

Investigating Attitudes Towards China English Accent among Undergraduate Students in Mainland China

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ABSTRACT

The China English (CE) accent, as an accent of English, has been traditionally investigated from an “inner-circle” perspective and compared with standard varieties. Under such a perspective, researchers often reported the negative attitudes and less preferences towards the CE accent. However, the concepts of “World Englishes” and “English as a lingua franca” have been popularized in recent years, and more and more studies have found positive attitudes towards the CE accent among English learners in China nowadays. Therefore, this research aims to serve as an empirical study to investigate the language attitudes towards the CE accent among current University students in China. The present study applies both questionnaires and interviews as research methods. A questionnaire of 22 questions was firstly conducted among 63 respondents to obtain an overall trend of language attitudes towards the CE accent, followed by the interviews among 3 participants to explore the in-depth factors influencing the attitudes. The results of the questionnaires suggest that the respondents hold mixed attitudes towards the CE accent: although the preference towards native varieties still exists, they tend to show a certain degree of positive attitudes as well as acceptance of the local accent. Thematic analysis of the interview also indicates that the acceptance of the CE accent could be related to both the identity construction and the influence of globalization, while the preference of standard accents may be affected by exonormatively orientation, the Chinese Education system, as well as the social norm.

Keywords: China English Accent, Second Language Acquisition, Language Attitude, Identity Construction.

1. INTRODUCTION

With an increasing number of English speakers, English with a Chinese accent has become a rather common phenomenon. According to the traditional SLA theories, the ultimate target of language learning is to achieve a native standard form [1]. Also, many studies previously found that L2 learners generally held a negative attitude towards CE accent and they preferred native accents [2, 3]. However, with the emergence of World Englishes (WE), more and more studies suggest that it is not necessary to set the native model as the unquestionable standard for L2 learners [4-6]. Moreover, some scholars argue that non-native varieties of English should be viewed as representations of sociocultural identities [7-9]. Under such a circumstance, it is worth investigating whether English learners nowadays still hold a binary love-hate viewpoint towards native accents versus the local accent. Therefore, this research aims to

test the current Chinese University students' mixed attitudes towards CE accent and factors that influence their attitudes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Definition of China English

With the popularization of “World Englishes,” China English has become an increasingly fashionable concept among researchers. According to He, China English can be defined as a performance variety of English which has standardized Englishes as its core but colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax, and discourse-pragmatics [10]. Apart from China English, “Chinglish” and “Chinese English” are another two terms that have been used to refer to the English variety spoken or written in China. However, Chinglish has been out of favor after 2003 as it has been regarded

as a stigmatized term with pejorative meanings in China [10]. For example, Li described Chinglish as the ill-formed English, which was used unnaturally under the influence of Chinese language rules and customs [11]. The terms “Chinese English” and “China English” are basically interchangeable, but China English is more preferred now [10]. Therefore, this paper applies “China English” for later analysis.

2.2 Negative attitudes towards CE accents and “inner-circle” perspective

As demonstrated above, traditional research investigating attitudes towards CE always took an “inner-circle” perspective. When an “inner-circle” perspective is taken, exonormative orientation could always be found, implying the pursuit of a high level of English correctness among L2 learners [12]. Therefore, the findings of such research always suggest the preference towards native accents and the hatred towards CE. For example, after investigating 1261 Chinese University students by questionnaires, Hu found that compared to CE accents, 79.1% of students preferred American English [2]. However, this research had many drawbacks. Firstly, questionnaire was applied as the only research method, while interview was not conducted to explore the in-depth reasons behind language attitudes. Moreover, the researcher took an ‘inner-circle’ perspective, namely he only asked participants’ relative language attitudes towards CE accent compared with native accents. However, he did not investigate how L2 learners would perceive the local accent if the comparison with native accents was not involved. Additionally, he did not take other factors into consideration, such as the attitudes towards CE accent in different contexts and domains. Another study from an ‘inner-circle’ perspective was conducted by Xu, Wang, and Case [3]. After investigating 108 university students in China, the researchers concluded that compared with native varieties, non-native varieties were less preferred, and compared with standard native varieties, less standard native varieties were disliked. Although this study applied both questionnaires and retrospective interviews, it still had several deficiencies. Similar to the research of Hu, this study only investigated university students’ language attitudes towards CE accent by making a comparison with native varieties. In addition, since the study was conducted more than 10 years ago, whether the findings are still applicable today is in question. Therefore, if studies to explore the attitudes towards non-native varieties are conducted only from an “inner-circle” perspective, they may only find negative language attitudes towards CE accent, which is not comprehensive enough.

2.3 Positive attitudes of CE accents due to intelligibility, use, and identity

Compared with studies focusing on the standard norms, more recent studies found a positive attitude as well as acceptance towards CE accent, which may be explained by the intelligibility, use, and identity construction. For instance, He and Zhang used questionnaires and interviews to examine the language attitudes of 948 students and their teachers in Chinese universities [13]. They investigated language attitudes by matched-guise technique, and they asked participants about their preference towards voice A (native accent) or voice B (CE accent). The results showed that over a half of the students preferred a local accent. They also listed several reasons explaining the acceptance towards CE accent. Firstly, some students reported that they regarded English as a communication tool, so as long as the accent was intelligible and understandable, there was no need to be like native. Also, they admitted that a local accent was unavoidable for L2 learners. More importantly, they related English with their Chinese identity, and they wanted to be identified as Chinese when communicating with foreigners by using English with a CE accent. Similarly, Hansen Edwards also found that the majority of her respondents believed that “a CE accent is not a big deal if the person’s speech is intelligible,” more than a third regarded it as “a unique variety of English in China,” “over a quarter believed it represents their identity,” and “over a half also believed it was normal to speak English with a Chinese accent” [14]. Therefore, nowadays L2 learners in China may hold a more positive attitude towards CE accent than before, and this can be related to the intelligibility of the local accent, the unavoidableness of use, and its relationship with national identity.

2.4 Attitudes of CE Accent and Identity Construction

Specifically, more and more scholars in recent years highlighted the relationships between positive attitudes towards CE accent and both national and cultural identity construction. Kirkpatrick and Modiano both argue that it is the right of non-native speakers to express their linguistic and sociocultural identities when speaking English [7, 8]. Apart from He and Zhang and Hansen Edwards’ research as mentioned before, Pan also suggested that those participants who favored a CE accent may also be high in cultural identity and national pride [9]. Moreover, Wei argued that with the “global expansion of English as a virtually international tool of communication,” English is not “merely as a language owned by native speakers,” and “learners began to be aware of the reciprocal relationship and their equal identity in international contact” [15]. Therefore, speaking English with a local accent may “help promote ‘a stronger sense of ownership’ among users of English

in mainland China” [16]. Under such a perspective, positive attitudes towards CE accents may reflect a desire of expressing the identity of “owners” of English among L2 learners in China. Therefore, CE accent may be beneficial to constructing both the patriotic identity and the identity of English-language “owners.”

Based on the literature reviewed above, one may conclude that although previous studies always investigated L2 learners' attitudes towards China English accents from the "inner circle" perspective, which reflected the preference towards native English accents, more and more studies recently have paid attention to the positive attitudes and acceptance towards CE accent, and factors such as identity construction have significantly influenced the language attitudes. Therefore, this study aims to serve as an empirical study to investigate the mixed language attitudes towards CE accent in a comprehensive way, as well as to explore the reasons behind the phenomenon.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this research, a combination of questionnaire and interview is applied. The research process is divided into two phases. In the first phase, Likert scale is used to investigate Chinese students studying in Chinese, American, British or Australian universities and their attitudes towards CE accent. The questionnaire is distributed via Wechat and QQ, 2 of the most famous social media in China. 63 valid responses have been collected in total (12 males, 50 females and 1 of other gender type). The statements on the questionnaire, which are designed to explore students' perception on CE accent, have been classified into 4 categories -- general attitudes towards CE accent and the relationships of CE with intelligibility, identity and daily use of English respectively.

After analysing the data collected via a questionnaire, more in-depth exploration into the reasons behind the students' attitudes on CE can be investigated, and a semi-structured interview is designed based on the analysis of the data. In the second phase of research, semi-structured interview is used to investigate reasons behind the participants' attitudes towards CE accent. 3 questionnaire participants who agreed to be interviewed joined in the second phase of research. A list of questions has been planned to make sure that all the interviews follow the same structure, while additional questions can be asked if more information is needed by the participants. The interview process is inspired by Ting & Wong's research where statements of the questionnaire are used as 'retrospective prompts' to help them generate reflections on attitudes towards CE [17].

4. FINDINGS

As is shown in Table 1, all the 19 statements are divided into 4 sections. Average score for each section is calculated. The score ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning “totally disagree” and 5 meaning “totally agree”. All the four sections of the questionnaire score about or beyond 3, which means that the participants as a whole show relatively positive attitudes towards CE accent.

Our research finds that Chinese students show acceptance towards the CE accent. The statement “I don't think (the CE) accent will influence my communication” is one of the items listed in the questionnaire. As is shown in Figure 1, 30.16% of the participants strongly agree with the argument and 36.51% of the participants agree with it. This implies that most participants can have successful communication with others with a CE accent. We also asked participants' opinions about the statement “I think an accent is normal as long as others can understand me.” As is shown in Figure 2, for this statement, 95.23% of the participants either strongly agree or agree with this statement. This suggests that it is acceptable to have a CE accent if speakers express their ideas clearly in the conversation.

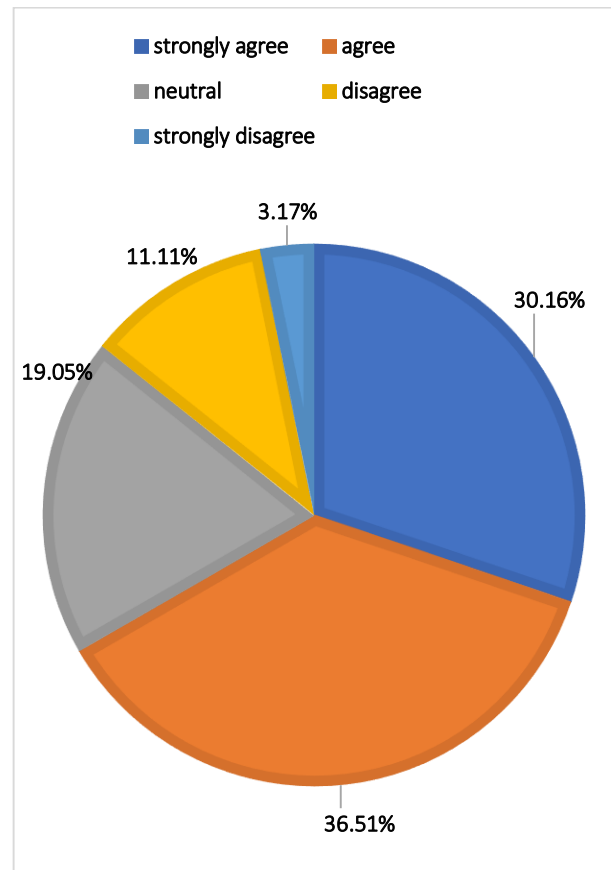


Figure 1 Statement “I don't think (the CE) accent will influence my communication.”

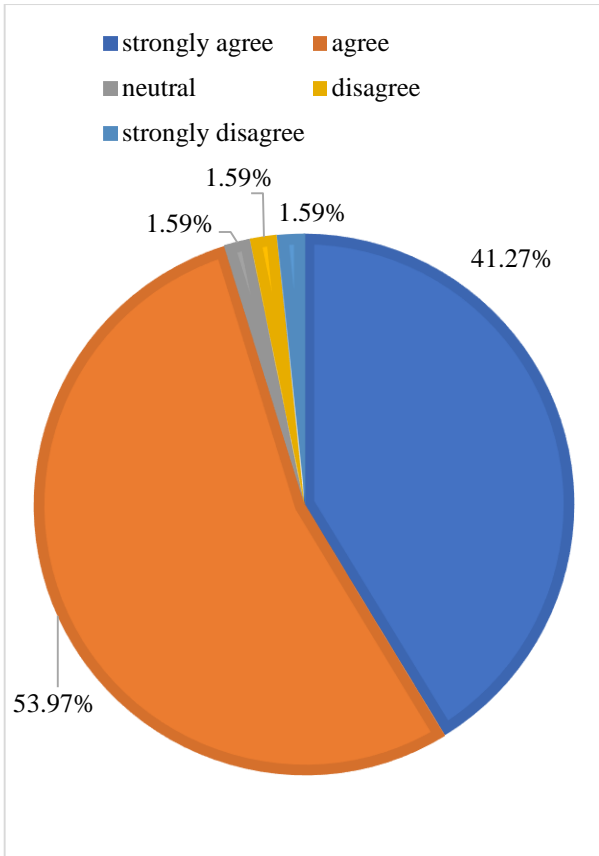


Figure 2 Statement “I think an accent is normal as long as others can understand me.”

As is explored via interview, all the three participants claim that they speak English with a Chinese accent. They show a preference on native accent of English, while they are not ashamed of the CE accent. Additionally, two of the participants regard CE as part of their cultural identity. Therefore, their acceptance of CE is a symbol of recognition of Chinese culture under the circumstances of internationalisation. All of the three participants assert that they receive support for learning English from their family. However, flaws are pointed out by the interviewees in terms of the pedagogy of English of many schools in China, and the interviewees tend to attribute their CE accent to their educational environments where many students and teachers speak English with a variety of accents. Moreover, the attention paid to English by each family varies. Two of the participants' families started to boost their children's interest in English at a very young age. However, the participant from another family only learns English by following the instructions provided by teachers at schools, receiving no support from family on a praxis level.

Table 1. Findings from the Questionnaire

Section of Questionnaire	Average Score	Example Statements
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Language attitudes towards CE (statement 1-8)	2.97	Sometimes I feel bad about the CE accent.
Language attitudes and intelligibility (statement 9-11)	4.15	I think an accent is normal as long as others can understand me.
language attitudes and identity (statement 12)	3.60	I consider the Chinese accent as a part of my Chinese identity, like my gender and ethnicity.
language attitudes and daily use of English (statement 13-19)	3.50	I have a chance to speak English in my daily life.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

After collecting data, we found similar patterns among the three participants' answers. In general, according to the sample, Chinese students show diverse opinions about Chinese English accents. Secondly, Chinese students show acceptance towards the CE accent. Lastly, people prefer native accents more than CE accents. This study also gets various opinions and answers from the interview, which shows that people's views differ greatly.

5.1 Acceptance towards CE Accent

5.1.1 Cultural Identity and Nationalism

According to the results of the questionnaire and interview, it is reflected that most participants believe CE accent is a part of learners' cultural identity. According to Kim, Cultural identity is a sense of belonging related to a specific social group that represents the surrounding cultures, for example, race, belief, nationality, ethnicity, religion and social class [18]. Cultural identity influences how people view things and how they establish their worldview. People are increasingly aware of the differences between their native pronunciation habits and English. When speaking Chinese, people pay attention to the pronunciation. Mandarin words sound beautiful

when people pronounce every word round, clear and smooth. Therefore, Chinese students will bring the Chinese standard and speaking habits into English speaking, for example, emphasizing the pronunciation of each sound and emphasizing the end sound. For example, participant 3(P3) said that:

"I think that the various accents in English are equal from my view. As long as we learn a new language, we join the cultural tribe that cultivates the language. In the tribe, I think, the native speakers and the second language learners share the same rights. We (second language learners of English) do not have to feel ashamed when bringing our own cultural elements to the tribe".

This suggests that when a language is learned and used by local people in a region, people will attach their own cultural identity and habits to the language. We also see how nationalism reflects through the questionnaire and interview. This is in correspondence with the previous findings that the acceptance and positive attitudes of L2 learners in China reflect their national pride and cultural confidence [9][13][14].

Moreover, Education also makes students feel more nationalistic and identify with their own accent as a part of their identity. Here is the transcript of participant 3:

"(P3) I also think that I am kind of proud of my accent, because CE accent reflect a recognition of Chinese culture[...]Literally, I am proud of the entire East Asian culture, which has been developing prosperously for thousands of years based on ancient Chinese civilization. [...] If I see someone speaking with the CE accent, I might even feel a sense of closeness."

This suggests that combining Chinese pronunciation with English, the CE accent conveys with it a sense of belonging and recognition of the Chinese Culture. School textbooks often combine English vocabulary with Chinese culture. For example, English textbooks will list how English borrowed words like "tofu" and "baozi" from Chinese, and students will be asked to learn how to introduce their hometown and country in English. English teachers will also let students learn to express Chinese traditional festivals in English, permeating patriotic education in teaching. This process helps students realize how English as a language can convey Chinese culture. As a result, students combine Chinese culture with expressions in English in the process of learning. Accent, as an important part of spoken English, has become a symbol of one's cultural background and identity. Naturally, having a CE accent has become a symbol of Chinese students, and although people don't particularly like it, they can accept it as an identity.

5.1.2 The Influence of Globalization

Some researchers might summarise Chinese people's attitudes to the CE accent as binary [3]. However, this

study found that people can accept the CE accent and try to pursue near-native accent at the same time. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire shows that students' opinion is also influenced by globalization. Here is the perspective of participant 3:

"(P3) Currently, English is still an essential tool for us to access cutting-edge technology and research in the world [...]As for education, the tendency of localization and internationalization may devastate the polarization of the rich and poor in China, with the children from high social-economic backgrounds occupying better education resources by learning English."

Globalization has made it easier to spread information through social media, and students can get more information and learn about the cultures of many other places. Chinese students can learn that people from different countries have diverse accents: Different people's English accent is influenced by the pronunciation habits of their first language. After learning about different accents, students can also consider their own accent as a symbol of their Chinese identity. Similar findings were reported by that with the globalization of English and the universally accepted concept of ELF (English as a lingua franca), L2 learners become more aware of their equal status with native speakers when using English as an international communication tool. Therefore more empathy, tolerance, and dual respect for nonnative learners and other accent varieties are called on [15].

5.2 The Preference towards Near-native Accent

Although this study finds an increasing acceptance and positive attitude towards CE accent, we still see the preference through the questionnaire that Chinese students take near-native accent as their ideal standard. For example, we list the argument that "If I have the chance to learn or change my accent, I prefer the accent that sounds more like a native speaker", and 82.54% of people strongly agree or agree with this statement. Our research shows the hidden curriculum that people believe speaking more native English is better, which means one is more well-educated or will have higher achievement.

5.2.1 Exposure to Standardized English Leads to Students' Preference of Native Accent

As is shown in the findings, many students have an inclusive attitudes towards CE accent however, many of them still show a preference on American or British accent.

The interview finds that all the participants started to learn English at a relatively young age (i.e. when they were in primary school). Many of them are exposed to Standard English audios or materials as they practiced their English listening. However, many students still

have a CE accent while speaking English. Below is the transcript of Participant 3:

“(P3) Well, I think English pronunciation is to some extent influenced by the Chinese pinyin system (Chinese phonetic alphabet).” “(Participant 1) Many English teachers in China have strong CE accents, we have been greatly influenced when we learn English from them [...] Well, if I meet a Chinese who speaks English with an American or British accent, I might think this person do put a lot of effort into practicing English pronunciation.”

This suggests that the English accent of Chinese students are influenced by the environmental factors such as their first language and the English-speaking environment around them.

One possible reason is that people might mix accent with other factors in English like pronunciation, grammar and fluency. These factors are key elements to decide one’s grade from the exam. For example, if one forgets to add “s” after the third personal pronoun in her passage of the writing assignment, he/she will lose points. TOEFL, the exam that tests students’ general English ability as a foreigner, also has requirements about the fluency of the test. Hardly can a student get a high score on speaking if the student cannot speak English fluently. Unlike native speakers who can switch from formal English and informal English easily, Chinese students attach importance to standard English in most situations as learners. Factors like grammar and pronunciation become the determining factors for standard English. Although learning language is a process dependent on different factors like the learning environment, motivation and the sentence structure of the learner’s first language, people tend to believe that better performance on grammar, pronunciation and fluency means that the learner has higher intelligence or works harder. Because accent is also an element in language, some people think that there are standards for accent as well. Native speakers use language as a means of communication most, so language learners might think that native speaker’s English is the most authentic English. Native accents, especially the British and American accents that are popular, become the standard accent naturally. Language learners might think that accent is also an element like grammar that has the correct “standard”. As a result, Chinese students will pursue the near-native accent to show that they are industrious or intelligent learners.

5.2.2 Chinese Education System Influences Students’ Preference

The Chinese education system is another factor that shapes students’ preference on near-native accent. The schooling and teacher’s pedagogy are decided by the education policy. Although learning English is a part of mandatory education in primary school, schools attach

little importance to pronunciation and speaking. For the argument we listed in the questionnaire that “my English teachers in middle/high school didn’t teach me how to pronounce like native speaker”, 60.32% of the students either strongly agree or agree with it. “(Participant 1) I think schools in China do not pay enough attention to students’ pronunciation and accent of English, we only learned the phonetic symbols in primary school. Literally, I haven’t learned anything related to correct pronunciation since I entered middle school.” Students are tested by listening, reading, writing and specific grammatical rules on the English test in NCEE (The National College Entrance Examination), but speaking is never a part of the exam. In some areas of China, the English exam is 150 scores: 30 scores for listening, 35 scores for writing, 40 scores for reading and 30 scores for grammar. The distribution of marks is also a manifestation of the imbalance in language learning in China. Educators emphasize language input but ignore language output. People use Mandarin in daily life, which means that English is not the dominant language in China, so speaking English might not be practical for most people. Below is the transcript of Participant 3:

“(P3) Definitely I think schools in China should put more effort in training students’ output of English, we students are now only trained to do the exams, I don’t think it is a correct thing.”

In the Chinese education system, tutors will spend more time on the input of English. They don’t train students’ speaking and will not convey language ideologies about accent.

5.2.3 Social Norms is Related to Students’ Preference

Also, social norms could influence students’ view about accents. People might believe that a near-native accent represents that one is well-educated or is more intelligent. For the question “If I’m going to study abroad or work in a foreign company, I think having native English will help me get better achievements or make friends quicker”, 26.98% of people strongly agree with it and 38.1% of people agree with it. When students are in the same environment, people believe intelligence and practice will determine one’s learning outcome. As a result, people who perform better in grammar or reading will be viewed as smart or hard-working. Similarly, because of the influence of the education system, hardly can a student get a chance to use English in a near-native accent in life if he/she doesn’t spend enough time on talking with others in English or practice English speaking. For students who have a near-native accent, some of them might spend extra money to take additional English courses after class, while others might study abroad. All these resources require time and affluence, which represents that the student has a higher social status or better education background. Compared to the

CE accent, large companies prefer people with near-native accent for these reasons. We did research about the preference of human resources in hiring teachers. We searched on LinkedIn for jobs as English teachers. On the requirement column, the hirer will list the qualification as “must be native speaker.” It turns out that most international schools and off-campus educational organizations prefer to hire native speakers as English teachers, and some of these companies set the requirement that candidates have to be native speakers. People believe that native speakers know the language better. They can speak fluently and know how to say things naturally. Here are the transcripts from 2 participants:

“(P2) Well, although I think that the CE accent is acceptable, I prefer the American or British accent.”

“(P3) I think Speaking English with a native-like accent might show that the speaker is from a family with a relatively high social background.”

These two statements suggest that Chinese students are influenced by social norms that they believe that near-native accent not only represents that one is intelligent and industrious, but also represents that they have higher probability to find a better job in the future. So they are taking near-native as their ideal standard.

6. CONCLUSION

This research used questionnaire and interviews to study Chinese students' attitudes toward Chinese English accents. Based on the interview and questionnaire, it is reflected that Chinese students have diverse opinions about the Chinese English accent. Most Chinese students consider CE accent as a part of their Chinese cultural identity and show acceptance towards their own accent. At the same time, Chinese students prefer and are pursuing a near-native accent because of the influence of the education system and social norms. The research also contains several potential problems that influence the result. Firstly, the gender of students who answer our questionnaire is distributed unevenly: the ratio of male and female in our questionnaire is 12:50. Also, among students in our questionnaire, there are 13 students who are learning in Chinese universities, and others are international students. It means only 25% students are students who study in China and use English, and 75% students are using English partly because of their identity as international students. Moreover, the questionnaire is conducted based on a small quantity, and the result might vary as the quantity increases. Therefore, further research could be conducted with a larger interview size, to draw a more comprehensive conclusion about the in-depth reasons behind the language attitudes of L2 learners in China.

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