

The Happiness Paradox in Development: Economic and Social Factors and the Corruption Index in East Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

Happiness is viewed as an important indicator of well-being in assessing development success. However, economic achievements do not always correspond with an increase in societal happiness. This phenomenon is known as the happiness paradox, which is evident in East Asian countries that serve as an interesting example because, despite having relatively good economic performance and human development, their societal happiness levels are still in the medium category globally. This study uses panel data from six East Asian countries, namely Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Mongolia, from 2014 to 2023. The dependent variable in this study is the happiness index, while the independent variables include economic growth, per capita income, the unemployment rate, Education, and Corruption Level. The analytical method used is panel data regression with a Fixed Effect Model approach. The research results show that per capita income and education have a significant influence on the Happiness Index. Meanwhile, economic growth, unemployment rate, and corruption rate do not show a significant influence. These results indicate that increases in societal happiness in East Asia are determined not only by macroeconomic performance or labor market conditions, but are more influenced by welfare aspects related to quality of life and human development.

Keywords: *Economic Growth, Income per capita, Unemployment Rate, Education, Corruption Perception Index, and Happiness Index*

How to Cite

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1 INTRODUCTION

Economic development is part of overall development. The main goals of development include improving the availability and distribution of basic needs, raising living standards, and expanding interconnected economic and social choices (Todaro, 2006). Well-being can be achieved when individuals can meet their life needs with adequate means. The limitations of economic indicators in representing societal well-being have drawn global attention to the social dimensions of development. Advanced economic indicators, such as economic growth and poverty alleviation, are considered insufficient to reflect the true level of prosperity (Rahayu, 2016). The primary goal of individual happiness goes beyond personal satisfaction, as happiness includes the recognition that an individual can contribute to the happiness of their environment (Hamidah & Voutama, 2023).

East Asia has begun to pay attention to the happiness levels of its people as an important indicator in assessing welfare and human development. According to the World Happiness Report (2025), East Asian countries show relatively contrasting results, with Taiwan ranking 27th in the world, followed by Japan at 55th, South Korea at 58th, China at 68th, Mongolia at 77th, and Hong Kong at 88th. This condition occurs despite the region having relatively high income levels, reflected in Hong Kong's GDP per capita of US\$44,725, Japan's US\$37,145, South Korea's US\$34,121, and Taiwan's US\$37,827 according to the World Bank in 2025. Meanwhile, China, with a GDP per capita of US\$13,122, and Mongolia, with US\$4,615, are still above several Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia with US\$4,368 and Vietnam with US\$4,018. (World Bank, 2025).

Nevertheless, countries with lower income levels actually show higher levels of happiness, such as Vietnam, ranked 54th in the world, and the Philippines, ranked 53rd, surpassing China at rank 68 and Mongolia at rank 77. Global comparisons further reinforce this phenomenon: Finland, with a per capita GDP of around US\$44,855, ranks first in the world, while Hong Kong, with a nearly equivalent income level, is ranked 88th. These findings indicate that the relationship between income and happiness is not linear and reinforce the presence of the happiness paradox in East Asia, where high economic achievements do not automatically result in higher levels of well-being. Economic growth achievements reflect the government's efforts to improve welfare (Amri, 2017).

The Human Development Theory proposed by Sen (1999) through the capability approach emphasizes that the main goal of development is not merely an increase in income or economic output, but the expansion of human capabilities to lead a life they have reason to value. According to data from the International Monetary Fund in 2023, Japan and South Korea have maintained very low unemployment rates, around 2.5 percent and 2.7 percent. In contrast, China and Mongolia face higher unemployment rates compared to other East Asian countries, at approximately 5.217 percent and 5.3 percent, while Taiwan is at 0.480 percent and Hong Kong at 2.975 percent. The phenomenon of long working hours, wage stagnation, and the increase in non-permanent employment actually creates new pressures on workers' well-being. Japan and South Korea are among the countries with the highest average annual working hours among developed nations, which impacts low work-life balance and increases the risk of physical and mental exhaustion. This shows that quantitative indicators such as low unemployment need to be complemented by an assessment of job quality in relation to people's happiness. (OECD, 2024).

In addition to unemployment, education is a major pillar in the Human Development Theory because it directly plays a role in expanding individual capabilities. Research by Titisari et al. (2025) states that highly educated people have significantly higher happiness than those with low education. According to Human Development Reports data (2025), educational attainment reflects gaps in the quality of education in East Asian countries, where developed countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong have reached high standards, with an average schooling length of 12 years, while Taiwan reaches 11 years, whereas China and Mongolia are still below the average at 8 years and 9 years, respectively.

However, behind these figures, a highly competitive education system actually creates psychological pressure, as seen in South Korea and Japan, where students face heavy academic burdens. Kim et al. (2023) found that academic helplessness significantly lowers the life satisfaction of Korean adolescents, with depression acting as a mediator in this relationship. The results of this study indicate that excessive academic pressure can negatively affect the psychological well-being of young people, which ultimately impacts the overall happiness level of society. In addition to economic and social factors, the corruption index plays an important role in shaping societal well-being.

Based on data from Transparency International (2025), there is a considerable difference in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in East Asian countries in 2023. Hong Kong recorded the highest score of 75, followed by Japan (73), Taiwan (68), South Korea (63), China (42), and Mongolia (33). These score differences indicate varying levels of institutional integrity and government effectiveness between countries. Countries with a high corruption perception index, indicating low corruption, generally have happier societies because public policies are carried out more transparently, social services are more efficient, and the sense of social justice is stronger. Corruption also causes widespread economic and social impacts, especially in the context of sustainable development.

East Asian countries show a fairly wide variation in levels of happiness. This difference indicates that although these countries have significant economic and social progress, the happiness of their people does not always align with development achievements, making East Asian countries a relevant and interesting context to study how dynamics and development factors such as economic growth, per capita income, unemployment rate, education, and levels of corruption affect people's happiness. This research not only provides an empirical understanding of welfare dynamics in high- and middle-income countries, but also contributes to expanding the human development perspective that is oriented towards well-being.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Dependent Variable

2.2.1 *Happiness Index*

The Happiness Index, as a statistical measure that describes the level of happiness, is constructed as a composite index that encompasses all dimensions and indicators that substantively together reflect the level of individual happiness. This composite index has a higher degree of reliability at the individual level. The dimensions and indicators that make up the index are selected with the consideration that both conceptually and substantively they indeed represent the condition of each individual's happiness. According to the Central Statistics Agency, the Happiness Index is compiled from three dimensions of life, namely: (1) the Life Satisfaction dimension, (2) the Affect dimension, and (3) the Eudaimonia dimension. These life dimensions are further divided into the subdimensions of personal life satisfaction and social life satisfaction. The happiness index is then compiled based on the level of satisfaction with 10 essential aspects of life. These aspects substantially reflect the level of happiness, which include satisfaction with: (1) Health, (2) Education, (3) Employment, (4) Household Income, (5) Family Harmony, (6) Availability of Leisure Time, (7) Social Relationships, (8) Housing and Assets, (9) Environmental Conditions, and (10) Security Conditions. All life satisfaction indicators used to measure the HII are considered capable of representing the essential aspects of life experienced by the population in daily life.

2.2 Independent Variable

2.2.1 *Economic Growth*

Economic activities in a region, including a country or area, that create additional income for the community over a certain period are defined as economic growth. Economic growth is also interpreted as the development of economic activities that results in an increase in goods and services produced by the community. From this definition, it explains why when the number of needs increases, the income generated will also increase. This income comes from the increase in the amount of goods and services. Budiono defines economic growth as the process of increasing output per capita over the long term. According to Sukirno (2011), economic growth is the dynamics in economic activities that increase the goods and services produced by the community.

2.2.2 *Per Capita Income*

Per capita income is a measure of the average income received by individuals in a country or region in one year. This concept is often used as a standard indicator to assess economic welfare and the standard of living of a population (Mankiw, 2014). Per capita income is calculated by dividing the total national income by the population. This method provides a general overview of wealth distribution and can help in comparisons between countries or over time (World Bank, 2025).

2.2.3 Unemployment

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, unemployment refers to the population that is actively looking for work, the population that is preparing a new business or job, the population that is not looking for work because they feel it is impossible to get a job, and the group of population that is not actively looking for work for the reason that they already have a job but have not yet started working..

2.2.4 Education

Education is one of the main pillars of human development that plays an important role in improving quality of life. According to Todaro and Smith (2020), education not only produces skilled labor but also strengthens human capital that drives long-term economic growth. Without education, the quality of human resources is considered inadequate in advancing human development..

2.2.5 Corruption Perceptions Index

Every year, Transparency International, a global non-governmental organization, publishes the results of a survey on corruption known as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). The CPI score provides an overview of the situation and condition of corruption at the country or regional level (Transparency International, 2025). By providing scores ranging from 0 to 100 for each country, the CPI reflects the extent to which a country is free from corrupt practices, with higher scores indicating a better level of cleanliness (0 indicates a very high level of corruption, while 100 indicates a very clean condition of corruption).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach with panel data from six East Asian countries, namely Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Mongolia during the period 2014–2023. The dependent variable is the happiness index, measured using World Happiness Report data. The independent variables include economic growth, per capita income, unemployment rate, education, and corruption level. The data used are secondary, sourced from the World Bank, UNDP, Transparency International, and various other international publications. The data analysis tool used in this study applies a panel data regression approach. The general equation model of the panel data regression is written as follows (Baltagi, 2005).

$$HI_{it} = \beta + \beta_1 EG_{it} + \beta_2 PCI_{it} + \beta_3 Un_{it} + \beta_4 Ed_{it} + \beta_5 CPI_{it} + u_{it}$$

Description:

HI	= Happiness Index
β	= Constant
$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$	= Regression Coefficient
EG	= Economic Growth
PCI	= Per Capita Income
Un	= Unemployment
Ed	= Education
CPI	= Corruption Perceptions Index
u	= error component

This study conducts model specification tests to determine the most appropriate panel data approach in estimating the influence of economic, social, and institutional factors on the happiness index. The tests are carried out through the Chow Test to compare the common effect model with the fixed effect model, the Breusch–Pagan Lagrange Multiplier (LM) Test to evaluate the random effect model against the common effect model, and the Hausman Test to determine the choice between the fixed effect and random effect models. This series of tests aims to obtain the most optimal estimation model in analyzing the relationship between economic growth, per capita income, unemployment rate, education, and corruption level on the happiness index in East Asian countries.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To determine the most appropriate model in managing panel data, there are three stages of testing, namely the Chow Test, and the Hausman Test. The following are the results of the tests that have been conducted:

Chow Test

The Chow test is used to determine the appropriate model to use in estimating panel data, whether it is the Common Effect Model (CEM) or the Fixed Effect Model (FEM).

Table 1. Chow Test Results

<i>Effects Tests</i>	<i>Statistic</i>	<i>d.f.</i>	<i>Prob.</i>
<i>Cross-sections F</i>	<i>19.596385</i>	<i>(5,49)</i>	<i>0.0000</i>
<i>Cross-sections Chi-square</i>	<i>65.725381</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>0.0000</i>

Source: Processed Data, 2026

From the test results conducted, it is known that the significance value of the cross-section Chi-square probability is less than $\alpha = 0.05$ ($0.0000 < 0.05$), so H_0 is rejected, and H_1 is accepted. Thus, in the Chow Test, the best model chosen is the Fixed Effect Model (FEM).

Hausman Test

This test compares the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) with the Random Effect Model (REM) to determine the best model for estimating panel data.

Table 2. Hausman Test Result

<i>Tests Summary</i>	<i>Chi-Sq. Statistic</i>	<i>Chi-Sq. d.f.</i>	<i>Prob.</i>
<i>Cross-sections random</i>	<i>97.531925</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>0.0000</i>

Source: Processed Data, 2026

From the test results conducted, it was found that the significance value of the random cross-section probability is smaller than $\alpha = 0.05$ ($0.0000 < 0.05$); thus, H_0 is rejected, and H_1 is accepted. Therefore, in the Hausman Test, the best model chosen is the Fixed Effect Model (FEM). The Fixed Effect Model was chosen based on the results of the model specification tests: the Chow test and the Hausman test. This model is considered the most appropriate because it effectively aligns with the research objectives.

Table 3. Regression Output Results

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>t-Statistic</i>	<i>Prob.</i>
C	8.025952	0.888296	9.035217	0.0000
EG	-0.005612	0.009775	-0.574078	0.5685
PCI	1.77E-05	5.84E-06	3.025792	0.0039
Un	0.049647	0.035906	1.382694	0.1730
Ed	-0.400575	0.117064	-3.421835	0.0013
CPI	0.024317	0.014677	1.656807	0.1039
Effects Specifications				
Cross-section fixed (dummy variables)				
R-squared	0.862120	Mean dependent var	5.768650	
Adjusted R-squared	0.833982	S.D. dependent var	0.438523	
S.E. of regression	0.178678	Akaike info criterion	-0.442323	
Sum squared residuals	1.564362	Schwarz criterion	-0.058360	
Log likelihood	24.26968	Hannan-Quinn criterion	-0.292134	

F-statistic	30.63822	Durbin-Watson stat	1.095936
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000		

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Based on the output results in Table 3, the regression equation model can be obtained as follows:

$$HI = 8.025952 - 0.005612 EG + 1.7669805 PCI + 0.049647 Un - 0.400575 Ed + 0.024317 CPI + \epsilon$$

The following is the interpretation of the panel data regression results in this study: the constant value is 8.025952. This means that if it is assumed that economic growth, per capita income, unemployment, average years of schooling, and the level of corruption are zero, then the Happiness Index is 8.025952, which is positive and increasing.

The Economic Growth (EG) variable has a coefficient of -0.005612, indicating a negative effect of Economic Growth on the happiness index. If Economic Growth decreases by one percent, it will reduce the happiness index by -0.005612, assuming other variables remain constant..

The per capita income (PCI) variable has a coefficient of 1.7669805, explaining the positive influence of per capita income on the happiness index. If per capita income increases by one USD, it will increase the happiness index by 1.7669805, assuming other variables remain constant.

The unemployment variable (Un) has a coefficient of 0.049647, explaining the positive influence of unemployment on the happiness index. If unemployment increases by one percent, it will increase the happiness index by 0.049647, assuming other variables remain constant.

The Education variable (Ed) has a coefficient of -0.400575, explaining the negative influence of average years of schooling on the happiness index. If education decreases by one year, it will decrease the happiness index by 0.400575, assuming other variables remain constant..

The corruption perception index (CPI) variable has a coefficient of 0.024317, explaining the positive effect of the corruption perception index on the happiness index. If the corruption perception index increases by one point, it will raise the happiness index by 0.024317, assuming other variables remain constant.

F-Statistic Test

This study has 6 variables with 60 observations, so df_1 (columns) = 5 and df_2 (rows) = 54. In this study, a significance level of alpha 0.01 is used, resulting in an F-table value of 2.39.

Table 4. F Test Results

F-statistic	Prob(F-statistic)	Conclusion
30.63822	0.00000	Significant

Source: Processed Data, 2026

The data processing results show that the Prob(F-statistic) is smaller than the significance level α 0.01 ($0.000000 < 0.01$) and the calculated $F > F\text{-table}$ ($30.63822 > 2.39$), which means H_0 is rejected and H_1 is accepted. Therefore, it can be concluded that all independent variables, namely Economic Growth, per capita income, Unemployment, Average Years of Schooling, and corruption perception index, together have a Significant Effect on the Happiness Index of East Asian countries.

t-Statistic Test

A t-table value of 2.66998 was obtained by looking at the fifth column of the t-table and at df number 59.

Table 5. t Test Results

Variable	t-Statistic	Prob.	Conclusion
EG	9.035217	0.0000	Significant
PCI	-0.574078	0.5685	Not Significant
Un	3.025792	0.0039	Significant
Ed	1.382694	0.1730	Not Significant

CPI	-3.421835	0.0013	Significant
EG	1.656807	0.1039	Not Significant

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Based on the data processing results, the P-value and t-statistics of each variable were obtained, with the test results showing that the Economic Growth (EG) variable has a prob(t-statistic) value greater than the 5% significance level alpha ($0.5685 > 0.05$) and the t-count value $>$ t-table ($0.574078 < 4.30265273$), meaning that the Economic Growth variable does not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The per capita income (PCI) variable has a prob(t-statistic) value smaller than the 5% significance level alpha ($0.0039 < 0.05$) and the t-count value $>$ t-table ($3.025792 < 4.30265$), meaning that the per capita income variable has a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The unemployment variable (Un) has a probability value prob(t-statistic) greater than the significance level alpha 5% ($0.1230 > 0.05$) and a calculated t-value $<$ t-table ($1.382694 < 4.30265$), meaning the unemployment variable does not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The Education variable (Ed) has a probability value (prob(t-statistic) smaller than the significance level alpha (5%) ($0.0013 < 0.05$) and a calculated t-value $<$ t-table ($3.421835 < 4.30265$), meaning the average years of schooling variable has a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

The corruption perception index variable (CPI) has a probability value prob(t-statistic) greater than the 5% significance level alpha = $0.1039 > 0.05$), and the calculated t-value $>$ t-table ($1.656807 > 4.30265$), which means that the corruption perception index variable does not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries.

It can be concluded that, in this study, Economic Growth, Unemployment, and the Corruption Perception Index are independent variables that do not have a significant effect on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries. This is proven by comparing the F-statistical probability value with a 5% significance level alpha and comparing the calculated t-value with the t-table.

Coefficient of Determination

The following are the results obtained from processing in EViews 12 software.

Table 6. Determination Coefficient Result

R-squared	Adjusted R-squared	Conclusion
0.862120	0.833982	Strong

Source: Processed Data, 2026

The coefficient of determination is 0.833982, or 83%. This means that economic growth, per capita income, unemployment, average years of schooling, and the level of corruption can explain 83% of the Happiness Index in East Asian countries, while the remaining 17% is explained or influenced by variables outside the study.

The Influence of Economic Growth on the Happiness Index

Based on the estimation results of the Fixed Effect Model (FEM), economic growth does not affect the happiness index in East Asia. This study shows that an increase in the rate of economic growth is not necessarily accompanied by an increase in the level of public happiness. The results of this study contradict research conducted by Lubis et al. (2023), which found that economic growth has a significant effect on the ASEAN happiness index. However, the results of this study are in line with research conducted by Nugraha (2024), which explains that economic growth does not have a significant effect on the happiness index in 34 provinces in Indonesia. Sari (2020), in her research on the determinants of happiness in Indonesia, found that high economic growth does not always increase happiness, because such growth is often not accompanied by equitable distribution of income and quality of life for the community.

The Influence of Per Capita Income on the Happiness Index

The per capita income variable influences the happiness index in the East Asian region. These results indicate that an increase in people's income contributes significantly to improved happiness in this region. Economically, higher income enhances individuals' ability to meet basic needs, gain access to better education and health services, and generally

improves the quality of life. These research results are in line with studies conducted by Hanifa et al. (2024), which stated that per capita income individually has a significant effect on the happiness index. Other similar findings were reported by Nandini & Afiatno (2020), which found a positive influence of income on the happiness index. Similar results were also found in the study by Yasir et al. (2022), which also reported a positive and significant influence between income and the happiness index.

The Effect of Unemployment on the Happiness Index

Based on the estimation results of the Fixed Effect Model (FEM), the unemployment variable does not affect the happiness index in the East Asian region. These results indicate that changes in the unemployment rate have not yet had a significant impact on people's happiness in East Asia. These countries have relatively strong labor protection systems as well as cultures that prevent individuals from completely losing social meaning when unemployed. This research aligns with the findings of Hendrawan & Yanto (2023), which state that the unemployment rate does not have a significant effect on the happiness index. The happiness index is not always determined by the unemployment rate. Similarly, the research by Bestari & Amaliah (2024) also states that the unemployment rate does not affect the happiness index. Research by Hanifa et al. (2024) states the same thing that unemployment does not have a significant impact on the happiness index in ASEAN countries. According to Gedikli et al. (2023), the psychological impact of unemployment on happiness can be reduced if there is good social support and adequate welfare policies. However, the relationship between unemployment and happiness remains complex and contextual. Kumar et al. (2024) found that globally, unemployment still has a negative relationship with happiness.

The Influence of Education on the Happiness Index

The education variable, measured through the average years of schooling, affects the happiness index in the East Asia region. This result indicates that although education is an important factor in improving the quality of human resources, an increase in years of schooling does not always accompany an increase in societal happiness. This phenomenon is quite prominent in the East Asia region, which has a competitive education culture and high academic pressure. The results of this study are in line with research by Purwanti (2022), which states that education has a significant effect on happiness in Indonesia. Similar findings were also reported by Haryati (2023), who stated that as the education level of the Indonesian population increases, it affects subjective well-being, including happiness, self-acceptance, family harmony, as well as monetary benefits such as reducing income inequality. Jiang (2022) also stated that education affects happiness. Higher education has been observed to increase happiness by improving an individual's political status, perceived personal status, health, and family social status in China. Helliwell et al. (2024) emphasized that education will have a positive impact on happiness if accompanied by a supportive social environment, a balanced work system, and public policies that consider the mental well-being of the population.

The Influence of the Corruption Perceptions Index on the Happiness Index

The corruption perception index variable shows an effect that is not statistically significant on the Happiness Index in East Asian countries. The results of this study contradict the research found by Wanti & Fafurida (2023), which showed that the corruption perception index is related to happiness in Asian countries, but its significance is greatly influenced by the economic conditions and human development of each country. However, the results of this study are in line with the research found by Surya (2023), which states that corruption does not affect happiness. In general, an increase in corruption should reduce a country's happiness due to decreased public trust in the government and perceptions of poor government structures, which will affect citizens' happiness. Similar research was also presented by Kumar et al. (2024), who found that corruption tends to lower happiness levels, but its effect weakens and is not always directly significant. This indicates that the impact of corruption on happiness often works through indirect pathways, such as the quality of public services and social trust.

5 CONCLUSION

The results of the Fixed Effect Model (FEM) estimation show that per capita income and education have a significant effect on the Happiness Index, while economic growth, unemployment, and the Corruption Perception Index have no significant effect. This indicates that individual and socioeconomic factors are more determinant of happiness compared to general macroeconomic indicators, and that the impact of corruption tends to be indirect. Governments of East Asian countries are advised to integrate economic policies with social policies in efforts to improve public welfare. Increases in

income and job creation need to be balanced with policies that pay attention to the quality of people's lives. In the field of education, the government needs to formulate policies that are not only oriented toward improving academic achievement but also consider welfare and a balanced social life. Although the level of corruption has not been proven to have a significant direct impact on happiness, strengthening governance still needs to be a priority to support sustainable development and increase public trust.

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7 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in the paper.

8 AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Author's Veranika Nabila 1- contributed to the conceptualization, research design, and writing of the original draft.

Author's Zulfanetti 2- was responsible for data collection, analysis, and validation of the results.

Author's Etik Umiyati 3- provided supervision, critical review, and editing of the final manuscript.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

9 ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of [Jambi University] and adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the [Institutional Ethics Committee/Review Board] under reference number [Approval Number, if applicable]. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

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