

‘Please Do not Stand over the Buddha’s Head (Pay Respect)’: Mediations of Tourist and Researcher Experience in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines signs mediating tourist experience in temples and heritage sites in Thailand, paying particular attention to how language is used on signs, the semiotic make-up of the signs, and the economy of discourses embedded within those signs. Utilizing a geosemiotic approach (Scollon and Scollon 2003), we show that the signs populating tourist spaces in Thailand not only address rather different audiences, but also index distinct orders of discourse (religious, commercial, informational, regulatory). We propose that signs mediate differently the landscape of Thai Buddhist temples for the local Thai audience and for non-Thai Western others, implying for each group not only different kinds of behaviours but also contrasted positions and identities. In that sense, we view signs in this tourist context observed as cultural tools for boundary production between Easterner and Westerner.

Keywords: geosemiotics, mediation, Thailand, tourism, relational inquiry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Councils assesses tourism to contribute 9.1% to the gross domestic product of Thailand in 2014 (World Travel & Tourism Council 2014) which makes tourism an important economic resource for Thailand. It is thus no wonder that research on tourism in Thailand has

been prolific, including such themes as: medical tourism (I.G. Cohen 2010), sex tourism (Leheny 1995; E. Cohen 1996; Montgomery 2001), drifter tourism (E. Cohen 1982 and 1989), as well as the craft trade (E. Cohen 2000). Tourism in Thailand includes many heritage sites, and as Peleggi (1996) found, Thailand's heritage tourist sites tend to attract a local domestic audience, and this is in part indexed by the fact that many temples and heritage sites are actually directed toward a seemingly Thai audience. In this contribution, we have chosen to focus our attention on tourism in such heritage sites and religious places in Thailand, focusing on the geosemiotics of Thai Buddhist temples and how the signs in such landscapes mediate tourist experience.

As background to this study, we should point out that in July 2014, two of the authors of this article, both of whom are Westerners (or 'farang' – white people in the Thai language), were invited to design a short course on ethnographic fieldwork for graduate students at Thammasat University¹. After some theoretical input about the basic tenets of ethnography, two days of fieldtrip were planned where the group visited different tourist venues, including some temples in Bangkok (Wat Arun, Wat Phra Kaew, Wat Pho, the Grand Palace, Wat Rakang) and heritage sites in Ayuthaya and Samut Sakorn. On that occasion, an interest in the linguistic landscapes of these venues emerged from noticing how these sites formed a complex communicative nexus, where Western, Asian and Thai tourists were represented disparately. Intrigued by these phenomena, the group set out to further explore the multilingual and multicultural landscape of Thai tourist sites, asking the following questions: what tourist identities and sets of practices were indexed by the signs? What representations and boundaries between Eastern and Western tourists were constructed through signage? In the course of this project, a specific epistemology and methodology developed. We briefly describe it in the next two sections.

2. CONSTRUCTING A RELATIONAL OBJECT OF INQUIRY

Desmond (2014) proposes that if ethnographers want to address the social issues of their time, a transformation of ethnographic models might best be in order. In particular, the vision of ethnographers as "lone wolf field-

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workers” (Desmond 2014, 571), writing up their own story from their own viewpoints, could be more fruitfully replaced by *collaborative ethnographies*. Collaborative ethnographies are not just ‘group ethnographies’ where all researchers look at an identical object from different vantage points, it is more like a “workforce of interconnected ethnographers, each working on his own piece of the puzzle” (ibidem). When researchers draw forces in this way, their “sprawling network of relations [...] transcends the scope of any single endeavor” (ibidem). Desmond’s description fits how our object of inquiry became constructed and defined.

For example, over the previous days the graduate students participating in the trip had presented their own projects many of which had to do with (English) language learning and tourist communication in Thailand. de Saint-Georges had presented the situation of multilingual Luxembourg and the challenges of this multilingualism for education. The presentation had created the opportunity for comparing sociolinguistic situations across the two settings and to contrast language policies in Europe with the language policy of the developing ASEAN community. This made *multilingualism* a common theme salient for the group.

Both Jocuns and de Saint-Georges had taken courses with Ron Scollon where they engaged in the first anticipatory steps of what would eventually become the field of ‘linguistic landscaping’. In those courses Ron Scollon first introduced them to examining the ‘literate face’ of a city – or how languages on city signs were reflective of local, national and international tensions and how they created certain kinds of identities for dwellers of urban spaces (de Saint-Georges and Norris 2000). This led further to the idea of looking at the *multilingual landscape of tourist signs*.

One of the authors, Nawasri Chonmahatrakul, had herself already conducted fieldwork at tourist sites in Thailand and became interested in the *discourses of donations* (explained below in more details), which further became a focus of attention, especially because it seemed constructed differently for Thai tourist and farang tourists.

Finally, several of the students had never travelled outside Thailand and it was de Saint-Georges’ first visit to the country. This transformed most of the exchanges into instances of *informal learning* about each other’s practices, which we could call *displacing dialogues* – where our respective sense of what we knew and who we were was gently being questioned in the conversation. For example, since many of the students were practicing Buddhists, data collection would only start after sequences of *bpai wat* – or offerings at the temple which led also to discussion about how to do an offering, the role of prayer in everyone’s life, the concept of making good merit, and the role of religion in our respective societies.

The particulars of this fieldwork configuration are worth noting, in our view, because they illustrate the fundamental dynamic and relational nature of our project from the outset. In the next section, we further specify the background of the research, the type of data collection we did and the stance on data analysis we took, namely a *geosemiotics* perspective.

3. OBSERVING MULTILINGUAL TOURIST LANDSCAPES

Urry's (Urry and Larsen 2011) notion of the 'tourist gaze' refers to the fact that tourists place a set of expectations upon locals in their quest for an authentic local experience in heritage tourism. At the same time, locals react to this set of expectations through a set of their own, hence reflecting back a gaze with the hope of benefitting financially or otherwise (*ibidem*). In addition Urry argues elsewhere that places are often visually consumed, in part through our experience of looking at tourist sites and also through the practice of picture taking (Urry 2005). The field that has paid most attention to the design and consumption of signs in public spaces within applied and anthropological linguistics is commonly known as 'linguistic landscaping'. This field represents a range of approaches which differ as much in terms of methodologies as they do in terms of research objects. They have in common however a focus on observing how public signs (such as billboards, regulatory signs, advertisements, graffiti, etc.) acquire specific meanings because of their placement in public space (Blommaert and Huang 2010; Blommaert 2013; Blommaert and Maly 2014). Earlier studies of linguistic landscapes tended to take a rather quantitative approach focusing upon the distribution of languages and thus cataloguing the multilingual landscape of a particular community (e.g. Gorter 2006; Backhaus 2007; Shohamy and Gorter 2009). Huebner's (2006) analysis of the changing linguistic landscape in Bangkok is an excellent example of such a study, illustrating the wide array of signs present in several Bangkok neighborhoods. Another discipline that has paid attention to the study of signs is social semiotics and the so-called 'multimodal approach to discourse' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). Multimodal approaches to signs examine their design in terms of visual aspects, textual features and textural dimensions. Researchers in this framework have an interest towards understanding which cultural, social, historical resources shape the construction of signs. They also examine these resources' potential to create certain meanings and interpretations.

In this study, we take yet another approach, called *geosemiotics*. Originally developed by Scollon and Scollon (2003), *geosemiotics* partly

builds upon the multimodal framework but also contributes its own unique approach to the understanding of signs in public space (de Saint-Georges and Norris 2000; Scollon and Scollon 2003; Lou 2007; Serwe and de Saint-Georges 2014) by taking a broader view than linguistic landscape studies or multimodal approaches to signs. A geosemiotic approach holds that focusing solely on the languages present *in* signs constitutes an inherent limitation if one wants to study social issues that matter for at least three reasons. Focusing on language alone we fail to see that signs are made up of multiple modes, and that color, font size, code-preference, and the whole array of the way signs are composed is relevant to understanding meaning. Secondly, geosemiotics is not just interested in the signs themselves but in understanding how individuals engage with the signs interactively, considering that they only become relevant when they are used in action. Thirdly, geosemiotics is interested in the political and social economy of a place and how it might affect the signs designed and used in that place (Lou 2007). As Blommaert and Huang (2010, 3) note:

Sociological, cultural, sociolinguistics and political features of [...] space will determine how signs look and work in that space, and signs will contribute to the organization and regulation of that space by defining addressees and selecting audiences and by imposing particular restrictions, offering invitations, articulating norms of conduct and so on to these selected audiences.

To recover this political and social economy of space, Scollon and Scollon (2004) propose that we should look at the Discourses (Gee 1999) that circulate in any one place and that make that space a unique nexus of discourses in tension. Considering together the emplacement of signs (their physical location), their semiotic design (*visual semiotics*), the type of interaction order they enter (*interaction order*), and the discourses they materialize (*discourses in place*), we argue, can teach us a lot about how the West and the East is constructed at the Thai tourist sites we visited.

With this framework in mind, we went to 16 sites and took more than 300 photographs of signs at four cities (Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Ayuthaya and Samut Sakorn) paying attention to the relationship between people's interactions with signs, language, space, place, the material world and the built environment. We observed how written text was lodged within complex built environments, including architectural structures such as stupas and pagodas (Cate 2003), images, sculptures, and statues that referenced and indexed discourses related to religion, mythic narratives and in some cases ethnic identity. We also considered how signs entered a larger nexus of practices, being caught in certain scripts for action. We finally considered what kinds of identities the signs thus observed mediated.

4. THE GEOSEMIOTICS OF THAI TEMPLES

The primary language for tourist experience at the sites we visited was overwhelmingly Thai. At these sites, Thai was used to name temples, to give historical explanations, to advertise products sold at shops bordering the sites, on food menus, to indicate directions, etc. The second most present language was English, even though some signs also occasionally came in other Asian languages. Our short survey included: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Malaysian signage. The image below gives an example of a multilingual sign with a combination of Thai, English, Japanese, and Chinese (*Fig. 1*).

As we noted earlier, of interest to us was to explore the following questions: what tourist identities and sets of practices were indexed by the signs? What representations and boundaries between Eastern and Western tourists were constructed through signage? Here we will particularly focus on Thai and English signs.



Figure 1. – A multilingual sign at Ayutthawa temple.

4.1. Discourses of donation: Thai tourists and merit making

Temples are an important part of tourism in Thailand. While in other parts of the world, tourists and practitioners of religion might not come into contact with each other very much (e.g. when a church is closed to tourists during a Mass, or a room is specifically reserved for quiet prayers), at the temples we observed, it was typical to find tourists capturing pictures in the same place where adherents of Buddhism were performing religious practices such as prayer. Buddhism became also intermeshed in our research practice. For the Buddhist researchers on the team, for example, each site visit actually started with a practice that has to do with the Thai Buddhist habit of merit-making, or *tham bun* (Piker 1968; Cate 2003; Ariyabud-dhiphongs 2009). *Tham bun* is the Buddhist concept of making merit and refers to the accumulation of good deeds and actions that carry over into the next life. There are numerous ways in which one can make merit from feeding monks, becoming a monk, having an offspring become a monk, to contributing to the construction, repair and maintenance of temples.

Related to this practice of *tham bun*, the most ubiquitous signs that fill the linguistic landscape of Thai temples are those that have to do with requests for donations. Requests for donation are commonly done in two ways – through verbal discourse or more commonly through written texts. In the first instance, there are announcements in Thai over a microphone telling people some of the ways in which visitors can spend their money on merit making actions. In the second more common instance requests for donations are scripted through various routines, signs and objects located throughout the temples.

One of the first ways of making merit is the practice of *bpai wat*. *Bpai wat* can be described as a short interaction sequence in which a Buddhist enters into a temple. It has the following steps (*Tab. 1* and *Fig. 2*):

Table 1. – Interaction Sequence at a Thai temple.

OPENING/ENTERING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take off your shoes. • Enter the temple.
PRE-OFFERING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy flowers/incense/gold leaf.
OFFERING / PRAYER / THE ACTION OF MAKING MERIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say a prayer either from a written script in the temple or something else. • Place flower and incense in the appropriate places. • Place a gold leaf on the image of the Buddha.
POST-OFFERING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walk around the inside of the temple reading the various texts. • Discover, find and/or conduct another action of <i>tham bun</i>.
CLOSING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather shoes. • Continue with tourist experience or leave the temple.



Figure 2. – Placing a gold leaf on the image of Buddha.

While typical, the above sequence can emerge differently depending on the temple one visits. For example a temple may have several Buddha statues on the premises in addition to a variety of types of donation through which one can make merit. We emphasize this to illustrate that the interaction between the built environment and tourists is not static in this context, touching the statues of the Buddha with the gold leaf is a practice which would be harder to imagine for example in a Catholic Church where crucifixes typically hang far up on the ceiling and are otherwise inaccessible, available for adoration but not for physical contact.

One way of making merit is according to one's birthday. *Figure 3* below comes from a temple in the Ayuthaya area which is located near several Thai heritage temple sites. It represents a common practice for making merit inside a Thai Buddhist temple that is related to the day on which one was born. Here an adherent will make a donation in the box beneath the Buddha image corresponding to the day of the week on which one was born. The text at the top of the display of Buddha images reads *Kao taon tambun prak prak jam wan* and asks for visitors to make a donation according to the image of the Buddha related to their respective birthday.



Figure 3. – Making merit based on your day of birth.

The text above and behind the Buddha image on the far left reads *wan atit* in Thai, which is Sunday, and is followed on the right by the remaining six days of the week. Notice that here there are eight Buddha images, the last one on the right hand side reads *rabu* in Thai and refers to the Buddha image for those people who were born on a Wednesday evening. Each different day of the week has its own distinctive Buddha image. In addition one will also notice that below each of the names for the days of the week, a number is represented. This number is the lucky number for that day of the week. For the purposes of making a donation one would possibly perform an action that number of times, e.g. saying a prayer, or possibly leave a donation in that amount. So for example the lucky number for *wan jan* or Monday is 15, so one could make a donation 15 times, say a prayer 15 times, etc.

Another typical script are requests for donation for monks' meals or for young monks.

The image in *Figure 4* depicts a donation box. The text above it asks adherents to leave a donation for the monks' meals tomorrow, the text on the bottom informs that the donation can be based on what you believe is appropriate to leave as a donation. The second image on the right in figure 4 displays two plastic figures that are holding alms bowls but the text on the bowls says different things. The alms bowl on the left says in Thai *Khaw tsaam sai bat kap samma nen noi*, 'Please donate for the young monks' and on the right *Khaw hai kwantuk tong sunsailai khwamsuksabai tong lai maa thema toiwit dikwa ni duai thon*, 'Hope all the sadness will disappear; the happiness will occur; pray for the better life'.

Looking at these representations we see that there is a wide array of ways in which donations for merit are requested. In Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) parlance, visual representations can be divided into different zones for analysis.



Figure 4. - Request for donation for monks' meals and for young monks (left) and 'happiness' (right).

The top zones typically correspond to some 'idealized' aspiration (here merit, happiness, better life, enlightenment), while the bottom is where the 'real' and concrete is located (in this case, the donation of money). Temples are full of such overt and covert discourses (Scollon and Scollon 2003) which constitute many 'calls for actions' directed towards Buddhist adherents.

What does this section tell us about tourist gaze and identities? Most of the signs select Thai Buddhist as their natural addressees: for them to be meaningful one has to know the Thai language and the Buddhist practices of *Thai Bum*. The signs are not just texts, or objects, but rather constitute prompts for further actions. If we thought about them as forms of speech acts, they would have the illocutionary force of directives. These signs are also caught within an economic discourse of the sustainability of Buddhist temples, a sacred discourse of religion and an aesthetic discourse of tourism. The audience for such signs is not just Thai people, but Thai tourists, because traveling to temples and visiting temples is a long practiced tradition in Thai culture and is also promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand. In other words a very distinct Thai and Buddhist identity is represented through signs related to donation.

4.2. *Discourses of information, traffic regulation and the construction of the Western 'other'*

Religious discourse was not the only type of discourse present in the tourist sites we visited. Another typical set of signs were 'information' stands, mostly bilingual Thai/English as *Figure 5*.

The brown color of the sign indicates that it is an official board put up by the *Thailand Tourist Authority* (TAT) aimed at giving historical information about what the visitor is seeing in the landscape. They are reminiscent of the colors that can be found in many tourist sites, for example UNESCO heritage sites. Signs with an identical 'corporate identity' are found throughout all the sites maintained by the TAT. The first sign notes a 'foreign' influence on the landscape referring to the borrowed architectural styles found in local temples and attesting to the international commercial and cultural ties in existence under King Narai the Great (1656-1688).



Figure 5. – Wihan Jataramuk.

Initially , this monastery was constructed by King U - thong in 1900 B.E. to accommodate the monks that once were ordained from Phra Wanratana Mahathera Bureau in Ceylon. This denomination is called The Pakaew Group. Thereby this monastery was named "Wat Pakaew". Many people because follows of this donomination and there were many monks ordered in the order so that Pakaws Group quickly because propous during this period. Later on many people were faithful in this domination. Many of them were ordained the monks of this domination so that Pakaew Group became prosperous rapidly during that time.

Figure 6. - Wat Yai Chaimongkhon.



Figure 7. - Bilingual directional sign at Wat Saket.

Such ‘informational signs’ show that tourist sites are often places of ‘informal learning’ where tourists learn to pair selected information with built elements of the landscape. In that sense, the tourist identity indexed is often that of the ‘information seeker’ or ‘learner’.

Zooming in on the variety of English used shows us that while the English side of the signs might be at first glance understood as a means to address a foreign audience, it does not mean that it does not also index the local community. One of the issues with English in Thailand is that while many Thai people argue that English is a lingua franca, the English spoken locally by Thai maintains few distinct features as one may find in such English varieties of English as Singlish or Hong Kong English, as becomes apparent on the sign *Figure 6* above.

In addition to information stands, there are also many ‘traffic regulating’ signs in temples, indicating for example directions. The following bilingual sign was found in Wat Saket, which is also known as the temple of the golden mount. In English it says ‘way up’ to the right of a red arrow that is pointing to the direction of the stairs, and is coherent in terms of text/image relevance (*Fig. 7*).

When one examines the Thai script in this sign, however, one finds that it actually says much more. Translated into English it says ‘the way to heaven, pay respect to the Buddha image name’ (*pra setti nawa goti* ‘[nine headed Buddha] WAY UP donating for the way to the heaven’) We suggest that leaving out a lot of the text in the English translation decontextualizes the religious significance as well as the metaphorical references within the text script. At Wat Saket, one walks up a series of spiral staircases and upon reaching the top, there are several Buddha images in addition to new opportunities for merit-making donation. This is thus another interesting example of the intersection between religion and tourism in the geosemiotics of emplacement. The English translation leaves out the references to heaven, the act of merit, and the specific Buddha image, thus addressing a foreign secular visitor. The Thai text on the other hand is again clearly prominent within this discourse of merit and donation. In the English text the elaborate metaphorical details are decontextualized to the phrase ‘way up’.

Another set of signs are those regulating tourist behaviour. Recently Thai news has been filled with several instances of tourists behaving badly at temples. The behaviour of Chinese tourists (Fernquest 2013) was considered so bad that 90,000 behavioural manuals were published and distributed in Northern Thailand over the 2015 Chinese Lunar New Year’s celebration (Parameswaran 2015; Paris 2015). We found many signs directed towards tourist behaviour typically drawing attention to actions and forms of conduct that are negative. From the manner of dress at

temples, to misunderstood representations of the image of the Buddha, in Thailand, one encounters a number of signs that inform tourists of unwanted dispreferred behaviour. We argue that such signs create a sense of otherness. Most of these signs are written in English but still many are bilingual and multilingual, with Thai, Japanese, and Chinese making up the other languages represented by such signage.

The image in *Figure 8* below is one such sign at the Thai Heritage sites of the ancient city and temple complex in Ayuthaya. On the left are behaviours that are deemed appropriate and on the right are behaviours deemed otherwise. Notice how some of the Westerners are represented in the drawings on the right: obese, shirtless, pot-smoking, and promiscuous.

Quite interestingly, these signs not only indicate dos and don'ts for behaviour on the temple complex, but also feature some stereotypical behavioural don'ts that can be applied to many Asian cultures. For example, 'don't display affection for another person in public. It is frowned upon in the Thai society. You may hold hands but that's as far as it goes in polite society'. Interestingly, societies where people kiss in public are presented here as impolite societies. 'Kissing' is euphemized in the text and becomes 'display of affection'.

Other signs are regulations about the potential for damaging ancient structures by trying to climb them. They are geared towards a wider audience, as shown in the multilingual display of instructions in *Figure 9* and *10*.

The picture in *Figure 10* is found in front of a famous depiction of a Buddha head encased in a tree. The sign is interesting because it indexes religion, namely one is called to pay respect to the Buddha, and one does so by not standing over the Buddha's head. Of course one witnesses many people doing as the sign asks and taking the photo while in the kneeling position. What is ironical is that at the same time many other people are also waiting in the foreground, standing no less, waiting for their turn to take a picture in front of the famous statue. This type of sign is yet another manner in which religion in Thailand and its tourist economy overlap in somewhat conflicting ways.

Another way in which this occurs is through the commodification of Buddhist imagery in the tourist economy. When one goes to a temple or heritage site there are any number of opportunities to purchase a buddha image. However, what is not written or acknowledged is how this action is really meant for adherents of the religion, not for tourists to keep as keepsakes or souvenirs. The image below is an example of this conflict between tourism and religion. One sees awnings, stickers, t-shirts, and umbrella shades at tourist sites and temples throughout Thailand that remind tourists to respect the Buddhist religion (*Fig. 11*).

สิ่งควรละเว้นและ
สิ่งควรปฏิบัติ

DO & DON'T



Figure 8. – Do's & Don'ts at Ayuthaya Historical Park.



Figure 9. – Multilingual do not sign at Ayutthaya.



Figure 10. – Multilingual sign at Ayutthaya.



Figure 11. – The ‘respect the Buddha’ umbrella shade Amphawa (it reads on the left: “Buddha is not for decoration”; “Stop buying Buddha”).

Despite the fact that such signs are necessary to prevent unwanted or embarrassing behaviour, there is a disconnection between the signs that construct a foreigner as ‘other’ and those that do the opposite, and try to enable tourists to interact with the geosemiotic landscape as locals do. That is to say, there are very few signs in the temples or heritage sites in our survey that explain how a tourist should interact with the temple. We are not suggesting that all signs in Thai temples should be exact literal translations from Thai into other languages. Rather we suggest that what might be needed are signs, pamphlets and brochures that instead of creating and indexing a foreign other, explain tourists how one can interact with a temple in an appropriate and respectful manner.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this contribution, we have sought to make the configuration of selected tourist venues in Thailand more visible, paying specific attention to public and private signs mediating tourist experience at those sites.

On an *empirical* level, we highlighted how the tourist sites examined constituted a complex nexus of discourses and practices. While Thai Buddhist tourists were specifically invited to donate, pray, make offerings, place golden leaf on Buddha statues, Farang tourists were more likely to be informed how to interact with the landscape (they were specifically requested to avoid touching or buying artefacts and requested to refrain from behaviour frowned upon in Asian societies). Another way of handling the two types of signs that we examined in our contribution to this special issue is to think of them as representing two disparate orders of indexicality (Silverstein 2003). On the one hand, we have a series of signs that orient local Thais to the built environment in terms of the practice of *tham bun*. On the other hand we have a distinct ‘other’ order of indexicality that mediates the behaviour of Western tourists. In that sense, we view signs in the tourist context observed as tools contributing to boundary production between Easterner and Westerner, implying for each group not only different kinds of behaviours but also contrasted positions and identities.

On a *methodological* level, we developed a collaborative project. The project involved a multilingual and multicultural team. In this team, we were sometimes insiders and sometimes outsiders with regards to the discourses and practices identified at the venues visited. Our own identities and trajectories thus contributed different kinds of insights, knowledge and practices to the overall research process (Creese and Blackledge 2012; Holmes et al. 2013). Reflecting back upon the make-up of this research, we believe that the possibility to ‘co-generate knowledge’ (Siry 2011) contributed to questioning the very boundaries we were identifying and to open new, more polysemic, spaces among ourselves.

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