Cai Yuanpei was a renowned educator in modern China, president of Peking (Beijing) University, and the founder of the Academia Sinica. Born in 1863, in Shangyin, Zhejiang province, Cai received a rigorous traditional education in Confucianism, history, and literature. He passed the highest level of civil service examination in 1890 and obtained the Jinshi ("presented scholar") degree. He was appointed as one of the youngest members of the imperial Hanlin Academy at the age of 26.

**Cai the Revolutionary**

However, his appointment in the Qing administration did not prevent Cai from engaging in revolutionary activity. As China continued to decline in the face of foreign aggression and internal instability, Cai helped organize, and served as the first president of the Restoration Society (Guangfuhui), a revolutionary society committed to overthrowing the Qing dynasty and establishing a republic. This society later became part of the United League (Tongmenghui), founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1905. Cai became the leader of the League’s Shanghai branch.
The Qing regime was overthrown in the 1911 revolution. The Republic was established in 1912 and nominally ruled China. Cai was appointed Minister of Education by Sun Yat-sen. However, when Sun resigned and passed the presidency to the military dictator Yuan Shikai, Cai also resigned his post.

Cai then went to Europe, where he stayed between 1913 and 1916. He helped organize a work-study program that brought over 2,000 Chinese students to France, where they both studied in schools and worked in factories. Among these students were many who later became leaders of China, including Zhou Enlai, who organized the first Chinese Communist Party branch in Paris and later became premier of China. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s economic reforms starting in 1978, also participated in the work-study program in France.
In 1916, Cai declined the position of governor of Zhejiang province, but instead accepted his appointment as president of Peking University, the most prestigious educational institution in China. There Cai played a crucial role in launching the May Fourth Movement and the New Cultural Movement in the 1910s and 1920s. Cai was famous for supporting critical evaluations of Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism, that served as the ideological foundations of imperial China.

Cai’s educational thought synthesized Western ideas, select Chinese traditions, nationalism, progressivism, and some anarchism. He advocated five values of life: “ethics, wisdom, health, socialization, and esthetics”. These core values are still taught in schools in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Cai also actively endorsed the women’s rights movement, criticizing traditional roles assigned to women and practices like foot-binding and concubinage.
Under Cai’s leadership, Peking University became the most important institution in China, espousing scholarship, nationalism, and social progress. Cai adopted a tolerant policy marked by freedom of scholarship and speech.

**Cai’s Later Years**

Cai left for Europe in 1923, but returned to China three years later to participate in the Revolutionary Northern Expedition led by the Nationalists and the Communists to unify China and to build a real Republic. When these efforts failed, Cai continued to work in higher education under Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government. In 1928, he helped found the Academia Sinica, China’s highest institution of academic study at the time, and served as its first president. He moved to Hong Kong when the Sino-Japanese war broke out and died there in 1940.