

## THE DYNAMICS AND DRIVERS OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN CHINA

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### ABSTRACT

*The introduction of Islam in China happened through two routes; the southeast ton led to Canton and latter was from the northwest, Silk Road. Since the 7th century, Islam has been practiced in China. Its evolution spanning over 1300 years, it now stands in the league of the five major faith-systems in the country. During the course of its growth in China, it has branched out into numerous Islamic schools and sects with distinct practices and doctrinal beliefs. Notwithstanding the vibrant cultural diversity, Islamic identity remains bedrock for the Chinese Muslim. The phenomenal economic rise of China and development boom has attracted a great number of local and foreign Muslims who have settled in the south eastern coast and pursue commercial activities. The settlement and presence of such a large Muslim population has a great religious impact on eastern Chinese cities. The golden Islamic value of harmony and brotherhood lays down guiding principles for the Chinese Muslims. The unifying forces of Islam provide them with an ideological framework seminal to establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and harmonious Muslim society in China.*

**Keywords:** Islam, Muslims, contemporary China.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades many scholars have contributed to understand Muslims and Islam in China. The prominent amongst those scholars are mostly western writers including Gladney (1998), Broomhall (2010), Lipman (1997), Dillon (1999), Atwill (2005), Murata (2005), and Frankel (2011) etc., conducted their research work from various perspective to understand Muslims and Islam in China. (Gui, 2016, 9). Scholars focused more on the historical and geographical context of slam and Muslims of China. This helped them develop a deeper understanding of the Muslims and Islam in China. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of translation, not much research on Chinese Muslims is being translated into English. The lack of information and knowledge between the West and the East is some time confusing to understand Islam and Muslims in the Chines context. It undermines the exchange of ideas and the peaceful dialogue among civilizations. The understanding of Islam and Muslims in China is thus important for the social integration of the Chines population and their interaction with the outside Muslim and non-Muslims world. This article is an attempt to examine the religious, ethnic and national identity of the Muslim and Islam in China. Ethnic identity and Islamic life practices of the Chines Muslims, and the interaction between the Muslim and Non-Muslim community of China is also the focus of this study.

Since its advent in China under the Tang and Song dynasties, Islam has evolved for 1,300 years and has emerged as one of the five largest religions namely Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism in today's China. Islam finds its recurrent mention in the chronicles of Chinese history. Historically, it has been referred to as *Tajir*, *Tajik Religion*, *Hui Religion*, *Hui Tajik Religion*, *Hui Denomination*, *Arabian Religion*, *Mohammedanism* and now Islam. In the wake of the creation of the People's Republic of China, the State Council of China notified Islam as an international religion, and the name of Islam is also an internationally commonly used name, thus this religion should be referred to as Islam in the future. Thereafter, the word 'Islam' is used across the Chinese mainland, while Hui Religion continues to be retained in Taiwan, Macao and Hong Kong. This article is divided into two parts. First part is about the spread of Islam in China while second part is about the demographic-ethnic composition and Contemporary Muslims of China.

### **History of Islam in China**

According to Chinese Muslims' accounts, Islam was first introduced to China during the time of the third Caliph, in 651. Sad ibn Ab Waqqas, who was the uncle of the prophet, came to China as an envoy during the Tang dynasty. After receiving the envoy, Gaozong established the first mosque in Canton. The mosque was built in memory of the prophet. Emperor Gaozong, received the envoy and established the first mosque in Canton as a memorial for the prophet. In the following years many Muslims merchants came to China. Along with their trade activities they also brought their religious faith and practices to China, and later on there were great influences of Chinese people to accept Islam (Ezzati, 1994, 300-333).

The cosmopolitan culture oriented Tang dynasty provides an opportunity to Central Asia and Western Asian merchants, helped introduce Islam to China. Arabs and Persian Muslims merchants were the first major Muslim groups settled in various regions of China including the ports of Quanzhou, Guangzhou, and Wuhan. In the interior centers of China i.e. Yangzhou, Kaifeng and Changan, the Muslim population mostly settled in the Song eras.

During the Song dynasty, Muslims had a significant role in the export and import industries. In the early years of 11th century Emperor Shenzong provides an opportunity to thousands of Muslims from Bukhara to settle in China to establish a buffer zone between the Liao Empire and the Chinese. The leader of these groups was Prince Amir Sayyid, who was referred to as the father of China's Muslim community. Those Muslims were settled in the city of Kaifeng and Yenching (currently Beijing). In 1080, another group of Muslims consisted of more than ten thousands came to China and settled in almost all provinces of China (Raphael, 2002, 283-284).

In the Yuan dynasty, the Grand Canal of China served as a vital point for the spread of Islam in China's east coast in the 13th and 14 century. Merchants from the region traveled to the canal's northern regions, which made these areas crucial for the spread of the faith. The Mongol founded dynasty, who were a minority in China, gave foreigners including Muslims an elevated status over the Han Chinese, which gave them a significant amount of power. Mongols also recruited thousands of Muslims to help them govern their growing empire. Mostly Arab and Persian Muslims were given major positions in the government circle. Muslim also mostly headed many corporations, and their contribution to the architect of China remained everlasting impacts on the overall population of China. Some of the Muslim soldiers and traders who came to China married Chinese women. This led to the rise of the Hui Muslims, which are also known as Chinese-speaking Muslims (Houissa, 2017).

Following the end of Yuan dynasty, many Mongols and Muslims who came with them stayed in China. Most of their relatives adopted Chinese names, and during the Ming rule (1368-1644), the city of Nanjing became a center for Islamic learning. Most of the Muslim population in the city became fluent in Chinese, and many of them adopted Chinese names too.

The Ming dynasty was tolerant to the Muslim population. Its policy of intermarriages provides further opportunities to the Muslims of China to keep their faith and integrate in the Chinese society. During the Ming dynasty, the Chinese Muslims had their freedom as normal citizens and to practice their religion without restrictions (Susan, 2000, 214).

The Hongwu Emperor ordered the construction of mosques in various areas in China, including Fujian, Guangdong, and Yunnan. The Emperor rebuilt a mosque in the city of Nantong, and many Hui Muslims moved to the area. During his rule, the number of Hui Muslims in the city had increased significantly. The successors of Hongwu, also had tolerant towards Muslims of China and contributed to their religious building etc. Muslims in China were treated with tolerance during the Ming dynasty. This led to an increase in the number of missionaries from Arab countries coming to the country. Many Muslims remains in the government's offices, as advisors, envoy, generals, etc. During the Ming dynasty, the city of Nanjing became the center of Islam and Islamic teaching (Hagras, 2019).

The Qing dynasty (1644-1911) was himself minority in China, and thus had provided countless opportunities to the Muslim minority of China to practice their religion and spread their religious faith. During the 17th to 18th centuries, the Qing dynasty's northwestern China region was home to various Sufism groups. Most of the activities related to Islamic proselytization in China were carried out within the Muslim community itself (Michael, 2004, 165). Contemporary, in the People Republic of China, the Muslim population is increasing with the passage of time. The government of China supported the Chengda Teachers Academy that helps in the new Era of Islamic educations to integrate the Muslim population and to promote Islam in China.

### Demographic Composition of Chinese Muslims

The Chinese followers of Islam are spread over in many provinces and autonomous regions as Xinjiang, Ningxia, Henan, Gansu, Hebei, Shandong, Qinghai and Yunnan in addition to the Muslim population living across the country. The Chinese national census conducted in 2000 reveals that the Muslim population of the country numbers 20320580. It includes 10 Muslim ethnic groups as Uyghur, Hui, Dongxiang, Kazakh, Salar, Kirgiz, Uzbek, Tajik, Tartar and Baoan. Suggested by natural population growth trend, the Muslim community in China is estimated to have exceeded 23 million as of 2010. In addition, a number of people of Mongolian, Han, Tibetan, Dai, Bai, and other nationalities also profess and practice in Islam as a religion. The demographic compositions of Chinese Muslims across the country are as follows.

**Table 1 Demographic composition of Chinese Muslims**

S/N.	Nationality	Main distribution area	Language/ Characters	Populating (2000)
1	Hui	Gansu, Ning Xia, Henan, Qinghai, Hebei, Beijing, Shandong, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Tianjin, Inner Mongolia, Shanghai etc.	Chinese (language/ Characters)	9816805
2	Uyghur	Xinjiang	Uyghur (language/ Characters)	8399393
3	Kazakh	Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gnsu	Kazakh (language/ Characters)	1250458
4	Dongxiang	Xinjiang, Gansu	Dongxiang Language, Chinese Character	53805

5	Kirgiz	Xinjiang	Kirgiz language, Uygur character	160823
6	Tajik	Xinjiang	Tajik language, Uygur character	104503
7	Uzbek	Xinjiang	Uzbek language, Uygur character	41028
8	Salar	Gansu, Qinghai	Salar Language, Chinese Character	12370
9	Baoan	Qinghai, Xinjiang, Gansu	Baoanlan Language, Chinese Character	16505
10	Tatar	Xinjiang	Tatar language, Uygur character	4890

Source: Junqin, Min. "The present situation and characteristics of contemporary Islam in China." *Doshisha University Center for Interdisciplinary Study of Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR)* 8 (2013): 28.

The 6<sup>th</sup> National Census Report of 2010 calculated the total Muslim population in China as 23.14 million. Out of 23.14 million only two groups Hui (10 million) and Uyghur (10 million) population was 20 million, almost 90% of the overall Muslim population (Rong, 2016, 11).

According to the 2009 Annual Report on Religions in China, there were about 3 million floating Muslims in the country, which is a huge increase from the 2 million in 2005. In addition, the number of permanent Muslim residents in the province of Jiangsu has increased significantly over the past decade. In 2009, over 53,000 non-local Muslims received residential permits in the city of Nanjing alone.

In China, majority of the country's population is composed of the Han people. From 2000 to 2008, the number of Han people has increased from 1 billion to 1.2 billion. They make up about 91.5 percent of the country's population. The remaining 8 percent are composed of minority nationalities, such as those from the Shuangshu minzu ethnic group. The minority population of China was 105 million in 2000 and was estimated as 118 million in 2008.

Almost one fifth of China's minority nationalities are Muslim, consisted of 10 minority groups from 1990 to 2000, the number of Muslims in the country has increased by over 15 percent. Compared to the growth rates of the Han and Chinese minorities, the increase in the number of Muslims was more significant. Although the number of Muslims in China has increased significantly, their share of the country's population remains only 1.6 percent in 2000 and 1.7 percent in the year 2008 (Boston, Zhang, 2010, 5).

The two largest groups of Muslims in China are the Hui (10.9 million in 2008) and the Uyghur (9.5 million in 2008), these two groups, which respectively make up over 90% of the country's Muslims. There are also eight other groups, including the Tatar, the Tajik, the Salar, the Bonan, the Kazak, the Kirgiz, and the Uzbek (Boston, Zhang, 2010, 6). The detail of Muslim population is given in the following table.

**Table 2 Muslim Population in China**

Total Population	1332810869	100.0%
Han	1220844520	91.6%
Non-Han (55 minorities combine)	111966349	8.4%
Muslims	23142104	1.7%
Hui	10586087	0.8%
Uyghur	10069346	0.8%

Kazak	1462588	0.1%
Dongxiang	621500	Less than 0.1%
Kirgiz	186708	Less than 0.1%
Salar	130607	Less than 0.1%
Tajik	51069	Less than 0.1%
Uzbek	10569	Less than 0.1%
Bonan	20074	Less than 0.1%
Tatar	3556	Less than 0.1%

Source: Lee, Raymond. (2015). Muslim in China and their relations with the state. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/08/2015826102831723836.html>

In Shanghai, the original Muslim population was around 60,000, and it has now reached around 165,000. In Fujian Province, there are over 3,000 Muslims, but there are also over 15,000 non-local Muslims scattered in various areas, such as Nanping, Fuzhou, and Quanzhou. The majority of the country's floating Muslim population is composed of the Hui people, Uyghur people, and Salar and Dongxiang from Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Lee, 2015).

Although the Muslim population in different regions varies, the diversity of the Islamic culture in southeastern China's coastal areas is still fundamental to the development of the region's social ecology. The presence of a floating Muslim population can have a positive effect on the lives of local residents. According to the above mentioned tables the Chinese Muslims population can be divided into two categories based on their cultural and regional backgrounds. The Hui-based Muslims can be found in various regions across China, while the Uyghur-based Muslims can be found in Xinjiang. Further, tables also show that the Chinese Muslims are distributed across almost all cities and counties of China. The wide-spread demographic spread of the Muslims is illustrative of the both- rich socio-culturally pluralism and vibrant complexity.

### **The Sectarian Composition of Chinese Muslims**

As the spread of Islam worldwide led to the establishment of various religious sects, there were also many different types of Islamic social thoughts in China. During the localization process, various religious groups having its own doctrines were also established in the country. During the late Ming and Qing periods, Islamic Sufism was mainly distributed in China's inland regions, such as Xinjiang. Ishan and the other religious groups in this area eventually merged with a feudal clan system in the northwest Muslim regions. This type of religious sect is an organizational structure and has the upper religious class as its members. (Rong, 2016, 9-12).

Of China's fifty recognized minority groups, ten are mainly Muslim. These include the Hui, Uighurs, Tajik, Dongxiang, Salar, and Uzbek. The other nine are located in various regions such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Qinghai. The Hui are the largest group and are the ones whose lives have been closely tied to the communities they live in. The Hui are the most dispersed group in China. They are the ones who have the most ties to the communities they live in, which makes them more freedom in religious practices than other Muslim groups. The Uighurs are the second largest group in China. They live in Xinjiang Province, which is a region in northwest China that's officially known as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Unlike the Hui, the Uighurs are concentrated in one region and have comparatively less political, religious, and cultural activities freedom. Due to the varying backgrounds and cultures of China's Muslim population, it is difficult to generalize about their religious practices. However, it is possible that some Muslims in rural areas and the northwest follow the basic tenets of Islam. Most Muslims in China, those who live in cities, isolated from Muslim population are relatively not practicing the religion. The majority of Chinese Muslim follows the Hanafi School of law (Armijo, 2008).

### **Islamic Groups**

Back in May 1953 China Islamic Association, which is one of the religious Islamic groups, was constituted in Beijing. Subsequently, at the state level, provincial level and municipality levels many Islamic forms and associations have been formed by the Chinese Muslims. These Islamic organizations pursue the following myriad and varied objectives:

- To impart Islamic education to train and develop Muslim human resource as faculty and staff
- To identify, research, explore, organize and curate the historical and cultural treasure of Islam
- To author, compile, print and preserve the Islamic classics in form of books and periodicals
- To coordinate and organize ethnic Muslims to facilitate them in the performance of the holy pilgrimage to Mecca
- To foster goodwill and engage in multidimensional and mutually beneficial exchanges with fellow Muslims and the Islamic forums outside China (Greer, Jardine, 2020).

### **Mosques and Muslim Identity**

The earliest surviving mosques in China were established during the Yuan Dynasty, which was a period of rule that was characterized by its openness to Western trade and its ecumenism. Some of these older mosques reflected the tastes of their patrons, who were also rich. The earliest surviving mosques in China were established during the Yuan Dynasty, which was a period of rule that was characterized by its openness to Western trade and its ecumenism. Some of these older mosques reflected the tastes of their patrons, who were also rich. Most Chinese mosques feature various functional features, but their architecture can vary significantly over time. One of the oldest surviving mosques in the country is the Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou, which was founded by the Prophet's uncle. It has a tall, pointed minaret that was allegedly built by the prophet's uncle as a part of the Hui community in the city. The Great Mosque of Xi'an, also known as Huajuexiang Mosque, is one of the most prominent structures in China. It was established in 742 in the Tang. It was reconstructed in 1392.

During the early twentieth century, China's older mosques were restored or replaced. Many of these were in regions such as Xinjiang and Qinghai. Although the Cultural Revolution occurred in 1966, many religious structures were demolished or replaced. One notable example of this was the Sojourners' Mosque, which was demolished during the Deng Xiaoping era (Butter, 2015).

In China, there are various types of mosque-buildings that are constructed according to the Arabian-style architecture. These are usually built during the Song, Tang, and Yuan dynasties. Some examples of these include the Qingjing Mosque in Quanzhou and the Fenghuang Mosque in Hangzhou. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the inland mosques were built on the patterns found in Chinese halls in Hui regions. These mosques were inspired by the classical Chinese architecture. Other notable features such as the preaching hall and worship hall were also added to the structures. The construction of these structures is influenced by the Central Asian and West Asian styles that were prevalent in the Xinjiang region. They used various materials such as timber, bricks, and adobe to create their buildings.

Most of the mosques built by Hui Muslims in northwest China's Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia regions have been constructed with Arabian dome architecture. The construction of these structures has also taken advantage of the various artistic features of Tibetan architecture, such as the Grand Mosque of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Lhasa. The other mosques in the region are also made from Dai bamboo houses. The colored walls and patterns of the mosque buildings have also been used to express Tibetan culture.

China has around 28,000 mosques. In Xinjiang alone, there are over 19,000. Many of these are located in areas where the hajj pilgrimage is permitted, and funding for these projects comes from other countries, such as Iran and Turkey. The competition for funding these projects is also due to the desire to encourage political and economic connections between China and other nations. During this period, missionaries from the Wahhabi movement promoted a more puritanical interpretation of Islam in China. They wanted to counter the more spiritual approach being used by Uighurs and Han Muslims. Beijing also played a role in the construction of mosques in order to gain the support of Muslim communities in western China. The construction and renovation of mosques in China have been influenced by various factors, such as the country's political and economic development.

The architecture of China's mosques reflects the diversity of its Muslim people and its long history. The mosque architecture in various parts of China, including Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region is considered important from the Islamic perspective. During the twentieth century, construction techniques became more modern, allowing people to design their own mosque designs. The materials and styles they choose can also reflect their religious identity (Butter, 2015).

### **Muslims integration in Chinese Society**

The Islamic religion is the foundation of Muslim nationalities. Through the establishment of localized Islamic thoughts, it has been linked with various nationalities. During the process of localization in China, the Sinic culture and Islamic culture fused together, forming communities such as Hui, Dongxiang, Baoan, and Salar. The other notable feature is that during the process of spreading Islam Xinjiang, various ethnic groups such as Uyghur, Kazakh, Tatar, and Kirgiz have gradually been integrated into the society. The establishment of Islamic thought in China is a process that involves mutual acceptance and integration between different cultures. It is also closely related to the nationalization of Chinese Muslims.

The Islamic faith is the primary cultural force that influences the development of the four inland Muslim nationalities: Baoan, Dongxiang, Salar, and Salar. However, the names of these groups are commonly referred to as Dongxiang Hui, Salar Hui, and Baoan Hui. All of these individuals share the same core values and culture (Junqin, 2013, 31). Without the presence of Islamic transplantation in China, many Muslim nationalities would not have been established. These include the following: Baoan, Dongxiang, Hui, and Salar. The development of these four Muslim nationalities is the result of Islam's localization in the country's cultural and regional setting. Although the different development processes of the different nationalities such as Baoan, Dongxiang, and Salar are unique, their Islamic culture is heavily influenced by Chinese culture. This is reflected in the use of Chinese language and other traditional values among their national members. The Islamic faith and culture are the presumed motivation for various groups to establish a national community within a certain historical context. They are also the source of the group identity and boundary erection of Muslim nationalities (Junqin, 2013, 32).

Before the spread of Islam in Xinjiang, the ancient Kirgiz, Uyghur, and Kazakh believed in various religions. As the spreading of Islam in China's Xinjiang region begins, it has noticeable characteristics of its various ethnic groups. Although the majority of the region's Muslims are Turkic, the process of nationalization and localization is still characterized by diversity (Dillon, 2003).

The process of Islamization in China is the collision and integration of various religions, such as Shamanism and Islam. This is the root cause of the long-term acceptance of foreign religions in Xinjiang. The different Islamic cultural systems in China's Xinjiang Uyghur and inland regions reflect the varying forms of Islam that are spread through the country's localization process. However, it is important to note that these changes do not alter the

expression of Islam as a whole.

Despite the varying Islamic cultures in different regions in China, the belief system of the Chinese Muslim ethnic groups remains the same. This ensures that the rising number of Muslims in the country has a significant impact on the social life and cultural ecosystem of eastern China. During the 1990s, the rapid development of China's southeastern coastal regions and the establishment of their commercial trade locations have led to a substantial increase in the number of foreign and domestic Muslims. The influx of Muslims has a positive impact on the local Islamic culture. It allows for the establishment of new businesses and the revitalization of local trade and commerce.

Due to the increasing globalization, people are required to dig deeper into their cultural traditions in order to develop a deeper understanding of the world's various philosophical resources. This can help them avoid falling into social development traps. This discipline aims to provide a healthy and positive spiritual and psychological support to the various nationalities in China. Since it was first introduced to the country in the seventh century, Islam has become an essential part of Chinese culture. Islamic culture continues to adapt and innovate in order to maintain its place as an integral part of the country's social construct. One of the most important cultural resources that people can use to develop a deeper understanding of their Islam religion is the concept of harmony. This is because it provides a framework for building a harmonious society within China.

The concept of harmony in Islamic culture is a broad-based one that encompasses all aspects of the human condition. It shows that God is good and wants to help people, that there is a spirit of love for everyone, and that man is living in a state of harmony with nature and society. The goal of Islamic culture is to create a world where people can live in harmony and without conflict. It promotes peaceful discourse and mutual respect between different various groups having different religions. In order to promote social harmony and development, the Chinese Islamic community has been studying various Islamic scriptures and works. They have also developed their own cultural traditions to provide spiritual and psychological support for the people. The goal of this concept is to create a unity among various religions, society, and nation states. It has been stated that Islam has contributed greatly to the ethical and ideological progress of China's society.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the presence of Muslims in China since the early days of Islam, few people are aware of the country's large Muslim population. The Muslim population in the country has evolved from a small settlement of Arabs and Persian traders on the southeast coast to a large and diverse group scattered across the country. Today, Muslims in China are the country's most widely dispersed minority groups. They are also the most urbanized and assimilated individuals in the country.

In China, Islam was first practiced during the 7th century. The practice was established through two routes: the southeast ton and the Silk Road. The Silk Road, spanned through Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and it was used by traders from various civilizations. Most of the traders who traveled through the Silk Road during the 7th to 10th centuries were Muslims. They brought their beliefs with them as they made their way through Asia. Eventually, Islam began to spread in China through the route due to the various trade and diplomatic exchanges that occurred during that period. There are currently around 40 million Muslims in China, making up less than 2% of its population. The majority of them belong to the Hui community. The Uyghurs are also a significant group in Xinjiang. Some of the country's minority groups are located in the provinces of Qinghai, Shaanxi, and Gansu.

The dynamic transformation of human culture is constantly being carried out due to its various social and cultural contacts. Aside from being a part of the overall development of the



society, religious culture also has a significant influence on the culture of the region it's located in. This activity contributes to the stability and survival of the local culture. As a religion, Islam works together with other cultures to create a unique blend of ideas and traditions. This is evidenced by the numerous mosques in different countries including China that have been established after the establishment of the religion. Due to the varying cultural and historical conditions that exist in different countries, the influence of Islamic culture on the development of the society can be considered as a two-way interface in China. On the one hand, it can have a significant impact on the political structure and economic development of the nation, as well as the lifestyles and ethics of its various ethnic and religious groups. On the other hand, it can also help maintain the standard of living of its people.

In China, Islam is regarded as a vital part of the Muslim community's development. It is also their potential to develop a distinct identity. The concept of equality, justice, and peace, as well as its enduring principles and values, are regarded as the core values of Islam and Muslims in China. As a part of its role, Islam aims to support the development of the Muslim community through its various activities, such as charitable works and humanitarian aid. It also encourages the members of the community to develop their spiritual strength and improve their lives. On the other hand, it should also continue to promote the development of its values and principles. Keeping in view the basic principles of Islam, the Muslim community in China should also reflect on its conservativeness and develop a more balanced and universal ethical approach. This will help the general public to have a better understanding of Islam and enable them to make informed decisions.

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