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Huynh Phu So's innate capacity of establishing Hao hoa buddhism in southwest region

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ABSTRACT

Huynh Phu So is the Hoa Hao Buddhist founder who established doctrines and canon laws of religion at a young age. The religion he founded so far has nearly one million believers throughout the Southwest region. It has also spread to other provinces and cities in the country. His teachings are always remembered and applied by believers in their lives in order to build a compassionate, peaceful and prosperous society. Through bibliographic documents and fieldwork in the community, the article analyzes his genius to explain the birth of an endogenous religion with a large number of followers in the Southwest region today.

Key words: *innate capacity Hoa Hao Buddhism, Huynh Phu So, doctrine, canon law*

1. Introduction

The definition of “gifted” (天賦) was explained in the Vietnamese Dictionary of the Institute of Languages (2001: 940) as being endowed, born with. A gifted person is a person who has a “special” ability such as revelation, or charisma, attraction, persuading the community by word and action... This is called a gifted person that ordinary people do not possess.

Study about Master Huynh Phu So through research papers on Hoa Hao Buddhism show that he is a gifted person. That is mentioned in Vuong Kim's book (1975), “*After a short time of using the miracles to treat the sick and preaching the oracle to awaken people, he caused an unprecedented religious movement*” and “*He had worked hard to explain the Four Debs (Tứ ân), the Three Karmas (Tam bảo), the Ten Goods (Thập*

*thiện), the Eightfold Path (Bát chánh đạo), the Four Noble Truths (Tứ diệu đế), etc. in a clear, easy-to-understand manner” (Vuong Kim, 1975). Or the book by Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1983) also mentioned to Huynh Phu So that was the modern embodiment and adaptation of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương to a profound change in the colonial period to establish Hoa Hao Buddhism. Pham Bich Hop (2007), Nguyen Thanh Xuan (2009), and Bui Thi Thu Ha (2012)..., when referring to Hoa Hao Buddhism, also emphasized the role of Huynh Phu So in founding, building, and developing this religion. Pascal Bourdeaux's research (2018) also mentioned “*Huynh Phu So, a young man aged twenty-one from a middle peasant family in Cochinchina, made a public announcement in his native village regarding terrible calamities which were going to occur. To this end he reinterpreted the basic teachings of a form of messianic Buddhism which would bring redemption and open up a path to salvation*” (P.302). Or, the Central Executive Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church (2018) has also published many books and articles about Master Huynh Phu So with the content emphasizing his role of establishing and building the Hoa Hao Buddhism in the Mekong Delta.*

In addition to the above resources, in order to better understand the role and authority of Master Huynh Phu So, we also conducted fieldwork in the community in 2020. We collected data about he from this religious community by in-depth interviews with people and leaders in the Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church. A total of 10 in-depth interviews were conducted, including 03 interviews by leaders and 7 interviews with followers. The content of these interviews focused on Master Huynh Phu So's role of founding, building religion, and religious legacy he left to present-day followers. Therefore, we have rich and specific material about Master Huynh Phu So to write this article.

2. Founding Hoa Hao Buddhism

According to published documents, Master Huynh Phu So was born on January 15, 1920, into a family of wealthy farmers in Hoa Hao village, Tan Chau district, Chau Doc province. His father, Master Huynh Cong Bo, who is the head of the village; his mother is Mrs. Le Thi Nham. Later, followers called his parents Monsignor and Notre-Dame. Master Huynh Phu So (called Xen in his family) is the third child, so he is often called Tu Xen¹.

When he was a child, he had a handsome, intelligent, agile, gentle and kind face. He has a talent for composing and improvising poetry that many people admire. This is considered a gift that he has. He was facilitated by his family to study, but due to poor health, he dropped out of school at the age of 15 after graduating from primary school. In the following years, his parents took him to many places for treatment, but there was no improvement, then he went to That Son area, An Giang for treatment. Here, he

became healthy, peaceful, voice inspirational, convincing and capable of healing others (Pham Thi Bich Hop, 2007). He also understood the doctrinal ideas of Buu Son Ky Huong and Tu An Hieu Nghia (Bui Thi Thu Ha, 2012). In 1936, he returned to Hoa Hao village, began to treat diseases and preached scriptures to the people. He advised them to practice mindfulness, do good to avoid evil, and turn to the Buddhadharma to avoid disaster. Thanks to that, he was converted and believed as his followers. When he preached, he considered himself Crazy, Mad with the opposite idea of the cunning, clever, and cruel people of the world. Moreover, he also regarded himself to be representative Buddha Tay An (founder of Buu Son Ky Huong) or God to preach to save the world; and in the section about the Master's Mission on May 18, 1942, he affirmed himself as a life savior (Central Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, 2018).

When all favorable conditions were met, on May 18, 1939 (July 4, 1939 lunar year), at his home, he held the Festival of Linh Thuu Son Trung Tho Manh, officially inaugurating his religion. The followers were initially mainly in and around Hoa Hao village, but then quickly developed and spread to the whole Southwest region. Devotees honor him as Lord Huynh, Venerable Master, Master. On the way of practicing religion, in order to bring happiness and peace to believers and the community as well as to contribute to the cause of national liberation, besides preaching religious doctrine, developing religion He was also involved in political organizations. On April 16, 1947, he disappeared at the age of 27. However, his images and poems of doctrine and oracles are always admired, worshiped, studied and practiced by the followers in their lives. And, Hoa Hao Buddhism continues to grow so that today it has nearly a million followers in Vietnam². In which, An Giang province is the place with the largest number of believers with more than 800,000 followers, 1,069 positions, 14 worship facilities and 135 local Executive Boards (An Giang Provincial Committee for Religious Affairs 2020) and is considered as the “capital” of Hoa Hao Buddhism.

However, it must be confirmed that the birth and development of Hoa Hao Buddhism in the Southwest region in the first half of the twentieth century also had many other dominant factors. Among them, the social context is a typical example. Because, at the beginning of the 20th century, the South region in general and the Southwest region in particular was a colony of France, so the people here suffered a lot. This made many scholars and working people to stand up to fight for the right of life. Thus, a series of uprisings broke out during this time such as the uprising of Tran Van Thanh, Tran Van Chat, Nguyen Trung Truc, and Phan Xich Long... but all failed. Therefore, during this period, people's life, especially poor farmers, fell into a serious crisis. Since then, they were always looking for new props in their lives, and one of those spiritual supports is religions (Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2017). Therefore, when Master Huynh Phu So, with his natural ability, preaching religious doctrines along with his healing ability, attracted a

large number of people in the Southwest region to pay attention, trust and then become a member of the community. Until today Hoa Hao Buddhism has nearly one million followers throughout the Southwest region.

3. Building doctrine and canon law for Hoa Hao Buddhism

****About doctrine***

The content of the doctrine of this religion is reflected in the works written by Master Huynh Phu So in prose and rhyme (poetry) such as: *Advice for people to meditate*, *The People of the Madness*, *Brief things to know of the sage...* These works were written from 1939 to about 1945, containing the basics of the doctrine of Hoa Hao Buddhism. That is the idea of “studying Buddha, cultivating people” and practicing “Four Great Gratuities”.

Master Huynh Phu So directed followers to “study Buddhism” which was to clearly recognize the evil dharma, to practice the true dharma and the good dharma in life briefly, easy to understand and easy to do³. In particular, his doctrine emphasizes the age of Dharma end, the period of decline. After that, Maitreya Buddha opened the Dragon Flower Festival to preach the Dharma, opening new flourishing period⁴. Therefore, he advised people to cultivate, live virtuously, and understand the cause and effect of Buddhism. He advocated that "studying Buddhism" must return to a good heart, not to be defiled, avoid extravagant forms, and must take the Pure Land method as the ultimate goal. As for the view of "cultivators", he explained in the book "The brief things to know of a sage practitioner" (written in May 1945), is to practice the Four Great Gratuities⁵, including: 1) Grateful to the ancestors and parents, 2) grateful to the country, 3) grateful to the Three Jewels, 4) grateful to the compatriots and humanity.

The Four Great Gratuities is considered as a “guideline” for believers towards building a good relationship in family life, responsibility to the homeland, the country, awareness towards humanity, and responsibility with Three Jewels. Fully practicing the Four Great Gratuities is to help family happiness, stable society, rich country, and a great world. In addition, he wanted his followers to be aware of themselves in social relationships, understand responsibilities and obligations to develop together. That is the humanity that Hoa Hao Buddhist followers need to aim for. Therefore, his doctrine of The Four Gratuities shows a clear sociality, in order to "bring humanity into a happy circle", and is a way to help believers eliminate bad karma, end sins for later liberation..

**** About canon law***

The Code of Canon Law was developed to direct believers to the principles of life to create good values for themselves, their families and society, and to maintain the morality of a layperson. This is clearly written by Master Huynh Phu So in his work

How to cultivate sage and conduct of a religious person as “...recently, there are some people who misunderstood and acted in some way that is not in accordance with the moral spirit, contrary to the spirit of morality compassion and the nobility of Buddhist teachings.... So from now, I hope that with a few brief things listed below, all good men and women in the religion will use their wisdom, meditate, and live according to the set rules, in order to avoid unfortunately events happening, and to preserve the dignity of Buddhism” (Central Board of Directors of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church 2018a). He laid out eight things⁶ in *the Devotional Advice*. Here, he emphasizes is on things that believers *must avoid* or *be forgiven* or *should do*, such as refusing to drink alcohol (maybe a little wine when there is a feast with outsiders, not a vegetarian day) to not get drunk, don't smoke opium, refusing gambling, respect true monks, help temples, do not offend other religions, educate themselves and send their children to schools for understanding, exercise to stay healthy, eat right and clean, do business without cheating and do honest jobs... (Central Administration Committee Hoa Hao Buddhist Congregation 2018a: 60-68). In addition, he also mentioned that believers must live according to the principles of right action and right livelihood. Right action, he said, is the righteous deeds to benefit themselves, their families and society; absolutely avoid illegal activities such as hoarding food, or doing occupations harmful to society such as drug trafficking, alcohol sales, ... and avoid fraudulent acts in commerce such as: shoplifting, cheating in measuring or counting... Right livelihood is righteous and pure life. To do so, one must avoid things that darken the spirit, give up all luxuries, self-control to find the place where immortality is born, meditation as body, wisdom as life, soul in lotus flower, super-born into Nirvana (Central Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church 2018b).

This shows that Master Huynh Phu So has absorbed teachings and canon law from previous religions such as Buddhism and Buu Son Ky Huong, but his gift is to have "simplified" this issue to be concise, easy to understand and easy to practice. That simplification makes the system of doctrine and canon law of this endogenous religion so special. These are also the core things to create religious ethics (monks) in order to direct believers to the righteous faith by eliminating superstition, bad habits in society, especially not against religions. , live an honest, upright, fair and charitable life to build a civilized and developed society.

4. Huynh Phu So's thought in the life of believers

In the life of Hoa Hao Buddhist followers, Huynh Phu So's doctrinal thoughts are always remembered and implemented by followers, especially in matters of right action, right livelihood, as well as commandments. This is actually recognized by us in the community when we interact with local authorities, particularly officers in charge of

security in the area. They all have good assessments about the economic life and security where the Hoa Hao Buddhist community lives. They said that Hoa Hao Buddhists, due to the influence of religious teachings and laws, always adhere to a “good life and good faith” lifestyle. Very few followers of this religion violates social security. They are all people who are dedicated to their work and do not do illegal things. Therefore, social security in the area where believers live is always appreciated.

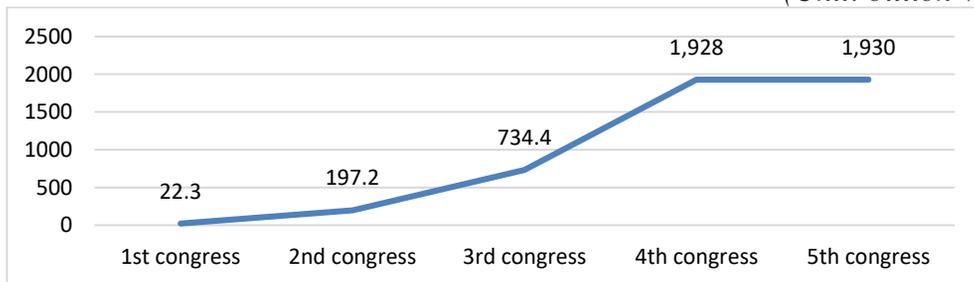
In economic activities, Hoa Hao Buddhist followers always keep in mind the teachings of Cardinal Huynh Phu So. That is to perform right action, not to do things that are harmful to oneself, family and society, not to deceive, not to cheat; as a female trader in An Giang said: *“I never thought that I would force people to buy goods, because it is very difficult for people to grow melons and rice seeds; Sometimes they even buy a few inches higher than others, because they think that if they use the money for charity, buying a few inches higher than outside is also considered as contributing a bit to people”*. (Nguyen Thi T, 53 years old, in An Giang, 2020). When participating in work, Hoa Hao Buddhists always show diligence and patience in their work, as commented by a non-Buddhist Hoa Hao: *“Hoa Hao people are very industrious and hardworking. They don't mind difficulty to complete their work. Thanks to that, there are many well-to-do families who are able to do charity work”*. (Nguyen V. M, 54 years old in An Giang, 2020). Or during the survey, we recorded a believer who is a leading civil servant in a state agency in An Giang, but still keeps his job as a farmer, and always does both jobs well. He said, *“There is lots of work in both office and home,, but it can be arranged. You have to take the time to complete both things to make good life (laughs). It can be said that diligence and hard work are common virtues of Hoa Hao believers. I'm a believer too, so I have this (laughs)”*. (Pham M. C, 52 years old, in An Giang, 2020). Or, so do other believers in An Giang, family members perform many jobs to make a living. They always complete their work and consider it as their duty to their family and society. This reflects the teachings of Cardinal Huynh Phu So as *“Holding hands back to the field; Need to work patiently Lac Long ancestor”*. (excerpt from the article *Agricultural Extension* written in 1945). That is the working spirit of Hoa Hao Buddhist followers.

Besides, Hoa Hao Buddhist followers also focus on sharing and helping the social community according to the teachings of Mater Huynh Phu So. That is, “we must let that money to help the poor, starving and disabled people” and “we must love each other like children of only one father, and guide each other on the moral path” (Board of Directors). Hoa Hao Buddhist Sangha Center 2018a: 78). This is demonstrated by Hoa Hao Buddhists by contributing funds to religious charity activities. The amount of funding statistics from reports through congresses (5 congresses) of the Central Executive Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church shows that the amount of charity is

always increasing. Specifically, at the first congress on April 19, 1999, the total funding for charity in 5 years (from 1995 to 1999) was VND 22.3 billion. By the second congress on May 9, 2004, the total donation was 197.2 billion. During the third congress on May 21, 2009, the charity amount was 734.4 billion. The fourth congress took place on May 22, 2014, the charity amount was more than 1,928 billion. The 5th Congress took place on June 5, 2019, the total amount of charity was 1,930 billion. This is shown in the following chart:

Charity funds of Hoa Hao Buddhism through congresses

(Unit: billion VND)



(Source: quoted reports of congresses)

Charity activities of this religious follower take place in many forms such as building houses of compassion, solidarity houses for the poor, building bridges, building roads, supporting study and talent promotion funds, and buying ambulances for transportation. free for patients in the area, organize charity kitchens in hospitals... This was recorded in our field diary when surveying in Dong Thap and An Giang: “*N.V.N believer is a business owner and a member of the local Board of Trustees in Dong Thap. Each year, his family deducts from the family's income to contribute more than 1 billion VND to charity. Another believer who works on an agricultural farm in Dong Thap, Mr. T.V.H, always uses his income to contribute to the construction of bridges in this area. The value of each bridge is about 200 million VND, his family always supports more than 50% of the cost; The rest of the money is contributed by the people. Today, 12 bridges have been completed. In An Giang, there is a case where a family of N.V.X believers, every month, contributes money to buy oil (7 million/month) for ambulances used to transport patients. This family also regularly supports funding for the construction of the bridge (from 5 to 10 million VND/tree) and participates in contributing funds to build houses of compassion for the poor*” (Excerpt from Duong Hoang Loc's field diary, year one. 2020). This is the expression of the thought of Master Huynh Phu So in the religious life of this religious believer. That thought has always been instilled in every believer, because they were exposed to and memorized his teachings from an early age. “*From a young age, I already knew the teachings of the Master, because my parents and neighbors all knew them. They often read and recite these teachings*” (Tran Thi M, 32 years old, in An Giang, 2019). In addition, at

each local Board of Trustees, there is a person in charge of disseminating the doctrine. They are responsible for opening a catechism refresher course to "explain and guide believers to practice in accordance with doctrine, canon law, and rituals according to the Master's guiding principles"⁷. They are professional catechists who receive annual doctrinal refresher training according to the schedule of the Central Committee. *"I regularly attend these doctrinal refresher courses. Although the doctrine is something I already know by heart, applying it to practice is different from time to time. Because today's life has changed a lot. They do many jobs, their lives are also getting better, they are exposed to more modern media, so if they want to teach well so that many people can understand and can be applied in life, they must attend refresher courses to know how to teach. be suitable. Each such refresher course lasts up to 15 days"* (Nguyen Van A. 52 years old, in charge of catechism at the Board of Directors in Dong Thap, 2020). Thanks to that, Hoa Hao Buddhists quickly understood and naturally applied his thoughts to life.

Besides that, Hoa Hao Buddhist followers in the Southwest region also live in hamlets that people call "religious village", meaning the place where Hoa Hao Buddhist families gather. These religious villages usually have from a few dozen to over 100 Hoa Hao Buddhist families. Due to the concentrated living, the religious community is strongly expressed, by the same faith, the same expression of religious behavior. Since then, they form a unity in the religious moral community. This forms a system of "cross control" among believers, in addition to the control of local Boards of Trustees. Therefore, the behaviors that are contrary to religious teachings, with the teachings of Master Huynh Phu So of believers rarely happen. *"To say that we control each other is an exaggeration, but because we live in the same neighborhood; one house opens the other door; cough a voice next door also know. Therefore, anyone who does bad things, goes against the traditional morals, contrary to the teachings of the Master, knows immediately. Neighbors will advise them. If conciliation does not work, then stop playing together; that family is seen as isolated in the community"*. (Nguyen Tan H. 51 years old, position on the Executive Board in An Giang, 2020). Hence, in life, followers of this religion always aim for a good community, equality, charity, and sharing. That is the influence from the thought, the teachings of Master Huynh Phu So have built up their religion.

4. Conclusion

It can be said that, with a relatively young age (less than 20 years old), Master Huynh Phu So founded a religion, built up doctrines and canon laws for his religion quite well. Especially in the period of 7 years (from 1939 to 1945), he wrote a series of works (both prose and rhyme) with simple words, but containing many philosophical implications

about about life, about being human, about the idea of liberating from the suffering of the world...helping believers have a basis to apply well in their religious life. Compared to people of the same age and contemporaries as him, maybe compared to posterity, not many people can do it. Because of the religion he founded, the doctrinal ideas he built up to this day are still valid in the lives of the community of believers, and are applied by believers throughout their lives. That is honesty in life, always focusing on right action and right livelihood in making a living, loving and sharing humanity's difficulties in order to build a life of kindness, peace and prosperity together. In our opinion, the things that Master Huynh Phu So did for religion and for his community of followers express the genius of a religious leader. And, this, not many people can do it.

Note

- (1) People in the South often call the first child as “Second Brother/ Sister”, so the third child is called “Fourth Brother/ Sister”.
- (2) According to the statistics of the General Statistics Office on Population and Housing in 2019, Hoa Hao Buddhist followers in Vietnam are 983,079 people (2020: table 3, p.21)
- (3) Evil includes: three karmas (body, speech, mind), seven emotions (sadness, love, hate, happiness, angry, sex, and positivity), five aggregates of clinging (form, sensation, perception, mental formations, consciousness), four bad habits (gambling, alcohol, boys and girls, fame). 2) True dharmas are the dharmas that dispel the delusions to brighten up wisdom and advance to the enlightenment of truth through the teachings: the Four Noble Truths (the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Truths of Cessation, the Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Path), the Twelve Links , Five slips (life slips, ants slip, afflictions slip, sentient beings slip, life slips); 3) Good dharma includes: Eightfold Path (Right View, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Speech, Right Thought, Right Progress, Right Concentration, Right Concentration), Eight Forbearance (patience, callousness, forbearance, forbearance in virtue, forbearance) (excerpt from Dignitaries of the Central Executive Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, in An Giang, 2020).
- (4) According to the interpretation of Hoa Hao Buddhism, the world exists as the rotation of a circle. That circle is divided into three parts corresponding to three periods: upper, middle and lower. The new flourishing period is the beginning of the circle. People living in this period were gentle, virtuous people. Evil people, bad people almost do not exist. To the end of this period, evil people and bad people begin to appear. This also ends of period, enters to the middle ages. People living in this age include both good and evil. But, at the end of the Middle Ages, there were more evil people than good people. When the number of evil people is superior, it is also the beginning of the period of decline, and towards the end of this period, there will be more evil people and bad people. The present is the final stage of the new generation, after which the new flourishing period will be re-established (quoted from Dignitaries of the Central Executive Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, in An Giang, 2020).
- (5) The Four Great Gratitudes include: 1) *Grateful to the ancestors and parents*: In order to repay the favor of our foster parents from birth to adulthood, we try to listen diligently, not to be distracted, see our parents making mistakes, doing things contrary to humanity, we advise. We need to take care of a good family to keep our parents happy. When your parents pass away, pray for the soul to escape. Parents are born thanks to their ancestors, so when you are grateful to your parents, you must be grateful to your ancestors. Paying respect to the ancestors is not to do anything to dishonor the sect, to do righteous things to overcome suffering if the ancestors do something wrong. 2) *Grateful to the country*: We must live by our country and homeland, so we have the duty to protect the country when

it is trampled by invaders, to help the homeland and make it strong. Make every effort to sacrifice for the homeland, do not help the enemy cause damage to the country. That's how we repay the country. 3) *Grateful to the Three Jewels*: People need to rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha to open their minds. Because the Buddha always guides and saves sentient beings from the domain of suffering, we should respect the Buddha, trust and believe in his life-saving career, and follow the instructions given by the monks. Therefore, it is our duty to follow the virtues of our ancestors in order to make our minds clear to come to the path of liberation, to guide the fallen, and especially to continue to open up the moral foundation for the spirit of compassion and charity is spread all over the world. 4) *Grateful to the compatriots and humanity*: We are of the same race, supporting each other in danger, closely related, inseparable. Therefore, we must try to help them repay the favor. Our nation must rely on humanity, that is, thanks to other peoples and must be grateful to them. Think of them as we think of ourselves and our fellow men (Central Board of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church 2018a: 20).

- (6) These eight things include: First thing: We should not drink alcohol, gamble, opium, play along the way of prostitution, must keep the morality of the three responsibilities and five personalities. The second thing: We should not be lazy, we should be thrifty and fervent, take care of our business and practice being honest, should not quarrel with each other, forgive each other's sins while angry. The third thing: We should not over-dress and take advantage of money, but instead forget benevolence and morality, don't be selfish and subservient to the rich and the poor. The fourth thing: We should not call Heaven, Buddha, God, or Saint, but send a message or curse, because the Holy Spirit does not offend Me. The fifth thing: We should not eat buffalo, dog, or cow meat and should not kill or kill animals to worship any God, because the Holy Spirit never uses bribes to forgive us our sins, because if we commit crimes, we will benefit and those who eat glass offerings and cure their illnesses are Evil Gods, if we make offerings to them forever, they'll get used to them and they will harm us. Article Six: We should not burn paper money, gold, silver, paper clothes that cost unreasonable money, because the realm of Pluto never takes our bribe, nor can we use it anymore, we must let that money be wasted. provided to those who lost their way, hungry, and disabled. The seventh thing: Faced with anything about life or morality, we must consider it rationally and then judge it. Article Eight: In summary, we must love each other like children of only father, guide each other on the path of morality, if anyone can keep their full light and return to the Western world to rest and learn the Way completely in order to return. saving sentient beings (Central Board of Directors of Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, 2018a, pp. 77-78).

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