When the origin becomes the destination: Lost remittances and social resilience of return labour migrants in Thailand

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In recent years there has been a renewed enthusiasm about the role of migration in development, as well as the importance of remittances. However, there is also a danger of rehashing previous debates with an overemphasis on economic remittances, while relegating the transfer of social remittances, such as new ideas, knowledge, skills, practices, and social capital, to a secondary role. Though literature on social remittances has increased over the last decade, the debate tends to emphasise the positive relation between migration, remittances, and development. In this paper we scrutinise this relation. Based on eight months of multi-sited empirical research in Thailand (origin) and Singapore (destination), the aim of this paper is to enhance our understanding of the process of transfer of social remittances to the place of origin, and their effect on social resilience. This paper examines current and returned migrants and hypothesises that the translocal setting – including both occupational engagement at the destination and local conditions at the place of origin – and time decisively influence how social remittances can be used back home.

KEYWORDS
migration and development, multi-sited research, return migration, social remittances, social resilience, Southeast Asia

1 | INTRODUCTION: THE MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVE

The long-lasting debate on migration and development has seen a constant tug-of-war between optimistic and pessimistic views (Haas, 2005, 2010; Penninx, 1982). In the 1990s, development euphoria (cf., Haas, 2005, p. 1269) came to an end, and more nuanced views on the migration–development nexus acknowledged the complexity of migration processes and their impacts. One important conceptual enhancement in this regard has been the debate on social remittances (Levitt, 1998), highlighting the importance of looking not only at financial remittances but also at the transfer and impact of social capital, new ideas, skills, knowledge, and identities (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011).

The literature on social remittances increased over the last two decades, often stating that there is a positive relation between remittances (both financial and social) and development. We argue, however, that insufficient attention has been paid to negative impacts of migration (cf., Cohen, 2005; Preibisch et al., 2016) and that the lost potentials of remittances – most notably of social remittances – have hardly been addressed.

The objective of this paper is to address the issue of lost (social) remittances. Based on qualitative research in Thailand and Singapore, we raise the question of what happens with social remittances during migration and also after migrants

All names have been changed to respect personal rights of the interviewees.
return. Singapore offers an interesting example illustrating how specific conditions at the destination (e.g., lack of social embeddedness and migration policies) shape the translocal connectedness of migrants. Migrants work for many years from one short-term contract to another, knowing that one day they must return. Their origin will become their final destination, which influences their future plans and the way financial and social remittances are used.

How are social remittances acquired, and what are the barriers to successful transfer and valorisation of remittances? The key challenge is that there is no simple causal relationship between migration and development (Porst & Sakdapolrak, 2018). In this paper we view development from a social resilience perspective (Cutter, 2016) which involves examining the capabilities of migrants and their non-migrating relatives to cope and adapt to shocks and perturbations. This requires a fresh perspective on migration processes. Thus one additional aim of this paper is to understand the impacts of migration beyond the sedentary bias (Cassarion, 2004; Castles, 2010). Too often migration is implicitly understood as a single event, and return migration is seen as its end. Many studies, however, show that migration in most cases is not just going and returning but rather a patchwork of moments, of differential duration, of going and returning. Therefore, it is difficult to judge when a migration process has come to an end.

We suggest taking a translocal view of the remittance–resilience nexus, since it is essential to understand the specific conditions at both places of origin and destination in order to understand how social remittances are acquired, transferred, and used. The translocal perspective helps us to overcome the sedentary bias by conceptualising localities as trans-locales (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013) where place of origin and destination are seen as one interconnected space.

2 | RESEARCHING SOCIAL REMITTANCES AND MIGRATION

While social remittances are often addressed within the wider migration–development debate, few contributions specifically examine the nature and mechanisms of their interactions. Taylor et al. (2006) for example concluded, in their research on Guatemala, that social remittances promoted a gradual shift of social and ethnic roles, while Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) highlight the positive role of migrants for community development in the Dominican Republic. Suksomboon (2008) stresses that through their social remittances migrants expose non-migrants to global cultural diffusion, and to an extent prompt a transformation of their values and lifestyles. All these are valuable contributions on their own; however, it has been argued that the relation between social remittances and development remains fairly vague and that the concept lacks analytical clarity (Boccagni & Decimo, 2013). Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish the migrants’ influence from other impacts of globalisation, such as digitisation, which also promotes the transfer of knowledge, ideas, information, and social capital. Boccagni and Decimo highlight that “despite its increasing salience, … this notion has rarely been object [sic] of further theoretical refinements” (2013, p. 1). We make three propositions which could help to develop the concept further. 1

1. Economic remittances and social remittances must be considered as equally integrated into a broader range of socio-cultural settings – rather than social remittances being viewed as a kind of add-on.
2. The translocal setting must be considered, which includes on the one hand the nexus in which the geographical and social distance between migrants and non-migrants (translocal connectedness) affects the circulation of social remittances (cf., Boccagni & Decimo, 2013; Grabowska et al., 2017). On the other hand, it entails the questions of how circumstances at the origin shape migration trajectories, and in turn how the context at the place of destination shapes social remittances and return migration.
3. The temporal dimension of remittances is often neglected, but both economic and social remittances can change in direction or quality based on the migration status or life situation of migrants and their families.

To meet the first aspect it is insufficient to investigate financial remittances only, as social remittances are essential regarding the question of how financial remittances are used, and if remittances may lead to a change or transformation of livelihoods (see Figure 1). Only if new ideas, knowledge, and practices are transferred might actors change their livelihood activities. Financial remittances are an important asset, then, to cover the transformation costs and investments in new livelihoods.

Much has been written on the transfer and impact of financial remittances. Thus, in this paper we focus on the transfer of social remittances, which is more complex than sending money through a remittance service.

We base our conceptual thoughts on the remittance transfer model suggested by Grabowska et al. (2017) and refine it by differentiating social remittances into intangible social remittances and incorporated social remittances, as they are differently transferred in the course of migration processes (see Figure 2).
FIGURE 1  The integrated view of financial and social remittances.  
Source: Own draft [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 2  Conceptual model of the transfer of social remittances.  
Source: Own refined draft, based on Grabowska et al. (2017) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
On the one hand, there are intangible social remittances, which include information, reflections on norms and values, different viewpoints, ways of doing, and generally new ideas. On the other hand there are the more tangible and incorporated social remittances. They include new skills and personal knowledge, and are incorporated, and thus can only be transferred and used when migrants return, or migrate somewhere where they can put their skills and knowledge into practice.

The acquisition and transfer of social remittances is strongly linked to migration. Over the course of extended migration trajectories, migrants are confronted with unfamiliarity and difference. It is important to mention that migrants also bring social remittances to the places of destination (see Figure 2). However, in this paper we focus on the role that social remittances play for the place of origin.

The transfer of social remittances is not an automatism, as certain preconditions (e.g., social proximity during migration) apply, and certain barriers have to be overcome (see Section 5). Furthermore, the transfer of social remittances is embedded within the translocal setting of each migration system or trajectory. As a further refinement, in the following section we suggest a translocal perspective to comprehend the acquisition, transfer, and impact of social remittances in more detail (see Figure 2).

3 | THE TRANSLOCAL RESILIENCE APPROACH

Seeking to understand the effects of remittances on development requires the specification of which aspect of development we are looking at. In this study we consider development as a transformative process which influences inequality, impoverishment, and human security (Lund, 2010). We are particularly interested in how these processes influence the ability of social actors to cope and adapt to change, shock, and perturbations – which can also be understood as their social resilience (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Obrist et al., 2010; Sakdapolrak et al., 2016). Based on this we define social resilience as:

The capability of a social system and its components to deal with stress and perturbation, or to take opportunities that might arise to maintain and increase its well-being.

Opportunities to improve social resilience often arise in the course of migration as migrants encounter new practices, new ideas, innovations, or different livelihoods (cf., Rockenbauch et al., 2019). Simultaneously, the digital era brings a new quality of connectedness between migrants across places (Levitt et al., 2003), which is an important precondition for the transfer of social remittances. Concomitantly, we should not look solely at migration movements but also at the translocal connectedness of actors during migration (Brickell & Datta, 2011; Peth et al., 2018). Places, migrants, and non-migrants are more connected than ever before, and the quality of these relations lead to a greater interdependence of places and people – who create translocal connections through their multi-locality and through their multi-relationality (Boccagni, 2010).

In this regard distinct localities become trans-localities (cf., Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013), where strong social and functional relations between various actors immediately influence one another at different scales (Naumann & Greiner, 2017; Verne, 2012).

Building on this, we define translocal social resilience as: The capability of a social system which is translocally embedded through its mobile and immobile components to deal with stress and perturbation, or to take opportunities which might arise at different localities and scales – to maintain or increase its well-being.

The translocal approach requires methodological adjustments (Falzoni, 2009; Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited research is the most suitable way to overcome the prevailing sedentary research tradition, and it takes into account the “interdependence between different locales as it may emerge in migrant transnational practices” (Boccagni, 2010, p. 14). This paper is based on a multi-sited research period from March 2015 until September 2016, during which the first author followed migration trajectories from four provinces in North and Northeast Thailand (Buriram, Udonthani, Phitsanulok, and Chiang Rai) to Singapore. Altogether 81 semi-structured interviews, 19 informal talks, and 12 participatory methods (Participatory rural appraisal) were undertaken in both the places of origin in Thailand and in Singapore. The data collection started in four sub-districts – one in each province – where we conducted (1) focus-group discussion at the village level (with local government officials, village heads, etc.) where we identified all families with past and current international migrants. We then (2) went to these families for semi-structured interviews and collected contact data for current migrants in Singapore, and return migrants. Subsequently, we (3) interviewed return migrants and (4) international migrants who were currently in Singapore.² We then (5) used snowball sampling to find additional current migrants from our four research provinces.

The qualitative data were translated, transcribed, and analysed using coding software.

The qualitative data were complemented with data from a household survey (TransRe Survey I, 2015, n = 1,085 households, with a sub-sample of international migrants n = 301 households). The TransRe Survey employed random sampling, where we interviewed one third of all households in each research site.
4 | WHEN THE ORIGIN BECOMES THE DESTINATION

In this case study we look at international migration processes from rural Thailand. The total number of Thai overseas migrants has steadily increased over the last two decades. There are currently over one million Thai international migrants working or living abroad (UN DESA, 2019) accounting for 1.3% of Thailand’s population (68.8 million).

However, these are just the simple numbers, behind each of which there is a complex story. Our interviews reveal the complexity of the migration process in rural Thailand. Migration usually starts with an initial idea to migrate, followed by a preparation phase (skill tests, visa applications, etc.), and then the actual migration journey. The journeys and migration movements are patchworks of moments of different durations that include often long-lasting trajectories involving going abroad, returning for short visits (when contract periods end, or for other reasons), and sometimes including several other (interim) destinations. The majority of participants interviewed spent more than 10 years abroad, and went not only to one country but also to at least two or three other work destinations. Despite these long migration periods, and due to social segregation which migrants often face at their place of destination, they maintain strong translocal connections to their places of origin (Peth et al., 2018). They focus their hard-working lives abroad on their livelihoods back home: the origin becomes the destination. This became evident on three levels:

1. The majority of migrants we interviewed in depth communicate with their places of origin very frequently. Our quantitative survey showed that 56.8% call several times a week; of these, 20.9% call daily.
2. The money sent back home indicates the importance of the place of origin. On average Thai migrants send back home 20,000 THB per month and keep only a minimal proportion of their salaries for their basic needs (5,000–7,000 THB).
3. Their strong sense of belonging is expressed in almost every interview. The migrants work abroad to enable a daily life for their families, putting themselves in a state of “permanent temporariness” (Swider, 2011) at the destination place while remaining absent from the villages they come from.

Figure 3 shows the main destinations for international migrants from our four research sites from 1978 to 2015. Most international migrants went to destinations in East Asia, followed by Southeast Asian destinations, and then the Middle East (see Figure 3). The question was why migrants decide to migrate in the first place, and why there are such differences in migration dynamics. Investigating the socio-cultural setting of the research sites reveals that communities have different social experiences with migration.

4.1 | Culture of migration

As was pointed out above, migration and related remittances must be understood within the wider socio-cultural setting of each case study. The results of this study show that both domestic and international migration are pervasive and commonplace, in particular in the northeast of Thailand, where migration has a long history (Ruenkaew, 2003). Similarly to what Cohen (2004) has observed in Mexico, we observe a “culture of migration” in rural Thailand and the Isan region in particular (cf., Ruenkaew, 2003). According to Cohen, the culture of migration describes a socio-cultural setting where migration decisions are “rooted in the everyday experiences” (2004, p. 1) of the people, and not, as often implied, the result of one triggering event or problem. Migration has become the norm. In this vein, our interviews also reveal that migration decisions are multi-layered, but at the same time they are normal and accepted by the community as a common path toward increased well-being.

The case of Mae Sam from Udonthani illustrates this very well. She was in her mid-forties and had three children together with her husband Chakan. Like most people in the village, they were rice farmers. When their second child was two years old, Chakan left to work in the construction sector, first in Bangkok and later Singapore. “He wanted to go, so it was his decision. If he were trying to work here he would get only little income. […] He then went to work in Singapore – abroad – the family will be better off, he said” (interview 19). As in this case, most families do not question their husband’s or sons’ migration decisions, and accept them because they are made to benefit the family. However, most often decisions are made within households, and relatives advise family members to go abroad to earn money. In a few cases families even pressure members to migrate, having seen neighbours being better off since someone went abroad. Such was the case of Thong, a young return migrant from Udonthani: “My mother asked me again and again. For over one year she did not stop asking me if I want to go to Israel. I was worried to go there because I heard that there was war in Israel” (interview 100). Thong said it took a while before he agreed to go, as he had a good job as a vendor in a DIY market and could support his parents with his salary. But his parents wanted to discharge their debts, and so asked him to go overseas.
This culture of migration – where working abroad has become the social norm – is important regarding the acquisition of social remittances, in the sense that migration decisions were seldom made strategically. The vast majority of interviewees did not choose their destination deliberately, for example, deciding to work in the agricultural sector not only to use their experience as farmers but also to learn new agricultural practices. Instead, in almost all cases the migrants followed rather random job opportunities, which mostly arose through social networks. Thus, social remittances were rather an unplanned outcome of migration.

4.2 | Social remittances within a translocal setting

We argued above that it is important to consider the translocal setting and translocal embeddedness of migrants when investigating the transfer of social remittances. The translocal setting has an impact on how social remittances can be acquired and transferred. In the first step, the context at the place of destination determines what kind of social remittances can be incorporated or acquired (cf., Figures 2 and 3). Workers who went to Israel and Malaysia to work in agriculture, for example, acquired different skills and knowledge (e.g., relating to palm oil production, computer-controlled irrigation systems, or new crops) from migrants working on Singapore’s construction sites (construction planning, concrete casting, electric work, welding, etc.) or in a factory in Taiwan (piecework, quality management, packing, etc.). Social embeddedness at the destination also has an impact on the acquisition of social remittances. In the case of Thai workers in Singapore, we found that the migration system and immigration policies create a state of structural segregation, limiting contact and...
exchange between migrants and the host society (cf., Peth et al., 2018). For the acquisition of social remittances in terms of social capital, new ideas, and changing identities, this means that Thai workers in Singapore have little exchange with people other than their colleagues and fellow migrants. This means that they have less contact with unfamiliarity and difference (see Figure 2) compared with migration systems where integration into the host society is stronger.

In a second step, the context at the place of origin influences the extent to which social remittances can be transferred. The local economy as well as characteristics of the families at home (e.g., openness towards new ideas and change) influence whether social remittances can be transferred and used. However, the transfer and use of social remittances also depends on the type of remittances.

The interviews show that in most cases intangible social remittances (for example, migrants talked about security issues, waste management, insurance systems, business thinking, or different kinds of agricultural practices) were already exchanged very frequently during the migration period. The question arises, however, as to the extent to which such intangible remittances really influence the social resilience of the migrants and their families.

There are a few cases where new attitudes influenced migrants’ livelihoods. Pom, a 45-year-old return migrant from Udonthani, is one example. His family possessed only a little land when he left his village. He worked in Singapore for 21 years and managed to become a foreman for a construction company, and with his overseas salary he could save enough money to buy land and start a pig farm, which was inspired by his experience in Singapore. “If you want to stay here (Thailand), you need to have a business. Then you can survive. In Singapore I saw how they do cow farming. [...] I saw the farm and I saw how they manage the farm. [...] But I could not do such a dairy farm in my hometown, so I operated a pig farm instead. I learned how to build the structure of the farm in Singapore” (Interview 20). Later Pom diversified his income and started a local noodle production enterprise, which turned out to be unprofitable. But he was not worried by setbacks, and so he built a karaoke bar on the main road to the district capital. This example also shows that social remittances (e.g., new business thinking) often go together with economic remittances, as Pom could only realise his new ideas with the money he saved in Singapore. However, this is an exceptional case.

More impactful were the incorporated social remittances: new skills and knowledge that have been acquired over time and prove useful back home (e.g., welding, concrete casting, electrical skills, language skills). One important aspect in this regard is the occupational situation of migrants before, during, and after the migration process. As only rural households were chosen for this study, almost all relied on agriculture. However, only 17% of the international migrants made use of their agricultural knowledge by choosing an agricultural occupation abroad, for example, in Israel, Malaysia, China, and South Korea (see Figure 3). The other 83% work or worked in non-farm jobs, such as in factories (Taiwan, Japan, China, and South Korea) or on construction sites (Singapore, Brunei, Taiwan; source: own survey). The fact that most migrants change from farming to a non-farm occupation during migration does not mean that social remittances are precluded. On the contrary, the change of occupation has a greater potential for social remittances, as new skills and knowledge can be generated and transferred during and after the migration process. However, our research shows that social remittances also require that migrants have the structural and personal ability to make use of them, such as by changing their occupation after returning.

5 | LOST REMITTANCES

As mentioned above, there seems to be a great potential for the acquisition of social remittances as migrants experience a shift in living and working conditions. However, there are many barriers that hamper the transfer of social remittances (Figure 4). International labour migrants from Thailand very often find themselves in neo-Fordist working systems preventing their holistic acquisition of new skills or knowledge. Seksan, a return migrant in his 60s who worked as a foreman in Singapore, explained that workers usually perform the same specific task for years, so a worker who has built only elevator shafts won't be able to build complete houses when he returns home (Interview 28).

Amrat, another migrant worker from Singapore, describes the difficulty of changing one's occupation in rural Thailand: “If you return back home after working abroad you have to do agriculture; there is no other option” (Interview 41). Both Seksan and Amrat returned to Thailand without changing their livelihoods. The case of Seri, a young migrant who worked as a well-trained technician on air-conditioning systems in Singapore, also shows the difficulty of making use of new skills. Despite the fact that air conditioning is also in high demand in rural Thailand, Seri does not see much chance of benefiting from his knowledge: “I would say I can't open (an AC maintenance business); what I can do is the big air-conditioning systems for shopping malls, and this type of air conditioning is expensive” (Interview 25).

Return migrants from factory work often face similar problems. The local labour markets in rural Thailand rarely include jobs in the manufacturing or industrial sector, where return migrants could contribute their skills. Even for return migrants
who had worked in agriculture, the use of new skills and knowledge from abroad was not self-evident. While some migrants faced the problem of not having enough land to try new agricultural practices, Thong, a 29-year-old returnee from Israel, emphasised that agriculture needs a lot of time and much more money than most migrant workers could save. Thong worked for five years in Israel and became familiar with a sophisticated cropping system. “The water management was controlled by computers and even if I learned how to manage some part of the system I could never install such a watering system on my parents’ land” (Interview 100).

Many migrant workers return between the ages of 50 and 60, a life phase when they usually do not invest time and money in totally new livelihoods. Sunti, from Udonthani, emphasised that after many years abroad the workers are quite tired, so they rather adjust the agricultural production system to their age. Sunti himself stopped planting all labour-intensive crops such as sugar cane and corn, and invested in livestock (water buffalo, pigs, poultry) instead. Though Sunti acquired many skills as a foreman, he concluded: “I threw away all the skills which I learned as a construction worker in Singapore and came back to work in agriculture” (Interview 05).

6 | MIGRATION, TRANSLOCALITY, AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE: A MATTER OF TIME

How can we grasp the impact of migration and remittances on the social resilience of translocal families? The impact of migration on social resilience differs from case to case.

Most importantly, maintaining a certain level of social resilience to shocks such as floods or droughts, stresses (e.g., health issues, social conflict), or perturbations (e.g., price fluctuations) is a constant process. This leads us to the last shortcoming mentioned above – the temporal dimension of social remittances and their impact on social resilience. Social resilience becomes evident over time, since it is a constant process of anticipation and adjustment determined by available assets and resources. Improving access to new assets and resources due to migration – for example, the transfer of social and financial remittances – also requires time.

We have shown above that migration does not guarantee the improvement of social resilience, as the transfer of social remittances faces many barriers (Figure 3). Economic remittances do not automatically lead to an improvement of social resilience. Most families we interviewed used remittances for daily expenses and to pay back debts. One could argue that
the latter is already an important step towards the improvement of the initial situation; however, very often those debts stem
from migration costs. Nevertheless, the analysis of the cases in this study also shows that the longer migrants remain
abroad consolidating their careers without changing employers, work sectors, or destinations, the higher the likelihood that
they can clear their debts and send higher remittances (see Figure 5).

This still does not automatically lead to an improvement of social resilience, as it is crucial what senders and receivers
use their remittances for. The results of our interviews showed that the anticipation of risks such as climate change, local
market fluctuations, or other problems was less important than social reputation and social capital. Remittances were mostly
used for house renovations or pickup trucks as investments in symbolic capital and as signs of success.

Last but not least, social remittances are also subject to time. The acquisition of new knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and
identities evolves over years. The translocal setting and geographical and social distance also play a role, as does the
migrant's biographical stage (Grabowska et al., 2017). Most migrants, such as Sunti, who returned from Singapore at the
age of 55, did not want to make a big effort to use their construction skills back home. However, Sunti's case also shows
that the impacts of migration on social resilience can be more subtle and long term, as he was able to finance the university
educations of his daughter and son, who became accountant and a teacher respectively. Their non-farm jobs mean their
livelihoods are less susceptible to the seasonal insecurities of the agricultural sector – though at the same time this might
expose them to other risks. This shows that migration can impact the social resilience of families, but such impacts are less
immediate than one might assume.

7 | CONCLUSION

This empirical study provides a critical insight into the dynamics of migration processes, remittances, and their role in pro-
moting the social resilience of families in rural Thailand. Scholars have emphasised that we need to understand these
dynamics beyond a mere focus on economic remittances by equally considering social remittances in the wider social
framework. Our study highlights the value of a translocal approach which acknowledges the complexity of migration pro-
cesses, the socio-cultural setting, and temporal dynamics of resilience-building. Although we do not accede to the recent
“remittance euphoria” we clearly agree that development and social resilience are influenced by migration processes.

The translocal perspective in this paper revealed that in the case of Thai migrant workers, the livelihood context at the
place of origin (rural Thailand) differs so much from the working context at the place of destination that a simple transfer
of new ideas, knowledge, and social practices is rarely possible. The more diverse the translocal setting, the more barriers
hamper the transfer of social remittances.

Both decision-makers and practitioners should consider the translocal setting of migrants in greater detail. Additionally,
more research is needed to examine the barriers to social remittances and how they might be mitigated.

FIGURE 5 Social remittances and time.
Source: Own draft [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
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[Correction added on 18 November 2020, after first online publication: Projekt Deal funding statement has been added.]

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

1 For further detailed discussion on social remittances see, for example, Grabowska et al. (2017).

2 Singapore was chosen because it has been one of the major migration destinations for Thai international migrants.

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Video S1.** Video Abstract.

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