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Echoes of *The Tales of Ise* in *The Tale of Genji*

Charles De Wolf (須田狼庵)

In 1999, when California's Jerry Brown was contemplating a run for the mayoralty of Oakland, his one-time campaign manager declined to rise to the challenge, declaring: "I don't do mayors." The quip stuck in my mind as a vivid example of how true command of a language is tied to intricate knowledge of the culture within which it is used. To understand the wry comment, one must recognize it as an echo of "I don't do windows," as attributed to cleaning ladies setting down their conditions during hiring interviews. Though no doubt broadly understood by late 20th-century speakers of (American) English, it was also just enough of an "in-joke" to have been particularly relished by those who heard it.

Language, we are reminded, both transcends and embodies the cultural milieu within which it is used. Its autonomous, creative capacity means that Modern Hebrew has a word for 'helicopter' (masók 'that which ascends'), as does Maōri (waka topatopa 'vehicle-duck'); it also makes possible the art of translation. At the same time, not unlike the incense-laden robes of Heian-era nobility, it is deeply imbued with the history of its words and their vast network of associations—and it is that, of course, which makes the art of translation a most interesting challenge.

The Tale of Genji (*Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語), as first read to the author's listeners a full millennium ago,¹⁾ presupposed shared intimate knowledge of the narrowly confined strata of Japanese aristocratic society, a literary tradition that was already several centuries old, and, even among Court ladies who were supposed to be innocently ignorant of Chinese, awareness of the language and culture across the sea. A passage in *Hahakigi* 帚木 (*The Broom Tree*)²⁾, the second chapter, may serve as an example. There a young courtier describes his ultimately unhappy relationship with a learned daughter of a scholar.

「……それは、ある博士のもとに学問などしはべるとて、まかり通ひしほどに、主人のむすめども多かりと聞きたまへて、はかなきついでに言ひ寄りてはべりしを、親聞きつけて、盃持て出でて、『わが兩つの途歌ふを聴け』となむ、聞こえごちはべりしかど、をさをさうちつけてもまからず、かの親の心を憚りて、さすがにかかづらひはべりしほどに、いとあはれに思ひ後見、寢覚の語らひにも、身の才つき、朝廷に仕うまつるべき道々しきことを教へて、いときよげに消息文にも仮名といふもの書きませず、むべむべしく言ひまはしはべるに、おのづからえまかり絶えて、その者を師としてなむ、わづかなる腰折文作ることなど習ひはべりしかば、今にその恩は忘れはべらねど、なつかしき妻子とうち頼まむには、無才の人、なま悪ろならむふるまひなど見えむに、恥づかしくなむ見えはべりし。まいて君達の御ため、はかばかしくしたたかなる御後見は、何にかせさせたまはむ。はかなし、口惜し、とかつ見つつも、ただわが心につき、宿世の引く方はべるめれば、男しもなむ、仔細なきものははべめる」と申せば、残りを言はせむとて、「さてさてをかしかりける女かな」とすかいたまふを、心は得ながら、鼻のわたりをこづきて語りなす。

「さて、いと久しくまからざりしに、もののたよりに立ち寄りては

べれば、常のうちとけゐたる方にははべらで、心やましき物越しにてなむ逢ひてはべる。ふすぶるにやと、をこがましくも、また、よきふしなりとも思ひたまふるに、このさかし人はた、軽々しきもの怨じすべきにもあらず、世の道理を思ひとりて恨みざりけり。

声もはやりかにて言ふやう、『月ごろ、風病重きに堪へかねて、極熱の草薬を服して、いと臭きによりなむ、え対面賜はらぬ。目のあたりならずとも、さるべからむ雑事らは承らむ』と、いとあはれにむべむべしく言ひはべり。答へに何とかは。ただ、『うけたまはりぬ』とて、立ち出ではべるに、さうざうしくやおほえけむ、『この香失せなむ時に立ち寄りたまへ』と高やかに言ふを、聞き過ぎさむいとし、しばしやすらふべきに、はたはべらねば、げにそのにほひさへ、はなやかにたち添へるも術なくて、逃げ目をつかひて、『ささがにのふるまひしるき夕ぐれに

ひるま過ぐせといふがあやなさ

いかなることつけぞや』

と、言ひも果てず走り出ではべりぬるに、追ひて、

『逢ふことの夜をし隔てぬ仲ならばひる間も何かまばゆからまし』

さすがに口疾くなどははべりき」

I had been studying under a teacher at the Academy and in the course of our association learned that he had many daughters, one of whom I happened to meet. When this reached the ears of her father, he produced a wine bowl and intoned, ‘Listen, as I sing the song of two ways...’⁷³⁾ Whatever intimacy there had developed between us, I had not dreamt of courting her with any such serious intent, but then, mindful of his parental concern, I nonetheless fell in with her – whereupon I found her to be most considerate of my needs. Even as we lay awake together, she would apply her learning, teaching me those classical fundamentals that

are essential for service in the Court; she likewise sent to me the most refined and formal notes, without a trace of our vulgar native script. Thus, I could hardly cease my visitations. She had been the teacher who had enabled me to produce at least some sort of half-formed Chinese verses, and even now I remain in her debt. Yet I was also filled with shame at the thought of taking as my loving spouse a woman before whom I would ever appear to be a bumbling ignoramus. I dare say that you, my lords, would have little need for such an unsparing companion...

“Now it had been some time since my last visit, when happenstance took me to her abode, where, to my dismay, I found myself received not in the usual manner but rather, to my annoyance, with curtains between us. I supposed it to be a foolish fit of pique and glimpsed therein a pretext for leaving her. She was, however, far too wise in the ways of the world to display her jealousy. With the air of a long-suffering wife, she offered no hint of resentment and merely said in an agitated tone:

“‘For some months now I have been suffering unendurably from a catarrhus ailment and have therefore resorted to imbibing an infusion of *allium sativum*. So foul is the odor that for the purposes of any direct visitation I am quite indisposed. I shall nonetheless be pleased to receive whatever miscellanea you may wish me to peruse.’

“Quite overwhelmed by her eloquence and the admirable plausibility of it all, I could only mutter, ‘I quite understand’, and so prepared to take my leave. As though sensing that something had been left unsaid, she called out in a high-pitched voice: ‘Please return for a visit when the odor is gone.’

“It seemed cruel to ignore her words, but to linger would have been quite unbearable, as the stench was truly vile. Preparing to flee, I left

this verse:

‘The spider’s spinning/ Surely told you I would call/ In the twilight hour.
Now you tell me to return/ Once this pungent day has passed.’

‘Unable to meet me because you have consumed garlic? What am I
to make of this?’

“Yet her swift reply quite caught me by the heels:

‘No odorous day would/ Ever bring a blush of shame/ Were we but
bound as/ Lovers, never to have known/ A night when we were parted.’

“It was just the sort of shrewd retort I might have expected!”²⁴⁾

The original listeners and readers would have been much amused by the irony of a young woman providing needed instruction in Chinese to a socially ambitious young man of less than exalted rank. Though women were generally expected in their writings to confine themselves to the kana syllabary, she makes exclusive use of Chinese characters and while the vocabulary of the text as a whole is overwhelmingly of native Japanese origin, the lady here is made to pepper her speech quite ostentatiously with Sino-Japanese words, which the translation here attempts to replicate by means of Latinisms.

The passage reminds us of several other significant cultural factors: that, at least on formal occasions, it was customary for visitors to converse with their hosts through either curtains or a bamboo screen, that the appearance of a spider was seen as a sign that a lover would soon be making a call, and that the exchange of verses was the most common form of

communication between lovers and would-be lovers. There is also a play on words, which typifies classical verse, *hiru*, the generic word for ‘allium’ being homophonous with *hiru*(ma) ‘daytime’.

The *Tale of Genji* contains nearly 800 verses, drawing on images and conventions already well established in both Japanese and Chinese literary tradition.⁵⁾ One particularly important source is *The Tales of the Ise* (*Ise Monogatari* 伊勢物語), a 10th-century collection of short narratives, including verses that number 209.

The tale begins with the deceptively simple sentence “*mukashi otoko ari-keri*” ‘Once upon a time there was a man’, which is repeated in most of the work’s 125 sections. This “*otoko*” is assumed to be, albeit highly fictionalized, the poet and courtier Ariwara no Narihira 在原業平 (825–880), who is clearly an inspiration for the protagonist of Murasaki Shikibu’s work. She goes so far as to include in the 17th chapter, *E-awase* 絵合 (A Picture Contest), explicit mention of *Ise Monogatari*, with high praise heaped upon it.

The following six excerpts from the *Genji* illustrate some of the many allusions to the earlier work, with which Murasaki Shikibu’s first audience would have been intimately familiar. The translations of the verses follow the form of the original; that is, with five lines following a syllable count of 5–7–5–7–7.

#1 At the beginning of *Hahakigi*, “Shining Genji” is ambivalently described as well-meaning and certainly never vulgar but nonetheless prone to romantic adventures and misadventures that might well have dulled his radiance.

まだ中将などにもものしたまひし時は、内裏にのみさぶらひようしたま

ひて、大殿には絶え絶えまかでたまふ。「忍ぶの乱れ」やと、疑ひきこゆることもありしかど、さしもあだめき目馴れたるうちつけの好き好きしさなどは好ましからぬ御本性にて、まれには、あながちに引き違へ心尽くしなることを、御心に思しとどむる癖なむ、あやにくにて、さるまじき御ふるまひもうちまじりける。

While serving as a captain of the guard, he spent much of his time at the Palace and became even less inclined to make his way to the minister's residence. The suspicion there may have been that he was entangled in secret liaisons, and though in his heart of hearts he loathed banal dalliances, he would on rare occasions yield to an unfortunate penchant, despite his better nature, for unhappy involvements and deplorable behavior.

In the original, what I have translated as “entangled in secret liaisons” reads *sinobu no midare*, where the phrase might be understood as “furtive entanglements.” The probable allusion is to the first section of the *Ise*, in which “the man” happens to spy two sisters through a gap in the hedge. He is so entranced that he composes a poem to send to them, tearing off a piece of cloth from his apparel to serve either as parchment or as its wrapping:

かすがの、わかむらさきのすり衣しのぶのみだれかぎりしられず

Indelible dye,/ Mottling robes and mottling heart,/ As deep as those tints
Drawn from the lavender grass/ Gathered on Kasuga Plain.

Here *sinobu* is a truncated form of *sinobu-zuri*, referring to dye-prints from Kasuga, now located within the city of Nara, the first imperial capital.

#2 In the fourth chapter of the *Genji*, *Yūgao* 夕顔 (Evening Bloom), the protagonist, who has lost his mother before he could remember her, goes to see his old nurse who, having become a nun, is old and ailing.

君は、いとあはれと思ほして、「いはけなかりけるほどに、思ふべき人々のうち捨ててものしたまひにけるなごり、育む人あまたあるやうなりしかど、親しく思ひ睦ぶる筋は、またなくなむ思ほえし。人となりて後は、限りあれば、朝夕にしもえ見たてまつらず、心のままに訪らひ参づることはなけれど、なほ久しう対面せぬ時は、心細くおぼゆるを、「さらぬわかればなくもがな」

His Lordship was filled with emotion: "I was but a small lad when I was abandoned by my loved ones, and among the many who kept me under their wing thereafter, no one is dearer to me than you. Now that I have grown into adulthood, I am unable to call upon you freely, at any hour of the day or night, but I am saddened whenever I have not seen you for some time. Ah, if only in this world there were no inexorable partings!"

The last phrase (*saranu wakare wa naku mo gana*) echoes the second verse in Section 84 of the *Ise*, which tells of a low-ranking courtier, presumably the protagonist, whose mother is an imperial princess residing at some distance in rural Nagaoka. Alarmed by an end-of-the-year message from her, he replies:

世中にさらぬわかれのなくもがな
世もといのる人のこのため

Oh but to tarry/ In this world for endless years!/ And never to know

The dread of final parting/ Prays a loving mother's son.

#3 The theme of exile is common to both the *Ise* and the *Genji*. In the 12th chapter of the latter, *Suma* 須磨, referring to what was once, at least for members of the nobility, a desolate coast, now located within the city of Kōbe, the protagonist is forced as the result of others' jealousy and his own indiscretions to leave the capital.

すがら、面影につと添ひて、胸もふたがりながら、御舟に乗りたまひぬ。日長きころなれば、追風さへ添ひて、まだ申の時ばかりに、かの浦に着きたまひぬ。……渚に寄る波のかつ返るを見たまひて、「うらやましくも」と、うち誦じたまへるさま、さる世の古言なれど、珍しう聞きなされ、悲しとのみ御供の人々思へり。

Throughout the journey he had longingly held in his mind the image of his beloved, as now he sorrowfully boarded his ship. With the long summer days and a favorable wind, he made landing in the late afternoon...He watched the waves lapping at the shore and slipping back to sea and softly murmured "oh, with such envy..." and though they were words from a verse and a world long past, those in his entourage were deeply moved, struck anew by the sadness of it all.

Genji and his companions could no doubt recite in its entirety the relevant seventh section of the *Ise*:

むかし、おとこありけり。京にありわびて、あづまにいきけるに、伊勢おはりのあはひのうみづらをゆくに、なみのいとしろくたつを見て、

いとゞしくすぎゆく方のこひしきに
うらやましくもかへるなみ哉

となむよめりける。

Long ago there was a man who, wearying of life in the capital, made his way east until, along the beach twixt Ise and Owari, he gazed upon the waves and composed the following verse:

Onward goes my path/ Drawing me ever further/ From all that is dear
With such envy do I see/ Waves returning from the shore.

The two protagonists have both been obliged to depart as the consequence of “inappropriate relationships,” the man in the older story having become involved with a future empress, Genji having been caught in a tryst with a consort, albeit unofficial, of his half-brother the emperor.

Allusion to the verse is again made in the 22nd chapter of the Genji, *Tamakazura* 玉鬘 (The Jeweled Chaplet), in which another journey is taken by ship, this time to Kyūshū. Again we are reminded that for denizens of Heian-kyō, any separation from the capital was regarded as cause for sadness.

#4 The journey mentioned above has taken the daughter of Genji's deceased lover, known by the sobriquet Yūgao (Evening Bloom), to faraway Kyūshū. In Chapter 26, *Tokonatsu* 常夏 (Wild Carnations), she has been found, now a beautiful young woman, and been taken into the care of Genji himself, who is torn between finding a husband for her and keeping her as his own.

されど、渡りたまひて、御容貌を見たまひ、今は御琴教へたてまつりたまふにさへことづけて、近やかに馴れ寄りたまふ。

姫君も、初めこそむくつけく、うたてとも思ひたまひしか、「かくても、なだらかに、うしろめたき御心はあらざりけり」と、やうやう目馴れて、いとしも疎みきこえたまはず、さるべき御いらへも、馴れ馴れしからぬほどに聞こえかはしなどして、見るままにいと愛敬づき、薫りまさりたまへれば、なほさてもえ過ぐしやるまじく思し返す。

「さはまた、さて、ここながらかしづき据ゑて、さるべき折々に、はかなくうち忍び、ものをも聞こえて慰みなむや。かくまだ世馴れぬほどの、わづらはしさにこそ、心苦しくはありけれ、おのづから 閑守強くとも、ものの心知りそめ、いとほしき思ひなくて、わが心も思ひ入りなば、しげくとも障はらじかし」と思し寄る、いとけしからぬことなりや。

He nonetheless continued to visit her with some frequency, and, all the more admiring her beauty, resolved that he would make teaching her the zither his pretext. At first she was guarded and diffident, but then, seeing that he was gentle and gave her no reason to fear, she no longer stiffened at his arrival and, indeed, became accustomed to his presence, responding as needed to his words, yet without suggesting undue intimacy, so that the more he saw of her the more delightful he found her, thereby rendering unbearable the thought of simply putting her into the hands of another. It occurred to him that the husband he found for her might come to live with her here, so that he might secretly go off to see her on occasion to offer words of cheer. Her current state of innocence was a troublesome hindrance, but once she had acquired a man, nothing would prevent him from stealing past the “barrier guards”

as oft as he liked—or so, appallingly enough, he imagined it.

The phrase “barrier guards” (seki-mori) refers to Section 5 of *Ise Monogatari*:

むかし、おとこ有けり。ひむがしの五条わたりに、いとしのびていき
けり。みそかなるところなれば、かどよりもえいらで、わらはべのふ
みあけたるついひちのくづれよりかよひけり。ひとしげくもあらね
ど、たびかさなりければ、あるじきゝつけて、そのかよひちに、夜ご
とに人をすへてまもらせければ、いけどえあはでかへりけり。さてよ
める。

ひとしれぬわがゝよひちのせきもりはよひよひごどにうちもねなゝむ

There was once a man who made his way in secret to a house near the Fifth Avenue. As he was obliged to remain inconspicuous, he could not go in through the gate and instead chose to enter through a fallen section of the tile-roofed wall, where the constant tread of children had formed a path. Visitors to the residence were few, but he took himself there with such frequency that the master posted servants each night to watch over the gap, so that the man invariably returned with his quest unfulfilled. He thereupon wrote:

Cease your vigilance / Ye watchmen who nightly guard / The once
hidden path

That led to my beloved / And yield to gentle slumber.

We must remember that Tamakazura is the daughter not only of Genji's long-dead lover but also of his one-time brother-in-law and closest

companion, first known by the sobriquet Tō no Chūjō. In a rare editorializing moment, the author expresses disapproval at her hero's sordid machinations: Ito kesikaranu koto nari ya ('most outrageous indeed')—or in Edward Seidensticker's amusingly understated translation: "These thoughts may not seem entirely praiseworthy." Reference to the poem is repeated in Chapter 33, *Fuji no Uraba* 藤裏葉 (New Wisteria Leaves), in which Genji's son, known by the sobriquet Yūgiri, seeks the hand of Tō no Chūjō's daughter, Kumoi no Kari.

#5 In Chapter 34, *Wakana-Jō* 若菜上 (New Herbs-I), Genji, nearing forty and now holding the status of honorary retired emperor, is asked by his half-brother, the retired emperor, Suzaku, to marry his daughter, the Third Princess. Genji complies with the request, much to the disappointment of his beloved Murasaki, only eventually to be cuckolded by Tō no Chūjō's son, known by his sobriquet Kashiwagi, the princess's second cousin. He has fatefully glimpsed her as the result of the latter's carelessness, when her protective screen is knocked over by two rambunctious cats, as she and her handmaidens are watching Kashiwagi and his companions playing kemari (football). Hopelessly in love, he conspires to meet her and, in the following chapter, impregnates her. The episode signals the beginning of Genji's decline: in the next few chapters he first loses his beloved Murasaki and then abruptly dies himself.

「いかならむ折に、またさばかりにても、ほのかなる御ありさまをだに見む……」など思ひやる方なく、「深き窓うちに、何ばかりのことにつけてか、かく深き心ありけりとだに知らせたてまつるべき」と胸痛くいぶせければ、小侍従がり、例の、文やりたまふ。「一日、風に誘はれて、御垣の原をわけ入りてはべしに、いとどいかに見落とした

まひけむ。その夕べより、乱り心地かきくらし、あやなく今日は眺め暮らしはべる」など書いて……

There was naught for him to do but ponder when again he might see her, if only, as then, for a fleeting moment...But how would it be possible to convey to her the depth of his feelings, confined as she was “deep behind the eaves”⁶⁾...He wrote dejectedly to her gentlewoman Kojijū: “It was a chance wind that took me to Her Highness’s gracious garden, and ever since that evening my spirits have been troubled, as I contemplate the low regard in which I may be held and while the hours away in idle, pensive musings.”

The last line echoes the first poem in Section 99 of the Ise:

むかし、右近の馬場のひをりの日、むかひにたてたりけるくるまに、
女のかほのしたすだれよりほのかに見えければ、中将なりけるおとこ
のよみてやりける。

見ずもあらず見もせぬ人のこひしくは
あやなくけふやながめくらさむ

返し、しるしらぬなにかあやなくわきていはむおもひのみこそしるべ
なりけれのちはたれとしりにけり。

Long ago, on a day during the Right Guard’s mounted archery contest, a woman who had come to view the spectacle was seated in a carriage, when her lower blind momentarily exposed her face to the man, who sent her a verse:

A fleeting moment/ Seeing and yet not seeing,/ Overwhelmed by love,
Whiling now the day away/ In a lonely, pensive daze

We know from the most enticing verse with which the woman responds and the unmistakable suggestion at the conclusion of the section that the man later gained more than a glimpse of her. Kashiwagi clearly has similar hopes, though the Third Princess, unlike the woman in the carriage, has exposed herself entirely by accident, and her response to the message sent to her gentlewoman is one of utter consternation.

#6 The final example comes from the 51st chapter of the *Genji*, *Ukifune* 浮舟 (A Boat Upon the Waters). The son of the reigning emperor and *Genji*'s grandson, Niou, is married to a daughter of the Eighth Prince (Hachi no Miya) but then recklessly pursues the prince's unrecognized daughter, whom we know as *Ukifune* ('drifting boat'). His friend and rival, Kaoru, Kashiwagi's son by the Third Princess, likewise becomes infatuated with *Ukifune*, as she reminds him of her half-sister, whom Kaoru loved but who has starved herself to death. Here Kaoru, remembering his first encounter with her, contemplates the challenge of seeing her again:

かの人は、たとしへなくのどかに思しおきてて、「待ち遠なりと思ふらむ」と、心苦しうのみ思ひやりたまひながら、所狭き身のほどを、さるべきついでなくて、てかやしく通ひたまふべき道ならねば、神のいさむるよりもわりなし。

For his part, he [Kaoru] was remarkably serene, troubled only by the thought of how she might pine for him in his absence. His position left him little freedom, and without plausible motive any path to Uji would

be plagued with more obstacles than if the mighty gods themselves had forbidden it.

The last clause echoes the second verse in Section 71 of *Ise Monogatari*:

むかし、おとこ、伊勢の斎宮に、内の御つかひにてまいれりければ、
かの宮にすぎごとひける女、わたくし事にて、

ちはやぶる神のいがきもこえぬべし大宮
人の見まくほしさに

おとこ、

こひしくはきても見よかしちはやぶる
神のいさむる道ならなくに

Long ago a man journeyed as an envoy of the Sovereign to the High Priestess of Ise, and there met one of her attendants who, having engaged with him in salacious banter, conveyed to him this intimate message:

O'er the sacred hedge/ Of the mighty gods I'd bound/ In my eagerness
To meet this manly envoy/ Sent by our most august lord

The man replied:

If it is indeed/ Passion's path that you would take/ Then now come to me.
For such is ne'er forbidden/ By the mighty gods you serve.

Kaoru will persist in his quest to win over his wife's half-sister, though the contrast between the earthy attendant at the Ise Shrine and the much put-upon Ukifune is striking. In the same chapter, Niou arrives in the midst of a snowstorm at the cottage where she is staying in Uji and takes her away in a small boat. When they come to an islet of green orange (*tachibana*) trees, Niou offers a verse:

年経とも変はらむものか橘の
小島の崎に契る心は

Years will come and go./ Yet my heart will be unchanged,/ Like the
faithful boughs
Of green-leaved tachibana/ Flourishing on this small isle

To this poor Ukifune can only reply:

橘の小島の色は変はらじを
この浮舟ぞ行方知られぬ

Though unchanged remains/ This isle of orange and green,/ Unknown is
the fate/ Of the river's drifting boat./ Oh, whither will it wander?

Unable to choose between the two men, Ukifune later throws herself into the Uji River but is rescued by a passing priest. The story ends in midair, as she resolves to remain a nun, even as Kaoru persists in his pursuit.

Notes

- 1) Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (?973–?1014) is the name given to the author, who in her thirties became a lady-in-waiting to Empress Shōshi (988–1074), Fujiwara no Shōshi 藤原彰子, whose father Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1028) had deliberately sought out the young widow for her literary talent.
- 2) The English renditions of Genji chapter titles are mostly taken from the Seidensticker (1976) translation but are not intended to reflect any personal preference on my part. “Evening Bloom” is my own choice for *Yūgao*.
- 3) This excerpt from a verse by the Tang poet Bái Jūyì 白居易 (772–847) suggests that it is better to marry the daughter of a scholar, however impecunious.
- 4) All translations are own.
- 5) Though herself a woman, the author has had enough of a “male” education to be familiar with the work of Bái Jūyì, for she has the scholar cite his words in speaking to the sometime suitor.
- 6) This is an apparent reference to Bái Jūyì’s *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, the implication being that the Third Princess is somehow a tragic figure such as the ill-fated Yáng Guìfēi 楊貴妃, the much-celebrated consort of the Tang emperor Xuánzōng 玄宗.

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