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FROM COMMODITY TO SYMBOL: THE GENESIS HISTORY OF TEA IMAGE IN 18TH-CENTURY RUSSIA*

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ОТ ТОВАРА К СИМВОЛУ: ИСТОРИЯ ГЕНЕЗИСА СИМВОЛИЧЕСКОГО ОБРАЗА КИТАЙСКОГО ЧАЯ В РОССИИ XVIII ВЕКА

Abstract. This article aims to reconstruct the “genesis history of the image” of Chinese tea in 18th-century Russia. The study adopts the methods of historical document analysis, integrating the perspectives of conceptual history, material culture history, semiotics, and reception history, using primary sources from 18th-century Russia as the core historical material. The research shows that tea in 18th-century Russia went through four progressive stages: precious commodity, multifunctional item, linguistic symbolization, and cultural image genesis. For the first time, this article systematically applies the frameworks of conceptual history and the “cultural biography of things” to the study of tea culture in 18th-century Russia, filling a gap in existing economic history and social life history regarding the mechanisms of meaning-making. This article is part of a series of papers reporting results from an interdisciplinary study on the influence of the “Tea Road” on Russian national culture. Its companion article, “A Study of the Meaning-Conveying Functions of the «Symbolic Image of Tea» in Works of Russian Literature” [15], examines the mature forms and functions of this image in 19th- and 20th-century Russian literature, whereas the present article traces its genesis in the 18th century. It helps to reveal general patterns in the cross-cultural dissemination of national cultures and has significant practical implications for optimizing contemporary mechanisms of cross-cultural communication. Future research may further examine the mature forms of “tea image” in 19th-century Russian classical literature or undertake comparative studies of tea culture symbols across countries.

Аннотация. Цель данной статьи – реконструировать «историю генезиса символического образа» китайского чая в России XVIII века. В исследовании применяется метод историко-документального анализа, интегрирующий теорию истории понятий, историю материальной культуры, семиотику и историю рецепции. Основой исследования послужили оригинальные источники России XVIII века. Результаты показывают, что чай в России XVIII века прошёл четыре последовательных этапа: период драгоценного товара, период функционального предмета широкого назначения, период языковой символизации и период генезиса культурного символического образа. Данная работа представляет собой первый системный анализ российской чайной культуры XVIII века с использованием методологии истории понятий и «культурной биографии вещей», восполняя пробел, существующий в исследованиях по экономической истории и истории повседневности, которые уделяли недостаточное внимание механизмам порождения значений. Данная статья входит в серию работ, представляющих результаты междисциплинарного исследования влияния «Чайного пути» на русскую национальную культуру. Вторая статья этой серии – «Исследование смыслообразующих функций “символического образа чая” в произведениях русской литературы» (Уфимский гуманитарный журнал, 2026, № 2) – рассматривает зрелые формы и функции этого образа в русской литературе XIX–XX вв., тогда как в настоящей статье прослеживается его генезис в XVIII в. Это способствует выявлению общих закономерностей распространения национальной культуры за рубежом и имеет важное практическое значение для оптимизации механизмов современной межкультурной коммуникации. В будущих исследованиях возможно дальнейшее изучение зрелых форм «символического образа чая» в русской классической литературе XIX века или проведение сравнительных исследований символики чая в межнациональных культурах.

Keywords: tea, 18th-century Russia, image genesis, cultural symbol, conceptual history, material culture history

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The central question of this article is: How did Chinese tea, in 18th-century Russia, gradually evolve from a scarce imported commodity into a cultural image with national characteristics? This question lies at the intersection of material culture history, conceptual history, and literary history, providing a typical case for examining the mechanisms of cross-cultural symbol genesis. Methodologically, answering this question requires transcending a single perspective of economic history or social life history and instead adopting an integrative historical-semantic path – tracing the trajectory of the meaning of the object “tea” in Russia and revealing the interplay among social structures, institutional arrangements, and cultural mentalities that shaped it. In other words, this article is concerned not only with “how tea was consumed” but, more importantly, with “how tea was endowed with meaning” – a central concern of the new cultural history.

Russian scholarly attention to the history of tea in Russia began in the 19th century. In 1856, N. Rzhанov, in his monograph *Chinese Tea: A Detailed Description*, briefly introduced the places of origin, cultivation, harvesting, and processing of Chinese tea, as well as its trade, consumption, and effects on the human body. In 1882, Nikolai Nikolaevich Bantysh-Kamensky, in his report *Diplomatic Collection of Affairs Between the Russian and Chinese States from 1619 to 1792*, systematically compiled records of tea trade from Russian-Chinese diplomatic documents. In 1906, Nikolai Dmitrievich Chechulin, in his monograph *Essays on the History of Russian Finance during the Reign of Catherine II*, analysed the relationship between tea tariffs and fiscal revenue. In 1947, Evgeny Panteleimonovich Silin, in his monograph *Kyakhta in the 18th Century*, devoted a special study to the Kyakhta trade in the 18th century, providing quantitative data on tea imports. In 2000, the Chinese scholar Deng Jiugang, in his monograph *The Tea Road: Three Centuries of Rise and Decline of the Eurasian Trade Route*, revealed, from the macro perspective of the “Tea Road” the historical significance of this international trade artery for the indigenization of tea culture in Russia. These studies provide a solid economic-historical foundation. However, existing research has mostly focused on the economy-trade or social-life spheres and has paid insufficient attention to the internal mechanisms by which tea transformed from an “alien commodity” into a “national cultural symbol”.

The present study is not an isolated inquiry but the first part of a two-stage interdisciplinary project. The second part, already published as “A Study of the Meaning-Conveying Functions of the «Symbolic Image of Tea» in Works of Russian Literature”, systematically analyses how the “symbolic image of tea” functions in 19th- and 20th-century Russian literature, identifying six meaning-conveying functions [15]. That study, however, presupposes the prior existence of a stable cultural image of tea in Russia. It does not answer the logically antecedent question: how did tea, as a foreign commodity, acquire the status of a cultural symbol in the first place? The present article addresses precisely this question by reconstructing the 18th-century genesis of the tea image – the period that prepared the material, linguistic, and semantic conditions for the literary flourishing analysed in the companion article. In this sense, the two articles form a continuous research chain: the present article traces the path “from commodity to symbol” in the 18th century; the published article traces the further development and artistic deployment of that symbol in the 19th and 20th centuries. Together they constitute a complete account of the cross-cultural biography of Chinese tea in Russia. This article attempts to fill this gap by introducing the theoretical tools of conceptual history and reception history to reveal the historical logic of the genesis of tea’s meaning in Russia.

This article adopts the method of historical document analysis, adhering to the principle of historical contextualization, interpreting each source within the specific social, economic, and cultural circumstances of 18th-century Russia.

In terms of theoretical tools, this article draws on cultural image theory, semiotics, and the perspective of conceptual history. A cultural image is an aesthetic symbol that emerges when a particular object appears repeatedly in a specific cultural context and gradually acquires a stable symbolic meaning. This article refines the genesis of this image into a four-stage model for the 18th century.

From a semiotic point of view, this process essentially involves a reorganization of the relationship between “signifier” and “signified”. Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out that the sign consists of the “signifier” (sound image) and the “signified” (concept), and that the link between them is arbitrary and conventional [14, p. 102]. Roland Barthes further proposed a “mythology” theory: when the signifier-signified relationship of a sign is appropriated by a second-order meaning system, a cultural “connotation” (signification) is generated [1, p. 144]. Applying this framework: at the first level, the signifier “чай” points to the plant-based beverage imported from China (denotation); at the second level, the same signifier is re-appropriated to refer to abstract values such as Russian herbal tea, psychological healing, social satire, emotional symbolism, and so on (connotation). It is the accumulation and stabilization of such “connotations” that constitutes the “genesis of tea image” studied in this article.

From the perspective of conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte), the German scholar Reinhart Koselleck emphasized that semantic changes in key concepts often reflect broader social structural transformations [3]. When “чай” expanded from a proper noun to a common noun and then entered the system of literary metaphor, it was recording not a simple linguistic change but

the deep historical process of “indigenizing acceptance of foreign goods” in 18th-century Russian society.

In addition, the material culture historian Igor Kopytoff proposed the method of the “cultural biography of things”, which traces the changes in the meaning of an object over its life cycle [5]. This perspective – from scarce commodity to everyday item, from practical object to symbolic thing – can be summarized in the four-stage progressive model of this study. Historical anthropology reminds us to attend to the symbolic functions of “things” in everyday practice and literary narrative. It is precisely in these practices and narratives that tea gradually acquired symbolic meaning and thus became a cultural image.

The earliest Russian record of tea is the 200 packets of tea brought back by Vasily Starkov from the Altyn Khan in 1638 as a gift [13, p. 9-10]. This article treats it as the starting point of a semantic process: at this stage, the meaning of tea was governed entirely by the logic of the gift and had not yet entered the market exchange system.

The 1724 tariff already reveals the structural position of tea in the Russian semantic field of beverages: among the three foreign drinks listed—tea, hops, and coffee—tea carried the highest import duty and was subject to export restrictions, while coffee remained free of export restrictions. This tariff configuration was the institutional precondition for the later semantic expansion of чай. In the 1720s, tea was an extremely valuable imported commodity, and the state restricted it through high tariffs [15].

From the 1730s to the 1760s, tea gradually shifted from a court gift to a market commodity. The 1739 publication *Decrees of the Blessed and Eternally Memorable Sovereign Emperor Peter the Great* repeated the 1724 tariff regulations, indicating that tariff policy remained relatively stable during this period and tea was still a scarce commodity.

In 1746, the German translated natural science work *Wolfian Experimental Physics* introduced tea as a subject of scientific inquiry into Russia, noting that tea could be used to make ink: “Instead of ink nuts, one can use with equal success rose flowers, tea, and some other things. From this experiment, sympathetic ink took its beginning ...” [17, p. 101]. This Russian translation gave Russia a scientific understanding of new values of tea, laying the groundwork for tea’s transition from “luxury” to “everyday item”.

The 1762 publication *Fables of Alexander Sumarokov* wrote: “For the bath, heat; for the cellar, ice; for tea, sugar ...” [16, p. 14]. This suggests that tea had become one of the conditions for a prosperous life among the Russian rich.

In summary, tea in Russia during this period had entered the market but remained a scarce, valuable commodity, consumed mainly in court and aristocratic circles; its symbolic attributes had not yet emerged. It was first of all a valuable “thing,” its meaning attached primarily to scarcity and economic value—i.e., “valuable.” This is the core of the “precious commodity period”: exchange value dominance, tea valued for its scarcity. From Kopytoff’s “cultural biography of things,” tea was in the “commoditization” phase, its cultural symbolic function still latent. Yet the desire engendered by this “scarce valuable” character laid the psychological foundation for later

symbolization: because a thing is valued, it carries imagination; and accumulated imagination is the precondition for symbol generation.

During the reign of Catherine II, the status of tea in Russia underwent a fundamental change. The significance of the 1766 tariff lay less in its fiscal calculation than in its semantic reclassification: tea was no longer a freely tradable luxury but a “necessity of the people” whose export was prohibited [15]. In Koselleck’s terms, the *Bedeutungsfeld* of tea shifted from the semantic axis of value to that of use. This institutional reclassification laid the foundation for the later linguistic and literary symbolization of чай.

The 1766 *Statute of the Imperial Noble Land Cadet Corps Established in St. Petersburg for the Upbringing and Education of Noble Russian Youth* prescribed tea, along with ale and kvass, as a permitted drink in the “black bathhouse” [3, p. 233]. From Foucault’s perspective of “discipline,” tea’s entry into the Cadet Corps behavioral norms meant that “tea drinking” was transformed from a private preference into regulated behavior. This institutional embedding was a key intermediate link in the transformation of material culture into symbolic capital.

At the same time, tea also began to enter social organization incentive systems. The 1765 social organization document *Plan and Statute of the Free Economic Society for the Increase of Agriculture and Housebuilding in Russia* stipulated that for members attending social organization meetings, “Moreover, each is left the proper liberty to order for himself a cup of coffee or tea” [12, p. 1]. This indicates that social organizations had begun to use the provision of tea as a means of rewarding their members.

In the second half of the 18th century, the medicinal value of tea was widely recognised by the Russian medical community, constituting another important dimension of tea’s functional differentiation.

The 1779 *Collection of Various Useful Medicines for Various Diseases with Recipes* clearly stated the different medical perceptions of tea and coffee: “All warm drinks, such as warm water, tea, coffee, are of such quality. Warm tea greatly relaxes, whereas coffee stimulates the dry sinews and brings them to such delicate sensitivity that often from it occur palpitations and trembling of the hands” [2, p. 69]. The same book also records: “On the second or third day, when the cough seizes the breath, then take an emetic powder of ipecac weighing twenty-five grains; and when this powder has done its work, then that day drink copiously of tea made from the shamrock herb ...” [2, p. 111]. Here, “tea” refers to “a drinkable infusion made from other herbs that has a certain effect”. From the perspective of conceptual history, this is a typical manifestation of a structural expansion of the semantic field of the concept “чай”.

By the end of the 1770s, “чай” had expanded from a proper noun for Chinese tea into a common noun meaning “herbal infusion.” Its foreign character diminished, while its Russian national character increased. Semiotically, this semantic expansion reorganized the signifier–signified relationship. According to Saussure’s arbitrariness of the sign, the signifier “чай” has no necessary link to its original signified (Chinese tea) and is thus transferable. When Russian sources used “чай” for local herbal tea, they performed a “renomination”: the signifier broke free from its

original signified and acquired expandability. This is the linguistic mechanism by which a sign moves from proper noun to common noun and from foreign borrowing to native word-formation.

In 1786, the first Russian pediatric medical work, *The Art of Midwifery or Science of Women's Business*, Volume 4, detailed the indications for postpartum women drinking green tea: "In drink, she may use green tea, pure water boiled with emollient herbs; and must be extremely cautious of everything that heats and agitates the blood. During milk fever, use such a drink as promotes perspiration or the gentle passage of vapors" [9, p. 18].

The medicalization of tea meant that its function expanded from "pleasure" to "healing". This shift has important semiotic significance: when an object changes from a consumer good for satisfying appetite to a "medicine" that maintains bodily health, it acquires a dimension of meaning beyond its materiality. This "functional spillover" laid the foundation for subsequent metaphorical functions (e.g., "healing mental illness"). From the perspective of historical anthropology, medicalization is a common path by which objects move from the "profane" to the "sacred" – it is endowed with the power to intervene in bodily order, thus becoming "a thing with meaning".

The 1782 international trade report *A Brief Description of Russian Trade Carried on by Dry Route with China, Bukhara, the Kalmyks, Courland, and Poland* recorded the situation of the Kyakhta trade in detail: "The Russians trade (and barter) with the Chinese: camlets, woollens, clocks, and some local produce. The Chinese, on the other hand, sell to the Russians precious stones, tea, rhubarb, Chinese silk fabrics, raw and worked silk, cotton, musk, anise, and so on. The collection of duties from Kyakhta in good years reaches up to 400,000 rubles; when Russia annually trades with China for about 2 million rubles, then 400,000 is a quarter thereof" [4, p. 19-20].

In the 1760s–1780s, tea in Russia shifted from a "scarce valuable commodity" to a "multifunctional item." Economically, it became an important source of state revenue; socially, it entered institutional consumption contexts such as cadet corps and social organizations; functionally, it expanded from a single beverage to herbal drinks, medicines, and incentives. Its meaning thus shifted from "valuable" to "useful," laying the material and social foundation for later linguistic symbolization and cultural image. From a *longue durée* perspective, medicalization and the semantic expansion of "чай" were two sides of the same process: medical practice gave tea new meanings, while semantic expansion linguistically confirmed and accelerated this transformation, making tea for Russians "something useful" rather than a "Chinese curiosity."

With the functional differentiation and popularization of tea, its linguistic indigenization accelerated. The inclusion of words in dictionaries and the systematization of meanings are important markers of linguistic symbolization. The 1780 *Russian Dictionary with German and French Translations, Part 1: A–N* included the phrases "чайная доска" (tea board) [10, p. 173], "ложка чайная" (tea spoon) [10, p. 335], and "луговой чай" (meadow tea) [10, p. 337]. In Russian, "луговой чай" refers to an infusion made from the flowers and leaves of herbs growing in meadows and steppes. This dictionary officially recorded the semantic expansion of "чай",

indicating that “чай” was already a familiar thing in Russia, a common word, and had acquired national character, allowing the formation of new phrases.

The 1794 *Dictionary of the Russian Academy, Part 6 and Last, From T to the End* contained entries for “чай”, “чайный”, “чайник”, “чайник (чайничек)”, “чайница”, and also included related phrases: “чай зеленый, черный, цветочный” (green, black, flower tea), “сухой чай” (dry tea), “торговать чаем” (to trade in tea), “пить чай” (to drink tea), “напоить кого чаем” (to give someone tea to drink), “чайные цветки” (tea flowers), “чайный запах” (tea scent), “с чаем настоящий” (steeped with tea), “чайная сода” (tea soda), “чайная чашка, ложка” (tea cup, spoon), “чайное ситичко” (tea strainer), “чайный прибор” (tea set), “чайник фарфоровый, серебряный, глиняный” (porcelain, silver, earthenware teapot), and “настаивать чай с кипятком” (to steep tea with boiling water) [6, p. 658-659]. This was a systematic explanation by the highest academic institution of Russia of “чай” and its derived words, while also confirming a large number of phrases associated with “чай”. This proves that the word “чай” (tea) had fully integrated into the Russian language system. From the perspective of conceptual history, inclusion in a dictionary means that the concept has been incorporated into the officially recognised knowledge system; its “conceptualization” is essentially complete.

It should be noted that linguistic symbolization and cultural image genesis did not unfold in a simple chronological sequence but overlapped: linguistic symbolization was concentrated in the 1780s–first half of the 1790s, while the cultural image sprouted earlier (1769) and developed alongside it. The genesis and dissemination of tea’s cultural image in Russia first manifested in literature, giving rise to the initial literary image. This section focuses on literature, tracing the “tea image” from its sprouting to early maturity.

On November 24, 1769, No. 31 of the Russian weekly *The Drone* wrote: “To eliminate the inclination to argue, administer to him daily 30 drops of bitter cooling infusion. These drops represent a correct understanding of things; they can imperceptibly reduce the inclination to argue, and the patient will recover” [11]. From the perspective of conceptual history, this “prescription” in *The Drone* (1769) represents a structural shift in the semantic field of “чай” – the signifier detaches from its botanical referent and begins to circulate as a sign of “correct understanding.” This shift is the precondition for the later emergence of tea’s literary image. From the perspective of Roland Barthes’ “mythology”, this marks the moment when “tea” completed its leap from the first-order sign system (the thing) to the second-order sign system (myth). At the first level, “tea” was merely a material substance for drinking; at the second level, “tea” becomes the symbolic carrier of “truth” – it “heals” not the body but the mind. The establishment of this “connotation” is the core marker of the semiotic leap of cultural image into the realm of literary signification.

In 1797, Karamzin published the first volume of *My Trifles*, including the play *Sophia*. There, the anxious heroine asks her husband, “Let me rest for a few minutes. Order tea to be served” [8, p. 114]. She wants tea to calm herself, invites him to join her, and pours it. After drinking, she feels better and confesses: “I am unworthy of you... Know that I love Le Thien” [8, p. 116]. Here “drinking tea” implies calming emotions, gathering courage, easing awkwardness,

and drawing characters closer. Tea thus acts as a dynamic literary image in psychological turning points and plot development, combining psychological symbolism, emotional expression, and narrative structure—an exemplary 18th-century literary use of “tea image”

Theoretically, the late 18th-century “tea image” remained at an early stage, symbolic beyond practical use but less rich than in 19th- and 20th-century classical literature. Yet the semantic expansion of “чай” and early literary metaphor laid the foundation for its later exploration in the 19th century. From the perspective of reception history, the 18th century was precisely an early stage in the accumulation of meaning and the diversification of form of the Russian cultural image of tea.

Through a systematic examination of 18th-century primary sources, this article reaches the following conclusions.

The genesis of the tea image resulted from multiple interacting mechanisms. First, economic drivers: tariff policy shifted from restriction to encouragement, moving tea from scarcity to popularity; converging interests of government, merchants, and consumers drove its indigenization. Second, institutional consumption: tea entered cadet corps, hospitals, and enterprises, making tea drinking regulated and accelerating its social spread. Third, functional expansion: tea moved from pleasure to healing (medicalization) and from thirst-quenching to incentive (institutionalization), giving it meaning beyond materiality. Fourth, linguistic transfer: “чай” shifted from proper to common noun, from loanword to word-formation core, from foreign to native reference, completing its cognitive “de-exoticization.” Fifth, literary figuration: writers gave tea metaphorical, satirical, and symbolic aesthetic functions, elevating it from everyday object to aesthetic sign. Literary imagination was the final and most important step; without it, tea would have remained merely a “thing”.

On the theoretical level, the Russian genesis of the tea image offers a typical case of cross-cultural symbol generation. First, image genesis is not one-way diffusion but creative reconstruction by the receiving side: Chinese tea did not retain its original connotations (tea ceremony, Zen, literati taste); instead, Russia selected, transformed, and recreated it according to its cold climate, noble-commoner structure, and humanistic psychology. The Russian tea image thus carries Russian emotions and imaginings, not Chinese tea-ceremony spirit – an instance of reception history’s “creative misreading.” Second, symbolization requires material and linguistic preparation. Without tea’s 18th-century popularization (the “rigid demand” shown by 1766 tariff data) and the semantic-lexical indigenization of “чай,” the 19th-century literary tea image could not have arisen. Symbols are rooted in social practice and linguistic convention, confirming historical materialism’s insight that the superstructure cannot be separated from the material base. Third, literature accelerates and completes symbolization. Tariff documents, medical works, and dictionaries proved tea was valuable, medicinal, and a Russian word, but only literature endowed it with “beauty” and “meaning.” The 1769 *The Drone* “cooling tea” metaphor and Karamzin’s 1797 tea-calming scene mark tea’s final leap from “thing” to “symbol.” From historical poetics, literature is the most effective mechanism for sublimating the meaning of everyday things.

On a more macro-theoretical level, this study provides empirical support for the following three theoretical issues.

First, a complement to the theory of the “cultural biography of things”. Arjun Appadurai emphasizes that the transformation of objects from “commodity” to “symbol” is usually accompanied by a process of “de-commoditization”. This study shows that, in a cross-cultural diffusion context, this process also involves the dual movement of “decline of foreignness” and “increase of nativeness”. Tea in Russia did not simply undergo “de-commoditization”; rather, it accumulated symbolic capital in the process of “de-exoticization”.

Second, a revision of the theory of “cross-cultural reception”. Traditional reception aesthetics emphasizes the “horizon of expectation” (Hans Robert Jauss) of the receiving side. However, this study finds that the reception of tea in 18th-century Russia was not an active “expectation” but was accomplished through “passive-semi-passive” mechanisms such as tariff policy and institutional consumption. This suggests that cross-cultural diffusion of material culture is sometimes not the result of being “desired” but the result of being “arranged” – state power and economic interests playing a more important role in it than reception aesthetics acknowledges.

Third, a distillation of the mechanism of “symbol indigenization”. The transformation from Chinese “tea” to Russian “чай” is not a “misreading” or “distortion” of meaning but a creative re-coding. This re-coding follows the rule of “function precedes meaning”: tea was first accepted because it was “useful”, then indigenized because it could be “named”, and finally symbolised because it could be “metaphorised”. This sequence “useful → nameable → metaphorizable” can serve as a general historical model for explaining the cross-cultural symbol genesis of foreign objects.

From “commodity” to “symbol”, Chinese tea completed the most critical step in cross-cultural diffusion in 18th-century Russia. The “Tea Road” was not only a channel for the circulation of goods but also a bond of civilizational exchange.

The indigenization of tea in Russia shows that a cultural product can, while retaining its core function (drinking), be re-coded and endowed with new meanings in another socio-cultural context. This mode of cultural interaction – “harmony in difference”, i.e., generating differentiated symbolic meanings on the basis of maintaining functional similarity – still holds important lessons for understanding the mechanisms of contemporary cross-cultural dialogue. From the tea tariffs of 18th-century Russian customs to the “tea-drinking” scene in Karamzin’s play, Chinese tea has been deeply integrated into the cultural body of Russia. Looking back at this cross-cultural journey of three centuries, what we see is not only a history of the diffusion of a plant and a beverage, but a history of civilizational dialogue and indigenous creation – a history of how matter is transformed into meaning.

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