

打工妹 ~ Migration As A Means To Female Emancipation



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Abstract

In the contemporary globalized society, migration and urbanization have become pivotal processes that involve large parts of the world population and have drawn the attention of analysts. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have analysed these two phenomena all over the world from different perspectives and with different aims. This paper explores the present situation of the so-called 打工妹 dagongmei (young Chinese migrant women) who arrive in big cities from small villages seeking social emancipation or to escape from patriarchy and other social impositions they are pushed to accept as young women.

Female emancipation has been an important goal for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Following Friedrich Engels' *"The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State"* and the Marxist theory of female emancipation as a class issue, the CCP tried to involve Chinese women in labour (i.e. farming and industrial labour). During the 1980s, feminists and intellectuals began to criticize this policy because it had failed in its goal to bring emancipation to Chinese women.

The present research revolves around the understanding of the concept of 自由 ziyou (freedom) among female migrants in Beijing. According to the results of the survey, "freedom" has different meanings for the young women but it is possible

to sum them up in three correlated categories: 自由 *ziyou* meaning economic freedom, or economic independence with no necessity to rely on someone else (family or partner); 自由 *ziyou*, the absence of familial control; and 自由 *ziyou*, the discovery of new urban realities and subsequent experiences of great importance for personal development and education.

Introduction

Since the implementation of the policy of reform and opening-up promoted by the “little helmsman”, Deng Xiaoping, at the end of 1970s, the People’s Republic of China has been and is still experiencing huge internal migration. This is a mass migration with no precedent in human history. At the beginning of the 1980s, there were only 20 million migrants in China; by 2009, this number had reached almost 150 million (俞可平 Yu Keping, 2010). Independent media reports (Yardley, 2004) now indicate that more than 200 million individuals have marched from rural areas to the industrialized areas of eastern China. Almost one third of this figure is made up of female migrants. In certain areas and in specific industrial sectors such as textiles, manufacturing, cleaning, and the sex industry, the percentage of women reaches 70 (Jacka and Gaetano, 2004).

It is not possible to study and analyse Chinese domestic migration without taking into account the cultural, political, social, and economic complexity of the country. The scope of the current chapter does not allow for an extensive analysis, so it will approach the issue of the 流动人口 *liudong renkou* (or “floating people”, the term usually used by Chinese media to refer to migrants) from a qualitative perspective and limit the geographical area of analysis to the city of Beijing. Furthermore, this chapter will attempt, to a certain extent, to observe if and how the process of migration to Beijing from the countryside is a means of emancipation for the thousands of young female workers who undertake the move. The findings of the present chapter are the results of an ethnographic research based on semi-structured interviews and direct observation of young female migrants in Beijing between March 2009 and December 2010.

Studies on Chinese migration from a gender perspective started in the early 1990s. Important contributions in this field come from the research of Chinese and international scholars like Li Xiaojiang, Lee Ching Kwan, Pun Ngai, Li Yinhe, Zheng Zhenzhen, Honig Emily, Tani Barlow, Dorothy Ko, Elizabeth Croll, Zhang Hong, Tamara Jacka, Zheng Tiantian, and Rachel Murphy.

During the Maoist era, the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF) followed with

fervour the political views of the Chinese Communist Party. They participated in basing the issue of women's liberation on the theory of classic Marxism, mainly inspired by the analysis of Friedrich Engels in his "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" (1884). Critical and independent thought about women's condition in China spread in academic and intellectual circles only at the end of the Maoist era.

According to the results of a survey entitled "Migrant workers and gender" (农民流动与性别 Nongmin Liudong Yu Xingbie, 2000), beyond the traditional socio-economic reasons and the "push and pull" factors, there are at least three factors motivating this new generation of young women to move from the countryside to big cities like Beijing: 1) to earn money, 2) to learn and seek personal development, and 3) to see the world. Thus, leaving home seems to be more a personal and free choice for individual emancipation than a need created by harsh economic conditions or miserable living standards in the place of origin. In fact, if during the 1980s it was very unpopular (or, in other words, not virtuous) for a woman of peasant origins to leave her village and work in the service industry in urban areas, nowadays Confucian morality seems to have given way to the need for mobility and speed dictated by the country's rapid economic development:

"Women's migration in China may at one time have been a signal of extreme poverty or desperation, but this is no longer the case. Now it is seen as a rite of passage by some young women, or at least a great adventure. In most cases the motive is still cash income, but often money is to be amassed for specific consumption goals, such as a new home, a bridal dowry, the bride-price for the girl's brother, or education expenses for younger siblings." (Jacka, 2004)

Of the many ways used by academics and media to define Chinese migrants, the one closest to the subject of this study is 打工妹 dagongmei. 打工 dagong literally means "to work", "to temp", or "to sell labour", while 妹 mei or 妹妹 meimei is translated as "younger sister" or "little sister" (Lee, 1998; 潘毅 Pan Yi, 黎婉薇 Li Wanwei, 2006; Yan, 2008). It is a term of Cantonese origin, used since the 1980s, to refer to the young migrants who ended up working in the factories of Guangdong Province, the "world's factory". Today, it is still used but more widely to refer to young girls (usually aged between 16 and 25) who leave the rural areas to work in the urban ones. They have a low educational level, are not skilled workers, and many of them come from poor economic backgrounds. And, perhaps most important from a sociological point of view, they are not married.

From a historical perspective, Chinese women have been seen for millennia in a

position of subordination within the patriarchal system, an order that wants them to serve, first of all their father, then their husband, and finally their son. The Chinese written and oral language itself is very well furnished with proverbs and sayings which emphasize this model of gender roles and relations. 三从四德 sancongside indicates the three different kinds of obedience (to the father before marriage, to the husband once they marry, and to their son after the husband's death) and four virtues (morality, proper speech, a modest manner, and diligent work); 男主外 女主内 nanzhuwai nüzhunei reminds us that men's duty is to work outside the house, a physical place much more appropriate for women; 嫁鸡随鸡 嫁狗随狗 jiajisuiji jiagousuigou (addressed to a woman) literally means "[if] you marry a chicken then follow the chicken, [if] you marry a dog then follow the dog", and highlights the importance of marriage and its indissolubility; 男尊女卑 nanzun nübei indicates the superiority of men over women in Chinese feudal society; 从一而终 cong'yierzhong expresses the moral prohibition of remarriage for a widow.

Method

This paper is based on the outcome of a series of meetings and interviews with over 50 Chinese migrants in Beijing, mostly young women between 16 and 25 years of age. A total of 31 interviews were recorded. The language used during the survey was Mandarin Chinese. The author chose to try to establish a certain kind of friendship with the interviewees from the very beginning and not only an investigative/work relationship, a relationship that is sustainable over time and which, perhaps, could give rise to opportunities for further collaboration and meetings of various kinds in the future. No interpreters were involved in the interviews and no institutions or intermediaries were used to establish contact with the young women, only common friends (i.e. common friends between the respondents and the author). No respondent was paid to give the interview, but as a token of gratitude for their time and availability, a coffee, a meal, or (following the request from a few of them) basic lessons in the English spoken language were often offered. The interviews were conducted mostly in bars, restaurants, and public parks in the Chinese capital, and more rarely in the workplace. The author usually met the young women more than one time, even after a gap of months. The average time for each interview was 30 minutes; the minimum was eight and the maximum 104 minutes long.

The main difficulties faced during the survey are summarized as follows:

1) The language. Despite having studied and lived in China for over six years, the author is a non-native Chinese speaker and language problems inevitably arose. For this reason, whenever possible, a voice recorder was used.

However, this language issue was not the central problem: for these young women who come from rural areas and have a low level of education, Mandarin Chinese can often be something similar to a “foreign language”. There is an anecdote about it: while observing female workers inside a restaurant, a Chinese customer complained to the waitress that she had misunderstood the order. The waitress apologized, saying “不好意思，普通话说得不好 bu hao yisi, putonghua shuo de bu hao” (“I beg your pardon; I do not speak Mandarin fluently”).

2) The second type of problem arose from the fact that the author was not only a foreigner and a stranger, but also a man. This made it more difficult to approach the respondents. The young women of the Chinese countryside are very shy and reserved, and educated in traditional values that are rather conservative. As noted by the Chinese journalist and writer Xue Xinran in her book *“The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices”*: *“For Chinese women, the naked body is an object of shame, not beauty. They keep it covered. To ask them to let me interview them would be like asking them to take off their clothes”* (Xue, 2002).

The women were first asked for general information, such as their age, geographical origin, marital status, reasons for migrating, where they lived and worked in Beijing, their impressions of the megalopolis, and their ideas or plans for the future. However, the focus of the interviews revolved around the concept they have of freedom, asking them to give examples and comparisons between their lives in Beijing and in their village of origin. Another key point of the survey was to ask about if and what they have learned (in a professional, relational, human, or other way) during the migration process and their period of stay in Beijing.

About the Interviewees

At the time interview, the youngest girl was 17 years of age and the oldest was 30. Twenty-two of the 31 respondents were aged between 19 and 23. They came from 13 different provinces in China, mostly in the north near the city of Beijing, Hebei Province being most common. Most of them had a junior high school diploma and a few had completed their secondary school studies, but none had ever attended third-level education courses. Three of them, however, had done

courses of professional specialization.

All of them were working in the tertiary sector (service industry). Roughly half were employed as waitresses in restaurants or bars. The others worked as janitors in residential buildings, in shops, as hairdresser assistants, or as sex workers in massage parlours. The parents of half of the respondents worked as farmers, while the others' parents were workers or owners of small businesses in the villages of origin. Some of the parents were seasonal migrants themselves (seasonal because farmers cannot leave the fields for long periods).

In most of the cases, the women's wages were between 900 and 1,200 Renminbi per month, and accommodation and meals were usually provided by their boss or employer. Working hours were between 10 and 14 hours per day, six or seven days a week. Vacation days were not usually fixed, but occasionally discussed with the employer.

More than half of the respondents reported having at least one brother or sister. This exemplifies how the One Child Policy has not been as successful as planned, at least in the rural areas of China. This is not the right place to discuss the reasons for this or to deepen the discussion; however, it is important to note that female migration is quite often related to having a male sibling, since the remittances of these girls are often used to support the studies of the males in the family.

Main Findings

According to the results of a quantitative analysis conducted in China in 1994 (农民流动与性别 Nongmin Liudong Yu Xingbie, 2000), 46.1 per cent of the women who migrated from rural areas did so to financially support their families, 34.9 per cent to "see the world" (an expression used in the meaning of "to enrich one's experience"), 11.6 per cent to follow their partners, 2.7 per cent to be able to afford their dowry, and 0.3 to avoid an arranged marriage. In the words of the Chinese sociologist Zheng Zhenzhen:

"[in China] married and unmarried women leave their homes for different reasons. Unmarried girls pay more attention to considering their personal careers and futures. As soon as they finish their studies in primary or secondary middle school, regardless of whether their families can afford study fees or whether they obtained good results at school, they think about their future at once and decide to leave their homes to seek [opportunities for their personal] development." (郑真真 Zheng Zhenzhen, 解振明 Jie Zhenming, 2004)

The findings obtained in the present ethnographic work update and qualitatively support the reasons for migration mentioned in the survey of 1994.

Family ties

The classic model of rural-to-urban migration in China is the one realized through family and friendship ties. Usually, everything is decided before the migrant's departure (final destination, temporary accommodation, kind of job, etc.) with the help of relatives or friends who have already settled down in the new location. These contacts are the key to accessing a new reality. Through these people, the migrant will be able to build up his/her personal network of acquaintances, find a job and a place to stay, whether temporary or otherwise.

This model does not seem to fit completely with the reality that these new female migrants are now experiencing in the city of Beijing. Family contacts, friends, and relatives have still played an important role in the process of migration for these women but many of them simply left home of their own accord, looking for exciting adventures and to escape the boredom of life in the countryside. As already reported by other scholars, sometimes this new generation of migrants chooses a city or a destination simply on the basis of its fame and reputation, and do not worry too much about the accommodation or kind of employment: *"People ask me, why did I come to Beijing? I say, there is no Tiananmen Square in my hometown! It gave me a great impression in my youth. Beijing is China's cultural center, its political heart, so coming out is a way of experiencing that, gaining knowledge"* (Cited in Jacka and Gaetano, 2004). The following excerpts from the interviews collected for this study give a better and clearer idea of how migrants might go about settling into their new lives in the city:

"Once out of the Beijing Railway Station, I got a bus and arrived directly in 中关村 Zhongguancun [a technological hub in the district of 海淀 Haidian]. 中关村 Zhongguancun . . . Ah . . . That was during Spring Festival and many work units, companies, shops, and restaurants were short of workers. I had my diploma of specialization, I had previous experience, and it was not hard to find a job. Eventually, I found a restaurant where they provide food and accommodation for the employees, so I decided to stay. [. . .] Personally I think that in Beijing . . . to look for a good job, a job in which you're treated well, with proper working hours, I mean, a really good job, that is definitely not easy to find. But you can still find some sort of employment easily." (Interviewee no. 1)

“When I started to look for a job in this area, I was in an awkward situation. I had no credit on my mobile phone, so I borrowed a phone from my friend, but there was just one ￼ mao [1/100 of a Euro] on it. During the interview, I spoke simply and genuinely. I got no phone call for two days, so eventually I called them again. We had another interview and eventually I got this job [as a waitress in a cafeteria]. I have always liked this area, it is so quiet, and I love peaceful places.”
(Interviewee no. 12)

“One of my relatives works for a cleaning company, but at the time she could not help me in looking for a job. I have no particular skills, so I went into an intermediary recruitment agency. The boss of the office is also Sichuanese [the same geographical region of origin as the interviewee], a good friend of my relative. I have done a lot of different jobs, like street vendor, selling pirated CDs, cleaning, helping in a small computer shop. Then I went back home and studied hairdressing with one of my relatives. Then a friend of mine called me, saying that his group needs an assistant and that he could teach me a lot of things. So I came back [to Beijing] and stayed.” (Interviewee no. 15)

“One day my mom went out shopping and received a notice about a three-month training course. [After the course] you could be assigned to Beijing, not so far from my hometown, and it included food, accommodation and [a wage of] 1,000 to 2,000 [Renminbi] per month, and if at the end you are not assigned you would be completely refunded. [. . .] At the beginning we were afraid of being cheated, so first we asked at the local police station and we eventually trusted the notice.”
(Interviewee no. 26)

Economic independence

It is undeniable that the economic factor, promoted through Deng Xiaoping’s well-known slogans, “To get rich is glorious” and “We should let some people get rich first”, is still a strong motivation for the new generation of migrants (both male and female) to leave the rural areas and flow into the most-developed industrial areas and big urban locales of the eastern Chinese coast.

However, the results obtained in this work point out that for these young migrant women who chose Beijing as ultimate destination of their migration, the concept of “economic motivation” acquires a slightly different and more sophisticated meaning: they are in fact talking about “economic independence”, becoming independent first of all from a financial point of view and not having to rely

anymore on the finances of their families back home. In achieving this, they do not see themselves as a burden on their relatives anymore.

Generally speaking, their parents were usually not in need of the money their daughters earned in Beijing. These young women chose to find any kind of job as soon as possible to afford a long stay in the city, to do some shopping during their spare time, visit tourist attractions, and enjoy their moments of amusement and recreation.

Sometimes they decided to send money home and the reason for this was often to avoid unnecessary expenses and not to squander their money in an extremely expensive city like Beijing. They believed their parents would know better than anyone else how to save their money or invest it for them.

Below are a few examples of the women discussing the meaning of “economic independence”:

“To be able to gain enough money to support yourself, to send back to your parents the money that you do not need, to be able to do your things and to think about your own life, to know what to do and not to do, to do what you want.” (Interviewee no. 24).

“Independence means [being able to] earn the money you spend, your parents do not need your money and you do not spend their money. [. . .] It means to rely on yourself and not always on your parents; all sorts of things must be taken into account by yourself.” (Interviewee no. 27)

“To study is good, but what I want is to work. To study gives increasing pressure to your parents, to work gives increasing pressure to yourself. When you study, you use your parents’ money, but when you work, you can save money and spend it whenever you want. And your parents will not use your money either.” (Interviewee no. 16)

“Life in Beijing, I think, is based on you, on yourself; you are not a burden on your parents. For this reason I [decided to] leave home and work. In Beijing, there are many [people like me] who do not want to rely on their families or spend their money, but fully rely on themselves. It is exactly like this. Most of the people who left home to work, they did it for this reason.” (Interviewee no. 17)

“No matter if the job is good or not, for me is always ok. If I am financially independent then nobody can interfere [with my life]. [. . .] If I am financially

independent I am also free. I want to be able to support myself; this is the most important thing. Doing manual work is not that bad. I can have a rest during the afternoon, I sleep in the shop. Here I have my bit of freedom. I use my own hands to gain money. I wish this in the future, to have enough money and enough freedom. This is the goal to achieve for my profession in the future; I can only try my best. You have to work hard for your life. You sacrifice your freedom for this little salary, this is how I spent [my time during] secondary school, and I was not happy at all. I hope to be able to decide my own life in the future.” (Interviewee no. 19)

Freedom: ideas and practices

Beyond the context to which we are now referring, it is never easy to deal with and talk about “freedom”. This brief survey is not an exception. Not surprisingly, the answers collected are multiple, varied, and multifaceted. 自由 *ziyou* is primarily perceived as getting away from other people’s (usually their parents, relatives, or elders in their village of origin) control over their daily life. “没人管 *mei ren guan*” is the most frequent response: “[Freedom is when] there is no-one who controls you”. Freedom means to have space, time, the financial ability to go around the streets and shops of Beijing, going into a bookstore to purchase a book, or inviting a friend for dinner in a restaurant. In other words, enjoying and learning from all the things that the Chinese capital city has to offer to the migrants, citizens, and foreigners of all nationalities.

However, sometimes it was not clear that these young women had more freedom in Beijing than they had with their families at home. As some of them pointed out, it is not easy to think or talk about freedom when you have to work 10 to 14 hours per day, 6 to 7 days a week. A couple of the respondents felt that they had actually enjoyed more freedom at home because their parents were working outside the home during the day and did not have the chance to exert pressure on their daughters. Some of them, eventually, admitted that it is hard and stressful to live in a chaotic and alienating metropolis like Beijing, “where the people do not look at your face, even in the elevator” (interviewee no. 4).

Despite those challenges, one positive aspect confirmed by almost all the respondents was the opportunity to gain experience on both a professional and social level. This included the possibility of practising and improving their English language skills with foreign customers in the restaurants or bars of Beijing, and the obligation to learn quickly how to deal (entirely alone and by yourself) with

the many difficulties of living in a metropolis without the help and the support of family or friends. In the words of one respondent: “[Beijing] teaches you how to become independent” (interviewee no. 3).

Freedom means the absence of annoying pressure from their families, but also a chance to have a more personal and independent life. Freedom is the dimension used to organize their daily lives, the decision of how to spend their salaries, etc.

“In terms of behaviour [in China], if a girl speaks freely and arbitrarily, her parents will not be happy with that; their way of thinking is quite traditional, a bit old-fashioned [封建 fengjian, literally “feudal”]. I mean, a girl must behave like a lady, and not be careless like me. [. . .] When I am at home I do not talk much, and I do not hang out often, because most of my friends or classmates have already left home to work. So, when I am in my house I do not even contact them, I cannot hang out with them. There is no-one to stay with and have fun with. I feel there is no freedom, but once I leave [my village] I can do whatever I want, earn money, spend money, use the internet, sing in the karaoke bar, eat with my friends . . . In this kind of environment I feel very happy and free. I feel that I can do whatever I want, it is exactly like this. If I spend money when I am at home, my parents will tell me not to do that, to save money, we need to save money. It is to say, I think that when I am away I can earn money and spend what I want, save a bit. I feel free when I can consume using my own savings.” (Interviewee no. 2)

“Many of my friends left [home]. I thought that was good. I did not want to study anymore, I wanted to leave [home] and work, too. I saw these people going to work and doing whatever they want. At home you have to do homework. I felt that there was much more freedom outside. [. . .] I realized you can do what you want to do, buy what you want to buy, organize your own time. At home, the people are conservative, there is much pressure, go to class, come back home. I felt there was no freedom; the others who were working away from home were having a better life, more free. So I quit school and left to work with my friends. Before, I did not like to study, [even though] my father wanted me to study. [. . .] Now I have a different attitude: working is hard, there are so many immigrants in Beijing, the truth is that earning money is not easy at all. I have no a clear objectives for the future. Perhaps I will stay here in Beijing, and see what the situation is.” (Interviewee no. 8)

“[Freedom is when] you are able to do what you like to do and to emerge from your own limits. But freedom is not limitless, its expansion is not infinite. If you go

too far in your freedom, this will affect your job. Freedom for me means to be able to arrange my own job, learning, and life; this kind of freedom would be enough.”(Interviewee no. 12)

“[Freedom is] to be able to do whatever you want. For instance, if I wish to do something next year or in the future, this thing must depend on me and should not be arranged by my parents. The kids of many rich people are like this. Their families have their own businesses and companies, so they arrange the education for their children, send them to be trained in the School of Economics, and once they graduate they go back to work in their families’ companies.” (Interviewee no. 24)

“This is the way I am, I can do things by myself. Sticking to one’s own principles and acts, without worries about what others say.” (Interviewee no. 29)

Nonetheless, there are also young women who regret the absence of family members’ control and help, as expressed in the words of this interviewee:

“In Beijing you can live freely and you have no binds, while at home your parents, brothers, or relatives take care of you, or at least think and worry about you. In Beijing you can have a careless life, no-one worries about you, even if you have friends, usually they do not worry about your life. [. . .] I prefer the life in my village. After all, this lifestyle does not belong to people like me; it belongs to the middle class, to the white collars, to the rich people. For poor people like me, this life brings only a lot of pressure.” (Interviewee no. 18)

When another young woman was asked if she feels free in her daily life in the city of Beijing, the answer was *“Yes. But I feel lonely, too”* (interviewee no. 28).

Final Remarks

The depositions of the dozens of young women interviewed epitomize not only the dreams, hopes, and expectations of hundreds of thousands of young migrants but also their most concrete realities, characterized on one side by difficulty and frustration and on the other by a partly realized desire for freedom. This is a freedom which becomes obvious in various forms of independence: from the economic freedom to spend (when possible) the time and money they have earned in their chosen way, to the many learning opportunities available in Beijing. These possibilities are not realistically available to those who choose to remain in their homes in rural areas. Leaving is often seen as an opportunity for emancipation, as

people and as women, according to a pattern that cannot be summarized in simple (and forced) labour participation in the community as suggested by the classical Marxist theories of women's liberation, but in a kind of emancipation that is more pragmatic and more related to contemporary Chinese society. The theories suggested by Friedrich Engels in his *"The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State"*, and embraced by Chinese communism and put into practice since the early fifties, state that the emancipation of women is closely linked to the class issue and "solved" with the participation of women in the labour market and social production. However, this model seems to have been largely unsuccessful and has become a target of criticism since the late seventies. In fact, Chinese scholars, intellectuals, and feminists have strongly criticized this policy of emancipation, opting for a deeper and more localized approach to studying the condition of Chinese women.

It is modest opinion of the author that the stories of these young women show how the experience of migration and life in a city like Beijing has provided them with several opportunities for personal emancipation. It might seem obvious to a Western readership that a girl from the Chinese countryside, with no educational qualifications or other kinds of labour skills, could learn a lot in a big city, both on a professional and on a social level, but perhaps less obvious is the importance that this has and will have for her life as a woman and as a Chinese person. "To leave home" and to go away to work and gain experience allows a woman not only to have economic and social independence from her family (and, for instance, to postpone or escape from an arranged marriage), but also to collect enough money to build a new life once she returns to her village of origin, after years spent in the city. This means she will have more choices for her future, even and especially on a romantic level. This means having the opportunity to start her own business (a small commercial activity, for example), and avoid getting married for the sole purpose of having revenue from the work of her husband. It means learning the unwritten rules of social and civil life in the urban reality, having contacts and relationships with men and women from different countries and continents, and is emancipating also culturally and compensates for a lack of education. Ultimately, it means self-emancipation for these migrant women to build a future more congenial to their own will, offering them a chance to escape what their families and tradition have already decided for them. In conclusion, and in the words of the Australian scholar Tamara Jacka, "[t]he expressed desire to develop themselves, to broaden their horizons and to test their sense of independence

suggests [. . .] that these women are concerned that their futures will be constrained in the village, and that they have a desire for new experiences and for personal development beyond what their village has to offer” (Jacka, 2006, p. 134).

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