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Twenty Years of the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS)

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Abstract

This report maps out the evolution of the European Association of Taiwan Studies over the last 20 years. Collaboratively authored by two former secretaries-general and the current office holder, the authors trace the Association's short history and express their gratitude to all colleagues and friends who have contributed to its work. Furthermore, they reflect on how the Association has enriched and expanded the scope of Taiwan studies across Europe.

Keywords

Europe – Taiwan – European Taiwan studies – academic association – academic conference – institutionalisation – research

1 Introduction

In June 2023, the European Association of Taiwan Studies (EATS) commemorated its 20th anniversary with its grandest annual conference held to date at SOAS University of London, drawing over 120 participants. As EATS embarks on its third decade at the 21st annual conference in Vienna in April 2024, this report charts the Association's journey over the past 20 years. Written by two former secretaries-general and the current incumbent, the authors express their gratitude to all colleagues and friends whose support and contributions have helped propel EATS forward. The authors also consider whether the Association has fostered a deeper and broader understanding of Taiwan studies in Europe. The opinions expressed herein are personal and do not necessarily reflect the official stance of the Association.

Dafydd Fell (EATS Secretary-General, 2004–2012)

2 The Establishment of EATS and Its Operation in the Early Years

Opening the 19th EATS Conference in June 2023 at SOAS University of London was a moment of great pride. Twenty years earlier, I was part of the organising committee for the inaugural EATS conference in March 2004, also hosted by SOAS at the same venue, the Khalili Lecture Theatre. The remarkable evolution of EATS since that first conference has been pivotal in shaping the rich and dynamic landscape of European Taiwan studies.

In this section, I will focus predominantly on the period during my tenure as the EATS secretary-general from 2004 to 2012. I will discuss three main themes: (1) the process leading to the establishment of EATS and the inaugural conference, (2) the early conferences, and (3) the initial strides towards institutionalisation.

2.1 *The Establishment of EATS and the Inaugural Conference*

The origins of the EATS project date back to a proposal in the late 1990s to establish a European Network of Taiwan Studies (Fell, 2023). The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation (CCKF) awarded SOAS a research grant to establish this network in 2001. I should note that what was envisaged at that stage was a more elite-based organisation. When I joined the SOAS Centre of Taiwan Studies two years later in 2003, one of my core tasks was to work on setting up this European network, as the project's progress had been sluggish over the previous two years.

During my doctoral studies, a number of other European junior scholars and I participated in the North American Association of Taiwan Studies

(NATSA) conferences. A frequent topic of conversation there was the necessity for a European counterpart to NATSA. Thus, when my colleague Bi-yu Chang and I started preparations for the inaugural conference of EATS, we adopted a model much closer to the NATSA conferences than the vision outlined in the original SOAS proposal. For instance, rather than a closed-door invitation-only conference, we opted for a competitive call for abstracts and made the conference an open public event.

Naturally, we were nervous about this first experimental conference in 2004. However, it turned out to be a huge success. News of the conference spread rapidly, attracting a plethora of abstract submissions from both young and established scholars from all over Europe, and the historic event drew a very sizeable audience. It is encouraging to see that many who were speakers or audience members at that first conference remain actively engaged in the European Taiwan studies community two decades later. Additionally, several important precedents established during that first conference significantly contributed to its success and have since become integral components of subsequent EATS conferences. Foremost among these precedents was the invaluable contribution of local student volunteers, whose dedication greatly facilitated both pre-conference preparations and the smooth operation of the event. Furthermore, the local Taiwan representative office set a noteworthy example by providing support through the sponsorship of a portion of the event's catering expenses.

2.2 *The Early Conferences*

The success of the inaugural conference was evident as we wrapped up with commitments for the next three conference locations. Bochum in 2005, Paris in 2006, and Stockholm in 2007 were confirmed, setting a precedent of rotating the conference venue to different countries each year. This strategic move aimed to not only diversify the geographical reach of the conference but also bolster the promotion of Taiwan studies across various European regions. As time progressed, the task of selecting conference locations became easier, thanks to the proliferation of Taiwan studies programmes across the continent and the increasing number of junior scholars who identified themselves as Taiwan studies scholars securing tenure-track positions.

It is also encouraging to see how EATS has been able to promote Taiwan studies publications and research. The annual EATS conference has emerged as a pivotal moment where scholars in Europe congregate to initiate discussions on future collaborative research projects. A significant early breakthrough was the release of *What Has Changed? Taiwan Before and After the Change of Ruling*

Parties (Fell, Klöter & Chang, 2006). This co-edited volume comprises revised papers from panels at the first and second conferences.

In the early years, the core function of EATS was to run its annual conference. However, even in this nascent period, we initiated several endeavours that would later become integral to the Association's routine operations. Recognising the challenges faced by MA students in securing acceptance for our regular panels, particularly in competition with PhD students and established academics, we introduced a separate MA panel at the Stockholm conference in 2007. This panel was designed to support the growing cohort of students enrolled in Europe-based Taiwan studies programmes and, in particular, help them develop their Taiwan dissertation projects. Additionally, in our efforts to support younger scholars, we established the Young Scholars Award (YSA), which was first awarded in 2011 at the Ljubljana conference and continues to this day.

Just a few years after EATS was founded, its impact began to be widely acknowledged. In 2007, Robert Ash, the initiator of the European Network research grant and a founding member of EATS, received the prestigious French Taiwanese Culture Prize for his contributions to advancing Taiwan studies in Europe. Subsequently, in 2011, EATS board member Táňa Dluhošová received the same accolade in recognition of her outstanding work in promoting Taiwan studies in Eastern Europe. When, at the 2009 EATS conference in Madrid, keynote speaker Murray Rubinstein delivered a pessimistic speech titled 'Is Taiwan Studies Dead?', the overall audience response was that European Taiwan studies had never been in better health (Sullivan, 2011).

2.3 *Initial Stages of Institutionalisation*

Discussions on institutionalising EATS to make it more sustainable began at the first and second conferences in 2004 and 2005. The first EATS Constitution was ratified by the annual general meeting at the 2006 Paris conference, where the first board was elected for two-year terms. Then, a second board was elected at the fifth conference in Prague in 2008 and a third at Tübingen in 2010.

There was thus a gradual transition away from what started out as a relatively informal entity centred on a few scholars at SOAS to a more structured organisation governed by established rules and involving a diverse team of scholars from across Europe. Teamwork was a key element in the success of the early conferences, particularly as their size and scope began to expand. The initial culmination of this institutionalisation process came at the Tübingen conference in 2010 when the Association was formally registered in Germany as a charitable entity. This gave EATS the legal status of a civil association under German law, recognised by the local tax office as a non-profit organisation of

public utility, and consequently exempted from taxes due to its objectives outlined in the Constitution. The attainment of this new status necessitated stringent compliance measures; any substantial alterations to the Constitution of EATS, especially those concerning the Association's objectives, outcomes of internal elections, or changes in personnel within the EATS board, have to be reported to the local court and tax office in Germany.

Ming-yeh Rawnsley (EATS Secretary-General, 2012–2018)

3 Conferences, Institutionalisation, Communications, and the *IJTS*

During my time as EATS secretary-general from 2012 to 2018, I aimed to build upon the foundations laid by my predecessor. In this section, I shall focus on three key dimensions that I consider pivotal achievements: (1) the organisation of the annual conferences, (2) fortifying institutionalisation for long-term sustainability and improving internal and external communications with our members and global Taiwan studies communities, and (3) the establishment of the *International Journal of Taiwan Studies (IJTS)*.

3.1 Conference Organisation

By 2024, EATS has successfully organised 21 annual conferences across 18 European cities hosted by 19 universities or research institutions. Researchers from across the globe working in the arts, humanities, and social sciences have presented over 800 papers. Notably, nearly 80 percent of the presenters are based in either Europe or Taiwan. The organisation of these annual conferences has been the cornerstone of EATS's activities and the most effective method of fostering the development of European Taiwan studies. While the importance of continuing the tradition of the EATS Annual Conference is indisputable, I would like to propose an operational consideration for future deliberation. Before I do, I should point out that this is not intended as a criticism of current practices but rather a proactive step towards adapting to evolving circumstances in order to propel further progress, something all organisations must do.

Over the past two decades, EATS has deliberately maintained the tradition of hosting modest-sized conferences by imposing limitations on the number of participants. As the volume of proposed papers escalates each year, the task of selecting abstracts becomes increasingly arduous, making the process of rejecting submissions more challenging. While there are inherent benefits to managing the size of the conference, such as fostering a conducive and more

targeted environment for scholarly exchange, it is evident that this approach has resulted in the stagnation of the Association's membership levels. Perhaps it is time for EATS to refresh its approach by extending invitations to all eligible members to present their research on Taiwan at the annual gatherings, thereby broadening participation. To maintain the quality and relevance of presentations, the selection process could be refined to screen out unsuitable topics, provide preliminary guidance to authors, and curate suitable panels. By embracing this more inclusive model, EATS has the opportunity to not only expand its membership base but also amplify the influence and reach of Taiwan studies in Europe.

3.2 *Institutionalisation and Communications*

As highlighted by Dafydd in the previous section, the institutionalisation of EATS began in 2006, leading to the Association's formal registration in Germany as a charitable entity in 2010. In my view, institutionalisation serves not merely as an end in itself but as a means to foster transparency, efficiency, and sustainability within the organisation. Therefore, akin to democratisation, institutionalisation is an ongoing endeavour, representing a continuous learning curve as the Association navigates the complexities of operating within a legal framework. There exists a delicate balance to strike: as EATS progresses towards higher levels of institutionalisation, there may be concerns that it could become overly rigid, potentially stifling its vitality and creativity. I do not possess definitive answers to this challenge. However, what I can say is that during my own tenure as secretary-general from 2012 to 2018, the EATS board and I tried to build on the efforts of Dafydd and his team to transform EATS. Notably, we endeavoured to enhance the Association's functionality, a journey that continues under the leadership of Isabelle today.

A key focus of our efforts was on making the Association more transparent, efficient, and sustainable through improvements in communication. First, I implemented clearer divisions of labour among EATS board members, streamlining responsibilities for smoother operations. Second, I spearheaded an overhaul of the EATS website and initiated the publication of a new biannual newsletter in both print and digital formats targeting members and general Taiwan studies scholars and students called *EATS News*. By the time I stepped down from the EATS board in 2018, the website had transformed into a comprehensive resource hub containing a wealth of information pertinent to the Association. From the Constitution to archived papers presented at past conferences, and from membership registration to various competitions such as the YSA mentioned by Dafydd, as well as new initiatives like the Library Research Grant, the Publication Grant, and the Workshop Grant—everything

was meticulously catalogued on the EATS website. The circulation of *EATS News* had experienced a surge, increasing from hundreds to thousands of readers, while the establishment of an EATS Facebook page facilitated lively and instantaneous interactions among members and associates.

Under Isabelle's leadership since 2018, I am pleased to observe the continued evolution of the EATS website, which has been reorganised and revamped.¹ Similarly, *EATS News* has been redesigned to ever high standards. Leveraging the expertise of interns and project managers, the EATS board has diversified its approach to task completion and forged partnerships with Taiwan studies communities beyond Europe to disseminate relevant news and information. However, it is worth noting that some planned initiatives, such as providing individual webpages on the website to strengthen members' sense of ownership, have yet to materialise. Moreover, EATS is relatively inactive on social media platforms, and its Facebook page has now fallen into dormancy. Moving forward, it may be prudent for EATS to consider investing more resources into communication and information strategies to further engage its members and stakeholders effectively.

3.3 *Launching the IJTS*

One of EATS's most notable accomplishments was its pivotal role in supporting the establishment of the *IJTS* in 2018, a peer-reviewed academic journal in English dedicated to disseminating of cutting-edge research on Taiwan. Alongside several other partners, including Academia Sinica, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), and our publisher, Brill, EATS played a key role in bringing this initiative to fruition. In 2020, the *IJTS* received an invitation from NATSA to become one of its affiliate journals, followed by a similar arrangement with the Japan Association for Taiwan Studies (JATS) in 2021, further solidifying its standing in the global academic community. Moreover, beginning in 2024, the *IJTS* is embarking on a collaborative venture with *Taiwan Insight*,² an online magazine boasting 163,000 readers worldwide. This collaboration aims to publish two *Taiwan Insight-IJTS* special issues annually, focusing on topics related to articles featured in the *IJTS*, thereby expanding the outreach and engagement of both publications with a broader audience interested in Taiwan.³

As such, the *IJTS* serves as an extension of EATS, connecting global Taiwan studies communities through the dissemination of high-quality research. We

1 See <https://eats-taiwan.eu/>.

2 See <https://taiwaninsight.org/>.

3 The first *Taiwan Insight-IJTS* special issue was published in March 2024; see <https://taiwaninsight.org/past-special-issues/international-journal-of-taiwan-studies/>.

believe that the more closely different organisations worldwide are able to collaborate, the more vibrant and robust the field of Taiwan studies will be.

Isabelle Cockel (EATS Secretary-General, 2018–Present)

4 The Pandemic, Taiwan as a Method, and the Third Decade

When I was elected as the third secretary-general of EATS in April 2018 at the 15th Annual Conference in Zurich, it had been my tenth participation in EATS conferences since 2008. By the time I step down in June 2025 at the 22nd conference in Olomouc, Czech Republic, I will have attended a total of 15 EATS gatherings. Much like an academic researcher's personal journey from novice to seasoned scholar, EATS, as an academic association, has undergone a similar path of growth and maturation. This journey has not been without its moments of solemn reflection, particularly as we bid farewell to Professors Bruce Jacobs (1943–2019) and Yun-han Chu (1956–2023), two scholars respected worldwide who made profound and deeply personal contributions to the field of Taiwan studies (Cockel et al., 2023; Damm, 2020). Leading the Association alongside the board members since 2018, I am proud to report that EATS has continued to fulfil the missions outlined in its Constitution. The impact of our efforts is evident in the lives touched and perspectives broadened by our initiatives. Amid significant challenges, we have risen to the occasion, launching critical initiatives at opportune moments, reinforcing EATS's position as a dynamic force within the academic community.

4.1 *The Pandemic Period*

An instructive example of EATS's resilience emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic when global academic communities faced unprecedented challenges and were constrained to virtual interactions. The 17th EATS conference, originally scheduled for April 2020 at Université libre de Bruxelles and KU Leuven Campus Brussels, became the conference that 'never was' (Cheng, 2022). However, undeterred by the circumstances, EATS adapted swiftly, merging the 17th with the 18th conference, to be hosted by Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, into a joint virtual convention. This transition to virtual participation provided an inclusive platform, enabling attendees from around the world to convene regardless of their physical location. The subsequent 19th conference, held in a hybrid format in April 2022 at the University of Central Lancashire Cyprus Campus, presented unique challenges, particularly with minimal participation from Taiwan due to stringent cross-border mobility restrictions imposed by the Taiwanese government at the time. Consequently,

the significance of the 20th conference at SOAS University of London in June 2023 cannot be overstated. Following three years of disruption, the EATS board finally had the opportunity to welcome both old and new members, marking a successful return to in-person gatherings at a landmark event for the Association.

When in-person meetings became almost impossible in 2020, EATS, NATSA, and JATS devised a borderless initiative. Together, they organised four online seminars, serving not only to mitigate the absence of their respective annual meetings but also to cultivate a sense of solidarity and stimulate scholarly discourse. The four online sessions delved into a diverse array of topics, including (1) racialism manifested in the fears and anxieties stemming from the perception of public health as being ‘under siege’, (2) the unstable relationships among Taiwan, China, and the US, exacerbated by the tensions of US–China trade war, (3) the deteriorating liberal order in Hong Kong, threatened by the imposition of the National Security Law, and (4) the conservation and European screening tours of Taiwanese-language films from the 1950s to the 1970s (Rawnsley, 2021).

I wish to put my gratitude on record here to CCKF and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) for their unwavering support of European and global Taiwan studies during the challenging period of COVID lockdowns. The cancellation of the physical conference in 2020 and the transition to an online format for the convention in 2021 meant that the funding EATS received from the CCKF and TFD was not spent as originally planned. However, to our surprise and delight, both organisations allowed us to repurpose their grants for alternative endeavours. This flexibility enabled us to continue to organise the YSA and launch the 2021 Taiwan Studies Research Article Competition in collaboration with the *IJTS* and the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*. YSA has long been instrumental in supporting early career researchers in the field of Taiwan studies, while the Research Article Competition was a new initiative that proved to be successful as it facilitated the recognition and publication of cutting-edge research in esteemed academic journals. Moreover, EATS used the remaining grant money to organise the Taiwan Studies Best Presentation Award held at the 17th–18th joint conference in 2021, as well as revamp various small grants offered by EATS to support workshops and research trips to archives and libraries. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the new and consolidated EATS Research and Publication Grant.

4.2 *Evolving Research Trends and Taiwan as a Method*

Undoubtedly, the significance of EATS’s achievements is most palpable in the wealth of research presented at the 21 EATS conferences held between 2004

and 2024, as well as the subsequent publications that have emerged from these presentations. Over the span of two decades, it is intriguing to observe the evolution of research topics, with certain themes fading in prominence while others emerge to fill the void. During my initial engagements with EATS conferences, it felt akin to attending immersive crash courses spanning various disciplines, particularly in the study of identity. Discussions revolving around the intricate relationship between China, Taiwan, and the US were perennial fixtures on conference agendas. Other recurrent themes included the study of democratisation through institutional lenses, such as party politics, nomination processes, electoral systems, and constitutional reforms, as well as from linguistic and communication perspectives, including electioneering, publicity, news reporting, and music. When in the realm of politics, these topics were often the subject of fierce debate, and such intense interests were duly translated into a range of research projects undertaken by master's students, PhD candidates, and faculty members.

As we entered the 2010s, a discernible shift in focus within the realm of Taiwan studies mirrored the trends of domestic politics in Taiwan. Researchers increasingly dedicated their efforts to exploring cultural policies, cultural industries, and the utilisation of museums as vehicles for community building. There were also those who delved into the sociopolitical, constitutional, and legalistic dimensions of transitional justice—a reflection of Taiwan's ongoing quest for societal reconciliation. Moreover, the study of Taiwan as a migration society underwent a notable transformation during this period. Previously characterised primarily as a settler society accommodating Han Chinese and various internal groups, Taiwan was reframed as a destination for migration from non-Chinese populations in Southeast Asia and beyond. This shift highlighted the multifaceted reasons for migration, including employment opportunities, marriage, family formation, and educational pursuits. Of particular significance was the prominence of women, particularly in the context of marriage migration, a theme that often featured prominently in panels addressing gender dynamics. The emphasis on gender intersected with discussions on transgender issues, sexuality, and reproduction, alongside considerations of class and ethnicity. This trend was further amplified by the increasing acceptance in Taiwanese society of same-sex attraction and the growing recognition of gender-fluid identities.

These evolving trends notwithstanding, certain foundational pillars remain integral to the versatility of Taiwan studies. Fields such as history, literature, film, media, pop culture, theatre, music, manga comics, and, most importantly, the study of Indigenous Peoples continue to serve as the bedrock of contributions to the field. These subjects have been explored through each conference theme

proposed since 2004, with papers addressing these issues offering immense potential to utilise the study of Taiwan as a method to challenge conventional divides. Such divides include those between the Global North and the Global South, the East and the West, the core and the periphery, the coloniser and the colonised, and the continent and the island. EATS is proud of its efforts to foster a welcoming, inclusive, and nurturing environment for these vigorous debates to unfold. Moreover, the outcomes of these discussions often find their way into various forms of scholarly dissemination, including journal articles, book chapters, book monographs, and academic blogs. In an era marked by the proliferation of digital platforms, the versatility of academic blogs has emerged as a particularly impactful tool for facilitating and disseminating thought-provoking arguments and preliminary research findings. Recognising this, EATS has joined forces with *Taiwan Insight* since 2021 to publish a series of special issues, often coinciding with the dates of the conference to generate further interest in EATS conventions.⁴

4.3 *Entering the Third Decade*

The last two decades have seen steady growth, an increased diversity of research interests, and several productive publications. As EATS embarks on its third decade, I shall finish by highlighting a couple of key projects, followed by some reflections on our journey thus far. The first is the EATS Publication Database, a self-funded initiative that is available on our website.⁵ This database comprises over 300 titles of publications that can be attributed to the support received from EATS. These publications may have originated from presentations at the conferences between 2004 and 2021, collaborative efforts among EATS members, or research directly funded by the Association. Recognising the importance of enhancing the visibility of Taiwan studies publications, particularly in anticipation of the growing role of artificial intelligence as a source of information (if not knowledge), EATS will continue to collect and catalogue such publication information. This endeavour is a vital service to both our members and the global Taiwan studies community.

The second key project, titled ‘TransTaiwan: A Research Gateway to Taiwan Studies’ (TARGTS), stands as a testament to the kind of collaborative excellence typical of our field. Supported by funding from CCKF spanning from July 2021 to June 2023, TARGTS represents a high point for cooperation among Taiwan studies entities. With myself leading as project manager, Ming-yeh

4 The first EATS–*Taiwan Insight* special issue was published in 2021; see <https://taiwaninsight.org/past-special-issues/9146-2/>. Two more appeared in 2022 and 2023.

5 See <https://eats-taiwan.eu/taiwan-studies/publications/>.

Rawnsley and five other academics at NATSA, EATS, and the Association of Taiwan Literature came together for this new initiative. Additionally, we enlisted the expertise of a professional outside these organisations to provide technical support. Launching its online platform at targts.net, TARGTS now provides more than 700 annotated bibliographies of Taiwan studies journal articles. Furthermore, it serves as a hub for key information about Taiwan studies associations such as EATS, NATSA, and JATS, as well as leading centres and programmes, including the Centre of Taiwan Studies at SOAS University of London, the Taiwan Studies Hub at the University of Nottingham, and the European Research Center on Contemporary Taiwan at the University of Tübingen. This wealth of resources encompasses departments, courses, funding sources, and academic associations both within and outside Taiwan. Building upon these initial achievements, EATS remains committed to securing further funding to advance its mission. In particular, our focus will be on highlighting two major categories of resources indispensable for research on Taiwan: archival materials, including physical and digitised collections, and database portals.

Reflecting on my own journey since assuming the role of secretary-general in 2018, it is evident that the transition from the preceding board to the newly elected board has been remarkably smooth, allowing EATS to stay true to its founding principles while evolving in response to changing needs. The biennial election cycle for EATS board members, enshrined in the Constitution, presents an invaluable opportunity for renewal. It allows the Association to recruit new blood and welcome fresh perspectives while enabling incumbent members to continue guiding the organisation in line with its mission to serve the European Taiwan studies community. This process ensures that EATS remains inclusive, embracing diversity across various dimensions, including gender, ethnicity, discipline, institution, nationality, country of residence, and career stage. By inviting participation from individuals representing diverse backgrounds and perspectives, EATS ensures that the planning process benefits from a wide range of insights. This collaborative approach not only leverages the unique contributions of each member but also underscores the Association's collective commitment to serving the Taiwan studies community more effectively.

Notes on Contributors

Dafydd Fell

is Professor in Comparative Politics (with special reference to Taiwan), SOAS University of London. He has long been active in developing the field of Taiwan studies at SOAS and beyond, helping to establish EATS in 2004 and serving as its secretary-general for eight years. As the director of the SOAS Centre of Taiwan Studies, he has helped develop the world's most extensive Taiwan studies teaching, academic events, and publications programmes.

Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley

is Research Associate, Centre of Taiwan Studies, SOAS University of London, and Research Associate, Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica. She is also the founding Editor-in-Chief of the *IJTS* (2018–present). Her recent publications include *Taiwanese-Language Cinema: Rediscovered and Reconsidered* (co-edited with Chris Berry, Wafa Ghermani, and Corrado Neri, 2024) and the *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media*, 2nd edition (co-edited with Yiben Ma and Gary Rawnsley, 2025).

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is Senior Lecturer, School of Area Studies, Sociology, History, Politics, and Literature, University of Portsmouth. Taking gender as an approach, her research focuses on migration and the Cold War in East Asia. Cockel's current projects include migrants' movement, migrant farm labour, and using women radio broadcasters to construct an ideological soundscape over the Taiwan Strait. She is the current secretary-general of EATS.

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