

# HOLD THE CHAR SIEW!



**EXPORTING TO ASIA,  
ONE MAN'S JOURNEY**

**BENNY LEE FOOK HENG**

## **ADVANCE PRAISE FOR HOLD THE CHAR SIEW!**

“Here is an excellent book written by someone who has walked the talk in International Marketing in Asia... he has obviously been there and done that. A novice international marketing manager or student will be able to learn from an experienced individual. I recommend it to anyone who is interested in marketing in Asia coming from the West.”

**Professor Dipak C. Jain**

**Dean, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University**

“This book represents an important synthesis of the practical with the conceptual for people interested in International Marketing. Benny’s use of interesting organizational examples and product introductions provides invaluable insights to both the practitioner in the field as well as the academic in the classroom. His discussion of cross-cultural and “criss-cultural” marketing is fascinating and a must read for any marketing professional.”

**Professor Christopher Earley**

**Dean, National University of Singapore Business School**

“Benny’s book should be read by Singaporean entrepreneurs for its wealth of experience, reflections and practical advice. His treatment of Hong Kong and China provides useful reference for anyone serious about accessing the booming China market through Hong Kong. Knowing the language is one thing, fine-tuning marketing strategies in the light of different cultural values and norms remains the heart of the matter.”

**K K Lam**

**Director, Hong Kong Economic & Trade Office (Singapore)**

“Recent studies at Glasgow University by Harris and Li, sponsored by UK Trade and Investment, have found that firms new to exporting experience a 34 percent long run increase in total factor productivity in the year that they start to export! For firms to start exporting they need a mentor and there can be no better mentor than Benny Lee. His book is an absorbing guide to exporting in Asia Pacific, written by a real practitioner with a passion for his trade. Sprinkled with amusing anecdotes (many of which found me nodding in agreement) as well as extremely well researched advice, the book will appeal to firms starting their journey in international trade as well as experienced exporters. I’ve been involved in international trade for 30 years and learned through bitter experience. If only I’d Benny’s book when I began, I could have had a head start on the opposition!”

**Clive Drinkwater**

**Director, UK Trade & Investment (North West)**

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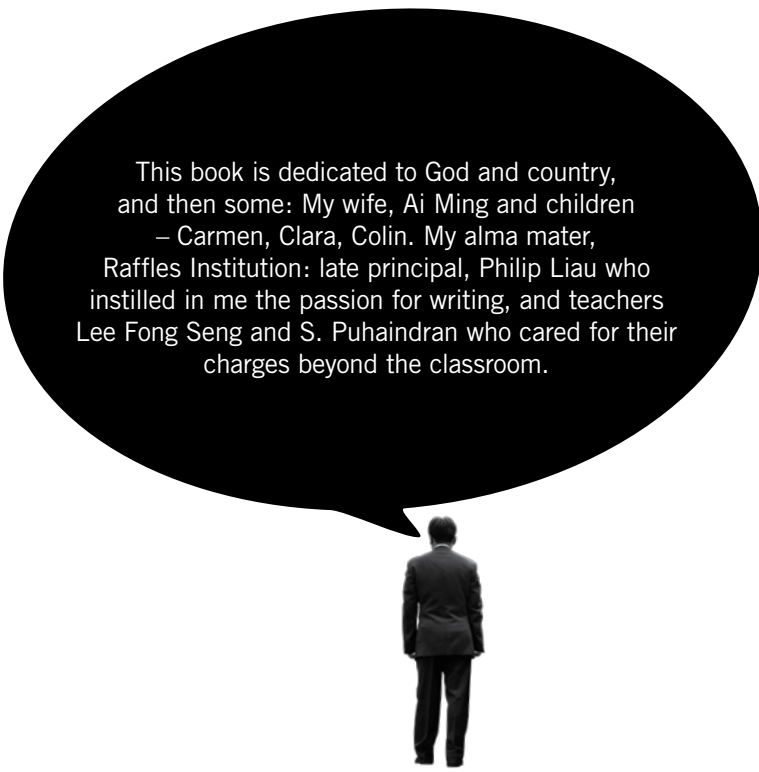
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This book is dedicated to God and country,  
and then some: My wife, Ai Ming and children  
– Carmen, Clara, Colin. My alma mater,  
Raffles Institution: late principal, Philip Liau who  
instilled in me the passion for writing, and teachers  
Lee Fong Seng and S. Puhaindran who cared for their  
charges beyond the classroom.

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## PREFACE

### 1975

I was a second-year student in the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Singapore. A scholarship programme sponsored by Japan Air Lines to study in Sophia University in Tokyo has imbued in me a love for interacting with peoples of different nationalities. It set me off in my quest for corporate nirvana – a career with a heavy international content. Thankfully, I have found it, and at 55, am still enjoying it.

In 1976, Aiesec International\* awarded me a traineeship with Caterpillar Far East in Hong Kong. A 6-month training programme led to a job offer. I was overjoyed, since a short stint in a local bank had convinced me that a sedentary job was, for this author at least, a fate worse than death. (Also, it was a S\$640 civil service job in Singapore versus a HK\$4,000 job at Caterpillar in Hong Kong.)

### 2007

In the blink of an eye, it's been 30 years since I began my international marketing career in the Asia Pacific, representing multinational industrial product companies from the West (America, United Kingdom, Belgium, New Zealand, Luxembourg and Italy), either as an employee or an Export Consultant. A stint with a Hong Kong company largely in the agency business between 1985-88 gave me a view of the export market from the other side of the fence. And, having bought over an existing access control agency business in 1994, I began to suss out what really makes a business ticks.

### Why The Book

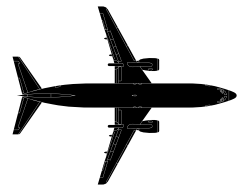
This book is about how to establish an export beachhead in the Asia Pacific region. Looking back, there were lessons which cut across product sectors, nationalities of the original companies and personalities involved; the cultural gaps at play were independent of the factors aforementioned.

For some reasons, most books on doing business in Asia – multi-racial at best, inscrutable at worst – are written by Anglo-Saxons. This book serves to buck the trend.

Finally, for practising International Marketers, if the book resonates with you – if my anecdotes and limited experiences echo your very own, or touch you in any way – drop me a line at [bennyfhlee@gmail.com](mailto:bennyfhlee@gmail.com).

I would love to hear from my fellow road warriors.

\* *Aiesec is an international organisation started in Switzerland for business students by business students linking them to the corporate world through industrial attachments or traineeship worldwide.*



CHAPTER ONE  
**JET SET, GO!**





**O**n a morning of unusually lucid sunshine in 1976, a message that would forever change my life arrived at my home in East Coast Hill. The telex (the fax machine though invented circa 1840 was not commercially available or popular) said I was wanted in Hong Kong for a training exchange programme with a tractor firm there. I had only recently graduated from business school in the then University of Singapore.

Having been selected for the exchange programme by Aiesec – the world’s largest student organisation – meant I had to work in Caterpillar Far East to plan and execute a market research survey of the tractor population in the entire Far East: Brunei, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand. The purpose was to find out, through a census of every piece of earth-moving equipment in the region, the market share of the different brands – Caterpillar, Komatsu, Ingersoll-Rand, International Harvester, John Deere, Mitsubishi, Jacobsen, etc. This was then to be segmented according to the machine type: tractor, wheel loader, hydraulic excavator, road grader, dump truck and so on.

With a shift of gear, and a little help from Aiesec, my career in International Marketing had taken off.

**International Marketing entails the rigors of criss-crossing the globe.** Seeing the big wide world has been, still is, and will

always be, mind-blowing. The Dead Sea and Petra in Jordan; the Tunnel dug by the North Koreans at the Demilitarised Zone in Korea; endless Kalbi and Bulgolgi BBQ dinners on cold mountain top restaurants in Korea; eating “balut” in the Philippines; Cracker Barrel Grandma Special breakfast in the US; countless KTV parties in Shanghai and Taipei...

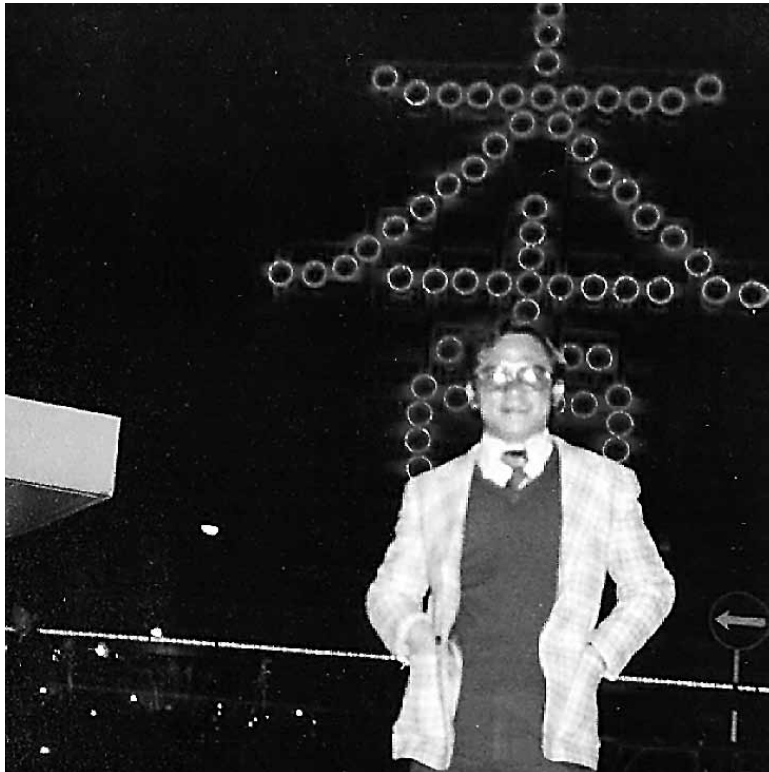
Instead of getting chained to a soul-sapping work station banging away at the calculating machine (before the advent of the spreadsheet and notebook computers) in a faceless bank, life for me was one of jetting in and out of this exciting world city called Hong Kong. That became a routine, not a dream.

It was an extremely cold Christmas eve in 1976 in Hong Kong. Global warming was just a distant rumble on the horizon. The temperature on that night was five degrees Centigrade. Snow blanketed Tai Moh Shan, or Big Foggy Mountain, in the New Territories. Shivering through the night and sneezing endlessly, it was only the vigour of a young athletic body strengthened by years of rugby training and two and a half years of National Service that averted a full-blown flu.

Upon finding appropriate accommodation, I settled down to living the bachelor’s life in this vibrant city. On the first night on my own (my two uncles had been looking after me before I found my own accommodation), I ran smack into my first cultural shock.

Back in Singapore, when one ordered *char siew fan* (rice with barbecued pork), it would always come with *siew yoke* (roast pork)





My first Chinese New Year in Hong Kong as a young expatriate, 1977.

and *siew cheung* (roast sausage). As I did not like barbecued pork, I would tell the stallholder to hold the char siew. In Hong Kong, this same request was received with considerable loathing as char siew fan in Hong Kong did not come with roast pork or roast sausage. The hawker was not amused, thinking I was mocking him by asking for a plate of plain rice. (In Hong Kong you get what you order, nothing more nothing less. For instance, if you order a bowl of wanton noodle soup, that is all you get, whereas in Singapore, you would also get char siew and some choi sum vegetables.) Before I realised my mistake, the man, incandescent with rage, slammed his

hefty cleaver on the chopping block. I was stunned. That moment wrenched me out of my delusion – that I had understood their culture simply because we shared a common Chinese dialect.

Imagine a native Cantonese who has been speaking Cantonese since birth coming into this quintessentially Cantonese town and tripping over the mother tongue. There were words like “kuk” which is not used; “yat kuk” is ten cents in Singapore but in Hong Kong, ten cents is “yat ho ji”. In the intricate and fascinating world of International Marketing I have learned many lessons.

#### THE FIRST LESSON IS THIS:

**Never assume to know a foreign market just because you speak the local language.** In the US, the assumption is that if you speak the language, you know the market. Nonsense. A candidate in the UK and US applying for the Export Sales Director job who speaks *Putonghua* (Mandarin) or Japanese may not necessarily know China or Japan. An Anglo-Saxon who speaks Mandarin or Cantonese is like someone who has the key to a house. It is easier for him to find his way to Puxi from the Pudong International Airport in Shanghai as compared to someone who does not. Yet, it does not equate to his knowing the inside of the house, where the treasures are, where the safe is and probably not even where the kitchen is. Using the kitchen analogy, in order to be successful in exporting to a particular foreign market, one may even need to know what is normally stocked in the kitchen cabinets and what kind of food the host likes to prepare.



It came as quite a shock to me that so many Hong Kongers would loiter on the streets of the crowded city till the wee hours, day after day. In Caterpillar Far East where I worked, going for Happy Hours at the Lau Ling Bar in the Furuma Hotel next door was a staple. The reason was simple: Most homes were so small, it made more sense to spend as much time as possible outside. The corollary was that you don't get invited home very much in Hong Kong. As a result, expatriates living in Hong Kong did not get to see this aspect of the ex-colony's life much. Then again, being foreigners, they would not have expected to be invited anyway. It is pertinent to point out that notwithstanding modernisation, it is very much Chinese culture to show hospitality – including inviting your friends home. In predominantly Chinese societies like modern Singapore, you don't drop in on someone unannounced like the good old days, but home visits are still practiced especially during Chinese New Year.

Another deep cultural difference between Hong Kong and Singapore is that, in the former, 'packaging' – dressing and presentation – is everything; high society is much more pronounced and entrenched. A big chunk of your salary in Hong Kong goes to the wardrobe. On the second day of my induction into the high life at Caterpillar Far East, the boss' secretary, Mona Chik (bless her!) told me in subtly polite tones that I needed to "upscale" my entire presentation. The next sundown I headed straight for the Central shopping area for a pair of Johnston & Murphy shoes, some Ermenegildo Zegna ties and Valentino business shirts. In

the mirror, I surveyed my entire first month's stipend.

Another aspect of Hong Kong society that stumps Singaporeans is their apparent rudeness and lack of social graces, especially in shops around Tsim Sha Tsui and Causeway Bay. This can be explained by the totally laissez faire society that they live in. The British colonial government, intentionally or otherwise, had left the locals to their own devices with nary a safety net. There is no Central Provident Fund or pension if something untoward happens to a Hong Konger. Eking out a living becomes brutally competitive. There is no room for everyday graces; just making enough to cover rental is a struggle for most retail shop owners in Hong Kong. Hence the curtness once they perceive that you will not be fishing out your wallet.

By the same token, the laissez faire policy brings out in Hong Kongers a keen sense of entrepreneurship that puts Singaporeans – so used to government patronage – in the shade. A good example is the taxi service. There is no surcharge of any kind be it to and from the airport or after midnight as in Singapore. What the Hong Kong government does is simply to issue sufficient number of licenses and let market forces take over. The system works amazingly. There is a cab waiting for you irrespective of where and when in Hong Kong compared to Singapore's sometimes dismal (peak hours) taxi situation as evidenced by the truckloads of complaint letters in the newspapers.

What is the intent in highlighting all these social characteristics of Hong Kong?





**You need to keep an extremely open mind as an International Marketer.**

In addition, it is imperative to use this first chapter to emphasize a key requirement of success in exporting or International Marketing:

**You travel to live (just like one eats to live) and not live to travel.**

Getting on a plane for an International Marketer is driven by one raison d'être only – getting a job done, be it to solve a letter of credit problem or to resolve a dispute with an agent. Business travel entails “open ticketing” most of the time as we would not be able to tell when we depart or how long we need to stay. Business travel means endless shuttling between the agent's office, airport, the hotel and some restaurants. No sightseeing, no sitting by the beach. Plenty of dining and wining (part of doing business in most of Asia), plenty of second guessing the body language displayed in the day's meeting (*wayang kulit* or shadow play) and plenty of talking to smoothen relationships.

One fine day in 1984, acting as the regional export manager for Blue Circle Armitage Shanks, I was summarily called into the office of the CEO Martyn Horbrough. Four containers of washbasins from our Malaysian factory were found to be completely unusable owing to multiple pinholes found on the surfaces (British Standards allows no more than seven pinholes in ceramic ware). These containers were already trucked to Guangdong. An air ticket order was placed immediately with our travel agent for me to take the 4 PM China Airlines flight to Hong Kong so that I could

verify the problem and pacify a very upset customer. The instruction was for the travel agent to meet me in the airport. My car was left at the carpark in Changi Airport. There was only time to inform my wife that I had to go to Hong Kong in double-quick time and that I would return the next day. No luggage was checked in as I had none. Whatever was needed was bought near the Excelsior Hotel where I stayed. I was immediately driven by car across the Lowu Border and straight to the site in the night. The complaint was verified and immediate replacement of the four containers was pledged. Only then did the customer simmer down. All in a day's work for an International Marketer.

One day in 1989, as the Regional Director of Singapore Technologies for Europe, Middle East and Africa, I was whisked into the boss' room and told that he could not travel with the President to Zurich. I had to take his place. The Singapore Airlines flight was to take off at 11 PM and it was 4.30 PM on the clock.



Martyn Horbrough with his wife dining with me in the JUMBO Seafood Restaurant in Aberdeen, Hong Kong circa 1984.



Business travel is sometimes like being in Fear Factor. I had my first emergency landing in 1977 in Jakarta's Kemayoran domestic airport on a Garuda domestic flight to Medan. The Boeing 727 had developed a hydraulic failure upon takeoff. We were hardly airborne when the pilot announced in Bahasa Indonesia that his engine was "rosak" (malfunctioning). The front wheels failed to retract. He circled for nearly three hours to use up the fuel while his flight engineer went beneath the cockpit to yank out the front wheels manually. We made it – but not before one Indonesian Chinese passenger came to me asking to swap seats with him as I was in the last row. His forehead had perspiration the size of beads. I told him matter-of-factly that the two JT8 engines of the Boeing 727 were adjacent to the last row of seats and in a crash, my seat would probably be the first to incinerate. He duly returned to his. The floundering Boeing 727 touched down, hobbling down the runway with the wing threatening to shear off. The wonder of it all was that there was not a single fire engine in sight while hundreds of passengers in the terminal rushed out to see what would probably qualify for Reader's Digest's "Drama in Real Life". After the pilot had guided the plane into the nearest hangar, we were rushed to the terminal building for medical attention. I sat down and it was then that cold fear overcame me. Knees shaking uncontrollably, I broke down while calling home.

**For the International Marketer, being frequently air borne, the probability of encountering such perils or worse is exponentially higher than for those with desk-bound jobs. But it can be equally harrowing on land.**

Traffic jams in Bangkok used to be legendary. In 1995, a distributor of mine drove me out to the suburbs to see a factory. The jams were ludicrous. We were stuck for more than three hours each way. On the way back, without so much as a backward glance, my host opened the car door and walked out – leaving me with his wife! We thought he went to ease himself. Finally it dawned on me that he would not return; he just had enough of the day's traffic. The wife then took over the wheels and drove me back to the Siam Intercontinental Hotel. The Bangkok jam has ameliorated much in the last few years and the unenviable reputation for bad traffic in Asia now goes to Beijing and Seoul.

Next up: China.

On arrival in Beijing at the old Capital Airport in 1996, I was picked up by a pirate taxi. The driver asked for RMB400 when the licensed taxi would have charged only about RMB100 on the meter. Worse, she (yes, it was a lady) refused to drop me in front of the Holiday Inn as she was obviously afraid of the hotel penalising her. Since I was travelling on behalf of a client, the problem was not in being cheated but how to claim the expense when she could not issue a receipt. But at least she wasn't a gangster. Speaking of which.

A Korean intermediary and I once hired a taxi from J. C. Mandarin Hotel in Shanghai to visit Yangzhou Tong Lee Reefer Container Ltd in Yangzhou. After five arduous hours that seemed more like 50, we arrived at the city centre. The driver, unfamiliar with the city, stopped at a round-about to ask some men sitting on the side for directions to the destination. A gentleman immediately jumped





## **Acknowledgments**

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Professor Kulwant Singh, Vice Dean of the NUS Business School who so kindly appointed MBA student, Koo Wee Leong to be my research assistant. Professor Singh, an experienced author, lent me his wisdom and wit, which liberated me.

Wee Leong, for his faithful service in getting the needful done in such a short time. I enjoyed our brief stint working together in the NUS Business School Library. (I wish you the best in your attachment with Beijing University.)

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My long-suffering colleague, Xanthus Tia without whose computer skills many things would not have come to pass. Thank you for keeping faith with me.



## About ITIS

The International Trade Institute of Singapore (ITIS) is a wholly owned subsidiary of International Enterprise Singapore Holdings. ITIS was formed in 2000 as a result of a merger and corporatisation of two former STDB units namely; the Export Institute of Singapore (EIS) and the Singapore Trade Development Board Consulting Group (STDBC).

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### **About the Author**

Benny Lee Fook Heng has over 30 years of international marketing experience, 18 of which were with multinational corporations like Caterpillar, Bekaert, Blue Circle Group, Polytek and Singapore Technologies. In each of the first four companies where he held export management positions, he covered the Asia Pacific region. But in Singapore Technologies, he was the Regional Director for Europe, Middle East and Africa from 1988 – 1994.

In 1994, he left the corporate world to set up his own export consultancy practice under the name of Benroth International. In the thirteen years since, Benroth has successfully consulted with many global companies in the United Kingdom, United States, Italy, Luxembourg and New Zealand culminating in his biggest client to date being the Arcelor Steel Group of Luxembourg, better known now as ArcelorMittal Steel Group since the merger with Mittal Steel in 2006. The world's largest steel company has appointed Benroth to be their Asia Pacific "Outsourced Regional Office" for their Long Carbon Division since March 2005.

Benny is frequently invited to speak at international seminars in Japan, China, UK and Singapore. He has contributed articles to the Business Times of Singapore and was also on the panel of GlobalSources.com. In 2004 he was appointed the Trade Consultant to Wales Trade International (WTI) in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. On 1 June, 2006 he was featured in the Business Times of Singapore as a successful "Pathfinder" for Hart Technologies of Singapore under I. E. Singapore's (the Singapore Government trade promotion agency) new assistance scheme to help Singaporean companies internationalise.

Benny graduated from the then University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in 1976. He was the leader of the first batch of JAL Scholars in 1975 having studied at Sophia University in Tokyo. He has also taught International Marketing in Temasek Polytechnic's Postgraduate Marketing and Sales Diploma Course as an adjunct lecturer from 1991 – 96.

Benny is the current Vice President of the NUS Business School Alumni.

He is married with three children.



### **About Benroth International**

Benroth International was founded by Benny F H Lee in 1994. Benroth International, headquartered in Singapore but with offices in Hong Kong and Shanghai, specialises in assisting clients in the first step of internationalisation – that of selling through agents and distributors. With initial success and at the request of the client, we offer further services in licensing, franchising, joint-venture or foreign direct investment.

Providing a cost-effective "Outsourced Regional Office" concept for manufacturers from the West in the Asia Pacific region, Benroth seeks to bridge the cultural, time and distance gaps, thus shortening the learning curve for first-time Asian market entrants.

With a staff of specialist consultants over a number of sectors, we search, appoint, train and manage the network of agents and distributors for clients in Asia, leveraging on an extended network of contacts built up over more than thirty years.

For more information on Benroth International, please refer to the company's website at [www.benrothintl.com](http://www.benrothintl.com) or contact Benny at [bennyfhlee@gmail.com](mailto:bennyfhlee@gmail.com)





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**BENNY LEE FOOK HENG** was Singapore Technologies' Regional Director for Europe, Middle East and Africa from 1988 to 1994. In 1994, he set up Benroth International, an export consultancy practice. In 2004, he was appointed the Trade Consultant to Wales Trade International in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. Since 2005, Benroth has been the Asia Pacific "Outsourced Regional Office" for Arcelor Steel's Long Carbon Division. With over 30 years of international marketing experience, he is frequently invited to speak at international seminars in Japan, China, UK and Singapore.

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