Daqu: the Gesamtkunstwerk of Ancient China

- Vincent C. K. Cheung

Daqu (大曲) was a genre of entertainment music popular in China from the Han dynasty to the Song dynasty. While da (大) in Chinese means large or great, qu (曲) means a song, or more generally, a piece of music. As its name implies, a daqu was always a long, multisectional piece of music performed in a grand style uniting singing of poetic verses, instrumental playing, and dancing together, and the daqu of each dynasty also reflects the period’s overall cultural atmosphere. Thus, daqu can be imagined as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork) of ancient China. Unfortunately, an important genre as it was, the music of daqu has not survived the harshness of history. To trace the rise and fall of daqu, we can only rely on various descriptions of this genre buried within historical sources such as the “Twenty-four Books of Official History” (二十四史).

I. The Birth of Daqu

1. From Tuge to Xianghe Daqu

   The Han dynasty (202 B.C. – 220 A.D.) witnessed a revival of economic life throughout China. With the effort of Emperors Wendi, Jingdi, and Wudi, China finally had a chance to recover from the civil wars during the late Zhou dynasty and the tyranny of the Qin rulers. In these four hundred years of economic stability, two social classes gradually emerged: the upper gentry class, consisting of merchants, government officials, and soldiers; and the lower peasant class, consisting of farmers and servants. At the same time, as Qian Mu (钱穆) points out, the Han period was the first time in Chinese history during which common people had the opportunity to rule the country (since the first Han emperor, Gaozu, was originally a peasant), and the feudal structure of the Zhou dynasty was consequently broken into splinters by the Han rulers.¹ Under this social and political atmosphere, traditional ritual music, which was important to

¹Qian Mu, Guo Shi Dagang (Taipei: Guoli Bianyi Guan, 1977), 90.
the feudal social structure, was no longer emphasized by the government. Instead, music written for enjoyment quickly became popular in urban areas where the prosperous gentry families made their livings.

One of the genres of music for entertainment emerged during Han was the *tuge* (徒歌), which eventually gave rise to the Han *daqu*. *Tuge* was a type of unaccompanied solo folk song, probably of improvisatory nature.\(^2\) It was mentioned in the *Yuezhi of Jinshu* (晋书乐志) [“The Book of Music” in *History of Jin*],\(^3\) and not much is known about it. Another vocal genre that grew out of *tuge* was the *dange* (但歌). How a *dange* was performed was vividly described in the *Yuezhi of Songshu* (宋书乐志) [“The Book of Music” in *History of Song*]:

> The four *dange*’s are from the Han dynasty. They were sung without any string instrument nor any wooden clapper. A performance was initiated by one person, then three more voices were added harmoniously to the performance.
> 但歌四曲，出自汉世。无弦节，作伎，最先一人倡，三人和。\(^4\)

Thus, *dange*, like its precursor *tuge*, was also sung without instrumental accompaniment; however, more singers were involved in *dange* than in *tuge*. *Dange* was further developed during Han into the *xianghege* (相和歌). According to *Songshu* again,

> The *xianghege* ’s are old songs from the Han dynasty. They are characterized by the harmonious blending (*xianghe*) of the *si* (“silk”) and *zhu* (“bamboo”) instruments. The person holding the wooden clapper also sang.
> 相和，汉旧歌也。丝竹更相和，执节者歌。\(^5\)

Here, we see a dramatic development from the *dange* to the *xianghege*: not only were musical instruments finally used to accompany the voices, but a variety of instruments, including string instruments (“silk”), wind instruments (“bamboo”), and at least one percussion (the wooden clapper) were also employed. Note that


\(^5\)Su and Xiao, 194.
in the above quotation, the word xianghe, literally meaning “harmonious” in Chinese, refers to the blending of the strings and winds; but it can also mean the blending of the voices and the musical instruments since the use of instrumental accompaniment was a distinctive feature of xianghege. As more xianghege’s were composed, this new genre became more and more elaborate in style of performance. Later, even dancing was included in a performance of xianghege. At this point, xianghege had already been transformed into the Han daqu, or xianghe daqu, which can be regarded as a kind of art song instead of the tuge-type folk music, as Yang Yinliu (杨荫浏) remarks.6

2. The Structure of the Han Daqu

Although no music of the Han daqu has survived, the lyrics of fifteen Han daqu’s are preserved in the Yuezhi of Songshu,7 and from the structure of the lyrics, the structure of a Han daqu can be reconstructed with the help of various authors who mention the Han daqu in their classical Chinese texts. One of them is Wang Sengqian (王僧虔), who elucidates the three sections of a typical Han daqu in his Yanyue Jilu (宴乐技录) [A Record of Techniques in Yanyue]:

A daqu had yan, qu, and luan......the yan section came before the qu proper, and the qu and luan sections went after the qu proper.

...而大曲又有艳、有趋、有乱……艳在曲之前，趋与乱在曲之后。8

In the above quotation, the first qu (趋) after yan literally means “quicker,” while the qu (曲) in “the qu proper” means “a song,” as explained earlier; thus, the two qu’s are two different characters. According to Wang Sengqian, in a Han daqu, there were three sections, in order, called yan (艳), the qu proper (曲), and qu (趋) or luan (乱) respectively. The yan section was considered to be a prelude to the qu proper section, and was probably performed without meter.9 In the fifteen daqu’s listed in Songshu, ten have no yan section, three have yan sections but with no lyrics for them, and the remaining two have lyrics especially for their yan sections. Therefore, yan was really an optional section in a Han daqu, and if present, could be either a section with voices and instruments, or a section with only instruments. In Chinese, the word yan means “visually beautiful,” or

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6Yang, 114.
7See Su and Xiao, 247-277.
8Wang Sengqian, Yanyue Jilu, as quoted in Wang Weizhen, 14.
9Wang Weizhen, 15.
“voluptuous,” suggesting that dancing was perhaps included in the yan section, as Yang Yinliu observes.\textsuperscript{10} It is also natural for us to imagine that the atmosphere of the music in this prelude was relaxing but captivating, as the meaning of yan implies.

The qu proper was the longest of the three sections in a Han daqu. Lyrics for this section are included in Songshu for all the fifteen daqu’s, implying that singing played a critical role in this part of the daqu. Since the qu proper was always long, in Songshu the lyrics for the qu proper in each daqu are divided into subsections known as jie (解): the shortest qu proper has only three jie’s while the longest has eight jie’s. Yang Yinliu further points out that jie can alternatively mean a subsection of instrumental music with dancing in between two subsections of vocal music, and this jie subsection was often more energetic than the vocal subsections.\textsuperscript{11} If Yang’s conjecture was indeed correct, the qu proper section of a Han daqu must be a piece of Gesamtkunstwerk alternating between the more relaxing vocal subsections and the more vigorous dance subsections, contrasting strongly to the more static yan prelude.

The last section, qu, like the beginning yan, was again an optional section since nine of the fifteen daqu’s documented in Songshu have no qu. Even if qu was present, singing in the qu section was also optional. As explained earlier, qu in Chinese literally means “quicker,” and hence the music of this section should be significantly faster than the preceding two sections. Dancing should also be an important component of qu. Guo Maoqian (郭茂倩), in his Yuefu Shiji (乐府诗集) [A Collection of Yuefu Poems], mentions that

Following the end of various daqu’s was the [instrumental] piece Huanglaotan in which there was only dancing and no words could be heard.  
凡诸大曲竟, 黄老弹独出舞, 无词。\textsuperscript{12}

As Wang Weizhen (王维真) points out, the fact that Guo Maoqian emphasizes in the above quotation that there was only dancing but no singing in the piece Huanglaotan, which was performed after certain daqu’s, already implies that both singing and dancing must be involved at the end of a Han daqu. Very possibly, then, dancers should also be involved in the performance of the qu section in addition to the instrumentalists.

\textsuperscript{10}Yang, 118.  
\textsuperscript{11}Yang, 116-117.  
\textsuperscript{12}Guo Maoqian, Yuefu Shiji, as quoted in Wang Weizhen, 22.
Among the fifteen documented Han daqu’s, there is one which has no qu section, but has a luan section instead. Yang Yinliu asserts that luan and qu are synonyms in this case. Nevertheless, in Chuci Dazhao (楚辞大招篇), there is a saying that “only luan can entertain people" (娱人乱只). It is possible that the final section of that particular daqu was named luan instead of qu simply because its “finale” was more enchanting than the qu’s of the other Han daqu’s.

3. The Mode and the Instruments Used in the Han Daqu

In the Han dynasty, a xianghege was always written in one of the three xianghe sandiao (相和三调) (the three xianghe modes) – namely, the ping mode (平调), the qing mode (清调), and the se mode (瑟调). Most of the Han daqu’s were composed in the se mode, which explains why the fifteen Han daqu’s are listed right after the sediaoqu’s (songs in the se mode) in the Yuezhi of Songshu. Guo Maoqian records that popular instruments used in the sediaoqu’s include sheng (笙), di (笛), jie (节), qin (琴), se (瑟), zheng (筝), and pipa (琵琶). It is reasonable to assume that in the Han daqu, the above-listed instruments were also employed.

II. The Golden Age of Daqu

After the fall of the Han empire in 220, China entered the so called “Wei Jin” period during which China was divided into various smaller kingdoms. It was not until 589, when Sui Wendi successfully sacked the citadel of the Chen dynasty in the south, that China was unified again. The short-lived Sui dynasty was followed by the Tang dynasty (618-907) which is regarded by many historians as the wealthiest, the strongest, and the most cosmopolitan of all dynasties in Chinese history. Daqu also reached its acme of development in this golden age of China. It was transformed from the Han xianghe daqu into a Gesamtkunstwerk with a complicated structure in which the native Chinese style and some non-native musical styles imported to China through the Silk Road were combined. However, this transformation of daqu would be impossible without the patronage of the Tang emperors.

14Zhang Shibin, Zhongguo Yinyue Shilun Shugao (Hong Kong: Union Press, 1974), 75.
16Guo, as quoted in Zhang, 71.
1. Daqu and Emperor Xuanzong

As illustrated earlier, the Han daqu was a genre originated from the xianghege, which represents vocal music of the common people at that time; thus, the Han daqu should also be music circulated mainly among the gentry families and peasants in the urban areas. In the Tang dynasty, on the other hand, daqu became a type of music for the imperial court, and it can be considered as a part of the Tang yanyue (燕乐), or court banquet music. The growth of daqu in the Tang court was largely due to the emperors’ support of music. Emperor Xuanzong (玄宗), one of the strongest Tang rulers, was a well known lover of daqu, as described in Xintangshu (新唐书) [The New Book of Tang History]:

Xuanzong not only knew music very well, but also liked faqu [a type of Tang daqu] very much. He even selected three hundred musicians from the “string division” to be trained in Liyuan. Whenever a musician made a mistake in a performance, the emperor always realized the mistake and suggested a way to correct it.

玄宗既知律, 又酷爱法曲, 选坐部伎子弟三百教於梨园, 声有误者, 帝必觉而正之。

It is apparent in the above quotation that the musicians in Liyuan (梨园), a music school privately owned by Xuanzong, were trained to perform daqu’s. This musical emperor even composed daqu’s himself: a Tang daqu documented in Jiaofangji (教坊记), called Yulinling (雨霖铃), was known to be composed by Xuanzong when he was in Sichuan soon after the Anshi Riot (安史之乱). With the wealth of the Tang court, the enthusiasm of the Tang emperors, and the professionalism of the Liyuan musicians, it is hardly surprising that the Tang daqu had a much more elaborate structure than the Han daqu.

2. The Structure of the Tang Daqu

The tripartite skeleton of the Han daqu was retained in the Tang daqu; but each major section of the Tang daqu was expanded and further divided into many subsections, resulting in a form with unprecedented complexity. The famous Tang poet, Bai Juyi (白居易), describes the characteristics of each section of a

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17 For a discussion of the relationship between faqu and daqu, see Qiu Qiongsun, Yanyue Tanwei (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1989), 44-99.
19 You, 236.
Tang *daqu* in his poem *Nichang Yuyi Ge* (霓裳羽衣歌).\(^{20}\) According to Bai, the three sections of a Tang *daqu* were called *sanxu* (散序), *zhongxu* (中序), and *po* (破) respectively.

i. *Sanxu* While *san* (散), in Chinese, means not ordered, *xu* (序) means an introduction. As the meaning of its name suggests, *sanxu* was simply a slow and unmetered prelude in the Tang *daqu*. Bai, in a remark of the *Nichang* poem, explains how the instruments were presented in the *sanxu*:

...at first, the musical instruments did not play together. Instead, the “metal,” “stone,” “silk,” and “bamboo” instruments produced their sounds one after another......also, since the six sections of *sanxu* [in the *Nichang Daqu*] had no meter, there was no dancing in this section.

...初, 众乐不齐, 唯金石丝竹, 次第发声......散序

六遍无拍, 故不舞也.\(^{21}\)

Not only was there no dancing in this section, but singing was also absent in the prelude.\(^{22}\) Hence, in the *sanxu* only the sound of a small group of instruments could be heard. Note that Bai mentions there were six subsections in the *sanxu* of the *Nichang Yuyi Daqu*, implying that the *sanxu* prelude could be a very long section. Sometimes, the *sanxu* section had an ending subsection known as *sa* (靸), which was in nature an intermezzo between the *sanxu* and the *zhongxu*.

ii. *Zhongxu* Unlike the *sanxu*, the *zhongxu*, or “middle prelude,” was a metered section, as Bai remarks in his poem.\(^{23}\) It was a very long movement further divided into three subsections, known as *paibian* (排遍), *dian* (扌颠), and *zhengdian* (正扌颠) respectively. The characters *pai* (排) and *bian* (遍) mean “to arrange in order” and “some sections of music,” respectively, and they together suggest that the *paibian* subsection itself must comprise several “sub-subsections.” Wang observes that the word *bian* can alternatively mean “changing,”\(^{24}\) implying that different sub-subsections probably had very different

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\(^{21}\)Bai Juyi, as quoted in Yang, “Nichang,” 326.

\(^{22}\)Wang Weizhen, 142.

\(^{23}\)Yang, “Nichang,” 326.

\(^{24}\)Wang Weizhen, 143.
music. The first sub-subsection of paibian was known as getou (歌头), or the beginning of a song, and therefore, singing must be included in the zhongxu section. In addition, the zhongxu section was slow in tempo whereas the music in the following po section was much faster. In order to maintain a continuous flow of music in the daqu, the gap between the tempi of the two sections must be filled, and this was exactly the function of the dian and zhengdian subsections of the zhongxu, with the tempo of dian slightly slower than that of zhengdian.

It is not certain whether dancing was included in the zhongxu. Analyzing the Nichang poem of Bai, Yang Yinliu asserts that dancing must be as important as singing in this “middle prelude.” However, Chen Yang (陈旸), in his famous Yueshu (乐书), remarks that “dancers did not enter the stage until the po section of the daqu.”

iii. Po The inner structure of the po section was the most complex among the three sections of daqu. Seven subsections of po can be identified, as listed below:

rupo - xucui - qiangun - shicui - zhonggun - xiepai - shagun
(入破 - 虚催 - 前衮 - 实催 - 中衮 - 歇拍 - 煞衮).

Rupo, the first subsection, literally means “entering the po section” in Chinese. In his Yueshu, Chen Yang describes how the rupo section was different from the preceding zhongxu:

In the rupo section, the jiegu, xianggu, and dagu started to cooperate with the “silk” and “bamboo” instruments, and the rhythm of the music became even faster.

Jiegu, xianggu, and dagu are just three different types of drum. The use of drums together with the string and wind instruments must have made the music of rupo much more energetic and rhythmic than the preceding zhongxu. Following rupo was xucui, or “the false hastening.” Note that there was also a shicui, or “the real hastening.” The main difference between xucui and shicui is elucidated by Yang Yinliu: in xucui, the tempo of the music was already faster than that of rupo, and

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25Wang Weizhen, 143.
26Yang, “Nichang,” 326.
27Chen Yang, Yueshu, as quoted in Wang Weizhen, 145.
28Chen, as quoted in Wang Weizhen, 144.
the drums functioned only as an accompaniment and did not press on the tempo; but in shicui, the tempo became faster as a result of the faster drum beats; this is why the former cui was called a “false” cui whereas the latter a “real” cui.29

In between the false and real cui’s was the qiangun, and later in the po section, there was also a zhonggun and shagun. Gun, according to Yang, refers to the rapidly-repeated notes of the pipa or the rapidly-repeated strokes of the drums;30 thus, the word gun was used in the names of these three subsections in order to describe figuratively the extremely fast tempo of the music in these subsections. In between zhonggun and shagun, there was also a xiepai subsection in which the music stopped momentarily so that the tension of the music built up in po can be slightly relaxed before the end of the daqu. Thus, zhonggun must be the section with the fastest tempo in the whole daqu.

As noted earlier, Chen Yang states that in a daqu, the dancers started to participate in the performance in the rupo section. Very possibly, then, dancing was included in all seven subsections of po. Nevertheless, singing was optional in this final po section of the Tang daqu.

The following table summarizes the structure of the Tang daqu.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Section</th>
<th>Sanxu</th>
<th>Zhongxu</th>
<th>Po</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subsection</td>
<td>sa interlude at the end</td>
<td>paibian - dian - zhengdian</td>
<td>rupo - xucui - qiangun - shicui - zhonggun - xiepai - shagun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Instrumental music only</td>
<td>Singing with instrumental accomp.; possibly with dancing as well.</td>
<td>Dancing with instrumental accomp.; optional singing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The Influence of Foreign Styles on the Tang Daqu

The Tang dynasty was a truly international age. It is not an exaggeration to say that Tang culture was an amalgamation of the culture of the Han majority, the culture of the “Western Region” (西域), and Buddhism. In the shibuji

29Yang Yinliu, Zhongguo Yinyue Shigang (Shanghai: Wanye, 1953), 132.
30Yang, Shigang, 132.
(十部伎) (the ten music-performing divisions) established in early Tang for performances of court banquet music, seven of the ten divisions were in non-

Han styles. Therefore, it is expected that the music of the Tang daqu was heavily influenced by some non-native musical elements, which were absent in the Han daqu. The poet Bai Juyi, in another of his poem, Faquge (法曲歌), complains the incorporation of foreign styles into the Tang daqu:

All the faqu’s now are combined with songs from the barbarians; but barbarian music sounds evil and disordered whereas Han music sounds harmonious!

法曲法曲合夷歌，夷声邪乱华声和。31

A more convincing example showing foreign influence in the Tang daqu comes from the Song writer Shen Kuo (沈括), who describes in his Mengxi Bitan (梦溪笔谈) how Emperor Xuanzong arranges the Nichang Yuyi Daqu (“A Daqu on Variegated Dresses and Feathery Clothes”):

Ye Fashan led Xuanzong to the “Moon Palace” where Xuanzong heard some music of the fairies. The emperor returned to his palace, but he remembered only half of what he heard; he then played the music which he remembered on a flute. At around the same time, Yang Jingshu, a governor from Xiliang, dedicated to Xuanzong the Poluomenqu whose melodies were close to what Xuanzong remembered. Xuanzong then composed the Nichang Yuyi Daqu using the music he heard in the “Moon Palace” in the sanxu, and the Poluomenqu in the main section of the piece.

叶法善尝引上入月宫，闻仙乐。及上归，但记其半，遂於笛中写之。会西凉府都督杨敬述进《婆罗门曲》，与其声调相符，遂以月中所闻为散序，用敬述所进为其腔，而名《霓裳羽衣曲》。32


The *Puluomenqu* (婆罗门曲) mentioned above was a piece originated from India,\(^3\) and very possibly, the “fairy music” which Xuanzong heard in the “Moon Palace” was of Han origin. Emperor Xuanzong, as a Han person, would also tend to write Han-style music when he was composing *Nichang*. Clearly, then, the *Nichang Yuyi Daqu* must contain elements of both Han music and Indian music.

### 4. Instruments Used in the Tang Daqu

Many more types of instruments were used in the Tang daqu than in the Han daqu. Since the Tang daqu was a type of banquet music, the instruments employed in daqu during Tang were similar to those used in the *shibuji*. Some examples listed by Wang\(^3\) include *bianzhong* (编钟), *bianqing* (编磬), *pipa* (琵琶), *konghou* (箜篌), *zheng* (筝), *yaoqiu* (腰鼓), *jiegu* (羯鼓), *sheng* (笙), *di* (笛), *xiaoyao* (箫), and *bili* (筚篥).

On the whole, the Tang daqu is much more aesthetically satisfying as a genre than the Han daqu. The structure of the Tang daqu is not only more elaborate and complete than that of the Han daqu, but is also designed to maintain a continuous increase in tempo so that tremendous tension can be built in both the music and the dance in the final section, resulting in an impressive conclusion of the daqu. The sudden pause in *xiepai* before the end also adds stylistic flair to the composition. Moreover, more instruments were employed in the Tang daqu, and the use of foreign musical elements must have given the music an exotic quality unknown to the musicians in the Han dynasty. This is why the Tang dynasty was the golden age of this grand genre of music.

### III. Epilogue: Daqu in the Song Dynasty and After

After the collapse of the Tang empire in 907, China was once again divided into many small states; but only fifty-three years later, these kingdoms were united by the Zhao family into the Song empire. The Song dynasty (960-1279) was politically much more fragile than the Tang dynasty. Music was supported by the royal family, but not to the extent of the Tang court. Without the enthusiasm of the rulers, daqu no longer flourished in the palaces of the emperors; instead, it became the property of the common people again. Most of

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\(^3\)Yang, “Nichang,” 334.
\(^4\)Wang Weizhen, 152-153.
the Song daqu’s were arrangements of the Tang daqu’s. However, the daqu’s of the two dynasties differ in a number of ways. One of them is mentioned by Shen Kuo:

The daqu’s performed nowadays are often selections of the originals; they do not represent at all the original [Tang] daqu’s. 今人大曲，皆是裁用，悉非大遍也。35

The grandioso structure of the Tang daqu was perhaps too “heavy” for the Song common people, and thus, very seldom was a Tang daqu performed complete during the Song dynasty. This is why the Song daqu was sometimes called zhaibian (摘遍), literally meaning “selected sections.”

In addition, unlike the Tang daqu, singing was not emphasized at all in the daqu of Song. Instrumental playing and dancing were equally important in a Song daqu, and later, the dance of a Song daqu was even designed to convey dramatic action. An example of a Song “dramatic daqu” is the Jianwu (剑舞) (“Sword Dance”) by Shi Hao (史浩).36 At this point, the original conception of the Han and Tang daqu was already lost – the elaborate tripartite structure could no longer be seen, and the essence of daqu had been shifted from the integration of instrumental music, singing, and dancing in the Han and Tang daqu to the dramatic plot in the Song daqu. The daqu of late Song should really be called xiqu (戏曲), or “music for drama,” instead of daqu. It paved the way for the prominence of zaju (杂剧) (“variety musical drama”) in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) following the Song dynasty.

By the Yuan dynasty, daqu was already a dead genre. Nevertheless, relics of daqu can still be traced today in Nanguan (南管) and Chaozhou (潮州) music. Nanguan is an ancient Chinese ensemble tradition preserved in Taiwan. Xu Changhui (许常惠) observes that a famous Nanguan piece, called Meihua Cao (梅花操) (“Maneuver of Plum Blossom”), has a structural organization very similar to that of the Tang daqu.37 Chen Anhua (陈安华) also realizes that the tripartite structure of the famous Chaozhou piece, Hanya Xishui (寒鸦戏水) (“Hawk and Crane”), is analogous to the sanxu-zhongxu-po arrangement of the daqu during the Tang dynasty.38 That the daqu structure can still be observed more than one thousand

35 Zhongyang Minzu, 30.
36 Wang Guowei, Song Yuan Xiqu Shi (Shanghai: Shanghai Shangwu, 1915), 49.
years after its creation confirms that daqu must be a very influential genre in the history of Chinese music.

For Prof. Alan R. Thrasher  
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Bibliography


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