

Xinjiang and the Uyghur Question

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This contribution will deal with a topic that has been a feature in the “empire of lies” promoted by the small number of Western countries in the world in the last few years: Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in the People’s Republic of China. I will provide a Marxist framework, relying on Chinese Marxist analysis, of the situation in Xinjiang. The article has three main sections. The first presents some geographical and historical information concerning China’s population distribution and the strategically and economically important corridor from the populous eastern parts to what is now Xinjiang. The second part provides an account, via first-hand experience, of the preferential policies for minority nationalities in socialist countries such as China. The third part turns to the question of a Marxist approach to human rights and how these rights are protected and promoted in Xinjiang, as well as other areas in China.

Concerning Geography

To begin with geography. In recent years, China has stepped onto the centre of the world stage. As the Russians point out, China is a giant; it may not yet see itself as a giant, but it is. As a result, China’s regions, provinces, and autonomous regions are starting to become known around the world, but much still needs to be learnt. Let us focus on the overall geographical situation in China.



Diagram 1: Hu Huanyong Line (Hu 1935).

The map here is a copy of an original initially published in 1935. Notice the black line, which runs from Aihui (in Heilongjiang province) in the northeast to Tengchong (in Yunnan province) in the southwest. For this reason, it is sometimes called the Aihui-Tengchong line. These days, it is more commonly known as the Hu Huanyong line, since this name refers to the geographer who first identified the line almost 90 years ago in an article entitled “Population Distribution in China – with Statistical Tables and Density Maps” (Hu 1935). It is from this article that I have drawn the map, and we can see study’s concern from its title. What were his findings?

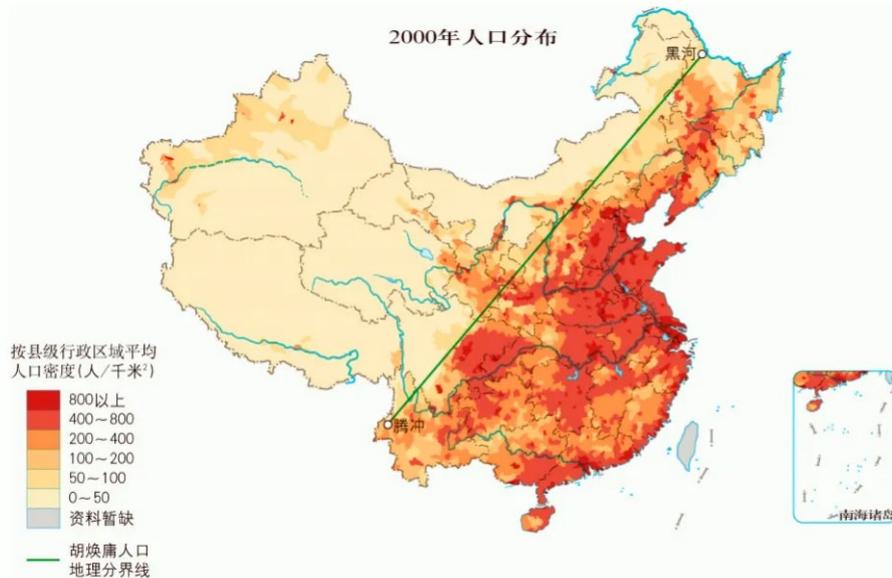


Diagram 2: Population Distribution in China (updated open source at baidu.com).

On the basis of a careful study of population data over the centuries, Hu Huanyong found that well over 90 percent of the Chinese population has historically flourished south-east of this line (the redder areas on the map above, updated to the year 2000). Further, political power has historically been located in the same zone. But there is a problem: most of the mineral resources and headwaters of the major rivers are northwest of the line, where less than 10 percent of the population lives. These are also border regions such as Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, and Tibet. The outcome: from earlier forms of the state until today, there has been a resolute focus on the unification of diverse areas. Historically, the only wars that China has fought have concerned the unification of its diverse areas. The state has focused from time immemorial to redistributing resources from the sparsely populated regions to those of population

density. Thus, the Chinese notions of harmony and stability, as well as the union of opposites, have always had a very concrete reference to the disparate regions of China.

There is another important geographical reality in China, which is known as the Hexi Corridor.



Diagram 3: The Hexi Corridor (source from author)

The red line on this map is the Hu Huanyong line, but it is the blue line in which I am interested: the Hexi Corridor. It runs from the eastern parts, along a natural corridor between high plateaus, in Qinghai to the south and in Inner Mongolia to the north. This natural corridor is 1200 kilometres in length and connects the eastern areas with what is now known as Xinjiang. The name “Hexi” simply means “West of the River,” the river in question being the Yellow River. In our time, the province of Gansu marks – by and large – the route of the corridor (the red part of the map). From a strategic and economic perspective, the Hexi Corridor is vitally important. Strategically, it has been a point of struggle for centuries and indeed millennia. A little over two millennia ago, the Western Han Dynasty managed to gain control in struggles with the Xiongnu and established the Western Regions Frontier Command; a millennium later it was the Tang Dynasty, who once again gained firm control of the whole route; but it only in the middle of the eighteenth century – almost 300 years ago – that the Qing Dynasty was able to include Xinjiang fully within China. Economically, it was precisely the Hexi Corridor that provided the initial route through China for the ancient Silk Road. By the time the route reached

Xinjiang, it took two paths, one in a southerly direction and the other in a northerly direction, before crossing into central Asia. It was along this route that Buddhism came into China, that the people now known as the Hui Nationality came from many parts further West, and indeed the way that advanced Chinese ideas passed into Western Europe to spur the European Enlightenment. And, of course, it was the absolutely vital trade route across the whole of Eurasia – silks, for example, had already made their way into Europe at the time of Julius Caesar of ancient Rome (Gan 2019, 263–70). Needless to say, the Hexi Corridor today is a linchpin of the new Silk Road, or the Belt and Road Initiative.

By now the reader should be able to see why Xinjiang is so important for China. Not only is it the major region on China's western border with a history of two millennia, but it also forms the end of the Hexi Corridor and the passage into Central Asia. Xinjiang has always been and will continue to be of utmost strategic, economic, and political importance.

Preferential Policies for Minority Nationalities

To begin this section with a story: Not long after the Kunming Railway Station massacre of March 2014, I was teaching a class in Beijing. The massacre was perpetrated by about a dozen Uyghur terrorists, who killed 31 people with knives and injured more than 140 others (this was one of thousands of such incidents in China since the 1990s). In my class was a young Uyghur student. She and her sister are both from Xinjiang and were studying in Beijing. During a presentation to the class, she made an impassioned speech. "Islam is a religion of peace and not violence," she said. "I am a Uyghur and am proud to be Chinese. In fact, the vast majority of Uyghur people see themselves as part of China and condemn the terrorists." Why did she feel that she needed to make this point to the class?

At the time many other people and nationalities in China distrusted the Uyghur, seeing them all as troublemakers and terrorists. I recall expressing a desire at the time to visit Xinjiang, and one of my colleagues said, "Don't go there, the situation is dangerous." The hard task for the local government in Xinjiang and the government in Beijing was to prevent this negative attitude to Uyghur people from spreading and cementing itself. In other words, there was a heavy focus on ensuring that all of the other nationalities respected Uyghur people and saw them as equally part of China.

Historical Development of the Policies

To go further: a major feature of all socialist countries since the earliest days of the Soviet Union has been preferential policies for minority nationalities.¹ These include high levels of autonomy in governance, economic support, fostering of minority languages, education, culture, and so on. We need to be careful here and avoid seeing the preferential policies for minority nationalities from Western colonialist perspective. These policies are not simply promoted by a government for minorities who are outside the structures of power; instead, the policies arise from the fact that minorities are very much embodied in the structures of governance.

Let us consider the history and enactment of the preferential policies in China in a little more detail,² since they provide the framework for China's response to the terrorism, extremism, and separatism that has been found in Xinjiang since the 1990s. Historically, we can see minorities' policies emerging already in the 1930s, in the context of the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance: "give the Meng, Hui, Zang, Miao, Yao, Yi, Fan, and all the other nationalities equal rights with the Han. Under the principle of joint resistance to Japan, they have the right to manage their own affairs, while at the same time uniting with the Han to establish a unified state" (Mao 1938, 506). By 1941 the Mongolian and Hui autonomous regions were established within the Red Areas (Fang 2015, 53–54). After liberation in 1949, the "Common Program" emphasised equality and unity between all nationalities, and stressed the need to establish autonomous regions where nationalities are concentrated. Note article 53 of the Common Program: "All minority nationalities have the freedom to develop their spoken and written languages, to maintain or reform their customs and religious beliefs. The people's governments shall assist the people of the minority nationalities in developing the construction of their political, economic, cultural and educational institutions" (CPPCC 1949, art. 53; see also National People's Congress 2018, art. 4). Clearly, nationalities have been an integral part of the political structure from the beginning. However, the process of identifying nationalities required extensive research by teams across China during the 1950s (Ma 2012), with the result that 56 official *minzu*,³ were recognised, including the majority Han and 55 other groups, with the latter ranging in size from almost 20 million to a few thousand.

¹ The most comprehensive work in English on the Soviet Union's policies is by Terry Martin (2001), although it is more useful for the massive amount of archival information than the author's conclusions.

² By far the best works in English on China's nationalities are by Mackerras (2003) and Hao (2020). In Chinese, the key study by Ma Rong (2007) set the agenda for a whole new level of research.

³ *Minzu* translates the Russian *natsional'nost*, with the meaning of nationality or nation. It is not the same as an "ethnic group," for which *zuqun* is used.

Culture and Education

In what follows, I will focus on the four features of the nationalities policy mentioned in the “Common Program,” although in this order: culture and education, politics, and economy. In terms of culture and education, local languages are fostered in media, literature, and in schools. Local customs, rituals, festivals, and especially religions are not merely permitted but actively supported, with temples, churches, and mosques constructed and maintained with state funds. In many cases, the minorities are far more religious than the Han majority, since often cultural identity is connected with religion (for example, the primary identification of the Hui Nationality is Islam). In schools, children have classes in their local language, alongside the obligatory classes in Mandarin that is needed for communication across China and for work. In regard to universities, there are *minzu* universities in all regions, and students are assisted – through quotas and extra points – for university entrance examinations (*gaokao*). These policies are well-established in China and minorities attest to their effectiveness. But they are not fixed and unchangeable, especially in light of the rapid pace of development in China. Ma Rong (2010) identifies a tension between “protecting the traditional culture” and “realising the modernisation” of minorities, especially in terms of the mobility of labour and participation in political, cultural, and economic life.

Governance

The question of governance has two levels, the one local and the other country-wide. Locally, autonomous regions and prefectures number almost 160 in China, with significant autonomy in policy development. Minorities are also assured representation in the local level People’s Political Consultative Conferences and can be elected to the local People’s Congresses. At a country-wide level, all minority nationalities are represented in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), along with delegates who may – through initial direct elections and then higher-level indirect elections – become delegates in the annual National People’s Congress. If we include the fact that people from minority nationalities are also members of the CPC, with the percentage growing to the point that it is almost equivalent to the percentage of minority nationalities among the population as a whole (8.14 percent), then it is clear that minority nationalities are structurally integral to the whole political system in China.

However, it is at the level of governance that a contradiction arises, between autonomy and unity. How does the significant emphasis on autonomous decision-making and policy development relate to the unified strength of the country as a whole? Western

imperialist efforts to exploit the autonomy of minority nationalities' regions are by no means new. The focus on Xinjiang is only the latest wave of efforts that have at times included Tibet, Taiwan island, Hong Kong SAR, and other regions. Already in 1949, Zhou Enlai warned that the newly-liberated China should be on its guard: "Today the imperialists want to split Tibet, Taiwan and even Xinjiang; in this case, we hope that all nationalities do not listen to the provocation of imperialists" (Zhou 1949, 140). What has been the response in China to such efforts? While a few scholars have suggested that political autonomy for minorities should be downplayed and the term "nation" reserved only for China as a whole (Ma 2007; 2011; see also Zhang and Wei 2018), others continue to emphasise a Marxist dialectical approach of diversity in unity: the greater the autonomy, the greater the unity; the more people's lives are improved through the preferential policies, the more do they see themselves as part of the whole (Fei 1989; Wang 2009; 2010; Wu and Hao 2017, 4).

Economic Development

The final category of preferential policies concerns economic development, which not only reflects the Marxist emphasis on the economic base, but also leads to the analysis in the following section. As noted earlier, many of the minority nationalities in China live in remote border regions to the north-west of the Hu Huanyong Line, and as a result many of them have lagged behind in China's rapid economic development. Many have been the programs over the years to develop local economies and improve basic living conditions, with significant funding from the central government for all manner of projects, favourable conditions for the establishment of local enterprises, and so on. Those from minority backgrounds have been provided with favourable opportunities for study and work. It was these types of policies to which the student in my class was alluding. At the time, she came from a relatively poor region of China – parts of Xinjiang were then still mired in absolute poverty. The preferential policies had given her and her sister an opportunity to study in Beijing.

At the same time, the policies up to about a decade ago had fallen short of the mark. Uneven and unbalanced development remained a significant problem. While development had improved the lives of hundreds of millions in the "cradle" of Chinese civilisation, south-east of the Hu Huanyong Line, in the sparsely populated border regions poverty was still a problem less than a decade ago. In short, despite all of the efforts at economic assistance to these areas – including Xinjiang – the results remained unsatisfactory. Absolute poverty remained a major problem in remote and rural areas.

Marxist Human Rights

The economic question brings us to human rights. Let me begin with a quotation: the “people of the various ethnic groups in Xinjiang have seen great progress in the protection of their human rights” (SCIO 2017, 2). Yes, there are many minority nationalities in Xinjiang – 13 with historical presence and more than 40 today. But what is meant by rights, specifically human rights? For those of us who have been brought up in one of the few Western countries in the world – all former colonisers – “human rights” automatically brings to mind freedom of expression, assembly, and movement. I will not spend any time on this very limited sense of these Western liberal human rights, save to note that it is based on private property (Marx and Engels 1846, 208, 361–63; 1848, 498, 504).

The Marxist Tradition

There is, however, another tradition of human rights that arises from the Marxist tradition and is promoted vigorously in China. To explain: while the roots are anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic sovereignty (shared by all colonised countries), the core human right is the right to subsistence, to socioeconomic well-being, to common prosperity.

We can note key moments in the development of this approach, such as Engels’s point that the purpose of socialism is to guarantee “the subsistence of the proletariat” (Engels 1847, 102), or Stalin’s point that the core to all rights is freedom from exploitation. Rights are meaningless if a person is “haunted by the fear of being tomorrow deprived of work, of home and of bread” (Stalin 1936, 169). Instead, socialism seeks a “prosperous and cultured life” for all (Stalin 1934, 365; Supreme Soviet 1936, art. 131). We can note the slogan from the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet of the late 1920s and early 1930s: ensure that people have a roof over their heads, food, clothes, and warmth in winter, and then they will become communists. Or Deng Xiaoping’s point that “poor socialism” is not socialism at all, since the purpose of socialism is to raise the socio-economic well-being of all as a preparation for communism (Deng 1979, 235; 1986, 174). Today, of course, this approach to human rights is embodied in the core policy of “common prosperity.” If you would like to know more, there are many resources in China on this approach to human rights. Perhaps the primary resource is the massive amount of material – in both Chinese and English – at the website of the China Society for Human Rights Studies (www.chinahumanrights.org). Further, there is a rapidly increasing amount of accurate information on China, from translations of detailed scientific studies on the history, theory, and practice of human rights in China (Sun 2014; Chang et al. 2020; Hao 2020), to popular Vlogs by expats who now live in China.

In order to summarise what could be a much longer analysis (Boer In press), the following image may be useful:



Diagram 4: The Marxist Approach to Human Rights

Thus, the roots of any approach to human rights is anti-colonial or anti-hegemonic sovereignty, since rights are meaningless if a country is subjected to imperialist colonisation. The trunk is – as I have discussed – socio-economic well-being, and it is from this core right that all other rights flow. A question remains: do citizens of a socialist country need to wait until they have all been lifted out of poverty and achieve at least moderate prosperity before the flowering of civil, political, cultural, and environmental rights? Of course not, but the process is a gradual one. As the socio-economic conditions improve for urban and rural workers, more substantive rights become materially possible. They grow over time, along with improving living conditions. Or, as Fang Ning puts it, from a Marxist perspective, human rights are historical rather than innate, are granted by society rather than by nature, and are practical rather than ideal (Fang 2015, 107–11).

Xinjiang and Human Rights

What has this Marxist approach to human rights got to do with Xinjiang? Precisely because Xinjiang has been and continues to be so strategic and economically important, it has been plagued by periodic difficulties. However, the 1990s were crucial. At that time, currents of Islamic radicalism began to be promoted in some parts of the population and there was a rise in terrorist incidents. Weapons, explosives, and militants began crossing the mountainous borders along drug routes from the west, usually funded by Western

sources (Davis 2013, 102–3, 118). From the mid-1990s until five years ago, there had been thousands of terrorist incidents, mostly targeted at other Uyghur people (SCIO 2019).

Marxist analysis was deployed. To begin with, the immediate questions of safety, stability, and social harmony had to be addressed. A new governor with a reputation for getting things done was appointed to Xinjiang. The result: since 2017 there have been no terrorist incidents.

But how is this Marxist? Achieving social stability was simply a prerequisite for economic development. The analysis by many scholars and policy makers was that the root cause of the unrest and difficulties in Xinjiang was endemic poverty. Obviously, this is a direct application of the primary rights to economic well-being and development (SCIO 2021a, 4). With limited job opportunities, young people especially would be attracted to extremist views, and engage in separatist and terrorist activities. As a result of these conclusions, many angles were developed to improve the socioeconomic conditions. The quality of education was improved so as to enable young people to find jobs. This of course included ideological education in Marxism and religion – yes, some of the key teachers were Muslim imams. Job opportunities have also increased, with incomes rising at about 10 percent per year (SCIO 2021a, 12). Further, young CPC members volunteered to work in poor villages so as to develop targeted programs, in light of concrete conditions, so as to lift people out of poverty. Indeed, Xinjiang – where some of the most intractable poverty in China could be found – was finally declared free of poverty in all areas in late 2020 (Note that the Chinese definition of poverty and thus alleviation from poverty is more comprehensive than that the World Bank). More than 2.7 million in some of the remotest regions of China had been lifted out of poverty. This was, however, only the first step. Apart from putting in place measures to ensure that people do not fall back into poverty, the program now is to improve people's lives much further. Measures in the more remote areas include targeted efforts to ensure employment – based on the right to work – for workers from poor families, people experiencing difficulties in finding work, and rural women. A comprehensive welfare system has also been developed in the last decade, so much so that Xinjiang took the lead in China in terms of retirement pensions, and medical, work-related injury, and unemployment insurance.

Xinjiang's Population

It is also necessary to address here the topic of Xinjiang's population. Simply put, over the last 40 years the total population of Xinjiang has doubled. In 1978 there were 13.08

residents; and by 2020 the population was 25.85 million. When we focus on minority nationalities, we see a comparable population growth, as this table of census data shows.

Minority Nationalities' Population Growth in Xinjiang

Census	Year	Minority Nationalities' Population	Increase from Previous Census	CAGR from Previous Census ⁴
1st	1953	4,451,500	--	--
2nd	1964	4,948,900	497,400	0.97%
3rd	1982	7,797,500	2,848,600	2.56%
4th	1990	9,461,500	1,664,000	2.45%
5th	2000	10,969,600	1,508,100	1.49%
6th	2010	12,985,900	2,016,300	1.70%
7th	2020	14,932,200	1,946,300	1.41%

Diagram 5: Population Growth of Minority Nationalities in Xinjiang (SCIO 2021b, 5).

From the first census after liberation to 2020, the population of minorities in Xinjiang has more than trebled; and from the beginning of the Reform and Opening-Up, this population has doubled. Is the situation for the Uyghur any different? Not at all, for they too have doubled in number in the last 40 years.

Uyghur Population Growth Between National Censuses

Year of Census	Uyghur Population	Increase from Previous Census	CAGR from Previous Census
1953	3,607,600	--	--
1964	3,991,600	384,000	0.92%
1982	5,955,900	1,964,300	2.25%
1990	7,191,800	1,235,900	2.38%
2000	8,345,600	1,153,800	1.50%
2010	10,001,300	1,655,700	1.83%
2020	11,624,300	1,623,000	1.52%

Diagram 6: Population Growth of the Uyghur Minority (SCIO 2021b, 8).

⁴ CAGR refers to the Compound Annual Growth Rate.

Statistics are important, but they can get us only so far. Analysis provides a more nuanced understanding, which points out that there have been three main periods of population growth: low growth, due to high birth and death rates; high growth, due to high birth and low death rates; low growth, due to low birth and death rates (SCIO 2021b, 9–14). The middle period of high growth was due to vastly improved medical care, and a rapidly increasing life expectancy from a low of 30 in 1949. It was also due to the fact that smaller nationalities such as the Uyghur were exempted from the recently abolished one-child policy, and to the persistence of traditional cultural and religious assumptions concerning women and childbirth. In this context, it was assumed that a woman would have on average six children. The more recent period of lower population growth is due to significant economic development (as noted), and extraordinary progress in education. In 1949, only 19.8 percent of children were receiving education and only 10 percent were literate. Among these, no women were literate. Now, 98-100 percent of children receive education, and literacy is universal. Further, the vast improvement in public health has meant that women have access to a full range of health services, including prenatal and postnatal care, children's health, and family planning options. If we include the many employment opportunities for women, who now make up 47.43 percent of the workforce, it should be no surprise that young Uyghur women are making clearer choices about their lives, and that they prefer smaller families. The future is focused on quality population growth, with a robust economy, a full range of educational and employment opportunities, and healthy children.

The Belt and Road Initiative

In all of this, the most significant project is the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in neighbouring Kazakhstan in 2013 (Xi 2013). The BRI has many dimensions, but Xinjiang is a linchpin. Nearly all of the long-distance freight trains running across the Eurasian landmass – and there are thousands of these trains now – run through Xinjiang. Major oil and gas pipelines from central Asia run through Xinjiang. As a hub of the new Silk Road, Xinjiang's economy has been booming. While the figures for 2020 are a little lower due to the pandemic, for the last ten years, the economy in Xinjiang has grown at a rate of about 10 percent per year (SCIO 2021a, 12). And as a sign of all this, in 2018 and 2019 there were about 150 million visitors to Xinjiang, not merely from other parts of China, but also from other countries.

Social and economic development in Xinjiang

1. GDP, 2010-2020

(Billion yuan, 1 billion yuan ≈ \$154 million)

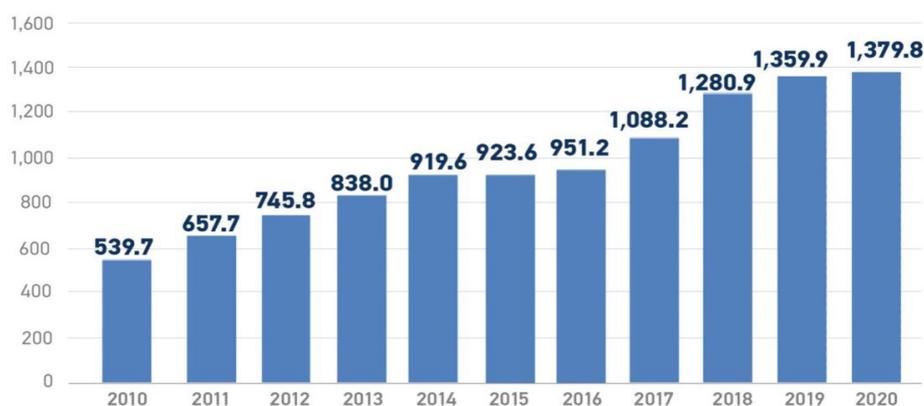


Diagram 7: Social and Economic Development in Xinjiang (Statistics Bureau of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region)

Conclusion

A question remains: why have the declining and fragmenting Western imperialists given up on the Dalai Llama and made Xinjiang the flavour of the month, deploying the old anti-communist playbook of “atrocious propaganda”? By now the answer should be obvious. As a precondition to all human rights, Xinjiang is at last realising the core Marxist human right to socioeconomic well-being, or common prosperity (SCIO 2021a, 11). For Western imperialists this is intolerable.

As a footnote: in 2016, Sinopec announced the discovery of massive oil and gas fields in the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, with more discovered in 2020. This is one of the largest reserves of oil and gas in Asia.

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