



Smart Engagement with Asia

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Smart Engagement with Asia: Leveraging Language, Research and Culture, published in 2015, was produced as part of the Securing Australia's Future (SAF) program, a multidisciplinary research initiative of the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA), funded by the Australian Research Council under the auspices of the Office of the Chief Scientist.¹ The report was a unique opportunity for humanities scholars to work together with other researchers — scientists and social scientists — on a topic of crucial importance for Australia's future prosperity and security, allowing them to conduct evidence-based research and generate interdisciplinary findings to support policy development. For three years from late 2012 an expert working group of representatives from all four of the learned Academies, chaired by myself, met regularly to scope the issues at hand, prepare and design the project, and debate the arguments and conclusions to be drawn from the research.² The report focuses on three areas of major importance for Australia's evolving relationship with Asia: languages and linguistic competencies, research and research collaboration, and cultural diplomacy and relations.

There is no question that 'smart engagement with Asia' is essential for securing Australia's future. But what is 'smart' engagement? The dominant meaning of the word 'smart' today associates it with being clever, quick, and

technologically sophisticated. In the context of international relations in today's complex world, however, 'smart engagement' needs to be conceived rather differently: in our report we define it as the slow and patient nurturing of long-term, sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships. In particular, smart engagement requires an outlook that goes beyond the pursuit of purely transactional relationships for short-term, self-interested gain. Rather than the one-way outward projection and promotion of Australia's national interest, smart engagement focuses on the patient cultivation of genuine partnerships through mutually beneficial cooperation and collaboration.

Smart engagement also requires nuanced knowledge and understanding of the complexity, diversity and intricate dynamics of the region we often too easily homogenise by using the shorthand term 'Asia'. Despite the rise of populist nationalist sentiment in the West, the common wisdom in the countries of contemporary Asia is that increased connectivity between societies — at physical, institutional and people-to-people levels — plays an important part in promoting growth, maintaining peace and safeguarding stability in the region and beyond. At the same time, Asia, or what is now sometimes called the 'Indo-Pacific' region, is rapidly being reshaped by the rising influence of the giant regional powers, particularly China and, to a lesser extent, India. In this context, Australia has to

(above)

Fireworks at the 2008 Olympic Games opening ceremony in Beijing.

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(far right)
Copies of the report at its launch in Melbourne at Footscray Community Arts Centre on 5 Jun 2015.

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make sure that it does not get left out of the intensifying web of transnational connections and cross-border alignments being spun across the region today. That there is still much work to do in this regard is evidenced by a recent PriceWaterhouseCoopers report which found that a great majority of Australian businesses (88%) have no experience of doing business in Asia at all, and that most of them have no intention of changing this aloof stance towards Asia because of a prevailing belief that engaging with Asia is 'too hard', that Asia is 'too different' and uncomfortably so.³ This indicates that there are many barriers to overcome for 'smart engagement' to occur, and that these barriers are not just economic or regulatory in nature, but linguistic, social and cultural. It is on these dimensions that the *Smart Engagement with Asia* report concentrates its focus.

LANGUAGES FOR SMART ENGAGEMENT

Language is a fundamental communication tool without which no social interaction (including the establishment of networks, linkages, and collaborations) can take place. The importance of language — and language differences — is often underestimated, especially in a largely monoglot, English-speaking country such as Australia. According to the 2011 census 81% of Australia's citizens and residents communicate only in English at home. This is despite the fact that Australia has a large migrant population from non-English speaking backgrounds. While 53% of first generation Australians spoke a language other than English at home, this dropped to 20% for second generation Australians, and plummeted to just 1.6% for third and subsequent generations.⁴ This process of linguistic assimilation is, according to Lo Bianco and Slaughter, the universal experience of immigrant populations.⁵

Promoting Asian languages has been an educational policy goal since the 1990s, with mixed success. Many Australians believe that they do not need to learn other languages because of the status of English as a global lingua franca, including throughout Asia. According to a global comparative study on the value of education conducted by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), only



12% of Australian parents see foreign language skills as an important priority for their children at secondary school. This is lower than for parents in other Anglophone countries (Canada 20%, US 23%, UK 28%). It would seem then that English monolingualism is more entrenched in Australia than in other countries.⁶ However, evidence shows that monolingual English speakers are at a significant disadvantage when engaging in a world where others tend to be multilingual.

Of course it is indisputable that English has become an Asian language, as it is widely used across the region. In many region-wide operations, such as international research collaboration or formal intergovernmental affairs, English is now accepted as the de facto language of communication. Demand for learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is high in all countries in the region. Yet proficiency levels are very uneven, with only Singapore (where English is the official working language) and Malaysia demonstrating high proficiency in English. In all other Asian countries, relying only on English as a vehicle of communication is a distinct disadvantage. In highly competitive global economic spheres, multilingual people have a comparative advantage in increasingly global or cross-national companies and organisations. Multilingual capabilities are of undeniable benefit for facilitating intercultural interactions and are considered essential in various professions such as engineering, medicine and tourism. A 2014 survey found that only 51% of Chinese visitors were satisfied with the availability of Chinese language facilities in Australia, and 37%

cited the 'language barrier' as a reason for not recommending Australia as a destination.⁷

Moreover, multilingualism, or more specifically, learning a language other than English, also translates into broader 'translingual' skills by challenging students to cultivate a worldview different to the one they inhabit through English, and to be more appreciative of the histories and cultures of the society whose language they are learning. For example, a recent survey of Australian attitudes towards Indonesia, commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, found that those who have studied the Indonesian language have a higher level of awareness and understanding of Indonesia, have more positive perceptions of Indonesia, are more likely to think Australia and Indonesia have things in common, are more likely to consider Indonesia important to the Australian national interest, and are more supportive of increased links between the two countries.⁸

with Chinese or Japanese culture are able to prevent these types of situations and help collaborative work proceed more smoothly.⁹

In short, although English is the global language par excellence, being monolingual in English will impede Australia's ability to engage more effectively with the region. To paraphrase Joseph Lo Bianco, there are two important linguistic disadvantages: the first is not speaking English; the second is speaking *only* English. Consequently, smart engagement with Asia requires breaking the 'vicious circle of monolingualism'.¹⁰ In this regard, promoting foreign language education remains an essential policy goal. It is not sufficient to rely solely on English in the expectation that others will adapt. The principle of reciprocity demands that Australians need to cultivate a preparedness to recognise the inherently complex language diversity within the region and the capacity

MULTILINGUALISM...TRANSLATES INTO BROADER 'TRANSLINGUAL' SKILLS BY CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO CULTIVATE A WORLDVIEW DIFFERENT TO THE ONE THEY INHABIT THROUGH ENGLISH.

Finally, the limits of English-only are evident even in contexts where English is the dominant international medium of communication, such as in science and research. For example, Montgomery has argued that effective research collaboration requires more than just a formal lingua franca. As he observes:

The daily operations of research, from the role of the individual to the structure of organizations, reflect the society in which they occur. When it comes to the actual work of collaboration, therefore, mismatches of practice often happen. A global tongue can make these situations both better and worse, since it can disguise through seeming agreement a disconnect in expected behavior. This has often been observed in the case of East Asian researchers, whose cultural ways of expressing doubt, agreement, and criticism are often quite indirect and can be easily misinterpreted when translated directly into English. Scientists familiar

and sensitivity to navigate this complexity. At the same time, although it is not necessary for Australians to be fluent in Asian languages to engage with Asia, multilingual capability is of undeniable benefit to facilitate intercultural interactions and collaborations.

RESEARCH COLLABORATION AS SMART ENGAGEMENT

Scientific research is increasingly a globally interconnected endeavour, with more researchers around the world seeking opportunities to pursue their research interests by collaborating both within and across national boundaries. In these circumstances, international research collaboration represents a significant mode of institutional and people-to-people connectivity between countries. When researchers work together across national boundaries, they not only contribute to the global production of knowledge, they also play a part in sustaining a culture of cooperation that

contributes to more harmonious international relations. In this way, international research collaboration has a strong potential to be a powerful form of smart engagement.

Asia is the most dynamic region for research investment and output today. Research and development expenditure in the region exceeded that in North America for the first time in 2011. China is now the third largest producer of research articles, behind only the United States and the European Union bloc, and is on course to overtake the United States before the end of the current decade. Japan's status as a global research power is in long-term decline, but it is still very strong. South Korea and India are also increasingly prominent regional research powers.¹¹ A recent article in *Asian Scientist* reports that, in 2007, Asia contributed nearly one-third of the 5.8 million researchers worldwide. The combined number of researchers in South Korea, Taiwan, China, and Singapore rose from 16% in 2003 to 31% in 2007, driven mostly by China's rapid growth in research and development. In contrast, the number of US and EU researchers declined from 51% to 49% of the global total; Japan's share dropped from 17% to 12%.¹² It is also heartening to know that, according to a recent UNESCO report, there has been a rapid increase in publication rates in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS)

disciplines in Asian countries, especially since 2008.¹³ This suggests that as the countries of Asia are becoming more developed, research and scholarship in HASS is growing in importance, although from a low base. This points to an increased interest in the HASS disciplines in the region, in line with the global trend to embrace a more rounded conception of knowledge, not just in science and technology but also of society and culture, required to understand and tackle more holistically the complex challenges of our time.

While the issue of (poor) quality is still an important one, with much professional development needing to be done in the research workforce, especially in smaller and less developed countries, the growth in the pool of researchers across the region enhances the potential for research collaboration with them. So what is the state of affairs in international research collaboration within the Asian region, and how engaged is Australia with Asia in this domain?

International research collaboration is usually measured through international co-authorship of research publications. This is at best a very partial measure, as international research collaboration can take many different forms and does not necessarily have to result in co-authored journal articles, especially in the humanities. In the absence of alternative measures, however,

(right)
Korean pop stars

PHOTO: 'KOREAN POP STARS - IMG_2601' BY SALI SASAKI <[HTTPS://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/SALISASAKI/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/salisasaki/)>, LICENSED UNDER CC BY-SA 2.0 <[HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-SA/2.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)>.



we had to rely on bibliometric data (such as those provided by Scopus) to gauge the rate of international research collaboration. These data show that, globally, there has indeed been a marked rise in international collaboration on scientific articles, with estimates ranging from 25% to 35% by the end of the first decade of this century.¹⁴ Overall the main Asian countries tend to show less collaborative propensity than researchers in North America, Europe and

exception: collaboration with China, which has risen exponentially in the past decade and a half. Between 1997 and 2012 the rate of co-authored publications with China has increased more than ten times.¹⁷ Only three other countries have seen similarly fast growth rates in co-authored papers with China: the US, Taiwan and Singapore. Why is this? An important explanation can be found in what we call the 'Chinese diaspora effect'. By this we mean that the exceptional

THE SHARP RISE OF AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COLLABORATION WITH CHINA CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO A VERY LARGE EXTENT TO THE ACTIVITIES OF RESEARCHERS OF CHINESE DESCENT WORKING IN AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTIONS.

Australasia. Nevertheless, the density of research collaboration between countries in the region has increased strongly in the past decade. This suggests that intra-Asian research collaboration is on the increase, though from a low base. The 1997 Asian financial crisis has propelled the countries of Northeast Asia and the Association of South East Asian Nations countries to pursue greater regional integration, and this has flowed into an intensification of research collaboration within the region.¹⁵ Australian researchers are among the most frequent international collaborators: about half of Australian scientific articles involve an international co-author. Data show, however, that Australian researchers are relatively less inclined to collaborate with Asian co-authors than with co-authors based in the US, Europe and New Zealand. As Thomas Barlow has observed, rather acerbically, Australian collaboration with Japanese co-authors remains at almost the same level as collaboration with researchers in New Zealand, even though Japan has thirteen times New Zealand's publication output. By the same token, India's scientific output is seven times larger and South Korea's six times larger than New Zealand's, but—using the number of co-authored papers as the measure—Australian researchers seem to collaborate less than half as often with Indians or South Koreans as with New Zealanders.¹⁶

Such quantitative data juggling suggests that Australia's pattern of international collaboration is heavily tilted towards other Western, especially Anglophone, countries. But there is one huge

growth in collaboration can be attributed to the contributions made by Chinese diasporic researchers in these countries.

Anecdotal observations suggest that migrant Chinese researchers have played a critical role in driving Australia's collaboration with China. Such observations can be backed by quantitative evidence, derived from research on co-authorships involving collaborations between researchers from China and other countries. Such research is usually conducted by examining the surnames of the international collaborators, on the basis that Chinese surnames are highly recognisable. Research by Wang et al. suggests that Australian research collaboration with China is driven far more by Chinese diasporic researchers than in other country: while as many as 66% of Australia-China collaborations involve the work of an Australia-based co-author of Chinese descent, this is the case for only 48% in the UK, 32% in Japan, and 28% in Germany.¹⁸ This tendency is corroborated by an analysis by Anderson and Stafford of the pattern of research collaboration of one Australian university, the University of Adelaide, with China. Of the top twenty most productive Adelaide researchers who co-published with Chinese researchers between 2009 and 2013, fifteen were originally from China. Of the five non-Chinese, two were ethnically Vietnamese, two British, and one Anglo-Australian.¹⁹

In other words, the sharp rise of Australian research collaboration with China can be attributed to a very large extent to the activities

of researchers of Chinese descent working in Australian research institutions. In terms of a broader research engagement with China, then, Australia's high reliance on Chinese diasporic researchers suggests that enhancing research links with China among non-Chinese Australian researchers requires major policy attention. The large contribution of Chinese diasporic researchers inflates the extent of collaborative links, and masks the fact that Australian researchers who are *not* of Chinese background are not as strongly engaged with China as they could be. At the same time, it is important to recognise the significant role played by Chinese diasporic researchers in bridging the cultural and linguistic divide between the two countries. More research is also needed on the role of diasporic researchers from other Asian countries in maintaining connections with counterparts in their home countries.

a lack of social connections and of intercultural capabilities plays a crucial role in the prevailing disconnect. The social and cultural dimensions of international collaboration require more attention if we are to nurture smart research engagement with Asia.

CULTURAL RELATIONS AND SMART ENGAGEMENT

As we have pointed out in the Smart Engagement report, the scale of cultural contact between peoples across the world, including Asia, has increased massively since the beginning of the twenty-first century. It has been fuelled by rapid economic development and the associated growth of new middle classes, the rise of international travel and tourism, and the growth of communication technologies, including social media. Globalisation is not

GLOBALISATION IS NOT JUST AN ECONOMIC PHENOMENON:
IT ALSO HAS AN IMPORTANT CULTURAL DIMENSION.

The *Smart Engagement with Asia* project has made a start by surveying not only Chinese, but also Indian diaspora researchers in Australia.²⁰ These diaspora researchers strongly argue that their linguistic skills and familiarity with their cultural heritage are of great benefit in their collaborative activities with researchers in these countries. For many of them, existing relationships (e.g. through postgraduate studies, former workplace relations or family or personal connections) have been fundamental to initiating collaboration.

From this it is reasonable to conclude that there is no quick solution to the challenge of developing collaborative research networks: it takes time, dedication and patience. In this regard, the most common official approach to international engagement such as trade missions or research delegations, typically of too short duration to enable in-depth mutual familiarisation, is unlikely to produce any concrete benefit without multiple return visits. Although institutional and resourcing barriers are important reasons for the weak links of Australian researchers with their Asian peers,

just an economic phenomenon; it also has an important cultural dimension, exposing different peoples and cultures to each other on an unprecedented scale. As a consequence, culture and international relations are now strongly interdependent, where culture can play both a positive and a negative role. A country's cultural credentials are very important for its international reputation and standing, with the implication that shaping international cultural relations to serve the national interest is now an increasingly important policy challenge. This is the field of cultural diplomacy.²¹

A popular term to describe the objective of cultural diplomacy is 'soft power', defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to influence others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment (hard power).²² It is thought that soft power can enhance a country's capacity to assert international influence, and soft power can be attained by presenting an attractive image of the national culture to foreign publics. In the globalised and multipolar world of the twenty-first century, governments around the world



have shown increased interest in maximising their soft power through cultural and public diplomacy initiatives. However, in the age of the Internet and mass international travel the flow of information and images can no longer be controlled by governments. Many other actors play a part in the shaping of international cultural relations, including independent cultural, media and educational institutions, cultural non-government organisations (including diaspora organisations), businesses, private foundations and philanthropists, and individuals (e.g. artists, sportspeople). Moreover, international publics are more active than ever before in seeking out their own information and in transnational peer-to-peer communications through social media and other means.

In this context, analysts argue that cultural diplomacy needs to focus less on simple, one-way 'projection' and more on mutuality, cultural exchange and cross-cultural understanding. According to Nye, 'effective public diplomacy is a two-way street that involves listening as well as talking.'²³ The lesson for governments is that if they want to pursue smart cultural engagement they should refrain from the too directive broadcasting of their national qualities: 'Public diplomacy that degenerates into

propaganda not only fails to convince, but it can undercut soft power.'²⁴

The notion of 'soft power' has recently become influential across Asia. Nations such as China and South Korea are investing heavily to increase their global cultural recognition and hoping to convert it into strategic influence in other areas. For example, China's extensive public and cultural diplomacy program includes Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture, a 'Media Going Global' strategy, educational exchanges, and programs of cultural festivals and performances showcasing Chinese culture in cities around the world.²⁵ Overall, however, an emphasis on outward cultural projection and cultural export predominates, with much less attention being given to reciprocal cultural exchange. This paradoxically can limit the soft power effects of cultural and public diplomacy initiatives.

Thus, data from several polls suggest that international public opinion of China has not significantly improved despite its massive investment in cultural and public diplomacy.²⁶ A poll taken in Asia after the Beijing Olympics in 2008, presumably a soft-power triumph, found that China's charm offensive had been ineffective. Opinions of China's influence have



(above)

Bollywood posters

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(above)

Fig. 4. Professors Krishna Sen FAHA, David Walker FAHA and Ien Ang FAHA discussing the *Smart Engagement with Asia* report at the Australian Academy of the Humanities' 2016 Symposium.

PHOTO: KYLIE BRASS

remained predominantly negative not only in the United States and Europe, but also in India, Japan and South Korea. Nye argues that China is weak on soft power because the style of its public diplomacy relies on the high-profile grand gesture and does not allow an active participation in civil society.²⁷

Similarly, while the Korean government has strongly relied on the popularity of Korean Wave popular culture to increase its international cultural standing, anti-Korean Wave movements have sprung up in Japan, Taiwan, China, Singapore and other Asian countries, criticising the cultural invasion of Korean pop culture as a new form of cultural imperialism.²⁸

Hall and Smith worry that the intensifying struggle for soft power in Asia may lead to the deepening of distrust and the hardening of international hostilities in the region. Rather than alleviating national differences, it may accentuate them and even heighten the competition for hard power.²⁹ This is a cautionary note, which poses important challenges to the cultural and public diplomacy strategies deployed in these countries, and their impact on regional prosperity and security. One conclusion is that the race for soft power, when conceived exclusively or predominantly as a competition for national cultural ascendancy, is not particularly helpful in improving the cultural relations between countries.

Instead, smart regional engagement requires more reciprocal approaches to cultural diplomacy to counterbalance the

overwhelmingly nationalistic objectives of most soft power schemes in the region. As Joseph Nye argues, 'cooperative public diplomacy can ... help take the edge off suspicions of narrow national motives.'³⁰ Important lessons can be drawn for Australia in this regard. Former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Peter Varghese, has famously made the observation that Australia is suffering a 'soft power deficit' in the region.³¹ Indeed, evidence suggests that the popular image of Australia in countries such as India and China is still dominated by its past embrace of the White Australia policy, or by stereotypical impressions of koalas or kangaroos. That is, Australia's relationship with Asian countries is comparatively thin and instrumental, characterised by a major sense of cultural distance.³²

There is no quick fix for this deep cultural disconnect, which poses a big challenge to Australia's cultural diplomacy effort. In particular, it is important that the focus here should not be on the unilateral projection of a preferred soft power image, but, in more reciprocal fashion, on building long-term, sustained cultural relationships. Rather than one-way messaging, smart cultural engagement should emphasise mutuality and collaboration.

Interestingly, as the *Smart Engagement with Asia* report details, in recent times a whole range of cultural institutions, artist associations and community groups have already risen to the challenge by initiating cultural exchanges, collaborative projects, and partnerships with like-minded people across the region. Often, though, these initiatives are small-scale, poorly resourced and lack broader recognition. Research conducted by Asialink in Victoria shows that such projects were largely self-funded, with only small contributions from government grants and subsidies. In the arts sector, smaller organisations and individual artists have shown themselves to be more active in cultural exchange initiatives and more willing to take risks than larger organisations which had to balance commercial returns and cultural exchange. The lessons learned from these experiences are, again, that successful engagement requires long-term commitment and substantial investment to develop enduring relationships based on trust: one-off, ad hoc projects do not necessarily lead

to sustainable relationships. In policy terms, this has implications for the design of funding models, too often restrictively focused on short-term outputs and outcomes. However, while lack of funding was the most important challenge, 51% of respondents in the Asialink survey mentioned difficulties in cultural understanding as a key challenge, as well as a lack of relevant experience and relationships in Asia.³³

In this context, the role of diaspora cultural practitioners deserves a special mention. Exploratory research by Fitzgerald and Chau shows there is extensive cultural exchange between Asian and Pacific Islands diasporas

CONCLUSION

The *Smart Engagement with Asia* project has highlighted a structural disconnect between Australia and Asia, despite increasingly strong pragmatic and transactional relations, such as through trade and tourism. This disconnect manifests itself in a lack of interest in learning Asian languages, the comparatively low level of research collaboration with Asian countries, and the fragmented nature of cultural connections with Asia. Underlying these issues are linguistic, social and cultural divergences which require long-term and sustained commitment if they

AUSTRALIA'S CONNECTIVITY WITH ASIA CAN BE FACILITATED BY THE BRIDGING ROLE OF DIASPORAS IN BRINGING AUSTRALIANS AND ASIANS CLOSER TOGETHER.

in Australia and their home nations and other diaspora locations. An example is the role of Indian diaspora professionals working in Australia in bringing Bollywood cinema productions to Australia since the 1990s. Diaspora cultural practitioners based in Australia demonstrate many of the key attributes of smart cultural engagement, including peer-to-peer trust, self-reliance, a focus on impact, a high degree of literacy in digital and traditional media, autonomous organisations, and a commitment to building long-term relationships. They are generally less dependent on public funding, they frequently engage business and private donors, and they bring requisite capabilities, understandings and networks to their work. They are alert to emerging sensitivities among Asian and Pacific Island communities and quick to take advantage of emergent opportunities for transnational engagements crossing ethnic and national boundaries. They are contextually aware, generally well informed, and need little advocacy, training, or encouragement to engage internationally. However, their activities receive little media coverage or public acknowledgement in Australia.³⁴ Greater recognition and understanding of the ways in which these diasporas can contribute to Australia's broader effort to engage with Asia, should therefore be an important priority.

are to be overcome. This is not an easy message to sell to policy makers and politicians, who are generally more interested in concrete measures with direct, calculable outcomes. Nevertheless, it is hoped that a report such as this can exert indirect influence by deepening Australian discourse and thinking about its changing place in the world in the coming decades. One important finding from the report is that Australia's connectivity with Asia can be facilitated by the bridging role of diasporas in bringing Australians and Asians closer together. Australia has a comparative advantage in this regard, given that it has a very significant Asian migrant population. At the same time, relying *only* on Asian diasporas would not be a smart option. As Asia will play an increasingly dominant role in global affairs in the coming century, smart engagement with Asia will require a reoriented outlook for society as a whole. ¶



IEN ANG FAHA is Distinguished Professor of Cultural Studies at Western Sydney University, where she was the founding Director of the Institute for Culture and Society.

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