

A Study of the Dissemination of Jin Yong's Novels in the English-Speaking World

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Abstract. The translation and dissemination of Jin Yong's martial arts novels in the English-speaking world provide a significant case study for examining the pathways and effects of Chinese literature's global circulation. Based on the OCLC WorldCat database, this study systematically investigates ten English translations of Jin Yong's novels published between 1996 and 2021. It analyzes the dissemination patterns and strategic evolution of these translations in the English-speaking world from three dimensions: publication information and library holdings distribution, cover design, and abstracts and keywords. The findings reveal that, first, the nature of the publishing entities has undergone substantial change, with a sharp increase and high concentration of library holdings; second, cover design has experienced a profound transformation from imitating the source culture to adapting to the target market; and third, the discourse of abstracts employs domestication strategies and vigorously presents an exotic oriental culture, while simultaneously exhibiting tendencies to simplify and tokenize Chinese literature.

Keywords: Jin Yong's novels, the English-speaking world, translation, dissemination

1. Introduction

Jin Yong's martial arts novels have not only had a profound influence in the Chinese-speaking world, but have also circulated widely in the Anglophone world—defined here as the six countries where English is an official language: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland—and their English translation history, which began in the 1990s, now spans more than three decades. Studying how these novels have been disseminated in the English-speaking world can provide valuable reference points for examining the pathways and effects of Chinese literature's global circulation. Yet, does the success of this dissemination rest mainly on the literary appeal of the novels themselves, or do factors such as the choice of publishing agents, cover design strategies, and the cross-cultural reconstruction of abstract discourse play an equally important role? And what opportunities and problems do these dynamics create? To address these questions, this study draws on the OCLC WorldCat database to systematically investigate ten English translations of Jin Yong's novels published between 1996 and 2021, analysing their dissemination patterns and strategic evolution in the English-speaking world across three dimensions: publication information and library holdings, cover design, and abstracts and keywords.

2. Overview of the dissemination and reception of Jin Yong's novels in the English-speaking world

Based on the above research framework, this section first undertakes a quantitative examination of the dissemination basis of the English translations of Jin Yong's novels, beginning with their publication information and library holdings. This section, based on the OCLC WorldCat database, compiles statistics on the publication information and library holdings data of the major English translations of Jin Yong's novels, aiming to present the dissemination landscape and evolutionary trends in the English-speaking world.

This study uses WorldCat as its primary data source. By searching for the major English translations of Jin Yong's novels, it retrieves the publication information of each translation and the global library holdings count. As of February 2026, a total of ten representative English translations were identified. Based on this corpus, library holdings statistics were compiled according to the countries/regions where holding libraries are located. By parsing the "Libraries that have this item" list in WorldCat, country/region codes were extracted and categorized.

2.1. Publication information statistics

Table 1 summarizes the basic publication information of the ten English translations of Jin Yong's novels, arranged by year of publication.

Table 1. Publication information of english translations of Jin Yong's novels

Chinese Title	English Title	Translator(s)	Publisher	Year of Publication	Place of Publication	Publisher Type	Total Global Holdings
雪山飞狐	<i>Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain</i>	Olivia Mok	Chinese University Press	1996	Hong Kong	University Press	106
神雕侠侣 (comic)	<i>Return of the Condor Heroes</i>	Wee Tian Beng (illustrator)	Asiapac	1998	Singapore	Commercial Publisher (Comics)	14
鹿鼎记	<i>The Deer and the Cauldron</i>	John Minford	Oxford University Press	2002	Oxford	University Press	25
神雕侠侣 (comic)	<i>The Legendary Couple Vol.1</i>	Tony Wong (illustrator)	Comics One	2003	Fremont, CA	Commercial Publisher (Comics)	12
神雕侠侣 (comic)	<i>The Legendary Couple Vol.2</i>	Tony Wong (illustrator)	Comics One	2003	Fremont, CA	Commercial Publisher (Comics)	13
书剑恩仇录	<i>The Book and the Sword</i>	Graham Earnshaw	Oxford University Press	2004	New York	University Press	147
射雕英雄传 ·卷一	<i>A Hero Born</i>	Anna Holmwood	MacLehose Press / St. Martin's Press	2018	London / New York	Commercial Publisher	529

Table 1. (continued)

射雕英雄传 ·卷二	<i>A Bond Undone</i>	Gigi Chang	St. Martin's Press	2020	New York	Commercial Publisher	405
射雕英雄传 ·卷三	<i>A Snake Lies Waiting</i>	Anna Holmwood, Gigi Chang	St. Martin's Press	2020	New York	Commercial Publisher	315
射雕英雄传 ·卷四	<i>A Heart Divided</i>	Gigi Chang, Shelly Bryant	St. Martin's Press	2021	New York	Commercial Publisher	282

Looking at the publication timeline, one can divide the English translation of Jin Yong's novels into two phases. The first, from 1996 to 2004, involved university presses and commercial comic publishers; library holdings in this period were generally low, pointing to a rather limited dissemination scope.

The second phase, from 2018 to 2021, is marked by the joint launch of the four-volume *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* by the UK's MacLehose Press and the US's St. Martin's Press—all volumes translated by professional translators and adopting a mass-market commercial publishing model—which led to a dramatic surge in holdings: even Volume 4, the lowest, reached 282 libraries, and Volume 1 reached 529, far surpassing all earlier translations. This shift signals the English translation's move from a phase of diverse explorations (academic translation and comic adaptations) into one of mass-market commercial publishing and popularization.

2.2. Analysis of library holdings distribution

Tables 2 to 4 present the country/region distribution details for each translation according to their publication phases.

Table 2. Country/region distribution of holdings for early university press translations

English Title	Total Global Holdings	Holdings in English-speaking World and Distribution
<i>Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain</i>	106	Australia (3)
<i>The Deer and the Cauldron</i>	25	USA (19), Canada (3), UK (1)
<i>The Book and the Sword</i>	147	Australia (5), New Zealand (1)

Table 3. Country/region distribution of holdings for early comic adaptations

English Title	Total Global Holdings	Holdings in English-speaking World and Distribution
<i>Return of the Condor Heroes</i>	14	USA (9)
<i>The Legendary Couple Vol.1</i>	12	USA (6), UK (5), New Zealand (1)
<i>The Legendary Couple Vol.2</i>	13	USA (7), UK (5), New Zealand (1)

Table 4. Country/region distribution of holdings for contemporary commercial translations

English Title	Total Global Holdings	Holdings in English-speaking World and Distribution	USA Percentage
<i>A Hero Born</i>	529	USA (518), Canada (5), UK (4)	97.9%

Table 4. (continued)

<i>A Bond Undone</i>	405	USA (392), Canada (8), New Zealand (4), UK (1)	96.8%
<i>A Snake Lies Waiting</i>	315	USA (303), Canada (8), New Zealand (2), UK (1)	96.2%
<i>A Heart Divided</i>	282	USA (268), Canada (9), New Zealand (2), UK (1)	95.0%

As shown in Tables 2 through 4, the distribution of library holdings for English translations of Jin Yong's novels reveals significant changes.

First, the early university press translations (1996–2004) had a relatively scattered distribution across English-speaking countries. The sample data for *The Deer and the Cauldron* shows holdings concentrated in the United States (76%), with a few additional libraries in Canada and the UK; the samples for *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* and *The Book and the Sword* included libraries in Australia and New Zealand. The distribution characteristics during this period were to some extent related to the target readership of university presses (academic institutions, Asian studies scholars, etc.), but a clear market focus had not yet formed.

Second, among the early comic adaptations (1998–2003), the majority of the holdings for the three comic adaptations were located in English-speaking countries, with the United States holding the absolute majority. The comic adaptation of *Return of the Condor Heroes* saw 64% of its library holdings concentrated in the United States; for the two volumes of *The Legendary Couple*, the US share stood at 50% and 54%, with only a few copies held in the UK and New Zealand. Although the circulation of these comic adaptations in the English-speaking world was largely US-based, the total number of holding libraries remained very small (12–14), resulting in limited impact.

Third, in the dissemination of recent commercial translations (2018–2021), the United States has emerged as the unrivalled centre. For the four English volumes of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, US holdings make up over 95% of the global total, reaching 97.9% for Volume 1; other English-speaking countries (Canada, the UK, New Zealand) hold a negligible share, just 1%–3%. This concentration does suggest that commercial publishers have made the US market their primary target, and that their distribution and marketing strategies have successfully penetrated American public and university library systems—driving a dramatic surge in holdings.

By comparison, the earlier university press translations were held by 25 to 147 libraries, and the comic adaptations by only 12 to 14, whereas the four *Condor Heroes* volumes average around 383. These numbers make it clear that the English translation of Jin Yong's novels entered a markedly new phase of dissemination after 2018.

3. Cover design of english translations of Jin Yong's novels and the evolution of their dissemination strategies

Gérard Genette defines paratexts as "all verbal and non-verbal materials that mediate between the text and the reader and serve to present the work" [1]. The cover, as one of the most important visual paratexts of a translation, is not only the first "threshold" through which readers encounter the text but also a visual language through which the publisher conveys positioning, shapes expectations, and performs cross-cultural translation [2].

3.1. Color: a positioning shift from imitating the source culture to adapting to the market

Drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's [3] visual grammar, colour functions as a key modal resource in images: its selection not only reflects aesthetic preferences but actively constructs and conveys meaning. The cover designs of English translations of Jin Yong's novels have moved decisively from source-culture imitation to market accommodation, signalling a fundamental reorientation in target-market positioning and cultural dissemination strategy.

The colour schemes of the early independent translations were modelled on the palettes of traditional Chinese painting. *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* used low-saturation off-whites and light greys to evoke the crisp, cool texture of an ink-wash snowscape; *The Book and the Sword* and *The Deer and the Cauldron* adopted warm browns and red-gold as dominant hues, reviving the visual idiom of Qing court painting. The overall palette was restrained and elegant, foregrounding a literary, artistic style and an exotic classical aura that matched the expectations niche literary readers hold for Eastern culture. Yet, from the standpoint of Venuti's [4] domestication theory, such low-saturation designs—though faithful to the source culture and thus essentially foreignizing—could not intuitively and rapidly project the qualities mainstream Anglophone readers expect of martial arts fiction, such as pulse-quickenning adventure. Without strong associations with traditional Chinese concepts like "chivalry" and jianghu, these readers found little immediate appeal, which limited the translations' mass-market potential.

The colour design of the popular comic adaptations, by contrast, followed a thorough domestication strategy, tailored to the aesthetic habits of Western young adult readers. All three comic adaptations employed highly saturated, high-contrast colours—blues, purples, oranges, and greens—combined with bright lighting effects, amplifying the fantasy and dynamic action of the character designs while deliberately downplaying the cultural metaphors embedded in traditional Chinese colour use. On these covers, saturated colour acts as a visual metonymy, presenting the pulse-quickenning passion and romance of wuxia directly to the reader and substantially lowering the threshold of cultural reception.

The cover design of the mainstream IP translations, exemplified by the four-volume Legend of the Condor Heroes co-published by MacLehose Press and St. Martin's Press, represents an organic fusion of Eastern cultural texture and Western market legibility. The series adopts a "single-volume dominant colour plus contrasting colour" logic, with each volume assigned a highly recognizable dominant hue. The saturated dominant colours align with the colour aesthetics of Western popular fiction, quickly capturing mainstream readers' attention, while elements such as ink-splash textures and silhouette outlines retain the cultural feel of Eastern wuxia. The serialized colour design further strengthens the IP's overall recognizability, meeting the English-language market's demand for clear visual branding of book series.

3.2. Composition: a narrative shift from atmosphere to storytelling

Composition—the primary means by which visual elements are arranged on a cover—can signal a work's genre at a glance, and the evolution of the covers of Jin Yong's English translations, from atmosphere-driven designs to narrative-centred ones, does trace a shift in visual-narrative logic away from Eastern aesthetic conventions and toward Western reader expectations.

The early independent translations modelled their cover compositions on traditional Chinese painting, a tradition where atmosphere takes precedence over narrative detail: the cover of *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, for instance, places a distant snowy peak as the main subject, drawing on the "blank space plus inscription" convention to evoke an ethereal literary remoteness,

while *The Book and the Sword* and *The Deer and the Cauldron* reproduce mounted warriors and palace ladies from Qing court paintings, with figures that dominate the frame and foreground cultural attributes but offer very few narrative cues. For English-language readers who are unfamiliar with such painterly traditions, these atmospheric compositions can obscure the martial arts genre altogether; readers may easily misread the works as nature writing or historical accounts—a serious genre misalignment that suppresses the adventure and conflict at the heart of the stories.

Popular comic translations adopted a character-driven paradigm that Western readers of popular fiction will readily recognise. On these covers, Yang Guo and Xiaolongnü occupy over seventy per cent of the visual space, surrounded by dragons, clouds and other fantasy elements that heighten the sense of dynamic action; the layout directs the reader's eye squarely at the protagonists, while supporting text is compactly placed at the top so that the main image remains unobstructed. As Kress and Van Leeuwen [3] have noted, compositional structure shapes the order and manner in which viewers take in information. In *The Legendary Couple*, for instance, a sword-wielding figure mid-leap dominates the composition, with the smaller text in the upper left functioning as given information and the large character image delivering the narrative core. This kind of arrangement aligns well with the fantasy-reading habits of Western young adults, allowing genre cues—adventure, romance—to be grasped immediately through the visual focus.

The four-volume *Legend of the Condor Heroes*, representing mainstream IP translations, takes a minimalist and symbolic approach. Each cover uses black martial arts silhouettes as the central subject, with riding and swordplay poses that convey action and adventure directly; the backgrounds employ restrained ink-splash and flying-white textures—abstract gestures that evoke an Eastern aesthetic without actually reproducing traditional painting. From a visual-rhetoric standpoint, this works as visual metonymy: a partial silhouette stands for the entire "jianghu" world [2]. Typographically, the main titles follow the hierarchical conventions of Western mainstream fiction, occupying the upper half of the cover while the silhouette remains centred, which yields a clear visual order and a polished, professional layout. What this minimalist, symbolic composition does is to avoid the obscurity that characterises the early atmosphere-first designs and, at the same time, to compensate for the popular comics' tendency to dilute cultural specificity, thereby bringing about an organic fusion of Eastern cultural symbols and Western narrative logic.

3.3. Style: a dissemination shift from niche literature to a universal brand

Martial arts literature is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese cultural system; the spirit of chivalry and the order of jianghu together constitute the unique cultural core of Jin Yong's martial arts works. The overall visual style of the cover and the textual symbols on it serve as the dual core vehicles for cultural transmission, each reinforcing the other, and together they get the cross-cultural translation of Jin Yong's martial arts culture accomplished in the English-speaking world.

The visual style of early independent translations adhered to the faithful imitation of traditional cultural authenticity, directly selecting traditional Chinese ink-wash painting and meticulous court painting as the main visual elements of the cover, embodying a style that was classically simple and elegant. In terms of textual design, a strategy of cultural literal translation was employed, with book titles strictly rendered according to their literal meaning. This foreignizing strategy, while academically faithful to the cultural context of the original work, "brought" English-language readers "to" China, but its dissemination circle remained confined to sinology enthusiasts and scholars of Eastern literature; its marketing and dissemination attributes were extremely weak, making it difficult to stimulate the reading interest of ordinary readers.

Popular comic translations, by contrast, deliberately muted the distinctive traditional cultural traits of Jin Yong's wuxia. Their visual style aligned fully with Western young adult fantasy comics—clean lines, exaggerated figures, and a trendy aesthetic. Textual design stressed IP association and popular appeal: the Chinese title 《神雕侠侣》 became *The Legendary Couple*, spotlighting romance and fantasy as the narrative hook and almost entirely discarding the cultural concept of "wuxia". This design traded some cultural authenticity for a greatly expanded popular readership, a move consistent with the "cultural turn" advanced by Bassnett and Lefevere [5], which holds that meaning in translation is reconstructed within the target cultural system rather than simply transferred from the source. Abandoning "wuxi" was thus a strategic repositioning of Jin Yong's works within the young adult popular literature system.

The mainstream IP translations—the four-volume *Legend of the Condor Heroes* co-published by MacLehose and St. Martin's Press—achieve a dual balance between visual style and textual codes. Visually, a modern, minimalist Chinese-inflected design employs simple martial arts silhouettes and ink-wash textures, forging a unified serial style that carries both Eastern cultural recognisability and a contemporary Western aesthetic. The titles abandon literal translation entirely, adopting instead the universalising narrative titles of the Western epic tradition—*A Hero Born, A Bond Undone, A Snake Lies Waiting, A Heart Divided*—replacing culture-specific terms like "wuxia" and "jianghu" with universally accessible themes of heroic growth and fated bonds. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, this domesticating strategy does not suppress cultural difference; it distils the universal core of the wuxia ethos—the claims of duty, the test of loyalty—to find an optimal intersection between the Anglophone reader's horizon of expectations and cultural alterity. The serialised covers employ an identical visual template, enabling the four volumes to cohere into a highly unified, instantly recognisable super-IP brand in the English-language market. Through this strategy, the translation and dissemination of Jin Yong's martial arts fiction shifted decisively from scattered, independent efforts to a universalised brand narrative targeting the English-speaking mainstream mass market.

4. Abstracts and keywords of English translations of Jin Yong's novels and their narrative strategies

As the core narrative text on the back cover or in library catalogues, the abstract serves the function of conveying the work's selling points and attracting potential readers within a limited space; keywords form the crucial basis for library system classification and retrieval, directly affecting the degree to which the translation is presented in databases.

4.1. Diversification and hierarchization of keywords

Genre and form tags in the WorldCat database are central to library classification and reader discovery. Examining the labels assigned to successive English translations of Jin Yong's novels reveals a clear shift in positioning strategy from the early period to the present.

If we look at the labels assigned to successive English translations of Jin Yong's novels, a clear shift in positioning strategy does emerge from the early period to the present.

Early translations carried markedly narrow genre labels: *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* was tagged simply as "Translation", while *The Deer and the Cauldron* received "Martial arts fiction" but did not enter any other mainstream category—which makes sense, since "martial arts fiction" itself was still a novelty for Anglophone readers at that stage and had not achieved broad recognition. What this sparse labelling did was to restrict the translations' visibility within library systems;

readers could only locate these works by searching specifically for "martial arts fiction" or the exact title, and they could not encounter them through more familiar categories such as "historical fiction" or "fantasy fiction".

In contrast, the more recent commercial translations carry multiple, overlapping tags that work together to build a layered genre identity: the four volumes of *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*—*A Hero Born*, *A Bond Undone*, *A Snake Lies Waiting*, and *A Heart Divided*—are simultaneously classed as "Historical fiction", "Fantasy fiction", and "Martial arts fiction", and *A Heart Divided* also carries "Action and adventure fiction", spanning four distinct genre placements.

What this multifaceted tagging strategy does is to open up several dissemination channels at once. On the one hand, composite tags allow the books to enter multiple library classification streams, which can markedly increase the likelihood of their being retrieved by readers with varied interests. On the other hand, "Historical fiction" and "Fantasy fiction" are two of the largest genre categories in the English-language market, and by securing a place there, Jin Yong's novels get onto virtual shelves alongside Western bestsellers such as *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Last Kingdom*. The combination of tags itself also does meaningful work: it signals historical depth and narrative richness to potential readers before they even open the book.

Diversified genre tags, then, enhance the translations' visibility and retrievability in library systems, and the strategic selection of these labels has become a crucial step in repositioning Jin Yong's English translations from a niche scholarly product into an offering for the mass market.

4.2. Genre reconstruction and domestication in abstracts

The martial arts novel is a genre indigenous to Chinese literature, and its core concepts have no ready equivalents in the English-speaking world. Translating these culturally remote notions into narrative cues that Anglophone readers can grasp in a book abstract is therefore a vital component of translation narrative strategy.

The abstracts of early academic translations tended to adopt a conservative, descriptive approach. The abstract for *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain*, for example, consists largely of plot summary and offers no explicit genre signals; its martial arts character is only hinted at through phrases such as "martial arts families" and "generational feud". Faithful as this strategy was to the original storyline, it left readers unfamiliar with martial arts fiction unable to form clear reading expectations quickly.

The abstracts of the four *Condor Heroes* volumes make use of genre labels that English-language readers will find thoroughly familiar. *A Hero Born*'s abstract, for instance, opens by calling the work "the epic Chinese classic" and "a kung fu epic", and then frames it as "a story of fantasy and wonder, love and passion, betrayal and war, treachery and brotherhood"—language that embeds Jin Yong's novels within the Western literary traditions of epic and fantasy and draws explicit parallels with works such as *The Lord of the Rings*.

What this genre reconstruction does, from the theoretical standpoint of Venuti's [4] domesticating translation, is to represent a classic domestication strategy: it converts unfamiliar source-culture elements into narrative symbols that target-language readers can immediately recognise. By recasting "wuxia" as "fantasy", "historical adventure", and "heroic epic", contemporary translations have thus lowered the threshold of cross-cultural engagement, allowing Jin Yong's novels to get into the mainstream genre marketplace of English-language popular fiction.

4.3. Presentation and stereotyping of exotic cultural elements

Genre reconstruction may be a tactic that belongs largely to contemporary commercial translations, but the appeal to exoticism and historical legend does cut across all phases of publication. Early academic translations also made extensive use of this approach, their abstracts foregrounding—to varying degrees—the cultural Otherness of China.

The construction of exoticism sits at the heart of this strategy. The abstract for *The Book and the Sword*, for example, invokes "the exoticism of Central Asia", "a lost city in the desert guarded by wolves", and "Princess Fragrance", while that of *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain* highlights "the snowy mountains of Manchuria" and "a feud lasting generations", conjuring up a mysterious and starkly austere Eastern martial world. By deploying defamiliarized geography, mystified characters, and settings tinged with the sensational, this narrative tactic plays directly to Anglophone readers' expectations of China as an exotic culture.

The embedding of historical legend provides another key strategy, and one can see this clearly in the abstract for *The Book and the Sword*, which explicitly references the "baby swap" legend—the rumour that the Qianlong Emperor was Han Chinese rather than Manchu. By inserting a fictional story into a genuine historical legend, the text gives English-language readers a cognitive anchor: the Qianlong Emperor is an Eastern monarch already within their sphere of knowledge, and the enigma of his origins does more than spark curiosity—it also lowers the barrier to comprehension.

From a postcolonial critical perspective, however, this discursive strategy does cut both ways. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said revealed how Western discourse constructs the "Orient" as a heterogeneous, mysterious Other available for imaginative consumption, and the deliberate foregrounding of "the Central Asian desert", "Princess Fragrance", and "the Qianlong baby swap" in the abstracts of Jin Yong's English translations arguably falls within this Orientalist rhetorical framework. On the one hand, the strategy has undeniably succeeded in drawing the attention of English-language readers and has given Jin Yong's novels strong market visibility under the sign of an exotic culture; on the other, it runs the risk of reducing Chinese literature to a series of consumable exotic symbols, which can obscure the literary value, intellectual depth, and universal humanistic concerns of the works themselves.

5. Conclusion

By systematically examining ten English translations of Jin Yong's novels across three dimensions—publication information and library holdings, cover design, and abstracts and keywords—this study traces a clear evolutionary trajectory: the dissemination pattern shifted from scattered to concentrated; the publishing agents moved from academic and comic presses to Anglo-American commercial publishers; cover design evolved from source-culture imitation to market accommodation; and abstract discourse transitioned from genre ambiguity to domesticating reconstruction. At the same time, it identifies a risk that the strategy of exotic elements, while enhancing market visibility, may reduce Chinese literature to consumable "exotic symbols".

On this basis, the study suggests that striking a balance between appeal and stereotyping remains a challenge requiring constant circumspection in cross-cultural communication. This is not a binary choice but a dynamic calibration to be made with regard to specific historical contexts, textual features, and target markets. One possible way forward is to foreground the universal dimensions of the works alongside their exotic elements—for instance, by appropriately emphasizing cross-culturally resonant themes such as emotion, duty, and other virtues in wuxia narratives within the

abstracts. This may point to a direction worth exploring further in the future overseas dissemination of Jin Yong's novels and other works of Chinese literature.

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