

# Poststructural Feminist Theology and Christian Education

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## Abstract

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In church tradition, cultural misappropriation has often legitimized unjust hierarchy rather than to challenge it. Under the rubric of culturalism, Christian Education has served to justify the oppressive system and maintain status quo as well. A feminist theologian, Rebecca Chopp argues that the contemporary Western culture has intensified narcissistic individualism and self-referentiality and has supported the powerful, while forced the marginalized to be silent. Chopp insists that the role, nature, and mission of Christianity is to provide Word and words of emancipatory transformation. She advocates poststructural feminist theology and aims at renewal of the socio-symbolic order in society by criticizing assumptions underneath language, culture and politics. In this study, we will review the interview with an Asian-American couple and disclose the underlying assumptions and hegemony which have contributed to maintain the male domineering system. I suggest that Christian education for emancipatory transformation should encourage the oppressed women to reflect critically the existing order and to restore their own voice through constructive intervention facilitating “plurivocality” and “problem-posing” dialogue. Proclamation of transformative Word can empower the marginalized people to revision the world alternatives to monotheistic patriarchal modernism.

## 《 Keywords 》

Feminism, Transformation, Interview, Silence, Received knowing,

Critical education

## I. Introduction

Christian Education is more than conveying information or transmitting speculative knowledge. A true faith involves communal and political responsibility and practice for transformation. In the book, *The Power to Speak*, Rebecca Chopp presents a poststructural feminist theology criticizing the monotheistic tradition of the contemporary Western society, which has perpetuated isolation of woman and tyrannical hierarchy(Chopp, 1984, 7). According to Chopp, the contemporary Western culture has intensified narcissistic individualism and self-referentiality, as a result, has served the powerful, while has forced the marginalized to be silent. Chopp claims that one of the main tasks of feminist theology is to restore power of the marginalized to speak out. Chopp criticizes the ways in which assumptions underneath language, culture and politics of the monotheistic tradition operate to maintain unjust status quo. A poststructural feminist theology aims at renewal of the socio-symbolic order in society by proclaiming the transformative Word. Chopp insists that the Word and words are “perfectly open signs” and “the role, nature, and mission of Christianity, [is] to provide Word and words of emancipatory transformation”(Chopp, 1984, 67). Proclaiming transformative Word can empower the marginalized people to renew the socio-symbolic order and to revision the world alternatives to monotheistic patriarchal modernism(Chopp, 1984, 7).

In church tradition, cultural misappropriation has often legitimized unjust hierarchy rather than to challenge it. Under the

rubric of culturalism, Christian Education also has served to justify patriarchy in stead of envisioning a new way of life for the oppressed women. In this study, we will review the interview with an Asian American couple and disclose the underlying assumptions and hegemony which have maintained the oppressive system. I suggest that Christian education for emancipatory transformation should encourage the oppressed women to speak out with their own voice and to reflect critically the existing order through constructive intervention of the educators.

## II. Interview with an Asian-American Couple

### 1. Interview Background and Process

The interviewees are a young adult Chinese couple(Ann and Mike—pseudo names) who have an eight-year-old son(John—pseudo name). Ann, a thirty five-year-old woman, studies at the County College for B. A. degree. Mike, thirty four-year-old man, received his doctoral degree in the area of the applied physics at Princeton University and currently works at IB(investment bank), in New York. Seven years ago, Mike alone had come to U.S. for his study, leaving Ann and John in China. Eight months later, Ann and John joined with Mike in U. S. During the interview, I have met each person separately for three times and asked following questions: ①who do you think you are; ②what your dream is; ③how your marriage is; ④how has been your life in U.S.

## **2. Interview with Ann**

### **1) Who do you think you are :**

Ann described herself as “a mother of John and a wife of Mike.” She said, “My family is most important for me.” Before marriage, she had a job in China. Yet, “marriage changed every thing. I had to quit my job to take care of a kid, then, had to follow my husband to America. I lost my friends and all old relationships. I was disappointed and unhappy but not terribly, because I wanted my husband’s success as well.” In addition, she had thought that it was a “common sense” that a wife should live for family’s sake.

### **2) What your dream is :**

She answered, “First I hope my son happy recognizing how much I love him. Also, I hope my husband is happy in his work, satisfied in his life.” According to her, even before marriage, she had neither a specific dream nor a plan about her life. She just wanted holding any full time job. Still, she wants a full time job: “Why? Well, it is … in fact, my husband has encouraged me to have a job. He told me that I should have my own life separated from husband and family to be happy. That’s why I am enrolling in the college.”

### **3) How your marriage is :**

She said, “In marriage, the most important thing is to care for each other and understand the other’s situation. If we have any conflict, I do not argue much with my husband. I express my opinion, but if my husband does not agree on the issue, I do not talk any more. I follow husband’s opinion. As time goes, in most cases, it turns out that my husband is right. Between us, it is not a big deal to have a conflict. My only

dissatisfaction with him is that he messes up the room too much. But as long as he loves me, it is fine. Right, love is most important in marriage. Though I like his success, if he does not love me, how useless it is! Even if he earns million dollars a day, well, it is his money, but not mine. Even if he buys a million dollar house for me, if he does not love me, it's ... it's ... (she could not continue to talk for a moment), it's just a disaster."

#### **4) How your life in U.S. is :**

"It was very hard. My husband was very busy, and I had never gotten a chance to study for long time. I had waited for five years until I enrolled in County College. During that time, I had been very depressed. The most horrible thing was the fact that I was unable to speak in English. I felt insecure. When my husband was not at home, nobody could protect me. Even if something would have happened, I could not have explained any thing to ask for help. I felt isolated. I was just like a fool, outsider, and stranger."

In a question what she had done to overcome such difficulty, she answered, "I had just waited until time passed and the situation improved." "Do you think your husband also would have just waited in facing difficulty?" as I asked, she replied, "No, he would have done something, yet, actually, he did not have any difficulty. He was already admitted to school when he came to America. He was capable of coping with everything." Besides it, she continued, "the horrible thing in U.S. is racism, yes, certainly it is. But as long as my teachers or my neighbors are not such extreme racists, I do not care. If so, it does not affect my life much." She added, "At that time, I converted to Christianity and it was very helpful. In

church, I found many friends. I tried to follow God's word sincerely."

### **3. Interview with Mike**

#### **1) Who do you think you are :**

He introduced himself in following way: "I am Mike. I graduated Princeton University attaining a doctoral degree. Now I am working at a bank in New York. To say who I am, I am just an "ordinary person." It means, from my childhood to youth, I had very a high standard about myself, such as "the best in the school," "a great guy in history." However, now I realize that I am just an ordinary person."

#### **2) What your dream is :**

"Once my dream was high education and success in society. Education and work have been definitely important in my life. But now it is not the ultimate goal, though a necessary means for happy life. Now my dream is happy life. I am much more comfortable and satisfied with who I am. I realized that life is much more multi-dimensional, rather than oriented to one single goal. I am neither overwhelmed nor obsessed to be the best any longer. Now I try to be happy and comfortable, sharing with and caring for my wife and son."

#### **3) How your marriage is :**

"My wife and my son are very important in my life, yet they have never influenced me to change my life goal. I am satisfied with my marriage in the sense that my wife has patiently waited until I come true my dream, not giving me any pressure on my way of decision-making: for example, when I

finished my doctoral degree, I had several options in choosing jobs but she just said: "I will follow you wherever you go." Also, I am satisfied with her, because she takes care of my son kindly and has appropriately educated him. In addition, she keeps good relationship with my mother. Furthermore, she is doing good job in her school and is becoming an intelligent dialogue partner to me. Intelligence was the most important condition for me in choosing marriage partner. I also think it is very important for her to be independent economically and psychologically from me."

Regarding conflict in marital relationship, he said, "If we have conflict on certain matter, I try to persuade her. But if she still doesn't understand, I think she should obey me, because first I am the head of family, and second, in a realistic sense, my decision is better than hers. If she obeys me in patience, she will see the result. In some sense, I have strong character -- I know that she must be difficult in following me, but I am not totally selfish. I consider very carefully "what is good for her and my kid too, and try my best for them."

#### **4) How your life in U.S. is :**

Illustrating his early experience in U.S.: "In the first several years in America, we had hard time. Economically, it was extremely difficult. In addition, my wife had to be at home deferring her education and I was very busy." Then, he added a complain about her attitude in facing difficulty "I told her that life is harsh to everyone, and there are many people who are in much worse situation than us such as the African. Many times, I have advised her to be thankful and not to blame anybody. Even though we had hardship at some points, I enjoyed those challenges and endured with hope and gratitude.

Studying in the prestigious school itself was a blessing. She should accept the fact that life is tough for everybody. In her blue days, her church helped her a lot. She found many friends there and they were very nice to her. But I think, if everybody learns to be patient and accept reality as I did, they do not need to go to church.”

### III. Interpretation of Interviews

#### 1. Selfless-Self Stage of a Woman

As analyzing interviews with Ann and Mike, I consider that Ann is in the selfless-self stage(Boim, 2018, 144-145), that is comparable to the stage between “Silence” and “Received Knowledge” in ego and epistemological development which Mary Belenky and colleagues have suggested. In the book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Belenky and colleagues(1986) examine women’s epistemological development and categorize its process into 5 major stages: 1) silence; 2) received knowledge; 3) subjective knowledge; 4) procedural knowledge; and 5) constructed knowledge. Through out the study Belenky and colleagues demonstrate how women’s self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined.

The first epistemological stage, “silence,” is characterized with feeling of being “deaf and dumb” and disconnected. These women tend to listen to others without any critical “inner voice” or “inner dialogue.” These women show passive and powerless attitude and extreme acceptance of an authority. Their self-concept is dependent upon what other people think of them, because they hold no value in their own assessment. In



the second group, "Received Knowledge," women learn by listening. These women take in information, but are not capable of conceiving original ideas. The "received knowers" have a great deal of troubles with all activities related to constructing their own meanings. Conversation with them is one-way directional. In addition, they tend to see things dualistically -- right or wrong, good or bad.

While Mike identifies himself with autonomous terms such as his name, education and occupation, Ann's identification is all secondary, e.g., "so-and-so's mother and so-and-so's wife"(Lee, 1985, 80). When she had to give up her job and close relationship in China in order to follow her husband, she had not been much troubled, because she had regarded it as "common sense." In illustrating her dream, she addressed happiness of her son and husband first. Even though she strongly insists that she wants her own personal life for independence and self-fulfillment, actually, it is an hollow resonance of her husband's voice: "He told me that I should have my own life separated from husband or family to be happy." It doesn't seem to be for self-realization in genuine sense. She is not pursuing an independent life but rather obeying her husband. Ann seems to fall short in establishing firm self-identity from youth. Her only wish in young age was to have "any full time job," no matter what it is. According to Belenky, in the stage of "Silence" women give no indication of an internal dialogue with the self. Their source of self knowledge is lodged in other authority. Similarly, Ann had no idea of "who she is," "what her aptitude or talent is," or "what kind of vocation fits to her personality." Still in her thirty's, she just wanted to have any full time job and accepted her husband's advice to enroll in a college. In assessing her own satisfaction or success of life,

Ann mostly depends on her husband's positive feedback on her achievement at college. She can have some sense of self-worth and self-esteem as long as her husband acknowledges it. Her husband, not Ann, has an authority to evaluate on her own life. In the case of Ann and Mike, their socio-cultural gap during young adult period may aggravate situation. According to Ann, they had bone in the same suburb town. However, Mike was extraordinarily smart and entered into Peking(Beijing) University, which takes 20hours by train from their hometown. While Mike had studied in Beijing, Ann had stayed in their very underdeveloped town after highschool graduation.

In addition, Ann demonstrates a difficulty to understand the notions of "becoming," "growing," or "evolving"(Belenky et al., 1986, 50). In facing troubles such as racism, she has done nothing to overcome distress by herself. While her husband is Asian as well, she shows unrealistic expectation that her husband would have had no difficulty. She supposes that her husband is naturally capable of anything. She does not understand what kind of current effort can gradually make a difference in future. She does not have a detailed plan to make her life better in future.

In social conception, Ann limits her world to her neighborhood and school, mentioning "as long as my teacher is not such a racist, I do not care." On the other hand, Mike shows more expanded boundary in understanding the world and situating himself within it. Mike appreciated the given circumstance by imagining worse reality of Africa. According to Erikson's scheme, people acquire virtues by accomplishing the given task in each life stage. Mike seems to have accumulated proper virtue in each stage(Erikson, 1963, 247-273). Unfortunately, Ann seems to have been unsuccessful in building healthy

self-esteem and solid self-identity in youth. It hinders her from development toward mid-life maturity. Christian educators should assist her for growth by facilitating her to restore her own voice.

## 2. Double Boundary and Hidden message

In analyzing interviews with the couple, I found factors restraining Ann from growing toward independence and autonomy, that is, double boundary and hidden message. Even though Mike clearly indicates that he wants an intelligent and independent wife, he has sent double messages to her wife. Mike asserts that in conflict between two, Ann has to definitely “obey” her husband. In their family, the husband’s authority is indisputable. Ann is appraised only for being obedient to him without complain. She should prove herself worthy by taking care of his son well and having a good relationship with his mother. Her value is estimated by the criteria to meet “her husband’s purpose” and “his family’s interest”(Boo, 1985, 80). Despite Mike claims that “it is very important for her to be independent economically and psychologically from me,” her education is for being an intelligent dialogue partner to him and a wise mother to his son. Ann is forced to be a Virginia Woolf’s Angel(Levinson, 1996, 49). Ann is requested to be intelligent in the domestic area to become a good dialogue partner of her husband and a good educator for his child. However, she should not be too smart in the public area to a degree to pursue her self-fulfillment equally with her husband. She is reinforced by the ideal of Victorian woman, that is, “Hyun-Mo-Yang-Cho” in Confucian culture(Boo, 1985, 90).

Education for Ann is to improve domestic duties rather than

to achieve self-fulfillment as an independent human being in society. She should exist for family but not vice-versa, whereas in Mike's case, family exists to assist achievement of his life goal(Lee & Son, 1999). Only for Ann, patient sacrifice is virtue. If she is obedient and patient, Mike may be generous enough to consider carefully what is good for her. However, she is not regarded as an independent subject capable to decide what is good for herself. Ann has to be independent to a degree to lessen her husband's burden, but not to a degree to have a different voice from her husband. Such an environment has reinforced Ann to remain in the "selfless self" stage(Belenky et al., 1986, 48). Ann notes that in her hard time at the foreign land, church has been a great place for consolation. She remarks "I tried to follow God's word sincerely." It is time to proclaim true Word of God to Ann(Lee, 2018, 75-76).

#### IV. Implication for Christian Education

##### 1. Constructive intervention of a Christian educator for transformation

Chopp claims that all of revision and renewal are enabled by the Word. According to her, the core of the gospel message coincides with feminism in a sense that both aim for emancipatory transformation. Chopp argues that subjectivity of the feminist theology must encourage peaceful co-existence and mutual enrichment rather than mastery, control and self-preservation of androcentric modernism. Feminist discourse must emphasize embracing difference and specificity, in opposite to ego-centricity and lineality in monotheistic modernism(Chopp,

1984, 125-126).

In general, both Ann and Mike express satisfaction in their marital life. Some might doubt the need for intervention of a Christian educator in their relationship. However, I consider their peaceful relationship as tentative. In fact, it is pseudo-peace. Ann exhibits remarkable anxiety although they look peaceful on surface. When Mike was not at home, her first concern was the matter of security: "nobody can protect me." Furthermore, she is aware that she and her husband cannot be identical: "anyway it is his money." For her, losing her husband's love is a disaster to destroy her entire self. If one's whole life depends on someone else's choice, it is natural for anybody to become anxious. The ultimate goal in developing Ann's self is to construct a mutually enriching egalitarian relationship(Lee, 1999, 135-137). Church should guide them to truly peaceful loving relationship(Chae, 2018, 109-112).

In pedagogy in process, Freire(1983) argues that for transformation of existing reality, there is a need for intervention. Without intervention, the oppressed will not achieve the "moment of awakening" which is prerequisite to their organizing the struggle for liberation. Since the oppressed are immersed in the false reality and since the oppressors want to keep them immersed, intervention has to occur in order for the oppressed ones to be able to criticize reality(Giroux, Penna & Pinar, 1981, 101). Through caring and awakening intervention, Christian educators should help Ann restore a sense of being worthy and secure in God, the Ultimate life-giver and Sustainer.

## 2. Speak-Out Education

Silence is forced on some women by domineering parents, authoritarian spouses, or other authoritative figures. They have been without voice for long time and thus have a very fragile sense of self. They do not consider themselves as source of constructive knowledge. For women of the selfless-self stage, reliable interpretation of the Word could only come from the authority. They tend to experience severe perplexity in comparing diverse opinions and multiple interpretations of the Bible. According to William Perry(1981), those women are often unable to accept gradation of truth and to perceive gray areas. To them a paradox is inconceivable and ambiguity intolerable. As Goldberger(1997) points out, the perspective of silence was not a way of knowing but a way of not knowing. Christian educators should understand that for women at this stage constructing knowledge from their own perspective and context is extremely difficult(Kim, 2019, 148-150).

For many of the silent women, giving birth is a major turning point in life. Often, the event of bringing a child into the world serves as the stimulus for moving beyond silence. Conversion to Christianity can be such turning point for those on the margin. Encountering and corresponding to God is a moment of having new life and being liberated. By experiencing new life as children of God and offering prayer, they are to realize that they are worthy to be listened. By declaring Good News to others, the women on the margin are to envisage that they can receive, retain, and pass on truth to others. Openness of the Word of truth and freedom can work through the words and lives of the oppressed women.

Received knowers tend to model themselves after the cul-

tural ideal of what a woman should be, as communicated by church, family, teachers, and other authorities. At the first step, Church educators should proclaim alternate value against that of the world. The message of God is for love, equality and freedom opposed to domination and oppression of patriarchal hierarchism. Chopp empathizes that the Word to be proclaimed as true and our words about the Word must also be true. According to Chopp, the true message of the Word can be delivered by restoring “plurivocity,” “specificity,” and “fluidity” of the Word, because the Word is “perfectly open sign.” Freire(1998) argues that education should be concerned with delineating, debating, and addressing differences. Dialogue should depend on difference as well as a particular kind of sameness for its very existence(Grümme, 2019, 38-39). Christian education should suggest more varied interpretations of different theological groups balancing between various perspectives of diverse classes, culture, and genders(Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, 128).

The good news of the Word can be actualized only when the plural and specific voices of people on the margin can be heard(Ruether, 1983, 161-177). The distorted interpretation of the Word from patriarchal-monotheistic religion cannot overcome egocentric domination and isolation(Gomes, 1996, 50). According to Chopp, the Word through androcentrism cannot be liberating:

In the space created among the Word, words, and women is the open possibility of change and transformation, ... The world in which women speak their words moves against the social-symbolic order precisely in its movement against the monotheism of Word as primal referent and patriarchal voice (Chopp, 1984, 30).

The interpretation of the Word must be constituted as multivocal, open, practical and anticipatory to deconstruct univocal rule and authorial intention of language in modernity (Cosser, 1964, 31). In liberating education, teaching-learning process should be dialogical welcoming different points of view. Plurality, diverse perspectives, and rational dissensus can be viewed as signs of strength and vitality in education (Polanyi, 1964). The interrelation of Word and women's words can reconstruct the socio-symbolic order and eventually renew the world.

### 3. Critical Education

Christian education ought not become a means to endorse the dominant ideology. In facing disappointing circumstance separated from original family and old friends in China, Ann admitted it as a "common sense" that a wife should live for family's sake. Elizabeth Minnich criticizes the dangerous "conceptual error" that has restrained women as following:

here we see conceptual errors expressed systematically in ways that depends on and affect how we think, for example, the assumption that it is 'appropriate' for women to be in service professions that have to do with caring for the needs of men and children (Minnich, 1990, 50).

For emancipatory praxis, Christian education should enlighten women on the margin to revision the existing politics and cultural assumptions from the perspective of liberation in the Bible. Christian education needs to allow the learners to develop counter values and to reclaim their own stories with their own voice and vision, challenging the dominant interpretation



and tradition centered on patriarchy(Kraemer & D'Angelo, 1999, 202-211). Belenky suggests Freirian "problem-posing" approach to education for women. In *Pedagogy of freedom*, Freire(1998) claims that educators have an important role to play in calling attention to issues of discrimination, exploitation and oppression. Christian educators need to ask: does my religious education promote the unjust status quo, or does it promote faith based action on behalf of a more just world?(O'Neil, 1976). A critical education is an essential tool through which humans can take a more responsible stance in relation to their future.

For emancipatory transformation, teaching and learning process of Christian education should involve the process of critical consciousness and subjectivity. Christian educators need to accentuate the problem-posing and critical questioning process rather than simply endorsing indoctrination. Christian educators should consciously review whether the educational process serves to reproduce the cultural wealth of certain dominant group(Cooley, 1909). Gillian(1982) and Belenky(1986) have advised that education based on the connected learning model would help women toward community, power and integrity. In the connected classroom, intervention process should be dialogical. Through critical education in the connected classroom, women on the margin can be able to rend and renew the oppressive socio-symbolic order in society.

## V. Conclusion

Silence is the overwhelming experience of the women of the margin. Chopp claims that people on the margin can transform and change the social-symbolic order by speaking out by

themselves. However, it is not easy for those women to speak out their anguish, to criticize the existing system, and to devise original idea, because social-symbolic order is much more deeply saturated in society wherein they also dwell(Reineke, 1992, 151-153). Despite obstacle, Christian educators should encourage those women caught in the web of selflessness and lethargy. Freire(1983) recognizes that Christian call to responsible human relationships is not optional but essential to the ontological nature of human beings. Human beings as image of God are not objects but subjects of history who construct their social reality. They can choose to be either responsible or irresponsible in its construction. As a vital social tool, Christian education can be used to assist either in the process of humanization or of dehumanization. Justice can be served only when educators intentionally work for the sake of humanization.

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한글 초록

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## 후기구조주의 여성 신학과 기독교교육

주연수 (부산장신대학교/부교수)

남성 중심적인 전통적 신학은 교회 내의 성차별과 불공정한 위계제도를 바로잡기보다는 오히려 정당화하는데 일조한 바 있다. 가부장적인 문화의 영향을 받은 기독교교육 역시 억압적인 체제를 유지하는 데 종종 남용되었다. 여성신학자 레베카 초프(Rebecca Chop)은 현대의 서구 문화가 자기애적(narcissistic)이고 자기준거적(self-referentiality)인 이기주의를 강화하면서, 강자의 편에 서서 사회에서 소외된 주변인들을 더욱 침묵하도록 종용해왔다고 주장한다. 초프에 따르면, 기독교의 역할과 본질, 그리고 선교의 핵심은 진리와 자유의 말씀을 통해 억눌리고 갇힌 자들에게 해방의 복음을 선포하고 세상을 변혁하는 데 있다. 초프의 후기구조주의적 여성신학은 언어, 문화, 정치 내에 스며들어 있는 차별, 편견, 배타성을 비판적으로 성찰하여 사회-상징적(socio-symbolic) 질서(order)를 개혁하며, 이를 통해 궁극적으로 정의와 평등을 실현하는 사회변혁을 도모한다. 본 연구는 먼저 아시아-아메리칸(Asian-American) 부부의 인터뷰를 개략적으로 소개하고, 그들과의 인터뷰 내용을 분석하여 사회에 편만한 차별적이고 억압적인 남성중심적 헤게모니를 살펴본다. 한 부부의 인터뷰를 통해 일반화된 사회이론을 제시할 수는 없지만, 이는 여성에 대한 편견과 배타성을 영속화시키는 잠재적 메시지와 헤게모니를 드러내는 좋은 예가 될 것이며, 이 사례를 통해 왜곡된 관계를 회복하고와 모든 인간의 존엄성을 존중하는 기독교교육의 역할을 성찰해 볼 수 있을 것이다. 필자는 해방적 변혁을 위한 기독교교육은 건설적인 개입을 통해 소외되고 억압된 자들의 의식화와 주관성을 회복하도록 돕고, 해방의 말씀선포를 통해 지금까지 배제되어왔던 주변인들이 사회 변혁을 위한 실천에 적극적으로 참여하도록 격려해야 한다고 주장한다.

〈 주제어 〉

여성신학, 변혁, 인터뷰, 침묵, 수용적 지식, 비판적 교육

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