

**MARRIAGE AND MIGRATION: A CASE STUDY OF UZBEK WOMEN IN SOUTH  
KOREA**

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**Abstract.** *Marriage migration has become one of the most feminized and socially structured forms of international mobility in East Asia, with South Korea providing a particularly illustrative example. This article examines marital migration through the lives of Uzbek women, situating their migration trajectories in the context of widespread demographic decline, rural unmarried life, gender imbalances, and state-regulated migration regimes in South Korea.*

*Drawing exclusively on official migration statistics, survey data, and qualitative fieldwork interviews, the study demonstrates that marital migration is not simply a private or emotional choice, but a rational, family-oriented, and strategic response to structural inequalities between countries of origin and destination. Empirical evidence reveals that women act as key agents of cultural transmission, social reproduction, and integration into transnational families, while simultaneously facing legal dependence, language barriers, and patriarchal family norms. By integrating gender theory, family migration theory, and transnational perspectives, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of feminized migration and highlights the role of marriage migration in shaping demographic resilience, multicultural governance, and social cohesion in contemporary South Korea.*

**Keywords:** *Marriage migration, gendered migration, transnational families, south korea, demographic decline, population aging, f-6 visa, social integration, cultural adaptation, gender inequality, family migration theory, transnationalism.*

**Аннотация.** *Брачная миграция стала одной из наиболее феминизированных и социально структурированных форм международной мобильности в Восточной Азии, и Южная Корея является особенно показательным примером. В этой статье рассматривается брачная миграция на примере жизни узбекских женщин, помещая их миграционные траектории в контекст широко распространенного демографического спада, жизни в сельской местности без брака, гендерного дисбаланса и регулируемых государством миграционных режимов в Южной Корее. Опираясь исключительно на официальную миграционную статистику, данные опросов и качественные полевые интервью, исследование демонстрирует, что брачная миграция — это не просто частный или эмоциональный выбор, а рациональный, ориентированный на семью и стратегический ответ на структурное неравенство между странами происхождения и назначения.*

*Эмпирические данные показывают, что женщины выступают в качестве ключевых агентов культурной передачи, социального воспроизводства и интеграции в транснациональные семьи, одновременно сталкиваясь с юридической зависимостью, языковыми барьерами и патриархальными семейными нормами.*

*Интегрируя гендерную теорию, теорию семейной миграции и транснациональные перспективы, эта статья способствует более глубокому пониманию феминизированной миграции и подчеркивает роль брачной миграции в формировании демографической устойчивости, многокультурного управления и социальной сплоченности в современной Южной Корее.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Брачная миграция, гендерная миграция, транснациональные семьи, Южная Корея, демографический спад, старение населения, виза F-6, социальная интеграция, культурная адаптация, гендерное неравенство, теория семейной миграции, транснационализм.*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, South Korea has experienced profound and widespread demographic, economic, and social transformations that have significantly altered family formation and migration patterns. One of the most significant consequences of these changes has been the rapid aging of the population, accompanied by persistently low fertility rates and a steady decline in the number of people of marriageable age. Taken together, these trends have created serious structural problems for contemporary Korean society.

The impact of these demographic factors is particularly noticeable in rural and peripheral regions, where long-term depopulation, youth emigration, and limited economic opportunities have exacerbated existing gender imbalances in local communities (Lee, Seo, & Cho, 2011). In these regions, the shortage of marriageable women is becoming increasingly pronounced, further weakening the viability of local marriage markets. As a result, traditional marriage models based on endogamous and regionally rooted unions are beginning to erode.

Beginning in the late 1980s, rapid and widespread industrialization and urbanization in South Korea led to significant changes in internal migration patterns, particularly affecting gender mobility. During this period, increasing numbers of young women migrated from rural areas to large metropolitan areas in search of higher education, stable employment, and better living conditions. While this movement contributed to women's social and economic advancement, it also had unforeseen demographic consequences for rural communities. As a result, many rural areas saw an increase in the number of single men, whose opportunities to start a family locally became increasingly limited (Systematic Literature Review on Foreign Bride Relations, 2016).

In this context, international marriage gradually became the norm as a response to the challenges of demographic decline and singlehood in rural areas. Initially perceived as a pragmatic, community-based solution, it later gained social acceptance and official institutional recognition as part of the state's demographic strategy (Yi, 2013). The South Korean government increasingly viewed marriage-based migration as a mechanism capable of stabilizing family formation, revitalizing rural areas, and mitigating the challenges associated with an aging population.

As a result, marriage-based migration was gradually integrated into South Korea's migration management system, primarily through the introduction and subsequent expansion of the F-6 marriage visa system. This marked a shift toward formal regulation of international marriages, their inclusion in national migration and family policies, and a more significant role for the state in managing marriage-related migration (Lee, 2008).

In the South Korean context, empirical data clearly demonstrates that marital migration is a highly gendered phenomenon: over 80 percent of marital migrants are women, the majority of whom originate from China, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, including Uzbekistan (Lee, Seo, & Cho, 2011).

The marked feminization of marriage-related migration reflects the complex interplay of structural inequalities between countries of origin and destination, as well as deeply entrenched gender norms regulating care work, reproduction, and the maintenance of family life in Korean society (KWDI, 2019).

Despite its growing demographic and political significance, migration through marriage remains understudied as a form of active, strategic, and gendered mobility. Prevailing academic and public discourses often portray migrant women's marriages as passive dependency or interpret their migration primarily through emotional, cultural, or romantic narratives. Such perspectives risk overlooking the structural and rational factors influencing women's migration decisions.

In contrast, the lived experiences of Uzbek women demonstrate that migration through marriage is a purposeful and multidimensional strategy driven by economic instability, family responsibilities, a desire for social mobility, and a search for long-term security through access to social security and legal regularization (UNDESA, 2020). Building on this understanding, this article seeks to fill an important analytical gap by examining marriage-related migration as a meaningful pathway to a new life in South Korea. By highlighting the experiences of Uzbek women, the study places individual migration choices within the broader context of demographic transformations, persistent gender inequalities, and expanding patterns of transnational mobility.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

Marital migration occupies a complex and multidimensional position at the intersection of various migration theories, each offering only a partial explanation. Traditional neoclassical economic approaches interpret migration primarily as a response to income inequality between countries of origin and destination. Within this framework, migration is understood as the result of rational individual choice driven by wage differences, employment opportunities, and the desire to maximize economic gains. These approaches assume that migrants act as autonomous agents responding to labor market signals and cost-benefit calculations.

However, when applied to marital migration, neoclassical explanations reveal significant limitations. Decisions to migrate for marriage are rarely based solely on expected increases in income or employment prospects. Instead, they are largely determined by emotional ties, family expectations, cultural norms, and gendered responsibilities associated with marriage and parenthood.

In contrast, family migration theory offers a more appropriate analytical approach to understanding marriage-related mobility. This perspective views migration not as an individual decision, but as a collective household strategy aimed at ensuring economic stability, diversifying risks, and achieving long-term social progress. From this perspective, marriage-related migration functions as a mechanism through which families attempt to stabilize their well-being, gain access to social security and safety nets, and improve life prospects for future generations.

Research also shows that for Uzbek women migrating to South Korea for marriage, decisions are often driven by family obligations, expectations of economic contribution, and long-

term planning to support transnational households. Thus, marriage-related migration is not an impulsive or purely personal choice, but a strategic and coordinated process embedded in broader family projects. In this sense, family migration theory more effectively captures the social logic, collective decision-making, and transnational aspects underlying marriage migration, particularly in contexts of economic uncertainty and gender inequality.

Transnationalism further expands this understanding by situating marriage migrants within multifaceted social fields that extend beyond national borders. Rather than representing a complete break with their society of origin, marriage migrants maintain strong cross-border economic, emotional, and cultural ties (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2020).

Through remittances, regular communication, and cultural traditions, migrants who marry actively maintain transnational networks linking their countries of origin and destination. Data from Uzbek women married in South Korea show that financial remittances, cultural reproduction, and emotional support remain central components of their lives after migration, confirming the transnational nature of marriage-driven migration (National survey on marriage migrants' employment, 2019).

Gender theory is particularly important in analysing marriage-induced migration, as women's migration experiences are significantly shaped by patriarchal family structures, gender norms, and expectations regarding care and reproductive labour. In South Korea, married women migrants are often expected to fulfil multiple roles within the family, including caring for elderly parents, raising children, and maintaining family cohesion. These expectations reflect a deeply entrenched gendered division of labour embedded in both family institutions and migration regimes.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives emphasize that marriage-induced migration cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical model. Instead, it should be understood as a gendered, family-based, and transnational form of mobility shaped by structural inequalities, demographic pressures, and institutional frameworks. In the South Korean context, marriage-induced migration emerges as a socially regulated pathway, responding to demographic decline while simultaneously reproducing gender roles and transnational family structures.

### 3. Research Design and Data

This study is based solely on qualitative and quantitative data, including official statistics from the Korean Immigration Service for the period 2009-2019, data from structured surveys, and in-depth interviews with Uzbek women who emigrated to South Korea through marriage (Chi, 2019).

Year	Unskilled worker visa (E-9)			Marriage visa with a Korean citizen (F-6)		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
2009	85 654	78 083	7 571	-	-	-
2010	82 099	75 557	6 542	-	-	-
2011	106 442	97 394	9 048	3 965	699	3 266
2012	99 140	91 026	8 114	97 504	17 279	80 225
2013	105 738	97 166	8 572	98 965	18 673	80 292
2014	115 294	-	-	98 364	-	-

<b>2015</b>	123 433	-	-	106 318	-	-
<b>2016</b>	134 764	124 220	10 544	118 883	23 465	95 418
<b>2017</b>	140 072	129 400	10 672	130 834	26 281	104 553
<b>2018</b>	145 174	134 839	10 335	143 092	29 028	114 064
<b>2019</b>	151 116	140 469	10 647	159 499	31 897	127 602

The table presents data on the number of foreign migrants to the Republic of Korea through two main migration channels: work visas for unskilled workers (E-9) and marriage visas to Korean citizens (F-6) for the period 2009–2019, broken down by gender. Overall, the statistics show a steady increase in both labor and marriage migration, with clear gender differences in each category.

The number of E-9 visa holders increased from 85,654 in 2009 to 151,116 in 2019 during the analyzed period, reflecting the growing demand for foreign labor in low-skilled sectors of the South Korean economy. Throughout this period, men dominated labor migration on E-9 visas, consistently representing between 90% and 92% of all migrants in this category.

The share of women remained relatively low, fluctuating between 7,000 and 11,000 annually. Since 2015, there has been a steady increase in the total number of E-9 visa holders, driven by the expansion of employment programs for foreign nationals, primarily through the Employment Permit System (EPS).

Unlike labor migration, marriage-based migration using F-6 visas has been characterized by rapid and large-scale growth, especially since 2011. While the total number of F-6 visa holders was only 3,965 in 2011, by 2019, this figure had grown to 159,499.

This form of migration is predominantly female. Women consistently make up 75% to 80% of all migrants entering into marriage. In 2019, the number of women on F-6 visas reached 127,602, compared to 31,897 men. This reflects the specific nature of transnational marriages in the Republic of Korea, where foreign women are significantly more likely to marry Korean men.

A comparison of the two visa categories reveals two distinct migration patterns. The E-9 visa reflects temporary labor migration motivated by economic reasons and predominantly male, while the F-6 visa represents long-term, family-oriented migration and predominantly female. Notably, by 2019, the number of marriage-related migrants on F-6 visas (159,499) exceeded the number of labor migrants on E-9 visas (151,116), indicating the growing sociodemographic significance of marriage-related migration.

Thus, between 2009 and 2019, migration processes in the Republic of Korea were characterized by both quantitative growth and structural differentiation. Labor migration developed under strict institutional control and maintained gender asymmetry, while marriage-related migration became an important factor in the feminization of migration flows and the formation of a multi-ethnic Korean society.

#### **4. Contextual Analysis: Marriage Migration in South Korea**

Family migration in South Korea must be considered within the broader structural context of long-term demographic decline, rapid population aging, and profound transformations in the national labor market. Since the early 1990s, South Korea has been experiencing rapid and persistent demographic changes, characterized by chronically low fertility rates, a growing proportion of elderly citizens, and a continuing decline in the working-age population.

These demographic shifts have significantly altered the country's socioeconomic foundations, placing increasing pressure on social security systems, labor supply, and intergenerational support mechanisms.

At the same time, these demographic changes have coincided with structural restructuring of the labor market, particularly a widening gap between high-skilled and low-skilled jobs. While young domestic workers increasingly avoid physically demanding or low-skilled jobs, demand for foreign labor has grown in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, construction, and services.

Along with this process, migration channels associated with family and marriage have expanded, functioning not only as paths of individual mobility but also as mechanisms of demographic compensation and social reproduction (KWDI, 2012).

As a result, international migration, particularly in forms related to family and marriage, has become a crucial demographic, social, and institutional component of contemporary South Korean society. Far from being a marginal or temporary phenomenon, family migration increasingly contributes to demographic renewal, regional stability, and the diversification of Korean households. In this sense, marriage- and family-related migration should be viewed as an integral element of South Korea's adaptive response to demographic decline, labor shortages, and the long-term sustainability of its social structure.

By 2020, the number of foreign residents in South Korea reached approximately 1.73 million, nearly forty times the figure in the early 1990s. This unprecedented growth reflects the cumulative effect of sustained labor migration flows and the parallel expansion of migration routes based on family ties and marriage, which have gradually become an integral part of the country's migration system (UNDESA, 2020). The scale and pace of this growth highlight South Korea's transformation from a traditionally homogeneous society into an increasingly multicultural and migration-dependent state.

A key feature of this transformation is the clear gender differentiation of the various migration channels. Labor migration remains predominantly male and is closely associated with employment in low-skilled and physically demanding sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. In contrast, female migrants are increasingly entering South Korea through marriage and family formation, reflecting both structural imbalances in the domestic marriage market and broader sociodemographic changes. As a result, marriage migration has become not just an additional pathway, but the central mechanism driving the influx of female migrants.

Empirical studies show that among foreign women who received permanent residence in South Korea, more than 80% entered the country through marriage migration, making it the main entry route for female migrants (Lee, 2008). This trend highlights the growing feminization of international migration, driven by transnational marriages and family reunification processes.

Furthermore, the growing importance of marriage-based migration points to its increasingly significant role in South Korea's overall migration system, which has significant implications for demographic sustainability, social integration policies, and the long-term transformation of Korean family structures.

The institutionalization of marriage-based migration through the introduction of the F-6 visa for foreign spouses marked a significant turning point in the governance and regulation of spousal migration in South Korea.

By formally recognizing marriage-based migration as a distinct legal category, the F-6 visa created a comprehensive legal framework granting foreign spouses the right to legal residence in South Korea, gainful employment, access to healthcare, and participation in national social security and insurance programs (Korea Immigration Service, 2023). This shift marked a shift from informal regulation to a more structured, rights-based approach to family-related migration.

At the same time, the institutional framework surrounding the F-6 visa included a number of regulatory and control mechanisms designed to manage migration flows and prevent abuses, particularly sham, forced, or arranged marriages. These mechanisms included mandatory Korean language proficiency requirements, minimum income thresholds for Korean sponsoring spouses to ensure economic stability, and strict marriage screening procedures designed to assess the authenticity of marital relationships. These measures reflect growing government concern about the commercialization of international marriages and the vulnerability of migrant spouses in transnational marriages.

These regulatory measures were significantly strengthened after 2014, signaling a revision of government policy in response to the growing number of migrants entering into marriages and increased public scrutiny. As a result, the current governance model embodies a dual and somewhat ambivalent state strategy: on the one hand, it promotes family formation in response to demographic decline and the need for social reproduction; on the other hand, it strengthens surveillance and regulation of transnational marriage practices to maintain public order and control migration (Korea Immigration Service, 2020). The F-6 visa regime therefore illustrates how marriage migration in South Korea is governed by a balance between inclusion and control, combining the goals of social integration with restrictive institutional oversight.

For many Uzbek women, migrating through marriage is more of a strategic, life-changing decision than a purely personal or romantic choice. It opens the door to long-term economic security, stable legal residency, and access to healthcare, education, and social services that remain limited or less accessible in their home countries. In this sense, migration through marriage lies at the intersection of individual agency and structural constraints, highlighting how institutional migration regimes, gendered opportunities, and transnational inequalities combine to shape migration trajectories. Thus, the participation of Uzbek women in migration through marriage highlights the broader role of family-based migration in South Korea's evolving migration system.

Furthermore, the growing presence of Uzbek women in South Korea's marriage-based entry system underscores the growing visibility of Central Asian women in transnational marriage markets. This visibility is due to historical connections through the Koryo-in diaspora, the role of marriage agencies, and notions of cultural adaptation and family values (Kim, Wang, & Torneo, 2012). As a result, Uzbek women's participation in marriage migration cannot be viewed solely as an individual choice, but must be considered within the context of broader transnational, economic, and institutional processes shaping gender mobility in South Korea.

### **5. Empirical Findings**

Empirical analysis shows that migration to South Korea for marriage is driven by a multidimensional set of economic, social, and personal motives, rather than a single determining factor. Survey data clearly demonstrate that economic stability is the most influential factor in marriage decisions.

Specifically, 73.3% of respondents cited income stability and long-term financial security as their primary motivation for marrying a South Korean citizen. This pattern reflects the stark structural economic inequality between South Korea and Uzbekistan, where migration for marriage is widely perceived as a viable strategy for achieving material security, improving living standards, and reducing long-term household economic vulnerability.

However, motives for migrating for marriage extend beyond direct income considerations and encompass broader issues related to institutional protection and quality of life. Survey results indicate that 66.7% of respondents identified access to social security and safe living conditions as decisive factors in their migration decisions. This includes access to comprehensive healthcare, guaranteed legal residency, and stable housing. The study's findings indicate that marriage-related migration is closely linked to perceptions of state capacity, institutional reliability, and social protection, particularly among women from regions with relatively limited social security systems and legal guarantees.

In addition to economic and institutional factors, intergenerational considerations play a significant role in shaping marriage-related migration. Notably, 60% of respondents cited their children's education and future prospects as key motivations, underscoring the family-centered nature of marriage-related migration. From this perspective, marriage is not simply an individual or romantic decision, but a strategic family project aimed at ensuring better educational opportunities, social mobility, and long-term well-being for future generations.

Taken together, these findings suggest that marriage-related migration to South Korea should be considered a rational and sustainable strategy, integrated into the broader family planning system and the gender dynamics of migration. The convergence of economic aspirations, institutional security, and intergenerational goals demonstrates how marriage-related migration operates at the intersection of individual agency and structural inequality, highlighting its growing importance in South Korea's contemporary migration system.

Statistics also reveal a marked gender asymmetry in migration flows to South Korea.

While employment-based visas (E-9) are primarily issued to men, marriage-based migration visas (F-6) are predominantly issued to women. Data from the Korean Immigration Service indicate that women account for over 80 percent of all marriage-based migrants, while male migrants remain concentrated in labor migration programs (Korea Immigration Service, 2020). This gender segmentation of migration pathways reflects both labour market demands and socially entrenched gender roles, with women more likely to migrate through family channels.

The educational gap between female migrants and their Korean spouses further highlights the structural inequalities underlying marriage-related migration. Empirical data shows that while over 90 per cent of migrant women entering marriage have at least a high school education, a significant proportion of their Korean spouses have higher levels of education and greater economic stability (Lee, 2008). This imbalance suggests that migration through marriage often arises from limited opportunities in source countries, where women with limited educational or employment prospects view marriage as a viable path to social mobility. At the same time, lower levels of education among some migrant women increase their vulnerability to economic dependence and unequal power relations within marriage.

Qualitative interviews provide a deeper understanding of the lived realities of migrant women entering marriage and reveal a significant gap between pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences. Although marriage is often portrayed as a path to increased social status, social integration, and improved quality of life, several respondents reported difficult living conditions, broken promises, and emotional distress after arriving in South Korea. In particular, marriages brokered by intermediaries were associated with misinformation regarding housing, employment opportunities, and financial stability. Some women described experiences of social isolation, language barriers, and limited autonomy within the family, further complicating their integration into Korean society.

These case studies highlight how migration induced by marriage is not always perceived as successful or empowering. Instead, the results vary significantly depending on factors such as the age difference between spouses, education, language proficiency, and the presence of supportive social networks. These findings highlight the need to understand marriage-induced migration not as a homogeneous phenomenon, but as a differentiated process shaped by structural inequalities, gendered power relations, and individual circumstances.

## **6. Discussion**

The study's findings confirm that marriage-related migration to South Korea represents a strategic and deeply gendered response to structural demographic and economic inequality.

Against the backdrop of an aging population, declining birth rates, and loneliness in rural areas, marriage-related migration has become an institutionalized solution, simultaneously addressing the shortage of family-building spaces in South Korea and economic instability in their countries of origin. Uzbek women, in particular, play a central role in this process, assuming key roles in family formation, childcare, and maintaining household stability. Their participation extends beyond the confines of private family life and directly contributes to broader processes of social integration, demographic reproduction, and the daily functioning of multicultural households.

Within transnational family relations, Uzbek women act as cultural mediators, navigating and negotiating multiple normative systems. They are often responsible for transmitting cultural values, managing linguistic communication within the family, and facilitating interactions between migrant families and local institutions such as schools, health centers, and community organizations. Through these practices, married migrants play an active role in strengthening social cohesion in multicultural families and facilitating their gradual integration into Korean society. This finding challenges the notion of married migrants as passive dependents and instead emphasizes their role as social and cultural mediators (MOGEF, 2022).

At the same time, the study's findings highlight the persistent vulnerability faced by married migrant women. Legal dependence on spouses under the F-6 visa regime remains one of the most significant sources of structural insecurity. Because residency status is closely linked to marital stability, women who have experienced marital conflict, divorce, or domestic violence may be at greater risk of legal instability and social marginalization. Limited knowledge of the Korean language further limits their autonomy, restricting access to employment, public services, and legal protection. Language barriers also exacerbate emotional isolation and reinforce power imbalances within the family.

Patriarchal family norms in Korean society exacerbate these problems. Married migrant women are often expected to fulfill traditional gender roles, including caring for elderly parents, performing household chores, and prioritizing family responsibilities over personal aspirations.

Arranged marriages further illustrate the commercialization of intimate relationships and the risks associated with transnational matchmaking systems. The involvement of commercial marriage brokers often transforms marriage into a transaction, where a woman's youth, citizenship, and perceived cultural adaptability are valued as marketable qualities. Overall, the analysis shows that marriage-related migration in South Korea occurs at the intersection of demographic needs, economic inequality, and gendered power relations. While marriage-driven migration opens avenues to legal residency, social security, and family formation, it simultaneously reproduces structural vulnerabilities rooted in legal dependence, patriarchal norms, and the practice of commercial marriage brokerage (KIHASA, 2022). Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing gender-sensitive migration policies that recognize marriage-driven migrants not simply as beneficiaries of demographic decisions but also as active social actors whose rights, autonomy, and well-being require on-going institutional support

### **7. Conclusion**

Marital migration is a crucial yet understudied aspect of contemporary migration to South Korea, particularly in the context of ongoing demographic decline, population aging, and rural depopulation. This study demonstrates that marital migration is not a marginal or random phenomenon, but rather a structurally determined response to demographic and economic imbalances affecting both countries of origin and destination. For Uzbek women, marriage simultaneously serves as a pathway to social mobility, legal residency, and access to social security, as well as a site of structural constraints marked by legal dependence, gendered power relations, and cultural hierarchies.

The study's findings indicate that while South Korean public policy provides an institutional framework for integration – primarily through the F-6 visa system and multicultural family support programs – these mechanisms remain insufficient to address the deeper challenges faced by married migrants. Legal dependence on spouses continues to limit women's autonomy, particularly in cases of marital conflict or family instability. At the same time, persistent gender inequality in family structures and limited language proficiency hinder full social participation and economic independence. Cultural adaptation, rather than being a mutual process, is often viewed as a one-sided expectation that falls primarily on migrant women, reinforcing asymmetrical integration outcomes.

Finally, marital migration should be understood as a complex and multidimensional form of mobility that simultaneously reflects structural inequalities and individual agency. Recognizing the central role of married migrants in demographic reproduction, social integration, and transnational family life is fundamental to developing inclusive migration governance frameworks that promote equality, dignity, and long-term social cohesion in South Korea.

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