



# Breaking the Motherhood Penalty: A Study on Coping Strategies of Chinese Career Women Based on Structuration Theory

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**Abstract.** Despite significant improvements in women's educational attainment and labor market participation worldwide, the motherhood penalty—manifested in wage loss, career stagnation, and identity devaluation—remains persistent.

Existing research has primarily documented the structural existence and magnitude of this penalty while paying limited attention to the subjective agency of working women and the concrete strategies they employ to mitigate its effects.

Addressing this gap, this study investigates how working mothers actively cope with the motherhood penalty through family collaboration, workplace negotiation, and adaptive care arrangements. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates questionnaire data from Chinese career mothers aged 25–55 with in-depth interviews that explore underlying motivations, decision-making processes, and contextual constraints. The quantitative findings reveal distinct patterns in strategy adoption across occupational sectors and family structures, while qualitative evidence elucidates the practical logic through which women mobilize family resources and renegotiate professional identities under institutional and cultural pressures. By foregrounding women's subjective initiative and everyday practices, this study extends existing motherhood penalty research beyond outcome measurement toward process-oriented explanation.

The findings contribute to feminist labor studies by reconceptualizing working mothers not merely as passive recipients of structural disadvantage, but as active agents navigating and reshaping care-work boundaries, and they offer policy implications for more flexible workplace arrangements and family-supportive governance frameworks.

**Keywords:** Motherhood Penalty; Career Women; Structuration Theory.

## 1 Introduction

Globally, women's social status and career prospects have improved significantly. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that the average female tertiary education enrollment rate across its 38 member

countries reached 59%, which is 10 percentage points higher than the male rate of 49%. Women's labor force participation rate stood at 64.1% in 2022, and women held approximately 45% of professional and managerial positions. Despite this progress, the motherhood penalty remains pronounced. In the United States, research [1] found that mothers are six times less likely to receive hiring recommendations and receive competency ratings that are 10% lower than those of equally qualified childless women.

In China, despite women's increasing representation in high-skilled sectors such as healthcare, finance, and education, motherhood penalties persist. Existing studies have primarily documented the existence of the motherhood penalty but have rarely examined the specific and practical strategies that career mothers adopt to cope with it. This study brings together evidence of women's improving social and professional status alongside the continued persistence of motherhood penalties, highlighting the need to explore targeted coping strategies. It addresses this gap by focusing on the practical coping mechanisms used by Chinese career mothers. Understanding these strategies is critical for empowering women to sustain career development, informing family-friendly workplace reforms, and advancing gender equality in the labor market.

This study focuses on identifying the specific proactive strategies adopted by Chinese career mothers to mitigate the motherhood penalty, taking into account factors such as job characteristics, family resources, and social norms. These factors jointly shape both the consequences of the motherhood penalty and the strategies used to address it. Central to this inquiry is an analysis of how Chinese career women exercise agency in selecting coping strategies while interacting with and drawing support from spouses, family members, and broader social institutions. The study further examines how job characteristics and family resources influence the choice and effectiveness of these strategies, as well as the degree of support available across individual, workplace, and societal dimensions. Job variation plays a particularly important role in shaping women's responses to the motherhood penalty. Coping strategies include, but are not limited to, job transfers, resignation, career interruption, the use of public or private childcare services, applications for flexible work arrangements, negotiation with employers for career continuity support, and reliance on spousal, family, or social policy support.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do career mothers perceive and experience the motherhood penalty in workplace and family contexts?

RQ2: What coping strategies do career mothers adopt to negotiate motherhood-related disadvantages, and how are these strategies shaped by family support and workplace conditions?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Motherhood Penalty

The motherhood penalty was first proposed by [2]. It specifically refers to the systematic unfair treatment that mothers face in the workplace due to their childcare responsibilities. Research [3] further refined this concept, pointing out that the motherhood penalty is mainly reflected in two dimensions: lower wages and fewer career development opportunities. This disadvantage is a direct career consequence of childbirth, rather than a result of differences in individual abilities. With the deepening of research, scholars have found that the connotation of the motherhood penalty has been further expanded. It includes not only explicit occupational disadvantages such as wage cuts and blocked promotions, but also hidden impacts, such as weakened family power, devaluation of professional skills, and the negative effects of accumulated psychological pressure on women's physical and mental health [4].

The formation of the motherhood penalty is the result of the interplay of multiple factors. Among these, economic factors are important driving forces, which interact with social cognition, workplace norms and other elements to jointly lead to the phenomenon of motherhood penalty. From the perspective of economic factors, the structural substitutability mechanism suggests that employers implicitly assess employees' "substitutability" in recruitment and promotion decisions. Working mothers may need to take temporary leave, work fewer overtime hours, or prefer flexible positions due to childcare duties, thus being regarded as a group with "high replacement costs" ([5]; [6]). In industries that require long working hours, fixed schedules and heavy workloads, mothers find it hard to meet the working time requirements because of childcare responsibilities, and thus suffer from a more severe motherhood penalty [7]. In addition, the human capital loss theory, which focuses on individual workers, holds that mothers' career interruptions and reduced labor force participation caused by childbirth and childcare will directly damage their human capital accumulation [3]. Such losses have a "cumulative effect": the longer the childcare period, the more serious the human capital loss, and the more significant the impact of the motherhood penalty ([3]; [2]). On the basis of economic factors, social cognition and workplace norms further reinforce the causes of the motherhood penalty. The traditional gender role concept of "men work outside and women take care of the family"[8], often closely binds the role of "mother" to "family caregiver" rather than "career participant" ([1]; [9]). This assumption categorizes mothers as a status group with "low occupational value". Even if they have the same educational background, abilities and work experience as childless women, mothers still have fewer opportunities to be hired or promoted [10].

The impacts of the motherhood penalty are multidimensional: wage reduction is the most direct manifestation. The reason is that after childbirth, women may work fewer hours or be questioned about their work commitment due to childcare responsibilities, or fail to update their skills in time because of career interruptions. These factors lead employers to lower their evaluation of women's labor value [1], and

thus offer working mothers lower salaries [10]. In addition, childbirth often changes women's labor force participation status, which in turn leads to a decline in employment quality (Kleven et al., 2019). Some women may temporarily withdraw from the labor market; when they re-enter the workplace later, they find it hard to return to their original positions due to career gaps, and have to accept jobs with lower salaries and fewer development opportunities [5], which harms their long-term career competitiveness [3]. Lack of promotion opportunities is also a key manifestation of the motherhood penalty [1]. Mothers are more likely to work in "female-dominated occupations" with low salaries and limited promotion prospects, and find it difficult to enter management or core technical positions ([11]; [12]).

Although existing research has established a foundational theoretical framework for understanding the motherhood penalty, significant gaps remain. In particular, prior studies have paid insufficient attention to the subjective agency of working women in coping with the motherhood penalty and have not adequately examined the practical mechanisms and effectiveness of women's proactive strategies—such as family collaboration and workplace advocacy—in mitigating its impact. Addressing these gaps, the present study focuses on the subjective coping practices of working women and provides more targeted theoretical insights and empirical evidence to inform efforts aimed at reconciling the tension between childbirth and career development.

## 2.2 The Establishment and Limitations of a Family Collaboration System

In this study, the underlying logic of family collaboration system construction for working women, the roles of key participants, and the allocation and adaptation of caregiving resources are examined. At the same time, it analyzes the structural limitations and practical dilemmas encountered in the operation of these systems, thereby revealing the foundational role of family collaboration in mitigating the motherhood penalty.

As the core carrier of childcare responsibilities, the quality of family collaboration directly determines the basic conditions for working women to cope with the motherhood penalty [9]. The core logic for working women to promote their partners' participation in childcare is to distribute childcare responsibilities according to their partners' job nature and time flexibility, so as to avoid the entire childcare pressure falling on mothers. This equal division of labor model breaks the traditional perception that childcare is an exclusive responsibility of women, and it is the core demand of shared responsibility in gender equality theory [13]. For partners who are busy with work and have fixed schedules, mothers reduce the cost of temporary coordination by defining "fixed tasks". "He sends the elder child to junior high school, while I feed the younger one and take him to the elderly's place; in the evening, he cooks, and I accompany the children to do homework and play, then put them to bed at 9 o'clock. If I have to work overtime, he will attend the children's parent-teacher meetings." (Wang Min, Administrative Supervisor) Although this division of labor model does not achieve absolute equality in family and childcare responsibilities, it clarifies the content of partners' participation through task concretization

and improves the efficiency of their participation. By calculating costs and benefits, working women choose the most feasible division of labor plan to achieve a balance between family and work [3]. The interviewed mothers generally emphasized that their partners' participation is not "helping out" but a responsibility. This conceptual transformation is the core premise for building an equal division of labor system. "I think making men truly participate in childcare, not just 'helping out', is their responsibility, not charity." (Sun Wen, Lawyer) Essentially, this conceptual transformation is a reconstruction of the connotation of the "father" role. It incorporates "caregiver" into the core role position- ing of fathers, instead of the traditional single role of "economic provider", which creates conditions for working women to spare more energy for work [14].

### 3 Theoretical Framing

This research is based on Giddens' structuration theory [17], which suggests that there is a two-way interaction between social structure and individual agency: structure shapes individuals' actions, while being continuously reproduced and changed by those actions. This theoretical framework is closely aligned with the core research question of the study: how Chinese career women negotiate and interact with gendered social structures in the context of the motherhood penalty, and through what mechanisms their proactive coping practices reshape existing structural constraints. By foregrounding this question and adopting structuration theory as the primary analytical lens, the study makes a substantive theoretical contribution.

The findings also demonstrate clear practical value for multiple stakeholders. For workplaces, the study identifies transferable practices that can help reduce the loss of talented mothers. For policymakers, it provides evidence-based recommendations for the development of family-friendly policies and for strengthening the enforcement of anti-discrimination measures. At the societal level, the research indirectly addresses China's declining fertility rate and persistent gender wealth gap by identifying effective strategies to alleviate childbearing anxiety. In doing so, it links gender equality with population sustainability while challenging entrenched "ideal mother" stereotypes and promoting more equitable caregiving norms. At the same time, Chinese cultural traditions and structural constraints on women's social roles shape the distinctive coping strategies adopted by Chinese women.

From the perspective of Giddens' duality of structure theory [17], the construction of a family collaboration system reflects the initiative of working women in actively reconstructing the family division of labor structure, while it is also restricted by objective structures such as traditional gender culture and intergenerational differences. The division of labor between husband and wife breaks the constraints of the traditional "men work outside and women take care of the family" structure. The adaptive role of grandparental support forms an effective supplement based on the traditional Chinese culture of intergenerational mutual assistance. The phased and

dynamic adaptation of care resources and proactive communication strategies further demonstrate working women's active regulatory ability in the family structure.

## 4 Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to address the research objectives. The mixed-methods approach enables the study to integrate quantitative breadth with qualitative depth. Specifically, questionnaire data are used to capture overall patterns in career mothers' experiences of the motherhood penalty and their adoption of coping strategies, while interview data provide deeper insights into the underlying motivations, decision-making processes, and contextual interactions shaping these practices.

To establish a foundation for empirical analysis, a structured questionnaire was designed and distributed to Chinese career mothers aged 25–55 who had at least one child. The questionnaire focused on core dimensions including perceptions of gender-based workplace challenges, manifestations of unequal treatment following childbirth, and self-reported coping strategies. Data collection was conducted through a combination of online platforms and offline community channels. In total, 25 valid questionnaires were collected, and all participant information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance.

Building on the questionnaire data, purposive sampling was employed to select two participants for in-depth interviews. Selection criteria emphasized diversity in occupational backgrounds and childcare support arrangements in order to capture variation in lived experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and was conducted in a private location chosen by the participant to ensure comfort and openness. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy.

The interview guide was developed based on the questionnaire dimensions and the study's research questions. It covered key topics such as participants' concrete experiences of the motherhood penalty, career-related decision-making following childbirth, coping strategies adopted in both family and workplace contexts, and the roles of spousal, extended family, and broader social support systems. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized using pseudonyms. The data were then analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to strategy selection, coordination of support resources, and the expression of individual agency.

This study is designed as an exploratory investigation rather than a generalizable survey, aiming to provide in-depth insights into career mothers' coping practices under specific social and institutional contexts.

## 5 Results

An examination is undertaken in this chapter of the specific practical strategies adopted by working women to cope with workplace identity depletion. From

three dimensions—maintaining workplace connections, breaking occupational prejudices, and reconciling work-family conflicts—it explains how working women, as active agents with initiative, break through the workplace limitations brought by the "mother" identity and avoid career development depletion.

### **5.1 Shorten Career Interruptions and Maintain Workplace Connections**

Most interviewed mothers try to avoid or shorten career interruptions to minimize the impact of childbirth on their careers. Career interruption is a key mechanism leading to the motherhood wage penalty, which will cause the interruption of human capital accumulation and thus damage career development prospects [2]. "Right after giving birth, my parents-in-law were in poor health, and my own parents didn't live in the same city, so I had to take care of the child myself. I didn't dare to return to work until the child was older and sent to a nursery. The interruption lasted about 5 months." (Sun Yue, Civil Servant) Even if forced to interrupt their careers, mothers will maintain connections with the workplace in various ways to prepare for returning to work. This practice reflects the "forward-looking planning" of working women and can effectively reduce skill depreciation and the loss of professional networks. "When I was taking care of the baby at home, I would spend 1 hour every day reading industry reports and occasionally help my former colleagues handle some simple cases to avoid being disconnected from the workplace." (Ding Ning, Freelancer) Essentially, maintaining such workplace connections is the protection and accumulation of professional social capital, which can help working women quickly integrate into teams, regain job opportunities and join core work teams when they return to the workplace.

### **5.2 Break Workplace Biases and Proactively Seize Opportunities**

After returning to the workplace, some women may encounter the dilemma of "marginalization", such as being transferred from core positions, assigned trivial tasks, or excluded from important projects. This is implicit occupational discrimination caused by the "mother" identity [1], and mothers in high-skilled occupations face more significant barriers to promotion [12]. The implicit discrimination against mothers and the irreplaceability of women's skills have contradictory impacts, but in practice, they usually lead to blocked promotions for women and increased difficulties in returning to the workplace. To cope with this phenomenon, many women choose to "speak with their strength", proactively strive for core opportunities, and reshape employers' perceptions through performance output. This practice breaks the vicious cycle of ability doubts, evaluation downgrades and opportunity deprivation caused by implicit biases, reflecting the initiative of working women. By breaking the normative expectation that "mothers should balance family", the career penalty brought by motherhood can be alleviated. "When I returned to work after maternity leave, the chairman talked to me and said, 'The CFO is in charge of the company's entire funds. You still have a child at home. Do you want to go to

the financial manager position first? I took out the financial statements and cost optimization plans of the past three years to prove that I could balance work and family, and finally kept my position." (Tian Tian, Finance Staff). This proactive striving strategy has allowed some women to maintain the continuity of their career development while taking care of their children [16].

### 5.3 Flexibly Coordinate Conflicts and Reduce Work Loss

When work demands such as overtime and business trips conflict with childcare responsibilities, working women will prioritize "flexible coordination" over "passive abandonment". They reduce work loss caused by conflicts through the dual paths of "work-side adjustment" and "family-side supplementation". This strategy reflects working women's "boundary management" ability and can effectively balance the needs of the two domains of work and family. Work-side adjustment is mainly manifested in negotiating with colleagues and leaders to adjust working hours or task forms. "There was an out-of-town case, but there was an emergency with my child at the same time, so I negotiated with the other party to reschedule the meeting time." (Sun Wen, Lawyer) Family-side supplementation relies on the sharing of responsibilities by partners. "If I have to work overtime, I ask my husband to attend the child's parent-teacher meeting; when the child is sick, he is responsible for taking the child to the hospital, and I handle urgent work." (Wang Min, Administrative Supervisor) Only in emergency situations such as the child being ill will mothers choose to take leave. After taking leave, they will actively make up for the work loss to avoid workplace discrimination caused by "frequent leave". This flexible coordination method not only reduces the impact on work but also conveys a professional signal of "responsibility and high commitment" to employers, which can effectively reduce the negative evaluation brought by the "mother" identity.

### 5.4 Proactive Striving for Workplace Rights and Interests

Proactive striving for workplace rights and interests is a core link for working women to cope with the motherhood penalty. This chapter focuses on the core external institutional support demands of working women. From three dimensions—the improvement of policy-based nursery services, the optimization of workplace systems, and the promotion of fatherly participation—it explains the important role of social systems and the workplace environment in alleviating the motherhood penalty.

#### 5.4.1 Nursery Services: Reducing the Care Cost of Childbirth.

Insufficient nursery services and the mismatch between after-school care hours and off-work hours are the most strongly reflected problems by the interviewed mothers. In the questionnaire, most mothers listed "insufficient public nursery classes and high costs" as the biggest difficulty during the childcare period. They generally call for

increasing the supply of public nursery classes and reducing nursery costs. For dual-income families, the improvement of such services is particularly important. "Only after sending the child to a nursery class can I return to work with peace of mind. Otherwise, I have to hire a nanny, which is more costly and unreliable. With improved nursery services, we don't have to choose between 'taking care of the child' and 'going to work', and the risk of career interruption will be greatly reduced." (Chen Xi, Lawyer) Essentially, improved nursery services make up for the shortage of family care resources through institutional supply, reduce the childbirth and care costs of working women, and remove basic obstacles for their career development.

#### **5.4.2 Workplace Systems: Safeguarding Equal Development Rights.**

Working women's demands for workplace systems mainly focus on two aspects: flexible work arrangements and fair career treatment. They generally hope that enterprises can introduce a flexible work system. "When children are young, it is necessary to flexibly adjust working hours to avoid being late or leaving early due to sending children to school or handling sudden childcare needs." (Zhang Li, Finance Staff) For high-intensity occupations such as lawyers and finance, they also hope for "flexible work tasks". "For example, replacing some business trips with remote meetings, and law firms having flexible court times, so that we don't always have to go on business trips when children are out of school or ill." (Chen Xi, Lawyer) At the same time, they call for the elimination of identity discrimination in the workplace. "I hope enterprises can design a return mechanism to allow post-partum women to gradually return to core positions. When evaluating professional titles and promoting, only work performance should be considered, instead of lowering expectations for us just because we 'have children'." (Tian Tian, Finance Staff) The core of optimizing workplace systems lies in breaking the single standard of the "ideal worker", constructing an inclusive workplace structure, and safeguarding the equal development rights of working women.

#### **5.4.3 Gender Equality: Institutional Design for Promoting Fatherly Participation.**

The interviewed mothers generally believe that one of the fundamental ways to alleviate the motherhood penalty is to promote men's participation in childcare through policy and institutional design, and change the traditional concept that "childcare is a woman's responsibility". They strongly call for extending men's paternity leave and even promoting "compulsory paternity leave". "In many families now, husbands only have a few short days of paternity leave, which is basically useless. If husbands can take several more months of leave, it will not only relieve my childcare pressure, but also allow children to see their parents sharing responsibilities since childhood, which is crucial for character development." (Zhang Li, Finance Staff) They believe that men's participation in childcare can not only reduce women's pressure, but also fundamentally balance family division of labor and reduce the occupational limitations faced by women due to their identity as the "main childcare

provider". Essentially, the institutional design to promote fatherly participation re-constructs the gender structure of family division of labor through institutional forces, thereby alleviating the motherhood penalty at its root.

### **5.5 Important Supplement: The Adaptive Role of Grandparental Support**

Within China's traditional family culture of intergenerational mutual assistance, grandparents play a crucial role in the family-based childcare support system. The convenience of grandparental care and their geographical proximity to adult children directly shape whether working women are able to maintain career continuity. The involvement of grandparents allows working mothers to withdraw from time-consuming childcare tasks and devote greater energy to their professional roles. As one interviewee explained:

"My child has lived with my parents since she was very young. Before she started school, her washing and breakfast were all arranged by the elders. I was only responsible for supervising her homework and taking her out to play after work in the evening. The elders handled all the trivial matters, such as cooking and picking her up and dropping her off." (Zhang Li, finance staff)

This form of support enabled Zhang Li to minimize family-related concerns during working hours and maintain focus on her job.

### **5.6 Dynamic Adjustment: Phased Adaptation of Care Resources**

There are significant differences in childcare needs at different stages of a child's growth, and working women will flexibly choose childcare models accordingly [15]. During children's early childhood, the high frequency and intensive nature of caregiving demand lead most mothers to prioritize reliance on support from older family members. This preference is driven not only by the emotional bonds of intergenerational affection but also by considerations of economic cost. As one interviewee explained:

"The elders helped take care of my child before he turned three. After he entered kindergarten, my husband and I assumed primary caregiving responsibilities. I felt much more at ease when the elders were involved." (Gao Jing, teacher)

For dual-income households, the economic advantages of elder-provided care are particularly evident. Another participant noted:

"A nanny's monthly fee would take up nearly half of my salary. Having the elders help relieved a great deal of financial pressure." (Tian Tian, finance staff)

## **6 Conclusions and Discussions**

### **6.1 Consolidation of Findings**

Based on Giddens' Duality of Structure theory, this study adopts a mixed research method combining questionnaires and in-depth interviews to explore the practical strategies, internal driving factors, and external influences of contemporary Chinese working women in breaking through the motherhood penalty. The core conclusions drawn from the study indicate that the elimination of the motherhood penalty is not based on the one-way individual resistance of female subjectivity or purely external structural changes, but rather the result of mutual influence, integration, and dynamic interplay between individual will and social structure. Individuals reshape structural rules through internal coordination and external striving, while society and structure shape individual choices through resources and constraints. The cyclical interaction between the two promotes the pattern of gender equality. This conclusion not only responds to the dualistic theoretical framework of "individual agency" and "structural constraints" in existing research but also provides an integrated analysis and guidance for structural reforms to solve the dilemma between childbirth and career development of working women. This process requires not only proactive actions at the individual level but also systematic support at the structural level, including the coordination of equal family values, inclusive workplace systems at the enterprise level, and improved public nursery services and equal policies for maternal return support at the social level. Only by combining individual feedback with structural reforms to achieve individual empowerment, structural optimization, and a virtuous cycle of two-way optimization can the dilemma between childbirth and career development of working women be truly resolved.

### **6.2 Contributions and Implications**

This study makes three key contributions to the existing literature on the motherhood penalty. First, rather than treating working mothers as passive recipients of structural disadvantage, this study foregrounds women's subjective agency by examining how career mothers actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to motherhood-related penalties in both workplace and family contexts. By shifting analytical attention from outcomes to coping practices, the study extends existing motherhood penalty research beyond predominantly outcome-oriented and structural explanations.

Second, this study identifies and categorizes concrete coping strategies adopted by career mothers, including family collaboration, workplace negotiation, and the mobilization of social support networks. Through a mixed-methods design that combines questionnaire data with in-depth interviews, the study elucidates how these strategies are shaped by occupational conditions and childcare support arrangements, thereby revealing the contextualized and relational nature of women's responses to motherhood penalties.

Third, this study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of a mixed-methods exploratory approach for capturing both broad patterns and lived ex-

periences of motherhood-related inequality in the Chinese context. By integrating quantitative pattern identification with qualitative accounts of decision-making and motivation, the study provides empirically grounded insights that complement existing large-scale or purely quantitative studies and offers a nuanced perspective on how agency operates under structural constraints.

### 6.3 Limitations of This Study and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is primarily based on existing literature and theoretical discussion rather than original empirical data, which limits its ability to capture the lived experiences of women facing the motherhood penalty in specific social contexts. Second, the discussion focuses mainly on generalized patterns of gender inequality and does not sufficiently account for variations across countries, industries, or socioeconomic groups. As a result, the applicability of the findings may be constrained.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating empirical methods such as surveys, interviews, or longitudinal data analysis to examine how women experience and cope with the motherhood penalty in diverse settings. Comparative studies across different institutional and cultural contexts would also help to identify how policy frameworks and workplace norms shape the effectiveness of coping strategies. Additionally, future studies may explore the role of fathers, organizational actors, and broader welfare systems to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the motherhood penalty can be reduced at both structural and societal levels.

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