

# The Translation and Dissemination of Alai's Works in the English-Speaking World

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## **Abstract:**

Alai's works are known for their mysterious and mystical Tibetan stories, which have drawn great interest from the Western world. His important works have enjoyed high quality translations and received positive feedback from the English-speaking world. In particular, the translations by Howard Goldblatt and his wife capture the aesthetic quality of the original works, allowing readers a unique aesthetic experience. However, it is undeniable that translation is constrained by ideology, which influences the texts of translation, and even makes the works of Alai objects of ideological imagination, which in a way diminishes the textual significance and authorial intention of the original works. Only when we fully respect heterogeneous literature, and the translational ethics of cultural values, allowing contemporary Chinese literature and world literature to communicate and strengthen each other can we highlight the unique value of Chinese literature, and enrich the discursive space of the republic of world letters.

**Keywords:** Works of Alai, English translations, ideology

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Within the contexts of the contemporary Chinese literary world, Alai is not a prolific writer. However, from the internal perspective of an ethnic minority, he has successfully deployed a subtle tone, a light and Zen-infused style in order to chant ecological epics taking place in a Tibet posited between history and reality, tradition and modernity, and nation and country, presenting the cultural charms of Tibet along with its vicissitudes and hardships, thus creating a unique writing style that stands out against the context of the Chinese-majority literature.

Looking at his reception in the West, Alai's works have been characterized as distant and oriental, showing the snowy frontiers and mysterious and legendary

stories of Chinese minorities, a theme which has garnered great interest and attention in the Western world.

During the 1980s and 1990s Alai wrote twelve novellas: *Akhu Tenpa*, *Dance of the Soul*, *The Silversmith in the Moonlight*, *The Fish*, *A Swarm of Bees Fluttering*, *The Loba*, *The Locust Blossoms*, *Gela Grows Up*, *Life*, *The White Mountain Range: Like Galloping Horses*, *Bloodstains from the Past*, and *Blood Ties*. These shorter works were collected in an English-language anthology titled *Tibetan Soul: Stories*, which were collaboratively translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping, and published by Merwin Asia Press in 2012. The Tibetan landscape, customs, and narrative techniques featured in these novellas were further exhibited in later novels such as *Red Poppies* and *King Gesar*. In 2005, the British publishing house Canogate Books launched at the global level a cultural exchange activity of “retelling myths,” aiming at drawing ancient myths from different countries or regions, mixing in the contemporary contexts and furnishing them with new meaning in the current times. Well-known publishers from more than 30 countries and regions including the United States, France, China, and Germany participated in the event. Participating authors included many Nobel Prizes and Booker Prize winners. Chinese writers and their respective representative works were also among them with titles such *Binu and the Great Wall: The Myth of Meng* written by Su Tong, *The Myth of Lady White Snake* by Li Rui, *The Myth of Hou Yi And Chang’E* by Ye Zhaoyan, and *The Song of King Gesar* by Alai. In 2013, through Canogate Books, Howard Goldblatt and his wife Lin Lijun published the English-language translation of *The Song of King Gesar*. Afterward, journals like *The Times*, *Wales Arts Review*, and *Fantastic Fiction* published relevant reviews to introduce the book to the West. However, the dissemination and influence of *The Song of King Gesar* are far behind *Red Poppies*, whose English version was also translated by Mr. and Mrs. Goldblatt and published by Houghton Mifflin in the United States in 2002. In the following years, *Red Poppies* was translated into more than ten languages, such as French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian, Hebrew, Polish, Slovenian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Hindi. It is noteworthy that the Hindi version published in 2018 is translated from the English version, which is a common phenomenon in the translation and introduction of exported Chinese literature. Similar examples would be the German and Norwegian versions of *Wives and Concubines* by Su Tong being translated from the English version; or the Spanish and Turkish versions of *The Moon Opera* by Bi Feiyu being translated from the French version. Because there are fewer foreign-language translators who are proficient in Chinese and understand the essence of Chinese culture, the translations of contemporary Chinese literature

sometimes have to be based on versions from English, French, German or other major languages that have successfully recreated the original and are thus fitting to become the blueprint for a new translation. How many Chinese elements and Chinese experiences can Chinese literature retain after it has been translated and retranslated between different languages? What is the readerly experience of readers from different languages? Chinese literature has undergone multiple instances of having gone through the linguistic and cultural transformations imposed by a “Chinese-Intermediate Language-Target Language” model of translation. In the process of eliminating or deriving multiple, complex textual meanings, these issues are worthy of our consideration.

Alai has mentioned how the literary style and a character, the second young master in *Red Poppies*, were the leading forces in promoting the development of the story of the novel. The two factors alternate and complement each other, bringing constant surprises and peaks to the creative process behind the novel (Chen 2016). It can be said that Mr. and Mrs. Goldblatt captured the aesthetic characteristics of the original text clearly, its purity and lightness, especially the exotic customs of Tibetan folk songs, and uttermost profoundly poetic language of Alai, not only introducing this work to English-speaking readers but also inspiring the West to think about Tibetan culture, society and history. American novelist Francis Goodman praised *Red Poppies* in the following way: “This wonderful novel is full of amazing textual brilliance, its vibrant and vivid depiction of the cheerful and cruel reality of the world, highlighting the author’s commonality with human beings and his deep insight into the human condition. Alai’s *Red Poppies* is a shocking work.” (Alai 2002: cover)

Tibetan folk songs are one of the unique characteristics of Alai’s works. There are eight simple, intelligent and concise Tibetan folk songs in *Red Poppies*. Folk songs are the psychological sedimentation of an ethnic nation and the representation of its collective unconsciousness, reflecting the history, culture and the complex spiritual world of a people. The mountains and snows of Jiarong, its vast flora and fauna, objects and the hardships of its life all collaborated to create the spiritual space of the tribe. The nature, the grass, the flowers and the flowers have integrated into the spiritual world of the Tibetans. The sounds have special meaning and feelings for the Tibetans who make the snowy plateau their home. Thus, when Drolma fell in love with the silversmith, she couldn’t help but quietly sing a love song full of Tibetan flavor:

她的肉, 鸟吃了, 咯吱, 咯吱,

她的血，雨喝了，咕咚，咕咚，  
她的骨头，熊啃了，嘎吱，嘎吱，  
她的头发，风吹散了，一绺，一绺。(Alai 2005: 100)

Her flesh, eaten by the birds, gezbi, gezbi,  
Her blood, drunk by the rain, gudong, gudong,  
Her bones, gnawed by bears, gazbi, gazbi,  
Her hair, loosened by the wind, one lock after another. (Alai 2002: 115)

The onomatopoeia “吱，吱，嘎吱” (“gezbi, gudong, gazbi”) combines nature (birds, rains, bears) with human elements, and integrates auditive and visual elements. It has a strong sense of synesthesia and enhances the aesthetic appeal of the expressions. The love of the world and the heavens and the earth, forever and everlasting, a beautiful girl’s sentimental map can be sublimated into a long-lasting narrative poem thanks to the imitative power of the onomatopoeia. Goldblatt used the method of transliteration to create a new onomatopoeia in English: “gezbi, gazbi, gudong,” vividly conveying Drolma’s strong love for the silversmith. This kind of animated words with musicality and rhythm not only aptly evokes the original style of the folk song, but also brings its auditory enjoyment to English readers. It introduced the sounds, its perceptions, and its rich related imaginary, all of which added to the evocative appeal and power of the text.

The act of translation is a process of decoding and re-encoding. The conversion between two languages will inevitably lead to the disappearance or appreciation of the original text’s content and meaning. According to Andre Lefevere, an American translation scholar, “patrons, ideology and poetics are key elements when translators dealt with original words and expressions” (48). Among them, the influence of ideology is the most notable, as aspects such as the choice of which text to translate, which translation strategy to use, and the addition, subtraction and rewriting of text content are subject to this ubiquitous “hidden” power, that is, the constraints of ideology, which are deeply rooted in the generative mechanisms of the text, manipulating the activity of translators from their consciousness. Being a famous translator, Howard Goldblat also inevitably has ideological biases when examining and translating Chinese literary works, which also affected the creative process behind the English translation of *Red Poppies*.

*Red Poppies* takes place in the Hengduan Mountains area on the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Jiarong Tibetan Area. The Jiarong Tibetans are a famous people with a long history and rich cultural heritage, which descends from

the line of the other peoples of the three Tibetan districts. Historically, the Jiarong Tibetan Area is an important area of passage for the ancient Tibetan-Burmese language family and other ethnic groups and tribes to the north and south. It is now an important border area in the northwest of Sichuan Province. Geographically speaking, Jiarong Tibetan Area is located on the eastern edge of Tibetan culture. Historically on the western edge of Chinese Han culture, it is a “transition zone” or “marginal zone” that is influenced by both Chinese and Tibetan culture. Alai, having been born in the Jiarong Tibetan area, has a deep understanding of the Jiarong Tibetan area, this “transition zone” between the Han and Tibetan cultures. Its complex entanglements of cultural, political and economic relations are also deeply influential on his work. In the novel *Red Poppies*, Alai elaborated on the power of space of the Jiarong Tibetan Area from the perspective of geographical features:

有谚语说：“汉族皇帝在早晨的太阳下面，达赖喇嘛在下午的太阳下面。”

我们是在中午的太阳下面还在靠东一点的地方。这个位置是有决定意义的。它决定了我们和东边的汉族皇帝发生更多的联系，而不是和我们自己的宗教领袖达赖喇嘛。地理因素决定了我们的政治关系。（Alai 2005: 17-18）

As the saying goes, the Han emperor rules beneath the morning sun, the Dalai Lama governs beneath the afternoon sun.

We were located slightly to the east under the noonday sun, a very significant location. It determined that we would have more contact with the Han emperor to the east than with our religious leader, the Dalai Lama. Geographical factors had decided our **political alliance**. (Alai 2002: 20-21)

“The Han emperor rules beneath the morning sun.” In the morning, the sun rises from the east, this means that the person we call the “emperor” comes from the east; “the Dalai Lama governs beneath the afternoon sun.” In the evening, the sun falls in the west, thus, the religious leaders of the Jiarong Tibetan area came from the West. This passage gestures to the fact that in the Jiarong area the political and economic realm is subject to China, while the religious realm is subject to the Tibet. In the original text, “Geographical factors determine our political relationship” (“地理因素决定了我们的 政治关系”). This “political relationship” (“政治关系”) refers to the “suzerain relationship” between the Jiarong Tibetan Area and the Han Dynasty regime in politics and economy. But in its English-language translation

(“Our political alliance”), the word “alliance” is interpreted as an association, connection, or union amongst equals; eg. a union of states or countries in alliance. This kind of translation changed the relationship between the Jiarong Tibetan Area and the Eastern Han Dynasty regime from one of a subsidiary or subordinates to another one of equivalent state alliance. The translation’s rewriting here is in line with the “expected imagination” of some people in the West who are sensitive to Tibetan politics. The rewriting of this relationship in translation under this ideological manipulation is faintly visible in the translation.

原文	译文	回译
<p>我说，“对一个吐司来说，这已经够了。土司就是土司，土司又不能成为国王。”</p> <p>书记官当时就把我这句话记下了。因此，我知道自己这句话没有说错。麦其家强大了，凭借武力向别的土司发动过几次进攻。如果这个过程不停顿地进行下去。有一天，天下就只有一个土司了。拉萨会看到，南京也会看到。而这两个方向肯定都没人乐意看到这样的结果。</p> <p>(①所以，麦其家只要强大到现在这样，别的土司恨着我们而又拿我们没有一点办法就够了。)(②在我们家里，只有哥哥愿意不断发动战争。只有战争才能显示出他不愧为麦其土司的继承人。)(③但他应该明白历史上任何一个土司都不是靠战争来取得最终的地位。)虽然每一个土司都沿用了国王这个称谓，却没有哪个认真以为自己真正是个国王。(④在这些雪山下面的谷地里，你不能太弱小，不然，你的左邻右舍就会轮番来咬你，这个一口，那个再来一口，最后你就只剩下一个骨头架子了。我们有一句谚语说：那样的话，你想喝水都找不到嘴巴了。)而我哥哥好像从来不想这些。他说，“趁那些土司还没有强大，把他们吃掉就完事了。”<sup>1</sup></p>	<p>I said, “This should be enough for any chieftain. A chieftain is a chieftain; he can never be a king.”</p> <p>The historian copied down my words, so I knew I hadn’t said anything wrong. The Maichi family had waged several wars against other chieftains and had grown powerful in the process. If that continued, one day there would be only one chieftain left in the world, which would not escape the attention of Lhasa or Nanking, and neither would be happy with that. But in the valleys beneath the snow mountains, one could not be too weak either, or his neighbors would take turns picking him apart. A bite here, another bite there, and pretty soon he would be nothing but skeleton. Then, as one of our savings goes, you could not even find your mouth to drink water. So the Maichi family had to be powerful only to the extent that other chieftains hated us but could do nothing about it. Yet one of this seemed to register with my brother, who should have known that throughout history not a single chieftain had ever succeeded in inheriting the title through wars. In my family, he alone sought constant warfare, since war was the only way he could show he was the chieftain’s worthy heir. “Before the other chieftains grow strong,” he’d say, “we should gobble them up and everything will be fine.”</p>	<p>我说，“对一个吐司来说，这已经够了。土司就是土司，土司又不能成为国王。”</p> <p>书记官当时就把我这句话记下了。因此，我知道自己这句话没有说错。</p> <p>麦其家向别的土司发动过几次进攻，当武力强大以后。</p> <p>如果这个过程不停顿地进行下去。有一天，天下就只有一个土司了。拉萨会看到，南京也会看到。而这两个方向肯定都没人乐意看到这样的结果。</p> <p>(④在这些雪山下面的谷地里，你不能太弱小，不然，你的左邻右舍就会轮番来咬你，这个一口，那个再来一口，最后你就只剩下一个骨头架子了。我们有一句谚语说：那样的话，你想喝水都找不到嘴巴了。)</p> <p>(①所以，麦其家只要强大到现在这样，别的土司恨着我们而又拿我们没有一点办法就够了。)(③但哥哥应该明白历史上任何一个土司都不是靠战争来取得最终的地位。)</p> <p>(②在我们家里，只有哥哥愿意不断发动战争。只有战争才能显示出他不愧为麦其土司的继承人。)</p> <p>“趁那些土司还没有强大，”他说，“把他们吃掉就完事了。”</p>

Notes: Italics mark adjustments of word order in translated text, and dotted underlines mark abridgements.

1 David-Néel Alexandra. *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling, the Legendary Tibetan Hero*. London: Ryder & Co, 1933.

“麦其家强大了, 凭借武力向别的土司发动过几次进攻。” In this sentence, the original text conforms to the standard Chinese language grammar rule of putting “cause” before “effect,” which is in contrast to the English-language practice of putting the “effect” first before introducing the “cause.” Therefore, the translator changed the word order of the sentence: “The Maichi family had waged several wars against other chieftains and had grown powerful in the process.” ( “麦其家向别的土司发动过几次进攻, 当武力强大以后” ). In addition, “effect” is usually introduced before “cause,” according to the Western people’s “consequence-oriented” thinking mode. However, translators usually rearrange “cause” before “effect” in order to make logic clear when sentences are too lengthy or written in groups or paragraphs. Thus, Howard Goldblatt rearranged the word order of the content of ④ and ① in the original text; “Yet” in ③ led to “brother” to link with ②. By paying attention to the linguistic conventions of the target language, rewriting in the translation above makes the logical order clearer and enables English readers to more easily accept and understand the content of the phrase. Furthermore, the translated text suppressed two sentences “我哥哥好像从来不想这些” (My brother never thought about these) and “虽然每一个土司都沿用了国王这个称谓, 却没有哪个认真以为自己真正是个国王” (although every chieftain adopted the title of king, no one took it seriously.) Because “my brother” never considered the reasons above, therefore he came up with the idea of “gobbling other chieftains.” Taking into consideration the communicative power and expressiveness of the passage, Howard Goldblatt deleted these sentences, thus conforming to the briefness and directness of English-language usage. Because of this, the translated text reads more fluently and smoothly.

We have seen that the words and psychological monologues of the second idiotic young master revealed that he saw through the internal relations of the chieftains in the Jiarong Tibetan area, as well as through the power games played between the Jiarong Tibetan area as a “marginal zone and the Han Dynasty. “One day there would be only one chieftain left in the world, which would not escape the attention of Lhasa or Nanking, and neither would be happy with that,” a sentence that shows us that the Jiarong Tibetan Area is an extremely complicated “marginal zone” in its geographical, political, military, economic and cultural dimensions.

If a chieftain and his tribe want to survive, the tribe can only expand in economic, political, and military terms in order to escape “being gobbled up.” Nevertheless, chieftains had to find a balance among their peers, lest the internal Tibetan conflicts spill over and turn into external conflicts with the Han regime

if ever the strongest tribe were to eliminate the other chieftains. This is because the Han regime never wished for any single tribe to rise up and be on a par with itself and out of its control. The second idiotic young master had a very clear and objective judgment on the political situation at this time. “虽然每一个土司都沿用了国王这个称谓,却没有哪个认真以为自己真正是个国王” correlates with “土司就是土司,土司又不能成为国王”, which further emphasizes the young master’s understanding of the chieftain system that is subordinated to the Han regime. However, the translated text deleted this sentence, thus weakening the fact that Jiarong was a suzerain of the Han Empire. We don’t know whether the translator disposed of the politically sensitive wording subconsciously or intentionally, however these ideological “hints” in the translation react or cater to the novelty-prone tastes and the Orientalist ethno-political “imagination” held by some Westerners.

The process of translation is a process of constant selection, from “what to translate,” or “translate for whom,” to “how to translate.” As the concept of translation shapes a translator’s overall understanding of the language and his understanding of translation activities, the process of translation always both tangibly and intangibly restricts the translator’s choices during the translation process, affecting the translation strategy at the macro level and the discourse processing at the micro level. In a sense, translation is a so-called “contact zone,” to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s expression. It not only uses a variety of political, historical, and cultural concepts that have a spatialized form of existence, but also witnesses the coexistence and interaction between them, especially the “essentially unbalanced power relations” between its constituents. The “contact zone” refers to the “colonial frontier” and is a derivative of imperialist expansion. However, in recognition of the colonial conquest and the rule of force, recent research has repeatedly also revealed the high amounts of energy that the colonized have used in their parody and appropriation of various colonial discourses, which has resulted in the creation of a highly efficient anti-exploitative discourse.

Certainly, in the post-colonial view, the “contact zone” emphasizes how “the colonized subjects try to express themselves in combination with the terminology of colonists.” In fact, many historical realities also reveal how the colonial subjects used the language of the colonizer in order to carry out the other side of political management. Therefore, in a more holistic way of thinking, the “contact zone” represents the cross-cultural phenomenon of mutual learning and self-othering (Pratt 11). Specifically, in relation to translation, it not only initiates a variety of operational functions that a cultural system deploys in the face of a foreign text, but

also initiates its own process of discourse. The process of facing the other is also the process of facing the self. Because it needs to mobilize all existing protocols and norms of “literary diplomacy” for the overall planning and layout of its strategy, and to mobilize more micro-level social and cultural memories in order to explain the details in the text, thus recognizing how the seemingly ordinary concepts breed a vitality of dialogues.

Translators whose first language is English lead the way in the translation and introduction of the exported Chinese literature, which is an established pattern at present. They are familiar with the cultural traditions, customs, and statutes of the target language, and have a clearer understanding of the aesthetic taste, reading habits, cognitive level, and receptiveness of the target language readers. To a large extent, their translations can satisfy the readerly expectations of readers in the target language. Goldblatt’s translation of *Red Poppies* has sold well abroad, which also illustrates this point. Judging from its reception, the English version of *Red Poppies* dovetails nicely with the imaginary of the ideology of a portion of Western readers, which has somewhat supplanted the textual meaning in the original work along with the author’s creative purpose. While interpreting the context of the text, some Western readers are carried away by their ideology, interpreting the politics in literature or the literature in politics through its lens, which is a common phenomenon in the spread of Chinese literature in translation abroad. Dedicating many pages to her analysis, Alexandra Draggeim tried to link the color “red” with the identity of the author Alai, in order to decode the textual imagery surrounding the color “red” and the textual meaning of *Red Poppies*, while in fact dealing with sensitive political issues (75-101). Similarly, Barbara Crossette praised the beautiful, magical natural scenery and human customs of Tibet, but she could not help but reveal her misunderstanding of Alai’s political writings. One article worthy of our attention is Nimrod Baranovitch’s “Literary Liberation of the Tibetan Past: The Alternative Voice in Alai’s *Red Poppies*,” which on the surface is a long analysis of the literary nature of *Red Poppies*, but by its end reveals itself to still feature a debate on ethnic and political issues (170-209). Nimrod believes that *Red Poppies* is a historical and geographical novel that reveals complex human characteristics and multiple social features. The love of men and women in Tibetan society is free, they have the right to choose their own lover; this is the embodiment of Tibetan autonomy and pride. According to Nimrod, the deaths and violence caused by the wars between chieftains show the bravery, loyalty and national glory of the Tibetans, but the main purpose of the article is still to introduce the territorial and political issues surroundings Tibet.

These overseas perspectives of literary criticism that mix in political interpretation give way to many reflections on our part: the various literary criticisms from overseas Chinese literature studies can provide many insights to local research; but in comparison with politically biased articles featuring simple, ill-natured, and direct criticisms of ideology, the ideology found in the politics of literature or in the literature of politics have a hand in making it into a more secretive and complex discourse. We must clarify and be alert to such issues in order to make a correct judgment about their value. Of course, generally speaking, the dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature has already changed from a political to an aesthetic basis, and in particular a considerable amount of professional criticism has increasingly presented a position of academic rationality and aesthetics valuation. As Sara Canby has pointed out, *Red Poppies* is a historical novel.<sup>2</sup> In a strict sense, the story and characters are separated from reality. It is as if Alai wanted to show us his hometown's people's livelihood and their local customs using the most authentic language possible. In Canby's view, the characters in the novel are more human and more realistic than in his memoirs. Unlike most Western pieces of criticism that seize on some pretext or other in order to distort the record and attack the Han dynasty regime's rule in Tibet, Canby thought that leaving behind the society of the past was an inevitable phenomenon in the historical development of Tibetan society and lacks any relationship to ideology. Thus, Canby's research is able to objectively look at the pervasive process of social civilization that is common to all human beings, and from there develop a reflection on human culture and historical development. This kind of academic criticism is worthy of recognition. Similarly, Gang Yue interprets the meaning of temptation, destruction, sexuality, violence, and death in the *Red Poppies* from the political, economic, and historical dimensions, and explores the significance of the second young master being both an idiot and a seer. He also points out that the connotations in the English-language meaning of the *Red Poppies* in the title are more readable and accessible, and easier for Westerners who have little knowledge of Tibetan culture to accept and understand.

In conclusion, there are many journals and articles focusing on readability, literariness and human values in overseas spread of *Red Poppies*, so that the meaning of the text expands as it travels abroad, digging out deeper and broader values and providing new perspectives for domestic researchers. It also provides new perspectives for local research. We have also noticed the existence of multiple

2 <https://tibetanhistory-20thcentury.wikischolars.columbia.edu/Red+Poppies>

“misreadings” in the works of scholars and critics under the influence of Orientalist ideology, and how these have gradually shifted from direct and ill-meaning political noise to the secretive sophistication of literary studies. We can only cautiously discriminate and clarify the issue, endeavor to open up the wall between “China” and “Overseas,” establish a dialogue between the China and the West in relation to contemporary literature and the study of contemporary literature, and subtly influence and shape the imaginary and knowledge that Western readers have about Chinese literature, while promoting the acceptance of contemporary Chinese literature of the ordinary Western reader. At the same time, when engaged in the practice of translation, we should fully respect the heterogenous and foreign literature and the ethics of translating cultural values, thus letting contemporary Chinese literature and world literature collide, and gain and integrate through these exchanges, thus expanding and enriching the discursive space and understanding of the world literature community. As the contemporary French theorist Francois Jullien has stated, when faced with the problem of the “separation and the in-between” (“L'écart et l'entre”), we must think about the cultural Otherness between China and the West, precisely because of the “separation” and “in-betweenness” which is shared by the translated and original text and by the act of translation itself. Only by doing this does world literature have the possibility of being established, only by doing this can literary discourse become more diverse and richer.

(Translated by Chen Weiwei and Manuel Azuaje-Alamo )

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