

# The British Raj Plague in 1897 and Anti-epidemic Measures at the Borders of China, Britain and Russia

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**Abstract:** *This paper studies the information transmission and people's cognition of the British Raj plague in 1897. The aim is to examine and summarize the emergency measures taken by China, Britain, and Russia based on border epidemic prevention under the impact of the epidemic. The anti-epidemic measures taken by the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty imitated those of Russia and had flexible adjustment characteristics. Russia had a tough attitude towards the British Raj plague in the border areas and harbored evil intentions. Since the anti-epidemic measures of China and Russia hurt Britain's interests in British Raj, Britain expressed dissatisfaction with the anti-epidemic measures at the border between China and Russia.*

**Keywords:** *British Raj plague; Rao Yingqi; Border; Measures*

## 1. Introduction

Xinjiang is located on the northwest border of China, "being adjacent to the Russian border in the northwest and bordering the British territory in the southwest corner".<sup>[1]</sup> In the late Qing Dynasty, Kashgar, Xinjiang, bordered Tsarist Russia and British Raj, and its geographical location and transportation were particularly important. In the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign (1897), the plague broke out in Karachi and Mumbai, British Raj, with tragic casualties, quickly spreading throughout the country. According to records, the plague in British Raj was "particularly terrible", with "a wide range of and serious impacts". Affected by the British Raj plague, the Russian Consul in Kashgar believed that "India is both connected to Kashgar and adjacent to Tibet. If it doesn't stop people from coming and going, the plague will certainly spread to Kashgar".<sup>[2]</sup> Based on this, China and Russia took measures in the border areas with British Raj to cope with the spread of the British Raj plague. Since the anti-epidemic measures of China and Russia touched Britain's interests in British Raj, British Raj further protested the prevention and control measures of China and Russia. At present, the academic community has not yet conducted academic discussions on the information transmission, the respective responses and response measures of China, Britain and Russia, and the political competition behind the border anti-epidemic measures of Britain and Russia in the context of the British Raj plague. This article attempts to explore these issues.

## 2. Information Transmission and People's Cognition of the British Raj Plague at That Time

The local government of Kashgar in the late Qing Dynasty was late in learning about the plague outbreak in British Raj. From a geographical point of view, Kashgar was adjacent to British Raj, and should have the initiative to learn about the British Raj plague. In fact, the late Qing government was informed of the plague outbreak in British Raj by the Russian Governor in Musk (Moscow) and the Seven-river Governor. On the 6th day of lunar January of the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign, Huang Guangda, Governor (Taotai) of Kashgar, sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, Governor of Xinjiang, claiming that "Last night, I received telegrams from the Governor of Musk (Russia) and the Governor of Seven-river, and konw that the plague across British Raj is very serious, which is very frightening".<sup>[3]</sup> This is the earliest record of the British Raj plague found in Chinese historical materials. In the next few days, Huang Guangda sent telegrams to Rao Yingqi many times on the 7th and 10th days of lunar January to ask for instructions on measures to deal with the plague in British Raj, and begged Rao Yingqi to order to ban commercial exchanges between Chinese Kashgar and British Raj travelling merchants, and to report the British Raj plague to the Premier Government in Beijing. In his reply to Huang Guangda's telegrams, Rao Yingqi suggested that "Businessmen going to India from Kashgar should postpone their travel"<sup>[4]</sup>, and rejected Huang Guangda's request and refused to report the British

Raj plague to the Premier Government in Beijing on the ground that "India is far away from Kashgar and it is difficult for people suffering from the plague to travel far away, so there is no need to stop them, and there has never been such a solution".<sup>[5]</sup> Since Kashgar bordered Tsarist Russia and British Raj, and there had no previous practice to deal with such matters, in order to avoid international disputes caused by border anti-epidemic measures, Rao Yingqi instructed Huang Guangda on the 12th day of lunar January: "India is plagued seriously, you may consult the places along the border of Russia to see how to stop it, and then inform Ma Jiye of the method. Please gently inform the Governor of India".<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps because of the fear of British prestige, the local government in the late Qing Dynasty lacked the initiative to deal with the British Raj plague, so it just blindly followed the epidemic prevention policy at the border with Russia. On the 19th day of lunar January, the Premier Government in Beijing sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, saying that "The Ürümqi Governor and the Russian ambassador sent a document saying that the plague was prevalent in India, and that your Governor has ordered Kashgar to prohibit people in Kashgar from going to India".<sup>[7]</sup> So far, the Premier Government in Beijing was informed of the British Raj plague from the Russian Consulate.

On the issue of the British Raj plague, the Tsarist Russian Governor of Moscow and the Seven-river Governor, out of their own national interests, were worried that the British Raj plague would "spread from India to Kashgar, and then from Kashgar to Russia",<sup>[8]</sup> so they promptly informed Huang Guangda of the news, hoping to build a "united front" with Huang Guangda to fight the epidemic in the border and jointly curb the spread of the British Raj plague. When Huang Guangda learned about the British Raj plague, he immediately reported it to Rao Yingqi, the Governor of Xinjiang. While the epidemic situation in British Raj was not yet clear, although Rao Yingqi was puzzled by the fact that there were no written cases to refer to, he could assess the situation, and seek benefits and avoid disadvantages. His actions are indeed commendable. Rao Yingqi, on the one hand, made the decision to postpone the Kashgar travelling merchants' travel to British Raj, and on the other hand, ordered Huang Guangda to consult Russia's anti-epidemic measures in the border areas. It should be pointed out that Rao Yingqi refused to report the British Raj plague to the Premier Government in Beijing, which was detrimental to the adjustment of British Raj's foreign policy by the Premier Government in Beijing. In a word, in the international context of this severe plague, the British Raj plague didn't finally affect Kashgar because of the timely communication of the epidemic information between Tsarist Russia and the local government in the late Qing Dynasty as well as the effective adoption of prevention and control measures.

Although the medical level and science and technology were backward at that time, people were highly vigilant and had basic knowledge of epidemic prevention to deal with the British Raj plague. "The epidemic in foreign countries is the most alarming and worrying, and the British Raj plague is widespread and severe".<sup>[9]</sup> At the same time, the public had realized that livestock and correspondence could be carriers of the epidemic virus. "This disease is particularly dangerous, and people are worried about being infected. Not only can travelling merchants bring this virus, but even livestock can transmit it to people".<sup>[10]</sup> "Letters can also transmit this virus, and it is best to strictly prohibit them".<sup>[11]</sup> These understandings about the carriers of the spread of the plague virus were beneficial for prevention and played an important role in blocking the large-scale spread of the plague.

### **3. Response Measures Taken by the Local Government of Xinjiang in the Late Qing Dynasty — "Policy Imitation" and "Policy Adjustment"**

In the face of the sudden plague of British Raj, the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty gradually deepened its understanding of it, which made its border anti-epidemic policies have the characteristics of continuous adjustment. These policies went through several stages from no need to prevent business dealings between Kashgar and India, to suspending the travel of Indian travelling merchants to Kashgar, and then to not obstructing the exchanges of Chinese and Indian travelling merchants, but checkpoints should be set up at the border and doctors should be appointed to inspect such traveling merchants to prevent or release them depending on the situation. At the same time, in order to prevent the Tsarist Russia from using epidemic prevention and control as an excuse to infringe on the territorial sovereignty of the late Qing Dynasty, the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty dispatched soldiers to guard the country's entrance.

Huang Guangda, Governor (Taotai) of Kashgar, reported the situation to Rao Yingqi on the 6th day of lunar January of the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign when he learned that the plague had broken out in British Raj, hoping to follow the Russian anti-epidemic measures and prevent the exchanges of travelling merchants. For travelling merchants from British Raj, Rao Yingqi believed that British Raj was far away from Kashgar, and "It is difficult for people suffering from the plague to travel far away,

so there is no need to stop them".<sup>[12]</sup> Regarding domestic travelling merchants, Rao Yingqi instructed Huang Guangda in a telegram that the Chinese side (mainly referring to travelling merchants from Kashgar) "should temporarily suspend their travel to India".<sup>[13]</sup> This was the initial response and the first action of local government officials in Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty, represented by Rao Yingqi and Huang Guangda, to the British Raj plague. Later, Rao Yingqi changed his attitude towards the British Raj plague. He stated in his article entitled "Discussing with Ma Jiye to Suspend Indian Visits to Kazakhstan" that "Sudden obstruction of people from India would hinder diplomacy".<sup>[14]</sup> Rao Yingqi hoped that Huang Guangda would consult with Ma Jiye, a British travel official, on China's anti-epidemic policy, and asked Ma Jiye to "send a telegram to the Governor of India, conveying the policy of prohibiting people from coming for a few months. Wait until the plague is over before continuing to travel as usual".<sup>[15]</sup> So far, local officials in Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty, represented by Rao Yingqi, changed their border anti-epidemic measures to deal with the British Raj plague. Such measures included the stopping of British Raj travelling merchants from coming to Kashgar, and then changed to the delay of British Raj travelling merchants from entering Kashgar. On the first day of lunar February in the 23rd year of the Guangxu reign, the Premier Government in Beijing sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, stating that the ban on travelling merchants' exchanges between China and India "seems to be inconsistent with foreign anti-epidemic measures".<sup>[16]</sup> In addition, the Governor of India stated in his official letter to the Premier Government in Beijing that "India is separated by two provinces and one country on the way to Kashgar, none of the residents in the three places are infected, and Indian officials strictly prohibit, so there is no need for the prohibition of China. However, it is reasonable for China to prohibit patients from entering the country. If Chinese residents are prohibited from traveling, it will hinder trades and have nothing to do with protection, so please do not prohibit it".<sup>[17]</sup> In addition, the Premier Government in Beijing believed that "The telegrams replied by the Indian authorities are particularly reasonable. It is possible to avoid prohibition, but it is necessary to set up doctors at border checkpoints for examination, and then prevent or release such traveling merchants depending on the situation". Finally, after multi-party communication and coordination, based on the consideration of Sino-British diplomacy and the comprehensive study and judgment of the British Raj plague, the border anti-epidemic measures of the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty were finally determined to set up doctors at border checkpoints to inspect, and if British Raj travelling merchants have plague symptoms, they will be prevented from entering Kashgar; if there is no plague, they can enter Kashgar.

Affected by the epidemic, in addition to the temporary impact on the commercial exchanges between China and British Raj, the pilgrimage activities between the two countries were also affected. At 5:50 pm on the fourth day of lunar February in the 23rd year of the Guangxu reign, Huang Guangda sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, claiming that the Russian Consul had sent telegrams eight times in succession, "only asking China to ban the flow of commercial and civilian goods and those who return to Kashgar after pilgrimage". At 2:20 pm on the 20th of the same month, Huang Guangda once again sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, "telling those who are going to pilgrimage in Xinjiang to wait for the disaster to subside before going to pilgrimage". In addition, Huang Guangda asked Rao Yingqi to send a telegram to Governors (Taotai) of Zhendi and Aksu, asking them to tell their subjects to go on the pilgrimage after the British Raj plague recedes.

In response to the British Raj plague, China appointed doctors and soldiers at the border to check. Rao Yingqi had ordered Huang Guangda to "send soldiers to check the plague at the border to prevent infection" at the beginning of the plague outbreak in British Raj. On the 19th day of lunar January of the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign, the Premier Government in Beijing sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi and said, "For those who come from India to Kashgar and their luggage, we should also follow the methods of epidemic testing in various states, keep them at the border for a few days, check for whether there is a plague or not, and smoke their luggage before they enter the border. In order to prevent further infection of the Russian border by Kashgar, ... Kashgar should be ordered to send personnel to set up a station at the border between India and Kashgar for investigation. If there are no such symptoms, release immediately and do not use excuses to give them a hard time". Objectively speaking, the measures taken by China to deal with the British Raj plague are scientific and reasonable: People who travel from India to Kashgar will be isolated for observation. If there is no plague symptom, the luggage of people coming to Kashgar can enter China's territory after fumigation and disinfection. This played a positive role in the screening of people carrying the British Raj plague virus, and to a certain extent, it also prevented the plague virus from passing through Kashgar to Tsarist Russia. In addition, the Prime Minister's Yamen in Beijing ordered the epidemic situation inspectors at the border between Kashgar and British Raj to release the people without epidemic disease immediately and not to make excuses for them. The order of the Premier Government in Beijing was quickly implemented. At 5:50 p.m. on the fourth day of lunar February, Huang Guangda sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, "I want to ask Shache Prefecture to set up a doctor in Suogaiti and Sarikol respectively, and instruct the checkpoint personnel to check the people entering Kashgar, and then prevent or release them

depending on the situation".

In order to prevent Tsarist Russia from using the pretext of epidemic prevention and infringing on China's territorial sovereignty, the Kashgar local government actively dispatched soldiers to guard the country's entrance. On the 26th day of lunar January of the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign, Huang Guangda, Governor (Taotai) of Kashgar, and Zhang Jun, Admiral of Kashgar, jointly sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, stating that "We received a message from the General of Russia, fearing that this disease would be transmitted from India to Kashgar, and that it then would be transmitted to Russia by Kashgar. It is planned to set up troops for inspection at the border between China and Russia". Huang Guangda and Zhang Jun believed that Russia's move "is unpredictable. After careful discussions, we plan to send spies and order the Indian officials to cautiously guard the fortress. If there is indeed a conspiracy, we will take the opportunity to send a telegram to prompt the handling". On the 18th day of lunar January of the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign, due to the addition of troops by Russia on the border between China and Russia, Huang Guangda and Zhang Jun once again sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, stating that "Border matters are uncertain... The most important thing we discussed is to allocate dozens of infantries to station, and be responsible for transporting food and firewood, and then evacuating after there is no need to do so". In response to the unilateral addition of troops by the Tsarist Russia on the border between China and Russia, the Kashgar local government remained highly vigilant and took timely and active actions, demonstrating the high political sensitivity and awareness of border guards in the Qing Dynasty.

In response to the British Raj plague in 1897, the border anti-epidemic measures of the local government of Xinjiang in Kashgar in the late Qing Dynasty were restricted by multiple factors. First, the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty had not accumulated experience in dealing with the international epidemic before, so it was slightly powerless when formulating policies to deal with the British Raj plague. Second, the local government in Xinjiang during the late Qing Dynasty was constrained by the constraints of Britain and Tsarist Russia, striving for survival in the midst of a rift, and the formulation of its anti-epidemic policies somewhat contained compromises to Britain and Russia. Under the impact and influence of the British Raj plague, the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty still firmly defended its territorial sovereignty and actively sent soldiers to garrison the border, which not only frustrated the Tsarist Russia's ambition to encroach on China's territory, but also effectively safeguarded the national dignity.

#### **4. Response Measures Taken by Russian Borders—Having a Tough Attitude and Harboring Evil Intentions**

Tsarist Russia was tough and resolute in dealing with the British Raj plague. It not only blocked British Raj's travelling merchants' exchanges, but also sent soldiers and doctors to check the epidemic situation at the border between China and Russia. In addition to the prevention and control of the epidemic, Tsarist Russia sent spies under the cover of doctors to infiltrate Sarikol (today's Tashkurghan County, China) area of the Qing Dynasty to create rumors and spy on intelligence on the pretext of investigating the epidemic.

Tsarist Russia's attitude of blocking the entry of British Raj travelling merchants was very tough from beginning to end. On the 6th day of lunar January of the 23rd year of Guangxu's reign, Huang Guangda sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, claiming that "Russia has also prevented trade between travelling merchants to prevent infection". In addition, in order to protect the interests of Tsarist Russia, Consul Kroklov of Tsarist Russia in Kashgar "put pressure on the Chinese people to close the Yarkant-Leh border and exclude Indian merchants from entering Xinjiang." Undoubtedly, Tsarist Russia's attitude towards the British Raj plague was tough and arbitrary. It not only took strict precautions against its own borders, but also demanded the Qing government to close the border between Yarkant and Leh. Its purpose was to protect its own interests, rather than protecting China's interests. The Tsarist Russia's move was not the result of equal consultation between China and Russia, but rather the result of the Tsarist Russia government's political pressure on the Qing government, which undoubtedly constituted unwarranted interference in China's sovereignty and internal affairs.

Since modern times, Tsarist Russia has devoured a large area of China's territory from the northeast to the northwest and men of insight have long recognized Tsarist Russia's wolf-like ambitions. Lin Zexu, who was familiar with Xinjiang's government affairs, exclaimed loudly, "After all, they are Chinese patients. What is their relationship with Russia?" At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the Xinjiang Administrative Commissioner Wang Shu'nian sharply pointed out, "I may infer from the overall situation of Xinjiang that the dangers and difficulties in negotiations are not in Britain but in Russia". In order to invade and occupy the Sarikol region of China, Tsarist Russia brazenly spread rumors and created disturbances and demagogues here. According to British historical records, "Kroklov", the

Russian Consul in Kashgar, did his best to facilitate this, and sent a Russian doctor to Sarikol to supervise the quarantine deployment. He also spread rumors that the plague had broken out in Sarikol". As early as lunar March of the 23rd year of the reign of Guangxu, Huang Guangda reported to Rao Yingqi about the Tsarist Russia sending "doctors" to Sarikol to investigate the epidemic situation, claiming that "The Russian envoy came to say that the Consul of Khashigari (Kashgar) had heard that there was an epidemic in Sarikol Range, and sent a medical officer, Yousupofu, to investigate there. Please order the distribution of passports along the way and send a leading officer with him". The Tsarist Russia's request for the Qing government to issue passports to "Russian doctors" alarmed the Premier Government in Beijing. On the first day of lunar April in the 23rd year of the Guangxu reign, Huang Guangda and Zhang Jun jointly sent a telegram to Rao Yingqi, claiming that they had rented a "Russian doctor" passport in accordance with the deployment of the Premier Government in Beijing, and that the Kashgar local government had sent soldiers to accompany the "Russian doctor" to investigate the epidemic. Later, according to Zhang Jun's undercover investigation, it was discovered that "The doctor was plotting at night... His trip did not seem to investigate the epidemic, but rather relied on probing the truth and falsehood of the situation". So far, in the name of investigating the epidemic situation, Tsarist Russia illegally engaged in intelligence gathering in the Sarikol region of the Qing Dynasty, and its sinister tactics were clearly revealed. In response to the shameless act of Tsarist Russia stealing China's military intelligence, Huang Guangda and Zhang Jun resolutely took emergency measures, "adding soldiers to the important checkpoints to be stationed under their jurisdiction, sending general security sentinels to guard, and taking 20 cavalries to Tahaman, Subashi, and Muji respectively". Tahaman, Subashi, and Muji were all Chinese territories. The Kashgar local government, in order to strengthen its defense of the national territory, immediately deployed forces to speeded along the three aforementioned areas, effectively building a military border defense barrier to defend territorial sovereignty and national security.

In addition, Sarikol was located in the Pamir Mountains, so the crops were not easy to grow, and the supply of daily living materials for the border guards of the Qing Dynasty stationed here was difficult to sustain, and because "There is not much food , it is planned to order Shache and Shufu to transport food at their discretion in case of emergency". But China's move was speculated by British travel official Ma Jiye who believed that the Chinese deliberately expressed their resentment towards the Russian Consul Kroklov, so "They organized the people of Tashkurghan to approach the Russians and also prevented them from selling necessities to the Russians". To be honest, the daily food needs of Chinese border guards and soldiers were allocated from Shache and Shufu prefectures and counties. Why was there any surplus food sold to Tsarist Russia?

## 5. Britain's Dissatisfaction with Anti-epidemic Measures at the Sino-Russian Border

In dealing with the British Raj plague, Britain considered from the national economic interests and its own political influence. First, Britain expressed dissatisfaction with the effective anti-epidemic policies of the Kashgar local government. Second, in the historical context of the great competition between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, Britain, in order to maintain its international influence, opposed Russian doctors to go to Sarikol in the Qing Dynasty to investigate the epidemic situation.

In order to safeguard their commercial interests, the Governor of British Raj expressed dissatisfaction with the anti-epidemic policies of the local government of Kashgar. As Huang Guangda, the Governor (Taotai) of Kashgar, blocked Indian travelling merchants from travelling to China, the Governor of British Raj believed that "The plague of Mumbai is relatively serious, where is more than 5000 li away from Kashgar. No one is infected in the northwest of the Indian border. It is indeed inconvenient for Xinjiang officials to ban trade routes immediately because of this". In fact, the reason why the Governor of British Raj was so resistant to the anti-epidemic policies of the Kashgar local government was that the Kashgar local government banned the business exchanges between China and India, which damaged the commercial trades between British Raj and Xinjiang, China. Therefore, the Governor of British Raj reacted strongly to the anti-epidemic measures taken by the local government of Kashgar.

In addition to safeguarding its own commercial interests, Britain constantly engaged in international political influence battles with Tsarist Russia. From the 1850s to the early 20th century, during a period of intense competition between Britain and Russia for control of Central Asia, Kashgar, located at the border between Central Asia and South Asia, naturally became a strategic location coveted by both Britain and Russia. In response to the British Raj plague, Russia wanted to send "doctors" to the Sarikol region of the Qing Dynasty to investigate the epidemic situation. Faced with the Russian move, British travel official Ma Jiye firmly opposed it. Ma Jiye believed that "At the border between China and Britain, Russia's travel to investigate the epidemic is a hindrance to Britain's face. Otherwise, Britain will send people to go there", and claimed that "The border between China and Britain has

nothing to do with Russia. Since China has already sent doctors, it is reasonable for Britain to send additional doctors if there is such a need". In response to Ma Jiye's proposal, Russian Consul Kroklov raised objections when he met with Huang Guangda from Kashgar, stating that "This is the territory of China, not under the jurisdiction of Britain. Russian doctors' going to investigate has nothing to do with Britain". Due to the ongoing dispute between Britain and Russia, Huang Guangda reported the matter to Xinjiang Governor Rao Yingqi, who then conveyed it to the Premier Government in Beijing. Later, after the discussion of the Premier Government in Beijing, "Russian doctors" could go to Sarikol to investigate the epidemic situation only when the Chinese side sent soldiers. In the event that the Tsarist Russia sent "doctors" to Sarikol to investigate the epidemic situation, Britain and Russia had their own evil intentions. Tsarist Russia not only took the opportunity to attack and weaken British Raj's trade with China, but also took the opportunity to collect Chinese intelligence. What they did was not worth mentioning. And in order to cover up its inferior position in the competition with Russia in Central Asia, Britain strongly opposed Russia to send "doctors" to Sarikol.

## 6. Conclusion

The plague that occurred in British Raj a hundred years ago didn't spread to the border between China and Russia because of the relatively rapid transmission of information, the more reasonable and effective measures to prevent the plague, and the relatively few personnel exchanges and infrequent commercial trade at that time. However, behind the surface of the measures taken on epidemic prevention, there were fierce competitions between Britain and Russia in Central Asia. The Chinese side, however, was continuously accumulating experience and adapting measures in epidemic prevention, while also strictly preventing and cracking potential collateral crises.

Tsarist Russia was tough in dealing with the British Raj plague, not only blocking the exchanges of traveling merchants, but also sending soldiers and doctors to check the epidemic situation at the border between China and Russia. At the same time, Tsarist Russia, under the pretext of investigating the epidemic situation, was engaged in illegal intelligence collection in the Sarikol region of China. Britain, out of a comprehensive consideration of the country's economic interests and its own political influence, expressed dissatisfaction with China's anti-epidemic policies and strongly opposed Russian doctors to visit Sarikol to investigate the epidemic. Against the historical background of the great competition between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, the anti-epidemic policies of the local government in Xinjiang during the late Qing Dynasty were characterized by continuous adjustment, with doctors and soldiers being appointed at the border to investigate the epidemic. In addition, in order to prevent Tsarist Russia from encroaching on Chinese territory, the local government of Xinjiang in the late Qing Dynasty actively dispatched soldiers to guard the country's entrance and made full preparations to safeguard China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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