

**Locke  
1915 - 1940**

By Kathleen Graham Hutchinson

The recent death of Locke native Ping Lee prompts this article on the Chinese settlement of Locke, when it was bustling and "wide open" prior to World War II. Ping, a gregarious man who died at 93 owned the Big Store in Walnut Grove and labeled himself "the unofficial mayor of Locke". He succeeded his father Lee Bing.



Lee Bing and Family - wife Lee Bo-ying, On Lee and Ping Lee

Chinese immigrated to "Gold Mountain" (California) early in the Gold Rush. After emigration they lived together for mutual support and brought with them an alien culture that the Americans were either "unwilling or unable to understand." The first wave of discrimination was a foreign miner's tax placed on non-citizens, especially singling out Mexican and Chinese. Nativism asserted that the "Anglo-Saxon" was entitled to the fruits of the land. Furthermore nativism was exercised by criticism of sanitary conditions, their women, use of opium (Ng Goh Pei), gambling, tong and family associations. As a result the Chinese were not allowed to testify in U.S. courts nor provide testimony. This led to their own law and justice. To take a step further the Chinese refused to cooperate with the United States even in murder cases.

After the Civil War, the Central Pacific Railroad advertised for employment in Canton Province, China and over 12,000 male Chinese responded. After completion of the road, some went on to other railroad projects such as the Carson and Colorado Railroad in Nevada, and the "Sunset Route" of the Southern Pacific across the lower U.S. Southwest. The remainder scattered across the west establishing "Chinatowns" in numerous towns and cities. Some went into business for themselves as shopkeepers and fishermen. Others were hired field hands in agriculture (they

didn't work the machinery), share croppers - 39% in the Delta, levee building and other manual labor enterprises. They built dry rock walls in the "Gold Country", were launderers, did any type of inexpensive labor, and were cooks and house servants (the ubiquitous "Chinese Houseboy".) And they were good at what they did. One story tells of the launderer who dampened his wrinkles "with jets of water swigged from a nearby bottle and ejected from his mouth." An observer commented, "The clothes have a beautiful polish." The Walnut Grove Hotel dinner rolls were glazed similarly. The cook demonstrated his technique for Mrs. Brown.

Immigration law was eased in 1915 and a few more women were allowed to immigrate. In 1930 Chinese females were finally allowed to more or less freely immigrate.

The financial panic of 1873 reached California by 1875/6 and unemployment was blamed on the Chinese. They were terrorized and their settlements burned in many locations and their employers' premises or crops burned. Newspaper editors fanned the flames siting disapproval of their customs, attacked those who supported the Chinese and defended those who abused them. Children followed a parents' antipathy and stole and scattered wares, produce or laundry from Chinese wagons and stands, tied queues together and performed other acts of menace. Considered hilarious, rebuke was mild.

In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. By 1886 the peak of anti-Chinese hysteria was reached. Sacramento that year held two anti-Chinese conventions. In 1902 the Chinese Exclusion Act was made permanent. Only merchants, students, diplomats and sons of a citizen were allowed to immigrate. The Chinese then began to bring in "paper sons" to circumvent the law. A loophole was found in 1915 which further circumvented exclusion and the law eased a little in 1930. In 1943 the law was repealed for Chinese but not for all Asians. Quotas remained very tight for years.

California farmers resisted the violence and found the Chinese able farm workers. They were reliable, sober and cheap compared to the "Anglo". It was editorialized that white labor had no right to complain until they "elevated themselves and became equal to or superior to Chinese labor". The "Marysville Appeal" editorialized "[any farmer who had] never been put to the necessity of employing Chinamen (sic) while besotted tramps lounged idly around and refused to work and cursed you with a stammering accent," [that farmer can throw the first stone]. The farmers usually did not have direct contact with their Chinese (due to the language barrier) but went through an intermediary -- a Chinese foreman, "runners" on the river freighters, or labor contractors.

Chinese society was predominately male (1000 to 1). This led to women imported for brothels and purchased wives by the more successful. Some men trafficked in the female trade. The successful returned to China to select a wife. They

all hoped to return to China someday, even if dead and in a funerary jar.

Locke which transliterates as "lok-kee" (happy living) in the Chung-san dialect is located a quarter mile above Walnut Grove and a half mile downstream from the Pierson District cross levee. The Southern Pacific's Sacramento Southern short line ran across The Meadows and Snodgrass Slough to the east crossing via trestle and pivot bridge. A spur laid on top of a levee serviced its big warehouse at the Sacramento River. As a result agricultural business located near or at the site. Until the 1930's produce was freighted on riverboats and in refrigerated (if needed) box cars. During the season the S.P. rented space in the warehouse, to among others, Scobel & Day, Simonds and French, Earl Fruit Co., California Packing Corp., Lambert Packing Co., American Fruit Co. In the ell between the river levee and cross levee Libbey, McNeil and Libbey operated a big cannery which processed asparagus and tomatoes. The complex included a shook box factory riverside and warehouse. The box works burned in a spectacular fire in the mid 1950's.

Locke is unique. It is the last remaining rural Chinatown in the nation and founded and populated mostly by Chinese. Since 1920 some non-Chinese have been residents, notably Anglos, Japanese and Hindu. For many years in The Meadows lived a community of Russian hermits (sic), but the town's atmosphere was overwhelmingly Chinese.

Chan Tin-San is commonly the credited founding father of Locke. He was the first Chinese to construct a building on property rented from the Locke brothers. The California Alien Land Act, repealed 1952, prohibited Orientals from owning land, but they could own the building on that land. Thus the town site was owned by the Locke brothers. The second and third structures were built by Wing Chong Owyang and Yuen Lai Sing. The three structures housed a boarding house, a gambling hall and a saloon. Ed and Spencer Owyang followed shortly thereafter and further developed the site. These buildings clustered near the S.P. warehouse at what became the "south" end of town (the Levee and River Road.)

In October 1916, a disastrous fire destroyed Walnut Grove "Chinatown." A group of Chung-san (they and their forbearers were from the Pearl River Delta, Guandong Province) leased orchard land from Clay, George and Lloyd Locke (the "Locke Brothers") to build new homes and shops. Prominent among those were: Lee Bing (Ping Lee's father), Chan Hing Sai, Tom Wai, Chan Wai Lum, Chow Hou Bun, Suen Dat Suen, Chan Dai Kee, Chan Lai Hoon, Chan So Nam, Chan Gum and Ng So Hat. Lee Bing built seven buildings immediately (6 stores and 1 gambling hall.) Locke like most Chinese communities became a service center.

Between 1915 and 1930 it is known that the town offered restaurants, dry good stores, hardware stores, groceries, brothels, a soda fountain, Post Office, a tobacco shop, shoe

repair, gas station and garage, barbers, a dentist, drug store, herbalist, pool hall, bakery, opium rooms, 2 slaughter houses, a water works, Chinese Theater, flour mill, laundry, 2 saloons as well as town hall, merchants association, Baptist Center, and other associations (Tongs).

"Many false front businesses (did) backstairs dealings." In fact, it was rumored that at one time virtually every two-storied building in town housed some illegal activity. Nevertheless when perusing a Sanborn Fire Insurance map of the 1920's, there are upper floors listed as living quarters and families did live in Locke. During prohibition (1920-1933) illegal alcohol was sold. Houses of Prostitution existed in the shadows either as a part of a building or standing free. Its gambling halls allegedly secretly housed brothels. The County Sheriff and District Attorney were gambling customers. The Chinese companies made certain that the officers never lost. The Sheriff was considered as a casual law officer. The busiest gambling was between 1920/33 but continued until the State outlawed it in the 1950's. Evidently some gambling halls were "wages of sin." As for the customers, when a gambling house was raided, a player or two would be picked up. Taken to the Justice Court in Courtland, they'd appear in front of Judge Bunnell, pay a \$25.00 fine and return to Locke to enjoy the entertainments at the gambling halls.

The gambling houses began with single owners but eventually had multiple share owners. Lee Bing was the last of the single owners. Companies ran the games. The Dai Loy had three companies. Lee Bing's responsible was the back of the building. His name was on "the board" hanging in the building. He as an owner was responsibility for payouts. His name was on "the board" from 1900 - 1950, the longest of anyone. He also collected rent from the companies.

Dominoes, Fan-tan, and Lottery were principally played. Businesses acted as lottery agents and paid a commission to do so. If a player was lucky enough to win, the merchant got a cut: his commission. Blackjack and craps were briefly tried to attract Causians, but the draw was too sparse. Filipinos later became big customers.

Women were rarely seen in these establishments - mainly because there were so few. Some families objected to gambling on the basis that it siphoned needed family income.

On Sunday or holidays Locke swelled with agricultural hands and share croppers. At the Dai Loy and other gambling houses, Chinese "goodies" were offered like those that the tea houses served. The treats were made by a local restaurant. On hot summer days a dozen watermelons were cut into serving sizes for refreshment.

The Dai Loy was the pre-eminent gambling house. If the town needed money the Dai Loy was the first asked. All the houses were asked and all came up with some money to save face. Among those causes were 1) basketball hoop, ball and uniforms, 2) a new well to replace the typhoid infected well,

3) for the Revolution to form a republic in China, 4) The Baptist Home Mission.

There were at least four gambling houses. These establishments not only offered games of chance but also offered food service, reading areas and sometimes lodging. Often lookouts were posted to watch for officers of the law. If the officer wasn't known, everything was closed down inside to appear innocuous.

One of the first gambling halls in Locke, The Victory Club, had seven glass panels above the entrance on which Chinese characters depict "Victory Club". During prohibition it was acquired by "Tuffy" Leamons who operated a speakeasy on the premises. After prohibition it reopened as a gambling hall. Lee Bing owned the Yoi Ling Sing. The house was divided in two in the 1930's and was known as The Dai Loy gambling house (Dai Loy means "Big Welcome") and the Hing Yick. Lee Bing had owned in Walnut Grove the Shang Loy ("come often"). The gambling companies which operated the Shang Loy transferred to the Hing Yick building in Locke and were then known Yoi Ling Sing. There were two additional gambling houses on Main Street and a gambling hall which in 1927 was listed as incorporating a restaurant and pool hall. There were at least six restaurants. The survivor from this era is Al's Place. In 1916 the building housed Lee Bing's Chinese restaurant. (Al Adami and Lee Bing first partnered in the restaurant business in Isleton in 1933.)



Businesses were found up and down Main Street, on the two side streets Locke and River and the Levee. Some buildings housed several businesses simultaneously. While through the years the buildings housed several disparate businesses. Most dwellings were on Key Street as well as the east two-thirds of River Street. A few were on the "north" end of Main Street and on the Levee above the commercial businesses. A service alley was between Main and Key Street. Lodgings for day laborers and single men were scattered throughout and as mentioned wedged in mezzanine rooms in various buildings and gambling houses. The one-story house on the east side of Main Street was always a dwelling. The building also on Main Street with the double doors was likewise a residence but could have been a gambling house. The gambling houses in Walnut Grove also had double doors. A few in Locke had single doors. The building at the "north" end of Main Street which today houses the State Museum was a boarding house,

though sometimes called a hotel. This building was purchased by Jack Ross in 1926. Ross owned the Associated Gas Station and garage at the corner of the Levee and Locke Street. The Wing-Chong Owyang Rooming House as mentioned was on the corner of River and the Levee. Built in 1912 it was reputed to be the second oldest building in town. As with other boarding houses rent was approximately \$5.00 per month which rented a bedroom, the light and a window. The Chinese who worked on ranches stayed at the ranch camps, only visiting towns on off-days. They left their belongings in the rented rooms. These men began work on the ranches 6 a.m. and worked 10 hour days six days a week. The boarding house which occupied the site of the memorial park had, like some of the Main Street buildings a balcony overlooking Main Street. It also sported a fancy stepped gable.

At the corner of River Street and the Levee the "Republic Restaurant" offered "Chop Suey, Noodles, and Peerless Ice Cream." The building is the oldest in Locke, built in 1912 by Chan Tin-Sen. Lee Bing also owned a restaurant in the Hing Lee building. The building was the first he built in Locke and the family lived above - 12 to 15 people also lived in the attic. Downstairs in the Hing Lee building Lee Bing operated a dry goods, hardware, housewares store and herb counter. His son Ping Lee noted "My father delegated most of the shop keeping. This was more an office and headquarters for his many businesses and outside contacts.... He owned two gambling places in Locke, a restaurant, the Hing Lee and had other business relationships that took him out to the farms and around the towns, so he never stayed in one place many hours." In 1934 the shop became a restaurant and "Noodles" was painted on the transom and known as the "Moon Café" and later "Lantern Restaurant" until 1940. By that time the restaurant was owned by Milton Lee's (no relation) father. Milton ran lottery tickets across the street to Lee Bing's Dai Loy Gambling House. This Lee's business was known as Fat Moon Co.

The first building on the SW Main Street was the first contracted built in a row. In 1928 it was a restaurant and the dwelling above was rented. Supplying the restaurants and townfolk were various retail businesses. There was a fish market on the east side of Main Street mid-block. On the west side Yuen Chong Market (Flourishing Source Market/Horn of Plenty) was established first in Walnut Grove as a co-operative. The store sold dry goods, primarily on the upper level, especially during World War II, and groceries and meat on the lower level. A grand staircase connected the two. In the 1960's it was bought by George Marr and Stanford



King. George operated the grocery end and Stan the butcher shop. Ping Lee worked in the butcher shop before buying with his brother On and Chester King the Big Store in Walnut Grove. In 1940 two gas pumps had been installed in front of the Main Street entrance. There was a popular Japanese Bakery beneath the Wah Lee Co. The Wah Lee Co. (The Flowering Profit Co.) specialized in dry goods and boots. He was Lee Bing's partner in Walnut Grove and "cousin" and moved to Locke in 1916. Wah Lee at various times also offered groceries, cold beer, cigars, a bakery and a lunch counter. The first Post Office was located at Wah Lee Co. It was later moved to the levee. The Foon Hop Co. established as co-operative public company on east Main Street began as a gambling house but became a grocery for over 20 years. In the 1920's there was also a gas pump curbside.

Another multi-purpose business began as Owyang Tin Git – a dry goods store built in 1916 by Owyang. In 1928 it was sold to Suen Yook Lim. Suen operated a grocery store and ice cream parlor and incorporated gambling on the side. Customers remembered the soda jerk played Keno when not waiting on them. After another ownership change the ice cream parlor was augmented with the installation of a small kitchen heated by wood and later by gas.

There was a drugstore on Main Street housed in a one-time gambling hall. It dispensed both herbal and western medicine. Yuen Chong also furnished drugs. As noted Lee Bing was also an herbalist. He wrote prescriptions for the ill and brewed herbs on a stove in back of the Hing Lee Store. Ping Lee remembered "patients" would be prescribed, return in an hour and sit in chairs in the drugstore section and drink their medicine.

Among the other businesses in town was the grand Star Theater or "Opera House". It still has a fancy front: a



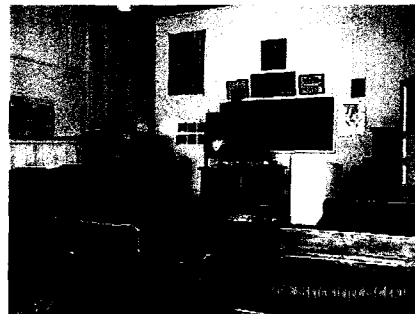
stepped pediment and shallow arch ornamented by dentelling and bare light bulbs and supported by simple pilasters. Welcome was spelled out below the arch. A two-step threshold the width of the building is unique in Locke. Travelling amateur theater companies performed and much money was raised for the Chinese Revolution. The lit arch was very showy at night. Below on Main Street was the Columbia Rooms, Locke's finest brothel.

According to Dick Phipps who worked for the Bank of Alex Brown, Locke was full of prostitutes. He knew the area well through his bank duties. The brothels were run by white women and in later years staffed by white women. Until the Chinese Exclusion was lifted importation of the girls was very limited. These "dusty dens of iniquity" were tucked in here and there throughout town. "As Confucius says: Bring a lovely Chinese woman to Locke and you do things."

It is also said there were opium dens in Locke where one went to smoke and then "sleep off (his) enchantment."

At now 13952 Main Street, another Lee Bing building housed the Japanese barber from Isleton. Originally a gambling hall in association with Walnut Grove Chinese, the barber and family lived above. The shop was also the local stage (bus) Gibson Stage depot. Also from the premises Chauncey Chew drove a jitney (charabanc) between Locke and San Francisco. Also on Main Street there was a warehouse, once a store, with a curved pediment anchored by short decorative piers. In back of town was the flour mill operated by Hindu farm laborers and two slaughterhouses close to The Meadows.

Children attended the segregated Oriental School in Walnut Grove (the law wasn't lifted until 1948 but hadn't



been enforced since World War II) and the Joe Shoong School in Locke. Opened with fanfare in 1926 it was named for its benefactor Joe Shoong who founded National Dollar Stores. It was a Chinese language, art and culture school. The

children attended State school followed by attendance at Joe Shoong School until dinner time.

Family district associations and tongs were the principal social groups among Delta Chinese. The District Lodge catered to the Chung-san dialect speakers and was used for social purposes. It was located at today's 13939 Main Street. The Lan Ying Benevolent Association (Handsome/Brave Industrial Commercial Association) the merchants association also on Main Street was a social center for men who trace their lineage to the Chung-san District in China. It also provided guidance, took care of burials and maintained cultural continuity. The Sportsmen Club was on Key Street. Also on Key Street was the Baptist Home Mission Society Sunday School building – Locke Christian Center.

Mrs. Ong, a Chinese Christian, remarked to the Baptist Home Mission Society that she had tried to start a Sunday school, but had difficulty in building attendance. She told the BHMS that if they would open a Chinese language school in town, she could bring together a large enough group of Chinese children to study Chinese and, she felt she could further coax them to Sunday school. The BHMS agreed to

pay Mrs. Ong a small stipend to conduct the language school and it followed that the children did attend the Sunday school in large numbers. The Sunday school first occupied a quarter of her husband's laundry building and later as the school grew, it occupied half the building, reimbursing Mr. Ong. Eventually, the school expanded to the entire building and Mr. Ong was employed to help teach Chinese. In the 1920's and 1930's support was provided by the gambling halls and brothels.

The Bing King Tong was a secret fraternal tong founded around 1900 with nationwide branches. It is possible it operated in Locke. Before 1925 tongs sometimes violent practiced extortion but were also associations whereby merchants received protection and where gambling, prostitution and drug activities were arbitrated. But to laborers and the little man, the tongs were social institutions which expressed desires for social change, justice and a strong China. Tongs also could provide jobs such as good jobs in gambling houses.

There was a "Town Hall" located on Main Street to run the town, the stores collected the money. Allegedly extortion was also practiced. Extortion was common in Chinese communities and was practiced in Locke. It was said that Lee Bing tried to shoulder in to Locke but was squeezed out and went to Grass Valley. He returned in 1934 after "things" cooled. Bob Suen's father tried to shoulder into Walnut Grove but was also squeezed out and he went to Locke.



Sun Yat-sen

The Kuo Ming Tong, known as KMT, represented the Nationalist Party of China and promoted and represented by Sun Yat-sen. The Chee Kung Tong was a branch of the Triad Society of China which also supported Sun.

In Locke, Lee Bing originally financed KMT. When Dr. Sun visited the Delta to enlist support for the Nationalist Party, the visit helped increase membership in KMT. There were big outpourings of Delta Chinese and panorama photos taken when he visited in Locke. KMT also supported the Nationalists in Manchuria against the Japanese and many Chinese Deltans again gave when General Tsai Ting Kai visited. School children marched from as far away as Isleton to see him in Locke. These were very exciting visits. But any dreams of returning to China were crushed.



Locke had its share of other celebrations, too. Everyone got "dressed up." Lion Dances and firecrackers, etc. were always a big part for them. Locke in the beginning only celebrated the Western New Year on January 1<sup>st</sup> because that was the day Dr. Sun established the Chinese Republic and Lee Bing was a follower. In later years both Western

and Chinese New Year were celebrated as well as other big American holidays.

Chinese communities began disappearing from the Central Valley by 1900 and most were gone by World War II. The younger generations left throughout the years for higher education and better opportunities. Hoy Key the night fire watchman who rhythmically struck the "bok-bok" (wooden musical instrument which signaled the hourly "All's well" died in 1984. Ping, who some time ago moved to Walnut Grove's Clampet Tract, died this year on March 10, 2011.

Locke was the last to be founded. It survives, even though most of the Chinese have gone. "[Locke's] simplicity and charm maintain a fragile existence surrounded by the pressure of major metropolitan areas."

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#### Sources:

*"The Sacramento Bee"*

*"The Sacramento Union"*

*"The Marysville Appeal"*

*Sanborn Fire Insurance Co Map 1927*

*Locke Feasibility Study*

*State of California, Dept. of Parks and Rec. Resource Agency 1979*

*Delta by Bob E. Waters*

*Bitter Melon by Jeff Gillenkirk & James Motlow*

*Samfow by Sylvia Sun Minnick*

*"An Account of Locke" by Jean Harvie*

*One Day One Dollar by Peter C. Y. Leung*

*"Celedons and Sake Bottles: Asian History Underground"*

*The Pacific Historian by Mary Maniery & Julia Costello*

*"Hello - Welcome to Locke" River Road Art Gallery*

*Letter from Chas. R. Shepherd, Supt. The Chung Mei Home for Chinese Boys*

*"Locke's Hidden Secrets" a talk to SRDHS by Ping Lee and Other recollections*

*Notes from: "Notebook at Dai Loy Gambling Hall Museum*

*Miscellaneous recollections of Deltans*

*History of the Sacramento Valley by Joseph A. McGowan, PhD*

*Sacramento's Chinatown - Arcadia Publishing by L. Tom, B. Tom,*

*Chinese American Museum of Northern California*

*Reminiscences of Ping Lee*

*Remembrances of Darwin Kan*

Published in *The Sacramento Bee* from March 16 to March 18, 2011



LEE, Ping Kan 'Gongon'

Born on October 22, 1917, passed away on March 10, 2011. Ping is 93 years old. Ping was born in Locke, CA, and lived there till 1989. He is the husband of the late Grace Chow Lee. Ping is survived by three children, Jeff in Santa Rosa, Darwin in Walnut Grove, and Gayle in Cathey Valley, CA. He is blessed with seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Ping also has two very special god-daughters, Eva and Pat. A visitation will be held at Harry A. Nauman & Son on Friday, March 25, 2011 from 4-7 p.m. at Harry A. Nauman & Son Funeral Chapel, 4041 Freeport Blvd, Sacramento, CA. Funeral Service will be held on Saturday, March 26, 2011 at 11 a.m., Harry A. Nauman & Son Funeral Chapel. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to Locke Foundation, P.O. Box 1085, Walnut Grove, CA 95690.

**RESOURCE CENTER NEWS**

Many visitors came to the Resource Center to be helped with their research. Donated resources are still being indexed and added to the data base. The center is opened most Tuesdays from 10:00 am to 12:30 pm. "2012 Calendars" featuring Pear Labels from Jim Dahlberg's collection and created by the SRDHS Board will be available for sale at the center beginning in August.

**MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

We would like to thank all those who made memorial contributions to the Sacramento River Delta Historical Society.

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**INTERESTING ITEMS**

From the San Francisco Chronicle June 3, 2010

*Sturgeon although found in all rivers on the Pacific Coast from Alaska to San Francisco Bay only spawn in the Sacramento River.*

From the Sacramento Bee Feb/Mar 1946:

*College Youth is Hurt*

*Tony Enos, 22, of Walnut Grove was treated in the emergency hospital for a cut on his right ankle suffered in the Sacramento College Gymnasium when he was hit accidentally by a baseball bat*

**SRDHS 2011 SCHEDULE**

- July/August.....Summer Break
- September 20.....General Meeting
- October 18.....Board Meeting
- November 15.....General Meeting
- December.....Board Meeting
- December Newsletter
- January 18, 2012.....Annual Potluck

**INFORMATION**

Sacramento River Delta Historical Society web site is [srdhs.org](http://srdhs.org). Please view and enjoy the information. If you wish to email the resource center, the email address is [srdhs@riverdeltawireless.com](mailto:srdhs@riverdeltawireless.com).

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**CORRECTIONS TO PREVIOUS NEWSLETTERS**

December 2010 – page 2 - Sanford Dickey (not Stanford)  
 June 2004 – page 5 – Phipps (not Phillips)

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