



THE MAY FOURTH CENTENARY: BINDING YOUTH TO THE NATION AND THE PARTY

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A few weeks ago official celebrations for the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement (or simply “Wusi”, five-four, in Chinese) took place across China amidst the Party/state growing anxiety and concerns about potential threats to regime stability.

That day in 1919, student demonstrations were staged in Beijing to protest against the decision taken at the Versailles peace conference regarding the transfer of the former German concessions in Shandong province to Japan (instead of returning them to China). While demonstrating against imperialism and for China’s right for self-determination, several thousand students also denounced their own leaders, those autocratic and corrupted Chinese warlords who had failed to protect their own country and were considered responsible for China’s backwardness and diplomatic weakness.

The protests began in Beijing but soon spread to virtually all major urban centers, involving unprecedented numbers of students and being followed by strikes and boycotts against Japanese goods. In cities such as Shanghai, students displayed strong organizational skills and were soon joined by urban professional classes, merchants and factory workers. Here, demonstrations reached their apogee at the beginning of June when a general strike paralyzed the city. The Chinese government eventually gave in to students’ demands and instructed the Chinese delegation to refuse to sign the Treaty of Versailles. Japan was, nonetheless, awarded German concessions and expanded its influence in the country in the following years.

The May Fourth Movement stood as a turning point in modern Chinese history, marking the birth of Chinese nationalism and symbolizing the power of student-led mass action. In point of fact, it set a precedent and inspired subsequent political movements that, up to June 1989, challenged arbitrary authority and the way the country was governed¹. As Peter Zarrow put it,² the May Fourth Movement was important as an evolution of New Culture intellectual trends, dating back to the publication of the progressive periodical *Xin Qingnian* in 1915 and Chen Duxiu’s “call to youth” (*jinggao qingnian*) advocating ideals of cosmopolitanism, self-determination, science and freedom

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as crucial to save China (*jiuguo*), as well as the beginning of a more activist political movement that sought to appeal to different social groups. Above all, it was a key to the politicization of a new generation of educated youth keen to overthrow conservative Confucian traditions and, at the same time, increasingly nationalistic and hostile to imperialism.

In fact, the May Fourth Movement provided the basis for the development of modern party politics, turning study societies that promoted political theories from the West into building blocks for new political organizations dedicated to fundamentally changing China. The Chinese Communist party (CCP) has its roots in the May Fourth Movement: in Beijing the Society for the Study of Marxist Theory (Makesi Xueshuo Yanjiuhui), which had been inaugurated as early as March 1920 at Peking University and had initially enlisted its recruits from student activists in the May Fourth Movement, provided the organizational and ideological basis for the birth of a Communist cell. Mao Zedong also participated as a student worker in the university library under the supervision of Li Dazhao.

Chinese official historiography has long treated May Fourth as a political movement that marked a turning point at which the revolution was no longer held by the bourgeoisie but instead by the proletariat and as a movement that created the conditions for the birth of the CCP. Chinese historical narratives have also identified May Fourth as the beginning of of China's CCP-led youth movement. Over the years, the CCP has adapted May Fourth spirit to its political agenda and to historical changes, trying to appropriate its legacy by creating images of May Fourth that fit into its vision of the past and supported its version of the present.

In 1939, in the context of the Sino-Japanese war, CCP leaders formally designated May 4 "National Youth Day," (*qingnian jie*) emphasizing its patriotic legacy and institutionalizing a linkage between May Fourth and youth as historical and political agents. Since then, youth has featured predominately in the CCP rhetoric during May Fourth celebrations. Commemorations became a site for articulating a youth discourse that inherited the spirit of

"national salvation/rejuvenation" — strongly linking youth with the nation —, while emphasizing the need to make young people subordinate to CCP authority.

After the 1989 Tian'anmen student protests, the CCP has increased attempts at binding youth to the Chinese state and its priorities and shaping youth attitudes towards the national collectivity. The "Patriotic Education" campaign implemented since the early 1990s has equated the nation (China) with the 'Communist Party' in an attempt to strengthen the CCP legitimacy and co-opt students. Recent calls by Chinese political leaders to pay attention to youth so as to ensure that the young generation become "builders and inheritors of socialism" reflect the continued importance attached to the youth for the future development of China as well as renewed attention on the need to 'manage young people' and keep them within the Chinese Communist Party's ideological orbit.

A month ago, during official celebrations of the May Fourth Movement president Xi Jinping gave a speech saying that youth must "[take] as their task the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people, not failing the hopes of the Party and the expectations of the people [...]". Official commentaries appeared on May 4th underlined that to take on the 'great task of national rejuvenation' Chinese youth must embrace Xi Jinping thought and vision, instructing them to have a profound understanding of the so called "Six Hopes", which include, among the others, "the formation of far-reaching ideals" and "ardent love for the great motherland", meaning to "listen to the Party and walk with the party". Embracing May Fourth spirit thus means that Chinese youth in the new era "must obey the party and follow the party". As Jeffrey Wasserstrom put it in his article³ appeared recently in the pages of *The New York Times*, "The warlord spirit is back in Beijing."

1. J. Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth-century China: The View from Shanghai*, Stanford University Press, 1991.
2. *China in War and Revolution 1895-1949*, Routledge, 2005.
3. J.N. Wasserstrom, "[May Fourth, the Day That Changed China](#)", *The New York Times*, 3 May 2019.