A Study of the Western Readers' Acceptance of the English Translation of The Legends of the Condor Heroes: An Approach of Sentiment Analysis Technology

ZHANG Jiajia

Northwestern Polytechnical University, School of Foreign Studies, Shannxi, Xi'an,710114

ABSTRACT

Sentiment analysis is a natural language processing technology used to identify the readers' emotional attitudes or opinions on various texts. Its application makes it accessible to acquire the comments of overseas readers on a large scale and quantify those directly. This research employs a mixed-methods approach to examine Western readers' reception of the English translation of The Legends of the Condor Heroes. Specifically, we conducted computational sentiment analysis on reader reviews from Amazon and Goodreads to quantify their emotional attitudes, supplemented by qualitative analysis of representative comments. The results show that this translation has an overall acceptance among Western readers. Positive reviews predominantly highlight three compelling elements: captivating portrayal of Eastern fantasy martial arts, immersive narratives integrating ancient Chinese historical contexts, and enlightening growth trajectory of the protagonist. Conversely, critical feedback focuses on four primary areas: inconsistent and overly literal naming conventions, underdeveloped secondary characters, prolonged combat sequences, and hyperbolic marketing claims that create dissonance between reader expectations and textual reality. These identified issues demonstrate significant correlations with diminished reading engagement.

Keywords: Jin Yong, martial arts, literary translation, sentiment analysis.

1. Introduction

Jin Yong, along with Liang Yusheng and Gu Long, is renowned as one of the "Three Great Masters of Martial Arts Novels." Throughout his lifetime, Jin Yong published 15 works, widely popular in the Chinese-speaking world. Since the 1970s, his novels have been translated into multiple languages, including Japanese and Korean. However, only four have been translated

into English and officially published, signaling slow progress in their dissemination within the English-speaking world.

It wasn't until 2018 that the first English translation of *The Legends of the Condor Heroes*, the first volume *A Hero Born*, was released in the UK by translator Anna Holmwood, a Swedish-British translator worked with the publisher Maclehose Press. Once published, the translation quickly gained widespread attention, reprinting seven times within a month, and received coverage from overseas media such as *The Guardian* and *The Quartz.* This translation has achieved considerable success overseas, to some extent, marking a turning point for Jin Yong's novels in English and set a precedent for the translation of Chinese literature.

While there is strong demand for foreign culture in target-language countries, most translations stem from the aspirations of the source country(Bao, 2015). For Chinese literature to truly "go out", faithful translation alone is far from enough; it is also necessary to objectively evaluate the effect of "going in". The most direct way is to examine the reception of the target readers (Xie, 2014), because book reviews made by readers on some book promotion websites or professional forums can illustrate the popularity and even survival of a (translated) literary work(Wu, 2021). Overseas readers, especially general ones, are key to a translation's success. Only when these readers engage with the work can it be considered effectively disseminated.

Therefore, this research investigates reader reviews on the English translation of *The Legends of the Condor Heroes, A Hero Born* through sentiment analysis—a text mining technique. By identifying the prevailing sentiments and general reception among Western readers, this research reflects on the further translation of Chinese wuxia literature and its literary position in the English-speaking world.

2. Literature Review

Since the publication of Anna Holmwood's English translation *The Legends of the Condor Heroes: A Hero Born* in 2018, scholarly interest in this work has grown rapidly, reaching a peak in 2020 with 35 academic papers published, before a gradual decline. Existing studies can be broadly classified into intratextual and extratextual research, with the former comprising 70% of the total.

Intratextual studies focus on micro-level analyses of the translated text, primarily examining translation strategies and translator behavior. For example, Zhao and Gou (2019) highlight Holmwood's creative translation strategies as a key factor in the translation's success, noting her effective integration of form, content, and linguistic creativity. Xu and Zhang (2020) argue that Holmwood reinterpreted the traditional translation principle of "faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance" (Xin Da Ya), emphasizing the importance for translators to deeply understand cultural

differences and make adaptive choices at grammatical and cultural levels. Similarly, Wang (2020) explores the translation of culture-specific terms, demonstrating Holmwood's successful application of functional equivalence to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps.

In contrast, extratextual studies prioritize the mechanisms of dissemination and reception. Wu and Liu (2019) employ the 5W communication model (communicator, audience, content, medium) to analyze factors behind the translation's success in English-speaking markets. Deng and Ye (2019) compare reader reviews and sales rankings of four Jin Yong translations on Goodreads and Amazon, identifying market-specific drivers of A Hero Born's popularity. Liu and Xu (2019) analyze reception through media reviews and online reader feedback, proposing strategies to enhance future translations via capital-driven publishing practices.

In summary, there are some notable limitations in current research. Firstly, most studies remain confined to conventional translation theories (e.g., translation strategies, translator behavior), lacking empirical analysis of reader reception, which is critical for evaluating cross-cultural impact. Secondly, existing studies on overseas dissemination rely heavily on qualitative textual or literary analysis, which risks subjectivity (Wu & Li, 2018). Additionally, limited access to reader feedback data hinders objective conclusions, primarily due to challenges in corpus collection—particularly the scarcity of comprehensive reader response datasets. These gaps underscore the need for data-driven approaches (e.g., sentiment analysis, corpus linguistics) to complement traditional methods, enabling a more holistic understanding of how translated works resonate with global audiences.

3. Methodology

The study will take the following steps in analyzing the reception of the English translation of this novel.

Firstly, reader reviews of the English translation of *The Legends of the Condor Heroes* were collected from Amazon and Goodreads, two reputable and mainstream western social book platforms. As of November 13, 2024, the number of reviews in English collected by Python from Amazon and Goodreads was 980 and 166 respectively, for a total of 1,146. Then, the study will preprocess all the obtained online reviews, where the nltk program is utilized to perform preprocessing for cleaning the corpus and expelling stop words. The reason for cleaning the corpus is to decrease possible negative effect of such "noise" within the corpus as emojis and additional spaces on the the analyses; meanwhile, excluding stop words can decrease the impact of functional words on the results, and lemmatization minimize the impact of inflectional changes in English on the investigation, for example, undesirable reiteration of content words. Altogether, 1,094 valid reviews were obtained and a corpora containing these reviews was built.

Secondly, high-frequency words in the corpora were extracted and a word cloud was created to visualize the acceptance of the English translation of *A Hero Born* by overseas readers. Specifically, Jieba word segmentation was performed on these reviews. Then, IF-IWF algorithm was used to extract keywords more accurately and finally Wordcloud was drawn. Subsequently, it can visualize the focus and theme of overseas reader reviews.

Thirdly, sentiment analyses were performed on the preprocessed review corpora in English. A coarse-grained sentiment analysis method was employed to assess the overall sentiment of the readers toward the translation. In the process, using the Pattern Analyzer --- a sentiment analysis tool in TextBlob, the overall sentiment extremes of the reviews were calculated. Furthermore, an attribute-level sentiment analysis was conducted, providing more granular insights to comprehensively identify the main factors influencing readers' reviews. Then, with the assistance of AntConc, the English reviews with respect to character, plot and translation were be sorted and classified. Subsequently, with both sentiment analyses and detailed semantic examinations, the receptive status of this English version can be revealed.

4. Results

4.1 Word Cloud of Reader Reviews

Word cloud is a tool that visualizes the keywords appeared the most frequently in the text. The higher the frequency of the keyword is, the larger its font-size is. For this reason, word cloud can vividly display the main theme of a corpus. After removing keywords such as "book" "story" "read" that are meaningless to the theme analysis of comment text, a total of 570 keywords were obtained. Among theme, 68 keywords with a frequency greater than or equal to 30 are selected as high-frequency keywords. Then, we used Python to create a word cloud to visualize the keywords in reader comments(see Figure 1 below). In addition, the top 20 high-frequency keywords are selected to make the reader comment high-frequency glossary(see Table 1 below). We can see from these two figures below that the keywords of reader comments on the English translation of A Hero Born can be divided into three categories: (1) title of works and personal names such as The Legend of Condor Heroes, A Hero Born, Anna Holmwood, etc., (2) keywords associated with evaluation such as Chinese, character, translation, kung fu and so on, indicating that readers try to understand the marital arts of Jin Yong′s novels by reading the English translations, and (3)words associated with reading experience such as excellent and good, which show the positive evaluation and good acceptance of the reader community. Through these two figures and intensive reading of the reader reviews, it is found that overseas readers' comments on the English version of A Hero Born mainly focus on the following aspects.

Fig. 1 Word Cloud of Reader Review of *A Hero Born*

Table 1 High-frequency Glossary of Reader Reviews of A Hero Born

Number	Word	Frequency	Number	Word	Frequency
1	Chinese	753	11	wuxia	236
2	character	634	12	fantasy	236
3	translation	622	13	great	230
4	like	598	14	action	223
5	kung fu	510	15	fight	195
6	Guo Jing	433	16	epic	195
7	martial arts	420	17	khan	186
8	hero	361	18	enjoy	180
9	name	335	19	history	169
10	good	256	20	*The Lord of Rings*	125

First, the word "Chinese" is in the first place, indicating that readers pay special attention to some Chinese cultural elements contained in the translation, with respect to martial arts, ancient history and religion. High-frequency words such as "kung fu" "martial arts, wuxia" "action" and "fight" appear repeatedly, fully reflecting the brand appeal of wuxia culture, while "move(104 times)", "battle(48 times)" and other words are also mentioned, further indicating readers' enthusiasm for action description. In addition, the "exotic culture" contained in the translation also stimulate readers' interest in reading. Historical words related to Genghis khan and Mongol empire such as "khan" "Empire(77 times)" and "Mongolia(43 times)" as well as religious words such as "taoist(44 times)" and "monk(40 times)", all indicate that this translation has successfully struck a chord in presenting Chinese history and culture.

Second, the word "character" follows closely, demonstrating readers' high attention to the construction of Chinese characters. Guo Jing, the protagonist, was mentioned 598 times in the comments, with one reader saying: " His growth process shows beautiful traditional Chinese values, such as national feelings and collectivism."

Third, the word "translation" appears 622 times, indicating readers' attention to the translation. Some readers have recognized the overall readability and flow well of the translation. Nevertheless, some readers doubts the name translation, criticizing its excessive literal translation and inconsistent before and after.

Fourth, there are more positive words in the reviews, such as "like" "good" "fantasy" "great" and "enjoy", which demonstrates that this version has a good overseas acceptance. Although there were some negative words in reader comments, such as "hard(104 times)" "bad(72 times)" "old(62 times)" and "disappointed(32 times)", they were far less frequent than positive one.

Fifth, "The Lord of Rings" appears 125 times in the reviews, reflecting the significant role of well-known media reviews and reports in literary translation. Many western media have compared the common themes of Chinese and Western literature, mainly comparing Jin Yong with Tolkien, *The Legends of the Condor Heroes* with *The Lord of the Rings,* Western fantasy with Eastern martial arts. Meanwhile, words related to translators and publishers such as "Anna Holmwood (107 times)" "St. Martin (60 times)" and "publisher (58 times)" also appeared frequently in the comments.

4.2 Coarse-grained Sentiment Analysis of Reader Reviews

Sentiment analysis, also known as opinion mining, refers to the use of computational techniques to identify and analyze the subjectivity, opinions, emotions, and polarity within texts, ultimately classifying their emotional tendencies (Yang et al., 2013). Sentiment analysis is a text mining technique which helps uncover readers' opinions pf these translated literary works from their online reviews. This analysis can be conducted at three textual levels: word, sentence, or text (Yang et al., 2013; Pang et al., 2004). Based on granularity, it is categorized into coarse-grained analysis (text- or sentence-level) and fine-grained analysis (word-level). This study focuses on text-level sentiment analysis, as the research object comprises online reader reviews, which typically function as complete textual units. Two primary methods dominate text-level sentiment analysis: lexicon-based approaches and statistical machine learning models (Li et al., 2017). Each method has distinct strengths and limitations, with applicability varying across text types. Given the relatively small sample size of this study, a hybrid approach combining lexicon-based analysis with both coarse- and fine-grained perspectives will be adopted.

Sentiment analysis has proven effective in product review evaluation, public opinion monitoring, and information prediction (Zhao et al., 2010). Recent scholarly efforts have extended its application to assess the overseas reception and cultural transmission of Chinese literary works (Zhang, 2019; Shi & Deng, 2020; Li & Wei, 2022), offering methodological insights for this research. Building on these precedents, this study employs Python-based sentiment analysis to examine international reader reviews of the English translation The Legends of the Condor Heroes: A Hero Born (translated by Anna Holmwood). Specifically, the Pattern Analyzer tool will process reviews from online book platforms to evaluate the translated work's reception in English-speaking markets.

We used the TextBlob toolkit and the sentiment analyzer to categorize the emotional inclination of the reader comments. The algorithm regards all comments as subjective evaluations and each review has a positive evaluation value and a negative evaluation value. The evaluation value given by Pattern Analyzer is between -1 and 1, which are the lower and upper limits of the emotion value. When the sentiment score is between 0 and 1, the review is considered to be positive; when the sentiment score is between -1 and 0, the review is considered to be negative. And when the sentiment score is 0, the evaluation is neutral. We obtained the final results as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 The number, proportion and average sentiment scores of each type of comment

Review Types	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Number	893	123	78
Proportion	81.63%	11.24%	7.13%
Average Sentiment Scores	0.22	0	- 0.15

For the reception based on the holistic perspective, the study finds that there are 893 positive sentiment ratings, 123 neutral sentiment ratings and 78 negative sentiment ratings in the translation of *A Hero Born* by Anna Holmwood, respectively accounting for 81.63%, 11.24% and 7.13%. When it comes to the sentiment scores, the average values of the positive sentiment are 0.22 while those of the negative sentiment are -0.15. All the details are illustrated in Fig.3, in which we can see that this English translation is largely welcomed by overseas readers.

Perusing 82 reviews that ranked in the top 10% of positive sentiment scores and contain 50 words or above, we found that these readers who liked the Holmwood translation of *A Hero Born* mentioned the following points.

The first is the fascination with Easternfantasy martial arts. The novel's construction of a martial arts universe within ancient Chinese historical contexts and its heroic archetypes are recognized as possessing universal resonance. Readers' enduring interest in Chinese martial arts narratives stems partially from the cultural legacy of classic kung fu cinema. One reader remarked, "This epic saga of martial arts adventure constitutes a magnificent century-spanning legend, replete with passion and warfare." The translation's vivid combat depictions receive particular acclaim, with readers noting: "The ingeniously choreographed fight sequences, featuring intricate martial techniques with poetic nomenclature, evoke the visceral impact of classic martial arts films." These observations demonstrate the translation's success in conveying the visual dynamism and artistic expressiveness inherent in the wuxia genre, while reaffirming the transnational appeal of canonical works.

The second is the engagement with ancient Chinese history. Set against the turbulent era of Song-Jin conflicts and Genghis Khan's ascendancy, the narrative provides occidental readers with a portal into Chinese historiography. Multiple readers described it as "a mesmerizing voyage through 12th-century China and Mongolia," expressing particular fascination with the cultural alterity of this ancient civilization. The translation's effective mediation of historical contexts is evidenced by evaluations such as: "An extraordinary tale – an incredible Chinese legend and heroic epic."

The third is the appreciation of protagonist characterization. The bildungsroman of Guo Jing, a protagonist embodying Confucian virtues of benevolence and moral integrity, presents a distinctive narrative paradigm. Contrasting with Western heroic traditions emphasizing noble lineage or preternatural abilities, Guo's growth from an ingenuous peasant youth through persistent self-cultivation offers fresh perspectives. A reader's commentary concludes this appeal: "The narrative core – a virtuous youth navigating his path in a complex world – generates profound empathetic engagement with each developmental stage." Guo's journey not only manifests traditional Chinese values of familial and national commitment but also challenges Western heroic conventions through its emphasis on ethical introspection.

Also, after reading all the 78 negative reviews, we found that critical feedback primarily addresses three aspects. Firstly, readers noted inconsistencies in personality depiction and Romanization of names (detailed analysis follows). Secondly, readers expressed dissatisfaction to the lengthy combat descriptions. While martial sequences enhance genre authenticity, their protracted nature risks alienating readers unversed in wuxia conventions. Critiques include: "My cultural curiosity ultimately outweighed patience for exhaustive technique cataloguing" and "Certain combative episodes feel cinematically contrived – akin to action sequences punctuated by dramatic scoring to maintain viewer engagement." One trenchant observation suggests: "This narrative seems better suited for serialized visual adaptation than literary medium." Thirdly,

readers criticized the marketing hyperbole. Excessive promotional comparisons between Jin Yong's work and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy generated inflated expectations. A representative critique states: "The most regrettable aspect remains the publisher's ill-advised Lord of the Rings parallel on the cover." Another astutely observes: "The promotional framework substantially contributed to negative receptions." This underscores the necessity for culturally calibrated marketing strategies that avoid overstatement while maintaining promotional efficacy.

4.3 Fine-grained Sentiment Analysis of Reader Reviews

Given that reader evaluations of translated works as commercial products typically address multiple dimensions—including content, cover design, authorial intent, translation quality, purchasing experience, and reading impressions—it is critical to adopt quantitative research methods to systematically examine core aspects of reviews directly tied to the translated text. This approach enables the identification of nuanced emotional responses toward different facets of the translation. Furthermore, integrating detailed qualitative analysis of review content ensures a precise understanding of reader perspectives, thereby facilitating an objective assessment of the translation's reception among international audiences.

For this study, the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) was employed to segment the preprocessed reader corpus into 1,510 sentences. By applying keyword filters related to three analytical dimensions—characterization, plot, and translation quality—we extracted key sentences (see Table 3) from the corpus. These sentences, which explicitly reference the predefined keywords, serve as the foundation for subsequent sentiment analysis.

Table 3 The number, proportion and average sentiment scores of each type of comment

Dimensions	Keywords	Quantity(sentence)
Character	character	420
Plot	plot/story	580
Translation	translate/translation	510

To systematically evaluate reader perceptions of the translated work, sentiment analysis was conducted on the extracted key sentences using TextBlob's Pattern Analyzer. This process involved calculating sentiment scores and classifying emotional polarity (positive, neutral, or negative) for each sentence across three dimensions: character, plot, and translation. The results demonstrate distinct patterns in reader evaluations.

Character: Readers expressed predominantly positive sentiments toward character portrayals, with 320 sentences (76.19%) classified as positive, averaging a polarity score of 0.23. Neutral evaluations accounted for 8.10% (34 sentences), while negative feedback constituted 15.71% (66 sentences), with an average polarity of -0.12.

Plot: The narrative structure received the highest approval, as 466 sentences (80.34%) reflected positive sentiments, achieving a mean polarity of 0.25. Neutral and negative evaluations were comparatively limited, comprising 7.07% (41 sentences) and 12.59% (73 sentences), respectively. The latter group exhibited a stronger negative polarity (-0.14) than observed in characterization critiques.

Translation: While still majority positive (356 sentences, 69.80%), this dimension revealed the most polarized responses. Positive evaluations averaged 0.25 in polarity, whereas negative feedback (18.43%, 94 sentences) showed the sharpest disapproval, with a mean polarity of -0.19. Neutral assessments accounted for 11.76% (60 sentences), indicating a higher proportion of ambivalent views compared to other categories.

As illustrated in Figure 2, which presents the distribution and mean polarity of sentiment across dimensions, readers exhibited the highest satisfaction with the plot, followed by characterization, and lastly translation quality. While overall sentiment polarity scores for both positive and negative evaluations were moderate, the translation dimension displayed the strongest negative polarity (-0.19), with 18.34% of comments expressing dissatisfaction.

Fig. 3 Distribution of Sentiment Scores in Key Reader Review Sentences
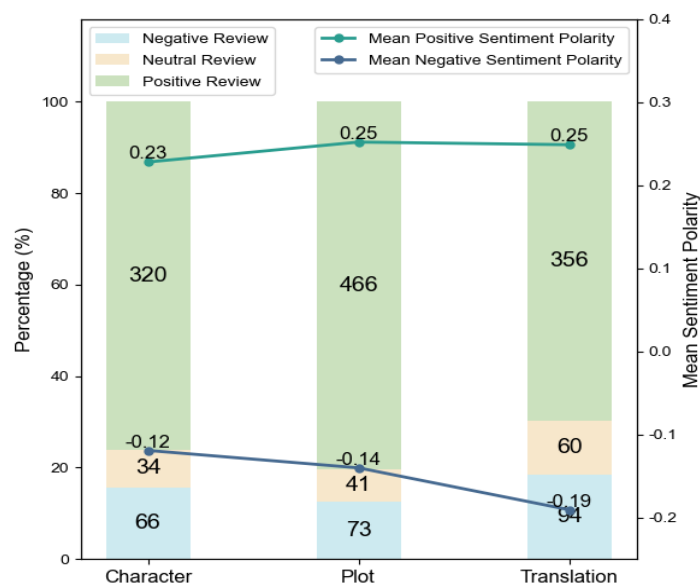
Using AntConc software, collocation analysis centered on the keyword "plot" (spanning three words to the left and right) revealed the top three associated adjectives: "twist," "intertwining," and "energetic." These terms all praised the narrative's complexity and multi-layered structure. One reader emphatically stated, "If I could give this book 10 stars, I would." Additionally, the integration of Chinese historical and cultural elements resonated positively. Comments such as "The backstory and setup are fantastic, and the inclusion of historical figures kept me thoroughly engaged" underscored readers' appreciation for the novel's cultural depth.

Collocation analysis for the keyword "character" identified "great," "rich," and "intricate" as the most frequent adjectives, reflecting broad approval for the diversity and vividness of character portrayals. However, negative descriptors like "thin" and "flat" emerged in critiques of underdeveloped secondary characters. Readers noted that "aside from the main protagonists, most characters feel underdeveloped and exist merely to serve plot needs." Some explicitly framed the novel as "plot-driven rather than character-driven," suggesting potential dissatisfaction among readers who prioritize nuanced character arcs.

Collocation analysis using AntConc software, centered on the keyword "translation" (with a span of three words to the left and right), identified the five most frequent adjectives: "lost," "literal," "excellent," "mediocre," and "inconsistent." A minority of readers praised the translation as "excellent," commending its overall readability (easy to understand) and fluidity (flow well). These readers acknowledged the inherent challenges of translating wuxia fiction, with some admitting they had initially deemed the genre "untranslatable." However, the majority raised concerns, particularly criticizing inconsistent naming conventions and excessive literalness. For instance, key characters such as Huang Rong, Mei Chaofeng, Yang Tiexin, Mu Nianci, and Guo Xiaotian were rendered as "Lotus Huang," "Cyclone Mei," "Ironheart Yang," "Mercy Mu," and "Skyfury Guo" respectively. These hybrid translations—neither strictly phonetic nor semantic— were perceived by many as "unnecessarily Westernized," disrupting cultural authenticity. In contrast, names like Guo Jing and Yang Kang retained direct phonetic transliteration (Guo Jing, Yang Kang), while Mongolian and Jurchen names preserved their linguistic roots (Genghis Khan Temujin, Khojin). Readers noted that this lack of translational consistency across naming strategies caused confusion, undermining the text's coherence and readability. Beyond naming issues, critiques extended to omissions in narrative details, truncated character development, and a perceived loss of the original's poetic luster. One reader remarked, "The translation feels functional but loses the lyrical beauty that defines Chinese wuxia." These findings underscore the delicate balance required in mediating culturally embedded texts, where translational choices—even minor ones—profoundly shape reader perceptions of authenticity and engagement.

5. Conclusion

Despite criticisms regarding inconsistent and overly literal naming conventions, underdeveloped secondary characters, prolonged combat sequences, and hyperbolic marketing claims, this study reveals that the translated work achieved favorable reception among its target audience. Readers speak highly of three compelling elements: captivating portrayal of Eastern fantasy martial arts, immersive narratives integrating ancient Chinese historical contexts, and enlightening growth trajectory of the protagonist.

The primary target audience for translated works is not academic researchers or library patrons, but rather the general readers. As Cui Yinghui (2017) noted, "The ultimate fate of a work rests with how genuinely resonant, responsive, and accepted it proves to be among ordinary readers". When translating classical cultural texts, it is imperative to consider the target readers' aspirations, practical needs, and contemporary relevance of canonical works.

Consequently, every phase of literary export—from text selection and translator recruitment to typographic design, print quality, and post-publication market analysis (e.g., social media monitoring)—requires meticulous orchestration. Each translation embodies China's cultural identity and commitment to global dialogue. To resonate deeply with international readers, translations must achieve linguistic coherence, contextual fidelity, and cultural accessibility. Only through such rigorous alignment can translated works transcend superficial reception to foster meaningful cross-cultural engagement, ultimately advancing the global reach of Chinese culture.

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