

Food, Gender, and Family Network in Modern Korean Society¹

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ABSTRACT— *This paper discusses the relationship between food and women’s identity in Korea focusing upon kimchi making and its distribution through family network. Through this, the paper shows how food making and sharing can be sources of women’s power as well as hard work. Giving kimchi to family members and relatives can be a source of satisfaction for many Korean women because as feeders in families, they fulfill their maternal responsibility and confirm their maternal identity. In a more general framework, this paper illustrates how food can make, break, reinforce, or weaken social relationships, especially in the context of family and kinship. Anthropological fieldwork and qualitative analysis have been the primary research method of gathering and processing the research data.*

Keywords— food, anthropology, family, Korea

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between food and women’s identity in Korea focusing upon *kimchi*-making and its distribution through family networks. By analyzing this, the author aims to illuminate how food making and giving can be sources of women’s power as well as hard work. Giving *kimchi* to family members and relatives can be a source of satisfaction for many Korean women because as feeders in families, they fulfill their maternal responsibility and confirm their maternal identity. In a more general framework, this paper illustrates how food can make, break, reinforce, or weaken social relationships, especially in the context of family and kinship. As Korean society rapidly changes by going through the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and commercialization, many aspects of *kimchi*-making and sharing are also going through transformations. Despite all these seemingly inevitable changes, however, this paper shows that there are some aspects that are resistant to changes in Korean *kimchi* making and sharing.

Fieldwork for the paper has been conducted for the past 11 years (2002-2013) at various locations: individual homes, a *kimchi* museum in Seoul, *kimchi* expo sites, cooking classes at a department store’s cultural center, supermarkets, and traditional outdoor markets where *kimchi* and its ingredients were sold, and other places. At those locations, the author made (participant) observations, and had interviews with various groups of people involved. A significant portion of this paper’s raw data were from essays on *kimchi* written by the students (at graduate and undergraduate level) who took the author’s anthropology courses that were offered between the fall semester of 2004 and the spring semester of 2006. Approximately 200 essays on their thoughts or experiences on topics related with *kimchi* were analyzed for this paper. Students were asked to write short anthropological fieldwork report on their personal experience on *kimchi* (including *kimjang*, a large scale *kimchi*-making done in late autumn in preparation of winter), or conduct in-depth interviews on *kimchi* with their family members. Students’ statements from their essays were used in quotation marks where relevant, but all the analyses and interpretation of their remarks were made by the author.

2. KIMCHI AND KIMJANG AMONG KOREANS

According to a survey done in September, 2006, when they were asked what the most distinct image of Korea was, the largest number of Korean respondents answered that it was Korean food, followed by Korean alphabet system (*han-geul*) and Taekwondo, traditional martial art.² Among many Korean food items, *kimchi* would be one of the most (if not the most) prominent items. Most Koreans say that they simply love *kimchi*, and they eat it practically at every meal.

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² For other anthropological work on food and national identities, see Appadurai 1988, Bak 1994 and 1997, and Ohnuki-Tierney 1993.

As in many parts of the world, preserving various vegetables has been one of important cooking skills in Korean history. As new ingredients such as chili peppers and napa cabbages started to be used among Koreans, *kimchi* making also went through continuous changes in its method and ingredients.³ Books on *Kimchi* (Choi and Jeong 2005) report that there are about 200 different kinds of *kimchi* reflecting the various kinds of vegetables, spices, and cooking methods that are used in *kimchi* making, depending on familial, regional, and class backgrounds of the households in which *kimchi* is made and eaten. The most popular kind is made of napa cabbages, seasoned with salt, fermented seafood, red peppers, garlic, and ginger, among others. The most typical process of making *kimchi* is: first, the main vegetable is soaked in brine up to a whole day, and washed later. While soaking is done, herbs and spices, together with fermented seafood paste and some starch are mixed together to create very salty and spicy sauce. When the main vegetable is properly salted and washed, it is mixed with the prepared spicy sauce mixture. Newly made *kimchi* can be eaten at any time depending on one's individual taste. When *kimchi* is stored in ideal condition of cool temperature for months it goes through slow process of fermentation, which creates the distinctive smell and taste of *kimchi*. *Kimchi* can be prepared either in small quantities as needed throughout the year, or in large quantities to last a whole winter (*kimjang*). The cabbage *kimchi* as we have today has much shorter history than popularly assumed among Koreans. The napa cabbage variety, suitable for making *kimchi*, was newly developed through cross-fertilization about 100 years ago by a prominent agricultural biologist, Dr. Woo Jangchoon, and quickly spread from Seoul to other parts of the country. The use of red peppers has only about 300 years' history. Although *kimchi* can be anything among the 200 varieties, in this paper it means such popular kinds as cabbage *kimchi*, turnip *kimchi*, mustard green *kimchi*, etc that are regularly made and eaten at ordinary homes. (Kim 1994)

In Korean meals *kimchi* is both essential and marginal: a meal is not proper without it, yet *kimchi* is not considered a main dish. *Kimchi* makes meals easier and tastier to eat, but it is not even counted in traditional way of counting dishes.⁴ The essential position of *kimchi* in Korean meals, and its regular consumption have made many Koreans *kimchi* connoisseurs. (Han 1998 and 2000; Ju 1994) Many people say that they have very high standards when it comes to the taste of *kimchi*. These standards tend to be quite individualistic, reflecting the fact that practically every household has a unique flavor of *kimchi*. Home-made *kimchi* is almost always preferred to store-bought versions. One student said, "No matter how tasty store-bought *kimchi* is, I instantly can tell it from home-made ones." Busy lifestyle forces an increasing number of Korean households to buy ready-made *kimchi*, or regularly receive home-made type from their family members.

Many students who wrote their *kimchi* essays mentioned how they "learned" to like *kimchi*. According to the majority of them, the appetite for *kimchi* is definitely an acquired taste. For most Koreans, eating spicy *kimchi* is difficult at first. Parents, or grandparents initiate the young children into *kimchi* eating as early as when they are just over one year old, by washing *kimchi* pieces in water to decrease its spiciness, while retaining its unique flavor. Haerin (Female, age 19) used to refuse to eat the washed *kimchi* because it was still hot and tasted strange, but her grandmother who lived with Haerin insisted that a Korean should be able to eat *kimchi*. Over the years Haerin came to like it very much, as was the case for most students who provided *kimchi* essays. When Haerin went to Australia to stay with her parents' friends to learn English, her parents packed a special box of *kimchi* for her to carry. This *kimchi* was to be eaten by her and the host Korean Australian family during her stay. At the airport in Brisbane, Australia, while she was waiting for the baggage check, she saw a dog, carrying its duty to detect drugs. Suddenly, the dog started to bark frantically at the *kimchi* box. Her box had to be opened, and people started to gather around the *kimchi* box. Although Haerin was very embarrassed, and had to stay there for one additional hour, she found it comforting that even the Australians knew what *kimchi* was.

Some male students said that they learned to appreciate *kimchi* while they were in the military. Hongseok (Male, age 25) grew up without liking *kimchi* in particular until he started his military service when he was 21. After the basic training, he was sent to the GOP, right next to the border with North Korea, where food supply was made only once a week. *Kimchi* was, of course, an important part of the supply. The problem was, they often ate up the week's *kimchi* in five or six days, and had to live without it for the rest of the week. Hongseok learned at that time that *kimchi* was essential and it was painful to eat meals without it. On the rare occasion that they had left-over *kimchi*, they used to get some wheat flour and made *kimchi* pancakes, a tasty delicacy everybody enjoyed. Because of the essential position *kimchi* occupies even in the military meals, canned *kimchi* used to be sent to the Korean soldiers who participated in Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s. Canned *kimchi* was created for the first time specifically for the military in Vietnam.

³ For anthropological work on food and historical changes, see Arnold 1988, Bak 2003 and 2005, and Mintz 1996.

⁴ On food and class, see Goody 1982.

The status of *kimchi* in Korean society has gone through a dramatic change in the recent several decades. As recently as in the 1970s and early 1980s, nutritional assessment of *kimchi* was mainly negative: it was too salty and detrimental to stomach health, lacked in protein or other essential nutrients, etc. However, as Koreans started to overcome the protein myth, and to have a closer look at the nutritional value of *kimchi*, its status climbed up steadily. Enhanced self-esteem of Koreans also contributed to assessing *kimchi* with a more positive look. Once regarded too smelly to serve to foreigners, *kimchi* started to be served to them with pride. For some Koreans who worried about obesity, *kimchi* was hailed as a good diet food. When some Chinese researchers claimed that Koreans do not get infected with SARS, because they eat *kimchi* regularly, Koreans felt happy with pride and sent *kimchi* gifts to their Chinese friends. Some Koreans strongly believe that *kimchi* prevents Bird Flu and fights cancer, as well. In this way, over the last couple of decades, *kimchi* was transformed from smelly food people had to eat out of familiarity and habit to nutritious food they actively sought after with pride.⁵

3. MAKING KIMCHI

As in most other societies, cooking has mainly belonged to the female domain in Korea, and cooking ability has been regarded as one of the most important skills women are expected to have. Women with poor cooking skills have been considered to lack feminine propriety. For example, when a number of women gather in a kitchen to prepare for holiday banquets or ancestor worship ceremonies, those with good cooking skills are given knives, cutting boards, and pans. They are the ones people trust for seasoning, too. Those with poor skills are asked to wash dishes during and after the cooking. This is not simply a division of labor, but reflects a hierarchical structure based on feminine propriety. Seniority and experience often account for good cooking skills, but a talented woman can overcome her junior status in age by displaying better skills. The most basic and important cooking skill for Korean women is *kimchi* making. Jiyeon(F 19)'s grandmother said, "The taste of *kimchi* is a good indicator of the housewife's overall cooking standards." Because of its importance, the grandmother hoped that Jiyeon starts to learn *kimchi* making by helping out her as early as possible.

Kimchi-making skills are transmitted from generation to generation through working together. Newly married-in daughters-in-law often realized they were in different household when they tasted *kimchi* of their husbands' homes. Learning *kimchi* making in mother-in-law style is one of the most urgent adaptation processes the daughter-in-law had to take. Most mothers want to teach the basics of *kimchi*-making to their daughters before the latter got married. But some mothers said during the interviews that they will not teach it to their daughters, because their daughters will have to learn it all over again from their mothers-in-law. To make *kimchi* palatable to their husbands, following the mother-in-law's way of *kimchi*-making was important. Some mothers said that they did not want to teach *kimchi*-making to their daughters because they believed that in the future only few people will make their own *kimchi*, and they hoped their daughters live different lives from those of their mothers.⁷

4. KIMCHI MEMORIES AND SHARING KIMCHI

Because *kimchi* is primarily home-made, many memories of *kimchi* involved family members. Jieun(F 20)'s grandmother, who lived with Jieun's family, used to exert great efforts to make sure each year's *kimjang* was done perfectly. Her preparation for *kimjang* had a year-round schedule. She bought a large sack of sea salt in spring and put the straw sack of salt over wood flanks to let the bitter brine out. In late spring she salted fresh anchovy to make fermented anchovy paste. Around September she bought a large quantity of red peppers, and wiped them one by one with clean dish clothes to be dried under the sun. When the peppers were properly dried she took them to the neighborhood mill to get them ground into powder. When the weather was cool enough for *kimjang* (usually in late November), she went out to the market to look for good cabbages and turnips. She used to buy about 150 heads of cabbages and 50 large turnips. In addition to these there were many kinds of ingredients for *kimjang*: scallions, garlic, fresh oysters (not used for *kimchi* to be eaten much later), ginger, among others. She had to buy such large quantities of *kimjang* ingredients, because *kimjang* was not just for the household she was part of. The *kimchi* would be distributed to four households: two sons and two daughters. *Kimjang* itself was a three-day event: first day for cleaning and salting the cabbages, second day for washing the salted cabbages while preparing other vegetables to be used in the spice mixture, third day for mixing the spices into each head of cabbage and making turnip water *kimchi*. Usually on the first two days, only Jieun's mother and grandmother participated in the work, occasionally helped by Jieun's father when they needed strength (digging holes in the ground to bury the large *kimchi* jars, or moving the vegetables for washing and salting them).

On the third day Jieun's aunts came to help in the early morning. Grandmother assumed the role of the commander-

⁵ For a theoretical discussion on consumption and identity representation, the author benefitted from Bourdieu 1984.

in-chief. She allocated the duties among the aunts depending on their skills and strengths. The most important job for the grandmother was to make sure that the *kimchi* had the appropriate level of saltiness, since this would determine the taste of *kimchi* throughout the winter and early spring when *kimjang kimchi* was eaten. Although *kimjang* was a hard work, the day was festive. Aunts chatted and laughed while they worked, and grandmother made beef broth and sticky rice for lunch. Both items were considered too good to be eaten at women's lunch in other circumstances. But grandmother said that on *kimjang* day women deserved to eat well. Around the dinner time *kimjang* was finished and Jieun's father and uncles came home from work. The big family dinner that evening consisted of rice, boiled pork, and the young leaves of salted cabbage. They wrapped the pork and *kimchi* spice with the cabbage leaves. For this dish a generous quantity of fresh oysters was added to the *kimchi* spice. Jieun remembers that the taste of *kimjang* dinner's special menu was extremely delicious.

Three years ago Jieun's grandmother passed away. When the first *kimjang* season without grandmother approached, Jieun's mother and aunts really felt the empty space the grandmother had left. Jieun's mother decided to do the *kimjang*, but in much smaller quantity only to be eaten by Jieun's immediate family members. One aunt decided that she would buy *kimchi* from a store because her family did not eat much *kimchi*. The other two decided to make their own *kimchi*, but had to call Jieun's mother several times, because Jieun's mother was supposed to have inherited the grandmother's knowledge and skills. Jieun said that the taste of *kimchi* at her home had changed without her grandmother, but no one in her family mentioned that. They did not want to disappoint Jieun's mother, nor wanted to feel sad even further over the absence of grandmother. The large-scale *kimjang* full of festivity was now gone with the death of the grandmother who had been at the center of family's network of making and sharing *kimchi*.

The particular family member associated with *kimchi* memories is not necessarily a woman with the mastery of *kimchi* making. When Jeongwoon (M 23) was a child, his family lived with grandparents and *kimjang* was supervised by his grandmother. His mother's role was mainly to take instructions from her mother-in-law. But when Jeongwoon was seven years old, his grandmother was away during the *kimjang* season to visit her other son's family living in the U.S. Jeongwoon's mother was getting nervous as the weather got colder and colder. One day the grandfather, who had not accompanied his wife to the U.S., went out to the local market and brought cabbages. The quantity was about three times as much as their regular *kimjang* amount. Jeongwoon's mother was shocked, but without any choice, had to do the *kimjang* using those cabbages. That year's *kimjang* was done by the grandfather and Jeongwoon's mother. Because neither was an expert, they nervously worked together. After finishing *kimjang*, Jeongwoon's mother felt much closer to the grandfather, from whom she had felt distant until then. That year's *kimchi* turned out to be even tastier than that of previous years. But the grandfather passed away in that winter. The large amount of tasty *kimjang kimchi* was eaten by the funeral guests who came to pay respect for the grandfather for several days. In the following years' *kimjang* seasons, Jeongwoon's mother often said, "Grandfather must have known something. He prepared for the funeral, and I am glad we got closer doing the *kimjang*."

Kimchi can be a medium through which one can reminisce the difficult times one endured with family members. When she was a child, Minjoo (F 20) could not understand her father's obsession over her grandmother's *kimchi*. When her grandmother was still alive, her father repeatedly told her mother to learn the skills of *kimchi* making from the grandmother. After the grandmother passed away, Minjoo's parents often went to markets together to find good ingredients for *kimchi*, and made *kimchi* together. But they could not exactly replicate the grandmother's *kimchi*. Minjoo's father often said, "Mother used to put together anything at hand, and did not even measure the amount of spices. But her *kimchi* tasted the best. I really miss her *kimchi*." Minjoo could not understand why her mother dutifully accommodated her father's seemingly excessive demand for replicating grandmother's *kimchi*. When Minjoo was old enough, her mother told her why *kimchi* had such special meaning to her father and why she was willing to satisfy her husband's demand. Minjoo's father grew up in extreme poverty, and had to support himself through secondary education by working as a night-shift security guard. He could not come home after school, and every month he bought a box of Ramen for his dinner. His mother could not help him other than occasionally delivering *kimchi* to him to be eaten with the Ramen. *Kimchi* was the food with which Minjoo's father could feel his mother's affection during those difficult years. It was the link that connected the mother and son.

5. FEEDING THE FAMILY AND WOMEN'S POWER

Studies of food, cooking, and gender often reveal that cooking is not only a burden for women but also a source of power, due to its nutritional and symbolic importance. (Counihan 1999) This was clearly observed in the case of *kimchi*, which is an essential part of Korean meal. Many people interviewed for this paper said that they were very strict about

kimchi taste, and hoped that they have properly made *kimchi* regularly. Sanitary concerns over factory-made *kimchi* reinforced the belief that home-made *kimchi* in traditional style is better.

Increasing participation of women in the workforce and the general social trends for consuming ready-made food have accelerated a steady growth of *kimchi* making business. However, even people who buy their *kimchi* from supermarkets admitted that home-made *kimchi* is more tasty and hygienic. In today's Korea housewives over 40 still tend to make their own *kimchi*, while an increasing number of younger housewives are converting to purchased *kimchi*, or get home-made *kimchi* from older generation women in the family. In November and early December, when the weather is cool enough for *kimjang*, one can easily see the transfer of newly made *kimchi* in various places. When the amount is small, and the younger family members' house is in the same region, mothers or mothers-in-law often put it in plastic containers and transport them using the subway trains or public buses. Due to the strong smell of *kimchi*, one can easily guess what the contents of the containers are. When the quantity is large and the distance is far, it is sent through the professional delivery services. Around *kimjang* season, the delivery companies' business is as good as holiday seasons, when people exchange gifts. When *kimjang* season is approaching, the companies teach their customers on how to prevent *kimchi* juice from leaking. But accidents happen very frequently, and even other delivery items get soiled to ooze strong *kimchi* odor. Some people take their cars to carry *kimchi* in the back trunks. Even in this case the car smells like *kimchi* for at least a week. Even with all these complications, people are more than willing to secure home-made *kimchi* to be eaten throughout the long winter season.

Providing one's home-made *kimchi* to others gives women power and satisfaction, as food-giving in general does. The fact that most people highly value home-made *kimchi* gives even greater power to the givers. Women's ability to feed the family has often been recognized as the source of their power. Counihan (1999) likened this to the mother's satisfaction over breast-feeding their babies. With childbirth, a woman's physical link with her baby is literally severed. But many women reveal that when they are breast-feeding their babies, they feel "connected" to the babies.⁶ After the baby is weaned, breastfeeding is replaced by feeding home-cooked food. By making and sharing *kimchi* in the familiar fashion their children have been eating even after the children's marriages and the establishment of independent households, women still feel connected with the children and this gives an enormous amount of satisfaction. For younger married couples, when both side's mothers are willing to provide *kimchi*, things can become competitive between the two mothers. One male college professor confessed that he and his wife always have too much *kimchi* in the refrigerator. To solve this problem, they give the excess *kimchi* to friends. They simply could not tell either of the mothers to stop giving them *kimchi*. Between the *kimchi* from two sources, they had their definite preference. But they would never tell that to either side.

However, more often than not, it is usually the case that young people are eager to receive *kimchi*, and the makers of *kimchi* wield power over the people who want it. Sometimes the older women use the power to manipulate their relationships with the younger ones. The meaning of giving *kimchi* is sometimes challenged when younger generation takes over the task of *kimchi*-giving. When her mother-in-law passed away, Naseon (F 26)'s mother initially continued to make large amount of *kimjang kimchi* and gave it to her sisters-in-law following her mother-in-law's model. But as years passed, Naseon's mother found it unfair that she worked so hard to make *kimchi*, and the sisters-in-law seemed to take it for granted. One year, she announced that from that year on she will not make other people's *kimchi*. Naseon's aunts were disappointed but accepted the decision because there was no choice. Several years later Naseon's youngest uncle got married and the new bride was very good to Naseon's mother. Favoring the youngest sister-in-law, Naseon's mother gave her home-made *kimchi* only to this new sister-in-law. She even let this fact known to the other sisters-in-law. In this case, *kimchi*-giving was done very strategically to manipulate relationships with sisters-in-law. Naseon's mother was clearly aware of the power of food-giving. The meaning of *kimchi*-giving also changed from an act out of familial responsibility to an act out of benevolence.

When the senior woman in the house has already retired from the primary housewife position, giving *kimchi* to other households can become an issue of contestation where old and new ideas of family relationship and responsibilities clash. Seongeun (F 26) married into a big family where grandmother-in-law was still alive. Due to her poor health, all housework had already been relegated to Seongeun's mother-in-law. Nevertheless the retired grandmother-in-law still hoped that food, including *kimchi*, is given to her younger sons' households. Seongeun's mother-in-law complied to do this food giving as a way of pleasing her mother-in-law. She said, "My life gets a lot more comfortable if I gave *kimchi* to the uncles." Giving food generously also elevated her status in the larger family, putting her at the same level as her own mother-in-law. On the other hand, Kyeongeun(F19)'s mother got frustrated when her sisters-in-law took the *kimjang kimchi* that she and her mother-in-law prepared for several days. In this case the sisters-in-law did not help out with the *kimjang*.

⁶ For a symbolic analysis of food and eating, the author benefitted from Douglas (1971).

Receiving *kimchi* often implies lower status in the family as most recipients of gifts are: junior generation or younger people often stand at the receiving end. Jiseung(M 22) noted that her paternal aunt, who is older than his mother but without children, often voluntarily assumed lower position by acting like a younger sister. The aunt readily admitted that her cooking skill is poor, and asked Jiseung's mother to cook extra food for her. Jiseung's mother complied and treated her sister-in-law with the kind of affection and indulgence often found towards younger sisters. All these examples show that giving or receiving, and accepting or refusing *kimchi* play important roles in constructing, maintaining, breaking, or reinforcing social relationships.

6. RECENT CHANGES IN KIMCHI-MAKING AND THE FUTURE

Kimchi factories try to lure more housewives to convert to ready-made *kimchi* by persuading them that factory-made *kimchi* can be as nutritious and hygienic as home-made one. One of such efforts is to invite housewives to factory tours. Most popular event is where the housewives make their own *kimchi* during their visit to the factories, which are mostly located in remote regions where cabbages are produced. The housewives pay fees depending on the amount of *kimchi* they want to make. In fact, when the housewives arrive at the factory in buses, most ingredients have already been prepared by the factory, and the visitors are asked to put the spices between the leaves of the cabbages, the last stage of long *kimchi*-making process. By doing this, housewives feel that they played a role in making the *kimchi* (so it's not exactly store-bought *kimchi*), and feel that it's more hygienic that way. Factories can show off their *kimchi*-making facilities, and hope that the visitors become trusting customers in the future. An average participant makes 30 kilograms of *kimchi*, to be eaten by a household for the whole winter. The factory conveniently divides it into three installments of 10 kilogram deliveries, even lessening the housewives' chore of keeping the *kimchi* properly at home.

Making *kimchi* in large quantities is also observed in *kimjang* for charitable causes. One of the largest yogurt manufacturers have annual *kimchi*-making event for the disadvantaged people who cannot afford to do their own *kimjang*. Every year mass events of *kimjang* by the Company's delivery ladies are done outdoors in six cities. There were over 4,000 participants in Seoul alone in year 2012. This certainly creates a spectacle of mass *kimchi*-making every year. Some local governments also organize such events. These events clearly show how essential *kimchi* is for Koreans. Participating in these events is considered very rewarding experience by many Koreans. At the yogurt company, they had to have straw polls to select the participants among the volunteers who are normally the delivery crew of the company.

Commodification of *kimchi* is probably an inevitable trend in modern Korean society where an increasing portion of domestic work is done commercially. (Bak 1994) More women are working, and less women of younger age are willing to learn the art of *kimchi* making. Cooking still remains to belong to the female domain, and the increasing number of women working outside their homes need *kimchi* to be made for them. Households that are resistant to store-bought *kimchi* try to resolve this by getting it from other women in the larger family. This paper shows that *kimchi* giving and receiving can be a useful indicator of dynamic relationship among family members. As it is observed in many industrialized and urbanized societies, individuals are not simply playing out existing family and gender roles, but creatively utilizing various resources to redefine their families and appropriate gender roles. (Beck-Gernsheim 2002) In this context, making and sharing *kimchi* may be used as a useful window through which the constantly negotiated notions of family and gender roles in today's Korean society can be observed.

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