Raising Quality, Fostering “Creativity”: Ideologies and Practices of Education Reform in Beijing

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Critics of education in China call for increasing students’ “creativity” as key to improving the nation’s education. This article examines the idea of children’s “creativity” in Beijing, associated with an education reform movement called “Education for Quality.” On the basis of ethnographic research in three elementary schools in Beijing, I argue that efforts to increase students’ creativity flounder both on structural impediments within the Chinese educational system and on contradictions inherent within the ideology of children’s “quality.” [China, education, quality, ideology]

On April 1, 2007, the cover of the New York Times Magazine asked “Can China Re-Educate its Education System?” In the accompanying article, author Ann Hulbert proposes that a new paradigm is growing in Chinese education: a demand by students for more “creativity” and openness in education. Interviewing students at an elite private high school in Shanghai and a Chinese student enrolled at Harvard, Hulbert describes what she calls the tradition-laden, regimented nature of Chinese education, and asks: “Will the most promising students of the new era be as overburdened and regimented as before?” (2007:36). She then discusses efforts by leading Chinese entrepreneurs to build exclusive private schools, where “independent students eager to use their imaginations [will] be the dominant breed on campus” (Hulbert 2007:39). Is it possible, Hulbert asks, for education reform to “liberate individual initiative and ease pressures” in a society where ever-increasing numbers of students are competing for a tiny number of places at China’s most prestigious universities? (2007:40).

Within China, calls for increased “creativity” are at the center of new calls to reform educational practice and ideology. Yet the ways that “creativity” is understood and inculcated is contested in daily practices inside and outside classrooms. Although some teachers, parents, administrators and bureaucrats are seeking ways to “liberate” children’s “individual initiative,” the problem of how to increase creativity in education is actually linked to a much larger social discourse, that of “population quality” (renkou suzhi). This discourse frames the question of what kind of subjects the state must produce for the nation’s future, and the kinds of children who will be able to generate and inherit the China of the future.

This article examines this discourse through a close study of how the concept of “creativity” is embedded within recent educational reform efforts in China. These reforms are subsumed under the heading suzhi jiaoyu (Education for Quality), and cover all aspects of education in the broadest sense, including recommended changes in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, homework, extracurricular activities, children’s civic engagement, and even the ways that children are fed and taught manners. In the following sections, I examine “Education for Quality” as both ideology and practice in

three elementary schools in Beijing. How are the “Education for Quality” reforms understood, implemented, and resisted by children, teachers, and parents? This is a broad topic; in this article I focus on only one aspect of the very broad concept of “Education for Quality”: fostering creativity inside and outside schools. Although the term creativity (chuangzao li; chuangxin jingshen) is as imprecise in Chinese as it is in English, it is seen as an essential aspect of children’s “quality.” My goal is not to define creativity nor to evaluate whether or not Chinese education allows children to be truly “creative,” but instead to probe the ways that the term creativity is deployed in contemporary educational discourse, and the different and competing ways that it is invoked in educational practices.

In the following sections I look at two points. First, I examine how “creativity” is understood by different teachers in different kinds of academic contexts, and explore some of the problems that teachers, parents, and administrators have encountered in their efforts to increase children’s creativity in classrooms. Although the simple reason is structural, linked to the national exam system, I suggest that there is also an ideological problem: the concept of “quality” is part of an ideology of rational social advancement through merit, measured objectively through numbers (such as test scores). Because creativity cannot be measured objectively, it can only be cultivated outside regular mainstream classes, and teachers relegate “creative thinking” to nonacademic subjects and extracurricular activities.

Second, I explore the ways that children’s “creativity” was at the center of a deeply controversial movement in 2000–01 to lessen students’ homework and other academic burdens, and how and why efforts to reform students’ activities outside of school backfired.

I argue that the Education for Quality movement is an example of how educational ideologies structure both school reform efforts and popular concepts of what constitutes an “educated person” (Levinson et al. 1996). As many anthropologists have noted, state-based ideologies about appropriate social relations among children, and about the ways that education should produce appropriate citizens, structure the educational experiences of children, teachers, and parents across the globe; education can never be dissociated from state projects designed to produce children as a new generation of national subjects (e.g., Bryant 2001; Hall 2002; Kaplan 2006; Levinson 2001; Luykx 1999).

This has certainly been true in China, where for the past century the public education system has been a key site of political struggle over how to reform the Chinese people so as to make them appropriately modern subjects. Historians have pointed out that the many revolutionary movements in China during the 20th century—from the nationalist revolution in 1911 through the communist era and into the market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s—have all been partly pedagogical movements, intended to teach the Chinese people how to be subjects for the modernizing nation (see Bailey 1990; Duara 1995; Pepper 1990; Unger 1982). And, as historians of Chinese education have noted, although the various education reform projects carried out over the past century have always stemmed from the reigning ideologies of the moment, these ideologies have also always been linked to China’s changing relations with the global economy (Luo 2007).

In the following sections I continue this line of inquiry, by describing the origins of the Education for Quality education reform movement in the context of recent Chinese history. I argue that the concept of children’s “quality” and the embedded
call for increasing children’s creativity stem from ideological transformations associated with China’s transformation to a capitalist economy, and national desires to produce an entrepreneurial new generation capable of building China’s links with the global economy. At the same time, the recent economic reforms have increasingly led the Chinese state to withdraw from the command and welfare economies, leaving individual families responsible for social welfare formerly provided by the state. The Education for Quality reforms therefore also attempt to prepare children to take on civic duties that were formerly the purview of the state. The concept of quality is thus key to transforming China’s children into new kinds of subjects for the nation’s future.

This is the question I originally went to China to study. I began my doctoral research in anthropology interested in the ways that children are central to imaginaries of the nation’s future, and soon discovered that all such discussions in China centered around the issue of quality. To understand how children’s quality was conceptualized ideologically and implemented as national policy, I conducted two years of participant-observation research in Beijing, 1999–2001. Looking at education in the broadest sense, I decided to work closely with a small group of families with middle school-aged children, as well as work in three elementary schools.3

One, the Pine Street Elementary School, was a small school that served children in a quiet working-class neighborhood in northwestern Beijing. Parents in this school were largely blue collar industrial- or service-sector employees. The second, University School, was an elite elementary school affiliated with China’s prestigious National University. The school catered to the children of the capital’s academics and elite nouveaux riches families who could afford the astronomical tuition rates.4 The third school, which I call Bright Day Elementary, was a very small, very poor, privately owned elementary school for children of migrant workers from China’s impoverished rural hinterlands who had settled in Beijing.5 I selected these three schools because I suspected that there might be a strong relationship between the concept of “quality” and children’s socioeconomic class, and used each school site as a general example of a class position. In each school I offered formal and informal English classes to some of the students in exchange for access to the schools, classes, teachers, and students. Over the two years of research I observed classes, met formally and informally with teachers and students, talked with parents and students, and met with students informally outside of school in a variety of settings. Although I am not Chinese, I was warmly welcomed into each school as a foreign guest; after many months the exoticism of my presence wore off, and students, teachers, and administrators spoke with me quite freely about quality and their goals for education.

During my fieldwork I probed the ways that “creativity” was a central concept through which children’s “quality” is being built. I found that the notion of children’s creativity that I brought with me to China—the idea that each child has innate creative abilities that should be expressed through free play and other nonacademic outlets—was only one of the many ways that the term was discursively deployed and implemented in policy. In fact, the problem of children’s “creativity” and the links between that and their quality were much more complex than I had originally assumed, and much more contested in daily classroom practice.
Population Quality

The current drive for more creativity in education is inextricably linked to the goal of raising the suzhi or “quality” of the Chinese population today. “Quality” is a very difficult term to define, and children’s quality can refer to their grades in school, their height and physical condition, their social consciousness and activities in the community, or even their manners. In this way, quality acts as floating signifier, changing meanings in different social settings (Kipnis 2006; Woronov 2003). In spite of the vagueness of the term, however, there is tremendous social consensus in China today that the quality of the population is too low, and that raising quality is essential if China is to achieve its long-desired national goal of wealth and respect in the international arena. Researchers have noted that the concept of suzhi is embedded in multiple discursive contexts in China today. Originally used to describe an individual’s level of educational achievement, the term now encompasses multiple meanings, as I discuss below. I focus in the following sections on only one aspect of children’s quality, their creativity.

The concept of quality is a product of China’s reform era and is derived from the social, economic, and ideological transformations carried out there starting in the early 1980s. To understand the current push toward raising children’s quality and creativity, it is thus necessary to briefly outline the historical processes that generated the concept and the term.

At the end of the 1970s, three new policies—and associated ideological positions—were promulgated in China more or less simultaneously. The first was the series of economic reforms associated with Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power in 1978. At that time, the Communist Party Central Committee announced that the formerly infallible Mao Zedong had made serious errors while Chairman of the Party; these errors, defined as “excessively leftist,” were to be corrected by putting China on a new ideological and practical path. That path was economic development, with science and technology as its guiding ideology. Ideologically, both official doctrine and popular opinion understand science and technology as apolitical, objective factors in national development, which replace and erase the political excesses of the Mao era. Thus, the project of economic development itself is seen as apolitical, a natural means for moving the nation along its teleological path; development policies are now judged by their economic effectiveness, much like the depoliticization of market rationality in the neoliberal West (see Miller and Rose 1995).

It is important to note that ideologically, economic development—and the new social mobility associated with economic growth—is directly contrasted with Maoism. Most Chinese people now argue that during the Mao era, particularly the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), social advancement was based on subjective, even irrational, factors. Political zeal, connections with high-ranking officials, and ideological position were the bases for the little social mobility that was possible at the time; individual merit and ability, particularly educational achievement, were far less important than political stance (see Unger 1982). At the end of the Cultural Revolution, one of the central government’s first moves was to signal a return to “rationality” by reinstating the nationwide university entrance examinations (Andreas 2002; Kipnis 2001; Thøgersen 1990). China’s current exam system is thus not merely a relic of the ancient imperial exams, but instead is an important aspect of the ideology of the reform era.
The second set of new policies implemented at the beginning of the reform era were population control measures collectively known as the One-Child Only policy. Although a detailed discussion of this policy is beyond the scope of this article, the ideology of “excessive population” on which it was based is essential to an understanding of quality, for several reasons. First, at the outset of the reform era the size of the Chinese population became an important ground for critiquing Chairman Mao. During much of the Maoist era, Malthusian concepts of population growth were excoriated as bourgeois (Bakken 2000) and Mao himself was strongly pronatalist. After his death, however, Communist Party Reformists reclassified China’s huge population—once considered a national strength—as an objective problem for China’s development, based in Malthusian science (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). In other words, unless the size of the population could be controlled, development could not take place.

Thanks to the Chinese Communist Party’s enormous educational and propaganda efforts over the past 20 years, this trade-off between population size and economic development is now common sense among urban Chinese residents, who have largely—if grudgingly—accepted the One-Child policy as a necessary condition for national development (Croll et al. 1985; Milwertz 1997). Having only one child is seen as a sign of modernity, as well as patriotic duty, and the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership of the nation became at least partially predicated on its ability to produce a population of the right size for economic development (Anagnost 1995). As discussed above, the reigning ideology claims that development has only been possible by correcting the political errors of the Maoist period, through implementing scientifically sound policies (which, by definition, are apolitical). Malthusian concepts of the population, based in science, have been one way to achieve this. In this respect, as Anagnost notes, China’s draconian population policy “has become the very ground for constructing political authority in the post-Mao period” (1995:29).

Yet merely reducing the size of the population has not been enough. The third concurrent ideological move was the concept of “suzhi” (quality), conceived as a direct trade-off for population quantity. At its most basic and popular conceptualization, the argument says that quality of the population can rise only when quantity goes down; when quantity is sufficiently low, the quality of individual Chinese can then coalesce into sufficient aggregate quality to bring wealth, power, and respect to the nation as a whole. Without exception, every person I spoke with in China fully believed in this syllogism, even if there is only limited consensus on the precise definition of the term suzhi.

Thus by the late 1980s an entire ideological edifice was in place that continues to guide social policy as well as common sense and daily practice in urban China: belief in the power of linear economic development to bring the nation toward its teleological goal; belief that development, guided by science, is apolitical and objective; agreement that the population must be reduced for development to be achieved, and that the quality of the population must also be raised. The concept of population quality thus shoulders a tremendous ideological burden, because it is firmly linked in Chinese Communist Party discourse and popular conception to the future of individual families and the nation as a whole, as well as its ability to lead China toward wealth and power. The Chinese Communist Party derives much of its current legitimacy from its ability to guide and implement these processes. And, as Anagnost (1997) notes, this ideological structure is part of the project of transposing blame for
the weakness of the Chinese nation from Western imperialism to factors endogenous to the Chinese people themselves.

**Education for Quality**

Although the quality of all Chinese people has been of concern throughout the reform era, the quality of the nation’s children is seen as a particular problem. The specific term *suzhi jiaoyu* (Education for Quality) originally appeared in educational journals in the early 1980s, to describe the various kinds of educational interventions and practices intended to raise the quality of schoolchildren. By the early 1990s, the term was widely used among educators and had expanded beyond the confines of formal education to describe changes in family-based childrearing practices and the wider social context that were intended to raise children’s quality. Throughout the 1990s, different Chinese provinces and municipalities implemented different Education for Quality reforms in their schools, which were widely reported in the educational journals. In June 1999, the Ministry of Education codified and standardized the disparate and often ad hoc education reform policies in place around China, through a formal policy called Education for Quality.

This policy document is extremely broad, stipulating sweeping changes in pedagogy, curricula, and teacher training. Notably, this breadth is matched by a singular lack of specificity: precisely how these changes are to come about is never clearly defined. In fact, the policy document had no administrative teeth: schools and school districts were largely free to define the term *suzhi* any way they chose, and to implement reforms designed to raise children’s *suzhi* in any way they saw fit. The Education for Quality reform document therefore opened up a new discursive space in which parents, teachers, administrators, and bureaucrats contested and challenged the meaning of *suzhi* and what to do about raising children’s quality.

In response to this new openness, there was a tremendous amount of written material available on the topic of raising children’s quality, to help parents and educators understand the meaning of the indistinct term *quality* and to offer multiple—and potentially competing—examples of what quality-raising practices might entail. In 2001, China’s largest bookstore, the six-story Xinhua store in Beijing’s Xidan shopping center, devoted several aisles of books to Education for Quality; newspapers and magazines addressed the topic, as did television talk shows. Among these materials, there are many common themes that emerge in their analysis of quality. For example, a teacher in Shanghai wrote:

Quality Education is to enhance the quality of Chinese citizens by focusing on imparting to children an accurate and scientific view of the living world while nurturing in them desirable attitudes toward life and the social values. They must be brought up to appreciate politics, national heritage, love for fellow-beings and a commitment to advancing the nation. The young must increasingly seek to develop their talents and abilities by learning of forefront technology and innovations together with the strong feeling of obligation to repay the society with their able services. They must be aware of the need to prepare themselves to take charge of the nation’s destiny when their turn comes.

Many of the themes inherent in the educational ideology of Education for Quality are apparent in this definition: that the world can be known objectively, accurately, and scientifically; that knowledge requires the appropriate attitudes, although she does
not specify who defines what is or is not “desirable”; that both nationalism and technology are at the heart of high quality; that quality-raising is a form of national labor; and that the goal of the project is to produce young people who can both effect and inherit China’s current modernization efforts.

Another article, titled “Raising Children’s Quality,” by an educational expert from Shenzhen, China’s wildly prosperous Special Economic Zone across the border from Hong Kong, shows how Education for Quality cannot be separated from China’s entry into the global market economy:

The new market economy place new demands on the quality of the personnel (rencai) of the future. The center of the market economy is competition. In order to prepare our youth for this, we have to get them used to the character of the new environment. First, survival of the fittest is a principle of nature in biology, the animal world, and in the changes in human society. Therefore, we have to inculcate in our young people, starting from a young age, the mentality of competition, mastering how to exist in the midst of competition, be good at developing amidst competition. Second, we have to raise their ability to generate new ideas. The central point of the new information age is constant change and newness. If creativity is internalized in one’s psychology and in actions, it can produce new ways of thinking, new ideas, new behaviors. In the market economy, those who can grasp the ability to be creative, who understands new technology, who can see new products—those are the ones who can succeed.12

This extremely popular Social Darwinist view presents a “commodified and competitive vision of quality that is presented as the new goal for personal and collective attainment” (Judd 2002:29). This focus on market competition, however, is predicated on an interesting trade-off between quality and quantity: children’s quality is at least partially defined as that which can be quantitatively measured in the market—and by test scores. Thus, ideologically, quality is always defined by and against some kind of quantitative measure.

In daily life in Beijing, Education for Quality was always simultaneously a set of very broad and ill-defined policies differentially implemented at different schools in many ways, and also a set of concepts about children and their role as future subjects of the nation. The sections below discuss some of the ways these intersecting and occasionally competing ideas of children’s quality played out inside and outside of schools, focusing on the ways that creativity was implicated as a problem among Chinese children.

**Raising Quality, Fostering Creativity**

As a national educational goal, “Education for Quality” was intended to address a series of educational and developmental problems caused at least partially by the structure and ideology of the exam system: pianmian studying (studying something only to learn it for the exam); a focus on shengxue (passing required exams into the next level of schooling), rather than the content and applicability of what should be learned; and students’ memorizing data, rather than creatively applying knowledge. The very first page of the Education for Quality reform policy, issued by the Ministry of Education in 1999, says that the goal of the policy is to “take fostering creativity and raising students’ practical abilities as the central point.”13 The term *creativity* appears in the media, in official documents, and in conversations with parents and teachers when they discuss the perceived problems of Chinese education. Yet although the
theoretical goal of Education for Quality was to move curriculum and pedagogy away from “exam-based” education toward allowing children more opportunities to learn to be creative, the definition of “creativity” was deeply contested, and the new policies were implemented within an educational structure that mitigated against reform.

**Elementary Education in Beijing**

In urban Chinese elementary schools, children take a range of classes scheduled at different time periods and taught by different teachers. Chinese literacy, math, and English form the basis of the elementary school curriculum. Students also take science (in the upper grades), music, art, gym, “moral education” (sixiang pinde), and “social education” (shehui ke, the equivalent of social studies). Individual schools also have some flexibility in offering nonrequired courses, and many offer computer classes, or “loving labor” classes (where students clean classrooms and the school grounds). Children in the younger grades are assigned class periods to practice writing characters, and higher grades have class periods designated for doing homework.

Generally, the Chinese-language and -literacy (yuwen) teachers are the equivalent of a child’s “homeroom” teacher, and they have primary responsibility for each child’s overall education. At elite University School, children had different teachers for each subject, while at working-class Pine Street School, teachers took on multiple classes (e.g., the Chinese-language teachers also taught society and morality classes, while the math teachers also taught some of the science classes). However, at Bright Day, the impoverished private school for rural migrant children, because of scarce resources, one teacher per grade covered all the courses in the curriculum.

Testing in the Beijing public schools was standardized across districts (qu). Toward the end of each semester, district officials delivered huge stacks of mimeographed review and practice test sheets to the Pine Street and University schools, and the last two weeks of each semester were devoted to drilling and review. Later, final exams in Chinese, math, and English were delivered by the District authorities to each school. These standard exams were very closely linked to the textbooks, and in fact each chapter in the students’ Chinese-language textbooks included detailed instructions on which passages of text they had to memorize verbatim because they would be covered on the tests.

At the end of the school year, teachers were partly assessed on how well their students did on the exams in their subject. Teachers were therefore under tremendous pressure to “get through” their textbooks each semester, then review and drill the contents so that students were adequately prepared for exams. Spending time on any extraneous material was considered a waste of precious teaching time.

Through observing classes at the Pine Street School, I began to understand how the pressures on teachers to improve children’s performances on standardized tests collided with competing definitions of the concepts of quality and creativity. One particular example was clear in Teacher Li’s first-grade class. She was a lively and engaging teacher, and her students clearly adored her. She, however, did not see herself the same way. “There have been complaints about my teaching,” she told me with a sigh one day over lunch. “When the other teachers overhear my class, or when the principal comes to observe, they don’t like what I do.” I was surprised, and pressed her for more details.

“Well,” she said, “do you remember the lesson this morning?”
I did. The children’s text was about elephants, including a short story about how loggers in Thailand train elephants to help them with their work. To begin the class, Teacher Li had her students locate Thailand on a map of the world; they then discussed what they knew about Thailand, including people they knew who had visited there. Later in the lesson Li digressed briefly to talk more about elephants, leading a class discussion about the animals’ intelligence, social systems, and their endangered status. The children participated eagerly.

“All that stuff about Thailand, about elephants—none of that was in the textbook,” she explained. “I include all that because I think it’s important for the children’s development, for them to know more about the world than what’s in the textbooks. I think this is the best way to raise their quality, and to get them to start thinking creatively about what they’re learning. But the other teachers and the principal think I’m wasting my time and the students’, because none of this will be on their final exams. I’ll probably have to start teaching more by the book.”

Teacher Li put her finger on the problem: if teachers are assessed by students’ test scores, and high test scores come from memorizing ever larger portions of textbooks, then even the most perfunctory efforts toward expanding children’s ways of thinking about class material could threaten academic progress. Her definition of “creativity,” understood as getting children to think about class material in ways beyond those specified by the textbook, took away valuable teaching time. Other teachers agreed.

“We have a lot of material to get through,” one Pine Street teacher told me, while her colleagues nodded agreement. “Raising quality is very important, but we have to be sure that the students pass into the next grade. They can’t be higher quality adults without getting an education, and getting through the exams!” One teacher in particular had more to say on the topic. Soon-to-retire fourth-grade Teacher Liu was Pine Street School’s resident cynic, and she always spoke her mind.

“Hmmph!” she snorted when I asked her about children’s quality and fostering creativity. “This whole so-called ‘creativity’ thing is stupid and won’t work,” she told me firmly. “It’s just part of the ongoing, never-ending effort to keep reforming schools. After all, kids still have to learn how to read and write. We’ve worked on our teaching methods and now classes are less boring than they used to be, but without homework and copying their characters over and over, how will they remember them?

“And don’t forget,” she added, “some of the kids just aren’t that bright. I know, we’re not supposed to say things like that anymore, but it’s true. Or their parents don’t know anything. Or they don’t care. But we can’t just leave them to be ‘creative’ about their learning. They have to be pressured into doing homework or they’ll never learn anything. But this creativity thing won’t change quality for a long time—you can’t just say ‘be creative!’ and expect kids’ quality to rise automatically.”

The majority of the teachers of academic classes therefore believed that raising children’s creativity was simply not their responsibility. They rationalized teaching practices that countered the spirit of Education for Quality by claiming that creativity had no place in their classrooms, and that instead the art, music, and gym teachers needed to take on the problem of raising children’s creativity. School administrators seemed to agree. For example, at University School, a large bulletin board near the entrance of the school titled “Education for Quality at Our School!” showed pictures of children performing traditional Chinese opera, an extracurricular activity the school was known for.
Yet the art and music teachers did not necessarily concur that raising creativity was their mandate. “Raising children’s quality is extremely important,” Pine Street’s art teacher Wu told me. “But I have to get through the textbook this semester, too. And after all, how can anyone be creative at art before they understand the fundamentals?” The art teacher at University School, Teacher Fei, also agreed. Soon to retire, he seemed to focus most of his teaching energy on keeping order among his unruly fourth graders, and getting them through the material in the art textbooks. For example, in one typical class I observed, the art textbook directed that children learn how to draw a chicken. Teacher Fei drew one on the board, handed out paper and crayons, and instructed the students to reproduce his drawing as faithfully as possible. When I asked him about the creative aspects of drawing and art in this class, he told me that the children could choose how large to draw their chickens, and could color in the drawings any way they liked. However, he stressed, they would still be graded on the fidelity of their chickens to his model, and that this was what the students should strive for. From his perspective, art was not a place to liberate and nurture children’s creative impulses, but a place to teach and reinforce technical skills.

Music classes that I observed were similar. Fourth graders at Pine Street School were learning to play the recorder in their music class, and their teacher also reiterated how important memorizing the basics was to her curriculum. Not surprisingly she told me: “They have to learn the scales first, before they can be creative about anything, right? How can they raise their quality without a foundation first?”

When I discussed “Education for Quality” with parents of Pine Street and University School’s fourth graders, they all agreed that quality-raising was essential for their children and for China’s future. When pressed to define the term quality, they, too, generally argued that creativity is an important element, and that education should work to foster children’s creativity. However, they were largely stymied as to how this could be accomplished. Do children need to have their creative impulses liberated? “Quality and creativity may be important,” one mother countered, “but you can’t raise children’s quality without also preparing them for exams.”

Thus, although parents, teachers, and the state all say they desire education reform that raises children’s quality and creativity, the contingencies of “quality,” as measured by the exam system, require that “creativity” be expressed outside of the academic curriculum. Academic classes, including literacy, math and science—precisely those developmental areas where Education for Quality seeks to raise creative thinking to prepare more entrepreneurial subjects for the global economy—exclude creativity from curriculum and pedagogy. Nor were music or art classes sites for fostering “creativity” as defined as liberating children’s extra-academic potential. Thus, calls for transformed pedagogy and curriculum went largely ignored in daily classroom practices in Beijing public schools.

Creative Performance

These competing understandings of “creativity” were most apparent during each school’s annual celebration of International Children’s Day, held every year on June 1. Derived from a Soviet holiday (Lane 1981), International Children’s Day is now observed in China as a school holiday, and an occasion for special treats for children. In Beijing, elementary schools celebrate the holiday with student performances intended to entertain their teachers and classmates (Woronov 2007).
At Pine Street, the principal and teachers decided to turn the June 1 activities entirely over to the students themselves, specifically to give them an opportunity to practice creativity and thereby raise their quality. In grades 3–6, two class periods a week during May were turned over to the students to plan and rehearse their performances. (“Listen to them!” Teacher Liu said as we walked out of her classroom, leaving behind a roomful of shrieking fourth graders, bouncing in excitement as they planned their performances. She covered her ears and grimaced. “Is that what ‘quality’ is supposed to sound like?”)

On June 1, a makeshift stage was erected in the school’s courtyard, and the children performed for each other. Groups of girls sang a medley of songs, some fifth and sixth graders performed patriotic skits, and several fifth graders demonstrated martial arts. The performances were remarkably varied (disco dancing and a fashion show were followed by a poem about the heroes of the Chinese revolution) and utterly charming. Even Teacher Liu smiled.

At University School, however, the International Children’s Day activities were distinctly different. There, the June 1 performances were not an occasion for children’s imaginations to have free rein, but were instead an opportunity to perform a pre-determined set of material in an extremely professional way. In 2001, this material was Chinese opera, performed by a small group of students who were studying traditional opera as an extracurricular, quality-raising activity, and Tang Dynasty poetry, memorized and chanted by students in every grade.

On the day of the performance I helped lead the students through the twisting alleys that separated their school from the main campus of National University, where we piled the children by grade level into the shiny, new campus performance center. For the performance, each grade took turns reciting their Tang poems at the top of their lungs for the rest of the student body; the older children performed longer and more complicated poems than the younger ones, but otherwise the performances were identical.

A few weeks later, when the school year ended, the principal of University School sent a questionnaire home with each child. One of the questions each parent was asked was, “What do you think our school does well?” Although I did not see all of the responses for all of the grades, I was struck by the large number of parents who specifically mentioned the extensive Tang poetry memorization for Children’s Day. “Keep up the good work with the Tang poems,” many parents commented; “this is what your school does well, and what is raising the quality of our children.” For these elite parents, quality raising lies less in “creative expression” than in highly structured memorization of poetry iconic of high Chinese culture.

Creativity and Family Income

The school that seemed to be most serious about allowing children to express their creativity through artistic and musical endeavors was the migrant school, Bright Day Elementary. Principal Chen, who also owned this private school, was particularly concerned about raising the quality of what she called the “low suzhi” children at her school. All the students at Bright Day—and Principal Chen herself—had come to the capital from rural areas around China, and, from her perspective, their dirty clothes, rough language, and lack of refined manners exemplified the “low quality” that native Beijingers assumed all rural people embody. To raise her students’ quality, Chen
decided that raising creativity was key, and announced one day that she had designated one class period per week as “creativity class” for the fourth graders she taught. During this time the children were free to create whatever they wanted. Usually the students performed songs and dances for each other, although sometimes small groups of children wrote and acted out short comic skits. The other children and teachers at the school were a rapt audience for these performances, which demonstrated the keen observations these children had of the social world around them.

As part of her quality-raising goal, Principal Chen also threw out the music and art textbooks she had been trying to teach, and instead opened up that class period for the children to draw or color whatever they chose. The students sang together, taught each other songs from their home provinces, and drew pictures. Rather than trying to faithfully copy models, however, the children colored pictures of their family members, of their home villages, and of their favorite characters from the manga-style comic books they loved. None, in my experience, drew pictures of chickens.

Of course, as discussed above, the regular Beijing public schools offered no such opportunities to its fourth-grade students. In fact, opportunities for children to spend school time freely creating art, music, or performance decreased as family income rose. The very low-income migrant children had time in their curriculum to write skits, sing, and draw. Children at the working-class public school Pine Street Elementary had very few opportunities to do so, with the exception of the annual Children’s Day celebrations. At the wealthy, elite University School, however, the annual Children’s Day performances were very closely choreographed by the teachers and administrators, who planned the performances and drilled students daily in their lines, songs, and dances in the weeks leading up to the performance.

In some ways, this inverse correlation between family income and children’s classroom time dedicated to creative expression is not terribly surprising. If the migrant children took time away from the academic curriculum to sing, dance, and draw, their exam scores would not suffer, because they did not take standardized exams. As discussed above, all testing regimes in the public schools were designed and administered through district-level education authorities. The Bright Day School, run privately and not registered with any authorizing educational agency, was unable to participate in the city’s standardized exam system. As impoverished, unregistered residents in the capital, Bright Day’s migrant students were at the time excluded from advancing within the regular Chinese education system, and unless they returned to their home villages to complete their schooling, most were forced to abandon their education before junior high school (Kwong 2004a; Woronov 2004).

The exclusive urban education system, which locks migrant children out of opportunities for educational advancement, reproduces the social stigma that rural migrants face as the lowest “quality” people in China (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; Murphy 2004; Woronov 2004; Yan 2003). Indeed, their relative lack of formal education, enforced by the educational structure, made these children objects of tremendous derision in the capital and across urban China. Ironically, however, the education they did receive in many ways helped them cultivate individual creativity as expressed through music, art, and drama—an essential aspect of higher quality—in ways that children in the standard schools did not. Children from elite families enrolled at University School were considered to have the highest quality of all children in the city, but they were part of an extremely structured and stringent curriculum that allowed very few opportunities for creative expression or outlets. Instead, their strict
focus on academics allowed these students to score very well on the standardized exams, thereby insuring their continued progress through the school system and into college. Although quality is discursively and ideologically linked to creativity, in practice it is linked to social position directly associated with educational achievement, attained through success on exams.

This holds true for the working-class students at the Pine Street Elementary School as well. By the end of the 2001 school year, teachers there had somewhat grudgingly carved time out of the curriculum to grant students opportunities for some what the teachers called “creative expression,” including allowing students to write some essays for Chinese literacy class on topics of their own choosing, rather than on assigned topics. Ironically, in the meantime, the principal had assigned the teachers to read hundreds of pages of material on Education for Quality and the importance of creativity. She then tested the teachers on their memorization of the material.

**Burden Reduction: Creativity Outside of Classrooms**

Just as teachers were struggling with how to implement Education for Quality and how to make children more “creative” inside classrooms, the national Ministry of Education was seeking ways to raise children’s quality by transforming their activities outside of school. On January 8, 2000, China’s Ministry of Education released a new educational policy to schools and parents around the country. Called “An Urgent Notice Regarding the Reduction of Elementary and Middle School Students’ Excessive Burdens,” or *jianfu,* the policy was quickly headline news around the country. Unlike the very general Education for Quality document, *jianfu* was a specific school reform policy, which schools across China were supposed to implement specifically and uniformly in the following weeks.

The logic of *jianfu* was that unless children could spend less time studying and more time on activities other than homework, they would be unable to develop the creativity necessary to become higher quality adults. Ministry officials repeatedly stated that *jianfu* was a crucial element in the nation’s efforts to fully implement Education for Quality, and an essential part of the nation’s efforts to enter the competitive new millennium by producing new kinds of subjects for the nation’s future.

The *jianfu* policy went into effect at the beginning of the 2000 spring semester, and mandated reducing or eliminating homework, reducing the number of books students had to purchase, and abolishing school-based extracurricular study and cramming sessions. Elementary schools were required to replace the 100-point scoring system for classroom tests with letters A–F. The policy was thus an attempt to level parts of the educational playing field: within classrooms, *jianfu* attempted to reduce competition among students, whereas economically, *jianfu* would theoretically enable all students to excel by reducing the number of books students were required to purchase. Socially, *jianfu* was specifically linked to a policy that had been promulgated the previous year, eliminating the sixth-grade graduation exams, which in previous years had tracked students into different junior high schools (*chuzhong*). After *jianfu,* formerly “key” junior high schools were required to drop that designation, and graduating sixth graders were assigned places in junior high by computer, which assured that a range of students of different academic abilities were placed in each school.
In principle, jianfu opened possibilities for children to spend time doing more “creative” things. Under the new policy, students would have less homework, fewer books, and less competition for scarce spots at key schools. Without the pressure of exams, students could devote more time to creative activities; without homework, they would have time to do more things outside of school. Without competition-based extracurricular activities like Math Olympics, schools could arrange other kinds of activities for children. Ironically, all this was done in the name of increasing China’s national competitiveness in the global economy: lowered homework burdens would raise creativity, thus producing children better able to compete in the global economy.

This, however, begs the question: what is creativity, and exactly what should children be doing in their newly found free time to make them more creative? To help parents and children answer these questions, major newspapers printed articles and editorials explaining the meaning and importance of jianfu, particularly during the upcoming long winter school break:

Less homework and fewer review classes during the upcoming vacation mean that children have more time to play. But parents fear idleness. So what can parents do? Organize groups and activities among classmates. In conjunction with the Street Office and Neighborhood Committee, arrange some activities to benefit society. Parents should give children even more attention and love, and carefully plan their studying, housework, and daily activities. Pay special attention to what they eat and drink, to make sure they aren’t developing bad habits.

Another article targeting elementary school children directed students on how to spend their time during the break:

[...] have a jianfu vacation! There are many things to do during your vacation other than study: read a book you’ve always wanted to read, go to the countryside and bring books; do labor in society; help parents around the house; visit a museum or aquarium. Remember—jianfu doesn’t mean no studying, it just means not studying “lifelessly” and instead using new and more active methods to learn. During vacation play, relax, and learn.

There are several interesting aspects to this advice. The first is the assumption that children usually spend their vacations doing homework. After jianfu, parents seemed genuinely puzzled: if their children did not spend several hours every day doing homework, what were they supposed to do instead? The proposed solutions are the second interesting aspect of these articles: that parents take over organizing their children’s time and activities. The assumption is that parents—even those working full-time—can and should find the time to organize and supervise children’s vacation days to the minute. Nowhere are parents urged to allow children to catch up on their missing sleep, or just hang out. Instead, their time must still be spent usefully, efficiently, and educationally—but in ways other than through formal homework. Third, jianfu would also free children to become more civic-minded and socially engaged, and take on aspects of social welfare provision from which the Chinese state had withdrawn during the reform era.

Finally, by limiting mandatory purchases for school materials, jianfu was supposed to make education more economically egalitarian. The recommendations for high-quality vacation activities, however, are both extremely expensive and very specific to children living in large urban areas. Admission to the Beijing Aquarium, for example, could cost as much as some working-class parents earned in a week, whereas the vast
majority of children across rural China have no access to museums or aquariums at any price. Thus, the policies of reducing burdens to increase children’s creativity also reinforced preexisting class divisions, helping ensure that the highest quality children came from the families with the most resources.

In practice, the realities of jianfu were quite different from the state-sponsored rhetoric. Polls taken at the end of the winter break confirmed that most Beijing families did not—or were not able to—use the winter vacation break to raise their children’s creativity. Without any homework to do, the majority of children polled spent their vacations at home alone, watching television.23

Responses to Reducing Students’ Burdens

Parents, teachers, and students had varying reactions to the jianfu policy. A few parents and students supported the move. For example, my neighbor Mrs. Wang, a kindergarten teacher and mother of a bubbly seventh grader, was all in favor of jianfu. Her daughter was a talented flute player who was thrilled to have less homework and more time to practice. Mrs. Wang saw this as a key way to raise her daughter’s quality, through mastery of a musical instrument. Then Mrs. Wang’s friend Mrs. Gao spoke up.

“I used to push my daughter a lot,” she told me, stroking her pretty fifth-grade daughter on the head as we chatted. “I wanted to build her creativity and made her study piano, calligraphy, painting, and dance after school and on weekends. But then I saw that she wasn’t happy—she was too busy, wasn’t eating well, had circles under her eyes. I thought that if I pressure her too much and her health isn’t good, then all the effort would just be useless.” Mrs. Gao said that she had made an effort to reduce her daughter’s burdens, and that she fully supported the Ministry of Education’s policy. “But it’s no use!” she added.

“Why not?” I asked.

“My daughter is a lot happier now,” she told me. “But there’s a serious problem. She doesn’t have any friends any more. The other kids in her class are all getting homework from their parents to make up for the assignments they’re not getting in school anymore. Since my daughter plays and just hangs out a lot, the other parents consider her to be a bad influence, and they won’t let their kids play with her anymore.” She shook her head and sighed.

Mothers Gao and Wang were indeed a minority, as opposition to the jianfu policy gained momentum during the spring semester. My friend Li Dong, a very bright and ambitious seventh grader, provides another example. According to his mother, Li Dong was a victim of the previous year’s decision to abolish the sixth-grade graduating placement exam. Instead of testing into a key junior high school on finishing elementary school, which she and her son had planned since first grade, this straight-A student had been assigned by the district’s computer to a mediocre junior high school not far from their home. Li Dong spent most of his class time reading comic books propped up behind his textbooks, but was still ranked as the top student in the entire school.

One Saturday morning not long after the start of the spring semester in March, 2000, I received a call from Dr. Yang, Li Dong’s mother. Her voice shaking with anger, she said: “You won’t believe what’s happening in Li Dong’s school. I have to tell you
all about it.” We arranged to meet for lunch so I could hear about the latest problem in her hapless 13-year-old son’s education. As we walked toward a local restaurant she was furious.

“You’ve heard about this jianfu policy, right? Do you know what the principal of Li Dong’s school did now? He abolished homework! How are our kids supposed to pass the zhongkao (entrance exam into senior high school) now?” In response, she had organized a group of parents in her son’s chuiyi (seventh grade) class, to meet with the principal to oppose his decision.

“He said there was nothing he could do! The policy came down from the central administration, and he was forced to implement it! It didn’t matter how we begged, he said that the policy would stand! What are we supposed to do now?” As we ate, she described the various strategies she and the other parents had attempted to get their children’s school to subvert the jianfu rulings, but with little success. Their only option was to assign homework themselves to their children, to force them into the prodigious feats of memorization required to test into a key (zhongdian) senior high school.

“It’s a good thing Li Dong is highly motivated on his own,” she sighed toward the end of the meal. Even without assigned homework, we both felt that he’d probably test very well, because of his diligence and motivation.24

Although the vehemence of Dr. Yang’s reaction—and her son’s principal’s insistence in following the letter of the law—were both unusual in the months following the jianfu decision, resistance to homework reduction was widespread. One key to the problem seemed to lie in memorization: if all students eventually face standardized exams that test huge amounts of memorized facts, how could children prepare for these tests without doing homework? In parents’ minds, there was a direct link between homework assignments and future exam success: decreases in homework would inexorably lead to lower test scores. And in spite of canceling the sixth-grade graduation exam, test scores did matter, even in elementary school. For students eventually would have to score well on exams, both to enter good high schools (which, unlike the junior highs, had not lost their “key” designations), and eventually, into universities. When would children find free time to learn to be creative, when there was so much material to memorize for exams?

Teachers also had mixed opinions about jianfu. The younger teachers at Pine Street School approved of lowering pressure on children by abolishing graduation exams and giving them all a guaranteed spot in junior high school. They also approved of assigning less homework, to reduce burdens on both the students and themselves: less homework meant less grading for them. But the older teachers were unhappy. “The kids are much worse now than they used to be,” grumbled Pine Street’s Teacher Liu. “They used to work hard, study, memorize, and obey their teachers because they knew they had to be ready to graduate in sixth grade. Now they don’t care and all they want to do is play and eat.”

Even some students voiced serious opposition to the policy. The editors of the China Women’s Daily published a letter from an eighth-grade student that showed that rather than liberating their time and energy to be used for creative expression, at least some children did not know what to do with their time other than study:

Right now I’m an eighth-grade student, I’m a good student, and I don’t feel pressured at all. I think that as a student, studying is my main task, and I should devote the best part of my
I like doing homework, and since jianfu we’ve had really no homework at all. I’ve been doing homework for seven years now, and if I don’t have any during the winter break I feel a little strange. If I don’t do homework then what else can I do at home? Just playing around isn’t very interesting (guang war ye meiyou shenma yisi). During vacation I’ll find some problems to do and will do some homework on my own. In a year and a half I have to take the exam for senior middle school (zhong kao) and my goal is to test into a provincial key school.25

Reservations about jianfu grew into serious opposition as the year moved on, so much so that by the time of winter break the following year (2001), teachers, administrators, and the media had dropped all mention of the policy. Although some aspects of jianfu remain in place (including abolition of the sixth-grade graduating exam), by the end of the school year in 2001 homework and other demands on children’s time and energy were back to prejianfu levels. The ideology of jianfu still remains in place, however, as parents, teachers, and officials all agree that ideally, children should spend less time memorizing and doing homework and more time being creative. But the state’s effort to mandate children to be more creative was a failure.

Conclusion

A sidebar in the New York Times article on Chinese education asked: “Can China create schools that foster openness, flexibility, and innovation? And what happens to China if it does?” (Hulbert 2007:36). Author Hulbert concludes the article by noting that “a generation of more independent-minded students with wider horizons . . . may inspire some trepidation as well as optimism among Chinese leaders” (Hulbert 2007:62). She hints that Education for Quality may ultimately fail in China because of the leadership’s possible fear of raising a generation of free-thinking students. Although I am not in a position to evaluate whether or not the state’s education reform efforts will flounder for political reasons, I do suggest that China’s Education for Quality reforms face serious systemic, structural, and ideological challenges.

Part of the problem lies in the syllogism in the New York Times article between “creativity” and “independent-minded” students. As discussed above, in China the concept of creativity is much more contested, and holds many different kinds of meanings in theory and classroom practice. Education reformers call for more creativity across the curriculum, but academic teachers try to relegate the teaching of creativity to extra-academic subjects. Parents search for ways to raise their children’s creativity through extracurricular classes without also adding to the significant homework burdens they face, whereas the state attempts to mandate how children spend their free time. Opportunities for students to express themselves creatively in classrooms vary widely among different socioeconomic classes.

All of these contradictions stem from the ways the concept of creativity is linked in theory and practice to the recent Education for Quality reforms. As the teachers I worked with noted frequently and ruefully, there are tremendous contradictions built into the Education for Quality document itself. On the one hand, the state says it wants teachers to de-emphasize memorization; on the other hand, it rations education and funnels all children through a harrowing testing regime. It wants creative students but mandates a standardized curriculum. It wants students to cooperate with each other and learn to be better citizens through additional civic engagement, but
encourages ranking and competition through the testing system. These contradictions were the source of much grumbling in the teachers’ offices in the elementary schools I studied.

Today many parents and teachers continue to assume that children’s academic credentials and technocratic skills, measured and displayed through exam scores, are the best possible way to prepare for the labor market. At the moment these are the portals to social and economic capital, although this, too, is changing. A record 9.9 million students took the university entrance exams in early June 2007, but in 2006 only about 22 percent of these students won a coveted seat at a university. More ominous are new employment data, which indicate that a university degree is no longer a guarantee of future success; official statistics note that up to 30 percent of college graduates are now unemployed.

Parents and teachers thus struggle with an ongoing question: which path will lead their children into the new promised land of global capitalism? The day may soon come when test scores no longer produce and reflect quality in the nation’s children. In the meantime, calls for increased creativity inside and outside classrooms will continue to bump into significant resistance and structural barriers. I have argued that although the concept of quality is hegemonic in China today, there is still no consensus on how to define the term, how to inculcate it in children, or how to transform education to produce higher quality children. The Education for Quality reforms are contested, contradictory, and are unevenly applied. To date, there are no easy answers for how to reform education in China.

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Notes

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1. In the following text, I use “Beijing” rather than “China” to acknowledge that my research was confined to only one city, and that my conclusions do not necessarily describe the situation in other parts of this very large and diverse country.

2. This is admittedly a very narrow definition of “creativity,” but reflects the ways the concept tended to be expressed among teachers, parents, and administrators in Beijing. For a more nuanced discussion of children’s creativity, see Feldman et al. 1994.

3. To protect their privacy, I have changed the names of the schools and the individuals with whom I spoke. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese interviews and written sources are my own.

4. University School could best be described as “semi-private.” Affiliated with National University, one of China’s top universities, University Elementary School provided free education to children of the university’s faculty and staff. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, the school’s reputation for academic excellence attracted students from outside the National University work unit; these families paid very high private tuition to enroll their children. See Luo 2007 for a discussion of school privatization in China.

5. The question of education for migrant children in China’s cities has only recently attracted popular and scholarly attention. Because they are not legal residents of the cities to which they
move, migrants generally must pay high fees to enroll their children in urban public schools. In
response, migrant communities have opened their own private schools. For more on the
education of China’s migrant children, see Woronov 2004; Kwong 2004a, 2004b.

6. The topic of “population quality” and the varying ways that it is used in contemporary
Chinese sociality and politics has recently attracted a great deal of attention from anthropolo-
gists working in China. For more details on the term suzhi see Anagnost 2004; Fong 2007;
Greenhalgh and Winkler 2005; Kipnis 2006; Murphy 2004; Woronov 2003.

7. The imperial Chinese civil service exams have been studied at length. See, for example,
Chaffee 1995; Elman 1994 for extensive references.

8. This policy has changed over time, and has always varied in different locations across
China. See Croll et al. 1985; Greenhalgh 1994; Greenhalgh and Winkler 2005; White 2000; Fong
2004 for how the plan was developed and implemented over time.


10. For an in-depth discussion of the advice materials available to parents to help them raise
their children’s quality, see Woronov 2006.

11. See Shirley Shen n.d.


13. “Yi peiyang xuesheng de chuangxin jingshen he shijian nengli wei zhongdian” (Ministry

14. Every large city in China is divided into districts for administrative and bureaucratic
purposes. School districts overlap municipal administrative districts. Central Beijing is divided
into seven districts; both Pine Street and University Schools were in Haidian District in the
northwestern part of the city.

15. Because Bright Day School was owned and operated privately and existed in violation of
municipal education policies, the school was outside the jurisdiction of the various district
school authorities (jiaowei). Students at this and other migrant schools were not able to partici-
pate in the state-organized testing regimes; therefore, Bright Day teachers wrote their own
exams every semester, and passed students into higher grades as they saw fit. At the end of
elementary school, Bright Day students were generally not allowed into the Beijing public
junior high schools. See Kwong 2004a, 2004b; Woronov 2004.

16. In this respect, Chinese education strongly resembles the No Child Left Behind education
reforms in the United States. A detailed comparison of the two programs, however, is beyond
the scope of this article.

17. Migrant schools were all privately owned, usually by migrant workers themselves. For
more details on this system, see Kwong 2004a, 2004b; Woronov 2004.

18. “Jianfu,” an acronym for “jianqing xuesheng guozhong fudan” (reduce students’ exces-
sive burdens), used as both a noun (for the policy) and a verb (for carrying out the terms of the
policy and reducing burdens), was the official and vernacular term by which the policy was
referred. I will continue this usage, both to highlight the local constellation of meanings
associated with the term, and to avoid the cumbersome term burden reduction in English.

19. Several teachers told me that the change to using letters A–F for grades was supposed to
reduce competition among elementary students, who were vying with each other over single
points on test scores.

20. Chinese schools have a longer winter break, and a shorter summer break, than U.S.
schools. Winter break, scheduled around Chinese new year, lasts about four weeks, and marks
the break between the fall and spring semesters for all students.


22. Studying “lifeless” books (nian si shu) referred not to the content of students’ reading, but
to their learning methods. An important aspect of jianfu was intended to eradicate memoriza-
tion without comprehension, replacing it with active and practical learning. See China Education

public space, urban parents generally do not allow children below high school age out of the
house unaccompanied by an adult. If parents were both working during their single child’s
long winter vacation, many children who were old enough to care for themselves would
indeed have been left home alone, forbidden to leave the house, left to entertain themselves
with TV.
24. Indeed, two years later her predictions were confirmed: in spite of the jianfu policy in his school, Li Dong did test into a key (zhongdian) senior high school after middle school.

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