

Reflective Paper:

## **One year in Paris, France!**

**» Experience report &  
reflection of the first three months «**

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# 1 Abstract

Completing two semesters of student exchange at SciencesPo in Paris, France was one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had in my life – also being cultural experienced through my abroad study at St. Mary's College of Maryland. The highlight was being able to immerse myself in the French culture, exist as a local and study with local students as well as students from all over the world. The lowlight was my experience to have had initial difficulties at the beginning of my time to deal with some of the French-specific habits and getting adapted to it.

If I could change one thing about my exchange experience, I wouldn't change anything; I would go back to the International Office of St. Mary's College to proceed once more with my application for an international exchange to Pairs. I have learned so much about myself, learnt a new language and made so many friends from all over the world that if I was to travel to any country now, I would have someone to visit and stay with.

These experiences and impressions I made, I want to take as the motive of this reflective paper to share them with you in more detail. To provide you with a holistic and comprehensive inside view, following topics are part of this reflective paper:

- my academic, professional and personal goals;
- a comparison of my experience before my stay in Paris and now;
- my interaction with the French culture and what I learned out of this;
- skills I needed to develop to have a valuable stay in Paris and to come along with the new culture;
- the experience I gained at SciencesPo and what I can take home to St. Mary's College of Maryland;



Picture 1: One of the 19 Sciences Po locations in Paris

## **2 Introduction**

### **2.1 About me and how it started**

To better understand my experience I gained during my exchange year and the described situations in the subsequent chapter, I would like to give a short abstract about me and my background idea why I am participating on the international student exchange program. My name is Emily Ma, I am 20 years old, and live since summer 2007 in St. Mary's City. My original home is Beijing, in China, where I spent my whole childhood. Before I came to US my only abroad experiences were to European countries as Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands and to Asian countries like Thailand or Singapore. Therefore, my first trip to US to start a new paragraph of my life was very exiting for me.

To fulfill my desire to study abroad I came to St. Mary's College of Maryland to make my Bachelor in Economics and Mathematics. During the first months at St. Mary's College I heard about the exchanges St. Mary's College offers to partner universities around the world and was prompt enthusiastic. After my national exchange to Baton Rouge, Louisiana (Louisiana State University), in 2008, I was sure about it to apply for the international exchange program. Already the experiences I gained during the national exchange – to see and to undergo the national specifics – were for me, as a non US-citizen, very impressive. My choice for the abroad program immediately falls on Paris. In February 2009 I started to get the needed information and to start with the application process. At the beginning of May 2009 I finally got the good news that SciencesPo will be my university for the next two semesters. I was very happy to get accepted from SciencesPo, because I heard that their criteria to accept students are very high. On August 28, 2009, the day has been finally reached: it was time to travel to the airport to start my journey to Paris and to welcome my new home for the next 10 months.

### **2.2 Paris the capital city of France and my home for twelve months**

Before I want to start to share my experience with you, I would like to give a brief introduction on Paris, from the cultural point of view. This is a good support for the subsequent chapters to understand some of my statements and explanation better.

Paris is a city with boundless possibilities with 20 Arrondissements. Arrondissements are in Paris districts. Each Arrondissement has its own charm. If you “enter” them you are immediately surrounded by their characteristic, for example their specific picture of bars and pubs, or their shops

and houses. Paris has many places to explore as the historical center around Notre Dame on the Ile de la Cité, from the Louvre via the Champs-Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe, the monument to honor those who fought for France, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars. It is also one of the most important landmarks of Paris and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arrondissement is famous for its very beautiful boulevards and their narrow alleys with pretty old buildings, the “Parc de Luxembourg”, a park, and the coffee bars where always a lot of students are enjoying their free time. From the art point of view a lot of art galleries are around St. Germain des Prés, where also SciencesPo is located. Most of the Paris’ museums are on the river side around the Eiffel Tower. The more romantically area of Paris is located in the city district Montmartre, also known as the boulevard with a lot of bars and meeting point of artists, but also providing a lot of parks to relax during the day time.

My home during the stay is located at the famous place Bastille where for more than 230 years the beginning of the French revolution started, so Bastille is a very historical place and I was amazed about my first impression – a lot of nice buildings and a very nice atmosphere. During the day and night it is a centre for many people to go to bars and restaurants. As I got taught from my host family (see picture 4) this area is very popular and high demanded from people who want to live there. I also enjoyed my time so far there because my room was lovely furnished (see picture 2 and 3) and the way to a lot of places and the school were reached within 10 to 20 minutes.



Picture 2: living room



Picture 3: my private room



Picture 4: my host family (left to right: son, mom, dad, and son)

Geographically wise, Paris is pretty much in the centre of Europe, so travelling is not too much of an effort. There are bundle of possibilities to travel comfortable and cheap, as bus, train and air plane. Compared to Maryland the travelling is much more convenient and this not only through the shorter distances also through the possibilities you have as mentioned before. For example travelling from St. Mary's College of Maryland to Washington DC takes the same time by car like travelling from Paris to another European country as Belgium or to the boarder of Germany. This allowed me in the past three months to travel during the weekends or school brakes to Spain, Belgium and Germany.

## 2.3 The goals of my one year exchange to Paris

My initial motivation to apply for the SMCM exchange program was to gain additional experience about culture and foreign countries. I am very eager to get in touch with foreign people to understand their habits and way of thinking. This is fascinated me. Based on this overall goal I have the expectation to be better prepared for the later job market if I can write later in my resume this experience. I think international experiences are very important in today's world. From my point of view knowing about other cultures and even have the chance to live with them together does not only broaden one's mind from the professional perspective (job enrichment) but also for your personal gain.

To start at the beginning, it was one day in April 2009 and my application to Sciences Po was ongoing, as I made thoughts about the possible time in Paris and the therewith related outcome. I wrote down the following about my expectations and goals:

- I want to learn how French people think, work, and behave
- I want to make French friends and I want to be as much as possible surrounded by French (I want to be together with other Chinese or Americans as less as possible, in order to learn about the French culture)
- I want to know how the French education system works to identify the advantages and disadvantages of them to compare these to the US one and also to the Chinese system.
- I will register for classes that St. Mary's College do not offer to have additional advantage from this exchange program
- My wish is to have a great time in Paris and to meet nice and friendly people
- The biggest wish I have, is to come back to St. Mary's College in one year not only with an unbelievable time I can talk about, but also with experience that makes me more mature and that I can use in my daily life.

To summarize, I applied to this abroad exchange program with the will to academically explore the European education system, where I heard about that this differs from the American one. Additionally, I thought it will be a good idea to concentrate on courses that St. Mary's College of Maryland does not offer, so I set me a goal that if I will be at SciencesPo I will take these kinds of courses. I expected that I can enrich my business major skill set and will be able to fulfill more requirements for Bachelor in Economics than other students in average. Personally, I had the wish to leave Paris one year later with a good portion of French skills and a luggage full of foreign friends and cultural experiences that will accompany me all my life. With this package of plans and goals I left on 28<sup>th</sup> of August my family in Beijing to fly to Paris.

### 3 Developed skills & experiences during my stay in Paris

#### 3.1 Before & after - a comparison of my experiences

I am already studying since two years abroad in USA. So, before I came to Paris I had gained some basic experience about other cultures and languages. I knew how to deal in a foreign country with another language other than my mother tongue. I also was familiar with big cultural gaps between me and the habits and culture I found among Americans two years ago when I started my college time at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Now, in a retro perspective, the gap between me and students at St. Mary's College appears for me much smaller now than two years ago during my initial period at St. Mary's College. A similar experience I made in France 14 weeks ago about them I talk in the next paragraph. But first one big difference that I repeated experienced during my whole time: As I arrived at the airport and wanted to catch a bus to the city center no one could speak to me in English and the people in front of the bus and the bus driver even didn't show me any sign that they are keen to at least try to speak to me in English. This incident I experienced as very rude and impolite. Over the time in Paris I got somehow more used to this behavior. But still, also after several months in Paris I can not get fully along with this attitude towards non French speakers. For me it still feels as a little bit respect less. Anyway, also if bad examples or experience improves your sensitivity for cultures and pool of experience, I also made a lot of good and very delighting experiences I want to share with you now.

On the basis of the quotation "*travelling enriches your life*", I explored Paris and saw Paris always like this. I went to Paris with the attitude that everything what I will experience will help me later on. For example through good and frustrating experience I made, I learnt to be more relaxed if people are not the same than me. I opened my self to be more tolerant. In America I was so use to it that everybody is polite. In a supermarket in Paris they are not that customer oriented like in US. They are not friendly looking and not very eager to help you. The cashiers are very slow and even most of them do not like to do a small talk with you. Another experience I made is when you go to a coffee bar or restaurant. Where it is usual in America that you order your coffee and sit down as long as you want, in Paris' coffee bars they even ask you after 50-60 minutes without ordering again to leave the place. This is still rude for me but I learnt to deal with this. I learnt to be more relaxed and just take it as it is – and very important: to do not feel offended. I always took it as a general attitude that is not personally against me. This tactic worked quite well for me.

What I enjoyed a lot are my in class experience I made. The classes I took in my first semester where very interesting also if they are very challenging. More than at St. Mary's College I had to hand in home works and essays. In total, I would assume that the school engagement was



higher than at St. Mary's College. But compared to the homework, the engagement during a class were less engaging as I experienced it at an American college. It seems to be, at least spoken about all my Sciences Po classes, that the France education system is less interactive. The teachers I had showed their PowerPoint slides on the screen or wrote their notes on the whiteboard. So, basically I took notes from the board or the spoken information from the teacher. French teachers also expect that at home you read a lot of books and do your studies. Based on my experience, I would assume that the French education system provides you in class the basic information you need and after the preparation there you learn by yourself at home everything what you need. So, it is a system where the students have to take care of themselves and the results mainly based on the quality of the learning outcome at home.

If I go through the streets I still enjoy the nice old architecture of Paris. But not only there you can see that Paris has a long history, also the entire museums are rich of this. Never before, I went in so many museums than in Paris. I really enjoyed to see art and to learn more about the French or European history. I made great experience about history that I would not expect before my exchange to Paris. Paris is a city very rich of history. Compared to the time before my start in Paris I am now much more skilled in questions about history. This is one of the experiences I made without knowing before about it or even expecting them. I much more expected that I will make a lot of French friends but so far I only have a few French friends. According to my experience I think this is not referring back to the fact that I am as a Chinese (affected with a little bit of the American culture) are too different compared to French people. I would say the problem that I do not have so many French friends is a language problem. I am still in the process to catch up with French so a deeper conversation I can not explain in French. But on the other French people are in general not very skilled English speakers. To be honest most of them speak not very good English or other languages so it is very difficult in France to make friends or being successful in doing business without speaking French. About what I was very surprised was as a friend of me told me that at IBM in France the employees all just speak French and that if colleagues from US or somewhere else are coming need to speak French or a translator. About this I am not surprised anymore after my own experience I made in Paris. I would say that French people are very proud of their culture and language and therefore also do not like to learn foreign languages.

To explain my advancement experience-wise, I would like to say that the stay in Paris changed following in me:

- I am now more interested in history and learnt a lot about the European history
- I learnt to better adapt to different cultures, I am now able to accept that not every culture is the same and I have to respect this
- I learnt how to deal with French people, about which I wasn't experienced before at all
- I made some French friends that broaden my experiences as well

## 3.2 The interaction with French people

As addressed in Chapter 3.1, by giving an example of one of my experience about French habits, French people are not the same to Americans or Chinese people. This is the focus of this chapter. I want to share with you my interactions with French people. Before I want to share with you my different experiences, I want to begin with an interesting and insightful model to explain cultural differences – the Hofstede's cultural dimensions –, with the objective of making my following explanations easier to understand.

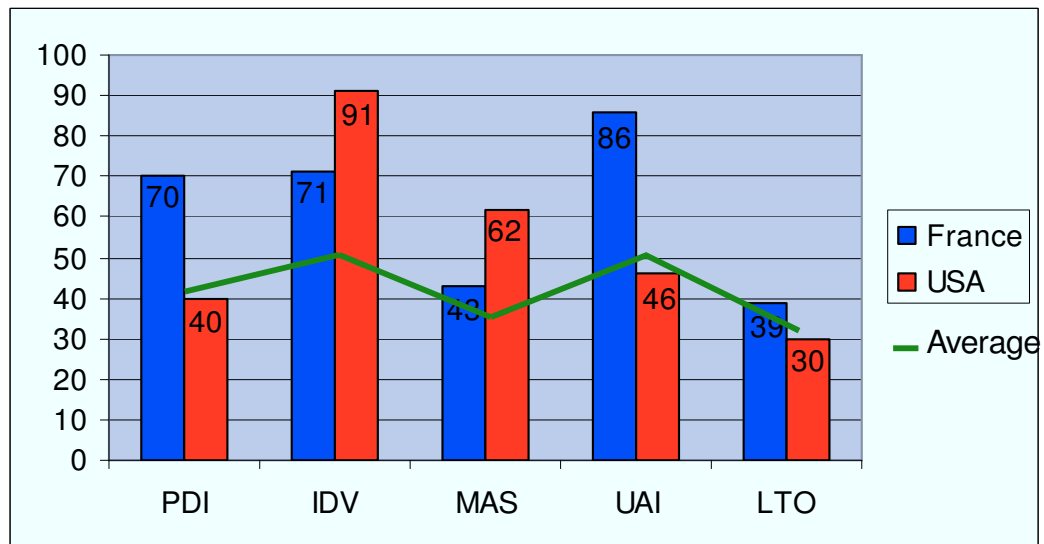
According to Hofstede, cultures can be explained and differentiate by following five dimensions – to be able do group them [Hofstede, G., p24]:

- *Power distance index (PDI)*: countries with high PDI are described as a culture were less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This means for instance, which hierarchy is important for the people and children for example obeying their parents and teachers.
- *Individualism (IDV)*: a high IDV results in a culture were the people feel responsible for themselves and their family. They think about themselves "I". A low IDV is reflected in people who think about the "we". They are within a high-context-communication.
- *Masculinity (MAS)*: In a society with a high MAS status symbols like cars, money are very important and an identification factor. If the masculinity is low, this means more feminine, people are more modest in their behavior and inter-personal relationships are more important than money.
- *Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)*: A high UAI symbolize that a nation tries to prevent uncertainties and risks. These countries usually have strict laws and rules, as well as safety and security measures. The opposite, a low UAI, are cultures that are

open and tolerant towards different opinions and follow only a few rules. They are also handling changes easier.

- *Long-Term Orientation (LTO)*: A high LTO shows that a culture is thrift and perseverance, compared to a low LTO – short-term oriented cultures – which stands for respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's "face".

Mapped on France, these dimensions have following values compared to US:



Picture 5: France cultural dimensions in comparison to US and world average

The graphs (picture 5) illustrate, that the *Power Distance*, *Individualism*, and *Uncertainty Avoidance Index* are higher pronounced than *Masculinity* and *Long-Term Orientation Index*. In a summary, this means that France is a country that counts on hierarchy and is a society of inequality. People are treated not the same and French people know that not every one is the same. One indicator for French people to evaluate the people is status symbols. Further on, French people more self-concentrated than taking care of their fellow men. The French culture is very much based on their jurisdiction. French people feel safe to know that for everything is a law in place, so the uncertainty can be minimized. On the other hand, of course, this reduces the spontaneously and "just do/try it" culture, as US is it. Compared to US, my current home country, French people pay less attention to status symbols (see MAS), is less individual-oriented than US (see IDV), but has a stronger sense for hierarchy (see PDI) and rules and regulations. French people like to have the safety that everything can be regulated by laws. This is not surprisingly, because France is the country where the law comes from. Now, let us see how my following experiences can be understood under the aspect of this cultural model.

After introducing the model, I want to describe some of my experiences I made in private situations and at school with familiar people as well as with people I met randomly.

One special interaction I had during my first team work together with one French boy and one girl from Czech Republic. I and the Czech Republic girl directly started to chat when we met each other the first time, but the French boy was just sitting there and did not talk that much. My first thought was “oh, what a strange boy”. But later I understood why he did not talk that much to us. The reason was that he had language disadvantages compared to us. We both girls spoke quite good English but his English abilities were quite basic and his spoken English even less good. And this is not a single-case experience. Most of my time I met people – on the street or other French students – I had a similar experience: French people do not like to speak other languages or do not have the ability. To differentiate between these both types is quite difficult. Another experience I gained during this first team work was the involvement and attitude the French colleague showed. He was punctual and doing his part of the team work but. This I found very good, because you could count on him. But what was less good was his attitude. He always gave the Czech girl and me a feeling that we are less good than him or less important than him. As I asked the Czech girl she confirmed the same impression I had. Because I was interested to know why he is behaving like this, I asked him. Surprisingly he did not recognize it. He answered me something like “what do you mean?”. As I explained him what I perceived, he was surprised, too. He also said that he does not think that our work is less good or less important. So, I concluded that it is a behavior from him, so he is not presently aware of this. Remarkable is, that this impression was my general feeling about French people. They most of the time try to be nice and polite but do not matter if it were other French school mates or my host family, they always were a little bit snobbish and arrogant, also if they might not mean that. From the perspective of now, round about three months later, I would say that I can handle this attitude better as at the beginning where I sometimes feel personally offended. Today, if someone is behaving like this it is not new for me, it is normality for me and I know how to handle it.

One experience which brightens nearby every Sunday my day was a green market visit to buy fruits and vegetables. Near my home, just 60 meters away, every Sunday a huge green market was organized by the city. It is still today fascinating for me and a kind of advantage to watch all the different nations (immigrants of France as Muslims and Africans) who are selling their products. They are loud; they make great self-promoting and even do some acts to attract the potential buyers. It is every time an enjoyment for me. From the experience perspective this was completely new for me. I never saw such a big green market where several sellers offer their products and you have a huge variety on products. Either in US or in China I do not know if these kinds of markets exist. To me this is something special of France. From a cultural perspective I want to highlight that

so many of the sellers did not speak French. They only could speak some words they need to say the total amount or the name of the fruit or vegetable. I believe that they just came to France/Paris to do their business. But what was an interesting experience for me, is that the French people accepted this. On the street or in the home of French people they give you the feeling that you are an alien and very impolite and rude if you speak in English to them. Their attitude towards a non French speaking person is very negative but on the market their attitude is in the different way: they do not complain about non French speaking sellers. I can only explain this on the two different positions you can be: someone who wants something or someone who gives something. On the market the French people want something (their green products) and the non speaking French sellers are the givers. But if you are on the street to ask after information you are the person who wants something, so French people are not tolerant with you in terms of your language abilities. Following my observation, then the science-based term “language allied” is accurate. Looking closure on the science, it is very obvious why the language is so important for France people. It is their culture; they identify each other by language, like other cultures identify themselves via their food, music or their richness of nature. According to Hall the own language is for French so important because of the history. Once, French was the language that was spoken from every aristocrat in Europe – it was the language of the wealthy and well-educated European citizen. Beyond that, French was the language of diplomacy. During the time when France was a colonial power, France insisted that every one learnt French – so, they spread the language all over Europe. [Hall, S., p94] What this explanation says, that meeting cultural differences – as with the interaction with French –, we should be open for them to be able to understand them before we neglect them. Then, we will never be able to deal with another culture. This was my secret recipe to learn more about French people.

A last interaction with French that might fit to the experience on the green market is another story of the world of shopping. In contrast to the green market the interaction with the French is complete different in the supermarket, or “*marché*” as the French call it. In general, French people are slower than Americans – not only their working style also the processes. Bureaucratic matters are very complex and takes a long time (as applying for a resident card), but also in the supermarket. As I went the first time to a supermarket I was surprised how small they are. If I imagine a Wall Mart store a normal French supermarket is not even half of this. It is maybe four times bigger than our St. Mary’s food store or double size of our book store. So, this was the first difference I realize. The next one was that the three lines in front of the cashier were very long. It took me 45 minutes to be the next in the line to pay. I was so frustrated that I swear at that time that I will never come back to the supermarket. Additionally, the interaction with the cashier is different. They are concentrated just on scanning the products very slowly and let you know at the end the

total sum you need to pay. More interaction like a “hello” is not there. Following my vow I went next time to another supermarket. This time the line was smaller but I waited more or less 40 minutes – and this experience did not change until now. Every time you need to wait a long time to pay your products. As I shared this experience one morning in class, everybody confirmed my statement and laughed about it – only the French students in class did not laugh about this, but asked why this is funny. They never experienced something different. It is for them normal. Here it makes “click” for me and I thought how enriching it is to live in another country: If you never experiences something different, you do not know about it and can not differentiate between what is better and what not – you can not change that much then.

If I span the whole three months since I am here in Paris, I can say that every interaction I had with French people were helpful for me. I had some less delightful once but most of my interaction were nice and transported very interesting insights, as the above experiences show. In the next months I am in Paris I want to start to talk more in French to the people because language also transports culture and can give me more changes to talk to French people.

### **3.3 The impact of my exchange year on my future education at SMCM**

I still have one semester of exchange in front of me and thus also more experience I can undergo, but by today I think the gained experience will help me to put another mind set or different approach of thinking into the class room discussion when I am back to St. Mary’s College. I will be able to understand or interpret a model or statement from a different angle due to my experience of European education and knowledge I gained about Europe. For example at SciencesPo the teaching material usually was based on European facts or stories compared to my classes at SMCM, where more information is related to the American culture. This cultural and historical background will be a supplement to my experience about the American history and culture. Back at St. Mary’s College this could help me to ask additional questions in class and to view the content from another perspective. If I reflect the last three months I think I get more mature. At SciencesPo in every class I joined, we discussed a lot of case studies. This was a new experience to me, which will help me for my upper-division economic classes, where case studies could be more present; to help me to comprehend the whole lesson. This is helpful because I will be able to spend the time I can save on other subjects. Additionally, being case study experienced and being able to explore a topic with different approaches is useful for my Bachelor’s degree in Economics.

There are many other things that I learned or experienced, which will help me in certain situations in future classes I have or situation I will meet. At the beginning I did not speak any

French word and by now my French skills are limited on basics. This means that I needed to get more sensitive in class on details and I needed to express myself more in pictures. In the last 3 months I enhanced my ability to describe things or my concerns more picture-like, because most of the teacher's were not English native speakers, so in some situations I was a more advanced English speaker than them. I think this skill is not only of importance in my daily private life but also in my school life or later at work. To describe your thoughts as easy as possible is always better.

Additionally, I have to be honest that SciencesPo is very challenging. They have a high expectation on you. Every class, which is usually once a week, you have to hand in homework. Besides the regular homework you have several essays and presentations to do. Of course, that was all to do besides the final exam and in some classes even a mid-term was taken. This was quite tough in my first semester. You need to be very organized to handle all this. I learnt how to be better organized and started to do every Sunday a week schedule for the next week. This was the only way to meet the teacher's requirements and to have still some spare time for my friends and for exploring Paris. I experienced this so far also challenging but overall easier at St. Mary's College.

To finalize this sub-chapter, I hope that the experiences as I described her will help me back at St. Mary's College of Maryland and will be a helpful part of my future life.

## 4 Conclusion

Paris. A city that changed me. I have already three months behind me with exciting adventures, various experiences – good once as well as bad once. I am already feeling sad now that nearly half of my time in Paris is over and my exchange will be at an end. At the beginning I could not imagine this, but the time is passing very quick. It was the right decision to go for two semesters to Paris and to study at SciencesPo. Now, after half time I feel settled down and part of the city. To be part of this city is something that sounds very unfamiliar to me at the beginning. But now, it feels not that unfamiliar anymore. If I pass tourists now, I feel different from them. I do not feel to be anymore the person who is just exploring the city, who is watching left and right and is seeing only new things – more and more parts of Paris are familiar to me. I live here and experience the daily life of Paris and have made enriching experience. By this I have learnt to see the city from another perspective. At the beginning I thought that the city is full of stress and hectic and the bureaucracy make me feeling tired. But now I can say if you do it more easy going it is not as bad as I thought. After four to five weeks adjustment period you are getting more away from your original habits and starting to adapt to the French way of life. Thanks to the contacts with French people I even did not realize it at the beginning that French doing things different than I was used to.

Overall I had a wonderful first period here and I am happy to look forward to one more semester in Paris. To conclude this reflective paper and my unforgettable time in Paris I want to share with you a quote as a thought-provoking impulse out of the book “The Little Prince”:

*« On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux ! »*

(One sees well only with the heart. The essential is invisible to the eyes.)



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