“Archetypes Unbound: Domestication of the Five Chinese Imperial Consorts”

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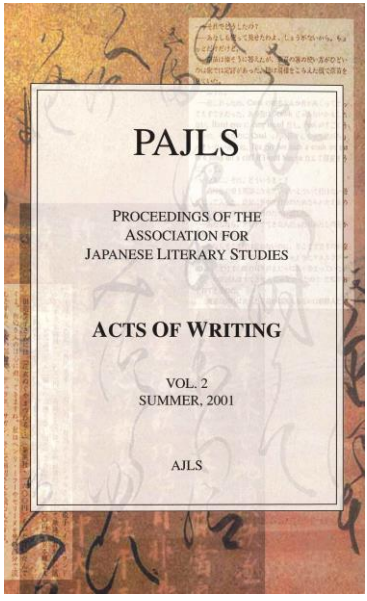

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ARCHETYPES UNBOUND: DOMESTICATION OF THE FIVE CHINESE IMPERIAL CONSORTS

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When Chinese legendary figures were translated into *waka* or *wabun*, it seems more often the case than not that a degree of autonomy from the original contexts was sought in order to enhance accessibility for and appeal to Japanese readers with varied levels of learning in Chinese. While honoring some of the attributes that had been encoded in Chinese archetypes, Japanese authors strove less to elaborate their socio-cultural contexts so as to reconfirm their alien status than to "naturalize" the already heavily codified cultural icons by finding or inventing Japanese vocabulary to relocate them in the framework of Japanese lyricism.

Whereas in *kanshi* and *kanbun* the figures may be bound to the historical and ideological connotations, because of the importation of a larger part of, if not the entirety of, vocabulary and rhetoric, attributes of the archetypes were susceptible to freer modification in *waka* and *wabun*; poets and prose writers curtailed or censored some attributes while highlighting or adding others so that the archetypes might meet the protocols of Japanese poetry and, though less tightly defined, those of the narrative. In this process of the adaptation of Chinese characters, varied degrees of ahistoricization as well as aculturalization transpired.

When we consider the conventional contrast between Chinese writing and Japanese writing, the oppositionals often paralleled respectively with the masculine and the feminine. The practice of translation of Chinese female characters into the *bungo* presents itself as a site of gender and ethnicity border-crossing: how did the females portrayed in the "masculine" language get translated into the "feminine" language? In this paper, I will focus on typical *bungo* renditions of the so-called "Five Consorts" ("*gohi* 五妃") made famous by the compositions of Bai Juyi (白居易, 772-846), Japan's favorite Chinese poet. The five—Wang Zhaojun (王昭君 [Japanese: Ô Shôkun]), Li Furen (季夫人 [Ri Fujin]), Yang Guifei (楊貴妃 [Yô Kihi]), Shangyang Baifaren (上陽白髪人 [Shôyô Hakuhatsujin, often abbreviated as, and thus to be hereafter referred to as,

Shôyôjin]), and Lingyuan Qie (陵園妾 [Ryôen Shô])—were more enduringly and systematically represented than others in various Japanese sources, including some canonical texts in poetry, prose, and criticism, and thus are illustrative not only of some of the problems of translation from Chinese to Japanese but also of the process of transformation of the rhetorical language of Japan.

In order to show that the choice of the five is not arbitrary, let us begin with arguably the last and most grandiose exhibition of the staging of the five consorts which took place in the early seventeenth century, when a collection of songs specifically on the five consorts was published under an imperial commission. Emperor Go Yôzei (後陽成, r. 1586-1616) authorized the publication of selected texts applying the copper printing technology newly acquired from Korea during Toyotomi Hideyoshi's unsuccessful attempt at invading the Korean penninsula (*Bun'ei no eki*, 1592, and *Keichô no eki*, 1599). The selected texts, in the order of publication, include: *Kobun kôkyô* (古文孝經 [Chinese: Guwen xiaojing]) in 1593; *Kinshûdan* (錦繍段[1]) and *Kangaku mon* (勸學文) in 1597; *Nihon shoki: Kamiyo no maki* (日本書紀神代巻), *Kobun kôkyô*, *Shisho* (四書), and *Shokugenshô* (職原抄) in 1599; and *Chokuhan hakushi gohi kyoku* (勅版白氏五妃曲) and *Nakatomi no harae* (中臣祓) in 1603.[2] The particular pieces collected in *Chokuhan hakushi gohi kyoku* (*Songs on Five Imperial Consorts by Mr. Bai: Imperial Edition*) are: "Li Furen," "Lingyuan Qie," and "Shangyang Baifaren," all of which are from the eponymous poet's *Xin yuefu* (新樂府 [*Shin gafu*; *New Ballads*]); his "Changhen ge" (長恨歌 [Chôgonka; trans. "Song of Lasting Pain"]), featuring Yang Guifei, accompanied by Chen Hong (陳鴻, n.d.)'s account of the circumstances of composition entitled "Changhenge zhuan" (長恨歌傳, early ninth century), which relates in prose the historical backdrop that is obscured in the Bai poem; and finally, two four-line poems (*jueju*: 絶句) both entitled "Wang Zhaojun," and "Zhangjun yuan" (昭君怨) ("Zhaojun's Regrets"), also by Bai Juyi.[3]

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[1] A textbook-like anthology of Chinese poetry, compiled by a monk called Ten'in Ryûtaku. A modern edition with annotation can be found in Nieda.

[2] Kondô, 432.

Given that the project was for the official purposes of demonstrating the current state of the art of printing, which was available only to the nobility, and of preserving important texts using the power of technology, the selection of the texts leaves ample room for speculation. Considering the fact that other texts printed in this multi-year project obviously served educational, administrative/ritualistic, and ideological (Shintoist, to be specific) purposes, the choice of the "Five Consorts" may seem hard to justify. Kondô Haruo wonders why these particular pieces on the five imperial consorts were selected along with such canonical texts and bureaucratic documents.[4] The enigma would grow even more serious if we considered the authorial intention, that is, to voice a criticism of the institution of the rear palace—an institution that some of the consorts exploited to a selfish end, and that invited the others' tragic fortunes—established under the imperial oligarchy.

The topical figures were indeed inauspicious; the consorts are not the ones who are remembered for contributions to the prosperity of the nation. Wang Zhaojun was sent to the northern nomads as a bride because the emperor misjudged that she be the ugliest woman in the rear palace, due to his inability to manage the institution with full knowledge of its members; Li Furen, dying young of a disease, refuses to show her emaciated face to the emperor for one last time, in order to pave the way for her kin's continued favor after her death; Yang Guifei, by her seductive power, distracted the emperor's attention that was to be devoted to political matters, and was killed because she was seen as responsible for the nation-wide disorder known as the An Lushan rebellion; Shangyang Ren and Lingyuan Qie were both removed from the rear palace and could not fulfil their ambitions to be favored by the emperor and possibly give birth to his offspring.

Despite the negative political connotations that the consorts bear, however, they have been imbued with aesthetic significance in Japanese interpretations of them. They became either the subject or the object of such appealing and intense emotions as isolation from and longing for a lost

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[3] Reprinted in Koten kenkyûkai, ed., *Chokuhan Hakushi Gohikyoku.*

[4] Kondô, 432.

lover. They emerged to convince us of their centrality to literary convention in the Japanese language, and thus of their symbolic status as a pinnacle of domestication of what was then thought to be the finest of Chinese literature (Bai Juyi).

LESSONS UNLEARNED

Whereas the actual intention exerted over the inclusion of the works could not possibly be identified, this exhibition of the celebrity status that the five consorts collectively enjoyed invites us to examine, in retrospect, the history of their transformation in Japanese literature as well as of how they had transformed Japanese literature. Indeed, there were notable discrepancies between the original and the Japanese readings of *Xin yuefu* and other poems of social critique by Bai Juyi. Burton Watson speculates that poems of social concern:

> introduced into the aristocratic society of Heian Japan, had a novelty and tone of moral and social seriousness that no doubt compelled the Japanese to reexamine their concepts of the nature and function of poetry and inspired some of them, such as Michizane, to write poems of a similar nature on the common people of their own land.[5]

This novelty would have been particularly intense given what Brower and Miner describe as "a distaste for the political that marks the Japanese [*waka*] poems."[6] It is true that Sugawara Michizane and others whose notable poetic contribution was made in *kanshi* adequately understood and followed in the footsteps of Bai Juyi in voicing social and political concerns in the form. However, Bai's poetry was more depoliticized than not in Japan, especially in *waka* and *wabun* compositions. We do not see conspicuous response to his criticisms of the prevalence of Daoism, what he deemed an excessive acceptance of non-Han cultural practices and products, or the tendency toward erotic indulgence. Songs that deal with those predominant

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[5] Watson, 79-80; quoted in Rimer and Chaves, 19-20.

[6] Brower and Miner, 428; quoted in Rimer and Chaves, 19-20.

themes in the *Xin yuefu* did not get selected for the 1603 imperial edition as well as other Japanese sources. The compelling issues that Bai raised seemed lost on the Japanese audience whose enthusiastic reception of the contemporary poet may have missed the mark. This trend of depoliticization is implicit in the fact that prefaces to "Li Furen," "Lingyuan Qie" and "Shangyang Ren" are eliminated from the text of *Chokuhan hakushi gohi kyoku*. The original songs are accompanied by short guidelines that are, respectively, "Jian bihuo ye" (鑑嬖惑也),[7] or "This is to learn from the precedence of obsessive attachment to a mistress," "Lian youbi ye" (憐幽閉也) meaning "This is to sympathize with those who are confined,"[8] and "Min yuankuang ye" (愍怨曠也), or "This is to sympathize with those who lament celibacy."[9] The elimination of these lines helps depoliticize the poems as well as silence a commentator's voice, as we will see later.

Though the collection is all in Chinese, its significance should be understood in the specifically Japanese context, as the selection, made not in China but in Japan, was unique in that most of the topics in *Xin yuefu* were eliminated in favor of inclusion of two of the consorts–Yang Guifei and Wang Zhaojun—who are not featured in this particular body of Bai's work. It should also be noted that this particular selection was not an unprecedented example of identifying the specific consorts as a group. It is true that the five did not meet equal reception—some were more frequently or longer exposed in the Japanese literary history than others—and that many sources (such as *Shinsen rôeishû* [新撰朗詠集, 1113], *Toshiyori zuinô* [俊頼髄脳, 1114-1115], *Konjaku monogatarishû* [今昔物語集, 1120 or later], to take an example each from three genres of poetry, criticism and narrative) list only two, three, or four of them rather than all five, and not necessarily in an uninterrupted sequence. It is also the case that the topics of Chinese legendary figures in some other sources are not limited to the five (*Kara monogatari* [唐物語, ca. 1176 (trans., "Tales of China," 1984)],

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[7] Kondô, 233.

[8] *Ibid.*, 236.

[9] *Ibid.*, 72.

and *Kan koji wakashû* [漢故事和歌集, ca.1474], both of which include all the five and more archetypes). That said, the consciousness that the five and none other constitute a distinct group of topics became evident in the medieval period; *Fûboku wakashû* (夫木和歌抄, 1310), whose thirty-fifth volume (Miscellaneous 17) closes with the five-star sequence, and *Sôkonshû* (草根集) of Shôtetsu (正徹, 1381-1459), which also lists five poems, one each on a consort, in a sequence, are two of the examples.

The selection and isolation of the five is thus a specifically Japanese practice that was moderately sustained. When we consider the elimination of other possible members in the club, and the conditions under which each constituent was found eligible, it is evident that depoliticization of the content of Bai's work took place. While the "Song of Lasting Pain" and poems on Wang Zhaojun convey strongly political messages, they had been largely neglected in *waka/wabun* adaptations of the two consorts. Mid-Heian *waka* composed by Ise (伊勢), Daini Takatô (大貳高遠, d. 1013), and Minamoto no Michinari (源道濟, d. 1019) among others, to correspond to specific lines in the "Song of Lasting Pain," seldom feature didactic lines and instead rework lines on either Yang Guifei's physical appearance or Xuanzong's emotions.[10] Wang Zhaojun, a well-established *kudai* (*kanshi* topic) as evident in her entry in *Wakan rôeishû* and in *Bunka shûreishû* (文華秀麗集),[11] has a much wider range of connotations than suggested by the Bai Juyi poems collected in *Hakushi gohi kyoku*. Bai himself composed more on her, including "Qingzhong" (青塚), a poem that features her grave: in a version of her life account, Zhaojun killed herself in order to avoid the shame of marrying her own son after her husband's death, which was a custom in the Xiongnu society, and thus remained honorable by Chinese standards throughout her life. This is evident in the green grass growing around her grave that distinguishes it from other vegetation in the northern territory. The topic of Zhaojun's grave was thus prominent in Chinese writing and inspired such famous poets as Bai and Li Bai. Despite the popularity of the theme in Chinese, it was not picked up in *waka*

[10] Sekine and Yamashita, 140-49; Wakashi kenkyûkai, 721-734; and Kuwabara, 194-200. See also Yamazaki.

[11] *Bunkashûreishû*, 251-257.

repertoire.[12] Whereas Japanese appropriations of the archetype extend over different stages of her life, unlike those on Shangyang ren or Lingyuan qie which I will view shortly, few describe her suicide compelled by the impending incest, or her grave's magical presence, which would be misplaced in *waka* vocabulary.

Instead of pursuing the bleak fate and mysterious legend of Zhaojun, the Japanese literary imagination took a turn to the metaphor of the willow tree which should symbolically reflect the lady's fortune. An account of Zhaojun's parents planting and cherishing a willow tree as the mirror of their daughter's fortune apparently came out of nowhere into a commentary of the *Wakan rôeishû*, in which another of Bai Juyi's poems on the archetype contributes a couplet to the rubric of "the willow." The original association of Zhaojun with the willow draws upon the shape of her eyebrows which resemble willow leaves, but the plant since has developed its own life in her homeland, and then was immortalized in the noh play "Shôkun," while the green grass over her grave "withered" in *waka* vocabulary.[13]

Cases of Mistaken Identity

Another significant change that occurred in representations of Zhaojun in *waka* and *wabun* reveals the fact that consorts were lifted out of their respective contexts and had their own features exchanged with one anothers'. In the earliest Chinese sources, Zhaojun had not been favored by the emperor, whereas she had been in some Japanese texts. He saw her for the first time after he selected her as a gift to the Xiongnu, because, in the most prevalent version, she was either too noble or proud of herself to bribe

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[12] Bai Juyi's "Qingzhong," collected in the "Fengyu" volume of Volume 2 as it teaches lessons on marrying well, has not been appropriated by Japanese *waka* composition, despite the popularity that both the poet and the archetype embraced in the history of the genre.

[13] Phases of transformation of Wang Zhaojun as an icon in Japanese literature are studied and discussed by many. See Ishida, Kobayashi Kenji, Mimura, Okazaki, Tanaka and Uehara.

the painter who was commissioned to submit portraits of all the ladies in the rear palace, and thus was portrayed as the ugliest woman. That the emperor had not met Zhaojun is the whole point of the story, as otherwise he would not have chosen the most beautiful woman in his rear palace as the barbarian's bride. This is also the premise of the criticism Bai tried to address, as he claims the lady's tragedy should not be attributed to the painter's misconduct, but to the emperor's neglect (自是君恩薄如紙/不須一恨丹青).[14] However, we see in *Toshiyori zuinô* and others that the emperor visited Zhaojun's former quarter out of longing for her. The detail of the scene—fallen leaves piling up in the courtyard—suggests that the scene was inspired by the "Song of Lasting Pain," which has almost identical description of the courtyard against which Xuanzong's yearning for Yang Guifei is illustrated. A mention of warblers in spring (*"Haru wa... uguisu tsurezure nite"*[15]) makes one wonder if Toshiyori had also confused the topical lady with Shangyang ren who is known to have been troubled by warblers' joyous chirping in long spring days.[16]

This change of the plot should be understood as a manifestation of the preference for emotionally charged scenes. Another example of such preference is found in *Toshiyori zuinô* and *Konjaku mònogatari*, both of which recount Xuanzong's visit to Mawei, the site of the execution of Yang Guifei. The trip, which predictably brought copious tears to the now abducted emperor and his company, had not been documented in any extant historical source, and thus was probably made up for dramatic effect. The two instances of invention of the respective emperors' visits to the special places in order to remember their loved ones demonstrate the Japanese literary obsession with men's longing for departed lovers, which is deprived of the third party's criticism of indulgence in romantic sentiments that frames these stories in Bai Juyi's version.

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[14] Kondô, 348.

[15] *Toshiyori (Shunrai) zuinô*, 207.

[16] Kondô, 74.

FROM COMMENTARIES TO CONFESSIONS

In terms of voice, the five consorts can be divided into two groups, with Wang Zhaojun right on the border line: Yang Guifei and Li Furen are denied their own voice in *waka* or *wabun*, and are objectified by the emperors, while the Shangyang Ren and Lingyuan Qie poems are almost invariably confessional, rendered in the first person. Wang Zhaojun is portrayed by the emperor or others with deep-felt sympathy in some cases, and speaks from her own standpoint to set forth her frustration, fury, lamentations, or regret in others. In all cases, the commentator, a significant and indispensable persona in Bai Juyi's satirical poetry, is largely absent, which invites the reader to identify with either the lady or her lover as the speaking subject of a given poem, rather than alerting them to the fundamental problems of the imperial concubinage that a detached observer would notice.

The confessional poems on Shangyang Ren and Lingyuan Qie also focus on their solitude and neglect to tell the reason that it has come about in the first place. Hardly any mention is made of the ladies' prehistory—expectations of the emperor's favor, sorrowful partings with their families, and their removal from the rear palace due to the conspiracy of jealous rivals. Equally neglected is the fact that Shangyang Ren was awarded the honorary office of Shangshu (尚書) after years of service which in fact meant that she did nothing but kill time in celibacy, or the suggestion made by the commentator that Lingyuan Qie's position as the guardian of the imperial tomb should be filled in equal turns by three thousand consorts so that the term of service might be shortened. The eventlessness and illusory timelessness of their lives in confinement, unlike the three others', as well as the richness of the flora and fauna which for the ladies replaced human company, was fully exploited by and explored in *waka*. Shangyang Ren in particular is a highly favored topic of composition in the Heian to medieval period, as is evident in her frequent appearances in various venues such as *utaawase*, *karon*, and other writings. *Tamekanekyô wakashô* (為兼卿和歌抄, ca. 1287) offers an important lesson about the poet's self-positioning vis-à-vis the subject of his/her poem, specifically taking "Shangyang Ren" as an example: the confessional speech that the poet delivers in the lady's own voice ("*narikawarite*") is the best, and the critical distance is least

commendable.[17] This statement encapsulates the force behind the deletion of the framing remarks in *Xin yuefu* in medieval *waka* poetry.

The confessional tone of speech dominates poems even when the gender of the speaker is obscured. Although there are a few poems which modify the circumstances of Shangyang Ren as separated from her lover, and which thus make her into a "lonely lady" of the ancient Six Dynasties of China, most poems on her and Lingyuan Qie read as though the subject's gender were unspecified. Their solitude, made autonomous of their socio-historically conditioned circumstances, is spoken of in general terms, as though it were experienced by recluses in medieval Japan, male or female, who, ostensibly, have renounced any intent ion of political engagement.

THE TALE OF GENJI—RESTORING SATIRE

The de-gendering of the consorts is not a unique practice in Japan. Wang Zhaojun, who endured the tragic fate because of her integrity and honorable action (evident in her decision not to bribe the painter), had long been associated with male figures of honor and misfortune that their virtue invited, such as Qu Yuan (屈原), in Chinese literary convention as well. Wang Zhaojun's anguish is felt by Genji as he quotes from Ôe no Asatsuna's poem on her collected in the *Wakan rôeishû*, 胡角一聲霜後夢漢宮萬里月前腸, or "A single blare of barbarian horn—awake from frost-chilled dreams/the palace of Han, ten thousand miles—heartbroken beneath the moon!"[18] and further refers to her during his self-imposed exile in Suma.[19] In fact the historical circumstances surrounding Wang Zhaojun are quite remote from Genji's own. His removal from the capital is not due to any serious injustice, as it was

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[17] See Amagasaki.

[18] Genji recites "Shimo no nochi no yume." See *Genji monogatari*, 200. The original couplet is found in Kaneko and Emi, 451; Rimer and Chaves, 211.

[19] See Chapter 2 of Pollack for some references to Wang Zhaojun in the "Suma" Chapter.

necessitated at least in part by his own wrongdoing of violating an imperial-consort-to-be, betrothed to his brother. The Chinese archetype does not share the same degree of responsibility for her misfortune, even though some blame Wang Zhaojun's excessive self-confidence, lack of discretion and stinginess as possible reasons for her tragedy. Genji could associate himself with Wang Zhaojun only in terms of homesickness, a general feeling successfully conveyed by the above-mentioned couplet which is fairly devoid of circumstantial details. Whether or not Genji's implicit claim that he was unduly removed from the capital is justifiable, however, the practice of trans-gender association of Wang Zhaojun with men itself was an established one in Chinese. This is only one of the many examples of how *Genji monogatari*, unlike other *wabun* sources, does justice to the authorial intentions of Chinese sources, most prominently those of *Xin yuefu* which Murasaki Shikibu says that she read with Empress Shôshi.[20] The well-known references to Yang Guifei and Li Furen in the "Kiritsubo" and "Maboroshi" chapters do not simply help elevate emotions of characters,[21] but rightly address social criticism that Bai's songs were meant to voice, quoting and alluding to the lines which were largely dismissed in *waka* in favor of other lines that easily catered to the aesthetic taste of the target audience contemporaneous to the production of the texts in Japan.

Conclusion

Depoliticization in *waka* and *uta monogatari* is evidently at work in every stage of transformation. The anguish felt by a given concubine, which is a result of political problems, and which, thus, should be humanly coped with and resolved, is presented as though it were triggered by the natural and inevitable (and thus beyond human control). Social commentary is silenced, and lyrical lamentation is given voice.[22]

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[20] See *Murasaki Shikibu nikki*, 98; Bowring, trans., *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, 58.

[21] See Shinma and Yokoi for more on less emotional and more critical aspects of *Xin yuefu* incorporated into *The Tale of Genji*.

[22] The shift of focus from social criticism to personal lament is most

This gives rise to the autobiographicality of the five concubines' accounts. The women are silenced when they are expected to speak out on stately affairs, but their voices are heard when they are expected to voice emotions that are taken to be "universal" regardless of the time. The male speaker/commentator speaks on behalf of the male lover, or a sympathetic third party, to relate his sense of loss, regret, lament, and longing for his lost lover. His neglect of her or the political circumstances which had led to the departure of the lady, for the land of the dead or the foreign land, is hardly foregrounded. Either the lady in her lifetime or the man after her death, has to be lonely, with hardly any trusted company. Her or his speech is thus almost always interior monologue, or soliloquy overheard—lyric, that is. There is no place in classical Japanese prose or poetry on the five concubines for Bai Juyi's commentator who takes up a specific character's life story in order to illustrate his criticism of a social or political problem of the time.

The only notable exception to this prescription is *Genji monogatari*. Despite the conventional perception that the narrative is romantic and lyrical, it also has a dimension of criticism, developed partly owing to its references to Chinese sources such as Bai Juyi's *yuefu* as understood in light of the original context. Even such examples themselves are ignored, however, in favor of the lyrical, autobiographical voice persistently sought after in literature in Japanese—or literature for and (ostensibly) by women.[23]

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manifest in the Japanese adaptation of Bai Juyi's poetry; in *Kara monogatari*, *Baishi wenji* oriented stories center on emotions, whereas *Mengqiu* oriented ones are with a larger corpus than personal matters. See Iguma.

[23] See Sakaki.

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