

Contours and Templates: Assessing the Re-assessments of May Fourth

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Accepting an invitation to comment on a time period [the 1910s and early 1920s], a type of history [intellectual, literary, and cultural], or subject matter [May Fourth] several degrees of separation from ones' own is fraught with risk. Accepting one when all three factors are present is downright foolhardy. But one of the great pleasures of being a senior scholar is that precisely these kinds of invitations – involving literatures and conversations that one might not have otherwise imagined -- prompt thinking through questions and concepts that are not only intrinsically interesting. Additional dividends suddenly appear when the very process leads to insights that are also, even more unexpectedly, directly useful for rethinking questions and concepts in one's own, seemingly far removed work, and for framing developments in China today. So it is with this postscript. As the critical centenary of the May Fourth Movement (五四運動) of 1919 approaches, and commemorative conferences, colloquia, and volumes are planned, the shadows of the Movement – what it meant at the time to participants and observers, what it came to mean over time, and how it is dealt with now in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in diaspora communities – inevitably loom large.

Although there is an entire sub-industry of general discussion as well as academic writing on the subject of “May Fourth” with predictable spikes around the time of major commemorative anniversaries (1989, 1999, 2000, and now in 2019), there is still a surprising degree of blurriness and ambivalence about a topic so large and so well covered. Even as current

scholarship is busily and fruitfully recovering and interpreting materials long hidden in plain sight, working on unremarked upon antecedents to New Culture concerns, and shining a light on the multi-vocal contemporaneous lost voices written out of the grand May Fourth and New Culture narrative, the contours of May Fourth, its periodization, and how we should best understand it now are still unclear and un-agreed upon.¹ Do we, like the classic treatments by Chow Tse-tung's *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (1960) and Vera Schwarcz' *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (1986), see the self-styled New Culture literary movement of the years immediately prior to 1919 to be an integral part of May Fourth, or is it best to treat the New Culture movement separately from the events of spring, 1919? Should we take at face value the New Culture Movement's claims of iconoclasm and utter "newness", and, if not, how far back do we push the antecedents to New Culture and May Fourth? There are, after all, precedents for not only scholar-official remonstrance reaching into the distant past, but also for the decidedly more "modern" active collective petitioning in the wake of traumatic defeat and national humiliation with the Kang Youwei/ Liang Qichao 10,000 Word Memorial of 1895. And if the beginnings of May Fourth are contested, its end point is even murkier and more occluded by the revolutionary politics of the 1920s, when key protagonists like Chen Duxiu gravitated increasingly leftward and laid the intellectual foundation of a Chinese Communist Party that was at least in part based on the foundational enlightenment promises of May Fourth. As Lanza so cogently points out, as basic and unresolved a question as "May Fourth" ended helps to interrogate the often conflated legacy of the "May Fourth event" and the "May Fourth period",² but whether May Fourth is to be considered a movement, an event, a period, an age, or as Peter Zarrow suggests in this special collection "not so much a turning point as a complex cultural moment that intensified certain

¹ See Ya-pei Kuo's "Mapping 'The Conservatives' – Polarity in May Fourth Historiography", in this special issue; Wang Hui, "The Transformation of Culture and Politics: war, Revolution and the 'Thought Warfare' of the 1910s", *Twentieth Century China*, 38:1, pp. 5-33, January 2013,

² Fabio Lanza, "Of Chronology, Failure, and Fidelity: When did the May Fourth Movement End?", *Twentieth Century China*, 38:1, January 2013, pp. 53-70.

trends and dampened others” is still subject to entirely legitimate scholarly differences of opinion. ³To one carrying a hammer, everything looks like a nail; intellectual historians, scholars of literature, and social historians focussed on social movements will all, entirely reasonably, draw on different materials and apply different approaches with different first order intellectual commitments to elucidate different aspects of this complex age/period/ movement/ event. Perhaps the achievement of scholarly consensus on the basics of framing, periodization, and contours itself inevitably writes out and excludes in ways that inhibit rather than promote understanding, and as such we shouldn’t worry too much about what inevitably happens when the boundaries of a phenomenon aren’t agreed upon: a certain amount of cross talk.

Yet – and here I reveal my own political scientist bias towards macro and the political – a very basic question remains about May Fourth. *Why* are we, on a regular ten-year cycle, still discussing and commemorating May Fourth now a century after the event, when the entire world and set of political circumstances that gave rise to May Fourth is long gone? Unlike the Great War, that is still commemorated in an act of national remembrance in the United Kingdom every November, May Fourth does not directly reinforce the legitimacy of the state for the people who make up the nation. Indeed, as anyone who remembers the June 4th Incident of 1989 knows, May Fourth is a quite risky legacy for the People’s Republic of China to promote. More prosaically, who *really* remembers key players such as Duan Qirui, other than in the May Fourth context of the betrayal at the Treaty at Versailles, or the ins and outs of the subsequent parade of weak warlord governments that occupied Beijing as anything other than the prelude to the party-states to come? Given the intervening century of another world war, the world map redrawn, de-colonization, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and decades of Cold War and post-Cold War neo-liberalism, it is extraordinarily difficult recreate the context of 1919. This was a world of European direct colonialism and informal empires just beginning to

³Peter Zarrow, “A Question of Civil Religion: Three Case Studies in the Intellectual History of ‘May Fourth’”.

recede, in collision with a the new aggressive one in Japan on the rise. This was a world of that was, certainly to our sensibilities today, shocking in its combination of vicious social Darwinism married to blatantly racist hierarchies. The contemporary scholarly focus on the micro, the rediscovery of lost voices, the intimate workings of student societies, the suggestion that “May Fourth” did not become a “movement” until it was decreed to be so, ex post facto, in the early 1920s by Chen Duxiu – might be missing something stated explicitly by Chow Tse-tung now some nearly 60 years ago, when May Fourth was closer in time and living memory than 1960 is to us now, when the memories and meaning of May 4th were still very much alive in the consciousness of powerful men edging into retirement and old age; that this was the period of “awakening” and political mobilization – a break point moment of heady optimism and youthful promise for both the self and the nation – before it gave way to the divisions, betrayals, polarization, and the subsequent generation of militarization, civil war, invasion, and geo-political division into two states both claiming to represent all of China.

May 4th, 1919 merits its importance not only because it was infused with the spirit of the New Culture movement, that it was cited by Mao as critical to his own awakening, or that it gave a tremendous boost in public profile to the intellectuals [Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Luo Jialun, Fu Sinian, Xu Deheng] who would go on to set the parameters of public discourse for the next generation and a half, or that the two variants of the Party-state that would go on to dominate Chinese politics both drew parts of their foundational legitimacy from May Fourth even as they needed to bend those untidy realities to party discipline and state will. The real and lasting importance of May Fourth is that it was a transformational break point, one that established a fundamentally new template for both intellectual discourse and social mobilization. As such it left behind an outsized set of footprints into which all subsequent student led mobilization and urban social movements have either stepped or has been measured against.

We are now so used to thinking of May Fourth as a set of new beginnings – a turning point in China’s modernity so profound that things have been forever after sorted into before and after that there is little discussion of precisely why it has been universally acknowledged as so utterly transformational ever since. The list of the usual suspects in explaining this foundational template creation invariably includes such factors as the iconoclasm of the New Culture movement, the liberal optimism and progressive Enlightenment values espoused, the network of unusually gifted Beijing students who came to the fore, who were themselves the product of the newly open and liberal atmosphere that Cai Yuanpei had fostered at Beida, the symbolism of Tiananmen, how the demonstrations attracted cross class urban support, and, *visz* more recent scholarship, the ways in which May Fourth was remembered and canonized some years later as part of the turn to the Left. I suspect that there was no one “key” in the coalescence of May Fourth into the basic template and yardstick by which for all future social movements would be measured. Rather it was a constellation of disparate elements that enabled students to capitalize on a moment of widespread public disgust and anger with a weak and illegitimate government, and in so doing create a perfect storm that was both novel and transcendent. This marriage of novelty and transcendence made was made visible through a public collective performance in which protesting students called for a strong and accountable government. The way in which this demand was articulated unified very old notions of moral virtue embodied in the collective with very new notions of progressive modernity.

Many different factors – some immediate and contingent, others more long term – were part of the May Fourth coalescence into this new template of publicly performed transcendence and virtue. First was the febrile intellectual environment in which a slightly older generation of intellectuals and leaders provided initial ideas and safe spaces for discussion of new ideas that brought a larger set of cohering principles to protestors’ concrete demands through such periodicals as *Xin Qingnian* and *Xin Chao*. All political movements required animating ideals, core ideologies, and key texts, and the several years before May Fourth provided a deep and wide

cache of new -isms. It is surely not coincidental that most of the personalities so important in the protests were not only from Beida, but were in the same department and working on the same progressive periodical. Closely related to this generational intellectual ferment and emergence of progressive new thinking among educated youth was the pre-existing capacity of organizers to mobilize others – in this case through student societies – in response to a sudden crisis/opportunity. Third were models and repertoires that were apprehensible and easily replicated, even when occurring for the first time on this kind of scale: Beijing students were able to draw on very recent events, notably from Korean students' demonstrations against Japanese imperialism only a scant two months prior, as well as the experiences within China of cross class urban boycotts against the mistreatment of Chinese in the United States (1905) and, more recently, with the boycott against Japanese products (1915) in reaction to the Twenty-One Demands, which were themselves an important trigger in the widespread feeling of crisis over China's weakness in the face of imperialism. Fourth was the movement's climax with the demonstrations in China's key focal site in the geography of political power. As the main public entrance to the old Forbidden City – where at this point the Last Emperor Henry Puyi, now abdicated but still very much in residence behind the walls. For all these reasons, Tiananmen still resonated widely with the glories of the late imperial past, while the (illegitimate) Duan Qirui government had its offices elsewhere. This meant that in the immediate term Tiananmen was a sacred political space as legitimate in its links to the past as it was symbolically pliable enough to be turned toward the future. The May Fourth demonstrators, quite literally, filled this central, close to sacred political space with young, indignant bodies that loudly proclaimed legitimacy, virtue, and optimism for the future in collectively demanding government accountability.

The way in which different generations and classes came together to support May Fourth fused two important principles into the bedrock of the May Fourth template of novelty, transcendence and public performed virtue. The idea that youthful students were a legitimately constituted corporate group whose rightful role was to remonstrate and demand accountability

from illegitimate and weak governments on behalf of the (urban) public in open, public space was unimaginably new. The experience of publicly leading urban society, with the presumptive if short term unity of different urban status groups – merchants, artisans, *shimin* was surely transcendent. Given this combination of youthful energy, new emancipatory ideas, socially validated position as remonstrators and spokesmen for the integrity of the nation, and openly expressed unity – with each other and urban society – it is little wonder that the May Fourth template did so rapidly become “canonized” and referenced as a golden age of enlightenment – both personal and national - by those who were either direct participants or merely swept up in the enthusiasm of the age. Naturally, the optimism engendered by unity passed, factions emerged, and May Fourth (or the spirit thereof) ended. So it invariably is with social movements of protest. The historiography of the Chinese Communist Party has it that the torch of progress movement then passed to the Left, to its patron saint Chen Duxiu, and to the eventual victory of the Chinese Communist Party itself. That of the Guomindang was more ambivalent, but still continued to award great honor to that other patron saint of New Culture, Hu Shi, to mention nothing of providing employment and stature to many of those most involved with *Xin Chao* and the actual demonstrations themselves – Luo Jialun and Fu Sinian.

Although it might seem close to heretical to so suggest, perhaps the way forward with further reflection and scholarship on May Fourth might be to consider it alongside other template establishing social movements in the West and in the decolonizing world. Consider the quintessential social movement of the 20th century United States: the civil rights movement. Despite their obvious differences – May Fourth protested government weakness and sell out to imperialism while Civil Rights aimed to mobilize society and the central government against local racism and racist state and local governments – Civil Rights and May Fourth played similar social roles and have been remembered in very similar ways. They captured the imagination of a youthful generation who were now suddenly the leaders of a movement for justice. They generated widespread social support in at least key parts of the country. And perhaps most

importantly, they laid down a basic template against which all later social movements were evaluated implicitly if not explicitly. Like May Fourth, the Civil Rights Movement had multiple strains and antecedents, was comprised of different actors, achieved widespread social legitimacy, and held together for a magical if short period a momentary unity that quickly fractured into factions with ultimately different political agendas. But it is perhaps in the realm of memory and commemoration that the two are most similar. Participants remembered the feelings of enlightenment, energy, youthful optimism, and fusion of the self with a higher collective good – the transcendence – for the rest of their lives. Whatever life’s later disappointments and joys, for the key elites and opinion makers who would go on to shape public opinion for the next two generations, these two social movements were key generational watersheds that demarcated life into “before” and “after”. May Fourth and Civil Rights fundamentally changed public discourse, and the ways in which people from that generation aligned politically. Even if its political objectives were not met in full, the civil rights movement mattered: for individuals, for the framing of politics, for wider understandings of a decent society. Similarly, May Fourth mattered – as watershed and template – for exactly these reasons, and is why we still, one hundred years later, deem May Fourth to be something worthy of decennial celebration, commemoration, and scholarly reflection.