



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Being Korean in Japan

Description: Ethnic Koreans have made up a substantial part of Japan's urban populations for generations. And while many get on with their lives among the Japanese, their unique status continues to present challenges to how they fit in and how they see themselves. Sociologist Assoc. Professor Nana Oishi and historian Dr Jonathan Glade examine the fates and fortunes of Zainichi Koreans. Presented by Peter Clarke.

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Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Peter Clarke: Hello, I'm Peter Clarke. This is Ear to Asia.

Nana Oishi: Many Zainichi Koreans still use both Japanese names and Korean names. Particularly kids who go to Japanese school tend to use Japanese names simply because they don't want to stand out, they don't want to be bullied because of their ethnicity. But when they enter universities, they tend to change, they tend to become more open, and accommodating their own identity.

Jonathan Glade: It gets to the core question of what does it mean to be Japanese. If you are born in Japan but not ethnically Japanese but culturally and linguistically Japanese, does that make you Japanese? These are questions I think Japanese people are really grappling with right now.

Peter Clarke: In this episode, the challenges for ethnic Koreans living in Japan. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

Korea is one of Japan's nearest neighbors, and the two countries have been exchanging goods, culture, religion and at times belligerence for over 1,000 years. Both societies like to portray themselves as ethnically homogenous, yet the truth is, as always, more complex.

Ethnic Koreans, in fact, have for generations made up a substantial part of Japan's urban landscapes. They blend in with Japanese sounding names and public appearance, and their integration is such that to outsiders, and even to many Japanese, their other-than-Japanese ethnicity is virtually imperceptible. Yet, the Zainichi Koreans, as they're known, make their home



in Japan as a result of historical misfortune. While many get on with their lives among the Japanese and couldn't imagine living anywhere else, their unique status continues to present challenges to how they fit in and to how they see themselves.

To examine the lives of the Zainichi Koreans and the social and personal burdens they face, we're joined in the studio by sociologist Associate Professor Nana Oishi, and literary historian, Dr Jonathan Glade, both of Asia Institute. Nana, welcome back to Ear to Asia, and Jonathan, welcome.

Nana Oishi: Thank you.

Jonathan Glade: Thank you.

Peter Clarke: This is a fantastic topic, and I bounced it off a few of my friends, just a little, personal survey to see if anyone knew about Zainichi Koreans, and not one did. So, I suspect that most of our listeners are discovering some of this narrative for the very first time. So, let's throw the spotlight on who these people actually are. Who are the Zainichi Koreans?

Nana Oishi: Zainichis are Korean residents who have been living in Japan for many generations. Zainichi actually literally means staying in Japan, so it doesn't really mean Koreans, per se. Zainichi itself. But it implies temporary residence. But in reality, most Zainichi Koreans are staying in Japan permanently.

The first generation of Zainichi Koreans arrived in Japan before 1945 under the Japanese colonial rule. There were about two million of them in Japan when the war ended, and most of them did return to Korea, but 650,000 of them stayed in Japan and have families. Many of them do not become Japanese citizens and still keep their Korean passports, and many of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who were born and grew up in Japan also keep their Korean passport and do not apply for Japanese citizenship.

Some of them do, though. Recently, I think more younger people are likely to apply for Japanese citizenship, for various reasons, but we don't really have the specific data on this. So, it's really hard to tell.

Peter Clarke: We're going to be talking about citizenship historically, because there are different periods, aren't there, where their status was quite different?

Nana Oishi: Right.



- Peter Clarke: Early on they were part of the empire, I guess, the national part of the empire. Then, of course, as you just alluded to, straight after the war that shifted quite drastically.
- Nana Oishi: Right.
- Peter Clarke: But today, what is the capacity for Koreans to actually become naturalized Japanese?
- Jonathan Glade: Probably since about the 1990s, it's been relatively easy. A special resident category, that most Zainichi Koreans were in, to change from that category to naturalized Japanese citizen is not a very difficult process. I think it entails a criminal background check and connections to North Korea, and other than that it's a pretty straightforward process.
- Peter Clarke: We perhaps should explain that, looking to Japan from the outside, they have quite a different system of citizenship, don't they? Because it's more based on family lineage compared to, perhaps, other countries like the US where it's place of birth.
- Jonathan Glade: Yeah. That's right. The important thing to think about is this particular experience and particular historical heritage, that led many to not want to become Japanese citizens. And so, because they were not Japanese citizens automatically at birth, those of second and later generations, then it becomes a choice in later cases. And there is a reason why many chose not to become Japanese, even if the process was relatively straightforward later on.
- Peter Clarke: Now, now, they are a major minority in Japan, there's no doubt about that. But what's the actual quantum? How many are there?
- Nana Oishi: There is no official statistics on Zainichis, but we know about 320,000 Korean passport holders who are under the visa called Special Permanent Resident Visa, and which is given only to people who were living in Japan before the World War II ended, and their descendants. In addition to that, another 360,000 people, Koreans, who came to Japan before the World War II, or they are children, or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren. And who became Japanese citizens. Those people who became naturalized. If we combine them together, then we can estimate that there are probably 700,000 of Zainichis in Japan in total.
- Jonathan Glade: Yeah, so, I think it's important to point out this is one reason why, I think, this topic is so important in terms of understanding Japan, and maybe East Asia more broadly, East Asian society. That notions of ethnic minority or ethnicity may be quite different than English language contexts. So, if we're



talking about Zainichi, once they become Japanese citizens, then the Japanese government no longer has statistics about whether they're ethnically Korean, or not, or the notion of Korean Japanese being Korean Japanese is something that's still quite unfamiliar in Japanese society, or maybe not broadly used.

To think of someone as a Japanese citizen but a different ethnicity is quite difficult, and so, yes, there are statistics, but sometimes it's a little hard to pinpoint exact numbers because the Japanese government is not overly concerned with ethnic minorities who are Japanese citizens.

Peter Clarke: Okay, Jonathan, let's trace the historical arc now. When did the first Koreans arrive? The first immigrants? And what drew them there?

Jonathan Glade: You know, going back thousands of years, and there's even record of Koreans coming over and having a large impact on Japan in 700, 800. Some even argue that Japan was settled via Korea. That's a controversial topic that we won't get into today, but that's a totally different history. What we're talking about with Zainichi mostly started after Japan officially colonized Korea in 1910.

Peter Clarke: When they annexed the Korean peninsula?

Jonathan Glade: Yeah, annexed the Korean peninsula, I think, is the way that it's usually stated, but basically as a formal colonization. There was influence before that, but formal colonization in 1910.

Peter Clarke: There were some Koreans, though, who immigrated a little earlier than that?

Jonathan Glade: Yeah, but very small numbers.

Peter Clarke: Yes.

Jonathan Glade: And really, the large numbers started about 1920. What happened is Korea was actually a settler colony for Japanese people, and a lot of Japanese people started going to Korea and buying up land, and many Korea farmers were displaced, especially from the southern half of the peninsula. I don't know the exact statistics, but I looked at a historical study and it said that around 40% of Koreans who made their way to Japan said they did so for economic reasons, especially around the 1920s and '30s.

Then, later on, with the war effort during World War II, there was this mobilization movement effort in Japan, and then a lot of Koreans were basically conscripted and brought to Japan to do manual labor. But as Nana



pointed out, of the two-plus million that ended up in Japan, most went back to Korea. So, all those who were brought in, basically by force in the 1940s, they went back. And it's those that were there longer, from the 1920s and '30s, who had saved up money or built a life in Japan, that stayed behind.

I think the US, or the Allied occupation made a rule that you cannot take more than 1,000 yen of property back to Korea. So, those who had actually built up a life in Japan were not motivated to return, because they couldn't take much with them.

Peter Clarke: Now we come to post-war, 1945 and the years following, and some pretty drastic things happen, don't they, Nana, in terms of the status of Zainichi Koreans? Because we should emphasize that during that earlier period, they were part of Japan, weren't they? They were citizens during that earlier period after the annexation of the Korean peninsula. They were part of the empire, if you like. But after World War II, things changed quite drastically.

Nana Oishi: That's right. Under the Japanese colonial rule, Zainichis were categorized as Japanese nationals. So, they had various socioeconomic rights. They even had a right to be elected, and in fact one Zainichi man was elected for Japanese parliament twice, actually. And others were elected for local government offices, et cetera. However, after World War II they lost most of these rights, since they were no longer Japanese colonial subjects or Japanese nationals.

Peter Clarke: What effect did that have on their everyday life? I'm just thinking that once you lost citizenship, I am assuming, just the normal processes of welfare, access to public service jobs, et cetera, the door slammed on those sort of things for Koreans in Japan?

Nana Oishi: Exactly. Exactly. They could no longer have access to the national health insurance, and national old-age pension. They were discriminated against in the labor market, and if they used their Korean name, their job applications were often turned down. In 1970, actually, a second-generation Zainichi Korean person, Mr. Pak Chong Sok, applied for a job at a very big company called Hitachi by using his Japanese name. And he passed the exam interviews, and he got a job offer, and when Hitachi asked for his family registration document and he told them that he was actually Korean, and then they canceled the job offer.

Mr. Pak was very shocked since he was a permanent resident, and he had a right to work in Japan, and he passed exams, and everything, right? But because the job offer was canceled, he decided to sue Hitachi. And his family and many of his Korean friends and Japanese friends got together and supported him, and he won. And this case was a major achievement, not



only for him but for all Zainichi Koreans and ethnic minorities in Japan, because the court officially recognized Japanese companies' discriminatory practices against them.

Of course, discrimination didn't disappear immediately, but after this lawsuit more opportunities became available for Zainichi and other ethnic minorities. So, it was a very positive development.

Peter Clarke: We've painted a picture of Zainichi Koreans being shut out of many aspects of particularly occupational life in Japan, but there was also some degree of surveillance, wasn't there? I'm thinking of the fingerprinting, for example, which has only comparatively recently been stopped in Japan. So, the Japanese government was quite keen to keep track of where they were.

Jonathan Glade: I think until the 1980s that fingerprinting was required by law, and that there was quite a lot of resistance to that. And that's just one of the different laws in place that separated the so-called special resident status from citizens, obviously, no voting rights, couldn't work for the Japanese government. Other certain benefits that were not available to Zainichi Koreans. But I think it's also important to take a step back to what happened after World War II. I mean, we use the term Zainichi, but at the time they were just Koreans. Anyone who was ethnically Korean throughout the Japanese empire just thought of themselves as Korean. There was no difference. But after 1945, many chose not to go back to Korea, and they were labeled as liberated people, but then they were subjected to Japanese laws, and in some cases labeled as enemy nationals, which is what the occupation called Japanese people at the time.

The reason why I point that out is there's a back-and-forth status that starts even in 1945, 1946, and so they're never, really, totally not citizens that are subjected to Japanese law, but they're never given the rights of Japanese citizens. So there's this in-between space that they occupy, not totally foreign, not totally Japanese, or not Japanese citizens, and that continues throughout, and it's still an issue going on today, that if you decide not to become a Japanese citizen, you still don't get full rights even if you're fourth-generation Zainichi.

Peter Clarke: What drove all that? What elements in Japanese society, and I'm assuming some elements in the US occupation forces, what drove that?

Jonathan Glade: This is the topic of my research, so I don't want to get into too much detail because I could really go off the rails, but I will just say Cold War is one big concern, and the Allied occupation, in particular United States, was concerned with communism. So, a lot of the control and suppression and surveillance of Koreans was due to fear that many Koreans were aligned



with the Communist Party, or with communism. So, the Japanese government as well was very motivated to kind of surveil, and keep Koreans under their watch, or under control.

I guess this is one topic that we're planning to talk about, but there was a Korean educational system set up, basically to restore a Korean identity that many Koreans thought had been erased during colonial rule, and that was suppressed in many ways. Even now, there are still Korean schools, but they are outside the Japanese education system. They don't have official status within the Japanese education system. So, you can see how there's this struggle between trying to have a Korean identity, but not being accepted or totally a part of Japanese society if you do that, right? If you want to become, quote, unquote Japanese as a Japanese citizen, then many Koreans, many Zainichi Koreans would think that you'd have to give up your Korean identity, and that's been a struggle that's been ongoing, basically, since 1945.

Peter Clarke: Nana, could you just clarify just how Korean will change their name to be more Japanese? This is something we don't probably understand as clearly outside Japan. This sense of identity, the actual name you have, the way it looks in calligraphy, too, I guess, how did they do that? And is that the same situation today, that most Zainichi Koreans in Japan would have a Japanese name?

Nana Oishi: Yes. Many Zainichi Koreans still use both names. Japanese names and Korean names. Particularly those kids who go to Japanese school, they tend to use Japanese names, simply because they don't want to stand out, they don't want to be bullied because of their ethnicity and stuff. But I think when they enter universities, they tend to change quite a bit, because universities are a lot more diverse. They have international students from Korea, and they have different ethnic Japanese. So, I actually realized that when I was teaching in Japan, quite a few Japanese students, I thought Japanese students, were actually Koreans. And they use their Japanese names in the first year, but the second year and third year, their names were different, or they call themselves Koreans.

I realized that they inspired each other in terms of ethnic identity, and in the university, in general, I think young people tend to become more open, and more accommodating their own identity, and they change the ways in which they perceive themselves gradually.

Peter Clarke: What you both seem to be describing is a real pull and tug situation. I think you almost used that term yourself a moment ago, Jonathan. What do you analyze as the incentives and the disincentives for Zainichi Koreans within the Japanese society to insert themselves more wholeheartedly into that



society, or hold back from it and keep their Korean identity intact within themselves, at least? What are those pulls and tugs all about?

Jonathan Glade: Thinking about what motivates an individual to do something, I think you can't think of it as hiding, or concealing, one's ethnicity, if you've always used a Japanese name, you only speak Japanese, you go to Japanese schools, then it would actually have to be a very active choice to break out of that. That's the default mode, so passing is not really an active choice.

This also shows up in a lot of literary works where characters are represented as not even knowing that they're passing. And it's only later, kind of what Nana points out, maybe going to university or later on learning and saying, "Oh, I have this heritage. I connect to this," but not really knowing about it in your younger years. And sometimes this is represented as a tragedy, sometimes it's just the reality, but passing and using different names, there's *shōmei* is what I guess it's called. The passing name. Can actually be the name that one is most comfortable with, the Japanese name. So, sometimes when one is called by their Korean name, they feel very uncomfortable because they're not used to it. Or they can't even pronounce it because they only speak Japanese. I think it's important to point out that a lot of these ideas of ethnicity and identity are not really so clear-cut.

Peter Clarke: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Peter Clarke, along with sociologist, associate professor Nana Oishi, and literary historian Dr. Jonathan Glade. We're talking about the challenges for ethnic Koreans living and getting along in Japan. Now, we come to that other dimension that's just lurking at the table here, and that's the Korean War, of course, and the split between North and South in Korea. How has that shaped and affected Koreans in Japan? Jonathan?

Jonathan Glade: Koreans in Japan, historically, have liked to see themselves as Koreans. Not North Korean, not South Korean. Because Korea was just one country when they originally emigrated to Japan, or when their grandparents or whomever immigrated to Japan. So, the split of the Korean peninsula was largely opposed and largely seen as a huge negative by Koreans in Japan. Now, later generations most closely, probably, identify with South Korea, but at the time, many were very opposed, and they particularly saw the United States as having a negative role in that. So, a lot were more closely aligned with North Korea, or saw North Korea as the true representative of Korea. But I would say, most at the time just saw themselves as Korean, and they didn't particularly identify with one nation-state.

Peter Clarke: To what extent do Koreans in Japan maintain some sort of cultural ties with Korea? Do they travel as tourists back to South Korea, or even some of them



go to North Korea? Do they generally sustain some of those cultural ties, and try and keep contact with some fleeting sense of identity?

Nana Oishi: Yeah, I would think so. A lot of my Zainichi students in Japanese universities, I taught at two universities, and in both places a lot of Zainichi students went to Korea as an exchange students, and they learned the language, and they try to keep very close cultural ties with Korea. Unfortunately, North Korea is not a very easy place to visit for them, but Zainichi South Koreans, they went to South Korea quite a few times, I think.

Peter Clarke: Within that back-and-forth that we're describing in this conversation, is applying for a Japanese passport, for example, seen as an enormously important step in terms of the Korean dimension to an individual's identity? Is it something that's commented upon, even frowned upon, by fellow Koreans? If you apply for a Japanese passport?

Nana Oishi: I think from the first-generation, second-generation point of view, it is, but among third and fourth generations, or fifth generations, some of them are, I don't think it is a big deal any more because most of them spent their whole lives in Japan, and I think young people tend to understand, even nationalistic ones, understand what other Zainichis are doing, and then I think they understand everybody has his or her identity. So I don't think citizenship application is something that's frowned upon by other Zainichis.

Jonathan Glade: Yeah. I think it is important here that we don't impose broader understandings on individual choices. So, as Nana pointed out, probably the biggest distinction that needs to be made is historical, or generational difference. Because of the reasons I've mentioned earlier, that Koreans were not given a lot of cultural autonomy in the 1940s and '50s, that many felt naturalizing, when the option became easier later on in the '60s and '70s and '80s, that it was betraying their own identity. But now, I don't think that's the case. And you can see in the numbers, there are actually probably more naturalized Zainichi than there are those who have not become Japanese citizens.

Just to touch on the earlier question about identity, and connection to Korea, I think there is quite a bit individually. And someone like me or Nana, in the settings that we work in, we may come across those who are very engaged and actively searching out their Korean identity, but the average Zainichi person or person who has one Zainichi parent, one Japanese parent, they may not really be concerned. You know, anecdotally speaking, I've met people like this through friends of friends, and they'll just say, "Oh, yeah, actually, by the way, I'm Zainichi Korean." And this is after knowing them for a year, and it's just really not a big deal to them. But then, when I was studying Korean in Korea, half of my class was Zainichi.



So, in those cases, it's like, well, there's so many Zainichi who are intensely interested in Korea, but I think in a way it's conformation bias because my opportunities of interacting with the average person who just goes about their daily life, marries a Japanese person, has a job, I would only interact with them on a very limited basis. Whereas, if I'm in Korea studying Korean, I have a lot more opportunity to meet with those who are actively searching out a Korean identity.

Peter Clarke: Nana, we've talked about the historical discrimination within employment, particularly, and the use of welfare funding and ability to be part of the civil service in Japan for Zainichi Koreans, but there are really clear examples, aren't there, of hate speech against these groupings, and even protests, and people yelling in the street, and assaulting and yelling at schools, et cetera. What are these hate speech incidents about? Who propagates this?

Nana Oishi: I guess what's happening in Japan right now is growing nationalism, just as NY other countries in the world recently. There are more and more extreme nationalists emerging in Japan, as well. One of the reflections of that movement, nationalistic movement, is the hate speeches against Zainichi Koreans. Even when I was in Japan, I've seen lots of demonstrations and hate speeches. There's a big organization called Zaitokukai which was established as an anti-Korean organization in 2006. They have 16,000 members, which is quite large, and they claims that the Zainichi Koreans have received too many privileges, including welfare benefits, and access to public housing, which some Japanese, according to what they claim, some Japanese people cannot even get, et cetera.

They have been demanding that the government cancel all the socioeconomic rights that have been given to Zainichis. So they often organize major demonstrations using hate speeches and demanding that Zainichis to go home, et cetera, which, horrible, horrible languages that they use in the demonstrations. It was really disgusting to see those demonstrations. But the Japanese government has passed the Hate Speech Act in 2016 to deal with the situation. It was good that they had passed it because it recognized hate speeches are discriminatory actions, and should be removed from our society.

However, there is no penal cost. It is not very effective, unfortunately. The positive development, though, is that every time when a hate speech demonstration is organized, a so-called counter action, or counter demonstration, is also organized, by Japanese people and Korean people. And forming a united front. So, more and more people are getting involved in this counter movement against hate speech demonstrations. I think more Japanese people began to feel that they need to protect their friends and neighbors, so this is something that is really emerging quite significantly in



recent years. I see it as a positive development, although, obviously, we definitely need to eliminate these kind of hate demonstrations for sure.

Peter Clarke: Certainly the demonstrations, you probably won't easily eliminate the underlying feelings. But these people who are protesting so vigorously and hatefully against Zainichi Koreans, what's their underlying sense of grievance, if you like? What is that about?

Jonathan Glade: Going back to what Nana was talking about, and I mean, I can see this happening in the United States, happening in Europe, happening in any place with large immigrant populations, that there is a fear that immigrant populations are taking over. As they would say in the United States, taking our jobs. Things like that. And that ethnic minorities become a scapegoat, right? And that, oh, they are not truly Japanese, therefore they should go back to their country, or they should not receive certain benefits.

One reason why I'm so interested in this topic, and why I really started, I guess, my research on the topic, is because it gets to the core question of what does it mean to be Japanese? Can you be Japanese if you were born in another country? Or can you be Japanese if you're born in another country and your parents are ethnically Japanese? Can you be Japanese without speaking Japanese? If you are born in Japan but not ethnically Japanese, but culturally, and linguistically Japanese, does that make you Japanese? These are questions, I think, Japanese people are really grappling with right now, that maybe even 20 years ago, when I first visited Japan, were not huge issues, or not really on the surface. But I think now it's definitely a huge issue, that many Japanese people are thinking about, "Can we expand that definition of what it means to be Japanese?"

Peter Clarke: There's a certain psychology at work here, isn't there? That discrimination brings a certain distortion in the way that people feel and think about the other within their society. Do you see this easing over the next couple of generations? You've talked about some of the younger Koreans in the Japanese society. How do you see it playing out?

Nana Oishi: I'm optimistic, because I've seen my students who were at the universities growing up in more diverse environment, and they really didn't have a feeling against any ethnic groups in Japan. They became friends with each other, and I haven't really seen any negative developments. At least at the university levels. So, Japan will change quite a bit in the near future, because we are going to open up our labor market to a larger number of migrants. Our society will be even more diverse than in the past. I think people will get used to living in a diverse community.



Peter Clarke: As you and I have discussed in another podcast, the plunging population of Japan, so it's slightly ironic, isn't it? That we've got this conversation going on at all about people, many of them who have been in Japan for so long, so how do you see the future, Jonathan?

Jonathan Glade: Well, to see the future, I guess I would reflect on my own interaction with Japan over the past 20 years, that demographically I think there's been a huge shift. Nana talked about a lot of those issues, you know, labor issues, aging society, all of these things where, especially, the Japanese government is hugely motivated to bring in people to encourage migration to Japan. And I think we can see those as positives, but at the same time, I don't want to make light of the ongoing issues that people face.

I think if you ask most Zainichi Koreans, they would say there are different issues that they still face in their everyday life, but I would also point out, anecdotally, one of my very good friends in Japan, he is not Zainichi but his father is African and his mother is Japanese. He has been contacted by researchers trying to get him to talk about the discrimination that he has faced. And for him, personally, he just says, "I love living in Japan. I am Japanese. This is how I've grown up. There's nothing else that I could imagine." And he feels kind of put off by people trying to get him to talk about being discriminated against.

So, once again, I think at the individual level, it's really hard to say what one's experience may be. But there are still ongoing concerns, and I'm very, I guess, optimistic as Nana pointed out, but also concerned to see how these shifting demographics will play out in the future. People see it as a positive, "Oh," you know, "It's globalization, internationalization." But there are very real economic factors at play, and there are still communities and populations that are marginalized. It may not, necessarily, be Zainichi Koreans, but it may be certain labor groups, groups brought in for labor that are working in jobs that, maybe, Japanese people don't want to work in. And once again, this is an international phenomenon, not necessarily particular to Japan.

Peter Clarke: Well, it is a fascinating story, isn't it? The story of ethnicity, nationalism, identity, and all the various human feelings that revolve around all that. Thank you so much, to you, Nana and Jonathan, for being with us on Ear to Asia, and helping us understand it more deeply. Thank you.

Nana Oishi: Thank you.

Jonathan Glade: Thank you.



Peter Clarke:

Our guests on Ear to Asia have been Associate Professor Nana Oishi and Dr Jonathan Glade, both of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Spotify, Stitcher, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on iTunes or Apple Podcast. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show. And, of course, let your friends know about us on social media.

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