

# The Enlightenment of Cai Yuanpei's Aesthetic Education to Personality Education

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**Abstract:** With the development of human society and the progress of science and technology, people's cultural cognition has constantly strengthened. With people's research and thinking, all kinds of cultural education came into being, aesthetic education, moral education, and sports, all play a significant role in people's physical and mental development, among which the aesthetic education thought advocated by Cai Yuanpei has a great value as guidelines for the significance of personality education. It is of great importance to people's physical and mental development.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic education; Cai Yuanpei; Personality

**Online publication:** September 26, 2023

## 1. Introduction

Personality education adheres to the people-oriented aesthetic education theory, develops through beauty and goodness, and innovates practice path of aesthetic education, to better develop China's education cause, and deepen the aesthetic education thought. Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought has important enlightenment significance to personality education.

## 2. Formation of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought

The contents of aesthetic education thoughts in different periods are different. Cai Yuanpei is the founder of modern aesthetic education in China. Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought expressed the freedom of aesthetic education, the compulsion of religion, the progress of aesthetic education, the conservatism of faith, the popularization of aesthetic education, and the limitation of faith. Cultural movement should remember aesthetic education, and replace religion with aesthetic education. The aesthetic education thought intensely cultivated by Cai Yuanpei profoundly influences modern times and even the future<sup>[1]</sup>. The aesthetic education thought studied by Cai Yuanpei has existed since a long time ago. However, his thought still has a profound influence and significance for today's aesthetic education research.

Two factors influenced the formation of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought. One factor is China's traditional culture, which profoundly impacted the structure and ideology of his aesthetic education. The other

is Kant's aesthetic education thought, which also significantly affected the system and nature of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought. These are the influences on aesthetic education thought <sup>[2]</sup>.

First of all, Cai Yuanpei grew up in Chinese traditional culture, mainly influenced by the Confucian tradition, rites, and music, the thought of neutralization, and the traditional culture of Confucius and Mencius' personality and spirit. His profound sinology foundation and correct attitude towards traditional culture laid the foundation of his aesthetic thought <sup>[3]</sup>. Cai Yuanpei believed that the cultivation of rites and music, and their aesthetic thoughts are the practical roots of the emergence of Chinese aesthetic thoughts and philosophical thoughts. Cai Yuanpei mentioned in the Great Department of Chinese New Literature: "The Zhou Dynasty is the most reliable source of Chinese ancient culture. The making of rites by the Duke of Zhou did not allow Solon of Greece to enjoy himself." Cai Yuanpei believed that among the six arts, "music" is a relatively pure aesthetic education, and the others also contain elements of aesthetic education. Cai Yuanpei found the importance of people's aesthetic appreciation and began to pay attention to the needs of spiritual life in etiquette and music education. In his youth, Cai Yuanpei was deeply influenced by Confucianism, but he always understood it clearly. For example, he agreed with Confucius that "learning without thinking leads to useless, and thinking without learning leads to dangerous" <sup>[4]</sup>. He appreciated Confucius' teaching method according to their aptitude, but he disagreed with "respecting Confucianism alone and eliminating all schools of thought," and opposed respecting Confucius and reading the Sutra. He proposed and abolished the provisions of "loyalty to the king" and "respect for the Confucius" in the educational purposes of the former Qing Dynasty, abolished scripture reading in primary schools and classics in universities, reformed the academic system, and revised the curriculum. Cai Yuanpei said: "The so-called freedom does not mean being self-indulgent, but that the right path has been established, that one is determined to be faithful to Yu, and that the outside world does not conquer one." Cai Yuanpei's idea of "freedom" and "equality" is the place where Western culture blends with traditional Chinese Confucian thought, which is also a vital point of the combination of China and the West that he found <sup>[5]</sup>.

Cai Yuanpei studied advanced Western thought at the University of Leipzig in Germany for three years. Kant and Schiller, as the representative of Western aesthetic thought, had an essential influence on Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought. Kant's philosophy divides the world into two parts, "phenomenon" and "substance," and beauty is somewhere in between. Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic thoughts, beauty, and aesthetic sense are one nature <sup>[6]</sup>. Beauty belongs to the phenomenal world in image and the entity world in essence. Cai Yuanpei strongly agreed with Kant's understanding of aesthetics. Cai Yuanpei agreed that aesthetics is not utilitarian, and is explained and expressed by art. Schiller, an esthetician of Kant's time, also played an essential role in forming Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic thoughts. Schiller wrote a book on aesthetic education. Schiller absorbed transcendental philosophy from Kant, separated the object from sensibility, and proposed solving actual political problems through aesthetic means <sup>[7]</sup>. Cai Yuanpei came into contact with Western Kant's dualism and Western aesthetic thoughts, and tried to combine Western philosophical theories with China's national conditions to develop aesthetic education thoughts suitable for China's national conditions. However, in this process, Cai Yuanpei overemphasized the role of aesthetic education, paid attention to the internal role, and ignored the importance of economic law reform, the external role, and the objective law. However, he made efforts to firmly become a modern intellectual with a world vision. As we all know, aesthetic education is not only a kind of education but also includes philosophy. In this aspect of philosophy, Kant's dualism profoundly influenced Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic research. Although he was influenced by Kant, he did not ultimately connect with Kant. Instead, he developed his understanding of aesthetic education on this basis: "The aesthete, in terms of beauty and dignity, is between the phenomenal and physical worlds, and is the girder of the body." From this

point of view, it can be seen that Cai Yuanpei's perspective is different from Kant's<sup>[8]</sup>.

Aesthetic education has a long history. The nobles of the Zhou Dynasty were divided into six arts. After the Spring and Autumn period, they began to differentiate from the whole. The influence of ancient aesthetic education thoughts and cultural thoughts on Cai Yuanpei is reflected in the thoughts of educators in different periods and their respective conclusions. Confucius attached great importance to "rites" and "music," in which "man's accomplishment begins with learning poetry, stands on learning etiquette, and completes with learning music." Xunzi wrote "Music Theory," there is a line where "if you are happy in your actions, you will have a clear mind, and you will be able to achieve success through ritual cultivation." It is also a systematic discussion on aesthetic education. Cai Yuanpei took the essence and added his views based on the sages' theories, and carried them forward, combined with the development trend and characteristics of Chinese society, and merged with Kant's thoughts of China and the West to form his unique aesthetic thoughts<sup>[9]</sup>.

### 3. Essential content of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic thought

In the Dictionary of Education, Cai Yuanpei put forward that those who apply the theory of aesthetics to education aim at cultivating feelings. It can be seen that the function of aesthetic education is mainly to cultivate feelings, and beauty requires creation and practice to stimulate or vent feelings.

- (1) The nature of beauty. Cai Yuanpei believed that beauty has two characteristics, which are universality and transcendence. He said: "How can the object of beauty cultivate emotion? Because it has two characteristics, one is universal, and the other is transcendence." This view, extended from Kant's view of aesthetic disinterest, has also become the foundation of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought. "Ordinary beauty" refers to the beauty, and "special beauty" is the sublime. To understand the aesthetic education of Cai Yuanpei is mainly to understand the aesthetic education. In the development of aesthetic education, we always insist on the universality and transcendence of aesthetic feeling. Through aesthetic education, people will naturally embark on the right road<sup>[10]</sup>.
- (2) Replacing religion with aesthetic education. Cai Yuanpei believed that religion is a kind of belief. With the development of science and technology, people's cognition is constantly improved, literature and art appear, and the status of religion will gradually weaken. The role of religion, which only provides spiritual comfort, will gradually weaken and be replaced by aesthetic education. At that time, the development of aesthetic education and religion was not sound, and the nation urgently needed new ideas to become the spiritual pillar of people by breaking the traditional feudal consciousness. At this time, Cai Yuanpei put forward the guidance of "aesthetic education in place of religion," which attracted everyone's attention. Cai Yuanpei replaced religion with aesthetic education. Considering the social situation and the demands of aesthetic education development, Cai Yuanpei advocated aesthetic education instead of religion. From a macro point of view, it profoundly impacted Chinese ideology and played a specific role in changing the national spiritual realm<sup>[11]</sup>.
- (3) The implementation of aesthetic education. When Cai Yuanpei took office as the Secretary General of Education, he published "Opinions on Education Policy." In this speech, he explained his educational thought and aesthetic education thought. Cai Yuanpei put forward "public," "military," and "real," and injected new explanations into them. He rejected "loyalty to the emperor" and "respect for Confucius," and replaced them with "worldview and aesthetic education." In the unsatisfactory educational environment at that time, the overall quality of the people was in urgent need of improvement, and the goal of education was to improve personality. Cai Yuanpei believed education should be conducive to politics and transcend politics<sup>[12]</sup>. The policy of simultaneous development of five education proposed by Cai Yuanpei was in line with the needs of the government at that time. It was challenging to meet

the material needs at that time, thus he proposed that the world outlook and aesthetic education should meet the spiritual requirements so that the material and spiritual needs could be unified into a complete whole<sup>[13]</sup>. Cai Yuanpei believed that only when aesthetic education meets the needs of the people and awakens the people's thoughts can we truly emancipate our minds. In a sense, the goal of cultivating a sound personality advocated by Cai Yuanpei conforms to social development needs and can simultaneously create a new educational atmosphere.

#### **4. Significance of personality education**

In many descriptions of school education, personality education is a kind of education based on the "id," temper, "self," and the "superego." It is a purposeful and planned experience for students in knowledge learning, ability cultivation, character cultivation, outlook on life, and value shaping, etc. It gives students a clear cognition and value judgment on the country's and society's needs. School education is a vivid practice to perfect personality in social norms and realize the value and pursuit of life. Prioritizing personality education is cultivating a sound personality, learning the coordination and unity of human knowledge, emotion, and behavior, and promoting human and society's all-round and coordinated development<sup>[14]</sup>. In addition, personality education is also an actual need for the psychological development of children and adolescents, which helps to solve some destructive psychological and behavioral tendencies existing in the development of children and adolescents, and contributes to the formation of good personality qualities of children and adolescents. Therefore, contemporary education should focus on imparting knowledge and personality education. The students should carry on the "suffering education," self-esteem, self-improvement, self-reliance, and education of adhering to the truth and upholding justice, which is the inevitable process and necessary conditions for them to form a good personality and adapt to the development of the 21st century.

Education has been a long-term battle since ancient times, and people have focused on the issue. The core of education is educating people, not simply imparting knowledge, but teaching students how to learn, preparing students to find their personality, and teaching them the correct values. Personal education aims to promote students' healthy personalities and characters. Firstly, a healthy self-attitude can recognize their value instead of denying themselves or being too conceited. Secondly, by adequately identifying with others, they can acknowledge their strengths and achievements instead of hiding from them. Thirdly, to face and accept the reality, and make the best of it, because no matter the outcome, the present reality cannot be changed. Plus, with rich subjective experience, one can understand one's characteristics. Personality education is a concept that everyone must shape in the process of growing up. Aesthetics and personality education complement each other. Personality education is a part of moral education, closely related to aesthetic education. However, the two also have essential differences. Although aesthetic education is philosophical, it also includes people's emotions, hence it involves moving the emotion, and using emotion to move the recipient. Personality education is biased to reason, mostly to convince people to know the reason. Aesthetic education is more of an internal emotion, which depends on the subject himself in many aspects and it has subjective consciousness. In contrast, personality education has an external moral constraint and it is more influenced by the superficial society. In today's era of knowledge economy, creativity and competitiveness have become the mainstream trend, which requires people to not only have knowledge reserves but also have enough innovation ability to adapt to the direction of today's society. Individuals can meet the needs of society only if they have the conditions to adapt to the needs of today's society, and individuals will also get the utilization value of society to produce self-satisfaction, the two are interdependent.

## 5. Enlightenment of aesthetic education to personality education

The comprehensive development of personality is essential to Cai Yuanpei's educational thought. To realize the integrity of human nature, he put forward that education policy should emphasize "five simultaneous education" and harmonious development. Being influenced by bourgeois educational thought, he gradually adapted to, then accepted, and finally worked out an educational theory suitable for the development of Chinese society. In the history of modern Chinese education, Cai Yuanpei first put forward national education, utilitarian education, bourgeois moral education, worldview education, and aesthetic education. The measures of simultaneous development of the five courses proposed by Cai Yuanpei not only conform to the changes in Chinese society at that time but also to the trend and direction of world development <sup>[15]</sup>. To carry out the educational policy of "five simultaneous education," he proposed to replace religion with aesthetic education. He put forward this saying: "beauty is free and fluid, compared with religion, which is rigid, compulsory, and limited." Therefore, he believes that education should be free from religious dogma, flexible, and it should exist in a form suitable for human development.

Another essential idea of Cai Yuanpei is the independence of education. Educational freedom means that education must transcend political parties, and be separated from political parties and religions. This idea was very positive in the mode of education at that time, and it also has profound significance for today's educational philosophy. These ideas of Cai Yuanpei are mainly aimed at cultivating human personality, which is a form of promoting personality education, social development, and catering to the national system. Their purpose is to create a democratic society with complete personality, advocating "keeping nature" and combining it with "showing individuality." Instead of connecting the rigid religion with the relatively flexible aesthetic education, people are free and dignified, and we may live in the world with dignity and significance. To achieve this meaning, Cai Yuanpei also introduced the school-running principle of "freedom of thought and inclusiveness," which highly praises ideals. An inclusive teaching concept will help to develop quality education and bring out the country's innovation potential. Therefore, the active study of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought will be of great inspiration and help in the teaching of personality education in modern teaching so that everyone can shine in the field of education, provide wisdom and knowledge so that future generations can walk firmly and powerfully on the road of education.

As an outstanding pioneer and founder of modern Chinese aesthetics, Cai Yuanpei's thought and theory have impacted the development of contemporary Chinese aesthetics. The "transcendence" of aesthetic education is the critical basis of Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought. In his aesthetic education concept, this transcendence is not beyond social norms and moral standards but beyond personal instinct, desire, and interest concepts. Once it touches on national crisis and independence, aesthetic education should serve the construction of the country and the transformation of society with its unique role. Cai Yuanpei stressed that the aesthetic education thought must be diversified, cannot rely on abstraction alone, cannot be particularly boring to preach, must be the most perfect, the most suitable to affect and move the hearts of the people, and to play an important role in purifying feelings, he believed that this is the most basic way to carry out the aesthetic education thought. Aesthetic education thought must be in the form of freedom to appear, the spirit of aesthetic education thought is to let people follow their will from the heart, as expected. However, this is not to show his indulgence in aesthetic education. On the one hand, Cai Yuanpei admitted to the correct and entertaining aesthetic, on the other hand, he also opposed harmful and improper entertainment, such as gambling, reading unhealthy novels, smoking, drinking, etc. He did not use administrative means to stop these, but he promoted healthy and elegant aesthetic taste. In the process of beauty, people are allowed to find their lost emotions from the heart to stimulate their sense of mission so that they can save the country, and strive for the revolution and

construction.

Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought has certain limitations and biases. It is mainly manifested in the need for a correct understanding of the society at that time, one-sided overemphasis on the transcendental function of aesthetic education, and the use of abstract human nature theory to explain aesthetic problems. First of all, although Cai Yuanpei's views on social issues are comprehensive and advanced, improving national quality requires months of accumulation. It cannot be denied that the reality of society fundamentally restricts or affects people's aesthetic ideas and activities. Secondly, looking at Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education theory from the present perspective, it overemphasizes the significance of aesthetic education on moral education, and the aesthetic education thought takes on more tasks of social transformation. Thirdly, Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought is based on idealism. Although he saw the difference and connection between science, morality, and aesthetics, he still needed to understand it fully. Cai Yuanpei's aesthetic education thought is based on Chinese and Western cultures and integrated the two, which became his theoretical basis. To comprehensively establish Chinese aesthetic education, the bourgeoisie itself had many limitations of the times and some relativity limitations, and his own identity was still a long way from the people at the bottom at that time. As a result, certain things could be improved in implementing his aesthetic education.

Cai Yuanpei's thoughts and opinions on aesthetic education reflect the pursuit ahead of times and fully conform to the characteristics of the times. In his aesthetic education thoughts, the diversified mode, cultivating noble and sound personality so that people can understand beauty and learn to create beauty, comprehensively developing the quality education of young people, correcting the educational attitude and thought, clearing the cultivation direction, and fixing the problems existing in the practice of running a school, such as emphasizing intellectual education, ignoring aesthetic education and moral education. This has important guiding significance for the reform of education.

The ultimate goal of social development is human beings' comprehensive and accessible development. On the one hand, aesthetic education plays a driving role in personality education, which can promote people to know the world from a beautiful perspective, find the beauty of the world, look at the world with their unique perspective, and encourage people's understanding of their personality. On the other hand, social development is realized through people's conscious activities. People's development and happiness are closely related to aesthetic education. Individual development and individual freedom should not be seen as conditions in themselves but as the goal of society's development, and not as a condition for the organization and the individual to fulfill each other, nor as a condition for saying who is who. The individual is an essential driving force for social development, and without human development, social product becomes meaningless.

Walking in the endless wilderness of life, each of us will grow up, our view and vision of beauty will change, and our personality will also alter in this process. In aesthetic education thought, nothing is right or wrong, and what we need is the real significance of the integration of those rights and wrongs into our life and growth, which is conducive to our personality education, rather than calculating those rights and wrongs one by one, because no matter right or wrong, we have grown up with a certain degree of education, which is particularly profound. In personality education, we should not only conform to the development of the times but also conform to the law of physical and mental development of people to better realize the influence and enlightenment of aesthetic education on personality education.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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