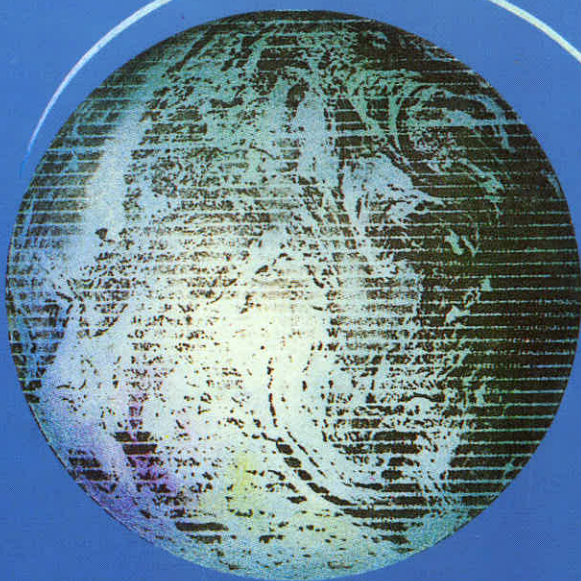


The futures of cultures



Future-oriented studies

UNESCO Publishing

Disintegration and reintegration: the futures of Asian cultures

Sohail Inayatullah

Introduction

Towards a critical futures studies

State/airport culture: the intangible asset programme of the Republic
of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Han and resentment

Schizophrenia as the model of the future

Alternative scenarios

Technology and culture

Conclusions

Introduction

In discussing the futures of Asian cultures here, we will take a variety of perspectives. Beginning with an epistemological approach in which we will examine how the 'cultural' is constituted, particularly official culture, we will move on to an analysis of culture, gender and structure. We will then reflect on the futures of cultures from the model of schizophrenia, using it as a way to comment on peripheral challenges to centre and pseudo-culture. We will conclude with an assessment of the impact of new technologies on traditional and modern images of culture.

Towards a critical futures studies

Our approach is to focus on the understandings we give to the future, thereby exploring a range of alternative futures. We thus seek to bring into the discourse different possible meanings of what constitutes culture instead of forecasting a particular version of it. Culture then ceases to be an essentialized reified category but becomes a particular way of knowing that has historically come about at the expense of other possible cultures. Even though we may construct culture in humanist terms as our possible saviour, no culture is innocent; every reality displaces another possibility. 'Culture' then exists centrally in the 'political', the ability to define what is important and what is insignificant; what is real. This takes culture away from frivolous discussions of eating, dress and smell (although these too can tell us a great deal), or even values and habits, to culture as resistance.

Defining culture as resistance leads to a more critical analysis of the role of culture in social change. In Hawaii, for example, local people have defined themselves by speaking pidgin English. While ridiculed by mainland Americans from the United States as poor English, pidgin English serves to differentiate outsiders and insiders and to help insiders gain some advantage in an island that has increasingly lost control of its own future through integration into the world capitalist system (particularly United States mainland culture). Through local resistance efforts – language, music and dance, as well as efforts to regain lost land – Hawaiian culture intends to return to its traditional cosmology and thereby cease to represent a romanticized orientalist narrative of cultural harmony, the land of swaying coconut trees and hula girls (Trask, 1993). The recovery of Hawaiian cosmology then becomes the best defence against modernity's 'commodification' of the native.

Within our theoretical perspective, we do not abandon scenarios, focusing only on critical analysis. Rather, scenarios become textual strategic tools to distance us from the present, to gain a fresh perspective on cultures.

State/airport culture: the intangible asset programme of the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

As an important case-study, both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea are conscious of the possibility of losing their culture because of Japanese imperialism and Westernization (pseudo-culture). They have therefore made it state policy to save their culture, to collect it for the future, to assert sovereignty.

Culture has become a central strategy in moving forwards and competing on the world stage. As with other Third World nations (conscious of becoming significant players on the world field), culture has been given official status; it is now sponsored much as in the feudal era when a wealthy merchant would sponsor an artist. But in both republics, this is more than merely creating an Institute for the Arts, to spur creativity; rather, culture is seen as a national asset, part of the drive towards full independence. The Republic of Korea has gone further: it has established an Office of Cultural Assets which designates certain individuals as 'Intangible Cultural Assets'. Upon designation, a number is assigned to the individual. When the Asset dies, the most senior student is given Intangible Cultural Asset status (Howard, 1986).

It is the state, then, that bears the onus of cultural preservation. Of course, the Republic of Korea believes that it is only in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that culture has been 'officialized'; in the former, it is tradition that is being kept alive. Yet the contradictions are obvious. *Pansori* (story-telling), for example, cannot be preserved through state power. It is an organic, interactive form of entertainment – community culture – based on ridiculing authority, uncovering moral duplicity and engaging in frank sexual talk. Attempts to make it 'timeless' risk losing the innovativeness of the art form. Art and culture as vehicles of limiting power or enhancing cultural resistance instead become re-situated in the context and power of the state. Moreover, while traditional Confucian culture was community-based, in the Intangible Cultural Asset programme culture becomes individually based; the group dimension of the art is re-represented as the state. Ultimately, this is not very different from efforts by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to develop an art and culture based on the glorification of Kim Il Sung. In defence of preservation efforts by the Republic of Korea, many people fear that, without state support, culture will become Westernized – fast music and commodified culture – with local dress, food and music marginalized.

Even if official recognition preserves the past, it does so at a cost, for it forces artists to endear themselves to the special board that decides who will become an Intangible Cultural Asset. Art becomes technical, patterned itself after recent successes, not creative but imitative. Thus Intangible Cultural Assets remove themselves from that which they claim to represent, the history of the people. Culture becomes 'museumized' even as individual artists gain recognition. Culture is seen either as Western or as traditional Korean; efforts to develop other forms of art have no space in this binary opposition. Moreover, if a post-Asian art or culture developed, it would probably be critical and transcendent of both. Would we then be able to recognize it as art or culture?

The logical extension of state art is what is commonly seen at airports: a few icons representing the nation's glorious past, present and future, to be consumed quickly before one's flight is called.¹ Hawaii has excelled at this with hula girls, *leis* and music to greet disembarking passengers. (Far more indicative of actual culture would be not the hula but immigration warnings, customs procedures, dogs searching for contraband and other entry requirements.)²

1. Indeed, in one American television show, *Cheers*, one of the main characters spends his week of vacation at the airport since that is the hub of cultural interaction.
2. From these we can learn how a nation sees the other and discover who can enter freely and who is searched.

Commodification and officialization are thus the two main trends creating Asia's future. In the first, recent Western categories of beauty and culture are imported and Asian as well as indigenous categories of thought denied. In the second, culture is controlled by official boards; art is necessary to unify a nation and to imply a distance, a measure of sovereignty, from other cultures. Extrapolating from this, we can imagine a scenario in which all the world's cultural assets are lined up and numbered. With instant-access video technologies, we will then be easily able to locate a nation and call for Intangible Cultural Asset number 4,500 and have it played for us. But by that time, real culture will again have spontaneously developed outside of conventional discourse, in other places. Culture is not state-owned or state-run; it is resistance, constantly slithering out of attempts to capture it, ever escaping the official discourse. It is intangible, neither realizable nor quantifiable. It is quite different from the state Intangible Cultural Asset programme which, in its attempt to preserve that which is considered intangible (art and beauty), has left the world of metaphor and interpretation and entered the economic and political discourse. Even dissidence might find itself being allocated an Intangible Cultural Asset number.³ Of course, the positive side is that culture is protected from the commodification of capitalism, from the market – a market which would prefer electric guitars to *kagym*.⁴

But which cultural period should be protected? Korea, for example, has been matriarchal (shamanistic), then Buddhist, then Confucian and finally modern. During the Japanese occupation, traditional Korean ways were sloganized but these were of the medieval Chosôn period, a time of considerable oppression of women. Nationalist leaders chose not to recover the social relations of the shamanistic or Buddhist period; rather, they used the more state-oriented and hierarchically rigid Chosôn period as a defence against Japanese imperialism. Each nation or collectivity has many pasts, many cultural histories which can be appropriated in the creation of a future. Through the recovery of the Confucian Chosôn, a strong nation based on 'Korean ways' was created, but at the cost of the suppression of women's rights and labour participation in the political economy: the championing of one cultural history meant the suppression of another.

3. I am indebted to Ashis Nandy for this intriguing point.

4. Traditional Korean instrument – a zither.

Han and resentment

For Korean women, the result of these practices has been resentment. In *Women and Han in the Chosôn Period*, Young Hee Lee (1992)⁵ argues that the rigidity of the neo-Confucian structure of male dominance did not give females an escape valve – what resulted was *han*, or deep resentment. With further justification from Buddhism, women were told to accept their suffering and live with their *karma*. Men could escape the rigid family structure through *kisaeng* (dancing girls) and mistresses, but women could not. While Korea is traditionally known as the ‘Land of the Morning Calm’, underneath this calm lie centuries of *han*. Men, too, enter the *han* discourse, not from the problems of daily life but from the shame of many defeats by the Chinese and Japanese. It is a territorial *han* based on lack of national sovereignty (now further exacerbated by the division of Korea).

Out of this *han*, this sustained suffering, came new fields of women’s literature and women’s expression – *kisaeng shijo* (songs of dancing girls), *minyo* (folk songs) and *naebang kasa* (songs of the court). Because of *han*, a great, albeit invisible, cultural renaissance resulted. This was the people’s resistance to patriarchy. Is this the world future: not structural change or implosion but deep repression and resentment? In the Korean context, even shamanism (which has allowed for occasional individual transcendence) and Christianity (which has energized women into social groups but without changing the male neo-Confucian social structure) have not succeeded in transforming *han*. The feminist movement has often been sidetracked by nationalist efforts, as is the case in Korea, where women’s resistance to the Japanese became far more important than the transformation of patriarchy (Oh, 1982). Moreover, in the larger Asian context, feminism has been seen as a Western force; the search for a women’s movement that is authentic to the history and categories of Asian women is still in its formative phase (Jayawardena, 1986). With further Westernization (in the form of east Asian capitalism), we can expect increased *han*, especially for women, unless an Asian women’s perspective (a post-feminist voice) combining ancient shamanistic principles and modern social organization can transform women’s condition.

From the Asian women’s perspective, *han* is the dominant cultural formation of the future. *Han* could also be a precursor to the breakdown of the self, especially as Westernization and travel intensify women’s

5. See also Young Hee Lee and Sohail Inayatullah, *Understanding Traditional and Modern Korean Women’s Literature* (in press).

resentment. While a united Korea might lead to an attempt to undo thousands of years of *han* for male Koreans, a transformation of patriarchy still seems far off.

Central to any understanding of the futures of Asian cultures is women's experience of their social reality and their efforts to negotiate patriarchal social relations. Moreover, Asian strategies in dealing with power – whether colonialism or developmentalism – have a strong *han* component: the face shown, for example, to the colonialist (the 'lazy worker' image in the Philippines) is markedly different from the face shown to one's own class and ethnicity.

Part of the return to the shamanistic past will be a recovery not of spirituality (the search for unity of the self with the cosmos) but of spiritualism, a search for connectedness with the dead. With the breakdown of modern society and the inability of modern spaces and categories of thought to provide answers, it is to the spirit that people will flock. At the same time, we should anticipate increased and stronger women's movements, both working alone and tied into ecological, co-operative and consumer associations. A new Asian women's culture might emerge from these efforts.

Schizophrenia as the model of the future

The most important future trend is the rise of cultures of schizophrenia, of madness. In the Asian setting, the schizophrenic has been located less in the medical than in the mystical discourse. Like the Hindu and Buddhist sage, the schizophrenic has understood that life is suffering; but instead of transcending the suffering and creating a new self or a no-self that is enlightened, the self breaks down and is neither normal nor enlightened. The schizophrenic, unable to transcend ignorance and fear, yet critical of conventional models of reality, can neither opt for an earlier time when life was simple (the mythological vision of traditional society) nor live with the duplicity of the modern self. An epistemologically open pluralist self with a high degree of psychological integration remains a distant possibility. Thus while schizophrenics reveal the irrationality of our rationality, they do so from a position of paranoia (an exaggeration of fear) not metanoia (which is a transcendence of fear). For example, schizophrenics believe that they are God and that everyone else is not.

Schizophrenia can be viewed from a cultural perspective, helping us understand what each culture sees as normal and as aberrant behaviour. One possible scenario for the future is a world where schizophrenia is

normal. Without any dominant model of the real, and in the midst of the end of the modern world, with the post-Asian world still shaping (ideally an integrated yet pluralist perspective), no coherent vision of self, culture or future exists. Unlike other eras where there was an authoritative discourse (an agreed-upon world-view), there exists a plethora of discourses of selves, each vying for supremacy.

At the level of the individual, Ball (1985) has argued that the key trend of the future is the lack of a responsible self, the end of any integrated set of experiences and functions. The self is now merely impression-management, created for social convenience. For Ball, there is a direct historical relationship between criminality and individuation. Within this context, with the breakdown of the self and no self to apprehend, the key problem for society in the future will be criminality, since responsibility will be problematic. Thus one could commit a crime without knowing which self was active.

The Asian self is particularly susceptible: it is caught between conflicting cultural demands (tradition, colonialism, nationalism and globalism), between rapid economic growth and rapid impoverishment, between the breakdown of the traditional Asian self and the lack of a new self. Of course, we would expect this to resolve itself differently in eastern Asia, China, southern Asia, South-East Asia and western Asia as the cultural forces vary from region to region. However, even as epistemology, economy and polity break down, there is a search for a new integrative model; whether this model will be the recovery of a particular past – ancient, classical or feudal – or the creation of a post-Asian model remains to be seen.

Alternative scenarios

Besides *han* and schizophrenia, what other scenarios are likely in the near future? The most likely possibility is the universalization of east Asian culture. Whereas Western culture was previously paraded before the rest of humanity as the standard, oriental culture has been gaining ground in recent years. It is considered much less exploitative of nature, more open than Western epistemology existing in an ecology of statements of truth and much closer to traditional culture when the cosmos, society and the individual were seen to be in harmony, before commodification, developmentalism and centre-periphery structures became the universal drivers.

However, one dimension of universality might be the rise of a sensate Asia. Lee Kuan Yew wondered if there was any solution to the rampant

sexuality of east Asians.⁶ With an emerging capitalist southern China connecting with Hong Kong and Taiwan, we can assume that sex is the future of eastern Asia, with Confucianism providing the commodification of women (women as servers of men) and Buddhism removing any guilt related to sex. Instead of the myth of a billion consumers of Coca-Cola, we can well imagine a billion sexually repressed Chinese waiting for a modernist China with fast time, fast sex and fast music. Eastern Asia would become the centre of modernist music, art and sexuality for the twenty-first century, taking over from the exhausted West. Only AIDS and virtual sex stand in the way. With developments in the latter, we could see dramatic transformations in both Bangkok and Manila, sex having moved to the virtual mind instead of the bodies of young village girls.

Along with sensate culture, vegetarianism, ceremonialized politeness and meditative practices are likely to become universal. Far less likely are complex social relations in which discourse is understood not because of what is uttered but because of who utters it and when it is uttered (this is far less likely to become universal since it is too difficult for other cultures to gain entry into this social network).

What are some less likely scenarios? One can easily imagine a Manila–Calcutta–Bombay–Dubai axis as a next major centre of culture in the twenty-first century. Besides a common experience of oppression (allowing the possible return swing of the cultural pendulum), there are factors such as a sophisticated and deep mysticism, a rich artistic heritage and an advanced intellectual climate providing high culture. In addition Bombay, as the centre of cinema audiences, provides mass culture. For instance, on one side there is someone like the late P. R. Sarkar – following in the footsteps of Gandhi and Tagore – with his thousands of spiritual songs; a range of new indigenous theories of science, society and culture; numerous social movements as well as ecological centres to create a new society and artists' and writers' associations to legitimize and enliven it; and on the other side the *film* mass culture that provides a voice counter to the 'pop' of the West. All these combine to provide the necessary ingredients for cultural revival. In addition, Star TV's Asian Music Television, with its local Asian celebrity video jockeys, provides the provocative youth dimension to this cultural rethinking. The concern then is not Hong Kong (the home of Star TV) or Calcutta, since culture now spreads through satellites creating an Asian Cyberspace, which will

6. Of course, neo-Confucianism and its oppression of women might have something to do with this. The exact quote is 'the libido of the sex crazed yellow races'. I am indebted to John Cole for providing this surprisingly racist quote, although the source has yet to be confirmed. But for more on Lee Kuan Yew, see his speech, 'The Vision for Asia', *The Muslim*, 20 March 1992.

flourish to new levels once electronic communications highways like Internet become the daily fare in Asia.

A resurgent Philippines is also a possible scenario. Centuries of resistance, of failed revolutions, of cultural eclecticism, of mysticism and pseudo-culture make the Philippines a potential cultural centre. This is more likely than the present rich Asian states, where modernity and the victory of the official discourse have produced wealth but at the expense of trimming of deviance – Singapore is the obvious example.

Islam as a cultural force is possible but, since it is politically in decline, this may force a rigidification of culture, a straightening of diversity, so as to uphold the State and the Text. Conversely, if decline leads to inner reflection and self-criticism, cultural renewal and creativity are possible. Islam would then have to reconstruct itself as a cultural epistemological force and not as a political statist force. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the potential breakdown of China, we could easily see a cultural renaissance in three areas: an Islamic south-west, a Westernized Hong Kong (or Taiwan after 1997) and a Manila–Calcutta–Bombay–Dubai crescent.

Technology and culture

The foregoing has focused on social and political forces, but how might advances in technology transform Asian cultures? New technologies will have a far wider impact than television and video. In some ways they will intensify Westernization and in other ways they will transform it. They will also transform our understanding of social reality, nature and human culture, displacing all three. New forms of resistance against the technologies will also result. With virtual reality, technology will have finally captured nature and made it obsolete.

But cultures need not be human, they can also be robotic; *robots can be sentient creatures*, potentially living with human beings and even displacing them. Concomitant with ways of thinking that see everything as alive (quantum physics, Hawaiian cosmology, Buddhism, animism and Indian thought) and with advances in artificial intelligence, we can envisage a time when robots will be seen as alive.

For capitalists, these new technologies promise a renewal, a rejuvenation from the exhaustion that has set in. They promise to revive the idea of progress and push back the notions of cultural revival, ethnic history and local knowledge. Thus it is not cultural humanists who will revitalize the dying modern world, but the new technologies and the cultural codes embedded in them. These new technologies pose dramatic problems for

those who consider the natural as fixed instead of as constantly changing and in the process of re-creation. Fundamentalists, in particular, will find the next twenty or thirty years the best and worst times for their movements: the best because the forces of tradition will flock to them; the worst because the technological imperative and humanity's struggle constantly to re-create itself (and thus nature) will not easily be reversed. It is important to remember that technologies in themselves will be redefined in this process as not merely material processes but mental and spiritual processes embedded in particular cultures. This redefinition will come about from non-Western interpretations of science (Inayatullah, 1991; Rudreshananda, 1993; Sheldrake, 1992).

We can hope for models of the future that result from co-operation. According to the scientist Lynn Margulis (1992), competition may be natural at the level of mammals, but at the microlevel of the cell an ecology of co-operation (where differences lead to higher unity) is normal. The cells need each other; through each other they can transform. The success of our cellular system might be a far better model in providing cultural hope than the failure of the war and competition model.

Once again, while the model of co-operation provides an alternative, more hopeful vision of Asia, new technologies promise to continue the process of the unravelling of the Asian self and Asian society and to create the conditions for a post-Asian culture as well as new forms of cultural resistance. Among the forms of resistance we can expect is a return to the classical life-cycle or seasonal aspects of Asian time. Part of the 'recovery of culture' project is regaining the traditional sense of time – time as friendship, as sitting around a tree and placing relationships ahead of economic gain or personal ambition, as living in the way God meant the world to be. New technologies, however, enter traditional time and disrupt local culture. The automobile is an excellent example. Pakistanis drive as fast as they can to reach their destination, even going so far as to drive on the pavement. Once they have arrived, however, they then wait for hours for friends to show up or for a bureaucrat to arrive. Or one may rush to arrive for tea-time – where one ritually relaxes. In the car, modernity becomes pervasive; the speedometer stares at the driver (there is no sun and moon contrast or images of the seasons or other historical symbols). The car is an imported technology with no local meanings attached to it.

With modernization we should expect a decreased emphasis on the classical model of time, on the degeneration of time from the Golden Era to the Iron Age. But culture as a response to the economism of modernity is precisely about the pluralism of time, about living in many types of time without allowing any one to dominate, particularly linear time. Other

people see cultural revival as part of a return to a more natural type of time, cognizant that all societies rise and fall, all economies go up and down.

Conclusions

We have discussed many possible cultural futures, the most important of which are: the unravelling of the traditional Asian self; women's cultural futures, particularly the role of *han* as the emotion of the future; the breakdown of the self and culture; the schizophrenic model of unending differences; the universalization of oriental culture; a new cultural renaissance from the periphery; and technological cultures from virtual reality, genetic engineering and robotics.

What is important is a vision of new cultures: not visions that take away the possibility of new cultures, but visions like the Renaissance which created ever new visions. In this sense, it is essential to find unity within our differences. The imagery of a bouquet of roses (with some of the roses virtual, some genetically derived and others grown in the soil), symbolizing individual cultures and planetary culture, remains an important integrative dream – a post-Asian dream perhaps.

References

- BALL, R. A. 1985. Crime Problems of the Future. *World Futures*, Vol. 21.
- CENTER FOR KOREAN STUDIES. 1992. *Korean Music and Performing Arts*. University of Hawaii.
- DUDLEY, M.; KIONI, A. 1990. *Man, Gods and Nature*. Honolulu, Ka Kane O Ka Malo Press.
- FOUCAULT, M. 1971. *The Order of Things*. New York, Vintage Books.
- . 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, Pantheon Books.
- GALTUNG, J. 1990. Cultural Violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3.
- HOWARD, K. 1986. Korea's Intangible Cultural Assets. *Korea Journal*.
- INAYATULLAH, S. 1990. Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Future. *Futures* (Guildford, United Kingdom).
- . 1991. Rethinking Science. *IFDA Dossier* 81.
- . 1993. From Who am I to When am I. *Futures* (Guilford, United Kingdom).
- JAYAWARDENA, K. 1986. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London/Delhi, Zed Books/Kali For Women.
- LEE, Y. H. 1992. *Women and Han in the Chosôn Period*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii. (M.A. thesis.)

- LEE, Y. H.; INAYATULLAH, S. In press. *Understanding Traditional and Modern Korean Women's Literature*.
- LOVELOCK, J. 1988. *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth*. New York, W. W. Norton & Co.
- MARGULIS, L. 1992. Life After Competition. *Edges*, Vol. 4, No. 3.
- MARGULIS, L.; SAGAN, D. 1986. *Origins of Sex: Three Billion Years of Genetic Recombination*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- OH, B. 1982. From Three Obediences to Patriotism and Nationalism: Women's Status in Korea up to 1945. *Korea Journal*.
- RUDRESHANANDA, A. A. 1993. Microvita: Unifying Science and Spirituality. *New Renaissance*, Vol. 4, No. 1.
- SHELDRAKE, R. 1992. Shaman, Scientists or Charlatan. Interview by A. Nethery and A. Lucas in *21 C*.
- THOMPSON, W. I.; SPANGLER, D. 1991. *Reimagination of the World*. Santa Fe, N.M., Bear & Co.
- TORREY, E. F. 1988. *Surviving Schizophrenia*. New York, Harper & Row.
- TRASK, H. K. 1993. *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*. Maine, Common Courage Press.
- YEW, L. K. 1992. The Vision for Asia. *The Muslim*.