



**08th Asia-Pacific International Conference on Quality of Life,  
Dokez Eylul University, Izmir, Turkiye, 22-24 May 2024**

## **An Integrated Approach towards Conservation of Traditional Patterns in Chinese Traditional Villages: A systematic literature review**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, the Chinese government and the local government have issued many conservation documents for traditional villages. However, the conservation of traditional patterns has still not been significantly improved. Therefore, this paper explores the conservation approaches of traditional patterns in traditional villages with a systematic literature review. The study suggests that adopting necessary conservation and safeguarding measures, harmonizing conflicts between policies and legislation, improving public participation measures in local communities, and formulating adaptive utilization can promote the conservation and development of traditional patterns of traditional villages.

**Keywords:** Traditional village conservation; Traditional patterns; Conservation measures

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i29.6017>

### **1.0 Introduction**

As an essential carrier for recording and inheriting ancient Chinese civilization, traditional villages have preserved much tangible and intangible heritage (He et al., 2023). However, with the acceleration of urbanization, many traditional villages are at risk of destruction and disappearance (Wang & Sun, 2021). According to the report "Statistical Yearbook of Urban and Rural Construction" released by the Chinese government in 2020, the number of villages in China has decreased by about 1.41 million within the last 30 years, many of which are traditional villages in disappearing villages.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (MOHURD) and four other ministries in China set up an expert committee for the conservation and development of traditional villages in 2012 (Zhang & Wang, 2022). Afterwards, the conservation of traditional villages was paid attention to both national and local levels, and many documents on the conservation of traditional villages were issued successively. These conservation documents cover the investigation and declaration of traditional villages, conservation and development, and financial support, providing policies and legal support for the conservation of traditional villages. However, the phenomenon of constructive destruction of traditional villages still exists, and the current situation has not been significantly improved by implementing the policies (Wei et al., 2022).

In studies related to the conservation of traditional villages, scholars have mainly focused on the evolution of geographic distribution characteristics and land use (Zhang & Zhang, 2024), the conservation and development of traditional village areas (Wang & Sun, 2022;

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i29.6017>

Wu & Yu, 2021), and the preservation and inheritance of tangible and intangible culture (Shi, 2023). However, current research lacks attention to the conservation of traditional patterns of traditional villages and lacks integrated strategies to support the conservation of traditional villages. Therefore, it is necessary for this study to discuss the existing conservation documents and literature related to the conservation of traditional patterns in traditional villages and to summarize an integrated approach to promote the effective conservation and development of traditional villages. Meanwhile, this study also answers the question of the critical factors affecting the conservation of traditional patterns in traditional villages.

## 2.0 Methodology: Systematic literature review

A systematic literature review synthesizes a well-articulated problem using a systematic and explicit methodology to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant studies (Siddaway et al., 2019). This study followed the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA) to execute the research process, including literature screening criteria, screening of databases and literature, etc., to provide a logical basis for literature review and analysis (Moher, 2009; Vafaie et al., 2023).

### 2.1 Keyword Identification

Identifying and selecting appropriate keywords/terms is integral to conducting a systematic literature review. From the definition of traditional villages, the term "ancient villages" is changed to "traditional villages" to highlight the historical and cultural values of traditional rural areas in China. Therefore, keywords similar to traditional villages include Traditional villages, Ancient villages, Historic villages, and Historic rural areas. Conservation documents, such as *Conservation and Utilization of Traditional Villages* (20154155-T-424), *Regulations on the Conservation of Famous Historical and Cultural Cities and Towns and Villages* (2017), and *Guidelines on the Conservation and Development Planning of Traditional Villages in Henan Province* (2022), classify the conservation objects of the traditional pattern into the following categories: overall pattern and traditional features, courtyard layouts, street and alley spaces, and historical elements.

Conservation documents are crucial in heritage conservation through continuous revision and improvement (Liang et al., 2023; Sun, 2023). Moreover, heritage conservation documents developed by international organizations and the Chinese government related to the conservation of traditional villages not only provide conservation and safeguarding practices as well as technical guidance but also emphasize the sustainability of the heritage for future generations (Wei, 2019). Recalling that the document on conservation is relevant to traditional villages, the key elements (Fig. 1) are mainly involved in conservation and safeguarding measures, legislation and local policies, finance and incentives, public participation, education and training, and utilization. Therefore, this study attempts to provide a systematic review of the conservation of traditional patterns of traditional villages from six aspects.

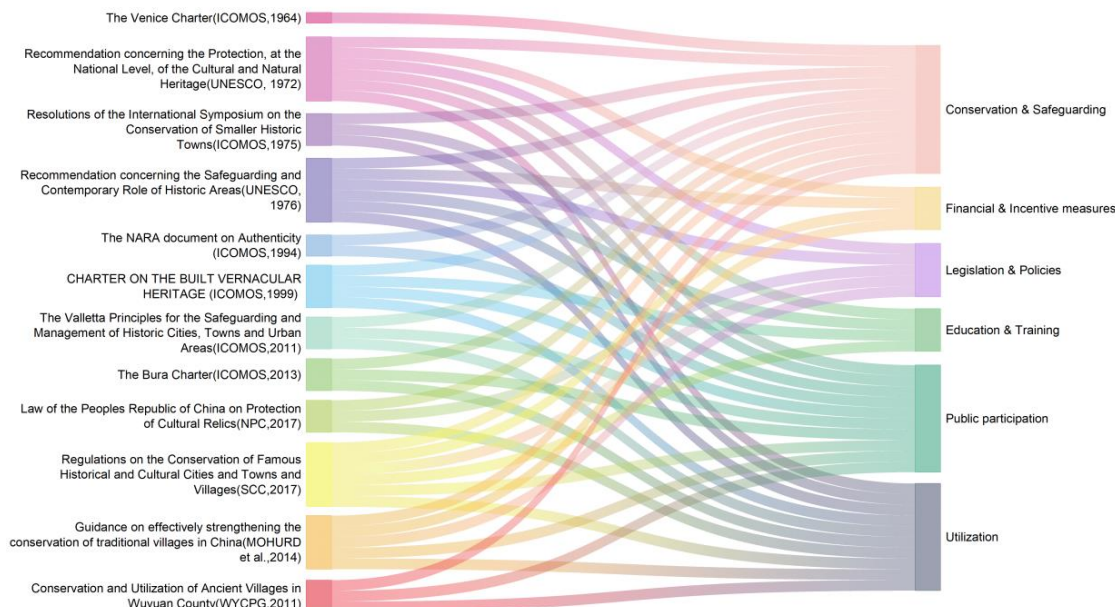


Fig. 1: Key elements of conservation documents for traditional villages

(Source: ICOMOS, 1964, 1975, 1994, 1999, 2013; UNESCO, 1972, 1976; NPC, 2017; SCC, 2017; MOHURD, 2014; WYCPG, 2011)

### 2.2 The screening procedure

The initial data search in this study was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science databases; however, the above two databases have fewer articles on conserving traditional villages with traditional patterns. Therefore, this study supplements the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database (CNKI). Simultaneously, only the articles included in the Peking University Core (PKUC), Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), Chinese Science Citation Database (CSCD), and Chinese Humanities and Social Science AMI

Citation Database(AMI) are selected to be included in the CNKI database. Literature was searched within the title, abstract, and keywords (articles published from 2014 to 2024, searched in March 2024).

This study screened the literature strictly according to PRISMA's guidelines. As shown in Fig. 2. (a), the process was divided into four parts: firstly, duplicates were removed; secondly, initial screening was done based on the type of documents, titles, and abstracts; then, retained records were obtained and further screened with full-text; and lastly, the final collection of documents was formed by supplemental searching of articles and conservation documents related to traditional villages (Fig. 2. (b)).

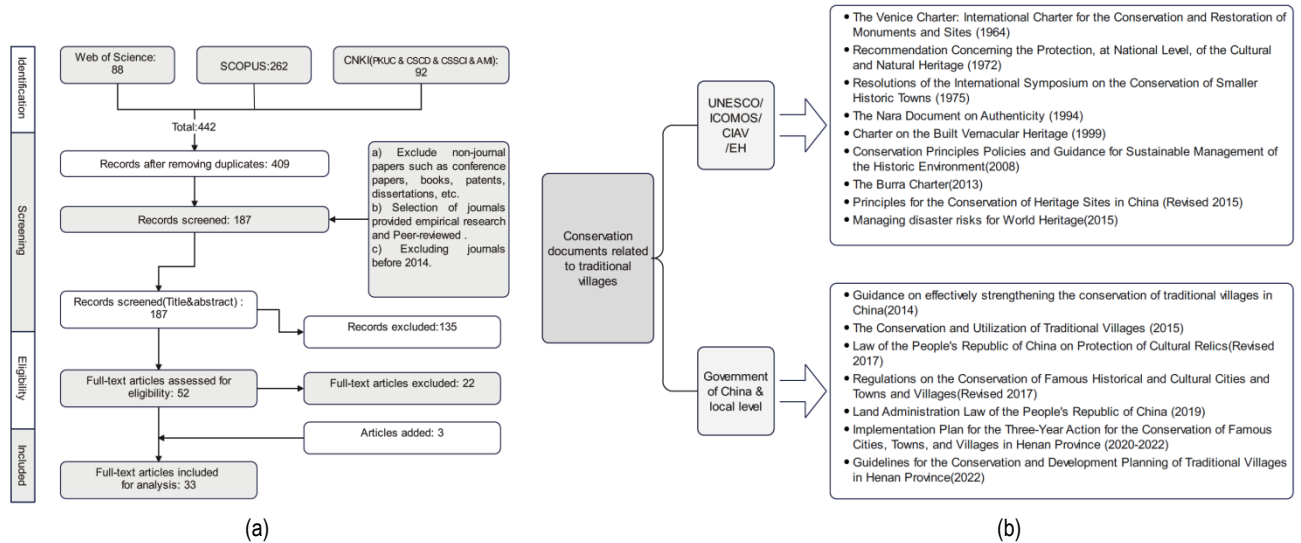


Fig. 2. (a) PRISMA flow diagram for inclusion of the articles during the review process; (b) Conservation documents related to traditional villages (Source: Author)

### 3.0 Result

#### 3.1 Conservation and safeguarding measures

Among the screened literature on traditional village conservation, 19 articles emphasized the importance of conservation and safeguarding measures for traditional patterns. Both international and Chinese conservation documents emphasize that reasonable conservation and safeguarding measures can be used to maintain heritage values and promote sustainable development (UNESCO, 1972, 1976; SCC, 2017). Currently, the implementation of conservation and safeguarding measures for the traditional patterns of traditional villages mainly relies on conservation documents. For example, UNESCO (1972) suggests that conservation and safeguarding zones and construction control zones should be delineated to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the heritage. Based on this, documents such as the *Conservation and Utilization of Traditional Villages* (2015), the *Guidelines for the Conservation and Development Planning of Traditional Villages in Henan Province* (2022), etc., divide the protection areas into core conservation zones, construction control zones, and environmental coordination zones (Fig. 3). They also put forward different protection requirements, focusing on precise control requirements for construction behavior, building height, color and other aspects, as well as overall conservation and guidance of traditional features.

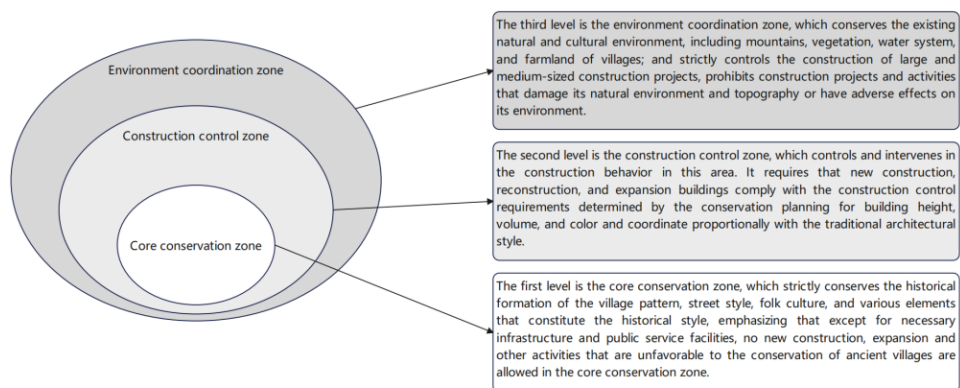


Fig. 3. Interpretation of Onion-type conservation (Source: Author)

As mentioned above, the "onion-type conservation" measures have advantages in traditional villages with relatively complete preservation of architectural groups and overall patterns. Still, the conservation and implementation process brings problems with poorly preserved villages. For example, the zoning boundaries for conserving traditional patterns lack a clear basis for delineation, which may result in a waste of resources or the consequences of incomplete heritage protection (Wei et al., 2016). Therefore, scholars have explored other paths for the conservation of the traditional patterns of traditional Villages. Some scholars have also emphasized multi-level conservation strategies (Wu et al., 2022; Liang et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2023). Relevant studies argue that establishing multi-level conservation strategies for the overall pattern, architectural groups, and historical elements, including the identification of the characteristics of the overall pattern and spatial morphology of the village, the protection of the overall space, and the intervention of the land use; the scale of the streets and public spaces, infrastructures, and streets and alleys; and the protection measures for the pattern of the traditional courtyards, the architectural characteristics, and the architectural details, etc. In addition, Sun and Ou (2021) proposed establishing multi-level protection measures for high-value, medium-value, and low-value areas through value assessment to achieve harmonious coexistence of traditional village spaces.

In addition to the measures proposed above for the conservation of traditional patterns of traditional villages, preventive conservation is increasingly being addressed by the field of heritage conservation, and these conservation methods are based on the principle of minimizing interventions to achieve continuity in the conservation of heritage (ICOM-CC, 2008; Levin, 1992). Preventive conservation has been applied to significant cultural and natural heritage conservation practices. Although preventive conservation has been less researched in the field of traditional village conservation, compared to standard conservation measures, preventive conservation has transformed from a single engineering event to a holistic and long-term vision, so it is necessary to introduce the work path of preventive conservation into the conservation and safeguarding measures of traditional villages. Preventive conservation focuses on the scope of heritage disasters, diseases, and human factors, and its workflow includes risk identification, risk assessment, and risk management. Firstly, identifying the risk factors of traditional patterns is the basis for implementing preventive conservation, screening and identifying the risk factors, and identifying the elements that may cause damage to the heritage by conducting preliminary analysis (Zhang, 2022). Usually, risk factors need to be screened out using information collection and site surveys (Xie, 2022). Risk assessment integrates the potential damage risk, frequency of occurrence, degree of impact, cost of repair and maintenance, and degree of impact on heritage value to determine the type, plan, and sequence of appropriate risk prevention measures (Zhang, 2019). The main thrust of risk management is to take integrated measures to enhance the safety of traditional patterns of traditional villages by identifying and addressing risk factors. In the World Heritage Disaster Risk Management Disasters released in 2015, risk management is divided into a total of three phases from the perspective of the occurrence time, i.e., the prevention phase, the emergency response phase, and the post-disaster recovery phase, and the specific initiatives include the monitoring and early warning, routine maintenance, disaster prevention planning, and emergency management (Li et al., 2021).

### 3.2 Legislation & policies and financial measures

Seven articles discuss the impact of laws and local policies on the conservation of traditional villages, which provide a framework for conservation and implementation mechanisms that play a crucial role in conserving traditional villages. Both legislation and policies emphasize prohibitions and punitive measures against behaviors that disrupt traditional patterns and requirements for engaging in construction activities (SCC, 2017; MOHURD et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the conflict between regulations and policies is a problem faced by conserving traditional villages. For example, the policy of "one house, one residence" stipulated in the *Land Management Law of the People's Republic of China* (2019) conflicts with the policy of "in situ preservation" in the protection of traditional villages; in fact, some of the traditional dwellings can no longer meet the lifestyle of the villagers nowadays; furthermore, the withdrawal mechanism of the right to use the residential land is also unsound (Xia et al., 2021). Accordingly, Bai et al. (2019) proposed the proposal of "two residences per household," i.e., the policy of "two residences per household" should be implemented for the residents who meet the requirements, and the government should provide the necessary technical services to improve the enthusiasm of traditional villages and traditional houses protection. (Bai et al., 2019). Moreover, when implementing the policy of rural living environment enhancement, some local governments fail to consider the unique characteristics of traditional villages, resulting in the disappearance of the traditional features of some traditional villages (Liu & Wang, 2015).

Financial factors and lack of funding have likewise been identified as one of the common challenges to traditional pattern conservation (Kuai, 2016; Fan et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2018). The local level can subsidize the conservation and safeguarding of historical buildings from conservation funds (SCC, 2017; UNESCO, 1972). However, it is not easy to implement traditional village conservation by relying solely on government finance and incentives (Kuai, 2016). Several scholars believe traditional villages can form a practical path of "self-blood support" through tourism development. Still, the development of rural tourism should be combined with local features and cultures and with the development of diversified and differentiated tourism projects, which provide financial support for the protection of traditional villages (Fan et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018).

### 3.3 Public participation & education and training

The role of public participation in traditional village conservation has been recognized (Li et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2021). *The Burra Charter* and *English Heritage* emphasize the importance of public participation (EH, 2008; ICOMOS Australia, 2013). In addition, local communities better understand the local culture and resources; in the process of conservation and utilization, the participation of local communities can promote the conservation and development of heritage (Li et al., 2018; Silviana et al., 2020). Moreover, decision-making and conservation planning at the local level should be premised on investigating the attitudes and perceptions of local communities (Yang et al., 2021b; Qi et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2021). However, in related research, it was found that

villagers lacked avenues for participation and a single and passive way of participation (Qi et al., 2023; Farinose et al., 2019). Based on the above, Farinose et al. (2019) suggest that participation should be mainly two-way, and the risk of "uninformed participation" and "passive participation" should be reduced. Besides the traditional forms such as questionnaires and hearings, the analysis of official documents, participant observation, focus groups, and interviews should be introduced; also, visualization tools are recommended to support the interviewer in interpreting the project.

Education and training are essential in improving community conservation awareness and skills for the traditional patterns of villages. We analyzed the relevant literature and found that most villagers had poor knowledge of conservation planning, construction projects, and related policies in their local communities (Qi et al., 2023). Education and training can help raise awareness of cultural heritage among local communities, which not only helps to strengthen cultural identity but also inspires a sense of pride in cultural heritage and motivates them to ensure that this heritage is passed on to the next generation (UNESCO, 1972; ICOMOS, 1999). Furthermore, education and training of professionals and managers should be emphasized to reduce inappropriate maintenance and development practices in traditional villages (ICOMOS China, 2015; MOHURD et al., 2014). In short, improving the knowledge and skills of stakeholders will help to ensure the conservation and heritage of these villages, and it will help in the conservation and safeguarding of the integrity and authenticity of the traditional villages.

### 3.4 Utilization measures

The effectiveness of measures to find suitable uses for the traditional patterns of traditional villages that can lead to their preservation has been proved in several studies. By analyzing 15 articles on utilization measures, we found that upgrading the living environment and developing heritage tourism are the main utilization measures of traditional patterns nowadays.

Traditional villages still serve the function of living, which is one of the reasons why they have been preserved due to long-term use. However, some traditional courtyards and dwellings can no longer meet modern people's needs. UNESCO (1972) states that "internal alterations and the installation of modern conveniences should be permitted for the benefit of the occupants, provided that the traditional character of the old dwellings is not completely altered." Wu et al. (2022) proposed functional updating of the interior layout of traditional compounds without altering the exterior style; this would satisfy the villagers' need for an improved living environment and allow for continuous utilization of the traditional compounds. Also, Kong and He (2018) suggested that villagers should mainly serve traditional villages with ordinary preservation conditions to improve the quality of rural life; long-term and iterative restoration and renovation of newly built areas should be carried out to achieve the effect of harmonizing the traditional villages with the ancient and new patterns.

In addition to the original residential function, traditional villages can fulfill new functions by transforming the production structure (Li et al., 2014). With the development of heritage tourism, traditional village villages can enhance the environment of the traditional pattern of the village and preserve and continuously utilize it in tourism (Wu et al., 2022). Yao (2016b) emphasized that promoting rural tourism can increase income generation for residents and tourists benefiting from traditional village tourism. However, it should be noted that tourism development should prevent the one-sided pursuit of economic value and deal with the relationship between conservation and development. In addition, Hu & Li (2015) suggested that the development and utilization of villages should not affect the living environment and lifestyle of the original residents. Moreover, tourism reception capacity and livability are crucial in developing heritage tourism in traditional villages (Fan et al., 2023).

Although the development of tourism in traditional villages can promote effective conservation and development, it is important to note that the development of tourism in traditional villages may lead to the homogenization of tourism. Zheng et al. (2023) point out that traditional villages with relatively rich agricultural resources should take a "differentiation" route and guide the transformation of local production functions into "tourism." The development of agritourism can bring into play the multiple values of land resources, which can not only obtain the necessary economic returns but also demonstrate the long history of farming civilization (Li et al., 2018; Wang, 2019; Yu et al., 2022). At the same time, Čurović et al. (2019) argued that rural areas suitable for developing agritourism also make it possible to alleviate the problem of hollowing out to a certain extent.

## 4.0 Discussion

This research aims to establish an integrated approach for traditional villages to promote the conservation and development of traditional patterns through a systematic literature review. We found that conservation and safeguarding measures, laws and policies, financial measures, public participation, education and training, and utilization measures play a vital role in implementing traditional pattern conservation. The results of the study show that:

Traditional villages can enhance the preservation of traditional patterns by developing and implementing necessary conservation and safeguarding measures consistent with the findings of the existing literature. It is worth noting that the conservation and safeguarding of traditional patterns must be based on investigating traditional villages to formulate specific "onion-type conservation" or multi-level conservation strategies. In addition, preventive conservation should be introduced into conservation and safeguarding measures, which can reduce or avoid the threat to heritage posed by potential risk factors to a certain extent. Still, preventive conservation measures' suitability, cost, and operability should be considered.

Most studies focused on conservation techniques and utilization measures in the literature review process and neglected legislation, policies, and financial measures. However, it is found that legislation policies and financial measures are crucial for enhancing the conservation effects of traditional patterns. Therefore, we expanded the proposal of "two residences per household" to mitigate the conflict between law and policy (Bai et al., 2019). While conservation and safeguarding measures can enhance conservation effects for

traditional patterns, economic support, and policy interventions are still necessary. Our study further emphasizes the importance of economic support and financing, validated in the results (Kuai, 2016; Fan et al., 2023; Xu et al, 2018).

Existing research supports the necessity of public participation, the expansion of forms of participation, and the preservation of traditional patterns depends not only on the efforts of the government and professionals but also on the participation of the local community. Additionally, education and training activities can help realize the vision of the sustainability of traditional villages for future generations.

Several studies have confirmed that traditional villages can enhance local communities' human environment, increase local communities' income, and promote the conservation and development of traditional villages by adaptive utilization measures via a systematic literature review. However, heritage tourism development needs to seek differentiated routes according to its own characteristics and cultural resources to avoid problems arising from homogenization of tourism or insufficient market competitiveness.

## 5.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

The systematic literature review shows that conserving traditional villages requires an integrated consideration of various factors, including conservation and safeguarding measures, legislation and policies, financial measures, public participation, education and training, and utilization measures. Furthermore, it requires the joint efforts and participation of the government, professional institutions, social organizations, and local communities to promote the sustainable development of traditional village conservation. However, there are limitations in this study; firstly, this paper does not explore the applicability of specific measures for preventive conservation in traditional villages; secondly, this paper does not propose detailed measures for the suggestion of "two residences per household," which needs to be formulated after investigating the wishes of the stakeholders in the next phase of the study.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to my supervisory committee for their guidance and help in this study.

## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study provides a reference for the conservation and utilization of traditional patterns of traditional villages. Meanwhile, the study will provide recommendations for policymakers and project managers at the local level for decision-making.

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