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# Analysis of reasons and countermeasures for the necessity of alternative futures discourses in South Korea



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines an overview of the Western origins and concepts of alternative futures to address the 'alternatives to what' question, and to define three approaches to clarify the concept of alternative futures. An integrated approach, as a holistic means, should be considered as incorporating both the formal approach and the content-based approach. Moreover, this paper presents the necessary reasons for alternative futures discourses in Korea and proposes several countermeasures to improve Korea's futures practice. To date the Korean society and its futures practices have been dominated by five tendencies: (a) a dominant modernization paradigm, (b) a prevailing unipolar worldview, (c) an uncertainty avoidant culture, (d) poor methodological practice, and (e) Westernization of the Korean futures studies. These current tendencies and their ensuing negative effects have undermined both the continuation of creative futures and the Korean way of seeing the future. Thus, Korea's futures practice has experienced a lack of alternative futures approaches as well as a kind of identity crisis. In order to respond to those problems and create rigorous products of future practice, it is crucial for Korea's futures community to concentrate on the five alternative tendencies: (a) inventing Korean models in a viable utopia, (b) adopting a liberal cosmopolitan worldview, (c) building an uncertainty tolerant culture, (d) overcoming methodological challenges and (e) moving toward indigenous futures studies. In particular, indigenous futures studies can provide the grounds for relevant and enriched futures studies as well as the development of universal futures studies.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade the concept of alternative futures has been widely employed by the futures field and other disciplines and has vigorously addressed various aspects of futures images and phenomena. Many futurists use alternative futures as synonymous with possible futures, probable futures, and preferable futures [1–4]. This concept of alternative futures has evolved to develop an elaborate mode of futures thought by adding plausible futures [5–8] and constructing a new profile for future images [9–12]. The core concept of the current definition refers to multiple futures representing the many different forms futures could take. Emphasis is particularly placed on the plural form of the word future. Thus, alternative futures, in a broad sense, are defined as “a cluster of possibilities” [13]. These cluster of possibilities are often given in the form of scenarios. The emphasis on multiple futures brings into view reactions to the problems of prediction, especially the unwarranted extrapolation and fallacy of a single vision.

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But the definition of alternative futures has two conceptual flaws. First, it is confined to form rather than content. This form-focused definition weakens the philosophical and ideological overtones from the question of alternative futures. It tends to stick to the connotation of a certain set of formal types about alternative futures, though it does not mean the form-focused definition has no interest in content. There are few questions or answers for 'alternatives to what,' though preferable and other possible futures present normative claims. The increasing importance of multiple forms of the futures cannot guarantee the profusion of futures thoughts and images. The widespread acceptance of the concept does not necessarily address the deep insight of the general characteristics of a future society. The second flaw arises when many people support the concept of alternative futures without necessarily knowing what it means and entails. Like the concept of appropriate technology and sustainable development [14,15], the concept of alternative futures can mean "many things to many people" or "almost anything to anyone" and its meaning varies between futurists and applications. Moreover, it may enable all manner of multiple futures to be called alternative futures. The current definition of alternative futures can thus lead to both ambiguity and flexibility. Furthermore, it can result in self-fulfilling positive effects, which are based on a belief that alternative futures will bring more positive effects to the study of the futures and future generations as well as lessen any harmful consequences. The current definition also assumes that alternative futures are the best way for all people. This assumption is limited because sound alternative futures to some may be unsound alternative futures to others. The current definition of alternative futures lacks the mutual complementarity between form and content, with form-providing process and scope, and content-providing orientations and elements. Although the multiplicity of alternative futures is important in any futures creation, narratives based on multiple futures that are not directed by concrete values and ethical visions may result in more problematic futures instead of desirable futures. Thus, the form-focused definition of alternative futures is an unsuitable and narrow framework as a way of representing a comprehensive meaning of alternative futures.

In South Korea (hereafter Korea, except when specificity is needed) alternative futures rose to prominence in public discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s following Korea's severe economic crisis in 1997. The crisis prompted Korea to develop alternative futures approaches in order to see a wide range of possibilities as well as to create Korea's own future development model to make prudent provisions. Moreover, during the 1960s to the 1980s democracy was an important element to consider in this development. However, the late 1990s were characterized by the consolidation of political democracy and globalization. The discussion of a post-democratic transformation and the future of Korea in a globalized world involved nationwide efforts, concurrent with the penetration of the concept of sustainable development [16–20].

Despite the popularity of alternative futures, not much Korean scholarship has overtly addressed the meaning of this concept. Like other alternative concepts, such as alternative schools, alternative energy, and alternative tourism, Korean scholarship views alternative futures merely as a new approach for solving current and potential problems for the futures. It is based on the problem-centered approach where main concerns are on finding problems and exploring alternative solutions. Korean scholarship has been inclined to adopt the Western concept of alternative futures without consideration of Korea's interests and conditions. It is somewhat believed that the Western alternative futures approaches are methodologically more advanced. As a result of this thinking, there has been little or no discussion of why Korea needs alternative futures discourses and how western-born alternative futures approaches apply to Korea. Furthermore, the reasoning behind the necessity of alternative futures discourses can influence the process of the future knowledge production, including research topics and the futurists' view of the boundary of alternative futures.

In this respect, this paper is comprised of the following sections: Section 2 defines three approaches to clarify the concept of alternative futures and presents an overview of Western origins and concepts of alternative futures to address the 'alternatives to what' question. Section 3 explores the reasons why Korea needs alternative futures discourses by presenting five tendencies and several negative effects. In addition, countermeasures are offered for overcoming the limits of Korea's futures practice and promoting the alternative futures approach through a discussion of five alternative tendencies and other several alternative strategies. Section 4 summarizes the main points posited in this paper and provides several implications to respond to the problems and questions raised.

## 2. Western origins and concepts of alternative futures

It is important to distinguish between a formal approach, a content-based approach, and an integrated approach for classificatory schemes relevant to the concept of alternative futures. A formal approach to alternative futures tends to emphasize forms, including categories, scope, process, and methods, rather than content, including meanings, orientation, substance, and subject matters. The key-identifying feature is enabling multiplicity, in which the main focus is on the diversity of futures in formal aspects. Particular attention is paid to how multiple futures should best be created. An intense assertion has been made that focuses on multiplicity that may require futurists to push beyond the concept of a predictable future to a variety of possible futures. Therefore, it tends to isolate any substantive content from creating futures and leads to a value-free undertaking: that is, some scenarios create neutral scenario titles using letters, colors, and numbers.

A content-led approach, in contrast, encompasses normative and ideological ideas as the means for enriching future knowledge through content. It expresses interest in futures phenomena based on their content aspects rather than on their formal aspects. It sets the objective to explore a range of normative and ideological content for constructing future visions by tackling established trends and challenging official futures. The crucial concern appears to be which futures we should create, or what the best futures are for meaningful lives. A strong claim has been made that the focus on enabling normativity may lead futurists to see which alternative futures contribute to the social betterment. Whereas a content-based approach,

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