

Article

Female Student Migration: A Brief Opportunity for Freedom from Religio-Philosophical Obedience

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Abstract: Vietnamese Confucian religio-philosophical ideals regulate social order in the family, community, and nation state. As a result, women's duties to their husbands, fathers, ancestors, and Vietnam powerfully permeate all aspects of gendered life. This study of 20 Vietnamese women explored their experiences as international students in Australia. Primary focus was on how their gendered Confucian histories compelled their migratory journeys, influenced changes to their intimate partner experiences while in Australia, and the reimagining of identity, hopes and dreams on looking forward at their future returns to gendered life in Vietnam. The application of Janus Head phenomenology enabled understanding of how the women's temporality became influenced by fascinations of future change, mixed with feelings of uncertainty and limbo that arose when forward facing hopes were thwarted by their looking back realities. There was an intense sense of unresolve as time drew closer to the end of their studies, in which the women associated feelings related to returning to Vietnam's strict Confucian informed gender order as a "living Hell."

Keywords: Vietnamese; Confucianism; ideology; gender; patriarchy; performativity; international student; Australia; migration

1. Introduction

Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam around two millennia ago and it remains the nation's most practiced religio-philosophy. The Vietnamese version, however, hosts a synchronous blend of folk religions, customs and beliefs derived from Buddhism, Taoism and the origins of Chinese Confucianism itself (Hieu 2015). Confucianism has survived feudal conflict, Vietnam's colonization by the French, warfare, and socio-political events, as well as communism's insistence with Marxist–Leninist atheism (Evans 1985; Phan 2019). Enmeshed religio-philosophical beliefs permeate filial structure, social aesthetics and political life, rituals involving spirit worship and ancestor veneration (Rydström 2017; Van 2019).

Vietnamese Confucianism regulates social order and gender roles, emphasizing conformity to behavioral correctness of women and of men (Nyitray 2004). Underlined by notions of family unity, obligations, hierarchal relations and filial piety (Gao 2003; Ha 2014; Hoang and Yeoh 2012), women's inferiority and men's superiority powerfully permeate all aspects of Vietnamese family, social, and political life. Men, as master and authority, set the rules for their households and social ethics, in business and political governance (Ma and Marquis 2016; Rhee et al. 2012). Vietnamese women are usually portrayed as quiet, devoted, caring and providing endless love to their husbands and children, and politically shy (Capps et al. 2010; Dyson et al. 2013; Hoang and Yeoh 2011; Kim et al. 2013; Lim and Lim 2004). In addition, women hold the responsibility to organise family rituals aimed at pleasing spirits, and for ancestor worship according to their own and partner's patriarchal lineage (Long and Van 2020; Vu and Yamada 2020).

Women's duties to their husbands, fathers and sons, ancestors and nation-state, are historically defined by Vietnam's Confucian ideology and political order. Corresponding with Confucian precepts, [Ngo et al. \(2008\)](#) wrote how contemporary Vietnamese wives are pressured to conduct themselves according to the four traditional virtues expected of women: *Công* [work], all reproductive labour in the household; *Dung* [appearance], being compliant and cheerful, foremost for the husband; *Ngôn* [speech], soft, calm and respectful in the presence of the husband and his family; and, *Hạnh* [principles], women knowing their place in the social order, especially obedience and loyalty to the husband. Women who resist their subservience, according to operant discursivity of cultural norms across given societies, risk being shamed as failed women and blamed for their imperfections ([McLaren 2016b](#)).

While Vietnam's socialist legal frameworks promote women's participation in socio-political life ([Schuler et al. 2006](#)), contemporary political propaganda reinforces women's subservience to men as crucial to family happiness ([McLaren et al. 2020](#)). Vietnamese Confucianism, in conjunction with political ideals, hold that women's keeping the family in order is fundamental to a well-run nation ([Burr 2014](#)). As a result, Confucianism ensures that Vietnamese women are triply burdened by their productive, reproductive and community/religious labour ([McLaren et al. 2020](#)). Freedoms from laborious responsibilities for family and socio-political life remains tipped in favor of men.

Obedience to Confucianism's privileging of men is pervasive. It permeates nearly all aspects of Vietnamese women's conscious and unconscious lives. From birth to death, the gendering of daughters, wives and mothers is discursively constructed ([Rydström 2017](#)), and often so powerful that women become muted. Paradoxically, women perpetuate the very discourses that powerfully burden them ([Gatwiri and McLaren 2017](#); [McLaren 2009](#); [McLaren 2013](#)), not even realizing that they are perpetuating Confucian informed gender inequalities to their own demise. An intergenerational phenomenon compels Vietnamese mothers to shape their daughters' attitudes and behaviors accordingly, so that female offspring continue to practice and reinforce Confucianism through their obedience to men.

Multigenerational post-nuptial cohabitation ensures that traditional Confucian religio-philosophical views and practices of their elders are reinforced within households ([Bélanger 2000](#)). These relationships are a salient feature of Vietnamese Confucianism in the oppression of women across all spheres of life. The power of Vietnamese Confucianism, however, extends beyond women's immediate families. Social order is held strong by the collective judgement of whole communities. This is synonymous across many Southeast Asian societies, where Confucian religio-philosophical ideology demands gender-based hierarchy, filial piety, inter-dependence and collectivism ([Ho 2014](#); [Kwan 2000](#); [McLaren 2016a](#); [Park et al. 2010](#); [Yeh and Bedford 2003](#)). When women are born into such burdensome roles, many women unquestionably conform, perceive no escape, and thereby resign to the status quo.

In addition, Confucian ideals value intellectual prowess and academic achievement, which are regarded as crucial factors in Vietnam for social mobility. Grounded in Vietnamese social order, children have an obligation to honor the family through high educational achievements ([Chua 2011](#); [Rindermann et al. 2013](#)); mothers, likewise, are expected to manage their children's study routines and to role model respect, compliance and unconditional obedience ([Nguyen-Vo 2009](#)). As a result, many mothers are discursively influenced to enact the authoritarian parenting styles that emphasise parental control, overprotection and expectation for children to prioritize the family's face and honour over individual interests ([Nguyen 2008](#); [Park et al. 2010](#); [Tran 2013](#)). Many studies indicate that improving lives for themselves and their children, via international study, is one of the most common motivations for migration, worldwide ([Johnsdotter 2015](#); [Nguyen et al. 2014](#); [Ochocka and Janzen 2008](#); [Pyke 2000](#); [Roer-Strier et al. 2005](#)). Determined to improve their children's life chances, many Vietnamese mothers become international students and likewise push their children to do so ([Liebkind et al. 2004](#); [Ngo and Lee 2007](#); [Nguyen et al. 2011](#)). While Vietnamese women may attempt to escape the pressures of Vietnam's strict Confucian informed gender order, engaging in student migration often reflects women's sacrifices to their own wellbeing in trying to make life better for their children.

Of initial interest to the current research were Vietnamese women's experiences as international students in Australia. In particular, how they negotiated, resisted, or rebelled their Confucian-influenced

gender responsibilities when temporarily migrating with their male partners and children, and separated from extended families and the socio-political pressures upon them. What transpired was the women's expression of freedom from the shackles of their Confucian religio-philosophical ideals that, in Vietnam, had formerly defined and constrained them.

2. Methods

Twenty Vietnamese women studying in Australia participated in one-on-one, semi-structured, face-to-face research interviews. The duration of each interview was between one to two hours. Interviews were conducted in the Vietnamese language, audio-recorded, transcribed and translated to English. Research ethics approval was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number 7511), which is a properly constituted research ethics committee in accordance with Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council. Standard research ethics conventions were applied, including informed consent, voluntariness, confidentiality, safe storage of data and di-identification in transcriptions and the use of pseudonyms in reporting.

At the time of interviewing, all the women who participated in interviews were postgraduate university students in Australia on Student Visa subclass 500. The conditions of this visa allow students to bring their immediate family members with them, either a spouse or de-facto partner and/or children under the age of 18 years ([Department of Home Affairs 2019](#)). In accordance with participant criteria, all the women had been studying in Australia for at least 6 months. Each of the women was accompanied by their partner and children, however, three women were separated from their partners at the time of interviewing. Two women had returned their children to Vietnam, to be cared for by extended family, while they stayed on in Australia with their partners to complete their studies.

Adopting an emancipatory research ethic allowed the participants to have some control over the direction of interview discussion, within the broader research focus ([Rose and Glass 2008](#); [Strier 2007](#)). Accordingly, many participants changed discussion focus to what they felt was important about context or phenomena being researched, namely their international student, parenting and intimate partner relationship experiences. As it transpired, the women interviewed constantly re-focused their responses to the performative nature of Vietnamese gendered life, the pervasiveness of Vietnamese Confucianism in filial structure, and compared this with the relative freedoms they experienced in Australia.

Interview data were transcribed, deidentified and analyzed. Data analysis involved the initial manual coding of interview transcripts, using an iterative process of data familiarisation, searching for patterns, reviewing, and clustering codes into themes ([Braun et al. 2019](#)). Themes were then subjected to interpretive analysis. This involved the researchers' application of Janus Head phenomenology to generate a sense of the subjective, lived experiences of the other.

In providing a brief methodological explanation, interpretive phenomenology is concerned with the meaning of human lived experience; how people perceive their lived experience and understanding of themselves ([Smith and Osborn 2007](#)). The Janus Head is a Greek mythological figure with two faces, one looking back at war and one looking forward in the search for peace. In application, Janus Head phenomenology assisted in making sense of subjective meanings arising from the interaction between one's history and their perceived future, in the context of the present human experience ([Mathews 2011](#)). Janus Head phenomenology, therefore, allowed for interpretations of the participants' perceptions of living in the present, as influenced by both their pasts and the obscurity of their imagined futures—and how current experiences may become altered by fascinations in achieving future change and/or losing projected hopes and desires.

3. Findings

The Janus Head lens offered phenomenological interpretations of temporality associated with participants' past, present lived experiences, and imagined futures. Findings are organized into three

subsections to assist in narrating patterns identified from across the data according to these experienced or imagined times.

3.1. Women's Looking Back at the Gender Inequity

Access to social media and stories from friends offered participants insights into how life could be for themselves and their children, if they were to study abroad. In seeing it, they dreamed about it and wanted it, with many going to great lengths to secure scholarships. Others sold properties, cars and household goods to self-fund their student migratory experiences, and to show sufficient funds to support themselves in satisfaction of student visa financial requirements. Participants spoke of the many opportunities they preconceived about going abroad; in particular, the chance to escape the multiple burdens that Vietnamese Confucianism imposed upon women and their children.

Intense feelings were expressed when the women spoke about Vietnamese Confucian religio-philosophical traditions, culture and societal norms. Women reflected on the division of labour and Vietnam's social gaze over the simplest of tasks, and spoke about how shame and stigma ensured that every facet of gender order was held strictly in place. For example, Quyen said:

Men from there [Vietnam] . . . always think that going to buy groceries is a women's job. Especially my husband, who was quite extreme and patriarchal back in Vietnam. If he went to the market, he would be very embarrassed because people would think that he was "scared of his wife."

The term *scared of his wife* is an insulting term in Vietnam. Through a Confucian lens, it represents the notion of a weak man who is not performing according to the social order. Such stereotypes risk bringing whole families to shame. As a result, the stealth of Confucianism holds women responsible for their men's social image.

Men in Vietnam are discursively constructed as having no role to play in household shopping or other reproductive work. They are not to prepare meals, do housecleaning or tend to children. Participants spoke about how this legitimises men's departure to engage in leisure activities while women engage in arduous chores, as there is nothing in the home for these men to do. Many of the women advised that their male partners typically went to the bar every night or played sports with their male friends until late. As a representative example, Kim presented a snapshot of her intimate life in Vietnam:

Back there, my husband would just come home from work and then go to play sports. I didn't really like it that way. I hardly knew how many meals he would have at home. . . . He worked and played sports, so he had very little time for our family.

Due to multigenerational living, the women advised of the pressure from mothers-in-laws for them to keep busy in the house. Coincidentally, men were expected to keep out of the way.

Women interviewed shared how the multigenerational grooming of them to abide by the gender order commenced as soon as they married. This is when, according to Vietnamese Confucian ways, that ownership of the bride passes from her family to that of the groom. Harsh practices towards brides guarantee that they know their place in the family according to the Confucian gendered social order of things. Tan described her wedding day, which is a typical practice still prevalent in Vietnam:

As for me, after having smiled to nearly 600 guests having meals, I still have my bride's white on and went to the well to wash the mountain of dishes. My face was still full of make-up, my hair was curled with flowers on . . . suffering so much. If I did not wash the dishes, my bride's new reputation would be really bad, as lazy and shameful for my husband's family.

In becoming a daughter-in-law, participants yearned not to be ridiculed. Due to social pressures to conform, many perceived that it was easier in life to be praised as a hard-working daughter-in-law, than to endure shame, blame and guilt associated with refusals to slave.

Some of the participants spoke about their male partners' attempts to help with the children, to cook or wash dishes after meals. Ha's mother-in-law told her off for not doing her own women's duties when her partner tried to help her. At any moment Chi had spare, her mother-in-law would say, "*How come no one is getting him a cup of tea?*" Examples like these highlighted the ways in which mother-in-laws controlled the distribution of every household task among the women, while gatekeeping to ensure their sons and other family men did none. Ha's and Chi's partners, rather, went out with friends every night as there was nothing to do in the home. The men's socialising was not questioned or spoken about when living in Vietnam.

For the women who engaged in productive work, they were able to afford the employment of domestic helpers. Women negotiated and organised these workers to assist with the care of their children and households. They added that paid domestic help was more so for the convenience of the male partners, so as not to interfere with his work, recreational activities and other absences from the home. For example, Thoa said:

My daughter mostly slept with my mother or one of our domestic workers. Another worker would just do the housework. So, my husband could pay full attention to [himself].

Thoa was influenced to relinquish her husband from family life, which enabled him to socially do whatever he chose. Women, like Thoa, were not necessarily alleviated of reproductive burdens upon being responsible to find, hire and supervise domestic helpers and be accountable when these arrangements went wrong.

Finally, marriage automatically made the women responsible for the labour associated with Vietnamese Confucian religio-philosophical practices and traditions. This was in addition to the productive and productive labour already endured. As a form of indentured servitude to the men's families, they organized, performed, and managed these often-torturous burdens that were held strong by their mother-in-laws, aunts, and the social gaze of others. The prospect of international study excited participants as it provided hope to break free from the intergenerational cycle of gender inequity that is characteristic of Vietnam's discursive religio-philosophical and socio-political ideals.

3.2. Women's Australian Experiences

Women identified a range of underlying feelings in which they hoped for, and fought for, change upon coming to Australia. They wanted intimate relationship transformation, resourceful family dynamics, and freedoms from the burdens of their Vietnamese lives. They wanted their partners to see the pressures of their intense study loads, women's difficulties in "*doing it all*" and to feel compelled to help. However, some of the men simply refused, as Kim said:

Back in Vietnam, his mum took care of our children when they were younger. So, my husband didn't even know what feeding or taking care of his kids was like. Now, there's no family here to help us. I also have studying to do and the children to take care of.

Likewise, Oanh expressed the struggles of having multiple burdens as a Vietnamese woman engaging in traditional filial practices, as a wife and mother, when also a student in Australia:

I really wanted to study more. But at night, I put my son in bed at 9.00 p.m., he lay there and didn't sleep until 10:30. I started studying at 11.00. When I had assignments, I didn't go to bed until 3.00 am. Taking care of my son and studying ... No, I can't just do everything badly. I didn't have a lot of time. I was so tired and exhausted.

With no perceived alleviation from their burdens, some of the women sent their partners back to Vietnam or divorced them, seeing this as an opportunity to achieve relative freedoms or to search for an Australian lover to further de-shackle their burdens. Quynh dreamed of breaking the intergenerational gender, expressed as hopes for her daughter:

I would like her marrying a Westerner. That's what I hope for ... a culture of sharing and helping each other in the family. The husband and wife are happily living and enjoying the family life together, and with their kids too.

Most of the women, however, experienced changes in themselves and their partners. For example, Ha gained the courage and confidence to speak out and demand support from her partner and son:

I would tell my husband to, together with our son, clean the house and take care of the garden. I believed that telling them to share housework with me would be better, would be the first step, rather than not having that determination in my thinking at all.

As well, many participants made relationships between sharing reproductive work and strengthening their intimate partner relationships. Kim explained:

To be honest, I do want a family to be able to share the tasks and have a balance. It's a way of bonding also, not just the work. If we share tasks, then we understand each other better.

Some of the women observed the influence of social image over their partners, including the importance of avoiding shame. While once these men would not help with grocery shopping or in the home due to stereotypes of being “weak men”, in Australia these partners feared being labelled as disrespectful to the women. Kim continued:

The society here [Australia] respects women more than in our Vietnamese society. Their thinking is different. The men respect the women more and Vietnamese men here look around them. Like my husband, he observes how the other couples take care of each other and that has an influence.

Ha expressed this change in Vietnamese men's behaviour, and the relative joys she experienced in terms of family life, in motherhood and in her intimate partner relationship. Consistent with other women, she was completely aware that her partner's change in behaviours was due to his environment:

They can see that any men here [Australia] would do the housework, it's their responsibility and duty. My husband too. He saw it and started getting involved in doing chores, cleaning and looking after our son.

As interviews progressed, most women bared truths about their experiences in Australia. Many of the men were performing chores as directed, not necessarily sharing the burdens. While the women were usually pleased with these small changes, due to not being under the Confucian gaze of mother-in-laws, they also believed that sustained change on returning to Vietnam would be unlikely.

When interviewing women, there were many hesitations and silences. We suspect that these silences may have represented much more than was said—a cautiousness in the protection of feelings and dignity due to the four virtues expected of Vietnamese women being so discursively strong. As well, there was monotonous reiteration by the women on the joy they experienced when their partners helped them. We suspect that this was safer for the women than to speaking about the Vietnamese Confucian religio-philosophy and freedoms that student migration may have provided from political obedience.

3.3. Women's Imagining Their Futures

In her statement, Quyen represented nearly all the women's voices:

I really want to maintain our lifestyle here, but I'm also worried that everything will just go back to the old ways. I can only hope, but I can't be sure.

Finishing their studies marked an end to the women's transitory migration experiences in Australia, and potentially an end to their temporary alleviation of gender burden. Worry and uncertainty for their futures heightened as their international student experiences drew to closer to an end. During interviews, the Janus Head action of looking back at life in Vietnam and looking forward did not appear to bring hope among the women. In fact, this action multiplied and intensified women's fears about returning to their Vietnamese Confucian-informed family lives. For example, Quyen said:

I really want to maintain our lifestyle here, but I'm also worried that everything will just go back to the old ways. I can only hope, but I can't be sure.

Kim also explained:

I don't have much hope. Here, my husband can understand me more. But, going back to Vietnam will make it difficult because it also depends on the family, friends and networks around him. I really don't have hope. Well, not much.

Others feared for their daughters' wellbeing in Vietnam, after having experienced relative freedoms in Australia, such as in one of the woman's words (Duong):

Our concerns are always there, since we are worried about our daughter being back after 2 years. What would happen?

"What would happen?" This very question was repeated in almost every interview. Participants looked back at their lives and expressed their state of uncertainty in going forward, for themselves, their children, and their intimate partner relationships. Using Dante's (in [Alighieri 1954](#)) language of "limbo" to describe their uncertainty, Duong and others communicated that returning to Vietnam would be a "living Hell."

When the Janus Head actions of looking forward in the search for their own peace failed, participants dreamt up new identities for their daughters. Quynh said:

I would like her marrying a Westerner. That's what I hope for. I think that he will have a culture of sharing and helping each other in the family. The husband and wife are happily living and enjoying the family life together, and with their kids too.

While the incidence and prevalence of gender inequity and gender-based violence in Australia is high, across every race and creed ([McLaren and Goodwin-Smith 2016](#); [Zannettino and McLaren 2014](#)), participants' hopes and dreams were founded upon their experiences and perceptions of family life in Australia. When the women could not find peace on looking forward at life in Vietnam, they then invoked hopes for the next generation. Facing forward to the future, as a return to Confucian religio-philosophy and its hold over gender order, manifested as an emotional inner war that seemed endless for these women.

4. Discussion

Drawing on the work of [Moser \(2012\)](#), it was the triple burden of productive, reproductive and regulated community/religio-philosophical labour that the women in this study sought to escape. The intergenerational pressures on them to conform to the Vietnamese ways had pressured and tormented them. Becoming international students offered the women perceptions of a temporary escape. In tasting a different life as international students in Australia, however, they feared, even more, their returns to socio-political expectations of domestic servitude of women in conjunction with allegiance to Vietnamese Confucian protocols.

Existing literature is limited in making these associations between women's experiences in collective traditions, such as in Vietnam's Confucian religio-philosophy, and their migratory intentions as a perceived escape. The Janus Head actions of looking back and looking forward, however, exposed the

interplay between women's want for a different life in becoming international students in Australia, as well as the prevailing sadness associated with their looking back and forward-looking realities. When the lives they sought were not tangible, temporal existences compelled the women to reimagine their lives and identities; both their own and that of their children.

Erichsen (2009) and Tran and Gomes (2017) wrote about how international students reinvent their identities in an attempt to resolve uncertainty through transforming ones' self into something else. While this can be imagined, it does not mean that transforming ones' self will necessarily be achieved or sustained. Accordingly, the women in our study engaged in a process of becoming lost, in liminality, and by redefinition; then, a set of better-fitting contexts emerged in which to discover their new selves, losing old and hoped for selves, and dreaming new selves. This experience, however, gave rise to the agony associated with limbo when identity reinvention was impeded by the imperatives to returning to their old lives. When tormented by the limbo, dreaming-up new selves, and new identities, became an unresolved constant.

The findings of the current study presented experiences of a sample of Vietnamese women who were determined to achieve greater gender balance in life, while simultaneously navigating and shrugging off the Confucian-imposed patriarchy that they lived and brought with them to Australia. These women used spoken words to describe feelings of success, associated with their perceived shifts in gender balance in parenting, their intimate partner relationships, and the family. Temporary living in Australia, as international students, enabled the enjoyment of being supported by their partners at levels they had not experienced before.

Studying in Australia created opportunities for family, parenting, and relationship changes. All participants expressed positive feelings for the changes they had experienced, so far. Many of them expressed how these changes were only possible by moving to Australia. The women fought hard to engage their husband's support in reproductive labour. Some of the men resisted the reproductive labour, but eventually conceded when shamed by the Australian environment and embarrassed for not helping. For the women whose partners refused to change, temporary separation or divorce allowed them to experience relief from their burdens when in Australia as international students.

Under Confucian religio-philosophy, mothers are expected to ensure their children are unconditionally obedient, are not allowed to confront parents, and must demonstrate respect to parents and elders. Some of the women were uncertain about their own and their children's ability to return safely to Vietnam's Confucian religio-philosophical order after the liberties of life experienced in Australia. This was especially so, of daughters whose conduct in accordance with the four traditional virtues expected of women (Ngo et al. 2008) would be demanded by elders, socio-cultural and political systems, and ancestors (Bertram 2004; Laporte and Guttman 2007; Lim and Lim 2004; Su and Hynie 2011). As a result, our study touched on the worries that women had for their children's futures. As part of their unresolved limbo, the women invented images for their children's futures that included dreams of marrying an Australian man and other wishes for their next generation.

5. Conclusions

The sample of women provided insights into their lived experiences of collectivist multigenerational living and the multiple burdens endured, as a reason for seeking student migration as a temporary escape. They enjoyed changes to their relationships in Australia, including their partners' help in reproductive labour when not under the gaze and control of Confucian order, mother-in-laws, and the gender expectations in Vietnamese society generally. Contrasting experiences between the women's pasts and their Australian experiences, including imagined hopes and realities of their futures, drew on the Janus Head concept to expose the inner turmoil experienced when unable to imagine better gender equity in their futures. The mix of uncertainties in going back to Vietnam, following their studies, remained heavily fuelled with hope, doubt and uncertainty, and was experienced as limbo—always.

The findings of this study cannot be generalised to other populations of women in Vietnam or other Confucian societies, and nor does it attempt to prove a hypothesis or answer any particular

question. Rather, this study contributes to theorising and dialogue aimed at challenging gender roles and partakes in the ongoing exposure of gender inequity. Specific to women seeking freedom from Vietnam's Confucian religio-philosophical order, the narrated findings highlight the emotional, inner turmoil that may be experienced by international students when fleeing something in their lives and fearing going back. Student wellbeing and educational achievements may be at stake, which calls for educators, counsellors and university personnel to recognise Vietnamese women's suffering and to find new ways of supporting and intervening.

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