

A Turn to the Politics of Place in Hong Kong Independent Documentaries

Enoch Yee-lok Tam

ABSTRACT

Through collating the discourse produced around the “Preservation Movement of Star Ferry and Queen’s Piers” and the independent documentaries concerning spatial issues produced after the movement, this essay attempts to theorize a turn to the politics of place which has happened in the past decade in Hong Kong. This turn abandons the old mode of spatial activism and the old form of spatial struggle, and instead conceptualizes spaces of struggle as “public space” and “living space” as well as places for reconstruction of community and identity. Through Chan Ho-lun’s documentaries about urban preservation and redevelopment, the essay attempts to illustrate how, after this turn, local documentary filmmakers negotiate with economic, political, cultural, and communal forces in their representation of a place, and how these forces are articulated in terms of the politics of place.

KEYWORDS Hong Kong independent documentary, Queen’s Pier Movement, politics of place, spatial awareness, Chan Ho-lun

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Introduction

Many regard the Umbrella Movement in 2014 as a watershed for Hong Kong society that brought enormous change in the political, financial, and social sectors as social activism and the progress of democracy came to their “suspension.” Some describe the situation as “post-Umbrella Movement melancholy,” in which a sense of impotence is felt across Hong Kong on account of the “Mainlandization” of Hong Kong society. The ideals brought forward by the progressivism of the pan-democratic movement have been seriously challenged, and the Hong Kong people have been compelled to adapt to the new political environment of “Mainlandization.” One has witnessed a very quiet five-year period after the Umbrella Movement, where no massive political protest has been organized due to the sense of powerlessness in the post-Umbrella melancholic state. Indeed, the Umbrella Movement was so robust that the Hong Kong people have almost forgotten the fact that there had been protests and demonstrations before the movement, activism that had shaped our modes of struggle in the last ten or more years.

No one can deny the importance of the Umbrella Movement and its political demand. To those activists who have been participating in political struggles for years, however, the movement’s single demand on the electoral reform for universal suffrage in Chief Executive and Legislative Council elections was just too narrow and limited a democratic vision for the Hong Kong people. For example, writer and cultural critic Lee Chi-leung points out that the scale of the Umbrella Movement is huge but the demands are unified to a fault. Besides the demand on universal suffrage, he cannot find any demand related to the economy, not even a demand for minimum wage (Ho and Tam 182-83). Before this unification of political demands, Hong Kong had witnessed a variety of political struggles where the spatial politics of such struggles became very intense, especially after the “Preservation Movement of Star Ferry and Queen’s Piers” which occurred in 2006 and 2007 (hereafter, Queen’s Pier Movement). In this movement, activists adopted a brand-new idea/discourse of space to replace (or at least displace) the old form of political demands. For example, when compared with the demonstration on July 1, 2003, the demands of which were about the withdrawal of the anti-subversion law in particular and the inefficacy of governance in general, the Queen’s Pier Movement brought in another dimension to Hong Kong’s political vision. Activists like Eddie Hoi-dick Chu (later elected as a Legislative Council member, in office 2016-the present) and Chen Yun-chung appropriated new thinking of spatial politics to examine oppressions under globalization and nationalism in spatial terms. In this respect, the Queen’s Pier is not merely a colonial

space for the British royal family (Ng et al. 417); it is also a place for articulating Hong Kong's local history of political struggles (Chow), Hong Kong people's daily lives and activities (Ku 89-103), and alternative Hong Kong stories (Ma). The Queen's Pier Movement infused the vocabulary of spatial politics into the political discourse of Hong Kong. Debates about and struggles for space after the movement have become more frequent and intense. This landmark incident brought forward an articulation different from that of the past and led to a turn from spatial awareness to the politics of place.

Although the form of the movement has changed, we shall not regard it as a total "break" from the previous protests and assume that there was no place-related discussion before the movement. To attend more critically to the changes in the discourse of place in Hong Kong, the turn itself should not be our main focus. We need to explain, instead, how the cultural environment enabled the turn, and how the changes were conveyed and received. To achieve this, I focus on one of the important vehicles for the changes—Hong Kong independent documentary—to discuss the close relationship between documentary and the representation of place. The "reverse hallucination" of place—the rediscovery and subsequent disappearance of place—arouses the desire for documenting.¹ This desire is, in fact, deeply connected to the inculcation of the new understanding of place and the manifestation of the power relations within places. My focus on documentaries is prompted by the emergence of a massive number of documentaries about place-related issues after the Queen's Pier Movement (and also subsequent movements about the politics of place). Through close analysis of documentaries, I examine how the turn from spatial awareness to politics of place in Hong Kong in the past decade is represented.

From Spatial Awareness to the Politics of Place

The turn from spatial awareness to the politics of place came about with the reconfiguration of the understanding of place following the Queen's Pier Movement. A comparison between the movement and an older mode of spatial struggles can foreground the reconfiguration. Take the relocation of rooftop houses in the Kingland Apartments in Mong Kok and the Richland Gardens protest, which happened in 1995, as an example.² The relocation was generally

¹ Ackbar Abbas defines "reverse hallucination" as "not seeing what is there" (6).

² In 1995, the Hong Kong government planned to build a rehabilitation center near Richland Gardens, Kowloon Bay, which would include some facilities for AIDS patients. However, the residents strongly opposed the plan and refused to allow the center to be built near their home. For relevant studies, see Leung.

taken to be about the right of residency or the forced eviction of local shops and stores. In this case, the rights of the residents or store owners were taken to be of primary concern, while social workers, intellectuals, students, and activists acted as mediators. These forms of engagement were brought together to fight for the rights of residency/ownership. One can detect in them a conscious attempt to protect the space of living and livelihood. Nevertheless, a meaning-making process that would engender the consciousness needed to turn a space into a culturally loaded place was yet to take shape. By contrast, the Queen's Pier Movement set forth a turn from spatial awareness to the politics of place. Before the movement, the general public saw the space around the Star Ferry Pier and Queen's Pier as some "highly abstract transitional space(s)" (Cheng). People would go there to transit from one place to another by taking the ferries or transit from one time to another by engaging in leisure activities such as having lunch, drinking beer, fishing, reading newspaper, etc. In the beginning of the movement, new ideas of space such as "public space" and "living space" were invoked by the activists as well as the public, providing a new set of vocabularies for conceiving of the spaces of the piers. Chen Yun-chung notes that the aim of the activists' protest points to a democratic use of public space. He makes reference to the theories of urban planning theorist Kevin Lynch and cultural geographer Don Mitchell to conclude that a public space should maintain its "openness," allowing people to use it freely for any purpose. He is also aware of the global tendency toward the privatization and gentrification of space, and pinpoints another level of meaning to the preservation of the pier: privatization and gentrification tend to make space for privileged people, while the preservation of the pier makes it a public space for everyone (Chen).

This new understanding of space to a certain extent continues the old spatial awareness in the 1990s in considering the space as a space of living. Yet, what is new to this movement is that the focus on the "residents" and "owners" has become obsolescent. The agency of the movement is no longer the prerogative of the residents or owners of the space. Whoever acquires the new spatial awareness can take part in the protest. The means of struggle has also changed from negotiation to protection, defense, preservation, and occupation. As a result, the experienced and veteran activists of the old mode can hardly understand what was happening in a movement with this new kind of spatial awareness. For example, Hong Kong artist Cally Yu, who participated in the Queen's Pier Movement, points out that some experienced and veteran social activists could not make sense of the movement, questioning how a spatial struggle without residents was possible (Ho and Tam 162-63).

As the movement developed, the turn from spatial awareness to the politics of

place became more apparent. In fact, in the very beginning of the movement, what caught the attention of the general public most was not the idea of space but the notion of “collective memory.” Forecasting the disappearance of the Star Ferry and Queen’s piers, a lot of Hong Kong people rushed to take photos of the scenes before their demolition. This speaks to what Ackbar Abbas had proposed twenty years ago: the politics of disappearance. Abbas asserts that Hong Kong culture “appears” based on its foreseeable disappearance. This engenders what he calls “the politics of disappearance.” The reaction of Hong Kong people toward the disappearance of the Star Ferry and Queen’s piers reveals a similar politics. But the major activist group Local Action rejected the notion of collective memory in the very early stage of the movement and asked the general public to focus instead on the politics of place underlying this demolition project. One of the members of Local Action, Ip Iam-chong, stated very clearly that he did not have a strong bond with the space nor any memory of the space before joining the campaign (Tang). Another member, Chen Yun-chung, points out in an article he wrote after the movement that the activists participating in the movement were not concerned about collective memory at all (Chen).

To Local Action, to make a space like Queen’s Pier public, in fact, does not only mean providing the public with another space for leisure activities. The act of preservation involves, on the one hand, democratic urban planning and development and, on the other hand, the promotion of Hong Kong cultural and historical heritage, the reconstruction of local history and identity, and decolonization (Chow). The idea of decolonization is essential here because at the time the older generation questioned why the young would like to preserve a colonial landmark (Yu). To answer this, the members of Local Action, through telling a local history of protests and struggles of the site, attempted to deconstruct the colonialism attached to the place and emphasize its importance in the course of decolonization and local history. Local Action member Chow Sze-chung states that the architectural cluster of the City Hall, Edinburgh Place, Star Ferry Pier, and Queen’s Pier has always been a public space and a critical historical site since the 1950s. He enumerates the political protests that have taken place there: People’s Assembly of “Anti-Increase in Tax, Rent and Price” in 1965, So Sau-chung’s hunger strike protest against the increase in Star Ferry fares in 1966, Defend the Diaoyu Islands Movement, and the Chinese Language Movement in the 1970s, among others. Based on this, he claims that this critical historical site “witnesses how the Hong Kong people understand and practice their own civil rights in the city” (Chow). Chen Yun-chung also mentions how the place has become a space of protests and political expressions. Besides Chow’s examples of demonstration against the

increase in Star Ferry fares and the Chinese Language Movement, Chen adds more civil and democratic movements to the list, including the labor movements in the 1970s (rights of blind people, maternity leaves, etc.), the Filipino domestic workers protest for using the public space in Central in the 1980s, and activities that supported the Tiananmen movement in 1989 (Chen). He thus conceives of the notion of a “lived multicultural space.” Later in an article co-authored with Mirana M. Szeto, he underscores the political multiplicity and diversity of the site (Chen and Szeto 4-5).

In this light, it is clear that the Queen’s Pier Movement brings about a turn in understanding a place in Hong Kong social activism. Different from the resident- and owner-based spatial protest, the new mode of politics of place bases its legitimacy on the historical and cultural signification of the site, and with this imparts new concepts including preservation and occupation. Through these concepts and the subsequent meaning-making process, the disappearing and transitional Star Ferry Pier and Queen’s Pier were then transformed into a living and public space as well as a place in which people could integrate different cultural and political forces. Hence, Hong Kong’s renowned critic Antu (Law Wing-sang) describes this movement as a three-in-one movement: a preservation movement, a civic movement with citizens’ active participation in democratic urban planning, and a Hong Kong identity movement (Antu 10-11).

The aftermath of this turn brought forth by the Queen’s Pier Movement caused the Hong Kong society at large to become more aware of issues related to space and place, and the issue of preservation gradually gained its import in the agenda of Hong Kong public policy. The turn can be found in the practices of film production and the three new ideas that were introduced by the turn, that is, preservation, democratic participation, and reconstruction of identity; these ideas also find their imprints in the documentary filmmaking in the last decade. In the following section, I turn to Chan Ho-lun’s documentaries to illustrate their desire of documenting the disappearance, indicate their new understanding of space, and elaborate how the cinematic images speak to the implicit power relations within a certain place.

Urban Preservation and Redevelopment

In her discussion of the Queen’s Pier Movement as an urban preservation movement, Agnes Shuk-mei Ku recounts that the pro-Beijing forces accused the activists of embracing colonialism as the pier itself was a site representing colonial power. The accusers pinpointed the place as the embodiment of the history of

oppression by the colonial force. In Ku's analysis, the group Local Action makes use of the discourse of "people's space" to replace the discourse of nationalism. She points out that the new discourse provides a new cultural framework of Hong Kong history and identity which incorporates the contexts of the struggles while matching the discourse of "people's space" with it (Ku 99). This reconfiguration of history and cultural identity based on people's daily lives offers a way out of the nation and national-oriented framework trapping Hongkongers in the Chinese/British dichotomy. This daily-life-based reconfiguration is seen not only in a series of urban preservation movements but also in those cinematic images in Hong Kong independent documentaries with themes closely connected to the turn to the politics of place.

After the Queen's Pier Movement, a large number of Hong Kong independent documentaries related to the politics of place were produced. For example, v-artist is an activist and artist group that has been devoting itself to the issues of urban redevelopment in the past two decades. After the movement, they produced documentaries on spatial issues, among them the "Tienu yanxian" ("Raging Land") Trilogy, which are three documentaries about the Anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link Movement and the relocation of Choi Yuen Village: *Tienu yanxian: caiyuan jishi* (*Raging Land: A Record of Choi Yuen Village*, 2010), *Tienu yanxian: bilu lanlü* (*Raging Land: Breaking New Ground through Thorns and Thistles*, 2011), and *Tienu yanxian: sangu* (*Raging Land: Three Valleys*, 2014). Besides the trilogy, this activist group of visual artists also made *Shunningdao, zouxiaqu* (*Walk On! Shun Ning Road!*, 2011), a documentary about the redevelopment of Shun Ning Road, Kwun Tong. In addition to v-artist's works, Lam Sum's *Ren zai huanghou* (*Beyond the Queen*, 2007-08) records the occupation of the Queen's Pier Movement and highlights how the occupation turns out to be a meaning-making process and an opportunity for artistic expression; Lo Chun-yip's *Nanian chunxia, zhihou* (*Days after n Coming*, 2012) follows a series of political struggles from 2010 to 2012 and is in particular a portrayal of turning an abstract economical space into a place for practicing anarchism and reconstructing community in the case of the 2011-12 Occupy Central, which took place in the context of that period's international Occupy movements;³ Anson Mak's *Zai fucheng de jiaoluo changshouge* (*On the Edge of a Floating City, We Sing*, 2012) addresses the survival issue

³ The 2011-12 Occupy Central is different from Occupy Central with Love and Peace, which is later commonly known as the Umbrella Movement. The former was an occupation protest which took place in Central, Hong Kong Island and lasted from October 15, 2011 to September 11, 2012, echoing Occupy Wall Street in the U.S., whereas the latter was a single-purpose Hong Kong civil disobedience campaign initiated by Chu Yiu-ming, Benny Tai, and Chan Kin-man to advocate universal and equal suffrage.

of the indie music scene in Hong Kong around industrial areas. In addition to documentaries detailing social struggles and activism, documentaries interpreting the concept of place and community can also be regarded as consequential productions influenced by the new consciousness of the politics of place. These documentaries include Chan Ho-lun's agricultural documentaries *Daomi shi ruhe liancheng de* (*The Way of Paddy*, 2013) and *Shouge, kailu!* (*Open Road after Harvest*, 2015); Jessey Tsui-shan Tsang's *Heshang bian cun* (*Flowing Stories*, 2015), which addresses the changes of Ho Chung Village, Sai Kung in the past few decades; Ma Chi-hang's *Anshang yuge* (*Ballad on the Shore*, 2017), an ethnographic documentary about local fishermen and their ballads.⁴

For a further elaboration of the turn to the politics of place in Hong Kong independent documentary, we may survey the works by Chan Ho-lun. He worked as a program officer for programs about politics and media monitoring in the Public Affairs and Multimedia News Section, Radio and Television Hong Kong. In 2008, he began his independent filmmaking career and engaged in visual education. His *Dongye waichuan zhi zhujun anhao* (*Good Luck Comrades!*, 2008) followed seven citizen journalists to the Group of Eight Summit in Japan in 2008. Later in 2010, his *Fangaotie yundong zhi chuanmei toushi* (*Media Digest on Anti-Express Rail Link Movement*) analyzed how frontline reporters shaped the public's understanding of the Anti-Hong Kong Express Rail Link Movement.⁵ After the movement, he produced two important agricultural documentaries, *The Way of Paddy* and *Open Road after Harvest*, and began his collaboration with Urban Diary to produce a series of short documentaries about urban preservation and people's daily lives, including *Dakeng huolong* (*Tai Hang Fire Dragon*, 2013), *Sajian yulan shenghui* (*30 Houses and the Hungry Ghost Festival*, 2015), and *Shuikou popo de shange* (*Rhymes of Shui Hau*, 2017).⁶

Tai Hang Fire Dragon is an excellent example of the various forces, including but not limited to cultural forces, community networking, and economic and political forces operating within urban preservation and redevelopment. The "Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance" is a distinct and unique aspect of Hong Kong culture.

⁴ This spatial turn can also be found in independent narrative films like Lai Yan-chi's *1+1* (2010) and *N+N* (2012), Wong Fei-Pang's *Dongchan* (*Season of the End*, 2015) in the renowned collection of shorts *Shinian* (*Ten Years*, 2015), and Rita Hui's *Fengjing* (*Pseudo Secular*, 2016).

⁵ It was a social movement that happened between mid-2009 and early 2010, where protests were staged at the proposed Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, a high-speed railway that would link Hong Kong with mainland China's high-speed rail network.

⁶ Urban Diary is a nonprofit initiative which promotes urban sustainability through community stories. They believe that people's everyday tales are pivotal to comprehending cities and to building a sustainable future. They have commissioned almost a dozen videos (including Chan's) to narrate community stories to the public. For a full list of their videos, see "Video."

Every year during the Mid-Autumn Festival, residents of Tai Hang will organize a Fire Dragon Dance for three days (“Tai Hang Fire Dragon Dance”). People in Tai Hang believe that in the nineteenth century, their ancestors performed a dragon dance to stop a plague from afflicting their village. They have continued practicing this ritual up to today and have made it an implicit cultural heritage of the village as well as of Hong Kong. In the documentary, the residents note that the performers of the dance are limited to “Tai Hang Tsai” (literally meaning “Sons of Tai Hang”). The so-called “Tai Hang Tsai” originally meant people born and raised in Tai Hang village, an area now incorporated within the urban fabric of the city on Hong Kong Island, near Victoria Park. But as many residents move in and out of the village, the demographics of Tai Hang have changed a lot. Some of the outsiders are now regarded as “Tai Hang Tsai” and are allowed to perform in the dance. The documentary begins with this local cultural event but does not limit itself to portraying the event as another festive event nor depict Tai Hang as yet another beautiful and exotic tourist attraction. It puts the site, the people, and the event in context to illustrate the connection between the place and the cultural activities on which they are based. Thus, the Fire Dragon Dance in the film is not an event for sight-seeing, but an event on the site.

The formation of this dragon dance cultural event is only part of the story. The other—and perhaps more important—part involves the entanglement between the residents and the “Land (Compulsory Sale for Redevelopment) Ordinance” (commonly known as the Compulsory Sale Ordinance) amendment that was passed in 2010. Before the amendment, any person who owned no less than 90% of the shares in a lot could apply for compulsory sale; after the amendment, the percentage has dropped to 80%. The amendment helps increase the incentive for property and real estate developers to buy old buildings in the old districts for redevelopment. Tai Hang also faces the threat of a similar redevelopment project. Other TV programs and promotion videos by the Hong Kong Tourism Board may regard the dance as an event for tourists or as a collective memory shared by Hong Kong people. Yet, *Tai Hang Fire Dragon* does not turn a blind eye to this redevelopment issue. In the latter part of the documentary, more attention is paid to how the amendment and the redevelopment project may affect the whole community: more and more Tai Hang people are willing to sell their apartments or stores to the developers. As a result, the community of Tai Hang, especially the strong bond with “Tai Hang Tsai,” is facing its disintegration while the continuation of the dance is in doubt. Through the talking heads of the residents, the film deliberately puts the economic (compulsory sale/redevelopment) and political (policy amendment) forces together with the cultural (Fire Dragon Dance) and

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communal forces (“Tai Hang Tsai”), underlining how these forces play their role in shaping a local cultural and site-based event and emphasizing the relationship between redevelopment and preservation, as well as between reformation of space and the reconstruction of a place-based identity. Here, we can see how capital overpowers the local residents (and capital becomes even more powerful after the amendment). Under the common ideology of “development is improvement” shared by the Hong Kong people, most of the residents are willing to trade off their apartments and stores to property developers. As a result, the redevelopment of the village will probably be similar to what we have witnessed in Lee Tung Street (Wedding Card Street)—the gentrification of a traditional cultural space, turning it into a glittering and splendid shopping area without any active involvement of the residents formerly belonging to the local community.

In this case, how does the documentary perceive the future changes coming to this place-based cultural event, Fire Dragon Dance? For most of the course of the film, the camera is rather detached from the interviewees and the events; yet the ending of the documentary may offer some hints on the filmmaker’s take on the entanglement he attempts to show. The ending of the film captures the closure of the dragon dance performance: the lead dancer goes to the shore and throws the dragon head into the sea to end the ritual; the incense sticks are extinguished in the sea water and the cinematic image gradually fades out to a black screen. Though looking typical and usual, this ending projects an implicit pessimism toward the area’s urban redevelopment: the fate of the fire dragon dance might be the same as that of the extinguished dragon head, and the fading cinematic image represents how the community will diminish thanks to the redevelopment project and the gentrification of the cultural and local living space.

This collaboration between Chan Ho-lun and Urban Diary is a good illustration of the politics of place in Hong Kong independent filmmaking. The turn to the politics of place makes clear that the historical and cultural construction of identification based on people’s daily lives is indeed a place-based problem. Chan Ho-lun’s *Tai Hang Fire Dragon* articulates the relationships among preservation, redevelopment, participation, and identification through a place and helps the audience recognize how the combined forces of the economy and politics can reduce the democratic participation of the people.

Coda

Because of the turn in politics, activism, and discourse, Hong Kong independent documentary filmmaking has turned to the politics of place and has engendered a

series of new practices. From the old mode of spatial struggle prioritizing the residents/owners to emphasizing living space independent of residents/owners and place-based meaning-making process, this turn has brought forth a change of subject in social activism as well as a whole set of new ideas: urban preservation, democratic participation, spatial occupation, reconstruction of community, etc. Additionally, because of this turn to the politics of place, many independent films concerning place-related issues emerge. Chan Ho-lun's body of work highlights the cultural, communal, economic, and political forces involved in urban preservation and redevelopment and depicts a complicated picture of local communities that can rarely be found in previous documentaries.

Yet, the turn did not come to its completion in the past two decades. The discourse about spatial awareness and politics of place has, in fact, kept changing in recent years. One can find in the Umbrella Movement the continuation of the way of organizing space/place engendered in the 2011-12 Occupy Central, that is, the place for reconstructing community. However, one can also see in the same movement the emergence of another idea of space, that is, space as a battlefield. Chan Tze-woon's *Luanshi beiwang* (*Yellowing*, 2016) and Nora Tze-wing Lam's *Wangjiao heiye* (*Midnight in Mong Kok*, 2014) are two good examples which illustrate the coexistence of the two ideas of space in the Umbrella Movement. *Yellowing* is a documentary about the 81-day occupation in Admiralty, in which people occupied the street, reorganized the place as a living community, and envisioned an alternative mode of living. On the other hand, *Midnight in Mong Kok* focuses on another occupied area of the Umbrella Movement, Mong Kok. The situation recorded by the images has nothing similar to what one can see in the reconstruction of community in *Yellowing*. The occupied area in Mong Kok is always in a battle state: in helmets and masks, some protestors go to the front-line to confront the threatening police force, while some wander in other non-occupied areas to seek opportunities to expand the occupied area by blocking the streets. These two different manifestations of space actually reflect another understanding of space in the Umbrella Movement.

While I am writing this article, Hong Kong people have taken to the streets to protest against the extradition bill. On June 12, 2019, protestors gathered around the Legislative Council Complex, Central Government Complex, and Harcourt Road in Admiralty. The picture is very much the same as the Umbrella Movement that took place five years ago. However, an implicit difference between the two can be observed: protesters this time never advocate a long-term occupation. What they are most concerned with are ways to increase the pressure exerted on the government to force them to withdraw the bill. Later that day, the police force fired

one hundred and fifty rounds of tear gas, several rounds of rubber bullets, and twenty beanbag shots to disperse the protestors on the street. Again, it looks very similar to the situation five years ago. However, the people's understanding of space has changed: from a place of occupation and reconstruction to a battlefield. Some critics have already pointed out how mobile phone games affect the protestors' conceptualization of space. This new spatial awareness is now taking shape. How will this new spatial awareness affect the manifestation of space in Hong Kong independent filmmaking? This is a question that remains to be answered.

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