

Malaysia Airlines Flight 370: What Really Happened?

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The Occasion

On March 8th, 2014, a Boeing 777 aircraft departed Kuala Lumpur International Airport under the call sign “MH370.” This routine flight intended to land in Beijing, China; instead, it landed in the history books as one of the biggest aviation mysteries.

The mystery begins at 12:42 AM local time in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. 227 passengers and 12 crew members boarded the flight, with their goal being to land in Beijing at 6:30 AM. Everything was going normally for the red-eye flight until it reached the end of the South China Sea. The last communication made with the aircraft was at 1:19 AM, just before it left Malaysian airspace. Audio transcription reveals that air traffic control in Kuala Lumpur was handing the plane off to air traffic control in Vietnam when pilot Zaharie Ahmad Shah said, “Good night, Malaysian Three Seven Zero.” One minute later, the transponder shut down and MH370 disappeared from radars.

Almost immediately following the plane’s disappearance, the search began to find it. Christopher Klein at The History Channel calls the search “the largest and most expansive search in aviation history, which included 334 search flights and the deep-sea scouring of 46,000 square miles of ocean floor.” (Klein, 2024) The New York Times also calls it “the largest and costliest search.” (Innis, et al., 2017) When Klein says this search was expansive, he meant it. According to the Australian Government, the search began later in the day on March 8th; they focused specifically on the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca, which are the two bodies of water surrounding Malaysia.

Although the outside world could no longer locate the aircraft, the Malaysian military could. But not for long. On March 10th, it was released that once the plane had lost contact, it was seen on military radars turning around and flying west toward the Strait of Malacca. In the

Netflix documentary *MH370: The Plane That Disappeared*, aviation journalist Jeff Wise says that finding a plane on a military radar “doesn’t require any kind of signals from the plane.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 1, 25:04) The safety investigation states that the aircraft could be seen on military radars for a little over an hour, completely disappearing at 2:22 AM in the Strait of Malacca.

On March 11th, search and rescue teams were in the Andaman Sea, as well as the South China Sea, where the last contact with civilian radar was made. On March 15th, Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak confirmed in a press conference the turnaround of the aircraft on military radar; this press conference stopped the search in the South China Sea.

The story doesn’t end there. CBS News states that the antenna on the aircraft was sending signals to a British satellite in the Indian Ocean well into the morning on March 8th. The final signal came at 8:19 AM, which is said to be when the plane ran out of fuel (Pegues, 2014). The problem with these signals? There was no way of knowing where they came from. ABC News states that the signal could have come from as far north as Kazakhstan to as far south as western Australia (ABC News, 2014). The Guardian states that the aircraft released “eight satellite ‘pings’... between 1:11 AM and 8:11 AM Malaysian time.” (Arthur, 2014)

In a press conference on March 24th, Razak revealed that the UK Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) and Inmarsat, a UK company analyzing the satellite data, had confirmed that the plane flew south. Razak said “Its [MH370] last position was in the middle of the Indian Ocean.” (Euronews, 2014, 1:18) After confirming the path of the aircraft from the satellite, the search shifted its focus. The world’s eyes were now on the remote Indian Ocean, hoping it would spew out anything that would bring authorities closer to finding the aircraft. Australia oversaw the searches that took place over the next couple of years. A news clip from

the documentary states that there were “43 ships, 58 aircraft, from 14 different countries, all working together trying to find clues.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 2, 3:24)

Over the years, many countries and organizations participated in the search, hoping they’d uncover something that wasn’t revealed already. On January 17th, 2017, all underwater searches for the aircraft stopped. In 2018, a private organization called Ocean Infinity started its own search. They conducted the search on something called a “no cure, no fee” offer; this meant that Ocean Infinity would only get paid for their efforts if they found the aircraft. It was not long after that the search ended, and the aircraft was not located. The case has been closed since then, but in March 2024, the current Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said in Melbourne, Australia that he’d be willing to reopen the case “if there was a compelling case to do so.” (Latiff, 2024)

While just about every search conducted has come up inconclusive, not all of them led to dead ends. For example, Rozanna Latiff at Reuters states that many pieces of debris were found “along the coast of Africa and on islands in the Indian Ocean.” (Latiff, 2024) However, only a select few are from MH370.

As information about the situation became available to the public, people around the world started making theories about what happened. The documentary highlights three possible scenarios. The first theory, and the theory this paper is focused on, is that someone on board purposely derailed the course of the aircraft to commit suicide and mass murder. The pilot, Zaharie Ahmad Shah, was the main suspect in this case, as there is plenty of evidence that supports his malicious intent. He was also the most experienced of the two pilots; the first officer, according to Wise, had “just been approved to fly as a first officer on a 777.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 1, 42:37)

In the documentary, Wise explains how he believes the pilot carried out his master plan. While the aircraft was being handed off to air traffic control in Ho Chi Minh, and “nobody’s paying attention to him,” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 1, 52:52) Shah lured the first officer out of the cockpit and locked the door behind him. Once the first officer was gone, he made the aircraft go electronically dark; the aircraft was now invisible to civilian radars. Then, he turned the plane around and the first officer realized he was locked out. Knowing this would be a distraction, Shah depressurized the cabin and it went silent after about 15 minutes. At this point, he turned south and kept going until the aircraft ran out of fuel.

The second theory was that a group of Russians on board hijacked the aircraft and flew it to Kazakhstan while tricking the rest of the world into believing it was in the Indian Ocean. The final theory was that the United States intercepted the aircraft while it was between Malaysian and Vietnamese airspace because there was technology on board that the Americans didn’t want the Chinese to have.

Any one of these theories is possible. With the possibility of reopening the case on the horizon, people will start talking again about what really happened to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370.

The Five Canons

Invention:

Ethos 1: Many people coming up with these theories have a background in aviation, data analysis, engineering, and other relevant fields. Others are just normal people hoping to get to the bottom of a fascinating mystery. The documentary follows a variety of people who held important roles during the search and those in power at the time.

One of these people is Jeff Wise, a respected aviation journalist who Decider calls “the ‘expert’ that anchors all those theories into some aspect of reality.” (Keller, 2023) he was the one who broke down each of the theories and walked viewers through everything that could’ve gone down. Also in this realm is Florence de Changy, an investigative journalist from France. She started from the beginning and formed her opinions by doing her own work to find out what happened to the aircraft.

Another important player in the documentary is Brian Exner, a pilot who Wise met through an online group whose goal was to try and figure out what happened to MH370. He said that when he first met Exner, he “was in enormous detail. Like, I couldn’t even understand fully what he was saying.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 1, 30:22) he said with a laugh that Exner “clearly knew what he was talking about.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 1, 30:27) Cyndi Hendry plays a similar role to Exner in the documentary. Though not a pilot, she searched for debris online for a group called Tomnod. She says that her eye for detail from photography was a big help in looking.

Two representatives from Malaysia were also in the documentary. The first one was Fuad Sharuji, the Former Crisis Manager at Malaysia Airlines. The other was Azharuddin Abdul Rahman, the Former Head of Civil Aviation in Malaysia. Both men were serving these roles on March 8th, 2014. Another person of authority included in the documentary is Mark Dickinson; he works for Inmarsat, the satellite company that received signals from MH370. Finally, Marie Dosé, Ghyslain Watrelos’ lawyer, spoke about how they worked to sue Malaysia Airlines for what happened to Watrelos’ wife and children.

Peter Foley is an Australian man who acted as the Search Director in the Indian Ocean. While he wasn’t successful, Blaine Gibson was. Gibson is an adventurer that made it his life’s

goal to visit every country in the world. When the flaperon was found, he wanted to be the one to find the rest of the debris. Wise says that Gibson is “the only person who can go out, walk along a beach, and pull up a piece of debris.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 3, 8:55) A news clip from FOX News in the documentary calls him “a modern-day Indiana Jones.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 3, 9:30)

Rationale: Including the importance of all these people proves their credibility and knowledge of the incident. It shows that the creators of the documentary made sure they were getting every angle they could of the situation.

Ethos 2: The documentary also followed five family members of passengers on board the flight; one woman was a part of the cabin crew for Malaysia Airlines, Ghyslain Watrelos—a businessman who, according to LADBible, claims someone named “Mr. B” told him what happened to the aircraft (Jones, 2023)—lost his wife and two youngest children, one Australian woman lost her husband, a Chinese man lost his mother, and a Malaysian woman also lost her mother. They all held different opinions on what they think happened, but they were all crushed about the loss of their loved ones.

Rationale: These relatives have spent many years following the case and waiting for answers about where their loved ones are. No one in their right mind would fake having a loved one on that flight.

Pathos 1: One way the creators tugged on the heartstrings of viewers is by interviewing the loved ones of the 239 passengers and crew and how they’ve managed

everything that has happened since March 8th, 2014. These five people have gone through a lot since that day, and they wanted others to know about it.

Jiang Hui's mother was a passenger on the flight. In every clip he was in, he showed no emotion. He kept a blank face that is somewhat unsettling. Many family members cried or stared into oblivion, like Jiang Hui, when they were overcome with emotion. Danica Weeks cried the most out of the family members. Ghyslain Wattralos would exclaim every once in a while as well.

There are clips of all the family members with their loved ones throughout the documentary. There are photos of Danica Weeks and her husband on their wedding day. Intan Othman and her husband posed for pictures in their flight attendant outfits. A photo of Ghyslain Wattralos' wife and children on vacation appears frequently. Finally, Grace Nathan and Jiang Hui are seen at vigils and other memorials advocating for their missing mothers.

Rationale: Showing the families' raw emotions gets viewers to feel for them and what they've gone through for the past decade. Hearing about what some of the passengers were like and what led them to be on the plane that night adds a layer to the documentary. These testaments to their character make the audience feel sorer for them because they lost such amazing people in their lives.

Pathos 2: The video and sound effects used throughout the documentary bring on a sense of uneasiness to viewers. One especially interesting effect occurs throughout the documentary. A beeping digital clock is often shown to display the time that has passed without finding the aircraft. When the clock nears an important time or date, the beeping will get faster and the movement of the clock will slow down; there is a subtle boom as the clock stops. After it

stops moving, the time and day stays on screen for a couple of seconds, then it shows how long it's been since the plane last contacted radars. This gets more upsetting to see as time goes on; at one point in the documentary, the clock ticks to December 2nd, 2016, 1,000 days since the last contact with MH370.

Another specific video effect that is unsettling is a video of the airport in Beijing at around 6:30 AM, when MH370 was supposed to land. The shot is of a silent, empty gate. No plane is connecting to the gate and no one is walking to meet their families near baggage claim.

Rationale: These effects are a form of foreshadowing at certain points in the documentary. For example, when the clock reaches 12:41 AM on March 8th, people knew that was when the plane took off and it was also the last time the flight was seen on land. It gives viewers an uneasy feeling about what's going to happen next. It also makes viewers sad because they know the people on board the flight won't make it to an airport gate and get the chance to live their lives.

Logos 1: What led Shah to do this? The Atlantic claims that his personal life may be to blame. In this article, William Langewiesche states that those who knew him said he was "often lonely and sad. His wife had moved out...he spent a lot of time pacing empty rooms waiting for the days between flights to go by." (Langewiesche, 2019) Langewiesche also goes into detail about his digital footprint. He would reach out to models on social media quite often. A lifelong friend of Shah's that spoke to Langewiesche shared that his emotional state was concerning. He learned that Shah had "become somewhat disconnected from his earlier, well-established life." (Langewiesche, 2019)

Rationale: This shows that Shah maybe wasn't the happy man everyone knew him as. Everybody has battles no one else knows about, and although it seems many people were on his case, Shah was very good at hiding his demons.

Logos 2: One of the theories covered in the documentary is that a group of Russians on board the flight hijacked the plane. Wise describes this theory in detail in *The Hijack*. This theory got Wise kicked out of the Independent Group, a group of people online that he calls an “amateur band of self-styled experts, who are obsessed with data and facts.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 2, 16:10) The theory came about after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was taken down in Ukraine just four months after MH370 disappeared. Wise says that one of the three Russian men on the flight could have gone underneath the plane—where all the plane's electronics are—and altered the data from there to show the aircraft going south when it was really going north. He blames the Russians because he says MH370's disappearance was “a perfectly timed and spectacularly convenient distraction for Russia from the condemnation it was facing from the rest of the world.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 2, 30:01)

Rationale: If this were the case, people would find out eventually. People in the area would've seen it go down; they also would've seen the fire from the crash. Military radars also would have seen it. Finally, there would have been debris and fire from where it crashed. In short, it would be very hard to cover it up if this were the case.

External/Inartistic Proof 1: On July 29th, 2015, the first confirmed piece of debris from MH370 washed up on La Réunion, an island near Madagascar. It was determined to be a

flaperon from the aircraft, which the Wall Street Journal says is near the end of the plane wings. (Raghuvanshi, 2015)

Rationale: Finding this piece and identifying it confirms that the Inmarsat satellite was correct; the aircraft's journey ended in the Southern Indian Ocean. This also debunks the theory that Russians on board took control and flew to Kazakhstan. Finally, it proves that there is more debris in the area. If this one fragment washed up on a beach in the Indian Ocean, the rest of the aircraft had to be nearby. This turned out to be the case when adventurer Blaine Gibson found more debris on other islands in the area.

External/Inartistic Proof 2: The most compelling evidence for this theory comes from the pilot's own home. While doing investigations on the people aboard the aircraft, authorities learned that Shah had a flight simulator in his home. Wise says in the documentary that this isn't uncommon; most pilots who love to fly have simulators at home. What was uncommon, though, was one specific flight path he had rehearsed. On his website, Wise states that police recovered hard drives from his home that included data points from his flight simulator. "Five data points recorded on February 2, 2014...looked like they came from a single [Boeing] 777 flight that went up the Malacca Strait, passed the tip of Sumatra, then turned south and wound up with zero fuel over the remote southern Indian Ocean." (Wise, 2017)

Rationale: The similarities between the assumed flight path and the simulation are very convincing and show that maybe this flight was mapped out by Shah. I don't know much about flight simulators, but it's unlikely that a pilot would rehearse a flight like this for fun. This information, along with the knowledge about his home life before the flight, makes this theory even more possible.

Organization:

The documentary consisted of three episodes; the first one was called *The Pilot*, the second one was called *The Hijack*, and the third one was called *The Intercept*. The episodes go in chronological order of the events that occurred on March 8th, as seen in each episode. *The Pilot* starts at the beginning; when the plane takes off, when it disappears, the immediate reactions of the public, and the initial search. It also goes into detail about the theory of pilot suicide and Wise describes what he believes happened if this theory were true.

The next episode, *The Hijack*, begins with the news of MH17 being shot down in Ukraine just a few months after MH370 disappeared. This episode portrays the families' frustration one year after the aircraft went missing. It also touches on when the first piece of debris appeared. It ends by introducing Blaine Gibson, who found most of the alleged debris from MH370.

The Intercept begins with the flaperon being found on La Réunion. Most of the episode shows more debris found by Blaine Gibson, and the family members and professionals give their thoughts about him. Finally, professionals go over the uncertainty in the search process in the Indian Ocean. This is when Florence de Changy brings forth the third theory of the documentary; that someone took the plane down over the South China Sea. This episode ends with all searches being called off and the official safety report being released in 2018.

Style:

A lot of the language used in the documentary, as well as in articles and the safety report, is part of the aviation lexicon; if one doesn't understand this, then viewers will spend

more time trying to figure out what everything means rather than reading or watching the safety report or the documentary. For example, most people probably have never heard of a flaperon before. So when news broke about one appearing on a remote island, everyone was confused because they didn't know where it went on an airplane. Using specific aviation terms without explaining what they meant isn't very effective because it takes away the audience's interest in what's happening.

Some of the family members spoke different languages in general. For example, Ghyslain Watrelos and his lawyer spoke exclusively in French, and Jiang Hui only spoke Mandarin. Everybody else spoke English. Florence de Changy, an investigative journalist from France, spoke English, but it was clear that English was not her first language. Danica Weeks had a thick Australian accent that can be difficult to understand at times. Intan Othman, Fuad Sharuji, and Azharuddin Abdul Rahman had thick Malaysian accents. Finally, Grace Nathan had an accent, but it wasn't as thick as the others heard throughout the documentary.

For most of the time, the family members in the documentary kept a neutral tone. It reflects the numbness they feel after receiving no answers about their loved ones for the past decade. The two people who stand out the most in this sense are Ghyslain Watrelos and Brian Exner.

Ghyslain Watrelos was upset about the loss of his family, but he was very good at keeping it under control. Florence de Changy calls him "the angry French man," (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 2, 25:14) which one would never guess if they didn't know Watrelos or his story. Exner was very stern, barely cracking a smile. In the final episode when the flaperon was found, he said "it was gratifying to learn that it [the flaperon] reinforced the theories that we [the Independent Group] had been advocating." (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 3, 3:41) The one thing

that made this unnerving was that Exner said this with a bland tone and a straight face. It shows that he knew the Independent Group's theories were bringing the world closer to finding where MH370's journey ended.

Wise was one of the few who would show more enthusiasm and emotion in the way he spoke. For example, he let out a laugh when he described the toll this mystery has taken on his life. "It [the case] needed to drive me mad! It's important and it's good that it drove me mad." (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 3, 49:36) He would also try to simplify things by making references to authors such as Agatha Christie and Tom Clancy; he even grouped one of his theories with the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot. Other than this, he always spoke with absolute certainty that he knew what he was talking about.

Blaine Gibson spoke very matter-of-factly. One could tell that he was passionate about finding the aircraft from his enthusiasm. Danica Weeks—whose husband was on the way to start a new job when he boarded MH370—is like Gibson and spoke the most confidently of all the family members. She also spoke in a monotone voice, but she sounded the most lighthearted and at peace throughout the documentary.

Some of the live clips from videos and news stations had more emotion than everyone in the documentary. News anchors showed excitement, anger, confusion, sadness, and shock in every clip. There are many clips of people analyzing the debris found on the beach. For example, there is a clip in *The Intercept* where Gibson is analyzing debris and says "Oh my God" in shock.

Memory:

I believe this topic is too obscure for someone to have mastered it. However, I do believe that the creators of this documentary got the right people together to show what they

know about the incident. This does not mean that people don't know about it or have forgotten it. Recently, the ten-year anniversary of the plane's disappearance passed. People still talk about it or, if you're like me, think about it every once in a while because nobody's ever seen anything like this. It's like something out of a TV show.

It's such a farfetched idea that someone made a TV show inspired by this flight. In 2018, *Manifest* premiered on NBC. The series is based around the fictional Montego Airways Flight 828. This routine flight from Montego Bay, Jamaica to JFK Airport in New York took off in April 2013. After an unusually turbulent flight, the plane lands and passengers are greeted by law enforcement and medical professionals when they exit the plane in the middle of the runway. This is where they learn that it was November 2018 and they were presumed dead for five and a half years. The rest of the show follows people who were on the plane and how their lives have changed since the incident.

This show resembles MH370 because they both disappeared for some time. However, Montego Airways Flight 828 made it home. This show gave the families of MH370 a glimmer of hope; although unlikely the aircraft will reappear on radars, it fosters the idea that maybe the plane will show up one day like Flight 828 did.

Manifest is just one of the many ways MH370 has stayed in the collective memory of the world. The other reason why MH370's disappearance is still relevant in society today is simply how rare this situation is. It's been ten years and we still don't know the location of the aircraft. I believe that even if MH370 is found, it will never be forgotten because of how uncommon the situation is.

Delivery:

The documentary *MH370: The Plane That Disappeared* premiered on March 8th, 2023, on Netflix; exactly nine years after the aircraft disappeared. Releasing it so strategically is a very effective way to deliver the documentary, as it reminds people about what happened to this flight while also remembering those who were lost nine years prior. This documentary was more of a docuseries, with episodes that were just under an hour long. Each episode includes Jeff Wise, Mike Exner, Mark Dickinson, and family members of passengers on board MH370. Those who played smaller roles in the documentary joined the conversation when it was suitable.

Along with testimonials from a wide variety of people throughout the docuseries, there were clips from news sources at all points during the search, reenactments of each of the theories explored in the documentary, real audio from air traffic control, home videos of the passengers, and screenshots of tweets and other social media posts about the incident. These posts included suggestions on where to look; for example, one user suggested looking in Cambodia while another suggested the jungles of Java in Indonesia.

Regarding the theory of pilot suicide/mass murder, *The Pilot* shows a reenactment of the theory. It shows the first officer leaving the cabin, Shah locking him out, the plane flying through the calm night, Shah putting on his gas mask while the oxygen masks hang in the silent cabin, and Shah eventually maneuvering the plane down to its demise.

The Assessment

1. I feel that the creators of this documentary accomplished their goal. People began to wonder about this missing flight again long before talks of the search reopening began. When I was aimlessly scrolling on Netflix one night and I found this documentary, I thought to myself, “Wow, they still haven’t found it yet?” and I was immediately interested in watching it.

Hearing about each family member's experience was very eye-opening; it showed me how much these people love their families and how badly these passengers are missed. Hearing the perspective of Peter Foley—the Former Search Director with the Australian Transport Safety Bureau—made me feel sorry for those who felt helpless after spending years in the Indian Ocean looking for any debris from the aircraft. Finally, I feel sorry for the Former Crisis Manager at Malaysia Airlines after hearing about what he went through. When MH370 first disappeared, Sharuji, along with everyone else at Malaysia Airlines, was just as confused and worried as the rest of the world. I could only imagine the stress they were under while trying to find the aircraft.

The goal of this documentary is to explore some of the theories about what happened to MH370 while also reminding the world that there are still 239 people unaccounted for as a result. The creators went above and beyond in achieving that goal while also keeping inklings of truth in every episode.

2. For many years, this theory has affected me. I remember first hearing about the flight's disappearance and being shocked that such a big plane could just disappear without a trace. I couldn't wrap my head around it as a nine-year-old girl who happened to fly a lot. This documentary brought me back to that time when the only thing on the news for those first couple of weeks was people trying to figure out what happened to the aircraft.

After watching this documentary, I learned more about the mystery that makes it especially interesting. I also feel more for the families, which goes back to the Pathos section. I couldn't imagine not knowing where my family was for such a long time. I especially felt for Ghyslain Wattlelos, who lost basically his whole family.

I'm still not sure if any of these theories are true. There's a lot of evidence pointing to all of them. There's also evidence that suggests these theories aren't true. However, I feel there isn't enough evidence for me to confidently say that one theory can be considered the absolute truth about what happened.

3. If any part of this theory is true, many implications would come out of it. First, it would provide some form of closure to the families that haven't given up hope, even after ten years of nothing. In the last episode of the documentary, Blaine Gibson says, "We need to bring the answers to the families. We need to bring the answers to the flying public. We need to show that a plane can't just disappear. We owe them the proof. We owe them the explanation. We owe them that closure." (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 3, 50:49) Although not the outcome they would have wanted, it allows them to try and find peace of mind.

Next, safety would become more of a priority for many airlines. This has already started. For example, Chris Lomas at FlightRadar24 states that MH370's disappearance "fast-tracked the development and implementation of ICAO's [International Civil Aviation Organization] Global Aeronautical Distress and Safety System (GADSS). This system contains three elements; aircraft tracking, the location of the aircraft in distress and post-flight localization and recovery."

(Lomas, 2024)

Finally, Malaysia Airlines could face a lot of backlash from the rest of the world. The documentary shows clips of family members and journalists showing their anger toward officials while they were waiting for answers and during every conference they held. One man is seen in the first episode yelling in another language. He says, "F**k Malaysia! Malaysia is lying!" (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 1, 2:03) There was also a lot of denial from Shah's family and

coworkers about his role in the disappearance as well. If this theory turned out to be true, they would be in for a big shock.

In the documentary, Jeff Wise says, “Planes go up. Planes go down. What planes don’t do, is just vanish off the face of the Earth.” (Malkinson, 2023, Episode 2, 7:49) This documentary explores only three of the many theories about the doomed flight. But we may never know the truth about what happened to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. We can only hope it’ll be found one day and provide long overdue answers.

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