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**FEMININE WORK ETHIC IN SMALL BUSINESS:
WOMEN SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS IN THAILAND'S KUAN IM
MOVEMENT**

Jitnisa Roenjun
Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) Program
Dhurakij Pundit University
Bangkok, Thailand
jitnisa_roenjun@hotmail.com

Mark Speece
School of Management
University of Alaska Southeast
Juneau, Alaska 99801, USA
mark.speece@uas.alaska.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper presents pilot qualitative work among women small business owners who follow Kuan Im Bodhisattva in urban Bangkok. Kuan Im's following can be seen as part of the broader Buddhist reform movement in urban middle class Thailand, which is fostering improved ethics, including especially in business. The in-depth interviews were conducted by a former small business owner (two decades), who is also a follower of Kuan Im. Here, we specifically examine how religiosity of small business owners influences recruitment and training. Kuan Im serves as a role model, teaching that women can do anything men can do. This translates into policies oriented toward hiring and developing women employees.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, Thailand's urban middle class has become increasingly disenchanted with the results of modern development. Many middle class Thai have come to the view that economic success has not bred happiness; but rather, new and bigger problems on many fronts. They are turning to Buddhism for guidance in dealing with problems in personal and public life. However, many feel that traditional official institutional Buddhism is incapable of meeting modern needs. "Middle class people are very different from the rural Thai villagers who had been the major followers of traditional Thai Buddhism" (Satha-Anand 1990, p. 396).

Baker and Phongpaichit (2005) talk about such things as the need to find new ways to practice Buddhism when people are no longer embedded in their local communities, greater sophistication of the increasingly educated populace, and the development of a "religious market place" as consumer culture and modern communication methods became increasingly prevalent. Traditional Buddhism seems somewhat irrelevant, focused on the traditional dichotomy between the Thai elite and the rural masses, and unable to address modern problems. Phra Payutto summarizes the issue well:

“when the modernists began to be disillusioned and dissatisfied with modernization [they] turned to find meaning and answers from [Buddhist] tradition. However, as the traditionalists have long been far removed from the real world of changing values, they cannot supply the answers or satisfy the need of the modernists” (Payutto 2007, p. 56).

Thus, they have turned to various versions of reform Buddhism. The three most commonly discussed movements strongly agree on the need for personal morality, including, importantly, in business (extensive references in Speece 2010). It has long been argued that religiosity can foster business ethics (e.g., Sauser 2005), although some observers see “little empirical support ... to demonstrate the actual influence of religion on individual decision making” (Middelstaedt 2002, p. 11). However, in Buddhist contexts, at least, there is some evidence showing the positive impact of personal ethics. One possible reason for this may be the strong emphasis on individual responsibility in Buddhism (e.g. Brammer 2007). Many small business owners in these Thai movements take business ethics very seriously (e.g., Horayangura 2007).

The growing popularity of the Bodhisattva Kuan Im (Chinese Kwan Yin) can be seen as a fourth stream in this broad movement. Kuan Im seems to be an adaptation of traditional popular Buddhism to modern, urban middle class life, rather than an attempt to purge Buddhism of so-called ‘irrational’ popular elements, as in many of the movements (e.g., Ganjanapan 2003). However, little empirical work actually examines this movement in much detail, particularly in a small business context. We found that Kuan Im’s followers do indeed fit the profile of urban middle class Thai who are uneasy about the modern situation, and want, in particular, better business ethics. We also found that among many women small business owners, Kuan Im is a sort of role model for the independent woman who can succeed and provide ethical guidance for women employees to succeed.

THE KUAN IM MOVEMENT AS REFORM BUDDHISM

Three of these reform movements have received a fair amount of scholarly attention: the Buddhādāsa-type, Wat Dhammakāya, and Santi Asoke; ‘Buddhādāsa-type’ being used here as shorthand to represent a somewhat broader set of views than only those of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu. “These three movements all make serious attempts to communicate and to answer the spiritual needs of the Thai people, particularly the urban middle class in the modern context” (Satha-Anand 1990, p. 397).

Satha-Anand uses the three divisions of the Eightfold Path (*sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*; i.e., moral discipline, mental discipline, and wisdom; e.g., Harvey 2000, p. 37) to summarize key characteristics of the directions these movements have taken, calling them “the *sīla* group (Santi Asoke), the *samadhi* group (Dhammakaya) and the *panya* group (Buddhadasa)” (Satha-Anand 1990, p. 405). This, of course, over-simplifies; in fact, they all take more rigorous ethics into middle class lay society, not restricting them to the monastic community.

“Urban professionals propose new definitions of lay ethics in modern social and political contexts that emphasize religious attainment and activism in society ... The enhanced weight attached to the ethics and conduct of Buddhist lay society invokes certain Mahayana concepts and highlights the heterodox, pan-Buddhist, and ecumenical character of these new movements within a predominantly Theravada Buddhist context. ... The new Buddhist movements further emphasize moral discipline as the basis for social action or activism” (Schober 1995, ‘Religious disenchantment ...’)

Kuan Im in Thailand is often discussed in terms of ‘spirit cults’, as a form of popular Buddhism. However, her growing popularity is better understood as part of this modern urban reform Buddhism, rather than as a popular ‘spirit cult’. Following the spirit of Satha-Anand’s (1990) shorthand designation of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* for the other three main Buddhist reform movements, we might call Kuan Im’s movement the ‘*saddhā*’ (faith) group. “Faith and spiritual strength ... serve as a primary step toward further and more energetic practice of the teachings” (Payutto 2007, p. 64).

Kuan Im is solidly rooted in spiritual aspirations and a desire for a more moral life. Compared to the spirit cults of popular Buddhism, that of Kuan Im

“is more organized, in the same way as the Buddhist reform movements [Ganjanapan briefly discussed Wat Dammakaya and Santi Asoke]. Although the two types of cults [contrasting Kuan Im with other spirit cults] share the same secular concerns, Chao Mae Kuan Im is more oriented towards the reproduction of morality in a religious sense, given the belief in the goddess is rooted in the bodhisattva concepts of Mahayana Buddhism. In this sense, the cult also incorporates the religious ethos and morality of Mahayana Buddhism, which enhances its position in the eyes of the urban middle class in comparison with the traditional spirit cults” (Ganjanapan 2003, p. 131).

[Kuan Im’s] “wide-scale popularity among the urban Sino-Thai middle class is linked more to moral than to political or economic aspects of life as experienced by urban dwellers. By establishing some religious restrictions for its followers (observation of Buddhist basic precepts, strict vegetarianism and merit-making with monks), the cult provides moral and ethical practices for achieving success in life and solving hardships and difficulties. Guanyin is well known for her compassion and kindness and is believed to help her followers to prosper in business” (Kitiarsa 2005, p. 480).

Historically, Kuan Yin has usually played a very similar role in China, appealing to people who place faith in her, and hope to achieve material success in a moral manner, but are disenchanting with official religious institutions. For example, a medieval Chinese commentary on an invocation [dhāraṇī] to Kuan Yin says:

“The term ‘dhāraṇī’ means to keep all virtues completely. The extended meaning of the term then is thus the keeping of all virtues. For this reason, the merit of keeping the dhāraṇī is indeed limitless. With this, Kuan-yin teaches people to do good. Therefore if the practitioner does good, when he chants the words of the dhāraṇī, blessings as numerous as the sands of the Ganges will instantly come to him. But if he does not dedicate himself to goodness, he will lose touch with the basis of the dhāraṇī. Even if he chants it, the benefit will be slight.” (Yü 2001, p. 140; quoting commentary from 1607).

“The [Kuan Yin] cult was quite independent of monastic backing. One chanted the scripture in the privacy of one’s home and it did not require any ritual that had to be performed by monks” (Yü 2001, p. 134-135)

“All of them [several manifestations of Kuan-Yin in Chinese history] break away from social conventions in order to teach a spiritual lesson. They compel people to question the superficial values of society so that they can find true salvation” (Yü 2001, p. 210).

Receptivity in Thailand to Kuan Yin, a Chinese Mahāyāna *bodhisattva*, is, of course, much broader than just among Thai-Chinese. Due to Chinese cultural influence, the wider middle class tends to hold strongly commercial values more characteristic of Chinese culture than of Thai traditional agricultural society, whether or not people are actually Thai-Chinese ethnically (e.g., Komin 1991; Speece & Igel 2000). This cultural mix and diffusion of values does build in some receptivity to Mahāyāna concepts:

It is not quite as simple as complete adoption of Chinese Mahāyāna; rather, Thai-Chinese identity is generally constructed around Thai Buddhism, but uses Confucianism and Chinese Mahāyāna regarding family and business (Stengs 2009, pp. 22-23). These values have spread beyond ethnic Chinese circles:

The appeal of Sino-Thai culture for other urban Thai can partly be explained by the inclination of people longing for middle class status to adopt “tokens” of middle class culture, which, by implication, are distinctive elements of Sino-Thai culture, in particular Sino-Thai ethics (Stengs 2009, p. 23).

We might say that because Thai-Chinese are so well integrated into Thai society, pure Thai regard Thai-Chinese culture and values as simply a variation on Thai culture. Thus, pure Thai, especially urban middle class, find it easy to adopt some of these values without having to agonize about their own cultural identity, as some might if they adopted ‘foreign’ ideas.

RELIGIOSITY AND BUSINESS ETHICS AMONG SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

Increasingly, evidence shows that spiritual people “are prone to perceive the ethical nature of business issues more clearly and are more sensitive to corporate social performance” (McGhee & Grant 2008, p. 61). “When one holds fast to such religious beliefs, then one seeks to exhibit behavior in daily life and work which conforms to them” (Sausser 2005, p. 349). But, Sausser notes problems in actual implementation – sometimes the need to compete, to make profits, even to follow the boss’s orders, can override personal ethics. Authority and responsibility are often diffuse in bureaucratic organizations, and the average employee cannot do very much. Under such conditions, personal ethics may not have much impact (Sausser 2005, p. 350 ff).

This seems to be less of a problem for devout Buddhists. For example, Brammer et al (2007) used data from over 17,000 managers worldwide to assess whether respondents identifying themselves strongly with their religions did, in fact, have greater concern for corporate social responsibility compared to managers who did not strongly identify with any religion. Most of the 594 Buddhists in this sample were either Japanese or Koreans (and thus, represent Mahāyāna traditions). “Surprisingly, only Buddhists show a clear preference for ethical business behaviour compared to nonbelievers ($p = 0.000$)” (Brammer et al 2007, p. 235). In fact, 55 percent of Buddhist managers said they should go beyond simply the ethical standards required by law, to actively help build a better society. This was nearly 20 percent higher than any other religious group or non-religious respondents in the sample (p. 236).

In another study, Sri Lankan business leaders reported applying ethical principles based on their religion (Fernando & Jackson 2006). The Buddhists in the sample (Theravāda in Sri Lanka) thought carefully about whether their decisions were in accord with the precepts. “I think within the five precepts, whether I am right or wrong. Every time I take a decision, I think within these five precepts” (quoting a Buddhist respondent, p. 34). These business leaders do certainly strive to be profitable, but sometimes the ‘right’ thing takes priority. One could say that religion-based spirituality need not ignore profits, but subordinates profit to broadly-defined morality.

This same concern for morality is apparent among Thai managers and business owners in the few projects that have explicitly looked at the issue (extensive references in Speece 2010). For example, Horayangura (2007) says that “for the spiritually inclined, the most salient consideration is not monetary remuneration, but whether a job allows for or even directly supports their spiritual practice” (p. 283). As they developed their understanding of Dhamma, respondents in this study became increasingly sophisticated in their views of right livelihood, thinking carefully about whether their jobs cause harm or break the precepts in any way. For example

“Daeng has developed a subtler interpretation of the precept on stealing [related to her family’s textbook business] ... Daeng reveals ... that nowadays corruption is unavoidable when bidding for textbook contracts from government schools. ... “It’s like stealing the nation’s money, money that should really have been used for the nation’s development.” ... She considers this kind of work a tainting of her precepts and has chosen not to continue it” (Horayangura 2007, p. 285).

“Mi believes corruption is not only endemic to the publishing business, but the contemporary business world at large. Through her experiences working as an auditor in a large accountancy firm and the finance manager of her family’s hotel, she says she has seen how it is virtually impossible to avoid under-the-table payments, circumvention of laws, or smooth-talking that involves lying in doing business” (Horayangura 2007, p. 286).

[Ko] “believes businesses that sell jewelry or other luxury items are problematic because they stimulate people’s desire for unnecessary things and encourage them to spend money wastefully” (Horayangura 2007, p. 287).

Horayangura talks about the more devout business people moving "from 'not wrong' to 'right' livelihood" (2007, p. 288); i.e., they come to believe that their work should not simply 'cause no harm', but should promote welfare in society. This is the proactive view of right livelihood espoused by many proponents of Buddhist economics, such as Phra Payutto:

"Right Livelihood ... is not determined by the amount of material wealth it produces, but rather by the well-being it generates. Many livelihoods which produce a surplus of wealth simply cater to desires rather than providing for any true need" (Payutto 1994a, Chapter 4, 'Right livelihood').

There seems to be little easily accessible research on how such commitment to Buddhist values affects treatment of employees, but Prayukvong (2010) reports one study showing that devout owners of larger factories take Buddhist precepts seriously in employee relations. For example, in the view of one factory owner:

"the high stock value of the company is not a true success indicator either. He obtains satisfaction from hearing that his employees are able to improve their house, purchase their own land or build a house which they proudly invite him to see. His factory can produce changes in people for the better. If a heavy drinker or drug addict chooses to change their lifestyle that is a profit he values" (Prayukvong 2010, p. 10).

This factory owner paid somewhat higher wages than market rate, and argued (unsuccessfully) in the Chamber of Commerce to get support for raising the legal minimum wage. He provides medical benefits, educational programs, and helped employees set up a cooperative to get better prices through bulk purchases of everyday products. On the job safety is a priority. Workers who had left and then come back reported that there were not many employers in the province who provided such good working conditions and benefits.

METHODOLOGY

This is exploratory work, just beginning, with an initial research methodology that might loosely be defined as ethnographic. "The ethnographer often begins with (participant) observation, which is later complemented by other data (interviews, documents)" (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, p. 161). They note that business research usually does not completely follow traditional ethnographic research methods; notably the extended fieldwork which can last for years. However, the first author of this paper is a follower of Kuan Im, and goes to the Kuan Im temple sometimes, so takes a thoroughly 'EMIC' approach, as is usual in ethnographic research. Thus, there was substantial background knowledge (participant observation) well before ever thinking of this project. (The second author follows the Buddhādāsa-type movement, and has conducted research on Buddhist economics and business ethics in the three Buddhist reform movements noted above. This provides 'ETIC' balance.)

Key informants often provide much of the detailed information that comes from interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008) The three key informants noted in this paper are women shop owners who frequent Kuan Im's temple in Chon Buri. Their shops are large enough to have several employees. These women key informants have seen the author often enough to recognize her as a 'participant'. This helped with access among the key informants, consistent with a recommendation about judgment sampling in Srijumpa et al (2004). Continuing the qualitative work will likewise take advice in Srijumpa et al (2004), by following a chain of introductions from the initial key informants:

"in Asia, with its strong traditions of business secrecy, judgment frequently includes an assessment of access. Working through connections and introductions is frequently the only way to gain good access at any level of companies in Asia" (p. 69).

KEY INFORMANT VIEWS

We focus here on the three key informant women who are small business owners. We are in the very early stages of this research, and although we have some additional interviews, the others are either men and/or managers who do not own their own small business, so they are not included here. (We do note, however, that their views are not much different from those reported here, except that men may not take quite as strong a position on the superiority of women employees.) Several key themes came out in the initial interviews:

1. the shop owners are proactive in their views of 'right livelihood', and do not believe business is incompatible with right livelihood;
2. the owners aim for good working conditions and a good relationship with employees;
3. they believe that mindfulness of Kuan Im inspires both diligence and ethical behavior;
4. owners mentor employees spiritually and commercially, teaching about Kuan Im and training about business operations;
5. they believe that all of this is worthy of merit in Buddhism, and thus will result in good results, both commercially and in terms of spiritual development;
6. and, Kuan Im's tie-in with feminist views is very apparent. Kuan Im is a role model for women, teaching that women can do anything men can do.

All of this, other than the feminist thinking that was very prominent, seems consistent with practice in the context of the other Buddhist reform movements in Thailand.

Proactive 'right livelihood', as described above among devout business people in some of the other Buddhist reform movements, seems strong among devout followers of Kuan Im as well. For example, the woman owner of two mini-marts believes people need to contribute something socially as well as make money in business, the same as Kuan Im historically helped people. She tries not to mark prices up too high, so that she can make a reasonable living but offer cheap products to customers to help them watch their budgets. (The local independent mini-marts, which are not part of any franchise, tend not to be located in the more upscale areas of Bangkok.)

Another woman shop owner said that she worked for a long time and advanced, she knows about how difficult it is to work hard and ethically all the time, but it helps make one's own future good and it helps make the world better. This belief that ethical work and ethical conduct of business is broadly beneficial to society has also been reported in other case studies (Horayangura 2007; Prayukvong 2010), and is characteristic of at least two of the other Buddhist reform movements noted above. Santi Asoke may dissent on the private business aspect.

The belief that ethical business practice is also personally beneficial, both spiritually and economically, is also common among business people in the other movements. The mini-mart owner explicitly said that Kuan Im makes her believe that if she does good for customers, customers want to do good for her, and will connect again (i.e., customer loyalty), and this makes the business a success. This sort of specific application of the concept of karma, learned through Kuan Im, seems to foster a sense of what Westerner marketing managers might call relationship marketing in the context of small retailers (e.g., Adjei et al 2009).

Responsibility for employees is very apparent; owners/managers must watch out for their welfare, and not treat employees simply as resources to be used in running the business. One shop owner reported seeing a broader lesson in her personal moral practices. She said that Kuan Im does not eat beef, but this means more broadly, do not eat big animals. Even more broadly, this point is simply symbolic of how to treat other beings. The lesson translates into the same thing as avoiding anything that would affect employees' lives negatively.

Mentoring, both spiritually and in terms of career development, is an important aspect of how these key informants treat employees. All three owners said that they teach the staff about Kuan Im. Taking time to teach Buddhism and engage in common elements of Buddhist practice is reported by others who have done research on devout owners (e.g., Prayukvong 2010). For example, one of our key informants talked about how the Kuan Im image in the shop encourages employees to be mindful, to work hard and ethically for a good future. If they work well (in both the diligent and ethical senses), feedback is good, too, both in terms of career advancement, and accumulation of merit for beneficial kamma.

The other shop owner observed that the Kuan Im Bodhisattva has worked very hard for a very long time to teach people about Buddhism to make them believe. This has benefited many people. She tells the employees that if they want go up high in work life, they have got to be ethical, and not make trouble for others, but help them. This stress on how personal morality brings material and spiritual benefits is common throughout the different strands of the Buddhist reform movement. (Santi Asoke may downplay the aspect of material benefit, believing in substantially more austerity than the others, but would not disagree on the karmic impact.)

The same concept noted above, about personal benefit from ethical practice, applies to treatment of employees – the three key informants all talked about some version of treating employees well, because then they will work harder, be more loyal, and help the business prosper. This, of course, requires more than just spirituality, so the shop owners teach the employees how to do the business, gradually increasing their responsibility as they learn more. This, in turn, means that they need to pay a little higher than the market rate for small business retail clerks, because the employees acquire more skills and have more responsibility than the normally low-skilled clerks in the market. The mini-mart owner even uses profit-sharing, not just the traditional bonus, at Chinese New Year. These favorable pay scales bring karmic benefits, because they are helping employees.

Thus, again, this specific application of the concept of karma, learned through Kuan Im, seems to foster an understanding of what Western managers might talk about in terms ‘internal relationship marketing’. Strong, long-term employee relations are critical in being able to implement relationship marketing (e.g., Herington et al 2009). “A company will not be successful on the external market if it has not first taken good care of its internal market – its employees” (Liljander 2000, p. 161).

Feminist perspectives are very strong, in the sense that these key informants believe women are as capable as men (or, sometimes, more capable). These small business owners follow Kuan Im at least partly because she represents the potential for women to reach the highest achievements. Kuan Im is a woman who can do everything. They associate Kuan Im particularly as a patron for women, and believe women who know Kuan Im work well (both diligently and ethically) and make the company more ethical, which helps it prosper. They translate their feelings about the feminine Kuan Im into personnel policy. Thus, these women small business owners employ only women.

For example, one owner said that women work harder than men, and also work more carefully than men. Thus, all of the staff in the shop are women. When working, the Kuan Im image makes them think about how to work hard for a good future – both in commercial terms, and for karma – and that women are as capable of commercial and spiritual success as men. Another shop owner also employs only women; she said that women can do all work, anything, and are smarter than men, as the example of Kuan Im shows. The women can keep everything in proper order in the store, and women can do the same work as well as men and are more responsible than men. The women often have more education than men at the same level, as well. The mini-mart owner said the same thing. In the world some women have to support men now, but this patriarchal hierarchy is not inherent. Kuan Im shows that women can do more than men; in particular, women can do successful business, not only men can do it.

In fact, these key informants generally believe that women are more responsible and more ethical than men, both of which help the small business prosper. As owners who benefit from the employees’ work, they feel responsible to provide good working conditions and mentor promising employees, as noted above, but it goes somewhat beyond this. We started out viewing Kuan Im Bodhissatva’s movement simply as simply a fourth stream of the broader Buddhist reform movement. However, historically (over the past few centuries, at least), Kuan Yin has often appealed particularly to women (e.g., Yü 2001). In a sense, these key informant women small business owners seem to have signed on to help Kuan Im in her work of helping other women improve their lives.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that the rising popularity of Kuan Im Bodhisattva among urban, middle class Thai is part of the broader Buddhist reform movement seeking, among other things, to improve ethical standards in modern Thai life, notably in business. As do business people in the other three movements which have gotten more research attention, Kuan Im's followers believe in high ethical standards, and are fairly proactive in thinking about 'right livelihood' and benefitting others as well as themselves. It is interesting that the application of Buddhist values – thinking of the welfare of others – seems to have led our women key informants to thinking that is similar in essence to Western concepts of relationship marketing and internal relationship marketing.

However, a distinctive feature among Kuan Im followers, at least for these women small business owners, is the strongly feminist thinking. However, we explicitly avoided using 'feminist' in the title of this paper, because this is not the Western version which the term usually brings to mind. These women have no real feminist ideology in the Western sense. They simply know that Kuan Im shows that women can do anything they want, in a highly ethical manner, and endeavors always to help others. Thus, Kuan Im is their role model in their own small business careers, and they follow Kuan Im's example in helping other women advance.

But while not really Western feminist thinking, neither does this seem to be exactly Kuan Im's role in traditional Chinese culture. Yü (2001) notes that Western feminist scholars sometimes view Kuan Yin's role in Chinese culture as evidence of a feminist role model for women. In fact, Yü shows that Kuan Yin usually functioned more to make women's lives bearable within traditional cultural norms, rather than as a patron of women small business owners. However, Kuan Im is not doing this for these Thai small business owners; rather, she is a role model for the independent woman who can succeed in business, using ethical means, and helping others through the small business.

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to go into gender roles in Thai culture, but we note that Kuan Im's different role in Thailand might come because strongly patriarchal values do not seem to run as deeply as in many Asian cultures. For example, Falk (2010) notes the seeming paradox of "strong and competent women alongside evidence of inequalities and discrimination against women", but also says that "Thai society is generally noted for its relatively egalitarian gender relations compared to neighbouring countries in South and East Asia" (p. 111). Patana (2004) describes the construction of patriarchal values, particularly in the legal system, during the 18th and 19th centuries, and also mentions elements of an underlying more matriarchal social organization. Bangkok women have also traditionally engaged in trade, even in patriarchal culture. While most tax collectors in early 19th century Bangkok were men, women were assigned as tax collectors in the market because most petty traders were women (Patana 2004).

Whatever the reasons, Kuan Im is clearly a role model who shows that women can be successful small business owners. Kuan Im fosters the application of Buddhist values in small business, both in terms of ethical interactions with customers, and, importantly, a mentoring role for employees. The employees themselves are women because these women shop owners believe women make the most diligent, most ethical employees. Teaching them about Kuan Im helps the business, helps improve ethics in Thai society, generates good karma, and creates more women who will help do the same; all a very virtuous circle.

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