



WHO NEEDS INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION? MAKING CULTURAL DIVERSITY WORK FOR HONG KONG

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Abstract

This paper examines an intercultural education project which involves South Asian youth and Chinese university students in a long term program to promote positive ethnic relations in Hong Kong. The program applies concepts of Participatory Action Research (PAR) which involves collaboration between university researchers and community members, in the process making available to participants the opportunities to transform their communities. This study identifies three types of participation: inactive participation, passive participation, and critical participation, and explores the underlying factors that affect the patterns of participation.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research (PAR), Intercultural Education, Ethnic Minorities, Hong Kong.

1. Introduction

Modern education prioritizes schooling as the preeminent institution of education (Levinson and Pollock 2011:1; Varenne 2008) and tends to limit itself to prescribed learning objectives and facts, without making the connection between learning and students' daily activities (Freire 1970). Irizarry and Brown (2004) have criticized this type of schooling which dominates urban schools, as dehumanizing and oppressive. Marginalized groups like ethnic minorities particularly suffer from this system as it often deprives students of a chance to develop a critical consciousness that is essential in identifying, investigating, and intervening into the conditions of their lives. Spindler (1955) advocates the application of anthropological understanding of human life to the schooling system. The authors believe that Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one such instrument, which is mostly carried out by groups defined as 'marginalized' or 'at risk' in society. Facilitators, usually university researchers, collaborate with local members to carry out ethnographic research on their communities, through which they develop a systematic way to understand their everyday life and take action to address problems in the communities. Participants could acquire an anthropological sensibility, understand cultural arbitrariness, and challenge social stereotypes (Hurtig 2008; Varenne 2007). Participants also gain research and presentation skills, develop an identity of academic persona, and take ownership over their education (Romeo et al. 2008). As they carry out collective social action, they could innovatively produce their knowledge in embodied, tangible ways (Wissman et al. 2015) and transform themselves and their communities (Cammarota and Fine 2008). PAR regards participants and professionals (e.g. students and teachers) as allies rather than opponents in knowledge construction. PAR also challenges the essentialized view that only policy-oriented activists have the capacity to initiate or carry out social change movements (Dyrness 2008). A small proportion of public schools with minority students have included participatory action research (PAR) projects in their curriculum (Demerath and Mattheis 2012).

Studies of PAR have focused on its multiple benefits while few have taken an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991) to examine whole projects from initiation, through to research and action. They may emphasize the collective deliberation of the multigenerational and multiracial participants but seldom do they discuss the internal diversity and dynamics, nor examine the generalizability of effects and feasibility of PAR projects.

This paper discusses an intercultural education project “Multiculturalism in Action” (MIA) in Hong Kong held since 2013, which involves participants from different ethnic communities to work together as partners of change, to achieve improvement on three levels: knowledge, social relations, and affectional affiliation. Data was collected between 2013 and 2016, to understand how a participatory action research brings about changes in the communities. Paying attention to intersectionality of different socioeconomic factors, this paper examines the opportunities and constraints of the project from the stage of initiation, research, to action, and sheds light on the challenges of integrating anthropology with intercultural education in the multicultural context of Hong Kong society.

2. Liberal Studies and PAR in Hong Kong

The education system in Hong Kong is closely tied to its colonial history. It was ‘depoliticized and decontextualized’ during the colonial period (Morris and Chan 1997:249), adopting an examination-oriented and teacher-centered curriculum, and avoiding topics that might compromise the legitimacy of the colonial government. After the return of sovereignty to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government carried out an extensive educational reform and in 2009 introduced a new curriculum with new subjects. One important change of the curriculum was the introduction of Liberal Studies as a core subject. According to the Curriculum Develop Council (CDC) (2000), liberal studies develop problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaborative learning capacities, enabling students to respond to the constantly changing economy.

The role of teachers is significant in the development of critical thinking (Fung and Howe 2012). However, surveys found that the majority of liberal study teachers did not find the interdisciplinary approach to learning and teaching effective in promoting social awareness (Fung and Yip 2010). Most teachers did not possess relevant training in the subject and found liberal studies difficult to teach as a subject (Fok 2016; Lai and Lam 2011). The curriculum comprised six modules under three major areas which many teachers criticized as “too broad and lacked coherence” (Fung 2016). Furthermore, the content produced many social stereotypes, like using a deficit approach to understand youth (Chan and Ting 2012), a prejudicial approach to analyze minority religious communities (Jackson 2015), and a dualistic approach (i.e. “East meets West”) to interpret multiculturalism (Jackson and Han 2016). In the classroom, these stereotypes were further reinforced when teachers narrowed down the meaning of “multi-perspective thinking” to “different stakeholders holding different views” (Chan and Ting 2012). Aggravating this was students turning to private tuition which provided them with an exhaustive list of comments on hot social issues, which they could just memorize without practicing critical thinking (Chan and Bray 2014).

As the education system was transformed from a teacher-centered to a student-oriented framework, the new curriculum introduced Independent Enquiry Study (IES) which requires students to choose a topic for cross-curricular analysis and use different media forms to present their findings. This approach is similar to PAR in cultivating critical thinking and facilitating the development of research skills, as well as transforming knowledge into action. However, few studies have researched comprehensively on IES, such as the topics, research methods, and presentation skills that students have chosen, together with the impact of IES on students’ learning. Existing literature has pointed out that Hong Kong teachers were inexperienced in school-based assessment, or using standard-referenced reporting (rubrics or portfolio) to assess students’ performance (Yu 2009). The oversight of IES in research resonates with its role in liberal

studies as it constitutes only 20% of the total mark. Furthermore, IES results would be statistically moderated based on the students' performance in the public examination. Against such an examination-oriented assessment, many teachers and students regarded IES as an unimportant assignment (Chan and Bray 2014). It is only supplementary, not core in learning. The MIA program was designed and carried out against such an educational context.

3. Multiculturalism as Method

According to the Census in 2011, Hong Kong is a homogenous society with 94% of its 7-million population being ethnically Chinese. Among the ethnic minorities, Indonesians and Filipinos are the two largest groups (population: about 133,000 each), followed by the generic category "White" (55,236). The third to fifth principal ethnic minority groups are: Indians (28,616), Pakistanis (18,042), and Nepalis (16,518). Education and employment segregation are implicit, as most ethnic minority students study at one of four designated schools consisting of a "Chinese-only" section and an "international" section, with little social interaction. Like the education system, the job market is also ethnicized. Ethnic minorities are channeled into certain kinds of jobs, for instance, South Asians in security and Southeast Asians in domestic work and catering industry. There is a low degree of social integration of ethnic minorities in different aspects of daily life, and responses of both school teachers and students to our questionnaire survey showed they have little intercultural experience and sensibility.

Past studies on multicultural education in North America and Western Europe have pointed out that many schools have failed to implement multicultural education properly as it leans toward assimilation rather than pluralism (Eldering 1996, p. 322), or are unable and/or unwilling to address unequal power relations inherent in the larger social structure (Lustig 1997; Banks and Lynch 1986). With these in mind, MIA is devised based on three guiding principles: partnership, mutual empowerment, and sustainability. On the one hand MIA uses critical pedagogy (May and Sleeter 2010) and intercultural education (Davenport 2000; Dietz and Cortés 2011) to address the structural problems faced by ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong, and on the other hand we form relations of partnership with different ethnic communities to create projects that would make improvement from the ground up.

The MIA project was carried out with a different ethnic community each year: first the Indian community, then Nepali, and Pakistani in the third year. In total we recruited 25 participants, with two having participated in two workshops: Indian (7), Nepali (7), and Pakistani (13). The Chinese participants were university students on either bachelor or master level. We used a two-tier, train-the-trainer model, in three phases each year. The first phase involved seminars and fieldtrips to enhance participants' knowledge of the respective ethnic community and culture. In the second phase, participants formed small groups to design and carry out a community-based project using their newfound multicultural knowledge. A 'buddy program' was introduced in the second year, in which 14 Nepali secondary school students and their teacher took part. They partnered with Chinese participants to conduct four community-based projects. In the third and last stage, participants became cultural trainers and gave multimedia presentations on their projects to local secondary school students. In total these projects were presented nine times in five secondary schools (four mainstream schools and one designated school). These minars and projects were also developed into information kits and portable exhibitions. The former was sent to all secondary schools in Hong Kong, as well as social service organizations, and public libraries, free of charge. It was made available on line to encourage more adoption in classroom and training programs. Between 2013 and 2016, the exhibition was displayed at four community events, one territory-wide teachers training workshop, and cultural festivals at two universities. In addition, seminars and interactive activities were arranged as appropriate.

To examine the effectiveness of PAR in intercultural education in Hong Kong society, this paper focuses on the Nepali workshop with the buddy program. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with five MIA participants, four Nepali buddies, and five secondary schoolteachers. A comparison is drawn between the workshop in the second year and the workshops of the other two years. To capture the changes and nuances of interculturality in multiple contexts, ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, were used (Dietz and Cortés 2011). Content analysis was used to examine the power-point presentations and other products developed by the cultural trainers. We coded the collected data and used a grounded theory approach to identify the recurrent patterns.

3.1 Structural Constraints and Inactive Participation

Peter (pseudonym) was a master's student in anthropology and participated in both Indian and Nepali cultural workshops. He and his Chinese teammate were interested in a drama production on the difficulties faced by Nepali youth in Hong Kong. Five Nepali buddies joined their group, but Peter considered the project a failure. He said "We only met once. When I tried to make another appointment with them, I was stood up for six times. Whenever I arrived at the meeting place near their community, they would text me to say that they were not available."

Turns out the five Nepali buddies were high school students who were recommended by their teacher Puja to join the program. Puja said he could not make the MIA program participation official, because "the school wouldn't allow me to ask students to spend school time on the program, especially for the senior classes, as the teaching schedule is very tight. In addition, students in my school have very low motivation to join extracurricular activities as they found most of them very boring. So I had to encourage them individually and emphasize that the MIA project is different as it is more interactive than others." As the buddies could not use their school time to join the program, they had to use their leisure time. However, leisure time was often occupied by revision sessions and tuition classes so as to cope with the examination-oriented curriculum. Many students also took up part-time jobs to provide extra income for the family, or went on occasional visits to their hometown in Nepal. For instance, one of the buddies returned to Nepal to visit his relatives in the winter break and decided not to return to Hong Kong, but joined his relatives in the UK instead. Another buddy worked as kitchen hand in a Japanese restaurant in all his spare time to make ends meet. The Gurkha background of the Nepali community was related to a high degree of transnational mobility and a heavy emphasis on remittance (Banskota 1994). Parents often believed that their children would not have a chance to attend university in Hong Kong, so they would rather send them to study abroad or have them start working at a younger age to support the family. Extracurricular activities were given a low priority.

In addition, Peter commented that making a drama might be too challenging for the Nepali youth. He said, "Our Nepali buddies could tell us stories of difficulties that they meet in everyday life. However, when we asked them the cause of the problems, they could not explain it clearly. Without such an understanding, it is hard to select suitable materials to write a drama script." Peter said his role in the project was supposed to be a facilitator. He hoped that he and his teammate could assist the buddies to develop social awareness, build their capacity for critical reflection on their everyday life, and use an art form such as drama to voice their views. However, structural constraints limited the participation of their buddies, and without their consistent involvement, Peter could not complete the project.

3.2 Passive Participation as Contestation

Both Jane and Winnie graduated from the anthropology master program. They designed a community project called "Festival Exchange" in which Chinese and Nepali participants learned one another's traditional festivals. Three Nepali: Kala, her niece, and her niece's classmate became

their buddies. The two young women were Form 5 students and preparing for the public examination. Compared to other Nepali buddies, they were from an affluent family so they were spared from part-time employment. Yet their motivation for joining the program was also low. They presented themselves as “modern” and future-oriented, hence had little interest in “traditions”.

It was close to Chinese New Year, so Jane and Winnie arranged two field visits: one to a local market to buy festival food, and another to a flower market to buy New Year items. Jane and Winnie were joined by Kala and her sister to the visits, during which Jane and Winnie explained the symbolic meanings of Chinese rituals to them. For instance, Jane explained that new year to Chinese people meant renewal and they would buy new clothes to replace old clothes, even though the old ones were still usable. Kala responded that she finally understood why there was a second-hand market in her neighborhood during Chinese New Year as the sellers might collect those throw-away but valuable goods. Learning the practices of other cultures and relating it to their everyday life was a good demonstration of intercultural communication. However, this only occurred among the adults. Whenever Jane and Winnie asked questions about Nepali festivals, they were answered by the Nepali sisters. The two young women gave little or no response.

The two Nepali buddies grew up in Hong Kong, and spoke Nepali, Chinese, and English. They occasionally paid visits to their hometown in Nepal, and were familiar with both Chinese and Nepali cultures. However, they would delegate (or relegate) the ‘traditional’ role to the adults in the buddy group. “There are always black-outs in Nepal. It’s terrible!” One of the buddies recalled, and the other said, “As we grew up in Hong Kong, we’re not familiar with Nepali traditions. You better ask my aunt.” Nepal was an embarrassment to them. They would rather talk about the future. One said, “We are now taking aviation courses. If we fail in the public exam, we’ll try to be a flight attendant. Or I’ll join my sister in Australia to study nursing.” To scholars, this is a *bikas* (Nepalese: development) discourse in which Nepal represents traditional and the West represents modernity; the affiliation of the young with modernity has emerged since the 1980s, which has created identity politics across generations (Liechty 2003).

Another group in the MIA project also manifested a similar kind of identity politics. Jackie and her classmate in museum studies wanted to create an exhibition to introduce Nepali culture to the Chinese public. Two Nepali sisters joined their group. They first wanted to work on the topic of Nepali festivals, but it was quickly turned down by their teacher who explained that he had collected stories of ex-Gurkha soldiers and would like us to provide technical support. They had earlier brought the two Nepali buddies to the Hong Kong Museum of History to learn the skills in making displays. However, the teacher made decisions on the content. Jackie said in her interview, “I explained to [the teacher] that if we want to engage the Hong Kong audience and achieve intercultural communication, we should include different voices, like Gurkhas’ wives and the second and third generations of Gurkha descendants. But he disagreed. He said priority should be given to the ex-Gurkhas soldiers who were old.”

In the end, the group produced five displays including black-and-white pictures of ex-Gurkha men with a serious face and a wrinkled hand wearing a Gurkha ring with a kukri symbol. A masculine image, imbued with loss and sadness, was presented. This coincided with the ‘warrior gentlemen’ image in British Army literature (see Caplan 1995), exploited labor in academic studies (see Des Chene 1991), and ‘lahure’ (a desirable livelihood strategy) in popular belief in Nepal (see for example, Subedi 1999 and Sharma 2008). These representations are not necessarily agreeable to other Nepalis. As ex-Gurkhas and their descendants migrate overseas, they attempt to construct other Gurkha representations. We were invited to participate in Gurkha Diwas (Ancestors’ Day) organized by Nepali associations to honor Gurkha veterans. A week before the event, a cultural workshop was organized in which an ex-Gurkha was invited to share his experience especially in the Falklands War. About 60 people attended the workshop, and the majority were Nepali youths.

In the Q&A, most of the questions were on his relationship with his family. The youths asked: “How did you meet your wife? What’s the love story?”, “When you’re serving in the army, did you miss your family?”, “How were your children? Did they miss you?” The soldier did not answer the questions directly, but merely stressed that he had taken the oath of allegiance to the Queen, and he would give top priority to his military duty. Having a split household was common among Gurkha families, and the children were labeled *lahure kochorachori* literally meaning the children of lahure, which has the implication of spoiled children who lack parental guidance and are susceptible to deviant behaviors (Tang 2013). In many representations by ex-Gurkhas and the first generation of Nepali migrants, the heroic image of Gurkhas is often highlighted while familial aspects are under-discussed. Within this context, it is not surprising that the second and third generation of Nepali migrants would question this traditional practice.

From the participant observation of Nepali community activities, we found that the young generation of Nepalis in Hong Kong are eager to have an alternative voice about their identity vis-à-vis the older generation (Tam 2010). However, as shown in the buddy program, their voices might be unheard. Their passive participation in community events (including this buddy program) might be symptomatic of the conflicts of representations across generations in their community.

3.3 Critical Participation and Social Action

Keith had worked as a sports consultant in mainland China before he joined the master program in anthropology. He partnered with Wai-man (the second author) to carry out a project on South Asian sports. Three Form 4 Nepali students and one Form 2 student joined their group. In the first meeting, they discussed the sports topic that they wanted to introduce to the public. One of the Nepali buddies suggested lacrosse. He said this sport is also played in Nepal, but few people know about this. Yet, Nan suggested kabaddi. Kabaddi is a tagging game, widely popular in South Asia. The rules of the game vary from place to place. It was formalized and standardized in the 1950s by the national sports organizations in India, along with the nationalist movements at that time. It was then exported to other Asian countries. This sport was, therefore, said to be an embodiment of both Indianness and foreignness (Alter 2000). Comparatively, Nepal has different historical trajectories with Western powers. Urban itest ended to associate Western sports with modernity (*bikas*), whereas traditional sports such as kabaddi, with rurality and backwardness (Nelson 2009). Regarding the perception of kabaddi in Nepal, one of the Nepali buddies said, ‘Kabaddi was played only when we were small. After coming to Hong Kong, I’ve only played it once... it’s a game played in the rural area.’ However, Keith tried to convince them that kabaddi could be an urban game. He was an event organizer in 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games and responsible for the game kabaddi. Furthermore, his previous work experience had taught him how to produce a spectator sport. He explained to the buddies, “We can play rock music before the game and make some sound effects during the game. The audience will be attracted to the game not only by the actions but also the sound effects.”

For the project, the Nepali buddies carried out research on kabaddi and learned that this game was not only played by the South Asians but also players of other nations, such as Japan and Korea. Being international helped to change its public image. They designed logos and T-shirts to promote the game, and created a set of actions to explain the rules to the audience. The kabaddi presentation was done twice – once in university, and once in secondary school. The group was surprised by the positive response of the local Chinese: “I didn’t expect that they would love playing kabaddi and be so involved in the game! We taught them Nepalese language and gave them Nepali snacks as souvenirs. They also loved it.” Another Nepali buddy compared MIA to other extracurricular activities provided by the school. She said, We usually sit down in a classroom to listen to the teachers to share their [Chinese] cultures. But in this workshop, we have become the teachers teaching the Chinese our culture.”

Under the framework of urbanity and internationality, the Nepali buddies were ready to introduce their culture to the Chinese audience and embraced their teaching role in the intercultural communication. This experience led them to have acritical reflection on their intercultural experience in everyday life. One Nepali buddy was a committee member of the Student Association in the school. She said, “We enjoyed making friends with the Chinese when we taught them kabaddi. In our school, we also have Chinese classmates. But we seldom talk to them. The school tried to organize different kinds of activities, like Multicultural Night, to give us the opportunity to mingle. But the Chinese classmates seldom join these activities.”

We were invited to attend the Multicultural Night in their school in 2016. As described by the Nepali buddy, there was little involvement of the Chinese students in the event. Nine of the 10 performances were dances performed by Pakistani and Nepali students. Among the audience, the majority were ethnic minorities.

While many school activities failed to engage the Chinese students, the Nepali buddies said they were at the moment considering using kabaddi to build intercultural communication with their Chinese classmates. The Nepali buddy said, “Our main barrier was language. We could not speak Cantonese, and they could not speak English. But sports don’t require us to use any language. And kabaddi is fun. This should bring us together.” Meanwhile, the Nepali buddies also considered another impact that kabaddi might have: “I grew up in Nepal. We used to have much open space. That’s why we played kabaddi. But for the new generation like my younger brother, they’ve never played this game. In Hong Kong and Nepal, we’re facing the same problem – we’re losing the open space to road construction, building houses... If we can play kabaddi at the school, it’s also an excellent opportunity to let the juniors know this game.” We do not know whether the Nepali buddies were able to use kabaddi to induce a cultural change in their school, but their critical participation in the project has changed their views towards their traditional culture, their role in intercultural communication, and their perception of the relationships with the Chinese, especially at school. Furthermore, this project has exposed them to education other than formal schooling, such as participatory action research and intercultural learning, which helped them make connections between education and their everyday life.

4. Discussion: Who Needs the MIA Project?

In each school presentation, we emphasized that the MIA Project aims at not only providing information but also demonstrating how to transform information into knowledge and wisdom, which in turn enhances one’s cross-cultural competence. In our interviews with school teachers, all of them appreciated these educative values but at the same time also found it irrelevant in the current education curriculum. One teacher said they invited us merely because it was for their Career and Life Planning Program – introducing anthropology as a major subject in university. Two other teachers said it was for their English lessons since the presentation was conducted in English – it is difficult to tell how much English proficiency can be improved in such a one-off activity. Meanwhile, they also agreed that our topics were most relevant to the subject of Liberal Studies. However, they also pointed out some limitations. Under the current rigid education system, Liberal Studies as a core subject was allocated the least teaching hours (i.e. 270 hours) compared to Mathematics: 270 – 405 hours, Chinese language: 338 – 405 hours, and English language: 338 – 405 hours. With the tight teaching schedule, it is difficult to include more class activities. Furthermore, the topic of multiculturalism in Hong Kong, which one of the topics in Liberal Studies, has only appeared once in public examination. With the examination-oriented pedagogy, it is not surprising that the teachers have low motivation to teach this topic. It may also explain why few Hong Kong students would research on topics such as multiculturalism in Hong Kong in their IES. In contrast, personal growth and interpersonal relationships were the most common topics. While the teachers found that our MIA project was irrelevant in the current education system, their schools would also organize intercultural programs, such as study tours

and student exchange programs. However, the programs were usually connected with schools and organizations in mainland China and/or countries in Europe and North America. Thus, the teachers expressed that our program was a good complement to their intercultural program. Yet, all of them admitted that it was very unlikely that they would have any follow-up after the MIA presentation. Some said it was because there were no ethnic minority groups in their communities, and some said the overseas intercultural programs in their school have already met the needs of the students. In the whole discourse regarding intercultural education, South Asians in Hong Kong were made invisible, irrelevant and insignificant.

While the education system de-emphasizes intercultural education at the local level, the public imagination of multiculturalism at the community level is also rather superficial and ephemeral. For instance, we have been invited to present our projects at four community events. These community events were conducted as funfairs. Booths were set up in an enclosed venue, and participants were given a card to collect stamps from each booth to exchange for souvenirs. Our docents (i.e. volunteer workers) shared that few funfair participants would spend time to read our exhibits or be attentive to their explanations. In such context it was difficult to develop meaningful intercultural communication with the participants.

Even though the MIA project aims at partnership, it is hard to recruit participants from ethnic minority communities to participate in the project. From the Nepali workshop we learned the use of a buddy program. In the Pakistani workshop, we tried to implement the buddy program again. When we contacted the community leaders to help recruit members to join the program, the common response was that they did not find such a need as their community members already had a good understanding of their own culture. Comparing the Pakistani and Nepali communities, the former had social and religious organizations such as mosques and the Pakistani Club to maintain their cultures, whereas the latter was relatively fragmented. This was also the reason why Pujabrough this students to join the MIA project. But it is also possible that the Pakistani community used the refusal to collaborate as a defense mechanism to prevent minoritization.

In the evaluation of the MIA project, many respondents found the project effective in enhancing intercultural competence. However, with the practice of negligence of South Asian minorities in Hong Kong, it is difficult to implement community- and research-based intercultural activities at levels such as schools and social communities.

Conclusion

This study has shown that participatory action research (PAR), having collaboration between participants from university and ethnic minority students from local schools and co-developing social engagement project, could have several patterns: inactive participation, passive participation, and critical participation. Through the kabaddi project, the Nepali buddies relearned their culture and attempted to make a cultural change in their school. Unlike other PAR which usually directly applies the results of their project to their community, the kabaddi project was first experimented and transplanted in the wider community (e.g. universities and local mainstream schools) and reapplied in their school. This approach allows critical participation and social engagement at more levels. In the drama project, participants realized that the education system had failed them and turned to migration and part-time jobs, which caused them to be inactively participating in any academic projects. Despite these difficulties (e.g. internal dynamics and oppressive education system), the MIA project persisted in the integration of anthropology into intercultural education, and was found to be valuable to ethnic minority members, university participants, students and teachers in local secondary schools, and social communities. We believe that if Hong Kong is to maintain its social and economic vibrancy, it is critical to enhance access to PAR, allowing citizens to build the capacity to aspire and make a change in their community, which in turn forms the basis of social resilience and cultural vibrancy.

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