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Values Negotiation in Early Career Decision-Making: A Longitudinal Case Study of Chinese Students in a UK-China Joint Institute

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Abstract: *Chinese students in transnational education institutions face complex value negotiations when making career decisions, balancing socialist core values with Western career discourses. This tension becomes particularly acute during the transition from university to employment, yet little is known about how students navigate these competing value systems. A longitudinal qualitative case study followed 15 purposively selected final-year Chinese students at a UK-China joint institute over 18 months (12 months pre-graduation, 6 months post-employment). Data collection included life-history interviews, Q-sort methodology with 40 value cards, monthly audio diaries, workplace shadowing, and career counseling session recordings. Analysis employed within-case narrative mapping and cross-case comparative analysis guided by Dialogical Self Theory and Cultural Hybridity frameworks. Three distinct value negotiation typologies emerged: Integrators (n=6) who synthesized competing values into coherent career narratives, Compartmentalizers (n=5) who maintained separate value systems for different contexts, and Resisters (n=4) who rejected Western career discourses in favor of traditional Chinese values. Successful negotiation involved four key meaning-making processes: temporal bridging, contextual switching, value hierarchizing, and narrative coherence construction. Students who developed hybrid value frameworks showed greater career satisfaction and reduced psychological distress. Value negotiation in transnational education contexts is a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a one-time resolution. The findings challenge binary conceptualizations of East-West value conflicts and reveal sophisticated strategies for managing cultural hybridity in career development. Implications include the need for culturally responsive career counseling approaches that acknowledge and support value negotiation processes.*

Keywords: *Values Negotiation, Career Decision-Making, Transnational Education, Cultural Hybridity*

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of transnational higher education has created unique psychological and cultural challenges for students navigating between different value systems. Nowhere is this tension more pronounced than in career decision-making, where students must reconcile competing discourses about work, success, and life purpose. For Chinese students in UK-China joint institutes, this challenge is particularly acute as they encounter Western individualistic career narratives while remaining embedded in collectivistic cultural contexts shaped by socialist core values. Socialist core values, formally articulated by the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, emphasize prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. These values promote collective welfare, social responsibility, and service to the nation. In contrast, Western career discourses prevalent in joint institutes often emphasize individual achievement, personal fulfillment, entrepreneurial risk-taking, and global mobility. The intersection of these value systems creates what scholars term a "third space" of cultural hybridity, where new meanings and identities emerge through negotiation rather than simple adoption or rejection.

Despite the growing importance of transnational education and increasing research attention to student experiences, the process of values negotiation in career decision-making remains underexplored. Most existing research focuses on cultural adaptation or academic outcomes rather than examining how students actively negotiate competing value systems over time. This gap is particularly significant given that career decisions made during university years have long-lasting implications for individual well-being and social development. The complexity of values negotiation becomes evident when considering the multiple layers of influence operating in transnational education contexts. Students must navigate not only the explicit curricula and career guidance provided by their institutions, but also the implicit cultural

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messages embedded in pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, and institutional structures. They simultaneously manage expectations from family members who may have invested significantly in their education with hopes of specific career outcomes, peer networks that may embrace different value orientations, and their own evolving understanding of personal identity and professional aspirations.

Furthermore, the temporal dimension of values negotiation adds another layer of complexity. Students enter transnational education programs with value systems shaped by their family backgrounds, previous educational experiences, and broader cultural contexts. Over the course of their studies, they encounter new perspectives and possibilities that may challenge or complement their existing values. The transition to employment then presents new contexts that test the viability and relevance of different value orientations, potentially triggering further negotiation and adaptation processes. The stakes of this negotiation process are particularly high for Chinese students in UK-China joint institutes, who often represent significant family investments and carry expectations for both individual success and contribution to national development. The career paths they choose and the values they embrace have implications not only for their personal well-being but also for their relationships with family and community, their sense of cultural identity, and their role in China's ongoing economic and social development. Current understanding of these processes remains limited by the predominance of cross-sectional research designs that capture values at single time points rather than tracing negotiation processes as they unfold. Additionally, most studies focus on outcomes such as career choices or satisfaction levels rather than examining the meaning-making processes that lead to these outcomes. There is also a tendency to treat cultural values as static entities rather than dynamic resources that individuals actively deploy, modify, and reconstruct in response to changing circumstances.

The current study addresses these limitations through a longitudinal qualitative case study that traces how Chinese students in a UK-China joint institute negotiate socialist core values and Western career discourses during their final year of study and first six months of employment. By focusing on the processes of negotiation rather than just outcomes, and by following students over an extended period that encompasses the critical transition from university to employment, this research provides unprecedented insight into how young people navigate competing value systems in contemporary globalized contexts. The research is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks. Dialogical Self Theory provides a lens for understanding how individuals manage multiple cultural identities and value systems through ongoing internal dialogue between different aspects of the self. Cultural Hybridity theory offers insights into how new cultural forms emerge through creative synthesis rather than simple adoption or rejection of existing cultural elements. Together, these frameworks suggest that values negotiation is not about choosing between competing alternatives but about creating new possibilities through creative integration and ongoing dialogue.

2. Literature Review

Transnational higher education has fundamentally altered the landscape of international education, creating hybrid institutional spaces that blend different educational philosophies, pedagogical approaches, and cultural values [1][2][3]. Unlike traditional study abroad programs where students temporarily immerse themselves in foreign cultures, joint institutes create permanent hybrid environments where multiple cultural systems coexist and interact continuously [2][3]. Research on student experiences in these contexts has revealed complex processes of cultural negotiation and identity formation [1][4][6]. Knight and Liu (2017) found that students in Sino-foreign joint programs developed “bicultural competence” that enabled them to navigate both Chinese and Western cultural contexts effectively [1][4]. However, this competence came with increased psychological complexity and occasional identity ambiguity, particularly during major life transitions such as career entry [4]. The concept of cultural hybridity provides a useful framework for understanding these experiences [5][6]. Rather than viewing culture contact as resulting in assimilation or resistance, hybridity theory suggests that new cultural forms emerge through creative synthesis of existing elements [5][6]. In educational contexts, this manifests as students developing novel approaches to learning, relationship-building, and future planning that draw selectively from multiple cultural repertoires [6][4].

Career decision-making has long been recognized as a value-laden process, with individuals’ career choices reflecting fundamental beliefs about work, success, and life purpose [7]. Super’s (1990) career development theory emphasized the central role of values in career exploration and decision-making, arguing that career satisfaction depends largely on alignment between personal values and work environments [7]. However, most classic career development theories were developed in Western contexts and assume relatively stable, individualistic value systems [7][8]. These assumptions become

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problematic when applied to students from collectivistic cultures or those navigating multiple cultural contexts simultaneously [8][9]. Recent research has begun to explore how cultural values influence career decision-making processes, revealing variations in exploration strategies, decision criteria, and outcome evaluations across cultural groups [8][9]. For Chinese students, career decision-making traditionally involves negotiation between individual preferences and family expectations, personal aspirations and social responsibilities, immediate opportunities and long-term obligations [9]. The introduction of Western career discourses through transnational education adds another layer of complexity, as students encounter alternative frameworks for understanding career success and life fulfillment [3][1].

Socialist core values represent an attempt to articulate a coherent contemporary value system guiding individual behavior and social development amid rapid change [10]. These values explicitly synthesize traditional cultural elements with socialist political principles and modern national development goals [10]. In career contexts, they emphasize service to society, contribution to national development, and collective welfare over narrow individual gain [10]. “Dedication” promotes commitment to one’s role, “patriotism” frames career choices in relation to national priorities, “integrity” stresses ethical professional conduct, and “harmony” encourages collaborative advancement [10]. Empirical observations suggest mixed influence: they remain salient in sectors linked to public service and state organizations, while younger cohorts also increasingly foreground individualized fulfillment and self-realization shaped by family expectations and global career narratives [10][9].

Dialogical Self Theory (DST) provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals navigate competing value systems [11]. DST proposes that the self consists of multiple I-positions that engage in ongoing internal dialogue about identity, values, and action [11]. In cross-cultural and hybrid educational settings, students may develop distinct cultural I-positions (e.g., “Chinese familial self,” “Western professional self,” “civic/social contribution self”) that hold partially divergent value priorities [11][4]. Rather than producing simple conflict, these positions can engage in productive dialogue generating creative integrative solutions and hybrid identities [11][6]. Successful navigation lies not in eliminating tensions but in managing them through iterative meaning-making and narrative reframing [11][12]. Applied to career decision-making, this perspective suggests that adaptive progress involves facilitating internal dialogue so that no single position permanently suppresses others, allowing negotiated coherence to emerge over time [11][12]. Narrative and constructionist career approaches further highlight the role of reflexive storytelling in integrating disparate value commitments into evolving vocational identity scripts [12].

Despite growing interest in transnational education and cross-cultural career development, several gaps remain. First, much existing work relies on cross-sectional designs that capture value orientations at single time points rather than tracing negotiation processes longitudinally [6][8][12]. Second, studies often emphasize distal outcomes (e.g., career choice, satisfaction) over the micro-processes of internal dialogue and narrative construction that produce those outcomes [11][12]. Third, cultural values are frequently treated as static attributes rather than dynamic symbolic resources that students selectively activate, reinterpret, and recombine across contexts [4][11][12]. Addressing these gaps requires longitudinal qualitative designs capable of illuminating how value negotiations evolve across transitional phases (e.g., final year study to early employment) and how dialogical positioning strategies adapt in response to shifting institutional, familial, and labor market demands [6][12][8].

3. Methodology

This study employed a longitudinal qualitative case study design informed by interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) principles. The case study approach was selected to enable in-depth exploration of values negotiation processes within their natural context, while the longitudinal design allowed examination of how these processes evolved over time. The research was guided by a constructivist epistemology that views values and meanings as actively constructed through social interaction and personal reflection rather than as fixed entities to be discovered. The research was conducted at a UK-China joint institute located in eastern China, established through partnership between a prestigious British university and a leading Chinese institution. The institute offers undergraduate and graduate programs in business, engineering, and social sciences, with instruction delivered in English using British curriculum frameworks adapted for the Chinese context. The hybrid nature of the institution creates a unique environment where students encounter Western educational approaches while remaining embedded in Chinese cultural contexts. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity across key characteristics likely to influence values negotiation processes. Selection criteria

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included academic major (business, engineering, social sciences), gender, socioeconomic status (based on family income and parental education), geographic origin (urban vs. rural), and career orientation (domestic vs. international). Initial recruitment involved presentations in final-year courses, followed by individual meetings to explain the research and obtain informed consent.

Data collection occurred over 18 months (October 2022 - March 2024) following a structured timeline designed to capture values negotiation processes during key transition periods. Initial data collection involved life-history interviews and Q-sort methodology. Life-history interviews (90-120 minutes) explored participants' family backgrounds, educational experiences, value formation, and career aspirations. The interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives about significant life events, influential relationships, and moments of value conflict or clarification. Q-sort methodology involved participants sorting 40 value cards into a forced distribution ranging from "most important to me" to "least important to me." The value cards included items representing socialist core values (e.g., "serving the people," "contributing to national development"), Western individualistic values (e.g., "personal achievement," "individual freedom"), and universal values (e.g., "family security," "meaningful work"). This method provided quantitative indicators of value priorities while generating rich qualitative data through participants' explanations of their sorting decisions. Monthly audio diaries were collected via a secure mobile application developed specifically for the study. Participants received prompts asking them to reflect on career-related decisions, value conflicts, conversations with family or friends about career plans, and experiences that challenged or reinforced their values. Diaries typically lasted 10-15 minutes and were submitted by the 15th of each month. Additional data sources during this period included recordings of career counseling sessions (with participant consent), reflective essays written for career development courses, and brief monthly check-in interviews (20-30 minutes) to clarify diary entries and explore emerging themes. Data collection during the employment transition period involved workplace shadowing (where permitted by employers), exit interviews with participants, and interviews with supervisors and colleagues (where accessible). Workplace shadowing involved 2-3 days of observation in participants' work environments, focusing on how they navigated value-related challenges in professional contexts. Exit interviews (60-90 minutes) explored how participants' values and career perspectives had evolved over the 18-month period, strategies they had developed for managing value conflicts, and their reflections on the values negotiation process.

Data analysis followed a multi-stage process combining within-case narrative analysis with cross-case comparative analysis. All interviews and audio diaries were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 12 for systematic analysis. Stage 1: Within-Case Narrative Mapping. Individual case narratives were constructed for each participant, tracing their values negotiation journey over the 18-month period. This involved identifying key value tensions, critical incidents that triggered negotiation processes, strategies employed to manage conflicts, and outcomes in terms of career decisions and psychological well-being. Narrative maps were created visually, showing the temporal evolution of value positions and the relationships between different I-positions within each participant's dialogical self. These maps highlighted moments of tension, resolution, and ongoing negotiation, providing a holistic view of each individual's values journey. Stage 2: Cross-Case Comparative Analysis. Comparative analysis involved systematic examination of similarities and differences across cases, leading to the development of typologies representing different approaches to values negotiation. This process was guided by constant comparative method principles, with emerging categories refined through iterative comparison with new data. Three primary dimensions emerged from the comparative analysis: (1) integration vs. compartmentalization of value systems, (2) active vs. passive negotiation strategies, and (3) coherent vs. fragmented narrative construction. These dimensions were used to develop a typology of values negotiation approaches. Stage 3: Process Analysis. The final analytical stage focused on identifying the meaning-making processes that enabled successful values negotiation. This involved detailed examination of how participants constructed coherent narratives from competing value systems, the strategies they employed to manage psychological tension, and the factors that facilitated or hindered effective negotiation.

4. Results

Analysis revealed that values negotiation was an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a one-time resolution of competing value systems. All participants experienced some degree of tension between socialist core values and Western career discourses, but they employed diverse strategies to manage these tensions and construct coherent career narratives.

Four key meaning-making processes emerged as central to successful values negotiation: temporal

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bridging (connecting past, present, and future value commitments), contextual switching (applying different values in different situations), value hierarchizing (establishing priority relationships among competing values), and narrative coherence construction (creating unified stories that accommodate multiple value systems).

Cross-case comparative analysis revealed three distinct approaches to values negotiation, each characterized by different strategies for managing competing value systems and constructing career narratives. As shown in Table 1, these typologies differed in their key characteristics, primary strategies, and career outcomes.

Table 1: Values Negotiation Typology

Type	N	Key Characteristics	Primary Strategies	Career Outcomes
Integrators	6	Synthesize competing values into coherent frameworks	Temporal bridging, value hierarchizing	High satisfaction, clear direction
Compartmentalizers	5	Maintain separate value systems for different contexts	Contextual switching, strategic deployment	Moderate satisfaction, some confusion
Resisters	4	Reject Western values in favor of traditional Chinese values	Value purification, cultural authenticity	Variable satisfaction, limited options

Type 1: Integrators (n=6). Integrators developed sophisticated strategies for synthesizing competing value systems into coherent career frameworks. These participants viewed apparent contradictions between socialist core values and Western career discourses as creative tensions that could generate innovative solutions rather than irreconcilable conflicts. Chen Wei, a business major from an urban professional family, exemplified this approach. Initially experiencing significant tension between his desire for international career opportunities and his commitment to serving China's development, he gradually developed a framework that positioned international experience as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills that could ultimately benefit China. His final career choice—joining a Chinese multinational corporation with significant overseas operations—reflected this integration. "I realized that the opposition between individual success and serving the country is false," Chen reflected in his exit interview. "The best way I can serve China is by developing my capabilities to the fullest, and that means gaining international experience. But my ultimate goal is always to contribute to China's development." Integrators employed two primary meaning-making processes. Temporal bridging involved constructing narratives that connected short-term individual advancement with long-term collective benefit. Value hierarchizing established meta-principles that could guide decision-making when specific values conflicted. For example, several Integrators developed hierarchies that positioned "contributing to human flourishing" as a superordinate value that could encompass both individual achievement and collective welfare. The integration strategies employed by this group are detailed in Table 2, which shows the specific approaches they used to synthesize competing value systems.

Table 2: Integration Strategies and Examples

Strategy	Description	Example Quote
Temporal Bridging	Connecting individual development with long-term collective benefit	"My MBA will help me build companies that create jobs for Chinese workers"
Value Synthesis	Finding higher-order principles that encompass competing values	"Innovation serves both personal fulfillment and national development"
Contextual Reframing	Reinterpreting Western concepts through Chinese cultural lens	"Entrepreneurship is really about serving society through creative solutions"

Type 2: Compartmentalizers (n=5). Compartmentalizers managed value tensions by maintaining separate value systems for different contexts rather than attempting integration. These participants developed sophisticated abilities to switch between value frameworks depending on situational demands, applying Western career discourses in professional contexts while maintaining traditional Chinese values in family and community relationships. Li Mei, an engineering major from a rural farming family, demonstrated this approach clearly. At university and in professional settings, she embraced Western notions of individual achievement and career advancement. However, in family contexts, she maintained strong commitments to filial piety and collective welfare. Rather than viewing this as inconsistency, she saw it as practical adaptation to different environmental demands. "I don't think there's anything wrong with having different values for different situations," Li explained. "When I'm at work, I focus on doing my best and advancing my career. When I'm with my family, I focus on supporting them and fulfilling my responsibilities as a daughter. These aren't contradictory—they're just different aspects of life." Compartmentalizers employed contextual switching as their primary meaning-making process, developing clear criteria for when to apply different value systems. They also engaged in strategic deployment, consciously choosing which values to emphasize in particular situations to achieve desired

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outcomes. While this approach enabled effective functioning in multiple contexts, it sometimes generated psychological tension and confusion about "authentic" identity. Several Compartmentalizers reported feeling like they were "living multiple lives" and struggled with questions about which value system represented their "true self."

Type 3: Resisters (n=4). Resisters responded to value tensions by rejecting Western career discourses and reaffirming traditional Chinese values. These participants viewed Western individualistic values as incompatible with their cultural identity and moral commitments, choosing career paths that aligned closely with socialist core values and traditional Chinese cultural expectations. Zhao Ming, a business major whose father worked in government, exemplified this approach. Despite exposure to Western business concepts and career models, he remained committed to traditional notions of service to society and collective welfare. His career choice—joining a state-owned enterprise focused on rural development—reflected these commitments. "I've seen how Western individualism can destroy social harmony," Zhao explained. "I don't want to be part of that. My goal is to contribute to building a better society, not just to make money or achieve personal success." Resisters employed value purification strategies, consciously rejecting elements of Western career discourse that conflicted with their core commitments. They also emphasized cultural authenticity, viewing adherence to traditional Chinese values as essential to maintaining cultural identity and moral integrity. While this approach provided clear moral guidance and reduced psychological tension, it sometimes limited career opportunities and created challenges in navigating increasingly globalized work environments.

Meaning-Making Processes in Values Negotiation. Analysis of successful values negotiation revealed four key meaning-making processes that enabled participants to manage competing value systems effectively. Temporal bridging involved constructing narratives that connected past experiences, present decisions, and future aspirations in coherent ways. Participants who employed this process effectively were able to position apparent value conflicts as temporary tensions that could be resolved through long-term strategic thinking. For example, several participants initially experienced tension between desires for high-paying careers and commitments to social service. Through temporal bridging, they developed narratives in which early career focus on financial success would provide resources for later philanthropic activities or social contributions. Contextual switching involved developing clear criteria for when to apply different value systems and becoming skilled at transitioning between different value frameworks as situations changed. Successful contextual switchers developed meta-cognitive awareness of their switching processes and clear boundaries around when different values applied. Value hierarchizing involved establishing priority relationships among competing values, typically by identifying superordinate principles that could guide decision-making when conflicts arose. Participants who employed this process effectively developed personal value hierarchies that provided clear guidance for career decisions while maintaining respect for multiple value systems. Narrative coherence construction involved creating unified life stories that accommodated multiple value systems without requiring complete integration. Participants who mastered this process were able to maintain psychological coherence while acknowledging the complexity and occasional contradictions in their value commitments.

Several factors emerged as important influences on the success of values negotiation processes, as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Values Negotiation Success

Factor	Positive Influence	Negative Influence
Family Support	Open discussion of value conflicts	Rigid adherence to traditional expectations
Peer Networks	Diverse perspectives and experiences	Homogeneous viewpoints
Institutional Support	Career counseling that acknowledges value complexity	One-size-fits-all career advice
Personal Reflection	Regular self-examination and journaling	Avoidance of difficult questions
Cultural Resources	Access to multiple cultural frameworks	Limited cultural exposure

The different approaches to values negotiation were associated with varying career outcomes and levels of psychological well-being. Integrators generally reported the highest levels of career satisfaction and psychological well-being, while Compartmentalizers showed moderate levels of both. Resisters showed variable outcomes, with some reporting high satisfaction with their value-aligned choices while others struggled with limited opportunities. Table 4 presents detailed outcome measures across the three negotiation types, showing clear patterns in career satisfaction, psychological well-being, career clarity, and value-career alignment.

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Table 4: Career Outcomes by Negotiation Type

Outcome Measure	Integrators (n=6)	Compartmentalizers (n=5)	Resisters (n=4)
Career Satisfaction (1-10 scale)	M = 8.2, SD = 1.1	M = 6.8, SD = 1.4	M = 6.5, SD = 2.1
Psychological Well-being (1-10 scale)	M = 7.9, SD = 0.8	M = 6.2, SD = 1.6	M = 7.1, SD = 1.9
Career Clarity (1-10 scale)	M = 8.5, SD = 0.9	M = 5.4, SD = 1.8	M = 8.0, SD = 1.2
Value-Career Alignment (1-10 scale)	M = 8.1, SD = 1.0	M = 6.1, SD = 1.5	M = 8.8, SD = 0.9

Longitudinal analysis revealed that values negotiation approaches were not fixed but evolved over the 18-month study period. Table 5 shows the distribution of negotiation types at different time points, illustrating the dynamic nature of these processes.

Table 5: Evolution of Values Negotiation Types over Time

Time Point	Integrators	Compartmentalizers	Resisters	Undifferentiated
T1 (Month 0)	2	4	6	3
T2 (Month 6)	4	5	4	2
T3 (Month 12)	5	6	3	1
T4 (Month 18)	6	5	4	0

The data show a general trend toward Integration over time, with several participants moving from Resister or undifferentiated positions toward more integrative approaches. This suggests that values negotiation is a developmental process that can be supported through appropriate interventions and experiences.

5. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that values negotiation in transnational education contexts is a sophisticated, ongoing process that requires sustained attention and support. The emergence of three distinct negotiation typologies reveals the diversity of strategies students employ to manage competing value systems, while the identification of four key meaning-making processes provides insight into the mechanisms through which successful negotiation occurs.

The findings challenge simplistic notions of cultural conflict and reveal the creative potential inherent in cultural hybridity. Rather than viewing competing value systems as problems to be resolved, educators and counselors should recognize them as resources for creative meaning-making and identity development.

For the broader field of career development, this research highlights the need for more culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge the complexity of contemporary career decision-making. As globalization continues to create contexts where individuals must navigate multiple cultural systems simultaneously, understanding and supporting values negotiation processes becomes increasingly critical.

The study also contributes to theoretical understanding of cultural hybridity and dialogical identity processes, providing empirical evidence for how individuals actively construct coherent identities from multiple cultural resources. This has implications not only for education but for understanding cultural adaptation and identity development in an increasingly interconnected world.

As transnational education continues to expand globally, supporting students' values negotiation processes becomes an essential component of educational quality and student success. This research provides a foundation for developing more effective approaches to this critical challenge.

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