China’s Revolution in Politics, Literature, Feminism

Commemorating the Centenary of the May Fourth Movement

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The Qing Dynasty was overthrown in 1911. The end of the imperial era led to a dynamic but also politically, socially, and culturally unstable era. Rather than leading to an enduring liberal political system, the 1911 Revolution inaugurated an era of alternate military dictatorship and weak national leadership that experienced conflict with its own provincial governments. China’s intellectuals and public leaders argued that China’s failure to modernize more successfully was caused by both external and internal factors. China had been targeted by imperialist powers for decades, and, despite its large size, had a relatively weak diplomatic positions vis-à-vis the West and Japan. Internally, China’s economy, social system, and cultural values were criticized as holding China back from modernization and national strength. Hence the call to create a “new culture” that could kick-start China’s overall development.

This movement was further galvanized by large public protests on May 4, 1919, which were held in response to the unfavorable terms of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. The May Fourth Movement (or New Culture Movement) which began in 1919 grew to encompass a variety of rallying cries, among them education, the embrace of science and social progress, popular literacy, socialism, feminism, and democracy.

Introduction to the May Fourth Movement
The May 1919 demonstrations had many points of inspiration, but the most immediate context was the political situation in China following the implementation of unequal treaties. Beginning with the first Opium War of 1842, China was forced under threat of military invasion and potential colonization to sign a series of unfavorable treaties with Western nations, including Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the United States, and Japan. These treaties gave extraterritorial jurisdiction for foreigners in China, and gave foreign governments control over profitable and strategically important railroads, mines, and communications infrastructure. Foreign governments were also given the right to establish territorial concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin. Germany by treaty was given the right to a 99-year lease of the coastal province of Shandong.

During World War I (1914–1918) China joined the Allied side and sent some 140,000 non-combatants to support the war effort in France. In 1915, Japan, which had stationed over 50,000 troops in Northeastern China, compelled China to agree to a new unequal treaty, the so-called 21 Demands, which included the transfer of German concessions in Shandong to Japan. The leadership of China at that time agreed to most of the demands, including the right of Japan to receive German territories. During the Spring 1919 peace negotiations after the end of World War I, Chinese delegates to the peace talks lobbied their victorious allies to regain sovereignty in Shandong. The Allied powers backed Japan’s claims and in fact extended Japan’s rights to include control over railway lines in North China and right to Shandong in perpetuity.

News of these events arrived in China in late April. On May 2, an editorial was published in a large-circulation liberal newspaper announcing the disaster. On May 4, concerned students from thirteen Beijing universities came together and issued a declaration that “China’s territory may be conquered but it cannot be given away. The Chinese people may be massacred but they will not surrender.” Some 4,000 students, including many women, gathered that day in central Beijing, in front of the southern entrance to the imperial city called Tiananmen, the ‘Gate of Heavenly Peace.’ They carried banners reading “Do away with the ‘Twenty-One Demands,'” and “Don’t sign the Versailles Treaty.” Students were beaten and arrested by police. Soon after, people in cities across China launched sympathy protests, demanding that the Chinese government free imprisoned Beijing students and take action against imperialism, social conservatism, and autocracy.
The May Fourth intellectuals promoted science and democracy, women’s suffrage and equality, economic rights for China’s poor majority, and the promotion of a new literary language, based on vernacular speech, that would allow greater literacy and spread of progressive political ideals.

The proponents of the New Culture saw education and social progress as crucial remedies to China’s diplomatic weakness and endemic poverty. Their goal was to strengthen China’s economy, social fabric, and international standing through programs of public education. They hoped to engage China’s masses through easily accessible texts and dramatic graphic design.

The Chinese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference included over sixty members, including military officers and technical experts. (Song Qingling’s maternal uncle, Linson Edward Dzau or Cao Linsheng, 曹霖生, 1895–1978, was also a member of the delegation as a secretary.) Five plenipotentiary delegates were authorized to sign on behalf of China’s government. Other well-known intellectuals like Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873–1929) were also present in Paris and communicated news of the negotiations to friends and journalists in China. Indeed, it was Liang Qichao who relayed to China news of the disappointing Shandong negotiations; his bulletins were the basis for the May 2 essay that launched the May 4 demonstrations.

The official delegation was led by China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lu Zhengxiang (陸征祥, 1871–1949), and had as its spokesperson Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun 顧維鈞, 1888–1985), who later served as Ambassador to France, Great Britain and the United States, helped found the League of Nations and the United Nations, and was a judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague. No formal instructions were given to the Chinese delegation as to whether they should endorse the treaty. Ultimately they all refused to sign, earning them wide public support from individuals and civic institutions in China who praised their patriotism.

Below is a telegram to the Chinese government, via the Chinese embassy in Washington D.C., from American advisor to China John Calvin Ferguson (Chinese name 福開森, 1866–1945), former president of both Nanjing University and Nanyang University in Shanghai. During the negotiations, Ferguson updated the Chinese government regarding the position of U.S. officials as well as American public opinion, which was generally supportive of China’s position regarding Shandong.
The first modern Chinese periodical was started in 1864 in Hong Kong, with two other publications established in Shanghai in the 1870s. Further growth in Chinese periodicals occurred after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, when Chinese intellectuals established journals to promote political and social reform, such as reformer Liang Qichao’s Shibao, founded in Shanghai in 1904. The periodical press that emerged during the May Fourth movement continued to showcase political, social, and literary concerns, including women’s rights and political reform.

When the May Fourth movement began, a number of new publications were instrumental in helping intellectuals communicate messages of political, social, and cultural change. One of the most well-known intellectuals of the era was the progressive educator and author Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀, 1879–1942), who in 1921 cofounded the Chinese Communist Party and served as its first General Secretary until 1927. In 1915, Chen started the magazine *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian* 新青年 or *La Jeunesse*), which was published until the Nationalist Government closed it in 1926. In addition to Chen, editors of the magazine included some of the most famous intellectuals of the era, including philosopher and diplomat Hu Shih (胡適, 1891–1962), fellow CCP founder Li Dazhao (李大釗, 1889–1927), and modernist fiction writer Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881–1936). *New Youth* is one of the most influential and representative publications of the May Fourth Movement.

In its first issue, Chen Duxiu published “Letter to Youth” (*Jinggao qingnian* 敬告青年), which encouraged young people to “be independent and not enslaved, be progressive and not conservative, be in the forefront and not lagging behind, be internationalist and not isolationist, be practical and not rhetorical, and be scientific and not superstitious.” Chen Duxiu’s advocacy of both science and democracy was soon a rallying cry for May Fourth protestors, who colloquially welcomed “Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science” 德先生和賽先生 to China.

Other progressive periodicals of the era include *The Renaissance* (*Xinchao* 新潮), published starting in 1918 by The Renaissance Society, whose members were Beijing students inspired by Hu Shih, Li Dazhao, and other progressives. *The Renaissance* articles promoted Western political and social thought and encouraged China’s young people to embrace progressive politics.

Magazines dedicated to women’s issues were also popular and gained wide readership. Numerous other magazines also focused on a women’s readership and highlighted feminist issues, like *Jiefang huabao* 解放画报 (Emancipation pictorial), an explicitly feminist magazine, whose inaugural issue was published on May 4, 1920, to commemorate the May Fourth demonstrations.
In their efforts to reach a broad public, May Fourth intellectuals promoted vernacular literature or *baihua wenxue* 白話文學. For example, starting in 1918, *New Youth* published exclusively in *baihua*, as did *The Renaissance* magazine. Other famous proponents of *baihua* included the poet and historian Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892–1978) and *The Renaissance* Society member Ye Shengtao (葉聖陶, 1894–1988), who founded the first literary association of the May Fourth Movement and later served as Vice-Minister of Culture of the People’s Republic.

Perhaps the most famous *baihua* writer was Lu Xun, whose story “Diary of a Madman” (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日記) was published in *New Youth* in 1918. The story tells of a man who sees the words “eat people!” written in the margins of Confucian classics, a metaphor for how traditional culture is said to devour young people. In 1923, “Diary of a Madman” and other stories were reprinted in the collection *Call to Arms* (*Nahan* 喊喊). The collection included Lu Xun’s masterpiece “The True Story of Ah Q” (*Ah Q zhengzhuan* 阿Q正傳), a comic account of a simpleninded everyman unable to cope with either traditional or modern social forces in China.

Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century were committed to increasing popular literacy, via both reform of Chinese characters as well as a radical transformation of the literary style. Two of the most significant proposals to create a more accessible written script were the movements to simplify Chinese characters, and to create a Chinese writing system using the Latin alphabet. One of the key figures in the Latinization movement was Qian Xuantong (錢玄同, 1887–1939), professor of literature at Beijing University. A noted iconoclast, Chen described Chinese characters as “backward, difficult to recognize, and inconvenient to write,” and blamed them for China’s supposed conservatism and lack of technological progress. In 1923, Qian wrote in *The Revolution of Chinese Characters* (*Hanzi geming* 漢字革命) that “the fundamental reform of the Chinese characters […] is to switch to using pinyin to spell out Chinese characters.”

This radical plan failed, but its circulation among intellectual circles was characteristic of the audacious and utopian spirit of the May Fourth era. By the 1950s, simplified Chinese characters and *Hanyu pinyin* 漢語拼音 romanization were adopted in the People’s Republic. Even in Taiwan, where non-simplified (or “complex”) characters remain standard, *zhuyin fuhao* 注音符號 phonetic symbols, also called *bopomofo* (ㄅㄆㄇㄈ), which was first developed in the early 1910s by the government Commission on the Unification of Pronunciation, is still the standard transliteration system for the Chinese language, as well as non-Han ethnic minority languages.
The movement by Chinese women to achieve cultural, political, and economic equality was a crucial element of the New Culture Movement. Women were at the forefront of the May Fourth demonstrations and continued to play leading roles in progressive politics. Women's education, a rallying cry for progressives in the late 19th century, led to increasing participation of women in all areas of modern life. Women joined the professions, became leading writers and social critics, and were important political figures.

The question of "what a modern Chinese woman should wear" was an important and tangible related issue. By the 1920s, elite women had largely abandoned traditional garments of embroidered hip- or knee-length jackets and trousers as well as, most famously, the bound foot with its delicate embroidered shoes. Instead, young women with "natural feet" preferred the short jackets and skirts favored by female students as well as the qipao旗袍, a one-piece dress.

Qipao (also called cheongsam) have asymmetrical front openings and are frequently embellished with piped seams, contrasting collars and trim, and knotted closures. Unlike traditional women's clothing in China, which hung loosely around the body, qipao were typically more form-fitting. They could accentuate the trim physique of the modern, athletic, and romantically adventurous modern woman.

The qipao became widely popular in the 1920s and, ironically—given that it was a thoroughly modern garment—increasingly came to symbolize Chinese traditional attire.

In the 1920s, the typical qipao was made with one piece of fabric for the front, back, and sleeves. A more modern qipao style has shoulder seams, with set in sleeves made from another piece of fabric. In both Chinese and Western fashion in the 1920s, women's clothing styles were straight in an H-line shape, and less fitted in the waist area.

The Feminist Movement & Women's Social Conditions

The May Fourth Movement as a whole took as its goals modernization, national strength, and cultural and social development. Women played key roles in this movement, both as members of society, and also as intangible symbols of China's development. Many intellectuals argued that the role of women in Chinese society was a barometer of the nation's degree of modernization as a whole, and in order for the nation as a whole to make progress, the social conditions of women deserved special consideration.

When the modern Chinese feminist movement first began in the late 19th century, the ideal woman was said to be a "good wife and loving mother" (xiangqi liangmu賢妻良母). This was originally a Japanese formulation that promoted women's education in order to raise more educated children. By the 20th century, the feminine ideal became the "modern woman" (modeng funü摩登婦女) who was more likely to pursue education and careers outside the home. Indeed, whether through choice or financial necessity, Chinese women increasingly left the domestic sphere. They became journalists, educators, officials, doctors, and entertainers. They worked in factories and offices. They enjoyed a growing consumer culture that targeted their desires for entertainment, social connection, and beautification. The ideal of love marriage and sexual fulfillment became much more common. However, women's options were still significantly limited by traditional social norms as well as limited opportunities for work, education, and political access.

Women Writers

Through the works of these women authors, modern readers can be connected to their inner world, perceiving their joys, pains and wonders, discovering their understanding of female identity, feminism and emancipation. Despite their different literary styles and political views, their writings as a whole reflect a unique female perspective that should not be overlooked when examining the course of modernization in China. Several prominent women authors have been selected here to showcase various female narratives in this time of political, social and cultural transformation in China, including the first vernacular fiction writer Chen Hengzhe (陳衡哲), romantic writer Lu Yin (盧隱), revolutionary activist Shi Pingmei (石評梅), feminist rhetorician, writer and translator Bing Xin (冰心), left-wing writer Ding Ling (丁玲), and politically liberal novelist Xiao Hong (蕭紅).

Women & Modesty

When the modern Chinese feminist movement first began in the late 19th century, the ideal woman was said to be a "good wife and loving mother" (xiangqi liangmu贤妻良母). This was originally a Japanese formulation that promoted women's education in order to raise more educated children. By the 20th century, the feminine ideal became the "modern woman" (modeng funü摩登婦女) who was more likely to pursue education and careers outside the home. Indeed, whether through choice or financial necessity, Chinese women increasingly left the