

## On Han Fei's Pragmatism

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### Abstract

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Han Fei, one of the princes of the Han State, China, was born around 281 B.C. and died in 233 B.C.. Han Fei's pragmatism emphasized facing situations, testing hypotheses by evidence, judging values according to their effects, and looking at gain and harm amorally. Han Fei's pragmatism was based on the self-interested human nature. He thought that it was proper to human nature to pursue gain and avoid harm and that the relations among people were established on the basis of self-interest, regardless between kings and ministers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, and employers and employees. Han Fei saw pragmatism as standard of values: whatever produced satisfactory effects was valuable, and whatever did not was useless. Han Fei also used pragmatism as foundation of rewards and punishments. On the one hand, he applied pragmatism to standard of rewards and punishments: rewarding those who corresponded to state interests and punishing those who did not. On the other, he used pragmatism as a means to rewards and punishments: bestowing wealth and nobility on people of merits as rewards and imposing harm on the criminals as punishments. The ultimate purpose of Han Fei's pragmatism was to make his state wealthy and powerful, and its way to success was with emphasis on warfare and agriculture under sovereignty of the king and through efficiency of the ministers in fulfilling certain tasks--monitoring people to obey the law with special emphasis on agriculture and warfare.

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**Keywords:** pragmatism, pursue gain and avoid harm, with emphasis on agriculture, with emphasis on warfare, make the state wealthy and powerful

### 1. Introduction

Due to his emphasis on power and statecraft, Han Fei's political thought has often been identified with Machiavellian-ism. However, besides this element of Machiavellian-ism, Han Fei's thought was also pragmatic.

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The purposes of this article are firstly, to analyze Han Fei's pragmatism systematically and clearly in the hope that it may become a useful reference for researchers on Chinese political thought, and secondly, to stimulate scholars for further research on this topic which I believe, will be beneficial to the world both in academic interest and in real politics.

Before discussing this topic formally, let me explain the meaning of "pragmatism". It implies, to Han Fei, facing the situation, testing hypotheses by evidence, judging values according to their effects, and looking at gain and harm amorally. The following examples from his writings shall be sufficient to illustrate what he meant.

### **1-1. Facing the Situation**

Han Fei thought that situations differed with age, and as situations changed, so were the ways of dealing with them. He said:

The past and the present have different customs, the new and the old adopt different measures. To try to govern the people of a critical age with generous and lenient ways is the same as to drive a wild horse without using a pair of reins or a whip. This is the misfortune that ignorance invites ("The Five Vermin").

According to Han-Fei, his age was an age of struggle for power and gain. Since strength was the basic requirement for existence and development, the state should face the situation in a way which would allow it to adopt a suitable solution.

1-2. Testing hypothesis by evidence: Han Fei thought that whether an hypothesis was correct must be tested by evidence. He said:

To judge right and wrong by the consistence of name and fact, to scrutinize speeches by evidence ("Ministers Apt to Betray, Molest, or Murder Ruler").

When the hypothesis was consistent with evidence, it was right, otherwise it was wrong.

1-3. Judging values according to their effects: Han Fei thought that all speeches and actions should be judged according to their effects. He said:

Speeches and actions should aim at producing specific effects...When listening to speeches and observing actions, if someone does not aim at specific effects, however profound the speeches may be and however thorough the action may be, he will be shooting wildly ("Inquiring into the Origin of Controversy").

Speeches and actions should be judged according to their effects. If they produced a satisfactory effect, they would be valuable, otherwise they would be valueless.

#### **1-4. Looking at Gain and Harm Amorally**

Han Fei thought that it was proper to human nature to pursue gain and to avoid harm. He said:

Eels are like snakes, silkworms like caterpillars. Men are frightened at the sight of snakes and shocked at the sight of caterpillars. However, fisherman would hold eels in hand and women would pick up silkworms. Thus, where there is gain, there everyone turns as brave as sir Meng Ben and sir Zhuan Zhu ("Collected Persuasions, The lower Series").

Han Fei thought that people always calculated between gain and harm, and that relationships among people were established on the basis of self-interests, whether they were between kings and ministers, parents and children, husbands and wives, employers and employees.

There were four dominant schools in the Chinese pre-Ch'in period: Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, and Mohism, each with a distinctive approach. The Confucianists emphasized morality, benevolence and righteousness and Mencius was especially opposed to discussion about gain. The Taoists, whose basic attitude was to transcend and to escape from the world, attempted to follow what they considered to be nature. Hence, although they sometimes also discussed politics, they still held a view of "doing nothing" with no concept of pragmatism. Mo Zi stressed gain, emphasized effects, and judged right and wrong according to their effects and thus he also had a clear concept of pragmatism.

## 2. The Career and Writings of Han Fei

Han Fei ( 281 B.C.-233B.C. ) was one of the princes of the Han State, China, died in the state of Ch'in in the fourteenth year of Ch'in Shih Huang (233B.C.). Han Fei's birth year was debatable, probably was around 281 B.C. According to Historical Records (Ssuma Ch'ien, 1982:146-155), Han Fei's career can be divided into two parts:

The first part was his research career before going to the Ch'in State. Being a stutter, he was unable to deliver fluent speeches, but was proficient in writing books. Together with Li Ssu, he studied under Hsun Ch'ing. Li Ssu considered himself not so good as Han Fei. Han Fei had frequently submitted his memorials to the king of the Han State, but the king did not make use of them.

The second part of his career was after being ambassador to the Ch'in State, and died in prison. The cause might be a political intrigue on the part of his former fellow classmate, Li Ssu, who was an official in the Ch'in State, and who may have been jealous of the growing favor accorded to Han Fei.

By Han Fei, we really mean the ideas in the collection of 55 essays, Han Fei Tzu , which has been ascribed to him. Most of essays were written by Han Fei himself, but some essays were added by his disciples. Except chapter 1, "The First Interview with the King of the State of Ch'in" which was controversial, the other 54 essays can be used as data for doing research on Han Fei's pragmatism (Wang, 1979:80).

Among various basic Chinese materials, Wang Hsian-shen's *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tz* is one of the best which covers 55 chapters of *Han Fei Tzu* (Wang, 1979). As to English basic source materials, Liao,W. K.'s *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tz* is the most famous one which also covers 55 chapters of *Han Fei Tzu* (Liao,1939/1959). Burton Watson's, *Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings* selected 12 out of 55 chapters of *Han Fei Tzu* (Watson, 1964). Those are useful materials for doing research on Han Fei.

### 3. Human Nature as Foundation of Pragmatism

There were different points of view concerning the goodness or evil of human nature. For example, Mencius said that human nature was good; Hsun Ch'ing thought that human nature was evil; and Kao Tzu considered that human nature was indifferent to good and evil. Each with a distinctive approach on human nature, but their concept of human nature was imprecise.

Han Fei's observation concerning human nature was above the consciousness of goodness and evil, but frankly acknowledged that human nature was self-interested. He thought that it was proper to human nature to seek for gain and to avoid harm and that relationships among people were established on the basis of self-interests.

#### 3-1. It was Proper to human Nature to Pursue Gain and Avoid harm

Concerning human nature, Han Fei said:

Everybody loves gain and dislikes harm...Everybody is equally fond of gain and afraid of punishments ("Criticisms of the Ancients, series two").

and:

It is the human nature to seek for ease and gain, to avoid danger and harm ("Ministers Apt to Betray, Molest, and Murder the Ruler").

and:

The plan of the people for themselves is only to seek for security and gain, to avoid danger and poverty ("The Five Vermin").

and:

Wherever lies gain, then people go; Wherever honor is offered, the officers die ("Outer Congeries of Sayings, the upper left series").

and:

If people do anything at all, it is done for gain if not for repute("Inner Congeries of Sayings, the upper series: Seven Tact ").

and:

It is the people's nature to abhor toil and enjoy ease ("Surmising the Mentality of the people: A Psychological Analysis of Politics").

As we can see from the above quotations, Han Fei revealed that since security, gain, repute, ease were good for people, they loved and sought for them. Since danger, harm, poverty, punishments were harmful for people, they abhorred and avoided them. In this point of view, Han Fei was very similar to J. Bentham who said:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognized this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law (Bentham, 1960:125).

To interpret human nature, J. Bentham used the concepts of pain and pleasure whilst Han Fei used the concepts of gain and harm. It is the undeniable fact that people are pleased when they gain, and feel painful when they are harmed. Gain may bring pleasure while harm may bring pain for the people, and thus people really love pleasure and dislike pain. Since gain may bring pleasure to people, who does not love and seek it? Since harm may incur pain to people, who does not abhor and avoid it? Hence gain and harm, pleasure and pain do govern us in everything we think and do (Sun, 1974:31). Therefore, Han Fei and J. Bentham's interpretation concerning human nature was very similar. Nevertheless, J. Bentham emphasized more on individual interests while Han Fei emphasized more on state interests and this was the difference between them.

### 3-2. Relationships among People Based on Self-Interests

Han Fei thought that relations among people are based on self interests regardless of between kings and ministers, between parents and children, between husbands and wives, and between employers and employees.

#### 3-2-1 Between Kings and Ministers

Han Fei thought that the relationships between kings and ministers were established on the basis of self-interests: The kings calculated the strength exerted by the ministers, and the ministers calculated the rewards bestowed by the kings, they were the outcome of mutual calculation. He said:

The kings keep the ministers in service with a calculating mind. So do the ministers with a calculating mind serve the kings. As both kings and ministers are equally calculating, each for himself, the ministers never care to harm their bodies and benefit the state, nor do the kings want to harm the state and benefit the ministers. By nature the ministers would regard the harm of themselves as un-gainful. By nature the kings would think the harm of the state as merciless. In short, Kings and ministers work together, each with a calculating mind ("On Pretensions and Heresies: A Memorial").

In Confucian theory, the kings should love the ministers while the ministers should obey the kings and morality was the first concern. But Han Fei was more concerned with the functional aspect of the ministers and their efficiency in fulfilling certain tasks and not their morality nor moral improvement, and thus the relationships between kings and ministers were established on self-interests.

#### 3-2-2 Between Parents and Children

Han Fei thought that although parents and children had the closest kinship, their relationships still governed by interest. He said:

Parents in relation to children, when males are born, congratulate each other, and, when females are born, lessen care of them. Equally coming out of the wombs of their mothers, why should boys receive congratulations while girls are ill-treated? Because parents consider their future conveniences and calculate their permanent gain ("Six Contrariety").

In ancient China, people considered men as more important than women partly because men were stronger and able to till the land. But women, after marriage, they could not serve their parents at home anymore, instead, they should serve their husbands and parents in-law, and therefore parents liked boys more than girls.

Parents considered their future conveniences and calculated their permanent gain, and what did children respond to their parents? Han Fei said:

If one receives no good care in his childhood from his parents, when he grows up, as a son he shows resentment at them ("Outer Congeries of Sayings, the upper left series").

As above we can see, Han Fei thought that the relationships between parents and children were established on the basis of self-interests. However, parents and children had the closest kinship, and parents usually victimized themselves for the children, and children also often respected their parents, and therefore, the relationships between parents and children were not necessarily like what Han Fei had said.

### 3-2-3 Between Husbands and Wives

Han Fei thought that husbands love wives because of wives' beauty and sex, he said:

Husbands at fifty have not yet lost interest in sex, and yet at their thirty, wives have already lost their beauty. If wives who have already faded in beauty wait upon husbands still occupied by thought of sex, then they will be neglected ("Precautions within the Palace").



And what did wives respond to their husbands? Han Fei thought that wives did not hope their husbands became rich enough to buy a concubine, only hoped husbands could obtain a limited amount of wealth to improve their living. He gave an example:

Among people in the state of Wei, there were a man and his wife who once during their prayers said as benediction: "Give us no misery but one hundred rolls of cloth." "Why is the benediction so simple?" Wondered the husband, "What? if it become more elaborate than this, then you might be thinking of buying a concubine thereby." replied the wife (Inner Congeries of Sayings, the lower series: Six Minutiae").

This quotation expressed the fair sex's feeling: She loved her husband, but could not prevent him from buying a concubine, and hence she hoped her husband could obtain some money just sufficient for living, and therefore, Han Fei thought that the relationships between husbands and wives were established on the basis of self-interests. However, the relationships between husbands and wives were not necessarily only established on beauty and sex. Congeniality and love were also the important factors for a married couple.

### 3-2-4 Between Employers and Employees:

Han Fei thought that the relationships between the employers and employees were established on the basis of self-interests. The employers offered rewards to exchange the employees' services, He said:

In the case of employees selling their services in sowing seeds and till farms, the employers would at the expense of his housekeeping and give them delicious food and by appropriating cash and cloth make payments for their services. Not that they loved the hired employees, but that, they say, by doing so they can make the employees till the land deeper and pick the weed more carefully. The hired employees, by exerting their physical strength, speedily pick the weed and toil the land, and by using their skill, rectify the boundaries between different tracks of ground and dikes separating different fields.

Not that they love their employers, but that, they say, by their so doing the soup will be delicious and both cash and cloth will be paid to them...Their mind were well disposed to act for each other because they cherish self-seeking motives respectively ("Outer Congeries of Sayings, the upper left series").

The employers and employees had no close kinship, the relationships between them, surely as Han Fei indicated.

Han Fei analyzed human nature thoroughly, pointed out the fact that it was the human nature to pursue gain and avoid harm, and the relationships among people were established on the basis of self-interests. So, he said: "Therefore in the conduct of human affairs, if one has a mind to calculate gain, it will be easy to remain harmonious, even with a native of Yue. If one has a mind to calculate harm, even fathers and sons will become separated and show resentment toward each other"("Outer Congeries of Sayings, the upper left series").

Confucian emphasized benevolence and justice, hoped the relationships among people could be established on morality and did not talk about gain. But Han Fei pointed out the fact that people deal with others by accounting gain and harm and looked at gain and harm amorally, and this was Han Fe's innovation.

#### **4. Pragmatism as the Standard of Values**

People had different views on the judgment of values. For example: Confucius used benevolence as the standard of values, and said that the determined scholars and the men of benevolence would not seek to live at the expense of injuring their benevolence and they would even sacrifice their lives to their benevolence complete. And Mencius used benevolence and righteousness as the standard of values, and did not talk about gain. However, Han Fei judged values according to their effects, and used pragmatism as the standard of values: Those which brought about a pragmatic-utility were valuable, and those which could not produce a pragmatic-utility were valueless.

#### 4-1. Those which could Bring About a Pragmatic-Utility were Valuable

Han Fei judged values according to their pragmatic utilities. He said:

Indeed, good drugs are bitter to the mouth, but intelligent people are willing to take them because they know the drugs after being taken will cure their disease. Loyal words are unpleasant to the ears, but the enlightened sovereign listens to them, because he knows they will bring about a pragmatic utility ("Outer Congeries of Sayings, the upper left series").

and:

Thus, law as the way to order may cause pain at first, but will give gain in the long run; Whereas benevolence as the way to order may give pleasure for the moment, but will become fruitless ("Six Contrariety").

As above, drugs and law, though were painful to people, they might bring about satisfactory effects, and hence they were valuable.

#### 4-2. Those which Could not Produce a Pragmatic-Utility were Valueless

Han Fei thought that speeches, scholastic and moral performances, action of swordsmen, commerce and artisan-ship were valueless, because they could not produce a pragmatic utility. He said:

Speeches makers propound false schemes and borrowing influences from abroad, furthering their private interests and forgetting the state interests ("The Five Vermin").

and:

The enlightened rulers pays close attention to state interests...He does not talk about benevolence and righteousness ("The Dominant Schools").

and:

Swordsmen gather bands of followers about them and perform deeds of honor, making a fine name for themselves and violating the prohibitions of the government bureaus ("The Five Vermin").

and:

Merchants and artisans spend their time making articles of no practical use and gathering stores of luxury goods, accumulating riches, waiting for the best time to sell, and exploiting the farmers ("The Five Vermin").

According to Han Fei, the speeches makers, the scholars, the swordsmen, the merchants and the artisans did not till the farm and produce products, nor did they attack the enemies, they only advocated private interests and neglected state interests, and therefore their speeches and actions were valueless.

However, this point of view is too narrow, as wealth and power of a state must depend on efforts made from various kinds of people. Han Fei only emphasized agriculture and warfare and neglected other activities, and this is short-sighted.

## **5. Pragmatic-utility As the Foundation of Rewards and Punishments**

Han Fei thought that it was the nature of men to pursue gain and avoid harm, and that the best way in ruling the world was to bestow rewards and impose punishments on people concerned. He said:

In ruling the world, one must act in accordance with human nature. In human nature there are the feelings of liking and disliking, and hence rewards and punishments are effective. When rewards and punishments are effective, interdicts and commands can be established, and the way of government is completed ("Eight Canons"). Hsun Ch'ing spoke of the balance between men's material wants and the supply of these necessities, and wanted to use "rite" to distribute the desires of people. But Han Fei further pointed out the fact that it was more effective to govern people according to their desires, and thus used rewards and punishments as a means of governing. He took pragmatism as the foundation of rewards and punishments. On the one hand, Han Fei used pragmatism as the standard of rewards and punishments: Rewarding those which corresponded to pragmatism and punishing those which did not correspond to pragmatism.

On the other hand, Han Fei used pragmatic-utility as a means of rewards and punishments: Bestowing wealth, nobility, rank, emolument as rewards on people of merits, and imposing heavy penalties such as death and hand-cutting as punishments on the criminals.

### 5-1. Pragmatism as the Standard of Rewards and Punishment

Han Fei regarded pragmatism as the standard of rewards and punishments. He said:

When a minister makes claims, the ruler gives him work according to what he has claimed, but holds him wholly responsible for accomplishment according to this work. When the accomplishment corresponds to this work, and this work corresponds to what the man has claimed he could do, he is rewarded. If the accomplishment does not correspond to the work, nor the work correspond to what the man has claimed for himself, he is punished ("The Two Handles").

and:

Men of merits are always rewarded...Men guilty of offences are always punished...They will strive to harvest merits and gains in their daily work ("Criticism of the Ancients", series 3).

As above, Han Fei thought that, those which were actually beneficial to pragmatism should be rewarded, and those which were actually harmful to pragmatism should be punished.

### 5-2. Pragmatic-Utility as a means of Rewards and Punishments

Han Fei suggested the ruler of bestowing rewards such as wealth, nobility, rank, and emolument on people of merits. he said:

Farming requires a lot of hard work but people will do it because they say, "This way we can become wealthy". War is a dangerous undertaking but people will take part in it because they say "through it we can become noble"("The Five Vermin").

and:

The ruler hands out good fields and large houses and establishes rank and emolument in order to encourage people to risk their lives in his service("The Dominant Schools").

Han Fei suggested the ruler of imposing heavy penalties such as death and hand-cutting as punishments on the criminals as well. He gave an example:

According to the law of Yin Dynasty, whoever threw ashes on the public road should have his hands cut off. Tzu Kong said, "The crime of ash-throwing is light but the punishment of hand-cutting is heavy." In reply Confucius said, "Not to throw ashes is easy but to have hands cut off is disliked. The ancients considered it easy to enforce the easy and prevent the disliked. Therefore they enacted the law ("Inner Congeries of sayings", upper series).

The punishments should be sure and heavy in order to frighten people out of committing crimes. Han Fei emphasized the use of people's self-seeking mind, suggested pragmatism as the foundation of rewards and punishments in a way which would allow it to govern a state efficiently, and this is a distinguished point of Han Fei's pragmatism.

## **6. The Target of Han Fei's Pragmatism and the Way to Achieve It**

Han Fei's pragmatism aimed at wealth and power of the state, and in order to achieve it, Han Fei thought that the king should hold the supreme power, controlled the ministers and emphasized warfare and agriculture, let the interests of people be consistent with state interests.

### **6-1. The Supreme Power of the King**

Han Fei thought that in Politics, the power should be held by the king. The king held the absolute power, used various kinds of skill to control the ministers who monitored people's obedience to the law. He said:

Supreme power is the means of controlling people ("Eight Cannons").

and:

Skill is the means whereby to create posts according to responsibilities, hold actual services accountable according to official titles, exercise the power over life and death, and examine the officials' abilities ("Deciding between Two Legalistic Doctrine").

and:

Skill is hidden in the bosom and useful in comparing diverse motivating factors of human conduct and manipulating the body of officials( "Criticism of the Ancients").

Therefore, according to Han Fei, skill was not only a method to put the right man for the job, but also a method to monitor the officials. The former was to increase the efficiency of the government while the latter was used to ensure the supreme power of the king. Han Fei also said:

The law is codified in books, kept in governmental offices, and promulgated among the people( "Criticism of the Ancients").

And the law gave emphasis on agriculture and warfare. He gave an example:

Lord Shang taught Duke Hsiao of Ch'in how to organize the people into groups...Glorified the lot of those who devoted themselves to agriculture and warfare,...and the state grew rich and powerful ("Mr. He").

The contents of law, would be the law of encouraging people to conduct agriculture and warfare. The king held the power, monitoring the ministers to make people obey the law, so that to make the state stronger and richer.

## 6-2. Emphasis on Warfare and Agriculture

Han Fei thought that his age was an age of struggling for power and gain, and so warfare and agriculture should be stressed. He said:

The state relies upon the warriors and the farmers for resisting the enemies and for enriching the state ("The Five Vermin").

and:

Who can rush his forces at enemies will become strong; And who can exert his forces to land-utilization will become rich ("Surmising the Mentality of the people").

"Who can rush his forces at enemies will become strong", in other words: the supremacy of military forces. It was very similar to the viewpoint of Machiavelli who said:

There is nothing proportionate between the armed and the unarmed; and it is not reasonable that he who is armed should yield obedience willingly to him who is unarmed, or that the unarmed man should be secure among armed servants (Machiavelli, 1952 :21 ).

Both Han Fei and Machiavelli gave special emphasis on military forces, and this is one of the major reasons why Han Fei's thought has been identified with Machiavellian-ism. The target of Han Fei's Pragmatism was to make the state wealthy and powerful, and the way to success depended on the supreme power of the king and the emphasis on warfare and agriculture.

## **7. Conclusion**

Han Fei's Pragmatism emphasized facing the situation, testing hypotheses by evidence, judging values according to their effects, and looking at gain and harm amorally. Its foundation was on the self-interested human nature. Its standard of values was pragmatism: Whatever produced satisfactory effects was valuable, otherwise would be valueless. And the foundation of rewards and punishments was pragmatism: Rewarding those which did not correspond to state interests, and punishing those which did not correspond state interests; Bestowing wealth, nobility, rank, and emolument on people of merits as rewards and imposing death, hand-cutting on the criminals as punishments. Its target was to make the state wealthy and powerful, and its way to success was the emphasis on warfare and agriculture by sovereignty of the king and the efficiency of their ministers in fulfilling certain tasks-- monitoring people to follow the law which stressed agriculture and warfare.



Contemporary realists assume that international relations can be best explained by the choices of states operating as autonomous actors rationally pursuing their own interests in an international system of sovereign states without central authority (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008:45). Realists tend to treat power over morality, and this is very similar to Han Fei's approach.

Yet, human beings are not always self-interested. Besides gain and harm considerations, human beings also considered affection and morality as important. And the method of governing is not necessarily only by means of rewards and punishments, benevolence and righteousness are also important. Furthermore, Han Fei only emphasized warfare and agriculture, but society needs various kinds of activities. The state was exalted at the expense of the individual, and therefore, Han Fei's pragmatism was a kind of state utilitarianism, not individual utilitarianism.

Nevertheless, Han Fei's pragmatism is practical, especially in the sense of the consistence of name and fact, the emphasis on effects, the notice of gain and harm, and the confrontation against difficulties ( Sun, 2002:22). Therefore, Han Fei's Pragmatism is useful for us both in the understanding of knowledge, and in the practice of real politics.

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