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Report

Global trends and Asia 2060

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Will Asia lead the world in green technologies and in the political–economic transition to sustainability? Can Asia bury past conflicts and create stronger regional institutions including perhaps, step by step, an Asian Union? In what ways could Asia's traditional cultures – Islamic, Tantric, Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist and Vedic – be resources in inventing an alternative more hybrid cultures?

These three questions were the core of deliberations of fifteen leading Asian scholars from Oman, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, Taiwan, Iran, China, South Korea, the United States and Malaysia. Held at Tamkang University, November 3–5, 2010, the conference was a joint project of the Foundation for the Future (www.futurefoundation.org), Kyung Hee University and Tamkang University's Graduate Institute of Futures Studies, created by the founding university president, Clement Chang, and now chaired by Jiang-bang Deng.

Facilitated by Sesh Velamoor of the Foundation for the future, Professor Jae Ryong Song of Kyung Hee University and Professor Sohail Inayatullah of Tamkang University, the two and a half day conference was conducted in a dialogical style. Tan Sri Dzulkifli, President and Vice-chancellor of University Sains Malaysia gave the opening keynote – focusing on the devastating implications of climate change on Asia's poor, and the need to create appropriate technologies for sustainability and poverty eradication. However most of the meeting was conducted through dialogical fishbowls. Earlier, Clement Chang provided welcome comments, urging that participants not only consider the future based on current trajectories but that they explore alternative futures, and move the debate on realist thinking to possibilities. Futures Studies, he argued, is not just a technical discipline but an opening up of imagination.

Short plenary presentations followed on the conference themes, with specific topics and questions as: what will happen when water becomes increasingly scarce in Asia (more water wars?); can a history of conflict lead to Asian integration?; can Asia move from the hyper capitalist growth discourse to localized economies focused on equity?; can Asia create new innovative futures instead of following the used futures of the West?; and finally, is the concept of Asia even conceptually accurate? Given the history of Orientalism and that all regions exist in the context of each other – isn't the planet a better way to think and speak? In answer to this final question, everyone agreed that we need to think in the global planetary context and we need to start somewhere, in this case with Asia.

The fishbowls were ninety-minute sessions intended to gauge the participant's thinking on climate change, political–economy and changing identity. It is worth noting that the participants came from varied fields including genetics, chemistry, security studies, Asian philosophies, futures studies, education and climate change studies.

The first fishbowl produced four scenarios for Asia.

1. Sustainability, equity and cultures of learning

Scenario one was idealistic. Championed by Dada Shumbushivananda, a yogic monk of the Ananda Marga movement as well as President of Gurukul Universities and Tan Sri Dzulkifli, the scenario saw a dramatic change from today to 2060. In this world, Asia leads the world in green technological innovation. Instead of a world of have nots and haves, in this future, equity would dramatically increase over the next 60 years. Learning, in the sense of capacity building, would be a key component in the transformation of Asia. Green cities, green buildings would become the norm, enhancing productivity and reducing illness. Health would emerge from using the best in all medical traditions, western to Chinese to ayurvedic. An Asian union would emerge and the geopolitical fault lines that currently are the basis for conflict throughout Asia would be smoothed over. Asia would rise to the challenge. A creative elite would spearhead this paradigm change.

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As an exemplar of this future, the best selling book in 2060 in Asia would be called, “Through reflective learning, Asia creates the dream.”

2. The new Asian imperialism—nothing learned

In the second scenario, the economic rise of Asia does not see a corresponding change in ethics and equity. Instead, as with the rise of all powers, the rise of China and India, and other parts of Asia, creates a new imperialism. By 2060 China and India comprise more than fifty percent of world GDP. Chinese and Indian state and private run corporations lead the ranks of the Fortune 100, indeed, there is a new measuring system of the world's wealthiest. Of course there are daily protests throughout Africa and the USA against these large, inhumane, hierarchal, collectivist Asian corporations. Highly sophisticated, interactive, artificially intelligent surveillance technologies are used to monitor protests. The protests came about as Asian corporations cornered the world's energy supplies. As energy, water, oil started to dry up, they were not keen on sharing. Asians are proud of the new found wealth and power but ashamed of losing their ethical focus. Instead of being the middle kingdom, China sees it self as the Centre Kingdom while India returns to the mythology of Rama Raja. Both believe that it is only natural they take centre stage in the world.

The best seller in 2060 is: “It is our turn now: we have learned nothing from history.”

3. Rise of Asia—part of the way there

The third scenario is a softened version of the imperialistic future. Parts of Asia move up in the world ranking. New Asian currency and other financial agreements emerge, and Asian culture softly spreads, but the nature of the world economy does not change dramatically. There are still core and peripheral areas. An Asian Union emerges but only in terms of the movement of trade and finance, as nation-states remain strong. However, regulation of green spaces, water and energy resources remains haphazard. Wealth does improve equity somewhat and sustainability has moved up the agenda. There are limited victories on issues of refugees and the poor. By and large, collective identity remains important.

The best seller in 2060 is: “Learn how you and your group can become rich.”

4. Climate change devastates Asia

In the fourth scenario, the fault lines – China/Taiwan/Tibet; Pakistan/Kashmir/India, to mention two – grow in intensity. Conflicts over water and energy multiply as Asia continues on its path of “sucking it – oil, gas, water – all dry”. As the seas rise, environmental refugees flood Asian cities. The Maldives disappears. Large Asian cities are swamped – Taipei, Bangkok and many others – are devastated by global warming. Asia did not prepare, rather, it continued the high energy, individualistic, expansionist model of the West. But the world had changed, and while Asia became wealthier in the 2020s, eventually the edifice had to come crumbling down.

The best seller in 2060 is: “Keep the refugees out, or we will no longer be number one.”

5. From scenarios to the vision

After exploring alternative futures, the subsequent fish bowl focused on moving toward the preferred future paradigm. To do this, participants first identified aspects of the old paradigm, which they did not see as useful in creating the desired future. Aspects were divided in three areas: (1) rationality, (2) economy and (3) society. In rationality, it was deemed that in the old paradigm, rationality was excessive (at the expense of other ways of knowing), instrumental, male, reductionist and overly empirical. It was based on the either-or approach to knowledge. In economy, it was expansionist, occupation-based, and against nature and others. It consisted solely of the accumulation of wealth at the expense of other aspects of life. As one participant put it: “money matters and matter is money”. In the social, it is based on the “survival of the fittest,” which is overly individualistic, and creates homogeneity. The goal is to have “one up on everything” – other cultures, indigenous peoples, nature, and women. The main underlying narrative is: “West is best, and this is the natural way of things.”

In their desire to create a preferred future, participants wished to ensure that they did not throw out the “baby with the bath water,” thus there were aspects of the old paradigm which they wished to keep, including the scientific-empirical; individual rights; civil liberties and the right to speak “truth to all forms of power.” They also did not wish to ignore the importance of a well run economy; indeed, they wished to integrate the spiritual, with the economic, the technological and nature.

6. The vision

From an analysis of the old paradigm, participants articulated their preferred future. The new paradigm began and concluded with education and learning. For a new Asia to emerge, a new type of education is needed – reflective, rational, service-based and inclusive of multiple ways of knowing. Along with education, creating an alternative sustainable cooperative and localized (with some aspects global) economy was considered foundational. Instead of colonial divisions, participants preferred to imagine administrative units created through bioregions. A cooperative framework was preferred

over a corporate structure although small businesses and state run enterprises for large industries would continue. Economic self-sufficiency was important as was free trade. Bartering, village to village trade was essential if education, health and financial equity is to be achieved.

Incentives around renewable energy were central to a new vision. This was considered a far more viable future than the current geopolitical adventurism to secure energy rich areas. The economy, participants reminded each other, was nested in nature, and not the other way around.

For any of this to occur, new forms of governance would be required. Crucial elements include transparency, deep democracy (not just voting, but using new technologies to have more inclusiveness in decision-making) and civil liberties and rights (including economic rights).

In this future, state power would be augmented by other forms of power with a new United Nations that has representation not just from nation-states but from indigenous people, nongovernmental organizations, associations, and even businesses.

Ultimately, however, while institutional changes were required, changing the world had to begin with each person – a new consciousness was required, a new mindset. This new mindset would embrace nature, other cultures and ways of knowing. The divisions of the last few centuries needed to be healed if there was to be authentic progress – body, mind and spirit. This was clearly a vision of both-and and not either-or in terms of rationality.

And: without gender equity, none of this was possible.

7. Strategies

But how do we move toward this vision or aspects of this vision? The last session focused on ways forward.

These included creating a global-Asian prize for innovation that helps create the new paradigm. Related to this were measurement systems that reflected the paradigm since we measure what we wish to do. Old measurement systems focused only on economic growth cannot do justice to a paradigm that integrates prosperity, respect for nature, gender partnership and spiritual practice.

At the institutional level, new Asian financial and energy agencies need to be created. Current global institutions need far more representation of Asian nations and communities. The United Nations has to transform, not only at the Security Council level but as well at the General Assembly level.

To create the impetus to move in this direction, we need a few leading Asian nations – as in the exemplar of the European Union – who move the debate and use soft power to create mechanisms for change. Others could then join in. Over the long run however education and learning remain central.

8. Conclusion

In the concluding session, participants focused on education and reflective learning, agreeing that without an emphasis on these two, a new paradigm would not emerge.

At the geopolitical level, the new paradigm could only come about if the US declined in power and Asia spent far less on military and more on education, health, and appropriate technologies.

The group concluded that without inner change, a new vision, education to create capacity, new institutional structures to support the vision and a change in mindset then the “Climate change devastates” worst case scenario or the “new Asian imperialism” were likely.