

# Cai Yuanpei's Vision of Aesthetic Education and His Legacy in China



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**Abstract** Cai Yuanpei was a traditionally educated Chinese scholar who later turned his attention to Western philosophy and played a central role in the development of Republican educational philosophies and institutions, with a legacy that continues to inform education in China. Studies tend to interpret Cai Yuanpei's approach to aesthetic education in light of his educational experience in Germany, regarding him as a Kantian scholar. However, the Confucian roots of his aesthetic education seldom draw scholarly attention. To fill that gap, this chapter examines Cai's vision of aesthetic education based on both his academic background in the East and his knowledge of Western philosophy, and maps out his influence on and legacy in aesthetic education in China. It argues that Cai's vision of aesthetic education has influenced contemporary Chinese education in four main ways: by advocating aesthetic education as social reconstruction, by bridging the gap between moral education and aesthetic education to nurture citizenship, by encouraging aesthetic education for whole-person development, and by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to school aesthetic education. The chapter concludes with reflections on the enduring value of Cai's vision of aesthetic education for contemporary China, but also worldwide, as international education is increasingly diversified and broadened by the notions of decolonization and global competence.

**Keywords** Cai Yuanpei · Aesthetic education · China · Humanism · Social harmony

## Introduction

Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1868–1940) was a prominent figure in twentieth-century China who served as the first Minister of Education of the Republic of China (ROC) and

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initiated modern education reforms nationwide. Aesthetic education (*meiyu*, 美育) was at the core of these reforms, and continues to have a profound influence on China's educational philosophy, policies, and practices. Cai interpreted aesthetics (*meixue*, 美學) as art appreciation and perceptual enlightenment, and saw aesthetic education as entailing affective ways of learning, including thinking with images, and observational processing that leads to insights into artworks, social issues, and the natural environment (Cai, 1983). Although Cai served as an official in the government of the ROC, which was replaced by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the early 1950s, he was also held in high regard by the PRC government, and his vision of aesthetic education was adopted by PRC officials. In 2007, Peking University, one of the most prestigious universities in China, established Yuanpei College<sup>1</sup> (元培學院) to honour Cai Yuanpei's contribution to modern Chinese education. Examining Cai's vision of aesthetic education casts light on arts education in not only the twentieth century but also today's China, and reveals a notable example of philosophy that may be relevant to education worldwide amid growing appreciation for culturally diverse theorising in a postcolonial world (Qi, 2014; Schwarzer & Bridgall, 2015).

After being educated in the Confucian tradition, Cai proceeded to Hanlin Academy (翰林院), which was the premier institution for academic officials located near the Forbidden City in the late Qing Dynasty (Duiker, 1971). While serving in the corrupt Qing government, Cai reflected deeply on traditional Confucian teaching and advocated for social reform (Duiker, 1971). To learn from modern Western thinking, Cai spent several years in Germany (1907–1912), during which he studied philosophy, education, anthropology, and psychology at university level—knowledge that he considered helpful towards building a modern China (Duiker, 1972). In 1912, the year in which the ROC government was founded, he returned to China and was appointed Minister of Education by the leader of the ROC, Sun Yat-sen (Liu, 2019). Cai's successful career in the administration gave him opportunities to put his philosophy into practice, especially his vision of aesthetic education.

The aesthetic education proposed by Cai Yuanpei is a popular topic of Chinese scholarship. According to a comprehensive annual review of research on aesthetic education in China, Cai's thoughts on aesthetics draw the most attention (Yang & Li, 2019). However, the literature regarding Cai's theory tends to trace his ideas about aesthetics back to his educational experience in Germany, thus identifying him as a Kantian scholar (Wang, 2020) with little notice of other influences. Previous studies tend to also overlook the enduring relevance of Cai's theory in contemporary educational practice (Liu, 2019). This article aims to fill these gaps by examining Cai's vision of aesthetic education based on his academic background in the East and his knowledge of Western philosophy, and by mapping out his influence on and legacy in aesthetic education in China.

This article begins with a brief introduction to Cai Yuanpei's early life and academic experience, followed by a discussion of his thinking, which was rooted

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<sup>1</sup> Yuanpei College provides comprehensive education that is designed to develop fully the mental and emotional strengths of its students. It puts Cai Yuanpei's advocacy of education for whole-person development into practice in the higher educational level.

in humanist Confucianism and the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, the two Western philosophers most prominently referenced in Cai's speeches and writings (Cai, 1983; Peng, 2018). The next section summarises policies Cai advocated regarding aesthetic education in the school, family, and social domains, which can be collectively understood as socially oriented aesthetic education. The last section explores how Cai's ideas have been put into practice, particularly by reflecting on the enduring value of Cai's vision of aesthetic education in contemporary Chinese education.

## Early Life Experience

Cai's early experience had a profound impact on his later thoughts on how to transform Chinese society. He was born during the late Qing Dynasty and spent his youth in Zhejiang (浙江), on the south-eastern coast of China, one of the few areas where people could trade with the West. Western ideology travelled alongside commercial trade and made such regions into the birthplace of modernity in China (Liu, 2019). Although Cai received a traditional education in his youth, like many of his contemporaries, he showed a strong interest in Western ideology (Wang, 2020). For instance, when he began his service as an official in 1894, he advocated for the integration of science subjects into the teaching of the Hanlin Academy, the most prestigious royal institution for academic officials in the late Qing Dynasty (Duiker, 1971).

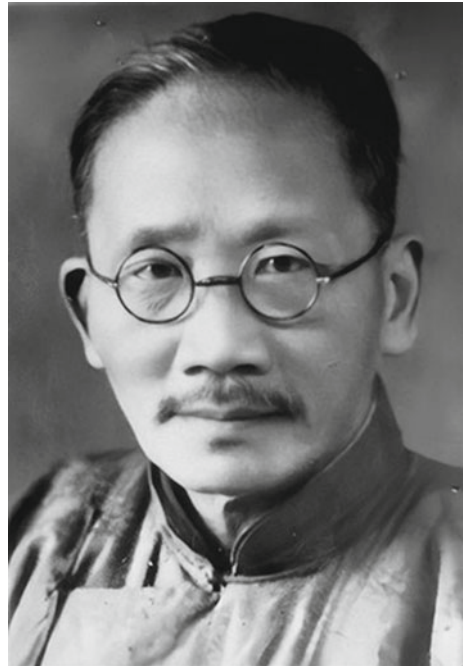
The proposed introduction of science to the Hanlin Academy was Cai's first attempt to enact reform within the imperial system. However, he was disillusioned by his experiences with the Qing government, and his reforms failed. He then moved to Shanghai, an open coastal city, where he became a member of the Revolutionary Party in 1898 (Liu, 2019). The revolutionary movement in Shanghai was attempting to overthrow the Qing dynasty and establish a Western-style republic. Despite his active role, Cai felt that his interests were too scholarly for being a revolutionary activist. To pursue his academic career and to avoid danger from enemies, Cai was obliged to flee to Germany, where he studied philosophy at Leipzig University from 1907 to 1911 (Duiker, 1971). He returned to China to serve as Minister of Education in the newly founded Republican government in 1912. However, corruption in the government again disappointed Cai, and he resigned and returned to Germany to continue his academic life (Liu, 2019). In 1916, he returned to China at the invitation of the reformed government and became the president of Peking University (Duiker, 1971).

During the first half of his life, Cai witnessed the collapse of the Confucian order, the military and intellectual challenges posed by the West, and the growth of a market society in China. He also experienced social crises, intellectual self-doubt, economic recession, and the rise of fascism in Western society after World War I. His early educational background in Confucian philosophy and his later academic experience in Europe provided him with a comprehensive worldview that served as a basis for the creation of a new Chinese society.

During his early years of learning in Germany, Cai was deeply concerned about the moral decay of his time, and he regarded aesthetic education as a promising means of social reformation. Cai attempted to synthesise the best values of traditional Chinese philosophy with modern Western ideology. He found that aesthetics could link the spiritual world to the physical world and build moral behaviours, as suggested both by Confucian thinking and by German philosophers (Fig. 1).

Unlike other leading activists in the New Culture Movement, a cultural and social undertaking to abolish the Confucian order in China in the early twentieth century, Cai received a comprehensive traditional education in his youth. At the age of 24, Cai enrolled in Hanlin Academy after passing a highly competitive examination (Duiker, 1971). From this perspective, Cai was a great success within the traditional education system and regarded as an accomplished Confucian scholar by his peers. He also admitted that his early years of Confucian learning sparked his later interest in moral issues, with a distinct emphasis on self-cultivation and social obligation (Duiker, 1971). Therefore, unlike many other activists in the New Cultural Movement, who took a radical attitude towards Westernisation and the overthrow of traditional China, Cai was an accomplished Confucian scholar who saw the value of traditional ideology and took a humanist Confucian approach to aesthetics.

**Fig. 1** Cai Yuanpei (Source <https://www.minguowang.com>)



## Philosophical Roots of Cai's Reforms

Cai's vision of aesthetic education as social reform originated from his academic background. Cai's deep concern about the moral decay of his time led him to think about how to rejuvenate Chinese society. Among other approaches, he believed that aesthetics, which is associated with the affective realm, could serve the purpose of cultivating emotion and shaping a new morality (Cai, 1983). This vision of aesthetic education was rooted in Confucian teaching on aesthetics in combination with Cai's learning from the Western philosophers Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller.

### *Confucian Teaching on Aesthetics*

Cai is not usually viewed as a supporter of Confucianism, because he advocated for the New Culture Movement and against the traditional order of Chinese society supported by Confucian ideology. However, from another perspective, he was an accomplished Confucian scholar in twentieth-century China who applied the humanist Confucian approach to reform society. During his time, there were two Confucian schools of thought—authoritarian and humanist (Duiker, 1971). Both schools served to maintain the hierarchy of imperial society; however, whereas the authoritarian school imposed social and political pressure on individuals, humanists believed in the good side of human nature. They asserted that individuals can best be led to follow *dao* (道, the Way) via education—thus adhering to the original teachings of Confucius and his successor Mencius (Duiker, 1971). Cai was an advocate of the humanist view and had demonstrated an interest in this approach since his youth (Duiker, 1971). According to the humanist school, to follow the Way is to manifest the function of *jiao hua* (教化, educating), which resembles the German term *Bildung*, in that both imply self-cultivation and harmonic growth (Danner, 1994; Tu, 1989).

Cai, like Confucius, argued that becoming fully human requires an internal transformation that can be best achieved through aesthetic experience. Cai adopted Confucian teaching on aesthetics in three main ways—learning via aesthetic activity; finding harmony in the unity of aesthetics, morality, and politics; and making use of aesthetics' capacity to engage one's body and heart.

### **Aesthetics as a Way of Learning**

In both Cai's conceptualization and earlier Confucian thought, aesthetic experience facilitates behaviour that follows the Way and enhances the function of *jiao hua*. Art played a significant role in Confucian thought, and the early Confucians were artists, mastering ritual actions and engaging in a wide array of aesthetic activities, such as music, poetry, and calligraphy (Mullis, 2005). However, mastering art skills

was not the main purpose of engaging in such activities; rather, the primary aim was to shape people's character through aesthetic activities. For instance, Confucius viewed aesthetic education as a means of self-cultivation, 'which starts with the study of poetry, then moves to the study of rituals, and then towards accomplishment in the study of music' (興於詩, 立於禮, 成於樂) (*Analects* 8.8). This saying underlines that the purpose of learning *shi* (詩, poetry) is to develop people's will to promote their self-consciousness and empathy. The next phase is to achieve self-reliance by learning and practising *li* (禮, rituals), which help one become a responsible member of the community. Finally, through *yue* (樂, music) education, one can achieve self-cultivation and approach the status of *junzi* (君子, a superior person).

### **An Integrated View of Aesthetics, Morality, and Politics**

Cai had a hierarchical mission for aesthetic education. In his arguments regarding the usefulness of aesthetics, Cai asked the following question: 'how can we turn the desire for beauty into self-cultivation and moral perfection, and eventually contribute to a harmonious society?' (Cai, 1983, p. 1). Cai's discourse on harmony is in line with the Confucian concept of *he* (和, harmony), which is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and influenced the manner in which morality and education are conceptualised (Feng & Newton, 2012). Methodologically, a traditional Chinese view of harmony acknowledges this virtue as 'a preference for negotiation over a fight, reform over revolution, and eclecticism over dogma' (Feng & Newton, 2012, p. 342). In an ontological sense, harmony is at the core of Confucianism, and itself manifests divine wisdom (Tu, 1989). *Yueji* (樂記, *The Book of Music*), the only text of Confucian teaching on music, defined *yue* (樂, music) as a privileged form of sound that can only be properly performed and appreciated by *junzi*, claiming that 'a superior person goes against the natural dispositions so as to harmonise his aspirations' (*The Book of Ritual* 19.5). Therefore, for both Cai Yuanpei and Confucius, art took on political and moral undertones, as a means to educate individuals to regulate their personal desires and pursue harmonious relationships between self, others, and society.

### **Engaging Body and Heart Aesthetically**

Cai also acknowledged the capacity of aesthetics to engage people's bodily and sensuous experiences, in turn regulating their moral behaviour. He offered the example of ritual and music in Confucian teaching to support this point:

On one hand, in the natural environment, music is the harmony of natural sounds which do not imply sadness or joy; on the other hand, in the ritual ceremony, certain music can evoke emotions that originate from the listener's heart, which embodies another kind of harmony that bridges the gap between the body and the heart. (Cai, 1983, p. 54)

This capacity was also mentioned in various Confucian texts. In *Discourse on Music*, for example, Xunzi (313–238 BCE) wrote 'where there is music, it will

issue forth in the sounds and manifest in the movement of the body' (*Xunzi* 20.2). Similarly, Mencius stated that 'when listening to music, people quite unconsciously find that their feet begin to dance and hands begin to move' (*Mengzi* 29.15). In addition, Confucius offered an interesting example of how aesthetic experience had influenced his appetite, saying, 'I could not discern the taste of meat for months after I learned this beautiful piece of music' (*Analects* 7.14). In this Confucian discourse, music is valued more than simply as sound and patterns; it is a product of aesthetics, morality, and politics, in which the body and heart of the listener are fully engaged and directed towards moral and prosocial behaviours and mindsets (Wang, 2020).

### *Learning from Kant and Schiller*

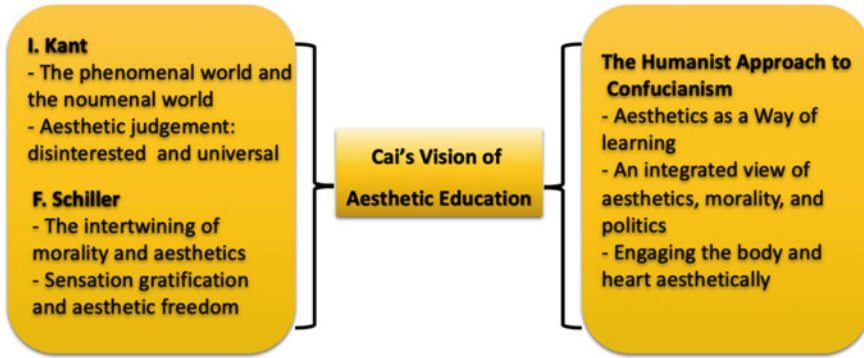
Of the European philosophers from whom Cai gained knowledge, he considered Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) the most important masters of aesthetics, stating that

Since Baumgarten (1717–1762) established aesthetics, Kant and his *Critique of Judgment* contributed the most to its discourse and system, and Schiller was the person who further developed aesthetics from the perspective of moral and ethics, laying the ground for aesthetic education. (Cai, 1983, p. 66)

Cai adopted Kant's dualistic standpoint of the phenomenal world and the noumenal world, arguing that 'aesthetics would bridge the two worlds and transcend human experience' (Cai, 1983, p. 4). In education, the phenomenal world concerns the material goals of making students as productive members of society, while the noumenal world, the 'thing-in-itself' (Zarrow, 2019, p. 154) in Kantian philosophy, are viewed as fundamental goals of education, which is about 'morality or transcendental laws' (You et al., 2018, p. 260). Cai specified that 'the ultimate goal of the phenomenal world is to return toward the noumenal world' (Cai, 1983, p. 5). He argued that aesthetic experience embodies this transcendent quality, and that the ultimate goal of aesthetic education is to lead people into the spiritual realm, which will help them achieve spiritual freedom and become moral citizens (Cai, 1983). To strengthen his argument for the transcendent quality of aesthetic experience, Cai borrowed from Kant the two key features of aesthetic judgement, disinterested and universal, claiming that 'aesthetics could help to develop humanism because of its disinterested and universal features would transcend the self-centred personality' (Cai, 1983, p. 56). In other words, Cai believed that aesthetic experience could reduce people's selfishness and prejudices in the phenomenal world and promote a feeling of the sublime that could transcend the material world of mundane concerns.

Although Cai adopted Kant's ontological understanding of the nature of the world and the essence of aesthetic judgement, his thoughts on the intertwining of morality and aesthetics came from Schiller (Cai, 1983). In his aesthetic discourse, Schiller reflected on the ways that the body and sensations could be educated to attain collective rules and maintain a bourgeois social order. Aesthetic education would allow





**Fig. 2** Origins of Cai's Vision of Aesthetic Education

for sensory gratification and aesthetic freedom, which were regarded as a solution to political problems. As Schiller (2004) stated, 'If we are to solve political problems in practice, follow the path of aesthetics since it is through beauty that we will arrive at freedom' (p. 27). Similarly, Cai's objectives for aesthetic education were to achieve moral perfection and to create an environment conducive to political engagement (Cai, 1983). However, unlike the disconnection of the phenomenal and noumenal worlds held by Kant and Schiller, Cai (1983) argued that the two worlds are actually the two sides of one world that complementary to each other in human's perception, because 'we perceive the world materially and immaterially' (p. 4). This argument is underpinned by the ontological holism in traditional Chinese philosophy, originating from the dialectical relationship between spiritual and phenomenal worlds (Liu, 2019) (Fig. 2).

## Socially Oriented Aesthetic Education

Based on his systematic understanding of modern Western thinking and the Humanist approach to Confucianism, Cai called for a new education that makes its ultimate purpose to foster the 'complete person' with intellectual, moral, and aesthetic capacities. Specifically, he argued that aesthetic experience could help to solve moral problems and purge politics for the sake of modern society (Cai, 1983). It offered a possible solution to moral decay that could foster civic virtue and build a democratic society. Cai showed no interest in the formalist aesthetics of art for art's sake, nor was he interested in aesthetics merely for sensory satisfaction (Cai, 1983). He believed that aesthetic education was intended to instil a humanist worldview, promote public morality, and nurture people's emotional and rational personalities. These characteristics were considered fundamental to modern citizenship and essential to the new Republican politics in China (Cai, 1983). In the early twentieth century, the transformational era of Chinese society, modernised reform denied the old morality, which



was bound to a hierarchical network of kinship, whereas the new order had not yet been established.

As the Minister of Education in the newly founded government, Cai was a visionary reformer who promoted aesthetic education in parallel with physical, intellectual, ethical, and worldview education in the Educational Proclamation issued by the first Republican government in September 1912 (Duiker, 1972). The five components of education, named *wuyu bingju* (五育並舉, 'education in five aspects'), gave the arts an unprecedented role in Chinese educational policies that even today serves as a key element of the Chinese nine-year compulsory education system (Ministry of Education, 2011). Aesthetic education was emphasised because it could 'cultivate good character in the Republic's citizens' (Cai, 1983, p. 68). Specifically, Cai's proposals for aesthetic education were grounded in the school, family, and social domains.

### ***School and Family Aesthetic Education***

Regarding school education, from kindergarten through university, Cai proposed that aesthetics did not consist solely of the art, music, and literature curricula, but rather, was part of every aspect of school life (Cai, 1983). In other words, aesthetic education was not a synonym for art education, but instead was a broad concept embedded across the school. For mathematics and chemistry, for example, 'the mathematical law of geometry is embedded in aesthetics; chemistry is closely related to the beauty of colour' (Cai, 1983, p. 136). This interdisciplinary perspective is similar to the recent movement (in response to STEM) of science, technology, engineering, *arts*, and mathematics (STEAM) education today. Cai further suggested that teachers should use aesthetics to facilitate students' learning and stressed the importance of maintaining a pleasant campus environment (Cai, 1983). He also felt that environmental aesthetics played a significant role in the family domain, in which people spend the most time. He stated that 'no matter how expensive the furniture is, the living room should always be clean and tidy and the arrangement of things should enable a sense of beauty' (Cai, 1983, p. 137).

### ***Aesthetic Education in Society***

Unlike the bourgeois ideology, in which aesthetic education is aimed at elites, Cai proposed that 'aesthetic experience should be promoted in the public sphere where everyone can get access to museums, parks, and theatres' (Cai, 1983, p. 221). He raised money to establish art centres in the community and advocated art as leisure for citizens, urging them to contemplate artworks in concert halls and museums and recommending the equal distribution of material and aesthetic goods. Well-designed urban infrastructure, he believed, was important, as clean and tidy streets and parks

would offer an aesthetic approach to fostering civic behaviour (Cai, 1983). They would provide an enjoyable public space, foster shared values, and eradicate the backward and immoral behaviours that persisted in traditional Chinese society, such as gambling, prostitution, and opium smoking (Cai, 1983). In addition, Cai was among the founders of a prestigious visual arts academy that nurtured many talented Chinese artists—the China Central Academy of Fine Arts (Cao, 2018). He also established various arts-related communities (e.g., in such fields as music, Chinese painting, and calligraphy) as grassroots units intended to bring together progressive artists (Cai, 1983).

## Cai's Legacy in Contemporary China

Cai's vision of aesthetic education has had a profound impact on Contemporary Chinese educational policies. Aesthetic education remains an important component in the Chinese public education domain, which was highlighted in the conference of the Ministry of Education in 1951 (Ministry of Education, 2015a). It was the first official conference about national education policy-making after the establishment of the PRC government. In China, aesthetic education is not a subdomain of arts education but rather serves as an educational priority in parallel with intellectual, moral, and physical education, which was explicitly noted in the documents issued after the conference held in 1951 (Ministry of Education, 2015a, 2015b). It then became the cornerstone of 'Comprehensive Education' (*quanmian jiaoyu*, 全面教育) and 'Quality Education' (*suzhi jiaoyu*, 素質教育)<sup>2</sup> proposed by the Ministry of Education in the late 1980s to the late 1990s. The concept of Comprehensive Education first appeared in the *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* promulgated on July 1, 1986 (Ministry of Education, 2015a). However, this concept was not fully developed until June 13, 1999, when the State Council issued its *Policy of Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education*, offering a series of approaches to reform public education by changing the examination-oriented ideology (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In particular, it emphasised the role of aesthetic education to ensure the quality of public education. The high status of aesthetic education was inherited from Cai's vision and is manifested in four ways: aesthetic education as social reconstruction, bridging the gap between moral education and aesthetic education to nurture citizenship, aesthetic education for whole-person development and an interdisciplinary approach to aesthetic education.

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<sup>2</sup> *Suzhi jiaoyu* also has been translated as 'competence education', 'essential qualities-oriented education', and 'character education'.

## *Aesthetic Education as Social Reconstruction*

As the first Minister of Education in modern China, Cai Yuanpei laid the foundation of aesthetic education as social reconstruction (Liu, 2019). During that time, social reconstructionism advocated by Dewey was accepted broadly by Chinese scholars, and Dewey himself was also invited to China to give lectures and recommendations for the development of modern Chinese education (Ying, 2020). Cai agreed with Dewey's view of the progressive education movement and considered this ideology would also help to transform traditional China into a modern country (Ying, 2020). Cai (1983) stated that 'aesthetic education should not only be carried out in schools, but also be integrated into daily life to serves the social domain, so as to improve people's living environment and deal with everyday problems and reconstruct our society' (p. 56). This view was encoded in the theme of social reconstructionism that highlighted the connection of aesthetics and everyday life. In the aesthetic education policy and art policy in general, this view of aesthetic education as social reconstruction was inherited by the CCP government. Back in 1942, in the famous *Talks at the Yan' An Conference on Literature and Art* (延安文藝座談會講話), Mao Zhedong denoted that art production should not be divorced from reality and people's everyday lives (Ying, 2020).

The view of social reconstruction serves as one of the principles in contemporary Chinese art and aesthetic education (Wang, 2019). Taking the art movement 'Rural Reconstruction through Art (藝術鄉建)' for example, in the past decade, Chinese artists initiated this movement in rural China in order to develop critical reflection towards urbanisation by employing art as 'an agent of social intervention, community building, and cultural change' (Wang, 2019, p. 245). This movement signifies art as an artefact or performance that reflects and facilitates the cultural life of a community.

Artists play the role of social workers who lift art to reconstruct rural areas and enhance their publicness and sociality. In such practices, aesthetic education is the means of social intervention and community participation, with the goals of facilitating conversations around social problems.

For instance, the Xu Village Project (許村計畫), a project of Rural Reconstruction through Art in the village of Xu located in Shanxi Province, China, included an aesthetic education project designed by a Chinese art educator. Prof. Bian Xia, from Nanjing Normal University. This project was implemented in the Xucun rural primary school aimed at facilitating local culture learning and enhancing students' socio-cultural identity for the purpose of community reconstruction (Xu & Bian, 2020).

## *Conjunction of Moral Education and Aesthetic Education to Nurture Citizenship*

Cai's vision of aesthetic education was intended to provide a moral basis for society (Duiker, 1972). The Chinese translation of 'aesthetic education' (美育) was introduced by Cai in 1912, from the German term *Asthetische Erziehung*. In his interpretation of the concept of aesthetic education, Cai (1983) explained that 'aesthetics is a means of transcending materialism... appreciating art could help to describe the nature of the real world and elevate its understanding in human society' (p. 461). For Cai, the appreciation of beauty could reduce prejudice, and aesthetic education was thus the best approach to connect people with the noumenal world. This interpretation laid the ground for the conjunction of moral education and aesthetic education in Chinese discourse, which is manifested in China's educational policies. The most recent educational policy issued by the State Council (2020), addressing the nature of aesthetic education, noted that,

aesthetics and morality are intertwined. Aesthetic education is about beauty, morally good and spiritual... Aesthetics is closely related to students' spiritual, emotional and character development. It can improve the sense of aesthetic quality, cultivate moral behaviour and promote social cohesion. (p. 1)

In this statement, aesthetic education is a way to promote social harmony because aesthetics can nurture a moral citizenry by connecting the physical world and the spiritual world. This is a legacy of Cai's explanation of the function of aesthetics: to bridge the gap between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world.

Cai's vision of aesthetic education addressed not only the moral identity of modern women and men, but also retained traditional moral components (Wang, 2020). In the early twentieth century, when Chinese authorities first sought reformation under the massive cultural and economic invasion of the West, many intellectuals advocated for the replacement of traditional Chinese philosophy with modern Western ideologies and thus the formation of a new moral basis for a common social identity. However, Cai opposed this call, believing that a philosophy that retained the positive aspects of traditional Chinese teachings would be the most practical solution for the new society (Duiker, 1972). Although this vision could not be put into practice due to the corruption of the Republican government, it has attracted scholarly interest in the new century and become a mainstream topic of debate among modern Chinese intellectuals on the ideologies of the East and West (Zuo, 2018).

This synthetic view is also consistent with a national cultural campaign endorsed by the PRC government: the new trend of reviving Chinese traditional culture in education. Since 2013, the PRC government has enacted several cultural and educational policies to promote the integration of traditional Chinese culture into aesthetic education. For instance, the *National Standards for Visual Arts* highlighted a community-based approach to teaching art, namely 'employing local and traditional art and materials to enrich students' aesthetic experience and develop a sense of community' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 2). That is, art education is not simply

about learning artistic skills; it also has the aim of nurturing community membership via appreciation of local and traditional arts.

### *Aesthetic Education for Whole-Person Development*

In contemporary China, aesthetics does not comprise a subdomain of arts education; rather, it is an educational objective regarded as essential for whole-person development in school education (Ministry of Education, 2011; State Council, 2020). This educational policy was adopted directly from Cai's vision of 'education in five aspects', of which aesthetic education was one (Cai, 1983). As the Minister of Education in the newly founded government, Cai was a visionary reformer who placed aesthetic education in parallel with physical, intellectual, moral, and world-view education in the Educational Proclamation issued by China's first Republican government in September 1912 (Duiker, 1972). This proclamation is still a key element of the Chinese compulsory education system (Ministry of Education, 2011).

As stated above, Cai's vision of aesthetic education was rooted in Confucian teaching, which emphasised comprehensive mastery of the 'Six Arts' (六藝),<sup>3</sup> the process of becoming *junzi* (君子), an ideal member of society and a moral exemplar for others (Li & Xue, 2020). For those who master the Six Arts, the important issue is not whether they can perform the best in the arts, but rather that they live a life that follows the 'way of truth' (道) and advance physically and mentally. Therefore, art plays a prominent role in classical Chinese philosophy and teaching of education. Being skilled in the arts is considered part of being a 'complete' person and the proper development of a moral agent.

The above views are evident in Chinese national education policies. For instance, in the first version of the educational objectives issued by the Minister of Education of the PRC in 1950, aesthetic education was highlighted and placed in parallel with the mastery of knowledge and skills to foster the development of well-rounded people (Li & Hasan, 2013). However, the practice of education was featured as examination-oriented, which has been widely criticised and recent reforms have attempted to implement the notion of developing well-rounded individuals rather than only memorisation for high examination scores (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> The Six Arts refers to the six disciplines of rituals (*li*, 禮), music (*yue* 樂), archery (*she* 射), charioteering (*yu* 御), calligraphy (*shu*, 書), and mathematics (*shu*, 數), comprising the domains of Confucian education.

## *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Aesthetic Education*

An interdisciplinary approach to aesthetic education outlined by Cai in the early twentieth century was also included in contemporary Chinese arts education. It originated from Confucius' commentary on 'skill' or 'craft' (藝/技), a concept similar to that of 'technology', in which Cai asserted that the greatest mastery of skill or crafts lies in the master's virtue and that the combination of skill/craft and virtue (以藝載道) is signified by aesthetics (Li & Xue, 2020). In Cai's vision, technology alone was not enough to transform the Chinese nation. That is, as a human endeavour, technology should serve the purposes of human ends, and aesthetics is embedded in humanity, which should thus be integrated with technology education in schools, and teachers should design a technology-related curriculum integrated with aesthetics (Cai, 1983).

This view is evident in contemporary Chinese education reform. The recent emphasis on STEAM education, for example, seeks to offer new space and roles for arts-related subjects in the school curriculum. For instance, in 2015, the Ministry of Education issued an educational plan on science and technology and introduced STEAM education as a curriculum model (Ministry of Education, 2015b). This was also endorsed by the policy issued by the State Council (2015), stating that 'school subjects should be integrated with aesthetics for the purpose of the comprehensiveness of the curriculum... Teachers should integrate aesthetic education with mathematics, physics and other science disciplines and develop extracurricular activities to enrich students' campus life' (p. 2).

## **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has examined Cai Yuanpei's vision of aesthetic education, which is rooted in the humanist strain of Confucianism, the branch of Confucian tradition that is closest to the original Confucian–Mencian model. For Cai, an aesthetic education lies at the core of a humane society. He advocated faith in the good side of human nature, particularly self-cultivation and social obligation. Cai combined this strain of Confucianism with Western aesthetics to arrive at his formula for Chinese modern education, which has had a great influence on contemporary Chinese education.

Although Cai adopted the humanist strain of Confucianism in his proposals for aesthetic education, it is important to note that as the first Minister of Education, one of his contributions to the educational system was to de-Confucianise the national curricula. This groundwork did not seek to overthrow the essence of Confucian philosophy; rather, it was a systemic reform that sought to eliminate the institutional constraints imposed by the imperial order. Some may argue that, all in all, Confucianism was developed to serve the imperial system. For example, the anti-traditionalists involved in the May Fourth Movement contended that the ideology that supported the imperial system should be totally abandoned in modern China. Cai believed otherwise. His experience in Europe, where he had witnessed World War I,

had led him to value the humanist strain of Confucianism; therefore, he advocated for an intercultural perspective, which he felt would best serve the needs of Chinese society. Based on his unique academic background, Cai tried to synthesise Western knowledge with Chinese knowledge, declaring that 'we should learn and integrate Western thoughts and borrow their good qualities to strengthen our own' (Cai, 1983, p. 28).

Today, we arguably see similar sentiments growing in many parts of the world, where as a consequence of the decolonization movement, educators increasingly apprehend the limitations of a Eurocentric vision, and seek to attain a more robust understanding by also learning from non-western philosophies (Abdi et al., 2015; Fung, 2017; Tan, 2022). With such an openness to diversity, it seems there is now an opportunity for Cai's rich contributions to become more broadly appreciated by educators not only inside China but also in other countries worldwide.

Cai's views on cultural interchange were visionary in the sense that they embodied cherished faith in the humanist strain of Confucianism for a harmonious society. During China's Republican period, a time of immense political uncertainty, education reform was not the priority; therefore, few of his plans were put into practice in that period. However, in the long run, Cai's thinking set the tone for contemporary education in China, and his vision of a moral and democratic Chinese society has enduring value.

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