

Continuity of Japan's Soft Power: Historical Legacies and National Identity

Yilun Jin, University of Edinburgh, UK

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Abstract

Japan's modern history sheds light on different forms and effectiveness of soft power as power of persuasion and power of assimilation—the former rests centrally upon its rapid adoption of Western institutions so as to gain equality with the Western Powers, as is epitomized in Japan's success in the revision of the unequal treaties; the later features its wartime overseas cultural policies supposed to consolidate the Japanese Empire. What is embodied in these two forms of soft power is Japan's differing attitudes toward the receiving end that is manifested as being equal with the West and being superior to its colonial subjects in Asia. Japan's historical soft power left a series of both positive and negative legacies that would facilitate or undermine its contemporary soft power. It is noticeable that soft power alone, as Japanese history reveals, may not achieve what is anticipated without the intervention of hard power, which, according to specific circumstances, may work with soft power and become “smart power”, reflecting the ambiguity of soft power itself and the conditions necessary for successfully wielding it. This essay makes a rather tentative beginning of applying soft power theory to Japan's prewar and wartime history by revealing some distinctive features of Japanese foreign policy and their role in the shaping of Japanese national identity.

Keywords: Japan, soft power, historical legacies, national identity

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Introduction

Since neoliberal theorist Joseph S. Nye developed the concept of “soft power” in 1990, “soft power” as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” has gained increasing prominence in Japan and has been applied in policy-making in many fields (Nye, 2004; Watanabe, 2008). Nowadays, Japan’s soft power resources in the global perception has come to be defined by what American journalist Douglas McGray (2002) called “Japan’s Gross National Cool” with regards to its prominence of popular culture products such as manga and anime. If we take a closer look at Japanese history, we would find that Japan’s soft power can be traced to the Meiji era when Japan attempted to regain its sovereignty through adopting Western institutions and succeeded in the revision of the unequal treaties. However, soft power alone does not enable Japan to join the Western Powers on an equal footing, which was greatly facilitated by Japan’s hard power as well. Ironically, Japan’s achievement of becoming equal with the West simultaneously requires its being superior to its neighbors in the Asian continent, the fact of which can be reflected from its wartime soft power policies supposed to assimilate its colonial subjects. Japan’s historical soft power left a series of both positive and negative legacies that would facilitate or undermine its contemporary soft power.

Power of Persuasion

Japan’s endeavor to regain its sovereignty in the late nineteenth century as is symbolized in the slogan *jōyaku kaisei* (revise the unequal treaties) has been frequently interpreted within the scope of modernization where Japan, within forty or so years since Perry reopened its door, transformed from a secluded, pre-industrial civilization to one that, from almost every aspect under the gaze of the West, was a modern state (Ewick, 2003). However, the word ‘modernization’ does not fully account for Western countries’ shift of attitude, which did not take place overnight but gradually took shape in the diplomatic context where Japan tried her best to interact with the West on a footing of equality.

Japan’s pursuance of equality started as early as 1871, when a mission with 107 people headed by the Minister of the Right Iwakura Tomomi embarked on an eighteen-month tour to the United States and Europe to undertake a firsthand observation of Western society (Beasley, 1973). The Imperial Letter delivered to the emperors and presidents of fifteen foreign countries on November 4, 1871 revealed that the purpose of the mission was to communicate to the West “Japan’s friendly intention” of consolidating “the amicable relations happily existing between Japan and Western governments” and to revise the existing treaties “so as to place Japan on the footing of equality with the civilized nations”. It also stated that:

“we do not intend to undertake the revision at once...we will first study the institutions of the civilized nations, adopt those most suited to Japan, and gradually reform our government and manners, so as to attain the status equal to that of the civilized nations” (The Center For East Asian Cultural Studies, Volume 2, p.95-6).

It can be said that from the beginning the mission adopted a double purpose: to conduct exploratory talks about treaty revision so as to join the Western Powers on an

equal footing on the one hand, and to pave the way for a series of domestic reforms that would make Japan acceptable to and compatible with Western society and tradition on the other. During this process, Japan's soft power took the form of persuasion and reassurance by projecting Japan's image as a modern state with great potential, as is reflected from Ito Hirobumi's speech at San Francisco on December 14, 1871:

“...this is perhaps a fitting opportunity to give a brief and reliable outline of many improvements being introduced into Japan...our people have acquired a general knowledge of constitutions, habits and manners existed in most foreign countries...we have adopted from more enlightened countries military, naval, scientific and educational institutions...” (CEACS, Volume 2, p. 96-8).

Ito concluded his speech by referring to the emblem of Japan's national flag, highlighting Japan's great potential of becoming a civilized and modernized nation equal with the West, just like “the rising sun moving onward and upward amid the enlightened nations of the world” (ibid.).

Japan's advancement in civilization was cordially welcomed by businessmen and politicians during the mission's stay in America, as can be seen from American Congress's decision of returning the money received for the Shimonoseki Indemnity to the Iwakura mission in total (Swale, 1998, p.13). In Europe, Japan's participation in the Vienna Exposition in 1873 was particularly remarkable as this was the first occasion on which Japan had her own traditional cultural products presented to international audience as the first of the Eastern nations. For the members of Iwakura Mission, the sense of being represented on international occasions was accompanied by an anxiety of establishing itself as an autonomous player on the world stage, being recognized on terms of equality with the Western nations. What concerned them most was not the extent to which the exhibition conveyed to the West Japan's authentic cultural landscape, but whether her performance in international occasions would draw her abreast with Western countries, as is indicated by Kido's comment: “...they have tried to display a mountain of tiny and delicate Oriental objects without regard for the expense. This seems to invite contempt for the dignity of our country on the part of others” (as cited in Nish 1998, p.4).

However, Japan's endeavors to secure treaty revision proved futile due to the mission's shifting priority and the mission members' frequently changed views and lack of experience in diplomacy (Swale, 1998, p.14; Nish, 1998, p.2). From another perspective, however, it can be said that Japan's persuasive soft power is not enough to require a total change of attitude among the Western powers, which provided much of the impulsion for Japan's speed of Westernization and modernization.

Japan's persuasive soft power was also facilitated by the Meiji government's willingness to cooperate and interact with foreign countries. During the 1870s, about 3000 foreign professionals, including engineers, scientists, teachers and military officers, came to Tokyo as employees of the Japanese government (*o-yatoi gaikokujin*) to help the country on a fast-paced course of modernization (Barr, 1968, p.25). Scottish experts, for example, played a distinguished role in the modernization and industrialization of Japan during the first decades, including Thomas Glover (1838-1911) and Henry Dyer (1848-1918) (Masami, 2014). Foreign Minister Kaoru

Inoue even invited the German architects Hermann Ende and Wilhelm Böckmann to design the new governmental district of Hibiya in central Tokyo (Bognar, 2000, p.50). Maybe what constituted as the symbol of the oligarchy's campaign to win the goodwill of Western countries by demonstrating Japan's degree of civilization was the erection of Rokumeikan (Deer-Cry Pavilion) in 1883 by famous British architect Josiah Conder, where social gatherings of Japanese and foreigners could be held. Equally noticeable was Japan's overseas cultural emergence. At the Paris Exposition in 1889, traditional Japanese handicrafts established themselves as being stylish and fashionable and became objects of admiration and imitation (Tsutomu, 2003, p.2).

Meiji elites also correctly realized that Japan had to adopt a constitution to persuade the Western Powers to treat Japan as trustworthy (Panton, 2010, p.168-9). The Senate was established in 1875 and the formation of Local Assemblies was authorized in 1878. Since the imperial edict announcing the convocation of the first session of the Diet was promulgated in October 1881, the government started to prepare a constitutional apparatus in a more diligent way. What is most noticeable was the establishment of a cabinet system under a prime minister in 1885, when Ito became the first holder of this office. In 1888 through the initiative of Ito, the Privy Council was created so as to pass critical judgment on the Constitution (Norman, 2000, p.188). Finally, on February 11, 1889, the Emperor Meiji handed the first written constitution of Japan to the Prime Minister Kuroda Kiyotaka in a brief but solemn ceremony at the palace (CEACS, Volume 3, p.69). The Meiji Constitution was not a liberal document, but it earned most Western Countries' approval of Japan's political development (Miller, 2008, p.88). However, foreign governments (especially Britain and German) claimed that they were not going to leave their nationals at the mercy of Japanese courts of law until the entire structure of the Japanese legal system was revised and brought up to date. In 1886 Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru purposed the establishment of administration laws, criminal law and civil law applicable to foreigners, which had been drafted by 1890 and greatly strengthened Japan's hand in its dealings with the Western powers (Storry 1982, p.124-6).

On November 30, 1888, The Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Mexico and Japan was signed, becoming Japan's first equal treaty with a foreign country (CEACS Centre, Volume 3, p.176-177). This success enhanced the confidence of Foreign Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu in dealing with America, who signed the treaty in 1889 even without any modification. On 16 July 1894, British representatives in Tokyo signed The Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Great Britain and Japan (*ibid.*, p.187) and called for an end to extraterritoriality in five years, which marked the first amendment of the unequal treaties—in no small part the result of Japan's emergence as a regional power that was able to better assert its inquires following 'international standard' (Ewick, 2003).

Most of Meiji Japan's modernization through adopting Western laws, culture, and ideologies reveals a similar feature of selectively adopting institutions of soft power from the West, the prestige that Japan gained from which was in turn used to prove its trustworthiness, which enabled Japan to renegotiate the unequal treaties with the Western powers fifty years earlier than China (Zachmann, 2007; 2013). However, we should not ignore the fact that soft power cannot guarantee the desired outcomes without the backup of hard power. The Western imperialist policy was also a

significant part of the various Western models that were selectively emulated by Japanese elites (Zachmann, 2007, p.345).

By the end of the 20th century, Japan had become increasingly familiarized with the alternating use of soft and hard power by taking advantage of the intensification of competition among the Great Powers. The 1894 treaty between Great Britain and Japan was carried out against the background of Russia's advancement in the Far East that was immensely strengthened by the possession of Port Arthur and the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway, which forced Britain to pry Japan away from aligning with Russia (Storry, 1982, p.128). Japan's position in the world was greatly enhanced by her successful war against China in 1895, with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki on 17 April 1895. However only a week later there occurred the 'Triple Intervention' of Russia, France, and Germany, which forced Japan to surrender the claim of the Liaotung peninsula—a national humiliation that Japan were to avenge 10 years later (ibid., p.126-7). At Britain's appeal for help during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, the Meiji government responded with a force of 10,000 to rescue the legations and restore order at Peking, the intervention of which was not without self-interest (Ewick, 2003). Nevertheless, the fact that Japanese forces was observed to have engaged in no looting of any kind fortified the growing belief among European nations that Japan was a great power to be reckoned with and the Japanese were an admirably advanced, civilized race who might be described as the "British of the Far East" (Storry, 1982, p.134). Britain's positive attitude toward Japan was confirmed by the the first Anglo-Japanese Alliance (*Nichi-Ei Dōmei*) that was signed in London on January 30,1902, representing the consolidation of the friendly relationship between the empire of the rising sun and the empire on which the sun never sets (Brown, 1998, p.2). Following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, Britain further recognized Japan's achievements by elevating its legation to an embassy and awarded the Japanese emperor the "Order of the Garter" and three Japanese commanders the "Order of Merit" (Towle, 1998, p.19), indicating Britain's absolute euphoria at Japan's victories and recognition of Japan as Britain's principal ally in Asia. However, the unfair treatment of Japan at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 caused Japan's severe criticism of Western Powers' hypocrisy and led to Japan's policy of confrontation (Dower, 2012, p.71), and ultimately, total war with the West.

Japan's achievement in foreign diplomacy during the Meiji era and the early build-up of the Japanese Empire can best be attributed to what Nye (2004) called "smart power" (an optimized combination of soft power and hard power) or what Herbert Norman (2000) termed "an infinitely complex ju-jutsu 柔術" (the art of converging a weakness into strength) (Nye, 2004, xiii; Norman, 2000, p.4). Meiji elites' keen scent for Japan's limitation that was largely defined by her comparatively late entry into international politics helped to shape the postulate of Japan's foreign policy:

Watchful waiting for the moment when the Great Powers should be severally embroiled; expedient retreating before the threat of joint action of the Great Powers; timely, fast, and hard striking to coincide with the moment of great confusion (Norman, 2000, p.4).

Japan's smart power enabled her to "acquire with a comparatively small out put of energy what other greater powers had achieved through long years of wars, setbacks and defeats" (ibid.). The characteristic of Meiji Japan's foreign policy tallies with

famous political scientist Kenneth Waltz's "Classical Realism", which stresses on the structure of the international system that determines how states behave (Waltz 2008). It also demonstrates to what extent can the combined efforts of soft power and hard power bring about real changes—in Japan's case, to become a strong player equal with the West.

Power of Assimilation

Japan's soft power during its overseas expansion took the form of selling its culture and ideologies, which became a systematic form of propaganda that was extensively utilized by many countries (Nakamura, 2013, p.3). After Japan occupied Taiwan (1895-1945) and Korea (1910-1945), and launched its conquest into Manchuria and China, cultural and educational policies as a substitution for military coercion served to not only achieve better control of local residents but also facilitate their assimilation with Japan (Otmazgin, 2012, p.43; Caprio, 2009, p.110). These policies, characterized by their respective idealistic slogans, were supposed to evoke a sense of racial or cultural intimacy with Japan among its colonial subjects.

As early as 1925, the idea of 'the Kingly Way' was proposed by Tachibana Shiraki so as to bring 'blessings' to the political lives of the Chinese people (Yamamuro, 2006, p.78-9), the idea of which was materialized in 1931 when the building of Manchukuo became the focus of Japan's ambitions. In July 1932 the "Manchukuo-Japan Cultural Association" (*Man-nichi Bunkakyōkai*) was established to disseminate Japanese culture by introducing Japanese films, paintings, books and magazines. In August 1937 the Manchuria Motion Picture Corporation (*Man'ei*) was established and monopolized the production, distribution, and screening of films in Manchukuo so as to promote the spirit of "ethnic harmony" (*minzoku kyōwa*), which was embodied most successfully in the Pan-Asian movie star Li Xianglan, who was often portrayed as Chinese woman falling in love with Japanese man (Hong, 2013, p.126-7). The shared culture of Japan, China and Korea such as the use of Chinese characters in the writing system was captured in the slogan "*dōbun dōshu*" (common script, common race), indicating that Asians were of the same race (Gates, 2011, p.6). Meanwhile Japan's rulers made full use of the potentialities of the native Shinto religion to inspire the spiritual mobilization within the empire, as is indicated by numerous overseas Shinto shrines, such as Taiwan Shrine, which was built up in 1900 to memorialize Prince *Kitashirakwa-no-miya Yoshihisa* who died in battle in the conquest of Taiwan (Murakami, 1980, p.111). Maybe what symbolized Japan's cultural and political assimilation through transplanting Shinto was the construction of The State-Building Shrine (*kenkoku shinbyō*) in the capital of Manchukuo in 1940, which was dedicated to the Shinto goddess Amaterasu-ōmikami as the primordial deity of Manchukuo, as the Manchukuo imperial edict promulgated on 15th July 1940 states: "...the establishment of the shrine...is for the happiness of our countrymen...Shinto as the only foundation of the state...should be meticulously observed" (Quanzhong Publishers, 2013, p.117). These shrines were materialization of religious aggression and assimilation and functioned as a basis of unity and authority that broadened Japan's dominions with every military success, embodying the deification of the political might of the military state (Holtom, 1963, p.64-5).

These policies are in fact rhetorically similar in that they feed into a racist hierarchical order with Japan as the elder brother, and the East Asian countries as younger

brothers (Jang, 2005). The concept of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, which was based on the idea of *hakko ichiu* (the eight corners of the world under one roof), also presupposes the emancipation or independence of Eastern Siberia, China, Indo-China, the South Seas, Australia, and India with Japan as the leader (Morris, 1963, p.75). Despite the increasingly sophisticated elaboration on Japan's side, the rhetorical idealism of a Japanese-sponsored Asian order failed to strike a chord among Chinese, who themselves, ironically, generally conceived a cultural superiority over their geographically peripheral neighbor, as is reflected from a story of the China Pacification Unit (*Shina Senbuan*):

“They argued that Japan and China...are brothers, and they should proceed with hands joined. Someone in the audience replied- Alright, but China is the older brother. It is said the members of the pacification unit had no words to answer this for some time. How wonderful if they had been able to reply immediately...Japan has always been leader of the Asia-Pacific sphere from ancient times” (as cited in Mark, 2005, p.21).

Nye argues that when a country's culture includes universal values that are shared by many nations and its policies help to promote values and interests shared by others, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates (Nye, 2004, p.11). In Japan's case, although Pan-Asianism does evoke a kind of relationship (ethnic harmony) and duty (to liberate other countries), Japanese leaders failed to convey them properly but dictated a narrowly-defined racial prescription that collided with values of other nations. When soft power only serves as a self-justified discourse to sheath the edges of hard power or becomes too closely embedded in a country's particular cultural political ideologies, the soft power policy may not necessarily bring about the desired outcomes or can even backfire.

Historical Legacies and National Identity

In the context of Japan-West relations, Japan's historical soft power has left a series of positive legacies, from which Japan's contemporary soft power policies attempt to draw energy so as to reinforce a sense of historical intimacy. In the years 2003 and 2004, Japan celebrated the 150th anniversary of Japan-US relationship that was traced back to 1853 with the arrival in Uraga of the black ships commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004). The year 2011 marked the 150 year anniversary of the friendly relationship between Japan and Germany, which traced the relations back to the Edo period (1603-1868) when German physicians and researchers such as Engelbert Kaempfer and Philipp Franz von Siebold helped the dissemination of knowledge about the West in Japan. It also confirmed Germany's contribution to Meiji Restoration in the fields of law, science and arts by referring to the fact that Ito Hirobumi adopted much from the Prussian constitution as a model of the first modern constitution of Japan (Japanese Embassy in Germany, 2011). In 2013, Japan and UK launched “Japan400” to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the start of diplomatic, trading and cultural relations between Britain and Japan in 1613 (British Council, 2013). From Japan's side, the construction of shared soft power sometimes requires the re-appropriation and reinterpretation of historical incidents. In 2013, Japan's national cricket team visited UK for the 150th anniversary of the first cricket match in Japan, the episode of which goes back to the year 1863 when a few

British merchants in Yokohama decided to challenge the Royal Navy to a cricket (Galbraith, 2013). The story happened around the time when a fatal attack on British residents by a Samurai of the Satsuma Domain and an attack by the Royal Navy in response. Interestingly, the story is now used as a reminder of the historical friendly relationship between the UK and Japan, as can be seen from propaganda titles such as “The First Cricket Game Saved Yokohama From the War” (Pamphlet 2013)—though it is hard to tell to what extent did the game ‘saved’ Yokohama. Historical hostilities can be easily changed to mitigate conflicts or even promote amicability through reinterpretation, indicating that soft power seduces as much as it obscures.

These episodes exemplify how historical legacies can enhance Japan’s contemporary soft power capitals through selectively mobilizing popular memory that would evoke Japan’s historical connections with the West that is based on equality. In other words, Japan’s initial encounters with the West tends to be positively interpreted as the starting point of intimate and interactive relationship by emphasizing the historical inheritance in various kinds of fields—it is exactly in these fields that Meiji Japan selectively adopted from the West institutions of soft power. We can not help but recall Japan’s opening up to the West in the 1850s, which can also be interpreted as Japan’s early encounter with soft power that was first successfully wielded by Western countries.

Perry’s return to Tokyo Bay in 1854 took the form of a relatively friendly presentation of America’s better life and higher civilization. Perry allowed some Japanese officials to board his steamers, in which they peered into every corner with great curiosity. Most noticeable is Perry’s gift to the Japanese—a small telegraph system and steam locomotive with carriage and tender. As soon as the track was laid, the exciting Japanese queued for hours to take a ride—‘they betook themselves to the roof...grinning with intense interest and crying out with enthusiasm every time the steam whistle sounded’ (Barr, 1968; Hawks, 1856). Perry left triumphantly with a preliminary agreement of trade between Japan and America, which was finally rewarded in 1858, when Townsend Harris negotiated the first commercial treaty with Japan (Norman, 2000, p.40). In response to the Bakufu’s requirement of procuring vessels, Dutch sent a steamship called *Soembing* to Nagasaki and ordered officers to instruct the Japanese in marine architecture, navigating, and gunnery. In 1855, the ship was presented to the Bakufu and was renamed *Kankō-maru*, which became the first steam vessel possessed by Japan. The friendly gesture finally enabled the Dutch to reach a treaty settlement with Japan (Storry, 1982, p.92). It can be said that Japan’s awareness of being on the receiving end of soft power of the West necessitates the later build-up of Japan’s own soft power, the result of which enables Japan to maintain a historical connection with the West that would consistently evoke a sense of intellectual, historical, and cultural intimacy, at least from Japan’s side, as soft power.

In the context of Japan-China relations, however, the legacies of Japan’s soft power of assimilation still takes its toll. What Chinese people remember bitterly as being relegated to a place inferior to Japan both politically and racially in the framework of ‘Greater East Asia’ can lead to the arbitrary politicization of issues that would awaken latent conflicts between China and Japan. For example, in 2007, Chinese criticism toward their national star Ziyi Zhang was sparked off by her acting in the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* as an inferior role providing service for the Japanese (Aoyagi,

2011, p.10). In 2009, then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama proposed the idea of creating an “East Asian community” as “a new path for Japan” (Hatoyama, 2009). However, the proposal put Beijing on alert and sparked a leadership rivalry between Japan and China in diplomacy (Hirano, 2009). It can be said that Japan’s wartime painstaking rationalization of an ‘Asia’ that should transcend the scope of Chinese understanding of regional order, where, ironically, China was traditionally conceived to be superior to their geographically peripheral and culturally subordinate neighbor, would brand in Chinese consciousness an uneasy sense of inferiority that would require constant struggle in various circumstances for a total reversal of their relative positions. In Sino-Japan context, cultural similarity more often creates a conceptual gap in perceiving regional order that would cause rivalry for cultural hegemony.

We should be reminded that Japan’s quest for joining the West on an equal footing also led to its alienation of neighboring countries, as is indicated by Fukuzawa Yukichi’s *Datsu-A Ron* (“De-Asianisation”)¹, which can be interpreted not only as Japan’s political betrayal of neighboring Asian countries during the late nineteenth century (Korhonen, 2014), but also a painfully charming discourse that greatly shaped Japanese national identity as a constant source of vexation to distinguish themselves from other Asian countries. In this light, Japan’s soft power of persuasion and assimilation can be understood as struggles to get rid of what Matthias Zachmann (2009) called “Japan’s double inferiority complex”, which poignantly depicts both the Western powers and China’s condescending treatment of Japan with their respective cultural superiority.

Conclusion

A historical view of Japan’s foreign diplomacy sheds light on both the advantages and limitations of soft power. Japan’s success in pursuing equality with the West benefited from its rapid adoption of institutions of soft power, which, unfortunately and inevitably led to Japan’s alienation and repression of its neighboring countries in East Asia. On the other hand, Japan’s historical soft power have left a series of both positive and negative legacies that would facilitate or undermine Japan’s contemporary soft power according to the context it applies to, indicating the ambiguous interpretation of history anchored in Japan’s foreign relations.

Japan’s historical experience also provides insight into the interdependent relationship between soft power and hard power—both Japan’s ascendance into Great Power status and the Western country’s success in opening Japan were backed up by the newly acquired hard power. Whether soft power would turn into real smart power depends on specific context that is greatly shaped by the uncertainty of international relations, the interpretation of soft power policies, and the perception of a country’s national identity as being ‘equal’ or ‘superior’ to the receiving end. Suspended invariably between these two divergent attitudes is the ambiguity of Japan’s national identity as being pro-Western or pro-Asian, which is Japan’s soft power’s source of strength, weakness, and dilemma.

¹ It expounds the “inevitability of the spread of Western civilization” and confirms Japan’s stance of ‘leaving’ China and Korea to enter the group of colonial powers (CEACS, Volume 3, p.129).

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Contact email: yilunjin@hotmail.com

Contact email: s1361175@ed-alumni.net