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THE STATE-EMBEDDED ORGANIZATIONAL BROKER: HOW COLLECTIVE ACTION DILEMMAS ARE RESOLVED IN NEIGHBORHOOD RENEWAL

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Abstract

How does governance consensus emerge in high-distrust, high-heterogeneity urban neighborhoods where both routine bureaucratic mobilization and community self-organization fail? Through a Bayesian process-tracing analysis of one neighborhood renewal project in Shanghai—where 1,126 households reached 100% agreement within forty-nine days despite 97 distinct floor-plan configurations and entrenched state–society distrust—this study establishes that consensus formation depends on a two-phase organizational brokerage mechanism. In the prerequisite phase, structural embeddedness (M_1) provides the legitimacy platform without which no negotiation can begin. In the recursive coupling phase, information brokerage (M_2) and resource brokerage (M_3) operate concurrently in mutually reinforcing feedback: information translation creates the cognitive conditions for material proposals to be credibly evaluated, while iterative resource adjustments generate new informational content for diffusion. This study

introduces the concept of the State-Embedded Organizational Broker (SEOB) and highlights political authorization as a critical brokerage resource that has received limited explicit attention in existing brokerage research. In doing so, it extends brokerage theory into a state-embedded governance context and provides a structured analytical approach for examining mechanism-based coordination in complex urban settings.

Keywords:

Urban Renewal, Organizational Brokerage, Governance Consensus, Process Tracing

1. Introduction

On May 15, 2023, Shanghai's F neighborhood reached a 98.6% household signing rate on the first day of a formal renewal agreement, achieving full participation within forty-nine days. This outcome is striking given the context: 1,126 households with 97 distinct floor plans, longstanding disputes over shared kitchens and bathrooms, and eroded trust in official commitments. Under such conditions—extreme heterogeneity, entrenched conflict, and low institutional credibility—stalemate would have been expected. Understanding how near-unanimous agreement emerged is the central puzzle of this study.

The puzzle reflects a broader governance dilemma. Neighborhood renewal is a collective action problem in contested urban commons: benefits are shared, but costs fall unevenly, creating holdout incentives (Ostrom, 1990; Olson, 1965; Webster, 2007). Standard theory assumes minimum institutional credibility, which often fails in Chinese cities. Repeated unfulfilled promises generate defensive skepticism, where official proposals are discounted before their content is evaluated (O'Brien & Li, 2006; Hurst, 2009). Horizontal distrust among neighbors combines with vertical distrust toward the state, rendering conventional administrative tools ineffective.

Prior research documents state-led interventions such as campaign-style mobilization and non-routine organizational forms (Perry, 2007; Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Mertha, 2009). These studies clarify when interventions occur but leave the causal process underspecified (Tsai, 2007). Brokerage theory highlights how actors bridge structural gaps via information and resource intermediation (Burt, 1992; Gould & Fernandez, 1989). Its assumptions—neutral

brokers without formal authority—do not hold in F neighborhood, where the broker simultaneously exercised political authority, controlled resources, and represented the community.

This study uses theory-testing process tracing to examine F neighborhood. We argue that consensus in high-distrust, heterogeneous settings relies on a two-phase causal architecture. First, structural embeddedness establishes legitimacy: a politically authorized, locally present organization provides a credible interface across boundaries. Without it, negotiation stalls. Second, information and resource brokerage unfold recursively: material adjustments generate new information requiring translation; successful translation enhances the credibility of further commitments. These dynamics reshape both cognition and incentives. We evaluate mechanisms via Bayesian process tracing, using a Hoop Test for structural embeddedness, a Straw-in-the-Wind Test for information brokerage, and a Smoking Gun Test for resource brokerage.

The study contributes three insights. It introduces the State-Embedded Organizational Broker (SEOB) as a distinct form where political authorization functions as a brokerage resource. It clarifies a two-phase causal process linking intervention to credible coordination. It also offers a replicable methodological template for mechanism-based research in complex urban governance.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Compound Dilemma: Horizontal Coordination Failure and Vertical Legitimacy Crisis

Urban neighborhood renewal poses a paradigmatic collective action problem (Ostrom, 1990; Olson, 1965): individually rational holdout behavior undermines collectively optimal renovation outcomes. Declining horizontal trust further impedes spontaneous cooperation (Putnam, 2001; He & Wu, 2009; Wu, 2015). In urban China, however, the governance challenge is more complex than standard collective action theory anticipates. Residents frequently invoke the state's own declared commitments to resist implementation—what O'Brien and Li (2006) term "rightful resistance"—while chronic administrative credibility erosion from prior policy failures generates a pervasive "defensive skepticism" (Hurst, 2009).

The result is a compound dilemma: horizontal distrust among residents is compounded by vertical distrust toward the state (Shue & Wong, 2007), such that even formally beneficial

policy proposals may fail to be evaluated on their substantive merits, simultaneously raising the transaction costs of consensus and undermining the legitimating capacity of standard administrative channels.

2.2 State-Led Governance and Non-Routine Organizational Intervention

Scholars have long framed state-led collaborative governance as a necessary corrective to self-organization failures (Stoker, 2018; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Zhu et al., 2019). This necessity is particularly acute in urban redevelopment; evolutionary game theory suggests that without deliberate policy intervention, resident-led projects inevitably collapse into strategic dilemmas where individual rationality erodes collective optimality (Chen et al., 2025). This theoretical tension is mirrored in practice, where the persistent focus on physical rehabilitation often crowds out the institutional design necessary to resolve such coordination failures (Qin et al., 2025). To bridge this gap, the Chinese approach typically shifts the focus from mere physical intervention to the structural embedding of political organizations within grassroots communities (Perry, 2007). Such intervention serves as a strategic response to "fragmented authoritarianism," where institutional veto points necessitate adaptive, non-routine, and often campaign-style mobilization structures to bypass standard bureaucratic inertia (Mertha, 2009; Heilmann & Perry, 2011).

These insights suggest that structural embeddedness—the physical and institutional insertion of politically authorized actors into community fields—may play an important role in enabling coordination under conditions of distrust. Yet existing work remains largely descriptive. It documents the deployment of non-routine organizational forms without specifying the causal mechanisms through which embeddedness translates into governance outcomes.

2.3 Brokerage Theory and Its Limits

Brokerage theory explains how actors positioned at structural holes—gaps between disconnected groups—facilitate coordination and create value (Burt, 1992, 2004; Gould & Fernandez, 1989). Two brokerage functions are particularly relevant. Information intermediation mitigates the "market for lemons" problem (Akerlof, 1970) by helping actors align expectations across fragmented networks (Lin, 1982; Obstfeld, 2005). Resource brokerage involves aligning vertical institutional resources with horizontal community needs in ways that reshape individual cost-benefit calculations (Olson, 1965; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993).

However, this body of theory was developed primarily in market-network and Western civil society contexts. It typically assumes that brokers occupy relatively neutral positions and lack strong institutional affiliations (Brass et al., 2004; Fernandez & Gould, 1994). This assumption becomes difficult to sustain in the Chinese governance context, where the broker often simultaneously holds political authority, controls access to resources, and claims community representation. Under such conditions, existing theory provides limited guidance for understanding how brokerage operates when authority, resource control, and trust are concentrated within a single organizational actor.

2.4 Research Gaps and Contributions

Three interrelated gaps emerge from this review. First, a process gap: existing research treats the micro-level consensus formation process largely as a black box, focusing on whether collective action succeeds rather than through what causal mechanisms it does so (Tsai, 2007). Second, a mechanism specification gap: the causal architecture through which distinct brokerage functions combine to overcome collective action failure has not been systematically traced; the literature often treats these components as interchangeable or additive despite their different roles in practice (Fung, 2006; Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Third, a theoretical scope gap: dominant brokerage frameworks presuppose neutral intermediaries and cannot adequately account for governance contexts in which political authorization shapes both the capacity to act and the credibility of action (Burt, 1992; Cook & Emerson, 1978).

This study addresses these gaps by introducing the State-Embedded Organizational Broker (SEOB) concept and specifying a two-phase causal model, which is then evaluated through Bayesian process tracing.

3. Research Design

3.1 Case Selection

This study applies theory-testing process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) to a revelatory deviant case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2007). The F neighborhood case is selected based on three criteria. First, structural severity: 1,126 households with 97 heterogeneous floor plans, combined with documented administrative credibility erosion, represent an extreme instance of the compound dilemma. Second, outcome clarity: 100% agreement without coercion within 49 days provides the analytical contrast necessary to isolate causal mechanisms. Third,

information visibility: the "1126 Work Model" archives, floor-plan consolidation blueprints, legislative records, and interviews supply the fine-grained evidence required for rigorous inference.

3.2 Bayesian Logic Tests

Process tracing evaluates whether theoretically derived causal mechanisms are present in the empirical record by applying differentiated evidential tests (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, pp. 95–117). This study applies three tests: a Hoop Test to M_1 (evidence is a necessary condition; its absence is decisively disconfirming); a Straw-in-the-Wind Test to M_2 (evidence incrementally increases the probability of mechanism presence without being conclusive); and a Smoking Gun Test to M_3 (evidence strongly confirms the mechanism because it is highly unlikely to be observed absent the posited process).

Table 3-1: Bayesian Logic Tests and Their Application in This Study

Test	Logical Property	Application in This Study
Hoop Test	Necessary, not unique	Verifying the necessity of the Temporary Party Branch as a legitimate cross-boundary hub (M_1)
Straw-in-the-Wind Test	Neither necessary nor unique	Assessing cognitive alignment in M_2 : shift from defensive suspicion to provisional acceptance
Smoking Gun Test	Not necessary, but unique	Confirming causal sufficiency of M_3 : technical consolidation of 97 floor plans into 8 standardized types

3.3 Causal Architecture

The causal architecture specifies the logical and dynamic relations among the three mechanisms. Structural embeddedness (M_1) constitutes a necessary precondition: it provides a politically authorized, locally present platform bridging the state–community structural gap. Information brokerage (M_2) and resource brokerage (M_3) operate recursively, with information translation reducing cognitive uncertainty and aligning expectations, while material adjustments generate new information for further translation. This process continues iteratively until both cognitive and material conditions for household-level consent are satisfied. Accordingly, the mechanism is conceptualized as a two-phase structure: a prerequisite phase (M_1) followed by a recursive coupling phase ($M_2 \leftrightarrow M_3$). In the recursive phase, the interaction between M_2 and M_3 is co-constitutive rather than strictly sequential, consistent with the *tertius iungens* orientation

(Obstfeld, 2005), in which the broker actively synthesizes rather than merely transmits information.

Table 3-2: Causal Architecture of the Organizational Brokerage Mechanism

Phase	Causal Part	Function	Logical Role	Logic Test
I: Prerequisite	M ₁ : Structural Embeddedness	Establishes a legitimate, authorized platform bridging the state–community structural gap	Necessary condition for M ₂ and M ₃	Hoop Test (Necessity)
II: Recursive	M ₂ : Information Brokerage	Translates proposals, coordinates cognitive expectations across actors	Recursively interacts with M ₃	Straw-in-the-Wind
II: Recursive	M ₃ : Resource Brokerage	Adjusts material allocations and institutional resources	Recursively interacts with M ₂ incentives collapse	Smoking Gun (Sufficiency)

3.4 Data Triangulation

The empirical foundation of this study is built upon a rigorous triangulation of multiple authoritative data sources to mitigate potential biases in official narratives. The primary data corpus consists of official administrative guidelines regarding the "1126 Work Model" and the "Eight Methods of Mass Work," which define the formal institutional design. These are cross-validated with legislative archives, such as the "Representative Proposal on Accelerating Neighborhood F's Renovation," and longitudinal media accounts from Xinhua News Agency. While targeted interviews with frontline coordinators provide supplemental insights into micro-interactions, the study utilizes the verified technical outcomes of the renewal process—specifically the documented consolidation of 97 heterogeneous floor plans into 8 standardized types—to provide objective evidence of the substantive efficacy of resource brokerage.

4. Case Analysis: Empirical Investigation of the Organizational Brokerage Mechanism

4.1 M₁: Structural Embeddedness—Establishing the Legitimacy Platform

4.1.1 The Failure of Routine Mobilization

Built in the 1960s as Shanghai's first five-story workers' village, F neighborhood had by 2022 accumulated severe structural deficits: three to four households shared a single kitchen and bathroom; the smallest units measured just 6.5 square meters; electrical wiring had long exceeded its 20–30 year safety life; aging sewage pipes caused chronic backflows for lower-floor residents. Beyond physical decay, the governance environment was characterized by a compound trust deficit. The 1,126 households held 97 distinct floor-plan configurations, each generating different renovation expectations. Decades of friction over shared facilities had eroded horizontal trust. In addition, residents demonstrated limited understanding of renovation policies and low confidence in routine administrative communications. Under these conditions, conventional sub-district mobilization proved ineffective, as officials struggled to engage residents meaningfully.

4.1.2 Structural Embeddedness: Establishing a Legitimate Hub

In response, Jing'an District Organization Department deployed an unconventional intervention: ten cadres with specialized professional backgrounds were seconded from district-level agencies to reside in the neighborhood, constituting a Temporary Party Branch. This structural reconfiguration provided three key functions unavailable to routine channels: Political authorization: High-level backing allowed cadres to coordinate resources across departmental boundaries; Physical presence: On-site residency made the state's intentions locally verifiable ; Cross-functional coordination: Planning, housing, legal, and public security functions were integrated within a single coordination platform.

As one stationed cadre explained:

"Initially, residents did not engage with routine officials, as they were uncertain who had actual authority. Once we established the Temporary Party Branch within the neighborhood, residents understood who was responsible and whom to consult for decision-making. "

The Temporary Party Branch functioned as a cross-boundary hub, bridging the structural gap between formal bureaucracy and a fragmented, distrustful community.

4.1.3 Hoop Test: Verifying Necessity

Table 4-1 shows the Hoop Test for M_1 , demonstrating that structural embeddedness is necessary for effective administrative mobilization.

Table 4-1: Table 4-1 Logical Test for Mechanism M_1 (Hoop Test)

Dimension	Description
Causal Part	M ₁ : Structural Embeddedness
Observable Hypothesis	Without a non-routine organization holding high political authorization, administrative mobilization cannot overcome barriers arising from accumulated interest friction and low trust.
Empirical Evidence	(1) Routine mobilization prior to intervention was largely ineffective. (2) Deployment of 10 cadres via the Temporary Party Branch established a legitimate and physically present coordination platform.
Competing Explanation Ruled Out	Standard sub-district methods had failed; the Temporary Party Branch was the unique legitimate contact point enabling subsequent brokerage activities.

4.2 M₂ and M₃: Recursive Interaction—Information Alignment and Resource Calibration

4.2.1 The Dual Constraints: Information Asymmetry and Interest Heterogeneity

Following the establishment of the legitimacy platform M₁, the brokerage process encountered two structural bottlenecks. First, Information Asymmetry: The reconstruction policy was framed in "bureaucratic logic" (e.g., plot ratios, technical area metrics) that remained opaque to the "life-world" of residents. This opacity increased the transaction costs of consensus, fueling "defensive skepticism" toward state intentions. Second, Interest Heterogeneity: The 1,126 households possessed 97 distinct floor-plan configurations, creating an extreme fragmentation of spatial expectations. Any standardized, "one-size-fits-all" administrative solution would struggle to achieve incentive compatibility. These constraints were recursively linked: unresolved technical uncertainty hindered material negotiation, while the lack of tangible resource solutions exacerbated cognitive distrust.

4.2.2 Information Brokerage: Institutional Translation and Social Proof (M₂)

The Temporary Party Branch bridged the gap between administrative and resident rationalities through Institutional Translation. The core of M₂ was to re-frame abstract policy indicators into concrete, verifiable outcomes. Cadres utilized "Boundary Objects"—specifically 3D spatial models and individualized blueprints—to create a shared cognitive space. A prominent example is Ms. Xu, a resident initially vocal in her opposition to the housing structure. Through sustained engagement, cadres translated the technical advantages into her personal

benefit logic. Once converted, Ms. Xu shifted from an "object of work" to a "governance agent," leveraging her peer status to assist in 28 household signings, thereby providing the social proof necessary to lower the collective threshold for cooperation.

4.2.3 Resource Brokerage: Achieving Incentive Compatibility via Technical Synthesis M₃)

Simultaneously, the Project Coordination Group executed a Synthesis of Fragmented Interests. The "97-to-8" consolidation was a process of technical-material calibration responding directly to household feedback. Vertically, brokers exercised administrative discretion to secure a 50/50 fiscal cost-sharing for elevator installation (¥240,000/unit). Horizontally, the refinement of design details (e.g., ventilation and orientation) guaranteed material reciprocity and Pareto-improving outcomes.

The relationship between M₂ and M₃ was co-constitutive rather than linear. Each round of translation (M₂) informed the technical refinement of floor plans (M₃), while each material breakthrough—such as the finalized elevator subsidy—functioned as a "credibility token" that validated subsequent policy communications M₂). This recursive loop continued until cognitive alignment and interest compatibility were simultaneously satisfied, enabling the final governance consensus.

Figure 4-1 illustrates the recursive interaction between these mechanisms, where M₁ provides the structural foundation for the continuous feedback loop between information translation (M₂) and resource coordination ((M₃).

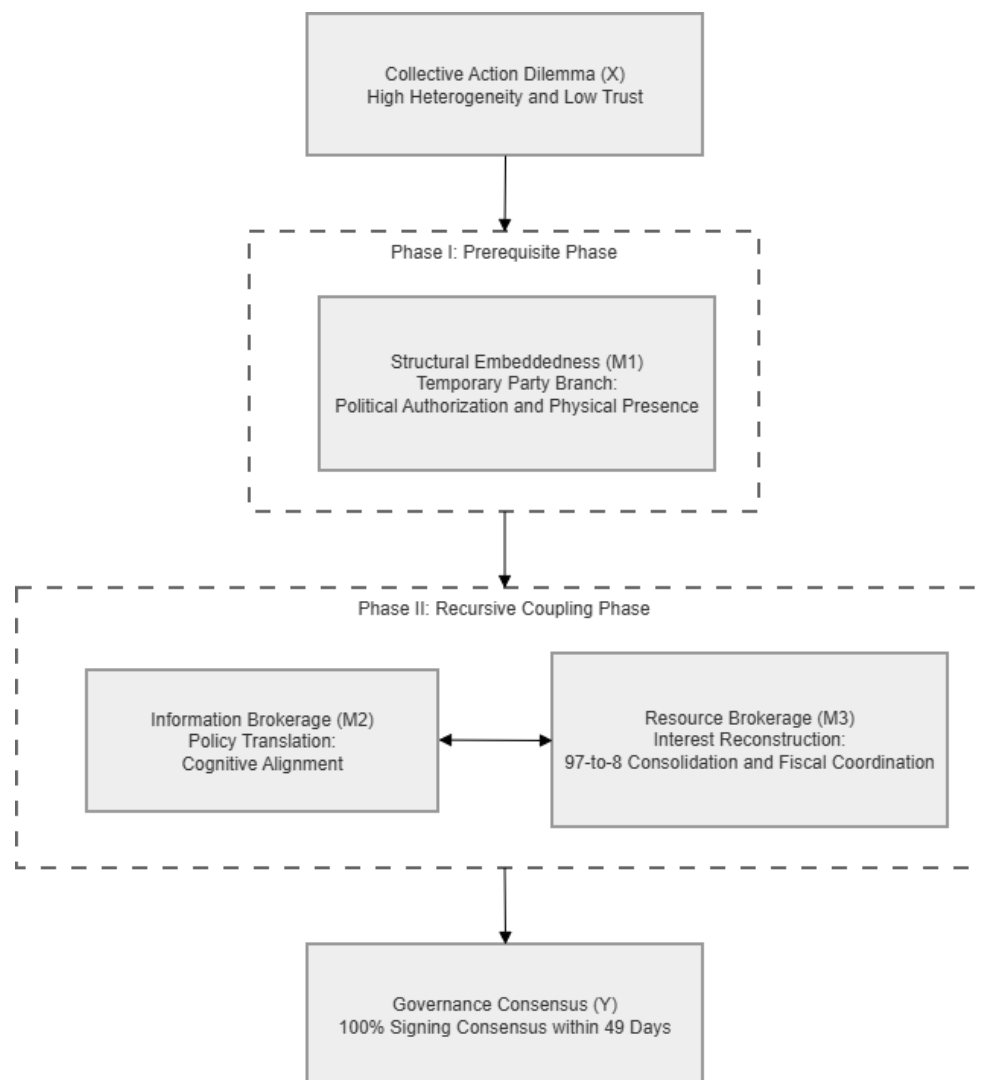


Figure 4-1: The Recursive Coupling of the SEOB Mechanism

4.2.4 Logic Tests

To verify the internal validity of the SEOB mechanism, this study applies Bayesian logic tests to evaluate the evidentiary weight of the observed process. Specifically, a Straw-in-the-Wind Test is applied to M₂ to assess how policy translation incrementally increased the probability of consensus, while a Smoking Gun Test is applied to M₃ to confirm whether the complex technical and fiscal equilibrium achieved serves as sufficient evidence of a functioning resource brokerage mechanism.

Table 4-2 Logical Test for Mechanism M₂ (Straw-in-the-Wind Test)

Dimension	Content Description
Observable	Information translation (M ₂) should reduce uncertainty and shift

Hypothesis	resident perception from suspicion toward provisional acceptance.
Empirical Evidence	(1) Use of 3D models and blueprints as boundary objects; (2) Conversion of high-resistance individuals (e.g., Ms. Xu) into project advocates; (3) High synchronization between clarification and signing velocity.
Logical Inference	The conversion of key opponents into active coordinators provides strong "social proof," significantly increasing the probability that M2 is a functional causal part.
Test Result	Passed (Probability Enhanced)

Table 4-3 Logical Test for Mechanism M₃ (Smoking Gun Test)

Dimension	Content Description
Observable Hypothesis	Resource brokerage (M ₃) should achieve incentive compatibility by converging heterogeneous demands into standardized, feasible outcomes.
Empirical Evidence	(1) Consolidation of 97 floor-plans into 8 standardized layouts; (2) Vertical mobilization of cross-jurisdictional fiscal subsidies; (3) Guaranteed net area gains for all households.
Logical Inference	Achieving a technical and fiscal equilibrium across 97 disparate interest groups is highly unlikely to be observed absent a functioning M ₃ mechanism capable of multi-agency coordination.

5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

The study concludes that governance consensus in high-distrust urban environments originates from a biphasic causal structure. Structural Embeddedness (M₁) provides the essential legitimacy platform, functioning as a strict prerequisite for all subsequent interventions. Following this, Information Brokerage (M₂) and Resource Brokerage (M₃) operate as a recursive feedback loop rather than a linear sequence. This interaction ensures that technical adjustments remain cognitively accessible while policy translations stay grounded in material commitments. The 100% agreement achieved in the F neighborhood case confirms the causal necessity of this integrated architecture.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The State-Embedded Organizational Broker (SEOB) reconceptualizes classical brokerage by shifting the focus from informational rent-seeking to institutional repair. This model bridges the gap between administrative systems and atomized communities through a dual mandate of political authority and grassroots trust. Furthermore, the biphasic structure offers diagnostic value for identifying governance failures. Phase I failure stems from a lack of a legitimate platform, whereas Phase II failure results from the decoupling of information and resource functions. Finally, political authorization is identified as a meta-resource. It enables the mobilization of cross-jurisdictional assets and validates organizational promises in settings where administrative credibility has eroded.

5.3 Policy Implications

First, organizational legitimacy must precede material incentives. Establishing an authorized platform (M_1) is more effective than escalating compensation in low-trust environments. Second, policy translation should be recognized as a distinct professional competency. The ability to render bureaucratic logic into life-world terms is essential for reducing cognitive barriers to cooperation. Third, technical design functions as a political instrument of credibility. Tangible outcomes, such as floor-plan consolidation, serve as physical tokens of the state's commitment that verbal assurances cannot replace.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The SEOB mechanism presupposes high political authorization and fiscal flexibility. Future research should apply this framework to diverse administrative cultures, such as those in Southeast Asia or Latin America, to test its generalizability. Additionally, a longitudinal study of the F neighborhood case following the resident return will provide insights into the long-term sustainability of the consensus achieved through organizational brokerage.

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