Hikikomori: Understanding Japan's Silent Cultural Revolution

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Introduction

To never leaving one's bedroom; ordinarily believed to be unthinkable but has become an inescapable way of living for thousands of Japanese, young and old. These people are referred to as *hikikomori,* coined by Japanese psychiatrist SAITO Tamaki. These are Japan's modern-day hermits. *Shakaiteki hikikomori,* often translated to "social withdrawal," shortened to *hikikomori,* is literally meaning "pulling inwards" and is often used to mean "shut-in," is a prevalent issue currently facing Japanese society. However, the nuance of the term is difficult both in translation and definition. *Hikikomori* isolate themselves from society and refusing to work of attend school, for a period exceeding six months, as defined by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. There are an estimated 541,000 of these recluses aged 15-39 living in Japan currently, and 613,000 aged 40-64. according to a 2019 government survey (KATO, SHIGENOBU, Teo, 2018). However, experts believe this number to be even higher since those afflicted will tend to not actively seek help immediately.

This is a relatively new social issue, only emerging towards the tail-end of the twentieth century, but has since been well-documented in research papers, documentaries, video interviews, and even within fiction. This paper will serve as a cursory overview of a few contentious aspects of Japanese society which are cited as the main causes of *hikikomori,* with the aim of exploring this issue primarily from an anthropological perspective. Researching and understanding *hikikomori* with an open mind can not only provide us with the tools to help those in social withdrawal but can also serve as a lens to magnify many of the more-unfavorable facets of Japanese society. And while this issue is not as culturally bound as once believed by experts, since withdrawal is oftentimes formed due to universal societal pressures,

there still seems to be a distinct form of acute social withdrawal within Japan that can only be described as *hikikomori.* Major reasons for the unique form of Japanese *hikikomori* have been identified and will be explored in this paper; analysis of the period of economic recession known as the "Lost Decade," the rigor of Japanese schooling, bullying, the importance of conformity, and the complicated role of parents with *hikikomori* children.

What is a *Hikikomori*?

Shakaiteki hikikomori, often shortened to *hikikomori,* are characterized by a person without psychosis, usually in their late twenties, retreating from society and avoiding contact with all people other than one's family, will avoid working or attending school, for a period exceeding six months. These people oftentimes still live their parents and rely on them as their sole lifeline. Outline by Alan R. Teo in *Psychopathology Associated with Social Withdrawal: Idiopathic and Comorbid Presentations*, some characteristics of social withdrawal include but are not limited to; "spending most of the day and nearly every day confined to home, marked and persistent avoidance of social situations, and social relationships, social withdrawal symptoms causing significant functional impairment, duration of at least six months, and no apparent physical or mental etiology to account for the social withdrawal symptoms." (Teo, 2015)

SAITO Tamaki is a prominent researcher of adolescent psychiatry and was largely responsible for shedding light on the *hikikomori* condition in the late-1990's. SAITO defined many of the typical characteristics of *hikikomori* in his 1998 publication entitled *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*, which was aimed at the layman as opposed a psychiatrist and was structured as a self-help book for both *hikikomori* and their parents to overcome this problem.

According to SAITO's observations of *hikikomori,* the average length of withdrawal is thirty-nine months, men are overwhelmingly more likely to experience withdrawal, the eldest son has a higher likelihood of being a *hikikomori,* the average age of withdrawal is 15.5 years old, and usually are from a middle-class family or above (SAITO 1998, 31) He also found that many *hikikomori* suffer from insomnia due to a reversed day-night cycle, mental regression or violent tendencies, listlessness, depression and suicide. (SAITO 1998, 49)

The Significance of the "Lost Decade"

The devastation of World War II and the horror of the atomic bombings left Japan's economy in shambles. Already being far behind the Western world, Japan ushered in an era defined by rapid modernization, under the pretense of a unified goal, all tinged with Japanese nationalism. Thus began an unprecedented period of rapid economic growth thanks to strong government intervention, unmatched work ethic, individual sacrifices and emphasis on "group harmony," all culminating in Japan's economic "bubble economy." Japan's companies prospered at a rate comparable to their American counterparts. Children would attend grade school, high school, become and adult, attend university, and then placed in a job that would guarantee them employment for life. Schools churned out increasingly higher percentages of university graduates trained for the competitive Japanese workforce. Hard work had definite payoffs, meaning studying hard granted you a good position in a company after graduation and working hard in your job ensured a promotion (Zielenziger 2007, 8-9).

However, the rapid modernization was not without consequences. At the beginning of the Heisei Period in Japan, during the early 19990's, the so-called "bubble economy" burst, thus beginning Japan's "Lost Decade" of both economic and social turmoil. This marked a

period of "economic slowdown, corporate restructurings, and rising unemployment rates, coupled with a growing sense of collective socio-cultural insecurity and anxiety" (Dasgupta 2009, 79) which experts say Japan has yet to recover from.

The end of the economic prosperity brought along a sense of social and cultural dislocation, and an overall loss in national confidence. Suddenly adults in alleged lifelong jobs found themselves without work due to "restructuring." New graduates found themselves lost after the promise of a good job was lost. No longer did hard work guarantee a fair return, and many found themselves disillusioned with the uncertainties of the present. The rules that guaranteed success in the prospering late-Showa Era no longer held true. The hard-working "salaryman" archetype was broken down and was quickly became an unattainable dream of yesteryear. The transformation from feudalism to modernity had suddenly made a turn for the worse.

The social unrest only compounded as increasingly more problems were unearthed amidst the "Lost Decade." Tragedies such as the 1995 Hanshin earthquake that devastated Kobe and the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack in public subways served to the exacerbate the already collective anxieties of Japanese people at the time. Moreover, "a succession of often extremely bizarre, and seemingly random acts of youth crime committed by ostensibly normal, everyday teenagers who suddenly snapped (*kireru*), punctuated these years" (Dasgupta 2006, 81) symbolized the social unrest disseminating down to Japan's youth. Coupled with rising concern of issues including, but not limited to, the decreasing birthrate, *enjou kousai* (compensated dating), the growth of *freeters,* and other tragic crimes were emblematic of Japan reaching a breaking point.

“Japan's neo-Confucian society, which preaches the importance of obedience, discipline, self-inhibition, and group harmony--and where even individual identity is deeply swathed in mutual interdependence…” (Zielenziger 2006, 18) The nail that sticks out gets hammered down, but some cannot withstand the pressure and “drop out” of society. “… [they] have imploded like vacuum tubes, closing themselves in, cutting themselves off, and utterly marginalizing themselves” (Zielenziger 2006, 18). This is their protest against a society that failed to accommodate those who were different.

A young man named Kenji is a thirty-four-year-old *hikikomori* who lives with his mother. According to Japanese psychiatrist, and expert in this field, explains:

> *"Kenji's willful retreat into the bedroom, his unwillingness to fit in, can be sensibly explained, Saito told me. Japan's traditional family structure is splintering, he said. Its educational system, which emphasizes rote learning over critical thinking, is being questioned as never before. Young people now sense that the old rules don't work in a global age."* (Zielenziger 2006, 20)

The youth were speaking out, the rules that governed their fathers no longer hold true. This is one way they are fighting back.

“In the 1980s, when Japan's economy was still humming, no one had ever heard the term hikikomori.” writes Michael Zielenziger, in his book *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation*. “…after the economy began to sputter and misfire, the pistons began to fail and fluids began to leak, exposing the rigidities and social dysfunction that had finally made the gears seize up.” (Zielenziger 2006, 20-1) The notion that *hikikomori* was not a prevalent phenomenon in the 1980’s aligns with our timeline since SAITO Tamaki didn’t

popularize the term until 1998 in *Adolescence Without End.* This leads me to believe that the so-called "Lost Decade" was the primary source of the social unrest and cultural dislocation Japan experience going into the new millennia, providing a perfect storm for a number of social issues that still plague Japanese society to this day; among those issues is the exponential rise in the number of *hikikomori.*

Causes of Social Withdrawal

Japanese Schooling

In *Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End,* SAITO found that "The most common trigger initiating the withdrawal was 'skipping school,' seen in 68.8 percent of the cases." (SAITO 1998, 31) "Student apathy" is a troubling issue that emerged in the 1970's in which university students failed to attend class. The important distinction between student apathy and those students who simply skip class, since those who suffer from student apathy will express a lack of interest, loss of goals or direction, and will avoid competitive situations in which they might fail. Student apathy was first studied by Paul A. Walters who likened it to "masculine identification." He explained that those who "see themselves as failing 'to be masculine' and hate to fail, so they avoid competitive situations as a form of self- protection" (SAITO 1998, 79) Student apathy is commonly discussed when understanding why students will stop attending school. The obsession with one's academic achievement dehumanizes these students; critics express how Japan's education system favors route memorization over critical thinking which alienates those who think differently. Coupled with the high expectations for students to succeed, it is clear why a struggling student will crack under the pressure.

Students in Japan are expected to pass rigorous exams to enter university and is a major stressor for third year high school students who refer to it as "examination hell." In Japan, exams were traditionally unique depending on the school and department, meaning students would need to prepare for numerous exams, all of which tested them on any subject taught during their entire schooling career. However, reforms to these "Center Tests" are expected to roll out shortly to reprimand known issues, chief among them being the mental health of these young people.

Those that fail their exams of their choosing are called *ronin,* literally "masterless samurai," who's sole focus for the following year is passing an entrance exam. In an article entitled *Overhauling Japan's High-Stakes University-Admission System* by Annabelle Timsit from 2018, she explains how "The psychological impact of falling behind in the highly structured Japanese tertiary system can be devastating. In a 2014 analysis, Japanese neuropsychiatrists found that roughly 58 percent of the *ronin* they surveyed had depression, and that just under 20 percent had severe depression." *Ronin* who fail on subsequent attempts are left to decide if entering university is even attainable, might suffer from student apathy, and are prone to withdrawal socially.

Returning to Zielenziger's *Shutting Out the Sun,* there is a powerful excerpt discussing the final straw for a young man named Hiro, who became a *hikikomori*. As a child, Hiro would go to *juku,* cram school, from four until ten at night which he later described to be extremely exhausting mentally, especially for a young boy. Despite his efforts, he was unable to pass entrance exams for a private elementary school and ended up in a public school. His father insisted that Hiro should study harder for the entrance exams and placed a considerable amount

of pressure on him. His mother began a rigorous tutoring period at the instruction of her husband where he would be criticized for not being tough enough. This ultimately culminating into him finally lashing out at his parents yelling "I am not your robot anymore." (Zielenziger 2006, 35-6) Following this incident, Hiro stumbled through elementary school and started junior high, but dropped out only after half a year, where alienation from his peers and all the accumulated pressure of studying had finally caught up to him. Hiro cites being so tired that he needed "ten days' sleep to get what other students got in one normal night." He now reflects on this time saying "[my mother] pushed me so much… she ruined my youth" (Zielenziger 2006, 36). In addition to feeling misplaced amongst his peers at school, who had already formed cliques that he wasn't welcome in, his parents had high expectations for him, and then he failed to meet them despite all the work. It's quite clear why this might break someone like Hiro and is reflective of the shared experiences many young people have relating to a rigorous school system and strict parents, where success is not applauded but expected.

Bullying in Japan

In addition to the rigorous education system, many young people must also with endure bullying at school. "My school uniform felt so heavy as if I was in armour [sic]" (OI, 2015), says Masa, in his article in an online publication for *futouko,* students who refuse to go to school. Continuing in the BBC article, we can see startling statistics about adolescents who feel as if there is no way out of bullying and resort to suicide. According to the Cabinet Office, September 1 is historically the day with the most suicides for people under eighteen, and it is no coincidence that this is the same day the new school semester begins. The trauma of being a victim of bullying is often enough to make students stop attending school altogether. Furthermore, there have been cases where teachers turning a blind eye to bullying because it

would hurt the school's reputation. As a result, the students who are the victims find it increasingly harder the seek help when the adults around are unwilling to acknowledge the issue.

SAITO Tamaki explains a case-study of his involving a twenty-one-year-old male. As a child he was described as outgoing and chased success. Throughout high school he excelled in classes and made it into his first-choice university without much trouble. There, he attended class diligently and joined the tennis club during the first semester. However, after summer break of his first year, he stopped attending class altogether, citing the reason as "not get[ting] on well with his classmates." (SAITO 1998, 20) Following this, he became hyperaware of the people around him and developed a debilitating case of anthropophobia, the fear of people and often relating to feeling uncomfortable around other or within crowds. This young man became paranoid, thinking that people were constantly watching him on trains and would avoid riding them. He later managed to recover somewhat with the help of his parents and counseling, but as SAITO states, "it does not seem like he can handle day-to-day life in quite the same way he once did." (SAITO 1998, 20) While not withdrawing completely, this man did reflect many of the same behaviors as other *hikikomori* based off my research. Representative by a debilitating fear of others, oftentimes escalating to DMS-IV, avoidant personality disorder. DMS-IV is characterized by avoiding interacting people or situations which would result in interactions, restraint in initiating intimate relationships, preoccupation with being rejected by others, and viewing oneself as socially inept or inferior. (SAITO 1998, 62) These symptoms can correlate with a person in the process of social withdrawal since such preoccupations can be the result of social trauma strong enough to initiate the descent to becoming a *hikikomori.*

Conformity

Amidst the light pink *sakura* blowing in the April wind, a sea of dark-haired graduates clad in black business attire are seen, hopeful in their job hunt. April marks the traditional time for *shuushoku katsudou*, or "job hunting." University graduates are seeking employment at companies which are beginning their hiring process at the same time, since this marks the start of the fiscal year in Japan. During their time at university, students are able to dye their hair, pierce their ears, dress in whatever fashion they wish all to express themselves. However, once graduation nears and it's time for *shuushoku katsudou,* they are expected to fall into line to what is expected of a working adult. Students dye their hair a natural color, put on the black suit and follow the crowd of others doing the same.

The *shuushoku katsudou* tradition exemplifies the Japanese proverb "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down" and represents the importance of conformity in Japan. The period following World War II and the bubble economy, the importance of "group harmony" was critical in creating a unified goal for a splintered nation. Individuals made sacrifices for the greater good and they saw returns on these actions. Employees would be expected to work overtime (*zangyou*), work off the clock and feel pressured to avoid using their vacation time. These practices persist today because the importance placed on conformity and group harmony still govern Japan. Coupled with the homogeneous society of Japan with hardly any ethnic diversity, it's made increasingly clear why the Japanese have a strong sense of group and national identity, and consequently, a pressure to fall into line. Thus, we return to the cliché: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."

Japan is responsible for creating an environment where dissenters would be met with opposition. Therefore, we see the prevalence of *honne* and *tatemae,* "true feelings" and "behavior and opinions displayed in public" respectively. Similar to the phenomena of the "persona" popularized by Carl Jung, *honne* and *tatemae* are representative of the two "masks" Japanese people wear on a daily basis. The *honne* mask with one's close family and friends and the *tatemae* mask at work, school or with strangers. Salarymen will cheerfully laugh to the lousy jokes made by their business partners over drinks to seal a deal, housewives will agree with their neighbors' opinions on politics to uphold a friendly relationship, and students will join in the slandering on a fellow classmate to avoid being on the receiving end. People will wear their *tatemae* masks to follow the crowd in public, suppressing their true feelings, to avoid being ostracized for overstepping their bounds. The uncomfortable relationship with conformity has resulted in an environment that struggles to oppose the notion of "the way things have always been."

> *"Hikikomori can see the intangibles, but cannot speak out because there is no place in Japanese society that allows them to . . . So," she concluded, "a person who challenges, or makes a mistake, or thinks for himself, either leaves Japan or becomes a hikikomori."* (Zielenziger 2006, 18)

Not all Japanese people can shoulder the weight of conformity and some will break under the pressure. People are inherently different from one another and expecting everyone to behave the same and accept that societal mandate willingly is terribly idealistic. This expectation alienates those who think differently. Japan is a nation that has always been marching to the

beat of "tradition," and the willingness of many to avoid opposing the accepted way of life, so for this reason the rules of old still find themselves at the forefront of Japanese society.

The Role of Parents

One of the common questions asked by those first learning about *hikikomori* is often along the lines of "why don't their parents cut them off so they are forced to work?" From an American perspective it might make sense since it appears as if the parents of *hikikomori* are in some ways reaffirming their children by supporting their unhealthy lifestyle. However, as I explore this issue, it will slowly become more apparent that this could not be further from the truth. Japanese family structures are quite different from those in Western countries. For example, young people are not expected to move out of their parent's house at eighteen and will oftentimes live with them until much older. There is a strong importance placed on taking care of one's parents as a form of gratitude for raising them, so the eldest child will usually stay with their parents instead of sending them to a nursing home, which is much more common in America. This lasting relationship between parent and child sets the stage of our exploration of why Japanese parents find it difficult to "cut off" their *hikikomori* children.

SAITO Tamaki found that in a survey of *hikikomori* cases, about thirty-six percent of respondents had demonstrated "regression to childhood" due to reliance on their parents. He explains this phenomenon to arise due to a prolonged period of being dependent on their parents, thus regressing their mental state to that of a child. This was compared to how hospitalized patients tend to display infantile or selfish tendencies. In the case of *hikikomori*, examples of this childlike regression can be seen with "cling[ing] to their mothers, speak in wheedling, infantile voices, or express the desire to touch their mother's bodies… There are

even times when if the patients' desires are not fulfilled, then they will become fussy like a child, pestering their mothers in a tearful voice or kicking their mothers' legs and struggling with their arms." (SAITO 1998, 44) In their article entitled *Hikikomori: experience in Japan and international relevance* published in *World Psychiatry 17,* KATO Takahiro, SHIGENOBU Kanba and Alan R. Teo provide insight to how this regression is related to *hikikomori's* social withdrawal:

> *"Parent-child relationships in Japan have long been considered less oedipal than in Western societies and marked by an absent father and an extremely prolonged and close bond to the mother, which may result in difficulty to become independent7. Especially in hikikomori, the development of basic interpersonal skills during the early stages of life seems to be insufficient, which can induce vulnerability to stress in later school/workplace environments and lead to escape from social situations."* (KATO, SHIGENOBU, Teo, 2018)

The reason regression is significant is due to how it is intrinsically tied to the Japanese concept of *amae,* which has been defined by Japanese psychoanalyst DOI Takeo to mean "the desire to be in good favor with, and be able to depend on, the people around oneself"(DOI 2001, 39) similar to the childish ideal of having your parents indulge you. In the context of *hikikomori,* one can see why the concept of *amae* might be applicable to the parent-child relationship between a *hikikomori* and their parents. According to the previously cited article by KATO Takahiro, SHIGENOBU Kanba and Alan R. Teo, "[t]he Japanese sociocultural background has been traditionally permeated by 'amae'(accepting overdependent behaviors) and shame, which may underlie the culture-bound syndrome called *Taijin Kyofusho*(a severe form of social

phobia) as well as hikikomori." (KATO, SHIGENOBU, Teo, 2018) In this context, not only does this allow for a child to become increasingly reliant on their parents in an infantile manner, but establishes a somewhat parasitic relationship where the child is solely dependent on the parents. For the parents, they might see it hard to cut off their child because the child has no income and might starve, so they continue to shelter them, and the cycle repeats itself. Furthermore, there are oftentimes cases in which the parents will blame themselves for their child's social withdrawal. Having a *hikikomori* as a son or daughter is often not without intense shame for a parent, where they feel responsible for raising their child "wrong" because they're someone who is unable to function "normally." For instance, in the aforementioned case of Hiro, his mother, who in retrospect, blamed herself for pushing her son too hard in.

A significant and ongoing issue that has been receiving more attention as of late is the "80-50 problem," which is the phenomenon of parents over 80 supporting a *hikikomori* child over 50. As mentioned previously, there are an estimated 541,000 *hikikomori* aged 15-39 in Japan currently, however there are 613,000 *hikikomori* in the 40-64 age bracket. (KATO, SHIGENOBU, Teo, 2018). What was previously thought to be a condition that affected young people under forty has now shifted due to recent statistics from a 2016 Japanese cabinet report. Children completely dependent on parents who have already retired stretches the family's savings thin and is a source of major economic distress in these households. Government support centers that traditionally support older people in the community are not able to provide support to these "older-with-single-child households" since by all accounts, the child could support their parents (YOSHIOKA-MAEDA, 2020). However, since there are underlying issues with the child that creates difficulty functioning in an adult society, they are not able to work and thus the family struggles.

Furthermore, Japan has been struggling with an aging society and a low birth-rate since the turn of the century, and the 80-50 problem is symbolic of the unforeseen consequences of larger societal problems straining Japan. The cabinet office estimates that the older population will reach 39.9% of the population by 2060 and the population's median age will continue to shift towards the elderly age range (YOSHIOKA-MAEDA, 2020). For *hikikomori,* this is a serious problem because they will eventually reach a point of desperation where they need to seek help and get a job, otherwise their parents will either cut them off willingly or pass away, leaving the middle-aged *hikikomori* forced to make a difficult decision.

Unfortunately, this is why suicide rates amongst *hikikomori* is so high. According to a 2019 paper by Roseline Yong and NOMURA Kyouko, they found that *hikikomori* have a significantly higher risk for committing suicide compared to non-*hikikomori,* 81.0% risk compared to 43.6% respectively. Some of these risks include wishing to die, hopelessness, self-harm, and feelings of guilt towards their family. It would not be unexpected for a *hikikomori* over fifty to resort to suicide after realizing they are the source of burden on their aging parents and are too afraid to seek help after living that lifestyle for the majority of their life.

Hikikomori **Outside of Japan**

There is discourse amongst academics researching social withdrawal who are seeing cases of *hikikomori* outside of Japan. This abnormality seems to go against the aforementioned causes for social withdrawal within Japan, since such factors are not all applicable for other countries, especially Western countries. Various researchers have gone on to challenge the notion of *hikikomori* as strictly a cultural-bound phenomenon, and if the cases abroad are analogous with Japan's *hikikomori*.

A group of researchers published a paper in 2015 entitled *Hikikomori in Spain*: *A descriptive study,* in which they concluded that *hikikomori* was, in fact, not strictly a Japanese problem. In their study, they observed 200 people referred to their institution due to social withdrawal and found many parallels between the majority of their participants and characteristics of Japanese *hikikomori;* predominantly young males (73.8%), many still lived with their family, unable to keep a stable job, and have difficulties in social situations. These findings attempted to quantify the already observed cases of *hikikomori*-like cases in other parts of Asia, Australia, parts of Europe and America.

These findings abroad seem to go against the previously believed doctrine of *nihonjinron,* collection of texts that attempt to explain the peculiarities of Japanese culture, which concludes that *hikikomori* is strictly a Japanese phenomenon in a twistedly boastful manner. *Hikikomori* appeared to be a consequence to post-war pressures, disillusionment, and a stubborn attachment to tradition despite changing times. However, we are now seeing *hikikomori* on a global scale, and whether all cases are analogous with being *hikikomori* in a conventional sense or simply a more general definition of acute social withdrawal is hard to say. On the other hand, experts within Japan still claim that "there are factors that are distinctive about the ways that Japanese culture treats a withdrawn person and handles the situation." (SAITO 1998, 74) which still attempts to uphold the notion that *hikikomori* is a more nuanced Japanese phenomenon.

Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, we have delved into the various aspects of Japanese society and culture which served as an incubator for the formation of reclusive people known as

hikikomori. Although this issue is not as culturally bound as once believed by experts since withdrawal is oftentimes the result of universal societal pressures. However, there still seems to be a distinct form of acute social withdrawal within Japan that can only be described as *hikikomori.* The importance of identifying such issues can help further reform in both Japanese society and societies across the globe plagued by similar universal issues that trigger people to give up participating in society.

Unfortunately, *hikikomori* will oftentimes be averse to seeking help. Those within withdrawal due to social trauma will likely find it increasingly more difficult to reach out to others due to the initial trauma, thus resulting in a vicious cycle. *Hikikomori* likely feel inferior to others, feeling as if they are in the wrong, due to the notion that "If you don't work, you don't deserve to eat." However, being able to recognize the problem is the first step, but before we can do that, we must first acknowledge the problems *hikikomori* face as valid. SAITO Tamaki writes, "…it is important to recognize the truth that social withdrawal is here… one should not look at people in a state of withdrawal and think they have gone wrong somehow as a person" (SAITO 1998, 94). In other words, when helping those in a state of social withdrawal, it is imperative that you should not pass judgement on these people due to your own preconceptions. So, from a place of understanding, we should instead offer a helping hand.

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