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## The Emulation of Western Organizational Patterns in Meiji Japan

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## The Emulation of Western Organizational Patterns in Meiji Japan

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The most significant artifacts of the great transformation of society which we call the Industrial Revolution may well be its organizations rather than its machines. As formal organizations became the context of a rapidly increasing range of activities, they became not only the major factors in the growing economic output of industrializing societies but also key agents in the generation and transmission of culture and in the dramatic extension of the sphere of activity of the state.

In virtually every society, the emulation of organizational forms from other countries and the influence of foreign models in reshaping existing organizations have been important factors in the development of administrative organization over the last century and a half. In some cases these cross-societal influences have been openly acknowledged; in others they have been concealed or denigrated. In today's rapidly internationalizing world, the processes by which organizational patterns cross national borders and are adopted and adapted in different environments are attracting growing interest. However, the discussions to date have revealed how much we still have to learn about the social processes involved. Japan in particular has been the focus of much of this interest. The success of Japanese firms in competing with North American and European companies and the apparent success of the government's structures for generating and carrying out industrial policy have sparked major debates over whether organizational patterns that are effective in Japan can be transplanted into Western social environments. Ironically, it is the study of Japanese experience in adopting and adapting Western organizational patterns in the Meiji period that may well provide the most significant basis for expanding our general understanding of the processes of cross-societal organizational emulation.

The cross-societal transfer of organizational patterns has been the focus of considerable speculation and analysis in the case of Meiji Japan, not because such transfer is unique to Japan but because it has seemed uniquely salient. The transfer

was particularly deliberate and wide-ranging; it took place in a very short space of time; and it drew on a number of Western countries for models, rather than on one. Moreover, it involved a transfer not merely across national boundaries but across civilizations: Japan was the first society outside the Judeo-Christian tradition to turn to Western organizational models. Meiji Japan thus provides a point of convergence between the social scientists' quest for generalizations and the historians' search for understanding of particular patterns. This paper draws both on original case studies of particular organizations [WESTNEY 1987] and on secondary literature to propose some generalizations about the patterns of organizational transfer and adaptation in organizational development. It examines the role of cross-societal learning in the development of administrative organization in general; the factors in Meiji Japan that influenced the selection of foreign models; the principal sources of modification in the organization as it developed in the Japanese environment; and the implications of the new organizations for the emerging patterns of Japanese civilization.

## 1. ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION AND CROSS-SOCIETAL LEARNING

In preindustrial societies, the administrative organizations of the state are primarily oriented to three tasks: the military task of defending the territory against external enemies and internal revolt; the legal and judicial tasks of resolving disputes and maintaining public order; and the fiscal task of collecting tax revenues to support the ruling class and the other two state functions. In addition, in larger premodern polities, government administrative organization is sometimes directed to the construction and maintenance of a limited set of public works, usually roads or agricultural irrigation systems. In modern industrial societies, however, state administrative organizations engage in an immensely greater array of tasks, as the scope of all three traditional functions—military, legal, and fiscal—expands dramatically and new functions are added, in education, communications and transport, public health, public works, the fostering and regulation of industry, and so on. The state expands dramatically in size as well as scope, and undergoes major organizational changes.

The key element of these changes, as Max Weber pointed out, is the application of the principles of bureaucratic organization. Weber was the first social scientist to identify "bureaucracy" or formal organization as a single category of analysis that could apply across types of organizations. Where economic theorists had looked at commercial and industrial organizations and political theorists had focused on state structures and political organizations, Weber identified the common elements across both and posited a strong evolutionary trend toward the application of bureaucratic organization to a growing range of human activities, particularly on the part of the state. As Gerschenkron subsequently pointed out, the role of state administrative organizations is even greater in countries that are "late developers"—

societies that are trying to follow the models set by the first-comers to industrialization, Britain and the United States in particular.

But later modernizing states did more than simply increase the scope of their activities as a consequence of followership. They also emulated, to varying degrees, the organizational patterns of the first-comers and adapted them to their own social environments. Moreover, the first-comers themselves often learned from the organizational systems developed by later modernizers: Great Britain, for example, emulated many aspects of German social welfare systems and some features of its military organization. Social scientists have paid relatively little attention to these aspects of the development of organizations, in part because both modernization theory and organization theory have tended to focus on variables within a society as the key factors determining the direction and speed of change. Modernization theory in particular was more concerned with explaining why late-developing societies did not learn more quickly how to develop organizational systems on Western models, rather than with how they did learn. Adopting and adapting "rational" organizational systems was seen as a natural evolutionary process; what needed explanation was why this process was "blocked" in certain societies. Aspects of the development of "modern" organizational systems which were "imitative" of Western organizations were seen as incidental to the more significant internal dynamics of natural evolution.

Whether or not the development of Western-modelled bureaucracies in state administration was indeed "natural" and evolutionary, it was clearly pushed onto later developing states by the Western powers. In Asia, for example, it was made clear that the condition for repealing the unequal treaties forced onto states like China and Japan was the development of a "civilized" state. This meant not only the development of a formal governing apparatus with the trappings of sovereignty, but the creation of a wide range of administrative organizations including police and court systems, customs administration, commercial legal systems, and postal and telegraph communications systems that met Western standards (which meant being based on Western models). The Chinese were for many years content to let the Westerners develop and manage such systems within the treaty ports and even within the national customs service; the Japanese were not, perhaps because they lacked the long Chinese tradition of "using barbarians to control the barbarians." The Japanese construction of modern administrative systems in both the state and private sectors in the Meiji period is one of the most wide-ranging cases of cross-societal organizational emulation in history, and can serve as an important case for generating insights into the general processes involved.

## 2. THE CHOICE OF MODELS IN MEIJI JAPAN

The dominant image of Japanese institutional change held by Western scholars of social change is that of the "rational shopper:" a picture of Japanese decision-makers drawing up a list of desired institutions, engaging in painstaking com-

parative shopping for the best model, and selecting the brand most suited to their tastes and needs. William Foote Whyte's description captures this interpretation very succinctly:

"Japanese imitation was really highly selective. Japanese change agents examined models from various more 'advanced' countries and selected in terms of their judgment of what would best fit into Japan." [1968: 372]

Such interpretations accept at face value the claims of Japanese decision-makers that their choices were "best for Japan" and fitted appropriately into the Japanese context. In the early Meiji period, when xenophobic opposition to emulating the West was strong and constituted a pervasive threat to the very lives of prominent advocates of the adoption of Western-modelled institutions, such assertions were necessary efforts at legitimation. Even among some high-ranking government leaders, there was reluctance to accept the rapid introduction of Western-style organizations, and justification of the suitability of the model to Japan and the search for Japanese parallels or roots were a natural recourse for the advocates of change. We see something of the same kind of process at work today in the United States, where efforts are underway to re-define the "American" management tradition to emphasize patterns (such as employee participation in work re-design) that have only lately been made acceptable to the majority of American managers because of Japanese models.

The image of the "rational shopper" derives largely from those organizations that were modelled on specific Western organizational systems, such as the British navy, the French school system, or the American banking system. This was the most visible form of organizational model, but it was not the only type. There was also what we might call a "general" model: that is, a general concept of a specialized organization performing a particular set of tasks, rather than a specific organization. One example is the newspaper; another is the company; still another is the factory. For the construction of either type of organization (that using a specific model or that using a general model), its founders had to acquire at least some knowledge of the Western organization. The organization employing a specific model, however, required considerably more detailed information and first-hand observation of the model. The major advantage of specific models lay in the greater speed with which organizations could be set up and expanded, particularly large-scale systems with multiple sub-units. The major disadvantage was that specific models required a much more detailed information base, and information on Western organizational structures and processes was both expensive and difficult to obtain. The utilization of specific models was therefore much more frequent in state administrative systems and in state-sponsored systems, such as banking. The government was very eager to build national-scale, standardized organizational systems to consolidate its control and to realize its goals of building national wealth and military strength, and it had the resources to gather the necessary information to base them on specific Western models.

However, the difficulty of gathering this information, even with the resources of the government behind the process, should not be underestimated. The image of careful and rational choice presupposes ready access to information about the range of organizations from which the models were selected, and compared to other industrializing nations of the nineteenth century, such access posed serious problems for Japan. Japan enjoyed neither the contiguity of European countries, which allowed relatively easy passage of information and personnel, nor the waves of immigration which carried information and skills across the ocean to the United States and the British dominions. In the 1870s, Japan confronted not only geographical separation from the centers of organizational development but also formidable language and experience barriers. Of the industrializing nations of the nineteenth century, Japan alone possessed a non-Indo-European language, and unlike the nations of the West, the transition to Western models was a major discontinuity. Virtually no Japanese in the early Meiji period had extended personal experience of the models which the society's leaders were determined to adopt.

Information was therefore a key factor in the emulation of Western organizational forms during the first and most far-ranging period of such emulation, the 1870s, and it was recognized as a key resource by the country's leaders. They put enormous effort and considerable financial resources into obtaining information—by hiring foreign advisers in a wide range of roles, from top-ranking naval advisers to engine drivers on the early railways; by dispatching upper and middle level officials on observation missions abroad; by sending promising students abroad for foreign study; and by bringing in published materials and organizational regulations and descriptions. The private sector in publishing and book distribution also engaged in extensive importing and translation of materials on Western institutions and organizational patterns. But information continued to be one of the most problematic resources, especially during the first two decades of the Meiji period.

The selection of models tended therefore to be a more cumulative process than the "rational shopper" model suggests: that is, the selection of a model from one society increased the likelihood that the same society would serve as a source for further models, especially in closely related institutional fields. Language was a key factor in this: Western language facility was a rare commodity in Japan during the first decade of the Meiji period. The availability of Japanese who could communicate with French advisers (the result of the French military mission to the Shogunate and the French language school established in Yokohama in 1865) was a major factor influencing the Meiji government to continue the use of the French army model, even after the French armies were defeated by the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War [PRESSEISEN 1965: 8]. The fact that Maejima Hisoka knew English was a key factor in his being sent to Britain to negotiate a railway loan in 1870. The opportunity this gave him to study the British postal system first-hand was a key factor in Japan's adoption of the British model of the post and of postal savings after his return.

Organizational models tend to be cumulative for still another reason. The

selection of one model opened channels of communication with officials in the foreign country and provided networks of personal contact which facilitated the use of that country's institutions as models in other fields. In the 1870s, the primary sources of models for government-initiated organizations were Britain and France. In the late 1870s, the army switched to the German model, and central government leaders, confronted by the need for a formal Constitution, were attracted to the German Empire as the only major Western power to have both an Emperor and a "modern" written constitution. The resulting "spread effect" became significant in a wide range of institutions, including the police, the school system, and legal institutions.

One would therefore expect that imperfect information would be a major cause of departures from the patterns of the original organizational model. This would probably be most marked in the organizations based on general rather than specific models, but it would inevitably occur to some degree even in those whose model was very specific. After all, perfect information about an organizational model is never available to those engaged in creating a new organization, even when the model is located in the same society as that in which the new organization is being constructed. Selective perception on the part of the informants in the model as well as on the part of the information-gatherers restricts the information available, and renders inaccurate some of what is available. Indeed, for some aspects of the organization's day-to-day functioning—especially at its lower levels—information may be missing altogether: information on organizational models tends to be biased toward the information available at the top of the organization.

A universal problem in constructing a new organization—or reconstructing an existing one—is that relatively few of its new recruits have any first-hand experience of how the original model works. Those that have such experience are usually at the top of the new organization, and their observations are usually concentrated on the variables of most immediate concern to them: relations with the environment, particularly the acquisition of resources and the nature of formal-regulatory controls over the organization, and internal coordination and control.

There are therefore always some gaps in the information about the model, and it is unlikely that they will all be filled in a manner that duplicates the features of the original model. What may fill them instead is an implicit model drawn from the past experiences of the new organization's recruits. Many of these people are recruited from existing organizations. This is particularly the case for those in supervisory roles and those in the upper level positions, because in most societies these roles are supposed to be filled by people with some age seniority over lower-ranking entrants. They are therefore overwhelmingly likely to have spent some time in other organizational or occupational roles. Such people enter the new organization with some implicit model of roles and structure based on this past experience, and since they play key roles in the control and communications systems, these implicit models can exert strong pulls on the new organization in its adjustment to its new environment. One of the challenges to the new organization,

therefore, is either to utilize this implicit model in its own structures, or to replace it, through aggressive training and socialization, with the new model. The emphasis placed by many of the Meiji state structures (the army and navy, the police, the postal system, and the educational system) on formal training is linked to the need to replace older, traditional models of roles and organizations with the new patterns. The extent to which the older models still persisted is the key to understanding the impact of pre-industrial structures on emerging organizations in modernizing societies.

Looking at the unintended changes in organizational structures patterns as the new organization adapts to its new environment can be extremely revealing. However, the innovations that result from imperfect information are the most difficult to trace. Unless they involve dramatic departures from the original model, neither the members of the new organization nor casual observers from the original model are likely to be aware of them.

In the emerging organizations of Meiji Japan, the unintended modifications of the original Western models that were due to imperfect information were, somewhat surprisingly, of less significance than those due to planned and deliberate innovations in response to the very different social environment in which they were being established.

### **3. PLANNED INNOVATIONS AND ADAPTATION IN MEIJI ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS**

In perhaps overly simplified terms, it is possible to distinguish between modifications in an organizational model that were made in the early stages of establishing the new organizations, and those that emerged later in the organization's development. The early, deliberate modifications tended to fit one of two types: (a) concessions to a "less-developed" environment that was seen as "not ready" for certain Western patterns; (b) changes to preserve certain valued "Japanese" patterns. This second type of deliberate modification involved such adaptations as limiting access to the organizations. For example, the Ministry of Justice objected to allowing dependent members of a household to open postal savings accounts without the express permission of the head of the household [YUSEISHO 1971: 158]. Other deliberate departures from the Western model were taken to maintain traditional behavior patterns that enhanced coordination and standardization: for example, the early Tokyo police maintained barracks for housing the force, on the older model of the samurai barracks.

Departures of the first type—concessions to a "less-developed" environment—involved an implicit assumption that the Japanese organization would move towards Western patterns over time; the second—to preserve valued traditional patterns—did not. Although deliberate modifications of Western-modelled organizational systems to preserve Japanese culture and traditions have been presented by many Japanese and Western analysts as the dominant mode of modification, they

were for most organizations the least numerous. Perhaps the impression of their importance derives from the fact that such modifications were most likely to be publicly announced; a second reason may be that in some cases a modification that began as the first type was redefined, once the patterns were institutionalized, as the second type.

Instead, a key factor in the adaptations and resulting innovations that occurred in Meiji organizations was a consequence of the fact that the institutional environment in which the new organization was being set up differed significantly from that in which the original model was embedded. One way of conceptualizing the differences between organizational environments has been the model of the "organization-set" put forward by William Evan [1971]. Evan portrayed each organization as operating within a set of other organizations which regularly interact with it, providing it with needed resources or services, acting as customers or clients, and exerting formal control over some aspects of its operations (this last category includes government regulatory agencies, labor unions, etc.). A manufacturing firm, for example, relies on other firms for its parts and materials, banks for its financing, railways and transport companies to deliver its inputs and take away its products, a postal system to maintain regular contacts with customers, a network of firms that take delivery of its products, and so on. A police system relies on a judicial system to handle the suspects it arrests, other government agencies to collect and allocate tax money to provide it with the resources to pay its men and equip its network of stations, a communications infrastructure to connect its headquarters and its stations, and schools to provide literate recruits for its ranks. For most of the early Meiji organizations modelled either on specific or general Western patterns, the Western model was embedded in a set of organizations that often had no direct counterpart in their new setting in Japan.

Therefore the concept of the "organization-set" is a useful one in examining societal patterns of organizational development, especially in terms of the cross-societal emulation of organizational forms. When an organization is transferred from one society to another, one of the key differences between its original and its new environments is that the "organization-set" which sustained its operations in its original setting is not usually in place. The way in which the new organization responds to this problem has profound implications both for its own future development and for the patterns of organizational development in the society as a whole.

The new organization can adopt one of four strategies:

1. It can turn to another type of structure or organization that already is present in its new environment and can serve as a functional equivalent. For example, the early Japanese postal system, lacking the railways and the transport companies that provided the infrastructure of the British postal system on which it was modelled, turned to the traditional transport guilds that supplied relays of runners, stationed at the post-towns, as carriers for the first long-distance postal routes [TAKECHI 1978: 15-17].
2. It can internalize the performance of a task or set of tasks performed outside

the organization in the original setting. For example, given the relatively slow development of law courts in Meiji Japan, the police took over the task of imposing fines and prison sentences on offenders for a wide range of minor offences that in its French model were dealt with by judicial officials.

3. It can simply modify its operations to do without that particular activity. For example, early Japanese newspapers, in the absence of a population of business firms that were accustomed to advertising through that medium, relied primarily on sales revenue and politically-motivated subsidies from wealthy patrons or political groups, rather than the mix of sales and advertising common in the Western press of the day.

4. It can undertake to act as what Arthur Stinchcombe [1965] has called an "organization-creating organization" and mobilize resources to establish new organizations to perform the required activities. For example, when the early Meiji government began to construct Western-style buildings in the capital in the 1870s, it established a cement factory and a glass factory to provide the building materials needed in the new type of construction.

The first three strategies have their major impact on the internal workings of the new organization. Each involves some departure from the original model. Adopting the first strategy of finding a functional equivalent within the environment means that the organization must adjust to a different type of support activity and to a different relationship with at least one element of its organization-set. The second and third strategies entail a direct change in the activities performed within the organization, and therefore in its internal structures and processes. But adoption of any of these first three strategies is not necessarily a final solution. Either because of emergent problems, or because of a continuing desire to emulate the "advanced" model, or because the supporting organizations gradually develop, the organization-set can move towards that of the original model over time. That was the case for all three of the organizations given in the examples above: the postal system, the police, and the newspaper. For example, railways and transport companies emerged to carry the mail and displace the more traditional transport guilds, and the revenues provided by the postal service's using their services was a not inconsiderable factor in their early expansion. As law courts were set up throughout Japan, the police relinquished much of their judicial function to the courts. And as branded consumer goods emerged to provide advertising revenues, the revenue structure of Japan's urban newspapers quickly came to resemble that of their Western counterparts, although in the provinces, where the market for branded consumer goods grew much more slowly, advertising revenues were much slower to displace political subsidies.

In other words, the organization-set of the original model, to the extent that information is available, can become a kind of "blue-print" for entrepreneurship and organization-creation, either on the part of those within the ranks of the organization itself or from outsiders who spot an opportunity. This is one factor making

for organizational change *towards* the original model over time, in contrast to the factors that induce change *away* from the model as the organization adjusts to the new environment.

The fourth strategy—organization creation—has the greatest impact on the pace of organizational development in general. There are three ways in which an “organization-creating organization” can operate. First, it can set up organizational subsystems which remain under its control (such as when a corporation diversifies and sets up a new subsidiary, or a government department creates a new sub-department). Second, it can set up organizations which are initially under its control but which it releases when they reach a certain stage of development (for example, when a government sets up a model factory and then privatizes it when it is solidly established). Third, it can provide the resources for the development of organizations which are not incorporated into its control structure and which from their inception are at least formally autonomous: for example, when a newspaper company moves to help set up an advertising agency to foster the growth of advertising, as occurred in Japan in the 1880s. An important incentive for such organization-creating behaviour is to provide major elements of the organization-set of an organization that has been transferred from one society to another. Each of the three modes of organization-creation outlined above accelerates the pace of organizational development in the society.

Obviously both the strategy chosen to cope with the problems of an incomplete organization-set and the scope of that strategy’s impact on the society’s organizational development vary enormously across organizations. But the impact of organization-creation can be very great indeed. If the “organization-set” approach is extended beyond a single focal organization to an entire society, one can conceive of that society as an interconnected system of interacting organization-sets. This interconnected system can be seen in terms of resources: the outputs of one organization become the inputs of another. The system changes over time, as the increasing density of organizations produces increasing interactions among them and such factors as changing levels of resources and the emergence of new types of organizations alter dominance patterns. In turn, the patterns of relationships among organizations are critical in shaping the transfer of resources within the society—including information about organizations models and innovations [DiMAGGIO and POWELL 1982]. That organizations use available resources to “fill in” the organization-set for which a foreign model supplies the blueprint is a major part of organizational development in many societies.

The Meiji state was the center of wide-ranging organization-creation throughout the Meiji period, but most intensively during the 1870s. One reason is that in general, the larger and more varied the organization-set of the original model, the greater the necessity for emulating the organization-set as well as the organization of the original model, and therefore the likelihood of the new organization actively trying to establish those elements of the environment in the new setting. The government, with its large and complex array of administrative systems,

from the military to the public schools, needed to foster the rapid growth of supporting institutions if it was to achieve its goals of nation-building.

This raises the crucially important issue of emergent organizational innovations: those that developed after the organization was set up in its new environment. These have been less studied than the changes made at the point of transfer of Western organizations into Japan. Yet the emergent innovations constitute perhaps the most interesting area of inquiry, because in several areas, Japanese organizations in the Meiji period developed innovations that departed from Western models in ways that anticipated later developments in the very Western organizations that had served as their original models [WESTNEY 1982]. And in other areas, the innovations exhibited distinctive features that are characteristic of what has come to be seen as "the Japanese management system," in terms of the patterns of coordination and control.

Emergent innovations occurred, as one would expect, from problems that the new organization encountered as it expanded. The specific nature of those problems varied enormously across organizations, but there are identifiable patterns in the sources of the organizational solutions that were attempted. The major sources of inspiration for such changes were:

1. Other organizations in the Meiji environment. The original models were far away, and the continued acquisition of information on their structures was often less influential than the models provided by powerful organizations in the immediate environment of the developing organizations. The army, for instance, provided a powerful model for the police; central government ministries provided models for those organizations for whom the state was a significant actor in their organization-sets.
2. Alternative foreign models. This was less common than the first source of innovation, but for some organizations it was a major factor. The army, the judicial system, the educational system, the banking system—all turned from their original models to another Western alternative within a decade of their initial establishment. The result was a grafting of certain features of the alternative foreign model onto the features of the original, to produce distinctive organizational patterns.
3. Idiosyncratic, function-linked adaptations that resulted from the challenges of specifically Japanese conditions. The production of morning and evening editions of the newspaper (the forerunner of today's "set" in Japan's newspaper industry) in response to the technological constraints on type-setting the complex Japanese language is one example of this. The dispersion of police posts throughout the urban areas is another.

Innovations of the first type tended to cluster on the dimensions of coordination and control, and tended to be drawn from state institutions, which were salient members of the organization-set of most types of organizations in the Meiji period. This type of innovation tended to produce patterns that were shared by a

number of organizations, and it is one of the major factors that make it possible to speak of emerging "Japanese-style" organizations. Innovations of the second and third type produced a wider array of patterns. In most major organizational systems of Meiji Japan, we can see all three types of innovation at work.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The interaction between Western and Japanese organizational patterns has been one of the major issues raised—although it has been by no means resolved—in the literature on Meiji institutions. A related issue, but one that has received less attention, is the potential for conflict and incompatibility among organizational patterns drawn from different societies. Government administrative organizations, for example, were drawn from Great Britain, France, and Germany, and the problem of constructing effective coordination and control mechanisms at the top of the system was one of the most serious challenges faced by the Meiji government.

The potential for conflict was greatest when the model was drawn from a setting where it enjoyed greater autonomy than it did when it was set up in the Meiji context, or when it had more preferential access to the allocation of resources. A further cause of long-term conflict was the early Meiji preference for multi-functional systems: that is, for models that performed a broad range of tasks. This was an understandable preference given scarce resources and extensive needs, but it created some problems for later organizational development as some of the first-comers to the organizational landscape proved somewhat reluctant to make way for more specialized organizations. The efforts needed to resolve these conflicts provided yet another source of innovation in the emerging organizational systems of Meiji Japan.

Analyzing Meiji organizational development is one way of coming to grips with the problem of understanding Japanese social change in a general and comparative context. The Japanese civilization which emerged from the Meiji era was a product of a creative mix of Western, traditional, and emergent patterns of organization. Historians and social scientists alike have long been fascinated by the debate over whether the emergent patterns owed more to Western or traditional influences. But for those who are interested in putting the experience of Japan into the context of general theories of social change, the more important issue is how those influences interacted in each organization, with each other and with the emerging social and organizational patterns of the society as a whole, and what the emergent patterns can begin to tell us about the general processes of cross-societal organizational emulation.

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