Linking metaphors of the future with socio-cultural prospects among Taiwanese high school students

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A B S T R A C T

This study is an investigation of diverse future metaphors used by Taiwanese high school students with the values and meanings that lie underneath them. The results show that "the strawberry" generation's chosen metaphors demonstrate their capability of critical and self-reflective ways of thinking. They also exhibit a deep sense of global awareness, foresight capacity and their role as a change agent for a better future. Their preferred stories of the future involve an open and global environment, broad and diversified friendship, leisure and travel over work, family and relationships, and most importantly, a multicultural and sharing world. The most crucial conclusion is that when young people are asked to discuss their future, they begin to explore new possibilities.

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1. Introduction

"We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."—Franklin D. Roosevelt

Caring for young people has long been a vital source of societal inspiration as they are the most energized group heading for the center of the society. Moreover, young people adapt to socio-structural changes with new ideas which leads to a more sustainable future. The report of the United Nations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (UN, 2013) notes that youth "are shaping social and economic development, challenging social norms and values, and building the foundation of the world's future." However, the UN report focuses primarily on the data showing that "some 75 million youths globally find themselves without work" (UN, 2013). It is quite surprising to see that the dominant image for the young generation supports traditional-survival mode of values (Welzel and Inglehart, 2010). The litany level of UN data should be under societal scrutiny and it should be noted that some sort of voice and action of young people around the world is emerging to replace stability with change and transcendence.[1]

Further supporting the UN's conclusion, 7300 students from year 5–12 in 31 schools across Australia were surveyed (Barrett, 2015). The major findings coincide with the UN perspective on young people's worries how to find work after graduation. The results showed that the students became less enthusiastic about school over time, dropping 19 percent from year five to 12 and falling to its lowest point in year 10. The poll noted that:

Thousands of Australian school students lack hope for the future and with only a third optimistic about getting a good job, according to a new Gallop Student Poll Survey measuring their levels of hope, wellbeing and engagement.Rebecca Barrett, NEWS, March 1, 2015.

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[1] For an application of CLA methodology, refer to Inayatullah (2002). Layered methodology: meanings, epistemes and politics of knowledge. *Futures*, 34 (6), 479–493.

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Conflicting expectations and concerns of youth has become epidemic and can be seen in news and reports around the world. Particularly, the rising Asian economies, namely, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, followed by China, are also vulnerable to the phenomenon. While we may claim that the result simply is a problem presented at a litany level, a systemic attitude and opinion analysis will provide some factual findings. Mostly importantly, research involves a deeper level of understanding of what the young students truly want. As Pieterse (2008) states the first cutting edge story of globalization is the rise of Asia, but changes in civil society and cultural change follow slower time lines than trends in political economy.

Kornprobst et al. (2008) suggest that given the interconnectedness wrought by a vast array of global processes; particularly telecommunications, metaphors of globalization as mirror (reflection), magician (transformation) and mutiny (rebel) are in a form of triangular dialogue and generate new opportunities for emancipation. The world environment of economy, culture and education is dramatically changing. Asia is emerging as the world center. More and more middle class Asians will aspire to sending their children not only overseas but to the top universities in Asia. Education has been considered as the major channel of social mobility through enhanced job status (Inyatullah and Chen, 2006). In comparison, this study aims at exploring much more meaningful and diverse images of the future from the youth generation. It would be extraordinary to find out what kind of optimism the youth can bring. They might be quite aware of the fact that a lot of the current jobs will not exist anymore, but they have the opportunity to invent new careers in the future. As Inayatullah (2015) states "That is saying we cannot forecast the future but we have a sense of what people really want at some deeper level and that becomes a way to create the future."

2. The 'strawberry' versus "face" generation

Young people aged 18–24 years old are popularly called the "strawberry generation" in Taiwan, because though they are stylish and attractive, they cannot bear pressure without being blemished. They are the generation who "bruise easily" like strawberries—meaning they cannot withstand social pressure or work hard like their parents' generation; the term also refers to people who are insubordinate, spoiled, selfish, arrogant, and sluggish in work (Chou, 2005). The term is starting to gain prominence in the East Asian press, as it could be a way to designate a rising demographic or psychographic in terms of consumer behavior. The strawberry generation, like the post-90s of China, could be the Asian counterpart of the millennials in the Western world. Ritzer (2011) even extrapolates the trend that in the ensuing years, fears of "Americanization" replaced by "Japanization" and to some degree replaced by fears of the "Asian Tigers" and likely more enduring, China. This foreseeable trend might indicate that generation gap widens as economic power rises.

The strawberry or millennial generations are also known as the digital natives, born with the information and communication technologies such as the web and various social media. These evolutionary children might create true 24/7 virtual, real time and face-to-face learning environment (Inyatullah and Chen, 2006). The gamers of today will be the inventors, innovators, or professors of tomorrow. Pedagogy, as the South Korean government advocates, will be more and more focused on a new balance of the individual and the collective, between discipline and creativity, between left and right brain, between status quo and paradigms and emerging futures, between respect for the past and responsibility for the future. Dator and Seo (2004) presented evidence to show that South Korea may be leading the transition, and eventually replacing "Gross National Product" as a measure of socioeconomic success with "Gross National Cool."

The youth generation in Taiwan, or the greater Chinese societies were raised by Baby-boomers or generation Xers, those who are identified as "face" conscious people. According to Wilson (1970) who spent time in Taipei studying five elementary schools, "face" is the driving force in creating and sustaining the Chinese political system. Wilson says that "face" for the Chinese has two meanings: the first "mien-tzu", is the prestige and reputation achieved through material or social success, ostentation or generosity. The second, "lien", is the respect of the group for a person with a good moral reputation. Having gone from poverty to riches, many of the values of futures studies are in conflict with the values of the "face" generation whose most immediate concerns are: (1) short-term strategic issues; (2) economic growth; (3) one future and not many futures for Taiwan; (4) dangers from China; and (5) by and large, a practical approaches to the world (Inyatullah and Chen, 2006). The significant contrast of generational metaphors will certainly reflect on their sense of direction in time, futures ahead and roles as change agents.

Inyatullah and Chen (2006) conducted research on Taiwanese college students on their futures images, the results showing that students are taking a relatively practical approach to link the world and are aware of the potential economic and political threats from China. In addition, they are learning new skills within the emerging knowledge economy and global market, and training for business positions. On the other hand, the students have also started to demonstrate the phenomenon of generational replacement. Most of them disagree that "only politicians, business leaders and other people holding powerful positions could influence the future" (ibid.). They constantly question not just their values and empirical positions about the nature of the world, but the paradigms that inform their positions. They are more integrated, seeing the links between the external world and the internal world, individual and society. They have a clear vision of the future, but see the future as evolving and thus continuously explore alternative futures, and link these futures to strategy and day-to-day outcomes. As in a comparative term, this study expects to explore deeper values of the even younger generation.