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From Migrant Workers to “Citizens”

Chen Aiqiao
Finance Office of Fushi Town, Nankang City, Jiangxi Province
No. 46, Jinshan Road, Dongshan Community, Nankang, Jiangxi Province, 341400, China
nkcaq@163.com
Mobile Phone: 13870751698

Abstract
Migrant workers are a special group formed by Chinese peasants in the process of social transformation during the course of urbanization. They have constituted an important component of China's industrial workers; however, they are obviously differentiated from industrial workers due to unequal job opportunities in the same city, unequal job treatment in the same factory, unequal pay for the same job. The essence of new urbanization is the change of social structure and the fruits of development must be shared by all the people. The main objective of urbanization at this stage should be the development of small towns. The flow of migrant workers into towns and cities has sped up China's civil society building. “Migrant workers” should be organized. The most critical, the most fundamental, the most practical and the most effective measure for institutional reform should be the returning of citizenship to the peasants.

Key words: migrant workers; new urbanization; civil society building; citizenship
The rural labor force, which had been greatly liberated due to the policy of Contractual Operation Right of Land, has enabled a large number of rural surplus laborers to move to towns and cities as migrant workers, which has become a special group in the process of China's urbanization. As the result of their movement, not only have social labor resources been fully utilized, they have also improved their own qualities and thus laid a solid foundation for “Made in China.” A more far-reaching significance lies in the fact that, the phenomenon of migrant workers has changed the social structure, thus accelerating the process of democratization in China, namely, the flow of migrant workers into towns and cities is speeding up the building of the civil society in China.

I. Urbanization and peasant movement into cities

China's reform and opening up have made it possible for the flow of production factors. Under the free movement of production factors, if the peasants cannot have social average income as the result of limited land they possess, most of them would reasonably choose to leave agriculture for towns and cities to engage in non-agricultural industries. Migrant workers have formed a special group in social transformation in the process of urbanization in China. From the point of view of effective allocation of social resources, the rural surplus labor force is fully utilized because of the migration; from the perspective of long-term development of rural society, it is the outflow of human resources.

A report of June 26, 2013 on Xinhua Net said that, China's urbanization rate in 2012 was 52.57%. But many experts and scholars pointed out based on research that, China's urbanization rate is now only 35%. This is due to the fact that, many migrant workers as well as their family members don't have access to basic public services such as housing security, employment, education, health care, pension and social welfare. They are not treated as urban residents in terms of social system, which has seriously affected the economic and social effect that urbanization should have from theoretical point of view.

II. Migrant Workers Travelling back and forth between Cities and Countryside

The means of subsistence on which the migrant workers survive and develop primarily come from non-farming wages instead of profits from agricultural labor. The first generation of migrant workers moved to cities because the meager farming income (average 500 Yuan on one mu of farmland in the south of China) could hardly maintain production, not to mention production expansion. “As long as the average daily income from breeding industry is less than unit payment from working for others, the surplus labor force and those from large areas of poor villages would be willing to choose to go outside to work.” Thus, it has become an inevitable trend for peasants to move to cities to seek non-
farming income in the historical situation of reform and opening up. Moreover, this trend is difficult to remove within a short period.

The second generation of migrant workers, (also known as the new generation of migrant workers), who are now the main body of this migration group, has been no longer a highly homogeneous group. The young migrant workers are much differentiated from each other. Many of the new generation of migrant workers do not have their own contracted land, with little or no experience of rural farming life. Despite of their high level of education, high vocational expectations, high degree of self-affirmation, and strong desire for social recognition, they cannot well tolerate work pressure, cannot adequately adjust themselves to difficult circumstances, and cannot fully endure social inequities. As a result, the new generation of migrant workers has been no longer the peasants in the traditional sense. They would not only work for survive, but also would like to enjoy life, since “bread and roses are equally important.” The labor force grown up in the 1990s attach more importance to “White Collar” than to “Blue Collar”, which reminds us that, we should focus on and accelerate the transformation of industries from “labor-intensive” to “capital-intensive.”

In current labor market, labor forces are in high demand. However, this doesn’t indicate that the “Lewis turning point” has really come. In fact, China’s “demographic dividend” hasn’t been used up so soon. Better education of labor force in general, stronger desire to transform from Blue Collar workers to White Collar workers, and the different capability of the new generation of migrant workers from what the industries are looking for, have led to a gap between the labor supply and demand in labor market. This is the internal factor for “labor shortage” phenomenon. But on the other hand, we cannot neglect the fact that large number of rural and even urban labor force remain idle. The current “labor shortage” is actually the result of structural problem of labor market.

Because of the structural shortage of labor force in market, it often consumes the migrant workers a lot of time before they could find a job, which is usually interpreted as frictional unemployment, covering up in part the fact that the migrant workers remain idle. From economics point of view, it is a waste of labor resources for migrant workers (labor force) to remain idle (unemployed); from sociological point of view, this will generate the proletarian class; from politics point of view, the authorities should make efforts to appease this group of people. If this problem cannot be resolved satisfactorily, it will not only deplete the strength of the country and delay economic development, but also shaken the foundation and cause unrest. There is no doubt that, if a large number of migrant workers remain unemployed for a long period of time, the whole society will not be able to run smoothly and orderly.
Both cities and businesses have benefited from “household residence dividend” and the rural “demographic dividend”. Thus, the two parties should take measures in addressing the employment issue of migrant workers. Urban authorities should try to provide migrant workers with the same welfare as that of city residents, while the most direct and practical practice for businesses is to pay wages to migrant workers on a standard and timely basis. What’s more, social insurance and housing public fund shall also be paid by the businesses. Nevertheless, according to the sample survey of migrant workers in 2012 by National Bureau of Statistics (the same below), the percentages of employers that pay pension insurance, industrial injury insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance and maternity insurance for migrant workers are 14.3%, 24%, 16.9%, 8.4%, and 6.1% respectively. Obviously, the businesses are not doing sufficiently in assuming social responsibilities.

The phenomenon of migrant workers reveals the following contradictions, namely:
“farming is not profitable”: low efficiency of traditional agriculture, meager rural per capita share of production materials, for example, per capita arable land is less than an mu; stagnant two-way flow of production factors between urban and rural area; high requirements for movement of peasants into cities; rural land is taken into account in urban planning, while peasants are left behind; land is wanted but people on the land are not considered; cities are not fully prepared to accept “new citizens”. Urban and rural areas are split from each other. There is still a long way to go before resolving agricultural, rural and peasant problems.

“People are no longer hungry thanks to household responsibility policy, and people had become better off since they went out to seek employment”; however, only about 10% of them have settled down in cities and got citizenship. Because most migrant workers have failed to save up enough money to afford the life as urban residents, they are still lack of the basic means as urban citizens. Compared with industrial workers, they cannot enjoy equal opportunities for employment in the same cities, equal job within the same factories, equal payment for the same job, not to mention the welfares enjoyed by urban residents.

According to a survey of National Bureau of Statistics, the average monthly wage of migrant workers is 2,290 Yuan, increased by 11.8% compared with 2011, but only about 30% of the local average wage for urban workers. This amount can only meet the basic living expenses in cities. Normally speaking, the income of a worker working normal hours should be able to meet a family's basic living expenses. That is to say, the average monthly wage should be at least 5000-6000 Yuan for a family of 3.5 members. In other words, the value created by migrant workers is disproportionate to their wages.
According to a survey by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, only about 20% of migrant workers will work in one place for more than 3 years. Due to complicated transfer procedure of social security information from city to city, the high mobility and income instability, very few migrant workers will choose to buy social insurance, which reflects the importance and urgency to enhance the social capital of migrant workers.

A survey of National Bureau of Statistics indicates that, 15.1% of migrant workers are over fifty years old. They have dedicated their youth to urban development, but the cities are not yet ready to accept them. By the age of forth years, they have almost exhausted their physical energy, the result of which is that it is more difficult for them to find jobs. They have no choice but to go back home in the countryside to spend the rest of life.

What lies in equal pay for equal work for both urban and rural labor force is that, cities purchase prime-time labor service of rural labor force at a low price, while leaving the costs for training of the laborers as well as the pension for them to the countryside. In other words, the migrant workers get paid for their labor, but they have to pay for training expenses by themselves before moving into cities. The cities have benefited from the investment of the migrant workers for their own training without paying any reward. Even there are migrant workers who have settled down in towns and cities, this has just reduced the costs for pension without avoiding the loss of training. Contribution and commitment to urban construction by the youth cannot integrate themselves into city life in the real sense, so we are far from the goal of “two-way flow” of urban and rural elements.

An often overlooked fact is that, even youngsters from rural areas enroll in colleges, they can hardly find ideal jobs in cities after graduation. They may only get a job as “dispatch employees”. Being a “dispatch employees”, they are not able to enjoy the same wages and welfare as those formal employees even with their higher education and university degree. “Knowledge will change fate” now seems a past tense, only belonging to the previous generation. This has forced people from rural areas to hesitate on investment in education, which indicates the social reality that the rising channels for rural residents have been blocked after the solidification of social stratification.

As a member of social group, migrant workers are under the management of both the government where they work, and the government where they are from. Although both parties try their best to provide a variety of preferential policies, a lot of time and energy as well as money would have been wasted if they have to travel back and forth between the two places in order to be entitled for these Policies. From a political science perspective, migrant workers have unknowingly lost more or less the
right to vote and to be voted for taking part in politics due to the long and expensive travel time between urban and rural areas, which is referred to in sociology as the marginalization of social roles. Because families members are unable to move into cities along with the migrant workers, and because the reform of dual society institution characterized by household registration system and land system lags behind, a series of problems such as left-behind children, left-behind elderly, left-behind wives, temporary couples, vacant rural housing and other issues have been generated accordingly.

III. Essence of New Urbanization is Change of Social Structure

Cities play an important role in improving public welfare. Therefore, the essence of urbanization is to improve people's living standards, and all the people shall share the fruit of urbanization.

The root of agricultural, rural and peasant problems are the urban-rural dual structure: differences of citizen's identity type between urban and rural residents, separate public service systems, incomplete property rights of peasants. And all these problems can be attributed to the lack of civil rights for peasants. Protection of the rights and interests of peasants has become a general concern. Focus of this protection shall be the returning of citizenship to peasants.

Urban-rural division of household registration system is extremely unfair. It has caused inequality of income not only between urban residents and peasants, but also between peasants themselves. What's more, it has fettered China's economic development and improvement of people's livelihood, becoming a barrier for China to achieve a comprehensive well-off society. There is no doubt that the urban-rural division of household registration system is a fundamental cause for agricultural, rural and peasant problems.

According to an article of China Financial News on August 20, 2012, the national special research group of urbanization found that, the “reform of household registration system is opposed by almost all of the mayors.” As a matter of fact, what the mayors worry about is the huge costs in the process of urbanization. It is estimated by some research department that, it will cost about 100,000 to 200,000 Yuan to grant a peasant with household registration identity in cities. However, we shall bear in mind that migrant workers will not only spend money to live and work in cities, but also create enormous value within the period of decades. Their consumption of commodities will also promote economic development. In other words, it will have positive returns to change the registration identity of peasants to urban residents during urbanization, which will result in a contradiction between current reality and long-term situation. To resolve this contradiction, we should begin from the reform of the current household registration system and complete change of urban-rural dual structure. On the one hand,
we should lower the “threshold” to enter into cities, and on the other hand, we should vigorously develop the service industry to create job opportunities for the rural surplus labor force to find a way out. It is the dream of migrant workers to find jobs with stable income at social average level. Therefore, great efforts shall be made to create conditions for migrant workers to settle down in cities.

1. “City management” must be considered in terms of integral planning of urban and rural areas

Because of the high concentration of population and other factors, the scale of modern cities has been highlighted. It has been proposed by China government that, during the “12th Five-Year Plan”, the urbanization rate will be increased to 51.5%. With the acceleration of urbanization, urban development concepts have also changed, and now “city management” has been regarded by many cities as a development roadmap.

However, an attractive slogan doesn’t mean it has been put into practice due to different theoretical understandings and the differences and shortcomings in the process of practice. “City management” is a new concept of urban development. As a kind of government action, it is to acquire economic, social and environmental benefits through market operation of urban assets and the intangible assets attached, so as to promote the integrated development of both urban and rural areas.

Not every city shouting “city management” slogan has truly recognized the truth. For example, some cities focus only on the marketing of certain specific elements, the typical example of which is "making money from land", namely, being keen to make money by selling land to earn money and leaving the farmers alone.

Urbanization is not a city-oriented development. We must balance urban and rural development. The fundamental point of China's modernization is the modernization of rural areas. It has now been universally believed by experts that, by 2031, China's population will reach 1.5 billion, with the urbanization rate getting 70%. Even under such circumstances, there will still be 450 million people in rural area. New Rural Construction and urbanization are the two aspects of the integral development of both urban and rural areas. “City management” must be considered in terms of integral planning of urban and rural areas, without cutting off rural area development.

2. Being Well-developed is More Important than Domain Expansion

The objective of urban development is to improve people's “happiness index”. During the early period of the new China since 1949, China's urbanization rate was 10.64%. Since reform and opening up,
China's urbanization has accelerated noticeably. According to the “Urban Blue Book” issued by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences during the second half of 2012, China's urbanization rate of population had reached 51.27% in 2011.

With previous model of development, the urbanization rate of land has far exceeded that of population. The uncoordinated development with the concept of “Selling land for money without considering the farmers on the land” has accumulated a good many contradictions which cannot be resolved on a timely basis. This reminds us from time to time that we must change the pattern of development. Urbanization will help solve rural issues, but it cannot solve the issues once and for all on its own. So we must combine urbanization with the construction of new socialist countryside, and put urbanization in the grand strategy planning of the development of both urban and rural areas.

Urban development is the natural result of economic and social development. In naturally developed cities, there are complete functions with supporting infrastructure in place. They have their own characteristics and cultural accumulation which render a sense of satisfaction and happiness for the general public living within these places. The urbanization of people, which requires people-oriented building of cities, is more meaningful and more important than the mere geographical expansion.

3. Urbanization will Release Sustainable Momentum for Economic Development

In the process of urbanization, its size, speed and quality determine the size, speed and quality of economic and social development. Urbanization of population has great potential and each increase of one percentage point of urbanization rate means the transformation of 10 million peasants into urban residents, with underlying investments of more than 1 trillion yuan. In the next 10 years, the newly added urban population is expected to reach 400 million or so, driving investment demand of 40 trillion yuan, according to forecast.

Currently, the small domestic market and a serious shortage of rural market consumption are the fundamental factors limiting China's economic development. In 2010, the annual per capita net income of rural residents was 5919 yuan, and the annual per capita disposable income of urban residents was 19,109 yuan. According to 2010 rural poverty standard of 1,274 yuan, 26.88 million people in rural area lived in poverty by the end of the year. (China Economic Net, March 1, 2011)

The sixth census shows that, 665.57 million people live in towns and cities, accounting for 49.68% of the total population; 674.15 million people live in rural areas, accounting for 50.32% of the total
population. That is to say, if the per capita net income of rural population can reach to the per capita disposable income of urban residents, there will be an increase of 13,190 yuan for each person, with a total increase of nearly 90 trillion yuan for 674.15 million rural population. If this amount of money is used for consumption, 90 trillion Yuan will be spent merely by rural population. In line with this calculation, the 26.88 million people living in poverty in rural area will increase the consumption of 480 billion yuan. In other words, the transfer of rural potential consuming power into effective demand into reality will release a powerful driving force for sustained economic development, which has far-reaching significance. The achievement of this expected goal relies on the process of urbanization and a sound Social Security System.

4. Increase of Urbanization Rate Needs a Large Number of Lower-priced Houses

In 2009, China's urbanization rate is 46.6% and this will be increased to 51.5% during the “12th Five-Year Plan” period. It is now generally believed by experts that by 2031, China's population will reach 1.5 billion, with urbanization rate reaching 70%. That is to say, another 5 percentage points will be increased during the “12th Five-Year Plan” period; while in the next 20 years, more than 20 percentage points will be increased based on current level. Moreover, China's urbanization rate “has been seriously overestimated” based on the fact that, "of the 600 million urban population in statistics, at least 200 million people did not enjoy the rights of urban residents.”

A notable feature of “at least 200 million people did not enjoy the rights of urban residents” is that they cannot afford houses. Among the basic means for survival, housing is one of the main priorities, providing a secure living basis to pursue your career. One will not be considered as a true citizen without possessing a house in cities.

If the urbanization rate reaches 70% for 1.5 billion people, the urban population will be over 1 billion by 2031. In line with this calculation, at least 600 million people shall have to solve housing problems in cities during this period of time.

The high prices of houses are far beyond the means of “working families”, which will severely restrict the transfer speed of China's population and urbanization process. A National Bureau of Statistics survey showed that, only 0.6% of migrant workers have purchased houses in the cities where they work, with 40% of migrant workers have neither quarters nor housing allowances. High prices still act as a barrier preventing migrant workers from settling down in cities. An extremely important factor for
the failure of 200 million people to enjoy citizen rights is the imbalance between house prices and wages.

Obviously, the current market has failed on this issue. The limitation for house purchase and prices has limited effect, since the developers will choose not to sell the houses or postpone the sales with the actual “negative interest rate”. As a result, house prices can hardly be decreased by means of limiting house purchase and house prices. The limitation policy can only stagnate the increase of house prices at most.

Rapid increase in labor wages will not work, either. Since wage level is the result of negotiation between the employees and employers based on market situation, the government can only intervene by setting a minimum wage or whatever, rather than intervene with labor-capital relations to increase labor wages.

It is a violation of market operation rules to artificially limit the purchase of houses or to raise labor wages, which will have limited effect or don’t work at all. I personally believe that, since urbanization is a major strategy of China’s modernization, We should, at least in the near future, provide migrant workers in cities with houses as a kind of urban welfare, just like public transport for travelling, so as to solve the inability of “working families” to afford houses by proving lower-priced houses for special groups of people. Therefore, to enhance urbanization rate, the government should build substantial lower-priced houses or the like, such as the purchase of the existing “small property houses” to relocate migrant workers by phases. This is also the practical requirements to curb the extremely high prices of houses, to promote healthy development of the market, and to solve the problems of people’s livelihood.

5. The main goal of urbanization for the time being is the development of small towns
A survey shows that migrant workers are more inclined to choose the nearest places for employment. Small towns, which connect the countryside and the cities, play an important connecting role in urban and rural development. They can be both important carrier of industrialization and service basis for agricultural industrialization, playing huge leading role for the vast rural areas. If we cut off the internal mechanism of city growth and development by artificially setting system barriers, we will mislead the choice of path of urbanization in theory and corner urbanization into the radical track of building “ghost towns” in practice.
Towns are a natural stage of urban growth. Urbanization is an inevitable part of the process of urban development. It is a slow and evolution process for villages to turn into communities, for rural centers to turn into towns, for towns to turn into cities. The speed of the process is determined by the level of economic and social development. The growth and development are affected by local natural conditions and other factors. Of all the factors, the most important is the willingness of local residents for development. People-oriented urbanization is its fundamental meaning. Urbanization is not a purely economic issue, nor is it a simple question of construction. Since it involves inherent demographic, social and political problems in the process, urbanization is quite complicated. Urbanization is the transformation of people’s production mode, people’s lifestyles, people’s values and consumption attitudes caused by the progress of productivity. The main objective of urbanization at this stage is the development of small towns, which can not only slow down the spread of “big city” disease in the process of urbanization, but also can allow peasants to settle down in nearby towns, thus eliminating the negative effects of urbanization.

6. Urbanization relies on deepening of institutional reform and public resources redistribution

The purpose of promoting urbanization is to improve people’s living standards, and in essence, it is to realize two-way orderly flow of rural and urban elements and to optimize resources allocation. Market mechanism should be adopted in planning urban and rural development as a whole, to accelerate government and institutional reforms, and to adjust distribution of public resources. Currently, the most urgent is the reform of household registration system, the land system and property rights system, to make them more responsive to the healthy economic and social development. Only in this way, can we activate the production factors, comply with market economic laws, and promote people-oriented rational flow of production factors. And this is actually the process of returning the citizenship to peasants.

IV. Migrant workers will exert profound influence on Chinese society

More and more people have recognized the importance of organizing the peasants together as a group. Only through the organizations of migrant workers can we solve such difficult problems as delaying of payment or refusal to make payment by the employers, so as to find fundamental and effective solutions to these problems.

Simply speaking, the essence of migrant worker issues is to confer them with equal citizenship identity. If peasants become citizens in the real sense, many problems will be solved internally. The
missing of peasants’ citizen rights and identity inequality are the root cause of many problems, and this is also the reason why some reform cannot receive expected results. Citizenship is the basic indicator of the civilized development of a nation and a society, and the core of rural problems is in fact the rights of peasants.

The practice of “accumulating scores to move into cities” and the like remind us of the 1791 law of Britain which stipulated that, only citizens with annual revenue of over 600 pounds from land are eligible to run for county members; in France in 1814, it provisioned that citizens must pay 300 francs of tax a year to have the right to vote, and 1,000 francs for the right to be elected, ..... American feminist movement, civil rights movement and the efforts of international community to eliminate desegregation embodied citizenship expansion process. It is a flexible policy now to allow migrant peasants to retain land tenure, since when the peasants move into cities to seek employment, they can transfer the land operation right to others without losing land contract rights. In this way, they don’t have to worry about unemployment, which is helpful for the current urbanization process. If they are required to forsake land contract right before moving into cities, they will worry about the possibly insecure future, generating risks to urbanization. In the current process of urbanization, the correct understanding of peasants will help us to be aware from a higher level that, new urbanization is in fact a process of changing the structure of Chinese society.

China has established social security system framework and is making continuous improvement; however, it is still far from the practical requirements of economic and social development. Migrant workers dissociated from both urban and rural organizations can hardly enjoy some preferential policies, and they have become a major group of social concern because of their “neither peasants nor workers” status.

We should look at the phenomenon of migrant workers from China reform process; we should look for the root cause of migrant workers in the deficiencies of China urban-rural partition system; we should analyze the issues of migrant workers in conjunction the market economy system with Chinese characteristics; we should find out the solution to migrant worker problems by reasonable planning of both urban and rural economic development as a whole. In the reform and opening up, the peasants moved into cities to seek employment to earn more money with opportunities from urbanization. They have gradually grown into a special group of migrant workers. Migrant workers walked out of the villages and broke off the restrictions imposed by the dual system, partially exercising such rights as migration, seeking employment in cities, exchange of jobs, etc. The reform of urban-rural partition system, represented by household registration system and land system, has lagged behind economic
and social development. Under such circumstances, the peasants walked out of the villages and moved into cities to seek employment in order to increase cash income. With more and more people joining in this trend one generation after another, they have encountered many practical problems such as the protection of their legitimate rights and interests as members of society, as well as the maintenance of their dignity. This has forced the whole society to reflect on the problems, in order to accelerate reforms accordingly.

Migrant workers have exerted great influence on traditional villages from such aspects as cultural attitudes, living habits, social values, politics and so on, rendering village communities on the edge of collapse. It is predicted that future national leaders may come from the two groups of migrant workers and college students acting as village officials. Since these two groups are not only overwhelmed with numerical strength (National Bureau of Statistics Survey shows that, in 2012, the nation-wide migrant workers totaled 262.61 million, an increase of 3.9%, namely 9.83 million over previous year) , they are also experienced and knowledgeable due to frequent change of jobs, necessary knowledge storage, and more extensive line of work experience. What's more, their active thinking will make them more likely to produce national leaders than other groups. Because they are from countryside (or have lived rural life), they are familiar with the traditional Chinese "social acquaintance" society; because they have grass-roots work experience (or lived lower-class life), they identify the modern "social contract" society. So, the elite persons from these two groups have laid solid social and political foundation for their rise to historical stage. The continuous evolution of civil society system will provide necessary and sufficient conditions required.
Conclusion

“It is one of the basic capabilities of a modern state to develop citizenship.” Migrant workers, who are by no means the so-called “aimlessly drifting population”, move from the countryside into the cities and towns to make a living, not only for survival, but also to break identity constraint with opportunities provided by policies, thus challenging the worship for pre-destined qualification by working hard on their own. The issue of migrant workers is caused by unequal identity resulted from urban-rural dual household registration system. “It is an inevitable trend of China's social progress to grant peasants with citizenship; however, this requires appropriate institutional reforms.” Everything in reality indicated that, we need to accelerate the construction of “Citizens-State”. We should begin from the reform of the current household registration system, and from the complete change of the structure of urban-rural dual system, to lower the “threshold” for peasants to move into cities, so as to find a way out for the rural surplus labor force. It is the dream of migrant workers to find jobs with stable income at social average level. Therefore, great efforts shall be made to create conditions for migrant workers to settle down in cities.
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