

The Dao of Foresight

ALEX FERGNANI

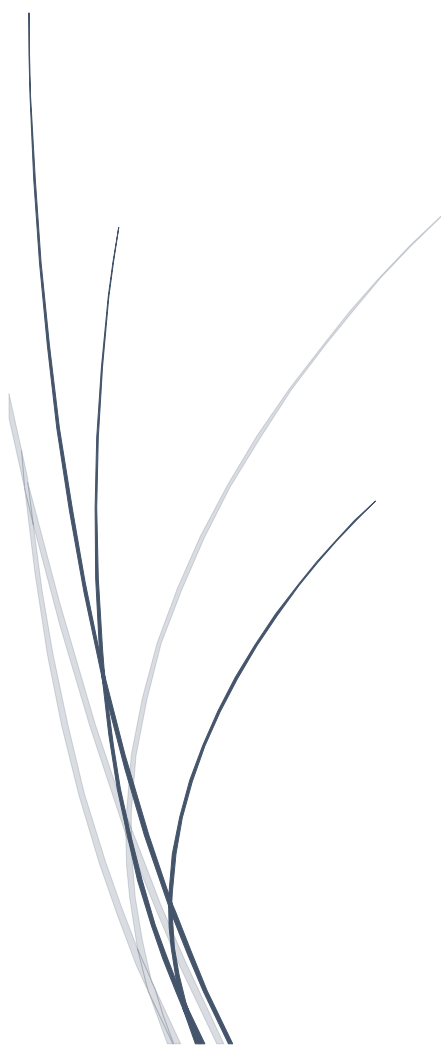
To Dad, to whom I
used to read Wu Xia
novels.

Alex Fergnani



THE DAO OF FORESIGHT

By Alex Fergnani





CHAPTER I

Turmoil in Sherusei

“Mother, I’m off!” Jigo grabbed his bamboo practice sword and walked briskly out of the palace. Today was combat practice day and he was not going to be late!

The Village Chief was still drinking her tea when she heard this. Jigo was growing fast, and with the many uncertain events that the village of Sherusei had faced in the past few years, the Chief was feeling her edge as a leader slowly dissipating. If only Jigo were to grow just a bit more mature and patient, she could finally count on him for the leadership of Sherusei! She was on the verge of shouting “Be careful!”, but realized that it would most likely go unnoticed, so she restrained her warnings.

Jigo had to walk apace to the combat practice field, lest he would not be on time. The road to the field was along the seashore. On his right, the sun was shining high in the sky, reflecting on the wet wooden flanks of the shipwreck of Nozo, now exposed by the low tide, careened obliquely half a Li away into the ocean. Still worshipped widely by the people of Sherusei, the shipwreck of Nozo was a simulacrum of their victory over Yokai in the war of Pangu twenty years prior, and a symbol of Sherusei’s subsequent gain of power over sea trade and fishing. On his left, he could hear some farmers’ voices, vehemently arguing with each other about the danger of the sea levels rising, reaching the inland faster and faster, devastating their crops. Not long after, Jigo had reached the practice field. His martial mentor Bejei, a portly and sinewy young fighter, Chief of the guards of Sherusei palace, was fighting Shrea, Jigo’s childhood friend and combat companion, with a thick pinewood staff.

“Be careful at the bottom or you ‘ll lose your balance!” Bejei exclaimed coyly as Shrea got distracted by Jigo’s arrival, and then swiped her right leg with a quick clockwise staff blow, “told you...”

Shrea, now on the ground, snorted annoyedly as she grabbed Bejei’s right hand, getting back on her feet.

“Well at least I’m better than him at balance techniques!” she said pointing at Jigo. Shrea loved to tease Jigo, who was always short of words to edge away from her quick wit. Yet Bejei was quick to prevent their bickering, “you two! On guard, now!”

“You know what happens to those who are late at combat practice?” although her amusement was of affection, Shrea teased Jigo once more. Jigo, did not reply, but nodded, focusing on Shrea’s step work instead, as Bejei would often advise.

“They get kicked!” as Shrea said this, behind her back, Jigo’s attention was caught by the trees on the sides of the combat field, unusually shaky for a day with no wind! Losing his focus, he indeed received a square kick in his stomach.

“Ouch! Wait! look behind you!”

“Sorry, Jigo, I am not falling for your trick!” amused Shrea, launching into another invigorated attack. But Bejei flinched, sensing something was odd with the boy.

“Ouch” snorted Jigo. Another punch, straight into Jigo’s stomach.

“Stop, Shrea! Listen!” two easy blows in a row were not a mean feat for Shrea to accomplish, so she indeed started to think that Jigo was not lying.

“Look there! the trees are shaking unusually, but there is no wind!”

Shrea and Bejei turned their heads, “Someone is light walking on the three tops!” Bejei exclaimed. He had a finer eye for this sort of things compared to his two mentees.

Quickly thereafter, as Bejei, Jigo and Shrea were still gazing at the woods, ropes were visibly lowered from some of the tallest trees onto the roof of Sherusei palace. This was clear to any naked eye.

“Thieves!” the trio shouted, almost in unison.

“We must head back to the palace at once!” commanded Bejei, and the three ran back as fast as they could along the seashore, carrying their practice weapons. At the entrance of the palace, the guards were all running inside in commotion.

“Chief Bejei!” an agitated guard shouted, after halting his run abruptly to face the Chief of Guards, “the palace has been overrun by intruders! we must succor it at once!”

Bejei said nothing. Instead, he signaled the group to follow the guard with his hand. When the group arrived at the palace’s main all, what they found was mayhem. Two dozen masked warriors clad in black were attacking the palace, seemingly attempting to open a passage between the guards through to the throne of the Village Chief, who stood at the back of the hall, surrounded by guards. In the moment Bejei, Jigo and Shrea made it into the hall, one of the black warriors leaped into the air with a dragon-head spear in his left hand. The warrior was also clad in black, but a red demon mask distinguished him from his peers. With great prowess, the warrior threw the spear in the direction of the Village Chief. At once, Bejei sensed that the attack would cut through the crowd of guards, and so jumped backward towards the weapon, pushing away the spear mid-air with his shoulder armor. Both spear and a wounded Bejei fell to the ground with a stomp and a clang. More cluttered fight ensued. Bejei stood up, trying to stave off as many black warriors as he could, but his wounded arm prevented him from prevailing in a battle that would have been otherwise easy in ordinary circumstances. Jigo, with his practice sword, and Shrea, holding tight to her mentor’s pinewood staff, were also fending off the attacks of the intruders. But yet, their skills were not a match for so many skilled warriors. Once again, the red masked warrior leaped into the air, this time drawing two arrows at once from his quiver, casting them against the chief of Sherusei with one single blow. Bejei, having lost a lot of blood, was on the verge of losing consciousness, unable to help. The two arrows pierced the Village Chief on the side of her neck and on her chest. She fell, a pool of blood around her.

“Out of here!” ordered the red masked warrior. In no time, all the warriors in black had fled away, while the palace guards and servants’ attention was all diverted into coming to the aid of the Village Chief. She had a long cut on her neck. Two servants briskly cleaned the wound. They then removed the outer layer of clothes, revealing a thin inner armor made of

steel. The armor had prevented one of the two arrows from piercing her heart, saving her life. Yet her neck, partially cut by the other arrow, was losing plenty of blood. She was in need of urgent care.

“Mo...Mother!” at a loss of words, that is all Jigo could say, shakingly, while she was transported away, into an inner chamber of the palace for medical care. Jigo, Shrea and Bejei could only observe worryingly.

They had to wait a long time in the palace’s main hall for news about the Village Chief. While waiting, Bejei tore a piece of his outer cloth to bandage his arm wound, while Jigo could not stop fidgeting with his practice sword.

At last, a guard barged into the hall, “the Village Chief is recovering, she summons Chief of guards Bejei and the counsel of the elders to discuss the problem at hand!” The guard had a stentorian voice, and his news were followed by a deferential bow and a sign to follow him.

Relieved, Jigo, Shrea and Bejei followed the guard to the bedside of the Village Chief. The elders had been loyal advisors to generations of chiefs of Sherusei for decades: Elder Kon, Elder Mo and Elder Xun. They were standing in a row in front of the Village Chief’s palanquin bed.

“We are still not aware of the origin and reasons of the attack” Elder Mo was reporting to the Village Chief when the three arrived, “the intruders are likely a group of mercenary warriors, the Black Demons, scoundrels at the order of Red Mask Piao, a deadly martial practitioner, notorious for its betrayal of the warriors’ code,” she continued. The Village Chief nodded thoughtfully.

“We believe these scoundrels were recruited by either Yokai or Nanda to exploit our weakness due to the rising water situation, and gain control of sea trade and fishing,” Elder Mo said worryingly, “indeed, the village is likely going to be partly submerged by water in the next five years due to climate change, and this would be an appropriate moment for them to attack if they had the intention.”

“I hear your concerns, Elder Mo” the Village Chief had a soft and weak voice, “yet the decision to move the village is not easy, as the village is surrounded by hills for defense

reasons. It would be difficult to retreat inland. It would entail traversing the hills.” The Village Chief was pressing on a point she had made several occasions beforehand, and silence fell onto the room as she said this.

Elder Kon asked the Chief how to proceed, but only a sigh came in response. The Chief was weakened, her voice hoarse.

Jigo struggled as he realized that in the span of a single day, the problems of Sherusei had escalated as such. Yes, the village had been battling with rising waters issues with no solutions in sight. Yes, his mother had difficulties leading the village on her own. But never had he thought that a serious crisis would ensue from an unexpected attack so quickly. As these thoughts were clouding his mind and the room seemed to have reached an impasse, Jigo had an idea, “perhaps Sherusei could fetch Master Fu! Master Fu would be able to help the village with foresight! The village elders have been in good terms with Master Fu for decades, and he has previously helped the village in times of difficulties with his foresight skills, like...in the war of Pangu twenty years before! Yes, that is what we should do!”

“Master Fu has retreated in the mountains to practice meditation and martial arts, he most certainly will not be interested in strategic problems!” Elder Xun was quick to reply with a reproaching look, “perhaps it would be wiser not to involve him in such matters. Moreover, the journey to his abode is treacherous. The Master lives on the mountain’s top, and it would be inconsiderate to put any of the village guards at peril for such a risky mission. Even if a valiant warrior is sent to him and succeeds in reaching the destination, it is not certain that the Master will consent to help us,” Elder Xun turned to the Village Chief while saying this, his tone changing into a hesitating voice asking for approval.

“It is such a difficult situation...” the Village Chief was not ruling out Jigo’s idea. Given the desperate circumstances, she thought it might be worth a try. She knew that the elders were conservative on this matter as they still felt indebted to Master Fu due to the support he had given to Sherusei twenty years prior. Jigo, on the other hand, spoke from his heart.

“But yet, who could be trusted for such a dangerous mission? Chief Bejei would be the only skilled and trustworthy warrior au par to ascend the mountain, but he is wounded...” as her thoughts relayed as such aloud, the Village Chief’s face could not hide despondence. She

could not help thinking that if only Jigo was older and more experienced, he could himself embark on such journey to fetch Master Fu. And Jigo, in turn, could not help but notice her disappointment.

“My Chief is right!” Bejei cut the awkward silence, “Bejei is ready to give his life for any task at the Chief’s command, but we would have to wait for this wound to recover!” while saying so in a resolute tone, he bowed deeply, supporting his wounded shoulder with the other arm.

Silence fell in the room once again and Jigo, looking down thoughtfully, was mimicking the mood of the room. Then, another idea came to his mind, “it is told that the Master had written a foresight manual for the future generations of chiefs of Sherusei, after the war of Pangu, what’s its name? Yes! the *Dao of Foresight*! We do not need the Master, we just need to consult the Dao of Foresight!”

“Son, the Dao of Foresight is a legend, it was made up to deter other villages from attacking us again...” Elder Kon looked at Jigo with sympathy while saying this, and this was enough to drive the boy back to his thoughtfulness.

Breaking the silence, the Village Chief, crestfallen about the bad news and exhausted for the day, said that she would consider the matter carefully. Now tired, she wished to rest.

As the group adjourned, back in his room, Jigo was laying down in bed, unable to sleep. He could not help thinking about the attack, about the water rising problem, and about the distressed farmers he heard in the morning. He could not possibly stay still and do nothing! There was only one rush but necessary decision to take! Leave, and find Master Fu himself! On the spot, he made up his mind. He wore his thickest linen coat, then gingerly tiptoed to the palace kitchen, filled a sack of baozi, stole a knife, and departed, disappearing into the darkness of the night forest.

Little did Jigo know that Red Mask Piao was observing his whereabouts, stationed outside of Sherusei’s palace.

* * *

Jigo crossed rivers, climbed hills, and walked under the snow. Finally, he saw an old temple on the top of the hills. Following the path in the woods, he was led to a spiral of uphill stone-carved stairs, leading on to the top of the highest peak of the hills, and reached the temple. As he walked into the temple, the whole building seemed empty. Yet after some more wandering, he reached an open courtyard in the middle of it. An old man, in rugged clothes, was standing with one leg on the top of a thin stick. The stick was in turn standing precariously on a stone. His body in a peculiar meditating position, eyes closed. Elated, Jigo shouted out, “Master Fu!”

The old man’s stance was shaken, but he did not lose his balance. Annoyed, rumbling something along the lines of “nuisance”, he got back to his meditation with more vigor.

“Master! I am Jigo, son of Village Chief of Sherusei! The village of Sherusei is in danger! It needs the Master’s foresight skills! A war might occur soon! The sea levels keep rising, and other states are attacking Sherusei to seize the circumstances!”

Hearing this, the Master seemed unfazed. So Jigo kept talking, explaining what had happened in Sherusei in more detail, and praising the Master’s skills, thinking that the Master would be pleased.

“I do not find interest in strategic concerns anymore; I retired here to practice more important arts.”

Disheartened, Jigo was at loss of words, then changed his strategy, “Master, many people may lose their lives if the water levels keep rising and if a war will occur!”

The Master opened his eyes suddenly, “how many people are living directly on the coastline?” he asked. Jigo did not know, and had to guess, “maybe five hundred...a thousand?”

Master Fu then descended from the stick, looking annoyed. He sighed deeply, “I will teach you foresight, so that you can deal with such problems on your own accord.”

Jigo was elated, but his emotion was soon interrupted by a serious look on the Master’s face.

“But I will teach you at one condition only: once you have learnt the basics of foresight, you should go your own path and practice foresight on your own, not here no more. I have

other concerns, meditation on a staff, eagle shadow fist and drunken immortal broadsword for instance, that I have to attend to.” The Master’s seriousness gave space to excitement as he uttered the names of these techniques, yet Jigo seemed unfazed, and accepted gladly.

“Is anybody in Sherusei aware that you are here, boy?”

“Master, no one knows, it was my initiative alone.”

The Master pondered that it was inappropriate to teach the boy without the Village Chief’s approval, yet the village was in danger, and lives were at stake. This was more important than manners. Besides, the Master did not wish anyone else to come searching for Jigo at the temple, lest they might also want to learn foresight, keeping him away from his martial and meditation endeavors even further.

“Then, we have to start immediately!” commanded the Master to Jigo after having found his resolution. He then sat down on a wooden stool. Two monks, whose presence Jigo had completely missed, brought in a small tea table, and started pouring tea in Master Fu’s teacup obsequiously.

“Let us see, you came here in search for foresight, what do you know about it?” Master Fu asked, sipping his tea thoughtfully. Jigo did not know anything about foresight, but did not want to appear stupid in front of the Master, “it is... similar to what accountants do for the village? count the consumption of rice in the past few years... and...they will know how much rice the village needs for the next year... so... that they can instruct the farmers about-”

Master Fu cut him short before he could finish, “that is forecasting! Foresight is not forecasting, foresight is the sky and much more than forecasting, try again!”

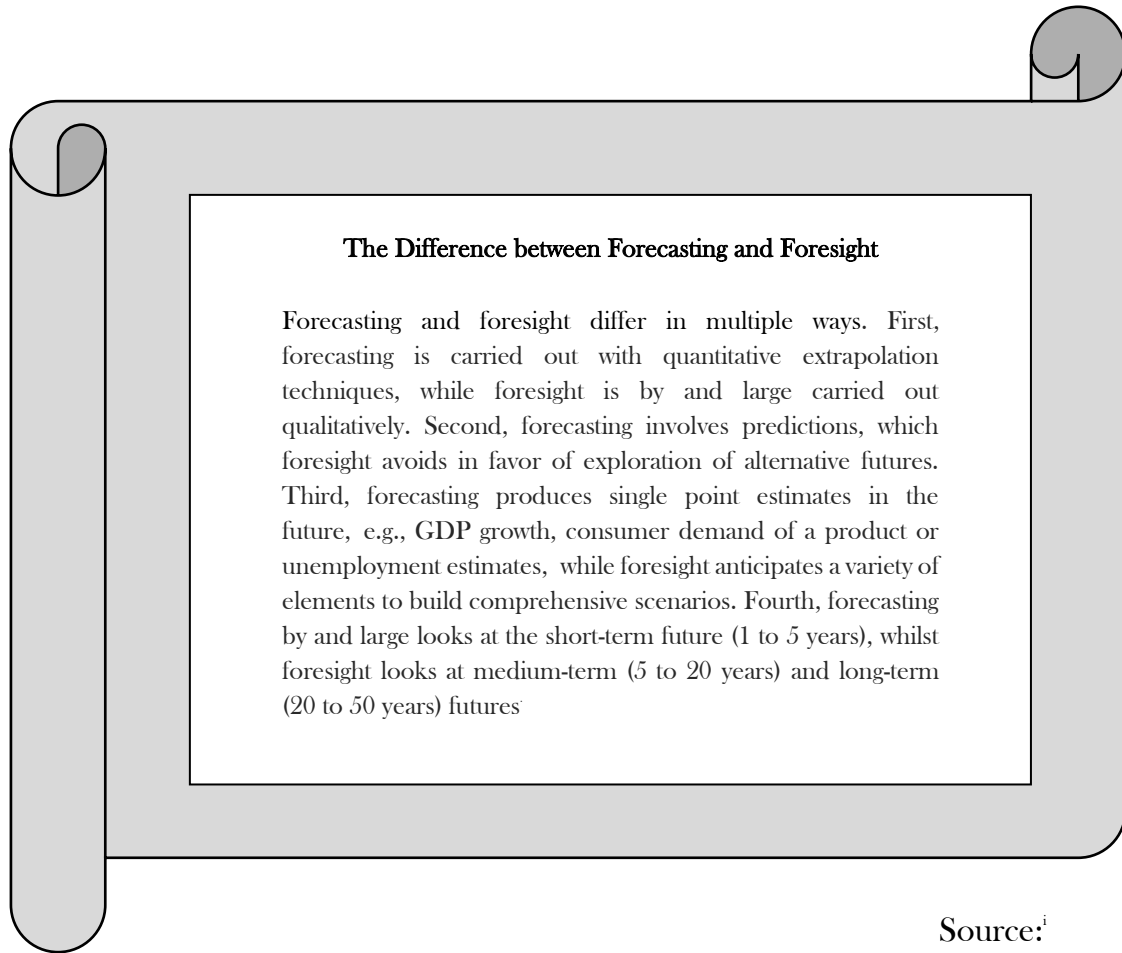
Jigo clutched at straws, “I know it is about the future... erm... I know it can help us...in the future... to... to predict the future?!”

“Is that so?” Master Fu replied while thinking that it was a shame that all the teachings he had imparted to the Sherusei administration thirty years before had not been relayed to the next generation.

“There is more than one, boy!”

“More than one... what?” Jigo replied with a puzzled expression.

“Future! More than one future! You shall not predict what does not exist!”



Source:ⁱ

Jigo was puzzled, all he heard were rumbles of an old man.

“One course of events...one future... does not exist! so you shall not predict what does not exist; it has always been so and always will be!” Master Fu said with resignation.

“So if you cannot predict the future, how are you going to help us?”

Hearing this, the Master hit Jigo’s head with the stick, “that is what you are here for, boy, to practice foresight! With foresight you cast your gaze wide! You look around at what is happening in the mountains and rivers around you, and then you imagine possibilities, many possibilities, many scenarios, many futures! Aha!” Master Fu stated enthusiastically, gazing into the horizon with the palm of his hand on his forehead as a visor.

“And then you use those futures to inform your strategic decisions now, you understand?” Master Fu added as such with an intimidating look, leaping closer to Jigo.

Jigo was not sure if he got the half of what the master said, “so why would you imagine multiple futures?” a puzzled look on his face.

“Well that is obvious, boy! To prepare for the futures! And also to create the futures!”

Yes! Now Jigo thought he was starting to get it, “so we imagine, say...two futures, and we prepare to both of them!”

“Haya boy! That is most incorrect! For starters, we always create at least four futures, as if we only create two, they are going to be a good and a bad one, and that will bias us. Reality is more complex than total dystopia or utopia. The Dao is not only black and white, it is white inside black and black inside white!”

The Ideal Number of Scenarios

The ideal number of scenarios to be created in foresight practice seems to be between four to seven. The reason behind this is that if only two scenarios are created, the result is a worst-case and a best-case scenario. Worst-case and best-case scenarios are not very useful as they are a gross simplification of reality. As Bruce Sterling famously said, “Neither best-case nor worst-case scenarios ever happen in the real world. What happens in the real world is always a side way-case scenario”. Unfortunately, if one creates three scenarios, the third one will likely be a middle way between the best-case and the worst-case, resulting in our attention being still focused on these two. That is why we must create at least four scenarios. Yet, why not more than seven? That is because once they have been created, scenarios have to be used (see Chapter Ten). To use them, one has to be able to recall all of them without confusion, and there seems to be ample evidence that human attention finds it very difficult to recall more than seven items at the same timeⁱ

Source:ⁱⁱ

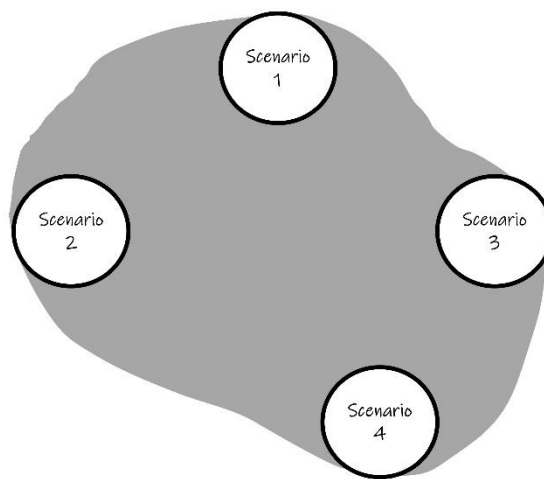
“But most importantly, we do not imagine a set of futures so that we prepare *only* to that set of futures. You do not want to imagine four scenarios of four different wars among the river and lakes of Pangu, and then be taken aback by a famine, do you?!”

“So how!? How do we...prepare for everything?!” Replied Jigo, now confused.

“You most certainly do not need to prepare for everything, boy, yet you need good scenarios, and you need to imagine them often enough! Good scenarios will map the unknown, they will give you the wherewithal to prepare for it, to be comfortable with it!” Master Fu replied with conviction while sipping his tea.

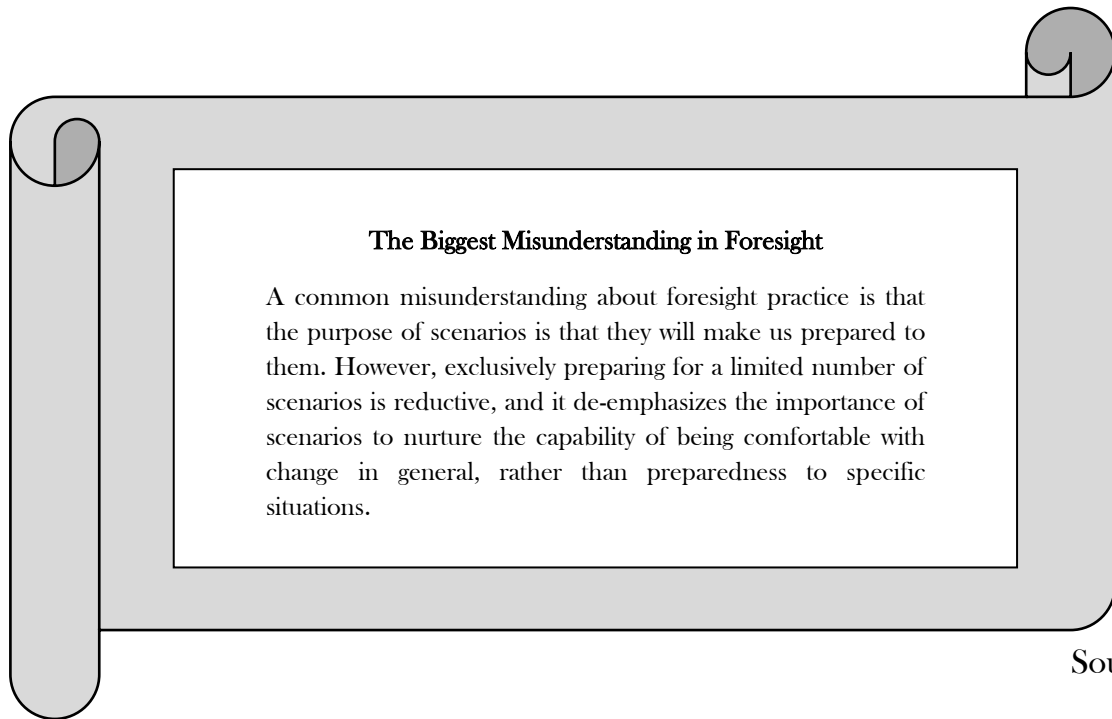
Jigo, even more puzzled, had nothing to reply with. The Master, seeing the vapid look on the boy’s face, waved his hand at the two monks, who responsively brought him paper, brush and ink.

“See, this grey stain on the paper? Imagine it represents all the possible futures that can happen, remember more than one future are possible! The edges stand for more extreme scenarios, such as...demons kidnapping all the women in your Sherusei, while the center stands for scenarios similar to the present, such as... a seasonal draught in the rice fields! Now, with foresight, we have to map this space! We have to create scenarios at the edges of it, like this, so that we are prepared to any kind of condition, including but not limited to the edges of what can happen, do you see?”



MASTER FU’S DRAWING

“Oh! Now I understand! We simulate extreme conditions so that we get used to them! So that we get used to the extreme and the not extreme!”



“That is quite right, boy!” rejoined Master Fu, “yet... that is not the whole picture! of course, we also simulate many kinds of futures so that we can choose which kinds we want to create and which kinds to avoid.”

Jigo was confused again.

“You see, you do not want something like this to happen,” Master Fu said while painting a bridge and a river not under but besides the bridge, “this is an example of worst-case scenario. Imagine Sherusei’s engineers were to build a bridge like this to cross the river, only to discover that the river will change its course, making the bridge utterly useless! We need to simulate situations like this repeatedly so that we avoid wrong choices now that may lead to such situations!”

“Ooh” Jigo was slowly digesting the Master’s words.

“And the same logic applies to the best-case scenario as well! We change our actions in the present to make them happen. A wise alliance with another village, a new kind of crop, a

well-built irrigation system, may all be possible actions one can take to plant the seeds for a better future, or to prevent a worst-case scenario, depending on the case, of course.”

“We use the futures to change actions now, for better or worse! I see that!” Jigo complemented the Master’s explanation.

“That is most correct!” seconded Master Fu, “the world is in perpetual change. What is yin can become yang in a time span shorter than what it takes you to eat a bowl of rice, what you do now may change the state of things dramatically in the future!”

“Master Fu! then how do I imagine scenarios, and...how do I use scenarios in such way, teach me! I need to go back and use these skills to save the village of Sherusei at once!”

“The road to mastery is not a simple one, boy,” the Master’s tone had changed from excited to condescending, “you are going to need patience for this. Foresight cannot be taught in one day. You will need to practice it and nurture your skills over time. That is all for today, it is time to rest now. Tomorrow, we begin training at dawn!”

* * *

References

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