

Asia re-imagined

by Margerite Nieman

The Asia-Pacific Futures Network was held on August 28th and 29th in Bangkok. The APFN partnered with the National Innovation Agency of Thailand to host the event, titled **Asia Imagined: Disruptions and Alternative Futures.**

Neither a 19 hour flight nor Bangkok's sweltering heat could stifle my enthusiasm as I headed for the Asian-Pacific Futures Network (APFN) Conference in Bangkok. Its aim was to think about the future of Asia and the future in Asia.

The conference offered a thinking space for futurists to identify emerging issues and new trends, reflect on their possible impacts and the new stories and possible futures they pose for Asia. In the process, new and interesting futures methods, approaches and thinking tools were shared.

Futures Studies and Strategic Foresight is a rapidly growing field in the Asia-Pacific region. Leading universities offer top-notch Foresight programmes, and an increasing number of international organisations and financial institutions support Foresight courses (e.g. in Pakistan, the Philippines and Bangladesh). The number of governmental foresight-driven projects and futures initiatives is also increasing (e.g. in Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan).

In his keynote speech, Prof Sohail Inayatullah¹, UNESCO Chair in Future Studies, mapped out five faces of the future of Asia in 2038. These themes were developed further throughout the conference.

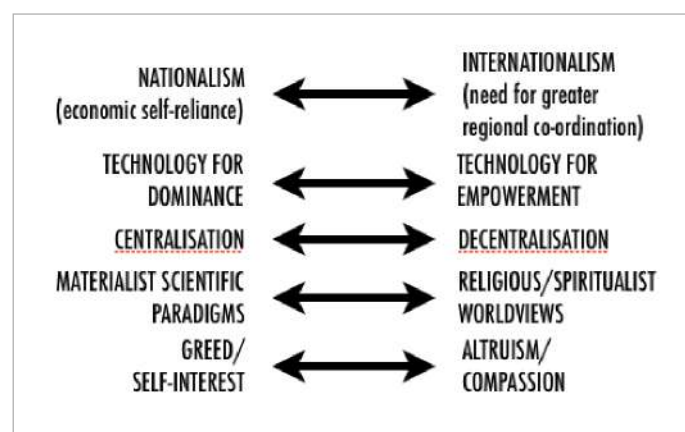
The Past	The Present	Preferable future for 2038	Possible negative futures for 2038
<p>The "Great Rise" - moving from poverty to economic wealth</p> <p>Journey was mainly driven by reaction to the "West is Best" metaphor, with a twist.</p> <p>Passive recipients of knowledge.</p> <p>Past-oriented</p>	<p>New measurements such as gross national happiness, the quadruple bottom line (prosperity, inclusion, nature, spirituality)</p> <p>47% of global patents derive from China, Japan and South Korea</p> <p>Asia as the centre of knowledge creation – global students travel to Asian centres.</p> <p>Singapore, South Korea and Japan rank in the Top 20 most powerful passports in the world²</p>	<p>China's Belt and Road Initiative reshapes global trade. Connecting 65% of the world population and 33% of GDP</p> <p>Asian metaphors move away from Western cultural framework – a cultural awakening where the West is not seen as the default future</p> <p>The greening of Asia</p>	<p>Further uneven wealth accumulation</p> <p>The 5C vision: Cash, Condominium, Credit card, Car, Country club</p> <p>Ageing population reduce innovation and thwart economic development</p> <p>A fragmented Asia with "warring states," collapsing into cycles of violent conflict. Geo-political unrest, nationalism and economic decline</p> <p>China returns to regionalism, sliding back into dictatorship</p>

The face of the vision: Change the game

Prof Mei-Mei Song³ mapped out some of the “used futures” or outdated metaphors of the Asian people:

The Past	Alternative futures proposed by some presenters
Follow the West	Rethinking the Western knowledge system.
Follow the Man: who gets to play?	The face of gender in Asia is changing. Women’s power increased as financial and economic progress is made and as birth rates in Asia drop, women can move into the public, monetised sphere. Female prime ministers provide positive examples of the future for young Asian women.
Follow the Big Man	The role of small businesses, private organisations and NGO’s should not be underrated. Prof Song used an analogy from the animal kingdom: We cannot only have lions and tigers, Asia needs all the animals in the zoo. Focus on people rather than systems, prevent vertical relationships.
Follow the Head	Value the importance of spiritual development. Transcending physical into psycho-spiritual domains. Understanding alternative realities requires the ability to move beyond the analytical and the empirical.
Follow the Money	Discard the used futures of “economic growth” at the cost of nature, equity, and spiritual development.
Follow the Past	Challenge a copy and paste future. “Cultures are always interacting with each other, learning and dissenting, creating new fields of possibility” – rephrasing Asish Nandy.
Follow Used Futures	A new Magna Carta (the idea of the liberty of citizens). Sustainable, resilient economies.

In his presentation “Technology and Spirituality in Uncertain Times”, Dr Dada Shambushivananda⁴ argued that Asia is experiencing local & global tensions:



The face of the education transformation

In a world where children can swipe, click, select and delete before they can talk, education becomes all the more crucial. The vision of a knowledge society was recurrent and Educational Futures were discussed in depth. Common themes raised by speakers were:

- the importance of multiple ways of knowing, in multiple languages
- learning from the sage and learning by doing
- rethinking the Industrial education system (“from the factory to the playground”) and the co-creation of knowledge

Using a Futures Triangle to depict the future of Higher Education in Malaysia, a preferred future with educators as digitised and connected academics (“iMurabi’s or iEducators”) with soul and wisdom were envisioned⁵. Some habits from the past, including (1) working in silos, (2) industrial pressure and (3) regulations and policies, are not conducive to the vision of the co-creation of knowledge.

Despite good test results, China’s education system has systemic flaws⁶. Often the emphasis is on the Gaokao (China’s notoriously tough entrance exams), so university education is not always regarded as a viable option. Parents and administrators lack foresight and the motivation to change. Teachers often lack skills, and students lack motivation to pursue life-long learning and change in later years.

One presenter argued that in a rapidly changing world, Confucian education and rote learning (memorization technique based on repetition) is no longer good enough for students, employees, and for society. Others argued that the Confucian concept of the cultivated person is ultimately compatible with Western traditions.

What Asia needs is a student-centred approach where teachers are guides and mentors. Deep questioning, research, critical and creative thinking and project work should be core elements of curricula.

The face of technology – the nature of nature?

Many presenters regarded technology as a holistic construct. Studies show that cognitive and spiritual technologies can have a positive impact on health issues and medical costs; the incidence of heart disease, mental disorders, infectious diseases and hospitalisation rates could reduce.

Prof Inayatullah foresees real time, predictive, prosumer based technology development. One preferable future would be a decentralised, integrated energy ecology with “energy anytime and anywhere just for you.”

The face of the grand transition to a planet after capitalism--rewrite the rules of the game

Can Asia create a regional and global transition? Several speakers envisioned a post-capitalist Asia where gender equality, spiritual values and the inclusion of all the Asian people, including future generations, are the rule rather than the exception. New technologies (digital, 3D, genomics) as well as peer to peer social sharing economy should be embraced. Yet the importance of triple or quadruple bottom line measures should ensure responsible, ethical conduct.

Workshops: futures methods and interesting approaches

Futures methodologies, novel approaches and thinking tools were used throughout to guide and direct collective thinking in a structured way. New ideas were shared and several interesting methods were introduced to include in futurists’ own representations and group sessions, such as:

- Digital scanning tools to discover disruptions;
- Designing experiential futures, adding sensory experiences to Futures Workshops, using games, storytelling, simulations and creative engagements. The use of sight, sound, touch and smell were included here. Open source digital tools such as the Mentimeter (an app that allows users to create presentations, share their opinions and acquire feedback from their audience in real-time using mobile devices), Vuforia (augmented reality software) and Chatfuel (a chatbot creation platform for public engagement) were demonstrated;
- Using World Café, participants worked on developing insights to adaptive approaches to AI Futures..

Also featuring in the programme was the South African futurist, Tanja Hichert, who presented an Anthropocene Visioning Workshop. Participants used “seeds” (weak signals / bright spots) to build scenarios inductively. The conversation was complemented with the Three Horizons Framework to deepen conversations about change and transformation.

Another slot in the programme was dedicated to Open Space discussion—self-organised, small-group sessions with topics chosen by participants themselves. These ranged from technical to cultural issues to sharing methods. The participant asking the question served as the discussion leader. Themes that were explored were, *inter alia*:

- How do futurists deal with clashes of culture?
- What are the challenges and rewards to being a “mutant futurist” (someone that stands with one foot in the Futures space and the other in a different discipline)? How does this change one personally?
- How do we bring Futures Thinking to the “man on the street”?

Other presentations included topics such as:

- Autonomous vehicles and the future of urban mobility
- Malaysian politics in transition
- The perception of time: Lessons learnt from an experience working with people from a small village in Sierra Leone, where indigenous people perceive time as “events” rather than a linear concept on a calendar or clock. This phenomenon signified the need revisit some of the dominant assumptions underpinning the epistemology of Futures Studies, as well as re-designing of some traditional futures tools and methods.
- An interesting perspective about futures conversations was raised in the session: “Do our windows frame revolutions or do revolutions frame windows?” which touched on Rifkin’s Third and Schwarz’s Fourth Industrial Revolutions⁷.

Future preparedness

Prof Renè Rohrbeck⁸ presented research done by Aarhus Business School, Denmark. In a ground-breaking study over ten years, they created a Corporate Foresight Maturity Model, did a longitudinal analysis of 40 European based firms and subsequently published a Corporate Foresight Benchmarking Report in 2018. Future preparedness leads to performance improvements and superior positions in markets of the future. The study found that vigilant firms achieved, on average, 16% profitability, surpassing the overall industry average profitability of 12%. Firms with immature foresight practices showed 37% lower profitability compared to vigilant firms in the industry.



Sky over Bangkok temples. Image: Good Free Photos.

Conclusion

Job done, the writer explored some of Bangkok's tourist attractions. Upon entering Wat Phra Kaew, a famous 400 year old temple, an old Buddhist Monk told me "You are free to meditate in here".

"No time for meditation now," I told him. "Only one day in Bangkok and so many things to see". His wrinkled face broke into a smile. He lifted a crooked finger towards me and said, "Ah! You have too many stories in your mind!"

Where then, I wondered, is the sweet spot between constantly contemplating multiple alternative futures, being vigilant, agile and nimble and dealing with change and disruption on the one side, and a quiet mind on the other?

Dr Riel Miller⁹ argues that Futures Literacy is a capability: how we anticipate matters change the present. Futures literacy helps to overcome 'poverty-of-the-imagination'. Uncertainty becomes an asset, not an enemy. It reduces fear and defensiveness, and it kindles hope and resilience.

It seems as if they are complementary, not contradictory. ◀

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