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On the End and Core of Chinese Traditional Calligraphy Art

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Abstract

The Chinese calligraphy art, which still adheres to tradition, has fallen into the formalism deeper and deeper. The majority of studies on calligraphy still focus on the formal beauty and neglect the core spirit hidden behind the calligraphy art. The calligraphy art is an art defined by words. This definition is not only reflected in the form of the characters but also, and more importantly, in the meaning of the characters. It is not a form of writing, but a writing of lives, wills and feelings, a writing of the experience of daily life, and an improvised poetic writing. With the advent of the age of artificial intelligence, the Chinese traditional calligraphy art, which still adheres to the "supremacy of the brush and ink", has shown a sense of dystopia, and its end is inevitable. Only by truly understanding the core of the calligraphy art, by integrating it with contemporary daily life, and by focusing on the communication of ideas in calligraphy, will it be possible to obtain a new life.

Keywords: Calligraphy art, Improvised poetry, Era, End, Daily life.

1. INTRODUCTION

On September 13, 2022, calligraphy was officially upgraded to a first-level discipline under the Chinese art discipline. Before that, Ministry of Education of PRC officially included calligraphy in the Senior High School Entrance Examination, which had been implemented across the country in 2022. With the governments' promotion, Calligraphy, which once was neglected, has become one of the most popular art disciplines in China and a weapon for "a country with a strong socialist culture". China has become the most artistically significant country in Asia since the beginning of the 21st century, and the introduction of "cultural self-confidence" signifies that presenting traditional national culture in the world, breaking with Western centrism, and attempting to establish a "Chinese modernization" system have become the most important goals in the field of Chinese culture and art today. The most important goals in the field of culture and art are nowadays. But in the midst of such a boom lies a great crisis, as the American scholar Tyler Smith, who proposed the "planetary narrative," has expressed pessimism about Chinese contemporary art: "In China, influenced by artists, curators, critics, and collectors around the world, art creation has become increasingly open, but increasingly internalized and isolated in spirit." [1] This isolation and internalization became increasingly evident as the post-epidemic era saw a counter-tidal development of globalization. The pioneering calligraphy art, which emerged in China in the 1980s, did not show a trend of being more and more popular, but began to

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disappear in the 21st century under the banner of promoting excellent traditional culture and national rejuvenation. And the calligraphy art was completely overwhelmed by the wave of returning to tradition. Although the calligraphy art is distinguished by its various calligraphic forms, it has fallen into a cage of forms and neglected the most hidden core of traditional calligraphy since the Song Dynasty, thus leading to no innovation in traditional calligraphy for centuries. It has constantly provokes contemporary people's thinking: Is the tradition that is being inherited and carried forward today really the core of Chinese traditional calligraphy? Can the traditional calligraphy art, seemingly out of step with the times, still continue to be inherited? In this study, the traditional calligraphy art was analyzed from a contemporary perspective. The deeper inner core hidden beneath the form was explored through the investigation of the form and content of Chinese characters, the influence of the combination meaning of Chinese characters on the writing form, and the relationship between calligraphy and literature.

2. The End of the Traditional Calligraphy Art

2.1 A Departure from the Times

When visitors walk into a Chinese calligraphy exhibition hall and admire the works framed in beautiful frames or on scrolls, they feel as if they are in a temple or a Taoist temple and have a sense of transcendence. Immersed in the enjoyment of beauty, they were as if revisiting history and experiencing the profound literati atmosphere in the midst of a long river of culture. However, when the thoughts return to the reality, there is a sense of disorientation after crossing "the paradise of the world" and returning to the present world and an inexplicable feeling of being out of place. After stepping out of the exhibition hall, they will be instantly overwhelmed by the noisy sound, bright light and towering buildings. The huge contrast leads to a dizzying trance that fills the whole body and makes you shake. Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "this dissociation of man from his life or of the actor from his background is a sense of absurdity".[2] What exactly is it that gives us such a strong sense of absurdity in the face of the vast majority of calligraphy works created today? The answer is simply a departure from the times. The Chinese calligraphy art has a long history, with the momentum of the Qin and Han dynasties, the charm of the Wei and Jin dynasties, the laws of the Sui and Tang dynasties, the will of the Song and Yuan dynasties, and the simplicity of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The extension of momentum, law, will, charm, and simplicity indicates the historical extension of the spirit of Chinese calligraphy and the transformation of different eras.[3] Professor Wang Yuechuan's summary of traditional calligraphy demonstrates that the calligraphy art should follow closely the changing times, and this holds true for any art. But the change of dynasties and the change of eras are two entirely different concepts. Era is a period in history divided according to economic, political, cultural and other conditions. The Qin and Han dynasties, the Wei and Jin dynasties, the Sui and Tang dynasties, and the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, although they spanned more than two thousand years, were all of the same type of system, both economically and politically, and their world was built on the same system. The world was built on the same system - the feudal system of "one family dominating the whole nation". People's world view, life view and values have not changed significantly. There is still no universally accepted standard for the division of the era, but the Enlightenment Movement and the Industrial Revolution that resulted from it are usually considered to be the dividing point between modern and ancient societies. Robert Hughes argued in *The Shock of the New* that the most important landmark of modern civilization is the Eiffel Tower, erected in 1889, which is not only a great metaphor for the sense of change of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, but also a great commemoration of the victory of the Industrial Revolution. The French writer Charles Peguy said, "The world has not changed as much since the time of Jesus Christ as it has in the last thirty years." What he referred to is all that is going on in Western capitalist society: its ideas about itself, its sense of history, its various beliefs, pious acts of worship and various modes of production, and its art. In just half a century, the social model gradually shifted from pre-modern to modern. Western modern art was also born at this time, and Impressionism became the most pioneering representative in the field of art. Since then, it has been unstoppable, with Cubism, Fauvism, and Dadaism as the representatives of the pioneer art becoming the most important and unique category in Western art. Professor Sun Zhouxing from Tongji University mentioned the concept

of "Anthropocene" in his lecture *Some Basic Concepts of Future Art*, showing another way of thinking about the division of the era. The emergence of the "Anthropocene" marks the transformation of human society from the world of natural life to the world of technological life, and also marks the beginning of the shift to the "axial age" of the linear view of time. In any case, when we look back today, all the circumstances of ancient Chinese society were so similar in the 2,000 years from the Yin and Shang dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties that it seems impossible not to classify them as the same era by any standard today. Therefore, no matter how many dynasties or how much time has passed, the so-called transformation of the spirit of calligraphy from one era to another can only be called a different way of expression, a different writing preference, or a different trend or fad by the same aesthetic standard in the same era. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chinese traditional calligraphy, which still maintains the aesthetic values of pre-modern society, appears "absurd" today.

2.2 The End of Traditional Calligraphy

From the Wei and Jin dynasties to the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Chinese traditional calligraphy was at its peak, with countless calligraphers emerging from each dynasty and generation. However, the feudal system of centralization has been gradually abandoned by the times and lost its advanced nature since the Qing dynasty, and a modern society based on subjects with "I think" has arrived. The long-sleeping traditional calligraphers who ignored the times sank deeper and deeper into the mire. From the Qing dynasty to today, there is hardly a single calligrapher with great influence. Could it be that the present generation is far inferior to the ancients? "But alas! Qin Huang and Han Wu, / In culture not well bred. / And Tang Zong and Song Zu, / In letters not wide read. / And Genghis Khan, proud son of Heaven for a day, / Knew only shooting eagles by bending his bows. / They have all passed away; / Brilliant heroes are those / Whom we will see today!" Mao Zedong's poem is not only a personal emotional expression, but also the best declaration. Today we stand on the shoulders of countless "giants", and even the most ordinary people are not too far behind the ancients in terms of knowledge. But why can't we create masterpieces of calligraphy? Why do most of today's calligraphy works give the audience a strong sense of "absurdity"? According to Professor Xia Kejun from Renmin University of China, today's Chinese society is characterized by pre-modern values (such as the concept of life and death, interpersonal relationships, etc.), modern lifestyles (urban life, public space, etc.) and post-modern technological operations (the Internet, etc.). Today, we still maintain pre-modern aesthetic values, and there is a great "dissociation" between our minds and our times. In my opinion, although Chinese traditional calligraphy has shown its own unique artistic value in pre-modern society, it no longer represents the whole picture of calligraphy today after the social transformation. It is easy to see that whenever a calligrapher's life is in flux, either with joy or sorrow, great works are often created. Because it is the true expression of their own life experiences, the true expression of the ideals of people in a feudal, centralized society, the most authentic "contemporary" expression of their times. It is undeniable that prior to World War II, Chinese traditional calligraphy was almost equivalent to the calligraphy art. The aesthetic idea, as a kind of moderating "absurd passion", had a positive significance in the pre-modern period, but lost its value of existence when it entered the modern era. It is easy to see that the calligraphy art has lost its core value and almost nothing has been achieved from the Qing dynasty to the present day. Numerous calligraphers have created numerous "antique" works through life imitation or association, without any real personal experience, let alone real emotional expression. They only read history books, experience the ancients' life through association, impose the values of the ancients on themselves, and create art through such false experiences. At the same time, with the collapse of the ancient Chinese language system due to the simplification of characters and the vernacular language movement, the calligraphy art, which still followed ancient methods, had no "qi", and most works became poorly executed

"imitations of ancient counterfeits". As a result, the Chinese calligraphy art quickly dimmed after World War II, and was even surpassed by Japan for a period of time. The Chinese calligraphy art today is more like religion than art, offering a metaphysical and esoteric ideal that allows the creators of traditional calligraphy to disguise themselves, their lives, and their aesthetics according to the aesthetic values of a pre-modern society under feudal centralization, but with little intersection or relationship to the real experience of life in the present. It cannot solve the present problems, so it cannot produce the "qi" of the present at all. Without "contemporaneity", it can only wander and repeat in the formal stage, forming a desolate place of extreme involution. At the same time, years and years of boring imitation of brushwork will easily make people lose thinking and turn into a writing machine that can only write something without problem awareness, life experience, or even literary cultivation. The death knell of Go was sounded when AlphaGo defeated Lee Sedol and Ke Jie in 2016 and 2017, respectively. The traditional calligraphy, which is trapped in a cage of formalism, will surely come to an end after all the modernization of our society is completed, as an art discipline born under feudal centralization. Marcel Proust once said: "We can not put our life into the fiction but turn life experiences into our creation". I still remember that on the squares at the end of the 20th century, there were always a lot of old men with broom-style brushes and buckets writing randomly on the ground every day. They did not aim to create works, let alone thought about participating in exhibitions. But they put real calligraphy into every day of their lives, which is the true spirit of calligraphy, and today there is no trace of it. Hans Bertin in *The End of Art History and Current Culture* said: "The end does not mean eschatology..... Art should be understood as a painting that depicts what happened Today, the painting is taken out of its frame because the frame no longer fits it, and this is what we call here the end of art history The frame makes everything in the frame a painting, just as art history makes the art that has been handed down a painting "[5] Therefore, in order to better understand and develop the art that is happening now, one should re-examine and reconstruct the new picture frame with a contemporary perspective, re-aware of the inner core of the traditional calligraphy art that has been neglected, and truly integrate writing and life together, so that writing becomes part of the daily life and a way to express one's thoughts.

3. The Core of Traditional Calligraphy Art

3.1 The Traditional Calligraphy Art Is an Art Strictly Limited by Words

The greatest difference between Chinese traditional culture and Western culture lies in the tireless pursuit of "*Zhongyong* (Golden Mean)". The Chinese have been pursuing "*Zhongyong* (Golden Mean)" for thousands of years, which is well demonstrated by the calligraphy art. Although the evolution of Chinese characters from complex to simple and from relatively figurative to relatively abstract is inevitable, whether complex or simple, they are symbols with specific meanings that are different from pictorial or completely abstract. Therefore, the Chinese traditional calligraphy art cannot and does not go to the extremes of figurative or abstract, it can only fall somewhere in between. "Many works in cursive script are often difficult to read, and the stylistic beauty of calligraphy gives us the satisfaction of appreciating them before we can read them. So the real appreciation of calligraphy is still in the purely stylistic aspect. By the time we read the text and know that it is a seven-line stanza or a five-line rhyme, our appreciation activity has already shifted from the realm of calligraphy to that of poetry. The words are the carrier of the calligraphy art, but the meaning of the words is not primary." [6] It is true, as Xiong Bingmin said, that very often the appreciation of calligraphic works in which the form of the characters precedes the meaning of the characters is more pure, although sometimes much of the virtue and pleasure is lost. There is nothing wrong with the

opinion, but assuming on this basis that the meaning of the characters is not of primary importance is somewhat one-sided. What a piece of calligraphy conveys comes not only from the variations of the characters, but also from the semantics of the textual composition. Although the semantic meaning is often hidden or unappreciated, as in the case of wild cursive, the semantic meaning itself spontaneously leads the artist to write a form that fits the meaning of the character. This is one of the connotations of "meaning before the brush". The "meaning" comes not only from the author, but also from the words. The reason why words are words and distinguish them from abstract symbols is that they can point to specific meanings. Even if sometimes there are multiple meanings that seem ambiguous, but they are completely different from abstraction and do not leave the creator completely free to play. At the same time, character form and meaning are not sequential, but exist simultaneously. The meaning of a Chinese character is already included in the form of the character when it is completed, so there is no form that is not limited by the meaning of a character when a calligrapher creates a work. However, the meaning of the characters is optional for ordinary viewers most of the time. For the creator oneself, the meaning of the characters is not only primary, but is the foundation of the entire work. Just like a tree, no matter how leafy and colorful it may appear to the viewer, its foundation is the root in the deep earth. "Calligraphy cannot be separated from Chinese characters and has some of the characteristics that Chinese characters have. Chinese characters have certain meanings, which are readable, and reading has a certain direction and order. When writing, there are agreed-upon rules for the sequence of strokes, the composition of strokes, and so on. From the perspective of purely stylized beauty, these characteristics are the fetters of creation; from the perspective of the calligraphy art, they make calligraphy richer than abstract painting. There is a level of Chinese characters beyond the abstract form, and thus a level of literature, making calligraphy a comprehensive art." [6] If abstract art seeks pure power, so that one can express one's emotions to the fullest extent of one's imagination, then even the most unrestrained wild cursive script, which is unlike the "drunkenness" of Nietzsche's Dionysus, still needs to follow the most basic laws of writing in the calligraphy art. Painting focuses on the relationship between image and expression, conceptual art on the selection of objects that accurately convey one's ideas, and calligraphy on how to convey one's emotions with the meaning of words, while using the shape of the written Chinese characters to fit the meaning conveyed. Only when the three are perfectly combined can a calligraphy work be called a masterpiece. Therefore, if the Chinese characters are crude and ungraceful, even if a famous artist comes to write them, they still can not become a masterpiece. Imagine Wang Xizhi standing in front of a table and looking at his own writing "Gong Xi Fa Cai". In calligraphy works, emotion precedes the Chinese character and is conveyed by the Chinese character, and the shape of the Chinese character defines and is limited by the meaning of the Chinese characters. The three important factors together make up an excellent calligraphy work. Therefore, any formal exploration of the calligraphy art must be developed on the basis of the shapes of Chinese characters, while at the same time being limited by the shapes of Chinese characters and their semantics. Excellent calligraphy works are created in a form that fits well with the meaning that the words can convey. And once this characteristic is lost, it will be difficult to create a masterpiece of divine quality. Both the *Preface to the Lanting Collection* and the *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew* are famous as masterpieces of calligraphy, and their beauty in form can be easily felt by any viewer. If Yan Zhenqing had been allowed to write *Preface to the Lanting Collection* with the same brushwork that he used to write *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew*, and Wang Xizhi had been allowed to write *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew* with the same brushwork that he used to write *Preface to the Lanting Collection*, the result would have been a double fall from grace. More importantly, because of the inherent compulsory limitations on the meaning of Chinese characters, it would have been difficult for a truly inspired creator to create a work whose content was poignant while its form was light, and the form

of his work would have been consistent with the content.

3.2 The Core of Traditional Calligraphy Art Is Improvised Poetry

According to Professor Niu Hongbao from Renmin University of China, the entire Chinese traditional aesthetic is based on lyrical poetry, and the traditional calligraphy art is naturally no exception. Sun Guanting once commented on Wang Xizhi that: "When writing *Le Yi*, one can feel melancholy. When writing *The Ode to Painting*, one can feel strange ideas. When writing *Huangting Sculpture*, one can feel relaxed and illusory. When writing *Taishi Admonitions*, one can feel floundering"[7] Han Yu likewise brilliantly discusses the true spirit that the calligraphy art should have through the contrast between Zhang Xu and Gao Xian in his *Preface to Sending Gao Xian to His Lordship*. It is thus clear that although traditional calligraphy is a form of shape art, its starting point and core is to express emotions and aspirations. Without the ultimate foundation, its monotonous formal elements alone cannot make it outstanding among the many art disciplines. Professor Xia Kejun from Renmin University of China divides the calligraphy art into six stages: writing the form, writing the line, writing the meaning, writing *qi*, writing the chance, and being written. The first three stages focus on the formal aspects: writing the form means writing the Chinese character. At the stage of writing the line, the script begins to have some decorative function, and the lines develop into regular script with realistic functionality or almost unreadable wild cursive. At the stage of writing the meaning, it focuses on the inheritance of style, which is still at a more programmatic stage. And the focus is on the layout and intention of the brush first, with more emphasis on the expression of "situation". "Writing *qi*" simply means adding the breath of life to the more programmed "meaning". If writing the meaning represents art in a broad sense, then writing *qi* represents personal art, one's own understanding of life, will and so on. The fifth stage is writing the chance, that is, the addition of the element of chance in the process of writing *qi*. Not only that, but what is more crucial is that Chinese calligraphy is a "one-time writing" - a one-time writing that can barely be modified. The one-time writing is related to the previous idea of "intention before the brush" and therefore it requires prior arrangement. But here is the problem: this prior arrangement can also lead to programming, so there is a tension between the one-time writing and the occasional emergence of timing. The writing is also related to the fate.[8] The last stage is the stage of being written, which is no longer writing with its own intention, but entering a passive state, with the destruction of the writing activity. It reduces the writing to the impulse of "writing", and art has been suspended.[8] At this stage, writing is not completely controlled by the subjective will of man, but it is different from Nietzsche's Dionysian. Being completely devoid of reason and morality, Dionysian is an impulse of powerful will power, a will to destroy oneself, and a conflict with the extremes of traditional Western classical aesthetics. But being written is a blind, completely unprepared, purposeless writing; it is not a confrontation, a conflict, but a self-evacuation, a self-cultivation integrated into the everyday. Therefore, for traditional calligraphy, the shape of the characters and the Chinese writing skills are only a matter of external form and can easily lead one deep into it. This is the writing of the will, the writing of a profound experience of daily life. In Chinese traditional calligraphy, there are many very personal works, such as letters, which are often improvised and unthought-out. This is like the sketches in the Western artists' hands, although they are presented as beautifully finished works when displayed, we now know that it is the hidden sketches and manuscripts behind them that are the important material from which we can explore the true ideas, intentions, emotions, and state of the work. And they are the more valuable works full of life, and this is especially true in the calligraphy art. Regardless of the Chinese characters in *Preface to the Lanting Collection*, *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew*, *Cold Food Copybook*, and other heirlooms, they are very good literary works in terms

of the content of the text itself. In the *Draft of a Requiem to My Nephew*, we can find that Yan Zhenqing does not care about word spacing and line spacing. The whole work is full of modified marks, but it is full of individual emotions, the mourning with the loved relative. "By writing individual mourning, he tries to call the dead and let the dead's soul return in his own writing, as if the clean forehead was touched again and the jade steps of youth were still there. This is to let the ghost in the underworld and the lonely dead guest can return home in his own writing." [8] This is a highly empathetic, yet unprepared improvisation with a single breath and strong emotion. This is also the case with *Preface to the Lanting Collection* and *Cold Food Copybook*. While Song Huizong's *Thousand Chinese Characters in Cursive Script* and Zhao Mengfu's *First and Second Visits to the Red Cliff* are also very excellent with good skills, but their text content is not personal, just borrowing other people's text to express their own emotions. So there may be emotional resonance, but the meaning of the text does not fit perfectly with the real emotions of the creator. The combination of the calligraphic form is less than perfect, and the impact of the calligraphic style is slightly more muted than that of the three works. In Japanese and Chinese modernist calligraphy, some single-character calligraphic works are written in such a way that the characters are no longer complete, or even completely unrecognizable. This is not, in my opinion, a very successful attempt to explore the form of the brush and ink. The absence of the complete character form makes it an abstract line without meanings. It is an incomplete state of absence, which results in the characters losing their meanings. The abstraction of meaningful characters, which only attempt to evoke associations through changes in composition and brushwork, reaches to the point of becoming almost completely abstract. These works broaden the path of calligraphy art, but they are lower-level and "formalistic" "ink games" that blend Eastern and Western cultures. They do not possess the most basic calligraphic spirit and run counter to the intrinsic qualities that characterize the calligraphy art.

3.3 The Traditional Calligraphy Art Is a Visual Literary Art

The core expression of Chinese traditional calligraphy is poetry. Even "quotational" creations such as Zhao Mengfu's *First and Second Visits to the Red Cliff* are not merely formal showpieces, but are inherently a poetic expression of emotion. Therefore, the Chinese calligraphy art can be seen as a visual literary art. When Li Bai's poems are carried by word forms, it can become a calligraphic work. But when his poems are carried by non-visualizations (such as sound), it cannot become a calligraphic work, but only a literary one. For a literary work to become a calligraphic work, there is a prerequisite: it must be, but is not limited to, the visual form. That is to say, it must contain a visual presentation way whether it is on bamboos, paper, walls, the earth or even the Internet, or a work that combines the senses of hearing, smell and sight. For example, a literary book on paper can be considered a work of calligraphy, but it does not mean that any presentation way of the literary work can be called a work of calligraphy, only when it is "written" in a certain script and carried on a certain material. Of course, a printed literary work can also be called calligraphy art. Is a great calligrapher's hand-copied version of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which is then displayed, a work of calligraphy? It seems impossible to deny that it is indeed calligraphy art, because it has all the elements required for calligraphy. So is the hand-carved and printed version of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* a work of calligraphy? I am afraid so. Seal engraving is part of the calligraphy art, and there is no shortage of excellent seal engraving works in history, many of which are highly individual. When a standardized font is engraved, such as the standard Yan, Liu, or even the standard Song, although they hardly have any individuality, they have a great deal of commonality, and they do have a certain uniqueness that makes them artistic. Even if you think it is a mediocre imitation, but it can also be called the calligraphy art. In modern times, seal engraving has evolved into electronic writing or printing, but it

is ultimately a subjective act of "writing" controlled by human beings. The form of presentation is also still a form of expression that possesses some artistry, even if this form is popularized, standardized, and vulgarized. Since Duchamp's *Fountain*, the form is no longer a criterion for judging artistry. The direct non-human writing or indirect writing by machine is not what prevents the form of writing from being artistic. Are the works of writing art with visual artistic form not calligraphy art?

4. Conclusion

The Chinese traditional calligraphy art is one of the most representative disciplines of Chinese art, and it is the highest expression of the aesthetics of the whole Chinese traditional society. However, it has "gone astray" and has not shown much adaptability in the face of social modernization and transformation. Any calligraphy theory should have the characteristics of the times, and it is therefore necessary to re-examine the core of traditional calligraphy from a contemporary perspective in the face of its imminent "end". The core of traditional calligraphy is that it is an improvisational visual literary art, and the form of calligraphy is an unconscious automatic choice based on the meaning of words, which is determined by the meaning of words. Only when the calligrapher's emotions are rendered by the combination of words and the calligraphic form fits the combination of words exactly is it possible for a calligraphic work to become an excellent work of art. At the same time, the traditional writing with Chinese brushes and Xuan paper no longer represents the full spectrum of calligraphy, and new electronic writing or even holographic capture of writing in the air using film effects technology may create a new way of writing calligraphy. The arrival of ChatGPT and other AI software indicates that human beings will eventually enter the age of AI, where all technical advantages will be defeated by AI so as to return to the ontology. Art will eventually return to personal physical experience. The new writing that returns to the everyday experience may become the final point of calligraphy.

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