

Korean Diaspora and the Moebius Strip: Sung Rno's *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* and Transnational Avant-Garde Theater

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Abstract This chapter discusses the production of *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen*. The play, written by Korean American playwright Sung Rno, was directed by American director Lee Breuer and produced in Seoul, Korea in 2000. Sung Rno presents a surrealistic play inspired by translations of the poems by Yi Sang, a Korean poet who died in 1937. The production was heralded as a meaningful coming together of three experimental artists of different generations and backgrounds. From Korean American's perspective, Lee examines the production in the context of Korean as well as transnational avant-garde theater, where Sung Rno creates a theatrical imagination of modern Korea through linguistic and visual poetry onstage.

Keywords Diaspora • Avant-Garde • Colonialism • Transnationalism
• Korea

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On October 10, 2000, the play *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* by Sung Rno became the first Korean American play to be produced in Korea. Directed by the American theater director Lee Breuer, the play premiered at the Seoul International Theater Festival, and it was later revived in 2009 in Seoul at the historic Changgo Theater. The play is about the enigmatic Korean poet Yi Sang, who is considered the first avant-garde writer in Korea. In an interview with *The Korean Theatre Review*, Sung Rno describes his play as an attempt to explore the mind of Yi Sang whose writing impressed him deeply (Son 2000, p. 88).¹ When the play was produced in Korea, critics emphasized the significance of Lee Breuer's interpretation of Yi Sang's story and did not give much attention to the fact that the play was written by a Korean American or that it was the first Korean American play to be produced in Korea. This paper examines Rno's *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* as a study of how modern Korean diaspora is made legible through transnational avant-garde theater with a focus on what is excluded from that legibility.

The term diaspora signifies a sense of scattering and displacement as well as adaptation and survival. At the same time, the diasporic experience is dynamic and constantly changing. Social scientists Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu write that being diasporic "requires continual reproduction of certain conditions and identifications" (Parreñas and Siu 2007, p. 12). This chapter interprets *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* as a play about the continual reproduction of the Korean diasporic conditions and identifications. It argues that the critical reception of the play in Korea ignored the diasporic perspective of the playwright and, instead, celebrated the importance of having it directed by a major American director.

YI SANG (1910–1937)

A self-described "genius," Yi Sang was born in 1910, the same year that Japanese colonization of Korea formally began. Yi was born Kim Hae Kyong as the first of three children and grew up in Seoul.² Although his mother was an orphan, his father was educated and came from a middle-class family. When his father was young, he worked in the printing office of the King's palace but lost three fingers in an accident. Images of physical dismemberment appear throughout Yi Sang's writings, and many have cited his father's disability as a source. Disabled, Yi Sang's father worked as a barber as an adult and never regained the middle-class status. Partly because of his parent's hardship, Yi Sang was sent to live with his paternal

uncle at the age of two. His uncle, who was the oldest son, was childless, and he adopted Yi Sang to continue the paternal lineage of his family as required by Confucius tradition. The move to his uncle's house was apparently traumatic, and Yi Sang would later write about the experience in a nightmarish way. His biographers note that Yi demonstrated exceptional talent in drawing and painting in school, and he wished to pursue art. However, his uncle expected him to carry the responsibility of the oldest son and find employment that was both prestigious and financially stable.

With his family's pressure on his shoulders, Yi Sang enrolled in the prestigious Kyung Sung Technical College at age sixteen to become an architect. At the time, more than a decade into Japanese colonization, Yi Sang had been educated in Japanese language at school. In his writings, he lamented the experience of learning a language that his parents could not understand. In 1929, he graduated first in his class with a degree in architecture and worked as a draftsman for the Japanese colonial government (Kim, M. 2009, p. 12). It seems that, while attending college, he started to use "Yi Sang" as a penname, as evidenced in the yearbook. According to his sister, the name originated from misidentification started by Japanese construction workers who thought Hae Kyong's last name was Yi. "Sang" means "mister" in Japanese, and instead of calling him "Kin-Sang" as Kin is the Japanese pronunciation of Kim, they called him Yi Sang. Korean definition of the word "yi sang" varies widely, and it can mean "strange," "ideal," and "exceeding." The exact reason for Yi Sang's choice of penname cannot be determined, but he began to publish under that name starting in 1931. His poems were first published in architecture journals such as *Korea and Architecture*, and his use of numbers, symbols, and geographic shapes in his poems can be attributed to his background in architecture and his choice of publication venue.

Yi Sang's life took a drastic turn when he became ill with tuberculosis and was forced to quit his job. While recovering at a hot spring resort he met Geum Hong, a *gisaeng* or a courtesan, and fell in love. Yi Sang returned to Seoul with Geum Hong, whom he credited for saving his life. With the inheritance he received from his uncle, he opened a *dabang*, a tea house, called *Jebi* (Swallow) with Geum Hong as the madam. At the time, Geum Hong was twenty-one, and Yi Sang was twenty-three, although he was said to look much older. The tea house attracted prominent and emerging Korean writers and intellectuals, but it closed in two years due to financial loss. During his tumultuous marriage with Geum Hong, Yi Sang published poems and writings in newspapers and literary journals.

Some critics recognized the value of his experimental style, but most found his poems scandalous and controversial.

After the destructive breakup with Geum Hong, Yi Sang married Byun Dong Lim, who was the younger sister of a friend. After only three months into the marriage, Yi Sang left for Tokyo by himself probably to experience the city that was considered the cultural and intellectual mecca of Asia at that time. He joined other Korean writers who were writing and working in Japan, and it seems that he wanted to go to France after his stay in Japan. The experimental writing style he was developing was influenced by French Surrealism, and many writers saw Paris as a place that could give them the opportunity to write more freely. However, after about four months in Tokyo, Yi Sang was arrested and imprisoned charged with a "Thought Crime." His "crime" was being a Korean intellectual, who was seen as suspicious and dangerous by the Japanese government. In prison, his chronic tuberculosis worsened, and he died about a month later in a hospital in Tokyo at the age of twenty-seven. He was cremated in Tokyo, and his ashes were buried at Miari Cemetery in Seoul, although no one knows exactly where.

SUNG RNO AND *YI SANG COUNTS TO THIRTEEN*

Sung Rno first encountered Yi Sang in *Muae: A Journal of Transcultural Production* (1995), a journal that aimed to "present work that innovatively critiques and re-imagines aspects of Asian/diasporic cultures, societies, or agency, with a particular emphasis on Korea-related work and issues."³ As a US born Korean American who does not speak Korean fluently, the only way he could read Yi Sang's writings was through selected translation. Rno was born in Minneapolis in 1967 to parents who came to the US for graduate studies in the 1960s (Lei 2002, p. 292). As a college student, Rno majored in physics and graduated with a BA from Harvard University. But his desire for writing took him to a postmodern drama class, which turned out to be an eye-opening experience. He received the MFA in Creative Writing from Brown University, where he studied playwriting with Paula Vogel. Like Yi Sang, Rno's college education had more to do with mathematics than with art, and both eventually moved toward the integration of mathematical and structural concepts with poetic and literary approaches.

Even before encountering Yi Sang, Sung Rno's plays included many references to numbers, physics, and machines. His first play, *Cleveland*

Raining (1995), features an old Volkswagen that can run on “emotional loss” and float on water during a flood. Rno’s *Gravity Falls from Trees* (1997) is about the shooting down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 in August 1994 over Soviet airspace and features the character named Isaac Newton. In the play, Rno makes a connection between human tragedy and the physical law of gravity as an attempt to understand not only how things happen but perhaps why they do. In *wAve* (2004), Rno dramatizes an adaptation of the classical Greek tragedy *Medea* as a commentary on hyper-mediatized twenty-first century and suggests that love may be explained with Newton’s Scattering Theory of Waves and Particles from quantum mechanics.

Rno states in the interview with *Korean Theatre Review* that reading Yi Sang’s writings was “shocking” to him and describes them as mysterious yet refreshing. To Rno, the writings were “free” to transcend the limits of literature: “Yi Sang’s works are dark but fun, and fun yet there’s pain. I was impressed with how darkness, humor, and pain could be expressed. I have always wanted to deal with such expressions in my own writing” (Son 2000, p. 88). The play *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* was Rno’s attempt to discover himself as a writer and to experiment with a non-realistic style of playwriting. The play, in that sense, should be understood as an exploration of how Yi Sang’s literary world can be represented onstage with characters who are inspired by Yi Sang but created with Rno’s imagination.

The original script of Sung Rno’s *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* features three characters: Blue, Red, and Green. According to the script, Blue “could be the Korean Surrealist writer Yi Sang”; Red “could be his best friend”; and Green “could be the woman both fall in love with. But these are just guesses” (Rno 2012, p. 198). The conditional verb, “could,” opens the possibility of the characters not being who they are described to be. They could or could not be the character as described by Rno. Rno’s character descriptions indicate from the onset that the play is not set in the world of realism. What is certain, according to Rno, is the description of Yi Sang, the Korean surrealist writer. The characters Blue, Red, and Green may not or may not be real, but the people they may or may not represent are. Yi Sang, his best friend, and the woman with whom both had relationships were real people who lived in Korea in the early twentieth century.

The setting of the play underscores the layering of real and fictional worlds and flattens the division between the 1930s and the early 2000s by asking the audience to imagine a different kind of time and place. The script indicates the time of the setting: “Imagine, in a mathematical- theatrical

sort of way, if you took the date 1937 and mapped it onto the present one.” And the place is described: “Imagine a similar mathematical- theatrical mapping in which Seoul circa 1937 was mapped onto New York City, with all the memories and nuances of Mr. Yi Sang’s strange and twisted psyche” (Rno 2012, p. 199). In the mathematical-theatrical setting, the characters Blue, Green, and Red interact as friends, lovers, and even body parts. Nothing dramatic happens in the play. The plot does not follow a linear dramatic structure with characters that change over chronological time. The play is structured with twenty short scenes, some of which are close adaptations of Yi Sang’s poems and stories.

The play begins with Blue, who could be Yi Sang, staring at a burning pot without realizing that there is no water inside. Green enters, points out that there is no water in the pot, and pulls out a package of instant ramen noodles. When Blue realizes that there is no water he gets worked up and says “Someone stole my water!” (Rno 2012, p. 198). Blue throws the noodles into the pot but decides to leave because he is hungry. When he asks Green if she would like to go with him, she replies, “I have to watch ... There could be fire” (Rno 2012, p. 201). After Blue leaves, Green pulls out a bottle of water from her pants and starts to drink “as if she’s been dying of thirst,” as Rno notes in the stage direction. Just as she starts to drink, Red walks in. According to the stage direction, Green “plays along like Red is Blue, although there’s definitely something ‘off’ about him” (Rno 2012, p. 201). Red and Green pick up the conversation Blue and Green had left off. Red is not happy that Green was hiding water from him and asks for something to drink, perhaps a Diet Coke. Like other experimental plays and what is commonly called the Theatre of the Absurd, there is an internal logic to the absurd world of the play, and the characters stay bounded by that internal logic.

Despite the confusion and conflation of Red and Blue in the first scene, it is established in later scenes that Blue is indeed the poet Yi Sang, Green is his lover/wife, and Red is his friend. Both men are in love with Green, although they know she may not be the best woman for either of them. The three characters are entangled in love, sex, violence, distrust, and codependency, but they cannot escape from the world they find themselves in. The play ends with Blue talking directly to the audience and telling the story of walking into Green’s room when she and Red were together as lovers. Blue confesses to the audience that seeing them together has affected and changed him. “My room has started to feel like a prison. I try to write. I try to laugh. I try to taste. I try to remember. I

try to feel all sides of the world—that feeling when I had wings. That indescribably delicious, joyous feeling” (Rno 2012, p. 244). But he realizes he has wings and laments that his poems are like “water slipping through” his fingers. The play ends with Blue holding out his hand asking the audience for a cigarette (Rno 2012, p. 245).

The main narrative structure of the play is based on Yi Sang’s short story *Nalgae* (*Wings*), which is considered one of the poet’s signature works. The story describes the poet’s life as a decrepit writer living with a wife who has many secrets and lovers. The poet knows that the men who visit his wife pay money to be with her, and he suspects that she may have tried to kill him with sleeping pills. At the end of the story, the poet wishes to grow wings and fly once more. The core story of *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* is a familiar telling of a triangle love story about a man who is betrayed by both his wife and best friend. But as a surrealist play, it reveals a dimension of reality that exists in the subconscious and the unspoken. Surrealist plays dramatize what cannot be expressed in realistic plays, and what is important is not what is said and done onstage but what is implied or left unexplained in silence and inaction. The world of a surrealist play is like a dream state in which events and people do not make logical sense, but the emotional and physical reaction to what unfolds is often more intense and vivid than the conscious and rational reaction.

Like other surrealist plays, *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* warrants multiple levels of interpretation which can range from a study of Blue as an Icarus figure to a study of the characters as a commentary of Japanese colonialism of Korea (Klasfeld 2001). For instance, critics have interpreted Yi Sang’s *Wings* as a story of the Korean subject who is cheated and destroyed by Koreans who sympathized with the Japanese colonizers, and the same interpretation can be applied to Rno’s play. In fact, Lee Breuer’s interpretation of the play in the 2009 revival focused on the historical context and emphasized the trauma experienced by Koreans under the Japanese rule.

LEE BREUER AND SUNG RNO IN SEOUL

Lee Breuer is considered one of the top three directors in American avant-garde theater and is recognized worldwide for his intercultural experiments. He is known for collaborating with theater artists around the world and for creating new types of theater with each project. He has received almost all the major awards and recognitions a theater artist can receive in a lifetime, and he continues to create works that “leave you in a daze,” as

one critic has put it. His work has been described as strange, singular, and wondrous. It is perhaps not surprising that he was drawn to Sung Rno's work. Rno wrote *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* around 1998 and further developed it in a workshop at Mabou Mines, a company co-founded by Breuer. According to Rno, Lee Breuer came to watch the workshop Rno directed and asked for a meeting.

Sung Rno, who was and still is a relatively unknown playwright in the Korean theater industry, wanted to emphasize the broader topics of art and existentialism from the perspective of a Korean American playwright. However, Rno's intention and perspective were not legible to the Korean theater industry. Korean producers, critics, and audiences mostly focused on the fact that a world-famous director of avant-garde theater was interested in Yi Sang. Marketing materials, program notes, reviews, and newspaper articles about the play highlight Lee Breuer's name first and foremost and mention Sung Rno as a side note. Sung Hee Choi, a theater scholar in Korea, makes a regretful observation when she describes her first meeting with Sung Rno in 2000. She writes, "The production [of *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen*] was noticed not because of the playwright's 'homecoming' but because it was directed by Lee Breuer, one of the top three experimental theatre directors from the U.S." (Choi 2012, p. 267). When Rno was cited by critics, his education at Harvard University and Brown University were inevitably noted, but no details were given to his dramatic oeuvre. If the prestige represented by Rno's Ivy League education was welcomed as a successful story of a Korean immigrant family, Lee Breuer's prestige stemmed from his reputation as an avant-garde director. The prestige embodied by Breuer is what James Harding calls "the immense cultural prestige" that comes "when critics designate the marginalized as avant-garde" (Harding 2010, p. 4). Even though Rno can be categorized as an avant-garde playwright, the cultural prestige granted to Breuer by Korean critics and audience was not extended to the Korean American playwright.

After the play was presented at the Seoul International Theater Festival on October 10, 2000, Rno directed the US premiere on August 10, 2001 at the New York International Fringe Festival, where it received a Best Overall Production Award. In 2009, when the play was revived in Seoul at the historic Changgo Theater, many changes were made. The revival was translated by Ahn Kwang-Jo who also produced the play, and with the translation, the script changed significantly. First, the revised script includes the fourth character who is a narrator and the poet Yi Sang. The play is presented as the narrator's internal imagination (Kim, K. 2009). Breuer

also made key directorial changes and made production more theatrical and literal with design elements and acting choices. Breuer emphasized Yi Sang's troubled life under the oppression of Japanese colonialism and directed the play as a story about the poet as a real person for the Korean audience. What was missing in the 2009 Seoul production was Rno's original intention, which was expressed most clearly in the New York production he directed. The gap between what was originally intended by the playwright and the translated interpretation produced in 2009 in Seoul was wide, and the Korean American perspective was absent in the critical reception in Korea.

THE "MATHEMATICAL-THEATRICAL" MAPPING AND TRANSNATIONAL AVANT-GARDE THEATER

I offer an analysis of the play in this section as an attempt to close that gap, interpret the playwright's perspective of Yi Sang, and articulate Rno's approach to avant-garde theater. As Rno has stated, *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* is his exploration of Yi Sang's mind. As the script indicates, the play is a "mathematical-theatrical mapping" of 1937 Seoul and the turn of the twenty-first century New York City. The play includes references to numbers, including thirteen in the title and three characters. But the most central mathematical reference is the Moebius strip, which functions like another character in the play. As Red explains in scene 4, the Moebius strip is created by twisting a strip of paper and connecting the ends. It creates one surface from two, and there is no endpoint. In scene 4, Red moves in a way that "looks like bad modern dance." When Blue asks him what he is doing, Red answers, "I'm trying to feel what it's like to be a Moebius strip" (p. 207). In scene 14, Blue plays with a Moebius strip, trying to "feel" what it is like to be a Moebius strip. In "disgust" he breaks the strip and declares, "There. You are no longer Moebius. I have freed you from the bonds of Moebius ... ness ... ity. You are now a free strip of paper. Go forth, be merry, and prosper" (p. 226). This god-like declaration of freedom is granted to the strip of paper, but the characters are fated to live out their function both theatrically and mathematically. Such fate is confirmed again when Red tells Blue that the three of them are each a function in a mathematical equation: "It's like you're one function, she's another function, and the two of you can be graphed. See, it's all very rational" (p. 227). And of course, the names of the characters in primary colors emphasize their reductive and abstract function bound by mathematical and natural laws.

If that law is the Moebius strip, which can be expressed in a mathematical equation, which world are the characters living in? First, we can conjecture a kind of twisted mirroring effect. According to Rno, the setting of the play should express Yi Sang's "strange and twisted psyche" (p. 199). In other words, the play can be interpreted as not only a play about the famed poet but also about how he influenced the Korean American playwright, and it can be read as Rno's mirroring of Yi's work. The metaphor of mirror occurs throughout Yi Sang's poems, and in one of his most famous poems, titled *Mirror*, the poet compares his "I" to the mirror's "I." Here is a truncated version translated by Walter K. Lew as it appears in the journal *Muae*.

Mirror

In a mirror there is no sound
 There is probably no world so quiet
 In the mirror also are my ears
 Two pathetic ears are there unable to hear my words
 In the mirror I'm left-handed
 Lefty that can't take my handshake—who doesn't know how to shake hands
 Because of the mirror I can't touch the mirror's I but if it were not a
 mirror
 How could I've ever done something like meet myself in a mirror [...]
 (Lew 1995, p. 85)

Sung Rno and Yi Sang are like the two "I"s who cannot shake hands, divided by space and time. While the mirror has been a metaphor of theater for centuries, Rno's use of the mirror as inspired by Yi Sang is not merely for the stage to reflect reality. In the world of the Moebius strip, the mirroring is twisted like two parallel universes that are connected.

One way to illustrate the twisted reflection is through the examination of how mundane objects and actions are dramatized. In the first scene, as described earlier in this chapter, Blue wants to make ramen but lacks water. Boiling water to make instant ramen at home is one of the most common sights in Korea and perhaps a quintessential "Korean" mundanity. To give another example, in scene 7, Green pours a can of Diet Coke into a cup in an elaborate and hyper-sexualized ceremony. Green makes the mundane task of pouring a soft drink into something similar to a Japanese tea ceremony. According to the Korean American theater scholar Ju Yon Kim, the mundane, or what she calls the "embodied everyday," is not a neutral term

(Kim, J. 2015, p. 19). Rather, the mundane can be made ambiguous depending on the context. Blue's attempt to boil a pot of ramen, a mundane task, takes on a different meaning when the audience sees that his wife Green has been hiding the water he needs to cook the noodles. In extending Ju Yon Kim's notion of the mundane, I would describe the ramen scene as a moment of the twisted mundane. As I will explain further, the twisted mundane is a key to understanding both Yi Sang's writings and Sung Rno's plays.

According to Myong-Hee Kim, a translator of Yi Sang's poems in English, the poet was in a "cultural vortex": "the poet was pulled by the old ways, in which a man wore his hair long and bunned up on top of his head, and the new, in which a man wore short hair and Western clothing. 'With my tuition my parents paid, I only learned words they don't understand,' he wrote. This sense of himself existing at a juncture of history, or not fitting in, of being lost, of 'lostness' permeates his work" (p. 19). From the quotidian act of wearing hair in a certain way to everyday speech, Yi Sang and the entire country of Korea had their lives twisted, interrupted, and destroyed. Like the ramen noodle that burns in a waterless pot, Koreans under the colonial rule of Japan had their mundane lives violently taken away. The tragedy is worsened by the fact that it is Green, the Korean wife, who is withholding the water. When Blue suggests that he can "turn the pot off," Green replies, "You can't do that to noodles. Reverse direction on them like that. Bad karma" (p. 201). Green is complicit in interrupting Blue's wish for a mundane and normal life, and she implies that things that are set in course cannot be reversed. Blue gives up and leaves the room, an act that reinforces his "lostness."

Yi Sang lived a life in which the mundane could not be experienced, and he was in a constant state of displacement. He was never at home both literally and metaphorically. The sense of displacement is dramatized by Sung Rno both as a way to reflect Yi Sang's life but also a way to represent abstractly what I call the Korean diasporic condition. Just as Yi Sang's life was made strange at his own home in the early twentieth century, Sung Rno tells us that the Korean American life is just as strange, twisted, and displaced. When Blue tells the audience, "My room has started to feel like a prison," these words may be spoken by Yi Sang, Sung Rno, or any other diasporic subject who experiences the loss of everyday normalcy in which their room starts to feel like a prison. The theatrical-mathematical mapping Rno dramatizes in his play is a commentary on modern Korean diaspora, which includes his own sense of displacement and loss of mundanity.

CONCLUSION

I speculate that when he went to Korea to see his play produced, Sung Rno found himself in his own Moebius strip. Perhaps like Yi Sang, Rno never felt at home in the country he was born in or in the country his parents taught him to call his "mother country." The first Korean American playwright's play to be produced in Korea was upstaged by Lee Breuer whose fame and reputation in Korea made it possible for the young playwright's play to receive publicity in the first place. Overshadowed by the "cultural prestige" of Breuer's avant-garde theater, Rno's own surrealist play was not interpreted from the playwright's perspective. While the play should be read as a Korean American play about a modern diasporic condition with transnational implications, the productions in Seoul focused narrowly and literally on the tragic life of Yi Sang and the immediate history that affected him.

As an example of transnational avant-garde theater, the play is about the Korean poet Yi Sang, who was influenced by French Surrealism of the early twentieth century, and the poet's story was imagined by Sung Rno, an experimental playwright of Korean descent living in New York City. Adding to the layers of transnational movements between different times and places, the productions in Seoul were directed by Lee Breuer, who is known as an innovator of intercultural avant-garde theater. Many things have been gained from this instance of transnational avant-garde theater, and Rno's play made it possible for a Korean American play to be produced in Korea. While such gains should be fully acknowledged and underscored, it is equally important to remember what was lost. Namely, the Korean American perspective of the diasporic condition was not made legible in the Seoul productions of *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen*. Rno's avant-garde experimentation as a Korean American and Korean diasporic playwright was not recognized in a production that privileged a different kind of transnational avant-garde theater. Rno wrote a play about the temporal and spatial conflation of Seoul circa 1937 and New York City of his time and found inspiration from a poet who felt like a stranger in his own house, but the production in Seoul was received as a notable illustration of Breuer's avant-garde theater. Like his characters, Sung Rno was caught in a twisted world in which his "homecoming" was not the one he had imagined it to be.

NOTES

1. All translation of texts from Korean to English in this chapter are by the author unless noted otherwise.
2. Kim is the surname. The biography of Yi Sang is drawn from Kim, M. (2002, p. 16).
3. From the back inside cover, *Muae: A Journal of Transcultural Production* (1995), New York: Kaya Production.

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