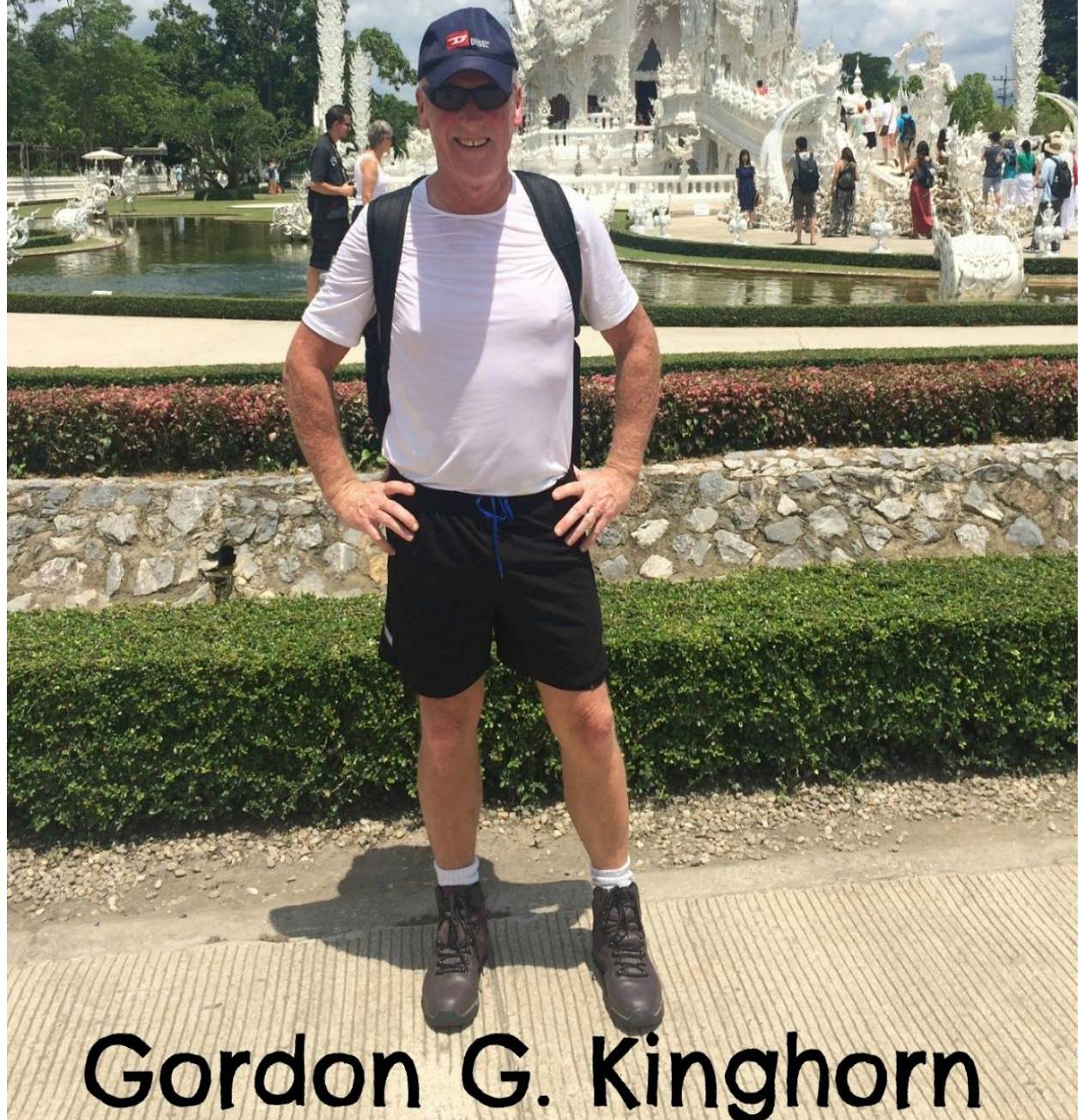


# **Far Eastern Journal**



**Gordon G. Kinghorn**

## “It’s Not the Wound that Teaches – But the Healing.”

(Marty Rubin)

Funny old thing this game of life, one moment I was ready, prepared and willing to embrace an exciting new phase of one’s sexagenarian existence, ergo; ‘The retirement years’, then my well meaning family practitioner, (let’s refer to him as ‘Doc Holliday) informs me that I suffering from a melancholic disorder, so prevalent apparently, particularly in those who have spent numerous years within the armed forces, such as myself.

I was prompted to arrange a visit with the aforementioned doctor, largely through my inexplicable and frequent (albeit covert) bouts of maudlin behaviour – the same of which that I had been experiencing for circa three to four months prior to my appointment.

The only passages that I ever [involuntary] wept during the course of my adult lifetime, were quintessentially during those horrible interludes when news is relayed through concerning the bereavement of kin or past colleague, or those emotionally-charged moments when confirmation is received of the educational/professional milestones accomplished by both wife and offspring, (So uncontrollably proud, I always am) plus that of the realisation that one’s football team had lost yet another Cup Final – and then pathetically reconciling oneself to the cheerless fact that the ‘Reds’ would never scoop sporting

silverware during the course one's entire lifetime...enough to make any man cry for sure, former soldier or otherwise!!!

'Doc Holliday' is a very, very good man, not that I have had the need to visit him, [thankfully] over the last two decades, in effect however, when I entered his surgery last year, we were relative strangers – nonetheless, come the end of my 30-minute tête-à-tête, I sensed that I had been wholly energised – renewed, rejuvenated, and not because the 'doc' had provided me with a fantastical instant elixir to overcome the inherent 'ailment', that of which had so unwelcomingly encroached into my infirm psyche, no, much more than that, he administered me with a course personal 'direction', and to be consumed as many times per day as required.

Following the primary phase of my 'evaluation', the goodly Doctor 'H' drew my attention to the screen on his PC, illustrating graphically the medication he was about to prescribe – and any after- effects it may bring. "Take one of these at night – and then one of these in the morning" when you have completed a 14-day intake of the course, come back and see me."

"I am bound by my profession to dispense the most beneficial means in which may bring to an end to the discomfort you are currently experiencing" he uttered, almost ruefully. "Deep breaths too, remain as worthwhile expediency when anxious feelings consume you, should you wish to avoid being overly-dependent on your medication that is, he added purposefully, I in turn,



retained a mental note to consider this plausible option as a wholly worthwhile preference.

He then stated that, given my obvious disorientation with general life following a hugely fulfilling and enormously active professional career, entwined with my current fitness levels and relatively sound, fiscal elasticity, I should consider embarking on a soul-finding mission, a purposeful sojourn to a country, or countries of my choice, then negotiate the possibilities of traversing across foreign real estate with nothing more than appropriate sensible clothing, along with a sturdy pair of walking boots and good size Bergen to house my personal belongings – adding further that the demons that possessed me could be met head-on through the adventures that would undeniably ensue – a latter day retreat, one that would eradicate or ultimately quell the rustling of my current discontent.

He added that my travels would be best concluded, not by unhealthily reflecting alone at trip's end, but to find release through writing extensively about one's exploits throughout the period of self-discovery, well away from UK shores.

Once out of the surgery – and a mere thirteen days following my liaison with the 'Doc', I had put together an agenda, booked my flight tickets, arranged for connecting transport and secured the necessary visas for; China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and areas of governmental approval, located on the periphery of Burmese, (Myanmar) border – given the excitement that consumed me regarding what lay ahead, I had not even looked at the blister pack of

medication that had been issued by the 'Doc, my faltering mind during this period, had been given liberty, now was all about precise focus – and not psychotically faltering.

My expedition commenced at the start of October last – and drew to a close at the end of November, much of my experiences in tropical climes I intend to share with fellow retirees over the coming weeks and months, yet, in accordance with the wishes of my MD, I must start at the very beginning – and then take the readership with me, step by step, on a voyage of no equal, in my humble opinion.

So, the diagnostic scribbling commences, thus; a literary quest to finally conquer the psychosomatic bandits that first established their cheerless attendance within my psyche – and, who knows precisely when?

In reflection, there is a prolonged and draining omnipresence of a melancholic status quo, I now fully recognise that prior to my travels, I was actually on the edge of permanent mental wretchedness – and without any real expectation of securing psychotic liberty without the aid of medical backing.

Prior to my appointment with Doctor 'H' – I had consulted with other veterans, some of which had been, or were enduring similar mental ambiguities, a number of which were unhealthily anaesthetising their troubling transience with all-too frequent intakes of non-prescribed pharmaceutical linctuses.

I refer to those powerful, internet accessible [universal] 'remedies', predominantly oval in design, with the odd exceptions being rectangular of even

diamond shaped, small multi-coloured pebbles, confection-like in appearance -these 'babies' come with their own in-built escape hatch, with the dubious promise that Nirvana is just one gulp away.

I did, for a brief moment, consider the benefits of such quick-fix 'medication', should I opt to by-pass the professional assistance I required – thanks to my inquisitive nature, I soon ascertained that questionable substitutes to sound medical expertise –were, at best, harrowing!

The medicinal route so ignorantly navigated by some troubled [former] military personnel remains an obtuse alternative.

These enticing options do precious little, other than propelling the gullible towards a short-lived gratification, where inherent stress, sadness and despondency is alleviated for an epigrammatic period of time, all through the emergence of a 'devil-may-care' [chemically induced] lethargy – providing nothing more than a short-lived 'Off-button' – and thus, far-removed from real world perspectives.

With this evaluation in mind, and remaining positive that the suggested substitutes to my problems lacked the real time ammunition to comprehensively annihilate the Gestapo of glumness that so prevailed within me, I picked up the phone and requested an appointment at the surgery.

The rest as they say, is history, before too long, I embarked on a venture shall remain long in my memory, where the only medication I required was a positive

reconnection with life, that comprising of the good, bad and downright ugly – as my forthcoming lines shall only too well convey.

Yet, despite the infrequent difficulties, which presented themselves, I would do it all again tomorrow – tragically, I must wait until October before embarking on yet another trek – it can't come soon enough!

When I finally lifted-off from Heathrow, en-route to tropical destinations various, my first stopover was at Guangzhou, known historically as Canton or, less commonly as Kwangchow, it is the capital and largest city of Guangdong province in the People's Republic of China- and located on the Pearl River, about 120 km (75 miles) north-northwest of Hong Kong – it is too, the most God awful city it has ever been my misfortune to visit – what a dismal destination it proved to be.

The international airport that supports this immense municipality has about as much architectural charm as Lubyanka Prison – a truly unwelcoming structure and one utterly devoid of a cheering welcoming mechanism for visitors.

I refer to the term 'mechanism' as the most suitable descriptive, largely as it appeared to me that each of the employees who laboured at this dreary, aeronautical receiving station, were little more than cold, unsmiling robots, each with seemingly no desire to demonstrate any specific human qualities, such as a smile, or a nod, or even the blink of an eye.

These uniformed, human appliances each appeared to me as pre-programmed androids, with apparently little or no awareness of anything other than the travail they were paid to execute on a daily basis.

As I waited to be reunited with my luggage, I immediately sensed that one had got off to a very bad start – if I was out-of-sorts before trip commencement – then this crowded corner of the Chinese neighbourhood – and the longer I remained ensconced within it, would surely see one's melancholic decline continue at a most unhealthy rate – it was at this juncture that I hastily rifled through my hand luggage to retrieve one of Doc Holliday's 'Happy Tabs' – then realised that I had packed the prescribed medication within my main baggage, that of which had not yet appeared – taking deep breaths however, proved to be a pretty good alternative.

If one discounts the appalling fact that I, in the mind of a petite, immaculately attired ingénue who stood directly in front of me at the baggage retrieval area – one whom I suspect, wrongfully ascertained that she was positioned too closely to a possible pervert, one whose sexual ardour had become uncomfortably audible and all too evident for her liking – and soon moved down the line of waiting passengers to be rid of the reprehensible presence behind her – then working on deep breaths during intervals of mild stress or personal difficulty remains a most worthwhile expedient for sure.

With baggage now in my possession and once through customs, I headed for the exit in order to secure the services of a more amiable representative of the



Chinese nation, ostensibly, a competent taxi driver, one that would transport me safely to my nearby hotel, in the shortest possible time – and for the most agreeable tariff I could secure, sadly, my expectations were perched a little too high that day.

If the airport staff appeared inexplicably grim, my driver was something else again – I can only describe this unsavoury specimen as one who sits marginally to the left of ‘Genghis Khan’ in the charisma department – he was ‘Odd Job’ with attitude, and that is about as complimentary as I can be about this particular bastardisation of mankind.

In the Army business, one’s bad days were an occupational hazard, during my own tenure as a serving soldier, I spent several bad days under shell fire at forward operating bases, I also have had the misfortune of being briefly semi-buried under rubble courtesy of so-called ‘friendly fire’, thus destroying a rather expensive pair of binoculars too I may add, to say nothing of a number of heavy handed members of an illegal militia during the 1980s, those who once attempted to beat the crap out of me, – largely because they (most accurately) determined that I was not one of their hostile fold.

In truth though, if I had told these ‘gentlemen’ who I really was – and what I was attempting to undertake during that specific period, they would have undoubtedly attempted to beat me twice as hard – and then, quite possibly, minced my lifeless parts for use as pig feed.

Now, as much as the aforementioned incidents proved to be incredibly frightening, with each occurrence coming very close to melting my then phony sangfroid, (War hero I certainly was not) it was almost small beer in relation to the threatening reaction of my Chinese taxi driver, this when I failed to settle with him appropriately...in his opinion of course.

The fare to my hotel came to around 55 Yuan, about £4.50 or \$6.00. Firstly, he wished to be paid in US Dollars, twenty of them in all, with a further five dollars to meet his tip. He must have considered me as some 'wet-behind-the-ears' tourist, one with little or no experience in dealing with the excesses of greedy ferrymen.

I immediately responded to his attempted thievery by conveying two simple words, I shall refrain from conveying the precise terminology that I transmitted in his direction, needless to say, the letter 'F' figured prominently in my brief response to his woeful attempt at highway robbery, I then handed over sixty Yuan and attempted to climb out of his dilapidated vehicle – at which point, this guy went berserk!

By this time, I was out of the car, (thankfully) but he then alighted and came at me with a metal torch and started waving it hysterically, very close to my face. I patiently attempted to explain that should he choose to continue with his unfortunate and unnecessary conduct, I would take great delight in delivering a swift, hefty blow to his thorax region, that of which, should he be very fortunate

of course, would land him in a wheelchair for the remainder of his pathetic existence – wow!

Something must have been lost in translation as ‘Odd Job’ failed to comprehend the full extent of my intentions, fortunately for him however, the doorman of my chosen hostelry had heard the clamour outside, and as one who could speak English proficiently, immediately rushed out to come between me and my ‘Bruce Lee’ wannabe assailant, in an most-welcome attempt to defuse the ensuing conflict.

The cascade of perspiration that transcended down my spine during this ‘altercation’ – had precious little to do with the high humidity levels on the day – my oriental fracas had serious weight loss implications – and not merely through dripping sweat, this frightful confrontation was horrifyingly coupled with the distressing reaction that one excruciatingly endures following a generous swig of a powerful laxative – apart from this disagreeable symptom however, I was doing just fine...not!!!

In effect, the dutiful doorman had to physically restrain the driver, this whilst gasping to me that he was going to call the police, advising me further, to enter the hotel and check-in, adding that my luggage would follow immediately, which it duly did.

As I hastily removed myself from this macabre, fierce war of words, I recognised that the taxi driver had become extremely red in the face, salivating profusely – and appeared to be a mere single breath away from a massive cardiac arrest, he

was also crying – tears of anger and unparalleled frustration, nothing more, nothing less – I did receive a full apology from the hotel management, with a free dinner thrown-in for good measure, however, I couldn't comprehend why the owners of the establishment chose to take sole responsibility for the fracas – oh, well, mustn't grumble I guess.

Before partaking in the culinary delights of the region, I was escorted to my room on the fifth floor, a pleasant if not somewhat sparse chamber it must be said, yet, the bed appeared most comfortable – and it came with a much yearned-for shower, plus television, DVD player and tea and coffee service.

Needless to say, there were no TV stations that transmitted in English, I therefore soon found myself watching 'Die Hard', with Bruce Willis prancing about in his grubby vest and bare feet, proficiently extolling the virtues of his heroic manliness in the most perfect Mandarin tongue you could ever wish to hear – actually, I didn't, so I switched him off and made for the shower...a much needed shower too.

The water was welcomingly hot and plentiful and as the cubicle offered an unusual seating arrangement, I simply sat down and just let the jet-stream saturate my now very weary frame, it had after all, been a very long day.

As strange as it may sound, I actually dozed off for a moment or two whilst showering, despite the intense pressure of the descending water, my psyche simply submitted to the weariness that consumed me – this surprised me very

much, I'm normally a fairly resilient chap and one that can cope adequately under the pressures of fatigue – not on that particular day, sad to say.

As I contemplated the thought of removing myself from the cubicle in order to dry off and dress for dinner, I quickly sensed that I was not alone in my steamy WC, someone else was in my chambers, and of this I was certain.

My first thought lay with the hostile taxi driver, it was possibly he who had found his way into the hotel, then established my precise whereabouts, possibly with a view to knocking my block off. I stayed cool, (mentally speaking) and with soldier-like acumen, (well, nearly) I attempted to devise an immediate plan on how to overcome the threat I was now placed under.

I then detected movement outside the cubicle, but opted to keep the shower running as there was little point in making it too obvious that I was aware of the intruder's unwelcome attendance.

I fretted a little at the prospect of physical contact whilst being totally nude, armed only with a towel and chunky bar of 'Boots' soap-on-a-rope, I mused that this was not the kind of weaponry one associates with Bruce Willis – I was only in possession of soft armaments, those that would be doomed to failure from the very start of any tussle – but, I had to go for it!

I speedily rose from the shower chair and threw open the glass door, armed with my flimsy towel, which I had wrapped around my left hand as means of



protection from a possible knife attack, whilst in my right hand, I was swinging my soap from the rope that accompanied it – for a mere second or two, I must have appeared as a poor man's Spartacus – yet light years removed from the figure that Kirk Douglas so successfully portrayed on film all those years ago.

As soon as my feet hit the arena of perceived combat, AKA, 'the loo', I was faced with a sight that shall remain with me for the remainder of my life, my pulse rate must have been going 250 to the minute, it then rose by another fifty beats, I was in utter shock.

There in front of me stood not a stiletto wielding, aggrieved taxi driver, but a very tall, totally bemused oriental gentleman, adorned only in his 'Birthday suit, with a towel draped over his left shoulder. From where I stood, the only implement in his possession that could do me any harm, sat limply between his legs, that being the most enormous human male reproductive organ that I have ever laid eyes on, the tip of which dangled only inches above the patella region of his left leg.

He menacingly glared at me and yelled something none-too-pleasant, although I couldn't understand one damn word of his tirade, it was clear that he viewed me as some form of fruitcake.

He then took steps in my direction, at which point I figured he was either going to whip me to death – or bugger the life out of me with the frightening tool that God, (Or the One-Party State) had bequeathed upon him – nope, he just casually

strolled into MY shower cubicle and commenced scrubbing his huge, portly frame, angrily talking to himself as he went about the task.

I quickly re-entered the bedroom and grabbed the telephone to call hotel reception, then anxiously relayed the fact that I had an intruder in my lodgings. Seconds after replacing the receiver, I heard a hefty knocking at the door, on opening, I was faced with no less than four hotel staff, one of which was a very tall European woman, and one who had a disturbing facial similarity to that of Irma Grese, adorned in leather, knee-length jackboots she was too.

This party of hotel employees brushed past me in a most lively manner and began searching, firstly in and behind the wardrobe, followed by an under-the-bed inspection, before moving out to the balcony, all in a bid to apprehend my intruder.

I attempted to explain that my uninvited guest was actually taking a shower, (Oh Lord, this dilemma sounds all so preposterous now) to which I received a finger over the mouth gesture, this from the apparent senior member of the group, telling me in-effect to say nothing at this stage of their investigative proceedings.

As they went about their business, frantically chattering in some indecipherable language, it dawned on me that the insubstantial towel remained wrapped around my left hand and the soap-on-a-rope still tightly coiled around my right wrist, hitherto, in my highly-agitated condition, I had completely overlooked the fact that I had been unclothed throughout the entire debacle.

My nudity had had seemingly had no effect on Irma, she didn't even blink an eye when I answered the door – I must make mention to the distressing fact that this particular situation did little for my recently, faltering psyche, (Getting old is such a drag too) – “She must be a lesbian” I mused to myself reassuringly, this as I hastily draped the hotel-supplied robe over my still-wet and dripping frame.

Everything then became incredibly quiet – and utterly motionless.

The water falling from the showerhead had ceased; the hotel entourage had too, become silent as they stood collectively still – in a concentrated huddle at the foot of my bed – not even the heavy city traffic below could be heard, this astounded me as the balcony door was wide open, yet, nothing – one could have heard a pin drop most definitely, the tension had become quite unbearable.

Ultimately, I was to discover that my concerns regarding personal safety had been totally misplaced; in this particular hotel they had a system in situ where two separate (Family) rooms shared a toilet and shower, hence the reason that I had a secure lock on both my main door and that of the WC.

No one had informed me of this set-up when I arrived at the hotel, hence the confusion and panic that ensued – a most embarrassing experience – with my all too apparent ignorance certainly not being bliss on that most unhappiest of days.

As it transpired, when the crisis eventually settled down and the hotel ‘heavies’ returned to their respective rooms or offices, I lay on the bed and slept for over nine hours, subsequently missing my free dinner and complimentary flagon of ‘House’ Beaujolais – still, breakfast the following morning proved to be something of a banquet – and I gorged myself accordingly.

For the next forty-eight hours, I aimlessly wandered the streets of Guangzhou – struggling to be truly inspired by anything that I saw during this short-lived visit to the grey and murky metropolis, oh, how I yearned to be in Thailand, this leg of the journey could not come to an end soon enough.

When the moment to depart finally did arrive and my aircraft lifted from the runway en-route to Bangkok, I reflected on the time spent in this corner of the huge Chinese empire, and then scolded myself for not being more tolerant and more embracing, the Chinese people, a large majority of them, do not enjoy the luxuries of their more well-heeled countrymen after all, what I did learn was that those who were fiscally blighted, turned out to be amongst the most friendly and most accommodating people that one may find anywhere in the world.

My overall experience had been an education – a period of crude erudition yes, but one day I must return to China to resume my learning in order to grasp a fuller understanding of this ancient nation and its vast cross-section of peoples.

In my hotel room laid a book, which contained the thoughts of Confucius. Within the many pages of this document, there existed a particular quote that has stayed with me since the moment I first stumbled across it, thus;

*“Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous.”*

As my aircraft descending towards the terra firma of sunny Siam, and irrespective of the trials and tribulations experienced during the brief first chapter of my travels, Doc Holliday had nevertheless been proved right.

Not since leaving the army had I felt such exhilaration – an utter renaissance was flooding throughout both body and mind – at 64 years of age, I was a newborn – life was the drug that mattered – and I sensed that I was to become a habitual dependant on the joys that it had to offer.

Soon I was to be in Vietnam – and my forthcoming 13-day voyage up the Mekong Delta would shortly provide a stimulus of no equal – with my prescribed medication remaining untouched – as it continues to do so at the time of writing.

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