Management Studies, Sep.-Oct. 2026, Vol. 14, No. 5, 298-303
doi: 10.17265/2328-2185/2026.05.006

Educational Quest in a Transformative Era: A Research on Cai Yuanpei's Educational Paradigm

CHEN Ning
Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, China

Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) was an epoch-making educator in modern China. Living through a period of intense encounter between Chinese and Western cultures, he traversed a personal life trajectory that resonated with the educational transformation of modern China itself. Evolving from a traditional scholar-official into a reformer of modern education, Cai grounded his thought in China's social realities while integrating Chinese and Western intellectual resources, and thereby formed a comprehensive and internally coherent system of educational thought. Taking the cultivation of a "complete personality" as his overarching goal, he formulated the guideline of "simultaneous development of the five types of education", upheld the university-governing principle of "freedom of thought and inclusion of diverse schools", promoted faculty governance and academic autonomy, and advocated the educational method of "respecting nature and cultivating individuality". Through top-level design of the Republican-era educational system, the comprehensive renewal of Peking University, and the wide promotion of social education, he powerfully advanced the paradigmatic shift from old-style feudal education to modern national education. A dialectical examination of his historical contribution and an objective grasp of the contemporary value of his educational paradigm can facilitate the creative transformation and innovative development of his educational ideas, and offer reference points for present-day educational reform.

Keywords: Cai Yuanpei, complete personality, educational thought, educational practice

Introduction

The traditional feudal educational system of late-imperial China crumbled amid the tides of the era, and the search for a new model of education became a central agenda of national salvation. Cai Yuanpei was an outstanding pioneer of educational reform in modern China (Liang, 2006, pp. 45-52). With his distinctive educational theory and practice, Cai Yuanpei stands as a benchmark figure of educational inquiry in this transformative era. Driven by patriotic conviction, he devoted himself to the revolutionary cause, and took education as his main theatre, and carried out sweeping reforms of traditional schooling, profoundly reshaping the landscape of modern Chinese higher education (Shen & Ji, 2025, pp. 8-14).

Cai's educational thought took shape amid the drastic social upheavals of the late Qing period and early Republican period. It was rooted in the Confucian scholarly tradition of "self-cultivation for public service", while also absorbed Western philosophy, ethics, and educational doctrine. His core proposition of "simultaneous development of the five types of education" broke through the limitations of a traditional feudal schooling that

CHEN Ning, Ed.D. candidate, assistant research fellow, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, China.

exalted Confucianism alone, placing the cultivation of a "complete personality" at the heart of educational ends. His institutional ideal of "freedom of thought and inclusive tolerance" fundamentally reshaped the spiritual core of modern Chinese higher education, turning the university into a sanctuary of intellectual enlightenment and academic independence.

These ideas not only responded to transitional society's demand for diversified talents, but also laid the basic value orientation of modern Chinese education. In fact, Cai's educational endeavours were not isolated personal practice; they epitomise how Chinese intellectuals of the transitional age sought to reconstruct social order and renew the national spirit through education. Cai Yuanpei's educational philosophy remains a valuable intellectual heritage and retains profound cautionary relevance for our times (Yang, 2005, pp. 123-126.) The complexity and foresight of his thought bear significance not merely for reinterpretations of modern educational history, but also for the fundamental question confronting contemporary educational reform—what kind of talents to cultivate, and how to cultivate them.

Accordingly, this paper systematically examines Cai's core connotations of educational thought, and his practical pathways. It explores how he probed the essence of education amid the tensions between tradition and modernity, and analyses the historical contributions and limitations of his educational paradigm for modern Chinese educational reform. Accordingly, it seeks to offer a fresh perspective on the educational transformation of modern China, together with historical reference for present-day educational development.

Core Educational Thought

Cultivation Thought: Simultaneous Development of the Five Types of Education and the Construction of the Complete-Person Cultivation System

In his Remarks on Educational Policy, Cai Yuanpei formally proposed an educational programme integrating military-civic education, utilitarian education, civic-moral education, worldview education, and aesthetic education (Gao, 2011, pp. 1-7). The five branches are hierarchically ordered, yet mutually interpenetrated. And they are dialectically unified, jointly serving the cultivation of a "complete personality". In Cai Yuanpei's vision of the "five educations cultivated simultaneously", both the material pursuit of practical utility and the spiritual aspiration for freedom ultimately converge on the cultivation of the individual's independent personality (Tang, 2009, pp. 38-42+55). They broke through the shackles of the old education, which had placed moral instruction alone at the apex, and built China's first systematic, multi-dimensional framework for holistic human development.

First, military-civic education—that is, physical education—was oriented toward remedying the national weakness of physical frailty, emphasising bodily strength and the forging of willpower. Education could not confine itself to book-learning, but must pay serious attention to physical training, forging physically robust citizens. This constitutes the bodily foundation of personality development, providing physical and psychological security for moral formation and intellectual advancement.

Second, utilitarian education—that is, intellectual education—was oriented toward the national economy and people's livelihood, emphasising the transmission of practical knowledge and skills. Cai criticised the old education's empty moral discourse, its disregard for industry, and its detachment from people's livelihood. He argued that education should align with social production and industrial development, transmit scientific and industrial knowledge, and enhance people's productive capacities and means of subsistence. This manifests the modern and pragmatic value of education.

Third, civic-moral education—that is, moral education—occupied the central position among the five branches. Cai absorbed the moral core of the traditional Confucian virtues of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and good trustworthiness", together with the modern Western ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity". He discarded the hierarchical dross and authoritarian colour of feudal ethical codes, and cultivated the moral character and sense of responsibility of modern citizens. In his view, physique, learning, and skill without moral guidance would easily deviate from the right path.

Fourth, worldview education was Cai's most original intellectual contribution, setting the theoretical feature that distinguishes his system from both Chinese and Western traditional education. It guides individuals to transcend gains and losses in the phenomenal world, break through the narrow confines of the self-interested ego, reflect on the essence of the cosmos and the ultimate value of human life, and elevate their spiritual stature. It enables individuals to leap beyond worldly instrumental concerns and to build a spiritual belief-system that transcends the mundane.

Fifth, aesthetic education—that is, the education of sensibility—gave rise to Cai's famous thesis of "substituting religion with aesthetic education". He recognized the affect-refining function of aesthetic education, advocated its widespread dissemination, and sought to reawaken the vital strands of the Chinese cultural heritage (Yao, 2024, pp. 5-15). He brought aesthetic education into the national formal schooling system and established its independent educational status. Aesthetic cultivation shapes emotion through artistic appreciation, purifies utilitarian desire, and cleanses the heart and personality. It bridges the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, subtly accomplishing the moral and spiritual elevation of the personality, and fills the spiritual-education gap that moral, intellectual, and physical education alone cannot reach.

University-Governing Thought: Freedom of Thought, Inclusive Tolerance, and Scholarship as the Foundation

Cai explicitly declared: "A university is an institution devoted to the pursuit of advanced learning" (Gao, 2011, p. 75). This is a fundamental definition of the essence of the modern university; it overturned the feudal conception of the university as a breeding-ground for bureaucrats. It made clear that the university is not a springboard for civil-service rank and wealth, but a specialised institution for the pursuit of truth, the advancement of learning, and the cultivation of personality. From this, he derived core governing principle of "freedom of thought and inclusive tolerance":

> For all schools of thought, in accordance with international university norms and the principle of intellectual freedom, Peking University practices inclusiveness. Any doctrine with sound reasoning and valid grounds, not yet doomed to natural elimination, may develop freely even if its ideas contradict others. (Gao, 2011, p. 200)

This principle was not boundless permissiveness: It was confined to academic research and classroom teaching. It was aimed at dismantling intellectual despotism and fostered an academic environment featuring a hundred schools contending of thought.

First of all, on faculty building, he insisted on recruiting scholars from all quarters on academic merit alone, irrespective of whether they belonged to the old or new school. He appointed representatives of the New Culture Movement to propagate democracy and science, while also retaining leading scholars of classical learning to deepen the study of traditional culture. Old and new scholars lectured on the same platform, engaged in intellectual debates, forming an open and inclusive academic ecology. Cai held that excessive disciplinary

fragmentation easily produced one-sided cognition; only the interpenetration of arts and sciences could cultivate an integrated mind. This view profoundly shaped the disciplinary planning of modern Chinese higher education.

Secondly, on internal governance, he advocated faculty governance and democratic administration. He established the University Senate and Academic Affairs Committees, drawing professors into major institutional decisions, teaching management, and academic evaluation. This practise constrained excessive administrative interference in scholarship and defended academic autonomy and independence. Entrusting academic affairs to scholars was an important experiment in democratic university governance in modern China (Dong, 2025, pp. 99-104).

Moreover, on the teaching system, he comprehensively introduced the elective-course system, breaking down the barriers between arts and sciences and advocating communication between the two, with general education prioritised over narrow vocational training. He strengthened the cultivation of students' comprehensive competence, opposed narrowly utilitarian, specialised skill training, and broadened students' intellectual horizons and mental scope, ultimately serving the overarching goal of cultivating the "complete personality" (Zhang, 2016, pp. 163-168).

Individual Development Thought: Respecting Nature, Cultivating Individuality, and Honouring Human Subjectivity

Cai recentred the human person within education, shifting the educational goal from civil-service success to personality formation. His idea of the "complete personality" challenged the deeply entrenched utilitarian conception of education. His maxim of "respecting nature and cultivating individuality" inspired later generations to honour student subjectivity, providing intellectual resources for teaching in accordance with aptitude and for personalised talent cultivation. His practice of educational equality and women's right to schooling gradually helped society break down gender barriers to education and overturned the traditional prejudice that "a woman's lack of learning is itself a virtue".

Cai sharply criticised old-style education as mechanical and rigid, shackling human nature "like objects cast from the same mould". It imposed uniform dogma and uniform standards, binding human innate dispositions, suppressing individual differences, and stifling innovative thought. He explicitly stated: "In education, rather than adhering to established methods, we should respect nature; rather than demanding uniformity, we should cultivate individuality" (Gao, 2011, p. 162).

Education should conform to the laws of physical and mental development, and respect individual differences in interests and endowments. He opposed mechanical indoctrination and dogmatic discipline, advocated heuristic teaching, and protected students' independent thinking and creative potential.

At the same time, he vigorously advocated educational equality, thoroughly breaking through the feudal class and gender barriers to schooling. He took the lead in promoting co-education at Peking University, pioneering gender equality in modern Chinese higher education (Dong, 2025, pp. 99-104); he also founded night schools for ordinary citizens and night classes for school staff, bringing inclusive education to grassroots workers and common people. This declared unambiguously that education was not the exclusive privilege of a small elite or the powerful: People of all classes, genders, and backgrounds possessed an equal right to education and to the development of personality. Respect for individual development and commitment to educational equality were mutually complementary and organically unified, together constituting the core of his modern thought on individual education.

Major Educational Practices

Restructuring the Modern National Educational System

During his term as Minister of Education, Cai issued his Remarks on Educational Policy, establishing "simultaneous development of the five types of education" as the national educational guideline. He presided over revision of the Renzi-Guichou school system, abolished the feudal educational tenets of "loyalty to the monarch" and "reverence for Confucius", and removed the classics-recitation curriculum from primary and secondary schools. He established the Department of Social Education, bringing social education into the national educational administration. He promulgated the University Decree, defining the university's mission as the pursuit of advanced learning and laying the basic framework of the modern university system. Thereafter, he led the preparatory founding of the Academia Sinica, building a nationwide modern scientific research system, and advocated that universities establish research institutes, integrating scientific spirit into the whole process of higher-education talent cultivation (Liang, 2006, pp. 45-52).

Directing the Systematic Reform of Peking University

The transformation of Peking University is the most representative sample of Cai's educational practice. After taking office in 1917, his first task was to turn students' aspirations around. In his inaugural address, he admonished Peking University students that the university was not for official advancement and wealth, but should take the pursuit of learning as its calling (Gao, 2011, p. 663).

On personnel, he reformed faculty appointment mechanisms, widely recruiting scholars of all schools and rebuilding the teaching body. On governance, he established the senate and faculty councils to put faculty governance into practice (Dong, 2025, pp. 99-104). On disciplinary, he expanded the arts and sciences, merged redundant departments, and implemented the elective system. Students were allowed to take courses across departments, breaking through arts-sciences barriers. On admission, he admitted female students, achieving the breakthrough of co-education in modern national universities. Futhermore, he also supported student societies, established research institutes, and founded academic journals to encourage scholarly research.

The reforms profoundly emancipated the minds of students at Peking University and in turn of students nationwide, strengthened their embrace of democracy and freedom, and turned the university into the center of the New Culture Movement (c. 1915-1923) and the birthplace of the May Fourth Movement (1919). It was transformed from the old Imperial University of Peking into a comprehensive university in the modern sense. His reform experience was radiated to higher education nationwide, driving renewal of institutional conceptions across the country. "Freedom of thought and inclusive tolerance" also forged the spiritual tradition of the modern Chinese university, and endowed the university with the social functions of intellectual enlightenment and cultural renewal.

Advancing Social-Education Practices

To compensate for the limited coverage of formal schooling and extend education to society at large, Cai set up evening classes for university workers and the common people's night school at Peking University, and backed the Popular Education Lecture Corps. He brought learning within reach of service staff, townspeople, and young workers—a practical expression of his ideal of the university as an institution serving society. Public libraries, museums, and public aesthetic education activities were likewise mobilized to cultivate well-rounded character, popularize knowledge, and reform social mores.

Conclusion

In modern Chinese educational history, Cai Yuanpei is an iconic figure combining the multiple roles of institutional designer, university president, and educational thinker. As a modern educator who had himself emerged from the traditional scholar class, he neither totally repudiated Chinese traditional culture nor rigidly clung to old learning. Instead, he insisted on synthesising Chinese and Western resources: drawing on the strengths of Western education to remedy the traditional suppression of individuality and the lack of scientific spirit, while preserving the Chinese educational tradition's emphasis on moral self-cultivation. He explored a modern educational path suited to China's national conditions. This cultural stance remains instructive today.

Viewed objectively, some of Cai's idealistic visions could not be fully realised amid the turbulent social conditions of Republican China, and a certain idealistic tendency can be detected in his thought. Yet the value of an intellectual idea cannot be measured solely by the extent of its practical realisation. The questions he raised—how to balance education's utilitarian ends against human personality development; how to handle the relation between administrative power and academic authority; how to build a pluralistic academic ecology; how to accommodate both indigenous and imported educational resources—are questions that educational development must answer over the long run. Looking back a century later, what Cai left behind is not merely a set of educational propositions and institutions, but an educational paradigm centred on the holistic development of the human person. This intellectual heritage continues to provide reference points for contemporary educational reform.

References

Gao, P. S. (2011). *Selected educational writings of Cai Yuanpei*. Beijing: People's Education Press.

Dong, Y. (2025). The humanistic educational thought and practice of the educator Cai Yuanpei. *Jiangsu Higher Education, 41*(6), 99-104.

Liang, Z. (2006). Cai Yuanpei's position in the history of modern Chinese education. *Theory Front in Higher Education, 19*(10), 45-52.

Shen, G. C., & Ji, X. X. (2025). Historical accumulation, connotative presentation and incentive effects of the educator's spirit. *Educational Science, 41*(1), 8-14.

Tang, G. Q. (2009). Freedom and harmony: A study of Cai Yuanpei's view of "simultaneous development of the five types of education". *Education Research Monthly, 26*(1), 38-42+55.

Yang, C. Y. (2005). The contemporary significance of Cai Yuanpei's educational thought. *Jiangsu Higher Education, 21*(1), 123-126.

Yao, W. F. (2024). Re-examining Cai Yuanpei's proposition of "substituting religion with aesthetic education". *Literature & Art Studies, 46*(7), 5-15.

Zhang, T. (2016). An analysis of Cai Yuanpei's educational thought from the perspective of scholarship-orientation. *Journal of Henan Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 43*(3), 163-168.