

Exploring Language, Culture, And Self–Motivation: Thai Students’ Experiences in An Exchange Program in Dali, China

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the students’ experiences in relation to language, culture, and self–motivation, drawing on self–determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Deardorff’s (2006) intercultural competence model for data analysis. A mixed–methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys on students’ perceptions of the program with qualitative in–depth interviews conducted with both students and teachers overseeing the exchange. The findings revealed that students had developed a positive attitude toward the program and had expressed aspirations to pursue higher education in China after graduating in Thailand. Their heightened sense of self–motivation led them to commit more strongly to mastering the Chinese language as a means of achieving future success. Six months after their trip, their HSK levels were found to have improved. Overall, the study demonstrated that cooperation between Chinese and Thai universities could significantly impact Thai undergraduates, even through a short 10–day visit to China.

Keywords: Chinese Language; Self–Motivation; Exchange Program; Intercultural Competence

Introduction

Like Lao Tzu said in his masterpiece *Tao Te Ching* over 2000 years ago, “千里之行, 始于足下,” which literally means “A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one’s feet” (Lau, 2007). This refers to the idea that one can achieve great success in the future by starting with small steps today. The initiative between Dali University, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, and the Maritime Silkroad Confucius Institute to bring a group of 20 students to Dali, Yunnan Province, China, was warmly welcomed by students, parents, and the university community. It is based on the belief that a small beginning can one day grow into something greater. Each student would pay only 6,963 Baht (218 USD) for the round-trip airfare, while Dali University will cover their meals, accommodation, transportation, museum entrance fees, and other expenses during their stay in China. With two teachers from Phranakhon Rajabhat University escorting the group at all times, parents felt reassured and were supportive of their children joining this international trip.

The program itself offers rich immersion in the Chinese language, cultural tours, and visits to museums and ancient villages of the Bai ethnic group in the Dali region. The trip took place from March 9 to 18, 2025, lasting 10 days in total. Immersion in Chinese culture occurred every day, beginning each morning with Tai Chi, the Chinese martial art adapted into gentle exercises. The participants visited several interesting places, including the Biological Science Museum at Dali University, Puzhen Bai Ethnic Tie-Dyeing Museum, Xizhou Ancient Village, the Three Pagodas of Chongsheng, Xiaguan Tuocha Museum, and Erhai Lake.

Teachers of the Business Chinese Program, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, are responsible for recruiting undergraduate students to join the program. We have a basic criterion that applicants should have passed the HSK Level 2 Chinese language test, which ensures that they can communicate at a fair level in everyday conversations.

A total of 37 students applied for this program during the application period from December 1, 2024, to January 5, 2025. After reviewing the documents and conducting interviews, the teachers carefully selected 20 applicants who were deemed ready to participate. Health issues were also taken seriously, as falling ill during the trip would cause significant problems. The final announcement was made on January 7, 2025. Students were then given two months to prepare their passports and other necessary documents. Since almost all of them had never set foot in China, parents’ concerns were something the teachers needed to handle with care.

Once everything was ready, the group gathered at Suvarnabhumi Airport on March 9, 2025, to board the plane, with parents coming to see their children off. The welcoming team at Dali University was eager to meet the students and had already arranged all necessary accommodations, including hotels, meals, and transportation.

Research Objectives

This study takes the form of action research, as we organized an international exchange program for Thai students. Our aim was to examine Thai undergraduate students' experiences in language learning, cultural immersion, and self-motivation through participation in a short-term exchange program in Dali, China. The findings will be valuable for planning future exchange programs, particularly if the results show that such initiatives are worthwhile.

Literature Reviews

International exchange programs are widely recognized as valuable opportunities for students to develop academically, culturally, and personally. Research shows that even short-term study abroad (STSA) programs can have meaningful outcomes for students' global awareness and cultural understanding (Kurt, Olitsky, & Geis, 2013). Kaplin (2010) similarly emphasizes that short-term exchanges enhance students' self-confidence, cultural knowledge, and academic ambitions. These findings suggest that the duration of the program does not necessarily limit its impact when structured effectively.

A key benefit of exchange programs is language learning through immersion. Immersive contexts provide authentic opportunities to practice the target language, enhancing fluency and confidence (Kinging, 2009). In particular, Kinginger (2011) highlights that immersion promotes social interactional competence and pragmatic awareness, though the outcomes vary depending on learners' engagement and motivation. For Thai learners of Chinese, direct exposure to real-life communication in China presents unique opportunities to strengthen both linguistic skills and intercultural competence.

Cultural adaptation is another critical dimension of study abroad programs. Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures, which develops through direct engagement and reflection. Structured activities such as museum visits, cultural performances, and local traditions are shown to deepen cultural understanding (Paige, Cohen, & Shively, 2004). Recent studies emphasize the role of

reflective practices, such as guided discussions and journaling, in strengthening intercultural competence (Pegrum, 2021).

Equally important is the role of motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), intrinsic motivation fosters sustained engagement in learning activities. Noels (2001) applies this theory to language learning, showing that intrinsic motivation contributes to persistence and achievement in second language acquisition. Anderson et al. (2006) also report that study abroad participants often return with increased commitment to personal growth and cross-cultural engagement, suggesting that short-term experiences can spark long-term motivation.

In the Thai-Chinese educational context, studies have begun to explore challenges and opportunities. Xiao (2013) evaluated a one-month exchange program between Dali University (China) and Burapha University (Thailand), finding that participants improved their communication skills, cultural awareness, and adaptability. Similarly, Peng and Yincheng (2025) examined Thai students studying in Yunnan, identifying both progress and challenges, including language barriers and strategies for integration. These studies highlight the relevance of institutional support and cultural immersion for maximizing benefits.

Taken together, the literature suggests that short-term exchange programs can positively influence students' language development, cultural adaptation, and motivation. However, the extent of these benefits depends on program design, individual learner differences, and cultural context. Few studies have examined these dynamics specifically for Thai undergraduate students in short-term Chinese exchange programs, leaving a gap that the present study addresses.

Exchange Experiences and Successful Lives

Historical and contemporary examples show that study abroad experiences have influenced not only personal development but also leadership and institutional transformation.

A classic case is Deng Xiaoping, who joined the Work-Study Movement in France in 1920. Although his formal schooling abroad was limited, his exposure to industrial labor and political ideas shaped his worldview and later reformist leadership in China (Britannica, 2024). Scholars argue that these experiences helped Deng appreciate both the challenges of modernization and the value of international perspectives in reforming China (Time, 2004).

Similarly, research highlights that leaders with overseas study experience often transfer those perspectives into institutional success. For example, a recent study found that Chinese university leaders who had studied abroad were more effective in promoting technology transfer and innovation at their institutions (Yang & Chen, 2024).

The long-term effects of study abroad are not confined to political leaders. Murphy et al. (2014) found that graduates who studied abroad were more globally engaged, participating more in international travel, cross-cultural civic activities, and professional networks compared to peers who did not. This suggests that international experiences create lasting habits of global involvement.

Other leaders have similarly benefited from foreign education. Carter (1998) analyzed the careers of Mary Robinson, Benazir Bhutto, and Shimon Peres, showing how their overseas education shaped their political leadership, vision, and approaches to governance.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that study abroad and exchange experiences can foster resilience, broaden perspectives, and nurture leadership qualities that extend far beyond individual gains, influencing institutions, societies, and nations.

Conceptual Framework

After this trip, we aimed to examine the students' perceptions of the Chinese language, Chinese culture, and the self-motivation they carried within their hearts for personal development. Some perceptions might be positive, while others might point to areas for improvement. These insights could only be determined after analyzing the results of the study.

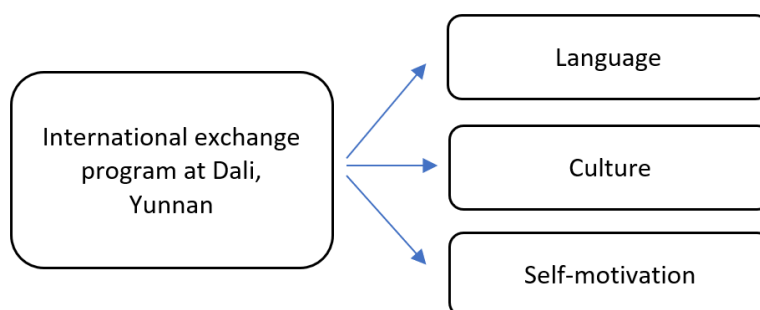


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research employed mixed methods. The quantitative approach collected data from an opinion survey completed by the 20 students who participated in the exchange program, focusing on their views regarding language, culture, and self-motivation. The qualitative approach involved in-depth interviews with 12 participants, consisting of 7 Thai students, 3 Chinese teachers, and 2 Thai teachers. These interviews also addressed the same three aspects, along with

recommendations for improving future programs. The statistical tools used were frequency, percentage, and standard deviation. Data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using content analysis.

In this study, two theoretical perspectives were adapted to frame the analysis: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Competence Model. Self-Determination Theory provides a foundation for examining how intrinsic motivation emerged among Thai students through authentic learning experiences in China, leading to stronger commitment to language learning and future educational aspirations. At the same time, Deardorff's model of intercultural competence was adjusted to capture how students developed cultural awareness and appreciation through direct engagement with Chinese traditions, practices, and communities. By integrating these two frameworks, this research explains not only the students' motivational growth but also their intercultural development, offering a comprehensive lens to understand the impact of short-term exchange programs.

Research Results

Among the 20 students who participated in this program, 15 were female and 5 were male. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22. All of them held different levels of the HSK test. However, the teachers selected only those who were able to communicate in Chinese at a fair level. The participants were undergraduate students in the Business Chinese Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University. Four were first-year students, two were second-year students, eleven were third-year students, and three were fourth-year students.

The results of the opinion survey are presented below.

Table 1 Opinion survey

	Descriptions	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
1	You are satisfied with this program.	4.75	0.43
2	Your Chinese language is getting better.	4.45	0.67
3	You learned new vocabulary.	4.55	0.59
4	You have more confidence to speak Chinese.	4.70	0.46
5	You have more knowledge on Chinese culture.	4.50	0.74
6	You have more appreciation to the Chinese culture.	4.44	1.37
7	You have more interest to learn about Chinese culture.	4.55	0.74
8	You are inspired to learn Chinese language.	4.80	0.40
9	You want to study further in China, after your graduation.	4.80	0.40
10	Your experience from this program encouraged you to obtain higher skills in Chinese language.	4.60	0.49
	Total	4.61	0.62

The students' opinions on all statements were at a high level. The highest was statement No. 8 ($\bar{X} = 4.80$), indicating that they felt inspired to learn Chinese further. This is especially encouraging for Chinese language teachers, as it shows their students are motivated to improve their foreign language skills. The lowest score was for statement No. 6 ($\bar{X} = 4.44$), which asked about their appreciation of Chinese culture. Although it was the lowest among all ten statements, the score is still considered high. This may suggest that students already had an appreciation for Chinese culture, and their views did not change significantly after the program.

Another interesting finding was statement No. 9 ($\bar{X} = 4.80$), where almost all students expressed a desire to continue their studies in China after graduating from Phranakhon Rajabhat University. This is a particularly satisfying result. Similarly, statement No. 10 ($\bar{X} = 4.60$), concerning self-motivation to study Chinese further, is also important. Many students reported planning to continue self-studying the language with the goal of mastering it. Such self-driven motivation is exactly what teachers hope to see in their students.

Six months after the trip, we followed up on the language progress of this group of students and found something remarkable. Some had become deeply engaged in self-studying Chinese, and their HSK results showed clear improvement. For readers unfamiliar with HSK, it stands for *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi*, the only official test of Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers in China. It ranges from the lowest level, HSK 1, to the highest level, HSK 6. A comparison of their results before the trip and six months later is presented below.

Table 2 Results of students' HSK test

HSK Level	Before the trip (number of students)	Six months after the trip (number of students)
HSK 2	11	9
HSK 3	1	3
HSK 4	7	4
HSK 5	1	4
Total	20	20

Most of the 20 students progressed to higher levels of the HSK tests, reflecting the fact that they had been self-studying the language. As they mentioned in the interviews after the trip, they were motivated to study harder in order to master the language—and they successfully passed the tests. The table above shows tangible evidence that the exchange program may have played a role in encouraging students to pursue self-study.

It is also possible that their advancement was influenced by progressing further in their Business Chinese program, as language competency generally increases with the number of years of study. This leaves room for further research to explore the contributing factors in more detail.

Results from the Interview

We interviewed 7 students, 3 Chinese teachers, and 2 Thai teachers. The open-ended questions for students were about their opinions on the trip regarding the Chinese language, Chinese culture, and self-motivation. Questions for the teachers were about their opinions on the worthiness of the programs for their students regarding the same three issues. Here are some selected excerpts worth sharing:

Students

Student A: *“For this trip, I set a goal for myself that I would find chances to speak Chinese as much as possible since I don’t have many opportunities at our university. At first, I was reluctant to speak because I was afraid they wouldn’t understand me. After a few days there, I spoke a lot with Chinese students, teachers, and street sellers that I could find. I’m happy with my courage.”*

Student B: *“I talked to everyone I met in Dali in Chinese. I ordered food, I shopped, I talked to the local people. I have more confidence now to speak the language. I learned many new words every day. I also understand their real accent.”*

Student C: *“The government tried to promote the existence of the local ethnicity of the Bai people. They want to keep the local culture for the next generation. I was amazed to see their effort, that they tried to keep the calligraphy using the brush, or playing music with ancient-styled instruments. I was very touched by this.”*

Student D: *“Every meal—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—we ate at a big table with a rotating platform where all the dishes were placed. It’s the real Chinese style of food serving where you can eat all kinds of foods in one meal. Also, many people can sit and eat at the same time, so we can talk about things. It’s very nice to see this dining culture, which I’ve never experienced before.”*

Student E: *“Every morning, we practiced Tai Chi with our master and we learned how to breathe with calmness and inner peace. It was very refreshing for me. The ancient city of Dali and all the old buildings are sacred and majestic. The cleanliness of the city was superb. The air was fresh everywhere.”*

Teachers

Teacher A: “Every day, in every activity, we included language elements. For example, we said: Go east for 200 meters (请您向东走二百米); Turn left at the intersection (请您在十字路口向左转); Excuse me, where is the subway station? (请问, 地铁站在哪里?). So, the students became familiar with the words and expressions in Chinese.”

Teacher B: “We brought students to experience real Chinese culture. For example, we let them wear 汉服 (Hànfú), the ancient Chinese clothes. Once you wear it, it’s not just the pictures in the book—you are wearing it. We also brought them to visit a tie-dyeing museum in Bai ethnic style. They learned how to make designs on the clothes such as stars or butterflies, and dipped the cloth into water mixed with the blue liquid from the indigo plant. When it was completed, the designs became white and blue, which is naturally beautiful. Each piece of cloth is unique—the only one in the world.”

Teacher C: “We need to prepare students for future jobs. The exchange program allowed the Thai and Chinese students to meet and interact with each other. Students became more open to cultural differences and opinions. This open-mindedness is very important for working at the international level.”

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the short-term exchange program in Dali, China, positively influenced Thai students’ language proficiency, cultural awareness, and self-motivation. Students reported increased confidence in speaking Chinese, acquisition of new vocabulary, and inspiration to pursue further study in China. These outcomes align with previous research suggesting that even short-term study abroad (STSA) programs can yield significant benefits in terms of global awareness, self-confidence, and cultural understanding (Kaplin, 2010).

Language Development

Participants highlighted that immersion in authentic communicative environments, such as conversations with local students, teachers, and shopkeepers, enhanced their practical language skills. This supports Kinginger’s (2009) argument that language immersion fosters pragmatic awareness and social interactional competence. While some students initially felt hesitant to speak, they reported rapid improvement in fluency and confidence—a finding consistent with Noels (2001), who emphasized the role of intrinsic motivation in sustaining language learning. Compared

to Xiao's (2013) evaluation of a one-month exchange between Dali University and Burapha University, the present study similarly demonstrates measurable linguistic gains despite the shorter program duration. The HSK level was higher among these 20 students during the past six months after the trip. This strongly indicates that the participants gained self-motivation to climb the test ladder in order to upgrade themselves on Chinese language.

Cultural Understanding

The program also exposed students to Chinese cultural practices, such as Tai Chi, calligraphy, traditional dining, and Bai ethnic tie-dyeing. Students' appreciation of these experiences resonates with Deardorff's (2006) framework of intercultural competence, which develops through direct cultural engagement. Activities like museum visits and cultural performances mirror Paige, Cohen, and Shively's (2004) findings that structured cultural experiences strengthen intercultural knowledge. However, the relatively lower rating for cultural appreciation compared to other items suggests that many students already held positive perceptions of Chinese culture before the trip, a contrast with Peng and Yincheng's (2023) findings that Thai students in Yunnan often face greater challenges in cultural adjustment.

Self-Motivation

One of the strongest outcomes was students' heightened motivation to continue learning Chinese and their aspiration to pursue higher education in China. This echoes Anderson et al.'s (2006) conclusion that short-term study abroad programs can spark long-term personal growth and cross-cultural engagement. The students' intrinsic motivation aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), suggesting that authentic, meaningful experiences nurture sustained learning commitments. Unlike Peng and Yincheng's (2025) report of language barriers reducing motivation for Thai students in longer-term programs, this study demonstrates how short-term immersion, when well-structured, can serve as an effective motivational catalyst. Moreover, the HSK levels of this group of students were found to have improved, as shown in Table 2. The interviews revealed that the students were motivated to master the language after the trip. This motivation could be one of the reasons for their higher scores on the HSK Chinese language test.

Broader Implications

These findings also connect with historical and contemporary cases of study abroad experiences shaping leadership and global engagement (Carter, 1998). While the present study focuses on undergraduate students, the consistent theme across studies is that international

exchanges—whether short or long term—provide formative experiences that influence not only academic pathways but also professional and civic engagement.

In sum, the present study reinforces the growing body of evidence that short-term exchange programs, when carefully designed, can foster meaningful language development, cultural competence, and self-motivation among students. Compared with other studies, this program's outcomes are notable given its brief duration of only 10 days, highlighting the importance of intentional structuring and institutional support in maximizing impact.

New Knowledge from Research

In order to make the student international exchange program successful, three aspects need to be considered before, during, and after the trip. The first is the language component, as this group of students aimed to master the Chinese language. They expected to immerse themselves in a Chinese language environment, so the organizers need to ensure that all activities in China are conducted in Chinese as much as possible. The second is the cultural component, where the organizers should provide opportunities for students to visit a variety of museums, attend local performances, and experience authentic places such as ancient cities, where traditional architecture and aspects of local daily life can still be observed firsthand. The third is self-motivation, where positive experiences can help drive students' intrinsic motivation and encourage changes in their daily activities, such as dedicating more time to practicing Chinese at home or during their free time.

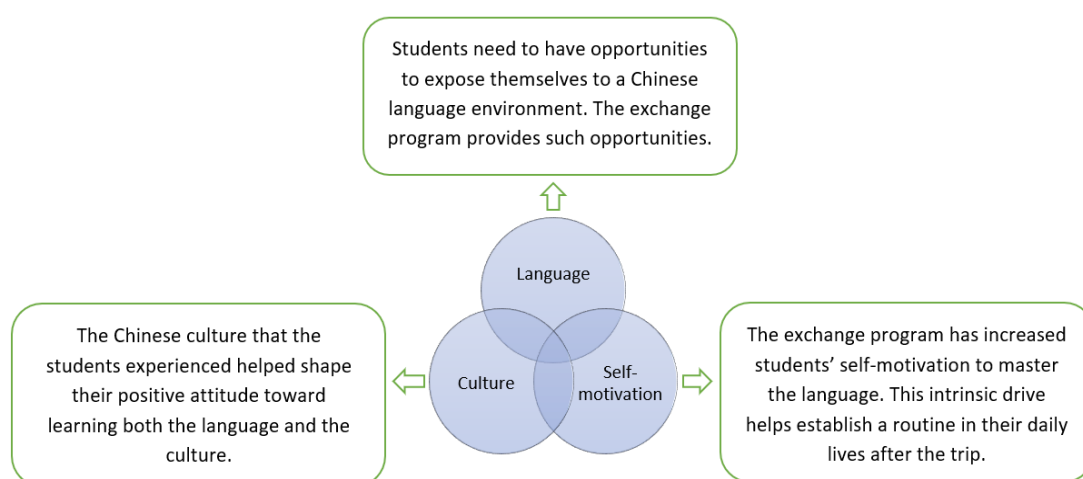


Figure 2 Three Components for Successful Student Exchange Program

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of Thai undergraduate students participating in a short-term exchange program at Dali University, China, with a focus on language development, cultural understanding, and self-motivation. The results demonstrated that even a 10-day exchange can significantly enhance students' confidence in using Chinese, deepen their appreciation of Chinese culture, and strengthen their intrinsic motivation to pursue further language learning and higher education in China. The study highlights distinctive outcomes within the Thai-Chinese educational context, where structured activities and institutional support helped maximize the benefits of a brief immersion experience. The evidence suggests that well-designed exchange programs need not be lengthy to be impactful. By providing authentic language opportunities, meaningful cultural engagement, and spaces for reflection, universities can foster both immediate learning outcomes and long-term motivation. Furthermore, the collaborative model between Thai and Chinese institutions demonstrated here offers a valuable framework for promoting cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation. Ultimately, the program not only benefited the individual students by boosting their skills and aspirations but also contributed to broader educational and cultural exchange between Thailand and China. Future efforts should continue to refine, expand, and sustain such initiatives so that more students can embark on their own “journey of a thousand miles,” beginning with the first steps of international exchange.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study and in light of previous research, several recommendations can be proposed for enhancing future short-term exchange programs between Thai and Chinese universities:



Figure 3 Recommendations for the next student exchange program

1. Extend Pre-Departure Preparation

While students demonstrated strong motivation and positive attitudes, additional pre-departure orientation on cultural norms, linguistic variations, and daily life in China could further reduce anxiety and increase readiness. This aligns with Xiao's (2013) findings that pre-departure training enhances adaptability during exchange experiences.

2. Integrate Reflective Practices

To deepen intercultural competence, structured reflection through journals, guided group discussions, or digital storytelling should be incorporated into the program. Research by Pegrum (2021) and Palmer (2021) highlights the role of reflective practices in strengthening intercultural awareness and self-understanding.

3. Provide More Interactive Language Opportunities

Although students benefitted from spontaneous interactions, creating additional structured language tasks—such as role plays, interviews with locals, or collaborative projects with Chinese peers—would further enhance communicative competence. This supports Kinginger's (2011) recommendation for programs to deliberately design contexts that promote interactional competence.

4. Balance Cultural Exposure with Critical Engagement

Students expressed appreciation for cultural activities but reported less change in their appreciation levels, suggesting that some cultural learning was confirmatory rather than transformative. Facilitating critical discussions about cultural similarities, differences, and evolving practices could foster deeper intercultural competence, consistent with Deardorff's (2006) model.

5. Leverage Motivation for Long-Term Goals

The heightened motivation observed should be harnessed through follow-up initiatives, such as advanced Chinese courses, exchange alumni networks, and scholarship guidance for further study in China. As noted by Anderson et al. (2006), short-term experiences can ignite long-term growth, but sustained institutional support is critical for maintaining momentum.

6. Expand Institutional Collaboration

Finally, stronger partnerships between Thai and Chinese universities can help institutionalize exchange programs, ensuring sustainability and inclusivity. Collaborative curriculum design, joint research projects, and reciprocal exchanges could broaden the impact beyond individual student experiences (Peng & Yincheng, 2025).

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that even brief exchange programs can be transformative when coupled with thoughtful preparation, reflective engagement, and ongoing institutional support. Implementing these measures would not only maximize student outcomes in language, culture, and motivation but also contribute to the long-term strengthening of Sino–Thai educational cooperation.

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