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The generative logic and value implications of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands": An analysis of Xi Jinping's key exposition on the relationship between government and market

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Abstract

The generation of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" is logically inevitable. This theory embodies the theoretical continuity and advancement of Marxist classicists and their successors' understanding of the relationship among planning, market, and fundamental social systems. It represents a historical necessity that builds on the Chinese Communist Party's experience in advancing China's economic reform, as well as an urgent practical need to refine the socialist market economy in the new era. Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" addresses three dimensions—content and essence of the issue, delineation of roles and functions, and methods and objectives of resolution—thus exploring the government-market relationship across six distinct layers. This approach scientifically answers questions concerning the nature of the problem, the roles and functions involved, the methods of handling it, and the goals it seeks to achieve. Not only does it expand new horizons in contemporary Marxist political economy, but it also deepens the understanding of the laws underlying socialist construction with Chinese characteristics, advancing the socialist market economy of China to a new stage of high-quality development.

Keywords: Xi Jinping; Government; Market; Theory of the Two Hands

1. Introduction

At the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping introduced a significant theoretical perspective: "allowing the market to play a decisive role in resource allocation while better utilizing the role of the government". He likened the market to an "invisible hand" and the government to a "visible hand", emphasizing the need to apply dialectical thinking and the theory of dual aspects, ensuring both "hands" are effectively utilized to maximize their respective strengths. This synergy aims to "establish a framework in which the roles of the market and government are organically unified, mutually supplementary, coordinated, and reinforcing" to drive sustained and healthy socioeconomic development (Xi, 2017, p. 58)—a concept now known as the "Theory of the Two Hands". Xi's "Theory of the Two Hands" represents a major theoretical innovation within the context of deepening comprehensive reform in the new era. The theory's generation is logically inevitable, with both theoretical and practical value. In-depth analysis of these aspects aids in advancing understanding and appreciation of the concept.

2. The Threefold Logic behind Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands"

Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" is not only a logical evolution of the theoretical principles established by Marxist classicists and their successors regarding the relationship among planning, market, and social systems; it is also a historical inevitability, derived from the accumulated experience of China's economic reform efforts. Additionally, it reflects the practical needs and requirements for improving the socialist market economy in the new era.

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2.1. The Theoretical Logic of the Generation of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands"

The issue of the relationship between government and market evolved from the question of planning versus market—a dilemma that further developed from the relationship between the planned economy and market economy within the contexts of capitalism and socialism as two fundamental social systems. Marxist classicists and their successors, when examining the interplay of planning (economy), market (economy), and social systems under various historical conditions, articulated, to varying extents, the relationship between planning and market, laying the theoretical foundation for Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands".

With the emergence of trusts in the 1890s, capitalism transitioned from free competition to a monopolistic stage. Engels observed that capitalism also used "planning" as a "visible hand" to regulate production, describing it as "the surrender of unplanned production in capitalist society to the planned production of the coming socialist society" (Lenin, 1975, p. 70). Lenin, citing Engels, acknowledged the planned aspect of capitalist production, asserting that it was "directly transitioning to a higher, planned form" (Lenin, 1985, p. 436). Furthermore, drawing from the New Economic Policy (NEP) period, Lenin endorsed the necessity of the market, or the "invisible hand", in constructing the proletarian state's economy and stressed the importance of "studying the market" (Lenin, 1986, p. 328). These insights provided theoretical guidance for the Communist Party of China in understanding the relationship between planning (economy), market (economy), and social systems. Although the Party encountered challenges in addressing this relationship in the early years of socialist construction, following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, the Party's understanding of the planning-market relationship evolved continuously, leading to a significant breakthrough by early 1992.

First, a preliminary understanding of combining the planned and market economies was established. In October 1985, Deng Xiaoping asserted that "socialism and the market economy are not fundamentally contradictory", suggesting that the integration of planned and market economies "can better liberate productive forces and accelerate economic development" (Deng, 1994, pp. 148-149). This was followed by an initial assessment of the attributes of planning and market mechanisms. Before the 13th National Congress, in response to the views that equated planning with socialism and the market with capitalism, Deng stripped these mechanisms of their institutional labels, regarding planning and the market simply as "methods" for developing production that could serve different social systems (Deng, 1994, p. 203). In January 1991, during an inspection in Shanghai, Deng further clarified that "both planning and the market are means, and the market can also serve socialism" (Deng, 1994, p. 367).

Subsequently, Deng provided a scientific conclusion on the attributes of planning and the market and their relationship with social systems. In February 1992, he emphasized that the extent of planning or market mechanisms was not a fundamental distinction between socialism and capitalism, stating, "planned economy does not equal socialism; capitalism also has planning; market economy does not equal capitalism; socialism also has a market" (Deng, 1994, p. 373). These are economic tools that can be employed under both socialism and capitalism. These insights liberated people's thinking from traditional constraints.

On the eve of the 14th National Congress, Jiang Zemin provided a detailed theoretical explanation of the issues surrounding planning and the market, along with their interrelationship, in the context of establishing a new socialist economic operating mechanism. Jiang argued that "planned control should not be seen as a unique feature of socialism", noting that many capitalist countries also "implement planning controls over economic activities" (Jiang, 2006, p. 200). He asserted that past biases and limited understandings of the market should be discarded, encouraging full recognition of the advantages of the market and strengthening the role of market mechanisms. At the same time, he acknowledged the weaknesses and limitations of the market, advocating for the advantages of the socialist system in terms of planning and macroeconomic regulation. China's new socialist economic operating system should organically combine the strengths of the market and planning, maximizing the effectiveness of each to promote optimal resource allocation (Jiang, 2006, pp. 200-203). Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" is thus a natural outcome of the Party's deepened understanding of the planning-market relationship.

2.2. The Historical Logic of the Generation of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands"

From the historical trajectory of reform and opening up, every theoretical breakthrough by the Communist Party of China regarding the relationship between planning and the market has driven reform in China's socialist economic system. These breakthroughs provide valuable historical insights and experiences that support the ongoing reform of China's economic system in the new era and offer historical foundations for Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands".

After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, the Communist Party of China began a new journey of practical exploration into the relationship between planning and the market. The Sixth Plenary Session of the 11th

Central Committee proposed that "a planned economy must be implemented based on public ownership while allowing market adjustments to play a supplementary role" (Communist Party of China, 2010, p. 79). The 12th National Congress formally put forward the principle of "planned economy as primary, with market adjustments as supplementary", breaking down the opposition between socialism and the market economy. The Third Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee characterized the "socialist economy" as a "planned commodity economy based on public ownership", affirming commodity economy as an attribute of the socialist economy. The 13th National Congress defined the "socialist planned commodity economy system" as a system where "planning and market are intrinsically unified", emphasizing the simultaneous use of both mechanisms without a primary-secondary distinction. In February 1992, during his Southern Tour, Deng clarified that planning and the market were economic tools without institutional attributes, laying the direct theoretical foundation for the 14th National Congress to establish the objectives of China's economic system reform.

The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China established the socialist market economy as the target model for China's economic system reform. This approach emphasizes both the fundamental role of the market and the enhancement and refinement of state-led macroeconomic regulation. Specifically, the goal is to "make the market play a fundamental role in resource allocation under the macroeconomic regulation of a socialist state" (Jiang, 2006, p. 226). The Third Plenary Session of the 14th Central Committee clarified the basic framework for establishing the socialist market economy, specifying the objectives and fundamental principles for economic reform. The report from the 15th National Congress stressed the need to "fully utilize the market mechanism and establish a sound macro-regulation system" (Jiang, 2006, p. 23). The Third Plenary Session of the 15th Central Committee proposed "fully utilizing the fundamental role of the market in resource allocation under national macroeconomic regulation" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 499). The 16th National Congress amended the term "fully" to "to a greater extent" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 499), reflecting the Party's progressively deepened and mature understanding of the relationship between planning and market forces.

The 17th National Congress called for "institutional improvements to better enable the market to play a fundamental role in resource allocation and to establish a sound and effective macro-regulation system". The 18th National Congress elevated the handling of the relationship between government and market to the central issue of economic reform, emphasizing greater "respect for market laws" and a "better application of government functions" in this relationship. It also underscored the need to "strengthen the institutionalization of macro-regulation targets and policy instruments" (Hu, 2016, p. 629). This expansion of institutional guarantees for the foundational role of the market also established a mechanism-based guarantee for government functions. Learning from historical insights, Xi Jinping proposed the "Theory of the Two Hands" to guide further steps in reforming China's socialist market economy.

3. The Practical Logic Behind the Generation of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands"

Xi Jinping has stated that "each era has its own unique issues; if we can scientifically understand, accurately grasp, and correctly resolve these issues, we can continuously propel society forward" (People's Daily, 2019). In other words, "theoretical innovation plays a critical leading role in practical innovation" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 498). At the same time, issues themselves are the source and starting point of innovation. Only by orienting theoretical innovation towards real problems found in practice can it effectively guide practical innovation. Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" embodies this problem-oriented theoretical approach and serves as a guide to new practices.

According to Xi Jinping, since the reform target was established in 1992, the practical experience of reforming China's socialist market economy system has spanned over two decades. Although the economic system has continuously evolved, numerous issues persist, primarily: (1) a lack of market order, with widespread occurrences of exploiting economic interests through improper means; (2) underdevelopment in factor markets, with a coexistence of unused factors and unmet demand; (3) inconsistent market rules, with significant sectoral and regional protectionism; and (4) insufficient market competition, impeding the natural process of selection and structural adjustment (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 498). Additionally, there remain "various obstacles that hinder the vitality of market entities and the functioning of the market and value principles" (Xi, 2017, p. 60). Xi Jinping emphasized that this round of reform should focus on "issues related to an underdeveloped market system, excessive government intervention, and inadequate regulation" (Xi, 2017, p. 52). In essence, these issues stem from the role of government versus that of the market, where the core remains "managing the relationship between government and market" (Xi, 2017, p. 51). If this issue is not resolved, it will be challenging to develop a sound socialist market economy system. Thus, the "Theory of the Two Hands" addresses the practical needs and demands for refining China's socialist market economy system.

4. The Three Dimensions and Six Layers of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands"

The relationship between government and market is the core issue of China's economic system reform and a major concern for Xi Jinping. His "Theory of the Two Hands" addresses this issue from three key dimensions—content and essence, delineation of roles and functions, and methods and objectives—thus exploring six specific layers. This framework scientifically answers fundamental questions about the nature of the issue, the roles and functions involved, the methods of addressing it, and the goals it seeks to achieve.

4.1. Content and Essence: Who Plays the Decisive Role in Resource Allocation—Government or Market?

Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" inherits the Chinese Communist Party's tradition since the reform and opening-up period of prioritizing the relationship between planning (government) and the market. This relationship has been framed as a central issue in economic reform, and Xi has further clarified its content and essence.

Since the reform and opening-up period, the Communist Party of China has consistently prioritized addressing the relationship between planning (government) and the market. In January 1980, Deng Xiaoping proposed finding an economic development path "suitable for China's reality", and in October 1982, he directly addressed the question of how to resolve the relationship between planning and the market, explaining its potential impact on China's economic future. He stated that "if handled well, it will greatly benefit economic development; if handled poorly, it could be disastrous" (Deng, 1994, pp. 16-17). From this point on, the Chinese Communist Party paid great attention to this issue, recognizing it correctly and addressing it to drive economic reform. In the report to the 14th National Congress, Jiang Zemin emphasized, from a strategic perspective of socialist modernization, that the key to China's economic reform lies in the correct understanding and management of the relationship between planning and market (Jiang, 2006, p. 225). In 2010, Hu Jintao underscored that understanding and handling the relationship between government and market was central to economic reform in the context of transforming the mode of economic development, a point reaffirmed by the 18th National Congress. After the 18th National Congress, Xi Jinping continued to emphasize the importance of this relationship.

At the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, Xi stressed that addressing this relationship remains central to economic system reform from the perspective of comprehensive reform. He conceptualized the issue as "resolving whether the market or the government should play the decisive role in resource allocation" (Xi, 2017, p. 59), with the essence being the question of who holds the decisive role in resource allocation.

4.2. Delineation of Roles and Functions: An Effective Market and a Capable Government

Reflecting on the Party's exploration of the government-market relationship since the 14th National Congress, Xi Jinping observed that over the past two decades, the Chinese Communist Party has "continuously sought new scientific positioning based on practical developments and deepening understanding" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 498). On the path of comprehensive reform, this entails "further theoretical positioning of the relationship between government and market" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 499), which holds great significance. At the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, Xi Jinping articulated this new theoretical stance as "making the market play a decisive role in resource allocation while better enabling the government to function" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 513), defining their respective roles and further clarifying the boundaries and functions of each.

Xi Jinping, adhering to the general principles of a market economy, posited that "the market should play a decisive role in resource allocation" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 499). In his view, this is primarily because "resource allocation by the market is a general rule in market economies; a market economy is essentially one in which the market determines resource allocation" (Communist Party of China, 2017, p. 499). Recognizing the decisive role of the market is essential to building an "effective market" (Xi, 2017, p. 64) that allows the market to fully function across all applicable areas, maximizing efficiency in resource allocation, and creating vitality and space for enterprises and individuals to drive economic growth and generate wealth (Xi, 2017, p. 60). However, the market does not play an exclusive role, and it is essential to recognize the overarching need for government involvement.

Xi Jinping stated, "Developing a market economy under socialist conditions is a great innovation of our Party" (Xi, 2017, p. 64). Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and within the socialist system, developing a market economy must always keep "socialism" as its defining attribute (Xi, 2017, p. 58). While leveraging the role of the market, it is vital to remember this overarching principle: to uphold and develop the advantages of the socialist system and the political strength of Party leadership. Under Party leadership, China's socialist market economy can exploit systemic advantages and effectively counter the drawbacks inherent in capitalist market economies.

Moreover, maintaining the Party's leadership and its role in coordinating all sectors is a fundamental feature of China's socialist market economy. The Party's strong leadership guarantees the government's ability to function effectively (Xi, 2017, p. 61). The government's role should not only respect market economy rules but also adhere to Party leadership. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee presented clear requirements for "better enabling government functions", emphasizing "scientific macro-regulation and effective governance" (Xi, 2017, p. 60). This involves redefining government functions, carrying out its responsibilities, streamlining administration, and enhancing governance capacity to establish a "capable government" (Xi, 2017, p. 64). This approach enables the government to "manage those aspects that the market cannot handle or struggles to handle" (Xi, 2017, p. 66), such as maintaining macroeconomic stability, strengthening regulation of market activities, ensuring market order, optimizing public services, supporting innovation, promoting social equity, and fostering sustainable development and common prosperity (Xi, 2017, p. 53).

4.3. Method and Goal: Upholding Dialectical Materialism and Dual-aspect Theory to Achieve Organic Integration

Xi Jinping views dialectical materialism as the worldview and methodology of Chinese Communists, emphasizing its application in addressing China's fundamental issues of reform and development (Xi, 2015). As a core component, dialectical materialism employs contradiction analysis as its foundational approach, with the "dual-aspect theory" and "focus theory" serving as specific expressions of this approach. Xi advocates for the consistent use of dialectical thinking in advancing reforms, where both the dual-aspect and focus theories are applied in any endeavor (Xi, 2015). He exemplifies this approach in addressing the relationship between market forces and government functions, applying dialectical thinking along with dual-aspect and focus theories to achieve an organic integration of an "effective market" and a "capable government".

In Xi Jinping's view, government and market functions each have distinct roles and strengths, mutually reinforcing and complementing one another. They should not be separated or opposed to each other; that is, "neither should the decisive role of the market in resource allocation replace or negate government functions, nor should the better exercise of government functions replace or negate the decisive role of the market in resource allocation" (Xi, 2017, p. 59). Therefore, handling the relationship between government and market functions requires adherence to the dual-aspect theory, where efforts continue to integrate the basic socialist system with the market economy (Xi, 2017, p. 58). Both the "visible hand" of the government and the "invisible hand" of the market must be effectively utilized (Xi, 2017, p. 68), with the goal of achieving "both an effective market and a capable government" (Xi, 2017, p. 64).

At the same time, there is a need to observe focus theory. Since China's socialist market economy system has already taken initial shape, the market mechanism has, to a considerable extent, shown its capacity to actively stabilize and regulate the economy, with certain matters no longer requiring government intervention and thus left to the market for automatic adjustment. However, from an overarching perspective, it is crucial to distinguish between primary and secondary roles, avoiding a blind and absolute reliance on automatic market adjustment. Instead, government functions should be applied in a scientifically reasonable manner according to specific circumstances, compensating for market failures. In some sectors, government functions may even be prioritized, such as in national defense, where "the government must play a decisive role" (Xi, 2017, p. 58). For strategic energy resources, government leadership may be needed, complemented by market mechanisms where appropriate.

5. The Value Implications of Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands"

The "Theory of the Two Hands" is a theoretical innovation within the practice of comprehensive reform in the new era, enriching Xi Jinping's political economy with new dimensions. This theory has both theoretical and practical significance.

5.1. Expanding New Horizons in Contemporary Chinese Marxist Political Economy

Xi Jinping has emphasized the need to "delve into new global and domestic economic situations and challenges, contributing Chinese insights to the innovation and development of Marxist political economy" (People's Daily, 2015). Addressing the relationship between government and market is not only the core issue of China's economic reform but also a "global economic challenge" (Xi, 2017, p. 64). The "Theory of the Two Hands" offers a theoretical basis for solving this problem, marking "a new achievement in the Sinicization of Marxism" (Xi, 2017, p. 59), thus contributing to the development of Marxist political economy in contemporary China.

Marxist classicists discussed the application of different economic operations under different social systems in broad terms; however, due to historical constraints, they did not address specific issues such as the extent to which socialism

should employ market mechanisms or how these should be implemented in practice. In the words of Mao Zedong, while Marxist classicists, in their lifetime, could predict general trends in economic development based on human social development laws, they could not foresee every future economic issue in exact detail. This inevitably left a theoretical gap, offering successors the opportunity to explore these questions further.

Since the reform and opening-up, Chinese Communist leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao have combined the basic principles of Marxist political economy with China's reform and opening-up practices. Their exploration of the relationship between planning (government) and the market has not only scientifically recognized the essential attributes of planning and market mechanisms but also established the theoretical foundation for the integration of socialism with the market economy. Additionally, their work has continued to advance the practical ways in which socialism and the market economy can be combined, propelling the innovative development of Marxist political economy in contemporary China. This effort has laid the groundwork for the construction of a socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, resulting in significant achievements within contemporary Chinese Marxist political economy. As a part of Xi Jinping's political economy, the "Theory of the Two Hands" further enriches the content of socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics, thereby expanding new horizons in contemporary Chinese Marxist political economy.

5.2. Deepening the Party's Understanding of the Laws of Socialist Construction with Chinese Characteristics

Mao Zedong pointed out that "the understanding of the laws governing socialist construction requires a process" (Mao, 1999, p. 300). Since the 18th National Congress, "adhering to the direction of the socialist market economy has become not only a fundamental guideline for economic reform but also a critical support for comprehensive reform" (Xi, 2017, p. 56). In other words, although the relationship between government and market primarily concerns economic reform, it inevitably affects various spheres, including politics, the economy, culture, and ecology. The Party's understanding and handling of this relationship is crucial to the overall construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and to a great extent, it reflects the Party's grasp of the laws governing this construction. Observing the Party's historical exploration of this issue, we see that its understanding of these laws has progressed from a superficial to a profound level, with Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" representing an enhanced understanding of these laws.

During the early period of socialist construction, limited practical experience led to a lack of understanding of the laws of socialist construction, resulting in "leftist" deviations in the Party's perception of the relationship between socialism and the market economy. Planning and market mechanisms were labeled with ideological tags, positioning socialism and the market economy as opposing forces. Since the reform and opening-up period, the Party's practical exploration of the relationship between planning (government) and market mechanisms has grown, gradually overcoming dogmatism. As the Party's understanding of market laws and its ability to harness them improved through ongoing practice, breakthroughs in understanding the laws governing socialism with Chinese characteristics followed. This journey of exploration connects Deng Xiaoping's identification of planning and market mechanisms as economic tools, Jiang Zemin's positioning of the market's role in resource allocation as "fundamental", and Xi Jinping's positioning of the market's role as "decisive". This progression, seamlessly linked through inheritance and development, constitutes what Xi Jinping considers "a new breakthrough in the Party's understanding of the laws governing the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xi, 2017, p. 59).

5.3. Advancing Socialist Market Economy Development to a New Stage

The new positioning of the government-market relationship is "both a significant theoretical and a major practical issue" (Xi, 2017, p. 58). Scientifically understanding this issue and accurately grasping its implications is "of great significance for comprehensive reform and the orderly, healthy development of the socialist market economy" (Xi, 2017, p. 58). The "Theory of the Two Hands", as a response to this issue, holds practical value by driving the development of the socialist market economy to a new stage.

The introduction of the "Theory of the Two Hands" implies that comprehensive reform, with economic system reform as its focal point, not only fully utilizes the advantages and regulatory functions of the market to invigorate market entities and enhance resource allocation efficiency and the quality and effectiveness of development, but also leverages the institutional strengths of socialism and the political advantages of Party leadership. These strengths guide and promote reforms in various fields, inspiring positive efforts across sectors while respecting market principles. This coordinated advancement of system reforms alongside the deepening of economic reform continually enhances the socialist market economy system, while enabling relevant aspects to better align with the demands of socialist market economy development, advancing the socialist market economy of China toward a new phase of high-quality development.

6. Conclusion

Xi Jinping's "Theory of the Two Hands" offers a scientific approach to the government-market relationship, fully reflecting the innovative thinking of contemporary Chinese Communists on the foundation of Marxist political economy. The theory's generative logic encompasses the inheritance of Marxist classic theories, the historical experience gained from reforming China's socialist market economy, and the practical demands of perfecting the socialist market economy system in the new era. This theory provides a systematic framework for deeply understanding the government-market relationship in contemporary China. Moreover, it highlights the organic integration of respecting market laws and utilizing government functions in the reform process, bringing fresh vitality to theoretical innovations in socialist political economy with Chinese characteristics.

The "Theory of the Two Hands" has deepened the Party's understanding of the laws of socialist construction with Chinese characteristics, propelling China's socialist market economy into a stage of high-quality development. By emphasizing the "decisive role of the market" and the "active role of the government", this theory establishes the market as central in resource allocation and clarifies the government's essential role in macroeconomic regulation, public services, and social equity. This dual-driven development model effectively combines the strengths of both the market and the government, providing a solid institutional foundation for China to navigate intense global competition.

In practice, the "Theory of the Two Hands" not only offers policy guidance for the reform of China's socialist market economy system but also drives profound reforms across various market mechanisms and structural frameworks, enhancing the efficiency of resource allocation and the overall social benefit. Through adherence to dialectical materialism as a methodology, the "Theory of the Two Hands" has established a scientific positioning for the Chinese Communist Party regarding the government-market relationship, thereby laying both theoretical and practical foundations for the goals of comprehensive reform.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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