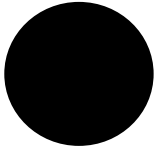


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Chinese Students and Anti-Japanese Protests, Past and Present

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom

When Chinese students marched against Japan in Beijing this April, their demonstration appeared to be adding yet one more chapter to the ongoing controversy over Japan's reluctance to deal seriously with the atrocities it committed during the Second World War.¹ But to make sense fully of the protests themselves and understand why a regime that seemed to encourage the students so abruptly switched gears and urgently tried to get the protestors off the street, one needs to recall the history of Chinese youth movements. In particular, it is crucial to look backward to what students did during the month of May in various years of the twentieth century.²

This history matters to the leaders of the People's Republic of China, who well know the student protests of May 1919 helped pave the way for the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, and that the student protests of May 1989 posed a formidable challenge to the party's post-1949 monopoly on power. May is one of the most symbolically charged months in China's political calendar. This helps explain the intense concern with getting students back into the classrooms before April ended. It also helps explain the acute official nervousness particularly about May 4, a very special day in a very special month. It was on that date in 1919 that the warlords then running China contended with the first of a series of dramatic student-led protests that precipitated the downfall of three high-ranking ministers. And May 4 also marked a turning point in the 1989 student-led struggle that

made Tiananmen Square a household word and a familiar sight on television news programs.

These events occupy a place in China's political mythology roughly comparable to that of the Boston Tea Party. May 4, 1919, began with students gathering in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen), an area later transformed into a massive plaza filled with such edifices as the Monument to the People's Heroes glorifying the Communist revolution. The youths then shouted denunciations of Japanese imperialism and official corruption. They also called for the dismissal of three government ministers, who were viewed as responsible for the soft line the government had taken toward Japanese efforts to wrest control of the Shandong region of north China. After protesters burned the home of one of the despised officials, students were arrested and beaten, with one youth subsequently dying from his injuries.

This launched a movement that spread to other cities, winning support from workers and merchants as well as students, and culminating in a general strike in Shanghai that paralyzed the Chinese economy. The May Fourth activists did not achieve all of their goals, and notably failed to block a provision in the Versailles Treaty that awarded the German-ruled enclave of Shandong to Japan. Nevertheless, their marches and boycotts forced the government to comply with three key demands: the release of all students arrested on May 4, the dismissal of the three hated ministers, and the with-

drawal of Chinese support for the Versailles Treaty (an important, if futile, symbolic gesture).³

This partial success, which demonstrated the ability of China's different classes to work together, won a celebrated place in the revolutionary mythologies of both the Nationalist Party (which was already in existence) and the Communists, thereafter the main rivals for control of China. The May Fourth Movement was especially exalted in Communist lore. This was because the party's founders included professors who were mentors to the activists of 1919 and students who had cut their political teeth during the street actions of that year. Further solidifying the links between the party and the May Fourth Movement was the fact that many of these same people edited or wrote for periodicals such as *Xin Qingnian*, a journal that published passionate denunciations of everything from Confucian traditions to imperialist exploitation of China by Japan and Western powers.

The Communist Party's links to, and veneration of, the May Fourth Movement meant that, from 1949 on, successive generations of Chinese students were encouraged to emulate the heroes and heroines of 1919. This official view is literally inscribed in Tiananmen Square itself. At the base of the Monument to the People's Heroes, friezes that commemorate the revolution include depictions of the May Fourth demonstrators. Hence every anniversary inspires countless speeches and editorials celebrating the great contributions that students have made, and continue to make, in carrying forward the sacred revolutionary mission. Sometimes, however, as the anniversary date nears officials have nervous second thoughts about youthful exuberance. Hence the mid-April about-face on the protests, signaled by sternly worded editorials calling for an immediate end to street actions. Hence the conspicuous police presence around Tiananmen Square on May 4, 2005—lest the students of 2005, like their predecessors of

1989, decided that a particularly appropriate place to stage mass actions in the May Fourth tradition was in front of the frieze depicting the 1919 events.

The regime's concern with halting the anti-Japanese protests came as a surprise to some observers because of their assumption that the marches had been carefully stage-managed, with the regime calling the tune to which the students danced. Howard French of the *New York Times* described them as a throwback to the manipulated street actions of the notorious Cultural Revolution era.⁴ More generally, the regime's turnabout was viewed as a replay of 1999, when anti-U.S. protests erupted during the second week of May after NATO bombs inadvertently hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

According to a still-prevalent interpretation of the 1999 protests, China's leaders had shrewdly used student demonstrations to divert attention from domestic sources of discontent, such as anger at endemic official corruption and the fraying of social welfare safety nets in an era of untrammelled Chinese-style capitalism. Since the regime had shown in 1999 that it could successfully ride the tiger of popular nationalism, so the common argument ran, it decided to try to do the same thing again.

By mid-April of this year, however, it became clear that at least some officials had begun to fear—and perhaps had feared all along—that the current movement could all too easily spin in unwelcome new directions. This suggests to me that the government had jumped ahead of and then tried to steer events, rather than unambiguously “orchestrating” anti-Japanese sentiment—sentiment that is deeply felt in part because official propaganda keeps it alive. This certainly fits in with my own sense of what actually took place during the 1999 demonstrations—demonstrations that I witnessed firsthand, ironically having come to Beijing to take part in an academic May Fourth anniversary conference that ended a few days

before China's Belgrade embassy was destroyed.⁵

In 1999, the government initially allowed the students to vent their anger and even provided buses to ferry youths to and from rallies. However, it would be a mistake to equate this with a government-inspired movement. The protesters were genuinely outraged by the fact that their country's embassy had been hit and three Chinese citizens killed by NATO bombs. But the students had begun to talk about new ways to express their patriotic fervor before the Belgrade incident. According to Wang Dan, a former Tiananmen leader who by 1999 was based in the United States, Beijing students earlier pressed for and were denied permission to hold patriotic rallies prompted by earlier events, such as the anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia.⁶ A few days before the protests began, I saw a wall poster at Beijing University that called on students to demonstrate their loyalty to the May Fourth tradition by meeting to discuss the NATO actions in the former Yugoslavia. The link was not far-fetched, since many in China saw (and were encouraged by the government to see) parallels between an embattled Serbia at the mercy of the United States and Britain, and their own country circa 1919. The fact that NATO had taken its actions regarding Kosovo without the sanction of the United Nations Security Council was also seen as a slap in the face, since China has taken great pride in its permanent seat in that body.⁷

Moreover, the government strove to limit the size and curtail the length of demonstrations, and tried keep ordinary workers from taking part in rallies, lest they begin to make common cause with students on other issues. Within a few days, there were efforts to get students off of the streets and back into classrooms. One reason for this was the looming tenth anniversary of the June 4 massacre that ended the 1989 protests, which the regime was determined to let pass as quietly as possible.

Similar concerns were felt this year, since calls went out on the internet in mid-April for demonstrations to be held on both May 1, International Labor Day, and May 4, which is officially designated Youth Day. New grievances might again be voiced, and new groups mobilized, emulating the multi-stranded and multi-class May Fourth Movement of 1919.

Politically Charged Anniversaries

In examining the history of student activism over past decades, one finds a plausible basis for the regime's concern with recent protests. The advent of politically charged anniversaries has often galvanized campus activists.⁸ Before the Communist takeover in 1949, this often benefited the party. This was the case, for example, in 1947, when anger over the arrest of two Shanghai law students who had marked May 4 by putting up posters criticizing the ruling Nationalist Party energized a local protest movement. Of greater concern to China's current leaders are anniversary-related events of the 1980s.⁹

In 1985, for example, anti-Japanese protests, which had some support initially from factions within the party leadership, broke out at the end of the summer, just as the anniversary of Japan's September 18, 1931, invasion of Manchuria was being marked. Though efforts were made to apply brakes, more protests followed with the advent of the fiftieth anniversary of the December Ninth Movement, an anti-Japanese, anti-Nationalist Party protest that is the second most famous student-led campaign of the pre-1949 era.¹⁰

A year later, in 1986, when I was in Shanghai doing research on campus activism of the Republican era (1912–49), I witnessed firsthand the complex links that can develop between anniversaries and new movements. A series of student marches that served as a virtual dress rehearsal for Tiananmen began early in December. Youths took to the streets to call

for speedier political reforms and for less government interference in campus life (a concern in 1985 as well). And though the protests had nothing to do with Japan, they once again gained momentum as the December 9 anniversary neared—and in this case continued to do so after that emotional date passed. Campus bulletin boards were plastered with official posters reminding youths of the brave deeds of the patriotic students of 1935, and then unofficial placards were placed on top of these appealing to a new generation to take to the streets.

Neither the events of 1985, nor those of 1986, were as dramatic as the phenomenon that helped bring the decade to a close. May Fourth's advent in 1989 was destined to have special meaning simply because it would mark the seventieth anniversary of the 1919 struggle. Such round numbers tend to be celebrated with particular energy. Moreover, the student-led upsurge of 1989 began in mid-April, and by the end of that month, despite forcefully written editorials calling for its end, was still gathering steam.

Things reached a boiling point on May 4. Demonstrators organized their own celebratory rallies in Tiananmen Square, which diverted the thunder from gatherings sponsored by the government, and issued a manifesto stating that they were the true heirs of the heroes of 1919. These self-styled "New May Fourth Activists" insisted they were risking their lives to save China from misrule. The government responded by insisting that the party continued to represent the ideals of 1919 and that the protests at Tiananmen Square were the work of "New Red Guards" (a term I saw used on some official campus bulletins to discredit the 1986 protests). Moreover, the government claimed, extending this denigrating analogy, there were "hidden hands" behind the movement striving to create "turmoil" of the sort that had devastated China during the Cultural Revolution.

This year, once again, as the anniversary neared, debates over the legacy of 1919

erupted. Officials insisted—echoing statements of their predecessors, and before that of Nationalist leaders—that students could best express their patriotism by studying hard. Some protesters claimed, however, that militancy was in order to show fealty to the true tradition. They saw continuities with the past in their outrage over Tokyo's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council and its claims to sovereignty over disputed islands. Not only did the original May Fourth demonstrators oppose the ceding of Shandong to Japan, but their early successors assailed the inability of the League of Nations, a precursor of the United Nations, to limit Japanese armed aggression in China.

The government responded to this latest appropriation of the May Fourth legacy in a familiar way. Officials claimed that with China in the hands of the party, the time had passed when sustained mass actions were the appropriate way to carry forward the May Fourth spirit. In addition, as in 1989, they countered one historical analogy with another: editorials referred to protests as involving a manipulation of popular feeling dangerously reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. This rhetorical strategy—plus a heavy police presence in key cities—succeeded in preventing major protests on May 4 this year. And, perhaps most importantly to the regime, a carefully guarded Tiananmen Square remained quiet. But the question remains whether this short-term victory means that China's leaders can now breathe easy.

One reason why the regime is likely to remain concerned is that the rest of 2005 is filled with interesting—and potentially provocative—anniversary dates. Within two weeks of the time I am writing (mid-May) comes the eightieth anniversary of the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, which had much in common with, and is seen by some as a continuation of, the 1919 struggle—even though it was associated with workers more than with students. Then the summer

brings the sixtieth anniversary of Japan's surrender, followed by the often volatile September 18 and December 9 anniversaries that sparked protests in the mid-1980s. But how worried should the regime really be?

The case for continued jitters due to student restiveness should not be exaggerated. There is no reason to think that students will ever again follow the exact same circuitous route that two decades ago began with small-scale anti-Japanese outbursts in 1985, followed by the larger demonstrations of late 1986, and from there to the massive upheaval of 1989. This student generation shares important things with its predecessors of 1989, including a strong sense of nationalism.¹¹ But there is a key difference: students now are in many respects less thoroughly alienated than their earlier counterparts, partly for material reasons (educated youths no longer feel as they once did that, as a social group, they are being left behind by economic reform) and in part because the state has become a less intrusive presence on campus.

Anger at official corruption and the sense that current leaders care most about clinging to power and ensuring the future of their offspring could still provide a common basis for cross-class alliances. Nevertheless, educated youths now often seem to live in a different world than that inhabited by workers laid off from jobs they thought were guaranteed for life, by villagers forced to relocate to make way for giant dams, and by other groups whose protests have caused trouble for the regime in recent years.¹²

Still, even if it seems doubtful that today's students could spearhead a movement similar to Tiananmen, the current leadership knows that the circuitous route from 1985 to 1989 has a place on the Chinese historical map. And it is easy to see why this knowledge, as well as familiarity with other unexpected twists and turns that student movements have taken over the years, would be a source of anxiety for any government leader with a sense of history. Moreover, there are

good reasons to think that if a situation were to emerge that led students to make common cause with members of other social groups, the result could be a dramatic form of People Power with twenty-first century characteristics—a thoroughly wired New May Fourth generation spreading plans for action through handheld digital mechanisms that can transmit messages faster than any of the technologies upon which their predecessors relied.¹³

Another point worth considering is that China's current leadership, though distancing itself from many of Mao's policies, remains familiar with the Great Helmsman's aphorisms, including his claim that a "single spark" is all it takes to start a prairie fire. The anti-Japanese protests of April were just one of a host of popular challenges, following closely on a range of rural protests, the ruling party has had to face recently. It is possible to marvel at the skill the current leaders have shown in rising to each occasion. But it is also possible to wonder, in light of Mao's words, just how long so many sparks can fly without igniting that prairie fire. ●

Notes

An earlier version of this essay, "Why China Was So Worried about Those Student Protests," ran on the History News Network website, www.historynews-network.org, May 4, 2005.

1. See, for example, "History that Still Hurts," *Economist*, April 13, 2005; and Hugo Restall, "'Opposing the Sun': Japan Alienates Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 2005, pp. 8–13, an essay that focuses largely on China but also deals with the broader pan–East Asian dimensions of the debates about Japan and the Second World War. An excellent online source for varied perspectives on news stories on China is the China Digital Times at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net>. In preparing this essay, I have relied heavily upon materials written for and reprinted by CDT, which is run by the Berkley China Internet Project, based at the Graduate School of Journalism, University of California, Berkeley.

2. Geremie R. Barmé put the recent protests into the kind of long-term historical perspective proposed here in “Mirrors of History: On a Sino-Japanese Moment and Some Antecedents,” written to mark this year’s May Fourth anniversary. The essay was posted on the Japan Focus website, www.japanfocus.org (article no. 280). I am grateful to the author, whose views of the situation overlap significantly with my own, for sharing his essay just prior to its online distribution. His essay provides a fuller discussion than I provide here of such things as the discursive aspects of the recent protests and the role that communication technology played in the spread and curtailment of the demonstrations. He also has insightful things to say about the trouble that Chinese (and Japanese) authorities have had in coming to terms with troubling aspects of their past.

3. There are many important discussions of the history of the May Fourth Movement in Chinese as well as in other languages. The classic work in English remains Chow Tse-Tsung, *The May 4th Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). For a recent interpretation of the events of 1919 and their legacy, see Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China’s Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), which uses May 4 as a starting point for looking at various major issues in the Chinese past and includes a very useful guide to further reading.

4. Howard W. French, “By Playing at ‘Rage,’ China Dramatizes Its Rise,” *New York Times*, April 21, 2005.

5. The following comments on the 1999 demonstrations build on the more detailed account provided in my “Student Protests in Fin-de-Siècle China,” *New Left Review*, no. 237 (September–October 1999), pp. 52–76. See also Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Zhao Dingxin, “An Angle on Nationalism in China Today: Attitudes among Beijing Students after Belgrade 1999,” *China Quarterly*, vol. 172 (December 2002), pp. 46–69; and for particularly good press coverage, the reporting at the time by Susan Lawrence of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and John Gittings of the *Guardian*.

6. See Wang Dan’s comments in “A Dialogue on the Future of China,” *New Left Review*, no. 235 (May–June 1999), p. 105.

7. On the ambivalence of the authorities toward the recent protests, even before the turn toward condemnation, as well as how one city and its residents experienced the demonstrations, see James Farrer, “Nationalism Pits Shanghai against Its Global Ambition,” *Yale Global*, April 29, 2005, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=5658>. Farrer’s discussion of the irony of China’s most cosmopolitan city serving as a hub of nationalist protest would have been richer had he pointed out that 2005 was not the first time this had occurred. As noted above, for example, Shanghai was also a major focus of nationalist upheaval in 1919—and that, too, was a time when it was commonly described, with good reason, as an unusually cosmopolitan metropolis. For more details on student-led nationalist movements in the city’s past, see my *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); for a useful recent work on labor unrest, see S. A. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses: Labor and Nationalism in Shanghai, 1895–1927* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

8. For further information about the events of the 1940s through 1980s discussed in this essay, see my *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China*, which includes a bibliographic essay that provides an overview of other works on the subject published prior to 1991.

9. On campus activism in 1985, see Gordon H. Chang, “A Report on Student Protests at Beijing University,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 18 (July–September 1986), pp. 29–31; and Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), chap. 8, which also contains a good discussion of the protests in late 1986. One relevant event that preceded by four months the September 1985 campus unrest was a riot that broke out on May 19 in Beijing after a Chinese soccer team lost to a Hong Kong team; during the match, somewhat surprisingly given that a team from Japan was not involved in the match, many anti-Japanese slogans were apparently shouted (see Barmé, “Mirrors of History”). Nor was Japan involved in the Kosovo intervention, yet during the anti-NATO demonstrations in May

1999, some Japanese students (for reasons that remain somewhat obscure) ended up the target of protesters at one Chinese campus; for more on this, see my “Student Protests in Fin-de-Siècle China.”

10. In the earlier version of this essay posted on the History News Network site, I mistakenly claimed that protests occurred on the December 9 anniversary itself in 1985. Large demonstrations were planned for that day, but they did not materialize, in part because, as Gordon Chang details in “Student Protests at Beijing University,” the government went to such great pains in late November and early December to take control of the way the anniversary was to be marked. Thus, the last big anti-Japanese gatherings that had a dissenting edge to them occurred on November 20, though the *New York Times* did report that some students shouted out unauthorized slogans during the biggest officially sponsored December 9 anniversary rally held in Beijing.

11. The Western press often differentiates sharply between the 1989 protests and those of 1999 and 2005, but there are common threads, such as identification with the May Fourth tradition and

concern with saving the nation that should not be ignored. It is thus no fluke that Wang Dan saw some positive as well as negative things in the anti-NATO demonstration of 1999 (see “Dialogue on the Future of China,” p. 105), and that another Tiananmen veteran was among those arrested for joining the recent protests (see the Human Rights in China report at www.hrichina.org/public/contents/press?revision%5fid=22194&item%5fid=22193).

12. On the unrest associated with these groups, see Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Stanley Rosen and Peter Gries, eds., *State and Society in Twenty-First Century China: Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

13. On the recent protests and new communication technologies, see Barmé, “Mirrors of History”; and Kristie LeStout, “Eye on China: Young, Angry...and Wired,” CNN, May 3, 2005, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/asiapcf/04/27/eyeonchina.internet/>).