

Cross-Cultural Combined Arts Creation/Performance And The Research Supporting It

Dr. Wai-On Ho

Abstract:

As a veteran composer, and creator/director of work/projects combining music, dance, drama and visual arts across different cultures, I undertook doctoral work in 2009 because the scope of a PhD in the arts has expanded to include cross-cultural combined arts creation/performance practices – conditions favorable for my project. From my PhD process and attending seminars/conferences, I became aware that practice-led creation/performance that results from academic research is a compromise between the disciplines of academic and professional practices. Academic practice has a tendency to attempt to fit complex projects into minute categorizations which might not show the full picture. For those who create and perform “interdisciplinary” work, what they do is inseparable from their complex life and responding to many factors of the time. They work for the audience, i.e., the general public. In a less obvious way, academic work is also affected by one’s background and personal experience – this is what gives the work passion and poignancy. Including an element of the autobiographical enhances the creation/performance to reach people beyond the academic circle because it is about life and people understand that. My chapter reflects critically on the purpose of research in the pursuit of cross-cultural combined arts creation/performance.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Combined Arts, Creative Performance Art, Academic Versus Professional Approach, Compromise Of Contradictions

Lead-In Note

Growing up in the British colony Hong Kong, I have lived most of my life in England. The music I love and know best is Western Classical. Yet as a small child, my first exposure to multimedia performance was Cantonese opera that reached the lower classes including those shunned by society – the poor, illiterate, beggars, prostitutes, gangsters... bringing them culture and enjoyment, and I lived among these people. As a composer of contemporary and electro-acoustic music, and creator/director of work/projects combining music, dance, drama and visual arts across different cultures, my work has been performed in concert halls and art festivals in Britain and abroad since 1974. Though the venues appear to connect more with the middle classes, my projects aimed at a wider reach. Art creation/performance as a result of academic research should also be for an audience, and reaching people beyond the academic circle.

On Categorization And Terminology

In 1979, Hong Kong Urban Council sponsored performance of my works at the City Hall including *Metamorphosis*, which involved mobile scenery/stage objects, mobile projection/lighting, dancers and their processed images, and instrumental/electronic-computer music. I created this work following artistic instinct and inspiration, without any thoughts on categorization. The Urban Council did not know what to call this and promoted it as “Multimedia Extravaganza”. At the time “multimedia” meant using more than one art medium in a creative work. Nowadays “multimedia” would probably be associated with audio/video and imply interactivity. Scholars categorize existing works of art creation/performance. Definitions change in the course of time, and creativity has a life of its own and is forever changing and expanding. Using categorization to predestine an art creation/performance that is yet to be may restrict its growth. Attempting to categorize too minutely a complex art work/project may prevent perception of the full picture. When I create or stage performance, I obey my artistic instinct following an idea rather than a definition. However, for applications that require categorization, I have used the term ‘cross-cultural combined arts’ to describe my work – based on my long years experience of staging/promoting performances, this term is people-friendly. Terminology in academic research may baffle even professionals who know the subject well, let alone the general public. E.g., “electronic computer music” is more people-friendly than “electroacoustics” (academically should be without the hyphen). PhD demands contribution to knowledge and originality. Surely knowledge should be for the people, ideally reaching lower down (more) than the very top (less). Originality in art creation/performance thrives under flexibility and freedom. When it comes to research-based art creation/performance, perhaps thoughts should also be given to making it people-friendly – for the audience, i.e. the general public.

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Cross-Cultural Art

Nicolo Prozio di Camporotondo in his article “*Multicultural, Cross-Cultural and Intercultural, are you using these terms correctly?*” (Porzio di Camporotondo 2015) quoted the Oxford dictionary to define that: “Multicultural – relating to or containing several cultural or ethnic groups within a society”; “Cross-Cultural – relating to different cultures or comparison between them”; and “Intercultural – taking place between cultures, or derived from different cultures”. He expanded on the definitions, and concluded that he himself had used the wrong word to describe his own work. Yet in the real world it is more complicated than that due to world events, migration, easy travel, cosmopolitan cities, mixed marriages and the Internet... Exposure to more than one culture, self-advancement/self-interest either for an individual or for a group, or genuine beneficence to another people can all be reasons for crossing cultures. Verdi's *Aida* (1871), Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885), and Judith Weir's *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (1987) appear to be deliberately cross-cultural as the composers are not from a cultural background related to the topics. BBC's *The Black and White Minstrel Shows* (1958-78) is at best superficially cross-cultural. Yet there are people who from an early age are aware of being perceived as different by the majority, and would react to this; it would also affect how they see society and the world. Knowingly or unknowingly, the creative/performing work of these people often has a distinct style, with cross-cultural elements, as this is their natural tendency – a trait that is ingrained and life-long. “Across-cultures” appears to have some racial implication, especially relating to groups of people of observable different physical traits, and their work might be assumed as “ethno”. In fact, they are the bridges. They are equally at home with more than one culture, yet they can also be critical of both. The more they know, the more they see from more than one perspective, and cannot wholeheartedly accept the values and traditions of either side – especially when there is contradiction. They refuse to choose sides and have a sense of not belonging.

Combined Arts

Humans have five senses. It is natural to want to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel by touching and being touched. Humans also have perception, cognition, and the ability to think. Opera, ballet, kinetic arts, film and TV are just some examples of appealing to various combined senses, and IT has been pushing the boundary further. Many in creative and performing art are multi-talented – e.g., Wagner. Many of Schönberg's paintings and drawings can be viewed on the Net such as on the Arnold Schönberg Centre website (schönberg.at). Perhaps it is not coincidental that *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), the melodrama for voice and ensemble, when staged, often has a surreal, striking and disturbing quality like Schönberg's paintings. “Interdisciplinary” can imply that people from different practices work together such as a choreographer collaborating with an artist or an architect in creation/performance, yet there are many who have a proclivity to work with many art forms, such as Robert Wilson (1941-) who is rooted in fine arts, is also an American experimental theatre artist – his website constantly provides new information and update of these activities (robertwilson.com). As there are many art forms and different ways of combining by different practitioners, variations are endless.

Cross-Cultural Combined Arts

Genres that are combined arts in nature such as opera, ballet, film and TV are good for expressing cross-cultural topics. Productions of these works are sumptuous and spectacular. This also allows more freedom of expression in a way that is appealing to a wide range of audience. Isang Yun (1917-1995), the Korean-born composer lived and worked in Germany for a long time for political reasons, his opera *Sim Tjong* (1972) – a Korean fairy tale about a blind old man and his daughter who was also an angel – was part of the official cultural programme for the 1972 Olympiad in Munich. Another example is the multi-talented British Indian Meera Syal as a creative/performing member of the BBC comedy *Goodness Gracious Me*.

Evolution And Catalysis

My PhD project “*A Cross-Cultural Combined Arts Prototype Arising From Cancer And Remembering Cantonese Opera*” (Ho 2016) is a creation for multi-venue performance and as a basis for new versions. The seed can be traced back a very long time. My childhood exposure to poetic lyrics as sung in Cantonese opera and the translation of simplified versions of Shakespeare had developed into an interest in literature. I entered the Chinese University of Hong Kong to read Chinese and English language and literature. After a year at the university, in 1966 I won a

scholarship for professional training at the Royal Academy of Music in the UK. The works that I read at university left a deep impression and a desire to combine music with fine writings.

Remembering the vast quantity of Cantonese and Hollywood films that I saw as a child, I wanted to create some form of music performance akin to film. In 1974 I won a part scholarship to study short courses for film & TV direction and production in London. Remembering how stylized movement and dance were an integral part of Cantonese opera, I wanted to incorporate similar elements alongside Western Classical music performance. In 1976 I was chosen by the Gulbenkian Foundation to participate in the First International Dance Course for Professional Choreographers and Composers under the direction of the American choreographer Glen Tetley (1926-2007). I worked with dancers and choreographers from the Royal Ballet, Ballet Rambert and other dance companies, composing and performing music for them daily. I have involved dance and especially modern dance in my creative/directing practice ever since. Remembering how the sounds of Cantonese opera are outside equal temperament and diatonic harmony, I wanted to venture beyond the confines of Western Classical music, and became interested in the wide and flexible sound world of electro-acoustics. In 1978 I participated in a computer music workshop at CCRMA, Stanford University under the direction of John Chowning.

I was exposed to Cantonese opera as a small child before I encountered Western opera. I have searched for a way to merge these different art forms throughout my professional life. For my Masters (1983) at Cardiff University I studied stage and operatic works by Stravinsky, Schönberg and Isang Yun. I wrote computer programs for musical purposes and used a hybrid computer music system to produce the germ for new quasi-operatic work. After obtaining an MA in contemporary and electronic-computer music, I wanted to work on a PhD related to Western opera and Cantonese opera but was told by various universities that this could not be done.

In 2009 Cantonese opera was inscribed by UNESCO onto their list of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” (UNESCO 2013) – Cantonese opera has become an endangered species. The process of surviving cancer three times alerted me to the possible demise of Cantonese opera. With the passage of time, the understanding of a PhD in the arts has finally expanded to accept my proposal of creating a work that retains some characteristics of Cantonese opera in a new format.

The Edge Of Our Thinking

On 18-19 November 2011, I attended a multi-disciplinary PhD student-led conference at the Royal College of Art called *The Edge of Our Thinking: Research in Art and Design*. Dr Glenn Adamson, then Head of Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum delivered the keynote address. He pointed out that, whilst every PhD must include research, since the AHRC had endorsed the legitimacy of a creative PhD, an accepted understanding of the term “research” might be disputed. As a veteran of creative work, I know that creative artists often undertake research – for the purpose of gaining ideas and inspiration that help them move towards the goal of completing a new work. Yet on other occasions creative artists will omit to undertake any research. This is unlike academic research where the emphasis is on research as an end in itself. Academic research is typically objective, avoiding that which might be regarded as personal. Yet a creative and/or performing artist needs artistic freedom, and needs to listen to his/her artistic instinct and intuition rather than to follow what others have done. Artistic creation is subjective and will bear the signature of the creator rather than present the objective findings of research. Otherwise the creation will be of little artistic value, merely an exercise. University research often involves rules and regulations. Such restrictions can stifle artistic inspiration and instinct.

The Living Tradition

In 1988, London’s Victoria and Albert Museum advertised in the press, inviting innovative proposals for ‘Special Events’ to take place in the museum. In response I wrote a proposal entitled “*The Living Tradition*”, which called for the performance of new works based around images of museum exhibits and involving many creative and performing artists with whom I had worked. The proposal was initially accepted, but as the project developed the V&A official in charge felt uneasy about the ‘creative’ and ‘living’ aspects of the project. I had to answer to repeated queries: Would the relationship between the creative work and the image be historically correct, and in what way would the relationship between the creative work/performance and the image have educational value? The official seemed not to understand that the project would use images of the past as creative/performative inspiration. Creative and performing artists are different from museum curators/researchers in that imagination and *‘Building Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Bridges: Where Practice Meets Research’*, www.bibacc.org

originality take precedence over historical accuracy or factual research; and creativity has a value of its own. In the end the V&A cancelled the project. However my group Inter Artes performed “*The Living Tradition*” at London’s Bloomsbury Theatre on 6th May 1989, in a version for soprano, dancers, three instrumentalists and multi-slide projection of images of V&A exhibits. A later version of the work was performed at the Hong Kong City Hall in 1991, with images from local museums (Fig.1). Even when writing a historical novel or directing a performance of historical drama, though the writer/producer will undertake a certain amount of research, authentic historical details alone cannot ensure the success of the work – ultimately it is the drama that matters. My PhD project is similar to “*The Living Tradition*” – its purpose is to create a performative work inspired by Cantonese opera at a time when the art form is in danger of becoming a lifeless museum exhibit. The frustration of working on a creative/performative PhD was like a déjà vu of the V&A experience – complying to procedures instead of following the surge of inspiration, and having to explain this and that all over again.



Figure 1: “*The Living Tradition*” – combined arts performance with images from HK museums
Source: Inter Artes record 1991 – author’s photograph.

The Autobiographical In Creation And Performance

Many creative/performative works have a tendency towards the autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, or at the very least are related to the creator’s background and experience. In a less obvious way, academic work is also affected by one’s background and personal experience – this is what gives the work passion and poignancy. If it is about life and life experience, even a PhD thesis will be of interest to the general public.

Sally Berridge is an Adjunct Professional Associate in the Faculty of Design and Creative Practice, University of Canberra. She was awarded her doctorate for a performative creative PhD in 2006 (Canberra). In her paper “*What Does It Take? Auto/biography as Performative PhD Thesis*” (Berridge 2008), she says in *The Introduction* of her Abstract:

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Yes, we had a farm in Africa, though not at the foot of the Ngong hills... the dry, burnt colours of Africa did enter my heart and my veins. It's not just the smell of the dust, the red and gold of the Gloriosa lilies, the geckos that hang stickily around the ceiling, the kak-kak-kak of the guinea fowl that call you back to Africa... There's no getting rid of Africa however hard you try, once you have been infected.

She then describes how her African experiences inspired her to research her family history. I have no knowledge of Africa and my work belongs to a different creative practice, yet I read Berridge's paper with keen interest as it is about life, not only hers, but also the lives of those people connected to her. I am sure this helps bring an academic work closer to the people.

Dr. Juliet Chenery-Robson is a visual artist who works mainly with lens-based media. She gave a presentation on her AHRC funded practice-led PhD at *The Edge of Our Thinking* conference at the RCA, which I attended in November 2011. Her PhD thesis "*Portrait of an Invisible Illness: The Visualisation of Myalgic Encephalomyelitis through Photography and Text with Participation from ME Sufferers*" (Chenery-Robson 2015) was inspired by her daughter Emilia suffering from ME for more than ten years. Her daughter's suffering has also become Juliet's life and this gives the thesis a personal perspective. The history and background of ME, case studies, participants' narratives... satisfy academic research, yet it is her own photographs of her daughter (Fig. 2a), a series of portraits of ME sufferers with their eyes closed (Fig. 2b) and a series of their hands (Fig. 2c) that speak directly to me, and no doubt have spoken to her audience. In them I see the strength of the silent invisible, the frustration, and the suffering of a prolonged challenge. In her photos there is a tone of the autobiographical – telling me of the life not only of Juliet, but also of her daughter and other ME sufferers. These photos have been exhibited in public.

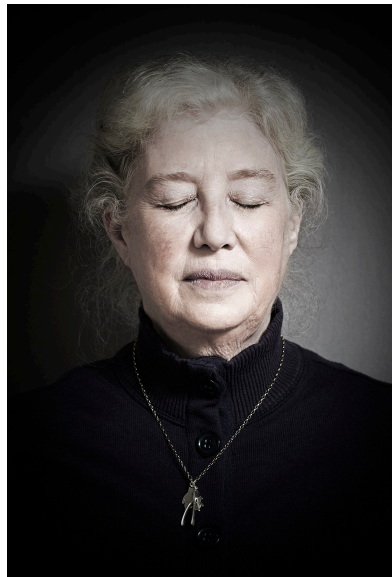
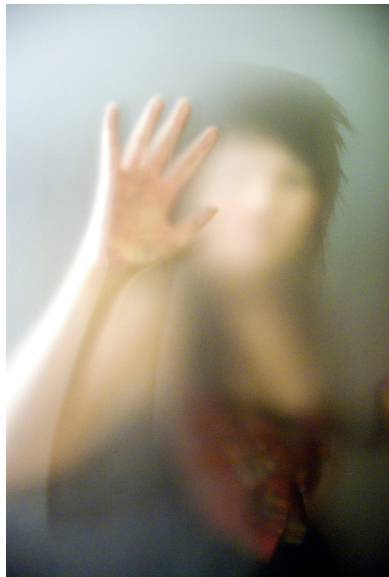


Figure 2a, Emilia (L)

Figure 2b, Jen – from a series of ME sufferers with eyes closed (M)

Figure 2c, Hand/cube image with text, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* – from a series of hands of ME sufferers (R)

Source: Dr. Juliet Chenery-Robson, used with permission.

John David Morley

I met the writer and novelist John David Morley in 1966. His mother, the artist Patricia Morley, told me that David grew up speaking Malay amid an extended household of Malays, Javanese, Chinese and Indians when they lived in Singapore. In his semi-autobiographical novel *Pictures from the Water Trade* (1985), he wrote in the third person calling his young Englishman Boon, and explained why he went to Japan:

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Boon went to Japan because he had once seen a Japanese actor walk across a stage in a way that deeply impressed him. It was not a big stage, not more than a dozen yards across, but the actor moved so slowly and with such controlled tautness of muscle that the stage itself seemed to become progressively bigger; it took him a full minute to pass from one side to the other. The distension of space and time in this performance on the stage likewise characterised Boon's decision. Made in the course of this minute, to visit Japan, for when he did eventually get there he was to stay for almost three years – far longer than he had originally intended when he took that decision. (p.30, 1st para.)

This is an example of an art performance of a different culture leading to a cross-cultural creation in a different format – in this case, a bestseller.

Dante And Beatrice

One of the set books during my year of study at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (1965) was Dante's *Divine Comedy III: Paradise* (trans. Dorothy L Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, 1962). Dante met Beatrice when he was a child and she captivated him completely. In 13th century Florence, arranged marriages were the norm. Dante was married to Gemma Donati, to whom he had been betrothed, and Beatrice married somebody else only to die three years after that. Dante remained devoted to Beatrice for the rest of his life and she was the principal inspiration for much of his well-known work, such as the *Divine Comedy*. The last part of my PhD title "*remembering Cantonese opera*" points to a similarity between my creative approach and Dante's use of the memory of Beatrice – his first love – as creative inspiration. As a small child my first exposure to music and multimedia performance was Cantonese opera and it captivated me completely. Providence decreed that I am married to Western Classical music and that I live in the West, yet I remain devoted to Cantonese opera from a distance. My creative and directing practice has been inspired and influenced by this first love despite its decline and possible demise. Another similarity shared with Dante is the perfection that may abide in memory. Memory is subjective and the image of perfection may suffer under scrutiny. Creation stemming from the memory is perhaps the most subjective. Had Dante married Beatrice, knowing her intimately, his image of her as perfection would probably have been shattered or at least dented, and perhaps she would no longer have served as Dante's muse. Some of my cherished childhood memories of performances of Cantonese opera have been diminished when seeing online videos of the same or similar performances while researching for this project. In pursuing research for creative inspiration, it is important to know when to stop so that the image remains intact.

Conclusions

A creative/performative PhD is like working on two PhDs – one for research, and one for the creation/performance. While "research" broadens my understanding of Cantonese opera beyond the childhood impressions that I cherish, an art creation/performance should be for the audience and judged on its artistic merits. To compromise with some of the contradictions between "academic research" and "professional disciplines", I decided that my PhD is a prototype and not a finished creation or performance. In my childhood, the basis of 'big drama' (i.e., Cantonese opera) was a Quben (pronounced chuben: u as German ü; en as in happen) – quasi libretto cum script that was also the basis for new versions. The music was a selection of existing tunes that performers had freedom to modify. I therefore supplied a humorous Quben about a three-time cancer survivor in storytelling style that can be enjoyed by the general public, with original music that can be played as written but with room for expansion, and production ideas for multi-venue performance based on my expertise... a reservoir of materials allowing free use and modification by others. Multi-faceted projects such as cross-cultural combined arts are difficult to define. Everyone does it differently according to the life experience that leads him/her into such an insatiable pursuit. Fig. 3 is an image explaining my complex project that is sometimes inaccurately assumed to be "ethno" or "art inter with medicine"... at academic conferences. Perhaps projects for an audience should be termed more generally such as "creative", and let the creation/performance's title speaks directly to the audience as in public performances?

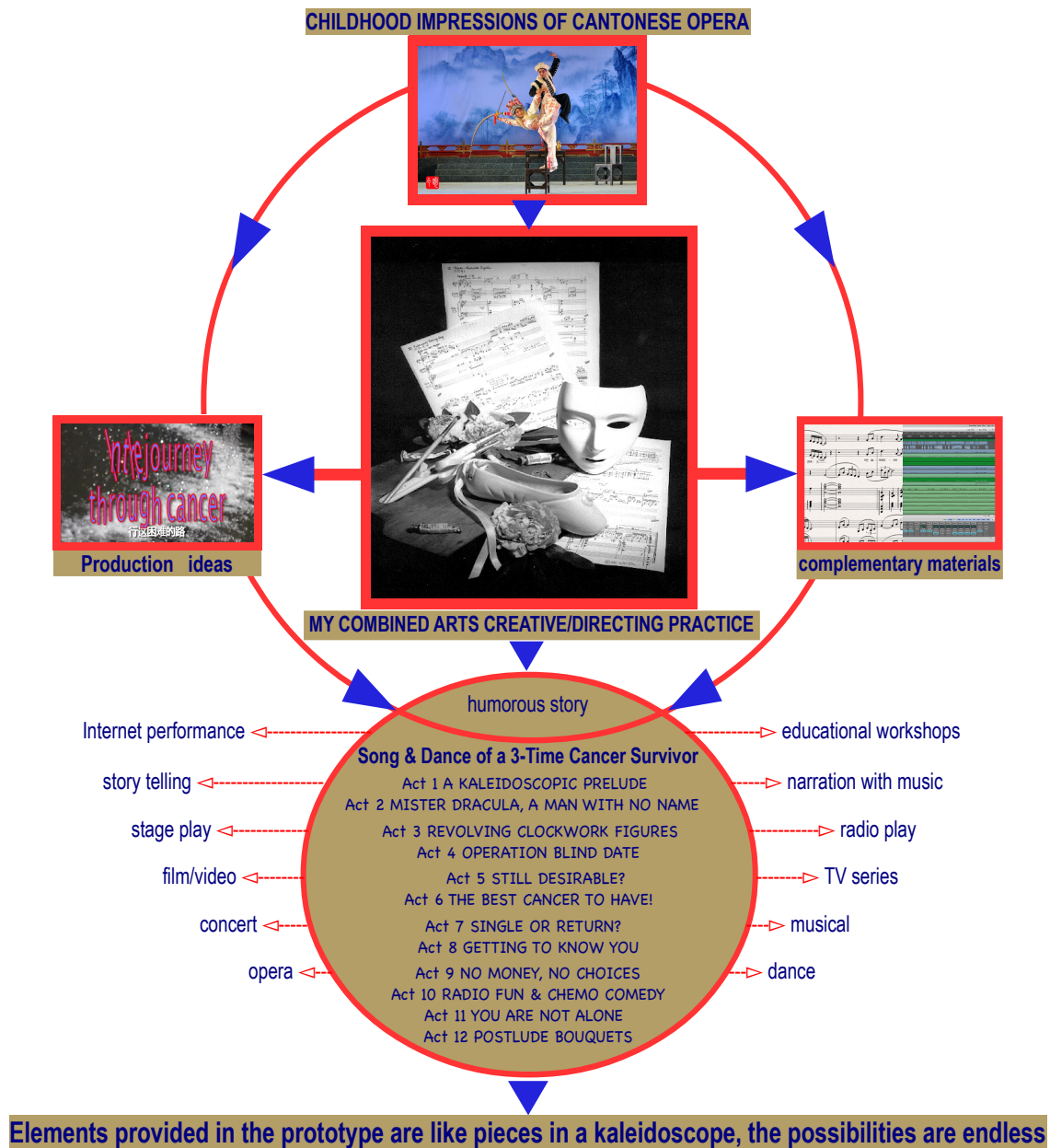


Figure 3: My PhD poster design
 Source: Wai-On Ho 2016 (the author)

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