



## ***The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung:* Teaching Reading Comprehension to Adult ESL Learners Using Culturally Relevant, Young-Adult Literature**

Valdes (2001), in her article on ESL classrooms, defines the need for language-rich and culturally relevant reading materials as a prerequisite to reading growth. Rising from a collaboration between a community college ESL instructor and a university professor of reading methodology, the paper details the positive impact of using culturally relevant literature, specifically *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung*, in an integrated skills course for adult ESL learners. During the course of the semester, researchers charted the level of student engagement with the book through multiple questionnaires, observations of class discussions, and student responses to writing tasks. The paper describes how the use of literature enabled the instructor to further integrate vocabulary and writing with the reading component of the class and how adding a multicultural dimension and perspective to the existing curriculum provided purpose and engagement for students.

### **Introduction**

Reading courses for ESL students are often taught with materials designed for the “teaching of reading” rather than the enjoyment of reading (Valdes, 2001). Textbooks composed of reading passages with accompanying comprehension questions are common. These reading texts, published for a generic learner (Ansary, 2004), traditionally have passages that bear no relationship to the interests or backgrounds of many students. In the process of using recommended textbooks, instructors may never realize that it is high-interest text, matched to interests and concerns of the individual reader, that promotes reading comprehension (Guthrie, 2003). Comprehension, developed through the activation of a reader’s prior knowledge, allows the individual reader to use his or her unique understanding of the world and extract meaning from text (Goodman, 1994; Langer, 1982; Smith, 2006). Referred to as schema theory, this personal view of the world is derived from socially and culturally acquired knowledge, encompassing language, thought, and action (Sweet & Snow, 2003).

The need for including culturally relevant literature in ESL reading courses is not a new idea. Neither is the acknowledgment that readers read more and with better comprehension when engaged with text that represents their lives (Droop & Verhoeven, 1998). With this in mind, the researchers wondered if the use of a single novel, written for an audience of young adolescents, could positively affect student learning in a reading, writing, and grammar skills class for adult second language learners. This study sought to answer this question by supplementing the standard reading textbook with a culturally relevant novel in an intermediate, college-level multiskilled course. This action-research study explores the effect of using culturally relevant literature on students' reading comprehension and attitude toward reading. Specifically, the researchers looked at the interaction of students with and around the young-adult novel *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung: A Chinese Miner* (Yep, 2000).

This study was conducted by an ESL instructor at an urban California community college and a reading methods professor at a local state university. Their two approaches to teaching reading were divergent. The instructor worked within what she perceived as the parameters of her department's common use of textbooks whereas the methods professor advocated the use of literature and nonfiction trade books for teaching reading and language arts at all levels.

The study began by considering the methods and materials used to teach reading to adult ESL students at the community college where the instructor worked. Faced with departmental guidelines that promoted the use of a reading textbook, the instructor thought that she needed to continue to use these materials. On the other hand, she no longer felt excited about the course, largely because of the dryness of the material to which she required her students to read and respond. From the professor's perspective, the essence of reading instruction was being ignored; without reading material that captivated and engaged the readers, opportunities to learn new vocabulary, gain fluency, and build comprehension were lost. As a result, the instructor began a process of change by selecting a young-adult novel that was intended to spark students' imaginations and set the stage for building their reading skills. Set in the rural countryside of 19th-century China and the gold fields of Northern California, Laurence Yep's (2000) *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung: A Chinese Miner*, served as a class novel in the class and provided the foundation for a semester-long focus on teaching reading, writing, and grammar in context.

### **Background**

In the six-unit intermediate, integrated reading, writing, and grammar class, the three skills were equally weighted. Like many of the instructors at her college, this instructor believed she had an inadequate amount of time to cover the required curriculum. Along with her fellow instructors, she scrambled to find the right combination of texts and teaching techniques to prepare the students for the subsequent high-intermediate level of the ESL curriculum in their department. Many of her colleagues were particularly concerned that the students were not gaining the necessary reading skills required to handle the demands of higher-level courses. As a result, some

instructors had begun recommending supplemental independent reading in student-selected novels or provided additional reading instruction through the use of one class novel.

The population of the class consisted of ethnic Chinese, Latino, Middle Eastern, Russian, and Burmese students. Of the 21 students in the class, 15 were Chinese. Many of the students had been in the US for 5 to 10 years before entering the credit academic ESL track offered at the community college. Therefore, many of them were quite competent in the English they needed daily though some were still uncomfortable with spoken English in the classroom setting.

In this class, the majority of the students had full-time day jobs and had dependent children in the home. Approximately three-quarters of the students were striving to realize higher career goals, and 15% were mandated by state and federal requirements to complete 16 college units to retain their jobs. They often expressed the effort and determination it took to attend a six-unit, 3-hour class, two evenings a week.

Given the profile of these students, the instructor hesitated to require reading outside of her ESL textbook, a book comprising two-page readings followed by skill-driven exercises. Before using the novel in class, she had supplemented the textbook with newspaper articles on related topics to fill out thematic reading units. Overall, she had found integration of reading, writing, and grammar skills into these units to be a challenge because of lack of class time and lack of integrated texts.

Yep's novel, *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung: A Chinese Miner*, seemed appropriate in theme and setting for her students in this particular class. This novel, a fictional account of a young Chinese miner during the height of the California gold rush, is written in diary form with short, easy-to-manage entries with a total of 200 pages. Yep, an author of young-adult literature, weaves a tale of hardship and loss into the historical fabric of 19th-century China and the subsequent exodus of thousands of impoverished Chinese to the shores of San Francisco Bay and the "Golden Mountain." The problems depicted in Yep's novel were real-life problems for the Chinese miners of the mid-19th century. Set largely in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the students lived, the novel's geographic location contributed to the students' ease with the book, generating discussions about topics such as the 19th-century San Francisco Chinatown as compared with the new.

### **Methodology and Results**

This study was carried out through the course of a summer and one semester. The collaboration between the instructor and the professor took the form of weekly meetings during the course of the semester to construct assignments, read students' work, and discuss students' attitudes toward the book. The instructor was responsible for carrying out the assignments and scaffolding the material, and the professor acted as the consultant by providing recommendations for assignments, critiquing student work, and observing student interaction and discussions in the classroom. The students' attitudes were also assessed by the results of three questionnaires: one adminis-

tered early in the semester; one halfway through the book; and another at the end of the book, which coincided with the end of the course.

### **Questionnaire Responses**

The first feedback was collected from students early in the semester. After the students had read 20 pages of the book, the instructor employed a simple questionnaire to evaluate the level of student engagement with the novel from the onset. The sole question was, "How do you feel about reading a novel?" For about three-fourths of the students, this was their first time reading a novel, and their responses indicated that they were excited and eager to read a novel. They thought it was a challenge that would help them to improve their English:

This is my first time to read a novel. Even though it isn't easy for me, I still encourage myself to read it because that can promote my reading and writing in English. This is a good way to push me to study more.

Another student wrote, "Even though the students sometimes don't understand many hard new words, they got the idea of the sentence because they keep reading the book and get into it." This feedback gave the instructor personal reassurance that she had made the right decision in assigning a novel.

Halfway through the semester, in a second questionnaire, the students were asked if they thought that reading *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung* and devoting class time to working with it were effective and worthwhile uses of their time. These were very important considerations because the class combined writing, reading, and grammar into one 6-hour class using a grammar book, reading textbook, and the novel. The overwhelming anonymous response by the students was favorable. In their comments, the students recognized that they could learn vocabulary as well as grammar, especially verb tenses, through use of this novel. As one student noted, "It includes a lot of grammar from our grammar book. Moreover, I can learn some new words from the novel." Another student wrote that before taking this class, she had wanted to read a novel, but when she had gone to the library, she had had difficulty choosing an appropriate one: "You recommend the novel to us and I have to say thank you teacher."

Their comments also point to how they were understanding the connections that the instructor was making between reading, writing, and critical thinking. One student wrote, "For my experience, I would say reading the novel was a good use of my time. I never thought that I was able to write and think a lot in English."

Some students particularly valued the content of the reading. Students were interested in the gold rush period in California since they lived in California, as evidenced by this response: "It had some information about the gold rush period which is very nice because we live in the U.S.; moreover, in the Golden State, so we should know what happens in the past." Another student wrote, "I think it's worthwhile because you learn how was California in that time and you learn history of that era."

In one case, the topic of the novel gave a student a vehicle to connect her life with that of the main characters. Although the student was not Chinese, the theme of immigration was highly relevant to her and gave her a reason to read. She wrote:

I definitely recommend everybody to read this book. It really touched my heart. Now I know a lot of information about the Chinese miners who could survive in America. The book showed me the real life of immigrants who came to Golden Mountain. All these suffering, indignity from American people made me put myself on the Chinese miner's side. While reading, I felt the same pain as all of these immigrants because I am one of them too.

Various Chinese students wrote about appreciating learning about the history of the Chinese in America since that was part of their ethnic roots. Other comments validated the theory that using literature from students' own culture made comprehension more accessible (Andersson & Barnitz, 1998). One student noted:

According to the pages I have read, it contains Chinese customs, traditions and some history in 1851. Because I am Chinese, it is so easy for me to understand the contents. I feel so good about that. I think it was a very good idea to choose this novel for our class.

Another student echoed this response:

It is an easier reading book because it talks about familiar Chinese story, so it's a good book to choose for our class. It lets me know something about Chinese work in the American early time.

These comments helped the instructor conclude that choosing culturally relevant literature facilitated the comprehension of the content for her students. In response to the midsemester student feedback, the instructor decided to build more of the curriculum around this novel during the remainder of the semester and in future classes.

Two weeks before the end of the semester, the students completed a six-question survey that asked them to reflect on their metacognitive understanding of using a novel in their ESL class. The survey included the following questions: "How did discussing this book in class help you?" "Do you think you have learned new vocabulary by reading this book? Why, or why not?" "Would you recommend that other ESL students read this book?" These questions specifically helped illuminate the role of attitude, oral language use, and vocabulary development in promoting reading comprehension.

Based on the students' responses, the novel became the focal point of this class, not supplemental, as the instructor had originally imagined. The students' enthusiasm for the novel came from the fact that the book was about immigrants. Since all of the students in the class had immigrated, the novel became a "feel good" story for the students, who were themselves "heroes" in a

new culture. Furthermore, for the majority of the students, the main characters' being of the same ethnic background allowed them to closely identify with the protagonists. Since the main characters were portrayed in a positive light as diligent, resourceful, clever, and compassionate, the story reflected positively on the students' cultural origins. Students were enthusiastic readers and expressed appreciation for having their history and culture profiled as the dominant theme of the class.

**Effect on Student Learning:  
Building Reading Comprehension Through  
High-Interest, Culturally Relevant Text**

Reading comprehension has been defined as the interaction between reader, text, and activity. Each of these separate elements interacts within the boundaries of an individual reader's sociocultural context (Sweet & Snow, 2003). This model of reading comprehension builds on the notion that readers interact differently with varying styles of written text. Their sense of purpose for reading depends largely on the type of activity and text they are engaged with, and the sociocultural circumstances of their lives determine the type of background knowledge and schema-driven conceptual understanding they have available to interpret the text (Sweet & Snow, 2003). A reader's active engagement with text depends on the content and accessibility of the text, both driven by interest and supported through background knowledge (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Langer, 1982; Smith, 2006). When readers lack cultural knowledge (vocabulary, colloquial phrases, geographic regions, social norms), reading comprehension can be impaired (Garcia, 2003). This type of missing information may lead a reader to confuse relationships between characters, miss key connections that lead to understanding plot lines, and come away confused by the climax and resolution. Ultimately, it is this inability to infer that reduces comprehension and the reader's enjoyment of the text (Adams & Bruce, 1982).

*The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung* spoke to the students in this class. They enjoyed the historical context of the novel, learning Chinese and American history through the eyes of a fictional 12-year-old. They brought their cultural and linguistic knowledge to bear on the reading, allowing them to infer and synthesize information throughout the text. The relationship between Uncle and Runt during their stay in Golden Mountain expressed through culturally specific language and social norms provided the backdrop for students' understanding. During the course of the semester, the value of reading a book that told the history of the Chinese in America through Chinese eyes became evident and revealed the role of cultural relevance in reading comprehension.

In the following sections, we discuss the development of vocabulary knowledge and of reading comprehension through oral and written response to culturally relevant text.

***Learning New Vocabulary***

The lack of sufficient vocabulary is often cited as having a direct impact on the acquisition of advanced reading skills (Hirsch, 2001; Vellutino, 2003).

Teaching vocabulary in the context of high-interest content has been shown to be more effective than teaching new vocabulary in isolation or accompanying uninteresting text (Cunningham & Allington, 2006; Rupley, Logan, & Nichols, 1999). The use of Yep's novel provided a rich cultural context that allowed these adult learners to attach meaning to unknown words. During the semester, when asked what they were learning from the novel, the students repeatedly noted that they learned a great deal of new vocabulary. One student noted: "I feel really good reading a novel. It's interesting and in my opinion, it is the best way to learn English, to practice grammar, to learn new words that connect with new ideas." Another student stated: "The story like a picture. It is easier to learn new vocabulary on a picture than on the air." For these students the novel presented new vocabulary in a context that supported reading acquisition and retention.

The students completed a range of vocabulary assignments, building primarily on extracting meaning through context. In a typical assignment, they were required to write down 10 words that were new to them and that helped in their understanding of the story. Five of these words needed to be "checked" in the dictionary and then explained to other students. Another assignment required students to submit 30 words from their class readings twice a semester. This vocabulary assignment included sentences copied directly from the book and original sentences developed by the students. By copying a sentence directly from the book, students were able to see the correct sentence structure and usage and model their own sentence after it. For example, for a student focusing on the word "fuss," the sentence in the book was, "The swans have left. It was quite a fuss" (p. 138). This was followed by the student's original sentence, "They made a fuss before they left."

### ***Building Reading Comprehension Through Oral Discussion***

Opportunities for students to discuss reading content with their teacher and among peers have been shown to have a positive impact on their reading comprehension (Fielding & Pearson, 1994). Before the incorporation of *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung*, very little class time had been devoted to oral discussion. Students had not been excited about the topics in the class textbook, nor did they have much prior knowledge to aid in the discussion. The instructor, not finding much substance in the two-page readings, rarely facilitated any lengthy discussions that related to subsequent writing assignments. The use of a 200-page novel provided continuity in class discussions and a specific focus on character development and the unfolding of events.

In an initial discussion, the instructor drew on the Chinese students' shared knowledge of cultural values and traditions, such as obedience to the eldest brother in the patriarchal family, and also of this period of extreme poverty of the Chinese peasant class. The Chinese students explained these references to the non-Chinese students who lacked basic knowledge of Chinese culture and history. In this way, the Chinese students became authorities and ambassadors, sharing their cultural understanding. Then students offered opinions on whether it was a good idea for Uncle, a main character and Runt's paternal uncle, to go to America. In this way, they could

immediately connect with the weighty decision-making process of an immigrant trying to determine to leave all he knew to try to start a new life in a foreign country.

The students interacted in small groups implementing an informal literature circle (Daniels, 1994), a process that seemed to fuel the students' enthusiasm for reading. This change was noted by one student who said that he thought that by discussing the book with his classmates, he was learning more easily than when he was left to read and study independently. Ultimately, those students who appeared to enjoy talking in class the most expressed their excitement at the recognition that they were learning new vocabulary and grammar through talking about the reading.

### ***Building Reading Comprehension Through Written Work***

The interface between reading and writing through exposure to different types of text structure has been well documented (Calkins, 1991; Wood Ray, 1999). Knowledge of story structure has been shown to have an impact on readers' comprehension of story lines and character relationships (Adams & Bruce, 1982). In this class, the students developed writing skills through assignments focused around the choice of literature. In the instructor's earlier experiences, students had struggled through essay-writing assignments when faced with writing about a little-known topic. When lacking background knowledge, key vocabulary, and interest in assigned essay topics, they routinely failed to perform adequately. With the cultural and personal connections so readily available to students when reading Yep's novel, the students capitalized on their background knowledge and engagement in the book to successfully complete a variety of writing assignments around the text.

**Reading Response Through Use of Quotes.** Students were asked to respond to the story of 12-year-old Wong Ming-Chung, or Runt, as he makes his way from his rural village in Southern China to the Sierra Nevada to meet his uncle. In an ongoing assignment, students were required to choose a quote from each 20 pages of the book and write a short journal entry. Their responses were to be specific; they were expected to explain what the quotes meant and if possible, why they were significant in the development of the plot, but foremost, students were asked to make personal connections with the quote.

The students were allowed choice in what they wrote about to enhance interest and understanding by tapping into their own life experiences. Injecting choice into the curriculum is a way of promoting text comprehension (Guthrie, 2003; Turner & Paris, 1995). Readers and writers are drawn to read and write about what they know; they usually have words for this.

Although a number of students struggled with responding accordingly, others were able to connect with the meaning and bring to bear their own background knowledge and understanding.

One Burmese student analyzed the following quote: "Our gold is in a basket that I'm sitting on. No one looks twice at two dirty, raggedy guests [immigrant miners]" (p. 181). The student wrote:

This quote means Runt and his uncle were hiding precious gold in a dirty basket, so no one was interested and noticed. I like this quote because almost all the people just care about the outside look. Even if you are millionaire, your clothes are too dirty, no one will care about you.

After living in the US for 6 years, this Burmese student is very aware of the importance of clothing “to create the man” or at least to create a respectable image. His writing shows that he thinks that people judge a person more by his or her clothing than by the substance of the person inside the garment. The Chinese heroes in the novel trick the Americans through their own American values: the shallow judgment of a person’s worth through appearance. From a follow-up conversation with the student, it became clear that he was proud that Asians were outsmarting the Americans, who did not see the true value of a man.

One Chinese student responded to a different quote: “I can’t let Uncle die in the mountains. Even if he doesn’t love me, he is still family” (p. 174). The student commented:

Runt loves his family so much. He is a traditional Chinese dutiful son. Although Uncle said many bad words to hurt him, he still didn’t want to leave him alone and helped him continue to find gold.

The student explained that because he had been raised to be a traditional Chinese dutiful son, he could readily grasp and identify with the hero’s decision to put his own life in danger to be loyal to and protect his uncle. Runt’s father specifically instructed him at their parting to take care of his uncle. He is being faithful to his father’s order and can not abandon his uncle under even a reasonable pretext. This suggests that the student’s personal experiences of growing up in a Chinese family helped his understanding of the importance of “the family” rather than “the individual” in making life decisions and choosing one’s path.

Another student quoted, “The Fox reminded us again to stay calm and not fight back. Then he announced to the mob in English that we were leaving” (p. 167). This student responded to the main theme in the novel:

I always remember that before I came to the U.S., one of my best friends told me that in the U.S. a lot of Americans are not nice to the Asians. They treat Asians badly (like discrimination). Whenever Asians have problem with Americans, Asians need to be stay calm and don’t fight back otherwise Asians will get hurt badly.

As students had been asked to do, in choosing this quote the student connected personally with this theme of racial discrimination, which she shared as it had also been a concern of hers living in the US.

With regard to another theme, a different student quoted, “I started to wonder whether I’ll ever get home alive or if they’ll ship my bones home. I feel terribly homesick” (p. 164).

I also got this feeling when I first came to San Francisco. I felt so homesick that I found a pretext to escape. I told a lie to my relative that I had something not finished yet in Hong Kong and got to go back. I even quit the job and spent seven hundred dollars to buy a ticket. After one month, I finally got to face the truth and came back to start again my new life.

In identifying with the main character's feeling of homesickness, this student revealed a common source of suffering for immigrant students. As with all of the responses to the quotes, this student's response demonstrated a personal connection to the novel. A personal connection to text increases a reader's level of comprehension through activation of background knowledge. The students brought their cultural understanding of Runt and Uncle's circumstances to extract meaning from the text.

**Reading Response Through Use of Themes.** Several times during the course of the semester, the students were to write a response to questions drawn from the themes of the novel. The purpose of these response writings was to connect the students personally with the themes in the reading. For one of these assignments, the students wrote about the dreams or fantasies that the characters Blessing (Runt's older brother) and Uncle had about coming to Golden Mountain and then to briefly describe their own dreams before coming to the US. One student described his dreams:

Before coming here, I don't have dreams for myself. I know that I should work harder and learn more than in Hong Kong. I come here only want my son has a better education and grow up environment. In future maybe he will be a great man and have his achievements. I think this is my dream.

In another response, in an attempt to incorporate the rich descriptive language of the novel with the students' writing, the students responded to a vivid quote, describing how Runt felt after leaving his village:

When someone has a hand cut off what does that hand think? Does it miss belonging to the body? That's how I feel. Like I've been cut off from something bigger. And now I've been tossed on the trash heap. (p. 39)

The students immediately recognized the metaphor in this description and were able to write about the meaning of this quote and a time in their lives when they felt this way. In their paragraphs, they were reminded of and shared their own feelings of homesickness and isolation in the early years of living in the US. One student, a Burmese refugee, wrote a particularly personal response:

I was a seaman. I stared at the ocean with tears in my eyes, and I see my family images. My spirit is sticking around my parents. Cruel, big wave are making me homesick. I hear my brother say you are the man, the brave, the only one for our family. I felt no confidence. I try to give myself power, and I struggle for our family, although I've been cutting off my hand from my body.

Before the use of a novel and response writing, there had been little opportunity for the instructor and students to connect based on the students' personal lives and emotions. In their response writings, the students received comments on the content without grammar corrections or organization concerns. In this way, these response writing activities allowed the students to closely address the theme or question and elevated the chance for deeper meaning and comprehension of the text to occur.

**Reading Response Through Essay Writing.** The first multiparagraph class essay was developed from identifying Runt's cultural-adjustment process to life in the Golden Mountain. The students were then asked to relate to this process and write about their own stages in the cultural-adjustment process to life in the US. All students were making connections as immigrants to the main character.

In the final writing assignment, the students used critical thinking to predict and evaluate the main characters' actions. In this essay they needed to decide and write about whether or not Uncle or Runt should return to China or remain on the Golden Mountain. Since the question about whether one should return to the home country is something that many immigrants address in their lives, this question elicited engaged responses from the students in their writing assignments. A student from Ethiopia wrote:

In my opinion Runt should stay in the Golden Mountain. Since Runt is a smart person, if he stays in American, he can go to school and be what he wants to be. He has the opportunity to pursue a higher education. A higher education may give him a better chance to find a good paying job.

In informal conversations with this student, she had explained that pursuing a college degree and upgrading her position at work were her goals in attending ESL classes. Through her own perspective, she connected with Runt's decision about whether to remain in California or return to China.

One student from China responded: "I think Uncle should stay on the Golden Mountain because he is the money for the clan. The clan is very poor; Uncle needs to send money back to China to support the clan." In an earlier class discussion, many of the students from China, and from other countries, said they were regularly sending money home to their families to help support them. Therefore, this Chinese student recognized the importance of the wages earned in the Golden Mountain for the support of the clan.

As these examples of students' writing illustrate, the use of *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung* provided students with an opportunity to discuss and write about a novel with which they could connect personally and culturally. This personal connection gave them a motivation to continue reading as well as a greater comprehension of the text. Writing as a means of delving deeper into the meaning of a text provided for these students an additional advantage. Sharing the pain of their experiences as immigrants allowed them to process their long-held feelings of cultural dissonance. This process emotionally connected them to the book in a way that had never been evident when discussing topics such as global trade and city life from their reading text.

## Conclusion: The Impact of Literature in the Classroom

The use of a culturally relevant novel, in addition to a reading skills–development text, allowed for greater development of reading skills for ESL students. Judging from classroom observations, student feedback, and the quality of student work, the effect of using culturally relevant literature on student learning was significantly positive, building the instructor's confidence in using literature in future classes. This novel gave these adult learners an opportunity to increase their reading comprehension. Using a full-length work of literature connected to students' cultural backgrounds and life experiences was the most critical factor in the study. Because of the focus on immigrant issues such as cultural adjustment and racial discrimination, students were visibly engaged in the reading, contributed to class discussions on a high level, and worked hard to extract meaning from the text. From vocabulary assignments, responses to quotes, thematic questions, and essay assignments, the students demonstrated that they were thinking critically about Runt and what the journey to Golden Mountain meant to him and the countless other Chinese who made the perilous trip. Through activating their background knowledge and by connecting their hearts and minds to Runt, we provided them with a reason to read. At the end of the day, it is this purpose for reading that we hope will stimulate their desire to read *deeply again*, and this engagement with reading will help facilitate ESL students' acquisition of reading and writing.

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