

The Yellow Leaves of a Building: Urban Exploration in China and the *Cooling Plan* Photography Project

ANNABELLA MASSEY

ABSTRACT: Ruins and rubble have become a ubiquitous feature of the urbanising Chinese landscape. They have also become key motifs in Chinese visual culture, and artists have used the ruin image to critically comment on post-reform urban development. This article, however, seeks to bring an overlooked dimension of ruin representation to light: the creative culture of China's "urban explorers," who infiltrate obsolete architecture for their own recreational purposes. It shows how the derelict spaces portrayed by the explorers' visual and textual accounts have a ludic potency of their own, with the urban ruin depicted as a site of embodied and aesthetic pleasure. The article ends by discussing the example of urban explorer Zhao Yang and his *Cooling Plan* photography project, which frames the ruin as a creative retreat from the pressures of the lived city.

KEYWORDS: urban exploration, urbex, ruins, ruin photography, Zhao Yang, the *Cooling Plan*, *Chaonei 81*.

Without yellow leaves, there can be no autumn. Ruins are the yellow leaves of a building. People say that the purpose of yellow leaves is to nurture spring. Yet I say that yellow leaves are beautiful in themselves. (Yu 1992: 362)

In a meditative essay titled "Ruins" (*Feixu* 廢墟) published in his 1992 volume *A Bitter Journey Through Culture* (*Wenhua kulü* 文化苦旅), the writer and scholar Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨 argues for the positive aesthetic value of derelict architecture. He alleges that Chinese culture has historically been unable to tolerate the sight of architectural degradation, and as a result, the nation "has always lacked a culture of ruins" (*Zhongguo lilai qieshao feixu wenhua* 中國歷來缺少廢墟文化, 1992: 365). This longstanding cultural aversion to the ruin has since been traced by art historian Wu Hung, who demonstrates in his 2012 monograph how visual representations of ruined architecture "virtually did not exist" in premodern Chinese art, and that there was an "unspoken taboo" against their creation (2012: 94).¹

However, following China's economic reforms of the late 1970s and its ambitious "urban revolution" (Campanella 2008), Mainland artists have since performed a *volte-face* over the ruin image. Over the past four decades, the country's physical landscape has been subject to intensive processes of redevelopment, with major demolition and construction projects forming a ubiquitous sight across the country. As Robin Visser has emphasised in her study of the rural-to-urban shift in the Chinese cultural imagination, this seismic environmental transformation reshaped the arts, and ever since the 1990s, the city has been definitively established as "[an aesthetic] subject in its own right" (2010: 9).

The human and environmental costs of China's unprecedented urbanisation drive have been significant, and alongside this, researchers have noted how mental health issues are becoming "increasingly prominent" in large cities (Chen, Chen, and Landry 2015: 9021). Over the years, the population has endured government land grabs, forced evictions, destruction of heritage, irreversible ecological damage, and the largest rural-to-urban migration movement the world has ever seen (Campanella 2008; Hsing 2010; Ren 2013). Some high-profile ruins, such as the Old Summer Palace (*Yuanmingyuan* 圓明園), have been remodelled into nationalistic tourist sites by the state and subjected to a process of "Disneyfication" (Lee 2009). Amidst all this turbulence, artists and filmmakers have sought novel ways to "respond to the cities' spatial semiotics of memory (and) unearth the scars of urban development" (Braester 2007: 162). Ruins that evoke a sense of trauma and critique the impact of urbanisation have subsequently become a powerful trope in contemporary visual culture (Chu 2010; Wu 2012; Ortells-Nicolau 2017). Representative pieces include the now-classic films of Wang Bing 王兵 and Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯, and artworks such as Zhan Wang's *展望 Ruin Cleaning Project (1994)* (94 feixu qingxi jihua 94 廢墟清洗計劃), a 1994 site-specific performance piece featuring the "restoration" of a partially demolished house; the *Liulitun* (六裡屯) photographic series (1996-2003) by the duo RongRong&inri 榮榮&映里, which documents their life in the eponymous former artists' village; and Huang Rui's 黃銳 2004-2009

1. Wu Hung attributes this view of the ruin to two main reasons, the first being that Chinese buildings were traditionally made out of ephemeral materials such as timber that, unlike stone, would fully disintegrate if not cared for; and secondly, that loss in premodern Chinese art was represented metaphorically rather than pictorially, and an actual ruin image "would imply inauspiciousness and danger" (2012: 8, 94).

Chai-na/China (拆那-CHINA) series, which juxtaposes the popular homophonic pun against photographs of demolished Beijing courtyard houses.² These iconic examples reflect how the vast majority of this ruin-related creative turn frames Chinese urbanity in bleak terms, using the ruin motif to invite broader reflection on the destructive social and environmental impact of the country's urban transformation.

This article, however, explores a more amateur and everyday dimension of Chinese ruin representation, which is distinct from the critical portrayal of the urban ruin produced by the professional art world and which has been overlooked by the scholarship to date.³ Here, I demonstrate how obsolete architecture in the Mainland has been infiltrated, reframed, and ultimately revered in an alternative urban imaginary produced by a loose network of thrill-seeking hobbyists: China's domestic "urban explorers." A thriving online and offline global subculture that has given rise to a unique visual aesthetic of its own, "urban exploration" (also known as "urbex," "UE," and *chengshi tanxian* 城市探險) was described in 2005 as an "interior tourism that allows the curious-minded to discover a world of behind-the-scenes sights" (Ninjalicious 2005: 3). More specifically, UE is the exploration of off-limits, abandoned, or hidden man-made structures, and examples of sites might include derelict factories and mines, abandoned hospitals and schools, sewers and drains, bridges and rooftops, and half-built shopping centres and skyscrapers. Emerging as a subculture in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the mid-2000s, urban explorers contribute to China's contemporary cult of the ruin by seeking out the "yellow leaves" hidden within the everyday city and circulating their findings online.

According to Yu Qiuyu's writing in the early 1990s, China's cultural unease over derelict buildings meant that the fate of the ruin – and, by extension, China's transition into a new era of modernity – was trapped between the polarising desires of nostalgia fanatics and those who wanted to demolish and rebuild the ruin entirely (1992: 366). Seeking a third path, Yu argued that ruins should be recognised as "a process" (*feixu shi guocheng* 廢墟是過程, *ibid.*: 362) and organically incorporated into the modern-day landscape. Moreover, Yu insists upon the captivating beauty of the ruin, bound up in the transcendental potency of juxtaposing temporalities:

Ruins can offer us a split reading. They exude a magnetic force that makes people want to linger. Yes, ruins are a magnetic field – one pole is antiquity, the other modernity – and the compass of the spirit responds keenly to this. (*Ibid.*: 364)

A great deal of UE creative culture reflects how the affective nature of ruined space and temporalities brought into dialogue with each other opens the explorer up to the sort of embodied imaginative experience that Yu evokes here. This article is therefore interested in the generative, playful view of the urban ruin that emerges from China-based UE, tracing it through the cultural forms created by some of its more publicly-minded practitioners, in photographs, videos, written accounts, and press articles. Several major academic studies on UE draw on participant observation and are written in the autobiographical mode (Garrett 2013a, 2013b; Bingham 2020), offering deep insights into the everyday workings of representative UE groups. However, as my interest here is on ruin representation and the urban imaginary invoked by cultural traces of the practice, I concentrate on publicly circulated expressions of UE rather than studying the practice itself through an ethnographic lens.

I begin with an introduction to the practice of UE, sketching out its global development and situating the Chinese example within this. I then give an

overview of how the UE scene in the Mainland articulates itself, locating this discourse in accounts of the practice on personal websites, popular media, social platforms, and so on. Finally, I discuss the example of the *Cooling Plan* (*Lengque jihua* 冷卻計劃) photography project, established online by the prominent Chinese urban explorer Zhao Yang 趙陽 in 2006. Concentrating on his *Chaonei 81* (*Chaonei 81 hao* 朝內81號) photo series (2006–2013), I show how he presents the ruin as a creative refuge that helps the explorer build a restorative sense of individual autonomy and mitigates the negative mental impact of the "seen" city.

In contrast to an artwork such as Huang Rui's *Chai-na/China* series, which uses the image of ruined courtyard houses to critique the destructive nature of China's urban development, buildings that no longer fulfil their original purpose have instead been reframed by urban explorers as wild, ludic spaces which enable a psychic retreat from modern-day life. As the geographer Tim Edensor has observed in his extensive work on ruins, it is the defamiliarising nature of ruins that enables them to also function as "spaces of fantasy" and "unhindered adventure" (2005: 25). Yu Qiuyu ends his "Ruins" essay on a corresponding note of excitement, with a utopian vision of ruins and the place they could inhabit in China's new dawn, as the nation approaches the end of its long twentieth century: "Modernity means tolerance, magnanimity, vastness, and boundlessness. We carry the ruins with us into this modern era" (1992: 368).

In China, the UE attitude towards the ruin is a similarly hopeful one, and indeed, Yu's essay is regularly cited by ruin enthusiasts and UE features across the Sinophone Internet.⁴ From this vantage point, ruins are treated as sites affectively charged with multiple temporalities, and as disorderly, wild spaces that can be both beautiful and creatively liberating in their own right. The worlds contained in these UE images, then, reveal an exhilarating way of mediating China's ruins in its age of urbanisation.

Invisible frontiers: An overview of urban exploration

In the shadows of the city waits an invisible frontier – a wilderness, thriving in the deep places, woven through dead storm drains and live subway tunnels (...). Crowds hurry through the bright streets, insulated by the pavement, never reflecting that beneath their feet lurks a universe. (Deyo and Leibowitz 2003: 3)

So writes L. B. Deyo, leader of the prominent American urban exploration group named "Jinx," in his 2003 book *Invisible Frontier: Exploring the Tunnels, Ruins, and Rooftops of Hidden New York*. Co-authored with fellow "officer" David "Lefty" Leibowitz, *Invisible Frontier* consists of twelve dramatic "mission" reports, which narrate Jinx's infiltrations into various sites across New York City in 2001, from the dank underground tunnels of the Croton aqueduct to the precarious heights of the George Washington Bridge. Throughout, Deyo and Leibowitz frame their group of "agents" as modern-day explorers seeking to channel the spirit of a bygone era of imperial adventure: "The Age of Exploration was gone; we of Jinx had never breathed its vigorous air. Ours was not the compass, the machete, or the duel, but

2. *Chai na* (拆那) means "demolish it/there."

3. To my knowledge, the only study on China-based urban exploration has been Judith Audin's ethnographic article on Chinese ruins and urban exploration as method (2018).

4. See, for example: Liu Xinwei 劉馨蔚, "罕有人踏足的廢墟 – 帶你領略廢墟之美" (*Hanyou ren tazuo de feixu – dai ni linglue feixu zhi mei*, Rarely Trodden Ruins – Bringing You to Appreciate the Beauty of Ruins), *Xinhuanet* (新華網), 13 August 2017, http://m.xinhuanet.com/2017-08/13/c_136517981.htm (accessed on 11 November 2021).

the mouse, the flip-flop, and the Casual Friday" (*ibid.*: 7). Jinx contend that the everyday city is anaemic and effete, and the desire to overcome this inferiority complex gives the group their traction: experiencing New York in urban explorer mode enables these officers and their agents to reframe the city as their "frontier" (*ibid.*: 28) – a challenging but exhilarating terrain that they are eventually able to master.

The example of Jinx encapsulates many of the traits common to cultural expressions of UE, both globally and in China. These include a deep attraction to the call of the wild, tribalistic affiliations, dissatisfaction with ordinary twenty-first century life, an uncritical enthusiasm for military and colonial metaphors, and the macho self-representation of the explorer. Positioning itself as an antithesis to the mainstream ordering of city life, UE is typically advocated by its proponents as an authentic way of combatting urban alienation and reenchanting the city. In his 2005 urbex manual *Access All Areas*, Ninjalicious (the alias of Jeff Chapman, the late Toronto-based explorer who is widely considered the spiritual father of the movement) writes: "For too many people, urban living consists of mindless travel between work, shopping and home. (...) It's no wonder people feel unfulfilled and uninvolved as they are corralled through the maze of velvet ropes on their way out through the gift shop" (2005: 3). Adopting the explorer's mindset, the movement tells us, can liberate the urban drone from the humdrum inauthenticity of the modern-day city.

Geographer Bradley Garrett, who has carried out leading ethnography on the practice, traces the first wave of UE as an organised movement back to the 1970s-1990s, when groups such as Jinx in New York, the Cave Clan in Melbourne, and the Diggers of the Underground Planet in Moscow began staking out their presence on the nascent Internet (2013b: 5).⁵ From the beginning, there was a clear impulse to document and share one's findings with a like-minded community, which coalesced into a global network in the early 2000s (*ibid.*). Ensuring their infiltration leaves no physical mark on a site is central to the UE community ethos. Sticking to Ninjalicious' golden rule, "Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints," ensures that sites are preserved for future urbexers (2005: 20). Urbexers often use photography to document their trips, and many post their images on websites such as *28 Days Later* and the *Urban Exploration Resource*. Some explorers, such as Troy Paiva or Wigo Worseling, might formally exhibit in physical galleries and publish glossy photobooks. However, the majority of urbex images are shared and circulated for audiences on the Internet by non-professional hobbyists, many of whom are secretive and deliberately conceal their identities (Fulton 2017).

Explorers themselves cite a wide variety of reasons as to why they urbex, and, by all accounts, are not a homogenous or united group. A number of urban geographers and social scientists have examined the range of motivations behind urban exploration, which include a view of the practice as a radical political gesture and ethically comparable to computer hacking (Garrett 2013b); heritage conservation and the urge to survey historical sites (Bennett 2011); the pursuit of embodied experience, edgework, and "sneaky thrills" (Garrett 2013a; Kindynis 2017); a romantic appreciation of ruination and decay (Edensor 2005); an enactment of a masculinist form of geography (Mott and Roberts 2013); a desire to practice psychogeography (Pinder 2005); an abiding interest in dark tourism and "ruin porn" (Arnold 2015); and the pursuit of online virality and transmittable media affect (Klausen 2017).

In general, public expressions of China-based UE are heavily centred on ruin culture and the aesthetics of dereliction.⁶ Unlike many write-ups by high-profile Western practitioners (e.g. Bradley Garrett), Chinese-language urbex accounts rarely foreground the illegality or riskiness of their practice.

They instead typically visit accessible abandoned spaces and produce write-ups that are loosely apolitical in tone, favouring a mode of representation that draws more on their individual encounter with the ruin and its affect. This article therefore accepts a broad definition of UE as the exploration of man-made infrastructure that is legally off-limits and/or hidden from public view. This hobbyist understanding is more akin to American light photographer Troy Paiva, who offers a straightforward and inclusive definition of the practice in a popular essay:

For some [people], it's about infiltrating a city's storm drains and subway tunnels. For others, it's climbing bridges and radio towers. Generally speaking, though, UrbEx is the exploration of TOADS (Temporary, Obsolete, Abandoned, and Derelict Spaces). (2008: 9)

Finally, often derided as a form of "ruin porn" or "dark tourism," urbex cultural production has long been criticised for its deliberate mystification of derelict space (Apel 2015; Arnold 2015; Lyons 2018).⁷ In Chinese UE culture, as elsewhere, the sociohistorical context of the ruin is frequently overlooked or ignored in favour of individual thrills and the apocalyptic imagination, setting it apart from the art world discourse of the ruin. To some onlookers, the China-based urbexers discussed here may appear just as self-absorbed as their global counterparts, although I would contend that this misses the point of the endeavour. As Dora Apel has argued in her writing on ruin porn, "no one [denies the popularity of sexual pornography] or its ability to arouse," and it is more useful "to focus on *why* we are so drawn to ruins and ruin imagery" instead (2015: 24). In the Chinese examples discussed here, we see that urban exploration and the playful self-presentation it facilitates is intrinsically dependent on disassociating a site from its sociohistorical context. Given that explorers typically seek transcendental encounters with the defamiliarised spaces they enter, it is perhaps unsurprising that this comes about in ways that prioritise the subjective experience of the individual over the wider context of the site.

Urban exploration in China

Through the creative output of China's urban explorers, an alternative view of urban dereliction enters public discourse: the ruin as a wild space that facilitates a mode of imaginative play and an escape from the everyday world of the regulated city. As established, urbexers present the Chinese ruin in a different light to China's professional artists, framing it as a backdrop for ludic narratives of fantasy and adventure rather than as a conduit for sociopolitical critique. This section discusses how this particular imaginary

5. However, it has become standard for practitioners themselves to trace the origins of the hobby back to Philibert Aspaïr, a French doorkeeper who died while exploring the Paris Catacombs in 1793 and whose body was eventually discovered in 1804 (Ninjalicious 2005: 229). This origin myth, which is noteworthy in its framing of the hobby as for the everyman, is cited regularly across Chinese UE forums and in journalistic features on UE. For example, Cheng Sai 陳賽 and Shang Jin 尚進, "城市探險: 人人都有一顆少年般的好奇心" (*Chengshi tanxian: renren dou you yi ke shaonianban de haoqixin*, Urban Exploration: Everyone Has a Child-like Curiosity), *Sanlian Lifeweek* (三聯生活周刊), 8 August 2005, <http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2005/0808/12736.shtml> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
6. The Chinese example does not resonate well with Bradley Garrett's view of UE, which argues that "Urban exploration is not about aesthetics of decay," but rather "a praxis that challenges dominant hegemonic spatial control through tactical urban infiltration" and is "about experiencing the world in the here and now" (2012b).
7. The term "ruin porn" was reportedly first coined by the photographer James Griffioen as he railed against the exploitative behaviour of "outsider" photographers flooding into postindustrial Detroit, seeking gratuitously derelict shots of a city now synonymous with ruin for their blog content. See Thomas Morton, "Something, Something, Something, Detroit: Lazy Journalists Love Pictures of Abandoned Stuff," *VICE*, 1 August 2009, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ppzb9z/something-something-something-detroit-994-v16n8> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

is produced by assessing articulations of China-based UE across public spaces of the Internet, drawn from hobbyist forums, popular journalism, and personal websites.

Across the Sinophone Internet, the majority consensus is that China-based UE gained momentum as an organised subculture around 2005, taking direct inspiration from the global model.⁸ Stories from Western UE history are scattered across the Chinese web, and Ninjalicious' famous honour code ("Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints") is cited in various subcultural guidelines as a basic principle.⁹

UE in China has received an increasing amount of domestic media attention over the past 15 years or so, including features in *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中國青年報), *VICE*, and *Sanlian Lifeweek* (*Sanlian shenghuo zhouban* 三聯生活周刊). Alongside Zhao Yang, who I discuss further on, urbexers with prominent public profiles include the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team (*Beijing chihou chengtian zhanshu xiaodui* 北京斥候城探戰術小隊), a group of five middle-aged men who are notable for the military aesthetic they have cultivated, and Hong Tang Miqi (紅唐米奇), a man who is highly active on the *Shanghai Ruins Exploration* Douban community and who livestreams his excursions on Douyin. Another key figure is Brendan Connal, a British national living in Beijing who uploads UE videos onto the Burbex YouTube channel and who previously ran the (now defunct) burbex.org blog between 2016 and 2020. A rare example of a female urbexer is the Canada-based scientist Pan Ran 潘然, who posts detailed accounts of her trips on various Chinese social media accounts (often under the name "Ran Pan"), and recently released a photobook of American ruins with Guangdong Tourism Publishing House. Beyond the Mainland, the seven-person HKUrbex group are the most prominent explorers on the Hong Kong scene, with a popular YouTube channel, a 2019 print book, and substantial global media coverage. Urbexing locations featured across these profiles include abandoned industrial sites; unfinished construction projects; derelict hospitals and mental health institutions; former Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo sites; exhumed mines, laboratories, and steelworks; defunct transit systems; abandoned theatres and cinemas; and even entire unpopulated villages and towns.

As well as maintaining personal websites and social media profiles, many urbexers also post on social networks dedicated to the hobby, the main public venues being UERChina.com and various Douban groups.¹⁰ UERChina is the most categorised and comprehensive of these online resources, with a public discussion board that has been active since 2015. It is currently made up of 12 sub-forums, which include sections for community newcomers, a second-hand equipment exchange, ruin photography appreciation, and the discussion of urbex abroad. While the website motto is "Explore ruins, discover history" (*Tansuo feixu, faxian lishi* 探索廢墟, 發現歷史), the community posts are more concerned with the aesthetic appreciation of ruins, feelings of nostalgia, and the practice of UE than with concrete discussion of history. This is consistent with the self-oriented nature of UE culture around the world; as Dora Apel noted, "the sense of history pursued [by urbexers] refers to an imagined personal connection to the past" rather than to genuine conservation efforts (2015: 60).

As I briefly mentioned, one way Sinophone UE deviates from the Western model is in its attitude towards the illegality of the practice. In their documentation, Western urbexers often celebrate acts of forbidden trespass, and their write-ups may contain a politically radical or libertarian sentiment akin to what Bradley Garrett describes as "taking back rights to the city from which we have been wrongfully restricted" (2013a: 8). Over the past few decades, as the PRC has moved from a centrally planned economy to

a more marketised system, space has become increasingly commodified. However, Mainland explorers comment on this situation far less than Western explorers do, even expressing disapproval over performative acts of transgression.¹¹ On UERChina, for instance, the forum guidelines explicitly state that practitioners should not "break into areas restricted by law" (*bu chuangu falü guiding de jinqu* 不闖入法律規定的禁區); that they shouldn't "show off by disclosing the specific location of exploration sites" (*bu yi xuanyao wei mudi gongkai tanxian didian de juti weizhi* 不以炫耀為目的公開探險地點的具體位置); and that one of their aims is to gradually improve UE community behaviour in China. Elsewhere, the urbexer Pan Ran notes that trespassing laws in China is less codified than in Western countries,¹² a point also made in a 2008 blog post by Chinese law scholar Donald Clarke. He observes that Chinese real property law "does not seem to contain a clear prohibition against trespassing," and speculates that this loophole goes back to pre-reform era times when all property was owned by the state, and implicitly, by all people of China.¹³ Moreover, the fact that state-sponsored media outlets such as *China Youth Daily* and *The Paper* (彭湃 澎湃) run positive UE features encouraging the practice suggests that ruin trespass is regarded by the authorities as a relatively benign activity.¹⁴

Rather than celebrating the act of trespass as many of their global counterparts now do, Chinese urbexers laud the practice as an effective means of alleviating urban alienation and everyday boredom. The *chengshi tanxian* entry on Baidu, for example, has been edited to claim that Chinese "city-dwellers who have a sense of curiosity and who don't want to be constricted by their boring lives and work are embarking on these journeys of discovery."¹⁵ Furthermore, urbex narratives often draw links between UE and the reclamation of a childlike sense of discovery, appealing to those who feel dissatisfied with ordinary city life, and the

8. The year 2005 is cited on the *chengshi tanxian* entry on the Baidu Encyclopaedia entry, across UE forums, and in media features, e.g. Bao Xiaoxia 鮑曉霞, "圖片故事: 靈魂廢墟" (*Tupian gushi: linghun feixu*, Photo-essay: Soul Ruins), *Southern People Weekly* (南方人物周刊), 1 June 2015, <https://www.nfpeople.com/article/4111> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
9. C60, "新人必讀: 城市探險者基本準則" (*Xinren bi du: chengshi tanxianzhe jiben zhunze*, Newcomers Must Read: Basic Guidelines for Urban Explorers), *UERChina*, 21 October 2016, <http://www.uerchina.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=629> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
10. Due to the intrinsically secretive nature of UE, it is unfeasible to accurately determine how many hobbyists participate across any country. However, as a general indicator of interest levels, the UERChina forums had over 11,000 registered users; the Fotiaoqiang Ruins Exploration Douban group had over 40,000; and the Beijing Ruins Exploration Group Douban group had over 15,000 followers at the time of writing.
11. Outside the Mainland, UE groups such as HKUrbex operate in a different political climate and position themselves accordingly. For example, HKUrbex are quoted in a *New York Times* profile as saying, "[Their] videos are visual expressions of the 'localist' political movement that has recently gained support in Hong Kong and reflects a conviction among many younger people that their city's identity is distinct from that of the Chinese Mainland." Mike Ives, "Using Stealth, and Drones, to Document a Fading Hong Kong," *New York Times*, 7 February 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/world/asia/hong-kong-historical-preservation.html (accessed on 11 November 2021).
12. Ran Pan 然潘, "我是廢墟探險者然潘, 在城市廢墟中探險是什麼體驗, 問我吧!" (*Wo shi feixu tanxianzhe Ran Pan, zai chengshi feixu zhong tanxian shi shenme tiyan, wen wo ba!*, I am the Urban Explorer Ran Pan, Go Ahead and Ask Me about What One Can Experience while Exploring Urban Ruins!), *The Paper* (澎湃), 30 July 2018, https://www.thepaper.cn/asktopic_detail_10013023 (accessed on 11 November 2021).
13. Donald Clarke, "No Trespassing in Chinese Law?," *The Conglomerate*, 9 February 2008, <https://www.theconglomerate.org/2008/02/no-trespassing.html> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
14. Ran Pan 然潘, "我是廢墟探險者然潘 (...)" (*Wo shi feixu tanxianzhe Ran Pan (...)*, I am the Urban Explorer Ran Pan (...)), *op. cit.*; Jiang Shan 江山, "城市廢墟探險家" (*Chengshi feixu tanxianjia*, Urban Ruin Explorer), *China Youth Daily* (中國青年報), 23 September 2020, http://zqb.cyo.com/html/2020-09/23/nw.D110000zgqnb_20200923_2-07.htm (accessed on 11 November 2021).
15. Baidu Encyclopaedia 百度百科, "城市探險" (*Chengshi tanxian*, Urban Exploration), <http://baike.baidu.com/item/城市探險> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

Baidu entry includes an unattributed definition of the practice popular on the Chinese UE Internet, that the impulse to explore “stems from the common eternal curiosity of our youth” (*zhe yiqie dou yuanyu women shaonian shidai gongtong de, yongheng de haoqixin* 這一切都源於我們少年時代共通的, 永恒的好奇心). In his study of adult play within urban space, Quentin Stevens defines play as “a counterpoint to behaviour which is ‘normal’” and that it “stands principally in contradistinction to people’s assumptions about the everyday functionality of the urban built environment” (2007: 26). Accordingly, in China-based UE culture, the urban ruin is predominantly framed as a liberating refuge that facilitates this sort of playful adult transgression.

In media interviews, the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration members have explicitly drawn links between UE and a desire to get back in touch with their childhoods. An article profiling members of their group notes: “If they now want to recall those childhood memories, they can only do so by visiting those ruins hidden in mountains or scattered among tall buildings.”¹⁶ The Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration are an example of how some people use the practice to immerse themselves in a ludic experience reminiscent of childhood dramatic play. Their form of UE is driven by a collective enthusiasm for military culture, which they simulate during their excursions (Figure 1). In one of their videos, we see the team unsheathing long knives and donning gas masks as they explore a series of abandoned tunnels, caves, and rooms, dressed in camouflage gear and exclaiming about the danger they supposedly face.¹⁷ Taking military make-believe even further than the Jinx Crew (Deyo and Leibowitz do adopt a self-ironicising tone at times), the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team projects a form of urbex that is comparable to immersive roleplay. Within the diegesis of this play, they transcend ordinary city life and take on militaristic hero identities.



Figure 1. Extract of the video *Originating from the Catacombs of Paris, and Popular in Europe for Many Years, Chinese Urban Exploration is Now on the Rise* (0:23), Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration, 2017. Credit: screenshot by the author.

Another manifestation of ludic UE from the China region can be seen in the video content of HKUrbex. They are particularly interested in using ruinous space to experiment with videogame aesthetics, incorporating a first-person shooter (FPS) interface into some of their accounts (Figure 2). Their 2014 video titled *HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital* features a programme loading screen, a loose narrative based around mission objectives (e.g. “explore Siu Lam Hospital”), site information fed to the viewer through a computer-generated voiceover, and a soundtrack lifted from the videogame *Battlefield 3*.

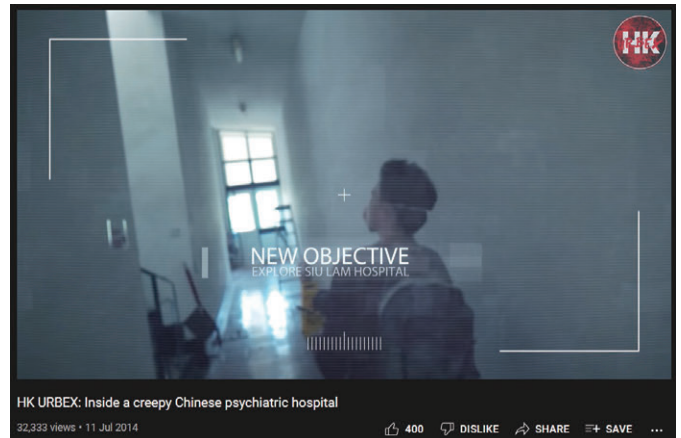


Figure 2. Extract of the video *HK Urbex: Inside a Creepy Chinese Psychiatric Hospital* (1:13), HKUrbex, 2014. Credit: screenshot by the author.

Elsewhere, HKUrbex states: “To many of us, urban exploration is like living inside a videogame. But the stakes are real” (2017). They are not the only ones to draw this link between UE and video gaming culture: in her *China Youth Daily* profile, Ran Pan compares the practice of urbex to an “immersive adventure videogame that races against time” (*chengshi tanxian shi ge yu shijian saipao de jinru shi AVG* 城市探險是個與時間賽跑的浸入式AVG).¹⁸

Spaces of solitude: The Cooling Plan photography project

Imaginative play also shapes the creative output of lone explorers, although in the examples covered here, highly developed alter egos and narratives are most consistently sustained when produced by a like-minded group. The journalist who profiles members of the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team, for example, observes that they always address each other by their aliases, even when dining together in the “real” world.¹⁹ This high level of engagement with the distinctive fictional world they have created is reportedly stoked by their urban ennui. Using the metaphor of a vinyl record, group member Dahui describes how UE facilitates a mental retreat from the “A-side” of the city (*women shenghuo de chengshi A mian* 我們生活的城市A面) across to the overlooked “B-side” (*chengshi B mian* 城市B面).²⁰ This sentiment is shared across the wider community: urbexers often cite the sense of authenticity generated by their practice and the difficulty of cultivating solitude in China’s overcrowded urban environments. Elsewhere, the explorer Li Fei 李飛 is reported as saying:

16. Xu Ye 許暉, “厭倦城市? 逃離北上廣? 詩和遠方? 可你從來沒有真正了解這座城市” (*Yanjuan chengshi? Taoli Bei Shang Guang? Shi he yuanfang? Ke ni conglai meiyou zhenzheng liaojie zhe zuo chengshi*, Tired of the City? Want to Escape Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou? Thinking of Poetry and Far off Places? But You’ve Never Really Understood the City), *ifeng culture* (鳳凰文化), 20 June 2017, <https://culture.ifeng.com/51286731/news.shtml> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
17. Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration 北京斥候城探戰術小隊, “起源巴黎人骨洞, 風靡歐洲多年, 國內城市探險運動正在崛起” (*Qiyuan Bali rengudong, fengmi Ouzhou duonian, guonei chengshi tanxian yundong zhengzai jueqi*, Originating from the Catacombs of Paris, and Popular in Europe for Many Years, Chinese Urban Exploration is Now on the Rise), *Tencent Video* (騰訊視頻), 9 June 2017, <https://v.qq.com/x/page/w0512tyxt2z.html> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
18. Jiang Shan 江山, “城市廢墟探險家” (*Chengshi feixu tanxianjia*, Urban Ruin Explorer), *op. cit.*
19. Xu Ye 許暉, “厭倦城市? (...)” (*Yanjuan chengshi? (...)*, Tired of the City? (...)), *op. cit.*
20. *Ibid.*

The fun of urban exploration lies in it always being a psychological sort of pleasure. Conquering one more building, discovering one more secret, seeing another thing lots of people don't ever get the chance to see – there's a feeling of exclusivity in that. At some point in the day, you'll feel as if the entire building belongs to you.²¹

These statements reveal how UE helps its practitioners construct a strong sense of identity in an urban imaginary that makes them distinct from ordinary citizens.

The individual search for solitude in urban China is an abiding theme in our final example, explorer Zhao Yang's online UE gallery *Cooling Plan*. Here, ruins are framed primarily as spaces of mental reprieve, and Zhao has discussed in interviews how he loves "the feeling of running away from crowded, noisy urban life."²² Elsewhere, he says that when he's "at abandoned sites, [he] feels [he is] the only person in the world (...). [He] likes this sense of solitude."²³ For Zhao and other practitioners, UE is presented as a way of psychologically managing the pressures of everyday urbanity in China. This struggle over personal autonomy within the city also resonates with similar impulses expressed in the wider realm of Chinese urban aesthetics, as shown in Robin Visser's discussion of individual identity and "the heightened desire for privacy" in postsocialist urban fiction (2010: 228).

Zhao's *Cooling Plan* gallery was set up in 2006 to showcase accounts of his trips into abandoned sites. Born in 1986 and based in Beijing, he is one of China's most prominent urbexers, and has been profiled by an array of international and domestic media outlets, including *The Guardian*, *VICE*, *Southern People Weekly* (*Nanfang renwu zhouban* 南方人物周刊), and the *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao* 環球時報). The majority of his featured excursions on the *Cooling Plan* website are from the Beijing area and include trips into the former Shougang steel factory, the Xiaotangshan SARS hospital, the Baroque-style mansion known as Chaonei 81, Shangyi Catholic school, Wangping coal mine, and an aircraft boneyard. The title of the project brings to mind the cooling towers in the Shougang factory, which are the subjects of some of Zhao's most striking photographs, and gestures towards how once-lively sites are now in a "cooled down" state – the opposite of the urban social ideal, with its "hot and noisy" (*renao* 熱鬧) qualities.²⁴ Furthermore, the word "plan" indicates an ominous vision of premeditated ruin, reflecting the general enthusiasm for apocalyptic fiction within UE culture (Apel 2015).

Framing himself as a solitary outsider even within the niche scene of Chinese UE, Zhao aligns himself with global rather than domestic articulations of the subculture. Other urbexers, such as the live-streaming Hong Tang Miqi and the UERChina forum users, are open about their methods and regularly acknowledge the broader UE community in their output. In Zhao's project introduction, however, the term "Urban Exploration/Urbex" is hyperlinked to the English-language "urban exploration" Wikipedia entry, and no Chinese-language definition of the practice is offered at all, although his website is clearly aimed at a Chinese-reading audience. His introductory text is accompanied by a photograph of a human figure (presumably, a self-portrait) standing in a commanding "hero shot" stance²⁵ in a derelict washroom. Selected from the 2014 *Military Hospital*²⁶ series (*Jun yiyuan* 軍醫院), the photo shows the room saturated with a jaundiced yellow light cast by a head torch, the bright beam obscuring any identifying facial features. Secrecy is a key part of Zhao's self-presentation: we are only given a clear shot of his face in a 2015 behind-the-scenes video account of a trip into the Shougang factory,²⁷ and while his videos are generally smoothly edited, he uses the shaky cam trope here to

signal that the viewer is being taken backstage.

Zhao's stated purpose in the "About" section of the website is to "present our past" (*chengxian women de guoqu* 呈現我們的過去) to his audience through the medium of photography. Accordingly, each visual record is accompanied by a brief textual commentary, ostensibly about the historical background of the site. However, as with many other urbexers, the prevailing narrative is Zhao's affective encounter with the ruin, and the historical detail given is often cursory and vague. Instead, we are shown evocative images that raise more questions than answers: a fiery ring of golden light illuminating the brick tunnel in an abandoned school, with Zhao at the centre; forgotten instruments sounding once again in a derelict theatre; or a ghostly human figure reflected in the glass panels of the Xiaotangshan hospital doors. These stories have an incomplete feel, captured in the process of initial conception and then quickly abandoned.

Throughout the body of Zhao's visual material, the theme of identity in formation becomes apparent: we see the explorer-subject playfully experimenting with different character types. For example, in *White Room* (*Bai fangjian* 白房間, 2009–2010), Zhao poses in a hazardous materials suit and gas mask.²⁸ In *Shangyi Normal School* (*Shangyi shifan xuexiao* 上義師範學校, 2012), he stands on a dark stairwell, wearing the iconic Guy Fawkes mask from the *V for Vendetta* film.²⁹ Unlike the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration team, who have clearly defined militaristic alter egos that remain consistent across their public output, Zhao experiments with a variety of different guises but never fully commits to one. In his work on the multiple temporalities held in ruins, Tim Edensor reminds us that "ruins do not merely evoke the past," but that they also contain a unique sense of the present, "a shadow realm of slowness in which things are revealed at a less frantic pace" than in the everyday city (2005: 125).

Accordingly, in Zhao's images, we see ruinous space charged with possibility and thereby enabling leisurely experiments with the self-presentation of the explorer. His *Chaonei 81* photo series, which depicts a foray into a derelict Baroque-style mansion in Beijing, is an apt example of this.³⁰ Made up of 19 images in total, it opens with a "Dear Photograph" style shot³¹ of the photographer's hand holding up an old print of a derelict house and a set of gates, aligning it with the site in its much smarter present-day state (Figure 3).

21. Cheng Sai 陳賽 and Shang Jin 尚進, "城市探險 (...)" (*Chengshi tanxian* (...)), Urban Exploration (...), *op. cit.*
22. Jonny Clement Brown, "Space Invaders," *Global Times*, 19 June 2013, www.globaltimes.cn/content/790078.shtml (accessed on 28 January 2021).
23. Tom Phillips, "Crouching Trekker, Hidden Buildings: China's Urban Explorers," *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/oct/29/china-urban-explorers> (accessed on 28 January 2021).
24. For more on *renao* as a desirable urban trait in China, see Farquhar and Zhang (2012: 306).
25. A ubiquitous pose in UE photography, Bradley Garrett's definition of a hero shot is "a highly stylised photo of an explorer looking smug about an accomplishment in a location" (2013a: 269).
26. Zhao Yang 趙陽, "軍醫院" (*Jun yiyuan*, Military Hospital), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/視頻/視頻-軍醫院/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
27. Zhao Yang 趙陽, "首鋼冷卻幕後" (*Shougang lengque muhou*, Behind the Scenes of Shougang Cooling), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/視頻/視頻-首鋼冷卻-幕後/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
28. Zhao Yang 趙陽, "白房間" (*Bai fangjian*, White Room), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/攝影/白房間/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
29. Zhao Yang 趙陽, "上義師範學校" (*Shangyi shifan xuexiao*, Shangyi Normal School), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/攝影/上義師範學校/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
30. Zhao Yang 趙陽, "朝內81號" (*Chaonei 81 hao*, Chaonei 81), *Cooling Plan* (冷卻計劃), <http://www.coolingplan.com/攝影/朝內81號/> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
31. "Dear Photograph" is a composition style that went viral on the Internet in 2011 (Munteán 2016).



Figure 3. Image 1 from the *Chaonei 81* photo series (2006–2013) on the *Cooling Plan* website, Zhao Yang. Credit: screenshot by the author.

Using two temporalities to frame one setting, the composition typically aims to evoke pangs of nostalgia in the viewer. We are guided into realising that the setting “marks a spatial and emotional reference point (*nostos*) projected in the idyllic world of the photographer’s past, invoked by the visible hand” (Munteán 2016: 8). We also infer from the renovated exterior of the present-day house that the following account of Zhao’s infiltration took place some time ago and is therefore being presented to us as a memory. Zhao has clarified elsewhere that Chaonei 81 holds special significance for him as his first UE site. In a 2015 article published under his alias Huaite Zei 懷特賊, he writes:

In the autumn of 2006, I was a second-year university student who had nothing to do other than turn up to a few useful and not-so-useful classes. One day on an Internet forum, I came across an article full of rumours about Beijing’s famous “haunted house.” The article contained a photograph of a blue door, marked with a few characters in red paint: “Chaonei 81.”³²

Accordingly, Zhao’s “Dear Photograph” rendering of Chaonei 81 encapsulates his nostalgia both for the site in its once-derelict state and the days of his own youth.

The *Cooling Plan* repeats the widespread belief that the house was built as a language training centre by American missionaries in 1910, but according to Beijing historian Wang Lanshun 王蘭順, it was actually built in 1921 for the French engineer Georges Boulliard and his wife Zhu Derong 朱德容 (2014). Zhu continued to live in the house after Boulliard’s death in 1930, renting out rooms to foreign missionaries and eventually selling the property to a Catholic priest in 1948. It subsequently came into the ownership of the Beijing Catholic Diocese, and in 1994, it was flagged for demolition. However, this was never completed, and the house fell into disrepair.³³ Chaonei 81 subsequently became known on the Internet as one of the “Four Haunted Houses” of Beijing, and grew especially popular as an exploration site after it inspired Raymond Yip’s 2014 horror film *The House That Never Dies* (*Jing cheng 81 hao* 京城81號).³⁴ Wang Lanshun has dryly noted that the high number of “novelty seekers and exploration fans” (*Lieqi zhe, tanxian mi* 獵奇者, 探險迷) turned the supposed ghost house into a “noisy house” (*naowu* 鬧屋) (2014: 51).

In the accompanying text to the photo series, Zhao distances himself from the ghost tourist crowd, channelling the authority of his explorer persona and telling his viewer that “there is ultimately nothing frightening about this place” (*Qishi zheli de jiben tan bu shang shenme kongbu* 其實這裡的基本談不上什麼恐怖). His photographs endeavour to demystify the building as far as ghosts are concerned, although they are still far more invested in the affective aura of the ruin than in actual historical investigation. They are loosely arranged as a house tour, taking the viewer back in time to the old entrance gates and then through the various chambers and levels of the building. They revere the site as a space of decay, but also recognise the role of the house as an alternate thoroughfare for those in the know. For instance, some rooms contain paraphernalia left behind by other visitors, and the walls are covered in graffiti. Zhao writes that, in lieu of horror stories, he is most drawn towards the “sharp [visual] contrast” (*xianming duibi* 鮮明對比) between Chaonei 81 and the ostentatious Chaoyangmen neighbourhood where it is located. Accordingly, his final image situates Chaonei 81 within the mainstream city, revealing the everyday architecture and cars scattered around the secret world of the ruin and evoking the sense of exclusivity characteristic to the UE experience. Zhao’s images also contain staged scenes of imaginative conjecture: in two photographs, he gives the space a surreal and uncanny quality through the use of coloured lights, and in another, he poses in a gas mask costume (Figure 4).

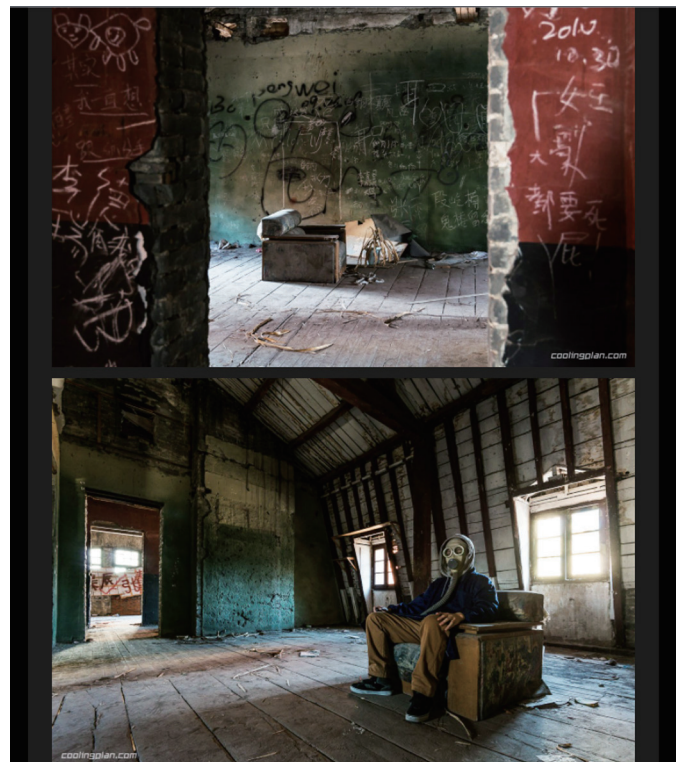


Figure 4. Images 6 and 7 from the *Chaonei 81* photo series (2006–2013) on the *Cooling Plan* website, Zhao Yang. Credit: screenshot by the author.

32. Huaite Zei 懷特賊, “攝影師趙陽跟我們談談‘朝內81號’如何讓他成為了一名廢墟探險愛好者” (*Sheyingshi Zhao Yang gen women tantan “Chaonei 81 hao” ruhe rang ta chengwei le yi ming feixu tanxian aihaozhe*, Photographer Zhao Yang Talks to Us About How “Chaonei 81” Turned Him into a Keen Urban Explorer), *VICE*, 8 September 2015, <http://web.archive.org/web/20160422091920/www.vice.cn/read/cooling-plan-20150908> (accessed on 11 November 2021).
33. Wang Lanshun attributes delays in the process to bureaucratic reasons, e.g. problems with the economic compensation to residents (2014: 55).
34. The Baidu Encyclopaedia entry for “*Chaoyangmennei dajie 81 hao*” provides several examples of some of the ghost stories associated with the building, e.g. on a full moon night, one can hear the sound of glass bottles being thrown about inside. See Baidu Encyclopaedia 百度百科, “朝陽門內大街81號” (*Chaoyangmennei dajie 81 hao*, 81 Chaoyangmennei Street), <https://baike.baidu.com/item/朝陽門內大街81號> (accessed on 11 November 2021).

Like the Beijing Scouts Urban Exploration group, Zhao's shadowy explorer-self is a performative construct, and could be regarded as a form of adult simulative play, defined by Quentin Stevens as "the fabrication of a different character or situation" (2007: 39). He continues by explaining how "simulative acts create the impression of the logic of a world, but a world which is never real, because the simulated actions do not carry real consequences" (*ibid.*). For Zhao, the ruin enables him to retreat from the everyday city and into the state of imaginative play captured in this mediation of fantasy and reality. It may be precisely because of this that Zhao and other urbexers display little genuine interest in the historicity of their sites: to know too much would upset the fantasy.

Conclusion

Zhao depicts his relationship to the city as one that enables him to flit between peopled and unpeopled space, catching moments of personal respite in the urban heart of Beijing. Recalling Yu Qiuyu's vision of ruins as a symbol of becoming, Zhao's visual narratives, in their semi-complete yet creatively charged states, show a private world captured in its moments of drafting and construction.

There is far more research waiting to be carried out on subcultural urban practices in China, particularly on related pursuits such as rooftoping, parkour, and drone photography, which have seen increasing levels of public interest over the past decade and have developed a distinct aesthetic of their own. An ethnographic study of the Chinese urbex scene would also provide valuable insight into the interior workings of the subculture. By concentrating on personal accounts and creative articulations of the practice here, however, I have set out to show that the practice of urbex has been

positioned in the Sinosphere as a unique coping strategy for city dwellers struggling with boredom. The ludic nature of UE is used to mediate the impact of the seen city, creating a rich inner world and alter ego that, in turn, enables the explorer to cope with the psychic pressures of urban modernity in China.

In contrast to the prevailing art world vision of the ruin, which typically concentrates on traumatic representations of the ruin, UE articulations present the ruin as a wild, exhilarating environment that lends itself to creativity and play. Moreover, it is a subcultural movement that is theoretically open to everyone, seeking to inspire participants and offering new ways of engaging with urban degradation and redevelopment. With a form of creative output aimed at browsers on the Internet and community insiders, rather than audiences in gallery spaces and arthouse cinemas, China's urbexers seek to draw their viewers into the alluring B-side of a city that exists in a collective imagination.

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■ Annabella Mei Massey is the Salvesen Junior Research Fellow at New College, University of Oxford. She is currently writing up her doctoral thesis in contemporary Chinese literature and visual culture. New College, Holywell Street, Oxford, OX1 3BN (annabella.massey@new.ox.ac.uk).

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