



5-1991

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Recommended Citation

Golden, John G. (1991) "The Acculturation of Three Korean American Students," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol5/iss1/3>

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THE ACCULTURATION OF THREE KOREAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

by

John G. Golden

During the last 15 years I have become acquainted with many Korean immigrants because of my work as a coordinator of an English as a Second Language program. Korean students once formed the largest group in this program and I am therefore in constant contact with them. I have made many friendships among them and have become familiar with their way of life, their customs, food and language. I lived with a Korean family for two years, lived in Korea itself, and Koreans have lived with my family.

The subjects chosen for the following interviews were part of a larger study (Golden, 1986) and were selected because they were all Korean American immigrant students in the process of acculturation. They seemed to represent different points of view and had an ability to express ideas. These students also seemed to be at different stages of the acculturation continuum. The first male student, although bicultural, was proud of his background and valued his ethnicity. The second female student had rejected her ethnicity but was in the process of rediscovering it. The third male student was bicultural but more assimilated to American life than the other two.

Subjects were interviewed separately but without much privacy. There was always a brother, sister or parent around. When I told the subjects that what they said would be treated confidentially they said they did not care and it was all right if people knew what they said. Privacy did not seem highly prized in their set of values.

The interviews were taped with a cassette tape recorder but some notes were taken as the subjects spoke. Notes consisted mainly of the subjects' reactions or reminders to myself of other questions to ask. The questions were unstructured and the sessions began with a discussion of the findings of the larger study and how the subject felt about some of the findings. Then the subjects would be asked to describe experiences related to their subjective acculturation experiences such as how they felt when they first came to the United States, whether they felt discriminated against and if so by whom, what they like about American culture and what they disliked as well as what they liked about Korean culture and what they disliked. Questions were also asked concerning the use of languages, Korean and English, self identity, and personal and social experience.

At the end of the interviews, the tapes were listened to several times and transcribed to paper. The transcriptions were used to form this narrative. The students were also given a questionnaire to fill out which included a semantic differential (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1957) to compare their feelings toward themselves, other Koreans and whites as well as their ideals.

Case #1: Jae

I first met Jae, as I will call him, about 8 months before the interview when he and his brother came to some friends' house to help them move into an apartment. Both were in the neighboring school district at the time and were good students. They were also hard workers and seemed to like to do physical labor. Jae was the most talkative of the two and, at 15, seemed older than his brother because he was bigger and his brother listened to what he said. I found out, however, that he was almost two years younger than his brother. There were no sisters and Jae was glad about that as he told me in the interview.

Jae and his older brother spend all their spare time when they are not at school in their father's business. Since he is a second-hand dealer, the boys have to carry heavy objects and they are therefore physically well developed. Jae's mother works full time in a factory assembling surgical tools. Jae said that 80% of the workers there are Korean because they work faster than other people.

Jae has no time to go out with his friends. "If I have free time I read and stay home," he says. He meets his friends at school but has little or no contact with them after school because he has no money to spend and has to help his father and brother. He said he did not mind this because it is his duty to help the family.

Jae and his older brother are straight A students. Jae's brother is in the 97th percentile in achievement tests but Jae himself received an average score last April with a composite of 51. Jae does not remember what happened on the test but the records show that he had 96 in science, 93 for reference skills, 83 in social studies, and 82 in math. Either Jae did not try to do the language section or there was a recording problem. He received 51 in reading vocabulary, 1 in reading comprehension and 1 in spelling. Jae's father and mother want their sons to go to college and although they themselves did not go to college, they have a high respect for education and want their children to be educated.

Jae's father is 50 years old and his mother is 41 years old. I observed that men in Korea usually wait until they are in their late twenties before they marry. Both parents are Korean and lived in the capital city, Seoul, which is now a very modern city with subways, expressways, skyscrapers, houses and large apartment-condominiums providing homes for close to 10 million people. His parents emigrated to the United States 5 years ago this month. Jae remembers the exact day. It was the happiest day of his life. My field notes described it this way:

Interviewer: "How long have you been living here in the United States?"

Jae: "About five years. Eight more days. Five years. Ha ha."

Interviewer: "You remember the exact day you came here?"

Jae: "Oh yeah! I was happy, very happy. It was snowing but the snow stopped and it was all white. I said, 'Wow!' you know, and then it was so big and broad, especially up there in Airport City, with all the room and all those houses. I said, 'Wow! Look at all

these houses! Big!' You know. They don't have back yards like that in Korea. They have small court yards and stuff. 'Wow! Look at all these grass and things like that!' And I went to my uncle's house and it was a bi-level apartment. It was cold and the next morning I woke up and there was this big field in the back yard. It was so clear and things. Gee, I've never seen places like this, you know. That was the best day I ever had in my life!"

Interviewer: "Were you not sad when you left Korea?"

Jae: "No! I was all excited. I wanted to go to Disneyland...."

But Jae's life in America was not like Disneyland. When I asked, "What was the worst time you had since you arrived in the United States?" he recounted his experience without hesitation:

Jae: "When I lived on the west side. When all those Spanish people were, you know, prejudiced and tried to beat you up all the time and stuff. I was small at that time. When I was twelve I was like 5 feet or something like that and they want to beat you up all the time. It's no fun. I felt dark all the time, you know. That was in elementary school in 5th grade. I felt sad! I didn't want to move to that house but my parents did and it was an absolute disaster when we lived there."

Interviewer: "Do you feel there's a lot of prejudice?"

Jae: "Not in our school but if you go to like rich areas like the south side or like the west side where Hispanics live, there's a lot of prejudice going on out there. Because I went to the west side and the south schools, there was a lot of prejudice. But in this school, I'd say there isn't much... They don't really care because they've been exposed to more Orientals than way over there on the west side or the south.... A lot of Koreans are prejudiced against their own Koreans. A lot of them, I'd say, there's more than this percent (pointing to some statistics on a sheet of paper) of Koreans who are prejudiced toward their own race."

Interviewer: "In what way are they prejudiced?"

Jae: "They think they're cool because they just came over here and things like that....They think they speak English so they're cool and things like that....Generally, how the other person acts. If they're a nerd they don't even look at that kind of people. They don't even try to help other Koreans....Some of them don't even look at other Koreans. There are all kinds of different people. I try to get along with them to see how they are. That's what my Dad always tells me, 'Get along with any kind of people. It doesn't matter. They could be druggies, any kind of people. Then it's good for you.'"

In another context Jae admitted that he did not always get along with other Koreans.

"When I first meet a Korean person I try to keep away. I don't know why, I just try to keep away. I say, 'This kid might be bad and things like that.' Then slowly I start to

know them, how they are and things like that. If they're bad I just stay away. If they're O.K. then I accept."

Jae speaks both Korean and English with friends and also at home. Jae is not only bilingual but seems to fall in the middle group of biculturals. He reads both American and Korean newspapers and magazines, watches both American and Korean movies and TV, identifies and admires both Americans and Koreans, and eats both kinds of food. He belongs to voluntary groups that are American but goes to Korean churches. His closest friends speak many languages although the friends who visited his home were mostly English speaking and the homes of friends he visited were mostly English speaking. Jae does not date members of the opposite sex, and often feels isolated with white Americans. This is what Jae had to say about his closest friend, neither a Korean nor a white American:

"My closest friend is English speaking. He's Vietnamese. There's no problem with this. As long as you can speak Korean at home it's good enough."

It is interesting to note here that Jae does not seem to notice that his closest friend is also Asian but refers to him as an English speaker who happens to be Vietnamese. His friend, as I found out, is an immigrant like Jae and referred to as a refugee.

Jae does not want to forget his Korean language. He admits that he has forgotten some words which he does not use very often but thinks that Koreans should not forget their language. On this point he says:

"The problem with some of these parents is they have the problem that, 'Go ahead and speak English. You've got to learn English,' and they forget Korean. They don't think about Korean. I told a friend, 'Why speak English at home? You're going to have to speak English at school anyway. You'll be learning it anyway.' And he told that to his father and got beat up. Ha! 'Why don't you obey your parents?' And he got slapped a few times and said, 'I have to speak English now.' But I think that's wrong because if we come to school we'll have to learn English. We don't come to school to learn Korean. We've got to use it at home."

Jae does not reject learning English but he rejects forgetting Korean and knows that if Korean is not spoken at home it will be spoken no where and will soon be forgotten. Jae deplores the fact that there are no Korean books for his age group to read. "There's nothing to read for Korean kids...for our age. There are adult books here but not for kids..." Jae admits that there are Korean newspapers but all they have is "current events."

Going to church services is not one of Jae's priorities. Jae claims, "The most important religion we have is Confucianism," but he thinks that many Koreans go to Christian churches because they are lonely and want to speak to other Koreans. But why do non-Korean speaking high school kids go to Korean churches. Jae's answer is quite simple, "In Korean society, if parents do it, you do it."

In a survey given to Jae on the seven point semantic differential, he scored highest on the following items (on a scale of 1 to 7) on these three concepts:

Myself		Koreans		Whites	
motivated	7	motivated	6	hardworking	6
careful	7	hardworking	6	humorous	6
smart	6	smart	6	popular	6
friendly	6	sophisticated	6	happy	6
polite	6	serious	6	careless	6
respectful	6	careful	6	aggressive	6
calm	6	defensive	6	excitable	6
stable	6	followers	6	prejudiced	6
sophisticated	6	passive	6	rural	6
constrained	6	unpopular	6		
defensive	6	impolite	6		
		selfish	6		

The two highest items rated for himself were that he was extremely motivated and careful. Almost all items concerning his self concept were positive except constrained and defensive. Jae was not so positive about Koreans. He rated 7 of 12 items as negative for Koreans and only 5 items as positive: motivated, hardworking, smart, careful and sophisticated. Jae did not rate whites any more favorably than Koreans, listing only 4 of 9 items as positive. I would conclude from this that Jae had an extremely high self concept and did not look at others, whether Korean or white, as positively as himself.

It is interesting to note that none of the items he has for whites are items he considers himself to have but five items he has attributed to Koreans he also attributed to himself: motivated, careful, smart, sophisticated and defensive. This tells us much about which groups he identifies with but the following leaves no doubt what he considers himself to be.

"I'm Korean...because I'm from Korea. I'm born in Korea. I have parents from Korea. My brains, you know, are washed up by Korean culture. Then, I speak Korean. Even though I work with American kids, I still don't forget I'm Korean and I look forward to getting along more with Korean people. And when I get a job, I'll look Korean even though I'll have citizenship because I don't have white hair. I don't have white skin. They'll still be prejudiced a little bit that I'm Oriental. They're not going to look at me as American. They're not going to say, 'Hey, you white man.' It's not that way. So I say, 'I'm Korean.'"

Jae is an individual. He is different from the other Korean American students in this study although all these students are different. In this case study I have attempted to peel away the impersonal packaging of numbers and statistics and have looked at a human being who is in the process of acculturation. He is a bicultural individual who has no illusions that he is Korean and will always be Korean because he cannot change his skin color and his "brains are washed up by Korean culture." He has no intention of rejecting the American society in which he lives. He wishes to be a part of that society and he enjoys it. He is happy to be here. Jae plans to go to college and become an American citizen. This is his home now and he is master of his own house.

Case #2: Mi Cha

Mi Cha, as I will call her, had just turned 16 years old when I interviewed her. She lived with her mother, older brother and sister-in-law in a low income apartment. Her father died before she came to America. Her mother, who was 65, looked very old. I found it hard to believe that her mother was 50 when she gave birth to Mi Cha but she insisted it was true.

Mi Cha had been in the United States 7 years when I interviewed her and came to this country when she was 9 years old. She spoke very good English but was an average student with a GPA of 2.0 and 51 on her achievement test composite. She belonged to a church group for teenagers who were Korean American and spent most of her time with this group. She described herself this way:

"I'm in the middle. I can't really speak good English. I can speak fluently Korean but I don't know about deep words, you know. So I'm in the middle. I know half English and half Korean. I know I'm Korean. I'm more into Korea than America. That's why I hang around a lot with Korean people who are older than me. They teach me a lot in Korean and I really learn a lot of Korean there. I will probably live my whole life here, probably learn American as I grow. But if you don't join Korean people you don't learn."

Mi Cha is deeply committed to the Korean culture. When I asked her if she would marry a Korean or an American when she became of marrying age, she replied:

"I would marry a Korean guy...I think we could get along better [than an American guy]. I see a lot of Korean women who married men [Mi Cha's sister was married to an American] and they don't really get along because, first thing, they don't really communicate that well with each other and then secondly, the culture thing, you know. The American really doesn't care how...let's say, the American doesn't worry as much as Koreans...so thinking wise is different. American people think differently than Korean people."

In order to test her resolve I reminded her that Korean men followed the Confucian tradition of authoritarian family structure where the wife was subservient to the husband. Would she obey her husband and serve him? She answered:

"I'm not going to be over men. It's better if they're over me. But they'll not rule me where I have to do every little thing like that. We're going to help each other but he's the one who's going to do everything...I want an equal chance but I could serve him. It will be easier for me."

I asked Mi Cha what advice she would give to a Korean person who wanted to come to America to live. She started off by giving advice but then slipped into prejudice:

"Tell the Korean to learn English before coming. That's the first problem....Expect people to make fun of you. But they don't do it now. There used to be a lot of prejudice. That was when I went to elementary school. Now they don't do it no more. In 6th, 7th and 8th grade I had a lot of American friends. I did a lot with them. Now it doesn't fit my way

of life. Now I'm more with a Korean group....I used to hate Koreans and now I've kind of changed."

I decided to pursue this and asked her why the Korean American students at her school seem to avoid each other. She answered somewhat like Jae did above. Students who know more English sometimes think they are better than the newcomers, and students who are newly arrived from Korea think they are better than Koreans that have been here longer because they speak Korean better. And, "Some kids don't want to speak Korean all the time at school so they can learn English so they stay away from Koreans."

Mi Cha does not feel left out or isolated with Koreans nor with white Americans. She considers herself Korean-American, belongs to voluntary groups and churches which are Korean and her closest friends speak both languages.

Mi Cha's response to the survey on the three concepts included the following items:

Myself		Koreans		Whites	
friendly	7	honest	7	happy	7
polite	7	positive	7	stable	7
respectful	7	smart	6	humorous	6
defensive	7	urban	6	popular	6
calm	6	active	6	active	6
positive	6	happy	6	aggressive	6
unprejudiced	6	stable	6	leaders	6
strong	6	defensive	6	undependable	6
brave	6	selfish	6	cowardly	6
active	6	lazy	6	selfish	6
stable	6			unfriendly	6
cooperative	6			prejudiced	6
careless	6			lazy	6

Mi Cha, like Jae above, rated both groups, Korean and whites, both positively and negatively. She seemed quite objective in rating herself. She had positive items highest such as extremely friendly, extremely polite, and extremely respectful but also included extremely defensive. To this she added that she was quite constrained, and quite careless but also quite positive, unprejudiced, strong, brave, and so forth. For Koreans she rated highest extremely honest and positive but for whites she rated highest extremely happy and stable. The negative items she rated for Koreans were quite selfish, defensive and lazy and whites were quite undependable, cowardly, selfish, unfriendly, prejudiced and lazy.

All groups had more positive items than negative items. It is interesting to note that Mi Cha does not have a pattern of similar items for herself and the two groups. She is similar to them in that she is defensive as she perceived them to be which is not exactly a positive concept. She considered herself active and stable but sees all groups that way. She considers both Koreans and whites to be selfish and lazy. She considers herself friendly and cooperative but whites as unfriendly and uncooperative. She is, as she stated, in the middle.

Case #3: Danny

The third student interviewed for this study seemed to be highly assimilated to the American culture. He was a 17 year old male, a junior in high school who was very active in sports, liked to party, went out with girls -- both whites and Koreans -- and had a best friend who was white and English speaking. His sister was in college on the west coast and he lived alone with his mother and father. His father had his own business and his mother worked part time. Both his parents were college graduates from prestigious universities in Korea who placed a high premium on education and claimed that they came to America for their children's education.

This student will be called Danny since he has an American first name although his family name is Korean. Danny speaks both languages fluently and switched back and forth between English and Korean depending upon whom he was addressing. He spoke English to the interviewer and a Korean American friend, spoke both languages to his mother, and spoke Korean to his father. Danny is his mother's favorite and I am told it is not uncommon in Korea for the mother to be closer to the son and the father closer to the daughter. Danny does not work after school. His work, as his father puts it, is to study.

Danny does his work well. He is a straight A student and is in the 92nd percentile on achievement tests with 99 in science, 97 in social studies and 97 in math. Spelling was his lowest at 62. His parents bought him a new car, pay for his insurance and his fuel and buy him whatever he asks. Danny does not seem to abuse this privilege and seems content to ask for just what he really needs.

At about 5 or 6 years old Danny came to the United States from Korea. He does not remember anything about Korea and does not seem too interested in returning even for a visit. When he was asked if he would like to go back for a visit his answer was simply, "Maybe?" All of Danny's friends and many relatives live in the United States now and he does not know anyone in Korea.

Danny started school in the United States and never studied Korean. He is sometimes embarrassed by his mistakes in Korean and prefers to speak English. He cannot read Korean except simple signs and labels. He said he would like to learn but does not have time right now. Danny claims that he is Korean-American. Not all Americans are prejudiced but there are some who treat him differently, he says. "Some people don't want to talk to me sometimes and look at me funny. Like the cashier will talk to the guy in front of me but won't say anything to me. Some people think I don't speak English and instead of talking to me will talk to a white person. But nobody really treats me bad, you know. I think it's only weird people who are prejudiced."

When asked how he got along with other Koreans Danny said he just knew a few and they usually spoke only English. The new Korean kids in school usually had their own friends. Danny said he would like to help the new Korean kids but he does not have time, "with football practice and things." But Danny said he felt more like he was American than Korean. He does not know much about Korea but he would like to know more. Danny's

mother still cooks Korean food for his father and he likes Korean food but does not eat much spicy Korean food anymore.

Korean churches are not for Danny. "They just gossip and things." Danny's parents do not go either so he does not feel any pressure to go to church. "They have so many Korean churches here....They're always fighting."

On the survey Danny rated the following:

Myself		Koreans		Whites	
aggressive	7	honest	7	happy	6
smart	6	smart	7	humorous	6
popular	6	serious	7	urban	6
excitable	6	respectful	7	careless	6
polite	6	sophisticated	7	followers	6
hardworking	6	dependable	7	prejudiced	6
free	6	careful	7	aimless	6
sophisticated	6	competitive	7		
lenient	6	respectful	7		
		polite	7		
		urban	7		
		hardworking	7		

Danny's survey responses were markedly different from the other two students. His ratings for Koreans were extremely positive (only items rated 7 were included on the above list since it would have been too long to include all the 6s). The ratings for white Americans, on the other hand, were low with only three quite positive items and four quite negative items. His self rating was not so high but was not negative. He rated Koreans higher than himself but himself higher than whites.

Although Danny considers himself to be American, his identification with Koreans on the survey was higher than the other two students. He considered himself smart, polite, hardworking and sophisticated as were the Koreans. He had no items that were identical to whites.

Danny struck me as a very intelligent, sensitive, popular, active individual. He is very assimilated in many ways but remains at the core very Korean. His social and personal behavior is mixed, his language is English dominant but his identity seems strongly Korean.

Analysis and Conclusions

Jae was the most recent arrival having been in the United States for only 5 years. Mi Cha was here two years longer and Danny was here from a very early age. Jae was really excited about being in the United States and counted the days when he would celebrate his fifth anniversary. Mi Cha did not remember much about her arrival except

that kids laughed at her in elementary school and Danny wasn't sure if he was 5 or 6 when he left Korea.

All three students felt some discrimination. Jae felt it most from Hispanics, wealthy whites and other Koreans. Jae felt it most from whites but also other Koreans whereas Danny did not experience it much except occasionally from strangers.

Despite his recent arrival, Jae was a straight A student. Mi Cha was still struggling with a C average and Danny was at the head of his class. Jae's social life was quite restricted because of the constant demands of his father's business. Mi Cha seemed to socialize more with church groups whereas Danny was very outgoing and had a full social life with sports, parties and girls.

All three students had a different identity. Jae felt strongly Korean, Mi Cha considered herself Korean American, and Danny considered himself American. All three students spoke very good English which was equal to their American peers. Jae worried about forgetting the Korean language and tried to get his Korean friends to speak Korean although he spoke English to his English speaking friends. Mi Cha spoke fluent Korean and perhaps could express herself better than in English but she had difficulty with "deep words" in Korean. Danny usually spoke English except to his father whom he addressed in Korean. All three ate Korean food except Danny who ate it occasionally when it was diluted. Both boys seemed negative toward Korean churches although Jae seemed to respect Confucianism. Mi Cha was very active in Korean churches spending her weekends with church people.

In summary, it may be stated that these three cases showed both differences and similarities. Many of the differences may have been due to personality traits as well as gender and the acculturation process. Jae was highly assimilated to American life but deeply attached to his Korean background and identity. Mi Cha was also highly assimilated to American life but despite her deficiencies in the Korean language was pulling back to her roots. She once "hated" Koreans but had changed and was trying to learn as much as possible about them. Danny was thoroughly assimilated to American life but his survey responses indicated a strong identification with Koreans although he did not know much about them.

Acculturation for all three did not seem to be a permanent status. The more assimilated individual indicated a desire to learn more Korean at a later date. The less assimilated individual indicated that she once hated Koreans but was now trying to find her roots in the Korean culture. The strongly ethnic individual nevertheless saw shortcomings in his countrymen. None seemed to feel that the acculturation process was a difficult problem nor that they were feeling much discrimination especially at the present time in their present situation. When they felt discriminated against it was usually from their own group or some other ethnic group.

None of these cases indicated that they would like to go back to Korea to live. They looked upon the United States as their home where they would make their future. All seemed to be imbued with the Korean Confucian ethic of hard work, politeness, respect and

honesty. Even the wealthier case indicated that he would like to be extremely hardworking. All were doing well in school, were popular, active and involved. None felt negatively marginal. They all considered themselves polite, Koreans smart and whites happy, humorous but prejudiced.

Recommendations

More research needs to be done on acculturation. This is a very individual and personal process and is not necessarily a linear progression from ethnicity to assimilation as was previously thought. It does not necessarily involve a process of replacing one culture with another or replacing one language with another. People in the process of acculturation need not make a decision to reject one culture for another or one language for another. People can be bicultural and bilingual, as were the three students in this study, and be successful in school and in society. Accepting both cultures and languages and choosing what is best in each seems to be a more positive and healthy way of acculturating. Teachers and social workers should encourage biculturalism and bilingualism and avoid placing too much emphasis on assimilation since too much assimilation can cut one off from his/her roots and leave the person drifting in a state of negative marginality.

Discrimination does not necessarily come from the majority group as we saw in this study. It can come from other minority groups and from one's own ethnic group. Teachers need to be on guard for this. Often teachers have a tendency to try to keep students of the same racial or ethnic background together and this could make the acculturation process more difficult. Children need to be taught at a very early age that prejudice and discrimination are very harmful and that it is all right to be different. Immigrant children need to be prepared to cope with discrimination. Teachers need to be sensitive to hints of prejudice and discrimination. More research is needed to see how prejudice and discrimination are spawned and expressed and how they can be controlled.

Sometimes parents can be just as responsible as schools in destroying a child's ethnic culture and language. In their quest for their children's progress in acculturation they may discourage them from speaking the native language and practicing the ethnic traditions. This can become a handicap in the long run if the child grows up not knowing any language very well and be "in the middle" as Mi Cha pointed out in this study. Second language acquisition studies are beginning to document concept transference but more research is needed here also.

Western type marriages and inter-ethnic marriages are not always the best for immigrants. Asian women may be quite happy to let their husbands make the decisions and be willing to serve as long as the husband gives them an equal chance. Often inter-ethnic marriages, as Ma Chi pointed out, do not work because of the insurmountable cultural barriers which hinder communication and sharing necessary between husband and wife. Studies are needed to measure the success rate of inter-ethnic and inter-racial marriages as compared to marriages between persons of the same ethnic and racial background.

The two boys in this study did very well in school. This was not because it came easy to them but because they had as their goal to be hardworking. They knew that their parents

valued education and believed that they would make their parents happy if they received good grades in school and were able to go on to university. Not all Asian students do well in school, as we saw in the case of Ma Chi. It would be interesting to see in a later study whether there is a correlation between the number of hours Asians study and the grades they receive in school.

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