

Affective-Discursive Approach in Digital Activism Research: Reflections on Working with Social Media Data in the Transnational Sphere

Abstract

This case study explores the methodological design and practical execution of a project that examines how overseas Chinese activists use X (formerly Twitter) to coordinate “distant witnessing” against China’s nationalist narratives in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Drawing on 1,675 tweets from a key activist-run account, the study combines analysis of discursive structures and prediscursive affective gestures, such as translation, image highlighting and hash-tagging, to analyze how emotional and political meanings are produced, circulated, and contested to scaffold a participatory project aimed at holding the Chinese Party-state accountable. The case focuses on the methodological complexities of working with multimodal, translingual, and politically sensitive data in volatile digital environments. It reflects on the ethical dilemmas of working with public yet high-risk content, the methodological recalibrations required by platform instability, and the interpretive labor involved in tracing affect across text and image. Readers will gain insight into the use of affective-discursive frameworks in critical digital research, as well as practical strategies for managing ethical, technical, and reflexive challenges in projects that analyze activist-curated social media content. The case offers a flexible, context-sensitive blueprint for researchers and students working at the intersection of affect, discourse, activism, and transnational politics.

Learning Outcomes

Having read this case study, readers should be able to . . .

- Apply an affective-discursive approach to analyze multimodal social media data in politically sensitive research contexts.
- Distinguish between discursive strategies, as conceptualized in the discourse-historical approach (e.g., nomination, perspectivization), and prediscursive affective gestures (e.g., image formatting, hashtags) in activist-curated content.
- Evaluate ethical challenges and implement context-sensitive practices when working with public data from high-risk online environments.

- Adapt methodological strategies in response to the practical demands of volatile platforms and multimodal digital content.
- Reflect on their own positionality and the interpretive responsibilities involved in analyzing affectively charged and politically engaged discourse.

Project Overview and Context

This case study discusses the methodological design and implementation of our research investigation of the ways overseas Chinese activists used social media, specifically X (formerly Twitter), to coordinate distant witnessing against the Chinese party-state's nationalist narratives. As scholars of political communication and discourse studies, we have long been concerned with state censorship, transnational resistance, and the affective dynamics of digital civic engagement issues that make this research topic resonate with our scholarly interests. Our work is grounded in an affective-discursive approach, drawing on a discourse-historical approach to critical discourse studies (CDS) (Wodak, 2009), while accounting for the affective dimension of social-mediated communication (Papacharissi, 2015) and the evolving role of digital witnessing in contested political contexts (Chouliaraki & Mortensen, 2022; Martini, 2018).

The focal case study was the Great Translation Movement (GTM), a participatory project launched in early 2022, amid the initial stages of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. During this period, while the Chinese government adopted a strategically ambiguous but implicitly pro-Russian stance, its state-aligned media outlets and censorship apparatus worked to deflect criticism and control public sentiment (Zhang & Liu, 2024). In contrast, a group of loosely connected overseas Chinese activists began to collect, translate, and disseminate screenshots of social media discussions in China that mainly revealed hyper-nationalist views. Through tagging, translating, and visually framing, these activists aimed to document state-aligned digital discourse and recontextualize it for international audiences to protest against nationalist politics within China.

Throughout the year, the activist initiative expanded beyond the war in Ukraine. By the end of 2022, the outbreak of China's A4 revolution, driven by prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns, presented an opportunity to continue witnessing and to amplify domestic protests in China via the same digital platform. What began as a response to a particular geopolitical event had turned into an ongoing activist repertoire of transnational witnessing. This offers a timely and politically

urgent opportunity to explore the ways in which dissent can be affectively mediated, politicized, and reframed by diaspora actors operating outside of the authoritarian control.

Our study centres on one prominent activist-curated X account that operated as a hub for distant witnessing. We collected a total of 1,675 tweets posted by this account between March and December 2022. These tweets combined translated screenshots, visual annotations, hashtag activism, and commentary. Rather than treating distant witnessing as solely a moral or representational act, we approached it as an affective-discursive practice, entailing discursive strategies (e.g., nomination, perspectivisation, intensification/mitigation) and prediscursive affective gestures (e.g., content-sharing, hash-tagging, and posting/reposting) to mobilize emotional engagement and public contention.

This research is embedded in wider discussions about the relation between state and society within authoritarian settings (Guo, 2021; Sun & Wright, 2024), the logic of connective action in digital media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), and the evolving role of the Chinese diaspora in sustaining transnational civic engagement (Yang, 2017; Zeng & Fang, 2025). In addressing these concerns, our study also advances a context-sensitive methodological approach that contributes to emerging debates on how digital activism, especially in circumstances of surveillance, censorship and platform volatility, is curated and studied across national borders.

Section Summary

- This research examines how overseas Chinese activists leveraged X to coordinate distant witnessing as a counter-response to China's nationalist narratives during and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- The project stems from a broader interest in the intersections of discourse, affect, and digital resistance rooted in critical discourse studies and affective publics theory.
- Initially focused on translating hyper-nationalist and dissenting voices from China's domestic platforms, the activist initiatives evolved into a sustained repertoire of digital witnessing.

Research Design

In designing this study, we sought to develop a theoretical and methodological framework that could account for the interplay of affect and discourse in the digital curation of distant witnessing. We aimed to capture how activist-curated content navigated the emotional, ideological, and translingual dimensions of resistance across volatile geopolitical contexts. To achieve this, we adopted an affective-discursive approach, which combines Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse studies with analytical attention to pre-discursive affective gestures as they manifest through platform affordances. Unlike sentiment analysis, which reduces affect to polarities, the affective-discursive approach foregrounds the entanglement of affect, discourse and ideology. This dual lens allowed us to analyze the pre-discursive affective gestures embedded in platform practices (such as tagging, screenshot curation, and hash-tagging) and the discursive strategies used in tweet composition, and how the micro-level participation facilitates the formation of affective publics.

The central focus of analysis was on tweets retrieved from a single X account coordinated by overseas Chinese activists. This account serves as a hub of curated content: translations of Chinese social media posts that reflect prevailing nationalist sentiment in China, and reposted content from moments of dissent such as the A4 revolution. In doing so, the initiatives aimed at exposing and criticising China's nationalist politics to challenge the legitimacy of the Party-state's geopolitical messaging through witnessing from afar. Thus, it offers an ideal site for studying distant witnessing as a digital and discursive practice.

To examine the temporal dynamics, we collected all tweets posted by the account over a 10-month period from 7 March to 31 December 2022. This enabled us to capture the account's activities during three key geopolitical moments: (1) Russia's first attempt to seize Kyiv, (2) the war's temporary stalemate, and (3) the start of Ukraine's counteroffensive. The end of the sampling period coincided with the high-profile street protests documented in China, which expanded the initiatives' focus from foreign affairs to domestic dissent. We also collected the complete sample of posted tweets ($n = 1,675$) during that 10-month period. This comprehensive sampling approach enabled us to capture a variety of tweet formats, topics and affective-discursive styles, rather than only a small number of cherry-picked examples. This also allowed us to trace changes in discursive strategies over time and across topics.

The analytical process followed a two-stage coding process. In the first stage, a coauthor coded the tweets by the main content format, the source of the original content, the posting language, the source language, and thematic focus (e.g., proregime sentiment, antiregime dissent, and international coverage). This stage generated a high-level overview of the data and identified common tweet clusters for more detailed investigation. In the second stage, the lead author conducted a close and theory-informed reading of a representative cluster of tweets using discourse-historical analysis (Wodak, 2009), focusing on five key discursive strategies: nomination (how actors are named and grouped to construct in-group/out-group distinctions), predication (how attributes are assigned to actors or events to qualify them), argumentation (how claims are justified through content-related warrants), perspectivization (how communicators' viewpoints or stances are conveyed), and intensification/mitigation (how epistemic certainty or emotional intensity is increased or reduced to shape illocutionary force).

In parallel, we examined prediscursive affective gestures, such as the use of red-highlighted translations in images, emotionally charged hashtags (e.g., #ThisIsChina) and tagging of prominent X influencers, as strategic uses of social media affordances. We interpreted these affective cues as deliberately mobilized gestures to amplify visibility and foster connective witnessing. Drawing on Papacharissi's (2015) theory of affective publics, we understood them as part of the connective action through which activists assemble transnational communities around shared emotional investments and political critiques.

Crucially, our design recognized that affective and discursive elements are mutually constitutive. For example, the same tweet might include a series of screenshots capturing netizen comments (a prediscursive affective gesture), paired with a sarcastic or solemn caption (discursive framing), and reinforced through hashtags that signal intended interpretation. Rather than coding for affect and discourse as separate phenomena, we treated them as entangled layers that together shape how publics are both affectively and discursively connected and how witnessing is enacted and politicized. This choice was also impacted by our orientation as critical discourse researchers. We were interested in what activists said, as well as how they positioned themselves not simply as observers but as affected mediators in contested digital spaces shaped by authoritarian power and diasporic resistance. This reflects what Tait (2011) calls "practices of enacting responsibility" and

positions the research within a growing body of literature that interrogates the ethics and politics of transnational digital engagement.

Ultimately, our research design aimed to elucidate how the affective-discursive entanglement of distant witnessing enables testimonies about Chinese nationalism and resistance to be curated, recontextualized, and circulated from afar.

Section Summary

- The study explores distant witnessing by overseas Chinese activists on X using an affective-discursive approach.
- A 10-month dataset of 1,675 tweets from one curated activist account was comprehensively collected and analyzed.
- A two-stage method combined structural coding of tweet attributes with close reading using discourse-historical strategies.
- Prediscursive affective gestures and discursive strategies were analyzed as entangled, highlighting how activists mobilized affective-discursive practice via social media to shape transnational resistance narratives.

Research Practicalities

When conducting this research on distant witnessing, we had to pay careful attention to practical and ethical concerns specific to politically sensitive contexts. Although the collected data were fully in the public online space, the risks of reposting and analyzing curated activist content under authoritarian oversight necessitated methodological choices that prioritized anonymity, contextual integrity, and responsible interpretation.

In contrast to projects that rely on interviews or field studies, this study did not involve physical contact with research participants. Rather, the data consisted of 1,675 publicly available tweets from an activist-run X account, which included textual commentaries, translated screenshots of Chinese-language social media content and tagged interactions. At first glance, the research appeared less ethically complicated because the data were ostensibly “already public.” However, we recognized early on that reposting, translating, and commenting on nationalist discourse from within China carried inherent risks for the original posters, many of whom were ordinary internet

users and likely unaware or unwilling that their comments were being reframed for international activist purposes. To address this, we treated each tweet as data and an artefact of mediated witnessing that was shaped by layers of curation, translation, and moral positioning. We took specific measures to protect anonymity in our published outputs by obscuring any identifying information, including usernames, full handles, and profile images. This included using visual redaction methods like mosaics in screenshots. We also anonymized the activists managing the account to avoid inadvertently amplifying the visibility of individuals who may already be at risk under the Chinese state's extensive internet surveillance apparatus.

Furthermore, strategically narrowing this project's scope to 10 months (March–December 2022) enabled us to track the progression of the initiatives from their initial responses to the Russo–Ukraine war to deeper engagement with domestic dissent in China related to the A4 revolution. This timeframe prevented our data collection from being a snapshot analysis and allowed us a manageable dataset. However, it was still time-consuming when we collected and processed 1,675 tweets (including images, videos, and tags). Thus, we divided tasks between initial categorization and selective close reading, which ensured depth without compromising dataset coverage. Although the research did not include fieldwork travel, costs were incurred for secure data storage, digital backup tools, and research assistance. In this case, institutional support allowed us to meet these logistical needs while upholding data protection standards.

The ethical challenge we encountered was how to balance documentation with protection. The tweets that we analyzed were politically charged: they named, critiqued, and sometimes ridiculed Chinese netizens, often recontextualizing their original meaning through translation and activist commentary. Although the content was publicly accessible, we were acutely aware that reproducing it risked amplifying the exposure of individuals already operating under a surveillance-heavy regime. In the authoritarian oversight contexts, obtaining consent from either the X account curators or the netizens was impractical and would have introduced further risks. We followed established ethical guidelines in internet research (Zimmer, 2018), especially those highlighting contextual integrity, harm reduction and exercising restraint. In practice, we anonymized data wherever feasible, situated quotations in their broader context to mitigate decontextualized misreadings, and resisted sensationalist framings in our analysis. There were also tensions we encountered in the activist discourse. While the initiative aimed to expose nationalist

aggression, some tweets risked reproducing essentialist narratives about “the Chinese people” writ large and depicting them as a singular group characterized by nationalism, cruelty or ignorance (Peng et al., 2024). While we were committed to examining activist discourse as it was, we were wary of these representations contributing to problematic generalizations or even Sinophobic narratives. Our role was not to judge the activists’ choices but to critically interrogate this issue as part of the internal tensions of digital resistance. We addressed these tensions by combining ethical protection with analytical reflexivity, acknowledging activists’ frustration with the regime as well as critically evaluating the risks of reproducing the exclusionary logics they sought to resist.

Section Summary

- The study required careful handling of politically sensitive yet public social media data, with safeguards to minimize risk to both activist curators and original posters.
- Ethical decisions prioritize contextual integrity and harm minimization in the absence of informed consent.
- Time constraints were mitigated through collaborative and reflexive analytic strategies that balanced breadth with depth and accounted for tensions in activist discourse.

Method in Action

Like many digital research projects, this study unfolded in a way that was both consistent with and divergent from the original plan. While the affective-discursive framework remained consistent, challenges in interpreting irony, selecting representative data, refining analytical methods and presenting affective complexity led to methodological recalibrations and adaptive strategies throughout the project. The following paragraphs will discuss the strengths, challenges and limitations encountered during our research.

Our analysis was strengthened by the team’s fluency in Mandarin Chinese and English, combined with professional backgrounds in critical discourse studies and political communication. This allowed us to interpret internet slang and nationalist rhetoric in their sociopolitical context and evaluate how activist translations acted not as neutral renderings but as affective-discursive moves. For instance, we noted how activists’ translations would red-highlight affectively charged phrases or provide idiomatic English translations to convey a sharper tone.

Yet, we encountered challenges in selecting appropriate tweets for close analysis during data collection. Given the volume and pace of activist-curated content, we needed to ensure that our selections represented a range of perspectives and affective styles without inadvertently privileging particular ideological tones. To mitigate interpretive bias during sampling and coding, we paid close attention to contextual variation and referenced related literature on Chinese digital nationalism and diaspora activism. Where possible, we contextualized controversial tweets in the larger pattern of the initiatives' discursive evolution.

Although we had originally intended to adopt both quantitative content analysis (CA) and affective-discursive analysis, we eventually made a conscious decision to mostly present the results of the analysis latter. This choice was driven by our research questions that centered on how affect and discourse coconstituted transnational activist practices in response to shifting geopolitical contexts. While quantitative CA helped us capture general trends in tweet frequency, content format, language, and source characteristics, it was clear that a qualitative approach was better suited to address the discursive complexity and affective dynamics embedded in the tweets. This methodological recalibration enabled us to prioritize interpretive depth over breadth, particularly in the analysis of multimodal texts and affectively charged discourse.

Another methodological challenge touched upon the transferability of affective-discursive insights. In light of the situated, multimodal, and affect-laden nature of our dataset, the meanings we traced were closely bound to the specific event dynamics and platform interactions. In order to address this, we employed an internal comparative strategy by focusing on three distinct cases: the early phase of the Russo–Ukraine war, the assassination of Shinzo Abe and the A4 revolution. This enabled us to observe how affective-discursive strategies (e.g., nomination, intensification, and perspectivization) shifted across political events. While our analysis remains contextually grounded, this comparative approach made it possible to identify recurring patterns in how mediated affect is mobilized to contest nationalist narratives and provoke transnational resonance.

In the analysis, a challenge was to maintain interpretive rigor. Given the affective-discursive nature of our data, including irony, sarcasm, and vernacular expressions, there were moments when interpretations risked becoming overly subjective or detached from platform-specific meaning. Thus, we utilized a reflexive triangulation strategy: our team cross-checked interpretations, questioned assumptions, and reflected on our positionalities as researchers located outside China

and interpreted grassroots discourse that originated in highly asymmetrical digital contexts. Such collaborative exchanges were invaluable in interpreting idioms, ironic tone and nationalist rhetoric that would likely be misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with the Chinese sociopolitical context. This dialogic approach enhanced the reliability of our analysis and deepened its critical insight. It also foregrounded reflexivity as a key methodological principle for engaging with politically charged digital discourse.

Beyond data selection and analysis, we also revisited our writing strategies. Based on the affective-discursive approach, we initially planned to present the findings in a more structured and category-driven format. Yet, we soon realized that students and readers would get a sense of how affective-discursive tensions play out in real-world activist practices, including those that are messy, contradictory, or ethically fraught. As such, we adopted a more reflexive and example-driven writing style, aiming to demonstrate how digital methods are shaped by tools or theories, as well as by political, affective, and technological contingencies.

Section Summary

- We prioritized affective-discursive analysis over quantitative content analysis to address the emotional and interpretive complexity of multimodal tweets.
- Bilingual and intercultural expertise enabled nuanced interpretation of internet slang, translation tactics, and nationalist rhetoric.
- We addressed subjectivity and contextual ambiguity through reflexive triangulation and collaborative meaning-making.
- A comparative strategy across three political events enhanced the robustness and situated applicability of our findings.
- A reflexive and example-driven writing style was adopted to communicate the real-world tensions of digital activism.

Practical Lessons Learned

Looking back on the methodological journey of this project, several practical lessons stand out, particularly those relevant to researchers working with digital activism, politically sensitive data and multilingual discourse environments. While much of our approach unfolded as planned,

unexpected frictions along the way sharpened our understanding of methodological flexibility, ethical judgment, and research design.

First, an important lesson was the value of building systematic archiving protocols into the research workflow at the onset. Our dataset focused on tweets posted throughout 2022, but we only began collecting those tweets in 2023 when the activist account had already existed for some time. This meant that our archiving process was retrospective. While we were able to obtain a full dataset, it was still vulnerable to platform-level deletions, algorithmic changes, and account suspensions. For example, the activist account was temporarily suspended following a coordinated reporting campaign by proregime users, and it was reinstated later. However, it reflected the precariousness of platform infrastructures and the fragility of activist-curated archives, which were exacerbated by technical restrictions introduced by X in 2023. After changes in platform ownership and policy, several restrictions were introduced to limit public access to tweet data. Most notably, the platform implemented stronger antiscraping mechanisms and restricted API access, making data retrieval prohibitively expensive. Automated tools could no longer reliably access even public content. As a result, we manually archived the data (e.g., screenshots or logging metadata). While this approach was labor-intensive, it was a necessary strategy to protect politically sensitive content under conditions of platform volatility. We had taken some initial steps (e.g., saving metadata and storing backups on encrypted drives), but these methods lacked systematic implementation and sustained effort. Moving forward, we view archiving as an integral and ongoing component of the research process. This includes version control, routine data verification, and redundant and secure storage distributed across the research team. Such measures are especially critical in politically sensitive projects, where platform volatility can jeopardize both data integrity and research continuity.

Second, the project reaffirmed the importance of building ethics into every stage of the research, not simply as a formal checklist but as an ongoing and reflexive practice. Although all data used were publicly accessible, the risks faced by domestic netizens and overseas activists reflected that we had to adopt a context-sensitive ethical stance. Key lessons included the need to anonymize proactively, to avoid sensationalizing politically charged material, and to continuously reflect on whether our analysis might inadvertently reproduce harm. Under these circumstances, researchers working in similar contexts should be prepared to adapt ethical practices as the project evolves.

Another important lesson involved the allocation of time and labor. Although we had narrowed our scope to 10 months, managing 1,675 tweets, many of which had multimodal components, the task proved more demanding than expected. While our analytical process included predefined categories and sample testing to ensure consistency, we realized that future projects would benefit from a targeted design of coding schemes tailored specifically for multimodal data. For example, we could further develop separate but linked coding tracks for tweets and postings, embedded screenshots, and translation overlays. Streamlining workflows across these layers from the outset would also help manage complexity more efficiently. Equally, translation analysis should be integrated into the research design from the beginning. In our case, we realized belatedly that translated content was not neutral but part of the activist strategy. Recognizing this earlier would have allowed for more targeted analytic frameworks.

Finally, this project demonstrated the value of collaboration and reflexivity. Working as a multilingual, interdisciplinary team allowed us to challenge one another's interpretations, especially when navigating sarcasm, satire, or ideologically charged rhetoric. Reflexivity was not an abstract ideal but a methodological necessity, which could help us resist overidentifying with activist narratives while remaining critically engaged with their communicative strategies. This process also deepened our appreciation of intercultural reflexivity and understanding of how our own positionalities shaped the way we approached, interpreted, and represented the data.

If we were to conduct this research again, we would approach archiving and translation analysis from the start in a more structured and integrated way. Most important, we would recursively treat method, ethics, and interpretation as inseparable and iterative components of research design. More generally, politically sensitive online political talk and discourse research is not just a technical exercise, as it requires careful calibration between methodological ambition and ethical accountability. We believe these principles are important for researchers seeking to explore the mediated resistance dynamics in uncertain and high-risk digital environments.

Section Summary

- Continuous archiving protocols should be implemented early to reduce the risks of data loss due to platform volatility.

- Multimodal datasets require tailoring analytic frameworks and clearly defining workflows to navigate complexity and ensure rigor.
- Ethical reflexivity should be maintained throughout the project to balance transparency, anonymity, and harm reduction in politically sensitive contexts.

Conclusion

This case study contributes to methodological debates on how to ethically and rigorously engage with activist-curated data in politically sensitive digital environments. In the original research, we advanced an affective-discursive approach, tracing how emotional and ideological meaning was created and circulated across languages, time, and platform affordances. We identified how activists combined translation, image selection, and tagging practices to construct emotionally resonant narratives and contest official discourse in the transnational public sphere.

The project also highlighted the labor-intensive and ethically complex process of working with multimodal and translingual data under volatile platform conditions. To address these challenges, we adopted a methodologically agile and ethically reflexive approach. Most important, ethical reflection was a continuous responsibility involving anonymity, representation, and harm reduction through careful interpretation and data handling.

In retrospect, while our approach yielded rich insights into how discourse and affect coconstitute mediated resistance, we also see potential value in future extensions through ethnographic or participatory approaches (e.g., coanalysis with activists or reception studies) to deepen understanding of the interpretation of such content. Yet, our experience demonstrates that reflexively applying an affective-discursive approach reveals the entanglements of meaning-making, affective mobilization and power negotiation in volatile digital spaces. Such practices as staggered archiving, affect-discourse coanalysis, and reflexive triangulation may be usefully adapted, especially in projects that rely on curated multimodal content and where direct fieldwork is impractical. For those interested in activism, political talk, and discourse in the digital sphere, this case study offers a research template that highlights the necessity of methodological flexibility, context-sensitive ethical consideration, and analytical adaptability when working with activist-mediated discourse on volatile digital platforms.

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Discussion Questions

1. How can an affective-discursive approach be applied to the multimodal content analysis, including screenshots and translated social media posts?
2. What methodological strategies help to retain meaning and affect when analyzing content across languages, cultures, and platforms?
3. What ethical considerations should be taken when analyzing politically sensitive yet publicly accessible digital content, particularly with activist-curated datasets?
4. What methodological strategies can researchers use to address the challenges posed by platform volatility?
5. How can a discourse-historical approach help uncover how emotional narratives are constructed in activist discourse?

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. What is the key advantage of using an affective-discursive approach for multimodal social media research?
 - A. It demonstrates how prediscursive affective gestures and discursive methods manifest via platform affordances to create meaning and affect. – **CORRECT**
 - B. Polarity counts of positive/negative words are sufficient to represent affect.
 - C. Network centrality alone reveals how emotions circulate.
2. What are the best approaches for critical research in authoritarian contexts?
 - A. Focusing only on criticizing authoritarian regimes' official rhetoric.
 - B. Assuming all dissidents represent democratic allies.
 - C. Holding authoritarian regimes accountable while being mindful of potentially distorted dimensions of grassroots resistance. – **CORRECT**
3. Which practice must researchers implement to handle public yet sensitive data on unstable platforms?

- A. Rely only on the platform API with a single local backup, since the content is public.
- B. Proactively anonymize and redact with context, use reflexive triangulation, and keep routine, versioned, and redundant secure archives. – **CORRECT**
- C. Seek consent whenever possible but it must keep all identifying information for tracking purposes.

Further Reading

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