

Research Article

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Naughty Boys as Heroes and Redefining the Father–Son Relationship: Examining *Mo's Mischief Series* by Hongying Yang

<https://doi.org/10.1515/cat-2025-0002>

Received March 2, 2025; accepted June 21, 2025; published online July 16, 2025

Abstract: As one of the most important writers of children's literature in the 21st century in China, Hongying Yang has not only topped the list of children's literature and started a “craze” phenomenon but also aroused particular controversy in academia over the issues of the commercialization and literariness of her works. Despite the criticism of the commercial aspects of her work, Yang has taken the lead in writing for primary school children in this century. In this study, by analysing *Mo's Mischief Series*, one of Yang's bestsellers in recent years based on the quality-oriented educational context, I argue that in the transition from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education, Hongying Yang depicts young characters who are regarded as naughty boys at school in a positive light by revolting against the good boy examples set by traditional children's literature. The interplay between school and family introduces the possibilities through which education emerges not only as coercive but also as formative, carrying profound implications for children's socialization and creativity.

Keywords: Hongying Yang's craze; *Mo's Mischief Series*; naughty boys; quality-oriented education

1 Introduction

Children's literature in China can be divided into three broad levels in terms of age groups, namely, infant literature (3–6), childhood literature (7–12) and juvenile literature (13–17) (Wang 2009: 93). For many years, children's literature catering to the needs of young readers between the ages of 7 and 12 has been lacking (Wang 2009, p. 96). The 21st century witnessed the first golden decade for children's literature in

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China, which is widely believed to have started with the introduction of the Harry Potter series. Since 2000, the children's book publishing industry has experienced impressive double-digit growth every year. This positive trend, which is described as "the most dynamic, promising, rapidly developing, and fiercely competitive within the entire publishing industry", has ushered children's literature into the age of bestsellers (Haifei 2015, p. 5).

Hongying Yang (杨红樱 1962), who is regarded as the J.K. Rowling of China, is one of the most prominent Chinese writers of children's literature, with a focus on childhood. Her noteworthy works include *"Girls Diary"* (2000), *"the Mo's Mischief"* series (2003), *"the Diary of a Smiling Cat"* series (2006) and the *Fairy tale* series (2008). By the end of 2021, Yang had published 80 children's books and achieved an impressive sales milestone of 200 million copies in China (Duan and Wanfei 2021).

Yang's success not only brought her instant fame and introduced the "craze" for her works among young readers, which is called 'Hongying Yang's Phenomenon', but also aroused a heated discussion in academia over the commercialization and literariness of her works. In the field of Chinese children's literature, a discussion regarding the balance between classic and commercial literature has persisted. Thus, the controversy surrounding Hongying Yang's phenomenon is centred on the debate over literary writing and commercial writing. The translation of foreign works has always played a notable role in the development of Chinese children's literature. In the 21st century, Western best-selling children's literature represented by Harry Potter has had a catalytic effect on the creation of local Chinese children's literature, promoting the development of best-selling children's books as writers, publishers, and the book market play key roles. The controversy sparked by Hongying Yang's phenomenon indeed revolves around the conflict and harmonization between literary writing and commercial writing. This phenomenon not only reflects the challenges involved in the development process of Chinese children's literature but also reveals the complex relationship between literature and commerce in the contemporary cultural market.

In general, there are two schools of thought on the evaluation criterion of children's literature in China. "One school of thought insists on the importance of aesthetic value in literature deferring to the classic and elegant style of writing for children", based on the belief that "the mission of children's literature is to enhance their spiritual life and thereby provide a solid humanist foundation for development" (Yin 2009, p. 107). When engaging in literary criticism, critics often compare and study works against classic children's literature. "A work considered as a classic should undergo the test of time, the sedimentation of history, and careful selection" (Yang 2006, p. 14). Therefore, children's works are actually assessed based on the standards set by classic works. This kind of critical system has existed for a long time. According to this school of thought, although times are changing, society is

progressing, and form and content are constantly evolving, the fundamental nature of literary works should remain unchanged.

The other school of thought “subscribes to some of the practices of commercialized writing” (Yin 2009, p. 108) to create market-tailored books for young readers and best sellers. According to Zhu Ziqiang, children’s literature in the 21st century has gone through four differentiating stages: fantasy novels branching out from fairy tales; picture books from general children’s literature; children’s literature differentiating into language education literature for children; and commercialized children’s literature separating from children’s literature as a whole (Zhu 2008, p. 18). Among these stages, commercialized children’s literature “is the most significant, complex, and substantial change that has occurred in Chinese children’s literature in the new century”, which can be seen from the perspective of social culture and economic activities (Zhu 2008, p. 18). The market-driven nature of publishing has led to a focus on works that are likely to achieve high sales and widespread popularity.

Among the different interpretations of Hongying Yang’s craze, the favourable comments have been focused on the popularity and commercial aspects of her works. Inspired by Yang’s bestsellers and her popularity among young readers in China, these comments on Yang’s books work their way out naturally from the deduction that bestsellers are the best and classic. Those who subscribe to Yang’s works believe that her works are supposed to be child-centred since they are well received by young readers (see Fang and Zhao 2012; Li 2013; Li and Yang 2005; Qiao 2013; Wang 2009; Wu 2007; Zheng 2016; Zhuang 2009). With a firm commitment to a child-centred writing approach, Hongying Yang is an outstanding writer whose work has been loved by children in the age group of 7–12 years (Wang 2016, p. 20).

The negative evaluations (see Liu 2009; Zhu 2008) of Yang’s work have been focused on the literary aspects of her works by drawing parallels with the iconic naughty boy stories prevalent in international children’s literature, exemplified by titles such as the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, the *Emil of Lönneberga*, and the *Harry Potter* series. While Mo’s Mischief shares thematic parallels with the three works—centering on young protagonists navigating growth, challenges, and self-discovery—it has faced criticism from scholars and literary critics for its perceived lack of depth in literary craftsmanship. In these negative evaluations, the consensus on her works is that “There is a lack of literariness in her books, lacking in thought-provoking and profound aesthetic connotations” (Li 2006); moreover, visualized storylines, uninteresting plots, cartoon-like characters and mediocre language characterize her works, which are the result of the commercialism of children’s literature. It is apparent that the bestsellers produced by Yang is not “the bestsellers in the sense of literariness, but completely in the sense of commercialism” (Zheng 2016, p. 50). In essence, Yang’s literature thrives as a commercial product: it meets market needs

and entertains effectively but lacks the artistic innovation, timelessness, and depth required to ascend to the canon of classic children's literature.

As one of the bestselling books written by Hongying Yang, *Mo's Mischief Series* with 30 instalments sold 70 million copies from 2003 to 2022 (Li 2022). Its publication marks the debut of “commercial children's books” in China (Chen 2010, pp. 76–77). Revolving around the family and education scenes, the series depicts a group of fun-loving children in primary school, represented by Mo, who often gets into trouble with his teachers and classmates while displaying a strong sense of participation and independent coping abilities towards the world in which they live and the things around them. They handle various issues in their surrounding world in a uniquely childlike manner. Indeed, “Not only do they freely expend their abundant energy of childhood in every corner of family and school life, but they also actively engage themselves in actions of self-empowerment during childhood, using their own strength and will to intervene in real life” (Fang and Zhao 2012, p. 144). In my analysis of *Mo's Mischief Series*, one of Yang's Bestsellers in recent years based on the quality-oriented educational context, I argue that in the transition from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education, Hongying Yang depicts young characters who are regarded as naughty boys at school in a positive light by revolting against the good child examples set by traditional children's literature.

2 Naughty Boys as Heroes

In traditional Chinese children's literature, boys' naughtiness and nature are absolutely at odds with the ideals of education. Therefore, instructing naughty boys to become model children has been one of the major patterns in many children's literature (Zhu 2008, p. 16). One of the typical examples of the image of a naughty boy was found in *The Story of Luo Wenying* written by Zhang Wentian (张闻天 1906–1985), an award winner for children's literature in 1954, describing a sixth grader named Luo Wenying whose lofty ideal is to join the People's Liberation Army in the future. However, like many boys of his age, he is very curious and playful, which causes him to get into trouble occasionally and prevents him from being a good boy. For example, one day, he is supposed to go home immediately after school and do his homework. However, when he passes the market, he cannot resist the temptation and lingers there for a couple of hours. Once again, he is attracted by the ball game outside the market before he realizes that it has been too late. In the story, Luo's curiosity is described as the major obstacle for his academic progress. It seems that the only way out for him is to eliminate it. As the PLA officer said in his letter to Luo, “hope you can behave yourself.” To help him, the students invited Luo Wenying to review his lessons together. Finally, with the help of teachers and young pioneers

and the encouragement of the people's Liberation Army, Luo Wenying managed to exercise self-restraint and significantly improve his academic performance.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, boys' images were moving further away from the traditional hero model and "focusing more on protagonists who confront the internal conflicts, struggles, and concerns those ordinary children face" (Fang 2009, p. 192). Shaped by this context, modern children's literature has begun to embrace children's genuine aspirations and perspectives rather than avoiding them. The characters dare to articulate what they want and need in a way that is respectful and firm and are willing to address various challenges with healthy selfishness. In the instalment of the *Four Naughty Boys*, Mo, along with his three classmates, who are regarded as naughty boys, hopes to compete for the "Three Good Student" (excellence in morality, study and health) in the class. Although they know that their chance of being granted such an honour is slim, they come up with a good idea of canvassing votes from each other. Much to Mo's embarrassment, his friends are too intimidated to vote for him in front of the whole class even though he has voted for them. At that moment, "Mo is in such despair that he feels being betrayed by his friends" (*Four Naughty Boys*, p. 75). Children's natural inclination to prioritize their own needs and desires is clearly displayed in this scene. Such a description of children's selfishness and desires is rarely seen in the traditional context of children's literature. Indeed, "Perhaps only in the commercial cultural context featuring modernity and openness can such a frank description of childhood desires exist" (Fang 2009, pp. 192–193).

Despite the real aspirations and desires described, naughty boys often display a strong sense of independence, wanting to do things their own way. They possess a creative mindset, finding unique and imaginative ways to address unexpected situations by themselves. As noted, "They not only spread their abundant surplus of energy to every corner of their families and schools, but they also begin to take part in activities of self-empowerment and try to change life with the power and will of childhood" (Nelson and Morris 2014, p. 193). The instalment of *Mo's TV Station* portrays a troubling incident encountered by Mo and his companions during their visit to the wildlife zoo. Upon their arrival, they were dismayed to witness a zookeeper forcibly removing a baby tiger from its enclosure for photo opportunities with tourists. Motivated by financial gain, the zookeeper callously disregarded the welfare of the tiger cub, subjecting it to repeated stressful situations merely for profit. This insensitive behaviour left the tiger cub visibly distressed, and its fear and helplessness were evident in its terrified gaze. In this scene, Mo and his friends were moved to action. They recognized the harm inflicted upon the tiger cub and the violation of the zoo's mission to protect the animals. Determined to intervene, they confronted the zookeeper and put an end to the exploitation of the tiger cub for photographs.

Through their bravery and wisdom, Mo and his friends succeeded in halting the zookeeper's actions and facilitating the tiger cub's escape from its ordeal.

This narrative not only highlights children's compassion and advocacy for animal welfare but also emphasizes the initiative that these boys take to help the weak out of the dilemma. Naughty boys' independence can be a valuable trait in many aspects of their life; however, as they progress through school, they may find that the demands of their studies become increasingly challenging. As a result, they may fall behind in their studies and experience frustration, anxiety, and even a sense of failure.

The term "boy crisis" refers to the challenges and struggles that boys face, especially in education and social development, that are believed to contribute to their underperformance and well-being compared with those of girls. Notably, "On the other hand, proponents of the much-touted "boy crisis" in education also blame boys' academic lagging behind their female peers on a kind of recently induced male passivity anticipated by Cleary's portrayal of Henry"(Nelson and Morris 2014, p. 183). In China, a unique colloquial term is used to describe the boy crisis – yin sheng, yang shuai – which means "the female (yin) is on the way up, while the male (yang) is on the way down – a gender stock market" (Farrell and Grey 2018). In the instalment of *War Between Mo and His Deskmate*, a teacher arranges for Mo to be a desk mate of a female student, named Lu Manman, who is the monitor and the top student in the class, to repress his extra energy and help him learn discipline. As a bright, obedient and spunky girl, Lu Manman contrasts starkly with Mo. Whenever Mo does something wrong, Lu reports his misbehaviour to the teacher. Specifically, "Miss Qin gives Lu a notebook and asks her to document Mo's misbehaviours at any time and gives it back to her after school. Accordingly, she is able to educate Mo on time" (Yang 2013c, p. 6). This highlights that the education system clearly neglects the differences between boys and girls in their mental and physiological development. The long-standing "exam-oriented education" is the primary cause of the boy crisis (Li 2018, p. 30).

Notably, "China's exam-oriented education system has a long history that can be traced back to the imperial period, from the Sui Dynasty (581–618) through the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)" (Lin and Ghail 2017, p. 4). For many years, Chinese families have highly valued examinations, especially high-stake and life-changing examinations such as Gaokao (College Entrance Examination) and Zhongkao (Senior High School Examination), in terms of their expectations and aspirations for their children. However, scholars have criticized the exam-oriented education system for overburdening students with schoolwork and perpetuating the vicious cycle of an examination-oriented approach that impedes the development of children's dispositions and imagination (Tang 2014, p. 117).

To shift away from this traditional system to focus on the formation of the individual as an all-round, capable citizen (Lin and Ghail 2017, p. 3), the Chinese government issued a policy of quality-oriented education (su zhi jiao yu) reform in 1999, stating that the fundamental aim of the reform was to improve the overall quality of the nation, focusing on cultivating students' innovative spirit and practical abilities and nurturing individuals who are idealistic, moral, cultured, disciplined, and capable of comprehensive development in areas such as morality, intelligence, physical fitness, and aesthetics. However, one of the most pervasive misconceptions among parents in China is the notion of "Never-lose-at-the-starting-line". This concept instils a fear in parents that their children might fall behind right from the beginning. As a result, they enrol their children in various training courses, attempting to preload them with the knowledge that they are going to learn soon. If we compare life to a competition, the metaphor of the "starting line" seems fitting. However, true education success cannot be measured solely by grades or scores. Instead, it should be evaluated on the basis of the level of interest that individuals have in and their engagement with the knowledge they learn; then, the education they receive can be considered successful.

In the instalment of *The Super Mayor*, a girl who has been nicknamed "a perfect girl" is described when she runs for the election of the super mayor of a virtual city. The girl, who is accompanied by her mother, is not allowed to utter a single word by the mother; instead, the mother speaks for her daughter. What we know about the perfect girl is told by her mother: "She said that her daughter is the school's captain, and her grade is ranked first in the whole year. She can not only play the piano, play the violin, and play chess but also excel at Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painting, oil painting, English and computer" (Yang 2013a, p. 17). Another example of a perfect boy is Wentao, who is skilled in Chinese idioms. He is nicknamed "the king of Chinese idioms" because "he can effortlessly spout a string of idioms, showcasing his impressive linguistic skills" (Yang 2013b, p. 2). While his verbal skills are impressive, he lacks dexterity in his hands, resulting in slow execution of tasks. Thus, he is perceived as the laughing stock in his class. Notably, the author depicts two seemingly perfect students to highlight the problem with the notion of "Never-lose-at-the-starting-line". That is, this utilitarian philosophy of education is not conducive to students' overall development in terms of morality, intelligence, physique and beauty or to the cultivation of their creative spirit and innovation.

At the end of *The Super Mayor*, three competitors – the perfect girl, the perfect boy Wendao and the naughty boy Mo – meet with each other in the final round of the election. When the perfect girl and Wendao deliver their speeches, they have memorized everything mechanically. However, Mo unexpectedly presents the survey he has conducted on the concerns of the children. As his survey arouses the judges' interest, one of them asks him about the children's most pressing concern. Mo

replies, “The most pressing concern is having too much homework and too many exams, which prevents them from doing what they want. They are not free, as they are constantly taken care of by adults from the moment they wake up in the morning until they go to bed at night. They have no personal space of their own. Their happiness is minimal, as school time is filled only with classes and more classes” (Yang 2013a, p. 134–135). Using Mo as a spokesman, Hongying Yang stresses the negative outcome of exam-oriented education because it has led to the deep-seated issue of ‘score-centric’ education in primary and middle schools. Examinations were originally designed as a means to assess students’ learning outcomes and levels. However, they have deteriorated into tools serving the sole purpose of students’ learning at school (Chen 2019, pp. 107–113).

3 Redefining the Father-Son Relationship

The strict “one-child policy” refers to the policy that was implemented in China in 1982 and limited most urban couples to having only one child as a means of controlling China’s large population and increasing job opportunities. However, in familial settings, this policy meant that the only child occupied the central position in the hearts of parents and grandparents. Therefore, “only children in China are often affectionately referred to as ‘little suns’” (Goh 2011, p. 1). This allows parents to do their utmost to provide their only children with a large amount of educational investment so that they will be able to “stand in the education system and job market, find elite work with high prestige and high pay, and achieve the upwards flow of family status” (Frenette 2006, pp. 24–25). In traditional Chinese culture, the relationship between parents and children, particularly the relationship between fathers and sons, is defined as the superiority of the former over the latter. The principle of “father guiding son,” one of “The Three Cardinal Guides” of Confucius, has given rise to the popular saying among Chinese families, “Parents always have their good reasons, and they could never be “wrong” (Tang 2014, p. 111). A typical example of the traditional father–son relationship is a story titled “Dad Checking My Homework” (1982) written by Ding Ahu (丁阿虎 1944). At the beginning of the story, the father, preoccupied with his arduous work schedule, had hitherto neglected his son’s studies, and the son, likewise, disregarded his father’s words. Nevertheless, a remarkable shift occurred when the father expressed a keen interest in his son’s homework, declaring, “I am now free to check your homework at any time I please”, while ceremoniously peeling off the days from the calendar (Ding 1982). This gesture, imbued with subtle yet profound symbolism, served as a metaphorical farewell to the hectic days of the past, signifying a beginning of life in which the father finally found the time to guide his son. However, “the late twentieth century provided its

own unprecedented context for a rewriting of the relationship between parent and child", and to some extent, the conflict between fathers and sons has become "a common master narrative" in Chinese culture (Foster 2013, p. 54). In *Mo's Mischief Series*, despite the similar only child family pattern, different father-son relationships have been depicted to demonstrate the influences that this pattern has on the growth and education of children.

As a manipulative type of father, Wentao Ding's father shows much care for his son's growth. Notably, "Most people regard their own expectations towards children as their children's needs, and push them to work under stress in the primary school, which deprives them of the most precious things in life, such as the shaping of healthy personality and the enjoyment of life" (Yang 2006, p. 46). As shown in the title of the instalment of *Wentao Ding – A Little Adult*, Wentao is depicted as pedantic and uninteresting, although admittedly, he is regarded as the top student in his class. Throughout Ding Wentao's growth, he unwittingly mirrors the traits and influences of the Ding family, evident in his pursuits ranging from campaigning for the position of super mayor to actively participating in charity events organized by his class and even in his aspirations for interactions with foreign friends. From establishing a win-win strategy for learning the language to forcing Wentao to abandon the class fairy tale performance for the personal honour to participate in the Chinese spelling contest, Mr. Ding always gives detailed instructions on his son's growth and life. According to his plans, his son is supposed to apply for a world-famous university, such as Harvard or Stanford in the U.S., and work his way up to be an economist after graduation. To help his son achieve this goal, Mr. Ding always gives detailed instructions on whether his son likes it. For example, as Mr. Ding clearly knows that social service is a plus for Wentao's application, he helps him implement the project of "Bank of Good Deeds" in class, an inappropriate way of winning favourable comments from others in the name of school charity. Although the idea helps Wentao successfully gain publicity, it is widely criticized by his classmates for misleading others to do good deeds out of personal interest, "not from the bottom of one's heart" (Yang 2013d, p. 112). Representing the manipulative type of father in the story, Mr. Ding regards his own expectation towards his son as his own and pushes him to work under stress at school regardless of his enjoyment of life.

Compared with Ding's family, the relationship between Mo and his father represents the democratic type in the stories. Mo's father not only possesses a youthful and caring spirit but also understands him and actively engages in playing together. Despite his mischievous nature and penchant for pranks, his tendency to disregard rules and his reputation as a troublemaker in conventional terms, Mo grows up within a democratic, affectionate, and nurturing family environment. This upbringing instils in him outstanding qualities such as integrity, kindness, and compassion (Zhang 2016, pp. 46–47). In the instalment of *The Playful Daddy*, Mo

comes up with the idea of swapping roles with his father on a whim because he believes that he could experience a happy day without doing homework. To his surprise, his dad readily agrees with his proposal. The idea of being “dad” makes Mo feel proud and triumphant. He is overjoyed that he can do what he cannot do as the son, like buying whatever he likes and watching TV all the time. However, at the same time, he also finds that being a father is not trouble-free because he has to cook in such a way that he can cater to the requirements of “his fussy son”. This act of standing in the other’s shoes not only highlights Mo’s democratic and affectionate family environment but also reverses the traditional father–son relationship in which fathers are omnipotent while sons are subservient and need to be instructed all the time.

This democratic father–son relationship also emphasizes the mutual growth and reconciliation between father and son. As Mo’s father navigates Mo’s misadventures, they both learn valuable lessons about communication, empathy, and the importance of familial bonds. In *The Four Naughty Boys*, Mo and his friends plan a secret camping trip without telling their parents. The boys leave behind clues indicating that they will be safe but gone. Unbeknownst to them, their fathers, concerned for their safety, decide to secretly follow them. Through a series of hilarious mishaps and clever manoeuvres, the boys try to lose their fathers while the fathers struggle to keep up. In the end, when the boys successfully set up a camp in a park, enjoying their freedom, their fathers engage in a delightful conversation and shared laughter, rejuvenating cherished childhood memories while joyfully accompanying their sons without intruding on their moment. The fathers learn from their sons to gain opportunities for equal communication with them to build what Raymond Williams called the deep community that “makes communication possible is drawn upon” (Williams 1965, p. 65).

4 Conclusions

As noted, “The children’s literature field represents a relative free space for unconventional ideas.” (Mickenberg and Nel 2008, p. 2) By revolting against the good child’s examples set by the traditional children’s literature, Hongying Yang depicts young characters who are regarded as “bad boys” at school in a positive light. On the basis of the social-educational context of the 21st century in China, this article has analysed Mo as an alternative role model at the transition between exam-oriented education and quality-oriented education rebelling against utilitarian educational values. For Hongying Yang, Mo is the ideal child image she wants to create because she has given him many things, such as her ideals of family education and school education, her thoughts on current education and her understanding of childhood.

Central to exam-oriented education, academic performance is not supposed to be seen as the major attribute to demonstrate individual quality, which has disproportionately affected “a range of subordinately positioned boys” (Lin and Ghail 2017, p. 4). In her works, Hongying Yang boldly challenges the conventional depictions of the “good boy” that have dominated traditional children’s literature. Instead, she shines a positive light on the young characters who are often labelled “bad boys” in school settings. In this way, she offers an alternative perspective that challenges societal norms and expectations. Mo’s behavioural patterns and attitudes subvert the traditional constraints placed on boys. He exhibits a daredevil spirit, embracing risk-taking and experimentation without fear of failure or setbacks. His antics, while sometimes frustrating adults, reveal his inherent enthusiasm and vitality, presenting readers with a refreshing and engaging portrayal of boyish charm. He treats his friends with sincerity and warmth, embodying a sense of loyalty and camaraderie that is often overlooked in stereotypical depictions of boyhood. This aspect of his character further enriches his complexity and depth, making him a more relatable and believable protagonist.

Additionally, the familial environment plays a pivotal role in the educational journey. A warm, supportive, and loving home fosters positive growth momentum, enabling children to develop healthy self-awareness and emotional expression. When education and family environments are considered in tandem, their intricate interplay becomes evident. The familial environment provides vital support and complementarity to education, whereas education, in turn, shapes children’s personalities and beliefs, further influencing and transforming the family environment. This mutual influence fosters children’s holistic development and contributes to the harmony and progress of families and society.

Acknowledgments: I’d like to thank Professor LI LI from Macao Polytechnic University for her feedback and insight on this article. I would also like to thank the peer reviewers for their kind input.

Research funding: This research is funded by Tianjin Municipal Education Commission (Grant number: 2023ZXWY-YB05) and Tianjin University of Technology (YJ2024-10020).

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