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Factors Influencing of School Type, Parental Educational Background, Gender, and Age on the English Language Speaking Proficiency of Chinese College Students

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Abstract
English, as an international language of communication, plays a crucial role in the development of global economic exchanges. In China, where English serves as a second language, the improvement of college students' English language speaking proficiency faces numerous challenges due to the lack of authentic English communication environments. However, there has been a lack of in-depth research on the relationship between Chinese college students' English language speaking proficiency and factors such as school background. This study utilized multiple linear regression to analyze data from the 2021 China General Social Survey. It aimed to investigate the relationship between college students' English language speaking proficiency and various factors, including different types of high school experiences, parental educational backgrounds, gender differences, and age disparities. The findings revealed that college students who attended provincial-level and municipal-level key high schools demonstrated higher English language speaking proficiency. Additionally, paternal educational background had a more significant impact on the English language speaking proficiency of offspring compared to maternal educational background. Furthermore, female students exhibited higher English speaking proficiency levels than male students. Moreover, English speaking proficiency showed an inverted "U"-shaped trend with age, peaking at 22.5 years old. Based on the research results, recommendations were proposed to balance the educational resources of different types of high schools and to reform English teaching in universities. These suggestions aim to provide robust evidence for the formulation of educational policies to meet the growing demand for English learning in China.

Keywords: English language; speaking proficiency; influencing factors; English proficiency

Introduction
As economic globalization continues to integrate and develop, English remains a vital language for international communication, and the demand for individuals with strong English oral

expression and communication skills is increasing. In this context, China places great emphasis on the quality and effectiveness of English oral education (Shang, 2024). However, as English is a second language, improving the effectiveness of English oral teaching poses one of the most challenging and complex issues in foreign language education (Ni, 2011; Alharbi, 2015), with 76% of students expressing fear or boredom toward English listening comprehension (Su, 2013). The English speaking proficiency of Chinese college students not only affects individual development but also has significant implications for China's economic development. Currently, China's higher education enrollment rate is 59.6%, surpassing the university enrollment rate in developed countries (Ou, 2023), and the overall effect of higher education on economic growth in China is 0.257 (Zhang, 2023). However, students' English speaking proficiency is influenced by many factors, including their school background, parental educational background, gender, and age (Chen, 2020; Qi, 2023; Cao, 2023; Feng, 2019; Huang, 2011). This study aims to explore the impact of these factors on the English speaking proficiency of Chinese college students, with particular attention to high school type, parental education duration, gender, and age.

Existing literature indicates that optimizing the teaching process to improve English speaking proficiency, such as designing flipped English speaking classrooms to stimulate student interest and foster internalized oral expression (Ni, 2024; Ren, 2024), applying artificial intelligence technology to the teaching process to integrate digital storytelling with college English speaking teaching, thereby enhancing college students' motivation to learn English speaking (Yang et al., 2023), and investigating the relationship between individual anxiety and English speaking proficiency to optimize English teaching strategies (Zhao et al., 2023).

Additionally, family background influences English speaking proficiency. For example, family income affects elementary school students' English speaking communication scores, with scores declining steadily for children from low-income families (Chen, 2020). The father's occupational background significantly affects junior high school students' English scores, with students whose fathers are professional or managerial personnel scoring higher in English than children whose parents are workers or farmers (Li, 2013). Family economic status significantly influences English learning motivation, with higher family economic status inclining college students toward cultural motivation for English learning and lower family economic status inclining college students toward instrumental motivation (Nong, 2015; Zou, 2013).

Some scholars have found that standardized English language tests can effectively improve the oral proficiency of non-English background students (Oliver et al., 2012), and proposed drawing lessons from international English proficiency tests to explore and improve the assessment system for college English oral teaching in China to enhance students' language communication ability (Yang, 2014).

Past studies have shown that teaching processes, family factors, standardized tests, etc., have significant impacts on English speaking proficiency. However, there is still a lack of in-depth research on the relationship between the English speaking proficiency of Chinese college students and their school background. This study aims to fill this research gap by exploring this relationship from the perspectives of school type, parental educational background, gender, and age. Specifically, through the analysis of data from the China General Social Survey, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Are there differences in English speaking proficiency among college students with different high school backgrounds? (2) Are there significant differences in English speaking proficiency between different genders? (3) What is the relationship between age and English-speaking proficiency? (4) Does parental education level influence the English-speaking proficiency of their children? Additionally, through these analyses,

we aim to provide a deeper understanding of English education in China and to provide strong evidence for the formulation of educational policies to meet the growing demand for English learning in China.

Research method

Research design

As the dependent variable, English speaking proficiency, is a continuous variable, a multiple linear regression model was employed to analyze the data. To effectively analyze the data, three regression models were established for comparative analysis. Model 1 served as the baseline regression model, including the dependent variable English speaking proficiency and independent variables such as high school type (categorized into five groups: provincial-level key high school, municipal-level key high school, county-level key high school, non-key high school, and general high school), gender, and age. Model 2 extended Model 1 by adding the independent variable of parental education duration. To further examine whether the age variable exhibits a curvilinear trend, Model 2 was augmented by adding the square of the age variable. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of the relationships among the variables studied in this research.

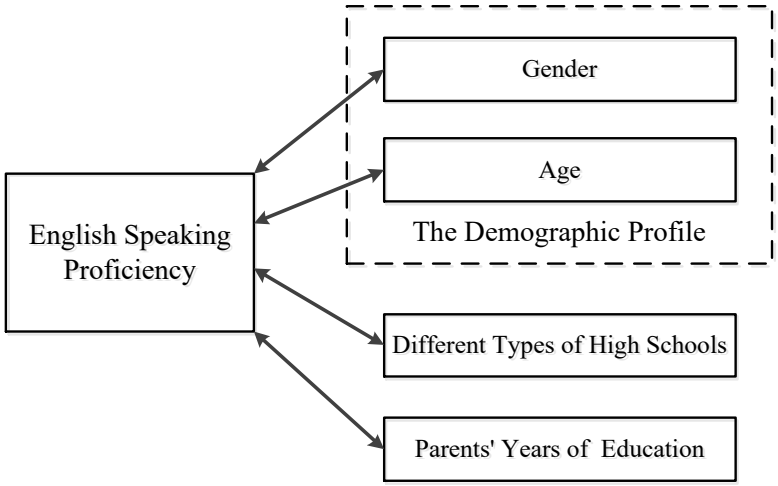

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Study participants

The data for this study were derived from the 2021 China General Social Survey conducted by the China Survey and Data Center at Renmin University of China. This survey, funded by the Key Project of the National Natural Science Foundation of China, is an economic and social data sharing platform executed by the China Survey and Data Center at Renmin University of China. The survey sampled data from 19 provinces in China, with a total sample size of 8,148 in 2021. The participants of this study were individuals with both high school and college learning experiences. According to the research requirements, individuals aged between 18 and 30 years old who had experienced high school and college education were selected from the 2021 China General Social Survey data. The final sample size obtained for analysis was 692 individuals.

Sampling design

The China General Social Survey is a nationwide sampling survey conducted by the China Survey and Data Center at Renmin University of China in 36 cities across China. The survey sampling population is divided into two main categories:

Mandatory strata

Special treatment is given to large cities that are at the forefront of domestic development. The urban households in the administrative districts of these cities are designated as a separate stratum and are selected as mandatory strata.

Sampled strata

This stratum comprises all households nationwide except for those in the mandatory strata. The sampled strata are further divided into district strata and county strata. Three indicators, namely population density, proportion of non-agricultural population, and per capita regional gross domestic product, are used to conduct factor analysis separately in the district and county strata. The district strata are further divided into 19 strata, while the county strata are further divided into 31 strata. In total, the sampled strata are subdivided into 50 strata.

Research tools

This study utilized Stata 15.1 and Excel 2016 for data organization and statistical analysis. Stata 15.1 was employed to conduct data analysis through multiple linear regression and to generate marginal effect prediction plots for English speaking proficiency. Excel 2016 was utilized for data summarization and statistical computations.

Results

Descriptive statistics results

The sample size of individuals with both high school and college learning experiences was 692. From Table 1 analysis, the core variable, English speaking proficiency, is a continuous variable ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 10, with a mean of 5.4 and a median of 6. The small difference between the mean and median indicates a relatively symmetrical distribution. The gender variable is a binary variable, with the digit 1 representing males and the digit 0 representing females. The sample consists of slightly more female participants, accounting for 11.2% more than male participants. The age variable is continuous, ranging from 18 to 30 years old, with an average age of 23.9 years. The parental education duration variables are also continuous, ranging from 0 to 19 years. The average education duration for fathers is 10.3 years, while it is 9.4 years for mothers, indicating that fathers' average education duration exceeds mothers' by 0.9 years. The high school type variable is a multicategorical variable, with five categories: provincial-level key high school, municipal-level key high school, county-level key high school, non-key high school, and general high school. Among these, municipal-level key high schools have the highest proportion at 45.4%, while general high schools have the lowest proportion at 6.2%.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	Description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
English Speaking Proficiency	Continuous variable ranging from 2 to 10	5.4	1.605	2	10
Gender (Proportion of Males)	Binary variable, 1 for males, 0 for females	44.4%	0.497	0	1
Age	Continuous variable ranging from 18 to 30	23.9	3.4	18	30
Father's Education Duration	Continuous variable ranging from 0 to 19	10.3	3.474	0	19
Mother's Education Duration	Continuous variable ranging from 0 to 19	9.4	3.601	0	19
High School Type	Categorical variable, with provincial-level key high school as the reference group				
- Provincial-level Key High School	Value of 1, other variables as 0	15.0%	0.358	0	1
- Municipal-level Key High School	Value of 1, other variables as 0	45.4%	0.498	0	1
- County-level Key High School	Value of 1, other variables as 0	7.8%	0.268	0	1
- Non-key High School	Value of 1, other variables as 0	25.6%	0.437	0	1
- General High School	Value of 1, other variables as 0	6.2%	0.242	0	1

Regression analysis results

Through conducting multiple linear regression statistical analysis, the regression results were analyzed separately from four aspects: different types of high school experiences, parental education duration, gender differences, and age differences, regarding their effects on English speaking proficiency.

Regarding the differences in English speaking proficiency among samples with different high school types of learning experiences, taking provincial-level key high schools as the reference group, it can be observed from the three regression models that there are significant differences between the other four high school types and provincial-level key high schools. Among them, municipal-level key high schools have the smallest gap in English speaking proficiency compared to provincial-level key high schools, while general high schools have the largest gap. For instance, in Model Three, the average English speaking proficiency of municipal-level key high schools is 0.435 lower than that of provincial-level key high schools ($P<0.01$), and the average English speaking proficiency of general high schools is 1.22 lower than that of provincial-level key high schools ($P<0.01$). The average English speaking proficiency of county-level key high schools and non-key high schools is between that of municipal-level key high schools and general high schools.

Regarding the impact of parental education duration on children's English speaking proficiency, both Model Two and Model Three indicate that the longer the parents' education duration, the higher the children's English speaking proficiency. Taking Model Three as an

example, for every additional year of father's education duration, children's English speaking proficiency increases by an average of 0.058 (P<0.01), and for every additional year of mother's education duration, children's English speaking proficiency increases by an average of 0.045 (P<0.05). The impact of father's education background on children's English speaking proficiency is slightly higher than that of mother's.

Regarding gender differences in English speaking proficiency, all three models indicate that female English speaking proficiency is significantly higher than male English speaking proficiency. In Model Three, female English speaking proficiency is 0.445 higher than male English speaking proficiency (P<0.01).

Regarding age differences in English speaking proficiency, the regression coefficients of the age variable in Model One and Model Two are negative. However, after adding the age squared term in Model Three, the regression coefficient of the age variable becomes positive, while the regression coefficient of the age squared term is negative. This suggests that English speaking proficiency initially increases and then decreases with age. Through observation of Figure Two, it can be seen that English speaking proficiency exhibits a inverted U-shaped trend with increasing age, with the highest point at 22.5 years old (calculated based on Model Three).

Table 2. Statistical analysis

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
High School Type			
(Provincial Key High School as Reference Group)			
Municipal Key High School	-0.562***	-0.454***	-0.435***
	(0.172)	(0.170)	(0.169)
County Key High School	-1.219***	-1.055***	-1.095***
	(0.255)	(0.251)	(0.250)
Non-Key High School	-1.033***	-0.807***	-0.809***
	(0.190)	(0.190)	(0.188)
General High School	-1.514***	-1.293***	-1.220***
	(0.276)	(0.273)	(0.272)
Gender (Female as Reference Group)	-0.413***	-0.440***	-0.445***
	(0.117)	(0.114)	(0.114)
Age	-0.067***	-0.061***	0.766***
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.256)
Age × Age			-0.017***
			(0.005)
Father's Education Years		0.059***	0.058***
		(0.022)	(0.022)
Mother's Education Years		0.044**	0.045**
		(0.021)	(0.021)
Constant	7.939***	6.661***	-3.211
	(0.433)	(0.480)	(3.084)
Observations	692	692	692
R-squared	0.113	0.153	0.166

Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

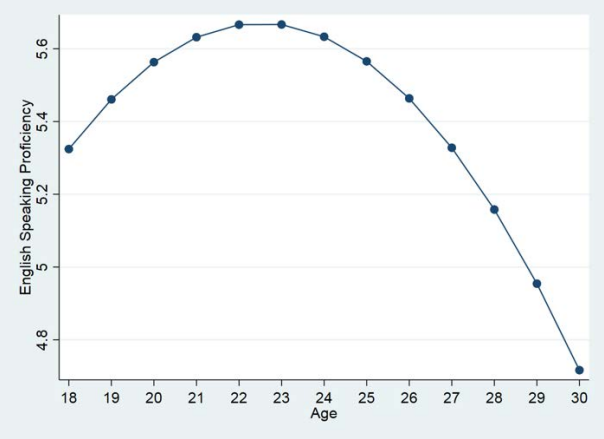

Figure 2. Predicted marginal effects plot for English speaking proficiency

The figure illustrates the predicted marginal effects plot for English speaking proficiency. It depicts how English speaking proficiency varies with age, showing an inverted U-shaped trend, with the highest point at 22.5 years old. The plot is based on Model Three of the regression analysis.

Discussion

Below, we will discuss the differences in university students' English speaking proficiency from four aspects: different types of high school learning experiences, different parental educational backgrounds, different genders, and different ages.

Differences in English speaking proficiency among students with different types of high school learning experiences.

Early high school English proficiency can influence later university English proficiency. Lei et al. (2014) conducted a study on 136 Chinese university sophomores and juniors and found that previous English proficiency significantly affects subsequent English proficiency. Further analysis by Wu et al. (2014) emphasizes the importance of high school English on university English. They suggest that the foundational knowledge acquired during high school, including pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary accumulation, and sentence structure, impacts the teaching effectiveness of university English teachers and significantly influences the confidence of students in their future English learning.

Similarly, the results of this study indicate significant differences in university students' English speaking proficiency based on their high school types. Students who attended provincial key high schools demonstrate the highest English speaking proficiency, followed by students from municipal key high schools, while students from general high schools exhibit the lowest proficiency. These differences stem from the historical development of high school education policies in China. The evolution of Chinese general high school education policies can be divided into three stages: the efficiency-oriented phase of key high schools, the expansion phase of high school education popularization, and the quality improvement phase of balanced and diversified development (Liang et al., 2022). Due to the historical development of high school education, various types of high schools have emerged, including provincial key high schools, municipal key high schools, county key high schools, non-key high schools, and general high schools. Key high schools receive significant advantages in terms of funding, teaching staff, hardware, and student source allocation. Although the Chinese government has been committed to promoting the

diversified reform of general high schools and has issued the "National Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)", aiming to promote the diversified development of general high schools and explore pathways for developing and cultivating innovative talents, the dominance of exam-oriented education in general high schools remains challenging to change. Additionally, due to differences in government funding, societal perceptions of schools, geographical locations, and other factors, some general high schools experience a continuous decline in educational quality due to the continuous loss of high-quality teaching staff (Feng et al., 2016). Consequently, there exists a significant gap in the opportunities for students from key high schools and non-key high schools to receive quality education, leading to differences in academic performance.

The influence of parental education on children's English speaking proficiency

He et al. (2015) conducted a study on 318 subjects to investigate the relationship between parental education levels and English learning plans. They found that parents with master's degrees or higher are more inclined to encourage their children to communicate with foreigners in the future, thereby improving their English speaking proficiency. The higher the parents' education level, the higher their expectations for improving their children's oral English proficiency. Chen (2020) explored the impact of family backgrounds on elementary school students' English speaking communication scores in two Chinese primary schools. They found that family cultural capital significantly influences students' English speaking proficiency; higher family cultural capital is associated with better English speaking proficiency. Similarly, Hosseinpour et al. (2015) reached the same conclusion through a study of 70 primary school students in Tehran, where they found a positive correlation between parental education background and children's English scores. This trend persists through different educational stages; Nurjannahtillah (2012) discovered a positive correlation between parents' education levels and students' oral proficiency among 50 high school students, with a correlation coefficient of 0.745. This pattern continues into university years, where longer parental education is associated with higher children's English speaking proficiency.

Better parental education backgrounds lead to richer family cultural capital, creating a more favorable learning environment for children. Children are influenced by their surroundings and become more proactive in learning English speaking skills. Another reason is that parents with higher education levels are more willing to provide more educational resources for their children, such as hiring private English tutors to enhance their children's English speaking proficiency. Li (2013) found that fathers with higher education levels pay more attention to their children's English learning. Fathers with education levels above university hire family English tutors for their children at a rate of 23.51%, which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, while the difference in mothers' education levels is not significant in hiring family English tutors. The research findings are consistent with the regression results of this study, indicating a positive correlation between fathers' education levels and children's English speaking proficiency, with fathers' education levels exerting a greater influence on children's English speaking proficiency than mothers'. Ning (2013) also reached the same conclusion, showing a positive correlation between parental education levels and children's academic performance. Additionally, they found that the higher the parents' English proficiency, the better the children's performance. Furthermore, the research results indicate that fathers have a greater influence on their children's academic performance than mothers in terms of education levels or English proficiency.

Gender differences in English speaking proficiency

Due to functional differences between the two hemispheres of the male and female brains, when it comes to language functions associated with the left hemisphere of the brain, females tend to outperform males (Sun, 2017). This physiological perspective corroborates the regression results of this study, indicating that females exhibit higher English speaking proficiency than males.

From a psychological perspective, females tend to have superior language skills compared to males (Sun, 2017). Wu (2011) conducted a study on the learning beliefs of 312 Chinese university students and found significant differences between males and females in the perceived difficulty of language learning. Males perceive learning a foreign language to be more challenging, while females are more likely to agree with the viewpoint that "Chinese and English have similar language structures." These differences in English learning beliefs directly influence the language learning behavior of males and females. Chen (2020) suggested that due to females' superior learning strategies, their average scores in English are higher than those of males.

From a motivational perspective, Wang's (2022) study results indicated that junior high school girls have higher motivation for learning English than boys, especially in terms of instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Motivation for learning English is positively correlated with English proficiency. Similarly, Becirovic (2017) concluded that there are significant differences in English learning motivation between male and female students, with female students being more successful in learning English. Oze (2000) proposed that the stronger the motivation of female students for foreign language learning, the more positively they perceive their goals, and they put more effort into language learning than males. However, Khong et al. (2017) presented different research findings. Through a study on gender differences in learning Spanish in a Malay-speaking environment, they found no significant differences between males and females in integrative motivation and instrumental motivation.

Furthermore, Wu (2019) suggested that besides the aforementioned physiological factors, psychological factors, and learning motivation, another reason for the differences in listening proficiency between males and females is phonetic awareness. By conducting tests on syllables, onsets, and phonemes, it was found that females generally have higher listening proficiency than males, and phonetic awareness is positively correlated with English proficiency, which is consistent with the results of this study indicating that female English speaking proficiency is superior to that of males.

Age differences in English speaking proficiency

Overall, transitioning from high school to university, there is a noticeable decline in English speaking proficiency. This decline primarily stems from the variance in the standards and importance attributed to English speaking proficiency between high school and university levels. In China, the National College Entrance Examination (known as the Gaokao) significantly influences students' future academic paths and career prospects. As part of reforms in the Gaokao system, the focus of English exams has shifted towards assessing language functions and emphasizing communicative abilities. Consequently, reforms in high school English education have aimed to integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, linking instructional content with real-life contexts to enhance students' practical English abilities (Feng, 2023). Consequently, higher demands are placed on students' English speaking proficiency during high school.

However, upon entering university, for students not majoring in English, the importance of English speaking diminishes as it becomes a compulsory general course. Moreover, university English evaluations primarily assess whether students pass exams rather than their speaking proficiency. Even in graduate studies, emphasis on English speaking is weakened, with greater focus on reading and writing skills. Additionally, despite university English courses emphasizing language communication skills (Xu, 2014), the lack of authentic language learning environments presents significant challenges in enhancing students' English speaking abilities (Alharbi, 2015).

Further analysis using Model 3 reveals that English speaking proficiency initially experiences a small peak followed by a decline after entering university, indicating a trend of initially rising and then falling proficiency, with the peak occurring at 22.5 years old, coinciding with the university stage. This is because Chinese university students typically take the National College English Test (CET), a national English proficiency test for college students organized by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, focusing on listening comprehension and oral expression among five aspects (Li, 2018). Since CET scores play a significant role in later employment and graduate school admissions for university students (Li et al., 2022), this standardized test promotes improvements in students' English speaking proficiency, confirming the occurrence of a small peak in English speaking proficiency after entering university. Moreover, for non-English background students studying abroad, standardized English language exams effectively enhance their English proficiency to adapt to the foreign language learning environment, and these students achieve better academic performance than those tested through regular English courses (Oliver et al., 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Husnia et al., 2023). Standardized English exams effectively promote improvements in English speaking proficiency.

Conclusion

This study utilized a multiple linear regression model to explore the relationship between different types of high school learning experiences, parental educational backgrounds, gender, age, and English speaking proficiency among university students. The results indicate that university students who attended provincial key high schools have higher English speaking proficiency compared to students from other types of high schools. Additionally, higher parental education levels are associated with better English speaking proficiency in children, with the influence of fathers' education being greater than that of mothers'. Female students exhibit higher English speaking proficiency than male students, and the National College English Test promotes a slight upward trend in English speaking proficiency during the university stage. Based on the findings and analyses of this study, the following are the conclusions and recommendations:

Firstly, provincial and municipal key high schools, due to their advantages in educational resource allocation, have overall higher academic performance than other high schools, especially in English speaking proficiency. Therefore, it is recommended to balance the gap in teaching quality between high schools by providing more policy support to schools with poor conditions, such as those in rural areas. This support could include mechanisms for per capita financial allocations, government educational financial inputs, and assistance systems for impoverished students to improve the teaching quality of these schools. Moreover, strengthening communication and cooperation between schools, including school management, teacher training, and teaching reforms, between key high schools and ordinary high schools is essential.

Secondly, regardless of innate conditions or factors such as learning motivation and strategies, female students consistently outperform male students in English language proficiency. Therefore, it is suggested to initiate English speaking teaching reforms based on gender

differences. Specifically, addressing male students' deficiencies in vocabulary and their aversion to rigorous oral training by enhancing teaching reforms focused on emotional stability and sustained motivation in English learning. Additionally, promoting cooperative learning groups between male and female students can leverage the strong language abilities of female students and the strong rational thinking of male students to help the latter overcome difficulties in English speaking learning through group collaboration.

Lastly, it is recommended to apply the practical advantages and experiences of international English speaking proficiency tests to the reform of university English teaching, thereby enhancing students' comprehensive application abilities in English speaking. Although students become relatively independent upon entering university, parental education levels still influence their English speaking proficiency. Therefore, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, schools and families should establish a school community, strengthen parental guidance and care for students, and collaborate with schools to instill correct learning motivations in children.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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