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The Dynamics of Body Politics in Korea

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I

Thanks to the compressed modernity and the rapid economic development since the early 1960s, contemporary Korean women have struggled against their Confucian cultural heritage related to the concept of the female body as they have searched for subjectivity with the “slim body” making process. The celebrated story of South Korea’s economic transformation is internationally famous, but it is not so well known how Korean people have experienced an unbelievable story of cultural transformation – a story about regressive changes in the roles and images of women since the 1960s when South Korea began to take steps towards economic development.

Traditionally, Korean society is a homo-social culture, a culture that values same-sex friendship and social interaction over heterosexual relationships and romance. However, accompanied by economic development and social change, transformations of women’s role and image have taken place swiftly as Korean society has regained self-confidence with rapid economic growth over the last several decades. As old customs and traditions have been replaced by new and modern ones, Haejoang Cho, the leading feminist scholar in Korea, has criticized the fact that women’s role and image have had to change twice, once from motherly to wifely, and then again to those of attractive, sexy young girls. She explains such a transforming process as follows:

With this refusal, women also deny the wisdom transmitted from the

mother's generation. Women of the daughter's generation have no ideal role models, only conflicting roles and images against which to measure themselves: that of mother, motherly wife, and sexy girl. Interestingly, women do not seem to feel conflict while going through such contradictory transformation. (167)

Influenced by economic developments in Korean history, modernity, understood as the birth of the individual, is for the male gender, while modernity for the female gender is expressed in status and materialistic display. In terms of gender relationships, it is generally believed that women exist for men's everyday life and to cater to the male ego. On the other hand, the evolutionary process of modernity is in parallel with the enlarging, expanding process of capitalism.

With regard to economic and cultural transformations, Haejoang Cho classifies contemporary Korean history into 3 stages of transition. The first transition of postcolonial South Korea from traditional patriarchy to modern patriarchy began in the 1960s and extended through the 1980s. The most visible transition from the extended family and from the rural collective family enterprise to the urban nuclear family occurred during these years. The second transition is marked by the rise of consumer society. Korean women's vision and subjectivity have been greatly transformed by Korea's economic success, and through their own related experience of a global culture united by capitalism. A drastic shift occurred between the 1980s and the 1990s, sweeping middle class women into consumerist postmodernity in their desire to be "charming" and "sexy." With its strong emphasis on economic production, consumerism becomes the central focus of sociocultural production in this second stage of transition. In the third stage of transition, starting from the early 1990s, South Korea became a genuine capitalistic-consumer society in which the force of advertisements in the mass

media accelerated (Cho 167-168). In this age of advertising, it seems normal that competence in the presentation of self is crucial for both men's and women's social success. However, it is women who have jumped into image management for body politics in the name of modernity and capitalism.

My discussion of body politics in Korea during the last 30 years mainly focuses on how the concept of the female body is reconstructed for a better appearance, and how the dynamics between women's performance and subjectivity have worked and conceptualized in the social discourse.

II

Body politics, especially female body politics in Korea, have been booming and conspicuously visible since the early 1990s, while the obsession with the unmarried woman's slim body was popularized during the 1970s and the 1980s. But it was in the 1990s that body politics became a kind of fashionable lifestyle among young Korean women. Body politics, epitomized by a good looking and slim body, overflowed and pervaded the whole of Korean society. Since the mid 1990s, a specific joke has circulated widely throughout society: that is, "a woman with a past - in other words, a past love affair with another man - can be forgiven but an ugly woman cannot be forgiven." Korean women, mostly born after the year of 1965, were brought up under the military regime in the period of economic development and started their families in the 1990s. Compared to Korean women of the former generation in the Korean society of the 1980s, when it was rapidly transformed towards political democratization, women of this generation sensed that changes in the social structure left them less and less social space in the Korean society of the 1990s, owing to the New Conservatism.

Only young and attractive girls can have power, so women find new ways to be powerful through body politics. Thus, good looks and a slim body are considered as the pre-condition for young women to achieve their inner desires and social success.

A young woman with good looks and a slim body could have more opportunities to present and practise her secret abilities, especially in the case of getting a job. Women of this new generation no longer identify themselves as mothers and wives, but as individuals. They are inclined to be individuals first and are determined to manage liberated lives free from the constraints of traditional patriarchy. For them, the body is considered as an immediately symbolic but, at the same time, peripheral space for the presentation of their individual self as well as the best place to build up their female identity. As Haejoang Cho argues, in the name of individuality and self-expression, the image of the feminine as embodied in a lovely and sexy woman was being constructed (182). Considering this social context, these newly feminine daughters were manufactured by ambitious mothers, who encouraged them to undergo cosmetic surgery on their eyes and noses, believing that an improved appearance would change their daughters' life chances in marriage and employment.

Moreover, a serious change has occurred in the image of married women, known as "*ajumma*."¹ The most important point of this new cultural phenomenon is the psychological and physical change in married women in their late 20s and 30s. The symbolic icon of this change is "The Missy" syndrome. The new term "Missy," invented in 1994, is now widely used as an expression of the strong desire of young Korean wives for an alternative way of life. This term first was used in 1994 in the

¹ "*Ajumma*," a term for the married woman in her 30s and 40s, is usually free and powerful, while managing all kinds of households. *Ajumma* has nothing to do with the typical concept of femininity, and her physical appearance is quite far from it.

marketing advertisement of a grand department store in Seoul. As soon as it came out, it was broadly adopted to indicate a particular kind of housewife, a married woman who still looks like an unmarried single woman. Even the copywriter was surprised at the speed with which this term took on social meaning and evoked specific images of women and femininity (Lee 150). The story behind the Missy-driven marketing campaign is that a copywriter had an image of “a young housewife who is somewhat independent, reasonable, and who knows how to make herself look like a college girl, not a middle-aged *ajumma*.” The new concept of femininity is encapsulated in the word “Missy,” women who look like *agassi*, like independent “unmarried young women.” Critics of popular culture frequently notice “The Missy” as a newly emerging group in contemporary Korean history, because they are the first daughters of an absolute consumer society. The concept of “Missy” rapidly permeated into the Korean language once the advertising industry recognized the consumerist implications of this target age group’s flamboyant desires. However, from my point of view, the most essential condition of being a Missy is a preoccupation with being looked at, namely, the body politics. Film, as a visual medium, has provided the best representation of this kind of social desire, not confined to material possessions but inclusive of an active and blatant sexuality. Since the 1990s, for Korean women, body politics have become the critical precondition to identifying their social self and self realization powerfully influenced by “Lookism” (外貌差別主義).

On examining the lookism in Korean pop songs and verbal discrimination against women in everyday lives,² In-Sook Lim insists that, “since the latter half of the 1990s”, there has been a new trend of pop songs which outspokenly express disgust

² In-Sook Lim has analyzed 508 songs since the 1990s whose lyrics admire or ridicule women’s looks from an internet music site, “Bugs.”

towards ugly and fat women and stigmatize these women as “bombs”. The more noticeable point is that “since 2000” men have been admiring perfectly beautiful women, and their interest in women’s “sex-appeal” images increased (“Lookism” 347). Both admiring and degrading women based on their looks treats women as completely physical beings. It suggests that the stereotype that the value of women is judged by their looks is still practised and even strengthened through lyric lines. This has been the contemporary popular culture in Korean society related to women’s body politics.

III

Until the end of the 1980s, body politics were less oppressive than nowadays. However, the “slim body” syndrome became clearly visible during the 1990s, influenced by the flowering of commercialism, the enlargement of the diet market, and the changing concept of female sexuality. In particular, after the 1997 IMF financial crisis, body politics with lookism were rapidly absorbed into the dominant power relations and, as a result, have had an important influence on getting a job, especially for young women in their 20s. During the transforming of the national economic system into the global structure, many people had to leave their contemporary jobs and it was more difficult for a woman to get a job. Thus, her individual body politics in the public sphere have become more and more important and crucial. For instance, a survey on the relationship between the employment rate and the look-discriminatory rate reports that in the year in which the employment rate of girls’ high school graduates was lowest, the look-discriminatory rate was the highest.

During the 1990s, Korean companies’ look-discriminatory selection customs were one of the major reasons for the pervasive lookism in Korean society and

overheated body management lifestyle. The degree of appearance restriction through unofficial and indirect methods was higher than that through direct/official methods. In-Sook Lim analyzed 3,152 official letters, which companies sent to a women's industrial high school from 1998 to 2002, in order to find any change in the trends and characteristics of look-discriminatory selection customs. She reports the major findings as follows:

First, there was a sharp decline in the discriminatory rate from about 40% in 1998 to 12.4% in 2002. Second, companies have sustained the custom through diverse ways in which they openly express specific bodily requirement in official letters, and unofficially ask for the requirements by telephone, or indirectly ask selection substitute companies to find the candidates that meet the requirements. Third, the fact that the same occupation and work require different conditions for the applicants indicates that these requirements reflect just the subjective preference of companies rather than the necessary conditions for work. Fourth, though bodily requirements apply not only to women but also to men, the restrictions for women are generally tougher than those for men. Finally, the discriminatory custom has contributed to the rapid expansion of body industries in Korea. (“Women’s Employment” 143)

Because Korean society in the 1990s considered a woman's appearance as her individual ability, 80% of women college students would like to transform their current appearance (*Hankyoreh Daily Newspaper*, 8 Oct 2001). It is reported that 70% of Korean women from their teens to their forties believe that a woman's appearance becomes the most important factor to have an influence on her personal life (*Saekye Daily Newspaper*, 3 Aug 2002). This kind of social atmosphere, in which a woman's appearance is the most decisive factor in her future, is strengthened and heightened by

the company's look-discriminatory selection customs. Thus, various kinds of body management like diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery have become popularized among Korean young women. We could see the enormous change during the 1990s in terms of body management for women's improved appearance.

According to a Gallup survey in 1994 on college women students' intentions regarding cosmetic surgery, only 13.9% had once considered it. But by 1999 the number had increased to 59%. In 1996, another survey on men and women college students' attitudes towards selecting their girlfriends and boyfriends was carried out. While 35% of men students considered physical appearance as the first condition for selecting their girlfriends, only 7% of women students considered it as the first condition for selecting their boyfriends. Thus there was a five-fold difference between men and women students' considerations. Moreover, while 67% of women students have considered cosmetic surgery, only 18% of men students have considered it (*Joong-Ang Ilbo*, 3 December 1996). On the other hand, in 1998, a survey reported that 67.4% of young unmarried women would like to have cosmetic surgery, because they thought that "good looks and a slim body" could be evaluated as the part of their intelligence and ability, in other words as "physical capital" (*Dong-A Ilbo*, 24 September 1998).

There is an interesting study of the ideal body in Korean Beauty Contests, such as Miss Korea and Super Model Contests, interpreting the phenomenon of Korean women's ideal body and analyzing the change in the body of winners of beauty contests in 1971-2002. It has shown us the changing process of the social concept of women's ideal body by investigating the objective data of the body size of winners in beauty contests. The body acquired commercial value with the start of the Miss Korea Contest in 1957, and maximized its commercial purpose with the introduction of the

Super Model Contest in 1992. The most conspicuous difference between the two contests are the evaluation categories. While Miss Korea contestants are evaluated by their body, character, and intelligence combined, Super Model contestants are evaluated by the body rather than other factors. So the body of a Super Model is accepted as a highly valued commodity. The standard height of Korean women aged 18-24 changed from 155.6 cm in 1979 to 162 cm in 2002. However, the standard bust measurement has changed from 85.5 cm in 1979 to 82 cm in 2002. These changing processes tell us that the standard body of Korean women has been slimming and slimming, in parallel with the changing process of the bodies of winners of both contests (Namgung 19). Thus, tallness is the most prestigious condition, considered as a natural gift among the characteristics of the ideal body. Because tallness cannot be achieved by cosmetic surgery, it has become the significant factor in the myth of social and commercial success.

Next, let's look at the socio-cultural context of diet, especially for young women since 2000. Attention should be paid to the effects of the look-discriminatory social atmosphere and the mass media, which intensively spread the image of the slim body, on the diet of college women. In her survey of 438 college women students, Lim insists that dieters are more likely than non-dieters to evaluate their own bodies on the basis of the media's body image and to embody that image. College women students' experience, related to the look-discriminatory custom in everyday life, becomes the fundamental reason to decide to carry on with the diet. Dieters also more likely regard the female body as a resource, which influences the quality of women's lives, and have actually experienced "the effects of physical capital" in a negative way ("Sociocultural Context of Diet" 263).

A similar motivation has an important influence on college women students' decisions about cosmetic surgery. In another piece of research by Lim, based on a survey of 479 college students in October 2003, those who have experiences or intentions regarding cosmetic surgery are more likely to perceive a woman's body as physical capital or actually experience looks-discrimination. Another interesting finding is that only looks-discriminatory experience remains influential on the dependent variables, while the stereotype does not. In that sense, an individual's personal experience connects to her performance of the slim body making project as well as her search for the subjectivity of self-integration into the dominant power structure. She concludes that the most crucial factor in the intention and practice of cosmetic surgery is "the looks-discriminatory social atmosphere" ("The Experience" 122).

On the other hand, it is assumed that working women have become increasingly concerned about their physical attractiveness and it will be up to the individual to adjust her behaviour in order to obtain a job or promotion, to develop a career and to increase her social confidence in terms of human relationships. It is also known that physical attractiveness significantly influences a woman's employment, promotion, earnings, and interpersonal relations. Chang-Hee Im argues that a woman worker's self-satisfaction in physical attractiveness is related to satisfaction with her interpersonal relations. Research has shown that the interrelation of physical attractiveness, self-esteem, interpersonal relations, and their relation to promotion are explained to a certain degree by the proposed model. Therefore, it is important for managers to know whether the physical status of employees affects their performance because it leads to self-esteem and excellent interpersonal relation skills, or whether their physical attractiveness acts

independently of these processes. The results of this research clearly suggest that physical attractiveness affects an employee's self-esteem and workplace interactions (597-621). Thus, the pervasive look-discrimination in everyday life contributes to the proliferation of diets and the intention and practice of cosmetic surgery among young Korean women.

Since the 1990s, the size of body industries in Korea has expanded immensely, while encouraging every individual woman to practise specific body management. Among them, the most rapidly enlarging section is the cosmetic surgery industry. When one focuses on it, the change in the quantity of advertisements is very clear. Among the 127 issues of two women's monthly magazines, *Women Dong-A* since November 1967 and *Women Joong-Ang* since January 1970, advertisements for cosmetic surgery in both magazines increased enormously up to July 2001. The number of advertisements per issue was 1-2 before 1995, 2-3 in 1995, 7 in 1997, but increased to 26.5 in 2000 (Lim, "The Body Project", 195). For instance, in *Women Joong-Ang*, the ratio of cosmetic surgery advertisements changed from 4.6% (3/65) in the issue of January 1971, 0% (0/92) in the issue of January 1981, 2.5% (5/201) in the issue of January 1991, to 18% (59/330) in the issue of January 2001. Lim analyzes the specific strategy of advertisements for cosmetic surgery as follows:

The main strategy to persuade consumers of the necessity for cosmetic surgery is to stigmatize the pre-surgery body. This type of advertisement seems to encourage women to feel an appearance-complex. The other strategies are to stress the beauty of a specific body part as a requirement of perfect beauty, and then to present the strictly ideal condition of the part. To reduce fear of the surgery, the scientific and safe aspects of the surgery are mostly mentioned. Other strategies are to emphasize the rapid recovery,

the naturalness of after-surgery, and images of active and courageous modern women. (“The Body Project” 210)

Naturally, the expansion and advertising strategy of the cosmetic surgery industry imply a strong emphasis on body politics for making the “slim body”.

So what was the main reason for the increase in the number of cosmetic surgery advertisements after the late 1990s? I would like to suggest that we should remember that \$10,000 as the GNP per capita was accomplished in 1995. This means that postmodern consumer capitalism has been emerging as an important part in the everyday lifestyle. Compared to other Asian countries, in Korean society cosmetic surgery is widely accepted and generally recognized as a usual and normal event. However, the more interesting point is that the majority of cosmetic surgery clinics are located in a particular district, Kangnam, South of Seoul.³ I’ll provide exact data from April 2000: 48.7% of the cosmetic surgery clinics in Korea are located in Seoul and 64% of those in Seoul are densely located in the area known as “Kangnam” (Lim, “The Body Project” 197). Another surprising point is the increasing number of plastic surgeons during the last 30 years. The number of plastic surgeons has changed from 22 in 1977, to 164 in 1985, 556 in 1995, 847 in 1999, and 1020 in 2001. While the increasing ratio of medical specialists as a whole is 630%, the increasing ratio of plastic surgeons is 4,636% (Chung and Kwon 572). A Korean feminist scholar calls this medication of beauty “knife-style.” (Lim, “The Body Project”, 202).

The effect of the looks-discriminatory social atmosphere and of sex-stereotyping is very powerful, especially in college women’s cosmetic surgery. I think it

³ “Kangnam” means not only the geographical location, but more importantly the specific culture dominated by postmodern consumer capitalism. Nowadays, the word “Kangnam” has a more important meaning as a particular cultural connotation.

is the most noticeable point that young women, especially college women students, consider their female bodies as physical capital, because the looks-discriminatory social atmosphere contributes to their intention and practice of cosmetic surgery. On 7 June 2004, Yoon-Ho Nam reported that 9.1% of men and 11.4% of women had experienced failure in getting a job due to their physical looks, based on an on-line survey of 8,576 men and women. At this point, the performance of slim body making is intertwined with the subjectivity of practising cosmetic surgery. Jung-Min Kim examines the triangular relationships between the effects of the mass media, the tendency for young women to make bodily comparisons, and the BMI of 392 high school girl students and 391 college women students on their attitudes to eating. The findings of the research are as follows:

- 1) While mass media influence differed by grade, the tendency for appearance comparisons and attitudes towards eating did not differ by grade.
- 2) Mass media influence, the tendency for appearance comparisons and attitudes towards eating differed by BMI⁴
- 3) Mass media pressure, specific attributes comparisons, and BMI were significant predictors of attitudes towards eating.
- 4) The tendency for appearance comparisons played a mediating role in the relationship between mass media and attitudes toward eating. (73)

Thus, young women students' tendency for appearance comparisons is the most important factor, influenced by the social concept of the slim body as physical capital.

On the other hand, adult women's experiences are not much different from young women's. Based on her research on the influence of

⁴ BMI: Body Mass Index

socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance, dealing with the questionnaires from 456 adult women in Pusan in July 2004, Keum-Hee Hong insists that socio-cultural attitudes toward appearance factors could be analyzed into 2 factors: the internalization of the mass media and the social recognition of physical appearance. Due to such a social atmosphere, cosmetic surgery has been popularized. In 2004, the survey, processed on the internet “Interpark” site, figured out that one in six men as well as one in four women have already experienced cosmetic surgery. According to Hong’s survey, there are significant differences in bodily satisfaction between groups in terms of body image distortion. Respondents were barely satisfied with their bodies, and the group with a high body image distortion showed low bodily satisfaction. Also, a significant difference existed in socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance and appearance management behaviour. The group with positive socio-cultural attitudes towards appearance was found in the analysis to show a high concern with appearance and many experiences of appearance-management behaviours. More interestingly, she emphasizes that the interest in body image and bodily satisfaction among middle-aged women in their 40s and 50s are now increasing. She analyzes the findings as follows:

Most people were not satisfied with their weight and overall body shape despite having normal or lean figures except in 3.3% of the total samples. From the above research findings, adult women’s satisfaction with their body was shown to be high when they were subjectively satisfied with their appearance’s attractiveness. And the results indicate that adult women are under the pressure of a socio-culturally distorted image of beauty. (48)

On the basis of several important studies, a paradigmatic analysis found sets of binary oppositions between the slim body versus the fat body, in which “being slim” equals “autonomy,” “subjectivity,” and “empowerment”. Thus, the social discourse about slim body making is dramatically increasing in the so-called “Body Society” where social and moral issues are centered around and embodied in the female body. A myth behind the contemporary consumer capitalistic society was also revealed, namely that a slim body could be culturally passed as an acceptable female body. At this point the dynamics between performance and subjectivity of “slim body” making has been ignited. Thus, mass media and popular culture need to play an educational role in demystifying the body myth in order to reveal that the slim body just makes “a spectacle of autonomy instead of authentic autonomy” (Yoon 381). For this purpose, we probably need media activism on a global scale.

IV

For better understanding of the slim body syndrome in current Korean society, I would like to present the interesting story of how powerfully the relationship between the physical appearance of the female body and body management politics is activated, by analyzing the recent film, “A beautiful girl is distressed” (2006). The main story is based on the animation by Yumiko Suzuki in Japan, but it clearly illustrates the dynamics between the performance of body politics and the subjectivity of women’s self-realization.

Hannah Kang is an extremely fat woman of 95kg with a medium stature of 169cm in her mid 20s. She is an invisible singer for another sexy singer, Ami, existing

only as a voice behind the stage, because of her obese body. Thus, no one recognizes her as a real singer. Hannah loves Sang-Jun Han, the music producer working for Ami at the company. When Hannah tells of her secret love for Sang-Jun to her friend, Jung-Min, she points out the importance of “slim body” making, saying how men have classified women into 3 categories, according to their physical appearance.

To men, there are only three kinds of women. The beautiful girl is classified as a precious article (名品), and the common girl as a genuine article (眞品), but the fat girl is classified as returned goods (返品).

Hannah is invited to Sang-Jun’s birthday party and a beautiful red dress is delivered to her, just before she leaves for the party. She misunderstands it as a present from Sang-Jun and decides to wear it. When she arrives, Hannah finds out that Ami is wearing exactly the same red dress. Thus, at the party, Hannah’s fat body line is sharply contrasted with Ami’s S(sexy) body line. Later, Hannah listens to a secret dialogue between Sang-Jun and Ami and she is immensely shocked by what Sang-Jun thinks of her.

Hannah is very miserable because she only exists for you. She is ugly and fat, thus miserable in spite of having an extraordinary talent, while you are pretty and slim, thus very lucky even though you don’t have any talent as a singer. We should only utilize Hannah, UTILIZE, I mean, commercialize her talent for singing.

Reflecting the essential characteristics of the show business industry, his words stimulated Hannah and, as a result, completely transformed her appearance, and thus her life.

On the next day, Hannah disappears, because she has decided to become a “beautiful girl” by undergoing serious cosmetic surgery. When the doctor warns her, saying “You may die of such a serious cosmetic surgery and it is probable,” Hannah answers very symbolically “I died yesterday.” Several months later, she appears with a new identity, not as fat Hannah but as sexy Jenny, with a slim body of 48kg. Now, she can become a popular singer with a perfect sexy body and an excellent singing ability. The following story of Jenny’s experience as a “beautiful girl” reflects the powerful marketability of a slim body in contemporary Korean society. However, she is not quite happy with the false identity as Jenny. When Hannah asks Jung-Min whether she should confess to Sang-Jun that she is Hannah, Jung-Min advises her not to tell him because most Korean men consider a woman with cosmetic surgery not as a woman from the three categories but simply as a monster. In fact, Sang-Jun tells Jenny his opinion, “I don’t mind a woman having cosmetic surgery, except my woman.” This is the common view of most Korean men. The director of this film, Yong-Hwa Kim, explained his intention in making the film: “Is she really happy if she has given up her past self and identity through cosmetic surgery in order to attain something new?” Finally, fat Hannah’s transformation into beautiful Jenny is revealed to the public. However, in the closing scene, Hannah/Jenny has achieved the public’s recognition as a popular singer and Sang-Jun’s love as a beautiful girl. The film shows an extreme case of cosmetic surgery in the consumer capitalistic Korean society. Thus, it is the story of Cinderella with cosmetic surgery.

Unexpectedly, this film was successful enough to attract 6,620,000 people to the cinema in only the 67 days from 14 December 2006 to 21 February 2007. Such a big success in a short time is a definite sign that many Korean people sympathized with

Hannah's story. The body politics in the film attempt to make clear how the power of making a "slim body" as physical capital drives the self-liberation strategy with self-confidence, and is replaced by the individual female body. In this consumer capitalistic society, the body has become the most important commodity, and an object of possession and consumption. Enormously influenced by the media and popular culture, more young women in their 20s make their female bodies into a site of investment and objectify it as a project in which fabrication can be carried out. This social phenomenon of slim body making is fostering and spreading a new means of self-realization and a logic of inclusion and exclusion, according to the social concept of "cultural passing." In short, the dynamics between the performance and the subjectivity increase not the possibility of resistance but the voluntary self-integration into the dominant power relations. This is the current stage of body politics in contemporary Korean society.

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