

# Are Migrant Workers Willing to Transfer Their Hukou to Cities? Evidence from China

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## Abstract

Household registration system is a unique management system in China. The rights of people to enjoy public services and social welfare are largely determined by their Hukou. How to promote the Migrant Workers to transfer their hukou to cities has been the key to promote the urbanization process of China. Based on the Dynamic monitoring data of floating population of National Health Commission and the data of the National Bureau of Statistics. Studies shows that: The overall willingness of the Migrant Worker to transfer their Hukou to cities is weak, and the imbalance between regions is obvious. The level of regional development has a significant effect on the Migrants' willingness to transfer Hukou. The trend of family-oriented migration makes the willingness of Migrant Workers to transfer their Hukou to cities more affected by non-economic factors. Further research shows that the level of regional development influences the willingness to transfer Hukou through the ability to provide public services and social welfare. When migrant workers in the eastern transfer their Hukou to cities, social factors such as education, health care, culture and ecological environment are considered more than economic factors such as employment and income, while people in central and western regions are still more influenced by economic factors.

## Keywords

Migrant Workers; Hukou; Household registration system; The willingness of; The level of regional development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the national new urbanization plan (2014-2020), the dual goals of urbanization rate of permanent resident population and registered population were clearly proposed for the first time. That is, by 2020, the urbanization rate of permanent resident population will reach about 60%, and the urbanization rate of registered population will reach about 45%. China's urbanization will fully enter a new stage that centers on people's urbanization and focuses on improving the quality of urbanization. Over the past five years, China's urbanization rate has increased by an average of 1.2 percentage points annually, and over 80 million rural residents have become urban residents. However, in the process of continuous improvement of urbanization level, China still faces the contradiction that the urbanization of registered population lags behind the urbanization of permanent resident population. In 2018, the difference between the urbanization rate of permanent residents and the urbanization rate of registered residents was 16.21 percentage points. The reason is that migrant workers live in cities but do not move their Hukou to cities and do not enjoy the social security benefits of the local population. Because the provision of urban public services in China is still linked to household registration. This leads to migrant workers in a state of "semi-urbanization". In

addition, with the increasing trend of family-oriented migration, the demand of migrant workers for public services such as education and medical care in the destination areas has been significantly increased. Therefore, to take the "new urbanization road" and improve the quality of urbanization, it is necessary to improve the urbanization rate of registered population and complete the transformation of migrant workers from long-term residence in cities to transfer their Hukou to cities.

"Man struggles upwards" reflects the historical pattern of migration to developed areas. This is also evidenced by the fact that migrant workers continue to gather in metropolitan areas, large cities and regional centers. However, migrant workers settling in the city does not mean that their Hukou is transferred to the city. We must see that the aspirations and demands of migrant workers to move their Hukou to cities have not been fully realized and satisfied. The reality shows that under the background of strict control in big cities, the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to the city remains high, restrictions have been lifted in smaller cities, but the effect of migrant workers transferring their Hukou to the city has been unsatisfactory. It seems that the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou is affected by the size of cities, but in fact, the level of regional development is playing an internal mechanism role, which determines the attitude and behavior of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to cities. The development level of a region determines its administrative level. The higher the administrative level, the more "cake" it gets. The prerequisite for migrant workers to get the "cake" is to get the urban hukou. Because, the household registration system in China makes the Hukou not only have the function of identification, but also assume the function of social management, which is directly linked with housing, medical care, education, social security and other resources. Hukou is of great value, which is fundamentally determined by the level of regional development. Migrant workers transfer Hukou to cities in order to obtain the right of enjoying urban public resources, which explains why people prefer to migrate Hukou to big cities instead of small and medium-sized cities.

Based on the above considerations, this study focuses on the comprehensive variable of regional development level, and measures the regional development level of the destination from four perspectives of economy, society, culture and ecology. Based on the analysis of the spatial distribution, characteristics and trends of migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou, this paper discusses the impact of unbalanced regional development on migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou. This will help us understand and analyze the current situation and causes that the urbanization rate of registered population is not optimistic and some migrant workers are not enthusiastic about transfer Hukou to cities. Meanwhile, it will provide an empirical basis for the selection of new urbanization model in China.

## 2. THEORY AND MECHANISM

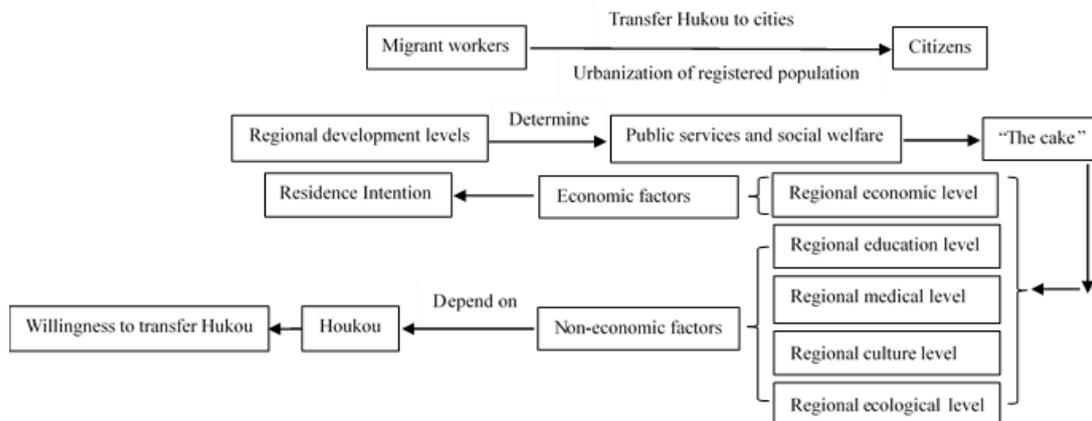
Population migration is a classic topic in academic research, and the three related decisions include whether to migrate, whether to permanently migrate and whether to transfer Hukou. At present, academic researches on migration motivation focus on two categories. One is to analyze the relationship between wages, employment, expected income and population migration from the perspective of economic rationality (Keith,1993; Borjas,1994; Raa & Pan,2005). The other is from the perspective of social rationality to study the impact of social environment on population mobility in areas such as social welfare, training system, living conditions, natural environment, policy system and race (Korpi & Mertens,2003; Shrestha & Bhandari,2007; Sagynbekova,2017). Classical push and pull theory and cost-benefit analysis theory also believe that climate, education, opportunity cost, psychological cost and other non-economic factors are important drivers of population migration (Stark & Bloom,1985). Classical push and pull theory and cost-benefit analysis theory also believe that climate, education,

opportunity cost, psychological cost and other non-economic factors are important drivers of population migration (Saiz,2007; Gonzalez & Ortega,2009).The research on the influencing factors and mechanism of population migration by scholars is summarized, and the conclusions are focused on micro and macro factors. In terms of micro-mechanism research, it covers variables such as age, gender, education level, marital status, occupation type, and various factors such as parental mobility experience, family income, land resource endowment and so on(Rayya & Motkal,2009; Chapman,1978; Hugo,1982; Nelson,1976).In terms of macro mechanism research factors, scholars analyzed the impact of economic income, wage income gap, housing price, supply difference of urban public services, educational resources, social security, social integration, traditional customs and other factors on migration(Brasington & Hite,2005; Plug & Vijverberg,2005; Potepan,1994).

The above academic research has provided an important reference for this paper to discuss the level of regional development and migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou, but there are some shortcomings. From the perspective of regional development level, this paper analyzes the mechanism between unbalanced regional development and the willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou to the cities (refer to figure 1), in order to make contributions and innovations. First, the urbanization rate of registered population directly reflects the level of urbanization, and the urbanization of permanent resident population is an "incomplete urbanization". The real meaning of urbanization is that migrant workers transfer Hukou to cities and enjoy equal access to urban public resources. Therefore, the core issue of this paper focuses on migrant workers' migration of Hukou to the city rather than residence in the city.

Moreover, only from the perspective of income and employment and other economic factors, the analysis of the impact on migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou is relatively weak in explaining the reality. Because the labor force is constantly moving and moving, the place where they work and the place where their Hukou is located can be separated geographically. High income and more employment opportunities encourage migrant workers to live in cities (refer to figure 1). However, whether migrant workers transfer their Hukou to cities depends on the value of urban Hukou. They pay more attention to the overall development level of areas including society, culture and ecology, such as education, medical care, social security, living conditions and natural environment.

Finally, there have been studies on the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to cities through questionnaires in some provinces and cities, but the conclusions are not consistent. This reflects regional differences in the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to the city. Further, from the perspective of reality, under the dual effects of internal conditions such as location and resources, as well as external factors such as macro policies and development opportunities, the imbalance of China's urbanization level is increasingly serious, which also shows that the population's attitude and behavior of transferring their Hukou to cities are different from regions. On the one hand, affected by unbalanced regional development, a new binary division has been formed between regions. The more developed a region is, the stronger its ability to provide public services such as medical care, education, culture and social security will be. Conversely, the less developed areas above the service supply capacity is obviously weak, the smaller the value of the Hukou. Therefore, the level of regional development directly determines the value of Hukou, and the difference between these Hukou values directly determines the willingness of the population to transfer their Hukou to cities (refer to figure 1). On the other hand, the continuous expansion and agglomeration in the process of urbanization leads to a series of "urban diseases" in some cities, such as air pollution, traffic congestion and housing shortage, which affect people's quality of life in the city. The above two points lead to new changes and demands in the willingness and choice of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to the city, and the level of regional development, as a comprehensive factor, becomes an important reference basis for migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to the city.



**Figure 1.** Mechanism analysis of regional development level and migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou to cities

### 3. DISTRIBUTION AND CHARACTERISTICS

The data selected in this paper are from the 2016 national health and health commission dynamic monitoring survey of floating population and provincial data of the National Bureau of Statistics. Considering the specific content of this study and the feasibility of data analysis, this paper selected groups with agricultural household registration and inter-provincial migration as samples. After screening effective data, the total number of samples in this paper was 65,734.

With the continuous promotion of urbanization, the internal structure of migrant workers has been sharply divided. The analysis of the differences in the willingness to transfer migrant workers' Hukou helps us to take their internal heterogeneity into full consideration when designing policies and formulate a practical system.

There are intergenerational, income and educational differences in migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou. According to table 1, the new generation of migrant workers is more willing to transfer Hukou to cities than the old generation, nearly 1.2 percentage points higher. The higher level of human capital enables the new generation of migrant workers to have better urban living ability than the old generation and show stronger willingness to transfer Hukou than the old generation. In other words, the new generation is more willing to live in the city and integrate into the city. The older generation is more willing to choose to return to the countryside, showing the state of "flow but not stay" and "flow but not transfer".

With the increase of the family income of migrant workers, their willingness to move is also reinforcing. The willingness of high-income families to move is 54.17%, far higher than 31.80% of low-income families. Transferring Hukou to cities means an increase in the cost of living, and the higher the income level, the stronger the willingness and ability to transferring Hukou to cities.

The higher the educational level of migrant workers, the stronger their willingness to move. Illiterate migrant workers' willingness to move accounts for 32.89%, which is not much different from those who have received compulsory education, but 24.04 percentage points lower than those who have received higher education. A large number of studies have also confirmed the positive relationship between education level and migrant workers settling in cities. The higher the level of education, the higher the human capital, and the employment is concentrated in the main labor market. Compared with the people in the secondary labor market, their employment is more stable, their wage level is higher, and they are more adaptable to urban life, so they have more willingness and ability to integrate into urban life.

**Table 1.** Group difference analysis of migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou

Group		willingness to transfer Hukou		
		Willing(person)	Unwilling(person)	The percentage of people who are willing (%)
Generational differences	The new generation	12229	20997	36.81
	The older generation	8533	15383	35.68
income difference	Low-income family	8379	17969	31.80
	Middle-income family	11507	17670	39.44
	High-income family	876	741	54.17
Education differences	illiteracy	313	683	32.89
	Compulsory education	13025	26797	32.71
	High school education	4732	6863	40.81
	Higher education	2692	2037	56.93

Note:1. According to the existing research results, the new generation and the old generation are divided according to the boundary of 1980. 2. According to the research results calculated by China comprehensive social survey data (CGSS) and Chinese family tracking survey data (CFPS), the annual household income of 69,000-236,000 yuan is regarded as the definition standard of middle income group, lower than this standard is low-income family, higher than this standard is high-income family.

## 4. QUANTITATIVE MODEL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### 4.1. Variable Selection and Model Construction

According to the existing academic studies and the availability of data, "are you willing to transfer your Hukou to the local area" in the questionnaire is selected as the dependent variable. Those who have the willingness to transfer Hukou are denoted by 1, while those who have no willingness to transfer Hukou are denoted by 0. In this paper, only migrant workers who migrate across provinces are taken as samples.

In this paper, regional macro indicators such as economic level, education level, medical level, cultural level and ecological environment are selected for analysis to comprehensively reflect the overall development level of the region (Massey,1987; Khraif,1992). Economic level determines the level of wage income, which will have an impact on the willingness to migrate. Per capita disposable income reflects people's living standard. Therefore, the variable of disposable income is selected to measure the economic level of the destination. The influence of educational factors on population migration has been generally verified by the academic circles. In particular, the development of higher education reflects the overall level of educational resources in the region to a certain extent. The enrollment number becomes an important reference variable when people settle down. Therefore, the average number of students in colleges and universities per 10,000 population is selected as the reflection of the education level of the destination.

In terms of medical security level, the number of health technicians per 10,000 people is selected as the proxy variable. In terms of cultural level, the amount of public library collections

per capita is selected as a proxy variable to discuss the impact on Hukou registration migration. The ecological environment of the region, especially the air quality, has gradually become an important driving force of population movement and migration. As the main source of air pollution, the emission of smoke (dust) affects the air quality of the whole region, and even the ecological environment. Therefore, it is selected as the proxy variable of the ecological environment of the destination.

Due to the differences in individual characteristics and living background of the population, there will be different influences on the intention of Hukou registration migration. Therefore, relevant demographic characteristic variables are introduced in the process of model establishment to analyze the difference in the intention of Hukou transfer with different characteristics (Table 4). The model is set as follows:

**Table 2.** Variable selection and description

	variable	Average (Standard deviation)	Variable description
Dependent variable	Willingness to transfer Hukou	0.36 (0.48)	Are you willing to transfer your Hukou to the local area Willing =1, no willing =0
Independent Variables	Sex	0.54 (0.50)	Male =1, female =0
Individual characteristics	Age	35.09 (9.66)	age
	Age squared	1324.96 (711.11)	Age squared
	Education level	9.48 (2.76)	Illiteracy=0, Primary school=6, junior middle school=9, senior high school =12, junior college student=15, Undergraduate=16, Postgraduate=19
Family characteristics	The number of children	1.45 (0.74)	The number of children
	family income	8.67 (0.55)	family income
Economic factors	Regional economic level	10.12 (0.40)	Annual Discretionary Income per person(yuan/person)
non-economic factors	Regional education level	10.17 (0.30)	The average number of college students per 10000 people(person)
	Regional medical level	8.24 (1.08)	The average number of urban health technicians per 10000 people(person)
	Regional culture level	6.63 (0.56)	The average number of books in public library per person(book/person)
	Regional ecological level	12.49 (1.07)	Emission of smoke (powder) dust(ton)

Note: The standard deviation of household income and some macro variables is much larger than the average, so we take the logarithm of the variables.

$$\ln\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i + u_i \quad (i=1, 2, \dots, n) \tag{1}$$

$$p = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_i + u_i)}} \tag{2}$$

In the formula, p represents the probability of migrant workers' willingness to transfer.  $x_i$  is the independent variable,  $\beta_i$  is the coefficient,  $u_i$  is the random disturbance term. Spearman collinearity test was carried out in this paper to eliminate the collinearity among the variables, and it was found that there was no significant collinearity among the variables. Table 2 shows the specific description and processing process of each variable.

### 4.2. Analysis of Empirical Results

#### (1) full-sample regression model analysis

In order to explore the influence of regional development level on the Hukou registration transfer of migrant workers, regression analysis is made to distinguish and analyze the different effects of economic and non-economic factors in the variables of regional development level.

**Table 3.** Analysis of influencing factors of migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou

Variable	Model (1)	Model (2)	Model (3)
Sex	-0.168*** (0.020)	-0.142*** (0.020)	-0.134*** (0.021)
Age	0.077*** (0.009)	0.098*** (0.010)	0.081*** (0.010)
Age squared	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)
Education level	0.103*** (0.004)	0.108*** (0.004)	0.100*** (0.004)
Number of children	-0.141*** (0.014)	-0.155*** (0.015)	-0.074*** (0.015)
family income	0.287*** (0.022)	0.055** (0.022)	0.079*** (0.022)
Regional economic level		0.635*** (0.027)	0.123** (0.059)
Regional education level			0.252*** (0.050)
Regional medical level			0.376*** (0.062)
Regional culture level			0.107*** (0.036)
Regional ecological level			-0.243*** (0.012)
Constant term	-5.318*** (0.251)	-20.410*** (0.357)	-15.015*** (0.457)
Number of samples	48545	48545	48545
R2	0.022	0.187	0.115

Note: \*, \*\*, \*\*\* mean significant at the confidence level of 10%, 5% and 1% respectively, the same as below.

Model 1 shows that without considering the variable of regional development level, there is a significant negative correlation between gender, number of children and willingness to transfer. On the contrary, there is a significant positive correlation between the variables such as education level, family income and the willingness to transfer. Model 2 only considers the role of economic factors in the regional development level. The results show that there is a significant positive correlation between the income level of the region and the willingness of the migrant workers to move. This means that the higher the level of economic development is, the more people will be willing to settle down here. In model 3, considering the influence of non-economic factors on household relocation intention, it can be seen that regional income level still presents a significant positive correlation, but its promoting effect on Hukou transfer intention is significantly weakened. However, there is a significant positive correlation between educational level, medical level, educational level and the willingness to transfer. The ecological environment (dust emission) shows a significant negative correlation, which indicates that the social factors such as education, medical treatment, culture and ecological environment are considered more than the economic factors such as employment and income when the migrant workers settles down in cities.

## (2) Analysis of different regions

There are regional differences in the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou, and it is because of the regional differences that the influencing factors of the willingness to transfer their Hukou play different roles in different regions. Based on the spatial distribution analysis of migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou in table 1, the samples were divided into three parts according to the eastern, central and western regions to make regression respectively, in order to conduct a comparative study on the influencing factors of migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou in different regions. It is beneficial for us to discover the differences between different regions and promote migrant workers to transfer their Hukou to cities according to local conditions.

According to the regression results presented in table 4, we can find that:

The sample of model 1 represents migrant workers in the eastern region. The regression results show that there is no significant correlation between the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou and the income level in the regional development level, but there is a significant positive correlation between the willingness and education and culture. There is a significant negative correlation between the ecological environment with smoke (dust) emission as the proxy variable and the willingness to transfer Hukou. The above shows that in the economically developed eastern region, non-economic factors such as education, medical care, culture and ecological environment have a greater impact on the willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou than economic factors. Because the eastern region has a high level of economic development and the income level of migrant workers is relatively high, social resources and public services are particularly important at this time.

The sample of model 2 represents migrant workers in the central region. The regression results show that the income level in the regional development level has a significant positive correlation with the willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou, while the education and cultural level has no significant correlation with the willingness to transfer Hukou. The economic factors in the regional development level have a greater impact on migrant workers' willingness to transfer Hukou than the non-economic factors such as education, medical care, culture and ecological environment. But, it is worth noting that there is a significant positive correlation between the ecological environment with smoke (dust) emission as the proxy variable and the willingness to transfer Hukou. In the central region, the economy is relatively underdeveloped and higher income is the most important thing, while the high income areas in the central region are concentrated in industrial cities and the smoke (dust) emission is

relatively large, which explains that there is a significant positive correlation between the ecological environment with smoke (dust) emission as the proxy variable and the willingness to transfer Hukou.

The sample of model 3 represents migrant workers in the western region. The regression results show that income, education, medical care and cultural level in the regional development level all has significant positive correlation with migrant workers' willingness to transfer their Hukou, and the ecological environment with smoke (dust) emission as the proxy variable continued to maintain a significant negative correlation with the willingness to transfer Hukou. That is, the better the environment is, the stronger the willingness of migrant workers to transfer their Hukou.

**Table 4.** Analysis of willingness of migrant workers in different regions to transfer their hukou to cities

Variable	Model (1) The Eastern region	Model (2) The Central region	Model (3) The Western region
Regional economic level	0.048 (0.111)	1.123*** (0.148)	0.932*** (0.207)
Regional education level	1.917*** (0.072)	-0.031 (0.612)	0.215** (0.0915)
Regional medical level	1.084*** (0.048)	0.573** (0.135)	0.287*** (0.037)
Regional culture level	0.503*** (0.052)	0.208 (0.311)	0.667*** (0.0744)
Regional ecological level	-0.230*** (0.016)	0.602*** (0.102)	-0.142*** (0.0298)
Other variables control			
Constant term	-22.001*** (0.935)	-70.538*** (11.957)	-13.27*** (1.574)
Number of samples	30173	5206	13166
R2	0.243	0.115	0.163

### (3) Robustness test

According to the model in table 5, we can find that there is no significant difference in the influence of regional development level on residence intention and household relocation intention. There is a significant positive correlation between the regional economy, education and cultural level and the residence intention of migrant workers in the destination area, and a significant negative correlation between the ecological environment with smoke (dust) emission as the proxy variable. According to the model in table 6, we can find that there is no significant difference in the influence of regional development level on migrant workers' residence intention and willingness to transfer Hukou. There is a significant positive correlation between the regional economy, education and cultural level and the residence intention of migrant workers in the destination area, and a significant negative correlation between the ecological environment with smoke (dust) emission as the proxy variable. At the same time, the

influence of economic factors on residence intention is greater than that on willingness to transfer Hukou. In addition, according to the OLS estimation results, the relationship between regional development level and migrant workers' willingness to transfer their Hukou was also verified, and the regression results were consistent with Logistic regression results, indicating the robustness of the whole model.

**Table 5.** Regression analysis of factors influencing Settlement intention and OLS linear regression analysis

Variable	Settlement Intention	OLS linear regression
Regional economic level	1.065*** (0.054)	0.026** (0.012)
Regional education level	1.181*** (0.045)	0.253*** (0.010)
Regional medical level	0.763*** (0.017)	0.326*** (0.251)
Regional culture level	0.607*** (0.032)	0.131*** (0.007)
Regional ecological level	-0.138*** (0.010)	-0.053*** (0.002)
Other variables	Control	Control
Constant term	-9.852*** (0.374)	-2.691*** (0.087)
Number of samples	55353	48545
R2	0.033	0.147

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICIES

This paper discusses the willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou to cities from the perspective of regional development level. Empirical findings show promoting migrant workers to transfer Hukou to cities is the main way to improve the urbanization rate of registered population. However, the overall willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou to their destination areas is not high. There is a significant positive correlation between the willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou and the level of regional development. Most migrant workers have the strongest willingness to transfer Hukou to large cities and urban agglomerations of the eastern coastal region, which shows the effect and capacity of urban agglomerations in attracting population to settle down in the region. Under the influence of family-oriented migration, the willingness of migrant workers to transfer Hukou to cities is more influenced by non-economic factors. Under the influence of unbalanced regional development, Regions and cities emerges divisions, forming a new Binary segmentation structure, which is showed in the supply capacity of public services. However, the Hukou is precisely linked to the acquisition of urban public services. The difference in the "value" of the Hukou urges migrant workers to use the way of "vote with their feet" when transferring Hukou to cities.

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