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Ho Chi Minh's Marxist–Humanist Conception of Ethnic Unity: Theoretical Foundations, Revolutionary Praxis, and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract—This study reinterprets Ho Chi Minh's conception of ethnic unity through the lens of Marxist–Leninist dialectical materialism and Vietnamese humanism, highlighting its historical formation, ideological coherence, and enduring policy relevance. In Vietnam's multi-ethnic context, ethnic solidarity was not merely a political slogan but a revolutionary imperative for both national liberation and socialist construction. Employing qualitative content analysis of primary sources including *Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap* (The Complete Works of Ho Chi Minh), Communist Party documents, and official speeches, this research situates Ho Chi Minh's thought within comparative frameworks of ethnicity, nationalism, and postcolonial socialism. The findings reveal that Ho Chi Minh synthesized Marxist class-based internationalism with Vietnamese cultural traditions, advancing a model of ethnic relations grounded in equality, mutual respect, and unity in diversity. His approach diverged from both assimilationist and liberal–pluralist models by emphasizing moral solidarity, inclusive governance, and cultural preservation. The study contributes to the theoretical enrichment of Vietnamese political thought and offers insights into contemporary challenges of social cohesion and ethnic policy in Vietnam. It argues that Ho Chi Minh's

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vision remains a foundational paradigm for reconciling national unity with cultural diversity in socialist nation-building.

Keywords--Ho Chi Minh's thought, Marxism–Leninism, ethnic unity, nationalism, socialism, postcolonial development.

Introduction

Vietnam's history of prolonged resistance against foreign domination—from centuries under Chinese feudal rule to decades of French colonialism and American intervention—has forged a collective identity centered on independence, unity, and social justice. Within this historical trajectory, the management of ethnic diversity has remained a defining challenge for both scholars and policymakers. Vietnam's fifty-four officially recognized ethnic groups embody not only cultural richness but also complex questions of governance, equity, and integration. Despite extensive scholarship on Ho Chi Minh's political thought, systematic studies that situate his conception of ethnic unity within the framework of Marxist–Leninist dialectical materialism and Vietnamese cultural traditions remain limited. This article seeks to fill that scholarly gap by exploring Ho Chi Minh's model of ethnic solidarity as both a revolutionary praxis and a theoretical construct. His thought diverged significantly from contemporary models of ethnic governance such as Mao Zedong's class-centered homogenization in China or Jawaharlal Nehru's liberal pluralism in India. Instead, Ho Chi Minh integrated Marxist–Leninist principles with traditional Vietnamese humanism (*nhân nghĩa*) to articulate a vision of unity that harmonized equality, cultural respect, and shared national purpose. This synthesis provided the ideological foundation for both Vietnam's anti-colonial struggle and the subsequent socialist project of nation-building.

By situating Ho Chi Minh's conception of ethnic unity within broader regional and global discourses on ethnicity, nationalism, and postcolonial development, the study demonstrates its philosophical depth and contemporary relevance. It argues that Ho Chi Minh's approach offers not only a historical model of inclusive governance but also enduring insights for addressing current issues of ethnic integration, cultural rights, and social justice in Vietnam's socialist modernization.

Literature Review

Ethnic unity has been a consistent and foundational theme throughout Ho Chi Minh's political thought and revolutionary practice. His vision of a unified multi-ethnic Vietnam was shaped by his early exposure to colonial oppression and deepened through his engagement with global socialist movements. This section critically reviews both foundational Vietnamese sources and recent international scholarship,

organized around three major themes: ideological continuity, cultural assimilation vs. pluralism, and models of nation-building.

A substantial portion of the existing literature on Ho Chi Minh's ethnic policy is based on state-published sources, including *Ho Chi Minh Toan Tap* (2004), especially Volumes 2, 3, 4, 9, and 12, and the official documents of the Communist Party of Vietnam (e.g., the 9th and 13th National Congress Resolutions). These works provide direct access to Ho Chi Minh's writings and speeches, where he consistently emphasized the synthesis of nationalism and internationalism, advocating for ethnic solidarity as a precondition for national liberation and socialist construction. He warned against narrow nationalism and stressed that national independence must align with global movements for liberation and justice.

Complementing these primary sources are biographical and historical accounts by Vietnamese scholars such as [Tien Dinh \(1994\)](#), [Giap Vo Nguyen \(1994\)](#), and [Giau Tran Van](#), which contextualize Ho Chi Minh's thought within the revolutionary history of Vietnam. These works underscore how Ho's ideas were translated into practice through key milestones such as the founding of the Viet Minh Front (1941) and the August Revolution (1945). They affirm that ethnic unity was not only a theoretical proposition but a practical strategy for Vietnam's survival and development.

However, much of this scholarship, while foundational, is now dated and heavily reliant on state-published tracts. Recent scholarship in Vietnamese Studies and comparative political thought has opened new avenues for critically assessing Ho Chi Minh's legacy, especially regarding ethnicity and nation-building. For instance, [Tuong Vu's *Paths to Development in Asia* \(2010\)](#) situates Vietnam within broader debates about socialist modernity and developmental states, raising questions about ideological continuity from Ho's era to contemporary governance. [Lee \(2020\)](#), in his article "Political Engagement and Ethnic Consciousness in Vietnam," offers an ethnographic perspective on the political agency of ethnic minorities, pointing to a more complex picture of integration, negotiation, and marginalization. Furthermore, anthropological studies by [Gerald Hickey \(1982\)](#) and [Oscar Salemink \(2003\)](#) have critically examined the challenges of upland ethnic minorities under socialist nation-building. These works argue that state-driven models of cultural assimilation, while rhetorically inclusive, often marginalized non-Kinh identities and practices. This scholarship calls into question the celebratory view of ethnic policy found in official discourse and suggests that Ho Chi Minh's legacy has been selectively interpreted to justify top-down approaches to national integration.

By engaging with both Vietnamese and international literature, this review highlights the contested nature of Ho Chi Minh's thought on ethnicity. While his writings laid the ideological groundwork for a pluralistic and inclusive model of national unity, the

implementation of these ideas has provoked ongoing debates over cultural homogenization, ethnic inequality, and the limits of socialist multiculturalism. Understanding this tension is essential to any comprehensive reassessment of Ho Chi Minh's political legacy in contemporary Vietnam and its relevance to the broader discourse on ethnicity, nationalism, and development in postcolonial states (Meier-Pesti & Kirchler, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that synthesizes Marxist-Leninist dialectical materialism, Ho Chi Minh's political philosophy, and contemporary postcolonial and regional theories on ethnicity and nation-building. The purpose of this framework is to offer a multidimensional lens through which Ho Chi Minh's conception of ethnic unity can be critically examined in both historical and contemporary contexts. Rather than viewing ethnicity as a static or purely cultural category, the framework emphasizes its dynamic relationship with class, national liberation, and socialist development in Vietnam.

At the core of this framework are four interrelated dimensions:

First, the *sacred and inalienable nature of national independence* is treated as the moral and political foundation of Ho Chi Minh's thought. Rooted in both Enlightenment ideals and anti-colonial praxis, Ho Chi Minh asserted that every nation has an inherent right to sovereignty, self-determination, and dignity. This principle aligns with postcolonial theories such as those of Frantz Fanon, which emphasize the primacy of national liberation in the struggle against colonial domination. Within this context, national independence is not merely the absence of foreign control but must lead to genuine material improvement for all people.

Second, the framework highlights the *dialectical relationship between nation and class*. Drawing on Marxist-Leninist analysis, Ho Chi Minh emphasized that in colonial contexts, the contradiction between the oppressed nation and imperialism takes precedence over intra-national class antagonisms (Minh, 2004c). However, he did not reject class struggle; rather, he subordinated it tactically to the immediate objective of national liberation. This perspective enriches classical Marxist theory by contextualizing the national question within colonial realities and prioritizing unity over division.

Third, the concept of *ethnic unity as a strategic and enduring force in socialist nation-building* is central to Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary vision. Unlike assimilationist models of ethnic governance (e.g., Mao Zedong's homogenization policies). Ho Chi Minh proposed a synthesis of unity and diversity rooted in shared struggle and mutual respect. This vision resonates with contemporary anthropological critiques of top-down integration

policies (e.g., Hickey, 1982; Salemink, 2003), while reaffirming the importance of grassroots solidarity and cultural recognition in maintaining national cohesion.

Collectively, these dimensions provide a holistic basis for interpreting Ho Chi Minh's ethnic thought not as a doctrinal set of propositions but as a flexible and responsive ideological system. It is both historically situated and future-oriented, capable of guiding Vietnam's contemporary efforts to manage ethnic diversity, reduce inequalities, and build a socialist society rooted in unity and justice. By adopting this theoretical framework, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Ho Chi Minh's enduring legacy and its applicability to present-day policy-making in multi-ethnic, postcolonial states like Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh's Thought on Ethnic Unity: A Revolutionary Framework for National Liberation and Socialist Construction

Ho Chi Minh's thought on ethnicity was not a spontaneous reaction to colonial conditions, but a comprehensive ideological system grounded in Marxism-Leninism and profoundly shaped by his revolutionary praxis. In the context of the proletarian revolution, Ho Chi Minh approached the ethnic question primarily as a national question under colonial domination. His philosophically rich and politically strategic ideas articulate a path of unity, resistance, and development. The core of this thought can be clarified through four foundational dimensions:

First, Independence and Freedom as Sacred, Inviolable Rights.

Ho Chi Minh began from a moral and experiential truth: a people without freedom suffer the deepest form of oppression. His poignant lines, "There are thousands of bitter things in life / Nothing is more bitter than losing freedom" (Minh 2004b), encapsulate the existential urgency of national liberation. For Ho Chi Minh, patriotism was not merely emotional fervor, but a political and ethical imperative. Drawing from the American and French Declarations of Rights, he universalized the claim: "All peoples in the world are born equal..." (Minh, 2004b).

However, this equality was meaningless without material security: "People only see the value of independence when they have enough to eat and enough to wear" (Minh, 2004c). Independence, for him, must be materially transformative. Ho Chi Minh's unyielding stance on national sovereignty ("Vietnam belongs to the Vietnamese people") (Minh, 2004c) led to one of the most powerful revolutionary slogans of the 20th century: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" (Minh, 2004a, p. 108). These principles shaped his leadership during the anti-colonial resistance and the foundational vision of a modern Vietnam.

Second, Harmonizing National and Class Issues

In developing Marxist-Leninist theory for colonial conditions, Ho Chi Minh advanced a distinctive interpretation of the relationship between nation and class. In his view,

the contradiction between colonized peoples and imperialist powers was more acute and urgent than intra-national class antagonisms. Thus, the national question required priority. Liberation of the nation became the precondition for class liberation.

Importantly, Ho Chi Minh never abandoned class analysis. He insisted that “national and class interests must be unified,” especially in times of foreign aggression. He warned against letting class distinctions undermine national solidarity. By framing national liberation as the shared mission of all social classes, Ho Chi Minh created a unifying revolutionary discourse that mobilized peasants, workers, and intellectuals alike.

Third, National Independence Associated with Socialism

When solving national issues and facing the choice of history, Ho Chi Minh affirmed that the development path of the Vietnamese revolution is national independence associated with socialism. Since being exposed to Marxism-Leninism and studying *Lenin's Thesis on National and Colonial Issues*, Ho Chi Minh made the statement that “to save the country and liberate the nation, there is no other way than the path of proletarian revolution!” (Minh, 2004d). He continued to affirm that “both of these liberations (national and class) can only be the cause of communism and world revolution” (Minh, 2004e). Right in *the 1930 Brief Platform and Brief Strategy*, Ho Chi Minh determined that the Vietnamese revolution would go through two stages, a bourgeois democratic revolution and a land revolution, to move towards a communist society. The above arguments demonstrated that the path of the Vietnamese revolution had to aim at the goal of national liberation, class liberation, and human liberation from all oppression, exploitation, and injustice to move towards a society “in which the free development of each person is the condition for the free development of all people”.

Throughout its history, Vietnam has endured continuous invasions by foreign powers, making the pursuit of independence, freedom, national liberation, and unification the highest and most urgent aspiration of its people. Ho Chi Minh emphasized that national independence and socialism are inherently interconnected. National independence serves as a prerequisite for building socialism, while socialism is both the goal and the fundamental condition to guarantee a prosperous, free, and fulfilling life for the people. Moreover, socialism acts as a safeguard for maintaining true national independence. Ho Chi Minh asserted that independence is meaningless unless it directly improves the well-being of the people: “If the country is independent but the people do not enjoy freedom and happiness, then independence is meaningless!” (Minh, 2004c). He further emphasized the material foundation of freedom: “People only know the value of freedom and independence when they have enough to eat and wear” (Minh, 2004c). These statements highlight his belief that national liberation must be accompanied by social and economic justice, ensuring that independence is not merely political but also translates into tangible benefits for the people. Thus, the

principle of national independence associated with socialism became a consistent and defining feature of Ho Chi Minh's thought. It reflects both the objective law of national liberation and the inseparable relationship between national liberation, class liberation, and human liberation. By linking these goals, Ho Chi Minh established a revolutionary pathway that not only freed the nation from colonial rule but also laid the foundation for a just and equitable society. If only national oppression is eliminated but exploitation and class oppression are not eliminated, the people will not be liberated. Therefore, when independence is achieved, socialism must be advanced because only socialism can ensure food, clothing, and true happiness for the people.

Therefore, national independence associated with socialism is the right choice for Ho Chi Minh, for all Vietnamese people, and the historical reality in the early years of the 20th century. That right choice has helped the Vietnamese people maintain independence, freedom, and national unity and steadily move towards socialism. That is the law of development of the Vietnamese revolution; thereby proving that the development trend of Vietnamese society is consistent with the general trend of history and today's era.

Fourth, Patriotism Coupled with Proletarian Internationalism

Ho Chi Minh rejected narrow nationalism in favor of a patriotism rooted in international solidarity. "The proletariat all over the world are brothers," he wrote, highlighting the Vietnamese revolution as part of the global struggle for emancipation. He repeatedly warned against the degeneration of patriotism into chauvinism, racism, or hegemonism forces that, in his view, could destroy both nations and international movements. This fusion of national and international solidarity became a moral and strategic compass. Ho Chi Minh's ability to connect Vietnam's struggle with that of other colonized peoples gained global resonance, turning him into not only a national leader but a symbol of the 20th-century decolonization movement.

Contemporary Relevance: A Blueprint for Ethnic Policy and Global Solidarity

Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on ethnicity remain deeply influential in shaping Vietnam's ethnic policy. Recognizing the diversity within the Vietnamese nation, the Communist Party has embraced its fourfold principles: equality, solidarity, mutual assistance, and shared development. Official documents (e.g., Communist Party of Vietnam, 2001; 2006) consistently affirm that ethnic unity is a "long-term strategic issue," vital to national modernization and socialist construction.

Throughout his life, Ho Chi Minh emphasized the need to uplift disadvantaged ethnic minorities through targeted socio-economic investments, education, and cadre training. He condemned the neglect of highland peoples, urging party cadres to help them "in all aspects." This legacy laid the groundwork for numerous contemporary programs aimed at reducing the development gap between lowland and upland areas. Crucially, Ho Chi Minh's approach did not paternalize ethnic minorities but respected

their cultural identity and agency. By linking ethnic policy with national strength, he redefined unity not as uniformity, but as coordinated diversity.

Significance for the World Revolutionary Movement

Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on ethnicity, together with his passionate and vibrant revolutionary activities, encouraged the spirit and promoted the world's revolutionary movement. His thoughts were like a bright torch that helped colonial peoples realize their national sovereignty and fight for that national independence, and at the same time, called for the support of the peoples and progressive forces in the world for the national liberation of colonial and dependent countries.

Based on absorbing and inheriting the Marxist-Leninist doctrine on the ethnic issue and colonial revolution, Ho Chi Minh supplemented and developed the ethnic issue to a new level, creating a theoretical basis for revolutionary movements in the world, especially revolutionary movements in colonial countries. He became a national liberation hero and had a strong influence on national liberation movements around the world. His convincing arguments contributed to awakening colonial peoples, helping them find the right revolutionary path, strategy, and method to stand up and fight for their liberation.

Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on the national issue became a symbol of the aspiration to liberate his compatriots and his nation from unjust oppression, and a torch for other peoples in the world to liberate all other countries from the oppressive regime of colonialism. He was a pioneer and worked selflessly in that struggle. His efforts contributed significantly to the process of "decolonization", completely collapsing old colonialism on a worldwide scale. Ignacio Gonzalez Janzen (a Mexican journalist and political activist) affirmed that "President Ho Chi Minh was not only an outstanding leader of his people, a key figure in the decolonization process in the 20th century, but also a great teacher in the subject of winning freedom for peoples" ([Xolomenxep, 1976](#)). Ho Chi Minh's national spirit and national liberation have always been praised by friends around the world. Dr. Ahmed, former director of the UNESCO Asia-Pacific region, once affirmed that "there are only a few historical figures who become part of the legend while they are still alive, and Uncle Ho Chi Minh is one of them. He will be remembered not only as the liberator of the Fatherland and the colonized people but also as a modern philosopher who brings a new perspective and hope to those who fight relentlessly to eliminate injustice and inequality from this earth" ([Giau, 1993](#)).

Significance of the implementation of ethnic policies in Vietnam

Ho Chi Minh's thought represents a priceless intellectual heritage for the Vietnamese nation and serves as the ideological foundation and guiding principle for all activities of the Communist Party and the State. Among his many contributions, Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on ethnicity hold profound significance in both national liberation and

nation-building, particularly in the context of a multi-ethnic country like Vietnam. Recognizing the enduring relevance of Ho Chi Minh's perspective, the Communist Party of Vietnam has affirmed that "the ethnic issue is a fundamental, long-term strategic matter, and at the same time, an urgent issue of the Vietnamese revolution today" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2001, p. 34). This statement highlights the dual nature of the ethnic question, not only as a historical and structural challenge but also as an immediate priority requiring continuous attention and strategic solutions. Further emphasizing the importance of ethnic unity, the Party reiterates that "the ethnic issue and ethnic unity hold a long-term strategic position in our country's revolutionary cause. The ethnic groups within the great Vietnamese family are united, equal, and respectful of one another, supporting each other's progress. Together, they strive to successfully carry out the industrialization and modernization of the country, as well as build and protect the socialist Vietnamese Fatherland" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2006, p. 121). These declarations underscore the Party's consistent policy of resolving ethnic issues effectively and fostering unity among ethnic groups as a means to strengthen the nation's internal resilience. This unity is not merely a moral or ideological aspiration but a prerequisite for the successful implementation of national liberation, the defense of independence, and the construction of socialism. By applying Ho Chi Minh's thoughts on ethnicity, Vietnam continues to harness the strength of its diverse ethnic communities, ensuring that national solidarity remains a driving force in the country's revolutionary path and long-term development.

Throughout his lifetime, President Ho Chi Minh consistently prioritized ethnic issues and ethnic affairs, recognizing them as fundamental to the Vietnamese revolution. He firmly believed that ethnic unity was essential for national development and social progress, emphasizing that "ethnic compatriots, regardless of their numbers, must love and help one another, uniting closely like brothers and sisters in one family to build a common Fatherland and socialism, ensuring happiness and prosperity for all ethnic groups". This principle of equality, solidarity, and mutual support among ethnic groups laid the theoretical foundation for the Communist Party of Vietnam's ethnic policies. The Party has upheld Ho Chi Minh's vision by establishing four core principles in its approach to ethnic affairs: equality, solidarity, mutual assistance, and shared development. These guiding principles continue to shape Vietnam's policies, ensuring that ethnic communities work together in harmony to strengthen national unity and advance socialist construction.

In particular, he paid special attention and had deep sympathy for ethnic minorities, as ethnic minorities were disadvantaged in terms of socio-economic conditions as well as opportunities for personal development. He advised that "under the colonial and feudal regimes, the people in the highlands lived very hard lives. Today, the people in the highlands are free and equal, not oppressed and exploited as before. However, their material and cultural life has not improved much. That is because the leaders do not pay enough attention to the people in the highlands. On behalf of the Central and

the Government, he assigns the cadres from the province to the commune to make every effort to help the people in the highlands in all aspects.” His advice became the starting point for our State to implement ethnic policies and issue subsidies, special incentives, and investment in development for ethnic minorities so that they had the opportunity to rise, reduce poverty and backwardness, and catch up with the general development level of the whole country. Today, our Party and State are continuing to carry out their will to make the mountainous areas catch up with the lowlands and to make ethnic minorities enjoy political, economic, and cultural benefits.

Ho Chi Minh advocated training, fostering, and promoting cadres in mountainous areas, helping them progress, not making excuses or doing it for them. The advice on solidarity, love, and mutual assistance among ethnic groups has become the starting point for our Party and State to build a consistent policy on ethnic groups.

It can be seen that Ho Chi Minh’s thought on the issue of equality, solidarity, and mutual assistance among ethnic groups is still the theoretical foundation for the ethnic policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the orientation and guidance for practical activities to effectively solve ethnic issues in the cause of building and defending the country. The State has had specific policies to develop the socio-economy for mountainous areas, respect and promote the cultural identity of ethnic minorities, increase the number of ethnic minority cadres, implement equality among ethnic groups, and build the great national unity bloc. These are also the efforts to gradually narrow the gap between the highlands and lowlands, between rural and urban areas, and between the Kinh people and ethnic minorities. The application of Ho Chi Minh’s ideology on ethnicity has helped the Party and State build a strong national solidarity bloc, creating endogenous strength for the country to rise in all circumstances. Thanks to the correct and consistent implementation of ethnic policies, the national solidarity bloc has been made, the socio-economy has been developed, and the lives of ethnic minorities in remote, isolated, and particularly difficult areas have been improved. In addition, the correct implementation of ethnic policies according to Ho Chi Minh’s thought has also helped us respect the religious beliefs, cultural traditions, customs and good practices of the ethnic groups, contributing to eliminating the plots of hostile forces that take advantage of religion and beliefs to cause social disorder and affect the prestige of the Party and the State. In particular, Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts on ethnic issues have helped our country gather all the material, spiritual, and intellectual strength of the entire nation into the cause of building socialism, inspiring and making use of the national strength and intelligence of the Vietnamese people.

Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh’s thoughts on ethnicity constitute a sophisticated and integrative political philosophy that continues to shape Vietnam’s approach to ethnic governance

and national development. At its core, his vision advanced a dialectical synthesis between national independence and socialism, between class solidarity and ethnic unity, and between patriotism and internationalism. This ideological framework provided not only the foundation for revolutionary mobilization in the 20th century but also a model for inclusive nation-building in a postcolonial, multi-ethnic context. Yet, the applicability of this vision in contemporary Vietnam must be critically assessed. In the 21st century, rapid economic restructuring, regional inequalities, and the complex aspirations of ethnic minority communities have presented new challenges that test the flexibility and responsiveness of existing frameworks. Episodes of protest and unrest, particularly in the Central Highlands, indicate that official discourses of unity may obscure unresolved tensions and systemic disparities. Ho Chi Minh's ideals, while foundational, must be reinterpreted to meet the demands of pluralism, cultural rights, and participatory governance in a rapidly modernizing society.

This calls for a renewed scholarly and policy-oriented engagement with Ho Chi Minh's ethnic thought not as a fixed doctrine, but as a living intellectual tradition open to contextual adaptation. His enduring principles of equality, mutual assistance, and cultural respect offer a normative compass but must be translated into policies that are empirically informed and socially accountable. Future research should pursue three key directions: archival studies of the Communist Party of Vietnam's evolving ethnic policy directives; critical discourse analysis of how Ho Chi Minh's legacy is invoked in contemporary governance; and ethnographic and oral history projects that foreground the voices and lived experiences of ethnic minority populations. Together, these approaches can illuminate the dynamic interplay between ideology, policy, and practice and contribute to more inclusive and equitable models of ethnic relations in Vietnam and beyond.

Ho Chi Minh's vision of ethnic unity remains historically significant and normatively powerful. However, its continued relevance depends on the extent to which it can be reimagined to respond to contemporary conditions, bridging revolutionary ideals and the complex realities of diversity, identity, and justice in a changing world.

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