

Helena MOTOH

Political Cosmology of the One Belt One Road Policy – the Conceptual Structure of the New Chinese Strategic Initiative

Abstract

In its very name, the large-scale strategic platform of the People's Republic of China uses a reference to the ancient Silk Road, i.e. to the connection that was established between the European and Asian sides of the same great landmass, and to the fruitful exchange of goods, cultures and ideas that it resulted in. This is not the only explicit reference to traditional ideas in this project, since the protagonists of the programme often refer to specificities of traditional Chinese thought to explain the ideological background of the One Belt One Road policy, whether this might be a relational concept, win-win strategic thinking or the *tian xia* worldview. The paper analyses the cosmological, ontological and other philosophical paradigms apparent in the context of this strategic initiative in order to be able to determine the characteristics of the conceptual structure of this new Chinese political cosmology.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, *yi lu yi dai*, China, political theory, cosmology

Povzetek - Politična kozmologija pasu in ceste – konceptualna struktura nove kitajske strateške pobude

Nova velikopotezna strateška platforma Ljudske republike Kitajske se že s svojim imenom sklicuje na svilno pot, na povezavo, ki se je v antiki vzpostavila med evropsko in azijsko stranjo celine, pri tem pa obuja asociacije na plodno izmenjavo dobrin, kultur in idej, ki jih je ta povezava prinesla. To pa ni edina eksplicitna referenca na tradicijo, saj se pri pojasnjevanju, kaj pravzaprav je idejno ozadje pasu in ceste, protagonisti kitajske zunanje in gospodarske politike pogosto zatekajo k elementom tradicionalne kitajske misli – k relacijski misli, domnevno kitajski strategiji »win-win« ali k svetovnemu nazoru »vsega pod nebom« (*tian xia*). Članek analizira kozmološke, ontološke in druge filozofske paradigme, ki se pojavljajo v kontekstu te nove strateške pobude, da bi lahko s pomočjo te analize opredelil konceptualno strukturo nove kitajske politične kozmologije.

Ključne besede: Pobuda pas in cesta, *yi dai yi lu*, Kitajska, politična teorija, kozmologija

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生万物。

The Way gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, three gives birth to the ten thousand things.

(*Dao de jing*, 42).¹

The bold strides with which more than half a decade ago the new Chinese model of the “Belt and Road” stepped onto the global political scene could give us the wrong impression that it is a unified, consistent and clearly structured strategic plan, through which – according to the different interpretations – China is trying, within the wider area of Europe, Asia and Africa, to achieve either global domination or global cohabitation and welfare. The basic premises of this initiative, as well as how it has in time evolved and changed, speak to the opposite. Numerous studies deal with the extreme complexity and heterogeneity of the phenomena linked to the “Belt and Road” initiative, and their authors mostly approach the topic through the optics of the economic-financial or international-political importance of the initiative, emphasizing, for example, the analyses of potentially beneficial or harmful effects on individual states and regions, predicting the possible transformative influences on the international relations currently established in the world and the Euro-Atlantic integrations and so on. However, often overlooked are the conceptual frame of the “Belt and Road” and the new political cosmology on which it is based. Even in those studies that do deal with this topic, the approach is usually based on scepticism and presents

1 The original quote from Laozi’s work *Daode jing* is referenced from the online database ctext.org, translation: H.M.

the cosmological-historical references as a cunning propagandist tool of the Chinese political leadership. Some authors (e.g. Nayyar 2017) decisively declare such historical references to the Silk Road to be a hollow promotional slogan, used to conceal Chinese plans of a completely different sort. Instead of reviving the historical Silk Road, the new initiative is rather a model that is more similar to the European imperialism of earlier centuries. On the other hand, certain interpretations (e.g. Sárvári 2017) express doubt about whether the declarative equality and principle of mutual benefit that the Belt and Road Initiative emphasizes are anything more than a rhetorical plaster on the wound of the asymmetrical relations of power between China and other potential partner states along the new Silk Road. For the present article I will in my analysis step beyond the propagandist functions of the Belt and Road Initiative rhetoric and, by analysing the ideological repertoire it uses to represent itself, try to outline the political-cosmological model on which it is based. To shine a light on the political cosmology of the Belt and Road, I will analyse a selection of the central concepts and references pertaining to it, and I will illuminate the problems that these ideological apparatuses aim to answer – as well as those that are actually caused by them. The central text that I will turn to in my analysis is that of the Initiative’s programme, its action plan, published in March 2015 by the National Development and Reform Commission (发展改革委) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, titled *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* (推动共建丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路的愿景与行动) (cf. *Qian nian ...* 2017).²

1 One and many

The use of the numeral “one” (一) that is a key part of the syntagm of “(One) Belt and (One) Road” is an important Chinese classical rhetorical figure. The one-ness symbolized by the numeral can be found in the works of different schools and is one of the key organizational principles within early Chinese thought. In the chapter titled “Li ren” of Confucius’ *Analects* the master says to his disciple Shen: “All my teachings can be threaded by a single thread” (吾道一以贯之)³ and this phrase was later used by the master’s successors

2 All the citations from the action plan’s text are referenced from *Qian nian zhi yue: “Yidaiyilu” liantong Zhongguo yu shijie* [年之约：“一带一路”连通中国与世界], Beijing Books, 2017. The online version is accessible at <https://books.google.si/> (accessed 10. 2. 2019) and is not paginated.

3 All the citations from Confucius’ *Analects* are referenced from the online database ctext.org, translation: H.M.

to assert a line of orthodoxy within the Confucian tradition. In Daoism “One”, which we can capitalize in this case, often stands as a synonym for the *dao*, the one-ness of all the world’s changes, from which all manifoldness arises and to which all manifoldness returns:

其分也，成也；其成也，毀也。凡物无成与毀，复通为一。

(*Zhuangzi*, “Qi wu lun”, 6).⁴

Through separation there arises the existence of things; with existence there arises their end. Beyond existence and the end, all things return to the one.

Within the framework of the classical Chinese cosmology, the choice of the term “(One) Belt and (One) Road” certainly makes sense, since it emphasizes the unity of the apparent manifoldness and the complexity of the connections that the strategy anticipates. However, the one is actually “one *and* one”, i.e. from the very beginning it is a duality, which is without a doubt also in the spirit of Lao Zi’s above cited expression. Even the syntagm of “(One) Road and (One) Belt” (一带一路) itself does not try to conceal this duality. In its longer form the original Chinese name of the Initiative for an “Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” references two segments of this strategy, the one on land and the one at sea. Their scope is outlined in the third part of the action plan:

丝绸之路经济带重点畅通中国经中亚、俄罗斯至欧洲（波罗的海）；中国经中亚、西亚至波斯湾、地中海；中国至东南亚、南亚、印度洋。21世纪海上丝绸之路重点方向是从中国沿海港口过南海到印度洋，延伸至欧洲；从中国沿海港口过南海到南太平洋。

The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China’s coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China’s coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other.⁵

4 The original quote from the *Zhuangzi* is referenced from the online database ctext.org, translation: H.M.

5 The English translation is from the <http://www.china.org.cn> version of the text (accessed: 12. 01. 2023).

The system of connections that the two-part structure sets out is anything but simple, since its branches spread across three continents and across many seas and oceans. The sea and land segments supplement each other and are joined together, especially at those final destination points, where the land routes flow into the most important ports at the end of the maritime Silk Road. Where then is it possible to find this unity that the syntagm of “(One) Belt and (One) Road” asserts? Despite the extremely large number of connections and crossroads the structure of this action plan is drawn from a single starting point, i.e. China; China is the starting point of both the land “belt” and the maritime “road”, which then branch away and intertwine across three continents and numerous seas. The fear that China’s new strategic plan also contains such imbalances of power in its intentions, with China on one side of the equation and the different states and regions on the other, brought about one of the most interesting complications that marked the initial period of the “Belt and Road” strategy’s implementation. The first official translation of the name *yi dai yi lu* followed the original literally, and the initiative was therefore called “One Belt One Road” or – abbreviated – “OBOR”. Despite the fact that from the very beginning the alternative version of the translation was also used in certain places, i.e. the “Belt and Road” (or BRI, i.e. Belt and Road Initiative), it prevailed in the official documents only three years later, on the basis of the idea that the translation might suggest a wrong interpretation of the strategic programme (Shepard 2017). As pointed out by Bērziņa-Čerenkova, the specialists in the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (中央编译局) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (中国社会科学院) decided on the alternative translation of “Belt and Road” predominantly due to the fact that it does not contain the problematic numeral one (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2016), which could have led to misunderstandings in two ways. First, it could be understood as if only one belt and one road are planned, by which the strategic framework of the action plan might be seen as simply a selection of possible alternatives. Those countries that would see themselves as potential partners on one of these routes or directions could come to understand their cooperation as a competition with other alternative versions of the Belt and Road. Whether such perceptions and the related fears can be put to rest simply by changing the name or whether they are caused by more complex structural elements, both in the international relations of these states as well as in their relations with China, is a question that begs for a closer analysis. On the other hand, Bērziņa-Čerenkova notes, referencing the numeral one could also be problematic due to the fact that it invokes a centralist, monopolist vision of the world and the strategic plans, where in other states China might be perceived as the new hegemon and

central player, and as the state that aims to lead the game on this new Silk Road. The present political leadership in Beijing wants to avoid this image of China at any cost, be it pertaining to the dilemma of whether China is already the biggest economy in the world or the question of whether China is already a global super-power.

In parallel with the term *yi dai yi lu* and its longer version, “Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, there also appear in the texts, beginning with the action plan itself, more direct references to the historical Silk Road that the new initiative is supposed to be reviving. Even the introductory speech of the action plan starts in this tone:

2000多年前，亚欧大陆上勤劳勇敢的人民，探索出多条连接亚欧非几大文明的贸易和人文交流通路，后人将其统称为“丝绸之路”。

More than two millennia ago the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges that linked the major civilizations of Asia, Europe and Africa, collectively called the Silk Road by later generations.

It is perfectly clear that the historic “Silk Road” that the initiative references was no more united than the complex system of connections and crossroads on which the Belt and Road Initiative is based on. Even in the time under discussion, i.e. the period of the Han dynasty on the Chinese side and the Roman Empire on the European side, both of the old continents were linked by a system of paths, roads, bridges, rest stops, oases, trading centres, geographical corridors, mountain passes and so on. This system provided between Chang’an and Rome, and not only them, a network through which people exchanged products, goods, materials, technology, inventions, religions, philosophies and much more. Regardless of whether the Silk Road of antiquity was mostly powered by the existence of two relatively politically stable and economically powerful empires at both of its ends, it was far from centralized or organized in the way that the Belt and Road Initiative aims to be. If we read the programme of the initiative without a cynical distance, we could even come away with the impression that this decentralization is precisely the ideal it strives for. The idea is expressed in the programme text using the term “the Silk Road Spirit” (丝绸之路精神):

千百年来，“和平合作、开放包容、互学互鉴、互利共赢”的丝绸之路精神薪火相传，推进了人类文明进步，是促进沿线各国繁荣发展的重要纽带，是东西方交流合作的象征，是世界各国共有的历史文化遗产。

For thousands of years, the Silk Road Spirit – “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” – has been passed from generation to generation, promoted the progress of human civilization, and contributed greatly to the prosperity and development of the countries along the Silk Road. Symbolizing communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world.

This is the heritage that the new strategic programme invokes and which it locates within the issues of the present-day world, by interpreting it as a model of cooperation and peaceful cohabitation:

进入21世纪，在以和平、发展、合作、共赢为主题的新时代，面对复苏乏力的全球经济形势，纷繁复杂的国际和地区局面，传承和弘扬丝绸之路精神更显重要和珍贵。

In the 21st century, a new era marked by the theme of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit, it is all the more important for us to carry on the Silk Road Spirit in the face of the weak recovery of the global economy, and complex international and regional situations.

2 All under Heaven

The vision that the “Silk Road Spirit” symbolizes is one of a decentralized and multi-polar world. It is also precisely China’s new international policy strategy of the last decade. Contemporary China does not interpret the build-up of its political and economic power in relation to other world powers as an attempt to supplant America as the first among the super-powers, but rather to place its own vision of the global power relations onto the world stage. As Jenny Clegg (2009, cf. Murray and Brown 2012) notes, it is a vision of the multi-polarization (多极化) of the world. The Belt and Road Initiative is supposed to aid in the building of this global order in key ways:

共建“一带一路”顺应世界多极化、经济全球化、文化多样化、社会信息化的潮流，秉持开放的区域合作精神，致力于维护全球自由贸易体系和开放型世界经济。

The initiative to jointly build the Belt and Road, embracing the trend towards a multipolar world, economic globalization, cultural diversity and greater IT application, is designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation.

The unity that the slogan “Belt and Road” is aiming at can also be read in the light of this strategic decision, which on the level of realpolitik is becoming more and more topical as it pertains to changes in US policy, which is increasingly leaning towards protectionism. As pointed out by Astrid H.M. Nordin (2016, 46), it is possible in contemporary Chinese political theory – and subsequently also in political practice – to recognize this movement towards a new model of globalization. As important theoretical proponents of this idea she primarily recognizes Yu Xiaofeng and Wang Jiangli, who as their central concept offer an explication of the notion of global integration (全球一体化), which Nordin herself interprets as a holistic model of globalization. It is interesting that in this model there is a meeting of the present-day information society and a classical philosophic reference. The social supposition of the political model of holistically understood globalization is an understanding of the political space as already restructured by the realities of information technology. As the author sums up from Ni and Qian (*ibid.*), the political space becomes a “net space” (网络空间). The desubstantialization of space into a net-like, relationally defined reality simultaneously means a reorganization of the political space into a net-like and at the same time holistically understood multi-polar structure. Within this theory of the new globalization this modern-information-technology-conditioned ontology of political space is joined by a classical reference that is here reflected and re-interpreted anew. The vision of this net-like multi-polarity, taking the place of a hierarchically and centrally organized community of more or less self-sufficient national states, where one or two among them take primacy due to their military or economic power, is in this context expressed by the term “all under Heaven”, *tian xia* (天下).

In the classical sources the term “all under Heaven” most commonly denotes “the kingdom” or “the known world”, and due to the isolation and the subsequent focus on one’s own state it often also meant “the whole world”. This classical usage of course did not predict any sort of decentralized net structure, more than what was already implied by the late Zhou dynasty period with its political particularization. The revival of this term as a symbol for the unique nature of Chinese political ontology has in the last decade given new meaning to a completely ordinary and generally used term from the classical (and of course later) texts. In the last two decades, Nordin recognizes two new re-interpretations of the term *tian xia* in Chinese political theory (*ibid.*, 47). In a narrower sense the authors understand it as a description of a harmonic space in between the national or already existing political units, as a sort of meta-structure that is supposed to provide the globalized world with

unity and harmonic stability. Other authors refer to *tian xia* as the key concept that supposedly demonstrates the essential differences between the Chinese political imagination and the Euro-American one. In this wider sense *tian xia* is seen as the name of the holistic transnational global community. Such an inclusive and all-encompassing notion necessarily includes all the realities of the world and there is nothing that is outside of *tian xia* (天下无外, Zhou and Jiao, as cited in Nordin, 2016, 48). On the basis of this vision of *tian xia*, which necessarily includes opposites and differences, in short, the diversity of the world, Fang Xiaojiao links the idea of *tianxianism* (天下主义) with the theory of harmony, and the latter represents the way the all-encompassing *tian xia* works to harmonize all the opposites in their differences. This sort of ontological insight without a doubt draws from the Daoist concept of the Way (*dao*). The key author, whose understanding of *tian xia* was essential to the formation of the present-day Chinese political cosmology (Nordin, 2016, 48–49), which is itself the basis for the Belt and Road programme, is Zhao Tingyang. In the programme part of *The System of Tian Xia* (天下体系, Zhao 2005) he establishes a vision of the Chinese understanding of the world as a global holistic reality and places it opposite the supposedly Euro-American or “Western” vision of the world as a cluster of national states.

3 Harmonization of manifoldness

The above-mentioned theory of the new (or old) model of alternative globalization can help us understand how the programme of the Belt and Road, which was outlined by Xi Jinping during his term in office, attaches itself content-wise to the heritage of its predecessors, i.e. the idea of harmonic society. In the action plan, it is precisely the question of how to solve and coordinate between the different interests of the cooperating agents of this mammoth project that is given the most attention. During the terms of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao (Motoh 2012) the idea of harmonization was mostly imagined as the answer to the internal problems facing China, which were brought about by the extremely rapid economic growth of the previous two decades – for example social stratification, corruption and environmental crises. These were the problems that were to be solved through the effort to build a harmonic society (和谐社会), which was introduced by Hu and Wen almost as a slogan for their political terms. However, in the context of China’s rise in the international political space, this vision of a harmonic society grows from a vision of solving societal problems into an almost ontological principle of the characteristically “Chinese” solving of opposites. Sixty years

after Mao Zedong's famous essay on the *Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (关于正确处理人民内部矛盾的问题, 1957), which predicted a strict handling of the enemies of the people and a democratic solving of oppositions among those, who would manage to avoid this label, Xi Jinping's vision of dealing with opposition reaches towards a completely different historical reference. Hu Jintao's doctrine of harmonic society was itself already based upon the differentiation of the two different sorts of unity that can be achieved. The classical reference for this understanding is Confucius' *Analects* (Zi lu, 23):

君子和而不同，小人同而不和。

The noble person seeks harmony not sameness; the petty person seeks sameness not harmony.

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Oneness, sameness, uniformity – *tong* is the state before things begin to separate; it is the oneness based on no differences manifesting yet. In contrast, harmony is a concept that in the ontological chronology is placed at the “end” of this process; it represents the unity that is formed through coordination and therefore harmonization of already existing and formed differences.

In Confucius' case the master is expressing his preference for coordination between opinions in contrast with an unreflected and undifferentiating acquiescence. Meanwhile, the present-day revival of the notion of harmonization addresses the unavoidable problem of how to coordinate between these different interests, opinions, visions and strategies of the different states and regions along the branches of the projected Belt and Road. This theoretical framework is most explicitly presented in the third part of the action plan, titled “Principles” (共建原则). It is arranged into five paragraphs. In the first paragraph it sums up the way in which the plan is based on one of the basic principles of Chinese foreign policy, i.e. “the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” (Motoh 2015), which are: respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state (尊重各国主权和领土完整), mutual non-aggression (互不侵犯), mutual non-interference in internal affairs (互不干涉内政), peaceful coexistence (和平共处), and equality and mutual benefit (平等互利). It then sums up the basic functioning principles which within the framework of the initiative all relations ought to be based on.

The first of these principles is the “openness for cooperation” (开放合作). It is clear that with its name and routes the initiative largely follows or models itself on the historical Silk Road; however an important part of the action plan's rhetoric is precisely the openness of the projected programme, which

on the one hand prevents competition among the individual regions and cities (e.g. ports) taking part in the initiative, while on the other also provides a space of flexibility, where China's plans can be adapted to the changing economic and political conditions in China and the international space. Openness for cooperation also means a step towards the meta-national or trans-national character of the Belt and Road:

(...) 各国和国际、地区组织均可参与，让共建成果惠及更广泛的区域。

(...) is open to all countries, and international and regional organizations for engagement, so that the results of the concerted efforts will benefit wider areas.

The next principle directly pertains to the organizing of relations among the numerous factors and agents of the project. The basic principle of these relations is "harmoniousness and inclusivity" (和谐包容). Largely in the spirit of the Five Principles, this principle also demands tolerance towards the differences between "civilizations":

倡导文明宽容，尊重各国发展道路和模式的选择，加强不同文明之间的对话，求同存异 (...)

[This principle] advocates tolerance among civilizations, respects the paths and modes of development chosen by different countries, and supports dialogues among different civilizations on the principles of seeking common ground while shelving differences (...)

At this juncture, the vision is still quite unclear; however, its intention is much clearer. In the almost Huntingtongesque rhetoric about the differences between civilizations, we can recognize an echo of certain authors of the theory of harmony, especially Zhang Liwen. On the basis of Huntington's vision of a world of several different civilizations, Zhang establishes his theory of the harmonizational nature of the East Asian civilization, which is supposed to set opposite the clash of civilizations that Huntington writes about (2005), a vision of the world where civilizational differences are coordinated in the process of harmonization.

The next principle is of a more pragmatic nature, but for obvious reasons it is a necessary ingredient of any Belt and Road programme *credo*. The principle of being bound to the "market operation" (市场运作) emphasizes the fact that activities pertaining to the Belt and Road will follow market laws and international standards.

The last of the listed principles goes back to the repertoire of contemporary Chinese political thought, as it expresses an obligation to the “win-win” (互利共赢) principle, i.e. principle of mutual benefit:

兼顾各方利益和关切，寻求利益契合点和合作最大公约数，体现各方智慧和创意，各施所长，各尽所能，把各方优势和潜力充分发挥出来。

It accommodates the interests and concerns of all parties involved, and seeks a conjunction of interests and the “biggest common denominator” for cooperation so as to give full play to the wisdom and creativity, strengths and potentials of all parties.

The question which the action plan gives no direct answer to, but which inevitably raises the issue of cooperation and harmonization, is which political subjects are the bearers of this initiative. In the above cited passage we can see that the plan is supposed to include the various countries along the routes, regional and international organizations, as well as looser entities, such as “people” and “civilizations”. Within this scope we can recognize the application of the transnational idea of *tian xia*, but it is not made clear from anything that is written in the text how this also applies to China, which always takes part in the initiative as an integral whole. To make a long story short, we find no regionalization or particularization in the action plan.

4 Cosmology and practice?

The action plan, based on the structural foundations of the new Chinese political cosmology, of course predicts a bright future for the partners in the initiative. The closing paragraph, in which there appears in an interesting way a double meaning of the term road/path (*lu*), does not leave much doubt about this:

“一带一路”是一条互尊互信之路，一条合作共赢之路，一条文明互鉴之路。只要沿线各国和衷共济、相向而行，就一定能够谱写建设丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路的新篇章，让沿线各国人民共享“一带一路”共建成果。

The Belt and Road cooperation features mutual respect and trust, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, and mutual learning between civilizations. As long as all countries along the Belt and Road make concerted efforts to pursue our common goal, there will be bright prospects for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, and the people of countries along the Belt and Road can all benefit from this initiative.

The bloated rhetoric of the official programme texts of course plays its part and has its purpose. Only by placing the Belt and Road Initiative within the conceptual framework of the new political cosmology and theoretical models of alternative globalization can we understand which of these high-flying words might signify an important paradigmatic shift. As mentioned already, it all pertains to the question of how many of these bold ideas fit within the real relations of power in the places and regions where systemic efforts towards establishing the Belt and Road are already under way. Moreover, analysis does not allow us to truly establish whether the cosmological or philosophical structures only play the part of a sophisticated propagandist tool. The dilemma of whether the Belt and Road rhetoric is simply a mask for the realpolitik plans for domination over the three continents of the Old World and the connections between them is not as easily put to rest as many critics of the Chinese globalization, especially North American authors, might believe. The solution to this problem would first demand an answer to the unanswerable question of what is the causal connection between the economic-political reality and the ideological structure? And for contemporary Chinese history it is often possible to show that the ideational structure influences the reality of the economic-political relations at least as much as the other way around, while the border between them is often impossible to define.

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