Constraining the depth extent of low-velocity zone along the Chenghai Fault by dense array ambient noise interferometry and horizontal-to-vertical spectral ratio

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ABSTRACT

The depth extent of low velocity fault zones is still a matter of debate due to the lack of vertical resolution for most seismic methods. Autocorrelations and cross-correlations of seismic ambient noise provide us new constraints on this issue by obtaining the shallow subsurface reflections without the need of active sources or earthquakes. The horizontal-to-vertical spectral ratio (HVSR) method can also give constraints on this interface and does not need any extra cost of data collection. In this study, we used one-month continuous seismic data from a dense linear array deployed crossing the Chenghai Fault (CHF) in Yunnan, southwest China. Single station autocorrelation and adjacent station pair cross-correlation methods were used to retrieve body wave reflections from the interface of the shallow crustal low-velocity zone (LVZ). The HVSR method was also performed to delineate the shape of the LVZ. Results show an inverted trapezoidal LVZ which extends to ~1.0 km depth across the fault zone with a lateral extent of ~3 km. Previous studies based on ambient noise surface-wave tomography and teleseismic travel time analysis in the same area show similar characteristics, consistent with the interpretation of our results.

1. Introduction

Crustal faults are generally associated with damaged zones that have intensive fractures around the main slip surface (Ben-Zion and Sammis, 2003; Yang et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2021). Generally, the damaged zone is generated by earthquakes over time and is seismically characterized as a low-velocity zone (LVZ) with a reduction in seismic velocities relative to the host rocks (Ben-Zion and Sammis, 2009; Yang and Zhu, 2010). High-resolution imaging of fault zone structure has great significance for us to understand the earthquake physics and provide important constraints on the behavior of past and future earthquakes on the fault. Based on high-resolution models, we can conduct numerical simulations for earthquake generation, rupture propagation, ground motion, slip localization, and so on. These approaches can give us an intuitive understanding of earthquake physics and behaviors. Several investigations have been made to obtain high-resolution images of fault zone structures. These include direct geological mapping and analysis of fault zone samples (e.g., Chester et al., 1993; Li et al., 2013), body wave travel time tomography (e.g., Thurber et al., 2006; Allam and Ben-Zion, 2012), ambient seismic noise tomography (e.g., Zhang and Gerstoft, 2014; Zigone et al., 2014; Vassallo et al., 2016; Zigone et al., 2019; Gu et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2020; Qian and Liu, 2020; Li et al., 2020) and waveform modeling of fault zone related seismic phases (Ben-Zion and Malin, 1991; Li et al., 2007; Yang and Zhu, 2010; Hillers et al., 2014). Despite the past efforts on imaging high-resolution fault zone structure, the depth extent of LVZ is still a big challenge due to the lack of vertical resolution (Yang, 2015).

A potentially good constraint on the depth extent of the LVZ is provided by exploiting stacked autocorrelograms or cross-correlograms of the continuous seismic records. Similar to the receiver function

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technique, the correlation methods are sensitive to the interface and thus can provide a robust constraint on the LVZ depth. Furthermore, these methods don’t need any active source, earthquakes, or long-term data collection, and therefore have already been successfully applied to retrieve P wave reflections for different scale imaging in different areas (Kennett et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2016; Feng et al., 2017; Saygin et al., 2017; Romero and Schimmel, 2018).

Besides, the Horizontal-to-Vertical Spectral Ratio (HVSR) method is another potentially efficient way to constrain the depth extent of LVZ (Nakamura, 1989; Bonnefoy-Claudet et al., 2006; Sánchez-Sesma et al., 2011). We can extract the frequency responses for the sharp seismic impedance between the sediment and basement through HVSR curves. Benefiting from its efficiency, the HVSR method has been widely used to investigate the shallow structure, especially within basins (Parolai et al., 2002; Bao et al., 2018; Molnar et al., 2018).

Here we aim to image the high-resolution structure of the Chenghai Fault (CHF) in western Yunnan, China. The CHF is a ~200 km long left-lateral strike-slip system, accompanied by normal dip-slip faulting. The CHF formed in the Pre-Paleozoic Era and extends from Yongsheng in the north to the Binchuan basin in the south. Not only the CHF, but many other faults with different trending and movement patterns are also distributed in this area. They have accommodated significant tectonic deformation and posed serious seismic hazards in this region (Allen et al., 1984). The largest earthquake that occurred on the CHF was the 1515 M7.7 Yongsheng earthquake (Huang et al., 2018a). According to the positive correlation between the intensity of seismic and fault activities, former studies considered the Binchuan area as an M7.0 earthquake potential area (Huang et al., 2018b). Yang et al. (2020) derive the high-resolution velocity structure of the CHF from records on a dense linear array crossing the fault. They found a LVZ of ~3.4 km in width and ~1.5 km in depth through ambient noise tomography. However, the model-predicted S wave arrivals are delayed in comparison with observations, suggesting that the depth extent of the LVZ was probably overestimated because of limited depth resolution in the LVZ. This inference has been proved in the newly developed array-based receiver function images (Jiang et al., 2021).

In this work, we applied the correlation methods and HVSR technique to our study region, the CHF in Yunnan, China. It is the first time that we calculate the autocorrelograms and cross-correlograms to retrieve body wave reflections from such a dense array. Previous studies based on correlation methods used stations separated by a few kilometers to several hundred kilometers. In comparison, the dense linear array we used has a small averaged spacing of ~50 m. It can provide us better constraints on the depth extent and lateral variation of the LVZ in CHF from these two kinds of methods.

2. Data and method

Between January 2018 and February 2018, 125 three-component short-period seismometers were installed across the CHF in the Binchuan basin, Yunnan Province, southwest China (Yang et al., 2020). The instrument has a built-in battery and data logger and a corner frequency of 5 s for all three components. These stations are in a roughly linear grid with an approximate station spacing of ~50 m (Fig. 1). Continuous recordings were collected at each point with 100 Hz sampling. This very dense linear array provides a great opportunity to image the high-resolution structure of the CHF area and to constrain the depth extent of the LVZ.

2.1. Ambient noise interferometry

Retrieving the Earth’s reflection response by seismic interferometry involves three steps: pre-processing the recorded ambient seismic noise, computing autocorrelations or cross-correlations of the preprocessed data, and stacking of the correlation functions.

For the initial pre-processing of ambient noise data, the instrument
response was first removed. The data were then cut to 1-day lengths, with mean and linear trends removed. The power spectra of the preprocessed ambient noise are not flat and are dominated by primary and secondary microseism peaks produced by ocean waves (Bensen et al., 2007). All the segments were band-pass filtered between 1 Hz and 2 Hz to enhance the reflectivity information beneath the stations. Moreover, energetic signals such as earthquakes, instrument malfunction, and local noise will also dominate the correlations (Bensen et al., 2007). In order to avoid contamination and bias from these high-amplitude signals, we applied time-domain normalization and spectral whitening with the running absolute mean method.

After the preparation of the daily time-series described below, the next step is computing the correlation functions. Correlation is a mathematical process that is often used to measure the similarity between two time series. In this work, we used the traditional correlation method based on the highest signal-to-noise ratio. We also tested other cross-correlation methods such as phase correlations (Schimmel et al., 2011).

Finally, correlation functions were stacked to improve the coherent reflection signals and to suppress noise. Here we used the phase-weighted stacking method (PWS) (Schimmel and Paulissen, 1997) because of its high efficiency in suppressing noise. To do so, the daily correlation functions were Hilbert transformed to split the instantaneous phase functions. Then we weighted the linear stack signals by the instantaneous phase coherency to enhance the coherent signals.

Fig. 2a shows an example of cross-correlation functions between station 1050 and all other stations in the frequency band 1–4 Hz. A wider frequency band is used here to show more details about the P wave. Fig. 2b shows the noise correlations stacked by distance bin of 0.1 km length. It shows the stack of the positive and negative parts of the correlation functions filtered in the same range of 1–4 Hz. The surface waves are dominant in the correlation functions. Although the refracted P waves can be observed, the reflected phases are hard to distinguish. The surface waves tend to mask possible reflections except in near-zero offset windows. In order to avoid the influence of surface waves, we used single-station autocorrelations and adjacent station pair cross-correlations to obtain the shallow subsurface reflection response.

2.2. The HVSR method

The HVSR method can help us retrieve and evaluate the resonance frequencies of unconsolidated sediments over high-velocity bedrocks (e.g., Chandler and Lively, 2016; Molnar et al., 2018). Following Nakamura (1989) and Arai and Tokimatsu (2004), we can express the H/V spectral ratio of microtremors at a frequency \( f \) as

\[
\text{HVSR}(f) = \sqrt{\frac{\langle NS(f)^2 + EW(f)^2 \rangle}{V(f)^2}}
\]

where \( V(f) \) is the Fourier power spectrum of the vertical motion and \( NS(f) \) and \( EW(f) \) are those of the two horizontal motions. We computed the HVSR curve of each station with the following procedure.

First, we split the entire three-component continuous data into several time windows of equal length. Window length is inversely proportional to the minimum frequency, so longer time windows should be used to measure stable low-frequency results. To extract HVSR in 0.2 Hz, daily seismic records were cut into 50 s-long time windows. We also performed statistical analysis for each time window and remove outlier windows in which the amplitude is in non-Gaussian distribution. Then we computed the Fourier spectra and the H/V ratio for each time window. We calculated the mean and standard deviation of each frequency for all time windows. The time windows were also removed if the corresponding HVSR curves have more than one third of frequency points out of two standard deviations. Finally, the HVSR curves from all left time windows were stacked to derive the averaged HVSR curve.

3. Results

3.1. P wave reflectivity profile from correlation methods

Due to the low amplitude of body wave reflections in the ambient noise field, we can only retrieve reflections from the interface representing relatively strong contrasts in material properties, such as velocity and density. Our results of autocorrelations and cross-correlations show clear reflections from the bottom boundary of the LVZ. All traces were filtered with a band-pass filter between 1 and 2 Hz, and a cosine taper was applied to suppress the characteristic zero-time peak. Higher-frequency noise sources would be able to increase the vertical resolution of this approach, but the ambient noise field recorded at this linear array contains little power at frequencies \( > 5 \) Hz.

For each station, we computed the autocorrelations for the 1-day segment with the maximum time lag up to 20 s. An example of the daily autocorrelations for station 1050 located in the central part of the CHF is shown in Fig. 3a. We also stacked the autocorrelograms by linear and phase-weighted stacking methods. The results were quite similar (Fig. 3a). In fact, it is quite difficult to identify the reflection signals by using the result from a single station due to the interference of noise such as multiples. But we can still find out the most likely reflection signals through some simple rules. First, the reflection signals should have larger amplitude than noise or multiples. Second, a positive impedance contrast corresponds to a negative phase in autocorrelograms. Third, the reflection signals from an interface should be a stable arrival during the
entire operation time window. Based on these principles, we infer that the clear signal at ~1.5 s two-way traveltime (TWT) is the reflection response from a low-velocity boundary (Fig. 3a). The variation in the P wave arrival time is very small and the amplitude is stronger than any others. Another possible reflection is detected at ~3.1 s in autocorrelograms. In consideration of the similarity of the waveform, the double arrival time, and the smaller amplitude of this signal compared with the reflection at ~1.5 s, we interpret this signal as multiple reflections.

Similarly, we calculated the cross-correlations for each adjacent station pair (Fig. 3b). The corresponding reflections at cross-correlograms are found at ~1.6 s and ~3.3 s TWT. The difference in time for the reflections can be explained by the different principles of autocorrelation and cross-correlation. The cross-correlation of two stations turns one into a virtual source, whose signal is recorded at the other receiver, while the autocorrelation is equal to zero offset seismic records. At ~5 s in cross-correlograms appears another multiple reflection, but the amplitude is slightly diminished and the daily signals are less robust compared to the signals at ~1.6 s and ~3.3 s (Fig. 3a).

After we got the daily autocorrelations (cross-correlations) for each station (station pair), all the individual autocorrelations (cross-correlations) were stacked to obtain one total stack per station (station pair) for final interpretation. The phase-weighted stack of autocorrelogram for each station and cross-correlograms for each station pair are shown in Fig. 4a and b, respectively. The x-axis is the distance between each station (or the midpoint of each station pair) and station 1001 (the northwest-most station). Results from such a dense linear array can help us identify the reflection signals. The result from a single station may be affected by noise and thus is less reliable. We can use the similarity from neighboring stations to reevaluate the signals and track the variations of the interface simultaneously.

Robust P wave reflections could be detected as isolated and clear signals for most of the stations, especially the stations in the central part of CHF (Fig. 4a & b). In combination with the results of ambient noise tomography (Yang et al., 2020), the most likely reflection from the...
3.2. Resonant frequency from HVSR method

The HVSR curves of all stations were computed for the potential information of the interface. Fig. 5 shows three examples of HVSR curves that represent three kinds of results. They have different numbers of resonant frequencies corresponding to different kinds of structure (Fig. 5a-c). Generally, the resonant frequency of the HVSR curve corresponds to the main interface of the sedimentary layer. No resonant frequency usually means no sharp impedance contrast between sediment and basement. The cause of two resonant frequencies is a bit more ambiguous. It might be a harmonic of the fundamental period, or might correspond to another layer (Bodin et al., 2001). However, the low-frequency peak is always significantly larger than the higher frequency peak. The HV curves of all 125 stations are normalized by amplitude and shown in Fig. 5d. We can clearly observe an inverted trapezoidal boundary in this figure. All resonant frequencies are picked manually and the station with different number of resonant frequencies are distinguished by the colour of their resonant frequencies (Fig. 5e).

Interestingly, we find that the central stations in the linear array all have two resonant frequencies. In contrast, the stations having single frequency peak are all distributed at the two ends of the linear array. This phenomenon might be caused by the structure difference between the fault zone and the surrounding area. The main resonant frequencies vary from ~0.1 to ~0.8 Hz, which implies the variation of the thickness of sediment.

3.3. Estimation on the depth of reflectors

In the previous seismic ambient noise tomography study of Yang et al. (2020), the S wave velocity of this area is estimated up to 1.5 km depth using surface waves extracted from interstation seismic noise cross-correlations (Fig. 4c). In this S wave velocity image, we find that the LVZ extends from ~2.8 km to ~6.5 km in width and ~1.5 km in depth. The shape of the LVZ is similar to our result. We further calculate the average P wave velocity in the LVZ to convert the TWT to depth by 1-D zero-offset ray tracing. This average P wave velocity is obtained from the S wave velocity model by assuming a constant Vp/Vs ratio of 2.25, similar to what was derived from receiver functions in the LVZ (Jiang et al., 2021). We choose this Vp/Vs ratio based on the empirical study of Brocher (2005) and Saygin et al. (2017). The converted model of the depth of the LVZ is plotted by blue dots in Fig. 4c. Our model obtained by the autocorrelation method shows the interface of the low-velocity boundary, which has good correspondence with the tomography model. The teleseismic travel time analysis (Yang et al., 2020) also shows similar characteristic, which provides strong evidence for our study.

For the simplest case of a uniform sediment layer, the relationship

![Figure 5](https://example.com/figure5.png)

Fig. 5. Three examples of HVSR results with no resonant frequency (a), one resonant frequency (b), and two resonant frequencies (c). The gray line represents the one standard deviation. (d) HV curves for all 125 stations after amplitude normalization for each station. (e) The resonant frequencies for all stations. Red and blue dots represent the two resonant frequencies of those stations which have two resonant frequencies. The green dots represent the resonant frequencies of those stations which have only one resonant frequency. (f) The comparison of converted model from autocorrelation results (blue dots) and HVSR results (gray dots). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)
between the resonant frequency \( f \) and the thickness \( H \) of the sediment layer can be determined as the following

\[
H = \frac{V_s}{4f}
\]

(2)

where \( V_s \) is the average S-wave velocity. But the S-wave velocities actually tend to increase nonlinearly with depth, due to compaction and other factors (Budny, 1985). In the absence of S-wave velocity information, Ilsen-von Seht and Wohlenberg (1999) demonstrate that an empirical power-law relationship could be established between sediment thickness \( H \) and the resonant frequency \( f \) by

\[
H = a f^b
\]

(3)

where parameters \( a \) and \( b \) are determined empirically by collecting data at control points such as drillholes. The parameters from the fitted power-law relationship can then be used to estimate thickness in areas without bedrock information.

Benefit from the S-wave velocity model established by Yang et al. (2020), we calculate the average S-wave velocity by using the traveltime information. Then the thickness of the LVZ can be estimated by eq. 2 (Fig. 5f). The boundary of the LVZ estimated from the HVSR method is shallower than autocorrelation results. To avoid the uncertainty from average velocity estimation, we further compare the \( f^{-1} \) of the HVSR method and TWT of the correlation methods directly to constrain the shape of the interface (Fig. 6). Results from the two kinds of methods match well and show a similar shape of the LVZ.

4. Discussion

We delineate a low-velocity boundary of the CHF region from dense array ambient noise interferometry and the HVSR method. An inverted trapezoidal LVZ which extends to \( \sim 1.0 \) km depth is shown in our results from two different methods. The formation and evolution of such wide and shallow LVZ along the CHF were under the combined effects of the regional EW-trending extension and the clockwise rotation of micro-massifs in this area (Wang et al., 1998; Fan et al., 2006). The left-lateral and pull-apart tectonic movement pattern was driven by the holistic clockwise rotation of the Tibetan Plateau (Wang et al., 1998; Zhang et al., 2004; Shen et al., 2005). Strike-slip movement caused intensive fractures around the main slip surface and the EW-trending extensional movement increased the rupture in top of the fault zone.

After a long-time geologic process of weather denudation and sedimentation on top of the fault zone, the inverted trapezoidal LVZ is gradually formed. The LVZ usually plays an important role in earthquake generation and rupture distribution (e.g., Dor et al., 2006; Ben-Zion and Ampuero, 2009; Huang et al., 2014; Yang and Yao, 2021). Cracks and fluids in the zone may decrease the strength of faults (Eberhart-Phillips et al., 1995; Faulkner et al., 2010) and the low-velocity material may amplify ground motion (Ben-Zion and Aki, 1990; Chen and Yang, 2020) and influence rupture propagation (Ben-Zion and Shi, 2005; Weng et al., 2016). Such a wide LVZ would be a significant potential risk of earthquake hazards for nearby residents.

Single-station autocorrelation and adjacent station pair cross-correlation methods were used to image the LVZ in the CHF area. These methods give a new approach to constrain the depth extent of the LVZ. In previous studies, fault zone trapped waves are commonly used to image the fault zone structure (Li et al., 1996; Ben-Zion and Sammis, 2009). Besides, seismic tomography methods are good ways to achieve high resolution of fault zone structure (Lin et al., 2013; Hillers et al., 2014; Zigone et al., 2019). But the vertical resolution of these methods is relatively low, which may lead to different conclusions in depth extent of the LVZ. The receiver function technique is a useful way to determine the interface but usually fails due to the reverberated phases in a low-velocity layer (Zelt and Ellis, 1999). Recently, Jiang et al. (2021) developed an array-based receive function technique, which can invert travel times of the LVZ and constrain subsurface structure. But in correlation methods, the reverberated wavefield reveals the effect of the low-velocity layer. So these methods can be good alternatives to detect the underground interfaces. Besides, the HVSR method we use can provide another constraint on the depth extent of LVZ. This method is also based on ambient noise data so that we can apply it to our study area without extra cost of data collection. In addition, these two kinds of methods can successfully detect the interface by using a few days of data and without the need for any active sources or earthquakes. For this study, only one month of continuous data was acquired and processed, but delivers confident results.

The thicknesses of the LVZ estimated from two methods are different, which shown in Fig. 5f. The largest error is expected from the time/frequency-to-depth conversions through inaccurate velocity models. For example, we used a traveltime-based average velocity in the HVSR method. However, this approach is established without taking into account the theory of the H/V ratio technique and it exhibits a flaw that the resonance frequency does not depend on the arrangement of the layers and their mass density (Tuan et al., 2016a & 2016b). The imperfect recovery of reflections due to even distribution of ambient noise sources is likely another source of uncertainty for the ambient noise interferometry method. Although the results from two different methods exhibit a gap in absolute values of the LVZ thickness, the shape of the LVZ from both methods is quite similar.

A difficulty in correlation methods we should mention is the contamination of sidelobes near zero time, which will affect early P wave arrivals. The sidelobes are caused by the convolution of a delta pulse at zero time lag with the effective noise source time function (e.g., Ruijgrok and Wapenaar, 2012). Applying a cosine taper to suppress the zero-time peak is useful to reduce the influence of sidelobes. Fig. 7d gives an example of autocorrelation results without tapering. It can be seen that the arrivals are masked by the sidelobes compared with the result with a taper (Fig. 7a). Instead of using a cosine taper, the procedure proposed by Clayton (2020) can also minimize the effect of sidelobes (Fig. 7f). This procedure is used to minimize the masking effects of the effective source time function by subtracting the average from each autocorrelation trace (Fig. 7b & 7c). However, the intensity and wavelength of sidelobes are highly dependent on the frequency bandwidth of the autocorrelation function rather than the structure or noise. So the sidelobes effect can be considered as a specific source time function, which can be also minimized. But this procedure will diminish the reflections from the laterally invariant structure. It is unavoidable.
since we used the average autocorrelations to estimate the source time function. The horizontal structure will also be included in the estimate, and hence will be removed from the image. Therefore, we recommend the second approach for a dipping interface and the first approach for a horizontal interface. Compared with autocorrelation functions, the cross-correlation functions are less affected by sidelobes. For example, the P wave reflection signals can be detected at ~0.7 s (at ~1.5 km) in autocorrelograms (Fig. 4), while the arrivals are ~0.2 s at the same station in cross-correlograms. The results between 0 s – 0.7 s in autocorrelograms have highly interfered with the sidelobes so that we can not see clear reflections in this time range.

In this study, we use a dense linear array deployed crossing the CHF. This preeminent array system provides a good opportunity to explore the fault zone structure and to constrain the depth extent of the fault LVZ. Most autocorrelation or cross-correlation studies used a 2-D seismic array with large interstation distances to obtain a basement map (e.g. Taylor et al., 2016; Romero and Schimmel, 2018). The reflection response usually has low lateral coherence because of large interstation distances and variable interface structures, which leads to difficulties for the interpretation of the imaging results. A denser station deployment, as we used in this study, can provide more coherent reflection responses for neighboring stations, which permits us to better track reflectors laterally and to obtain the depth variations of these reflectors (Fig. 4). An inverted trapezoidal LVZ is recovered for the CHF area, which agrees well with the ambient noise tomography and teleseismic travel time analysis results (Yang et al., 2020). Indeed, a 2-D seismic network was deployed in Binchuan in 2017 with interstation distance of ~2 km (Jiang et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021), which could be used with the autocorrelation technique to derive the basin structure.

In this study, the low-frequency peak of HVSR curves are only used as a supporting evidence for the results from ambient noise correlation methods. We should point out that there is more useful information we can exploit from HVSR, for example, using inversion technique to generate a 2D velocity model from the HVSR curve (e.g., Rivet et al., 2015; Piña-Flores et al., 2017), comparing the HVSR curves from forward computation with the observations (e.g., García-Jerez et al., 2016), and even using the directional HVSR to observe the direction of the seismic site responses (Del Gaudio et al., 2008; Di Naccio et al., 2017; Song and Yang, 2022). We also note that the correlation method has a limited lateral resolution beneath the array. To derive higher resolution subsurface structure, spectral ratios between records at different stations of the array can be calculated, as shown in a recent study of our Binchuan array (Song and Yang, 2022). In future work, these methods can be utilized to better constrain the fault properties of the CHF and underground structure in other regions with dense seismic network.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we have shown that correlation methods and the HVSR method are useful to image the interface of LVZ in the CHF area. An inverted trapezoidal LVZ which extends to ~1.0 km depth with a lateral extent of ~3 km is constrained in our study. Neither active sources nor earthquakes are needed in these methods. Only one-month continuous seismic records were collected and processed to derive such results. The dense station deployment of the linear array enables high lateral resolution of the interface imaging results and enhances the reliability and
stability of our results. These kinds of dense array observation systems are recommended in imaging fault zone structures in future studies.

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Data availability statement

Waveform data used in this study are available from Data Management Centre of China Seismic Experimental Site (http://www.cses.ac.cn).

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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