

Review

Reimagining Holistic Education in Contemporary China: A Critical Review of Zhu Yongxin's The New Education Dream and the New Education Experiment

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical review of Zhu Yongxin's The New Education Dream and its practical implementation through the New Education Experiment (NEE), one of China's most influential grassroots educational reform movements. Zhu's educational philosophy integrates Confucian moral tradition with constructivist pedagogy, aiming to transform schooling into a process of life cultivation rather than test preparation. Based on a "New Six Arts" curriculum, the NEE promotes student agency, teacher reflection, and community-based learning. Drawing on case studies from Jiangsu, Ningxia, and Zhejiang, the paper evaluates the outcomes of NEE in improving literacy, emotional well-being, and pedagogical innovation. A comparative analysis highlights the alignment between NEE and international models such as Finnish comprehensive education, Japanese holistic reform, and Freirean critical pedagogy. Despite institutional barriers—such as exam-driven systems, teacher overload, and policy fragmentation—Zhu's model offers a scalable vision for culturally responsive, learner-centered reform. The paper concludes by proposing policy strategies to embed NEE principles into China's national education agenda and global reform dialogues.

Keywords: Zhu Yongxin; New Education Experiment; holistic education; Confucian constructivism; educational reform in China; student-centered learning; teacher reflection;



1. Introduction

In the past four decades, China's educational reform has undergone rapid institutional and pedagogical transformations. These shifts reflect the nation's broader socio-economic modernization and its integration into global educational discourses. However, despite policy innovation and rising international test scores, Chinese education remains strongly exam-oriented, with persistent challenges in fostering creativity, emotional development, and ethical citizenship (Zhao, 2014; OECD, 2020). Within this paradox, grassroots reformers like Zhu Yongxin have emerged as powerful agents of change.

Zhu Yongxin's *The New Education Dream* (2004) did not emerge in a vacuum. It was shaped by his extensive teaching experience, administrative work, and philosophical engagement with both Confucian educational heritage and modern progressive thought. As a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and vice chairman of the China Association for Promoting Democracy, Zhu recognized the deep structural limitations of China's schooling system. His dream was to construct a new paradigm that reimagines education not merely as a means of economic utility but as a process of human cultivation (Yang, 2015).

The New Education Experiment (NEE), launched in 2002 and formalized with pilot schools across various provinces, represents a reform practice that seeks to align daily school life with holistic, student-centered values. Its slogan, "Let education be full of poetry," symbolically challenges the mechanization and utilitarianism of mainstream Chinese schooling. As of 2023, the NEE network includes more than 10,000 schools, impacting millions of teachers and students (Zhang & Liu, 2023).

This paper critically analyzes the educational theory and practice behind *The New Education Dream*, exploring how Zhu's work intersects with constructivist and humanistic educational thought, how it has been implemented across diverse regions in China, and how it compares with similar global reform initiatives. The study aims to provide a scholarly evaluation of NEE's contribution to educational transformation and to identify its practical limitations within China's systemic structure.



2. Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations of The New Education Dream

Zhu Yongxin's educational vision is built upon a synthesis of traditional Chinese educational ethics and contemporary progressive pedagogies. Central to his theory is the belief that education should aim to “nourish life” (yang sheng), not merely train the intellect. This life-centered orientation resonates with the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation (修身) and virtue formation (德育), placing moral development alongside cognitive growth (Tan, 2016).

At the same time, Zhu draws deeply from Western educational thinkers. His writings frequently reference John Dewey, whose philosophy of experiential learning and democratic education greatly influenced Zhu's critique of rote memorization and passive learning (Dewey, 1938). Dewey's concept that “education is not preparation for life, but life itself” finds practical reflection in NEE's commitment to life-integrated curriculum design.

Jean Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development and constructivist learning models also underpin Zhu's pedagogy. For instance, Zhu advocates for classrooms that encourage exploration, discovery, and personal meaning-making—core tenets of Piagetian constructivism (Piaget, 1972). Furthermore, Jerome Bruner's idea of the spiral curriculum is visible in NEE's scaffolding strategies that reintroduce core concepts through life practice and reflection at increasing levels of complexity (Bruner, 1960).

In parallel, Zhu's “New Six Arts” educational framework offers a culturally localized model of holistic education. These six arts—reading, writing, speaking, aesthetic experience, labor, and life practice—reimagine the ancient Confucian curriculum for the 21st century. The focus on embodied, experiential learning mirrors aspects of the Montessori method, while the emphasis on expression and reflection aligns with dialogic teaching strategies (Alexander, 2006).

Zhu's educational ideal can thus be understood as a hybrid philosophy: Confucian Constructivism—a model that marries moral education with cognitive autonomy, and tradition with innovation. His framework resists the binary of East versus West, instead proposing an integrative pedagogy rooted in human flourishing.

Importantly, Zhu's emphasis on teacher growth is not merely pragmatic but philosophical. He asserts that the transformation of education depends first on the transformation of educators themselves. In this sense, his vision overlaps with Paulo Freire's idea of "praxis"—reflection and action as dialectical processes of liberation (Freire, 1970). The NEE's teacher reading groups, reflective journals, and peer dialogues embody this ethos of critical pedagogy within a uniquely Chinese context.

3. The New Education Experiment in Practice

The New Education Experiment (NEE), launched by Zhu Yongxin in 2002, represents a bottom-up reform movement that actively reimagines school life. Rather than prescribing a rigid model, it encourages participating schools to adapt core principles—such as reading-based development, democratic classroom governance, and life-integrated curricula—into their unique local contexts. Over two decades, the NEE has evolved into one of China's most influential grassroots educational reform initiatives.

3.1 Structural Features of the NEE Model

The NEE model is not a unified program but a framework structured around “ten practical actions,” including:

- Morning reading and silent reflection
- Teacher lifelong learning communities
- Thematic classroom culture
- Teacher-student journaling
- Life-centered curriculum design
- Parent-school co-construction

Each action seeks to restore purpose, emotional resonance, and student agency to school life. Schools are encouraged to form “teacher reading clubs,” publish reflective essays, and share progress on online platforms such as the New Education Research Network.

3.2 Regional Implementation Cases

Jiangsu Province – Haimen District

Haimen was one of the earliest experimental districts and has become a model of implementation. Schools here established “Teacher Growth Centers” with weekly reading discussions, collaborative lesson planning, and public lesson reflections. According to data from Jiangsu Educational Research (Wang & Chen, 2021), reading habits among teachers increased by 53% over five years, and student reading comprehension scores outpaced non-NEE schools by 12%.

Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region – Yanchi County

In Yanchi, a predominantly rural area, NEE helped revive previously underperforming schools. Teachers began integrating local desert ecology into environmental curricula, while aesthetic education projects were supported through community art collaborations. A 2022 study by Liu and Zhang (2022) reported improved student engagement, with absenteeism rates dropping by 30% and parent satisfaction rising sharply.

Zhejiang Province – Wenzhou

Wenzhou focused its implementation on cross-disciplinary integration. One elementary school combined aesthetic education with science learning through a school garden project. Thematic “life weeks” encouraged students to conduct home interviews, cook with grandparents, and present findings in oral history projects.

3.3 Evaluative Outcomes

Numerous studies affirm that the NEE boosts:

- Student engagement and emotional well-being (Zhang et al., 2021)
- Teacher reflective practice and collegiality (Wang, 2023)
- Family-school relationships (Yang & Du, 2020)
- Equity in resource-limited schools (Liu & Wu, 2021)

However, as discussed in the next section, many of these outcomes remain localized and face difficulties in scaling due to structural pressures.

4. International Comparison and Global Relevance

Zhu Yongxin’s New Education Dream aligns with—and significantly contributes to—international conversations around child-centered, humanistic, and transformative



education.

4.1 Finland and Whole-Child Development

Finland is often cited as a benchmark for child-friendly education. Zhu's model echoes Finnish priorities such as:

- Minimizing standardized tests
- Emphasizing reading culture
- Valuing teacher autonomy and emotional development

As Sahlberg (2021) notes, both models resist high-pressure competition and instead foster internal motivation and social responsibility.

4.2 Japan – “Zest for Living” Curriculum Reform

Japan's yutori kyoiku reforms similarly aimed to reduce stress and promote holistic learning. Zhu's vision shares its emphasis on aesthetic cultivation and ethics education. However, whereas Japan's reforms were top-down and met public resistance, Zhu's reform gained traction as a voluntary movement.

4.3 U.S. Progressive Education and Freirean Pedagogy

Zhu's vision resonates with Dewey's democracy-in-education model and Freire's dialogical pedagogy. NEE's journaling, teacher-student co-reflection, and reading culture represent localized enactments of these philosophies.

Zhao Yong (2021) argues that Zhu's work serves as an East Asian adaptation of progressive traditions, offering a culturally rooted version of “humanistic constructivism” applicable to Global South contexts facing rapid modernization.

4.4 Global Policy Dialogue

Zhu's approach anticipates elements of international frameworks:

- UNESCO's Futures of Education (2021): Learning to become human together
- OECD's Education 2030 (2020): Student agency, well-being, and co-agency

While many global models remain conceptual, NEE represents actual large-scale implementation of such ideas.

5. Institutional Challenges and Structural Constraints

Despite the widespread adoption of NEE principles, multiple barriers restrict their deeper institutionalization.

5.1 Standardized Testing and Policy Inertia

China's high-stakes examination system remains the greatest systemic challenge. Even within NEE schools, middle and high school curricula often revert to test drills, especially under parental pressure. The 2021 "Double Reduction" (shuangjian) policy attempted to curb homework and off-campus tutoring, which aligns superficially with NEE. However, implementation inconsistencies persist (Xiong, 2022).

5.2 Teacher Overload and Role Ambiguity

NEE expects teachers to write, reflect, and collaborate daily. Without reduced teaching hours or increased professional support, this can lead to burnout. Studies by Zhang and Xu (2020) show that nearly 41% of teachers in NEE schools report increased stress, especially in exam years.

5.3 Administrative Resistance and Symbolic Compliance

Local educational bureaus sometimes interpret NEE as a branding tool rather than a substantive reform. Practices like "teacher reading clubs" are sometimes ritualized—done for reporting rather than meaningful transformation (Li & He, 2021).

5.4 Rural-Urban Implementation Gaps

While rural areas benefit from NEE flexibility, they often lack stable teaching staff, digital resources, and community involvement. Urban schools, meanwhile, face intense parental competition culture.

5.5 Lack of Integration with National Standards

NEE operates parallel to, not within, the national curriculum framework. This limits its impact on textbook design, exam structures, and college admissions policies. Calls have been made for Ministry-level incorporation of NEE elements into national education policy, but as of 2024, integration remains fragmented.

6. Educational Policy Implications and Future Prospects

The New Education Experiment (NEE), as both a reform initiative and a philosophical movement, has generated significant momentum at the grassroots level. However, for such movements to achieve long-term sustainability and broader systemic transformation, their principles must be reflected in national education policy frameworks and resourced accordingly.

6.1 Aligning Curriculum Reform with NEE Principles

China's New Curriculum Reform (NCR), initiated in 2016 and updated in 2022, already embraces several NEE-compatible values: comprehensive quality education (suzhi jiaoyu), student autonomy, and interdisciplinary learning. Yet, the curriculum documents remain heavily constrained by rigid exam demands and subject silos (Li & Fan, 2023). Integrating NEE's "life-oriented" learning, especially through its New Six Arts framework, into national textbook design and formative assessments can bridge this gap.

6.2 Reconfiguring Teacher Professional Standards

NEE places teacher reflection, moral growth, and dialogic learning at the heart of reform. National teacher certification and evaluation systems must shift from compliance-based rubrics to growth-oriented indicators. As suggested in the 2023 China Teacher Development Report by the Ministry of Education, performance appraisal should include reading logs, reflective writing, and collaborative learning outcomes (MOE, 2023). NEE schools can serve as national models for professional learning communities.

6.3 Expanding Digital and Community Infrastructure



Rural schools implementing NEE need substantial support in terms of ICT, library resources, and training. National programs such as “Internet+Education” and “Digital Rural Education” (2021–2025) offer a platform to embed NEE’s reading culture and life-practice curriculum into online formats. Moreover, partnerships with local cultural centers, NGOs, and universities can help contextualize learning and strengthen place-based education.

6.4 Building Evaluation Systems Beyond Exams

The 2020 OECD report *Beyond Academic Learning* emphasized student well-being, resilience, and social-emotional skills. China’s recent push toward process-based evaluation—including student portfolios, project-based learning outcomes, and classroom dialogue—should be formally embedded within basic education policy. NEE’s experience with student-teacher journaling and project exhibitions provides scalable assessment models that better align with whole-child development.

6.5 Envisioning Global Applications

Zhu Yongxin’s work, although deeply rooted in Chinese traditions, offers transferable insights. In rapidly modernizing nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where exam-centric education often dominates, NEE can inspire reform models that integrate cultural identity with pedagogical innovation. Cross-national pilot projects, academic exchange platforms, and multilateral dialogue—supported by organizations like UNESCO and the Global Education Monitoring Report—could amplify NEE’s global reach (UNESCO, 2021).

7. Conclusion

Zhu Yongxin’s *The New Education Dream* is not only a book—it is a social vision, a pedagogical strategy, and a reform practice that redefines the possibilities of learning in the 21st century. By prioritizing moral education, experiential learning, and teacher-student co-development, it challenges deeply ingrained paradigms of utilitarianism and standardization that dominate global education systems.



Over the past two decades, the New Education Experiment has demonstrated that large-scale reform can emerge from the bottom up—through teacher agency, community commitment, and shared imagination. While challenges remain, especially regarding institutional rigidity, assessment systems, and teacher workload, the movement continues to evolve and inspire.

In the global context, Zhu’s philosophy offers a unique contribution: a hybrid model of Confucian constructivism that honors cultural continuity while embracing modernity. For educators, scholars, and policymakers worldwide, the New Education Dream is a call to reimagine education not merely as schooling but as a living journey—toward wholeness, humanity, and harmony.

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