

The Pioneer of Korean Studies in Denmark: Huy Dong Shin (1935–1985)

Korean Studies in Northern Europe have yet to fully spread their wings. Despite the global prominence of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), many universities across the region continue to maintain well-established programs in Chinese and Japanese Studies while either refraining from introducing Korean Studies altogether or subsuming it under the broader umbrella of “Asian Studies.” Because language instruction is generally costly, some programs labeled “Korean Studies,” or “Asian Studies” now operate without requiring Korean-language training at all. This development has significant implications. When students are unable to read Korean, they cannot engage directly with primary and secondary sources in Korean and instead attempt to understand Korea chiefly through secondary literature in English. Consequently, Western theories and methodologies tend to take precedence. Rather than asking which theoretical or methodological approaches might best illuminate specific phenomena in Korea, we increasingly observe the reverse: students begin with a preferred Western method and subsequently seek Korean cases that can function as test sites for theoretical experimentation.

Against this broader Nordic background, the University of Turku, the University of Stockholm, and the University of Copenhagen stand out as institutions that successfully combine rigorous Korean-language instruction with research-based training in Korean Studies. Yet, considering the overall fragile state of the field in Northern Europe, it is all the more striking to recall the enthusiasm and dedication with which early pioneers such as Huy Dong Shin worked in the late 1960s and 1970s to promote a deeper understanding of

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Korea—supporting the Royal Library, the National Museum of Denmark, and the University of Copenhagen alike.

Surprisingly, however, Huy Dong Shin is not widely remembered at the University of Copenhagen. When preparing annual reports for various funding bodies, we used to include a brief paragraph on the history of Korean Studies in Copenhagen—often with the assumption that, in a small country like Denmark, the field could hardly predate the 1990s. Yet several years ago, while browsing Bent Lerbæk Pedersen’s (2015, 103) *Catalogue of Korean Manuscripts and Rare Books*, we encountered a note under the entry for the manuscript *Classified Glossary for Water Margin* (*Suhoji eorok* 水滸誌語錄) stating: “Purchased in South Korea in 1974 by Library Assistant Shin Huy-Dong, employed in the Library from 1965 to 1985.” This brief remark sparked our curiosity. Who was Shin Huy-Dong (or Huy Dong Shin)¹? How had he come to Denmark, and what had he contributed during his time here? Further research—including a reading of Martin Petersen’s PhD dissertation “Collecting Korean Shamanism”—revealed that Shin’s influence extended far beyond the Royal Library and the National Museum of Denmark. His efforts also played a notable role in shaping the development of Korean Studies in Denmark, in the Nordic countries and, more broadly, in Europe and the world.

Huy Dong Shin’s Journey to Denmark and His Friendship with the Late Kim Dong Hi

The Korean newspaper *Jungang ilbo* conducted several interviews with Shin in 1975 and 1978 (Yun 1975a, 1975b, 1975c; Jungang ilbo 1978). According to these interviews, Shin came to Denmark in 1962 as a government-sponsored student after graduating from Taegu University. He spent two years studying agricultural economics at Haslev Agricultural School before transferring to the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen, where he pursued research on cooperatives. After completing his studies in 1965, Shin obtained employment as a civil servant in Denmark’s central cooperative federation—likely referring to the Danish cooperative employers’ organisation *Kooperationen*.

1 Shin is the family name. From here on, we will refer to him as Huy Dong Shin, as this is the name he used in Denmark.



Figure 1. Picture of Hiu Lie, a PhD Candidate from Leiden, William E. Skillend, and Huy Dong Shin (from left to right) in Front of Beopjusa Temple

During this period, he also began working as an interpreter and lecturer on Korea-related topics. In 1966, he even served as the official interpreter during the visits of National Assembly Speaker Lee Hyosang and Cabinet Head Kim Hyeoncheol. In one of the interviews, Shin explains that most Koreans residing in Denmark at the time were government-sponsored students who had come to study agriculture, as Denmark was regarded as an agricultural model for Korea during that period (Yun 1975a).

At first, it seemed difficult to locate further information about Shin—until we stumbled upon a photograph on Hiu Lie’s blog² showing Shin together with William E. Skillend (1926–2010) founding figure of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe [AKSE] and founder of Korean Studies at SOAS), Hiu Lie 李喜雨 (*1936) himself (an expert on Altaic languages, particularly Manchu)³, and a PhD student from Leiden (Figure 1), standing in front of the main hall of Beopjusa Temple 法住寺.⁴ After posting the image in the “Koreanists” group⁵

2 For this, see <https://m.cafe.daum.net/kg51/ivBf/155?listURI=%2Fkg51%2FivBf>.

3 We would like to thank Dr. Johannes Reckel (Göttingen State and University Library) for bringing us in contact with his teacher Dr. Hiu Lie. We are also very grateful to Dr. Hiu Lie for sharing his memories with us and for providing the picture. Dr. Lie is the author of *Die Mandschu-Sprachkunde in Korea (The Study of the Manchu Language in Korea, 1972)*.

4 We are grateful to Han Oonjin (Dongguk University) for identifying the temple on the picture.

5 Available at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/koreanists>.

on Facebook to inquire whether anyone in the Korean Studies community was familiar with Shin, we were contacted by Kim Seong Nae (Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Sogang University). She informed us that her father, the late Kim Dong Hi 金東熙 (1928–2010)—former vice-president of the Korean Rural Economic Institute (KREI, Hanguk nongchon gyeongje yeonguwon)—had been a close acquaintance of Shin.

Shin is mentioned not only in Kim's memoir *Songam Gim Donghui seonsaeng hoegorok: Hanguk ui nongmin gwa nongjeop eul sallin hangyeol gateun sam (Memoirs of Songam Kim Dong Hi: A Steadfast Life Dedicated to Reviving Korea's Farmers and Agriculture)* (2010), but Kim Seong Nae also generously shared with us two postcards from Shin as well as a photograph. The postcards date from 1981 and 1984 and were written by Shin to Kim Dong Hi. Kim Dong Hi visited Europe in his capacity as vice-president of KREI for a 27-day tour in May and June 1981. In his report *Jeonhwangi ui seogu nongjeop gwa hyeopdong nongjeong ui silsang: Peurangseu, Seo-Dok, Nedellandeu, Denmakeu ui sichal bogo (Western Agriculture in Transition and the Realities of Cooperative Agricultural Policy: Inspection Report on France, West Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark)*, Kim (1982, 55) notes that he met Shin in front of Shin's residence in Copenhagen on June 3 in 1981 and expresses admiration for Shin's enthusiasm for the agricultural development of South Korea despite living far from his homeland. Another KREI report from 1981 indicates that Shin himself visited KREI two months later to deliver a seminar on Korean Studies in Northern Europe on August 12 (Kim 1981, 250).

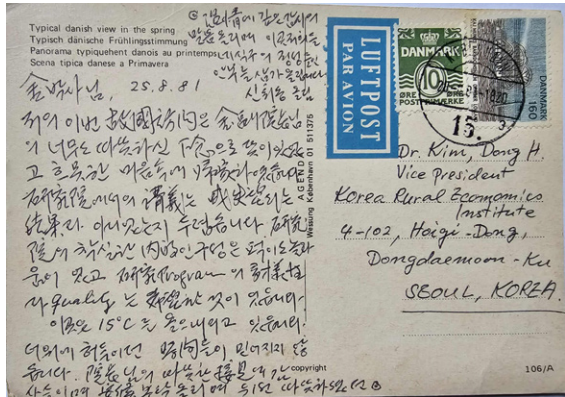
Taken together, these reports suggest that Kim and Shin met as two specialists in agricultural economics who were deeply engaged in the modernization of South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s. Shin's first postcard (Figure 2),⁶ dated August 25—less than two weeks after his seminar at KREI—expresses his gratitude for Kim's warm hospitality during his recent visit.

Interestingly, even after Kim Dong Hi stepped down as vice-president of KREI and assumed a professorship in agricultural economics at Dankook

6 Contents of the first postcard: “金 박사님, 저의 이번 故國訪問은 金 副院長님의 너무도 따뜻한신 下念으로 뜻 있었고 흐뭇한 마음 속에 歸家하였습니다. 研究院에서의 講義는 或 失望되는 結果가 아니었는지 두렵습니다. 研究院의 착실한 內的인 구성은 펍이도 놀라움이 있고 研究program의 多様性과 quality는 希望한 것이 있습니다. 이곳은 15°C를 오르내리고 있습니다. 더위에 허독이던 時間들이 믿어지지 않습니다. 院長님의 따뜻한 接見에 감사드리며, 安候 부탁 올리며 위선 따뜻하셨던 溫情에 깊은 감사의 말씀 올리며 이곳 저희들 네 식구의 정성들인 안부를 삼가 올립니다. 1981.8.25 신취동 올림.”



Figure 2. Postcard from Huy Dong Shin in Copenhagen to Kim Dong Hi in Seoul, Written on August 25, 1981



University in March 1983, Shin and Kim remained in contact. When Shin visited Seoul again in the summer of 1982, he met with Kim together with two researchers from Bergen and Copenhagen, and they took a photograph together on Namsan on July 30 (Figure 3). Although the precise purpose of Shin’s visit is unknown, the photograph clearly reflects the warm personal and professional relationship between the two men.

The second postcard is dated July 15, 1984 (Figure 4).⁷ Although Shin wrote it in the middle of summer, he selected a winter motif depicting Frederiksberg Castle on a snowy day. In the message, he recalls his fond

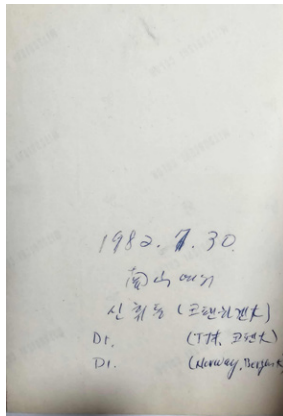


Figure 3. Kim Dong Hi (left) and Huy Dong Shin (right) with Two Researchers from Copenhagen and Bergen

⁷ Contents of the second postcard: “金東熙 教授님, 其間 너무 積阻했습니다. 82年度 서울에서 뵈던 즐겁고 흐뭇했던 時間들을 잊지 못하고 있습니다. 저는 不幸히도 지난해 겨울부터 身病으로 지금 좀 完快치 못하고 있습니다. 入院兼病暇로서 春期學期를 쉬고 지금 Århus 妻家에서 休息을 하고 있습니다. 많이 完快했으며, 이러한 經過라면 來月中旬쯤에 서울에서 뵈을듯도 합니다만, 金教授님 모쪼록 建 安하시우고 여름방학을 뜻있게 지내시기 바랍니다. 1984년 7월 15일, 오후스에서 신회동 올림.”

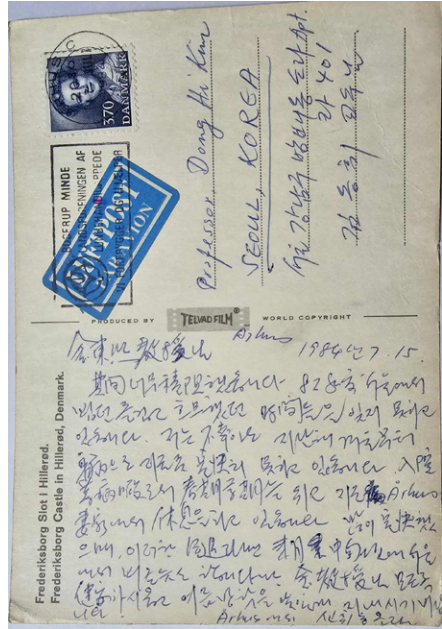


Figure 4. Postcard from Huy Dong Shin in Copenhagen to Kim Dong Hi in Seoul, Written on July 15, 1984

memories of meeting Kim in 1982—which we know about from Figure 3—but explains that he fell ill during the winter of 1983–1984 and is still on sick leave. Nevertheless, he expresses hope that they will meet again in the near future. This is the last recorded contact between Kim and Shin.

While other sources highlight Shin’s extensive efforts to promote Korean culture in Denmark and his contributions to fostering a deeper understanding of Korea, the photographs and postcards shared by Kim Seong Nae point to another dimension of his life: Shin came to Denmark as a specialist in agricultural economics and was deeply committed to the modernization of South Korea, particularly the development of agricultural cooperatives. His long-standing friendship with Kim Dong Hi appears to reflect his dedication to this field. In his wife’s obituary, Shin is described as someone who “dreamed of rebuilding South Korea after the Korean War” (Cramon 2022). Let us now return to Denmark and explore Shin’s life as a librarian, museum assistant, and Korean Studies lecturer.

Huy Dong Shin at the Royal Library

The Royal Library employed Huy Dong Shin in 1965. From that year onward, he was authorized to regularly purchase Korean books and journals for the Library's Department of Oriental Studies. In one of the *Jungang ilbo* interviews, Shin notes that he had an annual acquisition budget of 2,000 USD (Yun 1975b). It was also at the Royal Library that Shin met his future partner, Lissa Marie Shin (1938–2021), a librarian and specialist in Slavic literature. The two (Figure 5) married in 1969, and Shin obtained Danish citizenship in 1970 (Folketinget 1970). According to an obituary for Lissa Shin published in the Danish newspaper *Information* in 2022, she gave up her studies in Russian after meeting her future husband, in order to spare him potential difficulties when traveling to South Korea. At the time, any association with the Soviet Union—even the study of the Russian language—could be interpreted as communist sympathies in South Korea (Cramon 2022).

Bent Lerbæk Pedersen (2015, ix), research librarian in the Far Eastern section of the Royal Library, refers to Huy Dong Shin as a “Korean B.Sc.” perhaps to emphasize that Shin was not trained in the humanities but was, rather, an expert in agricultural economics. The *Catalogue of Korean Manuscripts and Rare Books* introduces Shin's contribution as follows:



Figure 5. Lissa Marie Shin and Huy Dong Shin in Their Home in Front of Kim Hong-do's Famous Wrestling Painting

From 1965, Library Assistant Huy Dong Shin was allowed to purchase Korean books and journals on a regular basis. In 1973, he made an official visit to South Korea to make exchange agreements and find possible purchases. He came into contact with some antiquarian bookshops, and in 1974 he managed to buy 79 manuscripts and rare block prints; these form the core of the Korean Museum Collection in the Library. Only a few titles have since been purchased and included in the collection. (Pedersen 2015, ix)

In addition to Shin's remarkable activities as a mediator between Denmark and Korea, it is striking—when viewed from today's perspective—that the Royal Library devoted financial resources in the 1960s to 1980s to employ a librarian who could actually read Korean and communicate in both Danish and Korean. This is no longer the case. Today, the caretaker of the Royal Library's "Oriental Collection" is a specialist in Jewish Studies.

Huy Dong Shin at the National Museum

Martin Petersen describes in his dissertation how Shin became involved in the work of the National Museum of Denmark. According to Petersen (2008a, 170; 2008b, 135), Shin was a close friend of Rolf Gilberg who, as a young researcher in the museum's ethnographic collection, was deeply interested in Shamanism and one of the driving forces behind the forthcoming exhibition *Ånder og Mennesker* (Man and Spirits). Petersen notes that, because Shin was not officially recognized as a scholar of Korean shamanism, the Bureau of Cultural Property Preservation in South Korea initially recommended appointing a certified expert instead. However, through a different network of contacts, Shin was ultimately commissioned to purchase a complete shamanic ritual set, with a budget of 3,000 DKK, during a planned research trip to Korea in the summer of 1973 (Petersen 2008a, 174).

Petersen also provides an English translation of a recommendation letter written by Gilberg on Shin's behalf:

On many different occasions through the 1970s the Ethnographic Collection of the National Museum through various co-workers has had a close and very fruitful academic cooperation with Mr. Shin, who time and again has been pouring generously from his vast scholarly insight and knowledge on

the East especially Korea and Japan...[H]e has grown up in another culture, whose language he thus commands and through his work with institutions of research in both Korea and Copenhagen has dug deeply in the culture of his home land to get the understanding, that only a researcher obtains even among natives—in part that he has lived in Denmark for so many years that he also has obtained an insight into the Danish culture and way of thinking, that he has very special qualifications to “translate” the culture of his home land in a way that will increase the understanding of Danish people of the cultures of the East. People with such ability are vital for intercultural understanding, and Denmark must be happy that such a man wishes to live amongst us. (Petersen 2008a, 172)

After Shin departed for his mission in Korea, he encountered several obstacles. These difficulties are documented in a Danish letter he wrote from Korea to curator Helge Larsen, in which he describes the challenges he faced in collecting the shamanic objects he had been tasked with acquiring.

Dear Helge Larsen,

After my arrival in Seoul on July 19, I had a meeting with the Director of the Emille Museum (ethnographic museum), Dr. Cho. In response to my questions about the possibilities of collecting various shamanic objects, he believed it would be difficult to obtain old items, whereas new ones could easily be acquired. In particular, he explained that it would be almost impossible to procure a used dress, because the shaman believes that the spirit of the god dwells in the dress. It must be kept in a special way and can be passed on to new shamans, but it cannot be sold. If it is no longer to be used, it must be burned. Dr. Cho suggested that I hold a ceremony in the museum courtyard, and he was willing to arrange it. In that way, I would come into possession of certain items (paper flowers and other decorative objects), and I would also be able to make sound recordings and take photographs. Due to the high price of such a ceremony (approximately 4,000 DKK), I had to leave the question open for the time being. Thereafter, I arranged a meeting a few days later with Mr. Seoh, with whom I had been corresponding. He, too, emphasized the difficulty of obtaining used “real” objects.

In the meantime, I met with one of my old friends, and it turned out that his aunt was the leader of the shaman organization. Thanks to him, I had a meeting with her, and she was extraordinarily sympathetic and helpful. She summoned a couple of other shamans to assist her, and we agreed that, in the

course of the following weeks, they would collect old (used) artifacts, which I would be allowed to acquire in exchange for purchasing new artifacts for them. They were also willing to let me have dresses—four or five pieces—and the prices were absolutely reasonable. Dr. Cho, Mr. Seoh, MiSook Chyung, and Mr. Lee were almost shocked by my amazing luck, especially that I had also obtained dresses.

Concerning these objects, kindly see the enclosed documents. Photographs and sound recordings of the shamanic ceremonies that I attended will arrive in the near future. The shamans, as well as Dr. Cho and the others mentioned, are willing to continue assisting in future efforts to collect items that the National Museum may lack in its representation of Korean shamanism. I now just hope that these things will arrive in good order. They will be sent directly to the address of the National Museum in September or October.

Sincerely yours,
Shin H. D.

(Petersen 2008a, 174–75)

This letter is not only a valuable source for understanding the difficulties involved in acquiring used shamanic ritual costumes; it also highlights the breadth of Shin's personal and professional network in South Korea. Although he was not an officially recognized expert on shamanism, this network enabled him to succeed in a range of tasks that would otherwise have been difficult to accomplish.

The interviews with *Jungang ilbo* indicate that Shin was a significant asset to the Korean collection at the National Museum of Denmark. Under his commission, numerous Buddhist and shamanic artifacts were collected, especially in the 1970s, and he organized several exhibitions (Yun 1975c).

Huy Dong Shin at the University of Copenhagen and at CINA, the forerunner of NIAS

On February 3, 1967, Shin taught the first Korean-language course ever offered at the University of Copenhagen to a group of twelve students, and in 1969 he became the head of the newly established program in Korean Studies. In 1980, Shin published an article titled “Korean Studies in Scandinavia,” in which he

explains that, in the early years, Korean functioned primarily as an auxiliary language taken by students alongside their main field of study. This situation changed after a few years, and it eventually became possible to obtain a mag. art. degree in Korean (Shin 1980a, 162).

For the time being, due to the very restricted budget of the university, only 4 hours a week are allowed and that means that a great deal of homework is required of the students. Courses are held in modern and classic Korean, history of Korean language, and cultural history. Besides that there are lessons in East Asian folklore, where shamanism and primitive religion in North-East Asia and Korea are elucidated through myths and legends.

Since establishment of the Korena Department, 2 students have received the exam. art. degree and 2 passed the examination in auxiliary language. There are now—autumn 1979—2 students studying for the mag. art. degree, 2 studying for exam. art. degree (one is halfway through, 1 auxiliary language student and 3 students from other institutes are taking courses in Korean... Due to the very limited number of courses, it is very important that the students have a chance to go to Korea on study tours to exercise their language and to receive guidance in their fields of specialization. Up till now the students have had to pay their travel expenses themselves, and the arrangements for their study in Korea had to be made on a private basis through friends and friends of friends. (Shin 1980a, 162–63)

Shin worked tirelessly to develop the field and, remarkably, confronted many of the same institutional challenges that we still face today. His efforts were not limited to strengthening Korean Studies in Denmark; he also played an important role in shaping Asian Studies across the Nordic countries. In 1967, the Central Institute for Nordic Asian Studies (CINA) was founded in Copenhagen (Lee 1980, 297; Glamann 2008; Liljedahl). Shin explains, CINA...

...was founded in 1967 with the purpose of stimulating Asian studies in the humanities and social sciences within the Nordic countries, and of acting as a channel of communication between Scandinavian and foreign scholars. To this end the institute provides access to research facilities, maintains a library, publishes scholarly works, provides various types of scholarships, and on occasions arranges lectures and symposia. CINA is financed through contributions from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. It is an independent institution with a governing board consisting

of two scholars appointed by each member government, with the exception of Iceland, and two members elected by the staff. (Shin 1980a, 162–63)

CINA was renamed the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in 1987 and promoted the study of Asia in the Nordic region for more than fifty years, until its closure in 2023. Shin was appointed Head of Korean Studies at CINA and was, at the time, its only “Far Eastern” researcher (Yun 1975a).

Shin contributed not only to Danish and Nordic Korean Studies but also to the international academic community. The Association for Korean Studies in Europe (AKSE) was founded on March 30, 1977, in London, and Shin appears already in the earliest newsletters from 1978. At the 1980 Annual Conference of AKSE, he presented a paper titled “Ginseng in Folkloristic Aspects,” in which he analyzed ginseng in relation to myth, ritual, and linguistic practice (Shin 1980b). At the 1982 AKSE conference, he gave a presentation on hereditary shamanism (AKSE 1983, 4), reflecting his work for the National Museum of Denmark.

During the membership meeting at the AKSE conference held in Seoul on 4 August 1982, Huy Dong Shin was elected to the AKSE Committee as Secretary, a position that confirmed the decision to hold the 1983 AKSE conference in Copenhagen (AKSE 1983, 1–2). After the Copenhagen conference, however, Shin’s name disappears from the AKSE newsletters until two obituaries for him were published in 1986.

OBITUARY

[Ed. Note]: In 1985 the Association lost one of its most devoted members, Dr. Shin Huy Dong. Dr. Shin selflessly and tirelessly worked for the advancement of Korean studies in Europe, and all of us who knew him deeply feel the loss of a wonderful person and loyal friend. The following are only two of the many tributes which have been made to the memory of Dr. Shin.

(AKSE 1986, 26)

This is followed by obituaries written by Staffan Rosén (University of Stockholm) and Henrik H. Sørensen (University of Copenhagen). From Lissa Marie Shin’s obituary, we learn that her husband suffered from a lung disease that slowly destroyed the tissue in his lungs (Cramon 2022), likely the same illness Shin himself mentions in his second postcard to Kim Dong Hi. Yet his legacy endures. Some of the founding members of AKSE still remember Huy Dong Shin with great clarity and warmth. Martina Deuchler (Professor Emeritus

of Korean Studies at the SOAS University of London) recalls evening strolls with him through Copenhagen during the 1983 AKSE conference, and James Grayson (Emeritus Professor of Modern Korean Studies at The University of Sheffield), Boudewijn Walraven (Professor Emeritus of Korean Studies of Leiden University), Hiu Lie and Staffan Rosén remember Shin with deep affection. In retrospect, we should have acknowledged Huy Dong Shin's work when we hosted the 2023 AKSE conference in Copenhagen—held precisely forty years after he organized the 1983 conference.

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- ui sichal gyeolgwa* 전환기의 서구 농업과 협동농정의 실상: 프랑스, 서독, 네덜란드, 덴마크의 시찰 결과 [Western Agriculture in Transition and the Realities of Cooperative Agricultural Policy: Inspection Report on France, West Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark]. Seoul: Hanguk nongchon gyeongje yeonguwon (Korea Rural Economic Institute).
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