

## **Ethnicity, Education and the Economics of Brain Drain in Malaysia: Youth Perspectives**

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to contribute to the debate over Malaysia's brain drain by critically examining the role of education as well as the changing socio-economic pressures faced by younger generations. It is argued that specific features of Malaysian education and political economy, with their attendant racial fixations, are contributing to the country's brain drain. Although there is a lack of consensus about the actual economic impact of the brain drain, the Malaysian government continues to dedicate substantial amounts of time, energy and resources into 'talent' initiatives with the aim of training and retaining domestic talent, while simultaneously luring highly-skilled foreign migrants to Malaysia and enticing the diaspora to return home. Drawing on interviews and observations from public universities and the burgeoning civil society sector in Malaysia, and supplemented by content analysis of recent films and theatre performances, this paper argues that most government initiatives have been undermined by a lack of foresight attributed largely to the straightjacket of Malaysian electoral politics and perennially 'sensitive' communal relations.

Keywords: Brain drain, education, ethnicity, political economy, Malaysian, youth  
JEL classification: F22, I24, J15, O15

### **1. Introduction**

In Malaysia, roughly 5.3 per cent of the population approaching 28 million are classified as emigrants (World Bank 2011a). It is estimated that as much as 50 per cent of the Malaysian diaspora is highly-skilled, tertiary educated, and thus represents a net loss for the country in terms of economic growth and national development (NEAC 2010: 42). While there are many popular destinations, including Australia, Brunei Darussalam and the United Kingdom, the Malaysia–Singapore migration corridor is the most significant in terms of the brain drain (World Bank 2011b). Therefore this paper seeks to contribute to the debate over Malaysia's

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brain drain by critically examining the role of education as well as the changing socio-economic pressures faced by younger generations.

Without being overly deterministic, it is argued here that specific features of Malaysian education and political economy, with their attendant racial fixations, are contributing to the country's brain drain. Although there is a lack of consensus about the actual economic impact of the brain drain, the Malaysian government continues to dedicate substantial amounts of time, energy and resources into 'talent' initiatives with the aim of training and retaining domestic talent, while simultaneously luring highly-skilled foreign migrants to Malaysia and enticing the diaspora to return home. In the executive summary of the 2010 Economic Transformation Plan alone, the term 'talent' is used thirty times (PEMANDU 2010). More dramatically still, part one of the 2010 New Economic Model makes reference to the 'exodus of talented Malaysians' resulting from failures in the national education system (NEAC 2010: 42). Drawing on interviews and observations from public universities and the burgeoning civil society sector in Malaysia, as well as content analysis of recent films and theatre performances, this paper attempts to gauge the extent to which policies can affect any meaningful change, slowing or even reversing the brain drain.

## 2. Political Economy and the Brain Drain

Malaysia was granted independence from Britain on 31 August 1957. An Alliance government was established in an attempt to represent and safeguard the interests of each of Malaysia's main ethnic groups. The three key 'allies' were the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), with UMNO holding the largest share of political power. UMNO was strategically positioned as champion of the *bumiputera* (literally 'sons of the soil'), all the indigenous groups and Malays with special rights and entitlements as stipulated in Article 153(1) of the Federal Constitution (Crouch 1996: 83). This political bargain lasted until 13 May 1969, when one of the defining moments of the post-colonial era took place in Kuala Lumpur. While it is commonly held that the country fell into the grips of bloody racial riots (there were some 200 fatalities concentrated around Chow Kit and Kampung Baru), this is unhelpful reductionism that does little for communal reconciliation and allows for deliberate political distortions and provocations. In the search for clarity, Jomo (1990-91: 417) identified three parallel and related developments that culminated in the events of May 1969. These were growing disillusionment among the Malaysian public with existing economic and cultural policies, rejection among the growing Malay middle class of Tunku Abdul Rahman's accommodative policy to Chinese and foreign capital, and the electoral rejection of the Alliance government.

Following nearly two years of emergency rule, a major leadership transition within UMNO took place with the Alliance being rebranded as the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), and the now infamous New Economic Policy (NEP) was approved in July 1971 under the Second Malaysia Plan (Cho 1990: 68). The legacy of the NEP can be flagged as a major contributing factor toward the current talent exodus in Malaysia. The NEP was first put in place in order to 'protect' the Malays until they outgrew this 'crutch', but special rights and entitlements – now referred to as affirmative action – gradually became institutionalised and seemingly permanent.

Malaysia and Indonesia both experienced an expansion of urban wealth in the 1970s, leading to an infusion of Western and East Asian consumer styles into elite and middle class circles (Dick 1985: 13). With the proliferation of nightclubs, alcohol consumption and youth rebellion, it was apparent that a new monied class had emerged, and this caused offence, with young people accused of callous disregard for traditional mores and etiquette. In response, the educational bureaucracy in Malaysia seriously attended to the creation of loyal and efficient citizens, reinforced by state licensed media with an interest in promoting national development and cultural consolidation (Jones 1998: 151). This included the inculcation of middle class values such as ‘community’ and ‘morality’, and the offering of rewards (state employment and patronage), gradually creating a pattern of middle class dependency (Jones 1998: 154). Therefore it was hoped that Malaysia’s *nouveaux riches*, so long as they remain the beneficiaries of state largesse, would shun political activism in favour of order and stability.

The National Economic Advisory Council has recently warned that the human capital situation in Malaysia is reaching a critical stage, with too much ‘talent’ leaving and not enough being done domestically to cultivate or develop talent (NEAC 2010: 6). Moreover, Malaysia must ‘remove barriers preventing its brightest people from gaining skills’ (NEAC 2010: 20). It would seem that the barriers alluded to by the NEAC are in fact entrenched features of Malaysian political economy and education, including special *bumiputera* rights and revisionist *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) policies, and that these barriers are driving the ‘talent exodus’ or brain drain out of Malaysia. Therefore it is hardly surprising that so many professional Malaysians feel that it is time for the sun to set on the NEP *bumiputera* policy.

While skilled emigration may have a negative impact on economic development, it is important to bear in mind that remittances, enhanced human capital and returned migration can all substantially ameliorate the net impact on Gross Domestic Product, GDP (Balaz *et al.* 2004: 19). Drawing a clear conclusion based on academic consensus remains difficult, however, for there is an overall lack of reliable data. With or without consensus, the position of the Malaysian government is quite clear: the brain drain is detrimental to national development, productivity and future competitiveness. Therefore the government continues to experiment with policy initiatives in order to reduce, or even reverse, the brain drain, pinning a significant amount of hope on the newly created Talent Corporation led by Johan Mahmood Merican. Most of the initiatives to date have been about economic reform and have been driven by technocrats, leaving a void that needs to be filled with pragmatic and robust political analysis. For instance, in a somewhat controversial editorial, Mokhtar (2010) opined that the talent exodus can be explained by disillusionment linked to rising crime, a tainted judiciary, human rights abuses, and an outmoded education system. While the general assumption is that Chinese and Indian Malaysians have a greater tendency to leave because of their *pendatang* (sojourner, alien) status – being guests in a *bumiputera* (Malay) land – increasing numbers of Malays have emigrated as well, disillusioned by corrupt practices as well as the rigid confines of state Islam (Mokhtar 2010).

Mokhtar’s (2010) analysis fits the conventional push-pull model, using Malaysia-specific examples to illustrate the motives for citizens to abandon their homeland in search of a better, or perhaps more fulfilling life. Push and pull factors, in the simplest terms, derive from

dissatisfaction with one's present location, and perceptions of golden opportunities and positive attributes elsewhere. The push factors that can be used to explain migration and the brain drain in Malaysia include market distortions, institutionalised discrimination (*bumiputera* policies), underperforming universities, political repression, and a lack of social integration. Pull factors, by contrast, are the prospects of better earnings and remuneration, the acquisition of new skills in a competitive, meritocratic environment, and political and cultural freedom, among others. According to Khaw Veon Jzu from the Socio-Economic Development and Research (SEDAR) Institute, Malaysians are inclined to stay and contribute to national development and progress so long as they receive a wage commensurate with their skills and abilities, and feel assured that a professional merit-based system is in place (interview in February 2011, Kuala Lumpur). While policymakers dither and politicians strategise, younger generations will continue to determine the criteria that will either drive them out of Malaysia or convince them to stay.

### **3. Youth, Family and Education in Malaysia**

To start, it is commonly held that youth, or what constitutes the demographic category of 'emerging adulthood', can extend up to the age of 35, although this depends on aspects of culture, religion, school-to-work transitions, marriage and resettlement (Nilan 2008: 65). The choices made by youth or emerging adults will largely determine the efficacy of government efforts to rollback or reverse the brain drain, which brings state education into the frame. Malaysian universities have always been 'deeply conscious' of their roles in the nation-building process, though in practice they face numerous constraints, often resulting in 'paradoxical situations whereby outcomes are contrary to basic aims and objectives' (Ahmat 1980: 736). One of the basic tenets of university education is the promotion of ethnic tolerance and social understanding, yet there are times when the university experience in Malaysia contributes to 'racial polarisation and tensions' (Ahmat 1980: 736). The National Economic Advisory Council has reinforced these findings, arguing that 'education policies saddled with socio-political goals have stymied the national objective of producing the best talent to meet the country's needs' (NEAC 2010: 55). One may be inclined to argue that the 'socio-political goals' referred to by the NEAC have something to do with continued preferential policies for Malays, as well as the 'subsidy mentality' that has arisen since the implementation of the NEP in 1971 (Gomez and Jomo 1999: 118). A complimentary goal of the NEP was to implement policies to entrench Malay educational and language hegemony, although critics contend that this has had limited success and, indeed, has 'prevented the growth of an inclusive multicultural educational system' (Guan 2010: 180).

From the 1980s onwards the quality of Malaysian higher education has been variable. By reinforcing socio-economic barriers between Malaysians, and remaining reluctant to allow greater student freedom of expression and opportunities for political participation, public universities are contributing to the push factors behind the country's endemic brain drain.<sup>1</sup> Despite government commitments to the creation of a knowledge economy and

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<sup>1</sup> A great deal of student hostility has been directed towards the University and University Colleges Act (UUCA) 1971, which impacts upon the language of instruction and curriculum development, and prohibits all students and faculty from affiliating with political parties or joining trade unions (Weiss 2006: 118).

society, there is a widespread perception that a top education can only be gained in a foreign institution, and many Malaysian families are willing to invest in a foreign education with hopes for a brighter future. In response, efforts have been made to reform higher education, for instance with the introduction of university autonomy and the involvement of the private sector in education, although the state remains the core provider of tertiary education and protector of national culture and identity (Kamogawa 2003; Sirat 2010).

Along with the continued educational preference for ‘intellectual containment’ in public institutions, government officials periodically raised the spectre of threats to public order resulting from a moral crisis among young generations (Weiss 2009). State controlled media is frequently used to cultivate exaggerated concern and moral panic about the decline of youngsters, blaming a lack of parental supervision and discipline on male tendencies to loiter and loaf around, and even more worryingly, female tendencies towards flirtatiousness and promiscuity (Lewis 2006: 65). Aside from such uneven attempts to morally police young minds, this is an acknowledgment that the rising expectations, activism and political aspirations of intrepid youngsters are potentially transformative, as evidenced by the role of university students in the overthrow of the Suharto regime in Indonesia in May 1998 (Weiss 2006: 194). More recently, and despite threats of expulsion or arrest, many Malaysian university students and young aspiring activists embraced the 9 July 2011 rally for free and fair elections in Kuala Lumpur, known as *Bersih* (Clean) 2.0.<sup>2</sup> Despite these popular political tendencies, tastes and preferences, Malaysian youth cannot be collapsed into a single category (as the bearers of modernity, for instance) because their socio-economic backgrounds and aspirations differ significantly (Gerke 2000: 135).

Two formative policy documents released in 2010, the New Economic Model (Part 1) and the Tenth Malaysia Plan, signify the government’s commitment to socio-economic transformation and the rollback of subsidies and other potential economic distortions. Younger generations in particular will be challenged to respond to the reduced role of paternal state institutions and, to a lesser extent perhaps, parental intervention and familial brokerages of marriage. As in neighbouring Indonesia, it can be expected that some of the resultant trends will lead to extended adolescence, increased age of marriage, prolonged education, late entry into work, and perhaps a greater tendency to gravitate towards political activism. Indeed, rapid changes and transformations tend to cause challenges, risks and uncertainties related to the future, forcing youth to ‘scaffold’ their transitions to adulthood (Nilan 2008: 68).

Despite the moralising tendencies of the Malaysian government and the sense of suffocation encountered in certain official settings (including, at times, public university campuses), Malaysian youth can be surprisingly dynamic, creative and innovative. From the results of a student focus group conducted by the authors at Universiti Utara Malaysia on 6 April 2011, for instance, it is clear that students are keen to discuss key issues such as national unity and strategies for national development. Though Tey *et al.* (2009) found that overall student perceptions of ethnic relations had improved at University of Malaya, the higher education experience is still firmly rooted in ethnocentrism, perpetuating negative

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<sup>2</sup> As of 10 October 2011 the official Bersih 2.0 Facebook account had 201,751 followers, and the number increases daily.

stereotypes and barriers to social integration, and increasing the likelihood that talented young graduates will seek opportunities for employment or further education outside Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> Many Malay graduates are aware that the civil service, with its massive workforce of approximately 1.4 million, is a safe option for them, especially when they perceive the private sector to be predatory and dominated by largely impenetrable Chinese-Malaysian business networks.<sup>4</sup>

Domestically, within the Malaysian family structure, there is a generation gap that can impose a stranglehold upon young persons. Whether framed as 'Asian values', local or traditional culture, many undergraduate students surveyed for this paper felt encumbered and limited by their immediate familial and communal surroundings.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the proverb 'the older, the wiser' implies that elder generations are beyond reproach and that it is flagrantly disrespectful to question parental authority, thus potentially limiting the social and professional choices young people have at their disposal. Directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously, the elder generations attempt to bend and mould the thinking and actions of the 'youth community' (broadly defined) in Malaysia. Of course this differs dramatically from urban to rural settings. The post-1969 legacy is often passed down to younger generations, influencing ethnic perceptions, stereotypes, goals, objectives and overall social integration in Malaysia. For many parents, it is difficult to endorse the idea of mixed marriages, particularly when thorny questions of religious conversion and apostasy are raised. Aside from religious beliefs, Nagaraj (2009: 89) found the key indicators influencing the improbability of intermarriage in Malaysia to be age and gender, education and occupation, place of residence, migrant effects and ethnicity.<sup>6</sup>

At the 2009 Freedom Film Festival in Malaysia, Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat (Community Communications Centre, KOMAS) released a film entitled *Gaduh*, which attempts to expose the hard realities of ethnic relations from the youth perspective. Well received by local critics, this film depicts a groundswell of dissatisfaction amongst young Malaysians, based on the persistence of ethnic segregation and fragmented national identities. Left unchecked, resentment and mutual enmity can lead to a proliferation of youth gangs. Audiences are forced to consider the extent to which ethnocentrism is fuelled

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<sup>3</sup> Comparing survey results from 2002 and 2008, Tey *et al.* (2009) found that overall student perceptions of ethnic relations had improved, although as a result of cultural and religious differences, dietary restrictions and language preferences, young people continue to struggle to cross the social divide. A recent Merdeka Centre (2011) survey of 1,013 registered voters also found that as many as 66 per cent of respondents felt ethnic relations in Malaysia to be 'good' or 'very good'.

<sup>4</sup> Part 1 of the 2010 New Economic Model stresses that the 'sluggish bureaucracy' in Malaysia is no longer fit for purpose, and therefore, by extension, will not be able to continuously absorb underemployed young graduates, a fact that may have serious political repercussions in the near future (NEAC 2010: 42).

<sup>5</sup> More often than not, 'Asian values' – notionally representing hard work, sacrifice for the future, deference to authority and intrinsic respectfulness – served to deflect attention away from the depredations of authoritarian leaders such as Suharto of Indonesia and Marcos of the Philippines (Case 2003: 250).

<sup>6</sup> In 2010 the Minister for Information, Communications and Culture, Datuk Seri Utama Rais Yatim, reportedly cautioned against mixed marriages, warning of the likelihood of divorce and other troubled dynamics (Arfah 2011).

by parents and the elder generation. Moreover, the film seeks to expose and engage with the so-called national ‘myth of unity’, whereby youth enrol in the same academic institutions and live in close proximity (often in the same neighbourhoods), and yet discrimination, ethnocentrism and dissatisfaction persists. As the plot progresses, the fear of being discriminated against and the fear of feeling inferior to another ethnic group provides a constant backdrop to simmering social and communal tensions. Such fears are often bequeathed by parents and elder generations based on past experiences and shared traumas. As a reaction against this unfortunate inheritance, however, many young Malaysians are drawn towards alternatives such as peaceful dialogues and inter-ethnic activities, creating a platform for engagement in an environment of mutual respect. Unsurprisingly, the Freedom Film Festival offers one such venue for critical dialogue and constructive engagement.

Returning to higher education, it is evident that social interactions between members of different ethnic groups often bring to the surface a divisive imagery and language that has for so long undermined the development of a truly united Malaysian character and identity. The learned patterns, practices and symbols of ethnocentrism predate the university experience, of course, and this has been skillfully depicted in a recent Instant Café Theatre play entitled *Parah*, written by Alfian Saat and directed by Jo Kukathas.<sup>7</sup> *Parah* revolves around the experiences and struggles of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (secondary school, SMK) Form 5 students as they confront ethnic stereotypes and question their own identities and place in modern Malaysia. Reconciliation, it seems, can only be achieved if young persons are encouraged to be introspective and to engage with hard questions surrounding equal citizenship and universal rights based on birthplace (*jus soli*).

Form 5 students, such as those depicted in *Parah*, would soon face a choice between an early career and furthering their studies at university. The matriculation programmes of the 1990s created a streamlined approach to university enrolment (and also maintained the fiction that university quotas for Malay students were being abolished). Roughly 90 per cent of all matriculation placements are reserved for those classified as *bumiputera*. This allows for earlier entrance into university, whereas the regular pre-university examinations known as Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (Malaysian Higher School Certificate, STPM) take two years to complete and, according to many students, are more rigorous. There is even a Malay-centric institution known as Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) with a specific mandate to offer education primarily to *bumiputera* students. Aside from potentially compromising standards and quality, the combination of pre-university matriculation and UiTM seems to run contrary to Article 12(1) of the Federal Constitution, which reads: “there shall be no discrimination against any citizens on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth as it applies to the administration of any education institution maintained by a public authority, and the admission of pupils or students or the payment of fees.” Unsurprisingly, controversy erupted when 600 Chinese-Malaysian students with exemplary STPM results were reportedly unable to gain admission into public universities (Chew 2001). Instead, many of the students received scholarships from foreign institutions, contributing towards Malaysia’s worsening brain drain dilemma.

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<sup>7</sup> The play *Parah*, based on the term *Pariyah* (lowest class of South Indian), was inspired by Abdullah Hussain’s novel *Interlock* as well as the film ‘Talentine’ by Yasmin Ahmad.

In public universities across Malaysia courses such as *Kenegaraan Malaysia* (Malaysian Nationhood), approved by the Ministry of Higher Education and compulsory for all first-year students, stress that diversity and tolerance are among the main catalysts for national unity and progress in Malaysia. Education also provides moral, intellectual and social instructions to students, bestowed by academic staff sworn to loyalty through the *aku janji* (pledge). From personal experience, however, the general unwillingness of Chinese, Indian and Malay Malaysians to cooperate with one another in the completion of academic tasks remains an obstacle to social integration and may even reinforce the talent exodus of skilled youngsters. Despite all of the platitudes about *Satu* (One) Malaysia, it is evident that Malaysians still experience (and participate in) segregation, where students find a comfort zone within the 'natural' groupings of their community or ethnic circle, and casual conversations are held in Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin or Tamil respectively. University administrations tacitly reinforce these divisions by compiling comparative performance and assessment data on an ethnic basis, and allocating shared hostel rooms to students of the same ethnicity. Student societies and organisations in public universities tend to have exclusivist names such as the Indian Cultural Society, the Malay Language Club, the Chinese Cultural Society and so forth, and they tend to become reified, creating another obstacle for students from different ethnic backgrounds to intermingle and integrate.

In an attempt to break with tradition, public universities in Malaysia have begun to hire larger percentages of foreign lecturers and academic staff from Western countries. English is now commonly used in the lecture hall as a medium of instruction, and seminar presentation groups are deliberately diversified to ensure that the 'natural' ethnocentric and gendered divisions and barriers between students are gradually eroded. This is important for, when the Cerberus of Malaysian racism rears its three ugly heads, the Chinese are viewed as selfish and greedy, Indians are characterised as violent, thuggish and criminal, and Malays are portrayed as underproductive, indolent and incompetent.

Although it is rare to encounter such a base level of racism in public or in the work place, a glance at the rapidly growing social media and interactive online forums, which are relatively impersonal and sometimes even anonymous, demonstrates that these damaging stereotypes remain highly salient. Students worry that these will linger so long as mainstream Malaysian politics and society deems ethnic relations too 'sensitive' to discuss in a critical and direct manner. The obvious outcome is that discussions are driven underground or to the fringe, where extreme views are left unchecked or contained within specific ethnic groups. Having witnessed the audience's emotional, sometimes pained response to Instant Café Theatre's performance of *Parah* at the Annexe in Kuala Lumpur, July 2011, it is evident that direct public engagement with ethnic stereotypes and questions of belonging in contemporary Malaysia is an absolutely necessary exercise.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper attempted to link economic and educational policies to the current brain drain dilemma in Malaysia, supplemented by a socio-political analysis of ethnic relations and familial ties. It is argued that most government initiatives to date have been a response (or reaction) to longstanding problems, with a lack of foresight attributable to the straightjacket of Malaysian electoral politics and perennially 'sensitive' communal relations. Ambitious attempts at economic reform and transformation have been driven almost exclusively by

technocrats, leaving a political void that needs to be continually filled with pragmatic and robust analysis.

By some measures, the 1971 New Economic Policy has led to successful poverty reduction and material advancement for the Malay community. In elite political terms, it has fostered inter-ethnic cooperation, guarding against future conflicts and riots *à la* 13 May 1969. More broadly, however, *bumiputera* policies created ethnic groupings and classifications, culminating in a dichotomous, ethnocentric society characterised by unhealthy rivalry and repressive control measures. From the structure of family life to the all-encompassing educational experience, Malaysian youth have been suffocated and stifled by the expectations of elder generations and the segregation of their schooling. In contrast to the dynamism and creativity that many students exhibit in private, negative stereotypes continue to thrive, causing dissatisfaction linked to the brain drain. Despite this negativity, recent findings from Tey *et al.* (2009) and the Merdeka Centre (2011) suggest that university students and registered voters over the age of 21 perceive ethnic relations to be improving. Through newfound avenues for activism and participation in civil society, young adults may be able to re-engage in the future and embrace a higher form of nationalism, one which is critical rather than subservient, thus lessening the push factors driving the brain drain. Connecting this to an examination of the parental role, it is argued here that youth need to be liberated, advised by elders but free to make informed decisions about their future, including over the thorny issues of intermarriage, social networks and career choices. In the absence of intellectual containment, educational and social mobility will play a large factor in nurturing independent and dynamic young generations.

The 2010 New Economic Model (Part 1) contains a significant amount of new and critical language, but Malaysians remain sceptical, poised and waiting to determine whether this economic, governmental and educational transformation will yield substantive results or merely perpetuate the same old practices. Young generations are demanding meritocracy and equal opportunities; otherwise, there are fears that social cohesion will continue to suffer, furthering the impetus to leave Malaysia. In an era of counterfeit unity, restrictions on free and open debate must be lifted, and more should be done to increase the viewership of critical films such as *Gaduh* and groundbreaking performances such as *Parah*.

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