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Rodney H. Jones*, Sylvia Jaworska and Zhu Hua

Affective geographies and tribal epistemologies: studying abroad during COVID-19

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between epistemologies, tribalism and affect in the experiences of Chinese international students studying in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on data from student diaries, interviews, and focus groups, it explores how boundaries between in-groups and out-groups were erected and dismantled through processes of socio-temporal scaling, whereby social actors configured affective geographies by linking local spatial relationships to higher level (national and international) scales. The analysis reveals how negative emotions like fear of infection led to practices of spatial distancing and the drawing of cultural boundaries between groups, while feelings of worry about family members in China shaped communication patterns and information flows across geographic spaces. At times, however, positive emotions like affection and sympathy helped participants transcend boundaries, leading them to readjust their emotional mappings of the world and reevaluate their beliefs about COVID. The study highlights the central role affect and emotional labor play both in the formulation of epistemologies around health and in the drawing of boundaries between groups.

Keywords: affect; COVID-19; International students; space; scales

1 A pandemic of affect

This virus is like a ghost, weighing on everyone. People felt overwhelmed at first, but after walking with this ghost for a long time, they seem to get used to it… But for me, for the past six months I've been fighting with this ghost. When the epidemic broke out in China, I developed the habit of video calling with my parents every day,

***Corresponding author: Rodney H. Jones**, University of Reading, Reading, UK,
E-mail: r.h.jones@reading.ac.uk
Sylvia Jaworska, University of Reading, Reading, UK
Zhu Hua, University College London, London, UK

talking to them about trivial matters, like the price of rice, oil and salt, just to help them ward off the loneliness… But then the epidemic began to spread globally, and governments of various countries did not 'copy their homework' from the Chinese government. They seemed to be doing nothing despite the emergence of new cases… Finally, Boris Johnson (the British Prime Minister) started taking about 'herd immunity', and all hell broke loose. The university announced the suspension of classes, and the dormitory WeChat group exploded with messages. It was like the end of the world had come. At first I thought everyone was panicking unnecessarily, until one day I suddenly realised that all the Chinese people I knew in the dormitory had returned to China or planned to buy air tickets soon… In a blink of an eye, all the Chinese in the dormitory were gone… and I started living alone.

In the first three weeks of June, I gradually became enveloped by loneliness and grief. I still tried my best to organize my study and life in an orderly manner, chatted and laughed with my parents and friends through the camera, but every night, when I lay in the dark, the yearning for China began to spread over me. The fragments of memories came to me like a tide, until they drowned me. Those nights when I had insomnia until three or four o'clock, I heard myself stupidly saying that tomorrow, tomorrow I will buy a ticket to return home. But when the day came again, my sanity seemed to wake up with me, and then I looked for comfort once again in the daily calls with my mother. (PR1, Diary 1)

The passage above, excerpted from a diary written in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic by a Chinese student living in London, reflects the complex mix of emotions that most of us who lived through this period experienced: the fear, the confusion, the loneliness, and the sense of isolation. But it also reminds us how these emotions were not just experienced by us as individuals, but were *collectively felt*, shared, passed around from body to body just like the virus itself. We are reminded of how these emotions filled the spaces of our lives and travelled with amazing efficiency from one place to another, sometimes over thousands of miles, with the help of electronic media, of how they bound us together even as they separated us, and of how nearly every decision we made about things like shopping, travel, work and study, became unexpectedly entangled with a new kind of emotional politics.

As much as SARS-COVID 19 brought with it a pandemic of disease, it also brought a pandemic of *affect*, a sudden reshuffling of our emotional worlds. As Ho and Maddrell (2021: 3) put it: "[T]he pandemic has resulted in new geographies of death, maps of bereavement, personal and collective topographies of loss… [It] has created new and varied experiences of vulnerability: biological, social, financial and existential…These experiences in turn have reconfigured individual and collective emotional-affective landscapes."

Because so much of how we understood and responded to the virus hinged on bodily proximity ("close contacts", "social distancing") and the movement of bodies across physical and geographical spaces ("lockdowns", "travel bans"), the *spatial* dimensions of affect became particularly salient. We were suddenly forced to contend with our own and others' discomfort with physical closeness, and to formulate new ways of expressing intimacy. This disruption of the physical spaces of sociality also took place on the geographical scale as human mobility across international borders became more difficult, increasing the felt distance between people living in different countries.

These new spatial challenges did not fall to all people equally. Some social groups had more opportunities to maintain physical distance from others, work from home, and travel, while others were more regularly exposed to the risk of infection or found themselves subject to more severe restrictions on their mobility. Some also found the fear and isolation they experienced was exasperated by racial discrimination or economic inequities. Among those most affected were migrant workers and international students like the diarist above, who, as the virus spread across the globe, often found themselves "quarantined between cultures" (Zhu et al. 2022; see also Hari et al. 2021), stranded in places far away from the emotional support of friends and family members where the "affective routines" (Wetherall 2012: 7) of the local people may have seemed "foreign".

Chinese students who were studying abroad during the pandemic faced a range of unique emotional pressures (Zhai and Du 2020). Their affective engagement with the virus began months before it reached the countries where they were studying, as they anxiously followed developments in Wuhan and the rest of China and worried about their friends and relatives there. Later, when the epidemic in China abated and case numbers in other countries started to rise, they found themselves struggling to decide whether to return home and desperately trying to allay the worries of their family members. Their fears were further compounded by exposure to sometimes contradictory news about the pandemic from Chinese media and social media and from the media in the counties where they were studying, along with incommensurate advice on how to prevent infection from authorities back home and where they lived. They sometimes had to deal with adjusting their health beliefs and practices when they found them to be out of step with those of the people around them. Finally, they had to cope with the threat of COVID-related stigmatisation and racial discrimination as the rate of hate-crimes against Chinese all over the world skyrocketed, increasing in the UK, for example, threefold from January to March, 2020 (Lovett 2020).

In this paper we attempt to understand how these emotional challenges affected how Chinese international students negotiated their social relationships

and "tribal" affiliations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we are interested in the discursive dimensions of what Anderson (2014: 18) calls "affective geographies" – the physical and relational spaces within and between bodies created by people's emotional engagement with the world and with others. We ask how different emotions came to be associated with certain spaces and places, how certain spaces became affectively charged through the way people talked about them, and how these "affective geographies" influenced Chinese students' "tribal" relationships with the people they came into contact with on a daily basis, and with their friends and family members back home.

2 Affect, tribalism, and space

Our theoretical orientation in this paper draws on recent work on the role of *affect* in social life, the most prominent being that of scholars in the field of affect studies, who see affect as a form of pre-conscious "intensity" (Massumi 2002: 14, see also Sedgwick 2003), generated through intimate encounters between bodies and the material world. Scholars working in this paradigm have focused on describing the "affective dynamics" that manifest in specific domains of social life, such as consumption, education, and work (Slaby 2019: 60). The "turn to affect" (Clough 2007), however, has made its influence felt far beyond this small group of scholars, informing research in fields such as social psychology, health studies, political science, and human geography.

While a focus on affect (rather than, for instance, reasoning or cognition) might seem out of place in a special issue about the "epistemologies" of COVID-19, scholars in a range of disciplines, from philosophy (Helm 2001) to neuroscience (Damasio 2006) have argued that understanding how people construct knowledge and evaluate information requires attention to the pre-cognitive, emotional and embodied aspects of thinking. Experimental psychologists have shown how emotions can have a powerful impact on the way we solve problems (see e.g. Jung et al. 2014), and scholars working in fields as diverse as psychology, political science and international relations have observed that affect plays an even greater role in decision making when threat or insecurity is involved (see e.g. Åhäll and Gregory 2013, Loewenstein et al. 2001). Indeed, attention to affect is not a matter of turning away from questions of "knowing", but rather part of a view of human psychology which eschews the traditional dichotomisation of "reason" and "emotion", emphasising instead their "co-dependence and entanglement" (Kahl 2019: 4). As the psychologist and Nobel laurate Daniel Kahneman has demonstrated in multiple experiments, most everyday decision making is guided by a constellation of

affective, spontaneous, experiential, and reasoning factors, and is rarely just a matter of cognition or rational calculus (Kahneman 2011).

The turn to emotions and affect as forces that drive decision making and behaviours also eschews other binaries that have dominated mainstream social scientific inquiry, including the traditional Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind, and the more recent Durkheimian distinction between the individual and society. It views human cognition and sociality as fundamentally embodied, material and *intercoporeal* (Merleau-Ponty 1968); affect is seen not to reside in individual bodies or minds, nor in the social environment, but rather *between* bodies and embodied consciousnesses as they interact with one another and with the environment, a view that can be traced back to the work of Spinoza (1994: 243), who viewed affect as chiefly a matter of *relations* of "affecting and being affected". This relational framework contrasts sharply with dominant philosophical and psychological theories of affect which see it as a function of individual experiences and intentions, and with more traditional sociological perspectives which speak of "collective emotions" (e.g. Durkheim 1995), but often without engaging with the *situated* and *dynamic* nature of affective relations between people and the material world.

One area where this more transpersonal perspective has been particularly productive has been in explorations of group dynamics of "affiliation" and "othering" – what we are referring to in this special issue as "tribalism". Affect has been implicated, for instance, in the formation and maintenance of subcultural groups (Driver 2011), in political polarisation (Boler and Davis 2018), and in the rise of postmodern "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli 1995), as well as in processes of intergroup hostility, racialisation, and demonisation (Blickerstein 2019; Shaker 2021). In her seminal work on the cultural politics of emotion, Ahmed (2014: 191) posits that "the doing of emotion is bound up with the sticky relations between signs and bodies." Particular kinds of bodies in particular political contexts are seen to "attract" emotions of fear or disgust, whereas the same emotions seem to slide off other bodies. These "sticky" emotions come to define not just the surfaces of bodies, but also the boundaries between groups, drawing certain bodies together, while other bodies are excluded. One important point this perspective highlights is that processes of marginalisation and "othering", while often supported by larger political and social structures, are practiced and experienced through visceral corporal encounters – relations between *physical* bodies in *physical* spaces. This fact has been reinforced in recent work on the affective basis of racial othering surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in which, as Kimura (2021: 133) puts it, the bodies of "others" were regularly "desensitized, dehumanized, and weaponized."

Another area where attention to affect has been particularly useful has been in understanding how space and place are affectively constructed and made available

as arenas for human interaction. In the field of human geography, for instance, scholars have become increasingly interested in what Anderson (2014: 18) calls "affective geographies", the ways affect is spatially expressed and impacts people's experiences of space (O'Grady 2018) and the ways affect functions in the drawing and redrawing of boundaries between places and social groups.

As with the focus on group dynamics mentioned above, a focus on affective geographies helps to draw our attention to the *politics* of affect, including the ways it can contribute to empowering or marginalising different kinds of bodies in different spaces and, to promoting political projects of nationalism, globalism, xenophobia or diversity.

The affective politics of geographical space, of course, can be particularly complex for migrants, who have to cope with the emotional strain of being separated from places they considered "home" and negotiate the (sometimes unfamiliar) "affective arrangements" (Slaby et al. 2017) that govern the new places they move through or settle in (Brooks and Simpson 2013). Campos-Delgado (2021: 179), for instance, talks about the "emotional geographies" of transmigrational journeys and how, encounters with different kinds of people and aspects of the environment can generate feelings of "love, sorrow, shame, courage, anxiety, fear, trust, kindness, and hope." Particularly relevant to the study described in this paper is work on the affective geographies of international students, such as Sidhu and his colleagues' (2019) exploration of the way the politics of belonging plays out in East Asian international students' everyday affective encounters in laboratories, lecture spaces, and student residences. While most work on international students focuses on the affective dimension of *mobility*, the COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to a new focus in the study of affective geographies on *immobility* and feelings of "being stuck" (Berhnardt and Salby 2022), seen, for example, in accounts of the emotional challenges of international students "stuck" in their home countries (Phan 2022) or in the countries in which they were studying (Taloko et al. 2020) because of travel restrictions, forced to construct "new forms of mobility" out of their immobility (Phan 2022: 66).

Some engagements with the concept of affective geographies have focused particularly on the ways people (re)imagine boundaries and binaries in the negotiation of group membership. One of the best examples of this is Vainikka's (2006) use of the concept of "socio-spatial scales" to describe how people "realign and recognise their identities" based on their embodied feelings of belonging on different *scales*. The concept of scale as used in human geography refers to the idea that people experience and produce space on various hierarchically nested socio-spatial levels, for instance, the "local", the "national" and the "transnational". But scales are not simply divisions of scope, but also, as Paasi (2004: 538), puts it, "technologies of bounding," which people and institutions deploy strategically to define space and

place in ways that are advantageous to them. Vainikka (2016) argues that scales also have *affective* dimensions, that is, they inevitably engender feelings of belonging or alienation as well as of affiliation or antagonism between "us" and "others". Seen from this perspective, affective geographies are not just about how people "feel space", but also how they strategically *frame* space as a way to contextualise their affective relationships with their environments and with the people around them.

3 Affect and discourse

Despite the commitment of many core scholars in affect studies to a view of affect as *non-representational* and *pre-discursive*, there are increasing attempts to understand how "the circulation of affect works in and through discourse" (Milani and Richardson 2021: 671). Even within affect studies, some scholars have highlighted the importance of understanding how affective relations between bodies are established through language. Ahmed (2014), whom we cited above, for instance, offers an analytical framework for "reading" affect through attention to how relational bodies emerge through people's use of emotion-bound vocabulary, registers, and genres. Within discourse analysis, the most prominent proponent of engaging with affect has been Wetherall (2012), who argues that it is actually *discourse* that "makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel" (2012: 19).

Among the main preoccupations of discourse analysts who have engaged with the notion of affect is its role in maintaining (and challenging) relations of power. Berg and her colleagues (2019: 57), for instance analyse power relations in discourse through focusing on the "discourse bodies" that emerge from the "relational affective dynamics" between social actors, and Glapka (2019) advocates combining critical discursive psychology with concepts from interactional sociolinguistics (such as "stance") to reveal how affect operates to link macro-political forces with the micro-politics of everyday life. Others have explored how expressions of affect function to mobilize groups to engage in collective projects of marginalization and "othering" (Blommaert 2017; Frabricio 2021).

Attention to affect has also been part of the more recent preoccupation in sociolinguistics with *spatiality* and *embodiment*. This is particularly apparent in work on linguistic and semiotic landscapes (Wee 2016), especially in the context of what have been called "turbulent landscapes" (Stroud 2016: 4), environments in which different discourses about how space and place should be "represented and owned" compete. Particularly important in such work is the recognition of the ways *human bodies* contribute to constituting semiotic landscapes, and how they can produce "spatial turbulence in interaction with other bodies" (Kitis and Milani 2015: 268). This affective turn in studies of semiotic landscapes is also evident in a

range of studies that have explored the landscapes of COVID-19 lockdowns, such as Marshall's (2021) account of the competing affects of distancing and solidarity in the COVID-19 semiotic landscape of Vancouver and Comer's (2022) examination of the affective regimes of Melbourne under lockdown, which, interestingly, he found to be characterised more by displays of "hope" and "love" than isolation and despair.

Sociolinguistic studies of enregisterment have also turned their attention to the way affect comes to be associated with certain spaces and spatial arrangements and how these associations influence the formation and circulation of socially recognisable ways of speaking and "figures of personhood" (Agha 2007). The "imagination, recognition, and enactment" of stereotypical persons, argues Park (2021: 48) "is always deeply rooted in specific material conditions and embodied experiences of social life." Scholars working in this vein (see e.g. Blommaert and De Fina 2017) often invoke Bakhtin's (1981) notion of the *chronotope*, the idea that the actions and identities of characters in literary works (and in real life) are dependent upon and arise out of particular configurations of time and space. One example of such an approach in the context of COVID-19 is De Fina's (2022) examination of the chronotope of the "balcony performance" that emerged in Italy during COVID lockdowns and came to be associated with particular *figures of personhood* and a particular set of *stances* towards the pandemic. Central to her analysis, and inherent in the concept of the chronotope, is an awareness of how social identities emerge across hierarchically ordered *scales* of time and space, in this case, for instance, how locally produced displays of affect occurring at particular times and places (balconies in Italian cities) underwent a process of "upscaling" whereby they came to function as more generalised emblems of hope, defiance and mutual care.

Like human geographers, sociolinguists see scales as "categories of practice" (Vainikka 2016: 7) through which people order their social worlds and enact *evaluations* of objects, activities and other people. Canagarajah and De Costa (2016), in fact, argue that it is more accurate to speak not of "scales" but of "scaling", the dynamic and fluid *processes* through which people discursively deploy parameters of time, space, size and significance as tools to contextualize social actions, enact stances, and construct social identities. Where sociolinguists differ from geographers is in their focus on *discourse* as the central means through which people "scale their worlds" (Carr and Lempert 2016: 4). Thus, sociolinguists attend to the ways people make meanings and construct social identities by discursively indexing the ideological values associated with different scales (Blommaert 2005), and how they use discursive strategies of framing, positioning, and stance taking to scale and rescale social situations as they negotiate issues of identity and belonging (Collins and Slembouck 2009; De Fina 2022). Crucially, discursive practices of

scaling function to signal people's affinity with or distance from particular social groups, and, in fact, claims and imputations of membership in groups of different sizes, (families, neighbourhoods, nations, races) are themselves ideologically laden acts of scaling. Finally, just as practices of scaling are fundamentally evaluative (De Fina 2022), they also inevitably invoke affect. Affect circulates differently and "sticks" (Ahmed 2014) differently to different kinds of bodies on different scales, and, practices of scaling can sometimes be used to reinforce certain kinds of "stickiness" (as, for example, when invoking geopolitical scales of "global terrorism" can sometimes make fear "stick" more strongly to the bodies of people of certain genders, races or nationalities).

In what follows we will draw upon the concepts we have laid out above to explore the affective experiences of Chinese students studying in the UK during the pandemic, especially the ways in which affect influenced their discursive construction of space and place, of group affiliation and belonging, and of COVID-19 as an object of knowledge. Our analysis will be guided by the following questions:

(1) What kinds of discursive strategies did these students use in accounts of their affective experiences to reference different spatio-temporal scales and position themselves and others within and across these scales?
(2) How did these strategies of "scaling" result in the construction of *affective geographies* – evaluative mappings of spaces and places and the people who inhabited them.
(3) How did these affective geographies enable and constrain particular kinds of social relationships and particular understandings of COVID-19?

4 Data and methods

The data for this study come from a project conducted from July 2020 to May 2021 which aimed to examine the communication challenges faced by Chinese students studying in UK universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project made use of a participatory research model in which Chinese students themselves were empowered to document the problems they were facing and to communicate them in their own words to relevant parties in the universities where they were studying. In order to facilitate this, five Chinese students from different UK institutions were recruited as "participant-researchers". For six months, they worked together with the authors to articulate research objectives, collect data from other Chinese students, analyse the data, and formulate recommendations for HEIs. The data they collected included: (1) in-depth individual and group interviews with other Chinese students, (2) participant observations, (3) weekly reflective diaries, (4) visual data in the form of photos and videos of their daily lives, (5) COVID-19 related correspondence from their

universities, and (6) texts from Chinese and British media and social media about the pandemic. The participant-researchers and investigators met every two weeks during the project to discuss their interpretations of the data, and these discussions were recorded and also became part of the project data.

This paper focuses primarily on segments from participant-researchers' diaries, interview transcripts/summaries, and transcripts of project meetings in which participant-researchers or their interviewees discussed or expressed various emotions (fear, worry, anger, affection, etc.). These segments were analysed with particular attention to the relationship between expressions of affect and the discursive deployment of space at different "scales" (physical spaces, relational spaces, geographical spaces), as well as to how participants positioned themselves and others within these *affective geographies*. Finally, these scalar expressions of affect and social relationships were further interrogated for how they affected participants' evaluations of their own and others' beliefs about COVID-19 and related health behaviours.

We divide our analysis into three sections, each focusing on a particular emotion that was prominently articulated in the data: fear/anger, worry, and affection. This division, however, is mostly for the purpose of convenience. These labels are not meant to represent clearly demarcated mental states, but rather reflect how participants discursively constructed the complex and dynamic forces that manifested and circulated between various bodies and within and across various spaces as they negotiated the complex social terrain of the pandemic. Indeed, in all of the vignettes below, fear, worry, stress, anger, affection, loneliness, and a range of other less clearly articulated emotions seemed to arise simultaneously with varying degrees of intensity. It is chiefly the human impulse to "make sense" of these intensities, primarily through creating discursive "maps" of the social world and the people who inhabit it, that interests us here.

5 Fear/anger

Not surprisingly, the most common expression of emotion found in our data was the expression of fear. Our participants were afraid not just of getting sick, but also of other things, ranging from not being able to complete their studies to not being able to return home when they wanted to. While such fears were experienced individually, and in some ways varied from person to person, they were often talked about as *collectively felt* by all or most Chinese students, and, as individuals talked about their fears with their friends, family members, and circulated "scary" news online, this sense of fear as a shared experience only increased. One of our participant-researchers wrote:

> We're scared. Chinese students are scared of staying in the UK, but also terrified of taking international flights back to China. We're worried about failing in the future exams and being absent for future courses, but we are also extremely frightened about being infected and not being able to get access to efficient treatment. These anxieties are made worse by rumours on social media about a mortuary being built in Hyde Park for keeping the bodies from the pandemic and about the UK government's policy of "herd immunity" (PR2 Diary 1).

Another student in one of our focus group interviews said:

> Chinese students are scared and wondering if they should go home or not since every day on BBC news we see people in Italy crying for freedom and the British government just letting things go. I told my dad on the phone that my hall was almost empty and I saw people were selling their stuff every day. I said I was so scared and felt I was abandoned here. But after chatting with him and thinking about it reasonably, I finally decided to stay here because it would be too exhausting and risky to go home. So basically, I'm not going out right now. I'm scared of going out (FG 3).

In both of these examples, what animates this sense of collective fear is a common experience of space, primarily the experience of a new feeling of distance between "here" (the UK) and "home" (China), created both by the practical difficulties of travel between the two places and the dramatic differences between how the people and governments in these places were responding to the pandemic. This sense of being "abandoned" far from home also affected the way other spaces were experienced or imagined: the increasingly empty spaces of their dormitories, the enclosed spaces of airplanes, the places they saw represented on television (such as Italy), and the places conjured up through rumours circulated in online spaces (such as the imagined mortuary in Hyde Park).

Motivating most expressions of fear was, of course, the fear of infection. But this often took the form of fear of other (potentially infectious) people, their behaviour, and, in particular, their use of space. Time after time, when discussing their interactions with others, our participant-researchers and their interviewees talked about managing space in their everyday lives to decrease close contact with other people. The most common manifestation of this, especially in the early days of the pandemic in the UK, was the practice of isolating themselves within the confines of their homes (even before this became a recommendation – and later a requirement – of the UK government). Participants consistently portrayed the household as a space of safety, and "outside" as a space of danger. As one interviewee put it:

> Basically, I'm isolating myself from the outside world. I've prepared food for myself, right, I'm isolating myself. Because I'm afraid people I'll contact with carry the virus, I'm not sure if they've got it. I think I have the awareness to protect myself. I do well at protecting myself. But what about the others? For now, I stay alone in my room, waiting until the epidemic is gone, then I will go out and have some activities (PR3, Int. 3).

For this interviewee, underlying her affective stance towards particular spaces is an epistemic stance characterised by a combination of certainty (regarding her own knowledge and "awareness") and uncertainty (regarding other people's knowledge and their status as infected or "safe"). Her response to this tension is to build into her "awareness" the belief that self-protection is not just a matter of knowing *what* to be afraid of, but also of *whom* to be afraid of. In many ways, then, fear was not regarded by our participants as something that compromised their decision-making ability, but as a *rational* response and an important tool for negotiating their use of space with others.

Often, these discussions were overlayed with references to higher scale phenomenon such as government policies. One participant-researcher, for instance, described an interviewee as "afraid that the government hasn't been clear or consistent about their COVID measures, and so she just won't go out anymore" (Project Meeting 2). Often, in such acts of "upscaling", in which the local spaces outside their homes came to symbolize the "chaos" of higher scale government policies, fear turned into anger and frustration, leading participants to redraw the boundaries between "safe" and "unsafe" space in more nationalistic terms. One focus group participant remarked:

> When I was chatting with my friends in China, they felt it unbelievable too. Some of my older relatives thought it couldn't be something that a developed country would do. They generally felt that China is a safer county… They said why do you even bother to go abroad? (FG3).

This clear border between the safety of the home (including both their physical homes and their home country) and the danger of "the UK", however, became blurred in cases where participants lived in apartments or dormitories with shared cooking and bathing facilities. In such cases, other people with whom they shared space were seen as undermining the inside/outside boundary. One interviewee, for example, said that she was "afraid of the other flatmates who share the same kitchen with her, especially non-Chinese students who might be too careless ("头铁", literally "iron headed") about COVID' (PR1 Interview Summary 6). What is interesting about such comments, which appeared consistently throughout the data, was the expression of fear in relation to contact with people who were deemed *not afraid enough* ("careless"). Another important feature of such comments was the almost inevitable identification of such "careless" people as "non-Chinese", "British" or "foreign" (cultural "outsiders"), which served to reproduce the experience of the nation (the UK) as a space of danger and to upscale depictions of interpersonal contact to the level of "intercultural' contact". So, while fear of infection (evidenced by taking "appropriate" measures to avoid it) was portrayed as collectively felt by Chinese students, lack of fear (evidenced by "reckless" behaviour) was portrayed as the collective affect of non-Chinese.

Successfully negotiating personal space for many of the students in our study, then, came to be seen as an issue of "intercultural communication" (see Zhu et al. 2022). In one of her diary entries, one of our participant researchers wrote:

> The three of us [she and her other Chinese roommates] are still thinking whether to remind the two British roommates in the apartment to pay more attention to things such as disinfecting the groceries brought back to the kitchen before putting them in the refrigerator. But all three of us felt it was bit difficult to speak out. Chen said that if he was with Chinese classmates, it would be natural to say this kind of thing, without the slightest embarrassment, but with foreign roommates, he would think about whether and how to speak. Probably because everyone's health beliefs and practices regarding COVID-19 are too different (PR1 Diary 4).

In this extract and others like it, fear arose out of a perceived incommensurability between the confined physical spaces of the apartment and the relational distance that was felt between the social actors. Again, the perceived communication problems between individuals are upscaled, so that broader "cultural" differences are seen as the source of interpersonal conflict. In part because of this upscaling, the original fear of infection becomes overlayed with another set of fears having to do with communication – the fear of "saying the wrong thing" in interactions with people who have different "beliefs". The "inappropriate" use of space by the British roommates comes to function as evidence of wholly different epistemologies, and it is in part this perception of incommensurate epistemologies that gives rise to seemingly insurmountable fears of miscommunication.

For many of our participants, the fear aroused by other people's use of space gave rise to practices of affectively mapping their surroundings based on the kinds of people that inhabited different spaces. The same participant-researcher quoted above, for example, discussed how she and other Chinese students came to see different parts of the building where they lived as more "dangerous" than others, the "geography" of the building mirroring higher scale mappings of "national" differences. Often, this upscaling accompanied a transformation of fear into anger, not just at particular individuals, but at whole classes of people, and as this anger circulated among Chinese students, the chasm between "cultural" groups seemed to widen.

> Today, in the WeChat group of Chinese students in the dormitory, a message broke out, saying that two "foreign" boys in Flat 601 were diagnosed with the corona and are now in isolation. The group exploded. People living on the 6th floor felt aggrieved and angry because their roommates often held parties. Others expressed sympathy and suggested that they change to a flat or call the police directly. This has also led to wider discussions about the mutual trust between Chinese students. Some students said, "all Chinese students should be placed in one building", and some people responded that "at least on the first floor is good". Others said, "It's good to suddenly discover that there are more Chinese people", and many people agreed (PR1, Diary 3).

In the examples above, we can see how the discursive construction of the figure of the "unsafe person" arising out of participants' affective engagement with physical spaces on the local scale (apartments, dormitory buildings), the circulation of narratives about unsafe behaviour, and the upscaling of such behaviour in ways that connected it to larger scale political policies and "cultural beliefs", sometime led to practices of othering and attitudes of tribalism. Similar dynamics can be seen in stories our participants told in which *they* were perceived as "unsafe" by others, leading to acts of hostility or micro-aggression directed towards them. Ironically, many of these incidents seem to have been triggered not just by Chinese students' racial identities, but by behaviour that they believed would *protect* themselves and others from infection – particularly wearing facemasks. One participant, for example, re-told a story of how a Chinese friend of hers navigated the space inside a classroom, and how a "foreign" (meaning non-Chinese) student responded.

> There was a foreign student sitting in front of a friend of mine, but my friend was so guarded that he wore a FFP2 mask, which was too much protection perhaps. Immediately after the first session, the foreign student switched to the other side to sit down. This is how people react, they want to stay away from us. When they join us in going up the stairs or taking the elevator, they would keep distance (P5, Interview 5).

Although it is important to see incidents like this in the context of the wider wave of discrimination against East Asians that washed over the UK and other countries in the early days of the pandemic, what this excerpt also highlights is how such discrimination often manifested in the form of small semiotic acts of managing space involving proxemics, posture, and gaze. Indeed, it was often through what Hall (1959) calls the "silent language" of time/space that acts of inclusion and exclusion frequently played out. But this excerpt also reveals how, through acts of spatio-temporal scaling, incidents occurring on the local level (such as a student changing his seat in a classroom) came to be interpreted as evidence of larger collective affects of fear and avoidance.

At other times, of course, the discursive positioning of Chinese students as objects of fear was more explicit, and more violent. In the excerpt below, for instance, a participant in one of our focus groups related an incident that occurred in a fast-food restaurant near her university:

> I was wearing a mask with a scarf outside when entering a KFC… There were quite a lot of people in front of me, so I stood at the vent, a spot beside the door. I was thinking I'd better not go inside since there were lots of people there. … I was standing there and there was a white man standing in front of me, shouting to people in the front of the line very loudly, "Can you be quick? An Asian is here. I don't want to get infected." I didn't hear him at the beginning because I was listening to music with my earphones. But then I realised that everyone was looking at me

> because that guy was pointing at me. I took off my earphones, but he was still swearing, something like "fucking Chinese". Then I realised he was cursing me, so I step back and went outside. I waited outside until the guy left and I went inside again. It probably was not the first time that this happened. Actually, before this, I thought people in Scotland were quite friendly, but now I know why when I went to Lidle and got in the queue, people in front of me or behind me will consciously stay away from me. Wherever I go they look at me with a despised look. But I'm getting used to it because I usually wear my earphones with music playing very loudly. I don't want to listen to them. But still, you will still feel hurt. I don't understand but I can do nothing about it. Right? (FG1).

What is particularly striking about this description is the palpable intensity of the "white man's" hostility and the way it transformed the affective atmosphere of the restaurant, forcing the speaker to step outside to escape it. What is also interesting is how the speaker effectively creates an additional boundary between herself and her surroundings using her earphones to block out potential negative expressions of affect directed towards her (in the same way she uses her face mask to block out potential pathogens) (see De Souza e Silva and Firth 2008). As in the previous excerpt, this particular incident becomes a template with which to interpret people's behaviour in other contexts as evidence of a larger scale phenomenon of exclusion and discrimination. It is also upscaled in a way that makes the speaker reconsider her evaluation of the "friendliness" of "Scottish people" as a whole.

Just as narratives of the "unsafe" behaviour of non-Chinese students circulated through social media, contributing both to the construction of a collectively felt fear and to a hardening of in-group/out-group boundaries, narratives of abuse and discrimination also circulated in virtual spaces with similar effects. Sometimes this involved the sharing of more high-profile stories that had been reported by the Chinese and British media of Chinese people being attacked in, for example, London ("Coronavirus: Student from Singapore hurt…" 2020a) and Southampton ("Coronavirus: Racist attack…" 2020b), but often they took the form of more *local* mappings of such incidents which were shared in order to advise people to avoid certain places. One interviewee, for example, explained:

> I heard about the Southampton thing from the news, but I get most of my information about this kind of thing from group chat. There would be people in the group saying let's be careful, something happened in some shop across the street near school, that sort of thing. If it's something that's going on near where I live, that's what's circulating in the various groups (PR3, Interview 4).

As with fear of infection, fear of discrimination frequently (and understandably) turned into anger. But this anger was often entangled with other emotions, such as confusion or feelings of helplessness. After hearing about an incident of verbal abuse from a friend, one of our interviewees said:

> I just felt so angry but also powerless. I just don't know what to do with it. I would think about how I would have handled it if I had been there, and I would feel like I wouldn't know what to do, just kind of helpless and angry like that (PR3 Int 6).

And, as with the fear of infection, the anger that fear of discrimination generated was sometimes upscaled, so that the affront suffered by individuals was interpreted as an affront to the larger group. In summarizing an interview with one of her friends, one participant-researcher wrote:

> She said the main thing she is afraid of is that she can't argue back in English fluently if there are ridiculous verbal attacks. "China is powerful and should not endure unjustifiable abuse," she said. These are Yan's original words, but of course I would say this idea is a little aggressive. (PR4, Int 2)

6 Worry

Whereas expressions of fear and anger dominated discussions of how participants negotiated immediate physical spaces and their relationships with those around them, expressions of worry were more associated with how they negotiated their relationships with family members back in China. Like fear, worry was also crucially portrayed as something that was *experienced within and across space* (both physical and virtual), and, like fear, participants' experience of worry often had an epistemological dimension, hinging on what they knew or understood about the pandemic and what they thought others knew or understood.

In describing their experiences at the start of the pandemic in China, most of our participants related their worries about their family members back home. One common strategy for dealing with these worries was to gather as much information about the situation as possible. For example, one participant wrote in her diary:

> I still remember how I spent my days back then – waking up and grabbing my phone straight away, Googling the latest coronavirus death toll in China, feeling scared for my family, and going back to sleep. I remember calling my parents on Chinese New Year's Eve, and my entire family went to a restaurant to have the big family dinner … They seemed pretty relaxed as the virus had barely spread to Shandong province. However, after reading through the news and case numbers every single day, I was extremely stressed, and I remember having a breakdown because I was too worried about them eating in a restaurant. In the end, my mum was the one who started to console me, telling me things hadn't gone that bad in our city (PR2, Diary 1).

Like so many of our participants' descriptions of their interactions with family members back home, this excerpt illustrates some of the challenges involved when worry had to be *negotiated* across physical distances and across multiple scales. The diarist here, here, for instance, bases her assessment of the situation in China on

information about national case numbers and death tolls, which she gathered as part of her daily, embodied ritual of "doom scrolling", while her family based theirs on their local experience of their city, where, at least at that point, things had not "gone that bad". In the context of such negotiations, physical spaces thousands of miles away, such as the enclosed space of a restaurant, can become sites for the generation of affect – in this case a "breakdown" by the daughter, which then has to be managed by the mother from a distance. In such cases, it becomes difficult to discern who was more worried about whom, and often in such interactions the worry expressed by one party became an even greater source of worry for the other party.

This understanding of worry not just as an emotional state, but as an affective force that circulates between people, requiring the careful management of information – worry as a form of *communication* – was evident throughout our data. One participant-researcher, reflecting on her interviews with friends and classmates, noted:

> You know, in the big category of communication with families, I think quite a few of them mentioned that they weren't concerned about themselves, it was more their family. They were worried, you know, because we literally live in different continents and it's quite hard to convince your parents that you're actually taking care of yourself, but I think it's interesting because a lot of them said first that when they were in the UK and coronavirus started in China, they were worried about you know families back home. And then two months later it was the other way round (Project Meeting 1).

As seen above, these local negotiations of concern often played out against the backdrop of larger scale epidemiological developments and government policies, and the communication of concern was often entangled with the sharing of "news" about these larger scale events. This meant that local experiences of risk often conflicted with understandings of risk based on these higher scale events and developments. One interviewee talked about the different perceptions she and her parents had about the risks she was taking by staying in the UK, noting:

> Because I see the situation is more serious in London, but it seems that Manchester has only had about 40 cases even recently, so I don't think it's that bad. But my mum and dad were worried about it, because they read that the UK came out with some kind of herd immunity scheme and the word spread around China. They called me every day, really, every day!! And told me not to go out, and they were worried and said maybe I should come back. My dad was also saying something about having someone charter a plane! (PR5, Int 2).

Here again, the key issue around expressions of worry was how to *manage* the worry of others which proved especially difficult in contexts in which the parties involved had such different understandings of the risks involved. Just as with fear, worry was seen not as the property of individuals, but as collectively felt; portrayed both as

something passed between the "worrier" and the "worried about" in the form of plans and exhortations, and as something that was "spreading" through China in the wake of news about the British government's approach to the pandemic.

For many of our participants, worry itself was bound up with patterns of communication with their family members back home. Expressions of worry manifested in the increased frequency of contact from family members, which were inevitably met with more frequent contact from Chinese students, who were afraid that if they didn't respond with equal frequency, their parents would worry even more. In other words, expressions of worry and alarm, and responses to such expressions, took on a kind of phatic function, serving to signal not just concern, but also affection, love, respect and filial piety. One participant-researcher commented specifically on how the pandemic had altered patterns of communication between Chinese students and their family members:

> Lots of my participants said like they communicated more often with their family. For example, before it was once a month and now it's once a week or every day. Their parents are always sending them some kind of links to stay in contact, not by video calling, but you know sending news. In my case I called my parents every day. If they don't hear from me, they will get worried … They always send me updates like 10,000 cases today in the UK or the University of Manchester has had an outbreak. I would get these messages from my parents every day. Basically, just when I wake up, that's pretty much what I read (Project Meeting 2).

Just as the affective geographies constructed through fear contributed to the discursive construction of the "unsafe" or "careless" ('头铁', "iron-headed") "foreigner" (non-Chinese), the affective geographies created through expressions of "worry" gave rise to the figure of the "overly worried parent", whose concern, while understandable, had to be carefully managed. The same participant-researcher went on to say:

> To be honest, I'm I'm a little bit, I'm not a fan of receiving these kind of messages. Obviously they're worried and I would just reply normally like OK received. OK, I read it, but… I understand that to them, obviously, China is basically completely saved now, whereas in the UK is going worse and worse everyday. So I I totally understand where they're coming from, but the same time, it doesn't really like change anything that I would do. I wouldn't like. I'm already being quite careful I think, and it doesn't really help much (Project Meeting 2).

Interestingly, the main way participants managed these transnational flows of worry was by attempting to manage transnational flows of information, first, by downplaying the information sent to them by their patents ("just reply[ing] normally"), and by avoiding sharing with them information that they thought might alarm them. In the same project meeting, another participant researcher said:

> I know myself, and maybe a lot of people would agree with me, I don't really share coronavirus news with my parents, for example, as I said, I'd literally just heard my friend's friend, another friend's friend, got tested positive. I wouldn't tell my parents anything about it. I would just tell them that I've been careful and everything's fine basically. And I yeah, I I think some of my friends do the same as well. Reporting every piece of news that's worrying them back home (Project-meeting 2).

For many participants, managing their parents' concern was not just a matter of familial love and filial piety, but crucially a matter of maintaining their studies by convincing their parents to allow them to remain in the UK. As one participant-researcher put it:

> So how do they manage it so that their families are OK with them staying in the UK? Yeah, I mean, lots of people have mentioned to me about this kind of challenge when their parents were very worried about them and maybe they even have some disagreement with their parents about whether they should go back to China or whether they should stay, and sometimes that caused some communication difficulties (Project Meeting 3).

At the same time, the barriers participants felt to being able to express to their parents their own fears and worries, and to share with them more openly about the challenges they were facing, gave rise to other emotions such as loneliness. While the circulation of affect across geographical spaces was sometimes perceived as annoying or even overwhelming, it functioned to maintain a strong bond with their distant family members during a time when, because of travel restrictions, they seemed even further away. Attempting to moderate these flows of affect also ran the risk of weakening this bond.

What is clear, however, is that participants became adept at *modifying* their performances of affect in different spatio-temporal contexts, whether they were, for instance, negotiating the use of space with "foreign" roommates in cramped kitchens, or engaging in collective expressions of outrage with their Chinese friends, or dealing with threats of physical or verbal abuse in public places, or responding to their parents' concerns during video calls. And these performances of affect also had the effect of helping to shape these physical and geographical spaces, erecting or removing boundaries between people, making small distances between them seem larger, or large distances seem smaller.

7 Affection

So far, the focus of our analysis has been on the ways negative affect (fear, anger, worry) impacted the ways Chinese students managed space, and how they used different affective "mappings" to manage their social relationships, social identities,

and their understanding of COVID. As we noted, these strategies often resulted in the discursive construction of "characterological figures" (Agha 2007) (the "unsafe foreigner"; the "worried parent"), as well in what we have been calling in this special issue "tribal epistemologies" – the tendency to see certain beliefs and behaviours as emblems of membership in particular groups. This, however, was not the whole story told by our participants. Along with tales of distancing, division, distrust, and discrimination, they also told stories of connection, conviviality and mutual care, and these more positive expressions of affect were also crucially tied up with dynamics of spatiality and embodiment.

While the fears participants experienced around COVID often resulted in them erecting boundaries – both symbolic and physical – between different groups based on things like where people lived, where they came from, and how they acted, these boundaries were porous, vulnerable to the force of other affects such as sympathy and affection, and other forms of group loyalty. For example, in the following diary excerpt, a participant-researcher, who in previous entries had complained about people not following the rules around household isolation, confesses her own household's transgressions of these same rules:

> One of our roommates, has a friend who lives in the same building. He's an international student who came to live in a foreign country for the first time, but his apartment does not have the friendly and joyful atmosphere of our dormitory, so he feels lonely. So this Friday we originally planned to have a Halloween party inside our flat, and my roommate invited this friend to come. Suddenly our innocent party became a "dark" event. Of course, we were all aware of breaking the rules, but we didn't talk about it directly. We just brought it up euphemistically, reminding everyone to turn the music down and to speak quietly. (PR1 Diary 5).

In this excerpt, the threat represented by the visitor is superseded by the sympathy the flatmates feel for him, and the boundaries between inside and outside are no longer erected just to protect them from the danger of infection, but also to protect them (and their visitor) from the danger of detection. As we have discussed above, negotiations around the use of space between flatmates was often fraught, with participants sometimes having trouble expressing displeasure and setting boundaries, especially when they perceived others to have different "cultural" beliefs. Interestingly, in this case (which also involved flatmates from different cultural backgrounds) the decision to allow an outsider to enter the flat is negotiated tacitly (or at least "euphemistically"), as if participants felt secure in their shared sympathy for the visitor and perhaps in part because their conspiratorial actions created among them a feeling of solidarity.

For some of our participants, the very fact that they were forced to continually make "spatial compromises" when dealing with others, especially those they lived

with, led them to reevaluate their affective stances towards their own epistemologies. They did not necessarily change their beliefs, but rather, changed their attitudes towards them, creating the mental space for them to tolerate behaviour that they did not agree with. As one participant-researcher wrote:

> The whole thing quite reflects my own struggle with the epidemic. I have always been very confident in my health belief + health behaviour and feel that I can survive the epidemic all the time. But after coming out of self-isolation/protection, I can't guarantee that the roommates/friends I have close contact with every day are exactly the same as my belief and behaviour in this matter. Even some of their actions are not in line with my belief. For example, Anna wears ordinary cloth masks when going out and working (I think N95 must be worn), Jin and Rowen often go to the swimming pool and gym (I feel that closed swimming pools, and gymnasiums are not safe). Sometimes people do not wash their hands immediately after returning from the outside, and the things they bring back will be placed in the refrigerator without disinfection, and they often go to see friends outside of our household. In my opinion, these behaviours are ineffective or careless. They will expose me to the virus, and even undermine my "absolute" security. But on the other hand, I feel that I am lucky, because with their existence, with everyone's sharing and company, the tone of my daily life is more joyful. So, in the face of the epidemic, I may become more "Buddha", do what I can do, and leave the rest to fate (PR1 Diary 12).

Throughout this paper we have spoken of how our participants responded to negative affect by erecting barriers between themselves and others. But, as seen in the excerpt above, there were also other ways they responded, one being accepting fear and worry as an inevitable consequence of sociality. Rather than regarding different beliefs about the virus as symbols of "tribal" differences, this diarist constructs them as part of the inevitable heterogeneity of social life. Part of this adjustment is a consequence of the discursive *downscaling* of social identities, the portrayal of the Anna, Jin and Rowen's behaviour not as representative of particular social groups, but as individual decisions, and the portrayal of the relational space between them as a space where positive affect could circulate, despite the negative affect generated by the pandemic. In this way, fear became "workable", something that was locally negotiable through different discursive orientations towards physical and relational space.

An even more explicit example of this process of discursive downscaling can be seen in the way the same participant-researcher described an argument among her flatmates about which country, China or the UK, was following a more reasonable policy regarding COVID outbreaks:

> The origin of the incident was Boris's public speech at 6 o'clock this evening, and the report about Qingdao preparing for universal testing because of 5 confirmed cases. The centre of the "debate" is British roommate Aiden vs. Chinese roommates Wen, Lily, and Rei. The theme is

> what is the best way to deal with coronavirus …The following is my recollection of this discussion from memory:
>
> […]
>
> Wen: But at least people are trying, we cannot do nothing and watch people die!
>
> Aiden: But what about the economy? If we lock down and everybody is unemployed, it will be a disaster for everyone. We've had the first lockdown and now it comes again.
>
> Lily: It's because the first lockdown here is not effective at all. You are not strict with the rules.
>
> Aiden: We can't be like Wuhan.
>
> Lily: It's not only Wuhan, the whole country was locked down.
>
> Aiden: But you know a lot more people died in Wuhan, right?
>
> Wen: How do you know that? Were you there?
>
> Rei: Maybe we should stop this conversation for the sake of our friendship.
>
> (PR 1 Diary 10, see also Zhu et al. 2022).

The way participants in the argument quickly divide into "camps", the Chinese students arguing for the Chinese government's policy, and the British student defending the British government's policy, is a good example of how "tribal epistemologies" unfold discursively through processes of upscaling, with participants aligning themselves with their respective countries/governments, even to the extent that the pronouns "you" and "we" are used not to refer to individuals, but to countries (Zhu et al. 2022). What drives this conversation, and so many like it, is not just a difference of opinion, but the affective "stickiness" (Ahmed 2014) of the these opinions, the way they adhered to feelings of pride, nationalism, and "loyalty" to one's "culture", along with, in this case, memories among the Chinese participants of worrying about their family members back in China during the Wuhan outbreak and suffering various forms of COVID related discrimination during their time in the UK. The turning point in the conversation seems to come when the debate about policies (the effectiveness of lockdowns) turns into a disagreement, not just about facts (regarding what happened in Wuhan), but about *ways of knowing* linked to embodied experiences of space and place ("How do you know that? Were you there?"). Interestingly, the debate is not resolved *epistemologically* (by anyone changing their way of thinking about the issue), but *affectively*, with participants consciously stepping back from the negative affect generated by the argument and appealing to more

the positive affect associated with their friendship, highlighting once again the effectiveness of discursive strategies of downscaling in defusing conflicts based on "national" or "cultural" affiliation. Such strategies and the new kinds of affective mappings they initiate have the potential not just to reduce the relational distance between people, but also to forge new, shared epistemologies based on common embodied experiences.

8 Conclusions

In this paper we have explored the relationship between space, affect and knowledge in discursive processes that connect and divide us, especially in times of crisis. In particular, we have shown how boundaries between in-groups and out-groups are erected and various 'figures of personhood' (Agha 2007) are constructed through processes of *scaling*, whereby social actors configure *affective geographies* by linking local spatial relationships (in shops, classrooms, and dormitories) to higher level (national and international) temporo-spatial scales. Our analysis resonates with much previous work in applied linguistics on migrant communities and transnational communication (Collins and Slembrouck 2009; Ou and Gu 2020) in highlighting how central such processes of scaling are for mobile people as they negotiate feelings of belonging and estrangement.

In the context of a global pandemic, in which both the physical spaces of everyday life and the geographical distances that separated people became saturated with feelings of fear and anger, loneliness and longing, the vulnerability of mobile communities became even more evident. The particular vulnerabilities experienced by those who had to navigate the pandemic far from their loved ones in sometimes unfamiliar environments, of course, emerged within the context of a more general sense of heightened vulnerability experienced by all of us, the vulnerability that came from confronting the fundamentally "porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives" (Butler and Yancy 2020: 483), from realising that what connects us as humans is also what endangers us.

A natural response to this heightened sense of vulnerability was to attempt to manage as best we could the spaces that connected and divided us, to, as Butler and Yancy (2020: 487) put it, "redraw the world". Affective geographies are the result of these territorializing practices, these attempts to redraw the world. But affective geographies do not just result in the reconfiguration of space, but also the reconfiguration of individual and group identities, and of interpersonal and international relations. Sometimes, the ways we map and remap our social worlds only end up entrenching past suspicions and stereotypes, strengthening the boundaries between us, but sometimes they can help us transcend these entrenched divisions and find new ways to connect.

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