

Eviction of the Middle Class & the New Role of Thai Buddhism: A Study of the Wang Lee Community, Bangkok.¹

Pthomrerk Ketudhat
Faculty of Sociology & Anthropology
Thammasat University

In Thai society, eviction is generally associated with slums and low-income city dwellers. The middle class, on the contrary, represents a well educated, more income stable, politically active and powerful social class. They are thought to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle and housing security. However, recent economic socio-political changes challenge such beliefs.

This paper is an attempt to examine the struggle of a middle class community, *Wang Lee*, against eviction from its shop-house buildings rented three generations ago from the Yannawa Buddhist temple property. It then focuses on the organization, tactics and strategies of this community fighting for their tenant rights, contributing to an understanding of wider issues, concerning middle class social movements as agents of civil society with a role in the democratization of Thailand. In addition, it investigates the new social issues concerning the changing role of Buddhist institutions in relation with neighboring communities.

Buddhism and Society

It is widely accepted that Buddhist temples were once at the center of community in Thailand, contributing a wide variety of knowledge to their communities – from Buddhist philosophy, arts, and literacy to social science, medicine, and martial arts. Here I will trace the means by which this has shifted in the last century and a half; however, a brief sketch of how Buddhism has, and in some ways continues to, influence everyday life seems in order first.

It is said that life of the Thai-Buddhist people use to revolve around Buddhist temples from birth to death. The Buddhist concept of “Karma” (the law of cause

and effect describing how life does not begin with birth and end with death but is closely linked to the volitional acts committed in previous lives) has continuously played a significant role in Thai society. Wealthy people, nobles, and royalty donated their land, money, and serfs to the temples, hoping to meet peace and happiness in their next lives. Daily food offering to the monks was, and still is, a general practice. Traditionally, monks and novices were members of the community where the temple is located. Akin Rabibhadana (1996:144-145) suggests that:

... almost every male Thai spent a certain period of his life varying from a few months to years as a novice or a monk ... From all appearances, the status of a monk was very high in Thai society. A layman of whatever status and rank, with the exception of the king, had to pay respect to a monk. When a boy was ordained as a novice, his parents had to pay respect to him ... Thai people conceive the world of the monks as another world, separate from their own. Thus, a separation between the religious organization and governmental organization was made, each constituting separate spheres of action called *Phra Satsana* (the realm of religion) and *Phra Ratcha Ana Chak* (the kingdom).

Akin went on to conclude that monkhood was not only “the rite of passage for boys before entering the adult world” and a route to social mobility, but it was also one way of avoiding government conscription and could at times relieve a person from the domination and oppression of his superior.

Significant reform of Buddhism started in 1833 when Prince Mongkut entered the monkhood and spent his next 27 years as a Buddhist monk. According to Wyatt:

...the more he learned of the core of Buddhist teachings and the original practices of the religion, the more dissatisfied he was with the current state of Buddhism in Siam. Monks and laypeople alike, he came to think, blindly followed the Buddhism of their fathers and grandfathers without thorough knowledge of the doctrines and teachings of the original texts ... By the late 1830's, Mongkut was invited by the king to move ... (from Wat Samorai temple) ... to Wat Bowonniwet, where he became abbot and in effect the head of a separate order within the Siamese monkhood. Mongkut named it *Thammayutika*, the “Order Adhering to the Dhamma,” the teachings of the Buddha, as contradistinguished from the older order, the *Mahanikai*, to whom Mongkut derogatively referred as the “Order of Long-Standing Habit (Wyatt 1984: 176).

The reform Thammayutika sect of Thai Buddhism later became an important political support when Prince Mongkut came to the throne as Rama IV in 1851, the same

year that the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, Chatsworth, England took place. The Thammayutika also played a significant role in the education reform during the reign of king Rama V. Prince Wachirayanwarorot (1860-1921), who later became supreme patriarch of all Buddhism in Thailand, was head of the sect and laid a foundation of modern village schools in 1898. Instead of the basic traditional education for literacy through religious texts, the new school system used standardized syllabi and textbooks developed by government. As Wyatt notes:

They introduced rural youth, not only to basic literacy in a standardized script and language ... in place of local scripts and dialects, but also to modern Western-style mathematics and science (Wyatt 1984: 217).

Thus the domination of state over Buddhist institutions in education reform interrupted the long history of relationship between temple and community.

Legislation: The Realm of Religion and the Power of the State

It is possible to understand the role of the state and administrative structure of Buddhist organization through a brief survey of legislation. The Sangha Administration Act of 1902 separated Buddhist administration from state government. The Central Buddhist Administration was thus made to consist of eight senior monks of the two sects, called *Mahathera Samakom* (Council of the Elders), and to act as an advisory body to the king who looked after the affairs of the entire Buddhist organization. Even though the “*Sangharaja*” (Supreme Patriarch) is not mentioned in the 1902 Act, king Rama VI had appointed Prince Wachirayanwaroros to the position in 1910.

The Sangha Administration Act of 1943 brought the next great change to the Buddhist administration. As Kusalasaya describes:

The organization of the Sangha in Thailand (according to the 1943 Act) was on a line similar to that of the state. The *Sangharaja* or the Supreme Patriarch is the highest Buddhist dignitary of the Kingdom. He is chosen by the King, in consultation with the government. The *Sangharaja* appoints a council of Ecclesiastical Ministers headed by the *Sangha Nayaka* whose position is analogous to that of the Prime Minister of the State. Under the *Sangha Nayaka* there function four ecclesiastical boards, namely the Board of Ecclesiastical Administration, the Board of Education, the Board of Propagation and the Board of Public Works. Each of the boards has a *Sangha Montri* (equivalent to a minister in the secular administration) with his assistants ... The Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council, corresponding to the Cabinet, consists of ten members ... There is a

Consultative Assembly (*Sangha Sabha*), equivalent to the National Assembly, the members of which number 45, selected from various important monasteries. The *Sangha Sabha* acts as an Advisory Body to the Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council. ... Each monastery has its abbot appointed by the Ecclesiastical Ministerial Council in consultation with local people (Kusalasaya 2001: 26-27).

The 1943 Act was an attempt to unify the two rival sects. Yet it caused more conflict and protest concerning chain of command, especially in 1949, by the Thammayutika. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, then prime minister, eventually abolished the 1943 Act.

The Sangha Administration Act of 1962 was then enacted, with the separation of the two sects. It brought back the *Mahathera Samakom* (Council of the Elders) headed by *Sangharaja* (Supreme Patriarch). The 1962 Act is the basic outline of the current Sangha Administration Act of 1992. The Council now consists of eight senior monks of the two sects. The king selects the Supreme Patriarch who serves as the president of the 12 member *Mahathera Samakom*. It has full authority concerning all Thai Buddhist affairs: administrative, legislative, and juridical. The Council appoints the abbot of each temple in the nation. Each abbot in turn has absolute power to administrate his temple, including the selection of Temple Committee members. The temple is, legally, considered to be a manifestation of State agency and the abbot to be a “juristic person”.

Traditionally, the abbot was selected from among the senior monks of the temple. He normally was a member of the community in which the temple was located. However, the 1992 Act authorized the administrative power of the *Mahatera Samakom* to appoint senior monks *from anywhere* to become abbot. Occasionally, an abbot needs political support from the temple committee to govern the temple affairs, including his temple development projects. Temple committee members, who are selected from the community, cannot be a reliable support for the “alien” abbot. The abbot, then, is able to appoint his own committee by choosing “outsiders” of high position and influence, including politicians, businessmen or investors, military or police generals, high ranking government officers, noble and royals. The community is thus finally excluded out of their own neighboring-temple.

Wang Lee Community

The word ‘community’ requires a clarification, here. The term is not only translated from English but the concept itself is also recently imported into Thai society. Traditionally, the word *muu ban* (village), *ban* (household), *yan* or *bang* (neighborhood) is an equivalent. It refers to mutual relationships among “group” members rather than the formal structure of the organization. Wang Lee is no exception. It did not

formally organize until faced with the crisis.

Wang Lee community is located on the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River near Wat Yannawa Temple in Bangkok. There is no reliable document to confirm when the community started. However, oral history of some families in the community indicate that their “great grandfathers” were the first generation to settle down. Shortly after newspapers reported the eviction of Wang Lee, a number of old Thai-Chinese came to pay their “last visit” to the community. They told their versions of childhood memories of traveling from China to embark at the port of Wang Lee.

Trade relationships with China have played an important role in Thai history, and particularly for the Wang Lee community. It is widely accepted among historians that Prince Chetsadabodin had a strong trade relationship with China. He ascended to the throne as Phra Nangklao or Rama III in 1824 when British forces invaded lower Burma. Throughout his reign the major income of Siam derived from the Junk Trade. As the inscription at the base of the King Rama III statue reads at Wat Yannawa Temple:

During his reign, King Rama III managed to solve financial problems which had accumulated since the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 (2310 B.E.). The economy was fully restored and quickly developed through trading with foreign countries. His Kingdom became wealthy... In recognition of his vision in trading, the whole nation honoured him with a designation “Father of Thai Trade”.

According to the chronicle of Wat Yannawa Temple, the original name of the temple was ‘Wat Kok Kwai’. It is believed that the temple was built in the late Ayutthaya Period (mid seventeenth to mid eighteenth century AD.). King Taksin (1767-1782) promoted the temple under royal patronage. After donating a new temple building, King Rama I renamed the temple “*Wat Kok Kra Bue*”. Major renovation of the temple was made in 1844 by King Rama III. In commemoration of the temple, he built a junk-like stupa. According to a legend, the unconventional stupa was built to remind the Siamese of the Chinese Junk trade, since the western trade under steamer was rapidly increasing, and the junk would likely soon disappear. King Rama III finally renamed the cite ‘Wat Yannawa Temple’ or temple of the sea-going vessel.

There is a strong indication that the Wang Lee community was established during the reign of King Rama III, founded by a small group of Chinese immigrants. They were the first generation, earning their living by working at the dock as coolies or opening small shop house businesses. These immigrants rented a small piece of land from the temple, and built wooden shop houses. The memory of wooden houses can be heard from most of the families in the community.

When Siam opened to the western world, the Chinese community’s participation in commercial industry expanded quickly. This community was located in the modern day China Town or *Yawat* area. King Rama IV (1851-1868)



constructed the 'New Road' of *Charoen Krung* road linking downtown Bangkok with the major business area of *Yawarat* to *Yannawa* and *Tanon Tok*.

The history of the business trade of the area provides a history of the community's growth and architecture as well. In 1908, during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), a group of Sino-Siamese established "The Sino-Siam Steam Navigation Co. Ltd." This was a reaction to the monopolization of shipping and transportation of the Nord German Lloyd Co.Ltd. (Vee Sakul 1949: 6-11, Leung Arun 1980: 103). Vee Sakul confirmed that "the newly established company" built the port, called *Hua Siam* or *Siam Rung Ruang* (Prosperous Siam), at Wat Yannawa and rented four steam ships from a Norwegian company (Vee Sakul 1949: 12-14). The rival German shipping company came to an end when the First World War broke out. The Sino-Siam Steam Navigation sailed between Bangkok - Singapore - Hong Kong - Shing Tao - Han Kao weekly. Hua Siam port then became a major gateway of the Chinese immigrants to Bangkok. The profit of the port was spent in building new wooden shop houses and warehouses. These wooden shop houses were single storey, built on each side of the road leading to the port by the river (Song Sorn 2006: 2). In 1913, the Sino-Siam Steam Navigation faced serious financial problems and went out of business. In 1923 the temple allowed Mr. Yam Pak Ruk, a Chinese businessman, to rent the property, and it was once again used as a cargo and passenger port. Between 1926-1927, the temple demolished the wooden shop houses and built two storey concrete shop houses instead. (These buildings stood until eviction in 2006.) The Wang Lee family rented the port in 1929, and since then the port has been known as Wang Lee Port. Finally, the Thai Shipping Company, a state enterprise company, took over the port in 1940. The shipping business at Wat Yannawa port declined shortly after World War II when the Klong Toey Port, operated by Port Authority of Thailand, opened in 1951.

Population Profile

The total number of the Wang Lee population prior to the eviction is unknown. It is quite common that many residents responded quickly to the eviction notice, accepting compensation and moving out. This group was composed mainly of white-collar workers with high salaries and a considerable amount of savings: some owned a rented house or apartment, some stayed with the family of their children, and some spent their savings on a down payment for a new house or apartment. Those who resisted moving were either low income earners or those waiting to bargain for greater compensation.

A survey by a group of undergraduate students from Thammasat University indicated that, in November 2006, 41 rooms were still fighting for their rights while 28 rooms had moved out. Among them, 8 rooms refused to provide any information to the students. The rest comprised a total number of 201 individuals, 112 female

and 89 male. Twenty-two belonged to the age group 10-14 years old, 30 belonged to the age group 15-24 years old, 115 belonged to the age group between 26-59 years old, and 27 belonged to the age group over 60 years old. The oldest member of the community was 108 years old and the youngest was 14 months old. The rough estimate of the total population prior to the eviction was between 420-450 individuals. It is extremely difficult to provide the total number of family units. From the survey, some extended families consisted of eight members, with three generations, but some families consisted of single parents of two individuals. It is worth noting that 3-5 rooms were rented only for business purposes: their residents located outside the community.

Economically speaking, residents' incomes were widely distributed. Although survey data for income among evicted community members is, usually, far from reliable, the available figures indicate the highest monthly income to be approximately 75,000 baht (US \$1,875)¹ and the lowest approximately 8,000 baht (US \$200). The average is between 15,000-30,000 baht per month (US \$375-750). The high income earners had their own business, the middle income earners were white-collar salary persons, and the lowest income groups earned their living by selling food and via low-skill labor. As a study of modern economic change in Thailand by Walden Bello suggests:

On the demand side were the new rich and, equally important, the new middle class that was spinning off from the prosperity of the 1980's and early 1990's. For the real estate developers, the middle class were those people who were making between 15,000 and 30,000 baht a month. The middle class, according to one prominent economist, probably made up some 17 to 18 per cent of the population. In Bangkok alone, there were over 1,783,000 people who were estimated to be in the middle class, and 57 per cent of these in 1993 were house owners (Bello 1989: 25).

Phongpaichit and Baker confirmed "the average real per capita income [rose] ... to reach US \$ 2,740 in 1995" (1998: 281).

Temple-Community Relationship

When my father was still alive, he always donated charcoal and wooden sticks for the funerals at the temple. Most of my family graduated from primary school at the temple. I remember that my mother used to wake up very early preparing breakfast for us and food for the monks; sometimes we would bring food to the temple, and many monks were our relatives and neighbours. We would sell food at the annual festival of the temple and donated all the money.

We went to school at the temple when we were young, and the monk gave us blessings when we got married. Boys ordained as novices or monks if they were old enough, and when we died we were cremated there.

Testimony like this was given by community members between August 2006 to May 2007. It may sound ‘romantic’, but we can imagine that the past relationship between the community and the temple was very close and somewhat ‘symbiotic’.

The current abbot was appointed after the death of the former temple head in 2001. At that point, the interrelationship between community and the temple abruptly changed. The new abbot was born in 1937 at Ubon Rachathanee province, and ordained as a novice at the age of 11. Having been a Thai Buddhist missionary to the U.S. for over 20 years, he was actively participated in raising funds to build Thai Buddhist temples in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington D.C. Countless development projects are being carrying out by him. He is also a member of *Mahathera Samakom* (Council of the Elders), and has strong relationships with high ranking government and military officers, politicians, and royals.

Eviction

According to the law, benefit from Buddhist cleric property belongs to the state. All contracts and leases have to be done through the Department of Religion, Ministry of Education.² However, the temple has the legal right to manage its own benefits from properties by making a request to the Department of Religion. Without exception for the Wang Lee community, the lease on the shop houses were done through the Department of Religion, and monthly rent was paid to the Department. The maximum period of lease was 30 years, according to Civil and Commercial Law, and extendable. Around 1998 the temple requested to manage its own benefits, but monthly rent was still paid through the Department, before being transferred to the temple. Community members soon learned that their long-term leases would not be extended. The new leases would be extended on a year to year basis.

Prior to 2000, the former abbot had a plan to build a new shop house building on the south side of the street. He promised that the old tenants would be the first priority to rent the new building. The community requested the abbot cancel the project, claiming that the old building was still strong and functional. They could not afford the new down payment of the new building. The project was finally cancelled.

Two months after the new abbot was appointed, in 2002, the construction project of the former abbot was revised. No agreement was reached. The project was stopped, it is told, only because the temple could not find investors.

In 2004, the abbot authorized temple attendants to terminate all the leases on the shop houses. The temple created a development project to construct new buildings

for commercial purposes. The temple attendant then entrusted a law firm (W. Law and Business Office) to notify all the community members to move out within 30 days. Notification letters arrived in October 2004.

Community Movement

Early in 2004, the community tried to negotiate, in person, with the abbot several times without success. In April of that year, the deputy abbot told community that the temple had signed a construction contract with J.S.T. Sathorn Co. Three weeks after the arrival of notification letter from the law firm, the community members started to organize themselves. Community leaders and a team of coordinators were selected. They began their campaign by contacting local politicians of the Democrat Party, the opposition party to the Thaksin Government. Letters to the politicians claimed that the community had lived there for a very long time and the shop houses were still in good condition. They agreed to pay for renovation to beautify the buildings, and said increasing monthly rent would be accepted. In responding to the letter, Charoen Kantawongsa, a Democrat Party member, tried to negotiate with the abbot, with the temple committee, and with the lawyer of the temple.

Between January and March 2005, the community launched a new strategy. They sent letters to a large number of government offices, the National Human Rights Commission, Senate Committees, the Council of Lawyers, the Ombudsman, and the Administration Court. Court writs arrived in April 2005 for 80 separate lawsuit cases of encroachment. (Two days prior to the court appointment, a 68 year old man in the community died of a hearth attack.) It is important to note here that when the landlords refuse negotiation, lawsuits are the best strategic choice. Once a court writ is issued, nothing can interrupt the juridical procedures. In September 2005, the community lost its cases in the Court of Instance. Another attempt was made the same month by submitting the case to the Administration Court. But the Court issued an order to dismiss the application. At that point, a small group of community members started to move out, but the rest still continued to fight for their tenant rights, albeit with extremely low morale. Community leaders and the core group resigned.

In August 2006, a group of people known as the Network for Housing Rights and 43 students from Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University, started to reorganize the community organization. Social movement strategy was used through building a network with outside organizations and communities that were facing similar problems. At the time, there were at least 29 communities in Bangkok facing eviction by Buddhist temples. Two seminars were organized: in November by the Association for Siamese Architects and Arts and Environment Conservation Association, and in December by Thammasat University. Several small group discussions took place in the community. News reporters from major

newspapers and TV stations were invited to those activities.

During the long weekend New Year holiday, 30 December 2006, a group of construction workers showed up before day break to vandalize the community. They were accompanied by construction contractors and local police. Several empty rooms whose residents had moved out were demolished. On 5 January 2007, the Four Region Slum, the major slum organization, organized a protest and blockaded the temple. Five days later, the minister of Social Development and Human Security tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the abbot. At that point, the population of the community had dwindled to only 42 individuals from 21 rooms. The rest had gradually moved out, after accepting 40,000 baht (US. \$ 1,000) compensation. They tried, once again, to present their cases to the Court of Appeal during February to March 2007. But the Court of Instance issued a decree enforcing the previous judgment. Arrest warrants were also issued in early April.

Dissolution of Wang Lee: The Final Chapter

The last group of the Wang Lee Community who stayed fighting for their rights and facing arrest consisted of: 11 rooms, 18 individuals, among them an 108 years old lady. By April, nearly the entire community had deserted, with less than 20 rooms left standing, the others already bulldozed. Few members remained guarding their valuables, the rest of them had to flee, staying with close friends and relatives. The Four Region Slum offered them to organize a long term protest in front of the Government House or the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. The final meeting took place at Thammasat University on Thai New Year day, April 14, 2007. They decided to meet the judge, accept the Court Decision, bargain for a little more compensation and extend the time of move out. On April 30, the judge ruled for an additional 30-45 days to move out and an increased compensation of 100,000 baht (US. \$2,500) maximum. By the end of June, the Wang Lee was completely abandoned. Most of the former residents stay with relatives, some share apartments with nearby food vendors. At the time of writing, four families are still looking for a permanent place to live.

Retrospect

A legal approach and petition is a widely known strategy among people's organizations and slum NGOs, though one that is known rarely to bring success. It is only a 'time buying' mechanism, providing a longer opportunity to reorganize internal structures, strengthen network relationships, and seek out new tactics and strategies. A study of the Small Scale Farmers' Assembly of Isan (SSFAI) and the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), by Somchai Phatharathananunth (2007), is comparable in terms of such a social movement approach. Somchai discusses the strengths and

weaknesses of organizational structures, both centralized and decentralized. In terms of tactics and strategies, a comparison between the Compromise Strategy and the Confrontation Strategy is made.

In case of Wang Lee, it is obvious that the community adopted a compromise strategy. Even though the Four Region Slum offered a long-term protest, petition and negotiation was nevertheless chosen by the community. In his study, Phatharathananunt suggested:

In certain circumstances, negotiation are required. For example, when movements need breathing space because they are exhausted or too preoccupied with internal problems, when negotiations might help resist counter-moves by the state, and when movements move forward to pursue further progress after successful protest. To engage in negotiations with state, civil society organizations move into a dangerous zone, because such organizations can no longer be politically effective when they have been drawn into “normal” political channels ... which could result in the disintegration of organizations. It is important to keep in mind that it is necessary to negotiate but never at the price of demobilizing the movement. Otherwise, you have nothing to negotiate in the future (Somchai 2007: 214-215).

Participation is another key component of the movement. But, according to the observations, almost all the activities are carried out by the core group of the community or the committee. As one community member explained, “We trusted them, that is why we selected them to do the job”. The concept of participation seemed to be far removed. When the Four Region Slum mobilized their network communities to help Wang Lee protest and blockade the temple, after the December 30 raid, only a handful of Wang Lee residents participated. As a result, the Four Region Slum backed off, choosing to watch at a distance.

Particular claims – including the long history of the community, its distinct Sino-Thai customs and culture, the meaningful architectural style of the shop houses made to resemble the Junk stupa of King Rama III in the temple – are always made in the petitions. Concepts of conservation of culture, art/architecture, and local history are introduced by the involved NGOs, particularly the Association for Siamese Architects and the Art and Environment Conservation Association. It is interesting to note that, such concepts and approaches can be successfully implemented in some political contexts, for example the Pom Mahakan Community which has a rather fragmented history back to the beginning of the city of Bangkok. Approaches to the conservation of heritage can, some how, be used to call attention of a wider audience, but the reasoning itself is useless in dealing with the interest of landlords and politicians.

As mentioned earlier, the state has a long history of domination and control over Thai Buddhism, and in fact more or less abandoned Buddhism. No annual budget is available for 34,654 Buddhist temples (438 located in Bangkok), 250,437 monks, and 62,830 novices nationwide. Certainly, in the old days, the communities took responsibility for these problems. They considered it their own duty simply because monks and novices were their mentors, friends and kinfolks. Changing relationships between local temples and communities can be seen through socio-economic change in Thailand. Community members have been driven away from the temple since the end of the Cold War. More people from rural locations have moved into the cities for the sake of better education, job opportunities, and good health care. There are more strangers than acquaintances in communities of the big city. As a result, temples become meaningless. In many areas of Bangkok, temples are surrounded by office buildings, department stores, and shopping malls; no community is left standing to offer food to the monks and novices in the morning. Temples and monks have to adapt tremendously to the changing world around them. The easiest way to do so is by becoming a part of it. Empty space for practicing meditation is found in parking lots. Temples themselves can be a tourist attraction. Finally, temple and cleric property became the last supply of land in the city, where investors and development contractors can easily obtain valuable land for a low price with long term extendable leases, protected by laws of its own.

On the day dignitaries celebrates the 70th birthday of Phraprom Vajirayan, the abbot of Wat Yannawa Temple, the 108 year old lady in Wang Lee community past away of hearth attack.

Notes

¹ Paper presented at the National Workshop “Building City as Public Domain: Exploring New Perspectives for Democracy and Citizenship in City Development”, Institute for Ecosoc Rights, Jakarta, Indonesia July 24-25, 2007

² Exchange rate at 40 baht per US \$ 1.

³ After 1997 the Office of National Buddhism, Office of the Prime Minister, is established. It is authorized to manage all the Buddhist temple land and properties.

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