

Is Scholarship the Real Key to Taiwan-Japan Student Mobility? A Literature Review

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Abstract

International student mobility between Taiwan and Japan has garnered increasing attention, driven by shared cultural ties and regional integration efforts. Scholarships are often cited as critical incentives for student exchanges, yet the true influence of financial aid on mobility patterns remains underexplored. This literature review examines whether scholarships are the decisive factor in facilitating student mobility between Taiwan and Japan, or if other structural and policy factors play equally significant roles. A review of academic articles, government reports, and institutional publications from the past two decades was conducted. The analysis focused on scholarship programs, mobility trends, policy frameworks, and identified challenges influencing inbound and outbound flows. Findings reveal that while scholarships such as MEXT and Taiwan Scholarship positively impact enrollment numbers, their effect is mediated by factors including language proficiency barriers, cultural integration challenges, limited credit recognition, and inadequate bilateral agreements. Especially, Japanese student mobility to Taiwan remains low despite scholarship availability, underscoring non-financial barriers. This review challenges the conventional emphasis on financial incentives alone and calls for strategies that enhance mobility quality and equity.

Keywords: student mobility, scholarships, Taiwan, Japan, international education policy, bilateral exchange, higher education

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Introduction

International student mobility has become a critical element of higher education strategies worldwide, particularly in East Asia where regional cooperation and cultural proximity encourage academic exchange (Barnett et al., 2016; T.-M. Chen & Barnett, 2000; Knight, 2012). Taiwan and Japan share a unique historical and cultural relationship that has shaped patterns of student flows between the two countries (Vickers, 2015). Despite numerous scholarship programs designed to promote mobility—such as Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) scholarships and Taiwan’s Taiwan Scholarship—the volume and balance of student exchanges remain uneven (Kuroda, 2012; Yonezawa, 2010). These imbalances are influenced not only by policy priorities but also by institutional recognition, economic considerations, and sociocultural perceptions of education quality and opportunity (APEC, 2019; Huang, 2015).

This paper explores the question: Is scholarship the real key to enhancing student mobility between Taiwan and Japan? It reviews academic literature and policy documents to understand the role of scholarships in facilitating mobility, and whether other barriers and structural factors limit the potential of these financial incentives. By examining both inbound and outbound flows, this review aims to provide a nuanced understanding of what drives or hinders Taiwan–Japan student mobility.

Overview of Scholarship Programs and Mobility Trends

Scholarship Programs in Taiwan and Japan

Taiwan offers a range of well-established scholarship programs to attract international students as part of its broader strategy to internationalize higher education and enhance soft power diplomacy in Asia (Andy, 2018). Among the most prominent is the Taiwan Scholarship, jointly funded by Taiwan’s Ministry of Education (MOE), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), and Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST). This scholarship supports outstanding students from over 100 countries to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Taiwan’s top universities, offering full tuition coverage and a monthly stipend (MOE, 2023). While the initiative initially prioritized Southeast Asian students under the New Southbound Policy (Patriadi, 2022; Y.-J. Wang, 2022), it is also accessible to students from East Asian countries, including Japan, reflecting Taiwan’s commitment to broader regional engagement.

Another notable initiative is the Huayu Enrichment Scholarship, which provides financial support for international students to study Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan’s certified language centers for 3 to 12 months. The program is designed not only to enhance language proficiency but also to promote cultural exchange. Japanese students, particularly those pursuing area studies or aiming for careers in diplomacy or multinational corporations, have taken advantage of this opportunity to gain both linguistic skills and a deeper understanding of Taiwanese society (Hanada & Horie, 2021). Besides the above, the Taiwanese government also offers specialized scholarships for specific fields (e.g., Traditional Chinese Medicine). These scholarships typically cover tuition fees, living allowances, and some travel expenses. It has been reported that Taiwanese higher education institutions and the government actively attract international students from Asia and worldwide through scholarship policies, particularly in distinctive fields like traditional medicine, emphasizing an academic and culturally integrated learning environment (Pham et al., 2024).

In addition to government-sponsored scholarships, Taiwanese universities such as National Taiwan University, National Chengchi University, and National Tsing Hua University offer their own competitive financial aid packages for international students, further incentivizing student inflow (TBS NEWS, 2024). These scholarships are often merit-based, with consideration for academic performance, leadership potential, and alignment with Taiwan's internationalization goals (MOE, 2021).

On the other side, Japan has long invested in international education as a strategic diplomatic and economic tool, and its MEXT scholarship is the most prominent scholarship for international students in Japan, directly provided by the Japanese government. It covers tuition fees, living expenses, and a portion of travel costs. This scholarship aims to attract and cultivate high-quality international students, addressing Japan's declining birthrate and the need for higher education internationalization. It has been reported that MEXT scholarship significantly impacts international students' academic and life satisfaction. While economic factors are not the sole determinants, the financial support provided by MEXT remains a key attraction (Lagones, 2019). These scholarships support thousands of international students annually, including a significant number from Taiwan, offering full tuition, travel expenses, and a generous monthly allowance (MEXT, 2025; Study in Japan, n.d.). Taiwanese students have traditionally shown strong interest in MEXT due to the high academic reputation of Japanese institutions and geographic proximity. According to recent statistics, Taiwanese students comprise one of the largest groups of international students in Japan, with many pursuing advanced degrees in STEM, business, and social sciences at universities such as The University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, and Waseda University (Okugawa, 2014; Yonezawa & Shimmi, 2017).

The historical relationship between Taiwan and Japan also plays a critical role in sustaining educational exchange. Many Taiwanese view Japanese culture positively, and the shared use of Chinese characters (kanji) lowers the linguistic barrier for Taiwanese students. Moreover, bilateral university partnerships and exchange agreements have increased over the years, with programs such as the Japan–Taiwan Exchange Association's Study Abroad Promotion Project actively funding short-term mobility and joint research opportunities (JTEA, 2025). These initiatives underscore a mutual recognition of the role education plays in strengthening regional ties, yet disparities remain in terms of outbound and inbound flows, often influenced by perceptions of academic prestige, language barriers, and post-graduation opportunities (Huang, 2021).

Mobility Trends Between Taiwan and Japan

Historically, Taiwan has consistently sent significantly more students to Japan than it has received from Japan, reflecting an enduring asymmetry in bilateral academic exchange (Newfields, 2019). According to statistics from the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), over 8,000 Taiwanese students were enrolled in Japanese institutions in 2022, making Taiwan one of Japan's top source countries for international students (JASSO, 2023). In contrast, fewer than 1,000 Japanese students were studying in Taiwan during the same period, a number that has remained relatively stagnant over the past decade (MOE, 2023). This disparity persists despite the existence of multiple scholarship programs on both sides, which aim to enhance accessibility and bilateral flow. Taiwan's scholarship programs are open to Japanese nationals, although the majority of recipients tend to come from Southeast Asia (MOE, 2021). On the Japanese side, the MEXT Scholarship has played a pivotal role in supporting Taiwanese students pursuing undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees in Japan. The

MEXT program, which includes categories such as research student, teacher training, and Japanese studies scholarships, is highly competitive and offers full tuition, a monthly stipend, and travel support. In 2021, over 300 Taiwanese students were awarded various MEXT scholarships (MEXT, 2022).

Despite these efforts to equalize opportunities, recent research indicates that factors beyond financial aid significantly influence student decision-making. Cultural affinity, historical ties, and language proximity strongly motivate Taiwanese students to choose Japan. Japanese culture is widely popular in Taiwan, with anime, fashion, cuisine, and pop music deeply embedded in Taiwanese youth culture (Cheng & Chen, 2015). Furthermore, the shared historical connection stemming from Japan's colonial rule over Taiwan (1895–1945) has left a legacy of Japanese language education and institutional familiarity, which makes the transition to Japanese academic environments more manageable for Taiwanese students (Heylen, 2005).

Japanese students often exhibit a lower propensity for outbound mobility, especially to destinations within Asia. Many Japanese undergraduates show a preference for domestic employment and tend to view study abroad, particularly in non-Western destinations, as carrying higher opportunity costs. Language barriers and the perceived lower prestige of Taiwanese institutions, despite their academic strength, also contribute to this imbalance (Burden, 2020). Moreover, recent qualitative studies suggest that Taiwanese institutions, while welcoming, may lack targeted marketing and recruitment strategies aimed specifically at Japanese students, which limits awareness and attractiveness (Ma, 2014). While scholarship availability on both sides has helped remove financial barriers, the asymmetry in Taiwan–Japan student mobility is underpinned by deeper structural, cultural, and perceptual factors. Efforts to address this imbalance must therefore go beyond funding mechanisms and consider the broader sociocultural and institutional landscape that shapes mobility patterns between the two countries.

Factors Influencing Taiwan-Japan Student Mobility Beyond Scholarships

Language Proficiency and Cultural Barriers

Language remains one of the obstacles to balanced student exchange between Taiwan and Japan. Taiwanese students, depending on their individual linguistic backgrounds, exhibit varying degrees of fluency in acquiring Japanese (Lin, 2023). For Taiwanese students, the requirement to demonstrate proficiency in Japanese, particularly for degree programs taught in Japanese, often presents a significant hurdle. Most Japanese universities require students to pass the JLPT at N2 or higher, depending on the academic field and institution. This level of proficiency demands years of dedicated study, which not all Taiwanese high school graduates or undergraduates possess. Although some universities offer courses in English under initiatives like the Global 30 Project, these programs are still limited in number and tend to cluster in select institutions such as the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, and Tohoku University (MEXT, 2022). As a result, many Taiwanese students are restricted to either language schools or short-term exchange programs before they are linguistically prepared to pursue full-time study in Japan (Hong, 2016).

Conversely, Japanese students encounter equally daunting challenges when it comes to Mandarin Chinese. Unlike English, which is widely taught across Japan, Chinese is not part of the standard curriculum in most Japanese secondary schools. The tonal nature of Mandarin, combined with the complexity of Chinese characters and grammar structures, presents a steep

learning curve (Rose & Carson, 2014). Although some Japanese universities have introduced Taiwan-focused language and culture courses, such programs remain niche and are often elective rather than core components of academic pathways (Andy, 2018; Sugano, 2014). This linguistic gap significantly limits Japanese students' ability to engage fully with Taiwanese academic content, navigate local life, or participate in internships and fieldwork that require functional Mandarin.

Beyond language, cultural adjustment issues further complicate student mobility. Taiwanese students in Japan often report difficulties adjusting to the more hierarchical and formal academic culture in Japanese universities. For example, classroom interactions in Japan are generally more passive, with limited space for student expression or debate, which contrasts with the more open and discursive classroom style increasingly promoted in Taiwan's higher education institutions (ADB, 2020; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2025). Social integration can also be challenging, as Taiwanese students may feel excluded from tightly knit Japanese peer groups, especially when informal communication is deeply embedded in nuanced cultural codes and polite speech (Jou & Fukada, 1996).

On the other hand, Japanese students in Taiwan may initially find the environment more relaxed and socially open, but they can struggle with cultural expectations around direct communication, food customs, or gender roles—areas that are often under-discussed in pre-departure orientations (Garbutt, 2017; Kheir, 2021). Moreover, although Taiwanese society is relatively friendly to foreigners, Japanese students may still experience a degree of social isolation, especially in smaller universities or cities with limited international student services.

These linguistic and cultural barriers not only impact students' academic performance and day-to-day experiences but also affect broader metrics such as student satisfaction, retention, and return on investment in overseas education (Varghese, 2008). Institutions on both sides have begun to implement support programs—such as buddy systems, intercultural workshops, and expanded language preparation courses—but the reach and effectiveness of such efforts vary widely. For example, National Taiwan University has launched peer mentorship and bilingual counseling services, while Tsukuba University has introduced Taiwan Week and language exchange clubs to promote deeper mutual understanding (Office of International Affairs, 2020; University, 2016).

In sum, while structural and financial resources are increasingly available, the persistent challenges related to language proficiency and cultural adaptation remain central barriers to deepening Taiwan–Japan educational exchange. Addressing these issues requires not only language training and intercultural communication support but also a systemic rethink of curriculum design, pre-departure preparation, and on-campus inclusion strategies.

Academic Compatibility and Credit Recognition

One of the less visible—but critically important—barriers to student mobility between Taiwan and Japan is the lack of academic compatibility and limited mechanisms for mutual credit recognition. Differences in academic calendars, credit systems, grading scales, and curriculum structures often result in bureaucratic and administrative hurdles that discourage participation in exchange or dual-degree programs. For instance, Japanese universities typically follow an April-to-March academic calendar, whereas Taiwanese institutions operate on a September-to-June calendar, which can create significant misalignments in course schedules, exam periods, and semester breaks (Shimmi, 2013). This temporal mismatch makes it challenging for students

to transfer without missing a term or duplicating academic content, often extending their overall study duration.

Moreover, disparities in credit systems further complicate the recognition of coursework. While Taiwan generally uses the Carnegie credit hour system—with one credit representing 16–18 hours of class time—Japanese universities often calculate credits based on contact hours and expected self-study hours combined, leading to inconsistent standards (MEXT, 2020). A 2-credit course in Japan might not be equivalent in workload or content to a 2-credit course in Taiwan, making one-to-one recognition difficult without detailed curriculum mapping or syllabi comparison (Noda et al., 2018).

Another layer of difficulty lies in limited articulation agreements between institutions. While flagship universities such as National Taiwan University (NTU) and Waseda University or Keio University have established some credit transfer arrangements through formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs), these are still the exception rather than the norm. Most smaller or regional institutions lack bilateral agreements, which forces students to seek individual approval for each course credit, a process that can be time-consuming and uncertain (Hotta, 2024). In many cases, credits earned abroad are only recorded as electives or non-degree credits, meaning they do not count toward graduation requirements, thus reducing the academic value of mobility experiences (Hawkins, 2012).

Even in joint-degree or double-degree programs—often viewed as the gold standard of institutional collaboration—structural incompatibilities pose challenges. For example, language and literature departments in Taiwan tend to emphasize comparative analysis, regional contextualization, and Mandarin-Japanese translation, while their Japanese counterparts often adopt a more philological and historically focused curriculum. These differences result in content misalignment, especially in upper-level courses, which makes cross-institutional course recognition particularly difficult (Choe, 2016).

In response to these challenges, regional efforts have been initiated to promote standardization and transparency. The Campus Asia program, supported by the governments of Japan, China, and South Korea, is one example of an attempt to align academic credit systems and promote joint curriculum development in East Asia. However, Taiwan has not been formally included in this initiative due to its unique political status, thereby limiting its ability to participate in multilateral academic harmonization frameworks (L. Chen & Huang, 2022). Some Taiwanese institutions have independently begun experimenting with modularized course designs and credit conversion tables, but these innovations remain localized and lack overarching national policy support.

The lack of streamlined academic compatibility not only undermines student confidence in the transferability of their international coursework but also places an extra administrative burden on university staff, thereby lowering institutional enthusiasm for expanding such programs. Until more robust, transparent, and standardized frameworks are developed—whether through bilateral agreements, credit transfer databases, or regional platforms—academic incompatibility will continue to act as a major friction point in Taiwan–Japan student mobility.

Policy and Institutional Gaps

While Taiwan and Japan both maintain scholarship policies and general frameworks to encourage international academic mobility, bilateral agreements specifically designed to

facilitate student exchange between the two countries remain surprisingly sparse and underdeveloped. The absence of a comprehensive and coordinated policy framework—especially one that reflects the unique educational, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of Taiwan–Japan exchange—has led to piecemeal and fragmented efforts, often dependent on individual universities or short-term initiatives (MEXT, 2025; MOE, 2023).

At the governmental level, Taiwan’s MOE offers scholarships such as the Taiwan Scholarship, and Japan provides support through the MEXT Scholarship program (Andy, 2018). While both of these funding streams are generous and cover tuition, living costs, and travel, they are not linked to any structured bilateral student exchange program. As a result, students who receive these scholarships often apply independently and study in their host country without the benefit of reciprocal institutional arrangements, academic advising, or coordinated curricular alignment (E. M. Wang, 2021). Unlike the well-established Campus Asia program between Japan, South Korea, and China, which promotes trilateral student mobility through policy harmonization and joint curriculum development, there is no equivalent trilateral or bilateral framework that includes Taiwan due to geopolitical sensitivities (Goldstein et al., 2016).

Moreover, institutional-level cooperation is highly uneven. A few leading universities such as NTU, Waseda University, and Kyoto University have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) that include faculty exchanges, joint symposia, and occasionally, student mobility opportunities. However, these tend to benefit elite institutions and are rarely extended to public or private universities in regional areas, where such exchanges could significantly diversify student exposure and broaden access (Kitamura, 2015). As of 2021, only 12 Taiwanese universities had active bilateral student exchange agreements with Japanese institutions as of 2021, compared to more than 50 with the United States (Andy, 2018).

Another major limitation is the lack of targeted promotion and institutional support structures for incoming Japanese students in Taiwan. Unlike Taiwanese students, who are often recruited through language school networks, education fairs, and extensive MEXT-backed campaigns in East Asia, Japanese students interested in Taiwan receive minimal institutional guidance. Many Japanese university international offices lack comprehensive information on Taiwanese universities, scholarship timelines, visa procedures, and housing options (Humphries & Allen, 2023). This results in low inbound mobility numbers from Japan, despite growing Japanese interest in Mandarin language learning and cultural immersion experiences in Taiwan.

At the institutional level in Taiwan, support services tailored to Japanese students are often underdeveloped or non-existent. For example, most orientation materials, campus signage, and academic counseling are provided only in Mandarin and English, but not in Japanese. Student services offices typically lack Japanese-speaking staff, making it difficult for less proficient Japanese speakers to navigate administrative processes (Office of International Affairs, 2020). While both sides have functioning international student offices, usually only the Japanese university provides culturally contextualized counseling, buddy programs, and targeted extracurricular activities to help inbound students integrate (Humphries & Allen, 2023; Rikkyo University, n.d.; University, 2016). In Taiwan, such initiatives are often left to student clubs or individual volunteers rather than embedded in university policy.

There is also a missed opportunity in public diplomacy and soft power initiatives. While Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively promotes Japan through cultural centers, Japan Foundation scholarships, and language learning programs abroad, Taiwan’s efforts to engage Japanese youth through similar channels remain modest. Taiwan’s soft power assets—such as

its democratic institutions, vibrant pop culture, and high-tech industries—are attractive to many Japanese students, but without strategic policy promotion or media visibility, these assets are under-leveraged in the realm of educational exchange (Green, 2022).

In short, despite the existence of individual scholarships and informal partnerships, there is no cohesive bilateral strategy for fostering Taiwan–Japan academic exchange. Without explicit governmental prioritization and institutional coordination, the potential for robust, sustainable, and mutually beneficial student mobility between the two countries remains unrealized.

Discussion and Conclusion

Scholarships have long been recognized as critical instruments in lowering financial barriers to international education. Both Taiwan and Japan offer generous support mechanisms to encourage student mobility. These programs provide tuition waivers, monthly stipends, and travel allowances, which have significantly reduced the cost burden for eligible students (MOE, 2021; Study in Japan, n.d.). However, despite scholarships, bilateral student mobility between Taiwan and Japan remains asymmetrical, with Taiwan consistently sending more students to Japan than vice versa. This imbalance suggests that scholarships are not sufficient to foster sustainable mobility. On a structural level, mismatches in academic calendars, credit systems, and degree structures continue to obstruct seamless exchange (Hotta, 2024; Shimmi, 2013). Culturally, language proficiency and integration support are key obstacles. Japanese students often lack access to Mandarin language education and are less prepared to navigate life in Taiwan. Furthermore, Taiwanese institutions outside of major universities offer limited support services tailored to Japanese. Moreover, policy priorities have shaped mobility trends. Since the launch of Taiwan’s New Southbound Policy (NSP) in 2016, strategic focus has shifted toward expanding ties with Southeast and South Asian nations, as well as Australia and New Zealand (MOFA, 2025). As a result, Taiwan saw a dramatic rise in students from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Nguyen et al., 2020). While this diversification is valuable geopolitically and economically, it has unintentionally sidelined Japan as a mobility priority.

Based on the synthesis of literature reviewed across policy, institutional, and individual dimensions, we propose an integrated conceptual framework to illustrate how student mobility between Taiwan and Japan is shaped by interconnected drivers at multiple levels. This model provides a foundation for future empirical investigation and targeted policymaking.

Figure 1
Framework for Taiwan-Japan Student Mobility

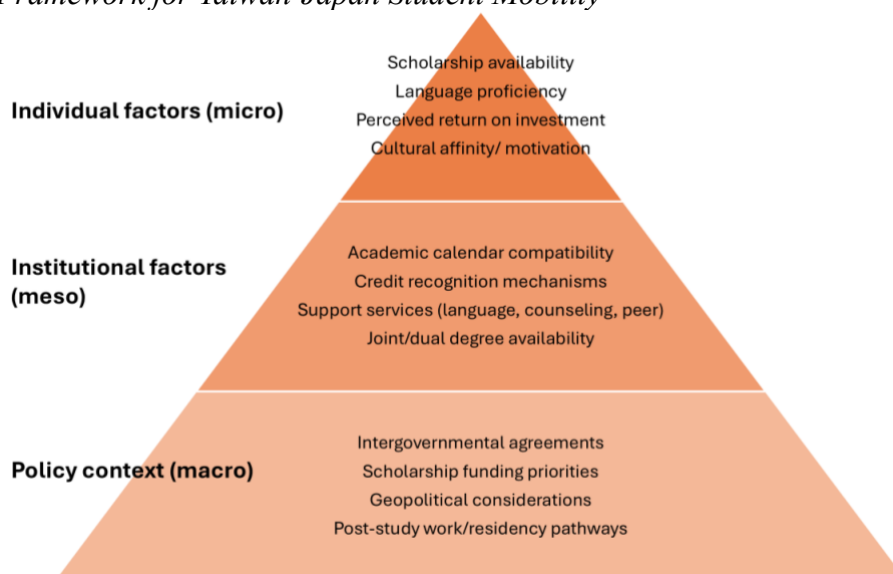


Figure 1 visualizes the dynamic interplay of three interrelated levels of influence: micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (policy). At the individual level, student motivations such as scholarship availability, language proficiency, and perceived cultural compatibility determine interest and capacity to pursue mobility. These micro-level drivers are necessary but must be enabled by institutional-level mechanisms, such as compatible academic calendars, formalized credit recognition systems, and embedded student support structures (e.g., buddy programs, bilingual counseling, and inclusive extracurriculars). Without these meso-level enablers, students face significant friction in navigating cross-border education systems. At the policy level, national strategies, bilateral agreements, and funding priorities such as Taiwan's New Southbound Policy or Japan's Campus Asia framework establish the broader mobility environment. In the case of Taiwan–Japan exchanges, current policy frameworks inadvertently sidelining Japan as a strategic partner. Furthermore, Taiwan's exclusion from regional trilateral initiatives like Campus Asia reduces opportunities for multilateral alignment.

This framework is based on Model of Student Integration (1993), which emphasizes the importance of both academic and social integration in student success (Tinto, 1993); Push-Pull Theory (Lee, 1966), which highlights mobility motivations and deterrents (Lee, 1966); and Policy Mobility and Educational Regionalism (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), which examines how cross-border policies shape institutional behavior (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). These theories emphasize the need for coordinated action across all levels to achieve reciprocal, high-quality mobility between Taiwan and Japan. The framework also serves as a diagnostic tool for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers to design interventions beyond financial aid, addressing structural, linguistic, and policy bottlenecks that impede student flows. Future studies may use this model to assess the effectiveness of targeted reforms or to compare Taiwan–Japan mobility patterns with other East Asian corridors.

In summary, scholarships remain a vital component in encouraging Taiwan–Japan student mobility but are not the sole determinant of successful bilateral exchange. This review underscores the need for integrated policy frameworks that address academic, linguistic, and cultural dimensions. Future efforts should move beyond financial aid to cultivate reciprocal, sustainable, and equitable student mobility that strengthens regional educational ties.

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