

Exploring the educational philosophy in Vietnam

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Abstract

Vietnam's educational philosophy is deeply rooted in cultural heritage and historical development. This article delves into the historical context, Confucian influence, and contemporary reforms that have shaped Vietnam's distinctive educational approach. Vietnam's educational philosophy can be traced back to the Confucian tradition, which places a strong emphasis on education for personal and social development. For centuries, Confucianism has been the cornerstone of the Vietnamese education system, promoting values such as respect for authority, filial piety, and the pursuit of knowledge as virtuous endeavors. In the modern era, Vietnam has undergone significant educational reforms to align its system with global standards while preserving its cultural identity. However, this exploration also sheds light on the shortcomings of Vietnam's educational philosophy, including its heavy reliance on rote learning and a rigid exam-oriented system that places immense pressure on students. Moreover, it underscores the need for fostering creativity and placing greater emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills to prepare students for the challenges of the contemporary world. Finally, the examination of Vietnam's educational philosophy uncovers a complex interplay between traditional values, historical influences, and contemporary aspirations. Acknowledging these challenges and concerns is crucial for policymakers, educators, and researchers as they endeavor to cultivate a more equitable, innovative, and inclusive education system in Vietnam.

Keywords: exploration, culture, Confucian, communism, educator, cultivate, educational philosophy

Exploring the educational philosophy in Vietnam

1. Introduction

Educational philosophy serves as the foundation for addressing issues related to educational theory and practice. It represents the fundamental ideas that guide the formulation of educational objectives, content, and methods. This philosophy considers education as a means to realize living values, emphasizing its role in shaping individuals' lives and values. Throughout the history of the world, notable philosophers such as Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Marx, Dewey, and others have contributed to the field of educational philosophy. Their ideas have left lasting impacts on educational systems globally. However, when it comes to the educational philosophy of Vietnam, questions have arisen. In recent years, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education initiated discussions to define Vietnam's unique educational philosophy.

Since the reunification of Vietnam, significant reforms and innovations have been introduced into the education system. Educational experts, policymakers, professors, teachers, parents, and others have raised concerns about a perceived crisis in Vietnam's education. This crisis is believed to be deeply rooted in the country's educational philosophy. Even at the National Assembly forum of Vietnam, delegates have questioned the existence and nature of Vietnam's educational philosophy, with inconclusive answers. Notably, *Bui Van Dung's* work on Vietnamese idioms and proverbs reveals the rich philosophical thought embedded in these linguistic expressions, emphasizing their role in preserving knowledge about life experiences and moral values, thus contributing to Vietnam's culture and national identity (Bui Van Dung, 2019).

Various other scholars have tackled the topic of educational philosophy in Vietnam, including *Kim Dinh, Thai Duy Tuyen, Pham Minh Hac*, and *Le Van Tung*. Their works have contributed to the understanding of Vietnam's evolving educational philosophy, with differing perspectives on its essence and purpose. Pham Minh Hac's book, "*World and Vietnamese Education Philosophy*" (2013), considers the philosophy of education as both a research field and a philosophy of life. It highlights the importance of instilling personal values, knowledge, the right attitude, and abilities in learners, emphasizing patriotism, compassion, hard work, honesty, and responsibility as key values.

Despite varying viewpoints, educational philosophy remains a crucial discipline that examines the entirety of the education system, seeking to establish general principles and laws governing its development. Moreover, the concept of liberal education has also gained attention in Vietnam, with scholars and institutions such as *Nguyen Xuan Xanh*, Professor *Lam Quang Thiep*, Fulbright University, and Vietnam-Japan University exploring its application in higher education. Furthermore, national universities, cultural organizations, and media outlets have facilitated discussions on educational philosophy, publishing magazines and articles to delve into this important subject.

The paper aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of educational philosophy in Vietnam. It intends to shed light on its historical foundations, tracing its evolution from a long-standing tradition, through colonial influences, to the period of national unification, and its relevance in contemporary times. Additionally, the paper will explore contemporary adaptations and its role in shaping the nation's education system in a globalized world. It will also discuss the practical implications of Vietnam's educational philosophy for teachers, students, and policymakers, offering insights into how it shapes teaching methodologies, learning outcomes, and the overall education system.

2. Educational Philosophy in Vietnam before Communism

Educational Traditions in Vietnam - Educational philosophies in Vietnam have been encapsulated in idioms and proverbs that are easily embraced and integrated into daily life, thereby transmitting valuable lessons and

ancestral knowledge. Rooted in the pursuit of individual development, Vietnamese culture places great emphasis on "*Study decorum first, then study literature.*" This concept underscores the notion that learners must first acquire the principles of decorum and personal character before delving into academic knowledge; otherwise, education may prove futile. Central to this philosophy is the recognition of the vital roles played by teachers and families, encapsulated in the saying: "*No one can succeed without the guidance of a teacher.*" This perspective underscores the indispensable role of mentors in one's journey toward self-improvement.

Moreover, Vietnamese society places significant importance on teacher-student relationships, as evident in the adage: "*A letter is also a teacher, half a teacher is also one.*" This reflects the cultural norm of showing respect to teachers and filial piety toward parents. These beliefs have collectively contributed to a strong moral foundation, instilling values such as gratitude towards educators and parents. In child-rearing, the philosophy emphasizes the importance of discipline and guidance, as encapsulated in the proverb: "*Spare the rod, spoil the child.*" Simultaneously, there's a call for unity and cooperation among individuals, akin to the saying: "*You are like feet with arms; torn and whole, good and bad, helping one another.*"

These educational philosophies, deeply ingrained in Vietnamese culture, have been distilled into simple and easily understood idioms and proverbs. They manifest in various aspects of life and have been passed down through generations, guiding the everyday educational practices of the Vietnamese people.

The Period of Colonial Nations - During the era of Chinese rule (111 BC - 1427), Vietnam experienced significant cultural influences that led to the adoption of the Chinese language and the assimilation of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. These three religions were adapted to Vietnamese culture and converged into a unified set of principles collectively referred to as the "*three religions of the same principle.*" Among their shared moral values, kindness held a significant place. All three religions emphasized compassion, solidarity, and harmony, with Confucianism, in particular, highlighting values such as kindness, decorum, uprightness, wisdom, and faithfulness.

Notably, these religions share a focus on humanitarian values and principles. Buddhism, for instance, centers on the Four Noble Truths, with compassion being the key to the path toward Nirvana, echoing the humanitarian ideals of Confucianism. Lao Tzu's Taoism promotes the preservation of human innocence and kindness. During the *Ly*, *Tran*, and Confucian dynasties, aspiring officials were required to demonstrate proficiency in all three religions' traditions—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—through a rigorous examination known as the "three-religion exam" in order to secure positions of authority. This era mandated a comprehensive understanding of these philosophies among government officials.

Subsequently, during the French colonization of Vietnam (1858-1945), French education supplanted the influence of the three Chinese religions. The primary objectives of French colonial education were to train a class of officials who would facilitate French rule and to disseminate French culture, fostering gratitude toward French civilization and loyalty to the colonial regime. This educational system aimed to portray French education as civilized and progressive, with the ultimate goal of serving French exploitation and domination in Vietnam. Historian *Duong Trung Quoc* analyzed this colonial philosophy as "civilizing to civilize" the colony, reflecting substantial investment and a clear agenda for shaping colonial education. This philosophy yielded measurable success over half a century, characterized by systematic educational reforms that aligned with the goals of colonial exploitation.

Notably, the colonial period necessitated the acquisition of the French language, creating a cadre of individuals with university degrees who possessed advanced knowledge and technology expertise. These individuals, initially serving the French administration, later transitioned to professional roles within the Vietnamese government after August 1945. Additionally, during this period, missionaries played a pivotal role in standardizing the national language, which remains in use today.

From 1955 to 1975, Vietnam was divided into two regions: North and South, each with its government. The Republic of Vietnam in the South, with American sponsorship, introduced educational philosophies that

emphasized humanism, nationalism, and scientific progress. These principles were intended to guide the educational system and cultivate values rooted in respect for human dignity, Vietnamese cultural traditions, and scientific advancement.

In 1967, the educational philosophy was officially incorporated into the Republic of Vietnam's Constitution. Article 10 emphasized the right to freedom of education, compulsory and free basic education, autonomous higher education, support for financially disadvantaged individuals pursuing education, and encouragement of citizens' engagement in scientific, literary, and artistic endeavors: "(1) *The State recognizes the right to freedom of education. (2) Basic education is compulsory and free. (3) Higher education is autonomous. (4) Competent persons without the means will be supported to pursue education. (5) Countries encourage and support citizens in the research and writing of science, literature and technology art*". Article 11 underscored the need for educational and cultural policies based on nationalism, science, and humanism, as well as adequate budget allocation for cultural and educational development: "(1) *Educational culture must be placed on the national policy on the basis of nationalism, science, and humanism. (2) An adequate budget must be devoted to cultural development education.*" However, despite these ideals, practical implementation of the principles of "humanism, nationalism, and liberation" faced challenges and complexities, leading to confusion and impracticality in their application.

3. Educational Philosophy of Communism in Vietnam

Education During the Early Communist Period (1945-1975) - The establishment of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930 marked a pivotal moment in Vietnamese history. With the successful August Revolution of 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was founded in the North, marking a new chapter in the country's educational history. The newly formed government issued a significant decree aimed at eradicating illiteracy, and it introduced innovative policies that extended to the entire national education system. By 1975, Vietnam had achieved national unification, bringing together the educational systems of both the North and the South. The North followed a 10-year education system encompassing elementary, secondary, and high school levels, while the South adhered to the 12-year educational system established during the Republic of Vietnam regime, influenced by the United States.

Education in Vietnam from 1976 to 1986 - Throughout this period, the educational philosophy underpinned by the policies of the Vietnamese Communist Party was deeply rooted in the principles of Marxism-Leninism. The 1980 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, in Article 41, outlined key educational principles: state uniform management of education, balanced development of the education system (preschool, general, professional, and higher education), and the elimination of illiteracy. It also emphasized the role of various stakeholders, including the *Ho Chi Minh* Communist Youth Union, families, and society, in educating young people. (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1980, Article 41).

From 1976 to 1986, Vietnam's education system adopted the educational model of the Soviet Communist Party. The Communist Party exerted substantial control over the education system and did not permit individuals or religious organizations to establish private schools. During this period, university and college admissions were influenced by one's background, with priority given to those with meritorious services to the Communist Party. Unfortunately, some individuals with strong academic abilities were denied access to higher education based on factors such as a Catholic background or familial ties to military missions for France, the United States, or the former Republic of Vietnam regime.

Education in Vietnam from 1986 to the Present - From 1986 onward, following the Sixth Communist Party Congress, Vietnam embarked on economic reforms. Despite these changes, the Vietnamese Communist Party continued to adhere to the principles and guidance of Marxism-Leninism, maintaining the belief that socialism represents a transitional phase between capitalism and communism, following the examples of Russia and China. Regarding the educational philosophy of *Ho Chi Minh*, the founder of the Communist Party of Vietnam, *Pham Minh Hac* (2013) emphasized the core principle of educating "*good citizens, good leaders.*" Vietnam's mission has been to establish "*an independent and wholly Vietnamese education*" with the goal of *fully developing the potential*

of every student." Ho Chi Minh recognized the pivotal role of education in the nation's development, stating that the country's future depended significantly on its educational endeavors: "In the construction work... the country has a lot of expectations for them. Whether the Vietnamese river will become beautiful or not, whether the Vietnamese people step up to glory to compare their shoulders with other great powers is thanks in large part to their learning work" (Ho Chi Minh, 1945).

The Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1986 marked a turning point, ushering in comprehensive reforms. During this period, the educational policy aimed to diversify types of schools, classes, forms of training, and regulations pertaining to private schools. The state's commitment to balanced development across various levels of education, including preschool, general, vocational, higher, and post-graduate education, as well as the elimination of illiteracy, is evident. The state also prioritized investment in education and encouraged multiple sources of funding. Additionally, the state focused on education development in mountainous, ethnic minority, and disadvantaged areas. Responsibility for educating young people rested not only with schools but also with social organizations, families, and individuals:

The State is committed to developing a well-rounded education system, encompassing preschool education, general education, vocational education, higher education, post-graduate education, universal primary education, and the eradication of illiteracy. It also encourages the establishment of national, community-based, and alternative forms of education.

The State places a high priority on investing in education and promotes diverse funding sources.

The State implements a policy to prioritize the development of education in mountainous, ethnic minority, and extremely challenging areas.

People's unions, foremost among them the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, as well as social organizations, economic entities, families, and schools, share the responsibility for the education of young people, adolescents, and children. (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1992, Article 36)

This resolution aimed to bring about radical and significant improvements in the quality and effectiveness of education. It aspired to develop well-rounded individuals who possessed a deep sense of family, national, and societal values, while promoting a culture of learning and achievement. Furthermore, it sought to modernize and democratize the education system, all while maintaining Vietnam's socialist orientation and national identity. The objective was to attain an advanced level of education in the region by 2030:

Striving to create profound and substantial improvements in the quality and effectiveness of education and training, the goal is to nurture the comprehensive development of the Vietnamese people, unlocking the full potential and creativity of each individual. This entails fostering a deep-rooted love for family, country, and fellow citizens, leading to a life of well-being and productive engagement. We aim to establish an educational system characterized by openness, genuine learning, practical career preparation, effective teaching and studying methods, sound management practices, and a rational educational structure. All of these efforts are closely tied to the vision of constructing a society that prioritizes learning, bolstered by conditions that support continuous improvement, standardization, modernization, democratization, socialization, and international integration of the education and training system, all while preserving our socialist orientation and national identity. Our ultimate aspiration is to strive towards achieving an advanced level of education within the region by the year 2030. (Resolution No. 29 TW 2013)

4. Criticism of education in Vietnam

Educational Philosophies in some other Countries - The researcher wishes to shed light on the educational

philosophies of several countries across the globe, as valuable lessons can be drawn from them to enhance Vietnam's education system. In the Western world, American education has rapidly gained recognition as one of the most successful systems, producing numerous Nobel Prize laureates and attracting a multitude of international students. Rooted in progressivism, a philosophy associated with luminaries such as John Dewey, American education emphasizes experiential learning and problem-solving. This approach fosters critical thinking, creativity, and a student-centered environment. American education has three fundamental objectives:

(a) Cultivating a Holistically Developed Individual: This encompasses qualities such as openness, a thirst for knowledge, and self-assuredness. It also involves the practical mastery of skills, a deep understanding of one's chosen field, and an embrace of diverse cultural and scientific experiences.

(b) Fostering Creative Thinking: This requires not only the acquisition of effective thinking habits but also the adeptness in critical thinking and problem-solving.

(c) Nurturing Civic and Ethical Responsibility: This involves the development of responsible citizenship, characterized by not only comprehension and adherence to the law but active engagement in its preservation and advancement. It also entails the instillation of fundamental values, including honesty, respect, sharing, self-discipline, patience, and dedication. Furthermore, it calls for individuals committed to high-quality work, a dedication to community service, and a sense of global citizenship alongside national pride (Le Van Tung, 2016: 75-98).

Japanese education, deeply influenced by Confucian values, prioritizes discipline, respect for authority, and a strong work ethic. This system is renowned for its rigorous curriculum and high academic standards. Japanese educational ideology, even before 1945, was guided by the principle of cultivating individuals with impeccable moral character. Based on the tenets of fairness and equal opportunity, Japanese education subscribes to the philosophy of *training individuals to serve the country.*" The Basic Education Law, promulgated in 1947 and amended in 2006, reflects Japan's commitment to fostering creative, virtuous citizens who can contribute to global peace and human welfare:

Our country, Japan, wishes to further develop a cultural, democratic country... continuously while contributing to world peace and improving human welfare. To realize this ideal, we will promote an education that values respect for the individual, the search for justice and truth, and respect for the spirit of community; aims to educate creative, wealthy people, inherit traditions and create new cultures (Ozaki Mugen, 2014).

In addition to these examples, countries such as Finland, Germany, Sweden, and Singapore have also achieved acclaim for their unique and successful educational systems. Finland's emphasis on comprehensive learning and problem-solving through phenomenon-based education stands out. Germany's vocational education and apprenticeship programs provide students with practical skills and employment opportunities. Sweden's child-centered learning approach encourages independent thinking and creativity. Singapore's education system places a strong focus on meritocracy, discipline, and academic rigor (Nguyen Van Khoi, 2014).

UNESCO's philosophy of education, articulated by President Jacques Delors in April 1996, outlines four pillars for lifelong education: *"Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be."* These pillars serve as a foundation for sustainable and long-term education that must be personalized to each individual's learning goals, regardless of their background, occupation, religion, location, or ideology (UNESCO, 1996).

Shortcomings in Education in Vietnam - Critics argue that Resolution 29 from the 8th Central Conference, while containing elements of educational philosophy, may not fully encapsulate the concept itself. Resolutions may reference educational philosophy but should not be conflated with it. Some mottos and slogans, such as *learning goes hand in hand with practice*" or *education goes hand in hand with productive labor,*" have been

used, but their effectiveness and relevance have come into question. These mottos, when taken individually, fall short of constituting a comprehensive educational philosophy. The real challenge lies in crafting and implementing a coherent educational philosophy for Vietnam (Phan Thang et al., 2017).

Huynh Cong Minh, former Director of *Ho Chi Minh* City's Department of Education and Training, has candidly addressed the issue of educational philosophy in Vietnam. He has pointed out limited awareness and understanding of educational philosophy within the education management system, coupled with underdeveloped educational science, which has impeded the dissemination of noble educational philosophies into practice. He also highlighted the slow pace of organizational innovation within the education system, marked by excessive conservatism. He underscored the need for effective mechanisms to implement the educational philosophy, as mere policy documents often overlook the philosophical nature of the challenges (Huynh Cong Minh, 2011).

Some critics argue that schools in Vietnam have limited autonomy in shaping curricula and teaching methods. This constraint can hinder innovation and impede students' ability to address their unique needs. Indeed, the Vietnamese education system maintains an excessively centralized management structure, wherein the state assumes superfluous functions, thereby weakening the autonomy and adaptability of educational institutions across all levels. The exercise of educational autonomy is notably absent, especially within universities. Even within schools, the absence of democratic processes between educators and students remains ingrained. This stands in stark contrast to the philosophy of Education Democracy embraced by modern civilizations (Chu Hao, 2008).

Traditional teaching methods in Vietnam tend to be teacher-centered, with the instructor taking a dominant role while students are expected to passively receive information. This approach can stifle student engagement and hinder the development of critical thinking skills. The system's strong emphasis on conformity and uniformity can suppress creativity and innovation. As a result, students may become disinterested in exploring new ideas or pursuing non-traditional career paths.

According to *Chu Hao* (2008), for many children in the current educational landscape, attending school has become burdensome. Their childhoods are seemingly "stolen" by a burdensome, tedious, and unrealistic curriculum. In this scenario, teachers are often perceived as cramming knowledge into students like "stuffing a warehouse," fostering passivity, stereotyping, and unhealthy competition. This approach fundamentally contradicts the educational philosophy and human-centric principles of modern civilization.

One of the primary criticisms lies in the excessive reliance on memorization and standardized testing. This approach tends to prioritize rote learning of facts over the cultivation of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creativity. The highly competitive nature of national exams, such as the National High School Graduation Exam, places immense pressure on students, leading them to focus on exam preparation to the detriment of comprehensive learning. Moreover, fundamental issues persist, including curriculum overload, teaching methods that encourage rote learning, inappropriate textbook content, and a severe imbalance between higher education and vocational training. This imbalance often results in graduates without suitable job opportunities or working in fields unrelated to their studies. For example, the education system frequently fails to align with the demands of society. The Vietnamese education system also falls short in preparing students with practical life skills, such as financial literacy, communication skills, and vocational training, leaving graduates ill-equipped to meet the demands of the job market.

Tran Ngoc Them asserts that each historical period shapes the educational system to meet the requirements of its time. Traditional Vietnamese education historically served the needs of a stable, traditional society by emphasizing obedience. However, in the context of urbanization, industrialization, globalization, and integration, modern society demands development. The traditional Vietnamese educational philosophy has become a hindrance, causing "serious ailments" within the education system that are difficult to rectify. These educational issues include the prevalence of private tutoring, exam-focused learning, dissertation ghostwriting, and the buying and selling of diplomas. Both in schools and society at large, competition for grades, positions, privileges, and accolades prevails. This manifests as a malady of obsession with achievement, falsehoods, fame, and fortune. In Vietnam, education

is both a cause and an effect of these societal issues (Tran Ngoc Them, 2021).

The Need for an Educational Philosophy in Vietnam - The absence of a clear and cohesive educational philosophy in Vietnam has raised concerns among educators and policymakers. In a 2012 article, *Lao Dong* newspaper lamented that the country lacked an educational philosophy. Professor *Pham Minh Hac*, a former Minister of Education, echoed this sentiment, asserting that Vietnam has never truly possessed an educational philosophy. At a National Assembly session in April 2014, when questioned about the philosophy of education, former Education Minister *Pham Vu Luan* stated that Resolution 29 of the Central Government encapsulated Vietnam's educational philosophy. However, this response failed to convince the public and the education community. During a National Assembly session in November 2016, the issue resurfaced, with one delegate questioning the existence of an educational philosophy. In response, former Deputy Prime Minister *Vu Duc Dam* contended that Vietnam indeed had an educational philosophy but lacked a widely recognized classic quotation (Vu Duc Dam, 2016). Thus, while elements of educational philosophy are present in Vietnam's education system, they have not been explicitly articulated and embraced.

In my view, Vietnam's education system aligns with the liberal education philosophy of Wilhelm Humboldt (1767-1835). This modern philosophy is widely adopted by leading universities worldwide. Humboldt's liberal education philosophy advocates for limiting the state's role in education and emphasizes the construction and development of the individual. It champions individual creativity, the liberation of the human mind, and the creation of conditions for self-realization within society. According to this philosophy, individuals are not subjects of the state but active agents capable of shaping their own lives and contributing to society. Key tenets include the freedom of science, encompassing freedom of research, thought, teaching, and learning, as well as autonomy for educators and teachers. Humboldt's liberal philosophy has been particularly influential in the structure of modern universities, which prioritize the unity of research and teaching. It upholds fundamental principles such as freedom of science, including freedom of research, thought, teaching.

5. Conclusion

Each historical period has been characterized by a distinct educational philosophy, tailored to train individuals with specific qualities and abilities appropriate for that stage of development. Vietnamese folklore and proverbs encapsulate a humanistic educational philosophy that places paramount importance on being a good human being, followed by a commitment to lifelong learning and contributing to the nation. The enduring influence of Confucianism in Vietnam emphasizes "*learning decorum first, then literature*." During the feudal era, the prevailing educational philosophy was to "*study to become a mandarin*," while under French colonial rule, it was to "*study to become a civil servant in the colonial government*." Upon the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the educational philosophy was focused on fostering "*good children and good students*." In the contemporary era, Vietnam's educational philosophy centers on "*enhancing the people, developing human resources, and nurturing talents*" in order to build a socialist Vietnam that is "*prosperous, strong, democratic, just, and civilized*." However, the reality of education in Vietnam is marked by numerous unaddressed shortcomings, including disparities between party leadership and the educational system, gaps between theory and practice, discrepancies between methods and actions, divides between teachers and students, and disparities between degrees and outcomes, among others.

It is hoped that Vietnam can cultivate an educational philosophy that not only bolsters its educational system but also aligns with global standards and ideals. To achieve this, it is essential for Vietnam to uphold fundamental human rights, including the principles and practices outlined by the United Nations. These obligations encompass respecting human rights, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which affirms that "*everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance*"(UN. 1948, Article 18). Additionally, the declaration asserts that "*everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom*

to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (UN, 1948, Article 19).

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