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Cultural Heritage and National Image: A Study on the Dragon Boat Festival's UNESCO Inscription in China and South

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the nomination of the Dragon Boat Festival to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as a lens to examine the intersection of cultural heritage, national identity, and international relations in East Asia. Drawing on comparative analysis of Chinese and Korean heritage policies, the study first traces the historical development of intangible cultural heritage governance frameworks in both countries, highlighting their divergent approaches: China emphasizes cultural sovereignty and unified representation, while South Korea integrates heritage recognition into its public diplomacy strategy. The article then examines the transnational evolution of the Dragon Boat Festival, the distinct narratives constructed in each country's UNESCO application, and the political symbolism attached to its inscription. By evaluating the festival's cultural and economic impacts—including the rise of heritage tourism, creative industries, and youth-driven digital engagement—the study underscores how intangible heritage functions as a strategic resource of soft power. Further analysis explores tensions between cooperation and competition in the UNESCO framework, showing how heritage diplomacy embodies both collaboration potential and identity-based rivalry. The paper concludes with policy recommendations advocating multilateral platforms, grassroots partnerships, and pluralistic governance models to foster cultural exchange and regional cultural integration. This case contributes to a deeper understanding of the political dynamics of heritage inscription, international cultural mechanisms, and the evolving role of intangible cultural heritage in East Asian diplomacy.

Keywords: Dragon Boat Festival, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Diplomacy, National Image, East Asia

1. Introduction

Protection of ICH has become an important part of the world cultural governance system under the UNESCO framework. ICH includes oral traditions, rituals, performing arts, social practices as well as festive events which show cultural diversity and community identity [1]. In which the Dragon Boat Festival, with over 2000 years of history has deep cultural persistence and collective memories

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of dragon boat racing, making rice dumplings, and protection rituals In 2009, It was recognized by UNESCO as a representative component of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, which gave it more public and institutional recognition [2]. It reflects the relationship of heritage protection.Identity politics and soft power, so it has become an important theme of cultural policies and international relations.

Although scholars explored the cultural significance of the Dragon Boat Festival or how UN UNESCO's nomination system is functioning, it is not analyzed on how China and South Korea use the inscription process to advance their country's stories and diplomatic agendas. South Korea's inscription of the Gangneung Danoje festival in 2005 and China's in 2009 show different methods and policies on cultural diplomacy and mobilization, however, the political aspects behind and construction processes remain unknown [3].

This paper fills this space by comparing each country's nomination strategies, discursive frameworks and policy frameworks for the Dragon Boat Festival inscriptions in these two countries. claiming that South Korea focused on local community engagement and the authentic Gangneung ritual tradition, China presented the festival as an example of national unity and infused patriotism into the nomination. And it further builds up the knowledge on cultural heritage governance. It is how the states make use of and leverage on cultural heritage in support of their own respective national cultural identities and to exercise the power of its culture.

From a methodological perspective, I use a comparison of nomination documents, cultural policy texts, media discourse, and secondary scholarship on heritage politics and UNESCO'S Conventions. Results show that the Dragon Boat Festival is neither just a resource for preservation, nor an instrument for diplomacy. This indicates cultural cooperation and competition in East Asia.

The hypothesis of this study is that China and South Korea's divergent approaches to the Dragon Boat Festival's nomination process illustrate how intangible cultural heritage functions as both a site of cultural diplomacy and a tool for asserting national identity. The objective is to contribute to theoretical discussions on heritage governance, examine the politics embedded in UNESCO's heritage framework, and provide practical recommendations for transnational cultural collaboration.

2. Cultural heritage policies in China and South Korea and the history of the Dragon Boat Festival's UNESCO inscription

2.1. Legislative and governance framework for intangible cultural heritage in China and South Korea

The protection of ICH is an essential component of global cultural governance. China and South Korea both established relatively comprehensive ICH protection systems in the early 21st century, but their policy orientations and implementation paths differ.

In China, in 2004, on August 28, the National People's Congress approved its accession to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. All signatories must produce a national inventory of their intangible Heritage [4]. In 2005, the office for policy coordination of ICH under the State Council, which was established in June 2005, promulgated guidelines to create a national-level ICH inventory database [5], the foundation of ICH listing in later years. In 2011, China carried out the Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage [6,7], which was one of the most important legislative texts after laws, local legislation, and regulations and ordinances, thus constituting a multi-level legal protection system. In particular, after South Korea successfully listed [8,9].

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South Korea incorporated ICH protection into its legal system earlier. In 1962, it enacted the Cultural Property Protection Act, establishing one of the earliest ICH protection frameworks [10,11]. The law emphasized the principle of "preserving the original form" and marked the formal establishment of South Korea's ICH protection system. Subsequent revisions and adjustments refined the identification of ICH, systems for designating bearers of traditions, and financial support measures [12]. Since 2000, the Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA) of Korea has focused on heritage protection, public participation, and policymaking, emphasizing both preservation and utilization of cultural heritage [13].

Thus, both China and South Korea emphasize the national significance of ICH in institutional construction. However, China places greater emphasis on cultural sovereignty and holistic protection, while South Korea more readily connects ICH inscription with public diplomacy, laying the groundwork for their different approaches to the Dragon Boat Festival's UNESCO nomination.

2.2. Historical origins and cultural positioning of the Dragon Boat Festival

The Dragon Boat Festival, a shared seasonal festival across East Asia, originated during the Han dynasty. The Fengsu Tongyi by Ying Shao of the Eastern Han records customs of avoiding conscription and evil spirits and preventing diseases on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month [14]. By the Six Dynasties, the festival was linked to the legend of Qu Yuan, the great patriotic poet, and during the Tang and Song dynasties, it evolved into a nationwide folk festival [15]. In South Korea, however, the festival is more closely associated with rituals for blessings and folk entertainment activities [16], emphasizing community participation and collective activities that reflect its communal character.

The festival's cross-border spread is closely tied to China's historical cultural exchanges. By around 400 CE, Dragon Boat Festival traditions had been introduced to the Korean Peninsula through migration and warfare. Over time, these customs localized, forming a distinctive Korean celebration while retaining similarities to the Chinese version [17]. South Korea's Danoje Festival, though influenced by China, integrates indigenous rituals and folk competitions such as ancestral tomb rites, wearing white ramie clothing, swing games, ssireum (wrestling), stone battles, and ball games [18], thereby developing a unique cultural focus.

The Dragon Boat Festival is thus a transnational cultural resource that has been reinterpreted in different nations to become a symbol of cultural identity. This "dual character" of shared tradition and localized identity has contributed to competition between China and South Korea in the international heritage arena.

2.3. Reconstructing the inscription process and comparing nomination texts

In 2005, South Korea became the first country to successfully inscribe the "Gangneung Danoje Festival" on UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity list, making it the first internationally recognized heritage item associated with the Dragon Boat Festival [9]. South Korea's nomination highlighted its uniqueness and community roots, emphasizing Gangneung's longstanding ritual traditions [16,19].

In 2006, China made a self - nomination of the Dragon Boat Festival, emphasizing the holiday's long- - time and cultural memories of the traditional festival of the Chinese ethnic group [20]. The Dragon Boat Festival in China was included in 2009 on the Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity [21]. Compared to South Korea's application, China emphasized on

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the symbolism of the festival as unity among emphasized. They associated Qu Yuan's mourning rituals with celebration customs, creating a storyline of loving one's country.

Compared to the two nomination text strategies: South Korea highlights distinctiveness through regionalization and folklorization, China stresses representativity through nationalization and politicization. This shows that the international heritage system is not just a safe haven of culture, but also a competition ground for different nation's cultures.

2.4. Public reactions and the evolution of cultural identity

South Korea's 2005 application succeeded immediately after that a media storm erupted in China. Many said it was an act of ' cultural appropriation ' and people's feelings on this made the conversation quickly turn into one over 'cultural sovereignty' [22]. this kind of reaction in the public domain also drove China to make its own nominations faster, making people have a sense of safeguarding traditional festivals, protecting national culture [23].

In South Korea regarding the reception, the public opinions on the inscription were mostly positive; the inscription was perceived as a symbol of Korean cultural soft power, a means to advance globalization of indigenous culture [24]; it was a boost in the number of tourists coming to Gangneung, and the local community's identity was equated to and with the national identity in discourses on the inscription [24].

Following China's successful 2009 nomination, both China and South Korea obtained international recognition for their respective cultural expressions of the Dragon Boat Festival. This "dual success" helped ease initial cultural tensions, although the political undertones of heritage remain evident. For China, the process strengthened awareness of cultural security and identity; for South Korea, the Gangneung Danoje Festival became a valuable asset for cultural diplomacy and local economic development.

3. The economic and cultural impact of the Dragon Boat Festival's UNESCO inscription on China and South Korea

3.1. Economic dimension: festival economy and integration of culture and tourism

The successful inscription of ICH is not only a symbol of cultural identity but also brings significant economic benefits. As a traditional festival, the Dragon Boat Festival has been further packaged and promoted after UNESCO recognition, gradually becoming an essential resource for the festival economy and integration of cultural tourism in both China and South Korea.

In South Korea, following the inscription of the "Gangneung Danoje Festival" on UNESCO's list in 2005, local tourism and cultural industries rapidly developed. The festival, lasting around a month, attracts tens of thousands of local residents and tourists daily. Its diverse activities—such as ritual ceremonies, Gwanno mask plays, farmer's music competitions, classical poetry contests, ssireum wrestling, swing games, and the large-scale traditional marketplace known as Nanjang—have boosted visitor participation and consumption, generating tangible economic benefits and promoting local tourism development [25]. In response, local authorities designated it a major cultural tourism asset, establishing specialized institutions like the Gangneung Danoje Festival Committee and the Dano Culture Center to plan, operate, and promote events, as well as provide funding and policy support. This institutionalized management ensures professionalism and sustainability, turning the festival into Gangneung's most representative cultural brand and driving the "festival economy" [26].

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In China, the economic impact following the Dragon Boat Festival's successful 2009 inscription has been even more apparent. First, there has been a growing trend of integrating ICH elements with festival commodities. For example, "DIY zongzi workshops" and "handmade sachet experiences" have become popular cultural consumption events during the holiday, with traditional customs being transformed into marketable cultural products and immersive experiences [27]. Second, the holiday tourism market has expanded, with many cities incorporating Dragon Boat Festival celebrations into cultural tourism packages, creating "ICH tourism" offerings. Data from Qunar in 2025 indicated that searches for keywords such as "dragon boat," "Duanwu," and "zongzi" increased by 2.5 times month-on-month, while bookings for folk experience destinations rose by 40% year-on-year. Tongcheng Travel reported that visits to ICH-related travel guides surged by over 300% [28]. Through festival activities, local governments and tourism enterprises have been able to increase visitor stays and spending frequency, making the Dragon Boat Festival a key driver of regional cultural and tourism economies.

3.2. Cultural dimension: youth engagement and digital empowerment

Culturally, the Dragon Boat Festival's inscription has not only heightened national cultural consciousness but also deeply influenced cultural transmission among younger generations in the digital age.

In China, the shock of South Korea's successful 2005 inscription sparked cultural anxiety and nationalism among Chinese youth. Following China's own recognition, the Dragon Boat Festival gradually took on the meaning of "cultural restoration." In 2008, the State Council designated the Dragon Boat Festival a national public holiday [29], which institutionalized protection of the festival and increased youth participation. Digital tools such as VR/AR, short videos, games, and social media have further facilitated immersive experiences and creative dissemination of Dragon Boat culture. Tourists can "travel back in time" to experience ancient celebrations or learn traditional customs like wrapping zongzi and dragon boat racing through gamification [30,31]. In addition, digital creative products such as virtual figurines, digital artworks, and themed dining experiences combine cultural heritage with consumer culture, making the festival a new engine for attracting young consumers [30]. The Dragon Boat Festival has thus become a key node for transmitting Chinese traditional culture in the digital era.

In South Korea, the Gangneung Danoje Festival has also been imbued with new cultural significance. In the digital age, South Korea has adopted a multi-media approach to contemporary dissemination. According to Korea's official tourism portal, the festival incorporates "media art" elements, using video editing and modern photography techniques to highlight its aesthetics and enable young audiences to experience traditional culture through visual art [32]. Educational and cultural institutions also emphasize youth involvement: since 2017, the Korean National Commission for UNESCO has launched the "KNCU Youth Reporter Corps," attracting young media creators to produce festival content on official social platforms, positioning them as both cultural transmitters and innovators [33].

It is worth noting that China and South Korea's approaches to digital cultural industries reflect different development paths. China places greater emphasis on reproducing "national cultural identity," integrating traditional rituals, social media promotion, and cultural creative industries to merge heritage with modern life. South Korea focuses more on the "globalization of local culture," using media dissemination and artistic expression to enhance the international visibility of the Gangneung Danoje Festival. Despite these strategic differences, both countries share a common vision of positioning youth and digital media as vital forces for intangible heritage preservation.

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4. The mechanisms linking cultural heritage and international relations

4.1. The UNESCO Convention and the international political dimension

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage provides a shared platform for countries to emphasize community participation, cultural diversity, and humanity's common heritage, aiming to protect and showcase national cultural traditions. However, in practice, this framework also reveals complexities in national identity construction and power relations.

In 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is adopted to make up for the imbalance between tangible heritage and intangible heritage. It emphasizes the importance of ICH [34]. The convention defines ICH as practices, knowledge or skills which are passed down through generations and is stressed how ICH is alive and full of cultural variety [35,36]. And the Convention is also been used by some countries as a way of creating and shaping their own culture. On the legal adjustment of Japan and South Korea, we can discover that the convention enables nations to govern culture or protect sovereignty by legal means [37]. States do not only act as "cultural protectors," but also "cultural competitors" during the process of cultural heritage nomination.

Dragon Boat festival nomination case of China and South Korea shows the aspect of international politics. South Korea in 2005 succeeded at the start, it shows that South Korea can cleverly take advantage of international mechanisms. China put forward in 2009 the "Dragon Boat Festival" together as well, showing the reaction by the policy makers and diplomats to safeguard the country's cultural interests. That these two countries have a disagreement indicates that when it comes to the UNESCO heritage site, it can be both seen as cooperative as well as contentious at the same time. In other words, UNESCO's world heritage lists have become a new stage of a"soft power battle".

4.2. Cultural diplomacy and the construction of soft power

Cultural heritage inscription is not only a kind of culture protection but also a national culture diplomacy. And Joseph Nye mentioned "Soft power", which means: Countries can increase their international influence by being attractive and having recognizable values [38]. It is a perfect example of that, with China and South Korea both nominating for Dragon Boat Festival.

South Korea has very good strategic sense in culture diplomacy. Aside from the global rise of K - Wave in TV, music etc [39].; South Korea also incorporates and integrates the Gangneung Danoje Festival into its cultural diplomacy programs and vigorously propounds about the Gangneung Danoje Festival into the world via the International Festival, cultural performances, academic exchanges and many more [40]. South Korea is about keeping the local culture when internationalizing the Danoje festival, and showing a country where traditions and modernity are linked, along with enhancing the national soft power.

And in China's submission for Dragon Boat Festival, they also mentioned the importance of "cultural safety" and "national identity." After receiving the recognition in 2009, Chinese government and media have been making a lot of promotion about this festival, they treat as a cultural symbol of their own country in their external cultural diplomacy work. Dragon boat races and Duanwu customs promoted internationally,built up with China's own soft power resources full of Eastern beauty and national spirit [41]. Festival's trans-boundary transmission is also a cultural exchange node of the Belt and Road, giving Chinese cultural diplomacy with a symbol full of traditional culture [42].

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That is, it's not just about "saving culture" or "projecting national value by national symbol" Dragon Boat Festival application It converts value export, which is an abstract concept of cultural diplomacy, into the practical act of experiencing the festival; it is better for soft power practice.

4.3. International cooperation and the tensions of cultural conflict governance

Although UNESCO promoted the idea of "Cultural Diversity" and "Shared Humanity's Heritage," there are also cooperation and disputes in reality. The Chinese and South Korean dragon boat festival nominations bring this out.

On one hand, cultural heritage is inherently transnational. The Dragon Boat Festival's spread across East Asian countries reflects a shared historical memory of cultural exchange. Theoretically, China and South Korea could have pursued a "joint nomination" to recognize the festival as a shared cultural heritage of the East Asian region. However, in reality, national identity competition and heightened cultural sovereignty awareness led both nations to submit separate nominations, resulting in a degree of opposition in public discourse.

On the other hand, the dual success of both nominations has also created opportunities for cooperation. Within the UNESCO framework, both China and South Korea have successfully registered Dragon Boat Festival-related items, which has somewhat reduced tensions over claims of "exclusive ownership" of cultural heritage. Theoretically, the two countries could use academic research, festival events, and cultural tourism to gradually promote a model of "co-construction and sharing." In practice, however, cooperation is still constrained by institutional barriers and political mistrust. Sensitivity in both countries' public opinion and the rise of nationalism further complicate efforts to create a collaborative atmosphere.

Therefore, international heritage governance operates under a dual logic of "institutional cooperation" and "identity competition." On the institutional level, countries are expected to follow shared rules and safeguard cultural diversity; on the identity level, nations tend to use heritage to construct distinct cultural narratives. The Dragon Boat Festival case demonstrates that cultural heritage can serve as both a bridge for cooperation and a trigger for conflict in international relations.

5. Comparison and insights on the Dragon Boat Festival's UNESCO heritage applications in China and South Korea

5.1. Possibilities for cooperation

Although the Dragon Boat Festival's heritage application once sparked controversy between China and South Korea, there remains potential for cooperation at both institutional and practical levels after the completion of the applications.

First, the heritage protection framework of the UNESCO emphasizes cross-national collaboration and the concept of shared heritage, providing an institutional foundation for cooperation between China and South Korea in preserving and promoting shared cultural resources such as the Dragon Boat Festival [43]. There are precedents for such international cooperation, such as the joint efforts of China and Mongolia in safeguarding and transmitting the Mongolian Long Song [44], which offer valuable lessons for bilateral collaboration in the management and dissemination of festival heritage.

Second, cultural heritage has complementary economic and social value. Both China and South Korea have accumulated substantial experience in festival tourism, cultural and creative industries, and youth cultural engagement. Future cooperation could focus on jointly developing cross-national

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cultural tourism routes and sharing festival branding resources, fostering economic and cultural synergy within an “East Asian Cultural Community.”

Third, China and South Korea share a long history of cultural exchange and interaction. Confucianism, seasonal traditions, culinary practices, and rituals all demonstrate deep cultural affinities [45,46]. These historical linkages provide a social and cultural identity foundation for bilateral cooperation on cultural heritage such as the Dragon Boat Festival, as well as for fostering mutual cultural understanding.

5.2. Practical challenges

The 1st is rising nationalism, the media’s amplifying of the stories causes problems with cooperation. South Korea succeeded in registering Gangneung Danoje festival in 2005, leading us Chinese to interpret and comprehend as “cultural taking advantage of”, South Korea said that they can retain their very own “local uniqueness”. Emotion-charged and polarized discussion still influences public opinion and politicizes cultural cooperation that is an obstacle to reasoning on cultural governance of transnational level.

Second, China and South Korea have different policy preferences for culture policies. In China, emphasis is placed on a nation’s cultural awareness and on cultural safety through the emphasis on unity and representative aspects [47]. Rather than that, south Korea uses internationalization to improve its cultural soft power and to show their own uniqueness and variety [48]. Different policy logic results in difficulty in mutual interest for running past each other on the Dragon Boat festival.

And the third is that the international heritage system is very fierce; The UNESCO nomination system is always based on “uniqueness” and “irreversibility” [49] The countries should emphasize on how special the culture of their country is. This method does well to encourage cultural differences, but it makes space for more cooperative stories. Both countries' Dual Listing in the Dragon Boat Festival is a manifestation of the interaction between institutional logic, state construction, and the nation.

Finally, uncertainty in bilateral political relations makes it hard for there to be a chance of culture. In recent years, Chinese-South Korean friction over trade, security, and foreign policy has made it nearly impossible to separate interactions involving Chinese culture from the larger political games [50,51]. So this overall political climate will always make it harder and less willing for deep cooperation in cultural resources.

5.3. Policy recommendations

First, to encourage multilateral coordination platforms. From the perspective of UNESCO, China and South Korea need to put forward an alliance such as “East Asia’s traditional festival alliance” to standardize regional cultural cooperation. Multilateral engagements can ease the bilateral tensions and put us in the same regional culture communal stories of the Dragon Boat Festival, bringing about East Asian cultural identifications.

Secondly encourage grassroots cooperation experiments The local government or civil organization of these two countries can try flexible cooperation. For example, Qu Yuan’s hometown in China and Gangneung in South Korea could establish sister-city relations and co-host a “Dragon Boat Festival Cultural Exchange Week.” Such community-level interactions are adaptable and sustainable, gradually building trust and laying the groundwork for higher-level collaboration.

Third, pluralism and learning together in governance: cultural heritage governance should not be about “excluding” others by “reciprocal learning,” through cross border exhibits and digital

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platforms presenting Dragon Boat Festival as an intertwined web of many cultures. In so doing, it follows through with UNESCO's value orientation as well as provides a way out from within the discourse of heritage that can create nationalism and identity conflict.

6. Conclusion

The case of the Dragon Boat Festival inscription on UNESCO ICH list is both a major landmark for China & South Korea ICH protection, but also an epitome of national identity formation,soft power competition, & tensions under the trans-national cooperation of international CAG. compared the countries' heritage protection policies and inscriptions processes to show different institutional designs, narrations, cultural diplomats. China highlights cultural sovereignty and full representativeness it improves the Dragon Boat Festival's strategic significance regarding national identity and image. South Korea was the opposite, trying to take their domestic culture internationally by making the Gangneung Danoje festival a brand for both local growth and cultural strength. The differences show a double logic, the heritage listing has a nationalism but also the protection of variety.

Dragon Boat Festival inscriptions also changed people's opinions on this traditional holiday from a cultural point of view and has brought some economic benefits such as tourism during the festival, creative industries and cultural and digital innovations have been generated. The international recognition of Intangible heritage brings in new sources of energy to the traditional festivals for today and young people stand in the front line of passing down and revitalizing culture; but on the other hand it also shows how there is the competition between the different international heritage government and the politics of identity so making transnational cultural cooperation work is hard.

The UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible cultural heritage takes these points from an international level and calls for "heritage of mankind" but in real life it is also one venue for national culture competitions. Dragon Boat Festival has double mark in the international situation, which means there is confrontation between the international community and state-building. At this time, it also reflects the problem of today, that is, there has been an increasing close east Asian cultural exchange. In the future, cultural governance will continue to face problems caused by this difference - the issue of being unique but not different.

Therefore, promoting cooperation on the Dragon Boat Festival and similar transnational cultural heritages requires building a regional cultural community consciousness within multilateral frameworks, and achieving interconnection of cultural resources through grassroots exchanges, joint research, and digital platforms. China and South Korea if they treat the dragon boat festival as a chance to shift the competition into cooperation, this will not only alleviate the nationalism and conflicts of identity but also bring the East Asia experience to intercultural governance. The significance is to take the dragon boat inscription as an example to understand the political nature and role of intangible cultural heritage in international affairs, and to provide a new perspective for theoretical exploration and practical innovation of cross border cultural cooperation.

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