Learning English in corporate China

TIAN BO LI and GILLIAN MOREIRA

A study of English in China's business context

Introduction

China's rise and its potential markets are attractive enough for companies worldwide to want to do business in and with this country. Recognizing the important role played by language and culture in international business, this paper will explore the functions of English as a language of international communication in the business context in China. In particular it examines the rise in English learning fever and how English is perceived, mainly in companies. Our analysis will be based on a survey of 59 foreign and Chinese companies in mainland China in 2007. The results show that in these companies English is perceived as a tool for international communication, better pay, better jobs and a window to the world.

After China opened up in the early 1980s, international companies have flooded into the country. With this, there has been a growing demand for English, and people's expectations of the language have started up a new movement. Even public schools have started to reform the teaching of foreign languages, following the trend established in the private sector. China's economy has increased dramatically in recent years, and its market has increasingly become multinational. Being a member of the *World Trade Organization* (WTO) since 2001, China's enterprises have more opportunities to contact their foreign counterparts and knowledge of English as an international business language is becoming more crucial than ever. As a business itself, it is widening into the private sector and corporations are also having the language taught on their own premises.

The survey

In order to keep track of developments with English in China, a questionnaire was developed in both an English and Chinese version to administer amongst employers and employees in selected Chinese enterprises. The questionnaire is divided into four parts, which deal respectively with the following: Personal Information; English Language Skills; Intercultural Skills; and English in China. Using this questionnaire, a survey was carried out in 59 companies by e-mail or in paper form in five provinces (Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Guangdong), one 'autonomous region' (Inner Nei Mongol) and the cities of Beijing and Shanghai (directly controlled by



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the central government). We worked with 296 people from the companies, resulting in 66 questionnaires answered in English, 9 non-responses and 221 questionnaires in Chinese. Other data were collected from newspapers about the companies, company journals and notes taken when we visited the companies. When we went to the companies and language schools, we also interviewed some Chinese managers, people in charge of foreign trade and teachers of the English language. The findings will strengthen our understanding of the role of English in the Chinese marketplace.

Results and analysis

The companies on which our study is based were classified according to their location, global or national profile, products and type of company (foreign, joint-venture, state-owned, or private). The classification of the respondents was based on gender, age, nationality, academic background and profession.

With regard to English, our survey revealed that it is closely associated with the employees' daily lives (Figure 1), with 88.9% of the respondents using English in their daily life and only a few not using it.

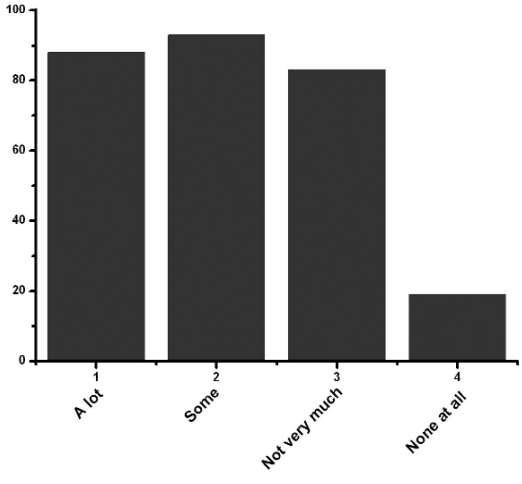


Figure 1 English in employees' daily lives

In relation to the purposes for using English (Figure 2), nearly 77% of the respondents use it for work, followed by conversation (21%), advancement (17.8%), knowing Western culture, recreation, going abroad/travel and others. These results strongly demonstrate that English plays an important role in companies.

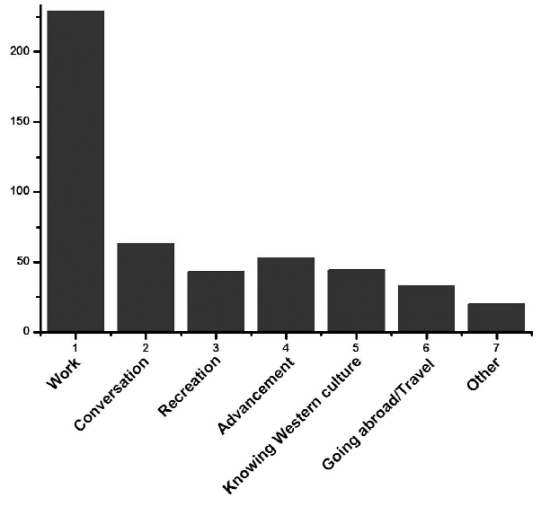


Figure 2 What do you use English for?

As for the language skills (Figure 3), half of the employees surveyed practise reading mostly, while the other half use English for both speaking and listening, followed by the written language. Some fifty claim to use all five skills (including translating). These results illustrate that the reading skill is perceived to be the most used by company employees.

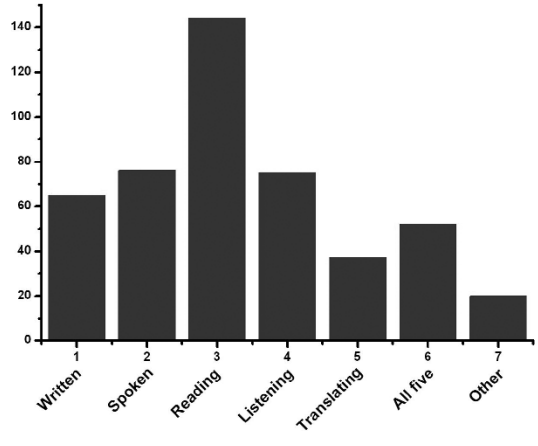


Figure 3 Language competences used by employees

When asked about the type of English used (Figure 4), American English seems to take a definite priority among other Englishes (around 56% selected it), with 25% stating they use British English, followed by a mixture of Englishes (14%), while some respondents (11%) confirmed they did not really know the source or type of English. Some 10% even

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chose Chinese English. These findings demonstrate that (a) there are currently many varieties of English in China, and (b) American English is felt to be dominant among these varieties.

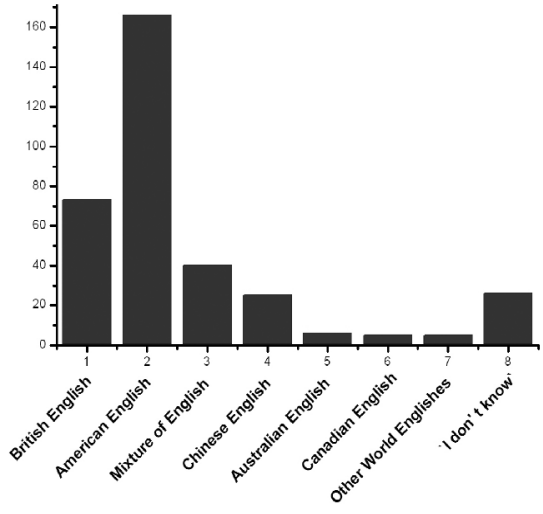


Figure 4 Varieties of English in employees'daily lives

When questioned about the areas in English communication (Figure 5), nearly 81% of the respondents considered English to be used mostly in trading companies, followed by translation companies (55%), hotels and restaurants (48%), tourism (43%) and school (20%). These results indicate the dominance of English in trade, but also its importance in the field of translation, and in the travel and hospitality industries.

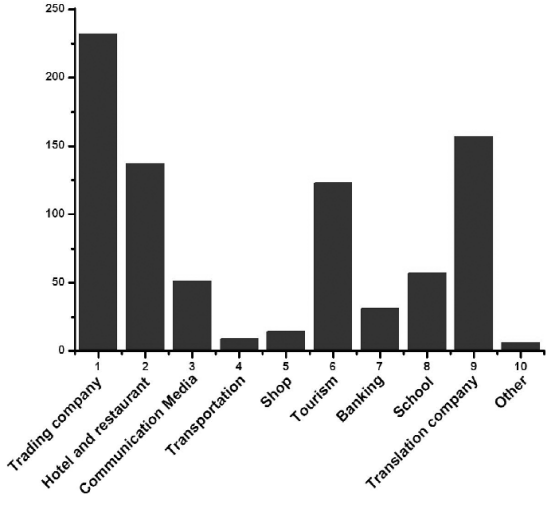


Figure 5 Areas in English communication

Regarding how English is perceived in China (Figure 6), almost 61% of the respondents confirmed its connection to 'better pay and better job', with nearly 46.1% considering 'communicating with foreigners', and a similar number selecting 'knowing Western culture' (42.1%). Smaller numbers of respondents chose 'going abroad' (to better their English and chances for better jobs), 'no English, no future', and so forth. These results demonstrate that English is felt to be an indispensable skill for the Chinese, with most regarding it as essential to secure better employment, and maintain contact with other peoples and cultures.

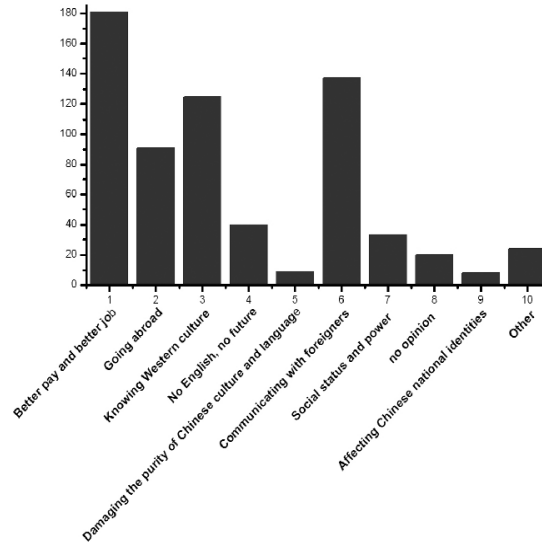


Figure 6 Perceptions of English in China

When asked about their difficulties in communicating in English, (Figure 7), the majority of the employees (78%) responded that cultural and language barriers presented the most difficulties, followed by 'work or educational background' (46%), cultural differences in outlook and temperament, gender and other differences. These results indicate how much cultural or language background influences effective communication with foreigners.

When questioned about how English is likely to develop as the language of business in China (Figure 8), our respondents strongly agreed with the statement: 'English will be the language of business in China' (69%). While almost a quarter of our respondents (21.2%) considered that Chinese would become the global business language, only one respondent answered that another foreign language would

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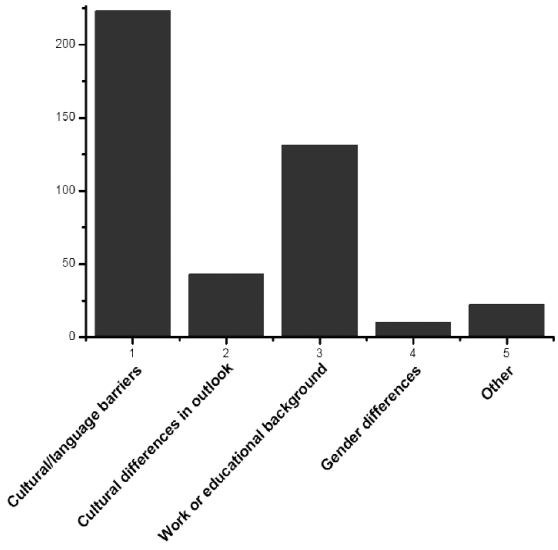


Figure 7 Difficulties in communicating in English

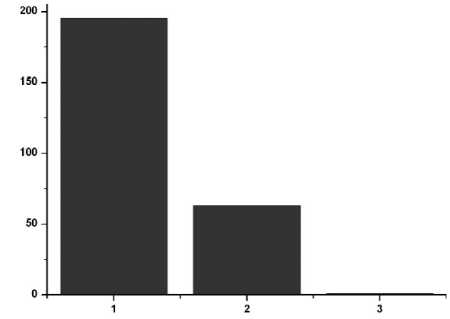


Figure 8 Future of English in business in China

take over. These results confirm the sense that English is the established language of business in China and will remain so.

As for the final open-ended question: 'China is a country with the highest economic growth rate; what is there to learn from China's success?', the responses were related to English, China, economy and globalization. The statements included the following:

- English is very important in our daily lives.
- English has been integrated into China's economy, social/cultural relations and politics.
- English will remain an important communication factor in China's business success.
- Language and communicative skills are crucial.
- Internationalization broadening into a global world.

In the face of globalization and internationalization, employees recognize the important role played by English as a bridge between China and the outside world.

When we interviewed managers, engineers and CEOs from some companies in 2007, they all confirmed that English plays an important role in their work. Mr Geng Biao, from the *Nestle Shuangcheng, Ltd.* (a joint venture company, from northeast China), for example, maintained that knowledge is learned through practice (*know-how*) and that English is a business language used as a communicative tool. English was an essential part of his career as he moved up from Chinese government officer to Deputy General Manager. It remains the main language he uses to communicate with his foreign colleagues. Mr Geng confirmed that most of his employees can use English for daily communication: dealing with e-mail, letters, negotiations and contracts. The company offers free English courses to its employees. Mr Geng's assistant, Mr Li Qiang, returning from the USA with a Bachelor's Degree, has been teaching English for employment purposes to workers for the last six years.

Another interviewee, Jack Wang, Chairman of the Board of the *Jiangsu Mana Co., Ltd.*, a trading company in East China, responded that his employees use English in their daily work. Most of his business partners are from the United States of America. Therefore, his company focuses on his employees' English qualifications. It is not unusual to see five managers of the company sitting around to examine an employee's language competency and communicative skills in English.

Examples from engineers also reveal the importance of English in their daily lives. Cheng Xin, from *Shanghai Yanfeng Weishitong Automobile Electronic Co., Ltd.*, a franchise of the *Ford Company*, USA, in East China, specializing in computer technology, claims English as his working language for reading materials, dealing with information, weekly reports for American or Asian-Pacific managers, amongst other things. Like *Nestle Shuangcheng Ltd*, the

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Shanghai Yanfeng Weishitong company also offers free English courses to improve their employees' English language skills twice a week, inviting foreign or Chinese experts to teach them.

Miss Huang Dan, a teacher of English at the *Green Bean Language School*, informed us that most people (sales-people, university students, air-hostesses, foreign company employees and others) come to learn English at their own expense, except the employees from some foreign companies.

Examples of English usage in tourism and technology

English is widely found in tourism in China's cities. It seems to have become a trend to use both English and Chinese in these two areas. Examples of this can be found in tourist offices, street signs, tourist sights and museums, hotel and restaurant information, along with the 2008 Beijing Olympics and other international fairs. More evidence can be seen from the Chinese government's promotion of Standard English in tourism: using Standard English to unify street names (e.g. *Xueyuan lu* changed to *Xueyuan Road*); regularizing the signposting of tourist sights; homogenizing the names of dishes in restaurants and hotels, such as *beef lung and liver* (in Chinese: 'husbands' and wives' livers') and *small chicken* (in Chinese 'virgin chicken'); and editing some pamphlets with specific terms and spoken English for Olympic usage (from Publishing House and Beijing Sports University). Although most of these initiatives had to do with the Beijing Olympics we believe they will persist in the near future.

As for English in technology, the internet has spread widely in China (there were 200 million users, the world's largest net population, in February 2008). The media transmit English usage through TV, special channels and programs, CDs, DVDs and video games. There are new worlds opening up in English through science and technology. Corporate businesses and all the newly founded language schools need permanent language training. The Chinese government has encouraged international cooperation, since this is regarded as a tool of raising competitiveness. Thus, China has been collaborating with 152 nations or regions worldwide in information, technology, energy, new material and the like from 2001 to 2006.[1]

According to China's *Scientific and Technological Information Academy*, the number of scientific and technological papers published in important international journals in 2006 was 172,000, putting China second, behind the USA, on the world publications ranking that year. China hopes to become an innovative country through importing advanced science and technology, thereby changing its position from the world's factory to the world's office and changing the product brand from *Made in China* to *Created in China* in the foreseeable future.

Discussion

English is the language of knowledge, particularly in the fields of science and technology, thus making it a unique tool for global competitiveness. It is also a language which is frequently and increasingly necessary in the lives of employees worldwide, and Chinese employees are not an exception (Figures 1–2).

Nowadays, communicating in an international language, such as English, is a common practice. Because of globalization many foreign companies in China and their partners outside communicate in English. As we have seen, reading and researching in English is common for professionals at all levels (Figure 3). Speaking and writing are also typical daily functions for employees, such as e-mailing, telephone conversations and letter writing with foreign counterparts, colleagues and customers. In China, the language teaching market is called 'a big cake', of which everyone wants a share. As part of this share, English is now being widely taught in and for the Chinese market by private language schools. One respondent reflected a common feeling by answering that English has two effects on China's economic development, a positive one and a negative one. It is positive that English helps the Chinese nation to be internationalized and modernized; it is negative for the learning of the Chinese language.

Through Americanization, Western culture has been adopted in Asia. This culture spawned recreational activities and popular culture, such as (dubbed) American films on TV, English learning programmes and cartoons, cinema, and dining at *McDonalds* and *KFC* restaurants. We found lots of English literature and textbooks, travel guides and hardcover books in Chinese bookshops. We also found American corporations such as *Ford,*

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Buick, General Motors (GM), *General Electric* (GE) established in the Chinese marketplace. Technology and internet usage has doubled in the past decade. It has become, somewhat paradoxically, a way of life in China today to learn the American way. This is the reason why American English is considered the dominant variety in China (Figure 4).

Tourism is another sector that is soaring and leading to a greater demand for languages, especially English. With improved living standards, many Chinese people go abroad, motivated by a curiosity about other cultures (see Figures 5–6). Chinese tourists have been allowed to go to 132 nations and regions worldwide since early 2007. To go to the US, Chinese could only apply for business, study or family visas with a low success rate. Only as of June 2008[2] was it allowed for Chinese tourist groups to contemplate going to America and nowadays, America is the most desired tourist destination for Chinese people.[3] To promote the new trips, there was an increase of 16 new air routes between China and America between 2008 and 2009. According to China's National Tourism Bureau, there were 132 million foreign tourists travelling in China in 2007 (an increase of 5.5 per cent in relation to 2006). Meanwhile, there were around 40.95 million Chinese travelling abroad in the same year (an increase of 18.6% in relation to 2006).[4]

Trading companies have contributed greatly to China's economic growth, particularly since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, for example: opening four 'Special Economic Zones' (geographical regions with more liberal economic laws than the country's typical economic laws)[5] in 1979; and opening fourteen coastal sites and Hainan Island (south China) in 1984 with profitable fiscal policies. Foreign trade has been the government's main vehicle for economic growth,[6] leading to a faster growth in this sector than in GDP over the past 25 years.[7]

According to China's Foreign Investment Company List,[8] there are 252,000 foreign and joint-venture companies in mainland China. These companies, from America, England, Germany, Japan, Sweden, South Korea, Portugal, France, Australia and other regions, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, have spread all over China. Meanwhile, Chinese enterprises have also built up their businesses abroad, branching out mostly into Asia (where China is the third investment nation), the USA, Africa and Europe, for example, *Haire* (domestic products), *Huawei telecommunications, Lenovo computers* and *Sino-petroleum* and others. The top five hundred foreign investment corporations in China specialize in electronics, computers, automobiles, everyday products and others. Most of these (451) are located in east China, 31 in middle China, and 18 in west China. Around 81% of these corporations are concentrated in the manufacturing industry. Because of this spread of international business relations, the English language has become the most used form of communication.

These foreign or joint-venture companies require more skills, specialization in financing, sales and trade, high-tech biology, and engineering. These specialists must also master written and spoken English. Taking into account China's membership of the *World Trade Organization* (WTO), the 2008 *Olympic Games* in Beijing and the 2010 *Shanghai World Fair*, it has been predicted that, from 2005 to 2010, the Chinese market will be short of one million trade experts.[9] The Chinese market also needs lawyers and negotiators familiar with international regulations and laws who are able to communicate in fluent English.

It is our goal to demonstrate that, in China, the corporations' most urgent objective is to train personnel for these market needs. On the one hand, facing such competition for skilled employees, companies have realized that good training conditions can attract excellent employees. On the other hand, companies have found their employees short of communicative skills, professional English writing and conference and negotiation skills when communicating with their counterparts. In our research, we have found that foreign, joint-venture or big Chinese companies offer professional English courses. These companies include *General Motors* (GM), *Shell*, *Carrefour*, *IBM, HP, Microsoft, Pansonic, China National Petroleum Corporation* (CNPC), *Guomei domestic products* (China), *Lenovo computers* (China), *Beida Fangzheng computers* (China), *Huawei telecommunications* (China).

In short, 'English learning is a source for employees' continuous learning of new knowledge…', as pointed out in 2005 by Wangya Dong, head of China's *Information* magazine, at a Human Resources for English Teaching in Enterprises Debate, and mastering English has become a strategy for international competitiveness within enterprises.[10] So it is the companies themselves who are promoting the spread

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and improvement of English language teaching. In order to expand international markets, corporations want to overcome language and cultural barriers, which present particular difficulties to employees, as reflected in Figure 7. These companies want language teaching schools to provide not only perfect English, but also comparisons between Eastern and Western cultures. Simultaneously, employees are required to improve their general English language skills, particularly English for professionals. In our 2007 survey, we found that 56% of our respondents were learning English, and about 30% of them confirmed that their companies pay their English learning fees. It is against this background that the English learning market has been growing fast for the past decade.

From the 1990s till March 2008, around fifty thousand English language schools have opened up throughout China. The language schools have been run by native Chinese, English, American, Australian, Canadian and other personnel. Therefore English in China has some international variants (Figure 4). These schools sell English courses to every professional area, such as students, employees and non-professionals. The language learning market for employees is divided into different fields, such as the hotel industry, banking, computers and information technology (IT), trading and medicine. It involves several foreign languages besides English, for example Japanese, Korean, German, French, Italian and Spanish. Many language schools are invited by companies to teach their employees. Most of these companies are foreign or joint-venture, large Chinese companies or research institutes. The characteristics of the schools are: small-sized classes, native English teachers from English speaking countries, an English learning environment and individualized class schedules. Some people even say *English kiss life* (a Chinese English expression meaning that English language skills can change the future).

Conclusion

English as the language of international communication and business is greatly sought after in China at present. For the past twenty years, English has become the most functional language for international communication in this country, and because of the Olympic Games in 2008 and the World Fair in 2010, English usage is still growing.

English is a global language in China (Ji, 2002; Li, 2005). The widespread use of English there is a reflection of the country's internationalization and fascination with and to Western cultures. Based on our research, we conclude that English has been widely adopted as a language of communication in corporate mainland China. The business world communicates with its foreign counterparts in this language and between themselves at meetings, training sessions and workshops. It is also a requirement for job qualification. As Dougill (2008:18) concludes in connection with Japan, 'English is the language of success, profit and international acceptability'.

At present, English represents high science and technology. It is widely perceived as the window to the future and to a better life. It is knowledge and a bridge to Western cultures. This has resulted in a change of English teaching both in the public and private systems for the past two decades, and English teaching has also become a common practice within corporations. This learning process starts at a very early age and goes on up to examination level in higher education. ■

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1 'The rushing of international cooperation sends China right ahead into the world's science and technology.'
(国际合作加速中国科技进入世界科技前沿)
Online at http://www.stcsm.gov.cn/detail/detail.aspx?tbno=202&id=83546 (Accessed October 29, 2008)
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(2007 年第三届中国出境旅游国际论坛).
Online at http://www.chuguo.cn/news/88823.xhtml (Accessed June 3, 2008)
3 'To aid to travel to America, China and the U.S. will increase 16 new direct air routes in the next two years.'
(协助赴美旅游今后两年中美将新增16条直飞航线)
Online at http://www.backchina.com (Accessed December 19, 2007)
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5 Online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Economic_Zone (Accessed June 17, 2008)
6 'Economy of the People's Republic of China.' Online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_the_People's_Republic_of_China (Accessed June 17, 2008)
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