An Inquiry into the Semiotic Thought of Laozi

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Abstract

Tao Te Ching, the masterpiece of Laozi the renowned philosopher of Pre-Imperial China, plays an important role in Chinese history. Laozi's philosophy centres on such concepts as *ming* (names), *li* (rituals), and *dao* (the way). *Ming*, originally developed as a result of human beings' endeavours to understand the world in which they live and to bring order to their society, has degenerated into the sources of evils and the reason for turbulence when people stop at nothing for fame and fortune; *Li*, an effective and efficient means for the kings of West Zhou Dynasty to maintain social stability, has become but a collection of empty sign vehicles with the disintegration of rituals and music; *Dao* concerns Laozi's metaphysical reflection on the origin of the universe and its ultimate laws. *Ming* and *li* are but artificial restraints imposed on human intelligence whereas *dao* provides the way out. Therefore, to lead a simple and natural life, it is advisable to eliminate *ming* and *li*, and worship *dao*. In semiotic terms, this means that desemiotisation is the solution to the crisis.

Keywords

Tao Te Ching – Laozi – semiotics – *ming* – *li* – *dao*

Laozi (老子) is an encyclopedic scholar of the academic thoughts of the Pre-Imperial Age. His main ideas are preserved in the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经) where he gives serious thought to names and rituals. This is of great semiotic significance. Semiotics is a recent concept, but the ancient Chinese philosopher does examine how signs make the world meaningful. His contribution provides us with a better understanding of the academic ideas and culture of the Pre-Qin Age.

The culture characterised by rituals and music, taking shape in the West Zhou Dynasty, is virtually a series of semiotic systems that aim to secure the social order. Since the disintegration of its rituals and music, this culture has been seriously affected, resulting in incessant disturbances. It is against this background that the Hundred Schools and great masters (诸子百家 *zhuzi bai-jia*) of the time make their voices heard. What they have in mind is to restore order to the troubled society. As Zhang Shunhui, (张舜徽 2005:1) the historian put it, 'The masters of the time, though different in their preaching, share the same goal: the restoration of order to the affected world'. Laozi is no exception.

1 Naming: Semiotisation of the World, Order out of Chaos

Charles William Morris, the American semiotician and philosopher, explains that:

Since the unique thing about the human being is that how he will act toward something is largely dependent on how he signifies that something, signs are the tool of tools for man-making.

MORRIS, 1948: 54

That is to say, it is humans have created signs, but these signs in turn influence cognition and the way we express ourselves. The first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* reflects on how human beings created 'names'. By examining this part, we may find the key to understanding Laozi's ideas on signs:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
 But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its
 manifestations.

These two are the same
 But diverge in name as they issue forth.
 Being the same they are called mysteries,
 Mystery upon mystery –
 The gateway of the manifold secrets.

LAOTZU, 1963: 5

This chapter is where the five thousand characters of the *Tao Te Ching* is announced and therefore it should not be neglected (Zhu, 1984: 4). According to Laozi, things are ever-changing, but behind the changes there seems to be something 'constant'. 'The way' (道, *dao*) is the name given to changes in general, but there are always things that remain 'unchanged'. These are known as 'the constant' (常, *chang*). In other words, 'the way that can be spoken of, the name that can be named, both these things tend to be concrete and specific, and therefore are not the constant' (Wang, 1980: 1). 'The way that can be spoken of' is something with forms that can be detected, hence physical; the 'constant way' is metaphysical, something understandable but inexpressible. There used to be no signs in the world. Signs are created and developed to facilitate interpersonal communication. Things are changing, so are names. The name that stays unchanged is 'the constant name'. According to Laozi, 'the way that can be spoken of' is not the 'constant way', and the name that can be named is not the 'constant name'. Therefore, what Laozi discusses here is the relationship between thought and existence, or between names and substance. 'The constant way' is beyond words, therefore there is no 'constant name'. That is to say, the constant way has no name, and as Laozi describes it, 'The way conceals itself in being nameless' (Laotzu, 1963:48). Without a name, the way cannot be conveyed by words.

The materialist conception of history suggests that a man's social existence determines his consciousness. With this comes a paradox: it is linguistic signs that 'create' the referents. Liu Xi (刘熙) of the Han Dynasty points out that 'names are to make clear the distinctions between things' (Liu, 2008: 116). Names distinguish one thing from another so that order will come out of chaos. Without the names of the world's 'myriad creatures', it would be impossible to tell them apart. In this sense 'the named was the mother of the myriad creatures' – names are what we know the creatures by. Saussure asserts, 'there are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language' (Saussure, 1965: 112). This is a perfect footnote to Laozi's ideas. With evolution, humans appear in this world. As humans develop, linguistic signs

appear. All of the cultural phenomena of human societies, including languages, arts, religions, and myths, are but products of the semiotic activities of human beings. The names of various kinds of things did not exist until after humans developed linguistic signs, without which there would undoubtedly be no names.

With the advancement of human society, linguistic signs are gradually enriched. People invent different names for things according to their respective properties. This is recorded in the *Tao Te Ching* as: 'Only when it is cut there are names. As soon as there are names/ One ought to know that it is time to stop' (Laotzu, 1963: 37). Names are given according to their properties, and there is a limit to the properties of things. Once the limit is exceeded, properties will change. What follows will inevitably be a change in names, or otherwise there will be a disagreement between the representamen and the object.

When names are given, they actually embody the value judgments of the name-givers. When these names are learned, the established value system is acquired with them. This is particularly true after Zhougong (周公, the Duke of Zhou) established the *zhouli* (周礼, the Rites of Zhou), and created the *yayue* (燕乐, graceful music). Names, graduating into synonyms of titles and status, with ever-greater ethical importance attached, became tools for social management. This phenomenon was no mystery to Laozi, whose insights led to his almost negative comments on naming.

2 Elimination of Names: Desemiotisation, Settlement of Disputes and Restoration of Order

With the invention of linguistic signs, order comes to an otherwise chaotic world. A well-organised society depends largely on the adoption of indices and symbols. Rituals, proprieties, and ranking systems are all examples of man-made indices. A ranking list demonstrates the different statuses of those concerned and how well they will be rewarded. The same is true of the ranking system in contemporary academia, according to which there are professors, associate professors, lecturers, and so on, each with different task requirements and different payment levels. Ranks and positions can be compared to representamen, and the corresponding powers and resources can be viewed as objects. Such being the case, the interpretant will be: the higher the rank, the better the treatment. It is therefore no surprise that many people pursue high ranks, and in doing so they aspire to the benefits high ranks may bring.

In the eyes of Laozi, 'names' are the very source of disputes and disturbances. To settle these disputes, we should stop naming and ranking. After all,

these signs are providing people with different statuses and thus justifying the different treatments.

Any object is semiotised when it conveys more than its practical use. The object becomes a carrier of meaning, a combination of sign and function. Chapter 12 of the *Tao Te Ching* refers to 'goods hard to come by' (Laotzu, 1963: 16), interpreted by some scholars to mean natural things like metals and stones. Once metals such as gold and silver come to stand for wealth, and once pearls and jades become symbols of status, they are no longer the purely natural things that they used to be. Instead, they have become semiotised wealth, which people will fight each other for. They can in fact lead many astray, making them 'go against their nature'. The source of the trouble is, again, semiotisation.

This point is exactly what Laozi reflects on in Chapter 44 (Laotzu, 1963: 51). Reputation, wealth, or life: which is the most important? In the real world, many people suffer great losses searching for fame and fortune, which is why Laozi raised these questions. He wants to warn them of the danger. If it were not for semiotisation, fame and fortune would not have become what they are. If this point is kept in mind, people will know better than to lose themselves in the pursuit of vanity.

Seeing that over-semiotisation brings harm to human nature, Laozi's solution is that desemiotisation will contribute to the restoration of order by helping people avoid the pursuit of fame and fortune. Chapter 28 reads:

Know the male
But keep to the role of the female
And be a ravine to the empire.
If you are a ravine to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will not desert you
And you will again return to being a babe.
Know the white
But keep to the role of the sullied
And be a model to the empire.
If you are a model to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will not be wanting
And you will return to the infinite,
Know honour
But keep to the role of the disgraced
And be a valley to the empire.
If you are a valley to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will be sufficient

And you will return to being the uncarved block.
 When the uncarved block shatters it becomes vessels.
 The sage makes use of these and becomes the lord over the officials.
 Hence the greatest cutting does not sever.

LAOTZU, 1963: 33

The authenticity of some of the quoted text here is subject to doubt, and various interpretations have been offered since ancient times. Despite the discrepancies, some key words in this part can still enhance our understanding of Laozi's idea.

Let us examine 'again return to being a babe'. The word 'babe' is used a number of times in *Tao Te Ching*. For example, in Chapter 10, we find 'In concentrating your breath can you become as supple as a babe?' (Laotzu, 1963: 14), and in chapter 20, 'Like a baby that has not yet learned to smile' (Laotzu, 1963: 24). Generally, all these 'babies' are associated with purity, innocence, and carefreeness. They have not yet acquired the world of meanings created by adults using signs, and can therefore 'return to being the uncarved block', something without artificial decorations. The conclusion reached is that 'the greatest cutting does not sever'. Things are not to be named and grouped. Without the man-made signs and names, there would no longer be a clear dividing line between men and their surroundings. As discussed above, the process of naming in itself involves value judgments, which can be illustrated by the many opposing terms in Chapter 2, such as 'beautiful/ugly' and 'good/bad'. Acquiring these terms means accepting their value judgments at the same time, which leads to an artificial definition and classification of the world they inhabit. This in turn will result in disputes between people. Laozi's assertion that things are not to be named and grouped amounts to saying that the names by which things are grouped should be done away with.

Human beings, by using signs, have created rich and colourful cultures. Culture can then be seen as a collection of all the sign-using behaviours of mankind (Zhao, 2015). Unfortunately in the real world, many people kneel before their own creations and become lost in the jungle of signs.

It must be noted that Laozi does not deny the basic needs of humankind. Several times in *Tao Te Ching* he uses the phrase 'fills their bellies' (Laotzu, 1963: 7), and 'the sage is for the belly, not for the eye' (Laotzu, 1963: 16). As Xu Fuguan (徐复观) notices, 'The freedom from desires as advocated by Laozi, is not to deny the biological and natural needs of human beings. What he opposes is any desire that goes beyond these' (Xu, 2014: 310).

Laozi the wise man has realised that in a world flooded by signs, human nature is likely to be lost, and damage will be done to humans themselves. In a sense, Laozi can be said to be the first to foresee a crisis caused by the abuse of signs. To avert this crisis, his suggestion is to follow this path:

After they (the myriad creatures) are transformed, should desire raise
its head,
I shall press it down with the weight of the nameless uncarved block.
The nameless uncarved block
Is but freedom from desire,
And if I cease to desire and remain still,
The empire will be at peace of its own accord.

LAOTZU, 1963: 42

As the myriad creatures grow and ripen, desire raises its head. To deal with greediness, the therapy prescribed by Laozi is the 'elimination of names'. Without names and statuses, there would be no reason for people to fight each other. Disputes would be settled, social order would be restored, and we would be blessed with a peaceful world. All things considered, Laozi believes that 'names', which are responsible for insatiable desires and incessant social disturbances, should be wiped out.

3 *Li* (Rituals) and *Yi* (Righteousness): Presence of Signs and Absence of Meaning

How did rituals and righteousness originate? According to the Discourse on Ritual Principles, Book 19 of *Xunzi* (荀子):

How did ritual principles arise? I say that men are born with desires which, if not satisfied, cannot but lead men to seek to satisfy them. If in seeking to satisfy their desires men observe no measure and apportion things without limits, then it would be impossible for them not to contend over the means to satisfy their desires. Such contention leads to disorder. Disorder leads to poverty. The Ancient Kings abhorred such disorder; so they established the regulations contained within ritual and moral principles in order to apportion things, to nurture the desires of men, and to supply the means for their satisfaction. They so fashioned their regulations that desires should not want for the things which satisfy them and goods would not be exhausted by the desires. In this way the

two of them, desires and goods, sustained each other over the course of time. This is the origin of ritual principles. Thus, the meaning of ritual is to nurture.

KNOBLOCK, 1994: 55

In the eyes of Xunzi, human beings are born with desires, which must be controlled so that they will not result in conflicts and collisions. To fulfil this task, rituals and righteousness should be introduced, and, through this, people will be offered what is appropriate for their positions in the hierarchy. Rituals are simply a sign system of hierarchy, but they can help regulate human behaviour and interpersonal relations. By the Spring and Autumn period, rituals and music had been destroyed and the sign system could no longer keep order in society. As described in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Historians*, 史记), Confucius, who was determined to restore balance to society by revitalising the rituals and music of the West Zhou Dynasty, once consulted Laozi on the topic of rituals. Laozi answered in a roundabout way by pointing out that 'What you are talking about concerns merely the words left by people who have rotted along with their bones' (Sima, 1982: 2139–40). That is to say, the rituals have become inappropriate for the occasion, which actually negates their significance.

From *Tao Tè Ching*, we get the impression that Laozi advocates the way of nature in preference to man-made rituals. He seems to believe that virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, rituals, and intellectual awareness are favoured because they are hard to find in the real world (Laotzu, 1963: 22). The reason why benevolence, righteousness, filial children, and loyal ministers exist is because the corresponding meanings are missing. In other words, the signs are present because the meanings are absent. As Shi Deqing (释德清) explains:

The *Tao* does not mean to love the ten thousand things, yet each and every thing is where it should be; benevolence and righteousness are meant to love the ten thousand things, yet what they bring about is nothing but discrimination between closeness and distance, between the humble and the noble.

SHI, 2009: 59

The ten thousand things used to follow their natural course, until the day when the great way fell into disuse. Hypocrisy has been brought about by cleverness; filial children are praiseworthy only when the six relations are at variance. The only reason a particular virtue is advocated may be because it is missing in the actual present world. Put another way, the sign is there because the meaning is absent. Benevolence and righteousness, filial piety and loyalty,

are terms emphasised because the corresponding meanings no longer exist. It is the absence of the meaning that calls for the presence of the sign.

In his lifetime, Laozi witnessed the decline of the Zhou Dynasty. Seeing that the nobles fought for fame and fortune in the name of protecting the rituals of the Zhou, he reflected on the true meanings of rituals and righteousness, and sought to find the causes behind the disorder, eventually coming up with his insightful views.

Rituals, closely linked with names and status, had long become an important means of ruling in the West Zhou Dynasty. Zhan Jianfeng (詹剑峰), in analysing the relationships between rituals, names and statuses, points out that:

Since the West Zhou Dynasty, an important tool for the feudal lords to maintain their domination is by rectifying names and giving appropriate names because names are closely related to statuses and rituals. Each name has its corresponding status and therefore its proper ritual. Furthermore, these are the only status and ritual proper for the name. Any attempt to adopt statuses and rituals improper for the name will be severely punished so that in a hierarchical society, the noble and the humble will be treated differently, the upper and the lower can be told apart.

ZHAN, 1982: 188

Laozi, a learned scholar and careful observer, did not fail to notice this fact. As pointed out in Chapter 38 of *Tao Te Ching*:

A man most conversant in the rites acts,
But when no one responds rolls up his sleeves
And resorts to persuasion by force.
Hence when the way was lost there was virtue;
When virtue was lost there was benevolence;
When benevolence was lost there was rectitude;
When rectitude was lost there were the rites.
The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and good faith.
And the beginning of disorder.

LAOTZU, 1963: 46

The loss of loyalty, trust, and other virtues is the real reason people may fight over trivialities. Hence, Laozi is justified in claiming that the rituals are 'the wearing thin of loyalty and good faith, and the beginning of disorder'. As moral standards degrade, the rulers resort to rituals to control behaviour so order

can be restored. Unfortunately, only the forms of the rituals remain. In Laozi's time, the rituals maintained by the feudal lords are merely forms that lack content. Political campaigns are launched and sometimes even wars are waged in the name of rituals, which are undoubtedly abuses of the term. It is therefore understandable that Laozi's comments on rituals and righteousness are unfavourable. The sign system of rituals and righteousness had degraded into no more than a collection of empty sign vehicles.

Laozi thinks deeply about the relationship between rituals and people, and points out in Chapter 57 that 'The more taboos there are in the empire, the poorer the people' (Laotzu, 1963: 64). That is to say, the more restrictions people tend to feel, the less likely they are to lead a rich and happy life. Laozi argues that rituals should be ended and the *Tao* advocated instead.

4 Worshipping Tao: a Metaphysical Reflection on the World of Signs

Taoism has been so named primarily because of Laozi's philosophical emphasis. *Tao* is an abstract term, which is at the core of Laozi's philosophy. As Chen Guying (陈鼓应) and Bai Xi (白奚) points out, for Lao Zi, *Tao* refers either to the basic principles by which things move and change, or to the origin of the things concerned (Chen & Bai, 2001: 102). It is a highly semiotised abstract concept that has evolved from concrete images.

Tang Lan (唐兰), an etymologist, points out that '*Tao*, in its philosophical sense, used to be very popular during the Spring and Autumn Period' (Tang, 1982: 614). At that time, each and every school has its own *Tao*. However, *Tao* could not have acquired its meaning in such a short time, and must have been a concept developed far back in Chinese history. According to *Shuowen Jiezi* (说文解字), the Chinese character '道' (path) comes from a combination of '辵' (walking on a road) and '首' (head of a man) (Xu, 1983: 42). As human thought has become more sophisticated and culture has developed, more meanings have been added to this character:

The original meaning of *Tao* is 'path', with a sense of definite direction, suggesting that it is the inevitable course leading to some particular destination. Therefore, *Tao* is used to denote certainty and inevitability perceived in the existence and development of things; since people are always travelling back and forth along (*Tao*) the path, *Tao* has been adopted to refer to the laws of how things move and change in this world; since people have to follow a certain path to reach their destination, *Tao* has acquired the meaning of principles that must be followed

in the development of everything as well as in human behaviours; since *Tao* has provided people with the necessary means by which their goals can be attained, it begins to be considered as the fundamental approach to understand things around us and to solve problems of different kinds.

CHEN; BAI, 2001: 103

This understanding of the *Tao* generally fits with the laws of the development of languages and signs. In human languages, there is an important cultural phenomenon: one word/character is capable of referring not only to concrete things, but also to abstract concepts. Generally, the concrete meaning usually comes before the abstract meaning. The Chinese character ‘节’ (originally means “node”) was originally written as ‘卩’, which, in oracle bone inscriptions, looks very much like a man kneeling and sitting on his heels. In this character, the knee, which is emphasised, is its concrete meaning. Later, the same character is borrowed to denote credentials, as in the word ‘符节’. With the development of language, and as human thought becomes more sophisticated, more meanings need to be expressed. The meanings of ‘节’ are then further enriched: controlling (节制, *jièzhì*), etiquette (礼节, *lǐjiè*), and solar terms (节气, *jiéqì*). The character ‘节’ therefore later acquires many abstract meanings, in addition to its concrete meaning.

The *Tao* held by Laozi has also undergone a similar process, from concrete to abstract. His *Tao* ‘is no longer a particular principle. Instead, it is the universal law that applies to everything. He has developed a system out of the *Tao* preached in the Spring and Autumn Period. This is a great leap-forward in the history of philosophy’ (Tang, 1982: 614). This is exactly why his thoughts stand out from the many other theories concerning the *Tao*. In the eyes of Laozi, the *Tao*, being far and deep beyond words, is so abstract that it defies any attempt to name and describe:

As a thing the way is shadowy and indistinct.

Indistinct and shadowy, yet within it is an image;

Shadowy and indistinct, yet within it is a substance.

Dim and dark, yet within it is an essence.

This essence is quite genuine and within it is something that can be tested.

LAOTZU, 1963: 26

A more detailed description of the *Tao* is found in Chapter 14 of *Tao Te Ching* (Laotzu, 1963: 18). *Tao* cannot be seen, nor can it be heard or touched. Being colourless, soundless, and imageless, it is indivisible. The properties of the

Tao will remain unchanged in the dark or in the daylight. It never ends, is ever beyond words, and eventually returns to emptiness. It is shape without shape, image with substance, and is, therefore, indistinct and shadowy. How then, should something indistinct and shadowy, something unfathomable, be named? Here is the answer offered by Laozi:

There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth.
 Silent and void, it stands alone and does not change, goes round and
 does not weary.
 It is capable of being the mother of the world.
 I know not its name, so I style it 'the way'.
 I give it the makeshift name of 'the great'.

LAOTZU, 1963:30

Laozi believes that the simple and natural *Tao* was born before heaven and earth. It has no name because it has no sound and therefore cannot be heard; it has no colour and therefore cannot be seen, which is why it is referred to as 'silent and void'. The *Tao* is above the myriad creatures. With its unchangeable shape, the *Tao* is recurrent, continually flowing around. The creatures of the world all emerge from the *Tao*, so it is known as 'the mother of the world'. What then is the name of this something from which everything has developed? Even Laozi does not know its name: 'so I style it "the way"' (字之曰道). 'I give it the makeshift name of "the great"'. Su Zhe understands that '*Tao* used to have no name. When the Sage notices that all things come out of it, he styles it the way and gives it the makeshift name of "the great"' (Su, 2010: 33–34).

In this part, what is rendered as 'style' is '字' in the original Chinese version. The character '字' is a combination of the upper part '宀' (meaning the roof of a building), and the lower part '子' (meaning child). It originally referred to a child in the house, but was later borrowed for a sound denoting a compound character. Based on the above analysis, we can assume that when Laozi uses '字' to explain '道', what he is actually doing is telling us that the meaning of '道' here is in fact derived through a process of interpretation. This is not unlike the interpretant put forward by Charles S. Peirce in his triadic hypothesis (cf. CP 8. 179) Zhao Yiheng believes that 'with the deepening of understanding on the part of the receptor, the properties of the interpretant concerned will inevitably change' (Zhao, 2014: 9). The different backgrounds and experiences of those analysing the *Tao* will undoubtedly result in different individual interpretations. The *Tao* is therefore open to unlimited semiosis.

What then is it that Laozi aims at with the term *Tao*? According to the *Tao Te Ching*, 'Man models himself on earth, Earth on heaven, Heaven on the way,

and the way on that which is naturally so' (道法自然) (Laotzu, 1963:30). *Ziran* (自然, *ziran*) is another important concept in the academic thought of Laozi, and the term appears in Chapters 17, 23, and 64. There is no agreement among scholars as to what it exactly means, but the authors of this article tend to agree with Zhan Jianfeng, who argues that nature as understood by Laozi 'is the nature of the natural world, the whole nature (including the essence of nature and natural phenomena)' (Zhan, 1982: 212). The *Tao* advocated by Laozi not only refers to the essence of nature but also to natural phenomena, to what is naturally so. Therefore, 'the way models itself on that which is naturally so' means that due respect should be shown for natural laws and natural phenomena, and that signs like fame and fortune, rituals and righteousness, should be eliminated, lifting their restraints on human intelligence and life as a whole. It is only in this way that human beings can lead a simple and natural life.

5 Conclusion

To inquire into the semiotic thoughts of Laozi, we have to take into consideration the social and cultural context which produces them, analyse them with historical awareness, and interpret them from a cultural perspective. Laozi has insights into the mechanism of the production of names and rituals. He is also familiar with their social functions, so much so that he has foreseen a potential crisis hidden behind these signs. That's why he has suggested the elimination of names and rituals so as to end the social disturbances of his time. And then the *Tao* is put forward as a further solution to the problem because names and rituals and righteousness are but restraints on human intelligence. Only by abandoning these restraints can it be possible for human beings to be closer to the way, the *Tao*. Laozi is the first in the world to perceive the nature of signs. His thoughts are believed to be the fountain of inspirations for us modern people to stay away from the semiotic crisis. Human beings have created a world of signs; they also have the ability to reflect, both cognitively and ethically, on their semiotic behaviors. This shows well that human beings, as animals of semiotic behaviour, of signs, and of ethical signs, care about the Earth and about life itself, and that they never shrink from their responsibilities. This new field of study is known as semioethics: the name of which Laozi could not have known, but concerning some of the ideas that Laozi has expressed. It will be worthwhile to explore the values of these ideas in the contemporary world overfilled with signs. And that may serve well to be the topic for another paper.

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