Enhancing EFL Learners' Native Cultural Awareness via Project-based Learning

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Abstract

English language education nowadays is not merely about the instruction and acquisition of linguistic knowledge and skills. Instead, it has progressed to the real-life applications of the target language, which further requires a mastery of cultural knowledge and skills. In terms of culture, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, compared to native speakers of English, own their unique native culture. Yet, since language teachers tend to focus on the delivery of English cultural knowledge, EFL learners' native culture is sometimes shadowed in the mainstream English classrooms worldwide. To this end, this exploratory paper aims to advocate attention to the importance of EFL learners' native culture awareness and share some practical teaching and learning experiences in an English course called *Multimedia and Foreign Language Learning*. The paper outlines the pedagogical design of the course in China, providing classroom examples and practical suggestions to course designers, educators and instructors. We expect to give insights into integrating native culture into foreign language education in university settings.

Keywords: native culture awareness, project-based learning, pedagogical design, EFL learners

Language and culture are inseparable (Kramsch, 2013). Language, in effect, is one of the most essential representations for understanding people's customs and beliefs (Blum, 1981). Language in EFL learning should never be limited to our traditional

understanding of the mere linguistic dimension (e.g., spelling, pronunciation, grammar), but, instead, it should be extended to the learning of language and culture (Hall, 2013) or "languaculture" (Chun, 2019). However, in general, previous studies have focused mainly on L2 culture over the past decades (e.g., Peirson-Smith & Miller, 2020), and relevant academic studies and educational practices on native L1 culture are lacking.

Against the backdrop of decolonisation and internationalisation, educators have called for the promotion of developing students' native culture awareness (NCA) in the globalised world (e.g., Wu & Miller, 2021; Wu, Zhang, & Wang, 2022). Reflected in Byram (1997) and argued by Wu and Miller (2021), native cultural awareness (NCA) refers to the ability to appreciate learners' native cultural heritage, express their local identity in L1 and L2 and critically evaluate their native and target culture when engaging in intra- or intercultural communicative events. NCA contributes to heritage education, which aims to connect individuals with the situated environment by using heritage for citizenship training and identity building (Pérez et al., 2010). However, studies such as Chen et al. (2010) only explore students' current NCA level and corresponding challenges, analysing the underlying factors that impact their NCA. There are few empirical attempts inside or outside the classrooms to improve students' NCA (Wu & Miller, 2021).

One possible approach to improving learners' NCA is project-based learning (PBL), which underscores students' active engagement and cooperation in the real world. Compared with typical teacher-fed classes, PBL can offer students an authentic, collaborative and dynamic learning environment to experience the culture, enhance cultural awareness and develop intercultural communicative competence. Thus, the present paper aims to support EFL learners' NCA developments in a participatory PBL-based English major course to cultivate foreign language talents with global horizons and native culture confidence.

Culture awareness (CA) and native culture awareness (NCA)

The well-known intercultural communicative competence framework proposed by Byram (1997) points out the notion of critical cultural awareness. In Byram (1997)'s framework, critical CA refers to a type of knowledge, abilities and attitudes to actively communicate across cultures and critically evaluate cultures based on explicit criteria, perspectives and practices. The cultures, including both learners' native and foreign cultures, should be understood with various contradictory views (Baker, 2012).

As Baker (2012) argues, the first step to developing learners' CA for intercultural communication is to explore the similarities and differences of the native culture, which contributes to an awareness of the multi-voiced 'diglossic' nature of culture. However, academic studies and pedagogical practices related to NCA are pretty limited in number. In mainland China, Wu and Miller (2021) reported a case study targeting university students' NCA via an informal collaborative WeChat-based learning community. Results of this study demonstrated the development of Chinese EFL learners' NCA, as they were motivated to participate in the English learning community in a WeChat group to communicate and share with others. However, they also pointed out a series of challenges from the technological, pedagogical and psychological perspectives. Thus,

future practices should be advanced by applying more effective pedagogical approaches. PBL, which advocates students' active and collaborative involvement with instructed guidance, deserves more scholarly attention.

Project-based learning (PBL)

PBL, according to the Buck Institute of Education (BIE), refers to a "systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks" (2003, p. 4). Although different scholars have attempted to define PBL, Adderley et al.'s (1975) definition is still good. Here are five key aspects (p. 1):

1)   [projects] involve the solution of a problem; often, though not necessarily, set by the student himself [or herself];

2)   they involve initiative by the student or group of students and necessitate a variety of educational activities;

3)   they commonly result in an end product (e.g., thesis, report, design plans, computer programme and model);

4)   work often goes on for a considerable length of time;

5)   teaching staff are involved in an advisory, rather than authoritarian, role at any or all stages – initiation, conduct and conclusion.

Regarding the assessment of language and culture, the traditional paradigm has been criticised for its overemphasis on the measurements of language achievements based on textbook learning (Scarino, 2010). Considering the benefits of PBL, the alternative assessment paradigm, which allows for analysing the ongoing, dynamic and complex learning process over time, has attracted increasing attention (e.g., Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Rea-dickins & Gardner, 2000). In particular, ongoing written work such as projects (e.g., Dooly & Sadler, 2016) has become an increasingly well-recognized way of assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning.

In the present study, we predominantly draw on the PBL approach, combing instructed teacher-involved training with student-centred group projects in an English major course. The problem aimed to solve in the student group work is to help learners understand various technologies and apply these technologies to teach culture (Aspect 1 in Adderley et al., 1975). The group work is led by students themselves (Aspect 2 in Adderley et al., 1975), which can stimulate their language learning motivation in foreign language education, strengthen their language skills and build their confidence. Students must finish their group work within one week before submitting their lesson plan and presenting their work in front of the class (Aspects 3 and 4 in Adderley et al., 1975). The course teacher (i.e., the first author) serves as an advisor, giving students suggestions, feedback and guidance when necessary (Aspect 5 in Adderley et al., 1975). We expect this study to help cultivate Chinese EFL learners' NCA and provide constructive suggestions on course design in languaculture education.

Pedagogical design

Forty-one third-year English major students from a Chinese public university were invited to participate in this study. There are nine boys and 32 girls, and their age ranges from 19 to 23. These participants are upper-intermediate English language learners whose CEFR level is around B2. This study was based on a 16-week English major course, *Multimedia and Foreign Language Learning*. There were eight sessions in this course, including four theoretical ones and four practical ones. In this course, the four theoretical sessions guide students to understand (1) the basic concepts of different multimedia technologies and (2) the developmental history, advantages, and challenges of the technologies in foreign language education. The four practical sessions provide learners with opportunities to experience and design four types of technological learning approaches (i.e., massive open online course (MOOC), gamification, micro lesson and social media). Figure 1 shows that Chinese cultural elements and examples are integrated into the sessions.
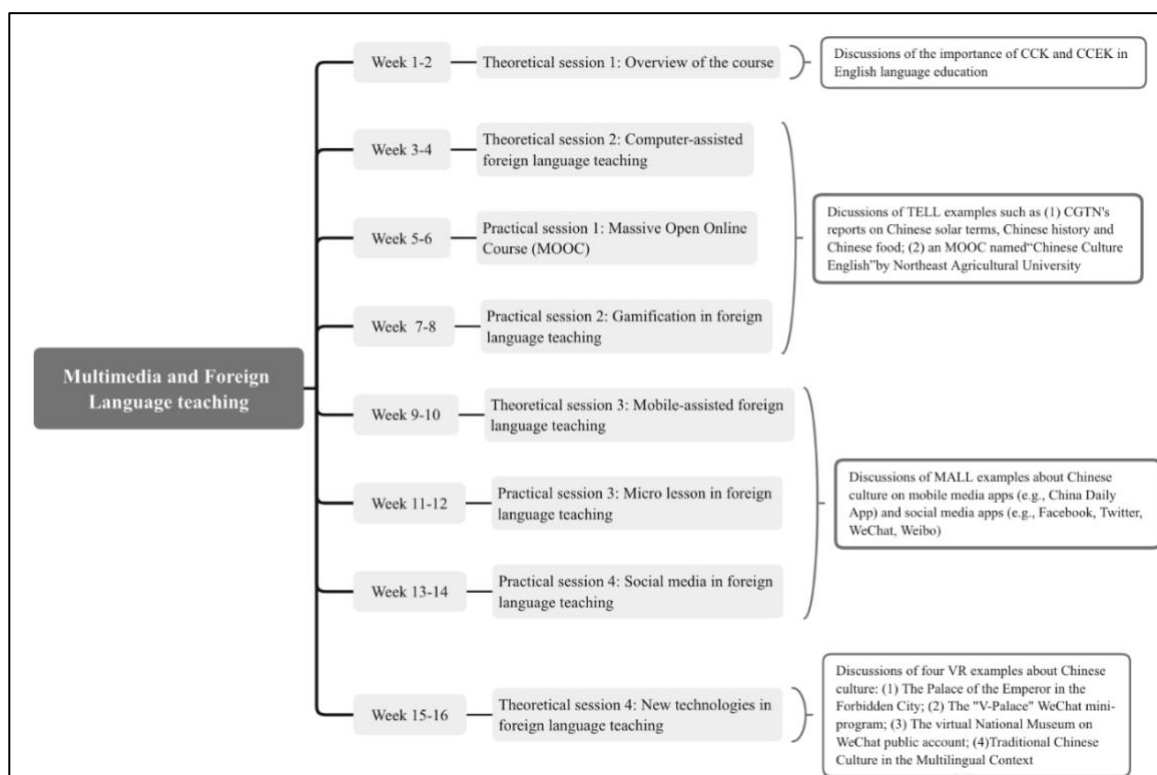

Figure 1. The course schedule and in-class integrations of Chinese culture

In addition to in-class teaching, the participants formed 12 learning groups and then worked collaboratively on four group projects after each practical session. Specifically, the first group project was about designing an English MOOC outline, including a course overview, course aims, an overall course structure, in-class and after-class activities, a discussion forum and referential materials; In the second group work, participants needed to integrate game activities into an English course, introducing the game name, platform and how games were used to support learners in language learning;

The third project required participants to design a 10-min English micro lesson on a single and tightly-defined topic, covering the course structure and script. The last group work was related to social media, asking participants to design a social media activity in an English class. To enhance participants' NCA, it was required that all project topics should centre on the Chinese culture that they have encountered in or after the class. In the next section, we will examine the accomplishment of the four group projects, especially showing examples of learners' NCA development.

Student work

Group project 1 – MOOC
The first group project requires each learning group to design an English language MOOC based on the native culture. Table 1 details the various themes selected by participants, among which Chinese food is the most popular topic. To produce a well-designed, information-rich MOOC, each group conducted out-of-class learning. They worked collaboratively and enriched the MOOC content, which included a wealth of Chinese cultural elements in various forms (e.g., videos, news, photographs).

Table 1. The first group project titles, language learning aims and Chinese cultural themes

Group No.	Group project title	Language learning aims	Chinese culture theme
1	Chinese society and culture	Comprehensive English learning (i.e., including listening, speaking, reading and writing)	Society
2	Chinese Gaokao culture: From 1949 to now		Education
3	From China to China		Ceramic
4	A taste of China: Chinese Cuisine		Food
5	English talks about Chinese food		Food
6	An introduction to Chinese Calligraphy		Calligraphy
7	Taste the merit of Chinese tea culture		Tea
8	Enjoy the Chinese cuisine		Food
9	Travelling in China		Tourism
10	Telling China's story well: Chinese cuisines		Food
11	Scientific and technological culture in China		Science and Technology
12	Chinese traditional instruments		Music

During the designing process, we can see participants' effort invested in developing their NCA. Here is an example of the project designed by Group 12. As Figure 2 shows, this project focuses on Chinese traditional instruments, introducing seven well-known instruments from China. Each learning unit in this MOOC follows a set template of several regular parts of each unit. Sections 2.1 to 2.4 contain videos, and Section 2.3 involves live videos for learners to understand the playing skills of Pipa. Section 2.5 with written materials and Section 2.7 with a unit test are in written texts. To design a comprehensive MOOC, participants were required to search for, select and use many materials about China. They had the chance to develop their NCA through this process of integrating input and output.

Figure 2. The structure of Chinese traditional instruments (Group 12)

Group project 2 – Gamification in foreign language teaching
Based on computer technology, some groups applied existing game applications (e.g., Minecraft, Group 2) and WeChat mini-programs (Group 7) to complete gamification teaching, while some designed their online games on website (Groups 3, 4, 5, 8, 11 and 12) and game applications (Groups 1, 6, 9 and 10). The Chinese cultural themes reflected in the projects, similar to the first group work, include many topics (Table 2).

Table 2. The second group project titles, language learning aims and Chinese cultural themes

Group No.	Group project title	Language learning aims	Chinese culture theme
1	Han-style doll		Clothing
2	Chinese traditional architecture: Stilt house in Yunan		Architecture
3	Ceramic firing: 'Purble pairs'		Ceramic
4	Cantonese cuisine in China: Super Brain		Food
5	Su cuisine in China		Food
6	Five types of Chinese calligraphy: Charigraphy	Vocabulary	Calligraphy
7	24 solar terms in China: monster hunter		Festival
8	Sichuan cuisine chef		Food
9	Chinese wedding dress		Clothing
10	Shandong cuisine in China		Clothing
11	Porcelain making process in China		Ceramic
12	Fingering of Pipa: Funplay		Instrument

Figure 3 illustrates an online adventurous game of making porcelain designed by Group 11. This is a well-designed game with an exquisite interface and complicated game rules. The figure demonstrates that the participants developed a well-round knowledge of the production stages since they had to set game rules for users, choose appropriate figures and describe each production stage. The inclusion of English vocabulary such as crushing, cleaning, forming, bisque firing, glazing and firing provides evidence that they made good use of this learning opportunity to familiarise related L2 vocabulary and enhance their NCA in the L2 learning environment.
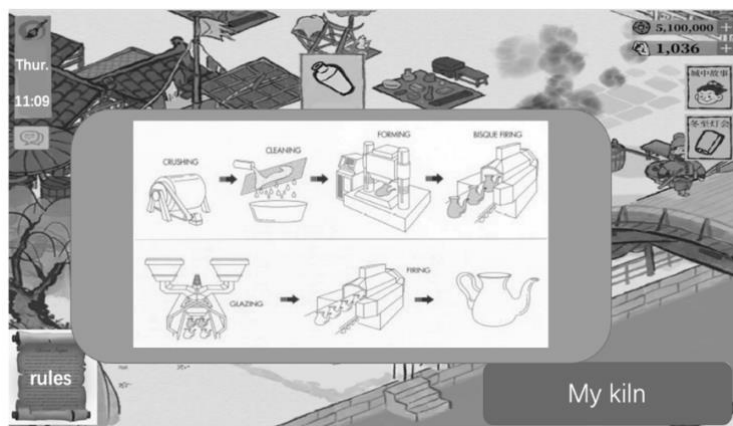

Figure 3. The steps of making porcelain (Group 11)

Group project 3 – Micro lesson in foreign language teaching

Group project 3 is an assignment requiring learners to design a 10-min micro lesson. Various cultural themes such as Chinese architecture, education, porcelain, food, calligraphy, and instruments are incorporated (Table 3). Three groups have designed vocabulary courses (Group 5, 6, and 7), two are speaking courses (Group 9 and 12), three are translation courses (Group 4, 8 and10), and four are vocabulary and speaking courses (Group 1, 2, 3 and 11).

Table 3. The third group project titles, language learning aims and Chinese cultural themes

Group No.	Group project title	Language learning aims	Chinese culture theme
1	The round-dragon house in Hakka	Vocabulary and speaking	Architecture
2	Chinese Education: Zhang Guimei, a pioneer for poor girls' education	Vocabulary and speaking	Education
3	From china to China	Vocabulary and speaking	Ceramic
4	Eight Chinese cuisines	Translation	Food
5	The legend of Dongpo pork	Vocabulary	Food
6	Five types of Chinese calligraphy	Vocabulary	Calligraphy
7	24 solar terms	Vocabulary	Festival
8	Translating Sichuan dishes	Translation	Food
9	Travelling in China: Intonations in speaking Chinese	Speaking	Tourism
10	Translating Cantonese dishes	Translation	Food
11	Differences between "Tao" and "Ci"	Vocabulary and speaking	Ceramic
12	Distinctions between civil tunes and military tunes of pipa	Speaking	Music

For instance, participants in Group 5 designed a micro lesson, which guides course takers to learn the key ingredients in cooking Dongpo Meat as the first step of making this cuisine (Figure 4). Through designing the micro lesson, they could learn these words which may be helpful for their future use when living in a foreign country. As Figure 5 shows, by systematically familiarising the steps of making Dongpo Meat,

participants were given chances to know Chinese food culture, enhance their NCA and apply their native cultural knowledge to the lesson design.
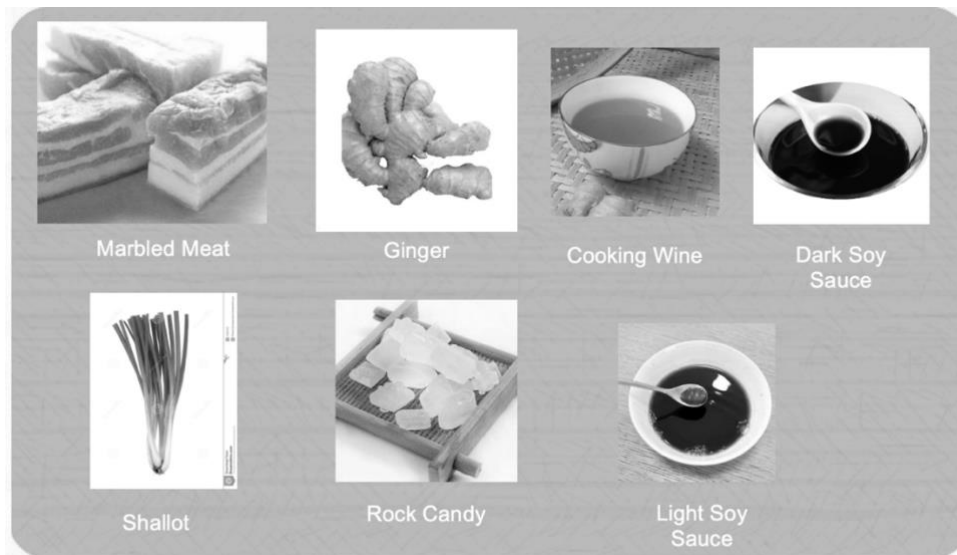

Figure 4. The key ingredients of Dongpo Meat (Group 5)

Figure 5. The steps of making Dongpo Meat (Group 5)

Group project 4 – Social media in foreign language teaching
As Table 4 shows, the social media platforms selected by participants are diverse, covering mainstream social media in China such as WeChat, QQ, Weibo, Douban, Douyin (TikTok), and Bilibili (Group 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12). Additionally, some groups considered the social media functions of non-social media platforms such as NetEase Cloud Music and HelloTalk (Groups 1, 2, and 6). These social media-assisted language learning activities are all "vocabulary+" tasks, which aim to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge and other language skills (e.g., writing and speaking). Similar to the previous three projects, the topics selected by the participants cover a wide variety of Chinese cultural themes such as transportation, music, food and arts.

Table 4. The fourth group project titles, language learning aims and Chinese cultural themes

| Group No.	Group project title	Language learning aims	Chinese culture theme
1	The history of Chinese transportation	Vocabulary and writing	Transportation
2	China observer via Chinese music – based on the same song	Vocabulary and speaking	Music
3	The history of porcelain	Vocabulary and speaking	Ceramic
4	I can cook Cantonese cuisine	Vocabulary and speaking	Food
5	Stories between Chinese etiquette and me	Vocabulary and speaking	Etiquette
6	Stories behind Chinese calligraphers	Vocabulary and writing	Calligraphers
7	The art of Chinese tea	Vocabulary and writing	Tea
8	Enjoy Chinese cuisine: Sichuan cuisine	Vocabulary, speaking and writing	Food
9	Differences in Chinese wedding dress	Vocabulary and writing	Clothing
10	The diet customs in China	Vocabulary and speaking	Etiquette
11	Differences between "Tao" and "Ci"	Vocabulary, speaking	Ceramic
12	Four fingerings of Pipa	Vocabulary, speaking and writing	Music
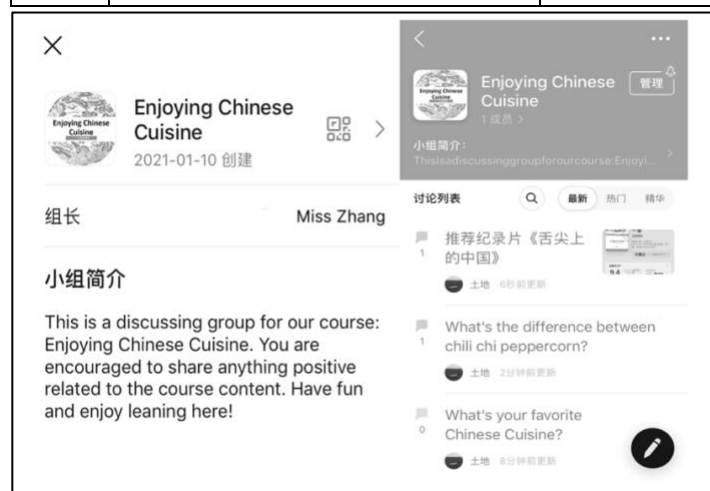
Figure 6. A Douban group about Chinese cuisine (Group 8)

Figure 6 is a Douban Group formed by Group 8, which stimulates students to contribute ideas about Chinese cuisine. On the left-hand side, an introduction is offered as a brief guide to this discussion group relating to Chinese cuisine. On the right-hand side, several discussion topics and questions are shown. Language students post these topics and questions for freely exchanging ideas about Chinese cuisine, which may improve their English language skills, such as reading and writing skills and enhance their understanding of Chinese culture through ways such as the integration of in-class learning and out-of-class PBL and the transformation of passive recipients of knowledge to active producers of knowledge. The participants, who served as activity designers, had chances to develop their NCA during material searching and activity designing.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presented an innovative approach to supporting EFL learners in developing their NCA through an English major course and after-class group projects. In the *Multimedia and Foreign Language Learning* course, learners took theoretical and practical sessions relating to multimedia technologies, in which Chinese cultural examples had been fully integrated. Apart from that, the PBL was another critical approach to enhancing learners' NCA. Learners added Chinese cultural elements throughout their design in the four projects relating to MOOC, micro lesson, gamification, and social media. Thus, it is assumed that their NCA could be enhanced. We expect that the course design and the idea of PBL could offer course instructors and teachers insights into curriculum development for simultaneously improving EFL learners' L2 linguistic knowledge and their NCA.

Based on the above descriptions and examples, this paper offers some preliminary evidence of the potential of PBL in contributing to the development of NCA. Here, we turn to Stoller's (2002) features of successful PBL learning in language courses. First, through the four learning projects, our student participants may invest more energy and attention in content learning instead of language drill exercises. Figure 5, for example, showcased that students worked collaboratively to produce an English recipe for Dongpo Meat. Learners focused more on making this famous Chinese course to accomplish this goal. However, at the same time, they were acquiring and using the English language as they needed to describe the ingredients, seasoning, and cooking procedures. Second, the current PBL was student-centred, and the teacher only played a supporting part. Compared to the accustomed teacher-led learning, learners in this study actively participated in the four projects ranging from choosing their project topics, searching for appropriate information, to producing final work. The teacher, upon reflection, only provided necessary scaffolding and suggestions to direct learners towards the right track. Third, collaboration instead of competition is encouraged. According to Wu (2018), university students need collaborative work regarding their school learning and future workplace. PBL in this study also promoted students' collaboration in that learners could share their responsibilities and workload by completing the part they are interested in or good at. This has been argued as an essential factor in forming a successful learning community (Wu & Miller, 2021) since learners tend to have diverse personalities and preferences in PBL. Fourth, the four

learning groups reflected the authenticity of learning, including the purposes, materials, and platforms. Authentic learning has been maintained as a critical element in PBL as it benefits learners' learning motivation, autonomy, and interest, which may further lead to better learning (Gilmore, 2007).

One major limitation of this paper is the lack of empirical data, which could have lent more convincing support to the effects of PBL on NCA. Against this backdrop, we prepare to further understand the use of PBL in NCA learning by comparing and contrasting learners in control and comparative groups, investigating learners' perceptions of such PBL experience, and exploring the longitudinal effects of PBL in contributing to the advancement of learners' NCA.

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