

Sex and the Chinese single space

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Sex and the Chinese single space



Virginia Cornue

The new categories of singleness (*danshen ren* [single person] and *zhende danshen ren* [really single person]) and changing sex practices marked mid-nineties urban China as a time of wrenching transition in the post-Mao era. «Children» of the Cultural Revolution, now middle-aged urban professionals, were stunned and baffled by the turn away from the socialist moral discourse of equality between men and women (*nannüpingdeng*) which had saturated their education, governed social relations and underpinned central planning. Official promotion of biologically based *xingbie* (*xing*-sex, *bie*-difference) was the organizing principal for the burgeoning market that operated on class and gender difference and hierarchy. Reared to believe women and men were the same and could do the same things, these professionals were grappling with new circumstances that required a radical shift in their attitudes and styles of social relating. Furthermore, many experienced rapidly degrading life conditions, rising or falling

with the success or failure of their work units' success at jumping into the sea of commerce and turning a profit (*xia hai*). These internal and external pressures were painful for most people, but at times offered unexpected intrapersonal, interpersonal and professional opportunities. Perhaps most important of all, single urbanites were faced with making, and had the opportunity to make, personal sexual, relational and vocational decisions that might be different from state sanctioned paths, yet should not be construed as «resistant» per se to state planners' economic and social goals. To the contrary, my data show a more flexible and permeable relation between state goals and social patterns than is commonly assumed.



Sex and gender at the center of change

In this article, I employ the narratives of four members of contemporary China's first social club for single educated professionals, The Beijing Weekend Social Club (*Beijing Zhoumo Julebu*), to illustrate discourses around gender, chastity, strong women (*nüqiangren*), marriage and homosexuality. These issues go to the heart of moral dilemmas, as perplexing for individuals as for the nation in a time of market reforms. «New» ideals about femininity and masculinity recuperated «old» and multiple traditions, and *amoral* global cultural productions allowed for new social and organizational spaces for unmarried, divorced or never married middle-aged professional singles. Because morality was so important in the shaping of this generation and of the new socialist nation, the disruptive impact of amoral global capital, with its sole value of efficiency to produce profit, cannot be underestimated in the relational and societal changes singles and other urbanites faced during this period. Their dilemmas and resolutions of personal troubles and confusion show, however, that the state had much less hegemonic control over social life, relations and identity than is popularly estimated, both in China and in the West. Furthermore, their narratives resonate with regularities in the effects of market economies on other former socialist nations: polarization of gender definitions (Gal 1993); reemergence of class formations; expulsion of masses of women from political processes, educational institutions, and upper level employment (Burns and Rosen 1986); a shift from production to consumption with attendant redomestication of women (Verdery 1991; Da Motta et al. 1995); and highly sexualized popular culture (Schein 1996). To this catalogue I add the corporatization of men and the emergence of large numbers of single people. Particularization of the China experience sheds light on its local specificities and also reveals commonalities with other nations undergoing

market reform, thus dispelling the exoticizing notion that China is a case apart.

Organizational reform

China's first social club for single people, *Beijing Zhoumo Julebu*, emerged in the post-Mao pre-market era, organized by a retired magazine editor and a group of volunteer professional women and a few men. The creation of the Beijing Weekend Social Club coincided with the social emergence of contradictory notions of Chinese gender (*xingbie*), singleness and sex. Let me digress for a moment to discuss the complex category of gender in Chinese usages today. Chinese scholars, officials, students and volunteers translated *xingbie* in English as gender. They employed the term in the sense of a lens of analysis, but not in the sense of culturally constructed sex and social roles defining femininity and masculinity. The explanations that I received were quite explicit about the fact that *xingbie* had a biological basis. Scholars instructed me that the Western feminist analytical term «gender» had been translated as sex difference because through that lens one could see real femininity and masculinity undistorted by the «misconceptions» of the recent past. In other words, *xingbie* had replaced *nannüpingdeng* as the national discourse about what was right and wrong about being male and female. Some few scholar/activists, including Wan Yanhai who will speak below, employed the term *shehui xingbie* (socially constructed sex difference) to approximate what Western scholars, myself included, would mean by gender. But even they recognized the «catch» embedded in a linguistic term that reiterated sex difference as its root definition, and struggled to find a way around this epistemological impediment.

As a channel for and a manifestation of *xingbie*, the new category of women's individual and personal subjectivity also emerged in the post-Mao era, expressed



through complex and critical issues such as sex, divorce, personal decision-making, abandonment (mostly of wives by husbands for a lover), sexual harassment and abuse, job loss, blatant semi-pornographic imagery, etc. Discourses surrounding these issues were mediated by new non-governmental women's organizations such as the *Beijing Weekend Social Club* (see Cornue 2001) and the Women's Hotline (*Funii Rexian*). Both the club and the hotline served men, but their main focus was on women; thus my research also entailed interviews and participant observation with men.

A brief overview of the concepts of sex and chastity

In contrast to the Cultural Revolution period, during which women and women's problems were «explicitly unnamed» and the period was «declared [...] not about a "sex" revolution» (Young 1989: 234), sexual feelings, thoughts and choices of individual people were officially encouraged in the reform era. Prior to Liberation in 1949, dominant discourses on women's virtue had been tied to virginity and, in contrast to Christian virginity stories, culminated in marriage that «required procreation, not renunciation» of the world (Carlitz 1994: 112). Most women would rather have killed themselves than be unchaste, whether married or unmarried. Some writers and activists in the early part of the 20th century such as Ding Ling did argue for and write about less restrictive codes of behavior for women and more egalitarian social structures¹. In the current period, however, women's «liberation» served the consumer market and equality was a thing of the past.

Norman Chance pointed out that for 1980s Beijing urban villagers, «sex and reproduction were largely synonymous», but sex and recreation were not (1991:

114). Sexuality as a public category of discussion was virtually taboo until the mid-eighties. However, by the mid-nineties the issue of sex and pleasure was squarely on the public's mind, supported by state leaders and addressed on a daily basis in government controlled media. Sexuality intersected with the new category of singleness in multiplicitous ways that disputed and merged not only with the egalitarianism of gender relations of the revolutionary period and the asymmetrical hierarchies of feudalism, but also with the *amoral* images and discourses of Western pop culture². Members of the *Julebu*, like millions of others of their generation, grappled with the personal and moral implications of changing notions of appropriate sex relations and practices.

(Zhende) Danshen Ren / (Really) single people: sex and singleness

«Are there singles clubs in America?» Tan Ming, 31, a state middle manager, and a really single man, asked me in English over chocolate shakes at McDonald's. And, he pressed me, «are they really single?» «Yes, I said, they're not married.» Gales of laughter erupted from the «McDonald's Branch» as the group which convened there after *Beijing Zhoumo Julebu's* regular Saturday evening hours called itself. «NO [...] are they really, really single (*zhende danshen*)?»

A whispered explanation from a woman member indicated that sexual experience (or non-experience) rather than marital status particularized the new category of single. Sexual experience, she asserted, was morally permissible only within the institution of marriage. This distinction of true singleness was grounded on female *and* male chastity (Hall 1997: 76) and opened the way to the underlying

² Unmarried women called themselves *daling qingnian*, older age unmarried youth, in southern China. Men in Shenzhen rarely used this term to describe themselves (Clark 2001).

¹ See Barlow (1985) on Ding Ling, and more generally Wang (1999) for a searching history of women in the Chinese enlightenment.



complicated ethical convictions held by the Cultural Revolution generation. Listen here to the narratives of four members of the Social Club whose personal stories reflected dilemmas that were confirmed by thousands of callers from across the nation to the Women's Hotline (see Cornue 1999 for a full discussion of the Women's Hotline). Further, their stories were not always consistent with the ideals of singleness they articulated in public.

I'm a nineties woman

Li Ming, a sales woman, detailed a varied marital and sexual story which included an abortion, several affairs with married men, her own marriage and divorce, and her desire for remarriage. «Now I satisfy myself by self-release (*zi fangsong*) [her term for what Western science calls masturbation], to have orgasm (*gaochao*: high tide³). That other part of my life is behind me.» She confided that she had become a born-again Christian and would no longer have sex without being married.

A take-charge woman, Li did not aspire to be boss of a company like many independent women (*niüqiangren*). «I want to assist a male boss – someone I can learn from.» Her certainty about the proper asymmetrical *xingbie* order of the workplace was no less resolute than her attention to the selection of a proper mate who would be her equal in education and employment and with whom she could start over again, her sexual transgressions washed away by her new faith.

As the months passed, Li Ming's chances for marriage with a *Julebu* member seemed increasingly difficult. Some male members classified her as a possible lover (*qingren*) rather than appropriate marriage partner. They detailed her openness (*kaifang*), beauty, intelligence, style, education, bilinguality and money as negative characteristics. It is unlikely

that they knew of her religious status. They speculated about valuable qualities for a suitable wife. Hierarchy in marriage is well illustrated by Li Ming's dilemma. *Julebu* members, both men and women, schematized the ideal marriage ranking that had been reborn in the market era: number one man marries number two woman and so on until number five man and number one woman have trouble marrying or cannot marry. Li Ming was rated by many members as a number one woman, a category most women at the *Julebu* shared and which interfered with their possibilities for marriage or remarriage.

Ranking of relationships was summarized by *Julebu* members (as well as by numerous callers from all over China to the Hotline) as a major problem for highly-educated women in the nineties. Undaunted by the judgments of male Beijing Weekend Social Club members, Li Ming continued actively to search for an appropriate partner and exuberantly introduced me to her new boyfriend a few days before I returned to the US in early 1996. He was her equal in education, language fluency, looks, sophistication, and employment status. Despite her goal to wait until she was married, they were living together – perhaps in a chaste relationship (I never had the opportunity to ask her). More successfully than other *Julebu* members, she had negotiated her own contradictory notions – Confucian ideals, socialist equality, Western-inspired free-sex mores, Christian sexual moral – to follow ideals of equality in selecting a marriage partner and high achievement in forging a career. Li Ming might be called the epitome of the post-Mao «new woman» for her ability to make up her own mind and search out her own path. Yet, her path did not lead back home nor was she content to be number two to a number one husband like so many women as state industry fired hundreds of thousands of women. She refused to sacrifice her career for her love life. Not only had Li Ming *xia hai* (jumped into the sea of commerce), she had *xia ai*⁴ as well.

³ It is ironic that the term «high tide» is the same used to indicate the scope and breadth of the reaches of the Cultural Revolution. In many ways a public discussion of women's sexual pleasure and orgasm is more far-reaching and revolutionary than the Cultural Revolution.

⁴ I have coined this phrase here to indicate jumping into the sea of love and choosing one's own partner on one's own terms.



Virtuous life - battered wife

«This is all I have left of my marriage, my daughter, my home.» Zhang Juan wept bitterly as she turned the pages of her photo album. «I was a good wife. I did everything for my daughter. But, my husband took the third one (*di sanzhe*, e.g. lover) and my daughter hasn't spoken to me in more than a year» explained Zhang, a 42-year-old doctor. «Now I live with my parents again [...] like a child. I'm waiting for my own house.»

During an overnight stay, Zhang Juan and I whispered to each other in the dark and tried not to shift on her creaky bed to avoid waking her elderly mother and father in the next room. Tearfully she related her wedding night 14 years earlier: «I was lying on our bed, this bed, just like now, waiting for my husband and our first night of love. Instead he hit me in the face with his fist. "That is so you will know your place" he told me. I went cold and I stayed cold. Maybe if I had not stayed cold, he would not have found a new person and I would still have my daughter.»

As a volunteer hotline (*Funü Rexian*) counselor, Dr. Zhang empathetically counseled women from all over China suffering from battering and betrayal, job discrimination and sexual harassment to follow their own minds and hearts. Yet, she clung to her belief that marriage, «even a bad marriage», was better than no marriage. Zhang Juan's insistence on the virtue of sacrifice in marriage is directly in line with traditional wifely characteristics. The sacrifice/loss of her child to her ex-husband's family and the pain of enduring her daughter's rejection, her return to single (but not really single) status, and the loss of her house signal women's problems after divorce in contemporary China. Along with women's loss of housing because of the rise in divorce, employment loss has marked their experience of the new market economy (Cornue and Wilson 1995). Zhang Juan was fortunate that she had not lost

her medical job as well in the economic restructuring underway.

Dr. Zhang had appointed herself my history teacher and endeavored at every opportunity to show me urban folkways that were virtually passé in Beijing, as home appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators, and new processed foods replaced what had been only a few years previously common housewifely cleaning and cooking practices, irrespective of educational status. One day in a demonstration of «Old Beijing laundry techniques», she showed me the right way to wash knock-off Levi jeans on the banks of the Miyun River and rinse them in the icy water. As we worked, Zhang Juan and another divorced woman friend discussed the issue of violence against women, punctuating their dialogue with a hearty thump of the beating stick. For the first time, she mused that her husband was wrong to have hit her during their marriage and perhaps she should not have accepted it as her duty. Zhang's largely resigned acceptance of her marital fate was profoundly rooted in the tradition of wives following their husbands. Revolutionary emancipatory ideals of women's education and employment, which contributed to her achieving a medical degree, did not cause her to call into question her notions of womanly duty. Yet her interactions as a volunteer at the hotline, in contact with information showing the extent of violence against women and with explanations countering notions of «women's duty», seemed to soften her strict adherence to rigorous ideals. Like Li Ming, Zhang seemed to be touched by the new cultural politics sweeping the country with the winds of globalization which included, in 1995, inaugurating the television Home Shopping Network and the infusion of international feminist ideas during the *Funü Dahui* (UN Fourth World Decade Conference on Women and the parallel NGO Forum held in Beijing). The former was saturated with «Baywatch-style» semi-porn images, and the latter with an insistence on women's self-assertion and



politics. Zhang had been involved with both: as a translator for HSN and a participant during the *Funü Dahui*. While I cannot say conclusively that she changed her views due to these particular influences, the range of possibilities opened to her as a volunteer at the Hotline, a translator for the new Home Shopping Network and a participant at the NGO Forum surely served to offer a broader consideration of marriage duties and sexual relations.

I teach others from my own story

Wan Yanhai, 31 and a health educator, had found in his family history a method (*banfa*) to «do my duty and be free». In 1992, Wan was a doctor at the Ministry of Health. Privately he had initiated an AIDS Hotline and had developed a group called Men's World. By 1994, he had been fired from the Ministry, briefly sent out of Beijing, forced to close his *rexian* (hotline), lost his housing, income and health.

Over tea at a restored Ming style teahouse, Wan told me «[his] story. You are the first person I have told.» Wan Yanhai came from two generations of scholars and revolutionaries. Factional fighting during the Cultural Revolution brought retaliation on his parents. «Are you a bad man?» 10-year-old Wan Yanhai had asked his father. «No, but if the party makes some mistakes and catches me, and [also] catches some really bad men, that is all right» was his father's patriotic response.

Along with an unshakable belief in working for the good of society, Wan Yanhai had absorbed the scholarly and activist legacy of his family. By the early 1990's, he set out on a course of organizing and action that paralleled an internal gender identity journey. He melded the personal with the political in action, education and ideology. One bitterly cold day, Wan instructed me «to sit at a

window table in McDonald's. Nobody will bother you. You can pretend to be a tourist.» This drill was part of an organizing plan for an independent street action. Wan had called together a group of straight supporters, gay men (*nanxing tongxinglian*) and one of China's two «out» lesbians (*nüxing tongxinglian*) to leaflet about AIDS and homosexuality on International AIDS Day, December 5, 1994. I was to secure particular tables at McDonalds in order to provide a warm resting-place for leafleters, an interview site with the foreign press and more importantly a command post with excellent visibility.

«The press will ask you if I'm gay. I'm not. Maybe I'm bisexual.» «When did you know you were different?» I asked. Wan said, «No, everybody is the same – not from sex relations, but from feelings (*qing*) with personal reactions. Many people explain me as a gay, but I say NO. Many people are bisexual in feelings. Not physical for men. I have feelings *for* women and men, have feelings *of* women and men which are the same. Other people have divided humans into two. Even Freud divided.»

With this radical identity move, Wan Yanhai stood against the *xingbie* (sex difference) definitions of femininity and masculinity underpinning the post-socialist state which divided, essentialized and historicized human biology, nature and psychology into two asymmetrical definitions of femininity and masculinity. From his perspective, people could only develop full humanity if gender divisions such as the contemporary *xingbie* order were seen as artificial and culturally constructed. Wan was among the scholars who ascribed to the theory of *shehui xingbie*: sex difference is culturally based. His individual practice and beliefs went further however than those of many scholar/activists in that he resisted the entire notion of social/biological categories of male and female at all.

Rather Wan asserted that people (*ren*) held a unitary humanity first and science and history had ascribed difference. Not only was this a radical move in epistemological terms, it was also a radical



move economically and socially. Even ardent Chinese women's rights activists fully believed that women had «special» characteristics, primarily maternal ones and therefore, for instance, were strong supporters of protective job policies for women. Wan's move had taken him beyond the gender sameness of socialist equality, the difference of market driven polarization and the cultural constructionists countering the market into a new realm considering humanity from a holistic viewpoint. Since historically speaking women's humanity was moot and only partial under socialism, his definitions opened the way to a radical new stance from which to formulate a different way of relating and living that, while not openly resistant to the state, its new economic policies and their cultural reverberations, is far-reaching.

Learning about sex

Lu Bing, a *danshen*, 42-year-old English professor, invited me to go shopping to learn about sex and romance in modern China. He proposed a visit to the Adam and Eve Sexual Health Shop⁵, founded by the Ministry of Health in 1993. White-coated «doctors» dispensing advice and selling sexual devices staffed both the Adam side and the Eve side. Devices to stiffen penises, deer blood wine to increase male *yang* essence, common in pre-Qing imperial China (Van Gulik 1974: 281), fancy boxed sets of French ticklers and copies of *The Hite Report* (Hite 1976) were on sale in the Adam side. According to the manager, all 11,000 copies of *The Hite Report* in English had sold out in two weeks. They were awaiting copies of the newly translated *Our Bodies Our Selves: A Book By and For Women* (Boston Women's Health Collective 1992).

As we perused the Eve side, Lu Bing fingered the white veil topping the bridal gown displayed on the Western-style mannequin which stood beside glass cases of Frederick's of Hollywood style bras

and panties. «I come here to learn about sex. During the Cultural Revolution we didn't learn anything. Now we don't have any opportunity to have sex.» Aside from his ex-wife, Lu Bing had had two sex encounters. He linked the communal and limited living space of single people with the state's management of sexual relations. His evocation of the state's role in sexuality allied closely with the Adam and Eve shop manager's explanation of marriage and sex relations. The state work unit system allocated both housing and marriage permissions. Housing was most always linked to marriage. Marriage was the permissible site for sex.

Danshen ren, in general, were restricted to shared housing. However, in practice not all single men or women lived with their parents or in dormitory settings. Rather living space was as widely varied as a rented full wing of a urban villager's house (*ping fang*) to sub-leased rooms in vacant apartments (the official residents living outside of China) to apartments in central Beijing rented on the open market. Other study participants did indeed live with their parents in sometimes comfortable five- or six-room apartments, sometimes in tiny, dismal quarters in a dismembered courtyard house (*siheyuan*).

Whereas Lu Bing attributed his sexual frustration to prudish housing restrictions, the shop's manager explained (during a later interview) that the purpose of the shop and public sex instruction was to alleviate sexual frustration due to population control policies. «The one-child policy limits couples. What are they going to do after one child? Not have sex? Divorce? Get a *qingren*? So we teach them to have sex for pleasure – to enjoy sex. We hold classes, we teach birth control, and we have TV shows. Both men and women should enjoy sex.» In response to my questions about morality and pictures of nude or nearly nude «Baywatch» style couples locked in ecstatic embraces which illustrated most sexual goods, the manager and Lu Bing asserted with surprise that the pictures showed romantic encounters. «That is the modern way»,

⁵ References to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden were commonly used in Beijing in relation to match-making, dating, romance, and sexuality. I suggest that the state appropriated Christian imagery in a triple move to sell what was hot; to neutralize reviving Christian practice; and simultaneously to hint at a Western primordial sexuality that provided the fantasy «skin» within which delimited sexual relations might be slipped.



the shop manager stated. Lu Bing nodded in agreement. The modern way then was linked with explicit and public images of sexual encounters, manufactured siliconized airbrushed and perfected bodies. Western blond forms were the ideal. Pleasure and control were merged in the displays of the (expensive) condom package: have fun during sex, but don't have babies. While the shop was directed at married couples, clearly singles came there as well to browse for titillation and instruction, and to buy.

Divergent paths

Others approached the housing/single sex problem differently. One woman who had a well-paying hotel management job and her own apartment was on the verge of experimenting with unmarried sex. «I have a house and good money. If I can't find a husband, I'll find a lover. I need to experience sex.» Her personal choice undercut state aims to forge a stable nation grounded on heterosexual marriage albeit now a sex/fun-filled union. In general, state prescriptions followed pre-socialist historical precedent that the well-regulated male-ruled family served as the foundation and model for society. The current market era twist added sex for pleasure to the marriage mix. The hotel manager rated the experience of pleasurable sex more important to her well-being than the acquisition of a husband. She had provided for herself what traditionally were some of the perks for well-married wives – a house and financial support. While choices pertaining to sex, marriage and housing were ostensibly the decision of the individual in this new era, state planners still aimed to regulate and manage these individual choices through administrative methods such as the Adam and Eve Sexual Health Shop and *danwei* housing restrictions that upheld hierarchical *xingbie* and «traditional» marriage forms. However, as can be seen from the previous examples, not all restricting

manœuvres by the state were successful, as individuals gained social and organizational space to formulate, however uneasily, their own resolutions to the sex and single nexus.

In sum

Reorganization of Chinese society in the global market era offered unexpected spaces for individual choices neither clearly identical with state planners' aims, nor openly resistant to them. New sites of mediation, such as the nation-wide *Funii Rexian* and the calls reported by this Hotline, demonstrated that these spaces, problematics and dilemmas of the Cultural Revolution generation were not confined to a small group of Beijing professionals, but reached across the nation and touched all levels of the social hierarchy. The new cultural category of singleness – considered by most married people as abnormal – offered new possibilities as well as losses for the women and men who experienced it. Among the possibilities were new ideas: women might resist battering in marriage, they might forego marriage altogether, they might consider experimenting with sex as a recreational activity or expect pleasure as a right of marriage. Interaction with Western ideas about feminism and sexuality (such as *The Hite Report*) as well as more public visibility and discussion about sex offered the potential for egalitarian love relationships denied by the current *xingbie* discourses, as well as the possibility for exploring gender on the basis of the common humanity of women and men. Accompanying losses included the difficulty, especially present for educated urban women, of marrying or remarrying, housing problems, the emergence of the third one, job loss, and loss of state sanctioned equality. The latter point is consistent with other post-socialist nations (Einhorn 1993) and is at the heart of restructuring in the market era in China and elsewhere.



The new society forming in 1990s China signaled a more profound cultural revolution than Mao ever generated or could have imagined, and one that opened the way to a plethora of social relations outside standard marriage patterns and purposes, whether feudal or socialist. Singleness, homosexuality, sex for pleasure in marriage and sex pleasure expressly sanctioned for married women and considered and practiced by single women, social organizations specifically for singles, and housing possibilities outside of work unit restrictions suggest the emergence of new patterns clearly worlds apart from pre-socialist Confucian hierarchical traditions and socialist egalitarian tradition. Individualized incorporation of the foreign «new» and multiple «olds» by the Cultural Revolution generation shows considerable efficacy on their parts, as opposed to the narrow and unifying strictures of the two previous decades. Further, the narratives offered above demonstrate a more nuanced picture of China in the market era, far from the regimented and stereotyped images commonly available. The space of singleness and sex points to profound cultural changes and new social patterns unlike anything that has come before in China and more akin to effects of global capital elsewhere in the world.

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Abstract

Sex and the Chinese single space

The global market, as it impinges on social organization and identity in China, has engendered a new space for singleness and sex which in turn has created new possibilities and difficulties for both sexes. Women especially now have the opportunity to expect sexual pleasure in marriage and the potential to seek it outside of marriage, even as their job instability and divorce rates have increased. With the advent of the market era, state-sanctioned equality has disappeared and sex difference (*xingbie*) serves to organize society hierarchically, most often to the detriment of women. New non-governmental women's organizations such as singles' clubs and a national hotline mediate the tremendous dislocations, especially among urban professionals who are «children» of the Cultural Revolution. While particular changes are unique to China, the emergence of singles and the centrality of sex and gender to the smooth functioning of the market are consistent with experiences in other post-socialist countries.

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