

Report on the Conference: Global Soul, Global Mind and Global Action—Futuring from Survival to Thrival

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Some forty presenters and 120 students, faculty, and visitors attended the international conference "Global Soul, Global Mind and Global Action – Futuring from Survival to Thrival," November 5-7, 2005 at Tamkang University, in Tamsui and Taipei, Taiwan. Headliners included *Global Soul* author Pico Iyer, internationally-recognized scholar and Club of Budapest founder Ervin Laszlo, and many well-known international futurists such as Ashis Nandy, Walter Truett Anderson, Richard Slaughter, Clement Bezold, and others. Tamkang University President Flora Cha-I Chang and Tamkang University Founder Clement P. Chang, opened the conference program, followed by a panel of representatives from international educational and futures organizations. Opening keynote speeches included an introductory overview by Professor Sohail Inayatullah, a set of techno-optimist forecasts by Professor Michio Kaku for the year 2020, and a critical futures analysis by Professor Nandy. Unfortunately, Kaku's remarks about Moore's Law, ubiquitous computing, skyhooks, and the multiverse theory of quantum physics seemed tired; Nandy's reminders that dystopian futures overshadow utopian futures and that futures work must continue to be a game of dissent were as timely as ever.

The plenary and breakout sessions were comprehensive. Although a few of the presentations seemed out of place, or parochial, for the greater part they all captured some aspect of the emerging global civiliza-

tion or challenges to it. The conference organizers also deserve credit for continuing to urge presenters to respond to the prompt: how can our actions foster greater global consciousness and purpose? Daily plenary and keynote sessions brought the group-as-a-whole together, while concurrent sessions and workshops provided a more intimate and conversational setting for topics of interest. As is often the case, it was a challenge to choose which concurrent sessions to attend. One innovative feature of the closing sessions each day was the "Facilitated Fishbowl" which gave everyone a chance to ask questions and for participants to respond to comments and questions from the organizers, fellow participants, and members of the audience.

From the onset of the conference, central themes and threads emerged including: the meaning of global citizenship, global culture(s), sustainability, global consciousness and spirituality, technological imperatives and determinism, leadership, the role of organizations, education for sustainability, communities and human settlements, and what might be called theories of consciousness, including the perspectives of deep narratives (myth) and integral philosophy. It became clear that there were few agreed-upon definitions of "global mind" and "global soul." For example, Iyer's global soul describes individuals whose experience is defined by shared global culture and experience, such as international air travel and urban life. Others at the conference seemed to see global soul as a more transcendent quali-

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ty of the collective global unconscious. Founder Clement Chang pondered some of these questions in his opening, acknowledging the rapid transformations of the "traditional self," the emerging collective identity that all persons on the planet now (potentially) share, and a fascinating revelation to the non-Chinese speakers (or at least to me) that the ideogram selected to represent "global soul" is translated as "global ghost."

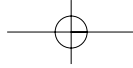
Human rights also emerged as meta-theme in the discourse on global civilization. For example, a number of participants questioned how far humanity has actually evolved; one noting that state-sponsored killing had taken 208 million lives in the 20th century. One clear, pivotal, and contentious issue was about the idea of "singularity" and, in the context of this particular conference, whether the evolution of humanity will lead to a "transhuman" (i.e., cyborg, post-human) condition or a "more humane" version of homo sapiens sapiens. For example, there were advocates, such as John Smart, for biological, genetically, and technologically enhanced or augmented humanity. There were advocates, such as Patricia Kelly, for what Pentti Malaska calls "globo-sapiens," globally-oriented, planetary citizens living in sustainable energy and resource systems.

From my perspective, the most constructive discussions turned on the transformation of thinking and behaving. Looking back over the last two decades of international futures conferences, it appears that the nexus of futures generation is shifting from the material past and present to the less tangible, "inner" and deep socio-civilizational challenges. This conference reflected the growing interest in and influence of the meta-narrative, paradigmatic debates. While futures studies has always been concerned with the notions of paradigm, worldview, and episteme, this conference stood out as an example of the kind of conference that the movement promised: a place where we talked about the future as much as the past and present, one where the idea of a tipping point to a new civilization hovered in the foreground. Whether spurred by technology or spiritual evolution, this conference was about *transforma-*

tional futures. For example, the most ubiquitous presentations and nuanced discussions raised serious futures questions regarding critical spirituality, the convergence of science and spirituality, and the appropriate role of action and reflection in making the transition to a new wholly (holy) new world. Not all were comfortable with the tensions between spirituality, religion, myth, and science, but no one shied away from tackling the thorny issues that are so obviously at the core of our humanity.

This was certainly one of the very best futures conferences that I have ever attended. The theme was global but it had a surprising tight focus in the manner in which most participants adhered to, responded to, or reflected on the theme. With some of the most prominent and thoughtful futurists in the world in attendance, the serious debates on Global Soul, Mind, and Brain had a learned, creative, and sometimes even light-hearted character. The venue contributed a unique and up-beat atmosphere. Taiwan itself is a contradiction and promise: neither a nation-state nor a province – the domestic and international politics of its exceptional place in the world are never far away, always palpable. Its progress, economically, is evident in its material development. The day of my arrival, the city of Taipei sparkled like a jewel in the distance under blue skies; the day of my departure, the smog of industrialization clung like a thick blanket all the way to the airport.

The university campus is a very attractive place, a bit above the Tamsui city streets, and the Chueh-Sheng International Conference Center offered delightful penthouse views and fully-equipped facilities. The conference was timed to coincide with the university's 55th anniversary celebrations, which added to the overall energy and sense of excitement. The Founder and other dignitaries are justly proud, as well, of the success and growth of the Futures Studies program. Participants were treated to many sumptuous meals and cultural activities. For example, a highlight for many was the informal evening party and music in the university's tea garden. The classic Grand Hotel also served as a venue for social events and lodging



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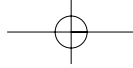
for foreign visitors – a treat for those eager to experience the art and architecture of traditional China.

The third essential element in the conference's success was the professional and efficient conference organization and logistics support for foreign visitors and conference activities. Kuo-Hua Chen, Chien-Fu Chen, and Sohail Inayatullah all deserve credit for the visible and seamless management of plenary meetings, concurrent sessions, and workshops. The panels were balanced and the overall structure of the conference was logical and coherent. Equally impressive was the hard work of the staff and students, and sometimes in front (but always behind the scenes), the leadership of Clement Chang.

The conference was full of hope for the future with signs of continued concern for societies that are failing to seriously deal with the issues of the past and present that cloud the future. Concerns were recognized and articulated about our unsustainable political, economic, and educational systems and outmoded ways of thought and behavior. Hope was grounded on the fact that a global society *is* emerging, foresight skills and activities *do* continue to grow, and it becomes more obvious that all 6.5 billion of us humans are in a grand experiment together with our Earth and its inhabitants.

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