

Constructing Japanese Nationalism on Television: The Japanese Image of Multicultural Society

New Cultural Frontiers

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Abstract

This article examines Japanese nationalism on television. Reflecting from cultural and ethnic diversity in contemporary Japan, there are increasing numbers of foreign and interracial Japanese entertainers on many television programs which play important instruments to manifest the concept of nihonjinron (the discussion of the Japanese) in the public image of global Japan. This research discusses the ideological meaning of foreigners and interracial Japanese residents. They are presented in the Japanese public as marketable show-business talents in Japanese society which continues to present itself as one social entity. The purpose of this paper is to pay attention to the conscious practice of cultural nationalism on Japanese television.

1. Introduction

This research explores nationalism under the influence of the nationalist concept of nihonjinron (the theory of the Japanese) formed on television in contemporary Japan. Nihonjinron has been a popular genre that particularly discusses the unique characteristics of Japanese society (Dale, 1986; Befu, 2001). The work of nihonjinron literature has been established by both academic scholars and non-academic writers. With the vast popularity from the early postwar time to the present, nihonjinron is still considered as a truism for most Japanese people (Dale, 1986, p. 15). The concept of nihonjinron emerged during the 1960s through the 1970s when Japan was on its way to become an Asian economic powerhouse. It was also the time that Japan was involved in a series of trade disputes with Western states, especially the United States. Japan often responded to criticisms by

claiming that Westerners would not understand the special situation of Japan (Befu, 2001, p. 1). Thus, Japan's psychological isolation was the principle of the concept of *nihonjinron*, arguing that Japanese society developed differently from the rest of the nations. This Japanese defensive behavior has mystified its own national identity through Japanese construction of self-image (Befu, 2001, p. 3).

Nihonjinon literature consists of the analysis of the uniqueness of Japanese society and its people. Based on the Japanese image of the world, Western cultures, especially American culture, are often used as appropriate cultural counterparts for Japanese culture due to their close political and economic relations (Befu, 2001, p. 1). The concept of *nihonjinron* are seen in many articles on books, magazines, television commercials, and other media as the discussion of the Japanese: Who are the Japanese? Dale (1986) has argued that it is a display for cultural nationalism consciously distinguishing the Japanese 'Self' and the foreign 'Others' by the collective view of the Japanese public. The 'uniqueness' of the Japanese is emphasized and acknowledged as a virtue even though there is a little logic behind the meaning. Yoshino (1998, p. 14) has argued that *nihonjinron* is a product of 'pop sociologists' who toy with the discussion of the cultural differences of the Japanese in relation to the foreigners. The pop sociologists often appear on popular books and weekly magazines, targeting students and white-collar workers who pick up and read them on their way to work or home (Befu, 2001, p. 8). The knowledge of being Japanese including a particular social manner is important because they might be seen as strange, unusual, or even 'un-Japanese' if they do not know how to behave 'Japanese'.

This research is divided into two parts. First, I will discuss a discourse of the construction of Japanese identity. Japan's quest for national identity has been alongside the development of modern Japan. Being Japanese has been a dominant concept, while the content of Japanese identity tends to be modified due to its changing economic condition as well as international political surrounding. I will include the recent developments of the practice of *nihonjinron*. The concept of *nihonjinron* has settled as a daily practice through television over the years. Television has become the primary

source of information (Lynn, 2006, p. 483-488). Most Japanese expect that television echoes a voice of the Japanese public, and it has become the dominant source to construct an ideological arena that the concept of *nihonjinron* is practiced in the general public.

Second, the inclusion of Japanese-speaking foreigners (*gaikokujin* [*gaijin*] *tarento*) and interracial Japanese (*hāfu*) entertainers on television programs as a part of *nihonjinron* will be discussed. They become important instruments to promote the concept of *nihonjinron* within the imaging of global Japan. With the visible increasing presence of foreign residents in contemporary Japanese society, many Japanese began to see Japan as a multinational society even though non-Japanese residents such as Koreans, Chinese, Okinawans, the Ainu and others have always resided in Japan. The changing social situation of Japan evokes a mixed feeling that Japan has finally become a global society, while the popular perception of Japanese society as that of a homogeneous Japan should be maintained (Creighton, 1997; Iwabuchi, 2005; Kaneko, 2009). Because of the controlled setting of most television programs, the presence of *gaikokujin tarento* and interracial *hāfu* Japanese entertainers brings the feeling of globalization in the general public while the uniqueness of Japanese society is emphasized through their cross-cultural perspectives. With their foreign backgrounds, they are the perfect actors to confirm the unique characteristics of Japanese society.

I argue that the inclusion of *gaikokujin tarento* and *hāfu* show-business talents brings two benefits. One is that it shows Japan's cultural dominance. They play Japanese-assimilated foreigners who Japanese audiences expect to see. The concept of *nihonjinron* includes a descriptive cultural model as how Japanese society should be as well as how the Japanese should behave (Befu, 2001, p. 78-79). Thus, the roles of *gaikokujin tarento* and *hāfu* are not only to bridge the gap between Japan and the rest of the world but also to show how much they have learned from Japanese culture even though they are not Japanese. The second benefit is that they are marketable in Japanese society where young Japanese people are tired of being 'just' Japanese. They wish to become liberalized Westerners as opposed to conservative stereotypical Japanese. Ethnicity, language, and ideology have been the three important symbols of Japanese national identity, but it

seems that Japanese ideology takes the priority in contemporary Japan. Japanese ethnicity and language may be seen too old-fashioned in fast-paced Japanese culture.

2. Constructing Japanese identity

It has been argued that Japanese construction of national identity is a conscious practice (Dale, 1986; Fukuoka, 1993; Oguma, 1995; Befu, 2001). Oguma (1995) has pointed out Japan's constant preoccupation for searching the origins of the Japanese since Japan's modernization in the Meiji period (1868-1912). Japan's industrialization triggered the construction of national identity due to the pressure from the Western Powers. It was a defensive act to unite Japanese society in the Western-dominated nineteenth century. The Japanese Emperor became the center of modern Japan and the rest of Japanese nationals were assigned as ideological agents to serve him. After Japan's surrender in the Second World War in 1945, Japanese society experienced another pressure from the West, especially, the United States for liberalization and democratization. The Japanese have gone through a series of social and political changes such as the early postwar poverty (1945-1954), the Allied Occupation (1945-1952), and the economic development (the 1960s-1970s). Oguma (2002) argues that those collective experiences have nurtured Japanese collective identity as well as cultural and economic nationalism.

Japan's cultural nationalism began alongside its success in economy. During the 1960s and through the 1980s, it was the heyday of Japanese business practice as the entire world wanted to know how Japan did it. Most Japanese were pleased with the economic success and interpreted it as a remarkable ethnic achievement (Befu, 2001, p. 68). Japan's achievement was the perfect proof of Japan's ethnic superiority, drawing the picture of the ethnic hierarchy of the world as "Japan [has] become an economic giant because what Japan is; therefore, whatever is not Japanese-like in the local culture is the reason for the economic backwardness of the country of assignment" (Ben-Air, 2000, cited in Befu, 2001, p. 68). Most Japanese interpreted the economic achievement of Japan as the exception of the world, rationalizing it with Japan's unique geographical, ethnical, linguistic,

and cultural characteristics (Dale, 1986, p. 13-15; Befu, 2001, p. 66-72). Fukuoka (1993) has identified the Japanese preoccupation of themselves through his analysis of the Japanese-Resident Zainichi Korean binary relations. Most non-Japanese residents are not only socially but also psychologically marginalized by the Japanese due to the strong presence of Japanese collective self-image.

Nihonjinron literature gained massive popularity at the same time (Befu, 2001, p. 14-15). Nihonjinron was often considered as a descriptive cultural model that most Japanese individuals consciously kept in mind (Befu, 2001, p. 78-79). Befu argues that Nihonjinron became the Japanese proposition in how they should behave: achieving social harmony as opposed to what Japan was. (Befu, 2001, p. 78-83) This development of nihonjinron was considered as the new symbol of postwar Japan in the sense that Japan had finally found what Japan redeem itself from its humiliating wartime past. For the sake of Japan, nihonjinron was practiced by most Japanese individuals as a national ideology and the direction of postwar Japan. The concept of nihonjinron was also applied to both cultural and social practices of Japanese society as moral codes, proper community rules, and pleasant manners. It became the national practice of Japan.

However, this popular genre has been the target of criticism by both Japanese and non-Japanese scholars such as Dale Peter (1986), Oguma Eiji (1995), and Befu Harumi (2001). They have responded to nihonjinron literature by doubting the homogeneity of Japanese society and criticizing the ambiguous framework of nihonjinron literature. Those anti-nihonjinron scholars have attempted to draw the clear line between non-academic nihonjinron and serious empirical research of Japan for the sake of the disciplined studies. Dale Peter (1986) pointed out the vague contents of most nihonjinron publications, arguing that nihonjinron literature was the self-descriptions of Japanese society that gather specific facts about Japan through the analysis of selected historical records, folklore materials, cultural rituals, and other social customs. Nihonjinron was a self-filling prophecy and it should be separated from any legitimate Japanese studies.

Japan has gone through the best and worst time: reaching the peak of its economic development with the bubble economic boom (1986-1990), but Japan soon entered a decade long recession (1991-2000). The popularity of *nihonjinron* literature has declined since the late 1980s, and there were a few *nihonjinron* publications released in the recent years (Befu, 2001, p. 14-15). Japanese society has changed in the last two decades such as declining economic power, aging society, and a new generation of Japanese people who do not show their interests in Japanese culture and tradition. With Japan's aging society, Japan has struggled with the shortage of labor forces (Kaneko, 2009), and the inclusion of foreign migrants and students are seen as inevitable for descending Japan. Despite its declining popularity, the concept of *nihonjinron* is still in part of the hegemony of Japanese society in the sense that the notion of *nihonjinron* such as the continuity of traditional and cultural values is included in political policies (Kawai, 2000). Japanese society is still interpreted as one social entity as opposed to Japanese perception of Western society consisting of different ethnic groups and cultures (Iwabuchi, 2005, p. 104). The concept of *nihonjinron* is still used as the explanation of Japan's cultural uniqueness.

I argue that television seems to be an effective mediator for the introduction of *nihonjinron*. Most Japanese expect that television echoes a voice of the Japanese public (Lynn, 2006). With the vast circulation of television sets in households, all messages distribute into the Japanese public widely and fast. Most television programs intend to consider the audiences as one social entity, finding the keynote that attracts all types of audiences. Thus, they often use the agenda setting within the narrow framework. Television has become the dominant source to construct an ideological arena that the concept of *nihonjinron* is practiced in the general public. Through my observations on the Japanese television market today, Japanese-speaking foreigners (*gaikokujin tarento*) and interracial Japanese (*hāfu*) play ideological actors for the practice of *nihonjinron*. The introduction of interracial Japanese and Japanese-speaking foreigners into the Japanese television market has brought a new image into the Japanese-Foreigner binary relations. Interracial Japanese and Japanese-speaking entertainers have become a marketable commodity with the notion of

nihonjinron appearing on different types of mass media such as advertizing, acting and singing and many others (“Hāfu kei no geinōjin,” 2007). I argue that their popularity in Japanese society holds a particular cultural meaning as their presence does not necessarily violate the public image of Japanese society with their Japanese characteristics such as Japanese language skills, and partial Japanese (Asian) looks. At the same time, they are considered as a profit-making commodity with their Western characteristics such as bilingual (English and Japanese) skills, and physical features. They live in the Japanese-image of cultural and ethnic boundaries between Japan and the rest of the world. Japan’s imagined cultural borders are not elastic in the sense that Japanese minority groups such as the Ainu, Koreans and many others are historically marginalized, but gaikokujin tarento and hāfu show-business talents found their way to be a part of the mainstream culture. Anderson (2003, p. 6) has defined the nation as an imagined political community in which all residents are aware of the presence of their nation through the image of their communion. The Japanese ideological borderlines have been consciously practiced through religious rituals, social customs, and public education. As Japan has liberalized through the influence of Western culture, the image of the Japanese also liberalized. Global information, knowledge, and ideas are incorporated into Japanese society while national ideology changed a little. Gaikokujin tarento and hāfu are appropriate messengers to discuss Japanese ideology in Westernized Japan.

3. The inclusion of foreigners on Japanese television

The roles of Japanese-speaking foreign and interracial Japanese entertainers on television are to project globalizing Japan with the notion of nihonjinron. Following the history of non-Japanese entertainers, resident Zainichi Koreans have been the dominant group, but this research will not include them as foreigners since they do not reveal their foreign backgrounds. I will focus on non-Japanese entertainers who emphasize their foreign backgrounds such as Westerners (White Americans), Japanese-speaking foreigners, and interracial Japanese. Some of them hold Japanese nationality or became Japanese through naturalization, but for the sake of this research analyzing

non-Japanese entertainers on Japanese television and my understanding of their roles, I consider them as foreigners.

Foreigners began to appear on Japanese television during the Allied Occupation (1945-1952) through American films. American films were broadcasted to insert the positive images of the United States. The images of the Americans (mostly Whites) in the films were civilized, sophisticated, and admirable for Japanese audiences, and particularly, white women made a huge impact on Japanese society with their revealing sexual images (Creighton, 1997, p. 217-218). Creighton has argued that the exposure of the American films triggered the image categorization of foreigners in Japanese society. They were seen as the representation of fantasy and exoticism, and the impact of the introduction of American films into Japan was the creation of the racial categorization. This perspective has been still seen in today's Japanese television.

In the early 1980s, the Japanese entertainment industry set a different tone for the images of foreigners on television (Iwabuchi, 2005, p. 106). Japanese-speaking foreign talents, mostly Americans, began to appear on several Japanese television programs as *gaikokujin tarento* (foreign celebrities). Iwabuchi argues that the foreign celebrities had a specific role. Their roles were agents for emphasizing the uniqueness of the Japanese discussing Japanese distinct cultural characteristics and social affairs in relation to their Western (American) origins (2005, p. 106-107). The wide acceptance of *gaikokujin tarento* reflected from Japan's confidence through its strong economy. Postwar Japan had made a huge effort to reconstruct Japanese economy, so having Japanese-speaking foreigners seems to be the sign that the Japanese had not only caught up with the Westerners, particularly Americans, but the Japanese also had exceeded them, as if the position was finally reversed (Creighton, 1997, p. 219-221). Japanese television producers created an image of Japanese culture as the dominant culture in which Americans tried to learn Japanese language. It was also Japan's strong self-interest as *nihonjinron*. Most Japanese have already discussed Japan with various angles such as foods, social customs, religion, and origins, and they were curious to know what other nations, especially Western countries, think about Japan. Having foreigners on

Japanese television signified both the economic accomplishment and cultural dominance of Japan in the world.

This type of Japanese television programs continues to be produced. In the Japanese television show, *Mishuran de tabi suru! Saihakken nihon* (MICHELIN Voyager Pratique Japon: 2007~), two Japanese-speaking French reporters: Dominique Chagon and Jessy Rousel introduce different tourist spots in Japan with their ‘non-Japanese’ perspective (“Mishuran de tabi suru,” 2008). This television show holds a sense of documentary as they discover interesting and impressive Japanese social customs and traditions while their overacting are comedic, funny, and even silly. I assume that the Japanese audiences of this television program feel not only pleased to see various beautiful sceneries of Japan, but they are also satisfied with the fact that the foreigners are impressed with Japan.

Non-celebrity foreigners or ‘ordinary’ foreigners began to appear on Japanese television by the late 1990s. Their appearance on television programs reflected the liberalization of Japan’s immigration policy in 1990 (the 1990 Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act). Because of which, there was a large inflow of foreign migrants, students, and their family members to Japan. Japanese popular television-show *Kokoga hendayo nihonjin* (This is so bizarre, you Japanese: 1998-2002) was on air with a similar framework to other Japanese television programs with foreign guests who are asked to discuss Japan’s uniqueness (Iwabuchi, 2005). The difference of this television-show was to utilize non-celebrity foreigners instead of foreign celebrities. The usage of ordinary foreigners was the niche of the show as they talked about Japanese unique cultural characteristics like the foreign celebrities on the other television-shows, but they discussed through their ordinary social experiences. Each foreigner from a different country presented its own view of Japanese society. It was like a taste of the United Nations, but Japan was very often the center of most discussions. A group of foreigners on the show made a strong impact, projecting the transformation of Japanese society into a global society. The Japanese audience loved this show by the fact that they did talk about Japan as the taste of *nihonjinron*, and they related to the foreigners

through their own experiences with the increasing population of foreigners in Japan (Iwabuchi, 2005).

In contemporary times, interracial Japanese take similar but bigger roles than ordinary foreigners on television to present global Japan. Their presence matches with the imaging of multinational Japan. In Western-influenced Japanese culture, interracial singers and models such as J-pop singer Crystal Kay, African-American enka singer Jero, model/ actor Kato Rosa, actor Wentz Eiji and talk-show host/singer Becky are in demand. Most Japanese show-business talent agencies such as Horipro-Inc, Bonamii Model Production, Signboard 40, and Lespros Entertainment create a special section for young foreigners and interracial Japanese as models, singers and actors. For instance, both Bonamii Model Production and Signboard 40 post their talents profiles with pictures, hobbies, the nationality of their father and mother, and their bilingual or multilingual language skills (Bonamii Model Production, 2006; Signboard 40, 2009). In the 1980s, there were only a handful of interracial Japanese or foreign-born Japanese (Nikkeijin) on television. The ethnic backgrounds of non-Japanese entertainers, especially Koreans, were rather hidden due to the possible discrimination from Japanese audiences. But today's Japanese entertainment industry promotes interracial Japanese with their mixed-ethnic backgrounds as the niche for becoming famous. They hold stereotypical East-West qualities especially for their foreign looks and Japanese culture including native Japanese language skills.

For example, J-pop icon Crystal Kay has dominated the Japanese music industry for the last ten years (Poole, 2009). She was born to a resident Zainichi Korean mother and a U.S. (African American) service man. Over the years, she has experienced the changing image of the Japanese entertainment industry, saying that "People are getting used to it. You can see a lot more mixed people on TV, and even (among) models in [Japanese] magazines, most are mixed or half" (Poole, 2009). Kay also states that "There is still some racial thing going on...Some people can't accept there are a lot of foreigners out there". Her strong presence has been the pioneer of interracial Japanese entertainers in the Japanese entertainment industry.

African-American interracial singer Jerome Charles White Jr, also known as Jero has also made a strong impact on the Japanese music industry from the United States. He began his music career as an enka singer, Japanese popular music genre but it is not often practiced outside Japan. Despite his non-Japanese appearance, Jero's debut single, Umiyuki (Ocean Snow) hit the top 5 Japanese music charts in 2008 (Hoban, 2009). With his strong Japanese language and singing abilities, Jero has connected to the Japanese audiences including the elderly. He was able to appear on one of the most popular music program, Kōhaku Uta Gassen (the red and white music competition) on New Year's Eve. His achievement is unprecedented not only for foreign singers but also all musicians. He has been appointed as the special ambassador of tourism for Izumozaki city by the mayor of the city of Izumozaki, Niigata prefecture ("Jero san, kankō taishi ni," 2009).

Besides those two talented interracial entertainers, talk-show host/singer Becky has become the Japanese household name with her Western looks and Japanese personality on television since the beginning of 2000. She was born to a Japanese mother and a British father and grew up in Japan. She has appeared in over 20 television shows as an assistant host, has acted in around 20 television series, has published 2 essays, and has appeared on 50 television commercials (Becky Official Website, 2009). In 2009, she was nominated for the 16th Best Smile of the Year ("Kotoshino besuto sumairu," 2009), and appeared in two popular fashion shows, the 2009 Spring and Summer Shibuya Girls' Collection ("Asashōryū ya Becky," 2009) and the 2009 Fall and Winter Tokyo Girls' Collection ("Aki fuyu fashon no shinsaku hirō," 2009) as one of the celebrity models ("Bassari itta heā mo hirō," 2009).

The Japanese are getting used to seeing interracial Japanese entertainers in fashion magazines, theaters, television commercials, and other types of mass media (Poole, 2009). Japanese-speaking foreigners and interracial Japanese are necessary for developing the Japanese entertainment industry and appealing Japanese audiences. Commercial goods and products are often advertized through interracial Japanese models and actors who have the sense of Western and Japanese beauty. Interracial Japanese have become a striking profit-making commodity which does not offend

conservative audiences with their Japanese language skills and likable modest social behavior while attracting younger liberal audiences. Japanese-speaking foreign and interracial Japanese entertainers on television project the hegemony of Japanese culture in which they are assimilated into Japanese society. They are appropriate messengers for the continuity of *nihonjinron*.

4. Conclusion

The popular practice of *nihonjinron* is not just ideology, but it is a Japanese way of living; most Japanese people consciously acknowledge the hegemonic concept of *nihonjinron* in their social experiences. The presence of Japanese-speaking foreigners and interracial Japanese on television are not considered as a cultural and ethnic threat towards Japanese society as long as they play assimilated foreigners. It is Japanese cultural nationalism with non-Japanese actors. The presence of non-Japanese on television maximizes the feeling of global Japan within the content of Japanese dominance. Creighton has argued Japanese ethnic resistance as the construction of foreign Otherness creating boundaries between the Japanese and foreigners (1997, p. 253). He has examined the notions of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) in the Japanese-Foreign binary relations as the idea of *uchi* creates the boundary of an inside group or space which forms the primary memberships and belongingness (Creighton 1997, p. 212). By the same token, the foreigners are always outsiders and secondary in relation to the Japanese. I will add the notions of *honne* (real intention) and *tatemae* (superficial-coated expression) to Creighton's argument. Japanese mass media only projects the feeling of global Japan with limited inclusion of non-Japanese as foreigners are often forced to play the role of the Japanese image of the foreigners on television. They have to discuss Japan with their cross-cultural knowledge and experience, and Japanese audiences are pleased to discover interesting characteristic about Japan. As most Japanese television programs are constructed as the informative and educational framework, most audiences fail to distinguish fictions and the realities.

At the same time, I acknowledge that *nihonjinron* has also taken a different direction over the years as it includes a sense of a liberal view and an idea of negotiation. It may still hold a sense of nationalism, but it has been compromised due to Japan's declining economic power as well as its new generation which is less interested in Japanese tradition and culture. The popularity of interracial Japanese is a marketable commodity to enhance Japan's declining domestic consumption even though it was not too long ago that the image of interracial Japanese was stigmatized as 'half-Japanese'. The ethnic boundaries between the Japanese and non-Japanese are compromised by economic interest. This increasing number of interracial Japanese can also be considered as another attempt by the postwar generation of the Japanese that they want to leave the negative semantics of old (prewar) Japan behind. There is also a cultural gap between the old and new generations of the Japanese. *Nihonjinron* is the invention of early postwar Japan, and it may not necessarily attract young Japanese. Young global Japanese want to change society, criticizing the lack of opportunity; thus, they are far less interested in being Japanese.

Today's interracial Japanese and foreign show-business talents hold a significant number of Japanese audiences and bring a strong message to them. The editor of the Japanese edition of *Vogue* understands how most young Japanese see themselves through the image of the Westerners, arguing that "Such relentless similarity 'gave young Japanese a complex. We're short, have the same color eyes and couldn't change the color of our hair. Now, we can change heights, eyes, and hair'" (Richie, 2003, p. 152). They do not only dress like foreigners (mostly Whites) but also look like them with dyeing their hair brown, red, and many different colors. This Japanese Westernization has influenced the opinion and regulation of private companies and public offices such as the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Office of Education which expected all company employees to look like more 'Japanese' (black hair). But recently, those traditional companies and offices have become lenient with the generation of young Japanese as they do not mind a hair-dyed staff as long as consumers and customers do not complain (Richie,

2003, p. 152). This may be seen as a small social change, but as I know how strict and uncompromising those companies and offices were in the 1980s regarding their office rules, it is quite surprising that they could actually change their office rules for their employees. It suggests that Japanese traditional values do not have psychological weight as much as they did before in contemporary Japan.

Watching interracial Japanese entertainers on the television shows as well as observing a new generation of Westernized Japanese on the streets, Japanese society may be on its way to become a multinational society while looking at how non-Japanese entertainers portray themselves forces me to think that it will take some time to get there. Respected travel writer Pico Iyer sees this Japanese adaptability as a cultural niche not erosion, stating that “Japanese inventions have won over the world through their smallness, their precision and their elegant design...”(Riche, 2003, p. 170). I do not disagree with Pico that the cultural transformation is the characteristic of Japanese society. This increasing presence of interracial Japanese on television will hopefully lead to a greater recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity and existing minority issues.

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