



# Playing Techniques of the Four Major Schools of Chinese Yangqin

**Khrai Nai Baan: Creation of a Gothic play script about sexual prejudice against Sapphism**

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Qiqi Luo <sup>[1]</sup>

## Abstract

This research article is part of the dissertation "The Chinese Yangqin: Performance Technique and Aesthetics since 1949". The Guangdong yangqin school, with its clear and bright tone, exhibits a lyrical and cheerful musical style. The tone of the Jiangnan Yangqin school is soft and delicate, showing a gentle musical style. The Sichuan yangqin school has a noisy timbre and shows a passionate musical style. The Northeast Yangqin school is a fusion of many cultures, with strong compatibility and rich tone colours, showing a strong and optimistic musical style.

Performance techniques are most influenced by the standard of living and culture of the region. Although the four traditional schools have commonalities in the use of performance techniques, with the increase in techniques, each school has its own unique techniques that better reflect the differences in history, culture, geography, and customs of different regions. The researcher found through investigation that the gradual disappearance of some playing techniques has led to a reduction in the characteristics of the schools, perhaps facing extinction.

**Keywords:** Chinese yangqin, four major schools, playing techniques

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<sup>[1]</sup> Independent Scholar

## Introduction

The yangqin originated in the ancient Middle Eastern countries of Assyria and Persia and later spread to Spain, Turkey, and Hungary, where it was known as the cimbalom. The yangqin is a stringed instrument with a broad cosmopolitan and distinctive national character. Among Chinese musical instruments, the yangqin is the only one with a broad cosmopolitan character. (Zheng Baoheng, 1995).

The formation of traditional yangqin schools began in the 1920s and 1940s, starting with the initial art of yangqin playing and gradually forming schools of traditional yangqin playing art characterised by local tonal playing styles and unique playing techniques. Some of the more developed schools include the Northeast yangqin, the Guangdong music yangqin, the Sichuan yangqin, and the Jiangnan Yangqin. (Xu Hefang, 2014).

The rap form "Sichuan yangqin" is the soil of the instrumental form "Sichuan yangqin", which stood out as one of the most important styles of Chinese yangqin performance in the early 20th century (Dai Ru, 2006).

The Jiangnan Yangqin is a musical form separated from the music of Jiangnan, with a smooth melody, steady rhythm, and a refined, delicate, and elegant style. (Zhang Min, 2010)

The Guangdong yangqin uses liner notes and other playing techniques to form the yangqin style of Guangdong music; the Jiangnan Yangqin is good at using changes in the structure of tunes and loops to express local styles. The Sichuan yangqin draws on local rap tunes and is good at using the wave bamboo technique; the Northeast yangqin combines with local folk songs. (Yang Jia, 2013)

The Northeast yangqin was founded in the 1920s by Mr Zhao

Dengxue, who took advantage of the rich folk songs unique to the Northeast, combined them with the folk rap music and shadow puppets unique to Liaoning and other regions, and used his own home-made yangqin to sing and sell on the streets and composed many of his own works based on Northeast folk music. Combining the life practices of the working people in the Northeast,

Mr. Zhao Dengxue created a school of playing with unique local style characteristics, which became one of the four major schools of the traditional Chinese yangqin and occupies an important position in the history of the development of the art of the Chinese yangqin. He is most famous for adapting Su Wu shepherding sheep into the yangqin repertoire, combining unique yangqin playing techniques such as kneading, pressing, sliding, trembling, and rolling to make a unique style of yangqin with great northeastern local characteristics (Huang Kun, 2016).

In this study, the researchers examined the playing techniques of each of the four major schools of the Chinese yangqin and found that the use of characteristic playing techniques best reflects the differences between the four schools. It took a total of 2 years, from 2021, to search for relevant literature and collect and analyse it in the field, and 2023 to produce the results of the study.

### **Objectives of Research**

Study of the Chinese yangqin in four major schools of playing techniques.

### **Research Methodology**

In this study entitled "Playing Techniques of the Four Traditional Schools of the Chinese Yangqin with Their Distinctive Characteristics," the researcher relied on the sociology of music research methodology and used qualitative research methods to collect data. In preparation for the fieldwork, the researcher conducted a literature review

from the literature and related studies. And interview questions were designed for field data collection. A follow-up research method was used to interview key informants at different times. And an audio-visual library was used to record the data from the field study. Finally, the researcher managed and analysed the summary of the information obtained from the literature study and fieldwork.

## Results

### 1. Guangdong Yangqin Schoo

#### 1.1 "Liners" (衬音)

"Liners" are homophonic octave skips, often used in the bass. It is divided formally into one, two, three, and four positions. Different positions can produce different sound effects. It increases the sense of continuity of the melody and facilitates changes in speed and mood.

An important difference between the Guangdong yangqin school and other schools is that it is generally not played in the first position. It is used at the end of a section and at the end of a whole piece of music to give the music a deeper artistic meaning. The third liner is the most common in Guangdong yangqin music, as shown in Figs. 1 and 2. Fig. 3 uses the second liner with added intensity.



Figure 1 A fragment of the score of "The Linking Chain", the third liner.

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Figure 2 An example of "Raining on the Banana", the second and third liner.

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Figure 3 A fragment of the score of the tune "Dry Thunder", in which the "liner" technique is used, requiring the accentuation of the third liner, the use of the accentuation symbol, the ">" mark, and the accentuation, specifically for emphasis.

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There is another form of "liner", called "sitting tone", which was created by Mr.Yan Laolie, the earliest player of the right bamboo school, using the traditional Cantonese small yangqin pitch arrangement. This arrangement is very suitable for using the "sitting tone" technique to enrich the melody, Figure 4.



**Figure 4** Double seven type yangqin", two rows of codes, each with seven notes, 21 notes in total, with three new and old yangqins.

Photographer: Yang Jia (June 2012)

The performance method is for the right bamboo to lead the melody notes in the mid to low range, and between each two melody notes, the left bamboo is evenly inserted into a continuously fixed backbone high note, with the double bamboo alternating and cooperating. Due to the fact that the notes inserted by Zuo Zhu are usually the main or subordinate notes of the melody used, the sound effect of harmony is achieved, enriching the melody and making it an original playing technique of the Guangdong Yangqin school, such as in Figure 5. In field research, researchers found that yangqin players had better use of this playing technique.

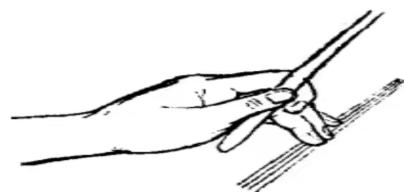


**Figure 5** Four bars of the piece "Inverted Curtain", all using the "sitting" technique.

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### 1.2 "Deng Yin" (顿音)

The action is shown in Figure 6. The characteristics of dun yin are short, jumping, and staccato. Can be used to imitate specific situations, such as Figure 7. In the application of "pause tone", "single handed pause tone" is the most commonly used, but it is different from the "hand closed tone" of the Sichuan Yangqin school, as shown in Figure 8. The sound effect is almost the same. The researcher made a comparison and scanned Figure 9 to watch the video. The use of 'double handed pause' in music is very rare, such as Figure 10. In field research, researchers found that yangqin players had better use of this playing technique.



**Figure 6** "One-handed staccato" technique, action diagram, in practice, the left hand holds down the string to stop the after tone while the right hand strikes the string with a bamboo beater.

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**Figure 7** A sample of the piece "Rain on a Banana", with a large number of four bars, all of which are played using the "staccato" technique, marked with "▼". It simulates the sound of raindrops falling on the banana leaves.

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**Figure 8** Shows a diagram of the Sichuan yangqin school, using the "closed hand" technique, using the side of the palm.

Photo: Illustration from Prof. Dai Ru's book (June, 2003)



**Figure 9** "One-handed staccato" and "hand closed", the former using the fingers, the latter using the side of the palm.

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Figure 10 The ending note of the tune "Raining on the Banana", using the "two-handed staccato" technique.

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### 1.3 "Lian Da Yin" (连打音)

The traditional "Lian Da Yin" is based on the alternate playing of two hands, dividing the original note into notes with shorter duration, such as dividing a quarter note into four sixteenth notes or dividing an eighth note into two sixteenth notes, so that the density of notes increases within the same duration, and the main melody sounds more coherent. For example, Figure 11. In field research, researchers found that yangqin players had better use of this playing technique.

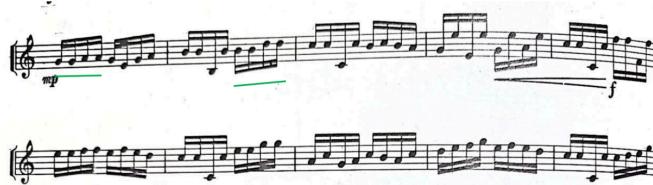


Figure 11 The tune "Rain on the Banana", marked by the horizontal line, uses the "Lian Da Yin" technique.

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### 1.4 "Overtones" (泛音)

Due to its unique nature, this playing technique has been rarely applied in the performance of Guangdong music yangqin. In the later stage, there were many innovations in the playing technique of "overtone", which used "octave overtone". For example, Figure 12. In the field research, researchers found that yangqin players would have some problems with this playing technique in playing practice; for example, they could not find the exact position, which would lead to incorrect sound and affect the musical expression of the works.



Figure 12 The piece "Rain on a Banana" uses the "overtones" technique, using "o" marks placed above the tone to imitate a small drop of rain falling gently on the surface of the banana leaf.

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## 2. Jiangnan Yangqin School

The most distinctive playing technique of the Jiangnan Yangqin School is "anti bamboo". For example, Figure 13. The researchers compared the three commonly used playing techniques of "anti bamboo" together, which are "anti bamboo left and right hand single notes", "anti bamboo single round notes", and "anti bamboo octave round notes". Scan the image in Figure 14 to view the video. Because the head of the bamboo hammer is coated with adhesive tape, the front and back of the bamboo hammer have two different tones, and "anti bamboo" has evolved from "single bamboo". Since the technical difficulty of traditional music is relatively

low, researchers found that yangqin players have better application of this playing technique in performance practice in field research.



**Figure 13** A clip of the score of the tune "Play Lyrics 3-6," starting from the second bar, using the "anti bamboo" technique.

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**Figure 14** The "anti bamboo" playing techniques are three commonly used ones, namely "anti-bamboo left and right hand single tone," "anti bamboo single tone round tone," and "anti-bamboo octave round tone."

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### 3. Sichuan Yangqin School

#### 3.1 "Pressure bamboo sound" (压竹音)

After striking the strings, the head of the bamboo board is lifted, and the board is pressed back onto the strings to produce a short sound. The dark timbre of the "pressed bamboo sound" contrasts with the noisy timbre of the "wave bamboo sound," making it more dramatic. It is often used as the closing note of a complete piece of music, thus making the piece distinctive. The ending note of the slow section of the piece "Haunted Stage" uses this technique to make the sound suddenly disappear.



**Figure 4-15** The video of "pressed bamboo sound".

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As shown in Figure 15, the main melodic notes struck by the head of the bamboo hammer still need to be clear and clear. Therefore, the difficulty of performing this technique is relatively high, and it is only limited to some highly skilled performers who use it to flaunt their skills during the final climax of traditional solo pieces such as "General's Order" and "Victory Battle Drum".

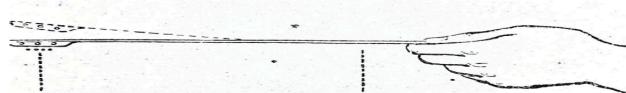


Figure 16 "Pressing bamboo sound," action diagram the dotted line is the position of contacting the string.

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### 3.2 "Wave Bamboo" (浪竹)

This technique produces the sound of bamboo and metal clashing, which sounds dense and noisy and has a dramatic effect, making it ideal for expressing a passionate and noisy scene. In the climax of the piece "Troublesome Stage", the "wave bamboo" is used, Figure 16, to show the Sichuan yangqin's spiciness and boldness. It is also used in the concluding section of "General's Order", but people don't like this kind of noisy sound nowadays, so this technique is seldom used in the 21st century, and in the researcher's fieldwork, it was found that this technique is almost not used in the performance practice because it doesn't meet the current aesthetics of the music.



Figure 17 In the climax of the piece "Haunted Terrace," the "Wave Bamboo" is used at the horizontal line mark.

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## 4. Northeast Yangqin School

### 4.1 "Trembling bamboo" (颤音)

After 1949, the performance methods were divided into "left handed Tremor bamboo," "right handed Tremor bamboo", "double handed Tremor bamboo," and "continuous Tremor bamboo" (created after 1949). Mainly using the "left hand Tremor bamboo" used by Mr. Zhao Dianxue. After 1949, the playing techniques of other yangqin schools were also borrowed, but the performance methods of the Northeast yangqin school were different from other schools. Although the power is also transmitted to the head of the bamboo hammer through the coordination of the arms, wrists, and fingers, which continuously vibrate on the strings, the method of conveying power is the opposite, using the lifting and pressing of the thumb joint to cause the bamboo head to vibrate. When the fingertip of the big finger is pressed down forcefully, opposite forces are generated above the middle finger and at the base of the big finger, and the opposite force is used to continuously vibrate the head of the bamboo hammer on the strings. The action is shown in Figure 18. The action of 'left hand bamboo shaking' has a smaller amplitude and is flexible, with rich expressive power, transforming the grain feeling of the yangqin into a sense of line, enhancing the coherence and singing of the melody. Figure 19 to watch a video of this playing technique.

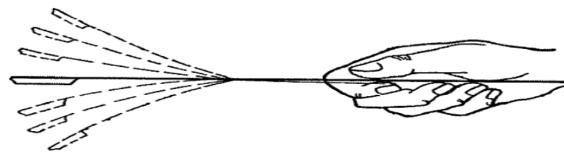


Figure 18 "Trembling bamboo" playing technique, movement diagram.

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Figure 19 includes "Right Hand Tremor Bamboo", "Left Hand Tremor Bamboo", and "Two Hand Tremor Bamboo" and compares "Right Folding Tremor" and "Left Folding Tremor" at the end of the video.

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#### 4.2 "Smooth tremors" (滑颤)

"Slide Tremolo" is also known as "Tremolo Slide", "Slide Bamboo", and "Tremolo Finger", and its sound effect is similar to that of a vocal glissando. This playing technique is used more with the left hand and less with the right. From the point of view of notation, slide bamboo can be divided into free slide bamboo and fixed slide bamboo. Free slide bamboo: "up slide" and "down slide". Generally speaking, players can slide about three degrees, and highly skilled players can slide four or even six degrees. A fixed slide refers to sliding the bamboo hammer to the appropriate position according to the markings on the score, most commonly two or three degrees, also known as "rotary slide vibration". In addition, according to the different methods of expression, the slide bamboo can also be divided into single slide bamboo ("right hand up slide bamboo", "left hand up slide bamboo", "right hand down slide bamboo", and "left hand down slide bamboo"), double slide bamboo ("same direction double slide bamboo" and "reverse double slide bamboo"), and continuous slide bamboo (produced after 1949).

The "Sliding Bamboo" is very difficult. When playing, it is necessary to tremble, then vibrate, while sliding the pitch up and down at the same time. Strive to touch the strings evenly and uninterruptedly, and the density and speed of striking the strings determine the playing technique. Refer to Figure 20 for the movement of the "sliding bamboo". Scan Figures 21 and Figures 22 to watch a video on the "Slide Bamboo" playing technique.



Figure 20 "Slippery tremor" playing technique, movement diagram.

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**Figure 21** includes "right hand up slide bamboo," "left hand up slide bamboo," "right hand down slide bamboo," and "left hand down slide bamboo."

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"Double Bamboo Tremolo". Instead of the left and right hands trembling the bamboo at the same time, one hand is in front and the other behind, alternately trembling continuously like a relay. This is a relatively difficult technique because the continuous trilling is long, cannot be broken in the middle, and needs to be kept even in strength.



**Figure 22** Playing techniques of "Double Bamboo Tremolo."

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#### 4.3 "String Pressing" (压揉音)

There is a small amplitude of string compression, resulting in a pitch change of about half a degree; There is also a strong pressure on the string, causing a second to third degree change in pitch. Therefore, researchers found in Field research that the range and speed of rubbing should be controlled according to the different needs of music, and it is not allowed to be too fast or too slow. The pitch change is generally within Minor third. Capable of playing including "up glide", "down glide", and "smooth kneading". Use greater force in special scenes to increase the amplitude of pitch changes. The technique of string pressing makes good use of the residual notes produced by the bamboo hammer after striking the strings. Each string pressing often involves rubbing and pressing the strings several times, which means that each string pressing can produce several small or large pitch changes. Therefore, it is commonly used to depict the lingering and melancholic emotions in characters' hearts. In Wang Yifu's "Suwu Shepherd", this playing technique is used in the Adagio section, which not only increases the sense of melody lines but also better displays the emotions of expressing emotions and sorrows. Figure 23 shows the playing techniques of "string pressing".

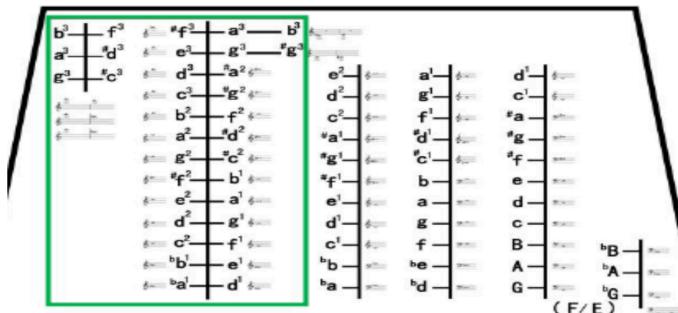


**Figure 23** This includes three playing techniques: "up glide", "down glide", and "smooth kneading".

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#### 4.4 "Plucked Strings" (拨弦)

As shown in Figure 24, during this period, the strings were struck with the ends of bamboo beaters, which were often used in the high register of the yangqin. The friction between the bamboo beaters and the steel strings produced a bright sound. Use of the other registers was relatively limited, as the strings were wound and the sound was relatively dull.



**Figure 24** The range of "Plucked Strings" playing techniques that can be used on the instrument

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Mr. Wang Yifu, a student of Mr. Zhao Dianxue, inherited and developed the unique playing techniques of the Northeast Yangqin. He created the techniques of "plucking" and "sliding" in 1935, using the tips of a bamboo hammer to pluck the strings. Sliding plucking refers to sliding plucking, using the end of a bamboo hammer on the yangqin to make an upward or downward plucking of four degrees. You can also slide up and down an octave according to the needs of the music or do a slide within an octave. Figure 25 shows the playing techniques of the "plucked string type".



**Figure 25** "Plucked string type". Including "single dial", "double dial", "sliding dial", and "continuous dial".

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## 4.5 "Pointed Strings" (点弦)

Mainly including "wood tone", "drum tone", and "pan tone" (which also appeared in the Guangdong Yangqin school). Figure 26 showcases the playing techniques of "wooden sound" and "drum sound". In the researcher's field research, it was found that "wood sound" and "drum sound" were used less. Some students who learnt to play the Yangqin said that they had not used this playing technique.



**Figure 26** The following are the playing techniques of "wooden sound" and "drum sound".

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### Discussion

Since its introduction to China, the Yangqin has been influenced by the historical and cultural aspects, geographical conditions, and local customs of each place. In the course of his research, the researcher found that the four traditional schools of the yangqin have distinctive musical styles and that the unique playing techniques are the main reason for its influence.

Xu Hefang's article *A Brief History of the Development of the Chinese Yangqin*, published in 2014, summarises the traditional schools of the Chinese Yangqin, analysing the four most influential schools and providing a brief summary. He Jing's article on the performance methods of the Yangqin published in 2018, provides an analysis of the training methods for playing techniques. The researcher uses music sociology theory, combined with literature and the cultural context of the times, to analyse the unique playing techniques of the four major schools, the reasons for their formation, and the influences on them.

### Conclusion

The four traditional schools of the Chinese yangqin are influenced by their history, culture, geographical conditions, and local customs. The use of distinctive playing techniques highlights the local musical characteristics. Each of the four traditional schools of the Chinese yangqin has its own distinctive playing techniques, as well as its own regional culture and aesthetic differences. Between the end of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century, the yangqin was influenced by local folk music and developed into the yangqin school. This was an important period of inheritance from the previous one, and some techniques were developed from this period, while others were developed from 1949 onwards. Before 1949, the yangqin was less developed, and some transitional techniques were used less and less as the instrument was improved. However, these techniques express the cultural differences of different regions and reflect the thoughts of the people of each region.

The Guangdong Yangqin School and Jiangnan Yangqin School are both light and delicate, but in terms of playing techniques, the Guangdong style is richer, with "Liners" and "Lian Da Yin" techniques, making the Guangdong style more lively and bright. The melody of Jiangnan Yangqin School music is mostly progressive or small jumps, more fluent, and will not change the music style based on improvisation to insert some notes to make the music more full, compared to other schools. Fewer virtuosic techniques are used. Because these two schools are located in the coastal areas of China, the economy is relatively rich, life is easier, playing techniques are relatively simple, and the melody is very smooth, so the circulation is higher.

On the other hand, in the Northeast region, where the winter is more than 20 degrees below zero and the people are very tough, the playing techniques are the most difficult among the four schools, and many techniques are only used in a certain piece of music. The researcher found through fieldwork that in playing practice, some college students studying

yangqin were unable to play some of these techniques, such as the "smooth tremors", which also led to the low distribution of yangqin works of the Northeast Yangqin School.

Before 1949, the production process of the yangqin was undeveloped, and the tone colour was complicated. After the improvement of the instrument, some transitional playing techniques were used less and less, such as the "pressure bamboo sound" and "wave bamboo" in the Sichuan Yangqin School. However, the use of these unique playing techniques is the main factor in the formation of the Sichuan yangqin school's spirited and passionate musical style and theatricality. Moreover, many of the pre-1949 folk artists of the Sichuan Yangqin School were blind and had a hard life, selling their skills on the streets to earn a living. Because they

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The researcher found through interviews that many professional players and teachers of the yangqin, as well as folk artists, believe that this is not good for the development of the yangqin. It is hoped that students learning to play the yangqin will practise the playing techniques of new creations and at the same time strengthen the playing techniques of each school, especially some with school styles, so as not to cause the extinction of the school.

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