. ... He killed several hours reading the paper, scrupulously reading everything, the date on each page, the page numbers, the want ads....

—Maxine Hong Kingston,
China Men (1981)

The birth of the Chinese-language press in America can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century when Chinese immigrants first arrived in California in large numbers.¹ Catering to tastes of readers from all over the Chinese world,² Chinese periodicals have enjoyed enormous popularity among the Chinese in America. The numerous Chinese newspapers and periodicals on display in Chinatown bookstores throughout the United States are clear evidence of their powerful influence in the Chinese-American community.

What are the characteristics of the Chinese-language press in America? What role does it play in Chinese-American life? In what ways has it been affected and transformed by changes in the Chinese-American experience? And how do Chinese periodicals differ

from their counterparts in English? This essay is an attempt to find some answers to these questions. By examining the historical continuity and changes of the Chinese-language press in America, this essay explores a major source of Chinese-American transnationalism and sheds light on critical aspects of the emergence and development of the trans-Pacific Chinese-American cultural, community, and migration networks.

I

In reviewing the development of the Chinese-language press in America, we are struck by two interrelated trends that run throughout its news coverage: global events and immigrant oriented local news. The first Chinese newspaper published in America is an outstanding example of this dual interest.

On April 22, 1854, San Francisco saw the birth of *Kim Shan Jit San Luk* [金山日新錄, *The Golden Hills' News*]³—the first Chinese newspaper to appear in America.³ Handwritten in beautiful Chinese calligraphy and printed on four full-sized pages, the newspaper was published twice a week (Figures 1 & 2). At the top of the front page was a publisher's announcement, serving as an editorial. Written in classical style Chinese, it declares:

The mission of a newspaper is to help merchants and salesmen to exchange ideas and serve as a channel to connect people with the government. San Francisco now has become a metropolis and major business center with California a gathering place for people from all over the world. Men of every nationality here have their own newspapers except us Chinese. This is why, despite our large numbers, we have little control of the market. We have been ill informed and exploited by others in purchase and sales. In dealing with American government officials, we are often misled, cheated, and bullied. As we live thousands of miles away from home and make a living in a difficult environment, we feel sad and frustrated with such a situation. For this reason, we have decided to set up a newspaper, published on every Wednesday and Saturday, to record and report daily news about market information, government announcements, and local events regarding Chinese and foreigners.⁴

The founding issue of *The Golden Hills' News* contained meticulously detailed coverage of shipping information as well as records of cargo, market, and other trade activities in the San Francisco Bay area. This is not surprising. After all, the newspaper was founded under the

auspices of local Chinese merchants who came from the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong (Canton), and the daily lives of the then-30,000-strong Chinese community in Northern California must have been significantly affected by trans-Pacific trade and shipping activities.

The newspaper, however, also covered a wide range of other news, including the discovery of a large piece of 25-pound gold ore in nearby mountains, performances at various local theaters, crimes, and even a police raid on a brothel in the Bay area. Regarding the last item, the reporter claimed that “the four prostitutes were all released on the

Figure 2. Kim Shan Jit San Luk [金山日新錄, *The Golden Hills' News*] (detail), San Francisco, July 29, 1854. Courtesy of Yong Chen.

following day, but their male patrons are still in jail, waiting for trial.” Since historically, prostitution was legal in China and the Chinese communities in America were composed at that time of mostly adult men (Figure 3),⁵ the newspaper *might* have intended to use the report to warn newly-arrived immigrants to stay away from such a “sin” in the “land of freedom.”

Two other reports in the founding issue of the earliest Chinese newspaper in America deserve mentioning. One was an update on the latest developments in the Taiping Rebellion in China.⁶ Titled “News from Tang Shan [China],” it reported in a pessimistic tone the following news: “Rebel bandits commanded by the ‘Criminal’ Hong Xiuquan [洪秀全] and his followers have recently marched from Nanjing towards the North in three different routes. They have invaded the Beijing area, posing a threat to the capital. Traffic and transportation between North and South China have been cut off for several months.”⁷

One can detect in the tone of the report anxiety and concern which must have been shared by readers of the newspaper. By then, the Taiping Rebellion, which started upriver in the neighboring province of Guangxi, had swept down along the Pearl River to Guangdong, the home region of the vast majority of Chinese immigrants in America. The newspaper’s coverage of the rebellion thus provided readers with the latest information about a critical event in their homeland.

The other fascinating news was about America’s recent adventure in Japan. The newspaper reported that “the government of Japan has just agreed to open trade with all foreign countries. A steamship will leave San Francisco for Canton via Japan in a few days.”⁸ The report, albeit placed at the end of the newspaper’s last page and consisting of only two brief sentences, was extraordinary. Considering the fact that

Figure 3. "The Street of the Gamblers," Chinatown, San Francisco, ca. 1898. Photographed by Arnold Genthe. Courtesy of California Historical Society.

Commodore Matthew C. Perry had reached the trade agreement with the Tokogawa regime in Japan merely a month earlier, the newspaper's coverage of the "global" event was amazingly swift, demonstrating its role as "a channel to connect" local Chinese communities with the broader world.

Such are the characteristics of the first Chinese newspaper in the United States. The writing styles of its editorial and reports, especially the use of concise sentence structures and literary vocabulary, reveal the strong influence of traditional Chinese literature on the newspaper. This is why scholars in China tend to view the early Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals in America as an extension of Chinese publications overseas rather than as part of the authentic body of Chinese-American literature.

II

During the following decades, Chinese newspapers and periodicals sprang up in major Chinatowns throughout North America. A study shows that by the turn of the twentieth century, San Francisco alone had at least seven different Chinese newspapers and periodicals. “The land of liberty and free speech seemed to offer advantages to the Chinese who would be journalist [*sic*]....,” a mainstream American reporter claimed in 1902. “In San Francisco there are four Chinese dailies, besides several weeklies.”⁹

Although they are varied in quality and scope, most Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals contained some forms of literary works as a means of attracting readers and promoting circulation. A few of them were especially known for their dedication to literary endeavors and had significant influence on the Chinese-American community, such as *Chung Sai Yat Pao* [中西日報, *China-West Daily*, 1900–1951] (Figure 4), founded by Dr. Ng Poon Chew [伍盤照], an eminent Chinese journalist and Chinese American Christian leader, and *Mon Hing Yat Bo* [民言日報, *Chinese World*, 1891–1969], favored by Sui Sin Far [水仙花, Edith Maude Eaton], the first Chinese-American woman writer (Figure 5).

The efflorescence of the Chinese-language press in America is a combination of many factors. Throughout the history of Chinese settlement in the United States, it has provided a bridge between the Chinese community and the larger society. As evidenced in *The Golden Hills’ News*, the Chinese-language press furnishes an interpretive prism through which most immigrants receive information of their old home and share experiences about their adopted country. Ordinary Chinese immigrants must rely on it for knowledge about American society and news about their homeland because they are unable to understand English. Even those highly proficient in English find the Chinese-language press a vital and convenient vehicle to exchange impressions of American life and communicate feelings about their native land.

Another critical element leads to the prominence and popularity of the Chinese-language press in America—it provides Chinese immigrants with a sense of community and ethnic identity. The Chinese community in America is represented by a diverse population, made up of Cantonese as well as *Kejia* [客家, Hakka] and immigrants from all over China and the Chinese world. Spoken Chinese is composed of a variety of mutually incomprehensible dialects; written Chinese, however, is read across linguistic lines and recognized as a common heritage by all Chinese. Thus, Chinese-language newspapers, periodicals, and other forms of publications create a sense of community for Chinese in America, reinforce their ethnic consciousness, function as an identity tool that unites the diverse population in the new country,

Figure 5. Sui Sin Far (水仙花, Edith Maude Eaton, 1865–1914), first Chinese-American woman writer. Although a Eurasian and writing in English, she mentioned many Chinese newspapers and periodicals published in America in her works. Courtesy of L. Charles Laferriere (Sui Sin Far's great-grandnephew).

and help Chinese immigrants maintain a strong attachment to their motherland.

As shown in the case of *The Golden Hills' News*, these functions were well embedded in the Chinese press in America from its inception. Even literary works published in Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals for leisure reading reflected such tendencies.

For example, in his study of early Chinese-American literature, Hsiao-ming Han discusses in detail a fascinating story that appeared in the Chinese-language periodical the *San Francisco China News* on July 28, 1874. The story centers on a Chinese scholar's dramatic encounter in a local brothel. Having failed to score any luck in "the land of opportunity," the man goes to a Chinatown brothel to release his frustrations. Unfortunately, here he fails again—being turned away by a prostitute. She thinks scholars "earn very little" and are not valuable in the "Gold Mountain."¹⁰ Disappointed that even a "sing-song girl" would not welcome him, the man laments that America is not the right place for literary men because "the value of literature turns out to be insultingly cheap here."¹¹

The story is significant in that the author reminds readers that America is a land for toughness and muscle and practical knowledge

rather than traditional scholarship and literary delicacy.¹² Such a message appeared frequently in Chinese newspapers and periodicals in America in the nineteenth century, and it still prevails today. That the Chinese-language press in America historically served as a vehicle for immigrants to exchange their views of the new country and nostalgic sentiments for the old is not surprising. Throughout the history of the Chinese diaspora, immigrant literati assumed the responsibility of interpreting and mediating Chinese and foreign cultures for their countrymen abroad. Elaborating traditional Chinese values and comparing them with those of foreign cultures thus made up a large part of the literary production of Chinese communities abroad, especially newspapers and periodicals. This tradition and practice inevitably affected the Chinese-language press when it began its endeavors in America.¹³

Thanks to its role as an identity tool, a critical means of networking, and a vital source of information, the Chinese-language press in America has enjoyed continuous popularity among immigrants in their adopted country. Maxine Hong Kingston [汤亭亭] recounts vividly how her father, an immigrant from Taishan County of Guangdong Province, loved reading *Jinshan Shibao* [金山時報, *The Gold Mountain News*], an influential Chinese newspaper on the West Coast in the mid-twentieth century:

.... The one event of the day that made him get up out of his easy chair was the newspaper. He looked forward to it. He opened the front door and looked for it hours before the mailman was due. *The Gold Mountain News* ... came from San Francisco in a paper sleeve on which his name and address were neatly typed. He put on his gold-rimmed glasses and readied his smoking equipment. ... He killed several hours reading the paper, scrupulously reading everything, the date on each page, the page numbers, the want ads. ...¹⁴

III

The Chinese-language press has entered a distinctively new phase as an outcome of historical, social, and cultural forces that have transformed profoundly the makeup and dynamics of Chinese America since the 1960s. As Table 1 shows, the arrival of Chinese immigrants since then has led to a twentyfold growth in the Chinese-American population. In fact, more than 70 percent of all Chinese-Americans today were born overseas, with 76 percent of immigrants arriving only in the past thirty years.

Table 1: Chinese Population in the U.S., 1900–2007

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Male/Female Ratio</i>	<i>U.S.-Born (%)</i>
1900	118,746	14:1	9.3
1910	94,414	9.3:1	20.7
1920	85,202	4.7:1	30.1
1930	102,159	3.0:1	41.2
1940	106,334	2.2:1	48.1
1950	150,005	1.7:1	53.0
1960	237,292	1.3:1	53.5
1970	435,062	1.1:1	46.9
1980	812,178	1:1	36.7
1990	1,645,472	0.99:1	30.7
2000	3,003,086*	0.99:1	29.1
2007	4,065,458**	N/A	N/A

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *General Population Characteristics*; Terrance J. Reeves and Claudette E. Bennett, eds., *We the People: Asians in the U.S.: Census 2000 Special Reports* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), 1, 9–10; and “China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan,” 5% PUMS (Public Use Microdata Sample), weighted data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

* The figure includes 435,321 individuals with mixed heritage but who identify themselves as Chinese on the census questionnaire, as well as 144,795 individuals who checked the “Taiwanese” response category on the census report.

** Estimated figure, including immigrants from Taiwan; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Americans; center@cis.org.

The rapid increase in immigration has also led to a dramatic growth in the Chinese-speaking population in America. As Table 2 indicates, Chinese has become the second most widely spoken non-English language in the U.S. since 2000; and nearly 70 percent of all Chinese Americans, including the U.S.-born, speak Chinese at home.

New immigration from the Chinese world not only far outstrips the old in size but also represents a more varied group of people. For example, although there were Chinese students and scholars in the United States as early as in the mid-nineteenth century, not until after World War II did Chinese student immigration gain momentum.¹⁵ Between the 1950s and the 1980s, nearly 150,000 students from Taiwan came to America for education or advanced training, and a large majority settled in the United States after graduation. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s saw approximately 400,000 students and scholars from China study in American institutions of higher learning. More than 50 percent eventually settled in the United States.¹⁶

Table 2: Eight Non-English Languages Most Frequently Spoken at Home for Populations, Ages Five and Above, 1990 and 2000

<i>Language Spoken at Home</i>	<i>Number of Speakers, 2000</i>	<i>Number of Speakers, 1990</i>	<i>Percentage Change</i>
Spanish	28,101,052	17,339,172	+62.1
Chinese	2,022,143	1,249,213	+61.8
French	1,643,838	1,760,216	-6.6
Tagalog	1,224,241	843,251	+45.2
Vietnamese	1,009,627	507,069	+99.1
Italian	1,008,370	1,038,648	-2.9
Korean	894,063	626,478	+42.7
Arabic	614,528	355,150	+73.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Summary File 3 (SF 3), 2003.

The arrival of a large number of student immigrants has dramatically shaped the fate of the Chinese-language press and other forms of literature in America in another way. Although the majority of student immigrants are in the sciences and engineering, a significant number are literary scholars and writers. With professionalism, talent, and craft, this cohort has raised the quantity and quality of Chinese-language publications in the United States.

Since the 1950s, for instance, most Chinese newspapers and periodicals in America have added *fu kan* [副刊, literary pages] to promote creative writing in Chinese and to compete for prospective subscribers. That practice has attracted more readers and expanded circulation. For example, Hu Shi [胡适], a prominent Chinese writer and literary critic, showed great interest in poems published in various *fu kan* during his stay in New York in the 1950s.¹⁷ In Yu Lihua's award-winning novel *Youjian Zonglu* [又见棕榈, *Seeing Palm Trees Again*, 1967], a student immigrant from Taiwan recalled: "[I] used to hunt Chinese newspapers and periodicals everywhere just like a hungry wolf... Sitting in the basement studio, [I] would read every character in *fu kan* carefully."¹⁸

It is noteworthy that the thirst of Chinese in America for newspapers and periodicals (in their mother tongue) is a uniquely "immigrant phenomenon." According to a Gallup study of urban life in contemporary China, even in cities that have the nation's highest economic development, only about 42 percent of adults regularly read newspapers or magazines. By contrast, nearly 90 percent of Philadelphia's Chinatown residents read Chinese newspapers and periodicals regularly. In Los Angeles County, there are now twice as many Chinese newspapers

and periodicals printed daily as there are Chinese households in the area.¹⁹

Of course, the keen interest shown by Chinese in newspapers and periodicals in their native language is not exceptional, but a familiar phenomenon among immigrant groups across America throughout history. "Out of 312 Russian immigrants," a survey finds, "only 16 regularly read newspapers in Russia ... [But] in America all of them are subscribers or readers of Russian newspapers."²⁰

IV

Globalization over the past four decades has further contributed to the prosperity of the Chinese-language press in the United States. It has transformed most Chinese newspapers and periodicals in America into partners of transnational Chinese publication networks in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, which in turn has helped them gain broad access to markets in Asia. The rapid expansion of the trans-Pacific cultural, community, and migration network has also made writing by Chinese immigrants who describe their American experience highly attractive and relevant to readers in the Chinese world. As a result, works by Chinese authors in America frequently appear in *fu kan* of Chinese newspapers and periodicals before being published in book form in Asia (Figure 6). In addition, the availability of advanced Chinese typesetting techniques has reduced production costs and made Chinese publishing businesses in America more accessible and profitable. Consequently, Chinese America has become the largest center for Chinese-language publications outside Asia.

The changes have resulted in the flourishing of the Chinese-language press in America and fostered its development at an unprecedented rate. At present, the numbers of Chinese newspapers and periodicals in the United States are exceeded only by those in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.²¹ There are at least four major transnational Chinese-language dailies circulating throughout North America with regional editions published in the Northeast, Middle West, South, Pacific Coast, and Canada (Figure 7). All of them are subsidiaries of publication networks in Asia with international circulation. With a daily circulation of more than 250,000 copies, *Shijie Ribao* [世界日報, *Chinese Daily News*] stands out as the largest newspaper in the Chinese-American community, followed by *Qiao Bao* [僑報, *The China Press*], *Xingdao Ribao* [星島日報, *Sing Tao Daily*], and *Guoji Ribao* [國際日報, *International Daily News*].²² Although each of the newspapers has its own particular subscriber group among immigrants from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia, they tend to cater to tastes of readers across group lines to seek a larger share in the highly competitive Chinese publishing market in America. There

Figure 6. Books by Chinese writers in the United States. Chinese immigrant authors tend to first publish their works in Chinese newspapers and periodicals in America and then reprint them in book form in Asia. Courtesy of Xiao-huang Yin.

Figure 7. Four major contemporary Chinese dailies published in the United States. From Top: *Sing Tao Daily*, *International Daily*, *Chinese Daily News*, and *The China Press*. Courtesy of Xiao-huang Yin.

are also numerous smaller regional and local Chinese newspapers and periodicals in virtually every American town with a substantial Chinese population. The Southern California Chinese community alone supports more than twenty different Chinese newspapers and periodicals in addition to a dozen television programs and radio stations.²³

Thanks to the influence of the Chinese-language press as well as media networks, Chinese in America today are well informed about developments across the Pacific. The activities of Beijing's leaders, life stories of returned migrants in Hong Kong, and the gyrations of the Taiwan stock market are read and discussed daily throughout Chinese communities in America. In this sense, Chinese-language newspapers and periodicals in America have brought immigrants' former hometowns into their living rooms in the new country. As a result, their lives are shaped not only by their adaptation to American situations, but also by their transnational links. A recent survey reflects, for example, nearly 70 percent of Chinese immigrants in America have paid very close or fairly close attention to events happening in their old home.²⁴ This is an impressively high rate measured by any standard.

Conclusion

The impact of the extensive and prompt coverage about the Chinese world by Chinese newspapers and periodicals in America is enormous. It has raised awareness among Chinese immigrants of what occurs in their native lands. As Chinese newspapers, periodicals and other media outlets keep immigrants attuned to developments in their old countries and reduce the sense of distance across the Pacific, they have stimulated and sustained tremendous interest among Chinese Americans in transnational activities. As ethnic-studies scholars generally agree, it makes immigrants feel much more involved if their former homeland is just on the other side of the border.

NOTES

¹ I use the term "the Chinese-language press" in this essay to refer to newspapers and periodicals published in Chinese in the United States and to differentiate them from their counterparts in English by Chinese Americans.

² "Chinese world" in this essay refers to places which are populated by the Chinese in Asia. It includes China mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and various regions in Southeast Asia.

³ Pronounced "*Jinshan Rixinlu*" in *pinyin* (Mandarin), the newspaper's title was translated into English as "The Golden Hills' News" rather than "The Gold Mountain News." The Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston has a copy of the newspaper's founding issue in its collection.

⁴ *The Golden Hills' News*, San Francisco, April 22, 1854, 1. #E187-L, Special Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. (My translation. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are mine.)

⁵ Chinese Americans remained a predominantly adult male community until the post-World War II era. See figures in Table 1 for more information on this issue.

⁶ "Taiping Rebellion" [太平天国, Heavenly Peace Kingdom, 1851–1864] is the largest peasant uprising in modern Chinese history and was considered a major "push" factor that forced the Chinese in South China to emigrate abroad in large numbers in the 1850s. For more discussions on the Taiping Rebellion, see Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

⁷ *The Golden Hills' News*, April 22, 1854, 4. Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

⁸ *The Golden Hills' News*, April 22, 1854, 4.

⁹ Ednah Robinson, "Chinese Journalism in America," *Current Literature* 32:3 (February 1902), 325–6.

¹⁰ Throughout history, America has been known to the Chinese as the "Gold Mountain" [金山, Jinshan] both because of the nineteenth-century Gold Rush in California and the country's image as "a land of opportunity."

¹¹ *San Francisco China News*, San Francisco, July 28, 1874. Cited in Hsiao-min Han, "Roots and Buds: The Literature of Chinese Americans" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1980), 81–82. Despite my many efforts, I have so far failed to locate this periodical.

¹² Noticeably, Sui Sin Far [水仙花, Edith Maude Eaton, 1865–1914], a Eurasian who wrote mainly in English, also shared such a belief. In her story "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," the husband, a Chinese merchant in Seattle, claims that "a keen eye for business ... in America is certainly more desirable than scholarship." Sui Sin Far, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1912), 17.

¹³ For more discussion on early Chinese-language literature in America, see Xiaohuang Yin, *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 157–161.

¹⁴ Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 250. Although she was born and grew up in America, Kingston speaks and reads Chinese well.

¹⁵ I use the term "student immigrant" to refer to a person who enters the United States on student/scholar visa but later adjusts to immigrant status.

¹⁶ Xiaohuang Yin, "Immigrants from China," in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 340–355.

¹⁷ Tang Degang [唐德刚], "Xinshi laozuzong yu disan wenyizhongxin" [新诗老祖宗与第三文艺中心, "Founding Father of New Poetry and the Third Center of Chinese Literature"] in *Haiwai huaren zuojia sanwenxuan* [海外华人作家散文选, *A Selection of Essays by Chinese Immigrant Writers*], ed. Mo Linshe (Hong Kong: Joint Press, 1983), 139–161.

¹⁸ Yu Lihua [於梨华], *Youjian Zonlu, Youjian Zonlu* [又见棕榈, *Seeing the Palm Trees Again*] (reprint; Beijing: Youyi, 1984), 270.

¹⁹ Yin, "Immigrants from China," in *The New Americans*, ed. Waters and Ueda, 340–355.

²⁰ Quoted in Werner Sollors, "Immigrants and Other Americans," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 579.

²¹ Yin, "Immigrants from China," in *The New Americans*, ed. Waters and Ueda, 340–355.

²² For more information about the four major Chinese dailies in America, visit www.worldjournal.com/; www.chinapressusa.com; www.stnn.cc/; and www.chinese today.com.

²³ Haiming Liu, "Historical Connections between the Chinese Trans-Pacific Family and U.S.-China Relations," in *The Expanding Roles of Chinese Americans in U.S.-China Relations: Transnational Networks and Trans-Pacific Interactions*, ed. Peter H. Koehn and Xiao-huang Yin (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 3–19.

²⁴ Pei-te Lien, "Taking a Pulse of Chinese Americans at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Results from the Multi-Site Asian American Political Survey," 2002, 8–9 (unpublished manuscript).

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