

# *A Rethink about the View on Women in Honglouloumeng*

Pan Jiayue

School of Foreign Language and Literature, Tianjin University, Tianjin, 300350, China,  
sfll@tju.edu.cn

**Abstract:** This article aims to further detect the diverse and contradictory view on women embedded in *Honglouloumeng* (*Dream of Red Mansions*) and to clarify the conscious praise of women and unconscious contempt for women made by the author Cao Xueqin in the text. Although *Honglouloumeng* is generally considered to be an open-ended text due to its all-encompassing content and multi-version issue, I believe the female perspective is the closest perspective to Cao's true intentions among others. In a realistic and compassionate style, Cao speaks out in a strong voice of "injustice for women" by writing about the miserable life of a group of remarkable but ill-fated women who lived around the hero Jia Baoyu. It appears to be a novel of praise and sympathy for women. Whereas when we explore the deeper connotation in *Honglouloumeng*, we might find that even Baoyu, who always holds up the banner of 'damsel worship', composes a 'trilogy for the destruction of female values' and has not been divorced from masculinity ever. Accordingly, we can glimpse that the embodiment of the view on women in *Honglouloumeng* is not entirely positive, but partly contains a devaluation for women.

**Keywords:** Dream of Red Mansions, Women Literature, Sexism, Women Worship.

## 1. Introduction

*Honglouloumeng* is one of the most distinguished novels in Chinese classical literature and plays a pivotal role in reflecting the history of nobility's life in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. This novel has received extensive attention owing to encyclopedical coverage and rich connotation in its narrative. Thus, Louise Edwards, who is a western redologist (one who studies the novel *Dream of Red Mansions*), interprets the novel with the polyphonic theory which favors a multi-perspective model of understanding rather than a single authoritative reading model [1]; Lu argued that different standpoints of readers have led to the diversified interpretation of *Honglouloumeng*, for instance, the Taoist saw the prostitution, the literati saw the romance, the revolutionary saw the crowding-out of Manchu nationality and the gossip saw the nobility confidential [2]. This not only reflects the wealth of Chinese social, historical, and cultural information contained in *Honglouloumeng* but also shows that different positions provide different perspectives for the interpretation of masterpieces.

The paper sets out to explore Cao Xueqin's unconscious views on women. With the prosperity of feminist theory since the 1980s, not only was *Honglouloumeng* regarded by feminist advocates as a monument to the development of female consciousness but Cao was also respected as a pioneer of modern feminism. Many arguments like "damsel worship", "gender equality" and even "male inferiority" gradually started to be the mainstream in feminist literary criticism about *Honglouloumeng*. Some researchers tended to oversimplify the author's intention attributed to the separation between

the social history and culture, and others questioned this kind of argument because the aesthetic preference for women in *Honglouloumeng* is still patriarchal. This paper discusses both arguments and provides a more compromised view that even majority of subjects described in it are women, *Honglouloumeng* is a product of the patriarchal culture in ancient Chinese society because of its male perspective and foothold.

## 2. Research Question

As it is stated earlier, a previous study has occurred in the field of feminist literary criticism. Fu studied the pureness of damsel's morality and thereby demonstrated the cult of damsel in *Honglouloumeng* [3]. Wu considered *Honglouloumeng* as a statement of patriarchy [4]. Liu argued that Cao Xueqin's preference for the nature of the maiden devalued that of the madam [5]. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are few results in the literature making Cao's dual cognition about women clear by associating with historical background. The present paper tries to systematize and logicize previous sporadic research to give an impartial assessment by analyzing the gender rules and cultural implications hidden in the text of *Honglouloumeng*. The assumption of Xue is used as a starting point to explore the relationship between the view on women in *Honglouloumeng* and the prosperity of talented women's culture in the Ming and Qing dynasties [6]. The result of this paper is encouraging to show the complex and contradictory views on female of the male literati who lived in the Qing Dynasty and were represented by Cao Xueqin.

*Honglouloumeng* is a female-oriented novel, this is what the author clearly out in the preface. Therefore, "female worship" can be said to be one of the indisputable important themes of the fiction. While many arguments are still trapped in the male/female, privilege/anti-privilege binary opposition by exploring women's issues from a one-sided perspective, especially from the hero Baoyue's viewpoint instead of distinguishing it from the author's. These scholars did not combine fiction with its social and historical background to explore the author's dual cognition. Hence, I will regard *Honglouloumeng* as a tension field in a specific historical context for diverse social and cultural factors and gender consciousness in order to demonstrate the attachment and resistance to traditional patriarchal society, then organize this paper in the following way. Chapter one will investigate the damsel worship in the fiction by wedging it into the culture of talented women in the historical context where it emerged. Based on this, the complex correlation between multiple gender codes, ideological privilege, cultural norms, and ethical order will be analyzed. Chapter two will try to demonstrate Cao's subtle mentality of gender identity in the narrative.

## 3. Literature Review

Since the middle of the Qing dynasty, there has been a lot of research on *Honglouloumeng* in the academic circle, and it has even formed an independent discipline, namely "red-ology". *Journal of Red Mansions* is one of the highly authoritative journals which collects a large number of outstanding research on red-ology in the past more than 40 years and provides the most advanced academic resources to the "redologist" today.

The discussion of gender in *Honglouloumeng* began in 1995. Li made a detailed investigation of Chinese academic works on the feminist criticism of *Honglouloumeng* from 1995 to 2011 and classified them into the following themes: 1. damsel worship of male literati; 2. theory of sexual harmony; 3. character image criticism; 4. comparative literary vision. The review conducted there is mainly around the first two aspects which are more closely related to this paper [7].

Firstly, damsel worship by male literati. *Honglouloumeng* is generally regarded as a Chinese feminist novel, not only because the writing motivation of Cao Xueqin was to make a biography for the boudoir, but also because he devoted unprecedented attention to the living condition and destiny

of women in a humble gesture and in a narrative language as soft and repetitive as water. Xue argues that Cao's view on female should be associated with the prosperity of the culture of talented women and women's literature in the Ming and Qing Dynasties [6]. Xue analyzes specific perceptions of women's culture and grasps the significance of the novel's feminine perspective on women's culture. However, Xue's argument is unconvincing because she makes no pretense of equating the protagonist Baoyu's attitude towards women with the author's thoughts and overgeneralizes the attitude of the whole society to women at that time. By contrast, Fu research is also one-sided as focusing on the novel without discussing the influence of socio-historical and cultural background [3]. Fu takes Baochai and Daiyu (two girls in love triangles with Baoyu) as the comparison subjects and analyzes the establishment and affirmation of the value of the damsel's personalities by Baoyu's attitudes. By comparing Daiyu's insistence and Baochai's improvisation, Fu affirms Daiyu's awakening of self-awareness and declares that *Honglouloumeng* broke the monopoly of the feudal patriarchal values [3].

On the other hand, some scholars think *Honglouloumeng* presents a kind of alienation and transformation of women according to men's wishes and needs, so the essence of it is an imagination of male literati. Wu criticized Cao's limitation of gender consciousness from the perspective of patriarchal discourse [4]. Wu admits that Cao Xueqin has the willingness to speak out for women, but as a male writer, he still unconsciously used "Phallogocentric Discourse" to shape women in masculinity. From this, Wu argues that Cao's sympathy for women is essentially the prejudice of masculine discourse against women. Moreover, he oversimplifies the love between Baoyu and Daiyu to Daiyu's frailness that satisfies Baoyu's protective desire as a male. Thus, women like Daiyu should be criticized by feminists [4]. Cui further pointed out that although the focus of *Honglouloumeng* is female, its perspective and foothold are still male. In other words, *Honglouloumeng* has received a strong male aesthetic preference and only taken women as the carrier to convey the value orientation of male literati [8]. Although this kind of view may partly reveal the deeper perception of Cao's view on female, it is unjustified to belittle the literary value of the work on this ground.

Secondly, the ideal of androgyny. One of the androgyny theory quoted here is first used by Adeline Virginia Woolf, namely men and women have the right to choose their gender roles freely. That is, women can have masculinity, and men can also show femininity. Edwards applied the feminist method, for the first time, with the goal of revealing the vague and contradictory sexual consciousness of people in the 18th century, and studied how *Honglouloumeng* shows the different gender roles and the concept of sexual characteristics in China during Qing Dynasty [1]. Edwards affirmed the novel as a great work but doubts the general belief that *Honglouloumeng* represents the prototype of Chinese feminism. Edwards's questioning is not speculative. By examining Cao's interpretation of purity, power, chastity, and bisexuality in the novel, she found that it did not overthrow but even consolidated the central and dominant gender order of men in the Qing Dynasty.

Besides, Zhou takes the gender-related component in Lacan's semiotic theory on sexuality as a theoretical cornerstone [9], i.e. when a male enters the system of paternal power, he must lose his indispensable genital primitive (phallus) as a whole. Based on this, Zhou points out that it is Baoyu's pursuit of femininity that saves him from being confirmed as male by symbolic order to avoid spiritual castration. After the theory of androgyny was introduced into China, many scholars use it to analyze the androgynous personalities of some characters in *Honglouloumeng*, to prove Cao Xueqin's advanced artistic pursuit and the humanistic ideal of "harmony between the sexes". Ma pointed out that the drawback of these studies is that they only stay on the gender characteristics of the characters, especially for Jia Baoyu and Wang Xifeng, whereas other sexual characteristics are partly neglected, the dual narrative strategy for example [10].

Taken together, although these arguments have their own merits, a general limitation should be

noted, i.e. the conclusion drawn by these scholars seems to be too absolute to show the profundity and diversity of the novel. Some scholars even neglect the evidence that goes against their points. Hence, I believe that a more comprehensive understanding of female consciousness in the novel could effectively take the debate forward.

## 4. Research Method

In order to gain a deeper insight into the author Cao Xueqin's spiritual world, I conduct my research through literature research and text analysis with the goal of exploring the historical situation and the multiple gender connotations in *Honglouloumeng*.

### 4.1. Literature Research

I apply an intertextual approach of history and literature by referring to Dorothy Ko's dynamic tripartite model for the history of Chinese women in the seventeenth century, i.e. regard Chinese women's life as the sum of three levels of shifting realities: theory or ideal norms, practice, and self-perceptions [11]. By studying their daily life and writing, Ko found that the women in the seventeenth century (especially in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the Qing Dynasty) were better educated than expected, and played an important role as educators in their families. Consequently, Ko argues that women did not actually live in the endless oppression from patriarchy as we think.

Indeed, Ko's book shows some strengths of the methodology and perspectives of American scholars to study the history of Chinese women. The selected material is too insufficient to include all women's life because the majority of them like poetry, prose, and play was written by the women from the upper class. While *Honglouloumeng* is exactly a novel about the life of aristocrats, so Ko's work can still provide abundant materials for reference. Hence, Ko's work is the main reference material for the discussion about the culture of talented women in this paper.

### 4.2. Text Analysis

I adopt the textual analysis method to read the novel in layers to find and record the forms of female devaluation and male privilege in the novel. As a result, I can probe into Cao's conscious compliments and unconscious prejudice against women, and summarize the roles in revealing and enriching the theme of the work.

It is worth noting that due to the complexity and specificity of the process of writing *Honglouloumeng*, there are several editions, and also disputes over the authorship of the sequel. To avoid ambiguities caused by different versions, all the quotations from the text of *Honglouloumeng* in this paper are taken from *Honglouloumeng* by Cao Xueqin and continued by Anonymous, 2019 edition by Yuelu Press.

## 5. Research Study and Analysis

### 5.1. The Contradictory View on Women in Society

#### 5.1.1. Talented Women's Culture

The Ming and Qing dynasties saw an unprecedented boom in Chinese women's literature. *A Study of Women's Writings Throughout the Ages* (Hu Wenkai), lists 4,214 women writers, of whom more than 3,900 lived in the Ming and Qing dynasties; of the more than 120 women writers included in *The Anthology of Chinese Women Writers through the Ages* (Kang-I Sun Chang, Haun Saussy), as many as 100 were living in the Ming and Qing dynasties, several times the sum of the previous

generations [12]. Using the interaction between Chen Zilong and Liu Rushi in poetry as an example, Chang shows the ideal state of poetic harmony between male and female literati in the Ming and Qing dynasties and points out that the prosperity of women's literature was opened up by both genders, and was the fruit of their intimate cooperation and synergy [13]. Contrarily, Ko argues that the culture of talented women of that time developed mainly attribute to the support of male literati, which is probably closer to the actual situation [11, 16].

Indeed, the development of women's literature during the Ming and Qing dynasties was partly due to the encouragement and assistance of men. Firstly, the collection and collation of women's poetry by male literati and the writing the prefaces of women's works were important reasons for the development and prosperity of women's literature at that time. The most representative work of these is *Wu Meng Tang Ji* by Ye Shaoyuan in Ming Dynasty, which contains the literary works of his wife Shen Yixiu and his daughters; by Qing Dynasty, there was an explosion in the compilation of women's poetry and anthology, *Women's Collection* by Chen Weisong, *Red-banana Collection* by Zou Yi, *Poems by Famous Ladies of the Present Dynasty* by Hu Xiaosi, etc. However, the compilation of women's literature above still follows the mode of male literati initiating and female literati passively receiving. In addition, the highly developed publishing industry in the Jiangnan region (South of the Yangtze River) provided the physical conditions for women to publish their own anthologies and technical support for the dissemination of their works, which to a certain extent changed the permanent silence of Chinese women in history.

The above is the mental and material basis of the culture of talented women so Baoyu's damsel worship is not an original intention of author Cao Xueqin to subvert Confucian social gender consciousness, but a cultural appropriation with a chapter to follow. Using a triple dynamic analysis model, Ko analyses the life of some aristocratic women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and illustrates the transformation of society's demand for ideal women from 'three obedience and four virtues' to 'talent, virtue, and beauty' [11]. This is clearly confirmed by Baoyu's comments on Xiangling's learning of poetry: despite her beauty, Xiangling is common because she is illiterate. However, when she could write poetry, Baoyu expressed his appreciation.

However, this culture of talented women arose within the area permitted by the Confucian gender frame, so rather than impacting male society, their growth enhanced male dominance. For instance, Xue Baochai is a proponent of the idea that a woman's lack of talent is a virtue. She taught Daiyu that the obligation of women is to be chaste and quiet, but not to be knowledgeable or wise. Take Baochai for example, it is evident that some educated women have internalized male-centred value judgment as a norm of self-restraint and discipline for other women.

### 5.1.2. The Essence of Sexism

The previous section has tentatively pointed out the lie of the male literati in pursuit of talented women. This section will further elaborate on this phenomenon to disclose the essence of the Confucian gender system's discrimination against women.

Firstly, the characteristics of innocence and naturalness showed in women's literature, which were appreciated by male literati, were actually the result of the lack of systematic writing education and social contact outside the home. Under the influence of the deep-rooted gender perspective of male superiority and female inferiority, only men were seen as the inheritors and pioneers of civilization in ancient China, while women were excluded from the governing classes of society. Therefore, for the father, the son has a duty to inherit the family business, while the daughters need only provide comfort and entertainment functions. Consequently, the most important mission of women was to serve both the husband and the child, not to read or write. In *Honglouloumeng*, Yuanchun's title of 'Concubine of Virtuous' highlighted the socially desirable demand for a woman's virtue at the time, literally the implementation of the principles of obedience

and the wisdom of housekeeping. Women's writing tended to be less utilitarian than men's because it did not aim at taking the official selection exam. Hence, women's writing usually displayed a more free and unconventional style of composition, namely the character of innocence that was so sought after by male literati.

Furthermore, women's limited space of activity at the time led to a paucity of life experience and they wrote mainly about the trivialities of daily life. However, this limitation was being disguised as "naturalness" by the male literati. As Zhang Xuecheng, a scholar who was a contemporary of Cao considered women's writing as only short pieces with the goal of expressing their sentiment for the glory and fading of flowers and love; Liang Mengzhao, a female writer, also recognized this and deeply regretted it [14]. Baoyu's negative comments about women's pursuit of fame and involvement in family affairs reveal the strict social restrictions on the field of women's life at the time. Once when Baochai persuaded Baoyu to study, Baoyu was offended and rebuked her as "a person who fishes for fame"; Baoyu also took a teasing, deprecating attitude toward Tanchun's (his half sister) assistance in the management of Grand View Garden because he thought a truly pure maiden can only be shut away from the world in her boudoir. It can be clearly seen that Baoyu's 'damsel worship' is very finite and is essentially a self-centred male gaze.

This phenomenon is also evident in social history. During the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, the change of dynasties led to social unrest and many families fell into economic crisis. In order to make ends meet, some educated women were unprecedentedly allowed to leave their homes and enter the public area to help their families through hardship by lecturing girls from noble families or publishing their own works. Although these women were allowed to leave home, their social acceptance was still predicated on selflessness to the family and fidelity to their husbands. In the case of the boudoir teacher Huang Yuanjie, stressed that although she earned her living through writing, she always put her family first. The male literati who wrote her biographies also invariably defended her status as a virtuous woman. It can be seen that the basis for the recognition of women's social value outside the boudoir was their adherence to a virtuous identity within the family, which made it possible for their talents to be recognized by the male literati and thus accepted by society.

On the one hand, the culture of talented women reflected the affirmation and support of male literati for women's talent and was conducive to the development of women's literature; on the other hand, its advocacy of innocence and naturalness further limited the scope and depth of women's lives, making their works adorable but not venerable, chic but not majestic. This is obviously a devaluation of the value of women's life.

## 5.2. Cao Xueqin's Attitude towards Women

### 5.2.1. Conscious Compliment

In the novel, Cao Xueqin has never skimmed on praising women. Cao emphasizes the objective of his writing is to biograph those excellent women who once lived around him and the motivation of his writing is not to have those wonderful women annihilated by his own mediocrity in the preface. In this session, I will analyse the female worship in *Hongloumeng* and discuss Cao's transcendence of the damsel cult of Baoyu.

Ou has summarized Baoyu's cult of damsels as follows: 1. Comparing girls to men, highlighting the purity of the former [14]. Baoyu's gender evaluation criteria can be described as 'stainless maiden and stained men'. Thus he felt refreshed when met a girl but sick when he saw a man. He saw men as scum and mud because the essence of the universe only loves young girls. 2. Comparing girls to married women, devaluing women by marriage and ageing. The girl is comparable to a precious pearl by Baoyu; once married, they lose their luster and become "dead

pearls"; as they get older, they will eventually descend to fish eyes [14-15].

However, is the sense of femininity implied by Baoyu's elevation of young girls above men and women all that positive? A further examination of the text gives us the answer in the negative. Firstly, Baoyu's comparison of young girls to men is logically incongruous and therefore unconvincing. Underage girls are generally more innocent than men in terms of age and social experience, but this difference can only account for differences in life experience, not argue for the essential goodness or badness of it. Additionally, Baoyu said that once a woman marries a man and gets his scent, she becomes such a bastard that she is even more murderous than a man. Reducing women to a lower status than men simply because of marriage is a one-sided judgement of the value of women. Millett criticized this kind of woman worship as "baby-goddess" because "society's perfect woman must be a cute preadolescent" [15]. Although such a cult glorifies the innocence of young girls, its impact is more negative. It denies women the value of enriching their life experiences, and thereby reduces the breadth and thickness of their lives. As a result, the growth and career of women were limited, ultimately, they were prevented from reaching out to a truer, grander world. For that matter, Cao's evaluation of women is obviously more comprehensive than Baoyu's, which helps us to distinguish their views. The women who were the motivation for Cao's writing were not only young girls but also married women, notably Wang Xifeng. He expressed his admiration for women's ability to run a household with the phrase 'one or two skirts and hairpins can run a family' [16]. In this way, Cao excludes age and marriage from the evaluation of women's value, and instead incorporates the amount of contribution to the family into the system of examination, presenting a more diverse range of evaluation criteria than Baoyu.

### 5.2.2. Unconscious Prejudice

Although Cao Xueqin expresses his praise for women in many places in the text, the traditional gender consciousness of 'male superiority over female' has been internalized into his personal consciousness, lurking in the unconscious and betrayed in his writing. In the self-repentance in the preface, the rhetorical question "Why am I not as good as skirt and hairpin?" [17]. implies Cao's prejudice that a 'hairpin' is not as good as a 'bearded man'. As readers, we should acknowledge and understand the limitation imposed on authors by his socio-historical context, but not ignore or blindly defend them.

Firstly, Cao Xueqin naturally regards women as the 'second gender'. Take the characterization of the heroine, Lin Daiyu, who was cultivated from an immortal herb but "only cultivated into a female body" because of insufficient cultivation. The word "only" indicates that the "female body" is, in the author's view, an inferior being. In fact, Cao's Confucian view of gender, in which 'men are valued', also incorporates the Buddhist view of gender. One of the Buddhist denominations argues that women are unable to attain Buddhahood because they lack 500-year cultivation and hence have heavier karmic debt [14]. This interpretation radically devalues women and denies their value, attributing the discrimination experiences in their life to the gender. According to Cao's demonstration, the subaltern gender is the decisive factor in the tragic fate of those female characters. All these inescapable fates of women were foreshadowed in the episode in which Baoyu sleepwalked to the realm of Taixu (which means the Illusory Land of Great Void). It is the palace of Fortuna, and her name "Jinghuan" means to warn people and awaken them from their illusions of the world. There are many rooms in this palace where books are kept to record the fate of women from various regions. These rooms are named after the causes of death of the women who were kept in them, such as Infatuation Division, Grievance Division, Morning Cries Division, Night Weeps Division, etc. The couplet on the wall of the Ill-fate Division also illustrates that this place, which brings together all amorous women, is simultaneously shrouded in the gloom of tragic destiny, exactly showing Cao's interpretation of the fate of women.

Secondly, the devaluation of women is reflected in the preferential treatment given to male characters. As mentioned above, women are not destined to achieve enlightenment because of their "body faults", while men are positively redeemed and liberated even if their moralities are deficient. On one hand, The Goddess of Fate, Jinghuan, has a negative attitude toward the fate of women. Although she foretold the fate of the main female characters during Baoyu's divine journey into the realm of Taixu, she did not lend a hand and prevent their tragedy from occurring. On the other hand, Jinghuan has a very different attitude to male destiny. She not only enlightened men when they were in trouble, but even actively intervened to help them change their fate. Like Cao Xueqin, Baoyu admits that he is less enlightened and talented than the women around him. But even so, according to the foreshadowing of Jinghuan, these women are all ill-fated, each with their own misery; but Baoyu, who is a perverse boy, is still given the hope of reviving the family's glory because of his gender. Wu cites the different endings of Baoyu and Daiyu to evidence Cao's masculinism, as he "leaves hope and salvation to the man while adopting a pessimistic attitude towards the woman on whom he places infinite sympathy" [4]. Likewise, as a woman, Tanchun was not qualified to establish a career and was eventually objectified and married off as a condition of negotiation. Recognizing that the root of her tragedy lies in the gender, Tanchun laments desperately, "If I was a man, I would have left home and started my own career, and then I would hold the power of speech. But I am a girl." In contrast, Jia Rui, with his lewd and incestuous behavior, is still classified as a "clever, handsome and elegant prince", and is cared for by Jinghuan at a deadly moment in his life—a Taoist priest was assigned to give him a mirror called "Feng Yue Bao Jian" (the mirror of romance) which could help eliminate his lust for his sister-in-law. This mirror, which is used to warn illusions, is exclusively reserved for men of status, as only such men are qualified to save society from becoming degraded and are worthy of salvation. This differential treatment of men and women could not be more explicitly sexist.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that we should take a more dialectical and comprehensive view on female in *Honglouloumeng*, i.e., neither is it completely superior to women nor is it a way to defend patriarchy. It is imperative to acknowledge both Cao Xueqin's heartfelt praise of women and unconscious gender bias in his writing.

Chapter one investigates the ideological basis provided by the culture of talented women in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties for Cao's sense of female worship embodied in *Honglouloumeng* and discloses its essence of discrimination against women. Chapter two further explain the limitations on women's value by analyzing Cao's female worship from relevant episodes and the fate of the characters of different genders and thereby points out the complex and diverse views on women. It has become clear that although Cao Xueqin has given great recognition to the talent and individuality of women and sympathized with their gloomy fate, "male superiority over female" is a collective unconscious gender concept in the period he lived. Thus, he automatically made this stereotype and consensus clear in the narrative.

It should be pointed out that there may be some omissions and overgeneralization in this article due to the huge volume of *Honglouloumeng* that only certain examples could be chosen and other details may be missed. Accordingly, the suggestion I wish to make is a more detailed examination of the text and a closer combination with history to make a more comprehensive and convincing argument for Cao's view on women in *Honglouloumeng*.

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