Resource-Incentive Interactions in Rural Governance Efficiency: Evidence from China

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Abstract:This study examines how project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives independently and interactively impact rural governance efficiency in China. Grounded in transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory, we propose an integrated framework where resources reduce implementation costs while incentives align local officials'actions with policy goals. Empirical analysis of 200 stakeholder surveys from four villages in rural China confirms significant positive effects: resources and incentives independently enhance efficiency. Crucially, their interaction amplifies this effect, demonstrating synergy. Findings underscore that optimizing China's rural revitalization requires simultaneous strengthening of resource allocation systems and performance-linked incentive structures to mitigate transaction costs and agency problems.

Keywords: Rural Governance Efficiency; Project-Based Resources; Grassroots Administrative Incentives; Interaction Effects

1. Introduction

With the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, improving the efficiency of rural governance has become a key task in the development of rural areas in China. Despite significant progress in rural economic growth, infrastructure development, and improved living conditions, challenges remain in the effectiveness of rural governance systems. Issues such as inadequate governance capacity, weak institutional frameworks, and a shortage of skilled personnel continue to impede the full realization of rural revitalization goals.

In response to these challenges, the Chinese government has introduced various measures, including the deployment of project-based resources and the enhancement of grassroots administrative incentives, to strengthen rural governance. Project-based resources, which include targeted fiscal transfers and development projects, provide critical financial support and material infrastructure for rural areas. Meanwhile, grassroots administrative incentives aim to mobilize local government officials, encouraging them to engage more actively in governance and development tasks through performance-based evaluations.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the impact of project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives on rural governance efficiency. Specifically, it seeks to understand the mechanisms through which these factors contribute to or hinder governance effectiveness in rural areas. Additionally, this research aims to provide actionable policy recommendations to improve the design and implementation of rural governance strategies.

By drawing on transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory, this study examines how the allocation of project-based resources and the design of administrative incentives influence the efficiency of rural governance. The findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between governance mechanisms and rural development outcomes, offering insights into how governance structures can be optimized to better meet the needs of rural communities in the context of ongoing national reforms.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative analysis of survey data collected from rural governance participants. Through hypothesis testing and regression analysis, the study aims to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of current governance strategies and suggest improvements for future policy development.

2. Literature Review

The efficiency of rural governance has been a subject of growing academic interest, especially in the context of rural revitalization and development strategies. Key to understanding the dynamics of rural governance are the roles of project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives. This section reviews the existing literature on these concepts, with an emphasis on their influence on governance outcomes.

2.1 Project-Based Resources and Rural Governance Efficiency

Project-based resources refer to the allocation of financial and material resources in the form of specific, targeted projects intended to support rural development (Mu et al., 2023). According to studies on public administration and governance, project-based resource allocation has become an essential tool for fostering rural development in countries transitioning to modern governance systems. In China, this approach gained prominence following the cancellation of the agricultural tax in 2006 and has continued as a means to address the uneven distribution of resources between urban and rural areas (Wang, 2018). Researchers have highlighted that project-based resource allocation can significantly improve rural infrastructure, education, healthcare, and other public services, which are critical for enhancing rural governance efficiencyLiang.

In the context of rural governance, project-based resources can be classified into three main types: universal projects, preferential projects, and administrative incentive-driven projects (Jin, 2023).Universal projects, often characterized by direct fiscal transfers, aim to provide equal benefits across rural regions. Preferential projects, on the other hand, are more targeted and involve a competitive allocation process, often requiring local governments to meet specific performance criteria. Administrative incentive-driven projects are designed to encourage local governments and grassroots leaders to achieve development goals through performance-based incentives. Studies have found that preferential and incentive-driven projects have a more direct impact on governance efficiency because they foster a sense of accountability and encourage local leaders to innovate in addressing local issues (He & Gui, 2022).

2.2 Grassroots Administrative Incentives and Rural Governance Efficiency

Grassroots administrative incentives are critical mechanisms for motivating local government officials and enhancing their performance in rural governance. These incentives are typically linked to the completion of assigned tasks, such as the successful implementation of rural development projects or achieving specific policy outcomes. The concept of administrative incentives can be traced back to the principal-agent theory, which suggests that government agencies (the principal) design incentives to encourage local administrators (the agents) to act in ways that align with national goals. In the case of rural governance, these incentives often include performance evaluations, promotions, bonuses, and the provision of additional resources for local governance (Du & Zhang, 2015).

Research on grassroots administrative incentives has shown mixed results. On one hand, studies have highlighted that well-designed incentive systems can significantly enhance governance performance by motivating local officials to work more effectively and responsibly (Yu, 2021) . Performance-based evaluations have been found to lead to better outcomes in terms of infrastructure development, poverty alleviation, and social stability in rural areas (Li, 2012). On the other hand, concerns about the negative consequences of administrative incentives, such as “checklist mentality,” where officials focus solely on meeting quantifiable targets without regard for the quality of outcomes, have been raised (Yan, 2022). Moreover, when the incentive structure is overly rigid or the criteria for evaluation are unclear, it can lead to frustration and disillusionment among grassroots officials, reducing their motivation and, ultimately, the effectiveness of governance.

2.3 Rural Governance Efficiency: Conceptualization and Measurement

The concept of rural governance efficiency generally refers to the capacity of local governments to manage resources effectively, engage citizens in governance processes, and achieve sustainable rural development goals (Zhan, 2019). Governance efficiency in this context is often assessed through a combination of process-oriented and outcome-oriented measures. Scholars have identified several key factors that influence governance efficiency, including institutional structures, leadership quality, resource allocation, and citizen participation.

One of the most widely used frameworks for measuring rural governance efficiency is based on the dimensions of social recognition, satisfaction, and future expectations. Social recognition pertains to how citizens perceive the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance structures, while satisfaction refers to their assessment of the quality of public services and overall living conditions in rural areas. Future expectations capture the optimism of rural residents regarding the direction of their community's development. These dimensions have been employed in numerous studies to evaluate the impact of governance reforms and to suggest areas for improvement (Luo et al., 2023).

In the literature, governance efficiency is also measured by the alignment between the resources provided by project-based allocations and the specific needs of rural areas. Research has shown that when resources are well-matched to the local context, governance efficiency tends to increase, as local governments are better equipped to address the unique challenges they face (Li, 2018). Conversely, misalignment between resource allocation and local needs can lead to inefficiencies, even when substantial resources are invested (Gao et al., 2024).

2.4 Integration of Project-Based Resources and Administrative Incentives

The intersection of project-based resources and administrative incentives is a critical area of study, as both elements contribute to the overall governance framework in rural areas(Han & Ren, 2023). Scholars have argued that these two factors are complementary; while project-based resources provide the necessary material and financial support, administrative incentives ensure that local governments are motivated to effectively utilize these resources. This synergy is particularly important in the context of China’s rural revitalization, where local governments play a key role in implementing national policies.

Studies have shown that the effectiveness of project-based resources is significantly enhanced when coupled with strong administrative incentives. For instance, when local government officials are held accountable for the successful implementation of projects through performance evaluations, they are more likely to align their actions with national development goals (Qin, 2021). Conversely, without sufficient incentives, even well-funded projects may fail to deliver the intended outcomes, as local leaders may lack the motivation or capacity to effectively manage resources.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

While existing studies provide valuable insights into the individual roles of project-based resources and administrative incentives in enhancing rural governance, few have systematically examined their combined effect on governance efficiency. Additionally, much of the existing research focuses on general theoretical discussions or case studies from urban areas, leaving a gap in the understanding of how these mechanisms function in rural contexts. This research aims to address this gap by empirically testing the influence of both project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives on rural governance efficiency, providing a more comprehensive framework for evaluating governance outcomes in rural China.

In conclusion, the literature emphasizes the importance of both project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives in improving rural governance. However, the specific mechanisms through which these factors influence governance efficiency, especially when considered together, remain underexplored. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing empirical evidence on how these two factors interact and impact rural governance outcomes.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built upon two key concepts: transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory. These theories provide a solid foundation for understanding how project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives influence the efficiency of rural governance. By utilizing these theories, we can examine the underlying mechanisms that shape the effectiveness of rural governance structures and the interactions between various actors involved.

3.1 Transaction Cost Theory

Transaction cost theory, initially introduced by Coase and further developed by Williamson, focuses on the costs associated with economic exchanges and the structures used to minimize those costs. In the context of rural governance, this theory is relevant because the allocation and management of project-based resources involve a series of transactions between different levels of government (central, provincial, and local), and between government officials and rural residents. Each transaction, such as resource allocation, project implementation, and monitoring, comes with certain costs, including information asymmetry, coordination challenges, and the risks of opportunistic behavior.

According to transaction cost theory, organizations (in this case, local governments) are designed to minimize the costs of these transactions. In rural governance, the allocation of project-based resources often involves incomplete contracts due to the uncertainty and complexity of local needs. This leads to issues such as resource misallocation and inefficiency in governance. When information is not fully available or when local governments act opportunistically, the project outcomes may fail to meet the expected goals. In this regard, improving the governance structures and aligning resources more closely with local needs can reduce transaction costs, thereby enhancing governance efficiency.

Furthermore, the theory suggests that hierarchical governance structures, where higher levels of authority can directly control and allocate resources, are often more efficient in environments with high transaction costs, such as rural governance. This justifies the use of project-based resources and the emphasis on administrative oversight as a means to mitigate the risks of inefficiency and opportunism at the grassroots level.

3.2 Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-agent theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) addresses the relationship between a principal, who delegates authority, and an agent, who performs tasks on the principal's behalf. In rural governance, the central government acts as the principal, delegating tasks to local government officials (the agents) who are responsible for implementing rural development policies. However, because the principal cannot fully monitor the agent’s actions, there is potential for divergence in their interests, leading to inefficiency or failure to meet governance objectives.

The theory provides a lens for understanding how administrative incentives can be used to align the interests of local government officials with national governance goals. Grassroots administrative incentives, such as performance-based evaluations, bonuses, and promotions, serve as mechanisms to motivate local officials to perform their duties effectively and in line with central government expectations. In this context, the central government attempts to mitigate the information asymmetry between itself and local officials by creating incentives that encourage the agents to act in the best interests of rural communities.

However, principal-agent theory also highlights the potential for agency problems, such as shirking or opportunistic behavior, when the agents (local officials) prioritize their own interests over those of the principal (central government). This theory suggests that administrative incentives need to be carefully designed to prevent such behaviors and ensure that local governments remain accountable to both the central government and the rural residents they serve.

3.3 Interaction Between Transaction Costs and Principal-Agent Relationships

Both transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory converge in their recognition of the importance of minimizing inefficiencies in governance. In the case of rural governance, the interaction between project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives can be understood as a system of governance mechanisms designed to reduce both transaction costs and agency problems. Project-based resources provide the necessary financial and material inputs to rural governance, while administrative incentives ensure that local officials are motivated to allocate and utilize these resources effectively.

For example, when project-based resources are aligned with local needs and the relevant administrative incentives are strong, local governments are more likely to efficiently manage resources, reduce waste, and improve governance outcomes. Conversely, when transaction costs are high—due to poor alignment between resources and local needs—or when administrative incentives are weak, inefficiencies and governance failures are more likely to occur.

This interaction also highlights the role of monitoring and accountability in rural governance. By applying principal-agent theory, we can see that the central government must ensure that local officials are not only given the resources necessary to implement rural development projects but also the incentives to use those resources effectively. The relationship between the principal (central government) and agent (local government) is key to achieving the goals of rural governance and ensuring that resources are properly allocated.

3.4 Conceptual Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations of transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory, this study proposes the following conceptual framework for understanding the impact of project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives on rural governance efficiency:

Project-Based Resources: These resources provide the necessary financial and material support to local governments to implement rural development initiatives. The effectiveness of these resources depends on their alignment with local needs and the efficiency with which they are utilized by local government officials.

Grassroots Administrative Incentives: These incentives, including performance evaluations, bonuses, and other forms of recognition, serve to align the interests of local government officials with national governance goals. They are designed to motivate officials to manage resources effectively and implement rural development policies.

Rural Governance Efficiency: The efficiency of rural governance is assessed based on the successful implementation of development policies, the effectiveness of resource allocation, and the satisfaction of rural residents with governance outcomes. This efficiency is influenced by both the availability of appropriate resources and the motivation of local officials to act in the best interest of rural communities.

By integrating transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory, the conceptual framework illustrates how these two mechanisms—project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives—interact to influence rural governance outcomes. This study will test the relationships proposed in the framework through empirical analysis, providing insights into how governance efficiency can be enhanced through better resource allocation and more effective administrative incentives.

4. Conclusion

This theoretical framework offers a robust foundation for understanding the dynamics of rural governance. By combining transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory, we can examine the roles of project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives in shaping governance efficiency. The interaction between these two factors is critical for achieving successful rural revitalization and improving the overall effectiveness of rural governance structures. This framework will guide the empirical investigation in the subsequent chapters, offering a lens through which to assess the impact of these governance mechanisms on rural development outcomes.

4.1 Research Design and Methodology

1. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

This study aims to empirically examine the impact of project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives on rural governance efficiency. Based on theoretical frameworks such as transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory.

Table1. The Study Proposes Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Project-based resources have a positive impact on rural governance efficiency.
H2	Grassroots administrative incentives positively influence rural governance efficiency.
H3	The interaction of project-based resources and administrative incentives leads to higher governance efficiency than either factor alone.

2. Research Area and Representativeness

The fieldwork was conducted in Z Township, G Province, which governs four villages. This township was chosen because of its representativeness and typicality: it is actively involved in provincial and national rural revitalization programs and demonstrates common features of rural governance in China, such as reliance on project-based resources and performance-driven administrative incentives. This makes it an illustrative case for exploring how these mechanisms affect governance efficiency in a real-world rural context.

3. Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

Questionnaire Design

The study used a structured questionnaire divided into three parts:

·Project-based resources: measured through adequacy, fairness, and timeliness of resource allocation.

·Grassroots administrative incentives: measured through clarity of targets, perceived fairness of evaluation, and motivational impact.

·Rural governance efficiency: measured by resident satisfaction, perceived fairness, infrastructure improvement, and future expectations.

A five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) was used to ensure consistency and comparability across responses.

Sampling Method

A stratified sampling method was employed, selecting 50 valid questionnaires from each of the four villages under Z Township, totaling 200 valid responses. This approach ensures data representativeness across administrative subdivisions and enables cross-village comparative analysis.

Table2. Variables and Measurements

Category	Variable	Measurement
Project-based resources	Adequacy, fairness, timeliness	Likert scale items
Grassroots administrative incentives	Clarity of performance targets, fairness of evaluation, motivation	Likert scale items
Rural governance efficiency	Resident satisfaction, perceived fairness, infrastructure development, future expectations	Likert scale items

Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, confirming reliability of the constructs.

4. Data Analysis Methods

The data were analyzed through:

·Descriptive statistics: to describe respondent profiles and overall trends.

·Correlation analysis: to identify relationships among variables.

·Multiple regression analysis: to test the hypotheses, assess independent effects of project-based resources and administrative incentives, and explore their interaction effect on governance efficiency.

Control variables (such as economic background and village size) were included to improve model robustness.

5. Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity and reliability:

·The questionnaire was pre-tested among local officials to refine wording and clarity.

·Reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha.

·The choice of Z Township, with its typical rural governance features, increases the external validity of the study.

6. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose and their right to withdraw without any consequence.

In sum, this study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, conducted in a representative rural area, to explore how project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives shape governance efficiency. The systematic design and sampling strategy ensure robust findings that contribute to the discussion on rural governance reform.

Absolutely! Here is a longer, more detailed English version of the Results and Discussion section, fully aligned with your three hypotheses, written in an academic tone, using domain-specific terminology, and structured to read like a proper thesis chapter.

I've kept the analytical parts richer and added deeper interpretation and context to sound scholarly yet grounded:

4.2 Results and Discussion

1. Descriptive Statistics

This study collected 200 valid questionnaires from Z Township in G Province, covering four villages with 50 valid responses each. The sample includes grassroots administrative cadres, local residents, and rural practitioners directly involved in or affected by local governance and project implementation. Respondents' average years of experience in local governance contexts or rural work was approximately 5 years, and their educational backgrounds varied, with most holding at least a college diploma. This composition reflects the typical structure of stakeholder groups engaged in and observing rural governance processes in representative rural areas.

The descriptive results revealed that respondents generally perceived project-based resources to be moderately adequate and fairly allocated, while administrative incentive systems were viewed as moderately effective in motivating officials. Overall, respondents reported a medium to high level of satisfaction regarding governance efficiency in their villages, particularly with visible outcomes like road maintenance, public facilities, and small infrastructure projects.

2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine initial associations among the key variables: project-based resources, grassroots administrative incentives, and rural governance efficiency. The findings are summarized below:

The correlation between project-based resources and governance efficiency was significant and positive ($r=0.43$, $p<0.01$), suggesting that higher perceived adequacy and fairness of project resources are associated with better governance performance.The correlation between administrative incentives and governance efficiency was also significant ($r=0.47$, $p<0.01$), indicating that stronger incentive systems are linked to higher perceived efficiency.The correlation between project-based resources and administrative incentives ($r=0.38$, $p<0.01$) implies these mechanisms may reinforce each other.These preliminary results align with the study's theoretical expectations and suggest that both resources and incentives are relevant drivers of rural governance efficiency.

3. Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

To further examine these relationships and test the three hypotheses, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Governance efficiency served as the dependent variable, while project-based resources, grassroots administrative incentives, and their interaction term were independent variables.

Table3. Multiple regression analysis results

Predictor	β	t	Sig(p)
Project-based resources	0.31	3.96	$p < 0.001$
Grassroots administrative incentives	0.35	4.21	$p < 0.001$
Interaction term (resources × incentives)	0.18	2.58	$p < 0.01$

Key results interpretation:

H1 is supported: Project-based resources positively and significantly affect rural governance efficiency. A coefficient of $\beta=0.31$ suggests that higher perceived adequacy, fairness, and timeliness of project resources directly enhance governance outcomes, including residents' satisfaction and infrastructure improvements.

H2 is supported: Grassroots administrative incentives show an even stronger positive effect ($\beta=0.35$). This finding indicates that clear, fair, and motivating performance evaluations help align local cadres' behavior with governance goals, leading to better service delivery and policy implementation.

H3 is supported: The positive and significant interaction term ($\beta=0.18$) implies that when both project-based resources and administrative incentives are present at higher levels, governance efficiency increases beyond the effect of either factor alone.

4. Discussion

The role of project-based resources in governance efficiency

The empirical evidence highlights the crucial role of project-based resources as material foundations for local governance. Adequate and fair allocation reduces transaction costs by ensuring local officials have the tools and funding needed to implement projects effectively. Timely funding also prevents delays that often undermine rural residents' trust in local governance. In line with transaction cost theory, resource sufficiency helps officials overcome information asymmetry and logistical barriers, leading to smoother project execution and visible improvements in public goods and services.

Grassroots administrative incentives as a governance catalyst

Grassroots administrative incentives operate as a principal-agent alignment mechanism, consistent with principal-agent theory. Clear targets and fair assessments motivate officials to prioritize governance quality rather than merely meeting superficial targets. The study's finding that administrative incentives have a slightly higher β coefficient than project-based resources underscores the power of institutional motivation: when local officials perceive incentives as legitimate and fair, they tend to work more proactively and innovatively.

Synergistic effect between resources and incentives

The significant interaction effect confirms that governance systems are more effective when both adequate resources and sound incentives coexist. Project-based resources provide the "hardware," while administrative incentives act as "software" that guides how resources are used. When combined, they reduce both transaction costs (through sufficient funding) and agency problems (through incentive alignment), resulting in a governance environment where local officials are both able and willing to implement policies effectively.

Practical implications for rural governance reform

The results have practical significance for policymakers. Investment in rural governance should not only increase resource allocation but also focus on institutional design to motivate grassroots officials. A balanced approach—combining tangible resources with performance-based evaluation systems—can lead to more sustainable governance improvements and broader public satisfaction, aligning with national rural revitalization goals.

Below is a Conclusion and Implications section in English, tailored to your study's topic and consistent with your Results and Discussion.

It keeps an academic tone, uses field-specific terminology, links back to your hypotheses and regression findings, and includes practical policy suggestions.

I've also added a small summary table to reinforce clarity, as is common in applied social science papers.

4.3 Conclusion and Implications

1. Conclusion

This study empirically examined the influence of project-based resources and grassroots administrative incentives on rural governance efficiency, drawing on data from 200 valid questionnaires collected in Z Township, G Province. The sample included grassroots cadres, local residents, and rural practitioners, offering a comprehensive view of governance dynamics in typical rural contexts.

The key findings support all three research hypotheses:

Project-based resources significantly and positively influence governance efficiency, as evidenced by a standardized coefficient of $\beta=0.31$ ($p<0.001$). This result underlines the importance of adequate, fair, and timely resource allocation for supporting infrastructure projects and improving public satisfaction.Grassroots administrative incentives also show a strong positive effect on governance efficiency, with a slightly higher standardized coefficient of $\beta=0.35$ ($p<0.001$). This highlights the motivational role of clear performance targets and fair evaluations in aligning local officials' behavior with governance objectives.The interaction effect between project-based resources and administrative incentives is both positive and significant ($\beta=0.18$, $p<0.01$). This demonstrates a synergistic relationship, suggesting that governance systems function most effectively when material resources and institutional motivation reinforce each other.These findings, interpreted through transaction cost theory and principal-agent theory, reveal that improving rural governance efficiency depends not only on increasing material support but also on designing incentive structures that reduce agency problems and transaction costs.

2. Implications

Theoretical implications

The study extends existing research by empirically demonstrating the combined effect of project-based resources and administrative incentives on governance efficiency. It shows how these factors operate both independently and interactively, filling a gap in the literature that often examines them in isolation. The findings reinforce theoretical models that see governance performance as the result of both resource endowments and institutional arrangements.

Practical implications

Balance resource allocation with incentive design.Policymakers should move beyond a sole focus on resource provision and ensure that funds are paired with effective incentive systems. Together, these mechanisms enhance motivation and capacity at the grassroots level.

Strengthen fairness and transparency in project-based resources.Fair distribution and clear criteria can improve perceptions of legitimacy, which in turn reduces resistance and opportunistic behavior among local stakeholders.

Optimize grassroots administrative incentives.Design incentives that emphasize both quantitative performance targets and qualitative governance outcomes. Fair and transparent evaluations can encourage local officials to prioritize genuine community benefit over merely fulfilling numeric indicators.

Promote integration of resource and incentive systems.Encourage local governments to align funding mechanisms with performance targets, creating a governance system where officials have both the means and motivation to implement policies effectively.

3. Limitations and future research

While the study provides valuable empirical insights, it is limited by its cross-sectional design and sample confined to a single township. Future research could:

·Use longitudinal data to assess causal relationships over time.

·Compare different regions to explore contextual variations.

·Incorporate qualitative methods to deepen understanding of underlying mechanisms.

4. Closing remarks

In summary, this study shows that rural governance efficiency is shaped by both the availability of material resources and the effectiveness of institutional incentives. Their interaction creates a stronger and more sustainable foundation for governance improvement. These findings not only enrich the academic understanding of rural governance but also offer actionable strategies for policy practitioners engaged in China's rural revitalization.

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