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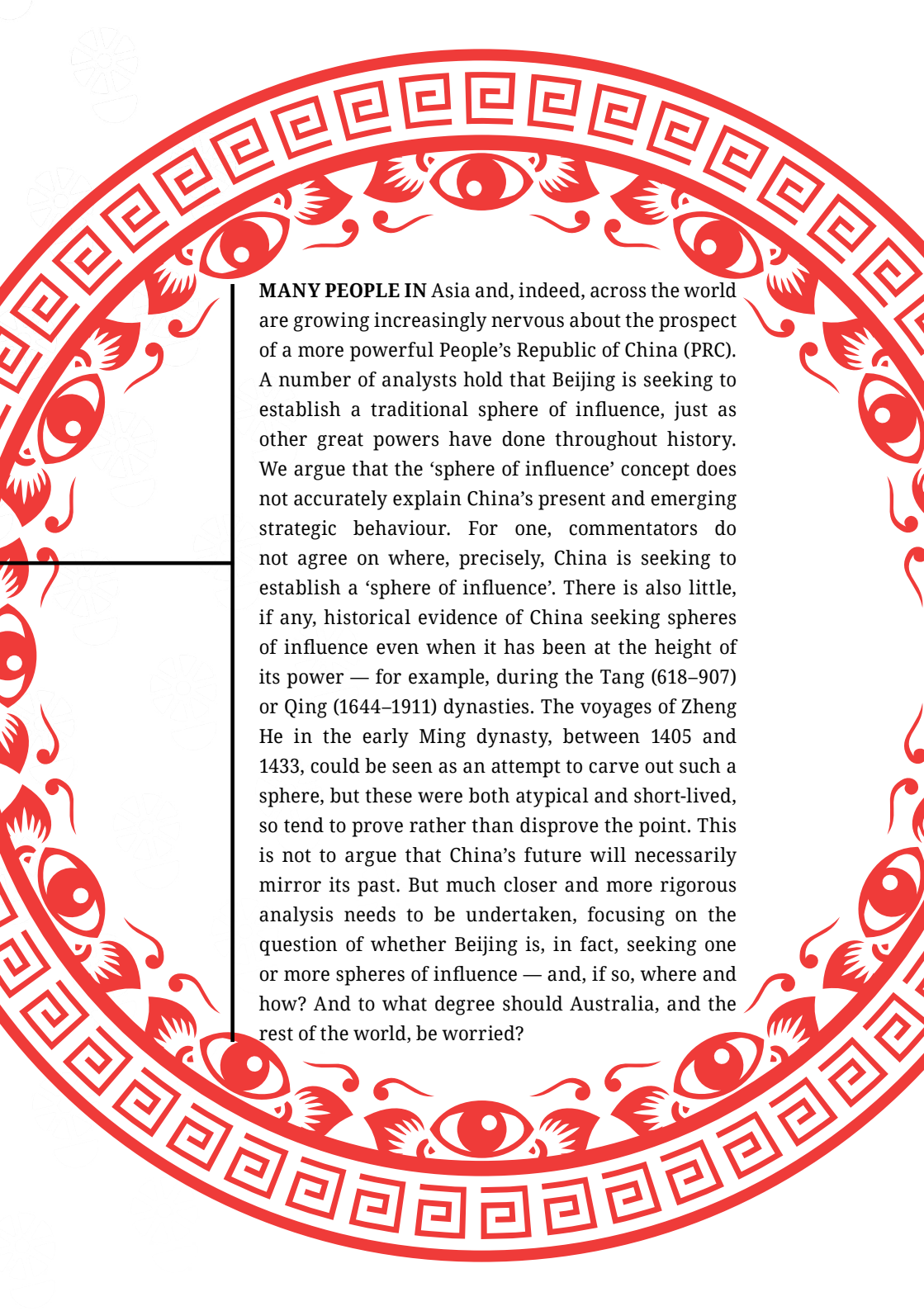
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MERIDIANS OF INFLUENCE

IN A NERVOUS WORLD

Brendan Taylor and Richard Rigby



A large, stylized red circular border with a repeating geometric pattern and stylized eyes. The border is composed of a series of red eyes, each with a black pupil and a red iris, arranged in a circular pattern. The eyes are connected by a red line that forms a continuous loop. The background is white, and the overall design is reminiscent of traditional Chinese art.

MANY PEOPLE IN Asia and, indeed, across the world are growing increasingly nervous about the prospect of a more powerful People's Republic of China (PRC). A number of analysts hold that Beijing is seeking to establish a traditional sphere of influence, just as other great powers have done throughout history. We argue that the 'sphere of influence' concept does not accurately explain China's present and emerging strategic behaviour. For one, commentators do not agree on where, precisely, China is seeking to establish a 'sphere of influence'. There is also little, if any, historical evidence of China seeking spheres of influence even when it has been at the height of its power — for example, during the Tang (618–907) or Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. The voyages of Zheng He in the early Ming dynasty, between 1405 and 1433, could be seen as an attempt to carve out such a sphere, but these were both atypical and short-lived, so tend to prove rather than disprove the point. This is not to argue that China's future will necessarily mirror its past. But much closer and more rigorous analysis needs to be undertaken, focusing on the question of whether Beijing is, in fact, seeking one or more spheres of influence — and, if so, where and how? And to what degree should Australia, and the rest of the world, be worried?

What Are Spheres of Influence?

The late Australian international relations scholar Hedley Bull dated the practice of states establishing spheres of influence back to the fifteenth century.¹ The most famous historical example is the so-called Monroe Doctrine of December 1823, wherein US President James Monroe specified that any attempt by a European power to extend its influence into the Western Hemisphere would be regarded ‘as dangerous to [America’s] peace and safety’. What he

meant by ‘Western Hemisphere’ encompassed the Americas (north and south) and their surrounding waters. At the same time, Monroe implicitly recognised European spheres of influence by stating: ‘In the wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so.’² Interestingly, however, the first recorded use of the term ‘sphere of influence’ was in 1869, in a letter from Russian foreign minister Alexander Gorchakov to his British counterpart Lord Clarendon, confirming that Afghanistan lay outside the Russian ‘sphere of influence’.³ The concept rose to prominence during the Cold War period (1947–1991). And yet ‘spheres of influence’ remain the subject of surprisingly little scholarship.⁴

In one of the few scholarly treatments produced during the Cold War, Bull’s protégé Paul Keal defined a sphere of influence as ‘a definite region within which a single, external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of states



A 1912 newspaper cartoon highlighting the United States' influence in Latin America following the Monroe Doctrine

Source: Wikipedia

within it'.⁵ Keal noted that a sphere of influence can be understood either formally or tacitly. He also observed that the use of military force within a sphere of influence is rare as the predominant powers generally prefer other instruments of statecraft. Keal thus argued that spheres of influence could potentially be stabilising, because they provide the great powers with guidelines or 'rules of the road' to follow. This was certainly the general pattern during the Cold War. Even during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when the Soviets deployed intermediate-range missiles to Cuba — within striking distance of the United States — Moscow ultimately acquiesced to American demands after recognising the upper limits of what Washington was willing to accept within its sphere of influence.

'Spheres of influence' fell from favour after the Cold War. Many people believed that great-power strategic competition would become a thing of the past following the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the rest of the world coming to accept the overwhelming dominance of the sole remaining superpower, the United States, and playing within the rules it set. Over the past decade, however, the term has returned to prominence. After Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in early 2014, German Chancellor Angela Merkel commented that this was 'a conflict about spheres of influence and territorial claims of the kind we know from the 19th and 20th century [that] we thought we had put behind us'.⁶ The US national security strategy of December 2017 used similar language, charging Russia with attempting 'to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders'.⁷

A Chinese Sphere of Influence?

In one of the only post-Cold War references to the concept before the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the American political scientist Robert Ross predicted that twenty-first-century East Asia would be

divided into distinct Chinese and American spheres of influence. The Chinese sphere would encompass continental East Asia, including North Korea, the Russian border states (such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), and mainland South-East Asia (namely, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam). The US sphere would extend over maritime East Asia, encompassing Japan, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Like Keal, Ross optimistically predicted that this would be a stabilising arrangement. Because these spheres would be separated by water, Ross maintained, military intervention by one power in its own sphere would not threaten the interests of the other power.⁸

There is now considerable divergence of opinion even among analysts who think China is seeking to establish a sphere or spheres of influence as to *where* precisely its (or their) limits are. Denny Roy, a senior research fellow at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawai'i, for instance, argues that China's irredentist claims — history-based claims over territory such as the disputed islands in the South China Sea — illuminate the boundaries of its aspirational sphere of influence.

Unlike Ross, Roy views this Chinese sphere as having both continental and maritime dimensions. He sees the disputed land and maritime territories along China's east coast forming

a seamless geographic region beginning with the Yellow Sea in the north and continuing southward through the East China Sea, Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait, and the upper and lower halves of the South China Sea.⁹

The Australian academic Hugh White offers another perspective, seeing the emerging contest for Asian supremacy as one between China and India. White believes the United States will ultimately vacate the region, resulting in this new bipolarity. New Delhi will rapidly realise, according to White, that it has no hope of dominating the Western Pacific and Beijing

will come to the view that any attempt to establish supremacy in the Indian Ocean would be equally futile. White argues that Asia will thus divide into ‘two separate spheres of influence, with China dominating East Asia and the Western Pacific, and India dominating South Asia and the Indian Ocean’.¹⁰

Other analysts argue that Beijing’s forays into the Western Pacific — namely, in the South and East China seas — are largely designed to distract from its primary interest in establishing a sphere of influence in Central Asia. Victoria University’s Van Jackson, for instance, contends:

Asia’s most extensive sphere of influence involves the rarely discussed border areas surrounding China ... Especially with smaller neighbours who are structurally dependent on Chinese economic ties — including Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹¹

Nadège Rolland of the American National Bureau of Asian Research concurs. She regards burgeoning Sino-Russian collaboration as temporary, maintaining that it will eventually give way to Chinese dominance. In Rolland’s words:

Russia is presumed to be bitter and resentful of China’s rising economic, political and military capabilities, and its increased presence in areas that Moscow still covets as its exclusive sphere of influence.

In the long run, she argues: ‘Russia will become a toothless former superpower, surrendering the stage for Beijing to fully assert its own influence over Eurasia.’¹²

Yet another interpretation sees China seeking a sphere of influence further afield, in South-East Asia or even the South Pacific. Paul Dibb of The Australian National University’s Strategic and Defence Studies Centre contends that ‘Southeast Asia is likely to be a focus of Chinese power and coercion and become a zone for incremental steps towards

**Chinese Defence
Minister Wei Fenghe
at the 2019 Shangri-La
Dialogue**
Source: YouTube



Chinese hegemony and a sphere of influence'.¹³ Some commentators have also alluded to the possibility of growing Chinese power encroaching on Australia's sphere of influence in the South Pacific — typically defined as the areas to the north and north-east of Australia, from Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands to Vanuatu and Fiji. Writing in July 2019, White posed the question: 'What can Australia do, then, to restore and preserve our sphere of influence in the South Pacific, and deny it to China?'¹⁴

China rejects any suggestion it is seeking spheres of influence in the South Pacific or elsewhere. In May 2019, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement paraphrasing a speech given by President Xi Jinping during a visit to Beijing by Vanuatu's Prime Minister: 'We have no private interests in island countries, and do not seek a so-called "sphere of influence"'.¹⁵ The following month, addressing the Shangri-La Dialogue, Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe 魏凤和 asserted that 'in the future, no matter how strong it becomes, China shall never threaten anyone or establish spheres of influence'.¹⁶

What is to be made of these competing interpretations of China's actions and intentions? It could be that the application of this concept to the Chinese case is simply inappropriate.

Getting China Wrong?

The American scholar David C. Kang, author of the article ‘Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks’, published in *International Security*, cautions against applying concepts of predominantly European origin to an Asian setting. He has long been sceptical that Asia — with its unique and highly diverse histories, cultures, economies, and demographics — can be considered an entity similar to Europe, for example. He believes that new and different analytical frameworks are needed for Asia. In his words:

This is not to criticize European-derived theories purely because they are based on the Western experience: The origins of a theory are not necessarily relevant to its applicability. Rather these theories do a poor job as they are applied to Asia.¹⁷

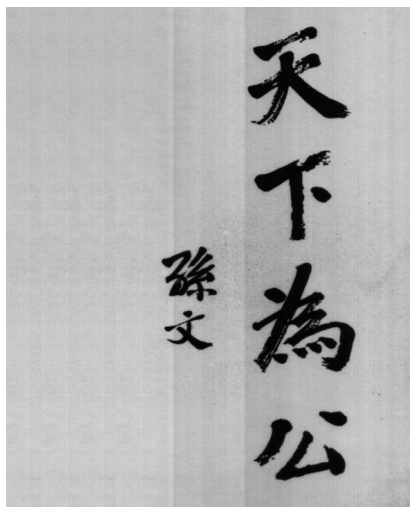
There are certainly some historical precedents from the Chinese experience that suggest that the term ‘sphere of influence’ may not be entirely inappropriate. Some might argue, for instance, that the traditional Chinese vision of world order known as ‘*Tianxia*’ 天下 or ‘All-Under-Heaven’ is analogous to a sphere of influence. *Tianxia* dates back to the Zhou 周 period (1046–221 BCE) and is a conceptual model for a world order based on the family. It is inclusive of all peoples, living in harmony with an absence of hegemony; it represents, in that respect, the very antithesis of the idea of predominance that lies at the heart of the spheres of influence concept.¹⁸ But it is really more of a worldview than a practice of statecraft.

The Chinese tributary system arguably makes for a better analogy. The tribute system, which guided early modern East Asian international relations, was hierarchical in nature. Neighbouring states were required to recognise Imperial China’s dominance. In return, China showed restraint towards its neighbours and would even provide them material benefits — among them, mutually beneficial trade. Yet the tribute system

required acknowledgement of China's *cultural* superiority. Rank in the hierarchy was determined by a state's cultural similarity to China. There was little, if any, attempt to achieve *political* dominance over these states, however, which were largely given a free hand to run their own domestic and foreign policies as long as they did not go directly against China's interests.¹⁹ This, once again, stands in contrast to the lack of independence and freedom of action experienced by subservient states within a traditional sphere of influence.

China's historical experience with foreign spheres of influence was extremely negative. In China, the concept is most commonly associated with the 'century of humiliation', which started with the Opium Wars (1839–1860) and culminated in the Sino-Japanese War (the Japanese invasion and occupation) of 1937–1945. During this period, China was essentially carved up by Europe's major powers and East Asia's rising one into spheres of influence in the context of their larger contest for supremacy. Central to his signature China Dream is President Xi's pledge to make the country so wealthy and powerful that it will never again be subject to such treatment. According to official Chinese pronouncements such as those quoted above, however, this will not include creating 'spheres of influence' as such.

It could be more useful to look at the term that the Party-state under Xi favours when it talks about coalition building: the 'community of shared destiny' (see the *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*, Chapter 2



'The World is For All': Calligraphy by Sun Yat-sen, 1924
Source: Wikimedia Commons

‘Whose Shared Destiny?, pp.59–73) — or, as it is now generally referred to, a ‘community of shared future for mankind’. Foreign Minister Wang Yi explains:

As China enters the critical stage of the great national renewal, its future and destiny are ever more closely connected with that of the world. As part of advocating and advancing the building of a community of shared future for mankind, China will promote the interests of its own people in conjunction with the common interests of people all over the world and pursue the Chinese dream in the course of attaining the dream of the whole world, thus adding a more profound global significance to the great renewal of the Chinese nation.

The slogan embodies a vision of China as a ‘responsible major country’, synergising its ‘development with the common development of the world’. According to Wang, in promoting

a shared future for mankind, China encourages all countries to coexist peacefully, engage in sound interaction and seek win-win cooperation. This in turn will create a favorable environment for the great renewal of the Chinese nation.²⁰

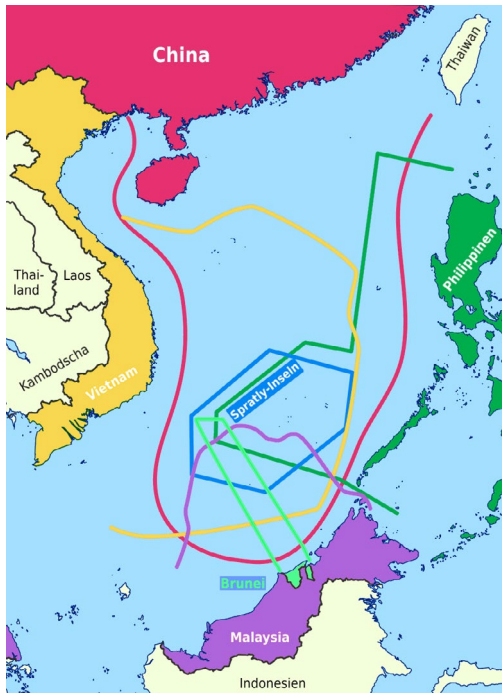
Moving the Needle

Whatever the true ambitions of the Party-state under Xi, China’s ability to establish a sphere of influence — by whatever name — across the entire Asian region is limited and will likely remain so. The presence of other major powers in this part of the world — the United States, India, and Japan — will prevent this from happening. It is true that China may ultimately become stronger than any of these countries. But it remains hard to imagine a situation where it develops the ability to significantly limit their independence or freedom of regional manoeuvring.

Beyond the major powers, recent polling conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that unfavourable views of China have increased across the Asia-Pacific, with resistance to even seemingly anodyne goals such as the ‘community of shared destiny’ making them harder for Beijing to achieve.²¹ Consistent with these findings, the Lowy Institute’s 2019 poll of Australian attitudes towards the world found that only 32 percent of respondents said they trusted China. This was a 20 percent drop from the previous year and the lowest result since the poll commenced in 2005.²² Beijing may have better luck in Central Asia, but that will depend on whether Moscow is willing to tolerate (or able to prevent) Chinese encroachment into what it regards as its own traditional sphere of influence.

In the longer term, a Chinese sphere of influence in the South China Sea is also conceivable. To be sure, much has been made of China’s building and militarisation of artificial islands here. But the South China Sea covers some 3.7 million square kilometres. Notwithstanding the impressive gains China’s military has made since its second modernisation drive in the 1990s (the first being the one prompted by Deng Xiaoping as part of the Four Modernisations in 1977), it is an exercise that reflects Chinese weakness as much as strength. The primary rationale for these islands was to compensate for China’s shortcomings relative to the United States when it came to aircraft carriers — the *sine qua non* of military power projection — even if some commentators now question the continued utility of these platforms in a world of more powerful and accurate anti-shiping missiles.²³

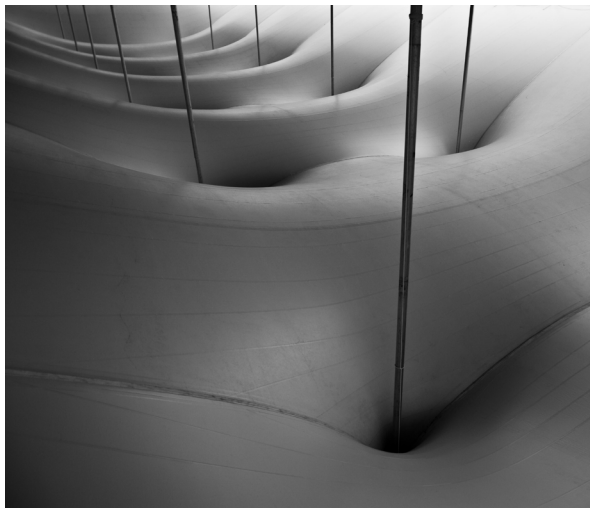
Most improbable of all is the prospect of China developing a sphere of influence in the South Pacific, although it may establish a military base here. Rumours circulated in April 2018 that Beijing was in discussions with Vanuatu regarding this very prospect — speculation that was swiftly quashed by Port Vila.²⁴ But the South Pacific is a long way from China and, in particular, from the focus of the Belt and Road Initiative. Power projection would be even more challenging for Beijing here than in the



Territorial claims of the various South China Sea claimants
Source: Wikimedia Commons

South China Sea, especially during periods of conflict. The South Pacific's strategic importance to Beijing is less than that of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, where access to sea lanes is critical. Rather, Beijing's interests in the South Pacific relate to this region's resource potential — including in fisheries, timber, minerals, gold, nickel, and liquified natural gas — and, with an estimated 20,000 Chinese nationals living in the region, the ability to evacuate them should there be a crisis.²⁵

This is good news for Australia. On grounds of likelihood and proximity, the spectre of a South-East Asian sphere of influence is one that Australian policymakers will be watching more closely. But even this is far from a foregone conclusion given the tensions in the South China Sea, which continued to simmer along in 2019, with Vietnam



Does 'acupuncture diplomacy' better account for China's present and emerging strategic behaviour?

Source: Pscheirer, Flickr

even banning the American-Chinese co-produced children's animation *Abominable* over a scene displaying China's contentious Nine-Dash Line map claiming sovereignty over mutually disputed islands.²⁶

Acupuncture Diplomacy

Rather than seeking any kind of traditional sphere of influence in the historical European sense of the term, it is worth considering whether Beijing might, instead, be engaging in the longstanding Chinese practice of what we suggest calling 'acupuncture diplomacy'. The traditional Chinese medicinal technique involves probing specific 'acupuncture points' with a fine needle to gauge the reaction and make fine adjustments to the flow of *qi*, the vital essence or energy that flows across the body's meridians, or pathways, freeing blockages, calming it where appropriate, and strengthening it where that is judged to be what is needed. In the case of acupuncture diplomacy, offers of loans, infrastructure building, aid,

invitations, or scholarships might be just what are needed to get blocked relations flowing again. Solomon Islands politicians, for example, were allegedly offered hundreds of thousands of dollars to cut ties with Taiwan and to formally re-establish relations with the mainland in September 2019.²⁷ In the final analysis, this idea of ‘acupuncture diplomacy’ may better account for China’s present and emerging strategic behaviour.

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