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Illegal Caravan Trade and Outlaw Armed Escorts in the Qing Dynasty: Critical Analysis of Two 18th Century Memorials

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Cases of attacks on merchants by brigands abound in the official reports of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Successive emperors ordered local governors to solve the brigandage problem. Apart from imperial measures intensifying military patrols in certain areas where brigandage was endemic at varying degrees, merchants (especially those from Shanxi Province) hired private escort companies (*biaoju* 鏢局) to ensure caravan protection during journeys over land and water.[2]

However, escort companies did not have a good reputation; the two memorials discussed in this research note confirm the overall poor image of "escort-guards" (*baobiao* 保標/鏢),[3] who formed the escort companies. This perception is still reflected in novels from the Republican period (1912–1949). In these novels, escort-guards are associated with "chivalrous warriors" (*xia* 俠) from the marginal communities of the so-called "rivers and lakes" (*jianghu* 江湖), while they were apparently disparaged by imperial officials who saw them as rogue imposters hiding behind a chivalrous ethic.[4] The fact is that escort-guards shared a particular secret language or argot (*heihua* 黑話) with the brigands, and from this respect, the social evolution of escort-guards can be seen as correlated with the history of

[1] This study was made possible by the Fieldwork Scholarship Programme of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the institutional recommendation of the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences (IHNS).
[2] Wang Ermin 2009.
[3] The social category of escort-guard has progressively evolved into the one of "escort-master" (*biaoshi* 鏢師) especially linked with martial arts groups. See Chircop-Reyes (forthcoming).
[4] Chircop-Reyes 2021b.

social violence in North China.[5] Throughout the Qing dynasty, they were seen by local officials as a real nuisance. Attempts were made at various level of local administration to, on the one hand, elucidate the statements of merchants who were victims of looting in the rocky valleys and steppes, and on the other, shed light on the identity of the escort-guards who were supposed to protect them.

Some regions were somewhat more under control of the Qing administration than others. Enforcing state law could be more difficult in areas of ethnic diversity: the Qing administration applied different laws to cases of looting in Mongolian areas depending on whether the individuals concerned were, for instance, Chinese or Mongolian.[6] In addition, archival material consulted for this research suggests that military patrols were intensified in Shandong and in Northeast China (Liaoning, Heilongjiang, Jilin) at the beginning of the 18th century. In Northwest China, on the other hand, state control remained difficult to enforce, especially in transregional areas such as Shahukou 殺虎口, which stood between the loess lands of Shanxi and the steppes of what is now Inner Mongolia.[7] Nathalie Platonova's research on Russian caravans in China indicates that the Russians, even when escorted by Cossacks, also fell victim to brigandage. However, they avoided the more dangerous south-western routes (from Siberia, and thus entering China via Mongolia and Shanxi) and preferred those in the south-east (entering China via Manchuria).[8]

During an ethnographic survey in Shanxi conducted from January 2017 to July 2018, I was able to collect abundant oral history material on escort companies and the routes on which caravaneers were travelling. This caravan trade was concurrent with a migration phenomenon called "through the Western Pass" (*Zou Xikou* 走西口), and the narratives concerning the harsh conditions endured by people migrating from Shanxi to Mongolia have already been extensively studied.[9] The oral narratives that I have collected come mainly from members of martial arts' lineages and are being transmitted within current practitioners' groups. Written traces of these companies in the imperial archives or local gazetteers are sparse. This is also the reason why so far relatively little research has been done on this phenomenon.[10] The few available studies on the topic are mainly concerned with the

[5] Chircop-Reyes 2022.
[6] Constant 2010, p. 55.
[7] Chircop-Reyes 2021a.
[8] Platonova 2011, pp. 3–27.
[9] See among other works Duan Youwen 2013; Li Zhiting 2010, pp. 33–40; Tao Jibo et al. 2014, pp. 61–62.
[10] As I was told by Liu Jiansheng (Shanxi University), an historian specialised in late imperial Chinese economy and Shanxi merchants' networks. I have to thank Liu Yinghai, Qiao Zengguang, and their team at Shanxi University for their support and precious help during my field research in 2017.

emergence of these companies, their social organisation or the knowledge distribution involved in it. Chen Hsi-yuan, for example, proposes that the escort companies' origin was linked to the cotton trade in Shandong province in the late Ming period. However, there is little archival evidence to suggest that escort companies were born exclusively out of the cotton trade in Shandong. Other scholars such as Liu Yinghai and Qiao Zengguang, or Ji Canzhong, argue that the development of escort companies was linked to martial arts lineages, and originated in Shanxi province. But again, there is no hard evidence for this. There simply is no sufficient documentation from before the late Ming to early Qing period to give a conclusive answer to the question about the emergence of the *biaoju* phenomenon in Chinese history.[11]

The most detailed source on this matter identified to date is a memorial from 1742,[12] which is one of the two documents I will discuss in detail in this note. I looked into these two sources from the imperial archive that I found during my visit to the First Historical Archives of China (中國第一歷史檔案館) from April to June 2018, as part of my PhD dissertation about escort companies.[13] I also identified a further fourteen documents consisting of memorials (*zouyi* 奏議) and official letters (*yiwen* 移文), dating from between 1736 and 1906. The two local governors' memorials describe escort practices in varying degrees of detail, and concern merchants' complaints, in which the latter testify being victim of attacks by brigands; the letters are reports of inspections and arrests of caravaneers for illegal possession of firearms. Although these documents do not provide any further information on the precise date and place of origin of escort companies, they do help us to understand their socio-professional functioning during a particular period. Moreover, they provide useful information on the companies' legal (or illegal) status according to imperial legislation.

In the following, I will focus on the two memorials written in 1736 and 1742 and address questions about the extent to which escort companies, as private armed groups, were formal commercial organisations recognised by the state to provide protection and insurance for merchants.

[11] See Ji Canzhong 2013; Liu Jiansheng et al. 2014; Chen Hsi-yuan 2018, pp. 165–216.
[12] See Ji Canzhong 2013, and Liu Jiansheng et al. 2014, *op. cit.*
[13] See Chircop-Reyes 2019.

1 An Attempt to Register Escorts: The 1736 Memorial

According to the narrative of the former escort-guard Li Yaochen 李堯臣 (1876–1973), at the end of the Qing dynasty, a number of practitioners of martial arts served as professional escorts, selling rudimentary protection services to travelling merchants in inns along travel routes.[14] Merchants carrying high-value goods and silver ingots preferred to hire escort-guards officially authorised to carry firearms. However, prior to 1906, no such regulation is mentioned in the historiographical documentation found to date.[15] It might be premature to support the idea of a general defiance of the administration but the absence of documented regulation suggests that some of the escort-guards practised their profession in relative illegality. As early as 1736, Li Jiangong 李建功 (n.d.) mentioned that the escort-guards were carrying muskets (*niaoqiang* 鳥槍) in a memorial. In this memorial, Li, Army General of Yanzhou 兗州 prefecture in Shandong province, exposes problems related to brigandage in northern Shandong. He suspects the escorts of being behind the looting of trade caravans crossing the region.[16] According to Li Yaochen, muskets were still widely used by several escort companies at the end of the Qing dynasty.[17] Evidence for the use of muskets can be seen in a photograph showing Liu Shijie 劉士傑 (1864–1930), an escort guard working for Tongxinggong 同興公, one of the major escort companies in Pingyao (see Image 1).

It was not until a century and a half after the first mention of the private escort trade that, on the eve of the imperial decline, Manchu authorities reported on the problem regarding the status of escort companies,[18] as well as the use of firearms by escort-guards. This raises several points to reflect upon.

[14] Li's narratives were noted down by his daughter during the 1970s and published in 1981. See Li Yaochen 1981, p. 231.
[15] There are four depositions from the "Commercial Affairs Tax Office" (Shangshui shiwu yamen 商稅事務衙門), written between April 1906 and January 1907, that confirm the implementation of the registration measures: the reports mention the arrest of four escort-guards in illegal possession of firearms at the capital's western railway station (Xizhan 西站). The four escort companies mentioned are Yuanshun 源順, Wansheng 萬盛, Xinchang 信昌 and Qingsheng 慶升. See *Guangxu sanshi'er nian jingcheng guanli biaoju qiangzhi shiliao*.
[16] *Zou wei xunji difang qing xing bing qing cebu zhuoyi ge sheng keshang gumi baobiao fa gei lu zhao shi* 奏為巡緝地方情形並請敕部酌議各省客商雇覓保鏢發給路照事 (Memorandum to the Emperor on the Regional Investigation into the Recruitment of Escorts by Merchants for Road Security).
[17] Li Yaochen 1981.
[18] See the depositions from the "Commercial Affairs Tax Office" mentioned in footnote 15.



Image 1: The escort-master Liu Shijie with horse and musket (Undated photograph from Tongxinggong Museum, Pingyao 平遙, Shanxi)

First, the status of escort companies would be less a matter of legislation than of the ethos characteristic of the merchant community. Merchants and practitioners of martial arts have in common that their social relations are structured by a set of moral codes defined by Confucian principles of conduct. This implies striving for an ideal of "benevolent" conduct (*ren* 仁) that requires, among others, to show "trustworthiness" (*xin* 信) and "righteousness" (*yi* 義), as well as to demonstrate "filial piety" (*xiao* 孝). This goes beyond the mere scope of family, by structuring the classificatory kinship system specific to both merchant and martial lineages.[19] Second, being an escort requires fulfilling a moral duty towards the members of the community in the broadest sense, that is to say, towards society as a whole. In the view of state officials, however, escorts did not have such a virtuous reputation. To them these men were brutal, disrespectful, and dishonest. Nonetheless, merchants still chose to hire masters of martial practices, which shows a certain degree of trust. It is worth recalling here that the reputation of powerful merchant guilds depended on Confucian ethical behaviour, especially in the respect of the periodicity system (*guobiao zhidu* 過標制度) for the shipment of goods.[20] However, one should not forget that merchants were quite often engaged in

[19] Li Jianying et al. 2012, pp. 67–78; Chircop-Reyes 2018, pp. 123–149.
[20] The different merchant families had to stick to a common calendar of caravan expeditions. The punctuality of the shipments was of utmost importance to fulfil the commercial contracts established between the seller and the

smuggling, even more so in times of political and social unrest.[21] "In imperial China, the merchant needed protection"[22] that he would get from powerful robbers and pirate bands; therefore, merchants could easily be accused of engaging in illegal activities. The official documents concerned here linking caravaneers to brigands question not only the status of escort companies, but also that of the merchants.

Li Jiangong's memorial begins with a discussion on the difficulties of securing the territory against brigands. It mentions previous efforts implemented by local authorities in compliance with imperial orders to secure the area. The memorial also ascertains a decline in crime in Shandong, thus correcting its reputation as a dangerous and risky area for merchants. It specifies that in the three years preceding its writing, 20 to 30 cases of looting were recorded annually in an area occupied by 70 units of military troops, called *xun* 汛. After Li Jiangong took measures to intensify military patrols, fewer than a dozen cases of looting and no more daytime looting were recorded. Despite the measures taken, however, Li Jiangong does not fail to point out the various remaining security loopholes, and it is precisely from there that he evokes the main purpose of the memorial. On the twelfth day of the fifth moon of the first year of Qianlong's reign (20 June 1736), Li Jiangong received a report from an official named Yu Chengfang 余成芳 (n.d.) with the testimony of a merchant named Liu Dezhi 劉德治 (n.d.) about being robbed by brigands. Liu, who was carrying 126 *liang* (about 7 or 8 kilos) of silver,[23] including 50 *liang* on his belt, 50 *liang* in a terracotta pot, and 26 *liang* in a rolled blanket, was travelling from Linqing 臨清 to Jining 濟寧 on business matters. He was robbed in broad daylight in Dongping 東平 in a rocky valley near the Qing River 清河. According to his testimony, the looters were two horsemen armed with muskets and sabres hung at the waist. They seized only the silver in the blanket. Troops to capture the brigands were dispatched as soon as the incident was reported, but Yu Chengfang's report does not specify whether the operation was successful.

I was particularly interested in a passage in which Yu Chengfang questions the testimony of the merchant: he is puzzled over the claim that the brigands only took a small part of Liu's silver, the 26 *liang* in the blanket. Here, the term "escort-guard" (*baobiao* 保标) appears in the text and Yu clearly suspects that it was the escorts who robbed the merchant:

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buyer. It was therefore the responsibility of the escort companies to respect the schedule. See Liu Xiangdong 2003, pp. 66–67.

[21] Gipouloux 2011, pp. 66–71.

[22] Gipouloux 2011, pp. 66–71.

[23] The memorial does not mention other merchants who were probably travelling together with Liu Dezhi in a caravan.

> […] 但此輩 [ ]用鳥槍然善良者少且身帶槍刀又有馬匹乘坐巡弁闖遇則以保標回覆又不便究訊是以此等人送客回家伊等銀錢浪費回身在路見財生心乘機掠劫勢 […]。[24]
>
> […] These individuals [the escorts] are armed with muskets but few of them are benevolent. They carry sabres and ride on horses. When questioned by military patrols, they conceal their identity by answering that they are escorts. This makes investigating difficult. Hence, these people escort their clients home, spending all their money. As soon as they see other wealthy merchants, they take advantage of the situation and rob them […].

Li Jiangong concludes the memorial by stressing the serious threat these escorts pose to the region. He recommends asking the Inspector General of Shandong Province, Yue Jun 岳濬, to implement all necessary measures to capture illegal escorts. In fact, to address this issue, he proposes to make it mandatory for merchants,

- to submit a declaration prior to their journey, stating the exact number of men engaged, as well as the exact number of weapons in their possession;
- to provide the detailed itinerary including all stages of the journey;
- to register with the authorities at each stage of the journey.

An authorisation would be issued after the declaration was examined. Without this authorisation, escorts accompanying a caravan would be considered outlaws, and consequently arrested and convicted (the memorial does not specify the punishment). The merchants would have to discontinue their journey and return to their province of origin.

Thus, this memorial tells us that the socio-professional status of escort-guards at that time was not fully formalised. There were still grey areas as to the nature of their activities that officials were unable to clarify. It is evident that there was a great deal of mistrust towards escort-guards, but also, to some extent, towards merchants. The document presented in the next section, written by the governor of Shanxi Province about five years later, is more specific as it calls for an immediate ban on any private escort expedition.

2 “These people are arrogant, brutal, and dishonest”: The 1742 Memorial

There is no doubt that escort-guards, although they were accused of behaving like brigands, did work for important merchant families. Escort companies were an important factor in the economic development and trade dynamism in Northern China, especially in

[24] See Li Jiangong, *Zou wei xunji difang qingxing bing qing cebu zhuoyi gesheng keshang gumi baobiao fa gei lu zhao shi.*

Shanxi Province during the Qing dynasty, as has been shown in studies about Shanxi merchants.[25]

Another document provides us with more details about the image of escort-guards prevailing among government officials. Below, I give a full translation of a memorial submitted in 1742 by Yan Ruilong 嚴瑞龍 (?–1751), Governor of Shanxi province, to the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor (1735–1796). The memorial is entitled "The Governor of Shanxi Province Yan Ruilong – Memorandum for the Prohibition of Illegal Activities of Escorts" (山西布政使嚴瑞龍為請嚴禁保鏢胡作非為事奏折):

> 乾隆七年十一月初一日
>
> 山西布政使臣嚴瑞龍謹奏，為請禁保鏢肆橫之禁，以安民生，以恤商旅事。
>
> 竊查西北各省，凡富商大賈前赴東南置買綢緞布匹等項，俱囊挾重貲，動至數萬金，騎馱數十頭，合隊行走。有等膂力過人、身嫻武藝之徒，受僱護送，帶有鳥槍、弓箭，名曰保鏢，所以防草竊、杜剽掠也。詎若輩驕悍性成，多不安分。入肆則強買食物，短少價銀，沿途則縱任騾頭踐食田禾，甚至投宿到店，勒令先到之人搬移他處，如遇過渡爭先，輒將上船行李拋棄岸旁。稍與較論，鞭撲隨之。商民畏其兇橫，莫可誰何。此臣向所得之傳聞者。
>
> 迨上年承恩人謹請訓後，於八月初旬道經河南滎澤之黃河地方，時已登舟而鏢客後至，手持小旗，稱系皇餉，喝令退避。臣隨問以餉運何處，有無解員，若輩茫無以對。又偵知臣系湖北布政使，始讓同舟。而睚眥之狀，勃不可遏，則其平日之欺壓商民，不問可知。
>
> 今歲奉旨調任晉陽，臣從湖北起程，復一路查訪。保鏢之徒到處肆橫，眾口一詞，實與臣聞見所及無異。並有語以若輩出店入店插旗放槍，形同官長者，更為僭妄不法。
>
> 伏思伊等受僱保鏢，俾得長途無事，乃其本分。若恃強肆橫，以致擾累商民，殊屬未便。臣為綏靖地方起見，可否仰懇天恩，飭令各該省督撫轉飭地方官通行示諭，凡保鏢之徒經過關津渡口及城鄉市鎮，毋許短價買用食物，亦不許縱畜踐食田禾。其於投宿、過渡，惟論到之先後，不得強為爭競。一有違犯，立即嚴拿重懲。至於借稱皇餉哄嚇鄉愚，並插旗放槍，虛張聲勢，均幹功令，並請悉行禁止，以杜僭妄。如此，庶強橫各知斂戢，而商民咸歌蕩平矣。
>
> 為此繕摺奏請，伏乞聖明裁斷施行。臣謹奏。[26]

[25] Zhang Zhengming 2001, pp. 114–115; Huang Jianhui 2002, p. 181; Wei Juxian 2008, p. 4.

First day of the eleventh month of the seventh year of the Qianlong reign [8 December 1742]

In order to ensure the safety of the people, and to serve the interests of the travelling merchants, I, Yan Ruilong, Governor of Shanxi Province, request that the escorts be strictly prevented from carrying out their activities.

Wealthy merchants travel across the country's provinces to trade in silk and other such fabrics. They travel in groups carrying in their bags, on the backs of dozens of portage animals, many goods and thousands in money [sum in *liang*]. Strongmen, experts in martial arts, accompany them in return for payment and defend them from the plundering of pirates and brigands from the steppes using muskets and bows. These people are arrogant, brutal, and dishonest. When they lack money, they do not pay their dues in buying their food; their mules trample the grain crops; they force the innkeepers to lodge them; likewise, they mistreat the passengers and throw their suitcases on the riverbank in order to be the first on the boats [to cross a river]. More can be said about their bad behaviour, which the merchants fear, without daring to complain.

This is hearsay. But last year, in the first decade of the eighth month, when I was returning from an official visit to His Majesty, I was about to cross the Yellow River at Yingze in Henan Province, when, after embarking, I saw behind me escorts holding a banner. They claimed to be escorting the wages of the Emperor's soldiers, and ordered us to stand back. I asked them where the money was to be sent, and whether there were any laureates of the imperial provincial examinations [among the escorts], but they remained vague without giving any explanation. They agreed, however, that we took the same boat, as they knew that I was accompanied by the governor of Hubei Province. They continued to give me sideways glances with such petulance that one can imagine the martyrdom that the merchants had to endure with them.

This year, by imperial decree, I shall take up my duties in Jinyang, leave Hubei Province and again conduct an investigation on the way. The disturbances caused everywhere by escorts are unanimously acknowledged, and the conformity of my information with reality is beyond doubt. Moreover, I would add that their manners of planting banners and displaying spears in the inns, taking themselves for officials, is not only insolent, but also illegal. It is imperative to secure long-distance routes. However, if this means hiring escorts, those trouble-making

[26] There are two copies of the memorial. I have not found any difference between the two copies. This transcription is based on First Historical Archives of China, category 04, catalogue no. 1, *juan* no. 73, document no. 12. This text is also reproduced in: Liu Jiansheng 2014, pp. 66–69; Ji Canzhong 2013, pp. 32–33.

> mercenaries who annoy merchants, then it is the same [insecurity]. In the interest of pacifying the territory, I respectfully request His Majesty, as far as possible, to communicate to the governors of each province the decree forbidding escorts to enter border posts, access to jetties, towns and cities, as well as prohibiting them from obtaining supplies without cash and trampling on grain crops. In consideration of what has been stated, they should be strongly prevented from frequenting hostels and crossing rivers. There shall be a severe penalty for the slightest infraction. And if they take the argument of transporting soldiers' wages in the name of the Emperor, displaying their banners and brandishing their spears in a show of force, we shall give orders to retaliate accordingly and put an end to their insolence by arresting them. Thus, by fighting these tyrants, the merchants can find peace.
>
> I solemnly implore Your Majesty for a favourable decision on this request. Sincerely, your minister.

This document not only highlights the existence of the escort occupation; above all, it helps to better understand how escort-guards were portrayed in the Qing official discourse.

In his effort to inform the emperor about the reality of the escort occupation, Yan Ruilong essentially focused on the hostile, aggressive and provocative behaviour of the escort-guards. However, the memorial remains silent on their identity, as well as on the nature of the various escort services of which the officials may have been aware, such as the agreements established with the traders, the responsibility for transporting military provisions and the escorting of candidates to the imperial examinations.[27] Nevertheless, how can we interpret the depreciatory discourse of officials, knowing that no escorted trade activity would have been possible without the principle of trust (*xinyong* 信用) so important in the merchants' community? Trust is the matrix of escort companies: no contract is written, no remuneration is given in advance by the merchants. The goods are entrusted to the escorts on the condition that a relationship of trust has been established beforehand. The escort business therefore emerges above all from the social value of trust, around which its actors can expect a certain loyalty from their clients (the merchants), and thus the longevity of their occupation.[28] From this perspective, Yan Ruilong's description appears rather partial and incomplete. It is quite

[27] See Liu Jiansheng et al. 2014, p. 69. According to the oral tradition, with regard to the transportation of military provisions the use of escort companies would have been particularly useful during and after the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) because of the government's fear of rebel soldiers in its army. See Qi Rushan 2007, pp. 87–88.

[28] For the notion of trust and credit (*xinyong*) in commercial relationship between merchants and escort companies, see Kong Xiangyi 2004.

clear that threatening and villainous escort-guards would not have been able to maintain such long-lasting trading relationships with influential merchants.

3 Concluding remarks

The phenomenon of escort companies depended as much on the geographical scope of the escorts as on the network system from which the caravan routes they used were drawn. The aim of this note is to reflect on the depreciatory discourse of officials. While remaining aware of the limits of this analysis, we can nevertheless observe a certain bias in the discourse of local governors, which can be critically analysed by considering the escort profession in its diversity on the one hand, and its systemic and structural complexity on the other. We could imagine that the willingness of local governors to prohibit private escort activity may have had more to do with the secret relationships that escorts established with the brigands than with actual criminal behaviour towards the merchants. For obvious reasons, this kind of cooperation with outlaws for profit had to be a direct affront against representatives of government authority. Furthermore, historical studies on the development of merchant activities in Northern China have shown that traders were profiting from the service of escort companies and that their commercial activities were effectively coordinated with the organisation of convoys.[29]

The two officials who submitted the memorials discussed did seemingly ignore all these dimensions of escort activity, or they chose not to mention it. According to their memorials, escort-guards were illegally armed with muskets, behaved in a manner similar to brigands, or were even brigands themselves. Their association with merchants was of little comfort to the literate elites who traditionally looked down upon the merchant class. Private trade was generally not seen as a virtuous occupation aligned with the Confucian ideal.

To conclude, the confidentiality of escort activities finds its meaning when we understand more deeply their proximity to the *Jianghu* 江湖 — a concept that is far from being only fictional. *Jianghu* is "the other society", the realm of the marginalised, including brave vigilantes (heroic outlaws) and brigands, as opposed to the literati society.[30] The complexity of social relationships in the *Jianghu*, based on ritualised codes of honour and respect to the point of dichotomously branching out into a relationship of trust and mistrust, does not favour the production of a written and official history. Mystery and secrecy are part of the phenomenon of escort companies and its actors. Despite their intimacy with the world of trade,

[29] Kong Xiangyi 2004. See also Liu Jiansheng et al 2014.
[30] See Durand-Dastès 2016. See also Chircop-Reyes 2022.

they remain in essence "marginalised". As a result, government officials at that time barely understood or, if they did, chose not to mention any details on the composition of escort companies. That said, the archival documents discussed here make it clear that the escort-guards were outlawed and illegal. Although these documents provide only the viewpoint of government officials, they tell us a great deal about the social behaviour of (some) escorts.

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