

## Xu Wang On Aesthetic Education in China

*This is the edited transcript of Xu Wang’s presentation to Panel 4, “The Beauty of True Human Nature,” of the Schiller Institute’s Nov. 13-14 conference, “All Moral Resources of Humanity Have To Be Called Up: Mankind Must Be the Immortal Species!” Mr. Xu is the General Secretary of the SMART Integrative Resort Committee, and the Executive Dean of Boao Culture and Creativity Institute. Subheads have been added.*



Schiller Institute

Xu Wang

Hello everyone! My name is Xu Wang.

Today I’m very delighted to share some experience about kids’ aesthetic education in China, because currently our kids’ education in China is still focused on exams and solid knowledge-transfer, instead of ability and methodology and vision. What will be focused on is so-called “future education systems,” which will adapt to current trends in technology, help kids learn their skill and sharpen their ability by play and interaction, and also experience. For that goal, we will build a children’s museum, an ideas club, a future education platform complex, to ensure our kids learn from the task, from the practice. Instead of traditional aesthetic education, we include art education into design, because my background is as an architect. So, first, the kids have to know what is the standard for beauty, for pretty, and how you define and validate it; then incorporate this ability into a design task, to practice it in real situations for real problem-solving.

### Future School Design Competition

We held a competition last year for kids aged from 6

to 10, to design a future school that the kids would like the most for themselves. From this task-and-result-oriented exercise, you can clearly see differences among the kids. Their abilities vary, but all are significant and super-smart. Some of them are really good at freehand drawing; some really love to make handmade models. Of course, some of them are really into games, so they build their small world with mind-craft by significant work.

This competition is called Future School. It takes three months for the kids to learn about architecture, to learn about how to draw, and how to build models. We have very strong jury members from Tsinghua, Tongji [University], and CAFA [the Central Academy of Fine Arts, in Beijing] and also from various education institutes.

We have a photo of our final: Thirty-six kids out of hundreds competing, who won their honors as candidates for the final prize. These are all very young and little kids, but they’re very daring in speaking about their ideas in front of hundreds of audience members, which is amazing. We all feel that they’re so brave. One



*Students and their projects in the six-month Future School, where young children learn about architecture, drawing, and the building of models. The school culminates with the children making presentations of their designs.*



*The 36 children who were certified as finalists in the Future Schools design competition. A jury member who had been Xu Wang's professor said, "All these kids did great work, more than what you guys did when you were freshmen in undergrad school."*

of the jury members was my professor from my university: She mentioned that "All these kids did great work, more than what you guys did when you were freshmen in undergrad school."

### **Drawings and Models**

I believe so. Because these kids are not limited by skills or setup rules for architecture. They're full of imagination and with the right tools to teach them about design thinking, and also hands-on making models and drawings, they really did a great job. All this design work is goal-oriented, or final-result oriented, so all the kids are starting to find their own sight.

Some of them are looking into this school endeavor because they want to teach [other] kids about how to maintain the environment for a better world. And some kids decided to put their school under the sea; they were starting to look into matters, how to transfer humans down, underneath, like 500 meters below the sea, and starting to find a way for all those mechanisms.

Some of them, for the first time, were cutting models from cardboard, and you can see they did a great job decorating their own design and also with different shapes as well. And from this kind of task, the kids were starting to learn about materials, color, and three-dimension layers, and also different materials showing different textures. One kid made a little kindergarten for cows. The kids had different schools for different

animals; some of their schools were even for aliens! It was really inspiring for us. All the professional architects and teachers, when they see these innovative designs, they all get amazed.

And also, when the kids for the first time were getting to know about structure, about the material contrast for the solid and also the transparency, how the light is coming in, and with angles cross the horizon. They decorated their work with different backgrounds: flowers and grasslands and forests. It's really a nice touch for the kids to utilize their aesthetic training in something real, and to put it into an environment where they can realize their own object and fulfill their goal for a school that they actually desire, that they're willing to go to.

In this one, they're not only showing really beautiful and rich-colored layers for the grassland, but as well, they're using some traditional tent architecture from Inner Mongolia and put one building onto a stand, and to make it [appear to be] really surrounded by the natural environment [depicted behind the stand].

A lot of these young kids have amazing skills for making drawings and with colors. For example, this one: She's really good at free-hand drawing. She starts with a single point, and a single line. She very easily draws all over the place on this drawing. And then, she was tasked to design an architecture. It was her first time to learn how to utilize shape, color, and different

thickness of the lines in a three-dimensional way, in a more task-oriented learning process. For example, to get to learn about the environment, to get to learn about structure, and how to make the contrast between different materials; and learn about space. I think aesthetic recognition of space, of architecture, of urban design, of our surrounding environment, this is our everyday use of aesthetic, and our everyday understanding about art.

That is a more important feature for this competition to try to do. That's what we mentioned before. Some of the boys were better at hand-made models. One model is an amazing white structure, which is very abstract, referring to the "white models" for professional architects. But they made very complex layers of space and they're trying to create in the structure a reasonableness, exploring how people as users are moving into and through space—which is amazing.

In a different model, they already understood [an idea of] superimposing traditional Chinese architecture in nature, in water and mountains, contrasting with super-high rises of the city of Beijing; It is an amazing idea to learn about the scale and the different sensation of a traditional Chinese garden, versus the contemporary Beijing city architecture with all its high rises and steel structure. We think it's a great way to not only learn about art, but also about social [relations], about history, about all human relationships, and [about] some psychology features, as well.

This competition actually went for six months, including the process where the kids learned how to make architecture. Sometimes they did their own study and research about a certain environment, where they want to put their buildings. Afterwards, we had this show, where the kids freely described their designs, proudly, to many different audiences. We felt so proud of them, because the kids' imaginations covered almost all the different environmental situations across China, from the mountains to the ocean, from the grasslands to the desert, from the high rise, high-density city center to the rural village and farmland. They really have big hearts, to discover and observe our world, and also give out their own solutions.

And they were not afraid to give public speeches about their designs, about their viewpoints and about their opinions.

And on the other hand, because they're creating the models together, in this kind of competition they learn how to work in a team, and for future leadership as well.

## Aesthetical Education, Solving Real Problems

I feel, in the future, aesthetic education, or art education shouldn't be limited to creating pretty drawings and paintings only. That should be a fundamental ability for kids; but, how to utilize all this ability to solve real problems, and also to create something more complex, for kids willing to explore the world by themselves and finding all the answers with their own hands and eyes, that is our point.

We're really looking forward to figuring out new ways, not only for the kids' design and art competition, but we're also looking into creating this integrated resource for kids, like the Ideas Kids' Club children's museum and future education complex. We think this is a holistic system for the kids in this age, with a lot of aid from a computer, from the internet, and from the "metaverse," but they still have to utilize the ability of seeking and touching and hands-on, to find a better way to explore, themselves.

And that's our share for today about our aesthetic education in China currently. Thank you for listening.



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