

Life and death in shanghai by nien cheng

Navigating Life and Death in Shanghai: A Deep Dive into Nien Cheng's Account

Problem: Understanding the complexities of life and death in a rapidly changing, culturally diverse city like Shanghai, especially during a period of significant historical and political upheaval, can be challenging. While individual accounts offer valuable insights, dissecting the nuances requires a nuanced approach. Nien Cheng's "Life and Death in Shanghai" offers a powerful personal narrative, but understanding its context within the larger societal tapestry demands deeper investigation. **** Nien Cheng's "Life and Death in Shanghai" serves as a compelling, firsthand account of the tumultuous period in Chinese history encompassing the Japanese occupation and the subsequent communist revolution. This book is more than a memoir; it's a profound exploration of human resilience, societal transformation, and the universal struggle for justice in the face of oppression. However, navigating the book's complexities requires contextual understanding, especially for readers unfamiliar with the specific historical circumstances.**

Solution: Contextualizing Life and Death in Shanghai **To truly appreciate Nien Cheng's experiences, we must look beyond the personal narrative and delve into the broader societal forces that shaped her life and the lives of millions in Shanghai.**

1. Historical Context: The Shanghai of Nien Cheng's Time **Shanghai, during the period chronicled in the book, experienced unprecedented change. The city was a vibrant hub of international trade, a bustling melting pot of cultures, yet simultaneously a microcosm of global conflict. The Japanese occupation brought a devastating new reality, disrupting daily life, economies, and social structures. The period leading up to and following the Communist takeover witnessed further societal upheaval, often characterized by fear, uncertainty, and intense political struggle. Understanding these historical events provides crucial context for interpreting the experiences detailed in the book.**

2. Social Structures and Power Dynamics: The book vividly portrays the power dynamics within Chinese society during this tumultuous period. Explored are class structures, the roles of women, and the influence of international forces. Examining these power imbalances is key to grasping the challenges faced by Nien Cheng and her family. Scholarly research (e.g., works by historian [insert a relevant historian's name and work]) provides insights into the social and political hierarchies that shaped the narrative.

3. Cultural Significance and Religious Beliefs: *Nien Cheng's account touches on the profound impact of Chinese culture and religious beliefs. Examining these traditions, alongside contemporary scholarship on Chinese religions and philosophy, helps to understand the forces influencing her decisions and the wider social landscape. For example, [insert a brief example linking cultural elements to societal values of the time]. This interplay between tradition and change highlights a key theme in the book.*

4. The Role of Fear and Resilience: **The book is saturated with the pervasive fear experienced by many in Shanghai during these turbulent times. Psychological research on trauma and resilience offers valuable insight into the emotional toll of oppression and the remarkable human capacity to persevere. Nien Cheng's narrative highlights the importance of individual agency, inner strength, and the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity.**

5. Nien Cheng's Personal Narrative and its impact: **Nien Cheng's courage and unwavering determination are central to the narrative. Her account serves as a powerful statement against injustice. Exploring her actions and motivations reveals her personal strength and resilience. Contemporary accounts of similar struggles in different contexts, such as [mention a specific example from a different geopolitical situation], can enrich our understanding.**

Expert Insights: *[Include quotes from historians, political scientists, and authors specializing in modern Chinese history, to support the above points. Each quote should be attributed properly.]*

Conclusion: Nien Cheng's "Life and Death in Shanghai" is more than just a

personal story; it's a window into a crucial period of Chinese history. By understanding the historical context, social structures, cultural influences, and the human capacity for resilience, readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of life and death within a rapidly changing society. The book serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of remembering the past, understanding the struggles of marginalized groups, and advocating for human rights. 5 FAQs:

1. Q: How does Nien Cheng's account compare with other historical accounts of life in Shanghai during this period? **A: [Answer based on comparative analysis, highlighting similarities and differences.]** **2.** Q: What are the long-term implications of the events described in the book? A: **[Discuss the lasting impact on Chinese society, including political and social legacies.]** **3.** Q: How does the book shed light on the challenges faced by women in the context of historical upheaval? A: **[Elaborate on the experiences and struggles of women within the larger narrative.]** **4.** Q: What are the ethical considerations of using personal accounts to understand historical events? **A: [Address the nuances of subjectivity and bias in personal narratives, discussing how to evaluate them critically.]** **5.** Q: Where can I learn more about the specific historical events surrounding the book's narrative? A:** [Provide recommendations for relevant books, documentaries, and online resources.]

This expanded post provides a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of Nien Cheng's work. Remember to replace the bracketed placeholders with specific information and expert opinions to create a truly insightful and engaging piece. This detailed structure ensures that the post effectively addresses reader needs and pain points, providing valuable context, expert insights, and actionable takeaways.

Life and Death in Shanghai: A Courageous Account of Resilience

Nien Cheng's memoir, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, is more than just a historical account; it's a searing testament to the human spirit's capacity for endurance in the face of unimaginable adversity. Published in 1986, the book offers a vivid, deeply personal, and unflinching look at the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution on an educated, cosmopolitan woman and her family in China. It's a narrative that has stayed with readers for decades, resonating with themes of political upheaval, personal sacrifice, and the unyielding will to survive.

For those unfamiliar with the period, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a sociopolitical movement launched by Mao Zedong, aimed at purging the Communist Party and Chinese society of capitalist and traditional elements, and reasserting Mao's authority. It plunged China into chaos, with millions persecuted, tortured, and killed. Nien Cheng, a woman of considerable intellect and privilege, found herself at the epicenter of this storm, and her story is a vital window into this tumultuous era.

The Unraveling of a Life: Pre-Revolution Shanghai

Before the storm, Nien Cheng lived a life that was a stark contrast to the grim reality that was to come. Married to a prominent government official and educated in England, she was part of Shanghai's elite intellectual and diplomatic circles. She recounts her early life with a poignant clarity, painting a picture of a vibrant, sophisticated city where Western and Chinese cultures intertwined. This idyllic past serves as a stark backdrop, highlighting the profound loss and drastic change that the Cultural Revolution would inflict.

Cheng's narrative skillfully builds this world, introducing us to her husband, her children, and the comfortable, cultured life they shared. This establishes the stakes of her eventual downfall. The description of her husband's work, her own background, and the social fabric of Shanghai before 1966 provides crucial context for understanding the sheer terror of what followed. It's in these early chapters that the reader begins to grasp the magnitude of what Nien Cheng, and countless others, would lose.

The Onset of the Cultural Revolution: From Privilege to Peril

The suddenness with which life changed for Nien Cheng is one of the most harrowing aspects of her memoir. As the Cultural Revolution gained momentum, the Red Guards – largely young, fanatical students – rose to power, fueled by Mao's ideology. Accusations of bourgeois tendencies, foreign connections, and anti-revolutionary sentiments became commonplace, and no one was truly safe. Nien Cheng, with her Western education and former connections to the British consulate, was a prime target.

Her story vividly details the terrifying atmosphere of suspicion and denunciation. Neighbors turned on neighbors, friends betrayed friends, and the rule of law dissolved into the mob mentality of the Red Guards. The constant fear of being singled out, of being accused of fabricated crimes, permeated daily existence. Cheng's account of her initial interrogations and the confiscation of her property paints a chilling picture of how quickly her world was dismantled.

Imprisonment and Interrogation: The Crucible of Resilience

The most gripping and difficult sections of *Life and Death in Shanghai* detail Nien Cheng's six and a half years of imprisonment. From the notorious Shanghai Number One Detention Center, she was subjected to relentless interrogations, psychological torture, and physical abuse. The interrogators, driven by Maoist dogma and a desire to extract confessions, employed a range of brutal tactics to break her spirit.

Cheng's resilience in the face of such immense pressure is awe-inspiring. She refused to confess to crimes she did not commit, even when faced with the constant threat of death or further torture. Her internal monologue, her reliance on logic and reason, and her determination to hold onto her dignity are what allow her to survive. She meticulously recounts the details of her cell, the meager food, the harsh living conditions, and the psychological games played by her captors. This is where the raw, unvarnished truth of survival in a totalitarian regime is laid bare.

Keywords like 'political persecution,' 're-education camps,' 'ideological struggle,' and 'confessions' are central to understanding this phase of her ordeal. The physical and mental toll of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, and constant pressure are palpable in her writing. Yet, through it all, Nien Cheng's intellectual fortitude shines through. She observes, she analyzes, and she strategizes how to survive each day, and each interrogation.

The Loss of a Child: A Pain Beyond Words

Perhaps the most devastating blow in Nien Cheng's life, and a central theme of the memoir, is the loss of her beloved daughter, Zian. While Nien Cheng was imprisoned, Zian, a young and idealistic student, was also subjected to persecution and harassment. The circumstances surrounding Zian's death are shrouded in the same obfuscation and denial that characterized the era, but Cheng's grief is a raw, open wound throughout the book.

The memoir powerfully conveys the agony of a mother losing her child under such horrific circumstances, and the added pain of not being able to fully mourn or understand the truth of her daughter's fate. This personal tragedy, intertwined with the political turmoil, elevates *Life and Death in Shanghai* from a historical narrative to a deeply emotional and profoundly human story. The impact of this loss underscores the immense personal cost of the Cultural Revolution, extending far beyond political prisoners.

Navigating the Post-Imprisonment Years: A Changed World

Upon her release, Nien Cheng found a China that was still reeling from the Revolution, though the worst had passed. The country was economically stagnant and politically scarred. She had lost her husband, her daughter, her home, and her former life. Rebuilding was not simply about finding a new job; it was about rediscovering a sense of self in a world that had fundamentally changed.

The challenges of re-entry were immense. She faced lingering suspicion and the difficulties of navigating a society that had been re-engineered by years of ideological extremism. Her journey back to a semblance of normalcy is a testament to her enduring strength. The memoir also touches upon her decision to eventually leave China, a choice that highlights the persistent impact of the Cultural Revolution on those who lived through it.

Themes and Enduring Relevance of Life and Death in Shanghai

Life and Death in Shanghai is rich with profound themes that resonate with readers across generations and cultures. At its core, it is a story of **resilience and courage** in the face of brutal oppression. Nien Cheng's unwavering commitment to her principles and her refusal to be dehumanized are central to her survival.

The memoir also serves as a powerful exploration of **political extremism and its devastating human cost**. It exposes the destructive nature of ideological fanaticism, the manipulation of masses, and the erosion of individual rights. The book is a stark reminder of the dangers of unchecked power and the importance of preserving truth and dignity.

Furthermore, the narrative delves into themes of **identity and memory**. Nien Cheng's struggle to reconcile her past life with her present reality, and to hold onto her sense of self amidst ideological onslaught, is a compelling aspect of her story. Her meticulous recall and detailed recounting of events are her way of preserving memory and asserting her truth.

The enduring relevance of *Life and Death in Shanghai* lies in its ability to offer a vital historical perspective, to humanize the abstract concept of political persecution, and to inspire readers with an example of extraordinary fortitude. It's a book that demands to be read, understood, and remembered, reminding us of the fragility of freedom and the immense strength of the human spirit. It continues to be studied in universities and discussed by individuals seeking to understand one of the most tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history.

For those interested in the broader context of Chinese history, books like Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* offer parallel narratives of family experience during the 20th century in China. However, Nien Cheng's memoir stands out for its intensely personal and focused account of surviving the specific horrors of the Cultural Revolution from within the confines of the prison system.

Why You Should Read Life and Death in Shanghai

Reading *Life and Death in Shanghai* is not an easy experience. It is filled with accounts of cruelty, loss, and profound suffering. However, it is also an incredibly rewarding one. Nien Cheng's prose is clear, articulate, and deeply affecting. She doesn't shy away from the grim realities, but she also offers glimmers of hope and moments of profound reflection.

This memoir is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the human impact of political ideologies gone awry. It's a story that will challenge your perceptions, evoke your empathy, and leave you with a profound appreciation for the courage and resilience that can be found even in the darkest of times. It is a reminder that behind every historical event are individual lives, each with their own story of survival, loss, and unwavering spirit. Nien Cheng's life and death in Shanghai is a story that deserves to be told, and more importantly, to be heard.

Life and Death in Shanghai: A Reflective Journey

Through Urban Existence

Nien Cheng's profound exploration of life and death in Shanghai offers a compelling lens through which to examine the intricate dance between human resilience and the inevitability of mortality in one of the world's most dynamic cities. Shanghai, a metropolis where glass towers pierce the clouds and ancient alleyways whisper stories of the past, stands as both a beacon of opportunity and a silent witness to the fragile line between survival and loss. Through personal narrative and cultural insight, Cheng captures the emotional and existential dimensions that shape how individuals navigate existence amid rapid urban transformation.

The Urban Fabric: Balancing Life and Mortality

Shanghai is a city defined by contrasts—between tradition and innovation, wealth and hardship, visibility and invisibility. This duality profoundly influences how life and death are experienced by its residents. On one hand, the city pulses with energy: bustling streets, advanced healthcare, and a thriving economy create an environment where life feels vibrant and full of potential. Yet beneath this surface lies a deeper awareness of impermanence. The high cost of living, intense work culture, and the relentless pace of change often place invisible pressures on mental and physical well-being. Cheng's work reveals how these pressures shape daily choices, from career decisions to family planning, subtly framing life as a balancing act between ambition and vulnerability.

Insights into Human Resilience and Grief

One of the most compelling aspects of Cheng's narrative is her focus on resilience—the way individuals and communities endure and adapt in the face of loss. Shanghai's history, marked by upheaval and rebirth, infuses everyday life with a quiet strength. Whether coping with personal bereavement or witnessing the quiet struggles of neighbors, the city's residents cultivate a unique emotional fortitude. Cheng highlights how shared cultural practices—funerals steeped in ritual, communal mourning, and the preservation of memory—serve not only as expressions of grief but also as vital mechanisms for healing. These traditions remind us that death, while final, remains intertwined with life through connection and continuity. For application, Cheng's observations offer valuable perspectives for urban planners, healthcare providers, and social workers seeking to support mental health and community well-being. Understanding the emotional landscape of a city like Shanghai allows for more compassionate, culturally attuned interventions that address not just physical needs but the deeper human yearning for meaning and belonging.

Future Outlook: Sustaining Life in a Changing Shanghai

Looking ahead, the interplay between life and death in Shanghai will continue to evolve amid demographic shifts, technological advancement, and environmental challenges. An aging population, rising mental health concerns, and the impacts of climate change on urban infrastructure demand proactive, holistic approaches. Cheng's reflections urge a future where urban development prioritizes not only economic growth but also the dignity and well-being of all residents. By fostering inclusive public spaces, strengthening support networks, and integrating cultural memory into city planning, Shanghai can build a more resilient and humane environment—one where life is nurtured even as it acknowledges the solemnity of mortality. Ultimately, Nien Cheng's portrayal of life and death in Shanghai invites us to see the city not merely as a backdrop of steel and neon, but as a living, breathing entity shaped by human experience. In recognizing both its brilliance and its burdens, we gain a deeper appreciation for the fragile, fleeting, and extraordinary nature of living in one of the world's most compelling metropolises.

Life and Death in Shanghai: A Testament to Resilience and the Human Spirit

Nien Cheng's seminal memoir, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, is more than just a historical account; it is a profound exploration of human resilience, the devastating impact of political upheaval, and the enduring strength of the individual spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity. Published in 1986, the book offers a searing, personal narrative of Cheng's experiences during the tumultuous years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This detailed, analytical piece delves into the memoir's key themes, its historical significance, and its lasting impact, examining why *Life and Death in Shanghai* remains a crucial text for understanding both personal suffering and the broader political landscape of modern China.

The Personal Crucible: A Life Turned Upside Down

Nien Cheng, formerly the daughter-in-law of a prominent Nationalist diplomat and a Shanghai socialite, found her privileged life shattered by the ideological fervor of the Cultural Revolution. As a woman of education and Western connections, she became an immediate target for the Red Guards, the zealous young revolutionaries who enforced Mao Zedong's policies with brutal intensity. The memoir meticulously chronicles the systematic dismantling of her former life: the confiscation of her property, the ostracization by former friends and colleagues, and the pervasive atmosphere of fear and suspicion that permeated Shanghai.

Cheng's narrative is characterized by its remarkable clarity and unflinching honesty. She does not shy away from the excruciating details of her personal suffering, recounting the relentless interrogations, the physical and psychological torture, and the prolonged imprisonment. The memoir's strength lies in its granular depiction of these events, allowing readers to viscerally understand the dehumanizing tactics employed by the regime. The sheer isolation, the constant threat of violence, and the erosion of trust are palpable throughout the text, painting a grim picture of daily existence under totalitarian rule.

Imprisonment and Interrogation: The Test of the Human Psyche

The heart of *Life and Death in Shanghai* lies in Cheng's six years of imprisonment in Shanghai's notorious Number One Detention Center. Here, stripped of her identity and subjected to constant psychological manipulation, she confronted the ultimate test of her spirit. The interrogations were designed not merely to extract confessions, but to break her will, to force her to renounce her past, her beliefs, and her very self. Cheng's refusal to capitulate, her quiet defiance, and her unwavering commitment to truth become a central motif of the memoir.

Cheng's description of the interrogation process is particularly insightful. She details the calculated strategies of her interrogators – the sleep deprivation, the starvation, the relentless questioning, the attempts to pit prisoners against each other, and the subtle threats against her family. Her ability to maintain her intellectual integrity and her sense of self under such immense pressure is nothing short of astonishing. This section of the book is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human psyche, demonstrating how a person can hold onto their core identity even when all external markers of that identity have been systematically removed. The memoir explores the psychological toll of such prolonged trauma, but also the unexpected sources of strength that can be found within.

The Cultural Revolution in Context: A Microcosm of National Trauma

While intensely personal, *Life and Death in Shanghai* also serves as a vital historical document, offering a ground-level perspective on the devastating impact of the Cultural Revolution on ordinary citizens and the fabric

of Chinese society. Cheng's observations of the rampant paranoia, the destruction of cultural heritage, and the elevation of ignorance over intellect provide invaluable insights into the chaos and ideological extremism that defined this period. The book illuminates how a society could descend into such madness, driven by Mao's cult of personality and the fear of dissent.

The memoir highlights the pervasive climate of denunciation and betrayal that characterized the Cultural Revolution. Neighbors turned on neighbors, children denounced their parents, and intellectualism was equated with treason. Cheng's experience of being targeted due to her background and perceived Western sympathies offers a lens through which to understand the broader purges and victimizations that occurred across China. By focusing on the micro-level of individual experience, Cheng masterfully illustrates the macro-level societal trauma inflicted by the revolution. The book is an essential companion to more academic histories of the era, providing a human face to the statistics and political pronouncements.

Navigating a World of Lies: The Power of Truth and Memory

A recurring theme in *Life and Death in Shanghai* is the struggle to preserve truth and memory in a world consumed by propaganda and distorted narratives. Cheng is forced to navigate a treacherous landscape where every statement could be twisted, every past association used against her. Her refusal to confess to fabricated crimes or to denounce innocent individuals is a quiet act of rebellion. She clings to the truth of her own life and experiences as a bulwark against the ideological onslaught.

The act of writing the memoir itself becomes a continuation of this struggle. By meticulously recounting her experiences, Cheng ensures that the truth is preserved and that the suffering of countless others is not forgotten. Her clear, factual prose stands in stark contrast to the revolutionary rhetoric that permeated Shanghai during those years. The memoir is a testament to the enduring power of personal testimony in challenging official histories and in bearing witness to the human cost of political extremism. The search for verifiable facts becomes a crucial element of her survival, both internally and externally.

The Shanghai Setting: A City Transformed and Scarred

Shanghai, a vibrant cosmopolitan hub before 1949, is depicted in the memoir as a city transformed into a battleground of ideology. Cheng's early life in this dynamic metropolis, with its blend of East and West, provides a stark contrast to the grim reality of the Cultural Revolution. The once grand buildings and bustling streets become stages for political rallies, public denunciations, and the pervasive fear of surveillance. The city itself bears the scars of the revolution, both physically and psychologically.

Cheng's detailed descriptions of Shanghai's streets, its neighborhoods, and the spaces where her life unfolded add a rich layer of historical and geographical context to the narrative. The reader gains a sense of how the revolution infiltrated every aspect of urban life, altering the rhythm and character of the city. The memoir captures the disjunction between the city's former glory and its revolutionary present, underscoring the profound societal rupture. Understanding Shanghai's transformation is key to grasping the broader impact of the Cultural Revolution on China's major urban centers.

Lessons for Today: The Enduring Relevance of *Life and Death in Shanghai*

Over four decades since its publication, *Life and Death in Shanghai* remains remarkably relevant. It serves as a potent reminder of the dangers of unchecked political power, the fragility of individual freedoms, and the importance of critical thinking in the face of ideological indoctrination. Cheng's story underscores the enduring human capacity for resilience, courage, and the unwavering pursuit of truth, even in the darkest of circumstances.

For students of history, political science, and human rights, the memoir offers invaluable insights into the

mechanisms of totalitarian control and the devastating consequences of political purges. For general readers, it is a deeply moving and inspiring account of survival that speaks to universal themes of loss, endurance, and the indomitable human spirit. The book's SEO-friendly nature lies in its rich historical detail, its exploration of universal themes like survival and resilience, and its powerful human narrative, making it a consistently sought-after title for those interested in modern Chinese history and the broader human experience. Nien Cheng's legacy, cemented by this powerful work, is one of profound courage and an enduring testament to the light that can persist even in the deepest darkness.

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Questions & Answers About life and death in shanghai

by nien cheng

No	Question	Answer
1	What is the central theme that Nien Cheng explores regarding life and death in her memoir 'Life and Death in Shanghai'?	The central theme is the resilience of the human spirit and the will to survive and maintain dignity in the face of extreme political persecution and personal loss during China's Cultural Revolution. Cheng grapples with the constant threat of death and the psychological toll it takes, while simultaneously focusing on the will to live and uphold her values.
2	How does the memoir depict the psychological impact of prolonged imprisonment and interrogation on Nien Cheng's understanding of life and death?	The memoir vividly portrays how prolonged isolation, interrogation, and the constant fear of execution erode one's sense of self and reality. Cheng's focus shifts from external comforts to internal strength, her memories, and her intellectual pursuits as vital anchors to her life and sanity, demonstrating a profound re-evaluation of what constitutes life when death is an ever-present possibility.
3	What role does the loss of loved ones play in shaping Nien Cheng's perspective on life and death?	The agonizing loss of her son, who dies in prison under suspicious circumstances, profoundly deepens Cheng's understanding of death's finality and its devastating impact. This tragedy fuels her determination to survive and seek justice, transforming her grief into a powerful impetus to bear witness to the horrors she experienced and to honor the memory of those lost.
4	In what ways does Nien Cheng's defiance and refusal to break under duress reflect a concept of 'living' even when facing death?	Cheng's refusal to confess to fabricated charges or betray her principles is a powerful act of defiance. By maintaining her intellectual integrity and inner conviction, she asserts her humanity and agency, essentially 'living' with dignity and purpose even when her physical life is systematically threatened and controlled. This internal fortitude becomes her primary means of survival.
5	How does 'Life and Death in Shanghai' illustrate the arbitrary nature of life and death during the Cultural Revolution?	The memoir highlights the brutal capriciousness of the era, where lives could be extinguished based on political accusations, denunciations, or mere suspicion. Cheng's own precarious situation, alongside the fates of fellow prisoners and acquaintances, underscores how quickly life could be taken, often without due process or reason, making survival itself a constant struggle against an unpredictable and deadly system.
6	Beyond personal survival, what broader message about the value of life is conveyed through Nien Cheng's experiences?	Cheng's memoir conveys a profound message about the intrinsic value of human life, dignity, and intellectual freedom. By meticulously documenting her ordeal and her determination to maintain her identity and principles, she implicitly argues that true living transcends mere physical existence and lies in the preservation of one's conscience and the pursuit of truth, even in the darkest of times.

life and death in shanghai nien cheng analysis, mortality and mortality in shanghai by nien cheng, life, death, and urban legends in shanghai, existential themes in nien cheng's life and death narratives, shanghai's life and death stories explored by nien cheng, cultural reflections on life and death in shanghai, truths and truths: life and death in nien cheng's work, shanghai's shadow of life and death by nien cheng, philosophical views on life and death in nien cheng's writing, life, death, and memory in shanghai's urban landscape

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