

Commentary: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-Construction of Hmong History

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ABSTRACT

In the past 30 years various accounts of Hmong history have emerged from Hmong and non-Hmong scholars working in the United States, other Diaspora countries and Asia. This short commentary paper examines and addresses some of the questions that have arisen from the many versions of Hmong history in China being circulated among the Hmong of the United States.

Introduction

As a people of Diaspora and an ethnic minority, the Hmong have previously been an undocumented people. This has gradually changed during the last three decades, as Hmong Americans have undergone the transition from pre-literacy to literacy. The Hmong of other countries have experienced similar patterns, which have led to more publications of books and scholarly articles written by Hmong writers and scholars. Additionally, the change in China from a strict socialist system to a socialist-market economy has enabled many Hmong/Miao scholars to publish books and scholarly articles about their past experiences. Combining these developments with the frequent interaction between the Hmong/Miao in China and their cousins in the western countries has generated many versions of Hmong history. This short commentary paper examines and addresses some of the questions that have arisen from these many versions of Hmong history being circulated among the Hmong of the United States. Moreover, it only selects bits and pieces from what have been circulated. As such, it is from the perspective of historicism. Moreover, it does not intend to cover all questions relevant to Hmong history, but only bits and pieces of them.¹

Hmong History

There are many versions of early Hmong history being circulating among the Hmong in the United States.² The most common versions are that the Hmong came from Mesopotamia, Siberia or Mongolia, and that their history in China can be traced back to King Chi You of ancient central China. A good example of these conflicting histories comes from Yang Kaiyi, a Hmong Chinese who visited the Hmong in America several times in the 1990s. He writes that he was surprised to learn that many Hmong Americans believe their history can be traced back to Mongolia. Kaiyi's article (1996) strongly objects to conjecture that Hmong came from Mongolia. He argues that the ancestral homeland of the Hmong is in central China, and that their history in China can be traced back to about 3,000 BC.³

Another example of the “popular” versions of Hmong history that are circulating may be found in a YouTube video entitled [A Brief History of the Hmong People](#). The narrator of this YouTube video says scholars believe that the Hmong originated from the Mesopotamia region, gradually migrated into China, and that in about 2,700 BC, the Hmong were governed by a warrior named Chi You (Txiv Yawg).⁴ In a recent article, Eric Yang (2008) analyzes other similar videos available on YouTube. I also found many online websites containing the word, “Hmong history” and/or “Hmong historical timelines”. From these websites, it appears that most writers are confused, so they end up just listing anything and everything they can think of. An example of this is found in a website for Lao Family Community of Minnesota, entitled, “History of the Hmong – A Timeline.”⁵ The timeline begins with a “Prehistory” section, which recognizes the existence of many conflicting stories of Hmong pre-history, but says, “some evidence shows that the Hmong originated in Siberia, with pale or white skin and blond hair.” Following pre-history, the timeline provides the period from BC to 400 AD, and the notation that

“The first firm historical accounts can be traced back to the Hmong in China. . . . The term Hmong came into use, often translated as ‘free’ or ‘free people’.”⁶ The timeline goes on to say that from 400-900 AD, “A Hmong Kingdom was established in China with a hereditary monarchy. . . . Only the rulers and the men voted”. But, during the same period, the website says that the Hmong returned to their nomadic existence after being defeated by the Sung dynasty.⁷

These accounts reflect not only the difficulties in reconstructing Hmong history, due to the lack of reliable records of information about past experiences, but also, the increased level of interest and circulation of accounts of Hmong history throughout Hmong funeral homes, Hmong churches, community events, and online. It seems that during the transition from a pre-literate to literate society, there have been many versions circulated of Hmong history, and because of the lack of records and reliable information needed to construct a more accurate version of Hmong history, these various accounts are often based on hearsay, oral accounts, legends or Biblical stories.

On the one hand, as a positive indication that Hmong Americans show interest in their history and are exploring all possible sources of information, this trend might energize the next generation to focus their research on Hmong history. On the other hand, inaccurate information, and personal or religious biases may lead to the making of wrong assumptions, which can result in unpredictable implications and/or dangerous outcomes. For example, when I visited the Hmong in North Vietnam in January 2008, I was told that Hmong American missionary workers have linked the coming of a Hmong mythical king to the coming of Christ, resulting in many poor Hmong climbing onto the roofs of their houses waiting to be picked up by a Hmong mythical king/Christ.⁸ I caution Hmong and non-Hmong writers to be aware of the consequences and implications of their writings. They should base their writings on scientific facts and credible

evidence. I also urge historians to step up and clarify the many historical events claimed by the Hmong, and put to rest anything that is not relevant to Hmong history.

My review of existing literature, the media, and other accounts of Hmong history generates many questions. Some of these questions are easy to discuss, others will require more extensive research by scholars of Hmong history. I will only single out a few questions to be discussed in this paper. Some of these questions are much easier to cover, and others are, in my view, central to Hmong studies and to the re-construction of Hmong history. I put the selected topics as questions because they are questions to me and they might as well be questions to readers, too. For the purpose of this commentary paper, I have selected the following questions to be discussed.

Was Chi You Di the ancestral king of the Hmong?

The claim that Chi You (蚩尤) was the ancestral king of the Hmong (and all groups under the lumping name “Miao”) has been made by not only the above mentioned YouTube video, but in various writings and other publications (by both Hmong and non-Hmong). Some, such as scholar Kao-Ly Yang in the Hmong historical timeline on her website, are more cautious, and use phrases, such as “Chi-You, the mythical ancestor of the Miao people in Central China.”⁹ Other sources, such as the above mentioned YouTube video, claim that Chi You was the ancestral king of the Hmong. The central question here is: what do historians know about Chi You Di, Huang Di and Yen Di? I explored this question further and learned the following:

When asked about the existence of Huang Di (黃帝), Yen Di (炎帝) and Chi You Di (蚩尤), the three legendary figures in ancient China, Shuo Wang, a Professor of East Asian History, replied, “They were just legendary figures like Moses or Abraham in the Bible. There is no archaeological evidence to prove their existence like what we have on the Oracle Bones.”¹⁰

Wu Shuguang, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the five volumes on the “General History of the Miao People,” agreed that the above three are figures in Chinese legend, but inserted that historians do agree that these kings did exist and the period of their existence is known.¹¹ He, however, did not provide specific information to their period of existence. He did explain that, although there is no archaeological evidence that links Miao groups to Chi You, historians believe that Chi You was the ancestral king of the Miao-Man people.

Many Chinese books and other accounts, including online articles from Wikipedia and Britannica Online, tend to generally indicate that Chi You Di, Huang Di and Yen Di (Di means king) existed in Chinese legend or as mythical kings. The time of their existence is estimated to be about 4,700 years ago.¹² In the Wikipedia article on Chi You, the author indicates that he was a war deity who fought the Huang Di (Yellow Emperor). The website of “The Three Chinese Ancestors Hall” in the Hebei province does recognize Huang Di, Yen Di, and Chi You as mythical ancestors, but it specifically highlights that all Han Chinese believe that Huang Di and Yen Di were their mythical ancestors.¹³ This claim led to my writing in, “My Visit to the Hmong of Asia,” that Chi You was left to be claimed by the Miao as their ancestral king.¹⁴

The mythical story of the battle of “Zhuolu,”(which is believed to be located in today’s Hebei province) and its consequences are probably the central points of the legend of Huang Di, Yen Di, and Chi You Di. According to “Yen Di and Huang Di, Ancestors of the Chinese Nation,” Huang Di and Yen Di became the victors of the battle of “Zhuolu” (涿鹿), and were credited for the foundation of the Han Chinese culture.¹⁵ As a result, almost every Han Chinese claims to be a descendant of these two kings. It is said that Chi You Di and his army were defeated at this battle. Consequently, many were killed and the rest were chased South where they eventually laid the “historical foundation of the Huaxia nationality.”

There are many versions of these three kings' histories, and though almost all the accounts that I came across or have heard have consistently claimed that Huang Di and Yen Di were the mythical ancestral kings/founders of the Han Chinese culture, the legend of Chi You is still not consistent; there are some claims that Chi You was the ancestral king of the Miao which is the version that most of the Miao in China embraced, and other claims, such as the one mentioned above, which says that the people of the kingdom of Chi You laid the historical foundation of the Huaxia (華夏) nationality. Ultimately, who were the Huaxia? There is no clear answer to this question. Some accounts claim that the Huaxia were the ancient people whose descendants are the Han Chinese, others suggest that the Huaxia were the ancestors of many ethnic groups in China, including the Miao.¹⁶ The word Hua or Huaxia does not exist in the Hmong language, except that the Hmong call the Han Chinese, Suav, which might come from Xia. The word Huaxia does exist in the Han Chinese language and is a very common term used to refer to anything Chinese. For example, the words Hua Qiao mean overseas Chinese and Zhonghua (中華) means China as in Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó (中華人民共和國). Moreover, Huaxia (華夏) "is the name often used to represent China or the Chinese civilization."¹⁷

On my many visits to the Miao (Hmu, Ah Hmao, Hmong and Qho Xiong) in China, I, too have found that the peoples included under the lumping name, "Miao," with the exceptional few, strongly believe that Chi You was their ancestral king. At an informal discussion in 2004, I used the phrase "the Miao people believe that Chi You was their ancestral king." A Professor of Qho Xiong ancestry quickly corrected me and said, "Chi You was indeed our ancestral king." In 2008, I visited the Hmong in Sichuan. My host took me to the local museum and cultural park of the Hmong, which has several examples of Hmong homes. There is an ancestral altar inside one

of these homes, which contains a painted portrait of Chi You. My host took me with him to the altar. He then offered to the altar three lid sticks of incense and bowed before the portrait of Chi You. Many Hmong in the west call Chi You, Txiv Yawg, and also embrace the version that Chi You was their ancestral king without differentiating history from legend.

Several Hmong in China have also mentioned to me that the Hmong have double clans (or surnames): the Hmong clans and the Han Chinese clans. For example, the clans, known in Hmong as Xeem or Xov and in Chinese as Xing (姓), such as Yang, Vang, Lor and Lee are Han Chinese clans, imposed on the Hmong by Han Chinese rulers, but in China, the term Xeem is used when interacting with non-Hmong.¹⁸ The Hmong clans, “Qhua Yawg” (Yang), “Qhua Dub,” (Thao) and “Qhua Cai” (Lee), are originally Hmong and are likely to come from residential areas, or occupations of ancestors.¹⁹ It should also be noted here that the Hmong in Southeast Asia also have double surnames, but the Xeem (clan) is the most widely used with the Hmong or non-Hmong. In the United States, the Hmong use only their Xeem, such as Vang, Yang and Lee. One Hmong Chinese, who lived in the United States, linked a Hmong clan to Chi You. He told me that the Hmong clan Qhua Yawg is originally from Txiv Yawg (Chi You). This linkage is, again, a legendary one as the Hmong have no written records to verify their history and to differentiate legend from history.

Wu Xiaodong, a researcher at the Central Institute of Social Sciences in Beijing is one of the few who does not support the belief that Chi You was the ancestral king of the Miao, including the Hmong. He says, according to his research, there was a tribe by the name of Miao, who lived near the battle of Zuolo, but the Miao today never call themselves Miao and the people of the Chi You Kingdom were not known then as Miao.²⁰ The name, Miao as known today, is the name imposed upon the Ah Hmao, Hmong, Hmu and Qho Xiong by others. Moreover, the

name Miao used to include more than these four subgroups as noted in Jacques Lemoine's 2008 article.²¹

Although many mythical accounts do link the Hmong to Chi You, their historical linkage, however, has not yet been fully established. Also, there are many scholars who have doubts about the historical linkage of the Hmong to Chi You. Until historians can establish the link of the Hmong people to Chi You, it is more proper to say, the "Hmong believe that their ancestral king was Chi You" rather than say, "Chi You was the ancestral king of the Hmong."

Was Sonom a Hmong King?

In a 2009 article, Frank Ng notes that "The tracing of the history of the Hmong and the Miao is only in its initial stage. While many Hmong in the United States draw upon oral tradition, folklore, legends, and other sources to recount the history of their ancestors in China, these accounts are sometimes subject to challenge. An example is the belief by some Hmong students in Minnesota that Sonom was a Hmong king who ruled over a Hmong kingdom in eighteenth century China."²² It is true that many Hmong in the United States draw upon oral tradition, folklore, legends and other sources to recount the history of their ancestors in China, but the example given by Ng is, as he points out, the result of inaccurate historical information spread by scholarly communication. Robert Entenmann, who first questioned the above students' beliefs, traced the source of their views to the writing of non-Hmong scholars. In his "The Myth of Sonom, The Hmong King,"²³ Entenmann writes, "Most of them [Hmong students] have learned about Sonom from Anne Fadiman's The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down,²⁴ certainly the most widely read book on the Hmong experience in America. In turn, Fadiman's account of Hmong history relies heavily on Keith Quincy's Hmong: History of a People,²⁵ the

only readily available English-language study of Hmong history.” Other books, such as Jane Hamilton-Merritt’s Tragic Mountains: the Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars²⁶ also contain the account of King Sonom.

In this case, Hmong students do what they are expected to do: they utilize literature from supposedly reliable sources such as historical documents. It turns out that not all of these historical accounts are reliable. In this particular case, there is no evidence that these Hmong students based their beliefs on oral tradition, folklore, and legends. On the issue of Sonom, the Hmong King, Robert Entenmann’s “The Myth of Sonom, The Hmong King”²⁷ has already put to rest the claim that Sonom was a Hmong king; he was not a Hmong king and was not even Hmong.

I want to also add to this discussion of a Hmong king that there are many stories of Hmong or Miao kings in China. During the so called, “Miao Rebellion,” at least two leaders were called, “Great King” by their followers. Robert Jenks’ Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The “Miao” Rebellion, 1854-1873, identifies these two great kings as Gao He and Jiu Song. When I visited the Qho Xiong in Western Hunan in February 2008, I was taken to visit many towns and at least two of them have museums that used to be the residences of the two so-called “Miao kings.” One of them still has the portrait of the king, known by the name, Long Yuenkai, hanging on the wall of the Museum of the town of Shan Jiang. The Museum guide explained to me that this king put himself and his people in a neutral position between the conflict of the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Communists. As the war intensified, both sides demanded that this king declare his loyalty. He realized that he could not defend himself and his people against these two forces, so he committed suicide.

After the visit, my host, a professor and a Qho Xiong himself, explained to me that there is officially no Miao king because there is no Miao Kingdom in China. During many periods of Chinese history, some warlords were known as minor kings, but that does not necessarily make them a ruler because they had no kingdom. This type of myth also exists in Vietnam. When I visited Vietnam in 2008, I saw a tourist brochure about the town Bac Ha of Lao Cai province, indicating that there is a former Hmong king's palace located in this town. I was anxious to see and learn more about it, but the more I dug, it became clear that there was no Hmong king. The so called Hmong king was a Dai (Tay), appointed by the French colonial power to be an administrator of the Hmong, responsible for collecting taxes and for carrying out French administrative functions, so some people merely called him "king of the Hmong."²⁸

What does Suav Tua Peb or "The Chinese Killed Us" mean?

Many Hmong have often said "Suav tua peb", or "the Chinese oppressed us and killed us", without being specific about the particular event and time period. This is questionable. Although the name, "Han Chinese" has its roots from the Han Dynasty (汉朝 '202BC – 220AD'), not all Chinese dynasties are Chinese. For example, the Yuan Dynasty (1271 to 1368 AD) is a Mongol Dynasty, founded by Genghis Khan and the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.) was founded by the Manchu (满族). As noted above, I believe that the word, "Suav" in Hmong comes from Xia, or people of the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BC), whose capital is thought to be located in today's Henan Province. According to Wu Shuguang, Xia is another earlier name for "Han Chinese."²⁹ Another possibility is that the Hmong word, Suav, is a derivation from the Chinese word, Hua (華) as in Huaxia (华夏) or Zhonghua (中華), which also means Chinese.

If the oppression and suppression took place during the Yuan or Qing Dynasties, then it is not correct to blame all oppression on the Chinese, or specifically on the Han Chinese. Moreover, the imperial government of a particular dynasty was responsible for an imperial order which often had a negative impact on the poor Han Chinese, and on the minorities. For example,

the so called, “Miao” rebellion, which took place from 1854 to 1873 (A.D.), was labeled as a “Miao Rebellion” by the Qing Imperial Government to make a political case for the brutal suppression which occurred. The rebellion included, not just the Miao, but other ethnic groups as well. ³⁰ This rebellion, in addition to the Opium Wars, (the first war was from 1839 to 1842 and the second was from 1856 to 1860), and the Taiping Rebellion (1850 to 1864), combined with economic hardship and alleged ethnic oppression, might have been among the major factors that pushed many Hmong out of China and into Indochina in the 19th century.³¹

Conclusion

As Confucius said, “To make a mistake and not correct it—that, indeed, is a mistake”, so we should attempt to correct any possible mistakes that we have made, found, or are about to make on Hmong history. Then, the history of the Hmong can objectively and appropriately be re-constructed and presented. As more and more Hmong begin to read and debate the past, that past needs to become more accurate and objective, so the Hmong can have a better understanding of the events which are a part of their historical identity. Readers need to question all the versions of Hmong history out there and accept only what is scientifically sound and verifiable by credible facts. No one should change history, but anyone can learn from their history to build a better future. Everyone is a product of the past and unless one knows the more accurate version of one’s past, one does not know why one is the way they are now and where should one go from here.

This paper offers different perspectives and additional information to the existing publications that are widely accessible about Hmong history. I am well aware that history has more than one shape and dimension, depending on who writes it, but at this very early stage of the re-construction of Hmong history, I hope a more objective account of Hmong history can be

re-constructed from the available historical evidence and credible sources of information. I caution Hmong and non-Hmong writers to write Hmong history with responsibility, and to be aware of the implications their writings can have. I also urge historians to step up and clear the confusion caused by the existing literature, and to put together a Hmong history based more upon scientific facts and credible evidence.

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About the Author

Kou Yang, Ed.D., MSW is Professor in the Department of Ethnic and Gender Studies, California State University, Stanislaus. He has published extensively on the Hmong, Hmong Americans, the Hmong Diaspora and the Hmong/Miao in China. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Ethnic Studies Review*, *Asian Pacific Migration Journal*, *Hmong Forum*, *Hmong Studies Journal*, *the Journal of the Guizhou University for Nationalities* and the *Journal of the Hubei Institute for Nationalities*. He has contributed to many books, including Passage, The Hmong: An Introduction to their History and Culture, Emerging Voices: The Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans, Hmong/Miao Migration, The Impact of Globalization and Trans-nationalism on the Hmong, and Hmong/Miao Research. His interests include Hmong Americans, Hmong migration, Hmong women in leadership, gender and social change in Hmong society, and Hmong in the Diaspora.



Kou Yang exchanges conversation with a group of Hmong women in Sapa, Vietnam (January 2008)

Endnotes

1. I want to thank Teng Lee and Leola Washington for reviewing and providing valuable comments on this paper.
2. Although this paper emphasizes the Hmong of the Diaspora, more specifically Hmong Americans, its history will be addressed from the context of the Hmong in general, and occasionally from the context that Hmong is one of the four major subgroups under the lumping category, “Miao.”
3. Kaiyi Yang (1996). “Hmong-Mongolian?” *Hmong Forum*. Saint Paul, MN: Haiv Hmoob, Inc., 48-62.
4. Author Unavailable (Not Dated). “A Brief History of the Hmong People.” YouTube. Link to view: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hYuXbtlvHg>
5. Lao Family Community of Minnesota (1997). “History of the Hmong – A Timeline.” Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc. Website. Link to view: http://www.laofamily.org/pdfs/Hmong_History.pdf
6. The word “Hmong” has no specific meaning. In my upcoming paper about the Hmong of the Diaspora and their Transition from Pre-literacy to Literacy: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-construction of their Identity, I write that during the last 15 years, I have asked one- hundred or more Hmong elders, scholars and students, who speak Hmong fluently to define the word, “Hmong,” and none of these individuals have been able to define this word. I am, myself, fluent in Hmong, but could not translate the word, “Hmong.” My curiosity has encouraged me to dig deeper and further. I found a few pieces of literature that define the word “Hmong” to mean ‘free,’ “free men,” or “free people.” Gary Yia Lee’s Cultural Identity In Post-Modern Society: Reflections on What is a Hmong?¹ identifies Dr. Yang Dao as being the first person to write that the word “Hmong” means “free people.” Mai Na Lee’s The Thousand-Year Myth: Construction and Characterization of Hmong,¹ indicates that this phrase was coined in the last twenty years,” meaning during the 1970s and 1980s, and it has since “been thoughtlessly promoted by both Hmong and non-Hmong alike.” Lee goes on to state that, “this phrase [Hmong Means Free], however, simply manifests thousands of years of narrow, one-dimensional characterizations of the Hmong. To historical oppressors of Hmong, “free” entails primitive savageness and inability to assimilate, or to enter the fold of what these outsiders defined as civilization. To outsiders, “free” also captures the essence of the warlike Hmong character, the Hmong’s inability to compromise on a peaceful, rational level.”
7. The Song Dynasty (宋朝) was between 960–1279 AD.

8. See Kou Yang. (2008). "A Visit to the Hmong of Asia: Globalization and Ethnicity at the Dawn of the 21st Century." *Hmong Studies Journal* Volume 9: 1-50. Link to view: <http://hmongstudies.org/KouYang2008.pdf>
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10. Shuo Wang (Personal Communication, 26 February 2009). Shuo Wang is an Associate Professor of History (East Asian History) at California State University, Stanislaus.
11. Shuguang Wu, (Personal Communication, 17 March 2009).
12. For example, see Sun, Jiabin & Kunali Shi (2002). *Traveling the Silk Road in China*, Xinjiang People's Publishing House. See also, "Yellow Emperor", Wikipedia. Link to view: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Emperor, and "Huangdi", Britannica Online. Link to view: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/274374/Huangdi>
13. Author Unavailable (Not Dated). "Three Ancestors Hall." Link to view: <http://english.hebei.com.cn/system/2008/08/20/010096978.shtml>
14. See Kou Yang. (2008). "A Visit to the Hmong of Asia: Globalization and Ethnicity at the Dawn of the 21st Century." *Hmong Studies Journal* Volume 9: 1-50. Link to view: <http://hmongstudies.org/KouYang2008.pdf>
15. Author Unavailable (Not Dated). Yang Di and Huang Di, Ancestors of the Chinese Nation. Online link to view: <http://english.hebei.com.cn/system/2008/08/19/010096537.shtml>
16. For example, see "Huaxiao." Wikipedia. Online link to view: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huaxia>
17. See "Huaxia." Wikipedia. Online link to view: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huaxia> One of the blind peer reviewers of this paper also suggested that Huaxia is from the Hua Dynasty.
18. Wenfeng Gu (2006). "Re-exploration on The Hmong's Double Surnames." A paper presented at the First International Conference on Hmong Studies, Concordia-St. Paul, St. Paul, MN: 11 March 2006.
19. Ibid.
20. Wu Xiaodong, (Personal Communication, 29 July 2009).

21. Jacques Lemoine. (2008). "To Tell the Truth." *Hmong Studies Journal* Volume 9: 1-28. Link to view: <http://hmongstudies.org/Lemoine2008.pdf>.
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 28. See Kou Yang. (2008). "A Visit to the Hmong of Asia: Globalization and Ethnicity at the Dawn of the 21st Century." *Hmong Studies Journal* Volume 9: 1-50. Link to view: <http://hmongstudies.org/KouYang2008.pdf>
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 31. See, for example, Kou Yang (2003). "Hmong Diaspora of the Post War Period." *Asian Pacific Migration Journal* Vol. 12, No. 3: 271 -300.
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