

Zhu Xi's *Ge-wu-zhi-zhi* Theory and Its Implications in Reconstructing the Postmodern Curriculum

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During the past few decades, effort has been exerted to unearth the limitations embedded in thought on the modern curriculum (deconstructive postmodern efforts) and to search for an alternative form of curricular discourse beyond the limits of modern thought (reconstructive postmodern efforts). In the deconstructive and reconstructive endeavors, the educational thought of Zhu Xi, a Neo-Confucian scholar, is applicable. In this paper, what has been attempted is the portrayal of essential features of Zhu Xi's educational thought, and also examined was what his thought implies to our efforts to re-understand and reconstruct the field of curriculum in the postmodern era.

Zhu Xi, called a synthesizer of Neo-Confucian doctrines, believes there exists an ultimate reality that eradicates everything in the universe. But it does not easily come within us due to the imperfection of our mind. It is not hidden, nor is it kept in darkness. We cannot see it only because the eyes of our minds are veiled. If there exists "a perfect light" that can be unilaterally shed onto the object inside the mind, then reality will be fully manifested by that light. However, this is not possible with the mind as it is. The workings of the mind are always restrained, depending sometimes on the movement of other things in water and at other times on the natural and artificial forces from the outside. In order to recover the original brilliance of the bead, we must make effort to govern the internal and external forces that sway our mind. This is the so-called process of self-cultivation.

If there is no process of self-cultivation to overcome the limitations of the mind, then the mind and the world cannot completely expose their true identities and face each other. Zhu Xi's *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory explains the way that the mind and the world truly meet through self-cultivation. It is in this sense that Zhu Xi's theory can be seen as a valuable and original curriculum theory.

According to Zhu Xi, since (wo)man is created after the great ultimate called *li*, his/her *xing* (nature) is assumed to be essentially complete. In spite of the essential completeness of humanity, human conduct is not always good because we follow our feelings in everyday life. This is why self-cultivation is necessary in the process of realizing essential completeness. In Zhu Xi's thoughts on education, the ultimate goal of education is to restore such original completeness of (wo)man. How is it possible for a (wo)man to reach the original state of completeness, i.e., his/her own nature? Zhu Xi applied his entire academic endeavor to this question and suggested

a variety of rich ideas, the essence of which can be characterized by *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* and the “self-cultivation” theory.

In spite of the recent diverse efforts to reconstruct the field of curriculum, it can not be denied that the dominant patterns of discourse still stand in the midst of the modern educational paradigm. Zhu Xi’s thought on education provides us with rich insights in our efforts to reflect on modern educational thought and to re-understand and reconstruct thought and practice on curriculum.

The implications of Zhu Xi’s thought in our effort to build a new curriculum paradigm are manifold. Zhu Xi’s interpretation of the mind asks us to see students as active beings of desire. Although Zhu Xi acknowledged from the beginning that (wo)man is a being with desires, he emphasized appropriate exercise of these desires instead of regarding them merely as objects of elimination, placing the basis of internal control on the mind. Zhu Xi’s *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory also allows us to see the nature of school knowledge in a different way. Knowledge contained in *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory emphasizes contextual appropriateness, because it attempts to uncover the ultimate reality within the living conditions of the self. Zhu Xi’s emphasis on self-cultivation is especially suggestive in the sense that it unfolds a new possibility to overcome ethical issues. Zhu Xi suggests self-cultivation is essential in the education process not only because it guides students to uncover their true selves but because it also leads them to search for the eternal reality of the world.

Reconstruction of an appropriate curriculum paradigm requires various and infinite endeavors. Our small effort to bridge Zhu Xi’s thought on the postmodern curriculum discourse is expected to be meaningful for future education.

Keywords: Curriculum paradigm, Ge-wu-zhi-zhi theory, self-cultivation, the postmodern, and ultimate reality

Investigating the Issues

The advent of the postmodern is accompanied by fundamental doubts about a series of beliefs that are instilled in our way of thinking. Human society today is rapidly plunging into a new way of thinking, and without hesitation the postmodern thinkers refer to such a trend as a “paradigm shift” after Kuhn (Slattery 1995: 17). According to Kuhn, the newly emerging paradigm is fundamentally different from further elaboration on or extension of existing paradigms. Scholars must modify the formula within their fields of study once a paradigm shift occurs (Kuhn 1970: 84-85).

The paradigm shift from the modern to the postmodern requires the discarding of modernity’s core beliefs. Modernity was formed after man tossed off the shackles of the dominant religious worldview of the Dark Ages. It is based on the beliefs of (wo)man and the world: (Wo)man is the possessor of absolute reason, and the world can be represented perfectly by such reason. Development of

scientific methodology based on such beliefs brought about an explosive growth in knowledge and technology. However, chasing after an endless desire to objectify the world has finally caused mankind to arrive at an ecological crisis that threatens the very existence of humanity itself.

The ecological crisis can be seen as the natural consequence of modern scientific logic that attempts to dissect everything (Jencks 1986). In the world, there may be “things that can be explained” and “things that cannot be explained.” The world is not just a simple subject standing in front of (wo)man’s reason but moves according to its own principle of being. Therefore, there is the need to accept the thought that our knowledge of the world is nothing more than a limited one. However, there is no place for such thought to dwell in modern logic. Nowadays mankind has ascertained an extremely large amount of knowledge but does not have any interest in developing the ability to investigate its legitimacy. The source of the current crisis is identified in the statement below:

Overwhelming quantity of knowledge is possessed by contemporary civilization, but the depth of wisdom is surprisingly superficial. The professionals of today only pursue the goals of their own special fields as time goes by and little by little loses sight of the world and man as a whole. (Hirschberger 1987: 100)

The crisis we face is fundamentally impossible to resolve under the modern scheme of thought. Postmodernity criticizes such a modern scheme of thought. In some ways, postmodernity did not suddenly appear from the tail end of modernity; rather, it may be a tendency to guard against (wo)man’s arrogance in always attempting to reach for the sky.

If we look at postmodernity as an attempt to overcome the problems resulting from radical anthropocentrism, postmodernity can provide an opportunity to overcome the limitations of the blind deconstruction of modernity. Griffin says the following about the essence of postmodernity.

The rapidity with which the term postmodern has become widespread in our time suggests that the antimodern sentiment is more extensive and intense than before, and also that it includes the sense that modernity can be successfully overcome only by going beyond it, not by attempting to return to a premodern form of existence. Insofar as a common element is found in the various ways in which the term is used, postmodernism

refers to a diffuse sentiment rather than to any set of common doctrines—the sentiment that humanity can and must go beyond the modern. (Griffin 1993: vii-viii)

To use a metaphor, postmodernity is like a crowd gathered under an umbrella to avoid a “lengthy rain” called modernity. In spite of this, Griffin claims that postmodernity has two distinctive tendencies related to its motives for deconstructing modernity: Deconstructive postmodernity and constructive postmodernity. If the former emphasizes deconstruction itself, then the latter attempts to create a new construction. Ultimately, the difference between these two lies in whether or not they attempt to establish a new worldview to replace modernity (Griffin 1993: 1-4). Griffin does not ignore the achievements of the deconstructionists but sees deconstruction as resulting in relativism and nihilism.

The conflict between deconstructionists and constructionists within postmodernity is a typical example of the dilemma inherent in postmodernity itself. Postmodernists succeeded in bringing attention to the legitimacy of deconstructing modernity, but it is criticized for bringing about radical relativism and/or nihilism because it was not able to provide alternatives for modernity. In a sense, it could be that discussions on the postmodern have accomplished their mission until now by bringing attention to the existence of a new world that can overcome modernity through deconstruction. Postmodernity’s attack on modernity can be viewed as containing a “negative aspect of the self.” “Deconstruction of the subject” is accepted as “the death of the subject,” which shows the limitation of the postmodern criticism against modernity. In this paper, we attempt to explore the meaning of “the metaphysics of *wu* (物: objectification)” and “the metaphysics of *shi* (事: participation),” which is expected to be a fruitful conceptual framework in looking at the essence of modernity as well as a critical alternative. The term “metaphysics of *wu*” is used to explain the characteristics of the modern Western philosophical worldview, and the term “metaphysics of *shi*” is used to signify the Neo-Confucian worldview that is central to traditional Eastern thought.

Two Worlds: Two Narratives

Modernity can be characterized as putting (wo)man at the center of universe where God was placed in the Dark Ages. In modernity, the rational mind has the

ability to represent the entire world we live in including the natural world. Just as an image is reflected in a mirror, (wo)man objectifies all of the world including her/himself, thereby completely locking in the world in a net of rationality.

The objectified world does not contain the principle of being by itself, but only through the application of rationality is essence bestowed upon it. Only (wo)man as a rational being can take her/his place as the subject, and the entire world is just an object waiting to be represented by human rationality. The term “metaphysics of wu” refers to such logical thought of modernity, namely the core assumption that only (wo)man alone can be the subject in the world. Anything interfering with the rational desire to objectify everything in existence is completely excluded. A typical example is to negate the existence of the body by distinctively dividing the mind and the body. The dimension of the body is excluded in the process of objectification, which means that the subjectivity of the individual is not acknowledged. The body is not free from its historical and social conditions due to having temporal and spatial limitations. However, logocentric thought from the dualistic viewpoint does not let go of the myth of objectivity and absoluteness, because it does not acknowledge the inseparable link between the body and the mind.

Is the rational mind the most essential characteristic of (wo)man, and is the body only an obstacle to transparent cognition? Is the world just an object waiting to be reduced to mechanical laws by rationality, a dead world that is not able to embrace its own principle of being? “Metaphysics of *shi*”¹ as advanced by Zhu Xi (1130-1200) provides us with a quite different picture on this matter. Zhu Xi created the tradition of Confucianism in a novel way by presenting his own theory on the relationship between (wo)man and the world. The word “*shi*” (participation) explains the continuous transaction between (wo)man and the world.

Etymologically, *shi* means “being eager to,” or “being concerned with.” *Shi* for Zhu Xi does not denote the limitation of the object nor the desire to discover something new, but rather, the struggle to face the immanent principle of being from within by immersing oneself in ontology including everyday life. Of course, the subject of the struggle is the mind, but the mind cannot be free from the actual conditions of the body because the mind exists within the body. Therefore, we as imperfect subjects must recover our true mind through active

1. Wang Yang Ming's thought can be said to be from the viewpoint of “*shi*” (事: participation). However, he was not able to show a systematic theory on the world of existence, and thus, cannot be included in the analytic scheme of “the metaphysics of *shi*.”

efforts to search for the principle of being within the world.² It is in this process that “the metaphysics of shi” is fundamentally different from “the metaphysics of wu.”

Zhu Xi’s *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory (格物致知論) is fundamentally grounded on “the metaphysics of shi,” which is closely related to postmodern curriculum thought. His complex and profound interpretation of mind, world, and their relations unfolds a new possibility for reconstructing postmodern curriculum thought.

Zhu Xi’s Ge-wu-zhi-zhi Theory

Fundamentally, Confucianism considers “contextual appropriateness” more important than the pursuit of an objective understanding of the world. Such thoughts are implied in “*Zhong-young*” (中庸, Doctrine of the Mean), one of the core virtues in the Confucian tradition.³ According to Zhu Xi, ultimate reality eradicates everything in the universe. But we cannot easily access this due to the imperfection of our minds. It is not hidden, nor is it kept in darkness. We cannot see it only because the eyes within our minds are veiled.⁴ If there exists “a perfect light” that can unilaterally shed light onto the object inside the mind, then the reality will be fully manifested by that light. However, this is not possible with the mind as is. Metaphorically, the mind is like a shiny bead immersed in water. The work of the mind is always restrained, depending sometimes on the movement of other things in the water and at other times on the natural and artificial forces from without. In order to recover the original brilliance of the bead, we must attempt to govern the internal and external forces that sway our minds. This is the so-called process of self-cultivation (修養). If there is no process of self-cultivation to overcome the limitations of the mind, then the mind and the world cannot expose their true identities completely and face each other. Zhu Xi’s *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory explains the way that the mind and the world truly meet through self-cultivation. It is in this sense that Zhu Xi’s theory can be seen as one of the valuable curriculum theories containing originality.

2. 『大學』「經一章」朱熹註：心者身之主也，意者心之所發也，實其心之所發，欲其必自慊而無自欺也。

3. 『中庸』「第二章」朱熹註：君子之所以為中庸者，以其有君子之德，而又能隨時以處中也。… 蓋中無定體，隨時而在，是乃平常之理也。

4. 『大學』「傳七章」心不在焉，視而不見，聽而不聞，食而不知其味。

The subject of self-cultivation is the mind. But the mind cannot be free from the limitations of the body it is placed in. Therefore, the work of “the mind” is always dependent on “the body.” Both are biologically connected as a living organism; they cannot be separated, nor can they be in conflict with each other. They are always interdependent. Such interrelatedness of the mind and the body is not ignored in Zhu Xi’s thought. According to Zhu Xi, everything in the universe, including man/woman, comes into being through the workings of “*li*” (理) and “*qi*” (氣);⁵ *li* refers to the ultimate reality that endows everything with its essence, and *qi* refers to the specific energy in which everything exists. In this process of birth, there is no intervention of any absolute force or will. Only the dynamics of universal forces surrounding the moment of birth affect this meeting. Everything that exists in the universe, therefore, conceives *li* as its reality, but at the same time, its actual mode of existence varies in accordance with the diversity of *qi* surrounding the moment of birth. *Li* is the infinite source of life that generates all things in the universe. At the same time, it maintains its original identity by existing diversely inside of things. *Xing* (性) is the very *li* which exists inside things (性即理). *Xing*, as an embodiment of *li*, has the original tendency to converge toward *li*. *Xing* coinciding with its *ben-ran-zhi-xing* (original identity, 本然之性) is called goodness, but the actual existence of *xing* depends on the degree of purity or impurity and flow or blockage of *qi*.⁶ That which restrains *ben-ran-zhi-xing* is called *qi-zhi-zhi-xing* (氣質之性).

Zhu Xi claims that the essence of the mind cannot be explained without relying on these two aspects. But these two aspects do not work in the mind as separate from each other; rather, they become partners and mutually influence each other. This relation between the two aspects is called *dui-dai-guan-xi* (對待關係). The mind as the subject of self-cultivation always elevates the original nature of *xing*.

Then, what is the way to self-cultivation as referred to by Zhu Xi? Must we silently sit with our eyes closed and try to eliminate all traces of desire as do the Zen monks? Zhu Xi, a Confucian scholar, recommends controlling desire in stages by immersing oneself in ontology in order to converge with our ultimate reality. Let us now investigate the essence of Zhu Xi’s theory of self-cultivation

Zhu Xi’s theory of the mind comes to the natural conclusion that *ge-wu* (格

5. 『朱子語類』卷一，理氣上。天下未有無理之氣，亦未有無氣之理。

6. 『朱子語類』卷四，性理一。人物之性氣質之性。理在氣中，如一箇明珠在水裏。理在清底氣中，如珠在那清底水裏面，透底都明。理在濁底氣中，如珠在那濁底水裏面，外面更不見光明處。

物) cannot be interpreted by means of an objective investigative process. According to Zhu Xi, *ben-ran-zhi-xing* (本然之性) and *qi-zhi-zhi-xing* (氣質之性) are chemically consolidated within the mind despite the fact that the mind is made up of both. From an essentialistic perspective, the two sources clearly co-exist in the mind; however, from a phenomenological perspective, separation of these two cannot be achieved without the loss of the mind, i.e., death.⁷ Therefore, the mind with various aspects of existence always becomes subjectively involved during the process of *ge-wu*. As the rays of the sun emit a diverse spectrum of color depending on the nature of the matter, so does the principle of being reflect various forms depending on the form of each mind.

Zhu Xi interprets “*ge* (格)” in *ge-wu* as “*zhi* (至).” This means that the world is not reduced into my mind (*ji-wu*: 卽物) but that I must approach the world. However, approaching the world does not mean mere physical nearness; rather, I must jump into the world (participation). “*Qiong-li* (窮理)” is the effort to understand the ultimate reality within the situation I face. It does not simply end at investigating objective reason but at interpreting it with a critical mind.⁸ This is why *ge-wu* is not different from the effort to attain true knowledge (*zhi-zhi*: 致知). Therefore, *ge-wu* and *zhi-zhi* go beyond a cause and effect relationship; there is synergism between the two. Zhu Xi’s conclusion on the theory of the mind is that *ben-ran-zhi-xing* and *qi-zhi-zhi-xing* coexist within the mind. Zhu Xi compares the workings of the mind to a mirror. As a clear mirror reflects things so vividly, the ultimate reality dwells in the mind by itself without making effort to do so if the mind is well-cultivated.⁹

Then what essence of the world does the mind face? Zhu Xi explains the world by dividing it into two layers. The one is the natural world. “Nature” (自然) can be interpreted as “being by itself.” Nature does not allow the intervention of the mind as the site of desire. Thus, the flow of *li* is not at all affected by the mind of desire in the natural world. Only the forces that endlessly create all things in the world and the sources that extinguish or contain them are immanent; any other intervention of external forces is not permitted. Today, modern science has ignored this essence of nature and has approached nature from the perspective of increasing the possibility of utilization, which has put mankind

7. 『朱熹集』卷四六, p. 2243, 「答劉叔文一」所謂理與氣, 此決是二物。但在物上看, 則二物渾淪, 不可分開各在一處, 然不害二物之各爲一物也。若在理上看, 則雖未有物而已有物之理, 然亦但有其理而已, 未嘗實有是物也。

8. 『大學』「傳五」大學始教, 必使學者, 卽凡天下之物, 莫不因其已知之理而益窮之, 以求至乎其極。

9. 『朱熹集』卷四九, p. 2369, 「答王子合十二」心猶鏡也。但無塵垢之蔽。則本體自明。物來能照。

itself in threat of ecological crisis.

The other layer is the everyday world where various minds are intertwined. Zhu Xi claims that man/woman also embraces the characteristics of the ultimate reality of the natural world. But in fact, a variety of desires overflow in everyday life. The greed to oppress each other is foremost instead of the intent to save each other. Zhu Xi, who was well aware of this fact,¹⁰ conjoins the pure natural world with the everyday world. He believed that the source of existence in the everyday world was based on the natural world that worked by the principle of being.

Ge-wu-zhi-zhi theory first focuses on the everyday world where humans as “relational beings” always stand. The history of Confucianism has developed focusing on the fundamental principle of the everyday world, i.e., human ethics that (wo)man must naturally follow. *Li* (禮) is the representative concept of various aspects of such ethics. It is formed in the realm of the sage beyond the sphere of ordinary (wo)man, but it is considered the principle that must be executed by all (wo)men.¹¹ Thus, its core interest is not in making an issue out of legitimizing *li* within me but to carry it out soundly in the everyday world through endless temperance. This trend of thought was dominant prior to Neo-Confucianism.

Zhu Xi, however, desired a new interpretation of the everyday world in order to find a way to overcome Zen Buddhism, which threatened the existing foundation of Confucianism, and also to reform the pessimistic conditions of his times. Thus, Zhu Xi collected the discourses of previous Confucians and precisely sketched his ontology as a foundation to maintain the everyday world. In his last work, he built a bridge that connects the two worlds. This is the *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory. *Ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory questions both the everyday world and the natural world and attempts to reconcile these two worlds in a more fundamental way.

Implications in Postmodern Curriculum Discourse

Contemporary hermeneutic awareness can greatly contribute to the discussion on postmodern curriculum discourse. When the history of modern hermeneutics

10. Zhu Xi vividly felt the impoverished reality of his times, because he held government offices several times. Much of his thoughts are based on his own experience.

11. 『論語集註』「學而」朱熹註：禮者天理之節文，人事之儀則也。

is traced, we can see that there has been a continuous self-reflective reaction against the dominant religious, epistemological, and metaphysical presuppositions which limit our understanding of human life in its full sense (Oh Mahn-Seug, 1986). It can be said that contemporary hermeneutics has opened a new horizon for understanding through fundamentally criticizing positivistic science that has monopolized the analysis of the world. The negation of objectivity and absoluteness in interpretation requires questioning of the source of legitimacy of the reasoning subject, mechanistic worldview, generalization of truth, and superiority of scientific methods, etc. that have been utilized in the past based on the modern educational paradigm. Negation of such beliefs, which are the foundations of the modern educational paradigm, suggests re-examining the entire essence of education including views on (wo)man and the world, knowledge and personality, teachers, students, and school textbooks, etc.

In spite of recent and diverse efforts to reconstruct the field of curriculum, it can not be denied that the dominant pattern of discourse still stands in the midst of the modern educational paradigm. Pinar points out that many scholars still do not utilize the paradigm shift in the U.S., even after twenty years since the reconceptualization of the theoretical and practical aspects in the field of curriculum, because they are nostalgic for the comfort of old paradigms (Pinar 1995: 12-13). If we expect the postmodern curriculum discourse to contribute to the reconstruction of the concrete field of curriculum, we need to explore a more appropriate thought on curriculum that can replace the dominant concept of curriculum. It is in this context that we attempt to bring out the implications of Zhu Xi's *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory in reconstructing the contemporary field of curriculum.

As we have seen, the implications of Zhu Xi's thought on our efforts for a new curriculum paradigm are manifold. First of all, Zhu Xi's thought requires reflecting upon all assumptions on students, school knowledge, teachings, and learning, etc., which have been taken for granted in the modern educational paradigm. Instead of dealing with these issues, some points that seem to be essential are made in this article below.

Zhu Xi's interpretation of the mind asks us to see students as active beings of desire. Although Zhu Xi acknowledged from the beginning in his theory of the mind that (wo)man is a being with desire, he emphasized the appropriate exercising of desire instead of regarding it merely as an object of elimination, placing the basis of internal control on the mind. Because each (wo)man temperamentally has a different level of desire and a different historical and social situation, the experience of each must be diverse. Thus, Zhu Xi leads us to question

the very assumption of the modern educational paradigm, which believes in an objective standard for experiencing the external world.

Zhu Xi's *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory also allows us to see the nature of school knowledge in a different way. Modernity sees the world as the sum of mechanical laws that are entirely operated by objective reason. But Zhu Xi assumes that the world contains the principle of being within oneself. He considers a factual world and a world of values as one by extending this thought to the everyday world. Modern knowledge is inclined toward the extension of quantity, i.e., an increase in ownership, because it is based on the distinctiveness of understanding. However, knowledge contained within the *ge-wu-zhi-zhi* theory emphasizes contextual appropriateness, because it attempts to uncover the ultimate reality within the living condition of the self.

Zhu Xi's emphasis on self-cultivation is especially suggestive in the sense that it unfolds a new possibility to overcome ethical issues. In contemporary educational practices, students are taught to be men/women of sophisticated knowledge and advanced technique, but they are not taught for what they should use their knowledge and technique. It can be said in this sense that contemporary schools teach students to be "hired gun-fighters" (Bercuson et al. 1984: 68) who are "technical giants" but "moral idiots" (Guy Debrock 1976: 4-5).

According to Zhu Xi as noted above, the mind is viewed as "a shining bead immersed in water." But the workings of the mind are always restrained by diverse forces from within and without. For restoring the essential state of the mind, "the original brilliance of the bead," we need to continue the effort to govern the internal and external forces that sway our mind. Zhu Xi calls this process "self-cultivation (修養)." If the process of self-cultivation to overcome the limitations of the mind does not exist, then the mind and the world cannot completely expose their true identities. Zhu Xi suggests self-cultivation is essential in the process of education not only because it guides students to uncover their true selves but because it also leads them to search for the eternal reality of the world.

Our intellectual journey into Zhu Xi's thoughts is at an end now. An idiom from the eastern philosophical tradition comes to mind: An ending is always a moment of new beginning. Reconstructing an appropriate curriculum paradigm requires a variety of infinite endeavors on our part. Our miniscule efforts are expected to bridge Zhu Xi's thought and the postmodern curriculum discourse to create meaning in the future of the field of education.

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