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# Exploring the motivations for corruption from a supply-side view in Chinese private procurement

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## Abstract

Whereas extant theories on business corruption have highlighted the importance of exploring private-to-public corruption, we shift attention to private-to-private corruption. This paper provides a multilevel investigation of the motivations of supply chain corruption practices in private procurement in China from a supply-side perspective. Based on eight Chinese cases of supply chain corruption practices, we develop a theoretical model, which describes why companies engage in corrupt behaviors as a supply side of corruption. We show that the motivational drivers can be traced at two levels: the micro and meso levels. Drivers at the micro level include organizational imperatives (financial and reputational), rent-seeking behaviors, and keeping a long-term interorganizational relationship. Drivers at the meso level include competitive and coercive isomorphism and institutionalization. Our findings bridge the research gap by exploring the motivations of supply chain corruption from a supply-side view. We also extend the application of rent-seeking theory in a new context by using it to explain corruption in the private sector.

**Keywords:** Supply chain corruption, private sector purchasing, motivation

## Introduction

Companies dealing with supply chains, no matter large multinationals (MNCs) or small and medium-sized companies (SMEs), are vulnerable to corruption. Extant research has widely investigated corruption practices by business organizations to government officials for obtaining contracts, which could be regarded as corruption in public-private procurement. However, there has recently been a growing surge of supply chain corruption (SCC) in private sector procurement in China. For example, in 2019, Dajiang (DJI), one of the world's biggest drone manufacturers, issued an anti-corruption announcement stating that in the decision related to supplier selection, some personnel in the R&D, procurement, and quality control departments engaged in extensive corruption,

resulting in a loss of over one billion yuan to DJI. In other words, SSC practices have caused significant costs to the focal firms, including financial loss, termination of customer-supplier relations, and damage to reputation. This suggests that corruption in the supply chain is an important phenomenon that requires more attention since it often occurs at all levels of society and is accompanied by business strategies that aim to maximize financial gains (Silvestre, 2018).

In contrast to public sector procurement, “private sector purchasing” takes place in the context of for-profit businesses and within privately held companies. Argandoña (2003) defined private-to-private corruption as a manager or employee in a private company or corporation who has significant authority or influence over the performance of a function, task, or duty can choose to behave counter to the obligations and responsibilities of his/her post or job, and therefore in a way that directly or indirectly hurts the company or organization for his/her personal profit or that of another person, firm, or organization since he/she has a margin of discretion. We regard SCC in private sector purchasing as the main form of private-to-private corruption and define it based on the definition of organizational corruption by Ashforth and Anand (2003) as the misuse of authority in a private company or corporation for personal, subunit, and/or organizational gain to assist suppliers or customers in obtaining unfair advantages.

Business corruption is most often studied from the perspective of organizations (Ashforth and Anand, 2003). However, it rarely considers the key interactions (often within complex supply chains) that contribute to corruption, especially in private sector purchasing, and there is a genuine chance for researchers to investigate this important area (Castro et al., 2020). A growing body of research has begun to emerge that examines the dark side of business-to-business operations, and one of these academics’ main areas of interest is supply chain corruption (Sharma, 2020). To fill this gap and improve our understanding of SCC, we engaged in an inductive study of eight SCC practices in private sector purchasing between employees of Chinese firms and their suppliers, exploring the motivations of suppliers for SCC practices. The existing literature has explored country-level (Silvestre et al., 2020) and firm-level antecedents (Arnold et al., 2012) of supply chain corruption, ignoring the motivational antecedents. In this study, we pay attention to the motivation itself, which will explain the corruption occurrence from a supply-side view in a more direct way. Our research question is: Why do suppliers engage in SCC practices as a supply side with the employees in the focal firms?

### **Theoretical background**

In this section, we first provide an in-depth review of the existing research on SCC. Based on the review, we identify the need for exploring motivations for SCC. Then we discuss the core insights that extant theorizing on organizational corruption or SCC to see what theoretical lenses can be used in this study to explain the motivations for SCC in private procurement.

#### *Supply chain corruption*

Despite the growing concern about SCC in the practical environment, academic research remains dispersed. Little research has been conducted to systematically identify basic initiatives and constructs about SCC.

*SCC in private procurement.* A dishonest person in the purchasing department is in a position to demand or receive personal enrichment or other personal advantages, including gifts, money, in the form of kickbacks and even bribes (Badenhorst, 1994). This article is an earlier study on corruption and bribery in the supply chain, while it focuses

more on the unethical behavior of purchasers. Millington, Eberhardt, and Wilkinson (2005) explored the relationship between gift-giving, guanxi, and corruption through a study of the relationships between UK manufacturing companies in China and their local component suppliers. These two studies focus on SCC in private procurement.

*SCC in public procurement.* To investigate the individual-level antecedents of corruption, Ntayi (2012) explored the relationship between moral schemas and corruption in Ugandan public procurement and found that moral schemas are significant predictors, which account for 73.3% of public procurement corruption. Heineman (2014) tried to answer who should be responsible for the Walmart scandal, and he argued that this is a core CEO responsibility. These studies are related to corruption in public procurement. Kim (2020) measured the stock price effect of a target firm's corruption risk in the context of supply chains.

Arnold et al. (2012) did not distinguish the types of SCC and found that the factors of organizational complexity, corporate culture, internationality, and functional complexity all influence a firm's inclination towards corruption, which in turn should manifest itself in the presence or absence of corruption control- and prevention mechanisms.

Although some efforts have been made on the phenomenon of SCC, little attention has been paid to SCC in private procurement. In addition, the existing literature pay attention to the antecedents of SCC, ignoring the motivations for SCC itself. In this study, we will fill this gap by exploring the motivations from a supply-side view.

### *Theoretical lenses*

To develop a theory on the motivations for SCC in private procurement, we reviewed the theories used in previous studies as well as the literature on SCC to see what new insights we could bring to this area.

*Rational action versus rent-seeking theory.* Early research on corruption argued that as rational actors, business executives make their decision on bribery within a benefit-cost framework (Michaels and Miethe, 1989). Consistent with this argument, Gao (2010) found that perceived benefits have a positive impact on a firm's bribing behavior (to government officials) or other unethical behaviors in the context of the emerging market. Government limits on economic activities are commonplace in many market-oriented economies. These constraints result in a variety of rents, and individuals frequently fight for them. Such rivalry is sometimes entirely legitimate. Rent seeking can also take the form of bribery, corruption, smuggling, and black markets in some cases (Krueger, 1974). Mbaku (1998) backed up the claim that corruption is a type of rent-seeking. Corruption was seen as a unique way for private parties to promote their own interests in the struggle for preferential treatment. Corruption, like other types of rent-seeking, is a technique to avoid the invisible hand of the market and influence policy in one's favor (Lambsdorff, 2002).

*Competitive isomorphism and institutional isomorphism of corruption.* DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified two types of isomorphism: competitive and institutional isomorphism. On the one hand, competitive isomorphism is the pressure on organizations to copy successful organizations due to market competition (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Contrary to the previous orthodox hypothesis, Bliss and Di Tella (1997) stressed that the growth of competition may increase corruption. For example, firms facing a sudden increase in competition may try to secure their rents with corrupted behaviors (Ades and Di Tella, 1999; Venard and Hanafi, 2008). On the other hand, institutional isomorphism occurs via three mechanisms: coercive, mimetic, and normative (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism refers to the fact that firms are constrained by other, more powerful social actors (Mizruchi and Fein, 1999). Coercive isomorphism is an important

mechanism to take into account in fighting corruption. Various international organizations and researchers have highlighted that institutional framework is a key to reducing corruption (Pope, 2000; Pena et al., 2000). Mimetic isomorphism is the tendency of firms to model themselves on other organizations' behaviors (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The "successful" behavior of the leading firms might serve as a reference for others. Thus, scholars have highlighted that firms may imitate the corrupted behaviors of other organizations (Venard, 2009). Normative isomorphism is defined as "the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define conditions and methods of their work, to control the production of procedures" (DiMaggio and Powel, 1983). According to this isomorphic effect, Venard (2009) studied inter-group normative isomorphism and supported that it has a negative impact on corruption by MNEs' subsidiaries to public officials.

Current theories of business corruption in the management area focused on private-to-public corruption with the business organization representing the supply side and government officials representing the demand side. To the best of our knowledge, no theory explains the occurrence of private-to-private corruption convincingly. In this study, we attempt to examine this unresolved issue by focusing on SCC, a pervasive form of private-to-private corruption. From a supply-wide perspective, we build theory by exploring why the suppliers are involved in the practice of SCC as the supply side of SCC based on the above theories.

## **Research methods**

### *Research setting*

In this study, we concentrate on bribery, including kickbacks and benefit fees and treat the upstream SCC practices which occur between suppliers and employees of the customer firm as the unit of analysis. Our study is based on eight cases of SCC practices, including eight focal firms, twenty-five corrupt suppliers, and twenty corrupt employees who violated their obligations to assist the suppliers in gaining unfair advantages over the focal firms. Examples of SCC are manifold, in this study, we concentrate on active bribery, including kickbacks and return for go-between. To guarantee the generalization of our research, the sample of focal enterprises and suppliers included companies of various years, types, sizes, and industry affiliations. Within supply chain management, Sanderson et al. (2015) advocated that the procurement process be separated into three phases: pre-contract or demand management, selection and contracting, and post-contract (relationship management and operational delivery). Following this idea, our cases are distributed across these three different procurement phases to get a comprehensive understanding of SCC in private sector purchasing.

### *Data collection*

*Archival documents.* Considering the paucity of objective data on such a controversial topic due to social-desirability bias, the data used in this study were mainly extracted from the archive of the Chinese Court (<https://wenshu.court.gov.cn/>). We selected final and definitive judgments that cannot be further appealed to ensure the corruption practices were determined to have occurred. As a result, they supply judicial facts from which we drew the majority of the information on SCC. Time is up to 2020, the document type is limited to the criminal case and written judgments, and the main focus of cases is on the crime of passive bribery of non-state employees and active bribery of non-state employees. The search items include two combinations of keywords as follows:

- Suppliers AND bribe AND (benefit fees OR kickbacks).

- (Buyers OR purchasers OR procurement) AND bribe-taking AND (benefit fees OR kickbacks).

The data from the legal system increases the reliability since it has been verified by various sources, such as documentary evidence, witness testimony, and statements of the defendants (different witness testimonies and defendants' statements can be verified against each other). Normally, the judgments include three main parts of information that are relevant to our research. First, the judgements define a monetary measure on the corrupt activities. They also disclose the scope of the corruption by defining the perpetrator's role, differentiating between the prime perpetrator and any accomplices, the organization's hierarchical levels, departments/units, and the number of persons engaged over time. According to this, we can judge that if the corruption practices were occurred in private sector purchasing between suppliers and employees of focal firms. Second, some information describing the process of corruption, including specific motivations, can be extracted from defendants' statements and witness testimonies.

*Secondary data.* To have a better understanding of the characteristics of relevant focal firms and their corrupt suppliers, we collected secondary data on their establishment (and listing) dates, company type, affiliation industry, and firm size of them on the following website: <https://www.qcc.com/>. This website contains information on most of the Chinese companies and is the official record of corporate credit agency.

#### *Case selection*

After deleting irrelevant cases, we obtained 191 cases of crime of passive bribery of non-state employees and 64 cases of crime of active bribery of non-state employees. In order to explore SCC from a system-wide perspective, we matched the cases in these two categories and got 23 pairs of cases. Considering the completeness and richness of the information, we selected 8 pairs of cases as a final sample. Since all the written judgments are in Chinese, data were further coded and analyzed in Chinese.

#### *Data analysis*

We analyzed our data iteratively, conducting within-case and cross-case analyses independently, then comparing coded data to ensure consistency. For the sake of clarity, we however illustrate this process sequentially.

*Step 1. First-order analysis of SCC occurrence.* Our initial engagement with the archival data was based on multiple rounds of coding to uncover SCC-related constructs from testimonies of defendants and witness. We firstly conducted our coding independently, later comparing our coding and emerging interpretations; we resolved disagreements through discussion, and occasional recording and relabelling.

*Step 2. Second-order analysis of SCC occurrence.* Afterwards, we started developing a more abstract model that theorized on the motivations for companies engaging in SCC in the private purchasing process that we observed in Step 1. At this point in our analytical process, we began relating our empirical findings to the existing literature on organizational corruption due to a paucity of research on SCC.

*Step 3. Development of an overall theoretical framework.* Finally, based on first-order analysis and second-order analysis, we produced an overall framework accounting for the motivational drivers of SCC we observed. This further round of analysis allowed us to develop a robust account of why companies engage in SCC practices as a supply side.

### **Findings**

During the coding process, we discovered that three key players would be involved in SCC practices as shown in Figure 1: the corrupt supplier, corrupt personnel at the focal

firm, and the focal firm. Figure 1 also depicts the relationships between each of the two characters. In the following part of this section, we organize a detailed narrative around corrupt suppliers involved in SCC practices, highlighting differences in what drove suppliers to behave corruptly from the perspectives of the three main characters identified above. We use F1-8 to represent the different focus companies, use S1-25 to represent the different corrupt supplier, and use E1-20 to represent the different corrupt employees who were involved in SCC practices. Following common prescriptions for reporting qualitative data, we display selected quotes supporting our categorizations of drivers in Table1 and Table 2.

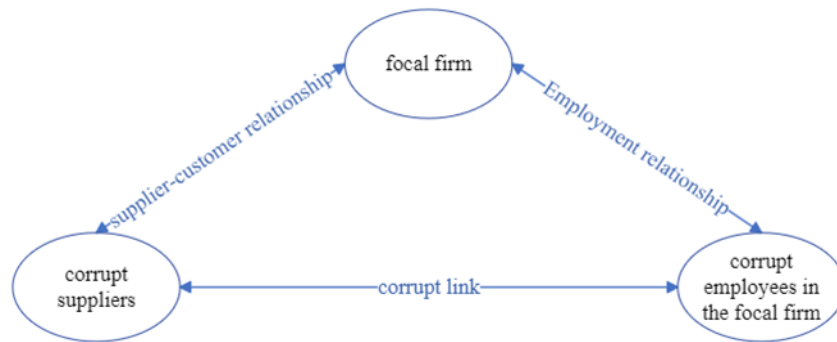


Figure 1. main characters in SCC and their relationships

#### *Micro-level divers*

At a micro level, the representatives or salesmen mentioned expected benefits for their companies when asked what induced them to engage in SCC on behalf of their companies. Bribery decisions appear to be rather influenced by motivations related to contract acquisition and performance during different phases of the purchasing process (see Table 1). The representatives and employees perceived that if they gave bribes to employees in the focal firm with appropriate positions who would abuse their duty to assist them, they can get a lot of convenience in the procurement process. During the pre-contract process, they gave bribes in exchange for becoming suppliers and obtaining orders. During contract performance, they gave kickbacks or benefit fees for passing the quality inspection. These motivations can be categorized into “organizational financial imperative”, which is defined by Compagni et al. (2015) as “the will, expressed by informants, to act in keeping with what they perceived as the distinctive cultural traits of their organization (cultural imperative) or the prominent position of the organization and/or its head surgeon (reputational imperative)”. In our study, we define organizational imperatives based on this definition and adapt them to our context. We refer it to the will, expressed by the defendants and witnesses, to act in keeping with what they perceived as the distinctive financial goal (financial imperative) or reputational status in the industry (reputational imperative).

Several defendants and witnesses related SCC to what they described as the will to preserve the company’s reputation in order to obtain more orders from the customers. As one representative of the corrupt supplier explained:

We sent money to E15 and E16 because we want them to take care of our company’s equipment in the daily production process and not to report equipment failure to F6 in order to preserve the reputation of our company and to ensure the number of orders of our company.

(S21)

Some defendants and witnesses described the motivation for SCC as gaining a monopoly in the competition among suppliers. Some suppliers offered kickbacks to the employee whose duty facilitation could ensure that other suppliers cannot supply similar products to their customers while others gave bribes when they knew their customers would evaluate a new supplier that would supply similar equipment to their companies. These suppliers paid bribes, because they feared that competition from suppliers would lead to low prices and loss of orders from customers. This kind of motivational driver reflects what has been described in past studies as a rent-seeking behavior, understood as the first economic instrument developed to model corruption in the public sector (Lambsdorff, 2002).

Other defendants and witnesses engaging in SCC appeared motivated by the desire to keep a good and long-term supplier-customer relationship. They perceived that if they offered kickbacks or benefit fees to the employees in the custom firm, they could maintain the relationship with their customers.

*Table 1 Motivational drivers of SCC from a supply side: Selected Quotes*

<b>Second-order Codes</b>	<b>First-order Codes</b>	<b>Selected Quotes on First-order Codes</b>
<b>Organizational imperatives (financial)</b>	Becoming suppliers	Introduction of their company as the supplier of F1 (S1)
	Obtaining orders	“We gave kickbacks to E1 and E2 to obtain large purchase orders.” (S1)
		“We gave E3, E4, and E5 kickbacks so that they could help us supply F2 in large quantities.” (S2)
	Passing the quality inspection	“Since the quality of the track bar products provided by our Company has problems, in order to resolve the matter to maintain business relations with F2, we gave benefit fees to E3, E4, and E5.” (S3) “E8 is responsible for the quality control of SF, the development of product standards, our products need to go through their department of sampling, is also a very important link, so we gave him benefit fees to pass the quality inspection.” (S19. S19) “We gave E15 and E16 benefit fees to expedite our product evaluations and assist us in improving equipment issues so that we were facilitated in the procurement process.” (S20)
<b>Organizational imperative (reputational)</b>	Preserve the company's reputation	“The supplier's equipment would inevitably break down in use, and the money was sent to E15 in the hope that he would allow people in the department to take care of us in using the equipment, so as to avoid expanding the equipment breakdowns and affecting the supplier's reputation.” (S20) “We sent money to E15 and E16 because we want to them to take care of our company's equipment in the daily production process and not to report equipment failure to F6 in order to preserve the reputation of our company.” (S21)



<b>Rent seeking behavior</b>	Gaining a supplier monopoly	<p>“The duty facilitation from E3 ensures that other suppliers cannot supply similar products to F2, so we paid him kickbacks.” (S2)</p> <p>“Because E15's department wanted to evaluate a new supplier that would supply similar equipment to our company, we were concerned that the new supplier would undercut the price and cause our company to lose orders from F6, so we gave E15 benefit fees.” (S22)</p>
<b>Keeping a long-term interorganizational relationship</b>	Keeping a good supplier-customer relationship	<p>“We hope that E3 will take care of us as a supplier and be able to continue cooperation with F2, so we gave him kickbacks.” (S3)</p>

*Meso-level drivers*

At the meso level, a few defendants and witnesses that were involved in SCC mentioned that there were many competitors, and they gave kickbacks to the employee who was in charge of the business so that they could keep the orders and their profits (S10). Some defendants and witnesses mentioned that they were forced to give the employees from their customers’ kickbacks if they wanted to keep the order and their profits. One of the corrupt employees forced the supplier to remit money to him, nominally as loans, but actually as benefit fees. Theoretically, this observation suggests that the suppliers offered bribes due to the competitive and coercive isomorphic responses.

In addition to isomorphic responses, other defendants and witnesses related their corrupt behaviors to “unspoken rule” (S24, S25, and E6). Unlike isomorphic responses, the suppliers offered bribes because they believed that it was the unspoken rule in the business world. This means that SCC during the private purchasing process has been institutionalized in the related industries. When a bribe is solicited or offered, the supply side acquiesces to and abides by such a rule.

*Table 2 Isomorphic drivers*

<b>Second-order Codes</b>	<b>Selected Quotes on First-order Codes</b>
<b>Competitive isomorphism</b>	<p>“Because E6 was in charge of the business and there were many competitors, our company wanted to keep the order and our own profits, so we gave her kickbacks.” (S10)</p>
<b>Coercive isomorphism</b>	<p>“E7 said that other suppliers gave her kickbacks and said that if we wanted to work with her, we would have to give kickbacks.” (S16)</p> <p>“We were forced to remit money to E17, nominally as loans, but actually as benefit fees, and without repayment, in order to get on good terms with E17 so that our company could win the tender and get the project settlement.” (S24)</p>
<b>Institutionalization</b>	<p>“Nominally lending money, but actually asking for benefit fees, which is also the unspoken rule.” (S24)</p> <p>“At that time, we knew that E17 borrowed from us was just a pretext, the essence is to ask for a benefit fee, which is also the unspoken rules of the business world.” (S25)</p> <p>“Suppliers gave me kickbacks because of unspoken rules.” (E6)</p>

*Theoretical model*

To improve our understanding of the motivational drivers of the supply side of SCC in private sector purchasing, we explored this phenomenon based on eight cases of SCC practices. Our findings portray the motivations at two levels: micro level and meso level (see Figure 2). As illustrated in Figure 2, at the micro level, the supply side (suppliers) would be driven into SCC practices because of organizational imperatives (financial and reputational), rent-seeking behaviors, and keeping a long-term interorganizational relationship; at the meso-level, competitive isomorphism, coercive isomorphism, and institutionalization are the factors that may lead companies to be involved in SCC.

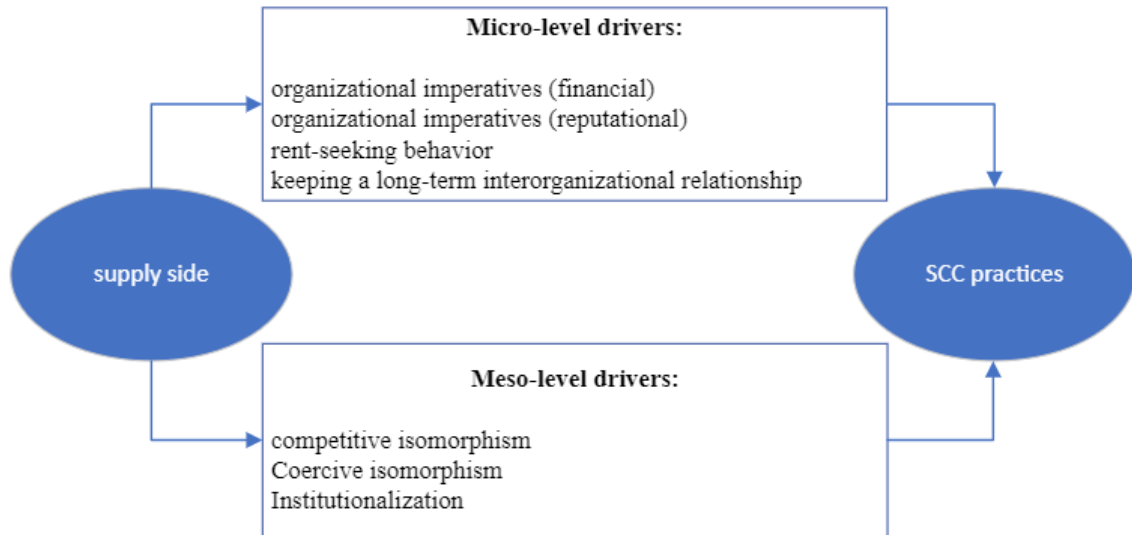


Figure 2. A theoretical model of motivational drivers of the supply side of SCC

## Conclusion

In this paper, we reported on a multilevel study investigating the motivational drivers of companies engaging in SCC practices. The purpose of our study was to improve our understanding of the motivations of SCC from a supply-side perspective, which also extends the knowledge of the motivation of private-to-private corruption. Our observations are important, as they begin to shed light on the motivations of the bribe-giver itself, instead of focusing on contextual antecedents of corruption. Our study contributes to both theoretical and managerial aspects.

Theoretically, first, this paper elaborates theory on the challenging phenomenon of SCC in private sector purchasing by linking the supply chain management literature to the corruption literature and offers important insights to extend our understanding of this topic. This study builds theories to elaborate on the motivations of companies that engaged in SCC practices, which provides a solid theoretical foundation for future research on SCC management. Second, this research makes efforts to fill the gap of research into private-to-private corruption. Third, this study tests rent-seeking theory in a private context by explaining SCC in private procurement, extending the application scope of this economic theory. In terms of managerial implications, this study offers a better understanding of motivations for suppliers to engage in SCC in private procurement, which will provide operations and supply chain managers with guidance on how to manage the relationship with suppliers and mitigate SCC. For example, Integrity agreements between focal companies and suppliers can be an effective means of preventing and mitigating SCC. It is important for managers to mitigate SCC risk to

reduce costs associated with SCC, improve product and service quality, and promote stable and long-term customer-supplier relations.

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