

Overcoming sexual repression: Humor and sexuality in Chosŏn period literature

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Introduction

In every society, group, or assembly of people there are multiple voices and worldviews. Despite this diversity, commonly a majority or “official” voice is emphasized to such an extent that dissenting or alternative voices are effectively secluded or marginalized. This often occurs in the creation of grand historical discourses that seek to establish a single narrative that explains a nation’s or people’s past. Yet, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has established in the context of nationalism, the manufacturing of a “national” or all-encompassing identity is little more than a fabrication and the emphasis of certain values/voices over others. Humans are diverse and multi-faceted, and to clumsily attempt to categorize any number of us into neat classifications is no more than a futile exercise. Humanity can be defined, in the most fundamental sense, by our individuality.

The case of the Chosŏn dynasty is illustrative of this tendency to oversimplify and selectively stress certain aspects of history. While the common characterization of Chosŏn concerns the influence of the Neo-Confucian ideology and its impact in transforming the whole of society, this is only one aspect of the actual situation. While acknowledging the expansive authority of Neo-Confucianism in the late Chosŏn period—many scholars argue otherwise for the early and mid Chosŏn periods (see Deuchler 1992; de Bary and Kim 1985)—I contend this merely represents one face of Chosŏn. Rather, Neo-Confucian discourses constitute what we can designate as the “official” ideology or discourse. Along with the “official” ideology, however, existed other—and equally important—“unofficial” discourses. These “unofficial” discourses were largely represented by the culture and belief systems of the common people, although not exclusively practiced by those in the lower classes. This corresponds with the circumstances in Europe described by Mikhail Bakhtin: an official society dominated by hierarchy and etiquette and an unofficial society that operated by a much freer set of rules (1984: 154). Yet, individuals were not confined to a single sphere of society, and the interaction of different classes of people in both official and unofficial society was (and is) characterized by fluidity and change depending upon time and place.

In this paper, I will focus my discussion on common human emotions such as passion and sexual desire. Certainly included in the Confucian code were norms that governed relations and interaction between the sexes, and these morals played a major role in repressing public discourse on sexuality and the propagation of ethics such as *ch’ilse-pudongsŏk* (男女七歲不同席 after the age of seven, one may not sit with one of the opposite sex) helped ensure that properly raised men and women were socialized in separate realms. Nonetheless, despite the pervasiveness of the Confucian codes and discourse, basic human emotions such as passion and sexual

desire were common, and as I will demonstrate, integral parts of society.¹

Subverting the Official Discourse on Sexuality

In his examination of sexuality in the West, Michel Foucault stated that in the process of transforming sex into a discourse, sexuality was carefully confined and moved into the home where it became simply a means for reproduction; thus it was not a matter for public discussion (1990: 3-4). Consequently, dialogues celebrating aspects of sexuality were no longer acceptable in official literature. Bakhtin wrote that the culture of folk humor was excluded from great literature and instead fell to the low comic level of the folk (1984: 33).

This is markedly different from early times when sexuality was closely linked with the sacred realm and religious beliefs. As ancient humans needed to multiply in order to ensure the survival of the tribe, aspects of the human body that emphasized sexual fertility were exaggerated in an attempt to bring about a magical influence on the reproductive capabilities of humans; this phenomenon is clearly seen in primitive art (Lucie-Smith 1991: 11-13). Yet, with the development of “higher” religions and beliefs systems, sexuality was understood as something that needed to be controlled or hidden from formal society.

One aspect of sexuality not discussed by Foucault is that of romantic love and passion. As Anthony Giddens reminds us, passionate love has long been viewed as a disruptive and even dangerous force by society, since it has the power to remove us from our usual existence and further pushes us to consider many radical options or sacrifices for the object of our passion (1992: 38). Marriage became a matter of economics instead of a consequence of mutual sexual attraction and desire. Yet passion is a relatively common human emotion and continued to figure significantly in male-female relations, oftentimes bringing about havoc in trying to desexualize or otherwise control the relationships between men and women.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the case of Korea is not all that different from the West and follows a similar continuum of relative freedom to systematic repression. As I have discussed elsewhere (2001), the sexual mores in ancient Korean states such as Koguryŏ were quite relaxed, a point on which some Chinese histories criticize their eastern neighbors. With the spread of Confucianism to all levels of society by late Chosŏn, the transformation of public discourses on sexuality was strikingly similar to that in the West. Still, this is not to say that the male-female union was not valued, as sons were needed to extend the family line, and women who did not produce sons were subject to expulsion by their husbands.² Accordingly, while the sexual act that would bring about heirs to a lineage was a necessary and natural function, it was excluded from the official discourse.

For a society such as Chosŏn that was organized on the foundation of patrilineal descent groups, the purpose of marriage, i.e., producing male offspring, was the manner in which society could survive (Deuchler 1992: 236-237). While males (at least the economically able ones) were allowed other outlets for their sexual desires such as concubines and female entertainers (*kisaeng*), this was definitely not the case for women. Adultery was harshly dealt with by society, and those women who were found guilty of this crime were punished severely in order to set an

¹ This paper is an extension of Pettid (2001). The present paper investigates new source materials that brings women’s voices into my discussion. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

² Not producing male offspring was one of the seven grounds for expulsion of a wife in Chosŏn (七去之惡 *ch’ilgŏ chiak*): the others are disobedience to one’s parents-in-law, adultery, theft, undue jealousy, grave illness, and extreme talkativeness.

example for the rest of society. At the same time, those women whose actions could be upheld as exemplars for others were glorified in educational works such as *Oryun haengshil-to* (五倫行實圖 Stories Exemplifying the Five Confucian Virtues with Illustrations) and *Samgang haengshil-to* (三綱行實圖 Conduct of the Three Bonds with Illustrations). Accordingly, the sexuality of women was repressed to an even greater extent than that of men during this period.

It is important to note that while control of sexuality was legislated to a certain degree in Chosŏn, for example with the *ch'ilgŏ chiak* and legal codes such as the *Kyŏngguk taejŏn* (經國大典 Grand Code of Managing the Nation), it was more significantly regulated by one's neighbors and community. Bringing order and uniform acceptance of Neo-Confucian precepts in Chosŏn society—although begun by the state—became the duty of all *yangban* society. From the upper class *yangban*, this sense of propriety spread to the lower classes such as the *chung'in* (middle people). As Foucault (1977) has asserted in the case of nineteenth century Europe, by making the subjects of the state the agents of surveillance and regulation, laws were internalized and the people became their own policing agents. The acceptance and practice of Neo-Confucian doctrine allowed marriages to be contracted between families, strengthened political alliances, and established a family as cultured and worthy of engaging. Those who did not adhere to societal norms were shunned and became social outcasts. Hence, by propagating a highly restrictive code such as Neo-Confucianism, the Chosŏn government, at least on the surface, was able to create a self-perpetuating system of social controls.³ Although Neo-Confucianism was not the only belief system in Chosŏn, it was certainly the dominant ideology and accordingly exerted its influence on other systems such as shamanism (see Ch'oe Kil-sŏng 1982). Given this type of social milieu, we can expect to find the official literature of Chosŏn to be largely in adherence with the norms established by society. And, in fact, this is the case with most upper class literature. While there were some outlets for writings that contained sexual themes, these were largely anonymous. The veil of anonymity gave the writers of these works an opportunity to release their repressed sexual feelings, most often in the form of humorous narratives. As Bakhtin argued, the sexual act is closely linked to laughter; moreover, as laughter does not create dogmas and cannot be authoritarian, it is not something to be feared, but rather an emotion that provides strength (1984: 95). Thus, laughter allows us to discuss those matters that official society does not broach.

Sexual relations outside of the realm deemed proper are also treated didactically in other Chosŏn literature.⁴ In these examples, the primary impetus for discussing sex, at least superficially, is to condemn certain behaviors as immoral. Hence, we have works by known authors revealing the consequences of lust and

³ Indeed, many remnants of the strong Neo-Confucian patriarchal system created in the Chosŏn period remain active in contemporary South Korean society. Some examples include the male-centered Family Registration Law (*hojŏk-pŏp*), preference given to males in employment, and the societal expectations placed on women concerning “womanly duties” such as childrearing and homemaking.

⁴ For example, the *Chosŏn wangjo shillok* (朝鮮王朝實錄 Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty) records numerous instances of those punished for inappropriate sexual acts. One of the best examples concerns the wife of Ch'oe Chunggi (her name is given as Kamdong). Ch'oe, a magistrate, divorced Kamdong after her many affairs were revealed. According to the account in the *Sejong shillok* (世宗實錄 Veritable Records of King Sejong) she had sexual relations with some twenty-four *yangban* class men. See *Sejong shillok*, [1427.8.17] 37: 14-15. Additionally, as a means of criticizing the corruption of the Koryŏ dynasty, the *Koryŏsa* (高麗史 History of Koryŏ) gives several examples concerning the corrupt behavior of Koryŏ personages. The account of the sexual misconduct of the monk Shindon (? - 1371) is particularly illustrative of this point (132: 10b-11a).

uncontrolled sexuality.⁵

The two primary sources for understanding alternative perceptions of sexuality in Chosŏn are narratives in literary miscellanies and *yadam* (unofficial histories) collections, and narrative *shijo*. The authorship of some of these works is known, and in the case of the former, exclusively male. Narrative *shijo*, on the other hand, were written by both men and women and thus provide us the opportunity to investigate sexual descriptions by both sexes. A common element in these accounts is the use of humor to create descriptions, that while establishing a counter discourse to the “official” perception of sexuality, are able to be shared across gender and class lines. Humor, then, allowed the people to subvert the official taboo against bringing sexuality into the public forum.

Alternative Views of Sexuality in Narrative *shijo*

Before examining particular works, let me first briefly discuss the importance of narrative *shijo* (辭設時調 *sasŏl shijo*) and their composers. Basically, narrative *shijo* are those works that broke from the established method of composing *shijo* (平時調 *p’yŏng shijo*, ‘standard’ *shijo*); they are generally longer than standard *shijo* and musically they differ considerably. This has led some scholars to suggest that the origins of narrative *shijo* might be found in folk songs, which have similar musical qualities (Cho 1991: 3.291-292; Kim Hunggu 1997: 71). Another possible link between narrative *shijo* and folk songs is the baseness of their composers or composer groups. While not all narrative *shijo* were written by members of the lower classes, many records do indicate composers outside of the *yangban* class.

Beyond a mere stylistic transformation, narrative *shijo* represent a major break in subject and disposition. While standard *shijo* concentrated on refined expression and descriptions of contemplative beauty, narrative *shijo* explored other sentiments of the common class and humans in general. Accordingly, we have poems telling of daily life and thoroughly antagonistic towards the ruling class of Chosŏn. Along these same lines and of particular importance to this study is the fact that many narrative *shijo* feature subjects such as love, sex, and relations between men and women. The following narrative *shijo* retell sexual relations as described by women. These descriptions will, I believe, help in overturning some myths or fallacies concerning the attitudes of women about sex and their own sexuality. Consider the following account:

I think that I will miss the guy I slept with last night.
As the son of a tile-maker works clay, he massaged me; as the son of a
mole rummages about, he groped me; as a boatman thrusts with his pole,
he thrust me; in my whole life, I’ve never had such a lascivious night!
Though I have met many kinds of men, truly I’ll never forget the guy who
was with me last night.⁶

Rather than a sexually repressed woman, the narrator of the above poem seems a passionate and eager bed partner.⁷ While this is just one woman, her strong

⁵ A good example of this is found in *Yŏllyŏshil kisul* (燃黎室記述 Narratives of Yŏllyŏshil) compiled by Yi Kŭngik (1736-1806), which records an account of the sexual misconduct of Yŏnsan-gun (r. 1494-1506), the tenth king of Chosŏn who was eventually disposed for his improper behavior. Yi retells the tale of a woman who was raped by the king and as a result committed suicide.

⁶ Translation aided by Suh Ji-young. Recorded in Chang 1980: 19, no. 64.

⁷ Although the authorship of this work is attributed to Yi Chŏngbo (1693-1766), a prominent *yangban*

voice—recollecting not romantic love, but sexual passion—should help us to debunk some of the myths that surround women and the qualities associated with them. Pam Morris (1993: 14-15) has written that the creation of “femininity” is merely the offspring of the fabrication of the traits grouped under the banner of “masculinity.” That is, the traits that men despise in themselves are the ones linked to women: hence, men are virile, enjoy sex, and are rational, while women are ascribed the opposite characteristics, as being yielding and demure, desirous of romantic love rather than sex, and are emotional. The above poem, however, depicts a woman who enjoyed the physical nature of her sexual encounter—she does not seem to have any vision of romance, just sexual satisfaction.

The imagery used in the poem adds a humorous touch to the account. The man’s rough caresses are likened to a tile-maker working clay, his movements are compared to a mole scurrying about in the ground, and sexual intercourse is correlated with a boatman using a pole to move his boat along. Tying her lover’s actions to daily life creates a very believable image of this affair, and the humor allows a metaphoric depiction of the lovemaking.

Yet, not all women seemed to have enjoyed the sexual relations that they were forced to endure for one reason or another. Consider the following account:

Look at that stout and manly army servant;
Wearing a narrow-cuffed shirt, red plumes, and throwing off his hat, he
enters a woman’s room only at night; then, after rough sex
throughout the night, his energy spent, he vomits the wine he had drunken.
Really, if I wanted to catch a drunkard, I would start by grabbing that
sot.⁸

The narrator of this poem,⁹ evidently an innkeeper or prostitute at a drinking establishment near a military post, has little use for her inconsiderate lover. He uses her simply as an object for his own pleasure with no regard for her needs, either emotional or physical. The narrator in this poem is not only dominated sexually by the drunken army servant who uses her as a vessel for his pleasure, she is also dominated by the patriarchal Chosŏn society that has forced her to serve in such a repressive occupation/role. Her dissatisfaction with having to submit to such men is clearly seen in the poem. Nonetheless, the poem is tinged with humor: the image of a macho man drunkenly having intercourse until he vomits, followed by the disgust and dissatisfaction of the woman who states that he would be the first drunk she would select if that was what she wanted. As such, the clear disdain of the narrator is softened by the humorous images she captures with her words.

The above two poems reveal quite different aspects of women and their sexuality. The narrator in the first poem enjoyed her night with an adept lover who sought to please his partner. The second poem, however, reveals the sexual domination of a woman by a man who had no concern whatsoever for her needs. The differing outlooks of the women, quite naturally, reflect their ability to maintain control over their bodies. When this basic human right is denied, sexual intercourse

scholar official, this seems only an attempt at humor by the compiler of this work. Cho Tongil states that is proper to believe that “wherever there was a song, someone would put Yi’s name on it” (1991: 3.294).

⁸ Translation aided by Hwang Jung-yon. Recorded in Chang 1980: 283, no. 1186.

⁹ Similar to the first poem examined above, the author of this piece is given as Kim Hwajin (1728-1803) a minister in the Chosŏn government. Yet, given the content and voice of this work, it seems that his name was simply placed on the poem by an editor.

loses its emotional intimacy and instead becomes a mechanical act to fulfill a male need to dominate women through sex. Yi Yōngja has stated that this type of sexual organ-centered intercourse is a means to “otherize” and degrade the woman partner (1994: 103). We can quite clearly see the resultant negative emotions of the woman in the above poem.

While I have only discussed two *shijo* poems—and I assure that there are many more that mirror these—I believe that we can see that the writers of these poems did not view sex as simply a means of reproduction. Women writers demonstrate their desire for enjoyable sexual experiences and moreover, their disdain for being treated as simply receptacles for men to vent their lust in. Thus, these narratives seem to belie any notion that Chosŏn society was devoid of sexual passion and activity. And keeping in mind that *shijo* were performed literature, we can imagine that both men and women enjoyed the performance of these humorous songs.

Humorous Narrative Accounts of Sexual Liaisons

I will next examine a few narrative accounts that will further demonstrate the extent of the “unofficial” discourse on sexuality in Chosŏn. These are taken from literary miscellanies or *yadam* (unofficial histories) collections, and while written by upper class *yangban* men, offer a very different glimpse of Chosŏn society.¹⁰ The fact that these are works of upper class men, demonstrates that even the banner bearers of the Neo-Confucian ideology sought refuge from its oppressive limitations on their personal freedom.

The narratives that I will discuss here center on the sexuality of women and provide, in my opinion, a far more realistic view of their lives and activities than what is found in the “official” literature of Chosŏn.¹¹ In particular, the myth of the chaste and loyal married woman is effectively debunked by many of these stories. Instead, we are provided with images of women and men who enjoy and desire passionate love affairs outside of their marriages.

Yadam collections are often the work of known writers and are collections of stories from any number of sources—including oral narratives—designed to be entertaining reading. In the preface of one such work, Sŏ Kŏ-jŏng’s *T’aep’yŏng hanhwa kolje-jŏn* (太平閑話滑稽傳 Idle Talk in a Peaceful Era), the author informs his readers that he “wanted to sweep the worries of the world away” (1998: 45) through these entertaining works.

While the simple fact that nearly all of these writings are attributed to men poses a problem with the potential of a biased or gendered perspective,¹² I believe that they can be productively analyzed in contrast to the established social norms of the Chosŏn period as they provide many narratives concerning the interactions, conflicts, and activities of humans. Consider the following narrative:

There was a blind man with a very pretty wife. In the neighborhood there

¹⁰ The authorship of some *yadam* collections is not known. However, given that these works were largely written in Classical Chinese, it is fairly safe to assume that the writers were most likely educated *yangban* who wished to remain anonymous.

¹¹ For example, *Naehun* (內訓 Instructions for the Inner Quarters; 1475), written by Queen Dowager Sohye, combines materials from works such as *Xiaoxue* (小學 Elementary Learning), *Lienu chuan* (烈女傳 Virtuous Women), and *Myŏngshim pogam* (明心寶鑑 Treasured Mirror for Enlightening the Mind) to instruct women how to live.

¹² I am aware of arguments that contend male-dominated writings tend to emphasize gender bias and the superiority of males over females such as discussed by Bonnie G. Smith (1998: chap. 5).

was a young boy who wanted to bed the woman; one day he asked the blind man “There is this girl that I am very close to, and finally her husband has went out for business and she is home alone. I want to go to her house now and have sex, so I would be very grateful if you would cast your divinations in front of the main gate of her house and let me know if he is about to return.” The blind man agreed to the request, and the boy took him around the village and finally stopped in front of the blind man’s own house and left him at the gate to do his divinations. The boy went in the house and had sex with the blind man’s wife, while the blind man cast his divinations, not realizing he was in front of his own house. Suddenly the blind man called out to the boy “You must hurry and finish! Her husband is standing in front of the main gate!”¹³

The humor in the above narrative is quite evident: the image of a naïve blind fortuneteller who could predict when a husband might return but failed to see that it was his wife that the boy was after is absurd and was undoubtedly well-received by the audience of this story. What is perhaps most interesting about the above narrative is the fact that it seems to demonstrate that passion was an important factor in Chosŏn society: the young boy desired the beautiful woman, and evidently, she also desired him. Hence, while monogamous marriage might have been the official discourse of Chosŏn, there seems to have been other outlets for sexual passion. It is also important to note that there is no trace of judgment in the narrative regarding the affair between the boy and the married woman—it is merely a story designed to arouse laughter from its audience.

We can view marriage in Chosŏn to have been largely an economic transaction between families, aimed at perpetuating a lineage by producing sons, strengthening social and political ties, and designed to reinforce the patriarchal system that dominated official society. Given the business-like nature of marriages, it should not be surprising that women often sought to fulfill emotional and sexual needs outside of their marriages (as men quite certainly did also). If they opted to run away from an oppressive situation at home, their choices were somewhat limited. Other women, however, simply pursued sexual fulfillment secretly as in the following narrative:

The wife of a scripture reader called her lover over when her husband went out on business. They went into the room and were about to have sex when they suddenly heard the sound of the husband entering the house. It seemed that they would certainly be caught, but the wife quickly jumped up, spread out her skirt and covered her husband’s face, playfully asking “Where are you coming from scripture reader?” and embraced her husband. The husband, knowing this game, responded “I’m coming back from a funeral at the Prime Minister’s house in the north” and hugged his wife and lay down with her. During this brief interlude, the lover was able to flee from the house undetected.¹⁴

The women in the above narrative is said to be the wife of a scripture reader

¹³ Recorded in *Kimun* (奇聞 Strange Tales; anonymous, n.d.), thought to be a late Chosŏn period work. Translations in this section were aided by renditions in modern Korean by Kim Hyŏn-ryong (1999) and Sŏ (1998).

¹⁴ Recorded in *Yongjae ch’onghwa* (慵齋叢話 Assorted Writings of Yongjae) written by Sŏng Hyŏn (1439-1504) a scholar-official.

(*kyōngsa*), so she is not an upper class woman. However, as the case of Kamdong described above in footnote four demonstrates, regardless of class, some women sought to find sexual satisfaction/adventure outside of their marriages. Thus, these narratives raise questions about the sanctity of marriage in Chosŏn, and at the same time the purity of the *yangban* lineages.¹⁵ Yet, humor allowed an otherwise taboo subject—at least for public discourse—to be shared publicly, and to subvert aspects of the official discourse, especially those that denied a woman control of her body.

Many other narratives (see Pettid 2001) demonstrate that sex was something that both men and women enjoyed, although this enjoyment was often outside of marriage. Moreover, this desire crossed class, age, and gender boundaries. Was this a common occurrence in Chosŏn? That is very hard to answer at this time, but sexual passion is a normal and strong human emotion, and there is little reason for us to assume that such emotions did not exist at every level of society in Chosŏn. After all, why should we imagine Chosŏn society and its people would be any different than our own?

Conclusion

I believe that the above poems and narratives demonstrate a clear contradiction between official Neo-Confucian society and its various controls on the lives of the citizenry and the actual lives of the people. While we cannot assume that these are non-fiction accounts, we can posit that they were based on factual happenings. Storytellers generally create their stories from actual happenings, and it seems reasonable to expect that most people knew or had heard of someone having an affair. Chosŏn society, thus, seems to match the two-tiered society that Bakhtin (1984: 154) described for the Middle Ages in Europe: an official society that was dominated by hierarchy and etiquette and an unofficial society that operated by a much freer set of rules. Research by Clifford Geertz (1973: 406) supports such a conclusion as he has argued that dominant cultural themes always have equally important “subdued opposites” and that the two tendencies are equally well-rooted in the community.

Although I use the terms “official” and “unofficial” to describe the different spheres of society, it is important to note that the interaction of various classes of people in both of these realms was very dynamic. *Yangban* did not live their lives solely in the official realm of society any more than commoners only existed in the unofficial sector. Both spheres were important to all classes of people, but for different reasons: adherence, at least superficially, to the conditions of the official sphere allowed one to interact with formal society, while interacting with one’s fellow humans in the unofficial sphere allowed for relaxation, release, and enjoyment.

Through reading (or hearing) narratives such as I have described above, the audience would have been provided with a release for the sexual repression that they experienced in daily life. This has been and remains a very important function of literature. While many sexual relationships are dominated by power relations, particularly the control of women by men in a strong patriarchal society such as Chosŏn, others fill different needs. Joseph Boone (1998: 1-2) has argued that both sex and fiction allow for the release of emotions, the need of humans to “let go.” The audience of these poems and narratives, regardless of gender, would have been provided a means to let go of their repressions and enjoy a common human expression

¹⁵ It seems pertinent to mention here that many scholars cite the uncertainty surrounding fatherhood—vis-à-vis the concreteness of motherhood—as a chief reason for the control and regulation of female sexuality in a patriarchal society. See Morris 1993: 20.

through these stories.

The vehicle for release in this case is almost uniformly made possible by humor. Without humor, these stories would have been difficult to share: humor allowed the authors/compiler of these stories to subvert the taboos against bringing sexual activities into the public discourse. The rigid and strict discourse of Neo-Confucianism stands in stark contrast to the activities described above. The authors/compiler were able to retell stories replete with sensuality and passion, emotions that, by the late Chosŏn period, had been purged from public discourse. Hence, we can argue that sexuality had become marginalized in the public sphere by this time. Humor allowed this oppressed emotion and need an outlet and a means in which to overcome and interact with the official dogmas and codes that had resulted in the suppression of a very natural human desire.

Accordingly, our perceptions of Chosŏn society should not be limited or focused on simply official Neo-Confucian discourse. Chosŏn should be understood as a multi-layered and intricate society, one where there existed many ways to subvert the official discourse. Sexuality, passion, and intimacy were, quite naturally, common emotions among the people that needed to be gratified. And this fact holds for all classes of Chosŏn and both men and women. While for some direct sexual activity served as a release for these emotions, others achieved satisfaction vicariously through narratives such as those discussed in this paper.

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