



A reflection on making 'Religion' in China: The Genealogy of Zongjiao through cultural exchange

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The term Zongjiao [宗教] originally referring to the teachings of Buddhism and Chinese ancestral worship was not considered the equivalent for the English term 'religion' until the late 19th century when Japanese translated religion as *shūkyō* [宗教]. The later introduction of the concept of Zongjiao into China via Japan triggered a deep exploration of the differences between religion and Jiao among Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei and Peng Guangyu, representing Chinese scholars' conceptualisation and reflections of Chinese traditional religious belief, practices and phenomena within the context of Western religious culture. Rather than a simple lexical selection, the translation of 'religion' essentially was a process of making the notion of 'religion' in China, which had provided valuable insight into the nature of Chinese Confucianism culture and was closely related to the understanding of the state–church relationship in China. With continuous cultural exchanges and integration, reflecting on this translation process will provide a more inclusive perspective on the complexity and diversity of religions and facilitate mutual learning.

Contribution: This article briefly reviews the process of accepting Zongjiao [宗教] as the equivalent for the Western term 'religion' in China, in order to shed light on how such translation has influenced people's understanding of religion and the inclusiveness contained in the study of religion.

Keywords: Zongjiao; Chinese religion; zong; Jiao; cross-cultural translation; Confucianism; state–church relationship.

Introduction

There was no modern concept of 'religion' in China before the 20th century. In 1870s, the Western term 'religion' was translated for the first time into Chinese characters by Japanese translators who created the Japanese neologism *shūkyō* [宗教], with 'the prototype of a belief-centred Protestant-style Christianity' (Krämer 2013). This new Japanese term was then taken over into the Chinese language, where the same two characters are pronounced *Zongjiao* [宗教]. The Chinese character *Zong* [宗] was closely related to the traditional Chinese ancestral worship and feudal clan system. *Jiao* [教] mainly referred to teachings, instructions and education the subject of which was usually the emperor and sages. The combination of *Zong* [宗] and *Jiao* [教] first appeared in China's Buddhist scriptures, referring to the ultimate truths realised by the Buddha and his teachings to later disciples. The process of considering '*Zongjiao*' [宗教] as the equivalent of 'religion' was complicated and tortuous. In the initial stages, the intellectual elites in China at that time still understood the meaning of 'religion' within the context of traditional Confucianism. However, when they gradually learned the real meaning of 'religion' in Western culture, they realised that there was no single area in the traditional cultural map of China lasting more than 2000 years that could be called 'religion'. Additionally, there was no lexical equivalent in the Chinese vocabulary that could accurately express the meaning of 'religion'. With continuous discussion on the difference between *Zongjiao* [宗教] and 'religion', the translation had been questioned for a long time. Chen (2002) published an article carefully discussing how and why 'religion' has become a key word in modern Chinese cultural history, and he pointed out that at the first stage the Japanese translation was introduced into Chinese without the connotation of religion but within the traditional understanding of *Jiao* [教]. Zhang (2006) discussed the methodology of how to understand 'religion' and suggested that this convoluted process of translating religion as *Zongjiao* [宗教] has greatly shaped Chinese academia's understanding of religion. This is not merely a simple issue of translation, but rather a cross-cultural and cross-civilisational process through which the Chinese scholars constantly adopt the indeterminate

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concept of religion and construct their own agenda. By reviewing this process, we can see that shaped by historical developments and cultural exchanges, the concept of religion remains dynamic and plural, and the academic field of religious studies should be more inclusive. The inadequate and inexact interpretation of the concept of religion may remind scholars of the necessity of interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding.

This article will first discuss the original meaning of the term 'religion' and *Zongjiao* [宗教] respectively. Then, it will describe how *Zongjiao* as a translation of 'religion' was imported tortuously into China from Japan. Subsequently, this article will clarify how such translation was related to the controversy that whether Confucianism should be considered a religion and how to understand the state–church relationship in China. Finally, a conclusion concerning the influence of this history will be provided.

The meaning of religion and *Zongjiao* Religion

The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin 'religion', which is believed to stem from the verb 'religare', meaning 'to bind' or 'to tie'. This interpretation suggests that religion serves to connect individuals to the gods (Taylor 1988:8). Although religion is a term relatively modern, animistic beliefs, rituals, creation myths, ancestor worship and the veneration of natural power which was central to ancient social organisation and divine authority has emerged in prehistoric societies. During the Axial Age, several transformative figures such as Confucius, Buddha and Socrates emerged independently across various cultures, which marked a shift towards introspection and the inquires for transcendental truths, leading to the development of more codified religious traditions. Then the rise and prevalence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam further shaped the modern understanding of religion. These monotheistic religions emphasised a more personal and direct relationship between individuals and a singular divine entity. In the 17th and 18th centuries, with the flourishing of The Enlightenment, thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant challenged dogmatic beliefs and highly advocated reason. This period represented a profound transformation where religion began to be viewed through the lens of human experience and rational thought, leading to a decline in the unquestioned authority of religious institutions. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the rise of secularisation and pluralism. Religions among the world were encouraged to be comparatively studied with scientific methods. Also during this period, the concept of 'religion' began to be analysed as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than a universal truth, which has facilitated the establishment of the discipline of religious studies. Scholars such as Edward B. Tylor, Émile Durkheim and William James examined the role of religion in society, and have provided various definitions of 'religion' from the perspectives of sociology, psychology and anthropology. These definitions and explanations undoubtedly sketch a more complete and

ample landscape of religious studies. However, they also illustrate the diversity and complexity in the concept of religion, as well as the difficulty of defining 'religion'.

Religion, with diversified historical traditions and evolving connotation, is notoriously difficult to define. It is challenging to provide a complete definition in just a few short sentences. Just like King (1954) said that the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task. In *The Meaning and the End of Religion*, Smith questioned the application of the notion of 'religion' and justified its abnouncement. He suggested that:

[T]he idea is widely accepted that religion is a something with a definite and fixed form, if only one could find it. This is the problem of the definition of religion ... full of confidence that that nature is somehow there. (Smith 1964:46–47)

Smith believed that the methodology of exploring the essence, the mainstream in Western philosophy since Aristotle, is not appropriate in the field of religious studies where Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and various kinds of religions are dynamic and human-orientated. Smith claimed that 'religion' was not a native term; it was a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore was theirs to define. It was a second-order, generic concept that played the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' played in linguistics or 'culture' played in anthropology. There could be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon (Smith 1988:281–282). In this sense, the term 'religion' did not naturally emerge with the development of human history and culture, but rather it is a concept created by scholars for the purpose of conducting research. It is more meaningful for scholars studying religions to use it than for individuals practicing religions, as it represents a disciplinary horizon and research paradigm. Muller, one of the founders of Western religious studies, proposed a classic argument from a comparative perspective: 'He who knows one, knows none' (Muller 1899:13). This illustrates the fact that understanding various religious phenomena on the basis of mutual respect is the intention for the study of religion. Muller has created an academic field where studying religions equally is reasonable (Chen 2017). Therefore, when the notion of 'religion' enters another cultural systems, what is crucial to know is not how to find a lexical equivalent in other language or to discover a new kind of religion analogous to Christianity, but rather how to apply the comparative research method to understand religious phenomena within that cultural system.

Zong and Jiao

Zong [宗] initially refers to sacrificial rites and ancestral worship, which is closely related to the feudal clan system. By analysing its character components, it is not difficult to find that '宀' represents a building, while '示' symbolises ancestors or deities. The combination of them represents a building dedicated to ancestors or deities. In ancient times, what people revered were usually ancestors or the gods of land (Zhou 2011:114–119).

Jiao 教 within the Chinese Confucian traditions often refers to education and teachings. *Jiao* [教] is composed of ‘支’ and ‘孝’. ‘孝’ represents filial piety, and ‘支’ denotes teaching. Combining the two implied the guidance and supervision of elders over the younger generation and later it referred to emperor and sages’ instructions to common people. *The Zhou Book of Change* [周易•观卦] said that people through observation of the grand scenes with respect could receive the education of moral beauty. If we observed with respect the miraculous way of heaven, we could see the wonder of alternation of four seasons without any error. Sages simulated the way of heaven and gave instructions throughout the land, so all people came to follow them.¹ At that time, *Jiao* 教 referring sages’ instructions did not necessarily involve gods or deity. Similarly, Taoism (*Daojiao* [道教]), considered an indigenous religion in China, was not consciously recognised as a religious organisation at the very beginning. The character *Jiao* [教], working as a verb, in *Daojiao* [道教] indicated educating people with the core value of *Dao* [道] which was inherited from the pre-Qin Taoist school and represented the central tenet of D. *Jiao* [教] that in practice meant leading people to study Taoism classics such as *Tao Te Ching* [道德经] to have a good life (Lu 1997:23). When ancient Chinese people talked about *Jiao* [教], they generally included three basic elements: sage, Dao [道] and scripture (Wang 2023:20–48). *Jiao* [教] is used to work as a verb meaning ‘to teach’, or as a noun meaning instructions, which is different from the modern semantics of *Jiao* [教] in *Zongjiao* [宗教].

Zongjiao

The combination of *Zong* [宗] and *Jiao* [教] first appeared in Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Liu Jinzao [刘锦藻], a historian in the Qing dynasty, stated that in ancient times, there was no such term as *Zongjiao* [宗教]. It was only after the arrival of Buddhism in China that their thoughts were distinguished as *Zong* [宗], and hence this terminology emerged (Liu 1936:8486). In Buddhism, *Zong* [宗] refers to the essence of Buddhist scriptures, namely the fundamental truth realised by the Buddha, which is transcendent and sacred. *Jiao* [教] refers to Buddha’s teachings to common people. Alternatively, *Jiao* [教] can be understood as the diversified methods of teachings tailored for different subjects in practice (Huang 2011:114–120). However, within Buddhism, what constitutes the fundamental truth is controversial. The different interpretations of Buddha’s truth eventually evolved into the concept of ‘sects’ within Buddhism. Because of variations in understanding the fundamental truth, *Zongjiao* refers to the different methods of conducting teachings (Zhang 2019:26–30).

Similar to the spread of Buddhism in China, Taoism and Confucianism also adopted the term *Zongjiao* gradually to advocate their own orientations and teachings. In this case, *Jiao* [教] specifically indicated the principles or doctrines of a certain school or sect. However, in modern Chinese, *Zongjiao* corresponding to ‘religion’ refers to a category and does not

specifically denote a particular sect, but rather serves as an abstract general term (Chen 2002:37–66).

The cross-cultural transition of ‘Religion’

Initially, the Japanese also adopted the literal meaning of *shūkyō* [宗教], ‘sectarian teachings’, to differentiate from ‘civic teaching’ (*jikyō* [治教]) that was dominated by politics (Krämer 2013). In their understanding, *shūkyō* [宗教] is about one’s heart inside, and civic teaching is about that outside the heart. Therefore, civic teaching is the official ideology and unique, while sectarian teachings are diverse but exclusive to each other and inferior. In this way, Buddhism is a *shūkyō* [宗教]. By appropriating the concept of religion from the West, the connotation of such distinction changed, and in the 1860s, Japanese Buddhists considered *shūkyō* [宗教] as a part of *kyō* [教] (teachings) that left behind civic teaching, politics and secular morals (Krämer 2013).

To use *shūkyō* [宗教] as a translation for religion began in the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Japan and the North German Confederation signed in 1869 in Japanese, German and English. Article 4 of the treaty was to explicitly guarantee the right of the people from North German Confederation to freely practice their *shūkyō* [宗教], that is, Christianity. The word *shūkyō* [宗教] in Japanese corresponded to the term ‘religionsübung’ in German, as well as to ‘religion’ in English. (Chen 2002) However, *shūkyō* [宗教] is not entirely a faithful translation or a cultural analogy. By articulating the new concept of ‘religion’, ‘Japanese officials translated pressure from Western Christians into a concept of religion that carved out a private space for belief in Christianity’. ‘The invention of religion in Japan was a politically charged boundary-drawing exercise’ (Jason 2011).

The introduction of the term *Zongjiao* [宗教] into China from Japan can be traced back to approximately 1895, starting with the publication of Huang Zunxian’s [黄遵宪] *Record of Japan* [日本国志] (Chen 2002).² In this book, Huang frequently mentioned *Zongjiao*, such as ‘in my observation of the monks in Japan, those who advocate *Zongjiao* are particularly talented’ (Huang 1898:31).³ However, it is not necessary for him to understand the new connotation of *Zongjiao* from ‘religion’.

When *Zongjiao* first entered China from Japan, it was not initially considered as the equivalent for ‘religion’, nor did Chinese scholars establish a correspondence between *Zongjiao* and ‘religion’. Instead, it was understood within the context of traditional Confucian culture in China. For example, Song Shu [宋恕] (1895:75) included a dedicated section of religious category in his work *Liuzi Kezhai Jintan* [六字课斋津谈]. Although Song’s call for the restoration of Confucianism fell into the category of *Zongjiao* [宗教]

1.[观天之神道，而四时不忒。圣人以神道设教，而天下服矣。] see *The Zhou Book of Change*, translated by Fu Huisheng, 2008, Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House.

2.Here and following historical clues, facts and documents are adopted from Chen, X.Y. (2002) with double-check of original literature.

3.The corresponding Chinese text is: 余考日本之僧其倡宗教者尤多俊杰.

(religion), he aimed to emphasise the pillar role of Confucius' teachings in traditional Chinese culture and did not regard Confucianism as a religion.

It is not vague to see that some Chinese traditional intellectuals (especially Confucianists of Qing Dynasty) attempted to defend Confucianism and draw a clear boundary between *Jiao* [教] and religion. The diplomat of Qing Dynasty, Peng Guangyu [彭光誉], delivered a speech 'Confucianism' (*Shuo Jiao* [说教], lit., On the Teaching) when he attended the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and claimed that:

'[jiao] [教] signifies properly 'to teach', if used as a verb; or 'instruction', if used as a noun. The English name of today's religion should be 'Erlilijing' [尔厘利景]. 'Jing' [景] is used here to translate religion to mean homophonic and comprehensible. (Sun 2015:64)

In his main theme, only Confucianism or its involvement of *Li jiao* [礼教] can be truly called *Jiao* [教] in China, which is superior to religions. '... According to these definitions, "religion" has its proper Chinese equivalent in the word "Wu" [巫] (Peng 1896).⁴ *Wu* [巫] means 'witchery' or 'shaman' who can communicate with gods by dancing and praying. Obviously, Peng found that divinity leads to the most essential distinction between *Jiao* [教] in Chinese and religion in English and he suggested to translate 'religion' according to its pronunciation. Similarly, the famous translator Yan Fu [严复] commented when translating Alexander Michie's *Missionaries in China*:

Religion is to believe in Heaven or God and all inapprehensible things before birth and after death ... Therefore it is obvious that Confucianism in China cannot be referred to as a religion together with Taoism, Buddhism, Mohammedanism and Nestorianism. (Yan 1899:850)⁵

Then, as an explicit example, in 1902, Liang Qichao [梁启超] consciously used *Zongjiao* as the equivalent of 'religion' from Western culture in his famous article against the idea to establish Confucianism as the national religion, where he regarded religion as belief-originated and exclusive faith that concerned the transcendental world. Liang contrasted it with Confucius' teachings which, being inclusive, concerning the secular world, focused solely on state affairs, ethical principles and less contained superstition, gods and worship. Liang argued that the core tenets and orientation of Confucius were entirely different from those of Western religious leaders. In sum, Confucius is not a founder of religion and Confucianism is not a religion (Liang 1999:766). By observing the West, a lot of Japanese intellectuals consider religion as an essential foundation for modern civilisation (Hiroshi 2017). The experience of staying and studying in Japan for a long time helped Liang make this concept clear and make use of the religion-civilisation model for religious issues in China and thus used *Zongjiao* close to his Japanese contemporary. Liang's

4.然则尔厘利景于华文当称为巫。We use original English version of the speech (see Sun 2015:64), but in this very sentence we follow the Chinese version.

5.The corresponding Chinese text is: 名教者, 必有事天神事及一切生前死后幽杳难知之事, 非如其字本义所谓文行忠信, 授受传习已也。故中国儒术, 其必不得与道、释、回、景并称为教甚明。

serial articles on religious issues greatly popularised the concept and the standard translation of 'religion' as *Zongjiao*.

The inequivalence between *Zongjiao* and religion

One of the core disputes about the compatibility between *Zongjiao* and religion is that *Jiao* [教] in Chinese refers to teachings and education encouraging the cultivation of morality and proper behaviour while religion is related to the worship of gods and supernatural which was partly misunderstood as mystery and superstition.

Scholars' debate on whether *Zongjiao* should necessarily involve divinity seemed to be a clarification of conceptual meanings. However, what need to be emphasised is the questions that whether humans have a unified understanding of divinity and supernatural forces. Unlike his contemporary Peng and Yan's opinions, Kang Youwei [康有为] believed that it was preposterous to exclude Confucianism from the family of religions just because of its silence on gods. Kang claimed that:

There are many ways of 'teaching': by the way of God, by the way of humanity, or by the combination. What is important is to teach people to keep goodness and resist evil. (Kang 1985:126).⁶

Kang believes that 'zong [宗]' comes from the Buddhism classic *Chuan Deng Lu* [传灯录] and refers to the cultivation of mind. '*Jiao* [教]' includes all the teachings that encourage people to behave morally. Obviously, Kang emphasises the function and social effect of '*jiao*' and strongly disagrees with the argument that only teachings concerning gods can be regarded as religions. Confucianism not only involves gods but has also been providing moral teachings to Chinese people for thousands of years (Kang 2007b:97-98). Therefore, Kang was the one who advocated that Confucianism should be reformed into a religion similar to Christianity. In order to receive more literati's support, Kang regarded the historical changes from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Han Dynasty as the process when Confucius created Confucianism and preached to people. In this case, the birth of Confucius' was considered as the appearance of *Heidi* ([黑帝] Black God) and Confucius has become the bishop (Kang 2007a:3).⁷ However, on the other end, Zhang Taiyan [章太炎] sharply criticised Kang for transforming Confucianism into a religion by imitating Christianity. Zhang Taiyan argued that the main reason why Confucius is great is that Confucius abandoned the beliefs in supernatural beings and began to think rationally.

Moreover, beyond the paradigm of academic research, the historical debate also leads us to the modern problem of how to understand the relationship between Confucianism and

6.The corresponding Chinese text is: 夫教之道多矣: 有以神道为教者, 有以人道为教者, 有合人神为教者。要教之为义, 皆在使人去恶为善而已。

7:'天既哀大地生人之多艰, 黑帝乃降精而救民患, 为神明, 为圣王, 为万世作师, 为万民作保, 为大地教主'。【As Heaven concerns the hardship of the people on the earth, the Black God descends to save the people, to be a god, to be a holy king, to be a teacher, to be a protector for the people, and to be a bishop.】

Chinese religions. Before the term *Zongjiao* entered China from Japan, whether Confucianism was a religion was not a question that troubled Chinese scholars. Smith (1964) stated that:

[T]here is no corresponding concept in China for the Western term 'religion'. For the moment, we may simply observe once again that the question 'Is Confucianism a religion?' is one that the West has never been able to answer, and China never able to ask.

But nowadays, just as Ames (2018) pointed out:

[I]n the process of Confucianism being introduced into the Western academy, the key philosophical vocabulary and the terms of art of Confucian religiousness have been overwritten with the values of an Abrahamic religiousness not its own.

On the surface, this may appear to be a conceptual game, but in fact it is a process of exploring the complexities and ambiguities involved in the term 'religion' and deepening the understanding of the novel notion of *Zongjiao* in China. The differences between Chinese religious phenomena and Christianity have facilitated the occurrence of new study methods and practices. For example, Yang proposed the structure–function approach, and stated that:

{W}e can discern two structural forms of religion. One is institutional religion which has a system of theology, rituals and organisation of its own, independent of other secular social institutions, and the other is diffused religion, with its theology rituals, and organisation intimately merged with the concepts and structure of secular institutions and other aspects of the social order' (Yang 1961:20).

Another important issue related to how to understand 'religion' in China was the problem of 'state–church relationship'. Within China's traditional cultural framework, there was no equivalent concept of 'religion', nor was there a notion of state–church relationship. In the context of Confucianism, with a focus on the role of Confucianism played in the political and social order, the so-called 'state–church relationship' (zheng-jiao [政教]) actually referred to the relationship between politics and education (or more precisely 'ritual and moral teaching') or between the emperor and scholar-official (literati) group. Confucius said that:

Govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by chastisements, and they will flee from you, and lose all self-respect. Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual and they will keep their self-respect and come to you of their own accord. (*The Analects, Weizheng*)

From the teachings of Confucius which emphasised the role of education in governance, to the principles outlined in *the Zhou Book of Change* which advocated for moral governance, there was a seamless integration of politics and education in traditional Chinese culture (Lei 2002). The Confucian literati class did not have the tightly organised structure similar to

religious groups, nor did they emphasise worship for gods or deities. Instead, they worked in conjunction with political power and conversely, political authorities protected the benefits of the literati class.⁸

In the process of accepting and constructing the concept of 'religion' in China, Chinese intellectuals at that time recognised the significant function of religion in political culture. During the early 20th century, with the overthrow of the feudal political system that had lasted for 2000 years and the establishment of a new political system, they began to re-examine the extent to which the state (government administrative power) should undertake the function of *Jiao* (moral teaching), as well as the extent to which public power should be isolated from the realm of people's spiritual life; with the issue of *Zongjiao* becoming unavoidable, they also accordingly began to ponder how much room is left for religions. While China's traditional ritual culture (Confucianism) undoubtedly contained religious elements, prior to the introduction of the concept of 'religion', traditional Confucian intellectuals did not perceive themselves as a religious group.

Conclusion

Instead of seeking a precise definition of 'religion' or evaluating how well the translation was working, this article aims to highlight the pluralism contained within the artificial category 'religion' and the inclusiveness and openness within the academic field of religious studies through reviewing the complex process of accepting *Zongjiao* as the equivalent of 'religion' during the beginning of the 20th century in China. When *Zongjiao* was introduced into China via Japan, it became intertwined with issues such as the state–church relationship and the political institution construction. The term *Zongjiao* was first discussed by China's intellectual elites before being disseminated to the general population and becoming a broadly accepted conception. Some Chinese literati argued that Confucianism should not be regarded as a religion because of its silence on supernatural beliefs. However, some literati emphasised the critical role that religion played in social solidarity and advocated making Confucianism a religion. The incompatibility between 'religion' and '*Jiao*' urged Chinese literati to reflect on Chinese traditions. This is a process by which Chinese scholars understand the concept of religion and comparatively investigate religious culture.

Indeed, the concept of religion has undergone a profound transformation from its ancient roots to contemporary understandings. With the continuous exchanges and integration of world civilisations, we have to establish a more inclusive conceptual framework to realise the coexistence of multiple belief systems and encourage interfaith dialogue. It is understandable that, until today, Confucianism is still in a disputation whether it is a religion. The concept of religion in China today is still in the cross-cultural entanglement, not a

8. How to describe China's state–church relationship remains a controversial topic. According to Wu Zhen (2017), this church–state analysis frame is invalid for traditional China, because Confucianism is not an institutional religion.

pure exotic concept; thus, *Zongjiao* is not only a symbol for Western 'religion'. Influenced by historical, cultural and social factors, the concept of religion is not static or singular but rather dynamic. From its etymological roots in ancient rituals to its modern interpretations, from its singular definition to pluralistic understanding, the notion of religion has been fluid and context-dependent. Reflecting on this history not only aims to understand the characteristics of Chinese religious culture, but also facilitate a more open and inclusive attitude towards understanding contemporary religious and cultural phenomena, thereby promoting cultural exchanges and mutual learning.

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This article is completed by X.L. and Y.C. The first author X.L. was mainly responsible for writing and methodology, and the corresponding author Y.C. was responsible for supervising, reviewing, editing, methodology and resources.

Ethical considerations

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