

The Role Reconstruction of Chinese Social Media in Informal Chinese Language Learning—A Case Study of Thai Chinese Language Learners

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Abstract. With the rapid development and widespread application of digital technology at present, the international influence of Chinese social media has increased significantly. More and more foreign Chinese language learners have begun to use Chinese social media platforms for informal Chinese language learning. However, most current studies focus on the instrumental role of social media, but pay insufficient attention to how it reconstructs its own role, promotes learning communities, and expands the usage market of Chinese social media. This study aims to explore the current status of the role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning, analyze its existing deficiencies, and explore possible paths for role reconstruction from different dimensions based on Situated Learning Theory. This study took 14 Thai Chinese language learners (8 high school students and 6 university students) studying in China as the research objects, adopted focus group interviews as the research method, and supplemented the survey data with questionnaires (9 of whom completed the questionnaires). The analysis was carried out by combining the interview results, 9 valid questionnaires and the three dimensions of Situated Learning Theory. The study found that Chinese social media plays an effective auxiliary role in informal Chinese language learning, but there are still deficiencies in terms of translation functions, content planning, systematic practice mechanisms and the promotion of learning communities. Based on this finding, this study puts forward three reasonable improvement path suggestions according to the obtained data samples: First, improve translation functions, enhance translation accuracy and lower the participation threshold; Second, establish systematic practice and feedback mechanisms to enhance foreign learners' interest and confidence in Chinese language learning; Third, update software service communities, integrate social and learning functions, promote deeper communication, facilitate the formation of learning communities, and drive positive changes and improvements for both parties. The goal of this study is to provide new influence paths for Chinese social media, offer clearer learning methods for foreign Chinese language learners, make up for the deficiencies in previous traditional studies, and promote the common progress of both Chinese social media and foreign Chinese language learners.

Keywords: Informal Chinese Language Learning, Role Reconstruction, Situated Learning Theory, Thai Chinese Language Learners

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and motivation

With the penetration of digital technology, the functions of social media have extended from entertainment and social interaction to knowledge dissemination and learning. In the field of language learning, an increasing number of scholars have studied the use of social media for informal language learning. Early scholars took language learning as a specific research aspect and proposed that extended activities of formal learning should be used to arouse attention to informal learning and conduct it more in-depth [1]. This trend has provided new ideas for international Chinese language education. The year 2026 marks the first year of the 15th Five-Year Plan, during which the state has clearly put forward strategic deployments of "promoting the international development of social media platforms" and "advancing the global, regional and targeted expression of Chinese stories and Chinese voices". Meanwhile, the newly revised *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* has incorporated international Chinese language education into the national legal framework for the first time. Therefore, how to reconstruct the role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning, enable it to better undertake the function of informal Chinese language learning and better serve the cultural going-global strategy has become a question that needs to be answered. Among them, Thailand, as a country along the Belt and Road Initiative, has a relatively obvious demand for Chinese language learning. The informal Chinese language learning behaviors of Chinese language learners among Thai students through social media provide research samples for this question. Based on the above background, this study takes Chinese language learners among Thai students as the research objects, focuses on the role and existing problems of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning, explores the current status of its role and reconstruction paths, and provides theoretical support for the future development strategies of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning.

1.2. Research purposes

The purpose of this study is to analyze the current status of the role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning and put forward targeted, reasonable and implementable improvement strategies. The specific research purposes are as follows:

- (1) Investigate the current status of the role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning
- (2) Analyze the deficiencies of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning
- (3) Explore the paths to promote the role reconstruction of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning based on Situated Learning Theory

1.3. Research questions

Based on the above research background and purposes, this study puts forward the following research questions:

- (1) What is the current status of the role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning?
- (2) What are the deficiencies of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning?

(3) What are the paths to promote the role reconstruction of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning based on Situated Learning Theory?

1.4. Research significance

1.4.1. Theoretical significance

This study expands the interpretation of Situated Learning Theory in the digital intelligence era. Situated Learning Theory emphasizes that the essence of learning is the process in which learners continuously move from the periphery to the core through "legitimate peripheral participation" [2], and it was born before the digital intelligence era. This study applies this theoretical framework to the field of Chinese social media, and examines the role reconstruction mechanism of learners in this era and this field, as well as the new forms of "legitimate peripheral participation" and the new patterns of "communities of practice".

It also provides a new theoretical analysis framework for the internal optimization of social media platforms and the media role of Chinese language dissemination in the future.

1.4.2. Practical significance

This study provides reference for optimizing the language learning functions of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning. By revealing the doubts and difficulties encountered by Thai university Chinese language learners in actual use, this study puts forward improvement suggestions for the interaction design, content recommendation, learning tools, technical optimization and other aspects of social media platforms.

In conclusion, it provides empirical evidence for the digital practice of international Chinese language education, and offers usage references for Chinese language education institutions and educators to use social media platforms as auxiliary tools.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on informal learning

Informal learning refers to learning that occurs outside formal educational institutions, without fixed curricula or teacher leadership, and often happens unintentionally. Early on, it was regarded as a supplement to formal learning, and it was pointed out that language learning in informal environments is uncontrolled [3]. Since the 21st century, the importance of informal learning has become increasingly prominent. The *Recommendation on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes* issued by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2015 has pushed informal learning into a broader context. After entering the digital era, most relevant studies have continued this perspective, focusing on how learners actively use social media for learning, but have relatively neglected the shaping effect of social media's own technical architecture on informal learning.

2.2. Research on social media and language learning

Social media is a series of online media with characteristics such as participation, openness and communication. The "Top Ten Trends in Social Media" proposed early on included trends such as aggregation platforms, cross-platform integration and geographical boundary elimination [4]. In the

rapidly developing digital intelligence era today, with the increase in the number of social networking sites and the enrichment of content, the influence of social media itself is constantly growing. Most existing studies focus on empirical research of social media (such as Facebook) and pay attention to learners' behaviors and states [5]. Against the background of the timeliness and diversity of digital media today, a transition phenomenon of language learning from "learner" to "participant" appears on many Chinese social media platforms. This identity transformation from learner to participant echoes the discussion of "role reconstruction" in Situated Learning Theory. However, studies on its motivation and process lack investigation into differences in platform ecosystems, the inherent characteristics of the Chinese language, and the particularity of learner groups. They have not continuously and deeply thought about how the technical and cultural characteristics of different social media platforms interact differently with specific languages (such as Chinese) and specific groups of people (such as non-native Chinese speakers).

2.3. Research on Chinese social media and informal Chinese language learning

In recent years, domestic social media platforms have carried out international development. Some scholars have paid attention to the characteristics of short videos on platforms such as Douyin in Chinese teaching, and found that they promote informal Chinese language learning by virtue of the attractiveness of teaching content and picture quality [6]. Other scholars, taking the Xiaohongshu platform as an example, examined the interaction mode between "bloggers" and learners, and pointed out that bloggers' "grassroots recommendation-style" content presentation is not only a commercial behavior, but also a new narrative model with multiple attributes integrating culture, social interaction and media [7]. However, most existing studies focus on the output behaviors of platforms, the language learning behaviors of Chinese learners, or the Chinese language learning behaviors of Western learners whose native language is English. There is relatively insufficient attention paid to Chinese language learners in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand and the connection between learners and platforms. This study will take Thai university Chinese language learners as samples to try to fill the above research gaps.

2.4. Situated Learning Theory and role reconstruction

Situated Learning Theory describes a process of "legitimate peripheral participation" in communities of practice [2]. Early scholars proposed that learning is individuals' participation in practice, and advocated hands-on practice and communication [8]. Other scholars pointed out that Situated Learning Theory aims to cultivate people's advanced abilities [9]. Through "legitimate peripheral participation", learners enter "communities of practice", continuously practice in participation, and then promote the transformation from "peripheral participant" to "core participant". This identity transformation is the reconstruction of one's own role in the process of practice. Under the background of digital intelligence, it is important to pay attention to the change path of how intelligent technology shifts from "tool assistance" to "ecological embedding", so as to explore the influencing factors that promote role reconstruction. Based on the above theoretical perspective, this study will take Thai university Chinese language learners as samples to explore the current status of the role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning, and further explore the paths for the role reconstruction of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning based on Situated Learning Theory.

3. Research methods and design

3.1. Research methods

This study adopts a qualitative research method, using focus group interviews as the data collection tool. Qualitative methods are suitable for exploratory research and can deeply reveal individuals' meaning-making processes in natural contexts [10], which aligns closely with the current status of roles and reconstruction paths that this study intends to explore. The researcher acts as a "moderator" to guide small group interactions, encouraging participants to conduct open discussions and debates on specific topics and exchange viewpoints, thus generating collective data that goes beyond individual interviews [11].

3.2. Rationale for research method selection

The use of focus group interviews in this study is based on the following two considerations: First, informal Chinese language learning occurs in the environment of Chinese social media. Through communication and interaction among Chinese language learners about their use of Chinese social media, we can gain a corresponding understanding and reflection on the current role of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning. Second, "role reconstruction" involves changes in learners' perceptions of social media functions. The collision and consensus of viewpoints in group discussions help capture the dimensions of this cognitive reconstruction.

3.3. Research design

The focus interview groups established for this study consist of two groups: a high school group and a university group, each composed of 6 to 8 Thai Chinese language learners. The respondents' native language is Thai and Chinese is their second language. They have the ability to communicate daily in Chinese and have continuously used at least one Chinese social media platform as a learning tool. Each group tries to include learners of different genders, grades and social media usage preferences to ensure the richness of information. Voluntary respondents are recruited through snowball sampling, where interviewed respondents recommend other eligible learners for recruitment.

Interviews will be conducted according to a semi-structured outline, focusing on the following dimensions: 1. Learners' practical ways of using Chinese social media to learn Chinese. 2. Changes in learners' perceptions of the "role" of Chinese social media in this process. 3. Factors influencing these changes in "role" perception.

The interviews will be conducted mainly in Thai and Chinese to ensure that respondents can fully and deeply understand the questions and completely express their understanding of abstract concepts such as "role perception". The researcher will invite a native Thai speaker with Chinese teaching experience and fluent Chinese to assist with translation throughout the process, and use the "back-translation method" to compare and verify with the original words after the interview to ensure translation accuracy. At the same time, questionnaires will be used for follow-up visits, and the questionnaires will be written in Thai to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data.

The interviews will be conducted in a quiet environment and recorded in full with the consent of the respondents. After the interviews, the recordings will be transcribed into written transcripts, which will then be coded and categorized to extract core themes for further analysis. The specific steps include: 1. Familiarize with the data by reading the transcripts repeatedly. 2. Conduct initial coding to extract meaning units related to the research questions. 3. Identify themes by categorizing

codes into potential themes. 4. Review themes to ensure the correspondence between data and research themes. 5. Define and name themes to clarify the connotation of each theme. 6. Write the research report to present the analysis results.

3.4. Rationale for research design

This study pursues theoretical saturation by designing two groups of the same size, avoiding groupthink interference within groups, and conducts cross-validation of data by comparing different groups. Centering on the dimensions of the raised questions, it reveals the entire process of "role reconstruction" and its influencing factors, providing ideas and basis for the formulation of response strategies in the later stage.

3.5. Research ethics

This study will strictly follow the ethical norms of social science research. Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain the research process to the respondents and inform them that they have the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. All participants' personal information will be anonymized, and research numbers will be used instead of real names in the transcripts and reports. Audio files and transcripts will be stored on encrypted devices, accessible only to the researcher himself/herself, and will be properly handled in accordance with academic norms after the study is completed.

4. Research results and discussion

4.1. Overview of research findings

This study collected a total of 9 valid questionnaires, including 5 from the high school group and 4 from the university group. In the focus group interviews, 8 participants were from the high school group and 6 from the university group, all of whom were Thai students studying in China. This chapter presents the specific picture of the role reconstruction of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning based on the questionnaires completed by 9 Chinese language learners among Thai students and the focus interview data. The research results are developed around three dimensions in Situated Learning Theory: practice field, legitimate peripheral participation, and identity and meaning construction. Table 1 shows the correspondence between codes and specific manifestations.

Table 1. Correspondence between codes and specific manifestations

Primary Code	Secondary Code	Specific Manifestations
Field: Short Video/Video Imitation	Practice Field	Short video learning on platforms such as Douyin, iQIYI and Xiaohongshu
Field: Comment Section Interaction	Practice Field	Comment exchanges on Xiaohongshu and Weibo
Field: Learning Apps	Practice Field	SuperChinese, HelloChinese, Thai-Han, Doubao
Field: Private Community	Practice Field	WeChat communication
Participation: Being Corrected/Receiving Feedback	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	Learning vocabulary, practicing listening, being corrected, looking up translations by watching videos

Table 1. (continued)

Participation: Teaching Others/Being Consulted	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	Making friends, language exchange, mutual learning
Participation: Actively Posting/Commenting	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	Actively practicing and using oral Chinese
Identity: No Longer Feeling Like a "Student"	Identity and Meaning Construction	Distinguishing between classroom learning and social media learning (9/9 respondents)
Identity: Changes in Language Confidence	Identity and Meaning Construction	From difficulty/lack of confidence to greater confidence/increased interest in Chinese learning (9/9 respondents)
Identity: Sense of Belonging	Identity and Meaning Construction	Metaphors for social media (9/9 respondents)

4.2. Case analysis: How Chinese social media reconstructs learners' roles

This study found that all respondents had a clear distinction between online network learning and offline classroom learning. Among them, X06's participation trajectory was relatively clear. Taking X06 as an example, this section analyzes the role of Chinese social media in promoting the obvious transition of learners' identities from "passive learners" to "active participants" in informal Chinese language learning.

Table 2. Typical quotations (N=9)

Theme	Primary Code	Secondary Code	Respondent	Typical Quotation
Role Reconstruction	Identity: No Longer Feeling Like a "Student"	Identity and Meaning Construction	X01	"Chinese social media makes us try to find the words we want to know by ourselves, and we can remember them better than when we learn them in class."
Role Reconstruction	Identity: No Longer Feeling Like a "Student"	Identity and Meaning Construction	X03	"On Douyin and Xiaohongshu, you can learn the language that Chinese people actually use and speak at any time."
Role Reconstruction	Identity: No Longer Feeling Like a "Student"	Identity and Meaning Construction	X06	"Classroom learning is systematic. Learning through social media is fun and relaxing, and it is closer to real life."
Confidence Changes	Identity: Changes in Language Confidence	Identity and Meaning Construction	X06	"When I first started using it, I had poor listening skills and no confidence. But after using it for a while, my listening and speaking skills have improved a lot."
Confidence Changes	Identity: Changes in Language Confidence	Identity and Meaning Construction	X07	"I thought it was very difficult at first, but after using it for a long time, I find it very interesting and more confident to speak Chinese."

Table 2. (continued)

Confidence Changes	Identity: Changes in Language Confidence	Identity and Meaning Construction	X09	"I didn't understand Chinese before, so I didn't want to use it. But when I started to understand it, I used it more."
Sense of Belonging	Identity: Having a Sense of Belonging	Identity and Meaning Construction	X06	"It's like a teacher who is always with us, because we can learn anytime and anywhere."
Sense of Belonging	Identity: Having a Sense of Belonging	Identity and Meaning Construction	X08	"It's like a personal assistant who always helps with translation and teaching."
Sense of Belonging	Identity: Having a Sense of Belonging	Identity and Meaning Construction	X02	"It's like a fun classroom, because you can learn the language through entertainment."
Social Participation	Participation: Teaching Others/Being Consulted	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	X05	"Yes, I made friends through Weibo and practiced Chinese conversation."
Social Participation	Participation: Teaching Others/Being Consulted	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	X06	"Yes, I met Chinese friends through social media and we can practice the language together."
Negative Cases	Participation: Teaching Others/Being Consulted	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	X08	"Not often, because I use it to focus more on learning."
Negative Cases	Participation: Teaching Others/Being Consulted	Legitimate Peripheral Participation	X09	"Never had that experience."

As can be seen from Table 2 (Typical Quotations), the identity transition from "passive learner" to "active participant" mainly lies in the different natures of offline classroom learning and online network learning. Taking respondent X06 mentioned in the above table as an example, based on the respondent's answers, we can perceive the different stages of role reconstruction after using Chinese social media to learn Chinese. This study divides this process into three stages:

Connection Stage. According to respondent X06's answer: "Classroom learning is systematic. Learning through social media is fun and relaxing, and it is closer to real life." We can feel that the content of offline classroom learning is relatively concentrated and the scope of selective learning of knowledge is limited, with its core being synchronous real-time interaction and immersive collective learning. This stage confirms the substantive role brought by Chinese social media, which expands the scope of learning choices and clarifies that users' purposes are more inclined to have interesting and relaxed learning methods and atmospheres. Chinese social media connects learning with life, preventing learning from becoming monotonous and tedious.

Stage of Moving from Peripheral Position to Core Position. According to respondent X06's answer: "When I first started using it, I had poor listening skills and no confidence. But after using it

for a while, my listening and speaking skills have improved a lot." This stage is the initial period of using Chinese social media for learning. The initial attempts make social software no longer a single tool for communication or entertainment, but a transitional tool that promotes X06's transformation from a "passive learner" to an "active learner". Learners gradually move from the peripheral position (lack of confidence) to the core through active learning.

Role Exchange Stage. According to respondent X06's answer: "Yes, I met Chinese friends through social media and we can practice the language together." At this stage, the respondent is no longer a single recipient of knowledge, but uses social media platforms to explore new learning possibilities (such as making Chinese friends). Based on communication with the Chinese friends they have met, they become "active participants" who actively receive and output knowledge, capable of both input and output, and even realize the role conversion of "teaching and being taught" in communication with Chinese friends.

Based on the analysis of the three stages of respondent X06, this study extracts the role reconstruction path from the classroom cognition of "systematic but monotonous" to the initial attempt of using Chinese social media platforms despite "lack of confidence", and then to the active participation of "making friends and practicing together". X06's trajectory clearly presents the process by which Chinese social media reconstructs learners' roles.

4.3. Deficiencies of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning

Chinese social media plays an obvious positive role in informal Chinese language learning. Nevertheless, there are still some problems that need to be addressed and resolved. According to the respondents' descriptions, this study mainly lists the following deficiencies:

Insufficiency of translation and subtitle functions. According to respondent X01's description: "I want to translate Chinese into Thai better." And X02 proposed: "I hope there are bilingual subtitles (Chinese and English played simultaneously), the ability to translate words when pressing on them, and a video vocabulary training system." Meanwhile, X03, X04 and X05 also put forward similar demands, hoping for a more accurate and comprehensive translation system. X09 stated: "Some applications can translate into other languages, but some incorrect translations can cause misunderstandings." Based on the descriptions of multiple respondents, the important role of translation and subtitle functions in assisting Chinese language learning is clarified, and such deficiencies cannot be ignored and need to be improved.

Lack of graded content. From the data obtained through questionnaires and focus group interviews, it can be noted that the lack of graded content creates an unfriendly experience for beginners. According to X03's answer: "I hope there are clearer vocabulary translations or explanations for beginners." And X04 said: "There should be multilingual translation and a clearer course classification system." X06 replied: "I think we should add more content for beginners, such as explanations or slower speech, so that it can be better understood." Based on these answers, it can be found that most of the learning content on Chinese social media platforms lacks grading, making it relatively difficult for beginners to use. Grading learning content can better accommodate foreign learners and even expand the scope of use among different groups, thereby enhancing their own influence.

Lack of systematic practice and feedback mechanisms. Some respondents expressed a desire for a more systematic layout. For example, X08 hoped: "I want to have more exercises or quizzes so that I can practice more." And X07 believed: "More interactive functions can be added, such as chatting with Chinese people for practice." Based on the descriptions of these respondents, their demand for improvement in learning Chinese using Chinese social media is known. These demands also reflect

that current Chinese social media lacks systematic layout in terms of informal Chinese language learning, and the satisfaction of detailed needs for foreign users is still not in place, requiring continuous attention and targeted upgrading.

Disconnection between social functions and learning functions. As shown in Table 2, X08 stated: "Not often, because I use it to focus more on learning." And X09 stated: "Never had that experience (referring to making friends)." From these respondents, it can be seen that although most respondents can establish social connections through Chinese social platforms, there are still a small number of foreign learners who cannot achieve the transformation from "content consumers" to "social participants". This reflects that the role of Chinese social media platforms in promoting learning communities in informal Chinese language learning still needs to be improved and enhanced.

4.4. Paths for role reconstruction based on Situated Learning Theory

Based on the above findings and analysis, from the perspective of Situated Learning Theory, this study proposes the following paths for the role reconstruction of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning:

Improve the practice field. In response to the problems of incomplete translation functions, translation errors and lack of content grading pointed out in 4.4.2, it is recommended to strengthen the "practice field" of the platform, add bilingual subtitles, provide a graded translation system, improve translation accuracy, and lower the participation threshold for beginners.

Promote legitimate peripheral participation. In response to the lack of systematic layout (mainly manifested in practice and feedback mechanisms) pointed out in 4.4.3, it is recommended to add follow-along reading functions and regular opinion collection, open Chinese learning columns, open comment sections, and add vocabulary training systems. Low-risk participation mechanisms help encourage learners to move from the periphery of participation to the core, and gradually establish learning interest and confidence.

Construct learning communities. In response to the social disconnection phenomenon pointed out in 4.4.4, it is recommended to open private message interaction functions and add multilingual exchange community forums, break down the barriers between social interaction and learning, mobilize learners' social interaction for learning purposes, and help learners realize the role transformation from "content consumers" to "social participants".

5. Research conclusions and prospects

5.1. Research conclusions

Based on the three research purposes of this study, the following research conclusions are summarized:

In terms of the current role status, Chinese social media mostly functions as auxiliary learning tools with relaxed and interesting characteristics in informal Chinese language learning. It also serves as an intermediary platform between learners and Chinese language knowledge, and has played a positive role in promoting learners' interest and information dissemination in certain aspects.

In terms of deficiencies, this study finds that the main problem lies in the poor alignment between the substantive functions provided by the platforms and the actual needs of users. Specifically, it

includes insufficient functionality (instrumental issues such as unstable translation accuracy) and the inadequate performance of Chinese social media platforms in promoting learning communities.

Regarding the paths for role reconstruction based on Situated Learning Theory, this study starts from specific phenomena and analyzes the specific problems of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning through three dimensions. Specifically, we should strengthen the practice field by improving the translation system and lowering the participation threshold; promote legitimate peripheral participation by expanding the scope of communication and building learning interest and confidence; and facilitate the construction of learning communities by lowering the barriers to social interaction and learning and mobilizing social initiative.

5.2. Research limitations

Although this study has obtained certain findings, it still has limitations. For example, the sample size is relatively small. In addition, all respondents in this study are Thai Chinese language learners, so the findings may not be applicable to foreign Chinese language learners of other nationalities, and the scope of research subjects needs to be further expanded. In conclusion, future research in this field needs to be further expanded in terms of sample size and group diversity.

5.3. Research prospects

Based on the focus group interview method and Situated Learning Theory, this study provides implementable paths for the role reconstruction of Chinese social media in informal Chinese language learning. In the future, it is hoped that in-depth research will be conducted on the connections and roles of Chinese social media with various countries, covering Chinese language learners of multiple nationalities and different age groups. More questionnaires will be distributed through online platforms to expand the survey scope, and combined with participant journal records, we will understand and analyze learners' actual participation behaviors and psychological paths. Through the "portraits of Chinese media" described by various countries, we will help promote the all-round improvement of Chinese social media and the export of excellent Chinese culture, strive to spread the excellent cultures of all countries, and promote friendly international exchanges through the "hand of culture".

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