

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF KINDERGARTEN 3 STUDENTS'
CHINESE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND ATTITUDE
TOWARD LEARNING CHINESE LANGUAGE ACCORDING TO
GENDER AND LINGUISTIC FAMILY BACKGROUND IN A
PRIVATE SCHOOL IN BANGKOK, THAILAND**

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Abstract: The study was conducted to investigate the Kindergarten 3 (K3) students' Chinese academic achievement and attitude toward learning the Chinese language according to their gender and linguistic family background at a private school in Bangkok, Thailand. The study was carried out with a total of 124 K3 students at the target school during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020. It was designed as a quantitative and comparative study. Two instruments were used in this study for data collection. One was the Attitudes Toward Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language Questionnaire, developed to measure students' attitudes towards learning the Chinese language. The other instrument was the Chinese Midterm Test, used to measure participants' Chinese academic achievement. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and independent samples *t*-tests were performed on the collected data to address the research objectives driving this study. The findings indicated that girls had a significantly more positive attitude toward learning the Chinese language than boys. Girls also had significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than boys in the target school. Moreover, it was also found that students with bi- and multilingual family backgrounds had a significantly more positive attitude toward learning the Chinese language than students with monolingual family backgrounds. Students with bi- and multilingual family backgrounds had a significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than those with monolingual family background. Based on the discussion of the findings, recommendations for action and further study are provided.

Keywords: Chinese Academic Achievement; Attitude Toward Learning

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Chinese Language; Gender; Linguistic Family Background; Kindergarten 3 Students; Thailand.

Introduction

With the rapid increase in the number of people learning Chinese worldwide, more and more practitioners and researchers are engaging in Chinese language teaching in Thailand, and the research articles on teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language at all school levels in Thailand are becoming more and more abundant (Narueporn & Yang, 2013).

Research on the relationship between second/foreign language learning and gender had changed considerably in the past few decades, as new gender conceptualizations in language studies had contributed to this understanding (Glowka, 2014). Murphy (2010) conducted a study in secondary schools in Ireland between 2003 and 2007. In the Leaving Certificate Examination (LCE), girls performed significantly better than boys in French, German, and Spanish. This consistent trend was also observed at a primary early stage. According to Murphy (2010), one possible explanation for female learners performing better than male learners in language learning could be based on the fact that girls were found to consistently have higher levels of internal attribution (ability, effort) in their studies than boys. These results were consistent with those from earlier studies (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Spolsky, 1989), which also reported that, compared to male students, female learners had a more positive attitude toward learning a second/foreign language and a stronger motivation for learning the target language, which positively influenced their language learning academic achievement.

The attitudes toward learning a second/foreign language of bilingual and multilingual children and adolescents have not yet focused on much empirical research involving language acquisition. Despite the rapid increase in the number of bilingual and multilingual children and adolescents worldwide, surprisingly little research had been done on this important phenomenon (Lee, 2018). Lee's (2018) study, which focused on five cross-culturally married families in Bangkok, found that children with bilingual or multilingual family backgrounds were always more active in using different languages when compared to children with monolingual family backgrounds.

In the target private school of this study, located in Bangkok, Thailand, the researcher has observed that contrarily to students with monolingual family background, students with a bi- and multilingual family background seemed to be always active in Chinese language class, and also seemed to have a better ability in learning Chinese language. Moreover, according to the researcher's

observation in the target school, Kindergarten 3 girls seemed always to have a positive attitude and a better academic achievement than boys in Chinese language class. In order to provide empirical evidence on these issues, the current study was designed to examine the difference in Chinese academic achievement and attitude toward learning Chinese language between Kindergarten 3 male and female students at the target school, as well as between Kindergarten 3 students with monolingual and with bi- and multilingual family backgrounds.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives were addressed in this study.

1. To determine the levels of attitudes toward learning Chinese language, according to gender, held by Kindergarten 3 students in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
2. According to linguistic family background, to determine the levels of attitudes toward learning Chinese language, held by Kindergarten 3 students in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
3. To determine the levels of Chinese academic achievement, according to gender, held by Kindergarten 3 students in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
4. To determine the levels of Chinese academic achievement, according to linguistic family background, held by Kindergarten 3 students in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
5. To determine whether girls have a significantly more positive attitude toward learning Chinese language than boys in Kindergarten 3 in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
6. To determine whether girls have a significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than boys in Kindergarten 3 in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
7. To determine whether students with bi- and multilingual family background have a significantly more positive attitude toward learning Chinese language than students with monolingual family background in Kindergarten 3 in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.
8. To determine whether students with bi- and multilingual family background have a significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than those with monolingual family background in Kindergarten 3 in a private school in Bangkok, Thailand.

Theoretical Framework

Three theories were used to support this research: Piaget's (1972) theory of cognitive development, Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of second

language acquisition, and Krashen's (2003) theory of second language acquisition.

Piaget's (1972) theory of cognitive development

In this theory, Piaget considered cognitive development as the process in which an individual's cognition of things and his/her expression of thinking mode and ability in the face of problem situations changes with age as the individual adapts to the environment after birth. In his theory of cognitive development, Piaget proposed that human development goes through four stages: sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years old), pre-operational stage (2 to 7 years old), concrete operational stage (7 to 11 years old), and formal operational stage (11 to 15 years old). Considering the target participants' age, this study focused more on the pre-operational stage.

The pre-operational stage. It starts at the age of two and continues until the age of seven. In this stage of cognitive development, children cannot understand concrete logic and cannot mentally manipulate information. Children at this stage still have trouble seeing things from different perspectives. This is a fast-developing stage during which children's language skills grow significantly, and children begin to think symbolically, using symbols like words to make their point clear. Children games are mainly divided into symbol games and symbol manipulation. In this stage, children can use symbols and language and try to communicate with the environment around them. During this stage, children grow in their ability to group or classify objects and are able to pick up words and phrases and put them in language communication to describe their behavior and desires.

In this study, all children in Kindergarten 3 were around four to six years old, which means that they were exactly in the pre-operational stage. Their cognitive and language skills were rapidly developing in this stage.

Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model of second language acquisition

This theoretical model considers second language acquisition as a learning process connecting four different aspects: socio-cultural milieu, individual differences, second language acquisition contexts, and outcomes. Socio-cultural milieu refers to the community or background where the child grows up, transmitting beliefs and knowledge about the second language (L2) and culture to the child. Individual differences refer to learners' characteristics that differentiate them from other learners, such as intelligence, language aptitude, motivation, and situational anxiety. Second language acquisition contexts refer to the formal (e.g., the classroom) and informal (e.g., TV) settings and situations in which language learning might take place due to the learner's

interaction with a second language in the community. Lastly, outcomes refer to the linguistic (e.g., fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation of L2) and non-linguistic (e.g., attitudes, self-concept, cultural values, and beliefs) results of the L2 acquisition process (Gardner, 1985).

In this study, the second aspect (i.e., individual differences) was mainly considered to identify exactly what individual factors influenced the participants' foreign language learning process. More specifically, how individual differences (i.e., gender and linguistic family background) affected participants' attitudes toward learning a foreign language.

Krashen's (2003) theory of second language acquisition

According to Krashen (2003), second language acquisition is based on five hypotheses that explain the factors affecting the second language learning process: the acquisition-learning hypothesis (i.e., learners unconsciously acquiring language, either formally or informally, rather than learning language through conscious attention); the monitor hypothesis (i.e., a language knowledge monitor being needed to learn the appropriate use of the language); the natural order hypothesis (i.e., second language learning requires the acquisition of grammatical features and rules in a specific sequence); the input hypothesis (i.e., when given comprehensible input, such as words, grammatical forms and aspects of pronunciation, learners will increase their language learning); and the affective filter hypothesis (i.e., the language learning is a process mediated, or filtered, by "affects" such as emotions, attitudes or needs). In this study, the affective filter hypothesis was used to explain how affective variables (e.g., attitude) have an influence on the acquisition of a foreign language.

The affective filter hypothesis.

The affective filter hypothesis explains that a number of affective variables play a catalytic but non-causal role in second language acquisition. These variables include motivation, confidence, and anxiety, which are closely related to attitude and academic achievement (Schutz, 2007). Krashen believed that learners with high levels of self-confidence and motivation for learning, a good self-image, and low levels of anxiety were more capable of achieving success in second language acquisition.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework of the current study. It shows the research target, the independent variables (i.e., students' gender and linguistic family background), and the dependent variables (i.e., attitude toward learning Chinese language and Chinese academic achievement) addressed in this study.

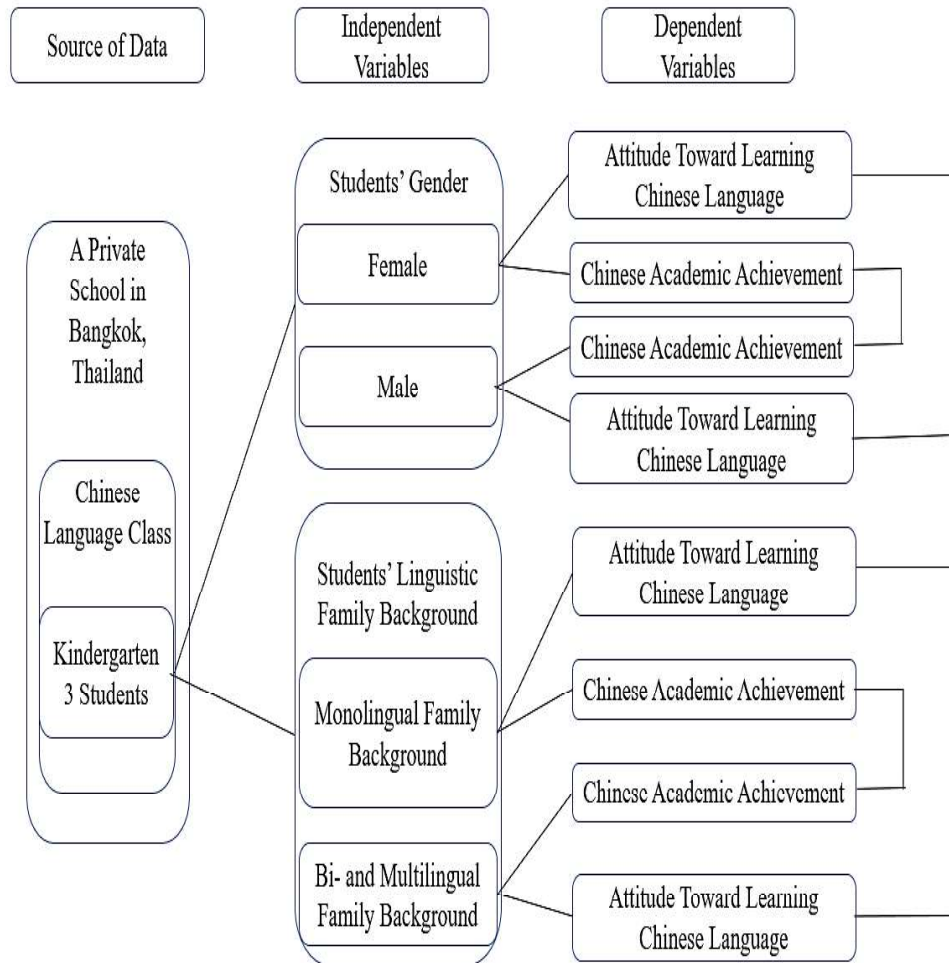


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Present Study.

Literature Review

This section reviews and summarizes some previous research related to the research variables addressed in this study.

Heinzmann (2009) conducted a quantitative study on 574 Grade 3 students from Switzerland to examine their motivation for learning English, attitude toward the English language, and confidence in their English ability, according to gender. According to the research findings, girls were much more motivated to learn English than boys. It was also found that girls had a more positive attitude toward the English language when compared to boys. Moreover, girls seemed to trust their English ability more than boys since they were more confident in their current and expected English ability compared to boys.

C. Li, H. Li, and Lin (2007) conducted a comparative study to examine the difference in English learning achievement, according to gender, of 11,275 Grade 6 students from Taiwan who were learning English as a foreign language. They used an online English listening and reading comprehension assessment for elementary school students as the instrument to measure achievement. According to the results of this study, it was found that the English learning achievement of female sixth graders was significantly higher than that of the boys. In the study, girls consistently outperformed boys in English. In general, C. Li et al. concluded that women seem to be born with a natural gift for language learning.

Owusu, Agor, and Amuzu (2015) conducted a study on second language learners' English writing competence according to their family background. The participants in this research were 30 first-year students from Ghana Baptist University College. All of the participants were from three different linguistic family backgrounds: those using only English at home, those using only Ghanaian language(s) at home, and those using both English and Ghanaian language(s) at home. According to the findings, learners who spoke both Ghanaian and English at home performed better in English writing than those with monolingual backgrounds. Moreover, it was found that there was a positive relationship between linguistic family background and English academic writing competence.

Oliver and Purdie (2014) conducted a study in Australia on the attitudes of 58 bilingual primary-school children toward their first and second languages. The participants, who were aged 9-12 years old and not native speakers of English, were all selected from bilingual family background, according to which would be divided into three main cultural groups: Asian (mainly speakers of Vietnamese or Chinese dialects), European (Greek and Macedonian speaking children) and Arabic (speakers of Arabic dialects). Based on the data collected from structured interviews, it was found that students felt more positive about their teachers and classmates when they spoke English rather than their native language. Moreover, it was found that students had a more positive attitude toward using English language in school. Similarly, participants were found to have a positive attitude toward the preference of communicating in English in school held by teachers, principals, classmates, and parents.

Method/ Procedure

Population and sample.

The population of this study was comprised of all 157 students enrolled in Kindergarten 3 (K3) at the target school during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020. From this population, a purposive sample

comprised of all the 124 students in the Go Genius Program (GGP) was chosen for this study. The study sample was comprised of 88 girls and 36 boys. As for the participants' linguistic family background, 61 came from monolingual families (using only the Thai language at home), while 63 came from families with a bi- or multilingual background. All students in Kindergarten 3 GGP had experience in learning Chinese language since they were in Kindergarten 1. The target school is a girl school, but boys are welcomed at the kindergarten level.

Research Instruments

There were two instruments used in this study: the Chinese Language Midterm Test, and the Attitudes Toward Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language Questionnaire (ATLCFLQ).

Chinese Language Midterm Test. In this research study, the Chinese language midterm test was used to measure the participants' Chinese academic achievement in relation to Chinese reading, listening, and writing. The first author designed the test, considering the target school requirements and target students' age level. There were three parts in this test, which included ten multiple-choice items, five match items, and four painting color items

In order to pass this test, students were expected to score at least 25 out of 50 points in total, with a score of 50 being determined as an excellent Chinese academic achievement. After the examination, the Chinese teacher checked the test paper and gave a list of grades according to student numbers in each classroom. The researchers also got a copy of the Kindergarten 3 students' Chinese midterm test list paper in each classroom from the Chinese teacher.

Attitudes Toward Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language Questionnaire (ATLCFLQ). This instrument was adapted from three subscales in Gardner's (2010) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) international version: attitude toward the teacher, attitude toward the course, and attitude toward learning the language. After performing a content analysis of the original items and adjusting the item wording considering the research context of this study and the cognitive ability and understanding capability of the participants, 18 items were arranged in three subscales: attitude toward Chinese teachers (eight items), attitude toward Chinese class (five items), and attitudes toward learning Chinese (five items). In order to make the questionnaire easier to understand by Kindergarten 3 students, only positive wording was used for the item statements, and the original 7-point Likert scale was adjusted into a 3-point Likert scale displaying three types of smiley faces (☺ = *agree*, ☹ = *neither agree nor disagree*, ☹ = *disagree*). In order to make sure the

participants understood the questionnaire, a Thai language version was developed. The translation was done by an experienced professional translator, who also assessed the translation validity.

Due to the fact that the researchers removed some of the original items that were found not relevant to the local educational context of this study, a pilot study was run in the third week of December 2019, before the conduction of the main study, in order to assess the instrument's internal consistency and reliability. The pilot study was run on ten randomly chosen K3 students in the target school (five boys and five girls; five with monolingual family background and five with bi- and multilingual family background). Results from the pilot study indicated that Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the ATLCFLQ was .86 (good reliability) for the total scale, providing then statistical evidence of the reliability of the ATLCFLQ for use in this study. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .72 (acceptable reliability) was found for the total scale for the main study.

Research Findings

In this section, the findings obtained from the data analysis performed on the collected data are summarized.

Findings from Research Objective 1

Regarding this research objective, the following findings were obtained.

- Kindergarten 3 girls, on average, showed a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language at the target school, $M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.46$ (on a scale of 1-3, with three being positive).
- Kindergarten 3 boys, on average, showed a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language at the target school, $M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.54$ (on a scale of 1-3, with three being positive).

Findings from Research Objective 2

Regarding this research objective, the following findings were obtained.

- On average, Kindergarten 3 students with monolingual family background showed a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language at the target school, $M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.49$ (on a scale of 1-3, with 3 being positive).
- On average, Kindergarten 3 students with a bi- or multilingual family background showed a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language at the target school, $M = 2.78$, $SD = 0.49$ (on a scale of 1-3, with 3 being positive).

Findings from Research Objective 3

Regarding this research objective, the following findings were obtained.

- Kindergarten 3 female students, on average, had a very good Chinese academic achievement at the target school, $M = 42.98$, $SD = 7.56$ (on a scale of 1-50, with 50 being excellent).
- Kindergarten 3 male students, on average, had a good Chinese academic achievement at the target school, $M = 38.77$, $SD = 9.27$ (on a scale of 1-50, with 50 being excellent).

Findings from Research Objective 4

Regarding this research objective, the following findings were obtained.

- On average, Kindergarten 3 students with a monolingual family background had a good Chinese academic achievement at target school, $M = 39.27$, $SD = 9.30$ (on a scale of 1-50, with 50 being excellent).
- On average, Kindergarten 3 students with a bi- or multilingual family background had a very good Chinese academic achievement at target school, $M = 44.31$, $SD = 6.18$ (on a scale of 1-50, with 50 being excellent).

Findings from Research Objective 5

Regarding this research objective, it was found that girls had a significantly more positive attitude toward learning Chinese language than boys in Kindergarten 3 at the target school, $t(112) = 2.43$, $p = .008$.

Findings from Research Objective 6

Regarding this research objective, it was found that girls had a significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than boys in Kindergarten 3 at the target school, $t(112) = 2.48$, $p = .008$.

Findings from Research Objective 7

Regarding this research objective, it was found that students with bi- and multilingual family background had a significantly more positive attitude toward learning Chinese language than students with a monolingual family background in Kindergarten 3 at the target school, $t(112) = -3.17$, $p = .001$.

Findings from Research Objective 8

Regarding this research objective, it was found that students with bi- and multilingual family backgrounds had a significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than students with a monolingual family background in Kindergarten 3 at the target school, $t(112) = -3.41$, $p = .0005$.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings obtained from the current study, placing

them in context with previous studies. The discussion is presented and organized by variables.

Attitude toward Learning Chinese Language According to Gender.

Based on the findings from the survey questionnaire and the inferential statistics used to examine students' attitudes toward learning Chinese language according to gender, it was found that both K3 girls and boys showed a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language. However, K3 girls at the target school had significantly more positive attitude toward learning Chinese language than boys. This finding is consistent with a previous study in Switzerland by Heinzmann (2009), who reported that among Grade 3 primary students (average age was 9), girls had a more positive attitude toward the English language, English language speaking countries and English language speakers than boys. Heinzmann (2009) also found that girls having a more positive attitude toward learning English contributed to being more motivated to learn English as a second language and more enjoyment of learning English than boys. According to the researchers' experience, K3 students seem always to enjoy learning Chinese with their Chinese teacher and enjoy the Chinese class and activities, particularly female students. However, considering that Chinese is a foreign language in Thailand and Chinese language teachers are foreigners, students' attitude toward the Chinese language teacher might have an impact on students' attitude toward learning the Chinese language, since they seem to have a preference for their homeroom Thai teachers, regardless the gender.

Attitude Toward Learning Chinese Language According to Linguistic Family Background.

This study found that students had a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language, regardless of their linguistic family background. However, K3 students with bi- and multilingual family backgrounds had a significantly more positive attitude toward learning the Chinese language than those with monolingual family backgrounds. This result aligns with the finding obtained by Oliver and Purdie (2014). They suggested that the 9-12 years-old students with bilingual family background had a more positive attitude toward their English teacher and learning English. According to the researchers' experience, and as previously mentioned, K3 students at the target school have a closer relationship with their homeroom Thai teacher. When it compared Thai teachers and Chinese teachers, they always seem to prefer their Thai teacher and Thai classes, which might impact students' attitude toward learning Chinese language, regardless of their linguistic family background.

Chinese Academic Achievement According to Gender

Based on the findings from this study, it was found that K3 girls had a very good Chinese academic achievement at the target school, while boys had a good Chinese academic achievement. It was also found that K3 girls in the target school had significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than boys. This finding is aligned with a previous study in Taiwan by C. Li et al. (2007), who reported that female primary students consistently outperformed boys in English language learning. Similarly, a previous study conducted in Spain (Arellano, 2012) reported that high school female students had higher reading comprehension of English as a foreign language than boys.

Chinese Academic Achievement According to Linguistic Family Background

Based on the findings from the current study, it was found that K3 students with bi- and multilingual family backgrounds had a very good Chinese academic achievement in the target school, while students with a monolingual family background had a good Chinese academic achievement. It was also found that participants with bi- and multilingual family background had significantly higher Chinese academic achievement than those with monolingual family background. This finding is consistent with a previous study conducted in Ghana by Owusu et al. (2015), who reported that people who spoke both Ghanaian and English at home (bilingual Ghanaian students) had a better academic achievement than other learners with only a monolingual family background.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the current study, there are some recommendations made for students, teachers, parents, as well as future researchers intending further to investigate aspects of Chinese language teaching and learning.

Recommendations for Students

According to the findings, to increase boys' Chinese academic achievement and promote their positive attitude toward learning Chinese language, boys are encouraged to pay more attention to Chinese language learning and focus more on the Chinese class. Moreover, students with a monolingual family background are encouraged to have more chances to talk to their family members and friends in the Chinese language to increase their individual accomplishment and promote a positive attitude toward learning Chinese language.

Recommendations for Teachers

According to the observation and research findings, in order to increase boys' Chinese academic achievement and promote their positive attitude toward

learning Chinese language, Chinese teachers should try to pay more attention to boys and give them more learning activities based on what boys like and are more interested in during the Chinese language class. Meanwhile, considering their linguistic family background situation, teachers should encourage students to communicate more with their parents in a second language.

Recommendations for parents.

The findings from the current study indicated that the linguistic family background has an influence on students' Chinese academic achievement and attitude toward learning Chinese language. Therefore, parents can improve students' learning situation by offering a second language environment, particularly for those students with monolingual family background. Then, parents can encourage their children to talk and apply their second language knowledge and skills at home, so students could improve their Chinese academic achievement and develop a more positive attitude toward learning the Chinese language.

Recommendations for future researchers.

Future researchers who would like to work on these variables may get guidance from the research methodology used in this study. Also, future researchers shall consider adding more variables in future studies, such as grade level, motivation for learning a second/foreign language and parental encouragement, so that the comparison could provide a deeper vision to understand and improve foreign language education in Thailand.

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