

# One hundred years since the May 4 movement in China

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One hundred years ago on May 4, 1919, thousands of students from 13 colleges and universities gathered in what is today Tiananmen Square in central Beijing to protest the outcome of the peace talks in Versailles following the end of World War I. They were outraged at the horse-trading between the major powers that handed Shandong Province to Japan and kept in place the unequal treaties forced on China. These had created British, French and International “concessions,” or enclaves, in cities like Shanghai.

The demonstration was the outcome of intense discussions and meetings throughout the previous day and night. These brought forward an already planned protest, following news about the complicity of the warlord government in Beijing in the outcome of the talks. Students handed out copies of a passionate “Manifesto of All Students of Peking” that called on the nation to rise up “to secure our sovereignty in foreign affairs and to get rid of the traitors at home:”

This is the last chance for China in her life and death struggle. Today we swear two solemn oaths with all our fellow countrymen: (1) China’s territory may be conquered but it cannot be given away; (2) the Chinese people may be massacred but they will not surrender. Our country is about to be annihilated. Up brethren! [1]

The students marched through the streets chanting anti-imperialist slogans such as “China has been sentenced to death [at the Paris Conference],” “Refuse to sign the Peace Treaty,” “Boycott Japanese goods” and “China belongs to the Chinese.” They denounced pro-Japanese “traitors” who were government ministers.

One account described the public reaction:

The people of Beijing were deeply impressed by the demonstrators. Many spectators were so touched that they wept as they stood silently on the streets and listened carefully to the students shout their slogans. Many Western spectators greeted them with ovations and by taking off or waving their hats... Boy scouts and students from elementary schools joined in and distributed leaflets. [2]

Prevented by police from entering the Legation Quarter to appeal to foreign representatives for justice for China, the students proceeded to the residence of one of the three pro-Japanese “traitors.” Students broke into the house and beat up several occupants. Clashes broke out with police. A number of students were injured, one later dying in hospital, and 32 were arrested and imprisoned in police headquarters.

The protest triggered a broad anti-imperialist movement, initially of

students, which also drew in the working class and layers of intellectuals, merchants and the urban poor, triggering strikes, protests and a boycott of Japanese goods. Police repression and arrests only provoked greater resistance.

In early June, the government launched a massive crackdown on groups of students campaigning in the streets, handing out leaflets and urging people to buy Chinese rather than Japanese goods. After the first arrests on June 2, thousands of students took to the streets on the following days, some with bedding strapped to their back in preparation for jail. By the end of June 4, over a thousand were being held in makeshift prisons in the buildings of Peking University, surrounded by troops.

The mass arrests in early June provoked indignation throughout China. On June 5, a commercial strike paralysed China’s main industrial centre—Shanghai—in support of some 13,000 striking students. Strikes by workers spread throughout the city over the next days, with estimates of up to 90,000 workers involved. From Shanghai, the protests and strikes extended to other major cities.

Brought to its knees by the strike movement, the Beijing government first tried to conciliate with the students. The police and troops were withdrawn from the campuses, but the students refused to leave their campus prisons until their demands were met. The government and the police were compelled to apologise. Finally, students marched out of their prisons on June 8 “amid firecrackers and cheers to a fervent mass meeting and parade of welcome given by their fellow students and the citizenry.” [3]

On June 10, as the strikes and protests continued, the government announced the resignation of the three pro-Japanese ministers. However, the key demand—that China not sign the Versailles Treaty—remained unmet. On June 24, the government instructed the Chinese delegation, even if its protestations to the major powers failed, to sign the document regardless. Faced with an outpouring of angry protest, the president was compelled to reverse the decision the following day. On June 28, China’s representatives refused to join the major powers in signing the peace treaty with Germany.

The demonstrations and strikes were part of a broader intellectual and political ferment. The students who came onto the streets on May 4 had been influenced by the ideas of the New Culture movement, which asserted that ending China’s subjugation required the modernisation of all aspects of society on the basis of democratic ideals and the scientific advances in Europe and the United States.

What was involved was a revolt against traditional Chinese ethics, customs, literary forms, philosophy and social and political institutions. The chief target was ossified Confucianism, which had the status of a quasi-state religion. It provided the ideological underpinning for China’s elites by insisting on the unquestioning obedience of the ruled to the rulers, women to their husbands and sons to their fathers.

The New Culture movement had many diverse strands. However, in the wake of the May–June protest movement, a layer of intellectuals and

youth turned decisively toward socialism, and, under the impact of the October Revolution in Russia, to Marxism and Bolshevism.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in July 1921, little more than two years after the first Beijing protest. Many of the founding members were youth who had been radicalised by the May 4 movement. The CCP's first chairman, Chen Duxiu, was a man in his early 40s who commanded respect inside and outside the party as a revolutionary and the chief intellectual leader of the New Culture movement.

One hundred years on, the CCP has long abandoned the socialist and internationalist principles on which it was founded and is resurrecting the stifling Chinese traditions against which the intellectuals and students had rebelled in the early 20th century. Today the CCP bureaucracy uses its police state apparatus to suppress any criticism or independent thought in schools and on university campuses, and is locking up students from Peking University and other campuses for the "crime" of supporting workers' struggles.

Whatever ceremonies are organised by the CCP to mark May 4 will, above all, be designed to cover up and deny the crucial political lessons the anniversary holds for youth and workers today.

### **The roots of the May 4 movement**

The roots of the May 4 movement lay in the failure of the 1911 Chinese Revolution, led by Sun Yat-sen. The movement overthrew the decrepit Manchu dynasty but could not implement its own aims—national unity and independence, a democratic republic and social welfare for the people, including land for the peasants.

The outcome demonstrated the organic inability of the class that Sun represented—the emerging Chinese bourgeoisie—to fulfil its historic tasks, tied as it was to the landlords in the countryside and subordinated to the imperialist powers on the world arena.

Chinese society had been wracked by crisis for well over a century, compounded by the corrosive influence of foreign invasions. Britain and France fought two Opium Wars, in 1842 and 1858, against the waning Manchu dynasty, which had attempted to block their huge sales of opium into China that were designed to ensure a permanent trade surplus in their favour. The European powers also established the treaty ports and the "concessions," where extraterritoriality applied and foreigners were exempt from Chinese law and the payment of Chinese taxes.

The response of the Manchu court to these defeats and foreign exactions was to impose new burdens, chiefly on the peasantry that formed the vast bulk of the population and underpinned China's economy. The ruination of the countryside was compounded by a flood of cheap foreign goods, which all but destroyed the local handicraft industries. Oppressive conditions sparked rural revolts, including the Taiping Rebellion, which grew out of an obscure neo-Christian cult in 1850 into a storm that swept the country and was only finally crushed in 1865 with the assistance of foreign troops.

The defeat of China at the hands of Japanese imperialism in 1895 came as a shock. It intensified the debate over how to resist the foreign carve-up and subjugation of the country. However, attempts to reform the decrepit Manchu dynasty and transform the archaic machinery of government came to nothing. The so-called "Hundred Days" of reform in 1898, under the young Emperor Guangxu, was abruptly ended by the Dowager Empress Cixi. She imprisoned her nephew and executed or jailed his reformist advisers.

The days of the Manchu dynasty were numbered. At the turn of the century, the dowager empress attempted to manipulate a new revolt by a Chinese secret organisation, known as the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists, that erupted in northern China, and direct it against the foreign powers. The Boxer Rebellion was suppressed by foreign troops and new impositions were made on China by the victors.

Sun Yat-sen came to prominence in the wake of the failure of all attempts to reform the Manchu dynasty. While advocating revolution,

however, he made no attempt to build a mass political movement, and engaged in conspiratorial activities involving small armed putsches or terrorist actions against individual Manchu officials.

In 1911, the Manchu dynasty virtually imploded. The imperial government was on the brink of bankruptcy after decades of plundering by the major powers. Politically, it was thoroughly discredited, as a result of the foreign annexation of Chinese territory in the form of colonies, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the extra-territorial "concessions."

When the Manchu dynasty finally promised constitutional reform, it was too late. Significant sections of the Chinese bourgeoisie, bureaucracy and military had turned to Sun Yat-sen. On October 10, 1911, thousands of troops in Wuchang in Hubei province staged a rebellion and proclaimed a republic. The revolt rapidly spread across many Chinese provinces, but the lack of any genuine mass movement left vested interests untouched.

Sun was proclaimed the provisional president of a loosely federated "Republic of China" but, lacking any significant social base of his own, compromised with the old military-bureaucratic apparatus. Under pressure from the imperialist powers, he handed the presidency to the last prime minister of the Manchu dynasty, Yuan Shikai, who scrapped the constitution and dissolved the parliament.

### **The New Culture movement**

In May 1915, Yuan provoked a wave of protests and opposition when his government accepted Japan's humiliating 21 demands that gave it effective control of large swathes of China, including Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. Public hostility only intensified when, in December 1915, he had himself "elected" as emperor of China by his puppet National People's Assembly.

Most of China's southern provinces under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen declared their independence from the Beijing government and, as his supporters deserted, Yuan expressed his intention of abandoning monarchism. He died in June 1916, leaving a fractured China ruled by rival warlords, each backed by competing foreign powers.

In 1915, amid the political turmoil, Chen Duxiu, who had been active in the 1911 revolution and in a revolt in 1913 against Yuan's regime, returned to Shanghai from exile in Japan. He established the *New Youth* magazine, which proved to be a powerful magnet for the new generation of students. It was one of the pioneer publications in vernacular Chinese, rather than in the scholarly classical Chinese that was largely inaccessible to the population.

*New Youth* sounded a clarion call. Chen proclaimed that the task of the new generation was "to fight Confucianism, the old tradition of virtue and rituals, the old ethics and the old politics... the old learning and the old literature." Mr Confucius, Chen declared, had to be replaced by Mr Democracy and Mr Science.

The extensive rural revolts in China—including the Taiping and Boxer rebellions—had been based largely on superstition, religious cults and secret societies. Sun Yat-sen espoused the ideals of a democratic republic, but exploited Han Chinese racialism against the Manchu, or Manchurian rulers.

However, Chen drew his intellectual inspiration from the European Enlightenment and the democratic traditions embodied in the 18th century revolutions in France and the United States. He wrote in *New Youth* in 1915:

We must break down the old prejudices, the old way of believing in things as they are, before we can begin to hope for social progress. We must discard our old ways. We must merge the ideas of the great thinkers of history, old and new, with our own experience, build up new ideas in politics, morality, and economic life. [4]

In his seminal work, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Harold Isaacs described Chen's appeal to youth as "the opening manifesto of the era of the second Chinese revolution"—the political upheavals and ferment that began with the protest and strike movement of 1919 and led to the nation-wide revolutionary upsurge in 1925, only to be tragically betrayed in 1927. Isaacs explained the impact of *New Youth*:

Chen's magazine was eagerly snatched up by students in every school and college in the country. When it was published, wrote one student, 'it came to us like a clap of thunder which awakened us in the midst of a restless dream... I don't know how many times this first issue was reprinted, but I am sure that more than 200,000 copies were sold.' It nourished the impulsive iconoclasm of the young people. It gave direction to the mood of unease and unsettlement that pervaded all classes in the population. It was a call to action that awakened an immediate response. [5]

In late 1916, facing growing popular opposition, the government appointed the noted liberal educator, Cai Yuanpei, as chancellor of Peking University. Cai transformed the university from a bastion of conservative tradition into a hotbed of progressive intellectual thought and debate. Early the following year, he brought Chen to the university as dean of the School of Letters. Other intellectual leaders joined him, including Li Dazhao, who was appointed chief librarian in February 1918 and became a close collaborator of Chen. Mao Zedong, 25, was one of Li's assistants.

Chen and Li helped to foster a group of students who produced their own monthly magazine, *New Tide*, which first appeared in January 1919. Many were to become prominent student leaders in the protests that erupted on May 4. *New Tide* groups were influenced by many intellectual currents, but the Russian Revolution was already making its presence felt. One contributor to the first issue, Lo Chia-lun, declared that the October 1917 Revolution was the new world tide of the 20th century.

With the end of World War I in November 1918, all eyes were on the Versailles Peace Conference, which would decide the terms of the peace with Germany. In the first year of the war, Japan had seized Shandong Province from Germany, which had held the area since 1898 on a 99-year lease. Japan's representatives in Paris made clear that Tokyo not only wanted to retain Shandong indefinitely but to extend its presence, as outlined in the 21 Demands that had been accepted by the Beijing government in May 1915.

China had a seat at the table as one of the victorious allies. At least 140,000 Chinese labourers had supported the British and French war efforts, as part of the Chinese Labour Corps, with estimates of the number of deaths as high as 20,000.

On November 17, 1918, a huge demonstration in Beijing of some 60,000 people had celebrated the end of the war. The speeches reflected the widespread optimism that the Allies represented democracy over despotism and would restore Shandong to China. When the Versailles Peace conference opened in January 1919, however, those illusions were shattered. Japan announced that Britain, France and Italy had signed secret treaties with Japan that supported its claims to Shandong.

Great hopes remained, however, that the United States would prevail. In his speech to the US Congress on January 8, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson had outlined, in 14 points, the aims of the US in entering the war against Germany. The speech was, above all, aimed at countering the appeals of the Bolshevik leaders, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, to the international working class to put an end to the war through socialist revolution.

Wilson called for the abolition of secret treaties, an adjustment of colonial claims in the interests of the native peoples, as well as of the

colonial powers, and, most significantly from the standpoint of China, a League of Nations that would guarantee the "political independence and territorial integrity [of] great and small states alike."

The outcome of the Peace Conference in May 1919 came as a huge blow to Chinese intellectuals, students and the broader population. Their anger was not only directed against Japan and its immediate allies—Britain, France and Italy—and pro-Japanese ministers in the Beijing government, but also against the US and its president. A graduate at Peking University later recalled:

When the news of the Paris Peace Conference finally reached us, we were greatly shocked. We at once awoke to the fact that foreign nations were still selfish and militaristic and they were all great liars... We had nothing to do with our government, that we knew very well, and at the same time we could no longer depend on the principles of any so-called great leader like Woodrow Wilson, for example. Looking at our people and at the pitiful ignorant masses, we couldn't help but feel we must struggle.[6]

The protests and strikes that began on May 4, 1919 were accompanied by a feverish intellectual and political debate over the way forward. It included a multitude of contenders—liberals and anarchists, democrats, syndicalists and socialists of different types. The American philosopher John Dewey arrived in China, literally on the eve of the May 4 protest, and developed a following, through his lectures and articles, over the next two years. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell also won followers after he was invited to lecture in China and remained for nearly a year from October 1920.

Marxism, however, had no strong established presence in China. It was identified with the Second International, which had been divided over the preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals—how to end colonial domination. At the International's 1907 Stuttgart congress, which discussed the issue at length, some delegates openly expressed chauvinist attitudes, including toward the "yellow race." The outbreak of World War I, an imperialist war for the division and revision of the world, precipitated the collapse of the Second International, as most parties and leaders sided with their own bourgeois governments and their predatory war aims.

Lenin and Trotsky, who had both opposed the betrayal of the Second International, expressed unambiguous opposition to colonialism and support for the struggles of the oppressed peoples of the colonies. In the wake of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, that message reverberated around the world. The manifesto of the founding congress of the Third International in March 1919 declared: "Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia: the hour of proletarian dictatorship will also be the hour of your liberation."

In one of his first actions as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Trotsky seized and published the secret treaties and papers of the Tsarist and Provisional governments, in order to expose the intrigues of the major powers. In July 1919, Leo Karakhan, acting for the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, issued a declaration abrogating all previous secret and unequal treaties between the Tsarist regime and China, and relinquishing Russian claims in China, without seeking compensation.

When news of that declaration finally reached China in March 1920, it had a profound impact. It stood in stark contrast to the determination of the imperialist powers to maintain their colonial possessions and enclaves in China. Some 30 major organisations publicly expressed their gratitude to the Soviet government. Most newspapers demanded that the Beijing government, which had continued to recognise the Tsarist officials of the Russian legation, establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet government.

One of the first Chinese intellectuals to recognise the significance of the Russian Revolution was Chen Duxiu's close collaborator, Li Dazhao. In an essay published in *New Youth* in 1918, entitled "The Victory of Bolshevism," he hailed the October Revolution as the beginning of a new era:

Although the word Bolshevism was created by the Russians, its spirit expresses the common sentiments of 20th century mankind. Thus, the victory of Bolshevism is the victory of the spirit of all mankind. [7]

Inspired by Trotsky's work, *War and the International*, Li declared that World War I marked the beginning of "the class war... between the world proletarian masses and the world capitalists." The Bolshevik revolution was only the first step toward "the destruction of the presently existing national boundaries which are barriers to socialism and the destruction of the capitalist monopoly-profit system of production." [8]

Societies for the Study of Socialism had proliferated following the protest movement of May–June 1919. However, in March 1919, inspired by Li, students from Peking University established a Society for the Study of Marxist Theory. Early in 1920, the Third International or Comintern, which had closely followed the events of 1919 in China, sent Gregori Voitinsky from the Far Eastern Secretariat to Beijing to make contacts. He met with Li, who sent him to meet Chen in Shanghai.

Chen, who had been influenced by the philosophical pragmatism and democratic idealism of Dewey, was slower to embrace Marxism than Li. However, in the wake of the May–June protest movement, his political attitudes shifted rapidly. He had been arrested for his activities during the protests, and following his release, later in 1919, left for Shanghai, where he found layers of workers and youth who had been radicalised. By one account:

When Chen returned there, he immediately attracted a group of active intellectuals who joined him in Marxist study and activities... Chen himself became active in promoting the labour movement, often making fiery speeches to the workers that reflected his Marxist thinking. [9]

When Voitinsky met with Chen in Shanghai the result was a decision to amalgamate a number of groups, which would form the basis for the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, initially created in secret in May 1920. A draft party constitution was passed and a provisional central organisation based in Shanghai. Chen was elected as its first secretary. The party was formally established in July 1921, which is usually taken as the official date. [10]

#### **The Chinese Communist Party today**

A hundred years on, the Chinese Communist Party completely distorts the significance of the May 4, 1919 events. It has long repudiated the democratic principles of the New Culture movement and the socialist internationalism upon which the party was founded. The last thing that the CCP bureaucrats in Beijing want is for young workers and students today to draw inspiration from the youthful rebellion of 1919 by mounting their own revolt against the CCP's police-state apparatus and the stultifying intellectual climate it engenders.

Chinese President Xi Jinping used his speech this week to mark the May 4 movement to hail the virtues of nationalism and patriotism. Xi, who rests on a vast repressive apparatus, insisted that young people must avoid "mistaken thoughts" and "obey the party."

Significantly, students from Peking University and other elite institutions have been detained since last year for the "crime" of assisting workers from Jasic Technology, in Shenzhen, in their struggle to form an independent trade union. The Marxist Society on the campus was threatened with closure, then taken over by CCP stooges. And this took place at the university that was at the very centre of the intellectual ferment of the New Culture movement, and whose students initiated the protest of May 4, 1919.

The CCP cannot tolerate the study of genuine Marxism because it raises far too many questions about its own history and practices. Its "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is an absurd formula, used to justify the processes of capitalist restoration, over which it has presided since 1978. The result has led to staggering disparities between the wealth and privileges of the CCP leaders and the super-rich oligarchs they represent, and the vast majority of working people. Incapable of making any appeal based on socialist principles, the regime has relied on whipping up Chinese nationalism and resurrecting backward Chinese traditions and superstitions.

This is epitomised by the CCP's revival of Confucianism—the chief target of the New Culture movement. It is promoted in schools, universities and through the fostering of Confucius Institutes in countries around the world. In a speech to an international conference in 2014, marking the 2,565th anniversary of the birth of Confucius, President Xi declared that "the Chinese Communist Party is the successor to and promoter of fine traditional Chinese culture." Undoubtedly, the rigid hierarchical view of society to be found in Confucianism dovetails with the bureaucratic outlook of the CCP apparatus.

The CCP long ago abandoned the socialist and internationalist principles embodied in Marxism and in the October 1917 Russian Revolution. The CCP bureaucrats today are not heirs of that tradition, but of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow that usurped power from the working class under the reactionary nationalist banner of "Socialism in One Country." Shortly after the CCP's formation, Stalin shackled it to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT), leading to a disastrous series of defeats of the Chinese working class in the revolutionary upheavals of 1925–27.

Once again, the figure of Chen Duxiu looms large. He opposed the betrayal of the Chinese revolution in the 1920s, and sided with Leon Trotsky, who had warned that Stalin's policies in China would lead to a catastrophe for the working class. Chen became the first chairman of the unified Chinese Left Opposition. Formed in 1931, it waged a courageous struggle for the founding principles of the CCP, despite being hounded and persecuted on all sides, including by the Stalinists.

In China, as internationally, the first stirrings of the working class are emerging in opposition to the oppressive conditions of work and life, and to the CCP's police-state apparatus, which seeks to suppress any form of opposition and independent thought. As in 1919, the main question that confronts Chinese workers and youth is on what basis a political fight can be waged against the CCP and the oligarchs that it represents.

The chief lesson from the May 4 movement is that the answers to these questions are not to be found in China—in particular, in reviving the Chinese variant of Stalinism represented by Mao Zedong. In 1969, on the 50th anniversary of the May 4 events, Mao exploited and perverted the memories of that movement to justify the unleashing of gangs of Red Guards against the so-called capitalist roaders in the misnamed Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

In fact, Mao proved to be the capitalist roader in chief. No sooner had he set the Red Guards against his factional opponents, than the working class appeared on the scene, with the establishment of the Shanghai People's Commune in 1967. Mao's response was to call out the army to bring the situation under control. By 1969, the disoriented youth in the Red Guards had become simply pawns in the factional struggles in Beijing.

The "Cultural Revolution," however, could not and did not resolve the

underlying economic and strategic crisis produced by the reactionary nationalist perspective of “socialism in one country.” There was no national solution: the only choices were world socialist revolution or reintegration in world capitalism. Having abandoned the former decades before, Mao reached a rapprochement with US imperialism in 1972 that opened the door for wholesale capitalist restoration.

Today, workers and youth in China confront the social catastrophe created by capitalist restoration, and the danger of war with the US, for which the CCP has no answer, other than an arms race that will inevitably end in catastrophe. As in 1919, the way out, again, is to be found on the international political and theoretical plane.

What is necessary is a return to the strategy of world socialist revolution and to build a Chinese section of the international party that fights for it—the world Trotskyist movement, today represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International. It alone embodies the necessary political lessons of the strategic experiences of the 20th century in the fight against Stalinism, including the courageous struggles of Chen Duxiu and the Chinese Trotskyists.

#### Footnotes

1. Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, Stanford University Press, 1967, pp 106–7.
2. *ibid*, pp 109.
3. *ibid*, p 160.
4. Harold R. Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, Stanford University Press, second revised edition, 1961, p 53.
5. *ibid*, p 54.
6. Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement (Intellectual Revolution in Modern China)*, Stanford University Press, 1967, p 93.
7. Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, Harper & Row, 1967, p 14.
8. Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism*, Harvard University Press, 1967, p 68.
9. Thomas C. Kuo, *Ch'en Tu-hsiu (1879-1942) and the Chinese Communist Movement*, Seton Hall University Press, 1975, p 79.
10. Chow, *op cit*, p 248.



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