



Review of The Chinese in Brunei: From Ong Sum Ping to Hua Ho Department Store (ed. Ooi Keat Gin)

Ooi Keat Gin, editor. *The Chinese in Brunei: From Ong Sum Ping to Hua Ho Department Store*. London and New York: February 1, 2026 (ebook); February 2, 2026 (hb), Routledge, Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series, 340pp, 28 b and w plates. ISBN 9781041100201.



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[*Abstract*]

This volume is important in documenting the somewhat neglected histories of some of the ethnic minorities in Brunei Darussalam. It explores the Chinese minority. It resists the debates using the term “race,” though officially, the categorization of populations in Brunei are phrased in terms of this misnomer. However, these are not racial issues. It explores the history and contemporary issues faced by the Chinese ethnic minority in Brunei, in the context of a predominantly Malay-Muslim monarchical nation-state, but this is not an issue of race. Key themes include the continuing need of the Chinese to negotiate their identity and whether they belong in Brunei. The Chinese are transnational; they have networks across the world. Some have already left Brunei; others have established residences elsewhere in case their status in Brunei becomes difficult to manage. In the pursuit of Malay-Muslim monarchy, Brunei does run the risk of losing some of its major contributors to the Brunei economy. Other Chinese have chosen to assimilate or accommodate to the Brunei concept of

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nationhood. And yet publications on the Chinese in Brunei continue to refer to “semi-citizenship,” “liminal spaces of in-betweenness,” “exclusion and inclusion,” “belonging and non-belonging,” and echoing Benedict Anderson, rather than an “imagined” community, they are “unimagined” and “stateless.”

Keywords: Chinese, Brunei Darussalam, Ong Sum Ping, Hua Ho, economy, race, ethnicity, minorities

This is the first substantial volume on the Chinese in Brunei, based on research primarily from within Brunei. It deserves detailed scrutiny and contextualization. The volume was edited by Professor Ooi Keat Gin of the Academy of Brunei Studies (*Akademi Pengajian Brunei*) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), where he continues to raise the research profile of the Academy and related subject areas in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences ([FASS], *Fakulti Sastera dan Sains Sosial*) and the Institute of Asian Studies ([IAS] *Institute Pengajian Asia*) in particular. It is a book about ethnic identity, citizenship, cultural resilience and transmission, adaptation and accommodation, inter-ethnic relations, oral histories, Chinese dialects, literature, and the influence of Mandarin on the local Chinese population. It also has a wider relevance to Southeast Asia in regard to ethnic relations and Chinese minorities. The title of the book is both novel and revealing. The Chinese are *in* Brunei and comprise just under 10% of the population, in absolute numbers roughly 44,500, but are they *of* it? The population figures in Brunei seem always to be approximate, but the Chinese community appears to have remained relatively stable since the independence of Brunei from the British crown in 1984. However, in percentage terms, the Chinese have declined from around 20% of the overall census population of Brunei in the early 1980s and on independence, to just under half of that during the last 40 years (Brunei Darussalam Government 2021, 2025).

There was a surge of Chinese immigration into Brunei, especially from Sarawak, Singapore, and Hong Kong from the late 1920s to the early 1930s to take advantage of the increasing wealth

generated by the discovery of oil. The influx mainly comprised Hokkien from Kinmen and Xiamen, as well as Hakka, Cantonese, and Hainanese, and small numbers of other sub-groups. This expansion in immigration continued into the post-war prelude to independence. Then the decline began from the 1980s. Some Chinese decided that Brunei Darussalam was not a country in which they wished to reside and they moved to other neighboring countries, Singapore and Malaysia in particular.

A relatively small number of Chinese clearly are *of* Brunei. For example, around 14% are Muslim. It is difficult to anticipate whether many more will convert; some undoubtedly will, but, given the options and avenues available, some others can navigate outside of Brunei. We must note that it is by no means unusual for Chinese to convert to Islam. But the majority of Chinese in Brunei are not Muslim. Most Chinese declare they are Buddhist/Taoist, approximately 65%, and 20% Christian (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) (Wikipedia 2026a; and see Minority Rights Group International [MRGI] 2025 [1992]). They also fund their own private Chinese schools; there are currently eight in Brunei, where Mandarin is also taught, alongside Malay and English, in addition to the two English-medium international schools to which Chinese families also send their children. The Chinese have generally been required to have a facility in the Malay language, but it appears that they prefer to work in English, and, of course, their own dialects, and if they are planning to enter a business or commercial field in Asia, they may well choose Mandarin rather than Malay. Understandably since independence, Brunei Darussalam has faced the problem of developing nationhood, national identity and the maintenance of territorial borders. But in a globalizing world of increasing mobility, people with skills, knowledge, education and wealth can decide to leave and reside elsewhere.

The two most well-known Chinese Middle Schools are Chung Ching in Seria, with 1,000 plus pupils, and Chung Hwa in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB); it now has around 3,500 pupils, founded as the Yik Chye primary school in 1912. The schools also enroll non-Bruneians. Most Chinese, who are self-funded students, if qualified, invariably pursue higher education abroad, not in

Brunei, because permanent residents do not qualify for free, state-funded higher education. Instead, they study in their most favored English-speaking destinations: United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and even China. Also available are the two international fee-paying schools: Jerudong International School (JIS) and International School Brunei (ISB), with three campuses in BSB, Panaga, and Seria. Those in government employment, in certain positions and with certain contracts, and expatriate employees, can receive a government subsidy. The two schools together enroll around 4,500 students, some of them Chinese, and JIS has upwards of around 200 boarders. In such a small country Brunei Darussalam has a relatively high level of educational provision, but it is selective, some of it is private and fee-paying, with a significant number of families, and especially Chinese, deciding on higher education outside Brunei. It is accepted that generally the Chinese place a high value on education, and on the maintenance of their culture and language. Professor Ooi's volume also explores parenting practices, educational standards in Brunei and beyond, and traditional beliefs and practices. It provides a searching evaluation of Chinese imperatives in the context of what Brunei national identity requires and what the local Chinese are prepared to adapt to and accept.

Though many Chinese are relatively long-established residents of Brunei, they are not citizens; they are "stateless." In the *Laws of Brunei, National Registration Regulations* (Brunei Darussalam Government 1959/1961/1962 [2011, 2024, 2026]), 2002; King 2023), there are three official identities which are color-coded on identity cards: "yellow" (a citizen); "purple" (permanent resident); and "green" (temporary resident). The majority of Chinese are given permanent residence (PR) status, but therefore do not hold a Brunei passport; instead, for foreign travel purposes, they have an International Certificate of Identity (ICI). Officially they cannot own land, or receive government subsidies for business ventures or other local activities, or receive support in higher education or enter certain occupations, including the police, military and certain civil service positions. The classification of Brunei ethnicity in census terms has also been collapsed into three major categories: Malay

(*Melayu*), comprising the officially recognized indigenous communities (*puak jati*); the Chinese (*Cina*); and “Others” (*Lain-lain*) which includes some populations from South Asia (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans) who contribute to the Brunei economy, and an important indigenous population, the Iban, which is not classified as *puak jati*.

The book traces the historical trajectories of the Chinese in Brunei from Ong Sum Ping in the late 14th century, to Hua Ho department stores and supermarkets in present-day Brunei, founded by Lau Ah Kok, an immigrant from southern China to Brunei during the 1940s. Professor Ooi, in his Introduction, Afterword, and two other chapters, expresses and examines in some detail a long but changing Chinese relationship with Brunei, though it was not known as Brunei in the pre-Islamic past. According to Johannes Kurz, a specialist in Chinese historical sources on Southeast Asia, and who taught at Universiti Brunei Darussalam for many years, it is more than likely that early “Brunei” was not even the “Poli” “Po-li,” “Polo,” or “Boni” which appear in early Chinese chronicles and records and claimed by later writers to be a direct pre-Islamic precursor of the Brunei sultanate. The main proponent of the view that the Poli and Boni referred to during the Song and Ming dynasties was a predecessor of Brunei was the historian, Robert Nicholl, who worked at the Brunei Museum in the 1970s and 1980s (1975, 1980, 1983). Kurz argues, however, that there is a geographical vagueness as well as ambiguity in Chinese records, and that the terms reputed to relate to early Brunei might have referred instead to shifting port centers in northern and western Borneo or even to other parts of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago (2013, 2014, 2018).

A port on the north-west cost of Borneo in what is now the Brunei Bay area and along the Brunei River, and other ports as well were known to have had direct trade relations with Quanzhou (also referred to as Wurongzhou and Zayton in historical records, and as the “Alexandria of the East”), a Chinese port in southern Fujian from which Ong Sum Ping is supposed to have departed and then ended up in northern Borneo in the unlikely location of the Kinabatangan River in what is now eastern Sabah. In turn, coastal

settlements on the north-west coast of Borneo were also engaged in maritime commerce with southeastern China from at least the 17th century during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), and their commercial connections intensified during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). Trade was also continued in the Yuan (1271-1368 CE) and Ming Dynasties (1368-1644CE), though varying in intensity during different periods.

The trade from Borneo comprised such tropical forest products as tortoise-shells, bezoar stones, turtle eggs, spices, resins, camphor, sandalwood and *gaharu* wood, hornbill and rhinoceros ivory and “birds of paradise” feathers, edible swiftlet birds’ nests, as well as gems (pearls, diamonds), gold, and antimony. It is also claimed that the beginnings of Chinese-Borneo trade relations were mediated by Chinese Muslims, among others, who brought ceramics, jars, bronze items, including gongs, and metal tools to Borneo. For trading purposes, it is also said that Quanzhou Chinese Muslims settled in Borneo, including Ong Sum Ping in Kinabatangan. But it is not Brunei history that dominates this relationship; at various times it also involved Santubong, Niah, and Gedong in present-day Sarawak, as well as Sambas and Tanjungpura in West Borneo, which provided gold and diamonds; and Limau Manis, Terusan Kupang, and later, Kota Batu in present-day Brunei. Importantly, Sambas in West Borneo was a crucial link in the trade between China, the Malayan Peninsula, and the Indian subcontinent, and Kurz suggested that it is more likely that Boni or Poli was located in the western region of Borneo (2013: 1-32). The term “Barune” apparently emerges in Javanese literature in the 14th century during the dominance of Majapahit as a leading maritime power in the Java Sea area and around the coasts of Borneo. The terms “Bornei,” “Ba[e]runai,” “Burni,” and other variations did not appear until into the 16th century in Portuguese, Spanish, and Italian literature in the “Age of Discovery.”

Ong Sum Ping (Huáng Sēnping), a somewhat mysterious and semi-legendary figure in the distant history and origins of the Brunei sultanate, is historically linked to the founding, or at least given the credit for the strengthening of this emerging Muslim polity on the north-west coasts of Borneo. Kurz has stated that Ong Sum Ping,

though referred to in the genealogies of the Sultans of Brunei (*Silsilah Raja-raja Brunei*) from the 14th century, is absent from the official Chinese records of the Yuan and Ming dynasties (13th to 17th centuries) (Kurz 2018; and see Gallop 2021; Lee Cheuk Yin 2025). However, in Negara Brunei Darussalam, he is the only Chinese historical figure who lends his name to a street in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, though British colonial administrators and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II still have a presence in the names of roads in the main town. The question has to be asked, “Is Ong Sum Ping merely a more recent imagined historical construction of oral tradition and folklore, demonstrating that Brunei had a close and important relationship with China from the fourteenth century?”

Issues of citizenship and ethnic-cultural identity in the state of Brunei Darussalam is complex. It is made, for the minorities in Brunei, including the Chinese, even more complex in negotiating an official status and an ethnic identity. I stated a few years ago that

In Brunei, though ‘racial’ identity is officially clear-cut and set in print on an official identity card, in practice, there is a significant and necessary level of interaction across boundaries, and therefore considerable acculturation of the minorities to the majority Brunei Malay culture. This is the case, for example, among the Chinese, where hybridity or ‘liminality’ is evident through intermarriage, adoption, religious conversion, educational instruction, language shift and political pressures which has produced a relatively small Chinese-Malay population. This has not given rise to a distinct hybrid identity and culture as in the case of the *peranakan* Chinese of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Instead, individuals make decisions about how they negotiate the two cultures. However, the strong tendency among Chinese-Malays is to move towards Malay culture and Islam, given their predominance in Brunei (2023:172).

I now think that this statement about shifting identities of the Chinese in Brunei and their accommodation to a nation-state that does not recognize them, requires qualification. Given the strong emphasis attached to the importance of the national ideology, Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*), based on an indigenous, monocultural ethnic principle (see King 1994, 2021), and on a national religion and a monarchical government, it raises problems

for those who do not meet these official criteria of status and identity, particularly the Chinese minority. How is the status of being resident, living and working in a country and conscious of one's identity, but not of it, in official nation-state terms, managed, negotiated, expressed, sustained, accommodated, and possibly transformed and reinvented? Issues of citizenship, though, in a significant sense, those who qualify as recognized members of the state are not strictly citizens, but "subjects" of the Sultan, are a constant matter of concern and debate in Brunei (see, for example Md. Zainul Anwar 2025). It also raises issues of the role of gender and residence in becoming a Bruneian, and, in the context of ethnic minorities, including, importantly, the Chinese, in their contribution to the development and well-being of the nation-state. Professor Gin's book adds considerably to these issues and debates across a range of cultural, linguistic, social, economic, and educational issues.

In order to become a Bruneian, based on residence, there is a requirement to pass an advanced language test in Malay, and to demonstrate knowledge of Malay culture. Most Chinese do not attempt it; even learning Mandarin seems to present issues for Chinese students. They are more inclined to learn English and then find their way to English-speaking higher education institutions overseas (see, for example Sin-Yee Koh et al. 2021). Some Chinese choose to remain in Brunei, while others migrate, or retain a business stake and domestic links in Brunei while taking residence in New Zealand, Australia, countries in Europe, Canada, and the USA, and engaging, as they have to do, with the status of being "stateless" or "permanent residents." Some of those who have the funds have prepared for an escape route. Indeed, the proportion of Chinese to the total population has diminished over the past 40 years since Brunei independence. As always, significant numbers of Brunei Chinese are internationally networked and do not need and are not confined to their status within a circumscribed nation-state, based on an ideology in which most of them do not participate. It is even more important when China, and those Chinese in Southeast Asia who are connected in business networks, are becoming increasingly economically dominant, globally and

especially within Asia (see, for example, Hoon and Zhao 2023).

The construction of official identities was initially provided in the Government of Brunei's Constitution of 1959 and the Brunei Nationality Act of 1961, enacted in January 1962 (Brunei Darussalam Government 1959/ 1961/1962 [2011, 2024, 2026] with amendments; regularly updated and most recently in 2024, in regard to Permanent Resident status and a national digital identity system in 2026, BruneiID. The qualification for recognition as a citizen is based on cultural factors, paternal kinship, and residence and on the principle of *jus sanguinis*, not *jus soli*. Dual citizenship is not permitted nor dual "racial" identity, and the constituents of the "Malay race" are precisely defined in government documents, though these need some close attention and revision (King 2023: 172-174; and see 1994).

However, in practice, the concept of "Malay" is polysemous. The late Allen Maxwell, a noted anthropologist of Brunei and Sarawak Malay society and culture, listed five different translations or meanings of "Malay," and the choice of a particular meaning is situational and pragmatic (2001). The Chinese, in their everyday interactions, also have to indulge in ethnic role-playing and accommodation to a situation and context over which they have very little control. In anthropological-sociological terms, Brunei is a prime example of theater, role-playing, and identity construction and transformation.

So, in Professor Ooi's book, from the Chinese involvement in the early history of Brunei we are then taken to the engagement of the Chinese in modern Brunei and their central position in the economic well-being of the nation-state. The statistics provided by the Department of Planning and Statistics do not enable us to unravel the contribution of the Chinese to the national economy and international trade (Brunei Darussalam Government 2025). Some time ago, Malai Yunus produced an interesting thesis on the attitudes to business and the ways in which approaches to economic activities differ between the Malays and Chinese in Brunei; the Malay value system based on Islam, monarchy, and Malay culture and language, and in that sense is localized, and that of the Chinese

on the basis of personalized social or friendship networks and trust (*guanxi*), and on the connections provided through the Chinese clan system which spans national borders (2013). There is certainly a debate to be had here about nationalism, localization, and globalization. Then, we move from the mysteries of Ong Sum Ping, a prominent personage who appears in Brunei folklore and oral tradition, but who shifts between various roles, in the late Yuan or early Ming dynasties, in the founding of the sultanate and the rule of Sultan Muhammad Shah. Was he a son-in-law of the first sultan, marrying his daughter Puteri Ratna Dewi, or a brother-in-law of the second Sultan Ahmad Shah, giving his sister in marriage to the Sultan or both? Its underlying message is that there was a relationship, recognized as important, between an emerging Muslim polity, following the conversion of indigenous populations to Islam, on the coast of Borneo, and the Chinese empire. Ong Sum Ping was also described, in various guises, as a traveller, an explorer, a “chieftain” or provincial leader of a Chinese settlement on the Kinabatangan River, a Yuan governor, a Ming envoy, an admiral in the great Zheng He’s fleet that traversed the South China Sea.

As already indicated, it would seem that much of this is a later folkloric construction which emerged from Sarawak, Mindanao, and Sulu in the 20th century, unsupported by Chinese historical sources, which are themselves problematic, contradictory, and unreliable (Abdul Latif 2021; Gallop 2021; Kurz 2018; Lee Cheuk Yin 2025). Abdul Latif proposes that, insofar as we can decipher the early connections of the Chinese with Brunei, Ong Sum Ping was given the title of Pengiran Maharaja Lela. If this is accepted, then Ong Sum Ping was certainly not of the royal family, but connected to it as a *cheteria*, a high-ranking noble official (2021: 173-174). We then have to contemplate the relationships of the Chinese to a Malay-Muslim monarchy. Both Ong Sum Ping and Lau Ah Kok have been incorporated into a Brunei hierarchy of titles and prestige. But should we be surprised whether or not Ong Sum Ping was a construction of Borneo folklore? What we do know is this was a statement of the emerging Brunei polity’s relationship with the Chinese empire, and it continues to the present. Brunei Darussalam needs China and Chinese investment.

We arrive in present-day Brunei. It demonstrates another curious relationship with the Chinese. And in Brunei who does not shop in Hua Ho supermarkets and department stores in Brunei-Muara and Tutong? It has become an institution. The title of the store is not associated with the founder. In translating the name of the store, Bruneians are shopping in “Prosperous Harmony.” Is this a message to both Malays and Chinese and other ethnic groups and expatriate workers in Brunei? Yet, now the Chinese are not in a Yuan-Ming political-administrative environment, but in a thoroughly economic-commercial one through supermarkets, retail stores, fast-food outlets, restaurants, and shopping malls?

Wherever we search in Southeast Asia, we find remarkable stories of the Chinese from humble backgrounds who became multimillionaires. The Hua Ho local empire in Brunei was founded by Lau Ah Kok (or Lau Gim Kok) (1920-2018), a Hokkien immigrant from a modest farming and fishing background in Lieyu, Kinmen in southeastern China (Wikipedia 2025; 2026). Following his arrival in what was the British protectorate of Brunei he purchased a modest plot of land off Jalan Muara, Manggis in the early 1940s. He developed a vegetable and poultry farm and also grew fruit, and then had the innovative idea of establishing a retail outlet to market his produce. He experienced several business difficulties but eventually founded and developed the largest homegrown supermarket and department store complex in Brunei. His farming enterprise flourished as did his retail business. Is there a connection between Lau Ah Kok and Ong Sum Ping? The interesting connection is that the Brunei polity has always found ways of incorporation. Ong Sum Ping is, in some ways, established as a founder of the Brunei sultanate. Lau Ah Kok was honored by His Majesty Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, as Pehin Kapitan China Kornia-di-Raja in 2004, and then two years later as Dato Paduka for his services to Brunei and the Chinese community. Ooi Keat Gin's book, with a historical emphasis, brings together political-economic personages in an interesting combination. Another important overview of the Chinese in Brunei by Marie-Sybille de Vienne, as an economic historian, connects material objects of trade and commerce, from ‘ceramics to oil rent’ (2011). Though, importantly she draws attention to the

Chinese role as mediators in Brunei maritime trade and, subsequently, as investors and founders of local industries, and urban and rural businesses in Brunei, drawing on the wealth that Brunei enjoyed from the exploitation of hydrocarbons.

What Ooi Keat Gin has done is assemble a formidable group of senior Chinese and Malay scholars who have long-produced publications on the Chinese in Brunei and the wider Southeast Asia. Chang-Yau Hoon, with a co-authored chapter with Hannah Ho, is noted for his work on Chinese identity in Indonesia and Brunei. Here he provides a chapter on Chinese education in Brunei. He has also published with Nur Shawatriqah on hybridity and the cultural identity of Muslim Chinese-Malays, though they are in the minority in Brunei (Nur Shawatriqah and Hoon, 2018; Hoon and Nur Shawatriqah 2021, 2023). In a comparative exercise in regard to the Straits Chinese or *peranakan* of Malaysia and Singapore, they argue that a distinct hybrid identity has not emerged in Brunei due to the strong assimilationist policy and national ideology of Brunei. Along with Kaili Zhao, Hoon has also published papers on Chinese identity in Brunei Darussalam, their transnational networks, expatriate Chinese workers in Brunei, the expansion of Chinese businesses there, and education, the influence of Mandarin and language change (see, for example Zhao and Hoon, 2024, 2025; and Sin-Yee Koh et al. 2021).

Hannah Ming Yit Ho has developed a deserved reputation for her research on language, literature, and cultural identities in Brunei, and more widely, in the transnational landscapes of Southeast Asia. She also presents a chapter on stories from the Brunei Chinese community taken from oral traditions (see also, for example, Ho, 2025; Ho and Deterding 2021; Ho and Ying-kit Chan, 2025). Grace V. S. [Voon Cheong] Chin is internationally known for her publications on post-colonial literatures in English and her specific focus on Bruneian Anglophone fiction and the interrelated themes of ethnicity, gender, and nation-building (see, for example, 2024; Chin and Katharina Mohd Daud 2018). Shirley Chin Wei Lee, a notable geographer at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, provides an interesting paper on the evolution and shifting of cultural traditions and socio-economic goals in Brunei, across the generations.

Debbie Guan, a specialist in socio-linguistics at UBD, produces an important paper on Chinese dialect shift and whether Brunei Chinese are abandoning their dialects in the face of competition from English, Malay, and Mandarin (and see, for example, 2001; 2021; Ho and Ho, 2021). Florence Kuek Chee Wee, from the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Malaya, provides an examination of Anglophone Brunei writers, and on Malay-Chinese literary relations. The *Chinese in Brunei* ranges over issues of statelessness, the “unimagined community,” negotiating identity, eclectic beliefs and values, the sustenance of Chinese cultural traditions and their transmission through language and literature; and the importance of the work of Anglophone Brunei Chinese authors.

Yes, this book is also a reflection of ethnic divisions, not only in Brunei, but in other parts of Southeast Asia. The chapters in this book are provided primarily by Chinese scholars. An exception is Ampuan Hj Ibrahim bin Ampuan Hj Tengah who examines Chinese images in traditional Brunei literary texts. There has to be a greater coming together of Chinese and Malays, not only in Brunei, but more widely in Southeast Asia. I think this is happening, but perhaps more slowly than it should. I commend this volume. It reinserts and strengthens studies of the Chinese in the life, history and economy of Brunei, Borneo, and the wider Southeast Asia. The editor has also situated the book and the research findings presented here into wider arenas of debate and presents an interesting historical context and overview in juxtaposing Ong Sum Ping and Lau Ah Kok (Hua Ho). This appropriate collocation prompts further thought, as hopefully this review provides, about the relationships between Brunei and China, and between Brunei monarchy and prominent Chinese. Importantly, the book summary indicates that it is “ground-breaking” and “it brings together research from early-career Brunei Chinese academics to provide an insider’s look at the community’s evolution.” It demonstrates that there is an important and developing scholarly tradition among Brunei Chinese.

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