

May fourth movement

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China is moving into the modern world with such speed that it is understandable that there are inevitable time warps. But such anomalies point to the transcendent questions of what China is and where is china going. These questions are crucial to us because in the twenty first century China is a significant player in world affairs; if we hope to deal intelligently with China and its people we must understand their past and present.

Revolution was one of the most important problems facing individual Chinese and China as a nation.

Focusing on the NewCulture/May Fourth Movement (1915-1923) and how its salient features, dominant themes were to influence successive generations of educated Chinese. Beneath the surface during the decade of military struggle China was stirring. A new generation, who had still been learning of their letter when the Empire disappeared, was coming of age. Their experience of the politics of their elders was uninspiring. They were ready for new loyalties and new ideas. The centre of new thought was Beijing University.

It was based on the Tong Wen Guan, which had been transformed into a university by the 1898 reformers; and it was only one of their reforms to survive. In 1916 the liberal scholar Cai Yuanpei had become its president. He encouraged debate and built staff representing every shade of opinion. While China's own culture remained the foundation of education it was studied critically. Typical was the work of Gu Jiegang, the young historian who applied to the classics the methods he has already used in his studies of the colloquial drama, treating the classics as accretions of tradition.

The most influential writer at Beijing was Chen Duxiu. In his journal 'New Youth' he encouraged his contributors in an open minded search for radical solutions to the nation's problems. He preached science and democracy as the basis of renewed national strength. He launched a head on attack on Confucianism, dismissing it as irrelevant to the modern world. Above all, he brusquely dismissed the central dilemma which faced China, the choice between preserving her culture and preserving her existence as a nation.

In an essay which persuaded new way called 'New Year 1916', Chen Duxiu rhapsodized: The epoch in which you are living, what epoch is this?..... To live in the present world, you must raise your head and proudly call yourself a person of the 20th century and not confine yourself to the following the 19th. For evolution of human civilization is replacing the old with the new, like a river flowing on, an arrow flying away, constantly continuing and constantly changing. (pg. 208) Another example from, Hsu (2002) suggest Chen Duxiu called for the destruction of conservatism in order to make room for constructing a new culture.

We indeed do not know which of our traditional institutions may be fit for survival in the modern world. I would rather see the ruin of our traditional 'national quintessence' than have our race of the present and future extinguished because of its unfitness for survival.... The world continually progresses and will not stop. All those who cannot change themselves and keep pace with it are unfit for survival and will be eliminated by the processes of natural selection. Therefore, what is the good of conservatism (pg. 498).

Chen Duixu's bold attack on traditionalism opened up a new vista in the musty intellectual world, and quickly won him an enthusiastic following the educated youth. A third young member of the Beijing staff was Hu shi recently returned from America. He had studied first under liberty bailey at Cornell, then at Columbia under the philosopher John Dewey, whose central tenet, that truth as we can know it is no more than inductively verified prescriptions for change, was an idea whose relevance to china seems very obvious to the new generation.

Dewey's pragmatism gave Chen Duxiu's appeal for open-minded, radical thought a philosophical foundation. The spark which lit this tinder came as usual from a threat to China's integrity. China's main object in joining the Allies in the First World War was that, Germany were defeated, German privileges in Shandong province would be abolished. This had been promised, but at the same time the Allies had, in contradiction, agreed that Japan should inherit these privileges. As Japan had the power to assert her claims and China had not, the peacemakers of Versailles had only Hobson's choice as to which promise they would keep.

By the spring of 1919 the situation was known in China; but the government of Duan Qirui had already gladly concurred - a phrase which became notorious - in Japan's claims and left the Chinese delegation at Versailles without instructions. On 4 May 1919, 3000 students from Beijing University and various other institutions held a protest march. Their example touched off national movement demonstrations, strikes of workers and a boycott of Japanese goods. The government responded by repression. The merchant

community organized a run on the banks, and the government gave in. China did not sign the peace treaty.

The Shanghai Student Union issued the following rationale for their actions: Throughout the world, like the voice of a prophet, has gone the word of Woodrow Wilson, strengthening the weak and giving courage to the struggling. And the Chinese have listened, and they too have heard.... They have been told that in the dispensation which is to be made after the war, unmilitaristic nations like China would have an opportunity to develop their culture, their industry, their civilization unhampered. They have been told that secret covenants and forced agreements would not be recognized.

They looked for the dawn of this new era; but no sun rose for China. Even the cradle of the nation was stolen. (pg. 7) Ten thousand attempted to march in a demonstration in the city on May 7. The Shanghai Student Union launched a boycott against the Japanese goods. Students sent from Beijing reported on government repression in the capital and further fired up the anger of Shanghainese. Whereas the Beijing unrest had continued to centre on teachers and students, in Shanghai by late May the nationalistic fever had spread to businessmen, merchants and labourers. This was the May Fourth Movement.

It predicated changes which had until then been only potential. A united front of intellectuals, merchants, and workers had defeated the government in defence of national interests. This was, its participants felt, democracy in action, successful in the streets while in parliament the nation's representatives had been bribed into acquiescence in treachery. The youth

of the nation, in colleges and schools in all major cities, threw itself into politics, confident in the ability to lead ordinary citizens. They opened workers night schools, wrote and published popular newspapers, and created trade unions.

They joined the Guomindang in such numbers that for the first time its membership in China exceeded its membership in the overseas Chinese communities. Yet the effects of the May Fourth Movement were the greatest in the cultural sphere. For some years a few individual intellectuals had argued that the classical form of written Chinese, hitherto used for all serious writings, should be replaced by the more colloquial written form, whose use in the past had mainly confined to the popular literature of novels and plays. Of the literate population of China only a small minority could read classical form with ease.

If the new ideas which the radicals sought to propagate in China were expressed in colloquial form they would reach a wider, and a non-elite audience. Until the resistance in 1919 this change had been all but universal. Now, suddenly the literary revolution was accomplished almost overnight, at least as far as the new generation were concerned. From then on they wrote about politics, economics, and philosophy, they wrote poetry, and they expressed their new passions for the nationalism and socialism, in baihua - plain language. The use of baihua became the shibboleth of radicalism.

This was the change almost significant for the democratization of culture as the replacement of Latin in Europe by the vernacular languages after the resistance. Confucianism was rejected by the new generation, but, as in any

revolutionary change in thought, the rejection was far from complete. In the first place the Confucian classics were still the vehicle by which children were taught to read and write; while the new generation might repudiate Confucianism as a guide to action in the modern world they were still too devoted to their cultural heritage to relinquish the classics as the basis of education.

In the second place it is easier to repudiate a system of ideas intellectually than to change behaviour accordingly; even now Confucian attitudes strongly influence behaviour in China; hierarchy and patron-client relationships, face savings, family solidarity avoidance of conflict, are still dominant characteristics of Chinese society. However, the intellectual dominance of Confucianism ceased. Before 1917 socialist ideas had little influence. Socialism as a reaction to the problems of modern industrial society did not seem relevant to China, whose problems arose from the absence of industry.

Only when in 1917 a socialist revolution occurred in Russia, a country sufficiently backward to be comparable to China, was the question of the relevance of socialism to China raised. Before then, while there existed in China the vague distaste for the idea of capitalism usual in premodern countries, the strongest revolutionary feeling was directed not against capitalism imported from the west but against China's own autocratic social system, which was based on familial authority.

It is not surprising therefore that, before 1919, anarchism was more popular than socialism among the young radicals. China's anarchist movement had

begun among Chinese students in France. There, during the First World War, a small group of anarchists published a journal called 'New Society'. In Japan another group published 'Natural Justice'. Two other students, Li Shizeng and Zhou Fuhai, translated Kropotkin's mutual aid, and other anarchist works were also translated.

The main anarchist organisation was a society for the promotion of virtue, which attracted some early members of the nationalist party, including the left wing leader Wang Jingwie. Its decline was a rapid as it was rise, however and by 1919 most of the influence was spent; of the young anarchist only one, Zhou Fuhai, joined the communist party, and he soon left. The three other leading spirits of Chinese anarchism moved indeed to the right as they grew older, and eventually became elder statement of the Guomindang.

Yet the fact that there is no continuity of persons to be discerned between the anarchist and the communist phases of the rebellion of Chinese youth does not necessarily mean that anarchist ideas played a role in the history of Chinese communism. Anarchist ideas profoundly influenced the mass line policies of Mao Zedong; and in so far as anarchism versus authoritarianism echoes the ancient Chinese Daoist Legalist polarity, the contrast can never be far from the subconscious, if not the conscious, thought of Chinese social theorists.

Regardless of these different viewpoints, the fact remains that the May Fourth Movement was essentially a socio-politico-intellectual revolution aimed at achieving national independence, individual emancipation, and creation of a new culture through critical and scientific re-velation of the

national heritage and selected acceptance of foreign civilization. Leaders of the movement regarded a radical change in the thought base as a prerequisite to successful modernisation and national regeneration.

Old ethics, customs, literature, social relations and economic and political institutions came under disparaging attack to make way for the new. Yet a new culture was slow to emerge. The New May Fourth Movement had been far more effective at destroying the past than at constructing the future. Nonetheless, three main achievements are disputable. First, the literary revolution led to the establishment of the Plain Language in 1920 and the rise of a new literature in vernacular style- based on humanitarianism, romanticism, realism, and nationalism.

Literature now assumed a didactic role of instilling social consciousness in the public- from literary revolution to revolutionary literature. Second, the influx of diverse foreign ideas and ideologies caused the emergence of two opposing views on social reconstruction and national regeneration: the pragmatic, evolutionary method expounded by Hu Shih and partly accepted by the Nationalist party; and the Marxist revolutionary approach adopted by the Chinese Communist Party. The contemporary history of China from 1921 onward is primarily a story of the struggle between these two parties and their different approaches. Third, the intensification of nationalism stimulated the rise of a Young China, extremely sensitive to its perilous position in the modern world and jealous of guiding its own destiny. Such an attitude generated psychological reconstruction and national

confidence which partially compensated for sense of inadequacy and inferiority that had built up over the decades.

The result was a violent reaction against foreign imperialism and an intense drive to end the unequal treaties. Yet, in the historical perspective, for all its bombastic characteristics, the intellectual revolution succeeded primarily in introducing Western thought and destroying Chinese traditionalism, rather than creating new systems of thought and new schools of philosophy. The confirmed purpose of forging a new culture through critical re-evaluation of Chinese and Western civilizations stirred up a series of debates and polemics without really creating a new culture as such.

Nonetheless, a foundation had been laid to adapt foreign ideas and institutions creatively to the Chinese situation. Whether by the evolutionary or revolutionary route, the ultimate goal remained the same; national salvation through the creation of a New China—thoroughly modernized, yet distinctly Chinese. Overall, successive generations have been influenced by these past themes which will take China into the future.