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Shaping China: The Youth's legacy in the development of Chinese Society and Government

The history of Modern China, a record marked by extreme forms of political, social and economic dynamism, is characterized by a lineage of moments of change making significant breaks with past tradition. The youth, a group of young intellectuals and students, has been one of the leading groups in effecting change in China. Through the youth’s shaping of political ideology, demands for reform, mobilization of other social groups, and its use by older intellectuals and the party as an instrument to pursue cultural and political change, the young have assumed a key role in determining China’s turbulent path in the process causing serious political, social and cultural consequences.

The younger portion of the intelligentsia has consistently played a monumental role in effecting changes in politics and in shaping discussions on ideology and society. Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a young scholar during the late Qing, one of the foremost advocates of institutional reform during the intellectual reform movement of the late 1890’s. Following the Qing’s humiliating defeat by Japan in 1895, one of many intellectuals frustrated by Qing incompetence, Liang, in hopes of making China modern, published his ““General Discussion of Reform” which called for the government to encourage “ideas from below and to expand the educational system”1. In doing so the publication implicitly called for a reorganization of a Chinese society traditionally entrenched in top-down governing, and in effect challenged “the political monopolies of the court and bureaucracy.”2 This, along with calls by other members of the intelligentsia resulted in a short-lived reform, by the Guangxu

2 Ibid.
emperor, including reform of an outdated educational system, the institutionalization of
the power of intellectuals to voice their concern, and the modernization of commercial,
industrial and agricultural sectors. However, the Hundred Days Reform as it was to be
called was quickly counteracted when a military coup restored traditional power to
Empress Dowager Cixi who subsequently revoked all of the modifications3.

Liang Qichao’s reforms, no matter how futile, had a variety of effects on Chinese
political and social life. That the reforms included the creation of a political medium
through which the intelligentsia could voice their concerns was significant not just because
it gave them a slight voice in a tightly closed political arena, but because it struck at what
once was a state monopoly of political power. This bottom-up reform laid a very thin, yet
tangible foundation for future democratization regardless of the fact that they were only in
effect for a brief period. Liang and the young intelligentsia also effected a substantial
amount of modernization, the key to China’s progress. Through its reform of the education
system, the youth began a movement away from Confucian tradition that would reach its
peak during the New Culture movement. Indeed the youth’s role in the modernization of
China is a recurrent theme in modern Chinese history. Therefore youth involvement in the
Hundred Days Reform shows how they can fight for a political voice, and effect real,
political reform and, in doing so, effect change in China by championing modernization,
starting a path away from Confucianism and initiating a small, yet nonetheless noteworthy
amount of democratization.

Li Dazhao was one of many young intellectuals who, influenced by the pessimistic
expectations of Confucian Chinese society during the New Culture movement, began to

3 Zarrow, Peter Gue. "The rise of Confucian radicalism, Ideas and ideals in the fall of the Qing." China in war and
look for replacement traditions in western ideological discourse. A Marxist theoretician, Li revised Leninist doctrine stating that a proletarian dictatorship was just a transitional phase and that “in a society without classes, government would become a matter of good administration of the popular will rather than an arena of competing interests.” This belief not only illustrated the democratic and even anarchistic leanings of Li as a Marxist, but also exerted huge influence on future Maoist ideology. Though the dictatorship was not actually abolished after the revolution, Mao justified its role as a vanguard by affirming the notion that the autocracy reflected popular will. Li’s writings emphasis on the role of free will would find concrete ideological consequences in Maoist doctrine by laying the groundwork for Maoism’s stress on consciousness and its capabilities. Furthermore, Li’s definition of the working class as the peasantry was an idea later championed by Mao who claimed that the peasantry was the true carrier of proletarian consciousness.

Li Dazhao’s offerings to Marxist theory would go on to have huge political consequences. Apart from their explicit broadening of the intellectual interpretation of Marxism, they would go on to exercise a serious influence over Maoist doctrine. This has even more far-reaching implications, since its emphasis on the peasantry as the proletariat and the powers of consciousness would go on to shape and motivate many Maoist-led campaigns. Li Dazhao’s contributions were not the only contributions by the youth to the CCP. Indeed the meetings between Comintern agents and intellectuals (many of which were of the younger generation) and students “produced study groups that would form the

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5 Ibid. 176-179
basis of the Chinese Communist Party.”
Indeed the CCP was comprised almost entirely of intellectuals and students. Thus a significant portion of credit can be given to the youth for the development of the CCP since its ideology was strongly influenced by the works of Li Dazhao and other youthful intellectuals and its membership and size, at least in its beginning stages were almost solely dependent on the participation of students and the intelligentsia. Young intellectuals, Liang Qichao and Li Dazhao were able to effect political change, expand on current ideological assumptions and shape a remarkable portion of Maoist doctrine.

Like the younger factions of the intelligentsia, students played a central role in revolution and change in China. By examining their function as an instrument of the older intelligentsia and the state in experiencing cultural change in the New Culture movement and in causing political and social change in the Cultural Revolution respectively, the youth’s role in revolutionary change in China will be expanded past the barriers of intellectual contribution to ideological theory and political reform, towards much more direct social and political consequences.

In the mid-1910’s, worried by the endemic imperialist encroachment of Chinese territory and the failure of the Xinhai revolution to bring about positive political change, the elder intelligentsia concluded that the root of China’s problems was its obsolete culture. Specifying that “Chinese culture and society were fundamentally repressive” and that “Confucianism seemed to sum up everything that obstructed progress”, they posited that

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8 Ibid. 170-187.
10 Ibid.
any real political change presupposed a deeper cultural transformation. Heavily influenced by incoming ideas of social Darwinism and other western philosophies, the intellectuals sought a culture that “would form the basis of a new kind of egalitarian and libertarian politics”\textsuperscript{11} and thus enable China to modernize. Agents of this change would be youth who in Nankai University (founded by Zhang Boling, a fervid nationalist) would be trained “for the salvation of their country. By 1915 mainstream intellectual opinion came to the same conclusion: that the path to real change lay through the changing of young minds.”\textsuperscript{12} The magazine \textit{New Youth}, founded by the new culture intellectual, Chen Duxiu, dictated that the youth should “avoid party politics and concentrate on consciousness and ‘citizens’ movements’.”\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, he encouraged them to embrace certain western values such as democracy and science and verbalized the need for them to be “independent, progressive, aggressive, cosmopolitan, utilitarian and scientific – and not servile, conservative, retiring, isolationist, formalistic, or introverted.”\textsuperscript{14} The role of students was thus not only to prepare the country for political change by refining their culture, but also to assist the modernization of China.

The intellectuals description of youth as having the potential to be saviors of their country expresses a recurring theme which will be analyzed in much greater detail when examining the May 4\textsuperscript{th} movement and the Tiananmen square protests: The sense of moral responsibility felt by the youth for their communities and China. What makes this particular disposition by the youth unique is not the feeling itself, but rather the fact that it was acquired through the intelligentsia’s imposition, rather than from self-issued goals.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. 129.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 133.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
However this is not to say that such nationalism-driven feelings of obligation were not produced naturally. In the 1930s publication *One Day in China* for example, young children in a class are shown to be incredibly nationalistic, voicing their feelings that they would like to join the war effort and shouting “Down with the Chinese traitors!”\(^{15}\) In addition to imposing nationalist sentiment on the youth, the movement was also contextualized within a social Darwinist international context that Chen Duxiu nicely described, stating “that China had to adapt to a world of ruthless competition”\(^{16}\). Thus not only were the youth responsible for China’s progress, but also given the international situation, responsible for the nation’s survival. In short, the New Culture movement not only resulted in the increased modernization and westernization of the youth but also asserted the important role of the youth in cultural change. Through this, one can conclude that the youth was largely responsible for the western-style transformation of culture in the early 20\(^{th}\) century and thus had a monumental role in shaping of Modern Chinese culture. Furthermore this movement was also significant since it began to position the youth as the leaders of change, regardless of their particular use as an instrument in this case. With these long-term effects on culture in mind, the ideas of the new culture movement would form the basis of May 4th movement politics\(^{17}\).

On May 4\(^{th}\) 1919, Beijing university students, frustrated by the recent drafting of the Treaty of Versailles, a treaty that ceded the occupied Chinese territory of Shandong to Japan, demonstrated, against both the imperialism of the foreign powers and their Chinese


\(^{16}\) Ibid. 134.

\(^{17}\) Ibid. 128-134.
politician-collaborators\textsuperscript{18}, demanding “that Chinese negotiators at Versailles repudiate any treaty that failed to restore Chinese sovereignty over Shandong.”\textsuperscript{19} Having proclaimed the goals of forming a student organization and awakening the people, the students distributed leaflets to pedestrians. The effort gradually spread to Shanghai and later other cities, resulting in the formation of student unions in Beijing and Shanghai alike. As it progressed, the movement drew the support and participation of other social groups, most notably workers and merchants, a cooperation most clearly exemplified in Shanghai. There, on June 5\textsuperscript{th}, students “called for a triple strike of classes work and markets”\textsuperscript{20} which brought the city to an almost complete halt. The movement reached its denouement when on June 12\textsuperscript{th} Beijing discharged three officials accused of treason.\textsuperscript{21}

The significance of the youth’s role in the May Fourth movement is not in its minor political consequences but rather, in its organization and mobilization of other key social groups. The strike on June 5\textsuperscript{th} not only symbolized the cohesion of three central social bodies, students, workers and merchants in the pursuit of national goals, but also demonstrated the leadership of the youth in mobilizing society. Furthermore, through its leadership of society in mobilizing social forces through the inciting of nationalist sentiment, the youth reinforced the notion that it was responsible for the rest of China. The appearance of student unions not only demonstrates the youth’s potential to create functioning organizations, but also denotes a contribution to an almost inexisten
t civil society. On a side note, May Fourth is important because, according to Mao, the “whole of

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 151.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 154.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 151-154.
the Chinese revolutionary movement found its origin in the action of the young students and intellectuals who had been awakened. 22 Thus May Fourth also signifies the youth’s role in beginning the legacy of the Communist revolution. By looking at the youth’s organization of the other parts of society, it’s triggering of political action, and it’s spreading of nationalism, the youth is shown to be central to China’s longstanding struggles against imperialism, its slow development of civil society, and key to the communist legacy.

The Cultural Revolution not only illustrates the youth’s role within larger CCP driven machinations but also reinforces the reality that they are a dynamic social force, not restrained by any (even those set by a sacrosanct Mao) outlined limits. Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution for a variety of reasons: First, because some party cadres “were becoming hedonistic and corrupt, seeking only power, status and luxuries” 23 and in the process becoming the new class of exploiters, second, to restore a fading revolutionary enthusiasm by training the youth for revolutionary succession, and third to destroy the four olds, “old ideas, culture, customs, and habits” 24 which were being used by party capitalists to corrupt the people’s minds. Thus the Cultural Revolution was commenced on the primary basis of revealing those in the party who take “the capitalist road.” 25. With these intentions in mind, Mao encouraged Red Guards - groups of radical university students, the supposed agents of the Cultural Revolution - to go forth and rebel. The effects were immediate: students politically and physically attacked school administrators, and party cadres, and destroyed massive amounts of art associated with the four olds. Party

25 Ibid.
bureaucrats, in an effort to deflect attacks on themselves, organized students to attack those with bad class backgrounds often leading to violent brawls between party-led factions and the original Red Guards. Soon after the revolution’s conception, it was clear Red Guards had been much more radical, and gone much farther in terms of violence and destruction than leading party elders had either wanted or anticipated. Eventually, as the chaos progressed, the military was called in to suppress radical Red Guards; the movement ended with a majority of students being sent to the countryside for reeducation.26

This episode is significant on many levels in determining the role of the youth in revolution. Their role as an agent of cultural, social and political purification reinforces the notion that they carry an inherent responsibility for society regardless of the violent reality that ensued. The massive destruction created by the youth left many deep social wounds: “Besides the dead, millions of Chinese limped away from the battles and repression of the Cultural Revolution physically and psychologically scarred.”27 Additionally, the youth’s violence and extreme radicalization during the movement asserts the fact that it is a dynamic and uncontrollable social force, free from party directives, effecting change in China at its own will. This would have very big implications in the future; the youth’s violence and uncontrollability inspired a deep distrust in the people by the Party and deepening the gap between governing and governed. This distrust in the people would have very tangible consequences in the Party’s treatment of students during the Tiananmen protests.

26 Ibid. 315-345.
A culmination of two-decade long movement for democracy, the Tiananmen Square incident was a conflict which revealed the growing contradictions in post-Mao society: the combination of economic liberalization with a politically repressive authoritarianism and the ever widening gap between the goals of the state and the goals of the people. Starting in 1979 with the proclamation of Deng Xiaoping's goal of a “socialist democracy”\textsuperscript{28}, “individuals and loose congeries of highly placed intellectuals some associated directly, some indirectly, with Hu Yaobang, general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party from 1980 until January 1987”\textsuperscript{29} began producing writings and speeches with “the shared conviction that some kind of limit had to be placed on the power of the party in order to prevent another cultural revolution.”\textsuperscript{30}. Following intermittent periods of repression and relaxation of the movement, in 1986, students demonstrated at Hefei University protesting “the lack of any real choice in the forthcoming elections.”\textsuperscript{31} As the student demonstrations spread to other cities, and began to attract support from minor numbers of workers, the Party, in fear of a Cultural Revolution-style chaos, repressed the movement, in the process ousting the democratically sympathetic general secretary Hu Yaobang. Indeed Hu's death in 1989 would mark the return of the movement when enabled by a traditional posthumous loosening of the political reigns, Beijing students began demonstrating again. This time however, rather than attracting the support of a few workers, the movement garnered the support of a significant amount of workers and other citizens. What made this effort particularly remarkable was not only the mass support it received from the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. 2.
community or the quick formation of autonomous student federations, but also their appealing to people through street-corner speeches and the fact that some of the first warnings from a fear-stricken party to stop the demonstrations went relatively unheeded. Eventually the old party leaders, seeing the demonstration as a real threat to the hegemony of the party and in opposition to the calls of Hu's sympathetic successor, Zhao Ziyang for a peaceful reconciliation, decided to impose martial law. After young soldiers of the People's Liberation Army were shown to not heed calls to fire on citizens, the military recalled all regiments, choosing instead to send in older factions as a means of massacring the people.32

The student actions in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and their aftermath had huge effects on change in China. First and foremost, the youth's power to mobilize society, just as in the May Fourth movement, demonstrates its role as the leader of the Chinese community. Though the society’s cohesion in the movement implies a uniformity of aims, it must be said that some of the support for the movement was caused by a popular resentment of widespread economic woes.33 Though this signifies a difference in goals of the movement’s supporters, it does not detract from the students’ key role in leading the effort and affirms their capacity to enable society to express its frustration. Student use of street-corners is remarkable since it represents their creation of a public political sphere in defiance of an atmosphere characterized by repression. Furthermore, by assuming a real political voice, the students were not only challenging CCP’s monopoly of political rhetoric, but also in a sense assuming politically dominant position over society, cutting the CCP and speaking directly to the people. The street-corner speeches are also significant since, in

32 Ibid. 485-511.
33 Ibid. 491-493.
their destruction of the political monopoly rhetoric, they asserted democratic notions of freedom of speech and pluralism. Moreover by not heeding Deng’s early demands to cease demonstrating students are shown to be in direct opposition to the state. The denouement of military intervention is incredibly important because of the implications it carries regarding the party’s relationship to the state. Regardless of the Party’s rhetoric that the movement was a “counterrevolutionary rebellion,”\(^{34}\) its use of the army as a means of oppression emphasized and revealed many buried contradictions in a party-state political system. The party’s legitimacy is blatantly called into question with its use of the People’s Liberation Army on the people. In using military organs made institutionally for the people, against the people, the imposition of martial law implicitly contradicts the party’s conspicuous function as a vanguard of the people. How can a party be so ruthless with a people, whose aims, goals and well being it is supposed to protect? The Tiananmen Square incident, in spite of many similarities with the May Fourth movement, is remarkable in the respect that it signified a direct confrontation between the youth and the state. The support of the Beijing community in the demonstrations, and its allegiance with the youth in its military confrontation leads one to two conclusions: first that the youth, contrary to any Maoist rhetoric, are the primary leaders of their community, and second that with this in mind, they are predominant deciders of the future.

The youth have played a consistently central part in shaping change in China: through its contributions to Maoist ideology, its efforts to political reform, its use as an instrument of cultural transformation, modernization and social upheaval, its capacities to mobilize the masses and its recurrent leadership of the rest of the society, one can conclude

\(^{34}\) Ibid. 510.
that youth has been essential to a history characterized by a relentless series of breaks with the past.
Bibliography


