Research Article

Revisiting The Influence Of Overseas Education Experiences On Chinese Students' Socio-Cultural Development

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Abstract

This research has revisited and reviewed the overseas education experiences of Chinese students from existing literature. Employing qualitative metasynthesis, findings show that students have the tendency to conceal the hardship and embarrassment of their sojourn in the foreign land which implies their sociocultural development as they favorably deal with challenges reflecting an influence of their Chinese culture, particularly on Confucianism. The Confucianism culture relative to harmony with environment and people are emphasized, thus necessitating appropriate coping strategy on the Chinese students to deal with social difficulties. Among other influences of their experiences are their placing of primary consideration on gaining a new perspective on their own country as they are oriented with overseas educational system, broaden their experience as they see the world, and learning a language as they interculturally interact. All these considerations direct the Chinese students' sociocultural development as they believe they have accomplished more showing a possession of a stronger sense of world mindedness and their social adaptability through their experiences.

Keywords: constructive development theory, overseas education experiences, socio-cultural development

Introduction

The concept of Overseas Education espouses the need to new strategic direction in international and comprehensive education that broadens perspectives, builds diverse connections and encourages innovation and ideas across borders. Overseas Education paves in providing assistance to students in learning new languages, appreciating various cultures, overcoming the challenges of living in a different nation, and gaining a better awareness of the globe. Thus, the terms globalization and internationalization of education. Globalization describes the global changes which fosters 'market-style competition between countries whereas internationalization is the response to globalization through university and government policies (Altbach,2009, Dagen 2019, Mohrman 2013). Hence, it can be simply said, that internationalization directly impacts the Higher Education as it opens its doors to the sharing of knowledge to cope with global academic environment while globalization directly impacts the process of internationalization to survive and thrive in a growing knowledge-based economy. (Bernet, 2020; Knight 2003 cited in Huang 2007; Altbach and Knight 2007; Barabantseva (2005)).

Along this thought, Chen (2011) posits that the internationalization of higher education necessitates international cooperation and communication among different countries, including overseas studies,

international exchange of students, international studies, to name a few. This necessity of international cooperation as advanced by Tsegay, et.al.(2018), intensified the mobility of people and culture, and international students have been the main part of this mobility.

One country that has invested heavily in policies that prioritize internationalization among HEIs is China, as shown by worldwide figures on foreign students studying outside of their home country come (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). With its economic rapid development, it also intensified institutional efforts to improve the quality and competitive standing of its higher education (HE) sector internationally (Dai, et.al 2018; Huang 2008). In fact, Zhang, et. al. (2012) cited that the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for "*one of the largest sustained increases of investment in university research in human history*". Similarly, Jiang & Ma (2011) expressed that China has become the major country sending students abroad in 2008 and in 2009. Conversely, considering socio-economic, academic and political reasons, China has also joined the race for attracting international students. (Pan, 2013). Towards this end, studies have shown that in recent decades, the internationalization of higher education in China has made considerable progress and has contributed to transforming the Chinese education system into one of the largest and arguably most promising systems in the world (Ma & Zhao, 2018; Yang 2014).

This transformation in Chinese education system reflects China's Education Modernization 2035 plan directing the development from "capacity" to "quality", resulting to modernization of education which in turn supports the modernization of China. Among the goals in the 2035 plan are *virtue, overall development, people-orientation, lifelong learning, personalized teaching, integration of knowledge and practice, integrated development,* and *co-construction and sharing*.

With hundreds of Chinese students pursuing their overseas education, the study of how these students adjust to a new culture has become a popular topic(Sun, et.al. 1997). One study by Hau & Ho (2010) declared that among the various cultural groups, Chinese and other Asian students from the Confucian cultural heritage have drawn special attention because of their outstanding performance in international comparisons of achievement, which may be ascribed to their decision-making skill.

One significant factor that influences international students' decisions to study in a particular country is the type of socio-cultural experiences they get during their study period despite knowing in advance of the likely challenges they will have to face and overcome. Understanding this adjustment process and getting relevant support from the HEIs during this transition period help international students to have fulfilling experience both academically and socially.

Among the countries to which Chinese students opt to pursue their international degrees are the United States of America and Australia, as these are developed countries (Lo, et.al 2019). This corroborates Bernet's (2020)in Choudaha and van Rest (2018)study where he states "China has seen large waves of its own post-secondary population choose to pursue degrees in the United States and Australia. Liu (2015) also presented that an increasing number of Chinese families were able to afford the tuition fees for their children to study abroad. Consequently, there appeared a new surge of students heading to destinations like the USA, Australia, Canada and the UK.

The growth in numbers of international students in these countries is now significantly driven by students coming from China. It becomes clear that different groups of students will have quite distinctive experiences depending upon their place of destination. Thus, research into student overseas education

experiences must take account of the influence students' experiences have on their maturity development, particularly along the sociocultural domain. On this note, King & Baxter Magolda (2005) opined that in times of increased global interdependence, producing interculturally competent citizens who can engage in informed, ethical decision-making when confronted with problems that involve a diversity of perspectives is becoming an urgent educational priority.

Premised on the above concepts and cases, this study explores Chinese students' overseas education experiences and the influence of these experiences on their adaptability and maturity development. In order to further understand this issue, the study asks the following central question: how do international students adapt in their overseas education? This question necessitates analysis and enables the study to explore the experiences of the international students, the support mechanisms they get and the challenges they encounter. Thus, it is the end-goal of this study to contribute to a better understanding of the maturity development of Chinese international students as they sojourn in their host countries. Moreover, it endeavors to provide valuable insights on how different factors influence the integration experiences of the students in their overseas education.

Conceptual Framework

This study positions the overseas education experiences of Chinese students in the context of intercultural maturity through a holistic approach to human development using (Kegan, 1994) model as a foundation and other relevant theories as complementary.

Kegan's theory of social orders of consciousness was described as a developmental model based on the following tenets: development was lifelong, was a process distinct from life tasks, was more than the accumulation of new information as it represented qualitative changes in the ways we know, was identified by an inherent mismatch between demands and capacities, and transpired through ongoing interaction between the person and the environment (Kegan, 1982; Barbuto & Millard, 2012; (Kegan, 2018). As a constructive-development theory, progressive changes were explored in how international students constructed meaning, interpreted and understood their experiences in the light of orders or "balances" in the affective, cognitive, and social elements – instrumental, socialized, self-authoring, and self-transformation. Progression involves a change in relationship and, as constructive development evolved, thinking became more flexible, open, complex, and tolerant of differences which result to an increased constructive capacity that was generally more adaptive.

Likewise, Bauer & MacAdams (2004) discussed growth goals in terms of intentional self-development and specific developmental paths. For Peseta (2008), three propositions are discussed which are: (a) assigning value to knowledge largely depends on how knowledge is managed, (b) current management of knowledge is slanted towards finding universal applicability, and, (c) in order to value knowledge better, knowledge needs to be managed in such a way that knowledge pluralism is recognized and at the same time, more importantly, conditions are created for it to flourish. Finally, Cubillo, et.al. (2006) in Cant (2004) averred that in order to be successful in the present global environment, students must develop some key global cultural skills. This need has increased international students' search for higher education around the world (Enders, 2004; Teichler, 2004). This brings the USA and Australia as countries which have been applying aggressive international marketing strategies for education (Michael, 1990; Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996).

In line with this, many researchers used Schlossberg's transition theory (1981, 2011) to explain the change that goes within immigrants to reach a stage of socio-cultural adjustment and coping (Amundson, Yeung, Sun, Chan, & Cheng, 2011; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Mims, Mims, & Newland, 2009; Smart & Smart, 1995; Zhang, 2016). Schlossberg identified four major factors (which are also called the 4S system) that influence individuals' coping strategies with transition. These factors are situation, self, support and strategies. In general, Schlossberg's transition theory emphasizes that a person's ability to cope with a transition depends on the person's condition, resilience for coping, the support levels obtained and strategies used in the situation (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). This generally indicates that human beings differ in the way they cope with a new environment, and on their level of integration to the environment not discounting the support they get greatly influences the process of integration.

Research Objectives

Generally, this study aimed to revisit the overseas education experiences of Chinese students and the influence these experiences have on their maturity development particularly along sociocultural aspect. Specifically, it metasynthesized their USA and Australia overseas education experiences and how these experiences shaped their progression and socio-cultural development.

Research Methodology

This study employed the qualitative-descriptive method in highlighting the overseas education of Chinese students. A metasynthesis of literatures along overseas education experiences in USA and Australia was conducted for the description of the experiences and the influence these experiences have in the students' maturity development.

Open access search was utilized for studies conducted by several authors and were thematized for purposes of underscoring experiences in specific domains. From the themes, interpretative results and discussion of the influence on maturity development following Kegan's (1982) theory of constructive-development model as foundation, were presented.

Results and Discussion

USA Experiences

China's outbound market has been considered the most attractive by many tourism destinations and became the leading place of origin for students to the United States (Liao, 2012). To concretize this, Chao, et.al. (2017) showed a 344% increase in student enrolment based on Open Door report (Report of Open Door, 2015). The Chinese students make up a commanding 31% of all international students, and have accounted for about two-thirds of the increase in total international student enrollments in the U.S. since 2003. This strong growth is likely to continue, presenting important export opportunities for U.S. colleges and universities (2015 Top Markets Report; Report of Open Door, 2015). The U.S. has maintained its leading position for attracting international students, while China has become the largest single source of international students studying in the United States.

It stands to reason that this figure continues to rise as Chinese students are supported by their families and their government as reported in the Open Doors 2019 that about 65 percent of all international students receive the majority of their funds from sources outside of the United States, including personal

and family sources as well as assistance from their home country governments or universities (Ping, et.al. 2020).

As regards their overseas education experiences in the US, Chang (1973) professed that the Chinese have a unique sociocultural background, and, therefore, may have a unique kind of life experience in the United States, which may in turn, produce a special kind of attitude among Chinese students toward the United States. To most of them, the U.S. represents democracy and freedom and the American people represent friendliness and liberalism. The idealization of the United States is often intensified and perpetuated by Chinese returning from America, who typically report the rosy aspects but conceal the hardship and embarrassment of their sojourn.

In many studies conducted on foreign students' sojourn as early as the 1970's (Chang, 1973), central to the studies' theme is frustration arising from cultural distance or adaptational problems, not to mention frustrating experiences on financial problems, language difficulty, racial barriers and consequent social isolation. Furthermore, the inherent difficulty and competitiveness in post-graduate studies poses another source of constant frustration and insecurity as academic progress may not only be impeded by inadequate English facility but also by Chinese cultural background which makes the adjustment process too painful to withstand, causing depression and withdrawal symptoms. Under these repressive conditions, a Chinese student often projects an unfavorable, or even hostile attitude toward the United States. In Chang's study, however, he concluded that a Chinese student's attitude toward the ·United States was found to be positively associated with the degree of his contact with Americans, and negatively associated with his degree of authoritarianism and that majority (about 83 per cent) of the Chinese students have a "favorable attitude toward the United States.

In a study by Sun, et.al. (1997) on dimensions of difficulties Chinese students encounter in the US, results indicated that three dimensions of difficulties were encountered: lack of language proficiency; a deficiency in cultural awareness; and academic achievements. To the Chinese students, cultural difference seems the major difficulty in their adjusting to American culture. Chen (1994), for instance, finds that there are three stages of adjustment for Chinese students in the United States, i.e., (1) *taking for granted and surprise*; (2) *making sense*, and (3) *coming to understand American culture*. He argues that Chinese culture is influenced by Confucianism in which harmony with environment and people are emphasized and made suggestions on appropriate self-disclosure as a coping strategy to deal with social difficulties in the United States.

Likewise, Xi (1994) observes that difference of collectivistic and individualistic orientations between the Chinese and Americans affect the adjustment process of Chinese students in the United States. Corollary to this thinking, Hegarty (2014) proffers that essential to accustomizing students to American life is to integrate students quickly into college life so as to avoid feelings of alienation which means a high level of interaction to promote retention and an overall positive learning experience. In support, Klomengah (2006) showed that students who have regular contact with others are less alienated from college than those who do not maintain regular contact. This therefore suggests that high levels of interaction facilitate an easier adjustment to college life in the United States.

Relative to their academic journey, Zhou (2014) shared results that Chinese students are known to face many difficulties in their doctoral education in the United States, such as cultural alienation, unfamiliarity with norms and expectations of U.S. doctoral education, racial discrimination, language

barriers in speaking and academic writing (Cho, Roberts, & Roberts, 2008; Le & Gardner, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007) which poses serious challenges to persistence.

Motivation, however, comes as a consideration in social adjustments and in the study of Chao, et.al (2017) on Chinese students' motivation to study in the US, the results show that two variables: (1) *Gain a new perspective on my own country* and (2) The *educational system is better overseas*, show the positive mean differences, which means that the Chinese students view these variables as more important than the rest. In the same vein, Ping et.al.' s study (2020) tests of hypotheses show that Chinese students have accomplished what they expect studying in US universities, where "*See the world and broaden my experience*" and "*Learn a language when being with native speakers*" got the highest positive values, which indicates that the Chinese believe they have accomplished more. What comes through from this research is that Chinese students try to achieve those that they may not be able to achieve in their home land. Cultural aspects and desires to gain a non-Chinese world perspective emerge as primary goals for study in the U.S. This may be due to the understanding and realization by the Chinese of a global economy and the need to understand the 'globalization' of education.

Moreover, studies show that students' reasons for studying abroad range from professional to cultural to personal which include the desire to use study abroad as a stepping stone to an international job or career, to gain work experience through a host university's internship program that will facilitate an international career, to master a foreign language, to experience living in another country, to study at another university, to make new international friends, to find excitement and enjoyment, and to experience a final college-level sojourn before moving from university life to a full-time job in the home country. Students who participate in study abroad programs were found to possess a stronger sense of world mindedness than students with no study abroad experience(Sanchez, et.al, 2006; Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001; Emanoil, 1999; Malliah, 2001; Schroth & McCormack, 2000).

Australia Experiences

The number of international students studying outside their home countries is growing rapidly. This increased demand is derived from a demand of the main source countries' growth in household wealth, increased demand for higher education, low education capacity in some countries and growth in interest in studying abroad (Yang, 2007 in Boehm, Davis, Meares, & Pearce, 2002).

In the past decade among the case study countries, foreign student numbers have grown more rapidly than all higher education enrolments in Germany, the Netherlands and Australia, with growth rates in Australia being among the highest in the world (Throsby, 1998). In Yang's study (2008) it is made known that Australia has become the third biggest of international education providers among the top six host countries and has been regarded as a safe and friendly study destination by many international students including Chinese students. Among the most motivating factors for Chinese students to study outside China are the *desire to have a higher quality of education* and *better career in the future*.

In a recent study by Dai, et.al. (2018) titled *Chinese students in Australia: Learning in between "physical places*" and "virtual spaces" across two HE systems, it was found out that many students reflected different experiences from those in the first two years at a Chinese university. For instance, learning activities had many interactions between physical places and virtual spaces, which positioned students in between different learning settings. Consequently, many students created their in-between space of learning via both physical and virtual mediation, leading them to make adjustments when they missed lecturer's

teaching and resort to online help through online learning system. It is therefore shown that the students in the Australian phase had to become more individual in orientation. This finding is different from that of Hou's (2011) research, which argued that the 2+2 setting allows students to learn as a group in a foreign university, as students can move to Australia and learn together as a group, similar to their Chinese experiences. However, it was very difficult in the Australian context for the students to study and live as a group in a 2+2 program. These changes positioned students to be in-between: *being in a group* and *functioning as an individual.*

In addition to suitable environment for research and excellent teaching practices (Dwyer & Peters, 2004), HEIs provide different services to support international students throughout their academic journey (Orth, 2015). For instance, many Australian universities have formed committees and networks to facilitate international students' socio-cultural adjustment, interaction and integration (Mahat & Hourigan, 2007; Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, & Williams, 2014). Still several studies suggested that socio-cultural adjustment needs effective and efficient support mechanism in order to resolve cultural conflicts and strengthen academic performance of international students (BeBe, 2012; Sun, Lu, & Liu, 2014; Tian & Lowe, 2014; Wang, 2009).

Influence of Overseas Education Experiences

Living in a country with a different culture is both exciting and challenging. With this, international students need to adjust to the social and cultural conditions of their host country to fully enjoy the benefits of the new environment (Zimmermann, 1995). Hence, social adjustment is an effort made for an individual to cope with standards, values and needs of a society in order to integrate to the existing situation (Wannamaker, 2013). However, the process of adjustment varies from one student to another, and is affected by students' prior international experiences (Heggins & Jackson, 2003), language capacity (Xiuhua, 2012; Yuan, 2011), socio-cultural connection with the host culture (Kim, 2005), level of cultural interaction (Brauss, Lin, & Baker, 2015; Xiuhua, 2012) and the supporting system the students get in order to adjust to the new environment (De Araujo, 2011).

Effective intercultural adjustment of international students to their host country and institution has to do with personal growth, intercultural adaptation, developing intercultural competence and the reconstruction of self-identity. Through their intercultural experiences, individuals attain cognitive complexity and new cultural aesthetic and emotional sensibilities with respect to the new cultural environment. (Gill, 2007; Kim & Ruben, 1988).

In the following discussion, three key elements of the experiences of Chinese students studying abroad are presented: firstly, the language challenge; secondly, the learning attitude; thirdly, the personal and social development.

The Language Challenge

For Chinese students following postgraduate studies in English speaking countries, the first major challenge encountered comes from the language barrier (Liu, 2015). In particular, Zheng (2011) has shown how an emphasis upon study skills in relation to learning surface language, grammar, and spelling to students, can produce students who have achieved academic success in English studies but arrive with little ability to use their English interactively. From the outset Chinese students will have to undergo academic socialization involving them in a struggle to adapt their writing styles to fit into mainstream academic

discourses. Hence, Chinese students are confronted with having to acquire a number of distinct types of English all at the same time as well as having to unlearn much of what they had been taught previously.

The above issue is compounded by the way Chinese students speak which is structured by the thought processes and the linguistic patterns of their own first (and second) languages. They come to a place where the languages are not related to their own countries (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991).

Learning Attitude

Other than the difference in language, the second challenge derives from different attitudes towards, and understandings of, learning. Li (2003) surveyed differences between Chinese and American students relating to their concepts of learning and found that Chinese students felt that they should always have a book in their hand because knowledge for them comes from books. Things have remained much the same to the present time, although more recently greater numbers of Chinese students are now more aware of what to expect when they arrive in English speaking countries as their home universities in China have begun to prepare some of their students for the experiences of studying abroad. Such as what is conveyed in the excerpt below:

> *For me it was really boring in the first two months because I did not know what I should say in the discussion and I did not form my own ideas even after the reading. Maybe I just did not become accustomed to this style. However, I gradually came to feel that it was a really effective learning method because I got to really know how to actively learn by myself and with fellow-colleagues as well as with the new surroundings.*

This culturally fixed approach to knowledge transmission shapes not only students' attitudes towards study, but also teachers' pedagogical methods and national educational assessment systems. Despite challenges on differences to learning attitude, however, Chinese students gradually adapt to the new environment.

Liu (2015) concludes in her study that Chinese students following postgraduate studies in their host countries often encounter many challenges as they study a different culture and encounter varied ways of seeing and thinking through participating in all kinds of activities in their local communities. In here, Tao (2016) used the social-oriented achievement motivation (SOAM) model in his study and revealed that Asian Chinese and Chinese students on average show better academic performance but report more negative emotions and test anxiety than other ethnic groups and their Western counterparts.

On the contrary, Liem & Nie (2008) showed the Chinese students endorsed more strongly on self-direction and hedonism values, individual-oriented achievement motivation, and mastery-approach goals. In Lo, et.al (2019) study on Chinese students' motivations for overseas education, findings suggest that students were motivated by a combination of their career-, social-, and culture-related concerns when choosing a discipline, destination, and university for their education.

In Martin's (2017) study on rethinking Chinese students' motivation for overseas education where motivations described by students and their parents in interviews, far exceed instrumentalism and engage tactics of both gendered risk management and cosmopolitan self-fashioning. Sanchez, et. al. (2006) found

it quite interesting in their study that almost all of the Chinese students responded that they had a strong intention to study abroad.

Chinese Common Motivations to Study Abroad (Sanchez, et.al. 2006)

Search for a new experience	To see the world
	For personal enhancement
	To see new things
	To experience a lifestyle other than my own
Search for liberty / pleasure	To have international experience
	To achieve my dream of having a foreign experience
	To have exciting experience
	To find greater freedom
Improve a social situation	To earn a better living
	To be richer
	To provide a good living to my family
	To achieve a higher social status
Search for travel	To vacation
	To travel
	To experience Western life

Personal and Social Development

Learning involves active participation in a community of practice where complex and inter-related social formations arise. It is through belonging to one or more of these "communities of practice" that people learn to relate more closely with each other (Wenger, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1998). This is exactly what Chinese students need to embrace as they participate in local communities within their host institution and country. In context, they become absorbed as active members for when they decide to leave China and take the unknown journey into another country, they need to be brave and become involved in a variety of social settings that are not necessarily connected to their particular studies. Such involvement will lead to very important learning and widening of vision and perspective.

With the changing realities, the image of the Chinese also changes accordingly. While there has been a lot of negative publicity about the Chinese, increasingly there have also been a number of positive commentaries (See, 2020). Emphatically, students with a healthy sense of self in school are also more likely to pursue the different types of achievement goals King, et.al. 2012).

The experiences of overcoming the challenges in foreign countries may give students increased confidence as they need to communicate in unfamiliar circumstance using their second or, in the case of most Chinese students, their third language. This process is often at first, full of isolation and loneliness, but as adjustment takes place, the individual can become more tolerant and stronger. According to Jackson (2010), these international students enhance their self-confidence and acquire a higher degree of independence and self-efficacy.

With the Chinese students' development in their study abroad, Liu (2015) anticipates an increase in the Chinese figures of wanting overseas education. However, this is realized if, as Fantini has argued (2006) international postgraduates overcome the culture shocks of new environments and, adapt socially, linguistically, academically, culturally, personally and economically, they develop sophisticated awareness of self and others and become the owners of enhanced social and cultural capital.

Given the above premise by Fantini, Zhou (2013) emphasized that the communication of culture, economy, science and technology and education can keep the connection and cultural communication with other countries as the internationalization of education particularly makes a great important contribution to cultural innovation among countries. From the angle of society and culture, Dong Chen (2011) professed that for countries which consider internationalization as a respect of diversity and a way of counteracting the homogenized influence, protecting and enhancing culture for these countries becomes their motivation, while acknowledging the culture differences among countries is considered as the main reason for the internationalization of a national educational system.

Conclusion

This research has revisited and reviewed the overseas education experiences of Chinese students from existing literature and findings show that students have the tendency to conceal the hardship and embarrassment of their sojourn in the foreign land. This has an implication in their maturity development as they favorably deal with challenges which is an influence as well of their Chinese culture, particularly on Confucianism in which harmony with environment and people are emphasized, thus necessitates appropriate coping strategy to deal with social difficulties. For the Chinese students, they place primary consideration on g*aining a new perspective on their own country* as they are oriented with overseas educational system, *broaden their experience as they see the world, learning a language as they interculturally interact. All these considerations* direct the Chinese students' sociocultural development as they believe they have accomplished more showing a possession of a stronger sense of world mindedness through their experiences. Moreover, studies show that despite challenges on differences to learning attitude, Chinese students gradually adapt to the new environment as they become absorbed as active members which leads to very important learning and widening of vision and perspective.

Pedagogical Implications

The study of overseas education students has immense implications for social and international relations. In a context of growing Chinese power, internationalization of higher education plays a significant role in the preparation for China's global roles. This, according to Rui (2004) requires a mixture of vision and boldness.

The findings of this study provide a further step towards the understanding of Chinese students' overseas education experiences and their adaptability skills in new and foreign environments. Future research may examine the coping strategies of the Chinese students as they face in the process of intercultural adjustment.

The limitations of this study stem from the nature of the study itself. As approached through the use of metasynthesis, it simply identified information in the existing literature on experiences of the Chinese students, culled from studies that were conducted and that their development was inferred therefrom. The

generality of the results and discussion may suffer from this limitation. Hence, future research should improve this problem.

Further research involving interviews specifically exploring on lived experiences with international students and teachers in their host countries would substantiate the findings as reported in this study.

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