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LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

ASIA RISING

Making a difference in the Asian century

Comfort women: denialism continues

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La Trobe Asia

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A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Welcome to the second issue of *Asia Rising*, a publication showcasing some of the impressively diverse Asia related research coming from La Trobe University.

2016 has been a busy year so far for La Trobe Asia. We have greatly enjoyed hosting a number of public events, including a panel with high-profile Chinese academics on China's view of the rest of the world, and the 2016 Nancy Millis lecture in Microbiology, presented by La Trobe Asia advisory board member Professor Khatijah Yusoff.

In March we hosted a colloquium on humanities and social sciences research with visiting scholars from Kyushu University in Japan, a close partner of La Trobe's. I had the great pleasure of awarding our early career researcher small grant program and have just hosted our first La Trobe Asia Visiting Fellow in May. Behind the scenes, La Trobe Asia has also developed whole-of-university strategies for China and India and later this year will finalise strategies for Southeast Asia and Japan.

Within the pages of this publication you will find stories on a diverse range of research assisted by earlier La Trobe Asia grants. The topics include oral hygiene education in Nepal, corruption in Indonesia, comfort women in Northeast Asia, collaboration on x-ray crystallography with researchers in Japan, and an art therapy project which is thriving in Samoa. Many of these projects have also featured in our podcast, *Asia Rising*, as well as regular commentary on developments and issues in the Asian region.

To keep up to date with our upcoming news and events, be sure to stay in touch and sign up for the La Trobe Asia mailing list. As always, please don't hesitate to contact us if we can assist you in any way.

Nick Bisley

Listen to the podcast

Asia Rising is also the name of the podcast from La Trobe Asia, with news, views and general happenings in Asia's states and societies. Subscribe now on iTunes or Soundcloud to hear interviews with La Trobe University academics and guests on a wide range of Asian countries and topics.

Dr Meenakshi Gopinath (Founder and Honorary Director of WISCOMP)[R] talks to **Dr Jasmine-Kim Westendorf** (International Relations, La Trobe University) about involving women in conflict resolution.

ART AS THERAPY IN SAMOA

On the South Pacific Island nation of Samoa, twenty minutes drive from the capital city Apia, is the Tiapapata Art Centre.

Perched on a hillside and surrounded by jungle, it is here where victims of abuse learn to express themselves through art classes in drawing, pottery and woodblock as part of an ongoing art therapy program called Fa'alaiga o Lagona – Expressions of Emotion.

"It is here where thoughts are put into motion to express feelings that are repressed," explains Tupou Sili, a senior mental health nurse. "What is thought is revealed in action. This is the reason why they are creating these images - however many colours they use for the painting, these express the feelings that are buried within."

Mental health and well-being is a recent national focus in Samoa, and the idea of art therapy as part of the mental health promotion was a new initiative. With 200,000 citizens in the island country, the sense of community identity is strong, and cultural input became a central dimension to the project.

Two groups participate in the art therapy session. The Samoa Victims Support Group is a shelter for young women who suffered violence and trauma in the family environment, and the Goshen Trust provides support and rehabilitation service for people with depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and bipolar illnesses.

Dr Patricia Fenner co-ordinates the Art Therapy Program at La Trobe University, and was approached by the Asia-Australia Mental Health Program to run art therapy workshops for staff in the Samoan health care system.

"I'd never been to Samoa and when the call came through I had to look it up on a map," says Dr Fenner. "Working on this project has been a rewarding experience. I travelled to Samoa to advise and support the program, but I figured I was there to learn as much from them as they were from me."

Art therapy is a relatively new therapeutic discipline. It has its origins in mental health initiatives in the United States and the UK, and has strong links to Anglophone countries. Applying these principles in a Samoan context provided Dr Fenner with an interesting challenge.

"There's nothing like being in other cultures to actually drive home just how euro-centric and euro-dominant your discipline can be," She says. "Samoa has the same issues you would find in mental health in Australia or New Zealand - a lack of awareness and a lack of understanding as to what a mental health issue is."

"The notion of self within the Samoan context is a much more multi-dimensional one than we have here in Australia, where we are far more individualistic. The whole conceptualisation of what might be a mental health issue is different."

The project has taken care to involve the community in the approach, and incorporate local beliefs and practices into the art therapy groups. A public exhibition of the artworks was held in the foyer of a government building in Apia to increase public awareness of the program.

"It was important for the general community to actually see the capacity of people who might have been put to the side in some ways, not necessarily intentionally, but perhaps through lack of awareness," Dr Fenner says. "It's about giving these people a voice and allowing the community to see them as something other than victims. They've got a lot to say through their art."

Dr Fenner's experience has also encouraged her to incorporate culturally responsive practices into her art therapy courses at La Trobe University, and to pass on her findings in a practical sense. She's also had interest in adapting these successful practices in other countries in the South Asia Pacific nations.

"This is a growing area, there's no question about that. And each will be different, even though I would imagine there will be a lot of similarities as well." says Dr Fenner. •

Dr Patricia Fenner
SENIOR LECTURER ART THERAPY
Public Health

Indonesia's fight against corruption

In late 2015, the speaker of Indonesia's parliament Setya Novanto resigned in a corruption scandal, after the release of a leaked recording in which he tried to extort shares from the mining company Freeport.

Freeport was negotiating for a renewal of its contract for the biggest mine in Indonesia. Novanto was allegedly recorded boasting about his close relationship to President Joko Widodo, and tried to extort a 20 per cent stake in the mine.

"This is one of the biggest corruption scandals in Indonesia in recent years," says Dr Dirk Tomsa, a senior lecturer in La Trobe University's Department of Politics and Philosophy. "Setya Novanto is one of the most powerful politicians in the country and had a history of controversial involvement in other scandals, but he always escaped prosecution."

While high profile, this corruption scandal isn't unique in Indonesian politics. Tomsa says corruption can be found at every level of Indonesian government, including the local level. While it is notable that Novanto has resigned, Tomsa believes criminal charges are unlikely.

"There's no indication that this will be followed up despite all the evidence, and it's a reflection of what I examined at the local level. It all comes down to the resources you have to buy yourself out."

A BROKEN SYSTEM

Tomsa points to Indonesia's corruption problem originating long before the establishment of democracy in 1998. When President Suharto's military-dominated government transitioned to a conventional democracy, much of Indonesia's politics were decentralised to the provincial and district levels, giving local officials new powers and resources.

"These positions were often occupied by the same people who held them during Suharto's authoritarian regime," says Tomsa. "They had more powers than they knew how to handle, and any existing corrupt practices just carried over."

The problem has only gotten worse as the initial euphoria for change has abated. While there is increasing public pressure in Jakarta to deal with corruption in the Indonesian political system, prosecution at the local level often occurs in a seemingly arbitrary manner.

"The long arm of the law doesn't always reach the areas that are far away from Jakarta, and there is little capacity to deal with the problems at the provincial or district level, especially in the outer islands of Indonesia," says Tomsa.

"The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) is trying to work effectively at the local level, but lacks the resources or organisational influence. Many of the cases that have actually been addressed happened primarily through links to the national level."

If measured only by the conviction rate, the KPK's anti-corruption efforts over the last ten years appear to have been remarkably successful, but the sheer number of cases exposed indicates corruption levels have hardly been reduced. To make things worse, both parliament as well as the national police recently moved against the KPK to further restrict its powers and weaken it.

Given the constant stream of new cases, frequent tensions with national political institutions, and its own limited resources, the KPK often has to leave the local level to its own devices. The most scrutiny local politicians face is during election cycles in the form of smear campaigns from rival candidates. Tomsa believes this is not effective at getting at the root of the problem.

"Anyone uncovering the corruption of a political rival are likely corrupt themselves and just better at concealing it," he says. "Local prosecutors are usually ineffective, as they are either too inert, too incompetent, or too corrupt to initiate and complete an investigation."

"In Kendari, for example, the local Attorney General has been so inactive that even a judge at the local anti-corruption court expressed surprise at the low number of cases brought to court."

THE CLEAN INDIVIDUAL

The public desire in Indonesia for a political system free of corruption has had one notable outcome, with the 2014 election victory of Joko Widodo, a man with limited political experience from outside Jakarta's political elite. His campaign promoted him as a man of the people, and his victory in the presidential election was seen as a step away from the entrenched corruption in Indonesia.

"Widodo's election as a president reflects the public's desire for a saviour to clean up the system," says Tomsa. "While it gives Indonesia hope, it's also problematic. He can't do much without broader institutional and structural changes, and more than likely he'll disappoint the people, and become overburdened with massive expectations."

Tomsa believes that one step towards a solution could lie in reorganising the responsibilities of local executives and providing alternative opportunities for political parties to generate income. Relying on the KPK alone to uncover and prosecute corruption is of limited effectiveness.

"The problem in Indonesia is systemic," he says. "The prospects for fighting corruption at the local level are grim if all the fight is relying on is local elites exposing the wrongdoings of political rivals." •

RECOGNITION FOR

Japan and South Korea have a lot in common – they're both long established democracies, they're allies of the United States, and their economies are prosperous. Despite this the two have had remarkably poor relations since the close of World War II, and the issue of so-called 'comfort women' in particular has long been a sore point.

"In the Asia Pacific War between 1931 and 1945 the Japanese military operated and maintained a large number of 'comfort stations'. They were presented as a way to comfort and pleasure their soldiers, boost morale and placate the local population," says Dr Nicola Henry, a lecturer in Crime Justice and Legal Studies at La Trobe University. "Between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand women were coerced, forced, kidnapped, and otherwise recruited into a military sexual enslavement. This was enforced prostitution, and these women were treated horribly."

Dr Henry's research has focussed on the legal aspects of sexual violence and trauma. The challenges experienced by comfort women and their supporters in getting compensation or recognition for what they have suffered during war times have been a particular focus of her recent work.

On 28th December 2015, Japan and South Korea reached what they hope will be an agreement that will settle this divisive issue. Japan agreed to pay ¥1 billion into a fund supporting surviving victims, and on South Korea's part they agreed to refrain from publicly criticising Japan regarding the issue, and to remove a provocative statue from outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul.

In an official statement, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe "Expresses anew his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and physiological wounds as comfort women."

"The demands that have been placed on Japan by survivor activists and their advocates has been very much around getting a proper apology that acknowledges the involvement of the Japanese military and political leaders," says Dr Henry. "For a long time there's been calls for compensation, but this is fundamentally a diplomatic deal."

Japan has subsequently demanded the statue be removed from outside the embassy as an initial act of this deal, stating that the ¥1 billion will not be given beforehand. Citizens of Seoul are conducting a round-the-clock vigil to prevent the statue's removal.

Japan's statement and reaction indicate there is no admission of responsibility, and their official position is that no women were coerced to work in comfort stations during the conflict. In a recent panel session of the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Japan's Deputy Foreign Minister Shinsuke Sugiyama made the claim that they have found no documents that can confirm comfort women were forcibly recruited by military or government authorities, and maintain that current beliefs are based on false accounts.

"I think it points to the power of language, and about the euphemism of 'comfort women', which is highly insulting to many survivors," says Dr Henry. "There's continued use of that term because it's catchy, it's understandable to media and academics and the population at large. But it's right at the heart of the problem of controversy and denialism."

"The euphemism lets denialists argue that there's no evidence to prove that these women were coerced or forced and kidnapped into sexual slavery,

COMFORT WOMEN?

and that they were willing sex workers. It allows the denial that in this instance there was no wrongdoing."

Regardless of a satisfactory resolution to the issue of comfort women, the current geopolitical climate in Asia and the activity of China in the South China Seas all but guarantee a strong relationship between Japan and South Korea. International support from advocates, as well as from the United Nations, Amnesty International and other groups, have criticised the lack of meaningful progress.

"It must add salt to the wounds of the comfort women to have their stories and their experiences denied in the way that they have been," says Dr Henry. "There are forty-six surviving comfort women in South Korea and more in China, Taiwan, Vietnam who have given evidence. The way they have been treated by Japan shows there is definitely a hierarchy there, there's an intersection between class, between national identity and also gender and race."

"None of these women were included as part of the negotiations. The continued denialism is a horrible thing they have to go through and they have to go to their graves with." ●

Dr Nicola Henry
SENIOR LECTURER
Social Inquiry

CLEAN INDIA!

The Western world may take them for granted, but in India, home to more than 1.2 billion people, about half the population has no access to or doesn't use toilets. That's 600 million individuals, or 120 million households: a formidable challenge for sanitation.

But it's a challenge that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has embraced wholeheartedly. His Swachh Bharat! (or Clean India!) campaign aims to build 100 million household toilets and 500,000 community toilets by 2019.

It's 18 months since the new prime minister inaugurated the program. He chose Mahatma Gandhi's 145th birthday, October 2, 2014. Gandhi was a major advocate of sanitation.

A clean India, Modi declared, would be achieved by the 150th anniversary in 2019. That is also the year of the next scheduled general election.

Since October 2014, there have been hundreds of photo opportunities and activities aimed at cleaning up domestic waste and at toilet building. Tens of millions of rupees have been committed – US$20 million went into advertising alone in the first six months.

The interest of the prime minister and the investment of substantial funds have given public sanitation and public health a profile that they have never had before in India.

So, will Modi achieve his dream of bringing sanitation to the masses?

THE SANITATION CHALLENGE

In the eyes of various people, from Gandhi in the 1920s to foreign tourists in 2016, India has offered extraordinary examples of unhygienic practices.

"During my wanderings," Gandhi wrote in Young India in 1925, "nothing has been so painful to me as to observe our insanitation throughout the length and breadth of the land."

Today, as the middle class expands and non-resident Indians with experience and expectations acquired abroad come and go, pressure to achieve sanitation targets is growing.

Depending on who is counting, India collects between 55 million and 70 million tonnes of waste a year. The United States is estimated to produce about 250 million tonnes a year, three-and-a-half times more for a population a quarter of the size. As Indian affluence grows, the potential for more garbage is a menace that the Clean India campaign is trying to head off.

Further impetus comes from widespread acknowledgement that random defecation, whether in town or countryside, injures public health and leads to physical and mental stunting in children. India's record in these matters falls behind sub-Saharan Africa and neighbouring Bangladesh.

Two factors make India's struggle with public sanitation different from the experience of urbanisation in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries, and from the problems of other ex-colonial countries today.

The first difference is the sheer volume of waste and the scarcity of space to deal with it. India's population density is about 370 people per square km. China's is about 150.

However you treat waste, you need space – for composting, biogas manufacture, sanitary landfill, sorting and recycling, incinerating. Nowhere else in the world have so many people generated waste on this scale and had so little space to deal with it.

The second problem lies in caste and the ideas and practices that go with it. Fifteen per cent of Indians are Dalits ("scheduled castes" in official language and once referred to as "untouchables"). Sections of Dalits have had "waste" as their expected vocation for generations.

As Indian scholar Sonal Sharma wrote this year, "Various micro-level studies show that non-Dalit workers do not like to clean toilets and that the workers who clean toilets are always from lowest castes."

A great many higher-caste people are repelled by the idea of connection with any kind of "waste".

POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS

In Swachh Bharat's favour is the work of activists and some dedicated sanitary engineers over the past 20 years. The Solid Waste Management Rules laid down by the Supreme Court of India in 2000 are an excellent guide, and local governments not following them are in contempt of the nation's highest court.

The rules go into fine detail about how to set up collection

systems and disposal centres. They prohibit "manual handling of waste" and restrict "land filling … to non-biodegradable, inert waste".

As such ambitious standards suggest, no local government has been able to get within a tiger's roar of meeting the requirements of the rules. They are a worthy, distant target.

At scattered locations around the country, local governments, non-government organisations and some businesses have shown remarkable achievements in cleaning up neighbourhoods, reusing and recycling materials and maintaining clean public toilets. There's unlikely to be a shortage of public funding, as the prime minister's reputation is on the line.

Household income is not a crucial obstacle. Of India's 120 million non-toilet households, a significant percentage could have afforded a toilet long ago if they had wanted one. There's a cultural struggle to be won about the importance for health – especially childhood health – of taming human excrement.

There's also an authority problem. Local governments, responsible for public sanitation, are underpowered legally, financially and administratively. For officials, service in local government carries little prestige and modest salaries. Local governments have trouble extracting rates and dues from residents, and the legal difficulties in locating sites for waste management are great.

It would be unwise, however, to write off Swachh Bharat. India has achieved some surprising results in the past 15 years. Tobacco smoke used to be everywhere; today some states are largely smoke-free. Some too have done a fair job in trying to eliminate plastic bags. The Delhi underground network, the Metro, was completed on time and on budget and serves the city well.

Swachh Bharat has the benefit of prime ministerial backing in a way that no Indian clean-up campaign has had before.

That's risky politics, because if "insanitation throughout the length and breadth of the land" is still a problem at election time in 2019, it will provide a propaganda picnic for opposition parties seeking to oust an incumbent government. The photo opportunities will be very different from those recent ones of smiling politicians, awkwardly held brooms and sparkling corridors.

First published on *The Conversation* on 1 April, 2016.

Robin Jeffrey is an Emeritus Professor of La Trobe University and La Trobe Asia advisory board member. ●

Improving access to oral health care in Nepal

In 2004 Ronald Knevel, an oral health therapist now at La Trobe University, travelled through Nepal with the founder of the country's first dental hygiene school Dr Buddhi Shrestha. During this trip they decided to work together to initiate projects promoting oral health awareness, and to support the education of dental hygienists in Nepal.

Nepal is a country in political transition, and after a decade-long civil war it is still struggling to establish an effective democracy. It faces many challenges, and justifying a focus on oral health needed the data to back it up. They conducted a pilot survey to investigate the oral health issues of children in Nepal and how it affected their everyday life.

"Our survey examined the oral health of 350 children from different socio-economic backgrounds and in different regions of the country," says Knevel. "We found that only 10 children had a healthy mouth, and many of the others reported recently experiencing tooth or other oral pain, or had difficulties chewing."

"Toothaches can lead to loss of school time, and difficulties chewing could lead to issues with malnutrition. Some children even reported being teased because of the appearance of their teeth. Oral health has an impact on aspects of their quality of life, and these findings were important drivers to get the project started."

Nepal's solution to the dental health problem, as in many countries, has been to increase the number of dentists. However, evidence indicates that this has little impact on improving the oral health of a population.

"Dental treatment alone has little effect on the oral health of the population," says Knevel. "It is commonly accepted that oral health promotion is more important than temporary relief of oral discomfort, and the sector still suffers from a lack of a preventative oriented approach."

When Knevel first started working in Nepal there was only one dental hygiene course, now there are six. The number of dental colleges have grown from two to twelve.

While he believes the interest in oral health and dentistry is a good thing, he fears the lack of jobs created by the Nepalese government won't accommodate the growing workforce graduating from their dental schools. The uneven distribution of oral health services is considered a major issue.

"Most graduates want to work in urban locations, so remote areas will remain underserved, and are missing out," he says. "Nepal might have a lot of schools, but graduates report they fear not getting a job. Young graduates are going overseas to explore other opportunities or will attempt further studies."

Knevel advocates oral health promotion and educational interventions together with other health professionals as a preventative measure, rather than relying primarily on dental intervention to address a problem.

To demonstrate this he ran a project in which rural women in Nepal received a one day training session to become oral health advocates in their village, and to communicate better oral health practices to the local community. They were provided with materials, and offered logistic support.

"The project has been very successful, and the women surpassed our expectation," he says. "After a year we evaluated their knowledge and skills. Their knowledge retention was impressive, and they were enthusiastically communicating the oral health message to the community in a culturally appropriate and effective way."

Due to a lack of resources Nepal started building the oral health workforce without up-to-date, local data and used models from other countries to design their oral health workforce. Nepal's last oral health survey was in 2008. Knevel is now involved in planning an accurate national survey of the oral health of the people of Nepal. The Nepal Health Research Council, the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and Kantipur Dental College will be involved and the data gathered will demonstrate the oral health needs of the population and allow appropriate oral health workforce planning.

"There will never be enough funds to treat all the current untreated dental disease in Nepal," says Knevel. "Current data is essential to allow assessment of needs for workers and their retention, recruitment and appropriate training. The country needs preventive care and a program to educate people in rural villages how to manage their own oral health. This will likely need to happen one community at a time." ●

Ronald Knevel
COURSE CO-ORDINATOR
Bachelor of Oral Health Sciences

Dr Megan Maher
SENIOR LECTURER
Biochemistry and Genetics

PROTEIN STRUCTURE UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

A collaboration between La Trobe University biochemist Dr Megan Maher and Professor So Iwata of Kyoto University is mapping the architecture of proteins that sit within cell membranes.

Dr Maher's research uses X-ray crystallography to visualise atoms and molecules and describe the three-dimensional architectures of proteins.

"An estimated 50% of drugs interact with proteins in the cell membrane, however in most cases, their method of action is unknown," says Maher. "My research is aimed at determining these structures so that drug design can be more targeted and therefore more effective and lessen side effects."

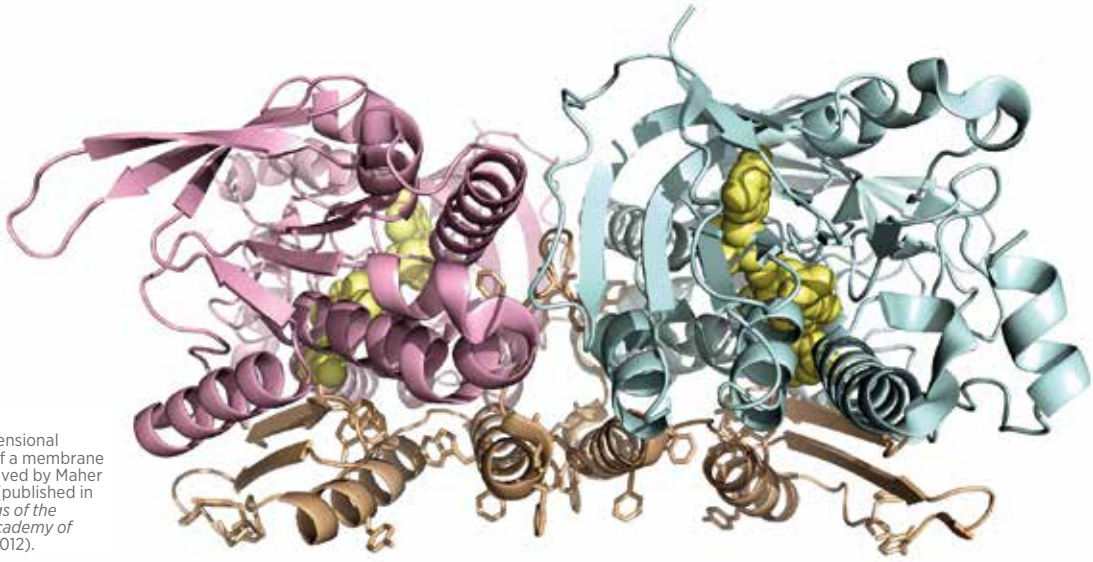
Maher's research is based on long-term projects, with the average structure of a membrane protein estimated to take five years of work and a million dollars in funding.

Dr Maher and Professor Iwata, along with her fellow project researchers received an NHMRC Project Grant as well as an ARC Discovery Project Grant to apply X-ray techniques to study protein molecules in membranes.

"Dr Maher and I have a very productive collaboration," says Professor Iwata. "Her expertise in metalloproteins at La Trobe University and our expertise in antibody production against membrane proteins in Kyoto are complementary. I hope our collaboration will be fruitful and that we can maintain this for a long time."

The research grants allow Dr Maher to collaborate closely with Professor Iwata's laboratory, with part of her research being carried out in Kyoto.

"Professor Iwata is a world leader in membrane protein X-ray crystallography," says Dr Maher. "His laboratory is state of the art and he's made major technological contributions to every step in the process. He is a true pioneer in the field. The opportunity to visit his laboratory and view his operations first hand, afforded by the La Trobe Asia funding, was invaluable. "



Three-dimensional structure of a membrane protein, solved by Maher and Iwata (published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2012).

This issue features La Trobe Asia work from...

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