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Spontaneous Expression and Spontaneous Improvisation: What Contemporary Improvising Artists Can Learn from Chinese Artist-Philosophers

Abstract

Spontaneous expression is a unique method of artistic creation that emerged from within a circle of Chinese Confucian scholar-philosophers for whom artistic creation complemented their philosophical activities. *Free improvisation* is a new phenomenon of the European art scene. It is typified by spontaneous, often *ad hoc* creation, without prior preparation of the act or the object. I want to illustrate the similarities in the strategies of creation between 'spontaneous expression' and 'free improvisation' and the extent to which the philosophical foundations and resulting strategies of the former can be used in the latter, demonstrating the philosophical basis for this artistic discipline. I will primarily consider the mind of the creator, and justify the thesis that the state of mind, or mental attitude, necessary for the practice of spontaneous expression could be useful in the development of the practice of free improvisation in contemporary art (*European art* here would be inaccurate). A 'method without method' built on the basis of Chinese philosophy can help generate a strategy to develop and improve the skills of improvisation among contemporary European artists and contribute to the development of a contemporary philosophy of free improvisation. It is my opinion that these are fields that lie fallow. This would be an attempt to adapt the strategy of creation borne of original Chinese philosophy to contemporary artistic activities and aesthetic studies: a kind of transcultural bridge.

Key words

spontaneous expression, spontaneous/free improvisation, Daoist strategy, Chinese aesthetics

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At first glance it seems that there is a great difference in meaning separating *spontaneous expression* and *spontaneous improvisation* (despite the use of an identical predicate). The first term refers to an artistic practice created in China several hundred years ago in a circle of Confucian scholars, *wenren*, among whom the practice of art and philosophical work were complementary activities. The second term refers to a practice developed in contemporary European art, mainly music, with its origins in the British avant-garde music of the 1960's and intuitive scores of Karlheinz Stockhausen. These two phenomena of artistic creation are divided not only chronologically, but also culturally, which is proverbially incomparable.

Readily employed by established artists from the *wenren* circle, and the subject of philosophical reflection and many aesthetic treatises, spontaneous expression as a specific method of action has existed for many hundreds of years. Yet the method of spontaneous improvisation in European art is a relatively new phenomenon. Improvisation has long been practiced in Europe, but for instance in music, where it has most fully developed, it existed through the centuries as a strongly formalized activity limited by the rules of organizing sound material and musical forms. In Renaissance, baroque or classical music, improvisation was only a method of enrichment of form or other compositional parameters and had to be strictly subordinated. A similar relationship was in place in theatre. The highest level of improvisation was attained in *dell'arte* comedy, in which the content of actors' speech was not actually predetermined and scenic action was only loosely organized. But the action was programmed in advance and convention defined the necessary development. Finales and characters were strongly defined. Reacting to this paradigm in music that determined the understanding of the practice of improvisation, Stockhausen called his method of collective creation of music in real time 'intuitive music.' The reasons why spontaneous creativity was thus approached in Europe are beyond the scope of this essay. Significantly, however, music – one of the seven medieval *artes liberales* – was considered a theory of numbers and proportions at the medieval universities. Scholars engaged in it were not instrumentalists and musical practice did not interest them. This contributed to the lack of evolved tools for the development of an art of spontaneous/intuitive improvisation in Europe. It was thus natural to search for an alternative culture in which that kind of creation was regarded differently than in Europe, and where tools could be found for its development.

Spontaneous expression is a unique method of artistic creation that emerged in the circle of Chinese Confucian scholar-philosophers known as *wenren*, and intimately bound with their philosophy. Strictly speaking, Chinese philosophers treated the artistic practice as an extension of their philosophical activity. It is an attempt to externalize the fields of philosophical reflection that elude verbalization. In the earliest history of Confucianism, when the philosophy was mainly a doctrine of the governance of state, scholar-clerks used art for self-realization and self-improvement. Over the course of time, understanding of the practice and its role changed. Following the fusion of Confucian and Daoist schools, when neodaosism and neoconfucianism emerged richer in elements of metaphysics and cosmology, art became a refined presentation of non-verbal elements of philosophical reflection and the expression of feelings and states of mind. Spontaneous expression has its roots in notions of the naturalness of the act of creation that is shared between humanity and Heaven and Earth. It is based on the belief that human creative ability is equal to that of Nature, ingrained in the Daoist worldview. It seems to have emerged with the reading and interpretation of Daoist texts by Confucian scholars. Spontaneous expression consists in immediate creation, inspired creation, a fierce eruption of creativity. We can say that it is the expression of *Dao*, in accordance with the Daoist perception of activity in agreement with Nature. It was used in a variety of human activity: in artistic creation like playing on *guqin*, *yihua* (one strike brush painting), *caoshu* ('grass script' spontaneous calligraphy), and for example in the Daoist martial art *Taijiquan*.

An original text describing an artist engaged in the act of spontaneous expression demonstrates precisely the phenomenon of spontaneous expression. Fu Zai describes Master Zhang Zao as he

suddenly appeared at the party and in a coarse voice asked for a piece of raw, white silk, since he desired to show his own eminent skills. The host rose [...] loudly expressing his own approbation. [...] The master sat on the ground with his feet stretched out in front of him, he took a deep breath and began to create in inspiration. The people gathered around him were scared, as if thunder or an air trumpet broke out in the sky. [The hand of the Master] moved briskly, bolting, then again jerking, piercing the air with devastating strength. Ink flying from the brush sprayed everywhere. From the maze of separations and connections emerged a strange shape. When he finished, [what was visible was] a pine tree with cracked bark like fish scales, dangerously steep rocks, craggy cliffs, crystal clear water and

clouds. The Master rejected the brush, arose from the ground and looked around. And as heaven is clean after a storm, so was the essence of all things visible. (Zemanek 2007: 169–170)

Chang Chung-Yuan writes about spontaneous expression:

In the execution of this style the painter's brush moves swiftly, absolutely free from restricting rules. There is no hesitation or deliberation when he handles the brush. Hand and mind are unified, there being no interference from the intellect or the emotions. It was said that Wang Hsia's brush sometimes waves and sometimes sweeps. The color of his ink is sometimes light and sometimes dark. Following the splotches of the ink he shapes them into mountains, rocks, clouds, and water. His action is so swift as if it were from Heaven. Spontaneously his hand responds and his mind follows. (Chang 1970: 219)

This type of spontaneous artistic creation is based on a conviction about human creative capabilities, which are considered equal with the capabilities of Heaven and Earth. But the origin of the capabilities of the triad lays deeper, in the very base of reality – it is *Dao*, the one, invariable, unspecified source of 'ten thousand things.' As Laozi said, 'The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things.' (Laozi: 42) The three are Heaven, Earth, and human beings between them.

According to Daoist thought, a person united with *Dao* can achieve the creative force of 'the dragon in the sky in his actions.' The phrase refers to the first hexagram of the *Book of Changes*, consisting of the uninterrupted lines of *yang*, and called *Qian*, or 'Creativity.' In the opinion of Hellmut Wilhelm, it symbolized the 'Creative Principle,' which refers to Heaven, Earth and also human beings. The symbol of creativity is a dragon, initially hidden in water. In another step the dragon emerges but his flight is 'unstable over the abyss.' The hexagram culminates in the final line: 'dragon is flying in the sky.' The image is a symbol of the pinnacle of creativity. Rooting one's operation in *Dao* makes it extremely effective and effortless. Moreover it creates effortlessly and without end. Laozi said 'The Dao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fullness.' (Laozi: 4) Elsewhere he said 'The Dao in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do.' (Laozi: 37) The outstanding neodaoist philosopher Wang Bi explains that this is in accordance with Nature. He writes 'in the midst of everything that is there is nobody and nothing that could be not supported by Dao – from the very beginning till full of maturity.' (Laozi &

Wang Bi 2006: 82) In his commentary on the *Daodejing* he states that in speaking about *Dao* we refer to '[the name of] a single, great substance acting such that there is no place it does not appear. That is why it is said that it works everywhere.' (Laozi & Wang Bi 2006: 65) Following the *Dao* gives one unusual efficacy and at the same time does not diminish one's energy to live. We extract creative power directly from the unexhausted *Dao*.

The conception of action, characterized by extreme efficacy, underlies the practice of 'spontaneous expression.' Since philosophers employed it in their artistic activity, we can say that it is an artistic-philosophical practice.

Chang Chung-Yuan calls the feeling of unity with *Dao* a fundamentally ontological experience, the experience of unity between a person and the universe, confirming that humanity occupies its place in the world. Chang writes that 'this experience leads inevitably to the interfusion of subjective and objective reality. This interfusion initiates the process of creativity, which in turn establishes unity in multiplicity, the changeless in the ever-changing. The artist who has reached this state of oneness is supported by all the powers inherent in multiplicities and changes, and his work will be far beyond what his ego-form self could accomplish. Such a reflection of strength from the centre of his being, however powerful it is, is completely nonintentional and effortless.' (Chang 1970: 207) The capability to create works that 'will be far beyond what his ego-form self could accomplish' occurs when one can say, in the words of Zhuangzi: 'Heaven and Earth and I live together, and all things and I are one.' (Chang 1970: 204) The ontological experience of unity with Nature was highly valued by Chinese masters of painting and calligraphy and often described in aesthetic treatises. Zhan Hui wrote in his *Treatise on Painting*: 'Only he who reaches Reality can follow Nature's spontaneity and be aware of the subtlety of things, and his mind will be absorbed by them. His brush will secretly be in harmony with movement and quiescence and all forms will issue forth.' (Chang 1970: 206) And in the text about Master Zhang referred to earlier, we find the commentary: 'When we look carefully at the work of Master Zhang, we no longer see a painting but a real Tao in and of itself. Whenever he created, it was clear that he rejected all usual painting techniques, because he reached his mind further, to the deepest mysteries of things. And things exist, not before the eyes or ears, but in the mind.' (Zemanek 2007: 170)

It seems that to achieve the experience of unity with *Dao* and to consequently practice 'spontaneous expression' the key is a suitable state of mind. Zhang Yanyuan wrote about this in *Notes about Painters Through*

the Ages: ‘Someone asked me: “How could Wu Daozi bend arcs, bare the blades of weapons, place the columns of buildings [...] without compasses and rulers?” I said: “He cultivated spirit in himself and concentrated on Unity. He achieved harmony with works of Nature”’ (Zemanek 2007: 176)

People with a clear state of mind can achieve an amazing fluency in their operations, in every kind of activity. Anything they decide to do will be realized with highest efficacy. Such fluid activity is called *wu wei*, ‘action without action’ or ‘effortless action.’ It refers to doing something in accordance with the course and force of Nature that supports human activity. This notion is captured by the image of sailing, or a raft drifting downstream. *Wu wei* fits our actions with the actions of the world.

When we fit with reality it is easy to realize what we are planning. This is to follow *Dao*. Shitao writes of this in *Dialogue on Paintings*: ‘Compasses and rulers can be used to make circles and squares. But in the universe there is a continual process by which circles and squares are created. If one can grasp the principle of the universe, one is freed from the necessity of using artifices, like compasses and rulers.’ (Chang 1970: 203) It is important to note here that to ‘grasp the principle of the universe’ does not mean to achieve speculative knowledge of ‘what,’ but rather knowledge of ‘how.’ For ‘he who is open accepts everything, sees everything. When he is open he is able to accept people. When he is calm he is able to manage the situations.’ (Winn 2006: 31) And the ability to act ‘here and now’ and the effective response to changes of situations is an essential attribute of the practitioner of ‘spontaneous expression’ or ‘free improvisation.’

Since I am an improvising musician in addition to my work as a philosopher, I will use the example of ‘improvised music’ to highlight the problems connected with spontaneous artistic creation in Europe and how recognizing the idea of ‘spontaneous expression’ might be helpful in solving them. In other words, I will demonstrate what improvising artists and musicians can learn from artist-philosophers about spontaneous creation in real time. The essence of ‘improvised music’ eludes analysis, mainly because any considerations of it focus on the music – a specific phenomenon of sound. Here there is a paradox. Since improvisation is not a style but rather a working method, it is not possible to say something about improvisation in the analysis of an improvised ‘piece.’ Music theory is based on the analysis of works, because every style has had its idiomatic sonic characteristics. Music reveals its genres by sound identity. By listening we can identify the genre of a piece. And composers think about genre when they compose music so that the music is easily recognizable.

With 'improvised music' the situation is different. According to British guitarist Derek Bailey – one of the pioneers of 'free improvised music' – a characteristic of 'improvised music' is 'the confused identity which its resistance to labeling indicates. [...] Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.' (Cox & Warner 2004: 256) In other words, we recognize 'spontaneous improvisation' in music not by its sound effects but by the method of creation that is used by musicians – by its manner of creation. The analysis of 'pieces' does not reveal anything about improvisation because the concentration is on sonic effects that are as 'incidental effects' of the process. 'Improvised music' is able to provide listeners any kind of sound phenomena we can imagine. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner write in their book *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* that improvised music 'abandoned virtually every prop or anchor for improvisation in order to spur musicians to play genuinely in the moment, relying solely on their ingenuity and their instantaneous responses to the contributions of fellow performers.' (Cox & Warner 2004: 251) As Stockhausen noted, a situation in which musicians create music in real time during a concert without any prior arrangements for the expected shape of a piece of music presents 'completely new standards which we have never learned before for playing music.' (Stockhausen 1971) It is a situation unprecedented in the history of European music. Therefore any tools for creating and playing music (strategic, rather than physical tools), i.e. compositional and instrumental techniques, cannot be used in the practice of intuitive improvisation since they concern a different kind of creation.

Analysing both types of creative methods we can easily observe fundamental ontological differences between them. An idealistic 'perspective' emerges from traditional methods of creating music and art in Europe: a piece of music exists before its physical implementation, in the moment of reading notation. In 'improvised music' a 'perspective' emerges that I would call 'relationist/relational': music comes into being only through the relations between musicians engaged in the very act of creation. When compared with preceding creative methods, in the practice of spontaneous improvisation the process of creation gains autonomy and becomes available for audiences in all its splendour. 'Improvised art' thus manifests as a performative art *par excellence*. In the act of music making, the myriad sonic effects are the result of what is most important in 'improvised mu-

sic': the kind or manner of activity. In other words, in 'improvised music' the emphasis is on the process of making rather than a non-existent, idealized 'Music' with a capital 'M.' The work of art is primarily the process, the authentic and real moment of the creation of a work.

Artists and audience alike appreciate the unique emotional and mental states they can enter through contact with a 'living' creative process expanded 'in front of their eyes.' Here impressions are as strong as they are fleeting because an inalienable attribute of improvised works is the limitation of time. Works arise and disappear immediately, moments recorded and transformed by artistic sensibility, records of 'here and now.' The creative process that is developed during a performance of improvised art 'grabs' all receivers and allows them to experience sensations that do not compare to the perception of traditionally created art. And I want to emphasize once again that in this type of creation sophisticated formal arrangements are far less important than what we can call (in language not especially academic but most apt) the flow of energy, both through the creators and the audience. Maybe it is an extra-musical element of a musical work, as Ingarden might say, but it is intimately bound to the sound activity called *playing*.

It is thus necessary to prepare a new strategy for engaging in this kind of artistic practice. It is more evident when we read up on significant comments of precursors of 'improvised music' in Europe. Derek Bailey spoke of the 'telepathic' properties of improvisation and Stockhausen addressed playing 'something that is in the air.' Further, when we look at the rather short history of spontaneous improvisation in Europe, we note that few practitioners of 'improvised music' actually practice free improvisation. The present moment is characterized by an inability to grasp the essence of spontaneous improvisation on the part of many young people, who do not improvise but rather prepare tools and strategies in advance and imitate the sound effects of the discipline's pioneers. Thus improvised music becomes another stylistic idiom and ceases to be improvised. It seems that 'free' or 'open' improvisation has become a cliché. (Cox & Warner 2004: 250) But the discipline is about something other than rapid calculation, or previously stated sound arrangements restated, or a splurge of technical skill. Rather, it is about truly spontaneous creation, something worthy of critic Richard Pinnelli's observation: 'Ah improvisation – the fire, the passion, the discussion, the coming together of personalities. No matter how unoriginal or otherwise a recording of improvised music may turn out to be, in my opinion no other music is as alive and vibrant as regularly.'

Why should we search for 'tools' for free improvisation in another culture, in the philosophy of the Far East? 'Free improvisation' in European art is first and foremost a particular type of activity, in the sense that the quality of a work of art is a result of its being acted out, such that it is inseparably linked with the quality of its practice. Improvisation is both the practice of art as well as the art of practicing. In music, for example, the quality of a piece that is created in the process of free improvisation depends on the quality of the process. A better improviser can play better 'improvised music.' Daoism contains within it a remarkable theory of effective operation/action upon which the practice of 'spontaneous expression' is based. Hajime Nakamura, among others, claims that Daoism and other ancient Chinese philosophical systems are strategies of operation that assist in the survival of extreme situations. Improvisation is a type or method of unarranged action that we can employ beyond art. I would call it the 'capacity to act adequately in extremely unarranged situations.' It is thus valid to attempt to transfer the experiences of activity based on Daoist strategy to the practice of improvisation in modern art.

The common element that determines the quality of action both in 'spontaneous expression' and 'free improvisation' is the ability to effectively act 'here and now.' As I have stated, a situation of creation 'here and now' – a situation in which a work of art is created and presented in the same moment – is unprecedented in the history of European arts. The capability to engage effectively, instantaneously, and especially collectively, in creating 'here and now' is the most important capability in the work of an improviser. Recall that the artistic activity of Chinese scholar-clerks was characterised by spontaneity and immediate realisation. A. Wójcik writes that 'calligraphy is the record of a real event that occurred, and the traces remain after it on calligraphy paper or silk. It can be said that Chinese calligraphy is the art of the document.' (Wójcik 2010: 138) We can say the same thing about the art of free improvisation in music.

The question is now: how are such creative abilities achieved? What are the conditions that must be fulfilled in order for an artist to create with the power of Nature, like *Dao*. I think we can take a risk and say: all roads lead to the mind. According to the Daoist strategy of action, in a suitable state of mind an artist-philosopher can unite with Nature and follow *Dao*. The state of mind allows for the deep perception of reality and the employment of the *wu wei* strategy. Only in the right state of mind can it be said that 'the skilful traveller leaves no traces of his wheels or footsteps [...] the skilful reckoner uses no tallies.' (Laozi: 27) The right state of mind

seems to be the key to spontaneous, free creative activity, to ‘spontaneous expression.’ We can presume that it will be useful also in development of ‘free/spontaneous improvisation.’

We find a strategy of action in the *Nanhua Zhenjing* of Zhuangzi, for example in the story of Prince Yuan who desired a painting and invited painters to his court. I recall here the final fragment:

There was one who came late, with an air of indifference, and did not hurry forward. When he had received his instructions and made his bow, he did not keep standing, but proceeded to his shed. The duke sent a man to see him, and there he was, with his upper garment off, sitting cross-legged, and nearly naked. The ruler said, ‘He is the man; he is a true draughtsman.’ (Zhuangzi 2009: 221)

The painter begins his work thus, sitting cross-legged with his shirt off, he enters a process that would result in a picture. Art is begun by reaching the right state of mind. Marcin Jacoby writes that

there is a single meaning of the story: the artist sat down relaxed, trying to concentrate before beginning the work. The paragraph is one of the oldest to mention Chinese painters and was repeated in countless treatises in the following ages. It became one of the key stories in the theory of Chinese painting and a symbol of creative freedom and the importance of inspiration. (Zhuangzi 2009: 226)

As we can see, completing a work of art became conditional on attaining the right state of mind. It is a clear reference to the Daoist ideal of detachment, or forgetfulness. An artist ‘sits in the silence and calm of his workshop to rid his mind of all that fills it – to sit in forgetfulness (*zuo wang*). Empty – he truly can, he is a real painter.’ (Wójcik 2010: 2008)

I want to draw attention to one important thing, particularly essential from the standpoint of the contemporary practice of collective improvisation. To be rooted in Daoist mind work, to empty the mind and the consequent state of detachment and forgetfulness, is not to separate from the world or to enter into a state in which one is insensitive to reality. On the contrary, it is a state of mind that allows for extensive and careful perception of the world. The mind remains unfocused on any distinctive thing, but simultaneously and with the same attention perceives all of them. This is the state of the ‘transparent mind,’ all perceptions and emotions flow through it, but do not remain in it, leaving it undisturbed. A correspondence can thus be established and preserved between the observed state of the world and our actions in it. This state of mind permits the effective activity ‘here and now’ – what the Chinese call the ability to work with *qi*.

The *qi* is a subtle layer of reality that pervades all things, the condition of which depends on the level of density and the quality of the flow of *qi*. The *qi* is unmeasurable and unwatched, but the Chinese believe that there is a natural relation between *qi* and the work of the mind. Thus the mind that is in a suitable, tranquil state, the state of 'diffused' attention that allows for the careful monitoring of reality without focusing on only one part of it, is able to direct the flow of *qi*. And to use *qi* in action, one can achieve amazing efficacy. The resonance of *qi* plays an important role in the aesthetic theory of *wenren* exemplified by the first principle from *Six Principles of Chinese Ink Paintings* by Xie He: *qiyun shendong* – 'spirit resonance, life-motion.'

Thus in the right state of mind the artist-philosopher is able to create with the force of Nature. In such a situation the attention is not on the preparation of a work of art but on the preparation of the artist himself. This is relevant to 'free improvisation' in that one cannot work with works of art, because works of improvised art do not exist before the act of improvisation. And yet, since one must work with something (the works of art are neither arrived at by miracle nor magic), concentration on and work with the state of mind seem to be very reasonable. Daoist strategy proposes that when the artist achieves a suitable state of mind, 'action without action' will be within reach. Then, coupled with the forces of Nature, the artist is able to create without effort. This is why the painter from the *Nanhua zhenjing* sat down relaxed to prepare his mind before 'licking brushes and preparing ink' as others did. Mentally prepared with a 'transparent mind' he probably made the paintings by 'one stroke of the brush' in the most favorable moment, acting by 'non-acting.' Zhang Huaiguan, author of *Evaluation of Calligraphy* explains that 'when we apply the action of non-action our brush work will be comparable to the works of Nature, when we identify our writing with the true nature of things we follow the fundamental principle of creativity.' (Chang 1970: 217) It seems that the musician who practices 'free improvisation' should also first of all mind the state of his mind, so nothing would slow creativity.

It follows from the foregoing that the most important 'tool' in the practice of 'free improvisation' is the mind; the mind in a suitable state, of course. In the right state of mind an improviser engaged in a creative act may react quickly and adequately as an unplanned situation develops. In the right state of mind an improviser can enter into authentic relations with other participants and with the other elements of a given situation, such as space, time, audience, and so forth, which are of utmost importance in the case of spontaneous creation. The improviser should be in

a state of mind that allows for immediate reaction to the sounds of the other musicians. And the kind of reaction matters, it must be adequate. In other words, 'when others make a move, he has to already be there.' All of the participants in an improvisation must similarly react. The necessary condition for creating a piece is the ability of each musician to enter into deep relations simultaneously with every person in the band. The improviser does not operate teleologically, does not define in advance how the music might look. S/he should become part of an 'organism' that is the ensemble of improvisers, a part that is in equal relations with every other. It is not possible (in contrast to conventional methods of creation) to use prepared sound material in playing. One must play the sound that derives from context, from the unfolding of events.

As the conventionally working musician is deeply engaged in the realization of ideas embedded in notation, an improviser is as deeply engaged in the concrete moment, in the 'here and now.' The development of the music depends only on the interaction between the players. The right state of mind, achieved through the arduous and consequent practice adapted from any of the artistic disciplines cultivated by ancient Chinese scholar-clerks, should guarantee the creation of perfect works created through the method of 'free improvisation.' The state of mind that arrives at the power of Nature should be for contemporary improvisers what it was for artist-philosophers: the tool for real-time creative expression. To this end I would recommend the practice of some Chinese art of the *wenren* circle, like calligraphy, monochromatic paintings or *Taijiquan*, to all contemporary improvisers and people who are interested in Chinese philosophy as well. And so as with this lecture, as with all theory that takes in Daoist strategy, as with Chinese philosophy: one must practice it in life, and not only study it.

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