Written & Directed by John Woo
Produced by Hark Tsui
Original Music by Lowell Lo (as Lowell Lowe)
Cinematography by Peter Pau (as Peter Pao) and Wing-Hung Wong (as Wong Wing Hang)
Film Editing by Kung Wing Fan (as Fan Kung Ming)
Art Direction by Man-Wah Luk (as Luk Man Wah)
Set Decoration by Chun-Ching Tai
Stunt action coordinators Siu-Tung Ching (as Ching Siu Tung) and Chi-Ho Lau (as Lau Chi Ho)

Yun-Fat Chow…Ah Jong (as Chow Yun Fat)
Danny Lee…Insp. Li Ying / Little Eagle
Sally Yeh…Jennie
Kong Chu…Fung Sei (as Chu Kong)
Kenneth Tsang…Sgt. Tsang Yeh (as Tsang Kong)
Fui-On Shing…Wong Hoi (as Shing Fui On)
Wing-Cho Yip…Wong Dung-Yu


David Chute: The killer— is he a good man, or is he a man who wants to be good?

John Woo: He wants to be good. That’s why at the beginning, I put church. In childhood, I always liked to sit in the church; I liked calm and peace and I liked to have time and a place for thinking to myself.

So, for the killer, he wanted to be good and he was fed up with killing and he’s trying to stop, but the problem for the killer is that once you pick up a gun, it’s hard to put down. So, it’s a matter of honor. So, he is also like me, sitting in a church and thinking, thinking of his destiny….Friendship is the only
thing he’s got, so he tried to quit, and he’s fed up with the killing already. But he’d like to do the last job for a friend. He believes in friends.

DC: Why does he go to the club?
JW: Since he wounded [the singer], the killer feels guilty, and in a way he tries to help her and tries to repay [her for ] what he did. So he always watched her silently...just trying to do something for the girl.

DC: This is a very important scene.
JW: Yeah, this scene, when the killer is looking at a picture of the way she was before. So when he looks at the picture and he realizes before the girl got blind she was so full of life and beauty, so when he looks at the picture, he feels more guilty about it...like he ruined her life. So, he feels more pain, because the killer has his own principles. He only kills the bad guy and never harms the good guy. Maybe the idea came from pictures all over the room and all over the living room, especially my wife, you know, she likes to put her picture in the bedroom. She wants me to look at her [all the] time.

DC: There was something interesting that you said about the way Catholicism was portrayed in Scorsese’s films, like Mean Streets.
JW: I admire Martin Scorsese so much, and also am influenced by him so much especially Mean Streets. I really love that movie. So, in his movie, they kept in the church, so it made me use the Catholic Church in my movie.

I learned from his powerful technique and also learned from his dramatic slow motion. Now, the way he uses slow motion—he likes to use [slow] motion to capture some beautiful moment in the acting, or he likes to capture some expression from the actors. It makes it look so beautiful and dramatic, so I use it in my frame.

I also use slow motion on actors, not only on the action. The action is from Sam Peckinpah, and also the camera movement—my camera movement is also influenced by him....I also learned from [François] Truffaut’s movies. He was the first one who used freeze frame on film for an emotional touch. There is a scene of Jeanne Moreau, she turns and looks at Oscar Werner [in Jules et Jim], and he freezes...on her smile. It was an unforgettable technique to make scenes more romantic. I never forgot and I try to use it in my movies.

Even though I learned [filmmaking] by myself, I also learned film theory from all the masters. But usually I don’t care about a theory, and don’t care about the traditional way of making film. Usually I will do whatever I want. And I do whatever I feel. When I do the editing, suddenly I feel—in this moment or this scene I would like to use the dissolve or the overlap in and emotional way. But when the audience sees the dissolve in the film, [they think] it means flashback.

DC: ...some of the things that you’re talking about are ways of taking what’s inside the character and making it visible.
JW: Usually, whatever I do, I never think about the audience. The first thing I think of is the character, the actor and myself—how we feel.

For example, when...[Chow Yun-Fat’s character] is betrayed by a friend. We usually talk before the shooting, and I ask him “Did you have any similar experience, or do you have any friends just like that?” Usually he will figure out and pick up some memory about his same experience. So it makes his acting look very real and touching, because it was real. That’s how I work with actors....So, usually when [Chow Yun-Fat and I] work together, we always put our input, our real feeling into the character. So, what I mean is that when you see Chow Yun-Fat, you see me. I always like to put myself into his character.

...The Killer [is about] trying to find out if there is something in common between people. Also, I was fascinated by a Japanese movie in the ‘60s. I forgot the name, [Law Kar says it’s a Teruo Ishii movie called Dip Hueh Shuan Hung in Cantonese—ed.] but the star was Ken Takakura and the movie was shot in Hong Kong and Macau, and was also about a killer who killed only the bad people—the killer has principles, and he only kills the bad guys, never kills a good guy. But since he took a job and goes to Hong Kong and was set up by the Hong Kong gang and the Japanese gang, the person who he killed was a good guy. So, he regrets that he was used by the gang. And in the meantime, there is a Japanese cop who tracks him down to Hong Kong and tries to arrest him.

And so, the killer tries to take the revenge, and find out who set him up to get revenge to the whole gang. When he is wandering in Macau, he met a Japanese girl, and she’s a whore. The girl tries to go back to Japan but she is so sick with tuberculosis and her dream is to go back to Japan. So the killer helps her, and asks her to wait until he fights the gang. He asks the girl to wait for him in the dark. So Ken Takakura goes to fight the gang and he gets killed. The Japanese girl is still waiting in the dark and the hero never comes. This movie I love very much, and it gave me the spirit to make The Killer.

DC: Did the book Chronicle of an Assassin that you read when you were younger have a direct influence on the movie?
JW: How did you know? In general I like the story about the assassins. Especially in the ancient time of China, there were four very famous assassins. They have a great story, and it is the character of the killer. You can say that the character of The Killer and A Better Tomorrow are all based on the ancient
Chinese assassin story. The movie, *The Last Hurrah for Chivalry*, was influenced by my master, Chang Cheh.

**[Dragon Boat scene]**

**JW:** This is my favorite scene in the whole movie. I tried to use that dragon boat race as a metaphor for the cop and the killer. For every movie I make, I always like to make a classic or unforgettable scene....And for *The Killer*, I also try to make a dramatic and powerful killing scene. I wanted to make the dragon boat scene a classic, like the final scene of *Day of the Jackal*, when the killer kills the French priest—just like that.

So this scene: we shot documentary [footage for] five months before we started shooting. And then we rebuilt the same set to do the real scene. We had a lot of footage. The editor had trouble cutting it, and he didn’t know how to cut it and the editor was not used to cutting scenes with other shots, with other storyboards, and he got no idea how to cut this scene well. So I cut it for myself and used three weeks to cut the scene. For the idea for the dragon boat I wanted, I tried to use the dragon boat race to symbolize the killer and the cop—the competition between them is like a sport.

**MARK RANCE:** *What does the cop have in common with the killer?*

**JW:** Even though they’re enemies, they respect the same thing from each other. For example, this cop has feeling—usually the cop has no feeling, [or] usually the cop doesn’t express feeling, and the cop feels the same way toward the killer because the killer usually has no feeling. So they recognize this in each other. That’s the idea for the scene.

**DC:** *Can you talk about how that was supposed to work in the movie…?*

**JW:** The original idea for *The Killer* was a triangle love story. The killer and the cop both fall in love with the singer. For some scenes, for example, the killer was with the girl or the girl with the cop, and I wanted to shoot it at the same angle, and put them in the same position and almost use the same line and camera movements, the same cutting, just try to show them have the same feeling....I love big close-ups.

**DC:** *Where does that come from? Some people say Sergio Leone.*

**JW:** No, no. It's maybe about my hobbies. No matter where I am, I love watching people’s faces. Even walking on the street, I always love to watch the different faces. I want to know their feeling....I want to create an intimate relationship between the audience and the actors, and the big close-ups can show them acting in more detail. It looks more like a sculpture—you can think and you can feel more from their faces.

**DC:** *We wanted very much to have you talk about violence, about how...much is too much?*

**JW:** I’ve never taken violence seriously in my films. All I’m concerned with is that when I’m making violent scenes, is that it has to be based on emotion, not based on how to please the audience or try to make someone happy. The most important thing is to try to make me happy, because when I’m shooting the action scenes, I feel very excited, it’s the most exciting moment in my work. So, I feel so much joy when I was shooting the action scenes. All I thought about was how to make the action look—this is a very silly thing—romantic and beautiful.

Usually I don’t think of how the audience feels. The most important thing is how I feel. Sometimes I use violence to send some message, because when I was a child, I saw so much violence, so many people got killed, especially in 1967. There were two big riots in Hong Kong. A lot of people got killed in front of my door.

So actually I hate violence. I’m a peace-lover, and I hate war. I hate to see people killing each other. I wonder if violence sends a message, that violence has got to stop. If it cannot stop, we need some kind of hero to stop it...the hero sacrifices his life for honor, chivalry, and sometimes for sympathy. It's a very Chinese tradition.

I’m not romanticizing the violence...I romanticize the hero. When I shoot a movie or decide anything, I usually don’t think about the result. I just do whatever I feel. For example, when I shot *A Better Tomorrow*, I just wanted to put Alain Delon’s image on Chow Yun-Fat, so I made Chow Yun-Fat wear the long coat with the sunglasses to look very ’60s.

But somehow his character and the movie became so popular; everybody imitated him. The young audience imitated him, they learned to dress like him and also learned his behavior. I didn’t realize that before. The people take the impression of my movie and turn to love the violence, and some people misunderstood. I tried not to glorify the Triad [Hong Kong mafia—ed.]. I really didn't intend that. When I make a gangster movie, it is just like making a Chinese swordplay [movie]. All I intended was to glorify the hero, the behavior of the hero, not the Triad society. I admit the filmmaker sometimes has to be concerned about the moral standard...but for me, I make the film as an artist, and juts make the film.
MR:  An obvious question would be, why a gun battle in church?

JW:  Good question. A lot of people wonder why I used a church for a gun battle scene, especially for the final fight. In the beginning, the killer is sitting in the church. I wanted to say that God is welcoming, no matter if it’s a good man or a bad man, everyone is welcome. When a gun battle is in a church, I just use it to say the war in between people and evil, they always turn heaven to hell. It’s just like Apocalypse Now.

When you see the statue of the Virgin Mary being blown up, it means the people ruined all the beauty, loveliness and holiness. To me, the Virgin Mary represents peace and love, the truth and beauty, and the love from God….[When the Virgin Mary blows up], it makes me feel more sad. So that’s why I used the church for the gun battle scene.

…Since I wanted to make it like the good against evil, I made the gun battle big, like a war was going on. Everything has been damaged and destroyed, including the truth….

MR:  Did it take longer to shoot this scene—was this scene bigger than all the other scenes?

JW:  Well, this scene, including the exterior and interior, took twenty-eight days to shoot. It's a different location, a different set. Between inside and outside it did take a long time to shoot the scene. Because every thing is a new experiment—everything was a new experience for the stunt group, for the special effect group, and also for the camera group. Everybody, everybody was having a hard time, especially the stunt group.

DC:  Was there some disagreement about how this final scene should be shot?

JW:  That’s interesting. The other reason I used the church was to represent the fate of human beings. I tried to use the church to represent a feeling of destiny. The killer, when he is shot, he is blinded. Even though he had a good heart, he still cannot avoid fate. So he lost everything, even though he got love. When we were shooting this scene, Chow Yun-Fat had a suggestion. He said he and Jennie [actress Sally Yeh—ed.] should go out together and meet, touch each other and hold hands very tight, and then die. I didn’t agree. I said, how about we make it more tragic, let both of them crawl together and pass, and miss each other. It will make it more tragic, and more like they have been played by fate.

MR:  They’ve been tricked by fate?

JW:  Yeah, they’ve been tricked by fate. That’s why they miss each other. And Chow Yun-Fat agreed, so we made the scene more sad and dramatic…so the cop did the last favor for the killer. He killed the bad guy for him, but by the law, he turns into a criminal. He’s also tricked by fate. So all he has is the memory of a good friend. That’s why at the end, I put Chow Yun-Fat playing the harmonica as the end shot.

DC:  His friend is thinking about him?

JW:  Yeah, his friend is thinking about him. The original idea for the ending is after the killing, Jennie goes to the airport again, alone, to try to get aboard. When she is just waiting for help, Danny Lee suddenly appears, brings the money, and goes to the United States with her, then tries to help cure her eyes. It’s more like a happy ending. But since I overscheduled too much, and Jennie’s schedule was too short, we canceled the scene…We put Chow Yun-Fat’s shot as the end shot, and [it] also got [across] the other meaning of an unforgettable friendship.

MR:  So in the end, death wins over the criminal, and law wins over the cop.

JW:  It’s a little pessimistic. That’s the world we live in.

David Chute: The Killer (Criterion notes)

The Killer is one of the most passionate and exhilarating gangster movies ever made. Written and directed by Hong Kong filmmaker John Woo, the film is the propulsive account of a super-cool Hong Kong hitman’s final assignment, after he seals his own fate with an unexpected spasm of remorse. Borrowing inspiration from doom-laden French crime movies like Jean-Pierre Melville’s Le samouraï and ancient Chinese chronicles of patriotic assassins, the film is a passionate cinematic upheaval.
To some aesthetic puritans, John Woo’s crime movies pile on a bit too much of everything: They are too violent, too melodramatic, altogether too emotionally unselﬁsh. But in fact, Woo’s gangster ﬁlms are fascinating precisely because they are such multifaceted hybrids. They reﬂect familiar Western pop cultural elements through an Eastern lens, and the most debased conventions come back looking fresh, reimagined, “made strange.”

While The Killer is aggressively violent, there is an undercurrent of pure sensuous enjoyment in the images of death by gunshot, as scores of perforated mobsters expire in languorous slow motion. “Life’s cheap,” a cop in the movie suggests. “It only takes one bullet.” But in practice, it always takes about a dozen geysering bullet hits to kill anybody here, as grim Triads in mirrored shades and duster overcoats blaze away with high-tech weaponry.

Despite his sanguinary reputation, John Woo wasn’t born as a ﬁlmmaker with a 9mm Beretta in his hand. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s he was an increasingly frustrated comedy director. In 1986, his ﬁrst gunplay ﬁlm, the disarmingly romantic and heartfelt A Better Tomorrow, became the biggest box- oﬃce hit in Hong Kong movie history, and its gifted leading man, Chow Yun-fat, became Hong Kong’s top box- oﬃce attraction. Over the next few years, hundreds of Better Tomorrow carbon copies were cranked out, mob movies with English titles like Brotherhood, Born Brothers, Sworn Brothers, and even Flaming Brothers.

The Killer appeared in 1989, summing up, and topping, the entire gangster-gunplay cycle. The plot is ripeness itself: A warbling torch singer named Jenny (Sally Yeh) is accidentally blinded during a slaying in a night club, and Chow’s character, a world- weary ace assassin (he is renamed “John” in the English subtitles) drags himself out of retirement to take on a ﬁnal assignment so that he can buy her a new set of corneas.

The blinded singer and the killer develop a wan affection for each other, but the most intense relationship by far is the brotherhood that develops between the killer and the idealistic cop (Danny Lee) who has sworn to bring him down. Although a relatively conventional strong- and-silent action hero, Lee brings an unusual feeling to the role. Empathizing with John’s yearning for a better life, the upright policeman recognizes himself in the killer. When the cop elects to set his worldly duty aside temporarily to stand shoulder to shoulder with his new soul brother against the armies of the night, John can only shake his head over the irony: “The only person who really knows me turns out to be a cop!”

Many of the outsized gestures in Woo’s ﬁlms, the unrestrained bold strokes of emotion melodrama, are a tough sell to fans of American- style action ﬁlms, which nowadays are as coolly brutal as possible. But if Sam Peckinpah’s most characteristic sequences are blood ballets, then surely Woo’s are Chinese blood operas. The interludes of rapturous slaughter are like arias, releasing the tension that has been accumulating in the “recitative” passages of dialog. John Woo takes violence out of the realm of spectacle and turns it back into a tragically self- defeating human activity, committed by fully ﬂeshed- out characters for reasons that make sense—at least to them.

Woo’s clearest explication of his tough- minded world view may be his harrowing epic of the Vietnam War, Bullet in the Head. But even his early swordplay picture, Last Hurrah for Chivalry, is set in a corrupt medieval Chinese milieu in which absolutely everything has a price tag. “But I paid 1,000 taels of gold for her!” gasps a rich landlord, after being skewed by his demure new bride, a former prostitute. “Yes,” sneers his enemy, “but I paid her 2,000 taels for killing you. Once a whore, always a whore.”

The Killer is about two men who become friends because they both want to stop being whores, to live lives that don’t constantly grate against their sensibilities and their values. While the movie suggests that this may not be possible anymore, at least not for these two, the attempt itself is portrayed with great respect. Finally, in the world according to John Woo, everyone you meet is potentially either your assassin or your best friend . . . if not both.

Hong Kong Action Cinema (Wikipedia)

Hong Kong action cinema is the principal source of the Hong Kong ﬁlm industry’s global fame. It combines elements from the action ﬁlm, as codiﬁed by Hollywood, with Chinese storytelling and aesthetic traditions, to create a culturally distinctive form that nevertheless has a wide transcultural appeal. In recent years, the ﬂow has reversed somewhat, with American and European action ﬁlms being heavily inﬂuenced by Hong Kong genre conventions.

The ﬁrst Hong Kong action ﬁlms favoured the wuxia style, emphasizing mysticism and swordplay, but this trend was politically suppressed in the 1930s and replaced by styles in which ﬁlms depicted more down- to-earth unarmed kung fu, often featuring folk hero Wong Fei Hung. Post-war cultural upheavals led to a second wave of wuxia ﬁlms with highly acrobatic violence, followed by the emergence of the grittier kung fu ﬁlms for which the Shaw Brothers studio became best known. The 1970s saw the rise and sudden death of international superstar Bruce Lee. He was succeeded in the 1980s by Jackie Chan—who popularised the use of comedy, dangerous stunts, and modern urban settings in action ﬁlms—and Jet Li, whose authentic wushu skills appealed to both eastern and western audiences. The innovative work of directors and producers like Tsui Hark and John Woo introduced further variety (for example, gunplay, triads and the supernatural). An exodus by many leading ﬁgures to Hollywood in the 1990s coincided with a downturn in the industry…. 
Building on the reduced but enduring kung fu movie subculture, Jackie Chan and films like Tsui Hark’s *Peking Opera Blues* (1986) were already building a cult following when Woo’s *The Killer* (1989) had a limited but successful release in the U.S. and opened the floodgates. In the ’90s, Westerners with an eye on "alternative" culture became common sights in Chinatown video shops and theaters, and gradually the films became more available in the mainstream video market and even occasionally in mainstream theaters. Western critics and film scholars also began to take Hong Kong action cinema seriously and made many key figures and films part of their canon of world cinema.


### Triad (Wikipedia)

Triad is a term used to describe many branches of Chinese criminal organizations based in Hong Kong, Vietnam, Macau, Taiwan, China, and also in countries with significant Chinese populations, such as Malaysia, Singapore, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The Chinese triads are one of the world's largest criminal organizations, encompassing other criminal organizations with a steady membership of around 1.5 million in mainland China alone and 2.5 million members worldwide.

The earliest triads started as resistance/rebel forces who opposed Manchu rule in China during the Qing Dynasty, as the Manchu ethnic group were regarded as foreign invaders in the predominant Han Chinese society of China then. In the 1760s, the Heaven and Earth Society (天地會) was founded, with its objective to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and restore Han Chinese rule in China. As the society’s influence spread throughout China, it branched into several smaller groups with different names, one of which was the Three Harmonies Society (三合會). These societies adopted the triangle as their emblem, usually accompanied by decorative images of swords or portraits of Guan Yu. The term "triad" was first coined by British authorities in colonial Hong Kong, as a reference to the triads’ use of triangular imagery.[1] While never proven, it is "highly probable" that triad organizations either took after or were originally part of the revolutionary movement called the White Lotus Society.

When the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949 in mainland China, law enforcement became stricter and tough governmental crackdown on criminal organizations forced the triads to migrate to Hong Kong, then a British colony. It was estimated that in the 1950s, there were about 300,000 triad members in Hong Kong. Academics at the University of Hong Kong say that most triad societies were established between 1914 and 1939, and that there were once more than 300 in the territory. Since then the number of such groups has consolidated to around 50, of which 14 are still regularly in the eye of police. By 1951, there were nine main triads operating in Hong Kong and they had divided the land according to their ethnic groups and geographical locations, with each triad in charge of a region. The nine triads were Wo Hop To, Wo Shing Wo, Rung, Tung, Chuen, Shing, Sun Yee On, 14K and Luen. Each of them had its own headquarters, its sub-societies and public fronts. After the 1956 riots, the Hong Kong government introduced stricter law enforcement and triads became less active.

Triads currently engage in a variety of crimes from extortion and money laundering to trafficking and prostitution. They also are involved in smuggling and counterfeiting goods such as music, video, and software as well as more tangible goods such as clothes, watches, and money.

Triads have been engaging in counterfeiting since the 1880s. Between the 1960s and 1970s, triads were involved in counterfeiting Chinese currency, often of the Hong Kong 50-cent piece. In the same decade, the gangs were also involved in copying books, usually expensive ones, and selling them in the black market. With the advent of new technology and the improvement of the average person's standard of living, triads have progressed to producing counterfeit goods such as watches, film VCDs / DVDs and designer apparel such as clothing and handbags. Since the 1970s, triad turf control was weakened and some triads shifted their revenue streams to underground as well as legitimate businesses.

Triads use numeric codes to distinguish between ranks and positions within the gang; the numbers are inspired by Chinese numerology based on the *I Ching*. "489" refers to the "mountain" or "dragon" master (or 'dragonhead'), while 438 is used for the "deputy mountain master". "426" refers to a "military commander", also known as a "Red Pole", overseeing defensive and offensive operations, while "49" denotes the position of "soldier" or rank-and-file member. The "white paper fan" (415) provides financial and business advice, and the "straw sandal" (432) functions as a liaison between different units.[8][9] "25" refers to an undercover law enforcement agent or spy from another triad, and has become popularly used in Hong Kong as a slang for "informant".
The 14K Triad (from Wikipedia)
The 14K (十四K) is a Triad group based in Hong Kong but active internationally. It is the second largest Triad group in the world with around 20,000 members split into thirty subgroups. They are the main rival of the Sun Yee On, which is the largest Triad. The 14K are responsible for large-scale drug trafficking around the world, most of it heroin and opium from China or Southeast Asia. This is their primary business in terms of generating income, but they are also involved in illegal gambling, money laundering, arms trafficking, prostitution, people smuggling, extortion, counterfeiting and, to a lesser extent, home invasion robberies.

The 14K was formed by Kuomintang Lieutenant-General Kot Siu-wong in Guangzhou, China in 1945 as an anti-Communist action group. However, they relocated to Hong Kong in 1949 when the Kuomintang fled from the Communists following the Chinese Civil War. Originally there were fourteen members who were part of the Kuomintang, hence the name 14K. However, some say that 14 stands for the road number of a former headquarters and K stands for Kowloon.

Compared with other triad societies, the 14K is one of the largest and most violent Hong Kong based triad societies, and its members appear to be more loosely connected. 14K factional violence is actually out of control because no dragonhead is able to govern all factions of 14K worldwide. While Hong Kong's 14K triad gang dominates its traditional areas of operation and has expanded far beyond the former British colony, its focus remains Sino-centric. Hong Kong triads, including the 14K, have also expanded their activities in mainland China; a key motivation for members to cross into China is to avoid police security and anti-gang crackdowns in Hong Kong.

During the 1990s, it was the "largest Triad in the world". In 1997, there were a number of gang-related attacks that left 14 people dead. Under Wan Kuok-koi (nicknamed "Broken Tooth Koi", 崩牙鰭), the 14K was being challenged by the smaller Shui Fong Triad. The next year, a gunman believed to be connected to the local 14K killed a Portuguese national and wounded another at a sidewalk café in Macau. In 1999, a Portuguese court convicted 45-year-old mob boss Broken Tooth Koi on various criminal charges and sentenced him to 15 years imprisonment. His 14K gang was suspected of drive-by shootings, car bombings and attempted assassinations. Seven of his associates received lesser sentences. Since the crackdown in Macau, the 14K triad resurfaced in North American cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago in the United States and Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto in Canada, and also Sydney Australia. In response to the massive publicity generated by Broken Tooth Koi, the 14K dramatically lowered its public profile. Meanwhile, loan sharking and money laundering continue to be the primary sources of revenue for the 14K in North America.

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