

Nikkei perspectives: Emerging narratives

Donna Fujimoto

Osaka Jogakuin College

Susie Sakayori

Doshisha Women's University, Ryukoku University

Ken Fujioka

Keisen University

Ken Ikeda

Rikkyo University

Laura Kusaka

Aichi University

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This paper is a collection of Nikkei narratives presented at JALT2005. Nikkei refers to Japanese emigrants and their descendants who live in all parts of the world. The focus is on the Nikkei who have lived long-term in Japan, and each writer shares a story. The stories include an explanation of the group of Nikkei that have formed a discussion group, personal anecdotes about difficulties, identity and reflections, reports on student perceptions of Nikkei teachers, and experiences involving institutional expectations of a Nikkei teacher.

本稿はJALT2005で日系人による日系人について発表した内容に基づいている。日系人とは世界各国の日本人移民及びその子孫を示す。本稿は長期にわたり日本に滞在している日系人に焦点をあて、次の5つのセクションについて報告する。「日系人とは?」「日系人である自分とは?」「日系人である自分は何処の出身か?」「日系人として何を教えることができるのか?」「日系人である自分に期待されることは何か?」。日系人グループの解説や個人の体験談や苦勞、アイデンティティの問題、さらに日系教員に対する学生や学校側の期待などが主な内容である。

Both Japan-based and U.S.-based scholars have written about Japanese Americans beginning from the end of the 19th century (Hayashi, 2004). While the Japanese academics have generally investigated the phenomenon of emigration from Japan to the U.S. and the first-generation, the Americans have focused on the immigrant experience (Izumi, 2004). Neither group has looked at the descendants of emigrants who have chosen to live in Japan, with the exception of Nomura (2004). A small group of long-term residents have begun some work on documenting their experience by and for themselves. Thus, the JALT2005 conference presentation was one of the collaborative efforts by this group.

JALT2005 was the first conference to have five Nikkei teachers (Nikkei refers to people of Japanese ancestry) presenting in a forum specifically on how their ethnicity impacted their teaching and their relationships with students, colleagues or the institution. The stories shared were deeply personal in nature. Some have suppressed or shrugged off their experiences living and working in Japan, feeling these stories were insignificant or too personal. Nevertheless, these incidents have affected them in various ways. The theme of JALT2005, “Sharing our Stories” was an encouraging impetus for them to work together in presenting their perspective. This paper endeavors to preserve the immediacy of the oral presentation. The writers hope to contribute to furthering the understanding of the complexities involved in intercultural interactions inherent in language learning and teaching.

Nikkei teachers in Japan

by Donna Fujimoto

Nikkei (日系) refers to Japanese emigrants and their descendants living both in and outside of Japan. Many Nikkei from North America have come to Japan in search of their roots, and they have found jobs in teaching, translation and other professions. Some have chosen to live in Japan long-term, many marrying Japanese nationals and raising families here. Nikkei tend to blend into the society because they look Japanese, so it is not always easy to recognize them. Often it is their names, a combination of western given names and Japanese surnames, which distinguishes them. Their language, behavior and values, on the other hand, differ often very significantly from Japanese nationals. It is this Nikkei experience that is the focus of this paper.

Although there are five writers, there are, in fact, a dozen other Nikkei who are also involved. These 18 or so Nikkei have never all met together at the same time and in the same place. Small groups have gotten together for discussions, often in Kansai and sometimes in Kanto. This group is not a club with registered members. It is not a political group with an agenda. Nor is it a social group to make new friends. Anyone who identifies themselves as Nikkei is welcome to participate, and people have generally heard about the group through word of mouth. This group of individuals keeps in contact by e-mail and meets whenever time permits. Informally these group discussions have been referred to as “Nikkei gatherings.”

Nikkei gatherings

Perhaps it is best to give some background as to how the Nikkei gatherings began. About 15 years ago, I met another Nikkei teacher at a JALT conference, and we had an interesting discussion about being Nikkei. She was very excited and asked me to work together with her to make a presentation about being Nikkei for the following year. I declined citing lack of time. Since then on numerous occasions non-Nikkei have suggested that I make a presentation, or they have told me about talks they have heard by other Nikkei. Each time I was reminded of my first refusal, which brought up guilty feelings.

Some years later I finally got past my resistance to delving into the Nikkei experience, realizing with the help of others, that while it is indeed personal, it is also of interest to a wider audience. I started interviewing some Nikkei hoping to turn it into a research project. Although I was deeply interested, I was unable to capture any of the interesting insights in the interviews which had occurred spontaneously during unplanned conversations with Nikkei.

Then two years ago I had long conversations with another Nikkei teacher. We were both greatly impressed by three Nikkei women filmmakers from the U.S. and Canada who had succeeded in making prize-winning films about the Nikkei experience. We realized that if we were interested in the Nikkei experience in Japan, then perhaps we were the best ones to document it ourselves. We organized a meeting for Nikkei at JALT 2003, but only the two of us attended. Fortunately, on the last day of the conference we met a fourth-generation Nikkei who was so full of enthusiasm that it encouraged us to continue our efforts.

Our first successful meeting was February 2004 where eight Nikkei gathered to introduce themselves and talk about their experiences. The participants were originally from California, Chicago, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and Seattle, and they have lived in Japan from five to 30 years. This discussion brought out in-depth self-introductions and rich descriptions of experiences adjusting to Japan. Since everyone in the group was Nikkei, it made it much easier to talk rather honestly. We were surprised after hearing everyone share their stories that, in fact, we had to subtly redefine our own ideas of who Nikkei are. Even this small group demonstrated unexpected diversity. While most grew up only speaking English in the home, one was bilingual. While some struggled with their sense of identity while growing up in the U.S., others faced it for the first time upon coming to Japan. While some had often talked with others about their experiences being Nikkei, others had found the opportunity to talk about it only recently.

The meeting produced six hours of videotape, and it has become routine to record all of our subsequent gatherings. To date we have had eight more Nikkei recordings. Everyone who has participated has welcomed the documenting of these shared experiences. Here again our motivation is diverse. For example, in my case, I am interested in conducting research, and so far I have conducted a narrative analysis of excerpts of the self-introductions from the first video-recording. Other members are interested in making a documentary, while several are involved in the development of classroom materials on the Nikkei experience. We plan to continue our discussions as it promises to lead to more interesting discoveries, and as we do so we have been meeting even

more Nikkei. It appears that a driving force is a shared desire not only to learn more about ourselves but also to make our collective voices heard well beyond the Nikkei gatherings.

Living in the U.S. and Japan: Identity issues

by *Susie Sakayori*

I am a third-generation Japanese American from Chicago, and I grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. My friends' parents would refer to me as that 'nice little Japanese girl'. I thought I was like all the other girls. I enjoyed school, belonged to the Girl Scouts, and took tap lessons. I liked hot dogs, hamburgers and pizza. I was a Chicago Cubs fan and I loved the Beatles.

Life was fine around family and friends, but occasionally out of nowhere, I would hear someone call out, "Hey, Jap!" or "Ching chong Chinaman." I would pretend not to hear. As a child, I didn't know how to react except with sadness and a feeling of shame. Whenever I heard racial slurs hurled at me, I wanted to run away and hide.

Why was I different? My grandfather had immigrated to Hawaii in 1898 and later settled in California in 1905. Both my parents were born in the U.S. and were put into internment camps during World War II (along with 110,000 other Japanese and Japanese Americans). After that humiliation, they picked up the broken pieces of their lives and worked hard to become good American citizens. They fought prejudice and discrimination but never complained.

When I married a Japanese national and moved to Japan 30 years ago, I was ready to start a new life in a country where I was able to blend in. Being young and naïve, I

thought that since I looked Japanese I could naturally be Japanese; that is, speak, act and think like a Japanese person. Other people also assumed I could become Japanese, and it was hard for them to understand why I would have any difficulties being 'one of them'.

It was an uphill battle, but I did try to be Japanese. I did things even though it was against my better judgment. For example, I would wash clothes everyday only to avoid being asked why I had no laundry on the line. I would let my kindergarten children wear short-sleeved shirts on chilly days because it was not yet the official day to change from summer to winter wear. It seemed ridiculous to follow what everyone was doing, but at that time, no one wanted to make waves or draw attention to themselves by doing something different. However, all these 'dos and don'ts' of living in Japan were making me wonder what I was doing with my life. Was I willing to give up my principles and ways of doing things just to feel part of the group or to not feel different?

Change in direction

Two incidents, involving my sons, brought all my hidden frustrations to the surface. One Saturday afternoon, my younger son came home from school asking permission to go camping with his friends at a river near our house. I immediately said, "Yes!" My husband and I could go and check up on them during the night, so we anticipated no problems. Later that afternoon I received a phone call from my son's homeroom teacher. She said she was disturbed that my son was going camping because she believed that it wasn't safe for a sixth grader to engage in such activities.

In a very Japanese manner, I politely apologized for inconveniencing her and hung up. My words were polite, but I was sizzling inside. How dare the teacher tell me what my son can and can't do outside of class!

A few months later, when my older son was in his third year of junior high, a parents' meeting was held to talk about our children and how they were doing with their preparations for the high school exam. I was expecting an afternoon of honest discussion, but I left with more questions than answers. The teacher asked us, one by one, if we were having any problems with our children, and to my surprise every mother expressed distress in not being able to get their children to study. I thought to myself, "Wow! These mothers must be having a hard time at home with their children." When it came to my turn, I said that I didn't tell my son to study, but that I thought that he was doing okay. It was a simple statement.

The next day my son came home furious. "What did you say at school yesterday? Did you tell the mothers that I was studying?" My response was, "I just said that I didn't tell you to study and that I thought you were doing okay." My son screamed back, "EVERYONE is studying. Not just ME." What did that mean? To be a good Japanese mother was I supposed to lie about my son or tell untruths just to be like 'one of the other mothers'? Pressure to conform and be Japanese went entirely against the way I wanted to raise my children. I could no longer follow this path of blind acceptance of the Japanese way. So, what am I doing here? Where do I go from here?

A few years ago, I went to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. As I looked at the photos

and displays, I got a better understanding of what my grandparents and parents had gone through to succeed in America. Information about my family was on file which included when they entered the relocation camp and when they were released. I realized that I am part of this history and at that moment I wanted to embrace the past and acknowledge the hard work of all Japanese Americans who came before me. As I looked around the museum, I was filled with pride—proud to be Japanese American.

I may never be accepted as a Japanese national, but it doesn't matter. It's time to free myself of cultural definitions of what an American or what a Japanese should be. I have a greater sense of peace with myself as Susie Sakayori, the Japanese American.

Nationality and identity

by Ken Fujioka

Frequently, in introductions, I'm asked, "Where are you from?" Does the question imply "Where is your home?" "Home" can mean the country you lived before coming here, or it can be construed as one's passport country. "Home" can signify a place where you and your family presently live. For me, I never lived in my passport country during my formative years, and therefore, a permanent home was never a reality. Our family moved so often that it was difficult to put a finger on where I was from. I can tell you where I lived, but defining what "home" is, or pinpointing where I'm from, is somewhat foreign to me.

Four generations ago, my great-grandparents embarked on a journey from Yamaguchi Prefecture to Hawaii as contract

laborers in the sugar cane plantation. After working a number of years in the fields, my paternal great-grandfather returned with his family to Japan leaving behind his eldest son, my grandfather, on the big island, Hawaii. Grandfather had visited Japan a couple of times, but he felt more at home in the islands. He opened his own general store at the plantation. Dad, born in the village, learned to drive the delivery truck in his pre-teens and helped his father pack and transport produce to the neighboring towns.

Nomadic life

My father, a career foreign service officer, and mother packed their bags and journeyed to Africa. I was born in Nigeria, attended pre-school in Turkey, elementary school in Tokyo, junior high school in Jakarta, and high schools in Brasilia and Bangkok. Our family moved frequently. Friends marvel at the distant places our journey took us, but what was most unusual is that I spent all of my childhood “away” from my passport country. Although I was a U.S. citizen by birth, I had never experienced life there until college. International schools prepared me academically, but there was something lacking as we traveled from country to country. From our parents, I observed how to be socially adroit, but paradoxically, I was inept at saying “goodbyes.” Learning languages and the local customs came naturally, yet I was slow to grasp American cultural references, such as jokes and cultural innuendos.

I existed in, what David Pollock (1999) coins, a “neither/nor” world. My concentric world is neither fully the world of my parent’s culture nor fully the world of other cultures in which I was raised. Simply put, the life experience of “global

nomads” is uniquely different from those raised in a more “stable, traditional, mono-cultural, community.”

Gradually, I became aware, that although I was proficient functioning in various international settings, I was also, sadly ignorant of my national, local and even family history. One reason for my detachment from my Nikkei identity is that I was not at my parent’s residence long enough to “take root.” There were many relatives, but I forgot them quickly. Family names, too numerous to remember, funny-sounding words, strange mannerisms, customs, they all contributed to unsettled feelings.

I also felt disconnected from my nationality. Visiting a school in Hawaii, we sang “God Bless America.” Not knowing the words, I pretended to know it. We pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States, but I wasn’t exactly sure what this meant. It was at this point, I wondered if I was really an American or not.

Reflection

The human race has become so mobile and so transient that established notions of nationality, ethnicity, and place of origin no longer maintain the same set borders. Future successful global interactions will depend upon how we revise our long-standing beliefs regarding where people should be from, where they consider home to be, and what their national allegiance is. Based on my experiences, there are four assumptions that may hinder our interactions.

1. We tend to attach one’s passport country to the place of residence. For example, if one’s nationality is Japanese, we may perceive their home country as Japan, but that’s

not always the case. We have to consider the exception—a Japanese family, for example, who immigrates and lives permanently overseas, like American children raised by missionary parents abroad.

2. We believe nationality is a logical link to one's birthplace. Such was the case when I produced my U.S. passport at immigration in San Francisco. "So you were born in Nigeria," the official said. "Yes", I replied, "My father was with the State Department," which seemed to explain the mismatch. Similar situations abound particularly with U.S. dependents, born to military or diplomatic families assigned overseas.

3. We tend to connect ethnicity with one's nationality. Once I met a diplomat who was Chinese, ethnically, but his nationality was South African. He was a South African national of Chinese descent. There are other similar cases such as Brazilians of Japanese origin or Fijians of Indian descent.

4. Another example is linking ethnicity (appearance) and the spoken language. Oftentimes, strangers have commented about my English verbal dexterity. Is it because they have never seen an Asian speak with an American Midwestern accent? Do they expect an Asian to struggle with English? I remind my students that if and when they interact with someone who is Caucasian or any other ethnic person in Japan, they shouldn't assume that that person must speak English or speak it well.

Being aware of these assumptions, I've learned that nationality is not necessarily static; ethnicity is not fixed; one's place of residence is not permanent, and being a Nikkei is central to that. We are not limited to our geography.

Like our ancestors who first embarked on a journey abroad, they have chosen to "re-chart" their family boundaries. The nature of the world is changing. With the advent of economical mass transportation, it is no longer unimaginable to find Nikkei mobilized more than ever.

Identity issues in the classroom

by *Ken Ikeda*

My Japanese parents immigrated to the United States in the late 1950s, so I have been sensitive to my Nikkei identity as a 'younger' Nisei in the Japanese American community. I am interested in student perceptions of Nikkei in general and their perceptions of Nikkei as English teachers. How students perceive Nikkei came from written responses collected as part of an action research project. The basis for student perceptions of Nikkei as English teachers consists of anecdotes of largely my experiences, which behooves an investigation in a more empirical fashion.

Student perceptions of Nikkei

I asked students enrolled in my English seminar at a university in Tokyo at the beginning of the course to write how they regarded Nikkei people and what topics they wanted to talk about. These student responses can be divided into two categories of views which reflect the extent to which they have been outside of Japan, their interaction with foreigners, and their perceptions of Japan in the world. The first category consisted of these student responses:

- Do Nikkei live as American or Japanese? Their origin is Japanese but tongue is English.

- I think Nikkei know Japan better than other foreign people. I don't expect them to talk about Mt. Fuji and sushi.
- Although we look the same, they grow up in a different culture, so fundamentally we are different and it affects our way of thinking.
- I must ask Nikkei where they come from, since I always do that with foreigners. I think Nikkei always have a complex, because they are a minority in the U.S.
- I don't doubt "Who am I?" because Japan is a "mono-race" nation.

All these students except one reported never having gone outside of Japan, which may correlate with their tendency to view identity and consequently attitude as profoundly determined by the nurturing environment. They use such words as "race," "looks," "origin," and "way of thinking," which show a ready adherence to *prima facie* judgments. They state that Nikkei differ from other foreigners (although what 'foreigners' they have in mind is intriguing).

For these students, Nikkei must be living in a constant state of anxiety, torn between two dominating identities of Japan and America. Nikkei may possess the intrinsic identity of 'Japanese-ness', but their identity is strongly impaired by growing up in a different environment. They puzzle over how to place the Nikkei, confirming Park's observation of Japanese Americans as 'marginal' (1928) who belong to two worlds but are not fully in either. Another group of students expressed these views:

- I know a Nikkei-Brazilian who came to learn about his mother country. Nikkei have a Japanese soul, but they also have that country's thinking. Nikkei have two types of identity.
- I wonder how we decide 'nationality' and 'identity'. The relationship between Korea and Japan is similar yet different in views and lifestyle, but the appearance between the two is the same. I have Korean friends who live so closely to Japan yet seem so far apart.
- I expect similarities in looks (so other foreigners can't tell the difference between us). There are differences in the histories, but I think the future is more important than the past.
- Even if I know they are Nikkei, I will ask what is their nationality, why they are Nikkei, and how they feel about what they are. I expect I won't be able to find out the differences. Although culture, nationality, skin color and other differences exist, I will not find differences between us as human beings.

These students reported having more interaction with foreign language speakers, and they all also had spent at least a year abroad. They seem more aware that perceptions of Nikkei go beyond 'what meets the eye'. They recognize 'nationality' and 'identity' are terms more complex, which contain contradictions, but they accept such a state of flux, and so this may explain their understanding of Nikkei as being able to hold more than one identity. They trust more in the commonality of humanity and individual differences than the determinant of environment.

One student was from China completing her university study in Japan. She thought she would be more easily accepted by Nikkei than Japanese because they too have the experience of being away from their home. She said that both natives and those from abroad ‘must have the same patriotism’. She added that she too had changed in her view of the world and of her own country.

Perceptions of Nikkei English teachers

While some Japanese students are glad to have a teacher who looks Japanese but speaks such ‘great’ English, others seem to wonder why the Nikkei teacher puts up a charade of being foreign. Younger students accept the view of a pan-Japanese identity, but not an alternate identity fostered without being in Japan. This assumption plays havoc with their perception of English as a white person’s language. My brother taught English at a conversation school for one summer in Japan, but because no students enrolled, the school thought the people perceived him as not a real English speaker. My first two years teaching as an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) were disappointing because my junior high students listened to my self-introduction but later asked me if I came from the ‘*inaka*’ (the countryside) and did not see me as a foreigner. At the college level, although my name is printed in *katakana*, some students write my name in *kanji*.

Returnees or *kikokushijo* may better relate to a Nikkei teacher. Two such students took remedial courses with me. They had become severely disillusioned with the Japanese university, so their initial reactions to me were guarded. But they quickly overcame their wariness and accepted my identity faster than other Japanese students.

It would be interesting to examine the student perceptions of the expertise of Japanese teachers of English, of Nikkei teachers of English, and of Caucasian teachers of English.

Negotiating roles at the workplace

by Laura Kusaka

I would like to focus on issues related to my position within the institution, in my case, the university. In particular, I will describe my perceived duties as the full-time native-speaker (NS) who is Nikkei and how that impacts my relationship with colleagues. In addition, I will mention some issues related to language use, especially Japanese.

Mediator

Six years ago, I was hired in my present full-time position, having worked part-time for 10 years at the same institution. This was a landmark for me, to obtain recognition as someone admitted to the “inner circle.” In the interview, I was told about the extra administrative duties that come with being full-time. In my case, the role of mediator between the department and other NS teachers hired on a range of limited contracts became a big part of my job. When I started off, two other NS teachers had just been hired at the same time, so immediately I became their supervisor. Referred to by their first names by most of the other faculty, they became the center of attention. It became clear that I needed to know how they were performing in their jobs and was asked to make informal reports on such things as their success with establishing rapport with students.

The negotiations with different offices about insurance, housing, and research fund usage on their behalf at first seemed to be a chore, but in retrospect this was a good way to learn how the system worked. In addition to these caretaker duties, I became the organizer of extracurricular social events involving the NS teachers, other faculty members and students. These are fond memories compared to a less-than-happy incident which marked the beginning of the restructuring and downsizing at our institution. Up to then, I had been moving fairly smoothly back and forth between the two groups, helping with the flow of communication. However, the mediator role then took on a different, ugly face, that of the bearer of bad news.

In the midst of departmental upheavals, a paper passed out during the last meeting of the academic year in March went largely unnoticed and without explanation. A complicated chart with many zeros was in fact the administration's plan for cutting numerous positions held by NS teachers of many different foreign languages throughout the university. Unfortunately, I did not understand that at the time, and I followed the usual routine of taking care of the renewal of one of the NS's contracts in September. In the meeting, when this issue was discussed, my superior was completely flustered, claiming that she had assumed that the cut was not applicable to the position in our department. I would have liked to have confronted her then, but I intuitively knew that making someone lose face would have serious consequences later, so I remained silent. Another colleague voiced his despair at the situation, something I also wanted to do, but I did not know how to do so tactfully.

I found that the painstaking trouble that I had taken to learn when and how to bring up matters like contract renewals with my superior had backfired on me completely. Until then, it had worked well, but in this case, it failed miserably. In an off-record, rather emotional phone conversation with the department head in which I sought his intervention, he more or less placed the blame on me for not bringing up the contract renewal earlier for discussion. In essence, I learned that no matter how well I thought I was following expected protocol, it was not enough. In the end no one in the department sent a message to the NS English teacher about the cancellation of the contract. I was left with this unhappy task.

Japanese-speaker dilemma

I began the position with a fair amount of confidence, being fluent enough in Japanese so that I could make myself understood in most situations. However, as my status of NS did not mean anything in many cases, such as committee work, expectations of my being able to carry the same load as my colleagues have been raised higher and higher. In fact, more of my work has nothing to do with English language teaching at all. For example, I have written reports on workshops attended promoting IT skills for college teachers in general. In addition, I have been required to submit articles for the faculty development newsletter on the observation of other teachers' classes. The more I do, even more difficult work is delegated to me, so I find myself in a dilemma. I cannot use ignorance of the language as an excuse, yet when I do accept such assignments, they are a huge drain on my time. For example, writing a 600-character

report can take days, in comparison to my colleagues who could finish it in a few hours. Even composing emails in Japanese can take a long time, since I feel I must pay extra attention to get the appropriate register or level of directness.

Positioned as both an insider and outsider, I have been keenly aware of what role I must fill from moment to moment. As mediator, I have been able to facilitate communication between NS teachers and the university faculty and staff. However, by doing so, I have also prevented more direct head-on dealings between them to occur. As the Japanese-speaking NS of English, I have become a part of the inner workings of the department and must equally share with my colleagues the responsibilities involved. In the process, however, who I am seems to have fallen by the wayside. Having shared some of my experiences, I have attempted to highlight the dilemmas of a Nikkei in the larger picture of intercultural relationships found at the Japanese university. The challenge remains for me to re-create a role which takes into account my own rich, multicultural background.

Conclusion

The writers described diverse experiences which shaped their identity as Nikkei living in the U.S., Japan and other countries. Their experiences in Japan have made them aware of how their Japanese American heritage distinguished them from the larger Japanese society. Negotiating their multiple roles as parents, colleagues, and language teachers, the Nikkei writers reported on how they have dealt with strong pressures to assimilate Japanese cultural values and practices. The narratives highlighted the fluidity of each

writer's identity and their efforts to proactively shape it. Suggested areas for further research included the positioning of the Nikkei teacher and how that affects students' attitudes towards those teachers. The collaborative efforts resulting in this paper exhibited the value of individual voices coming together to describe in more breadth and depth the complex issues inherent in the teaching and learning of language across cultures.

Donna Fujimoto is teaching at Osaka Jogakuin College. Her interests include intercultural communication, pragmatics and conversation analysis.

Susie Sakayori teaches at Ryukoku University and Doshisha Women's University.

Ken Fujioka is currently with Keisen University. He is involved with overseas study programs.

Ken Ikeda is teaching at Rikkyo University. His research interests include learner beliefs, classroom interaction and language testing.

Laura Kusaka teaches at Aichi University. She is interested in content-based teaching and learner autonomy.

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