

The Double Agent between Empires: Diplomacy, Conspiracy, and Reconnaissance during the Sino-Japanese War, 1894–1895

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Abstract

This article explores the activities, during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, of Wang Zhichun (1842–1906). Wang acted as a double agent traveling between the Qing, British, French, and Russian empires, using his knowledge of informal and formal Chinese and non-Chinese networks to represent local and imperial Chinese interests abroad. Officially, he served as the envoy extraordinary representing the Qing court to the Tsar, pleading for Russia's diplomatic intervention on behalf of China. But beneath this façade, he also served as an intermediary for local Chinese officials from southern China who were dissatisfied with Qing conciliation. In this unofficial capacity, Wang also traveled to the Qing's legations in London and Paris, gathering and interpreting knowledge about European military industries and seeking loans, gunboats, and military support from foreign companies in defiance of the Qing court's decision to end the war.

Keywords: transimperial, Wang Zhichun, Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), Diplomacy, Qing China, Britain.

In the decades after the Opium Wars, the Qing government employed a growing number of investigators to carry out land surveys, reconnaissance missions, and strategic operations in its frontier regions and in foreign countries. Although these investigators held low-ranking official titles, they primarily served as aides or secretaries to provincial governors-general, utilizing their talents in less conventional fields, such as cartography, military technology, and foreign languages.¹ This article explores the activities and perspective of one such agent, Wang Zhichun (1842–1906), during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895. Wang acted as a double agent traveling between the Qing, British, French, and Russian empires, representing local and imperial interests in different capacities. Officially, Wang served as the envoy extraordinary

¹ This trend had much to do with the devolution of bureaucratic authority to local elites during the Taiping Rebellion. See Stephen Halsey, *Quest for Power: European Imperialism and the Making of Chinese Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), chapter 4.

representing the Qing court to the Tsar, pleading for Russia's diplomatic intervention on behalf of China. But beneath this façade, he also served as an intermediary for local Chinese officials from southern China who, dissatisfied with the Qing court's conciliatory attitude, searched for foreign loans and militia to continue the war. In this unofficial capacity, he traveled to the Qing's legations in London and Paris, acting as a provincial agent seeking loans, gunboats, and military support from foreign companies in defiance of the Qing court's decision to end the war.

The story of Wang as a double agent representing conflicting local and imperial interests abroad underscores how a transimperial approach can bring a fresh perspective to an established narrative of the Sino-Japanese War. The war has conventionally been presented as a story of conflict and competition that irrevocably shifted the balance of power in East Asia, or as a diplomatic chess match marked by interventions from other powers, a prelude to the so-called "scramble for concessions."² The main categories of analysis adopted in these studies are empires, a framework privileging imperial rivalries and the work of official representatives—statesmen, diplomats, and commanders. Within the historiography of modern China, the Sino-Japanese War has also been known for galvanizing the politicized literati, many of whom had little connection to officialdom, in challenging the court's legitimacy and paving the way for the reform movement of 1898. According to Liang Qichao, the famous late Qing journalist and public intellectual, the Sino-Japanese War "awakened the country from its four-thousand-year slumber."³ As a result, the historical narrative of the war often assumes a dichotomy between those embodying the Qing's dynastic interests on the one hand, and those who took the Qing's defeat for granted and used the war to agitate for reform and the overthrow of the dynasty, on the other.⁴

Wang's story shows that the Sino-Japanese War was not exclusively a conflict between empires but also represented a transimperial moment of networking, opportunity seeking, and knowledge making by men occupying lower levels of the

² For classics representing the first approach, see Sarah Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and John L. Rawlinson, *China's Struggle for Naval Development, 1839-1895* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard East Asian Series, 1967). For studies in diplomatic history surrounding the War, see Frank W. Iklé, "The Triple Intervention: Japan's Lesson in the Diplomacy of Imperialism" (*Monumenta Nipponica* 22:1/2 (1967), 122-30; E. D. Nish, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Diplomacy of Two Island Empires, 1894-1907* (Dover, NH: The Athlone Press, 1966); Qi Qizhang, *Jiawu zhanzheng guoji guanxi shi* [A history of the Sino-Japanese War from the perspective of international relations] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1994).

³ Liang Qichao, *Wuxu zhengbian ji* [A record of the 1898 coup d'état], 1.

⁴ Edmund S. K. Fung, "Ch'ing Policy in the Sino-Japanese War," *Journal of Asian History* 7, no. 2 (1973): 128-152. Harold Z. Schifffrin, *Sun Yat-sen and the Origins of the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), chapters 3-4.

official echelon. What enabled these dynamics were transimperial processes, facilitated by the flow of money, the free movement of individuals between empires, their access to both formal apparatus of the states and the private world of entrepreneurs, and finally, their access to the print media. As a member of the Xiang Army, a local militia, the social and political ties which shaped Wang's career were rooted in regional ties, not the formal apparatus of the Qing state. He represented an increasing number of low and mid-ranking officers from southern China whose interests did not necessarily align with those of the Qing court, even though they served in an official capacity. Their social networks extended above to powerful provincial officials in charge of the Qing's industrialization and self-strengthening movements, and below to the local gentry who often served as investors and stakeholders for provincial enterprises.⁵

By moving between different regions and empires, writing about his encounters during his travels, and publishing them upon his return, Wang's diaries represented a new type of knowledge about the world, one told from the perspective of a border crosser and informal powerbroker. The emergence of this type of semi-official agent came as a result of intensified trade and diplomatic relationship with Western powers, as well as the daunting threat of the Taiping Rebellion (1856–1860). It was widely recognized that the traditional channels for selecting officials—the Confucianism-oriented Civil Service Examinations—were no longer sufficient for recruiting the kind of talent needed in a new commercialized and transnational environment. As the Qing's regular army—the Eight Banners and the Green Standard—proved incapable of defeating the southern rebellions, the state increasingly relied on local forces commanded by Han Chinese officials drawing from their own native hometowns and powerbases.⁶ These officials, in turn, promoted their own trusted lieutenants—often from the hometowns or provinces—over successful examination candidates.⁷ Besides Wang, Chinese provincial elite promoted a wide range of eccentric and talented translators, entrepreneurs, belletrists, and publishers such as Yung Wing (1828–1912), Zeng Jize (1839–1890), Wang Tao (1828–1897), Xue Fucheng (1838–1894), and Yao Wendong (1853–1929), many of whom went on to have illustrious careers in the formal bureaucracy of the Qing due to their earlier successes.

⁵ One historian has termed Wang's mission as one representing both “centralized diplomacy” and “regional diplomacy.” See Ji Chen, “‘Zhongyang waijiao’ yu ‘difang waijiao’ zhijian: Jiawu zhanzheng qijian Wang Zhichun chushi lunshu” [Between centralized and regional diplomacy: Wang Zhichun's mission during the Sino-Japanese War], *Guoli zhengzhi daxue lishi xuebao*, no. 50 (2018), 1–44.

⁶ William Rowe, *China's Last Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), chapter 8.

⁷ For a range of case studies on how local elite changed their engagement with the state in the late Qing, see Joseph Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin, eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Acting as the unofficial intermediary between foreign resources and the Qing's local interests, men like Wang socialized widely with merchants, mercenaries, and agents of other empires. The accounts and strategic advice they offered to Qing officials, in turn, represented the vantage point of those traveling between empires, rather than those who stayed within the metropolises of the empires.⁸ Compared to the latter, transimperial actors like Wang often had no fixed agenda, political affiliation, or bureaucratic hierarchy, but were constantly on the move in search of opportunities, intelligence, and resources. The unconventional services they offered came to be in particularly high demand during periods of crisis, such as the Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Uprising. Their motives, mobilizations, and networking efforts were critical in bringing about a new understanding of China's engagement with the West, which in turn underpinned the dramatic shifts in the Qing's political reforms in the postwar era.

In this chapter, I analyze Wang's activities abroad in the period 1894–1895 and argue that he undertook three distinct kinds of knowledge-related mediations between the Qing and the Western powers: 1) as a formal agent between empires, 2) as an informal agent between provincial Chinese interests and foreign capital, and 3) as an interpreter of the West for domestic audiences. First, as a formal agent of the Qing, he served as an envoy to the Tsar by representing the peace-seeking faction of the Qing court, hoping to gain Russia's intervention in Japan's aggression against Korea and China. As he fulfilled his official duty in Russia, Wang engaged, via telegraphic communication, in clandestine networking and mobilization with provincial officials who disagreed with the Qing court's policy of peace seeking. He met with financiers, mercenaries, and foreign representatives in Britain and France and obtained two million pounds with which to order a fleet from Chile for a surprise attack on Japan—a plan which failed to materialize because of political opposition. Thirdly, I analyze Wang's travelogue during his mission in Europe to uncover how he presented a different image of the “West” from reports of previous envoys and diplomats, with attention to circulation, connectivity, and resource mobilization over intrinsic cultural qualities.

⁸ This approach can be juxtaposed with the existing scholarship on Chinese and Europeans employed in the diplomatic and customs services, which primarily sees them as mediators between the Qing and the West; see, for instance, Jenny Huangfu Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West: Diplomacy and Information Order in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and “Mediating Sovereignty: The Qing Legation in London and its Diplomatic Representation of China, 1876–1901,” *Modern Asian Studies* 55:4 (2021), 1151–84; Hans van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Andrew Hillier, *Mediating Empire: An English Family in China, 1817–1927* (Folkstone: Renaissance Books, 2020); Emily Whewell, *Law Across Imperial Borders: British Consuls and Colonial Connections on China's Western Frontiers, 1880–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

Wang Zhichun's Profile

Born in 1842 in Hunan, a province along the middle reaches of the Yangzi, Wang Zhichun's career followed an unconventional path to officialdom. When he was still a teenager, the Taiping Rebellion threatened his home province, interrupting his study for the civil service examinations. In the late 1850s, he was recruited into the Xiang Army, a local militia organized for provincial defense. In 1863, Wang came under the service of Zeng Guofan, the famous Confucian statesman who would lead the Xiang Army to defeat the Taiping forces, thereby preserving the dynasty. Over the next five years, through donations and patronage, he earned a series of low ranks while continuing to work as a secretary to provincial officials.⁹ During the period 1870–1871, he provided logistical aid to General Zuo Zongtang's campaign against Muslim rebellions in the northwest, responsible for overseeing the transportation of grain and fodder to Qing forces.¹⁰ From 1872 to 1881, he was transferred to the staff of the Li Hongzhang, Governor-General of Liangjiang, and entrusted with leading a battalion.¹¹

Wang's career took a turn in 1879, when Li chose him to embark on a reconnaissance mission to Japan during the Sino-Russian conflict over the Ili Valley, which raised concerns about maritime security. After he successfully accomplished his duty, more unofficial diplomatic assignments followed. During the Sino-French War of 1884–1885, Wang was dispatched by Zhang Zhidong, the Governor-General of Liangguang, on a secret mission to Thailand to seek an unofficial alliance against the French in Tonkin. After the war, Wang managed to lead a joint Sino-French mission to chart the border between Guangxi province and Annam.¹² Due to his excellent work during the war, he was promoted to Surveillance Commissioner in Guangdong Province (rank 3a).

This biographical sketch shows that Wang did not climb the bureaucratic ladder through the civil service examinations, nor did he consistently render service to any single patron but moved from patron to patron depending on the military and political exigencies of the time. His networks were closely intertwined with the provincial armies—the Xiang and the Huai, in particular—which relied on local sources of funding and were controlled by Han Chinese statesmen from the southern provinces. Because he combined literary skills and military experience

⁹ Qin Guojing et al., eds., *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan Qingdai guanyuan luli dang'an quanbian* [Complete official records of the Qing dynasty held at the First Historical Archive] vol. 3 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1997), 735.

¹⁰ Qin, eds., *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan Qingdai guanyuan luli dang'an quanbian*, vol. 5, 14.

¹¹ Qin, eds., *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan Qingdai guanyuan luli dang'an quanbian*, vol. 3, 735.

¹² Qin, eds., *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan Qingdai guanyuan luli dang'an quanbian*, vol. 5, 14.

(*yi wenren jian wushi*), Wang was kept out of the conventional path of bureaucratic service until 1884, when he became a circuit intendant in Guangdong province.¹³ His work was not characterized by any single official position (*que*), but a series of temporary assignments (*chai*) which required a high level of specialized knowledge and unconventional skills, such as land survey, navigation, map making, and conducting on-site negotiations with foreign agents.¹⁴ He was also an ingenious networker and enjoyed friendships with a wide range of people, foreigners included. This can be observed from the numerous calls that he received from his erstwhile colleagues and subordinates when his steamship reached Guangdong and Hong Kong on its way to Europe. Wang was also able to claim to have established a degree of “friendship” with the French reconnaissance agents when he joined a Sino-French survey mission in Vietnam. He tapped into this connection in 1895, when he pleaded for French military intervention in Japan’s seizure of Taiwan. A talented writer, Wang had the ability to compose poems quickly, a valuable social skill which endeared him to his friends and acquaintances.¹⁵

Beyond his military and diplomatic service, Wang was also an excellent historian and geographer. In a capacity similar to Wei Yuan (1795–1857), author of the famous *Haiguo tuzhi* (1843), Wang published compilations of statecraft essays, geographical accounts, and studies of the Qing’s previous engagement with the outside world.¹⁶ His most famous work was the twenty-volume *Guochao rouyuan ji* [An account of the imperial dynasty’s pacification of men from afar], which he wrote in 1879 and published in 1882. The book revolved around the idea of *rou* (to cherish with grace) as a strategy in foreign affairs, with a particular focus on the way in which the High Qing emperors pursued a flexible and pragmatic “middle course” in subjugating foreigners.¹⁷ It argues that the court’s combination of force, alliances, patronage, and trade was the real source of the Qing as a great power in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Complete with accurate maps of the Chinese coast and sites of maritime fortification, it was widely respected as an

¹³ Qin, eds., *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan Qingdai guanyuan luli dang'an quanbian*, vol. 5, 14.

¹⁴ Even though Wang’s official title was circuit intendant (*daotai*), his work throughout the 1880s seemed to have very little to do with bureaucratic administration and inspection.

¹⁵ Wang used poems as a way of establishing a shared ground for his sentiments and emotions about the war, and for tying the goals of mission with Qing officials and overseas Chinese whom he encountered abroad. Most of these poems are included in Wang, *Shi E cao*, usually placed after his main diary entry of the day.

¹⁶ For an insightful discussion of the significance of Wei Yuan’s work, see Matthew Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), chapter 8.

¹⁷ Wang Zhichun, *Guochao rouyuan ji* [An account of the imperial dynasty’s pacification of men from afar] (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1985), 127.

authoritative record of the Qing's foreign affairs up to the Guangxu years, receiving five glowing prefaces from prominent officials of the time. By the late 1880s, Wang's extensive fieldwork and scholarship had made him one of China's most valuable military advisors, and the ideas that he expressed in accounts such as *Guochao rouyuan ji* were, in essence, the guiding spirit leading self-strengthening officials.

Envoy to Russia

Wang's mission to Russia took place at a critical juncture during the Sino-Japanese War: following significant losses by the Qing but preceding any negotiated treaties. Naval conflict first began in July 1894 with Japan's surprise attack on and sinking of the British-made man-of-war Kowshing, which the Qing had commissioned to transport troops to Korea.¹⁸ In a series of battles from September 1894, the Chinese army lost the cities of Pyongyang and Lüshun. Meanwhile, in the naval engagements in the Yellow Sea, the Qing's Beiyang Fleet lost some of its best battleships and naval officers. By late October, Japanese forces breached the Qing's defense at the Yalu River and occupied the Liaodong Peninsula.¹⁹

In response to these setbacks, two concurrent mobilization efforts unfolded: one overt, the other covert. The more overt approach involved the Qing's diplomatic appeal to foreign powers.²⁰ Empress Dowager Cixi, backed by a "peace party," delegated Li Hongzhang to explore possibilities of European and American diplomatic mediation. Li and his supporters hoped to leverage international law and diplomatic pressure to restrain Japan. Discussions were held in Beijing with European and American ministers, mediated by Robert Hart, Inspector General of the Qing's Maritime Customs. In the meantime, Qing ministers abroad were instructed to visit foreign offices personally to apply for help. However, by October, Germany, the United States, and Italy had declined to support the Qing, while a lukewarm British mediation attempt was rejected by Japan. In November, the French government followed suit and declared its neutrality. It seemed that the only hope was for a Russian intervention.

Another form of mobilization remained inconspicuous to contemporaries and has been largely overlooked by historians. Its proponents saw the prospect of a

¹⁸ For a detailed study of this event and its ramifications, see Douglas Howland, "The Sinking of the S.S. Kowshing: International Law, Diplomacy, and the Sino-Japanese War," *Modern Asian Studies* 42:4 (2008), 673–703.

¹⁹ Qi Qizhang, *Jiawu zhanzheng shi* [A history of the Sino-Japanese War] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 2014), 37–144.

²⁰ For an analysis of the activity of the peace party, see Fung, "Ch'ing Policy in the Sino-Japanese War," 128–52.

treaty, signed under the condition of defeat, as deeply humiliating and harmful to China. They were particularly wary of the looming threat of territorial concessions. Their endeavor focused on sustaining the war effort until the Qing was in a better place to negotiate. Spearheaded by provincial officials heavily invested in the war, they believed that the Qing could not afford to lose its territories. This group included provincial governors-general in charge of provincial defense, such as Zhang Zhidong, Liu Kunyi, and Tang Jingsong. The staff employed by Zhang, Liu, and Tang often shared the unconventional paths of Wang Zhichun—men who rose from humble backgrounds not through the civil service examination, but due to their specialized knowledge and problem-solving skills. In Beijing, these pro-war local officials found allies in Weng Tonghe and Li Hongzao, two powerful Grand Councilors close to the Guangxu Emperor. The young monarch, groomed by his aunt, the Empress Dowager, had already developed his own political ambitions and ideas for China's future. In October 1894, Zhang had proposed applying for loans from Western banks, acquiring a new fleet, and forming military alliances with European powers, but these plans were disregarded by the court.²¹ As the Qing army and navy faced repeated defeats, and Japan's demands for a peace treaty grew increasingly audacious, support for the war camp gained momentum. By February 1895, when Japan's terms were revealed to include not only a war indemnity and Korea's independence, but certain "territorial concessions," such as Taiwan, Zhang and his allies at court were prompted to take immediate action.

Wang's official mission, aligned with Li's conciliatory camp, sought to enlist Russia's intervention in Japan's aggression toward Korea and the Liaodong Peninsula. The goal was to cultivate a favorable friendship with Russia through a special mission of condolence and congratulation to the Russian court. The opportunity arose due to the recent ascension of Tsar Nicolas II following the death of his father, Alexander III, on November 1, 1894. Wang was chosen for this role for two reasons. During Nicolas II's tour of East Asia in 1891, he was hosted by Wang in Canton and the two developed a personal relationship; and Wang was well known to the Qing court for his expertise in foreign affairs, international law, geography, and foreign customs.

Wang hoped that his mission could make a difference. In preparation, he studied closely the diplomatic files in the Zongli yamen (the Qing's foreign office), paying particular attention to the so-called "Port Hamilton incident."²² In 1885, British forces had occupied the islands of Komundo off the southern coast of Korea as a deterrent against perceived Russian threats. In response, the Russians dispatched their own envoy to Chosŏn with the ultimatum to annex "ten times as much [Korean] territory as

²¹ Zhang Zhidong, "Telegram to Grand Councilor Li in the capital," October 28, 1894 in *Zhang Zhidong quanji*, vol. 7 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1998), 5824–25.

²² Wang, *Shi E cao*, 611–12.

had been occupied by Great Britain unless the latter withdraws.”²³ Through the mediation efforts by Zeng Jize, Qing minister in London, and Li Hongzhang, Commissioner of Trade in the Northern Ports, the Russians decided to temporarily withdraw, with the understanding that Korea would remain diplomatically neutral. These historical documents fueled Wang’s optimism that Russia would uphold its commitment to Korean neutrality and serve as a counterbalance to Japan’s aggression.²⁴

Departing from Shanghai on January 5, 1895, Wang arrived in St. Petersburg on February 16. His main activities were under the close supervision of Xu Jingcheng, Qing minister in Russia and Germany, who had made all the necessary provisions for his visit.²⁵ The Russian court welcomed Wang’s entourage with a sumptuous reception. Wang was aware that all his conduct in Russia was highly visible to Western presses, the Russian court, and the Qing minister in St. Petersburg, so he strictly adhered to his role as an envoy of goodwill.²⁶ He presented Emperor Guangxu’s letter of condolences and congratulations to Nicolas II on February 18, expressing goodwill and the desire for closer diplomatic collaboration. The Tsar responded favorably, expressing a wish for a “harmonious and intimate relationship between the two countries.”²⁷

To keep Wang from interfering from his long-term diplomatic relationship with the Russian government, Xu Jingcheng, the Qing’s resident minister in St. Petersburg, had memorialized and requested Wang not to mention anything about the war. Xu’s reasoning was that “being a special envoy of condolence and congratulation, Wang should refrain from mentioning other business to show the Qing government’s sincerity.” Although Xu’s memorial was accepted and a telegram edict was issued to that effect, Wang still alluded to the war in his meeting with Nicolas II, but kept the message simple and discreet. At a private meeting, when Nicolas II asked whether Li’s peace negotiations in Japan had come to a conclusion, Wang took the opportunity to entreat the Tsar to “hold a conference of remonstrance to restore peace between the two countries.” According to Wang, the Tsar reassured him that “now that you have come all the way here, it will be unreasonable of me not to exhaust my means to help. Please express this to your emperor.”²⁸ Wang duly informed Li of his exchanges with the Tsar via telegram.²⁹

²³ Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center), 174.

²⁴ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 610.

²⁵ The court was notified of Wang’s activities in Russia by Xu’s telegrams.

²⁶ See *Dezong jing huangdi shilu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), juan 359.

²⁷ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 673.

²⁸ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 674.

²⁹ Li Hongzhang, *Li Hongzhang quanji* [The complete works of Li Hongzhang], v. 26 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007), 55, 60, 61.

Wang's official activities in Russia were carefully documented in the Qing archives, remaining the standard narrative by historians.³⁰ But this official understanding does not capture the complexity in the networking, reconnaissance, and strategic planning that Wang engaged in after he left Russia, nor does it take into account the deep-seated ambition and frustration which the war kindled in the minds of Wang and his compatriots. For this, we need to turn to private journals, memoirs, and the telegrams between Wang's entourage and the provincial officials in charge of military defense. These unofficial sources reveal the mobilization and conspiracies pursued by networks of provincial officials and gentry, which laid outside the formal knowledge of the court.

Commissioner Wang's Secret Plans

The Sino-Japanese war ushered in a significant shift in the exchange of information among the Qing court, the Zongli yamen, provincial officials, and the Qing agents overseas. Prior to the war, the Qing legations had served as the nodal points for sifting and structuring diplomatic intelligence before sending it to the Zongli yamen, which then conveyed it to the court or other domestic officials. This system was established in the late 1870s and was gradually implemented throughout the 1880s, and by 1894, this information network had worked relatively well in shaping domestic consensus that supported the fundamental interests of the Qing dynasty.³¹ But in late 1894, when consensus over military policies collapsed, officials who favored war circumvented this bureaucratic channel by setting up an informal network through their own agents abroad.

By March 1895, when Wang concluded his mission in Russia, the need for immediate action to prevent further territorial loss was glaringly apparent. After leaving Russia, Wang stopped communicating with Li Hongzhang and the Zongli yamen, thus disappearing from the official awareness of the Qing bureaucracy. Instead, he directed most of his correspondence to Zhang Zhidong and aligned his new mission with the goals of Zhang and the pro-war officials. They aimed to prolong the war by using resources overseas, such as a securing a new fleet, recruiting a private merchant navy, or leveraging trade privileges for foreign intervention. Just before Wang's departure to Russia, he detoured to Hubei for an extensive exchange of ideas with Zhang.

³⁰ Philip Snow, *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 133-150; Li Yongchang, "Wang Zhichun shi E yu Qing zhengfu de lian E zhengce" [Wang Zhichun's mission to Russia and the Qing government's policy of alliance with Russia], *Shehui kexue jikan*, no. 4 (1996), 117-21.

³¹ See Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, chapters 4-6.

As we have seen above, Zhang and the other provincial governors-general in charge of coastal defense resisted a peace treaty due to Japan's excessive territorial demands, particularly concerning the cession of Taiwan. Following the outbreak of the war, the Qing's central and local treasuries depleted rapidly, and the necessity of foreign loans became immediately apparent. Prior to the Sino-Japanese War, foreign loans to the Qing were primarily facilitated by HSBC (Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Corporation), which served as the intermediary between the Chinese silver-based economy and the global financial market based in London. The loans were generally of modest size and backed by Customs revenue as security, which required the approval of Robert Hart, the fiscally prudent Inspector General for the Maritime Customs. This arrangement was intended to prevent provincial officials from borrowing from foreign banks without the approval of the Zongli yamen, thus controlling the size of the Qing's total debts.³²

Provincial officials saw emergency foreign loans as critical in fighting the war, but because of the reluctance of Hart and HSBC to underwrite local loans, they began to search for alternative funding avenues. Under Zhang's direction and authorization, Wang turned his mission into a travel agency enabling his patron to bypass the regular bureaucratic channels to communicate directly with foreign banks, companies, and mercenaries. Via telegram, Wang provided Zhang with up-to-date news, offers, and details of negotiation, helping him navigate a new world of resources and promises overseas.

Wang's first stop after Russia was London. Here, within the staff of the Qing legation, he discovered several officials who supported his views on the war. One of his most significant allies was Song Yuren, the counselor of the Qing legation.³³ Before Wang's arrival, Song had independently reached the conclusion, too, that the key to solving the Qing's predicament in the Sino-Japanese War was to rebuild the navy and sustain military engagements. While perusing the London legation's files, Song had discovered that Gong Zhaoyuan, the minister, had worked with Li to explore the possibility of purchasing a fleet from Brazil and Chile in the early stages of the war.³⁴ He also learned that a British navy reserve named Hargreaves had offered to procure a fleet on behalf of the Qing government, circumventing British neutrality. But these plans were ultimately dismissed by Li Hongzhang. At the same time, minister Gong was absent from the legation due to official business in France. Recognizing an opportunity, Song decided to take matters into his own hands.

³² Van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 133–38.

³³ For a short biographical sketch of Song, see in Wang Dongjie, *Jindai sixiangjia wenku (Song Yuren juan)* [A literary archive of modern intellectuals: Song Yuren] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2015), 1–12.

³⁴ Li, *Li Hongzhang quanji*, v. 25, 122.

During Gong's absence in early 1895, Song assumed responsibility as deputy minister and managed the legation's everyday affairs. He connected with a member of the British Chamber of Commerce in Australia known as "Angewatt," whose opinions apparently carried some influence within the chamber. Angewatt showed willingness to advocate for the chamber's nominal employment of a new fleet in the name of protecting Australian merchants in Japan, thereby providing it with a semblance of legitimacy under international law. To lead this fleet, they sought the expertise of Admiral William Lang of the British Navy.³⁵ Lang had been appointed as Vice Admiral of the Beiyang Navy in 1888 but resigned in 1890 due to his conflicts with the Chinese commanders.³⁶ The plan was to purchase a fleet from Chile and Argentina and place it under the command of Lang. Lang would then recruit a crew from Australia to man the fleet. The strategy involved a surprise attack in Nagasaki while Japanese forces were occupied in Korea and the Shandong peninsula. Although it sounded audacious, by February 1895, the plan was mostly set in motion by a group of inexperienced, mid-ranking Qing agents.

The group's plan, as Song was aware, faced a major issue: they lacked the authorization from the Qing government to negotiate the loans. While Song had informed his British partners that he was acting under a "secret order" from the Qing court, no such endorsement was ever issued.³⁷ It was around this time that Wang arrived in London on his return trip from Russia on March 26, 1895, giving Song and his associates their much-needed connection to officials in China. Wang kept Governor-General Zhang closely informed about the progress of the bank loans, the purchase of the fleet, and the recruitment of the navy. Zhang, in turn, gave his authorization for these activities in the name of military defense. Shortly after Wang arrived in London, he sent a member of his entourage to Chile to inspect the condition of the ships that Song had arranged.³⁸ As Minister Gong had returned to London on the same day as Wang, the group decided to conduct their secret meetings in Paris.

On April 5, 1895, Wang sent an urgent telegram to Zhang with promising news: they had ordered a new fleet from a certain "Western shipyard." The fleet was well equipped with munitions, and was to arrive in China within three months. The total cost amounted to two million pounds. It would be paid under a loan from several "gentry merchants" in Europe, and the Qing government was given twenty years to repay it.³⁹ They sought Zhang's assistance in memorializing this matter to

³⁵ Song, "Jiechou ji," 4–6.

³⁶ Qi Qizhang, "Lang Weili yu beiyang haijun" [Captain William Lang and the Beiyang Navy], *Jindaishi yanjiu*, no. 6 (1998), 53–72.

³⁷ Song, "Jiechou ji," 4–6.

³⁸ Wang, *Shi E ji*, 738.

³⁹ "Wang Qichai laidian" [Telegram from Commissioner Wang], in Zhang Zhidong, *Zhang Zhidong quanji* [Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1998], vol. 8, 6237.

the throne. In the meantime, they also revealed to Zhang that a similar plan was being negotiated in Germany.

Zhang responded immediately and enthusiastically. He had already received authorization from the emperor to order new ships, guns, and torpedoes from Europe, but he knew that by the time that these orders were fulfilled, the war would likely be over, and China's losses would be irreversible. Wang's news offered a chance to take immediate action to derail the peace treaty negotiations. The timing was favorable, as they had just learned that Li, having arrived in Japan for the negotiations, had been shot and wounded by a radical Japanese assassin.⁴⁰ Although they were appalled by the incident, they saw it as an opportunity for delaying the signing of the treaty. In his reply, Zhang inquired about the speed, tonnage, and length of each ship, and encouraged the group to pursue their plan with the Germans.⁴¹ He also promptly telegraphed the Zongli yamen, asking them to present a memorial in support of the plan. The Zongli yamen followed Zhang's suggestions, but no definite answers came from the court.

With Zhang's endorsement, Wang, Song, and their colleagues worked diligently on the details of the loan. But their efforts were rebuffed by the newly returned Minister Gong, who in turn informed Li Hongzhang and the pro-treaty faction. It also faced unanimous opposition by senior members of the Qing diplomatic establishment, including Halliday Macartney, Gong's second-in-command and long-term Qing diplomat in London, and Robert Hart, the Intendant General of the Maritime Customs.⁴² Apart from their concerns about the plan's high risk, they disagreed with Wang and Song's choice of the Ottoman Bank, favoring instead HSBC, the Qing government's long-term partner. On April 18, 1895, the day after the Qing ratified the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Zhang Zhidong received an edict instructing him to abandon the plan. He was also warned that any future loans for the naval project must be approved by the Board of Revenue and come exclusively from HSBC.⁴³ This edict effectively put an end to Wang and Song's ambitious scheme. Upon hearing the news, Wang fell ill and expressed his frustration in a letter on April 25:

For more than a month I have exhausted my heart and mind inspecting Chilean ships, recruiting soldiers and captains, attending to every detail in the purchasing and fitting of the ships. I had hoped that this work could come to use, however slight the chance might

⁴⁰ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 726.

⁴¹ "Zhi Bali Wang qinchai," [Telegram to Commissioner Wang in Paris], in Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong quanji*, vol. 8, 6236.

⁴² Song, "Jiechou ji," 8–9.

⁴³ *Qingji waijiao shiliao* [Historical sources on the late Qing], vol. 5, juan 109 (Changsha: Hunan shifan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 2169–70.

be. I knew that it was like cutting one's own flesh to fill a wound, but I had placed my life under oath, and when the war began, I could not help recommending my own service (to the country). Once I heard that the peace treaty had been ratified, and China's loss was significantly more (than if the war had continued), my resentment and frustration cannot be restrained. My whole body is sick from it.⁴⁴

A widely circulated anecdote symbolized the spirit of the moment. According to this story, Wang and Song allegedly cut their queues—the Qing hairstyle mandatory for all men and a symbol of loyalty to the dynasty—and boarded the ships that they had borrowed, ready to sail for a fight in Japan. At that time, the news of the treaty ratification had reached them, prompting them to sigh with anguish and disappointment. “The Qing is done for!” they exclaimed. Song then abandoned government service and joined a study society to investigate alternative ways to save China.⁴⁵

Though partly fictional, the story captures the prevailing sentiment of the ambitious mid- and low-ranking officials during that time. The Sino-Japanese War provided them with the opportunity for socialization and mobilization beyond the world of diplomats. It also disrupted the bureaucratic channels of communication between the Qing government and the financial and military resources overseas. To men like Wang and Song and their patrons at home, it was access to foreign capital, rather than formal decrees of the court, that could decide the final outcomes of the war. The energy and initiative exhibited by Wang and the junior diplomats in the London legation was spontaneous and contagious. It demonstrated that the court's decision to pursue peace was not absolute, and the war could be legitimately pursued up to the moment that the peace treaty was ratified. Although they were formally agents of the empire, their actions were not bound by a sense of obedience to the dynasty, but loyalty to their country and conditioned by personal ambitions and local exigencies.

Traveling in Europe during the Sino-Japanese War

Traveling in Europe during the Sino-Japanese War presented a profound emotional and psychological challenge for Wang. He received timely news about the Qing's losses via telegrams and newspapers. The newspapers provided explanations for

⁴⁴ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 772.

⁴⁵ According to Song's own account, they had indeed planned to cut their queues and board the ships, but it was to disguise their identities as Qing officials by dressing as overseas Chinese merchants. The plan was never carried out. See Song, *Jiechou ji*, 7.

China's defeat and speculated about its future, often leaving him despondent.⁴⁶ As an emotional outlet, Wang and his fellow junior diplomats sometimes gathered at local taverns, attempting to drown their sorrows. As a military man, Wang channeled his pent-up frustration into an extensive study of Europe. China's wartime predicaments influenced the planning of his visits, the nature of his inquiries, and his documentation of his observations. He meticulously examined every facet of Europe with the goal of discerning the deeper cause of China's loss in the war.

This narrow focus on China's military inferiority was, in essence, a consequence of the Sino-Japanese War. This was not the common perspective of prior diplomats who had visited Europe and America. The 1880s and early 1890s had seen several notable diplomatic triumphs, fostering a general sense of relief that the Qing's foreign affairs were on the right track. In 1890, Xue Fucheng, minister to England and France, reported that many British and French officials who had previously scorned the Qing now sought an alliance. Xue gave several explanations for this shift. First, the failure of France to obtain an indemnity from China after the Sino-French War (1884–1885) suggested that China could fight a major European power to a standstill. Second, the restructuring of Chinese coastal defenses and the Qing navy projected an impression of maritime strength. As Allen Fung and Benjamin Elman have observed, the pre-1894 Chinese navy was widely respected for the quality of its weapons and military strategy.⁴⁷ Third, Chinese students studying abroad often ranked highest in their classes, defying racial expectations. Perhaps the most significant reason was the proliferation of Qing ministers and consuls around the world, who actively sought to understand foreign cultures and scrutinize the state of affairs, gradually integrating China into the international order.⁴⁸

The Qing's crushing loss in the period 1894–1895 prompted mid- and low-ranking officers to question the entire edifice of China's self-strengthening movement under which these projects were pursued. In the case of Wang, this manifested as a proclivity to extol the virtues of Western institutions based solely on their contributions to the state's military prowess—their ability to quickly mobilize resources, money, soldiers, and public support. He spent most of his leisure time visiting military establishments and manufacturing plants. In all the cities that he visited—St. Petersburg, London, Paris, and Berlin—he paid close attention to military museums, artillery and armament manufacturers, naval and infantry schools, and shipyards. According to Wang, European militaries developed according to the principle that “the best defense is to attack” (*yigong weishou*) and “sparing no

⁴⁶ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 773.

⁴⁷ Allen Fung, “Testing the Self-Strengthening: The Chinese Army in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895,” 1007–31.

⁴⁸ Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, chapter 6.

effort” (*buyi yuli*). This approach stemmed from the proximity of European powers, wherein any sign of weakness could be exploited by a neighbor. As each country strove to perfect its weaponry, artillery, ships, and fortifications, each possessed some technology capable of countering that of others. Thus, “the ability to attack and defend becomes the best way to maintain peace.”⁴⁹

Wang observed that all European military establishment sincerely and eagerly pursued a cult of the new. Because war was a topic of great interest, even in peacetime, European countries had a thorough and accurate understanding of each other’s military capacity. By knowing which country possessed the most, best, and newest armaments, Western countries could settle conflict without always resorting to war. Military manufacturers were seen as a primary driver of the European economy: they employed tens of thousands of people each, constantly improved their products, and made huge profits. Wang was painfully aware that, because China lacked the technological and industrial means to compete with European arms production, it was perpetually kept at a disadvantage to European powers no matter how much and how quickly it purchased their products. He noted with alarm the significant advancements in recent products compared to those utilized merely a decade or two ago. With increased speed, power, precision, and maneuverability, armies equipped with newer products could easily surpass adversaries armed with only slightly dated weaponry. As he inspected the newest torpedoes that the Qing navy had just ordered with money borrowed from foreign banks, Wang observed that they too would soon be obsolete. Foreign engineers were already working on the blueprint of a faster and more powerful model.⁵⁰

Another aspect which Wang highlighted in his journal was networks of railways, which strengthened the state’s military, fiscal, and commercial capabilities. While previous diplomats praised the railway for its convenience, comfort, and benefits to the general populace, Wang argued for its centrality to the fiscal-military state.⁵¹ Railways figured in his writing as the most important source of European wealth and power: they facilitated commerce and industry, bolstered state security, nurtured scientific discovery and technical ingenuity, and were indispensable to territorial integration. He likened the functions of railways in a society to blood vessels in a human body in transmitting and balancing the *yin* and *yang* forces.⁵² He also corrected a common misconception of his contemporaries that railways were always operating at a loss. Wang stressed the fact that although initial funding

⁴⁹ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 723.

⁵⁰ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 735.

⁵¹ For a comparison to earlier observations, see Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, 45–48.

⁵² Wang, *Shi E cao*, 765.

came from private sources, the government could regain control over the railway in ten or twenty years.

Wang highlighted that the burgeoning demand for affordable, high-quality steel driven by the railway industry prompted engineers like Henry Bessemer to refine steel-making technology.⁵³ He argued that the relentless drive for more military capacity served as the fundamental impetus behind the technological progress. The urgency of building the railway was underscored by the fact that Westerners had already moved onto more convenient and powerful methods of communication. Electric cars, he reported, promised lighter maintenance and easy maneuvering. Furthermore, the French were experimenting with building an “electric channel” on the ground for sending light mail. The future, Wang predicted, would witness a constant influx of new and outlandish inventions.⁵⁴

In order to access Western expertise in building railways and other infrastructure, the Qing needed capital. As a specialist in provincial finance, Wang observed that the exchange rate between gold and silver had been widening significantly since the 1880s. China’s lack of a centralized currency made it particularly vulnerable to worldwide fluctuations in the relative values of gold, silver, and copper. If, as it seemed likely to him, gold mines worldwide were depleted, the exchange rate between European currency and silver ingots would skyrocket. If by then China was still using bulk silver in transactions with foreign countries, how much more would it stand to lose? The expansion of the state’s military expenditure suggested the urgency of the problem. To avoid getting into an endless cycle of foreign debt, Wang suggested that the government establish official banks with branches in each province similar to Japan’s postal saving system. This could help the common people accumulate savings and fund large, expensive projects for the government. In addition, he proposed that the government purchase the newest Russian machines, which could print a variety of hidden code and patterns on paper notes, making them difficult to counterfeit.⁵⁵

Another aspect of European institutions subjected to Wang’s investigation was education. Previous diplomats paid attention to a wide variety of schools; Wang’s focus was on military and naval academies.⁵⁶ In the Naval Cadet Corps in St. Petersburg, Wang was impressed by the discipline of the students, noting, for example, that each wrote his name and badge number neatly on the left side of his bunk bed. He observed that Russian women also received education and served in

⁵³ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 753.

⁵⁴ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 719.

⁵⁵ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 838.

⁵⁶ For a study on a Qing minister’s investigation into the education system of Victorian England, see Day, “Searching for the Roots of Western Wealth and Power,” *Late Imperial China*, 35:1 (2014), 1–37.

the military. Boys who were weak and poor, instead of enlisting as an army reserve, were trained as military musicians, with all their expenses paid for by the government.⁵⁷ The necessity of educating soldiers was obvious in that modern soldiers often had to read detailed maps, military intelligence, and directives. According to an official German publication in 1893, for every ten thousand German soldiers, only twenty-four were illiterate. The figure for the French was 643, but this was still much better than for China, where soldiers, often recruited in haste, rarely had any education.⁵⁸ Wang observed:

Presently we see the flourishing of education laws in European countries. If boys and girls do not go to school by the age of eight, their parents are punishable by law. Not only does each man pursue an appropriating course of learning, women, too, studied widely. The deaf, dumb, blind, crippled, each have their schools to learn what could be taught to them. Charity schools are established to teach the poor and the orphaned. Numerous schools exist on the county, prefecture, and state level, and universities, middle schools, and elementary schools are established to nurture children into talent. Those who can conduct research also have levels and degrees attainable: literary scholars study in schools of arts, soldiers study in military schools, farmers study in agricultural schools, artisans study in schools of engineering and technology, and merchants study in business schools. Not only do elites study, everyone in the country who has an occupation study [...] In the last ten years, German schools have been the most extraordinary. Because its soldiers are all trained in schools, the German army is superior in battle. Other countries also join in the education competition and model their schools, whether in literature, agriculture, engineering, and business after Germany military schools. If we observe the deeper causes to the waxing and waning of civilizations, we know that the origin of strength and wealth is not elsewhere.⁵⁹

Wang's sense that universal education had its origin in European military demands led him to propose a reintegration of civil and military education for China's students. He argued that the classical education of gentlemen from the Zhou to the Tang dynasties contained both aspects, and it was only in the Song and the Ming (900s–1300s) period that the two became two separate paths. This unfortunate separation resulted in a widening gulf between the civil and military servants of the state. As the civil bureaucrats became more prestigious, they also disdained being associated with the military, and soldiers were men of the lowest quality. European countries, on the contrary, put the ancient Chinese ideal into practice:

⁵⁷ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 700.

⁵⁸ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 769.

⁵⁹ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 708.

soldiers were all trained in preparatory academies, and even princes and nobility were proud to be in the army.

In a secret memorial submitted after his return, Wang summarized his observations and put forth a series of proposals which he argued must be implemented immediately.⁶⁰ The Qing government should develop a dense network of railways, linking the empire's heart with its frontiers, and connecting resource poor and the wealthy regions. It must revamp the existing army on the German model, send more talented officers to study abroad, recruit foreign officers, and provide a basic level of education to all its soldiers. It must reform the civil service examination, to give more weight to sciences, foreign language, and other practical knowledge, and set up dedicated schools of Western learning. To ensure the government's ability to fund these operations, it must build a nation-wide banking system, encourage popular saving, and issue its own paper currency. The government must also promote industrialization, commerce, and mining. Finally, it needs to rationalize its offices in foreign affairs and eliminate joint posts or overlapping responsibilities. The gist of the proposal was to increase the circulation of goods and money, to pursue new knowledge and technology, and to adapt the existing system of recruitment so that every man's talent could contribute to the wealth and power of the state.

Compared to the famous reform proposal put forth by Kang Youwei in 1898, Wang's memorial strikes us as rather conservative: it was strictly confined to the measures which had been taken by leaders of the self-strengthening movement and had nothing to say about administrative or political reform. But if we refrain from the failure narrative later constructed by the constitutional propagandists, it appears that Wang's memorial was far more practical and politically feasible and was probably the farthest the government could safely go without alienating too many stakeholders.

Reading Wang's travelogue from a transimperial perspective illuminates what Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé have termed the "three c's"—"competition, cooperation and connectivity not as separate phenomena but as entangled processes."⁶¹ From Wang's point of view, great empires were not simply entities locked in competition or cooperation but were constructed from the ground up through the sinews of capital, enterprises, transportation networks, and education systems. By observing the dynamics of empire through the prism of wartime mobilization, Wang created insights about the modern world that emphasized the importance of circulation and connectivity over intrinsic cultural qualities.

⁶⁰ Wang, *Shi E cao*, 833–41.

⁶¹ Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, "Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition," *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018), 430.

Conclusion

Wang's complex experience of diplomacy, conspiracy, and reconnaissance in Europe during the Sino-Japanese War demonstrates the limits of a purely international approach to the event. To him and the other mid- and low-ranking agents of the Qing empire, the European states were not only allies, competitors, or foes, but also offered resources—be it military, capital, or intellectual assets—for the Qing. While diplomats and higher-ranking officials often had to navigate within the confines of formal diplomatic relations, agents like Wang transcended these strict roles. They assumed multiple identities—as envoy extraordinaries, imperial commissioners, and private agents—and shifted between these roles freely. More importantly, these men did not simply follow orders passively, but sought to exert their own agency to change the course of the war. In the process, they got to know European empires in new ways, and helped frame them for multiple Chinese audiences. And, finally, they demonstrated an ability to maneuver within and beyond formal diplomatic channels to serve both the interests of the Qing empire and to satisfy their own ambitions.

To Wang and many who traveled with him, the mission was a trip of revelation on the inner logic of European state making. Diplomats who had reported on the condition of the West prior to 1894 had generally frowned upon what they saw as the incessant pursuit of novelty and waste of resources. The Sino-Japanese War, disrupting the traditional logic of Confucian statecraft, provided the key to how the various parts of the war machine fit together. As Wang says, “European countries established their governments on the basis of war.”⁶² Confucian principles, which traditionally regarded war as a symbol of despotic rule to be avoided by virtuous leaders, could no longer be sustained. Instead, a state of military readiness had to be recognized as the norm, essential for maintaining peace.

Although Wang and Song's plan failed, the precedent that they established of using foreign banks to fund local developments continued after the war. They showed how self-strengthening officials interested in foreign loans could circumvent the control of the central authority—as represented by the Board of Revenue and the Imperial Customs—and directly negotiate loans. After the war, provincial officials would increasingly turn to foreign capital for industrialization projects in transportation, infrastructure, and textile. While these new developments spurred on provincial development, they also worsened the Qing's fiscal crisis and the tension between the central and local administrations in how to allocate a dwindling revenue. In many ways, this devolution of the fiscal control and the rising conflict between the local and the central governments over the sources of loans would directly pave the way for the 1911 revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty.

⁶² Wang, *Shi E cao*, 835.

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