

Building a Solid Bridge between Chinese and Western Cultures: Commentary on Wu Di's Comparative Studies in Poetry

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Abstract: Wu Di's comparative studies of Chinese and Western poetry focus on two interrelated considerations: the distinctive artistic appeal of poetic texts and the cultural exchanges between the East and the West. These exchanges are evident in the mutual appreciation of civilizations, which is reflected in the significant artistic discipline of poetry. In his monographs, such as *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* and *Studies on English Metaphysical Poetry*, Wu Di explores important issues in British poetry and examines the subtle relationship between Chinese and Western poetry, along with its complex influences, all showcased through his keen philosophical thinking and exquisite writing style. Furthermore, he offers an insightful account of the structural and artistic differences between Chinese and Western poetry, as well as their spiritual integration, particularly through the practice of poetry translation. Wu Di has made a commendable effort to build a solid bridge between Chinese and Western cultural exchanges by studying poetic texts from both traditions, which deserves recognition and praise.

Keywords: Wu Di; Chinese and Western poetry; comparative studies; cultural exchanges

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标题：构筑中西文化交流的坚实桥梁：吴笛的中西诗歌比较研究

内容摘要：吴笛先生的中西诗歌比较研究，不仅基于诗歌文本的独特艺术魅力，更基于中西文化交流以及在诗歌这一重要艺术门类中所体现的文明互鉴。他的专著，如《比较视野中的欧美诗歌》《英国玄学派诗歌研究》等，以敏锐的哲思和细腻的笔法，论及英国诗歌中的重要命题以及中西诗歌之间的微妙关系和复杂影响。他还从诗歌翻译的具体实践出发，对于汉语诗歌与西方诗歌在结构艺术上的不同之处，以及精神层面的相融相通，作了出色的论述。吴笛先生以切身的努力，以中西诗歌文本为研究对象，构筑起了中西文

化交流的坚实桥梁。

关键词：吴笛；中西诗歌；比较研究；文化交流

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Wu Di (also known as Deyi Woody) is a prominent scholar recognized both domestically and internationally. His acclaim stems not only from his extensive publications but also from his academic insight, multi-dimensional approach, and cross-disciplinary research, all of which have significantly contributed to the field of foreign literature studies. Wu Di leads a major project funded by the National Social Sciences Foundation titled “Studies on the Formation and Dissemination of Foreign Literature Canons.” In addition, he has completed several other projects, including “Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry” and “Studies in European and American Poetry from the Perspective of Eco-Criticism.” His research interests are broad, encompassing literary theories, literary criticism, comparative studies, and the interpretation of literary texts. Over the past 20 years, Wu Di has made remarkable contributions to poetry and poetics, particularly in the comparative analysis of Chinese and Western poetry.

This paper primarily focuses on his two monographs, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* and *Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry*, to highlight Wu Di’s impact on the comparative research of Chinese and Western poetry and his contributions to cultural exchanges between the East and the West.

I. “ABC Metaphor” and the Exchange of Chinese and Western Poetry

Wu Di’s study of European and American poetry highlights not only the unique artistic charm of Western poetry but also the cultural exchanges between the East and the West, as well as the mutual appreciation of civilizations reflected in this important artistic discipline.

In April 2023, during a gathering hosted by Mr. Burns, the U.S. Ambassador to China, Wu Di introduced a thought-provoking metaphor using the English alphabet to describe cultural exchanges between China and the United States. He proposed that if “A” stands for America and “C” represents China, then what does the letter “B” signify in this context? Wu believes that “B” stands for “Bridge.” He emphasized that by strengthening cultural exchanges and communication between China and the United States, we can reinforce this bridge. This ABC metaphor offers valuable

insight.

This kind of metaphor between Chinese and American cultures appeared in Wu Di's writings long ago. In his monograph entitled *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry*, when discussing the relationship between the American poet Walt Whitman and Chinese literature, he uses the metaphor of a "bridge" and writes, "Whitman's poetry is undoubtedly deeply influenced by the classical Chinese poetry, but in turn, it has exerted a similarly obvious effect on the contemporary Chinese literature. This phenomenon is evident in the cultures of all peoples, which is indeed worthy of note and study in the cultural exchanges of various nationalities, and in a sense, it serves to build a bridge between classical Chinese culture and modern culture" (Wu, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 369).

Wu Di is committed to fostering a robust interconnectivity between Chinese and Western cultural exchanges, particularly through an in-depth examination of Chinese and Western poetic traditions. In his book *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry*, Wu Di examines the intricate relationship between Chinese and Western poetry, as well as the profound impact of philosophical thinking and writing style. "It would be remiss not to consider the influence of exchanges between Western poetry and Eastern culture on their development. The mutual exchanges and influences between Eastern and Western poetry also play an important role in the development of human culture, to some extent" (Wu, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 268).

In addition to providing a summary of the cultural influence resulting from the interaction between Chinese and Western poetry in a broader sense, Wu Di also illustrates this influence by using specific poetic trends, schools of poetry, and genres of poetry as examples. To demonstrate the influence of Western poetry on Chinese poetry, he initiates the discussion with an analysis of Romantic, Symbolist, and Imagist poetry. He argues that these genres not only play a pivotal role in the advancement and transformation of European and American poetry but also exert a profound impact on the development of Eastern literature.

In his analysis of the modern Chinese poet Dai Wangshu's poem "Rainy Lane," Wu Di examines the characteristics of Western symbolism and its correlation with musical elements within the poem. He draws our attention to the utilization of natural imagery in this poem and its capacity to evoke a musical quality through techniques such as repetition and superimposed lines. Wu Di emphasizes that these artistic techniques create a harmonious and beautiful rhythm, enhancing the lyrical color of the poem and underscoring the symbolic meaning of the "lilac-like" girl as the embodiment of beauty in a somber and solitary environment. Wu Di's analysis

is characterized by a rational and insightful approach, which is both profound in its thinking and keen in its perception.

In the context of Romanticism, Wu Di makes a significant reference to the impact of Guo Moruo's seminal work, *The Goddess*. Composed primarily in 1920, Guo Moruo's anthology *The Goddess* reflects the tenets of "constant destruction" and "constant creation," as espoused by Western Romantic poets such as Shelley. The fundamental spirit of *The Goddess* can be defined as a process of creation and destruction, whereby the old is discarded to facilitate the emergence of a new self. This bears resemblance to the English Romantic poet Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," in which the central figure is both the "destroyer" and the "creator." Furthermore, Wu Di identifies an ideological connection, proposing that "the majestic style and belief in victory expressed in Guo Moruo's poetry, the artistic 'borrowing of metaphors,' the ideological 'doctrine of reincarnation' and 'reverence for the self' and so on, are all very closely related to the Western poetry" (*Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 302).

The interrelationships between different poetic traditions are not unidirectional; rather, they are reciprocal, a phenomenon that is particularly prevalent in the domain of poetry. Wu Di is profoundly affected by this and he not only addresses the influence of Romanticism and Symbolism poetry on modern Chinese poetry, but also the impact of Chinese poetry on Western poetry. In Chapter 19, entitled "The Influence of Classical Chinese Poetry on Imagism," Wu Di posits that the influence of classical Chinese poetry on imagist poetry can be primarily attributed to three key factors: visual consciousness (sense of picture), mood, and language style. The characteristic of using "absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (Pound 4) in imagist poetry is believed to be deeply inspired by Chinese poetry, as Chinese characters are hieroglyphs and possess strong visual effects.¹

A considerable number of classical Chinese poems possess a pronounced visual impact, largely due to the distinctive role of hieroglyphs. In the extensive corpus of Chinese poetic art, poetry and painting have reached a state of harmonious unity, as Su Shi once observed, "In painting or in poetry, the same pursuit is freshness and spontaneity" ("诗画本一律, 天工与清新") (Su 211). In particular, the concept of the "realm" as it pertains to mood in classical Chinese poetry has exerted a notable influence on the Imagist school of poetry. Accordingly, Wu Di posits that the emphasis of classical Chinese poetry on the "realm of the selfless" bears some resemblance to the Imagists' emphasis on objective presentation and opposition to

1 See Wu Di, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry*, Beijing: Writers' Publishing House, 2004, 306.

subjective emotions.

A distinctive feature of classical Chinese poetry is its ability to evoke a sense of beauty and tranquility. An ostensibly objective description of natural scenery is replete with thoughts and emotions, leaving a lasting impression and an enduring charm. This has served as a source of inspiration for Imagist poets.

In the context of cultural exchanges, there is a mutual influence between Western and Chinese poetry. Wu Di thinks that the Western Imagist movement, which has been shaped by classical Chinese poetic traditions, has also exerted an influence on 20th century Chinese literature. In particular, the renewed focus on poetic imagery has been enriched by the influence of Imagist poetry. “This multifaceted influence is not merely a reiteration, but rather a deliberate intertextuality with substantial cultural exchange implications” (Wu, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 320).

Furthermore, poetic or literary exchanges entail a more profound level of cultural exchanges, encompassing a spiritual dimension of communion. In his study of Western Romantic poetry and the corresponding ecological criticism, Wu Di has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the concept of “seeking common ground while reserving differences” in the spiritual aspect of cultural exchanges between the East and the West. He observes that “Concerning the relationship between humanity and the natural world, the principal tenet of Chinese culture is one of interiority and homogeneity. Western dualism gives rise to a confrontational and conflictual relationship between humanity and the natural world, whereas Chinese monism fosters a harmonious coexistence between the two. However, as a result of the intermingling of Eastern and Western cultures and the ongoing evolution of ideas and circumstances, there have been notable shifts in the relationship between humanity and the natural world in both Eastern and Western cultures. Western ecocriticism, which prioritizes the pursuit of a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world, draws upon this connotation of Chinese culture” (*Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 269).

It is obvious that using poetry as a medium to explore the cultural exchanges between East and West in terms of poetic forms, styles, themes, and schools of thought is of great importance in building a solid “bridge” between Chinese and Western cultural exchanges.

II. Sensitivity in Perception and a Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Poetical Texts

In his books, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* and *Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry*, Wu Di provides a thorough examination of poetic

themes, poetic art, and rhythms in both Eastern and Western poetry. He illustrates the integration of human cultures through a proper comparative study.

For instance, in his thematic comparisons, Wu Di analyses such themes as “Carpe Diem,” “life and death,” “female world,” “peace and war,” “love” and “the self” etc. In the two books, he provides detailed and in-depth discussions of these themes in both Eastern and Western poetry. Wu Di argues that “Carpe Diem” is a universal theme in both Eastern and Western poetry from a philosophical perspective. He points out that although the term “Carpe Diem” was first used by the Roman poet Horace and has been an important theme in Greco-Roman literature, this theme is not a specialty of Western poetry. Many ancient Chinese poems also emphasize this theme, highlighting the similarities and differences in its expression across different cultural backgrounds. Wu Di takes the Tang Dynasty poem “Gold Thread Coat” as an example to show that “Carpe Diem” is a common theme that embodies the awareness of life and the spirit of secularism, albeit with specific manifestations in poems from different cultural traditions. In “Gold Thread Coat” Du Qiuniang, the poet of the Tang Dynasty, writes:

I adjure you, sir, not to prize your coat of gold thread;
I adjure you, sir, to prize the time of youth.
When the flower opens and is ready for plucking, it should straightway be plucked;
Do not delay until these no flower, and pluck an empty twig. (Davis 24)¹

In his books, Wu Di compares the poem with the 17th century English metaphysical poet Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time” and the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora’s “While to Contend in Brightness with Thy Hair.” He argues that one of the distinctive techniques of these poems is the use of floral imagery as a metaphor for expressing the theme of “Carpe Diem.”

The analysis of the poem is highly relevant: “The poem emphasizes the importance of cherishing time and not missing out on the youthful years. The flowering season is short and youth is fleeting. The poet openly declares that there is no need to hesitate to boldly enjoy real life, otherwise one will only find oneself in the situation of ‘plucking an empty twig’” (Wu, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 52).

Wu Di’s analysis of the poems on this subject is very convincing from every point of view. It shows an in-depth study based on a keen perception of the poems in

1 劝君莫惜金缕衣，劝君惜取少年时。花开堪折直须折，莫待无花空折枝。

terms of conception, wording, philosophy, and other aspects. He carefully examines the structure of the poem and finds that the ancient Chinese poem “Gold Thread Coat” is very similar to Góngora’s “While to Contend in Brightness with Thy Hair.” In both poems, the first part uses imperative sentences to urge the other person to enjoy life, while the last line expresses, in sharp contrast, the decaying state of “the future.”

In terms of wording, Wu Di posits that classical Chinese poetry is characterized by a greater degree of subtlety and euphemism, whereas Western poetry tends to be more impassioned, uninhibited, and forthright in its expression of the same theme of “Carpe Diem.”

With a comparative study of Eastern and Western Poetry on the theme of “Carpe Diem” on one hand, Wu Di, on the other hand, puts this theme at a macro-level to outline the evolution of its implications and connotations under different cultural backgrounds in different times. He points out that the idea of “Carpe Diem” appeared in poetry a long time ago, and that “in its development and evolution, it has been closely connected with various trends of thoughts in different ages throughout the world” (*Studies on English Metaphysical Poetry* 30). Before the Renaissance, the theme of “Carpe Diem” was confined to such topics as romantic love and fine wine, persuading people to enjoy secular life and this life, which lacks deep philosophical thoughts and takes on a pessimistic outlook though it has a somewhat progressive tendency. During the Renaissance and the century following it, greatly benefiting from social innovations, religious reforms, achievements of science, and the further development of humanist thoughts, this theme is endowed with a strong progressive color of anti-feudalism, anti-religion, and anti-abstinence. “Carpe Diem” emphasizes that people should cherish this life and secular life because of a transient life and flying time. In the book *Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry*, Wu Di takes Andrew Marvel’s “To His Coy Mistress” as an example, and makes a deep analysis, pointing out that the poet stresses the importance of enjoying life here and now by his deductive reasoning. Wu Di thinks that this poem is a deep meditation on life though it is seemingly dedicated to his “coy mistress,” giving the poem a philosophical meaning.

As far as philosophical meaning is concerned, Eastern poetry expresses the theme of “Carpe Diem” with profound depth. Wu Di argues that the connotation of this theme is not a negative view of the world in general, but rather a specific manifestation of a positive philosophical life. “This expression goes beyond literature and plays a crucial role in the conflicts between human studies and theology, secularism and the idea of afterlife, as well as between feudalism and

humanism in the history of human thoughts, and has significant implications” (Wu, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 41).

Moreover, *Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry* focuses on the theme of the female world with its sharp sensitivity and in-depth sight. Wu Di takes Katherine Philips’s poem “A Retir’d Friendship. To Ardelia” as an example, and through deep textual analysis, points out that this poem expresses a kind of women’s idealistic tendency, hoping to run away from the political society, return to nature, and enjoy love and friendship, which to a certain degree let people hear women’s voice that belongs to the women of that time. In that patriarchal society, the world that women picture for themselves tended to be too idealistic, “the female world in the English metaphysical poetry is outlined anyway mainly by those male poets” (Wu, *Studies on English Metaphysical Poetry* 102). Unfortunately, the male voice expresses a kind of desire to dominate the women. They adopt the same model of discourse, that is, to persuade the women to have their hands tied and wait to be captured, completely disregarding women’s free will, thus leading to a confrontational female world. To this, Katherine Philips makes a reply in her poem “An Answer to Another Persuading a Lady to Marriage” and discloses the inequality between men and women in an ironical approach.

As it is, *Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry*, with John Donne’s poem “Good Morrow” as an object of textual analysis, shows women’s yearning and pursuit of equality between men and women through the imagery of “two hemispheres.” With an in-depth textual analysis of many metaphysical poems, Wu Di puts forward his view that the female world in English metaphysical poems is complex, changeable, and confrontational. “Behind the complex, conflictual and strange mood that the metaphysical poets hold toward the women there hides a kind of obvious patriarchal consciousness” (Li 171), but the exquisite language, the profound thoughts, and rich rhetorical devices in the metaphysical poems lead us readers into a wonderful realm and allows us to appreciate their artistic charm.

Whether “Carpe Diem” or “female world,” themes in both Eastern and Western poetry have been developed and enriched with the progress of society. Wu Di concludes the scope of the themes, saying that it no longer focuses solely on romantic love between men and women, but goes further to explore the existential value of the individual life. It delves into various topics such as human society, war and peace, and the mystery of existence, etc. Through a comparative study and impact research both at a macro and micro level, Wu Di points out that since the Renaissance, the theme of “Carpe Diem” which seemingly belongs to Western poetry is found to be closely associated with Eastern literature and cultures. The

mutual influence and reference between Eastern and Western poetry helps to push forward the development of world literature and world civilization. In my opinion, Wu Di's analysis appears to be unique and insightful.

III. The Ideal Presentation of the Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Prosody

Problems of prosody mainly belong to the category of poetic creation. The comparison of Chinese and Western poetic rhymes primarily belongs to the category of comparative prosody. This type of study involves comparing different types of literary genres and different languages. The specific research categories involved in this comparison tend to include the following: 1) the comparative study of a poetic meter; 2) the comparative study of rhyming schemes; and 3) the comparative study of poetic forms and styles. In *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry*, there is an ideal presentation of a comparative study of Western and Eastern prosody.

As far as the comparison of poetic meter is concerned, it involves studying different poetic meter systems from around the world. Professor Fei Bai, in his wonderful book *The Outline of the History of World Poetry*, identifies six main metrical systems of world poetry, which are considered to be more scientific. These include the long and short syllable system, the accentual system, the pure syllabic system, the accentual-syllabic system, the syllabic-tonic system, and the free verse system.¹ These metrical systems are really important and have their peculiar focuses in poetry from different countries, but they're not fixed, instead, they change as poetry evolves and develops. Take free verse, for instance. It took off with the advent of modern poetry and can be seen in the works of poets from all over the globe.

When it comes to comparing the meter and rhyming scheme of Chinese and Western poems, Wu Di really shines! He says, that although Chinese poetry doesn't have any corresponding meters like iambic pentameter, it does have some lovely forms of Ping and Ze (level and oblique tones) in modern-style poems, which are formed by matching tones with each other. This is done artistically, using the "flat voice, rising voice, falling voice, and entering voice" to form the format of pentameter, heptameter, and quatrain (Jueju). Similarly, since there is no concept of "foot" (音步) in Chinese, some poetry translators and researchers have tried to replace it with "pause" (顿).²

1 See Fei Bai, *The Outline of the History of World Poetry* (Modern Volume), Guilin: Lijiang Publishing House, 1989, 1600-1610.

2 See Wu Di, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry*, Beijing: Writers' Publishing House, 2004, 175.

When it comes to metrics, Wu Di believes that it's all about cultural exchanges. In the translation of poetry from Western languages into Chinese, understanding and capturing the rhythmic essence of the original is crucial to conveying its full meaning. Wu Di is impressed by the translation of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* by Tu An, Pushkin's *Yevgeny Onegin* by Wang Zhiliang, and *Anthology of British Victorian Poetry* by Fei Bai, as well as Xu Yuanchong's translation of Chinese poems into English. He thinks these translations show that full use can be made of the strengths of the target language in getting across exactly what the original poem means. In his translations, he tries his best to keep the formal structure and the semantic richness of the poems, including their rhyming schemes, just as they were in the original.

Based on what is discussed above, it can be said that the translation of poetry succeeds as an efficacious method of fostering intercultural understanding between Chinese and Western civilizations. The translation of Western poetry into Chinese serves to showcase and promote Chinese culture on an international scale. This principle also applies to the translation of Chinese poetry into foreign languages. In the Western world, as early as the 20th century, several poets recognized the value of drawing on Chinese poetic traditions and began their spontaneous translation of Chinese poems into Western languages. To guarantee that the translated version of the poem can be well received in the target language, translators from both Chinese and Western backgrounds frequently utilize the domestication strategy. This necessitates a considerable degree of rewriting and reconstruction of the original text to align it with the reading preferences of the target audience. This strategy is consistent with the essential characteristics of translating literary classics. A key aspect of the essence of literary classics lies in their ability to be adaptable and translatable. If a classic work cannot be effectively translated or fails to resonate with readers of the translated language, it loses what Benjamin termed as the "eternal afterlife" (Benjamin 255) of the source language text.

In the translation of poetry, how to deal with rhetorical devices is one of the difficulties since people of different cultures tend to associate with different matters on the same linguistic expressions. In *Studies in English Metaphysical Poetry*, Wu Di puts forward his view on the translation of poetry with analogy and image as the research points. While discussing how to deal with metaphor in the process of translation in this monograph, he argues that it is much more difficult to handle since it is more obscure and hidden in poems, and it is not so easy for translators to find effective equivalents in another culture. Imagery is also one of the main rhetorical devices that often appear in poems. Greatly affected by natural science and geographic discovery of that time, the metaphysical poets are encouraged to use the imagery in

astronomy, geography, and nature to express their views and thoughts on society, politics, love, and life, which are so peculiar that it is very difficult to find equivalents in another culture or another language. For this situation, Wu Di says, “It is very important for translators to find objective equivalents in another culture in the process of translation, to associate sensitive intuition and inner feelings ingeniously, so that readers can follow what the poem implies and means without making logic reasoning or in-depth analysis” (Wu, *Studies on English Metaphysical Poetry* 139). Wu Di’s views greatly enlighten and inspire translators. Different cultures and languages may have different vehicles, so it is encouraging for translators to find objective equivalents as Wu Di advises so that the translated versions can be better received in the target audience.

In the field of prosody, Wu Di offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the structural nuances between Chinese and Western poetic forms. He places particular emphasis on the distinction between the structural unit of Chinese poetry (the word or Chinese character) and that of Western poetry (the syllable). He notes that some Western scholars regard each Chinese character as a vivid picture with deep meaning. They frequently equal Chinese characters to syllables. Nigel Fabb, for instance, asserts that “the earliest recorded Chinese verse (12th-7th centuries BC) is in 4-syllable lines, that later developed into 5-syllable and 7-syllable lines” (Fabb 255). However, Wu Di posits that “While the ‘syllable’ in Western poetry and the ‘word’ in Chinese poetry are both the smallest structural units of poetry, the connotation of ‘Chinese character’ is greater than that of ‘syllable.’ This is because, in English poetry, a syllable is merely a connection of sound categories, whereas in poetry, a Chinese character serves a dual function, both as a semantic component and as a sound connection” (Wu, *Comparative Studies in European and American Poetry* 371).

And in this field, scholars of Chinese poetry in the West have conducted fruitful explorations in the process of translation, with the purpose of liberating the traditional syllabic-accented meter system and thus introducing a novel structural unit. The pursuit of a high degree of integration between the structural units of Chinese and English poetry has, to some extent, prompted poetic and metrical transformations in prosody. These examples illustrate the appeal of East-West cultural exchanges through the medium of poetry.

Hu Shi once wrote in his article “The Concept of Literary Evolution and Theater Reform” that “literature sometimes evolves to a certain stage, comes to a stop and makes no more progress. It is only through contact with other literature that it can make comparisons, and either be influenced unconsciously or deliberately incorporate

the strengths of others: then and only then progress may continue [...]” (qtd. in Saussy 6). This is the significance of engaging in the comparative studies of Chinese and Western poetry. In a discussion of the role of literary translation, Wu Di cited the words of Aleksander Pushkin, who observed that translators serve as “couriers of the human spirit” (Yang and Woody 513). In this sense, Wu Di can be considered a cultural “courier.” He specializes in the field of comparative studies of Chinese and Western poetry, acting as an intermediary between the two cultures. His assiduous translations and research are intended to reinforce this bridge, which is commendable and worthy of recognition.

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