Intercultural Communication in Nursing Education: When Asian Students and American Faculty Converge

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and changing American demographics, it is becoming increasingly important to understand and communicate effectively with people from diverse cultural and racial/ethnic backgrounds. This article applies the framework of cultural variability and intercultural communication research literature to examine and highlight the different communication behaviors of Asians and non-Asians in the United States. The meanings of various verbal and nonverbal behaviors of Asian students are examined to clarify their communication patterns. Culture-based assumptions are identified, and measures to improve intercultural communication in nursing education are provided.

Effective communication between students and faculty is critical to learning outcomes. This is especially true for international nursing students and nursing students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Because of personal factors (e.g., personality, knowledge, skill level) and cultural factors (e.g., language, different values and beliefs), intercultural communication between Asian students (and Asian-American students, to a lesser extent) and non-Asian faculty members, peers, and patients in the United States can be challenging.

In addition, two conceptual obstacles to enhancing intercultural communication exist. First, the need to understand Asian nursing students is often underrecognized. On the one hand, the number of international nursing students, including those from Asia, is relatively small within the total population of nursing students in the United States. On the other hand, raised expectations of nursing faculty to perform scholarly activities, in addition to teaching and service, and increased enrollments have resulted in heavier teaching loads with less time to attend to less-urgent issues. Consequently, intercultural communication is perceived as a less-urgent issue. Second, misunderstandings due to miscommunication between Asian students and American faculty are frequently mystified. In most cases, misunderstanding and miscommunication occur due to lack of knowledge and ignorance, rather than ill intentions. Asians have been compared to onions because they have many layers, and understanding and comprehending the "Asian psyche" is perceived as a daunting challenge. The profound differences in cultural values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, resulting behavioral patterns, and more important, the "nonlinearity" of the Asian psyche contribute to this challenge. As a result, many American faculty member feel "lost" as to how to take appropriate measures to improve the learning outcomes of Asian students.

Promoting effective intercultural communication in nursing education has become more important as the U.S. population and the nursing profession become increasingly diverse. In addition, the percentage of international students attending nursing schools in the United States increased by 10% between 1980 and 1990 (Colling & Liu, 1995). With increasing globalization, this trend is certain to continue. According to the most current statistics, the United States remains the most popular destination for international students, with a total of 582,996 international students enrolled in American colleges and universities during 2001-2002 (Wheeler, 2002). This number was the largest to date and occurred despite the loss of some

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international students in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Traditionally, Asia has provided the largest share of international students to the United States. During 2001-2002, 55.7% of the 582,996 international students came from Asia (Wheeler, 2002). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2002) reported that 4,682 Asians were enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs, which include Asian Indian (9.6%), Chinese (.9%), Filipino (.7%), Japanese (.3%), and other Asians (.5%). While discussion of the differences among these Asian groups is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that, because of diversity between and within cultural groups, it is imperative to guard against overgeneralization and stereotyping. Nevertheless, there is value in exploring some of the commonalities that exist among people of Asian origin. These shared characteristics and undergirding rationales can help faculty understand the behaviors of Asian students from a cultural context.

Culture determines perceptual selectivity and, therefore, communication. In fact, culture is the crucial dimension that differentiates human perception from that of an organism. Based on his extensive cross-cultural study, Edward Hall, guru of intercultural communication research, was the first to propose the revolutionary idea that "Culture is communication and communication is culture" (1959, p. 217). In addition, Hall suggested that culture determines what one takes in and processes and what one leaves out. Hall (1966) also noted that:

> Selective screening of sensory data admits some things while filtering out others, so that experience as it is perceived through one set of culturally patterned sensory screens is quite different from experience perceived through another. (p. 2)

In other words, culture determines what one attunes to and the attributions one makes about what is observed (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Chua, 1988).

This article examines the communication behaviors of Asians and provides explicit and implicit comparisons with those of mainstream Americans. Cultural values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that underlie Asian communication patterns and styles are also explored. Culturally congruent measures to improve the effectiveness of intercultural communication for both Asian students and American faculty are proposed. For this article, Asian nursing students from East and Southeast Asia are the primary targeted groups in the description, analysis, and discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on international students in the United States have identified various issues that affect the educational outcomes of this group of learners (Abel, 2002; Barber, Altbach, & Myers, 1984a; Goodwin & Nacht, 1983; Jenkins & Associates, 1983; Lacina, 2002; Spaulding & Flack, 1976). English language deficiency is identified as the cause of many academic and psychosocial issues, and often leads to communication and adjustment difficulties in social and academic environments in the United States. In fact, language deficiency is the primary determining factor of whether or not international students have a successful stay and achieve their academic goals (Abel, 2002; Wimberley, McCloud, & Flinn, 1992). In an editorial for a special issue of *Comparative Education Review* focusing on international students, Barber, Altbach, and Myers (1984b) concluded that, "Except for English proficiency, which is unambiguously related to satisfactory educational experiences, studies of other variables have produced no consistent results" (p. ii). This is one reason admission tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language, are required for all international students as a screening and placement mechanism.

A review of the nursing literature revealed a number of difficulties encountered by international nursing students (Abriam-Yago, Yoder, & Kataoka-Yahiro, 1999; Abu-Saad & Kayser-Jones, 1981, 1982; Abu-Saad, Kayser-Jones, & Tien, 1982; Carty, O'Grady, Wichaikhum, & Bull, 2002; Carty et al., 1998; Colling & Liu, 1995; Doutrich, 2001; Gay, Edgil, & Stullenbarger, 1993; Julian, Keane, & Davidson, 1999; Kayser-Jones & Abu-Saad, 1982; Pardue & Haas, 2003; Ryan, Markowski, Ura, & Liu-Chiang, 1998; Sanner, Wilson, & Samson, 2002; Shearer, 1989; Tien, 1982; Wang & Frank, 2002). Due to the nature of nursing and the communication competencies inherently required by the profession, language skills are even more critical in nursing. Proficiency in English is correlated with a positive nursing school experience and is the primary determinant and predictor of educational outcomes (Abriam-Yago et al., 1999; Abu-Saad & Kayser-Jones, 1981, 1982; Abu-Saad et al., 1982; Carty et al., 1998, 2002; Colling & Liu, 1995; Doutrich, 2001; Gay et al., 1993; Julian et al., 1999; Kayser-Jones & Abu-Saad, 1982; Pardue & Haas, 2003; Ryan et al., 1998; Sanner et al., 2002; Shearer, 1989; Tien, 1982; Wang & Frank, 2002). However, a systematic search of the Cumulated Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature since its inception in 1982 retrieved no studies that focused on Asian communication behaviors from cultural and psychosocial perspectives.

A FRAMEWORK OF CULTURAL VARIABILITY

Variabilities across cultures have been identified and studied by many disciplines, such as anthropology, comparative sociology, and cross-cultural psychology. Among a plethora of cultural variabilities, collectivism versus individualism and high-context versus low-context communication are the two dimensions of variability affecting intercultural communication most profoundly. Collectivism versus individualism and high-context versus low-context communication are also more encompassing because other identified cultural variabilities (e.g., uncertainty, avoidance, power distance, masculine versus feminine) are either derived from or related to these two dimensions (Hofstede, 1980). Evidence exists that these two dimensions form a robust explanatory framework (Hofstede, 1980).

Collectivism Versus Individualism

In individualistic cultures, the emphasis is on individuals' needs, initiatives, and achievements. The "I" identity supersedes the "we" identity. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures, the needs of a group (i.e., family, work unit, community) are prioritized over individual needs. This is symbolized by "we" coming before "me," and the emphasis on group membership and identity. This cultural value is also reflected in language. For example, the Japanese word for "self" (*jibun*) literally means a part of the larger whole that consists of groups, relationships, and interdependency (Davis, 1999). According to Minami (1985), "There is no man without another man, according to the Japanese concept" (p. 316). Hofstede's (1980) multicountry study revealed that most northern European countries, Australia, and the United States are individualistic cultures, while African, Arab, Asian, Latin, and southern European cultures are primarily collectivistic in nature.

Individualism and collectivism co-exist in all cultures. However, one tendency dominates in a given culture (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). Individualism versus collectivism exists at the cultural level (i.e., cultural norms and roles), as well as at the individual level (i.e., personal values). Individualism versus collectivism affects communication through its influence on cultural norms and roles related to group identities and the differentiation between members of "ingroups" and "outgroups." In addition, individualism versus collectivism affects the ways individuals are socialized into their cultures (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002).

High-Context Versus Low-Context Cultures

Hall (1976) conceptualized world cultures along a high-to-low continuum in terms of context dependency. According to Hall (1976):

> A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is versed in the explicit code. (p. 79)

To a large extent, low-context cultures (e.g., mainstream U.S. culture) correspond to individualistic cultures, while high-context cultures (e.g., all Asian cultures) are associated with collectivistic cultures.

Similarly, low-context and high-context communication is practiced in all cultures. However, one form tends to prevail in a given culture. A closely related aspect that derives from high-context versus low-context communication is the degree of openness or straightforwardness of communication in a culture. Low-context communication is usually more direct, while high-context communication is almost always indirect. Members of individualistic cultures tend to communicate in a more direct manner that has relatively low dependence on context, while members of collectivistic cultures are inclined to use high-context messages in a more indirect fashion (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002).

According to Gudykunst et al. (1988), the directness of the communication style "refers to the extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit verbal communication" (p. 100). They indicated that:

> The direct verbal style refers to verbal messages that embody and invoke speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and desires in the discourse process. The indirect verbal style, in contrast, refers to verbal messages that camouflage and conceal speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation. (p. 100)

In addition, Gudykunst et al. (1988) elaborated on the differences between direct and indirect communication styles and their underpinnings:

> The value orientation of individualism propels North Americans to speak their minds freely through direct verbal expressions. Individualistic values foster the norms of honesty and openness. Honesty and openness are achieved through the use of precise, straightforward language behaviors. The value orientation of collectivism, in contrast, constrains members of cultures such as China, Japan, and Korea from speaking boldly through explicit verbal communication style. Collectivistic cultures like China, Japan, and Korea emphasize the importance of group harmony and group conformity. Group harmony and conformity are accomplished through the use of imprecise, ambiguous verbal communication behaviors. (p. 102)

Gudykunst et al. (1988) also analyzed the differences in motivation and purpose of direct and indirect communication, stating:

> The use of direct verbal style in individualistic, low-context cultures is, overall, for the purpose of asserting self-face need and self-face concern, while the use of indirect verbal style in collectivistic, high-context cultures is, overall, for the purpose of preserving mutual-face need and upholding interdependent group harmony. (p. 104)

However, people using either pattern of communication may not be aware of such differences because communication patterns and styles are largely determined by culture, which functions at subconscious or unconscious levels. In addition, the indirect communication pattern also influences and determines, to a considerable extent, the Asian conflict management style that is characterized by passivity and avoidance to preserve mutual face (Xu & Davidhizar, 2004).

ASIAN COMMUNICATION PATTERNS AND STYLES

Asian Cultural Values and Communication Behaviors

Communication behaviors are largely determined by culture (Scollon & Scollon, 2000) and are specifically modified by the cultural values, norms, beliefs, and language characteristics of a given group. To a considerable extent, these factors function at the unconscious and subconscious levels, unless intentionally brought to consciousness.

Respect for Teacher. Confucianism has a profound effect on East and Southeast Asian cultures. From the Confucius perspective, teachers are regarded as the "parent outside the home" for students and should be so honored, respected, and revered. This tradition is derived from the absolute respect for and obedience to one's parents and the love for learning and knowledge. In return, teachers are expected to treat students as their own children. Teachers are also regarded as truth holders, exemplars for moral behaviors, and trusted friends. Therefore, the relationship between students and teachers in traditional Asian cultures is much "thicker." Consequently, this cultural values orientation gives teachers enormous authority, power, and influence.

Face and Associated Concepts. "Face" is of paramount importance in Asian cultures and, therefore, is a pivotal psychosocial concept that underpins Asian communication behaviors. In sociological and sociolinguistic research, "face" can be defined as the "negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event" (Scollon & Scollon, 2000, p. 45). The concept of face is rooted in honor and means bringing reputation to oneself and, more important, to one's family. To Asians, family includes not only their nuclear families but also their extended families. Open and direct confrontations in collectivistic cultures are avoided at all costs, to save face. Frequently, Asians appear polite, courteous, and agreeable, and to have a higher tolerance for different, or even conflicting, views. However, such impressions are superficial and misleading because Asians' "gut" feelings are disguised, very often through the unconscious cultural programming that becomes second nature. In contrast, in individualistic cultures, the concept of face is rarely a concern beyond the involved individuals.

Verbal Communication Behaviors

Indirectness. Indirectness is the first and the most readily recognized characteristic of Asian verbal communication. This mode of communication may be called "circular" or described as "beating around the bush." However, this culturally determined communication pattern should in no way be equated with deception. Indirectness is perceived as having good taste and being tactful because indirectness offers the opportunity for saving face, especially in conflicts and potentially embarrassing situations. Directness is perceived as threatening and rude. Thus, open confrontation is avoided by Asians, if at all possible. However, when open confrontation is unavoidable, the relationship of the involved parties is likely to suffer long-term, possibly permanent, damage.

To a large extent, the preference of Asians for indirect, ambiguous communication over direct, open communication can be attributed to the importance of face honoring and group harmony. However, such indirectness in communication does not diminish the expectations of Asians. On the contrary, people in high-context cultures have much higher expectations of others because they expect listeners to detect their unarticulated moods, subtle gestures, and environmental cues, which people from low-context cultures simply take for granted (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002). According to Triandis (1995), "Collectivists are expected to read the other's mind during communication so the message is quite indirect, dependent on hints, the use of the eyes, distance between bodies, and so on" (p. 76). If both parties are from high-context cultures, this expectation is mutually understood implicitly, due to shared cultural programming.

Discourse Pattern. Scollon and Scollon (2000) provided a linguistic-cognitive interpretation of the indirect Asian communication style. Based on empirical research, they found that East Asians provide rationales first and make their points at the end of a conversation. This communication pattern may be perceived as confusing and anxiety provoking because listeners must remain attentive throughout the entire conversation until the last sentence when the speaker "makes the pitch." This discourse structure can be formulated as: because of _____ (topic, background, or reasons), then _____ (comment, main point, or suggested action) (Scollon & Scollon, 2000). In contrast, the typical Western discourse logic is just the opposite.

Nonverbal Communication Behaviors

According to sociolinguists, more attention needs to be paid to nonverbal behaviors, which are more reliable and revealing because they are subject to less, if any, conscious control. However, cultures dictate the meanings of a nonverbal behavior. In other words, the same nonverbal behavior may have different, or even conflicting, interpretations across cultures.

Facial Expressions and Gestures. Conformity and courtesy are major concerns among Asians to maintain face and group harmony. Affirmative replies such as "yes" are often accompanied with nodding and smiling (Stauffer, 2004). However, a response of "yes" often means only "I heard you," and may not be automatically equated to agreement or consent. The cultural phenomenon that "yes" may not mean yes (i.e., agreement or consent) is difficult for people from Western cultures to comprehend and may lead to innocent misunderstanding (Xu, Lippold, Gilligan, Posey-Goodwin, & Broome, 2004). This pattern of response is culturally programmed because Asians do not want to offend others by saying "no." In addition, limited English proficiency frequently compounds the situation, making it a challenge to substantiate whether Asian listeners comprehend the situation or are simply being courteous (Stauffer, 2004).

Quietness and Silence. The typical impression of American educators about Asian students is that they are "good" students—hard working, attentive, quite, polite, and punctual, with few questions and demands. The common assumption by mainstream American culture that people comprehend something if no questions are asked is often inapplicable to Asian students, who live by different cultural norms. Frequently, intense intrapersonal tension occurs within Asian students before they make a decision they perceive as important or difficult. For example, it is

not uncommon for Asian students to dwell on whether "to ask or not to ask questions" for days before they gather enough nerve to approach American faculty. Both making an appointment to see and being in a one-on-one situation with a faculty member may provoke anxiety and panic in Asian students.

Silence has different meanings in Asian and mainstream American cultures. East Asians perceive silence as "an indication of strength, power, and disagreement," whereas those in mainstream American culture are more likely to interpret silence as "an indication of weakness, being shy, or troubled" (Triandis, 1995, p. 125). American faculty should guard against interpreting Asian students' silence as their having no learning needs, being unable to answer a question, or being incorrect or dishonest. Rather, the reasons for Asian students' not asking questions in class is that they do not want to stand out in public, want to avoid personal embarrassment by asking a "foolish" question, or wish to avoid a possible situation in which the faculty member would lose face by being unable to answer a question.

ENHANCING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Based on the above analysis and the research literature, factors affecting communication patterns and styles can be grouped into two general categories: personal and cultural. Personal factors include lack of English language proficiency (e.g., limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with slang, inaccurate pronunciation) and other psychosocial barriers. The situation can be exacerbated by intrapersonal anxiety within Asian students (sometimes to a panic level), frequently brought on by lack of confidence, the perceived significance and pressure of the issue on hand, a self-imposed drive for perfection, and extreme self-consciousness and sensitivity. Those factors are often compounded by different expectations of the American faculty.

At the cultural level, factors that impede intercultural communication include belief in and valuing of saving face, the indirect communication style, and the inclination to avoid real and potential conflicts. In addition, American faculty may have personal biases toward and culture-based assumptions and expectations of Asian students. The combined effects of these factors may result in two self-insulated, parallel communication systems that rarely intersect.

General and specific measures can address these intercultural communication barriers. These measures are based on the first author's personal experiences as both an international student and a nurse educator, as well as both authors' years of study as transcultural nurse specialists. General measures include:

- Both Asian students and American faculty must realize the need to learn about each other (cognitive domain).
- Both students and faculty must be willing to reach beyond their own "comfort zones" to make conscious efforts to understand the other side (affective domain).
- Both students and faculty need to learn how to engage in intercultural communication (psychomotor domain, in a broad sense).

In addition, specific student and faculty measures can improve intercultural communication (Table).

Student Measures

Asian students can improve their intercultural communication skills by taking full advantage of an English environment. They should take opportunities to learn about American culture through both formal and informal channels. Formal learning may include English as second language training and organized cultural immersion programs (e.g., living with American host families), while informal learning may involve mass media (e.g., television, film, radio) and social functions.

Efforts to improve use of the English language are essential and should include expansion of vocabulary and knowledge of slang and idioms. Students' fellow classmates can serve as resources for learning about American academic culture, including rules, regulations, and expectations of students. Being reflective on and observant about personal experiences can promote insight.

It is also important that Asian students make efforts to bolster their self-confidence. Asian students should be encouraged to approach their American faculty to meet their learning needs and to ask questions in class, realizing this is acceptable and expected in American academic culture. Making appointments with faculty members during their office hours or seeking out faculty members immediately after class can help Asian students meet their learning needs. This practice is congruent with the Asian cultural value of respect for the teacher.

Faculty Measures

American faculty should make conscious efforts to learn about their Asian students and their cultures. It is important not to make assumptions but to remain open-minded. When an Asian student is speaking, faculty members should be alert to the student's nonverbal behaviors. When speaking to Asian students, faculty members should avoid using colloquialisms, slang, culture-based metaphors, idioms, and words unlikely to be understood without further clarification or knowledge of the cultural or situational context. If a faculty member has an accent, it may take some time for Asian students to become familiar with it.

Faculty members should encourage Asian students to ask questions and make efforts to confirm with individual Asian students, whenever possible, that the content presented in class is understood. Asking students to paraphrase or perform a return demonstration can be effective. However, this should be done in a manner that will not increase the students' anxiety or cause students to lose face.

Faculty members should avoid asking Asian students questions in public, since this may cause discomfort, stress, and even panic in the students. Approaching Asian students in a sensitive manner and asking questions in

TABLE

Problematic Culture-Based Assumptions and Expectations, and Measures to Improve Communication Between Asian Students and American Faculty

Problematic Assumptions and Expectations	Measures to Improve Communication
Asian Students	
American faculty should understand you, your culture, and your communication patterns.	Students should seek to understand their American faculty before hoping to be understood by them.
American faculty should take the initiative to ask about you and be concerned about your academic progress.	Students should initiate contact with faculty regarding academic matters. It is an exception, rather than a norm, for American faculty to take the initiative and approach the student. However, when American faculty does so, it is more likely to indicate there may be a problem.
American faculty will question you in person to ensure you understand lecture content.	Students should ask questions in class or a setting they find comfortable. The American academic norm is to assume that students understand the content if they ask no questions. Seeking out a private setting, such as immediately after class or during faculty office hours, can help resolve the dilemma between fearing public embarrassment and compromising learning. With American faculty, the more questions one asks, the more one benefits.
American faculty should understand your flawed English.	Students should make every effort to improve their English language proficiency.
American faculty should be interested in and concerned about you and your family.	American college students are regarded as mature adults who are able to make reasonable decisions independently. Respect for privacy is the American social norm.
American Faculty	
Asian students should understand American culture, including communication patterns and styles.	Faculty members should take the initiative to learn about Asian people and cultures, including communication patterns and styles.
Asian students with learning needs should take the initiative to contact you.	Faculty members should ask Asian students individually if they have any learning needs.
No international students, including Asian students, should have language difficulties.	Faculty members can slow down when speaking; be patient and attentive, especially to students' nonverbal behaviors; give more response time; reduce students' anxiety levels; and be aware of different discourse patterns. Faculty should also avoid asking negative questions.
Asian students should speak out in class whenever they have questions.	Faculty members can approach Asian students in a culturally sensitive manner to check if they have questions. Faculty should avoid asking them questions in class so they will not lose face in public.
Asian students should not expect or ask for advice regarding personal matters.	It is perceived as a sign of caring, rather than personal intrusion, for American faculty members to show a reasonable level of interest in Asian students' overall well-being, including cultural and academic adjustment and broader family factors that may affect their learning.

a non-threatening manner can ease the students into a more interactive mode. Faculty members should avoid using negative questions, such as, "You understood today's lecture, didn't you?" This type of questioning is confusing to Asians because the cultural programming for answering such questions is different.

For students who have difficulty with English, providing access to lecture notes, handouts, and other supplemental materials before class may facilitate their understanding. Faculty should also be aware that international students often take two or three times longer than American students to complete reading and writing assignments.

Asian students and American faculty are frequently insulated by an invisible wall of cultural differences and frustrated by the seemingly insurmountable communication barriers. Lack of mutual understanding is at least partially attributable to this frustration. Unfortunately, impending academic disasters caused by communication barriers are often not perceived or prevented until it is too late to intervene.

CONCLUSIONS

During the past decade, the United States has made significant strides in boosting racial and ethnic diversity in the nursing workforce (Cole & Stutte, 1998). In 2002, 22.5% of nursing students in the United States were from minority groups (AACN, 2002). From 1996 to 2000, the number of minority nurses grew 35%, while the number of non-minority nurses increased by only 2%. According to the census projection, the trends of U.S. demographics will continue to fuel such changes in the decades ahead.

In addition, globalization will continue to increase and intensify intercultural encounters in nursing and nursing education. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize these trends and be prepared to meet the emerging challenges.

Personal and group communication patterns and styles are rooted in cultural backgrounds. Dissonance, misunderstandings, conflicts, and clashes are unavoidable when people from different cultures come together, because no one knows everything about others' expectations. From a philosophical viewpoint, intercultural conflicts present valuable opportunities for gaining a better understanding of taken-for-granted personal values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms. To a large extent, the degree to which mutual understanding is achieved between Asian nursing students and American faculty members is based on increasing one's self-awareness and assuming an open, tolerant, empathetic attitude toward different ways of doing things.

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