On the Chinese Translation of Swearwords in English Films Under the Polysystem[*]

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This study focuses on the translation of English swearwords to Chinese through the ages, drawing mainly on the correlation between the position of translated films and the translation strategies. With the results, the study aims to testify the applicability of principles of the Polysystem theory for translated films. The sample consisted of English subtitles and their Chinese fansubs of 21 English films. With a combination of quantitative study and qualitative analysis, the study classified the translation strategies the Chinese fansub use and examined how their choice correlates with the position of translated films in three different periods in China, based on Masood Khoshsaligheh's (2018) taxonomy of the translation strategies of taboo language items. The findings revealed that the Chinese fan subtitle attempted to translate swearwords into Chinese with a milder or toned-down degree of offense and insult. As the translated films strove from a peripheric margin for a higher position in China's film market, the selection of strategies was inclined to move from the preference for acceptability to adequacy.

Keywords: English films, swearwords, subtitling, polysystem

Introduction

Since China's reform and opening up in 1978, great changes have not only occurred in society, but marked a turning point in Chinese film industry (Chen & Huang, 2018). In the early stage (1980-1990), the policy of importing foreign films was not clearly established, and with the planned economy, the limited funds could only attract low-budget and old films. Since the 1990s, the transformation of Chinese market economy brought new opportunities for Chinese film market. The influx of foreign films not only boosted Chinese film market, but hit the domestic market seriously. In the new century, Chinese film industry has stepped in a new era after joining the WTO, featured with more access for foreign films to the Chinese market and the enterprise-oriented reform. A series of policies nurtured the boom of imported films and witnessed the counter attack of native films. The research chose three time nodes, 1980, 1990 and 2000 to investigate the status of imported films in Chinese film market and its impact on fansub strategies.

In film scripts, swearwords are common because swearing is part of human's everyday communicative behavior. Swearwords in audiovisual texts contribute to the "naturalness" of the films and the successful

characterization of some individuals. Moreover, swearing is culture-specific because different social groups have different taboo topics (Fernández & Ana, 2006), and one swearword frequently used among natives may be forbidden in another language. Therefore, swearwords translation is important to film success in the overseas market.

We first review the literature on swearwords in films translation and audiovisual translation (AVT), with a focus on the translation strategies and influencing factors. A framework of film polysystem guided by Polysystem theory is set to explore the relationship between the position of translated films and the translation strategies. For the final results, the corpus-based research investigates the actual translation strategies, based on Masood Khoshsaligheh's (2018) taxonomy of translation strategies of taboo language items and concludes the general changing trends of the strategies. Then we will try to figure out the position of translated films in 1980-1990, 1990-2000, and films after 2000 respectively in China's film industry with facts and statistics. Finally, the study intends to answer the correlation between the position of the translated films in China and the translation strategies and the possibility of a film polysystem.

Literature Review

The study of swearwords has caught considerable attention over the past decades, especially in linguistics (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Christie, 2013; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Ljung, 2011), psychology (Jay, 2017) and translation studies (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007; Valdeon, 2015; Chen, 2004; Santamaría Ciordia, 2016). Swearwords undertake specific linguistic, psychological, social and interpersonal functions because of its taboo nature and potential for offence, and they can be ranked in line with strength or tone.

Studies on swearwords translation have shown that translators often omit or tone downs wearwords with certain techniques. For instance, in American hip hop movies and their Arabic correspondence, the subtitler, with a "euphemistic swearing" technique, mildens and tones down the degree of offense and insult. The techniques of euphemisms and omission are mainly used for cultural constraints (Noor F. Al-Yasin & Ghaleb A. Rabab'ah, 2019); while in the Spanish subtitles for the film *Pulp Fiction*, a substantial amount of non-transfer was not "technically justified" (Ávila-Cabrera, 2015); in Quentin's another film *Reservoir Dogs*, some selective examples of the swearword were shown to suggest that the level of swearing in Spanish translation is lower than the original (Pardo, 2013); in Ndhlovu and Botha's (2017) research, most Ndebele translators selected strategies that promoted the target norm of euphemism, namely cultural substitution, using a general word, a neutral or less expressive word, and paraphrasing. Similarly, Chen (2004, p. 138) notes that the "cleanliness of written language" is extremely important in Hong Kong, resulting in the "undertranslation" of English profanity in film subtitles. When comparing the Polish and English translation of film *¡Atame!* Santamaria Ciordia (2016, p. 298) shows that while the former maintains the vulgarity of the source script, the latter prefers to replace the vulgar parts of dialogue with expressions that are colloquial in tone but not offensive. In addition to case studies, Valdeón (2020) analyzed four seasons of the same film series, and found contemporary AVT in Spanish not only preserves the emotional force of the original texts, but sometimes increases the frequency of swearwords.

Moreover, the reasons of omitting or toning down also catch much attention. The general tendency to soften offensive language in subtitles can be attributed to several reasons (Chen, 2004, Fernández, 2009; Hjort, 2009; Mattsson, 2006) including no equivalent in the target language (TL), time and space constraints in subtitling, the

original swearwords being sacred or forbidden in the TL, and the intensification of tone from spoken to written language. Films are cultural and economic products that may exchange across time and regions. The position of translated films and the translation strategies are sure to experience alterations and changes. Considering the historical background, including economic interests, creative gravitas and sociocultural trajectory. Cintas (2004, p. 23) discussed the concept of "film polysystem" in relation to AVT, in that the film polysystem of a country comprises the national audiovisual products and the translated ones. On such basis, Perdikaki (2018) applied the idea to film adaption, approached as "a conjoined resultant of creativity and sociocultural motivation". However, few scholars have deepened the film polysystem.

This study attempted to fill this gap by investigating Chinese fansub-translation of swearwords in AVT through the changes of the status of translated films in China and aimed to conclude the correlation between the position of translated films and translation strategies under the guidance of the Polysystem Theory.

Framework of Film Polysystem

The Polysystem was pioneeringly proposed by Israeli culture researcher Itamar Even-Zohar to explain literature translation at a cultural level, adopting a systematic and descriptive approach. Even-Zohar (1990) suggests that the position occupied by translated literature in the polysystem conditions the translation strategy. If it is primary, translators often produce news models in order to find a close match in terms of adequacy. Adversely, if the translated literature holds a peripheral position, translators tend to employ existing target culture models and for sake of target acceptability.

The present paper thus proposes a film polysystem in light of the translated literature and makes an assumption that the position of translated films may occupy a primary or a secondary position in a dynamic state in the target culture and the position occupied by the translated films determines the translation strategy.

Research Design

Research Questions

The aim of this contrastive study is to investigate the strategies of swearwords translation in fansub subtitling and its changing laws under the guidance of the Polysystem Theory from the synchronic and diachronic perspectives respectively. It is intended to testify whether the Polysystem theory is applicable in film translation. This paper attempts to answer thefollowing research questions: (1) How are swearwords in English films translated into Chinese? (2) What is the position of the translated films as part of the film polysystem in China? Is its position changing with time? (3) Is there any correlation between the changing position of the translated films in China and the choice of the translation strategies?

Corpus

Source

The sample consists of English subtitles and their Chinese fansubs of 21 movies, with seven in three different periods (1980-1990; 1990-2000; 2000-) respectively. The movies are selected according to the genre, involving crimes films in that criminals or irritable peopletend tocurse and use profane language frequently. Below (Table 1) are the movies selected in the study. Both English subtitles and Chinese translation were from the website *Zimuku* (http://www.zimuku.la), which contains original and fansub subtitles of most international

movies in various languages. Considering the acceptance and popularity of viewers, versions with most downloads were set as research objects.

Table 1

Films in Three Periods for Study

1980-1990	*Thief (1981)*	*Bad Boys (1983)*	*Beverly Hills Cop (1984)*	*Down by Law (1986)*	*Blue Velvet (1986)*	*Full Metal Jacket (1987)*	*Midnight Run (1988)*
1990-2000	*Good Fellas (1990)*	*Reservoir Dogs (1992)*	*Pulp Fiction (1994)*	*Desperado (1995)*	*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998)*	*American History X (1998)*	*The Boondock Saints (1999)*
2000-	*Alpha Dog (2006)*	*Rocknrolla (2008)*	*Inglourious Basterds (2009)*	*End of Watch (2012)*	*The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)*	*Django Unchained (2013)*	*The Hateful Eight (2015)*

Search terms

To specify the object of swearing, the researcher looked through the subtitle sources and manually tracked the utterances that included tabooed terms and their translation. Only utterances with swearwords were maintained in the data corpus. The search items are from the website *Swear Word List, Dictionary* (https://www.noswearing.com/dictionary), where the swearwords are sorted by the first letter and the list is open to supplement, considering some new swearwords may be created or evolved through ages.

Taxonomy of Strategies of SwearWords Translation

Within the corpus of swearwords and their Chinese rendition, this contrastive study analyzed each English swearword and attempted to find out to how much the Chinese translations satisfy English swearwords in tone and emotion. The paper adopts Masood Khoshsaligheh's (2018) taxonomy of the translation strategies to identify the classification of translation strategies and see how the Chinese translation conforms to them. Khoshsaligheh's taxonomy of translation strategies of taboo items include: (1) maintaining; (2) substituting; (3) mitigating; (4) deleting and; (5) amplifying.

In response to the first research question, with a careful review of the coupled segments, the researchers finally established this paper's taxonomy of translation strategies in the rendition of English swearwords into Chinese. The taxonomy and the definition are presented as follows. (1) maintaining: the original swearword is directly translated to an equivalent word in Chinese with the same force; (2) substituting: the swearword is translated to something which is not regarded as taboo or inappropriate item in Chinese; (3) mitigating: the force of the swearwords is reduced in the translation; (4) omitting: the swearword is totally deleted in the translation; (5) amplifying: the non-swearing item with a weak contextual taboo implicature in the original is translated as a swearword in the rendition.

An example of maintaining strategyin asegment of *Down by Law* (Jarmusch, 1986) is presented below (Table 1) to show how the strategies are applied. The underlined swearword "fucking", is transferred straight forward with corresponding Chinese swearwords "该死的" and "他妈的". According to *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the word "fuck" is a taboo word, used when "you are very annoyed about something" (Longman, n.d., Definition 2). In the fierce squabble, the first character describes the other's radio

show as extremely stupid, with an adverbialized "fuckin (fucking)". The Chinese expletive "该死的" (damned), expressing one's loathing or condemnation over something, has a similar force in emphasizing the character's mood. The swearword "他妈的", a vulgar expression revealing angry and detestation, maintains the original force of "fucking". In this example, the first character is complaining fiercely about the other's job and the life they are living in. The source text (ST) and the target text (TT) both render an attitude of intensive discontentment and furious complaints. The strategy of maintaining is crystallized in the example.

Table 2

An Instance of Maintaining from Down by Law

Context: the DJ's lover is complaining about her boyfriend.		
Original:	Chinese subtitles:	Back-Translation from Chinese
A: I've had it with you and your fuckin' stupid radio shows. This is really fuckin' boring! B: Okay. Okay.	A: 我受够了你和你该死的音乐了！真他妈的烦死了！ B: 好吧。	A: I've had enough of you and your damned music. It is motherfuckingly boring! B: Okay.

Results and Discussion

Data Analysis

The section shows the quantitative frequency of different translation strategies English swearwords into Chinese with the taxonomy above. In addition, the comparison of the results among different periods is made tofind out the changing laws behind English swearwords and its translation. In the corpus, a total of 5362 taboo instances were identified. Notably, several swearwords absent or very implicit in the source script are unveiled in the translation. Such instances constitute most cases of the amplifying strategy, which, however, encompassed the fewest instances in each phase. Therefore, the number 5362 refers to swearwords in both original and fansubbed versions.

Table 3

Overall Frequency and Percentage of the Strategies in the Entire Corpus

Phases	P1(1980-1990)		P2(1990-2000)		P3(2000-)	
Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Maintaining	365	39.7	900	48.3	1378	53.4
Substituting	136	14.8	297	16.0	362	14.0
Mitigating	160	17.4	154	8.3	209	8.1
Omitting	250	27.2	473	25.4	573	22.2
Amplifying	8	0.9	38	2.0	59	2.3
Total	**919**	**100**	**1862**	**100**	**2581**	**100**

In the first phase (1980-1990), 919 swearwords are identified. The most frequent strategy the fansubapplies is maintaining, occupying 39.7%. The omitting strategy (27.2%) comes after the maintaining strategy and makes up approximate one-third of the overall number. The next are the strategy of mitigating and that of substituting, the shares of which are 17.4% and 14.8%. Finally, fansub in this phase were least inclined to use amplifying to intensify or creating swearwords.

During 1990-2000, the number of swearwords captured in the original subtitles has more than doubled, amounting to 1862 (Table 3) besides some minor changes in fansubs' selecting strategies. The most and the fewest strategies remains respectively maintaining (48.3%) and amplifying (2.0%), as well as the second mostly used omitting strategy (25.4%). The mitigating strategy, which only accounts for 8%, seizes fewer shares than others except the strategy of amplifying. The remaining strategy substituting gain shares (16%).

In the third phase (2000-), the sum of the strategies is 2581 (Table 3). It can be found that maintaining is always the first choice for the fansubs faced with swearwords, with a percentage of 53.4%, accounting for more than half of the total strategy. The second most frequently used strategy is still omitting, with a percentage of 22.2%. The strategies of substituting (14.0%) and mitigating (8.1%) remain the following ones after omitting. As already mentioned, the least translation strategy fansubs tend to employ is amplifying, represented by a percentage of 2.3% since 2000.

Correlation Between the Position of Translated Filmsand Translation Strategies
    Changes of translation strategies in three periods

Table 4

The Percentage of Different Strategies in the Three Phrases

	P1 (1980-1990)	P2 (1990-2000)	P3 (2000-)
Maintaining	39.7	48.3	53.4
Substituting	14.8	16.0	14.0
Mitigating	17.4	8.3	8.1
Omitting	27.2	25.4	22.2
Amplifying	0.9	2.0	2.3

As can be seen in the Table 4, when considering the same translation strategies, fansubs of different ages tend to differentiate themselves from that of the other ages with different proportions of the five strategies in swearwords translation. Chinese fansubs appear to weigh up many factors in the final decision. Although maintaining was always the most recurrent strategy in all three periods, the frequency of maintaining strategy cover various shares (respectively 39.7%, 48.3% and 53.4%) of overall strategies of the same age. As years go by, Chinese fansubs seem increasingly inclined to preserve the original force of swearwords in film translation. Likewise, the other translating strategy that has been increasingly used is amplifying despite the smallest proportion (0.9%, 2.0%, and 2.3%) in all three periods. When using the amplifying strategy, the translator renders a nontaboo item in the original into a taboo item in the translation, or replaces an item with implied taboo force with a word or phrase with explicit taboo force. The subtle but evident variations of share of the amplifying strategy revealed that Chinese fansubs, with a few Chinese swearwords with stronger force, attempt to highlight the context of original text. Contrary to the strategy of maintaining and that of amplifying, the mitigating strategy and the omitting strategy declined with time. Most clearly, the proportion of mitigating strategy decreased by more than a half from 17.4% in 1980-1990 to 8.3% in 1990-2000. It is clear that the Chinese fansubs become less likely to weaken the explicit swearing items and euphemize the dirty word when translating swearwords. In addition, the omitting strategy, the second most reoccurring strategy in the corpus in each period was also moving downward from 27.2% in 1980-1990 to 22.2% after 2000. Such a decline also suggested the fact that the translators try to avoid deleting the original swearing items roughly. The remaining strategy is substituting, the

substitution of the original swearwords with words or items involving no force of swearing. Since 1980, the frequency of substituting rose up from 14.8% to 16.0% in the beginning and fell down to 14.0% in the last period. The changes in such coverage implied some changing factors influencing the Chinese fansubs' choices of strategies.

Generally, in 1980-1990, most swearwords in the original subtitles were de-toned or deleted in their forces for the acceptability of target audience. Ten years later (1990-2000), nearly half of the swearwords were preserved in forces and the strategies of omitting, mitigating and substituting were less used. Fansubs cared more about the adequacy of the ST. In the third period, the strategy of maintaining covered more than a half of all. According to the data analyzed for the first time, fansubs focused more on the adequacy of the original swearing forces than the acceptability of target culture.

Based on the data collected and strategies analyzed, it allows for a conclusion that Chinese fansubs were cautious about the translation of swearwords in each period, featured with a relative majority of practices of preserving the original force of swearwords and an absolute minority practices of enhancing the swearing tone. To illustrate further, the extensive practices of weakening the originalforce of swearing, replacing the swearwords with non-offensive ones and deleting the original swearing items shed light on the facts that Chinese fansubs attempted to adjust the original films with intensive swearwords to a more polite and peaceful one for its acceptability. Meanwhile, fansub subtitles are unofficial and do not undergo a legal check (Muñoz-Sánchez, 2009, p. 178), the Chinese fansubs did try to preserve the key cultural features of the original text, swearing language here, in Chinese subtitles. The tendency becomes stronger as time goes by. Instead of holding fast to acceptability, the change of these strategies by supports the conclusion that for Chinese fansubs, the marching of time encourages a resistance to the traditional principle of great harmony and politeness and heading for an adequate translation.

Changes of the position of translated films in China

Although the foreign films firstcame to Chinain the 1920s, it was not until 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded that the birth of translated films finally made sense (Tan, 2014, p. 9). Nevertheless, the development of films relies heavily on the social environment, crystallized by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which films in China were closely intwined with political struggle and translated films from English-speaking countries were scarce. Because of the social environment, the incunabular industry has undergone several unrests. Not until the reform and opening-up at the end of the 1970s, China's translated films finally ushered in its new stage.

The position of translated films in 1980-1990

After the stagnated development in 1966-1976, the long-lasting interaction between films and literature witnessed a golden age of Chinese film industry (Zhu & Wang, 2018, p. 185). It was at that time when rich kinds of Chinese literature works were adapted for films such as *Midnight (1981)*, *The Border Town (1984)*, *Hibiscus Town (1986)* and *Red Sorghum (1987)*. This process of bilateral interaction marks the gradual maturity of Chinese films as cultural products and the rich harvest of native films. In the early stage of 1980s, China Film Group Corporation, as the only imported film distributor, purchased foreign films with a yearly budget of around 20,000 dollars, which limited the development of film dubbing greatly. In the middle and later half of the 1980s, several production bases for film dubbing cultivated outstanding dubbing specialists and teams. In spite of the

national and social efforts in introducing excellent English films, the immature situation left much to be developed. From 1980 to 1990, the number of translated films in China stabilized at 35 every year, with a growing tendency. Whereas the number of native films at the same time stage remained over six hundred each year, the imported films accounted little in Chinese film market and was reduced to the peripheric position.

The position of translated films in 1990-2000

In 1992, as the socialist market economy was established in China, the systemization of Chinese film industry begun since then. An important document by National Radio and Television Administration stated explicitly that China Film Group Corporation could import 10 foreign films every year with the option of box office revenue sharing. Under the circumstances, the first imported Hollywood revenue-sharing film *The Fugitive* (1994 Chinese Mainland) was released in six cities with a total number of 1.39 million viewers. The 10 imported Hollywood films aroused viewers' interest and infused fresh blood into China's film industry. During this period, the output of Chinese native films decreased year-on-year, especially in the later half of the 1990s, the annual total films only amounted to less than 300. The first half of the 1990s could also found evidence of downtown of Chinese film industry, as Yuan (1993) puts, "the 1992's annual film viewers declined by 13 billion compared with 1982". In 1996, the National Film Board officially put forward the Strategy of High Quality of the domestic films and demanded that Chinese films hold more than two-thirds of the annual film screen in every cinema nationwide. Despite the weakness of the overall film industry in China and the normalized import of Hollywood films, the native films still held a dominating position during this period, and the translated ones were enlarging its influence.

The position of translated films after 2000

In 2001, China's accession to WTO entailed a promise of increasing the number of imported films from ten to 20 and to 50 in three years. The increased import quotas encouraged increasingly foreign films especially English-speaking films landed on the Chinese film market. The diversified development of the film dubbing industry also fueled the growth of translated films. Fansub, as a typical form of film translation has risen up because of the rapid development of internet and the strong desire of knowing about the world. In such situation, the domestic films begin to push back. Since 2001, the annual number of domestic films increased considerably. Another typical strive for the dominating position was "the months of protecting Chinese films" issued by the National Film Board, anotice in hopes of supporting domestic films. Tacit agreements were made by all cinemas on abandoning the importation of blockbusters during July and August every year. In combating for higher position, China's films maintain the predominance. Whereas the demand for moreimpot quotas and the rising of fansubs attest to the foreign films' struggling for a stronger foothold.

To address all the aforementioned questions, a key exploration will be launched with respect to the relations between the position of translated films and translation strategies. From the qualitative and quantitative analysis, we may recapitulate the following points.

(1) During 1980-1990, translated films were on the marginal position in the film system of China. The translation of films from English-speaking countries consulted the demand of target acceptability.

(2) During 1990-2000, translated films were enlarging its influence, but still in a weak position to compete for a larger film industry market. The translation strategies in this period seek the potentialforcloser matches of the SL.

(3) After 2000, translated films continue to strive for a more advantageous position in Chinese film market, but with some measures taken, foreign films fail to obtain the primary position. This period's translation strategy moves forward to maintaining the original forcesso as to approach the rules of adequacy.

To recap more explicitly, the correspondent relationship between the position of translated films and the translation strategies of each period is generalized in Table 5.

Table 5

The Position of Translated Films and Translation Strategies in Three Periods

	Position of translated films	Translation strategies
1980-1990	Peripheric	Acceptable
1990-2000	Weak	More acceptable and less adequate
2000-	Weak with more influence	More adequate and less acceptable relatively

Correlation

According to Table 5, there does exist a correlation between the position of translated films and translation strategies. Apparently, when translated films began to enter the film polysystem of China and squeezed peripheral space in the first period, the translators adhered strictly to the principle of acceptability and made the renditions as acceptable as possible for readers' purposes. It accords with the second hypothesis. However, although there is no period when the translated film products occupy a leading position to validate the observance of the adequacy principle, the increasing influence of translated films indeed has proved an accordingly growing tendency of achieving its adequacy, which conforms to the trend of original hypothesis. In short, the correlation between the position of translated films and its translation strategy can be substantially consistent with that between the position of the translated literature and its position. Therefore, the hypothesis of film polysystem is tenable.

In the light of the polysystem theory of translated literature, we establish a similar theory model for translated film products and testify its possibility of existence. The film polysystem is defined as an aggregation of film systems, and the translated film products, as a kind of film system, belongs to the film polysystem. Meanwhile, the position of translated films within the film polysystem can be either central or peripheral. When the translated films are in a central position, a ready-made repertoire will be adopted and the translation strategy of adequacy is preferred. While when they are in a peripheral position, an innovative new repertoire and the translation strategy of acceptability will be utilized.

Conclusion

This study was to present a snapshot of fansub practice in China interms of swearwords translation of films, and to identify the possible regularities about the strategies employed by the Chinese fansubs. The study also explored the changing laws of these strategies from the perspective of cross-period AVT conventions in the Chinese context and investigated the correlation between the position of translated films and the translation strategiesto identify the tenability of film polysystem. Based on the analysis of three corpora of 21 subtitles from Chinese fansubs, we can conclude that the fansub translation strategies are influenced by the position of imported films. When comparing the phenomenon of translated films with translated literature, the study testified a similar rule, that is to say, there is a film polysystem.

Guided by Polysystem, the film polysystem is defined as an aggregation of film systems, and the translated films, as a kind of subsystem, belongs to the film polysystem, which is by no means immobile and settled. Instead, it is dynamic and in constant changes. As the sub-systems under the film polysystem always combate for the central position. As a result, the translated films within the film polysystem can be in any state of the variation ranging from central position to peripheral position. Within the film polysytem, the translation strategies of translated films vary with their position. To illustrate specifically, if the translated films are in a peripheric position, the fansub sprioritize the requirement of acceptability; if the position of translated films is enlarging, an approach of moving toward the standard of adequacy is preferred.

Although the study has conducted an initial verification of the possibility of film polysytem, more research is required to distinctly manifest the other factors such as the translator's subjectivity and cultural elements that influence fansubs' choice of translation strategies. Further research is recommended to set up larger corpora for more generalizability and reliability of the results as well asa deeper investigation of this nonprofessional practice across various genres and languages among other relevant variables. Additionally, supplementary research is suggested to clarify the driving forces behind the position of the translated films.

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