

## Feng-shui Chinese culture's space philosophy, worldview for built environment.

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### ABSTRACT

Some concepts as a form of folk-cult philosophy are still persistently believed by traditional Chinese ethnics in Indonesia, influencing their perception of the built environment. This is an effort to synchronize universe with human beings during the construction of built environment. Aiming on harmonizing building with the nature and the universe, the macro-cosmos is projected into the micro-cosmos of building space. What are the backgrounds for such a worldview? The methods used in this research are: hermeneutic, semiotic, and structuralism; Through the extensive literature research and combined with architectural analyses. This paper will describe in brief; from the cultural anthropological point of view, those specific ideas which are still influencing the community's opinion. Based on ancient traditional cosmology concepts, transformed along with the Chinese civilization history; the ideas are adopted and believed as a worldview in public daily lives. As a pragmatic society, those complicated concepts are condensed and crystallized into practical and compact patterns; simplified for application by those who believe them.

Keywords: Chinese architecture philosophy, cosmology, culture, space, feng-shui.

Some traditional Chinese ethnics in Indonesia still persistently believed in *feng-shui* concept for reviewing any dwelling sites or buildings, even though not whole of the community adhere to it. Some are more or less skeptics. But this belief is also adopted now by other Indonesian ethnics, it has become an important subject to be considered in design by architects, developers and customers. Some stakeholders, advertisers, marketers, as well as customers are able to very fluently use some terms of *feng-shui* during their communications and decision makings.

As today's current trend, most users only focus on talks about *feng-shui* for people's living spaces, either houses, offices, buildings, or business locations. While in fact, previously in historical Chinese culture, initially *feng-shui* was a concept for positioning a correct and suitable tomb, a burial place for the dead.

The believers of traditional Chinese culture believe that when a person dies, the soul will continue on living as before like during his/her lifetime. Traditional cult says that after death, the body and 7 components of soul (=po 魄) will go back to the earth (there are total 10 components of soul). While the other 3 components of soul (=hun 魂), one will go to heaven to be together with his/her ancestors, one will settle at the tomb, and the last one will stay at the place the person die; or at the name board (=sin-ci, shen-zhu-pai 神主牌) which was placed on the ancestor altar table at home.

Therefore his/her children will do best to get a perfect site for the tomb, to enable their parent's soul feel comfortable and happy. When this is attained, in return the ancestor souls will bless and help their descendants' lives.

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Thus with this intention in mind, began the art to analyze a suitable tomb site which is called as *yin-cay*; *kan-yu*. The concept is to get a harmonized ancestor tomb site which match perfectly with the descendant's living components. Later on this concept is extended for the living people, with the same intention; people try to create an art to analyze suitable places for living which can bring happiness and luck to the person who lives there; this concept is known as *yang-cay*. There are several different rules between the two, for instance with a dwelling the building should face south; while for the tomb it should face north.

This folk-cult also believes that this capacity of ancestor souls effectively helping their descendants (=qi 气) is valid only when the corpse body is still intact and in good condition. This is one of the reasons in traditional culture; the coffin is made with very strong wooden material and is airtight. The tomb should be located on the higher part of the landscape, to get a deeper underground water level; preventing the water to penetrate the coffin. In an emperor tomb we can find the corpse of the king completely covered by jade stone, believed to prevent decay.

### Short History of feng-shui.

Tracing back through early Chinese cultural history; people have already known *kan-yu* 堪輿, *di-li* 地理, *di-xue* 地学, *yin-zhai* 阴宅, *yang-zhai* 阳宅 etc., their meanings are similar with later days *feng-shui*. In the "Burial book *Zang shu* 葬书" wrote by Guo-pu 郭璞 (276-324 CE); appeared for the first time in writing the *feng -shui* 风水 terminology. This specific book became the earliest manual for every *feng-shui* practitioners in later periods.

During the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE); Yang Yun-Song wrote about symbols of dragon and tiger, and the influence of flowing water to *feng-shui*. Yang worked as adviser to the emperor Ji Zong (874-888CE), and his writings were treated as basic theories for later palace *feng-shui* advisers. He introduced the symbolism of dragon and tiger representing the landscape topography. His concepts connecting mountains, water flows, and landscape is called as "**Form-school**" or "**Jiang-xi school**"; following the area name where Yang worked. His concepts suited the South and South-west China as these are mountainous area, though it is rather difficult to find ideal sites which always face south.

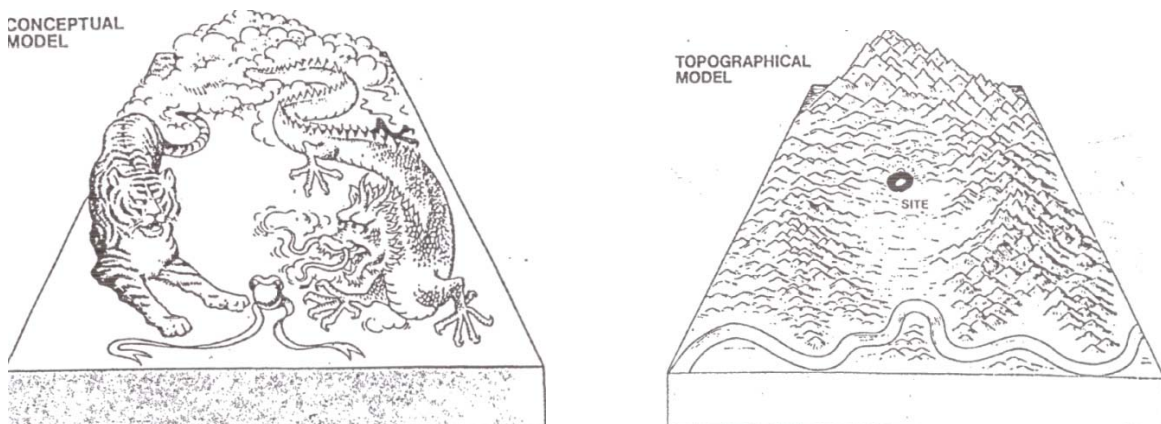


Figure 1. Symbolics zoomorphic translated from the site topographic. (Skinner, S.2006:59)

During the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) when Buddhism started getting strong influence in the Chinese society by the support of the palace, emerged a group of scholars

called Neo-Confucians led by Zhu-Xi (1130- 1200 CE). They are distinctively different from the early Confucians who focus on daily life ethics, education, ritual, filial piety, and logic. Neo-Confucians adopted the metaphysics, after life beliefs, divination, and promise of future life, subjects that are more attractive to the common people. Those terms match with the folk cult symbols as common beliefs and common memories.

Zhu-Xi promotes *qi* 气 breath, *dao* 道 way, which are the reason and source for every change in the universe. The concept related with existing ancient traditional cosmology theories, utilizing the same symbols and interpretation. Further in history this Neo-Confucians school was adopted as the kingdom philosophy, and its scholars became mandarins in the emperor organization. The ideas became major subjects during the state examination, as a prerequisite to enter the hierarchy. The characteristics of a common believe in *feng-shui* are very flexible, it can be interpreted freely by any parties without strict dogmas.

Combining with the invented compass, the Zhu-Xi concept consolidated and called “**Orientation school**” *fang-wei* 方位, or “**Fu-jian school**”. These ideas are more suitable to be applied in the center and north China areas; where the land are topographically plain and flat, without any significant landmarks.

During centuries of practice, nowadays the difference between these two schools does not clearly show anymore. There were some periods in the history that the state tried to control, censor and monopolize the *feng-shui* concept, they established an institute teaching the formal and legal *feng-shui* concept. Unfortunately the *feng-shui* concept was already popular with the common people, it was impossible to eradicate it.

The intrinsic open system in *feng-shui* concept enables anybody to interpret the theories whenever someone feels confident to do it, resulting many *feng-shui* schools established during the history. As examples: *Ba-gua feng-shui* 八卦风水, *Fei-xing feng-shui* 飞星风水 (flying star), Black hat feng-shui. This last school started in Taiwan during 1970 – 1980s, with Buddhist Tantra background. It gained popularity in the West and USA, by teaching through the set up of *feng-shui* schools. Black hat claimed as modern *feng-shui* and matched with the contemporary western culture.

### **Traditional Chinese cosmology.**

The basic traditional concepts are that human being is the center of universe, and that man’s destiny is influenced by totality of nature’s powers. These emphasized the cosmology ideas as theoretical bases for *feng-shui*. Traditional Chinese cosmology is a very speculative philosophy, it is believed to be true and correct by people. Groupings of those basic concepts will be as follow:

- Cosmogony (origin of universe):

mythology of *Pan-ku* and *Nu-wa*

*tai-ji* 太极 the Great absolute concept

*gai-tian* 盖天 sky shell

*hun-tian* 渾天 hen egg model

*xuan-ye* 宣夜 dark empty space

- Numeric, visual, classification (visualization of universe concept) :

*luo-shu* 洛書 manuscript of Lo river (9 nonary)

*he-tu* 河圖 diagram from Yellow river (10 numerals)

*wu-xing* 五行 (5 quinary)

- Harmony, dynamics (source of ever changing universe):

*yin – yang* 陰陽, 阴阳, *tai – ji - tu* 太極圖 (2 binary)

*wu-xing* 五行 (5 quinary)

*ba - gua* 八卦 (8 trigrams)

- Time dimensions related to astronomy (synchronization of the 3 dimensions world with the universe cycle, to get a harmonized time dimension) :

*gan-ying* 感應 (cosmic resonances)

calender: *lunar & solar, lunisolar*

10 sky stems *tian-gan* 天干

12 earth branches *di-zhi* 地支

universe cycle of 60 years *liushi jiazi* 六十甲子

4 *Si-xiang* 四象 4 mythology sky animals

28 *Ershi-ba-xiu* 二十八宿 *lunar mansion*

- Correlation, relativity, application to daily life.

*Geometrical cosmology, geometrical cosmography*

*Ming-tang* 明堂 (lights hall)

*Correlative thinking*

*Correlative cosmology*

*Correlative geometry*

**feng-shui**, *ba-zi, tcm, culinary, ritual, cult, ethics*

A detailed explanation of each theory unfortunately will need many pages, thus beyond the scope and limitation of this short paper.

Cosmology is a human effort to explain his/her position in the universe, a figure of the nature as perfectly regulated and very systematic. Correlation and relativity are major characteristics for application to the daily life of the above complicated cosmography. Cosmology always appears within every aspect of traditional life. For buildings it appears as *feng-shui* concept, in medicine it emerges as acupuncture, herbal medical, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), in divination it is known as *ba-zhi* (horoscope). Every concept has its fundamental theory which always refers to the traditional cosmology. They are extremely very flexible, borderless, boundless, and have indefinite relativity.

For building construction these cosmology concept needs tools as interfaces for any thought of ideas to be transformed into tangible dimensions. Further they need also to transfer the concept into numeral figures of length, width and height. This end result is applicable to building dimensions, constructions of built environment or dwelling places.

### **Luo-pan.**

To be practical in traditional Chinese culture, the complicated result of total analyzes of universe characteristic ideas were then transformed into a portable tool, instrument; called *luo-pan* 罗盘. The instrument consisted of two pieces of flat planks. The top plank is a circle, drawn with concentric circles, it can be moved rotating around a center axis fixed on a square plank as the bottom. Current *luo-pan* will show a compass needle at the center, circled by many concentric cycles around it. Each cycle specifically represented single philosophical concept. There are several versions of *luo-pan* with different numbers of cycles. Each version belongs to a different *feng-shui* school.

This tool shows a complete system symbolizing the relationship between human being, earth/world, universe, astrology, cosmology and philosophy. Creating a perfect picture of totality, a complete universe. With this tool, the *qi* 气 situation of the building site could be discovered. To interpret the result of a *luo-pan* analysis; we need help from a *feng-shui xian-sheng* 风水先生, who is capable to explain with his *feng-shui* vocabulary and local cultural symbols to the customer. The position of a *luo-pan* while analyzing; is taken as the axis-mundi of that specific building site. Luo-pan can also be used to give advice about the perfect time to install critical components of a building; such as installing the ridge purlin, starting the foundation works etc.

*Luo-pan* is known since the Warring states period (475-221 BCE) in the early simpler version. Throughout the history, *luo-pan* slowly became more complicated. During the Tang dynasty (618 - 907 CE) and Song dynasty (960 - 1279 CE) a compass needle was inserted at the center. Later with Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644 CE) and Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 CE) *luo-pan* arrangement is more complicated and more details were added due to combination with divination theories. Some versions of *luo-pan* will have more than 30 concentric circles with variety of philosophies.



Figure 2. A *feng-shui xien-shen* in practice, with a *luo-pan* on the portable rack. A classical picture copied from Sun Jia-nai. *Shu-jing. Shujing tu shuo*.1905. (Knapp, R.G. 1992:37)

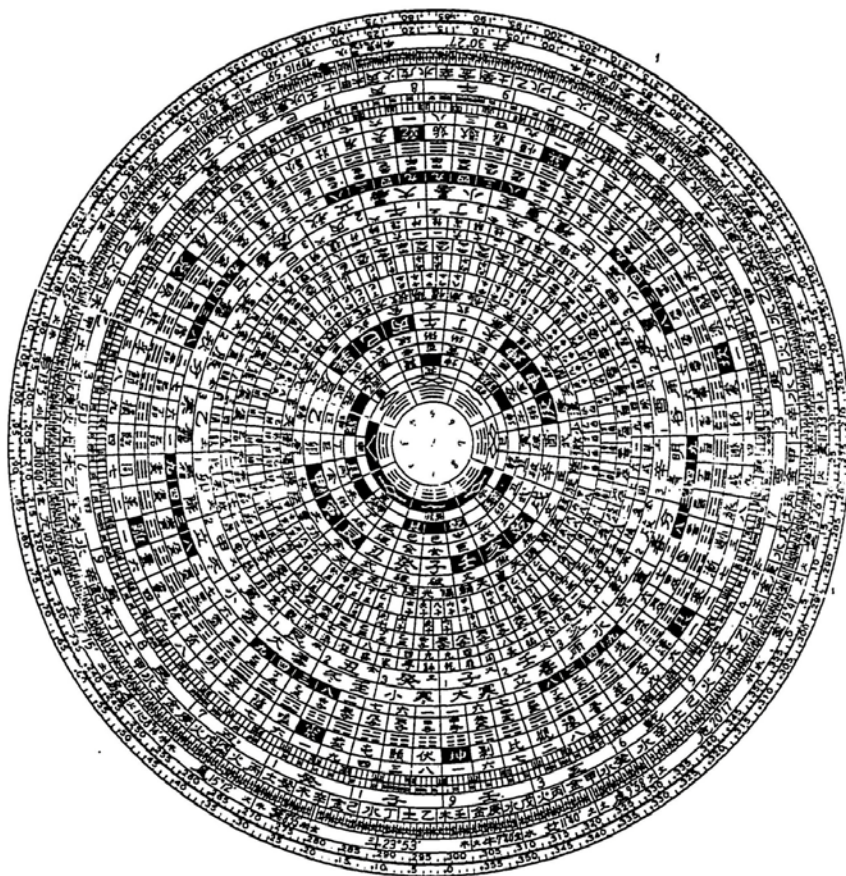


Figure 3. Luo-pan sample. It has 29 concentric cosmology circles. (Lu A. H. M. 1997:168)

1. Heaven Pool
2. Former Eight Trigrams (Treatment; Generation and Formation)
3. Loshu (Numerology of *Jiugong*, Nine Palaces; The Origin of Transformation)
4. The Evil-spirit of Brightness (*Yao Sha*)
5. The Evil-spirit of the Netherworld (The directions of the Eight Roads and Four Roads)
6. The Evil-spirit of misfortune (*Jie Sha*)
7. The Replacing Star (the starting star in the occult school, *xuan kong xue*)
8. Twenty Four Directions of Correct Needle and Pure *Yin* and Pure *Yang* (the Earth Plate for orienting the Site)
9. Nine Stars (transformed from the Earthly Mother Eight Trigrams)
10. Twenty-four Heaven Stars (with the Nine Stars for distinguishing the Dragons, orienting the Site, judging the local eminences, *Sha*)
11. The seventy two Mountain-penetrating Tigers
12. One hundred and twenty divisions, *fenjin*
13. Earth-penetrating sixty dragons (with three and Seven and the method of Deviation and Absence)
14. Numbers of *Loshu* (the numbers of sixty-four Former trigrams)
15. Sixty-four Hexagrams
16. Twenty-four directions of the Middle Plate (the Man Plate) (For distinguishing the Dragons and surrounding mountains)
17. Twenty-four seasonal *qi*
18. Numbers of Loshu (Numbers of Later sixty-four Trigrams)
19. Sexagenary *Jiazi*
20. Sixty-four Trigrams (Images)
21. Sixty-four Trigrams (Names)
22. The Fortunatness of Trigrams
23. Three hundreds eighty-four Lines
24. Seam Needle (the Heaven Plate) (for orienting the Site, the watercourse, the door, and the road)
25. Sixty Hexagrams to Link Mountains (set the water mouth)
26. The Five Phases (examining the local eminences and watercourse)
27. The Twenty-eight Asterisms
28. Degrees of Latitude
29. Degrees of Longitude

Table 1. List of 29 circles of a *luo-pan* as shown in previous picture. (Lu A. H. M. 1997:167)

### Feng-shui square and ruler.

To transfer the result of analyzing into construction figures, the builders will use a special ruler and square. Called as Lu-Ban ruler, Lu-Ban square; they were named after Lu-Ban, a known expert in the carpenter works. The ruler will have red and black areas with each specific category name, matching to the *feng-shui* terms. There are several versions of ruler; each from a different *feng-shui* school. It is very critical to measure dimensions of any opening on the wall, door frames, windows, and the distance of windows from floor surface. The dimensions must always fall inside the good area. The ruler is also used for measurement during the furniture making.



Figure 4. Lu-ban carpenter square ( Ruitenbeek, K. 1996:77)

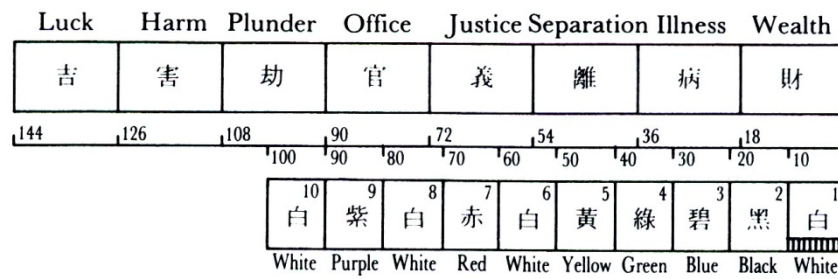


Figure 5. Lu-ban ruler (top), part of Lu-ban square (bottom). ( Ruitenbeek, K. 1996:77).

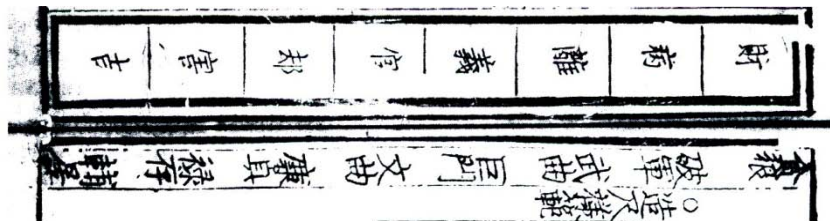


Figure 6. Lu-ban ruler. ( Ruitenbeek, K. 1996:77)



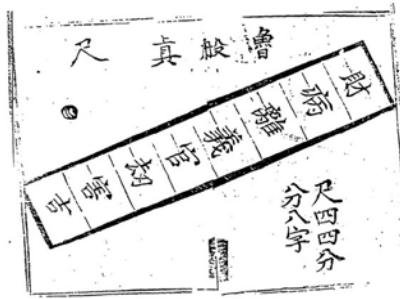


Figure 7. Lu-ban ruler. It shows : wealth *cai* 財, sickness *bing* 病, separate *li* 離, wisdom *yi* 义, position *guan* 官, rob *jie* 劫, danger *hai* 害, root *ben* . (Lu, A. H.Min. 1997:101

#### FOOT-RULES

N.B. In the drawings of nos. 1 - 11, the length of one Chinese foot, *chi* (= 10 *cun*), has been fixed at 30 cm. Favourable inches are shaded.

1. *Lu Ban chi*, 12 *cun* (divided into eight favourable and unfavourable inches).
2. *Lu Ban chi*, 11 *cun* (divided into eight inches).
3. (*Lu Ban chi*), 14.4 *cun* (divided into eight inches).
4. *Xuannü chi*, 11 *cun* (divided into fifteen inches).
5. *Feibai chi*, 10 *cun* (divided into ten inches).  
[Nos. 1 - 5: *Shilin guangji*, Yuan dynasty.]
6. *Jiutian Xuannü chi*, somewhat over nine *cun* (divided into eight inches).  
[*Yinyang baojian*, Yuan dynasty.]
7. (*Lu Ban chi*), 16.6 *cun* (divided into eight inches).  
[*Sancai tuhui*, 1609.]
8. *Zifang chi*, 9 *cun* (divided into nine inches).
9. *Quchi*, 9 *cun* (divided into nine inches).
10. *Lu Ban chi*, 9 *cun* (divided into thirteen inches).
11. *Xuannü chi*, 9 *cun* (divided into eight inches).  
[Nos. 8 - 11: *Bazhai zaofu zhoushu*, 1629.]
12. *Mengong chi*, 14.1 *cun*, 42.76 cm (divided into eight inches).
13. *Ding Lan chi*, 12.8 *cun*, 38.8 cm (divided into ten inches).  
[Nos. 12, 13: Taiwan, modern.]
14. *Menguang chi*, 14.4 *cun*, 46 cm (divided into eight inches).  
[Peking, modern.]
15. *Sashigane*, 12 *cun*, 36.36 cm (divided into eight inches).
16. *Sashigane*, 14.1 *cun*, 42.7 cm (divided into ten inches).  
[Nos. 15, 16: Japan, modern.]

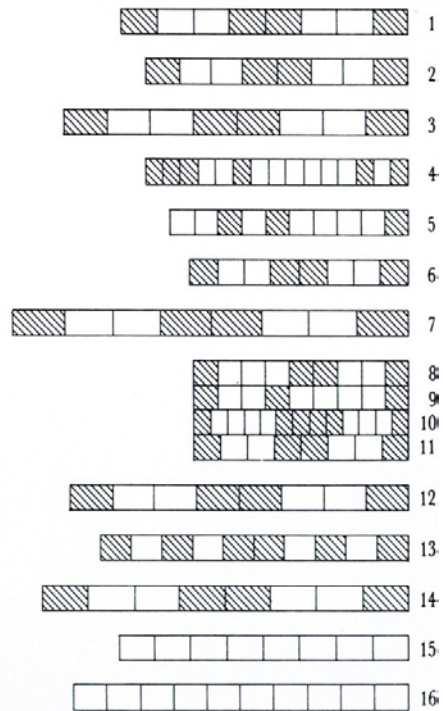


Figure 8. Different *feng-shui* rulers from several schools. Favorable areas are hatched with stripes. (Ruitenbeek, K. 1996:91)

#### Discussion.

The freedom to interpret the *feng-shui* concept without restriction for any parties; proofed to be the strength and spirit which enabled the persistency of its existence up to nowadays, in fact it is getting popular again currently.

Luo-pan, Lu-Ban's ruler and Lu-Ban's carpenter square; are the portable tools specifically designed to serve the complicated traditional Chinese cosmology concept to be transformed through the *feng-shui* theories. They work as an interface for application in the construction and building activity, transforming concepts into livable space dimensions.

*Feng-shui* has the capability to translate the landscape topography into traditional cultural zoomorphic and anthropomorphic symbols which are already understood

by common people, integrated with their folk-cult or folk-believe. *Feng-shui xian-sheng* 风水先生 background can be very flexible, the *xian-sheng* can be either from very basic or very sophisticated educated and cultural background. They can explain in detail the outcomes of *feng-shui* interpretations within their vocabulary and symbols.

*Feng-shui* can be an expression of self personification in a building owned. The traditional Chinese architecture elements already have fixed common form and symbols, enforcing almost similar appearance in any Chinese vernacular building. The suitable site or building according to *feng-shui* then can be an ego-centered universe.

The traditional Chinese cosmology of macro cosmos, through the *feng-shui* concept is transformable into a micro cosmos of site or dwelling building. It is thus transformed from indefinite concept into a definite tangible dimension. Feng-shui is a systematic metaphor which became a myth for those who believe in it. (Feuchtwang, S.D.R. 1974: 236-264).

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