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CAI YUANPEI

(1868-1940)

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Cai Yuanpei, the leading liberal educator of early twentieth-century China, was best known for being the Republic's first Minister of Education, Chancellor of Beijing University, and the founder and first president of the Academia Sinica, China's highest national research institute. However, Cai was also noted for his pioneering work in reforming the system of traditional education and for his efforts to synthesize Chinese and Western educational ideas. In the midst of today's search for solutions to educational problems, there has been a noticeable renewal of interest in Cai as evidenced by the recent founding of the Institute of Cai Yuanpei Research at Beijing University, which is designed to sponsor and encourage the study of Cai's thought and practice.

Biographical sketch

Cai Yuanpei was born on 11 January 1868 in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province. As his father was the manager of a local bank, Cai had a comfortable family life. This enabled him to receive a traditional education which concentrated on knowledge of the classics and the successful completion of the civil-service examinations. After doing so at the age of 22, Cai earned the title of *jinsshi* (doctorate) and became a member of the Hanlin Academy, the highest honour accorded to a scholar in feudal China. In 1894 he was promoted to the rank of compiler at the Hanlin Academy.

As the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 demonstrated China's weakness in the face of Western science and technology, Cai decided to turn away from compiling the classics and began working on translations of European books in order to understand the reasons behind Western successes. From this period onwards, he spent much time teaching in various government and private schools, trying to disseminate the new ideas from the West. In 1901, educators in Shanghai set up the Chinese Educational Association and elected Cai Yuanpei president.

In 1907, Cai went to Germany and enrolled at Leipzig University where he took courses in philosophy, aesthetics, anthropology and experimental psychology. During his stay in Germany, he compiled a series of textbooks for middle schools on moral education, wrote 'The History of Chinese Ethics', and translated several German books into Chinese.

On his return to China in 1911 he was appointed Minister of Education by the Republican government. In protest against Yuan Shikai's autocratic rule, Cai resigned from the post in 1912 and returned to his studies in Germany. In 1913, he moved to France where he studied French and assisted in running the Educational Institute for Chinese Labourers and in organizing the Sino-French Educational Association.

In 1916, Cai was appointed Chancellor of Beijing University and held this position until 1926. During this ten-year period, the leadership of Cai Yuanpei and his devotion to independent thinking, his innovative experimentation and encouragement of young talent helped to develop Beijing University into the major institution of higher education in China.

In 1927, he was named President of the *Daxueyuan* (the University Council), which replaced the former Ministry of Education. Early in 1928, he was instrumental in founding the Academia Sinica, which was designed to advance national research in science and technology. The

Academia Sinica, with Cai as its first president, did much to raise the level of scientific research in China, and certain of its institutes gained international recognition.

After retirement from public life, Cai fell ill in 1936 and died on 5 March 1940 in Hong Kong at the age of 72.

Critique of traditional education

Cai's first book specifically on education was *Xuetang Jiaoke Lun* (On School Curriculum). Published in 1901, it analyses his most significant early experiences, as well as contemporary thinking. It also forcefully enunciates some of the fundamental educational thoughts that he came back to and pursued in his later writings.

The origin of Cai's educational outlook is the education he received and the intellectual life he experienced within in. At the very beginning of the book, Cai wrote emotionally:

My childhood was wasted by being entirely committed to becoming a successful candidate in the imperial examinations. My youth was devoted to pedantic learning, a scholasticism confined to explaining the classics and annotating historical works. I began to discover its limitations at the age of 30 (Vol. 1, p. 139).²

Whereas Cai's indictment was truly based on his own early experiences of examination-based schooling, his first investigation into education was to reason out the limitations of the traditional education then existing in China. Cai summarized his critique of traditional education by using six ideograms: *bi* (vulgar), *luan* (disordered), *fu* (superficial), *xi* (fearful), *zhi* (discouraging) and *qi* (deceptive) (Vol. 1, p. 140). The reasons for choosing these characters, as Cai fully explained, can be outlined as follows.

The aim of traditional education was 'vulgar' because it focused mainly on teaching students how to pass the civil service examinations. This forced them to consider the only goal of learning to be the selfish pursuit of personal gain.

The content of traditional education was 'disordered' because there was nothing designed for children's needs in particular and for human development in general. What was taught to students had always been the unchanging classical texts.

Teaching and learning within the prevailing system was also 'superficial' because the dominant method consisted of memorizing and reciting classical texts.

Furthermore, the relationship between teachers and students was 'fearful' because teachers had absolute authority to force students to learn, but the students had no right to question their teachers and no freedom to pursue learning for its own sake.

The common psychological characteristic among students was 'discouragement' because the pressure on them to learn was so strong that they viewed the school as a prison, and longed with a feeling of despair for a joyful life.

The outcome of the civil service examinations was thus 'deceptive' because the schooling was obviously ineffective and irrelevant, and the selected bureaucrats formed a privileged caste who took care to shield one another. Pointing out the above defects, Cai concluded that the existing system of education made no adequate preparation for the Chinese way of life and gave no inspiration to the Chinese mind. Apparently, as he stressed, the roots of its inadequacy were 'its philosophy centred around the examination system' and 'its aim that had no consideration for the human community' (Vol. 1, p. 139). In the early years of reflection on the most urgent problems of education, he advocated that every Chinese educator must be aware of the educational crisis and should have the courage to throw off the yoke of traditional education. Emerging as a leading figure of an educational renaissance in China, Cai claimed:

We must follow the general rule of freedom of thought and freedom of expression, and not allow any one branch of philosophy or any one tenet of religion to confine our minds, but always aim at a lofty universal point of view which is valid without regard to space or time. For such an education I can think of no other name than education for a world view (Vol. 2, p. 134).

Furthermore, he was adamant that ‘educators can set up a standard based upon the situation of the people and thus we may have education beyond political control’ (Vol. 2, p. 130). It was a new education he sought which, in his view, would be linked organically to society and its culture.

An attempt at synthesis

While his outlook took its origins from his attack on traditional education, Cai did not consider in any way that the new education it was intended to create would have no connection with Chinese traditions.

For Cai, if the new education was to pave its own distinctive pathway to modernism, it was essential to create a new sense of national self-esteem and an open mind to Western advances. He saw that one of the difficulties confronting Chinese educators was the failure to differentiate between those aspects of China’s civilization that were still relevant and those that were not. As he observed :

Whereas in the past we boasted of our own superiority, now, as a result of repeated defeats and humiliations, we have begun to worship everything foreign and depreciate everything native. We have willingly adopted theories and practices accepted by other nations but refused to experiment for ourselves (Vol. 2, p. 264).

To counter this tendency, he suggested that the road to true reform was in adopting a middle course. This meant that the best in each culture should be selected and synthesized so as to formulate and experiment new theories in the light of China’s specific conditions.

That explains why his further investigations focused on one major task: to compare the cultural and educational ideas of China and the West in order that certain syntheses could be made to guide and promote Chinese education. In trying to fulfil such a task, Cai first of all considered a method for the synthesis: ‘Regarding the method for establishing this synthesis, it is essential at first to understand the scientific spirit of the West. Then this scientific spirit can be employed to sift China’s traditional doctrines, and only by so doing can a new vision be discovered’ (Vol. 3, p. 350).

With great enthusiasm, Cai began to look towards the West for guidance in science, the force behind Western progress. His appreciation of Western science was accentuated when he discussed its relation to education. From Western successes, he recognized that the cultivation of science leads to the development of human knowledge and skills in observation and experimentation, and the power of accurate thinking. Science therefore enables the educational effects to be enhanced in both scope and accuracy.

In view of the lack of science in traditional Chinese education, he made a strong case for the theoretical and practical mastery of technical skills through the study of Western sciences. In comparing the educational developments of China and the United Kingdom, he stated:

We must express a desire that our education should make headway towards a much greater development of scientific education. In England, not only the laboratories in the universities, but also the scientific research societies, are all well equipped. [...] But in China our education for at least 2,000 years has aimed at no higher scientific teaching than to mould the man with a perfect character and give him a literary training (Vol. 4, p. 473).

By virtue of the scientific spirit, he attempted to synthesize valuable ideas and experiences from China and the West so as to discover some applicable formulae for China’s educational reform. These efforts can be better seen through his conception of five types of education.

Five types of education

When Cai became Minister of Education in 1912, he made a cogent proposal on educational policy for the Republic, characterized by the unity of five types of education: military/citizenship, utilitarian, moral, a world view, and aesthetic education.

For national survival, he recommended military/citizenship education so as to defend China itself, to regain its lost rights, and to develop its industrial civilization. On the other hand, he acknowledged that this type of education was derived from the ideology of nationalism that should eventually give way to an international approach. But to meet the crisis of the time, when foreign aggression and rivalry between military factions were threatening the very existence of the nation, he deemed 'military education for the citizen' both necessary and urgent as a measure of national defence and a balancing force against the different factions.

In connection with the objective of military training, Cai proposed to borrow Western sciences for promoting utilitarian education in China. To clarify the notion of utilitarian education, he noted:

This theory was created in America but has recently been popular also in European countries. In our country the treasures under the earth have not been developed, the organization of the industrial sector is still in its infancy, the unemployed are numerous, and the nation is extremely poor. Thus utilitarian education is certainly a matter of priority (Vol. 2, p. 131).

In this respect, he was greatly attracted to John Dewey's pragmatic theory with its emphasis on the method of experimental inquiry. He agreed with Dewey that modern education should be designed to bring about the utilitarian aims of fostering human intelligence, democratic mobility and economic growth. It seemed to Cai that the problems of education in China were intertwined with political, economic and social questions. As such, they would not be solved simply by making it possible for more citizens to attend school, or by developing a school system patterned on those of the United States or other industrialized nations.

Cai was fully aware of, and had often referred to, the tragic abuse of scientific knowledge for the selfish ends of political power and economic profit in the West. He warned that military and utilitarian education unaccompanied by moral training would lead to aggression and arrogance. Moreover, he went so far as to believe that national prosperity unaccompanied by a worldview would create restlessness, discontent and chaos. He therefore suggested that the traditional moral outlook of China should be wedded to the scientific spirit of the West, and the benefit of science and technology should be extended to all the people in the world.

Regarding moral education, Cai valued the national morality as the essence of people's nature and the intrinsic attribute of human life, and he believed that the richly varied ideals of great educators in Chinese history have always been at work in shaping people's lives. From a historical perspective, one crucial problem he raised was how to transfer the traditional values to modern society in accordance with the ideal of new education. He held that obsolete moral precepts, such as loyalty to the Emperor and the worship of Confucius, which violated the spirit of the republican era, should be eliminated from school textbooks. On the other hand, those traditional ideas of morality in line with the republican spirit should be used to serve the needs of modern education.

Thus, Cai advocated that China's new education should carry forward the valuable moral principles in the national heritage and draw support from this moral force for building up China's modernization. As he pointed out:

Moral education is to make people work for mutual protection and mutual preservation, and all this is instrumental in breaking the habit of scheming for one's own interest and in eradicating the sense of difference between self and others. From this, people can progress to the promotion of education in the light of reality (Vol. 2, p. 134).

Cai's attention to the conception of reality was related to his interest in what he called 'an introduction to a worldwide approach'. Here, he employed the Kantian idea of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. In Cai's view, granting excessive importance to the phenomenal world tended to produce an unhealthy materialism and selfishness. He hoped that the cultivation of a proper world view would help foster more altruistic and elevated sentiments, thus moving on towards understanding the essential unity of all humankind.

Finally, Cai thought of aesthetic education as an essential part of the new education. He pointed out that little attention in traditional education had been paid to artistic subjects, such as drawing, music and dance. Arguing for the necessity of artistic appreciation for building the life of students in an active and joyful way, he pleaded that artistic subjects must have a prominent position at all levels of the curriculum. A further argument he made was that aesthetic education should be substituted for religious indoctrination. To Cai, it was through aesthetic sensitiveness that the innermost desires and feelings of humanity are revealed, whereas the authoritarian nature of religion militates against students' freedom of learning. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate students through aesthetic education liberated from any kind of religious connotations.

He also considered aesthetic education a bridge between the phenomenal and the noumenal world, because artistic appreciation can help students develop purer emotions and eliminate baser ones such as selfishness, stubbornness and hatred. Thus, he related aesthetic education to world-view education and hoped through these two types of education to extricate the other three types of education (military-citizenship, utilitarian and moral) from political restrictions.

The independence of education

In order to implement the five types of education, Cai thought that the independence of education was a basic and necessary condition. He concluded:

Education is to help the taught obtain the abilities to develop the intelligence of mind, and perfect personal traits that contribute to the culture of humankind; but education is not to make the taught a special instrument used by others who have some other kind of purpose. On that ground, the enterprise of schooling should be entirely given over to independent educators, uninfluenced by any political party or church (Vol. 4, p. 177).

Since Cai was deeply concerned with the problem of political or religious control in educational affairs, he offered an administrative plan for safeguarding the independence of Chinese education. It advocated the adoption of a university district system in China modelled upon the education system in France. He recommended that the Chinese Government establish university districts in various regions of the land, with each district having a university to supervise all levels of district schooling. Control of the university and district educational affairs would rest with an education committee, organized by university professors. The university chancellor would be elected by the committee, and all the district chancellors would form a council of higher education which would discuss matters of mutual concern and decide educational policy. Funds would be collected from local taxes, but a poor district could request aid from the central government upon receiving approval from the Council of Higher Education.

Such a plan, associated with Cai's idea of independent schooling, was desirable but unrealistic. Cai's failure to put his plan into practice is evidence for this point. The plan was proposed in 1922, at a time when China was politically and geographically divided between a host of warlords. Given a situation of incessant warfare and social upheaval, Cai could not hope that the regime of the Beijing warlord would implement his plan for a nationwide system of university districts. In 1927, when the Kuomintang took over China, Cai eventually persuaded the Nationalist Government to approve his plan to delimit university districts. He was appointed President of the *Daxueyuan* (University Council), which replaced the Ministry of Education, to direct the administration of university districts. Because the crux of his plan—namely the shaking off of political control—was in direct conflict with the Nationalist aim to unite China under its centralized political power, Cai's University Council was destined to be short-lived. In fact, it survived for less than a year. Facing the harsh reality, Cai might perhaps have felt that the impact of party politics upon education in the country was too enormous to withstand.

Although Cai was frustrated in his attempt to realize his plan to establish a university district system, he never tired of insisting upon and disseminating his idea of independent schooling.

Based upon this key idea, he made efforts to develop his thinking on such relevant issues as democratic administration and academic freedom.

Consistent with his idea of making schooling independent of politics and religion, Cai advocated creating democratic conditions for educational administration. He pointed out that there are two essential elements in democratic administration: one is 'to seek and accept suggestions made by the masses'; and the other 'to encourage reforms where needed' (Vol. 3, p. 332). As an administrator and educator, Cai was always in favour of sharing responsibility, and he stressed the importance of running the education system by those directly concerned with, or experienced in, education.

When Cai became Chancellor of Beijing University, he did his utmost to put into effect the principle of democracy, and successfully initiated a number of reforms in university administration. First, the *Pingyihui* (Executive Committee) was organized among the faculty deans, as a legislative body to help direct the institution, thus permitting greater participation in university decisions by the faculty. Secondly, the *Jiaoshouhui* (Professors' Committee) was set up as an academic body to take responsibility for the curriculum. Thirdly, several student organizations were formed by the students themselves, to promote students' self-regulation as well as to serve their campus activities.

Another important aspect of Cai's belief in democracy was his adherence to the principle of academic freedom. For Cai, schooling was essentially responsible for developing the widest diversity of commitments and attitudes in support of intellectual progress. As he remarked in a letter about the policy of Beijing University on academic freedom:

1. With respect to intellectual theories, the example of universities all over the world will be followed, that is, all ideas and opinions will be tolerated and accommodated in accordance with the principle of 'freedom of thought'. [...] Inasmuch as different schools of thought can uphold their views and have not fallen by the way in the process of natural selection, they will be allowed to develop freely in spite of their conflicting natures.
2. With respect to the teaching staff, scholarship will be the main criterion for their appointment. Their work of teaching will also be guided by the principle of freedom of thought (Vol. 3, p. 271).

Consequently, this open policy enabled Beijing University to attract and recruit many renowned scholars who represented various schools of thought, such as: Chen Duxiu, editor of the radical journal *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth) and, in later years, a founder of the Communist Party; Hu Shi, a leader of the literary revolution and a key figure in introducing Dewey's ideas to China; Liu Shipai and Huang Jigang, defenders of the traditional literary style; and Gu Hongming, a supporter of the autocratic monarchy. It was the creation of a highly competent and committed faculty that helped Beijing University become a central forum of cultural and intellectual interchange and gain a high reputation for its advanced scholarship. Based on his experience at Beijing University, Cai concluded that it was particularly significant to raise awareness of the issue of academic freedom among Chinese educators since this principle could be used to break down the authoritarianism of the Confucian tradition which had dominated national education for 2,000 years.

Influence on Chinese education

Cai was first and foremost an enlightened educator who grappled with new ideas and searched for positive answers to China's many problems in the course of educational modernization. His great influence on Chinese education can be epitomized in the following four aspects.

First, in the history of China's educational reform, Cai's critique of traditional education was remarkable since it helped to create a consciousness of the limitations of the Confucian framework and consequently initiated the construction process of modern Chinese education. Even more remarkable was his effort at synthesis that has been regarded as one of the most significant attempts to fuse China's cultural and educational heritage with the dynamics of modern Western thought.

Second, Cai's conceptualization of five types of education represented a new theoretical orientation, characterized by its critical attitude towards the Confucian tradition and its objective to be congenial with the spirit of China's republican era. His emphasis upon the importance of scientific knowledge and social action was particularly influential in exchanging a classical curriculum for a scientific one. Moreover, his sustained promotion of aesthetic education made schools give an important place to teaching artistic subjects, which were despised in traditional education.

Third, through his leadership as Chancellor of Beijing University, Cai carried out many practical reforms that had a profound impact on the development of higher education in China. He is well remembered for his accomplishments in the stimulation of creative scholarship and pure research, and in the reorganization of university administration based on the principle of democracy. Also, the pre-eminence of Beijing University is directly attributable to Cai's encouragement of academic freedom, which led to the creation of a varied intellectual community and activated a wide range of learning interests among the students.

Fourth, his claim for the independence of education has been an inspiration for realizing democratic education in China. In this respect, Cai's relevance lies precisely in his treatment, within the context of his liberal educational theory, of exactly those problems which are still perplexing Chinese educators today: the role of the government in the provision of education; the function of political ideology in schooling; and the continuity and stability of educational policies. However, the relevance of his claim lies not merely in its substantive contribution towards pinpointing these problems but, equally, in its illustration of some possibilities for addressing their apparent intractability.

Because of his influence, it is not hard to see why scholars have paid so much attention to Cai. As a result, considerable literature has been devoted to his life and work. Most recently, in order to commemorate the 120th anniversary of his birth, a conference on Cai Yuanpei was held at Beijing University in May 1988, and attended by scholars from both China and other countries. It demonstrated that it is well worthwhile to renew investigations of Cai's pursuits and ideas, especially with reference to education in China today.

Notes

1. *Zhang Lizhong (China)*. Project leader at the China Education Centre of the University of Sydney where he edits a monthly periodical on bilingual popularization (English-Chinese). Formerly lecturer in history at the University of Huazhong (Wuhan, China). Co-author of Guide to Resources on Chinese Language Acquisition and A New Text of the 'Three-character poem' (in Chinese).
2. Quotations from Cai Yuanpei's writings are taken from: Gao Pingshu (ed.), *Cai Yuanpei Quanjī* [The Complete Works of Cai Yuanpei], Vols. 1-4, Beijing, Zhonghua Press, 1984.

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