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Chicano Educational Leaders: Some Reflections on the Southwest

Henry T. Trueba

In the past the literature overemphasized the underachievement of Chicanos, Latinos, or Hispanics. The reality is that today, *la Raza* has discovered the enormous value of its cultural capital—its ability to use different languages and to understand other cultural values. The development of new educational leadership in the Rio Grande Valley can be seen as reflecting this trend. The significance of Hispanics in the valley can best be appreciated in the context of general immigration phenomena around the world, and of immigration trends in the United States.

The Rio Grande Valley has unique sociocultural and economic characteristics that make it a human laboratory and a training ground for the future of American society. What happens in the valley now will soon—within a couple of decades—affect the rest of the country. The region's rapid economic development, its fast demographic change, its ethnic, racial, and economic diversification, and its unique cultural profile make it the most fertile ground for the development of new intellectual leaders with a realistic vision of the future and an educational mission of inclusion, academic excellence, and democratic participation.

Perhaps no other international development has affected schools more profoundly than immigration and transnational phenomena. These phenomena have changed the face, social composition, and overall organization of schools in Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Internal migration and emigration have affected many parts of China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, as well as a number of societies in the

Pacific Islands (such as Samoa, Hawaii, and the Philippines). Experts such as Marcelo and Carola Suárez-Orozco of Harvard, co-directors of the Harvard Immigration Project, one of the leading centers of immigration research in the country, estimate that between 100 million and 130 million people live in foreign countries as guest workers, or, in a very profound sense, as *GHOST* workers—invisible, exploited, and doomed to hard labor with few if any civil rights and compensations.

I have just returned from Almería, in Andalucía Province in southern Spain, where thousands of new immigrants from northern Africa are now working in the so-called *invernaderos* (greenhouses that grow, with intensive use of pesticides, vegetables consumed throughout Europe). The new Muslim families, many of them undocumented, have changed the local schools so drastically that a sort of “white flight” of mainstream Spaniards has taken place, leading to the establishment of new private schools. These immigrant families face prejudice, low expectations, rejection of their home language and culture, and even public hostility. The reactions of the Europeans to unwanted immigrants of color are characterized by a paradoxical ambivalence: they need hands (cheap labor), but reject what comes with the hands—the body, the person, the culture, the language, the lifestyle. That sounds familiar, and indeed is not entirely different from recent attitudes toward immigrants in many other parts of the world, including the Southwest of the United States.

The Example of China

In order to understand the significance of immigration and transnational phenomena in the Rio Grande Valley, we need to look at the global context, that is, at similar trends in other countries, turning first to those that are culturally and geographically distant and therefore forgotten or unnoticed. Immigration and migration experiences in those countries can teach us important lessons. China, for example, with 1.2 billion people, more than 100 million of whom are classified as ethnic minorities (“nationalities”), has been ambivalent about its ethnic diversity. There are 54 recognized nationalities, whose populations range from 12 million (the Zhang) to less than a million. They control 68 percent of China’s natural resources (minerals, timber, etc). In the second half of the nineteenth century, many of the autonomous regions

primarily inhabited by these ethnic nationalities were persecuted, resulting in millions of deaths. Nanjing to the north, Hunan and Hubei to the west, and Hangzhou and Suzhou to the east lost most of their population.

The Chinese population had remained between 50 million and 110 million from the beginning of the Christian era to the Qing Dynasty in the mid-1770s. Yet by 1840 there were 400 million Chinese, and a century later, when the Cultural Revolution in China began in 1949, the country had 500 million people. And over the next fifty years (1950 to 2000) the urban Chinese population quadrupled. The enormous population growth from 1949 to the present has clearly contributed to wars, deterioration of the quality of life, overall decline, and accelerated migration and emigration trends. The international impact is evident. The Hmong (or Miao) in south central China, tired of central government oppression in the form of taxes on opium, moved to Indochina through different routes. Approximately 40 million Chinese live in Western countries, especially the United States. Rural people from a number of provinces have attempted to move to larger metropolitan areas in the east and north. Beijing has seen a significant increase in the Muslim population from the north-west (the Uygur and others, who account for more than 19 million Muslims) (Trueba and Zou 1994).

The central government as organized by Mao Zedong in 1949 played a key role in organizing the geographic location or relocation of ethnic groups, in an attempt to reach a political balance. This was important for Mao because the borders with the Soviet Union, Mongolia, Korea, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, Laos, and Burma (among other countries) were weak and China was in danger of losing parts of its territory. The very integrity and cohesiveness of China as a single nation depended on the cooperation of ethnic nationalities. Mao, therefore, promised them a number of privileges: increased autonomy, and legal, political, and military freedom. Some of these promises were never honored, and the hegemonic structure of the central government monopolized military and political power. The Han majority made some concessions, but most of all, demanded loyalty and used brutal force to obtain it. Between 1947 and 1965 five new autonomous regions were created: central Mongolia, Xinkian, Uygur, Guangxi, Zhuang (the largest, with over 12 million ethnics), Ningxia Hui, and Tibet (61-65).

The Cultural Revolution led to drastic changes in the organization and location of ethnic populations and the subsequent population growth. While the Han were obligated to restrict family growth (one child per family), ethnic families could have two or more children. The increase in population and the relative freedom of movement resulted in migration waves from the rural to the urban areas, and from the autonomous regions to the prosperous eastern provinces and to Beijing. There are a number of consequences that we must mention. The rapid and frequent mobility of members of ethnic nationalities has led to the abandonment of rural villages and migration to large cities in search of education and work. This in turn has resulted in:

1. Use of Mandarin as the lingua franca or dominant language for the whole country (the Han people speak different varieties of Mandarin, but generally understand each other across regions).
2. Standardization of the Mandarin language for official purposes and for communication between the central government and the various provinces. The use of Mandarin for communication via fax, telephones, cellular phones, media (TV and radio), and newspapers has helped a great deal in the process of standardization.
3. The centralization of public higher education and rigorous examinations have led to the creation of private institutes and universities, with a number of specializations in great demand, especially technology, business administration, and the teaching of foreign languages.
4. Chinese scholars, researchers, and professors residing in other countries (especially Europe and the United States) are often and insistently invited to return to (or at least visit) China, with the hope that they will remain in their homeland. The response has been largely negative. Most Chinese Americans stay in this country.
5. The influence of Chinese scholars and experts in the natural sciences, medical research, and technical fields (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) is very significant and is recognized by their peers.
6. Chinese students in U.S. public schools tend to perform extremely well (at least for the first and second generations), and their preparation in mathematics seems superior to that of mainstream high school and college students.

In fact, some of the literature in sociology, anthropology, and psychology seems to stereotype Chinese students as a “model minority” due to their high academic achievement. We cannot generalize, but the differential achievement of immigrant children appears to be explained by the literacy level of the immigrant families, the students’ motivation to achieve, grounded in their cultural values, the support system provided to them at home, and the history preceding their arrival in the host country (including the degree of exploitation, cultural discontinuities, etc.). Studies on resiliency are now revising previous theories. See, for example, the work of John Ogbu and his associates (Ogbu 1974, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1989). The impact of exploitation and illiteracy affect not only students’ personality types but also their responses to the culture of the schools. Scholars such as Ogbu explain well the failure of many ethnic minority students, but they have a hard time explaining the success of the few subjected to the same negative forces of poverty, discrimination, and neglect. New approaches involve looking into the organization of learning tasks and the cognitive strategies of high-achieving students (as in the recent study that Dr. Zou and I carried out in Houston, focusing on the highest achieving Latinos and Asian high school students).

The Impact of Latino Immigration

In this country, the two groups that are rapidly changing the face of schools and the culture of the entire country are Asians and, especially, Latinos. The significance of the migration of Spanish and Portuguese speakers around the world is pointed out by Marcelo and Carola Suárez-Orozco, who analyze immigration waves in the United States in great detail (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995a, 1995b, 2001; M. Suárez-Orozco 1998a, 1998b; see also Trueba 1988, 1999a, 1999b 2000, 2001a, 2001b). The lessons we can learn from immigration research, especially regarding Spanish-speaking immigrants in the Rio Grande Valle, are important:

1. As we know well, many of the Spanish-speaking families living in parts of California, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas were legitimate owners of their land before 1848 when, as a result of the U.S.-Mexican War, the United States purchased these territories from

Mexico for \$15 million. Consequently, many residents of these states have a long history of living within their ethnic communities, speaking Spanish and retaining their Mexican values; therefore they have not become marginalized, although some of them feel they were invaded or conquered by the North Americans.

2. Most of the Indian groups living in the Southwest belong to the Uto-Aztecan linguistic family (Nahuatl and Nahuatl primarily) and were closely related to their ethnic groups in Mexico. Their relationships with Mexican populations were friendly and earned them a degree of autonomy. Their ongoing *mestizaje* or "interbreeding" has been well known in the history of Mexico ever since its first accurate census in 1773. The new U.S.-Mexican border bisected these Indian groups and divided families and populations.
3. The unique patterns of immigration from Mexico since the nineteenth century have contributed to the maintenance of a social, economic, and cultural infrastructure of genuine binationalism and transnationalism.
4. The Spanish-speaking immigrant population in the United States (primarily of Mexican origin) constitutes the largest ethnic group in the United States, with an estimated 38 million people. It is also a young population with the highest fertility rate in the country and is growing very fast.
5. The flow of new immigrants from Mexico with and without legal documents continues to be the largest and most consistent source of population growth in the Southwest.
6. According to the 1990 U.S. census, 21.7 percent of the total foreign-born population of the country (4.3 million of the 19.8 million foreign-born) were born in Mexico. By 1996 this had increased to 27.2 percent (6.7 million). In 1996, of the estimated 5 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, 2.7 million were born in Mexico (Espenshade and Belanger 1998, 365–66).
7. Mexican and Mexican American workers in the United States send nearly \$8 billion back to Mexico every year. Remittances are Mexico's third-largest source of revenue, after petroleum and tourism. It is believed that remittances consume approximately half of the annual income of these workers, who also support their hometowns in Mexico in many other ways.

8. The Latino (or Hispanic) population in the largest U.S. cities (Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, etc.) is reaching unexpectedly large proportions), but the Hispanic population remains concentrated in the southwestern states (California, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona).
9. In general, the Hispanic student population has been isolated and segregated in many states, and the situation has not improved in the last few years (Orfield and Eaton 1996). This isolation results in scarce resources for marginal schools.
10. The political and economic power of Hispanics has not increased in direct proportion to their demographic growth. Many Hispanics do not have or do not use voting rights.
11. The overall achievement of Hispanic children has remained low in many districts, and their linguistic and cultural capital has not been used. With the exception of the border areas (certainly inclusive of the Rio Grande Valley), teachers and principals of schools with the highest concentration of Hispanic children cannot speak Spanish fluently, nor do they use it for instruction in math and science, language arts, and other important subjects.
12. The Southwest, and especially the Rio Grande Valley from the Matamoros-Brownsville area to Laredo and beyond, has become an active market corridor, with rapid exchange of goods and services and frequent communication across nations.
13. The industrial impact of northern Mexico's maquilas and their newly established quarters in the Rio Grande Valley promises prosperity yet unknown for the Hispanic population.
14. The Rio Grande Valley has also become the U.S. port of entry into Latin America's industrial complex, opening new markets. Important higher education institutions are now being organized into consortiums and in close relationship with European institutions.
15. Mexico's exports, including inexpensive and expertly hand-crafted items as well as products required by a number of large American industries, have increased dramatically in the last decade.
16. The overall impact of Hispanic immigration in our schools beyond the border area is profound and durable.

These considerations lead us directly to the urgent need to prepare intellectual leaders for the near future, and to respond to the needs of immigrant children, who hold the future of American society in their hands. By the mid-twenty-first century, half of the U.S. population will consist of Hispanics, African Americans, and other people of color. We all recognize the need to prepare intellectual leaders, or rather to discover them and help them fulfill their potential. The question is how, and what kind of people are we looking for?

Educational Leaders for Tomorrow

The experiential and theoretical contexts of education for educators in the past were clearly framed by values, traditions, and practices that worked fairly well with mainstream populations and a philosophy of rapid assimilation into a presumed monolithic Anglo-Saxon culture. Now, the most difficult challenge for educational leaders (principals and superintendents) is to understand the schools of a new century, which primarily serve students who are linguistically and culturally “different” and whose histories and experiences at first may seem incomprehensible to teachers and principals. Beyond the difference in what we call cultural traditions (the “enchilada” culture), immigrant children display profound cognitive differences and consequently have different pedagogical needs. How do we find and appropriately train new educational leaders who have no experience outside their mainstream culture? We know that 92 percent of the country’s teachers are Anglo-Saxon and culturally mainstream, and thus are different from a vast number of the children in their classrooms (although this is not the case in the Rio Grande Valley, fortunately). Educators who have no way to understand immigrant families and the experiences of immigrant children cannot design appropriate and effective instructional approaches. The use of ethnic cultures and history in the teaching of basic subjects is clearly absent. How do you create continuity of learning and an appropriate learning climate if you have no idea of what children have lived through and what is in their minds?

The immigration experience creates many cultural and linguistic discontinuities that put immigrant children at a disadvantage. Without educational leaders who understand these discontinuities, teachers will have no guidance and

discretion in adapting teaching practices so as to teach these children effectively. The very relationship between parents and teachers is drastically changed when immigrant families cannot communicate effectively with teachers. So, what kind of leaders are we looking for? What characteristics should they have? How should we pave the way for their full development? I believe that we need educators who:

1. Have great capacity to adapt and understand—ideally, individuals who have themselves experienced cultural discontinuities, or have worked with people of different cultures and languages.
2. Can use the home languages of the largest groups of immigrant children, and understand their cultures.
3. Are creative, disciplined, and consistent, good managers, and capable of teamwork but still self-directed and self-sufficient.
4. Have a broad and clear vision of the world today, of schools, and of our country—the most important qualification. Ideally educators will have lived abroad and understand other countries, and thus will have become more appreciative of our country.
5. Have the motivation and commitment to continue to learn, and the capacity to manage large amounts of information.
6. Can draw on their daily working experience to develop their own learning theories, their own effective pedagogy, and their own strategies for best serving all students.

Critical Pedagogy

I have outlined above some of the characteristics described in the literature by Paulo Freire and critical theorists. For at least two decades Freire's critical pedagogy has inspired new approaches to reform schools and improve instruction. Freire has made important contributions to our thinking. See, for example, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1974), *Pedagogy in Process* (1983), *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), *Letters to Cristina* (1996), *Mentoring the Mentor* (1997), and *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), to mention only a few. His followers and colleagues have also pursued the themes of freedom, critical analysis, and school reform. See, for example, Apple 1982, 1985, 1989, 1990, 1993, 1996; Andrade and Moll 1993; Aronowitz and Giroux 1991;

Giroux 1983, 1992; Giroux and McLaren 1986; Lather 1986; McLaren 1995; Mercado and Moll 1997; Moll 1995, 1997; Moll and Gonzalez 1997; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez 1992; Moll, Tapia, and Whitmore 1993; and Ovando and McLaren 2000.

Perhaps one of the best interpreters of Freire's theories and educational philosophy is Moacir Gadotti (1996), who summarizes Freire's thinking into the following principles:

1. Principle of totality: Everything is related. Nature is a coherent whole in which objects and phenomena are reciprocally conditioning each other. To understand a concrete totality it is not enough to accept the fact that parts are in an internal relationship and connection with each other. The essence of phenomena and objects does not come from their individuality, but from their place in the total structure (the law of universal connection) ... The implication of this principle is that there is no isolated phenomenon, and it does not make sense in isolation. To isolate something is to artificially deprive it of meaning (Engels), to immobilize it, to kill it. Chaos is the result of this metaphysical isolation of natural phenomena whereby nothing is related to other phenomena, and some are exterior to others.

To internalize the meaning of this principle, we must place humans in their entire context. Human communities, particularly the small units in which we grow and learn to become human, are important because they define us, give meaning to our lives, and condition our intellectual and moral growth. Without awareness of this principle, research can become a tool of isolation, an instrument of dehumanization, and a destructive force. The fundamental principle of meaningful research, action research, and praxis (in the Freirean sense) is to define research as a tool to bring us back to our communities in order to find meaning in our lives, and to help us rediscover our humanity in the service of that community.

The culture of academia that fosters research as a means to isolate us as individuals—that conceives of human behavior as a set of individual phenomena away from actual communities—is a disservice to our collective partnership in life within a community, and a step backward in our intellectual development. The question is: Where do we belong as human beings and as researchers? Where are our communities? How can we find ourselves integrated in these communities where we have a role, a function, and a sense of belonging?

2. Principle of movement: Everything is in continuous flux and is being transformed and transforming other phenomena. Movement, action, is a quality inherent in everything that exists. Nature, society, our lives, everything is continuously being transformed and is always unfinished. Moacir Gadotti says: "Life produces death; heat can be understood only in function of cold, and the new is born from the old." Ongoing development and transformation is part of life.

The actual social and cultural context of research defines the importance of the issues we study, the premises we use to justify our efforts, the goal of the research activities, the role we play in the research, etc. And the social and cultural context also defines for us the process of the research, the methodology, and the limits of our activities.

3. Principle of qualitative change: The transformation process is not random nor circular in eternal repetition. Qualitative changes are reached within specific conditions and after concrete quantitative changes in the physical world (water boils as its temperature rises, and eventually becomes steam); this is the law of conversion or of leaps (in Engel's terms). The creation of a new research culture, a culture that recognizes the community as the center and the inspiration of action research, is not a sudden change; it takes place gradually, and changes take the form of small steps toward a community-based operation. This means that decisions on what to study, how to study it, and for how long are determined with and by the members of the community, not by the academic personnel who conduct the research.

4. Principle of contradiction: This is also called the "struggle of opposites." The transformation of things and persons responds to internal forces that coexist and simultaneously move both to unity and opposition. All material and spiritual realities undergo this struggle. Lenin used to say "unity, coincidence, identity, equivalence of the opposites is conditional, temporal, transitory, relative. The struggle of opposites which exclude each other mutually is absolute, like development and movement." Gadotti describes this struggle as *dialectics*, and divides dialectics into three categories: of nature, of history, and of knowledge. Dialectics of nature is independent from human influence. It has its own forces and dynamics. Dialectics of history is in the hands of people as they intervene and pursue specific objectives, within the context of material conditions that preexist and are not controlled

by humans. And dialectics of knowledge results from the constant interaction between the objects to be known and the actions of the subjects attempting to understand them.

The above principles constitute the philosophical foundation for the pedagogy of the oppressed. Freire himself found in Gadotti a loyal friend and a pioneer historian who wanted to change education through dialogue, but dialogue clearly based on the three dialectics stated above. In his preface to Freire's *Educacion y Cambio* (1976), Gadotti writes:

The dialogue could take place inside the school, in the classroom, in small groups, but not in global society. Within a macroeducational vision, where pedagogical education is not limited to school, the organization of society is also the task of the educator. In order to do this, his strategy, his method, is much more that of disobedience, *conflict*, *suspicion*, than that of dialogue ... Dialogue cannot exclude conflict lest it be considered ingenuous. They act dialectically: what gives strength to dialogue between the oppressed is its force of bargain when faced by the oppressor. It is the development of the conflict with the oppressor that maintains the cohesion of the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. (1979, 12–13)

To go from dialectics to dialogue and then to praxis one needs to reflect on the implications of the principles established above for community-based research. These principles constitute the basis of the pedagogy of the oppressed, which includes a conception of society in general, beyond educational institutions. In order to gain a global vision, an educator needs to question not only instructional practices in schools but also social practices that affect schools. Consequently, educational leaders must explore the conflicts resulting from a dialogue between our conscience and the existing social justice. This dialogue should include the representatives of the unfair social system (or in Freire's terms, the oppressor). Indeed, an effective strategy to maintain a productive dialogue is outlined in the practice of critical ethnography (Trueba 1999a, Trueba and McLaren 2000; Zou and Trueba forthcoming; Foley forthcoming; Guajardo and Guajardo forthcoming).

One of the goals of critical ethnography is to move from dialogue to praxis. That is, if we want intellectual leaders to

acquire a deep understanding of the challenges faced by oppressed people in schools and society, they should learn how to study these challenges. Indeed, critical ethnography suggests that potential educational leaders should:

1. Document the nature of oppression suffered by community members.
2. Outline the process to stop oppression and enhance the quality of life, respecting the human dignity of all members.
3. Accelerate the process of reflection or conscientization in both oppressed and oppressors, thus creating a sense of history and a context for equity.

Educational leaders must envision strategies for empowerment among the oppressed or neglected, the educational underachievers. The literature on critical pedagogy often alludes to this empowerment and liberation as a process in which hegemonic structures are destroyed. Hegemony is a highly abstract concept applied to discourse (hegemonic discourse or text) as well as to social structural settings. First Lenin in Russia and later Gramsci in Italy (see Gonzalez 2001, 107) apply the concept of hegemony to something that occurs at the macro level of the nation-state or the world system, such as the elements that control all social classes and constitute political domination and economic exploitation. Gonzalez views hegemony not as direct stimulation of thought or action but as a framing of competing definitions of the reality in which the dominant classes exist. Thus, hegemony can be seen as the collective (even contradictory) social forces that establish historical and cultural relationships that permit one group to exploit another via a dialogical process. Gonzalez states:

Hegemony is the name given to the *momentum* of the objective relationships of forces that exist between different collective social agents (for example, classes, groups, regions, and nations) situated in a determined social space which we observe from a symbolic point of view—that is, where the creation and recreation of meaning take form in the enactment of all social relations. (108).

Gonzalez places the interplay of contradictory forces in the communications arena, at the level of symbolic exchanges

between people. Language, communication, and the creation of hegemonic structures are intimately related to each other and to education, and specifically to literacy. As Freire often repeated, in order to understand our place in history and to walk erect like humans we must understand the word and the world; we must become literate and skillful in communication. Liberation from oppression, freedom, and the possession of human dignity require a set of conditions that permit community members to become literate, educated, and in full control of their lives. The ultimate empowerment of communities that have been oppressed depends on the ability of the community to regain a sense of history, and control of the means of communication within the community and across communities. We must focus on the mechanisms and strategies that permit communities to gain a high degree of literacy (in its broadest sense) and the means to control communication with the outside world and its members.

This topic of community literacy and autonomy brings me directly to the most important constituent of a community and the indispensable element that makes literacy and communication meaningful: culture. Culture in a community is understood as the engine of our lives, the lifestyle, the common origins, traditions, and values, the common language, multiple networks of blood, kinship, and friendship—in brief, it is what distinguishes a community from others. Culture must remain alive as the key instrument of communication. It is through culturally agreed rituals, traditions, and collective expressions that people retain and reaffirm their membership in a community. It is the community that gives individuals their self-identity and motivation to excel.

The dramatic events of September 11, 2001 have triggered new anxiety and law-enforcement policies that fall back on racial stereotypes and xenophobia. Communication skills are essential for educational leaders in order to restore peace and confidence in all families, and the presumption of innocence unless proven guilty. In 1942 we saw prejudice in action against Japanese families on the West Coast. Equity and justice must be deeply ingrained in intellectual leaders.

I often attend the mariachi mass at the *Basilica de San Juan*, in San Juan, near McAllen, Texas. I am always amazed by the sense of belonging and collective Mexican identity of those who attend. In spite of their differential skills in Spanish

or in English, their obvious income differences, and their varying occupational profiles, there is a strong sense of being together as members of a single community. As people prepare to work in fields and move north, as they return from their labor in other states, they meet there. To celebrate their wedding anniversaries, baptisms, confirmations, and other life events, they come to San Juan. Life is full of hardships, difficulties, and unpredictable events, yet the communication of a religious and cultural message of peace and confidence renews the energy of many to keep trying. Religious leaders must have the communicative skills and sensitivity to identify their congregants' most basic needs and speak to their values; so, too, educational leaders need these same skills and sensitivity. Settings like San Juan create "cultural fronts" in which we renew our cultural beliefs, according to Jorge Gonzalez (2001).

The intellectual leaders of the twenty-first century will be characterized by their global vision, their understanding of the new spaces needed by immigrant children, and their communicative skills to persuade the world of the need to commit to the education of all children, especially the children of immigrants.

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