

Strategies for Event Organizing in Art Communities: The Artist-Initiated Model of Fotan Open Studios

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In 2001, art teachers and students from The Chinese University of Hong Kong organized open studios events, leading to a rise of artistic activities in industrial buildings. Many artists moved into Fotan, forming a local art community. At the time of writing this essay, Fotan Open Studios has taken place for 19 years. It can be considered a long-lived artist-initiated event in Hong Kong. This essay discusses how in recent years the event organization model of Open Studios has continued to bring artists in the district together to promote art, forming an art community.

Intermittently I have participated in the event ten times since 2009 but have never been an organizer. I attempt to explore the topic from an intimate yet distanced perspective, with the help of documents, research, interviews and participant observation, etc.



The map and catalogues of open studio activities of different years. (Photography by Phoebe Man)

The Origin of the Open Studios Event

Hong Kong's industries relocation to the Mainland and the financial crisis in 1997 triggered economic recession. The rent of industrial buildings was relatively low. Subsequent to two fire incidents at the Fine Arts Department of The

Chinese University of Hong Kong, studio space for students was reduced.¹ Some students would want to continue making art after graduation. As a result, more and more students set up their studios into the industrial buildings in the nearby Fotan area. Feeling that contemporary art in Hong Kong was limited to a small circle, the teachers and students wanted to promote it to the public. Since the first Open Studios in 2001 for people in the circle, in 2003 the event opened to the public under the name of “Fotanian,” and received about 600 visitors.² In 2004, the event was headed by a Chief Coordinator. Since then, it had partnered with the large-scale promotion of the programs of other art institutions such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Fringe Club, obtained sponsorships and subsidies from the business sector and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, registered and operated as a society and a limited company. The highest recorded number of visitors was 20,000 in 2013,³ while the highest recorded number of participating studios was 92 in 2014. In 2015, “Fotanian Limited” disbanded, some artists in the community took over the organization and self-sponsored the Open Studios. A formal organization became unnecessary when no external financial aid was needed. Between 2017 and 2019, around thirty studios opened to the public every year before the Chinese New Year for four days on two weekends. Like a tradition, artists gather to open their studios when the time comes. Fotan is not the only place where there are open studio events, but also in other industrial districts in Hong Kong, such as Chai Wan, Kwun Tong, San Po Kong and Ap Lei Chau, with Fotan being the most long-lasting with a visual art focus.

The Formation of an Art Community

How did the event attract attention in the first place? The idea of a group of poor young artists pursuing their dreams inside the industrial buildings itself is very captivating. The format of open studios removes the power of intermediary agency, wherein artists engage directly with the participants. There is a sense of challenge to the authority, a transfer of power, and a return to the fundamental. According to Law Man-lok, “Artworks find irreplaceable truth and innocence in the studio of their creators. These qualities render the relationship between the artwork and the studio intimate, like the fetus and the mother.”⁴ The Hong Kong public enjoy seeing show flats, and art in industrial buildings sate their appetites for the unusual. Going through the media reports over the years, one finds Fotanian approached from the perspective of art and culture, extending to a wide arena that includes economy, tourism, urban planning, education, real estate, parenting, home decoration, successfully attracting public attention. There is also an endless train of student visitors, and the event has long been welcomed by the education sector, not least because it presents an opportunity to interview multiple artists in one single event, fulfilling curriculum

¹ Fire broke out in the studios of the Department of Fine Arts in 1997 and 2001. See So Fong-suk Jenny, Department of Fine Arts at 50 The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007): 113; and Lam Tung-pang’s blog entry: <http://www.lamtungpang.com/writings/files/d6af0c4ff5d4cd37a535cc595f9371ba-11.html>.

² Chow Chun-fai, “Fotan, Fotanian,” in Fotanian Open Studios 2014 (event catalog): 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Law Man-lok, “Fotanian: 100Q,” in FAIR ENOUGH, January 22, 2008. Accessed on May 11, 2020: <http://mmk-fair-enough.blogspot.com/2008/01/exhibition-progress-sarah-suggested.html>.

requirements such as “Other Learning Experiences” in the New Senior Secondary Curriculum, “Independent Enquiry Study” in Liberal Studies subject and the extracurricular requirements in secondary and tertiary art education courses. After Fotanian ceased to receive sponsorships, much administrative work was alleviated, except for those required for outreach to schools. Each Open Studios event is attended by many students, other audiences include art and cultural practitioners, families and tourists. One former regular visitor who started studying art became an artist and ended up renting a studio and participating in the Open Studios: an art practitioner produced within these industrial buildings.

In the early days of Fotanian there were many media interviews and visitors. Its independent atmosphere attracted participants. Teachers and students from other art schools, foreign artists, and commercial galleries gradually moved into Fotan. Fotanian has a tradition of openness. Regardless of connections and fame, anybody with a studio in Fotan could participate in the event. As entry barrier was low, both professionals and amateurs were represented. Not limited to visual arts, it also included performing arts and cultural activities in broader senses, such as a nostalgic theme canteen, African Drum & Dance Academy, some even offered advisory sessions on industrial building investment, which shows an absence of moderation. Since then there had been some adjustments. A WhatsApp group was created in 2015, in which some participants questioned whether the canteen counted as a studio unit. Subsequently the canteen dropped out. I asked Winnie Davies, an organizer in recent years, whether she has ever refused application to participate. She said that there was once a magician who wanted to participate but was rejected as stage magic was not considered visual art. In recent years the event has been focusing on visual arts, with a certain degree of openness. In 2020, some participating artists exhibited artworks in a self storage company.

Most visual art media exhibited during the Open Studios were those that required working spaces, such as ceramics, printmaking, sculpture, painting, installation, and socially engaged art that emphasized audience participation and which benefited from the influx of audience in the four days of the Open Studios. For example, a work of mine about the #MeToo movement in 2018 received over 1,200 audience in four days, of which more than 200 participated in real time creation, resulting in an open and diverse work teaming with various energies wrestling against each other. The compressed time, concentrated space and proactive audience of the Open Studios constitute a very good production site for breeding such works.

⁵ From an interview with Winnie Davies on April 25, 2020.



Performance art outside factory buildings in 2009. (Photograph by Phoebe Man)



Performance art in the corridors in 2014. (Photograph by Phoebe Man)



Viewers participated in the creation of the art works. (Photography by Phoebe Man)

Open Studios activities included artwork making, traditional exhibitions, curatorial projects, creative experience. In the early days some artists even opened up their living spaces. The activities were spread across ten plus industrial buildings. At the beginning, most studios concentrated around the cheaper high-ceilinged Wah Luen Industrial Centre that was further away from the train station, and real estate agent even coined it the “artist village” where property prices rose faster than other industrial buildings in the district. In recent years, there are more studios opening in the nearer Wah Lok Industrial Centre, demonstrating the demise of the idea of a Wah Luen “Fotanian” artist village and the displacement of communities.



Property agents call Wah Luen Factory Building as “artists’ village.”

Reasons for the Decline in the Number of Participants

As the event reached its peak, the number of participating studios decreased year by year. Reasons include the “Revitalization of Industrial Buildings” policy introduced by the Hong Kong Government in 2009 which led to an annual increase of the price and rent of industrial buildings, making it difficult for artists to afford having studios there. Buyers came to the Open Studios for viewings, then appointed agents to make offers to the studio owners, and artists were forced to relocate. Some artists may be reluctant to open the studio for this reason. Has the Open Studios led to the gentrification of Fotan? The proportion of the number of open studios to the total number of industrial units in the Fotan district is relatively small. According to the Planning Department’s “2014 Area Assessments of Industrial Land in the Territory,” the total number of industrial units in the Fotan industrial district was approximately 7,675, while less than 100 of them joined the Open Studios. The impact of art could not have been very immense.

The decline in the number of participating studios was also related to the inspections of the Sha Tin District Lands Office. After the industrial building fire in 2016,⁸ the government stepped up inspections. The largest-scale inspection in Fotan probably happened during the end of 2016, when more than twenty studios received letters (requesting inspection), including myself. That year I was too busy to participate in the Open Studios, but the Sha Tin District Lands Office inspection was based on the directory of the 2015 Open Studios. Artists from numerous studios connected and communicated with each other. Though nothing seemed to have come out of that inspection, the early scenes of bunk beds and mahjong-playing vanished, and the number of participating studios eventually dropped to twenty in 2020. Sometimes I come upon young artists working overnight in their studios, who fearing the

⁶ Leung Ching-man, “1004 Playground,” in *Fotanian Open Studios 2011* (event catalog): 36.

⁷ Planning Department, *Report on 2014 Area Assessments of Industrial Land in the Territory*, September 25, 2015, Appendix 3.1. Accessed on May 11, 2020, https://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/comp_s/industrial_report_2014/index.htm.

⁸ A piece of news coverage on the incident: <https://www.ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/1329114/20160622-dreadly-kowloon-bay-fire-exposes-industrial-building-risks>.

government's "sting operations" are reluctant to open their studios. The major participants of the Open Studios have also changed from young graduates to middle-aged artists. On the other hand, in recent years there are more ways for artists to reach the audience; experimental art spaces and public art are blossoming, leading to fewer Open Studios participants.

Exploration of Event Organization Models

Although the number of participating studios has decreased, the event continues, the number of visitors is numerous. The organization model helps sustain the art community. Initially, Fotanian was mainly organized by the teachers and students of The Chinese University of Hong Kong and maintained through friendship. Its scale subsequently expanded. From 2007, for six years it had received sponsorship from a real estate developer, which according to report was paving the way for future biddings for conservation projects.⁹ According to Chow Chun-fai, former chairman of Fotanian, "In the debate about sponsorship, the differences lie in the definition of target audience, whether the sponsor has overly interfered with the image and promotion of Fotanian, confusion of the roles of sponsor and organizer, and the forms of sponsorship, etc."¹⁰ The sponsorship ended in 2012. In 2013, Fotanian received two million dollars subsidy from the government,¹¹ for which many administrative tasks, such as submitting reports, processing receipts and coordination were required. These were no easy tasks for creative minds, if not overwhelming. In 2015, the subsidy ended, and Fotanian as a limited company ceased operation.¹² Since then, a group of enthusiastic Fotan artists took over. Quick to action, they reduced administrative work, and with a flexible promotion strategy, within a short time they organized the following Fotanian (2016), renamed in 2017 as "Fotan Open Studios." Between 2017 and 2020, each event was self-funded and organized by artists in the community. There was no sponsorship, less red tape, running costs were low. Each studio contributed a mere \$500, and a total of \$10,000 was enough to break even. Lack of funds in turn increased participation of individual units, and more volunteers contributed to the administrative work. Open Studios volunteer committee member Davies believes that "the members of Fotan have the guts to not rely on government subsidies. We don't really need the money to show our team spirit!"¹³

⁹ "Wanzai Chengxiong fuhaodierdaichongjianjiuqubianhuangjindi" (Lording over Wan Chai: Second Generation Rich Turning Old Districts into Gold Mines), Sing Tao Daily Z02, July 5, 2009.

¹⁰ Chow Chun-fai, "Fotanian, People of Fo Tan," in Fotanian Open Studios 2014 (event catalog): 3-4.

¹¹ "Industrial Building Revitalization in Hong Kong: Artists Displaced by High Rent," Hong Kong Economic Times A14, May 21, 2013.

¹² "Yishujiagaogongzuoshi Panxiaotanyuzhiyin" (Artists opening studios to meet their audience), Apple Daily A13, March 13, 2018.

¹³ From an interview with Winnie Davies on May 18, 2020.



Minibus advertising in 2007. (Photograph by Phoebe Man)



“Self-help” publicity in 2018. (Photograph by Phoebe Man)

You need organizers as well as participants. It is not easy to maintain a studio when the rent is not cheap. Previously artists used to live and work in the studios, now because of the inspections, that is no longer feasible. Most remaining participants have full-time jobs and can only work as part-time artists. Though not full-time artists, their works display professional standards. As the Chinese says, “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” this power should never be underestimated. Joined by other full-time artists, the Open Studios event maintains operation year after year, relying not on commercial institutions or the government, but self-support and volunteers. Chartrand & McCaughey discusses the different parts of contemporary art, the obvious ones being fine arts, commercial arts and amateur arts. “Fine arts produce knowledge, commercial arts generate profits, while amateur arts bring self-actualization. Amateur arts have become a force against the utilitarian values of Hong Kong. According to Professor Chan Yuk-keung, “The tyranny of a single value in the society suppresses the development and survival of other values.”¹⁵ I teach in the university and see for myself how students choose courses by their future prospects instead of aptitude. In the past two years (2019–2020), during the Fotan Open Studios, I organized “Project C,” an educational program in the form of apprenticeship. At first, I thought it would attract the public to take it as an interest class, but it brought together especially those who once gave up art for a living. There were pensioners, art teachers who had no time to make art, and patients. They took it very seriously, some submitted five when one task was assigned to them. Their works were sincere and some students shed tears during works critique session. Why take these community art activities so seriously? Some may wonder. That inner spiritual need is so strong it becomes a source of support for contemporary art that cannot be overlooked. Fotan Open Studios demonstrates an artist-initiated model for the independent pursuit

¹⁴ Harry Hillman Chartrand and Claire McCaughey. “The Arm’s Length Principle and The Arts: An International Perspective — Past, Present and Future,” in M.C. Cummings Jr & J. Mark Davidson Schuster eds., *Who’s to Pay? for the Arts: The International Search for Models of Support* (New York, American Council for the Arts, 1989). Accessed on May 11, 2020, <http://www.compilerpress.ca/Cultural%20Economics/Works/Arm%201%201989.htm>.

¹⁵ Chan Yuk-keung, “High Land-Price Policy and Hong Kong Art Affairs,” in *Fotanian Open Studios 2012* (event catalogue): 104.

of dreams. Every year, some artists quit and some join in. It seems that the fire of creation is still burning, and the event continues to be fueled.

Why Do Artists Come Together Still for the Open Studios?

Nowadays there are many opportunities for creation and exhibition in Hong Kong, so why do artists come together still for the Open Studios? In the first place, the “Fotan Art” brand has been established through years of effort by the organizers, it is, as art critic Leung Chin-fung Jeff puts it, a “scenic spot.”¹⁶ Secondly, participation is easy, no connection or social skill is required, one can come and go and is not bound to it forever. Artists manage their own affairs and help each other when the occasions arise. The open decision-making model strengthens the individual’s sense of participation. In the past, the “Fotanian” organized the Open Studios as if it were a graduation show. Meetings were held to deliberate matters, during which a tradition of democracy and openness was built. Now, with the help of communication software and applications, participation becomes even easier. Every year a WhatsApp group is set up for the Open Studios event to discuss important matters. For example, the 2019 group had a heated discussion about the poster for 2020: A masked shouting face in monochrome in response to the social movement. Opinions were polarized, some supported the designer and respect for creation, while some stressed political neutrality. In the end the poster became a blank slate, and each unit was to put in its own content, reaching a kind of consensus. At times outside of the Open Studios period, discussions return to the everyday. In the group there are posts about studio rental, exhibition material exchange, community news, art events and art news, commentaries, etc. Having faced adversities and inspections together, a sense of community slowly builds up among members who are no longer mere participants of an event.



“Fotan Open Studios” 2020 poster.

Different Sectors of the Art Community

It was once estimated that there were about 400 artists in the district. “In 2019, thirty-three studios opened to the

¹⁶ PEP, Nothing’ Steady eds., *Fotanian: 100Q* (Fotanian: 2008): 56.

¹⁷ Chow Chun-fai, “Fotanian, People of Fo Tan,” in *Fotanian Open Studios 2014* (event catalog): 2.

public, which was probably the largest art event in the district in that year. There are other art activities in the district. Some studios open on other days, while some open only to people in the circle or curators from overseas. Canteens not participating in the Open Studios join with canteens in other districts to organize handicraft art fair and cultural activities. One major player is "Artists Co-op," who introduces itself as "a member of the Fotan studios community," with the belief that bringing artists together helps to promote local art.¹⁸ They not only participate in the Open Studios, but also hold regular art talks, art camps and international exchange activities. In 2018 there was the "Join Fotan" project, co-organized with the Hong Kong Design Center, aligning other Fotan artists to hold exhibitions, fairs and community cultural tours. In 2019 Artists Co-op acquired "Sha Lek Corner," a 60,000-square-foot space under a bridge in Sha Tin Wai, which will become an art center. ¹⁹ So we can see that the community formed by the Open Studios generates different art activities, forming different sectors of the community.

The Government's Role

Now that the Fotan art community is formed, how do we go on? Chan Mo-po Paul visited Fotanian in 2008 and wrote in a newspaper column that after the visit, he felt "a little uneasy about their (artists') poor working conditions," and suggested the government to "purchase levels or whole blocks (of industrial buildings), renovate them, then rent them to the artists...The more artists gathered together, the more they can exchange and be inspired. It also makes it convenient for the public to visit, one extra weekend activity and an easy channel for students to learn by observation, while creating more exposure for the artworks. The advantages are just numerous."²⁰ The government supports the arts in different ways. According to John Pick, there are three kinds of cultural policy: 1. Prescriptive Policies, 2. Descriptive Policies, and 3. Reactive Policies. ²¹ Prescriptive Policies exert control with regulations and are not conducive to creative development. Descriptive Policies record existing culture and art, transmit knowledge, do not establish new goals or new systems, impose no interference, and allow art to develop freely. Reactive Policies only respond to the industry's needs. There are also different ways of responding. According to Chartrand & McCaughey, there are four ways for the government to support art: 1. The Facilitator formulates legal policies conducive to the development of art; 2. The Patron relies on recommendations from elite members of the art circle, such as those in the Hong Kong Arts Development Council committee; 3. The Architect formulates welfare policies for most artists through a Ministry of Culture; 4. The Engineer supports only pro-establishment art. ²² Each model has its

¹⁸ Artists Co-op Facebook page. Accessed on May 11, 2020,

https://www.facebook.com/pg/ArtistsCoopHK/about/?ref=page_internal.

¹⁹ Sha Lek Corner Unveiled Facebook page. Accessed on May 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/events/2981966288528191/>.

²⁰ Chan Mo-po, "Jielian Youzou Duojaodu" (Connect, Roam, Mult-perspectives), in Hong Kong Economic Times C14, January 16, 2008.

²¹ Pick, J., Ajala, R., & Anderton, M. H. *The arts in a state: A study of government arts policies from ancient Greece to the present* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1988): 97-111.

²² Harry Hillman Chartrand and Claire McCaughey, "The Arm's Length Principle and The Arts: An International Perspective — Past, Present and Future," in M.C. Cummings Jr & J. Mark Davidson Schuster (eds.), *Who's to Pay? for the Arts: The International Search for Models of Support* (New York: American Council for the Arts, 1989). Accessed on May 11, 2020, <http://www.compilerpress.ca/Cultural%20>

own advantages and disadvantages. Most governments apply a combination of these, but usually the fewer restrictions, the more creativity.

Self-organization

The Fotan art community is formed organically. Too much planning, such as the above-mentioned Prescriptive Policies and The Engineer approaches undermine vitality and are detrimental to the development of creativity. The strength of the Fotan Open Studios lies in the difficulty to intervene. Scattered across individual units in the industrial buildings, it is difficult for the organizer to exert control. This allows uniqueness and vitality in each unit. As early as 2008, Law Man-lok discussed self-organization. "I think this prototype (of Fotanian) very much resembles the self-organizing advocated by Danish artist Jakob Jakobsen and his colleagues. This concept differs from that of conventional art institutions (such as the major painting associations, 1a space, etc.) which are conceptually and organizationally directed by the centralized system of the institutions. Instead, individual participants conduct their own liaisons and plannings, allowing interested parties to join in the discussion and participate. In other words, it is non-institution-centered, but is an organizational activity centered on individual plans; at the same time, participants establish a spontaneous form of partnership, thereby creating a temporary community."²³ Self-motivation is the best stimulant. Organizing committee member Davies said, "We emphasize that we do not want subsidies. Avoiding complicated processes and administrative work, we promote art in the most economical way, and save time for creating and improving on our art."²⁴ Since the event's return in 2016, everyone put in their money for promotion, using de-institutionalized organizational methods, artists from different units were responsible for liaison, budget, publicity, and documentation. For example, in 2019, Wong Yuk-ling from "Ling's Mountain" was in charge of internal communications and public tours, H2o from "LfxLab" operated the social media platforms, external communications and graphic design, Chan Wan-lai from "Artist's Den" managed the budget, Alan Lai from "arthome.hk" designed the website, Dio from "Dio Production House" interviewed each studio on Dio Channel to help the public understand more about the artists in the district. Important matters were discussed in the WhatsApp group, where decision-making was transparent, the financial report was accessible to all, and everyone participated on equal terms.

The thirty-three participating studios each organized their own activities, as well as collaborated with one another. In addition to displaying their own artworks, Ling's Mountain and Artists Co-op organized the exchange event with Brazilian artist Genna Naccache and her photographs of women's prisons. On top there were photography demonstrations by "The Blue Hydrant," as well as participatory events such as sand art calligraphy at "Elephant House," pottery wheel trials at arthome.hk, new media interactive installation at LfxLab, etc. I also tried to do a

Economics/Works/Arm%201%201989.htm.

²³ Law Man-lok, "Fotanian: 100Q," in FAIR ENOUGH, January 22, 2008. Accessed on May 11, 2020, <http://mmk-fair-enough.blogspot.com/2008/01/exhibition-progress-sarah-suggested.html>.

²⁴ A piece of news coverage titled "Ziyou Yili Juhuotan" (Free Art Power Converge at Fo Tan), Sing Tao Daily P01, January 25, 2018.

community art project, based on the above Reactive Policies and The Patron methodologies. Realizing that there were a sizable number of teachers in the Fotan art community, and that many schools organized visits, I saw a potential for educational activities. So, in 2019, I applied to the Hong Kong Arts Development Council for funding to organize "Project C," a master-apprentice style free education program, where C stands for Create, Connect (artists from within and without the district), and Collaborate. In the end, one third of the Open Studios artists participated in the Project, and there were a number of student applications. Arranging for each tutor to take in two to five students, I paired up ten teachers and thirty plus students. The response was considered satisfactory. Equipped by their teaching experience, the artists taught individual students according to their aptitudes and joined them in appraisal classes to deepen artistic discussions. Imagine some kinds of martial arts conference where teachers of different schools argued about the criteria of art criticism, while the apprentices were less aggressive in their exchanges, mostly encouraging each other and exploring together the possibilities of art. Both teachers and students took it very seriously. Amidst the turbulent situation in Hong Kong, except for a few students who pursued some other directions and withdrew from the program, everybody took the exhibition seriously. There are both senior and emerging artists in Project C, bringing novelty to the Open Studios event. Its two-year timespan allows it to secure ten artists each year to participate in the Open Studios, safeguarding its continuity which in turn takes up some of the workload of event management and tour guides during Open Studios.

It can be seen from the above that artists in the district have enriched the Open Studios event as they mobilize themselves, help each other, and organize their own activities. This is a bottom-up, free and open model. The Anti-Extradition Bill Movement in 2019 received widespread attention, many cultural and artistic activities were cancelled or postponed, and artists in the district decided to continue the Open Studios with the situation in mind. They decided their content, self-financed themselves, and made last-minute decisions on what to show. They could respond or not respond to current affairs, they did not have to submit any proposal, nor did they need any approval as they were held accountable to no one but themselves. They only shared promotion costs, there was no leader, no one could represent no one, no one would interfere with no one, each was only responsible for his or her own studio. This allowed much more flexibility than most institutions, and the artists enjoyed greater creative freedom.

Self-support

This artist-initiated, self-supporting art community event model is a return to the organization methodology when Fotanian first began. By now it has continued for five years. Unlike the models of Cattle Depot, PMQ and Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre, there is no third-party management and is more artist oriented. However, without a representative organization, it is more difficult to take a strong stance regarding government policy. Chow Chun-fai, former chairman of the Fotanian, together with members of the "Factory Artists Concern Group" and "Hong Kong Culture Monitor," strongly criticized against the Revitalization of Industrial Building Policy and the outdated industrial building regulations, putting much effort in protecting the industrial building art ecosystem. This might have helped bring about the government's announcement on February 1, 2019 of the relaxation of waiver application for artists' studios in industrial buildings. Fotan's decentralized, flexible organization model has been naturally

developed from the combination of circumstances. The support it has received can be regarded as a reflection of the times.

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