

Work Resumption and Employment Stabilization Measures against COVID-19: The Experience of China*

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 epidemic, the Chinese government has responded to the health threat and impact of the epidemic by stopping work and production and has achieved positive results. This article elaborates on the effectiveness of China's economic and administrative governance during the epidemic from several aspects, including the challenges faced by China in resuming work and production after the epidemic, the overall thinking and focus of promoting resumption of work and production, the effectiveness of promoting resumption of work and production, and the role of China's resumption of work and production during the global pandemic. It provides a reference for countries around the world to respond to the epidemic and resume production.

Keywords: *post pandemic work resumption challenge, priorities and counter measures*

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020 almost put China's economic development on hold. To fight against the pandemic and stop its spread, the Chinese government has adopted strict measures of epidemic prevention and control such as work suspension and city lockdown, which yielded prominent results and effectively curbed the epidemic spread. Local governments also took strict prevention and control measures such as travel restrictions, city and road lockdowns, production suspension, and stay-at-home orders. While major progress was achieved in epidemic prevention and control, the national economy and people's livelihoods were inevitably affected. Work suspension should not be the norm, and quick resumption of work and production is the key to safeguarding the national economy and people's lives. As the general epidemic prevention and control situation turned better, the timely release of work resumption policies and measures helped stabilize supply and employment and maintain the normal operation of the country and society, as well as the normal life of the people.

In the condition of well-controlled epidemic situations, for the purpose of advancing work resumption and promoting sound socioeconomic development legally, orderly, and smoothly, the governments at all levels have issued a total of 215 relevant policies, including 127 policies concerning people's livelihood, 25 concerning economic development, 31 concerning employment guarantee and 22 concerning work resumption, which significantly spurred the national economic recovery and effectively ensured the stabilized employment and accelerated work resumption. This paper addresses the

*This is the revised version of an article previously published in *Social Security and Administration Management* (2023), Clausius Scientific Press, Canada.

challenges, priorities, and countermeasures of work resumption in the post-pandemic period and summarizes China's practices and experience in response to major infectious diseases, and the significance of all-around work resumption to the fight against COVID-19 throughout the world.

Challenges of work resumption in the post-pandemic period

Risk of resurgence of COVID-19

Since the major epidemic situation has not been fully curbed, large-scale work resumption may lead to a cluster of cross-infections and the resurgence of COVID-19. Quarantine containment is the most straightforward and effective way to contain the spread of the virus while unprepared work resumption with more contact, movement, and gathering of people poses a direct and potential threat to the overall situation. Thanks to the prompt and effective response, China has decisively contained the spread of COVID-19 throughout the country and gained periodical achievements. According to the research of clinical medicine and virology experts, however, the virus has not disappeared and repeatedly occurred in a scattered manner. As time goes by, the COVID-19 virus continues its mutation. During spread, its pathogenicity and infectivity may be either weakened or enhanced, resulting in the risk of resurgence.

Economic fundamentals affected by COVID-19

A pandemic is a war without gun smoke and is highly destructive. The rigid prevention and control measures against the pandemic adversely affect economic development and its fundamentals, resulting in direct economic loss and potential loss of market opportunities. Owing to economic pains like reduced investment, restricted exports and withered consumption plus more laid-off workers and rising prices, some enterprises (especially medium-, small- and micro-sized private enterprises) struggle in dilemma under the impact. In the context of severely affected fundamentals of economic growth and order, all walks of society are facing more serious challenges like survival and financing of enterprises, employment, raw material supply, production, product transportation, sales, and export.

Prominent labor and employment troubles

The interrupted production and travel caused by the pandemic make the labor and employment troubles more prominent. On the one hand, the interrupted production of most enterprises during the pandemic period affects financing, production, sales, and other links that significantly lowered the revenue of enterprises, in which case salaries are not paid on time while employees are laid off. On the other hand, employees are kept away from their posts due to restrictive measures and are concerned about their jobs and salaries. The decision to retain or dismiss employees and the payroll during the pandemic period becomes a thorny issue. In addition, the lockdown policy makes it hard for employers to recruit new or unemployed workers.

General principle and priorities of steady work resumption after the pandemic

General principles and basic policies coordinated and determined by the central government

First, China's central government made general planning and coordination to create favorable conditions for work resumption considering local and temporal conditions and ensured unimpeded industrial, market, and socioeconomic circulations. It developed the general principle of work resumption and policies and legal guidelines to guarantee step-by-step resumption in a legal, orderly, and stable way. On 21 February 2020, under the State Council's Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of Response to COVID-19, the *Notice on Publishing Guides to Enterprises and Government-sponsored Institutions on Epidemic Prevention and Control Measures for Work Resumption* was released, which for the first time proposed the arrangement of work resumption of these organizations in the post-pandemic period. On 4 March 2020, the General Office of the State Council officially issued the *Notice of the General Office of State Council on Further Streamlining Approval Procedures, Optimizing Services and Promoting Enterprises' Work Resumption Accurately and Steadily* that clarified the notice matters, decisions, and deployments of work resumption during epidemic prevention and control. On 7 April, the Communist Party of China Central Committee Leading Group on Novel Coronavirus Prevention and Control issued the *Guiding Opinions on Effective Epidemic Prevention and Control and Positive and Orderly Work Resumption Simultaneously* that proposed the general strategy and specific measures of work resumption.

Second, based on the evidence-based judgment and prediction of epidemic development trends made by the public health and epidemic prevention and control authority and its expert panel, the central government developed rough timelines for work resumption of different sectors in different provinces and cities that served as the guidelines for practice. In addition, the authority strengthened the information disclosure mechanism to release the most updated information about the epidemic situation that systematically and orderly guided the local work consumption efforts. The local governments executed the accountability system to implement the documents and arrange work resumption of different sectors in an orderly way at all levels. These documents included the *Notice on Releasing Guides on Work Resumption of Housing and Municipal Engineering Projects* issued by the General Office of the Ministry of Housing and Urban-rural Development, the *Notice on Further Optimization of Review and Approval Service to Accelerate Work Resumption of Agricultural Enterprises* issued by the General Office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the *Guiding Opinions on Promoting Orderly Work Resumption of Industry and Communication Enterprises* issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the *Notice on Securing Scientific Epidemic Prevention and Control in State-level High and New Technology Areas to Promote Orderly Work Resumption of Enterprises* issued by the General Office of the Ministry of Science and Technology, the *Notice on Accurate and Orderly Recovery of Transportation Service to Promote Work Resumption* issued by the Ministry of Transport, etc. All these policies released by the central ministries and departments in different sectors well guarantee the sound and orderly progress of work resumption.

*Guarding against imported cases and preventing
a resurgence of the outbreak at home*

On the one hand, China strengthened the mechanism of risk pre-alerting, testing and quarantine mechanism for people from abroad: first, the Chinese embassies and consulates abroad notified the entry persons from abroad of the relevant Chinese laws and measures of epidemic prevention and control such as quarantine control, and their obligation of observing and cooperating local governments in epidemic prevention and control. Second, China strengthened the testing of the entry persons and fully evaluated the health and safety risks of imported cases. The Chinese embassies and consulates abroad are required to thoroughly verify the record of travel in high-risk areas or contact with high-risk persons. Third, China improved the medical quarantine measures to prevent imported cases and possible cross-infection during the quarantine period. The infected entry persons were subject to classified diagnosis and treatment. More treatment methods were available such as remote treatment and reservation via special channels to minimize the contact and cross-infection risks.

On the other hand, persisting in the domestic regular epidemic prevention and control mechanism and accelerating the R&D, clinical tests, and uptake of special medicine and vaccine against COVID-19: first, China continued the epidemic prevention and control measures, always kept alert of personal safety protection in work resumption, encouraged online work and communication, and reduced unnecessary group contact. Second, the enterprises of work resumption must provide necessary protective facilities for certain activities, like meetings and meals, and enhance the routine physical examination of employees. Qualified employers with many employees were allowed to temporarily hire medical personnel in charge of the physical examination of employees and treatment of sudden medical events during the pandemic period. Third, the R&D of the vaccine was intensified. Through expanding public diplomatic channels, establishing academic platforms, convening international workshops, and strengthening international collaboration, China explored the direction and progress of anti-virus medications and vaccines and studied all possibly effective medications and vaccines through labor division and cooperation from different perspectives to save the time of trial and error and develop the vaccine that thoroughly conquers the pandemic.

*Advancing local work resumption in different sectors
in a classified and staggered way*

In the process of advancing work resumption, local governments implemented scientific and precise policies relating to the *Law of the PRC on Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Diseases* and pushed forward work resumption in an orderly and staggered way by sector, region, and urgency.

Work resumption was carried out by sector and its urgency. In the first batch, it is the work resumption of enterprises and government-sponsored institutions engaged in the production of protective equipment, medicine, and medical equipment provided sufficient medical supplies for epidemic prevention and control that curbed the spread of the virus. In the second batch, the work resumption of enterprises and institutions of

survival food, such as grain and oil, meat, and vegetables, as well as those energy-related ones, like urban water, electricity, coal, petroleum, and gas, maintained and improved people's livelihood and guaranteed the supply of grain and key agricultural products. In the third batch, the work resumption of enterprises and institutions engaged in the wholesale, retail, warehousing, and transportation of daily necessities and those engaged in communication, traffic, transportation, and other businesses, were realized step by step. Finally, the shopping malls and marketplaces were allowed to reopen. This initiative recovered life services to normal, expanded the consumption scale of residents, and sped up the construction of investment projects, thus reaching a good supply-demand balance.

At the regional level, local governments all released policies targeted to work resumption considering the regional epidemic prevention and control situation. For example, on 30 May 2020, the General Office of the Heilongjiang Provincial People's Government issued the *Notice on Several Measures for Coordinated Advancement of Epidemic Prevention and Control and Stabilization of Employment*. The General Office of the Jilin provincial government issued the *Notice on Shared Duties to Implement the Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Response to COVID-19 Impact and Enhancement of Employment Stabilizing Measures*. The Shanxi provincial development and reform commission issued the *Notice on Establishing of Financing Matchmaking Mechanism for Bolstering Weak Links, Stabilizing Investment and Supporting Work Resumption*. Guangdong province issued the *Notice on Several Policies for Response to COVID-19 Pandemic and Supporting Work Resumption of Enterprises*. The General Office of Hebei provincial government issued the *Notice on Several Measures for Accelerating Work Resumption of Enterprises*. The General Office of Zhejiang provincial government issued the *Opinions on Supporting Work Resumption of Enterprises and Guaranteeing Services for Stabilizing Enterprises, Economy and Development*. In a few regions less affected by COVID-19, like Qinghai and Tibet, the restrictive measures were promptly relaxed as the situation got better. These regions took the lead in promoting work resumption by lifting traffic restrictions and simplifying the handling formalities of paperwork certification for the workers returning to their posts. Megacities, like Beijing and Shanghai, continued to attach great importance to both relaxations of epidemic prevention measures and acceleration of work resumption, which only scaled up after the general situation stabilized. The border port areas with a high risk of imported cases like Heilongjiang mobilized more resources to quarantine control and test by the customs to prevent the resurgence of COVID-19 and strived for work resumption in a flexible manner by reducing the pressure of imported cases to the greatest extent.

Implementing the general principle of epidemic prevention and control measures not affecting production and life

As the epidemic prevention and control situation got better, China implemented policies legally and precisely and gradually reduced the "one-size-fits-all" approach to avoid disputes caused by simple and rude measures that hampered the progress and effect of work resumption, and ensured the normal work, life, and study, not impeded by epidemic prevention and control. First, as the epidemic was under control, China started to steadily lift the restrictive measures against free movement step by step to support recovery and resumption of production, life, routine activities, and schools. Such practice of relaxed policies was of exemplary significance

to nationwide epidemic prevention and control and rehabilitated people's confidence in returning work and life to normal. Second, China gave the role of smart city technology in epidemic prevention and control and made use of big data technology to connect and integrate the urban systems and services, improve the efficiency of utilizing medical resources, optimize the urban medical management and epidemic monitoring services, and precisely test, identify and treat patients so that the normal life of other people was not affected by epidemic prevention and control as far as possible. Third, attention was paid to people over 65 years old, with underlying diseases, and with a record of living or traveling in the countries/regions with major risk. Prevention and control were strengthened in places where people usually gather, such as detention houses, lockups, drug rehabilitation centers, compulsory medical centers, nursing homes, orphanages, welfare institutions, and psychiatric hospitals. Fourth, China enhanced the basic living guarantee to the disadvantaged groups by granting temporary subsidies, and expanded coverage of unemployment insurance to maintain the basic living standards of the unemployed. Fifth, China made an overall arrangement to postpone the opening time of primary, secondary, and college schools and the end time for college graduates, and advance the opening of primary, secondary, and college schools by region and group so that the college graduates could timely and smoothly graduate to find jobs.

Multiple measures of response to COVID-19 to consolidate work resumption

In the early stage, China achieved good results in epidemic prevention and control at the cost of a temporary economic slowdown, ensuring economic pains in the short run. Except for the consumer price index (CPI), all the other major economic indicators showed a declining trend such as industry, service, and outward economy. In January and February 2020, China's cumulative growth of industrial added value dropped by 13.5%, the service production index had a year-on-year decline of 13%, and the total imports and exports fell by 11%. Due to efforts from the government, the work resumption rates of enterprises above the designated size in many regions reached 90% and above. As of 20 March 2020, the resumption rate of major projects was reported as 89.1%. Although the rate of medium-, small- and micro-sized enterprises was relatively lower, their recovery was expected to take on a faster pace due to the stimulus policies. Based on the ratio of the cumulative active working population after the Spring Festival Holiday (31 January 2020) to baseline active working population in December 2019, there were 20 provinces with at least 70% of overall work resumption rates. The specific outcomes were as follows:

Releasing countermeasures immediately and seizing very minute to develop relevant policies

First, boosting work resumption by positive supporting policies of local governments. When the epidemic situation eased in March 2020, the Chinese government took a quick response to issue policies, guarantee employment, support work resumption, launch online recruitment campaigns, and aid Hubei province. These policies effectively ensured materials supply and work resumption. Hubei successively issued 20 policies on lowering costs, 10 policies on stabilizing and boosting employment for enterprises, 45 policies on the service sector, 13 policies on stabilizing the industrial economy, 13 policies on supporting medium- and small-sized enterprises and self-employed individuals, and 18 policies on accelerating consumption recovery with the more prominent effect of policy implementation.

Nanjing released the *Several Policies and Measures of Nanjing City to Promote Stable Industrial Economic Growth* that contained 15 measures to find alternative solutions to the supply of key spare parts and major raw materials, establish an efficient interactive and coordinative mechanism for epidemic prevention and control in the metropolitan circle, and solve the challenges to industrial enterprises. Henan province set up a “1+1+N” policy system and the provincial economic operation dispatching mechanism under regular epidemic prevention and control and created a “four-guarantees-in-one” dispatching platform to realize the horizontal connection of departments and vertical connection of provincial and municipal governments, thus accelerating the implementation of policies benefiting enterprises.

Second, quickly establishing a 24-hour guarantee mechanism of labor dispatching for key enterprises. The government clearly defined a list of 10,000 key enterprises and appointed more than 4,000 service staff to go deep into the enterprises and carry out mobilization in counties and villages. Through multiple measures on special employment, assistance in work resumption, labor dispatching and organizing probation, and joint efforts in over three months, the departments at all levels dispatched 550,000 workers to around 10,000 enterprises, and the work resumption rate of these enterprises reached 99%. They launched a connecting service platform and app to offer targeted, real-time, and round-the-clock liaison services on enterprise employment, and sent over six million migrant workers, including 1.6 million impoverished workers, back to their posts in a safe and orderly way.

Third, launching the innovative online recruiting campaign, “10 million jobs in 100 days”. Concentrating on the critical sectors, regions, and communities, the government held over 14,000 online job fairs in different time intervals that released information on over 27 million jobs offered by over two million employers, and received nearly 20 million applicant resumes, serving as a special channel of job matchmaking in the context of the pandemic.

Overcoming negative impact of the pandemic, and achieving employment goals and poverty alleviation as scheduled

The year 2020 witnessed a decisive battle against poverty for China, and it was of special significance to finish the task of poverty alleviation on schedule. Withstanding the enormous impact brought by COVID-19, the Chinese government took the employment guarantee and poverty alleviation as a key approach in this decisive battle and an important political responsibility to spare no efforts to fight against the pandemic. First, relevant authorities immediately released three general documents and nine specific documents to provide unusual policy assistance to poverty alleviation. Fifteen provinces and regions organized on-site investigations of stabilizing employment, conducted telephone surveys of 10,000 people, and dispatched impoverished workers to other places by month. Second, China encouraged the eastern and western provinces and regions to sign memorandums on jobs and labor dispatching and required local governments to prioritize the work resumption of the leading poverty alleviation enterprises and workshops. Public welfare jobs were arranged for the jobless and those unable to lift themselves out of poverty. Third, forums and press conferences on employment for poverty alleviation

were held to create a favorable consensus. China also actively connected poverty alleviation and the strategy of rural vitalization, and initially proposed the idea of policy adjustment after fully sorting out and streamlining the policies on employment and poverty alleviation.

Stabilizing employment fundamentals to maintain a steadily upward momentum of employment

Facing the unprecedented impact of the pandemic on the economy and employment, China promptly made the important decision of coordinating epidemic prevention and control with economic and social development and gave the top priority to the “six securities”¹ guaranteeing employment. Under the joint efforts of all authorities in various places, a total of 10.99 million new urban jobs were created from January to November 2020 and the surveyed urban employment rate declined from 6.2% in February to 5.2% in November. The overall employment situation remained stable and was better than expected.

First, prioritized employment policy was improved. China innovated and implemented 28 groundbreaking policies, released a list of employment subsidy policies and an online application channel, and spent over 100 billion yuan on employment subsidies and special awards, forming a policy safety line for employment.

Second, employment was encouraged by promoting entrepreneurship. China released opinions on supporting flexible employment via diversified channels, uplifted the business startup credit quota to 200,000 yuan, and expanded its coverage to the platform employees. In the first three quarters of 2020, the business startup loan balance registered 197.5 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 43%, which broadened the channel for job growth in the context of the pandemic.

Third, priority was given to the employment of critical groups. China expanded the scale of recruitment and probation of university graduates in enterprises, government-sponsored institutions, and grassroots programs, started a campaign to propel employment and business start-up, organized regular online job fairs and other cloud-based services, launched the graduates’ employment service platform and small employment registration programs, and provided assistance to the unemployed graduates. In addition, China improved the policy of supporting employment and business startup of peasant workers, expanded the channels for migrant workers to find jobs away from home or in nearby places, and offered the service of employment equality. Employment assistance was provided to disadvantaged groups, and public welfare jobs were available as the bottom line.

Fourth, employment services were improved and refined. China intensified the serial special activities of employment services, prolonged the private enterprise recruitment week to a month, and enhanced online recruitment and offline services. Information on around 100 million jobs was publicized. A campaign for employment and business startup services was launched with refined services and prioritized assistance to the key groups. An online unemployment registration platform was opened to accept and review the registration of the unemployed.

Fifth, China conducted a statistical survey of employment and enterprise operation, strengthened the big data analysis and application of market entities and mobile communication, organized several rounds of on-site employment investigations, and established monthly analysis and consultation mechanisms to evaluate the employment trends. The government also constantly tracked the international employment situation, gave quick feedback on domestic employment updates, and compiled influential reports on international employment research and employment messages.

China's work resumption in the context of the global pandemic

The global pandemic had a severe impact on the weak and fragile world economy, and the uncertain duration affected both the production and consumption sides. The sectors with high mobility bore the brunt. Tourism came to a halt and transportation was seriously affected. The pandemic also had a negative impact on the expectations of economics, resulting in panic and ensuring volatility in the financial market. The pandemic almost brought the transportation and industrial production of all countries to a standstill, and the international production of countless products and services slowed down or stopped, which worsened the global economic situation. Therefore, full and rapid work resumption is of significance to consolidating global confidence and spurring economic resurrection as a response to COVID-19.

China's work resumption helps with maintaining the continuity of the global industry chain

China's rapid economic growth has revitalized the world economy. Since 1978, China has witnessed great economic growth. From 1981 to 2015, the absolute impoverished population as per the World Bank standard was reduced by over 60%, of which China contributed a reduction of 76.2%. China's driving effect is reflected by both the statistical increment of the world economy and its role in the global value chain. Relying on its large economy size and internal demand, China follows the trend and changes the development pattern, providing an even stronger impetus to the world economy.

China has steadily resumed work and production and restarted the economic engine, which is of great significance for alleviating the impact of the epidemic on countries and driving the world economy onto the road of recovery. In the era of economic globalization, countries' economies are inseparable from that of the world, and vice versa. The basic pattern of international industrial cooperation has already taken shape. China's resumption of work and production will help maintain the operation of the global industrial chain, give full play to the potential of the entire industrial chain, and provide support for the international anti-epidemic strategy. China has the largest manufacturing system in the world, with complete supporting facilities and advantages in the whole industrial chain. The epidemic is urgent, and the supporting capacity of China's upstream and downstream industries has been rapidly mobilized. Take the mask industry as an example: the daily output of the industry reached 120 million in early March 2020. The rapid operation of China's manufacturing industry has become an important backup source of global epidemic prevention materials.

China's work resumption guarantees the epidemic prevention supplies to the world

After devoting the resources of the whole country, China has basically curbed the spread of the epidemic. In the post-pandemic period, China's experience in both epidemic prevention and control and work resumption is of importance to the world economic stability.

First, with the epidemic breaking out in multiple places, many countries adopted measures, like regional lockdown and work suspension. Some countries with limited productivity that heavily relied on imports for domestic needs had incurred several cases of intercepted import supplies. Owing to suspended production, quite a few countries did not have adequate epidemic prevention supplies, causing the pandemic to further spread. China's quick recovery of production capacity effectively supported other countries in addressing the shortage issue. Since the interruption of production had a great impact on daily life, in the condition of meeting domestic needs, China tried its best to make full use of its capacity to provide a certain number of supplies to other countries, helping them fight against COVID-19.

Second, as the biggest importer and exporter, China is an important part of the global industry chain. While it is hard for countries to find an alternative trade partner other than China, especially in the context of the pandemic. China boasts the largest manufacturing industrial system, and its advantage in the global industry chain is irreplaceable. China's position in the global industry chain and supply chain will remain unchanged. The overseas work interruption led to an overstock of materials and intermediate products, while China is a key destination for production capacity. Consequently, China's work resumption plays a significant role in smoothing the global industry chain.

China's work resumption consolidates the confidence in global epidemic prevention and control

COVID-19 has ravaged the world, and the global manufacturing industry, tourism, and financial markets have been greatly impacted. The downward pressure on the world economy, which once showed signs of recovery, has increased again. The outbreak of the epidemic has added risk factors to the already weak growth of the world economy. Many international organizations have pointed out that the world economy was in the most severe period since the financial crisis, and the development of the world economy was in a sad state. However, China took the lead in launching the resumption of work and production plan and put it into practice. This initiative made the Chinese economy recover and develop effectively in the short term. It effectively supported anti-epidemic programs in other countries in the world and revived the weak world economy.

China's epidemic prevention and control showed the first-mover and institutional advantage. The first-mover advantage reflects the solidarity and perseverance of the country to control the pandemic by devoting all focus to it. Meanwhile, the institutional advantage allowed the country to gather and mobilize its resources to control the epidemic spread within certain regions. China's work resumption measures also serve as an effective

experience for global economic growth. By the end of March 2020, the average operating rate of industrial enterprises was above the designated size in the country except Hubei was more than 95%. The average return rate of enterprise personnel was about 80% and the operating rate of small and medium-sized enterprises reached about 60%. China's accurate and efficient resumption of work and production under the epidemic has provided valuable experience in fighting the epidemic and improved the morale of global economic recovery.

Conclusion

Once again, COVID-19 tested the global response to a major crisis, forcing people to think about the reform or possible restructuring of the global governance system. Gradually incorporating both oriental and occidental wisdom in the global value chain governance system can significantly reverse the downturn of the world economy.

On the one hand, China should take advantage of its huge market, strong manufacturing advantages and institutional advantages, while seizing the opportunity to ensure strategic reserves and supply chain security. On the other hand, it is also necessary for China to increase the supply of global public goods, carry out global cooperation and joint efforts to deal with the crisis.

Endnote

¹ To maintain security in six areas, including employment, basic living needs, operations for market entities, food and energy security, stable industrial and supply chains, and the normal functioning of primary governments.

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