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Issues in discourse approach to social transformations in China

A synopsis

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This chapter discusses theoretical and methodological issues concerning doing critical discourse analysis in China. The authors believe that China's unique social, cultural and political context justifies an assumption that the Western originated paradigm of critical discourse analysis needs tailoring and appropriating when being applied in China. Starting from this assumption, the chapter discusses four issues relevant to discourse approach to the socio-political transformations in China: a 'wider' angle critical perspective, a research focus on the functionality of discourse, the emergent public sphere, and qualitative research method. It is argued that, while the first two issues are basically important for an appropriation of CDA in China, the second two issues needs to be given more attention, for the new media has become a new tool for discourse struggles, and the qualitative research methodology needs to be given more weight in CDA-related social research in China.

Keywords: Western originated CDA; appropriation of CDA in China; four issues

1. Introduction

In the Introduction to this edited volume, Cao provided a brief account of the development of the discursive regime in China. The writing system in the 3000 years of history is referred to as 'an enduring force in keeping the Chinese culture intact', that is, by having access to the same written language people of different nationalities, while living thousands of miles apart and speaking hundreds of dialects, shared the same set of cultural norms, literacy, identity, values, assumptions and worldview that kept them united. This enduring force, typically embodied in the classic text of Confucius' *Analects*, has ceased to be as powerful in

the 20th century as it used to be, and still less powerful in post-modern times when situations become more complex and unstable. In the seven chapters collected in this volume, the use of the Chinese language in the form of political discourse and media discourse invokes more possible ways of understanding. The meanings expressed by the use of a word, a metaphor, or even a fixed and formulaic proverb, become flexible, changeable, and indefinite, a possible proper understanding mostly resting on the negotiation of the speaker and hearer in terms of both sides' social values, political conditions and economic interest. This situation becomes more salient in the context where the new media such as Internet are used and manipulated by subjects of different social status. Here an example in point is the meaning of 'soft power', a buzzword emerging in the first decade of 21st century China. To interpret this concept, there are externally-oriented formulations as well as internally-oriented formulations, and official as well as academic formulations, each formulation backed up with its unique conditions and imaginations of the interpreter. Its meaning becomes more diversified and heterogeneous as the Internet turns out to be a discursive site for public debate, where different versions of soft power compete for recognition, legitimacy, consensus and authority (see Chapter 7 for details).

The message carried in this (and other) chapter(s) of this volume is that China is changing, and this change is occurring not only in domains such as economics, politics, and media, but in discourse, that is, in the way in which complex kinds of verbal exchanges are institutionalized around macro-topics and realized in genre and text. Accordingly, to understand the socio-political changes in China, it is important to understand their discourse aspects. But how do we approach the discourse aspect of socio-political change? Researches in this volume show that a possible way of researching discourse in China is firstly to examine how discourses change in context-dependant ways, and then to relate the discourse changes with the social factors that lead to these changes or are the effect of them. These two levels of analysis, descriptive and explanatory, are in fact the general practice of critical discourse analysis (KhosraviNik 2010), which convincingly explains why a discourse approach to the socio-political transformations in China is needed. But a discourse approach is needed not for the sake of research methodology, but for the fact that the discourse aspect of social change has become so salient that in postmodern times it becomes the real change itself. To quote from Kress (2001: 37), 'the social is *in* the linguistic sign: it is not around it, not correlated with it nor is it there as a resource to use.' Therefore, it is necessary that 'to "do" social life is to "do" discourse' (Wetherell et al. 2001: 4).

In this concluding chapter we discuss issues concerning such a discourse approach, with an intention that this approach is particularly applied to the Chinese socio-political transformations. We are aware that social transformation

is currently a global phenomenon, and the discourse of globalization has been researched in a more or less general sense (e.g. Fairclough 2006; Blommaert 2009). However, we believe that the socio-political changes in China have characteristics that deserve special attention. Obvious reasons might be that social change in China brings change to a very large population, and to every corner of the society. But more fundamentally this change is taking place in a country whose political system is not the same as that of Western countries. Taking into consideration the socio-political context in China, we assume that a discourse approach to these social changes have unique features that raise a number of theoretical as well as methodological issues. We will discuss these issues in turn.

2.   A 'wider angle' critical perspective

Wetherell's 'to-do-the-social-is-to-do-discourse' motto justifies the importance of a discourse approach to the socio-political transformations, and this applies to the Chinese context as well. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) as such an approach began to receive much attention from the Chinese academics and saw many applications in China during the last two decades. As it originates in the Western academic context and puts a strong emphasis on its political commitment, CDA nevertheless needs some tailoring and appropriating when being applied in China. We want to emphasize this point for the simple reason that we see a long tradition of criticism and self-criticism in China and this tradition is different from the Western tradition of criticism and/or critique.

For a discussion of the Western and Chinese traditions of critique, Chilton, Tian and Wodak (2009) have outlined the development of the two traditions. The word *critique* and its translation equivalent in the Chinese language have different concepts at their etymological origins. In the ancient Chinese language it originally meant a removal of something undesirable, the action of which may bring painful sufferings to a subject. This conception of 'critique' has already implied the connection of criticism with action, and this connection is strengthened and reinforced in Confucian discourse of 'rectification of names', according to which 'words should be chosen by the ruler in the belief that they determine the way people think about reality, in line with the policies espoused by some such ruler' (Chilton, Tian & Wodak 2009: 500). In the Chinese tradition textual criticism becomes essential in the period from the middle of the 17th century to the middle of the 18th century, when the re-analysis of classical texts and the questioning of the authenticity and accuracy of texts by the use of rational methods were favoured. Ideas about free thought, as well as radical criticism of the authoritarian empire, had their roots in the 16th century, as was the case, *mutatis mutandis*, in the West, where the

tradition of textual criticism, reaching back to the 16th century, were eventually merged with political critique in the European Enlightenment.

It is from this period of time on that the Western tradition and Chinese tradition of critique began to emerge. The former produced much philosophical exploration to Kantian critique, Marxist criticism, the Frankfurt school of critical theory, leading to further developments in the second half of the twentieth century, including, for instance, Bhaskar's critical realism, critical cultural studies and critical discourse analysis. In contrast, the Chinese tradition of critique consisted rather of political practices. Reinforced by political movements such as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the meaning of critique was, for many people, especially those being criticised (mostly intellectuals), associated with pain and painful reflections, which can certainly be traced back to the original meaning of criticism in the ancient Chinese language. Against such an epistemological background, it is not surprising to see that some Chinese scholars agree to do discourse analysis but not "critical" discourse analysis, or they prefer to do "positive discourse analysis", that is, analysis of discourses that are representations of "positive" rather than "negative" social phenomena (e.g. Xiong 2001; Huang et al. 2007). What they are worried about is that their scholarly discourse analysis may evoke critique from others (e.g. those in power) who in turn bring criticism back to them.

As it is, a critical perspective in the Western sense may meet obstacles in merging itself with the discourse approach in China. To remove the obstacles, a political environment of free speech is essential, and at the same time a tailored critical perspective is necessary in the discourse approach to the Chinese socio-political transformations. For such a tailored critical perspective Tian (2008, 2009) proposes a 'wider angle' critical perspective that is different from that of the Western CDA. In the Western CDA practice, the scholarly discourse analysis consciously engages in socio-political commitment. This engagement of CDA in social practice leaves CDA a characteristic of having a 'narrow' focus on specific socio-political issues. To expand this focus wider from social issues to the issues of discourse, say the functions of discourse, we may actually take a 'wider angle' critical perspective. Tian (2008, 2009) expresses his new critical perspective in geometrical terms. In geometry, an angle that is less than 90 degrees is called an 'acute angle', and an angle that is wider than 90 degree and narrower than 180 degree is called an 'obtuse angle'. In Tian's (2008, 2009) proposal, the 'acute angle' is metaphorically referred to the Western CDA, as it is 'sharp' in the sense of criticising the undesired social problems and of bringing about social change. In the same way, the 'obtuse angle' is metaphorically referred to the newly proposed critical perspective on discourse analysis, which is not so ambitious as the Western CDA in its emphasis of political commitment but milder in the sense that the 'wider angle' critical perspective of CDA aims to understand the workings and functions of discourses in

the socio-political transformations, that is, to understand how discourse works to construct and represent social realities in the complex of societal context.

This way of doing CDA in China is an outcome of dialogue between reflections on discourse and critique in China and the West, and also of a recontextualization of Western originated CDA in the Chinese context. The 'wider angle' critical perspective does not fully follow CDA's political commissions. By doing critical analysis of political discourse, media discourse, and discourse of discrimination, the CDA practice preferably aims to make explicit the implicit ideologies embedded in these discourses, and in so doing, to solve undesired social problems that have a discourse aspect. In a society where freedom of speech exercises to a somewhat greater extent, this sort of commitment is expected to be realized (though in fact with obstacles and therefore the effect is doubted, see Chilton 2005), but still in the way in which social agent and agency 'internalize' the discourse in the practice, 'just as designs for a new automobile engine are internalized and materialized in the engine itself' (Fairclough 2006: 10). In the Chinese society where public sphere is vague in the structure of the society, CDA's political commitment becomes limited, and it is more dependent on those who have sources of power to internalize the discourse change in real social change. It is therefore understandable that discourse analysis with a critical perspective (critical in the Chinese traditional sense) is possible only if the critical perspective takes a 'wider angle', with a focus on exploring the role of discourse in the social transformations. We will discuss this shortly.

3.   Functionality of discourse

A discourse approach to society may take political commitment as its ultimate goal, as is claimed by the Western CDA. By such an approach to social discrimination, for example, the ultimate purpose is to remove racial discrimination from the society. Though the effect is often doubted (e.g. by Chilton 2005), academic discourses, in the forms of descriptions, interpretations, explanations, analysis and theories, sometimes serve strategic ends and are in some cases pursuing strategies to push social change in particular directions (Fairclough 2006). We do see the emancipatory force of academic discourses in the social sciences and humanities, but this often seems to be a long-term pursuit of goals. For a more practical end, both in academic life and in politics, we can agree on one minimum, though limited aim – that the discourse approach helps in the interpretive, subjective and communicative understanding of the functions of discourse in society.

For the various theoretical accounts of the functions of discourse in society, we refer to those proposed by van Leeuwen (1993), van Dijk (1997) and

Fairclough (2000, 2003) in particular, among others in the vast CDA literature. In this concluding chapter we do not have space for scrutiny of these theories; therefore we simply examine the functions of discourse in certain social events that occurred in the recent Chinese society. We can see, in one way or another, that these events and happenings have discourse aspects in themselves and that they evolve or develop either through discourse itself or through social agents who make use of discourses. We hope that our account may explain how discourse works in the complex of power, institution and ideology in the Chinese context, and will call more attention to researching these complexes.

One example is the case of the recent struggle over the typical way in which *Shanxi vinegar* (山西醋) is produced. There is a long tradition and huge industry producing vinegar in Shanxi, a province in the northern part of China, and the vinegar produced in this province is generally known as 'Shanxi vinegar', though it has different trade marks and commercial brands. In August 2011, it is reported in 'Voice of China', a programme of China Central Broadcasting Station that 90% of Shanxi vinegar is produced by way of *goudui* (勾兑) rather than by way of *niangzao* (酿造). Technically, *goudui* (勾兑) and *niangzao* (酿造) refer to different ways of producing vinegar, and so far as this study is concerned, it is not so necessary to explain in detail the chemistry of the two processes as to simply state that vinegar of better taste and higher quality is not produced in the *goudui* (勾兑) process but in the *niangzao* (酿造) process. When interviewed on the broadcasting programme, Wang Jianzhong, an official in the Shanxi Vinegar Association, an organisation of vinegar producers, confirmed that less than 5% of the Shanxi vinegar on the market is produced by the superior process known as *niangzao* (酿造).[1] This disclosed information, suggesting the lower quality of the Shanxi vinegar that is available on most markets, was certainly likely to bring a bad reputation to the vinegar industry of the province and to cause a great potential drop in sales. Against this context, the Shanxi Vinegar Association made an institutional statement, saying that what Wang Jianzhong said about the way most Shanxi vinegar is produced is not true. The statement further asserts that most of the Shanxi vinegar is produced by the method of *niangzao* (酿造) rather than that of *goudui* (勾兑). In other words, the Association denied the truth of the information provided by Wang Jianzhong, the speaker on the broadcasting programme.

It can be seen that there exist two contrasting discourses about how the Shanxi vinegar is produced, namely, the *niangzao* discourse and the *goudui* discourse. The two discourses are in fact two representations of the ways in which Shanxi vinegar is produced, and the two different representations, according to Fairclough (2001), are due to the different ways in which differently positioned social actors 'see' and represent the Shanxi vinegar's production process. To the audience of this discourse struggle and the consumers of the Shanxi vinegar, the truth concerning

the way in which the Shanxi vinegar is produced is still not known, but what is known is that the speaker on the broadcasting programme, Wang Jianzhong, was removed from his position soon after.[2]

The Shanxi vinegar case suggests a number of things that are useful for understanding the functionality of discourse in the Chinese context. We list some of them as follows for consideration in further researches.

1. The quality of the Shanxi vinegar is represented by discourses. In real life, there does exist a kind of Shanxi vinegar that has a good quality, but this real and tasted quality is no longer interesting to the social actors involved in this discourse struggle. For them, and for the audience of this discourse struggle, the good quality is not personally felt by tasting the vinegar, but is made known by the discourse about the quality of the vinegar. This relates to the discourse function of representation.
2. The quality of the vinegar is constructed to a great extent by discourse. Discourse does not represent, but also constructs. In this case, the *goudui* discourse constructs a low quality of Shanxi vinegar and the *niangzao* discourse constructs a high quality of Shanxi vinegar. In both discourses exists a constructive and transformative force of discourse. This relates to the discourse function of construction.
3. The constructive force of discourse does not work all the time and in all situations, it depends on the social position of the discourse producer. In this case, the *goudui* discourse eventually gives way to the institutional *niangzao* discourse because it is not in the dominant, decisive, and ruling position. The discourse that enjoys the benefits of the constructive force is the discourse of those who are in a dominant position. So the functions of discourse involves power.
4. The dominant discourse has power because it has an institution behind it. This institution, together with the prevailing ideology, is what Fairclough (1989) calls 'power behind discourse', the power of the relatively endurable set of the whole social order and social relations, including the systems. The institution of the vinegar association, together with the interest of the whole vinegar industry of the province, endows the power to the discourse that should have and must have been considered to be telling the truth. Obviously, discourse functions in relation to institution and ideology.
5. Discourse is social practice, and it has social effect. In this case, the discourses are in fact a struggling means, by which the two sides (i.e. Wang Jianzhong on the one side, and Shanxi Vinegar Association on the other) struggle with each other, resulting in the removal of Wang Jianzhong from its position. Discourse thus participates in social practice.

To such a complex practice of discourse we may apply the term 'functionality of discourse', which, on the one hand, indicates explicitly the functions of discourse in society, for example, the functions of representation, construction, and participation (Fairclough 2003; Tian 2009), and on the other hand, explains that discourse fulfils these functions together with the power of the social agents and their institutions, their prevailing ideologies, norms, interests, and many other factors that may work on the discourse. To investigate the functionality of discourse in Chinese society, then, is to understand the complexity of the discourse in relation to the people who make use of the discourse out of their own interest. This research issue is urgently significant for the present Chinese context of discourse, because new media such as the Internet have enjoyed a rocket-speed development in China and create more chances for the increasing number of netizens to make their voices heard. We will look at this context by examining the emerging public sphere in China.

4.   An emerging public sphere

The notion of public sphere is in contrast to that of private sphere. The family is conceived as private, so in the simplest sense everything outside the family belongs to the domain of the public which, according to Habermas (1992), has a spatial location known as the public sphere. Habermas further locates the public sphere in structural terms and identifies the bourgeois public sphere as part of the private realm of civil society that is distinct from and yet related to the public realm of state authority. This bourgeois public sphere is situated as an interface between the private realm and the public realm of state authority, and therefore puts the state in touch with the society. The people who participate in the public sphere, therefore, are members of the civil society and national community rather than the state subjects, and they participate in the public sphere through the vehicle of public opinion that is based on rational-critical discourse. The public opinion is a discursive construction of what people in the society believe to be the prevalent opinions in the society at specific times, and it has a shaping force for the culture and politics of the public sphere.

Thus, the public sphere is 'a network for communicating information and points of view' which eventually transforms them into public opinion (Habermas, cited from Koller & Wodak 2008: 1). For the operation of the public sphere, that is, for the points of views to be communicated and eventually transformed into public opinions, two factors can be recognised as essential: one being freedom of speech in a society, the other being a rational elite or intellectuals. In the Chinese socio-political context, however, there might be a third factor, that is, the new media of the Internet. Some scholars highlight the importance of this factor in

the emergency of public sphere in China and call it 'web public sphere' (e.g. Xiong 2011). As the internet enters the Web 2.0 age, netizens do not only receive but also transmit information, by way of the new media, say blogs and microblogs. The technology greatly facilitates the freedom of speech of the intellectuals. Against this context, scholars believe that a public sphere is beginning to take its shape in China, in the sense that it enables citizens to participate in democratic dialogue.

A discursive event may serve to illustrate such an emerging public sphere. It is a recent public debate over a penalty imposed on Wu Ying, a 29-year-old woman entrepreneur of Zhejiang province. Wu Ying took 770 million *Renminbi* yuan (approximately 121.8 million US dollars) between May 2005 and February 2007 from 11 investors who live on high interest of loans. She was arrested in February 2007, accused of committing finance defraud crime, and sentenced to death on 18 December 2009 by Jinhua Intermediate People's Court, as this local court found that 380 million yuan of the money fraudulently pooled could not be returned and large amounts of other debts were unpaid. Wu Ying appealed to the provincial Higher People's Court but her appeal was rejected 18 January, 2012. While her case is in the final process of review by the Supreme People's Court,[3] a debate over and discussion of her penalty occurred in the public, among lawyers, entrepreneurs, economists and other elite of the society.

For example, on 4 February, 2012, about two weeks after the rejection of Wu Ying's appeal, Zhang Weiying the forum chair economist called for the protection of Wu Ying on the 12th Forum of Chinese Entrepreneurs. Two days later, 6 February, Xinhua News Agency published two articles, expressing the opinions of 8 professionals who discussed the case in terms of law, economics and finance. In addition, Chen Zhongtian, Xu Xi, gurus in the field of law, and Zhang Shuguang, Liu Xiaoxuan, gurus in the field of economics, all speak out their opinions that Wu Ying should not be sentenced to death though they agree that she may have committed crimes of some kind. At the meantime, the elite of the society, such as Li Kaifu, Pan Shiyi, Xue Manzi, Chen Jinsong, and Yi Zhongtian, speak out similar opinions via their microblogs. Xu Xi also starts an on-line opinion poll on his microblog which attracts 20,000 voters, of which 94% expressed the idea that Wu Ying did not commit crime that deserves death penalty.

Although a spokesman from Zhejiang Higher People's Court expressed on 7 February the correctness of its verdict, it seems that the public favours an opposite opinion, which can be formulated as that Wu Ying did not commit a crime that deserves penalty.[4] This public opinion, embedded in public discourse, a set of cultural and social practices in public sphere, 'constitutes a powerful political weapon of the citizentry vis-à-vis the state' (Ku 1999: 6), and consequently has a discursive force that shapes the culture and politics of the public sphere. For this case, as it turns out, the Supreme People's Court, after carefully reviewing the case,

overturned the judgment of the provincial court on April 20, 2012, and sent the case back for retrial in Zhejiang Higher People's Court.

This discursive event raises new issues for critical discourse analysis. Facilitated by the technology of new media (in the form of blogs, microblogs, etc.), various voices spread out quickly, turn to be united as one, and ultimately reach a public opinion. What is important, the new media encourages participation and free voicing in a way in which it saves the face of the speakers who otherwise might worry about their speaking in face-to-face communication. The discursive strategies employed in the public debate, both those concerning the use of language and those concerning the internet operation with using language, are therefore significant for the practice of discourse analysis.

In addition, the symbolic power of the participants also requires attention in the critical discourse analysis of the emergent public sphere. In the Wu Ying case, for example, professionals make use of their knowledge and expertise and make rational reasoning in the public debate. Their social prestige and position make it possible to have their opinions up moved to mainstream media and shed influence whatever to the top decision makers. These socially influential people are important, as is seen in the Wu Ying case, especially in a public sphere which begins to take its shape.

5. Qualitative research method

Doing critical discourse analysis in the Chinese context, with the aim of understanding discourse functionality in socio-political transformations, we have proposed to consider the Chinese social and political context as unique and characteristic of its own – as indeed the case for all social and political contexts, whether sub-national, national or international. Theoretically, following Tian's framework outlined above, one might argue that it is useful to take a 'wider angle' critical perspective, focusing on the study of discourse functionality in society and privileging observation of the emerging public sphere in China. This does not imply that we start a new and different method for doing critical discourse analysis in the Chinese context. Rather, we think that the general principles underlying the analytical tools of discourse analysis are applicable. For example, the linguistic analytical tools provided by systemic functional grammar, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics are found useful by a number of Chinese scholars. What we would like to highlight in this concluding chapter is the point that methodologically qualitative research, based on a deep understanding of the way human language works, is essential to the analysis of the discourse that constitutes and is constituted by the current and ongoing socio-political transformations in China.

Qualitative research is different from quantitative research in that it emphasises 'the bottom up' process, that is, it starts from the ground with the researcher's collection of data, proceeds with data analysis and micro theory formation, and eventually reaches an emancipatory understanding of the object of research through the researcher's reflection on the research (Chen 2000: 12). We have many examples of applying qualitative research methods in discourse analysis (e.g. Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008), and based on Chen (2000) we can summarise some of the principles of qualitative research that are relevant to discourse analysis:

1. The researcher takes herself or himself as the tool of research. This requires that the researcher is sensitive to the current happenings in a particular society, and thus sensitive to relevant areas for investigation, together with the discourses that may provide data for analysis.
2. The researcher admits his or her 'bias' in the research. That is, the researcher starts the research from his or her ethical and perhaps political stance if he or she has one. It is not clear, philosophically speaking, whether total 'neutrality' is possible, but a reasoned 'critical distance', as opposed to strategically interested orientation, should always, as a matter of principle, be aimed for.
3. The researcher frequently reflects critically on his or her research. This complements any possible unconscious bias or selectivity in the research, and is helpful in achieving an emancipatory understanding of the object of research.
4. The researcher does not give priority to theory formation, but proposes specific, local and problem-oriented micro-explanations from data analysis. This does not, however, rule out further rational exploration leading to hypotheses and potential theory-building.
5. Finally, the research should lay emphasis on participation in social change. This means that qualitative research needs to be aware that it is potentially involved in constructing the reality in the process of constructing outcomes of the research. The apparent circularity here is not a defect, but a part of an interactive evolution analysis and thoughts.

The above summarised principles of qualitative research coincide with precisely those of critical discourse analysis, and the reason we outline them here is that we are fully aware that, in the Chinese context, the current discourse approach to social change badly needs such a paradigm. Under the disguise of pursuing scientific and objective truth, many current researches on the discursive dimension of social change still follow the empirical and structural traditions, and end up with either losing the critical edge of discourse analysis or sacrificing the ethical significance of the research. This situation needs to be changed.

6. Conclusions

In this concluding chapter we discussed issues that we believe are important for discourse approach to the socio-political transformations in China. Taking a 'wider angle' to do critical discourse analysis appeals to what 'critique' is conceptualised in the tradition of Chinese culture. The 'wider angle' also suggests that to do critical discourse analysis in the Chinese context is to explore the discourse functions in the socio-political transformations rather than to fulfil a political commitment. This Chinese way of doing critical discourse analysis provides possibilities of investigating complex social transformations in China, including changes in the emerging public sphere that largely relies on the new media of Internet. To fulfil this 'commitment', scholars of critical discourse analysis need to take methodologies that are more of a qualitative orientation.

Notes

1. See the information at http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2011-08-07/041222947824.shtml (visited on 5 March, 2012).

2. See the information at http://www.yicai.com/news/2011/08/994890.html (visited on 5 March, 2012).

3. More information on this lawsuit case is available on a number of news websites, for example, http://english.people.com.cn/90882/7729977.html

4. For example, Yang jingjie from *Global Times*, reports that observers call "for a relaxation of limits on informal lending"(see at http://english.people.com.cn/90882/7710737.html), and Xinhua News Agency also summarizes the online poll by saying "many people calling for a more lenient punishment"(see http://www.sina.com.cn).

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