

# Research on the Influence, Value, and Development Strategy of Chinese University Teachers' Leadership—Based on the Perspective of Distributed Leadership Theory

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## Abstract

More and more universities all over the world realize that improving the leadership of university teachers is very important for the development of students and schools. However, at present, most of the leadership models in China University are still based on the traditional leadership theory, and the cultivation of teachers' leadership ability is neglected. In addition, China University seems to prefer centralized right-based management. So, what is the value and influence of teachers' distributed leadership on China University? What can China University do in the future to better cultivate and develop teachers' distributed leadership? This essay will make a detailed comment on the distributed leadership of teachers, the role and value of distributed leadership of teachers, and the obstacles to its implementation, so as to provide reference strategies for the future development of distributed leadership of teachers in China University.

**Keywords:** teachers' leadership, education leadership distribution, university development

## 1. Introduction

At present, many countries have begun to hope to improve the quality of talent training through the improvement of teachers' leadership. In the era of the knowledge economy, many enterprises regard human capital as a necessary pillar to help maintain and enhance competitive advantage, and leadership can be regarded as a special human capital (Hitt & Duane, 2002). At the moment, the university is a reserve base for cultivating talents, and it is a vital place for education. Although some universities in some countries, such as China, will conduct leadership education for university students through lectures and courses, the effect of this direct indoctrination education is very small (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). University teachers not only implement educational policies and practical teaching and scientific research, but also have close contact with university students, so this means that the influence of teachers on students is imperceptible (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Therefore, it is very significant for students to improve the leadership of teachers in universities, and it can also meet the needs of organizations for high-quality leaders to a certain extent.

Now many educational practitioners have pointed out that school leaders should not only belong to principals and other formal leaders but also cultivate a variety of leading teachers (Thornton, 2016). Distributed leadership theory holds that position power is not the most important source of leadership, and ordinary teachers can still play an effective leadership role because of their professional authority and personality charm (Timperley, 2005). At present, most of the leadership models of Chinese universities are still based on the traditional leadership theory. They often only pay attention to the leadership of school leaders with a certain authority, such as the president, and ignore the cultivation of teachers' leadership ability (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In addition, some teachers in Chinese universities will feel frustrated in management due to the pressure of long-term teaching work and the constraints of centralized leadership of the school, resulting in their lack of enthusiasm and

autonomy in school management (Cheng, 2003). China's Ministry of education points out in relevant documents that school development should be administrative, and university teachers should give full play to their role in school affairs (Lee et al., 2011). This means that universities need to enhance teachers' autonomy, voice, communication, and cooperation awareness in various activities, so as to provide good opportunities for the development of university teachers' leadership.

Different from focus leadership, distributed leadership believes that multiple members should jointly undertake and be responsible for the leadership tasks in the team, rather than only one person. Distributed leadership emphasizes that in an organization, each employee has a certain leadership ability in some aspect, and there may be several leaders responsible for different tasks and roles at a specific time (Timperley, 2005). In the middle and late 1990s, the United States, Britain and Australia gradually attached importance to distributed leadership, and began to spread it to schools and implement the distributed leadership model in schools. Finally, it was found that this can promote the management effectiveness of schools and improve students' performance to a certain extent (Gronn, 2002). This research mainly wants to explore the role, value, and development strategy of university teachers' leadership based on distributed leadership theory through literature review. The review will be guided by the following questions:

- 1) What are the relevant theories and characteristics of teacher distributed leadership in the past few decades?
- 2) What is the value and impact of teacher distributed leadership on Chinese universities?
- 3) What can Chinese universities do to better cultivate and develop teachers' distributed leadership in the future?

Therefore, this research will explore these three issues, and will review in detail the teacher distributed leadership, the role and value of teacher distributed leadership, and the implementation obstacles, so as to put forward reference strategies for the future development of teacher distributed leadership in Chinese universities.

## **2. Methodology**

This part will specifically introduce the research methods adopted in this study. Mainly, the literature selected in this study basically comes from the past 21 years. Moreover, the literature sources of this study are mainly academic journal articles and academic books. Boudreau et al. (2001) point out that professional journal literature is very valuable for research, and researchers should critically select appropriate academic articles as much as possible. Moreover, in the process of selecting and analyzing literature, this is mainly divided into three steps.

### *2.1 Identify Initial Keywords and Key Authors*

Firstly, in the process of literature selection, researchers can rely on the method of searching keywords (Cronin et al., 2008). Keywords can often help researchers find a suitable series of literature as quickly as possible (Yu et al., 2007). Therefore, this research first uses the key terms of distributed leadership, teacher distributed leadership, mobility, shared leadership, organizational structure, and organizational culture. In this way, I found some literature related to the subject, and also found some authors with high frequency in the process.

### *2.2 Screening, Retrieving, and Collecting Literature*

When I used the keyword method to collect a series of documents, I began to sort and classify them. I divide all the literature into six categories: the concept of distributed leadership, the theory of teachers' distributed leadership, the characteristics of teachers' distributed leadership, the value and influence of teachers' distributed leadership, the obstacles to the construction of teachers' leadership under distributed leadership, and the development strategies and suggestions of University Teachers' distributed leadership. In the process of screening these documents, I focused on some documents that I think have high value, such as Lu & Smith (2010) and Zheng et al., (2019). These documents appear frequently in the search and have a high number of hits. Moreover, after reading these documents, I also sent more useful documents contained in these documents, which were critically screened and recorded. I searched and downloaded these documents through online databases and libraries. Then, I divide these documents into the classification table I created one by one, and continue to search by using the high-frequency words of a kind of documents, so as to enrich the content of the documents.

### *2.3 Recording, Analysis, and Writing*

In this step, I will record my previous draft of literature classification. In addition, this draft will clearly contain which documents will be used in the next writing process and the order in which they will be used. Finally, after finishing, I will write the final literature, and make appropriate adjustments to the literature in the process of writing.

## **3. Main Body**

### *3.1 The Concept of Distributed Leadership*

Initially, the concept of “distributed leadership” was proposed by Gibb in 1951 and stated that the roles and responsibilities of leaders can be distributed and shared in organizations and groups (Gronn, 2008). Gronn (2002) points out that leadership behaviour is regarded as the behaviour of a single individual in the traditional leadership theory, but it is evaluated as the behaviour of several different individuals independent of each other or consistent as a whole. It can be seen that the leadership role is no longer limited to individuals in the traditional sense but can be shared and distributed by many people. Moreover, this distributed leadership, which can be led by multiple team members to share leadership responsibilities, has gradually attracted attention, and more and more scholars begin to deeply study the related concepts of distributed leadership. Spillane (2005) states that distributed leadership is regarded as a dynamic process of interaction between leaders and specific environments. Gosling et al. (2009) also agree with this view, and further point out that based on the dynamic view, distributed leadership will also take into account the differences of abilities and suitable task types among different members of the organization and promote the dynamic alternation of leadership roles. This shows that distributed leaders will pay attention to the principle of matching ability and task characteristics to promote different members to assume leadership roles in specific and appropriate situations.

Zheng et al. (2019) hold a similar view and point out that distributed leadership means that there is no direct connection between leadership roles and administrative functions, but those leadership roles are dynamically allocated among organization members according to the principle of task and ability matching. Therefore, this shows that the leadership role has dynamic characteristics, and the leadership role also changes dynamically due to the characteristics and differences of tasks, and there is no obvious boundary between the leader and subordinates.

### *3.2 Teacher Distributed Leadership Theory*

Distributed leadership is not just individual practice but covers many individual practices. This view has changed the previous research direction of leadership role, ability, trait, and cognition, and has become a practical research on teachers’ distributed leadership. Goksoy (2015) believes that teachers’ distributed leadership is a practice of applying multiple leadership, emphasizing teachers’ personal professional knowledge, and achieving common goals through cooperation. Goksoy (2015) further defines teacher distributed leadership as teachers’ diversified guidance and guidance combined with the professional knowledge of the organization, so as to achieve the goal of teaching improvement.

Later, according to Jin (2007), Jin’s conceptual framework of teacher distributed leadership proposes that the occurrence of teacher distributed leadership will promote the development of the school cultural environment and improve school culture. The main body of teacher leadership can be explicit leadership forms such as principal, backbone, discipline leader, education director, and discipline leader, or implicit leadership forms of ordinary teachers. The principal’s support for teachers’ distributed leadership will promote the standardization and interpretation of teachers’ leadership behaviour (Chen & Lu, 2010). Yan & Nai-gui (2012) further point out that there are two modes of teacher distributed leadership: institutionalized and non-institutionalized, which can be realized through group learning, discussion, team activities and informal communication between teachers. Therefore, it can be found that the practice of teachers’ distributed leadership is not only promoting the development of teacher leaders but also promoting the development of followers, realizing the goal of common leadership and development, thus improving the school culture and improving the quality of the school. In addition, the improvement of schools can expand more space and provide a better platform for the development of teachers’ distributed leadership (Jiang, 2008). It can be seen that the two are a development process of mutual promotion and mutual restriction.

### *3.3 Characteristics of Teacher Distributed Leadership*

Teachers’ distributed leadership has the characteristics of organizational culture because it advocates the organizational culture of cooperation, trust, dialogue and consultation (Bennett, 2008). According to the above, distributed leadership is the interaction between organization members, not the behaviour of individual members. In other words, this is the interaction between organization members, not the behaviour of leaders. The focus of distributed leadership is not on the leader’s “power”, but on the leader’s “influence”, and the source of “influence” is the mutual benefit and synergy between leaders (Hulpia & Devos, 2010). This means that positive growth and development can be achieved only by maximizing the linkages and interdependence among the members of the organization. Therefore, the key to advocating teacher leadership is not to let teachers and schools give orders, but to establish a cooperative relationship between teachers and schools, so as to jointly commit to teaching reform and school construction.

Moreover, trust is the axis for leaders to implement leadership behaviour, which is of great significance to the work, role identity and loyalty of organization members (Smylie et al., 2007). If teachers lack a basic sense of trust, they cannot actively cooperate and assist each other. Therefore, this shows that the implementation of teachers’ distributed leadership must also be guaranteed by building a high degree of trust within the

organization. Woods et al. (2004), believe that equal and open dialogue can help teachers get rid of isolated work, overcome self-defence and have an inclusive attitude. Therefore, in the context of equality and development dialogue, the development of teacher leadership organizational culture can not only allow new members to join the Department but also promote the consistency of team members' behaviour.

Furthermore, many studies point out that teacher distributed leadership advocates a flat, empowering, open and supportive organizational structure. The premise of traditional leadership theory is that the organization has hierarchy, and leadership is the management of members in the organization with distinct hierarchy (Seers et al., 2003). In the hierarchical management mode that emphasizes rules and control, teachers rarely have the opportunity to participate in school decision-making, and they are only the implementers of various reform measures (Bogler & Somech, 2005). This shows that in the traditional hierarchical management system, teachers are in a passive state, and their initiative and creativity are also restrained. Distributed leadership theory calls for the best way to make everyone at all levels of the organization a leader (Ezzani, 2019). Therefore, this requires the school organization to establish the leadership mode of authorization and decentralization and transform the bureaucratic organization into a professional learning team to realize the flattening of the school organization (Wieczorek & Lear, 2018). In other words, the decision-making power of the school should be moved to the lower level of the bureaucratic organizational structure, and teachers should be given full professional autonomy and the right to participate in major decisions of the school. Therefore, the mobility of leadership roles under distributed leadership also requires schools to have an open organizational structure, that is, any member of the organization can dynamically share leadership roles according to task characteristics and personal abilities.

In addition, teachers' distributed leadership practice has the characteristics of mobility, collectivity, interaction, and distribution (Firestone & Cecilia Martinez, 2007). This means that every teacher has the responsibility and ability to become a leader and can show his leadership in different ways. Teacher distributed leadership is naturally developed in the deep-seated interaction of mutual benefit and coordination among teachers (Tian, 2016). This shows that teachers' distributed leadership is the practice of teachers' collective leadership and teachers' team cooperative operation. Therefore, the mobility, collectivity and distribution of teachers' distributed leadership are reflected in that this leadership is not limited to individual or formal position power, but also a dynamic division of roles. Organizations can assign different leadership roles to teachers according to task requirements and their personal expertise, so as to give full play to their talents.

### *3.4 Value and Impact of Teachers' Distributed Leadership on Chinese Universities*

#### *3.4.1 Impact on School Education Reform*

Distributed leadership can help that leaders are no longer equivalent to a position or role, but can be regarded as a collection of organizational members (Liu, 2020). Pingping & Huang (2019) point out that although principals and other managers will have certain value and role in school efficiency and improvement, the education reform movements in many countries, such as Europe and the United States, have proved that it is difficult for schools to successfully respond to the challenges and changes of the external environment if they only want to rely on the leadership of principals. Liu et al. (2021) also emphasize that teachers are regarded as high-value resources in the school, and it is beneficial to the development of the school to rely on teacher education reform to promote the implementation. These studies mean that if schools want to further improve teaching and successfully reform, it is very necessary to pay continuous attention to teacher leadership and the importance of teachers for educational reform. Teachers' distributed leadership can enable teachers to develop into leaders and can be given autonomy to better carry out professional development activities, flexibly set professional development goals and independently plan curriculum reform (Tian, 2016). Therefore, teachers' distributed leadership enables teachers to obtain opportunities to participate in teaching management and decision-making and can also enhance their enthusiasm to participate in teaching reform to a certain extent, which can further promote the implementation of school education reform.

#### *3.4.2 Impact on Students' Academic Progress*

Teachers' distributed leadership can not only promote the development of teachers' leadership, but also optimize the effect of educational practice to the greatest extent, thereby promoting the development of students (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). Many scholars have found that the development of teachers' distributed leadership has a positive impact on students' academic performance, and this impact is more significant than that of family and socio-economic background (Pingping & Huang, 2019). Teachers' knowledge, style, behavior and attitude always affect students in the way of explicit and implicit curriculum (Zheng et al., 2019). It can be seen that many aspects of teachers will have an impact on students to a certain extent, and students are actually the most profitable object in the practice of school education reform. Zheng et al. (2019), also emphasize that the democratic management mode of teachers' distributed leadership can help teachers to participate in the process of teaching reform and decision-making to a certain extent, and teachers' participation and enthusiasm can further promote classroom teaching to play a better effect. In this way, students will also see the role of teachers

as not only a navigator who explains knowledge, but also a high-level and active professional leader (Lu & Smith, 2021). It can be seen that this will also promote students to respect teachers more because they feel the professional guidance of teachers, so as to achieve better academic development.

### 3.4.3 Impact on Teachers' Professional Development

Zheng et al. (2019), point out that the development of teachers' distributed leadership can enhance the attractiveness of teachers' profession and reduce teachers' sense of isolation. In addition, according to Tian & Virtanen (2021) and Li et al., (2019), teachers' distributed leadership is not only conducive to changing the current situation that teachers passively accept the orders of principals in schools, promoting teachers to more actively and deeply participate in the development and evaluation of school management, and teaching management, but also help teachers obtain more opportunities to realize their self-worth. This can then stimulate the enthusiasm and motivation of them for continuous learning and development. Thus, these studies show that teachers' distributed leadership can help reduce teachers' burnout and enhance their sense of self-efficacy, so as to achieve better professional development. In addition, teachers' distributed leadership helps to promote mutual assistance among teachers and mutual assistance leading groups for teachers' professional development, which will promote teachers to obtain a sense of belonging and emotional support (Pingping & Huang, 2019). Therefore, the practice of distributed leadership can promote the growth of individual teachers' professional knowledge and the expansion of professional experience, so as to provide a better environment and platform for personal development.

### 3.5 *Obstacles to the Construction of Teacher Leadership Under Distributed Leadership in China*

From the perspective of distributed leadership, teachers' leadership can be divided into internal and external levels. The external level is the leadership level of school organization and management; the internal level refers to teachers' personal consciousness. Limited by various factors, the construction of teacher leadership may encounter difficulties. Lu & Smith (2021) proposes that school culture and environment, role, relationship, and structure will have a certain impact on teacher leadership. Combined with the concept of distributed leadership and the general characteristics of school organization, the obstacles of Teacher Leadership Construction under distributed leadership may arise from two aspects: organization and individual.

#### 3.5.1 External Level

The external obstacles are mainly reflected in the organizational structure and organizational culture, which may be the shortcomings of the traditional bureaucratic organizational structure and school cooperation culture. In terms of organizational structure, Wang (2016) points out that the nature of the traditional school organizational structure in China belongs to the distinct upper and lower levels and strict management. This shows that under this organizational system, the power distribution between teachers and leaders in schools often belongs to a well-defined binary relationship. Under the leadership mode of the principal led responsibility system, the principal is in the highest position of power in the school, but the teacher is in a subordinate position for a long time, which will lead to the principal having the largest and main decision-making power in the school to a great extent (Truong et al., 2017). In contrast, teacher leadership under distributed leadership emphasizes sharing and empowerment, which breaks the previous strict upper and lower level structure to a certain extent, which may lead to a chaotic state of everyone leading or no leader (Zhang et al., 2021).

Moreover, Li (2019) points out that, it is also difficult to ensure that the original school leaders are willing to implement a new model to share power equally. In addition, teachers often have undertaken a lot of teaching work in schools, so distributed leadership will also increase their work pressure to a certain extent, and even affect the state of teachers' teaching. Therefore, this shows that whether teachers will eventually be willing to assume leadership responsibility is also an obstacle. In addition, in terms of organizational culture, distributed leadership is expected to have a common vision and belief within the school. However, the goals, beliefs and values culture of each teacher in Chinese universities still have certain differences, so it is difficult to form a common culture (Lu & Smith, 2021). When leadership behaviour lacks a common culture, which means that it may be more difficult to be accepted by other members, then cooperation is more difficult (Chu & Cravens, 2012). Therefore, the lack of common culture will make it difficult for schools to form a common vision to a certain extent, which will make it difficult for teachers' leadership behaviour to be recognized by all members, so as to form the final positive effect.

#### 3.5.2 Internal Level

In addition to classroom teaching, there is little cooperation between teachers in Chinese universities, and teachers' behaviour tends to be closed, so an isolated culture has been formed within teachers (Lu & Smith, 2021). This shows that in school organizations, the cooperation between teachers is low, which makes teachers lack the enthusiasm to participate in leadership. Secondly, from the perspective of teachers' work value orientation, due to the influence of factors such as the environment and personal professional ability, different

teachers have different professional orientations, which makes teachers with livelihood orientation only hope to obtain economic income and material return from work to meet their living needs (Li, 2019). This shows that only career oriented teachers hope to take more responsibilities and obtain personal realization from their work. In addition, although teachers have rich teaching knowledge and skills, most teachers themselves lack the qualities and skills that leaders should have (Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, this shows that many teachers are actually incompetent for relevant leadership work and difficult to lead.

### *3.6 Development Strategies and Suggestions of Chinese University Teachers' Leadership*

#### 3.6.1 Improve Organizational Culture and Structure

Organizational culture and organizational structure are the important soil and environment for teachers to implement distributed leadership. The cultivation of organizational culture should focus on building a culture of "attaching importance to teacher resources, people-oriented and peer ethics" (Tian & Virtanen, 2021). Firstly, in China's teaching curriculum reform, only by giving teachers full attention and professional autonomy in curriculum development, teaching and evaluation, can they enhance their cognition and understanding of curriculum reform (Zheng et al., 2019). To some extent, this approach helps to mobilize teachers' enthusiasm to participate in curriculum reform and give better play to curriculum leadership. Secondly, there are some common problems in the professional development of university English teachers, such as too many courses being allocated, insufficient scientific research time, too few doctors, and it is difficult for teachers to publish scientific research results in high-level journals (Tian, 2016). University leaders should be "people-oriented", consider the actual difficulties of teachers and communicate with them more, so as to understand their development needs (Lu & Smith, 2021). Therefore, this approach calls on school leaders to communicate more with teachers and provide teachers with external resources such as advanced learning at home and abroad as much as possible, so as to promote them to participate in academic conferences on teachers' professional development.

In addition, the school leadership managers should change the anatomical management mode and have a linear relationship with the teachers' command, control and communication channels, so as to create an empowerment situation and encourage teachers to organize characteristic professional development teams according to their professional knowledge (Fu & Liu, 2018). In addition, schools can improve teachers' sense of self-efficacy and responsibility by establishing teachers' professional community, so as to train them to become leaders in their respective fields of work.

#### 3.6.2 Reshaping Teachers' Concept of "Leadership"

In the context of educational internationalization, schools should lead young people to build a community with a shared future of mankind in teaching through moral leadership and can apply the innovation of teaching means based on educational information technology to teaching through teaching leadership (Li et al., 2009). This can promote teachers to flexibly use the teaching cloud platform to carry out curriculum construction, so as to improve students' learning enthusiasm and initiative and optimize learning efficiency. This will also further help students acquire the ability of cross-cultural communication and cooperation. From the perspective of distributed leadership, teachers' leadership in the organization needs to break through the traditional concept of connecting "leadership" with "bureaucratic authority" under the bureaucratic leadership and rebuild the new leadership concept (Lu & Smith, 2021). In other words, leaders should be guided by distributed leadership concepts such as trust, empowerment and sharing, and recognize that every teacher can be a leader and play an important role in the organization. According to the specific situation, the relationship between leaders and followers can also change to affect organization members (Li et al., 2009). The traditional school structure is a vertical structure in which principals are supreme and teachers are subordinate, and this structure has clear hierarchical boundaries and only ensures the leadership of principals. Therefore, it is difficult for teachers at the lower level to obtain the right of participation and leadership.

According to Tian & Virtanen (2021), leadership activities are distributed in the "network" where leaders, followers and situations interact. This means that schools can help form dynamic and interactive networks within organizations through some collective activities. Teacher leadership under distributed leadership also needs to rebuild the network organizational structure, contact all parties to support each other through the organizational network, and determine the leadership role based on the specific situation of the organization (Tian & Virtanen, 2021). In this way, in the organizational network, the leadership role is distributed at all levels. Therefore, the organizational network integrates the functions of teacher leaders, which ensures that they can not only upload and release, but also contact and communicate horizontally, so as to provide an efficient operation platform for teacher leaders.

#### 3.6.3 Shaping a Common Culture

The common culture is one of the important conditions for the effective implementation of teacher leadership. Research shows that the shaping of common culture mainly includes trust, support, sharing and learning. First,

the common culture is a culture of trust, which means that leaders are willing to delegate power and teachers are willing to participate in Leadership (Zheng et al., 2019). Secondly, the common culture is a culture of support, which means that all members of the school organization help, communicate and cooperate with each other (Tian, 2016). Thirdly, the common culture is the culture of sharing and is regarded as the culture of learning (Fu & Liu, 2018). This means that members of the organization should share power, responsibility and mutual benefit, and all members of the organization, especially teachers, need to constantly improve their professional knowledge and skills and the quality they should have as leaders. Therefore, this can make the teacher leadership under distributed leadership have lasting vitality. Having a shared vision is a key element for teachers' leadership, and in Teachers' leadership, the shared vision runs through teachers' leadership behaviour (Lu & Smith, 2021). In other words, only by finding the "greatest common divisor" of the vision of all members and being accepted by all members can a recognized common vision be formed. Therefore, in school organizations, a common vision that respects and trusts teachers and can stimulate teachers' leadership is very important to build teachers' leadership.

#### 4. Conclusion

In short, this research explores the role, value, and development strategy of University Teachers' leadership from the perspective of distributed leadership theory. By reviewing the previous literature, this research finds that in the past few decades, the teacher distributed leadership theory has gradually attracted the attention of many countries and also points out that it has the characteristics of organizational culture, flat, authorized and open organizational structure, as well as the characteristics of mobility, collectivity, interaction and distribution. These characteristics also promote the influence of school education reform, students' academic progress and teachers' professional development to a great extent. To some extent, these studies provide development findings for Chinese universities to implement the distributed leadership of teachers and make them aware of the value and impact of implementing this strategy. However, the research also found that the obstacles to the construction of teachers' leadership under distributed leadership may not only lead to the state of everyone leading or no one leading but also lead to the increase of teachers' pressure and affect the quality of teaching implementation. Therefore, this research finally puts forward some suggestions on the development strategy of Chinese universities to build teacher leadership based on distributed leadership in the future from three aspects.

However, the limitation of this research is that the development strategy is only provided for the current situation of Chinese universities. Future research can select universities in several countries to compare the current implementation of distributed leadership, and evaluate what problems teachers should pay attention to in the implementation of distributed leadership from many aspects, and how to maximize the value. To some extent, the results of this research can also provide some reference value for other countries to implement teacher distributed leadership. However, future research can compare the situation of multiple countries, so as to make the structure more universal.

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