



## The Zen Relationship between Chinese Poetry and American Poetry

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### **Abstract**

Zen has become especially popular after 1950 and the Zen craze of East Asia not only has become a kind of belief but also a way of life in America. Many American writers introduce, advocate, and concentrate on their Zen, and even go to the East to learn Zen. They applied the ideology, content and allusions of Chinese Zen to their works, so they have a close relationship with Chinese Zen. This article aims to analyze the poems of Kenneth Rexroth, Anthony Piccione, Gary Snyder and James P. Lenfesty to explore the mysterious relationship between Chinese and American poetry. These poets imitate the quiet beauty, wild freedom or orthodox of Zen poetry. Furthermore, each of them forms their own writing characteristics, thus creating a new realm of American poetry.

**Keywords:** Chinese classical poetry; American poetry; Zen

### **1. Introduction**

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western culture was continuously introduced into the East, and eastern thoughts were quietly introduced into the West at a slower rate. Zen thought took this opportunity to begin its travel in America. In the 1930s and 1940s, the scholars of the East and West translated a large number of Buddhist doctrines. In the 1950s and 1960s, Zen became an important ideological pillar of the Beat Generation, and its influence almost infiltrated itself into philosophy, literature, psychology, education, sociology and many other fields.

Zen has certainly made an impact on American poetry. During the New Poetry Movement, some American poets began to think about Taoism in their own works, and in the next one or two decades, they translated and studied Zen. The poets began to understand the essence of Zen and absorbed Zen thoughts in their own works as they deepened their understanding of Zen. After the Second World War, and with the rise of the Beat Movement in America, the influence of Zen almost penetrated into various fields. Their study of Zen is mainly from reading books. In this regard, Zhao Yiheng has a saying: "It is not so much that Chinese poetry gives up Confucianism but chooses Zen and Taoism, but a selective misunderstanding of modern American poets, or a selective misunderstanding of modern society, because

Chinese poets are increasingly inclined to exclude Confucianism from Chinese poetics (Zhao Yiheng, 2003:314). And the Zen thoughts also directly or indirectly use Chinese classical poetry as a bridge to effectively influence and promote the change of American poems from the aspects of subject matters, skills, language and artistic conceptions.

## **2. "Zen" Thought to America**

### *2.1 The meaning of "Zen"*

"Zen" is the transliteration of Sanskrit Dhyāna. The earliest transliteration of Chinese is "Chan Na", later simplified as "Chan". Dhyāna was also intentionally translated in the Chinese translation of Buddhist classics as "abandoning evil", "merit jungle", "quiet thinking" and so on. In fact, "Chan Na" is a meditation practice commonly used by ancient Indian sects and similar to "Yoga" described in the *Upanishads*. Moreover, it is also an activity through quiet sitting to adjust the mentality. And it can prohibit greed and increase willpower. It aims to make people know themselves clearly (Ren Jiyu, 2002: 1224). The English translation of the word "Zen" commonly comes from the Roman alphabet Zen pronounced in Japanese, and later some scholars and translators pronounced it Ch'an or Chan in Chinese.

### *2.2 The Origin and Development of "Zen" in America*

In 1844, Henry David Thoreau retranslated *Saddharma-pundarika-sutra (Lotus Sutra)* translated by French scholar Eugene Burnouf in French into English and published it in *The Journal of New England Metaphysics*, which was considered a sign that Buddhism landed in America (Xia Jinhua, 2005: 547). But in both the Eastern or Western academic circles, the date of the introduction of Zen into America was set in 1893 (Zheng Jinde, 1984:65), because the World Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago that year, and through the enthusiastic discussion of the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, the Buddhist Zen indeed has an access to America (Zheng Jinde, 1984:105-114). Buddhism really began to enter the American vision, but the spread and development were quite slow.

In the 1920s, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki published a series of books of Zen Buddhism which promoted the development of Zen in America. By the mid to late 19th century, Zen has become popular in America. The young of "The Beat Generation" and its representative writers including Kenneth Rexroth, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder who love Zen Buddhism mainly through English translations and regard Zen and Zen doctrines as their knowledge and spiritual refuge. Some of Beat Generations, such as Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, went to Japan to receive formal and strict Zen training. But in any case, they have managed to have Zen's mysterious experience, which usually rely on the disciples' own understanding and cannot be expressed in words into poetry in their own way (Geng Jiyong, 2006:82).

## **3. Chinese Zen Poetry and American Poetry**

### *3.1 Chinese Zen Poetry*

In Chinese classical literature, Zen poetry has a long-standing cultural tradition. Since the Six Dynasties, many famous writers have studied Buddhism in depth, and in the Tang Dynasty, a large number of Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese. The relationship between literati and monasteries in the past is also very close; furthermore, they not only believe in Buddhism, but also integrate Zen into their own poetry. From the content of Zen, both ancient and modern Chinese critics believe that the Zen poems written by poets and monks in the past can be roughly divided into two kinds, one is poetry with buddhism theories, and the other is poetry with buddhism joy (Chung Ling, 2009:84). The former aims to express one's profound comprehension of buddhism theories or sect tendency, and to

show the trend about buddhism development at that time. The latter refers to a kind of pleasure that a poet obtains from the objective realm with the Zen mind (Niu Yanfeng, 2007:68). The former emphasizes that poems should be started with a buddhism idea and be described with buddhism language while the latter elaborates the sublimation of the poet's psychology and emotion through Zen, which mainly reflects the profoundness of Buddhist teachings and influences. To American poets, the latter has a deeper influence than the first one.

### 3.2 Zen Buddhism Influence of Wang Wei

American literature absorbs Chinese Zen mainly through poems with buddhism joy. The Buddhism Zen poetry of Wang Wei, Han Shan, Li Bai, Du Fu, Jia Dao, Bai Juyi, and Su Tungpo has inspired some American writers who infatuate Zen and cite it in their works (Chung Ling, 2009:86). The main representatives who quote Zen poetries are the Beat Generation's father Kenneth Rexroth who named himself Wang Honggong in Chinese, the recognized leader Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder who was not beaten down in the Beat Generation Movement.

Rexroth's poem "Heart's Garden and Garden's Heart" can be said to be a poem that absorbed Chinese Zen. After comparative analysis, it's found that this poem contains the similar content of Wang Wei's poem "The Deep Enclosure". Thus, it is recognized by critics as a Zen poem. Zhu Jianxin pointed out that from the two poems "The Deep Enclosure" and "Xinyiwu", we can feel the same features of the two poems that Wang Wei started his poem with Zen thoughts, which are reproduced in Kenneth Rexroth's translation in Table 1. Zhu Jianxin said that people could feel the meditation of life and poetry. Similarly, we can also feel the poet's understanding of life (Zhu Jianxin, 2005:74), so it can be said that Rexroth's poetry also contains Zen thoughts. The following part will analyze how Kenneth Rexroth incorporates the content of "The Deep Enclosure" into his own poems, and also study whether it really presents Zen. In his two poems, Kenneth Rexroth ever applied Wang Wei's "The Deep Enclosure" to "The Heart's Garden the Garden's Heart" and "Stars and Crescent" (Kenneth Rexroth, 1994:70). Though "The Heart's Garden the Garden's Heart" imitated the English translation of "The Deep Enclosure", the poet didn't explain this phenomenon. The following are Kenneth Rexroth's translation of "The Deep Enclosure", which is extremely similar to the original poetry's translation:

**Table 1: A Comparison between Rexroth's Translation and the Original Poem**

The translation of "The Deep Enclosure"	Some lines in "The Heart's Garden The Garden's Heart"
Deep in the Mountain Wilderness Where nobody ever comes Only once in a great while Something like the sound of a far off voice The low rays of the sun Slip through the dark forest. And gleam again on the shadowy moss. (Fang Yijie, 2015:102)	Deep in the Mountain wilderness Where nobody ever comes, Only once in a while something Like the sound of a fair off voice, The low rays of the sun slip Through the dark forest and gleam In pools on the shadowy moss. (Kenneth Rexroth, 1994:70)

By comparing the two poems in Table 1, it is clear that the translation of "The Deep Enclosure" is very similar to some lines in "The Heart's Garden the Garden's Heart". And then comparing Xu Yuanchong's English translation: "In pathless hills no man's in sight, / But I still hear echoing sound, / In gloomy forest peeps no light. / But sunbeams slant on the mossy ground(Xu Yuanchong, 2000:102), and Rexroth's "The Heart's Garden The Garden's Heart", it's also found that there are not many changes in the imitation work "The Heart's Garden The Garden's Heart", but the changes can show the American background of his living time. For example, "empty" does not mean that there is no one in the mountains, but the words

“Mountain wilderness” emphasizes the majestic mountains of the United States. Kenneth Rexroth often climbs the mountain during his young-adulthood while the Zhongnan Mountain where Wang Wei lives has been exploited to an extent, because it was a famous villa area in the Tang Dynasty, and it cannot be considered a wild land (Chung Ling, 2009:108). From this, it can be inferred that the Zen meaning of the word “empty” actually refers to the tranquility in the heart of the poet who removes the troubles from the society. Although this kind of silence is not reflected in Kenneth Rexroth’s poem at first sight, he has achieved this tranquility by omitting it, leaving much room for imagination. The word “gleam again” in the original text means that the sun has been gone, but it returned to the moss in the forest. It can be seen that the author sat quietly in the forest for a long time, while the meaning of this meditation is lost, because of the omission of the word “again”. However, Rexroth can still create a quiet atmosphere in the mountains. The deep meaning implicit in the poetry reveals the author’s quiet enlightenment mentality, so it can be regarded as an English verse of Zen buddhism.

### 3.3 The Zen Buddhism Influence of Liu Zongyuan

Liu Zongyuan, one of the “Eight Prose Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties”, is a writer, philosopher, essayist and thinker. His masterpieces include “Dwelling by a Stream”, “Fishing in Snow” and “An Old Fisherman”, and the second is considered a poem containing buddhism. It mainly describes the empty and quiet artistic conception. The first couplet describes birds flying in the mountains and all roads without human traces, and the second couplet writes about an old fisherman fishing with a palm-bark rain hat on a lone boat on the river on a cold winter day. The world presented by the whole poem is the world that is incomparably quiet, pure, amazing, and illusory. This empty realm is undoubtedly the most ideal Zen environment (Li Miao, 2005:36), and it is also the realm which the author would like to express.

The American poet Anthony Piccione once taught in China has a poetry anthology *Seeing It Was So*. One of the poems is probably influenced by Liu Zongyuan’s “Fishing in Snow”. The following are an translation of the original poem and one of Anthony Piccione’s poems (as Table 2 shows).

**Table 2: A Comparison between “Fishing in Snow ” and “Ice Fishing”**

	Fishing in Snow	Ice Fishing
poems	From hill to hill no bird in flight; From path to path no man in sight. A lonely fisherman a float. Is fishing snow in lonely boat. (Xu Yuanchong, 2000:52)	I stand two days staring into the black hole. The slowness fills With seawater. Ice mountain Blaze all around. Every thing’s mind sweeps over me. We meet our own eyes. (Kent Johnson, 1991: 209)
Similar images	Ice, mountain, hill, snow, lonely.	

This poem is called “Ice Fishing” (Johnson, 1991: 209). It is collected in the poetry anthology *Under the Same Moon: Buddhist Thoughts in American Contemporary Poetry*. There are both endless snow mountains and loneliness in “Fishing in Snow” and “Ice Fishing”. Two fishermen are fishing by the river alone on a cold winter day, which may be a self-perception to life. It is very likely that Anthony Piccione got inspiration from “Fishing in Snow”. What’s more, the poet is echoing it with his own experience. The images of “no bird”, “no man” and “lonely fisherman” appeared in “Fishing in Snow” shows a picture of an old man’s lonely fishing in winter, which is very similar to what Anthony Piccione describes in his “Ice Fishing”.

### 3.4 *The Zen Buddhism Influence of Su Tungpo*

It is Gary Snyder who has absorbed the most Asian culture and also gotten the deepest understanding of Asian culture among contemporary Western poets (Chung Ling, 2003: i). Snyder not only discussed the Zen of Su Tungpo's poems in his prose "Walls within Walls", but also quoted Su Tungpo's sentence in his "The Canyon Wren". The allusion quoted is from the first poem of Su Tungpo's "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids" (Chung Ling, 2009:113), (hundred-step rapids also called swift running water). This poem described that Su Tungpo was demoted to the county of Huangzhou, his friend Wang Dingguo came to visit him. The first half of the poem describes the fairly strong current, and the second half expresses the world view of Zen. Though the two parts describe the flood and the poet's thinking, they are in perfect harmony because of their deep Zen meanings, and the medium that links them is the water speed. Su Tungpo thinks of the fast change of life from the fast flow of water. He compares "one thought", and "thousands of difficulties" in life to a turn of water in nature. Although the current is fast, it's not so fast as the world changes. Here, the author feels that life is limited and the universe is infinite, which is also expressed by Su Tungpo in another poem "Fu on Red Cliff", that is "sad for my limited life, envy the endless of Yangtze River". The whole poem uses abundant, fresh, and appropriate metaphors to describe the thrill and excitement of the rafting rapids. It fully embodies Su Shi's meditation and uses Zen thinking.

The first line of Su Tungpo's "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids" makes a brief summary of the practice of meditation: "Instantaneous and eternal exist side by side. How ridiculous the secular disputes in the changing space-time", which is similar to the lines "People should not try to comprehend Zen through desiring for beauty and people should not comprehend the essence of Zen through hearing sound, smelling taste, touching and quoting Zen classics. People should have no desire for secular material, so as to have a profound understanding of Buddha" in "Diamond Sutra" (Cheng Gongrang, 1997:51). So how does he show these elements in his poems such as the rabbit and eagle—Understanding Zen not by visual sense, the sound of the wind—knowing Zen not by auditory sense, arrow off the hand—understanding Zen not by tactile sense, taking in Zen—not by quoting Zen doctrines. Therefore, this "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids" can also be said to be a Zen poem.

Snyder's "The Canyon Wren" also describes his own rafting in California, similar to Su Tungpo's rafting in "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids". This poem describes that he went boating in a turbulent current of Stanislaus River in the mountains of western California in 1981, accompanied by the Katz couple. This trip was due to the fact that the New Mellones Dam was built and would be opened in 1983; at that time, the rapids of the boat were at the bottom of the reservoir (Chung Ling, 2009:116). This poem describes that they watched the cliffs of the canyon at first, then rafted down and experienced the stirring of the rapids, heard the songs of the canyons, and camped by the river at night. Snyder thought about the nature of water deeply, when he saw and experienced this sight, but he didn't quote the sentences of Western philosophers or European and American poets, but chose Su Tungpo's "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids" to quote from, as John Whalen-Bridge pointed out that "Among these beads are prior incarnations of the poet at play on the river--Su Tungpo and Dogen before Snyder. For all the three men (and for the bird) the object of meditation is the winding, roiling river." (Whalen-Bridge, 1998:121). He quoted the lines of Su Tungpo's poems as follows:

We're swept on by down river  
the rafts  
wobble and slide over roils of water  
...we paddle forward, backstroke, turn  
spinning through eddies and waves

stairs of churning white water.

above the roar hear the song of a Canyon Wren (Gary Snyder, 1996:90).

With the deep understanding of Zen and the singing of nature, Snyder made two breakthroughs: one was realizing the beauty of rapid rushes, the language of Wren's, and the singing of flowing water. Another breakthrough was from Su Tungpo's second vision. As a poet who has studied Zen for a long time, he has his unique illustration of Zen, and observes water differently from ordinary people who generally think that water is a flowing liquid. However, he believes that water is still at a certain moment. The following are some lines in Canyon Wren.

Descending through ancient beds.  
A single female mallard flies upstream---

Shooting the Hundred-Pace Rapids  
Su Tung P'o saw, for a moment,  
it all stand still.  
"I stare at the water:  
it moves with unspeakable slowness" (Gary Snyder, 1996:90-91).

The line "I stare at the water / it moves with unspeakable slowness" in "The Canyon Wren" is directly quoted from Burton Watson's translation of Su Tungpo's "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids" (Watson, 1965:76). He may want to express a calmer life than a fleeting life (Liu Piyong & Sun Hongzhe, 2014:54).

### 3.5 *The Buddhism Zen influence of Hanshan*

Hanshan, also known as Han Shanzi, was a vernacular Buddhism poet in the Tang Dynasty. Hanshan and his poems once aroused a profound social reaction in America during the 1950s to 1960s called "Craze for Hanshan". The youth in some western countries even divinized Hanshan to be an idol. He is a monk poet who lived on the mountain which is extremely high and covered by ice and snow. He loves to write poems, and when he has some ideas, he will write it on the stone at once. Due to this reason, some people call him "the poet on the stone". Hanshan speaks a strange language and wears ridiculous clothes, living alone, laughing alone, and not fettered by secularity. His poems are simple and natural, but diverse in content, which express the interest and meditation of the life with philosophy, sneering at the state of the world and showing sympathy to people. Later generations compiled *The Collection of Hanshan Poems* including his 312 original poems.

The translation of Hanshan poetry in the United States started in 1954 with the translation of 27 *Hanshan Poems* by Arthur Waley the English orientalist and sinologist. With the development of the times, the translation and research of Hanshan poetry in the United States has developed greatly in depth and breadth mainly because of the Zen Buddhism in his works. The keynote of his poems is calling for returning to nature and the spirit of resisting social customs. It is very suitable for the needs of American society at that time. Therefore, many people have translated Hanshan poems, and some of them also have outstanding research results. For example, Gary Snyder's translation of Hanshan poems was very far-reaching in 1956; Burton Watson's *Cold Mountains: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet* was also quite outstanding, Robert G. Henricks's *The Poetry of Han Shan-A Complete, Annotated Translation of Cold Mountain*, 1990 was of great value (Zhu Hui, 2004: 84-89), which all set off research hotspot of Hanshan in the United States and made a continuous influence till today in the West.

Hanshan's poems directly influenced the works of Philip Whalen, Mike O'conner, S.J. Marks and

James P. Lenfestey. The following is a discussion of several American poetries that have absorbed the content and spirit of Hanshan poetry. The poem of Marks' "Losing Myself" incorporates Hanshan's poems into his own verses. The following is the original text of Marks' poem:

I sit drinking wine, and, for a long time, don't notice the dusk.  
 The delicate sweetness of pink emperor lilies fills my nostrils.  
 I get up and walk and see again the faces of old friends  
 As if they were here.  
 The birds are silent,  
 You're asleep.  
 No one else is around.  
 The way through the trees eyes never to end.  
 On the rocks along Gulph Creek  
 the moss is slippery, rain or no rain (Chung Ling, 2009: 100).

The last three lines of this stanza are based on the artistic conception of Snyder's translation (Snyder, 1966:37). The following are Snyder's translation and Marks' poem.

**Table 3: A Comparison between Snyder's Translation and Marks' Poem**

Snyder's translation	S.J. Marks' poem
The Cold Mountain trail goes and on	The way through the trees seems never to end
The moss is slippery, though there's been no rain	The moss is slippery, rain or no rain

It can be clearly seen from the table that Marks cited the allusions of Hanshan's poem: "The way seems never to end" and "moss is slippery, rain or no rain". From this example, we can know that through the English translation of Hanshan poetry, American writers have absorbed the artistic conception of Chinese poetry and applied it well to their own works.

The American poet James P. Lenfestey is also obsessed with Hanshan poems. In 1974, he read *Cold Mountain; 100 Poems* (1970) translated by Burton Watson, and he showed great enthusiasm for Hanshan. He once revealed that Watson's Han-shan lyrics are colloquial, sometimes deeply thoughtful, at other times ironic or satiric, all with the rhythm of a mini-editorial and occasionally the punch line of a good joke. His Han-shan was the first poet making him laugh out loud. Watson's book in hand, he began, for the first and only time in his life, to 'write back' to an author, a 'correspondence' he has kept up for more than thirty years. Lenfestey studied and imitated Hanshan, and he wrote one hundred poems in 2007 which is entitled *A Cartload of Scrolls: 100 Poems in the Manner of Tang Dynasty Poet Han-shan* (Chung Ling, 2009:103). This book not only imitates Hanshan poems in content, but also learns Chinese classical poems in style—the eight-line style.

### 3.6 The Zen Buddhism Influence of Tu Fu

Zen advocates harmonious beauty and the complete emancipation of the soul through the epiphany of subjective spirit. Therefore, it pays more attention to the spiritual harmony that resolves the inner contradiction, that is, it pays attention to the physical and mental health of the individual. This kind of harmonious beauty is also used by poets in poetry writing. Tu Fu is a typical example. The poem "Climbing the Height" is a poem of Zen harmony, affecting the creation of Snyder on the other side of the ocean.

Tu Fu is a great realist poet in the Tang Dynasty, and his life was generally dominated by Confucianism,

but the Buddhism and Taoism also played a coordinating role in Tu Fu's world, and even became an important spiritual pillar in a certain period. In terms of Zen, Tu Fu's youth was influenced by Buddhist culture (Lu Kebing, 2010:26).

The Taoism and Buddhism esteems promoted the harmony of beauty and promoted the pursuit of harmonious beauty in Chinese classical poetry. Their different emphasis on harmonious beauty perfected its connotation: the harmony between man and nature and the human body and mind, which is the highest and most beautiful harmony. Therefore, in order to achieve this perfect harmony, we must forget our greedy desire, which means to annihilate the boundaries between things and person and to show that there is little separation between subject and object in poetry. Taking Tu Fu's "Climbing the Height" as an example: "The wind so swift, the sky so steep, sad gibbons cry;/Water so clear and sand so white, backwards birds fly./The boundless forest sheds its leaves shower by shower;/The Endless river rolls its waves hour after hour./Far from home in autumn, I'm grieved to see my plight;/After my long illness, I climb alone this height./ Living in hard times, at my frosted hair I pine;/Pressed by poverty, I give up my cup of wine" (Xu Yuanhong, 2015:114). The first four lines in the poem describe the object of nature, then the poet writes about the objects in the human world, and finally concludes the poem with the personal feelings of the subject, which is also caused by the stimulation of the object. These are also absorbed by American poetry, such as the famous poet Snyder's "Pine Tree Tops": "in the blue night/frost haze, the sky glows/with the moon/pine tree tops/bend snow-blue, fade/into sky, Frost, starlight./The creak of boots./rabbit tracks, deer tracks,/what do we know" (Snyder, 1974:33). This poem is a classic among modern American poetry that expresses the harmony of beauty between man and nature. From this, we can see how profound the American poet's understanding of Chinese poetry is. Moreover, the most interesting is that the poet uses similar expressions as Du Fu, which is also commonly used in Chinese classical poetry. The concrete expression is that the first six lines describe the natural scenery, and the scenery is naturally presented according to its own rhythm. The seventh line introduces people's activities. The last line is turned from the object to the subject's awakening: "What do we know", showing the poet's concern for nature, making the poet feel good.

## **Conclusion**

This paper first introduces the meaning of "Zen", traces the origin and development of "Zen" in America, and then explores the influence of Chinese Zen poems to American poets and poems with specific examples. Through the analysis of Rexroth's quotation in Wang Wei's "The Deep Enclosure", a comparison between Anthony Piccione's "Ice Fishing" and the image of a fisherman in Liu Zongyuan's "Fishing in Snow", the description of Snyder's boating on a rushing current "The Canyon Wren" and Su Tungpo's "Narrations of a Hundred-Step Rapids", the influence of Hanshan on James P. Lenfestey and Du Fu on Snyder, it can draw a conclusion that Zen in Chinese poetry has great influence on American poetry.

From the relationship among American poets, Buddhism Zen and the creation of Zen poems, it can be seen that when Western civilization and its literature were in trouble after World War II, American poets turned their eyes to Eastern civilization for help. Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Rexroth Kenneth, and Gary Snyder all chose the fulcrum and inspiration for finding changes from Chinese civilization. American poets were highly fortunate to choose Buddhism Zen. They take in the emptiness and freedom in Chinese classical poetry, or try to pursue orthodoxy. Their absorption and reference of Buddhism Zen have different focus, but one thing is certain: as Snyder learned in Dao De Jing, they got rid of the "individual custom" of Western culture (Geng Jiyong, 2006:86), and American poetry has created an unprecedented realm.

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