

REMEMBERING

Restoration Heroes in Modern Japan

By Michael Wert



From left to right: Saigō Takamori, Sakamoto Ryōma, and Oguri Tadamasu.

Image source: Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures site at <http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/contents/index.html>.

Just as the American Civil War lives on in historical fiction, television series, and movies, so too does the Meiji Restoration of 1868 continue to evoke memories of heroism, pride, and tragedy. In the centuries preceding the Restoration, Japan had been split into domains ruled by military lords (*daimyō*), with the head of the Tokugawa family as the country’s nominally leading warrior (*shogun*). During this time, the emperor and court nobles lived in Kyoto, but they possessed little political power. In the first half of the nineteenth century, domestic politics, economic problems, social change, and pressures from the West weakened the Tokugawa regime. These trends coincided with a new intellectual movement that recognized the importance of the emperor in Japanese history. Several powerful *daimyō* used the newfound legitimizing force of the emperor to overthrow the Tokugawa regime, “restoring” him as the symbolic ruler of Japan in 1868. Portrayals of these nation-defining events change throughout time, reflecting the views of society during specific historical moments. Whether in the call for greater political participation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reaction to Japan’s growing imperial aspiration in the 1920s and 30s, celebrating the economic boom of the 1960s, or expressing apprehension during the troubled 1990s, people have looked to the Meiji Restoration for models and solutions to contemporary problems.

The following essay traces several major themes in the portrayal of three Meiji Restoration heroes. Two of the most popular heroes in Japan, Saigō Takamori and Sakamoto Ryōma, were supporters of the Meiji emperor and powerful *daimyō* who opposed the Tokugawa shogunate. As samurai, Saigō and Sakamoto participated in pro-imperial, anti-shogunate activities during the 1860s, and they have a long history of being appropriated by writers and academics in Japan since the nineteenth century. Saigō’s image resurfaced often before World War II, a time when the implications of his actions were felt the most. On the other hand, much of post-war historical memory has moved away from the “great men” of history, focusing instead on men of humbler origins, like Sakamoto. As a counter to the pro-Meiji heroes, I offer the case of a Tokugawa bureaucrat named Oguri Tadamasu. His popularity is a recent phenomenon, owing to the efforts of citizens in Gunma Prefecture, where he has been commemorated as a local hero for over a century.

The film *The Last Samurai* recently introduced American audiences to Saigō Takamori. Saigō is portrayed as a paragon of samurai identity who teaches the values of *bushidō* to a captured American captain (played by Tom Cruise)



Saigō Takamori.

Image source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Takamori_Saigo.jpg.

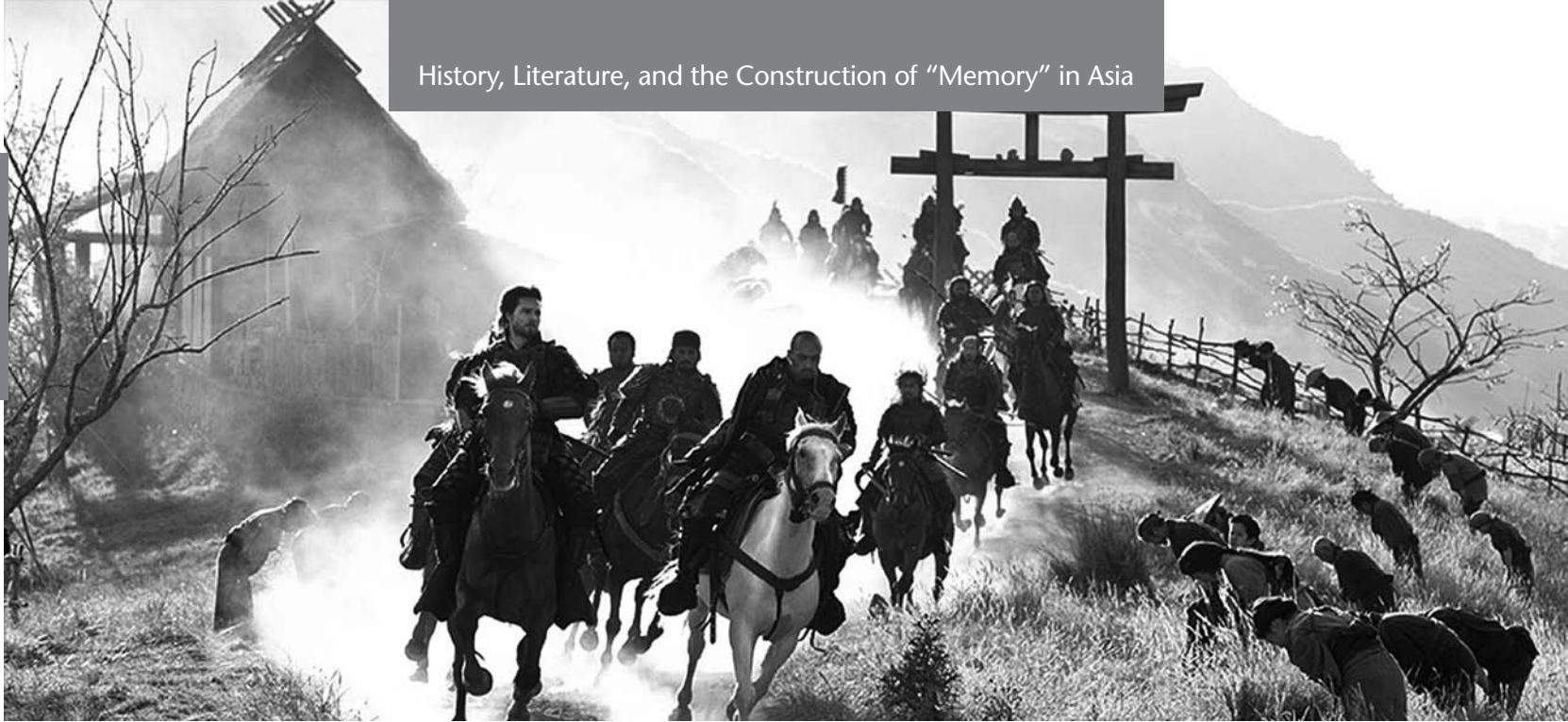
SAIGŌ TAKAMORI IN PREWAR JAPAN

The film *The Last Samurai* recently introduced American audiences to Saigō Takamori. Saigō is portrayed as a paragon of samurai identity who teaches the values of *bushidō* to a captured American captain (played by Tom Cruise), hired by the Japanese government to help modernize its military.¹ Although the film is largely fiction, it captures the tension Saigō felt between loyalty to the young Meiji emperor, whom he helped bring to power as one of the Meiji Restoration leaders, and opposition to the changes made by his rivals in the Meiji government. In 1873, he resigned his post in the central government out of frustration, and in 1877, he led the Satsuma Rebellion. Former samurai disaffected by the Meiji oligarchy attacked the military garrisons stationed in the former Satsuma domain in the southwest. The government suppressed the rebellion after only two months—Saigō was killed in the fighting and labeled a “traitor.” These events did little to sully Saigō’s image. In fact, many considered him a god and claimed to see his image in a star.² Several kabuki plays, such as *The Morning East Wind Clearing the Clouds of the Southwest*, portrayed Saigō’s heroism in the rebellion within a year after it had ended.³

The government capitulated to the public’s love of Saigō, and he was officially pardoned in 1889, the same year as the proclamation of the Meiji Constitution. This prompted a minor “Saigō boom” that began in the 1890s. His first biography was published in five volumes from 1894–1895. A couple of Satsuma natives, who had long planned to erect a statue of Saigō, achieved their



Yoshu Chikanobu Ichikawa Danjūrō IX in the role of Saigō Takamori, with other actors, 1878. Image courtesy of Scripps College, Claremont, CA.



Promotional poster photo for the Last Samurai. © 2004 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

goal in 1898 with contributions from thousands of fans across Japan and the Meiji Emperor himself. The statue remains a popular attraction in Tokyo's Ueno Park.

Even before his death, Saigō had become popular among those who opposed the Meiji oligarchy. The first group to appropriate Saigō's image was the People's Rights Movement. Started in the mid-1870s by former samurai such as Saigō's colleague Itagaki Taisuke, this political movement demanded greater representation in national government, mostly for wealthy men. Even those not directly associated with the People's Rights Movement appropriated Saigō's image. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a liberal intellectual and educator, regarded Saigō as a hero who fought for all people and against the dictatorial Meiji government.⁴ Violent attacks against the government also invoked Saigō's rebellious past. The first such comparison was made between Saigō and Kōtoku Shūsui, a socialist and anarchist. Like many socialists, he criticized Japan's costly war with Russia (1904–1905). He rejected the emperor-centered ideology, and was tied to the High Treason Incident, a plot by anarchists to kill the Meiji emperor. Although Kōtoku was not involved in the plot, his prominence as a known radical resulted in his arrest and execution in 1911. Many writers criticized the Meiji government for using the High Treason Incident as a pretext for rounding up dissidents, and some used the thirty-third anniversary of Saigō's death as a way to speak out. Novelist Tokutomi Roka compared Kōtoku to Saigō, saying that both were “assassinated,” not “executed,” and mislabeled as “traitors” for trying to do something new.⁵ Some even asked that Kōtoku's life be spared—they argued that Saigō too had been labeled a “traitor” before being declared a hero.⁶ Saigō became a nationalist during the 1930s, a decade when Japan was often compared to fascist Germany and Italy. During this time police censored critics and leftist ideology, privately formed ultranationalist groups, assassinated politicians, and the military dominated the government. Members of the Imperial



Statue of Saigō Takamori and his dog in Ueno Park, Taitō-ku, Tokyo. Image source: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saigo-Takamori1332.jpg>.

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Sakamoto followed the path of many young samurai activists of his time. He fled his obligations to the lord of the Tosa domain and joined those who declared loyalty to the emperor.

Way Faction, a group within the imperial military that advocated totalitarian rule by the emperor, looked to Saigō as the model of a true warrior. They attempted to overthrow the government in 1936, in an incident similar to the Satsuma Rebellion, and invoked the spirit of Saigō’s rebellion to justify their own coup d’état.⁷ Many participants were influenced by Kita Ikki, a socialist turned ultranationalist, who often wrote about Saigō and described the Satsuma Rebellion as a failed nationalist revolution.⁸ Nationalist renderings of Saigō’s past also incorporated elements of anti-Western thought. The 1934 publication of *An Accurate Biography of Saigō the Great* opened with a homily expressing the hope that someone like Saigō would appear to defeat the “English Shogunate,” just as Saigō defeated the Tokugawa shogunate.⁹

It is a testament to the malleability of history that Saigō was appropriated by a wide range of groups who opposed each other, and whose politics Saigō would have thought reprehensible. Even Saigō’s pardon by the Meiji leaders attests to the power of historical memory. Why did they pardon him even though many within the government were his rivals and considered his actions unforgivable? Perhaps they felt that leaving Saigō’s popularity unaddressed further alienated them from the sentiment of the people.

SAKAMOTO RYŌMA IN POSTWAR JAPAN

Although Saigō continued to inspire television dramas, historical novels and *manga* (graphic novels) after the War, the postwar historical memory of Restoration heroes was dominated by Sakamoto Ryōma. Sakamoto followed the path of many young samurai activists of his time. He fled his obligations to the lord of the Tosa domain and joined those who declared loyalty to the emperor. Although initially anti-Western, he eventually became convinced of the benefits of opening up to the West, participated in the formation of a proto-navy, and brokered a deal between two domains that led the Meiji Restoration. His pro-emperor, anti-shogunate activism eventually caught up with him in 1867 when Tokugawa supporters killed him in Kyoto.

Sakamoto’s history was not completely absent in pre-World War II discourse of the Meiji Restoration. He appeared alongside Saigō among writers within the Popular Rights movement, but in a different guise. Sakamoto was portrayed as a hero who helped bring about a successful Restoration, while Saigō’s rebellion was an attempt to complete the putative liberalizing spirit left unfinished in the Restoration. Novelists and biographers alike championed Sakamoto as a hero who worked to destroy feudalism and create a new Japan. During the Russo-Japanese War, he was portrayed as the “father of the Japanese navy.” Even Kōtoku Shūsui wrote about Sakamoto’s exploits as one of the “men of true spirit” active in the Restoration years. But before World War II, he remained an obscure figure among the general population. During the Russo-Japanese War, even when Sakamoto appeared in the empress’s dream to reassure her of Japan’s victory, she had to ask a court official, conveniently from Tosa, about Sakamoto’s identity.¹⁰



Portrait of Sakamoto Ryōma.

Image source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/Sakamoto_Ry%C5%8Dma.jpg.

Oguri Tadamasu . . . provides us with an example of how the losers of the Restoration were rehabilitated in the national consciousness and how the efforts of local people, rather than academics or famous writers, affect the landscape of national memory.

Shiba Ryōtarō, the most widely read historical novelist in the second half of the twentieth century, is responsible for rescuing Sakamoto from anonymity in the postwar era. Shiba wrote over 200 books, and his collected works, including fiction, essays, and lectures, amount to sixty-eight volumes. Narita Ryūichi calls Shiba the most popular writer of postwar Japan because of Shiba’s wide readership and the broad range of topics and media he covers. Moreover, Narita considers Shiba to be a “writer of the people” because he always addressed the issue of how Japan came to be.¹¹ Shiba’s historical fiction of Sakamoto Ryōma, *Ryōma Goes (Ryōma ga yuku)*, serialized in a national newspaper from the early to mid-1960s, reflects the concerns of that decade. Several major themes in Shiba’s writing about Sakamoto included the legacy of World War II and the high economic growth. Postwar Japan embraced decentralization and democratization. The emperor had been reduced to a symbol of the people; he was no longer Japan’s leader. Although Sakamoto supported the imperial cause during the Meiji Restoration, Shiba distanced Sakamoto from the die hard, pro-imperial rhetoric of the Restoration years because it was too reminiscent of the emperor ideology that led Japan into World War II.¹²

Instead, Shiba described Sakamoto as wanting to destroy the shogunate for the sake of the country, because the shogunate had lost its ability to hold the country together. Rather than start a bloody revolution, Shiba’s Sakamoto sought a more peaceful transition. In fact, Shiba wanted to remind Japanese about those who died during World War II by comparing the war to the Meiji Restoration.¹³ The economic miracle of the 1960s also influenced Shiba’s rehabilitation of Sakamoto. Revitalization of Japan’s economy after the war had paid off. Investments in new industries, a high rate of personal savings, and rising exports drove the ten percent annual growth rate experienced during the 1960s. Shiba portrayed Sakamoto as an economic thinker who understood the value of money and commerce, and was convinced that he should engage in commerce for the country’s future, not simply his own. This positive view of money marked a watershed moment in historical fiction more generally. Until *Ryōma Goes*, most historical novels portrayed only villains as having financial savvy.¹⁴

The hundredth anniversary of the Meiji Restoration in 1968 and the media boosted Sakamoto’s image. A scholarly reassessment of the Restoration boomed in the 1960s in anticipation of the centennial, and given the dark legacy of imperial Japan, not all of those histories placed the Restoration leaders in a positive light. The old heroes and fervent imperial loyalists retreated into the background while those with more tempered attitudes like Sakamoto found a new audience. In 1968, a year long historical drama depicting Sakamoto’s life, based on Shiba’s novel, aired on Japan’s national television station, NHK. Young people have been captivated by his adventuresome spirit ever since.

OGURI TADAMASA, CREATION OF A NEW HERO

Just as Japanese of the late nineteenth century faced disorder as they approached a new millennium, so too did Japanese citizens of the 1990s. The bursting of the bubble economy, government scandals, calamities such as the Kobe earthquake, and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, were just some of the reasons why many referred to the 1990s as the “lost decade.” The previous heroes still remained in the popular imagination, but new ones emerged, particularly those on the losing side of the Meiji Restoration. One such figure was Oguri Tadamasu, a former samurai bureaucrat who worked for the Tokugawa regime. He provides us with an example of how the losers of the Restoration were rehabilitated in the national consciousness and how the efforts of local people, rather than academics or famous writers, affect the landscape of national memory.



Portrait of Oguri Tadamasu.

Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oguri_Tadamasu.jpg.

Oguri might not inspire a call to action as Saigō and Sakamoto do, but his portrayal as a tireless and honest samurai bureaucrat made him a hero in the 1990s.

Oguri's background did not fit those of the typical Restoration heroes. He opposed any compromise with the emperor, the court, or the major daimyō, and advocated fighting against the imperial forces, a position for which he was killed in the spring of 1868. In the dominant historical narrative of the Meiji Restoration, Oguri was either vilified or ignored. In the late nineteenth century, former Tokugawa shogunate officials mourned his death as a great loss for modern Japan, and used him as a way to critique the Meiji government. But as a middle-aged, married bureaucrat, his past lacked the adventure that inspired political activists.

Oguri's image as a local hero in Gunma Prefecture, where he was killed, enjoyed a resurgence in 1915. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the Yokosuka naval base, and Oguri's one legacy that had an impact on prewar Japan, owing to its role in Japan's naval victories. Local Gunma historians participated in the Yokosuka City celebrations, passing out pamphlets containing a short biography of Oguri. In 1922, Yokosuka City wanted to build a bust of Oguri and the French architect who constructed the Yokosuka naval base. City officials received contributions from Gunma citizens who became more aware of Oguri as a local hero. Gunma historians wrote articles about Oguri convincing citizens of the need to recognize him as a local and national hero.

Until the 1990s, Oguri had little presence in national popular culture as it related to the Restoration. The only national attention he received occurred when television followed the exploits of would-be treasure hunters, searching for the Tokugawa shogunate money reputedly buried in the mountains of Gunma. According to the legend, Oguri had been charged with burying some of the shogunate's money for later use against domestic enemies.

Locals succeeded in promoting Oguri to a larger audience. Historians wrote more books about Oguri, Gunma television stations produced documentaries and historical dramas about him, and anniversary celebrations of his life, held at the temple where Oguri lived, gave him greater exposure in the region. The Prefectural Governor and the mayors of Kurabuchi Village (where Oguri was killed) and Yokosuka City petitioned NHK to create a drama about him. In January of 2001, the first full treatment of his life appeared in the annual New Year historical drama. Since then, more books and his own *manga* series have come out, and he has even made it into a Japanese high school history textbook, sure signs of his rising status in Japanese historical consciousness.

In the 1990s, historical novelists visited Gunma to learn more about Oguri, and adopted many of the major narrative themes of his life from local researchers. In 1994, Shiba Ryōtarō wrote of Oguri:

Oguri was a patriot in every bone of his body, but he wasn't the type to talk about patriotism. Real patriotism is not about getting loaded and letting the tears flow while talking big. In such times, there are as many of those kinds of patriots as there are dogs in the mountains, fields and towns barking so loudly it bursts my eardrums. Oguri was not that kind of patriot. He sent a new energy through the day to day affairs (of government).¹⁵

This differed from his portrayal of Oguri in *Ryōma Goes*, where Shiba blames Oguri for endangering Japan's independence by relying too much on the French.¹⁶ The extent to which he has changed his mind over the last twenty years suggests just how far Japan has gone in reassessing its past.

CONCLUSION

Saigō, Sakamoto, and Oguri share similarities regarding how and why they are remembered. First, they were all samurai. Commoners in the Meiji period have long been studied by academics and local historians alike, but few played a decisive role in the events of the Meiji Restoration. Saigō and Sakamoto are remembered because they were part of the adventure shared by many samurai during the Restoration years. Oguri might not inspire a call to action as Saigō and Sakamoto do, but his portrayal as a tireless and honest samurai bureaucrat made him a hero in the 1990s.

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The second commonality in remembering these men is the role of local historians. Both famous writers and academics often rely on these grassroots enthusiasts for rich, detailed information. Shiba's novel about Sakamoto is based on an 1885 novel by a local author and member of the People's Rights Movement.¹⁷ In his biography of Sakamoto Ryōma, Marius Jansen noted that a great debt is owed to local historians, who wrote some of Sakamoto's most comprehensive biographies and published his collected writings.¹⁸ Local people also had the initiative to create memorials in both local and national spaces. Former Satsuma residents were responsible for the erection of Saigō's statue in Ueno Park that commemorated him before he ever received a pardon from the Meiji state. Likewise, in 1928 locals of Kochi City in Shikoku erected a statue of Sakamoto that faces toward the Pacific—deliberately imitating the Statue of Liberty that faces the Atlantic. Local commemoration never ceases. In 2003, the Kōchi City airport was recently renamed “Kochi-Ryoma Airport” in honor of their hero.

Finally, these men suffered violent deaths. Traumatic death often leads to intense historical memory, as is true of the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, or dropping atomic bombs on Japan. The Meiji Restoration was not nearly as bloody as these events, but the controversies surrounding the deaths of Saigō, Sakamoto, and Oguri will always remain. Moreover, they died at the moment when modern Japan was formed. The association between their deaths and this reverberating occurrence has forced Japan to reflect on what has been lost in the process, and what might be endangered in the future. ■



Statue of Sakamoto Ryōma. Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Sakamoto_Ryoma_on_Katsurahama.jpg.

NOTES

1. For a historical review of the film, see <http://www.willamette.edu/~rloftus/LastSamurai.htm>. On the modern construction of the bushidō ideal, see Karl Friday, “Bushidō or Bull? A Medieval Historian's Perspective on the Imperial Army and the Japanese Warrior Tradition” in *The History Teacher* (27) May 3, 1994.
2. For English translations of newspaper articles about the star see Noriko Berlinguez-Kōno, “How did Saigō Takamori Become a National Hero after his Death? The political uses of Saigō's Figure and the Interpretation of *Seikanron*” in Sven Saaler, Wolfgang Schwentker, *The Power of Memory in Modern Japan* (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2008). For a recent biography of Saigō see Mark Ravina, *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004).
3. James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, *Kabuki Plays on Stage: Restoration and Reform, 1872–1905* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 18–19.
4. Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), 221. See also Miyazawa, 192.
5. Miyazawa Seiichi, *Meiji ishin no saisōzō: kindai nihon no kigen shinwa (The Reinvention of The Meiji Restoration: The Myth of Historical Origin of Modern Japan)* (Tokyo Aoki Shoten, 2005), 43.
6. Morris, 222.
7. *Ibid.*, 179.
8. *Ibid.*, 223.
9. Miyazawa, 142–143.
10. Marius Jansen, *Sakamoto Ryōma and the Meiji Restoration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), x.
11. Narita Ryūichi, *Shiba Ryōtarō no bakumatsu-meiji: “Ryōma ga yuku” to “Saka no ue no kumo” wo yomu* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbunsha, 2003), 6–8. Shiba wrote over two hundred books in his lifetime. His collected works amount to sixty-eight volumes. Some of his novels have become the basis for movies and NHK historical television dramas.
12. *Ibid.*, 75, 136.
13. *Ibid.*, 69–70.
14. *Ibid.*, 40.
15. Shiba Ryōtarō, *Meiji to iu kokka: jo (The State of Meiji: Volume One)* (Tokyo: Nihon hōsō shuppan kyōkai, 1994), 38.
16. Narita, 121.
17. *Ibid.*, 87.
18. Jansen, x–xi.

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