

**Empathy and Its Others:
The Voice of Asia, A Pail of Oysters,
and the Empathetic Writing of Formosa**

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Abstract

Two books published in the early 1950s, James Michener's *The Voice of Asia* and Vern Sneider's *A Pail of Oysters*, focused on the role that Americans could play in Cold War Asia. Michener's 1951 book of interviews stressed the idea that Americans needed to listen to the people of Asia in order to understand the region. Sneider's 1953 novel had as its protagonist an American reporter who traveled to postwar Taiwan to learn about the populace of the island. Both books emphasized the importance of face-to-face personal contact with common people, which the authors believed was instrumental to the creation and maintenance of cross-cultural understanding and regional peace. As such, they participated in a cultural rhetoric of empathy that would educate Americans about Asia and convince Asians of Americans' honorable intentions. The books also suggested that Americans in Asia had not only the privilege, but also the moral duty to represent Asia to other Americans through their writing. This paper, by looking into depictions of empathetic listening and writing in the two books, examines how *A Pail of Oysters* complicates Michener's treatment of Taiwan. In both works, Americans are granted moral authority as listeners and writers. In spite of the authors' emphasis on Americans listening to Asians, an important difference between them lies in the goals they set for listening. Michener's emphasis on Taiwan's role in the future of China is challenged by Sneider's on the socio-political situations in which the Taiwanese lived in the fifties. The reception of these books suggests that the power of the empathetic American writer to shape Americans' role in Asia was limited by the material, political, and discursive contexts in which it was situated.

Keywords

Cold War, Taiwan, United States, empathy

James Michener, *The Voice of Asia*, Vern Sneider, *A Pail of Oysters*

Introduction

The early 1950s was a time in which the government and people of the United States began to pay attention to Asia as the locus of a struggle between the Western capitalist democracies and the Communist regimes of the Soviet Union and China.¹ Accusations flew as to who had “lost China” when the Chinese Nationalists (KMT) were defeated and driven off the mainland to take refuge on the island that was known to Americans at the time as Formosa.² The Chinese Nationalists governing Taiwan and conservative groups in the United States worked to present the island as a base from which the forces of democracy and freedom would battle against totalitarian Communism’s spread from China to other countries in Asia.

As Christina Klein argues in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961*, during the early Cold War period US government officials began to express the need to develop Americans’ understanding of the people of Asia so that the US might establish and maintain good relations with the newly independent nations of Asia. American “empathy” for Asians, then, was posited as an ethical stance by US officials, one that would encourage the people of Asia to see the United States, democracy, and capitalism as alternatives to Soviet Communism. To one of these officials, Francis Wilcox, *empathy* meant ““the ability to put yourself in the other fellow’s position and see things from his point of view””

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² The naming of Taiwan is itself politically charged. While the Portuguese name “Formosa” was used by the United States during the period of Japanese colonization (1895-1945), it was slowly replaced by the use of the Mandarin name “Taiwan” after the KMT took over the island in 1945. The Nationalists preferred “Taiwan” because it emphasized the island’s status as a province of China. As one of James Michener’s interviewees (a soldier from the mainland) told him in *The Voice of Asia*, “We call the island Taiwan now. It’s Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s last stronghold” (91). According to Douglas Mendel, however, “*émigré* Formosans prefer the old Portuguese name to indicate their rejection of both prewar Japanese and postwar [Nationalist] Chinese domination” (8). After 1949, when the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, the island was also called the Republic of China and was referred to by the KMT government and by many in the US as “Free China,” which identified the island as a base from which to fight the Communists. I will be using “Formosa” when quoting from sources that use that name. Otherwise, I will use “Taiwan.”

(*qtd.* in Klein 22).³ In a 1957 speech, Wilcox proposed for Americans an “education for overseasmanship” that focused on the cultivation of empathy. If Americans, who would be increasingly living and working abroad, had this capacity, they could more easily participate in the American project of providing the newly decolonized countries with an alternative to Communism.

While Americans could indeed be persuaded to believe in the importance and possibility of seeing things from others’ perspectives, some scholars have questioned the ethics of empathy. Russell Scott Valentino characterizes it, for instance, as an “assertive projection of one’s own feelings into another’s imagined perspective” or even an “aggressive ‘entering into’ another’s psyche” (*par.* 5). Wayne Booth has also suggested that *empathy* is one of the terms in an “endless debate about which forms of intrusion on the minds or souls of others are defensible: What right have I to claim that I have understood you better than you have understood me?” (48). Suzanne Keen, while arguing for the value of empathy, notes that it is sometimes criticized by postcolonial and feminist scholars because “it appears to depend on a notion of universal human emotions, a cost too great to bear even if basic human rights depend upon it” (223). Further, there is the question of the relationship of empathy to power—to assume to know how another person feels based on one’s own experiences runs the risk of becoming a form of narcissism, an attitude that allows the other’s perspective to be effectively pushed aside, particularly if the other is not in a position to dispute the matter (Keen 222).

Some of these arguments against empathy grow out of the changes that have taken place in how the concept has been understood. While government officials like Wilcox used *empathy* in the layperson’s sense of “the emotional resonance between two people, when, like strings tuned to the same frequency, each responds in perfect sympathy to the other and reinforces the responses of the other” (Gauss 85), the term has its roots in the fields of aesthetics and psychology. David Depew notes that a dramatic change occurred in the meaning and implications of the term *empathy* after it became associated with psychology:

Originally the paradigmatic cases of empathy were inanimate objects, including “expressive” works of art. Once psychotherapy and ethics captured the term, however, persons became paradigmatic. With the

³ Daniel Lerner, in *The Passing of Traditional Society*, uses nearly the same terms to define empathy as “the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow’s situation” (50). However, Lerner’s purpose is to suggest the kind of psychological changes that people from traditional societies need to go through in order to modernize.

exception of a few higher animals, mostly pets, persons seem now the *exclusive* objects of empathy. With this change comes another. In the original theory, *empathy* acknowledges that the feelings we feel about others are actually our own; in the new meaning, *empathy* refers to our ability to identify with others by getting in contacts with feelings that *they* have (although the ability to empathize in this sense might be stimulated by analogous experiences we have had). (par. 9)

It is the notion that one can come into contacts with the feelings of others that some object to; now that humans rather than inanimate objects are the typical objects of empathy, it is easier for people to forget that they are actually projecting their feelings onto others. Despite the dangers involved in assuming that we know how others feel, however, psychologists argue that empathy is necessary to moral thought and “more complex moral emotions such as guilt and anger on behalf of others” (Pizarro, Detweiler-Bedell, and Bloom 85).

Another danger with regard to empathy concerns the possible agendas or motivations of the people who believe they are putting themselves in someone else’s shoes. The fact that the call for empathy was tied to US foreign policy immediately calls the government’s rhetoric of empathy into question. Indeed, at the root of the idea of developing understanding between nations and cultures was a desire to make Asians understand and support the United States. The notion that cultivating empathy for Asians was good for the people of Asia suggests both the American government’s anxieties about Communism and its paternalistic attitude toward Asia. In the 1950s, Americans were still coping with the “loss” of China and the rise of new nationalisms (sometimes including Communism) in parts of Asia. The US’s China Lobby (a loose confederation of supporters of Chinese Nationalist government in Taiwan) encouraged the view that Communist China and, ultimately, the Soviet Union, were behind all Asian Communist movements and nationalistic movements that were unfriendly to the US. At the same time, the US government used images of hunger, poverty, and illiteracy in its portrayal of Asia and suggested to Americans that by helping eliminate these ills they could prevent Asia’s slide into Communism. Empathy was to be put in the service of a paternalistic campaign to win over “Asian hearts and minds to match an American model” (Thomson, Stanley, and Perry 311).

As Klein argues, part of the American effort to cultivate and express empathy for the people of Asia involved the establishment of one-to-one personal contacts between Americans and Asians. For Americans who were unable to make direct

contacts with Asians, the published writings of Americans who had spent time in Asia were fundamental to an “education for overseasmanship.” For many Americans, this education meant reading about Asia—and particularly China—through the perspectives of popular magazines like *Reader’s Digest*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and Henry R. Luce’s magazines, such as *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*. Klein notes that the International Educational Exchange Service of the US State Department encouraged travel writers to educate (rather than merely entertain) American readers so that the latter could learn about other cultures and how to interact with people who had different cultural values and practices (110-11).

In addition to providing information about Asia and teaching traveling Americans how to behave in foreign lands, some works attempted to *model* for Americans the acts of interacting and empathizing with the people of Asia. Two books from the early 1950s, James Michener’s *The Voice of Asia* and Vern Sneider’s *A Pail of Oysters*, provided models of empathetic listening and writing. In Michener’s 1951 book, the author interviewed people from all over Asia, including countries like India, Korea, Pakistan, Singapore, and Taiwan, in an effort to introduce Americans to the Asian people with whom they were supposed to empathize. Sneider’s 1953 novel also gave readers a model of an American who listened with empathy to the people of Taiwan with the intent of passing on to fellow Americans what he had learned. Both *The Voice of Asia* and *A Pail of Oysters* emphasized the importance of face-to-face personal contacts with ordinary people to the creation and maintenance of cross-cultural understanding and regional peace. As such, they both participated in a cultural rhetoric of empathy that Klein describes as propagating a “sentimental ideal of forging personal bonds” that could both educate Americans about Asia and convince Asia of Americans’ “honorable” intentions (131).

For the US government, the cultivation of “the ability to put yourself in the other fellow’s position” had its dangers in terms of foreign policy, because it risked giving American citizens perspectives toward developing countries that might not match official interests or policies. Michener’s and Sneider’s portrayals of Taiwan and the reception of their books demonstrate how attempts to write empathetically about Taiwan during the Cold War era were constrained by the material, political, and discursive limitations of that time. This paper will assess Michener’s and Sneider’s depictions of Taiwan in order to compare and contrast their modes of empathetic representation. It will analyze the ways in which Michener and Sneider portray the work of empathetic Americans among Asians, and what kind of moral authority they envisioned for (and assumed in) writing about others. Above all, it

will try to explain how they ended up with diametrically opposed views of the island.

James Michener's *The Voice of Asia*

Christina Klein describes James Michener as “a well-known private citizen who explained the [US] government’s positions on events in Asia” and who “translated Cold War ideology into popular narrative and explained it in terms that the man on the street could understand and accept” (126). Famous for his collection of short stories entitled *Tales of the South Pacific* (which was adapted into a musical and made into a movie), Michener turned from short fiction to reportage in *The Voice of Asia*. This book is not political reportage, however, in the traditional sense of interviewing government leaders. Michener’s goal was to talk to ordinary people in the countries he visited.

The process that Michener undertook in his interviews suggests a model for how his fellow Americans could learn about the “real” Asia. He writes that he “did not approach any Asiatic government, although the police in Burma made me do so, and government press agents in India and Pakistan very quickly got on my trail and were of immense help” (10). The point he wants to make is that he tried his best to come into personal contact with people “on the street,” unimpeded by the local governments of those countries. For example, Michener describes his approach in Singapore, claiming that he “listened for fifteen or sixteen hours a day” to people “of every complexion, of every intellectual or political persuasion” (135).

He goes on to suggest that the US should send “some of its ablest young men” to Asia so that they, like Michener, might also listen and talk to people in Asia. “For unless we know Asia,” he concludes, “we will never gain the wisdom to make right decisions at the right time. And unless we start making some right decisions, Asia will become by default our implacable enemy” (135). While Michener depicts himself as an open-minded listener who wants Americans and Asians to learn about each other and make wise choices about how to relate to each other, he sees Americans as the ones who are supposed to make the important decisions based on what they learn about Asia.

At the end of the introduction to *The Voice of Asia*, Michener makes a major point: despite the differences in political systems, Asians are basically not that different from Americans:

The most meaningless cliché used to obscure our understanding of Asians is to label them yellow hordes. They are yellow, many of

them, but they are also individual human beings who can be approached by every single psychological avenue used to persuade Americans. The nation of Pakistan—as a group of such human beings—is motivated precisely by the same social, economic, political and nationalistic drives that motivate the sovereign state of Texas or the regal city of New York. (11)

Michener thus demonstrates how he has learned about Asians through his travels and interviews in Asia. Importantly, he stresses that Asians have the same motives and needs as Americans do. One effect of, and possible reason for, Michener's insistence on the similarity between Asians and Americans is that this would make easier his American readers' empathetic identification with the people introduced in the book and, by extension, with the populace of Asia. As some psychological studies have pointed out, empathetic reactions are more likely to occur in cases where there are more identifiable similarities between the target of empathy and the target of the empathetic appeal (Pizarro, Detweiler-Bedell, and Bloom 86-87).

Ironically, however, Michener's attempt to make Asians more understandable to Americans—as opposed to the “meaningless cliché” that refuses to recognize their individuality—itself rewrites the cliché by suggesting that they are all like “us” (Americans) in that they share Americans' drives and motivations.⁴ Michener has thus overwritten one generalization with another, this time a claim of universalism that his personal interviews seem to contradict. But his generalization about Asians' similarity to Americans actually works together with his later descriptions of difference by creating an image of Asian people who need America's help and understanding in order to achieve what Americans have achieved. By balancing similarity with difference, Michener thus develops a paternalistic argument that calls for Americans to hear the “voice of Asia,” one that calls out for the US to help the region “mature” into a collection of capitalistic, democratic, and anti-Communist states. As with his argument about Americans needing to be able to make “the right decisions,” Michener portrays Americans as having not only the power, but also the moral responsibility to understand Asia and act on that understanding.

⁴ With surprising cynicism (and again unwitting irony) Michener practically *celebrates* the “fact” that Asians share the (apparently) American trait of being amenable to various forms of psychological manipulation. Perhaps that “goodness” of American life, which is intrinsically (or potentially) universal, includes this ability to be easily persuaded and manipulated by others.

The Voice of Michener's Formosa

Michener's section on Formosa in *The Voice of Asia* continues the argument that Americans must play a role in Asia. While trying to balance the depictions of similarity and difference, Michener's concern in this section seems to center on the prospect of war between the Nationalist government in Taiwan and the Chinese Communists in the mainland. To Michener, it seems that Taiwan's only importance for Americans is in its status as a base against Communism. Further, by portraying the issue of Taiwan's strategic role in the anti-Communist struggle through the eyes of the people in Taiwan, Michener implies that *they also* view the island primarily as a fortress from which to attack the mainland.

The section includes five short chapters: "Indian Summer in Formosa" (a chat with Y. P. Tom, a Chinese C-47 pilot); "The Governor's Mansion" (a chat with Edith Wu, the wife of K. C. Wu, Governor of Formosa); "The Hard Way" (a chat with Liu Ping, a Political Science student at National Taiwan University); "The Tank Commanders" (a chat with "four young fellows, tough, straight and aching for a fight"); and a chapter called "Observations" that sums up Michener's view of Taiwan's potential role in a future war with the Soviets. Michener's interviewees do not come from the same social status or class. Liu Ping, the college student, is a homeless refugee who can barely afford the basic necessities, much less study in a university. Edith Wu, the wife of the governor, seems to be in a much more stable position, having a residence provided for her and a husband with a government-appointed position. Others are military personnel—a pilot and four tank commanders. Some of their stories are quite moving. Liu Ping, for instance, says that when he came to Formosa, he had no food or shelter. Later, he "lived on one bowl of rice a day" while he prepared for the university entrance examination (98). Although Liu is already attending NTU when Michener interviews him, he still has no fixed place to live. "At night I sleep where I can," he says (98).

While Michener does not explain how he met his interviewees, they seem to share two commonalities: first, they are all recent refugees from the mainland and second, all of them seem to live in Taipei. These facts suggest that Michener stayed in Taipei for the extent of his trip in Taiwan. And despite their class differences, all of Michener's interviewees lead him to the conclusion with which he begins the chapter "Indian Summer in Formosa": "Formosa is perhaps the single country in the world that prays constantly for war. Everyone hopes it will be a general world war.

And they want it now. Two years from now may be too late” (91). All of the people he interviews want to take back the mainland and return to China. Edith Wu, for instance, ends her talk by apologizing for the unfinished work around the governor’s house. She says, “After all, we do not think of this as our permanent home” (97).⁵ Liu Ping tells Michener, “Of course there will be” war and says that after graduation he will fight for the Nationalists (99). “Everyone on Formosa is loyal to Chiang Kai-shek,” Liu says (99).⁶ One of the tank commanders shows Michener a pledge, signed in blood, to “restore China” and to “drive the communists from the island” (103).

The section of “Observations” sums up Michener’s views concerning the situation in Taiwan, given the overwhelming support among his Formosan interviewees for war with China. Although Michener does not give them his unreserved endorsement, he seems to be in agreement with them that with help from the US, Chiang’s army could win back China. He says that the US should help Chiang invade the mainland in case of a war with the Soviet Union. In fact, he predicts “a long and silent tragedy on Formosa” if the US and the Soviet Union never go to war (107). He argues that Chiang’s military cannot invade the mainland by itself, but that Taiwan’s military would be loyal if the US backed an attack on the mainland and that most of the people of South China would welcome Chiang—though Michener insists that he personally is “against war with China” (109).

Michener also repeats his interviewees’ statement that Chiang’s regime in Taiwan “is [a] responsible” government (107). In his short discussion of conditions on Taiwan, Michener concludes that Chiang’s regime

is probably the most efficient government in Asia today, not even excepting Japan’s. It has solved the food problem. It has rationed goods so that everyone gets a fair break. It polices the island so that even white men can move about at night without risk of murder. It has launched an education program, prints liberal newspapers and insures just trials. Furthermore, in order to erase evil memories of the

⁵ Ironically, rather than leaving Taiwan to return to the Chinese mainland, the Wus left Taiwan for exile in the United States after K. C. Wu (Wu Guozhen) fell out of favor with Chiang Kai-shek in 1953 (Tucker 73).

⁶ After this comment, Liu ominously adds, “Not long ago they shot four generals who weren’t [loyal] and one of them was a four-star job. They also investigated the Chinese who served as translators for American newspapermen. They were found to be communist spies, telling the Americans what Mao Tse-tung wanted them to believe. The translators were shot” (99). Michener passes over Liu Ping’s statement without comment.

initial Chinese occupation, the Government has specifically worked to protect the indigenous Taiwanese population. (106)⁷

Michener's conclusions seem to suggest that no changes were needed in the way Chiang was running Taiwan. The above paragraph gives unstinting praise to the government for political reforms that the characters in Sneider's *A Pail of Oysters* would say hadn't even taken place. In his veiled reference to the 2-28 Incident, Michener does not mention—and considering his interviewee subjects, he might not have even known—that one of the major ways in which the government was trying “to erase evil memories the initial Chinese occupation” was to ban people from talking in public about 2-28. To Michener, the KMT government was taking care of the Taiwanese people and Americans needed to know this.⁸ Michener criticizes American ignorance of the situation in the Taiwan Strait. He asserts that Americans needed to be educated about the situation in the Strait and that it is the duty of “anyone who knows anything about Formosa these days to share his knowledge” (103). Michener thus implies that the conversations with his interviewees have provided him with an understanding of Formosa that he must share with his fellow Americans. On the other hand, Sneider argues that American ignorance of the real conditions on Taiwan—ignorance exacerbated by reportage like Michener's—would be disastrous for Asia.

⁷ Michener's comment that “even white men can move about at night” in safety reflects an issue that he raises elsewhere in the book—namely, that white people are physically in danger in Asian countries particularly where the governments are unfriendly to US interests. Earlier, he writes that Americans who go out at night in Asia are “likely to get shot” (64); he blames “communist manipulation” of the facts about the US's role in Asia for the hatred that he says many Asians feel for Americans.

⁸ In fact, the ROC Army's Peace Preservation Command declared a state of siege in Taiwan in 1949 and suspended many of the civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the ROC. The “Declaration of the State of Siege” provided for death sentences for people found guilty of committing crimes such as “[c]irculating rumours and beguiling the public”; “[i]nciting the public to riot”; “[s]triking by workers or traders disrupting public order”; and “[e]ncouraging students to strike or publicly inciting others to commit crime” (Peng 472). People accused of such political crimes were tried by military courts, whether the accused were military personnel or not. Nancy Tucker also writes of a “1950 search by the Peace Preservation police of island homes for copies of USIS materials and warnings to Taiwanese against subscribing to American publications” that simultaneously limited Taiwanese access to foreign information and undermined the image of the US in Taiwan (90). Michener either did not know of these laws and events or did not consider them important enough as exceptions to his argument.

Vern Sneider's *A Pail of Oysters*

Vern Sneider is probably best known for *Teahouse of the August Moon*, his novel about Occupation Japan that was adapted into a Broadway play and eventually made into a movie. Like Michener, Sneider spent several years of the Second World War in the Pacific. In 1944, he was enrolled in the Military Government School at Princeton, where he learned about Taiwan. After that, he was sent to Okinawa as a Military Government team member and became an area supervisor there (Walbridge 300). In Korea he met several people from Taiwan, whose interactions with him led him to write a short story entitled "A Pail of Oysters," which was published in the *Antioch Review* in 1950 (Sneider, "Pail" 315).

Sneider's 1953 novel *A Pail of Oysters* was written after he spent the summer of 1952 in Taiwan collecting more information about the island and its people (Nichols BR18). Sneider's novel indirectly responds to Michener's treatment of Formosa by focusing on events related to the lives of the four main characters. The first is Li Liu, a part-Hakka and part-Pepohuan (Plains Aborigine) man who has been sent out by his ailing father to bring back their god (a framed lithograph of a god) after it has been stolen by some KMT soldiers. The second is Precious Jade, a twenty-year-old Taiwanese prostitute in Taipei, who escapes the House of the Laughing Gods brothel. The third is her younger brother "Didi," a high school graduate who is about the same age as Li Liu. Finally, Ralph Barton, who is arguably the protagonist and a skeptical American reporter. He is being taken around Taiwan by Nationalist government officials to write glowing accounts of how the Nationalists are running Taiwan.

After escaping the House of the Laughing Gods, Precious Jade finds her brother in the house of their rich adoptive father (the same man who sold her to the brothel) and they both escape. The two run into Li Liu, who has accidentally ended up in Taipei after hitching a ride on a jeep carrying Ralph Barton. Precious Jade's brother also meets Barton, who gives him the English name "Billy" and gets him a job at the Friends of China Club, where Barton is staying. Eventually Precious Jade and Li Liu also start working for Barton, helping to convert an old Chinese boat into a floating press club.

Barton then becomes involved with a man surnamed Chou, the head of an architectural firm who arranges secret meetings with the American to tell him about the plans some Formosans have to try to reform the Nationalist government by

getting rid of the “Communitic-technique” faction of the KMT.⁹ Chou wants Barton to write articles about Formosa in order to let Americans know about the problems so that the “Democratic-technique” faction can overcome the Communitic-technique one. Chou also mentions their plans to build Formosa’s democracy through economic development, specifically via “free enterprise,” and their hopes that Americans would help with this. Chou assures Barton that their plan to “build Formosa” will also “be helping to build all of Asia” (180). He argues that a strong capitalist economy in Formosa would help break up government monopolies and create a more appealing alternative than Red China. Chou implies, then, a democratic and capitalistic Formosa would help further the US’s fight against Communism in Asia.

Toward the end of the story, Barton finds out that Precious Jade and her brother have been arrested by the “Peace Preservation Corps,” taken to a racetrack near Tamshui, and shot to death as suspected Communists. Upon hearing this, Barton finds he is sick of the island and wants to leave. Then, meeting Li Liu again, Barton borrows a jeep and helps the young man escape to the South before he is arrested. As Barton drives, he changes his mind: he decides to stay in Formosa and write about the reality of conditions on the island. This is the last we see of him, and when Li Liu returns home with his god, he also realizes he cannot stay with his family because the Save the Country Soldiers might be looking for him. So Li Liu takes to the hills at the end, returning, Sneider suggests, to his aboriginal roots.

Portrayals of Empathetic Listening

A Pail of Oysters complicates Michener’s treatment of Formosa through depictions of empathetic listening that echo, yet, at the same time, radically revise the way in which Michener represents empathetic listening in *The Voice of Asia*. In spite of the two authors’ common emphasis on Americans listening to Asians, there are important differences between the models they give readers for the act of listening, and between their depictions of the possibilities and difficulties of this

⁹ The “Communitic-technique” faction refers to officials in Taiwan who used the same approaches as the Communists (such as propagandistic slogans, internal spying, and harsh punishments for political crimes) to fight the Communists. Here Sneider is alluding to Chiang Ching-kuo, not by name, but as a member of the “Communitic-technique” faction who “has lived almost half his life” in Russia (177). Chiang Ching-kuo lived in the Soviet Union for twelve years as a young man. An article about Chiang in a 1955 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* also spoke of “his insistence on fighting communism with communist methods” (Whiting 117).

praxis of listening.¹⁰

As Chou implies in his conversations with Barton, the expression of a willingness to listen is an essential part of building understanding between people from different lands. At their first meeting, Barton does not promise to write articles presenting Chou's side of the story. Chou responds, "I understand that. But will you listen to us?" Barton agrees to that, and Chou concludes, "No one has ever done that before, Mr. Barton, and for that I thank you" (182). Chou's conversations with Barton are long and wide-ranging, and Barton listens carefully and patiently to Chou. Likewise, Michener portrays listening and the willingness to listen as vital. Early in *The Voice of Asia*, Michener depicts his interviews as occasions through which interviewees could reveal their "soul" to him during "tremendous conversations" that often lasted over three hours (10-11). According to his description, Michener would begin interviews as a typical American journalist who fires question after question at his interviewees, but later on he would allow them to open up to him. Michener suggests that he was able to reach the interviewee's "soul" through an interactive process of questioning and answering.

Despite this description of the active give-and-take of his conversations with Asians, many of the interviews in Michener's book, including those in Taiwan, have been written so as to allow the reader to "listen" directly to his interviewees' voices. Christina Klein comments that Michener

often fades into the background of his conversations, serving more as a shadowy amanuensis than an active participant, and the dialogue often reads like monologues by his interviewees. By absenting himself and reproducing the words of his interviewees, Michener creates the impression that the reader is being spoken to directly in an unmediated fashion. (131)

In addition, Robert Peel was one of several reviewers who praised this technique; he wrote, "These are real people. This is the authentic, many-tongued voice of Asia [Michener] has captured" (13).

In sharp contrast to Michener's depiction of himself as a "shadowy amanuensis" is Sneider's portrayal of "mediated listening" during an interview that Barton has with Chin Poo-Liang, a Chinese soldier who has retreated to Taiwan

¹⁰ While I have found no evidence to suggest that Sneider had Michener's book in mind as he wrote *A Pail of Oysters*, as one reviewer of this paper suggested, it "would not be surprising" if Sneider had read *The Voice of Asia*.

with the Nationalists. The interview is arranged by Paul Huang, the KMT interpreter assigned to Barton. Throughout the interview, the reader never “hears” Chin’s voice, only Barton’s questions and the interpreter’s immediate replies. At one point, Barton notices tears in Chin’s eyes as Huang tells of the death of Chin’s family at the hands of the Communists. But Chin is never portrayed as speaking in his own voice. In contrast to the “unmediated” experience of listening to Michener’s interviewees, mediation is all the reader experiences in Sneider’s portrayal.

Sneider’s portrayal of Barton’s interviews indicates that the task of listening is not as simple as Michener has presented. Despite Michener’s depictions, his approach to interviewing Asians seems easy for the most part. In his section on Formosa, Michener does not discuss how he found his interviewees, leaving the reader to fall back on his earlier comment about his method: “I went into a nation, sat quiet, listened, and in time found that all sorts of people wanted to talk with me” (9). In Taiwan, Michener “sat quiet” and listened in “the cockpit of a C-47” (91), at the home of the Governor of Formosa, and among the tanks of four tank commanders. How he got there is never mentioned—he is simply there. Americans might have found such a portrayal encouraging. After all, if Michener could engage Asians in meaningful conversations without any special skills (or even much effort), then perhaps other Americans could, too.

Sneider’s portrayal calls this into question. In the novel, interviewing people in Taiwan is not just a simple matter of an American reporter talking to whomever he likes. For Barton, interviews are complicated affairs, sometimes involving the arrangement of the government (in the case of the interview with Chin) or long pedicab rides to secret locations (in the case of the discussions with Chou). Barton also listens to Chin through a government interpreter, which adds one more layer of mediation to the attempt to reaching the interviewee’s “soul.” Despite Michener’s intent of “hiding” himself from the eyes of the reader, we know from Barton’s conversation with Chin that talking and listening across cultures does not simply involve a meeting of two disembodied minds. Even if interlocutors speak the same language, their interaction is generated and conditioned by the discursive, social, and political circumstances involved. When, for instance, Paul Huang insists that Chin will have a good life “when we retake the mainland,” Barton thinks, “if you ever do” (198). But given the presence of officers and an official translator in the room, Barton probably knows that he cannot express his doubt out loud.

Empathy as Embodied Practice

One-to-one personal interaction is highlighted in Michener’s and Sneider’s books as a way to promote changes in attitudes and political action. Personal

contacts are an embodied practice in that they require the crossing of the boundaries between people. As Sara Ahmed suggests, “while the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how bodies are touched by others” (45). “The skin,” she writes, “provides a way of thinking about how the boundary between bodies is formed only through being traversed, or called into question, by the affecting of one by an other” (45).

In *A Pail of Oysters*, Sneider demonstrates how empathetic responses depend not only upon verbal exchange, but also upon embodied exchanges. Barton originally decides to leave Taiwan after he learns of the deaths of Precious Jade and her brother Billy. But in the end, he decides to learn as much as he can about Taiwan and write to his American readers about “the utter stupidity, the ignorance of a small group who not only enslaved eight million people, but who endangered all of Asia” (304). The primary cause of this change of heart is the boy, Li Liu. It is not simply the boy himself, however; it is the interaction between the two of them when they meet after the deaths of Precious Jade and Billy.

The killing of Precious Jade and her brother seems to make Barton completely forget any interest he might have had in the articles the Formosan democracy activist Mr. Chou has asked him to write. Chou has risked a great deal to talk to Barton about the political situation in Taiwan—and also to help him find out what has happened to Billy and his sister—but Barton is ready to leave the island behind and get back to the US. Yet Li Liu “convinces” Barton to stay in Taiwan despite his inability to verbalize anything that Barton can understand.

The exchange between Li and Barton is arguably the climax of the novel, in which Sneider depicts an embodied rhetoric of empathy that shows us dramatically how personal emotional connections can lead to political commitments. Li goes to the Friends of China Club and stands outside, staring in at Barton, “knowing not why, except that the man with the dog lived there. The man who was the friend of his friend Didi. The man who had been glad for him when he learned his god had come back to Chung Hwa Road” (299). Li appears unsure himself about what he wants to do, but he knows that there is a connection between them. Barton has shown friendship to Li’s friend and has shown feelings that seem similar to Li’s own over something very important to Li. That is, the two seem to have had “common” feelings, feelings “in common.” In effect, Li goes to Barton because the American has successfully demonstrated empathy for others.

Outside the Friends of China Club, however, Li is a body out of place. When Barton looks out into the night, he sees “a bronzed face, beneath a conical straw hat, staring wildly at him” (299). The screen that separates Li and Barton is a boundary

that can only be crossed by Barton. Both of them know that the difference between them that is marked by Li's bronzed face and straw hat also marks Li as the outsider in this exchange. Li's body—his physical presence outside the club—calls for a response from Barton, a response which the American makes when he slides open the screen and joins Li outside of the club.

Barton looks into Li's eyes and recognizes Li as the boy who rode with him to Taipei. He speaks to Li, telling him he wants to leave Taipei, but Li doesn't understand. Barton uses the name of their mutual friend Billy to explain the situation to Li. It is significant that in the end the English name "Billy" that Barton gave Didi is the only verbal communication that is meaningful to both Li and Barton. The connection between Barton and Li was originally forged via Billy; now his English name serves as an index of that connection. Once Li knows of Billy's death, the English name also points to his own possible demise:

"Billy." And Barton, raising his thumb, and extending his forefinger to indicate a revolver, brought it up, put it to the back of his head, and quickly lowered the thumb, as a hammer snaps.

The sickness hit Li Liu, for he understood the meaning. "*Iie . . . iie*—no . . . no," he said in Japanese and shook his head, the tears coming to his eyes.

Sensing, Barton nodded. (300-01)

In this conversation, bodily gesture and facial expressions constitute the medium by which Barton and Li share not only information but emotions. Although Li cannot understand Barton's words, the American's physical gestures affect him—something that Barton is able to sense, too.

Barton tries to persuade Li to leave, but the latter does not move. "'Go!' Barton motioned. 'Go!' Still the boy stood there. 'For God's sake,' Barton said, and then he saw the trembling lips trying to tell him something. He couldn't understand, but he knew this one had to get away" (302). Actually, Barton *does* understand. His visceral understanding of Li's feelings and needs—including the need to retrieve his god from the pawn shop—leads him to renew commitments that he had earlier wanted to abandon. His mostly wordless conversation with Li leads him to decide to risk his own well-being to help Li and to reengage himself in the Formosan political situation. As they drive south, Barton rethinks his decision to leave Taiwan:

No, he told himself, he wasn't finished with this part of the world. His glance slid to the boy who held his god. He would stay here. He would learn all that he could. And then he would reveal—in articles and fiction—in any way he could, the utter stupidity, the ignorance of a small group who not only enslaved eight million people, but who endangered all of Asia. (304)

Meeting and helping Li—even more than conversing with Chou—leads Barton to a moral commitment to stay in Taiwan. He wants to inform Americans what is happening here so that the future of the island—and ultimately of Asia—can be changed.

It is significant that in the above scene, which alternates between Barton's and Li's points of view, Sneider portrays Barton as the language user. Li speaks only a few words (primarily Didi's English name) during the whole exchange. Although Barton and Li respond to each other nonverbally, by the end of the novel Sneider has put the American in the role of the person who needs to communicate verbally to others about what he has experienced. Like Michener and Sneider, Barton sees writing as a mission that he must undertake.

The Power of the Writing American

Both Michener and Sneider depict “writing Asia” as a powerful act that has the potential to change not only American attitudes toward Asia but also the actual situation in Asia. Klein cites an incident which “offers a startlingly literal example of the influence Michener possessed during the 1950s as a representer of Asia to postwar America” (101). When the Saigon hotel where Michener was staying was attacked by rioters, he reports that he “stood there with [his] typewriter and said, ‘I’m an American writer. Behave or I’ll write bad things about you.’ They stood there for a second and then we all laughed” (qtd. in Klein 101). By the time this event happened (in July of 1955), Michener had developed enough of a reputation—or at least there was enough of a concept about the power of an American writer—that the rioters paused in their action for his sake. Sneider's character Barton hopes to have the same kind of power—or at least assumes that he is capable of possessing it. When readers last see Barton, he is thinking about how he will write in various genres to reveal Taiwan's situation to his audience. He is not shown speculating about the possibility of being published, or about whether harm would come to him as a result of his writing. He seems to assume that his

work will have the power to revise the American view, to correct Americans' misunderstandings about Taiwan and its government. It will have the power, he feels, to help the people of Taiwan overcome the evils of their government.

Barton's beliefs about the power of writing appear to reflect Sneider's own expectations about what *A Pail of Oysters* could accomplish. In a November 7, 1952 letter to George Kerr (former US attaché in Taiwan and witness to the 2-28 Incident), Sneider writes about his plans for the novel: "In this novel on Formosa I hope to lay bare the entire situation. The situation there lends itself well to fiction. And I think fiction, in this case, can do something which no work of fact can do—namely, fiction allows for that thing called emotional pull, and a writer can reach the feelings of the reader, along with an appeal to the mind" (Su 562).¹¹

He goes on to suggest the effect he thought the book would have:

I think this novel will blow the roof off things, Mr. Kerr. My viewpoint will be strictly that of the Formosan people, trying to exist under that government. Certain editors who have seen the outline and sample chapters have termed it the most powerful thing they have ever read, which means this to me—that I'm on the right track. And that, maybe, in my small way, I can do something for the people of Formosa. (Su 563)

In this letter, Sneider expresses his view of the power he feels creative writing can have to evoke feelings in the reader. The feeling he attempts to evoke is that of empathy for the plight of Formosa. He suggests that emotions, as separate from the "mind," need to be appealed to in order for a book to "do something" for Taiwan.

With the character of Ralph Barton and the persona of the "reporter" Michener creates in his book, readers see traveling American writers are apparently committed to learning about the people of Asia and sharing their newfound knowledge with fellow Americans. Both Barton and Michener want to tell Americans the "truth" about Asia. (Note that Barton is going to "reveal" to the world what conditions in Formosa are like.) They both want to use their writing to form sympathetic bonds between the people of Asia and those of the US. They both suggest that telling Americans the truth about the lives of Asian people is their moral responsibility as writers.

¹¹ In a letter to Sneider, written over 10 years later, Kerr wrote that he "thought the book [*A Pail of Oysters*] excellent, although for [Kerr] almost too poignant to bear" (Su 652).

An important difference, however, between the two books' portrayals of the writing American concerns how readers are called on to relate to Michener's persona and the character of Barton. As mentioned earlier, Michener often removes himself from the scene of the interviews, so that the connection readers make to the interviewees appears to be unmediated. But once Barton appears on the scene in *A Pail of Oysters*, his character often acts as a channel through which American readers come in contact with the Formosan characters. It is noteworthy that when Sneider expanded his story from a short story to a novel, his representation of America in Taiwan expanded from a few brief references in the former to an actual character that plays a major part in the novel. It's almost as if he felt that American readers would be unable to empathize with Li, a Formosan who was searching for his household god. In the end, the novel is less about martial-law Taiwan and more about an American trying to understand Taiwan. Like *The Voice of Asia*, it models Americans' attempts to learn about Asia. But unlike Michener's book of interviews, Sneider's novel actively calls on American readers to put themselves in the shoes of the American character.

The Ends of Empathy

Another important difference between Barton's character and Michener's narrative persona is that while they both start out in the position of trying to "listen" to Asia, they end up hearing entirely different voices. One reason for this has a great deal to do with *whom* one chooses to listen to—something that is absent from Klein's otherwise cogent analysis of Michener's work (126-35). It is unclear whether Michener talked to any Formosans during his time in "Free China"—he said that he interviewed a total of 120 Asians for the book, but only "reported on 53 individuals or groups" (10). When he was in Taiwan, he seems to have stayed in Taipei and it is quite possible that people were brought to him to talk with, much as Huang brings people to Barton for interviews in Sneider's novel. In the end he communicates *a* voice rather than voices, and this certainly affects the conclusions he draws in the book. The people he talks to lead him to advocate military aid to the Nationalists to help them retake China if the opportunity arose. Sneider portrays a wider range of ethnicities in Taiwan than Michener does. Sneider's book includes Taiwanese, a mixed Pepohuan/Hakka, a soldier from a village near Canton, and a Shanghainese, among others. Barton's interactions with this diverse population lead him to decide to write against the martial law regime in Taiwan. Both Michener and Sneider suggest that the sentimental bonds between different cultures can motivate

people to engage in political action—but such action is, in turn, determined by the nature of those bonds and the people with whom those bonds are formed.

Another reason for the very different conclusions that Michener and Sneider come to concerns their motives for empathizing. Michener's book, published in 1951, but based on interviews conducted in 1950, attempted to intervene in the Cold War by reinforcing the US government's position. In the case of Taiwan, *The Voice of Asia* portrayed the people Michener talked to as being of one voice regarding the need to fight the Communists. They all wanted to fight and return to China. (The fact that his interviewees all came from the mainland after 1945 is important in this case.) Sneider's novel, on the other hand, attempted (as he himself admits in his letter to Kerr) to intervene in the US relationship with Taiwan by portraying the current government of Taiwan as being unworthy of US support.

Both of these books put forward the idea that individuals can make a difference—that friendly relations between people from different countries, brought about through listening to each other, can lead to the development of empathy and ultimately have an influence upon the attitudes that nations take toward one another. The different perspectives on Taiwan, however, demonstrate the vastly different views that individual authors can get by listening empathetically.

The Responses to Michener and Sneider

As suggested earlier, Michener and Sneider were both popular writers when *The Voice of Asia* and *A Pail of Oysters* were published. *The Voice of Asia* enjoyed great popularity after publication, having been chosen by the Literary Guild “as a main selection, and it was translated into fifty-three languages” (Klein 126). Orville Prescott praised Michener for having “an instinctive sympathy for all sorts of people that is immensely attractive” (27). Prescott continued by saying Michener's own political and military analysis was full of “persuasive good sense” and “idealistic good will” (27). Robert Peel wrote that Michener's “evocation of people and places and points of view . . . should win him a wide hearing. For here is the very ‘feel’ of Asia in all its richness and multiplicity” (13).¹²

¹² At least one reviewer expressed strong reservations about *The Voice of Asia*, however. Hyman Kublin's review in *The Far Eastern Quarterly* calls the book “an extremely superficial volume with a pretentious title by one whom the jacket blurb unabashedly designates as an ‘acknowledged authority’” (472). He criticizes Michener's basic method of reporting on interviews with a few dozen people and concludes, “Mr. Michener raises a fervent plea for American understanding; his book, unfortunately, will make that difficult” (473). In a specific reference to Michener's chapter on Formosa, Kublin asks the rhetorical question, “Do the

A Pail of Oysters received mostly positive reviews and was selected by the Notable Books Committee of the American Library Association as one of the 50 books “of the previous year which it considers meritorious in terms of literary excellence, factual correctness and sincerity and honesty of presentation” (Taylor 10). After that, however, it seems to have sunk into obscurity in the US. It was not mentioned in any Asian Studies journals or Asia-related magazines, and the only citation of the book in English-studies journals was a brief review by Lorraine Lowry in the *English Journal*. It is not discussed in histories of Taiwan or book-length studies of US-Taiwan relations, either.¹³

Sneider’s book is also difficult to find. Publishers consider statistics about number of copies sold to be confidential, but the number of copies existing in libraries might be suggestive of the book’s popularity. According to WorldCat, whereas there are over 1,500 copies of *The Voice of Asia* currently in US libraries, there are only 264 library copies of *A Pail of Oysters*.¹⁴ One online source suggests that copies of the book in many US libraries were stolen by KMT student spies. While there is no conclusive evidence for this, the story does fit with the official profile of the KMT’s actions regarding international criticism during the martial law period, as well as with the sort of stories that Taiwanese democracy and independence activists often tell about the KMT’s operations.¹⁵ Although the story is unsubstantiated, it is suggestive of how the KMT government tried to control access to negative portrayals—even in English—during the martial law period. In Taiwan, according to the memories of some alumni of the Taipei American School, the book was “passed around the foreign community in a *Catcher in the Rye* book

statements of several Nationalist soldiers and of the Governor’s wife represent adequately the views of Formosa (or of Nationalist China)?” (473).

¹³ The book is cited once in *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947*, a controversial study of 2-28 written by Lai Tse-han, Ramon H. Myers, and Wei Wou.

¹⁴ WorldCat (<http://www.worldcat.org>) is an online service that can be used to search multiple library collections. The number of copies of *A Pail of Oysters* has increased slightly since an earlier draft of this paper. It is unclear whether this is because more libraries are buying the book, more libraries have catalogued the book, or more libraries are now included in WorldCat.

¹⁵ There are several recorded instances of suspected KMT suppression of negative information about itself. According to Jonathan Fenby, a book of memoirs that Chiang’s second wife Chen Jieru wrote about her life with him was suppressed, with at least tacit support of the American China Lobby, through the efforts of Chiang’s regime in Taiwan, and was not published until 1992 (45). Ross Y. Koen’s *The China Lobby in American Politics*, a scholarly book originally to be published in 1960, was prevented from being published until 1974 (Tucker 85). The information I found about *A Pail of Oysters* comes from a Feb. 28, 2003 speech at Berkeley by Keelung Hong, which can be found at the World United Formosans for Independence website. WUFI is an international Taiwan-independence organization, created in exile during the martial law period.

jacket” to avoid detection and confiscation (Belanger). A retired US serviceman stationed in Taiwan during the early 1960s noted that a copy of the book was kept under lock and key in the US Naval Library in Taipei. When he returned to Taiwan in the early 1970s, the book was gone.¹⁶

That early critics were divided in their judgment of Sneider’s work suggests the importance of context to empathy. Some reviewers were quite positive. Santha Rama Rau, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, said that the characters in *A Pail of Oysters* “are brought together in a most ingenious way and surrounded by as magnificently colorful a picture of life in the Formosan capital under the Nationalists as the reader has any right to expect” (BR4). She concluded, “Vern Sneider has an acute sense of political injustice, and certainly he writes with enormous affection about the Formosans. . . . With such a wealth of material and such arresting writing his book will find, I’m sure, interested readers” (BR4). The reviewer from *The Times Literary Supplement* in the UK felt that *A Pail of Oysters* “reflects an honest indignation at the sight of cruelty, injustice and indifference, and . . . [that Sneider’s] easy, unassuming style of writing enables one to understand and share his sympathy for the islanders” (817). This reviewer cited Sneider’s clear writing as a way of evoking emotions in the reader. Yet apparently those feelings that Sneider wanted to evoke, and the point of view “strictly . . . of the Formosan people” that he took (Su 564), turned off some readers. Gordon Walker, for instance, argued in *The Christian Science Monitor* that the book was unbalanced “political analysis,” and that it appeared “that Mr. Sneider himself went to Formosa on assignment, brought himself to the boiling point, and then began writing before he had cooled off. As a result, his finished work is all blacks and whites, with virtually no grays” (11). Walker concluded, “If Mr. Sneider had injected this balance, he might have won more adherents to his point of view” (11).

Both books were written during the McCarthy period, when the China Lobby, supported by publications like *Time* and *Life*, put great emphasis on the threat of Communism and the US failure to curb that threat by allowing the Communists to win the war with the Chinese Nationalists. Chiang’s Nationalists were thus portrayed by those groups as fighters with the US against Communism, and Taiwan was portrayed as a bastion against Communism. This was particularly true after the US became involved in the Korean War and began using Taiwan as a military base. Karl Rankin, who was heading the American mission in Taiwan, told Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1951 that in a few years, Taiwan would become the “rallying

¹⁶ The serviceman reported this information in an e-mail message to the author.

point for freedom-loving Chinese everywhere” (qtd. in Accinelli 92). Articles by Allen Whiting and Robert Sherrod in the *Saturday Evening Post* depicted Chiang Ching-kuo as a well-liked, devout Methodist and Chiang Kai-shek as “the tiger at Red China’s heels.” In a 1950s America, where magazines like *Reader’s Digest*, *Time*, and *Life* represented Chiang Kai-shek as a great leader and the KMT’s opponents as Communist sympathizers, Michener’s portrayal of Taiwan generally matched the dominant opinion and thus fared better than a critical depiction like Sneider’s.¹⁷

Any discussion of the fate of *A Pail of Oysters* cannot ignore an important translation of the book that appeared in Taiwan fifty years after its first publication. In 2003, Wu Yengtsu (吳英資, pen name “Gō-hūn-chu” 五分珠), a retired research scientist living in California, translated the novel into Taiwanese. In the translator’s preface, Wu writes that when he read the book, tears filled his eyes and he felt as if the book had brought him back in time to 1950s Taipei. He says that the book shows the author’s sympathy for the fate of the Taiwanese people. He also argues that the book is important for the Taiwanese to read because it portrays the period from the perspective of a foreigner (“Translator’s Preface” 9-10). That *A Pail of Oysters* was translated into Taiwanese fifty years after its publication suggests how successful the suppression of the book had been, but it also indicates the translator’s and publisher’s acceptance of Sneider’s attempts to promote empathy for the people of Taiwan.

Conclusion

Both *The Voice of Asia* and *A Pail of Oysters* were products of the Cold War effort to help Americans understand Asia. Michener and Sneider both wrote in order to teach Americans how to view Asians, how to learn about Asia, and how to build meaningful relationships with Asians. Michener’s book depicted a Taiwan where the people all spoke with one voice of their unanimous desire to return to the mainland, a dream which Michener’s America seemed to support. Sneider’s novel, on the other hand, attacked the KMT government and implied that American support of this government was misguided. The simplistic “monologic” view of Michener is clear from the way in which his interviews were conducted and presented in his book, just as Sneider’s very different presentation of human

¹⁷ See Robert E. Herzstein’s *Henry Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (NY: Cambridge UP, 2005) for more information on *Time* and *Life*’s portrayal of Asia.

interactions—not merely staged interviews but real “dialogues” (or *attempts* at dialogue)—foregrounds the problems, the obstacles to communication which one must struggle to overcome. Sneider, unlike Michener, delved into the complexities of building and maintaining relationships with the people in martial-law Taiwan, a place where it was hard for both parties to say what they really thought, and where such relationships were not always safe. Ironically, those complexities were also mirrored in the reception of *A Pail of Oysters*, a novel that tried to encourage Americans to focus on Taiwan at a time when all eyes were fixed on China.

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