

An Ecological Model for the Cultural-Creative Cluster: A Study of Shenzhen's OCT-LOFT and Its Creative Management

Yuan Yuan, Chao-ming Chen

Introduction

The concept of creative clusters is a critical issue in recent research literature on creative economy, creative cities, and cultural policy. As a well-known industry developing model in the context of industrial economy and scale economy, the business cluster was first initiated by Marshall (1890) in the term of 'industrial districts' and then developed by Michael Porter (1990) into the policy mainstream. While the economic and industrial properties of culture and creativity have been legitimated and accepted broadly, the cluster model in traditional industries has been given great emphasis on cultural and creative industries by governments, private sectors and academic groups, hoping that the proximity in geography of creative companies and the burgeoning creative clusters can help boost the creative economy. Such kind of expectation lies mainly on the high level of spatial proximity which is usually thought efficient for tacit knowledge exchanging and cooperation (Scott 2000; Pratt 2004; O' Connor 2004; Schoales 2006) and on the cultural regeneration as a dominant urban/regional cultural/economic development model (Mommaas 2004).

However, since the concept of creative cluster is too extensive with

the sectors of creative industries spanning from visual arts to software developing, to discuss the concept of creative clusters in general offers little practical application for various creative cluster developments. Many scholars spotted this problem in their respective research literature and commonly proposed a category approach to respond to the heated debates on the necessity and abuse of creative clusters (Mommaas 2009; Kong 2009; Shan 2014). Responding to this debate, this paper is also an attempt to construct a developing and promising model for cultural-creative clusters.

Shan (2014) categorizes current main cultural-creative clusters as four: the first category includes those relying on the upgrading and renovation of old buildings; the second category are those clusters affiliated with higher education institutions and high-tech industries development zones; the third category starts from the cultural community and artists' villages facilitated by traditional cultural resources; and the fourth category is cultural consumption-leading with entertainment and leisure zones as its main business operation. But just as Hans Mommaas (2009) suggested, the notion of cultural clusters would be too narrow for the reason of not taking into account the ways in which cultural forms of creativity feed into other creative realms, while it is simply too broad which cannot sufficiently differentiate between different forms of creativity. Mommaas used the phrase "cultural-creative" instead. Lily Kong (2009) went further to point

out “there is as yet insufficient nuancing and detail in our understanding of different type of creative clusters.” She proposed a theoretical study of the process at work in different types of clusters.

Starting from this discussion of the nature and development of creative clusters, many scholars tended to use Chinese cultural-creative clusters, which have already served exemplary models, as springboards from which to explore the past, present and future prospects of creative clusters. Gu (2014) studied cultural industries and creative clusters in Shanghai, under her expectation to examine ‘cluster theories’ in different social, political and culture contexts. Zheng & Chan (2013, 2014) gave a very specific and quantitative study of ‘property-led clusters’ in Shanghai, with a conclusion that the inter-company networking is the main benefit for creative SMEs in creative clusters. Zielke & Waibel (2014) employed a governance perspective to make a comparative study of creative spaces in different cities of China, mainly Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Li & Cheng & Wang (2014) did a case study of Dafen oil painting village of Shenzhen, analyzing the urban redevelopment strategy and city branding. And Justin O’Connor & Liu (2014) exactly conducted a specific case study of Shenzhen’s OCT-LOFT, connecting the cluster with the city as a “dream city.”

We could easily find that scholars have paid more and more academic interest in specific city’s creative cluster development under social, political

and culture contexts. However, most of these studies gave their observations from an external perspective on the levels of national or local state policies and city branding. Successful cultural-creative cluster itself, as an organic, holistic and sustainable development entity, was seldom given enough discussion from the perspective of cluster management.

Developed along this research route, this paper is focusing on one of the most representative, popular and hence most disputable categories of creative cluster--the cultural-creative cluster as a symbol of connecting cultural regeneration and industrial heritage preservation. Using Shenzhen's OCT-LOFT as its case, this paper is attempting to find an inspiring developing model from the perspective of creative ecology and creative management, examining both the external and internal factors of the cultural –creative cluster.

A theoretic framework: creative ecology and creative management

In the specific category of cultural-creative cluster connected with space regeneration, our principal argument is that we cannot view the cluster as a pure economic space, neither as a pure cultural or historical space. To the contrary, we would like to view this kind of cluster as a double-orientation space, not only a hub of creativity with symbolic cultural implications often known as “creative milieu” or city branding but also a creative product of space economy under the framework of creative

ecology and creative management.

For instance, the abandoned factories in post-Fordism cities are usually taken as the left-over of Fordism city or Fordism developing stage. Yet, with a widespread nostalgic mood in post-modern society, they are often seen as industrial heritages with special architecture features or spatial texture. The SOHO art district of New York is such a cluster prototype for successful urban regeneration. One crucial thing in New York SOHO case is its “from bottom to top” development model.

How does this model work? Can this model be applied to other clusters? In order to answer these questions, we believe that John Howkins’ creative ecology and Bilton’s creative management will provide us with good foundations to re-think and re-construct a pragmatic model, a model from bottom to top and from top to bottom.

John Howkins (2009) proposed the concept of “creative ecology” in his same name’s book. For him, “ecology is the study of relationship between organisms and their environment, which probably includes other organisms.” He further elaborates,

a creative ecology is a niche where diverse individuals express themselves in a systemic and adaptive way, using ideas to produce new ideas; and where others support this endeavor even if they don’t understand it. These energy-expressive relationships are found in both physical places and intangible communities; it is the

relationships and actions that count, not the infrastructure.

Diversity, change, learning and adaptation, according to Howkins, are four aspects of ecological thinking that are closely connected to creativity and innovation.

By applying the species diversity, Howkins believes that a strong team of diverse workforce has multiple mental frameworks and ways of handling knowledge and is more robust than a single and unified one. What makes people or a company creative is the diverse culture, both “culture-as-anthropology, which includes beliefs, morals, manners, dress, food and son on, and culture-as-art or aesthetics” (47).

Change is another dominant factor in a biological system. There is always “uncertainty about the extent to which the phenotype, consisting of an organism’s physical characteristics, include those acquired culturally, has a role in evolution.” Cultural change inevitably serves a potent force to regenerate or re-invigorate any creative business--in this case, any creative cluster.

For an ecological system, to learn and to adapt are two of crucial abilities for any species to survive and sustain. It is also true for creative industries to keep learning and maintain an adaptive mind. Howkins argues that learning is “personal, diverse and endless” (54). He further states: “It is self-motivated, self-managed and often self-financed.” (54). By learning, we spread the net wide and facilitate mutual interaction.

Adaption also involves learning process. During the process, imitation, community sharing, collaboration, and competition are all crucial to any individual and agent to evolve in this ecological system. Howkins finally summaries by stating:

What we need is a new balance between the integration of ideas and the self-assertion of the individual voice. On the one hand, a creative ecology will exhibit strong trends towards sharing, networking and collaboration; on the other, we need room for difference and disagreement. (70)

John Howkins' (2009) application of "creative ecology" echoes Chris Bilton's (2007) "system theory of creativity," which encompass a psychological model of creativity as a complex combination of different thinking styles and a sociological model of creativity, involving a combination of different types of people, and a growing interest in the environment, organization or ecology which enables creativity to happen. In Bilton's understanding, "systems theories of creativity have shifted focus away from trait-based models of creative individuals towards the communities and relationships which define them, studies of the creative industries have become increasingly concerned with **the geographical networks** which connect creative organizations and individuals."

In his book entitled *Creative Management*, Bilton stresses an ecological mindset in relevant with innovation and creativity, which consists of four

aspects in Howkins' system: diversity, change, learning, and adaptation. He also views this ecological mindset as 'the adaptive mind'.

Hence, if we take OCT-LOFT as a creative property project, viewing its success as the result of ecological mindset and creative management, we need to understand how its developer, OCT group, operates along with its dynamic development. We would like to argue that OCT-LOFT as a cultural-creative cluster serves as a Chinese-model of a creative ecology in Howkins' philosophy, with its creative mindset for "diversity, change, learning and adaption."

OCT-LOFT: a cultural-creative cluster as a "product" of space economy

Developed by OCT Group, OCT-LOFT is the most successful cultural-creative cluster in Shenzhen. As an acronym for Overseas China Town, a state-owned corporate, OCT Group started its business in Shenzhen with operating factories of The "Three-plus-one" trading-mix (custom manufacturing with materials, designs or samples supplied and compensation trade), then expanding its business to tourism and estate developing. The OCT Group has been growing with the development of Shenzhen, a very young city given birth in 1978 as the first Special Economic Zone of China and then establishing a city administration structure in 1979. Since the early years of 21th century, the city government has shifted its industry focus from "world factory" to

innovative industries, taking OCT Group along this creative route.

In a focus interview held in November 2015, Mr. Liu Honglie, OCT-LOFT's current manager, specifically illustrated the decision-making process for the birth of OCT-LOFT as a cultural-creative cluster focusing on design. Since 1995 or 1996, OCT Group has adjusted its main business, closing most of its industrial economy except KONKA electronics group and beginning its new business in developing tourism property and housing property projects. The most famous theme park of China, *Windows of the World*, was developed by OCT Group in Shenzhen and then replicated in Changsha. OCT Group also developed '*Splendid China*', *Happy Valley* and *Interlaken Town*. The popularity of these theme parks and their featured hotels, like OCT Grand Hotel, Venice Hotel, and City Inn have made the tourism industry the most influential and main business of OCT Group.

After a series of successful business operations in real estates and tourism, the high-level managers of OCT Group began to adopt a holistic corporate developing strategy. Shenzhen government's decision to maintain its Avant-guard status among Chinese cities helps to accelerate OCT's policy of developing cultural-creative clusters

Upon a special inspection journey for Beijing 798 and Shanghai's Tianzi Fang and even SOHO district of New York in 2002, the high-ranking management team of OCT was determined to develop a cultural-creative cluster in 2004. That year, OCT Group was granted the title of the first batch

of “National Culture Industry Demonstration Base” by the State Ministry of Culture and 3 years later, OCT-LOFT was granted the title of one of the first two “National Culture Industry Demonstration Park Areas” by the State Ministry of Culture in August 2007. The first honorary title could prove the OCT Group’s success before its cultural-creative cluster establishment and the second one was directly given to the OCT-LOFT, which proved its success at a national level.

OCT-LOFT project has been recognized as a successful model from the perspective of ecology. First, its diversity in economical values in culture and urban development is viewed as a part of diversified products of OCT Group, which makes the brand of OCT Group better known than before with the name of OCT-LOFT. Second, OCT-LOFT project was inspired and hinted by Beijing and Shanghai’s cultural-creative cluster “fever” by reverting industrial land usage to commercial land usage. Diversified business practices, change with the economical development in the 21st century and learning from China’s cultural-creative cluster fever—all these prove that OCT-LOFT develop its ecological mindset to adapt and to sustain.

The intertwined relationship between OCAT and OCT-LOFT: branding and independent

In order to understand how OCT-LOFT has operated and why it is so well-known and successful, we should examine what has been done after

the reconstruction of the original factory space.

Currently, OCT-LOFT has two main districts—the South District and the North District. But at the very first beginning, OCT Group only took out the area of South District for reconstruction as an experimental project. And the most impressive renovation was to reuse an old warehouse as OCAT Museum to accommodate contemporary art (OCAT: OCT Contemporary Arts Terminal). The South District finished its architectural restore and space redesign in 2004, yet it was little known to the public. OCT Group then took advantage of public cultural events to attract people’s attention. The chief curator of 2005 Shenzhen Urban Architecture Biennale, Zhang Yonghe, who was the director of MIT architecture department at that time, thought the restored old factory space was distinct, using it as the main exhibition site of the biennale. This biennale was given tight report by local, national press for its serious academic tendency, helpful for the promotion of newly-established OCT-LOFT. Later on, when Shenzhen Urban Architecture Biennale was developed as Bi-city (Shenzhen and Hongkong) Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, OCT-LOFT was picked as the first and third exhibition sites respectively in 2007 and 2011.

In his opening remark of OCAT in January 2005, the president of OCT Group, Mr. Ren Kelei clearly stated the goal of OCAT: “to create the base for Shenzhen contemporary art innovation” and “to become a window of

Shenzhen fashion and culture life and to represent the high-taste culture of Shenzhen”, obviously placing OCAT as the core project of OCT-LOFT. Actually, the original idea of OCT-LOFT was to make it as the agglomeration of artists and galleries, just like 798 of Beijing or LOFT of New York.

But then, there were not many artists and galleries in Shenzhen for such a huge economic special zone. Nevertheless, Shenzhen has very huge and excellent designer groups, as the service part for industry and space developing. It is part of ecological mindset, especially adaptation, that transforms the general industry environment of the whole city from traditional industries to design and contemporary art as its cultural-creative themes.

From this process of self-identification and change, OCT Group has a very ecological mindset. Not only it took the external economy into consideration and made the cluster theme consistent with the whole city’s missions, but also built a distinct and far-reaching vision to make a change to Shenzhen’s cultural ecology with the establishment of and persistent sponsor on OCAT Museum. This is not an easy choice. Other Shenzhen real estate developers made a comment on this: “Only OCT Group would do such kind of non-profit business.” Up to now, OCAT had been developed into a group of Museums, consisting of OCAT Shenzhen, OCAT Shanghai, OCAT Xi’an, OCAT Institute (Beijing) and OCT Art & Design Gallery (Shenzhen), the first gallery on design in China, with its headquarter in

Shenzhen. The budget invested on all of these OCAT projects amount to 20 to 30 million RMB per year.

What deserves our attention is an interesting relationship between OCT-LOFT and OCAT. OCAT headquarter, OCAT Shenzhen, is located in the South District of OCT-LOFT; Yet, OCAT is an independent department, part of the OCT Group, not of the OCT-LOFT. However, the manager of OCT-LOFT believes that OCAT can be viewed as the soul or hallmark of the whole cultural-creative cluster. With its high quality and high academic values of exhibition and self-definition, OCAT instantly won acclaims among professionals. Meanwhile, the press reports of significant exhibition events also attracted citizens, such as the Shenzhen Urbanism Architecture Biennale and Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture, which claims itself as 'the Only Biennale Urbanism/Architecture in the World' on the official website.

From high-brow culture perspective, OCAT illustrate OCT Group's slogan—'Creator of High Quality Life.' It generates a kind of cultural symbolic capital for the whole group. OCT Group invests the economic capital on OCAT while OCAT produces social and symbolic capital for the OCT Group.

And from an ecological perspective, OCAT Shenzhen not only creates added values to OCT-LOFT, but also builds a cultural highland for Shenzhen. The dynamic relationship between these two entities helps create a

diversified combination of business and culture. With OCAT, OCT Group has intertwined itself into a change to the city's cultural ecology and, moreover, it has changed the whole brand image from an electronics producer and real estate developer to a 'creator of high quality life,'

The creative management and sustainable development of OCT-LOFT: 'from up to bottom' and 'from bottom to up'

From the very beginning, OCT-LOFT didn't have its own management team. Its establishment was based on the borrowed human capitals from different departments of OCT Group. With the development of OCT-LOFT, it has more and more conflict between the original business and OCT-LOFT business. For example, at first the cultural events were planned and organized by OCT real estate company. But the main target of real estate company is to sell property products, while the OCT-LOFT was still on the start stage as a test of hybrid community construction. Hence, the efficiency of traditional real estate company was challenged by the exploring project of cultural-creative cluster.

In 2011, in order to make a better operation of OCT-LOFT after it had been expanded to the North District, OCT Group established a OCT-LOFT Cultural Development Company, responsible for OCT-LOFT operation exclusively. According to Mr. Liu Hongjie, the general manager of this company, there are three parts to measure this branch company's running

efficiency: first but not the most, is the economic measurement, specifically speaking, every year's tenement planning; second measurement is the number of cultural events: OCT-LOFT has abundant and various cultural events across the year; third measurement is the branding part, aligned with the client communication and brand promotion.

The cultural events in OCT-LOFT across a year:

Name of Cultural Events	Time	Frequency	Regular or not
OCAT exhibition	Across the year	Every working day since 2005	regular
Branch exhibition site of ICIF(Shenzhen International Culture Industries Fair)	May	2007,2013	irregular
OCT-LOFT International Jazz Festival	Sep. or Oct.	Annual since 2011	regular
OCT-LOFT Creative Festival	From Nov. to Dec.	Annual since 2007	regular
Bi-city Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture	From Dec. to March	2005, 2007, 2011	irregular
T-street I-Mart	Across the year	Every two weeks since 2008	regular
Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale	From May to Aug.	Every two years since 2012	Regular
"One and One"—Invitational Lectures of Rising Designers	From July to Aug.	Every Wednesday since 2012	regular
Shenzhen Independent Animation Biennale	From Dec. to March	Every two years since 2012	regular
'Light and Heavy' Art Film Panorama	May, July, Nov.	Two or three seasons since 2013	Regular
Tomorrow Festival (avant-guard music festival)	May	Annual since 2014	regular

To attract commercial tenants, OCT-LOFT has a diversified strategy. Their commercial tenants include a certain proportion of star or established designers' studios or companies and a certain proportion of

young teams' businesses. The former group could maintain the cluster's fame and stability while the latter could keep the Avant-Guard spirit and risking atmosphere. Even after the North District opened, OCT-LOFT still have a great deal of tenants on the waiting list. OCT-LOFT held 'T Street Creative Market' activities every two weeks to pick up talented creative entrepreneurs and prosperous brands, supplying them fixed space for long-term development with only 60% of the original rental. In addition to the diversity of mature and green-handed enterprises, OCT-LOFT also make very careful choice in consuming business.

Many consuming businesses in OCT-LOFT are operated by designers themselves. With the cultural events held in OCT-LOFT becoming regular and persistent across the whole year, citizens tend to take OCT-LOFT as a leisure place and culture engaging destination in their daily life. Those established designers expressed their willingness to operate cafés or noodle restaurants; for them, these consuming spaces are a good extend of their tastes and aesthetic attitudes. They see these consuming spaces as communication platforms with cultural visitors and the general public, who enjoy the cultural atmosphere, special space design with personality, and ever changing artworks in it as decoration. The consuming business in cluster can be taken as spillover benefits for creative talents.

To follow the logic in the ecological framework, we must see the OCT-LOFT first of all as a site of branding value creation. So it does matter

whether the OCT-LOFT is a profitable business but more important, what cultural values can be added to the diversified commercial business.

In our interview with him, Mr. Liu uses an example of the book store 'Old Heaven' in the North District to demonstrate this complicated and dynamic relationship. OCT-LOFT gave the tenement chance to the book store, not to a restaurant, with its consideration of sustainable 'creative milieu' creation, although the rental for a restaurant would be higher than for a bookstore. It is exactly from one of the bookstore's partner—Ah Fei—that the idea of holding annual international Jazz Festival was developed. Ah Fei himself is an independent-music fan, organizing some small-scaled music festivals before. Not only his independent bookstore in OCT-LOFT has become the must-go for book fans, but also he himself has co-worked with OCT-LOFT operators as one of the planners of OCT-LOFT Jazz Festival since 2010, a very popular and well-known even in China for its abundant and high-level international jazz music.

In addition to the learning process from tenants to OCT-LOFT, the government also have learned from what OCT-LOFT have done to cultivate the local culture atmosphere. When the Jazz Festival becomes a great success, the government of Nanshan District began to sponsor OCT-LOFT to hold another music festival called *Tomorrow Festival* to meet the growing needs of the public on independent music.

All the spillover effects have been produced from an adaptive and

learning mindset of management models of OCT-LOFT. And with this mindset, the cluster creates and forms a living ecology in which the tenants and the managing group have cultivated a kind of symbiotic status in communication and adaptation. Besides, this symbiosis changes the local cultural ecological system, making some impact on the government's behaviors and policy making. Here, there are two levels of creative management, first, between the tenants and OCT-LOFT managing team; second, between the government and the cultural-creative cluster.

Conclusion

At present, there are about 300 businesses located in this cluster and its GDP in 2015 amounted up to 10 billion RMB. Many business experiments are happening there. A striking experimental project is *The Firewood Maker Space*, where Premier. Li Keqiang gave a visit in Jan. 2015. Shortly after his visit, Premier proposed a policy of 'Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation' in that year's National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Creativity and innovation of OCT-LOFT has thus become a national icon for creative industries.

Every year, close to 200 official learning teams come to OCT-LOFT to study its successful experience. And many businesses have been waiting for the chance to be part of OCT-LOFT. What is the successful model of OCT-LOFT? Is it possible to transplant this model to other Chinese or Asian creative clusters?

Firstly, OCT-LOFT has its particularity. It was reconstructed from old factories and totally operated by a centrally controlled state-owned enterprise--OCT Group, with ample management experience in cultural tourism and real estate developer. OCT-LOFT is a cultural-regeneration project, but not under the guide of the local government. So it is not a renovation project only. As a consciously diversified part of the original three main businesses of OCT Group—cultural tourism, real estate developing and KONKA electronics, OCT-LOFT create its strategic meanings and branding functions. OCT Group high-level leaders clearly identify the OCT-LOFT and OCAT contemporary art museum groups as its branding strategy, urging both sides to organize high-quality cultural events and exhibitions to create and cultivate the ‘symbol capital’ to the cluster, not taking economic profits as its sole goal

Pure and high academic valued arts in OCAT is used to communicate and link with national and international elite communities. It helps shape the communities in an ecological system. Howkins’ concept of adaption in terms of imitation and communities for all species in nature provides us with a good ground for analyzing the communities within OCAT and its outside communities. OCT Group plays a role, more like an art-sponsor, not a commercial entity while OCAT is the anchor of OCT-LOFT’s position, identifying its high-quality and symbolic connection with creativity.

As to the affluent cultural events held in the cluster all across a year,

OCT-LOFT successfully established its communication and linkage with the public. If we view OCT-LOFT as a creative product, then these cultural events could be seen as the content output of the product. In this part of cultural events, OCT Group play a role of creator of the popular culture. It made a change to itself from profitable cultural tourism operator to diversified community creator, bringing big changes to the city's cultural ecology. Thanks to OCT-LOFT's efforts of self-branding with cultural events, the young city added various successful cultural festivals on international level, such as *Jazz Festival*, *Independent Animation Biennale*, *Sculpture Biennale*, and *Art Film Season*.

With the fame created by those branding events, it's more easy for OCT-LOFT to attract excellent designing and creative enterprises. In this centralized geographical network, creative community and creative milieu are gradually shaped, which directly or indirectly give out some unexpected spillover effects, like the Jazz Festival and the Firewood Maker Space. The maker space is particularly a very newly industrial developing trend, in which industrial design is crucial, making the combination of art and science possible. Besides, the landlord and tenants have developed partnership relation. The upcoming years witness sustainable cluster development and operation.

The determination to create a diversified community defined the management style in OCT-LOFT. The management is willing to learn and

adapt for any changes ahead. As a cluster based on the industrial heritage and cultural regeneration, OCT-LOFT exerts the historic value, the cultural value, and social value to its most. And then it earns back the economic value not only from the high annual GDP of the whole cluster packed with star design companies, but also from the branding values for the whole OCT Group. With the successful model of OCT-LOFT and other creative projects, Shenzhen was given the title of 'creative city' by UNESCO as 'Design Capital' in 2008.

Secondly, is the model of OCT-LOFT duplicable? Our argument is that it might be easy to copy the cultural events branding model, but its management strategy is only viable in its particular ecological system.

Gentrification has been criticized in any regeneration project for cultural-creative clusters. Yet, In OCT-LOFT case, when both the investor and the profit receiver are OCT Group, gentrification is no longer an issue. Instead, it helps add values. While spending huge budgets on cultural projects without considering financial gains, OCT Group has instead received its profits from all its real estate projects all over the country. It could be called 'implied gentrification', without normally moral debate.

Lastly, there exists a long-lasting myth on spontaneous artistic cluster, which used to be taken as the only right way to start an organic artistic community. OCT-LOFT case can prove that old factory or historic district regeneration can follow the model of cultural-creative clusters, but the

construction of the clusters does not end with physical renovation. How to manage and operate with sustainability is the key. If we would like to create the cluster organic and sustainable, then in the process of management, the ecological mindset and governance is crucial. The nature of creative industry lies in uncertainty; to negotiate uncertainty and to develop diversity, as Howkins states about the beauty of creative cities and places, are overwhelmingly crucial to this ecological system. A planned cultural-creative cluster needs vitality; its manager should keep space for any possibility, conflicts or uncertainty because he realizes that 'creativity' is a dynamic and never-ending process. To keep balance between loose and control, in Bilton's words, is the core of the creative management.

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