

# Resource Transaction and the Disadvantage of Vulnerable Youth

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## Abstract

Under the background of social transition and globalization, vulnerable youth in China is quite disadvantaged in the public activities. Based on the ecological system perspective, this paper examines the situation of vulnerable youth in Tianjin, one of the five municipalities directly under the Central Government in China, by the qualitative-quantitative mixed method. Findings show that the disadvantage of vulnerable youth is caused by the shortage of economy resource, culture resource and information resource, which the groups can not obtain sufficiently from family system, school system, work system and community system by successful transaction. Some suggestions for social policies and further research are set forth accordingly.

## Keywords

Vulnerable Youth, Ecological System Perspective, China

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## 1. Introduction

Under the background of social transition and globalization, the living conditions and problems of vulnerable youth in China are of great concern and call for the effective social policy to cope with. As a kind of vulnerable group, vulnerable youth has relative less access to social-economic resources and lack of capability of maintaining subsistence and seeking self-development in a dignified manner. Social transition and globalization intensify the competition in labor market in China, which made the vulnerable youth more disadvantaged in the public activities. In view of basic right of human, the loss of manpower due to youth unemployment and the social cost associated with the senior of social problems caused by vulnerable youth in their life course, developing program to support vulnerable youth is an important social issue significant for modern society. To ensure that youth have the opportunities that would enable them to

become healthy, productive adults, states need to implement policies and programs to better prepare youth for independence and development.

Theory increases a research's awareness of interconnections and of the broader significance of data (Neuman, 2003). And as Babbie (1999) stated, social theories offer a variety of views, each of which offers insight the other lack, but ignores aspects of social life that the others reveal. The use of multiple theories in a research area helps to increase the depth of understanding. As a modern social work theory, ecological system theory is an important perspective for the study on vulnerable group, and there was still no study on vulnerable youth in China from this perspective. Therefore, based on the ecological system theory, this paper examines the situation of vulnerable youth in Tianjin City, which is one of the five municipalities directly under the Central Government in China, by the concurrent transformative qualitative-quantitative mixed method and tries to set forth basic suggestions for social policies accordingly.

## 2. Literature Review

A volume of research on vulnerable youth has been carried out in the developed country. These research have focus on numerous of importance to the well-being of vulnerable youth, such as social support, social negative effect, transition to adulthood, development outcome in a particular situation, social risk, risk-taking behavior and program assessment for the relative social policy and social service (e.g. Holzman & Grinker, 1974; Schinke, Jansen, Kennedy, & Shi, 1994; Taylor & Dryfoos, 1998/1999; Collins, 2001; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001; Huba, Panter, & Melchior, 2003; Hyucksun, 2004). Based on the Results of a study, Stice, Spangler and Agras (2001) suggest that exposure to thin-ideal images has lasting negative effects for vulnerable youth. Furlong, Cartmel, Powney and Hall (1997) represents the culmination of an eighteen month research project funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) into the effectiveness of youth work with vulnerable young people. Besides, by describing and analyzing their demographic characteristics, exposure to stress and trauma, and psychosocial well-being, Laelia, Lou, Jonathan, et al. (2006) evaluated psychosocial support (PSS) programs and the impact of these programs on vulnerable youth's psychosocial well-being.

In comparison, the study in China is just at an embryonic stage. With a target sample of 2360 vulnerable youth, Yang and his colleagues (Yang & Chen, 2002; Yang, 2004) carried out a survey and collect quantitative data from the vulnerable youth in Shanghai city. Base on case interview, Fu (2003) attain qualitative data from 22 respondents in Hunan province. Like these study, most of the present study focused on describe the education, employment, family and living state and desire of living vulnerable youth, and lack of an explicit theory guiding research, which limit the research implication for social policy and social service. From the social exclusion perspective, Lu and his colleagues (2004) found that vulnerable youth faced a degreed of social exclusion, and the relative social poli-

cy had construct a social inclusion mechanism for them, but it was still at low level.

### 3. Research Design

Qualitative-quantitative mixed method is one of the important triangulation in the modern social research. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed (Denzin, 1978). As a generic form of multiple methods approach, qualitative-quantitative mixed method is a type of research in which qualitative and quantitative method are used in type of questions, data collection and analysis procedures, and/or inferences (Teddlie & Tasbakkori, 2003). It helps to completely understand multifaceted institutions or realities and there is three areas in which mixed methods may be superior to single approach designs: 1) mixed methods research can answer research questions that the other methodologies can not; 2) mixed methods research provides better (stronger) inferences; 3) mixed methods provide the opportunity for presenting a greater diversity of divergent views (Teddlie & Tasbakkori, 2003). At the same time, mixed method should not be considered as an approach that is universally applicable or as a panacea, because it is subject to similar constraints and considerations as research relying on a single method, and must be appropriate to the research area and be competently designed and conducted (Bryman, 2004).

As one type of mixed methods design, concurrent transformative strategy is guided by the research's use of a specific theoretical perspective, by which qualitative data and quantitative data are collected at the same time and integrated during the analysis phase (Creswell, 2003). To both generalize the findings to the population and develop a detailed view of the meaning of the phenomenon for the individual in a systematic way that helps to develop theory and formulate effective social policy, this research selected the concurrent transformative strategy to guide the design.

#### 3.1. Theoretical Perspective

Focusing on environments, individual and the complex reciprocal relation between the two, ecological system theory emphasizes that individual need to use the internal resource and positive behaviors to acquire environmental resources by transaction to meet the need and finish the task in life course. The fundamental assumption in ecological system theory is that systems are mutually interacting and the nature of this interaction at least partially explains a variety of phenomena, including the existence of problems, the nature of behavior, and the course of human development (Tolson, Reid, & Garvin, 1994). From this perspective, circular causality replaces linear causality in explanation. The value of ecological system theory, as Evans and Kearney (1996) stated, lies in offering a broad framework not only for understanding and analyzing many of the situation and problem people are faced with, but also as a method of deciding on the

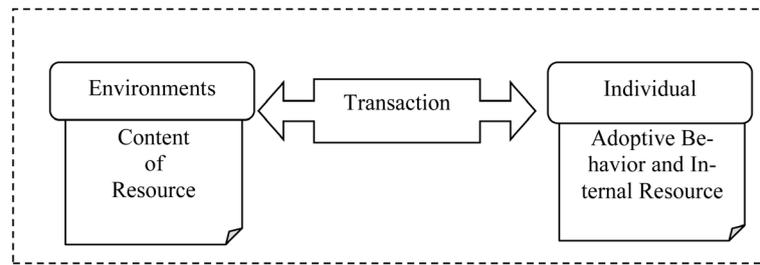
most suitable mean of intervening in them to achieve effective change.

In general term, a system may be described as “a complex of elements or components directly or indirectly related in a causal network, such that each component is related to some others in a more or less stable way within any particular period of time” (Buckley, 1967). There are different levels of systems, including larger and more encompassing systems and smaller systems that may be seen as subsystems of the larger systems (Compton & Galaway, 1979). Individual and environments constitutes a unitary system, in which individual can be seen as active subsystem capable of self-initiated behavior and interacting with the situation systems of the environments, which is viewed as the combined situational forces that work to shape the behavior and development of individual in a particular settings (Greene & Ephross, 1991). According to Pincus and Minshan (1973), environments could be divided into three kind of system: 1) informal or natural system (such as family, friend); 2) formal system (like community group, trade unions); 3) societal system (for example hospitals, school). Thus the transaction between individual-environments could be viewed as a individual-system transaction.

Another key concept of this perspective is transaction, which donates the nature of relationship between the individual-situation phenomenon--not just a single interaction, but also an interaction influenced by other interactions in the environment (Johnson, 1986). It is resources that individual transacts with environment. Instrumental resources and emotional resources are two basic kinds of resources. Instrumental resource refers to the resources individual need to use as a means to attain some target in life, and generally divided into economy resource, culture resource and information resource.

As a conceptual framework, ecological systems theory encourages transactional thinking and observations, and helps the researchers to guard against the problem of reductionalism, forcing to a different method of data collections and thus making it possible to assess the impact of multiple factors that may bear on causation (Compton & Galaway, 1979). According to Tolson, Reid and Garvin, researcher should select the systems with which they would conduct most of their work in the attempt to resolve target problem. The systems in which the problem is located, the systems in which changes must occur to achieve problem alleviation, and the systems best able to make the necessary change must be considered--with three question in mind: first, what is the role of these systems in causing or maintaining the problem; second, what is the impact of the problem on each of these systems; third, what is each system likely to contribute to solving the problem (Tolson, Reid, & Garvin, 1994).

Based on ecological systems theory, the scheme of this research was formulated out as showed in **Figure 1**. Family system, school system, work system and community system were single out for study according to the selective guide put forwarded by Tolson, Reid and Garvin (1994) and the limitation of a study. Focusing on vulnerable youth's disadvantage in the public activities, this study targeted the content and the transaction of the instrumental resources, which



**Figure 1.** Research scheme.

mainly includes economy resource, culture resource and information resource. Adoptive behavior of individual was also investigated, for it's a crucial factor influenced the transaction between environments and individual.

### 3.2. Method

In this study, the operationalization definition of “vulnerable youth” is the youth who is in the 12 - 25 age range and in the state of dropout or unemployment during the research. Took as the research site, Tianjin city is one of the five municipalities directly under the Central Government in China and located in the northeast of the North China. Besides being a business and trade center, Tianjin is also a famous historic and cultural city, and has a population in excess of 10 million people, among which the number of the youth who is in the 12 - 25 age range is approximately 2.2 million.

Firstly, this research conducted a population census to gather the basic information of vulnerable youth in Tianjin city. And then using the “district-block-community-vulnerable youth” multistage probability proportionate to size (PPs) sampling method, this research selected 1000 vulnerable youth as the sample for the questionnaire survey which was administered by interviews in face-to-face encounters or home delivery. The final effective return rate of the survey is 77.3%. The sample evaluation between sample and population on the indexes of gender, age and education level suggested that the sample of the survey is representative for the whole population and the data of it is useful in making generalization pertinent to the vulnerable youth in Tianjin city.

On the other hand, Qualitative research selected 22 respondents, which includes vulnerable youth, parent of vulnerable youth, community worker and teacher, for the case interview and focus groups according to the stratified purposeful sampling. These interviews were based on structure outlines and the interviewers were experienced and well-trained social work senior and graduates with each discussion lasting around two hours.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Family System

As a basic social unit in individual life and an important agent of socialization, family system was the major economy source and the important culture source

for youths. The results showed that 46.93% of the fathers of vulnerable youth were Out of job (Retired persons, household workers or unemployment) and the mothers 71.72%. Even engaged in employment, the parents' occupation was mostly low-income one. Only 9.1% of the fathers and 3.38% of the mothers had a high-income job, such as cadre, executive, technical personnel or private enterprise owners. Besides, only 13.69% of vulnerable youth's family lived in a house they bought in the commercial building market, and 8.67% had a welfare house. 42.68% of the total just lived in the low-rent dwelling house allotted from the community and the dwelling area of these houses were mostly less than 50 square meter. A father said, "We have no house. Just live in the house of my wife's mother. The living space for my son and meis less than 10 square meters and there is no kitchen in the house. We cook in the corridor. The electronic household equipment we had is just a TV set we bought long ago and a washing machine which is quite dilapidated." As to the family structure, 11.60% of vulnerable youth lived a single-parent family. These data suggested that the economic resource of family system was quite scarce.

What's more, over 76% of the parents (76.41% of the fathers and 80.43% of the mother) only reached junior secondary education or below. 14.57% of the father and 17.41% of the mother attained primary education and about 2% of the total had no education. 20.60% of the parent had reached junior secondary education and the remaining, about 3.1%, got the higher. The result indicated that the culture resource of family system was also not enough. The low educational level of parent could conceivably result in their inability in fulfill the perceived parental role, causing a degree of dysfunction within the family. A mother told the way she used to control his son, "Right after he dropped out, he began to kill time with some one in society. I worry about it and try to lei him stay home. Sometimes I just lock him at home. He had the key of the door before, but now I don't give him the key. I work outsides all the day and could not control him, so I lock him at home." Too rigid parental control may foster rebellion in vulnerable youth.

When facing the divergence with parents, most of vulnerable youth could cope with it rationally. 53.13% of them would talk it over and try to reach unanimity and 27.55% accept parent's advice. With age increasing, more and more vulnerable youth take these approaches in solving divergence with parent ( $X^2 = 53.005$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $F < 0.001$ ;  $\text{Gamma} = 0.28$ ,  $F < 0.01$ ; Divergence-solving Pattern dependent, Somers'  $d = 0.197$ ,  $F < 0.001$ ). This helps to maintain the relation between parents and them. Only 6% of the vulnerable youth thought they lacked of the love from their parents, and 91.20% felt satisfied about their relation with parents. However, there were still many vulnerable youth who would choose not to listen to their parents' opinion in divergence. 4.05% of them would make parent comply with them and even 15.27% would outwardly obey but inwardly do what they like. A vulnerable youth said, "I don't think that it was not important to communicate with my father. But our opinion differs from my father. My

father holds that everything he said was always right. We could not talk with him. So I just do the things I want to do, let alone whatever he would think. Don't let him know, and everything would be OK." These approaches may break off the transaction between the vulnerable youth and their family, which would probably stop the economy support from the family.

#### **4.2. School System**

In modern society, school system had the major culture resource for youths and the culture resource need to be transacted by the individual's internal economy resource and culture resource, which mainly presents as tuition fee and learning ability to pass the exam. The results showed that 34.61% of vulnerable youth were deprived of education because of the poverty of family, which limits the internal economy resource of vulnerable youth. A father said, "I let him out of school after junior secondary. Though his school record was not good, I still hope that he could finish the vocational secondary education. However, because we weren't able to afford the tuition fee..." A vulnerable youth felt sorry about it, "I stopped my schooling in the second grade of junior secondary. (Did you discuss it with your father?) It's not the matter of discussion but the situations that make you stop schooling." Besides, the low education level of the parent also restricted the internal culture resource of vulnerable youth. Using the data from the population census, vulnerable youth's education level and the parental education level cross tabulation show that coefficient of Gamma between them was 0.310 (father's) and 0.316 (mother's), which partly indicates the effect of this limitation: the lower education level the parent got, the lower education vulnerable youth reached. A father said, "I could not give my son some guidance in his studying right after he passed the Grade 2 of primary school."

When it comes to the adoptive behavior of vulnerable youth, the results revealed that the school record of the vulnerable youth was mostly not good. As a result, more than 25% of them were not able to pass the exam to enter the higher schools, and about 17% gave up schooling of their own accord which just as a vulnerable youth said, "I don't want to go to school. I could not keep up with others. It makes me feel terrible." Growing up, more and more vulnerable youth recognized the importance of education and hoped to go back to school. A girl said, "As a matter of fact, I just 15 old when I was dropped out and didn't think about the consequence of low education level."

#### **4.3. Work System**

The low education level made the vulnerable youth marginalized in the work system, which holds the major economy resource in modern society. About 50% of vulnerable youth faced education discrimination in employment. What's after it was work experience, which account for 16.12% of the total. In the past six months, 22.8% the vulnerable youth didn't try to find a job, 42.61% took a try but failed, and others couldn't find a suitable job. Some said, "Even the simplest

technical posts needs specialized college education level. It's quite difficult to find a job for those who like me just had vocational secondary education", "I had done many work, but... It's education level that hinders me. I hope to find a job in real estate agency, but it needs a specialized college education level at least for application". Many of vulnerable youth had attained the vocational secondary education or specialized secondary education, but these did not help much. Just as s vulnerable youth said, "Only one of my classmates in vocational secondary school got a job after graduation, the others stay at home just like me, though we all finished the course and got the diploma. Some of my friends who went to the regular secondary school were the same. There would be better if the school gives a recommendation, but we didn't get it because of the poor record for study."

Still, many vulnerable youth got the job opportunity, but they gave up in the end. Among the reason for giving up, "Low income" was the major, which account for 41.36% of the total. "Not promising" takes up 26.82%. 17.27% goes to "Tough", 8.64% "Distant workplace", "Not decent" 1.36% and "others" 4.55%.

Under this condition, informal employment becomes the main means that vulnerable youth could use to get economy resource from the work system, but only 20% of them could do it and informal employments in China exists many problems currently, which made the right and the interest of vulnerable youth need protection. As some parents said, "My son gave up the jobbing work, for it was too tough. 24 hour a day. Working from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and then stay there watching over as a guard", "There were three months for probation. Many companies would fire the freshmen right after probation, just for not signing the labor contract". A vulnerable youth also said, "Generally the entire good job need high education background. So I took the informal job. It doesn't need high education background, but all doesn't last long."

#### 4.4. Community System

Under the state of dropout or unemployment, vulnerable youths hope that the community department could provide job information (81.92%), training course (67.21%) and the social assistance (60.17%). But the relative service in community was quite limited at present. Because of the social transition, the work focus of the community department in Chinese city was not on the vulnerable youth at present. As some community works said, "There was almost no service for vulnerable youths. Our community just could use the lowest life security system (social assistance system in Chinese city) to help them. But when they reach 18, they were regard as active labor force and could not get the lowest life security system. Therefore the most important thing was provide a job, but there was no suitable job information for them in our community", "Generally speaking, the job information our community received was mainly for junior adult and not suitable for vulnerable youths".

At the same time, 65% of the vulnerable youths knew little about the work

their community department carried out for them. The transaction between community system and vulnerable youths was still at low level.

#### **4.5. Vulnerable Youth**

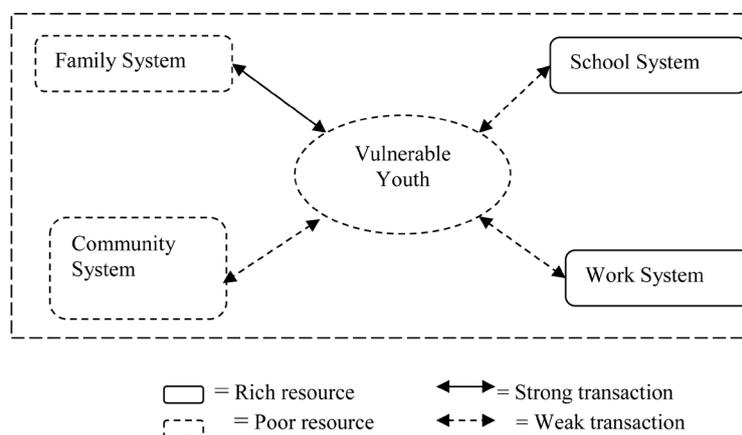
64.4% of the vulnerable youth were male, and 35.60% female. The ratio of gender was 1.81:1. The majority of vulnerable youth identified was likely to be male. As to the age, 7.8% of them lie within the range of 12 to 16, 47.6% 17 to 21 and 44.6% 22 to 25. The formal education of vulnerable youth, on average, was at low level. 19.47% of the total only reached primary education or below and 30.06% attained junior secondary. Among the vulnerable youth (42.08%) who had the senior secondary education, the majority (73.24%, 30.82% of the vulnerable youth) went to the vocational secondary school, 15.7% specialized secondary school and 13.42% regular senior secondary school, which was the main path to regular college or university. The remaining, only 6.39%, reach the higher education, but still almost half of them were just adult education.

The result of survey shows that 62.37% of vulnerable youth faced discrimination in everyday life. And though facing the situation of dropout or unemployment, many vulnerable youth did not take a positive behavior to cope with. Net bar became the second place where vulnerable youth go to in everyday life, just after the home of friends. Whereas a majority of them (74.84%) spend less than 2 hour a day on internet, among which 36.13% less than 1 hour and 38.71% 1 - 2 hour, there was 25.16% of vulnerable youth spend more than 2 hour a day and some of them, 10.16% of the total, more than 4 hour. When it came to the purpose for logging on internet, listening to music, chatting and gaming construct the main three types. Only 3.4% of them were intent to learning something useful.

From the data of the population census, 4.4% of the vulnerable youth committed deviation behaviors. Among them 91.9% were male and 8.1% female. Theft was the major type of the deviation behavior, which account for 40.8% of the total. Assault takes up 22.8%. 10.9% goes to robbery, 5.0% extortion, 4.4% drug use, 1.9% rape and 14.2% others. The majority of the deviation behavior (about 56%) was relative to property, which suggests, to some extent, that the lack of economy source was an important reason for the deviation behavior committed by vulnerable youth. Deviation behaviors leave them more vulnerable to stigmatization within the community and society.

### **5. Discussions and Further Research**

From the analysis and empirical data, the living condition of vulnerable youth could be diagrammed into an eco-map as shown in **Figure 2**. Focusing on the content and the transaction of the instrumental resources (economy resource, culture resource and information resource), the eco-map drew the target system (vulnerable youth) as a elliptic circle box and the situation system as square frame, using the full/dotted line to represent the rich/poor resource condition



**Figure 2.** The Eco-map of vulnerable youth.

and the full/dotted arrows to represent the strong/weak transaction between the systems.

As the basic social support systems, the family system of vulnerable youth was not sufficient in economy resource and culture resource. The parental occupation in the system was mostly out of job or low-salary and the living condition of the family was also not good. Besides, the low education level that the parents of vulnerable youth attained limited the culture resource in the system. Therefore, although the transaction between family system and vulnerable youth was strong, the resource deficiency in family system restricted its ability to provide enough resource to support vulnerable youth, which made them lack of the resource to maintain the transaction with the school system. The weak transaction resulted in the low education level of vulnerable youth, which in turn limit their internal culture resource. Because of the social transition, the work focus of the community department in Chinese city was not on the vulnerable youth at present, providing little services, such as training course and job information, to them. The culture resource and information resource from the community system is not enough too. Due to the low education level and the lacking in job information, vulnerable youth met with difficulties in transaction with the work system, which is the main source of economy resource in society and the strong transaction with it can provide important support to attain higher education or vocational skills. Facing the situation of dropout or unemployment, many vulnerable youth did not take a positive behavior to cope with and some of them even committed deviation behaviors, which made them more vulnerable to stigmatization within the community and society.

By analyzing the research data, a conclusion could be draw that the disadvantage of vulnerable youth was caused by the shortage of economy resource, culture resource and information resource, which the groups could not obtain sufficiently from family system, school system, work system and community system by transaction.

As the study may only reveal the tip of the iceberg concerning vulnerable

youth in China, more research is necessary to extend the present one. From the same theoretical perspective, further research needs to investigate and assess the importance of various factors related to the adoptive behavior of vulnerable youth in China, especially the behavior toward community, which is significant for the service acceptance of them, in order to offer detail information useful for the planning of intervention programs.

What's more, alternative theoretical perspective would have their contribution to reveal the problem of vulnerable youth in China. Empowerment perspective, strength perspective, feminism perspective and others could shed light on the problem. Strength perspective focuses on the ability, and it may offer a useful path to construct a social inclusion for vulnerable youth in China.

## **6. Policy Implications**

Focus on enhancing the resource support of situation systems and the capability of vulnerable youth to obtain resources, some suggestions for social policies are set forth accordingly:

1) Vulnerable youth. Enhance their capability to cope with the current satiation. Provide the training program on divergence solving and occupation technique, and help the vulnerable youth who have committed deviation behaviors.

2) Family system. Provide social welfare to the poverty family to support their children's education and training, such as educational voucher and guidance services, in which handling the divergence with children is important part.

3) School system. Enhance the support to marginalized (such as low academic record, poverty and behavior deviation etc.) student to avoid the dropout of them and low down the dropout rate. Setting up the effective channel for dropout youths to return school is also necessary.

4) Community system. The specific service for youth, especially the vulnerable youth should be developed in time. And more effort should be made to improve the propaganda of the service.

5) Work system. Low down the education discrimination in employment by law and the public campaign, and social policies should be made protect the right and the interest of informal employer.

What's more, in order to enhance the environmental support to vulnerable youth, it is necessary to add a new situation system, which can help to transact useful resource with them. And an administration system is needed. The duty of this system is to guide and supervise the support provided to vulnerable youth from the family system, school system, community system, work system and other relative social system, and to set up a special channel for vulnerable youth. As an Administrative department, this system helps to better the environmental support in a systematic way.

As well as the current situation systems, the successful operations of the new systems depend largely on the positive behavior of vulnerable youth. Therefore, relative propaganda of the service must be carried out to develop a strong trans-

action between vulnerable youth and the systems. In the long run, a situation system network should be constructed to provide sufficient support to vulnerable youth, so as to protect their basic right as a social citizen.

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