



MAIN TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NON-STATE EDUCATION IN CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

MA. Nguyen The Lan

No 22 Nguyen Huy Nhuan Road, Phu Thi, Gia Lam, Hanoi, Vietnam, Pin/Zip Code 12409; Global Translation, Training and Trading Company.

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*Corresponding author: MA. Nguyen The Lan

No 22 Nguyen Huy Nhuan Road, Phu Thi, Gia Lam, Hanoi, Vietnam, Pin/Zip Code 12409; Global Translation, Training and Trading Company.

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, for China, preparing a population capable of ensuring not only high growth rates in all areas of activity, but also improving its quality characteristics has become crucial. The PRC authorities proclaimed science and education to be the “foundation” of socialist modernization and the “root” of the further development of Chinese society. To deepen the transformation initiated during the period of reform and opening up, China's education system has come a long way of development. Until recently, the main focus for the authorities was the public education system, in the development of which impressive results have been achieved. The private education segment, although formally having political support from the state, nevertheless developed rather chaotically. Economic reforms in the country have created the preconditions for increasing the population's demand not only for public but also for private education, which was facilitated by a number of factors, including increased prosperity and urbanization. However, the development of the sphere of non-state education had pronounced regional specifics, and therefore occurred rather unevenly.

Recently, the state has paid closer attention to industries that were previously largely in the shadow of reforms. The development of private educational institutions has become one of the important task areas of the authorities.

The paper provides an overview of the development of private education in China from the 2000s to the present, when this segment has entered a new stage of development; the issues and features of the development of the non-state education sector are touched upon, prerequisites and upcoming reforms in the industry in the near future are considered.

Keywords: China, private education, non-state educational institutions, reforms.

Introduction

In the modern world, a key factor in the successful functioning of any country is increasing the efficiency of the educational system. Private education plays an important role in this context.

The relevance of the topic under consideration is determined primarily by the fact that the system of non-state education in China, its issues and possible directions of development have been studied very little in the scientific literature, especially in comparison with the sphere of public education in the PRC. In recent years, reform of China's education system has attracted

increasing attention. However, the private education segment has so far remained in the shadows.

Gradually, non-state educational institutions (*hereinafter referred to as NOUs*) are beginning to play an increasingly significant role in the life of Chinese society, that is why this paper will examine the modern period of development of the industry, starting from the 2000s. Currently in China, there is an increase in the number of students at all stages of education, the number of schools is increasing, thereby allowing more and more children to gain access to education, regardless of their region of residence. Private

education compensates for the lack of resources that the public sector cannot cover. Until recently, the private education segment developed without significant interest from the authorities. However, recently, having established the overall functioning of state educational institutions, the authorities have begun large-scale work in the sectors that previously received much less attention. Private education has become one of them. As of September 2021, new amendments to the law regulating the work of non-state educational institutions came into force. Anh there will certainly be changes in the development of the industry in the future.

In this regard, the goal and objective of our research was to determine the position of this segment of education in the overall system of organizing education in China, the degree of involvement and interest of the authorities in the development of non-state educational institutions, and to identify issues and prospects for the development of private education in China. Separately, it is worth noting that we will focus on the analysis of preschool, school and higher private education. Tutoring and additional out-of-school education, which, of course, are also important segments of private education, require separate consideration.

Theoretical and methodological basis of the study

In the research process, comprehensive and systematic approaches were widely used, as well as methods for analyzing cause-and-effect relationships, economic-statistical and socio-economic methods.

The paper presents the results of a study of materials from the Chinese educational and socio-political press, economic publications of Chinese researchers, regulatory and legislative acts of the People's Republic of China on the issues of the development of non-state education. The author also used materials that became the basis of his own research as part of his MA thesis on economic issues in the development of the PRC education system.

1. History of the development of non-state education in China

The history of private education in China goes back to the time of Confucius during the Chunqiu era (c. 722 - 481 BC), when the first analogues of private educational institutions began to appear. In the 19th century, private universities were founded by public forces (社会力量 shehui liliang), which subsequently came under the jurisdiction of the state¹. However, the rise of non-state educational institutions began with the period of reforms and openness, when the vector of development created by social forces was called the national one [1]. From the 1980s to the present day, non-state educational institutions, called minban (民办), have gone through a significant and difficult development path.

The main prerequisite for the growth of private education during the period of reform and openness was the inability of the state to provide the educational needs of the population. The state educational institutions available at that time could not cover all segments of the population living in various regions of the country. On the one hand, private schools were created in the interests of the children of the already rich elite at that time, on the other hand,

¹ Social forces, as a rule, mean various enterprises, budgetary organizations, public associations, individuals and other structures ready for cooperation.

for residents of rural areas who were looking for opportunities to provide education to their children [2, p. 160].

Since the beginning of reforms and openness, non-state educational institutions have gone through several stages of development.

The 1982 Constitution states: "The state encourages collective economic organizations, state enterprises, organizations and other public associations to create various educational institutions on the basis of law" [3]. A number of documents of the State Council on reform of the structure of education developed these provisions of the Constitution. In the 1980s, the main form of non-state education was preparatory courses that were not part of the compulsory education system.

After Deng Xiaoping proclaimed the creation of a "socialist market economy" in the early 1990s, non-state diploma education (民办学历教育 minban xueli jiaoyu) began to appear in the country, covering mainly the field of secondary and higher-level professional training².

In the "Regulations on the creation of educational institutions by public forces" 1997. It was said that "the state strictly controls educational institutions created by social forces" [4, p. 328]. From this moment on, the non-state educational institution sector fully entered into a period of regulatory development.

By the beginning of the tenth five-year plan (2000–2004), the position was finally formed that the state would act as the main founder of educational institutions and state educational institutions would begin to develop together with non-state ones, while the important role of the private education segment was separately emphasized [1].

The legal framework for private education in China, in addition to the Constitution, includes the Law of the People's Republic of China on *Promoting the Development of Non-State Education* (2002), laws adopted by the State Council regarding non-state educational institutions, as well as departmental decisions and instructions from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and local authorities. The law equalized the status of state and non-state educational institutions, the rights of their teachers and students [4, p. 330].

2. Non-state educational institutions in China today

The development of non-state educational institutions in China has distinct regional specifics. It is inextricably linked with the socio-economic development of regions and the policies of local authorities. In many regions, the authorities are not at all involved in the management of non-state educational institutions, acting on the principle of "first development, then regulating activities." That is why the private segment of education is more successful in developed eastern provinces such as Zhejiang, Guangdong, Shandong, as well as in large cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Dalian, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, Wuhan, etc. [5].

Obtaining a license is a mandatory condition for the functioning of the private education sector. The law provides for administrative

² Non-state diploma education means private education, upon completion of which graduates are issued a diploma that has the same legal force as diplomas from state educational institutions.

bodies to monitor the activities of private schools on a legal basis, and certification of the quality of education in non-state educational institutions is carried out by public organizations.

The modern private education system covers all basic levels, from kindergartens to higher education institutions.

Back in the early 2000s, private kindergartens predominated, since the state at that time still focused on the development and stimulation, first of all, of compulsory nine-year education. After 2010, the situation began to change rapidly, and preschool education with state support began to increase its scale, and today over 50% of all kindergartens in the country are private.

In general, according to statistical data for 2019, in the country more than 1/3 of all educational institutions were at non-state educational institutions, and the total number of their students amounted to 20% of all students in China [6].

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when the proportion of the illiterate population exceeded 80%, the authorities have achieved impressive results in the field of public education. The illiterate rate of the population dropped to 4.59% in 2020, and nine-year compulsory education coverage reached 95% [6]. And although the main driving force today is the public education segment, nevertheless, private educational institutions are playing an increasingly significant role in the life of Chinese society.

Figure 1. Data on the number of students, teaching staff and the number of educational institutions in state and non-state educational institutions³.

	Students (million)		Educational institutions (thousands)		Teachers (million)	
	State institutions	HOY	State institutions	HOY	State institutions	HOY
Kindergartens	47,13	26,49	281,1	173,2	2,76	1,69
Primary School	92,25	9,44	160,1	6,2	5,48	0,50
Secondary school 1st level	48,27	6,87	52,4	5,7	2,58	0,42
Secondary school 2nd level	24,14	3,59	13,9	3,4	1,85	0,23

³ In China, high school is divided into two levels: primary and secondary. The first-level secondary school includes grades 7–9 and, together with the primary school (grades 1–6), constitutes a compulsory free nine-year education. Secondary school (grades 10–12), as a rule, is a fee-paying school and is not yet included in the compulsory education system.

University (bachelor's degree)	17,5	4,39	2,6	0,4	1,74	0,25
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Over the past ten years, some progress has been achieved in the development of primary and secondary educational institutions. From 2008 to 2019, the number of non-state educational institutions in this area increased from 13,081 to 15,448, maintaining an average growth rate of 1.33%. The number of students increased by more than 8 million, from 11.49 to 19.91 million [7]. At the same time, a steady growth trend in the number of students remains at all levels of education.

As we see in Figure 1, kindergartens retain their leadership in the number of children attending them, while primary and secondary schools have begun to expand significantly more actively. Among them there are institutions that are separated by educational level (grades 1–6, grades 7–9, and grades 10–12) and those that include both levels. The latter often take the form of boarding schools, where students spend most of their time, going home only on weekends and/or holidays. As a rule, in central cities all levels of educational institutions are fairly fully represented; in medium-sized and small towns, junior high schools (up to 9th grade) predominate; in counties, urban-type settlements and rural areas, primary private schools predominate.

Higher educational institutions are most often divided into two types: regular non-state universities (国家承认的正规民办大学 *guojia chengren de zhenggui minban daxue*), which have the right to issue state diplomas, and independent colleges (独立院校 *duli yuanyao*). Enrollment of students in both types of institutions is included in the state plan. By 2019, there were more than 700 institutions of this type operating in the country, although only a little more than 20 universities offered diplomas from bachelor's degree programs (本科教育), while the rest were predominantly short-term professional special education programs (专科教育). Such institutions are mainly located in the departments of the provinces⁵ [4, p. 332].

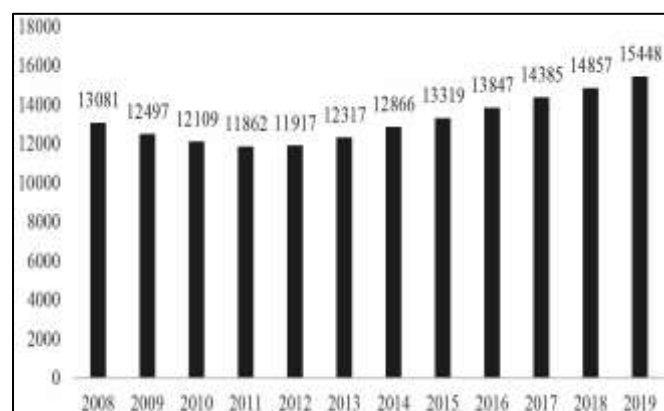
The number of teaching staff did not grow as evenly as the number of students. The most stable trend is maintained by teachers in preschool institutions, where almost 2 million teachers currently work. It has been possible to significantly increase the number of teachers in primary schools, while the same cannot be said about secondary schools. Statistical collections do not contain information on the number of university teachers at the undergraduate level, so the data below is presented for only three years: 2016, 2017 and 2018.

⁴ Unlike regular non-state universities, which are usually established by public forces and can have both undergraduate courses and special educational programs, independent colleges, as a rule, are established by other educational institutions (as reflected in the name), but offer only undergraduate programs.

⁵ The administrative division of the PRC is based on a three-tier system: province, county, township. Provincial departments refer to regional authorities, which, although they have their own legislative bodies and governments, are nevertheless subordinate to the central authorities.

In 2016, amendments to the law on promoting the development of non-state education were published, according to which schools belonging to the level of compulsory nine-year education must be strictly non-profit in nature [8]. The law now stipulates the conditions for the ownership of school assets, the distribution of financial proceeds and property after the closure of the school, etc. [9]. These steps have had an impact on the development of the non-state education sector. Thus, one can note a decrease in the growth rate of the number of educational institutions after the entry into force of these amendments. If in 2016 the annual growth rate was 3.96%, then in 2018 it decreased to 3.28% [7]. This may be partly due to the ban on making a profit from a private educational institution, which has reduced the attractiveness of opening such educational institutions for investors.

Figure 2. Dynamics of changes in the number of private educational institutions



Students with rural registration strive to receive education in larger cities, so they often go to study in district centers and other provinces. Non-state schools are an opportunity for them to receive a better education if for some reason they cannot enroll in a state educational institution. This has become a definite incentive for educational institutions to invest funds and efforts in improving the quality of education.

In general, private educational institutions in western and central China have been developing at a fairly steady pace recently. Thus, the volume of investments by local authorities in the development of such schools in the west and center of the country respectively increased by 4.91 and 9.92% compared to the east, where this figure was only 0.62%. Investments of school founders in the west and center increased by 79.85 and 61.87%, respectively, while in eastern China, on the contrary, this figure decreased by 2.09%. Over the past ten years, the number of private secondary schools in the western and central regions of the country has increased by 7.1 and 5.27%, while in the east we have seen a decrease of 0.49%. The situation is similar with the number of secondary school students: in the eastern regions there is a decrease of 27.82%, in the western and central regions the increase reaches 22.42 and 28.94%, respectively [7]. This is largely due to the fact that educational institutions in the more developed eastern regions of the country have already gone through the path of formation and development and are now working more actively on the quality component of the education provided, while other regions are still in an active stage of growth and expansion, showing higher quantitative indicators.

3. Financial sources of non-state educational institutions

Sources of funding are quite diverse in composition and include public organizations, enterprises and companies, foreign citizens and citizens of the People's Republic of China, administrative authorities of education and government educational institutions.

Among the models of non-state schools, “those established by the people with the support of the state”, “established by the state with the support of the people”, corporatized educational institutions, as well as schools created by enterprises and companies currently predominate [4, p. 335]. There are not so many schools opened by private individuals and jointly with foreign educational institutions. Those schools that were opened “by the people with the support of the state” have various connections with public schools, the percentage of their graduates who continue their education is quite high, and therefore such schools are more popular.

Apart from some NOUs, which receive some funding from local governments for their mission to promote compulsory education, other schools receive only political support and encouragement for their work without any financial investment. It is for this reason that the main source of funding for the creation of non-state educational institutions is tuition fees (学费 *xuefei*). Its share, as a rule, exceeds 80% of all receipts. “Temporary measures to regulate tuition fees in non-state educational institutions” (2005) established that students at non-state educational institutions may be charged tuition and dormitory fees, and separate fees for additional services provided during the period of study should not be included in such calculations [10]. They can only be charged if the student himself wants to pay them.

The tuition fee standard (at the higher school level) ranges from 3 to 10 thousand yuan per year per person, and the fee for a dormitory is at least 1000 yuan⁶. Income from tuition fees varies greatly from school to school and depending on the region, so educational institutions located in large cities have more sources of funding, attract wealthier families and are able to better develop educational infrastructure.

4. Private education reforms in 2021

After sustainable development was achieved in the public education segment, the authorities turned their attention to other areas of education. In particular, in 2019, work began on the assessment and development prospects of non-state educational institutions. The result of the monitoring was the measures introduced by the Ministry of Education regarding the functioning of all private educational institutions.

On September 1, 2021, amendments to the *Law on Non-State Educational Institutions* came into force [11]. The main provisions can be summarized as follows:

— According to the document, public organizations and individuals can operate private educational institutions without involving budget funds. On the contrary, fundraising from various funds and donations will be encouraged. For these categories of citizens, it is prohibited to carry out operations to merge schools for the purpose of generating income.

⁶ 1 yuan = 0,14 USD (November 6th 2023)

— Private educational institutions must recognize and support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The subject of moral education must be introduced into them by analogy with public schools.

— Institutions with foreign capital and public organizations under foreign management may not participate in the management or control of private schools at the compulsory education level. In addition, it is prohibited for foreigners to conduct classes in any educational institutions belonging to the system of compulsory nine-year education.

— State schools belonging to the compulsory education system cannot have subordinate private educational institutions and cannot retrain themselves as non-state educational institutions. Other state schools can be founders of non-state educational institutions, but profit from them is not allowed.

— It is prohibited to collect fees for admission to non-governmental educational institutions, even if such fees are in the nature of donations or sponsorship.

— Leadership positions in NOUs should be held by members of the CCP. This will be quite a serious innovation, especially for schools whose founders are foreign colleges and universities.

— The importance of providing equal rights to admission to public and private schools for all categories of citizens is emphasized.

— It is necessary to create a clear system of hiring and concluding contracts with the main staff of non-state educational institutions. All teachers must have the appropriate required qualifications.

— All fees carried out by NOUs must be clearly regulated and not carried out in the interests of individual parties.

— Local governments should ensure regular monitoring and work with local managers of non-state educational institutions, while provincial authorities should be responsible for establishing a mechanism to support and stimulate the development of the private education sector.

— All curricula must comply with the requirements of the Ministry of Education, otherwise their use in the educational process is prohibited and equated to a violation and damage to the national interests of the country.

These measures will undoubtedly have an impact on private schools and will likely change the landscape of the industry quite significantly. Increased government control and stricter rules for the management of non-state educational institutions are intended to strengthen the role of the state in the private education sector, qualitatively improve the level of education and bring them to greater parity with public educational institutions.

5. Issues of development of the non-state education sector

For a long time, the private education sector developed quite chaotically without significant interventions and regulations from the authorities in China. For this reason, various obstacles arose in the legal and economic development of such educational institutions.

In China, it is legally established that the founders of non-state educational institutions can only be public organizations or private individuals who are not related to government agencies and do not use budget funds for these purposes. Initially, this was supposed to

guarantee a certain “nationality” of such educational institutions. However, in fact, cases have become more frequent when a well-known or large public school establishes a private one and uses not only budget resources, but also its name, which creates authority and attracts the attention of potential students and their parents [13]. Such schools benefit significantly financially, since, having become a well-known educational institution with a modern, developed educational infrastructure, they can afford to invite more qualified teachers, introduce high tuition fees and attract more solvent sections of the population with their image. Thus, in May 2021, one of the schools in Guangzhou attracted attention, which sharply increased the amount of fees per semester by 143%, from 17.5 thousand yuan to 40 thousand [14]. This caused dissatisfaction among parents and led to discussion in the press of similar price hikes in schools located in large cities and more developed regions. In a situation where education costs are the main item in the budget of a significant part of Chinese families (according to various sources, more than 70% of family funds go specifically to education), even despite the good reputation of the school and the desire to give their children the best education, the overly inflated cost of education is expected causes discontent on the part of parents and sometimes local authorities. After education in private schools in large cities grew by an average of almost 30% in 2021, the introduction of amendments regarding price controls in the non-state education sector seems to be an important and necessary step on the part of the authorities [14].

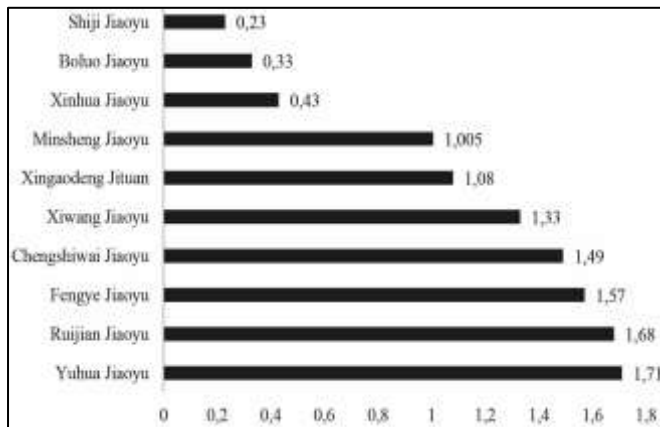
It is to such non-state educational institutions that the attention of local governments is now focused. The need is emphasized not only to resolve existing imbalances in the industry, but also to equalize access to educational institutions for different segments of the population.

Tuition fees are the main source of income for private educational institutions, which bear all financial expenses themselves. One of the most pressing issues of private schools is still the lack of classrooms. Most educational institutions do not have their own buildings and are forced to rent space from larger public schools/universities or from local authorities. In addition to high rents, schools, especially those located in small towns and villages, experience a shortage of educational materials, instruments, and equipment [15]. Non-state kindergartens, primary and secondary schools suffer from frequent turnover of teaching staff, understaffing and low wages. Even in regions inhabited by national minorities, there were strikes by teachers of non-state schools, who expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of any social guarantees, pensions and extremely low salaries, not reaching the subsistence level [16]. The pandemic COVID-19 has only worsened the financial situation of many educational institutions located outside large cities.

At the same time, cases have become more frequent when successful large private schools or kindergartens turned into market players, the commercialization and purchase and sale of which brought tangible profits to their managers and other interested parties. Thus, the Dongruan Jiaoyu company, which went public in 2019, was initially an educational institution at the secondary level to train young people who plan to connect their lives with the field of information technology. After establishing cooperation with Dongbei University, a separate private institution of higher education, Dongruan Jiaoyu, was created, which gradually grew into a network of higher education institutions and secondary schools, the total profit of which grew rapidly every year [5].

The income of such companies sometimes exceeds 1 billion yuan per year, turning them into major players in the country's educational market (Fig. 3) [17].

Figure 3. Income of private companies in the field of education that went public in 2019 (billion yuan) Compiled from: [17].



That is why the new amendments, which came into force in September 2021, state that non-state educational institutions must primarily be of a non-financial nature and cannot serve as a source of income for groups of individuals, enterprises or associations. At the moment, a clearer legal framework for the functioning of private educational institutions is being developed, which should streamline and bring to a common denominator the work of the entire segment of non-state education.

In addition to the approval of regulations regulating the work of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, the importance of strengthening control over the quality of education and compliance with state educational standards is specifically emphasized. New clear regulations for the work of institutions will also apply to the field of additional education [18]. Thus, in recent years, the authorities have paid special attention to reducing the workload on students and the importance of the provision on the “three restrictions”: time restrictions (classes cannot be held later than 20:30, including online), the amount of hours in the subject and the amount of homework in week and control of prices for classes [19].

More stringent requirements will also apply to online learning, which has been growing rapidly in China over the past 4-5 years. For example, the authorities prohibit advertising of any educational products or schools of additional education, check the qualifications of teachers conducting distance classes, emphasize the importance of protecting the rights and safety of minors on the Internet, etc. [20].

It should be noted that high spending on education has become a stumbling block in promoting the policies of equal access to education. While some families can afford their children to enroll in classes with a variety of tutors, in additional education schools and purchase expensive online applications for learning, others living in remote regions of the country and sometimes not having not only a stable Internet and additional clubs, But even the schools available nearby are qualitatively lagging behind in the level of preparation. In recent years, this issue has become more acute, and it is probably this factor, which is to a certain extent related to demographics, that served as the impetus for the reforms undertaken by the authorities today. Despite the abolition of the birth control policy, Chinese parents, not always having access to

quality education, do not strive to have more than one child, which affects the rate of population growth in the country and cannot but cause concern for the authorities. Smoothing and regulating social contrasts, providing more equal opportunities for education are named as important directions in the work of the central government of China in the near future, which, in particular, is reflected in the fourteenth five-year plan for national economic and social development of the PRC and the plan for long-term goals for 2035, adopted in March 2021 by the National People's Congress (NPC) [21].

Conclusion

Private education is still at a stage of development and growth. Today, non-state educational institutions play an important role in the development of China's education system, since they cover a significant part of the country's population, which for one reason or another does not have the opportunity to receive education in public educational institutions [22].

It is important to note that private education arose in China not as some kind of creative incentive and desire for higher standards of education, as, for example, it was in America or some European countries, but primarily to satisfy the minimum educational needs of the population. The main function of such schools was to provide basic education. Previously, the state did not interfere in the work of such schools, but, although it continued to formally control their work, nevertheless, in fact, it provided them with a certain autonomy in their work. However, gradually the situation began to change, private schools in a number of regions became more prestigious and attractive to many Chinese families with above-average incomes. At the same time as the number of non-state educational institutions at all levels of education is growing, the authorities are increasingly regulating their activities and introducing new rules and restrictions. The pandemic also made a special contribution to this process, which became a kind of stimulus for new transformations in the industry. The reforms coming into force from September 2021 are sure to bring significant changes to the way private education operates. It seems interesting what the short-term and long-term prospects for the development of the private education system will be in the context of solving the general problems of education development in China.

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