



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Sexual citizenship and Asian migration to Australia

Description: How do people at the intersection of LGBTQIA+ and Asian ethnicity fare when migrating to Australia, why do they choose to make their lives here, and what challenges do they face as they seek genuine inclusion? Associate Professor Claire Maree and Dr Jay Song, both of Asia Institute, examine their lived experiences and life challenges. Presented by Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Claire Maree:

What does it mean and what is valued to belong to a community? To feel that you belong to a place that you can participate fully in different communities is a big part of what citizenship means.

Jay Song:

Migration is a love story, I would say. It really depends on who you interact with closely and intimately that will determine the post-migration process.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, sexual citizenship and Asian migration to Australia. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

In December 2017, marriage equality in Australia became enshrined in law after an overwhelming majority of Australians voted in favour of changing existing legislation. It was seen as a significant victory for LGBTQIA+ communities in Australia, with the right to marry no longer determined by sex or gender, removing a longstanding roadblock to fully participating in society.

At the same time, Australia has become home to a rapidly increasing number of people born in Asia, despite evidence of persistent anti-Asian sentiment in the wider community. So how are people at the intersection of the LGBTQIA+ communities and Asian ethnicity fairing? What does it mean to be on the double-barreled receiving end of both race and gender or sexuality-based discrimination, and how could a focus on sexual citizenship inform our understanding of the experiences of all migrant communities?

Joining us to look at those experiences and the life challenges facing Asian migrants to Australia of diverse sexualities and genders are experts in gender studies and human migration, Associate



Professor Claire Maree and Dr Jay Song, both of Asia Institute, who have been working together on these issues. They joined us via Zoom. Welcome back, Jay and Claire.

Claire Maree:

Thanks for having us.

Jay Song:

Thanks very much.

Ali Moore:

Claire, when we talk about the LGBTQIA+ community, who are we talking about?

Claire Maree:

I think the term LGBTQIA+ is trying to capture a lot of different identities and also orientations, gender expressions. And it kind of evolves from people wanting to claim their identity as a valid life choice and also to raise visibility of the issues that people face from institutionalised elements of society that kind of more focused towards people who are in what we might frame straight couples. So the L is lesbian, G is for gay, B, bisexual men and women, T, transgender men, women. And more and more nowadays, people will also talk about being non-binary and also I, intersex. A is increasingly being used by the asexual community and plus, because there are so many variances and differences and a rich kind of understanding of what it is to be a gender or a certain sexuality or sexual orientation. So it's trying to capture all of those, which means that it's a fairly long-term and more letters will get added to it, I think, as we go.

Ali Moore:

And do we have any sense of what proportion of Asian migrants to Australia would identify as part of these communities?

Claire Maree:

Well, I'm not really sure that we do have any hard statistics on that, but we generally think of there being a certain maybe population of the community who possibly likely to identify as either lesbian or gay, maybe trans, bisexual, or intersex and asexual. So usually, amongst different statistics, there are figures thrown around from any from seven to 11, 13%.

Ali Moore:

And, Jay, you're the migration expert. How much do we know about what informs the decision to come to Australia? I suppose we talk a lot about socioeconomic reasons for migration or political or cultural factors, how important is sexuality to that decision-making process?

Jay Song:

Oh, sexuality and gender identity is increasingly becoming a more important factor when the migrants are making decisions about the next generation. If we look at the basic statistics in Australia and the Asian immigrant population in Australia, the share of Asian-born Australians in the total overseas-born population in Australia has risen from 24% in 2001, that's 20 years ago, to 40% in



the last census, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2016. So, from 24% in 20 years ago and 40% in 2016, that's quite a significant increase. One in every 10 Australians was born in Asia and Asia is becoming the largest source of overseas-born population in Australia too.

And also, what's a very important thing about this particular population is that in comparison with the European-born immigrants, there is also a higher proportion of Asian Australians aged between 15 and 44. That's considered as a reproductive age range. So, if we think about the demographic change in future and how the Asian migrants and immigrants contribute to this future change, it's very important factor for Australia's future as a whole

Ali Moore:

So do you think that we should look at the role of sexuality in all migration, not just members of the LGBTQIA+ community?

Jay Song:

Oh, definitely. I mean, decision to migrate to another country is multifactor, complex and non-linear process. As you mentioned, those economic and social factor and family and some of the humanitarian reason are important for migration, but during the post migration procedures, the social network, family, partners, and other intimate relations are becoming more important during these post migration.

What I mean by post migration is whether to return to the country of origin or stay permanently, settle in Australia, or go to another location as onward migration. These intimate relations and sexuality and gender identity are a very important factor. So, migration is a love story, I would say. It really depends who you interact with closely and intimately that will determine the post migration process.

Ali Moore:

Claire, I love Jay's description that migration is a love story. But if we look very specifically at the LGBTQIA+ community, how important do you think sexuality is to the decision-making process to come to Australia for those in that community?

Claire Maree:

Well, I think Jay's response there, the love story of what it means to actually be mobile, relocate, there are many different factors. And I think one of the things that will influence the way that we make our decisions and choices around mobility is tied to perhaps our relationships, or it could be tied to the way that we experience social institutions and discrimination in maybe our country of origin or other countries in which we're settled and the countries through which we travel. So, although it may be for some people, the main reason, the impetus will be a relationship with somebody who happens to be based in another country and they travel or they relocate to be with their partner.

So, in that instance, it's a very central part of the decision. But when it comes to thinking about economic push and pull or thinking about family, it could be one of many things, because as Jay said, it's multilayered and multifaceted. The key thing is thinking that we want to bring as we have done gender to migration studies, also to think through the sexuality or sexual orientation aspect of our life choices and things that enable us to be mobile, or things that maybe don't enable some people



to be mobile in the same way as others do. So, for a long time within Australia it was very difficult for people who were in what we call same-sex relationships to bring a partner who was not an Australian national to live their life with them in Australia. So when that is, you can't get a visa to stay with your partner, that's a major factor in your decision to where you are going to locate. So, sometimes a third country could be the choice for people in relationships where they can't stay together due to visa restrictions.

Ali Moore:

It's an interesting point that you make there, that it's not just about the pull factor or push factor with the country of origin and the country of choice necessarily, is it Claire? There is occasions and complicated situations, where as you say, there might be a third option.

Claire Maree:

I think with marriage equality in Australia now, I mean, we still have 12 months cohabitation, which means that for some people it can be quite difficult to actually make that 12 months. They can be in a committed long-term relationship but still not have been able to be in the same geophysical space or place for those 12 months. So, there are things that complicate it, so it's not a simple matter that since the de facto laws in 2008 were altered, kind of evened the playing field for straight couples and same-sex couples. But there are also other factors that complicate things. So, it's a little bit messy and there's not one story we can give perhaps.

Ali Moore:

Do you think though, Claire, that marriage equality in Australia has been a draw card? If you look at the situation in many countries of origin for Asian migrants to Australia, do you think that when they look at this legislative change in 2017 that it does change the game for them?

Claire Maree:

I think it will have for some people, definitely, because it opens up an opportunity where you can relocate with your partner, perhaps, that isn't available in the home country. But whether that is what would motivate someone to relocate to Australia is, again, a bit messy because we're talking about citizenship, we're talking about whether marriages that are made in Australia and legal in Australia would be recognised in the home country and the ramifications of that as well.

Ali Moore:

We'll look at it, in a minute, at the situation around the region. But Jay, from a broader immigration perspective, how much do we know about immigration as a response to discrimination, and not just immigration to Australia, but immigration to anywhere?

Jay Song:

Discrimination is a huge part when asylum seeker is applying for refugee status determination in the country of destination. So mainly discrimination or political persecution is used for a humanitarian reason to be granted residency in another country for humanitarian reasons. But when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity, I think it's not just for the humanitarian migrants but economic and family migrants. Although for the official reason is economic, skills migration for the



job, for the education, but these sexual orientation gender identity is the secondary source. And later, it becomes more important when they are making a decision for permanent migration and citizenship. So, discrimination is a more a sort of universal factor that applies to all migration streams; economic, family, and humanitarian.

Ali Moore:

But if you look specifically at the LGBTQIA+ community, another aspect to it is that if you are persecuted for your sexuality or gender identity you can seek refuge in Australia. I wonder, Jay, how different is the process for those migrants or those refugees who seek protection on the basis of being persecuted for their sexuality or gender identity? How different is that process compared to those who are fleeing persecution on grounds of, say, religious or political views?

Jay Song:

Oh, those are very small minority group of applicants using the sexuality as the basis for discrimination. So, if you look at the number of applications based on the sexual discrimination, it's very small compared to other religious persecution or the political persecution happening in their country of origin.

Ali Moore:

Is the process the same?

Jay Song:

Oh, processes are the same. They're using the same refugee determination process.

Ali Moore:

Claire, I know that when we look at the region around us, every country is different, we can't just talk about a region as such, but very broadly, can you give us an idea of what the situation is for those in the region of diverse sexualities and genders? As I said, each country has its own story.

Claire Maree:

Yeah. And I think that that's one of the things when we find things looking at the Asia region or Asia Pacific, there's a huge diversity and different cultures and languages and understandings of what it is to be a person, let alone, a person of a specific category or classification that has to do with gender or sexual orientation. One of the things, with what Jay was just talking about in claiming persecution based on sexuality, is that often the understandings of what that means are very different. They're often based on ideas around coming out and making claims to the family, which may not be salient or may not be possible in different regions, even within the same country.

So, what does it mean to come out is quite different across the region and whether that, in and of itself, is a valued process is also something that differs quite a lot across the region. In terms of non-discriminatory clauses or legislation, there's a wide range of differences within legislatures, and that is linked to the whole legal system in each country is quite separate. So, the aftermath of colonisation has also impacted on those laws, which could outlaw things such as sodomy and also more thinking around or legislation around what it means to be a family could also impact on how relationships are viewed.



So in terms of marriage equality, which is where we started today's chat, Taiwan has legalised same sex unions under law, and Thailand has also introduced some legislation and changes there, which also recognise relationships or people who identify in same-sex relationships. And across the region, there are pockets at different local levels that also recognise partnerships, de facto partnerships to the differing levels of legal clout, I suppose.

Ali Moore:

Indeed, we've spoken on this podcast before Claire, about the situation in Japan, which is rather disparate, depending on where you're talking about.

Claire Maree:

Exactly, yeah. And I think a big thing that is also emerging is from UN human rights discourse and the SDGs leaving no one behind or no one left behind. There's also within that a clear focus on LGBTI, is how that's mostly framed, and that is being translated through various legal systems to what it means on the ground, in different places. But for example, the area that I'm most familiar with in terms of Japan is in regard to anti-harassment laws and the introduction of laws that govern the workplace and that discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is not to be tolerated anymore. And those moves usually come in, in a less visible manner and are put in place through things like anti-bullying laws. And I think we've seen that a little bit more throughout the region.

Ali Moore:

And Claire, I wonder talking about marriage equality legislation, again, it's very hard to generalise, but do you think that marriage equality is a priority for LGBTQIA+ communities in the region? Or as you say, every country has its own unique circumstances, so are there often other issues that are potentially even more pertinent?

Claire Maree:

Yeah, I think even when marriage equality is being pursued by groups within a certain country, there'll be other groups who are working on eradicating poverty or raising awareness around discrimination towards disabled peoples or people with mental health issues. So, I think that marriage equality is one part of the conversation, but it's not always the focus of every group in every country. And exactly, what is marriage? There's a little bit of discussion, I think, within the legal frameworks of how people want to, or may not want to pursue an image or an ideal of marriage that is linked to straight understandings of the family or heteronormative, what we usually refer to it, that is very much linked to procreation and creating children and carrying things forward. So, there's debates within communities about that. But usually, the main thing is that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression is just something that should not continue and that that should be eradicated. I think there's fairly good understanding of the importance of that.

Ali Moore:

Jay, on the issue of marriage equality, it's not the be-all and end-all, is it? I wonder how much has actually changed in Australia in the environment for the LGBTQIA+ community post the introduction



of that legislation, not just for those with an Asian background. How much difference has the legislation made?

Jay Song:

As a migrant expert looking at the Asian immigrant communities in Australia, I think it affects not only those who are affected by the Marriage Equality Act, but also heterosexual couples. Because it is not just about those minority groups, but it is about the Australian values and their core Australian-ness in order to be part of the Australian society and to be the part of the mainstream discourse and the normative construct. I think the symbolism carried by this Marriage Equality Act, it's impacting not just the minority group but the broader immigrant population in Australia. It's just that whole symbolism and the liberal values it carries for the broader community and the feeling of the sense of belonging to that society, it's making a huge difference.

Ali Moore:

So what stories do migrants tell you when you interview them about their lived experience after this legislation was introduced?

Jay Song:

I have a very small number of interviews collected through this exploratory project that I'm doing with Claire. It was a huge learning experience for me. I learned a lot about how important the gender identity and sexual orientation is for this broader immigrant community. Their lived experiences vary from one person to another, so I can't really generalise the commonality of the lived experiences. So, for example, I interviewed an Asian refugee who's refugee status was granted based on his sexuality. At the beginning, I said the migration is not a linear process, it's totally unpredictable constitutive process. So, this person originally wanted to go to one of the Scandinavian country. So, he and his partner went to one of these Scandinavian countries and apply for refugee status, but during the waiting process, they broke up. So, his partner went back to the country of origin and he decided to come to Australia as a secondary choice to apply for refugee status based on his sexuality.

So, he is now an Australian citizen. He has experience with the Australian, the gay community was... This is just his personal anecdote, but it was not very pleasant because there is within that gay community, there is also sexual racism going on. So, for example, Asian gay man or the white guy dating Asian gay man, they have this name calling as a rice queen or potato queen. So, within that, in the gay community, there is also this racialised sexism going on. Another person who I interviewed is a 30 year old second generation or 1.5 generation Asian woman, who's also Australian citizen. She grew up in a very conservative Christian upbringing. The family was very conservative, so she never had any sexual relation with any partner. And it was not in her interest to have sexual pleasure or sexual desire until she finds a good job.

But before finding a good job, go to good university and have a good job, find a good man, married life, before the sex was not in her mind. And according to her, she said the white people or Westerners are obsessed with sex, but Asian communities, we Asians, we want a good life. We want better job before we think about enjoying sex as a leisure. I hear a very different stories about how this gender and sexuality plays in a sense of belonging in Australian society. It's a fascinating project.



Ali Moore:

It is indeed. You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

Ali Moore:

I'm Ali Moore and I'm with guests, Dr. Jay Song and Associate Professor Claire Maree, and we're discussing how Asian LGBTQIA+ people fit into contemporary Australian society. Claire, Jay Song just touched on so many issues that affect this community of migrants in Australia. I wonder what your perspective is on what difference the marriage equality legislation has made. I asked Jay if it was the be-all and end-all, and Jay talked about the symbolism of the legislation. How do you see it changing the game or not?

Claire Maree:

Yeah, I think the symbolism is very important. And I mean, marriage equality for people who can access or who want to become legally married is also something that people place great value on in specific communities and relationships. So, there's no argument or there's no real opposing opinion in regards to what marriage means to many people. I suppose in Australia, much of these things had already been attended to in terms of accessing visas, in terms of superannuation and other aspects of laws which were altered in 2008. There were 84 or something Commonwealth laws that were altered to recognise same-sex partners. But one part of the conversation that also has to be touched upon is trans issues and those can often get put to the side when we talk about and focus mostly on marriage equality. So, that's one thing for sure.

Ali Moore:

Marriage equality is not necessarily applicable to all members of the community?

Claire Maree:

It's also to do with this term "same sex". When we start to think about transgender and cisgender, cisgender is the term that we need to introduce, right? So, cisgender is when we're thinking through gender identification, expression, sex characteristics, which is usually the way that it's more being framed at the moment is to that conversation what straight is to LGBT. That's why we talk about marriage equality, because for people who perhaps they're legal registered, you know, on all of their documentation, that category of sex may not be the gender through which they live their lives.

So, when we talk about same sex marriage, we're talking about certain configurations of that LGBTQIA+ experience that can be quite alienating to trans and non-binary folk within the community. And I think that, that's something that is increasingly becoming more of a focal point for understanding and building up our support mechanisms around that.



Ali Moore:

And at the same time, Claire, as Jay was saying, even if we have this legislation, marriage equality legislation, it's not stopping discrimination.

Claire Maree:

Yes, that's a big issue. And I think, that runs through a lot of, we can have anti-discrimination legislation, but it doesn't eradicate all discrimination. So, marriage equality allows people to access rights and responsibilities that were previously unavailable to them, but it doesn't mean that it fully eradicates all discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity expression, et cetera. It's not directly related to our project at the moment, but it is in the sense that I really want to listen and learn from the experience of people. What is it now that needs to be done in terms of providing services, better access to health services, building up better bridges within communities and facilitating, understanding through education, community projects and things like that?

For me, that's a really important part of the conversation. So, it's at the exploratory stage, it's finding out, well, what are the issues now that people are experiencing? And one of the things that it's emerged from, Jay and collaborators speaking to people, is a certain kind of common themes to do around differences with community understandings of what gender is, of how sexuality is experienced, enjoyed, or otherwise. And also, around things to do with access to services, racism, and that bigger picture. So, I think that our project is moving towards that. Do you agree, Jay?

Jay Song:

Oh, totally. Spot on. And I mean, I totally agree with you on that point about this anti-discrimination legislation will always leave out some people who are not included in that sort of a legal framework. There will be always people left outside and there are still these group of people who we never heard from, these voices are not out there in public or in academic literature. There's just so many stories unheard of, we don't know yet. So, in that regard, I think it's just been really inspiring and fascinating project to listen to these different stories. And Claire is also right that this cross-cultural interaction is very important in how the gender and sexuality is understood differently or family, marriage, partner, asexuality, for example, is understood differently in different cultures.

Ali Moore:

Jay, when you talked earlier about some of the responses within their own communities, the lesbian, gay community, for example, in that instance that you gave of a migrant, an Asian migrant from the LGBTQIA+ community, when you put that together with what we know is persistent and, perhaps, growing anti-Asian sentiment, how much harder does it make it for people of these communities?

Jay Song:

Oh, those gender stereotype is very entrenched in this Western liberal discourse. And there is some criticism about these whole sexuality studies or the LGBTQIA+ community is very Western centric, doesn't represent an Asian community. Or it has a distorted image of Asian because there is petite Asian ladies or Asian men, not masculine enough, all these sort of stereotypes. It's strengthened through the media or the general public's discussions about different ethnicities have different gender stereotypes. That's a problem in a public media sense.



But within that LGBTQIA+ community, there is also racism, the sexual racism going on against the Asian community. This is the felt or lived feelings and experiences that some of those Asian sexual minorities people have encountered while settling in Australian society. But they're not representing the entire group, but there are people who are integrating into this community very well and embracing this Australian definition of sexuality and gender identities. The conclusion I drew so far is that it's very difficult to generalise this community and have a broader political implication out of this group. So, we just still have to listen to these various and diverse voices from this community.

Jay Song:

And one thing I also found very important is reproduction and reproductive citizenship. To give you just one example, this is a case from the US but in comparison with the white same sex couples, those with Asian partners are more likely to raise children and more likely to gain familial support in child raising from the government services. So, the understanding about family and family formation through migration, having partner, having children, the core concept is probably slightly different from other, not interracial same-sex couples like white same-sex couples. So, it also opens up new discussions about how migration also related to reproductive citizenship. It also connects to access to health services as well.

Ali Moore:

Claire, if we use more the term sexual citizenship, if we looked more at migrants in that context, how do you think it would change our understanding?

Claire Maree:

Well, I think it forces us to actually think more carefully about the multiplicity of people's experiences within structures that delineate or map out expected courses for people, what are considered to be different genders, sexual orientations, and from different regions, different abilities. What does it mean and what is valued to belong within a community? So, citizenship, from my point of view, and I come to it from thinking through media representations of what is acceptable, what can we talk about within mainstream media? What can we consume and what is considered to be too excessive that we need to be wary of? And all of those images around people who may identify as lesbian or gay or transgender framed in certain ways, is that a good way to be, or a bad way to be, and what does it traverse, and when has it gone too far?

So, if we look at the representation of people in media spaces, gives us a good idea of how the society and cultures behind that positioning different types of people or categories of people as role models or are things that we should learn from in terms of what to avoid. That's a pretty pessimistic and cynical way of looking at it. So, citizenship is, yes, it's about legal rights and that's Jay's speciality here. Mine is actually thinking through, what does it mean to belong somewhere, to feel that you belong to a place and that you can participate fully in different communities, is a big part of what citizenship means. Who's included and who's excluded and where are those lines drawn and redrawn, and what repercussions does that have for an individual's work life or their private family life and even things such as their sex life?

Ali Moore:

And indeed, Jay, I know that you talk about just how many different layers there are to belonging. And you've given me outside the context of this podcast, but maybe you could repeat it, the



example of the Mardi Gras in Sydney, for example, and the importance of class. Can you just explain a little bit to people about the Mardi Gras and about this example?

Jay Song:

Oh, thanks for asking that question. I was going to point out how important the intersectionality of different identity is. Certainly that race, ethnicity issue, but also gender identity, sexual orientation, but class is playing a big part, a significant part in this intersectionality of different identities. For example, if Sydney, Mardi Gras is a pride parade for LGBT community, many gay and lesbian communities. But working class gays and lesbians, for example, I mean to participate, to join this parade is an expensive one, to buy costumes and all these accessories and heavy makeup. But it's something that the middle class or upper middle class gays and lesbian can enjoy, but not from the working class because these people are busy with their daily lives.

Ali Moore:

And Jay, are you optimistic about our ability to make this a better experience and a better process or are we still too, not necessarily one tracked, but too narrow-minded?

Jay Song:

I'm an optimist on this. I think being able to have this conversation, which is in some Asian community is a taboo, is a very uncomfortable topic to talking about the sexual orientation, so you don't really talk about this topic outside of family or outside of close friends. But just opening up this conversation about how your gender and sexuality is important in making a decision to settle and applying for citizenship or feeling a sense of belonging to Australia and acquiring some of those core Australian values is important. And Claire and other collaborators have taught me so much through the process. So, thank you, Claire.

Claire Maree:

Thank you, Jay. I'm not a migration specialist. And just listening to Jay now, and how she's able to frame things in a way that really makes it clear what the issues are and what we're trying to achieve as well, thanks so much.

Ali Moore:

And Claire, having a greater understanding, incorporating the concept of sexual citizenship, how important do you think it's going to be to having a better lived experience for people of the LGBTQIA+ Asian community in Australia?

Claire Maree:

It's strange, because I don't know how Jay feels about this, but is "sexual citizenship" the word that we really want to push forward? How can we bring these issues to the forefront? And is it the best way to do it through this term, which has got a specific academic and scholarly context to it? So we've decided that we're going to focus on inclusion, belonging, and also the intersectionality that Jay's just alluded to. Things to do with class, things to do with ethnicity, things to do with able-bodiedness, these also pay a really significant part in the choices that people make in their life decisions and also the way that they're categorised and classified.



So, when we talk about these issues, it's not just the neoliberal subject, being able to do what they wish in the way that they so feel fit. It's really about how you were being classified by legal systems and by societal systems and cultural systems as well. So, if sexual citizenship, as a term that we're going to use for the moment, raises a bit more attention around the need to think about intersections of gender/sexuality/race, if we want to use that term slash ethnicity. I think that, that's a bit of a way forward to thinking about migrants from the Asian region and their experiences in Australia right now.

Ali Moore:

A way forward, indeed. Claire and Jay, thank you so much for telling us a bit about the work that you're doing and the importance of continuing. Thank you so much for joining Ear to Asia.

Claire Maree:

Thanks so much. It's wonderful to be able to speak with you again.

Jay Song:

Thank you very much.

Ali Moore:

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Ali Moore:

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