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New Towns in Hong Kong

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by

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TOWNS IN HONG KONG\*

### Introduction

Certainly, Hong Kong is "one of the most fascinating economic curiosities in the world today" (Owen, 1971). Facing problems of unparalleled migration influx and economic stagnation caused by trade barriers against China in the early 1950s, Hong Kong successfully developed its manufacturing industry, and in a few decades, has emerged as a world centre of trade and industry.

Apart from the economic expansion, Hong Kong has also experienced rapid urbanization in the last 25 years, with its rapid changing urban landscape and booming new towns which would amaze any visitor.

Searching into the factors which operate in the processes of urbanization and industrialization and the "causal relationships" between them may be of great interest; however, the focus of this paper is on the

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\* Part of the materials in this paper are extracted from a research report -- "The Rise and Growth of Kwun Tong: A Study of Planned Urban Development" written by the same author and published by the Social Research Centre, the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1973, and also from a background paper -- "Social Problems and the New Towns" presented by the author and Drs. Pedro Ng and S.K. Lau to the Symposium on "Social Planning in a New Town, Case Study: Shatin New Town" sponsored by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in 1976.

common product of both processes - the industrial new towns, with special reference to Kwun Tong, the first new town in Hong Kong.

#### Background for Rapid Development

By the early 1950s, available lands in inner-city areas around the harbour for domestic or industrial uses had long been exhausted. Industrial development and the invasion of small industries in domestic tenements were not the only causes for deterioration of the environment of inner-city areas. The unprecedented refugee influx and the rapid natural growth of the population (Choi & Chan, 1977) had caused massive housing deficiencies. Older tenement buildings in the urban areas were facing intolerable overcrowding situation, and those who could not afford a living quarter, which might be of unimaginably small size, began to occupy hill slopes in northern Kowloon and on Hong Kong Island. "At its peak in 1953, a belt of squatter camps, each containing up to 50,000 people and comprising, in all, over 300,000 squatters, enveloped Northern Kowloon" (Dwyer, 1971).

Feeling the pressure from increasing demand on more spaces for further urban development and from the need for amelioration of the urban environment, the government has gradually begun to give up the laissez-faire

official policy towards the use of land, large scale reclamations have been carried out, planned layouts have been imposed to further urban development and thus out-came the industrial new towns.

The rapid inflow of population, due mainly to the building of large public housing schemes, which provide residence for those lower income groups who have been living under intolerable housing conditions in other districts or whose former living place is no longer available, has put new town development to speed. However, the new town dwellers have always been passive; instead of being active in building up their community, they are tend to mind only their own business (Chan, Y.K., 1973). But on the other hand, the contributions from private enterprises and voluntary bodies have their special importance to the new towns.

Take Kwun Tong as an example. Manufacturers have made enthusiastic investments, as can be seen from the applications for land, up to 1965, land applied for was  $4\frac{1}{2}$  times the land available; and, without counting the large amount of capital for land and equipments, only the cost of constructions, up to the end of 1971, was more than 4 times the estimated cost for the government in the reclamation and preparation of Kwun Tong (Chan, Y.K., 1973). It was the investments from private enterprises

that have led manufacturing industry to flourish, provided job opportunity, and made Kwun Tong one of the most important industrial areas of Hong Kong.

Voluntary bodies, both religious and secular, have been important contributors to the new towns and have played a very important role in their development. Their contributions are always magnificent, particularly in the three major sectors of social services - education, medical and health, and social welfare services. In Kwun Tong, 83% of the students have enrolled in subsidized/grant schools run by voluntary bodies (Education Department, unpublished data, 1975); and, 81.8% of the social welfare agencies and 34.3% of the clinics in the area were also operated by voluntary bodies (Chan, Y.K., 1973). The efforts which voluntary bodies have made in rendering social services in new towns have certainly weakened the environmental push factors and strengthened the pull factors to migrants from old urban areas.

Contributions from both private enterprises and voluntary bodies undoubtedly have been important throughout the developmental history of new towns, but what is the role played by the government?



Government as Policy Maker, Planner, and Entrepreneur

It is the government who initiates and plans the new town development. The governmental bodies mainly responsible for planning are the Town Planning Board (chaired by the Director of Public Works and comprising 8 official and 8 unofficial members), and the Land Development Policy Committee (chaired by the Secretary for the Environment and comprising 6 official members). The Town Planning Office of the Public Works Department services these two bodies and their sub-committees, prepares plans and also provides planning advice for the New Territories Administration and Advisory bodies. General planning concepts and policies are set out by the Hong Kong Outline Plan which is based on the findings of 6 interdepartmental working committees and a data bank, and provides a framework for the preparation of the Town Planning Board statutory outline zoning plans and departmental plans. The statutory plans indicate broad pattern of land use and provide a guide to public and private investment. The departmental plans, subject to the approval of the Land Development Policy Committee or the New Territories Development Progress Committee, are detailed "action" plans to enable lands to be prepared and released for public or private development (Hong Kong, 1977).

Though plans are prepared under the supervision of various committees, it is the Town Planning Office which does the actual planning works in the urban area. For new towns in the New Territories, the newly set up New Territories Development Department, also within the Public Works Department, is charged with the planning, co-ordination and implementation of the department's effort; and, besides, in each new town, planning and development are under the control of a Project Manager who is responsible to the Director of New Territories Development. (Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun, Sha Tin, undated).

All new towns in Hong Kong, including Kwun Tong in New Kowloon, and Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun and Sha Tin in the New Territories, are developed or developing under the guidance of governmental plans. Apart from working out the "plans", the major contribution of the government has been to provide industrial lands under more favourable lease terms, public housing, services and utilities. It is good for the lower income groups to be accommodated in public housing estates, and maybe it is profitable for industrialists to invest in new towns owing to the favourable terms of lease and sufficient labour supply, but it may even be more profitable for the government.

Take land provision as an example. During the period of 1955-1972, the total non-recurrent expenditure

of public works done in the Industrial Zone of Kwun Tong was estimated to be about HK\$50 million, but industrial lands auctioned off in Kwun Tong Reclamation gave the government a return of HK\$120 million. Thus in comparison, Kwun Tong Reclamation alone gave the government a profit of more than 100% in 17 years, without taking into account the returns of outstanding premia, lands not yet auctioned off, direct and indirect taxes from industrial establishments, etc. (Chan, Y.K., 1973). In other words, the government may also be doing a good business in new town development.

#### The Development Pattern

All new towns in Hong Kong go through similar planning process, and traits of planning can be easily discovered from the physical layout of the areas. With the purpose of providing housing and industrial lands, in every new town, public housing estates are built and new factory sites are created; besides, miniature commercial centres are erected, public utilities and social services are provided. Hereunder are the major common characteristics.

##### (A) High density development

New towns in Hong Kong are all of considerable large size in terms of population. In Kwun Tong the

population size has reached 575,000 in 1976 (By-census, 1976), and in Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun and Sha Tin, the population has been estimated to be 885,000, 486,000 and 524,000 respectively on full development in the 1980s. In these new towns, high population density and high degree of overcrowding can be expected, since a large population has to be transplanted to limited space. The gross population density of Kwun Tong is 1,459 persons per hectare at present; for Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun and Sha Tin which are in the New Territories and cover much larger areas, the population density is estimated to be 349, 442 and 301 persons per hectare respectively. Again, if we calculate the population density for the residential area only, for example, in Kwun Tong, the density will be over 3,000 persons per hectare, and in Housing Authority Estates in Sha Tin, will also be as high as 2,500 persons per hectare. (Sha Tin, undated). Moreover, in new towns, the majority of the population will be housed in public housing estates when completed - in Kwun Tong, 80%, Tsuen Wan, 75%, Tuen Mun, 70%, Sha Tin, 60%, all higher than the Hong Kong average of 43%. (Choi & Chan, 1977; Tsuen Wan, Tuen Mun, Sha Tin, undated). As the standard set so far for public housing estates is 35 to 40 sq. ft. of space for each occupant, there is reason to believe that in new towns, high degree of overcrowding will be observed.

Besides the high residential density, flatted factories are also predominant in new towns. As a planning standard of 364 workers per gross hectare (350 workers/acre) of industrial land has been set for new towns (Tsuen Wan and District Outline Development Plan, 1966), therefore, intensive use of industrial lands can be expected.

(B) More space for industry

Since industrial development has vital importance to the Hong Kong economy, and space is always in great demand for its development; therefore, in all new towns, important portions of land have been reserved for industrial use. From the outline development plans, we can find more space has been reserved for such usage in Tsuen Wan and Tuen Mun (more recently developed) than in Kwun Tong, both in terms of acreage and percentage (e.g. Kwun Tong 15.7%, Tuen Mun 21%). And for Sha Tin, which was originally planned to be a residential new town, the development plan has been revised and industries, particularly light industries will be developed in the township.

(C) Employment

The provision of employment is a crucial factor for the residents in a new town, particularly for those who would much prefer working in the same locale to

commuting to the city every day. This may be particularly true for the new towns in Hong Kong which accommodate mainly people from lower and lower-middle classes. In Hong Kong, the major economic activity in new towns is manufacturing industry which provides important working opportunities for blue-collar workers and it can be assumed that the manufacturing industries can attract workers from the vicinity. However, taking Kwun Tong as an example, nearly half of the blue-collar workers were working outside, and moreover, the proportion is even higher for white-collar workers of lower income group, as there is a lack of working opportunities. (Chan, Y.K., 1973). Therefore, commuting problem is unavoidable, and many residents even have to spend nights away from home frequently (13% households have at least one member doing so). (Choi & Chan, 1977). Since the authority is aiming at developing industry in all other new towns as in Kwun Tong for the provision of employment, and still little attention has so far been paid to the employment opportunity for white-collar workers, plus the uncertainty of attractiveness of local factories to the residents, very probably, these industrial new towns may face the same commuting problems, regardless of the fact that there may be sufficient blue-collar jobs provided in the area.

(D) Community services

The provision of various community services, e.g. education, social welfare, medical and health services, etc., in a new town has typically been estimated on the basis of some facility-population ratio which may be purely arbitrary. Not that arbitrary ratios are necessarily undesirable, but the allocation of facilities on such basis alone may be quite inadequate.

Development outline plans so far published show that sufficient spaces have been reserved for these purposes; and eventually welfare buildings and schools would be built by the authority in public housing estates or crown lands. However, taking Kwun Tong as an example again, many schools, clinics, and social welfare agencies are found under the auspices of voluntary bodies, and the provision of these services always lags behind the needs of the people (Chan, Y.K., 1973). In other new towns, though enough spaces have been reserved for the development of community services, again, there is no clear indication whether more of these organizations providing services to the community will be under government sponsorship. In Tsuen Wan, for example, two of the four main social welfare buildings will be under private sponsorship. (Tsuen Wan, undated). If we must wait until voluntary bodies to take up the responsibility in developing these services, very likely

obvious time lag between supply and demand, as in Kwun Tong, will again appear.

(E) Other facilities

Besides the above-mentioned necessities, there are many other facilities which are indispensable for each area under development - e.g., recreation/entertainment, commercial/business, transportation and public utilities.

On plans, open space for new towns has been well reserved. (In Kwun Tong over 50 hectares, Tsuen Wan 47, Tuen Mun 44, Sha Tin 53). But experience in Kwun Tong shows that the fulfilment of the requirement cannot catch up with the need created by the rapidly growing population. Therefore, in the new towns under development, open space, green belt and recreation facilities should be developed before an urgent need is created by the occupants.

The 5.7 hectares central area for business and commercial undertakings in Kwun Tong was too small and it lacked space for expansion, yet district outline development plans show there are larger central areas in other new towns (Tsuen Wan 46 hectares, Tuen Mun 31, Sha Tin 17) and pressure arising from limited space for commercial undertakings can be expected to be lightened.

Among new towns, whether completed, or under development, Sha Tin most likely will have the best



transportation network. At present, to communicate with Kowloon, there exists already the Kowloon-Canton railway, the Tai Po Road and the highway through Lion Rock Tunnel; in 1978, a second Lion Rock Tunnel will be completed and a double-tracked railway will be laid between Sha Tin and Kowloon. As for Tsuen Wan, there are two road linkages to Kowloon, the Castle Peak Road and Kwai Chung Road, and a bridge connecting Kwai Chung and Tsing Yi. But in Kwun Tong, 20 years after the development, the four-lane Kwun Tong Road is the only land route to Kowloon, and terrible traffic congestion can hardly be solved before the completion of the tunnel linking Kwun Tong with To Kwa Wan (still under-construction). Tuen Mun may face the same problem in land transportation unless improvement, e.g., widening the Castle Peak Road, will be carried out in time; otherwise its development will be hindered.

At the beginning of its development, factories in Kwun Tong faced many difficulties - shortage of labour supply, lack of water and electricity supply, etc., because it was industry which developed first in the area, and followed later by public and private housings and other utilities. Now in the other new towns, public housings will be constructed in an early stage of development so as to stimulate industrial, commercial and private housing development - e.g. Sun Fat Estate (in Tuen Mun),

Lick Yuen Low Cost Housing Estate (in Sha Tin), and Low Cost Housing Estates of Kwai Chung (in Southern Tsuen Wan). In Tuen Mun, before the completion of the Resettlement Estate, road network, sewage system and a water filtration plant have been constructed (Wah Kiu Yat Po, 6-3-1969); others such as the construction of Hawker Bazaar and "Cooked food stall" Bazaar in Tuen Mun, fire station and bus terminus in Kwai Chung, sewage treatment plant in Sha Tin (Sing Tao Jih Pao, 8-2-1971 and Wah Kiu Yat Po, 3-1-1972), at an early stage of development can indicate, at least to some degree, improvement in coordination of work in building up a new town.

#### Social Aspects

Town planning has traditionally been concerned with such physical aspects as patterns of land-use, communication, provision and distribution of facilities, and aesthetic qualities of architectural designs. Often neglected, consciously or unconsciously, but at least equally important in planning for a new town, is the social well-being of the community and its residents. Certainly the physical set-up of a new town can facilitate or hinder particular social activities, it is highly unlikely that the coordination of social activities, the integration of the residents and the promotion of the

community's welfare can be achieved through physical planning alone. Insofar as planning takes cognizance of the social aspects of a new town, what is usually considered as socially basic consists only of the demographic characters since these are attributes of a population that can be measured statistically. What follows is typically the consideration of how facilities can be allocated most effectively, some socially problematic issues are not tackled if not ignored. With regard to the development of new towns in Hong Kong, there are some major issues which are socially important and immediate attention should be directed to:

(A) Balanced community and self-containment

Some planners have pointed out that in Hong Kong, "..... one cannot but recognize that the present and future development of this small city region lies directly in the path of Megalopolis rather than in any concept of a central urban area plus self-contained new development .....", "..... it would appear that Hong Kong, having achieved an urban concentration, would not, indeed probably could not, willingly change in the direction of independent new towns but should develop from the advantages so achieved, structured by modern mass transport. It would consider itself as a whole, as a system, rather than as a series of towns in a hierarchical grouping." (Prescott, 1971).

This could be true for the case of Kwun Tong which is a "virtual extension of the enlarged urban area of Kowloon and New Kowloon" (Prescott, 1971). But recently, the government has clearly stated that new towns should be self-contained (Hong Kong, 1973), and developed as balanced communities (Hong Kong, 1977).

However both "balanced community" and "self-containment" are not feasible town planning concepts in the case of Hong Kong, which is characterized by a high level of interdependency and interpenetration between the constituent components of the society. "Balanced community", even if achieved, may only mean "balance" in a demographic sense, while socially individuals belonging to the same socioeconomic stratum would interact exclusively with each other, and inter-strata relationship would be minimized or even avoided. Similarly, "self-containment", if realized, would be tantamount to segregation between new towns and the other parts of Hong Kong. It is also doubtful whether self-containment would necessarily generate community identification; however, even if it can be generated, it is still arguable whether a high degree of localism or "parochialism" would really benefit both the new towns and Hong Kong as a whole.

In practice, contrary to the intention of the plan, new towns are not "balanced communities" even in demographic sense - all having a younger population than Hong Kong as a whole. Furthermore, they are quasi-homogeneous working class communities - in Kwun Tong, only 15% households have a monthly income of over HK\$2,000 (Choi & Chan, 1977); and in Tuen Mun, only 1.4% of the working population have a monthly income of over HK\$2,000 (Chan, W.T., 1977). Besides, there are practical difficulties in making available a whole spectrum of services and jobs for different socioeconomic groups, in attracting sufficient amounts of industrial and commercial investment in the new town and in luring individuals of different socioeconomic status to live alongside each other.

(B) Heterogeneity and segregation

Though all new towns in Hong Kong can be described as quasi-homogeneous working class community, as mentioned in the previous section, these new towns all have low and high density residential zones for residents of different socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, the Yuet Wah Street area in Kwun Tong, Residential Zone R3 in Tuen Mun, Residential Zones R3 and R4 in Sha Tin are for the development of low density private housing for residents of better socioeconomic status, in contrast to the crowded public housing estates which are mainly for people

of lower income. In other words, new towns are planned as heterogeneous communities with block or estate homogeneity in terms of social class. This physical "segregation" by design may engender social alienation among certain residents, especially those of the lower classes. Some planners might believe that a multi-class community could enhance better understanding among the residents and might argue that the upper or middle classes could serve as a source of status emulation to the lower classes, thereby uplifting the latter's social and economic aspirations. However, it is doubtful whether frequent contacts and interactions among the residents will in fact take place. Even if there are frequent contacts and interactions, it is doubtful whether any positive effect will ensue. Furthermore, physical segregation and relative deprivation that is likely to be felt by the lower classes may also be a source of anti-social behaviour.

(C) Community consciousness

How to create a sense of community among the residents is one of the major social issues in new town development, particularly when the new town contains a large population. In Hong Kong, all new towns are designed to accommodate populations as large as several hundred thousands, which is comparable to a primate city of many countries. It is true that the new town dwellers\*

attitude towards participation in community affairs is rather apathetic (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1977). May be the recentness has not provided the residents with enough time for the development of community consciousness, but the lack of community participation is nevertheless an obvious result of the failure of local organizations to attract local support, and the large scale entry of external organizations which fulfil many of the community requirements (Choi & Chan, 1977).

May be the organization of voluntary groups, mutual-aid societies, and similar activities in the community may contribute to the promotion of community consciousness. But considering the size of the population, local voluntary groups and associations can only be formed at the housing estate or at most sub-district levels. Consequently, the aim of creating among the residents a sense of identification with the new towns can hardly be realized.

(D) Social organization

The ultimate success of the new town will depend on the type of social organization established among the residents. Different types of social organization will affect the patterns of utilization of the physical facilities provided in the new town plan. Before they

move into the new town, individuals and families might be already well-integrated in their former neighbourhoods, largely through a conglomeration of formal and informal interpersonal relationships. They might have little difficulty in satisfying their physical and social needs through these relationship. However, once relocated in the new town, they will find themselves living in a social organization vacuum. A survey in Tuen Mun showed that 37.8% of the respondents made very few friends in the area, and 46.1% seldom interact with other residents (Chan, W.T., 1977). Another survey in Kwun Tong also found that satisfactory neighbourhood relations were felt by only a small proportion of households, and community activities are rare and insignificant, thus hindering neighbourhood/community interactions. Furthermore, community organization works have been externally initiated and supported, local motivation for organization has been weak, and the linkages between organizations were also weak or non-existing (Choi & Chan, 1977).

Even though forms of social organization among the residents will emerge spontaneously anyway, as time goes by, it is nonetheless the responsibility of planners to facilitate and to structure these processes if improvement of the general life quality of the community is a desired goal.



Discussions

Through close examination of the development of new towns, we can see that besides the task of physical planning, the government's involvement in building up a new urban area is to some extent limited. Many deficiencies prevailing in older urban areas - such as overcrowding, high building density, lack of environmental beauty, traffic congestion, shortage of suitable site for certain institutions, insufficient supply of services and facilities also exist in new towns.

To deal with overconcentration in large cities, the two most propagated theories are suggesting the erection of high-rise buildings or the development of satellite towns (Hongladarom, 1972). However, in Hong Kong, it is not the question of choice between high-rise buildings in central urban areas and satellite towns, but at the same time, high-rise buildings in inner-city and new towns with unusual features - high-density and proximity to industrial locations and residences, are developed.

Actually, patterns adopted so far can be justified by (1) within such a limited surface of about 1,000 sq. km., land is too valuable and it is not possible to develop dispersed suburban residential areas; (2) industrial establishment should be city-oriented or close to existing urban areas, otherwise, enormous investment would

be required for transportation facilities and other public utilities; (3) what have to be developed as first priority would be housing for lower class population, rather than upper class residences located in a "green belt"; (4) to minimize the commuting problem, housing for workers would best be located close to factories; (5) high-density urban development is possible since "..... Hong Kong has had the advantage of taking a large agrarian based immigrant population and converting it into an urban multi-storey densely-packed community. The population had little preconception of what urban life meant or would mean and had adapted to whatever it found". (Prescott, 1971).

Though the dual-purpose of providing housing and industrial sites have been attained, the physical and social infrastructures of new towns are still far from satisfactory. For example, even fairly enough jobs have been created in the vicinity, they do not necessarily have met the need of the new town residents; therefore large scale commuting cannot be avoided. While the plan for industrial development in a new town should provide considerable occupational opportunities for blue-collar production workers, sufficient opportunities for white-collar workers should also be provided for residents of different occupational interests. Of course, the latter type of work would have to stand competition with similar

opportunities available in the city. While there would always be some residents of the new town who for various reasons want to or have to work in the city, some minimum variety of job opportunities - some of which may have to be highly comparable in rewards with those in the city - would be necessary in order to satisfy a fairly heterogeneous working population in the new town. This would also have favourable implications for reducing the load on the transportation system between the new towns and the inner-city.

In the case of Kwun Tong, community services and facilities provided have been inadequate, either because of limited government involvement or the provision of such services and facilities was not actively considered until urgent needs had been created (Chan, Y.K., 1973). That is, planners must consider, for other new towns, whether provision of services and facilities could keep pace with the rapid population influx. And it is also necessary to examine deliberately, whether the proposed services and facilities would in fact serve their purposes, whether there might be differences in the pattern of use among different types of residents, and whether the needs of some particular groups of residents might have been totally neglected. If too much attention is paid to the physical and quantitative aspects of community services

and facilities, it may turn out that some of them are ill-used or under-used while certain other needs remain unsatisfied.

Therefore, instead of talking about "balanced community" and "self-containment" in general terms, the plan must be more specific. What need to be "balanced" and what need to be "self-sufficient"? Obviously, as a minimum, the working population and the non-working population must be balanced, and those urgently needed facilities and services (e.g., hospitals, schools, clinics, law-enforcement agencies) must be self-sufficient. A list of these specific items of "balance" and "self-containment" must be carefully spelled out as the relatively feasible goals for the plan to achieve.

Moreover, planned social intervention is particularly necessary in the early stage of the implementation of the new town plan. This planned social intervention should aim at mobilizing the new residents to form informal and semi-formal networks of interpersonal relationships, and at coordinating these networks. These networks can serve both the expressive function of catering to the psychological and social needs of the residents, and the instrumental functions of social welfare provision, social control, cooperative actions and collective decision-making.

In many town planning cases, "the profession of planning sees itself as planning for the community, but deals with only a portion of that community, and city planning has concerned itself primarily with buildings and the physical environment, and only secondarily with the people who make use that environment. Moreover, it sometimes even pays no attention to the social structures, institutions, culture and subcultures; the people are seen only as occupants of dwellings, offices, factories and moving vehicles. Not much attention has been paid to how they use these facilities; the people are little more than artifacts." (Gans, 1972). That is also a rather appropriate description of the philosophy of the planning authority in Hong Kong. It cannot be denied that in societies undergoing rapid social change, social objectives become very difficult if not impossible to define, let alone to quantify with relatively clear directions for planning. That being the case, any attempt to strengthen and coordinate "community" efforts in dealing with emergent social issues, either during the planning process or after the new town has come into being, will remain highly problematic. However, the planners should listen to the people, investigate and help the people and to solve their problems instead of just imposing professional expertise and values on the people assuming that these former squatters and rural dwellers are totally ignorant of what life in a new urban area should be.

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