

## **A Brief Discussion on the History of Subject Education**

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**Abstract:** The history of subject education is an important branch of educational history and also an important branch of subject educology. It is a science that studies the history of the emergence and development of education and teaching in a certain subject, reveals the objective laws formed in the process of its occurrence and development, and predicts its future development trend. The history of subject education is the intersection of multiple disciplines, involving education, subject educology, history, educational history, etc. Its ideal group of researchers should be a perfect combination of subject educology researchers and educational history researchers. The history of subject education poses a challenge to traditional research on educational history, especially in terms of research fields and methods. The current research status of the history of subject education in China mainly manifests in uneven development, lack of systematic and holistic content structure, single research methods, neglect of the study of the history of subject education ideology, and neglect of the study of students and teachers. Vigorously conducting research on the history of subject education has at least the following significance: opening up new fields of research in the history of education; Building the theoretical foundation of subject educology; Enriching the knowledge curriculum of teacher education; Clarifying the historical context of the development of subject education; Adapting to the training mechanism of professional graduate students.

**Keywords:** Educational History; Subject Educology; History of Subject Education

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The history of subject education is the study of the educational history of a certain subject offered in schools. It describes the history of the emergence and development of a certain subject education, and at the same time, it is a science that reveals the objective laws formed in the development process of a certain subject education and predicts its development trend. There are two points that need to be pointed out. Firstly, its essential attribute, namely connotation; The second is its classification, namely extension. Firstly, the history of subject education has dual attributes, namely educational and historical. Although it sometimes intersects with humanities and sciences, and even has a heavy component of 'reason', such as the history of mathematics education, physics education, etc., it is ultimately the history of 'reason' and cannot escape its

essential attribute of history. The history of subject education is different from the history of general disciplinary professional knowledge (Monroe, 1907). It is not only the history of disciplines, but also includes the basic content of education related to educators, learners, teaching methods, etc. (reflecting the essential attributes of education), that is, the history of subject education in which the subject, object, and media interact. Secondly, its classification includes various subjects offered in schools, such as Chinese language educational history, mathematics educational history, English educational history (as well as other foreign language educational history), physics educational history, chemistry educational history, biology educational history, history educational history, geography educational history, ideological and political educational history, physical educational history, art educational history, music educational history, etc. It should be noted that some disciplines in the history of education have their own characteristics of the development of traditional Chinese culture, such as the history of Chinese language education, the history of ideological and political education, etc; Some disciplines also involve foreign educational history, such as the history of natural science education, history education, art education, music education, etc. The history of subject education is a special interdisciplinary field, which is not only the intersection of subject education and history, but also the intersection of subject education and educational history. The particularity of disciplinary education history is manifested in the following aspects: firstly, disciplinary education history is the intersection of multiple disciplines, and any disciplinary education history involves content from multiple disciplines such as education, disciplinary education, history, and educational history; Secondly, the history of subject education is sometimes the intersection of humanities and sciences (Thomas, 2021). This intersection does not mean that the main content of the history of science education belongs to the nature of humanities, but rather that its achievements are ultimately manifested in the nature of history, including the characteristics of education; Thirdly, the content and research objects of educational history in different disciplines are different, which makes the research methods of educational history in different disciplines not the same. However, due to the essential attributes of history and education, some methods in history and education research should be one of the common methods in disciplinary educational history research; Fourthly, for the history of education in natural science disciplines, it is necessary to overcome some drawbacks in traditional educational history, such as the opposition between Chinese and foreign educational histories, the gap between

national educational histories, and the interconnection of different types of educational histories; Fifthly, the history of disciplinary education is not only a branch of educational history, but also an important theoretical foundation of disciplinary education. Given the above particularities, the history of disciplinary education places extremely high demands on the personal qualities of researchers. Firstly, researchers are required to have a high level of disciplinary knowledge background, and their professional knowledge should be sufficient to master the overall framework of a discipline and the development history of the discipline itself; Secondly, researchers need to have a certain foundation in historical research in order to ensure that the research results of disciplinary education history are presented in a historical manner; Again, education and subject education are essential professional foundational knowledge for researchers, ensuring that the history of subject education is not just a simple history of subject specific knowledge; Finally, as educational history is an interdisciplinary field that combines the research methods and content of education and history, and encompasses the research content and methods of disciplinary educational history, researchers must also possess a certain theoretical foundation in educational history. So, what kind of people or research groups can do a good job in studying the history of subject education? The author believes that researchers in the history of disciplinary education should be a perfect combination of researchers in disciplinary education and researchers in educational history, and it is best for a group or organization to study the history of disciplinary education. Subject education ensures both the subject knowledge of the history of subject education and its educational characteristics; Educational history not only affirms that disciplinary educational history is a part of educational history, but also ensures its essential historical attributes. The collectivization of research subjects in disciplinary education history is determined by the trend presented by educational history in contemporary times. In the context of globalization, researchers in the field of educational history "need to form research groups, form research teams, shift from individual efforts to group cooperation, and shift from 'sparrow warfare' to 'battlefield warfare', in order to achieve optimal results. In addition, from the perspective of the construction of the discipline of educational history, researchers also need to form groups and achieve the collectivization of research subjects" (Shen & Zhou, 2009). The history of subject education poses a challenge to traditional research on educational history, especially in terms of research fields and methods. Traditional research on educational history is deeply influenced by the theories of general education

(also known as "big education", "macro education", "broad education"), which confine the research object of educational history to the history of macro education theory and ignore the history of the educational process. The questions of "what to teach" and "how to teach" in school education in history have never been systematically explained, forcing educational history to gradually follow the path of theoretical and academic research. This has led to traditional research on general education history always being lofty, unrelated to teachers, students, and classrooms. It is evident that the detachment between theory and practice has triggered a chain reaction, ultimately leading to traditional research on the history of education being unrelated to school education. The history of subject education poses a challenge to this. In the field of research, the study of educational history should be specifically focused on various related disciplines in school education; In terms of research methods, combining historical research methods with research methods from various disciplines. Due to the concretization of research objects and diversification of research methods, the history of subject education has broken the theoretical framework of traditional pan educational history research, leading the study of traditional educational history theory towards practical research of subject education history, and closely linking teachers, students, and classrooms, thus breaking through the generalization of traditional educational history research (Goldin, 1999). The task of education is to solve practical educational problems, and the construction of its discipline is also based on this. In the construction of the discipline of education, it is not a matter of how to be greedy for 'big' and 'comprehensive', otherwise it will lose its vitality. The root of education should be rooted in the interior of education, rooted in practice, rooted in educational practice. The task of educational history is also based on this, focusing on real educational problems and needs, rooted in practice, and improving the explanatory ability of educational history to reality, the predictive ability to the future, and the service ability to current educational reform and decision-making. The history of subject education faithfully fulfills the mission entrusted to it by the history of education in the new century, without losing its historical, realistic, contemporary, and important characteristics of "learning from history", "using the past for the present", and "using the West for China". It focuses on the practical problems in school education, accurately grasps the historical development of subject education, keeps up with the forefront of subject development (keeping pace with the times), grasps the future development trend of subject education, and better meets the demands of teachers and students for

subject professional knowledge, teaching methods, curriculum organization, learning methods, and many other aspects from the perspective of historical development (Goodson, 2013). The study of subject education history not only greatly solves the long-standing obstacles that have plagued the development of educational history, enabling it to better penetrate the classroom, serve students, and serve teachers, but also to some extent solves the crisis faced by the development of the discipline of education in contemporary times, namely the weakening of its ability to explain reality. The key to resolving the crisis in education and rebuilding its disciplinary status lies in enhancing its ability to explain reality, which is the source of vitality for all theories... Why has the ability of education to explain reality weakened? In short, the fundamental reason lies in two aspects: first, the narrowness of the theoretical perspective of education, and second, the scattered and localized theories lack integration, resulting in the fragmentation and limitations of the theoretical perspective (Xiang, 2003). The history of subject education shifts its research perspective downwards, and applies traditional pan educational history research specifically to disciplinary education in schools, closely linking teachers, students, textbooks, teaching methods, learning methods, etc., clarifying the changes and laws in various aspects of disciplinary education development, enhancing its ability to explain reality and predict the future. The history of subject education applies the theory of educational history to the practice of subject education, closely integrating theory with practice, which helps to resolve the modern crisis of education and concretizes the research perspective of education (specifically in the daily teaching and learning content of teachers and students), making it more targeted.

## 2. REALISTIC DIFFICULTIES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Due to historical reasons and cognitive issues, the research on the history of subject education in China has shown a series of negative and abnormal developments, which is regrettable. For example, the current development of subject education in China has led to the publication of books on various subjects of education on a certain scale. However, for the establishment of a subject, how can its development be discussed without the foundation of its history? No wonder some scholars have specifically written articles criticizing that "discipline education" has not yet matured as an independent discipline and is not worthy of its name. However, the

development of any discipline is from immaturity to maturity, from imperfection to perfection. Mr. Gu Mingyuan once pointed out about subject education: "We should help it like we do with children learning to walk, rather than blaming it" (Tao, 2011). According to the currently collected data, many subjects have not clarified their historical development context; Some subjects start early, so the understanding in this area is earlier; Some subjects only briefly describe a few sentences in their subject education, which is seriously insufficient and dilutes the research on the history of subject education. Generally speaking, the development of disciplinary education history in China has the following significant characteristics: Firstly, there is an imbalance in development. Generally speaking, disciplines that started earlier develop faster, while new disciplines develop slower, which is due to the historical reasons of discipline development. Mathematics is one of the oldest disciplines in school education, and the history of mathematics education is relatively mature, with certain reference significance for other disciplines. The research on the history of mathematics education in China began in the 1930s, with the main representative figure being the famous mathematics historian Li Yan (1892-1963). In 1933, Li Yan published an article titled "The Mathematical Education System of Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties" in Volume 17, Issue 10 of *Science*, marking the beginning of research on the history of mathematical education in China. Since then, research on the history of mathematics education in China has developed rapidly. Scholars such as Li Yan, Yan Dunjie, Chen Jiangong, Wei Gengren, Ma Zhonglin, Yu Ziyi, Wang Quan, Zhang Dianmiao, Li Di, Li Zhaohua, Dai Qin, and Song Gongzhefu have conducted numerous studies from different perspectives and to varying degrees, achieving fruitful results (Dai & Li, 2007). Among them, Yan Dunjie divided the development of Chinese mathematics education into three periods in his book "A Brief History of Chinese Mathematics Education": ancient mathematics education (Spring and Autumn Period, Warring States Period -1840), modern mathematics education (1840-1949), and modern mathematics education (1949-1965); Ma Zhonglin divided the development of Chinese mathematics education history into seven stages in his book "History of Mathematics Education" (Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, Wei, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing, late Qing Dynasty, Republic of China, and after 1949), and for the first time included foreign mathematics education history in his research scope. All of these have made outstanding achievements in the development of the history of mathematics education in our country (Cordasco, 1976).

In addition to the history of mathematics education, there have also been

some research achievements in the history of Chinese language education, physics education, chemistry education, art education, etc., but they are still in their infancy. However, the development of English education history, history education history, geography education history, biology education history, ideological and political education history, music education history, physical education history, etc. is relatively slow. Some only set up research sections on the history of education in their respective professional journals, and even do not have a history of education in each discipline. This is truly heartbreaking (Fedorov, 2008; Meltzer & Otero, 2015). Secondly, the content and structure are not complete enough, lacking systematicity and integrity. Taking the history of Chinese language education as an example. The study of the history of Chinese language education began in the early 1960s, based on the book "A Preliminary Exploration of Traditional Chinese Language Education" published by Zhang Zhigong. This book can be regarded as the "foundational work of research on the history of Chinese language education". The 1970s and 1980s were a period of development in the history of Chinese language education, and in the 1990s, it entered a period of prosperity. A large number of works related to the history of Chinese language education emerged, such as "Notes on Modern Chinese Language Education in China", "Ye Shengtao's Speech on Chinese Language Education Thought", "Series of Chinese Language Education Books", "History of Ancient Chinese Language Education", "History of Modern Chinese Language Education in China", "Outline of Chinese Language Education History", "Collection of Chinese Language Education Discussions in the Early 20th Century", "Education of Analects of Confucius by Chinese Modern Masters", "Theory of Traditional Chinese Language Education Textbooks", "Research on Chinese Ancient School Textbooks", "History of Modern Chinese Writing Education", "History of Chinese Primary School Chinese Language Teaching", "Brief Compilation of Chinese Language Education History", and so on. The sentence is: The research on the history of Chinese language education, which tends towards maturity and transformation, cannot conceal the problems reflected in its existing achievements. Firstly, the research on the history of ancient Chinese language education has not received as much attention as the research on the history of modern Chinese language education. This is not only a problem that exists in the history of Chinese language education, but also in the history of education in other disciplines. The history of ancient subject education is an important part of educational history research, which includes the enlightenment, emergence, and development of ancient

subject education ideas. It is an inseparable part of the history of subject education and, together with modern and contemporary times, forms a complete system. The three are interrelated, closely linked, and cannot be neglected. Secondly, due to the disciplinary specificity of the history of Chinese language education, this specificity limits the educational content to only Chinese ideological and cultural knowledge, and it is understandable to focus on the research of Chinese language education history on domestic language and cultural knowledge (Heitmann, 1996). The history of education in this category includes the history of ideological and political education, while the history of education in other disciplines includes the dissemination of foreign knowledge in subject education. For example, the history of historical education also involves world history, and the history of music education and physical education will also involve some equally important related knowledge abroad. For natural sciences, the history of subject education should break the boundaries between domestic and foreign fields, and fairly and objectively treat and absorb the historical development and tremendous achievements of foreign natural sciences. Thirdly, the integration of research methods is insufficient and relatively single. According to the nature of the discipline, the history of subject education can generally be divided into two categories: the history of liberal arts education and the history of science education. In the process of selecting research methods for disciplinary education history, it is inevitable that these two types of disciplinary education history will produce this phenomenon: researchers of liberal arts education history find it difficult to appropriately integrate scientific research methods (such as quantitative history methods, educational statistics methods, etc.) into the study of liberal arts education history, and researchers of science education history find it difficult to appropriately integrate liberal arts research methods (such as literature review, historical research methods, etc.) into the study of science education history. Each discipline has its own research field and research methods. It is not easy for natural sciences to fully integrate their research methods with those of educational history, disciplinary education, history, and other disciplines. However, the particularity of disciplinary education history also requires researchers to combine interdisciplinary research methods. The diversity of research methods can help us better understand the historical trajectory of disciplinary education development and make scientific predictions. Every historical method helps us grasp history from a quantitative perspective within its own scope, while sociological methods help us grasp history from a social perspective (Ball & McDiarmid, 1989). Each method has its merits and limitations. The



more methods there are, the richer and more colorful our understanding of history; conversely, the lack of methods reflects our lack of understanding of history. Fourthly, neglecting the study of the history of disciplinary educational thought. From the existing research results, it can be seen that the history of mathematics education and the history of Chinese education started relatively early and developed relatively maturely. However, the research perspectives and depth of both still need to be adjusted and strengthened. There is a tendency to overlook the history of characters' thoughts and different periods of ideological trends or schools, and the research depth often remains superficial, like keeping a chronological record. Taking Ma Zhonglin, Wang Hongjun, and others' "History of Mathematics Education" (Guangxi Education Press, 2001 edition) as an example. The book is divided into two parts: the history of Chinese mathematics education and the history of foreign mathematics education, with a total of 19 chapters. In these 19 chapters, most of them describe the mathematical education of various dynasties in China and different periods in foreign countries, without a separate chapter or section to elaborate on the mathematical education ideas of the characters. Many of these mathematical education ideas have been diluted, which is a pity. As is well known, mathematics is an ancient discipline, and the development of mathematics education history cannot be separated from the promotion of the ideas of mathematicians in different periods. Many mathematicians gathered together at the same or different times to form different mathematical education trends or schools. Therefore, the mathematical ideas of famous scholars cannot be underestimated in the history of mathematics education. This has been improved in the book "History of Mathematics Education - Chinese Mathematics Education from a Cultural Perspective" co-authored by Daiqin and Tetsuo Matsumoto (Beijing Normal University Press, 2011 edition). Fifth, emphasis is placed on the study of academic systems and curricula, while neglecting the study of individuals. The history of physics education in China started relatively late. In the early 1990s, Luo Bingxian and He Ruxin edited and published the first history of physics education in China, "A Brief History of Chinese Physics Education". The book was reprinted by Hunan Education Press in 2001 with some adjustments to its content. The title was changed to "History of Physics Education" and it was included in the "Department of Chinese Physics History". The entire book consists of only five chapters, including Ancient China, Late Qing Dynasty, Republic of China, New China (Part 1), and New China (Part 2). In these only five chapters, most of the editors have focused on historical research on

educational systems, curriculum design, teaching materials and methods, with little research on physics teaching and learning for teachers and students. However, natural sciences such as physics are far ahead of China in modern Western countries, and most of the current physics education in China also draws on advanced achievements from abroad. However, it is difficult to imagine a history of physics education that does not involve foreign physics education ideas (Cubberley, 1922). From the perspective of historical development, subject education in China emerged after the shift from "textbook and teaching method research" to "subject teaching theory". Therefore, it is understandable to focus on the study of textbooks, teaching methods, and educational systems. But as a discipline closely related to students and teachers, the study of the history of subject education cannot ignore the historical research of students and teachers. In short, development is a process that always moves from immaturity to maturity, from imperfection to perfection. Looking at the overall development of disciplinary education history in China, it is still in its infancy, and a series of problems presented at this time are either caused by historical reasons, cognitive reasons, or other factors. We should face history squarely and improve our cognitive abilities. This requires scholars to constantly strive and draw on relevant knowledge from disciplines such as educational history, pedagogy, history, and subject education to jointly construct a beautiful picture of the history of subject education.

### 3. PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE TRENDS

In China, overall, the research on the history of subject education is still in its infancy and requires us to constantly strive and innovate. It is of great significance to vigorously carry out research on the history of subject education in China. Firstly, explore new areas of research in the history of education. Traditional researchers in the field of educational history have divided their research objects into two categories: the history of educational thought and the history of educational systems. In recent years, some scholars have proposed a tripartite approach to the research objects of educational history, namely the history of educational activities, the history of educational thought, and the history of educational systems. The history of educational activities "is not only the origin of the history of educational thought and the history of educational system, but also the premise and foundation of the existence of the history of educational thought and the history of educational system, as well as the intermediary and bridge

connecting the history of educational thought and the history of system... The three complement each other, stand in a tripartite relationship, and are indispensable." Whether it is a binary or ternary theory, it still belongs to the category of traditional pan educational history research, and does not link the real needs of teachers and students in school education together. However, the history of subject education is different. It concretizes the traditional research object of pan educational history, extends the research perspective to various subjects offered in school education, and focuses on the history of education in a certain subject. Therefore, the history of disciplinary education has transcended traditional pan educational history and opened up new fields of research in educational history. Secondly, establish the theoretical foundation of disciplinary education. Subject education has entered a new century and ushered in new developments. Various works on subject education have been published one after another. However, the related history of subject education lags far behind the development of subject education. This is inconsistent with the original intention of constructing disciplinary education and goes against the historical theory of disciplinary education. The history of subject education should naturally be a part of subject education, and an important part. The history of subject education should include both Chinese and foreign perspectives. Only by studying the history of subject education seriously can future teachers have a deep understanding of the work they will engage in and form the necessary qualities of subject education." The author believes that before constructing a subject education, the first step is to clarify the history of the emergence and development of the subject education, understand its origins and development, and only in this way can the theoretical foundation of subject education be continuously consolidated. It can be seen that another important significance of the history of subject education lies in building the theoretical foundation of subject education and enhancing the theoretical level of subject education. Thirdly, enrich the knowledge curriculum of teacher education. For a long time, the history of subject education has been an important aspect of teachers' lack of professional knowledge. The courses of teacher education and in-service teacher training are often organized around three types of courses: professional knowledge, education, and psychology. Due to the slow development of disciplinary education history and the inability of textbook compilation to keep up with school needs, there are very few courses on disciplinary education history. Only courses such as curriculum and pedagogy, education, psychology, and educational history can be used to make up for this fragmented curriculum learning, which lacks integrity

and systematicity and is not conducive to teachers' overall grasp of the historical development of disciplinary education. In fact, the idea of establishing a discipline education history has been proposed by scholars for a long time, but it has not received enough attention, or has been replaced by other courses, or has been downplayed. In the late 1990s, some scholars proposed the idea of offering a course on "History of Mathematics Education" in the mathematics department of normal universities. The reasons were: ①Understanding history can predict the future, and reviewing the historical development of mathematics education helps us face the future; ②Understanding the history and current situation of mathematics education in various countries around the world, and drawing on the strengths of others, will help our mathematics education face the world; ③'Taking history as a mirror can reveal its rise and fall'. Regardless of China or foreign countries, mathematics education has been prosperous and declining at times in history. Analyzing the reasons for its rise and fall can be used as a reference, which can help us take measures to further develop mathematics education and achieve modernization of mathematics education as soon as possible (Sun, 1989). Fourthly, clarify the historical context of the development of subject education. This is an important responsibility of the history of subject education, and it also has significant implications for the development of subject education. The history of subject education is the study of the historical process of the emergence and development of subject education, mainly to sort out the development of subject education, summarize and generalize important subject education ideas in history, conduct specialized research on the subject education ideas of famous figures, summarize historical experience, and provide inspiration and reference for the development of subject education. Therefore, clarifying the historical context of the development of subject education is not only an important responsibility of the history of subject education, but also of great significance for the development of subject education. In addition, from the perspective of the development of various disciplinary histories, the history of disciplinary education also plays an indispensable role and can be an important part of it, just like the inclusion of "History of Physics Education" in the "Department of Chinese Physics History". The history of subject education can also fill in some of the content of subject history. Fifth, align with the training mechanism for professional graduate students. In recent years, China's graduate education mechanism has been in a transitional stage. Since the reform of the graduate enrollment system last year, the graduate students admitted by

universities will be divided into two categories: academic and professional. There are two main reasons for expanding the cultivation of professional graduate students: one is the surplus of academic graduate students, and the other is the shortage of professional graduate students. Due to the diversion of training objectives, the previous "one size fits all" training mechanism is no longer suitable for the current needs of professional graduate education. Reform is imperative, and curriculum design and restructuring will be an important aspect of the reform. There are two main types of course requirements for professional graduate students: professional knowledge and non professional knowledge. Since it is a professional graduate student, their professionalism must be strong, and traditional professional knowledge courses have already been learned in the undergraduate stage, but they have been studied more deeply in the graduate stage. The history of subject education is an exposition of the entire historical development process of subject education, which belongs to the in-depth study of professional knowledge and is in line with the training mechanism of professional graduate students. The transformation of the graduate training mechanism is one of the important reform contents in the field of contemporary higher education in China. The history of subject education should seize this opportunity of the times, set sail, and move forward courageously.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research scope of traditional educational history focuses on typical figures at the elite level and their educational activities. Teachers and students in school education are often the focus of attention, while the disciplines and curriculum that connect the two are often overlooked. Discipline and curriculum are the intermediaries that link teachers and students, and the foundation for promoting their common growth. Therefore, the history of subject education should be given sufficient attention. The history of subject education is different from the history of curriculum. In the context of China, curriculum is equivalent to textbooks, that is, teaching content. Therefore, the history of curriculum can be equated with the history of textbooks. Subject education is an interactive communication activity carried out between teachers and students around a subject; The history of subject education is the history of interactive communication activities between teachers and students around a subject. It is worth mentioning that in addition to the educational history of the

main disciplines covered in school education, there is also a new discipline that cannot be ignored, which is derived from local curriculum and school-based curriculum. These new disciplines can reflect the regional and cultural characteristics of disciplinary education history. China is vast in territory and rich in resources, with diverse traditional cultures. Each region has its own unique cultural heritage and humanistic atmosphere. Conducting research on the history of education in this field undoubtedly plays an important role in protecting cultural diversity in our country, which cannot be underestimated. In short, the history of subject education is a new field of educational history research and the theoretical foundation of subject educology. Subject educology is the core content of the teacher education and training system, and an important manifestation of the professionalism of teachers. The history of subject education helps to consolidate the knowledge framework and theoretical depth of subject educology. We should not ignore the lack of professional knowledge in our own discipline, nor should we sacrifice our own interests and focus on one aspect over another due to the immaturity of the discipline. Instead, we should unite multiple forces to jointly carry out scientific research on the history of discipline education and maintain our own academic territory.

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