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Ekaterina Zavidovskaia

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Daoist Ritual Manuals in Vietnam

Self-Cultivation, Cosmic Steps, and Healing Talismans

EKATERINA ZAVIDOVSKAIA

Abstract

This paper examines visual representations—charts, talismans, and drawings—in Daoist ritual manuals contained in a collection of about 200 Chinese-language manuscripts from the Sino-Vietnamese border. Today kept in Taiwan, they presumably belonged to ritual specialists of Zhuang and Yao ethnic minority groups. This paper provides detailed analysis of many common graphic and pictorial images featured in Daoist manuals omnipresent in south China and, as this research shows, neighboring Vietnam. Used during the ritual of salvation of the soul of a deceased, these manuals present numerous talismans that formed part of the healing techniques practiced by Daoist priests.

Returns and Reversions

About 200 Chinese-language manuscripts with Daoist ritual manuals from the Sino-Vietnamese border, today kept in Taiwan, presumably belonged to ritual specialists of Zhuang and Yao ethnic minority. Some of them contain graphic representations called either “seven returns, nine cycles” (*qifan jiuzhuan* 七返九轉), or “seven returns, nine reversions” (*qifan jiujuan* 七返九還).

The term originally relates to practices of internal alchemy. Here “seven” represents fire, “nine” stands for metal, and “seven returns, nine

reversions" means to use fire to melt metal. Doing so, practitioners revert metal to its original nature, obtain the immortality pill, and reach the highest rank of sainthood, a rank known as Gold Immortal of the Daluo Heaven (*daluo jinxian* 大羅金仙). The idea is to return or revert (*fan* 返, *huan* 還) to Dao and cosmic origin (Robinet 2011; Baldrian-Hussein 2008). Song-dynasty Numinous Treasure (Lingbao 靈寶) adepts on Mount Tiantai practiced "the salvation of the living and the dead; they were linked with practical exterior methods using cosmological correlations and the force of thunder as well as with interior techniques patterned on inner alchemy" (Despeux 2000, 515). This matches what the manuscripts describe.

The first work to examine is manuscript V34. Its title is not legible, but it gives the Daoist name of its recorder as Daochang 道昌 and the date as *dingmao* 丁卯, i. e., 1867 or 1927. Typologically similar to V30, discussed previously (see Zavidovskaia 2017), here seasons are also connected to heavenly marshals, but with a stronger emphasis on their summoning.

The beginning of the manuscript looks incoherent and may well describe a ritual of the salvation of the dead, transferring them to be re-born or become immortal (*chaosheng* 超生), not unlike requiems or universal salvation rites (*pudu* 普渡). Although showing only few thunder characters, the text belongs to school of Thunder Rites (Leifa 雷法) and frequently mentions the Thunder Lord (Leigong 雷公).

Many passages also deal with visualization. "Imagine that this star enters the Heavenly Palace" (*tiangong* 天宮), a major sphere in the sky, it says, and, "Imagine summoning many stars, visualize your own body as their receptacle and parts of your face like gates." The text also associates the inner organs with marshals and matches the fingers to the Perfected of the Ten Directions (*shiji zhenren* 十極真人). Other visualizations include the ringing of a bell, celestial officials summoning demons, the organs and elixir fields in the body, as well as the breaking of an egg.

In line with classical Thunder Rites, where internal alchemy was at the heart of the Daoist therapeutic and exorcist ritual (Despeux 2000, 471), the text here seems to describe how an officiating priest performs the procedure of "rotating" his vital energy (*qi* 氣) to establish contact with the Thunder deities and save the soul of the deceased.

Fig. 1

Page 38 of V34 (Fig. 1) shows a picture in the context of a liturgy that fights pestilence, portrayed in the shape of a snake. It depicts a method of making a royal boat for the king or god of pestilence (*wen* 瘟), made of paper and sent off along the river or burned to signify the expulsion of demons. Here the boat is also associated with parts of the body. So the ritual of sending off the King of Pestilence on a flower connects to the spleen. Two human figures appear to be a Daoist priest, shown once face forward and once with his back. His hat and a pole are decorated by a shining pearl.

The same text, on pages 45-46 (Figs. 2-3) shows specific diagrams that can be split into pairs of lines with cyclical symbols. The first shows the “nine returns”: kidneys→heart→liver→lungs→spleen→Cinnabar Chamber→Energy Gate→Gate of Life→Divine Palace (part of the celestial Wei 尾 constellation). The “seven reversions,” depicted next, include: veins→*qi*→blood→essence→bones→marrow→bodily form.

They probably are linear versions of the Nine-Star circular diagrams discussed earlier (Zavidovskaia 2017), but it remains unclear whether they represent actual physical movement or are purely about interior action. In any case, they relate to the central thunder deity called Tianting yuanleisheng Puhua tianzun 天應元雷聲普化天尊, also known as the Thunder Ancestor (Leizu 雷祖).

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

On page 54 (Fig. 4), the diagram reads top to bottom, describing the process when the soul is taken to the terrace for the deceased souls. In the position *si* 巳, it transforms into a perfected. The central diagram, then, has five cyclical symbols with the names of five perfected, such as Heavenly Born (Tiansheng 天生) Unchanging (Wuying 無與), Dark Vermillion (Xuanzhu 玄朱), Full Central (Zhengzhong 正中), and Baby Cinabar (Zidan 子丹).

The next page (Fig. 5) gives instructions to “chant this ten times to isolate the demons” while using “the palm to close the demons’ gate,” the one among the three gates—plus humanity and the gods—that leads out from the infernal world. The ceremony is typically performed on the last day of the 7th lunar month, or after the ritual of universal salvation. It also involves shutting off the demons’ route in the belly, closing the earth door, i. e., the mouth, and blocking the gate of humanity, i. e., the nose, through which the demons might enter the body. To the left we is a diagram with eight symbols that features one return and six reversions.

The manuscript stands out due to its intensive use of this alchemical method, known previously mainly for personal self-cultivation in the context of a ritual for the dead.

Cosmic Steps

Book 3 is a work most likely of the Yao 瑤 tradition, famous for its rich pictorial works, nowadays rapidly snapped up by tourists. It presents another diagram showing rituals of cosmic stepping or “pacing the void” (*bugang* 步罡). This comes in two forms.

[The first] begins usually from the star closest to the celestial North Pole. Then, in accord with an ancient, universally accepted numbering of the stars, the walk leads through the eight trigrams arranged in the pattern of the *Luoshu* 洛書—commonly following the sequence of numbers from the so called magic square. (Andersen 1989, 17-18)

Linked with the medieval school of the Three Sovereigns (Sanhuang 三皇), here generally each step comes with an incantation: the adept, standing in the position of the star, evokes the image of its deity (1989, 39).

Its second form is the Pace of Yu (*yubu* 禹步), closely related to the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師). Here "the master follows the outline of a constellation or of a cosmic diagram. Through the dance, he is taking possession of the constellation's or the magic square's forces" (Schipper 1996, 85). In the Vietnam manuscripts, the *Luoshu* version is almost omnipresent, but Book 3 is different.

Page IMG 7133 (Fig. 6) depicts several Dipper constellations. Four diagrams have the Northern (7 stars), Southern Dipper (6), and Eastern Dippers (6), leaving out the Western and Central Dippers, maybe because they are lower in the hierarchy. Two constellations of four unnamed stars each sit around the central part that shows the top Daoist heaven, Daluo tian 大羅天; plus, there is a five-star constellation beneath the Southern and Eastern Dippers.

Page IMG 7148 (Fig. 7) has an image of a Daoist, preceded by a picture of a sacrificial boat (Fig. 8), used to send the soul of the deceased to the otherworld, more specifically to the Western Heaven (*xitian* 西天). Page IMG 4178 (Fig. 9), moreover, seems to show a procedure of taking the soul across the bridge from hell, releasing it from the Iron City (Tiecheng 鐵城). Here the stars of the Northern Dipper next to the Daoist priest appear from the bottom up, showing seven real instead of the canonical nine and expressly mentioning their names.

Book 3 also provides several "cloud" style talismans, notably on page IMG 7200 that activate the bearer during the morning audience. On the following page, the talismans go together with characters "master" and "treasure," while others work during major festivals or purgations (*zhai* 齋), i. e., liturgies for the living, and provide protection when commencing distant travels. In addition, there is also a talisman for the twenty-four nodal periods of the year.

A talisman topped with human head appears variously, e. g., on page IMG 7204 (Fig. 10), matching comparative images in the Daoist Canon associated with the Numinous Treasure (Lingbao 靈寶) school of the Song dynasty (Figs. 11, 12). The text says that this type of talisman should be burned for best effect. Further pages, moreover, show three human figures each, possibly depicting Daoist priests or the Three Pure Ones.

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Rites of Healing

The manuscript V99 has neither title nor front page. Its first part consists of a set of addresses and memorials to various deities, with no talismans. Some characters are supplemented with Vietnamese writing in ballpoint pen. Page 76 has a partial memorial to the Lord of the (Yellow) River and the Tortoise King, the water official of the eight seas. Another page mentions of Annam 大南國 and relates how a local believer got sick. Divination reveals that “the red hibiscus tree (*fusang* 扶桑) from the Water Department (*shuifu* 水府)” is to blame, but that the Great [Jade] Emperor, duly summoned, will descend to the altar and reveal a divine spell to expel the illness.”

The text excels in the outstanding artistic value of its drawings, the refined brush of its calligraphy, and the exquisite talismans of various structure, which seem to be produced by a different school. Page 161 (Fig. 13) shows thunder characters in circles combined with the instruction: “Hold the talisman in your left hand and engage your essence. With the fingers of your right hand make a hand seal [mudra] and pierce the talisman with it. This causes the deities to descend to the altar.”

Page 162 (Fig. 14) reads: “The first talisman cures all sickness and the evil that caused the disorder. Install a lamp installed on the bottom [at the patient’s feet?] and direct the head of a patient lying on the bed upward. This imitates prison. Next, wrap up parts of the body with yellow paper.”

The talisman to the right shows the figure of a patient, some parts painted in yellow, indicating the wrapping of the body. The top presents the names of top deities in circles, notably the Three Primes (Sanyuan 三元). Ritual masters worship them in their human form as generals Tang 唐, Ge 葛 and Zhou 周, and also as the celestial Three Officials (Sanguan 三官). Along the patient’s body write: “Evil enters into prison, life arrives from outside, the demon is suppressed.”

In addition, the text lists manipulations on body that symbolize the five thunders deities catching, handcuffing, and beating the offending demon. Cowering beneath the patient’s feet, the ferocious malevolent entity is suppressed while the patient has both hands and feet hand-

cuffed. The lowest line reads: "Smash the nasty demon! Smash the nasty demon!"

Fig. 13

Fig. 14.

Page 163 further instructs that one talisman should be taken with water, presumably after it is burned, to be effective inside the body. It can make the patient experience spirit powers (*shentong* 神通) and comes with the incantation: "I use the rope to catch the demon!"

Page 164 (Fig. 15) talks of "using yellow paper and vermilion ink" while showing two human figures, one above the other, being attacked by metal and fire. The chant runs, "Standing on one foot, I handcuff the demon, tie him up with yellow and vermilion. As they serve as a medium, the power enters the drawing, and creates a beating without number." Here the priest stands on one foot and performs the Daoist magical calculation *liujia* 六甲, a type of divination associated with the sixty-day cycle (Andersen 1989 33). The demon is driven to hell.

Fig. 15

Fig. 16

Pages 165-66 outline how to ask the one-foot spirit general to summon myriads of gods, including the Lord King of the East and the Highest Lord Lao, to enter the talisman and expel all evil. There is a ritual of cosmic steps, complete with incantations. In addition, priests ask the notorious divine warrior Heisha to enter the body of the patient and kill the demons, using various seals (*yin* 印) with the names of deities. “I capture and beat on Heaven and Earth at each hour, day, month, year...” Some talismans here are to be buried in the ground, others are used in lanterns that stay lit until recovery.

Page 167 (Fig. 16) depicts the process of descent into the underworld prisons to suppress the demons there. It shows a human figure with crossed legs, his torso marked with the names of the three corpses or deathbringers who, on each night of the *gengshen* 庚申 day, report the person’s misdeeds to the heavenly authorities, then punish him with sickness and pestilence (Qin 1994, 321; Maspero 1981: 330-39; Kohn 2015). The depicted figure also has a space for the bearer’s name and a formal

note to the Department of Pestilence. The talisman signifies that some force has been dispatched to bind and destroy the demon, marked on the body at head, chest, and feet, where its influence is most potent. In addition, blocks are put on the sides of the body.

Fig. 17

Fig. 18

Page 168 (Fig. 17) has a talisman depicting the suppression of the demon in the center as he is attacked by spirits described as numinous entities (*ling* 靈), incense is placed all around, and four types of demons are left outside. The top shows the removal of other magical influences coming from spirit writing and talismans, shackles. The bottom shows the dissipation of evil influences and all illnesses. This talisman is to be carried on the body.

The talisman on page 169 (Fig. 18) serves to eliminate evil influences. Made in the shape of a human figure, it should be kept at the head of the bed. The sides of the body show orders to great generals (*dajiang* 大將), inside the body's contours there is a command that all evil from the "actual body" (*zhengshen* 正身), as opposed to its replica, the paper effigy (*tishen* 替身), is to be dispatched driven to prison. Five knights and five officials stand near the shoulders of a figure. Human figures on Pages 184, 185 (Figs. 19-20) are to be made on yellow paper with use of cinnabar ink, they represent the generals of the five directions as specified above their heads. Their purpose is to catch and defeat demons causing pestilence and cleanse their area of control. They are placed in the five corners or around the sickbed. All the figures have the corpses drawn in the chest area. The generals of the north and south seem to provide stronger protection, given the talismans on the contours of their bodies. They represent a Thunder Rite centered on destroying evil forces by means of thunder military deities (Reiter 2011).

To sum up, the manuscript V99 stands out because of its elaborate talismans used in rituals of healing contagious diseases and pestilence. Daoist talismans were widely used to cure and block pestilence, commonly found both throughout China and its adjacent regions. From a structural perspective, the talismans can be described as a visual representation of the ritual act itself: they use many details and symbols that imitate the priest's actions of pointing at demons and expelling disease.

In addition, they also depict the internal agents within the patient's body responsible for illness or well-being, such as, most importantly the three corpses or deathbringers. Some talismans use a human figure as the replica of the patient's body, subjecting it to exorcism. In another case, the talisman depicts only the head, an incantation written beneath it. However, the ritual affects the replica, even if partial, and its effect carries over into the person's actual real body.

"Rain" Talismans

There are many talismans with special characters in the manuscripts that are difficult to figure out. What exactly is their system? What are the principles of their composition?

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Most obviously, they tend to consist of the word for “rain” (*yu* 雨) plus something below, putting together various characters and radicals according to context and often also using the word “demon” (*gui* 鬼). Such talismans seem quite similar to those usually drawn by Daoist priests for sundry purposes, such as those shown in Henri Doré’s *Researches into Chinese superstitions* (Fig. 21; 1914) and collected by Alexeev (Fig. 22; 1910, 37; also Zhang and Wu 2014; Liu 1999).

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

For example, the talisman in Fig. 21 uses three characters containing “rain” at the top, indicating the three highest heavens. This is followed by three characters containing the radical “demon” and four with the word for “food.”¹ Talismans in manuscripts from Vietnam, too, use “rain” as a header, forming part of a sacred word, a feature sometimes called “rain header characters” (*yugaizi* 雨蓋字; Zhang and Lee 2005, 44). Here the word “rain” is more than just rain: it signifies thunder in all its potency. The talismans accordingly fulfill an active function in the ritual texts, implying the use of thunder to fight, block, and expel evil forces and demons of disease. They enhance the power of both text and ritual. As Catherine Despeux says,

A number of texts, especially since the Song ritual compendia, describe the rules that apply to the proper drawing and preparation of the talismans, including preparatory measures, proper times and conditions as well as ac-

¹ For studies of talismans both in historical context and in terms of structural typology, see Chen 1942; Drexler 1994; Liu 1995; Liu 1999.

companying visualizations. Few instructions, on the other hand, have come down to us regarding the composition of diagrams. (2000, 534)

Scholars so far have not come to any firm conclusions about the meaning of the "rain header characters." I find that they follow a fixed pattern, but show a variation of elements that may well depend on the ritual specialist working within his own hereditary tradition. Despeux also mentions that drawing a talisman happens in two phases—separating the shape (*sanxing* 散形) by tracing the elements one by one, then putting them together to assemble the shape (*quxing* 取形). This method is often used in Thunder Rites:

Fig. 23

Fig. 24

It allows the clear distinction of the originally separate elements that created it; in others, the various parts are meshed together inextricably so that the talisman becomes one integrated whole. A good sample for the latter are certain talismans used in thunder rites where the overall pattern obscures the various internal parts. (Despeux 2000, 534; see also Liu 1999, 106)

V 142, page 5, shows these “rain headers” in the process of creation (Fig. 23). The text above and below describes the sequence of adding the brush strokes. In addition, there is also the process of “walking” along the cyclical symbols, which signifies separating and assembling the talisman.

V99, Page 161, in addition, first presents a prayer: “May the Tiangang 天罡 star of the Northern Dipper give me power to fill my body with perfect energy and blow the divine power into the talisman!” (Fig. 26). Then it shows a string of thunder talismans, all consisting of “demon” plus various other radicals, signifying different effects upon nasty sprites. It also has instructions: “Hold the talisman with your right hand and blow on it with incense; pierce it with the fingers of your left hand held in the form of a hand seal.” This procedure will make heavenly generals and troops descend to and dispel demons.

V98, of the same author and owner as V99, devotes its first pages purely to talismans, with some variations (Fig. 25). The intended subject, a demon or evil person, is taken into a circle so that various forces can attack it from all directions. At the top, the talismans show the standard vignette signifying the Celestial Master ordering all evil forces to disperse.

Fig. 25

Fig. 26

V100, page 26, next, contains a number of talismans whose structure imitates the human body (Fig. 27). They include characters on the head as well as written formulas on the torso, specifying its purpose and two lines that describe the sequence of pacing the Northern Dipper. The lower part of the body seems to be associated with demonic forces concentrated there.

Fig. 27

The calligraphy in V 100, page 29, proves that the manuscript belongs to the same author and tradition as V98, V99 (Fig. 28). The page starts with a talisman to be placed at the head of the bed. It shows an eye and says, “The eye holds sun and moon.” Above is a string of cyclical symbols, clamped down between eight demons. To the left it shows a “talisman of the eight arrays of the mysterious altar” to be consumed with water. Here the eight trigrams are accompanied by combinations of characters, differing from one another in symbolic writing.

Fig. 28

Fig. 29

V48, page 16, several times uses the word “prohibit” (*jin* 禁) in talismans that otherwise mainly employ the radicals for “sun,” “moon,” “mouth,” and more, together with the regalia of the Celestial Master (Fig. 29). Similar talismans resembling human figures became quite common after the rise of Thunder Rites in the Song.

V56 has neither title nor front page. Page 2 is an example of the combination of active visualization (*xiang* 想), awareness of the inner organs, and application of cyclical symbols plus “rain header characters” (Fig. 30). It probably serves in a procedure of opening the demon gate for general salvation while pacing the *Luoshu*. The composition of characters, with occasional other elements, like a bar under “rain,” should be read in context. Generally there seem to be two traditions: special talismans that present a separate entity containing magical and healing powers; and, more commonly, “rain header characters” spread through the entire liturgical text, enhancing the potency of the work as a whole.

Fig. 30

Miscellaneous Diagrams

Further manuscripts contain pictures and diagrams that—as far as research shows so far—differ from standard motifs, showing that even highly conservative Daoist ritual manuals, which normally present information accessible only to trained adepts, may yet have individual variations.

V143-2, page 292 035 presents a combination of trigrams, rain header characters, cyclical symbols, and the word for “sun” on the right (Fig. 31). It may well depict the process of the soul’s passing into the abode of the immortals (*xianjie* 仙界). The page also shows four “thunder” characters, representing the heads of nine demons who are taking their pleasure (*le* 樂) but are now put behind bars (*ge* 格). Then there are Queen Mother of the West and her partner, the Lord King of the East as well as images of wells water, the trigram for “land.” All this signifies well-being, the soul’s “entering the Hall of Bliss” (*futang* 福堂).

Fig. 31

Fig. 32

Page 292 049, on the left, presents a diagram of pacing the stars together with an incantation of Thunder Ancestor: “The body of the priest becomes the North Pole, the Lord Lao, and the roar of the lion” (Fig. 32). To the right, it has a chart possibly showing a visualization system of protection for the priest’s body. One of the protectors is the Perfect Warrior Zhenwu 真武 (here written 鎮武), with the prayer: “May the Great General of the Thunderbolt protect my body!”

Page 292 051 has an illustration of more details, including a cup of clear, probably hot, water to drive away nasty sprites and a long snake that dispels demons (Fig. 33). The rain header character contains the word “imperial” (*yu* 御), joined by a picture of a Seven Star sword of the Celestial Master.

Fig. 33

Another relevant source here is V28, entitled *Xinlu guigu xiansheng gua ke* 新錄鬼谷生先卦科 (Newly Recorded Divination Rites of the Master of the Demon Valley), a rare text relevant for ancestor worship. It is dated to 1910, the forth year of Dyu-Tân 維新肆 (1907-1916), and the owner’s name is Su Shunqing 蘇順慶.

The work presents of divination methods related to various historical or legendary figures, mainly of the Warring States period: Jiang Tai-gong 姜太公, Emperor Wu 武帝, the Duke of Zhou 周公, and Lü Dongbin

呂洞賓 (Fig. 34). Each name is accompanied by a combination of five "sun" and "moon" characters, plus their various combinations, ranging from auspicious through neutral to inauspicious. It may well reflect a Confucian type of divination.

Fig. 34

Page 39 presents a chart that determines which taboos (*ji* 忌) family members have to observe with regard to their deceased ancestors (*jiagui* 家鬼). Its central panel gives the number of days in the lunar month, while various lines point to days best for prayers for the living and the dead. This impacts the good fortune of the living as well as the well-being of the family's life stock (fig. 35).

Folder 5 is another divination book, consisting of thirty-six pages. It begins with methods of divination for various life matters, such as selecting lucky dates to do certain things. Then it deals with diseases, reflect-

ing the belief that ailments are the result of an unwholesome interaction with deceased parents, spirits, or ancestral tombs.

Fig. 35

For example, on page IMG-00015, the text has ballpoint writings in Vietnamese, says, “See urine channel sickness and sand, child’s disease,” or maybe “See child’s disease of Hung,” referring to cases when children suffer fever. Page IMG-00017 again repeats this phrase and includes the names of local deities, otherwise unknown.

Another big part of the text deals with divination for marriage, using cyclical symbols, the five phases, and more. The five emperors of the five directions are particularly efficacious in selecting the right wife.

Conclusion

The various ritual practices documented in this collection of manuscripts from among ethnic minority groups rural North Vietnam share a great deal of similarity with those in neighboring Guangxi. It is most likely

that the manuals were transmitted from China, but it is hard to track down earlier or even parallel Chinese versions, as much as it is next to impossible to determine their relationship to the more standard texts included in the Daoist Canon. Most manuscripts present a variety of methods for different ritual purposes. They tend to be truncated or corrupt, often highly abbreviated, reflecting a long history of being copied, abridged, and recompiled to serve as handy tools of local Daoist priests.

The practitioners of these liturgies may belong to either of two categories. 1) Daoists (*daogong* 道公) or non-celibate priests, masters of civil altars (*wentan* 文壇), who claim to belong to the Maoshan 茅山 and Zhengyi 正一 schools. Reciting Chinese scriptures, they work both in North Vietnam and throughout Guangxi. 2) Ritual Masters (*shigong* 師公) or masters of military altars (*wutan* 武壇), who define themselves as associates of the Meishan 梅山 school. They perform rituals in Chinese and also in Zhuang, as documented in works using the old Zhuang script.

The texts mention both schools and lineages. Their priests can perform rituals in Chinese, but they may also cooperate with local shamans. They make ample use of Chinese and Daoist cosmology and take frequent recourse to diagrams, such as the ones described above. Most common among them are those showing how to pace the Nine Palaces or the *Luoshu*, closely followed by thunder talismans, notably with rain header characters, as well as divination charts. They all serve the needs of the community, the living and the dead, activating healing and marriage as much as for mortuary and salvation rituals.

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