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A Preliminary Study of Seal-Engraving Education in the Ming Dynasty: The Case of Peng Wen's Sanqiao School

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Abstract:
Since literati began to engage with seals in the Song and Yuan dynasties, the function of seals has shifted from a primarily practical tool to an artistic medium. As literati aesthetic interest in seals took shape, schools of seal-engraving emerged by the mid- to late Ming dynasty. The notion and scope of seal-engraving education also gradually came into view. The rise and consolidation of the Sanqiao School exemplify the development of such education within literati seal-engraving. Taking the Sanqiao School as its point of departure, this article traces the formation of Peng Wen's seal-engraving style and his approach to seal studies. It further examines how later generations received and interpreted Peng Wen's artistic ideas, and how, in this process, a form of seal-engraving education came into being. In doing so, it elucidates the evolution of seal-engraving education in Ming-dynasty literati practice and explores its implications for contemporary seal-engraving education.

Keywords:
Seal-engraving Education, Peng Wen, Sanqiao School

1. Introduction

Education may broadly be understood as a social activity that intentionally shapes individuals' knowledge, skills, moral character and modes of thought. Seal-engraving education, more specifically, refers to the process by which educators train learners in seal-engraving techniques, aesthetics and artistic concepts. Its aim is to foster practitioners of the art of seal-engraving and to preserve and develop the cultural and artistic tradition of seal-engraving. Viewed from a wider educational perspective, those who acted as instructors in relation to seals in ancient China were manual workers—minor clerks and craftsmen with a certain degree of literacy. On the basis of their practical engagement with the craft they developed theoretical approaches, which they then passed on, forming a latent mode of "seal-engraving education" at that time. Prior to the emergence of distinct schools of seal-engraving, this implicit mode of "teaching by word and example" constituted the principal form of seal-engraving education. Around the transition between the Song and Yuan dynasties, the involvement of literati in the making of seals transformed the seal into an art of seal-engraving.

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Their participation also helped, to a significant extent, to bring about the conditions necessary for the development of seal-engraving education. Driven by the participation of the literati, the refinement of seal-engraving techniques and the consolidation of ideas in seal studies further affirmed the role of seal-engraving education within the art of seal-engraving in antiquity. In the mid- to late Ming dynasty, the emergence of distinct schools of seal-engraving provided the art with a coherent developmental trajectory. Within this context, the formation of the Sanqiao School laid an important foundation for the seal-studies principle of "taking Qin and Han seals as the standard" and, on this basis, helped to establish the orthodox lineage of seal-engraving art. Accordingly, this article seeks to examine how the seal-engraving art of the Sanqiao School took shape, and thereby to offer a tentative account of the forms and content of the development of seal-engraving education in the Ming dynasty.

2. A Brief Overview of the Formation of the Sanqiao School's Artistic Style

Peng Wen (1489–1573), a native of Changzhou in Jiangsu, bore the courtesy name Shoucheng and the style names Sanqiao, Sanqiao Jushi and Yuyangzi. He was the eldest son of the renowned Ming calligrapher and painter Zhengming Wen. Gifted in calligraphy, painting, poetry, prose and seal-engraving, he was especially celebrated for his achievements in seal-engraving. [1] As the founding figure of the schools of seal-engraving, Peng Wen is discussed in Zhu Jian's *Yin Jing* (Classic of Seals), which contains a number of references to the Sanqiao School of seal-engraving and remarks as follows (Figure 1):

In Wu Commandery, Dr Wen, known by his style name Shoucheng, rose to prominence and set up his standard in the world of seals. Around him gathered Gaoyang Xu, Yuwei Wang and other gentlemen in succession, so that his fame soon spread throughout the empire. Changqing He formally acknowledged him as his master, diligently improving day by day and month by month; the derivative works he compiled and refined likewise enjoyed considerable renown for a time. In the next generation, Erxuan Su came to the fore, striving hard to stand as their equal, yet his reputation was somewhat lessened. Living in a remote coastal corner, he nonetheless indulged in self-importance, like the king of Yelang who fancied himself great. Some have claimed that Shoucheng provided the original ideas, Changqing composed the inscriptions, and Erxuan was accomplished in both literary formulation and method; all the same, each of them was a leading master in the field. Thereafter, celebrated figures emerged one after another, each cultivating a flourishing circle of followers. Competing trends contended with one another, and attempts to determine definitively who was right or wrong, or who ranked first or second, could not easily be settled. The styles practised by Yuanyu Qu, Juyi Chen, Changhengheng Li, Zhonghe Xu and Wenxiu Gui, together with those of many other eminent scholars of the Three Wu regions, all belong to the Sanqiao School. [2]

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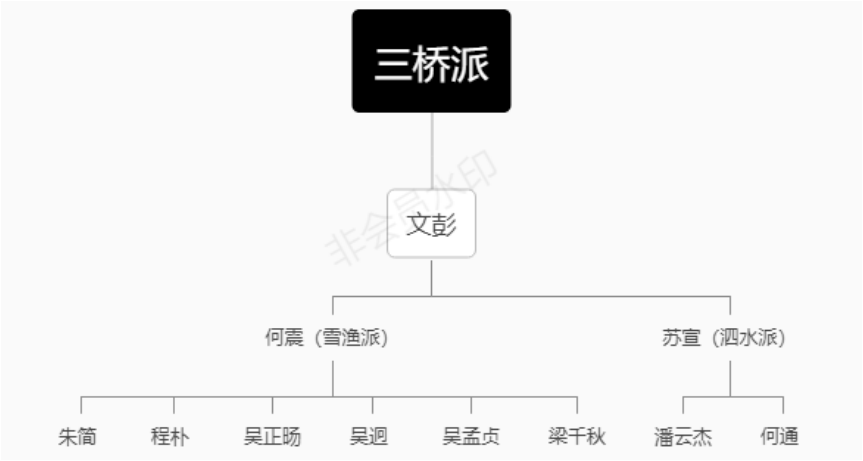


Figure 1 Lineage diagram of the Ming-dynasty Sanqiao School

			Sanqiao School				
			Peng Wen				
Zhen He (Xueyu School)						Xuan Su (Sishui School)	
Jian Zhu	Pu Cheng	Zhengyang Wu	Jiong Wu	Mengzhen Wu	Qianqiu Liang	Yunjie Pan	Tong He

As leader of the Sanqiao School, Peng Wen's development of his artistic ideas in seal-engraving forms the very core of the school's conceptual outlook. A review of the formation of his ideas in seal studies and his seal-engraving style shows that he was shaped above all by Yuan-dynasty predecessors and by his own contemporaries, and, more crucially, that he came to model himself on the seal style of the Qin and Han dynasties. To begin with, he absorbed both the literati seal-engraving of the Song and Yuan and the work of his contemporaries. Literati seal-engraving has its origins in the Song and Yuan dynasties. In his *History of Seal Studies*, Menghai Sha observes that Mi Fu, Mengfu Zhao, Yan Wuqiu and others were "writing the seal script but not carving". Only with Wang Mian did artistic works that truly combined inscription with carving come into being. Over the several centuries from the Song and Yuan through to the Ming, the sustained involvement of the literati in seal use enabled the art of seal-engraving to flourish, while the theoretical discourse of seal studies was likewise greatly enriched. As a founding figure in Ming literati seal-engraving, Peng Wen's early artistic thinking in this field was similarly influenced by Song- and Yuan-dynasty predecessors. This is recorded in many Ming discussions of seals. In *Seals from the Tianlai Pavilion*, Zhicheng Deng reproduces a poem by Zhucha presented to Rong Xu, which states:

"In later times there was Dr Wen of Changzhou, whose stone engravings strongly displayed the seal style associated with Songxue." [3]

Lingdian Xu, in his *Preface to the Gan Family Collection of Seals*, likewise comments on Peng Wen's study of Song- and Yuan-period masters, writing:

In Wu there is Shoucheng. Shoucheng gathers up the styles of Shen, Song and the Yuan masters, yet turns his back on Qin and Han. [4]

In the *Preface to the Wu Yuanding Seal Album*, Shijiao Liu observes that the seal style propagated by the Wen brothers largely bears the hallmarks of Zhao Wenmin (Zhao Mengfu):

The works transmitted by the Wen brothers are for the most part of this kind; are they not, indeed, quintes-

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sentially in the Wenmin manner? [5]

These assessments by Ming writers of Peng Wen's seal style amply confirm that his early seal-engraving manner inclined towards the seal style of the Song and Yuan periods. Moreover, when we compare Peng Wen's surviving Peng Wen zhi yin ("Seal of Peng Wen") with Zhao Mengfu's zhu-wen (red-script) seals of the Yuan dynasty, we find that, in both the handling of seal script and overall formal arrangement, they are markedly close to the style of the Song-Yuan period (Figure 2). Secondly, there is a marked tendency towards archaism. Although Peng Wen's seal-engraving was at first shaped by Song- and Yuan-period models, in his later work his stylistic allegiance shifted to the seals of the Qin and Han dynasties. This turn towards antiquity laid the foundations for what later generations came to regard as the orthodox tradition of seal studies. In the self-preface to On the Quality of Seals, Zhu Jian states explicitly that the Ming-dynasty archaising movement in seal-engraving began with Peng Wen, writing:

In Wu Commandery, Wen Shoucheng rose to prominence and set in motion a return to antiquity. [6]

In his S*elf-preface to Yinke,* Zhengyang Wu further elaborates on Peng Wen's seal-engraving style. He argues that Wen's style follows directly in the line of Qin and Han, and thus marks the source of the orthodox tradition of seal studies, observing:

Only in our dynasty's Wen Shoucheng does the lineage run straight back to Qin and Han, with a determined effort to return to the orthodox beginnings. [7]

In *On Seals*, Ye Shen likewise outlines the process by which Peng Wen learned from ancient methods, remarking:

In our own dynasty, it was only with Guobo Wen that one began to take the ancient seals of the Han and Jin as models and consciously follow in their steps. [8]

Having first learnt from his near contemporaries, Peng Wen then redirected his seal-engraving style towards a conscious return to antiquity. This archaising tendency in his thinking stemmed chiefly from the influence of his father, Zhengming Wen, and earlier masters of the Wu School. In *On Seals, Gaining Strength*, Yingyuan Zhou remarks: "Only with Wen, the Censor-in-waiting, and his son did the sources of seal art begin to open up; in white they re-established the origins of seals, and in red they pressed down the legacy of the Song and Yuan." [9] (253 *A Classified Anthology of Chinese Writings on Seals from Successive Dynasties, Volume One.*) Moreover, from the Ming dynasty onwards catalogues of collected ancient seals began to appear and multiplied steadily. These provided Ming literati seal-engravers with concrete models through which to engage with the seal style of the Qin and Han dynasties. Among such catalogues, the *Gu Family Catalogue of Collected Ancient Seals* exerted particularly strong influence on Peng Wen's efforts to emulate ancient seals (Figure 3).

The formation of Peng Wen's seal-engraving style may therefore be understood in two main respects. On the one hand, he assimilated the ideas of Song- and Yuan-dynasty seal engravers; on the other, he studied the seal style of the Qin and Han dynasties. The former is better seen as the process through which he learnt the art of seal-engraving, whereas the latter—his engagement with Qin-Han seal styles—was the decisive factor in shaping the seal-engraving style of the Sanqiao School.

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Seal of the Tianshui Commandery Library (Yuan dynasty, Mengfu Zhao); ***Seal of Mengfu Zhao*** (Yuan dynasty, Mengfu Zhao); ***Seal of Peng Wen*** (Ming dynasty, Peng Wen)

Figure 2 Comparison between Peng Wen's seal style and that of Yuan-dynasty seal engravers



Huayin (Peng Wen) Sanqiao Jushi (Peng Wen) Wuhu Youxia (Peng Wen)

Figure 3 Peng Wen's Qin-Han-style seals

2. Characteristics of Seal-engraving Education in the Sanqiao School

2.1. Forms and Content of Seal-engraving Education in the Sanqiao School

The notion of seal-engraving education, whether during the phase when seals served mainly practical functions or in the phase when seal-engraving was pursued chiefly as an art, tended for the most part to evolve in an implicit manner. Its forms and content, however, were very much present. Consequently, when considering whether ancient seal-engraving education existed, we cannot rely solely on abstract definitions of the concept. Rather, we should infer the existence of the concept from the conditions that satisfy what is meant by seal-engraving education. For instance, in *Seal-engraving Studie*s, Gangtian Li and Shida Ma propose a set of necessary conditions for seal-engraving education and compare these with the ways in which seal-making skills were transmitted in antiquity. Their discussion offers a clear point of departure for examining seal-engraving education within the Sanqiao School. Adopting a reverse line of reasoning to trace back how seal-engraving education took shape in the Sanqiao School allows us to apprehend its existence in a more immediate way. (Table 1 Ancient Seal Makers and Forms of Seal-engraving Education)

Table 1: Ancient Seal Makers and Forms of Seal-engraving Education [10]

	Acquisition of seal-making skills	Seal-engraving education
Educational subjects	Craftsmen (lower-ranking clerks responsible for drafting the seal-script text and the engravers themselves)	Literati
Form of education	Master–apprentice instruction	Social forms of education such as master–apprentice teaching and self-directed study
Educational aims	To train craftsmen with a high level of technical skill	To cultivate creative practitioners engaged in the art of seal-engraving

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Educational content	Professional skills in the making of seals	The art of seal-engraving together with its associated knowledge, techniques and theoretical framework
Educational function	Transmission of practical production skills	Transmission of stylistic lineages and the continuation and development of the art of seal-engraving

Following the Song and Yuan dynasties, the literati entered the sphere of seal production. The inherited skills of craftsmen in seal making were thereby transformed into a literati mode of seal-engraving education. From this point on, practice and theory began to be brought together. This, in turn, fostered the flourishing of the art of seal-engraving, while the concept and forms of seal-engraving education gradually reached maturity. On the basis of the above table, I will trace the formation and development of seal-engraving education in the Sanqiao School from four angles: the educational subjects, the forms of education, the educational content and the educational function. The following discussion will take up these points in turn:

Firstly, the educational subjects. In the period after the Song and Yuan dynasties, a group of seal-engravers largely drawn from the literati came to prominence, and this gradually gave rise to distinct schools of seal-engraving. Under the formative influence of Peng Wen's ideas on seal-engraving, later figures such as Zhen He and Xuan Su emerged as leading representatives of literati seal-engraving of their day. Thus, within the Sanqiao School both those who provided seal-engraving education and those who received it belonged to the literati.

Secondly, the form of education. Prior to the Song and Yuan dynasties, the mode within the sphere of seals that most closely embodied an educational function was "teaching by word and personal example". After the Song and Yuan, the passing on of seal-making skills was recast as seal-engraving education. As theoretical reflection on seals became more mature, literati seal-engraving acquired clearly articulated models to emulate, shared aesthetic concepts and a consciously transmitted body of artistic ideas. In *A Classified Anthology of Chinese Writings on Seals*, Dun Huang notes: "From the time he came of age, Changqing (Zhen He) devoted himself to his craft under the tutelage of Shoucheng." [11] In this way, the line of influence and transmission from Peng Wen to Zhen He already indicates that the Sanqiao School had established a master–apprentice form of education.

Thirdly, the educational aims. Viewed from the standpoint of modern seal-engraving education, the explicit educational objectives of Peng Wen's Sanqiao School are not easy to discern. Yet under the school's influence there arose the Xueyu School, the Sishui School and a number of later lineages, which indirectly testify to Peng Wen's role, through the Sanqiao School, in nurturing generations of seal-engraving artists. By comparison, in contemporary practice the master–apprentice model of transmission remains one of the principal forms of seal-engraving education.

Fourthly, the educational content. In the Ming dynasty, both the techniques and the theoretical discourse of seal-engraving had already achieved a basic degree of formation. Although this was still far from the richness attained in the Qing dynasty, Peng Wen's writings on seal-engraving techniques, together with his advocacy of taking Qin and Han seals as exemplary models, were carried forward by later seal-engraving artists. Building on this foundation, they articulated artistic principles such as "taking Qin and Han seals as the standard",

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"seeking seals beyond seals" and "deriving seals from calligraphy".

Fifthly, the educational function. In Seal-engraving Studies, Gangtian Li and Shida Ma define the educational function as the transmission of schools of seal-engraving and of artistic styles. In this regard, the Sanqiao School is exemplary. Later writers hailed Peng Wen as the leading figure in literati seal-engraving. Under his influence a substantial circle of followers gathered, forming the Sanqiao School with Peng Wen at its centre, and from that point onwards schools of seal-engraving began to take shape and develop.

In summary, the development of the Sanqiao School embodies both the forms and the content of seal-engraving education. Accordingly, within the Ming-dynasty schools of seal-engraving headed by the Sanqiao School, the concept of seal-engraving education had already come into being.

2.2. Transmission of Ideas in Seal Studies

The theoretical writings on seal studies produced over the centuries do not set out Peng Wen's seal-studies ideas in a direct or systematic way; our glimpse of them can only be obtained indirectly. In the *'On He Zhuchen'* section of *Biographies of Seal Engravers*, Lianggong Zhou notes: "Guobo Wen devoted himself to the study of the Six Scripts, and Zhuchen He followed him in discussion, arguing with him day and night without respite. He would often remark: 'If a person cannot grasp the subtle, numinous meanings of the Six Scripts, yet is said to handle the knife as if it were the brush, I do not believe it.'" Hence there was not a single mistaken stroke in Zhuchen He's seals; for the most part he owed this to Guobo Wen." [12] In Yin Jing, Jian Zhu likewise remarks: "From Sanqiao Wen and his immediate circle onwards, none failed to draw on the Si and Zhou scripts; every character bears the stamp of Qin and Han. How splendidly flourishing this is! There is much here that repays close viewing." [13] Lianggong Zhou's testimony reveals both Peng Wen's dedication to the study of the Six Scripts and the extent of his influence on Zhen He. Peng Wen's insistence on grounding seal-engraving in the Six Scripts also led later seal-engravers to comply with the standards laid down by scholars of ancient writing. Jian Zhu's observations further confirm the enduring impact of Peng Wen's seal-studies commitment to ancient scripts on subsequent generations. In the *Self-preface to Yinke*, the Ming writer Zhengyang Wu records: "Only with our dynasty's Wen Shoucheng does the line run straight back to Qin and Han, with a determined effort to return to the orthodox beginnings." [14] It is thus clear that Peng Wen's archaising approach to the art of seal-engraving had already reached maturity in his own day. It was precisely this shift towards archaism that brought forth the notion of "taking Qin and Han seals as the standard", which later became the central guiding principle of seal-studies theory from the Qing dynasty to the present.

Accordingly, even though Peng Wen's seal-studies doctrines were never set out in a systematic written form, his practice in the creation of seal-engraving works provided an important foundation for later theorising on seals. As Lianggong Zhou observes in the *Before the Seals of Guobo Wen section" of Biographies of Seal Engravers*: "If we speak only of the art of the seal, it was Guobo Wen who first opened the way, and later generations have treated his work as an inviolable rule." [15]

In the wake of the Sanqiao School, the techniques of seal-engraving, the body of seal-studies theory and the lines of transmission in the Ming and Qing dynasties all developed in a more systematic and regulated fashion.

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3. The Value of Seal-engraving Education in the Sanqiao School

The seal-engraving education of the Sanqiao School provided exemplary models and standards for seal-engraving education in the Ming and Qing dynasties and, indeed, for contemporary practice. Its value lies chiefly in its pioneering character, its establishment of key concepts and the insights it offers; these aspects will be examined in turn below.

To begin with, it has a foundational and historically pioneering significance. From the Song and Yuan dynasties onwards, the involvement of the literati in seal-engraving broke free from the constraints of mere "artisan skills" and turned towards the "art of seal-engraving". This shift made possible the emergence of schools of seal-engraving centred on communities of literati seal-engravers. The appearance of the Sanqiao School further dismantled existing constraints. It reached directly back to the seals of the Qin and Han dynasties while seeking to renew and innovate on the basis of earlier achievements. Under its development and influence, seal-engraving in the Ming and Qing periods rose to become another summit in the history of the art. This not only opened the way for the formation of Ming- and Qing-dynasty schools of seal-engraving, but also nurtured new forms of education in the art of seal-engraving. As a result, seals, in a fully meaningful sense, entered the artistic realm of seal-engraving. Over the course of the Sanqiao School's development, seal-engraving techniques, ideas in seal studies and the relevant lines of transmission all became increasingly rich and mature. This has considerable significance for present-day education in the art of seal-engraving and for the wider development of seal-engraving as an academic discipline.

Secondly, the establishment of the principle of "taking Qin and Han seals as the standard". In the evolution of the Sanqiao School's artistic thought on seal-engraving, centred on Peng Wen, the early phase focused primarily on his study of Song- and Yuan-dynasty masters. In the later phase, once Peng Wen turned to the seal style of the Qin and Han dynasties, Zhen He and Xuan Su came under his influence and successively followed the same path. Thus, through the efforts of the Sanqiao School seal-engravers, they first assimilated the ideas of their near contemporaries and then gradually redirected their development towards Qin-Han seals. Building on the foundation laid by Mengfu Zhao, the various members of the Sanqiao School went on to formulate more clearly the seal-studies doctrine of "taking Qin and Han seals as the standard".

Finally, this has significant value for contemporary seal-engraving education. The distinctive features of ancient seal-engraving education emerged only after literati seal-engraving had attained a certain maturity. The educational content of the Sanqiao School's seal-engraving consists chiefly of its forms of instruction, its substantive content and its educational functions. By setting the Sanqiao School alongside contemporary seal-engraving education, we can gain a clearer understanding of the insights it provides for present-day approaches to seal-engraving education. Form of education: The dominant form of seal-engraving education in the Sanqiao School was instruction between master and disciple. This model continued to exert an influence from the Ming and Qing periods through to the present. Although contemporary seal-engraving education is now centred on teaching within educational institutions, master–apprentice transmission remains one of the more prevalent forms at the level of individuals and artistic associations. Educational content: Today, seal-engraving education is based chiefly in higher education institutions. Within university curricula, teachers are expected to possess specialist expertise and to equip students with the relevant knowledge of seal-engraving, its techniques and the associated seal-studies theories, with the aim of cultivating broadly trained and

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well-rounded practitioners. When set against the relative objectivity of modern seal-engraving education, the traditional master–apprentice model was more directly concerned with transmitting the master's personal artistic vision. This form was more subjective, yet its power to carry forward a tradition was stronger. In terms of educational function, ancient seal-engraving education gave full expression to the inheritance of stylistic features and artistic concepts in seal-engraving, and it also produced a coherent line of historical development. By contrast, the primary focus of contemporary seal-engraving education is the training of artists in the field of seal-engraving itself, and this education is geared mainly towards horizontal, wide-ranging development. Thus, the development of ancient seal-engraving education laid the groundwork for its modern counterpart. It is likewise thanks to this earlier development that contemporary seal-engraving education now has at its disposal a relatively complete system of creative methods and ideas in seal studies. From this perspective, viewing Ming-dynasty education in the art of seal-engraving through the lens of Peng Wen's Sanqiao School is both meaningful and valuable.

4. Conclusion

Whether one focuses on seals as instruments of practical use or on seal-engraving as an art form, in both cases the modes by which they are handed down embody, in different ways, a kind of seal-engraving education. Because the concept itself remains somewhat indistinct, I have taken the Sanqiao School as a case study and, by considering the formation of schools of seal-engraving, the emergence of the Sanqiao School's stylistic features and the characteristics of its seal-engraving education, have attempted to gain a partial view of the origins and development of seal-engraving education in the Ming dynasty. On the basis of this research, I would argue that from the emergence of the Sanqiao School onwards, the rise of distinct schools of seal-engraving endowed Ming- and Qing-dynasty seal-engraving with a clear and coherent artistic trajectory. At the same time, seal-studies ideas were able to flourish. In this sense, the formation and subsequent influence of the Sanqiao School already display the defining features of seal-engraving education and, in so doing, laid the groundwork for later forms of such education.

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