The Educational Thought of Cai Yuan-Pei

(Abstract)

This paper presents an analysis of Cai Yuan-pei's educational thought.

Cai Yuan-pei was an important educationist during the hectic first decade of the Republic of China. He tried to change the Chinese educational system to meet modern needs, and thus he came up with his unique educational thought.

As he was influenced by Neo-kantian Philosophy, he asserted that the world comprises noumenon and phenomenon. The former is an absolute entity and can only be comprehended through intuition. The latter is subjected to causality and spatiotemporality and therefore can be experienced through sensation. Education, especially aesthetic education, is the bridge connecting these two worlds.

Education, according to Cai's world-view, is divided into education referring to phenomenon, which is political, and education referring to noumenon, which is non-political. The first category contains military education, utilitarian education and ethical education. This kind of education is aimed at the satisfaction of personal and national requirements. Non-political education includes world-view education and aesthetic education. World-view education demonstrates the unity of the spiritual needs of all mankind through a curriculum presenting the essential meaning of all religions and philosophies of mankind. Aesthetic
education encourages the love of beauty so that a student would be able to transcend his tendency towards the noumenon world.

When Cai became the chancellor of Peking National University, he stressed that the university would not be a stepping stone to a government career, but would be an institution to carry out research studies. Besides, he also promoted academic freedom in the university.

In order to transform China into a modern nation, he did his utmost to promote scientific education. He encouraged scholars to carry out advance scientific research and promote universal adoption of scientific knowledge.

Intellectuals were also encouraged to participate in physical labour, so as to raise the dignity of manual workers.

Bearing in mind the shortcomings of religion and its effect on society and in order not to leave education, which is highly influential, in the hands of any religious body, he proposed substituting religion with aesthetic education. This was the most revolutionary aspect of his educational thought. However, I think the shortcomings of religion can be overcome, yet the spiritual joy that religion can give cannot be replaced.

In conclusion, though there are some drawbacks in Cai's theory, most of his ideas are very practical. He is recognised as a great educationist having devoted his whole life to seeking ways and means of improving education.