

From a Slip in the Rain to a Fissure in Time: Interpreting Childhood, Discipline, and Social History in “Yingzi's Late Journey”

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Abstract

This paper presents an interdisciplinary analysis of the four-panel comic strip “Yingzi’s Late Journey,” treating it as a culturally rich text. By situating the comic within its literary source, Lin Hai-yin’s “My Memories of Old Beijing,” the socio-historical context of Republican-era Beijing, and the artistic tradition of modern Chinese comics, this study argues that the comic is not a simple illustration of its source text but a critical visual re-reading. Through the methodologies of visual narratology and social history, this paper deconstructs themes of patriarchal discipline, class stratification, and the complexities of childhood memory. It contends that the comic, through its medium-specific “panels” and “gutters,” transforms the nostalgic and melancholic emotional rhythm of Lin Hai-yin’s prose into a micro-political theater of discipline and repair. It not only amplifies the inherent tensions between nostalgia and trauma, innocence and social cognition, but also, by juxtaposing domestic violence with the structural violence of the urban underclass, reveals the hidden resonance between personal memory and macro-history.

Keywords Lin Hai-yin; “My Memories of Old Beijing”; Comic Studies; Visual Narratology; Republican Beijing

1 Introduction: A World in an Episode

The comic strip “Yingzi’s Late Journey” depicts a chaotic morning for a little girl in a seemingly simple four-panel narrative: she is disciplined by her father for sleeping in, rushes to school in the rain, encounters an accident where her rickshaw puller slips and falls, and ultimately arrives late. This small episode, though trivial on the surface, can be seen as a “compact object” laden with dense cultural meaning. It is not merely a visual representation of a fragment from Lin Hai-yin’s classic novel “My Memories of Old Beijing,” but a profound act of cultural interpretation.

This paper argues that the value of this comic lies precisely in its “betrayal” and reshaping of the source text. Lin Hai-yin’s original work and its classic film adaptation are both characterized by a tone of “faint sorrow” and “deep longing,” enveloping childhood memories in a soft, nostalgic light. This comic, however, chooses a highly confrontational opening: the scene of the father’s discipline with a feather duster in hand. Through the static panels unique to the comic medium, the reader is forced to gaze upon this

moment of patriarchal violence, unable to let it “slide by” in a continuous narrative flow as one might when reading prose or watching a film. This medial translation is itself a critique; it places an element that was downplayed or absorbed into a grander, tragic narrative in other media at the center of the analysis.

Accordingly, this paper aims to answer three core questions. Firstly, how do the comic’s panels and gutters rewrite the emotional rhythm of “My Memories of Old Beijing,” transforming a nostalgic memory into an examination of the mechanisms of discipline and repair? Secondly, how does the rickshaw puller manifest as a “social gutter” in the narrative, allowing the structural existence of the Republican-era urban underclass to briefly intrude upon the daily life of a middle-class family? Thirdly, how does a comparison with Feng Zikai’s children’s comics help us define the essential difference between the realist view of childhood in the Lin Hai-yin tradition and the poetics of Feng Zikai’s child-centric philosophy?

By integrating the methods of visual narratology, literary adaptation studies, and social history, this study seeks to demonstrate how these four short panels, like a fissure in time, allow us to glimpse the complex entanglement of family power, social structure, and individual memory in a bygone era.

2 The Grammar of Gutters and Panels: A Visual Narrative Analysis of “Yingzi’s Late Journey”

Before placing the comic in its broader literary and historical context, it is necessary to first conduct a rigorous formal analysis of its own visual language and narrative structure. This chapter will apply comics theory to dissect how it constructs meaning through images, text, and the “grammar” between its panels.

2.1 Theoretical Toolkit: McCloud’s Core Concepts

This analysis is framed by the vocabulary of comics as defined by Scott McCloud. Key terms include the “gutter,” the space between panels where readers imaginatively fill in omitted actions and time to connect the story. Another is “closure,” the psychological process where readers perceive a whole narrative from its observed parts, becoming active co-creators of meaning in the gutter. Finally, “panel transitions” describe how scenes change, with “action-to-action” transitions showing consecutive stages of a single subject’s action, and “scene-to-scene” transitions jumping across different times and spaces, requiring significant reader inference.

2.2 A Frame-by-Frame Close Reading: From Domestic Discipline to Public Accident

To achieve a panel-specific analysis, we will examine the four panels sequentially. Fig. 1a (Confrontation) opens with conflict. The father, on the left, leans forward with an authoritative and angry posture, his feather duster symbolizing domestic order. Yingzi, on the right, shows a mix of defiance and fear, her gaze averted in passive resistance, visually representing the power dynamics of a patriarchal household. Fig. 1b (Transition) shifts the scene from the oppressive indoors to the open street, a classic “scene-to-scene” transition. Yingzi’s lonely back as she sits in the rickshaw, combined with the rain, creates a sense of desolation. The rickshaw puller is a functional character here, a tool to move the narrative forward.

Fig. 1c (Accident) marks the narrative turning point. The image captures the moment the rickshaw puller slips, with motion lines and splashing water heightening the impact. This is an “action-to-action” close-up that materializes the uncontrollable risks of the outside world. Notably, the focus remains on Yingzi’s startled expression, framing the puller’s suffering as another obstacle to her punctuality, thus suspending his own subjectivity. Fig. 1d (Repair) brings the story to a resolution in the semi-public, semi-institutional space of the school. The father’s posture has shifted from an angry disciplinarian to a concerned protector. He now holds a “padded floral jacket,” symbolizing warmth and care, and “five cop-

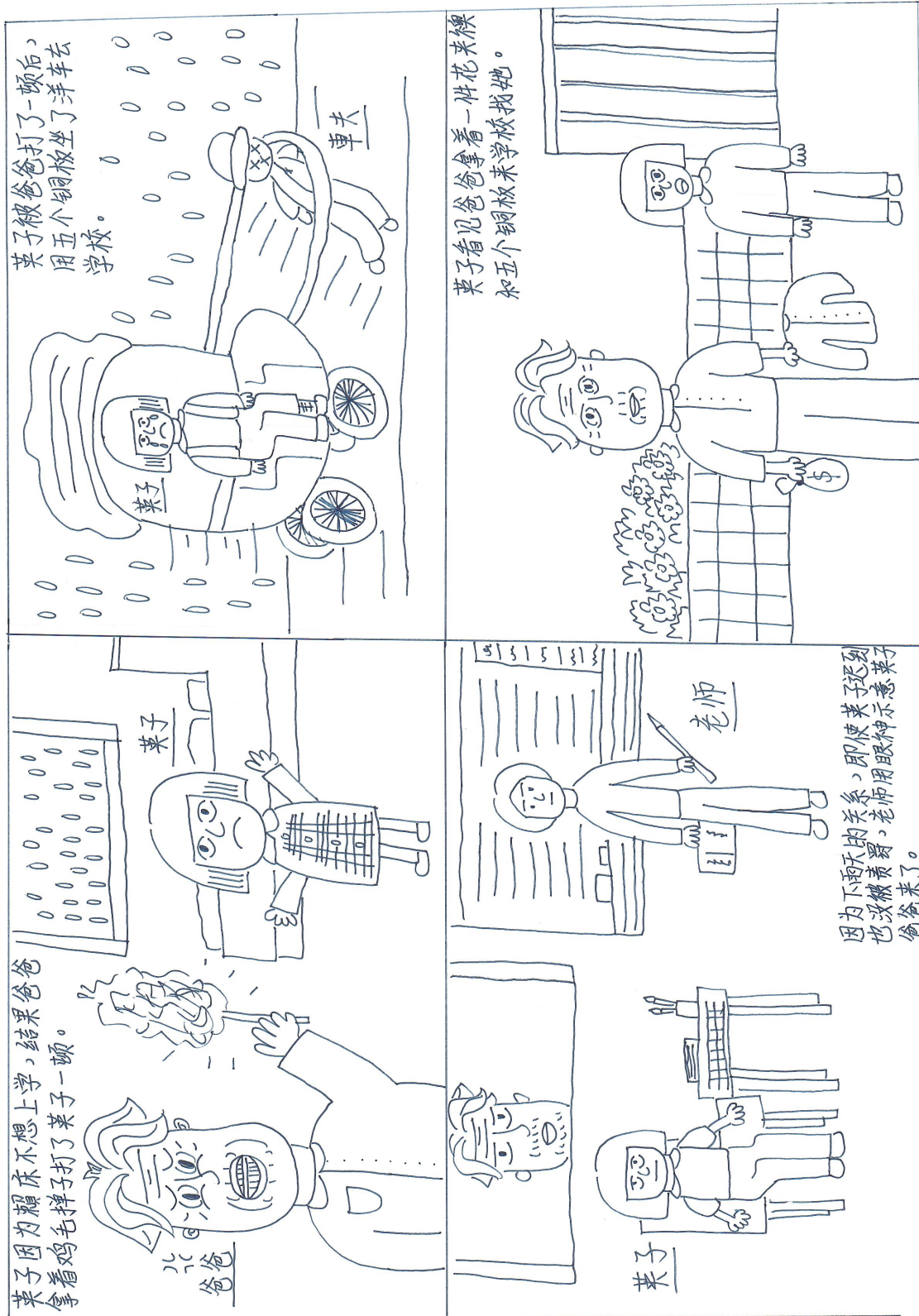


Figure 1: The Journey of Yingzi's Tardiness, by Sophia LI

per coins” for financial compensation. The teacher’s presence serves to mediate and witness, signifying that the internal family conflict is ultimately resolved in a socialized manner.

2.3 Operationalizing the Gutter: How the Reader Infers Violence

The most profound narrative operation of the comic occurs between the panels, particularly in the “gutter” between Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b. Fig. 1a presents the threat (the father with the feather duster), while Fig. 1b shows the consequence (Yingzi on her way in the rain). The comic does not directly depict the corporal punishment, but the caption explicitly states: “Father took the feather duster and gave Yingzi a spanking.”

The process of “closure” here is unique. The reader does not infer in a vacuum but is anchored by the text. The text instructs the reader to imagine a scene of violence, and the gutter provides the “stage” for this imagination to occur. Through this symbiotic strategy of text and image, the comic compels the reader to become an accomplice in the disciplinary act. We not only deduce that the violence has occurred but actively construct the un-drawn scene in our minds. This narrative strategy of making the reader an active participant in constructing the violence is more impactful than direct depiction because it internalizes the external act of viewing into a psychological participation.

This structure also reveals the potential of the “gutter” as a multi-layered metaphor. The formal gutter between Fig. 1a and 1b conceals domestic violence, while the character of the rickshaw puller himself—his entire life story of hardship—exists in the social gutter outside the panels. The comic’s structure thus cleverly mirrors its social observation: the most fundamental forms of violence, whether domestic or structural, are often invisible, omitted from mainstream narratives, and require a critical “closure” to be perceived.

3 From Nostalgic Prose to Graphic Trauma: Adaptation as Critique

To consider the “Yingzi’s Late Journey” comic as an act of adaptation is to place it in dialogue with its literary source and its significant cinematic predecessor. It is in this comparison that the critical potential of the comic medium is revealed.

4 From Nostalgic Prose to Graphic Trauma: Adaptation as Critique

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4.1 The Cinematic Precedent: Wu Yigong’s Poetic Nostalgia

Before the comic, the most important adaptation of Lin Hai-yin’s **My Memories of Old Beijing** was the 1983 film of the same name directed by Wu Yigong^[3]. Hailed as a classic of China’s Fourth Generation directors, the film’s style is widely defined as “prose-poem” cinema^[2]. Through extensive use of long takes, empty shots, and a subtle narrative pace, Wu successfully visualized the “faint sorrow” of the original text, creating a deep sense of nostalgia and melancholy for a lost childhood^[2]. The film’s tone is gentle and poetic, capturing the novel’s theme of “parting” and elevating it to a universal homesickness^[2]. In this version, the father’s image is also softened, his strictness interpreted more as a form of profound paternal love that serves the overall nostalgic atmosphere.

4.2 The Politics of Scale: Grand Tragedy versus Micro-Reconciliation

The comic’s adaptive strategy is fundamentally different from the film’s, with its core lying in a shift of narrative scale. The novel’s grand arc, in the chapter *Dad’s Flowers Have Fallen*, embeds the “lateness” incident within a grand narrative of growth and death. The father’s disciplinary actions are ultimately retrospectively justified and explained by his death from illness, the ultimate “parting.” His strictness is

framed as a loving form of training, meant to prepare Yingzi for a life without him. Thus, the corporal punishment in the novel is placed within a tragic, existential framework, ultimately leading to a profound realization of life's impermanence and the end of childhood.

The comic, however, completely severs this grand arc. It compresses the story into an independent, self-contained narrative loop: Discipline → Consequence → Repair. The story begins with a specific conflict and ends with a specific reconciliation (the father bringing the jacket and coins). The shadow of death is entirely removed, replaced by a domestic dispute that can be resolved and mended in daily life.

This compression of scale raises a key question: is this a “de-politicization” or a “re-politicization”? On one hand, reducing a grand tragedy concerning life and death and marking an era's transition into a reparable family incident seems to weaken the historical weight of the original work. On the other hand, this focus is precisely a process of “re-politicization.” It strips away the sugar-coating of nostalgia and melancholy, forcing us to confront the micro-mechanisms of power operating within the family. The comic no longer discusses “why childhood ends” but instead starkly displays “how patriarchy operates.”

4.3 A Reverse Reading: Repair as the Reproduction of Power

A close reading of the comic's ending reveals its complexity. The father's arrival at the school with a “padded floral jacket” and “five copper coins” is not a simple apology but a carefully calibrated performance of power. The repair of the emotional economy is achieved through the “padded floral jacket,” a tool to counteract the physical cold of the rain and the emotional chill of the morning's conflict. It is a non-quantifiable, symbolic gesture of care that reasserts the father's role as a benevolent protector. The repair of the material economy is addressed by the “five copper coins,” a precise reimbursement for the fare Yingzi was forced to spend. This is a quantifiable, transactional act that both acknowledges his responsibility for the consequence and restores the balance of the family's economic ledger.

This dual gesture appears to achieve reconciliation, but the logic operating behind it is telling. Through this act, the father demonstrates his absolute control over the two core forms of “capital” within the family: emotional and economic. He is both the disruptor of order (through discipline) and the restorer of it (through repair). This process, far from diminishing his authority, reaffirms it in a more comprehensive way: a competent patriarch must know not only how to punish but also how to compensate. Therefore, the reconciliation at the comic's end is not a subversion of patriarchy but a perfect demonstration of its resilience and complexity. It simultaneously repairs the parent-child relationship and reproduces the power structure itself.

5 The Social Fabric of a Bygone Era: Historical Contextualization

Details in the comic, such as the feather duster and the rickshaw puller, are not isolated narrative elements but gateways to the socio-historical reality of 1920s and 1930s Beijing. This chapter will use these details as entry points to reconstruct the social fabric behind the story.

5.1 The Feather Duster and Domestic Order

The father's use of a feather duster as a disciplinary tool was a widely accepted practice within the socio-cultural context of the time. This acceptance was rooted in the traditional educational belief that “sparing the rod spoils the child” and the Confucian archetype of the “strict father” in the family structure^[7]. However, historicizing this act reveals an interesting tension. At the level of concept and practice, corporal punishment was seen as a necessary means to maintain hierarchical order and shape a child's character, possessing deep cultural legitimacy^[9]. Memoirs from authors like Shen Congwen and Li Zongren men-

tion the widespread existence of corporal punishment in private schools and homes during the Republican era^[8].

At the level of institutions and regulations, as part of modern nation-state building, the Republican government had begun to attempt to ban corporal punishment at an institutional level. For example, the “Regulations for National Schools and Central National Schools” as early as 1945 explicitly stipulated that “corporal punishment shall not be implemented”^[10]. Although these bans were often difficult to enforce in practice, their very existence indicates that the issue of corporal punishment had become a site of conflict between traditional family ethics and modern state educational ideals. Therefore, this scene in the comic captures not just the daily life of a family, but a microcosm of the clash between old and new ideas. The father’s action can be seen as the stubborn persistence of traditional patriarchy within the “fortress” of the family, even as modern state regulations attempted to penetrate the private sphere.

5.2 The Man Between the Shafts: The Rickshaw Puller as a Social Symptom

The rickshaw puller in the comic is a functional character who drives the plot; his misfortune is significant only because it delays the protagonist. This narrative marginalization accurately reflects his real-life social status. Quantitative evidence from sociological studies by Li Jinghan and historical research by David Strand shows that rickshaw pullers and their families in 1920s Beijing may have constituted as much as 20% or even one-third of the city’s total population^[11]. The vast majority were landless peasants who had migrated from bankrupt rural areas, forming the core of the urban proletariat^[13].

Regarding economic exploitation, most pullers did not own their rickshaws and had to rent them from fleet owners, paying a high daily “share fee” that kept them in a perpetual state of poverty with almost no chance of improving their lot^[11]. While Lao She’s literary classic “Rickshaw Boy” is a work of fiction, it profoundly depicts the dehumanizing process this group endured under the dual pressures of economic exploitation and the caprice of fate.

5.3 The Rickshaw Puller as a “Social Gutter”

If the “gutter” between comic panels is the space where readers use their imagination to connect the narrative, then the rickshaw puller’s existence in the story can be seen as a metaphor for a “social gutter.” He is functional and invisible in the narrative, just as he is essential yet ignored in the social structure. His fall is a moment when the “social gutter” briefly seeps into the panels—the harsh reality of the urban underclass intrudes, by way of an accident, into the personal troubles of a middle-class girl. However, the narrative focus quickly returns to Yingzi’s problem of being late, which precisely illustrates how easily this structural suffering is overlooked and forgotten by the mainstream gaze. The rickshaw puller’s entire world—his poverty, struggles, and hopes—exists in the vast silence outside these four panels.

6 The Poetics of Innocence: Two Gazes on Childhood in Modern Chinese Arts and Letters

“Yingzi’s Late Journey” unfolds from a child’s perspective, placing it within an important tradition of modern Chinese arts and letters. However, by comparing it with the work of Feng Zikai, the most renowned artist of children’s subjects of the period, we can more clearly discern two distinctly different “views of childhood.”

6.1 Feng Zikai’s Poetics as Child Supremacism

Feng Zikai is a foundational figure in modern Chinese comics, known for his simple lines and profound meaning^[17]. Children are the central theme of his artistic world. Feng’s view of childhood can be sum-

marized as a form of “child supremacism.” His philosophical ideal, repeated in his essays, is that “the most wholesome eyes and hearts in the universe belong only to children,” while adults are “pitiful, disabled beings”^[19]. He believed children were “true people” because of their innocence and directness, which allowed them to see the world’s truth, a world full of hypocrisy and pretense for adults^[20].

As for his graphic evidence, numerous paintings by Feng aim to celebrate the poetic inner logic of the child’s world. For instance, in his famous work **A’bao Has Two Feet, the Stool Has Four Feet**, his daughter A’bao’s act of putting shoes on a stool, which an adult would see as nonsense, is depicted by Feng as a poetic expression full of imagination and animistic belief^[19]. In **Zhanzhan’s Cart**, his son tying two chairs together to serve as his “vehicle” is similarly a celebration of childish creativity^[23]. Feng’s art consistently finds philosophy in children’s play, using it to offer a gentle critique of the rigid rules of the adult world.

6.2 A Contrast of Two Childhood Views: Idealism versus Realism

When “Yingzi’s Late Journey” is juxtaposed with Feng Zikai’s works, the thematic difference is stark. If Feng’s childhood is an independent, self-sufficient, and superior poetic world, then Lin Hai-yin’s childhood is a gateway to the complex and often painful adult world.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Two Poetics of Childhood

Feature	Feng Zikai’s “Poetics of Innocence”	Lin Hai-yin / “Yingzi’s Late Journey” and the Realist Childhood
Narrative Trigger	A child’s imagination or play (e.g., putting shoes on a stool in <i>*A’bao Has Two Feet*</i>) ^[22] .	A collision with adult rules or social reality (e.g., lateness, corporal punishment, witnessing poverty and death).
Emotional Tone	Celebratory, whimsical, gentle, and philosophical.	Melancholy, observational, filled with a “faint sorrow.”
Role of the Child	The “true person” or “wholesome being,” whose superior perspective critiques the adult world ^[19] .	The “child’s eyes,” a sensitive medium for observing and learning the joys and sorrows of the adult world.
Resolution	An affirmation of the intrinsic value and purity of the child’s world.	The end of childhood, marking the child’s forced entry into the complexity and sorrow of the adult world.

In “Yingzi’s Late Journey,” Yingzi finds no poetry in being late or in her conflict with her father. She experiences irritation, anxiety, and frustration. Her world is disciplined by adult rules (punctuality), adult authority (her father’s punishment), and the failures of the adult world (the rickshaw puller’s fall). Therefore, this comic is not a pastoral ode to innocence transcending reality, but a documentary report on how an individual gets caught up in social friction. It faithfully inherits Lin Hai-yin’s realist tradition, depicting childhood as an “initiation ceremony” comprising a series of farewells to innocence and lessons in harsh truths.

7 Conclusion: The Enduring Resonance of a Childhood Memory

Through a multi-layered analysis, this paper argues that “Yingzi’s Late Journey” is far from a simple cartoon. It is a complex work of visual narrative that, through the formal properties of the comic medium, transforms a nostalgic literary memory into a profound examination of discipline, power, and social class.

It is a critical adaptation that rejects the sentimental tone of its source text and film adaptation, choosing instead to amplify moments of conflict and discipline. It is a miniature historical document that, through symbols like the feather duster and the rickshaw puller, allows us a glimpse into the social dynamics of Republican Beijing, from family structures to class stratification. It is also an artistic statement that clearly positions itself within the realist tradition of depicting childhood in modern Chinese culture, standing in sharp contrast to Feng Zikai's idealist poetics.

The enduring power of this comic lies in its ability to condense and present multiple tensions within just four panels. The father's final gesture—as both disciplinarian and restorer, whose very act of repair is a reproduction of power—perfectly embodies this complexity. It captures the bittersweet nature of growing up, where the harsh lessons of discipline are intertwined with the deep, complex love of a parent. All of this, in turn, is set against a shifting social backdrop where the suffering of the underclass is ever-present yet fleetingly visible. It ultimately proves how a single “slip in the rain” from memory can pry open a fissure in time, allowing us to see the creases between the individual, the family, and history in a bygone world that cannot be easily smoothed over.

7.1 Methodological Limitations

Finally, it must be noted that as a case study based on a single text, the generalizability of this study's conclusions has its limits. Although this paper has attempted to broaden its significance through historical contextualization, the socio-cultural insights drawn from a four-panel comic still require cross-validation with a wider range of visual materials and historical documents. Furthermore, the mutual corroboration of literary/visual texts and historical sources is an enlightening but cautiously applied method. This paper has striven to distinguish the nature of different types of evidence, but the boundaries of interpretation always require vigilance and reflection.

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