

**An Antidote to Modern Test-oriented Education:  
Toward a Constructive Postmodern Education**  
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*Although Modern Test-oriented Education is still dominant in both East and the West, It has caused a great deal of tragedies. This paper tends to examine the limitations of modern test-oriented education and presents a Constructive Postmodern Education as an alternative in light of Whitehead's education philosophy.*

One of the unfortunate representation or limitations of the test-oriented education is that the student is treated as “Exam machine” rather than alive human being with feeling. Another unfortunate representation or initiations of the test-oriented education is that its overemphasis on book-learning as the second-hand information. The third unfortunate representation or consequence of the test-oriented education is that its disregard of the pressing issues. The most important issues of our times like ecological crisis, are hardly put in the list of tests. modern test-oriented education greatly narrows the student's horizon. It leads to a lack of whole view. To sum, modern test-oriented education is not only the murder of children's souls, but also the murder of children's bodies. It seriously devoices school from life, book from practice. It is time to reflect and modern test-oriented education and reorient the modern education due to its these drawbacks. The call for postmodern education has become pressing both in the East and the West.

Constructive postmodern education may offer an effective antidote to modern test-oriented education, especially its fragmentalness and the narrowness and try to move beyond it. First of all, from a point of view of organic philosophy, constructive postmodern thinkers view the students as living human being instead of machine. Secondly, constructive postmodern thinkers challenges people to pay much attention to life and life wisdom instead just to textbook. Thirdly, postmodern education values alterity and put emphasis on “The welcome of the new” by encouraging creative knowledge and imaginative knowledge. Fourthly, Postmodern deconstruct the boundary between school and society modern test-oriented education draws. Treating schooling as a distinct isolated activity is contrary to Whitehead's conception of interrelatedness. From a point of view of process, constructive postmodern thinkers stresses that the society is complex and ever-changing. The school should open to change. Constructive postmodern thinkers challenges people to realize that school cannot offer the whole of education. Fifthly, constructive postmodern thinkers put beauty first rather than intellect. It insists that concrete aesthetic appreciation should be given equal importance as facility with abstractions. That means that Postmodern educators should pay much attention to the appreciation of concrete things. More important, it encourages students to appreciate another person as a invaluable individual. It stresses that other human beings are aesthetically interesting in their own right no matter how low their scores are.

From what we discuss above, we can see clearly that constructive postmodern thinkers plays a vital role in liberating children from the modern test-oriented education. It frees the student from the tyranny of science and intelligence. It frees the student from overloaded homework. In this sense, it is emancipative.

### **I. Tragedies Modern Test-oriented Education Caused**

On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003, a beautiful Chinese girl died of cerebral hemorrhage due to constant overwork, at her age of 14. She left nothing but more than 20 awards and certificates and four copies of diaries. The awards and certificates are the honors she received; the diaries tell people how she got these honors and her reflection with tears.

She was a typical good student. We learned from her diaries that she got up at 4 a.m and went to bed at midnight every day. She just had a few hours for rest. She almost had no vocations. Following is her study schedule for a winter break.

*6:30 a.m get up*

*8:00 a.m-11 a.m homework*

*1:00 p.m-2. p.m Practice math*

*2:00,p.m—2:30 p.m pre-study the English book of next semester.*

*2:30 p.m—3.00.p.m reading Guide to Literature Classics*

*3.00.p.m—4:00.p.m reading reference books*

*recite an ancient poem*

*finish practicing one unit math questions exercise*

*Study English New Thinking in Class*

*Study Math's New Thinking in Class*

*Practice Calligraphy*

*Saturday self study Target English*

**Sunday Self study Target English**

*Compose two papers in English per week*

*Compose two papers in Chinese per week*

Without a doubt, she was extremely overwhelmed by the book learning.

Ironically, quality education under modern test-oriented education also has played an important role in pushing her to death. Recently quality education has become very fashionable in China. By quality education, mainly focuses on training student's talents on music and painting. It is also called "The second classroom." It is nothing wrong to do quality education, the point is that original implication of quality education was distorted by too many tests. In her diary, Xiaoxu wrote, "Right now people praise quality education, the second classroom, the awards, the certificates, however, which one is without test?" On February 28, 2003, half a month before she died, Xiaoxu wrote such a paragraph in her Diary, "The new semester will start tomorrow. I must achieve the best marks. My original dream is to become a medical doctor. Now I badly want to become an educator. I will let all parents and children feel easy."

It is obvious that Xiaoxu is a victim of modern test-oriented education. Her death urges us to rethink modern test-oriented education. As we know, exam has been playing a vital role in modern education system. Like a baton, it pushes the students, teachers, parents, even the whole society to spin around it. To some extent, the modern education system can be called modern test-oriented education. This situation is very evident in China today, which is marching toward modernization. Exam is not only justified as the important mean of realizing equality, democracy and social justice, but also turns out to be the aim of education.

It is nothing wrong with exam itself. But it is wrong with the overemphasis on tests. It is wrong with modern test-oriented education, because theoretically it is inhuman and practically causes a great deal of tragedies.

Xiaoxu was not an exception. Thousands upon thousands children are suffering from such an education. For example, Xu Li, a high school student in Zhejiang Province, China, killed his mother on January 17, 2000 because he was unable to endure the pressure of testing and his mother's push.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, recently a psychological survey showed 32% out of 10 thousands elementary and middle school students to some extent felt war-weary and wanted to run away from home. This study was conducted in 76 schools in Northeast of China.<sup>1</sup> All of these tragedies and sufferings challenge us to rethink the test-orientated education which is dominant in China today.

## **II A reflection on Modern Test-oriented Education**

### **1. The importance of tests.**

There is little doubt about the importance of test, which is an important element of education because testing is a necessary step in making the student learn precision. For Whitehead, precision is one among the three stages of mental growth and the rhythm of education. In this stage exactness of formulation is dominant. "It proceeds by forcing on the students' acceptance a given way of analyzing the facts, bit by bit."<sup>1</sup>

Test is a measure to the degree of the student's command of knowledge's precision. This helps students to lay a foundation of common knowledge which can make them learn the development of human knowledge and communicate with others.

In China, historically testing played a very important role in struggling for the equality of men in feudal society. A farmer's son without any family status eventually could become a prime minister thru tests.

The Great Culture Revolution totally abandoned any kinds of tests. During that time, the student of Zero Score became hero meeting the political need. The abandonment directly led to a cultural disaster and knowledge faultage. After the Great Culture Revolution, the test system was restored. It played a very positive part in assuring the justice and equality before grade or score.

Considering the particular situation in China, the test in general, the university entrance exam in particular, is a very effective way to prevent from corruption like "back door". The university entrance exam has been criticized for years because it drives China's education system to move toward test-oriented education, like a baton, it makes not only the whole education system, but also the whole society revolve around it. Although many of its drawbacks were revealed, it is still justified as a mean to assure justice from the point of view of the majority. One major reason is that the test can assure the justice by the equality of scores.

There is nothing wrong with emphasizing justice at social level. However, the point is how about students' justice and freedom? who come to care about children's feeling? Children's health, children's lives? All of these questions lead us to rethink modern test-oriented education , especially its limitations.

1. One of the unfortunate representation or consequences of the test-oriented education is that the student is treated as "Exam machine" rather than an alive human being with feeling.

Under such an lifeless and mechanical modern test-oriented education, student is viewed as the product to be developed, manufactures by machines(lessons) once they are provided with the raw materials(the curriculum)." Students become seriously overloaded. They are lacking so much in time, they have no leisure time. According to Aristotle, human beings without leisure are slaves. Within the test-oriented education, children are viewed not as a living human being with their own feeling but as "exam machine". People forget that "The students are alive." Nobody cares about their feeling. The only thing people including their parents are concerned with is their scores or grades.

If they survive the tests, they are conceived of winners; otherwise, they are viewed loser by the whole society, even by themselves. This is why some of them committed suicide after they failed their exams.

The good student means the student of high score. The higher his or her score is, the more excellent he or she is. Under such a criterion, other human qualities and virtues such as self-respect and "the refusal to do less than one's best", "the love of what one does", "a passionate, focused engagement in one's work, and the pleasure of sharing one's work with others" are totally excluded or ignored.<sup>1</sup>

2. Another unfortunate representation or consequences of the test-oriented education is that its overemphasis on book-learning as the second-hand information. Selective abstract concepts and categories are overemphasized. Practice is overlooked. It devotes school from reality.

In China “Primacy of Knowledge” has been prevailing since the end of the Great Culture Revolution. This phenomena has its historical cause and political cause. Because the Great Culture Revolution halted the search of Chinese people for knowledge by stopping nationally college exam under the philosophy “The more you own knowledge, the more you are antirevolutionary.”

In order to catch up with the developed countries in the West and realizes modernization, Chinese government was determined to highlight and stress knowledge by promoting the political status of intellectuals including teachers, scientists and technologists. A movement titled “march toward science and knowledge” was launched. It is nothing wrong to pay respects for science and knowledge. The point is that when science becomes scientism, when intellect becomes intellectualism, there is a danger to harm people’s imagination and creativity and to causes the student to miss opportunities for pleasure, interest, and adventure. It trains a way of seeing things as abstract rather than as concrete. Every valuable individual under modern test-oriented education see each other only as abstractions. The richness of life is forgotten, the aesthetic vividness is forgotten, the student’s enjoyment is destroyed, the romance is forgotten. In one word, Modern test-oriented education leads the student to insensitivity and the lack of creativity. Just in this sense Whitehead called modern education “ soul murder”.<sup>1</sup>

3. The third unfortunate representation or consequence of the test-oriented education is that its disregard of the pressing issues. The most important issues of our times like ecological crisis, are hardly put in the list of tests. modern test-oriented education greatly narrows the student’s horizon. It leads to a lack of whole view.

To sum, modern test-oriented education is not only the murder of childrens’ soul, but also the murder of children’s bodies. It seriously devoices school from life, book from practice. It is time to reflect and modern test-oriented education and reorient the modern education due to these drawbacks. The call for postmodern education has become pressing both in China and the US.

### **III. A Constructive Postmodern Education**

As many scholars point out that looming in the background behind the test-oriented education is the modern worldview, which is characterized by its scientific and mechanic way of thinking. In other word, the test-oriented education is tied to the modern way of viewing the world and human being. Behind modern test-oriented education is the modern mechanical worldview and modern logo-centric thinking. Postmodern thinking, especially constructive postmodern thinking based on Whitehead’s process philosophy plays a vital part in challenging the modern worldview. As Evans states, “The influence of Whitehead’s the philosophy of organism and his philosophy of education on the emerging epoch is one of several factors in postmodern thought.”<sup>1</sup> Evans emphasizes that “Constructive postmodernism is an inviting and useful term.”<sup>1</sup> Because its insistence on constructivity, which meets the need of our time.

Constructive postmodern education may offer an effective antidote to modern test-oriented education , especially its fragmentalness and the narrowness and try to move beyond it. As Patrick stated, “we must deconstruct and /or transcend modernity because it has reached the apex of absurdity in schooling practices that prioritize rote memorization, reward mastery of trivial facts, and proclaims the winners of Wheel of Fortune Jeopardy as the most intelligent.”<sup>1</sup>

First of all, from a point of view of organic philosophy, constructive postmodern thinkers view the students as living human being instead of machine. The modern mechanism is replaced by organism and the metaphor of the machine is replaced by the metaphor of the tree of life. The modern ideas mechanism, scientism and organism are not compatible with the postmodern education of living human beings.

Whitehead emphasizes in *The Aims of Education* that “The Students are alive.”<sup>1</sup> Since they are alive, education should not be “a process of packing articles in a truck.”<sup>1</sup> Whitehead stresses, “education must pass beyond the passive reception of the ideas of others.” the purpose of Education is to stimulate and guide their self-development.”<sup>1</sup> Since they are alive, they have their own feelings, experience, and appreciation, which are very diverse. Educators should pay much attention to diversity, to the diverse ways of appreciation. The famous Chinese saying, “teach students in accordance of their aptitude” expresses the same wisdom.

Process philosophy provides an ontological support for the respect for diversity. According to which, every concrete individual is valuable. Whitehead emphasizes that the major work of his philosophy, wherein the stage of satisfaction is the last phrase of concrescence or actualization of every actual entity. For Whitehead, The students are unique “concrete beings”, with “creativity and style, aesthetically interesting.”<sup>1</sup>

Like the actual entity, the student is in the experience and having the experience as well. According to Whitehead, “no one, no genius other than our own, can make our own life live.”<sup>1</sup> Like the aesthetic experience, Learning is something teachers can facilitate but not force. The traditional view of education treats education as something teacher gives, like a treasure box from attic. Postmodern education emphasizes that every student packs his own box in learning. In this sense, constructive postmodernism and deconstructive postmodernism converge because both of them put emphasis on the respect for the other. We can safely say that one of the important characteristics and contributions of postmodern education is its insistence on an appreciation of the other.

Starting from his philosophy of other, Levinas stresses that the learner should not be treated as merely a recipient of knowledge; she or he is the absolute other. “ To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly” to have the idea of infinity... but this also means to be taught.”<sup>1</sup> It is the respect for the other allows us to hear the voice of “the alienated or marginalized”, to see their ways, to understand their narratives, because it “requires reflectiveness on our part to acknowledge the existence of those unexpected and unpredictable vistas and perspectives in our experiences.”<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion, the appreciation of others is an effective antidote to modern test-oriented education. This can be viewed an important contribution postmodern education make to the theory of education.

Secondly, constructive postmodern thinkers challenges people to pay much attention to life and life wisdom instead just to textbook. As we know, test oriented education is based on rely on book-learning and based on the belittling practice. Constructive postmodern thinkers do

not deny the importance of book-learning; what it rejects is such a view that Treats book as the only one resource of knowledge. Whitehead once told technical students, “In estimating the importance of technical education we must rise above the exclusive association of learning with book-learning. First-hand knowledge is the ultimate basis of intellectual life.”<sup>1</sup> Because for Whitehead, the information book-learning conveys is just second-hand information. It is in importance next to immediate practice. For Whitehead, “it is function of the scholar to evoke into life wisdom and beauty which, apart from his magic, would remain lost in the past.”<sup>1</sup> For Whitehead, life and practice are very important source of knowledge. He writes, “Education is discipline for the adventure of life. Research is intellectual adventure; and the universities should be homes of adventure share in common by young and old. For successful education there must always be a certain freshness in the knowledge dealt with.”<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, postmodern education values alterity and put emphasis on “The welcome of the new” by encouraging creative knowledge and imaginative knowledge. Levinas challenges the Socrates method of teaching which assumes knowledge is already inside the learner. The teacher functions just like a midwife. On contrary, teaching, for Levinas, does not mean simply transmitting a abstract content already there to the learner, but is the responsibility to bring the student to what he does not yet know. Otherwise there is no pathway toward the production of new knowledge.<sup>1</sup> For Richard Rorty, the role of postmodern teacher is to arouse the learner, to challenge his/her imagination. In his words, what teachers have to do is to “make students thrill to the same things they themselves thrill.”<sup>1</sup> A postmodern teacher to Rorty should be highly imaginative, constantly inventing new, alternatives, displacing an intellectual world by considering a new one, transfiguring tradition with original and utopian fantasies.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, postmodern educators urge the student, “Don’t accept what you are reading! Ask other questions.”

Fourthly, Postmodern deconstruct the boundary between school and society modern test-oriented education draws. Treating schooling as a distinct isolated activity is contrary to Whitehead’s conception of interrelatedness. From a point of view of process, constructive postmodern thinkers stresses that the society is complex and ever-changing. The school should open to change. Constructive postmodern thinkers challenge people to realize that school cannot offer the whole of education.

Fifthly, constructive postmodern thinkers put beauty first rather than intellect. Due to the great influence of “a biased and exclusive rationalism”, modern test-oriented education treats intellects as the sole aim of education. Abstractions are put first. In Brumbaugh’s words, “We have concentrated exclusively on facility with abstraction—number, names, mental discipline.”<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that modern test-oriented education considers the disembodied networks of abstractions as the only real or really important entities. The concrete aesthetic experience or appreciation is forgotten.

Postmodern education based on Whitehead’s process philosophy insists that concrete aesthetic appreciation should be given equal importance as facility with abstractions. That means that Postmodern educators should pay much attention to the appreciation of concrete things. In Cobb’s word, “For Whitehead, the purpose of education is primarily aesthetic, it is primarily for increasing strength of beauty... the overall focus is clearly on what happens in the interior life of

people.” (Evans, 103 ) Here “equal importance implies equal time.”<sup>1</sup> This reminds me of the point of view of Tao Xingzhi, a famous educator in China, who expresses the same feeling:

“Generally school occupies the entire time of children. This makes them lose the opportunities to study human life and shapes their habit of no intention to create. The first move for the creative education is to free children from time.”<sup>1</sup> For Whitehead, being interesting is more important than that it is true. According to Cobb’s interpretation, “the heart of teaching is lifting appropriate proposition into the attention of students.” Postmodern education tells us that knowledge is not enough. Of course, nobody denies the importance of knowledge. Knowledge is necessary, but it is not sufficient for the development of the individual. Postmodern educators stress aesthetic appreciation, not only of art works, natural objects, but also of a society and a civilization. It encourages a wider horizon. More importantly, it encourages one to appreciate another person as a invaluable individual. It stresses that other human beings are aesthetically interesting in their own right no matter how low their scores are.

From what we discuss above, we can clearly see that constructive postmodern thinkers play a role in liberating children from the modern test-oriented education. It frees the student from the tyranny of science and intelligence. It frees the student from overloaded homework.

Cobb once talked about a Whiteheadian school, “Students will be encouraged to listen to their bodies and learn from them.” Our bodies, our minds, and our spirit are intertwined and interdependent. Modern test-oriented education ignores the student’s feeling, emotion, and body.

In China recently we have been stressing that education is “a systematic project”, which deals with a variety of factors such as political, economical, cultural and social factors. However, we have forgotten the student himself as an alive human being, we ignore his/her feeling, body, spirit. It is time to integrate these factors and to see the student as a living and organic whole rather than an exam machine. Constructive postmodern view of education may help us to realize this task.

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## Biography

Zhihe Wang is a Ph.D candidate at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont CA, 91711. He is the director of the China Project in Center for Process Studies, USA, and a board member of Center for Global Integrated Education.

Formerly, he was Associate Professor at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the editor in chief of *Social Science Abroad*, a journal at national level. He has published around 40 articles in both Chinese and English, including *Postmodern Philosophical Movement* (1993, 1996, and 1998), which was awarded first prize by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1995 and *Foucault* (1999). He is the translator of *On the Future of Art* [Written by A.J. Toynbee and H. Marcuse et al (Beijing :Peking University Press,1991, 2003)] and *Conscious Capitalism* [written by David Schwerin (Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 2001,2004)]. He is the editor of *A Dictionary of Postmodernism* (2004) and *Globalization and Postmodernity* (2003).

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