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# **Imagining the Future in Today's China**

University Students' Images of the Future

Centre for East Asian Studies

Master's thesis

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In recent years, worry about youth's hopelessness about the future has been on the rise. In China, the youth were affected, for instance, by the Covid-19 pandemic and related policies, followed by a record high youth unemployment rate. Simultaneously, the Chinese youth have been expected to carry out the 'Chinese Dream'. In this thesis, I investigated what Chinese university students think and feel about the future, and most of all, what their probable and preferred images of the future were like. The study was conducted through an online survey. On average, the respondents perceived future of the world as slightly more uncertain than their own future, and they were slightly more optimistic about their own future than the future of the world. Additionally, half of the participants indicated a rather weak sense of agency. Concerning sources of views and opinions about the future, the respondents encountered them most often in social media. Through thematic analysis and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), I found that images of probable and preferred futures an individual held were often similar. From the data, I identified a total of three (3) different images. The most common was an image of a *high-tech society*. In this image, progress and development had occurred in most areas of life and the society, and as the title suggests, advanced technology played a significant role in the society and daily life. The second most common image was of a *harmonious world* – a sustainable and peaceful globalised world where people led meaningful lives. The least common image was titled *times of change* due to respondents describing societal issues, unrest, disconnection, and chaos. Overall, China was depicted as both a powerful country with high potential for innovativeness and achieving its aims, while also navigating challenges brought by systemic issues and domestic tensions. The results imply a complex societal landscape, where optimism about progress, harmonious relations, sustainable lifestyles, and technological advancements coexists with awareness of inequality, environmental issues, as well as potential crises and instability. Due to a small sample size (N: 34), the results are not generalisable, but the study provides a snapshot – a localised and time-bound depiction of values, experiences, and perceptions among the participants. The research holds significance through informing about the appropriateness of the research design in the context of China, and the results could be used as a basis of further studies in larger samples.

**Key words:** Images of the Future, Chinese Youth, Post-00s Generation, Critical Futures Studies, Causal Layered Analysis, Chinese Futures

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years, worry about youth's hopelessness about the future has been articulated by researchers and amplified by the media across the globe. Researchers have suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic alone has triggered tensions in how future and life course is understood by an individual of any society (e.g., Settersten et al. 2020, 10). This includes the Chinese youth who, whilst having higher living standards than the previous generations, have been recently faced with multiple challenges. Besides the pandemic, trends like record-high youth unemployment may well have led the youth to change their views about the future and made it necessary for them to adjust their future plans. Therefore, research on Chinese youth's relationship with the future is particularly timely.

In my thesis research, I collected and analysed Chinese university students' images of the future. Images of the future is a key term in futures studies, which in short refers to a person's or a community's visualised and conceptual idea of the future (e.g., Mäkelä, Karjalainen & Parkkinen 2012, 297). Collecting images of the future provides important information about the participants and their political, economic, social, and cultural context in which they live in for multiple reasons. Firstly, drawing from previous research, at the individual level, images of the future guide actions and planning and can therefore be indicative of what the future may hold. Secondly, they reflect the present moment, including one's wellbeing, values, worldview, possibilities, and expectations. Thirdly, they are reflections of wider societal phenomena like social or cultural change, environmental attitudes, and social mobility. (Ono 2003, 737 & 754; Rubin 2013, 40-41). While my research concerned views and visions about the future, my primary aim in this study was to learn about the present, as images of the future reflect the participants' views and their context in the here and now.

As a concept, images of the future gained popularity following Fred Polak's publications in the 1960s. He argued that whether a society holds an image of the future influences the longevity and prosperity of the society. In his research, Polak concluded that modern era societies lack an image of the future, which leads to their stagnation and decline. From the perspective of Polak's arguments, research on Chinese people's images of the future is particularly interesting. Rather than not being exposed to a vision for the future, the Chinese Dream discourse, although rather vague, portrays a vision for many aspects of China's future, from the level of the individual to China's global role (e.g., Bislev 2015). While China's rise has been a popular topic in international relations and political science, there is lack of

research on the future of China and its people from a social sciences perspective. Thus, there is a research gap, which this thesis contributes to.

In existing research about youth's images of the future<sup>1</sup>, researchers have focused on analysing the youth's relationship with the future, the characteristics of their images of the future and the influencing factors behind the formation of those images. In addition, they have discussed what implications the results have at the level of the individual and the society. The implications have been studied, for example, through analysing indicators of social change and change in chosen life course trajectories. The aims listed here came to form the research aims of my thesis as well.

To attend to these research aims, my main research question concerned what the participants' images of the future were like (RQ1). More specifically, I focused on their images of probable and preferred futures<sup>2</sup>. As my secondary research questions, I studied what are the underlying factors informing the future images (RQ2). To answer this question, I collected participants' self-reported values that shaped the images, the information sources that the participants engaged with concerning opinions and views about the future, as well as contemplated how social, political, economic, and cultural conditions may have influenced the formation of the images. To support the analysis and to allow comparisons with results from previous research, besides the research questions presented above, I also explored the question of what the participants' relationship with the future was like. For example, how often they engaged in thinking about the future, their felt agency in relation to shaping the future, and how they felt about the future (i.e., in terms of optimism or pessimism and certainty or uncertainty). These aspects were also important for my research due to providing valuable information about the underlying factors that influenced the formation of the images (Remmert, 2020, 11).

In order to answer the research questions, I collected data through an online survey from students studying at a university in a second-tier city in China. I then analysed the data through thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. I also used the method of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) to answer the secondary research question about some of the influencing factors behind the images. The method has not yet been widely used for the analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed review of previous literature is presented in the background chapter (pp. 8-31).

<sup>2</sup> Here, probable futures refer to future scenarios that are most likely to occur, while preferred futures refer to scenarios that the participant finds ideal.

individuals' images of the future, but it has so far proven to produce rich and meaningful analysis on the few existing studies (E.g., Kaboli & Tapio 2018; Hoffman 2019).

Besides being significant in its timeliness and due to the research gap, some studies on the topic have been noted to have benefitted the participants. As an example, researchers have reported that participation empowered the youth to actively create their preferred futures. Additionally, as theorised by Polak (1973), an active relationship to the future holds significance not only for an individual, but for the prosperity of the society as a whole. Finally, the findings can also be used to clear misconceptions about the young generation, as well as to better understand and support the youth. (Gidley & Inayatullah 2002; Chen 2016; Ono 2003) For those who work with Chinese youth, even small-scale studies can offer actionable insights.

Finally, due to a small sample size (N: 34), the results are by no means generalisable. The research holds significance through providing information about the appropriateness of the research design and survey design in the context of China, aiding in the design of further studies on the theme. The study also provides a focused snapshot of the values and expectations of the Chinese university students participating in this study. As the nature of the research is exploratory, it also reveals initial trends and hypotheses worth investigating in larger samples. The results of the study should be interpreted as a snapshot – a localised and time-bound depiction of this particular group's experiences and perceptions. While the findings cannot be generalised, they do provide a microcosmic view that can enrich understanding when combined with other studies or situated within a broader framework.

## 2 Background

In this section, I first explore conceptualisations of images of the future and present the definition based on which the paper proceeds. While the concept of images of the future is rather broad, it has been shaped and defined in various ways over the years. In the following chapter, I locate my study in terms of academic fields: at the intersection between futures studies and East Asian studies: while the focus of the thesis was on understanding Chinese society, the key framework used in the research came from critical futures studies. In this section, I also provide a description of the field of critical futures studies and an overview of the analysis framework of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), as well as critical futures studies in the context of China. Next, I discuss future studies in the context of China and review previous literature related to my research topic and aims. Finally, I end the background chapter by describing the target group of my research, including the wider context in which they grew up in, previous research on their values, and expectations towards them often placed by families and the society. I also describe some of the current initiatives and aims that China has and that are to reach completion by 2049.

### 2.1 Defining Images of the Future

Research on youth's relationship with and perceptions concerning the future has been conducted with various conceptualisations and frameworks in different fields within social sciences. Images of the future is one of these conceptualisations which has been primarily developed in the field of futures studies, although used also in various other fields, such as youth studies. As noted in the introduction, in simple terms, image of a future is a person's or a community's visualised and conceptual idea of the future (Mäkelä, Karjalainen & Parkkinen 2012, 297). In this chapter, I offer a brief history and an overview of some of the various ways in which the term of images of the future has been conceptualised in research<sup>3</sup>.

During the mid-1900s, future studies was just becoming an established research field. Images of the future were seen as part of strategic planning, policy development, and scientific progress due to e.g., the Cold War (Son 2015, as cited in Godhe & Goode 2018, 152). The

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the concept of 'images of the future' itself is very new in comparison to the long history of humans envisioning and conceptualising the future. As Godhe and Goode (2018, p. 151) write, 'the future is ancient: prophecy, forecasting and foresight are as old as recorded human history'.

term images of the future itself was not yet commonly used, but there were other terms to understand future visions and the process of envisioning the future. For instance, in the 1950s, Bernard De Jouvenel's began to promote the idea of 'futuribles', referring to a multiplicity of potential futures<sup>4</sup> (Malaska & Virtanen 2005, 10).

Images of the future as a conceptual term started to gain popularity in research after the publication of Fred Polak's *Image of the Future* (first published in 1955). In his research on multiple societies, Polak aimed to connect societies' images of the future to their rise or fall. He argued that the collective vision of the future held by a society influences its prosperity, creativity, and direction. According to Polak, where the absence of an image or a negative image led to stagnation and decline of a society, a positive or inspiring image led to greater innovativeness and societal cohesion. Polak emphasised that images of ideal future guide societal and historical progress by helping individuals navigate between present and imagined realities. He also saw the images as a product of emotions and imagination rather than logic. (Mäkelä, Karjalainen & Parkkinen 2022, 298-299).

In the 1970s, emphasis on sociocultural aspects emerged and grew as a counterpoint to the strategy and forecasting focused mainstream. Scholars proposed that images of the future were deeply rooted in cultural narratives, values, and societal identities. Wendell Bell suggested that the future can be accessed in the present through thoughts and expectations about alternative futures. These thoughts and expectations become visible through decisions and choices that people make. The expectations are also embodied by images of the future. In fact, Bell suggested images of the future to be a central force driving social change.

According to Bell, social change is driven by ideas which consist of concepts, values, and images – including images of the future. These ideas interact constantly with action, and the interaction between the two is what creates social change. (Mäkelä, Karjalainen & Parkkinen 2022, 300).

In her research, Elise Boulding focused on the importance of peace and sustainability, urging that future images should include values of compassion and awareness of global interconnectedness. Her approach emphasised the societal and ethical dimensions of images of the future, suggesting that such images reflect and reinforce shared values, beliefs, and concerns. (Boulding & Boulding 1994; Boulding 2002) Her work underscored the notion that

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<sup>4</sup> This too is not a new idea but was popularised by De Jouvenel under this terminology at this point in time.

collective images of the future could inspire social movements and activism, impacting areas like environmentalism, anti-war efforts, and human rights.

“[As] long as we can imagine a better world with minds adequately equipped for the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will be able to work for it.” – Elise Boulding (1991, 532)

From the 1990s onward, critical futures studies emerged as a critique of Western-centric and technocratic approaches in the field. Scholars like Richard Slaughter, Sohail Inayatullah, and Ziauddin Sardar highlighted that images of the future are not neutral, but rather, they are embedded with power dynamics, cultural biases, and ideological assumptions. The focus of critical futures studies is to map and analyse images of the future. Critical futures studies frames images of the future as tools for exploring and questioning existing power structures, pushing for social justice, and empowering marginalised voices. According to critical futures studies, images of the future should not simply extrapolate from present trends but should also seek to transform societal structures. Such images are referred to as alternative and/or transformative images of the future, which hold great importance in critical futures.

(Inayatullah, 2013; Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015)

Finally, I would like to note that it is not only that images of the future are influenced by one’s context but that they also influence perceptions and behaviours in the present. For instance, Anita Rubin describes images of the future as flexible and deeply personal, shaped by identity and knowledge, influencing both conscious and unconscious decision-making in a dialectical manner where future images and decisions both influence each other (Mäkelä, Karjalainen & Parkkinen 2022, 298; Rubin, 2013).

Based on previous conceptualisations and with an emphasis on critical futures, for the purposes of this thesis, I define images of the future as socially constructed, culturally embedded visions or ideas of futures that shape attitudes and behaviours. Drawing from critical futures studies, the images reflect underlying power dynamics, cultural values, and ideologies that can both constrain and empower societal transformation. In my thesis, I aim to uncover some of the underlying assumptions, values, and interests the images are influenced by. I am also advocating for pluralistic and inclusive visions that challenge dominant narratives and encourage alternative possibilities for the future through studying the future images of university students instead of focusing on the dominant images advocated by those in power, and through studying not only probable but also preferred futures.

## 2.2 Combining East Asian Studies and a Futures Approach

“[...] while there is never a bad time to interrogate imagined futures, now there is something especially timely in the call for more sustained and critical scholarly engagement with the future in the Humanities and Social Sciences.” – Godhe & Goode (2018, 153).

As my thesis research revolves around collecting and analysing Chinese university students' images of the future, my research is interdisciplinary in that it involves elements from both futures studies (especially critical futures studies) and East Asian studies (area studies). While futures studies have informed much of my choices concerning methods of analysis and theoretical framework, East Asian studies allow for in-depth analysis, enabling a thorough understanding of how China's cultural, societal, economic, and political dimensions may interact with the participants' visions of the future and shape their relationship with the future. At the same time, elements of futures studies provide a valuable perspective to current Chinese society and possible future trends concerning phenomena such as social and cultural change, social mobility, environmental attitudes and more, therefore making a valuable contribution to the knowledge base in the field. Therefore, the two fields chosen for this research complement each other in research on how future is imagined in today's China.

In this section, I first introduce the paradigm of critical futures studies and how the paradigm has inspired my research design. I then describe critical futures studies' analytical framework of Causal Layered Analysis which I use in my analysis. I then move on to briefly discuss futures as a concept and as a research field in East Asia with a focus on China.

### 2.2.1 Critical Futures Studies and Causal Layered Analysis

Within the field of futures studies, my thesis falls under the school of critical futures studies. Since the 1970s, this sub-field has been developed by numerous researchers. As of today, critical and transformative futures are often described as an emerging direction within the field, holding a meaningful position among contemporary futures studies paradigms.

“From a focus on predicting the future, the modern discipline of futures studies has broadened to an exploration of alternative futures and deepened to investigate the worldviews and mythologies that underlie possible, probable and preferred futures.” – Inayatullah (2018, 64)

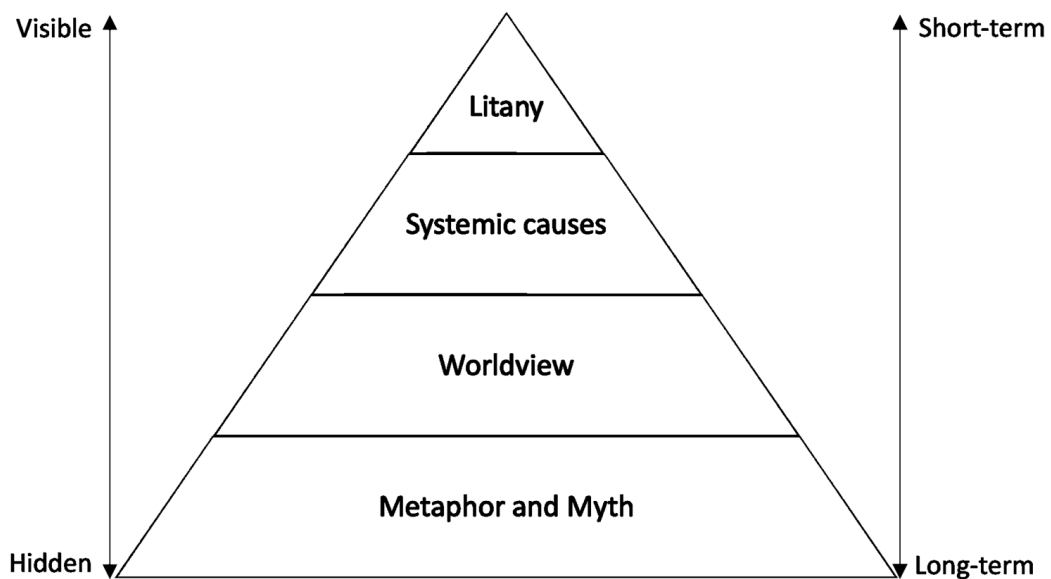
Critical future studies examines and questions how societies and different actors within them (including individuals) conceptualise and communicate about future. The analysis focuses on discourses, images, and ideas about the future generated by social sciences and futurology, but also from non-expert domains from science fiction to the public's views. (Godhe & Goode 2018, 152).

Futures can be categorised based on their likelihood and desirability. Plausible futures encompass possibilities that could occur within the bounds of uncertainty, while probable futures focus on scenarios that are likely to happen. Possible futures represent the broadest spectrum, including all conceivable scenarios, regardless of likelihood. Among these, the preferred future reflects the most desired for the future. In existing literature, researchers have chosen to focus on one, two, or all of the above three categories. For my thesis, I decided to narrow down the scope by focusing on probable and preferred images of the future. Methodological choices such as this will be explained in more detail in chapter 3.

Another central key feature of critical futures studies is questioning prevalent images of the future and critically analysing what people think about futures (e.g., Milojevic & Inayatullah, 2015). In my research, I analysed probable and preferable images of the future through performing a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). This is a critical futures studies analytical framework that was introduced by Sohail Inayatullah in the late 1980s (Inayatullah 2019, 3). The framework enables the researcher to unpack what shapes images of the future. At its best, CLA can be used to reveal intricate influences, allowing an in-depth understanding of the web of causal factors that shapes the images. In his article from 2019 Inayatullah outlines the most common uses of CLA as follows: '1) mapping the present/future; 2) critically unpacking an issue; 3) creating a preferred future; 4) reconstruction from an alternative worldview; 5) mapping of multiple perspectives leading to a transformed future that integrates difference' (Inayatullah, 2019, 1). These I kept in mind while designing my study, although most emphasis was on the first usage.

The CLA analysis framework consists of four levels, which are commonly referred to as 1) litany, 2) systemic causes, 3) worldview, and 4) metaphor and myth. The analysis protocol involves moving up and down the levels, starting from the first level of litany. The levels are often illustrated as a pyramid or an iceberg to communicate the idea that each level differs in terms of their timescales and how visible or apparent their content is (Figure 1). (Inayatullah 2005, 3 & 6-8)

**Figure 1. Sohail Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis Framework\***



\*CLA framework as described by Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah 2005, 6-8).

The first level of *litany* refers to surface-level most obvious facts, events, and trends. The second level of *systemic causes* involves the analysis of underlying external causes behind the litany level. These causes can be, for example, historical, social, cultural, economic, or educational. The third level of *worldview*, again, focuses on a deeper understanding of the previous level. Here, worldview refers to the structures and discourses that are beneath the systemic causes. Finally, the fourth level of *metaphor and myth* focuses on mapping what underpins cultural and societal narratives of the worldview level. As is rather evident from the title of the level, these can be myths, metaphors or archetypes. (Inayatullah 2005, 6-8) As mentioned, CLA has not been widely used to analyse individuals' images of the future yet. In the table on the next page (Table 2), I present examples of CLA analysis of individuals' images of the future from previous research to illustrate the method.

**Table 1. Examples of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) from Previous Research\***

	<b>Tapio &amp; Kaboli (2018, 14)</b> <b>Image title: 'Living with the Chill'</b>	<b>Hoffman (2019, 75)</b> <b>Image title: '2060'</b>
<b>Litany</b>	'War, violence and crime is growing.'	'Future oriented policies – for the future generations'
<b>Systemic Causes</b>	'Crime is growing as a result of highly competitive world and egoism.'	'Our leaders have a desire for postmaterialist values'
<b>Worldview</b>	'Egoism'	'[...] all the people work together'
<b>Myth and Metaphor</b>	'The dominant theme of the futuristic movies is dystopian, deteriorating future'	'Heaven on earth'

\*Not all the descriptions of each level are shown in this table. Rather, one example concerning each level was picked from the CLA analysis of the respective images presented in the studies.

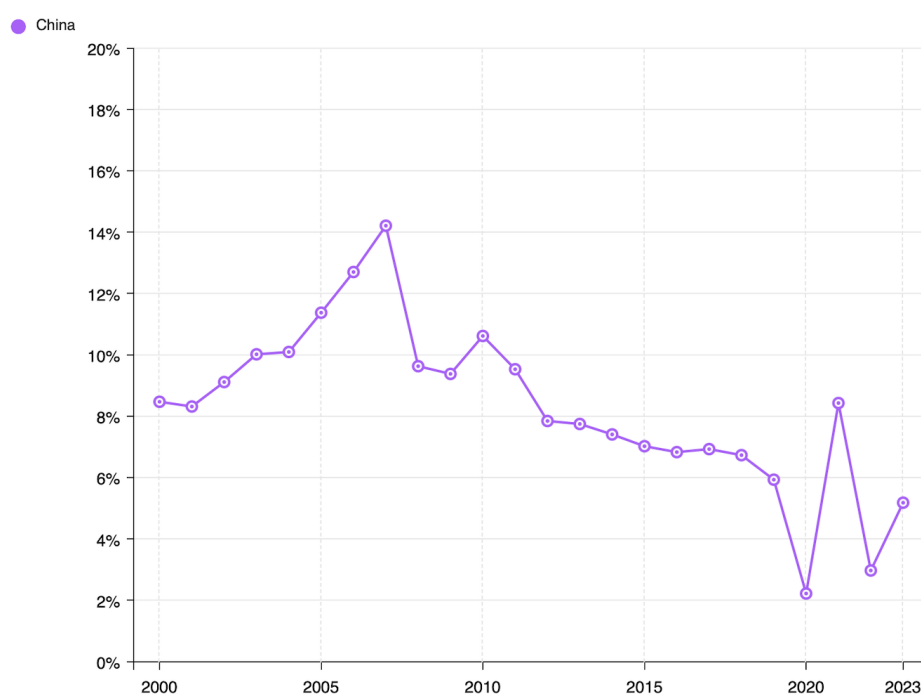
## 2.2.2 Thinking 'Futures' in East Asia

The concepts of 'the future' and 'futures' carry different meanings in different cultures and societies, which may influence images of the future and how the concept is understood. In addition, the prevalence of futures studies, futures thinking, and critical thinking in a society is one of the factors which may influence participants' image of the future. These factors also provide context for understanding existing literature on images of the future in China and more broadly in East Asia, which will be discussed in the next section (2.2). In this section, I discuss the concept of futures in East Asia with a focus on China.

In a previous study, researchers have found that spatially, some Mandarin Chinese speakers associate future time as something that is behind and the past as something in front of them (Gu, Zheng & Swerts 2019). Linguistically, for instance, character (前, *qian*) that is also used to refer to 'in front' (前面, *qianmian*) is used to refer to the day before yesterday (前天, *qiantian*), and the phrase 'day after tomorrow' (后天, *hou tian*) is expressed through the combination of the following: 'back' or 'after' and 'day'. Additionally, present, past, and future tenses are expressed implicitly through adverbs, context, and the use of time-related words. Although spatial understandings of futures was not the focus of my study, it is important to understand these nuances and to steer from assuming that time is linear, and future is something that awaits somewhere in front.

In his paper from 2014 researcher Bae noted that there is no plural term of ‘futures’ in East Asian languages. This would indicate that multiplicity of alternative futures – which is central in critical futures studies – is not clearly communicated as an idea using East Asian languages. It should however be noted that in languages including Japanese, Korean, and Chinese plurality is expressed differently than in many Western languages. In Mandarin Chinese, the word for future (未来, *weilai*) is not specifically singular or plural but could refer to either ‘a future’ or ‘futures’.

**Figure 2. Average Annual GDP Growth (%) in China 2000 – 2023 (World Bank, 2023)**



Source: World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. Data Retrieved from World Bank Gender Data Portal.  
License Type: CC BY-4.0.  
[https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/ny-gdp-mktp-kd-zg?view=trend&geos=CHN&year-range=2000\\_2023](https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/ny-gdp-mktp-kd-zg?view=trend&geos=CHN&year-range=2000_2023)

Moving from linguistics to society and politics, since the start of the reform and opening up era in 1978, China’s society’s and economy’s modern history has been marked by relatively rapid change and economic growth. The years 2001 to 2008 are often referred to as a “Golden Years” due to high economic growth rate (see Figure 2), which is a time when the participants of my study were born and when they spent their early childhood years. Since then, China’s economic growth has been slowing instead of growing. Another notable potential influence on the participants’ images of the future comes from the socio-economic context of China which is guided by five-year plans designed by the party-state. These may also influence the

way in which the participants viewed pace of time and timescales concerning the future in this study. There are also medium- to long-term plans with aims for e.g., 2035 and 2049. These are introduced in more detail in Chapter 2.5.4.

Traditional philosophies and worldviews in China are another aspect to consider – although it should be noted that these are by no means the sole factors that define today’s society and culture in China. As is commonly known, the most prominent traditional philosophies in China include Confucianism and Daoism which I will summarise here based on a paper by Liu (1974). Concerning understandings of the future and time, Confucianism traditionally has emphasised the continuity of the past. In addition, factors like social harmony and filial piety have been emphasised. These could also impact the people’s relationship to time. In Daoism, there is also emphasis on living in harmony with the natural flow of events, providing a fluid and adaptable approach to the future. Additionally, in Confucianism and Daoism, as well as due to the dynastic cycles, time was traditionally viewed as cyclical. As noted, it would be an oversimplification to state that the Chinese people’s conception of time is solely based on these philosophies, but they were nevertheless considered in analysis of the participants’ images of the future as possible influencing factors.

### 2.2.3 Future Studies as a Research field in East Asia

In this section, I explore the state of futures thinking and research in East Asia with a focus on China. I also briefly discuss the suitability of using CLA as a methodology in research concerning China. Starting with terminology, for images of the future, the term 未来图景 (*weilai tujing*) is sometimes used to refer to the concept in Mandarin Chinese<sup>5</sup>. The first two characters mean ‘future’, while the second two can refer to view, prospects, mental picture or landscape (either figuratively referring to a situation or literally to a landscape in a picture). Besides images of the future, the same term also refers to ‘futurescaping’<sup>6</sup>, which is a specific design futures methodology involving prototype design and spatial narratives of the future. However, there appears to be no other term that would specifically refer to images of the future only.

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<sup>5</sup> As an example, in this article: <https://ahybridlab.com/blog/future-triangle> .

<sup>6</sup> As an example, in this event advertisement: <https://www.bjdw.org/contents/ztzlzx/11783.html> .

In East Asia, futures studies is even newer as a formal discipline compared to the rest of the world, critical futures studies even more so. Much of futures studies emphasis is either on forecasting and strategy or finding ways to improve ideological guidance. There are associations and societies for futures work, including China Futures Association (CFA; 中国期货业协会, *Zhongguo qihuoye xiehui*), China Society for Futures Studies (CSFC; 中国未来研究会; *Zhongguo weilai yanjiu hui*). CSFC was established already in 1979 and has also published a journal of future studies since the year 1980 called 'Future and Development' (未来与发展, *weilai yu fazhan*).

There are also some futures workshops and related methodologies that have been developed in China. As an example, an article from 2021<sup>7</sup> outlines a research approach utilised in community-based activities, which combines exhibition curation, workshops, foresight, individual perspectives, and youth storytelling. This method uses collages created by workshop participants to explore and understand individual future narratives, aiming to extend these insights to the long-term study of youth group futures.

Tamkang University in Taiwan acts as the most active hub of futures research with a focus on critical futures studies. Based on Anthony's paper (2022), in the mainland, China's first critical futures courses in tertiary education were introduced around five years ago in 2019. Overall, futures thinking and critical thinking in general do not have a strong foothold in the Chinese education system. Instead, the education system has been described as 'test-oriented, teacher-centred, and driven by pressure from society' as is common to Asian societies (e.g., Anthony 2022, 45-49). While during Xi's era, innovativeness, which requires critical thinking, has been emphasised, also contrasting educational guidelines that underline the importance of ideological education have been put into place.

Education is not the only factor that shapes thinking and ideas in a society, but it nevertheless has a key role in the process, therefore being indicative of the current prevalence of futures studies and the extent of promoting of critical thinking in Chinese society. However, it should be noted that futures thinking has existed through time in all cultures long before the creation of futures studies as an academic field of study with its terminologies. In research, specific

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<sup>7</sup> Read more here: <https://jfsdigital.org/2021/05/03/年轻人与个体未来叙事-youth-future-and-personal-future-narratives/>

characteristics of images of the future in East Asia beyond futures studies have been explored through the lens of local classical texts. These will be discussed in the following section.

Lastly, I will briefly discuss the appropriateness of using CLA as a methodology in the context of China. CLA is a methodology that was developed by Sohail Inayatullah, a Pakistani-Australian futurist. It has been widely adapted in various contexts from business strategy to research around the world. Coming from the school of critical futures studies, the methodology was designed to challenge dominant assumptions about the future, and it does not assume a singular, universal vision of the future. Instead, the importance of acknowledging multiplicity of futures that reflect different worldviews, discourses and myths is emphasised. It is still important to note that the methodology was not specifically designed for the context of China by Chinese researchers. Therefore, while the analytical framework can serve as powerful tool, it is important to remain sensitive to local context while using it. I aim to do this through a careful examination of the participants' responses, and when interpreting the data, applying my knowledge about China. One of my aims for this research was also to assess the appropriateness of the method in the Chinese context, therefore not assuming that it is one.

## **2.3 Images of the Future**

Researchers' conceptualisations of images of the future were introduced in a previous section (Chapter 2.1). In this chapter, I will now go into further depth and detail, going over theories about types of images in section 2.3.1, and characteristics of images of the future in section 2.3.2. I will discuss theories and findings from both international and specifically East Asian research.

### **2.3.1 Types and Characteristics of Images of the Future**

A traditional classification of images of the future which continues to influence today's research comes from Fred Polak's work. He classified images of the future into two main types: negative and positive. In addition, he identified two dimensions concerning the extent to which future can be influenced in the images: essence and influence. Out of these two dimensions, 'essence' refers to a predetermined course of events which cannot be changed

while ‘influence’ refers to the extent to which actions can affect the course of events. (Polak, 1973, 16-17) The four categories of images formed through these two classifications are summarised below. While images of the future have been further categorised in later research, this classification is useful for mapping basic characteristics of the images and also inspired my survey design concerning questions about future orientation and agency.

- a. **Essence optimism + influence optimism:** world is a good place and people have the power to change it for the better,
- b. **Essence optimism + influence pessimism:** world is a good place, but humans have no control over it,
- c. **Essence pessimism + influence optimism:** world is a bad place, but people have the power to change it for the better,
- d. **Essence pessimism + influence pessimism:** chaos is inevitable, and humans cannot affect it. (Polak, 1973, 16-17; Kaboli & Tapio 2018, 3, Table 1.)

In the early 1970s, researcher Jim Dator developed another categorisation of future images, suggesting that all images of the future can be classified into four categories. These are 1) growth, 2) collapse, 3) discipline, and 4) transformation. In the first image, ‘growth’ tends to refer to continued economic growth. Concerning the second image of ‘collapse’, a range of different causes of the collapse can be part of the scenario. These include resource exhaustion, military attacks, and economic instability to name a few. The third image, ‘discipline’, refers to a scenario where society has become organised around an overarching set of values. These are usually traditional or ancient value sets. In the fourth image, ‘transformation’, new forms of beliefs, behaviour and organisation have emerged and shape the scenario. (Park, 2013; Dator, 2019.)

In his paper, Park (2013) explored futures studies in East Asia by looking at Dator’s four images through the lens of Zhuangzi – a foundational text of Daoism which is highly regarded in East Asia. The researcher argues that ‘bird’s-eye view’ is central to developing an East Asian understanding of futures. Park justifies this perspective in the prevalence of a holistic, relation-centred approach in East Asia, in which attention is focused on relationships between objects and the field to which they belong rather than primarily on the objects themselves. He summarises East Asian futures thinking as having the following characteristics: 1) exploring

appropriate<sup>8</sup> alternative futures instead of mutually exclusive scenarios, 2) ‘finding an aesthetic moment<sup>9</sup> rather than a predetermined moment’, 3) “dancing” with chaos instead of trying to control it, and 4) ‘using both the useful and the useless’<sup>10</sup> (Park 2013, 19). Although these had only a minor influence on my research design (read more in Chapter 3) I considered these characteristics during the analysis of the participant’s images of the future, which can be read in Chapter 4.

Overall, during the analysis phase, I reflected on the extent to which the types and characteristics of images presented above corresponded to the participants’ images. Besides the types of images of the future, it is important to investigate what are the ways in which the contents of images of the future have been analysed in research. In the next section, I discuss what is understood as forming images of the future in this thesis based on previous research.

### 2.3.2 Formation of Images of the Future

In the existing literature about youth’s images of the future, researchers have focused on analysing the youth’s relationship with the future and the characteristics of their images of the future. Their relationship with the future and characteristics of the images have mostly been studied by assessing different aspects of the images of the future. These aspects have been summarised by Ono (2003, 741) and are listed below. As noted, these aspects were accounted for in the research- and survey design of my thesis.

- 1) **Time:** past, present, or future,
- 2) **Proximity:** in terms of time, short range or long range,
- 3) **Nature:** positive or negative,
- 4) **Scale:** personal, national, or global,
- 5) **Familiarity:** i.e., similarity to the past and the present,

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<sup>8</sup>‘Appropriate’ signifies something mutually helpful and beneficial in contrast to ‘exclusive’, which signifies a zero-sum game (Park, 2013, 19).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Aesthetic moment’ refers to a moment that cannot be predetermined but “feels good” (Park, 2013, 20). An aesthetic moment could therefore be described as spontaneous and “correct” in an intuitive sense.

<sup>10</sup> This refers to overcoming the dichotomy of ‘useful’ and ‘useless’ as what these two categories contain fluctuates (Park, 2013, 22-24).

6) **Occurrence:** i.e., do the images concern possible, probable or preferred futures.  
(Ono 2003, 741.)

Concerning the different aspects of images, researchers have noticed that participants' images tend to contain contradictions, and that an individual may hold multiple different images simultaneously (Rubin, 2013, 40-41). Besides the different aspects of images, the contradictions may manifest in different themes that the images contain. As an example, experts have speculated that the pandemic may have increased tensions concerning one's vision of the future, for example, in terms of 'individualism and collectivism, autonomy and interdependence, freedom and control, [and] rights and responsibilities' in all societies (Settersten et al. 2020, 2 & 10).

As a basic assumption, I approach the future as something that is socially constructed – that an individual's view of the future is shaped by a complex interplay of factors related to the individual. These include societal, cultural, economic, educational, environmental, and political factors. This is also the theoretical basis applied in most of the existing literature on similar research topics. Due to this theoretical starting point, other than the aspects of the images, the influencing factors behind the formation of the images are also an important part of analysing images of the future. The influencing factors include one's values and felt agency, as well as different sources of information, such as education and the media. The importance of these aspects in research of images of the future is apparent, for example, from the analysis method employed in this thesis, as analysing what shapes the images is central to CLA.

“The identification of alternative futures is [...] a fluid dance of structure (the weights of history) and agency (the capacity to influence the world and create desired futures).” – Inayatullah (2013, 37)

Lastly, a considerable feature of previous studies has been discussing the implications of the results concerning all the aspects discussed above at both the individual and the societal level. At the individual level, images of the future guide actions and planning and therefore are indicative of what the future may hold. Moreover, they reflect the present moment, including one's wellbeing, values, worldview, possibilities, and expectations. At the same time, they are also reflections of wider societal phenomena like social or cultural change, sustainability, and social mobility. (e.g., Ono 2003, 754; Rubin, 2013, 40-41).

The types and characteristics of images of the future summarised above influenced my research as I aimed to design the survey so that would allow me to reflect the results of my study against these existing theories and categorisations. In the next section, I discuss key results from previous research from East Asia concerning the characteristics and aspects of images discussed in this chapter.

## **2.4 East Asian Futures**

In East Asia, critical futures research on images of the future has mostly been conducted with a focus on the society and nation-state as a whole or from an international relations perspective. This section begins with introduction of these studies. I then continue with discussing research from Taiwan and Mainland China concerning youth's images as well as hopes and fears concerning the future. The findings summarised in this section were used to reflect upon, interpret, and discuss the results of my thesis research in Chapter 4.

### **2.4.1 Images of the Future of China**

A few studies have been conducted to analyse images of the future of China. In her 2012 study, Hoffman combined elements of international relations and futures studies to analyse what Hoffman refers to as stories of China's rise in China and in the West. These consist of the 1) Western perspective to 'China Threat', 2) Chinese perspective to 'China Threat', as well as 3) an alternative future of peaceful development (Hoffman 2012, 4). The first contains the idea that China is becoming a potential hegemon, and it can and should be stopped. The second story contains the idea of China bringing a new 'golden age' rather than being a threat, unlike Western powers. In this image, China strives for recognition in international institutions. In the third story, focus is on economic growth, global peace and harmony, and respect towards 'China's cultural and civilisational superiority' from the international community (Hofman 2012, 4). In an earlier study, Anthony (2009) analysed two alternative futures for China: a dystopia of a 'Brave New China' and a utopia of a 'Harmonious Society'. While the former was described as a market driven scenario where people have become alienated from nature, the latter scenario was 'driven by responsibility to humanity and

nature' (Anthony 2009, 23). In these studies, CLA was used as part of the methodological tools to investigate the images, as I chose to do in my study as well.

In addition to these images at the national and societal level, Callahan (2012) has pointed out that China contains multiple futures which are advocated by different groups of experts. In his study from 2012, Callahan also notes a general shift from viewing the West as the future to viewing China as the future and recognising it as an alternative to the future of the world. Callahan's writing also supports the significance of my study: if the perception of China as the future has increased, so has the significance of what that may hold from the perspective of the youth – those who, in a way, are becoming China's future.

If anything, since the publication of the studies introduced in this section, debates and speculation about the Chinese vision for its own and the world's future has intensified. While my research is not necessarily focused on national, international, nor expert-level future images in particular, it is likely that aspects of the findings of these studies will be present in the participants' images of the future in my research as they also contained images common in China.

#### 2.4.2 Youth's Images of the Future: Research from Mainland China and Taiwan

As noted, some research has been conducted concerning Taiwanese youth's images of the future, and on Mainland Chinese youth's future orientation. This refers to what one thinks and feels about the future. One way in which future orientation is studied is through collecting data about participants' hopes and fears concerning the future. (Seginer 2008, 10.) While studies on Mainland Chinese youth's future orientation were not specifically focused on images of the future, research on future orientation is also relevant in relation to the research topic of my thesis as future orientation is connected to one's images of the future<sup>11</sup>. In this section, I present relevant findings in relation to my thesis from the existing studies.

One central aspect of images of the future is the scale: to what extent one is concerned with their own future versus the more general future, such as the future of their community, society, nation or the world. In 2003, Ono conducted a case study in Taiwan and the US, analysing university students' images of the future. In the study, out of both the Taiwanese

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<sup>11</sup> Influencing and being influenced by images of the future.

and US participants, half chose to discuss the global future when given the choice to discuss anything about the future (Ono 2003, 754-757). In Mainland China, research on Chinese adolescents' future orientation has revealed that most adolescents' hopes and fears related to the general or collective future. Additionally, the researchers concluded that hopes and fears concerning the self were far fewer than those related to education, career and family. (Zhang et al. 2015, 625-626; Zhao et al. 2018, 67.) This finding aligns with the idea about Chinese people approaching the future from a holistic, relationship-centred viewpoint, as there is more emphasis on inter-personal role and one's societal role than for instance, one's wellbeing, personality, and so on (Lyu, Du & Rios 2019, 2; Bae 2013).

Another aspect of images of the future is where the images fall when placed in a continuum between optimism and pessimism. In a study conducted by Chen (2016), the researcher discovered that Taiwanese elite high school students were interested in and optimistic about the global future, the future of the environment, and their personal future. Interestingly, drawing from studies conducted in the West, Rubin concludes that youth tend to have more pessimistic views about the general future in comparison to their own future (Rubin 2013, 40-41). It is possible that recent events such as the pandemic and related policies, as well as the record high youth unemployment may have resulted in the youth holding more pessimistic images about both the general and their own futures. Experts have hypothesised that at least the level of uncertainty felt towards the future has increased in all societies due to the pandemic alone (Settersten et al. 2020, 2 & 10).

## **2.5 Chinese Youth and China's Future Strategies**

The participants of my study were Chinese university students born between the years 2002 and 2006 and were 18 to 22-year-olds when the data was collected. In China, the generation born between 2000 and 2010 is referred to as the 'post-00s generation' (零零后, *lingling hou*). I would also like to note that the participants of my study were all attending a public Chinese university in a second-tier city at the time of the study. In this chapter, I first give an overview of social factors and societal events during the participants lifetime. I then discuss previous studies on the post-00s values and attitudes, the Chinese Dream discourse and expectations towards the youth, and lastly other initiatives, strategies, and values promoted by CCP. I considered these as possible factors that could be present in the data collected for this

study, as they all concern either the participants' age group or the context in which they live in.

### 2.5.1 Societal Context and Major Events During Post-00s Lifetime

In this section, I describe common life experiences that the members of the generation often share. This overview is not comprehensive but summarises some of the main influences during the participants lifetime. Although in this and upcoming sections I discuss the generation as a whole, it should be noted that these are merely generalisations, and diversity exists among the members of China's post-00s generation. For example, there are likely great differences due to factors such as geographical location within China and the family's socioeconomic status.

The post-00s' life course has been greatly affected by one-child policy<sup>12</sup>, the era of reform and opening-up, as well as China's rapid economic growth (e.g., Li 2020, 2). In addition, the post-00s childhoods were also situated in the era of globalisation and internet which distinguishes the generation from older generations as having had more exposure to overseas cultures (e.g., Yang 2022). As mentioned previously, the generation was also born during the "Golden Years" of economic growth in China.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, over 60% of the post-00s are from single child families, which has likely had an impact on their upbringing, intrafamily relationships and family structures. Researchers have suggested that among other things, this has resulted in many parents investing more in their child's education. (Li 2020, 3.) Education is also important from early stages onwards due to competition in high school and university admittance. Today, especially wealthy families tend to prefer to send their children either to study abroad or to a Chinese-foreign partnership universities which are often costly (e.g., Anthony 2022, 50). Consequently, the pressure to perform well academically is also high. Additionally, while post-00s families have had better living conditions and income levels, also living costs have increased during their lifetime – especially in the cities (Li 2020, 2-4).

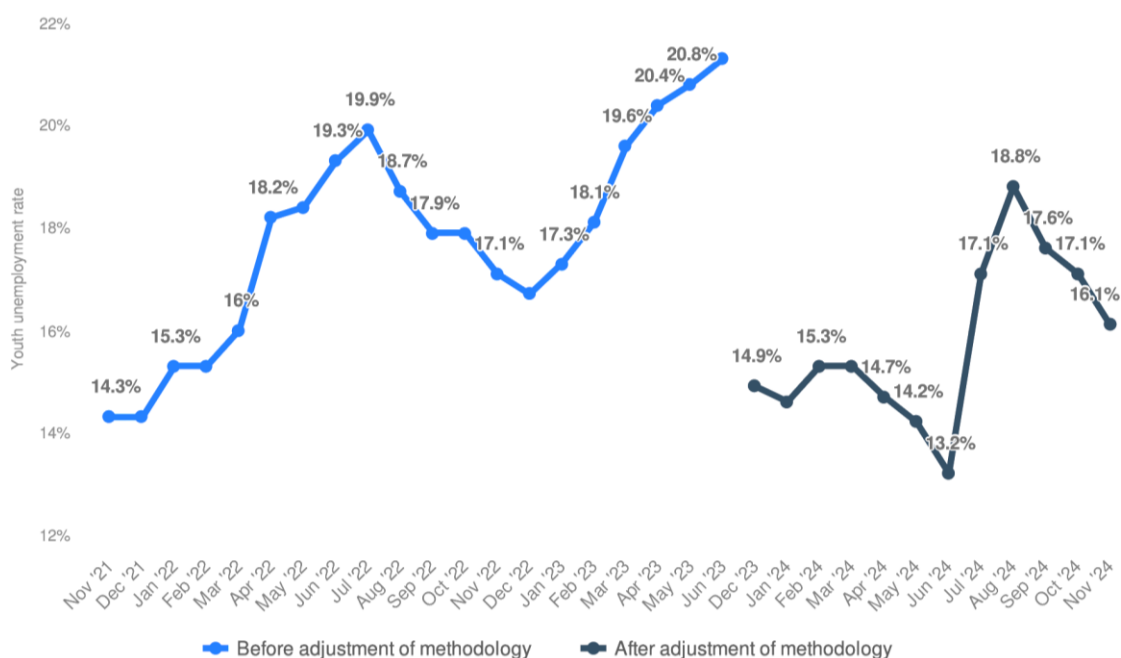
In research from China, it has been argued that the generation holds advantages in the job market due to having better access to higher education (Li 2020, 5). While this can be true, in

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<sup>12</sup> The one-child policy was in place from 1979 to 2015.

addition to competition concerning education, there is also high competition in the job market. As the participants of my study are university students, they are soon to transition into work life where opportunities are scarce, and the youth unemployment rate is high. China's last reported youth unemployment levels from June 2023 were record high at 21.3% (Statista 2024; see Figure 3).<sup>13</sup> While broader access to higher education may indeed have led to a more competent young workforce, it has also led to more competition in the job market, as well as a higher supply of professionals in comparison to the demand and available suitable jobs.

**Figure 3. Monthly Surveyed Urban Unemployment Rate of People Aged 16 to 24 in China from November 2021 to November 2024 (Statista 2024)**



Source  
National Bureau of Statistics of China  
© Statista 2024

Additional Information:  
China; November 2021 to November 2024

National Bureau of Statistics of China. (December 19, 2024). Monthly surveyed urban unemployment rate of people aged 16 to 24 in China from November 2021 to November 2024 [Graph]. In Statista. Retrieved January 07, 2025, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1244339/surveyed-monthly-youth-unemployment-rate-in-china/>

<sup>13</sup> After that, youth unemployment levels were not made public for six months. From January 2024 onwards, the rates have been published but calculated using a different methodology that has provided much more positive statistics.

Li (2020, 5) also argues that due to their generation's lived experience, the Chinese population born between 1980 and 2010 are 'more capable of adapting to changes in dramatic social transformations' in comparison to older generations (Li, 2020, 5). He adds that the competency of the younger generations has led to a weakening sense of intergenerational hierarchy (Li, 2020, 5). This could lead to the older generations having less of a say concerning, for example, the young generations' life-course trajectories.

Finally, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic should be also considered. China's strict lockdown policies lasted from early 2020 to late 2022. During this time, the participants of this study were teenagers, as they were all born between 2002-2006. The overall consensus is that the pandemic and related policies had various negative impacts on the youth. The topic has also already been researched, but mostly concerning mental health, which I will not go into depth here. However, for instance a study by Jiang et al. (2022) involved studying the impact of the pandemic on teenagers' family relationships. The teenage participants reported significant negative change concerning their relationship to their parents. Teenagers' family relationships were also found to be impacted by the pandemic the most out of different age groups<sup>14</sup>. This also aligns with findings of Chen et al. (2020, 4), as the researchers note that staying at home with parents under lockdown policies exacerbated familial tensions for teenagers and also increased their mental health symptoms. Finally, it is likely that the tensions in values and attitudes that one has have been intensified by the pandemic, as already noted in previous sections (e.g., Settersten et al. 2020). Unfortunately, no comprehensive studies were found about post-00s views about the future nor their values from a period prior to the pandemic.

### 2.5.2 Post-00s Generation: Values and Attitudes

In this chapter, I explore the values and attitudes of the post-00s generation based on previous research, after which I discuss expectations projected towards the youth in Chinese society. At the time of writing this thesis (2024), members of the post-00s generation are 13-24 years old. It is therefore understandable although unfortunate that the existing research about this age group's values and attitudes is not extensive. Studies from China take on quite an optimistic tone concerning the youth or suggest improvements to their ideological education. Due to

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<sup>14</sup> The other age groups were unmarried young adults, married adults, and grandparents.

their lack of credibility, such as lack of openness about methodological choices, these studies will not be discussed here. The only studies conducted that do not exercise these perspectives are those that focus on activism and youth sub-cultures. To what extent such groups were present in the sample is unclear, but I assumed that they would constitute a minority at most. Overall, research concerning the values of the post-00s is scarce, but I present here an overview of the most relevant studies.

Based on Witte (2004), post-materialism as a concept and hypothesis became popular in the late 1970s through Ronald Inglehart's work. It refers to changes in worldview towards more emphasis on self-expression and quality of life over economic and material gains. These changes were proposed as being brought by industrialisation. The hypothesis has been also questioned and seen as outdated by some. In my thesis, I see it as a useful categorisation of values, which allows comparisons as it has been used in research and articles concerning post-00s. Post-materialism has commonly been connected to the generation Z<sup>15</sup> in general, for example in media in the West. Similar hypothesis has been raised concerning the Chinese post-00s generation, although also materialist values have been argued to be common amongst them. While desiring worldly success, material abundance, ease and convenience, the post-00s also seek true happiness and high quality of life and are concerned about issues like environmental protection (Yang, 2022). Additionally, Li (2020, p. 11) notes that while Chinese youth have a tendency to overspend, the young generations also hold a variety of nonmaterial aspirations.

Similar claims have been made by Wang and Yu in their study from 2021. According to the researchers, the participants felt that their material needs had been met, and self-expression, personal happiness and life quality, belonging and self-esteem were noted as important for them (Wang & Yu, 2021, p. 169). Consumption was described as important – but as a way to 'enjoy the present moment or pursue a better quality of life' (p. 168). Aesthetics matter, and include 'ecological culture, liveability, pursuit of beauty, [and] decoration of surrounding environment' (Wang & Yu, 2021, p. 168). Additionally, participants valued humanistic knowledge, and interpersonal communication skills, and a sense of social belonging was also important to them.

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<sup>15</sup> Generation Z covers a wider age range than what is referred to China as post-00s, as people born between 1997-2012 are commonly attributed as 'the Gen Z'.

In his paper, Remmert (2020) concludes that Chinese urban young adults are more confident to not conform entirely to parental expectations, showing increasing interest towards pursuing individual aspirations and autonomy. A weakening sense of intergenerational hierarchy was also noted by Li (2020, p. 5). In addition, Wang and Yu's (2021, p. 169) results align with individualisation:

‘Most young people have proper individual values, regard social contribution as the standard of value judgement, and emphasize the significance of their own efforts’ – Wang & Yu (2021, 169)

These findings support the hypothesis about individualisation. However, researchers have also argued against the individualisation thesis. In his study, Barbalet (2016) argues that several phenomena such as family transformations, labour migration, and rights awareness are linked to family obligations and commitment to the collective good and therefore speak against the theory of individualisation instead of supporting the thesis. All in all, I considered the scholarly debate especially while delving into the causes behind the images of the future while performing the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA).

In a recent study from 2023 that was conducted using open-ended questions, the Chinese general public was found to value the following: 1) self-fulfilment, 2) self-cultivation, 3) social development, and 4) interpersonal ethics (Pan & Huang 2023). The researchers write that diversity existed between participants and that ‘some of the socially advocated values have been internalized into the value system of individuals’ (Pan & Huang 2023, 1). Unfortunately, the study did not further categorise the sample based on participants’ characteristics and therefore it is difficult to draw conclusions about the post-00s.

In an earlier section, I noted that it is common for contradictions to exist in images of the future and for an individual to hold multiple different images. The contradictions in images of the future may manifest due to different values and attitudes that the participants carry. Concerning China’s post-00s generation, it is evident from recent survey studies that the youth have a mix of values. According to the results of a Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences survey on ‘cognitive features and thinking patterns of the post-00s generation’, the post-00s’ hold a mix of modern and traditional values. This does not necessarily present as a divide between members of the generation, as individuals tend to hold both, rather than one or the other. (Yang 2022.) Contradictions were therefore one of the attributes noted to possibly show in the data in this thesis.

### 2.5.3 The Chinese Dream and Expectations Towards the Youth

The 'Chinese dream', the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', has been a major political ideological slogan that has been used in Xi Jinping's era (although it is rather vaguely defined). In his speeches, Xi has also emphasised the role of young people in realising the Chinese dream stating that 'a nation will be prosperous if its young generation is ambitious and reliable'. Additionally, the importance of 'integrating individual dreams into the national cause' has been emphasised. (Xinhua 2022) From the official discourse alone, it is clear that expectations towards the Chinese youth are high. Chinese Dream and related initiatives in China are discussed more generally in the following chapter 2.5.4.

Most of the research on the relation between youth and the Chinese dream has been conducted by Marxist scholars. For example, in his study, Yan (2021) notes that to realise the Chinese Dream, the youth should be passionate, hardworking, responsible, innovative, and creative among other attributes. They should take part in modernising the country and in promoting world peace and development. Above all, all of this should be done with the goal of rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in mind, with a firm belief on Marxism and the paradigm of Socialism with Chinese characteristics. While the methods of this and many other such studies are most often not clearly stated, they appear to be interpretations or reaffirmations of Xi Jinping's speeches and the party-state's white papers. Nevertheless, these studies inform about what is expected from the youth in public discourse in accordance with the 'Chinese dream' paradigm. The Chinese dream discourse, although rather vague, could well be one of the factors affecting the participants' images of the future.

While the expectations towards the youth are high, the Chinese youth's own preferences are not in complete alignment with what is expected from them. In existing studies published in the early 2010s, researchers have presented findings supporting the claim that an intergenerational cultural value conflict exists in China, which has led to a gap between parental expectations and youth's aspirations (Leung et al. 2010; Hou & Leung 2011). While the gap is not wide concerning career and education, the conflict is shown more clearly in topics such as premarital relationships, filial piety, and consumption (Leung et al. 2010). Although these conclusions were made based on data about the post-90s generation, it is likely that the intergenerational differences apply to the younger generation of post-00s as well.

Due to social media's importance in youth's lives, the youth's attitudes and values can be found reflected also in different online trends and social movements. Although restricted through censorship, in the past ten years, several buzzwords concerning the rejection of social pressures have emerged in China. One of the trends in recent years that has already been studied is called "lying flat" (躺平; *tangping*). In her study, Su (2023) refers to the trend (and other similar buzzwords), as a youth subculture. She describes it as 'non-violent uncooperative rebellion', 'spontaneous resistance to social inequality, and a collective and desperate yearning for social change' (Su 2023, 127-128). While it is difficult to estimate how widely spread the rejection of social pressures is among the post-00s, these trends nevertheless show that there are some counter-narratives to the social expectations and norms in contemporary Chinese society.

Concerning possible future developments, Li (2020, 9) has speculated that rapid changes including improvements in 'living standards, one-child policy, expansion of public education, the penetration of the Internet and the wave of migration' will result in a drastic 'silent revolution'. Here, migration refers to rural-urban migration, whereas silent revolution is yet another concept developed by Ronald Inglehart, referring to the change in values when younger generations replace older generations with differing values. According to the researcher, this will lead to 'a more progressive, open, innovative, tolerant, and equalitarian society' that is also 'increasingly [...] free, with more respect for individuality' (Li 2020, 9 & 12). Like the findings, arguments, and hypothesis presented above, the results of my study were reflected against these speculations.

#### 2.5.4 Visions, Values, and Strategies for the Future in Today's China

Previous studies about images of the future of China were already briefly outlined in an earlier section. Here, I focus on notable initiatives, visions, and strategies promoted by the party-state in China, which are all present in all areas and levels of the society. As these are not only the party-state's initiatives implemented by the state but also promoted through various visible campaigns to the general public and communities, it was likely that some of the discourse and ideas would show in my data as well.

The most prevalent vision about China's future is deeply intertwined with the aforementioned ideological framework of the "Chinese Dream" – a concept promoted by President Xi Jinping.

Xi's articulation of this dream integrates economic prosperity, cultural renewal, environmental sustainability, and military strength and pervades all levels and sectors of the society, stretching from the level of the individual to the global stage. The Chinese Dream emphasises national rejuvenation, reflecting an overarching ambition to restore China to a position of global prominence after the "century of humiliation". Central to this vision are long-term strategies such as the 2049 goals<sup>16</sup>, marking the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, and emphasising a fully developed socialist nation with strong international influence. (e.g., Xinhua 2021a; MERICS 2019)

As noted, China's governance mechanisms include medium- and long-term planning. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) the Vision 2035, and the aforementioned 2049 goals are examples of such strategic planning. These documents prioritise technological self-reliance, green development, and a shift from export-led to domestic consumption-driven growth. The current 14th Five-Year Plan reflects a shift towards innovation-driven growth, with major investments in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology. It also emphasises carbon neutrality, with a commitment to peak emissions by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2060. (e.g., Xinhua 2021a) Overall, Xi Jinping has commonly talked about the importance of sustainability, viewing future as shared and maintaining harmony among people and between people and nature:

"Man and nature form a community of life; we, as human beings, must respect nature, follow its ways, and protect it." – Xi Jinping (as cited in Xinhua 2021b)

Vision 2035, an ambitious medium-term goal, outlines China's aspirations to achieve high-income nation status and become a global leader in innovation. (e.g., Xinhua 2021a) The 2049 goals chart a longer horizon, aiming to position China as a fully modernized socialist country. This includes goals such as eradicating poverty, elevating global technological leadership, and establishing a more balanced urban-rural economy. Also, the Made in China 2025 outlines several goals to be achieved by the year 2049. These include becoming a leading global manufacturing, cyber, and science and technological superpower. (e.g., MERICS 2019.)

The Chinese Dream and its supporting plans reflect not only domestic aspirations but also a reimagining of China's role on the global level. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrate China's commitment to extending its influence through infrastructure

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<sup>16</sup> The goals set for 2049 and 2021 are together referred to as "两个一百年" (*liang ge yibai nian*), "two centenary goals".

investment and trade connectivity. This strategic global engagement complements China's internal modernisation efforts. Overall, China seeks to secure its place as a leading power in the evolving global order. While the first three years of the Covid-19 pandemic and related lockdown policies affected such initiatives, the China's global ambitions have been gaining new momentum since the end of zero-covid policies in December 2022. (Gunter et al., 2023.)

Besides the many discourses, aims, and initiatives, it is also important to consider values that are actively promoted by the party-state. The 12 Core Socialist Values<sup>17</sup> (see Table 2) form a foundational framework for contemporary Chinese society, promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a guiding set of principles for personal behaviour, governance, and cultural identity. Introduced under the leadership of Xi Jinping, these values aim to reinforce ideological unity and provide a moral compass for individuals and institutions alike. They are organised into three categories: national values, societal values, and individual values, representing a holistic approach to fostering a harmonious and prosperous society. I saw it likely that these values would appear in my data as well.

**Table 2. The 12 Core Socialist Values of Chinese Communist Party**

<b>The national values</b>	"prosperity" (富强), "democracy" (民主), "civility" (文明) and "harmony" (和谐)
<b>The social values</b>	"freedom" (自由), "equality" (平等), "justice" (公正) and the "rule of law" (法治)
<b>The individual values</b>	"patriotism" (爱国), "dedication" (敬业), "integrity" (诚信) and "friendliness" (友善)

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<sup>17</sup> These are commonly known and can be read more about, for example, here: <https://www.strategictranslation.org/glossary/core-socialist-values>

### **3 Methodology**

In this section, I explain my choices concerning research methodology and the process of data collection and analysis. I start by outlining the data collection methods and fieldwork process, including characteristics of the sample, as well as choices concerning research and survey design. I then move onto describing the data analysis process and the methods used. The results of the study are discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 4).

#### **3.1 Data Collection and Fieldwork Process**

Concerning the data collection for my thesis, I chose to collect information from Chinese university students in China about their relationship with the future and their images of the future as well as information about what shapes these images. These aims were the major factors which were the basis of my decisions concerning the sample and survey design. Secondly, the sample and data collection were also largely determined by convenience due to limited resources and time constraints. I was not able to travel to China to collect data myself and lacked financial resources for the study. This was behind some decisions in my study, for example, concerning the survey administration method: an online questionnaire.

Thirdly, the safety of the participants was a major concern. This meant designing an anonymous survey and avoiding inclusion of questions that could be interpreted as politically sensitive. To protect all who were involved in the data collection process, their names nor the name and the location of the university were disclosed. However, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to everyone who participated in the survey, and to the many colleagues and professors who helped me throughout the research process, from comments on the survey questions and design, to feedback about my translations, and for using their valuable time for helping me to apply for research permits and aiding in the distribution of the survey.

### 3.1.1 Sample: Size and Characteristics

“The world belongs to you. China’s future belongs to you.” – Mao Zedong in a speech to Chinese students in Moscow in 1957.

I first narrowed down the scope of the study to Chinese youth. While those currently in power have the means to influence the here and now, studying the youth is valuable due to them being the potential future leaders and changemakers of the society. The youth are also quick to create, shape and adapt new ideas and views, which can reflect ongoing and incoming socio-cultural changes effectively. In previous research about future orientation, researchers have identified differences between age groups, genders, and between rural and urban residents. Therefore, I further narrowed down the scope to the post-00s generation and to university students. These choices were also based on convenience and existing contacts.

I planned to target the research further to those who were from and currently lived in a first-tier city in China, but in the end, the sample included students from diverse city-tiers, but who all studied in a second-tier city at the time of the study. I made no restrictions concerning gender, as this could not only allow comparisons between genders but also speed up the data collection process (in contrast to using gender quotas or choosing participants only from a specific gender). Finally, due to not being able to personally travel to China to collect data, the sample was shaped by convenience – based on existing contacts and possible new connections residing in China that could be able to reach the target group (i.e., professors at universities). Therefore, the results may be affected by selection bias through participants not being randomly selected but rather based on access to them. The contacts were also mainly foreign professors working in China in universities that have some international staff. These universities are generally more internationally oriented and may be more prestigious<sup>18</sup>.

After narrowing down the sample and clarifying my research topic, aims, and research questions I started drafting the survey in June 2023. I then began to advance the fieldwork process in August 2023 by emailing two universities I had existing contacts at, inquiring the universities about the possibility and process of conducting an online survey involving their students. From these universities, one replied and was therefore chosen based on availability. The process of obtaining required permissions for conducting research continued until November 2023, and I eventually obtained a research permit that was to expire in March

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<sup>18</sup> However, there are also many other factors that affect how prestigious a university is.

2024. The process included sending information about my study and the survey design in English and Chinese for application of research approval and ethical approval. After attaining the required approvals, I started contacting university staff, inquiring about the possibility of them distributing the survey. I then had to go through another application stage at the department level. In the end, I only managed to get one response.

As the reasons for the failure of the first data collection attempt were unclear, I modified the survey, making questions clearer and the survey format more concise. I first reached out to several universities in China but received no response. I then contacted existing contacts in another city to enquire about the possibility of survey distribution. Soon it became clear that I would not be able to reach enough participants from my target group (Chinese university students) through these contacts.

Finally, in the end of March 2024, I decided to try to contact a professor working at a university in China. After an approval process, this attempt eventually led to a successful data collection. I received 38 responses which were collected on May 23<sup>rd</sup> and May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The survey was advertised to a total of four professors working at the same university. The questionnaire link was distributed to students through email and through a social media group chat which only had students that a professor had taught at the university.

### 3.1.2 Research and Survey Design

Firstly, concerning the timescale of the future images: in some studies, the future is not specified to a certain year. This choice would have also supported by Park's (2013) findings presented in his paper. However, using a specific year allows for better comparison of the results, which is why I chose to do so. In studies by Hoffman (2019) as well as by Black and Walsh (2019) the year 2060 was chosen. However, as the participants would likely to be close to retirement at that point, I chose the year 2050 instead. In 2050, the post-00s will be 40-50 years old. This is an age at which major life choices have been already made (e.g., concerning career and family) but one is likely to still lead a "normal" adult life in comparison to having retired. While not too far into the future in this regard, 2050 is far enough into the future that it opens the possibility of some major changes having already occurred in the world. The year is also situated right after China's outlined objectives that are to be reached by 2049.

Concerning data collection methods, the responses collected through an online administered survey. I chose to use Webropol to create and distribute the survey due to it being available through my university and due to it providing better security and privacy than many other available platforms. The first page of the survey (Q1) consisted of the contents of the participant information sheet, and it was required for the participant to indicate that their participation was informed and voluntary before moving on with the survey. The second page concerned background information about the participants. In compliance with China's new data transfer law from 2023, and to protect the participants, I designed the survey to be anonymous and no personal information was collected.

Concerning the participants' background (Q2), I collected the following information: age, gender, year of study, and university major. Then, the participants were asked to indicate the category of hometown tier (Q3). The participants had the option to opt out of this question. The survey then continued with questions about the participants' relationship with the future – their future orientation (Q4-12), after which the participants were asked to describe what they think the year 2050 will be like (probable future: Q13-17) and secondly, their ideal scenario for 2050 (preferred future: Q18-22). Lastly, the participants were given the opportunity to give feedback about the survey (Q23). The full survey is available in Chinese (as presented to respondents') in Appendix 1 and outlined in more detail in English in Appendix 2. The survey questions were drafted after a review of previous studies with similar topics, as well as previous research, suggestions, theories, and analysis on images of the future which I outlined in the background chapter (Chapter 2).

Because of RQ1 (what the participants' images of the future are like), I wanted to assess which themes are important to the participants. This is why in designing the survey, I wanted to word the questions as open as possible. I aimed to design them in a way that would leave space for the respondents' ideas in order to not impose my own. While I did specify the year to be imagined as 2050, I chose to avoid asking about any specific themes, as this would allow me to map out topics that were important to the participants. However, based on feedback from the colleagues who reviewed the survey, concerning future of the world and top three changes in the world, the following aspects were mentioned as examples of aspects that could be considered: "environment, society, technology, infrastructure, culture etc.". Concerning top three values that guide the society, one example was given in the question: "care" (关怀, *guanhuai*). This specification too was made to the question based on feedback to ensure clarity of the survey design. It is possible that giving these examples may have

influenced the results, through increasing the likelihood of participants mentioning these particular examples rather than what spontaneously comes to their mind. Ideally, a pilot study with and without the examples would have been conducted to assess the impact of the given examples on participants' responses.

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

After data collection, I began to prepare for data analysis. At this stage, four (4) of the participants were disqualified from the study, because it was clear that the participant's answers were unusable either concerning the probable, preferred or both visions of 2050. For example, to describe a vision of 2050 using three adjectives or descriptive phrases, the following answer was given: "good; bad; mediocre". Because it was difficult to estimate if the participant had completed the prior and following sections of the survey seriously, all of the answers of those four participants were omitted from the study. In the end, the analysis proceeded with 34 participants. I then performed quantitative analysis on questions Q2-12, producing descriptive statistics to form a general picture of the sample concerning their demographic information and relationship to the future.

In previous research on images of the future, some researchers have used qualitative content analysis (e.g., Kaboli & Tapio 2018), some have used thematic analysis (e.g., Rasa & Laherto 2022), while some mention no other methodologies than Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) (e.g., Hoffman 2019). For this thesis, I chose to conduct a thematic analysis as it was one of the methods used in previous studies and as I was most familiar with the method.

CLA was used as part of the thematic analysis. CLA has been recommended by Inayatullah himself for use as a research method in master's thesis (Inayatullah 2004, 19). However, as noted, research in a group of individuals' images of the future using the CLA is still scarce, although the few existing studies promote its use for such research. As an example, in their study, Kaboli and Tapio conclude that Causal Layered Analysis produces 'a fruitful, rich, in-depth understanding of the images of the future' (Kaboli & Tapio 2018, 42). While their study used interviews, CLA has been proven to be effective for analysis of survey data about images of the future as well (Hoffman 2019).

### 3.2.1 The Data Analysis Process: Thematic Analysis, Descriptive Statistics, and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

I first combined all of an individual participant's responses about the probable 2050 scenario to form a comprehensive description of the individual's image of the probable future. I then did the same concerning questions about the ideal 2050 scenario. Therefore, concerning the probable images of the year 2050 and the preferred images, there were 34 images for each and a total of 68 images. I analysed the data through thematic analysis, aiming to find distinct images of the future from the participants descriptions of a probable 2050 and a preferred 2050. I followed the six stages of thematic analysis as outlined in a paper by Naeem et al. (2023) based on previous publications and descriptions of the method. The process is presented below based on their paper.

Step 1 involves 'transcription, familiarization with the data, and selection of quotations' (Naeem et al. 2023, 2). At this stage, I first translated the answers to questions 13-22 from Chinese to English. The decision of analysing the data primarily after translating it to English was made mostly due to the versions of programs I had and used in analysis (NVivo, Excel, and SPSS) being better able to comprehend data in English compared to Chinese. However, I referred to the original answers periodically throughout the analysis process. Here, I also familiarised myself with the data, reading over it multiple times and noting initial themes. I also selected quotations that could be used later to 'bring the data to life and aptly represent diverse viewpoints and patterns pertinent to the research objectives' as advised by the writers (*ibid.*, 4). However, some of the quotations presented in this thesis were added later on as a last step of the analysis process.

Step 2 consists of selecting keywords. This meant identifying and noting down recurring patterns and terms that 'are directly derived from the data' (Naeem et al. 2023, 4). For my study, these included, for example, 'deteriorated environment', 'conflicts', and 'world peace'.

I then continued to step 3, which is coding and involved using short phrases or words to capture the essence of a segment of data concerning its message or theme (Naeem et al. 2023, 4). Here, for example, different descriptions of technological advancements such as 'flying cars' and 'artificial intelligence' were coded as 'high-tech'.

Step 4 focuses on development of themes. Here, codes are organised to groups through more abstract interpretation 'to identify patterns and relationships, thereby offering insights into the

research question' (Naeem et al. 2023, 4). In my study, the themes were essentially images of the future, and codes different aspects and details of the images. In previous research, it has been common to form between two to four groups of images (e.g., Kaboli & Tapio 2018). I used this as a guideline in how many final groups of images (i.e., themes) should be developed.

Firstly, one major theme that emerged was an emphasis on progress and development accompanied with a sense of optimism (conveyed through e.g., description of changes as “better”). Through a closer look, a common denominator between these images was also a focus on technology and mentions of various high-tech products. These came to form the image labelled as *high-tech society*. At first, however, the images were divided into more specific themes with different emphasis: development, prosperity, patriotism, and high-tech. Due to their similarities overall in codes and keywords, these images were combined to form image A.

I also identified relationships between codes of individual images that concerned another focus: sustainability, and harmony (often as peaceful relations with others and nature). Looking at the individual images that contained these codes, I noted that also codes such as “meaningful life” and “happiness” were common. These individual images came to form the second image of *harmonious world*. A similar process as with image A was undertaken concerning image B, where different emphases were identified concerning harmoniousness: environmental focus, world peace focus, and a more abstract description. These were combined to form a singular image, again, due to significant overlaps in codes and keywords.

Thirdly, I had noted that there was a minority of images that stood out by containing codes such as “instability”, “conflicts”, and “negative changes”. These were grouped to form the third image of *times of change*. At first, I tried to group the images under image C in images A and B as many of them contained some elements that would have fit the images, for instance “convenience”, which was emphasized especially in image A. In the end, I decided to leave the images to their own category, as they stood out from the other individuals' images in A and B groups.

I first considered six images: three for probable 2050 and three for ideal 2050, with similar titles. However, the three categories of each probable and preferred images were very similar, which is why I chose to combine them and only use only three categories. This, again, also aligned with the number of images usually formed in previous studies. The similarity in

participants' images concerning the probable 2050 and preferred 2050 suggests that the participant's dreams about the future tend to be similar to what they imagine the future to likely be like.

Therefore, the analysis process did involve some hesitation. However, although I tried to develop the themes in differing ways, in the end, the three images repeatedly appeared as the best fit to the data. Beyond just images grouped under *times of change*, it was common that individual images contained elements that would have fit under multiple types of images of the future (Images A-C). They were categorised based on which they fit the best. There were also contradictions in the images, as expected based on previous research. As an example, concerning changes in the environment, some participants listed both positive and negative descriptions. It was also clear that some tensions were present in the images, as for instance, the participants reported both materialist and post-materialist values<sup>19</sup>. These will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming sections.

Although in previous research it has been common to place the images on a continuum from positive to negative as was suggested by pioneers in the field such as Fred Polak, it was difficult to do some concerning these images. Judging images as positive or negative must be done against a norm of a desired outcome. Great technological progress is as ideal to one as social change and instability is to another. Even if assessed against normative developmental images, images A (*high-tech society*) and B (*harmonious world*) were both quite positive to a similar extent, while especially image A could have well been an undesirable dystopia instead of a utopia to some participants whose images fell under category C (*times of change*). In image A, the word *utopia* was first included in the name (*high-tech utopia*) to communicate an overwhelming optimism that was present in the images. However, there were some (n: 5) participants that appeared to not prefer this future, only seeing it as the likely scenario, (see Figure 9). Due to this, and to avoid making normative judgements, I later changed the title to *high-tech society*.

Between stages 4 and 5 I also produced descriptive statistics concerning the other information collected in the survey: demographic data, attitudes, agency, sources of information concerning the future, and so on. I used the descriptive statistics to add to my

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<sup>19</sup> While Inglehart's study is rather dated, the terminology is used here due to it having been used in recent studies on the post-00s values, attitudes, and expectations towards them. This makes comparisons of the results easier.

conceptualisation of the images. At this stage, I also started to look at the values which participants had reported about the future scenarios. I investigated the frequency of different values concerning each category of images.

Step 5 is ‘conceptualisation through interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes’ (Naeem et al. 2023, 4). This involved understanding and defining the images of the future, making connections between the different concepts within them. Here, I also conducted CLA to help me understand and conceptualise the images. As recommended by Inayatullah and other researchers in previous studies and guidebooks, I moved up and down the levels of CLA (Figure 1) in conducting the analysis, categorising codes and keywords within each theme (i.e., group of images of the future) on the levels of CLA. These mostly fell under litany, systemic causes and worldview levels, while less metaphors were mentioned. CLA also involved interpreting the data based on my prior knowledge and the research review I completed for Chapter 2.

As the final step, step 6 consisted of developing a conceptual model – ‘a unique representation of the data’, ‘to answer the research questions and underscore the study’s contribution to knowledge’ (Naeem et al. 2023, 5). At this stage, descriptions of the images were finalised, and tables and diagrams were produced to illustrate the different images and their prevalence within the sample, as well as the results of CLA. I chose to illustrate the number of images and their overlaps between probable and preferred images using an alluvial diagram (Figure 9), as it allowed me to present many-to-many connections between the images. The diagram was created using Flourish Studio’s online tool.

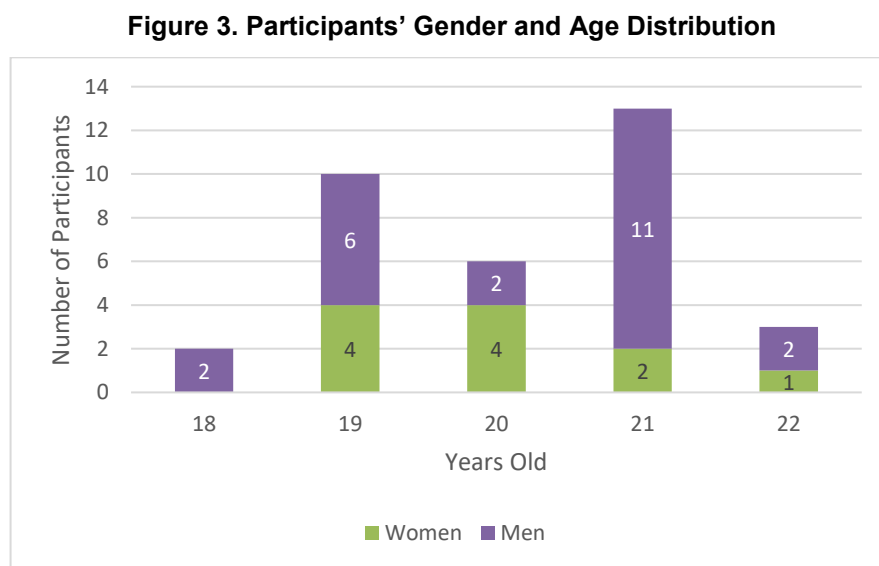
Lastly, I would like to note that while the analysis was inductive (besides interpretations noted during CLA). I did compare the results from all stages of analysis with previous research and existing theories, and considered possible implications of the results, based on the data, previous research, and my knowledge of the context in China and beyond. It is possible (or perhaps likely) that the research review (i.e., reading previous studies and theories) I completed before the analysis, as well as my other prior knowledge, worldview, and assumptions may have influenced my judgement during the analysis.

## 4 Results & Analysis

In this section, I discuss the results of my study. I start by describing the sample – focusing first on the demographics. After that, I move onto discussing the participants future orientation. I then describe and discuss the participants’ images of the future. Finally, I reflect on the implications of the results, limitations, and significance of the results and the study.

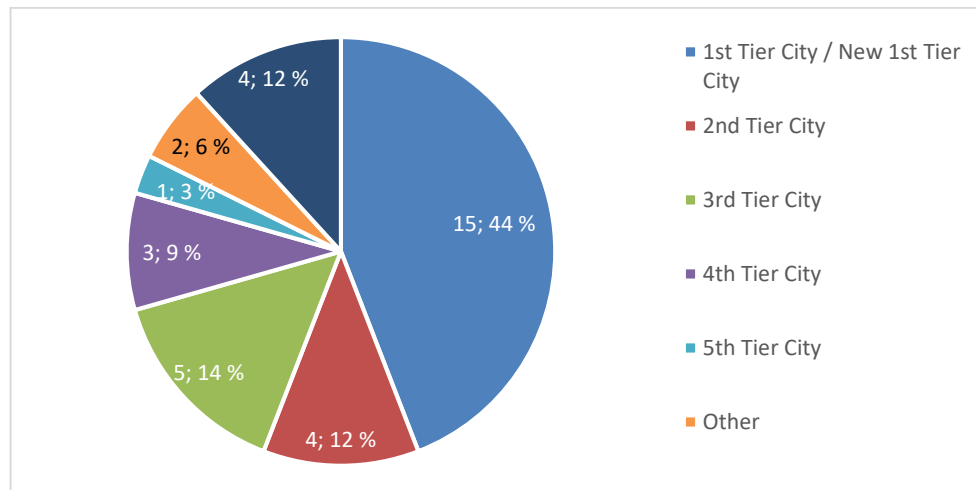
### 4.1 Sample Demographics

Out of the participants, 11 (32%) were women and 23 (68%) were men, and their ages varied from 18 to 22 years old. The age and gender distribution of the participants can be seen in the figure below (Figure 2). The mean age was 20,15 and the median age 20.



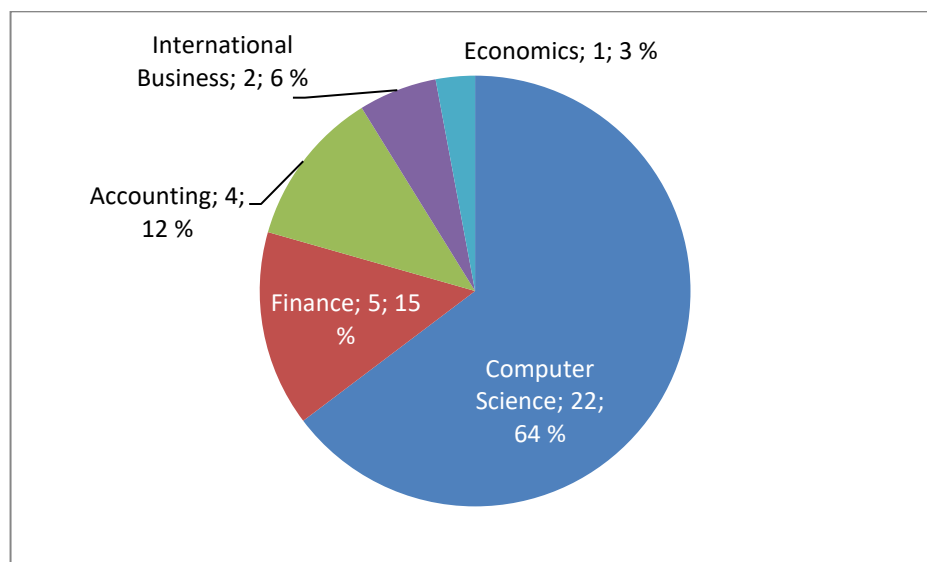
Concerning their home city’s tier, the participants were given the choice to opt-out by choosing the option: “unsure/unwilling to answer”. Four participants (n:4; 12%) opted out. Most of the participants indicated that they were from a city, and almost half of them (n: 15; 44%) were from a first-tier or new first-tier city. As noted previously, all the participants were studying at the same university in a second-tier city at the time of this study. The portion of all city tiers out of the participants’ answers about their hometown can be seen in Figure 3.

**Figure 4. Participants' Hometown City Tiers**



All participants indicated that they were studying at the university where the data collection was intended to be administered. All participants also indicated that they were undergraduate students. The participants' university majors can be seen in Figure 4. Majority of the participants studied computer science (n: 22; 64%), while the rest studied international business, economics, accounting, and finance. The participants were also asked if they had previous study experience with futures studies. A majority of the participants (n: 25; 74%) indicated that they had no prior futures studies study experience

**Figure 5. Participants' Majors at University**



The participants' age distribution was as desired and corresponded to the research aims and research questions. Concerning gender, it would have been more ideal to have a better-balanced sample through a more equal amount of male and female participants. Moving onto the participants university majors and hometown city tiers, it would have been better to obtain a sample in which the students would have been studying the same major and be from similar hometowns (i.e., same city tier). This would have reduced variability within the sample, allowed some control over socioeconomic background and therefore also improved comparability of the results if similar studies are conducted in the future. However, this sample still provides meaningful results concerning the appropriateness of the research design in China and the results could still be used as a basis of drafting research designs in future studies.

## **4.2 Participants' Future Orientation**

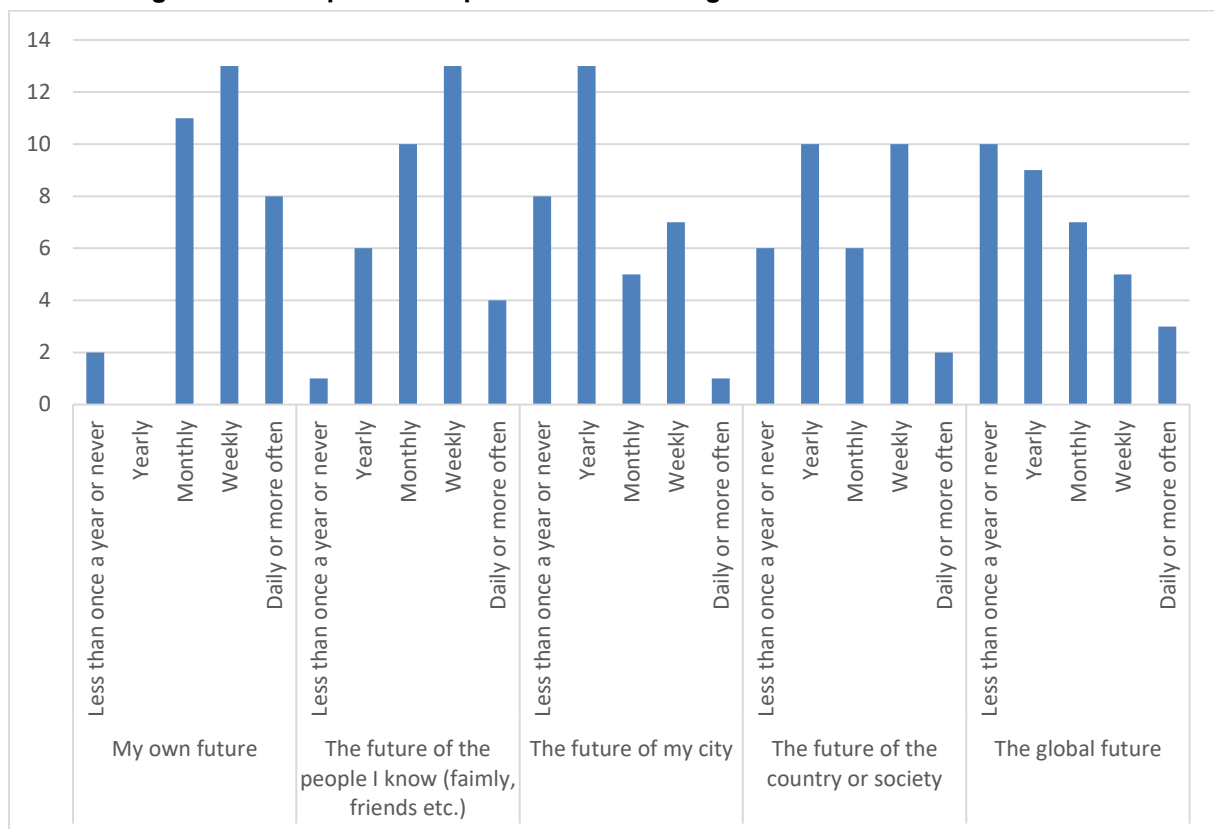
In this chapter, I provide a general overview of the participants future orientation, describing their frequency of thinking about different scales of the future (from one's own future to global future), the time periods the participants tended to focus on when thinking about different scales of future, the participants' external sources of information and views concerning the future, as well as their agency, feelings about the future (on a continuum from optimism to pessimism), and their felt certainty about the future (on a continuum from certainty to uncertainty).

### **Scales of the Future: From the Individual to the Global Scale**

In the survey, question four (Q4) assessed how often the participants think about a) their own future b) the future of the people they know (family, friends, etc.), c) the future of their city, d) the future of their country and e) the global future. When asked about the frequency of thinking about their own future, 61 % (n: 21) of the participants reported thinking about their future at least once a week. The same figure was 47 % for thinking about the future of the people they knew (e.g., family and friends). Out of the five items, the future of one's city and the global future appeared to be the least on the participants' minds. When asked about the frequency of thinking about their city's future or the global future, only 21 % reported thinking about their own city's future or the global future at least once a week. In comparison,

the same figure was 34 % concerning the future of China. Interestingly, when asked about the global future, 32 % of participants reported that they thought about it less than once every year. The participants reported encountering information and ideas about the future the least in documentaries, movies, series and books out of the items measured. However, these sources can have a lasting impact as they are often longer in duration and more immersive, deeper experiences than watching the news or having a conversation with a friend.

**Figure 6. Participants' Frequencies of Thinking about Different Future Scales**



These results indicated that for the participants, the frequency of thinking about a certain future scale did not increase linearly from smallest to largest scale, i.e. from own future to the global future. This could be due to asking the participants about the future of the city they live in currently, which many of the participants may have moved to only when entering university. It should also be acknowledged that these categories are not exclusive, as many elements from larger scales may influence smaller scales. For instance, the future of one's city affects one's daily life from transportation to employment opportunities. Similarly, the global future sets the context for one's life, for example, through affecting climate change affecting local weather and climate conditions.

**Figure 7. Participants Frequency of Thinking about Different Future Scales: From the Most Often Thought About Scale (Left) to the Least Often Thought About Scale (Right)**



As introduced in the background section, in previous studies, researchers have found that most Chinese adolescents' hopes and fears related to the general or collective future, and that hopes and fears concerning the self were far fewer than those related to education, career and family (Zhang et al., 2015, pp. 625-626; Zhao et al., 2018, p. 67). In addition, in another study from Taiwan it was found that half of the participants decided to discuss the global future when given the choice to discuss anything about the future (Ono, 2003, pp. 754-757).

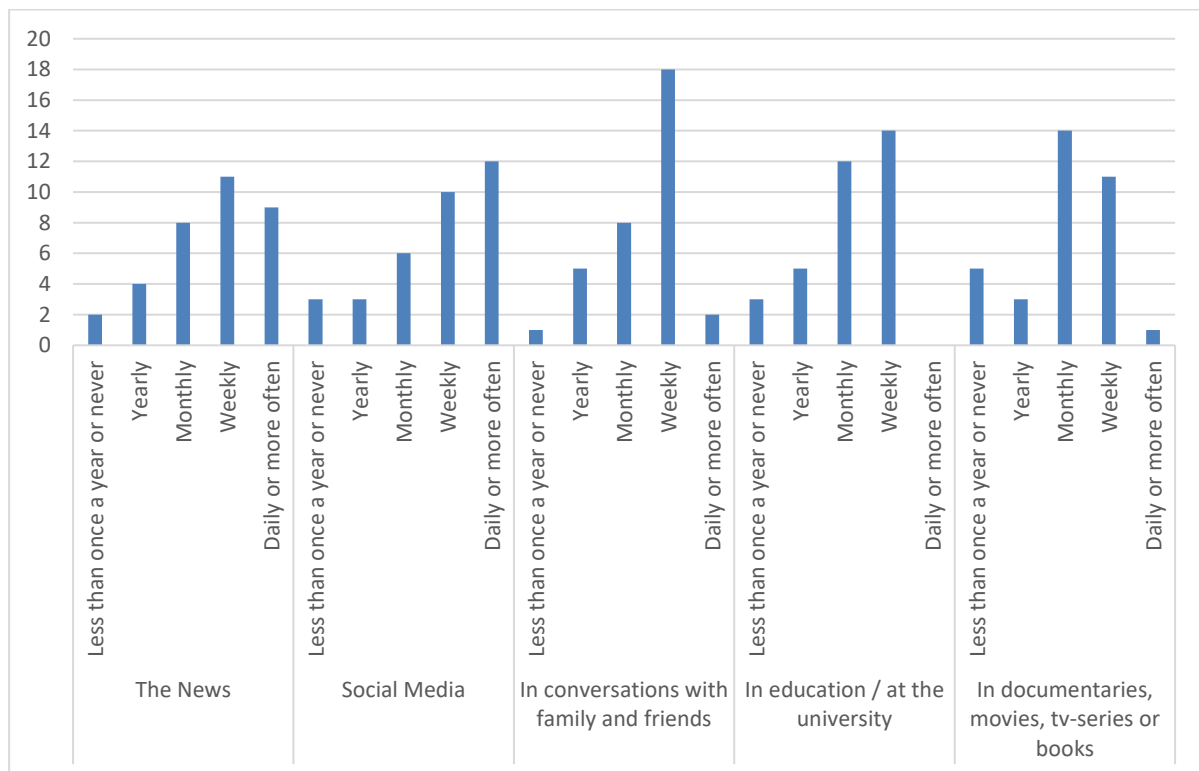
### **Proximity of the Future in Years**

The survey also included a question about what point in time they most often consider when thinking about the future. Concerning their own future as well as the future of the world, participants' answers ranged from less than one year to 90 years, with an average of six (6) years for both. The similarity in proximity of thinking of the future concerning own and the global future contrasts with previous studies.

### **Information and Ideas about the Future**

The participants were also asked about where and how often they encounter information and views about the future. The frequency of encountering information and views about the future varied across the different sources. 65% (n: 22) of the participants reported that they encountered information and ideas about the future in social media every week or more often. Compared to other given sources of information, social media was in fact the source where they encountered information and ideas about the future most often. However, this was followed closely by the news and conversations with family and friends as both had 59% (n: 20) participants encounter views and information about the future every week or more often. This number decreased concerning other sources. 14 (41%) of the participants reported encountering information and views about the future at least weekly in education, while 12 (35%) indicated so concerning documentaries, tv-series or books.

**Figure 8. The Frequency of Encountering Information or Views about the Future from Different sources**



## Agency

To study the participants felt agency, they were asked to choose the sentence that describes them the best out of the following options:

- a. There are many possibilities for my future. The future is something I can proactively plan and formulate.
- b. The future is unknowable. I cannot change the future – I can only adapt to what will happen.
- c. The future is somewhat predictable, but it is largely determined by economic, social, and political factors beyond my control.

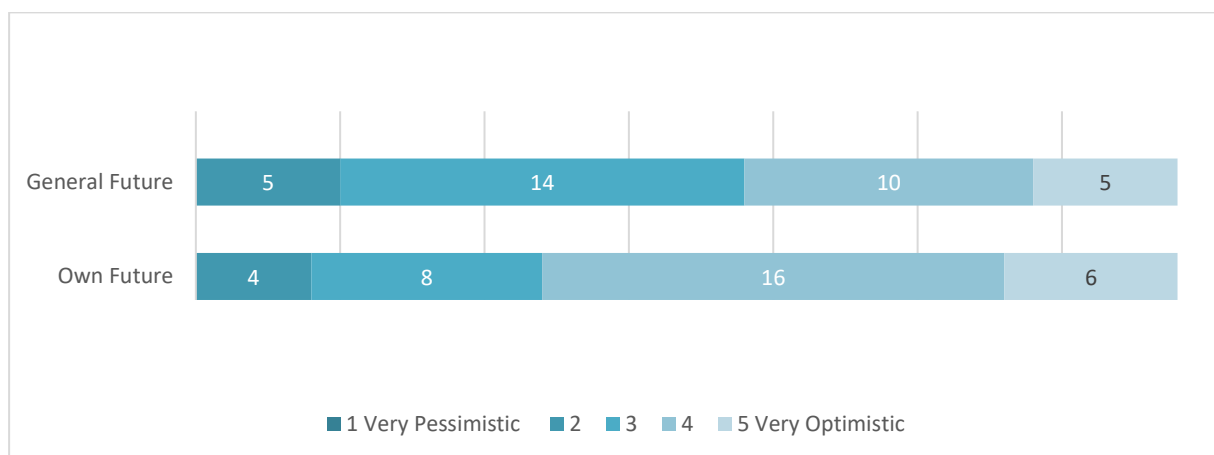
These options were formulated based on multiple previous studies and theories (presented in Chapter 2, e.g., Polak 1973) to assess participants' agency through collecting data about the extent to which they 1) feel like the future is pre-determined, and 2) feel like they can shape

the future<sup>20</sup>. Roughly 35% (n: 12) of the participants chose statement A, which indicated a sense of confidence concerning shaping the future and the opportunities it holds. Statement B indicated the strongest sense of uncertainty and helplessness about the future. Around 15% (n: 5) chose this statement. Finally, half of the participants (n:17; 50%) chose statement C. This option presented a balance between options A and B, indicating that while there is some predictability, the future is largely beyond their control, therefore representing a rather weak sense of agency.

### Nature of the Future: Positive or Negative

To study the extent to which the participants felt optimistic or pessimistic about the future, I collected data about how the participant felt about their own future and the general future on a 5-point scale from very pessimistic (1) to very optimistic (5). For feelings about both own future and the future of the world, respondents' answers ranged between 1-5. For own future, the mean was 3.71 and the median 4, whereas for the future of the world, the mean was 3.44 and the median 3. Therefore, the respondents were slightly more optimistic about their own future than the future of the world.

**Figure 9. Results Concerning Optimism and Pessimism about the Future among the Participants**

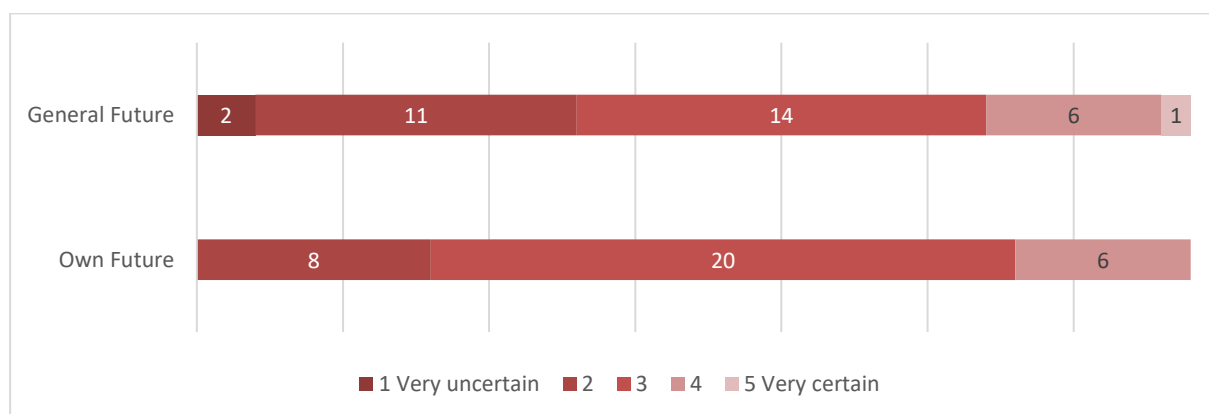


<sup>20</sup> For instance, a set of sentences mapping these were used in Polak game: a) 'The future is bright, and I have the ability to change the world; b) the future is bright, but there is little I can personally do; c) the future is bleak, and I have little influence; d) the future is bleak, and I can change it' (Polak 1973 as cited by Inayatullah 2019, p. 12).

## Uncertainty and Certainty

Felt uncertainty about the future was also measured with a 5-point scale from very uncertain (1) to very predictable (5). For uncertainty about their own future, respondents' answers ranged between 2 and 4 while for the future of the world, they ranged from 1 and 5. The median was 3 for both one's own future and the future of the world. There was a slight difference in the means: for own future, the mean of felt uncertainty was 2.94, while for the future of the world, the mean was 2.80. Therefore, the general future was perceived a little more uncertain (on average) than one's own future.

**Figure 10. Results Concerning Perceived Certainty and Uncertainty of the Future among the Participants**



### 4.3 Participants' Images of the Future

After analysing the data about participants' future orientation, I moved onto their images of the future. In this chapter, I first present an overview of the different images found in the data, and their prevalence under probable and preferred futures. I then compare participants probable and preferred images and end the chapter by presenting descriptive statistics about the three images.

### 4.3.1 Participants' Probable and Preferred Images of the Future

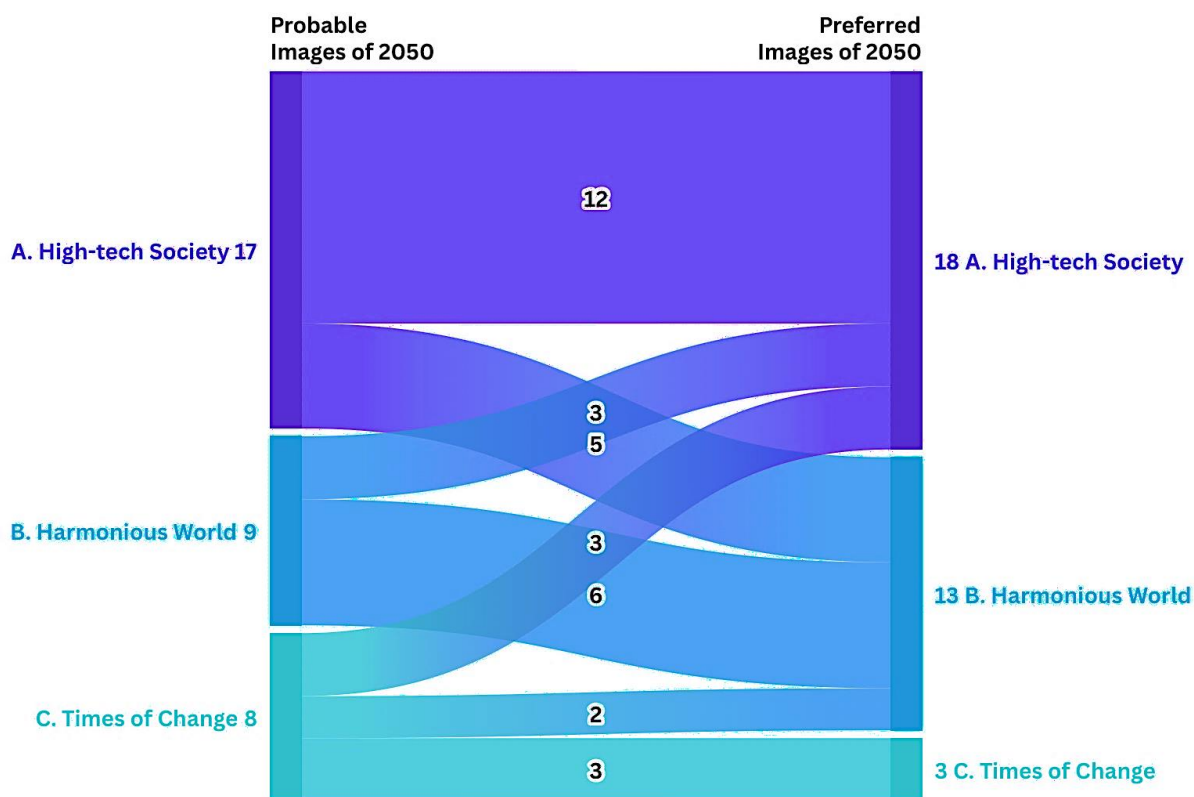
The main results of the study concern what the participants' images of the future are like (RQ1). As described in the section about process of the analysis under methodology chapter, I found three distinct images in the data. These were namely *high-tech society*, *harmonious world*, and *times of change*. A summary of the images can be seen in the table below (Table 3). Full analysis and description of the three images can be found in the next chapter (4.4).

**Table 3. Summary of Participants' Images of 2050**

	<b>Summary of Participants' Images of 2050</b>
<b>A. High-tech society</b>	Progress and development have occurred in most areas of life and the society, where life is proliferated with advanced technology.
<b>B. Harmonious world</b>	A sustainable and peaceful globalised world where people lead meaningful lives.
<b>C. Times of Change</b>	There are some societal issues, unrest, disconnection, and chaos, but also cultural diversity, some technological development, and convenience of daily life.

Concerning the prevalence of the three different images under probable and preferred futures, as can be seen from the diagram (Figure 11), 12 of the participants whose images fell under category *high-tech society* (A) also fit the best under the same category concerning preferred images, while 5 of the participants' images were categorised under image *harmonious world* (B) concerning preferred 2050. A majority (n: 6) of the participants whose image was categorised under *harmonious world* (B) also fit the best under the same category concerning preferred images, while the images of the rest of them (n: 3) resembled more closely category A. Finally, from probable 2050 category of *times of change* (C), three participants' images were categorised under *high-tech society* (A) in preferred 2050, two of them under *harmonious world* (B), and 3 under the same category as for probable image: *times of change* (C).

Figure 11. Participants' Probable and Preferred Images of 2050\*



\*This alluvial diagram was created using Flourish Studio:  
<https://flourish.studio/visualisations/sankey-charts/>.

My main secondary aim in this research was to consider aspects including systemic causes, values, and worldviews that underlie the images and may influence their formation (RQ2). Especially related to RQ1, it was important to investigate what themes are important to the participants when thinking about the future. In the tables below are listed the most common keywords found in the realistic and ideal images of the future. The frequencies were counted using NVivo. Some terms with topics that were highly alike such as “high-tech” and “technology”, “development” and “progress” were grouped together to form the keywords.

While technology was important in both probable and preferred images, it does have a much stronger role in the probable vision, with over twice as many mentions (n: 58) than in the preferred vision (n: 27). This suggests that in the probable images, participants more commonly thought about technology as a factor shaping the future, while it held lesser priority on the participants' minds when imagining preferred futures.

**Table 4. Top 10 Keywords Concerning Descriptions, Values, and Changes Described when Asked About Probable and Preferred 2050**

Probable 2050		Preferred 2050	
Keyword	Frequency (n)	Keyword	Frequency (n)
Technology	58	Technology	27
Culture	18	Environment	18
Development and progress	17	Life	15
Environment	14	Society	11
Convenience	13	Science	11
Science	10	Equality	9
Friendliness / friendship	10	Money	8
Society	9	Enjoyment	8
Equality	8	Peace	7
Infrastructure	7	Home	7

As can be seen from Table 4, environmental concerns appear in both visions, indicating that besides technology, the environment was a central theme in the participants' imaginings of the future, more so in preferred images (n: 18) than in probable (n: 14). However, it should be noted that the participants did not refer to specific phenomena such as climate change/global warming in their responses, although this has been a common theme in previous studies<sup>21</sup>. Finally, science is also present in both visions, which shows that scientific advancements have importance in the future in addition to technological development (probable n: 10, preferred n: 11). However, technology, science, and the environment are not the only themes apparent from the frequencies. In both sets of images, "society" was mentioned multiple times. Based on these frequencies of keywords, equality is something that often shapes the future society in participants' minds (probable n: 8, preferred n: 9). Finally, culture was often mentioned by participants especially concerning the probable images (n: 18).

In the probable image, many participants noted development and progress (n: 17). In the probable image, also "convenience" (n: 13) and "infrastructure" (n: 7) were common, suggesting a future shaped by efficiency and a society where advanced systems support daily life. In the preferred image, these aspects were less prominent, perhaps reflecting a preference for more wellbeing and human-centred, peaceful futures. In fact, in the ideal image, "peace"

<sup>21</sup> Climate change was also chosen as a focus in some studies, for example, by Hoffman (2019).

is mentioned (n: 7). This reflects a desire for a harmonious future. Some other keywords were also only mentioned in preferred images that related to personal life, such as “money” (n: 8), “enjoyment” (n: 8), and “home” (n: 7). Overall, these findings suggest that in participants' preferred futures, there is more importance on personal life, well-being, enjoyment, and tranquillity than on development and advancements.

Overall, concerning the preferred images, responses were generally briefer as well as more abstract and general than those in the part about the probable vision of 2050. Another observation I made while going through the responses was that the responses for preferred 2050 tended to centre more around one's own life, in comparison to the probable 2050 images, which were more focused on national and international level, society, culture and technology – besides when asked specifically about the participant's daily life. Additionally, three participants focused only on their personal life when asked to describe the preferred future, while none of the participants did so concerning the probable images.

Preferred images are something that one has to make up oneself – to imagine. They are more loosely tied to the current circumstances and trajectories than realistic images. Under life's pressures, one may naturally tend to put more thought into what is likely to occur in the future and how to adjust to it rather than dreaming of an ideal future and putting effort to make one's visions the reality. It is easier to adapt to the surroundings than to adapt one's surroundings to one's wishes and values. This highlights the importance of encouraging the youth to imagine preferable futures.

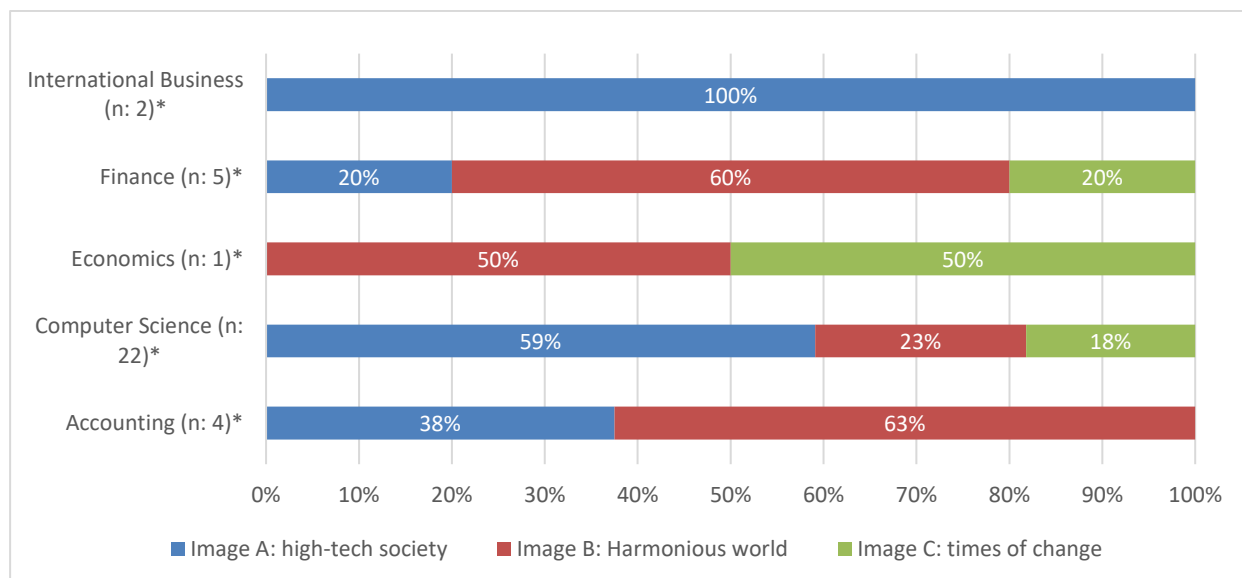
To summarise, the keyword frequencies suggest that a more harmonious, people-centred future where life enjoyment and societal peace are prioritised alongside technological advances. In essence, the probable vision is more about systemic and technological growth, while the preferred vision leans towards personal and inter-personal satisfaction. The expected trajectory is a continuation of focus on technological and scientific advancements, development and progress. This is no surprise looking at China's aims for 2049 (as noted in previous chapter) and knowing the major of over half the participants to be computer science. Additionally, development and rapid growth have been part of the post-00s early growing-up experience, although China's growth has been slower since.

### 4.3.2 Descriptive Statistics about the Three Images

In this section I introduce some descriptive statistics concerning each of the three images, before moving onto presenting the detailed descriptions and CLA of each of the three images in the next section (4.4). For descriptive statistics, the data for probable and preferred images were combined (images n: 68; participants n: 34) to provide a general summary of the three images<sup>22</sup>. It was therefore enough to categorise the participant under a certain image if either their probable or preferred image was categorised under the given group of images.

As can be seen from figure 11, 59% of Computer Science students' images aligned best with *high-tech society*. This was more compared to all other majors besides students studying International Business. 23 % of the Computer Science students' images were grouped under *harmonious world*, and 18% of their images were grouped under *Times of Change*. This implies potential awareness of both the rapid advancements in technology and the uncertainties such changes might bring, but also some yearning for a world with a different more emphasis on sustainability and peace.

**Figure 12. Participants University Majors and their Images of the Future (n: 34)**



\*The number refers to number of participants, whom each contributed two images.

<sup>22</sup> This choice was made due to constraints concerning length of the thesis and available time.

Because the number of participants studying other majors than computer science is very small (n: 1-5), the results cannot be used to draw any conclusions. These were still included in the figure above (Figure 11) and the results could be compared to data from larger samples. Future research could focus on specific majors to analyse the differences in visions of the future in more depth.

Between the three images, one notable difference concerned how far into future the participant usually thought when thinking about their own future or the future of the world as can be seen from Table 5. The biggest contrast was between respondents grouped under image B (harmonious world) and C (times of change). Whereas under image B, the averages were 9.81 and 9.00 for own future and general future, under image C, the same numbers were 2.62 and 2.88. Notably, also the standard deviations were quite low, especially compared to the two images A and B. Additionally, under image B, participants were more certain and optimistic about the future compared to the other two images, followed by participants under image A and lastly C. These results would suggest that sense of uncertainty, pessimism, and tendency to think in short time scales when thinking about the future could be linked to viewing the future as gloomier and more turbulent, and the other way around. However, studies with larger samples should be done to investigate this before any conclusions can be drawn.

**Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations Concerning Data about Aspects of Participants' Future Orientation under the Three Images (n = 34)**

	<b>Image A: high-tech utopia</b>	<b>Image B: harmonious world</b>	<b>Image C: times of change</b>
<b>Thinking about own future (years from now)</b>	7.86 (sd: 18.55)	9.81 (sd: 21.99)	2.62 (sd: 3.11)
<b>Thinking about future of the world (years from now)</b>	7.35 (sd: 18.33)	9.00 (sd: 21.88)	2.88 (sd: 3.27)
<b>Optimism about own future (1-5)*</b>	3.65 (sd: 0.98)	4.06 (sd: 0.44)	3.38 (sd: 0.92)
<b>Optimism about future of the world (1-5)*</b>	3.35 (sd: 0.94)	3.87 (sd: 0.719)	3.13 (sd: 0.99)
<b>Certainty about own future (1-5)*</b>	2.91 (sd: 0.67)	3.13 (sd: 0.62)	2.75 (sd: 0.46)
<b>Certainty about future of the world (1-5)*</b>	2.61 (sd: 0.89)	2.94 (sd: 1.00)	2.75 (sd: 1.17)

\*For certainty, 1: very uncertain, 5: very certain. For optimism, 1: very pessimistic, 5: very optimistic. Under all three images, participants encountered views and opinions most often in social media. Under image A and B, this was followed by the news, and thirdly by friends and family. Under image B, at shared third place came education. For image C, participants encountered views and opinions about the future second most often in conversations with friends and family, which was followed by the news. Concerning these top three sources, participants encountered views and opinions more often in them than respondents under image A and B. It could be that these external sources of information shaped the participants descriptions of the future more than in the other two images.

**Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations Concerning Frequency of Encountering Views and Opinions about the Future from Different Sources Under the Three Images (n = 34)\***

	<b>Image A: high-tech utopia</b>	<b>Image B: harmonious world</b>	<b>Image C: times of change</b>
<b>News</b>	3.61 (sd: 1.31)	3.44 (sd: 1.03)	3.75 (sd: 1.17)
<b>Social media</b>	3.65 (sd: 1.43)	3.81 (sd: 1.20)	4.13 (sd: 1.13)
<b>Friends and family</b>	3.52 (sd: 0.95)	3.31 (sd: 0.79)	3.88 (sd: 0.64)
<b>Education/university</b>	2.91 (sd: 1.04)	3.31 (sd: 0.70)	3.12 (sd: 0.99)
<b>Documentaries, movie, series or books</b>	2.96 (sd: 1.22)	3.13 (sd: 0.81)	2.88 (sd: 1.13)

\*1: never or less than once a year; 2: once a year; 3: once a month; 4: once a week; 5: every day or more often

While these results are indicative of differences between the images, as noted, further statistical tests in bigger sample sizes should be conducted in order to draw generalisable conclusions.

#### 4.4 Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) of Participants' Images of the Future

In this section, I present the Causal Layered Analysis of the participants images of the future. Under each of the three images, I first give a general description of the images, which mostly involve the litany level. I then move onto the underlying layers: systemic causes, worldview/discourse, and myth/metaphor. These layers are in part notions directly from the images and in part interpretations of the images based on review of previous literature and analysis that was presented in the background section. I first discuss present description and CLA of the most common image A, *high-tech society*, after which I move on to the second most common image B, *harmonious world*, and lastly image C, *times of change*. A summary of the CLA can be found in Table 6 on the following page. The significance and implications of the results are discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 4.5).

##### 4.4.1 Image A: A High-tech society

The most common image among the participants depicts a high-tech society in the year 2050 (probable 2050, n: 17, 50%; preferred 2050, n: 18, 53%; together, n: 35, 51%). The future images in this category included scientific and technological advancements, prosperity and economic development, a civil and stable society, improved infrastructure, a better environment, and a rich cultural landscape with no conflicts. In this image, positive development had generally occurred in all aspects of life and the world. One of the participants describe three main changes that have occurred since 2024 as follows:

“The degree of social civilisation development is high; Infrastructure development is more complete; There are new breakthroughs in scientific and technological development.” (preferred 2050)

In the images, participants anticipate a society transformed by technology, where automation and robotics have reduced the demands of work for individuals and demand of labour for the society, therefore making a departure from the current work-centred societal structures and norms in China. Work takes only one portion of the day for most participants, while the day is otherwise spent relaxing and on one's chosen leisure activities, such as watching movies and exercising. Some participants imagine still facing high competition and pressure at work despite having more free time, while others imagine being free of such pressures.

Table 7. Summary of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) of the Participants' Images of the Future

	<b>A. High-tech society</b>	<b>B. Harmonious World</b>	<b>C. Times of Change</b>
<b>Litany</b>	<p>There is progress and development in most areas of life and the society (environment, civilisation, science...)</p> <p>Convenient, technology-assisted life</p> <p>Robots are used for many jobs</p> <p>Advanced technology</p>	<p>Globalisation</p> <p>Harmonious exchanges; world peace</p> <p>Improved environment, sustainable practices</p> <p>Technological advancements, but also technology-free activities</p> <p>Life is less centred on work</p>	<p>Ongoing (and/or incoming) changes and turbulence: opposition, conflicts, chaos, unrest</p> <p>Alienation and disconnection from other people and what is humane</p> <p>Diversity and niche cultures</p> <p>Technological developments, convenient life</p>
<b>Systemic/ Social Causes</b>	<p>Continuation of current trajectories, fulfilment of China's current aims</p> <p>Policies: prioritisation of convenience and efficiency through new infrastructure, efforts to maintain stability, and support for innovation</p> <p>Further increased role of technological solutions in the society</p> <p>Replacing human labour through automatization and robotisation</p>	<p>Green transition</p> <p>Continuation of current policies and initiatives that emphasise sustainability and harmony</p> <p>Support especially for sustainability related innovation</p> <p>Automatization and robotisation</p> <p>Welfare systems have been improved</p>	<p>Growing inequality</p> <p>Worsening unemployment</p> <p>Changing power structures</p> <p>Fast pace of life</p> <p>Disillusionment; rejection of societal expectations and pressures, emergence of social movements and/or opposition</p> <p>Failure to maintain social stability and satisfy the general public</p>
<b>Worldview/ Discourse</b>	<p>Technocratic optimism</p> <p>Technological advancements align with social harmony and the "greater good"</p> <p>The idea of linear progress</p>	<p>Holistic sustainability (environmental, cultural, societal...)</p> <p>Embracing diversity</p> <p>Technological development and globalisation bringing peace, harmony and stability</p>	<p>"Punk"</p> <p>Scepticism about and resistance towards a tech-driven, efficiency and materialism focused world</p> <p>The idea that progress comes at a cost</p>
<b>Myth, Metaphor, Archetypes</b>	<p>Technology as the "saviour"</p> <p>"High-tech utopia"</p> <p>Popular movies &amp; art about the future -&gt; especially technological aspects</p> <p>Chinese Dream</p>	<p>The world as a "Global Village"</p> <p>A "harmonious future" where peace and equality prevail</p> <p>"Green utopia"</p>	<p>"Surging undercurrents"</p> <p>"Lurking crises"</p> <p>"Dystopia"</p>

Another participant noted the top three changes to be the following:

“Infrastructure has become more advanced; More jobs may be completed by robots; Technology is getting better and better.” (probable 2050)

Overall, advancements and proliferation of technology can be seen as having a major influence on people’s daily lives. Besides an all-encompassing sense of advancements and optimism, what differentiated the participants’ responses from the other images is also this emphasis on high technology. Its influence is not limited to the changes concerning work-life that were described above. The respondents describe life as convenient and smart. People enjoy the benefits of smart technology, with innovations like robots, internet of things (IoT), virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) integrated into everyday tasks. In the high-tech society of 2050, a day may start as follows:

“Artificial intelligence reports weather and news for me, and a smart home makes breakfast for me.” (probable 2050)

“[...] making brunch reservations through an AI voice assistant” (preferred 2050).

For the preferred image, one of the participants listed the main changes compared to today as follows:

“There is VR-interaction; Robots have begun to be part of daily life; AI has become stable” (preferred 2050)

Some other specified ways in which innovativeness shows includes drones, novel healthcare solutions (e.g., in curing cancer). Additionally, space exploration has continued, and there may even be flying cars. The influence of technological advancements is not only limited to the life of humans, but it has also had a considerable impact on the environment and sustainability efforts. In fact, the environment has seen improvement thanks to sustainable tech developments, with a strong emphasis on harmony between technology and ecological sustainability.

“Regarding environmental protection, due to scientific and technological progress, people's goals have changed from energy conservation and emission reduction to finding new energy sources and neutralising pollution.” (probable 2050)

Science and technology also encourage peace, perhaps through balance of terror:

“With advanced science and technology, we dare not easily start a war.” (preferred 2050)

Overall, participants value cooperation on global challenges, some mentioning more specific terms like ‘win-win cooperation’ and ‘mutual aid’ besides just cooperation. These are usually used to refer to the international level (this was however not specified by participants). As an example, one of the participants used the following three terms to describe the future:

“Mutual aid; Technology; Friendship” (probable 2050)

As noted in the previous section concerning the common differences between probable and preferred images, in the preferred images the focus tended to be more on the personal level over wider scales of the future. Here, participants envisioned not only technological progress but also personal prosperity, with home and car ownership symbolising material stability. Participants mention having money to spend, which reflects valuing the ability to buy whatever one wants or needs. Prosperity was also a prevalent theme in the probable images, but in the probable images emphasis was more on prosperity and development of the society and economy. Overall participants depict a society that maintains a balance between material wealth and personal fulfilment.

“I have money to spend and people to love.” (preferred 2050)

The **systemic causes** behind the set of images include the rise of digital economy and the push for innovation-driven growth in China. A continuation of current trajectories can be clearly seen from these images. For instance, already in today’s world, China has the largest e-commerce market. Additionally, the party-state has heavily invested in things like AI, 5G, and quantum computing. Policies such as the Made in China 2025 initiative aim to position the country as a leader in technology and innovation, which is also included in the centennial aims for the year 2049: becoming a science and technology superpower. (e.g., Xinhua 2021a; MERICS 2019) These systemic causes are reflected in daily lives of the participants in today’s China and in the imagined futures. In the images, smart and convenient cities have continued to develop and be developed – likely supported by government policies.

Technology plays a pivotal role in shaping daily life and beyond, from changing the role of employment in society to being the key to solving environmental issues. The society is depicted as stable in the images, which could be in part due to other aspects mentioned, such as AI. AI is already being incorporated for governance in China to ensure stability. Systems including facial recognition are justified as tools for security and efficiency. (e.g., Brown, Statman & Sui 2021.) However, no specific examples like this were given by the participants. Additionally, such systems are commonly viewed as dystopian rather than utopian. It is

possible that stability is achieved in other ways, and this is a topic that could be explored in future research.

Finally, the post-00s are digital natives. Currently, young Chinese already commonly embrace digital tools in daily life. For instance, proliferation of social media and payment solution platforms like WeChat, Douyin (TikTok), Alipay, and more recently Xiaohongshu, as well as advancements in electric and driverless car production in the post-00s lifetime showcase the transformative potential of technology in the society. The images of 2050 reflect a continuation of this trend of increasing role of technology.

Concerning the **worldview/discourse** level of causal layered analysis (CLA), technocratic optimism appears as a major underlying view. Technology is depicted as the ultimate driver of progress, empowering individuals and bringing about prosperity in all areas of life and the society as a whole. The participants hold a utopian belief in the ability of science and technology to solve environmental issues and drive societal stability and prosperity. The images also reflect the youth's desires of continuing to access lifestyles enhanced by technology. It is noteworthy that no participants noted any negative impacts of technological advancements.

Concerning this image, the most common values noted by the respondents were friendliness (n: 13), care (n: 9), integrity (n: 6) and equality (n: 6). Overall, in the high-tech society, human-centric values underline the images, suggesting an optimistic vision of the future where collaboration, care, and technological progress coexist. Here, also some Confucianist ideas appear to be reinvented for modernity, with the collectivist ethos where technological advancements are aligned with social harmony and the "greater good".

Moving onto the level of **myth/metaphor**, overall, the images align with the myth of a "high-tech utopia" due to the optimism about technology and progress. A metaphor of technology as the "saviour" appears to be present in the images. It is depicted as rather divine, omnipotent force capable of solving societal and environmental problems. Finally, it should be noted that the images also align with popular depictions of the future familiar from movies, books, and other forms of art that is situated in the future.

#### 4.4.2 Image B: A Harmonious World

The *harmonious world* formed the second largest category of images (probable 2050, n: 9, 26%; preferred 2050, n: 13, 38%; together, n: 22, 32%). Similarly to image of the high-tech society, this group of images is overall very positive. Technological advancements play an important role in the society and people's lives. Like in image A, smart technologies like AI have become prevalent and affect life from work to entertainment. Robots have become popular, and although flying cars are not mentioned as in the image A, there are self-driving cars. Overall, there is not as much emphasis on technological advancements and the society is not quite as proliferated with advanced high-tech as in the image A. Instead, harmony, freedom, and globalisation are much more prevalent themes. While mutual aid and cooperation were also mentioned by some participants categorised under the *high-tech society*, the overall perspective was more patriotic and focused on the national level in comparison to this image. When asked to describe the image with three adjectives or descriptive phrases, the participants descriptions included the following:

“High-tech; Civilised; Harmonious” (probable 2050)

“Beautiful; Harmonious; Warm” (preferred 2050)

As noted, globalisation was a central theme, especially cultural globalisation. Due to globalisation and cultural sharing, cultures appear to have blended to an extent while there is also greater cultural diversity. A participant describes two of the main changes as the following:

“Earth is more like a global village; There are more blended cultures” (probable 2050)

Although there is global integration in preferred images, the global level is not mentioned in them as commonly as in probable images. In a sense, in the preferred images the focus on harmony extends to individual lives and societal interactions, rather than primarily on the international level. Overall, the world is a safe, peaceful, and harmonious place, which is reflected in the society and individuals' lives. A quotation that shows this from the preferred images can be seen below.

“Communication among people increases; Hearts become closer” (preferred 2050)

Important themes also include sustainability. The condition of the environment has been improving, and sustainability is visible in participants' lives:

“I use environmentally friendly transportation to go out” (preferred 2050)

Sustainability is however not limited to environmental sustainability, but also especially social sustainability was visible in the participants' descriptions. In the images, social harmony pervades and connection between humans has strengthened. Social security and support systems have also been developed:

“Children have some support, and the elderly have something to rely on.”  
(preferred 2050)

Besides development in China, many other countries in the world have developed too. Conflicts have reduced and there may even be world peace. Notably, there is not only harmony between peoples but also harmony between humans and nature. In this image, besides global integration, the world is characterised by growing ecological consciousness. A participant describes the world as follows:

“Reduction in conflicts and wars; Harmonious exchanges between humans and nature; Harmonious coexistence between humans and living things” (preferred 2050)

Importance of work has decreased, and there are opportunities to work from home. Additionally, balance between work and leisure is a key component in this envisioned future. While there is technological advancement, free time activities which do not involve any gadgets or screens are also valued. Some of the activities that were mentioned include meditation, reading books, handwriting to-do lists on notebook, and exercising. In fact, multiple participants emphasised that technology would not be used in these activities. Advancements in technology seem to be valued in part due to it having actually led to more time being freed to do things that do not involve tech. This is a key difference between the images A and B.

“The environment is better; The society is more stable; There is greater cultural diversity.” (probable 2050)

Concerning the **systemic causes**, the images showcase a set of current initiatives, goals, and policies in today's China. However, the images emphasise another set of ongoing campaigns and future aims than in the image A. These include China's initiatives and policies related to building an 'ecological civilisation' (生态文明, *shengtai wenming*). This has also been

included as one of the tenets of the ideology of the CCP. The related initiatives and aims include commitment to becoming carbon-neutral by 2060, afforestation programs and the Beautiful China initiative. Overall, the concept of “harmony” has been promoted by the CCP throughout the post-00s lifetime. (e.g., Xinhua 2021a.)

Xi Jinping has also emphasised the interconnected nature of the modern world and advocated for a shared responsibility among nations to address common challenges through concepts like ‘a community with a shared future for mankind’ (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*). This refers to pursuing openness, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, equity and justice (SCIO 2023). The concept reflects China's broader efforts to position itself as a leader in fostering a cooperative and multipolar world order and is connected to initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (which too is to reach completion by 2049) (SCIO 2023).

Overall, the images align with the green transition. The two discourses, and all their related initiatives and aims, align well with the images, which can in this sense be seen as an emphasis and continuation of these present campaigns. This would be through promotion of sustainable initiatives including social aspects such as welfare services, and innovation for sustainable solutions. Finally, the images also align with automatization and robotisation efforts, which would have shifted workload off from humans, making the society and people’s lives less centred on employment.

Moving onto the **worldview/discourse** level, the images align with contemporary global sustainability narratives, involving not only environmental aspects but also cultural, social, and economic dimensions. According to prior research, the post-00s are an eco-conscious generation in comparison to previous generations. Many young people are more engaged in environmental issues, viewing them as more integral to a meaningful future than previous generations. This was reflected in this category of images.

The top values listed to describe the future by the participants are as follows: equality (n: 8), peace/harmony (n: 7), friendliness (n: 6), and freedom (n:4). It could be said that there has been a silent revolution in this scenario – a generational value change – towards post-materialism, sustainability and harmony from seeing wealth, consumerism, and working hard as measures of success. As noted, images of the future are indicators of today’s society, and therefore based on the answers a silent revolution may have occurred in these participants’ attitudes as well. For instance, one of the participants described their preferred scenario of 2050 as with the following adjectives:

“Meaningful; Happy; Sustainable” (preferred 2050)

Overall, collectivist ideals dominate over individualism, with emphasis on balancing personal aspirations with collective well-being. Moreover, prioritisation of trust and social harmony present in the images could be seen as echoes of Confucianist values. Indeed, Confucian values have been selectively used by Xi Jinping in many campaigns and in justifying policies, for instance, the social credit system<sup>23</sup>.

Concerning the level of **myth/metaphor**, no metaphors were mentioned by the participants. However, a metaphor of a ‘Global Village’<sup>24</sup> or garden could be seen here, as there appears to be a harmonious society (or world) where everyone plays their part in cultivating harmony, reflecting an ecological and relational view of human existence. In addition, rooted in the concept of “*tian ren he yi*” (harmony between heaven and humanity; 天人合一), environmental sustainability is viewed as going hand in hand with societal harmony. The images also resemble a common image of a “green utopia”, aligning with sustainability, better and more harmonious relationship between humans and nature, as well as improved environment.

#### 4.4.3 Image C: Times of Change

Compared to the other two images, the images categorised under image C present a gloomier and more turbulent picture of 2050. Such images were also the least common among the participants (probable 2050, n:8, 24%; preferred 2050, n:3, 9%; out of all the images, n:11, 16%). All participants’ images that included multiple notions of either some sort of chaos or negative developments were categorised under this title. One of the participants described the three main changes that have occurred as follows:

“The power structure has changed; The gap between rich and poor widened; The number of unemployed people has increased” (probable 2050)

In this image, the future is characterised by environmental deterioration, as well as domestic and/or international unrest, conflict, and presence of opposition. Concerning changes, there is

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<sup>23</sup> The social credit system is used to assess and influence actors (e.g., corporations) behaviour by rewarding compliance and penalising misconduct.

<sup>24</sup> The term global village (地球村; *dìqiú cūn*) has been commonly used by Xi Jinping, usually together with the “shared future for humankind” discourse.

increasing inequality, growing unemployment rate, and changes in the power structures within the society, as can be seen from the above quotation. There is cultural diversity with niche cultures having emerged and becoming more abundant. Cultural diversity may be one factor that has led to a more conflicting society with opposition present as well:

“Culture: diversity but also opposition” (probable 2050)

In most images within this category, chaos and negative changes are not omnipresent in all aspects of the future. The images can be considered to contain contradictions in that also stability, comfort, prosperity, and development are used to describe the future in some of the participants’ descriptions. In other words, the future is not seen as merely black and white. Some of the ways in which the participants described the year 2050 included the following:

“Punk; Chaos; Prosperity” (probable 2050)

“Conflict; Development; Local unrest” (preferred 2050)

Although there is development too, there is not as much emphasis on technological development as in the image A. There is also no consensus on whether technological development has already been great or if it is still in a “bottleneck phase”.

Participants’ work-life balance varies between individuals from sleeping all day and working all day. Overall, life has become more fast-paced, convenient, and efficient. One participant describes one of the changes that has occurred as decreased human-touch (人情味减少; *renqingwei jianshao*). This highlights a downside of the fast-paced future, where the essence of human connection and empathy could be compromised in favour of efficiency and productivity. This could lead to a lonely, impersonal, and cold world of disconnection from with what’s humane.

“People’s life pace is accelerating, and human touch is decreasing” (probable 2050)

Moving onto the **systemic causes**, rather than a continuation and a development based on the current campaigns and aims of the CCP, the participants anticipate change or upcoming crisis. This could be due to changes in power structures (as mentioned by participants).

Alternatively, this could be the result of unrest and opposition. Unfortunately, the nature of the changes was not further specified by participants. It could however mean either a change in leading faction or even party, or other changes in governance structures. In any case, changes in power structures are a major cause of changes in any society, and in the images, it

is evident that the party-state's desire to maintain societal stability and achieve the Chinese Dream has failed to varying extents.

These are reflected in recent movements such as 'lying flat'. These express a form of relatively low-risk rebellion in a tightly controlled digital landscape. For some youth, such movements symbolise a revolutionary personal choice against materialism and overwork. (Su 2023.) While not explicitly mentioned by the participants, such movements reflect dissatisfaction with societal pressures, economic inequality, and limited social mobility which were mentioned by the participants. The recent movements as well as the participants images reveal scepticism about a tech-driven, productivity-focused future such as in image A.

Finally, in the images, it appears that rejection of expectations and social pressures or recognition of such applies to a minority of the participants in this sample (n: 8). Themes of alienation in hyper-connected worlds appear to resonate with young generations such as the post-00s who live in digital culture. The images appear to be underlined by emergence of counter movements and general disillusionment of the youth.

Concerning **worldview/discourse**, scepticism about a tech-driven, efficiency and materialism focused world is evident. In addition, participants mention terms such as "punk" to describe the future, in addition to describing proliferation of niche cultures. This would indicate a worldview that emphasises diversity and alternative cultures, maybe even embodying a hint of anarchism.

Chaos and changes could be interpreted as part of cyclical nature of change in societies (and beyond, e.g., in nature). Besides, the Chinese understanding of history and time often incorporates a cyclical view, rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, and the dynastic cycles. Finally, revolution in itself (however big or small) can be seen as a period of instability leading to desired change. In any case, the images do not (at least not as strongly) align with linear progress narratives, which were prominent especially in image A.

As in other images of the future, under this category, many participants' images contained contradictions. In the images, there also appears to be the idea that progress has its costs. While also some positive changes are mentioned by the participants, the images are not overwhelmingly optimistic as images A and B. Additionally, the blending, integration, and rise of new niche cultures would suggest that there are tensions arising, as well as from

different values. This could be due to phenomena such as globalisation, but this was not specified by participants.

Finally, when it comes to **myth/metaphor** level of CLA, under this category of images, the participants used catchwords and metaphors to describe their vision more than in other images. “Surging undercurrent” (暗流涌动, *anliu yongdong*) which is one of the terms that was used refers to hidden tensions or forces that are not immediately visible but are powerful and could lead to significant changes or disruptions – presence of weak signals. It conveys the idea that beneath a seemingly calm or stable surface, there are underlying issues or movements that could potentially burst to the surface have a major impact on the stability of the society, leading to social change.

Another participant noted that “crisis lurks on every side” (危机四伏, *weiji sifu*), which emphasizes the pervasive and imminent nature of risks. It can be used to describe situations in geopolitics, business environments, or personal circumstances where one faces multiple, pervasive threats or challenges. At the societal level, this expression suggests that the society faces multiple, pervasive risks or challenges, creating an environment of instability and uncertainty.

Finally, the images remind of dystopic future portrayals popular in literature and other works of art. Dystopia was in fact used by one of the participants to describe the future.

Nevertheless, this scenario was preferred by some participants (n: 3), although it was the least popular image.

#### **4.5 Discussion: Implications, Limitations, and Significance of the Study**

As noted, images of the future inform about the participants and the political, economic, social, and cultural context in which they live in. They guide future actions and planning and can therefore be also indicative of what the future may hold. Additionally, they reflect the present moment, including one’s wellbeing, values, worldview, possibilities, and expectations. Finally, they are reflections of wider societal phenomena like social or cultural change, environmental attitudes, and social mobility. (Ono 2003, 737 & 754; Rubin 2013, 40-41). In his paper, Inayatullah (2019, 6) suggests that concerning the images, it is useful to consider potential indications in terms of the following: systemic changes, changes in

worldview, cultural change, new metaphors/narratives, and novel litanies. In this section, my main aim is to first reflect upon what my results indicate concerning the above aspects. I begin by discussing the results more generally, moving then to the three images and what they imply of today's China (and the future). I also discuss the extent to which the images match Polak's and Dator's types of images of the future, as well as images found in previous research which were presented in the background chapter of this thesis. After discussing the images, I move on to discuss the limitations of the study itself, ending with a few thoughts on the significance of this study.

#### 4.5.1 Implications of the Results: General Remarks

Firstly, I found that images of the future were often overlapping and not mutually exclusive. This aligns with basic assumptions of critical futures studies, findings of researchers in previous studies, and previous arguments about characteristics of East Asian images of the future. As was expected based on previous research (e.g., Rubin, 2013, 40-41), the images contained some contradicting elements. In addition, Park (2013, 19) suggested that images of the future are not mutually exclusive in East Asia.

Furthermore, experts have speculated that the pandemic may have increased tensions concerning one's vision of the future, for example, in terms of 'individualism and collectivism, autonomy and interdependence, freedom and control, [and] rights and responsibilities' in all societies (Settersten et al. 2020, 2 & 10). Concerning tensions in life course and ideas of the future being increased by the pandemic, it is difficult to say much as this was not something that has been researched thoroughly prior to the pandemic. However, there were clearly tensions in values and ideas which showed as contradictions in the images. Tensions between expectations towards the youth and the youth's ideals were most clear in image C, which appeared to contain an extent of rejection of expectations and pressures, overall dissatisfaction and an extent of disillusionment.

That being said, many participants opted for a similar image when describing their probable and preferred visions of the future. The similarity in participants' images concerning the probable 2050 and preferred 2050 suggests that the participant's dreams about the future tend to be similar to what they imagine the future to likely be like. A possible conclusion from this would be that the participants are highly optimistic and certain about the future, thinking that

what the future likely turns out to be like aligns with their hopes and dreams. However, looking at the results presented in section 4.2 on future orientation, it does not appear as the only reason behind this, as the only a minority of the participants were highly certain and strongly optimistic about the future. The similarity could also be due to lack of opportunities to dream about and plan a preferred future, and/or a perceived lack of opportunities to create a desired future. Looking back at the results concerning future orientation, majority of the participants had a rather weak sense of agency concerning the future (although not zero), which would align with this possibility.

Moving onto values, I previously introduced the list of 12 core socialist values that I suspected may show in my data as well. Looking at the values in the images, out of the 12 values<sup>25</sup> 10 were mentioned in by the participants. Harmony (和谐) and Equality (平等) were each mentioned 16 times, followed by freedom (自由) that was mentioned 14 times, and friendliness (友善) which was mentioned 11 times. Integrity (诚信) was mentioned 9 times, while justice (公正) and civility (文明) were both mentioned 8 times. Other values appeared two or less times. However, while these have been widely promoted by the CCP, they are also common terms that could well have been present in the data without the campaigns as well. Still, it is fair to assume that the campaigns had some influence on their popularity.

Concerning sources of views and opinions about the future, under all three images, participants encountered views and opinions most often in social media. This shows the power of images shared in social media, as frequent encountering certain types of images may influence what one thinks of the future. At the same time, future views presented there are not as curated and may be suggested by algorithms based on user data on their preferences. The types of views opinions and images that the youth encounters on social media would be one idea for further research.

The future scale (from individual to global) has been studied in previous research, as presented in the background part (Chapter 2). In previous studies, it was found that most adolescents' hopes and fears related to the general or collective future, and that there were more hopes and fears concerning the self were far fewer than those related to education, career and family (Zhang et al., 2015, 625-626; Zhao et al., 2018, 67). Ono (2003, 754-757)

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<sup>25</sup> For the purposes of seeing the prevalence of these specific terms, frequencies were counted based on exact Chinese terms rather than based on terms combined into keywords as in previous parts of this study.

on the other hand found that in Taiwan, half of the participants chose to discuss the global future when given the choice to discuss anything about the future (Ono 2003, 754-757). In my study, I found there to be differences between scales of the future that were considered depending on whether the participants imagined a probable or preferred future, as there was more focus on own future concerning the latter. This hypothesis too could be investigated in future research.

Earlier on, I suggested that recent events such as the pandemic and related policies, as well as the record high youth unemployment could have resulted in the youth holding more pessimistic images about both the general future and their own futures. The averages and ranges of responses indicate that most participants were either moderately optimistic or moderately pessimistic, with a minority of the participants falling on the extremes. On average, the respondents perceived future of the world as slightly more uncertain than their own future, and they were slightly more optimistic about their own future than the future of the world. Chen (2016) found that Taiwanese elite high school students were interested in and optimistic about the global future, the future of the environment, and their personal future. However, in studies conducted in the West, youth have tended to have more pessimistic views about the general future in comparison to their own future (Rubin, 2013, 40-41). This latter finding aligns with my results. The finding could be speculated to be due to influences from the West, but could as well be due to a number of other factors. The topic needs further research before any conclusions can be drawn.

A central theme in both probable and preferred images was technological advancements, with “technology” being the most frequently mentioned word in both probable and preferred images. This could be due to a majority of the participants studying a computer science major in university. Another reason could be the central role of technology in participants’ lives due to the proliferation of technological solutions such as smartphones (and the countless applications used in daily life in today’s China), and more recently the rise of AI, VR, and IoT technologies. Thirdly, technological advancement and technological superpower status is also a part the party-state’s aims for the year 2049, as noted. When looking at participants’ descriptions of futures in detail, it was clear that advancements were also often seen as closely related to the convenience of life, which appeared to be preferred by majority of participants.

As noted, concerning the preferred images, responses were generally briefer as well as more abstract and general than those in the part about the realistic vision of 2050. These differences

might be due to imagining a preferable future not being something that the participants are used to. This could be because of China's education system's lack of encouraging critical thinking and challenging of prevalent narratives of the party-state. While innovativeness is valued, ideological education has been emphasised in recent years. In addition, futures studies is still a very new subject in China. This would highlight the importance of futures studies and its methods in encouraging participants to imagine preferred futures. Lastly, it might be that because this was the very last section of the survey, the participants were already weary and unmotivated to describe their images in detail.

#### 4.5.2 Implications of the Results: The Three Images of the Future

As the title of the image tells, most changes were evident in image C (*times of change*), while image B (*harmonious world*) aligned with some of the party-state's campaigns, discourse, and initiatives. Image A (*high-tech society*) appeared as the closest to the current campaigns, aims, strategies, and initiatives of CCP, therefore being the closest to a future as an extension of the trajectories of the present day. Some cultural changes were present in all the three images, with mostly either blending of cultures, emergence of new cultures, or both.

Contrasting my results to results from previous studies, especially image B (harmonious world) resonates with other researchers' work. For instance, Hoffman's (2012) image of 'alternative future of peaceful development' and Anthony's (2012) 'the harmonious society' align well with the image. Image A (high-tech society) on the other hand somewhat aligns with Anthony's (2012) image of 'brave new China', which is a market driven scenario where people have become alienated from nature. However, image A appears more as a technology driven scenario than market driven scenario, and the extent of alienation from nature is unclear, as environment is also cared for through technological solutions. Concerning attributes associated to East Asian futures by Park (2013)<sup>26</sup>, it is unclear to what extent these apply to my results. Perhaps the third point of "dancing with chaos" instead of trying to control it could be seen as aligning especially with image C.

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<sup>26</sup> These are: 1) Exploring appropriate alternative futures instead of mutually exclusive scenarios, 2) 'finding an aesthetic moment rather than a predetermined moment', 3) "dancing" with chaos instead of trying to control it, and 4) 'using both the useful and the useless' (Park, 2013, p. 19).

The results about future orientation under the different images would suggest that sense of uncertainty, pessimism, and tendency to think in short time scales when thinking about the future could be linked to viewing the future as gloomier and more turbulent, and the other way around. However, studies with larger samples should be done to investigate this before any real conclusions can be drawn.

Out of Polak's four types of images (see Chapter 2), images A and B align the best with a combination of essence optimism and influence optimism, where world is a good place and people have the power to change it for the better. Image C on the other hand could be seen as aligning the best with either a combination of essence pessimism and influence optimism, in which world is perceived as a bad place, but people have the power to change it for the better, or with a combination of essence pessimism and influence pessimism, where chaos is seen as inevitable, and humans cannot affect it. (Polak, 1973, 16-17; Kaboli & Tapio 2018, 3, Table 1.) Out of Dator's four images of the future, image A resembles 'Continued Growth'<sup>27</sup> the best, while image B best resembles Dator's image type of 'Disciplined'<sup>28</sup>, and image C can be interpreted as either 'Transformative'<sup>29</sup> or 'Collapse'<sup>30</sup> (or a mix of both) out of Dator's image types. I will next give some final remarks about what each image tells of today's China.

**Image A (high-tech society)** reflects the ideas of a generation raised during China's rapid technological growth, such as advancements in AI, e-commerce, and green tech. They have witnessed how technology reshaped urban life and improved China's global status in e.g., trade. The participants also appear to have trust in party-state-led development, which has prioritised technological progress and national modernisation. This potentially fosters confidence in technological solutions to societal and environmental problems, as well as enhancing one's life.

**Image B (harmonious world)** reflects influence of both traditional and modern values, and a blend of ideals of harmony with aspirations for sustainability, diversity and inclusivity. It appears to suggest a yearning for balance in a society where rapid development has created disparities and environmental challenges. Many post-00s have grown up with greater

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<sup>27</sup> 'Growth' refers to phenomena such as continued economic growth. (Park, 2013; Dator, 2019.)

<sup>28</sup> 'Discipline' refers to a scenario where society has become organised around an overarching set of values. These are usually traditional or ancient value sets. (Park, 2013; Dator, 2019.)

<sup>29</sup> In 'transformation', new forms of beliefs, behaviour and organisation have emerged and shape the scenario. (Park, 2013; Dator, 2019.)

<sup>30</sup> For collapse, a range of different causes of the collapse can be part of the scenario. These include causes such as resource exhaustion, military attack, and economic instability to name a few. (Park, 2013; Dator, 2019.)

exposure to global issues through social media, study-abroad opportunities, and China's increasing international presence. This vision might also indicate a growing sense of civic responsibility, as well as environmental and social consciousness among Chinese youth. Based on this image, the post-00s are aware of climate change and social inequality, and they appear to hope for changes to address these challenges.

**Image C (times of change).** The post-00s generation has witnessed geopolitical tensions, economic shifts, and domestic challenges such as housing affordability and high youth unemployment. This image reflects apprehensions about domestic and global instability, manifesting as a sense of uncertainty and perhaps even anxiety. Growing up during times of rapid growth, technological development, and changing lifestyles the youth may feel the strain of intergenerational divides and changing social norms. These frictions and tensions may have in part influenced the images. The youth are aware of costs of rapid development, such as risks of environmental degradation, political tension, and economic volatility. They appear to view their future as possibly shaped by the challenges for China in both the global world and domestically, while also viewing their own futures as uncertain.

Overall, image C showcases the emergence of a desire for change, and a complex interplay between progress and its costs. Whereas in images A and B, there were hints of continuation of current policy-directions and campaigns of the party state, in this image, the participants appear to anticipate amplification of social counter movements.

#### 4.5.3 Limitations and Significance of the Study

There are many limitations to my study, from survey design to depth of analysis, which are mostly related to time and resource constraints. First of all, the size and depth of the data about each individual's image varied. For one part of the question, the greatest difference was in the sections about changes concerning the future. There, responses varied between 2-55 Chinese characters. While others mentioned areas such as "environment" to answer this question, others additionally described the type of change in detail in multiple levels (e.g., society, global level, and personal life). The latter was the type of data that I aimed to collect for this question, and the shorter responses could have been avoided through separating the question into two parts (as an example: 1. Which area has most change, 2. Please describe the change). At the same time, this choice was made in order to ensure that a large enough sample

would be collected, as I was afraid that participants would not finish filling the survey if it was too long and had too many requirements for the answers e.g., concerning length. This is however one of the necessary improvements which I would make to the survey design should I conduct a similar study in the future: having more specific questions with stricter requirements for answers.

The results indicate that what aspects of the future readily come to the participants' mind vary. While technology was a popular theme to consider, some participants chose to discuss environment or culture, while others omitted these aspects. As was described in the introduction, one of the aims of my study was to find out which aspects of the future are important to the participants. Although the sample is small, these aspects can inform future research, and their accuracy can be tested in larger samples. However, there are some limitations concerning this aspect of the study. In section 3.1.2, I discussed my choices concerning the survey design, including which terms were used as examples in a few of the questions ("environment, society, technology, infrastructure, culture", and "caring"). It is possible that giving these examples may have influenced the results, but opting to not give any examples, based on feedback from those who reviewed the survey, it may have been unclear what was meant (i.e., future of the world and values). This is a limitation of the study, as it might be that the images were influenced by the examples.

While looking at the data, there were many instances when I wished I could have asked to participant to elaborate or clarify their response. The analysis could also be deeper if I had more time. However, taking into account the constraints of this study, and the long process of collecting the data, I was still pleased about the data and results that I was able to obtain. Besides the data collection method and question set design, exploring more innovative ways of online data collection concerning images of the future would likely provide interesting results. One interesting possibility would be to enable the participants to turn their images of the future in their minds to actual pictures by describing them to AI. Also the three images could be used in future research. Some survey studies which I came across while conducting literature review used multiple images in the questionnaire, from which the participants were to choose e.g., which was the probable and which the preferred image for them. The results of this study could be used to draft the images used as options in future survey studies.

As noted in the introduction, the results of the study should be interpreted as a snapshot – a localised and time-bound depiction of this particular group's experiences and perceptions.

This is due to the small sample size (N: 34). The research holds significance through providing information about the appropriateness of the research design and survey design in the context of China, aiding in the design of further studies on similar topics. Whether the three images found in this study are prevalent on larger and differing samples in China could be investigated in future research. It would be interesting to see if such positive and technology centric scenarios would be popular among students with different majors, such as social sciences or environmental science.

## 5 Conclusion

In this research, I collected and analysed Chinese university students' (N: 34) images of the future. My main research question concerned what the participants' probable and preferred images of the future were like. As my secondary research questions, I explored some of the underlying factors behind the formation of the images. Finally, I also explored the what the participants' relationship with the future was like (i.e., their future orientation).

As noted, research on Chinese youth's relationship with the future is particularly timely due to increased perceived hopelessness of the youth, recent adverse events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and numerous conflicts in the world, as well as high youth unemployment and other local challenges. In my research, I found that on average, the participants fell to the midrange in a continuum from certainty to uncertainty (own future: 2.94; future of the world: 2.80)<sup>31</sup> as well as optimism and pessimism (own future: 3.71; future of the world: 3.44)<sup>32</sup> concerning the future. The general future was perceived a little more uncertain (on average) than one's own future, and the respondents were slightly more optimistic about their own future than the future of the world. Finally, concerning agency, half of the participants indicated that while they felt that there was some predictability, the future was largely beyond their control, therefore representing a rather weak sense of agency.

Through thematic analysis, I found three distinct images in the data. Firstly, the most common was an image of a *high-tech society* (n: 35; 51%<sup>33</sup>). In this image, progress and development had occurred in most areas of life and the society, and as the title suggests, life is proliferated with advanced technology. This image came the closest to the Chinese Dream and current aims, initiatives and campaigns related to development, innovation and technology in China. The second most common image was of a *harmonious world* (n: 22; 32%), in short, a sustainable and peaceful globalised world where people lead meaningful lives. The image aligned the best with some of China's aims and initiatives related to sustainability. In the third image of *times of change* (n: 11; 16%), in which there were some societal issues, unrest, disconnection, and chaos present, but the image was also marked by cultural diversity, some technological development, and convenient lifestyles.

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<sup>31</sup> On a scale from 1: very uncertain to 5: very predictable.

<sup>32</sup> On a scale from 1: very pessimistic to 5: very optimistic.

<sup>33</sup> These refer to number and percentage of images out of both preferred and probable images (N: 68).

In his research, Polak (1973) concluded that modern era societies lack an image of the future, which leads to their stagnation and decline. From the perspective of Polak's arguments, research on Chinese people's images of the future is particularly interesting due to the Chinese Dream as well as related aims and ideas about the future widely promoted by the party-state. As was hypothesised in and based on previous research, diversity and tensions in ideas and intergenerational value differences were evident in my research.

Together, the three images suggest a complex societal landscape in today's China, where optimism about progress, harmonious relations, and technological advancements coexists with concerns about inequality, sustainability issues, and uncertainty – for instance, manifested as concerns about possible future crises. A preference for high-tech and harmonious futures appear to indicate a relatively high level of trust in the government's ability to manage challenges, while the anticipation of turbulence would suggest awareness of unresolved systemic issues which seem to be perceived as worsening.

While my research focused on views and images of the future, my primary aim in this study was to learn about the present, as images of the future reflect the participants' views and their context in the here and now. Images of the future inform about the participants and their political, economic, social, and cultural context in which they live in. All in all, the post-00s generation is generally more educated than the previous generations and also more tech-savvy. The latter showed in the respondents' answers through mentions of high-tech as well as through the respondents' reporting that they encountered opinions and views about the future most often in social media. Moreover, the post-00s are expected to carry out the "Chinese Dream" and "National Rejuvenation" but shouldering high expectations and pressures may lead to rejection of such at least for a part of the youth. The data reflects China as both a major global power and a nation navigating domestic tensions, which were expected to be increasing in the future by some of the participants.

While participants' preferred and probable descriptions of the future fit under the same three images, there were some differences between participants' descriptions of probable and preferred futures. Overall, concerning the preferred images, responses were generally briefer as well as more abstract and general than those in the part about the probable vision of 2050. In addition, the responses for preferred 2050 tended to centre more around one's own life, in comparison to the probable 2050 images. There were also some differences concerning prevalence of different keywords between the images. For instance, while technology was the

most mentioned keyword overall, in the probable images, participants mentioned technology much more often than when imagining preferred futures. Additionally, the environment was a central theme in the participants imaginings of the future, more so in preferred images than in probable.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) which I used in my analysis has not yet been widely used for the analysis of individuals' images of the future, but it has been noted to produce rich and meaningful analysis in the few existing studies (E.g., Kaboli & Tapio 2018; Hoffman 2019). In my research, I found the framework to be useful for deepening the analysis, ensuring that the analysis is comprehensive (i.e., encompassing all the levels) and for organising my ideas and presenting them in a coherent way. While it was possible to use CLA for the survey responses, I do think that interviews would provide richer data concerning a topic like this, and the participants could be asked more in depth about each of the levels. A second-best option would be a longer survey format. As the survey had to be kept rather concise due to time and resource constraints, questions specifically concerning the myth/metaphor level, for instance, were not included.

Finally, as the sample was very small (N: 34), the results are not generalisable. Instead, the results of the study should be interpreted as a snapshot – a localised and time-bound depiction of values, experiences, and perceptions within this particular group of university students. The research holds significance through providing information about the appropriateness of the research design and survey design in the context of China, aiding in the design of further studies on the theme. For example, the three images found in this thesis could be used as part of a survey to investigate their popularity in larger samples. There are also limitations to this study due to time and resources and many questions were left unanswered that could be explored in future research. For instance, a more detailed review could be conducted about where and what kind of views and opinions about the future the youth encounters. Another possibility would be to consider would be to further analyse what aspects and aspects of the future are the youth most concerned about.

“The future not only must be perceived; it also must be shaped.” (Fred Polak, 1973, 5)

What shapes the future are in part our images of it. Therefore, it is crucial to look at the images we have, and to encourage people to imagine the future, so that the future is not merely shaped by unquestioned hegemonic visions of it. Dreaming of alternative futures can

be perceived either as an opportunity or a threat by those holding power. My hope is that it would be considered increasingly as something enriching and beneficial for a society as for individuals wellbeing too. I also hope that the findings can inspire research in the future, provide actionable insights to those engaged with the youth (e.g., educators), and that the survey inspired the participants to imagine and actively create alternative, desirable futures beyond the study itself.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Survey in Chinese

### 研究导师:

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1. 我已阅读并理解您所提供的信息表，同意参与该研究项目。我明白我的参与是高出出于自愿的，并且我可以以接管之前随时无理由退出。\*

是

### 2. 个人信息\*

年龄 \_\_\_\_\_

性别 \_\_\_\_\_

大学 \_\_\_\_\_

年级 (比如, 大二)

专业 (比如, 经济学)

您有没有未来学 (future studies) 的学习经历?

\_\_\_\_\_

### 3. 您的家乡\*

一线城市 / 新一线城市

二线城市

三线城市

四线城市

五线城市

其他 (例如, 村)

不清楚 / 不清楚

回答本页问题时，请考虑至少一年后的未来。

4. 当您考虑未来时，您会想到以下哪一方面? \*

## 《畅想未来》

欢迎来参加调查!

请注意，本次调查仅针对中国在校大学生。

先阅读参与者信息表，再回答下面的问题：

研究员: 我是 Anni-Lotta Simpanen，芬兰图尔库大学东亚研究硕士生，正在为我的硕士论文进行研究。

硕士论文的标题: 《畅想未来: 中国青年对未来的想象》 "Imagining the Future in Today's China: Urban Youth's Images of the Future"

研究论文的总描述: 我的硕士论文调查参与者 (1) 想象未来会是什么样子 (2) 什么因素塑造和影响了这些想象的形成 (3) 参与者对将来有什么感受和思考。一个人对未来的想象在个体和社会层面具有重要意义。数据将通过在线调查收集，然后进行内容分析。调查需要30-40名参与者，都是中国在校大学生。完成论文后论文发表在芬兰图尔库大学的 UTUPub 数据库 <https://www.utupub.fi>。在网站上您可以找到我的论文以及我的名字为关键词搜索。

参与者参与: 我想邀请您参与这项在线调查。参与此研究是匿名的。答案只将用于我的硕士论文。参与研究完全自愿的。填写问卷的预计时间为 10-15 分钟。如果您决定参与，但后来改变主意，可在提交答案之前，随时退出。退出不会对您产生任何负面影响。请注意，您在提交答案后不能退出。调查可能包含许多精神和情感问题。就是关于您对未来的感受和想法。您还需要想象 2050 年的生活而世界，如果您对将来感到焦虑或不确定，不建议参与调查。在另外一些相似的研究上，参与后参与者对将来感到更加乐观。鼓励您积极地规划而探索自己的未来。此外，您还可以增进对中国城市青年的了解，使其他人更好地了解年轻人，包括您自己。

保密性: 参与此研究是匿名的。您在调查中提供的任何可能识别您的身份信息都将被删除，不会被公开。然而，尽我最大努力保护您的身份。您有可能匿名答案可能会使您被认出来。在您的答案中，请不要透露任何敏感信息。非法活动信息或书写诽谤性言论。作为研究人员，我将尽最大努力保守您的信息。由于强制性法规的要求，我可能需要向地方或政府官员提供信息。

研究数据的存储、扫描和进一步使用: 数据将通过 Webropol 在线调查平台收集。数据将仅存储在图尔库大学提供的个人存储设备中。这些数据最迟将于 2024 年删除。数据仅用于我的硕士论文研究。

研究员:

Anni-Lotta Simpanen  
MA student at the University of Turku, Centre for East Asian Studies  
alsimp@utu.fi

	从不 / 少于每年	每年	每个月	每个星期	每天 / 每天多次
您自己的未来生活	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
您认识的人的未来 (家人、朋友、等)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
您所在城市的未来	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
国家或者社会的未来	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
全球的未来	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5. 我在 ... 中遇到有关未来的信息和意见: \*

	从不 / 少于每年	每年	每个月	每个星期	每天 / 每天多次
新闻	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
社交媒体	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
与家人或朋友的对话	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
教育 / 大学	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
纪录片、电影、电视剧或书籍	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. 以下哪一项最能描述您对未来的看法: \*

- 我的未来有多种可能性, 且由我控制, 未来是我可以主动规划和制造的。
- 未来是不可知的, 我无法改变未来将会发生什么, 只能适应将会发生的一切。
- 未来在某种程度上是可以预测的, 但大体上仍由经济、社会和政治等我无法控制的因素决定。

回答本页问题时, 请考虑您自己的未来生活。

7. 您在考虑自己的未来生活时, 能预估的时间跨度为 (请使用阿拉伯数字回答) . \*

\_\_\_\_\_ 年 (少于一年, 请写 "0")

8. 您对自己未来的生活感到: \*



9. 您觉得您自己的未来确定性还是不确定性? \*



回答本页问题时, 请考虑未来世界 (环境、社会、科技、基础设施、文化、等)。

10. 您在考虑未来世界的时, 能预估的时间跨度为 (请使用阿拉伯数字回答) . \*

\_\_\_\_\_ 年 (少于一年, 请写 "0")

11. 您对未来世界的态度是: \*



12. 您觉得世界的未来确定性还是不确定性? \*



在下一部分 (问题13到问题22), 请想象 2050 年的两种不同的愿景:

1) 首先, 想象2050 年最有可能的愿景 (问题13到问题17)

中午 \_\_\_\_\_  
晚上 \_\_\_\_\_

2) 接下来，想象您理想的2050年愿景 (问题18到问题22)

请注意，这些问题没有标准答案，请根据自己的看法和感受来回答。

请想象2050年最有可能的情景回答本页问题 (问题13到问题15)。

13. 如果您此时正置身于2050年，您认为它是怎样的？请列出三个最能描的形容词或描述性短语。\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. 价值观是判断事物对错和做出选择的标准。您认为在2050年，社会中最重要的是三个价值观是什么？ (例如：关怀) \*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. 如果您想象的场景成为现实，与现在相比，世界格局上发生了哪些变化？请在下面描述世界三个大变化，请考虑未来世界 (环境、社会、科技、基础设施、文化、等)。

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. 请描述您2050年一天中不同时间段所做的事情。\*

早上 \_\_\_\_\_

17. 如果您想要更多描述您2050年的愿景，请写在下面 (非必答)。

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

请想象您理想的2050年愿景回答本页问题 (问题16到问题18)。

18. 如果您此时正置身于您的理想2050年愿景上，您认为它是怎样的？请列出三个最能描的形容词或描述性短语。\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

19. 价值观是判断事物对错和做出选择的标准。在您理想2050年愿景，社会中最重要的是的三个价值观是什么？ (例如：关怀) \*

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

20. 如果您想象的场景成为现实，与现在相比，世界格局上发生了哪些变化？请在下面描述世界三个格局的重大变化。请考虑未来世界 (环境、社会、科技、基础设施、文化、等)。

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

21. 请描述您在理想的2050年愿景一天中不同时间段所做的事情。•

早上

---

中午

---

晚上

---

22. 如果您想要更多描述您理想2050年的愿景，请写在下面（非必答）。

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23. 如果您对本次调查有任何意见或反馈，请写在下面（非必答）。

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退出调查前，请不要忘记提交您的答案！

## Appendix 2 Survey Structure in English

### I. THE PARTICIPANT

1. Personal information
  - a. Age
  - b. Gender
  - c. University
  - d. Year of study
  - e. Major
  - f. Hometown city tier (e.g., first tier city)
  - g. Previously/currently attended future studies courses? Y/N

### II. FUTURE ORIENTATION: GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ABOUT THE FUTURE

2. How often do you think about:
  - a. Your personal future
  - b. Future of the people you know
  - c. The future of your city
  - d. The future of your country
  - e. The future of the world
  
3. How often do you encounter views and opinions about the future in:
  - a. The news
  - b. Social media
  - c. In conversations with family or friends
  - d. In education/university
  - e. In documentaries, movies, series or books

4. Which of the sentences describes you the best:
  - a. There are many possibilities for my future. The future is something I can proactively plan and formulate.
  - b. The future is unknowable. I cannot change what will happen in the future, I can only adapt to what will happen.
  - c. The future is somewhat predictable, but it is largely determined by economic, social, and political factors beyond my control.

### III. OWN FUTURE AND GENERAL FUTURE

In this section, the same questions were repeated for a) personal future and b) future of the world, which was defined as referring to environment, society, technology, infrastructure, culture, etc.

5. When you think about the future, which time period do you most often think about?
6. How do you feel about the future? (pessimistic – optimistic)
7. How certain or uncertain do you feel about the future?

### IV. IMAGINING THE YEAR 2050: PROBABLE AND PREFERRED SCENARIOS

In this section, the same questions for both scenarios (most likely and preferred/ideal):

8. List three adjectives/descriptive phrases that describe the scenario.
9. List three prominent values in the society.
10. Short description of major changes that have occurred (concerning e.g., environment, society, technology, infrastructure, culture...)
11. Describe what you are doing on an ordinary day during:
  - a. Morning:
  - b. Noon:
  - c. Evening:
12. Any additional details/description (optional)

### V. Comments about the survey (optional)