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Heart of the dragon: Metaphor use in futures thinking in Taiwan[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores metaphors in the teaching of futures studies in Taiwan. Metaphors are divided into those that describe current reality and those that describe the future. For instance, the metaphor of the gold fish is used by students to illustrate the short attention span of the people, which attributed to recurring societal crises. A transformative metaphor example is for the library—from a *fort* that passively awaits worships to *fire* that actively passes knowledge to people. The article concludes with the benefits of using metaphors in futures thinking.

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1. Introduction

In my years of teaching futures, I have found using metaphors to describe envisioned futures to be one of the most powerful ways to challenge people's assumptions about *change*, especially the construction of *time*. Future becomes robust and exhilarating as it helps individuals to deconstruct reality to the level that they had never experienced before.

The use of metaphors is highly geographically and culturally contextual (MacGill, 2015). In this paper, I will depict the overall benefits of using metaphors in futures thinking, derived from my experience in teaching the future in university courses and workshop facilitation over the years, along with actual examples. Almost all of the metaphor examples presented here originated from the use of causal layered analysis (CLA), which assumes four levels of analysis for the future—litany, systemic causes, worldview, and myth or metaphor (Inayatullah, 2004); a few came from the process of *questioning the future* with 6 (later evolved to 7) basic futures questions (Inayatullah, 2008). Only cases in Taiwan will be discussed.

2. Metaphor examples

People usually—and probably unconsciously—take materials that are more familiar with as metaphors when thinking about the future. Tangible entities such as objects and animal creatures are easily accessible images to many; so are the intangibles such as stereotypes, fables and fairy tales, and traditional wisdom. These are all commonly seen in my workshops and classes. Occupational stereotypes such as beavers for civil engineers and gardeners for teachers were indicated. Famous tales in collections such as Grimm's Fables and Andersen Fairy tales are another favorite source of metaphors among my students. What

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is interesting to me is that fables and fairy tales imported from the West are popular metaphors among Taiwanese instead of traditional stories. It perhaps is an indication of how Western culture has manifested the Taiwanese society.

Metaphors that use traditional “wisdom” offer a rare opportunity for people to challenge the deep-rooted beliefs that often become irrelevant or even obsolete in this day and age. Using traditional proverbs or idioms as metaphors is particularly powerful in helping people apprehend the obsolescence of old values in today’s society. By deconstructing the present with the well-known wisdom, people quickly realize those values can no longer be called “wisdom.”

In addition to the aforementioned metaphor categories, young people in my workshops also use stories of and characters in Hollywood movies, especially those depicting future scenarios. With dramatic storylines and powerful visual and audio effects, these movies often have overpowering impacts on the audience. Participants often feel that movies help in their envisioning of the future—especially if the movie already portrays the future. On the other hand, it is my observation that the propelling vividness of future images in the movies actually colonizes people’s future visions and often obstructs them from constructing genuinely original metaphors. Those that use Hollywood movies as metaphors to deconstruct the present are actually less likely to successfully reconstruct a new scenario from it, despite their dissatisfaction towards the status quo. Moreover, the storyline of the movie usually “overspills” and takes over the entire scenario instead of serving as only a metaphor.

Some examples of metaphors for the future presented by various groups in my classes and workshops are illustrated here. Based on the nature of the metaphor, these examples are organized into two categories: “metaphors that describe the current reality” and “metaphors that describe the future.”

2.1. *Metaphors describing the current reality*

2.1.1. *Goldfish*

When analyzing the series of food crises involving problematic food additives and inferior recycled food oil that caused a frantic scare in Taiwan a couple of years ago, one group of students initially focused on the failure in the government’s food and health monitoring systems as well as the none-of-my-business mentality at the worldview level. One of the students, however, proposed using metaphor of the “memory of a goldfish,” which is believed to last for only three seconds, to describe the forgetfulness of the social mass, that actually attributed to the government’s lack of subsequent actions to severely penalize the wrongdoers.

2.1.2. *Koi*

In a workshop with mid-size and small business owners, the relationship between the economy and the environment were examined in the 4-archetypical scenarios. In the growth scenario they created, in which both the economy and the CO₂ emission skyrocketed off the charts, the group used koi, a fish widely seen in Taiwan and commonly regarded as voracious because of its hyperactive reaction during feeding, to describe the money-oriented (or even money-only) future.

2.1.3. *Fence*

When a group of female top scientists in Taiwan unpacked the current reality of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), they used fences as the metaphor to signify the distinctive division between the two genders. Though it is already accepted that men and women are equal and there ought to be no distinction or separation between the sexes in the world of science, it is still overwhelmingly recognized by these female scientists that there are tall fences everywhere at school and at workplaces in terms of unspoken stereotypes delivered by teachers and parents, familial obligations especially in child rearing, promotions, communication, work culture, and social lives among colleagues, to name a few.

2.1.4. *Good medicine tastes bitter*

A group of professors analyzed the current reality of university education with CLA and found the old saying to be a good metaphor representing the old mindset. The traditional proverb states that a good medicine tastes bitter but cures the disease and often implies that good advice is unpleasant to hear but is usually the best. Many educators and parents *still* believe that students need to endure the hardship in learning, which is just like the bitter taste in medicine—one needs to tolerate the short-term hardship in order to be rewarded with long-term benefits. Learning with an “unpleasant flavor,” however, is a big turnoff to most students these days, especially when they are surrounded by many easily accessible “sweet choices” such as computer games and smart phones. The professors therefore realized that they had to “sugarcoat” their pedagogy in order to retain students’ interests in classroom teaching.

2.1.5. *Children as a defense for ageing vs. shackle*

A group of women in their twenties analyzed the future of family with CLA in my class and deconstructed the worldview of the past from the old saying, “*Raise children to protect oneself from being old and helpless [yang er fang lao].*” As depicted in the idiom, children were regarded as an investment for parents’ future and a defense mechanism against parents’ poverty and loneliness in the old age. The conviction exists not only at individual or familial level when youngsters are viewed as an insurance policy, but also the case at national levels, as young people are commonly referred to as *manpower* and the *work force*.

The young generation reaching child rearing age in Taiwan no longer share the same view, as argued by the group. They, instead, now see offspring as *shackles* that tie down the parents, especially mothers, limiting their freedom and flexibility in life.

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