CHAPTER 4

In Asia, For the World: Liberal Education and Innovation

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Abstract This chapter explores the ways in which both new and old institutions might leverage the past successes and challenges of liberal education systems in order to create a form of education that emblematizes, promotes, and sustains innovation. Yale-NUS College's common curriculum encompasses both Asian and Western influences in humanistic, social, and scientific studies. Students participate in on-campus communities of learning while expanding the scope of inquiry outwards through research trips and internships. In drawing together a highly international group of students and challenging them to create connections across time, space, and cultures, this form of liberal education teaches students to take risks and experiment so that they in turn may become innovators in the university and in the world.

Keywords innovation • liberal education • Yale-NUS college • common curriculum • Asia

Liberal arts education is among the most honored and the most contested creations of American colleges and universities, a mode of learning broadly and deeply which has inspired new programs and schools throughout Asia and

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W.C. Kirby, M.C. van der Wende (eds.), *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe, and Asia*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-349-94892-5_4

beyond, even as it has faced increasing skepticism within the USA. Although liberal education is often understood as a primarily Western or even American invention, it in fact draws on ideals recognized throughout Asia. It is recorded in the Analects of Confucius that "The Master said: "The gentleman [*junzi*] is not a vessel [*qi*]," (*Analects* 2.12). The recent translator Chin Annping explains, "A gentleman, *junzi* (君子), is broad of spirit and intellectually agile; he can take on different problems and apply himself to many situations and so is not a vessel, a *qi* (器), for a specific use." How should we who seek cooperation between Asia and the West educate men and women of broad spirit, intellectual agility, and great virtue today? Three themes dominate recent discussion of what is healthy and what is ailing in the tradition of liberal arts education: conversation, character, and community.

Twentieth-century liberal arts education should draw on the strengths of the tradition. We must at the same time acknowledge certain important criticisms of existing liberal education programs, which question whether and how such programs might successfully mold students' character along with their minds. This chapter draws on the experience of founding a new college of liberal arts and sciences in Singapore, Yale-NUS College, envisioned as a community of learning where living and learning are intertwined and where students and faculty share a common goal of developing an innovative new educational model.

While this chapter speaks broadly of liberal education, my focus will be on the form of education in the liberal arts and sciences practiced in the best colleges and universities in the USA, as contrasted with university systems that emphasize relatively early specialization, such as have been common in Asia and Europe at least since the Second World War. While I myself attended such a program at McGill University, where I took a three-year honors degree in English literature, my experiences in graduate school at Stanford University, as a faculty member at Yale University, and most recently as president of Yale-NUS College, has convinced me that a broader, four-year program spanning the breadth of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences promises a better foundation for future global citizens.

In a wider sense, of course, my training at McGill was also a form of liberal education, as a broad study not directly related to professional goals. Perhaps more important than the distinction between curricula with greater specialization or greater depth is the broad spirit of liberal learning fostered by many great colleges and universities around the world, and certainly not the exclusive preserve of the American form of liberal education. The focus of this chapter, then, is dual: both on the specifics of a particular kind of curriculum and collegiate organization, and on the broader principles underlying

liberal education in general. The form of liberal education I investigate and advocate here privileges no single field of study over the others, but instead argues for their integration in the education of globally aware citizens.

There are at least five good reasons to pursue a liberal education and to provide one for our students.[1] The most commonly cited reason, and a very important one, is to make students into better-informed citizens. By developing their critical reasoning skills, and by practicing the arts of discussion, collaboration, and compromise both inside and outside the classroom, students become better able to debate matters of public importance and to arrive at a reasoned agreement, or reasoned disagreement, with their peers in the political or civic sphere. A second reason, equally valid and perhaps even more significant to some parents and governments, is to shape more innovative contributors to the economy and society. Technical education is extremely important for the development of industrial society, but in the postindustrial world, employers value "softer" skills such as creativity, the ability to "think outside the box," and openness to multiple perspectives. Liberal education fosters these traits. Third, certain forms of liberal education also prepare students well for life in a multicultural or cosmopolitan society by making them aware of a variety of cultures and the need to communicate effectively across cultures. Fourth, and more fundamental than any of these, perhaps, is the ethical case for liberal education. Socrates said that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Liberal education makes us aware of the importance of examining our own prejudices and assumptions by fostering habits of self-awareness and self-criticism. Finally, and most intangibly, liberal education allows the individual a greater enjoyment of life, whether it is in appreciating a work of art, understanding an argument in philosophy or an equation in mathematics, or exploring the diversity of the natural world (Delbanco 2012, p. 9–35).

The challenge for new programs in liberal arts and sciences throughout Asia is to foster the vibrant *conversations* that have developed within the tradition of liberal arts education, to identify and ameliorate certain shortcomings of contemporary liberal education with regard to student *character*, and to promote the innovations that might reenvision liberal education as the basis for a new intellectual *community* within a complex, increasingly interconnected world.

Conversation

The liberal education of the twenty-first century should draw on the traditional strengths of the liberal arts tradition, which can be understood as a series of conversations: conversations between past and present, conversa-

tions between cultures, and especially conversations between students and faculty. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer spoke of the encounter with a text from the past in terms of a "fusion of horizons." As Gadamer explains in an important passage from *Truth and Method*, "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (2004, p. 317, 313). Metaphorically, we can speak of people with narrow or broad horizons, that is, people who have very limited ideas and people who perceive many other points of view. What is important about the horizon analogy is that it both suggests that we can see a certain distance and calls attention to the limited range of our sight. There is always something beyond our horizon that we do not yet know or have not yet experienced. The nature of conversation, including conversations with texts, is that we try to make our horizon match the horizon of the person to whom we are speaking. Gadamer gives as an example of an unproductive conversation the oral examination, in which the examiner seeks to find out what the examinee knows, but not really to learn from him or her, and not to arrive at a real understanding (Gadamer 2004, p. 314). In contrast, the true "fusion of horizons" for Gadamer consists in really engaging with the other and thus in opening up our horizon for possible changes. Our horizon evolves as we grow, learn, and develop. A real fusion of horizons with the past involves the potential for such change. Our encounter with the past, Gadamer argues, is part of what allows this development. The problem of interpretation is the problem of all understanding—of how to engage in this dialogue with others, with texts, with the world—by which we at once challenge our own horizons and seek to learn from and speak back to the rest of the world.

Gadamer was concerned with the philosophy of interpretation, but it is no accident that the most characteristic form of liberal arts education in the USA is the undergraduate seminar, in which a professor and a group of students grapple with the interpretation of an important text, a work of art, or a piece of evidence. Liberal education allows students to test their own ideas against those of their classmates, their professors, the great works and thinkers of the past, and the most important current research in their fields of study. It also demands that they learn some of the tools of interpretation in a variety of disciplines, so that they can approach problems from multiple perspectives. Ideally, liberal education also leads students from different backgrounds to encounter diverse and disparate cultures. Not only do students bring these distant cultures together through their studies, but they themselves encounter different backgrounds and patterns of thought

through the diverse student body with which they share this educational journey. Indeed, liberal education leads students not just to encounter distant cultures, but to redefine what they understand as "distant," forming their own pictures of the world and its global conversations.

Liberal education encourages students to enter into such conversations firsthand, through small classes, discussion groups, and laboratories. Here, they become active participants in their own learning process, deriving new, diverse methods for encountering problems ranging from social inequality to the age of the universe. Students work together to solve problems, broaden their perspectives, make decisions based on others' advice, and learn accountability for their own ideas and contributions.[2] This feature of liberal education is one of the reasons that it can propel students toward innovative approaches, which can be valuable in their later professional lives. By working alongside others, students come to recognize that innovation is the product not just of a single brilliant mind operating in a vacuum, but of the continued, concerted efforts of teams that discuss, encourage, criticize, test, and refine new ideas.

Such conversations between individual students and the group or groups in which they participate become part of daily life through the residential college system. The collegiate model goes all the way back to medieval Oxford and Cambridge, but similar communities of learning existed in China and India even earlier.[3] By living alongside peers with a variety of different backgrounds, experiences, and interests, students learn to coexist with others, even in situations where their opinions or expectations may differ widely from one another (*see* Lewis 2007, p. 79). In such communities, students participate in sports, clubs, societies, musical groups, and student publications, creating a lively civil society in parallel with the official curriculum taught by the faculty. Supported by a residential staff that pays attention to their emotional and social needs, students find in this period of their lives an opportunity for personal growth and for developing their abilities as citizens and leaders. Residential colleges continue the work of liberal education beyond the classroom, promoting compromise over unilateral decision-making and a recognition of others' humanity and worth over the primacy of a single student's individual needs. Students become leaders among their peers, but also learn to listen to what their peers have to say, forging and evaluating solutions together. Further, residential colleges lead students to see their education not as a "job" that is localized to a single classroom or laboratory but as a vocation, a collection of many "roles" that they play in relation to others.[4]

By learning to move fluidly among these roles and to integrate education into their everyday lives, students create a space in which they might reevaluate and adapt the lessons of the classroom into real-world conversations.

Character

Despite liberal education's broad success in fostering an environment that promotes conversation, there remain aspects of liberal education as currently practiced that call for reform and innovation. Older liberal arts institutions of the West and new or recreated institutions of Asia have both taken on this task. To say that liberal education requires some rethinking in the twenty-first century is simply to recognize that colleges and universities, like other great institutions, must change in response to history, technology, and the needs of our students (*see* Laloux 2014, p. 15). This section outlines a few of liberal education's pitfalls, in order to address how this form of learning might be improved and enlivened to serve the needs of twenty-first-century students. The most telling critiques of liberal education can be summarized in terms of the problem of character. On the one hand, colleges and universities have often promised to shape the character of their students. On the other, critics such as the former Harvard College Dean Harry Lewis and William Deresiewicz (a former colleague of mine at Yale), have pointed to weaknesses, especially in elite American educational institutions, that they claim breed excellence "without a soul" or worse, "excellent sheep" (Deresiewicz 2014). While their analyses may be exaggerated or overly pessimistic, they do indicate real problems. As competition for entry into the top institutions continues to increase, there are risks that those who attend elite institutions such as Ivy League colleges will come from a narrower stratum of society, will see themselves as entitled, will avoid risks and stick to safe subjects and pursuits, and will be treated by their institutions as the customers who are "always right" rather than challenged to grow and sometimes to fail.

The most important issue here is one of access. Given increasingly tough competition for spots in the top universities of the world, those born into privileged families can take advantage of better primary and secondary education, tutors, admissions coaches, and other perquisites that help them to gain admission to elite institutions. In the USA, these institutions have recognized the problem and devoted considerable resources to seeking out students from poor backgrounds or from underrepresented minorities, but it is still the case that most students at Ivy League

colleges come from families that are upper middle class or wealthy, and that relatively few talented students from the poorer segments of society receive the kind of college preparation that allows them to attend the Ivy League. In 2000–1, for instance, only about 4.4 % of students at Harvard University came from families making less than US$30,000, and according to a 1995 study, only about 12 % of students who even *applied* to Ivy League schools came from families in the bottom income quartile (Pallais and Turner 2007, p. 130–1; see also Bowen 2005, p. 95*ff.*). Even when underprivileged students do succeed in attending an elite institution, they are sometimes underprepared for the work they find there (*see* Lewis 2007, p. 134). There has been some improvement in the past 15 years at Harvard, Yale, and other elite institutions, and notably also at selective liberal arts colleges such as Amherst and Vassar.

Even among those who might benefit from an Ivy League education, ignorance of the opportunities or fear of the cost may prevent them from applying. This is not a problem with an easy solution; colleges and universities rightly seek to promote diversity, but ultimately some of these problems are a product of a stratified social structure and the poor opportunities at earlier levels of education for the underprivileged in the USA. Elite universities such as Yale and Harvard have made a point in recent years of seeking out a more diverse student body through generous funding (Yale University 2012, p. 3). While we strive to improve public education in the USA, colleges and universities should continue to seek out a diverse array of students with high potential and should place greater emphasis on developing an ethos of service among their students so that those who are privileged to attend the great universities recognize their responsibility for giving back to the broader community. Yale-NUS College has similar values and strategies. In selecting students, we look for not only those with a strong record of academic achievement and desire to become critical thinkers capable of rigorous and insightful analysis, but also individuals with different backgrounds, interests, and ambitions, including an interest to serve broader society, both locally and globally. A number of student organizations reach out to the local population, for example, teaching special classes for at-risk high school students or migrant workers.

There are those who argue, however, that the problem with our admissions systems goes deeper than emphasizing service to others and seeking out students from diverse backgrounds who also have a commitment to humanitarian ideals. Even among the children of the elite who do ultimately get into the top universities, there may be negative effects from

the pressure of competing for these spots. One risk is that well-meaning but ambitious parents might teach their children to view their studies and extracurricular activities only through the prism of what will get them into the college of their dreams. Here, it would be helpful if parents and admissions officers reminded students that there are many good colleges and universities where they can get an excellent education and that the disproportionate focus on a very few elite institutions can be damaging and misleading.

One of the main criticisms of the liberal education provided once students arrive at leading institutions has been that it caters more to student desires or fads than to challenging students or building their characters. As Lewis (2007) notes, liberal education systems based on "distribution requirements" provide "the easy way out of the imperative for general education" for both students and faculty, since professors "can teach from their home bases and yet take credit for contributing to the breadth of undergraduate education" and students can "treat curricular requirements as the rules of a game they are challenged to win, seeking out the easiest course in each division" (p. 50). In many curricula, such relatively weak general education requirements have allowed the opening of a rift between disciplines, with the humanities and natural sciences on opposite sides of this divide, and the social sciences hovering somewhat uncertainly toward the middle. In this situation—a modern variant of C.P. Snow's "two cultures"—students and faculty seem increasingly unable to traverse the space between the disciplines.[5] Humanities majors think that science is too "difficult" or "objective"; science majors think that the humanities are too "soft" or "subjective." If given the opportunity, many students avoid taking courses outside of their own discipline, or, in the case of "distribution requirements," they often take the easiest, most watered-down courses they can find. This situation may help students to specialize in a single field, but it also runs the risk that they will remain distrustful of concepts and forms of learning beyond their own purview. In fact, this isolation of the disciplines stands in the way of students bringing together multiple disciplines in order to make all of their studies richer by adapting vocabularies and ideas from one discipline to another in order to create an interdisciplinary conversation.

Furthermore, in many liberal education programs and particularly in the USA, curricula artificially limit the scope of their students' education even before they arrive on campus. Even in institutions that boast cohesive, challenging liberal education curricula, the focus is often exclusively on Western thought, with relatively weak gestures toward comparison

with sources outside of Western Europe and Northern America. In addition, many schools place a disproportionate focus on liberal education in the humanities, with students required to take only superficial, watered-down courses in quantitative or natural sciences. This exacerbates the "two cultures" problem, and, ironically, does a disservice to both sides of the disciplinary divide: it paints the humanities as easy enough for any student to learn, marks the sciences as too difficult, and provides students with a rather lopsided, insufficiently challenging education.

Finally, a common complaint about academia today concerns the perceived over-emphasis on research at the expense of teaching. While there are indeed a number of problems with the incentive structure in academia that sometimes grants tenure and promotion to indifferent or even bad teachers, and that discourages some faculty from truly engaging with their students, it would be a mistake to assume that the relationship between research and teaching is a zero-sum game. Some faculty may ignore their teaching duties while pushing to get tenure; others may churn out publications of minimal importance. For the most part, however, the opportunity to conduct specialized research allows faculty to develop their knowledge of their fields and to hone their own intellects, allowing them to share this learning, in turn, with their students. There is, however, some risk that by over-emphasizing research in our rewards system (tenure, promotion, salary), we may encourage faculty to become too absorbed in their research at the expense of their teaching. This phenomenon can also have a negative impact on the content of their teaching, as they may treat undergraduates like proto-graduate students, grading undergraduate work as if it were a credential for graduate school rather than tailoring courses to fit undergraduate needs, and expecting students to become premature specialists rather than allowing them to explore subjects broadly.

The challenge here lies in balance. Faculty should have the freedom to pursue their own research, so that they can advance knowledge and infuse their teaching with the newest ideas and methods. They should also teach a curriculum that is inspiring and demanding, but tailored to a class of undergraduates who likely will not become specialists in a given academic field. Instead, professors should teach students with the expectation that they will be adapting their liberal education to a world beyond the academy, from the arts to law, medicine to business, government to non-governmental organizations. They need not pander to students' career goals but should allow this breadth of application to infuse their approach to their specialized subjects, so that both students and faculty see beyond the subject at hand to its larger importance.

Community

One further challenge of current liberal education programs bears mentioning: the problem of forging a deeper link between living and learning, between undergraduate student life and the educational mission of the college or university. As twenty-first-century educators, how might we address these challenges of liberal education while also retaining the traditional strengths of this mode of education? How might we create an innovative form of liberal education which itself promotes change? These are questions that my colleagues and I have asked ourselves repeatedly as we have forged ahead in the process of creating a new college of liberal arts and sciences at Yale-NUS College in Singapore. Yale-NUS is an autonomous college within the National University of Singapore, jointly governed by NUS and Yale University. Its founding has provided a rare and exciting experience to draw on the history of the liberal arts and sciences and on current best practices, and then to apply the resulting findings to a practical outcome.[6] At Yale-NUS, this is precisely the opportunity we have cherished over the past several years. Some of the most innovative applications of liberal education these days are to be found not just in the ivy-covered institutions of the USA but also in the ancient courtyards and quickly rising campuses of Asia. Consideration of new or renovated Asian versions of liberal education affords the chance to see what is most relevant in these methods and what can be adapted for greater success in the future.

One of the first innovations that Yale-NUS introduced was a rigorous common curriculum. This addressed several of the pitfalls discussed above by including texts both Western and non-Western, pairing Confucius with Aristotle, the *Odyssey* with the *Ramayana*, and also bringing modern texts from Asia and the West in conversation with each other. Such a comparative approach is not just limited to the humanities. Courses on "Comparative Social Institutions" and "Historical Immersion" carry this global scope into the social sciences, too. Yale-NUS attempts to bridge the "two cultures" by having all students develop basic scientific literacy. The common curriculum gives a broad and rigorous introduction to the methods of the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. Out of ten required courses, three focus on the natural sciences and one on quantitative reasoning. Rather than offering non-majors watered-down classes, each common curriculum course challenges students to understand a variety of disciplinary approaches. This teaches students to become proficient in and understand the applications of multiple subjects, as well as to bring these together in their work in and beyond the university.

In the course of the past decade, much has been said about the failure of traditional liberal education programs to furnish students with the tools to make wise financial decisions or to vote on hot-topic political issues. By introducing every students not just to "science" or "math," but to the structure of scientific inquiry, Yale-NUS is providing them with the vocabulary and confidence to think critically within their own disciplines and future careers, as well as to become responsible citizens and leaders. At times, innovation means simply possessing the awareness of what might need changing, and a training in all three branches of the liberal arts—science, social science, and humanities—will equip students with precisely this openness.

In building innovation into the core structure of liberal education at Yale-NUS, we have also sought to recruit our faculty as champions of change. By placing faculty in divisions that are inherently interdisciplinary, rather than disciplinary departments, Yale-NUS strives to break down the silos inherited from the traditional nineteenth-century organization of research universities. The result is an integration of disciplines that is emulated in the students' common curriculum. Faculty participate in workshops and teach in teams that help them to generate new ideas regarding both research and pedagogy. Yale-NUS recruited faculty through workshops in which, in addition to presenting their current research, candidates share their conceptions about pedagogy and about extracurricular life. As a result, and with the advantage of self-selection on the part of prospective faculty, Yale-NUS has found an inaugural faculty unusually eager to engage with students both in and outside the classroom.

Yale-NUS has built its faculty and created the common curriculum with one central question in mind: "What must a young person learn in order to lead a responsible life in this century?" In other words, what education must we provide for our students such that they continue to learn and create once they leave our campus? How do we ensure that they do in fact live what Socrates called "the examined life," thinking critically about their own values, and at the same time have the opportunity for an active life, one that allows them to make a difference beyond the campus walls? One solution was already available: by placing the school in a uniquely cosmopolitan city in Asia, Yale-NUS is able to bring together students from a variety of backgrounds, including adventurous students from all over the world. The entering class of 2013, comprising about 150 students, was roughly 40% international, including young women and men from six continents. This sort of diversity allows students to explore new practices and viewpoints simply by working with their peers. It also allows them to

embrace risk and the possibility of failure, since students know that they will encounter others with habits, traditions, and languages that are entirely new to them, and that they will have to test and retest methods for finding a middle ground.[7] Because Yale-NUS students have come from far and near, and from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, they are primed to become self-reliant and to probe traditional knowledge with open but critical minds.[8] Yale-NUS strives to capitalize upon these instincts through an education that leads them even further beyond their comfort zones. As an international community of learning, the college teaches its students to discover and create new opportunities in their world.

In addition to in-class curriculum, Yale-NUS has designed a program that requires students to bring their campus-bound learning into the world, to make education into innovation. This "Learning Across Boundaries" program developed out of a faculty initiative and relies on close collaboration among faculty, staff, and students. All students at Yale-NUS spend a week immersed in off-campus projects with faculty mentors, on topics such as biodiversity in Thailand, Burmese literature, or Buddhist philosophy in Kyoto, Japan. Much like the "20% time" set aside by major corporations like Google for their employees to pursue self-driven, innovative projects (Tellis 2013, p. 13), these off-campus trips provide students with a canvas on which to experiment with the skills they have learned in class. Students push themselves to understand the world not just intellectually, but practically, to apply their education as a basis for engagement and empathy.[9] By going out into the world as an integral component to the common curriculum, students practice bridging the gap between world and campus, precisely the same bridge that they will cross as they graduate from our institution. Yale-NUS hopes that this practice in bringing liberal education to real-world applications will allow students to replicate and expand upon their experiences in college by creating their own innovations in the world. The college hopes, further, that this will foster a seemingly paradoxical *tradition* of innovation. As Tennyson's Ulysses says (verses 18–21 of "Ulysses"),

> I am a part of all that I have met;
> Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
> Gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades
> Forever and forever when I move.

Instead of seeing college as an endpoint to their achievements, the hope is that students will understand it as a testing ground from which they can learn to encounter the wider world.

Through a broad but well-defined and intensive common curriculum, the integration of different disciplines, the recruitment of an energetic faculty with a strong commitment to undergraduate education, and finally the drawing together of world and campus, Yale-NUS is striving to create an international community of learning. The community is founded in the conversations facilitated by the liberal education tradition and it addresses head-on the challenges that liberal education confronts as it adapts to the twenty-first century and spreads throughout the globe. Most of all, the community is founded on the idea that we wish to teach students to anticipate change, to ask future-facing questions, to take on risks, and to carry their learning beyond the walls of the campus. Through interdisciplinary, international knowledge, through self-reliance and teamwork, the college wishes to create a campus of innovators. Yale-NUS has summarized the mission as follows:

A Community of Learning
Founded by two great universities
In Asia, for the world.

It is our hope that liberal arts traditions from Asia and the West will continue to enliven Asian educational systems in the generations to come, shaping a generation of Asian leaders who are also citizens of the world.

Notes

1. The list here is influenced by but not identical with that of Andrew Delbanco in *College*.
2. Frederic Laloux (2014) discusses the efficacy of this non-hierarchical process in the context of contemporary business (see *Reinventing Organizations*, p. 100–4).
3. On the history of Chinese education (and higher education), see Lee 2000, *Education in Traditional China*.
4. As Laloux explains, this "holocratic" approach is also adaptable to professional contexts (p. 90, p. 119).
5. See Snow (1998) on the polarization of "literary intellectuals" and scientists, especially "physical scientists" (p. 4).
6. Indeed, as Michael Roth (2014) recounts in his history of the development of liberal education in the USA, innovation within the liberal arts has often arisen out of the creation of entirely new institutions. Take, e.g., Thomas Jefferson's creation of the University of Virginia, which he chose to pursue rather than striving to reshape the original public institution in Virginia, the College of William and Mary (27).

7. Writers on innovation identify embracing risk and encountering the possibility of failure as key criteria for the creation and implementation of new ideas (see Tellis, 65*ff*., Black).
8. Roth traces "self-reliance" as a key component of liberal education back to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Booker T. Washington.
9. On Jane Addams' pioneering link between empathy and education, see Roth (2014), p. 18.

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