

The Impact of Mass Media and the Craze for Beauty in China

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Abstract

Since the beginning of China's open-door policy in 1978, there have been tremendous changes inside China. The changes in the image of women can be regarded as one of the most astonishing one. This study examines the changes of Chinese women's images influenced by the impact of mass media in the context of China's modernization. Through a close examination into the changes round 2003, the study finds that the craze of Chinese women for beauty, while partially reflecting the decline of state control over people's everyday lives, has been closely linked with the impact of mass media, especially with that of television.

Keywords:

impact of mass media, women's image, beauty contest

Introduction

The creation of a consumer society has been central to China's economic development since the end of the Mao era (1949~1978) and the beginning of economic reform in 1978. Prior to 1978, when most of the income of a Chinese family was spent on necessities such as food and basic clothing, the most popular household goods, often referred to as the "four big items", were sewing machines, watches, bicycles and radios. With economic reform and continual improvement in living standards, in the 1980s, the old "four big items" were replaced by a new "six big items", which were color TV set, refrigerators, cameras, electric fans, washing machines and tape recorders. With increasingly larger incomes in the early 1990s, people have come to focus their attention on such luxury items as video recorders, hi-fi systems, air-condition machines and computers. Entering 21st century, demands has been increasing for private apartments and cars. Whereas the "four big items" in the 1980s were virtually the only consumer goods available, by the 1990s they represented merely the tip of a consumer goods iceberg.

According to a late 2010 report from National Bureau of Statistics of China, China's consumer market was the fastest growing in the world during first decade in 21st century. The market for imported luxury products might be small in population percentage terms, but it "translates into millions of affluent customers" (*China*

Daily October 7, 2010). While China's pattern of burgeoning consumerism and increasing integration into the global economy is a familiar one, what distinguishes China from many other countries is the dramatic change in country's ideological environment. During the decade immediately preceding the economic reforms of the late 1970s, China had not only a low level of consumption but a virtual cult of austerity in an officially sponsored atmosphere of extreme self-denial (Hooper 1985). Since the 1980s this cult of austerity has given way to one of consumption, encouraged not just by Chinese and foreign producers but also by the Chinese government. As an early examination of Chinese advertising expressed it, "luxury goods have changed from being hated symbols of decadent capitalism to being touted as consumption incentives for those who work hard and show initiative" (Bao 2006:45).

One of the most visible manifestations of the growth of consumerism in China, set against the decline of state control, has been the recreation and commercialization of "femininity". Take China's cosmetic economy for example. It has experienced rapid development during the past two decades, with the annual increase rate of revenue standing at 15 percent from the mid-1980s. It stood much higher than the growth rate of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) and its tertiary industry as a whole, which were about 8 percent and 9 percent respectively on average in recent decades. The sales

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volume of China's cosmetic industry was just 200 million yuan (US\$24.1 million) in 1982. According to research firm Kline & Company, the cosmetic and toiletries market in China increased 13 percent from 2003 and 2004, with the country's share of the \$147.4 billion global market coming at \$7.1 billion at the manufacturers' level, accounting for nearly 5 percent of total sales (<http://www.cosmeticsdesign.com/>). Potential consumers made up 7 percent of the country's total population of 1.3 billion. China, which used to frown upon beauty and fashion as frivolous and decadent in the Mao era, has become the world's eighth-largest and Asia's second-biggest cosmetics market since 2004.

Remembering these facts in mind, this study examines how the changes of Chinese women's images are influenced by the impact of mass media in the context of China's modernization, particularly in the growth of a consumer society set against reduced state control over people's everyday lives. The study tries to address such questions: What are the present ideal images of women portrayed by media? In what way are women influenced and why is it so? By using the theoretical frameworks of influence of media, especially of television, on culture and through examining the women's image change process and events happened around 2003, this study puts its focus on two aspects: 1) how the recreation of femininity was carried out through media and, 2) what kind of reaction were women taking. 2003 was chosen because it was a turning point for the image changing of Chinese women.

1 Mass media and the change of women's image

Since we live inside the consumer culture, and most of us have done so for most of our lives, it is sometimes difficult to locate the origins of our most cherished values and assumptions. In fact media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil (Kellner 1955). Television, as a popular media in the modern society, has long been considered the medium that better portrays people's ways of life at a particular time and place than newspapers, radio, or magazines (Knapp 1992). Aside from providing audience with entertainment, it serves a surveillance function by providing information about society and the

developments taking place within it. It also has a cultural transmission function by educating audience about cultural values.

The creation of female domestic stereotypes in traditional Chinese society enforced women's responsibility for domestic chores. Women's job was to stay at home, taking care of their husbands, looking after their kids, and serving the whole family. Women's "femininity" or gender inequality was strongly emphasized through different kinds of books since it was the main media at that time. Under the Confucian code, there were seven grounds on which a married woman can be unilaterally divorced by her husband. These were: 1) failure to serve the husband's parents and disobedience to them; 2) failure to give birth to a son; 3) dissoluteness of manners; 4) jealousy; 5) loquacity (talkativeness and quarrelsome conduct); 6) malignant disease, and 7) larceny. The traditional values that saw "men taking society as their dominant sphere while women, in family" were popular.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, China has experienced tremendous social change. Among the most dramatic cultural shifts that accompanied this political transformation were changes in the general perception of women's roles in society, a phenomenon that may have been documented by the portrayal of women in the mass media. As Mao Zedong tried to establish a new order, he saw patriarchy and gender inequality as antithetical to the new socio-political order he sought to create. The liberation of women was to be realized by eliminating restrictions in domestic labor laws such as the Labor Law of the People's Republic of China, and the acknowledgment of women as active agents of production.

From 1949 to the end of 1970s, defeminised images of the Mao era was known to the world. Dooling (2005) found that before the period of economic reforms from 1978, Chinese women were portrayed as "self-assured" and "strong". Such characterizations were consistent with Ebrey's (2002) findings of images of highly committed model workers during this time period. These images showed women as active participants in the labor force and demonstrated the highly politicized nature of social life (Knapp 1992). Traditional feminine characteristics were ignored following the tenets of socialist asceticism

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that denied sexual desire and romantic love between men and women. Instead, women's portrayals propagandized that love was based on political class and relations. Although television was not so popular at that time, other media like radio, newspaper and magazines were used to integrate that ideology into everyday life through aggressive information campaigns. Such practices cleave toward Ko (2003) notion that the modern nation-state relies on the media to implant national consciousness and values, articulating national identity as a ubiquitous and often banal part of everyday experience that influences other identities, including gender and sexuality.

The minimal emphasis on gender distinctiveness reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Baggy cotton trousers and jackets, which gave little indication of the female form, were combined with plain hair-styles (either plaits or "pudding basin" haircuts) and fresh-scrubbed faces free of make-up. The degendered appearance and behavior of Chinese women then had a strong and positive impression on some Western women visiting China during the early and mid 1970s, "The first images that flash past the bus windows are simply dressed men and women free of class and sexist distinctions ... the street scenes are drab, if dignified, largely for lack of decorative women" (Barrett 1973).

Since the late 1970s, China has embarked on a path of modernization involving a transition from a centrally planned to a market-driven economy. Societal values were seen as having moved from extreme collectivism to individualism, which may be attributed to retaliation against the long-term oppression of individual interests and to the dissemination of Western values. Since 1979, the Chinese state has implemented policies consistent with its drive to become an exemplar of neoliberal capitalism in the global economy (Wang 2003). This redirection of values involves encouraging people to pursue personal wealth and self-satisfaction.

Entering 21st century, television has become one of the most common mass media in mainland China. While the commodity image-system of television is primarily about satisfaction, its influence and effect are not limited to that alone. One of the areas is that of gender identity. Many commercial messages use images and representations of men and women as central components

of their strategy to both get attention and persuade. Of course, they do not use any gender images but images drawn from a narrow and quite concentrated pool. With the strong influence of the global consumption concept, television after 1978 draws heavily upon the domain of gender display — not the way that men and women actually behave but the ways in which men and women are believed to behave. In other words, it is creating an ideal image of a should-be woman.

These portrayals cannot of course be considered as true reflections of gender. On television, gender (especially for women) is defined almost exclusively along the lines of sexuality. Sexuality provides a resource that can be used to get attention and communicate instantly. Within this sexuality is also a powerful component of gender that again lends itself even easier to imagistic representation. As Ko (2003) suggests, in today's China modernity is often associated with notions of gender, and a modern woman adheres to a blend of traditional and westernized standards of physical beauty and feminine comportment.

2 Recreation of femininity through mass media

Starting from a situation of imposed austerity and asexual representations at the end of 1978, post-Mao China sees a speedy creation of a gendered consumer culture. One of the most visible manifestations of the growth of consumerism, set against the gradual decline of state control, has been the recreation and commercialization of "femininity". The era has seen the recreation of "femininity" in all the manifestations, including the construction of distinctive female characteristics, ranging from the body, hair and clothing to voice, skin and movement. This has included not just official statements about "innate female characteristics" but, more visibly, the development in the media and especially in the consumer market of "feminine" representations. In this section, an examination will be made on how "femininity" is recreated through television around 2003 by looking at two respects: wide-spread of glamour women, and the holding of beauty contests.

1) Wide-spread of glamour women

Soon after Mao's death in late 1976, waved hair, skirts and a touch of lipstick reappeared. These were followed, from the early to the mid-1980s, by make-up,

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jewelry, and attention to the female form through fitted or “revealing” clothing (Hooper 1985). The period since the mid-1980s has seen the emergence of modern (and modernized) Chinese woman, gradually drawing closer to her Taiwanese or Hong Kong counterpart. The changes can be readily traced in the representation of women in popular Chinese magazines, ranging from women’s and youth publications to fashion and television magazines. Apart from clothing and make-up, a striking feature of these representations is the shift in body language from being virtually asexual to obviously “female”: variously demure, coy, provocative and seductive.

The early stage of the process can be seen as a return to the situation during less rigid periods of the communist era, what one might term “normality” socialist-style. But over the past 30 years or so, especially after entering the 21st century there has been a shift towards fully fledged consumerised femininity. One of the most striking features of China’s burgeoning consumerism has been the manner in which women (invariably glamorous young women) have increasingly been utilized for commercial purposes, particularly by China’s fledgling advertising industry. The complete lack of the commercial exploitation of Chinese women that so impressed some Western women in the 1970s was gone and Chinese women began to be being widely featured in advertisements — on television, on street billboards and in magazines.

As in many countries, glamorous Chinese women models have been used for a wide range of consumer products aimed not just at women but also at the more general market. The “female-specific” market is equally pervasive, with advertisements offering women almost the full international, as well as local, range of beautifying and age-defying cosmetics. Female models have also been widely used as magazine cover-girls in the keen competition that has developed in China’s flourishing magazine market. Until 2003 the most blatant and visible use of women for commercial purposes, however, has been for the lucrative annual calendar market. From the early 1980s attractive young women wearing Western-style fashions were being featured on these calendars. With a different female for each month or two-month period the calendars came to dominate the New Year gift calendar markets, interrupted only by the

occasional landscape or fluffy kitten calendars.

2) Holding of beauty contests

Starting off in the mid-1980s with euphemistic titles such as a “charms of youth contest” and a “flowers of the nation contest”, the beauty contest was, by the early 1990s, “labeled for what it was” (*China Today* February 1994:41). Although a new tolerance has been developing as the country continues to open wider to the world, frivolous activities like beauty contests were still frowned upon in China at that time. Beauty contests among common Chinese people originated from the prostitution circle. There was “flower board” evaluating prostitutes dating back to the Xining period (1068-1077) of North Song Dynasty (960-1127) in Bianjing (today Kaifeng city in Henan Province), several hundred years earlier than the “World Pageant” in the Western world (Wang 2003). During the Mao era when degendered appearance and behavior of women had been cherished, beauty contests were strictly banned.

From the end of 1980s in some big cities like Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou surreptitious beauty contests have been held but all were taking the name of “modeling contests” or selections for various “image ambassadors”, trying to avoid the wording “pageant”. The long-term suppression of the activity still kept most of the ongoing contests in China relatively discreet.

However, in 1989 Guangzhou, a city in Guangdong Province in south China, hosted Beauty in Flower City, advertising new star competition, which was regarded as the first pageant in post-Mao China. Since then, beauty contests with different names like New Silk Road Beauty, or Miss Model were held in several big cities and were broadcasted locally. In 2000 Miss Shanghai contest was carried out. Although the government seemed to have nodded to these pageants, they were not allowed to be broadcasted nationwide on television and the media did not show much interest on them. Take Miss Shanghai contest for example. Although it had the Shanghai Charity Foundation and the World Expo 2010 Shanghai Bidding Office as its main sponsors — both with a degree of governmental background — the organizers remained reluctant to give much publicity to the contest. Even the co-sponsoring media, like the Xinmin Evening News and the Shanghai Evening Post, only provided modest coverage. “Anyway it is still a great

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breakthrough,” wrote Mini Ai, a reporter from the Shanghai Youth Daily. “In the past when we were invited to report on the contests for ‘image ambassadors’, which were very similar to beauty competitions, the organizers would keep re-emphasizing that their contest was not a beauty contest.” (*Shanghai Youth Daily* July 23, 2000) Eager to demonstrate that such pageants were harmless to the still cautious leadership, organizers for the Miss Shanghai contest even ensured that the contestants promoted a host of charity causes, including visiting an orphanage and distributing milk to seniors. The contestants were carefully chosen not only for their looks, but also for their educational background. Of the 20 contestants, 17 have received university or college education.

No matter how strongly the organizers stressed the healthy moral tone of the competition, not many women showed much interest. The small number of women entering the competition may be taken as one indication of the widespread doubts. In a large city like Shanghai only about 200 women have entered themselves for the contest — a too small figure given the city's 6.5 million female population at that time. Many women were even frightened away when they discovered that more than a month of intensive training was required before the final contest, an unbelievable reason for those women in today's China who are crazy for beauty.

However, only two years later a tremendous change occurred. In 2003 for the first time China officially hosted a nationwide contest to choose Miss China for the 52nd Miss Universe pageant. Also in 2003, after a 54-year absence since 1949 beauty contests made a comeback in China. China hosted the 2003 Miss World pageant in Sanya, a city in South China's Hainan Province, making it the first international beauty contest to be held in China. A strong signal was being communicated that beauty contests, once regarded as bourgeois and was severely banned during the Mao era, have finally got the green light in the country.

Compared with the Miss Shanghai contest only two years before, the 53rd Miss World pageant in 2003 attracted more positive attentions. A total of 108 Chinese and foreign journalists have been invited to cover the competition. In addition to China's media giants like Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily and CCTV, famous

foreign media, such as the BBC and NHK, were also invited. An information center was newly built to accommodate the media. The cultural exhibition center, named the Crown of Beauty, was designed and built especially for this contest. Contenders from 117 countries and regions converged on Sanya and the pageant was televised live for the first time to the whole China. Statistics showed that about 200 million people watched it (*Hainan Daily* January 12, 2004).

Shao Zhong, a famous columnist in Hong Kong and member of the evaluation committee of the 53rd Miss World pageant in China, said that Miss World held in China indicated that China's image and economic development has won attention and respect from the international community. Miss World held in China for the first time is a symbol of China's reform, opening-up and going international. China is welcoming the world to know China in a more open way. In the meantime, the competition can enhance the popularity of Sanya and Hainan as a whole, thus promote the local tourism industry (*Hainan Daily* December 20, 2003). Liu Zhaojia, a senior consultant from the Hong Kong Central Policy Unit, compared the lifting of the ban of beauty contests to a milestone extension of the mainland's reform and opening up policy, from the previous freed political and economical activities to cultural and social events (*Nangfang Daily* December 15, 2003).

Thus 2003 is regarded as the first pageant year in China. The reason for this is not only because the 53rd Miss World is China's first beauty contest in its real sense, but also because a series of beauty contests really make people feel overwhelmed. Miss China sponsored by the Phoenix TV, the first Miss China Pageant, Miss Shanghai, China World Model Competition, International Advertising Model Competition came one after another in 2003 and all of them were televised live nationwide. China might have witnessed more major events in 2003 than in any other single year — from the plague of SARS to its first manned space mission. Xinhua News Agency chose 10 snapshots from the year to summarize the story of China in 2003 and 53rd Miss World Pageant was chosen as one of them (*People's Daily* January 10, 2004).

How ordinary Chinese people view pageants can be seen from the Internet questionnaire conducted by portal websites Sohu and Sina. 27 percent of the netizens regard

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pageant as a demand for the development of the market economy and 75 percent support China to take part in international pageants, although opponents maintain that China's "pageant economy" is of a low level, and the beauty economy in China is going unchecked (*Beijing Evening News* January 25, 2004).

Early in 1994, the All-China Women's Federation (the largest women's NGO in mainland China) officially stated that it opposed beauty contests, which it declared to be products of a male-dominated society. However, from the beginning of 21st century, the attitude of the federation seemed to become more softened. A spokeswoman from the federation said that while it was still against tasteless pageants focusing purely on women's appearance, it was not opposed in principle to those which also took the bearing, education and attitudes of contestants into account (*Xinmin Evening News* December 13, 2003). The fact that Chinese government, even feminists are taking a softer line on beauty pageants, suggests that the degendered appearance and behavior of women which was so encouraged in the Mao era has been replaced by a recreation of consumerised Chinese femininity.

3 Craze for beauty

Almost all the contestants in the beauty contests around 2003 gave the same image: they had no lines or wrinkles, no scars or blemishes — indeed they had no pores. They were thin, generally tall and long-legged, and above all, they were young. All "beautiful" women in advertisements, regardless of product or audience, also conform to this norm. Women began to admire, to feel ashamed even guilty when watching TV and comparing themselves with those beauties. They are made to feel that a woman's desirability and lovability are contingent upon her physical perfection. Desperate to conform to an ideal and impossible standard, many women went to great lengths to manipulate and change their faces and bodies. In this section, we will examine how crazy for beauty the women were through looking at two specific events round 2003.

1) Creating artificiality

Coupled with the wide-spread of all kinds of beauty contests from 2003 was the prosperity of cosmetic industry in China. The idea of beauty treatment of body

was not introduced into China until the late 1970s. The double eyelid surgery undergone at Beijing Plastic Surgery Hospital in 1979 marked the first beauty surgery in post-Mao China. The operation cost 40 yuan (about US\$5), which was equal to an ordinary worker's monthly wage at that time. The operation was largely reported in media both for the high cost and for the bravery the woman had. Since then cosmetic beauty surgery gradually broke away from plastic surgery, and in the 1990s it promoted a booming face lifting industry nationwide.

In 2003 there were three kinds of institutions engaged in beauty surgery in China. They included: plastic surgery affiliated to public hospitals, contract plastic surgery in some hospitals, and private beauty parlors scattered everywhere. According to the China Plastic Cosmetology Committee there were more than 10,000 medical institutions carrying out procedures throughout the country. "The Plastic Surgery Department has now become one of the busiest departments in our hospital," said Liu Chunlong, an executive official from the Shanghai-based Ren Ai Hospital, which first introduced plastic surgeons from South Korea, a country best known for its plastic surgery industry. The Shanghai Ninth People's Hospital conducted 26,000 cosmetic surgeries in 2003, up 40 percent over 2002 (*Xinmin Evening News* December 23, 2003). Plastic surgery advertisements flooded in Chinese media, enticing women who are not satisfied with their original looks to go for a "change overnight".

Artificially enhanced beauty began to really catch on in China after the country's first "man-made beauty" Hao Lulu was "created" in 2003 by Beijing Evercare Cosmetic Surgery Hospital and Clinic, a private beauty centre where the famous Lumenis provides the equipment. Hao Lulu was a 24-year-old plain-looking girl. On November 26 2003, after undergoing a grueling series of 14 cosmetic procedures — from the head to the buttocks, she finally finished her long, drawn-out "man-made beauty project". The surgery was divided into four phases — the longest lasting a month and the shortest two weeks, which included creating double eyelids, enhancing the nose bridge, removing wrinkles from the neck, enlarging breasts and uplifting buttocks — all in the hope of turning her into a stunning beauty.

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The story of Hao Lulu was reported by all the media, debated on the Internet and she could even be recognized by strangers on the streets. The reason she was given the name of “first man-made beauty” was not only by the scale and complication of her operations, but also the high cost involved — 300,000 yuan (US\$37,500) — 30 years income of an ordinary worker at that time! As the process comes to an end, Hao finds it all worthwhile. “The most important is that I have become more confident in myself with a prettier appearance. I am sure many women agree with me” she said (*China News Service* November 28, 2003).

2) Man-made beauty contest

Hao Lulu was right. She was not the only one who has thrust herself into the growing trend of cosmetic surgeries and has gone bravely under the knife. Following the Miss World pageants which were held in Sanya of Hainan Province for two years in a row (2003 and 2004), another new-type beauty contest appeared in China’s beauty pageant scene. Beijing Weiye Culture and Media Corporation, a Chinese company, sponsored in December 2004 in Beijing the world’s first Miss Surgery Pageant for women who have gone through various types of cosmetic surgery from eyebrows to mouths, from breasts to hips. All the contestants have to provide a doctor’s formal certificate to prove that their beauty was acquired by means of a scalpel. Nineteen finalists aged 17 to 62 vied to become the country’s most beautiful “artificial beauty”. They were chosen by plastic surgery experts from nearly 600 candidates both from China and other countries like Japan, Malaysia and South Korea. The contest was broadcasted live nationwide and over 300 million audience were reported to have watched it (*Xinmin Evening News* December 13, 2004).

Entering the competition as “the top man-made sunset rose of Hebei province”, 62-year-old Liu Yulan, the oldest contestant, said she cherished the chance to show off her wrinkle-free face and larger, more defined eyes. “I want to convey a message to society — that the pursuit of beauty is ageless”, said Liu in the interview (*Beijing Evening News* December 12, 2004). Most contestants were even in their early 20s and have typically undergone surgery for bigger busts, larger eyes, more defined noses and slimmer bodies, which obviously followed Western standards of beauty.

Although the purpose to participate in the contest varied, to gain an advantage in employment and love turned out to be the first for most of the young contestants. “Everybody should have the right to pursue beauty. And in fact, we all know that pretty women have more opportunities than others,” said a 23-year-old contestant. From the beginning of 1990s to 2004 there was a year-by-year rising tendency among female white-collar employees and university students who underwent cosmetic operations. They insisted that improved physical appearance can give them an edge on fierce rivals, and increase the bargaining power in their hunt for jobs.

While admitting that it was one’s personal choice to remodel oneself, some social scientists have expressed worries that the sole emphasis on physical beauty by the media would confuse traditional aesthetic standards. “Feminine beauty takes many forms, such as intellect, benevolence and care,” said sociologist Liu Bohong (*Women of China* November 15, 2003).

Conclusion

In the post-Mao era the images of Chinese women parading down the catwalk in the different fashion or beauty contests have overtaken images of the revolutionary Chinese women digging ditches in a “Mao suit”. Not so long ago, beauty contests were strictly banned in China when the nation extolled the Spartan style of living and rejected even simple makeup as vanity and bourgeois. This change of Chinese women’s images, while partially reflecting the decline of state control over people’s everyday lives, has been closely linked with the impact of mass media, which might be a clear reflection of China’s shift towards a market economy and, in particular, the growth of a consumer society increasingly integrated into the global economy.

With the rapid development of the social economy in China, more and more women become much wealthier and have more freedom and more money to chase after beauty. Even the artificial beauty craze is almost inevitable. Women’s beauty, it seems, is no longer something natural and honest. Nowadays it becomes something you have to work on by spending a huge amount of money. Although the images of Chinese women and their designated roles largely parallel those

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characteristic of countries in Asia and elsewhere undergoing the development process, they have seemed particularly dramatic in China because of the defeminised images of the Mao era and the speed with which the changes have been occurring. The changes have not stopped by 2003 but continued taking place with faster steep, which have turned to be very interesting study theme for the future.

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