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Shaping futures in Sino-character: What's in a name of East Asian futures studies?

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights how the Sino-character system, because it lacks a plural form, hinders promulgating and popularizing the concept of plural and diverse futures in Korea, Greater China, and Japan. Difficulties are revealed when East Asian futurists emphasize the plural concept of 'future + s', because the linguistic conventions of Sino-character languages and cultures do not clearly express plurality. The singular-form wording for 'future + s' excused by East Asian futurists tends to unintentionally stick a knowledge divide between public and futurists. It also shapes a more uniform, less diverse image of the future. This paper suggests that those engaged in East Asian futures studies adopts a standardized and more intuitively understandable Sino-character term for 'future + s' to enable futurists to effectively publicize and popularize the more plural, diverse and alternative values of futures studies. It also suggests related guidelines for creating and establishing a more popular term for 'future + s'. Finally, author coins the term 'multi + future' in Sino-characters as a useful term to effectively spread a more diverse, pluralistic concept of alternative futures in East Asian countries.

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1. Introduction

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world" Wittgenstein (1998).

Human thought and language are intimately interrelated. Lera Boroditsky (Boroditsky, 2001) has done numerous studies showing that people speaking different languages think differently about time and space. One of her findings, looking at differences between speakers of English and speakers of Mandarin, is that Mandarin speakers frequently use vertical metaphors when speaking about time: earlier events are said to be 'up' and later events are 'down'. Mandarin speakers also use horizontal time metaphors, but they use vertical metaphors far more, eight times more, than English speakers. M. Keith Chen (Chen, 2013) looked at differences in future-oriented behavior between speakers of languages with strong future-time reference, with obligatory grammatical distinctions when referring to present and future events, and speakers of languages with weak future-time reference, with few or no distinctions. His findings indicate that when the future is not so grammatically distinct from the present, speakers are more likely to make present sacrifices to save for a future which seems closer. Thus, linguistic convention may routinely shape different patterns of thinking and acting about the future.

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Language matters in futures studies, because it not only shapes images of the future, the essential core of futures studies, but is also the means of conveying these images of the future to the general public. Futurists should understand how their linguistic choices of terms affect public discourse about futures, and how their choices can either expand or limit the potentiality of futures in their societies.

Sardar in his article 'The Namesake' (Sardar, 2010) recognizes that the term used to describe the discipline of futures studies, its 'name', affects the identity and social role of futurists. So, he warns that using a singular term in describing the discipline and defining the concept 'future' rather than 'future + s' will just strengthen the image of a singular, determined future that is still predominantly Eurocentric. In his words, to create more pluralistic, multi-civilizational, alternate futures "plurality has to be emphasized consciously, constantly and continuously".

The author agrees and asserts that the plurality of the future must be consciously and continuously emphasized not only in English, but also in non-European languages such as Korean, Japanese and Chinese. So far, minimal attention is paid to how futurists groups speaking non-European languages as their mother tongue emphasize the plural possibilities of 'time to come'. Little is known about whether and how their linguistic conventions affect images of the future that are transmitted to and accepted by their general publics.

The present study highlights that Taiwanese, Korean and Japanese futurists who share a Sino-character culture very rarely emphasize the plurality of 'future + s', compared to futurists whose primary language is English. Sino-character notation, the traditionally authorized standard for intellectual expression in East Asian languages, lacks a commonly used plural suffix, such as the '-s' in English, and the grammar of East Asian languages allows the singular form to substitute for the plural form, as plurality is indicated by context and not by any obligatory grammatical forms. Thus, East Asian futurists customarily use the singular term future even in cases where the plural term 'future + s' is required by the context.

This does not mean that the East Asian futurists have a problem correctly understanding the plurality of the future. This semiotic contradiction in their mother tongues: expressing the plurality of the future while using the singular form might be a trifling issue for East Asian futurists who are mostly bilingual in English and can read Western futures texts, but it means that East Asian futurists have been indifferent to the public image of futures studies in their own countries where the plural concepts of "futures" are habitually expressed in singular form. For the general East Asian public, who may have only limited, fragmented, and sporadic exposure to the views and concepts expounded by East Asian futurists and who lack fluency and literacy in English, the linguistic conventions of their mother tongues, using singular terms even when expressing plural concepts, are a barrier to adopting the concept of plural and alternative futures. This conceptual gap about the concept of the future between elite futurists and lay public impedes actively eliciting public participation in creating, expressing and practicing alternative visions of the future other than those of the state-led growth model.

The lack of plurality in East Asian languages is not the only major factor that hinders the recognition of plurality in East Asian futures studies. Language constitutes just one aspect of an epistemology in East Asian societies that constructs reality in a holistic frame that deemphasizes plurality. Confucian values, still at the core of East Asian cultures and politics, stress the priority of the group over rights of the individual, and also lead to a relative indifference to the plurality of alternative, individualized futures. The underlying metaphor of Confucian thought is that of a single, definite, and true path called 'Tao' (道: road) in Chinese, which must be found and followed and which reflects the concept of a life and the cosmos as a single definite order (Fingarette, 1972). In contrast, Robert Frost in his famous poem, "The Road Not Taken," expresses the Western metaphor of the path of life as a series of individual choices among multiple possibilities: "Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Analyzing how language affects East Asian futures studies has the practical value of suggesting how local futurist groups can more effectively articulate and convey to the general public concepts of plural and alternative futures in their mother tongue. East Asian futurists may not be able to change traditions of Confucian values in their societies, but at least they can consciously choose wording that more effectively expresses the pluralistic values and images of futures studies.

The author suggests a linguistic solution to overcome this conceptual gap between futurists and the general public by coining a standardized sign for 'future + s' in Sino-characters that more popularly conforms to the linguistic conventions of Japanese, Korean and Chinese and thus can more strongly and consistently render plural images of diverse, alternative futures more easily comprehended by the general public.

Creating a standardized term for 'future + s' in Sino-character would lay a semiotic foundation that would help all East Asians understand the value of pluralistic and alternative approaches to the future and take more important roles in leading futures studies. Also, it would help futurist groups that seriously espouse alternative futures to expand their market opportunities, brand recognition and political influence in East Asian societies.

This paper first demonstrates how linguistic conditions affect East Asian futures studies. Secondly, it explores how the weak emphasis on plurality in East Asian languages has limited the popularization of the plural concepts of futures studies in this region. Finally, the author establishes a guideline for creating a standardized and better name for 'future + s' and coins a 'plural prefix + future'¹ in Sino characters, which would have a better recognition rate among East Asians than the English 'future + suffix-s'.

¹ The italicized words as "future" in this paper indicate the translation of Sino-character terms.

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