The Yongle Dadian:
The Origin, Destruction, Dispersal and Reclamation
of a Chinese Cultural Treasure

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Abstract

The history of the Yongle Dadian’s[1] creation, near total destruction, its wanton dispersal, its promising reprinting and possible digitization, is but one example of a fascinating cultural treasure worth studying. As this paper will show, even the partial recovery of an artifact brings to light the significant contribution of a culture, a time, and a people. The author will trace the course of the Yongle Dadian over 600 years. From the original compilation during the fifteenth century Ming Dynasty to the burning and looting of the prestigious Hanlin Academy where it was held during the 1900 Siege of Peking. The function and rising importance of the Hanlin Academy as a cultural repository of Chinese scholarship will be discussed. In addition, relying on siege diaries and other primary source materials, the author will present what occurred on that fateful day of June 23, 1900 when the Hanlin Academy was reduced to ashes and its contents looted. Lastly, the author will conclude with the recent reclamation efforts of the Yongle Dadian and touch upon the role of libraries as repositories of intellectual heritage and cultural record.

永樂大典的編作起源幾近毀壞，肆意分散的歷史，以及翻印與數位化的可能性，使它成為值得研究的文化寶藏。誠如本文之呈現，即使是部分古籍的修復，也能對文化、時代以及民族作出重要貢獻。作者將追溯永樂大典六百多年的歷史，從十五世紀明朝時原典的編纂，到西元 1900 年間，北京被圍攻時，永樂大典的貯藏地「翰林書院」被焚燒以及劫掠。本文也將討論翰林書院作為貯藏中國學術成就的功用和重要性。此外，根據北京圍攻的紀錄和其他文
Part I: The Origin and History of the Yongle Dadian

The Yongle Dadian was a massive and unique collection of Chinese literature, culture, knowledge and experience; it remains a singular and remarkable achievement. The Yongle Dadian spans the equivalent of 8,000 years worth of texts in one encyclopedia and embraces four main topics: the Confucian canon, history, philosophy, and the general literature of China. Dr. W.T. Swingle[2] broadly describes the Yongle Dadian as “a universal compendium of all existing Chinese history, ethics, science, art, geography, religion, in a word, of all human knowledge among the Chinese up to 1400 A.D.” (Wilcox, 1947, p.20). L. Carrington Goodrich specifies “thought, morals, poetry, frontier people (the Xiongnu and Hu for example), geography, surnames, government, law, the spirits, biography, divination, architecture (gates, bridges, halls, storehouses, walls, offices), villages, capital cities, history, burial customs, astronomy, botany, grain, military matters, Buddhism, Taoism, travels, bronzes, food and drink, caves, dreams, scholars, drama, sacrifices, clothing, mathematics, carpentry, post stations, shamans, literary collections (Goodrich, 1901, p.18). Two other prominent scholars in this field add “…as well as descriptions of unusual natural events” (Davis & Cheng, 2007, p. 436). The collection was commissioned by the 3rd Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, the Yongle Emperor Zhu Di (reigned 1402 - 1424), who was also known as Ming Chengzu, his Yongle era means ”Perpetual Happiness” (Tsai, 2001, p. 436). The emperor, though considered a “warrior emperor,” was also a man of education, writer, philosopher, calligrapher, and historian. As a patron of literature, he commissioned this mammoth undertaking with the thought “...to boost the imperial library’s collection, making the encyclopedia the only source for ancient books now long lost,” (Bray, 2002) however Goodrich and others state that the proposal “…for this undertaking was officially made by the Grand Secretariat[3] Xie Jin (1369 – 1415) of the Hanlin Academy on July 19, 1403” (Bray, 2002). Goodrich goes on to state that the Emperor approved Xie’s proposal, appointed him editor and gave him 147 assistants. Either way, the Grand Secretariat was given the task of oversight and the project was underway. However after 17 months of conscientious devotion to the project, the emperor rejected their first draft, titled “Wenxian Dacheng”[4] or Great Collection of Documents, citing it as incomplete.

The Yongle Emperor added the imperial scholars Yao Guangxiao and many other scholars and imperial officials to the mission. During the following five years, these scholars persevered in collecting and copying between 7,000 and 8,000 texts, documents, and other materials from the Pre-Qin Period (221 B.C – 207 B.C), also known as the Spring and Autumn periods, up to the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644). Thousands of scholars traversed China’s countryside searching for texts that had not been previously recorded or seen since ancient times. Other Hanlin scholars worked on the compilation of the texts within the Imperial Library at Nanjing. Finally, on December 14, 1407, Yao re-submitted the Wenxian Dacheng to the Emperor. By now, the encyclopedia had grown to 22,211 sections, or juan, bound as 11,095 handwritten folio volumes, “...370 million characters on magnificent paper bordered with red silk, covered with perfect script in black lacquer with punctuation and notes in vermilion, all bound in imperial yellow damask silk”[5] (Polastron, 2007, p.102). This work was painstakingly copied character for character. Exact copies produced
not only a key dictionary, but more importantly an extraordinary, grand “lei-shu”[6] or encyclopedia, the earliest and largest one to date. Many of these traditional characters originally copied from ancient texts are no longer in use today. With the addition of 60 juan forming the index and the emperor contributing a preface in which he used the phrase “completed in the winter of our sixth year,”[7] the final encyclopedia contained 22,937 juan. At last, bearing the name of his reign period, the Yong le Emperor was satisfied and bestowed upon it the title of Yongle Dadian, Vast Documents of the Yongle Era or Grand Canon of Yongle.

Upon its completion, the original was kept in the Ming Dynasty capital of Nanjing. In 1409, a copy of this extraordinary work was to have been printed, but the expense of woodblock cutting was too great and the Yongle Dadian was never printed; it existed only in a simple manuscript copy in Nanjing. In 1421, Yongle moved the capital from Nanjing, along with the Yongle Dadian, to Beijing. Here it was kept in the emperor’s Old Summer Palace, in the Forbidden City[8] library called Wenyuan Ge. A 1557 fire nearly burned the emperor’s palace. In the 1560’s a second copy was made and housed in the Huang Shi Chen or Imperial Archives in Nanjing. A third manuscript copy was later moved to the Hanlin Academy Library during the period of the Emperor Yong Zheng (1723 – 1736), the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty. The original Yongle Dadian in Nanjing possibly perished by fire in 1449. However, there is speculation that the Jiajing Emperor, the 11th emperor of the Ming Dynasty, had it placed in his tomb and it may one day be found hidden in the tomb complex of Jiajing (Mote, 1986).

The first manuscript copy probably perished in the collapse of the Ming Dynasty (Zhang, 1986). Some volumes have long been scattered, but the largest number were destroyed when invading British and French troops sacked the Summer Palace and the Imperial Archive in the autumn of 1860. Along with burning the palace and taking away many precious artifacts now displayed in British, French, and U.S. museums, eyewitness Robert Swinhoe, recorded in his memoir “Narrative of the North China Campaign of 1860,” “What they could not carry away, they smashed to atoms” (Sanello, 2004, p.6). A bibliophile and British interpreter among the troops realized the historical importance of the Imperial Archive and managed to save several wagon loads of books which he sent to the British Museum. At this time, the last remaining copy was held in the Hanlin Academy Library, “…nearly complete…but not cared for,” (Coul ing, 1917, p. 256), and like its original was bound covered with yellow silk, each volume being 1 foot by 8 inches in length by one foot in breadth, and averaging 1 – 2 inches in thickness. Sadly, this, the only Yongle Dadian manuscript copy, long revered by scholars and emperors, over time fell prey to poor preservation whether through theft, rodents or insects, warfare or fire. Calculations indicate that of the 11,095 volumes existing in 1407, only about 800 remained in 1900. It was left to the Siege of Peking in 1900 to halve what little remained of the once magnificent Yongle Dadian.

Part II: The Hanlin Academy

The prestigious Hanlin Academy (Hanlin Yuan) was founded in the 8th century during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD) by Emperor Xuanzong. The Hanlin Academy originated as “…a society of scholar-officials. . . when medieval emperors granted their personal favorites an honored place as special advisors within the palace.” (Elam, 1989, p. 383 ). The Chinese term Hanlin has several interpretations, all equally appropriate descriptions explaining the institution’s various functions. Professor of East Asian Languages at Harvard University, Stephen Owen, interpreted Hanlin Yuan as “Forest of Writing Feathers,” “Forest of Brushes” “Brush Wood Court,” "Forest of Scholars" or even “Forest of Quills.” Taizu, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1328 – 1398) defined the
academy’s purpose: “. . . to provide a body of scholar-officials for literary services to the Inner Court” (Mote, 1999, p.601); they were responsible for drafting proclamations and edicts, processing documents and supplying specialists for high-level clerical support to the emperor. However, it was the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Yongle, who was interested in elevating the status of these officials, selecting only those who ranked the highest in their special examinations to serve in the prestigious academy. Yongle successfully turned daily administrative tasks over to higher ranking ministers with the goal of creating a more dignified and serious central government. As a result, the emperor fashioned this elite scholarly institution and designated the imperial officials to perform secretarial, archival, and literary tasks for the court.

It was during the Yongle’s reign that the Hanlin Academy became more involved in editing and compiling various projects, such as anthologies, and philosophical and literary works, such as the Yongle Dadian. The Hanlin contained Chinese bibliographic treasures and centuries of cultural accumulation. Hanlin scholars had access to the imperial library and archival resources. In a 1996 conference proceeding paper titled “The Hanlin Academy and Cultural Authority in the Early Fifteenth Century, Ditmanson asserted that “…that the academy functioned as the proxy of the court in the intellectual and literary circles of the day” and was “...a central repository of literati culture and tradition.” Fortunately, for the scholars who labored and lovingly compiled the Yongle Dadian would never know of the catastrophic losses the Yongle Dadian would suffer over the coming centuries, or of the demise of their most venerable academy.

Part III: The Siege of Peking

It is not within the scope of this article to give an account of the Boxer Rebellion[9] or the stirring story of the actual Siege of Peking during that late hot and humid summer of 1900. The author will leave that to the excellent treatments and numerous eye-witness accounts from 1900 siege diaries regarding the rebellion and the events that occurred inside the legations in Peking.[10] However, one of the most thorough and compelling accounts of the siege is by Sir Claude MacDonald. The various sources addressing the cause of the fire are in conflict. The Chinese attest that the British began the fire, and the British point to the Chinese. Yet, it is difficult to believe that the Chinese would deliberately set fire to their own library knowing their reverence for their cultural tradition and respect for their cultural record. Fleming argues that the diplomats did not believe the “… Chinese would do anything to imperil a building which housed the oldest and richest library in the world” (1959, p. 122). According to correspondence of the events at Peking, “At 11:15 a.m. a determined attack was made on the Hanlin inclosure. . .a fresh north wind was blowing and the flames were carried nearer and nearer to the Legation building; a stubborn fight was maintained until late in the afternoon when the flames were got under, but not before more than three-quarters of the temples, examination halls, and libraries forming the Hanlin College, had been destroyed” (Parliamentary Paper, No. 4, 1900, p. 5). There is also some thought that it was a shift in the strong north wind veering to the northwest that was the culprit. To quote Fleming again:

The old buildings burned like tinder with a roar which drowned the steady rattle of musketry as Tung Fu-shiang's Moslems fired wildly through the smoke from upper windows. Some of the incendiaries were shot down, but the buildings were an inferno and the old trees standing round them blazed like torches. The firefighters had already demolished the nearest of Hanlin halls. The next one was the library. (1959, p. 122).

Davis and Cheng continue:

It was then that the British defenders immediately began systematic destruction of most of
the remaining building of the Hanlin, along with their precious contents. Some of the books were taken as booty by the curious. Others were simply thrown on the ground and still others tossed into lotus ponds and later buried—all covered when the compound was leveled soon after the siege. (2007, p. 435).

What we do know is that the Hanlin Academy Library was “. . . China’s largest repository library” (Knuth, 2006, p. 183). There is no complete record or catalog of the library’s irreplaceable and unique contents. What we do know is that among the valuable and rare works lost in the flames was the pride of the library – the Yongle Dadian. Nearly 60 days after the assault on the legations and the destruction and looting of the Hanlin, “. . . Peking was reached, stormed at different points, and the Legations relieved, or rather what was left of them”[11] (Satow, 2006, p. 153).

Along with the destruction of the Yongle Dadian, the library also included 36,000 volumes of the Siku Quan Shu or the Four Treasure Library, which was completed in 1782, during the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty. It consisted of some 3,500 selected titles in 36,000 manuscript volumes and included 385 books drawn from the Yongle Dadian (Davis & Cheng, 2007, p.437).

As William Blades wrote in his 1888 book The Enemies of Fire, “THERE are many of the forces of Nature which tend to injure Books; but among them all not one has been half so destructive as Fire.” (1888, p.1). The following section will discuss several historical examples of the destruction of library collections and the importance of reclaiming and preserving libraries as intellectual and cultural repositories.

Part IV: Reclamation of Yongle Dadian

Throughout history, most nations have been marked by war and revolutions. There has been no shortage of a succession of devastation that has plagued libraries and archives throughout the world. Beginning with the famous Royal Library of Alexandria founded in the 3rd century B.C. and continuing with an inventory of other cultural repositories or institutions there are numerous examples of cultural destruction. (Prescott, 2005; Zgonjanin, 2005) The following list is only a small listing of intellectual and cultural obliteration.

- The House of Wisdom in Baghdad, circa 11th century; Glastonbury Abbey in Britain, 1539
- The Library of Congress, 1814
- The focus of this paper, the Hanlin Academic Library, 1900
- The Catholic University of Louvain Library, 1914, 1940
- The Commercial Press and the Oriental Library in Shanghai, 1932
- The Angevin Archives in Naples, 1943
- Jaffna Library Tamil, 1981
- The National University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarejevo, 1992
- The Hakim Nasser Khosrow Balkhi Cultural Centre, Afghanistan, 1998
- The National Library and Archives of Iraq and The Library of the Korans, Baghdad, 2003

What does it mean to lose libraries and great book collections? Why does the study of these losses extend our understanding of political, religious, social, cultural, and intellectual history? When we analyze the value of libraries and their importance to collective memory, and not merely value them for their purely informational content, we move into the realm of assessing group contributions to the intellectual and cultural heritages on a global scale. Valencia argues that group identity and culture are products of communication and that collections of text embody the collective memory of that group (2005). There is a Jewish proverb which says that when a man dies, a library dies with him. But the obverse is also true: when you de-
stroy a library you destroy the memory of a people and a culture, and render them culturally homeless (Bevan, 2005, p. 8). Furthermore, according to Boylan, the destruction of physical evidence of existence of a group’s culture is legally defined as genocide in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 (1993). The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict is the document that governs treatment of cultural property during war. Signed in 1954, this convention describes a model principle:

Cultural property is of importance not only to its originators or to the community of its origin, but to all humankind – it is in all of our interests to ensure that it is safeguarded when threatened by war. The Convention’s definitions of cultural property include not only the library collections, but the buildings used to house these collections. (Valencia, 2002, p. 11).

By safeguarding collections, culture, collective memory and group identity, libraries serve as intellectual and cultural repositories because they represent “. . . national and cultural identity and aspirations” and allow “. . . access to educational and cultural resources” for the entire human community (Rayward and Jenkins, 2007, p. 361). This paper has studied one example of such cultural destruction - The Hanlin Academy Library in China and, in particular, the Yongle Dadian. Nevertheless, recall that in the century following the First Opium War (1840 – 1842), other Chinese cultural relics had been swept away at a scale unprecedented in China’s history. Besides the pilfering in Beijing, from Lost Memory, a UNESCO report on libraries and archives destroyed and damaged during the twentieth century, the author would include Dunhuang Buddhist relics; the legendary city of Heishui in today’s Inner Mongolia; the three ancient kingdoms of Loulan, Milan, and Khotan, built in Northwest China’s Silk Road; as well as the earliest of Chinese inscriptions on tortoise shells and bones, pictographs, called jiaguwen, from the Shang Dynasty (16th – 11th centuries B.C.). While researching the destruction of Chinese libraries, the author would mention several of the great many private and public libraries that were destroyed by war or political upheaval. From 1937 to 1945, some of China’s most important losses occurred during the Sino-Japanese War and include the National University of Qinghua and National University of Hunan, the Institute of Technology, the Medical and Agricultural College of Hepei, Universities of Daxia, Guanghua, and Nanjing; all were destroyed by bombs. The Royal Asiatic Society in Shanghai had its collection transferred to Tokyo. From 1949 to 1957, following the Communist take-over, libraries all over China were purged of “reactionary, obscene and absurd” publications (Hoeven, 1996, p.15; Ting, 1983, p.139). During the Cultural Revolution, a systematic effort was made to purge and destroy all politically incorrect books. All libraries were closed for various lengths of time between 1966 and 1970. Some were closed permanently and burned.[12] Others were thoroughly purged; only the books of Marx, Lenin and Mao were spared. Although no record was kept of the losses, it is clear that destruction of books took place on an unprecedented scale (Ting, 1983, p.141).

There is no record of what was in the collection of the Hanlin Academy Library. The contents are irreplaceable. Only about 370 volumes, or 809 juan (sections), of the more than 11,000 volumes of this great 15th century encyclopedia have been accounted for in China and elsewhere. On a slighter, brighter note, after World War II the Soviet Union returned 64 volumes --11 volumes in 1951 and 53 more in 1954. East Germany returned 3 volumes in 1955. By 1959, the National Library of China possessed 216 volumes from the original collection. The Library of Congress in the United States received 29 volumes in 1923 and 12 more a few years later. These 41 volumes in the United States have yet to be returned (Xinhua News Agency, 1996). The United Kingdom has 51 volumes, Germany 5, and the Republic of Korea and Japan both are keep-
ers of the *Yongle Dadian*. Duplications or photocopies of the extant volumes were accomplished by the Chinese Press, which published *juan* 797 since 1959 and the Taiwanese, who published *juan* 742 in 1962. In 1963, *juan* 6933 and 6934, together in one volume, was purchased by the British Museum from the widow of Captain Francis Garden Poole. Poole was in charge of the British defense in the legation during the siege and rescued/looted the volume.[13] Other volumes continue to be held: Cornell University has *juan* 13,853 in the Wason Collection, The National Central Library in Taipei has *juan* 7,527, and The Chester Beatty Library in Dublin has *juan* 803/4, 805/6, 10, 110/1. None of these have been returned to China. Out of 22,877 *juan* (excluding the table of contents), only 809 *juan* remain and can be accounted for, less than 4% of the original.

In the 2001, at the Society for Ming Studies Evening Meeting in Association with the Asian Studies Conference in Chicago, Soren Edgren, the distinguished Sinologist and Chinese bibliographer at Princeton in charge of The Chinese Rare Book Project at Princeton University, outlined his proposal for the return to the People’s Republic of China of the original *Yongle Dadian* volumes held in American libraries. He argued “… that the publication of reprinted versions makes it unnecessary to hold these materials in this country United States and that returning them would be a significant gesture of goodwill”. The following year, at the first international symposium, Edgren addressed the International Federation Library Association delegates in Beijing marking the 600th anniversary of the *Yongle Dadian* compilation. There 90 experts and noted scholars from over 50 institutions “agreed it is imperative to reprint all the remaining parts of the encyclopedia so it can be studied and shared by more people” (Bray, 2002). The National Library of China reports only 62 volumes of the 400 volumes extant. The most complete of these surviving later Ming Dynasty copies of the *Yongle Dadian* are kept there, the largest library in Asia and the fifth largest in the world. Also attending the symposium, Ren Jiuyu, director of the National Library, stated, "We plan to finish duplicating all the existing volumes that can be found in the Chinese mainland within one and half years” and “… hope s we can reprint the other volumes scattered outside China” (Bray, 2002). Also in attendance, University of Texas Professor Davis, a leading scholar in library history in the United States, led a plan to digitize the *Yongle Dadian*. For the first time in 600 years, the *Yongle Dadian* has been republished by The Beijing Library Press. Full-size replicas have been made of all volumes held at the National Library of China. "It is the first time in the world to have photocopies of the encyclopedia in its original size, color and style," Guo Youling, director with Beijing Library Press, told Xinhua. "We are making every effort to make it resemble the originals so as to give readers an idea of the *Yongle Dadian*" (Bray, 2002). While these facsimile reprints are an important contribution towards preservation of this treasure, digitizing the *Yongle Dadian* would be an ideal solution. According to Edgren “A few years ago, a digital edition of the *Yongle Dadian* (*Yongle Dadian* was planned to be published jointly by Gale Publishing and the National Library of China, but nothing happened” (Edgren, personal communication, July 10, 2009).

Answers to lingering questions elude us: “How many more volumes from this unique collection exist in European and Japanese research libraries or are in private hands is a matter of speculation,” said Davis, “How many souvenir volumes, carried home by people in the Allied Legations in 1900 and hidden away in attic trunks, is unknown. Some could yet appear” (Bray, 2002).

**Notes**

The author would like to thank Amanda Hagan for allowing me use of her home library and Ana Caberra-Luna for her assistance in locating other needed library materials.
[1] Also referred to as Yongle da dian, Yung Lo Dian, Yonglo dadian and Yung-lo ta-tien

[2] Dr. Walter Tennyson Swingle (1871-1952) spoke Chinese and accumulated a large personal library on Chinese agriculture procuring over 100,000 books on Chinese botany for the Library of Congress.

[3] It is not unlikely that the proposal came from the Grand Secretariat in conjunction with the Emperor. This was a time of greater collaboration among the Hanlin scholars and the Emperor. 66% of all Ming grand secretaries had also served in the Ministry of Rites, and 56% of the latter went directly from the Ministry of Rites to the Grand Secretariat. In Ming political life, we see the Hanlin Academy, Ministry of Rites, and Grand Secretariat converging. In a typical bureaucratic career, then, a successful graduate (normally with high honors) in the metropolitan and palace examinations was first appointed to the Hanlin Academy where he served the court as a compiler, editor, or as personal secretary to the emperor. From there he went on to serve in a variety of possible positions but eventually became a fixture in the Ministry of Rites, often as a capital or provincial examination official supervising the examination system. The Ministry of Rites then served as a springboard for promotion to the Grand Secretariat, which until the eighteenth century remained the highest advisory body in the state apparatus. See: Benjamin Elam, Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China: The Hanlin and Donglin Academies. Modern China, Vol 15, No 4 Oct., 1989, p. 385.

[4] Wen has been a central concept in Confucian thought throughout its long history in China. The character wen originally denoted the marks of writing on bamboo or other surfaces, a meaning that it continues to carry today—e.g. denoting a piece of writing (wennun, an essay or thesis) or literature in general. But already before Confucius’ time, it had also come to mean culture or civilization in general—particularly literate culture. Thus the modern word for culture is wenhua, literally “writing-transformation,” i.e. the transformations wrought by literacy see: Joseph A. Adler, The Qianlong Emperor and the Confucian “Temple of Culture.” Xian means fundamental laws or polity. For a brief but fine reading of all things Ming see: Hucker, The Traditional State in Ming Times, p.51).

[5] Bound in 11,100 volumes, covered with yellow silk, each volume being 1 foot by 8 inches in length by one foot in breadth, and averaging 1 – 2 inches in thickness, each juan (section) contained about 20 leaves, making a total of 917,480 pages for the whole work. Each page consisted of 16 columns of characters averaging 25 to each column, or a total of 366,992.00 characters (nearly 3.7 million characters) See: An Exhibition of Oriental and European Manuscripts, Bulletin of the New York Public Library, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, January, 1914. To gain a better understanding of the vastness of this monumental work, the Yung Lo Da Dian 12 times the size of the encyclopedia put together by the 18th Century French author Diderot, and which experts predict hit the scales at 40 tons. (Davis, 1996).


[7] In this preface the number of juan is given as 22,937, excluding the table of contents 60 juan, obviously the editors had added some 700 juan in the interim between Dec 14, 1407 and the writing of the preface Dec. 17, 1408. Also: the emperor’s referral to the “sixth year” corresponds to the sixth year of his reign, not the sixth year of the compilation. See: Goodrich, More on the Yongle Dadian

[8] The Forbidden City was China’s imperial palace from the Ming Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty,
also known as the Manchu Dynasty and was the last ruling Chinese Dynasties of China, ruling from 1644 to 1912.


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