

Shakespeare: Authenticity and Adaptation

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Chinese *Hamlets*: A Centenary Review

By Ching-Hsi Perng

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

National Taiwan University

Taipei, Taiwan, ROC

E-mail: chperng@ccms.ntu.edu.tw

Chinese renditions of Shakespeare fall into three kinds: 1) paraphrase, represented by the translation of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, which is also the earliest introduction of Shakespeare's work into China; 2) complete translation of play texts, in the form of various versions that strive for "faithfulness" to the original; and 3) theatrical adaptation, which explicitly tries to put Shakespeare in Chinese contexts. *Hamlet*, one of the most popular of Shakespeare's works, is also an obvious favorite with Chinese translators or adaptors. This paper discusses some of the more significant renditions of *Hamlet*, either on page or on stage, from the beginning of the century to the present. It is observed that these versions inevitably sinicizes Shakespeare to different degrees; theater productions, especially, are most daring and innovative in appropriating *Hamlet*.

I. Paraphrase: Lin Shu & Wei Yi's story version

Compared to his introduction to some other Asian countries, such as Japan, Shakespeare came to China relatively late. The name Shakespeare was first introduced to the Chinese by a British missionary in 1856, with the publication of his

translation of a history of Great Britain (Mu 22, Chou 5, Meng 2).¹ But a more or less "literary" introduction of Shakespeare's work had to wait almost a half-century, when, in 1903, a translation of 10 of the 20 chapters from Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* appeared.² This was followed the next year by Lin Shu and Wei Yi's *Ying-guo shi-ren yin-bian yen-yu* [Chit-chat of an English poet], which contains all 20 tales from the Lambs' work. It was the fruition of a unique collaboration: according to Lin, Wei would orally interpret the stories from English, and Lin, who knew little or no English, but who was an accomplished prose writer of the classical school, composed in Chinese ("Preface" 2). This kind of collaboration results, as we shall see, in some significant alterations of the original, i.e. the Lambs' *Tales*.³

Lin and Wei titled their chapter on *Hamlet* "Gui-zhao," or "The ghost's command," thus clearly indicating what in their view is of primary interest in the story. In this connection, it may be observed that Lin felt it necessary in the "Preface" to apologize for introducing a writer who not infrequently deals with subjects that Confucius refrained from discussing:⁴

Shakespeare's poetry is comparable to that of [the "poetic sage"] Tu Fu [712-70] of our country, and yet in both theme and language, he often writes about spirits and supernatural events. If the Westerners are indeed civilized, they should burn and censor such works so as not to cause confusion to the world's knowledge. As far as I know, however, some well-known personages among them are so enchanted by Shakespeare that they recite his

¹ The text I consulted gives no English for the original title or the name of the writer or translator. The Chinese transliteration of the missionary's name is Mu Wei-lien, and the work he translated is *Da Ying-guo zhi* [A history of Great Britain] by one Tuo-ma-shi Mi-er-na [Thomas Milner?].

² The work is done by an anonymous translator, and its Chinese title is variously given as "Xie-wai qi-tan" (Meng 8) and "Hai-wai qi-tan" (Chou 6); unfortunately, I have not been able to lay my eyes on the book.

³ Not that the Lambs are faithful to *their* original, of course; they have, for instance, done away with the Fortinbras plot.

⁴ In *Confucian Analects*, it is recorded that the Master did not speak on subjects pertaining to "the

poems or set them to music at home. And, as if that weren't enough, they use them as play scripts for the theater, where ladies and gentlemen go and watch, and are moved to tears. None of them rebukes him as being moldy in thought or gets enraged by his proclivity to talking about spirits and supernatural things. Why? ... (1)

It appears that Lin anticipated, and would like to preempt, possible criticism of the translation. The mention of "civilized" Westerners is significant, for Lin was writing at a time when the imperial government of China, having suffered many war losses at the hand of Western powers, was trying to catch up by emulating the West. In fact, Lin and Wei were then employed specifically for the purpose of translating western thoughts into Chinese, although the rendition of *Tales from Shakespeare* was not on the job list. In any case, the translation proved popular; in less than two years it went through three printings. Even today, when many other, more accurate, translations of *Tales* in modern vernacular are readily available, Lin and Wei's version is still cherished both as a pioneering piece of Shakespeare translation and as a fine specimen of classical prose.

Its departure from the original, however, has so far been overlooked. While generally following the English original in story line, Lin and Wei also introduced a number of noteworthy details not found in either Shakespeare or the Lambs, such as the following in "Gui-zhao":

1. "All the people in the nation" thought the queen lacks feeling for the former king. Prince Hamlet, known throughout the nation for his filial piety, has no ambition for the throne (64).
2. On the day of Claudius and Gertrude's wedding, the prince keeps to himself and does not attend the ceremony (64).

extraordinary, the violent, the chaotic, and the world of the spirits" (Ch. 20).

3. Convinced that the cause of Hamlet's madness is his unrequited love for Ophelia, the queen commands that gifts be prepared [for the wedding of the two] (66).
4. Hamlet composes the play-within-the-play, in which Lucianus is brother to Gonzago (66). During the performance, Hamlet sits at a corner, quietly watching the reaction of the king. The players continue to finish the play after Claudius, displeased with it, has gone back to rest in his chamber (67).
5. The queen begins the mother-son talk in her chamber by using "sweet" words with Hamlet (67).
6. Hamlet blames himself for having killed Polonius, his father-in-law, and wails (67). Upon returning to Denmark, Hamlet sees the hearse of his wife. Ophelia has lost her mind due to the death of her father at the hand of her mad husband. Hamlet jumps into Ophelia's grave as her husband (69).
7. Claudius would have exiled Hamlet, but repeated entreating of the queen softens him and he sends the prince to England instead (68).

With these alterations, the story becomes quite different from that in the Lambs' *Tales*, not to mention the "original" *Hamlet*. It would appear that Lin and Wei's version stresses what might be for the Chinese the most important human relationships: those between king and subject, parent and child, brother and brother, and husband and wife.⁵ Thus Hamlet is recognized for his filial piety, and Gertrude in the chamber scene talks to Hamlet "sweetly"—a misreading that probably results from the sentence "[Gertrude] began to tax [Hamlet] in the roundest way with his

⁵ The fifth of the Chinese *wulun* or "five important human relationships" is that between friends, which Shakespeare's *Hamlet* also makes much of in the interactions between the prince and such characters as

action and behaviour" (*Tales* 265), where the word *roundest* is construed as meaning "roundabout" or "indirect." Gertrude shows motherly love in her earnest pleading for her son after he has killed Polonius by mistake. Her second marriage, however, is detested not just by Hamlet, but by the nation as a whole. And Claudius's fratricide is unforgivable.

The most interesting change occurs in the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. At some point, not clearly indicated in the translation, Hamlet and Ophelia become man and wife; instead of being one-time lovers, they are now married. This interpretation may result from a misreading of the word "mistress" in *Tales*, where it is stated that upon his return to Denmark after the sea journey, Hamlet saw the funeral of "the young and beautiful Ophelia, his once dear *mistress*" (268, emphasis added). The change, unfortunately, does great damage to Hamlet's image as "a most exquisite practiser of propriety" (*Tales* 256-57). In concealing his pretended lunacy even from his wife, Hamlet's love and honesty as husband is seriously called into question; furthermore, in killing Polonius, his father-in-law, Hamlet commits a crime as monstrous as patricide. Hence the prince's sin is enormous, making him unfit indeed to crawl between heaven and earth.

Second, the involvement of Hamlet in the play-within-the-play is both greatly enlarged and significantly reduced in the translation. On one hand, instead of adding "some dozen or sixteen lines" to the play, he becomes the sole playwright of *The Murder of Gonzago*. On the other hand, unlike in Shakespeare's play, where, rather hot-headed, Hamlet frequently cuts into the performance, prologue-like, with various comments of his own, Lin and Wei depict him as calm and quiet throughout. (The Lambs have "Hamlet sitting attentively near [the king] to observe his looks" [263].) More importantly, Lucianus becomes *brother*, not *nephew*, to Gonzago, thus making

Horatio, Rosencranz, and Guildenstern, but which is largely deleted from the Lambs' *Tales*.

the parallel between his murder and Claudius's too explicit to escape notice and too crude to be credited to the Hamlet as he is generally known from Shakespeare's play. The change all but rules out the possibility of the prince—from the court audience's point of view at least—maliciously dropping hints of his intention to kill Claudius. (In the Lambs, Lucianus is ambiguously described as "a near relation to the Duke" [263].) And the fact that such an openly suggestive play is allowed to come to its normal conclusion, even after Claudius has departed in anger, shows the entire court either improbably insensitive, or numbed with fright at the thinly veiled murder charge against the reigning king.

All in all, Lin and Wei's rendering of the Lambs' tale gives the impression that *Hamlet* is a domestic tragedy with clear moral lessons on proper human conducts and relationships. There is little, if any, of the contemplative prince meditating on such large issues as right and wrong, life and death, vengeance and forgiveness, crime and punishment, and providence and human endeavor—issues with which Hamlet is often associated. Part of this impression may be attributed to the Lambs' retelling and, as has been pointed out, the difference may result from a lack of proper understanding of certain words in the English text. But the emphasis on proper human relationships is certainly very much in keeping with the "orthodox" Confucianism, the dominant ideology in China. As for the appearances of Old Hamlet's ghost, it should be noted that spirits and supernatural beings abound in traditional Chinese literature, notwithstanding Lin's apology.

II. Complete Translation: the search for "faithfulness"

Lin and Wei's story version of the Lambs' *Tales* was done in classical Chinese. Shortly afterwards, a patriotic movement later known as the May Fourth Movement started in 1919, and soon a Literary Revolution followed. One of the major issues

hotly debated at the time was the writing medium. The revolutionaries advocated that serious literature, hitherto written in classical language, be written in modern vernacular. In 1921, Tien Han published *Ha-meng-lei-te*, his translation of *Hamlet* in spoken Chinese (Chou 6, Meng 12). It marks China's first attempt at rendering a Shakespearean play in full. Other versions of the same play followed, translated respectively by Shao Ting, 1930; Zhou Zhuangping, 1938; Liang Shih-ch'iu, 1938; Zhou Ping, 1940; Cao Wei-feng, 1944; Zhu Shenghao, 1947; Bian Zhilin, 1956 (Chou 31, Meng 112-13);⁶ Lin Tongji, 1983 (Meng, 113-14); Sun Dayu, 1987; and Fang Ping, 2000. Except for Shao's translation, which is written in classical Chinese, all of the above render the play into modern mandarin. Of the ten versions, the most widely used are those by Liang Shih-ch'iu and Zhu Shenghao. Their popularity is founded not so much on the superiority of the translation's quality, however, as on their being part of the "complete translations" of Shakespeare's works.⁷ For more than thirty years, Liang and Zhu are synonymous with Shakespeare where Chinese is spoken.

From the beginning, would-be translators of Shakespeare's plays were faced with the problem of finding a suitable medium for Shakespeare's language. Prose and rhymed verse posed no problem, but there existed no convenient established Chinese counterpart of the English blank verse. Both Liang and Zhu settled for prose translation. While Zhu says nothing on the subject, Liang explains his choice as follows:

There is simply no such form as "blank verse" in Chinese [poetry]. And Shakespeare's use of blank verse was quite loose, to the extent that it approaches prose, except that it is somewhat more rhythmic. When his plays

⁶ Chou gives 1924 as the year of Shao's first publication, and 1936 as the year of Liang's first (31).

⁷ In fact, only Liang single-handedly performed the Herculean task, while Zhu was able to finish 31 and a half plays before his premature death at the age of 32. In Taiwan, the job Zhu left unfinished were completed by Yü Er-ch'ang and published in 1966; in Mainland China, the first "complete works" of Shakespeare, based on Zhu's translation, was published in 1978 (Perng, "Shaju" 149-51).

are performed on stage, the actors do not recite or chant, and blank verse is spoken like prose. ("Li-yen" [Notes on the translation], 1-2)

Not all poets or translators would agree with Liang. Many of them began to experiment with the modern vernacular in the hope of finding a new poetic idiom that would be able to somehow bring forth the flavor of Shakespeare's "mighty lines."

Sun Dayu, a highly regarded poet, scholar, and translator, was one of the first to propose the concept of *yinzu*, or "sound-unit." The gist of this concept argues that unlike in classical Chinese, where a character usually constitutes a word, in modern vernacular, often two or three characters form a word. In modern poetry, a poetic line may then be divided into any number of sound units, each of which consists of two or three or (rarely, four) Chinese characters and contains one stress. In this way, it is possible to approximate the five beats of the blank verse. "In September 1934," Sun recalled fifty-five years later, "when I started my translation of *King Lear*; I decided to call the basic meter unit of the Chinese blank verse 'sound unit.'" He also noted that "From April 10th, 1924," he had, "for sixty years, created and employed the 'sound-unit' system," a system that he considered "germane to the versification of vernacular Chinese." He had produced, in his own creative works and translations, about thirty thousand lines in this form, including his translation of *Hamlet* in 1965 (Sun xxvi-xxviii). Bian Zhilin, whose translation of *Hamlet* was first published in 1956, acknowledged in the "Explanatory Notes on the Translation" the inspiration of Sun's concept of "sound unit," adding that he handled it in a "slightly different way" (Bian 6). "Sound unit" has since become a norm in most translations of Shakespeare's blank verse, as is witnessed in Lu Chien-chung's translation of *Macbeth* (1999) or *The New Complete Works of Shakespeare*, translated and edited by Fang Ping et al (2000).

The search for—and eventual establishment of—a new Chinese poetic "meter" to accommodate the English blank verse ensures the translation of poetry into poetry.

In a book-length study of six Chinese versions of *Hamlet*,⁸ Chou Chao-hsiang gives the nod to Bian's translation. In the conclusion, he remarks,

Whether in the principle of translation or in the artistic level of execution, Bian's version has made great improvement on the other five versions. On one hand it is as thorough in scholarship as Liang's; on the other, it is almost as easily understandable and as interesting as Zhu's. Most importantly, its language is handled with art, as in Shakespeare's original. ... A translation that can artistically hold its own without distorting the original is an admirable achievement indeed. (420)

And this artistic achievement is largely founded on his adroit application of the "sound unit" concept.⁹

As indicated earlier in this paper, Chinese poets breaking away from the classical language and traditional poetic forms were badly in need of a new poetic idiom. The concept of "sound unit" seems to have provided, though not a solution to all the problems of rhythm for modern Chinese poets, at least a new way to think about it. In his essay "On New Poetry," for instance, Yeh Kung-ch'ao writes that "sound unit" is what regulates the rhythm of the Chinese modern vernacular (68-74). In short, the attempt at a more "faithful" rendition of Shakespeare's verse form has gone some way toward innovating or invigorating modern Chinese verse.

III. Adaptation for the Theater: *Hamlet* in Chinese context

If Chinese literary translations strive for faithfulness to the "original" text, the theater versions show much more inclination toward situating *Hamlet* in the Chinese context.

⁸ The six versions under scrutiny are those by Tian Han, Shao Ting, Liang Shih-ch'iu, Zhu Shenghao, Cao Weifeng, and Bian Zhihlin, respectively.

⁹ Chou also evaluates the six plays in terms of cultural transformation. For discussions of some other aspects of *Hamlet* translation, see Perng, "Dramatic Effect" and "Yen-wei-xin-sheng."

Early on, the play was used as a means of political satire. In 1916, a play titled *Cuan-wei dao-sao* [Usurping the throne and stealing sister-in-law], which is one of the earliest recorded stage adaptations of *Hamlet*, was presented on Qiankun Theater in Shanghai. The play, originally titled *Luan-shi jian-xiung*, or "A villain in troubled times," was meant as an attack on the then President Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), who was trying to restore the Republic to monarchy. The names of the play's dramatic personae follow those given in Lin and Wei's "The ghost's command," discussed above (Meng 173).

In their detailed study of Shakespeare on Chinese stage, Cao Shujun and Sun Fuliang take note of the special effort early theater management put in to promote this playwright who was to become a household name in China. One version of *Hamlet*, titled *Qie-guo-zei* [Thief of a nation], was advertised in a mixture of playful verse and prose:

A subject, he steals the throne and the nation, and commits adultery with the queen;

A brother, he steals his sister-in-law and [his brother's] regime.

The murder of a father must be avenged, especially when the mother is married with the murderer! [The prince] cannot choose but pretend madness [to probe] his mother. In the end, nobody escapes death. How horribly tragic is this tragedy? (*Min-guo ri-bao* [The Republic Daily], March 11th, 1916; qtd. in Cao and Sun 77)

And to further attract the audience during the raining season, a proverbial saying was added to the advertisement above as subtitle: "*It's god's will to rain, and mother's will to marry,*" meaning that neither can be helped (Cao and Sun 77).

Many other versions of *Hamlet* have since been mounted on Mainland China's stage, showing greater and greater sophistication in costuming, stage design, and

performance skills.¹⁰ Before moving on to scenes in Taiwan, suffice it to add that *Hamlet* is also the first Shakespearean play to have been adapted into the Sichuan regional theater sung and spoken in local dialect (Cao and Sun 78).

In Taiwan, stage performances of *Hamlet* began with university students' semi-professional productions. The 1971 production of the play by the Department of Theater of Chinese Culture University under the direction of Wang Sheng-shan was based on the translations of Zhu and Liang, hence close to the original in story line.

Yen Hung-ya's *She-tian* [Shooting heaven], 1987, marks the first serious attempt in Taiwan to adapt *Hamlet* to Chinese historical and cultural contexts. The play was set in the Sung court during the Epoch of Warring States (403-221 BCE). It is noted that in the "Mousetrap" scene, Prince Meng Xin (Hamlet) is asked by the King of Sung (Claudius) to preside over a ceremony to appease heaven. Meng takes the opportunity to have the Court Diviner reveal the murder of his father. During the ceremony, Court Diviner, as if possessed by the spirit of the former king, accuses the reigning king of murder, and is killed by the furious king on the spot. As such a ritual was prevalent in that historical juncture in ancient China, the court performance in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is smoothly translated into a different cultural code (Wang 144).

In 1989, the Contemporary Legend Theatre followed their success of *Yu-wang cheng-guo* [The desire of the kingdom], the Peking opera version of *Macbeth*, with *Wang-zi fu-chou-ji* [The prince's revenge]. Scripted by Wang An-ch'i, the play is also set in ancient China, and some soliloquies are turned into arias, underscoring the inner drama of the prince. Chinese folk art and stunning martial art are also featured (Wang 145). It is quite clear that, like Yen's *She-tian*, this adaptation presents the revenge play under the cover of a China remote in time and place.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive survey, see Cao and Sun, particularly Chapters 2-4.

Not so Li Kuo-hsiu's *Shamlet*. First produced in 1995 to the roaring laughter of packed audience, it has gone through two revisions. The third version of *Shamlet* began its tour of the island on August 11th, 2000. Dubbed as the "hilarious version of the millennium," the playwright-cum-director insists that it is a "hilarious comedy" that "has nothing to do with Shakespeare although related to Hamlet." What exactly is the relationship between the two playwrights and between the two plays? What kind of play is *Shamlet*? I would like to conclude this paper by discussing this fascinating play at some length.

IV. *Shamlet*: a (sub)version

In *Shamlet*, the structure of the original is completely lost. Only parts from seven scenes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are selected to furnish the new play's ten scenes, and the order is jumbled beyond recognition. The duel scene between Hamlet and Laertes, in Act 5 scene 2 of the original, now appears three times, making up part of Scenes 1, 5, and 10, thus emphasizing the motif of revenge and reconciliation. In each of the three scenes, different players perform Hamlet and Laertes. The same confusion happens to the other characters, including Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia. Because of this rotation in performing different characters, each player gets to experience other people's emotions of anxiety, pain, joy, anger, despair, hostility, remorse, etc. In other words, in real life everyone can be a Hamlet, Laertes, or Ophelia. Thus not only the play *Hamlet*, but even Shakespeare is dwarfed, trivialized, and made frivolous. In contrast, however, Everyman—what the play repeatedly calls "riffraff"—is elevated. The riffraff are the lead in *Shamlet*: Hamlet may be us; we may be Hamlet!

The love and hate of ordinary people, normally the bill of fare in melodrama or sitcom, is now placed side by side with "immortal" Shakespeare's "immortal" *Hamlet*.

One is reminded of Arthur Miller's "Tragedy and Common Man" (1949). In this important essay, the contemporary American playwright argues that the days are gone when only kings and princes are fit to be tragic heroes; rather, in modern times the protagonists should be ordinary people. His *Death of a Salesman* (1950) may be seen as an example of this theory. Li Kuo-hsiu seems to share the same idea. In *Shamlet*, he carries out a dialogue with Shakespeare on equal footing. The players rehearse and perform scenes from Shakespeare's play, speak Shakespeare's language (though in translation), and express the emotions of the "nobilities." But outside (or is it "inside"?) the play, we witness the lives of a group of riffraff, listen to their language, and glimpse their inner world. By adroitly confronting, juxtaposing, and subverting the two plays, Li Kuo-hsiu presents a (comic-)tragedy of and for the modern man.

Subversion is the name of the game in Li's play. The performing company Ping Fon Theatre Troupe is called "Fon Ping Theatre" in the play. The players in the play all have their given names in reverse order, thus Li Kuo-hsiu becomes Li Hsiu-kuo, Ni Min-jan becomes Ni Jan-min, etc. The prelude presents curtain call. The first scene is a rehearsal of the duel scene. Etc. Due to all sorts of mistakes and erroneous arrangements, the tragedy of the original, expected by the audience, is permeated with comic atmosphere. All this indicates that Li Kuo-hsiu is determined to charm his audience by turning the play upside down and inside out. To be sure, members in the audience who have only heard of the play *Hamlet* will not have enhanced his understanding of either the Prince of Denmark or Shakespeare. Yet through this play he could "experience" the emotional ups and downs similar to those experienced by Hamlet. It may be argued that the prince is no ordinary man, but that seems just the kind of fairytale that Li wants to demystify. He is the spokesman for the common man. A couple of scenes into the play, and the audience will soon give up hope of an "authentic" performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it will not, like Old Hamlet's ghost,

cry foul and say, "What a fall-off was there!"

This being the case, *Shamlet*, unlike adaptation in the ordinary sense of the word, is rather a parody or travesty of *Hamlet*, a special kind of appropriation. In form it resembles Ronald Harwood's classic, *The Dresser* (1980), which also tells the story of a theater troupe that goes on tours performing Shakespeare. Through the rehearsing and performance of *King Lear*, a special relationship is unfolded between the troupe owner-cum-lead, known as "Sir" throughout the play, and his dresser Norman. The selfishness and self-glorification exhibited by Sir reminds one of King Lear, the role Sir plays. Some of the intricate relationships among characters in *King Lear* are duplicated in those among the players, just as Fon Ping Theater's players enact *their* version of the stories of *Shamlet*. Only it is more outrageously uninhibited in the latter.

Paradoxically, Li Kuo-hsiu, who in many ways seems to be subverting Shakespeare, is also very Shakespearean in other ways. Both of them in their respective play deal with loyalty and betrayal, integrity and deceit, love and hate, and, as a result of the aforesaid emotions, vengeance and reconciliation. In Li's play, one Shamlet/Hamlet/Laertes finds it hard to forgive his elder brother, who has cheated him of forty million Taiwan dollars, thus ruining his credit and life. "But what about my reputation?!" he cries as he breaks down during the performance. Himself likewise an actor, playwright, and troupe manager, Li is also fond of discussing the purpose and function and management of the theater, never forgetting to spice the tragedy with comical ingredients. The players of Fon Ping Theatre are even more incompetent than Peter Quince and Company in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Most importantly, both Li and Shakespeare take material from other people, and sauce it with their own inventions, and both are popular with their contemporaries.

Shakespeare's popularity has lasted over four centuries; Li has yet to pass the test of

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time.

Toward the end of Scene 9 in *Shamlet*, when one player questions the logic of the play being rehearsed, the director grumbles: “Are the theater players so great [that they can prove the conspiracy of the King]?”, adding, “the biggest problem with Fon Ping Theatre is—we should not perform Shakespeare’s play! What does Shakespeare have to do with Taiwanese!?” Having seen the play, Taiwan’s audience need not seek far for the answer to both questions.

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