

# Facilitating Social Interaction without Social Intent: Autonomy and Confusion among Middle-Aged and Elderly Women in Chinese Small Towns within the Realm of Short Videos

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**Abstract:** The contemporary world is facing a dual acceleration of population aging and new media evolution. Whether the use of new media can mitigate aging challenges, especially in underdeveloped regions, and provide relief strategies for elderly care at both material and spiritual levels, is a topic worthy of exploration. As the largest developing country globally, China's experiences and current situation are pertinent for examination and emulation. This study employs in-depth interviews, focusing on Henan Province, a populous region grappling with significant aging issues, to investigate the usage of short videos among elderly women in small towns. It explores whether new media can provide psychological comfort and improve their living conditions to some extent. The research reveals that through watching, creating, and sharing short videos, elderly women in small Chinese towns establish virtual connections transcending geographical constraints. They form online and offline communities based on shared interests, work experiences, and physical spaces. This new media environment fosters novel social interactions, offering virtual companionship, spiritual solace, expanded social engagement, group connectivity, and communal revitalization. This approach of "short video socialization" and "media-assisted eldercare" enriches the spiritual lives of the elderly, alleviates loneliness to a certain extent, enhances their living conditions, and initiates a process of rediscovering their self-worth.

**Keywords:** Short videos, Chinese towns, middle-aged and elderly women

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, issues related to small towns have increasingly captured public attention, yet the lives of elderly women in these towns have not received corresponding focus. Indeed, in the contemporary Chinese context, "small town" is not merely a concept but also a symbol of identity. Historically, urban and rural communications have been marked by a form of isolationism, as described by Andersson and Jansson (2010), rooted in a media landscape centered around "urban-centrism"[1]. This has habitually simplified urban-rural relationships into subjective urban-rural disparities, perpetuating a perception of distinct and separate urban and rural communications. Small towns, originating from rural areas but aspiring towards urbanization, find themselves positioned between these two realms, representing a unique zone that neither fully belongs to urban perspectives nor can revert to rural settings. Due to economic foundations and educational resources that are superior to rural areas yet inferior to cities, small towns have become the natural choice for families lacking the means to settle in cities but seeking to escape the relatively backward conditions of rural life.

With the continuous advancement of the "new-type urbanization" strategy in China, there are now over 21,000 established towns where a staggering 325 million people reside, and this number continues to grow steadily[2]. Small towns, as the core carriers of local urbanization efforts, have become crucial for a significant portion of the agricultural population who choose not to leave their hometowns. Against this backdrop, 58.66% of middle-aged and elderly women (aged 40-70) in small towns are actively engaged in social production, comprising 38.30% of the total labor force. Compared to middle-aged and elderly men in small towns, with an 86.63% participation rate in social labor, women in this demographic clearly play more diverse roles, occupying pivotal positions both within their families and in society. However, this age group represents the most burdensome period in the lives of middle-aged and elderly

women in small towns. On one hand, women in this age range are typically navigating a period of career maturity and transition, shouldering greater work responsibilities than in their younger years, and often facing critical moments of reevaluating their career experiences and making decisions for future development. On the other hand, within many Chinese families, caregiving duties for both younger and older generations predominantly fall on the female members, placing middle-aged and elderly women in small towns under the dual burden of caring for their descendants and elders while managing their work responsibilities.

As the "sandwich generation" in the fabric of society and family dynamics, the integration of short videos has provided a fresh social and entertainment mode for middle-aged and elderly women in small towns, granting them opportunities both to see and to be seen. On one hand, the low-threshold viewing model of short videos enables them to transcend physical constraints, shedding the barriers and limitations imposed by their small-town identity. Within the interactive space of "virtual and real," they can explore and immerse themselves in life scenarios they had never imagined, engaging with individuals who share similar interests yet remain both familiar and unfamiliar. On the other hand, short videos bestow visibility upon middle-aged and elderly women in small towns, enabling them to break free from the historical monopoly of urban-centric media. Through showcasing their lives and presenting themselves, they intertwine their identities closely with the medium of short videos, becoming a part of the landscape while seeking economic benefits and social engagement opportunities. Scholars have noted that while short video platforms indeed offer diversified social avenues for these women, expanding their social boundaries, incidents such as those involving impersonations (e.g., "fake Jin Dong") underscore the economic losses and risks of emotional deception inherent in short video social interactions. Who are middle-aged and elderly women in small towns engaging with through short video social interactions? What motivates and shapes their experiences behind these interactions? How does short video socialization contribute to their lives in small towns? Addressing these questions forms the core focus of this study.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *The Unseen Middle-Aged and Elderly Women in Small Towns*

The small town, serving as a pivotal region for the relocation of rural populations, embodies a dual nature of incomplete urbanization and an indelible "rural essence." The people who have grown up in this land, rooted in the small town's soil, inherit this unique duality. The term "middle-aged and elderly women in small towns" specifically refers to women aged between 45 and 70, residing in county-level cities, townships, or rural towns. They tend to invest less in themselves and do not pursue outer beauty and glamour as zealously as young women in small towns. Within the objective conditions of patrilocality and patrilineality, their subjectivity is often closely intertwined with their fathers, husbands, and sons, shaping their sense of belonging and the world of meaning following the logic of rural women: "unmarried under the father's authority, married under the husband's, widowed under the son's." These women are neither typical of rural middle-aged and elderly women, drawing heightened attention due to their extreme vulnerability, nor typical of urban middle-aged and elderly women, possessing a more independent economic foundation and significant consumption power. As a result, the roles of middle-aged and elderly women in small towns have long been concealed and overlooked, hidden from view.

However, studying the middle-aged and elderly women in Chinese small towns is crucial for gaining a multidimensional understanding of Chinese society. Serving as a bridge between urban and rural areas, small towns not only showcase the diversity of socio-economic structures but also play critical roles in cultural preservation and transformation, social governance, and community development. They are witnesses to both the preservation and evolution of traditional culture and rich sources of practical experiences in social governance. Moreover, amidst the challenges of aging population in China, the living conditions of middle-aged and elderly women in small towns have become a focal point of research. Their health, well-being, social participation, and elderly care issues not only reflect the level of social welfare but also serve as significant indicators of intergenerational relationships and changes in family structures. Research on gender roles and social status further reveals the crucial roles women play in families and societies, holding profound implications for advancing gender equality. In summary, studying the current realities of middle-aged and elderly women in small towns not only enriches our understanding of the diversity and developmental patterns of Chinese society but also provides valuable insights for promoting social harmony, cultural heritage, addressing elderly care challenges, achieving gender equality, and enhancing social welfare in other developing countries around the world.

## ***2.2. Short Video Social Interaction and Middle-Aged and Elderly Women in Small Towns***

While a significant portion of middle-aged and elderly women in small towns originate from rural areas, their household dynamics have undergone notable changes compared to their counterparts in rural settings. This transformation is particularly evident in their increased autonomy in aspects such as marital and occupational choices, facilitated by their relatively independent economic footing[3]. Additionally, the infrastructure and industries within small towns provide mobility that gradually liberates these women from purely domestic roles, pushing them towards more public engagements[4]. However, economic empowerment alone does not fully achieve autonomy for women in small towns; due to cultural and age-related constraints, their work often remains within service-oriented sectors that emphasize caregiving traits. The emergence of social media applications like short videos presents an opportunity for middle-aged and elderly women in small towns to break free from these constraints. As these applications become more widespread and attract a diverse user base, these women increasingly transition from behind-the-scenes roles to active participation, balancing consumption and creation. Inadvertently, they transcend physical limitations, seizing the chance to forge new social circles. Overall, while short videos offer potential for increased economic income and enhanced social status among middle-aged and elderly women in small towns, scholars remain divided on their actual impact. There is ongoing debate between expanding and narrowing social interactions through these platforms[5]. Therefore, this study aims to examine the everyday media practices of these women and specifically explore the role of short video social interactions in their lives. By providing rich empirical data, this research aims to shed light on a group often overlooked and provide a humanistic perspective to the study of middle-aged and elderly women in small towns.

Reviewing past studies on social interaction, middle-aged and elderly women in small towns exhibit distinctive heterogeneous characteristics in their use of short videos. On one hand, unlike the younger generation who enthusiastically embrace the immersive nature of short videos in daily life, these women are still in a phase of gradual exploration and learning. Due to their family responsibilities, they prioritize real-life interactions over virtual socializing, but within short video platforms, they tend to actively express their emotions and engage in more two-way interactions than one-way interactions[6]. On the other hand, they differ from elderly urban populations who may hesitate or avoid media usage. Due to the lack of retirement pensions and elderly care benefits, middle-aged and elderly women in small towns often need to work throughout their lives. Faced with the mandatory requirements of work, they do not rely heavily on their children for digital support and are able to independently utilize various functions of short video social platforms[7]. Over the course of extensive research, scholars have developed two contrasting viewpoints regarding the effects of short videos on middle-aged and elderly women in small towns. From a positive perspective, for those with a resilient temperament, the absence of adequate outlets for releasing the pressures of family life and work in reality can lead to emotional exhaustion due to sparse social interactions. The existence of short video social platforms provides them with a means of emotional relief. For outgoing individuals, the personal performances in short video spaces undoubtedly offer a domain for subcultural capital and resource transformation, enabling economic improvement and elevating social status[8]. However, the negative view suggests that behind the practice of short videos and social interactions among middle-aged and elderly women in small towns lie hidden power dynamics and capital manipulation. Their expanded social circles through short videos may be subject to dual scrutiny from men and urban users. Social interactions facilitated by short videos may possess a certain degree of illusion, potentially leading these women from small towns into a risky realm of detachment from reality. Moreover, it could exacerbate the possibility of further narrowing their real-life social circles.

Thus, it appears that the potential for increased economic income and improved family status brought about by short videos among middle-aged and elderly women in small towns has been acknowledged to some extent. However, scholars remain divided on the actual impacts of short video social interactions on these women. There persists a longstanding controversy between "social expansion" and "social narrowing." Therefore, this study aims to examine the daily media practices of middle-aged and elderly women in small towns, as well as the specific role of short video social interactions in their lives. It seeks to provide richer and more detailed empirical materials for this long-overlooked group, aiming to supplement research on middle-aged and elderly women with a humane perspective of care.

## **3. Methods**

Due to a focus on the social interaction modes, experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of middle-aged

and elderly women in small towns regarding short video platforms, this study employed in-depth interviews and field observations. The research examined the short video social patterns of 18 women aged between 45 and 70 years. Participants were selected using a snowball sampling method, primarily comprising self-employed individuals and service industry workers. Each participant had at least three years of experience using short video platforms, with follower counts ranging from 200 to 50,000. Among all interviewees, the average age was 58.5 years old. Three interviewees had completed junior high school, fourteen had completed high school or vocational school, and one had completed college (Table 1).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face between December 2023 and March 2024, with each session lasting approximately one hour. The sampling locations were chosen in Boai County, under the jurisdiction of Jiaozuo City in Henan Province. This choice was based not only on geographic proximity and data accessibility but also on the region's representation of typical rural life in a populous agricultural province like Henan. Boai County, a representative town in Henan, has a total population of 400,000 and comprises two townships and 204 villages, located just 18 kilometers from downtown Jiaozuo. Serving as a transportation hub between urban and rural areas, Boai County facilitates a blend of agricultural and urban populations, making it a suitable setting for understanding the daily lives of small-town residents.

Table 1: Interviewee information.

Number	Name	Age	Occupation	Education	Number of Followers
1	BA01	51	Freelancer	High School	235
2	BA02	69	Waitress	Junior High School	487
3	BA03	67	Entrepreneurship	High School	2314
4	BA04	51	Entrepreneurship	Junior High School	498
5	BA05	70	Entrepreneurship	Technical School	5032
6	BA06	53	Online Content Creator	High School	50000
7	BA07	51	Entrepreneurship	High School	498
8	BA08	58	Educator	High School	502
9	BA09	51	Entrepreneurship	College	6823
10	BA10	56	Entrepreneurship	Technical School	2346
11	BA11	60	Entrepreneurship	Junior High School	1225
12	BA12	61	Entrepreneurship	Technical School	4870
13	BA13	57	Freelancer	High School	769
14	BA14	60	Entrepreneurship	High School	829
15	BA15	53	Entrepreneurship	Technical School	26
16	BA16	55	Waitress	High School	200
17	BA17	59	Janitor	High School	349
18	BA18	53	Factory Worker	High School	395

#### 4. Results

The use of short videos is an inevitable outcome of technological advancement and societal decentralization. However, the presence of short video social interactions is closely tied to individual usage habits and purposes. Unlike active use of short videos for specific purposes, short video social interactions often serve as an adjunct to the content published by middle-aged and elderly women in small towns. Many interviewees expressed, "I don't shoot short videos for socializing; it's more about work requirements or documenting life. Whether others will contact me because of this is something I haven't thought about." Regarding the emergence of short video social interactions, this study posits that middle-aged and elderly women in small towns often play a passive role. Through their unintentional social interactions in videos published without social intent, they inadvertently fulfill emotional needs

that they hadn't previously considered.

#### ***4.1. Leveraging Real-Life Work: Social Interactions Generated Unintentionally from Non-Social Use***

The interviews revealed that many middle-aged and elderly women in small towns deliberately or inadvertently establish "social connections" through their use of short videos, which serve as a "social bridge" to a certain extent. Unlike interest-based online communities, the use of short videos among these women is intricately linked to their professions. They highly value videos related to their work tasks or skills enhancement. Their usage patterns have evolved from entertainment to a medium of work. BA08, a self-employed individual who runs a barter business locally with her husband, prominently features her products and latest offers on her Douyin account. Her videos straightforwardly promote items like "Internet café tables, chairs, all available for barter! Come take a look!" and "Whiskey, brandy, vodka, we have everything! See the pictures! Take them for free!" These videos detail the quality, quantity, and barter requirements of the goods. Through Tiktok, BA08 has connected with friends from across the country, stating, "I initially played around with short videos on Kwai, but when I heard some people were making good money from it, I joined in. I used to sell clothes and wanted to promote them, but the results weren't great. Later on, Tiktok became popular, so I started posting related videos, and the promotional effect was quite good. Many old customers originally came from seeing my short videos." BA03 also mentioned during the interview how she began shooting short videos primarily due to work requirements: "My supervisor needed publicity. I didn't know how to use short videos before, but when I worked at the maternity center in the city, they required you to know how to film and document your daily work routine. That's when I started learning. Initially, it was just group check-ins, but later I got used to it and started posting my daily work routines on my video account. As a result, other maternity center managers contacted me through the video account, wanting me to join them!"

#### ***4.2. Localization of Social Connections Based on Geographically-Rooted Short Video Socialization***

Use Social identity theory posits that collective identity channels are based on interactive information symbols within a group, predicated on shared understandings of certain elements among individuals. This social process relies on interpersonal interactions, where mutual "cooperation" of information between self and others internalizes collective identity. The interactions form interdependent, shared fate, homogeneity, and self-restraint attributes. For many middle-aged and elderly women in small towns, a significant portion may not originally hail from these locales but have "migrated" there as outsiders. Despite the spatial proximity of small towns compared to their hometowns, social relations' "displacement" compels them to self-regulate with a resistant attitude akin to "outsiders" towards potential social interactions. The advent of short videos provides them with a novel localized social interaction method. As expressed by interviewee BA04, "I enjoy square dancing and lead a team in our town. Initially, there were several dance teams on the square, but there was little contact between us. Everyone maintained their own 'territory' and boundaries. However, since I started filming our training and gatherings regularly, leaders from other dance teams saw the videos and thought they were well done. They asked me for tips on filming, and over time, we've become acquainted. Now, we sometimes dance together, film short videos, and even plan to participate in competitions together."

#### ***4.3. Reconnecting Forgotten Relationships: Virtual Presence in the Absence of Physical Space***

Moreover, for most interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on their social video interaction patterns. Before the pandemic, they mostly filmed videos for personal enjoyment and interacted with their existing social circles through these videos. However, the pandemic significantly restricted mobility, prompting them to reconnect with disconnected offline communities. Through the channel of filming short videos, they transformed their original social patterns. Gordon Neufeld argues that each person is not an island and has a need to be seen and connected[7]. During the pandemic's isolation, their existing social connections were severed, and individuals were confined to narrow spaces such as neighborhoods or hallways. Their inner social needs compelled them to actively engage with the communities around them. BA09 stated, "During the COVID-19 pandemic, my son took me to their new neighborhood to take care of me. I didn't know any of the neighbors, but during the lockdown, I often filmed videos teaching cooking at home. It turned out to be very popular, and I met many people who actively interacted with me."

In the process of reconnection, the joy of continuity in past relationships brought to elderly women in small towns through social video interaction may also harbor underlying frustrations. This could lead

them to choose to actively "disconnect" once again. Short videos, as edited and embellished creations, construct an idealized life for the creators through collaging and reconstructing scenes from real-world spaces. However, for elderly women in small towns who are viewers rather than creators, they often struggle to distinguish authenticity, perhaps choosing to selectively ignore the technology behind the potential blend of virtual and real. Subsequently, subconscious comparisons may amplify dissatisfaction with their own lives, leading to displaced anger towards the video creators and eventual disconnection. BA05, an educator in the small town who has been raising her son alone since a relatively early divorce, shared her perspective on social video interaction: "Initially, I enjoyed using short videos to catch up with old classmates. At first, everyone's videos were simple and casual, which was comforting to watch. But as more people started using it, someone began posting videos mainly for showing off, and the tone of video-sharing changed. I ended up deleting those who loved showing off."

#### ***4.4. Socializing with Strangers: A New Social Mode in the Reconstruction of Social Scenes***

In studies concerning strangers, Simmel pointed out that strangers are neither mere "wanderers" nor completely "outsiders," but perpetually exist as "external members" within community relations. According to Simmel's understanding, although strangers differ from locals, they remain integral to community relationships[8]. In the era of social media, the concept of community has significantly expanded beyond previous emphases on specific ethnic nations, locations, or spaces, now structured around common digital platforms. Moreover, perceptions of strangers by social media users differ from those in traditional media eras. Individuals familiar through the same platform are naturally categorized as "bros," "friends," "sisters," and similar terms, fostering subconscious feelings of closeness. Very few users are considered entirely strangers, and any such perception is short-lived. For elderly women in small towns, they have adapted quite well to the networked society composed of strangers. While maintaining a cautious approach towards strangers, they also view them as potential business partners, life assistance allies, deep conversationalists, and sources of emotional solace.

For elderly women in small towns, their engagement in social video interactions is typically grounded in real-world work and a heightened awareness of potential business opportunities, without overlooking the emotional relief that such interactions can provide. The home, often seen as a channel for stress release, is sometimes limited in its effectiveness due to the presence of family members and the constraints of family dynamics. It can only offer limited stress relief and, in many cases, family life itself contributes to the stress. Some interviewees express the need for self-relaxation time through activities like watching short videos, seeking someone who understands them to confide in. "The stress from work and home are equally overwhelming. Every time I think about the chores waiting for me at home after work, it gets me upset. My child's father only knows how to browse through TikTok and play games; he rarely shows proactive care towards me. I'm not the type to constantly complain about how tired I am, as it would make me seem overly dramatic." (BA16)

Against this backdrop, elderly women in small towns are using social interactions through short videos as supplementary channels for emotional release. This practice primarily manifests in their engagement with video comments, likes, and private messages. This study found that while these women may initiate less direct, intimate social invitations via private messages, they actively seek out individuals with similar interests through public interactions such as video uploads and comments. In their videos and comments, these women attract both individuals drawn together by shared interests and groups formed around professional affiliations. BA08, a junior high school teacher, has formed several close friendships based on shared interests: "There was a time when I really wanted to learn broadcasting techniques, so I started watching short videos related to it. Some like-minded friends online communicated with me, and a few of them have become close; they even send me birthday gifts every year, remembering my birthday better than my own family."

#### ***4.5. The Perils of Excessive Socialization: Temptations of the Unreal World and the Battle against Real Space***

In the current era marked by the overlapping of pre-modernity, modernity, and post-modernity, the complex relationships fostered by social video interactions serve as a microcosm of "compressed modernity" [9]. Amid the squeeze between rural and urban cultures, elderly women in small towns face a stark reality: they cannot return to the rural life they once knew, nor fully integrate into the urban landscape. Thus, they are compelled to construct their ideal life scenarios through the medium of social video interactions. Compared to physical spaces, social video platforms offer better control over communication targets, strategies, and modes. Through flexible viewing, communication, and interaction,

these women navigate across different spatial and temporal dimensions, enjoying new social circles and personal connections that real-life interactions may not provide. However, social video interactions do not necessarily bring emotional or social support. The abundance of social contacts and interaction patterns may tempt them into the illusions of a virtual world, further alienating them from their existing social circles in real life. BA02 expressed, "In my daily life, my friends can't appreciate my beauty or notice when I buy new clothes that look good. I feel quite lost. But online, there are friends who share my aesthetic sense; they always compliment me and give me advice on looking even more beautiful. I find myself talking less and less with friends around me who only say it's unnecessary or not worth it."

Simultaneously, excessive reliance on social video interactions may lead to blind trust, exposing individuals to risks of emotional manipulation and financial fraud. The personas portrayed in short videos are often heavily curated, embodying a certain degree of virtuality. Therefore, elderly women in small towns may find themselves engaging with an "idealized persona" during their social interactions, possibly experiencing emotional trauma when forced to sever these connections. BA04 shared, "There was someone who was very enthusiastic before, often leaving likes on my video comments. Later, he initiated private chats with me, and we chatted for about a month. He eventually asked to borrow money from me. I refused, and he stopped talking to me. My friends said he was a scammer. Luckily, I didn't lend him any money, but my emotions were hurt. I no longer trust people I meet in short videos."

## 5. Conclusions

Bill uses the term "technological unconsciousness" to describe the subtle ways in which information technology shapes daily life without users being fully aware of it[10]. As a byproduct of filming or viewing, social video interactions seamlessly integrate into the practices of elderly women in small towns in an almost imperceptible manner. Traditionally, discussions about elderly women in small towns have often associated this demographic with invisibility and obscurity, leading to unconscious assumptions that link the physical space of small towns with the specific identity of elderly women. This constructs a narrative of a vulnerable and passive image, perpetuating the belief that their use of short videos would conform to this predetermined pattern. However, visibility and attention are not privileges exclusive to urban culture. The elderly women in small towns in this study are presented as dual agents of social videos, engaging in both filming and watching, and autonomously shaping their ideal virtual social spaces.

For elderly women in Chinese small towns, social video interactions provide them with an avenue to transcend geographical limitations, seek out individuals with shared interests, and connect with those who have similar professional experiences. The fundamental logic behind their use of short videos originates from work but extends beyond mere work-related activities. It spreads from the realm of work, radiating into their existing social relationships. Social video interactions facilitate the reconnection of previously severed relationships caused by spatial and temporal barriers while reinforcing existing local connections. In the context of social video practices among elderly women in small towns, on one hand, social video interactions can bridge online relationships to offline interactions, enhancing the virtual connections of shared interests and work experiences through real-world interactions. On the other hand, due to the mobility and boundary-crossing nature of elderly women in small towns, they utilize social videos to navigate and interact with their inherent relationships. Social videos create opportunities for integrating these relationships into daily life and establish a common conversational space for future meetings and interactions. Moreover, the attributes of social video interactions, such as bridging across social strata and timelines, greatly expand the social circles of elderly women in small towns, transforming localized connections into virtual companionship in the digital realm. In the realm of socializing with strangers, individuals who have never met in person develop genuine emotions through virtual interactions. Elderly women in small towns do not harbor the same level of fear and wariness towards the internet as urban elderly populations do; instead, they are more receptive, adept at understanding, and following the rules of social interaction online. This enables them to view social video interactions as a legitimate channel for relaxation and integration.

However, while social video interactions indeed provide emotional support and understanding for elderly women in small towns that offline social interactions may not fully compensate for, their virtual and curated nature also introduces uncertainties inherent to online social interactions. This could potentially lead to emotional and economic losses. Moreover, excessive immersion in virtual social interactions may inadvertently detach them from real-life social interactions, thereby deepening their dissatisfaction with their physical surroundings.

Therefore, for elderly women in small towns in China, while leveraging social video interactions to expand their social spaces and reorganize their social relationships brings many benefits in their often overlooked lives, we must not overlook the hidden risks and crises behind these interactions. As some social risk scholars have cautioned, in post-industrial societies, risks are no longer "acts of God" but rather "manufactured risks" or "civilizational risks" [11]. For elderly women in small towns engaging in social video practices, it is crucial neither to completely dismiss these practices nor to blindly embrace optimism. Technological presence can never replace social presence but can only compensate for its absence.

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