

Another Hungarian looting China's treasures?

Sir Aurel Stein, Lajos Ligeti and a case of mistaken identity

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The voluminous publication *Zhonghua minguo shi dang'an ziliao huibian* 中華民國史檔案資料匯編 (*Archives of the History of the Chinese Republic*) includes a group of documents called "Correspondence related to the theft of historical artefacts in the Xinjiang and Gansu region by the British national Stein (May 1930-December 1931)."¹ One of the files in the group is titled "Report of the Government of Jehol province regarding the coping of Buddhist scriptures by the Hungarian national Stein (September 9)". In a recent article, the Chinese historian HUO Yunfeng 霍雲峰 scrutinized the details of Sir M. Aurel Stein's (1862-1943) visit to China during 1930-1931 and came to the conclusion that the telegram from Jehol could not have been written about Stein.² He concluded that the person mentioned therein must have been an unrelated "ordinary man" (一小人物) who was investigated only because he was engaged in copying Buddhist writings and happened to have a Hungarian passport.

HUO was, of course, correct in pointing out the mistake of the editors of the archives in associating this telegram with Stein,³ he was, however, unable to determine the identity of the person referred to in the telegram dispatched by the Jehol Government. In reality, this was the young Lajos LIGETI (1902-1987) who was to become one of the giants of Mongolian and Turkic studies, and who subsequently served for 20 years as vice president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.⁴ From the 1980s, his name, transliterated as Li Gaiti 李蓋提, became well-known in academic circles in China, as he gradually became one of the trusted authorities in the field of Mongolian linguistics and history. But at the time of his first visit to China he was still in his late twenties, and completely unknown to anyone there. He had just completed his studies in Paris with Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) and Henri Maspero (1882-1945), and upon his return to

¹Zhongguo di'er lishi dang'anguan 1994: 679-710.

²HUO 2008.

³At the same time we should give credit to the editors who organized the material on the basis of the content, which in fact refers to Stein. Thus they are surely not the ones to be blamed for the resulting confusion.

⁴LIGETI's first name Lajos is more commonly known in Western literature as Louis, and this was also the name he used for academic publications in French.

Hungary succeeded in obtaining a three-year scholarship to visit the lamaseries of Inner Mongolia to study Tibetan Buddhist texts.

Sir Aurel Stein's 4th, so-called "American," expedition to Xinjiang is the least known of all of his explorations.⁵ This is no doubt due to the ultimate failure of the enterprise, which had been the result of a public campaign organized against him and his archaeological activities. While his former work in Western China earned him a knighthood and international fame as scholar and explorer, the fact that he removed the rich archaeological material of his expeditions from Chinese territory eventually led to resentment among Chinese intellectuals. His image evolved into that of an imperialist thief and spy. During his earlier expeditions, he had successfully cooperated with provincial authorities, even if with time this was becoming increasingly difficult, and in many cases earned the respect of the officials he interacted with. But in 1930, amidst the patriotic sentiments struggling to reassess China's historical past and to define its new identity, the public saw foreign explorers and archaeologists as plunderers of China's cultural property.

In the late 1920s, the main voice against foreign excavation and surveying in China was that of the Society for the Preservation of Cultural Objects, an unofficial organization consisting of scientists and scholars, many of whom had been educated abroad. In 1927, two major foreign expeditions that were in the process of being organized became the primary target of the Society. One of them was Sven Hedin's 1927 expedition which was only allowed to proceed after he assented to the Society's demands to finance ten Chinese members and to share the archaeological proceeds with China. The other major foreign enterprise at the time was the Mongolian expedition of the American Museum of Natural History, headed by the adventurous naturalist and explorer Roy Chapman Andrews (1884-1960). Hedin was flexible enough to accept the Society's demands and to convert his original team into a "Sino-Swedish expedition." Accordingly, his work not only received great support from Chinese officials but was also widely publicized within China. In contrast, Andrews adamantly defended the autonomy of his operations and regarded the compromises unacceptable. Although he managed to recover the material seized by the Society in 1928, by 1931 he was forced to abandon his expeditions and completely withdraw from China. Writing about the events in retrospect, he voiced his opinion that the efforts to prevent foreign exploration were part of a new nationalistic movement in China:

Anti-foreignism accompanied the increasing nationalistic spirit throughout China; any agitation of whatever character that was directed against foreigners found immediate popularity with the masses. The Cultural Society saw an opportunity to obtain an exaggerated importance for themselves

⁵On the background of Stein's 4th expedition, see BRYSAK 2004.

before the public by attacking our Expedition. They had been successful in the case of Doctor Hedin a year earlier and obtained much “face” for themselves. Later they and the official offshoot called the “Commission for the Preservation of Ancient Objects” caused enormous trouble for the Citroën-Haardt Trans-Asia Expedition, and drove the distinguished British archaeologist, Sir Aurel Stein, out of Chinese Turkestan.⁶

Stein, of course, was well aware of these difficulties, and thought it prudent to visit Nanjing in person in April-May 1930 to secure a travel passport for his new expedition.⁷ His notebook and diary written during this time show that both he and the diplomats aiding him exerted considerable efforts to come up with a scenario that would ensure the success of the expedition. Following a meeting over dinner at the British Consulate, he wrote that Sir Miles Lampson (the British Minister), Sir Frederick Whyte (advisor to the Chinese Government) and Eric Teichman (Secretary at the British Legation) all agreed that the submission to the National Council of Cultural Association in his case was “undesirable.”⁸ Two days later, during a visit to the US Consulate, the British Ambassador Nelson Johnson gave the same advice: “N. J. knows of Chapman Andrews acceptance of National Council’s conditions but does not think it advisable in my case.”⁹

On May 10, Stein finally received his passport that permitted him “to trace ancient vestiges and artistic remains.”¹⁰ Three days later he left China on board of the Japanese ocean liner Hakone Maru in order to return to India and make preparations for the expedition. As the ship was leaving the Chinese continent, he enthusiastically related his successful application for a permit to his long-time friend, the Hungarian art historian Zoltán Felvinczy-Takács (1880-1964):¹¹

... I am glad to inform you, at this time only confidentially, regarding the aim and results of my visit to China. The truth is that I was trying to obtain from the Central Chinese Government official permission for another Central Asian exploration, for which Harvard University, with the assis-

⁶ANDREWS 1932: 418.

⁷Stein arrived in Shanghai on April 22, coming from the United States via Japan. He spent almost three weeks in China, mostly in Nanking, and on May 13 continued his trip to India. After leaving Shanghai, he also made a brief stop in Hong Kong.

⁸Notebook entry for April 28 (MSS. Stein 264).

⁹Notebook entry for April 30 (MSS. Stein 264).

¹⁰This was, in fact, a corrected version of the passport because the first version received on May 8 did not specifically authorize him to travel in Inner Mongolia. Stein also requested further corrections because in his opinion the expression “to trace ancient vestiges and artistic remains” did not include surveying work. Dr. C. T. Wang, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, however, assured him that to “trace vestiges” implied surveying. (Notebook entry for May 9, MSS. Stein 264.)

¹¹Felvinczy-Takács was the Director of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of East Asian Art in Budapest, and this is where his papers, including his letters from Stein, are held today. I am grateful to Dr. Györgyi Fajcsák and Tatjana Kardos from the Museum for helping me with the archives.

tance of some friends in Boston, and the British Museum had rather generously provided the financial means. The ardent support of the British Embassy and the friendly help of the American Ambassador yielded positive results, although it was quite difficult to avoid those obstructing conditions with which the nationalistic movement called “Young China” tries to burden nowadays any foreign scientific endeavor. But I still cannot be certain how I shall be treated by the Turkestan government, which since the revolution has been in rather loose contact with the (changing) Central administrations. Although fortunately that region is still governed by old type Mandarins and I have enough old friends who, as I am informed, still remember me with goodwill...¹²

Thus it is clear that Stein was very optimistic with respect to his upcoming trip, even though he acknowledged that he could run into some difficulties in Xinjiang. In the meantime, however, proponents of the preservation of antiquities movement did not remain idle, either. On May 31, only two weeks after Stein’s departure, Academia Sinica issued a public letter calling for the prevention of Stein’s new expedition to Xinjiang. It began with a condemning summary of the British explorer’s past activities in China:

The Hungarian Stein has already visited Xinjiang and other regions three times in the past, and has stolen and carried off many antiquities, such as the Dunhuang manuscripts, the Xichui bamboo slips, Buddhist statues and murals. He had had no prior permission from Chinese authorities and has inflicted serious damage on Chinese historical material...¹³

The reference to Stein’s Hungarian nationality in the letter is an obvious misunderstanding which clearly shows that the authors were not government officials. All official communication related to Stein’s upcoming trip had been conducted through British diplomatic channels where the country of his birth had very little significance. He had been a British subject since 1904 and had always traveled as such.

As a result of the letter from Academia Sinica, the Nanjing government sent out a directive to local administrations in North-Western China, calling for vigilance with respect to Stein’s archaeological activities in the region. The Commission for the Preservation of Ancient Objects was also successful in pushing through a new Law for the

¹²Ferenc Hopp Museum of East Asian Art. A 1994/1. The letter is dated May 16, 1930, “Aboard the Hakone Maru, near Hong Kong.”

¹³Zhongguo di’er lishi dang’anguan 1994: 679-680. This part of the letter is also quoted for reference in the Jehol Government’s telegram (Ibid.: 684), although with a few typos, including the toponym Xichui 西陲 written erroneously as 觀垂. A draft of the letter from Academia Sinica is also held in the Xinjiang Archives, and a photograph of this has been published among the archival material related to Stein’s 4th expedition (Zhongguo Xinjiang Weiwu’er zizhiqu dang’anguan 2007: 5).

Preservation of Antiquities, according to which foreigners could excavate in China only in cooperation with the Chinese and only if the proceeds remained in the country.¹⁴

It seems that Stein himself, confident as ever, did not recognize the extent of hostility and resentment towards foreign excavations, otherwise he would not have embarked on this expedition, which turned out to be his most costly and humiliating failure.¹⁵ Initially, Jin Shuren 金樹仁 (1880-1941), the Governor of Xinjiang was instructed from Nanjing to deny Stein's entry into Chinese territory but after a rapid exchange of diplomatic correspondence, the permission was nevertheless granted.¹⁶ This, however, did not mean the end of troubles for Stein who spent his entire time in China in constant argumentation with the authorities and was eventually forced to leave the country well before he had originally planned. Most importantly, he was unable to take with him any of the material he had collected on this trip and had to leave everything behind under the care of the British Consulate at Kashgar. The material was finally released by the British Consul to the Chinese authorities in November 1931.¹⁷

Coming from the direction of Srinagar, Stein entered Chinese territory at the end of September 1930 and made his first major stop at the British Consulate in Kashgar. The report that is recorded in the republican archives, however, was submitted by the Jehol Government on August 22 of the same year, while Stein was still in Hunza awaiting permission to cross into Xinjiang. Since this was only granted in early September, a fact the Chinese authorities must have been aware of, it is surprising to see that the young Hungarian scholar LIGETI, working thousands of miles away in the north of China, could have been suspected of being Stein.

Undoubtedly, the connection was made on two points: interest in ancient Buddhist writings and LIGETI's Hungarian nationality. LIGETI, in contrast with the ageing Stein, was a citizen of Hungary and traveled with a Hungarian passport. His philological interests lent him a certain degree of resemblance to Stein, although LIGETI never conducted any archaeological work and had a very limited budget for acquisitions. When he finally returned home, he left China with a rather small collection of books and manuscripts he either salvaged from the "book cemeteries" at the Lamaist monasteries or purchased very cheaply. In fact, he describes in his writings that on several occasions he had been offered good deals on antique books but had to decline the offer because he could not afford to pay for the books and their shipping.

¹⁴BRYSAK 2004: 20.

¹⁵In contrast with the resentment experienced by Stein and Roy Chapman Andrews, both of whom saw the prevention of their exploration as a politically motivated attack on science and scholarship in general, HEDIN (1943, Vol. 1: 62) described, at least in writing, his dealings with the Society in a much more sympathetic tone, even claiming that none of the harsh conditions laid down in Peking was applied in practice.

¹⁶BRYSAK 2004: 20.

¹⁷For a detailed description of the extended diplomatic disputation over the fate of the spoils of Stein's 4th expedition, see WANG 1994.

An archival letter written by LIGETI in Peking in June 1931 before returning home illustrates the dire financial difficulties he was having while in China. This is a letter addressed to his former professor, the linguist János Melich (1872-1964), and it is a desperate cry for help as the young LIGETI, despite having been promised so, has not been provided with the means for his return trip. The small stipend he had received from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences only covered his modest living expenses and he did not have enough money to return home. Although he had initially contacted Professor Zoltán Gombocz (1877-1935), he received no reply (possibly because the professor was out of the country) and in this letter was asking the help of Professor Melich:

I have completed my three-year period of studies among the Mongols of Northern Manchuria. My return home, however, is hindered by unexpected difficulties. As you may remember, his Excellency the Minister was kind enough to grant a monthly stipend of five hundred pengő for the duration of my three-year research. I was not, however, granted travel expenses. The various promises all turned out to be illusory when the time came. My situation became all that more difficult because I could not travel through Siberia. In the first year the Hungarian Academy of Sciences kindly relieved the large deficit caused by my travel expenses, supporting my research in Mongolia with a one-time grant of two thousand pengő. At the end of last August, anticipating the impossibility of my returning home using the means at my disposal, I submitted a petition to the Ministry requesting a travel grant in the amount of two thousand pengő, as the minimal sum on which I could travel from Northern Manchuria to Peking, from there to Shanghai, then by ship to Marseille and then by train to Budapest – all using the lowest available fare. Although I have spent three months in Hailar in Northern Manchuria, I received no reply to my petition. Without waiting further, in order to complete the remaining part of my schedule, I continued my travels. At the end of April I received the Ministry's resolution (dated December 31) that I had been awarded one thousand pengő for my return trip. Following this, I applied for a visa at the Russian Consulate at Harbin but after lengthy back-and-forth communication my application was denied...¹⁸

The letter continues by asking the professor to take some action because otherwise he would simply not be able to return home. In his published accounts LIGETI does not discuss the financial difficulties related to returning home from China and thus this letter is an interesting piece of evidence that supplements our knowledge about his trip. But

¹⁸Manuscript Collection of the National Széchenyi Library (Levelestár, LIGETI Lajos MELICH Jánoshoz, Peking, June 4, 1931).

it is clear that under such circumstances the young scholar had no chance to engage in a large-scale acquisition of manuscripts and antiquities. Instead, he either salvaged discarded manuscripts or copied texts by himself.

The telegram of the Jehol Government identifies LIGETI by name, using the Chinese transliteration Li Gedi 李格第. This was, of course, different from the form Li Gaiti 李蓋提, how his name became known in China in later years. The telegram is dated September 9, 1930¹⁹ and bears the title “Report of the Government of Jehol province regarding the coping of Buddhist scriptures by the Hungarian national Stein (September 9).” The document is signed by Tang Yulin 湯玉麟 (1871-1937), the Governor of Jehol. The beginning explains that the investigation was launched in response to the directive calling for caution with regard to Stein’s activities. It also quotes part of Academia Sinica’s letter in which the explorer is referred to as a Hungarian subject.

Consequently, a Hungarian scholar turning up at the Youshun lamasery 佑順寺 at Chaoyang 朝陽 around the same time with the aim of copying Buddhist scriptures immediately attracted the attention of the Jehol Government. It initiated an investigation which was carried out by Li Zhongxiang 李中祥 of the First Police Precinct, according to the instructions of Tian Yufeng 田雨豐, County Police Chief. Li reported back the following: “There is a Hungarian national residing at the Youshun monastery at the county seat. The examination of his passport revealed that his name is Li Gedi. Being asked about his background, he related that he came here to make copies of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures and will return once finished with this task.”²⁰ To this report the Police Chief added a comment that “Li Gedi has a different name [from Stein] but is of the same nationality.” However, no further assumptions were made beyond this observation.

While the Chinese archives afford no further insights regarding the mysterious Hungarian working at the Youshun temple, there is a wealth of information about this period in LIGETI’s own recollections. He wrote two longer accounts of his journey, one an academic report published in 1933 in French,²¹ the other a popular narrative that came out a year later in Hungarian.²² In the French report he gives a general description of his visit to the Youshun monastery:²³

I passed through Beizefu, a Chinese center in terms of its administrative and commercial makeup, and after three days of travelling on May 20 arrived at Chaoyang. Today, this city is completely Chinese but in the past it

¹⁹Interestingly, just about this time a short review of LIGETI’s trip appeared in the Letters to the Editor column of *The Times*, in which “Dr. Louis LIGETI” is commended on having obtained “a wealth of valuable information” (“Research in Mongola,” *The Times*, September 13, 1930: 6).

²⁰Zhongguo di’er lishi dang’anguan 1994: 684.

²¹LIGETI 1933.

²²LIGETI 1934.

²³I uniformly render the Chinese words and proper nouns in LIGETI’s descriptions into pinyin, even if in the original they appear in their French or Hungarian spelling.

was known by its Mongolian name as *Γurban suburγan*, or the city of the Three Stūpas.

Ĵigs-med nam-mkha talks at length of this city in connection with the history of Buddhism in Mongolia. (Huth did not recognize its Tibetan name *mČhod rten gsum*, “The Three Stūpas.”) Of the three towers only two remain today, the third having been completely demolished in the civil war of the Republic. In fact, the city of the ‘Three stūpas’ played a particularly important role in the history of the Lamaist Church. To these glorious times dates the large and rich Youshunsi lamasery which has fortunately survived the past twenty years without much damage. Still, one of its buildings was transformed into a Chinese school, and a small wing of the former residence of the lamas into a military office. I remained at the Youshunsi lamasery until July 30, and then returned in a diluvian rain to Beipiao, the terminal station on the branch of the Peking-Mukden line, from where I took the train to Peking.”²⁴

This short description shows that LIGETI was at the lamasery for over two months, from May 20 until July 30. In contrast with this terse scholarly narrative, LIGETI’s popular account devotes three whole chapters to his life at the Youshun monastery (Figure 1) and thus provides a much more detailed description of the circumstances of his stay there. With his distinctive sense of humor he describes his encounters with the very people whose report is now kept in the republican archives. He identifies the Police Chief Tian Yufeng by name, erroneously calling him Tian Fengyu.²⁵

I ensconced myself in the monastery and, as far as it was possible, made myself comfortable in Deva Chenpo’s rather uncomfortable dwelling, eager to begin working. As a measure of foresight I gave strict instructions to little Song, Deva Chenpo, and to Dambinima, the *shabi*, to resolutely deny my being home if anyone came to call on me. I had enough experience with nosy visits that were utterly pointless and only kept me from working for extended periods of time. My austere precaution worked out quite well, if only for a short while. One day, a number of policemen of various ranks came over in an attempt to see me. It would not have been a good idea to turn them away, and it seemed that Deva Chenpo shared the same opinion, as he led them straight in one after the other. Whispering in my ear, he at once let me know what great dignitaries were visiting me and that, for

²⁴LIGETI 1933: 11.

²⁵In this case LIGETI is mistaken because the name of the Police Chief was in fact Tian Yufeng, as can be attested from other historical sources.



Figure 1: The main gates of the great monastery at Chaoyang (Ligeti, p. 418).

both his and the monastery's sake, I should give them a friendly reception. These visits have certainly raised my status in the eyes of the monastery's residents, and from there on the lamas all greeted me with frequent bows. To be sure, this reverence was not without reason, as the monastery was in desperate need of police goodwill — but more of this will be said later.

The procession was opened by a police officer. He saluted me in a military manner and declared that he was visiting me on behalf of Tian Fengyu, the Chief of Police, and should I feel the need they would be happy to place two guards in front of Deva Chenpo's door for my safety. As much as I was touched by their kindness and consideration, I anxiously protested against measures of this kind. I had absolutely no need for two good-for-nothing soldiers lurking around me all day, not leaving me a minute of peace. Not to speak of their salaries and rations which I would have been expected to provide. I had managed to get by in far more dangerous places without Chinese soldiers guarding my doorstep, and I was confident that I would also manage here. After all, I was in a monastery located in the heart of a large city.

Thus I politely conveyed my gratitude to chief Tian Fengyu, and as a token of my appreciation immediately sent him my business card, along with a small gift.

Tian Fengyu called on me the very same day. The lamas bowed their heads to him and led him to me with full reverence. Tian Fengyu immediately called lama Chen and turned to him in anger:

“How dare you accommodate Li *xiansheng* in a dirty hole like this?”

Lama Chen was lost for words, anxious to come up with an answer; while inside he surely blamed me for the new troubles with the police, as if they did not have enough of these already. I came to his rescue by saying that he had actually wanted to give me a much better room but I insisted on taking this one on account of Deva Chenpo being a famous astrologist. Deva Chenpo’s eyes glistened with gratitude. Lama Chen was also appeased and even Tian Fengyu’s anger dissipated, although he no doubt thought that foreigners were crazy to choose of their own accord to live in such filth.²⁶



Figure 2: Tian Fengyu, the “polite policeman” (Ligeti, p. 417).

Further on, LIGETI retells his adventures with Tian Fengyu (Figure 2) whom he mockingly calls the “polite policeman” because he showered the young scholar with a multitude of small and useless gifts, each of which had to be reciprocated with a gift of European origin. Since by this time LIGETI was on a very tight budget, this caused him a considerable amount of headache. He also describes that this “polite policeman”

²⁶LIGETI 1934: 446-447.

often showed up at his door with pieces of antique porcelain to inquire about their age and potential prices abroad. This, LIGETI says, was primarily because Governor Tang was a great collector and “Tian Fengyu knew from experience how useful it was to be passionately interested in the same things as the provincial governor.”²⁷ The depiction of the Governor is even more sarcastic:

Tang Yulin himself was illiterate and, of course, his fondness for collecting Chinese antiquities did not stem from an innate artistic disposition but from the fact that he could trade, through his men in Peking, the treasures he had gathered by means of extortion and looting, for shiny American dollars.²⁸

While such condemning words may appear unwarranted with regard to a provincial governor, they echo Hedin’s account of a meeting with the same Governor Tang, whom the Swedish explorer described as an “incapable and unscrupulous person” notorious for being involved in the business of selling off stolen artefacts to Japanese dealers:

He was of medium stature, powerfully built and had coarse features. His behavior lacked all culture. The temples of Jehol from the time of the great Manchu Emperors had probably been robbed of most of their treasures of ecclesiastical art by his predecessors, but a few things had not yet been stolen and sold to Japanese agents or curio dealers from Peking. During our stay at Jehol we daily saw loaded lorries which at the command of Tang Yulin, it was said, removed idols and other objects from the temples, to Mukden.²⁹

We can see that Governor Tang’s passion for temple treasures was not a secret in Jehol and he felt no need to hide his dealings from others. Of course, the provincial governor’s looting of antiquities by the truckload in full knowledge of the entire populace appears absurd in view of the efforts of the Society for the Preservation of Antiquities during this period. Even more ironic is that Governor Tang was the official in charge of investigating whether the young LIGETI had any illicit designs on treasures that might have been considered by the Society as part of China’s cultural heritage.

Lajos LIGETI spent three years in Inner Mongolia during the time that coincided with an unprecedented antagonism towards foreign-led expeditions on Chinese soil. He himself traveled alone and conducted no archaeological excavations, thus remaining outside the field of vision of the preservation of antiquities movement. Unknowingly to himself, he had been briefly investigated after his arrival in Chaoyang on the suspicion

²⁷Ibid.: 450.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹HEDIN 1940: 46-47.

that he was in fact Sir Aurel Stein, plotting to rob China of yet another substantial piece of its cultural legacy. This suspicion was in part the result of official directives recently dispatched to local governments calling for vigilance with regard to Stein's activities in Chinese Central Asia. Added to this were LIGETI's Hungarian nationality and his interest in Buddhist scriptures, the two of which were enough to suggest that he was the notorious Hungarian-born explorer Stein. It is hard to believe that anyone who met the 28 years old LIGETI personally could have mistaken him for someone 40 years senior to him. The two scholars were a generation apart: LIGETI was a student of Stein's great rival, Paul Pelliot, and in 1930 he was only beginning his career, whereas by this time Stein was a celebrated explorer who had already completed his finest expeditions.

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Zhongguo Xinjiang Weiwu'er zizhi qu dang'anguan 中國新疆維吾爾自治區檔案館,
Riben Fojiao daxue Niya yizhi xueshu jigou 日本佛教大學尼雅遺址學術機構,
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