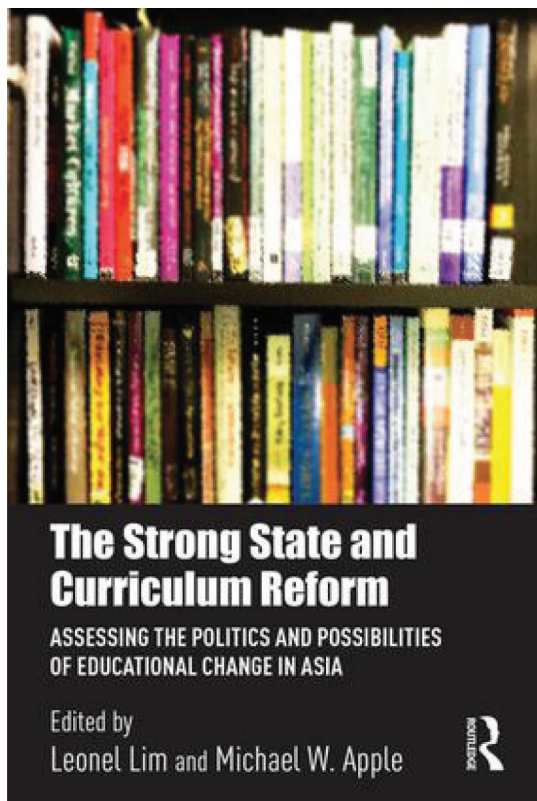


## Book review

*The Strong State and Curriculum Reform: Assessing the politics and possibilities of educational change in Asia*, edited by Leonel Lim and Michael W. Apple

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'Nearly all of the work on curriculum reform and the state has been localised in either single nations in the global West or North (sic.)', state Lim and Apple in their introduction to this volume (4). 'Very rarely,' they go on, 'do ... comparisons extend beyond Western imprimaturs of the state' (5). By way of further elaboration, Takayama, in the book's final chapter, tells us that 'intellectual, theoretical work is produced in global peripheries and yet it is excluded from the so called global conversation due to the global geopolitics of academic knowledge production and circulation' (162). In other words, the political 'hegemony' (this book's key concept) that 'Western' powers exercise over everybody else is replicated in the world of academia. Research produced in Asia, or informed by Asian perspectives and experiences, remains marginalized as Anglophone, Eurocentric scholarship reigns supreme. Hence these scholars position themselves as champions of 'counterhegemonic', 'critical' scholarship that will secure for 'Asian' voices a proper hearing.

A noble mission, surely? The marginalization of Asian scholarship has certainly been a serious problem – as the experience of many Asia-based scholars, including

myself, bears out. Fifteen years ago, based in Beijing and having recently graduated from the University of Hong Kong, I submitted my doctoral thesis for publication in a Routledge series entitled *East Asia: History, Politics, Sociology, Culture*. The response from New York was: 'we do not usually consider dissertations from Asian universities'. Thanks to support from the series editor, my dissertation was published (Vickers, 2003), to be followed over the years by many further studies of the history and politics of education in contemporary Asia. These include works by Vickers and Jones (2005); Morris *et al.* (2013), Vickers and Kumar (2015), and a 2009 volume I coedited with Marie Lall featuring a foreword by none other than Michael Apple (Vickers and Lall, 2009).

Strangely, however, neither my work nor a range of other existing scholarship on the educational politics of East Asia is referenced in the volume here under review. Puzzling over why this might be, I consulted Lim and Apple's introductory chapter and the book's front matter. It appears that this study has its roots in 'the history and tradition of the Friday Seminar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison ... set up by one of us – Michael Apple' (Acknowledgements). Most, if not all, of the contributing authors are Wisconsin-Madison graduates and former students of Professor Apple. This helps explain why the book is suffused with references to Apple's work and his central preoccupations: theorizing the relationship between education and 'hegemony' and arguing for 'counterhegemonic' resistance to it. This terminology indicates the influence of Gramsci, at whose altar all contributors reverentially genuflect. Indeed, on page 7 we find 'Apple ... speaking for Gramsci': he has become the Italian revolutionary's representative on Earth.

So this volume is not primarily an attempt to engage – 'critically' or otherwise – with the considerable existing literature on the politics of education in contemporary Asia because it is, in essence, an Asian festschrift for Michael Apple. This is a legitimate exercise in itself; Apple is a substantial figure in the field of educational studies, has done important work on the politics of education in North America and internationally, and has supervised some excellent doctoral students, several of them featured here. But to position this as a pioneering work by pretending that the 'critical' study of Asian educational politics is virgin territory reflects either ignorance or breathtaking arrogance. This is doubly unfortunate, because some of the chapters are of considerable interest, and would have gained from a properly critical engagement with previous research and a less monomaniacal obsession with the Gramsci–Apple ('Grapple'?) paradigm of 'hegemony'/'counterhegemony'.

The first section, 'Ideology and the strong state: The tensions and limits of state curricular control', begins with a chapter by Lim on Singapore. Spiced with some wonderful quotations from Lee Kwan-yew, this material pinpoints the essential contradiction between the Singaporean state's attempts to promote 'critical thinking' for instrumental purposes and its efforts to quarantine the political realm from critical public scrutiny. This is a tension long intrinsic to state-led educational development in Asia and elsewhere – in the troubled 1930s it was eloquently critiqued by Bertrand Russell (1932). Lim's attempts to theorize this phenomenon with reference to the work of Bernstein (29–30) – a rather more convoluted thinker than Russell – unfortunately obfuscate more than they enlighten. And other scholars unacknowledged here – notably Christine Han (2015; see also Han *et al.*, 2013) – have previously written about precisely the kind of contradictions in Singaporean educational policy that concern Lim, albeit without deploying the elaborate conceptual armoury that he fields.

Mi-Ok Kang's chapter on the political controversies surrounding South Korean history education deals with a fascinating subject on which research in English remains relatively scarce. But that being the case, it is odd that she fails to reference the

widely reviewed volume by Shin and Sneider (2011) that features substantial analysis of the Korean case. Kang also makes little attempt to relate the analysis of Korean textbook politics to the wider East Asian context – the importance of which Takayama rightly stresses in his later chapter. Kang's chapter makes for difficult reading, largely because of her attempts to provide a superfluous theoretical gloss: she writes of 'symbolic control' rather than simply 'control', tells us that Rightists are engaged in 'empire formation' (it is unclear what 'empire' means here) (54), and declares that the history curriculum promoted by 'counterhegemonic' Leftist groups has been 'delocated and recontextualised' (i.e. 'revised') (42).

By contrast, Ting-hong Wong's chapter on Chinese schools in post-war Hong Kong is much more readable, and makes the crucial point that what may seem, in retrospect, to have been a fiendishly cunning exercise in the construction of 'hegemony' may sometimes, on closer inspection, turn out to have been far less 'conspiratorial' than it might appear (70). Indeed, this is an argument that Anthony Sweeting and I made ten years ago in an article not cited in Wong's bibliography (Sweeting and Vickers, 2007) – though whereas we looked at this issue primarily from the perspective of the role of English in local schooling, Wong focuses on schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction. But given its focus on the 'Chinese' aspects of Hong Kong schooling, reference to the truly pioneering work of the late Bernard Luk Hung-kay (1991) on the *localization* of curricula for Chinese language, literature and history in the post-war period (an issue distinct from, but related to, that under discussion here) would certainly have strengthened this paper.

The second section, 'Praxis and change: Teachers, social movements and pedagogic agents', begins with another chapter on Hong Kong, by Sara Lam, this time analysing the phenomenon of post-1997 'national education' and the tensions it highlights between the 'one country' and 'two systems' aspects of China's governing formula for the former colony. Lam gives a clear account of the 2012 controversy surrounding the government's attempts to introduce a 'Moral and National Education' subject into the local school curriculum – a move branded as an attempt at Communist 'brainwashing' by furious local critics, high-school students prominent among them. One welcome feature of her chapter is her use of Cantonese to transliterate Chinese terms, in itself a subtle but significant assertion of Hong Kong's distinctive identity. But Lam's analysis lacks historical depth: her vague references to 'the counterhegemonic social movement' (or just 'the movement') (e.g. p. 79), stretching back to before 1989, imply a unity among Beijing's local critics that, in reality, they have seldom displayed. Lam also appears unaware of the nature and extent of the institutional continuities in education policymaking, and in patterns of resistance to it, that span the 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' periods. This may be down to her lack of acquaintance with the considerable body of work by Paul Morris on Hong Kong's school curriculum, much of it dealing with citizenship education (e.g. Morris et al., 2000; Morris and Vickers, 2015); by Law Wing-wah (2004) and Flora Kan on curriculum development in the areas of citizenship and Chinese history respectively; and by myself on the local history curriculum and 'national education' specifically (Vickers, 2003; Vickers and Kan, 2003; Vickers, 2011).

The following chapter in this section, a study of migrant schools in Beijing by Min Yu, provides a useful introduction to a crucial aspect of inequality in contemporary Chinese education – but here, too, important existing work is overlooked, namely Charlotte Goodburn's excellent research on Beijing's 'black' schools for migrants (2009). And while Yu ends her analysis on an optimistic note, seeing in the struggles of migrants a 'foundation for further collective action' by a 'grassroots movement for

educational changes' (108), the broad picture over recent years is one of a firmer official clampdown on non-formal migrant schooling alongside greater, but still only partial, accommodation of migrant children within formal schools. The space for grassroots activism in Xi Jinping's China is not expanding – it is contracting.

The book's second section concludes with an interesting paper by Hee-Ryong Kan on teachers' unions in South Korea, which documents the travails of the left-wing union, the KTU, legalized only in 1999, and subjected since 2008 to what Kan calls a 'McCarthyist' right-wing campaign to discredit and undermine it. That campaign has been calculated to neutralize KTU opposition to a 'neoliberal' turn in official policy that seeks to sacrifice the education system's longstanding prioritization of 'equity' in favour of an emphasis on 'excellence' (these two principles represented as being necessarily in tension). This sort of argument is, of course, far from confined to Korea these days, but following the spectacular defenestration of the conservative President Park in early 2017, perhaps the political tide is about to turn.

The third section, 'Globalizing hegemony: Resisting and recontextualizing international reforms', begins with a well-crafted chapter by Christopher Crowley on the Chinese branches of the global 'Teach for All' movement. As Crowley stresses, 'Teach for China' and 'Teach Future China', while formally affiliated with this global movement, have not followed 'Teach First' (in the UK) or 'Teach for America' in attempting to challenge established teacher certification arrangements. Rather, these are initiatives that have from the start remained hand-in-glove with the Chinese authorities, attracting substantial (mostly favourable) publicity domestically and internationally for their work in sending bright young graduates to remote rural areas for a spell teaching the children of peasants. This in practice represents a tiny contribution to alleviating the challenges facing rural schools, but the exercise has propaganda value, signifying concern for the plight of the peasants while deflecting calls for more fundamental structural reform.

Youl-Kwan Sung's analysis of 'the politics of neoliberal loanwords' in South Korea similarly underlines the fact that appropriation by Asian groups (whether 'hegemonic' or 'counterhegemonic') of Anglo-American words or concepts by no means implies straightforward or unmediated Western influence. In Korea, the language of 'diversity' and 'choice' has been deployed by those on the political right to legitimate an erosion of egalitarianism and the promotion of greater elitism. At high-school level, a highly uniform system has thus in recent years witnessed the introduction of several new types of provision under the banner of 'choice' and 'diversity'. Such drastic reforms are justified through the manufacturing of a sense of crisis around Korean education, which – despite the country's stellar PISA results (or because of them?) – is represented as woefully inadequate in fostering a capacity for creativity and innovation. Invoking 'battlefield metaphors' (156), right-wing commentators and politicians have portrayed the pursuit of excellence – irrespective of equity – as a matter of national survival. Sung might have noted that reform discourse in Japan and China has in recent years featured very similar tactics and arguments. He observes the 'oxymoronic' results of this in Korea, arguing that 'monolithic choice' derives from 'various options' (154). In other words, more 'choice' has not proved liberating for students or parents: if anything, it has fuelled an intensification of competitive credentialism.

Finally, Keita Takayama writes of the 'provincializing and globalizing' of 'critical studies of school knowledge', with particular reference to the Japanese history textbook controversy over 'comfort women' (i.e. women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army during the Asia-Pacific War). Takayama's central point here is that this controversy cannot be understood from the narrow perspective of Japanese

politics alone, but must be explained with reference to Japan's relationships with America, on the one hand, and her East Asian neighbours, on the other. The 'comfort women' saga certainly constitutes a strong case in point: as Takayama shows, since the issue first surfaced in the early 1990s, campaigns to secure proper recognition of the suffering of former 'comfort women' have transcended national boundaries, bringing together Japanese journalists, academics and feminists and their counterparts in Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and elsewhere. By the same token, attempts to suppress this history have also been transnational in scope and nature, and America's geopolitical entanglements in the region are an important part of this story. In a refreshing display of independence from his guru, Takayama suggests that Apple has been 'constrained by ... methodological nationalism', and emphasizes that 'the possibilities of tactical alliance making' go 'beyond national borders' (171). However, this is hardly a new insight – Takayama appears unaware of important earlier work on the national and transnational politics of the 'comfort women' issue and other aspects of East Asia's 'history wars' by Carol Gluck (2007; see also Morris-Suzuki *et al.* (2013), especially Morris-Suzuki's introductory chapter), who argues much the same thing as he does (minus his theoretical apparatus). And it is hard to see how all of this is relevant to tackling Takayama's biggest bugbear: the hegemony of 'sophisticated Western and Northern scholars' within the global academy.

This brings us back to the central contradiction of this entire volume. The contributors portray themselves as champions of what they term – citing Chen (2010) – 'Asia as method', yet they remain in thrall to a Western sage. So much so, indeed, that their project of formulating a distinctively 'Asian' voice ultimately collapses, in the 'Afterword', as the editors resort to elaborating a set of nine 'tasks' for the 'critical scholar' identified by Apple in a previous publication. It would seem that handing down commandments to Asian scholars is reprehensible in a 'Western or Northern' scholar – unless he is ensconced in Wisconsin. And it is worth noting that, of the ten scholars featured in this volume ('Asian' or otherwise), five are now based in North America and one in Australia. For them, as for Chen, it would seem that 'Asia as method' is less a personal career path than a handy slogan with which to belabour their guilt-ridden, postcolonial Western colleagues and gain kudos within the Anglophone social science fraternity.

For someone like Apple, who came to maturity in the shadow of the Vietnam War, approaching East Asian educational politics through the prism of Anglo-American global 'hegemony' understandably holds a certain logical and emotional appeal. But while American influence throughout the region remains strong in the early twenty-first century, to see it as dominant in shaping political or educational discourse in East Asia today is hopelessly anachronistic. Imperialism was never the sole prerogative of 'Western' states or interests, even at the height of formal empire in the twentieth century. But now more than ever, the operations of 'hegemony' in East Asia are complex and its sources diverse: ask the Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongols, Taiwanese and – yes – the Vietnamese, too. For all their talk of displacing the West from the centre of scholarly debate, Apple, Lim and their co-contributors are ironically reinforcing it by continuing to train their focus overwhelmingly on Western agency. In the twenty-first century, analysis truly rooted in Asian realities and experiences must take far greater account of the roles played by other actors, not least the Chinese.

In place of Apple's nine commandments, therefore, I offer just two. First, if you want to challenge the still substantial dominance of Western networks and preoccupations within Anglophone educational scholarship, stop writing for the same old journals, attending the same old conferences and generally working within the

cozy echo-chamber of established, North America-centred academic networks. Get out more, and – if you work on Asia – focus on addressing Asia-based colleagues and cultivating scholarly networks within the region. Stop attending CIES or AERA year in year out, and attend the meetings of the Comparative Education Society of Asia (full disclosure – I am Secretary-General) or other associations based in Asia. Perhaps even consider moving to Asia to work!

Second, if you aspire to reach a wide readership and exert an influence on educational debate beyond the narrow confines of academia, read less Gramsci and more Orwell – and seek to emulate the latter. Do not lard your writing with unnecessarily abstruse theoretical allusions; write clearly, for the educated general reader. This is especially important if you aim to reach a readership within Asia, for most of whom English is a second language. If you want to conceal the radicalism of your critique from the authorities in, say, Singapore or Beijing, while simultaneously impressing your scholarly colleagues, by all means write in obscure ‘academese’ – but you will have no impact whatsoever on public debate. On the other hand, if you really believe that scholars should contribute actively to the public discussion of education, then strive to write in plain English – or Japanese, Chinese or Korean.

Edward Vickers  
Kyushu University, Japan  
edvickers08@gmail.com

## A Response to Edward Vickers

Michael W. Apple, Christopher B. Crowley, Hee-Ryong Kang, Mi Ok Kang, Sara Lam, Leonel Lim, Youl-Kwan Sung, Keita Takayama, Ting-Hong Wong and Min Yu

We have collectively taken the position that reviewers have the right to say what they believe and only very rarely have any of us ever responded to the reviews of our work over the years. Indeed, we are deeply committed to the principle of welcoming substantive criticism. However, in this case we think that a response to Edward Vickers’s essay review would be worthwhile since by and large it treats all of the authors as nearly ‘clones’ of one of us – Michael Apple – and raises a number of points that are not only not completely accurate but also politically and conceptually problematic.

Some of Vickers’s points are certainly useful, but we find it interesting that his style is rather ironic and at times borders on being condescending. It is worth noting that he was a respected colleague of one of us, Michael Apple, at the UCL Institute of Education when Apple was a World Scholar there. Vickers now teaches in Japan. Apple did indeed write a positive preface for a book that he and Yoshiko Nozaki edited, so it is rather surprising to see the at times aggrieved tone of the review. But, again, we do want to respect his arguments in the review, even when we may have substantive disagreements with many of them.

We cannot deal with all of his claims in a response of this length. But there are a number that need to be held up to closer scrutiny.

We find it interesting how Vickers attempts to position himself in this critical review. In essence, he is positioning himself as a ‘truer’ advocate for critical Asian perspectives in education research, and this is attempted by implicitly juxtaposing himself against we who in his view have failed to practice what he sees as central to critical work in Asia, which he seems to claim that he practices. Thus, in many ways it is possible to see his critical intervention as a kind of contestation over who has a more legitimate voice representing critical scholarship in Asia.

To achieve this goal, he makes several moves in this piece. First, he identifies a number of existing studies (his own work included, and all written in English) that each of us could have cited but did not. Then he argues that because of our lack of reference, what we present as new insight is in fact nothing new. But it is indeed important that most of the works that he mentions are written in English. We shall come back to this point shortly.

Second, he discredits Gramscian theoretical tools that some of us use, saying that they are not only unnecessary but also obscure the argument and undermine the impact that our writings could have had in Asia where, he seems to assume, problematically, standards of academic English are lower. Third, he points out the fact that some of us are not based in Asia (hence implicitly again contrasting us with himself as someone who is based in Japan), assuming that we lack a professional network and strong intellectual and biographical experiences in Asia and hence a lack of understanding of research produced in this part of the world. This is simply incorrect.

It is particularly interesting how he legitimizes himself (or delegitimizes us) by (1) demonstrating his awareness of those studies that we failed to mention and (2) stressing his institutional base and professional affiliation in Asia. This is worrisome, since it indicates the extent to which he is caught up in an essentialist form of identity politics – one that holds that where one is based geographically matters more than anything else in determining what can be known about Asia. But the fact of the matter is that many of the chapter authors, if not all, have deep and lasting connections to scholars and movements in Asia, constantly transcend geographical boundaries, draw on literature from both within and outside Asia, and have written and continue to write in multiple languages. Furthermore, conspicuously erased in his assertion is any awareness around the language- and race-related privilege that he enjoys in Asia and how that might have shaped his scholarship. In this regard, his lack of due regard for the non-English, local-language scholarship that many of the chapters draw upon must be highlighted.

He discredits some of us by saying that there is nothing new in our work because the existing studies that we failed to refer to have already generated the same insights. But this is not quite accurate either. He points to English-language work that authors in our book should have cited. But such work, while relevant, often does not illuminate the complexities of, to take one example, the transnational politics that Takayama highlights, especially the elements concerning the Korean diaspora's involvement. Citing such work does not add much to the analysis. Thus, Vickers runs the risk of discrediting our work without really carefully assessing whether or not our work presents anything new. This is true for his comments on a number of the chapters in the book.

Let us say more about this. His focus solely on English-language literature is one of the things about which we are expressly cautious in our writing. Indeed, the 'important work' he accuses some of us of failing to include actually speaks to a certain degree of shortsightedness as it pertains to the real complexity of the issues we are engaged with. To give another example, all too many of the articles on migrant children's schools, including the piece Vickers refers to, have portrayed these schools as low quality without taking a critical look at how 'quality' is defined and/or the complex community-based activities that shape the education of migrant children.

What is most unfortunate, however, is the fact that his polemical style of writing could have the effect of creating an unnecessary divide among those who look at education critically in Asia. In a sense, scholars like Vickers and many of us in this book are similar; we are bi-discoursal, bi-cultural and bi-lingual, better positioned to push the discursive boundaries of scholarship to create new, critical insights. Thus, we do

not wish to be caught up in the sort of reductive identity politics that seems to guide Vickers's points. Instead, we too would prefer to work together, not only to provide new critical insights into the politics of education in Asia but to also provincialize and then de-provincialize theories developed elsewhere. All of us would have much to gain by unifying our work around the need for 'decentered unities' (Apple, 2013) both conceptually and politically.

All this makes it even more unfortunate that Vickers's tactical moves (both implicitly and explicitly) appear intent on positioning himself, in contrast to us, as the legitimate voice of critical Asian scholarship. Vickers seems to see the relations between Western theory and research in Asia as antagonistic and dualistic. This follows from many of his remarks on the various authors remaining 'in thrall to a Western sage' and holding onto Asia as Method only as a 'handy slogan'. But the approach to scholarship in Asia that Vickers speaks of assumes that it is a zero-sum game. And it is important to point out that, as we explain in the book's introduction, Asia as Method involves not simply casting the West as 'the dialectical other, along with its implied antagonisms' (14), but bringing Western ideas into conversation with a range of issues and relations in Asia. And this we have done in each of the chapters. A large part of this is carried out by a deliberate and critical engagement with published work in non-English languages. But such work is also done by how the authors frame the issues their chapters address from the *sui generis* perspectives of particular social formations, rather than assuming a universality that was argued for elsewhere. In thus speaking authentically, such forms of writing and engagement – found across many of the chapters – often speak truth to power, and involve political risks that our authors must bear. All of these seem lost on Vickers.

Vickers's claim that we have fetishized the use of hegemony is also puzzling. Most of the chapters carry a reference to the term – hardly surprising at all, given how our work in general and the focus of this book in particular deal with power relations among the state, various pedagogic agents and institutions, and society. But not all chapters foreground the notion. Also, Vickers appears to hold on to an impoverished, static understanding of hegemony, failing to take notice of the different and creative ways in which some of the chapters employ the term. This is certainly evident in Hee-Ryong Kang's chapter, for instance, which goes beyond Gramscian analyses to deploy Stuart Hall's ideas around supersession.

In the end, then, we have many worries not only about what Vickers has said in this review, but also about what underpins it. We worry that the larger project Vickers wants to construct from his highly selective review (and reading) of our book is a misrecognition of the field, and along with that, a kind of symbolic violence around issues of whose research counts, who has the right to speak, which texts constitute the 'core' scholarship in the field (again, his own work appears central here), etc. Second, as we have already pointed out, such a move bifurcates the field. His portrayal of those who are 'in' Asia vs those who are 'out' of it misses the reality that many of us work across national/regional boundaries, write for multiple audiences, and, perhaps most importantly, hold ourselves answerable to a diverse, conflicting set of commitments across nations and institutions. We worry that Vickers's project around the fashioning of the field of critical Asian scholarship is reminiscent of an imperialist gaze. Speaking very honestly, as we stated at the outset it is ironic that Vickers remains silent about the linguistic and racial privileges he enjoys in Asia. In this regard it is doubly unfortunate that he is quick to castigate some of the developments in this field. Indeed, in the process of doing so he seems to guard closely an essentialized form of research, drawing up boundaries of access and legitimacy – from all of which he would have



benefited significantly, and which he remains in a uniquely privileged position to pursue. It is thus ironic – and problematic – that in pronouncing on our failings from his own unexamined location he does not see that he inevitably risks positioning himself as a modern viceroy of sorts.

We say much of this with some sadness. Edward Vickers is someone who has much to offer. We hope that our public reflections on his essay assist him and the field in going further in a more cooperative commitment to critically understand the complex realities of education in Asia.

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