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Recovering the Senses: Taoist Response to the Modern Spiritual Crisis

✦ Кључне речи:
epistemology, Taoism, image, perception, communication, spirituality, bodily awareness.

Савремени свет је у дубокој духовној кризи условљеној распадом класичног епистемиолошког модела. Наслеђе кинеског таоизма са његовом неисцрпном традицијом заснованом на принципу непосредне комуникације у континуитету одуховљеног живота може допринети превазилажењу савремене кризе. Овај чланак испитује потенцијал таоистичке медитативне праксе за духовни развој и друштвену димензију човека. У извесној мери се анализирају и појам слике у Кини и на западу, природа перцепције и телесне свести. Као илустрација тренутног духовног преокрета користи се популарни филм *Matrix*.

1. Long before the outbreak of the latest financial crisis hardly anyone doubted that contemporary civilization suffers from severe ills that need urgent treatment. Most people readily admit political, economical as well as cultural dimensions of the ongoing crisis. It is more difficult, or daring, to realize that our problems have in fact epistemological roots and the humankind must change its basic premises relating to the nature, the

method and the goals of knowledge. Because this change requires a radical break with the former ways of thinking it is only to be expected that the impulses for the new spiritual revolution may come from various spheres of life: the arts, science fiction, even popular culture while relatively conservative academic establishment as well as political institutions will probably be reacting reluctantly and slowly.

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I strongly believe that Taoist legacy which comprises both original epistemological patterns and, essentially, a rich tradition of moral and somatic cultivation, has a lot to contribute to the cure of contemporary woes. The Eastern approach is based on the direct, immediate communication with the world, or, in other words, on the immanent continuity between the inner and the outer dimensions of existence. What the Oriental thinkers are looking for is not rational knowledge but the experience of being real which has no need of proof. Consequently, language in the East is fundamentally an expression of self-transcendence, an allusion, a hint at something as elusive as it is all-pervading. While speaking we cannot help giving free rein to the “metaphorical slippage” of words, every moment we experience and, therefore, say something new. The reality that we are talking about without knowing what it is bears the name “emptiness” because emptiness is self-transforming reality par excellence: emptiness must empty itself and become... the perfect fullness. Everything is simultaneously one’s own opposite. As a popular Chinese wisdom puts it,

*Emptiness within is the body and the mind.
Emptiness without is the world of things.*

Looking for a more concrete definition of reality in Taoism we come across the concept of “Thusness”, “That which is so of Itself” (*zi ran*). This notion is free from metaphysical oppositions of transcendence and immanence, universal and particular which has been the basis of the European thought since Antiquity. Taoist *zi ran* means simultaneously the most general principle of existence and the singularity of each moment. It is related, no doubt, to the expression “transcending everything by itself” (*chao ran*) including itself. Hence its main feature is,

according to the *Tao Te Ching*, “standing in solitude” (*du li*). It is also closely connected with the notions of “multiplicity of subtleties” (*chung miao*), “infinite variety” (*zhung fu*) which point to the ontology of multitude and singularity.

So, the concept of *zi ran* justifies both the unity and multiplicity of being. Things are identical inasmuch as they are different. Such a perspective does not establish any privileged way of representing reality and thus does not imply any violence in the act of representation (for violence is basically a claim for the identity of things in nothingness).

These premises of Taoist thought have a profound impact on the phenomenological status of image so a brief comparison of Western and Taoist approaches to the nature of image would be appropriate here.

A concept of normative or traditional image requires at least tentative elaboration. Tradition is above all something that is being transmitted and, therefore, something that perpetuates itself within changes, something eternally recurring and thus renovated. Consequently, tradition presupposes the coexistence of different life-worlds: it points at the universal co-being-ness of things, a “passing eternity” where a community of minds becomes co-mutiny, instantaneous coming and going. The study of tradition leads to the discovery of meta-historical continuity which is the real foundation of sociality in Asian civilizations. It is a sociality of school both as a way of self-cultivation and the medium of transmission. The image of school’s Founder (“the highest ancestor-teacher”) has qualities of primal phantasm that account for the school’s endurance. He is the witness to the invisible “thread” that maintains the meta-historical existence of school. As I have already attempted to show (Maliavin 2005), this self-perpetuating core of individ-

ual/social existence (un)folds in consequent circles, a spiral-like movement rooted in the experience of universal co-relatedness in the hub of the cosmic circle. Tradition in China stretches across the whole history of Chinese civilization while being reflected more or less vaguely in every particular teaching, i.e. every historical moment.

Now in Christian tradition, especially Orthodoxy, “traditional image” is closely related to the concept and the usage of icon – the most popular representation of the *imago Dei* and an important object of reverence. Christian writers have always opposed icon (derived from Greek *eikon*) to idol (from Greek *eidolon*). The opposition between the two has been aptly defined by J.-L. Marion who treats them not as objects or substances but rather as two inversely juxtaposed “manners of being for beings”. The idol, according to Marion, “consists only in the fact that it can be seen, that one cannot but see it. And see it so visibly that the very fact of seeing it suffices to know it” (Marion 1991: 9). Epistemologically the idol’s function is to confine the gaze to the material visibility of the world and by doing so the idol conforms to man’s measure. It is indeed what can be created by and for the human capacities.

The icon functions in the opposite way. It sets the limits of seeing by revealing not some form or substance (*ousia*) but the event (*parousia*) making visible the invisible. This is what the life of spirit is: an incessant overcoming of everything “given” in which the spirit “gives itself”. In the technique of icon painting this essential feature of the iconic vision is expressed by the so called “inverted perspective” so brilliantly analyzed by the Orthodox theologian Pavel Florensky (Florensky 1996): in the iconic space the furthest images appear as the largest. Such a vision both highlights and suspends the awareness of distance generating an experience

of the infinite depth in the hairbreadth scission, or gap.

While icons are revered by both Catholics and Orthodox, J. Kristeva justly underscores the cardinal differences between the concepts of image in Western and Eastern mentality. In Catholic world image is closely connected with the idea of *figura* representing real persons and events of history which stand for the noumenal reality of Christian mysteries. This conception predicted from the start the evolution of European painting toward naturalism and humanism of the European painting. The Orthodox icon, by contrast, is not painted but “inscribed”. The icon, according to traditional definition is the “witness to things invisible”. As Kristeva notes, the icon “is a *graphein*, a sensibly trace, not a spectacle” (Kristeva 2000: 153). So, in Orthodoxy the icon is presented, strictly speaking, not for looking but for the cultivation of mind. It is a gate to spiritual path.

This distinction between image as *figura* and image as *graphein* is important for understanding the nature of image in Taoism. In fact, Chinese concept of image (*xiang*) presents an interesting corollary to the Western understanding of the image. One should bear in mind, of course, that the basis of Chinese thinking is not any kind of essence, substance or even form but the Change itself. Consequently, Chinese thought and culture deal not so much with things but relations between things and pursue the ideal of universal harmony.

We do not even find in the inventory of Chinese thought the concept of a fixed image which can be seized in contemplation. But already in the *I-ching* and even more obviously in the *Tao-Te ching* it is treated both as the ontological reality and the truth of human awareness. As we know already, Chinese intellectual tradition is interested primarily in the *continuity* of consciousness and the

external world. Consequently, the concept of image in China has always been closely related to human creativity and cultural practice. The idea of image in the *I-ching* is inextricably tied to creative imagination. According to the classical definition, the “Heavenly images”, or the first visible reality, corresponded to “the pattern of Heaven and the order of Earth” as well as the *traces* left by the divine animals. In other words, the image, in Chinese view, is defined not so much by its essence or nature as by its limit: it is precisely there where its presence ends.

Since the image in China is rooted in the force of creative transformations it can only be conceived as a dynamic reality. Indeed, its real core is the Will (*yi*) which, in conformity with the basic premises of Chinese tradition, refers to the pure dynamism of life as well as the human drive for self-perfection, i.e. it is both natural and cultural. So the Chinese artists were inclined to stress the mutual penetration of the human mind and the natural environment though the mind and the nature, strictly speaking, do not mirror each other (that would be in fact an idolatry) but rather merge simultaneously in a “dark unity” (*xuan tung*) of self-transcending Will.

The existential roots of this thinking should be sought in the nature of our raw experiential data. Chinese “image” has nothing to do with the external physical objects. It refers to the sources of living experience, the sphere of perception. The early commentators of *I-ching* speak of “seminal images” (*jing xiang*, see Wang Bi’s commentary to the Ch. 25 of *Tao-Te ching*) or “subtle images” (*miao xiang*). Images in Chinese vision are rather amorphous and elusive, if perceived externally, but fairly lucid and compelling, if contemplated internally, reality. They are not essences but rather structures. The extremes coincide, as is prescribed by the over-

all harmonic vision shared by all Chinese thinkers.

Apparently, the image in Chinese tradition occupies an intermediary position between physical objects and the Void which is the source of all things. Images “follow” the Way; they are essentially bearers of “intentions” (*yi*) and from the start have a nature of phantasm. But this also means that images, according to Taoism, refer to the creative Void, “the mysterious Female” (Lao-tzu) that gives birth to all things, i.e. simply lets everything be.

In the world dissolved into the boundless network of dynamic co-being the individual, like Leibniz’s monad, exists in the world while the world exists in her. Here the subject appears with the recognition of rupture between different life-worlds. Yet contrary to Western transcendentalism, Chinese “awakening” is characterized by the opening of consciousness to the bodily presence which stands for an experience of limit and by virtue of this represents the medium of forming types out of experience’s raw data. In short, images in Chinese tradition have the nature of types, they contain an event of transformation. This is why Chinese pictorial art has always been wavering between realistic representation and pure expressionism. Its glory is marked by the affirmation of the type’s synthetic nature. Its demise, especially in recent times, is the sign of the dissolution of this synthesis which produces crafty but uninspired academic realism on the one hand and expressionist abstractionism on the other.

So the image in Chinese thought is justified by the act of transformation, its very capacity to transcend itself. Such a view to a certain degree resembles the idea of Being as shadow elaborated by E. Levinas. According to Levinas, reality is in fact its own transpar-

ent double (i.e. a shadow) incapable to hold its own contents, perpetually “losing” it. As a result, “the sensible is being insofar as it resembles itself, insofar as... it casts a shadow, emits that obscure and elusive essence which cannot be identified with the essence revealed in truth” (Levinas 1989: 135). The image in Chinese tradition actually had the status of shadow and referred to the “abysmal crack” which constitutes the very nature of reality. It is no less noteworthy that the term image in Chinese means also similarity.

So Chinese concept of image ascribes the reality of image to the power of creativity which makes possible the multiplication of images, the creation of world as the infinite and, therefore, living variety of being. Creation in Chinese thought is infinite modeling according to the absent model, the repetition of the absent norm.

Making a general assessment of the traditional (iconic) image in China and the West we should point out two important issues:

1. The iconic image is basically different not only from the idol but also from all kinds of symbols and allegories. A noteworthy fact is that the icon painting in Christianity, according to the undisputed tradition, started as a direct offprint, as if in photography, of Christ’s face on a towel. This idea of a painting as purely material vestige of spiritual presence is akin to the Oriental status of image as a trace, a shadow of the invisible reality.

2. The iconic image revealed a definite hierarchy of pictorial qualities corresponding to certain stages of spiritual development. In China it was an hierarchy of form (*xing*), spirituality (*shen*) and the Void (*xu*). This stratification ran parallel to the division of artists into three groups: “the skilful”, “the subtle” and “the divine”. The iconic tradition in Christianity, to my knowledge, lacked an explicitly determined stages of iconic con-

templation but it could easily be – and actually was – related to the stages of spiritual progress in prayer.

2. So, the nature of the phenomenal world exemplified by the iconic image is the notion of the “minutest gap”, a hairbreadth scission which makes possible the creation of the world through the eternal recurrence of being’s “suchness”. The essence of creative transformations is a “reversal”, a backward movements to the origin of existence.

In Western thought the memory of this uncreated, always reached in a backward turn reality has been almost obliterated in traditional metaphysics. Taoist thought has preserved a keen understanding of this fundamental layer of experience primary because its freedom of self-cultivation was not obscured or limited by the logical requirements of established doctrine. It is the reality which is variously but consistently named by such terms as “small” (*xiao*), “minute” or “subtle” (*wei*), “miraculous” (*miao*), “one” (*yi*), “centrality” (*zhong*) and, finally, “confidence” (*xin*). The supreme position of the latter concept makes clear that the “primal matter” for the Taoists is not some kind of substance or essence, but relation and correlation between things or rather vector of virtual movement.

All terms mentioned above relate to the micro-world of original perceptions, *petits perceptions* to use Leibniz’s expression, which constitute the original matrix of experience. It is the source of existence as described in the recently published “Song on Transmitting the Mystery” attributed to the famous Tang dynasty Taoist master Li Dao-zi, the legendary (one of several, in fact) founder of the Tai-chi chuan. It is written there:

“No forms, no images, the whole body is suspended in the void” (Taiji quan pu 1995: 236).

The absence of forms and images does not imply absolute nothingness, rather the contrary: the fullness of Being's potential in the minutest semen of things. It is the symbolic matrix of experience, the foundation of life which precedes, and in a sense, anticipates all things. It is the Vortex of Tao within which myriads of symbolic, would-be worlds come into being and pass away in one flash of time shorter than the shortest possible duration of experience. Spiritual awareness in Taoism is precisely the ability to perceive and follow these impulses that trigger the activity of the primal Will (*yi*). The Will, being a self-determining reality and, therefore, a radical finiteness, constitutes the "subtle principle" (*miao li*) of every thing, the inner limit of existence.

How can such vision contribute to the overcoming of modern civilization's crisis? The answer, as I have mentioned, may come from many and sometimes unexpected sides. One of the most illuminating lessons known to me is provided by a well-known Hollywood blockbuster "The Matrix". Most critics in the West saw in it – quite reasonably – a gloomy allegory of the epistemological dead-end peculiar to the Western civilization. The world of perfect simulation controlled by the Matrix means in fact the oblivion of the ontological depth of experience, the loss of the immanent awareness and thus the dehumanization of human beings. In phenomenological terms it means the substitution of the icon by the idol, i.e. the reduction of "primordial image" to its purely visible likeness, a perfect imitation. The task now is clearly Taoist: to discern the difference, the gap within likeness: No wonder the film suggests the way out of the Matrix's trap which obviously has connection with Taoism.

The movie's hero, the leader of resistance against the yoke of the Matrix, a young man called Neo (i.e. New Man, an obvious Chris-

tian allusion), studies ardently the Oriental martial arts and finally acquires an amazing speed of physical movements and no less outstanding power of intellectual intuition (to put it in quasi-schellingian terms). This romance of self-cultivation reminds that in the world of all-pervasive illusion only ascetic experience, an effort of self-transcendence can confirm the reality of one's existence. Indeed, the world of Zion opposed to Matrix is the land of scarcity and hardships. The world of Matrix, by contrast, is brightly illuminated by electric, i.e. artificial and deceptive, lights.

An old-fashioned, purely external division between "real" and "unreal" worlds will not do, however. It is too arbitrary. The Zion is unable to maintain its identity and is conquered by the machines. Yet the film, just like the world of media itself, offers opportunities to discover reality even within total illusionism. The eye of the camera and special effects are capable to tell more than the physical eyesight and even imagination. The physical objects in the movie display an astonishing plasticity: human bodies are suspended in the air, various things bend and curve in all directions disclosing, as it were, their illusionary nature. Some important scenes are presented in a very slow motion, creating the world that is unfolding or, if you wish, folding up unto itself within one passing moment; it is the world of "Bullet-Time". This trick draws us into the inner world of Neo. It is the condition of the extraordinary sensitive awareness or, as Taoists used to put it, "purity and calmness" of consciousness. The nature of such calmness is the infinitely small "spiritual transformations" (*shen hua*) which are much faster than even the flight of the bullet. The latter, as physical object, has a fixed trajectory consisting of mechanical repetition, while the spirit is capable of transforming, or "renovating" itself within

the shortest possible interval of time. Spirit, in a word, is faster than any physical speed, even that of the bullet. But in order to be so fast it must be capable of “letting everything go” and first of all liberating itself from all things or, to be precise, its own dependence on its cognitive faculties. Pure spirit has no contents.

This continuum of “spiritual transformations” which exists before the split between subject and object must be conceived as a pure interaction without separate agents, an omnipresent medium and limit of everything. To grasp it we need an extremely heightened sensitivity inextricably related to one’s corporeal presence in the world or, better say, one’s active participation in what M. Merleau-Ponty called “the flesh of the world”. The capacity of our body to react to external influences even before they are detected by consciousness has been noticed by some Western philosophers, but the Taoist tradition provides us with the systematically explored experience of our primordial and impeccably intact being-in-the world.

Neo’s interest in self-cultivation by means of Chinese martial arts is well founded. Attaining or rather restoring one’s original presence in the world which is essentially a pure communication was a goal of the Taoist martial tradition. Already in classical Taoist texts we find statements that “stillness within the motion” is the sure sign of the Sage. This formula means in fact the living, dynamic unity of mind and body which creates a thoroughly conscious movements and allows the adept of Tao to really *live his life*. The perfection of sensitivity is named in Tai-chi tradition “the understanding power” (*dong jing*). This is how it is explained in the Tai-chi chuan texts:

“The understanding power of humans is the edge of sight and hearing, a capacity to

undergo transformations through the encounter with circumstances. It produces miraculous results all by itself. The body attains enlightenment without effort, inner motion and external movement are permeated by awareness and knowledge” (Taijiquan pu 1995: 137).

Let us note that the goal of Taoist cultivation, no matter how fantastic it may seem to the superficial observer, is the return to the original, perfectly natural fullness of one’s existence. It is the relieving and effortless effort, the way of releasing oneself in the seamless “flesh” of existence and thus “forgetting” one’s individual Ego. This perfect naturalness, or “original nature” (*ben xing*) coincides with the “spiritual illumination” (*shen ming*). Forgetting or letting go one’s Self gives access to the most extraordinary level of awareness. Why? Precisely because this plenitude of Being is the principle of self-differentiating, boundless dispersion, the empty dynamism of the uncreated Chaos, the break that constitutes every single rhythm of being.

So reality as a constant and all-pervading Transformation (*yi hua*), is the infinitely fast circuit of the virtual and actual aspects of existence. Participating or rather co-existing with one’s alterity in this vortex of the Way amounts to returning, or rather “inheriting” the source of existence. This is why the man of Tao acts *contrary* to the apparent tendencies. He goes a “reverse path” and according to the Taoist dictum, “those who go contrary-wise will become Immortals. Those who just go on will become ordinary people”.

The power of Matrix is derived from the capacity to make perfect machines. Basically it is the power of schematizing which reduces things to external objects and technical tools. Neo discards rational knowledge and acquires, or rather restores the capacity to encounter the world in a direct, unmedi-

ated and holistic way. Neo wins by letting the world free. Indeed, only acting knowledge grants freedom.

Neo's Taoist predecessor is the famous cook in the book of "Chuang-tzu" who cuts the ox without noticing it and even touching it with his knife. The butcher does his job simply by involving both himself and the ox into the irresistible, infinitely differentiated, perfectly musical, as it were, rhythm of life. His "pure" contact with the ox has no quantitative physical dimensions because the place of this contact is actually the all-pervasiveness of self-differentiating Void. Like the "marvelous images" of the Tao vortex it is simultaneously present and not-present, inside and outside. This is why the ability of "understanding power" implies the so called absence of forms which is in fact a form-generating propensity. Taoist authors speak about "miraculous matching" (*miao qi*) of the opposites. The Great Tao is the "spontaneous responding to influence" (*ziran gan ying*) which is the realization of one's "thusness".

What we are dealing with in this theme of non-contact touch is essentially a sort of differential relation between two kinds of duration: a physical and a spiritual. Neo is not evading bullets, for the simple reason that "spiritual illumination" knowledge of objects. He is in some profound sense coexisting or rather co-relating with them while being impenetrable for the limited physical forces. He does not look for the "matrix" as a sort of transcendental intellectual model of existence. He returns to the "semen" of things, the immanent source of life and finds abode in the infinitely small middle space of "spiritual transformation". He does follow something, surely not things (he does not have individual Ego anyway) but what the Taoists used to call "the profound impulse" (*xuan ji*), "heavenly impulse" (*tian ji*) etc. of

universal transformations. T'ai-chi master Li Yaxuan defines the T'ai-chi skill as the ability "to follow spontaneously the impulse and respond to changes" (Li Yaxuan 2003: 122).

I find a rough Western correlate to this reality in Jille Deleuze's concept of the fold which is described as the relatedness of actualization (the spirit) and realization (the body), a relatedness that actualization cannot fully realize and realization cannot fully actualize. The "heavenly impulse" is precisely the force of actualizing the virtual and providing virtual depth to the actual. The "crack of being", the abysmal reserve of things left out in this interaction correspond, as Deleuze himself affirms, to the circuit of Tao that stands for the ultimate reality in Chinese thought (Deleuze: 1993, 125).

We can add now that living in the fold or the virtual mode of the ever-passing Bullet-Time means sinking ever deeply in the dynamic of existence which comprises and finally mixes up both virtual and actual aspects. This mode of living grants the sense of inner continuity beneath the visible changes. On the way from the seemingly real self (individual) to the real non-Self (the awakened Self) one passes through two main stages: first one should "forget oneself" and then self-forgetting should also be forgotten. The truth of this Taoist double un-doing transcends all images and concepts. The transition to the highest level of enlightenment through "following the impulse" is described in the saying which is known to me only in oral transmission:

*"If there is a Will then there is spirituality.
If there is no Will then there is miraculous effect".*

This amounts to saying that the supreme achievement is leaving behind even one's concentration. Living by T'ai-chi means ex-

actively dwelling at the intersection of forms and formless, at the level of “semen of things” where, according to Lao-tzu, we can contemplate the rise of all things and their return to the root. It is something existing “between presence and absence”.

Interesting to say, the combination of “awareness” and “knowledge” quoted above corresponds to the notion of “perception” (*zhi jue*) in modern Chinese language. Indeed, under conditions of informational civilization the faculty of perception has acquired a great importance and can even overshadow the intellectual reflection that has traditionally served as a basis of identity in the Western thought. Does not the digital world of electronics disclose extremely evasive, ephemeral, full of vibrant dynamism, pre-reflective images that we encounter at the level of primal perception? We have to deal with these images directly, to be in exchange with them rather than “react” to them or reflect on them, in a word – to be existentially involved in the world of mediation and media. Yet the media of telecommunication transcends intellectual mediation.

Previously these images constituted the contents of prophetic dreams and spiritual visions of a few chosen persons. Now they are accessible to the general public. By giving priority to the material presence of image they stimulate the sharpening of our perceptive abilities and, in a wider sense, spiritual sensitivity. And this new identity based on perception opens a prospect of a new safe heaven for the pre-subjective Self. This brings the social values of the information age even closer to the Taoist ideal of a

sage who guides the world without being noticed by it.

Can't we call it a providential twist of history if technological innovations generally assessed as detrimental to human spirituality and even natural sensitivity turn out to be the means of recovering that desperately wanted spirituality along new lines and in new forms? We are not yet ready to say what kind of identity can be nurtured by relying on perception and thus “forgetting”, un-doing our reflective ego. Perception is ambiguous because it discloses the non-availability of the world for the critical thinking. We can say only that this will be an identity of the Great Self whose very essence is a promise to come, a New Man as anonymous as he is real.

The reliance on perception implies the “acceleration in the void” beyond historical objectivity – a destiny of mankind predicted by J. Baudrillard and other contemporaries. This destiny has surprisingly much in common with the Taoist reality as a circuit of pure interaction “suspended in the void”.

So the Matrix – this truly apocalyptic revelation of modern crisis – is to be defeated not by confronting it but by the most sensitive perception of powers that are at work behind its dazzling imagery. The victories in the world and *over* the world are won by the inner and invisible effort. The triumph of technology, this epitome of mediation, is bound to create its counterweight – a “civilization of awakening” based on the immediate perception of the creative source, a non-grounding ground of existence.

summary



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The author contends that the roots of modern global crisis are not so much economical or political but epistemological. It is the crisis of the classical subject-object opposition which does not fit the realities of the digital world. The Eastern religions can provide a solution of this crisis. In particular Taoism with its spiritual practices (meditation, Taijiquan etc.) presents technique of immediate communication which is a distinctive sign of to-day's post-historical world. The article is an attempt to rethink the nature of human experience and related concepts such as image, spirit, practice, cultural style etc. The author explores the new kind of identity based on what can be called perceptual awareness. Recent trends in phenomenology and even mass culture are used as illustrations of this new turn of Western thought.

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