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# China 2020: Looking Forward

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# CHINA 2020: LOOKING FORWARD

by

**J. A. English-Lueck**

"The present is never our destination, the past and present are only our means, the future alone is our destination." [Quotation of Blaise Pascal by Zhao Fusan, vice-chairman of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, at the 10th World Federation Conference of the World Futures Federation in Beijing, 1988] (Huang, 1988).

In November 1988 I began to conduct interviews with various scholars in a key university in Southwestern China concerning the future of Chinese education, science and modernization. China is a planned society, with ideologically defined goals outlining the shape of the future, if only hazily and distantly perceived. What do Chinese scholars, a group emerging tentatively from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, think about the possibilities facing China? How do those perceptions reveal structural features of Chinese society?

China's role in the consideration of the future is doubly significant. First, China represents a fifth of humanity, and her version of the future should surely be better understood by Western futurists. Secondly, the field of futures studies is heavily dominated by the perspective of the developed world, especially the West. Too often, future scenarios are thinly veiled exercises in self-projection, middle-class intellectual America writ large. Hence my decision to undertake cross-cultural futures research. China can also further our understanding of a methodological issue in futurism--the role of planning. The benefits and trials of a planned society are hotly debated in futures conferences, as a matter of speculation. Yet an ethnographic analogy exists today--there are highly planned societies, such as China. How does planning shape the perception and reality of alternative futures?

I chose the Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR) technique (Textor, 1980) as my methodological tool. Through an open-ended interview format, the interviewer elicits an individual's concept of the best, worst and most probable scenario of a particular future. The individual is encouraged to describe freely the future in question, in this case the future of science, education and society in China in A.D. 2020. Sometimes I would couch this future in personal terms--what will your 4 year old son's life be like in the University when he is 34? What will your life be like in the University

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when you are 60? This approach was used only when needed to elicit responses--usually such detailed probing was unnecessary. In addition, each interview report contains a brief biographical sketch, intended to give some personal context that would help interpret the information. For example, if a person had been sent to the Chinese countryside in the 1970s, this would illuminate any opinions that person might have on the rural/urban split, or for that matter, on the power of the policy-makers who sent him there. The interview is primarily an exercise in scenario building--highly fruitful for revealing values (what is desired, feared, etc.) as well as those issues in the ethnographic present that seem relevant to the interviewee in determining the shape of the future, such as economic policy in the educational system of China. I had used this technique with great success with American holistic healers, midwives, legal personnel and educators. However, I had no experience using the technique cross-culturally.

The Chinese who agreed to be interviewed consisted of scholars from all over China studying temporarily in Southwestern China. Although self-selected, and motivated by the opportunity to practice their English with a native speaker, they proved to be a relevant and accessible group. I conducted 103 interviews from November 1988 to January 1990. The interviews fell into 3 field seasons, November 1988-January 1989, June 1989, and December 1989 to January 1990. Only a few interviews were carried out in June 1989, because I felt that further research would be inappropriate and uncomfortable for my potential interviewees in view of the turmoil of that time. Thus the bulk of the information comes from the winters of 1988/1989 and 1989/1990. All interviewees were asked to give some basic background (all names and work units were edited out in transcription). Prompting with a fan-like diagram depicting the various alternatives (worst to best) stemming from the present, I asked the scholars to talk about the future of Chinese science, particularly science education, and the impact of science and technology on Chinese society. In practice these domains often were generalized to science, education and society.

## METHODOLOGICAL TRIBULATIONS

The cross-cultural context highlighted some methodological questions I had already encountered--such as the issue of analytical reciprocity, how to interpret the responses of the interviewees. Moreover, some difficulties were generated directly by the problems of doing Chinese futures fieldwork. The interviews were quite different in style and content from anything I had encountered in their American counterparts. There were some interesting limitations in applying the EFR technique in this context, including factors such as language, openness, temporal preconceptions and timing.

In general, any scenario-building technique presents some difficulties for analysis. Since the scenarios are a product of spontaneous creativity and free association, rarely are they tidily organized in easily understood categories--relevant current events, best scenarios, most pessimistic scenarios, etc. Instead, as ideas occur to the respondents, they may comment on these issues, even if it is inconvenient for the overall

organization. This problem is often easy to adjust for in the transcription phase. However, it implies a methodological question that is not so easily resolved, for social scientists must analyze not only what is said, but what is left unsaid. As I outlined and tabulated observations on the best and worst scenarios I pondered once again the nature of the scenarios I was building.

If a person mentions a feature of the optimistic scenario, will its opposite automatically be implied in the pessimistic scenario? Can we assume a reciprocity of worldview--P is favored, Q is the opposite of P, so Q must be negatively valued? Are our projected realities really that consistent? After all, few other aspects of human behavior are consistent! If someone states that population control will determine the success of China's economy, it is fairly clear what he means. I can easily determine this factor in his optimistic and pessimistic scenarios. However, if someone says that the increase in privacy will break down the network of relations that maintains Chinese society, is she implying that the best future will minimize privacy? Particularly since this interpretation of values runs counter to my American branch of ethnocentrism, can I really be sure I understand what she means? How do we deal, methodologically, with retrospective implications?

Of course, many of the difficulties I encountered in my fieldwork were a function of doing cross-cultural research, particularly in China. The first difficulty is language. Since my Chinese is good primarily for buying vegetables, not conducting sophisticated discourse on social issues, the interviews were conducted in English. This had both advantages and disadvantages. Clearly, my main disadvantage was the inaccessibility of the vast number of Chinese scholars who spoke only Chinese, or perhaps French or Russian. In addition, the interviewees, whose English level was advanced, were still constrained by the inability to express themselves at their native intellectual level, but at the same time they were liberated by speaking in code--things can be said in English that would not be uttered in Chinese. A translator would be out of the question since that would eliminate any attempt at anonymity, which was vital to ensuring cooperation.

Unlike my American informants, Chinese scholars are unused to expressing personal opinions freely, especially to foreigners. Often the best observation would go unrecorded since the interviewee would not want to be linked with the observation. My rapport was sufficient to get fairly creative responses, but it was clear that many individuals, particularly the older scholars, were insecure, or even afraid to respond with any direct personal opinion. I had to respect their concern. In addition, politeness may dictate that nothing would be said that might disturb the American guest. This occasionally left me with the feeling of being invisibly second-guessed as the interviewees would carefully watch my responses to see if they were answering "correctly", that is, in a way that would not offend me. This concern was one reason I decided to get a large number of interviews (at least by qualitative, anthropological standards) to see a greater variety of opinion.

The next perceptual screen I had to pierce was determining to what extent

the opinion was truly individual. Could I detect a "rhetoric factor", an interpretation of social events in accordance with the current governmental policy? Surely the concordance of information and issues between interviews and the People's/China Daily was not entirely coincidence. Determining the larger social values is the whole point of the EFR technique, but in China social judgements may reflect a consciously articulated governmental policy. In any EFR interview, there is a key moment when the shape of the most probable future emerges. How is it like the optimistic scenario, or the pessimistic? In the 1988/1989 interviews, the response was overwhelming. All but one individual said the most probable future was only slightly less wonderful than the optimistic one (even though the details of the scenario might be contradictory to that assessment). Moreover, although the content of the best and most probable futures was more guardedly optimistic in the winter 1989/1990 interviews, it was also optimistic in the long view, after another decade or so of difficult times. Of course, within Marxism (as well as indigenous Chinese philosophies) there is the idea of an inherently brighter future. "Progress is inevitable", stated several intellectuals. There is a conscious effort in Chinese political rhetoric to emphasize this idea (whether the progress will reach fruition in 10 years or 200 is often subject to debate). Such overt optimism was inevitable. What was interesting was the degree to which individual answers belied the generalization. The theme was "Yes, the future will be better, but realistically, it won't be glorious quite so easily". This was particularly noticeable in the interviews after June 1989. The interplay between rhetoric and analytical foresight is a fruitful area of exploration.

The events of June 1989 caught many foreign Sinologists by surprise (Coughlin, 1989). Yet the Chinese intellectual community was slowly stirring before that time (see also Jacobson, 1989). The interviews came at a unique moment in recent Chinese history, at the edge of discontent--half of them at a time when freedom seemed greater than in anyone's memory; half at a time of greater caution. It was far easier to get personal opinions in 1989/1989 than in 1989/1990, for reasons of realpolitik and methodology (the openness factor again). Recently, the official rhetoric concerning the arrival of a bright future has been revised--it has been postponed potentially for several generations. The role of intellectuals has been defined more keenly--the scholars must realize they are workers in the service of the state. These factors have made the generation of an optimistic future, comparable to the developed world, more hesitant and decidedly more realistic. The future would still be brighter than today, so the scholars believed--but the timeframe would be longer and the path uphill steeper than anticipated.

Beyond the purely methodological questions, the EFR technique readily yielded patterns that are worth discussing here. The concerns of overwhelming interest to futurists--the fate of the developing world, the issue of planned and unplanned societies, the concerns of the group championing Chinese modernization, i.e. the intellectuals-- can also be explored.

## EMERGENT THEMES--POWER, PLANNING AND SURVIVAL

In the EFR interview, one gets a sense of not only the array of alternatives in a given framework, but also the values--hopes and fears--of the interviewee, as well as a description of those current issues that will shape the future. When the rural Chinese construct a building, they lay earth bricks over a primary framework. One of the difficult jobs in analyzing the EFR interviews is separating the framework from the bricks. The following ideas, repeated over and over, may be part of that framework.

One critical difference between my American and Chinese interviewees is the locus of control. Any American informants might cite economics, ideology, the supernatural, or luck as the agent of change, but always with a clear idea of the role of an individual as an actor. "In the future, we will be able to..." is a common pattern. Not so in this Asian set of interviews. There is only one locus of control, the government, more specifically, the government's policies, not the laws, but the ever changing images of the near future. In futurist circles we often debate the merits of planned societies, forgetting that we have models of such societies in the world today. Repeatedly the informational distance and mercurial nature of central planning leaves a gnawing sense of frustration. Not only the workplace is assigned, but also the content of scientific work, based not on the scholar's education, interest or personal convenience, but on Beijing's outline of what is needed from science and technology in the immediate future. The plans are often either over-generalized, thus not including diversity or concrete goals, or over-specified, thus not allowing for regional variation or lack of infrastructure. This may give rise to some kind of failure, or the threat of failure, of the individual scientist, engineer or middle-level manager trying to implement the goal. In the interviews, virtually no one expressed the desire for complete freedom of choice, but instead a desire to "deregulate" and find greater freedom of choice within the larger policy guidelines of the central government.

There was also a consciousness of the profound problems facing China as a developing country, particularly those issues emphasized by the government, such as population control, rural/urban divergence and possible emergence of a class distinction, and insufficient education. Such global considerations are an appropriate focus for futurists, since they represent the real world constraints on the shape of the future. Once again, pre-existing rhetoric was a clear influence on the declaration of the problems by interviewees. Although personal experience was clearly a more profound factor than such rhetoric, such issues as the success of the one-child policy (although never a critical analysis) or the increasingly obvious differences between the cities and the countryside were mentioned. On a more subtle level, there were long-standing rhetorical connections that caught me off-guard. For example, I was surprised, though perhaps I should not have been, that when I asked about science I frequently got responses about democracy. Why? Science and democracy were coupled in the educational development of early 20th century China as well as the

historic May 4th movement in 1919. They are coupled in rhetoric as well as in logic--things dealing with greater accessibility of information.

Personal experience was overwhelmingly the source of information on change and trouble in Chinese society. All of the scholars interviewed had a university education, most were teachers as well as practicing engineers or researchers, some of whom had worked in primary and secondary education in the countryside during and after the Cultural Revolution. At that time the status of intellectuals was low, just next to that of beggars. An effort was made to give them more prestige, and they are now officially workers, i.e. the good guys.

Their concern with educational futures was intimate. The interviews revealed the conflicts inherent in a developing country, such as the budget and priority battle between mass education and elite development of science and technology. The lack of infrastructure and facilities (what use is a supercomputer if the electricity is not dependable?) was a consistent concern. The poor material living conditions and the low morale of educators were the most common issues discussed in the interviews. Lack of broad support and empty coffers has led to a chronic undersupport of teachers. A young scholar working in the university makes 90--100 yuan monthly. To put that into perspective, a chicken costs 15 yuan, a bicycle 250-300 yuan. Fixing shoes is far more lucrative.

In the past decade of economic reforms, the perception has been that to be rich is glorious (even if this creed is officially revoked in the future, it is well established in the minds of the youth), and teachers are de facto inglorious. This has led to a crisis of morale. Coupled with the lack of facilities and genuine research opportunities--there is a sense that research now is mundane and filled with duplication (how many space heaters can be designed?)--it is amazing to this Western observer that there is any optimistic scenario, but the majority of the interviewees felt policies would change in 30 years and more people would want to go and could go to universities. Although some scholars pointed out the crisis of money and morale in education in the countryside in their pessimistic scenarios, others pointed out that education remained a main avenue of social mobility, even if the economic payoff was low. An intellectual is an official, albeit usually not a high one, and the move to the urban sector may otherwise prove impossible for a member of a rural family in a society where residence is governmentally controlled. Many felt that education would proceed along two separate paths of vocational, practical training, especially in the countryside, and advanced theoretical work.

In scientific education, often the greatest projected advance would be in those fields that do not need sophisticated technology, such as math and theoretical physics, or in those areas on the cutting edge--superconductors, computers, genetic engineering. Perhaps, scholars speculated, in those fields China would not be bogged down by existing lack of infrastructure and it could co-opt the latest nanotechnology. In spite of this optimism, it was also noted that neither theoretical research nor advanced research, which might require a large amount of foreign hard capital for equipment, was a high priority in educational policy. Not everyone lauded the coming

of an age of high technology. Some scholars dismissed higher level education, emphasizing that as long as the rate of rural illiteracy was astronomical, building the upper end would only accelerate the creation of two Chinas, a neolithic rural and a 21st century urban sector.

## FUTURE IMAGES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

In my previous work with American informants I had been struck with the way in which visions of the future played a large part in fuelling social movement ideology. I had particularly noted the way in which holistic health practitioners revealed New Age expectations in the EFR interviews (English-Lueck, 1990). Although I had not anticipated tapping into social movement sentiment in my interviews with Chinese scholars, I might well have done so. China's modernization effort is not simply building more concrete structures and the occasional Weaver Girl rocket. Western ideas have accompanied the technology. Youth culture has revived elements of traditional Chinese arts and practices, as well as embracing jeans, rock music and a new cultural independence from the tyranny of an age-grade system in which the elders are unquestionably in the right. Although more conservative than the "waiting to work" set, intellectuals, particularly students, have adopted the values that inadvertently accompanied the opening of China in the last decade. The stage is set for a truly New China. How do these attitudes appear at the individual level, which is often invisible?

It has been lamented by students of social movements (Gerlach and Hine, 1981) that it is difficult to study a social movement in its early phases, before a crisis alters the worldview that highlights the visible features of the movement. For example, the 1968 Santa Barbara oil spill and Chernobyl disaster forever changed the perceptions and activities of the anti-nuclear and environmental movements. After all, most people do not study a social movement until after a crisis has crystallized that movement into a visible social entity. The EFR technique did reveal the stresses inherent in the system, before the events of June forever altered the visible efforts of Chinese intellectuals to effect change. After June 1989, in events better described by journalists than anthropologists, the outside image of the distress felt by the Chinese has been altered permanently in our perceptions. It is analytically very difficult now to separate the events of the "turmoil" in Beijing and other urban centers of China from the grassroots concerns of the relevant segment of Chinese society, the intellectuals. Understandable affective reactions and oversimplifications based on the highly visible turmoil of the 1989 May and June movement--i.e. the Western perception of a Chinese "yearning for democracy", or a causative factor of "outside agitators"--color, and perhaps obscure, any analysis. Although my interviewees did not march in the streets of Beijing, they had earlier expressed concern with the issues that the demonstrators highlighted--concern for corruption and emergent class distinctions and an increased desire for freedom of expression, within a planned centralized system. If social changes are lurking in the background of the collective consciousness



of the Chinese intellectual, perhaps it would be useful to go back and reexamine their optimistic scenarios, the ones that I suspect contain the deepest motivation for change. The more widespread and opaquely visible message might be that Chinese intellectuals desire a materially prosperous future--although few would expect parity with the developed world--in a centrally guided stable political environment where laws and not policies prevail and where each individual has increased ability to make moral and other life decisions. This vision is accompanied by an overall sense of nationalism, i.e, a deep desire to retain and regain Chinese heritage. This was partially undermined during the attempted ethnocide of the Cultural Revolution and is now overshadowed by the ideology and economic influence of imported worldviews.

Planning, rhetoric, and personal experience shaped the images of China's future. Primarily an Americanist by training, I was deeply struck by the constraints--economic, structural and practical--on the Chinese intellectual. Doing futures research cross-culturally has presented some unique problems but also yielded insights into my own preconceptions and biases. The future is not simply a projection of Middle-America with nifty gadgets--an image I feel sometimes pervades futurism--but reflects a complex set of widely divergent patterns, some of which are alien indeed.

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