

# **From Faith Substitution to Personality Cultivation: The Philosophical Path and Educational Practice of Cai Yuanpei's Aesthetic Education Thought**

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## **Abstract**

As a foundational theory in the development of modern Chinese educational philosophy, Cai Yuanpei's doctrine of "replacing religion with aesthetic education," formulated within a specific socio-historical context, continues to hold significant theoretical and practical value today. This study takes Cai Yuanpei's theory as its point of departure, offering an interdisciplinary exploration of the theoretical construction of his educational philosophy. Specifically, it first deconstructs the complex historical conditions that gave rise to the theory—conditions shaped both by the urgent realities of national crises during the late Qing and early Republican periods and by the cross-cultural integration of Western positivist philosophy with traditional Chinese aesthetic thought. It then analyzes the theory's three core philosophical dimensions—"unity of form and meaning," "morality as the foundation," and "integration of knowledge and practice"—to reveal its vision of educational ethics that transcend instrumental rationality. Finally, by connecting the theory to contemporary demands for reconstructing spiritual beliefs and transforming quality education, this paper demonstrates its practical relevance in addressing value nihilism and enhancing aesthetic education, thereby providing a historical reference for the localized innovation of modern educational philosophy.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic education; Cai Yuanpei; Educational philosophy

## **Introduction**

Cai Yuanpei, a landmark figure in the intellectual history of modern China—an educator, revolutionary, and pioneer of aesthetic education—creatively proposed the iconic theory of “replacing religion with aesthetic education” in the early 20th century. Centered on advocating aesthetic education, this theoretical framework firmly opposed religious obscurantism; aimed at promoting scientific rationality, it resolutely criticized ignorance and backwardness; and driven by the pursuit of intellectual freedom, it sharply condemned autocratic tyranny. Situated within the turbulent context of China’s early 20th-century social transformation, this doctrine not only embodied the enlightening value of breaking the shackles of thought but also triggered profound and enduring reverberations in the intellectual and cultural spheres. Consequently, it secured its central place in the corpus of Cai Yuanpei’s educational thought and became an indispensable point of departure for interpreting his educational philosophy.

## **I. The Foundations of the Doctrine of “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education”**

The formation of Cai Yuanpei’s doctrine of “replacing religion with aesthetic education” was rooted in a profound interplay of multiple historical dynamics and cross-cultural intellectual resources. In the cultural arena following the 1911 Revolution, there emerged a structural tension between the deconstruction of traditional values and the construction of new paradigms. The educational community faced a twofold challenge: the revivalist movement advocating the “sacralization of Confucian classics,” and the growing cultural influence of Christian missionary organizations empowered by unequal treaties. Under such dual pressures, Cai Yuanpei, in 1917, formally proposed an aesthetic path to spiritual redemption imbued with civilizational critique, marking a pivotal moment in modern Chinese educational philosophy that broke away from conventional frameworks.

### **1.1. The Socio-Historical Context of the Doctrine**

Cai Yuanpei's proposition of "replacing religion with aesthetic education" was born from a deeply complex socio-historical backdrop. At a time when the nation was engulfed in crises of survival and its people were experiencing profound disruptions in their belief systems, this idea emerged as a timely intellectual response.

Before the 18th century, Chinese society maintained a relatively stable, self-contained system that gradually nurtured a Sinocentric sense of superiority. However, the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1840 shattered the illusion of the "Celestial Empire," forcibly opening China's doors and ushering in an era of unprecedented upheaval. The humiliating defeat plunged China into a semi-colonial, semi-feudal state. The vast peasantry not only endured brutal exploitation by imperialist powers but also suffered from the oppressive rule of the Qing government.

The Taiping Rebellion of 1851, a massive uprising of the peasantry against this dual oppression, though ultimately suppressed by the combined forces of domestic and foreign reactionaries, powerfully demonstrated the unyielding will of the Chinese people to defend their national independence and dignity. As the Qing regime grew increasingly corrupt, foreign powers intensified their ambitions to partition China. The crushing defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki and the Boxer Protocol further exposed the nation to existential peril.

Within traditional society, Confucianism had long served as the core belief system, providing moral guidance and a spiritual anchor for the populace, as well as a framework for interpreting life and the world. Although the Opium War disrupted the established order, it did not immediately displace Confucian orthodoxy, which continued to exert a cohesive influence over Chinese society. However, it was the Xinhai Revolution that delivered the most profound blow to the Confucian belief structure. Against the backdrop of escalating imperialist aggression and mounting national crises, the revolution's rapid advance dismantled the authority-based ideologies of "revering heaven and honoring ancestors" and the "three cardinal guides and five constant virtues."

Yet, the nascent belief system of bourgeois democratic republicanism was neither mature nor robust enough to fill this ideological vacuum. Society descended into a state of spiritual disarray: a proliferation of competing value systems failed to coalesce into a unifying moral framework. This vacuum left many Chinese people, caught in the turbulence of social transformation, without the spiritual support or sense of meaning they had long relied upon, triggering a widespread crisis of faith.

Amid this chaos, intellectual pioneers of modern China, driven by the urgent desire to rescue a nation on the brink of collapse and to alleviate the suffering of its people, searched for new ideological paths to salvation. However, ideological extremism and the cultural aggression of imperialism fueled the rampant spread of “religious redemption” theories. The Confucian religion movement gained momentum, and missionary education rapidly expanded its influence, bringing further turmoil to the intellectual landscape.

Confronted with this grim reality, Cai Yuanpei actively engaged in intellectual exploration and resistance. On April 8, 1917, during a lecture at the Shen Zhou Society in Beijing, he formally articulated his proposition of “replacing religion with aesthetic education.” From that moment on, this doctrine became a crucial banner in Cai’s efforts to resist feudal revivalism, counter the cultural incursion of foreign religions, and promote the development of aesthetic education in modern China.

## **1.2. Intellectual and Cultural Roots of the Doctrine**

As the most prominent synthesizer of modern Chinese aesthetic education theory, Cai Yuanpei’s proposition of “replacing religion with aesthetic education” reflects a distinct feature of integration between Chinese and Western cultural resources. The construction of this theoretical system is deeply rooted in China’s millennia-long ritual and music traditions while also absorbing modern Western intellectual resources since the Enlightenment, thereby forming a unique paradigm of cross-civilizational dialogue.

The lineage of Chinese aesthetic thought can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, where the rudiments of aesthetic moral cultivation appeared during the eras of Yao

and Shun. The establishment of the “Six Arts” educational system during the Western Zhou marked the preliminary institutional framework of aesthetic education. In the Qin and Han periods, the Confucian canonical system elevated the ethical-aesthetic ideals of “poetic education” and “music education” into an official ideology. Notably, Dong Zhongshu’s cultural policy of “exalting Confucianism exclusively” not only cemented the orthodox status of Confucianism but also, through the “correspondence between Heaven and humanity” theory, constructed a philosophical link between cosmic order and social ethics.

This model of moral cultivation—integrating ritual and music—survived the intellectual shocks of Wei-Jin metaphysics and Tang dynasty Buddhism, continuing to uphold the value system of traditional society centered on the “three cardinal guides and five constant virtues.” Cai Yuanpei’s scholarly foundation was deeply embedded in this cultural heritage. His interpretation of the *Yue Ji* (“Record of Music”), especially his creative reinterpretation of Xunzi’s idea that “when harmony is achieved in music, the people are at peace,” exemplified his modern reading of Confucian ritual-music philosophy. In his Speech at the Sino-French Educational Association, Cai emphasized “the great power of music in unifying the national spirit,” a belief that inspired him to establish institutions such as the National Conservatory of Music in Shanghai.

Importantly, Cai inherited but was not constrained by tradition. In *Opinions on New Education*, he explicitly called for “breaking the old system of using classical studies as the sole carrier of aesthetic education,” a critical stance that laid the foundation for his theoretical innovations.

Cai’s cross-cultural intellectual orientation was inseparable from the knowledge framework shaped by his five academic journeys to Europe and America over a span of twelve years. These experiences allowed him to construct an aesthetic-education theory bridging Chinese and Western thought, with three theoretical pillars: Kantian epistemology, Schiller’s theory of aesthetic emancipation, and Comte’s positivism.

From the Kantian dimension, Cai creatively adapted the transcendental aesthetics of *Critique of Judgment*. He not only absorbed Kant’s dual distinction between “pure

beauty” and “dependent beauty” but also transformed the theory of “aesthetic common sense” into a philosophical basis for the universality of aesthetic education. His “four-element theory of aesthetic education,” articulated in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, represents a localized reconstruction of Kant’s “three critiques.” This theoretical integration was concretized in his 1912 *Opinions on the Aims of Education*, where he advocated for “worldview education,” emphasizing that aesthetic experience mediates between the phenomenal and noumenal realms.

Schiller’s influence was more methodological. The proposition in *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* that the “aesthetic state as the third realm” was reinterpreted by Cai as a practical path to breaking religious constraints. Unlike Schiller’s reflective critique of the French Revolution, Cai highlighted the political and educational potential of aesthetic education. In his *Lectures at the Chinese Laborers’ School*, he advocated the strategy of “replacing religion with art” as a means of popular education. This theoretical shift was tested in practice during the 1916 “Art Movement,” where organizations like the Society for the Study of Painting Methods and the Drama Reform Society extended aesthetic education into the field of social reform.

Comte’s positivism exerted a dual influence. His “hierarchy of sciences” offered an epistemological framework for Cai’s academic classification, while the concept of the “Religion of Humanity” inspired Cai’s exploration of secular alternatives to traditional religion. The founding of the Comte School in 1917 epitomized this intellectual synthesis: the curriculum incorporated both positivist sciences such as physics and chemistry and traditional music courses, embodying the principle of the “symbiosis of scientific spirit and aesthetic education.” This interdisciplinary integration endowed Cai’s aesthetic-education theory with both philosophical depth and practical operability, ultimately elevating it into a cultural program aimed at transforming national character.

## **II. Philosophical Connotations of the Doctrine**

Cai Yuanpei's philosophical thought was grounded in both Chinese and Western traditions. His critical engagement with these intellectual currents allowed him neither to reject Chinese philosophy outright nor to idolize Western ideas blindly. Instead, he sought points of convergence to create a uniquely inclusive and integrative philosophical vision. Within the particular historical and cultural context of his era, Cai developed a distinctive philosophy of "balance and harmony." Although rooted in Chinese tradition, his philosophy harmoniously blended the essence of Eastern and Western thought, as well as ancient and modern ideas, to form a comprehensive system.

### **2.1.Unity of Form and Essence**

As the founder of modern Chinese aesthetic-education theory, Cai Yuanpei creatively reinterpreted core Kantian propositions at the ontological level. In his *Outline of Philosophy*, he constructed a dualistic framework of "phenomenon–noumenon," inheriting the speculative tradition of German classical philosophy while incorporating the Chinese concept of the dynamic relationship between "substance" and "function."

This theoretical framework operates on three progressive levels:

**Phenomenal Realm:** Cai defined the phenomenal realm as the objective reality accessible to experience. Governed by time and space, this material world encompasses natural movements and historical processes, all strictly determined by causal laws. In *Worldview and Lifeview*, Cai emphasized that the limitations of the phenomenal realm lie not only in the constraints of time and space but also in the epistemological limits of empiricism—knowledge acquired through induction remains within the domain of "relative truth."

**Noumenal Realm:** The noumenal realm, as a transcendental existence, constitutes the metaphysical dimension of Cai's philosophy. Free from temporal, spatial, and causal constraints, it resonates with Schopenhauer's notion of the "world as will and representation." On the epistemological level, Cai underscored the ineffability of the noumenal realm, noting that any attempt to grasp its essence through logical

deduction or empirical validation would lead to antinomies. This “boundary of reason,” described in his Brief Outline of Philosophy, reveals that these two seemingly opposing realms are, in fact, dialectically unified.

**Will as a Mediator:** In his *On Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education*, Cai proposed the innovative “mediation of will,” where free will serves as the ontological bridge between the phenomenal and noumenal realms. This will, as a transcendental spiritual force, is neither purely material nor entirely metaphysical, but rather connects the two. This conceptualization reflects a synthesis of three intellectual influences: Kant’s theory of the “thing-in-itself,” Wang Yangming’s doctrine of “unity of knowledge and action,” and the Huayan Buddhist principle of “non-obstruction between principle and phenomena.”

This ontological framework found practical application in Cai’s educational philosophy. He advocated that aesthetic education should serve as a means to transcend the phenomenal world. Within his aesthetic theory, the notion of “universality” aligns with the transcendental quality of the noumenal realm, while the “transcendence” dimension corresponds to the realization of free will.

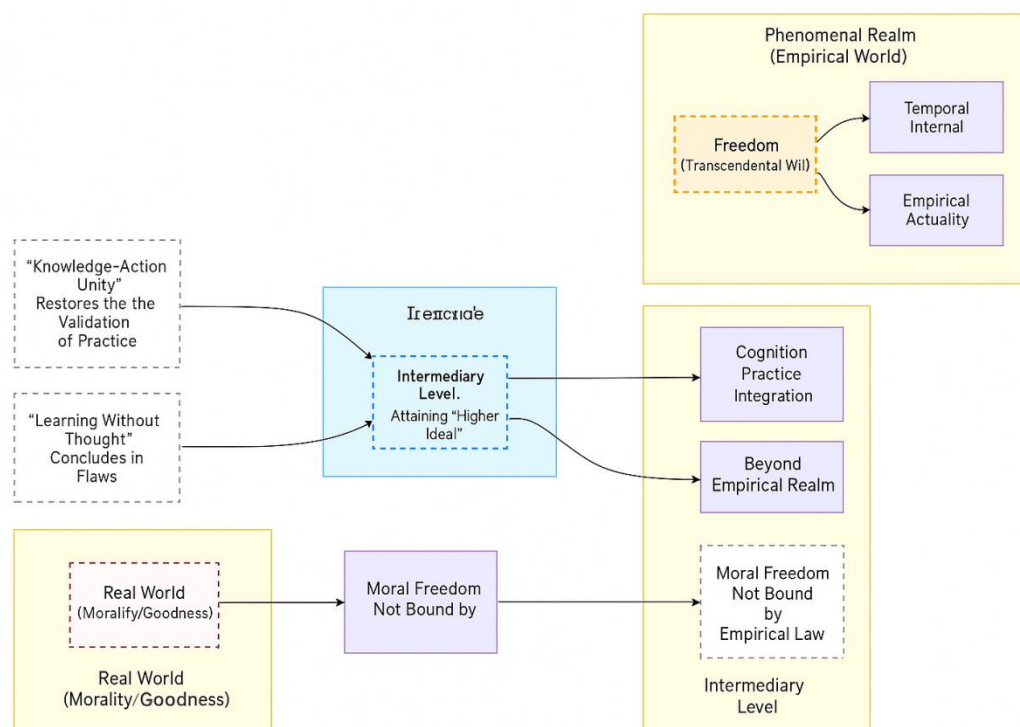




Figure 2-1. Schematic Diagram of Cai Yuanpei's Philosophy of the "Unity of Form and Essence"

## **2.2.Morality as the Core**

The ontological roots of Chinese ethical thought can be traced back to the intellectual breakthroughs of the Axial Age. Laozi's proposition in the *Dao De Jing*—"The Dao gives birth, and virtue nurtures"—opened the path for metaphysical moral philosophy. Later, Xunzi's assertion in *Encouraging Learning*—"Ritual is the great division of law and the guiding principle of order"—signaled a practical turn in the conceptualization of morality. This virtue-centered tradition was creatively transformed within Cai Yuanpei's intellectual framework, where his construction of ethical thought unfolds across three theoretical dimensions.

First, at the level of disciplinary structuring, Cai modernized traditional moral thought through the compilation of *History of Chinese Ethics*. In this work, he redefined "self-cultivation studies" as a practice for the moral refinement of the individual, while elevating "ethics" to the level of a phenomenological study of the national spirit. In his *Textbook on Self-Cultivation for Secondary Schools* (1910), he explicitly stated, "Ethics is not merely a norm of personal conduct, but the pivot for the survival of the collective." This redefinition broke away from the linear logic of the traditional framework of "self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and peace under Heaven," and instead constructed a dialectical cognitive model that integrated the individual and the community.

Second, on the ontological plane of morality, Cai proposed the "dual moral structure theory." In his *Manifesto for Social Reform*, he systematically distinguished between negative morality and positive morality. The former is expressed as a baseline ethic—"Do not commit evil even if it seems trivial"—while the latter aspires to the Confucian ideal of "One who wishes to establish himself must also establish others," pointing toward the perfection of virtue. This innovative classification inherited Zhu Xi's tradition of moral self-cultivation expressed in "preserving heavenly principle and eliminating human desires," while also incorporating the rational core of

Bentham's utilitarianism. The result was a distinctive moral development ladder theory that conceptualized ethics as a progressive process.

Finally, from the dimension of practical philosophy, Cai emphasized the dialectical process of moral cultivation. He argued that "negative morality is like a dike, while positive morality is like a spring," together forming the tension that drives the cultivation of virtue. This perspective was concretized in his 1912 work, *Opinions on the Aims of Education*, through what he called the "three-step progression method": establishing behavioral boundaries through normative constraints, fostering empathy through emotional resonance, and ultimately achieving moral self-awareness and freedom of will. This process, moving from the negative stage, through a transitional stage, to the positive stage, illustrated his belief in the dynamic development of moral consciousness.

This ethical framework not only achieved a modern transformation of traditional virtue ethics but also provided a theoretical paradigm for the reconstruction of values during the New Culture Movement. Cai's cross-cultural interpretative strategy maintained the ontological commitment to the "unity of principle and diversity of phenomena," while also integrating the methodological tools of "evolutionary ethics," demonstrating the creative intellectual capacity of modern Chinese thinkers in bridging the dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophies.

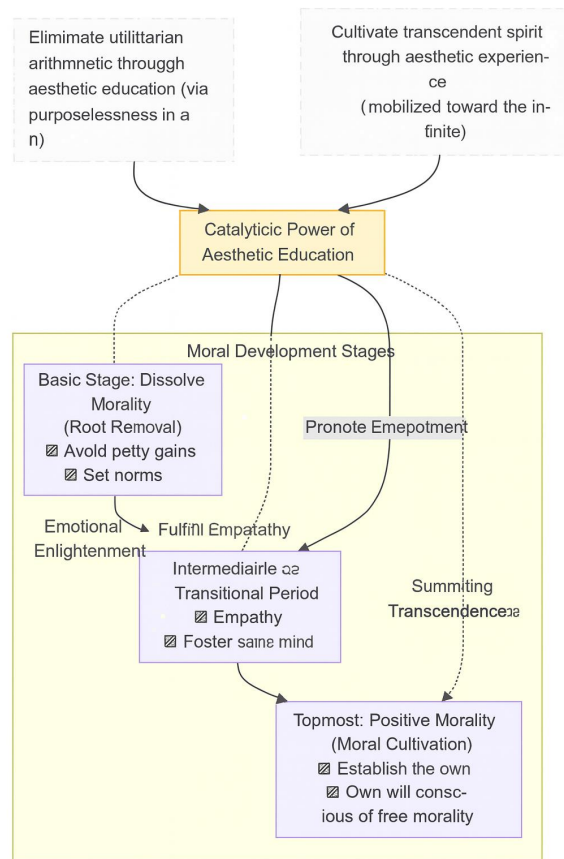


Figure 2-2. The Ladder Model of Cai Yuanpei's Moral Development Theory

### 2.3. Integration of Knowledge and Action

The cognitive paradigm of “unity between Heaven and humanity” in the Chinese philosophical tradition pursues not only the metaphysical comprehension of the “Way” (Dao) but also the practical wisdom of “methods of attaining the Way.” This interactive relationship between knowledge and action constitutes the essence of the concept of zhizhi (attaining knowledge). From an epistemological perspective, Chinese philosophy has consistently viewed the relationship between knowledge and action as a dynamic unity: action, as the foundation of practice, nurtures the budding of cognition; knowledge, as rational awareness, in turn deepens and refines practice. The two together form a dialectical process of mutual construction.

In his epistemological framework, Cai Yuanpei articulated four principles for “ethical cognition”: the harmonious integration of emotional experience and rational judgment; the balanced development of empirical accumulation and logical reasoning; the clarity

and transparency of subject consciousness; and the embedding of value cognition into everyday human affairs. At its core, this epistemology calls for “acting in accordance with reason,” transforming moral cognition into practical action.

This principle was operationalized in the “integration of teaching, learning, and doing” approach that Cai implemented at Xiaozhuang Normal School. Through labor-practice modules in the curriculum and the systematic connection between theoretical knowledge and practical application in teaching methods, he transformed philosophical ideas into institutional innovations in education. Addressing the chronic disconnection between knowledge and practice in modern education, Cai advocated for a dual pathway of strengthening both mental and physical education. He introduced practical courses such as handicrafts and horticulture into the school curriculum and established school-run factories and experimental bases to build an integrated model where “knowledge and action support each other.”

This educational practice revealed a profound insight: the cultivation of moral character can only be completed through practical discipline, where “spare energy after physical work should be devoted to learning,” and where intellectual and physical labor interact to achieve personal integrity and moral growth. To address the practical dilemma of “knowing is easy, doing is hard,” Cai introduced art education as a transformative medium. Leveraging the inherently “non-utilitarian” nature of artistic activities, he used aesthetic experiences to dissolve utilitarian calculations, cultivating a transcendent spirit through artistic creation undertaken “for its own sake.” This pathway of promoting moral practice through aesthetic education not only inherited the Confucian tradition of “wandering in the arts” but also imbued art education with modern significance, representing one of the most innovative dimensions of Cai Yuanpei’s educational philosophy.

In sum, Cai Yuanpei integrated ancient and modern, Eastern and Western philosophical ideas to form an inclusive “philosophy of harmony.” On this foundation, he constructed the educational philosophy of “replacing religion with aesthetic education.”

### **III. Educational Philosophy of “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education”**

Since ancient times, Chinese philosophy and education have been closely connected, with aesthetic education (meiyu) serving as a key concept within Chinese educational philosophy. Although Cai Yuanpei was not the first to advocate for art education, his educational philosophy of “replacing religion with aesthetic education” carries profound meaning and has played a crucial role in advancing the development of art education in China.

#### **3.1. Advocating Educational Freedom**

In response to the educational realities of his time, Cai Yuanpei argued that “without adopting a new style of education, we cannot revive our ancient civilization.” Thus, the new style of education must be a form of free education—one independent from religious influence and capable of transforming the outdated notions of traditional education.

On one hand, the proliferation of missionary schools established by imperialist powers in China posed a serious threat. These schools, heavily promoting particular religious doctrines, often ignored Chinese history, literature, and other essential subjects, creating a parallel system that conflicted with China’s educational framework. This situation endangered the integrity of China’s cultural values and traditions. In response, Cai Yuanpei strongly advocated for the separation of education from religion, insisting that “religion should not intervene in education.”

Cai criticized religion as a form of ossified conservatism that used elaborate rituals and exaggerated propaganda to induce blind faith among the uninformed. Such coercion, he argued, constituted an invasion of personal consciousness and an infringement of human rights. He believed that unchecked religious influence would undermine the independence and creativity of education: education is progressive and encourages human advancement, while religious dogma often stifles critical thinking. Moreover, education should transcend all boundaries of race, gender, or nationality, whereas religion is inherently sectarian and nationally divided. Allowing religious

forces to control education, Cai warned, would inevitably strip education of its freedom.

On the other hand, traditional Chinese education, though strong in moral cultivation and talent development, often neglected science and overemphasized literary refinement. This elitist system allowed only a small fraction of students to succeed and enter officialdom, thus ignoring the universal mission of education. To overcome these limitations, Cai proposed that universities should first prioritize scientific education to cultivate students with dignity and scientific thinking; second, integrate knowledge and practice, balancing intellectual and physical labor to foster a respect for and habit of labor; and third, emphasize aesthetic education by establishing proper facilities and integrating artistic appreciation and creation into all disciplines, making aesthetic education an indispensable part of the entire educational system.

For Cai Yuanpei, aesthetic education was always the core of his educational philosophy. By using aesthetic education as a substitute for religion, he sought to enlighten individuals and achieve the ideal of educational freedom.

### **3.2.Achieving Educational Equality**

The unequal distribution of educational resources, Cai argued, was a major cause of entrenched social stratification. To counter this, he developed a theoretical framework in which educational equality served as the foundation for dismantling social inequality.

His vision of educational equality carried two dimensions. At the level of rights, he championed the Confucian principle of “education for all without discrimination,” emphasizing that every member of society—regardless of wealth, age, geography, or gender—should have the equal right to education. At the level of practice, he stressed the need for institutional mechanisms to equalize access and eliminate barriers of class and gender, thereby building a universal, lifelong education system.

In terms of class equality, Cai’s educational reforms exhibited a clear populist orientation. To counteract the monopolization of educational resources by elites, he led the Chinese Educational Improvement Society in initiating the Civic Education

Movement. This movement creatively combined the implementation of compulsory education with empowering the working population. On one hand, it introduced diverse educational forms such as workers' night schools and literacy classes for peasants; on the other, it promoted language reform by replacing classical Chinese with vernacular Chinese, giving illiterate groups the tools to participate in modern cultural life. This idea of "compulsory education" was reflected in his Proposal for the Implementation of New Punctuation Marks, where lowering the barriers to literacy was seen as a way to promote substantive equality in educational opportunities.

In terms of gender equality, Cai advanced a three-stage model of "rights → opportunities → capabilities." From the philosophical standpoint of "natural human rights," he pioneered the implementation of co-education at Peking University, breaking away from the tradition of segregated schooling that had persisted since the Qing dynasty. At the level of legal and institutional support, through revising the Latest Political Program of Zhejiang, he advocated for women's rights to property inheritance and marriage autonomy, eliminating economic constraints that had long hindered women's access to education.

This path of "rights protection → opportunity access → capability enhancement" allowed educational equality to transcend mere formal justice and become a practical tool for social transformation. Cai's philosophy of educational equality revealed that the democratization of education is not only an indicator of social justice but also a lever for societal reform. Through institutional innovations, he restructured social relations, fulfilling the ideal of "saving the nation through education" and paving a unique path for the modernization of education in modern China.

Figure 3-1. Schematic Model of Cai Yuanpei's Three-Stage Advancement toward Educational Equality

### **3.3. Promoting Art Education**

As both an administrator and practitioner of education, Cai Yuanpei consistently promoted the development of art education. In 1918, Cai founded the Peking University Painting Research Society, the first modern art research group in China

dedicated to painting, with the goal of “studying painting methods and developing aesthetic education.” In the same year, Cai established the Peking University Music Research Society, aimed at “valuing music education and promoting aesthetic cultivation.” In 1920, in his speech at the Music Research Society titled “Address at the Peking University Music Research Society,” Cai stated that he not only hoped to draw upon the strengths of Western music to enrich traditional Chinese music but also wished to foster a spirit of innovation among the Chinese people to enhance artistic creativity. He envisioned music as a “cultural amplifier”, allowing more people to access music, popularizing it among the public, and ensuring that the arts were not just objects of study and appreciation for experts and students but an essential part of everyday life for ordinary citizens. In 1927, during a meeting of the University Council’s Art Education Committee, Cai proposed the “Plan for Establishing a National Art University.” This proposal reflected Cai Yuanpei’s philosophy, his artistic vision, and his educational ideals. Its central aim was to establish a specialized university to impart knowledge of art appreciation and to cultivate the ability to create art, underscoring the crucial role of aesthetic education in Cai Yuanpei’s educational system.

#### **IV. Contemporary Value of “Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education”**

As a value reconstruction framework during the New Culture Movement, the theory of “replacing religion with aesthetic education” embodies a dual dimension of critique: on the epistemological level, it deconstructs the metaphysical foundation of religious discourse; on the axiological level, it constructs a spiritual paradigm for an aesthetic community. In *Outline of Philosophy*, Cai Yuanpei systematically elaborated the three pillars of this theory: first, religion relies on mystical experiences to sustain authority, whereas aesthetic education builds value consensus through universal aesthetic experiences; second, religion creates a hierarchical order between gods and humans, whereas aesthetic education nurtures intersubjective relationships of equality; and third, religion appeals to promises of an afterlife, whereas aesthetic education emphasizes spiritual transcendence grounded in the present world. Although historical



limitations prevented the full realization of this theory in practice, its internal logic still provides valuable insights for contemporary spiritual governance.

At present, China faces complex challenges in building spiritual civilization. According to the China Religious Blue Book (2022), between 2010 and 2020, institutional religious adherents grew by 63%, while the number of emerging religious groups increased 2.8 times, with individuals under the age of 35 accounting for 47% of followers. This transformation in belief structures reflects three crises of modernity: a value vacuum during the market economy transition, ideological infiltration in the process of globalization, and a crisis of meaning caused by technological alienation. Certain extremist sects, through emotional manipulation and cognitive distortion, have established forms of “spiritual colonization,” posing serious risks to the mainstream value system. Against this backdrop, Cai Yuanpei’s critique of religion gains contemporary relevance. His intellectual legacy offers three governance pathways worthy of consideration. First, the knowledge-based demystification path, which advocates using the study of religious history to reveal the “constructed sacredness” of religion. In *Lectures on Religious Reform*, Cai analyzed the power-production mechanisms of religious rituals, providing epistemological tools for contemporary governance of religion. Second, the value-substitution path, which emphasizes constructing a sense of identity that transcends religion through the formation of aesthetic communities. For instance, public art projects that cultivate citizens’ aesthetic sensibilities have proven effective: in Shenzhen’s “Urban Cultural Menu” initiative, participation in artistic activities led to a 29% reduction in religious tendencies among participants. Third, the spiritual-supply path, which advocates creating “non-utilitarian spiritual products,” such as promoting nighttime museum openings and building community aesthetic spaces. In Hangzhou’s “Citizen Cultural Living Room” project, these measures increased residents’ satisfaction with their spiritual lives by 34%.

Therefore, the modern transformation of this theory must consider three dimensions. On the methodological level, communication theories such as “frame analysis” should be applied to develop strategies for deconstructing religious discourse. On the

practical level, big data should be used to monitor shifts in belief patterns and build precise mechanisms for aesthetic education interventions. On the policy level, experiences such as Germany's "cultural education" legislation can be referenced to incorporate aesthetic education into the national education system. This cross-century intellectual dialogue demonstrates that the construction of spiritual civilization cannot rely solely on restrictive control but must achieve active governance through value provision. Cai Yuanpei's intellectual legacy reminds contemporary policymakers that only by building more inclusive mechanisms for meaning production can cultural leadership be established in a competitive environment of plural values. His governance logic of "deconstruction → reconstruction → innovation" provides a Chinese approach to resolving the spiritual dilemmas of modernity.

In the 1980s, to align with the global trend of high-tech development, advance reform and opening-up, and promote socialist modernization, while also addressing the long-standing drawbacks caused by exam-oriented education, China formally adopted the strategic policy of quality-oriented education. The core of this policy lies in comprehensively implementing the Party's educational guidelines, upholding the fundamental goal of improving the overall quality of all citizens, and particularly emphasizing the cultivation of students' innovative consciousness and practical abilities. The aim was to cultivate a generation of individuals with lofty ideals, strong moral standards, solid cultural knowledge, strict discipline, and balanced development in moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic aspects—individuals capable of becoming the driving force of socialist construction and the successors of its cause.

After decades of development, quality-oriented education has made remarkable progress in building curricula and refining implementation mechanisms, but deep structural contradictions continue to constrain the modernization of education. Currently, the practice of quality-oriented education faces three major bottlenecks. First, structural deficiencies in the curriculum system, manifested in the limitation of knowledge transmission to specific fields, preventing the creation of an interdisciplinary, multidimensional framework for cultivating competencies, resulting in "comprehensive development" being reduced to the mere accumulation of

fragmented knowledge. Second, methodological path dependence, which simplifies quality education into skills training and behavioral regulation, while neglecting the establishment of immersive, long-term mechanisms for holistic development. Third, a misinterpretation of values, particularly the narrow understanding of the role of aesthetic education, reducing it to technical training in the arts and obscuring its deeper role as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment.

On one hand, addressing these challenges requires a reconstruction of the educational cognitive framework. The historical insights of Cai Yuanpei's theory of "replacing religion with aesthetic education" highlight that aesthetic education should not be treated as a mere tool but should be established as an ontological foundation of quality-oriented education. This ontological reconstruction includes two dimensions: at the value level, it is necessary to transcend the misconception that "art education equals aesthetic education," and instead position aesthetic activities as core carriers for cultivating critical thinking and value judgment; at the practical level, aesthetic education must be integrated with moral, intellectual, and physical education to achieve holistic effects, realizing the ideals of "truth inspired by beauty" and "virtue nurtured by beauty."

On the other hand, advancing the deepening of quality-oriented education requires building a three-dimensional support system. At the cognitive level, a modern interpretation of "aesthetic education as spiritual education" should be established, preventing both the overgeneralization and the over-instrumentalization of aesthetic education. At the institutional level, reforms in teacher training, development of school-based curricula, and the construction of smart education platforms are needed to strengthen implementation guarantees. At the practical level, drawing on Cai Yuanpei's concept of "education for the whole life," it is necessary to build a network linking in-class and out-of-class learning and connecting schools, families, and society.

This multi-dimensional strategy essentially establishes a new model of quality-oriented education with aesthetic personality cultivation at its core, providing

pathways to address the dual challenge of “modernizing education” and “modernizing human beings.”

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