

Textual Borrowing of Aftertime Literati from the Nineteen Old Poems

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Abstract: The *Nineteen Old Poems*, hailed as the “crown jewel” of five-character lines, has left an indelible mark on countless poets of subsequent generations, inspiring an array of imitative works. This paper aims to explore the diverse practices of textual borrowing from the *Nineteen Old Poems* across three distinct historical periods: the late Han and Wei-Jin periods (Cao brothers, Ruan Ji, Lu Ji), the Tang dynasty (Li Bai, Wei Yingwu), and the Ming dynasty (He Jingming, Li Panlong, and others among the Earlier and Later Seven Masters). By selecting representative imitative poems from these poets and comparing them with the original works, this paper reveals that each dynasty (period) exhibits unique characteristics in its textual borrowing from the *Nineteen Old Poems*, which differ widely. Notably, the influence of these poems was widespread during the late Han and Wei-Jin period, but varied significantly during the Tang dynasty due to the diversity of poets and poetic styles. This paper sheds light on the innovative linguistic styles and artistic techniques prevalent during the Wei-Jin period, as well as the tendency towards literati stylization, delves into the inheritance and reformation of the ancient poetic tradition by literati during the “Classical Revival Movement” in the Ming dynasty, contributes to the broader research on imitative poetry derived from the *Nineteen Old Poems* and probes into its artistic achievements and literary value.

Keywords: *Nineteen Old Poems*, imitative poetry, late Han and Wei-Jin period, Tang dynasty, Ming dynasty

1. Introduction

The *Nineteen Old Poems* is a collection of five-character ancient Chinese poems heavily influenced by the *yuefu* (Music Bureau) poetry of the pentasyllabic genre. These poems were selected by Xiao Tong of the Southern Liang dynasty and included in his compilation, the *Wen Xuan* or *Selections of Refined Literature*. The collection represents a pinnacle of five-character poetry, drawing inspiration from *Shi Jing* (Classic of Poetry) and *Chu Ci* (Songs of Chu), and paving the way for the five-character and seven-character poems of the Wei-Jin period. In many respects, such as composition, wording, expression, and idea conveying, they have exerted a profound and lasting influence on subsequent poetic works. The creation of the *Nineteen Old Poems* roughly falls between the middle and later Eastern Han period and the emergence of the Seven Masters of Jian'an. During this era, the once-mighty Han Empire was already in decline, and scholars and literati had tasted the bitterness of a disordered world. Through these poems, they expressed the brevity of life and the difficulty of

finding kindred spirits. Although each poem stands independently, they convey shared sentiments. Broadly, these poems can be categorized into the wanderer's poems and the poems of yearning women, both expressing the bitterness of human existence and the melancholy of separation.

This paper aims to explore the diverse practices of textual borrowing from the *Nineteen Old Poems* across three distinct historical periods: the late Han and Wei-Jin periods (Cao brothers, Ruan Ji, Lu Ji), the Tang dynasty (Li Bai, Wei Yingwu), and the Ming dynasty (He Jingming, Li Panlong, and others among the Earlier and Later Seven Masters), and to compare their representative imitative poems with the original works. While both domestic and overseas academic communities have shown significant interest in the study of the *Nineteen Old Poems* themselves, with a substantial body of published research, the study of imitative poetry derived from these works is relatively limited. This paper, to some extent, contributes to filling this research gap and enriches the scholarship surrounding the field of imitative poetry.

2. Borrowing from the Nineteen Old Poems in the Late Han and Wei-Jin Period

The Jian'an poets in the late Han dynasty ushered in the first golden age of imitative poetry based on the *Nineteen Old Poems*. Cao Pi and Cao Zhi, as the leaders of the Jian'an poetic style, pioneered the borrowing from this collection. They, in some cases, preserved the wording and structure of the original lines to a significant extent. In *The High and Long East Wall*, for instance, we find the phrase "The wind whirls wildly up and down", and Cao Zhi's *Miscellaneous Poem* includes "The sorrowful wind whirls wildly up and down", both conveying a similar subtle sense of sorrow and lament. Similarly, in *Why Does the Moon Shine So Brightly*, the line "Tears fall, wetting my garments" is adapted in Cao Pi's *Two Poems of Yan'gexing - I* as "Unconsciously, tears fall and wet my garments", and the line "Why does the moon shine so brightly, illuminating my silk-crafted bed curtains" appears as "The bright moon shines brightly on my bed" in the *Two Poems of Yan'gexing - I*. Another approach involved not directly borrowing from the original text but rather creatively reinterpreting it. Cao Zhi's *To White Horse King Cao Biao*, for example, draws inspiration from the poem *Drive the Cart to the Eastern Gate* collected in the *Nineteen Old Poems*. The lines, "Life lasts but for one age, departing like morning dew. Years pass like the shifting shadows, allowing no one to chase up. I ponder my mortality, not like stone or gold, and thus sigh with a heavy heart", are masterfully transformed from "Through vast changes in Yin and Yang, our years are nothing but morning dew. Life appears as a temporary guest, not as solid as gold or stone", indicating a holistic contemplation on life.

By the time of Wei's Zhengshi period, Ruan Ji's *Yong Huai Shi* (Songs of My Heart) represented the pinnacle of five-character poems during that time. Ruan Ji not only directly borrowed words and phrases from the *Nineteen Old Poems*, ingeniously incorporating them into his own compositions, but also inherited the syntactic structures of the collection to the point where, without reference to surrounding lines, it was sometimes challenging to distinguish whether a line belonged to Ruan Ji or the ancient poems. In *Eighty-Two Poems of Yong Huai Shi - XII*, the lines "May we transform into a pair of flying birds, soaring wing to wing" draw inspiration from the phrases "May we transform into a pair of swans, vigorously flapping wings to ascend high" found in *In the Northwest, There Stands a High Tower* and "May we transform into a pair of flying swallows" from *The High and Long East Wall*. In terms of theme, *Yong Huai Shi* excelled at exploring profound emotions using minor details. Ruan Ji borrowed the concept of "bu mei" (cannot sleep) from the *Nineteen Old Poems* to convey a more abstract and deeply profound sense of melancholy. Take *Eighty-Two Poems of Yong Huai Shi - I* as an example: The lines, "In the middle of the night, unable to sleep, I sit up and pluck the strings of the qin, with a gentle breeze caressing my lapel. The solitary goose calls from afar in the wilderness, while soaring birds sing within the northern woods. Wandering, what shall I witness? Sorrow and thoughts burdening my heart alone", derive from the poem *Why Does the Moon Shine So Brightly*,

particularly the lines “Why does the moon shine so brightly, illuminating my silk-crafted bed curtains. Unable to sleep due to worries, I grab my robe and rise to pace back and forth,” reflecting a deeper and more cryptic form of melancholy.

Shen Yue once commented on Western Jin literature as “abounding in exquisitely crafted words and a profusion of ornate compositions” in his discussion on the *Biography of Xie Lingyun in the Book of Song* [1]. As one of the representative figures in the Wei-Jin period’s creation of imitative poems, Lu Ji’s *Imitative Poems* series of twelve poems marked the first publicly acknowledged attempt to simulate, in name, the *Nineteen Old Poems*. These poems often retained the themes of the original poems but were influenced by the poetic style of the Taikang period, resulting in a more ornate linguistic tone, highlighting the characteristics of literati stylization. Take *In Imitation of Green, Green Grass by the Riverside* as an example:

“Lush, lush is the grass by the riverside, sparkling beside the flowing waters. Countless are those beautiful maidens, each working diligently by their looms. Gorgeous and graceful they are, their beauty is radiant and enchanting. Their loved ones wander and do not return, leaving them accompanied only by their shadows. The empty rooms resonate with sorrowful winds, and in the midst of the night, they sigh.”

It can be compared to the original poem *Green, Green Grass by the Riverside*.

“Green, green is the grass by the riverside, with lush willows in the garden. Upstairs, a charming lady stands by the window, with her fair skin rivaling the brightness of the moon’s glow. Adorned in beauty, she extends her delicate fingers. Once a virtuous maiden, now she is married to a playboy. The playboy has gone and won’t return; an empty bed is hard to bear alone.”

It is evident that the entire poem essentially carries forward the theme of a woman longing for her husband, and the sentence structure and the specific meanings corresponding to each line are largely similar. Even the techniques of parallelism and repetition run in the same groove. However, the poet, through subtle adjustments in language and phrasing, has transformed the overall linguistic style of the original poem, elevating it to a more ornate and exquisite level. In summary, Lu Ji’s imitative poems, while inheriting the original themes, broke new ground in terms of techniques, wording, and phrasing, reflecting a strong sense of literati stylization. Lu Ji is, so to speak, the true pioneer of imitative poetry based on the *Nineteen Old Poems*.

In a word, during the late Han and Wei-Jin periods, the influence of the *Nineteen Old Poems* on the imitative works of literati was significant for a couple of reasons. First, it was due to the relatively close temporal proximity to the era of the *Nineteen Old Poems*. The shared historical backdrop provided fertile ground for the creation of literary works with certain commonalities [2]. Second, during the Wei-Jin period, literary circles were thriving, with the group of literati centered around Cao Pi in Yecheng serving as the starting point. Throughout the Wei-Jin period, literati passed on the *Nineteen Old Poems* to each other, which not only expanded the dissemination of these poems but also deepened the influence of these works on Wei-Jin’s poets. Although these imitative poems still bore significant thematic and formal influence from the originals, literati authors, through innovations in linguistic styles and artistic techniques, further elevated the original works into a realm of literati stylization. Thus, imitative poems of this period collectively exhibit a pronounced literati stylization.

3. Borrowing from the Nineteen Old Poems in the Tang Dynasty

The Tang dynasty, known as the most prosperous era for Chinese poetry, offered a more diversified avenue for poets to explore, and as a result, the borrowing from the *Nineteen Old Poems* was not as widespread as in the Wei-Jin period. Nevertheless, some poets in the dynasty creatively engaged with the poems, allowing imitative poetry to shine even amidst the prevalence of regulated verse. In *Man Tang Shuo Shi* by Song Luo of the Qing dynasty, it is mentioned that “Li Taibai’s *Fifty-Nine Ancient-*

Style Poems and Wei Suzhou's *Twelve Imitative Poems*, both capture the spirit of the *Nineteen Old Poems*" [3]. The following analysis will focus on Li Bai and Wei Yingwu as representatives.

Li Bai, one of the greatest poets of the Tang dynasty, is often referred to as the "Immortal Poet". His *Twelve Imitative Poems* can be seen as another instance of organized poetic imitation of the *Nineteen Old Poems* following in the footsteps of Lu Ji. The *Twelve Imitative Poems* directly corresponds to the twelve poems of the *Nineteen Old Poems*. "The stars twinkle in the vast night sky", for instance, corresponds to "So remote is the cowherd star", and "Wading into the river to play with the autumn water" corresponds to "Wading into the river to pick lotus", among others [4]. In terms of structure, Li Bai directly incorporates numerous lines from the *Nineteen Old Poems*. For example, "The stars twinkle in the vast night sky" directly adapts from *Bright Moon Lights Up the Night*, which features the line "Masses of stars shine so sharp and clear". Similarly, in the eleventh poem of *Fifty-Nine Ancient-Style Poems*, the line "Life is not like a cold pine tree. How can one's appearance remain constant with the passing years" directly borrows from *The Cart Turns for the Trip*, where it says, "Life is not like rock or metal. Who can count on a long life?" In terms of themes and language, Li Bai's imitative poems carry a significant trace of the *Nineteen Old Poems*. This is evident in the themes of the fleeting nature of life and yearning for women, as well as the influence of folk songs and the clear, concise language of the collection. These elements contributed to the unique poetic style of Li Bai, described as possessing "both the freshness seen in the works of Yu Xin and the grace and elegance found in the writings of Bao Zhao".

Li Bai's imitative poems not only borrowed from the form and techniques of the *Nineteen Old Poems* but also integrated the essence of these poems into his own creative works, infusing them with new thoughts and characteristics [5]. While the *Nineteen Old Poems* contain poems with uplifting themes, most of them are filled with concerns about life and feelings of desolation. Li Bai, on the other hand, after lamenting the brevity of life, reveals a profound insight that worldly success and fame are all illusory, showcasing the poet's optimism and conveying fresh thoughts and emotions. For example, in his poem "The living are merely passing travelers", borrowing from the poem *Green, Green Cypress on the Grave-Mound* in the *Nineteen Old Poems*, Li Bai transforms the realistic sorrow of the original poem into the freedom of romanticism. The line "With ceaseless sighs upon pondering, worldly honors and riches are unworthy of cherishing" expresses the idea that life is just like this - in the end, the praise and disgrace of life are all empty and not worth treasuring. This contrasts starkly with the atmosphere of "Amidst opulence and grandeur, they revel without restraint, yet their countenances bear the burden of unexplained woes" in the original poem.

Apart from Li Bai, the mid-Tang dynasty poet Wei Yingwu inherited and developed the *Nineteen Old Poems*, shaping his poetry style as elegant and classical, graceful and leisurely [6]. His *Twelve Imitative Poems* is, like Li Bai's, an imitation and borrowing from the *Nineteen Old Poems*. For instance, in the second piece of the *Twelve Imitative Poems*, "In the yellow sparrow's resounding song, even the secluded orchids seem to bloom. Deep within the boudoir, the sun shines through the sandalwood window. The lady within, adorned and youthful, gently reveals her jade-like teeth. She regrets the years wasted, associating with wandering knights errant. Separation has endured for far too long, unaware of life and death in this present," is a result of imitation of *Green, Green Grass by the Riverside*. However, Wei Yingwu's poem shifts from a description of a moonlit night to the circumstances of daytime, emphasizing that the daylight is already so gloomy, not to mention the night. The emotions are more poignant. Both the structural layout of the imitative poem and its themes and expressive techniques closely resemble those of the original. The repetition of words like "guan guan" and "mi mi" follows the original's use of "ying ying" and "xian xian", adding a touch of ancient style. Furthermore, the metaphorical technique deeply borrows from the original poem, using "you lan" (secluded orchids) as a metaphor to depict the inner conflict of a woman's thoughts.

Furthermore, some of Wei Yingwu's imitative poems do not rigidly adhere to the original poems. Instead, he provides personalized interpretations that express unique thoughts and emotions. The sixth piece of the *Twelve Imitative Poems*, for example, is an imitation of *Bright Moon Lights Up the Night* [7]. Both poems were spontaneously composed on autumn nights and revolved around themes of friendship. The original poem conveys a desolate atmosphere, showcasing the author's despair over the loss of friendship: "We were once study mates, soaring high like a pair of carefree birds. Not thinking of holding hands in companionship, you abandoned me as though I were a forgotten relic." However, Wei's poem takes a different approach, beginning with "The moon is full, and the autumn night grows long. Startled crows cry out in the northern woods. The celestial river spans the sky, and the dipper's handle points southwest. The chilly crickets lament in the bridal chambers, and the melodious birds leave no traces of their songs," which describes the sorrowful scenery, accentuating his deep longing for his friend. He emphasized, "Old friends may be separated by thousands of miles, yet they bridge the distance between my highs and lows. For life is not as transient as grass and trees, this longing is eternally present," indicating that true friendship is not like plants and trees; even if separated by thousands of miles, through seasons of cold and heat, it remains unchanged. Wei Yingwu, a wanderer far from home, infused his yearning for old friends into his imitative ancient-style poems, thereby giving rise to a new set of emotions and thoughts.

In summary, the imitative poems of the Tang dynasty did not experience the same degree of influence from the *Nineteen Old Poems* as those in the Wei-Jin period. The primary reasons for this are the temporal gap of three to four hundred years separating the Tang dynasty from the late Eastern Han period and the potential damage to many primary sources during that time. Poets in the Tang dynasty, therefore, had limited access to the *Nineteen Old Poems*, with most of their understanding coming from sources like Xiao Tong's *Wen Xuan* and Zhong Rong's *Shi Pin* (Criticism of Poetry). Additionally, the dominant form of poetry in the Tang dynasty was regulated verse, and not every poet favored or excelled at imitative poems. Nevertheless, poets in the Tang dynasty, while not borrowing heavily from the *Nineteen Old Poems*, did pay attention to the poetic style and temperament and incorporated such elements into their own poetic styles to depict genuine emotions, thereby presenting distinctive individual characteristics.

4. Borrowing from the Nineteen Old Poems in the Ming Dynasty

After the Tang dynasty, imitative poems based on the *Nineteen Old Poems* touched a low point during the Song and Yuan dynasties, failing to make substantial progress. However, in the mid-Ming dynasty, they experienced a resurgence, primarily due to the classical revival movement. "The classical revival movement in the Ming dynasty was a natural outcome of the development and changes in classical aesthetic ideals and characteristics of classical poetry, and an inevitable result of cultural and literary evolution since the early Ming dynasty" [8]. During this period, the Earlier and Later Seven Masters emerged, advocating for a return to the "literature of the Qin and Han dynasties and poetry of the flourishing period of Tang dynasty. They championed the revival of classical literature, with representatives such as He Jingming and Li Panlong.

He Jingming, one of the Earlier Seven Masters, achieved the most significant success in imitative poetry. His *Eighteen Imitative Poems* closely mimics the *Nineteen Old Poems*. These imitative poems were composed in two different phases. In the early phase, there are clear traces of imitation in terms of themes, language, and format, only with some changes made in his wording. For example, his third poem in the series imitates *In the Northwest, There Stands a High Tower*. "Who will be the like-minded companion, rising together on twin phoenixes" imitates the original poem's "May we transform into a pair of swans, vigorously flapping wings to ascend high", both ending with "gao fei" (soaring high), creating a sense of helplessness in the search for like-minded friends. Furthermore, He Jingming was well-versed in the traditions of Han and Wei poets and was adept at adapting

specific lines from the *Nineteen Old Poems*. For example, a line in his sixteenth poem, “A guest comes from the south, bringing me a green silk qin” imitates “A guest comes from afar, bringing me a piece of fine silk” in *A Guest Comes from Afar*.

In the later stage of He Jingming’s imitative poetry, the *Nineteen Old Poems* exerted a more substantial influence. While adhering to the forms of the ancient poems and respecting their spirit, he introduced his personal style and expanded the thematic content. Regarding themes, He Jingming borrowed and developed the theme of friends being forsaken in the *Nineteen Old Poems* [9]. The most outstanding work carrying such a theme in the collection is *Bright Moon Lights Up the Night*, which narrates a friendship ultimately destroyed by self-interest. He Jingming, however, pointed to the underlying social reasons as the primary cause of people’s indifference. For instance, his twelfth piece in the *Eighteen Imitative Poems* states, “To form shallow friendships is not advisable, for who can claim they will endure in the long run?” In terms of depth of thought, it is clear that he outperformed the original poem.

In terms of the poetic spirit and temperament, He Jingming would incorporate a significant amount of contemporary elements into his imitative poems. For instance, his eighth piece in the *Eighteen Imitative Poems* bears some resemblance to *In the Northwest, There Stands a High Tower*. “Are there no virtuous gentlemen left, one’s honor lost for folly’s sake. The returning wind enters the embroidered curtains, with the passing of bright days in an instant. A jade-like beauty fades and withers. What will be left in the not-too-distant future?” It captures a sense of resolute faith and unyielding spirit, in contrast to the original poem’s sense of frustration due to the difficulty of finding like-minded friends. Considering the historical context in which He Jingming lived, there was internal corruption such as the dominance of Liu Jin and external threats from northern invaders and southern pirates. The scholar-officials found limited opportunities to serve their country, yet they stood firm against dark forces instead of being swayed.

Among the Earlier Seven Masters, only He Jingming composed a series of imitative poems based on the *Nineteen Old Poems*, while the other six masters had relatively fewer contributions in this regard. After the era of the Earlier Seven Masters, the practice of imitative poetry declined for a while. It was not until the reign of Emperor Jiajing that the Later Seven Masters inherited the spirit of revival from their predecessors and once again embraced the tradition of imitative poetry. The society during this time was marked by further darkness and corruption, somewhat resembling the era in which the *Nineteen Old Poems* were composed. Li Panlong, the leader of the Later Seven Masters, was significantly influenced by such an atmosphere. While He Jingming’s approach to imitative poetry involved more innovation than adherence to the original, Li Panlong, on the other hand, went in the opposite direction. His choice of themes, contents, techniques, and even specific words in his imitative poems showed little deviation from the original poems, preserving their antique and classical style. However, this approach can be seen as a double-edged sword.

First and foremost, the language used is deeply influenced by the *Nineteen Old Poems*. In his creative process, Li Panlong would often compose a portion himself and then directly splice in original lines from the collection, achieving a sense of natural integration. For instance, in his second piece of the *New Nineteen Old Poems*, which imitates *Green, Green Grass by the Riverside*, the transition between the last two lines, “The cold sky thins brocade covers. An empty bed is difficult to stay”, feels natural. However, in reality, it directly borrows the latter half of the original poem, “The wandering son does not return. An empty bed is difficult to keep”, just replacing “*shou*” (keep) with “*chu*” (stay). Another example is in the fourth piece, “Life is but a single game, how will it end?” which borrows from *Today There Was a Fine Feast* - “We lodge here for one generation, fleeting like a gust of wind-blown dust”. In the seventeenth piece, the line “Alone in solitude, one knows the long night; far from home, one knows the cold sky” borrows from *At the Beginning of Winter, A Cold Breeze Rises*, which includes the line “Amidst much worry, one knows the length of the night; looking

up, one sees the multitude of stars”. Readers who are not familiar with the original works would find these borrowed lines to be quite natural.

Additionally, Li Panlong’s poetic techniques are also deeply influenced by the collection. In the *New Nineteen Old Poems*, there are numerous sections that draw from the common techniques, such as repetition and simile, found in the *Nineteen Old Poems*. For instance, in poem VIII, which emulates *Wild Bamboo Growing Alone in the Wilderness*, though the theme may differ, the artistic form borrows considerably. Lines like “Swaying is the drifting clouds, showing its presence in the southern mountains” use “*fu yun*” (drifting clouds) to invoke the imagery and “*ran ran*” (gradually) as a repetition technique, echoing the connotation of the original poem, “I feel like the wild bamboo growing alone in the wilderness, hoping to find a companion to lean on in the vast mountain valley”.

However, the Later Seven Masters, led by Li Panlong, imitated the *Nineteen Old Poems* too heavily to the extent that their works bear a striking resemblance to the original poems in terms of form, structure, and themes. In Liu Zhiji’s *Shi Tong* from the Tang dynasty, it is stated, “To imitate faithfully while maintaining distinctiveness is the pinnacle of emulation. To imitate faithfully while lacking originality is inferior emulation” [10]. This intense emulation might be one of the reasons for the criticism and the perception that the Later Seven Masters were not as accomplished as their predecessors.

In general, the extent of influence exerted by the *Nineteen Old Poems* during the Ming dynasty depends on the prevalence of the classical revival movement. During the flourishing period of the Earlier and Later Seven Masters from the Hongzhi to Jiajing eras, the influence of the *Nineteen Old Poems* was notable in their works, regardless of the degree of imitation. However, Ming dynasty literature was not exclusively characterized by classical revival. Coupled with the considerable temporal gap between the *Nineteen Old Poems* and the Ming dynasty, the degree of influence was not as significant as it was during the late Han dynasty, the Jin dynasties, and the Tang dynasty. Nonetheless, with each classical revival movement, these poets expanded the themes and artistic techniques of the *Nineteen Old Poems*, thus continuing the artistic legacy of these poems and laying a solid foundation for future research.

5. Conclusion

The *Nineteen Old Poems*, as a vast treasure trove within the realm of Chinese pentasyllabic poetry, have provided an unceasing source of literary nourishment and intellectual inspiration to subsequent generations of poets. Moreover, poets in later periods have, through their creative adaptations of the *Nineteen Old Poems*, broadened the scope of themes, enriched the depth of emotions, and innovated various artistic techniques, thus elevating the collection to new heights. The period spanning the end of the Han dynasty, the Wei and Jin dynasties, and the Northern and Southern dynasties was an era of literary self-awareness, with poets consciously attuned to their own creative impulses. During this period, writers and scholars extensively imitated the *Nineteen Old Poems*, leading to an unprecedented prosperity of imitative poetry, characterized by an overarching “iterati stylization” trend. In the golden age of the Tang dynasty, poets represented by Li Bai and Wei Yingwu shifted their focus from mere formal imitation to the expression of individuality. They sought to channel the inner spirit and charm of the *Nineteen Old Poems*, thereby making a considerable achievement. In the Ming dynasty, although the achievements of imitative poetry were somewhat overshadowed compared to previous dynasties, the Earlier and Later Seven Masters, represented by He Jingming and Li Panlong, held high the banner of classical revival. They inherited and developed the thematic content and artistic expression of the *Nineteen Old Poems*, showcasing the enduring vitality of imitative poetry.

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