

# Japanese Fireworks (Hanabi): The Ephemeral Nature and Symbolism

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*Abstract: Hanabi (lit. flower fire) were popularised and developed during the resplendent days of Edo and have come to hold cultural significance in Japan both in physical displays and metaphorically as a symbol of ephemeral beauty. Despite the obvious appreciation of physical beauty and a regard for the craftsmanship of Japanese fireworks; comprehensive information encompassing the development of fireworks culture in Japan, the history, and any intricate symbolism, is not widely known or appreciated within Japan, let alone abroad. Fireworks are claimed to have been introduced to Japan c1600, however, the fireworks tradition and culture seen throughout Japan today can largely be attributed to an honouring of tragic events when in 1733 fireworks were displayed on the Sumida River in Edo (now Tokyo) as part of a memorial service for the victims of starvation due to crop failures and plague, and an epidemic of cholera. This fireworks display inaugurated the “Ryōgoku Kawabiraki Hanabi” (Ryōgoku River-Opening Fireworks) in which only 20 fireworks were displayed. Further absorption of fireworks into Japanese culture has led to the numerous variety of small and large scale displays dispersed across the country today. Aiding progression, Japan entered an era, under the Tokugawa shogunate, with near entirety of peace, that lasted for approximately 250 years and as a consequence, the necessity for gunnery was diminished. The usage of gunpowder throughout this time therefore had a different outcome as its purpose was redirected from aggressive power into a peaceful product that, correlating with Japanese aesthetics, could represent life and ephemeral beauty.*

Keywords: Hanabi, Fireworks, Edo Period, Sumida River, Gunpowder, Ephemeral, Japan

## Introduction

**F**IREWORKS ARE UNIVERSAL devices used in some capacity by nearly every country in the world. From firecrackers, to toy fireworks, to mass displays; fireworks manifest themselves in many shapes and forms, mesmerising and engaging observers for purposes of ceremony, celebration, and entertainment. Whilst spectators recurrently admire contemporary fireworks displays globally, the developmental origins of these mesmerising entities are largely overlooked. In light of this, the Japanese have contributed and influenced the global pyrotechnics stage significantly with numerous fireworks related innovations, many associated with the aesthetics of colour and design. The most common display fireworks used in the world today are known as peony and chrysanthemums, and whilst easily recognisable by their round blooms, their origin in 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan <sup>[1]</sup> remains largely unrecognised in the occident and, to a certain extent, within the global pyrotechnics industry itself.

The Japanese have a profound reverence towards fireworks which continues to support and promote the development of such innovative fireworks. Furthermore, this reverence

emanates from a long history of fireworks in Japan that has given rise to a unique fireworks culture, and an industry currently estimated to be in the billions of yen annually. <sup>[2]</sup> A number of separate thoughts arise as to why fireworks have been embraced so avidly by the Japanese; however, it is a combined contribution of notions that formulates the view taken in this paper.

In order for fireworks to progress successfully in Japan, particular circumstances had to be in accord, such as the availability of its primary component, gunpowder, and a favourable environment within which the craft could develop. After centuries of provincial wars for power, Japan finally came under unification due to the historical activities of Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu (who was eventually appointed the title of shogun). Under Tokugawa rule, Japan was fortunate an extended period of over 250 years with the absence of any major conflict. A new capital was established in Edo (the former name for Tokyo) and the Edo Period (1603 - 1868) was initiated, allowing an environment and circumstances favourable for the advancement of fireworks, such as the availability of gunpowder, a demand for culture in a developing city, and peace.

A series of events and an aggregation of possible opportune circumstances, however, is not necessarily enough to establish a culture, and thus, significant consideration should be given to the influence of traditional Japanese aesthetic principles and sentiments in the formation of this unique culture.

In Japanese, the term for fireworks is *hanabi* (literally: fire flower) arising from the two *kanji* (Chinese characters) 花 (*hana*) meaning 'flower' and 火 (*hi* or *bi*) meaning 'fire'. This association with flowers and fire automatically endears itself to the Japanese who culturally have a reverence towards nature, whilst the symbolism transcends the basic phenomena of the technical effect of fireworks. In 1888 Vincent Van Gogh stated "You see more with Japanese eyes, you feel the colour". <sup>[3]</sup> Although referring to art, the observation can directly reflect a distinct characteristic of the Japanese nature, in which aesthetic ideals and sentimental experiences are united. In this respect, it can be suggested that the Japanese not only view *hanabi*, but they also emotionally feel *hanabi*.

By proposing various factors that may have contributed to the inclusion of fireworks as a culture in Japan, and by highlighting the interplay between symbolism and the ephemeral nature of fireworks with a stance that Japanese aesthetics and sentiments are paramount in the formation of this culture; the significance and influence of Japanese fireworks culture can be better appreciated.

## Introduction of Fireworks and Access to Gunpowder

The exact date that fireworks were introduced to Japan is not entirely clear, although it is likely that Dutch or Portuguese traders brought them, along with other trade goods, approximately 400 years ago (c. 1600). Despite reports that the term '*hanabi*' was first used in 1585, <sup>[4]</sup> and further suggestions that various forms of fireworks were observed dating back as far as 1558 <sup>[5]</sup> <sup>[6]</sup>; the first official documentation of *hanabi* being viewed is often attributed to a diplomatic meeting between the revered Tokugawa Ieyasu and John Saris (an envoy of King James I of England) in 1613. <sup>[7]</sup> Few other references to *hanabi* are documented until 1659 when Yahei from Shinohara-mura (in present Nara Prefecture) came to Edo and set up a small shop under the name Kagiya, thus founding a dynasty that still continues in some capacity to this day.

Fireworks were already known to be popular in Edo as evidenced by the many edicts issued (notably 1648, 1652, 1655, 1670, 1680) <sup>[7]</sup> warning of expulsion for causing fires, thus indicating increased government attention and therefore assuming frequent practice of the activity. Contrary to these threats though, Kagiya made a good reputation for himself by developing specialized fireworks such as Roman candles that shot out two or three flaming stars. <sup>[8]</sup> Around 1700, the 4<sup>th</sup> generation master of Kagiya was appointed as a purveyor to the Tokugawa shogunate and officially recognized as the first private fireworks manufacturer. By this time, fireworks had been banned from the city and confined to the surrounds of the Sumida River where fireworks and pleasure boats had become characteristic of the summer months, and where rich merchants and daimyo would finance Kagiya to display fireworks <sup>[1]</sup>, a further demonstration of the increasing popularity and contribution to the founding of the activity.

The most significant juncture for fireworks culture in Edo, however, came in 1733 when Tokugawa Yoshimune (the 8<sup>th</sup> Tokugawa shogun) sanctioned a display of fireworks on the Sumida River. About 20 fireworks were displayed by the 6<sup>th</sup> generation master of Kagiya as part of a ceremony in honour of the *suijin* (water deity), an observance to pray for the success of future crops and purification of epidemic diseases, thereby alleviating superstition arising from mass deaths caused by crop failures and a cholera epidemic in the year prior. This event coincided with the annual *kawabiraki* (river opening festival) on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month (of the old Japanese lunisolar calendar), which also marked the first day of the summer season. 1733 thus marks the inaugural *Ryōgoku Kawabiraki Hanabi* (Ryōgoku River Opening Fireworks), a tradition that still continues to this day under the name *Sumidagawa Hanabi Taikai* (Sumida River Fireworks Display). <sup>[1]</sup> The occurrence of this event in 1733 indicates a level of acceptance of *hanabi*, and furthermore, with shogunate approval; whilst the basis for inclusion implies a purpose and deeper emotional association with *hanabi*. With acceptance, purpose and an emotional association, *hanabi* were beginning to find a place in Japanese culture.

A further juncture was the emerging of a talented *hanabishi* (fireworks craftsman) by the name of Seishichi, who was an apprentice in the Kagiya guild. In 1808, the 8<sup>th</sup> generation master of Kagiya helped Seishichi set up his own shop in Yoshikawa-cho, where he took on the name Tamaya Ichibei, and after not too long he surpassed his former master in skill and reputation. Consequently, the *Ryōgoku Kawabiraki* saw rival displays from Kagiya and Tamaya on either side of Ryōgoku Bridge where the best skills of both artisans were demonstrated. Whilst a tradition of fireworks on the Sumida River had already been established previously, the rivalry between Kagiya and Tamaya heightened the concept of the competition, another aspect of fireworks culture that remains prominent in contemporary Japan. This competitive rivalry was highly beneficial as it stimulated development of new designs and raised the overall standards and quality of the fireworks, and furthermore, increased public awareness and interest. Revellers would shout “*Kagiya!*” or “*Tamaya!*” to encourage the artisans or to impart approval of the most pleasing *hanabi*, an iconic tradition that is still in practice today as an exclamation of satisfaction and excitement. This rivalry between Kagiya and Tamaya continued until 1843, when a fire broke out in the Tamaya store causing a conflagration in the surrounding neighbourhood and resulting in the expulsion of Tamaya from Edo.

Aside from these founding occurrences, it is probable that fireworks culture would not have been established so extensively and uniquely had it not been facilitated by certain

factors, such as the stability of the country under unification, availability of necessary ingredients, the emerging need for culture in Edo, and the spiritual nature and aesthetic considerations of the Japanese people.

Upon consolidation of power and unification of Japan under Tokugawa Ieyasu, the Edo Period was initiated in which Japan enjoyed an absence of major conflict for more than 250 years, and a period in which the Tokugawa shogunate limited contact with the outside world. With the majority of the outside world playing out games of war and conquest throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, gunpowder had become an essential global commodity that was much sought after and stocks continually ran low; however, with military activity now negligible in Japan, subjugation and conservation of gunpowder was no longer an issue. Gunpowder continued to be produced, mostly under strict regulation by the shogunate, although it could also be readily made illegally from natural agricultural by-products. Either way, gunpowder, the primary ingredient in fireworks, was accessible and Japanese artisans had the opportunity to develop and improve fireworks in a manner that could not be afforded to the rest of the warring world; furthermore, this was in a politically stable environment conducive to experimentation and enjoyment of the arts.

### **The Developing Culture of Edo**

The Edo period is often regarded as a period of resplendence where the wealth of the middle class rapidly increased, arts and culture advanced, and frivolity prevailed; and thus, new attitudes and principles evolved. In particular, the Buddhist precept that ‘worldly existence is futile and ephemeral in nature’ saw a new adaptation in which transience and futility were honoured by enjoying every moment to its pleasurable maximum. This manifested itself in various forms of entertainment, available to all classes of people, with indulgences such as geisha, teahouse and restaurant activity, and theatre becoming staple forms of entertainment; whilst seasonal observances such as cherry blossom viewing in spring and moon viewing in autumn were also popularised. Many suburban enclaves, often along the banks of the Sumida River, hosted such festivity and pleasurable activities, such as the renowned pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara, associated with the red light district; and Ryōgoku, associated with river life, summer festivity, and *hanabi*.

This increased emphasis on transient pleasure and hedonistic indulgence would have created an increased demand for the public to be entertained, and therefore, a demand for methods of entertainment to evolve accordingly in order to satisfy the desires of the people. Fireworks, being mysterious, exciting, aesthetically pleasing, continually progressive, and having the ability to be displayed to the public *en masse*, were an ideal form of entertainment that could fulfil the desires of the Edo people, whilst reflecting the jubilant sentiment of the time. Furthermore, the ephemeral nature of fireworks allowed an experience within the framework of Japanese aesthetics, whilst adhering to the notion of ‘the floating world’, as will be discussed later.

It is important to consider that Edo was a new city, arising from swampland and marshes. Thus, Edo initially had no culture and although rapidly developing into a metropolis by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, “it did not match Osaka’s commercial strength or Kyoto’s cultural heritage”.<sup>[9]</sup> The lack of culture had to be rectified in order for Edo to become a respected capital, thus it was necessary to “set about rectifying this imbalance by reinventing Edo as a city of beauty and cultural depth”.<sup>[9]</sup> Edo was searching for culture and, in particular, for culture

with an aesthetic feel that could rival Kyoto and Osaka. Accomplishment of this was largely achieved through highlighting and associating *meisho* (famous views/celebrated spots) with the aesthetic qualities of *meibutsu* (celebrated flowers, fauna and natural features). Furthermore, this presented an opportunity to grasp new concepts and make them intrinsically characteristic of Edo. Considering this, it is then possible to see how *hanabi* could be a felicitous offering, having the aesthetic characteristics of flowers and nature, a sense of transience and futility, and the pathos of nostalgia; thus endearing itself to the people in a culturally Japanese manner. Furthermore, being a new technology with an unclaimed origin or geographical association, Edo could claim and add fireworks to its cultural identity. Whether pre-conceived or not, this seems to be the result; fireworks in Japan have a strong historical association with Ryōgoku, on the Sumida River, in Edo.

### **Illustrations of *Hanabi* in *Ukiyo-e***

Another consequence of the cultural progress in Edo was an increased interest in literature, poetry, and art. In particular, *ukiyo-e* (literally: pictures of the ‘floating world’) was born, with its focus on the ephemeral and futile nature of life. Initially beautiful women, actors, and heroes were the main subjects of the prints; however, in accordance with the evolving desires of the urban population, flowers, landscape scenery, cultural activities, and common scenes depicting the lives of the everyday people soon found favour through such masters as Hiroshige and Hokusai. *Ukiyo-e* and other forms of woodblock printed materials such as *nishiki-e* (multicolour prints) and *kusazōshi* (illustrated woodblock print books), could also be reproduced and distributed to the masses rapidly and cheaply, further benefiting their popularisation. From an Edo point of view this was highly beneficial as news about its developing cultural identity could be transmitted and promoted throughout the lands quickly. Fireworks, being exciting and intriguing, could therefore be used in prints to convey the excitement of the thriving culture in Edo, whilst simultaneously expressing deeper sentiments relating to the futile and ephemeral nature of things.



Figure 1: “Ryōgoku Hanabi” from the Series Meisho Edo hyakkei (100 Famous Views of Edo: Fireworks at Ryōgoku) by Utagawa Hiroshige

‘*Meisho Edo Hyakkei*’ (100 Famous Views of Edo) by Hiroshige, is a famous series of *ukiyo-e* that presents and depicts scenery and cultural aspects of Edo life. Within the series is perhaps the most recognisable *ukiyo-e* print that depicts fireworks, ‘*Ryōgoku hanabi*’ (Fireworks at Ryōgoku)(Figure 1). This print can be used perfectly to exemplify the promotion of cultural interests and activities in Edo whilst also expressing deeper sentiments about the futility of life. On a basic observance, the print demonstrates the activity of a festive summer evening at Ryōgoku. The bridge is inundated with revellers, whilst the Sumida River hosts numerous pleasure ships, all with the common purpose of viewing *hanabi*, the subject of the print. The print not only highlights *hanabi* as a part of Japanese culture, but its inclusion as one of the

100 Famous Views of Edo, can be taken as a claim of fireworks being part of the cultural identity of Edo.

At a deeper level of consideration, the print presents a capture of a once ephemeral moment, thus proposing a highly melancholic situation that accords with the Japanese concepts of *mono no aware* and *wabi sabi* (discussed later). Primarily, attention is drawn to the trajectory of the solitary firework, evoking a sense of loneliness. However, it is soon realised that the entire transient experience of the firework has been captured as a static image through which one can experience the birth of the *hanabi*, the vacillating rise to its apogee, followed by the quavering melancholic descent towards its ultimate fate. Parallel to its apogee, a bright burst of stars in the night sky metaphorically suggests strength and beauty in the prime of life. The trajectory is incomplete though, and the void beneath becomes apparent, allowing personal contemplations of the unknown future to fill the empty space. The path of the firework thus allows a comparative reflection on the parabolic course of one's own life, and moreover, the transient and futile nature of all life can be considered.

The bird's eye view perspective of the print further enhances the sentiment by creating distance and a withdrawal from the world that is presented, allowing feelings of nostalgia and melancholy, as the remote past and the unknown future are simultaneously contemplated. As one's gaze casts down, colourless spectators on the bridge are noticed, indistinguishable and featureless. Not only does this create a further allusion of loneliness in the wake of anonymity, but it conveys a feeling of irrelevance in this world, whilst further implying that the fate of life is common to us all, without exception. All hope, however, is not lost, as attention is finally drawn to the illumination on the pleasure ships where patrons are partaking in indulgent acts of festivity; perhaps a subtle reminder to enjoy all moments possible and indulge in the pleasures of life, despite the unavoidable and uncertain fate we all face. Hiroshige and other artists purposely designed many of their works in a manner that is suggestive, and to be interpreted and discussed freely. <sup>[3, 10]</sup>

Hiroshige included *hanabi* in more than 50 of his works where he "raised them to the status of an unmistakable topos relating to the pleasures of a summer night" <sup>[10]</sup>. Many other famous artists such as Toyokuni, Kunimaru and Chikanobu also depicted fireworks in their works either as a background motif (Figure 2) or as a main feature of the artwork; a trend that continued well into the Meiji Era (1868 – 1912)(Figure 3). The fact that so many *ukiyo-e* contain a theme of fireworks further confirms the importance and acceptance of *hanabi* as a significant Japanese cultural activity.



Figure 2: “Bando Hikosaburo V”, The Famous Kabuki Actor with Hanabi Depicted in the Background; by Toyokuni III/Kunisada (1786 – 1864)

### Japanese Aesthetics and the Ephemeral Nature of *Hanabi*

Life, death, reverence of nature, the notion of impermanence, and the appreciation of life in its entirety, are but a few typical Japanese aesthetic considerations that can be observed in the arts and through traditional Japanese seasonal activities, such as cherry blossom viewing and autumn moon viewing; and can be expressed with such aesthetic principles as *mono no aware* and *wabi sabi*. Accordingly, these notions can be observed when viewing *hanabi*.

A full explanation of these principles would fill an entire volume and are thus beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover, they have evolved in connotation throughout time which would require further explanation, but briefly: in the view of Motoori Norinaga, a scholar of *kokugaku* (literally: national study) in the Edo Period, *mono no aware* (literally: a deep feeling over things) “is a purified and exalted feeling, close to the innermost heart of man

and nature. It tends to focus on the beauty of impermanence and on the sensitive heart capable of appreciating that beauty”.<sup>[11]</sup> It usually has an association with nature and human life, and assumes feelings of reverence and gentle melancholy. *Wabi* came to have a connotation of liberation from material and emotional hardship through poverty and solitude, and finding beauty in the absence of apparent beauty. *Sabi* is often used in conjunction with *wabi* and has a sense of loneliness, maturation, resigned acceptance, and tranquillity.

With regards to fireworks, a most notable observance of these principles can be envisaged through ‘*senko hanabi*’ (literally: incense stick firework), a traditional Japanese ‘toy’ firework (akin to a sparkler) that was popularised in the Edo period. *Senko hanabi* can be found in two forms: *subote botan*, appearing like incense sticks (thus the incense stick reference) with firework composition adhered to a stick or piece of straw; and secondly, *nagate botan*, with firework composition wrapped in traditional Japanese paper and held suspended (Figure 3). Well manufactured *senko hanabi* are renowned for having 5 phases in the course of its life: birth, infancy, youth, middle age, and old age. In the birth phase, the firework composition burns to leave a wire-like cinder. In the infancy phase, the cinder gradually shrinks and produces a fireball that increases in brilliancy. The youth phase then displays large pine needle shaped sparks that project from the surface of the fireball. Next, in the middle age phase, many small sparks are emitted from the fireball. Then finally, energy fades in the old age phase as the sparks die down and become willow-like.<sup>[4, 12]</sup>



Figure 3: An Enlarged Section of a Meiji Period Print Entitled “Senko Hanabi” from the Series “Kodomo Fuzoku” (Customs of Children) by Miyagawa Shuntei (1873 – 1914). Children can be Seen Playing with Nagate Senko. Subote Senko can also be seen on the Floor with Two Circular Nezumi Hanabi

Watching *senko hanabi* is like a meditation, mesmerising and calming, allowing thoughts and earthly worries to be temporarily cast aside. Although *senko hanabi* only lasts approximately 20 seconds, its brief existence manages to express the sentiment and emotion of an entire life. As the *senko hanabi* briefly transitions through each phase, comparisons can accordingly be drawn to the various transitions of one’s own life. The observer is reminded of

the rapid change and development in birth and infancy; the vivacious energy of youth; refinement in middle age; and finally, withering in old age. Moreover, the irregular nature of the sparks stresses the randomness and uncertainty of life. Symbolism can also be found in the name '*senko*', as the analogy of a burning incense stick has an association with Buddhist funerary rites and ancestor worship through which a notion of mortality and respect for the deceased can be contemplated. Overall, with such melancholic and aesthetic considerations, the principles of *mono no aware*, *wabi*, and *sabi* have been embraced. Senko hanabi are to this day still extremely popular with children and adults who value the symbolic representation of life in its entirety.

A similar sentiment can be appreciated when considering aerial display fireworks. Despite the modern day popularity of launching many fireworks simultaneously, Japanese fireworks are still often launched one by one, maintaining the original tradition of Edo where each effect can be appreciated and reflected upon individually, without distraction.<sup>[1]</sup>

Complementing this tradition, most Japanese *hanabi* shells are purposely created to symbolically represent the appearance of flowers; *botan* (peony) and *kiku* (chrysanthemum), which produce a perfectly symmetrical spread of stars, are notable examples of this (Figure 4). With these shells, the botanical nomenclature already creates an association with nature which automatically appeals to the Japanese; however, it is the ephemeral nature of *hanabi* that holds the deeper sentimental value. This sentiment, supplementary to the symbolism associated with the trajectory of the firework, need not be restated as it directly mirrors that of the static image previously addressed in the discussion on Hiroshige's '*Ryōgoku hanabi*'; except that the physical viewing of fireworks involves an actual participation in the experience and absorption of the atmosphere as well, rather than just a retrospective contemplation that the artwork alone affords. It is through such participation that a true experience of the ephemeral can be perceived as the *hanabi* literally blooms and dematerializes in an instance, bestowing only a memory. Furthermore, the sentiment associated with *hanabi taikai* (fireworks displays) as an entire event, particularly associated with summer, heavily correlates with the sentiment of *hanami* (flower viewing), in which the transience of life is contemplated through admiration of the ephemeral nature of flowers. With seasonal observances, such as cherry blossom viewing in spring and moon viewing in autumn being so prominent in Japanese culture, it is quite feasible that they should be joined by a seasonal observance, in the festive atmosphere of the summer, in the form of fireworks.



Figure 4: Shin-iri Kiku (Chrysanthemum with a Single Core) – Nagaoka 2008 (DLB)

## Conclusion

Fireworks have made a powerful and lasting impact on Japan as evidenced by the unique fireworks culture that has evolved; one that comprises of numerous displays occurring across the country each year, many of which can not be rivalled by any other displays in the world. As discussed, the foundations of this culture can be highlighted by certain significant events, such as the arrival of Kagiya, the tragic events leading to the inaugural *Ryōgoku Kawabiraki Hanabi*, and the emerging of Tamaya. Supplementary to this, various circumstances have facilitated the progression of fireworks culture in Japan, such as the initial political stability of the country under Tokugawa rule, access to necessary ingredients, the emerging need for cultural identity in Edo, and a favourable environment for development.

These events and circumstances combined, however, are still not likely to have been sufficient enough to give rise to a fireworks culture, and thus, it seems that deeper Japanese sentiments and aesthetic considerations have added the integral ingredients. Having a name derived from an association with flowers and fire, *hanabi* spectacularly symbolise the ephemeral nature of life. This accords with essential Japanese aesthetic principles, encompassing a reverence towards nature, the melancholic appreciation of ephemeral beauty, and the need for an embracement of life in its entirety. These notions can be further expressed and appreciated through the visual and emotional experiences inspired by *hanabi*, as exemplified by *senko hanabi*, aerial display *hanabi*, and through traditional Japanese artworks.

Fireworks in Japan are therefore not just viewed as ethereal entities. They are intimately engaged with emotional experiences and thus the term *hanabi* can be considered as a fusion of the visual and the emotional. With this in mind, and considering that *hanabi* have a strong affinity with the summer season in Japan, it is understandable why *hanabi* culture can be considered as a traditional seasonal observance in Japan, comparable to cherry blossom viewing in spring and moon viewing in autumn. With such an overall cultural emphasis on fireworks in Japan, it is then quite conceivable why concerted efforts have been made in the development and innovation of fireworks, which not only satisfies the needs of the Japanese, but consequently, has influenced the entire world.

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