

NARRATING THROUGH TEXT AND IMAGE: CHARACTER AND SEQUENCE IN JAPANESE HANDSCROLLS

Sebastian Balmes

fig. 1
Chapter 38, "Bell Crickets [2]"
(*Suzumushi [2]*) from *The Tale of Genji*, Heian period, first half of the 12th century, fragments of a handscroll (script and image), ink, color, gold, and silver on paper, 21.8 x 22.7 cm (script), 21.8 x 48.2 cm (painting), The Gotoh Museum, Tokyo



Anonymous Bodies

In premodern Japan, the illuminated handscroll (*emaki*) was a popular medium to tell stories in both script and painting. These handscrolls were often over 10 m long, and they were viewed by gradually unrolling them from right to left, little by little. The oldest (and the most famous) extant handscrolls with *Yamato-e* (Japanese-style paintings) are those of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) that today survive in fragments and date from the first half of the twelfth century. In these, one to three passages were selected from each of the fifty-four chapters of the tale, which was written in the early eleventh century by the court lady Murasaki Shikibu. Excerpts were copied from these passages onto ornate sheets of paper sprinkled with gold and silver foil; each concluded with a scene painted with expensive pigments.¹

Narrating in *The Tale of Genji* differs greatly from forms commonly encountered in modern literature, not least regarding its language. There are, for example, very few characters assigned with personal names in the text. In accordance with the social conventions of the period, the characters in the story are referred to by titles and nicknames, and these can change as the plot proceeds. Even more importantly, in classical Japanese the subject of a phrase is generally omitted, and verbs do not indicate grammatical person. Frequently, it is only through the use of honorifics that we can discern which character is meant. But there are also instances where it is not clear which character acts or feels, such that the boundaries between characters or between the narrator and a character can be blurred. At times, the text makes use of this as a poetic technique.² This is also facilitated by the lyrical nature of the work, which comprises 795 short Japanese poems (*waka*) and quotations from Chinese poetry.

Considering this linguistic tendency of indeterminacy, it is not surprising that in paintings of *The Tale of Genji* the characters are difficult to differentiate. They are all depicted with so-called “dashes for eyes, hooks for noses” (*hikime kagibana*). Furthermore, while the description of a character’s dress can be found in literary accounts, the body itself appears to be of little significance and was even less associated with appeal.³ This is seen, for instance, in the tale *The Lieutenants Who Lodged in Unexpected Quarters* (*Omowanu kata ni tomari suru shōshō*, ca. 12th century), in which a young woman does not initially notice anything amiss when, due to a mix-up, she is greeted by her sister’s lover instead of her own:

How was she to guess that the man who helped her down from the carriage when it pulled up

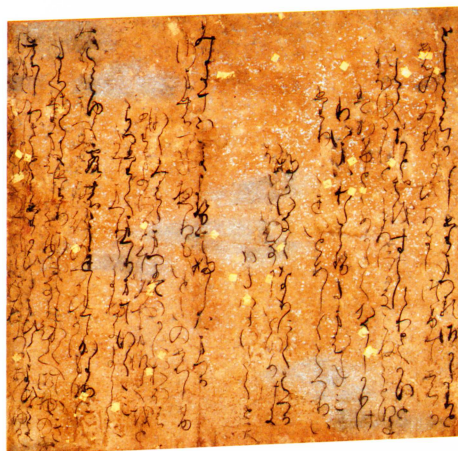


fig. 2
Chapter 40, “Rites of the Sacred Law” (*Minori*) from *The Tale of Genji*, Heian period, first half of the 12th century, fragment of a handscroll, ink, color, gold, and silver on paper, 21.8 × 23.6 cm, The Gotoh Museum, Tokyo

at the house was not the right one? Infinitely appealing and suave in his manner, he had much in common with the other; and so she did not detect the slightest difference, until gradually, as she perceived him to be the wrong man, she was seized with such bewilderment that she simply could not believe her own eyes.⁴

This text passage shows that physical contact was not considered personal in the sense that it is linked to a particular individual. The most corporeal element of the *Genji* handscrolls is arguably the handwriting; it is not without reason that it is also referred to simply as “hand” (*te*). This becomes especially clear in the passages on the last sheets of the second fragment of Chapter 36, “The Oak Tree” (*Kashiwagi*),⁵ and the fragment of the Chapter 40, “Rites of the Sacred Law” (*Minori*), that are written in “tangled script” (*midaregaki*)—that is, with fast movements and without lifting the brush such that the script in adjacent lines overlap (fig. 2). In “The Oak Tree” chapter, the (in metadiscourse) eponymously named courtier suffers from illness and finally dies; in “Rites of the Sacred Law” Murasaki no Ue, the main wife of the protagonist Genji, meets the same fate.⁶

If we return to the pictorial representations, the illustration of the second passage from Chapter 38, “Bell Crickets” (*Suzumushi*), shows the abdicated emperor Reizei in the upper left and to his right Genji, who sits in the center of the assembled figures (fig. 1). They appear, as Sano Midori succinctly points out, as if they mirror each other.⁷ Their close resemblance is also mentioned



fig. 3
The Ise Stories, Edo period, late 17th century, Scene 7 of Scroll I from a set of five handscrolls, ink, color, and gold on paper, 32 x 1490 cm, The British Museum, London (1920,0514,0.16.1), © The Trustees of The British Museum



fig. 4
The Ise Stories, Edo period, late 17th century, Scene 9 of Scroll I from a set of five handscrolls, ink, color, and gold on paper, 32 x 1490 cm, The British Museum, London (1920,0514,0.16.1), © The Trustees of The British Museum

in the literary work: “. . . as he matured and grew in dignity, his resemblance to Genji was ever more striking.”⁸ Reizei is in fact Genji’s secret son, the result of an affair with Empress Fujitsubo, the consort of Genji’s father, the emperor Kiritsubo. This liaison is Genji’s greatest transgression, which not only possesses moral but also grave political connotations. But even apart from Reizei and Genji, the other courtiers also cannot be differentiated from one another.

In order to understand the illustrations in the *Genji* handscrolls, a knowledge of the text is indispensable. It should be remembered that the text sections on the handscrolls (*kotobagaki*) are not a faithful copy of the original literary work. Of the twenty-one extant *Genji* handscroll texts, nine are excerpts from the original, ten are shortened excerpts, and for two of the chapters new versions of passages from the original were created.⁹ Brief summaries and minor additions were inserted so as to minimize any disruption in the flow of the text caused by the omissions. While the *Genji* handscrolls are indeed more rhythmical, many mistakes occurred in the copying process. Moreover, omissions have meant that several verbs and adjectives no longer refer to the characters for which they were intended, and narrator’s and character’s speech overlap. In this way, the linguistic tendency of indeterminacy is heightened. It can be concluded therefore that the texts were not designed for reading the *Genji* story, rather to describe the paintings, and that the aesthetic value of the handwriting and paintings was considered paramount.¹⁰

Although the excerpts on the handscrolls convey a rough idea of the original, it is often not enough to identify the characters depicted.¹¹ The details in the paintings are not limited to the excerpts but also refer to scenes before or after the selected passages. For example, at another point in the “Bell Crickets” chapter Genji’s son Yūgiri plays the flute, and therefore it seems likely that the courtier on the right side of the painting is Yūgiri (see fig. 1). Consequently, there is a diagonal axis of father-son relationships: Genji and his secret son Reizei face each other and appear like “complementary mirror images,” while Yūgiri sits on the veranda outside and gazes into the garden.¹²

Clothing and Character Identity

Another narrative work of classical Japanese literature that enjoyed continued popularity is the tenth-century *The Ise Stories* (*Ise monogatari*), which too was illustrated in painted handscrolls. The text comprises short episodes, each revolving around a poem or a poem exchange—occasionally several—and was copied in its

entirety. Paintings concluding the text were created for select scenes.

In the text, the protagonist is always only referred to as the “man” (*otoko*) introduced anew at the outset of many episodes: “Long ago, there was a man.” Compared to the twelfth-century *Genji* handscrolls, in the five illuminated handscrolls of *The Ise Stories* from the late seventeenth century in the British Museum in London¹³ it is relatively easy to identify the main character in the image, even without reading the text and even though the figures are not recognizable by their facial features. The composition of the paintings draws on the illustrated Saga version (*Sagabon*) that was printed in Saga near Kyoto in the early seventeenth century (see cat. 25). The printed version does not use colors, and shows the “man” dressed in variously patterned robes; however, the British Museum handscrolls show the protagonist with a specific selection of colors and designs. He mostly wears an orange-red garment over blue-gray skirt-trousers. This is also the case in the first seven episodes, the only exception being the white garment in the painting of Episode 4, and this might be connected to the full moon. The orange-red garment is depicted with different patterns, the most frequent one seen in the illustration of Episode 7 (fig. 3). Noteworthy here is the regularity with which the thin golden lines are applied to the robes of the figure that is about 6.5 cm in height.

The illuminated handscrolls seem to facilitate the viewer’s understanding by assigning a certain set of clothes to the main character, and therefore it is quite unexpected when a minor character is suddenly portrayed in the prototypical appearance of the protagonist. An example is the first painting of the famous Episode 9, which recounts the protagonist’s journey to the east (fig. 4). The figure in the blue garment can be identified as the protagonist because it is the only one facing the viewer, and he is depicted in the same clothes in the preceding illustration of Episode 8. The unexpected composition in Episode 9 does not imply in any way that there is more than one “man.” Although anonymous, the “man” has traditionally been identified as the court poet Ariwara no Narihira (825–380), and in the early tenth-century *The Collection of Japanese Poems Past and Present* (*Kokin waka shū*) the first poem of Episode 9 is also ascribed to Narihira (no. 410). This leads to the conclusion that one appearance type does not “belong” to a certain character. This is also supported by the fact that in seventeenth-century *Genji* illustrations, the protagonist after Genji’s death wears the blue or white garments that marked Genji before.¹⁴ This suggests that the category of character was seen as a role rather than as a (fictive) individual.

A more unified depiction of characters can be found in the paintings of *Rajōmon* (*Rajōmon emakimono*), a work that belongs to the genre of the Muromachi tales (also called *otogizōshi*) that flourished from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. The title *Rajōmon* is taken from the name of the southern gate of the capital (i. e., Kyoto).¹⁵ In the tale, a demon inhabits the gate, and the protagonist Watanabe no Tsuna (953–1025) sets out to vanquish it. Compared to the court literature discussed above, the Muromachi tales stand out not only for their brevity but also for being extremely plot oriented, with psychological aspects fading into the background. Accordingly, they are much clearer regarding language and contain fewer poetic references—this made them accessible to a broader audience. The appearance of the figures in *Rajōmon* only changes when they don armor.

Narrating in the Moment

Among the great many surviving *Rajōmon* manuscripts, the late seventeenth-century illuminated handscrolls from the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart (see cat. 85) are unusual for their pictorial representations. Although the nine paintings in the two handscrolls may not be significant in number, the pictures are comparably long and dynamic. Their position within the text is equally remarkable: other versions tend to place illustrations at the end of a scene but in the Linden-Museum handscrolls the paintings are often inserted into the text at an earlier point such that the moment just narrated is shown, which is also the moment in the story with which the textual narrative resumes after the picture. This way, the paintings are prevented from interrupting the flow of the narrative. Yet some paintings depict a scene that was previously narrated, thus providing a flashback before returning to the moment just narrated in the next section of the painting.

The second painting in Scroll I is particularly complex. Multiple times that are allocated several images in other handscrolls are unified in one panoramic view, and a gradual temporal transition is skillfully done. The principal section of the painting illustrates the warriors rushing to Tsuna’s aid who are caught in a violent storm conjured by the demon, its feet barely perceptible in the cloud (see the upper right of fig. 5). The warriors on the right of the scene (not seen in fig. 5) advance toward the *Rajōmon* in an orderly formation. A mounted warrior gallops forward in the wind, and from this point onward their progress becomes increasingly difficult. The warriors just ahead of the rider are still running upright, then bent over, and the one at the very front next to the small pagoda that symbolizes the temple Tōji is thrown into the

air. Throughout the entire picture the wind is indicated through lines that are especially thick and dark next to the gate at the left edge of the painting. The picture is structured spatially, with the right representing north and the left south, and at the same time there is a gradual temporal transition. This follows from the fact that in the text the warriors are all lost in the storm and is confirmed by the double depiction of the demon inside the storm cloud and at the Rajōmon.

At the gate, Tsuna clashes with the demon, who clutches his helmet and the tail of his horse. At this point we catch up with the textual time of the narrative. Immediately before the extended painting, the text recounts that

. . . [Tsuna] turned his horse around, used both switch and stirrups, and was about to return quickly. As he thought that the Rajōmon would collapse any moment from behind, the demon, who was about two *jō* [ca. 6 m] tall, extended its long arms, seized the top of Tsuna's helmet with its left hand, and wrapped the tail of [Tsuna's] horse several times around its right hand. "Where are you going? Hang on!" it said, taking [Tsuna and his horse] and wanting to throw them, but since Tsuna had always been a brave warrior with great strength, he understood [what was happening] without losing his composure in the least, quickly drew [his sword] Hizamaru, turned around, and tried again and again to slash [the demon], but it was like being crushed by a giant rock, and was to no avail.

Tsuna then cuts the cord of his helmet and the tail of his horse, and chops off the demon's right hand: the painting is skillfully positioned to capture the climax of the plot.

There is, however, one inconsistency between the painting and the text. The text describes the plates of Tsuna's armor as bound together with red cords, and that he rides a dapple-gray horse. Following the text, the viewer might identify the rider rushing forward as Tsuna. But if we continue with the painting to the left we encounter the mounted warrior fighting the demon; he is unmistakably Tsuna even though he wears a green suit of armor and his horse cannot be recognized as dappled gray. In contrast to the demon, Tsuna cannot be depicted twice because in the tale there are no men running ahead of him, and secondly, the group of mounted warriors to the right would be one figure short. Moreover, the characters' attributes do not generally change in *Rajōmon*; there is only a distinction between formal robes and armor.¹⁶ In the handscrolls of the Linden-Museum, Tsuna appears in a green suit of armor in subsequent paintings as well, and he is similarly



represented in other versions.¹⁷ By contrast, the older handscroll *Tsuna* (*Tsuna emaki*, 16th century) in the Tokyo National Museum, which remains without text, shows Tsuna as described in the narrative—that is, in a red suit of armor on a dapple-gray steed.¹⁸

Painting and Text as Two Modes of Narrating

Another work, also classified as a Muromachi tale but fundamentally different from *Rajōmon*, is *The Tale of the Monkeys* (*Saru no sōshi*) from the second half of the sixteenth century. It has survived in a single painted handscroll in the collection of the British Museum (see cat. 101). It revolves around festivities: a wedding and the first visit of the young couple with their little son to the wife's parents. This handscroll not only differs essentially from the examples discussed above in terms of subject matter but in other aspects as well.

In four of the total six paintings a great many monkeys are depicted, next to which are short texts (*gachūshi*). While these texts often provide just the name of the respective character, they also frequently note what the character says. Both uses fulfill an important function. First, without the names, even important characters cannot be identified since their robes also change in this handscroll. Secondly, most of the images do not serve to illustrate the text sections (*kotobagaki*),





fig. 5
Rajōmon, Edo period, late 17th century, Scene 2 of Scroll I from a set of two handscrolls, Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, see checklist, cat. 85

rather they show scenes that are not narrated in the text and without which it would be impossible to connect the individual sections in a meaningful way. In the text alone, there is hardly any narrating in the narrow sense. For the most part, it consists of characters' speeches, especially of the bride's father, Shibuzane, who orders the preparations of the festivities. Long passages are essentially lists of objects the bride takes with her as dowry, dishes to be served when the young family visits, and the types of decorations for the house.

At first, the pure text sections and the pictures with their written notes stand in stark contrast to each other concerning both content and language. In the short texts on the paintings, even the servants have their say, complaining or joking around. Moreover, the lengthy text sections are composed in literary language, whereas the dialogues on the pictures are delivered in colloquial language. Although this difference continues throughout the entire work, near the end script and painting not only fit together to form a narrative sequence but increasingly complement each other regarding their content. This begins with names that before can be found almost exclusively on the paintings and that now increasingly occur within the text. After the large banquet celebrating the visit of his son-in-law, Shibuzane orders that a *renga* ("linked verse") poetry session be held the following day. At this point, a hint of the comic that is typical of the

comments on the paintings can be detected in the character's speech:

Tomorrow we will hold a *renga* [gathering] to allow Lord Yasaburō to enjoy himself. [But] we have absolutely no *renga* poets. I have told the young ones over and over again that they should form monthly *renga* [gatherings] and practice; this would have been of use at such a time. Practice is not something that suddenly happens. They shall now realize that they have not practiced their writing, not even once, and have spent all their time on useless things, such as climbing trees (*ki e nobori*), creeping through the thicket (*yabu o kuguri*), climbing mountains to peel chestnuts, and descending into the valley to pick persimmons. . .¹⁹

Kinobori ("Tree-climber") and Yabukuguri ("Thicket-creeper") are in fact family names that appeared on the preceding paintings. Shibuzane gives precise instructions regarding the preparation of the *renga* session that in part takes the form of lists:

. . . for the writing desk, the one with pear-[skin] ground that came from the Asai last year; also, perform a tea ceremony in the [room of] four and a half tatami mats at the back, and put an [earthen] brazier from Nara on a black-lacquered shelf; a fitting *koshiki* kettle; for the lid rest, the top of an incense burner; for the vessel for fresh water, a *dakioke*; for the vessel for used water,



fig. 6
The Tale of the Monkeys, detail,
 Muromachi–Momoyama periods,
 1560s–1580s, handscroll,
 The British Museum, London,
 see checklist, cat. 101

a *gōshi* . . . A *sagara-tenmoku* [bowl] shall be placed in a [fabric] bag and set on a black coaster; for the tea, you shall fill [the tea caddy] named *Tsukumo* with *bechigi*, and you shall arrange the flowers in the [boat-shaped] vase *Kateki*. These [two], *Tsukumo* and *Kateki*, are implements about which there are all kinds of details [to be told]. . .²⁰

Shibuzane offers a thorough account of the tea caddy named *Tsukumo Nasu* (the *Tsukumo* in the above passage), possibly the most highly sought-after art object during this period. The caddy was lost twice in the chaos of war and was rediscovered later. The most famous warlords of Japan were known to have it in their collections at various times, even though this was not until after the composition of *The Tale of the Monkeys*. It is, of course, totally inconceivable that Shibuzane would obtain the *Tsukumo Nasu*, and this explains why the tea caddy is not seen in the painting. The primary purpose of this excursus is most likely to stress the value of Shibuzane's *ikebana* vase *Kateki* by its association in the text with the *Tsukumo Nasu*. In the following painted scene, the *Kateki* vase is hung on the wall on the right and identified by name (fig. 6). The so-called “pear-[skin] ground” (*nashiji*) of the writing desk, which is produced by sprinkling gold or silver powder onto a layer of lacquer that is afterwards covered with a yellowish, transparent lacquer, is indicated by yellow paint on the red-brown desk. The tea utensils are rendered in meticulous detail—almost all of the objects named in the text are visible in the picture (fig. 7).

The *renga* session takes place only in the painting and in the short texts therein, making the picture an integral part of the narrative sequence. At the same time, the accurate depiction of the objects illustrates what is named in the text. Yet because Shibuzane's instructions are not narrative segments per se, the lists in the text may also be understood as one way of preparing the viewer to look at the image.

The illuminated handscrolls discussed above exhibit divergent characteristics with regard to sequence and character. In the *Genji* and *Ise* handscrolls the paintings are each located at the end of a scene, while in the Linden-Museum *Rajōmon* the paintings are part of the narrative sequence. A difference of the time narrated occurs only in the extended pictures that start with a flashback. By contrast, *The Tale of the Monkeys* is designed in such a manner that the complete narrative only emerges through the combination of the text sections with the paintings and the short texts on them. In that the text primarily consists of the character's speech, the narrative possesses a strong dramatic tendency.

There is a discernible link in the depiction of the characters to linguistic- and content-based traits of the texts. They seldom take up bodies as a topic, and these too cannot be differentiated in the paintings. More significant is the placement of the figures and the rendition of their robes. Nevertheless, the latter, in particular, does not necessarily facilitate the identification of the character portrayed and remains an attribute of the category “(main) character” rather than of one specific (fictive) individual. If any definite identification is indeed possible, it would be in plot-oriented works such as *Rajōmon*.

These varying configurations of sequence and character were not part of a linear historical process, rather different traditions coexisted. For this reason, it was not necessary to discuss the works in this essay in chronological order. Instead, they should be understood as representative of the themes of Japanese narrative art and literature highlighted in this publication—that is, of love, fights, and feasts.

- 1 Sano, 2009, pp. 41–42.
- 2 Jinno, 2020, esp. pp. 43, 46–51.
- 3 Pörtner, 2019, pp. 13–14.
- 4 Backus, trans., 1985, p. 145.
- 5 Translations of chapter titles quoted from Murasaki, trans. Washburn, 2015.
- 6 Although these parts of the handwriting are usually associated with the psychology of characters in the tale, Reginald Jackson argues for a more corporeal interpretation. Jackson, 2009, esp. pp. 8–9.
- 7 Sano, 2009, pp. 50–51.
- 8 Murasaki, trans. Washburn, 2015, p. 805.
- 9 Nakamura, 1982, p. 61. One of the chapters for which shortened excerpts were created is Chapter 15, “A Ruined Villa of Tangled Gardens” (*Yomogiū*). For a comparison of the text of the illuminated handscroll with the original work, see Wittkamp, 2020, pp. 272–77.
- 10 Nakamura, 1982, pp. 61–63, 66–67.
- 11 Tanaka, 1984, p. 21.

- 12 Sano, 2009, pp.51–52, quoted on p.51.
- 13 All illustrations can be accessed from the homepage of the British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>, accessed March 27, 2021. The individual scrolls can be found under museum number 1920,0514,0.16.X, with "X" replaced by a number between 1 and 5.
- 14 See, for example, the *Genji* album *Excerpts from The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari kotoba*) with paintings by Sumiyoshi Jokei in the British Library in London (Or 1287) and the version of the digest *The Small Mirror of Genji* (*Genji kokagami*) in the Bavarian State Library in Munich (Cod. jap. 14), which was produced in the second half of the seventeenth century in five booklets. Both are digitized and available at <https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/>, and <https://www.bsb-muenchen.de>, both accessed March 27, 2021.
- 15 *Rajōmon emakimono* is the title of the version of the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart. *Rajōmon*, here written in Chinese characters 羅城門, is the gate's old name. In fact, in the late medieval period the variant *Rashōmon* 羅生門 was much more common. We can assume that the name was also pronounced that way in the text of the illuminated handscrolls, where it is always written in phonographic characters らしやうもん. For the sake of consistency, however, only *Rajōmon* is used here.
- 16 An exception is the version of Kokugakuin University in Tokyo (貴 4249, 貴 4250). In Scroll II, Tsuna's lord, Raikō (Minamoto no Yorimitsu), wears the green robe characteristic of Tsuna in paintings in which he is not depicted. Thus, we discover a trend detected in seventeenth-century *Genji* pictures—namely, that a recurring form of appearance does not mark a certain character, rather the role of the protagonist. The Kokugakuin scrolls are digitized and available at <https://opac.kokugakuin.ac.jp/library/lime/rasyoumon-4249/pages/rasyoumon-4249.html>, accessed March 27, 2021, and <https://opac.kokugakuin.ac.jp/library/lime/rasyoumon-4250/pages/rasyoumon-4250.html>, accessed March 27, 2021.
- 17 See, for example, the handscrolls of Kokugakuin University (note 16), Bukkyō University in Kyoto (991002769649706201), and the Kyoto National Museum (A甲2). All are digitized and available at <https://bird.bukkyo-u.ac.jp/collections/titles/rashomon/> (see "first" [上, jo] and "second" [下, ge] handscrolls) and https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_item_images/kyohaku/A甲2?locale=ja, accessed March 27, 2021.
- 18 The handscroll (A-942) is digitized and available at <https://webarchives.tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/C0062294>, all accessed March 27, 2021.
- 19 Translation based on the text in Ichiko, Akiya, Sawai et al., 1989, p. 459.
- 20 Translation based on the text in Ichiko, Akiya, Sawai et al., 1989, p. 460.

fig. 7
The Tale of the Monkeys, detail,
 Muromachi–Momoyama periods,
 1560s–1580s, handscroll,
 The British Museum, London,
 see checklist, cat. 101



Catalogue

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