

# ***Shaping Identities: The Influence of Female Filmmakers on the Portrayal of Women in 21st-Century Chinese Mainstream Cinema***

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**Abstract:** This research paper examines the portrayal of women in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese mainstream cinema, particularly through the lens of female filmmakers in a male-dominated industry. Guided by case studies and comparative analysis of Chinese classical films since the early twentieth century, the paper explores how female filmmakers uplift feminine trends, breaking free from the conventional norm and male gaze to eulogize their realistic female figures in Chinese cinema based on their personal experiences and narratives. In addition, the study unveils that despite their efforts, the influence of the male gaze and deep-seated patriarchal values still confines female filmmakers to traditional and stereotypical portrayals of women. While female filmmakers have succeeded in presenting more authentic, intricate, and empowering representations of women, their impact is still hindered by long-lasting obstacles such as limited funding and fewer opportunities compared to their male counterparts. To eventually actualize justice and equality between women and men, new emerging filmmakers, regardless of gender, should therefore utilize the power of storytelling in film, arousing feminine awareness and reversing the world to be more diversified and embraced.

**Keywords:** Female Filmmakers, Male Gaze, Cinematography.

## **1. Introduction**

Every era has its mainstream values which are the embodiments of social and political value systems [1]. Undoubtedly, the mainstream values have been the headstream of film production. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chinese mainstream cinema has undergone significant changes. More genres appear and more sensitive topics are being discussed. In China, this upsurge in sharing more voices, regardless of gender, social class, cultural background, and individual identity, depicts the future trend of the Chinese film industry to be more open-minded and bolder.

In effect, feminist cinema contributes as an emerging scholarly trend in the discussion of Chinese-context film. For years, women have lived in a patriarchal society where their roles in history serve as subordinate and *otherness* [2]. They are taught to behave as an obedient housewife, affectionate mother, and even the beauty of those stinkers. This inequality and injustice are shown explicitly in early Chinese society.

In virtue of the Western first and second feminine waves in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the British colonial period in Hong Kong [3], Chinese women reached an epiphany, realizing that the world had

no fixed center and power dynamics were erratic regarding the sociopolitical change [3]. They empowered themselves and were unafraid to state their identity. Thus, more renowned female filmmakers emerged, utilizing film as an intermediary to evoke more women and carve out feminist films and *herstory*.

Notably, a feminist film, by definition, means films about women made by women that present a new way of seeing based on the lived experience of women [4]. They serve to reflect and address the issues of women, ranging from the contradiction between family and career to self-inquiry and their point of view on sexuality [2].

The feminine movement in the film industry declares a manifesto to offer the world a new look of women, breaking free from the existing stereotypes and liberating women from the bitter bygone days. In 2024, Jialing's *YOLO* hit the market and broadened the archetype of women in film. More often than not, women are narrowed into four cliched figures. This generates the vacancy for more female filmmakers to start off and create their "new woman".

Meanwhile, it's widely acknowledged that film and cinema are powerful media to promote an idea, functioning as a didactic tool [5]. People are more willing to believe an opinion based on concrete storytelling and vivid visual presentations. However, many films and movies present on account of a male gaze instead of creating a *mise en scene* based on an equal portion of gazes from both genders. In turn, it's of great importance to fulfill the underrepresented portion in the film industry, preventing more women from falling into the stereotype and acquiescing in transgressive sexuality, such as prostitution presented in 1934's *Goddess* [6]. Fittingly, more mainstream films should eulogize women's intellectual response to sexuality and avoid objectifying women as a symbol of desire. Women should no longer be deemphasized; it is an era of liberty and equality and an age that is no better to explicitly uncover male spectatorship and women's power.

### 1.1. Significance

The research significance delves into three aspects. First, the research paper serves as a scaled-down version of those exhaustive and time-consuming case studies from fascinating scholars, such as Ms. Wang [2,7]. The paper highlights the essential elements and foundational historical context derived from those well-written theses for readers to understand the current situation of the Chinese film industry. Second, the research paper references the rapidly changing societies, revealing the progression of women's position in this industry. By giving a plethora of recent films, readers can use these real cases to exemplify the theoretical knowledge applied to feminism. This can, therefore, benefit readers by giving an easier approach to apprehending some radical viewpoints. Last but not least, all the arguments in the research paper are based on the point of view of a man, supplementing the gap in man's perspective in this field. Overall, the significance of such a research paper is to diminish the misconception of feminism and push boundaries to make the world more diversified and embraced.

## 2. Literature Review

Previous scholars have shared abundant insights relevant to the research topic. They provided a systematic framework for me to swiftly deep down into the core structure of the discussion. It demonstrates my research is feasible and necessary to further explore.

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

Previous studies mainly used a psychoanalytical framework to dissect the question, introduced by Laura Mulvey [6]. Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in the cinematic concept argued that women in film were often objectified and used as visual pleasures for the male spectator, a concept rooted in

Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis. Women were inadvertently linked to voyeurism and scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking or stalking. This theory has been instrumental in analyzing gender representation in Chinese cinema, where traditional patriarchal norms often dictate the portrayal of female characters. Chinese feminist scholars, such as Dai Jinhua, adopted the concept in analyzing the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou, whose works like *Red Sorghum* are often critiqued for their depiction of female characters as symbols of resistance against traditional values [7]. However, this approach fails to define the physical mechanism for how the ego works or how one would test their existence. In addition, the theory is mainly Western and over-relies on Freud and Lacan's concept, lacking substantive empirical evidence to support it [8].

## 2.2. Gender-as-Nation in the Chinese Cinema

The representation of gender in Chinese cinema is not solely about individual identity but is also closely connected to national identity [3]. The way women are portrayed in films often reflects wider societal changes and national stories [1]. For example, during the socialist era, women were depicted as companions, embodying the collective spirit of the nation. This portrayal changed in the post-socialist era, with films beginning to explore the conflict between individual desires and collective responsibilities, often reflecting broader socio-political changes in China. This shed light on the pattern of early Chinese cinema, whereas the current trend refutes such an idea due to the new wave of individualism in China and the influence of Western culture. Still, such a fact provides an insightful perspective to dissect the foundation of Chinese cinema. It further suggests the patriarchal nature of Chinese societies.

## 2.3. Women Archetype: Expand, Remain, or Reduce

Women's archetype has not been fulfilled; rather, it remains disproportionately limited. Wilk [9] and Hu et al [10] examined the representation of women in film. They found that women were still short of both on-screen portrayals and behind-the-scenes roles. Hu et al highlighted almost 72% of female characters in films from 2001 to 2018 were categorized as powerless, while only 12% showed a degree of self-efficacy. However, the intricate and complex interplay of socio-cultural changes may undermine the statement provided by both scholars. They both concluded based on existing data in 2018 without the consideration of some qualitative aspects such as a radical movement, which can inadvertently and unexpectedly invite a revolutionized wave of expansion for the archetype.

## 3. Research Methods

The research methods are designed to investigate the impact of female filmmakers on the portrayal of women in mainstream Chinese cinema. To address this aim, both qualitative and comparative approaches are taken, gaining a thorough understanding of how female filmmakers have influenced the representation of women on screen.

The research will first analyze women's position in the historical Chinese film industry. Specifically, the paper will introduce six stages, socially and politically, in helping transform the rise of female filmmakers. Granted the status quo, the paper will likewise interpret why gender inequality still exists between the two genders.

On top of that, comparative film analysis is at the core of the methodology. This involves choosing films directed by either male or female filmmakers in mainstream Chinese cinema. By comparing narrative structures, character development, and aesthetic presentations, the study aims to unravel differences in how female characters are portrayed based on the filmmaker's gender. This contrast is pivotal for suggesting how female filmmakers bring unique perspectives to their depiction of women, as opposed to the more traditional portrayals often found in films depicted by men (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative Films

Films' Names	Year	Filmmakers
It's a Women's World	1939	Esther Eng (Female)
Woman, Demon, Human	1987	Huang Shuqin (Female)
YOLO	2024	Jia Ling (Female)
Red Sorghum	1988	Zhang Yimou (Male)
In the Mood for Love	2000	Wong Kar-wai (Male)

The selection of these films aims to provide an atypical comparison of how gender is portrayed in Chinese cinema across different periods and directorial viewpoints. *It's a Women's World* (1939) by Esther Eng and *Woman, Demon, Human* (1987) by Huang Shuqin offer early and pioneering female perspectives on women's roles. On the other hand, *YOLO* (2024) by Jia Ling represents a contemporary female-directed film. Therefore, it can provide a holistic view of how women's roles in filmmaking have evolved. Contrasting these are *Red Sorghum* (1988) by Zhang Yimou and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by Wong Kar-wai, which presents male filmmakers' approaches to female-centric narratives. This selection of films thus renders an in-depth analysis of how female filmmakers have influenced the representation of women in mainstream Chinese cinema. All these are analyzed through the cinematography to better explore the interplays and discrepancies.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1. Historical Context

#### 4.1.1. Six Developmental Stages of Chinese Women's Filmmaking: The Rise

From the silent era of the mid-1910s to the golden age of Chinese cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, an early stream of women filmmakers came forth [2]. More women put themselves in the shoes of actresses, writers, and filmmakers, breaking down the conservative Chinese portrayal of women and being bold to introduce the market with more thought-provoking mindsets (see Table 2).

Table 2: Chinese Iconic Female Filmmakers

Stages	Year	Representative Figures
Silent era	1910-1920s	Marion E. Wong, Xie Caizhen, Anna May Wong, Wang Hanlun, Yang Naimei
Republic era	1930-1940s	Esther Eng, Ai Xia, Chen Baoer
New beginning	1950-1970s	Wang Ping, Wang Shaoyan, Chen Wenmin
Development	1960-1970s	Kao Pao-shu, Tang Shu-shuen, Wang Ying, Liu Lili
Transformation	1980-1990s	Zhang Nuanxin, Ann Hui
Contemporary era	2000-now	Barbara Wong, Yan Yan Mak, Jia Ling, Ma Li

In Stage 1, ***Silent era*** (1910-1920s): Marion E. Wong and Xie Caizhen are the earliest-known practitioners in Chinese cinema. They contributed works, such as *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* (1916) and *An Orphan's Cry* (1925). In addition, actresses like Anna May Wong, an influential Chinese American in Hollywood, showed their talents on the world-class platform. Furthermore, Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei from mainland China were star-turned-filmmakers [2], opening up new opportunities for women. This period was marked by the emergence of female stardom and overlapped the first wave of feminism.

In Stage 2, **Republic era** (1930-1940s): A turmoil period when societies underwent wars and unstable social order built up an embraced mindset for progressive ideas. Female filmmakers, including Esther Eng, Ai Xia, and Chen Baoer, exploited new fields, avoided the male gaze, and did not eroticize the women in the film, laying a solid foundation to excel in such a masculine industry.

In Stage 3, **New beginning** (1950-1970s): Cinema in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan experienced a shift from national studios to the rise of mainstream, commercial, and independent cinema. Wang Ping, Wang Shaoyan, and Chen Wenmin applied to those three geopolitical locations, revealing a thematic conversion from propaganda to rebellion to individualism, though the expression of women's themes was as usual lacking because of the socio-political issue [2].

In Stage 4, **Development** (1960-1970s): Female filmmakers confronted gender and social issues more directly. Hong Kong female filmmakers like Kao Pao-shu and Tang Shu-shuen were against the patriarchal norms and influenced Taiwanese female filmmakers like Wang Ying and Liu Lili.

In Stage 5, **Transformation** (1980-1990s): With China's economic reforms and opening-up policy, more freedom of speech was allowed; therefore, filmmakers, namely Zhang Nuanxin and Ann Hui, began to delve into women's subjectivity and demonstrate feminist ideology. Representative works include but are not limited to *Woman Demon Human* (1987) by Huang Shuqin and *The Secret* (1987) by Ann Hui. This upholds a classic topic: the women's dilemma in succeeding in their own profession.

In Stage 6, **Contemporary era** (2000-now): The Chinese film industry has entered an "unprecedented golden age" when art-house and experiential films have taken the backseat in China, broadening the entire market and welcoming its "Hollywood". This offers a wide range of film genres and limitless opportunities. Indeed, three geopolitical regions celebrate innovative ideas, lifestyles, and overall value systems. Particularly, Hong Kong and Taiwan have developed in two distinct directions: Hong Kong transitioned to industrialization with an inclination toward commercial movies, whereas Taiwan embarked on building thoroughly its auteurist language combined with indigenous culture [2]. Essential figures like Barbara Wong, Yan Yan Mak, Jia Ling, and Ma Li have gained domestic and international recognition, further examining the sexual desire, female voice, and gender subjectivity inherited from the previous generations.

#### 4.1.2. The Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in Chinese National Cinema

Although decades have shown the rise of women's voices in the film industry, the fact still suggests that women have not achieved equal rights and fair treatment in this male-dominated world. This can be evidenced by the University of Southern California (USC) research, indicating that 12.1% of the 116 directors evaluated in 2023 were women. Over 17 years and 1,769 directors, only 6% were women, showing an increase from 2.7% in 2007. However, the progress was modest as in 2022, only 9% of the top box office directors were women [11]. Unsurprisingly, the growth rate of celebrating Chinese female filmmakers is also consistent with that of the world. This can primarily affect the stereotypical women's portrayal.

In Chinese national cinema, the portrayal of women is rooted in the ingrained notion, or even prejudice, that reinforces the patriarchal and heteronormative framework [9]. One pervasive example is the "Iron Lady," depicted as a strong, independent, and self-assertive woman prioritizing careers over other trivial things. This is a sincere success but think twice. Isn't this figure embedded in maintaining the male power structures? It seems to perpetuate the femininity to be more masculine, mitigating the female innate identity. Although some may argue that the "Iron Lady", depicted in *Fighting Youth* (2021) and many other films and TV series, really fulfilled the context of women's archetype, it's still noteworthy to state that such a figure offers merely the superficial ideology of women's power; more often than not, it is rather contingent on adopting conservative masculine traits or inadvertently copes with the cliched theme of women's contradiction between professional pursuit and motherhood.



Despite this progression, women are, in effect, underrepresented. Wang and Wilk et al have suggested that female figures are to some extent convergent. For decades, industry inequality has not been well-resolved, and most women's themes in the film will not be extended to the lens of family relationships, considered as women's vulnerability in power relations [10].

## 4.2. Portrayal of Women in Female-Directed Films

Vanderstaay, L. suggested that most “male directors primarily utilize scopophilia while female directors prefer the use of ego and identity” to express the social issue relevant to women, further exploring the inner struggles and resilience different from that of the male-dominated framework. Honestly, the difference in narratives offers completely distinct points of view to dissect a social issue, such as fetishistic scopophilia, sexual abuse, surrogacy, and queerness.

### 4.2.1. The Chinese First and Most Iconic Female Filmmaker

Undoubtedly, Esther Eng was considered the first professional Chinese female filmmaker. She upfronted about being a lesbian and loved to wear slacks. Her most transgenerational work, *It's a Women's World*, marked the beginning of Chinese feminist cinema. *It's a Women's World*, or *36 Amazons*, paired with a number symbolizing “all-embracing”, denoting the “fiercest female warriors” [12]. It revealed the harsh reality that women must suffer. The film used an all-female cast from all walks of life to communicate the way they lived, providing equal chances for each woman to be the protagonist to speak of their “creative energy” and “ambitions” [12]. Additionally, the film didn't promote the image of “virtuous wives” or “good mothers”. It merely used direct narratives to sketch the dilemma of all women who suffered in that period. The cinematography was quite limited and straightforward, mostly consisting of close-up shots and portraits. Esther Eng inaugurated the Chinese film industry and was deemed as the pioneer who crossed the boundaries of race, language, culture, and gender. Her bold step evokes many other lateral and even contemporary female filmmakers.

### 4.2.2. Chinese Female Filmmakers in Shaping the Female Character in Filmmaking

*The Human, Woman, Demon* (1987) directed by Huang Shuqin demonstrated a shift in narrative strategy, analyzing the process of Chinese women's self-discovery and the predicament from both the social and family pressures they have suffered. The entire film was based on female subjectivity and sutured the audience to feel the mediocre burden of their life. Qiuyun, the film's protagonist, was an actress in Chinese opera in modern China. She disengaged herself from conventional Chinese norms and used Chinese opera as an embodiment to represent her consciousness. The film didn't objectify Qinyun—being sexless and even de-gendered [10]. Such a narrative indicates the importance of shifting the narrative strategy. Under Huang Shuqin's lens, women are no longer housewives or inferior to men; they crave and uphold their dreams and artistry.

Although films, in some cases, showed that Qinyun required the “masculine mask” to become the essence of her per se, which many critics would question that such behavior was the same as the figure of “Iron Lady”, molding femininity into masculinity and the male gaze, notably, this is quite disparate. Huang Shuqin presented the internal conflict and multifaceted nature of female identity. Rather than conforming to the traditional male gaze or adopting masculine traits, her characters embody a more profound struggle between societal expectations and personal aspirations. This internal conflict highlights the complexity of femininity, where women are portrayed as resilient individuals who navigate and challenge the boundaries imposed by a patriarchal society. Thereinto, it explicitly shows the complex interplays of women's ever-lasting trauma.

What's more, the usage of extreme close-ups and medium shots was what indeed underscored the ambition and perseverance of Qinyun's personality. What Qinyun performed was the saviors and

sages embedded in the rich Chinese history. As Zhong Kui asked Qinyun whether she regretted marrying herself to the stage, Qinyun's "NO" emblemized women's power. The film is subversive in uplifting women's experiences into societal reflection and arousing the trend of "looking for a real man" in the Chinese context [13].

The *YOLO* (2024) also plays a significant role in eulogizing the scope of depicting a female character. Le Ying, played by the filmmaker Jialing herself, used boxing as an approach to reflect her transformation. Le Ying had undergone a considerable change in appearance; so did Jialing. This role is the awakening of feminine thought and the courage to challenge herself. In effect, this film is not about losing weight; rather, it uses this subject matter to deep down the topic of women's strong individual consciousness and self-assertion [14]. This designates that Le Ying wants to cast off her laziness and lapse. Boxing likewise can be a metaphor to suggest the powerful punch to the real-life issue of the superiority of men's privilege. Le Ying's lines "You're so man" and "Win once" functioned as the cognition of women's independence and confidence. Within such a lens, the film boldly states the sexual harassment and the struggle between feminism and misogyny [14].

#### 4.2.3. Male and Female Perspectives in the Portrayal and Storytelling of Female Characters

Male filmmakers, predominant in the film industry, often epitomize the portrayal of female characters manifested through the male gaze. Remarkably, the cinematography tends to emphasize physical presence, frequently through a lens that accentuates voyeurism, underscoring women's roles within a patriarchal framework.

*Red Sorghum* (1988) by Zhang Yimou exemplifies the male perspective in filmmaking through its use of scopophilia, where he uses a close-up shot of Jiu'er's face, played by Gong Li. The close-up shots of Jiu'er's face, hair, and body parts during her wedding preparation and her gaze upon Grandpa's bare back highlight her sexuality within a confined space, reflecting her lack of freedom. Tight framing and extreme close-up shots illustrate Laura Mulvey's "fetishistic scopophilia". Zhang Yimou uses few egos but more emphasis on voyeurism to treat Jiu'er as an erotic object, evoking audience sympathy for her unfair situation [6]. As such, *Red Sorghum* demonstrates the unequal treatment of the female figure, being poignant and helpless. This highlights an evident distinction in portraying a female character based on male directors' points of view.

Similarly, *In the Mood for Love* (2000) likewise presents similar patterns. The former evokes a sense of voyeurism, suturing the audience with an intimate vibe [15]. More eye-level tracking shots of the characters' backside are shown; indeed, it offers the audience a phantom of eavesdropping on two lovers' conversation.

In contrast, films directed by women, as mentioned before, provide a more multifaceted and nutritious portrayal of female characters, outlining their internal experiences and struggles. This departure from the male perspective highlights the independent nature of the portrayal, offering a more accurate understanding of women in nature. At length, it suggests that more diversity should be celebrated, enriching female archetypes and reducing stereotypes.

#### 4.3. Impact on Chinese Mainstream Cinema

The rise of female filmmakers has achieved a momentous impact on the portrayal of female characters in Chinese mainstream cinema. Female filmmakers introduce the market with more feminine aspects to observe the world. Therefore, more women stand up and fight for the slogan "My Body, My Choice" to counter the long-lasting patriarchal discourse [2].

A subconsciousness of counter-cinema emerges, referring to a type of oppositional cinema that contests mainstream films [16], and gradually becomes the next wave of mainstream vibes. More

topics about womanhood and femininity are brought up and presented boldly. *Otherness*, a pivotal concept of feminist cinema, is also underplayed.

Jia Ling's film, *YOLO* (2024), for instance, raked in over 3.4 billion RMB at the box office, accumulating over 10 billion RMB at the box office over her career. Notably, what she portrays has evoked societal discussion and reflection. *YOLO* unveils women's struggles as they navigate the demands of modern life, both personally and professionally. Such films resonate with this new era, where ideas are boosted, and self-awareness is fostered, thereby contributing to a more exhaustive understanding of gender dynamics.

Furthermore, as more women share their ideal approach to presenting women on screen, male directors will no longer hold the fallacy of treating women's bodies to challenge Confucian morality and political repression. New ideology will thus be elevated [17].

Women's rights, including education, employment, and welfare, were promulgated from the 1950s to the 1970s as national laws thanks to those female pioneers in filmmaking. As the film industry foresees promoting economic prosperity and national history in a multidimensional way, women's discursive power will gradually be consolidated.

#### 4.4. Existing Dilemma

##### 4.4.1. The Commercial Nature of Film

The commercialization and entertainment-driven nature of the Chinese film industry have significantly influenced the portrayal of female characters, often at the expense of artistic value. Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" has been widely applied in Chinese film studies, shaping both narrative and framing strategies in a way that reinforces patriarchal views. Female roles in Chinese cinema are frequently depicted as objects of desire, subject to scrutiny and judgment by both creators and audiences. This focus on entertainment has led to a strict emphasis on the physical appearance and age of actresses, with narrower age ranges for female roles compared to their male counterparts. As a result, the demand for female characters to cater to voyeuristic pleasures has become a standard, limiting the diversity and depth of female representation in Chinese films [18].

##### 4.4.2. Funding Is Sobering for Female Filmmakers

In the Chinese film industry, male directors overwhelmingly dominate. Women are mainly confined to roles as actresses and makeup artists, with limited opportunities to influence the industry as filmmakers or producers. This is because filmmaking requires a large amount of capital and funding. Female filmmakers are less likely to afford this, as investors require them to demonstrate their ability based on past movies and box office. Obviously, it harnesses unfair treatment to maintain man's privilege. Men in such an industry, however, are funded by their potential, making it much simpler and swifter to start projects. This male-dominated environment results in a narrow approach to gender topics and limits the versatility of opinion and expression in cinematic discourse. Consequently, the portrayal of women in Chinese cinema often reflects a singular mode, undermining the richness of female experiences.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the paper explores the dynamic portrayal of female characters in Chinese mainstream cinema through the lens of female filmmakers. Driven by a comparative case study, this paper observes the historical context of women's stereotypes, distinct visual presentations between women-directed and male-directed films as well as the relevant existing dilemma. The paper highlights that



female filmmakers avoid scopophilia or voyeurism; instead, they sketch the internal turmoil, struggle, resilience, and even bravery that female characters have encountered.

The research paper therefore concludes the rise of female filmmakers in the 21st century has to some degree positively influenced the portrayal of women, diversifying female figures and filling the gap of misconception in women's ideology.

Still, there are unresolved issues, such as few investment funds and market interest. To address these obstacles, the instrumental means is to teach the market and deliver more authentic and empowering portrayals of women, guiding the market to accurately capture the intricacies of modern womanhood.

After all, film is an atypical icon of the entertainment industry. It is a mirror to celebrate the nature of humanity. It can rebel against conservative norms. It also records our culture in a more aesthetic approach, witnessing our growth, and cherishing invaluable memories of our time. Films are as if a stage. "The stage is a small world, and the world is a big stage." How to play well on this stage of life is another adventure left for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese mainstream cinema.

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