

# China's Cultural Communication with the Middle East under the BRI: Assessment and Prospects



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## ABSTRACT

Since China put forward the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the BRI has achieved significant progress, especially in the Middle East. China's cultural communication with the Middle East is the emotional glue that brings both sides together by building trust and dispelling doubts. Evidence in the statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, the communication by the media, the development of Confucius Institutes, and the cooperation between different NGOs, China shows the fact that the BRI is being built jointly with the Middle East. Moreover, the Middle East's unique geopolitical situation and cultural differences require China's cultural communication with states in the region to be done with Chinese characteristics. With descriptive case study methodology, this article revolves around these questions: How do China's cultural communication mechanisms work? Why does China's cultural communication play an essential role in the Middle East under the BRI? What is its characteristic? To answer these questions, the article is structured in three parts. The first part will outline the role of cultural communication in Chinese diplomacy, based on cultural communication, to jointly build the BRI. The second part will focus on Chinese communication with the Middle East through cooperation related to the pandemic, tourism, Confucius Institutes, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum. The third part will highlight China's cultural communication with Chinese characteristics in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** BRI, Chinese diplomacy, Chinese characteristics, cultural communication, Middle East.

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## Introduction

HISTORICAL CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE East have long complicated matters. Especially after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the fundamental interests of the region became more complex and changeable, reflecting the differences between religious sects and cultures as well as the power competition between global and regional powers in the region. All these situations have challenged the smooth implementation and development of the BRI in the Middle East. From 24-30th March 2021, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, visited six countries in the Middle East to put forward a Five-Point Initiative to achieve security and stability. Wang Yi emphasized

the need to change traditional thinking, observe the Middle East from the perspective of weakened geopolitics, strengthen partnerships, and respect the Middle East's characteristics, models, and roads (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). The Chinese media also alleges that the hour hand of China's diplomacy now points to "Middle East time" (Qin, 2021). China adheres to cultural communication as a link to other regions and strives to promote the exchange and integration of different civilizations in the Middle East. It has contributed much to reducing geopolitical and economic factors, and increasing the dialogue between civilizations through its commitment to the in-depth development of the BRI in the Middle East.

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Ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in Beijing, capital of China, July 10, 2018. (Xinhua, 2018)

With descriptive case study methodology, this article revolves around these questions: How do China's cultural communication mechanisms work? Why does China's cultural communication play an essential role in the Middle East under the BRI? What are its characteristics? To answer these questions, the article is structured in three parts. The first part will outline the role of cultural communication in Chinese diplomacy, based on cultural communication, to jointly build the BRI. The second part will focus on Chinese communication with the Middle East through cooperation related to the pandemic, tourism, Confucius Institutes, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum. The third part will highlight China's cultural communication with Chinese characteristics in the Middle East.

## The Position of Cultural Communication in China's Diplomacy

The formation and development of culture are inseparable from the practice of communication. Culture, in a broad sense, not only refers to spiritual products but also material products. Historically, in Alexander the Great's eastern expeditions, the expansion of the Roman Empire, the Arab Empire's "jihad"

and Crusades, Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions, Marco Polo's eastward journey to the discovery of the New World by Columbus, and Zheng He's voyages to the West, exchanges were the driving force and motivator in forming culture (Ran & Hong, 2018). Human history is a magnificent picture of mutual exchange, mutual learning, and integration of different civilizations. China upholds the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits and insists on building the BRI into a civilized road. China advocates the notion that exchanges should transcend the barriers of civilizations, that mutual learning should transcend the conflicts of civilizations, and that the coexistence of civilizations should transcend the superiority of civilizations (Ping, 2017). In recent years, China has focused on improving cultural exchange and cooperation mechanisms and platforms, building cultural exchange brands, promoting the prosperity and development of cultural industries, and improving cultural trade cooperation. A community with a shared future will promote the high-quality construction of the BRI (Liang & Hong, 2018) Under the BRI, China's foreign cultural exchanges benefit the overall diplomatic strategy. China's overall diplomacy includes public diplomacy and government diplomacy.

Government diplomacy represents official exchanges between state leaders, between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which represents national sovereignty, and the corresponding departments of foreign governments. Public diplomacy refers to various ways for foreign exchanges to take place in addition to government diplomacy. The most significant difference between public diplomacy and government diplomacy is whether the participants can handle foreign affairs on behalf of the country. Public diplomacy actors include governments, civil organizations, social groups, social elites, and the public at multiple levels. Although there is no internationally accepted definition of public diplomacy, there are three points in common:

- The government leads it.
- It targets foreign governments and the foreign public.
- It aims to improve the image of the country (Zheng, 2011).

The BRI runs through Asia, Europe, and Africa, and its scale of construction framework and investment strength reveals the fact that relying on any diplomatic method alone is not the best choice. Only by being good at combining the two forms of government diplomacy and public diplomacy can we achieve political mutual trust, economic integration, and cultural tolerance through the BRI and create a community of interests, destiny, and responsibility.

Friendship, which derives from close contact between the people, holds the key to sound state-to-state relations. People-to-people connectivity is the social foundation and public opinion foundation of the BRI. In March 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission of China, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce of China jointly “issued a white paper entitled, *Joining Hands to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – Vision and Actions*. It

calls for policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people ties (a five-pronged approach)” (The State Council Information Office the People’s Republic of China, 2020: par. 2). The smooth implementation of the first four-pronged approach cannot be realized without the people’s support. China strengthens friendly exchanges between people and expects to enhance mutual understanding and traditional friendship by laying a solid social foundation for regional cooperation. These people-to-people ties have attracted widespread attention from domestic and foreign media and scholars.

### **Culture is the carrier of people-to-people communication, which is why cultural communication is an effective way to promote people-to-people communication**

Culture is the carrier of people-to-people communication, which is why cultural communication is an effective way to promote people-to-people communication (Xiu, 2020). At the Opening Ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, China’s President Xi stated that “We need to build bridges for exchanges and mutual learning among different cultures, deepen cooperation in education, science, culture, sports, tourism, health, and archaeology, strengthen exchanges between parliaments, political parties, and non-governmental organizations, and exchanges between women, young people and people with disabilities to facilitate multi-faceted people-to-people exchanges” (Ping, 2021). As of April 2021, China has signed more than 200 cooperation documents for the joint construction of the BRI with 140 countries and 31 international organizations (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

The BRI has become a popular international public product and the largest cooperation platform.

### The Practice of China's Cultural Communication in Middle East Diplomacy

The Middle East was once a civilization highland in human history, but it has turned into a “safe depression” in the world's eyes due to long-term regional conflicts and turbulence. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010, this change has not only led to political upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, but also from West to East, from Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan in North Africa to Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine in West Asia. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iraq, and more than 20 countries in the Arab world in the Middle East, except Qatar and the UAE, all have different degrees of social and political turbulence (Hua, 2018). Such widespread social and political change will profoundly and extensively affect internal and external politics in regional countries, thereby reshaping international relations in the Middle East and even the world. Seeking change and governance amidst chaos has become the urgent desire of the governments and people of Middle Eastern countries.

China's Middle East diplomacy in the new era requires an understanding of the Middle East's issues to shift from emphasizing conflicts and contradictions in the past to the emphasis on governance and development nowadays (Jian, 2016). China's Middle East diplomacy targets are directed primarily towards 23 countries in West Asia and North Africa, of which 19 are Arab countries. Arab countries make up the main body of the Middle East countries. The BRI is highly compatible with the development strategies of Arab countries, such as Morocco's “Economic Takeoff Plan” and “2014--2020 Industrial Revitalization Plan Development Strategy”, Saudi Arabia's “Vision 2030”, the UAE's “2030 Industri-

al Development Strategy”, Qatar's “2030 National Vision”, Bahrain's “2030 Economic Development Vision”, Egypt's “2030 Vision Sustainable Development Strategy”, Kuwait's “2035 New Kuwait”, Oman's “2040 Vision”, and other national mid-term or long-term development strategies. They are all committed to solving the “governance deficit” plaguing Arab countries, such as a single economic structure, lagging industrial development, and high unemployment of youth (Zhang, 2019)



The Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building in the UAE, displayed encouraging slogans such as “Come on, Wuhan!” (Wuhàn jiāyóu!). (Xinhua, 2020)

First, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China and the Middle Eastern countries joined hands to fight the pandemic, deepening their friendship in response to the public health crisis. It not only enhanced mutual trust but also opened up new areas of cooperation, culminating in China and the Middle Eastern countries reaching an agreement on vaccine research and development cooperation. King Salman of Saudi Arabia was the first foreign head of state to call President Xi Jinping to support China's fight against the pandemic. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Zarif, was the first foreign minister to support China's fight against the pandemic openly.

The Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building in the UAE, displayed encouraging slogans such as "Come on, Wuhan!" (WUhàn jiāyóu!). Turkey was one of the first countries to provide medical assistance to China, and President Erdogan even broadcasted the vaccination process on live television. These actions deeply moved the Chinese people during their most challenging moments.

After the outbreak of pandemic in the Middle East, China promptly provided a large number of anti-viral materials to regional countries and dispatched more than one hundred medical expert teams to 9 countries in the region. More than 60 video conferences with health experts have been held in countries in the same region. According to the information released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Administration of Customs, China has provided more than 500 million doses of vaccines to more than 100 countries and international organizations around the world, equivalent to one-sixth of the total global vaccine production. In addition, the Chinese government also supports Chinese vaccine companies in technology transfer to developing countries. Currently, they have launched cooperative production with Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, the UAE, and Egypt (Feng & Lin, 2021).

In response to Western accusations of China's "vaccine diplomacy", Turkey's Ambassador to China, Abdulkadir Emin Önen, said Turkey strives to maintain a close dialogue with China on vaccine production and supply. He also highlighted that every country should carry out vaccine cooperation, and diplomacy should be contributed to a global fight against the pandemic. Turkey's President Erdogan has also repeatedly emphasized that political and commercial interests should be put aside from vaccine affairs and that vaccines should be regarded as human public property (Feng & Lin, 2021). To promote the availability and affordability of vaccines in developing countries, China is now

taking concrete actions to promote the fair and reasonable distribution of global vaccines and earnestly implements its solemn commitment to make vaccines a global public product.

### **Tourism plays a unique role in promoting unimpeded trade and people-to-people bonds in countries along the route.**

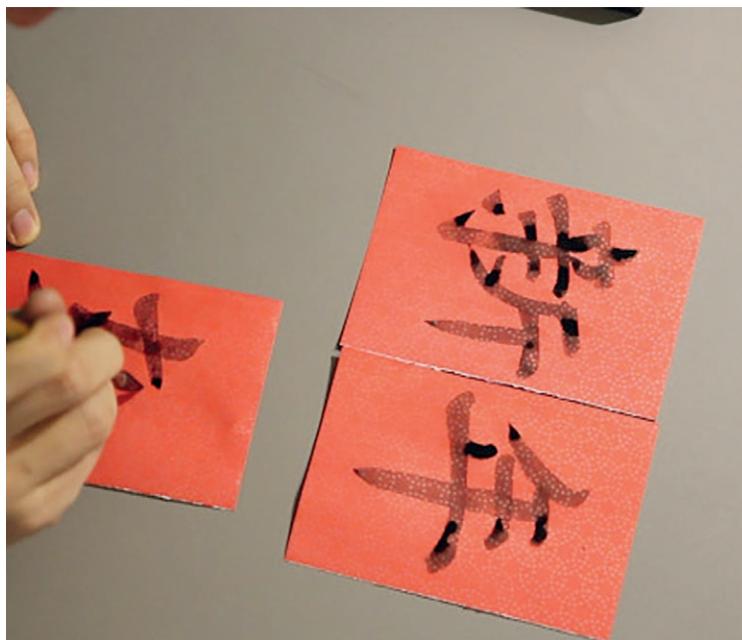
Second, tourism is a leading industry for China to promote the BRI's establishment. It plays a unique role in promoting unimpeded trade and people-to-people bonds in countries along the route. At the tourist source markets, both China and the Middle East countries have great potential for tourism development. According to the China National Tourism Administration, during the 13th Five-Year Plan period, China would transport 150 million Chinese tourists and 200 billion U.S. dollars into tourism consumption to countries along the BRI (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Moreover, the cooperation between China and the Middle East in the Islamic tourism industry has also enhanced both side's cultural awareness. By strengthening cooperation with multinational tourism groups in Middle Eastern countries, China is steadily improving domestic Islamic tourism infrastructure. In addition, China and the Arab countries cooperate in tourism with information technology, which mainly includes two major areas: Tourism cooperation on the internet and the joint construction and sharing of tourism information (Xiao, 2016). Internet technology has an important impact on the tourism industry, and internet-based tourism information services have become an essential means of global tourism business development and tourism marketing, especially in the pandemic period.

Third, the Confucius Institute, as a language institution, cultural institution, and scientific research institution, carries the task of introducing the Chinese language to the world, disseminating Chinese culture, and enhancing exchanges between different cultures. It plays an essential role in Chinese cultural exchanges with the Middle East.

The first Confucius Institute to open in the Middle East was at St. Joseph's University in Lebanon in 2007. In 2018, the development of Chinese in Turkey had moved from a niche to the public. The Turkish Ministry of Education decided to offer optional Chinese courses in Turkish junior high schools in the 2018 academic year; Turkey's Ankara University and Erciyes University even established a Department of Sinology (Yang & Chun, 2018). In the 2020-2021 academic year, the UAE Chinese Language Teaching Program offers Chinese courses in 119 public schools, with 210 Chinese teachers on the job and 31,538 Chinese learners, accounting for 10% of the total number of students in public schools. The UAE became the first Arabic-speaking country to incorporate Chinese into its national education system. 70 countries worldwide have included Chinese in their national education systems (The Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, 2020). In 2002, the Confucius Institute established the first "Chinese Bridge" Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students. It has run continuously for almost 20 years, and tens of thousands of contestants from more than 70 countries participate in the competition.

"Chinese mania" is sweeping the world. Although the development of the tourism industry has not fully recovered from the pandemic, the "mania" driven by the considerable tourism market potential has not been affected by this. At present, there are approximately 25 million people outside of China who are learning Chinese, and the cumulative num-

ber of people learning and using Chinese is nearly 200 million (People's Daily, 2020). On 25th January, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) announced that Chinese had become the official language of the organization. This further enhanced the authoritative effect of Chinese as an official text in international communications and the credibility of international communications (The Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, 2021).



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Fourth, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum is a platform to increase diverse cultural activities that effectively promote the overall development of China-Arab cultural exchanges. Since the establishing of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2004, it has organized the Sino-Arab Civilization Dialogue Symposium eight times, Arab Arts Festivals four times, Press Cooperation Forums four times, Radio and Television Cooperation Forums four times, and the Think Tank Forum two times.

The ever-increasing political mutual trust and the increasingly close economic and trade exchanges between China and countries of the Middle East have also injected a strong impetus into the cultural exchanges between the two sides. The China-Arab Friendship Conference is an essential non-governmental exchange platform under the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum. It plays a vital role in deepening the traditional friendship between China and Arab countries and promoting the people-to-people bond between the two sides. Moreover, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum should play an effective role in strengthening exchanges and dialogues, in deepening mutually beneficial cooperation, and in working together to build a community with a shared future, making new and more remarkable contributions to the peace and development of humankind.

### **Although the BRI originated in China, the opportunities and fruits belong to the world.**

Although the BRI originated in China, the opportunities and fruits belong to the world. Just like President Xi said, “The BRI is a sunny avenue for everyone to move forward hand in hand, not a private path of one party. All interested countries can join in, participate, cooperate and benefit together” (Ping, 2021). After 40 years of reform and development, China and the Middle East have focused on mutual support in politics. In the mid-term, emphasis was placed on developing energy-centric economic relations and expanding the current political, economic, security, cultural, and other all-around cooperation in multiple fields (Jian, 2018). The performance of China's Middle East foreign policy has changed from overall detachment to operational performance. Among them, the use of cultural exchanges as the glue has

dramatically expanded the depth and breadth of cooperation between China and Middle Eastern countries in building the BRI and has contributed Chinese strength and wisdom to the peaceful development of the Middle East.

### **The Characteristics of China's Cultural Communications with the Middle East**

In the new era, China's cultural exchanges with the Middle East must change its traditional thinking, remove the prejudices of Orientalism and the absolutism of the conflict of civilizations theory to apply the BRI to find ways of cultural exchanges suitable for itself. In exchanges between different cultures, cultural identity is formed through mutual learning. Mutual learning is the prerequisite for realizing people-to-people bonds and the significance of cultural exchanges. A peaceful and civilized future ultimately depends on the understanding and cooperation between the politics, spirits, and intellectual leaders of the world's major civilizations. In 2014, President Xi Jinping proposed that “China must have its characteristics of major-country diplomacy” (Ping, 2017). Under the BRI, the geopolitical and cultural differences in the Middle East determine that China's cultural exchanges with the Middle East must also be unique.

First, China must adhere to mutual learning between different civilizations. In 2014, President Xi Jinping mentioned at the 60th Anniversary Meeting of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, “We must respect the diversity of civilizations, promote different civilizations' exchanges and dialogues, peaceful coexistence. We must not stand alone or belittle other civilizations or nations. Human history tells us that attempting to establish a single civilization to dominate the world is just unrealistic.” China is a multi-ethnic country, and no one knows better than China how important it is to maintain the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures to the stability of a country.



The Middle East is a place where all the major civilizations of the world gather and blend. The interaction, integration, and symbiosis between different nations, cultures, and religions represent the historical tradition of the Middle East. In cultural exchanges with the Middle East, China attaches great importance to the mutual learning and coexistence of different civilizations and supports Middle Eastern civilizations' inheritance, development, and innovation. Moreover, China disagrees with cultural hegemony and prejudice and insists on making joint efforts with countries of the Middle East to promote diversity within civilizations. Only through drawing on the outstanding achievements of civilizations created by different countries and nations can civilization advance with the times to continuously increase the driving force for development

Second, China must actively shoulder the responsibility of being a great power. As China's international status and influence gradually increase, the international community and Middle Eastern countries hope China will play a more proactive role in the Middle East. In this regard, China must respond to these expectations by taking responsibility for peace and development. Actively taking on responsibility is an important symbol of China's practice of great power diplomacy (Xiang & Han, 2020). Democratization in the Middle East has experienced a slow course of exploration for decades after World War II. With the fierce confrontation between strengthening the authoritative regime and advancing democratic politics, the process has been interrupted from time to time, and there have repeatedly been setbacks and bumps. Relative to the pace of global political evolution, democratic politics in the Middle East are behind other developing areas (Hua, 2018). Especially after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the conflicts in the Middle East have become more complex and changeable.



Confucius Institute carries the task of introducing the Chinese language to the world, disseminating Chinese culture, and enhancing exchanges between different cultures. (CGTN, 2018)

In this regard, China has put forward Five-Point Initiatives to realize security and stability in the Middle East:

- Advocate mutual respect and respect for the Middle East's characteristics, models, and roads.
- Persist in fairness and justice to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli issue.
- Achieve nuclear non-proliferation, encourage the United States and Iran to reach an agreement on the nuclear issue as soon as possible.
- Jointly build collective security, accounting for the concerns of all parties.
- Accelerate development and cooperation to achieve long-term peace and stability in the Middle East (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

China will stick to abandoning the zero-sum game and become a defender of peace and stability, a promoter of joint development, and a defender of fairness and justice in the Middle East.

Third, China must commit to developing partnerships in diplomatic relations. China's Middle East diplomacy has always adhered to the idea of partnership and non-alignment.

China adopts these three principles in the Middle East: China does not find agents but persuades peace and promotes talks; China does not engage in spheres of influence but encourages everyone to join the Belt and Road circle of friends; and China does not seek to fill the “vacuum” in the region but weaves mutually beneficial and win-win partnerships throughout (Tai, 2018). China’s partnership in the Middle East has two forms: multilateral and bilateral. The multilateral form refers to the League of Arab States (22 Arab countries), the African Union (10 African Arab countries), the Gulf Arab States Cooperation Council (the six Gulf Arab countries), and the Arab Maghreb Union (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania (5 countries), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (57 member states). Bilateral form refers to China’s bilateral partner diplomacy with Middle Eastern countries, such as Algeria (2014), Egypt (2014), Saudi Arabia (2016), Iran (2016), and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (2018) (Gang, 2019).

**Seeking common ground while reserving differences, maintaining mutual benefit, and applying a win-win approach represents the hidden logic of Chinese diplomacy.**

The creation of this partnership network has placed China without a historical burden in the Middle East and has demonstrated neutrality, fairness, and non-interference in internal affairs as a good partner (Kemal, 2018). China’s partner diplomacy with the Middle East focuses on the future, firstly integrating the countries in the Middle East into a community of interests, forming a security community through the community of interests, and finally evolving into a community of values. Seeking common ground while reserving differences, maintaining mutual bene-

fit, and applying a win-win approach represents the hidden logic of Chinese diplomacy. China’s partner diplomacy in the Middle East has objectively weakened the influence of the alliance of major powers in the region and played as the soft check and balance against hegemony and unilateralism.

### Conclusion

Cultural cooperation plays a vital role in promoting high-quality development of the BRI, attracting more countries, regions, and international organizations to participate, forming a greater international consensus, and other visible achievements that benefit more countries and people. Eight years have passed since Chinese President Xi proposed the BRI in 2013. There are uncountable problems in a world composed of different cultures, races, skin colors, religions, and social systems. However, differences can coexist peacefully and develop jointly, which is the answer given by China’s cultural communication and China insists on using actual actions to prove it. Conflicts between civilizations are not absolute. Promoting the coexistence of diverse cultures is the prerequisite and basis for China’s foreign cultural exchanges under the BRI.

The development of the BRI as a glue that connects different civilizations in the Middle East is a concrete manifestation of China’s insistence on abandoning blind admiration of national nihilism, narrow-minded national xenophobia, and self-conceit centralism. The five-thousand-year Chinese “和” (He) tradition determines the principles of extensive consultation, joint construction, and sharing to build the BRI. Although the BRI is not enough to solve all the problems, it represents China’s response to the challenges. The BRI is an open and inclusive platform for cooperation and an international public product jointly created by all countries in the world.

As a latecomer to global governance, under the background of the BRI, China looks forward to developing and broadening its cultural exchanges with China persists in answering the “Question of the Middle East” with practical actions and has contributed Chinese experience and wisdom to building a more open, inclusive, fair, and just Middle East. In

this era, when peace and development are still main themes, China needs to develop itself by maintaining world peace and maintain world peace through its development. Acknowledgement: This article is supported by funding from the “Key Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Ministry of Education of China” (17JZD036).

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