



In this essay, the author discusses the intellectual and material foundations that led to the spread and transformation of American Theory in China over the last two decades of the 20th century.

Transfers and Transformations of American Theory

The Chinese Example

By Gregory Jones-Katz

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, most academic humanists in America felt that defining “theory,” which swept through fields and disciplines across humanities, was a lost cause. This did not, however, stop them from trying. Gerald Graff postulated: “‘Theory’ is what erupts when what was once silently agreed to in a community becomes disputed, forcing its members to formulate and defend assumptions that they previously did not even have to

be aware of.”¹ Theory, for Graff, denoted the paroxysm following the post-sixties breakdown of “consensus,” in the academy and the wider culture. Topics such as language, society, gender, and the literary canon became objects of (renewed) investigation. Theory, though, was also “a way of interacting with objects . . . which does justice to the mission of the university to produce new knowledge and not conserve traditions.”² What’s more, disparate “methods, concepts, models,”

“argumentative and demonstrative techniques,” and “institutional arrangements” notwithstanding, the theoretical enterprise collectively stressed ideology as a primarily vehicle for and medium of power, mistrusted modern “grand narratives,” and challenged meaning’s solidity and stability.³ Together, the research programs and practices of theorists, a distinct group of historical actors, was thus anti-foundational or anti-metaphysical; they were “postmodern.”⁴

The postmodern theoretical enterprise was not limited to the United States, but assumed international dimensions. And during the last three decades of the twentieth century, transatlantic and transpacific transfers and transformations of American Theory, a postmodern cultural-political movement that began in United States higher education and which often focused on “difference” and “otherness” in language, gender, and so on, occurred via transnational connectivities—organizations, institutions, institutes, classrooms, exchanges, conferences, public events, etc. Intellectual as much as material infrastructures, in other words, transferred and transformed American Theory for and in specific settings. Yet, despite these different routes, American Theory, in almost all the pronouncements was, it was assumed, superior to previous views or to any antagonists; recalcitrant adopters refused this new high-tech intellectual good from America at their own risk.

The following essay presents a small sample of results from a pioneering study, *Empire of American Theory and the Triumph of Neoliberalism*. Using both published and archival materials from America, Germany, France, and China, the larger project aims to innovatively historicize the postmodern intellectual goods of American Theory in relation to neglected political and cultural contexts and hitherto unexamined institutional sites, organs, and avenues from the mid-1960s to the 2000s. The core statement of this study is the post-sixties neoliberal capitalist ethos animated transnational sites, spaces, and events that circulated American Theory as well as motivated American theorists’ attention to difference. Here, the presented evidence concentrates on some of the intellectual and material foundations that aided the diffusion and alteration of American Theory in China over the course of the twentieth century’s last two decades. More specifically, the essay focuses on the importance of American

literary critic, philosopher, and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson in the 1980s.

Material Foundations

When *Superman* and its sequel were released in China, in 1986 and 1987 respectively, U.S.-Chinese relations were developing in leaps and bounds. In 1988, U.S.-China trade exceeded \$10 billion dollars and America became China’s third-largest trade partner. But not simply cultural and economic links and exchanges were forging the new era of American-Chinese relations: at the beginning of May 1988, a delegation of ten leading American academic humanists and social scientists who flew to Beijing to help Chinese colleagues “review...selected fields of study” and their development “over the last fifty years” faced a

remarkably open moment. The gathered Western and Chinese social scientists and humanists focused on how specialization and “divided knowledge” contributed to (post)modern ideas that, a number of Western academics stressed, subverted the universalistic (ethnocentric) assumptions of Western knowledge. Proponents (literary critic J. Hillis Miller for example) and detractors (philosopher John Searle for instance) foregrounded various American Theoretical intellectual goods during the debates, while exposure to the postmodern approaches of Western scholars helped Chinese attendees conceptualize their work in advanced global terms. In the end, more than one hundred Western and Chinese scholars conducted cross-cultural dialogues and collaborative intellectual conversations at the Beijing event.

The image shows a conference program titled "TRAVELING THEORY" sponsored by the University of California Humanities Research Institute. The conference took place on December 6-7, 1991, at the University of California, Irvine, in the 338 Administration Building. The program lists a keynote speaker, Edward Said, and several principal speakers including Ted Huters, Lee Yu-chang, Kang Liu, J. Hillis Miller, Shen Dan, Wang Fengshen, Zhang Longji, and Zhao Yilan. The program is divided into sessions for Friday, December 6, and Saturday, December 7, with specific times and locations for each session.

TRAVELING THEORY
A Conference Sponsored by
The University of California Humanities Research Institute
December 6-7, 1991
University of California, Irvine
338 Administration Building

"Traveling Theory" refers to what happens when literary theory or critical theory developed in one country, language, or culture is transferred to the pedagogical, institutional, and social circumstances of another culture.

Keynote Speaker
EDWARD SAID
Columbia University
"Traveling Theory Revisited"

Principal Speakers

Ted Huters, UC Irvine
"Identities of Realism in Modern China: The Hard Imperatives of Imported Theory"

Lee Yu-chang, Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica
"Froing Rabbit, New Humanism, and China"

Kang Liu, Pennsylvania State University
"Chinese Marxist Cultural Theory in the Debate about Culture in the 1980s"

J. Hillis Miller, UC Irvine
"Border Crossings: Translating Theory"

Shen Dan, Peking University
"A Twisting Movement"

Wang Fengshen, Institute of Foreign Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
"The Originality and Creativity in Translation, or the Power of Intertextuality"

Zhang Longji, UC Riverside
"Western Theory and Chinese Reality"

Zhao Yilan, Institute of Foreign Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
"Traveling Theory: Qian Zhongshu vs. Edward Said"

Program

Friday, December 6
UCHRI, Adm. 338
UC Irvine
Session I: 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
Welcoming Remarks
Clarence Walker
Acting Director, UCHRI
Speakers:
Ted Huters
Wang Fengshen
Shen Dan
Session II: 2:30 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.
UCHRI, Adm. 338
UC Irvine
Speaker:
Lee Yu-chang

Session III: 8:30 p.m. - 11:30 p.m.
Sumner Hall 178
UC Irvine
Speaker:
Edward Said

Saturday, December 7
UCHRI, Adm. 338
UC Irvine
Session IV: 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
Speakers:
Zhao Yilan
Zhang Longji
J. Hillis Miller

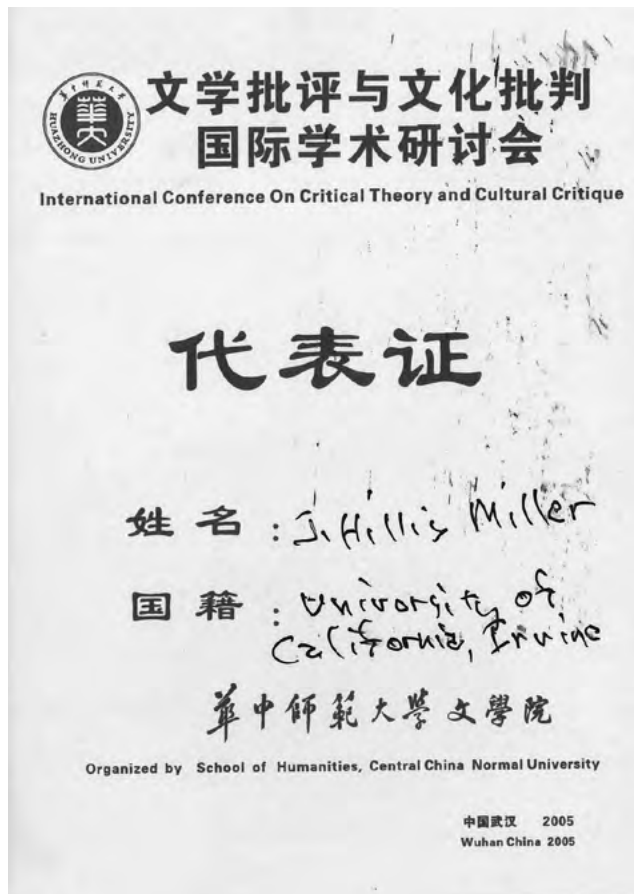
Session V: 2:30 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.
UCHRI, Adm. 338
UC Irvine
Speaker:
Kang Liu

Session VI: 6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.
UCHRI, Adm. 338
UC Irvine
Roundtable Discussion
with all participants, including
Fantine Via, UC Irvine, and
Leo Lee, UC Los Angeles

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(1) Conference Program.

Source: J. Hillis Miller Papers. MS-C013. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California



(2) Chinese conference announcement.

Source: J. Hillis Miller Papers. MS-C013. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California

Such transfers of American Theory were rooted in earlier developments. In fact, beginning in the late 1970s, a Chinese professional-managerial class, often trained in the American academy, promoted and disbursed American Theoretical goods. The existence of this social class was itself a consequence of the 1978 economic and cultural “opening up” of China, a key piece of which developed after Washington and Beijing issued a joint October memorandum that “called for exchanges of students and scholars in all fields at all levels during the first year of up to 700 on the Chinese side and 60 on the American side in a U.S. national program, as well as ‘such other numbers as the Chinese side is able to receive.’”⁵ Waves of students and scholars followed, crisscrossing the Pacific, though these exchanges were at first limited to science and technology, which

the Chinese saw as most essential to modernization. This emphasis is reflected in the fact that during the period 1979–1984 about two-thirds of the Chinese students and scholars who traveled to the U.S. were in the physical and natural sciences. “Until the late 1970s,” Suzanne Ogden sensed in 1981, “the social sciences were openly and mercilessly disparaged in China, far more than any other aspect of Chinese academic life.”⁶

This intellectual culture had begun to change with the founding of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in May 1977. CASS not only quickly became the leading comprehensive academic research organization in the People’s Republic, but also sent, in 1979, a delegation of prominent humanistic and social science scholars to the United States. There, the group, while stres-

sing to their hosts the significance of increasing the flow of scholars, books, and ideas between the U.S. and the PRC, engaged several hundred American scholars and academic administrators in research universities, libraries, academies, centers, and institutes. American scholars responded enthusiastically: “[E]verywhere we found signs of renewed scholarly activity, of intellectual exuberance, and of academic vitality.”⁷ Indeed, in the period 1979–83, more than 3,500 Americans based in the humanities and social sciences went to China to teach, research, study language, and take courses; more than 100 American colleges and universities established institutional agreements with their counterparts in China.⁸ Exchange programs that aimed to modernize the Chinese academy, above all their humanities and social scientific knowledge, occurred, in earnest, during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

Postmodern Provisions

Evidence of American-Chinese exchanges during the “reform” era in humanities and social scientific disciplines is manifest in the number and variety of articles and essays devoted to postmodern analyses of culture. For the 1980s was the “Age of Theory” in the American academy, a time when advanced humanists and social scientists worked from and adapted concepts drawn from postmodernist texts. The term “postmodern” was first mentioned in Dong Dingshan’s 1980 essay in *Dushu* (Reading), a leading periodical in China that saw itself as playing a key role in instigating cultural change, publishing critical reviews on many translated Western humanities subjects. Late in 1980, “postmodern” or “postmodernism” also appeared in Chinese in an essay on American writer John Barth published in *Waiguo wenxue baodao* (Report on Foreign Literature). While the essay attracted the attention of and was sharply criticized by orthodox

Marxist literary critics, reform-minded intellectuals enthusiastically received postmodernism there and elsewhere; by the mid-1980s, Chinese intellectuals' interest in the "postmodern" was also sated by the- orists from or theorists' Chinese students trained in Western world. For example, in 1984, a France-trained young Chinese scholar, Li Youzheng edited and translated a volume by French (post)structuralist theorist and critic Roland Barthes, *Luolan Bate wenxue lilun xuanji* (Selected Writings on Literary Theory); presumably because Maoist ideology still dominated Chinese intellectual life, Li was unable to find a publisher willing to accept the manuscript until eight years later. Nonetheless, Chinese translations in journals such as the previously noted *Dushu*, *Zhongguo shehui kexue* (Chinese social sciences), *Wenyi yanjiu* (Studies on Literature and Art), *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary Review), *Zhongshan* (Purple Mountain), and others, of leading philosophers and theorists of postmodern ideas, concepts, and positions, including Jürgen Habermas, Ihab Hassan, Jean-François Lyotard, Linda Hutcheon, William Spanos, and Hans Bertens, followed.

Chinese intellectuals and scholars' uses of postmodern theories to advance humanistic and social scientific knowledge occurred "in the flesh" as well, materially supporting the "cultural fever" for postmodernism inside and outside Chinese universities. Sartre had famously visited China in 1955 and his existentialism introduced there before the Cultural Revolution, but his philosophy, in the 1980s, did not fit the spirit of the times. Instead, Western prophets of (post)modernity, such as Ihab Hassan (in 1982) and Douwe Fokkema (in 1987), offered lectures on the subject, in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Dalian, and elsewhere. But it was American literary critic, philosopher, and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson's visits during the mid-1980s that most intensively and productively dovetailed with Chi-

nese intellectuals' passion for post-modern theoretical goods.

According to a Chinese colleague who became acquainted with Jameson at UC-Berkeley in 1983, Jameson was likely attracted to China because of the practice of Marxism there. Ironically, though, Jameson became best known in China not for his Marxist theory. Jameson was, rather, received as a herald of that brave new world "America": "America," as it was theorized in post-Mao China, signified efficiency, productivity, and technological know-how; "America" was the Name of the new. In the West, a number of scholars suggested that postmodernism, while initially appearing in architecture at mid-century that then sweeping through literature and other areas of art and culture, culminated "in the magisterial work of Fredric Jameson" who "provided us [Western scholars] with carefully discriminated analyses of many schools of thought about postmodernism, linking these scholars to various ideological attitudes and positions, within postmodernism itself."⁹ In China, Jameson captured the collective modernizing desire of his audience during his 1985 lecture tour devoted to postmodernism, which began at Peking University and ended at Shenzhen University; the tour lasted several months and his lecture notes were translated and published in Chinese under the title *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* (Postmodernism and Cultural Theory) not only in China but also in Taiwan during the late 1980s.¹⁰

At Shenzhen University—the institution was a symbol of China's modernization, part of the country's experiment with making Shenzhen its first Special Economic Zone—Jameson delivered his Summer 1985 lectures to the inaugural conference of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association. Attended by 130 delegates from more than 10 higher education institutions and publishers, the international conference was a watershed event, with another

130 participants also present at the workshops. Many of the attending young scholars became pillars of Comparative Literature in China, and their eagerness to compare and contrast Chinese literature, customarily viewed as expressing and capturing the nation's essence, with other national literatures marked how segments within Chinese higher education were willing to reflexively consider, perhaps even relativize, China's assumed cultural uniqueness. Practically, the conference also helped establish the international status of Chinese achievements in the discipline of Comparative Literature, with Fokkema, President of the International Comparative Literature Association, the Secretary General of the ICLA, and Professor A. Owen Aldridge, President of the American Comparative Literature Association, all coming to express their congratulations in person. And in addition to Jameson, other renowned American professors attended the conference, including Earl Miner and Wai-lim Yip.

Entitled "Postmodernism and Postindustrial Cultural Logic," Jameson's 1985 Shenzhen-Peking lectures prompted Chinese intellectuals to conduct a theoretical reflection on postmodernity vis-à-vis the modern, informing listeners that postmodernism had displaced modernism in the contemporary West. This news added to the broader sense among Chinese intellectuals that they had to "catch up." In his lectures, based on previous articles published in the English-speaking world,¹¹ Jameson theorized about three stages of capitalism and their related logic of culture: (1) the first was market capitalism, which drove Western nation-states to construct a single market within their national borders; the cultural logic in this stage was realism; (2) the second stage manifested the worldwide colonial expansion of Western nation-states; the logic of this culture was modernism; (3) the third was late capitalism, a period that began in

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- 文坛评点
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- 学子论坛
- 艺术故乡



山东师大艺术学学科主办

(3) Humanistic Trends (Spring 2005), sponsored by the Department of Literature and Art, Shandong Normal University. Source: J. Hillis Miller Papers. MS-C013. Special Collections and Archives, The UC Irvine Libraries, Irvine, California

the 1960s and which was facilitated by the technological advancement of mass media such as TV and video cassettes; Jameson, here, advanced a Marxist theory of postmodernity as the cultural logic of late capitalist societies.¹² In the 1983 version of his soon-to-be seminal text, Jameson declared: "I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism."¹³ For Jameson, the few areas or zones left untouched by commodification during the imperial seizure (second stage) were then, during the third stage, colonized and capitalized by late capitalism. "In postmodernism, because of advertisements, because of metaphorical culture, capital and the logic of capital thoroughly penetrate the [previously relatively untouched] unconscious and aesthetics. The forms of commodification are ubiquitous in areas such as culture, art, and the unconscious. Exactly in this sense, we are in a new historical stage, and culture is given different implications."¹⁴

Following the more general de-Marxification of intellectual life, Chinese intellectuals, seeking not only definitions of modernity, for a term to signify the ongoing reformation of national identity in relation to the "modern" West, embraced the arguments of Jameson's 1985 Shenzhen-Peking lectures. They used Jameson's text to orient their intellectual inquiries to the significant contradictions that structured Chinese cultural politics. For instance, Jameson's Western-centered lectures, echoing the 1983 Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign launched by conservative circles within the Chinese Communist Party, appeared to forecast that China's economic liberalization would encourage not simply the intrusion of Western cultural commodities but the commercialization of the Chinese people's unconscious. Such an intervention and such commercialization subordinated China to the West, thereby

threatening the ruling communist party's ideological positions, even its foundations, for instance its anti-colonial nationalism. Jameson therefore offered Chinese intellectuals not only an example of how to theorize China's cultural phenomena in postmodern terms, but also a theoretical justification for rejecting or combating the Western intrusion of China's unconsciousness, its habits and norms.

Another concrete result of Jameson's 1985 Shenzhen-Peking lecture was to stimulate both conservative and reformists to contemplate an alternative cultural path for China's continuing reforms. The former group would gain the upper hand post-Tiananmen, halting many transpacific and transatlantic textual and personnel exchanges, such as those that contributed to the 1988 symposium in Beijing; in the latter group, a number of Chinese literary scholars and critics, inspired by Jameson's dialectical methodology in regard to the situation of Asian and Third World countries, and seeking to theorize Chinese literature's dual ambition to be "modern" and "native," would bring a Chinese practice of postmodernism to the attention of the English-speaking world.

Larger and longer trends

Without understanding the interrelations between the American Theoretical enterprise and the material foundations that facilitated its transfers and transformations in China—including grants from major private and public foundations in America, such as the Ford and Andrew W. Mellon Foundations, and exchange agreements, such as the 1984 agreement between the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences—scholars cannot grapple, as my larger project *Empire of American Theory* will, with the multiple sources of postmodernism, an important consideration, with the "rise" of China. Preliminary results of my

research suggests that transfers and transformations of American Theory by way of transpacific connectivities after the post-1978 "opening up" of China, whether through quasi-official research institutes (sites); at conferences (events); in scholarly works (corpora and organs); or by Chinese scholars and intellectuals' uses to evaluate "traditional" Chinese modes of thinking about "man in society" vis-à-vis the "modern" West, resulted in what one might call "Chinese postmodernism," a cultural phenomenon, an *épistémè*, and a literary current co-created by Western and Chinese intellectual traditions that subverted hierarchies of all kinds, political, intellectual, and so on.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Essay erörtert Gregory Jones-Katz die intellektuellen und materiellen Grundlagen, die die Verbreitung und Veränderung der American Theory in China im Laufe der letzten beiden Jahrzehnte des 20. Jahrhunderts mit sich brachten. Die Amerikanische Theorie, wie er sie definiert, war eine postmoderne kulturpolitische Bewegung, die ihren Ursprung in den Hochschulen der Vereinigten Staaten hatte und sich häufig auf „Differenz“ und „Anderartigkeit“ in Sprache, Geschlecht etc. konzentrierte. In China wurde die American Theory mit den Veränderungen in der intellektuellen Kultur des Landes nach der „Öffnung“ nach 1978 verwoben; ihr einflussreichster intellektueller Botschafter war Fredric Jameson, dessen Besuche Mitte der 1980er Jahre mit der Leidenschaft chinesischer Intellektueller für postmoderne theoretische Güter aus den Vereinigten Staaten zusammenfielen und diese ermutigten. Gregory Jones-Katz' Aufsatz ist Teil eines größeren Projekts, das darauf abzielt, sowohl bereits veröffentlichtes als auch archivierte Material aus Amerika, Deutschland, Frankreich und China zu verwen-

den, um die postmodernen intellektuellen Güter der amerikanischen Theorie von Mitte der 1960er bis in die 2000er Jahre zu historisieren.

Annotations/Literature

- 1) Graff, Gerald, "Preface," in *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*, eds. Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer, (Holland and New York: AUP), 8.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 9.
- 3) Bod, Rens, Jeroen van Dongen, Sjang L. ten Hagen, Bart Karstens, Emma Mojet, "The Flow of Cognitive Goods: A Historiographical Framework for the Study of Epistemic Transfer." *Isis*, Vol. 110, No. 3 (2019): 483–496, 488.
- 4) This paragraph is adapted from the first paragraph of the article, Gregory Jones-Katz, "The Euphoria of Theory," *the minnesota review: a journal of creative and critical writing* (forthcoming).
- 5) See "October 1978 Memorandum between Washington and Beijing," FF Grants FA732C Reel 4325 Report 08090351, (Rockefeller Archive Center, New York).
- 6) Ogden, Suzanne, "China's Social Sciences: Prospects for Teaching and Research in the 1980s," in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 22, No. 7 (1982), 581–608, 582.
- 7) Prewitt, Kenneth, "Prospects for Research in China by American Humanists and Social Scientists: The Report of a Commission," *Items*, 36, (no. 1–2, June 1982), 8–12, 8.
- 8) See "Student/Scholar Exchanges with the People's Republic of China: A Report for the U.S.-PRC Joint Commission on Science and Technology," FF Grants FA732C Reel 4325 Report 08090351, (Rockefeller Archive Center, New York).
- 9) Bové, Paul, "Preface: Literary Postmodernism," in Paul Bové (ed.), *Early Postmodernism: Foundational Essays* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1.
- 10) The Chinese translation of Jameson's transcribed lectures appeared under the title *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* (Postmodernism and Cultural Theory) in 1986, trans. Tang Xiaobing, 3rd rev. Ed. (Taipei: Hezhi wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 1980) and in Taiwan in 1989.
- 11) In 1983, Jameson published an article, titled "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in a collection of essays (see footnote 12), and, in 1984, a revised version of the earlier article, titled "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," appeared in the *New Left Review*. The article would then become the first chapter of Jameson's 1991 book, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Presumably, Jameson based his 1985 lecture in Shenzhen and Peking, "Postmodernism and Postindustrial Cultural Logic," on previous efforts.
- 12) Jiemuxun [Fredric Jameson], *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun*, 5–6.
- 13) Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and

Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 20.

14) Jiemuxun, 142–6.

The author

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