



## May 4, 1919: The Making of Modern China

100 years later, modern China's foundational moment has taken on many meanings.

By **Sebastian Veg**

As China marks the 100th anniversary of the 1919 May Fourth demonstrations, it is certainly a challenge to write anything new about this unanimously celebrated event. May Fourth has been studied and discussed from every imaginable angle and political perspective over the last century. It is no longer the case, as it was when Chow Tse-tsung (1916-2007) published his seminal study around the time of its 40th anniversary in 1959, that scholars are

divided over whether to see it as a national renaissance or a national catastrophe. Today it is indiscriminately celebrated by progressives and conservatives – with the possible exception of some die-hard Confucian fundamentalists – the Communist (CCP) and Nationalist (KMT) parties, Chinese people and foreigners. It was even briefly appropriated by advocates of independence in the 2008 presidential campaign in Taiwan. However, such unanimity is only achieved at the price of considerable ambiguity as to what is actually being commemorated.

In recent weeks, some students at Peking University – the institution at the heart of the May Fourth movement – leaked a questionnaire they had been asked to fill out appraising Xi Jinping and the current political situation in China. In a group of questions specifically dedicated to the May Fourth movement, they were prompted to identify May Fourth with patriotism (“the most important part of personal dignity is knowing how to be patriotic”), the need to actively practice it (“patriotism should not be limited to slogans”), and the progressive values of the Chinese people. It has indeed been the CCP’s habit to highlight the patriotic student demonstrations and the worker and shop-owner strikes that took place for roughly one month between May 4 and June 10, 1919, while other aspects of the broader New Culture Movement – which unfolded over the years between 1915 and 1923 – are downplayed.

This selective form of commemoration is particularly ironic at a time when two central aspects of the New Culture – the defense of academic freedom and cosmopolitan enthusiasm for ideas and knowledge from around the world – are being repressed in contemporary China. Xu Zhangrun, a professor at the Law School of Tsinghua University, was suspended from duty and placed under investigation by the university in March 2019 for no other reason than penning a series of editorials criticizing the current government (and there are a number of less prominent but nonetheless well-documented cases of a similar nature). More broadly, following the publication of a State Council “Opinion” in January 2015, the minister of education issued a call to minimize the use of “foreign content” in textbooks and other class material at all levels of the educational system, leading to a gradual phasing

out in all but some top tier institutions of the cosmopolitan spirit that has imbued China's universities for the last decades.

### **Commemorations**

The foundational ambiguity of May Fourth – the somewhat tenuous connection between the student protests and the intellectual effervescence of 1915-1923 – was reflected in the battle to control the naming and narrative of the movement, which began even before the end of the demonstrations. Indeed, selective re-narration has contributed so much to May Fourth mythology that before returning to the events themselves, it is useful to begin by briefly attempting to scrape off the commemorative varnish of the last century.

In “The True Spirit of the May Fourth Movement,” written on May 26, 1919, Luo Jialun (1897-1969), one of the Peking University (PKU) student leaders and editors of *New Tide*, not only gave the movement its name, but also argued that its spirit could be summarized as a challenge to arbitrary authority. Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), a PKU professor and founding editor of the movement's other most influential journal, *New Youth*, canonized the phrase “New Culture Movement” in several articles published in early 1920, in which he made a case for “newness” as its intellectual core. By contrast, Hu Shih (1891-1962) was critical of the notion of “New Culture” and preferred the notion of “Chinese Renaissance,” which originated in a letter addressed in 1915 by the famous journalist Huang Yuanyong (1885-1915) to the editors of *Tiger* magazine in Tokyo, shortly before he was tragically assassinated in San Francisco. The implications were almost diametrically opposed: While the notion of “New Culture” suggested a clean break with the past, Hu's “renaissance” highlighted the need to re-establish cultural continuity through a critical confrontation with the ossified aspects of tradition.

The ambiguities of commemoration are well reflected in the stance of political leaders. The KMT leadership, including Sun Yat-sen and later Chiang Kai-shek, while eager to capitalize on their connection with the patriotic student demonstrations and outrage against unequal treaties, consistently tried to minimize the significance of

language reform or anti-Confucianism (although Sun and the pro-KMT newspaper *Meizhou Pinglun* quickly picked up the term “New Culture Movement”). After the KMT and the CCP entered the Second United Front in 1937, they agreed to make May Fourth into Youth Day, a national holiday, in 1939. However, in 1944, Youth Day was changed by the KMT government to March 29, while May Fourth became “Literature Day.” This remained its name after the KMT fled to Taiwan, where the movement was commemorated, but with the lament that it had led to the victory of the “communist bandits,” a conviction shared by KMT and CCP historians alike.

The CCP leadership, no less eager to rake in the political capital of the patriotic demonstrations, went to great lengths to establish a direct connection between the movement and the foundation of the Party. In 1939 in Yan’an, Mao gave a speech for the 20th anniversary of May Fourth, in which he first set out the ideas that he refined the following year in “New Democracy” and that continue to inform historiography in the People’s Republic today. The two strands of the movement are tied together as “anti-feudal” (New Culture) and “anti-imperialist” (patriotic marches), and the emphasis is placed on the mass mobilization of June 3, 1919, which included workers, so that the movement can be construed as the turning point from the “old democratic” revolutions (controlled entirely by the bourgeoisie) to the “new democracy,” in which the proletariat has allied with the bourgeois intellectuals. While May Fourth is portrayed as a consequence of the Bolshevik Revolution, it necessarily remained incomplete until the foundation of the CCP in 1921, establishing the leadership of the masses, which intellectuals in Yan’an were now – in 1939 – summoned to conform to.

The notion of “enlightenment,” today a central idea in the May Fourth portfolio, was not used at the time of the events and appeared quite late, in the context of the United Front of the mid-1930s. It was discussed by Li Changzhi (1910-1978) in *China’s Cultural Renaissance* (1946), and picked up by intellectuals in the early 1980s who were eager to salvage May Fourth from Mao’s narrative. Li Zehou (b. 1930) used it to elaborate his influential theory of “enlightenment and national salvation,” in which

intellectuals' aspirations to autonomy were repeatedly thwarted by the demands of national politics. Enlightenment too can be viewed as an *ex post* reconstruction that mainly served to vindicate the loyal intellectuals whose views had been neglected by the Party and who hoped to launch a new enlightenment in the 1980s by designating Mao's despotism as the new "feudalism."

## Events

To understand what happened in 1919, we need to begin in 1915. The "21 demands" made by Japan, including territorial and economic claims, not only represented a colonial encroachment, but also sparked outrage because they contained secret clauses and did not follow diplomatic protocol. They were accepted on May 9, 1915 by Chinese President Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), without any regard for public opinion or the institutions of the republic, since he had dissolved the democratically elected parliament in 1914. Later in 1915, Yuan crowned himself emperor and toyed with the idea of making Confucianism into a state religion, an arrangement supported by some older intellectuals, such as Kang Youwei. These events form the background to a deep crisis among the younger enthusiasts of the republican revolution of 1911, who questioned whether institutional reforms were sufficient to make China into a truly democratic country, or whether institutional reforms needed to be complemented by far deeper social and intellectual evolutions. The protests against the 21 demands, with the establishment of "National Humiliation Day" on May 9, represented a benchmark in the rise of a mobilized public opinion of urban citizens expressing their views on the political matters of the day.

These events were followed by two broader evolutions that unfolded gradually over the next few years: The unprecedented expansion of journals and newspapers, in particular small intellectual journals run by groups of like-minded activists (*tongren zazhi*), with *New Youth* as their flagship (founded in September 1915 by Chen Duxiu) and the establishment of a modern academic institution at Peking University, with the appointment of Tsai Yuan-pei (1868-1940) as its chancellor in 1916. While the freedom of press enshrined in the 1912 Constitution had

been severely curbed by Yuan Shikai, the new publications evoked an enthusiastic response among educated, urban readers.

In an essay titled “1916” published in the fifth issue of *New Youth*, Chen Duxiu called on readers to become independent individuals, and embrace citizen movements (*gongmin yundong*) rather than party movements (*dangpai yundong*). The failure of republican institutions provoked a rejection of party politics (which endures among Chinese intellectuals to the present day), while autonomous citizenship was embraced as an ideal of emancipation and self-awakening. Chen’s radical form of citizenship, which rejected all forms of hierarchy, family, and Confucian authority, remained decidedly anti-institutional. The “movement” (*yundong*), not previously a widely used term, became the preferred form of modern politics. *New Youth* further promoted the vernacular language, science against superstition, women’s rights, and the reform of the family system, as well as popular education. Chen even went so far as to directly criticize patriotism, which he saw as a tribal remanence in an era when identities should be chosen by rational deliberation.

Peking University (PKU), established in 1898, had remained a somewhat quaint institution dominated by elderly literati, and known mainly for its “dissolute” morality. Upon his appointment in 1916, Tsai – a vegetarian whose simple and modest lifestyle commanded respect – thoroughly reformed the institution, recruiting younger scholars from the broadest political and intellectual spectrum, including opponents of the New Culture like the classical scholar Gu Hongming (1857-1928). Gu liked to describe the modernists’ credo as “demo-crazy” and “Dosto-whisky.” Tsai repeatedly defended the principles of academic freedom, both in theory and in practice, by sparring with critics of student activism and opponents of the New Culture, as well as by his personal initiatives to free arrested students and teachers.

The immediate prelude to the May Fourth demonstrations was a controversy that played out in the press in March 1919, when Lin Shu (1852-1924), a classical scholar at PKU, criticized the New Culture and the alleged exclusion of Confucian teaching from the PKU curriculum. In response, Tsai wrote an open letter, published

on April 1, in which he reiterated that PKU's only tenet was tolerance and freedom of thought, by virtue of which the classics could still be taught, among other disciplines. Professors were to be judged on their competence alone; "their words and actions outside the university are entirely their own affairs." Despite Tsai's spirited defense, Chen Duxiu was obliged to resign as dean of the Faculty of Chinese Literature.

It was against this background that the events in Beijing of a century ago took place. The sudden mobilization of public opinion in early May 1919 was sparked by the revelation that the Beiyang government in Beijing, as well as several of the Allied powers engaged in the Versailles negotiations, had signed secret agreements with the Japanese government recognizing its claims on German interests in Shandong. The spark of the movement was undoubtedly patriotic anger and frustration at Western double standards, as evidenced by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's change of heart regarding Shandong. As John Dewey, who had arrived in China on May 1, put it: It was a sudden realization that "Western democracy" was distorted by Western "self-interest and hidden groups."

However, the movement escalated in large part because the government, criticized for its incompetence and inability to defend China's territory, and under pressure from conservative politicians, tried to take the opportunity to intimidate students and purge PKU, the university where many of them were enrolled. The government issued a series of edicts forbidding student involvement in politics, banned public meetings, and censored news of the demonstrations. The university's chancellor, Tsai Yuanpei, took refuge in Tianjin from the attacks against him. A mass movement soon ensued. The movement eventually forced the government to back down and dismiss three pro-Japanese officials singled out by the students, to bring back Tsai, and eventually decline to sign the Versailles Treaty (a decision taken by the negotiators themselves, since the president retracted his earlier instruction to sign the treaty too late to actually reach the negotiators).

While the movement was largely over by mid-June, a period of intense intellectual and organizational activity ensued. Over 400 new journals appeared during a time of “periodical fever” between July and December. The student unions and other groups established during the protests were consolidated and became tools to mobilize urban society, using the techniques of public lecturing and distributing handbills that had been developed in May and June. Although by 1920 *New Youth* was inclining toward Marxism, it still preserved its collegial editorial arrangement. It was only after a police raid on its press in Shanghai that its editors parted ways and the journal became an organ of the CCP, which was officially founded in 1921. *New Tide* was disbanded. The controversy over “life philosophy” in 1923 marked the final split among the groups of New Culture intellectuals and the return of factional politics.

### **Ambiguities**

One of the most significant consequences of May Fourth is undoubtedly the birth of movement politics and the mobilization of society. The work-study movement, which began among Chinese students and workers in France around 1912, disseminated anarchist ideas and provided organizational experience to several of the May Fourth leaders. It spawned a whole series of social experiments in the following years, including the popular education, folklore, and new village movements. The student unions that appeared in 1919 provided a new model of social organization and many functioned according to rules of internal democracy. The relative success of the demonstrations (in that the immediate claims were met, although many larger challenges remained) further legitimized social mobilization as a tool of modern politics, and gave rise to a form of urban civil society in its aftermath, in striking contrast with the outcome of the 1989 democracy movement.

However, this form of movement politics also contained some of the deep-set contradictions of modern Chinese political culture. For the student activists, politics remained a strongly moral pursuit, predicated on a lofty ideal of disinterestedness, with no use for the compromises of daily politics in parliament or institutional



representation of different groups in society. The ideals of individual autonomy and awakening never developed into an institutional agenda. Political parties were distrusted as expressions of self-interest and vehicles of corruption. *New Youth* itself functioned on the tacit agreement among its members to remain detached from politics (if not apolitical), and eventually broke up because of political disagreements.

In recent years, a decidedly critical view of May Fourth intellectuals has come to dominate the field. The continuities between Confucian literati and New Culture luminaries had been pointed out by scholars several decades ago, who noted their shared elitism, unquestioned sense of responsibility for society and the nation, and unabashed self-confidence in an avant-garde role in which they spoke for the people. A wave of scholarship inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of intellectuals argued that in their quest for "cultural capital" the younger generation was every bit as factional and dictatorial in imposing a hegemonic idea of "New Culture" as its Confucian predecessors. Some even argue that the debates that had opened up in the lively press columns of the late Qing period and early years of the Republic were foreclosed by the new orthodoxy of "modern" thought after 1919. In any event, it is hardly in dispute that the central role claimed by May Fourth intellectuals remained almost unchallenged throughout the 20th century, up to and including the democracy movement of 1989, in which intellectuals and students once again claimed to speak in the name of the people. Only in the 1990s did a different type of "grassroots intellectual" (to which I have devoted a recent study) begin to gain prominence, outside elite educational institutions and on the margins of society.

Finally, although no one today would draw a direct connection between May Fourth and episodes like the Cultural Revolution (as Chiang Kai-shek might have done), its utopian idealism also contains elements of social engineering that sometimes resonate uncomfortably. The historian Wang Fan-sen summed up this idea in an essay titled "From New Citizen to New Man." While Lu Xun, often celebrated as the father of modern Chinese literature, never actually used the phrase "national character" (*guominxing*), many

of his contemporaries were persuaded that people's psychology and social habits could and should be deeply remolded. Lu Xun himself conceded in the preface to *Outcry*, his 1923 seminal short story collection, that he had originally turned to literature in order to "change people's minds." Such changes could take the form of violent eradication of "superstition," a blind embrace of "science," in particular of Darwinist evolutionism as applied to the competition between nations, and in general a deeply ingrained belief in progress and the benefits of modernity. All of this was questioned in the 1990s, when a "critique of enlightenment" appeared that challenged the elitist, prescriptive, and teleological discourse of New Culture. Some pointed out the similarities between the avant-garde role of *New Youth* and the avant-garde role of the Party, for example during the Cultural Revolution. Others underscored the need to excavate the voices critical of enlightenment embedded in the May Fourth movement itself.

### **Legacies**

Nonetheless, for better or worse, the May Fourth movement remains a central legacy of China's modern history. While the Party will no doubt continue to develop its monistic patriotic narrative of 1919, it is worth pointing out some other legacies that remain meaningful today.

First, the link between the intellectual movement and the student protests was not superficial or fortuitous. Not only was the same group of student leaders responsible for organizing marches, establishing student associations, and editing New Culture journals like *New Tide*, but the movement itself led to a new wave of cultural activism in the second half of 1919. Second, the movement also marked the emergence of universities as autonomous institutions, based on freedom of thought and expression, where students were both socialized in the ethos of new citizens and from where they organized the movement, establishing groups to awaken and mobilize society. The protests of 1919 were also to a large extent a struggle over the control of PKU.

Similarly, the movement marked the emergence of "peer journals" as spheres for elite discussions on culture and politics, predicated

on the broad social endorsement of freedom of the press. The press was both used as a means to spread information and mobilize the masses (for example when students were arrested on May 5), while at the same time letters to the editor sections provided a public platform for open discussion. The expression of student “patriotism” is therefore inseparable from the claims of freedom of expression and political participation.

Finally, the issue of patriotism itself is also worth revisiting. Much of the public outrage stemmed from the fact that the Beiyang government (like the Yuan Shikai regime before it) not only eschewed normal diplomatic protocol by signing secret agreements, and accepted foreign loans as funding for party campaigns or as personal bribes, but was also perceived as lacking the democratic legitimacy to represent the nation in the first place. The Peking government remained strongly contested, seen by many as *de facto* rather than *de jure*. Many members of the first Assembly elected in 1912 had regrouped in Canton and peace negotiations between the Peking and Canton governments were ongoing, even as representatives from both camps were included in the delegation sent to Versailles. It is against this background, a lack of both democratic procedure and democratic legitimacy, that the patriotic demonstrations should be understood; not unlike Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement, which many decades later similarly tied together the assertion of a strong Hong Kong identity with a call to respect democratic procedures. As Chen Duxiu wrote in “The Question of Shandong and Citizen Awakening,” the issue of Shandong brought about two decisive realizations in China: International relations are not governed only by reason, and domestic politics should not be monopolized by a small clique.

Woodrow Wilson’s doctrine uniquely connected internal democratization (self-determination of peoples) with the promise of a more equal, rules-based international order, which was echoed in the student manifestos published on May Fourth, in which principles of “justice” (*zhengyi*) and “rationality” (*gongli*) were contrasted with the practice of “power politics” (*qiangquan*). This is why the legitimate critique of Western double standards – one that understandably continues to resonate for many Chinese

intellectuals to this day – can only be understood in connection with a broader cosmopolitanism. Criticizing the Versailles negotiators’ unwillingness to act in accordance with their lofty principles did not lead the May Fourth students to turn back to jingoistic nationalism. On the contrary, they saw themselves as being at the frontline of a global struggle for a fairer world order. The journals they edited were filled with translations from dozens of foreign languages. Many of the journals had foreign-language subtitles, some in Esperanto like *Reconstruction* (*Gaizao/La Rekonstruo*). Nor were they alone in their critique of the Versailles negotiators. The “Manifesto of *New Youth*” which brought together for one last time the whole editorial group of *New Youth* in December 1919, echoed the “Déclaration d’indépendance de l’esprit” published in *L’Humanité* by a group of European intellectuals critical of the Versailles Treaty and its revanchist nationalism on June 26, two days before the signature of the treaty. Therefore, while official commemorations will no doubt focus on the role of subsequent CCP leaders in the student movement and the need to foster the spirit of patriotic activism today, May Fourth also remains as an ambiguous moment of open possibilities and utopian moralization of politics. While Western politicians would do well to remember the broad resonance of the movement’s critique of Western double standards, Chinese politicians would be well inspired to pay heed to the ideals of academic freedom and democratic process that were at the heart of the student activism of 1919.

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