



# Music Education: The Chinese Bel Canto Theory of Peking University's Opera Research Institute: A Case Study of the Opera Jiang Jie

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## Abstract

This paper examines the application of Chinese Bel Canto theory, as articulated by the Peking University Opera Research Institute, through a detailed case study of the opera "Jiang Jie." This notable work centers on the life and struggles of Jiang Jie, a female revolutionary during the Chinese Civil War. The opera explores themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and heroism, highlighting Jiang Jie's dedication to her cause and the emotional turmoil she experiences in her fight against oppression. The research method is qualitative research, which mainly combines the literature review and Field Research. The findings found that, the study explores how vocal techniques and body language enhance character portrayal and emotional depth. Key findings reveal that skilled manipulation of sound dynamics—encompassing variations in intensity, timbre, and rhythm—enables performers to convey complex emotional states effectively, thereby reflecting the inner lives of their characters. Furthermore, the research underscores the significance of synchronizing vocal expression with physical movement, resulting in a more vivid and impactful theatrical experience. Ultimately, this study examines how Bel Canto principles shape contemporary Chinese opera, enhancing emotional depth and artistic impact in 'Jiang Jie'. This analysis enhances our understanding of how Western vocal traditions intersect with Chinese operatic practices, highlighting the ongoing evolution of performance art in China.

**Keywords:** The Chinese Bel Canto Theory, Opera Research Institute, Peking University, The Opera Jiang Jie

## 1. Introduction

Because of its combination of vocal and instrumental brilliance, opera, one of the greatest works of classical music, is regarded as a model of artistic culture throughout the world. Opera is known for its most scientific voice methods, but it also reflects the general artistic level of a country. Material requirements are being progressively satisfied as China's

economy and technology advance quickly, but there is a growing emphasis on the need for spiritual and cultural enrichment. In this regard, opera is without a doubt the best performing art form for China's pressing need for a platform that can demonstrate artistic ability and cultural confidence on a global scale (Gao, 2017: 67). Bel Canto, a significant aspect of Western vocal art, began to permeate Chinese culture during modern times, primarily facilitated by Christian missionaries. The historical roots of cultural exchange between China and the West can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty in the 8th century, which marks a crucial period where Eastern and Western influences began to intertwine. This early interaction set the stage for future developments, including the introduction of Bel Canto techniques in China (Tao, 1994: 1-18). As Bel Canto took root in China, it engaged deeply with traditional Chinese music, leading to notable transformations within the country's vocal music landscape. Scholars have noted that this interaction enriched Chinese national vocal traditions, promoting innovation while preserving core aspects of indigenous musical forms (Luo, 2019: 98).

The evolution of opera in China has been a complex interplay of cultural heritage, artistic innovation, and social dynamics. Among the various forms of Chinese opera, the emergence of the Chinese Bel Canto theory represents a significant development, particularly as articulated by the Opera Research Institute at Peking University. This theory not only aims to rejuvenate traditional operatic practices but also seeks to blend Western vocal techniques with rich Chinese musical traditions. The Peking University Opera Research Institute's adaptation of the opera "Jiang Jie" tackles the crucial challenge of integrating "Chinese language with bel canto technique." This focus addresses unique linguistic characteristics of Mandarin, including its four tones, rhyme, articulation, and phrasing, which are vital for adapting bel canto methods to Chinese vocal art.

This paper presents a case study of "Jiang Jie," an opera that embodies the principles of the Chinese Bel Canto approach. Through an analysis of its thematic elements, musical composition, and performance techniques, we aim to understand how this opera serves as a practical manifestation of the theoretical framework proposed by the Opera Research Institute. Furthermore, we will explore the implications of this synthesis for contemporary Chinese opera and its potential to forge new pathways in the realm of performing arts.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Origins of Bel Canto Theory**

Italy, the birthplace of Bel Canto theory, is often referred to as the "cradle of opera" (Chai Xin, 2017). Bel Canto, meaning "beautiful singing," emerged in 17th-century Italy and developed into a recognized singing style across Europe. It is currently regarded as the most perfected, systematic, and scientifically advanced method of singing in the world (Gao Min, 2017). During the Baroque period in the 17th century, Italian vocalists began systematically developing a style of singing that emphasized elegance, continuity, and expressiveness. This style focused on the natural flow of the voice and the purity of tone, requiring singers to achieve perfect vocal expression through scientific breath control, precise resonance adjustment, and delicate vocal cord manipulation.

The earliest Bel Canto theories were systematically summarized by Italian vocal educators, gradually forming a foundational framework. For example, early Bel Canto emphasized the combination of head and chest resonance, aiming to present rich color and depth in the voice (Stark, 2003). The rise of Italian opera, particularly the works of composers

like Claudio Monteverdi, significantly promoted the popularization of Bel Canto singing. These composers' works demanded that singers maintain continuity and purity of tone across a wide vocal range, and Bel Canto theory provided solid technical support for such performances.

## **2.2 Introduction and Localization of Bel Canto Theory in China**

As an important component of Western vocal art, Bel Canto theory gradually entered China in modern times through Christian missionary activities. Historical records indicate that the earliest cultural exchanges between China and the West can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty in the 8th century, where the collision of Eastern and Western cultures laid the foundation for the later development of Bel Canto in China (Tao Yabing, 1994). The introduction and gradual spread of Bel Canto in China deeply interacted with and impacted traditional Chinese music culture, enriching and innovating Chinese national vocal music (Luo Qi, 2019).

The development of Bel Canto in China went through several key stages. In the 1930s and 1940s, the first batch of Chinese vocal students studied in Europe and America. Upon their return, they introduced Western Bel Canto culture to China. Representative figures such as Yu Yixuan, Zhou Xiaoyan, and Ying Shangneng advocated for "adapting Western techniques for Chinese use," and they trained a large number of vocal talents. During this period, Western Bel Canto spread widely in China, breaking the range limitations of traditional national vocal music, and outstanding singers such as soprano Zou Dehua and tenor Li Guangxi emerged. Although Bel Canto faced suppression during the 1950s and 1960s due to conflicts with the need for "nationalization," this conflict gradually turned into integration with the deepening of reforms, promoting the further development of Bel Canto in China (Wang Nan, 2022).

## **2.3 The Development and Characteristics of Chinese Opera**

As a comprehensive art form, opera was introduced to China in the early 20th century and has undergone nearly a century of development. Its development is closely linked to the historical processes of Chinese society, spanning important historical periods such as the Republic of China, the founding of the People's Republic of China, and the reform and opening-up. Mr. Jin Xiang, in his article "A Glimpse of the Development of Contemporary Chinese Opera: Also on 'Opera Thinking and Opera Creation,'" divides the history of Chinese opera into three stages: the initial period from the early Republic to after the Anti-Japanese War (1928-1949), the period from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the reform and opening-up (1949-1979), and the period from the reform and opening-up to the present (1980-). This article summarizes these three stages as the initial, growth, and diversification and innovation periods of Chinese opera development. Each of these stages is represented by a typical opera work, reflecting the thematic ideas and cultural connotations of the works during different periods (Zi Ran, 2020).

Summary, Bel Canto theory originated in 17th-century Italy, often celebrated as the "cradle of opera." Translating to "beautiful singing," this style developed into a systematic and scientifically advanced method of vocal performance throughout Europe. During the Baroque period, Italian singers began to cultivate a singing style that emphasized elegance, continuity, and expressiveness, focusing on natural voice flow and tonal purity. Early vocal educators systematically summarized these principles, establishing a foundational framework that combined head and chest resonance to create rich vocal color and depth. The rise of Italian opera, notably through composers like Claudio Monteverdi, greatly contributed to the popularity of Bel Canto singing by demanding consistency and purity across wide vocal ranges. Chinese opera, introduced in the early 20th century, has undergone nearly a century of evolution, closely tied to significant societal changes during various historical periods,

including the Republic of China and the founding of the People's Republic of China. Jin Xiang categorizes the history of Chinese opera into three stages: the initial period from the early Republic to post-Anti-Japanese War (1928-1949), the growth period from the founding of the People's Republic to the reform era (1949-1979), and the diversification and innovation stage from the reform period to the present (1980 onwards). Each stage is marked by representative operatic works that reflect the cultural themes and ideas of their respective eras.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This research is a qualitative study, the researcher uses the literature review and Field Research.

#### **3.1 Literature review**

The literature review sources are categorized into three main areas. Firstly, academic papers and monographs relevant to Peking University Chinese Bel Canto theory, Jiang Jie, and comparative studies between Chinese and Western vocal traditions have been gathered from databases such as CNKI, Wanfang Data, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These resources provide a solid theoretical foundation for the research. Secondly, historical documents pertaining to the early development of Chinese opera and literature on Chinese vocal education were collected, which aid in tracing the evolution of the Peking University Chinese Bel Canto theory and its contemporary relevance.

#### **3.2 Field Research**

Field research serves as a vital method for gathering firsthand data through on-site interview and observation, and it was utilized in this study to explore the relationship between Peking University's opera Jiang Jie and its Chinese Bel Canto theory, with a focus on practical application and performance in actual productions.

3.2.1 Interview: interviews were conducted semi-structured and the researcher used the descriptives to analyzed the data form interview.

#### **3.3 Key informants**

Jin Man: A renowned opera performer, opera educator, and vocal educator.

Dai Yuqiang: A famous tenor, opera performer, and vocal educator, Dai Yuqiang is a professor at Peking University Opera Research Institute and the dean of the Henan Music Academy at Zhengzhou University.

Li Hong: A soprano and Ph.D. holder who studied in Russia, Li Hong is the deputy director of Peking University Opera Research Institute, an associate professor, and a vocal instructor.

3.3.1 participant selection criteria for field research: Participants must have substantial knowledge and experience in Chinese vocal traditions, specifically related to the Chinese Bel Canto theory as practiced at Peking University. Participants needed to be available for interviews and willing to share their insights and experiences regarding the Chinese Bel Canto theory and its practical applications. Their willingness to engage in open dialogue was crucial for collecting rich qualitative data.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1 The Chinese Bel Canto Theory of Peking University's Opera Research Institute: A Case Study of the Opera Jiang Jie**

This section focuses on the background of the formation of Peking University's Chinese Bel Canto theory and its practical pathways in opera art, systematically analyzing its core ideas and application value. Through field research, literature analysis, expert interviews, and questionnaire surveys conducted among actors, vocal coaches, and audiences involved in various versions of Jiang Jie, this section comprehensively showcases the theory's specific practices in teaching, performance, and creation. The diversity of the research subjects ensures the representativeness and depth of the data, providing a solid foundation for exploring the logic of the theory's formation and its practical models.

#### 1) Implementation of Bel Canto Theory

The integration of Bel Canto theory in the opera "Jiang Jie" exemplifies a remarkable fusion of vocal technique and artistic expression. Unlike traditional Bel Canto, which primarily emphasizes sound purity and technical precision, this adaptation incorporates distinct cultural and contextual elements specific to Chinese opera. Vocal instructors stress the necessity of conveying the revolutionary spirit embodied by the character of Jiang Jie, ensuring that performances transcend mere technical execution to resonate with emotional depth and narrative urgency.

In key scenes, performers harness their vocal abilities to amplify emotional intensity, employing dynamic control of sound through variations in volume and intensity. This technique not only enhances dramatic tension during climactic moments but also ensures that the lyrics are articulated clearly, thereby enriching the overall expressive power of the performance. For instance, during Jiang Jie's solo segments, actors adeptly alternate between chest resonance and head cavity resonance, elevating the emotional impact of their portrayal. This innovative approach represents a synthesis of both Eastern and Western vocal traditions, allowing "Jiang Jie" to maintain the inherent qualities of traditional Chinese opera while simultaneously showcasing the technical advantages offered by Bel Canto principles. The result is a distinctive artistic style that reflects contemporary interpretations of operatic performance, demonstrating how traditional narratives can be revitalized through modern techniques. By marrying these diverse influences, "Jiang Jie" not only honors its cultural roots but also embraces a broader, more universal appeal, ultimately enriching the landscape of Chinese opera.



**Figure 1:** Schematic diagram of vocal skills in the emotional climax part

In some dramatic scenes with fierce conflicts, the actors explored new ways to apply traditional vocal skills. By adding more emotional colors to the timbre, or by changing the rhythm to enhance the expressive force of the voice, the actors can better meet the needs of the plot development. Five vocal music instructors agree that this innovative practice has significantly improved the emotional expression in Jiang Jie. For example, when Jiang Jie is threatened by the enemy, the actor shows the emotional fluctuation of the character through the gradually enhanced timbre (see Figure 1).

Besides, in Jiang Jie, Bel Canto theory insists on the application of natural sound field in western operas, and retains the original charm of opera art. In the performance, the actors completely rely on the natural sound field without using modern public address equipment. This practice not only shows respect for traditional bel canto, but also enhances the natural expressive force of the voice. For example, in some scenes, actors use the acoustic characteristics of the stage to enhance the spatial sense and three-dimensional sense of sound through the interaction between sound and theater space. This treatment not only enhances the audience's auditory experience, but also enables actors to express the pure power of sound more freely.

## 2) Selection and Application of Vocal Techniques

In the performance of "Jiang Jie," the essential skills highlighted by the Bel Canto theory at Peking University encompass resonance, breath control, timbre modulation, and various technical methods. These techniques not only amplify the penetration and expressiveness of the performers' voices but also improve the clarity of articulation, making the lyrical delivery more engaging for the audience. Expert feedback from vocal instructors has been instrumental in guiding actors on how to effectively implement these techniques during live performances.

Breath control and vocal technique form the foundation of Bel Canto singing, particularly critical in a complex emotional narrative like that of "Jiang Jie." Observational studies reveal that most actors recognize the crucial role of breath control in their ability to



sustain long phrases and convey nuanced emotions. Notably, the distinctive "crying deep breath" technique, a hallmark of Peking University's adaptation of Bel Canto, is frequently employed in "Jiang Jie." This method enables performers to maintain vocal consistency and stability, especially in high notes and extended passages, thereby ensuring the integrity of their emotional expression.

For instance, during the poignant scene where Jiang Jie learns of his beloved Lao Peng's tragic death, the actors must navigate long, emotionally charged notes (as illustrated in Figure 2). The use of deep breathing techniques allows them to preserve vocal strength and stability amid the emotional turmoil, preventing any disruptions caused by heightened feelings of grief. The ability to manage breath effectively ensures that the performers can deliver emotionally rich performances without compromising vocal quality.

Additionally, the application of various resonance techniques contributes to enhancing vocal richness and depth. By skillfully adjusting their timbre, actors can evoke a wide range of emotions, further immersing the audience in the narrative. This multifaceted approach to vocal training not only showcases the technical prowess of the performers but also aligns with the overarching themes of "Jiang Jie," emphasizing the struggle and resilience of the human spirit. Overall, the careful selection and application of these vocal skills create a compelling and memorable theatrical experience, bridging traditional Chinese opera with contemporary operatic excellence.



**Figure 2:** Jiang Jie's application of crying deep breathing skills in the face of his lover Lao Peng's dead

The use of resonance skills played a key role in the performance of Jiang Jie. Actors need to show the changes of Jiang Jie's inner feelings through the head-cavity resonance and the transformation of chest resonance. The actors mentioned that they better expressed Jiang Jie's emotional fluctuation in key aria by adjusting the resonance position. In Jiang Jie's classic aria "Red Plum Praise", the actor uses chest resonance in the bass passage, which shows Jiang Jie's firm revolutionary belief; In the high-pitched paragraph, she turns to head cavity resonance to express her inner tenderness and perseverance. The use of this technique not only

enhances the transmission of emotion, but also makes the voice more layered and expressive.



**Figure 3:** The Transformation of Resonance Position in Red Plum Zan

in the aspect of timbre adjustment, Bel Canto theory of Peking University emphasizes conveying multi-level emotions through timbre changes. in the paragraphs separated from the comrades, the actor expressed Jiang Jie's revolutionary spirit through bright and firm timbre; In the face of inner emotional fluctuations, actors express their deep feelings for their families and comrades through soft timbre (Figure 3). The indication of strength change in the score further emphasizes the details of timbre adjustment, and through this contrast between light and shade, the emotional level is richer.



**Figure 4:** The timbre changes in Jiang Jie's different scenes



3) The action design and stage performance are standout elements in the production of "Jiang Jie." Bel Canto theory underscores the essential integration of vocal delivery with physical movement, enriching the expressive capacity of the characters and enhancing the overall impact of the performance through the synergy between choreography and vocal artistry. In "Jiang Jie," the design of actions serves not only as a supplementary expression of the character's emotions but also as an artistic device intricately linked to vocal techniques.

In the interpretation of "Jiang Jie" by Peking University's Opera Research Institute, the action design is pivotal for illustrating character dynamics and propelling the storyline forward. Each movement is infused with emotional weight, which elevates both the visual spectacle and the emotional resonance of the performance. The choreography is carefully crafted to reflect the unique characteristics of each role and the progression of the narrative, ensuring that every gesture complements the dialogue and musical elements.



**Figure 5.:** Jiang Jie's standing posture and gestures in the scene facing the enemy

The combination of action design and vocal performance is a great innovation in the performance of Jiang Jie. Bel Canto theory usually emphasizes the independence and purity of voice, but in Jiang Jie, directors and actors explore the synchronization of action and vocal music, making action a part of voice expression. For example, in Jiang Jie's monologue aria, the actor vividly expresses the inner emotional ups and downs of the role through delicate gesture changes and gradual vocal performance. The combination of this kind of action and vocal music makes the emotional expression more abundant, and the complex emotions in the character's heart are also more completely displayed.

Finally, the visual design of the stage is also an important practical link of Bel Canto theory in Jiang Jie. Through the careful design of the stage scene, the director team created a visual effect that complements vocal music performance. For example, in Jiang Jie's monologue scene, through the clever use of light and shadow, the stage background and the vocal performance of the actors reached a harmonious unity. The design of the stage not only enhances the drama of Jiang Jie's emotional expression, but also further highlights the appeal of vocal performance and the scene atmosphere through the changes of lighting and scenery. This multi-dimensional combination of vision and vocal music makes Bel Canto theory not only stay at the auditory level, but further enhance the expressive force and artistic appeal of the stage through the joint action of stage action and visual design.

#### 4) Emotional Expression and Character Portrayal

Emotional expression in performance is intricately tied to the precise control of sound. Bel Canto theory emphasizes revealing the characters' inner worlds through variations in sound intensity, timbre, and rhythm as they navigate different emotional states. In "Jiang Jie," the actor effectively illustrates pivotal shifts in the character's internal feelings by modulating sound intensity, transitioning from soft, delicate tones to powerful, resonant vocalizations. For instance, when Jiang Jie expresses her deep affection for her comrades, the actress employs a soft and lyrical quality in her voice, capturing tenderness and care. Conversely, while conveying her anger toward the enemy, she embodies Jiang Jie's resolute revolutionary spirit through commanding vocal strength. In these moments, the actor skillfully utilizes dynamic markings in the musical score to gradually amplify the emotional expression, enhancing the intensity of the performance.

Character development relies not only on vocal expression but is significantly enriched through body language. In "Jiang Jie," the actors breathe life into their roles by harmonizing vocal delivery with physical movements. A poignant example occurs during a scene where Jiang Jie faces interrogation by the enemy; the actress cultivates an image of an unyielding revolutionary through a steadfast posture and decisive gestures, which complement her strong, assertive voice. The collaboration between movement and sound has been unanimously recognized by the five vocal instructors involved in the production as essential for shaping characters. This synergy between vocal artistry and body language creates a more three-dimensional and authentic portrayal of the roles. The success of emotional expression is greatly aided by meticulous attention to the nuances of sound. Actors convey the emotional depth of their characters through subtle vocal adjustments. In a reflective scene where Jiang Jie recalls her past, the actress skillfully uses a gentle tone to evoke feelings of profound nostalgia and resilience. During rehearsals, all five vocal music instructors highlighted how this delicate manipulation of sound significantly heightened the emotional impact in that moment. The gradual fading of her voice and the nuanced changes in timbre poignantly illustrate Jiang Jie's complex emotional landscape, rendering her character more relatable and multi-faceted.

In essence, the interplay of vocal techniques and physical expressions crafts a rich tapestry of emotional storytelling in "Jiang Jie." Each actor's commitment to mastering both sound and movement allows them to delve deeper into their characters, ultimately resulting in a powerful and resonant theatrical experience. By merging these elements, the performance transcends mere representation, allowing the audience to engage fully with the characters' journeys and struggles. This holistic approach not only enriches the characters but also underscores the overarching themes of resilience and solidarity within the narrative.

## 5. Conclusion

through the case of Jiang Jie highlights its unique adaptability, innovation, and theoretical significance within Chinese cultural and artistic contexts. Unlike a mere replication of Western Bel Canto, Chinese Bel Canto has been carefully modified to align with the aesthetic values, linguistic characteristics, and emotional expressions deeply rooted in Chinese traditions. The success of Jiang Jie in integrating Eastern and Western vocal techniques demonstrates the artistic vitality of Chinese opera and its potential contributions to global Bel Canto development. Furthermore, the opera's innovative application of Chinese Bel Canto theory, including adjustments in vocal techniques to accommodate Mandarin's phonetic structure and the incorporation of traditional Chinese opera movements, showcases its potential to expand across different languages and cultural backgrounds. This research also underscores the dynamic interaction between theory and practice, as the continuous refinement of vocal techniques and performance styles in Jiang Jie provides empirical support for the

evolution of Chinese Bel Canto theory. Additionally, the pivotal role of the Peking University Opera Research Institute in advancing this theory through research, performance, and talent cultivation has been instrumental in establishing a Chinese Bel Canto theoretical system, which not only enriches the foundation of Chinese opera but also enhances its presence on the global stage. This study affirms that Chinese Bel Canto theory serves as both a bridge between cultural traditions and modern artistic innovation and a significant force in the global dissemination of Chinese opera.

## 6. Discussion

The research Conclusion and Discussion highlights several critical areas for further exploration despite the significant findings of the study. Firstly, it addresses the ongoing challenges in cultural integration, particularly in merging Bel Canto with traditional Chinese vocal techniques. While Jiang Jie exemplifies some success in this area, performers often grapple with balancing technical requirements and emotional expression, indicating that achieving effective cultural fusion in performances remains a complex issue requiring more attention and practice. The study notes a persistent gap between theory and practice. While the application of Bel Canto theory within Jiang Jie has shown positive outcomes, its broader adoption in other operatic works falls short, especially in productions with strong local traditions. This disparity may stem from limited dissemination of the theory, differing levels of acceptance among performers, and audience preferences favoring traditional techniques. As such, finding ways to bridge this gap and effectively promote Bel Canto theory for wider use is an essential direction for future research. Bel Canto techniques can enhance contemporary Chinese opera training by focusing on breath control, legato singing, clear diction, and dynamic expression. Integrating physical movement with these methods helps singers authentically embody their roles. In future productions, blending Western operatic elements with traditional Chinese music, utilizing multimedia for engagement, and promoting diverse casting can create innovative performances. Workshops on Bel Canto methods and audience education through pre-show talks will further enrich appreciation and understanding of these vocal techniques in a modern setting.

Expanding on the cultural implications of Bel Canto's influence on Chinese opera is crucial for understanding its role in shaping the future of this art form and enhancing its global recognition. Integrating Bel Canto techniques can facilitate a fusion of Western vocal aesthetics with traditional Chinese elements, potentially attracting a broader audience and promoting cross-cultural appreciation. This blend not only revitalizes Chinese opera but also positions it within the global operatic landscape, fostering dialogue between diverse musical traditions. By exploring these intersections, we can better appreciate how such adaptations may lead to innovative performances that resonate with contemporary audiences while preserving cultural heritage.

## 7. Suggestions

Generally speaking, philanthropy is helpful to promote the financial performance of enterprises, whether it is a strategic investment in the market or an initiative to realize legitimacy. Enterprises should incorporate philanthropy into their own development strategy system, and formulate corresponding philanthropy strategies according to different development stages, the nature of property rights and the market environment in which they are located, so as to improve their profitability while fulfilling their social responsibilities and further promote the development of enterprises.

Future research should focus on comparative studies examining the influence of Bel

Canto techniques across various Chinese opera styles. Exploring how these vocal methods can enhance traditional forms such as Peking Opera, Cantonese Opera, and others may reveal new insights into performance practices and vocal training. Additionally, investigating the reception of Bel Canto-influenced productions among diverse audiences could provide valuable feedback for integrating Western techniques into Chinese operatic traditions. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural exchanges in the performing arts.

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