ACMR Newsletter

Association for Chinese Music Research

中國音樂研究會通訊

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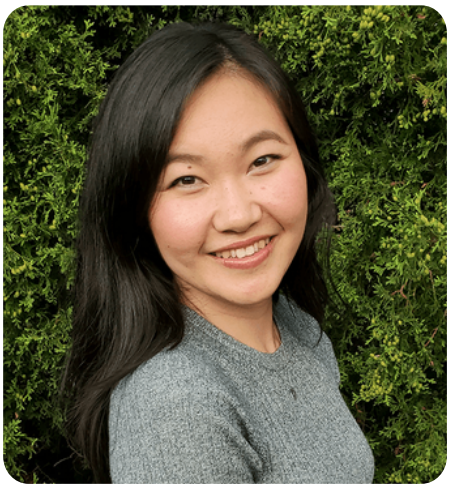
Message from the President



Shelley Zhang

Winter greetings to all ACMR members! It was wonderful to see some of you at our in-person meeting in October in Atlanta, Georgia. We met in conjunction with the Society for Ethnomusicology's Annual Conference, two years after our last in-person meeting in Ottawa, Canada. So much has changed since 2023 and I have been thinking of everyone affected by the devastating fires in Hong Kong, funding cuts, and other external circumstances this year. At times such as these, we are reminded of the importance of community building, acts of kindness, rigorous research, and facts.

I was encouraged of these things at our meeting, where we heard three papers by Yawen Ludden, Yuwei Jing, and Zhilin Zhang, and awarded the Rulan Chao Pian Publication Prize to Ilsa Xiaoshan Yin, the Barbara Barnard Smith Student Paper Prize to Ruixue Hu, and the Bell Yung Student Travel Prize to Diandian Zeng. More information about each individual and their great work is included in this newsletter.

Prior to our meeting, our student representative, Faye Fanyi Ma, organized a social happy hour for student members at a local dessert shop. We hope to make this an annual tradition at in-person conferences!

My term as President and Matthew Haywood's term as Secretary are both concluding at our next meeting in Fall 2026. ACMR invites nominations and self-nominations for these roles by April 1, 2026, after which an election will take place. While the President is required to have served at least one year in another role on our board, there is no prerequisite for the Secretary.

In addition to news from our annual meeting, this issue of the newsletter features talks and publications from our members, such as articles by Matthew Haywood and Bell Yung, an article by Sixian Wang, and information about upcoming conferences, including calls for papers.

As always, I thank our editorial team of Bernice Hoi Ching Cheung and Yanxiazi Gao, and heartily welcome Boris Wong to the team! This will be Bernice Cheung's last issue and we sincerely thank her for her years of dedicated work. I also thank Sue Tuohy, who has been generously helping with the issues.

I wish everyone restful and happy winter holidays and New Year!

Inside This Issue

People and Places

Yanxiazi Chloe Gao is currently a doctoral candidate in ethnomusicology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She successfully defended her dissertation, "Folk is the New World: Creating Han-Kazakh Pop Music, Networks, and Places," on December 1, 2025. Her dissertation explores how The Voyagers, a Han independent band from Xinjiang, creates their way of life and social networks by incorporating Kazakh folk traditions and fusion music concepts into Chinese discourses. It draws on the idea of "*minzu* as technology" to explore folk ideologies in their songwriting and gig economy, which are linked to cultural tourism and policies in Central and Southern China.

Matthew A. Haywood gave a research seminar, "Surviving the Silence: The Resilience of Hong Kong Cantonese Opera throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic," in the FUAIM Public Lecture Series at the University College Cork, Ireland on March 27, 2025. In 2025, he also published "A 'Hong Kong–Style'? Identity and Authenticity in Hong Kong Cantonese Opera," *Asian Music* 56 (2): 31–64.

Sue Tuohy (苏独玉) (Senior Lecturer Emerita, Indiana University), gave a talk titled "民歌研究的基本概念和方法：条件和媒介变化中的重复模式" (Fundamental concepts and methods in research on folksongs: Repeated patterns through changing conditions and media) in Beijing Normal University's inaugural Jingwen Folk Literature Summer School (北京师范大学首届敬文民间文学暑期学校) in July 2025. The Summer Schools are intended for graduate students specializing in folk literature and folklore studies from throughout China. The theme of the 2025 Summer School was "Contemporary Trends in Folk Literature Research: Achievements and Challenges" (民间文学研究的当代动向：成就与挑战).

Bell Yung 荣鸿曾 published three articles in Chinese: "馬思聰與波城中國學生合唱團" (Ma Sicong and the Boston Chinese Students Choral Society),《傳記文學》(Taipei), 2025年，11月號; "'有声必歌'：'白' 在舞台上的音乐成分" ('All speaking is singing': The musical elements of 'bai' on the operatic stage); and《中国音乐》(Beijing) 2025年第六期. "粤剧帝女花的情与景" (The scenes and feelings of the Cantonese Opera The Flower Princess), 《广东艺术》(Guangzhou) 2025年第六期.

Shelley Zhang gave a Brown Bag Lunch presentation at Rutgers University's Department of American Studies (New Brunswick, New Jersey) on November 5, 2025. The talk, "Musical Afterlives of the Cultural Revolution: Transpacific Migration and the Question of Citizenship," drew from her current book project to discuss the advent of Chinese professional musicians in Western art music. This generation of performers were born during the one-child policy and have migrated in China and to North America through music conservatories, navigating issues of *hukou* 户口, immigration, citizenship, and Orientalism in the process.

Upcoming: Events

The School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University will host an international interdisciplinary conference, "Music, Crisis, Memory," on May 8-9, 2026, in the UK. The conference will be onsite and in-person only, with English as the presentation language. The organizing committee invites submissions on the following topics, among others, whereby worldwide contexts can be considered: music as a response to crisis; music-related remembering/forgetting about crisis; selective memory and power; crisis and memory in the music industry; memorizing and reflecting with and through music; musical objects, places and spaces of remembrance; affective impact and emotion in musical memory; music or musicking as a therapeutic medium or practice during crises; politics of memory and identity through music-related practices; and remembering and nostalgia in different music cultures.

Please send an abstract (max. 300 words) stating the desired format (paper, project presentation) and a short biography (approx. 100 words) online via this form by **January 16, 2026.** Papers will be 20 minutes with 10 minutes for discussion, and roundtables, panel discussions, conversation formats or short workshops will be 30 minutes. Acceptances will be announced by February 20, 2026. Please contact numcm2026@gmail.com with questions.

The 9th Symposium of the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance Study Group on Musics of East Asia (MEA) will be held at the Taiwan Music Institute and the Taiwan Music Institute of the Taiwan Traditional Theatre Center in Taipei, on July 3-5, 2026.

The 29th CHIME CONFERENCE, Ecological Dimensions of Chinese Music, will be held in Sydney, Australia, December 1-4, 2026. The conference is sponsored by the China Studies Centre and hosted by the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

Chinese music has long played a vital role in environmental awareness within Chinese culture, serving as a key medium for recording and transmitting knowledge that blends physical experience with philosophical ideas. These aspects are especially relevant amid today's climate crisis, as cultural practices increasingly influence biodiversity protection, environmental consciousness, and efforts to lower ecological footprints. Additionally, China's growing leadership in renewable energy, marked by major investments in clean energy and initiatives like the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, shows that its ecological focus now extends far beyond cultural traditions.

This theme provides a timely platform to explore the varied connections between Chinese music, environment, and ecology across historical and contemporary contexts, while emphasizing the importance of appreciating our natural world amid a global environmental crisis. The conference is in-person only. For questions, email yanping.zhang@sydney.edu.au. The submission deadline is February 28, 2026; see the Call for Papers here and submit your title and abstract here.

Upcoming: ACMR Elections and ACMR Prizes

ACMR Elections

In 2026, **Shelley Zhang's** and **Matthew Haywood's** terms as President and Secretary, respectively, will be up. ACMR invites nominations (including self-nominations) for these roles by **April 1, 2026** after which an election will take place amongst the membership. The results will be announced in the summer. Please submit nominations and direct any questions to Shelley Zhang at shelley.zhang@rutgers.edu.

ACMR Prizes

ACMR invites submissions for the Rulan Chao Pian Publication Prize, which recognizes the best article on Chinese music, broadly defined, published in an English-language scholarly journal or edited volume within the calendar year of 2025.

Similarly, ACMR invites submissions for the Barbara Barnard Smith Student Paper Prize, which is awarded annually to recognize an outstanding student paper in the field of Chinese music, broadly defined, that was presented at the national Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) meeting in 2025.

Please see **https://acmr.info/prizes/** for more information regarding eligibility and submission procedures. All submissions and nominations should be sent to ACMR President **Shelley Zhang** (shelley.zhang@rutgers.edu) by **April 1, 2026.**

ACMR 2025 Meeting Presentations

The ACMR held our annual meeting on Thursday, October 23, 2025 in conjunction with the SEM 2025 Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. After last year's inspiring roundtable, "Decolonization as Praxis in Chinese Music Research," ACMR was excited to welcome paper presentations for this year's in-person conference. Three papers were presented by Dr. Yawen Ludden, Yuwei Jing, and Zhilin Zhang. Their abstracts are included below.

Yawen Ludden (Georgia Gwinnett College), "'Virtual' Virtuoso Victor Wang: Digital Pioneer in the Realm of New Media Music"

Abstract: Digital media have provided new opportunities for creating, sharing, and preserving music, and a case in point is the work of Chinese-Australian musician Victor Wang (王迟). A virtuoso pianist and accordionist, Wang has been named an International Role Model by the United Nations' World Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Foundation for his achievements in music production. As a pioneer in digital media, Wang has taken full advantage of new technologies to create and curate a large collection of self-performances that have garnered millions of internet followers.

Based on personal interviews with Wang, I will trace his transition from traditional to "digital" musician. In particular, I will explore the various techniques, such as polyphonic texture and virtuosic improvisation, that Wang employs to enrich the relatively simple melodies he starts with to create complex and engaging compositions that are at once both novel and familiar. I will reveal how digital media have changed what it means for Wang to be a musician as it provides new opportunities for musical creation and self-fulfillment. And finally, I will demonstrate how Wang draws on his profound understanding of Western and Chinese music culture to create significant works that resonate with listeners in mainland China and among Chinese overseas. In this way, he creates tonal spaces that bring common memories, emotions, and shared identities conjured by what I call "new media music," in which technologies affect how space is experienced, navigated, and conceptualized to create new artistic and cultural possibilities for Chinese music lovers.

Yuwei Jing (Victoria University of Wellington), "Resonating with Nature: The Morin Khuur, Mongolian Music, and Cultural Continuity"

Abstract: The morin khuur, Mongolia's most emblematic bowed string instrument, embodies both the pastoral nomadic tradition and a deep reverence for the horse. Its distinctive horse-head design and resonant tone are often linked to the spirit of the Mongolian horse, evoking values of strength, freedom, and resilience. In rituals, festivals, and daily life, the instrument not only reinforces ethnic identity but also sustains a vital connection to pastoral culture.

Mongolian musical practices more broadly reveal distinctive ecological characteristics. Long song (*urtyn duu)* and throat singing (*khoomii*) often imitate the sounds of wind, water, and hoofbeats, reflecting the close interdependence between music and landscape. The rhythm of horseback riding on the steppe, where the rider's subtle shifts of weight create a flowing asymmetry, parallels the "slow melody over fast movement" found in long song traditions. These embodied forms highlight an aesthetic rooted in ecological harmony.

Drawing on interviews and musical analysis, this study explores the diverse roles of the morin khuur and related traditions in contemporary society. Instruments crafted from local materials like horsehair and wood reflect sustainable cultural practices. By tracing the evolution of the morin khuur and Mongolian musical forms across history and into the present, the research illustrates how music serves as both a form of cultural heritage and an ecological practice, offering insights into how communities navigate continuity, identity, and environmental awareness in a changing world.

Zhilin Zhang (Rutgers University, Mason Gross School of the Arts), "Nature's Resonance in Chinese Piano Concertos: A Journey through Musical and Cultural Synthesis"

Abstract: The influence of nature on Chinese music has deep roots in traditional Chinese culture. Over the centuries, Chinese artists have sought to reflect a semblance of harmony between humanity and nature in their works, leading many composers to explore the potentially intimate relationship between Chinese music and the natural environment, which has included landscapes such as waterfalls, forests, and mountains. This deep reverence for nature was carried into the twentieth century, when Chinese composers began their engagement with Western classical music forms such as the symphony, the sonata, and the piano concerto. Thus, the process of integrating Western music with Chinese aesthetics was not merely a matter of adopting European techniques. Rather, I argue that Chinese composers reimagined Western forms by combining Chinese musical and environmental aspects to evoke landscapes in their music. The piano became a symbol of this cultural synthesis.

This paper explores the historical and environmental inspiration behind Chinese piano concertos in the twentieth century. Specifically, I show how Chinese composers in Western art music drew inspiration from landscapes to hybridize the genre of the piano concerto with Chinese artistic values. I analyze three representative works: the Yellow River Concerto 黄河协奏曲 (1960s) by multiple composers, *The Mountain Forest* 山林 by Liu Dunnan 刘敦南 (1980's), and *Ailao Rhapsody* 哀牢狂想 (1996) by Zhang Zhao 张朝. Using Western structures, all three concertos employed specific musical gestures to express and imply environmental imagination.

ACMR 2025 Prizes

Ilsa Xiaoshan Yin (PhD, University of Maryland) was awarded the **Rulan Chao Pian Publication Prize** for her paper, "Reimagining the Past in the Construction of the Present: Visuality in Neo-traditional *Guqin* Performances in Twenty-First-Century China," published in *Asian Music* 55, no. 1 (winter/spring 2024).

Abstract: Visual elements have always been an integral concern in performance of the Chinese seven-string zither guqin, as seen in both early records and contemporary practice. Since the mid-2010s, a neo-traditional guqin performance group, Zi De Qinshe (Zi De meaning "enjoy oneself"; Qinshe meaning "guqin studio"), has been a leader in a cultural trend known as *guofeng* (Chinese style) and *guochao* (China chic) with their viral online videos and live performances featuring stage settings, clothing, and makeup that re-create paintings and other visual images from past centuries. In this essay, I focus on Zi De Qinshe as a case study based on fieldwork with the group and their audiences as well as analysis of their performances. I explore how and why contemporary Chinese musicians reinterpret and reimagine the past through visuality in performance, how they negotiate the old and the new, and how a neo-tradition and a neo-cultural identity are being constructed in this process.

Ruixue Hu 胡瑞雪 (PhD student, Eastman School of Music) was awarded the **Barbara Barnard Smith Student Paper Prize** for "Harmony in Diversity: Theorizing Qin Phrase Structure," presented at SEM 2024 (virtual conference).

Abstract: The oldest native instrument of China, the guqin is a seven-string plucked monophonic instrument known for its ornamented melodies and nuanced performing style. Despite its long association with the literati, its musical form remains undertheorized as relevant discussions tend to be descriptive rather than analytical. Contextualized by perspectives on performance practice, organology, and Chinese culture, this presentation proposes a hierarchical framework for understanding guqin's phrase structure with examples from the eighth to the seventeenth century, to be performed live. While the native tablature notation (*jianzipu*) does not directly communicate such information as rhythm or phrasing, the interpretive practices by various guqin schools share enough common features to inspire a formal framework. Extending from ancient treatises, I define guqin's phrase components as basic articulations, compound articulations, and elaborative gestures, which are congruous with the timbral qualities and pitch content they generate such as motives and elaborated notes. Invoking the Chinese philosophical and literary idea of "harmony," and taking the qin-song (singing while playing the guqin) practice into account, I propose that the reiteration of pitch classes realized contrastingly in musical parameters such as articulation, register, timbre, and ornamentation is the fundamental organizing and developing principle both within and between phrases in guqin music. In addition, phrases can be complicated by transformations such as elision and expansion. I hope this framework can assist the rendering process (*dapu*) of many uninterpreted ancient scores and the idiomatic composition of new pieces.

ACMR 2025 Prizes

Diandian Zeng (PhD student, University of California, Santa Barbara), received the **Bell Yung Student Travel Prize**. She presented her paper, "When the Underground Is above Ground: Old Heaven Books and the Curated Independent Music Scene in China," at SEM's 2025 Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

Abstract: Due to tightening state control over cultural expressions, particularly the censorship of hip-hop in 2018, indie music in China have been significantly impacted, forced to either adapt to mainstream culture or retreat into the underground (Nie 2021). This paper examines "Old Heaven Books," an independent bookstore and record shop in Shenzhen, China, which remains fully visible to the public while engaging with the Chinese indie music scene through multiple adaptive strategies. As both a physical store and a music label, Old Heaven Books not only sells books, and records but also publishes indie music and hosts free performances and listening sessions featuring alternative music, including works by ethnic minority artists.

This paper draws on my 2023 fieldwork to investigate how the record store has both preserved and compromised the spirit of "independence" in indie music under state control and censorship. Viewing the store as a "sonic infrastructure" (Kielman 2018), I explore how its physical setting, target customers, and audio products blur the boundaries between mainstream and subculture, sensitive and safe, and local and global. I also examine the store's offline, co-present engagements with physical material culture, including records and live performances, which create a space for open musical conversation and world learning beyond China's Great Firewall (Plovnick 2024). This paper argues that the independent music scene at Old Heaven Books represents a distinct form of curated subcultural practice, cultivated through listening and learning about voices from the outside world, as well as hidden histories obscured by official discourse.

An Ontological-Hermeneutic Interpretation of "The Music of Xianchi" 咸池之乐 and Its Significance in *Zhuangzi* 庄子

Sixian Wang 王思嫻 (Beijing Foreign Studies University)

The fable in "The Revolution of Heaven" (*Tianyun*) chapter of *Zhuangzi*《庄子·天运》concerning the Yellow Emperor's performance of "The Music of Xianchi" (咸池之乐) constitutes the most systematic exposition of music within Zhuangzi's philosophy. It centrally articulates the Daoist conception of "heavenly music" (天乐), delineating the content, form, and effects of ideal music—termed "perfect music" (至乐) or "heavenly music." This concept not only complements Zhuangzi's idea of "heavenly sound" (天籁) but also extends Laozi's notion that "the greatest music is soundless" (大音希声). It has profoundly influenced Chinese musical thought and aesthetics, emphasizing simplicity, naturalness, and the "sound of silence," thereby presenting a contrast and complement to ritual-centric Confucian musical theories.

Traditional scholarly interpretations have predominantly emphasized the connection between "heavenly music" and the Dao, often overlooking the intrinsic ontological attributes of music itself. This paper posits that an interpretation from the perspective of musical ontology is essential for understanding the unique significance of music in Zhuangzi's thought and its role in his discourse on the Dao.

1. Transformation of the "Perfect Music" Itself

The fable describes three stages of the "perfect Music," marked by the phrases: "It was performed" (吾奏之), "In the second part" "In the last part" (吾又奏之), and the listener's resultant states of "fear" (故惧), "weariness" (故怠), and "perplexity" (故惑). The first stage —"It was performed with (the instruments of) men, and all attuned according to (the influences of) Heaven"—portrays music attuned to human sensibilities and celestial harmonies, representing impermanent natural phenomena: the succession of seasons, the alternation of civil and martial forces, and the blending of yin and yang. Its characteristics of "its end was marked by no formal conclusion, and it began again without any prelude" evoke an awe of the Dao's unpredictable, boundless dynamism.

The second stage emphasizes music harmonized with yin and yang, illuminated by sun and moon. Its notes are "short and now long, now soft and now hard." "Their changes, however, were marked by an unbroken unity, though not dominated by a fixed regularity." They fill all space, obscuring distractions and preserving spirit. This segment expands expression to the cosmic realm, highlighting omnipresence and transformation that surpass human comprehension, leading the listener to exhaustion and numbness.

The third stage presents music which is free from stagnation, harmonized by the decree of nature. It is described as shrouded in darkness and silence, moving without fixed direction. It transcends dualities like life/death and fullness/decline, becoming indistinguishable from the Dao: "You listen for it, and do not hear its sound; you look for it, and do not perceive its form; it fills heaven and earth; it envelopes all within the universe." This is the fully realized "heavenly music."

Superficially, these stages suggest a hierarchical progression from tangible, audible forms to abstract, metaphysical essence. However, as Lin Xiyi noted, "although divided into three segments, there is no fundamental distinction" (1997, p. 233). All three are manifestations of the same ever-changing Dao ("not dominated by a fixed regularity"), differing only in emphasis and scope—from concrete to abstract, finite to infinite—while rooted in the Dao's fundamental unity.

2. Psychological Reactions of the Listeners

The listener's psychological journey—fear, weariness, perplexity—mirrors the stages of encountering the Dao. Fear arises from confronting the Dao's vast, unpredictable variability in the first stage. Weariness follows when relentless effort to grasp the elusive Dao leads to exhaustion. Perplexity emerges when facing the soundless, formless "heavenly music" of the third stage, which defies ordinary perception.

Yet, this perplexity can culminate in "wordless joy" (无言而心悦), a state achieved not through intellectual comprehension but through harmonious alignment with the Dao's effortless flow. As scholar Liu Chenghua observes, these reactions reflect the stages of comprehending the Dao: initial fear from unawareness, then exhaustion from partial understanding, and finally transcendence into wordless harmony—a state of "stupidity" (愚) that integrates with the Dao, paralleling Laozi's "soundless music" (2018, pp. 59-61).

3. The Ontological Existence of Daoist Music

The music of Xianchi both guides toward and embodies the Dao. Its emergence requires alignment with natural order: "It proceeded according to (the principles of) propriety and righteousness and was pervaded by (the idea of) the Grand Purity." As Guo Xiang's annotation states, it achieves wholeness by following the natural flow without imposition (Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying 2011, p. 272).

The ontology of "perfect music" manifests in two interrelated states. As sound, it is characterized by boundless, unpredictable dynamism ("Its end was marked by no formal conclusion, and it began again without any prelude."), and it reflects the Dao's infinite variability. As transcending sound, it becomes "You listen for it; . . . it envelopes all within the universe," merging with the Dao's formless, omnipresent essence.

These states are fluidly interchangeable, each fully possessing Dao-attributes. The audible reveals the Dao's dynamism; the silent embodies its transcendental holism. Together, they demonstrate music as both a manifestation of and a conduit to the Dao.

Conclusion

Music, with its unique abstract nature, serves as an ideal hermeneutic medium for the Dao. Unlike language or visual arts, music simulates the Dao's operational principles—formless yet all-encompassing, unpredictable yet ordered—through sonic flow, rhythmic tension, and melodic contour. This abstraction aligns with the Dao's profundity while offering intuitive perceptibility: listeners discern yin-yang waxing/waning in tonal impermanence and sense cosmic harmony in faint rhythms. As the fable demonstrates, music maps invisible cosmic laws through perceptible dynamics (e.g. thunder, seasons), bridging abstraction and concreteness. It transcends linguistic limitations, infusing metaphysical contemplation with vibrant, tangible life, thereby guiding individuals toward apprehension of the Dao.

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About ACMR

The Association for Chinese Music Research (ACMR) serves as a forum for the exchange of ideas and information for anyone interested in the scholarly study of Chinese music. Catering mainly though not exclusively to those living in North America, ACMR holds an annual meeting in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

ACMR's online discussion group is hosted by the University of Hawai'i. To send messages to the list, please use the address acmr-l@lists.hawaii.edu.

The *ACMR Newsletter* is published twice a year in spring and fall. We encourage ACMR members to submit the following kinds of materials: notices of recent publications and recently completed dissertations or theses, announcements of and reports on scholarly and performing activities, news of institutions and individuals, as well as views and opinions on any matter relevant to ACMR. Please send all materials and enquiries to ACMRnewsletter@gmail.com. Back issues are available at https://acmr.info/newsletter/.

Membership Reminder

We encourage your new membership and renewal for the 2025-2026 period. Current membership dues are $15 for those in professional positions and independent scholars, and $10 for students. Please define your status when paying. Please notify us of address and email changes.

Payment can now be made through PayPal, Venmo, or personal check. Please send an email to Alec McLane (amclane@wesleyan.edu) with your name, preferred email address, and payment method. Please also indicate if you require an invoice and appropriate currency type. Otherwise, you may send a check to ACMR by mailing it to:

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