Essay

Envisioning the Futures of Taiwan

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Taiwan is a mixture of cultures, which has resulted in the complex development of Taiwan. Although past can not completely predict the future, current trends and phenomenon can provide a useful context of its probable as well as preferable development. Having a sense of vision has played an important role in Taiwan's movement toward its future. Taiwan has reached a turning point of developments after its strong emphasis on economic achievement. The will and commitment to create new and alternative images of Taiwan's future has challenged its people at the turn of the century. This article attempts to offer insights that could be helpful in exploring possible futures of Taiwan.

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Bridge of Eastern Culture and Western World

Taiwan, an island located off the eastern coast of China in the Western Pacific between Japan and the Philippines, has been an important stage for the encounter of western culture and eastern culture for centuries in terms of geographic and cultural viewpoint. Taiwan was an unavoidable stop of voyage from southeast Asia to northeast Asia in 16-19 centuries, when European traded with Asian countries, especially China and Japan. During the Cold War, Taiwan was an unsinkable carrier for the western allies against the expansion of Communism at the center of western Pacific Rim. Owing to its geographic peculiarity, it was ruled by other countries, such as Spain, Netherlands and Japan in turns; which varied the nature of Taiwanese culture and brought into the particular characteristics of the Taiwanese culture.

From sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, Taiwan started to emerge its importance as a center for business in the southeast Asia. The Dutch began its earliest exploit in Taiwan and organized immigration from mainland, and Taiwan had its own agriculture and trade with other countries.

After the defeat of war between China and Japan in 1895, Taiwan was colonized by Japan for 50 years until 1945. Although Japan's development focused on agriculture, Japan started Taiwan's infrastructure in cities around Taiwan and the establishment of railroad around the island beneficial for Taiwan's development in economy after World War II.

In 1949, the civil war of China led to the split the government, and the ensuing ideology clash between western and communist bloc has two influences on Taiwan. In terms of culture, Taiwan maintained the basic values of Chinese tradition which was attacked severely during the Culture Revolution in Mainland China and filled the gap made during Japanese colonization. On the other hand, in order to contain the invasion of communism, the United States began to have an influence on Taiwan in many respects. In the early stage, it affected Taiwan's military and politics; later, its sphere of influence has spread to its culture and values as well. This is reflected in a variety of ways: the widespread celebration of the Christmas holiday, numerous students choosing to study abroad and, most prominently of all, the infiltration of Hollywood movies and American fast food into daily Taiwanese life.

Taiwan is a cultural hybrid, which has been vividly recorded by constant changes of Taipei's landmark. First, the previous presidential palace built during Japanese colony with the style of European baroque style represented Japanese material structure for Taiwan. Second, the Grand Hotel built after 1949 with typical Chinese style represented the protection of Chinese culture imposed by Kuomintang government. Finally, the modern skyscraper of tower

represented the acceptance of western culture. Present Taiwan is a product of its past and heritage of history characterized by its geographic uniqueness and historical specialties. The mixture of different cultures of Taiwan not only has played an important role for Taiwan's past development, but also can serve as an importance reference for Taiwan's future. The visions of Taiwan's futures should take its unique culture into consideration.

A Time of Visions

Where is Taiwan's future? The visions of future can stimulate and encourage collective mind of people in the road leading to the futures. Usually we are accustomed to forecasting the future from the present and history. Can the past faithfully forecast the futures? Not exactly. In a rapidly changing era, various aspects such as society, economy, politics, and technology in the past have been dramatically different from the ones we live in now. If we take a look at the log of the earth, it is apparent that the future is moving in an accelerated pace. The acceleration can easily been shown by the shrinkage of time span from the process of invention to innovation.

While anticipating uncertainty and change as the main features of the future, exploring scenarios of alternative futures will definitely be a wiser choice than remaining "business as usual." At a recent envisioning workshop conducted by Sohail Inayatullah in Tamkang University, participants consisted of professors, graduate, and undergraduate students were split into two groups. They were asked to envision the future of Taiwan in the year 2025, and then asked to backcast what should be planned form 1999 to 2025.

The practice of backcasting provided the participants an innovative means for envisioning the future. At the workshop, each participant talked freely about his/her vision for Taiwan. This paper is going to discuss the trends of Taiwan, because we believe futures are based on trends, data, and enriched by people's imagination and visions. This workshop served as the first trial of envisioning from groups of various social positions. I hope the following recordings and discussions of the workshop can provide readers with a new vision for Taiwan's futures and improve its readers' understanding of Taiwan.

Taiwan's Dilemma

In the path of moving ahead, the present is the trickiest thing to deal with. Whether making a correct decision or not will deeply affect the future we are going to live with. To make a right choice, sufficient information always helps

us making a better decision. At this turning point of history, Taiwan is facing many dilemmas that will deeply influence the development of its futures. These dilemmas result partly from both the institution of society and the mindset of the people. Each composition of each entry multiplies the numbers of probable futures. The main disputes are as follow:

1. **Ecology versus Economy:** The revelation of environmental deterioration has increased environmental awareness around the island. There is a bitter struggle between green (environmental protection) and growth because the island's residents realize they should leave a clean environment for the next generation. Taiwan has created a so-called "economic miracle" at the expense of its environment. But with the improvement of living standard, people have begun to value and demand a better living environment over economic development. How to maintain economic competitiveness while protecting the environment challenges the wisdom of both the Taiwanese government and its private sectors.

2. **Humanity versus Technology:** Taiwan's economy used to be based on a labor-intense industry, its people's diligence, and the underestimate of social cost. Because of the rising cost of labor, land and environmental protection, these advantages have ceased to exist along with development of Taiwan's economy. Information technology became the backbone of Taiwan's economy. While bragging about the achievement of being the world's biggest computer hardware exporter, stock values, once again, overwhelmed broader values of humanity. Taiwanese society should have answers to the following types of questions: Which possible futures are most desirable in the sense of promoting the achievement of positive human values? Which are intolerable in that they violate and prevent the fulfillment of such values? (Bell 1993)

3. **Taiwan versus China:** Since the military crisis imposed on Taiwan by the Mainland in 1996, the number of Taiwanese who think of themselves as Chinese has plummeted and most people favor the status quo in terms of identity politics. Since the PRC government has never given up the last resort of force in order to resolve the issue of Taiwan, the Taiwanese people are torn between the Chinese and Taiwanese. Despite the efforts Taiwan's opinion-makers to push citizens to choose between two extremes (unification or independence), a plurality of Taiwanese continues to resist. For most Taiwanese, the ideal future is the present, the status quo (Rigger 1999). Maintaining status quo symbolizes the uncertainty of Taiwan's future.

These paradoxical options provide variables for the futures of Taiwan. These situations serve as a context or platform upon which futures are based. The combination of each factor will result in many possibilities. The decision mak-

ing process is not completed by any individual or any sector of government, but depends on the collective intention of society supported and sustained by the visions of the public. Having visions are to a society what the eyes are to a man.

Taiwan's Tomorrow : Vision of Taiwan in 2025

To prepare the futures of Taiwan, at the workshop held recently in Tamkang University, we can find various types of Taiwan's vision from the different backgrounds of its participants. Most of them are the younger generation of Taiwan. Their concerns are different from their parents and ancestors. They came up with some creative alternatives for Taiwan's futures.

Some of these visions include:

1. Comprehensive education: Most participants emphasized education. They all hoped to work as teachers, professors or writers. Free education should be provided. Thus, education would become a main activity of people in the future.
2. Interpersonal relationships: Everyone stresses the importance of setting up good relationships with family. The world of the robot is inhumane, although most people may use advanced technology to facilitate communication with others.
3. Hi-technology: Women may use artificial wombs to have children. People may eat artificial meat, instead of killing animals. Genetic produce may prevails in the market place.
4. Nature: Most people long to live on farms. Organic farming is more popular than genetic farming, because maintaining the natural nature of foods is the main concern of people. Ecological balance is an important task of people.
5. Boundaries: Most people will do a lot of traveling. Some of them may have their own jets. Free to go to anywhere at anytime is a common desire in the future.

After the representation of each one's vision, here are some of the metaphors that the participants came up with:

1. Green Globe: Most participants picture their future set on a farm. Perhaps Taipei can be transformed into a garden city. Organic farming is the main type of activity in daily life.
2. Idealist Green: Most participants imagine living a high-tech society where people do a lot of traveling. With internet around, people may also work using their computers. After they have reached a desirable living standard, people emphasize the importance of recreation.

3. Tou Hua Yuan: This was an ideal land, a utopia, from ancient Chinese literature. One participant pictures Taiwan as a utopia where people live in a self-sufficient community. Since a dense population is the cause of many crimes, it is reasoned that a small community may improve people's interactions and increase understanding. There would be no currency used in the community and people would work because they loved their jobs. The community would also provide the residents with free housing, clothing, food, education and medicare.

4. A Tragic Taiwan: Some of the participants are pessimistic to the futures of Taiwan. One participant worries that China will invade Taiwan, as Taiwan has long been considered as a renegade province of the PRC. Besides, one participant predicts that there will be many people encountering mental disturbance. Recent psychological studies have indicated that not only a high rate of change can generate stress but a low rate of change can also be stressful.

Conclusion

The most important part of the envisioning workshop was the backcasting. After each participant presented his vision for Taiwan's future, participants were asked to recall history. Through this practice, it is obvious that the future is no more uncertainty but can be revealed as a process of people's will and creation. This is a kind of positive thinking. Given the futures they have envisioned and history recalled, participants are encouraged to consider what action they might tack in the present to bring about the possible futures they have envisioned.

Envisioning is not just a free-floating fantasy and escapist daydreaming, but a valid method to envision alternative futures. People using this technique can shape the futures they want instead of reacting to whatever is happening. Envisioning futures become a participatory activity done by every member of society. This was the first envisioning workshop held at Tamkang University, and we discovered it was not an easy job for participants to imagine the future. The group was not homogeneous which produced a variety of visions. This was a process of construction in the mind, which is helpful to the construction of the whole society in the real life. No matter how useful these visions would be, at least younger generation are being asked their future, are beginning to explore the possibilities.

References

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