



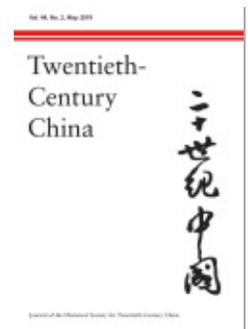
PROJECT MUSE®

May Fourth Youth Day From Yan'an to the Early People's
Republic: The Politics of Commemoration and the Discursive
Construction of Youth

Sofia Graziani

Twentieth-Century China, Volume 44, Number 2, May 2019, pp. 237-252
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2019.0022>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/718859>

MAY FOURTH YOUTH DAY FROM YAN'AN TO THE EARLY PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC: THE POLITICS OF COMMEMORATION AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH

SOFIA GRAZIANI

University of Trento, Italy

In 1939, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders designated May 4 “National Youth Day,” emphasizing its patriotic legacy. Subsequently, the CCP adapted May Fourth spirit to its political agenda and to historical changes. This article examines how the CCP’s May Fourth public commemorations constructed a linkage between May Fourth and youth as historical and political agents in CCP discourse and discusses meanings of youth articulated in commemorative articles and editorials from 1939 to the early People’s Republic. May Fourth commemoration became a site for articulation of a youth discourse that inherited the spirit of national salvation/rejuvenation and of concrete political action and evolved in response to changing sociohistorical circumstances. In 1939, youth received attention as a new force against Japan. With the creation of the socialist state, youth assumed unprecedented significance as children of New China, symbols of a new beginning, and privileged agents of socialist transformation and modernity.

KEYWORDS: China, Chinese Communist Party, commemoration, May Fourth, national rejuvenation, propaganda, youth

According to Maurice Halbwachs, commemoration of formative events through calendar celebrations is an instrument to strengthen collective memory, intended as a socially constructed notion wherein views of the past are shaped by the concerns, beliefs, and aspirations of the present and by conscious manipulation by elites.¹ Commemoration ensures past events’ presence in the public memory and allows interpretation of the past to meet the needs of the present.

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

The May Fourth movement represents a major event in China's modern history.² The official historiography of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long treated May Fourth as a watershed in modern history, mainly as a political movement that marked a turning point at which the revolution was no longer held by the bourgeoisie but instead by the proletariat and as a movement that created the conditions for the birth of the CCP. Chinese historical narratives have also identified May Fourth as the beginning of China's Communist youth movement.³ Western studies have, instead, tended to investigate May Fourth not merely as a political movement but also as a broader and highly complex social and cultural moment. Not by chance, the very expression "May Fourth movement" has become an ambiguous and highly contested notion, being used to refer both to a general atmosphere of cultural and intellectual ferment (from the mid-1910s into the 1920s)⁴ and to the original student demonstrations organized in Beijing and followed by strikes and boycotts across China in 1919.⁵ Other studies have focused on May Fourth as an independent political articulation within which "students" emerged as an enduring political category.⁶ Scholars have also highlighted the movement as both a precedent and inspiration for subsequent student protests that, up to June 1989, challenged arbitrary authority and the way the country was governed.⁷

Appropriating the heritage of May Fourth became an important means for the CCP to establish legitimacy beginning in its early days. As May Fourth became a symbolic source of CCP legitimacy, it also became the site where interpretation of the past met the needs of the present. With the establishment of May 4 as Youth Day (青年节 *qingnian jie*) in 1939, public commemoration of May Fourth became a privileged site for articulation of CCP youth discourse.

Vera Schwarcz and Rudolf Wagner have shown that the May Fourth legacy became part of a revolutionary history contested between the Nationalists and the Communists and that each party tried to control the political capital embodied in May Fourth, creating images of May Fourth that fit into their vision of the past and supported their version of

2 On how May Fourth was "constructed" into a major event in modern Chinese history by its participants, see, for instance, Rudolf Wagner, "The Canonization of May Fourth," in Milena Doležalová-Velingerová and Oldřich Král, eds., *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 66–120; Chen Pingyuan, *Touches of History: An Entry into "May Fourth" China*, trans. Michel Hockx (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

3 See, for instance, Yu Shiguang, *Dangdai Zhongguo de qingnian he gongqingtuan* [Youth and the Communist Youth League in contemporary China] (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1998), vol. 1, 1–28.

4 Ya-pei Kuo, "The Making of the New Culture Movement: A Discursive History," *Twentieth-Century China* 42, no. 1 (January 2017): 52–71.

5 Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18–19; Peter Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895–1949* (London: Routledge, 2005), 149. On the difficulties of defining the chronology of the movement, see Fabio Lanza, "Of Chronology, Failure, and Fidelity: When Did the May Fourth Movement End?" *Twentieth-Century China* 38, no. 1 (January 2013): 53–70.

6 Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

7 Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

the present.⁸ In the process of reclaiming May Fourth, the role of youth was reduced to a “minor support prop” by both parties, cutting away any possible independent political articulation. Controlling and ritualizing May Fourth activities thus became an important device for “influencing the formulation of model values.”⁹

This article builds on and extends the analyses of Schwarcz and Wagner but highlights evolutionary changes in the political appropriation. It examines the politics of commemorating May Fourth via National Youth Day from 1939 until the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with a focus on the CCP’s discursive construction of youth. While recent studies have explored the rise and evolution of youth and its relations to ideas of nationhood and modernity from late Qing times to the 1950s, with a focus on *bildungsroman* and how that literary genre and its narratives evolved,¹⁰ in this article, I provide an historical investigation of the origin of China’s Youth Day and examine how May Fourth commemoration became a privileged site for the CCP’s construction of a linkage between May Fourth and youth as historical and political agents. I look at the process of institutionalizing public commemoration and discuss the meanings of youth as articulated in commemorative articles and editorials.

The first part of the article introduces the rise of youth (青年 *qingnian*) as a discursive category linked to China’s pursuit of modernity and an autonomous social force in the May Fourth era. The second part documents the process that led the CCP to formally commemorate May Fourth as Youth Day, and the third part investigates the perpetuation of the May Fourth commemoration in the early years of the PRC and examines, in particular, *People’s Daily* editorials as a device to communicate desired political values and images of youth. The article thus addresses three moments in China’s modern history. It starts from the May Fourth era, which encompassed both the New Culture movement with its emphasis on “new youth” and the student protests against the outcome of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. Then, it delves into the early Yan’an era when May 4 was formally established as Youth Day in the context of the Second United Front and renewed mobilization strategies against Japanese aggression, and, finally, it visits the early PRC, when the New China (新中国 *xin Zhongguo*) was founded and leaders’ enthusiasm for youth gained momentum.

I argue that with the establishment of Youth Day in 1939, CCP leaders created a linkage between May Fourth and the political agency of youth. May Fourth commemoration became a site for appropriating the youthful heritage of May Fourth and articulating a youth discourse that inherited both the spirit of “national salvation/rejuvenation”—strongly linking youth with the nation—and the importance of concrete political action, as shown by progressive students during the May Fourth protests, while emphasizing the need to make young people subordinate to CCP authority. Yet, while the idea of national rejuvenation was a constant theme, the party’s youth discourse changed in response not only to the Party’s needs and political agendas in different periods but also to sociohistorical

8 Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), chap. 6; Wagner, “Canonization of May Fourth.”

9 Wagner, “Canonization of May Fourth,” 67, 109.

10 Mingwei Song, *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman, 1900–1959* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

circumstances. Whereas, for instance, in 1939 the youth were given particular attention in the war efforts as a new force combating Japan, after 1949 youth were the children of the new regime. The creation of the socialist state was accompanied by a comprehensive top-down ideological project of which May Fourth political commemoration was an integral part and within which youth assumed unprecedented significance as the children of New China, as the symbol of a new beginning, and as privileged agents of socialist transformation. Their image was integrated into leaders' vision of the nation's future. On them depended the achievement of the CCP's national aspirations. By taking the case of May Fourth commemoration, this article shows that the attention CCP leaders gave youth was not merely a post-1949 phenomenon but had roots in preceding years.

THE EMERGENCE OF YOUTH AS A CATEGORY OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In China, the turn of the twentieth century coincided with the emergence of youth as both a discursive category associated with modernity and a major social force. Political crisis and intellectual ferment produced a new generation of educated, nonconformist youth who started to speak of saving China and searched for new solutions to the backwardness of their country. In the context of the New Culture movement, the term *qingnian* took on an unprecedented significance and came to be conceptualized as a privileged category for "renewal" that marked a rupture from the past.¹¹ Chinese intellectuals came to pin the hope of an alternative future on young people, as a privileged category expressing, at best, a radical rejection of the past and embodying "the new." Magazines and periodicals catering to a young readership proliferated in this period—the most influential journal was symbolically entitled, by its founder and editor, Chen Duxiu, *New Youth* (新青年 *Xin qingnian*; also known as *La Jeunesse*). In the discursive practices elaborated at that time, youth was turned into "a powerful symbol of regeneration, vitality and commitment to modernity," and the term *qingnian* came to stand for "reason, progress and science."¹²

Chen Duxiu's famous 1915 "call to youth" (敬告青年 *jinggao qingnian*) championed the young as China's saviors, calling on them to be independent, progressive, aggressive, cosmopolitan, and scientific. Here, youth is first understood as a biological process of uninterrupted rebirth:

Youth is like early spring, like the rising sun, like trees and grass in bud, like the newly sharpened blade.... The function of youth in society is the same as that of a fresh and vital cell in a human body. In the processes of metabolism, the old and the rotten are incessantly eliminated to be replaced by the fresh and living.¹³

11 Chen Yingfang, "*Qingnian*" *yu Zhongguo de shehui bianqian* ["Youth" and social change in modern China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 53–80.

12 Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republican Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 147.

13 Chen Duxiu, "Jinggao qingnian" [Call to youth], *Xin qingnian* (1915), repr. in *Chen Duxiu xuanji* [Selected works of Chen Duxiu] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1990), 10. English translation from Ssu-yu Teng and John King Fairbank, eds., *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 240–46.

Yet, as Fabio Lanza noticed, Chen Duxiu's conceptualization of youth was not intended in terms of age and went beyond the cellular metaphor of renewal to also include the "will to fight today for the possibilities opened in the youthful present, the determination to construct today the foundations of a possible future."¹⁴ As Mingwei Song stated, the cellular metaphor also implied a scientific view of rejuvenation, wherein the nation featured as a natural part of the metabolism of the body. In fact, the discourse of youth was influenced by the ideals of national salvation (救国 *jiuguo*) and national rejuvenation (兴国 *xingguo*) that appeared in the political thinking of late Qing reformers such as Liang Qichao, who in 1900 introduced the term "young China" (少年中国 *shaonian Zhongguo*), praising youth and reinventing the image of China as a youthful nation (instead of an aging empire).¹⁵ In introducing a biological factor into the debate about China's salvation, he closely linked youth with national, future-oriented aspirations to make China into a strong and wealthy nation: "Wise youth make for a wise country, well-off youth make for a well-off country, strong youth make for a strong country, independent youth make for an independent country, free youth make for a free country, progressive youth make for a progressive country."¹⁶

In the late 1910s, the term thus referred both to an emerging force of progressive youth who were breaking with Chinese tradition and pursuing personal freedom and self-determination at the individual level and to the ideal of national rejuvenation.¹⁷ Yet, as Chen Yingfang argued, youth as a political category was above all a product of May Fourth, which also turned educated youth into a politically active subject.¹⁸

By the end of the 1910s, the deployment of the category of youth was indeed accompanied by a new spirit of political activism. The May Fourth protests in 1919 were a key to the politicization of a new generation of patriotic students keen to overthrow the old traditions but, at the same time, increasingly nationalistic and hostile to imperialism. Marking a new scale of public action, the May Fourth movement—as the prominent historian Peter Zarrow put it—"was important as an evolution of New Culture intellectual trends and especially as the beginning of a more activist political movement that deliberately sought to appeal to different social groups."¹⁹ In fact, these events also turned young people into a force that could be organized and mobilized for effective action by nascent, ideologically oriented, modern political parties dedicated to fundamentally changing China, the most influential of which were the Guomindang (GMD) and the CCP.

By the early 1920s, the new student generation began to acquire new loyalties. Subsequently, both the CCP and the GMD acknowledged the importance of reaching out to young people and capturing the enthusiasm and patriotic energy kindled by the May Fourth demonstrations. As youth became the target of party politics, a shift toward youth

14 Fabio Lanza, "Springtime and Morning Suns: 'Youth' as a Political Category in Twentieth-Century China," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5, no. 1 (2012): 37.

15 Song, *Young China*, 1–23, 73–79.

16 Liang Qichao, *Shaonian Zhongguo shuo* [Ode to a young China], in Xia Xiaohong, ed., *Liang Qichao wenxuan* [Anthology of Liang Qichao] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1992), vol. 1, 254.

17 Song, *Young China*, 113–22.

18 Chen Yingfang, "*Qingnian*" *yu Zhongguo de shehui bianqian*.

19 Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution*, 150.

mobilization for state-building also occurred.²⁰ As a result, the conceptualization of youth also gradually changed. The CCP had articulated a youth discourse since its early days, while also politically organizing youth, as proved by the establishment and development of the Socialist Youth League (社会主义青年团 *Shehuizhuyi qingnian tuan*), the junior partner of the CCP.²¹

As will be shown in the following sections, what the party inherited from May Fourth was mainly a link between youth and the ideals of national salvation and national rejuvenation rather than the core idea of fostering autonomous, self-assertive, and independent-minded individuals. Moreover, it would emphasize the spirit of patriotism (and anti-imperialism) and concrete political action, as shown in the student protests against the result of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that infringed China's sovereignty and in the birth of the early socialist youth groups.

MAY FOURTH AS “YOUTH DAY”: ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENTS, POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The relevance of May 4 as a crucial date to be commemorated was recognized by May Fourth political intellectuals involved in the formation of the early Communist cells as early as 1920, when the first commemorative writings by leaders such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao appeared.²² A few years later, when the CCP formulated its propaganda and organizational strategy for the purpose of the First United Front, the CCP Central Committee adopted the first two documents (May 1924 and May 1926) on propaganda work during memorial days that included commemoration of the May Fourth anniversary. May Fourth Day was here defined as “a day on which to commemorate the first time the Chinese people opposed imperialism, on their own initiative, under the guidance of young students.” The document went on to say that “on this day propaganda should put students at the center.”²³ The focus in these documents was on the mobilization of students in the revolutionary upsurge that took place in the mid-1920s. Not by chance, at that time students featured as a crucial group in CCP propaganda and organizational work among workers. The “Resolution on the Youth Movement” adopted at the CCP Fourth National Congress in January 1925 defined students as an important “driving force” (推动力 *tuidongli*) in the current revolutionary movement. As such, the main goal of the student move-

20 Lu Fangshang, *Cong xuesheng yundong dao yundong xuesheng: minguo ba nian zhi shiba nian* [From student movements to mobilizing students in China, 1919–1929] (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1994).

21 On the birth and early developments of the Socialist Youth League/Communist Youth League and its relationship with the CCP, see Sofia Graziani, “Youth and the Making of Modern China: A Study of the Communist Youth League’s Organization and Strategies in Times of Revolution (1920–1937),” *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, no. 13 (2014): 117–49.

22 Hu Guosheng, “Lun minzhu geming shiqi Zhongguo gongchandang dui Wusi yundong de jinian huodong” [On the activities of the CCP for commemorating the May Fourth movement in the period of democratic revolution], in *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, no. 5 (2009): 22–28.

23 Tuan zhongyang qingyunshi yanjiushi and Zhongyang dang’anguan [Communist Youth League Central Committee Research Office on the History of the Youth Movement and Central Archives], eds., *Zhonggong zhongyang qingnian yundong wenjian xuanbian* [Collection of CCP Central Committee documents on youth movement] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1988), 101.

ment was to build alliances with workers and peasants, guiding them to struggle for their interests so as to secure their participation in the political struggle.²⁴

Yet, it was only in 1939 that May Fourth started to be commemorated as May Fourth Youth Day (五四青年节 Wusi qingnian jie).²⁵ This choice originated in the context of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second United Front policy between the CCP and the GMD. With the outbreak of the war and the threat of national extinction, the mobilization of every social group to resist Japan became urgent. In an effort to increase its patriotic credentials and operate as a defender of national interests, the CCP had put a reform of the youth movement on the agenda as early as 1936. A year later, the Communist Youth League was eventually reorganized into a mass organization for national salvation, welcoming all patriotic youth, regardless of ideological or political affiliation, who were keen to participate in the war effort. By April 1937, about 300 delegates representing various youth associations gathered in Yan'an, where the CCP had just transferred its headquarters, to participate in the First Northwest National Salvation Conference, hosted by the CCP. This meeting led to the establishment of the Northwest National Salvation Youth Federation (西北青年救国联合会 Xibei qingnian jiuguo lianhehui).²⁶

On March 18, 1939, the Standing Committee of the newly formed Northwest National Salvation Youth Federation approved a “Decision” that proposed May 4 be made National Youth Day,²⁷ a proposal that was soon afterward approved by the CCP Central Committee²⁸ and agreed on by the Nationalist’s Three Principles of the People Youth Corps (三民主义青年团 Sanminzhuyi qingnian tuan).²⁹ The GMD government thus also expressed its agreement, though subsequently—driven by the fear of the revolutionary power of May Fourth and with the intention of making people inherit the culture of the Republican Revolution—it designated March 29 as its own Youth Day in commemoration of the Huanghuagang (黄花岗) martyrs who had died during the Guangzhou uprising in 1911 and made May 4 a Day for Literature and the Arts (文艺界 wenyi jie), focusing the commemoration on the cultural aspects of May Fourth instead of the political.³⁰

24 *Zhonggong zhongyang qingnian yundong wenjian xuanbian*, 41–45, esp. 44.

25 In 1924 Li Dazhao proposed for the first time the establishment of May Fourth National Youth Day. Hu Guosheng, “Lun minzhu geming shiqi Zhongguo gongchandang dui Wusi yundong de jinian huodong,” 23.

26 Wang Liandi, *Kangri zhanzheng shiqi guogong qingnian yundong fengyun lu* [Record of the CCP’s and Nationalist Party’s youth movement during the War of Resistance against Japan] (Beijing: Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2006), 9–12; Li Yuqi, *Zhongguo gongqingtuan shigao 1922–2008* [History of China’s Communist Youth League, 1922–2008] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2010), 155.

27 “Xibei qingnian jiuguo lianhehui guanyu liang zhounian jinian he qingnian canzhan dongyuanzhou de jue ding” [Northwest National Salvation Youth Federation decision on two anniversary celebrations and the week dedicated to youth mobilization for the war], in *Gongqingtuan Zhongyang qingyun shi gongzuo zhidao weiyuanhui, Zhongguo qingshaonian yanjiu zhongxin, and Zhongyang dang’anguan liyongbu*, eds., *Zhongguo qingnian yundong lishi ziliao (1938–1940.5)* [Historical material on China’s youth movement (1938 to May 1940)] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2002), 451–52.

28 The Youth Committee of the CCP Central Committee approved the Northwest National Salvation Youth Federation’s proposal at the beginning of April 1939. See “Zongzhengzhibu, zhongyang qingwei guanyu budui jinian ‘Wusi’ qingnianjie gongzuo de zhishi” (April 6, 1939), in *Zhonggong zhongyang qingnian yundong wenjian xuanbian*, 473–74.

29 “Xibei qingnian jiuguo lianhehui zhi sanminzhuyi qingnian tuan shu” (May 4, 1939), in *Zhongguo qingnian yundong lishi ziliao (1938–1940.5)*, 469–75.

30 See for instance Zhang Yan, “‘Qingnian jie’ yihuo ‘wenyi jie’: 20 shiji sansishi niandai de Wusi jinian jie wenti tansuo” [“Youth day” or “festival of arts”: analysis of May Fourth commemoration,

In the context of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the commemoration assumed unprecedented relevance not just as an opportunity to reinterpret May Fourth history but also as an instrument for mobilizing youth of all classes for the war by promoting May Fourth “national salvation spirit” (救国精神 *jiuguo jingshen*). This was clearly stated on April 1939 in a document of the CCP Central Youth Committee that called for “widespread propaganda of the national salvation spirit of the ‘May Fourth’ movement.”³¹

The decision to turn May 4 into Youth Day was followed by large-scale commemorative activities. Articles in CCP journals soon conveyed to youth and young intellectuals the message of their historical responsibility in saving the nation from extinction, revolving around the idea of youthful patriotism and unity. By linking their political commitment and actions with China’s destiny, articles gave youth a sense of purpose, hope, and meaning. For instance, in an article in the CCP journal *Jiefang* (解放) on May 1, 1939, Hu Qiaomu (胡乔木 1912–1992) explained why the patriotic movement of May Fourth was worthy of commemoration by Chinese youth, listing three main reasons.³² Besides reinterpreting May Fourth as the starting point of Chinese modern history, as an anti-imperialist (especially anti-Japanese) national revolutionary movement that lay the basis for the birth of the CCP, the reform of the GMD, and the First United Front policy, Hu moved on to appeal to youth, emphasizing the importance of unity (团结 *tuanjie*) for the purpose of national salvation. In his words:

All Chinese youth of the May Fourth period were of one mind: to transform old China, to create an independent, free, and happy new China.... Is it possible that today there are among youth people who do not wish...to build a big and powerful United Front of youth that struggles for a new China? We are convinced that there cannot be people like this; we hope that all youth of China will study the glorious history of the May Fourth movement, shake off all discords, and promptly and fully unite!³³

Next, he argued that commemorating May Fourth meant commemorating and being touched by the young people’s struggle against the Beiyang government and their willingness to sacrifice themselves in defense of national interests. He then urged youth to “persist in bringing the struggle for the liberation and independence of the Chinese nation to the end” and “to inherit the great cause of resisting Japan and eliminating traitors We should head everyone to the frontline of the war of resistance. . . . This is how we commemorate May Fourth.”³⁴

1930s to 1940s], *Shixue yuekan*, no. 8 (2015): 39–51; Xu Mengge and Gao Xiangyu, “Wusi ‘qingnian jie’ de youlai, yanbian yu Guo-Gong zhengzhi huayu” [Origins, development, and CCP-GMD political discourse on May Fourth “Youth Day”], *Xueshu tantao*, no. 1 (2012): 89–91. See also Wagner, “Canonization of May Fourth,” 108–10.

31 *Zhonggong zhongyang qingnian yundong wenjian xuanbian*, 471.

32 [Hu] Qiaomu, “Qingnian yao fahui Wusi aiguo jingsheng” [Youth should bring into play the May Fourth patriotic spirit], in *Zhongguo qingnian yundong lishi ziliao (1938–1940.5)*, 462–68.

33 [Hu] Qiaomu, “Qingnian yao fahui Wusi aiguo jingsheng,” 465.

34 [Hu] Qiaomu, “Qingnian yao fahui Wusi aiguo jingsheng,” 466–67.

Finally, in this discourse May Fourth was constructed as a mass political movement driven by, among other things, the “spirit of practical action” (实际行动的精神 *shiji xingdong de jingshen*). Concrete political action in organizing workers and in the birth of the first socialist youth groups was linked to the still ongoing task of creating a new China:

Commemorating May Fourth and carrying on this May Fourth spirit further enable us to turn our patriotic feeling from being abstract to being concrete, because this is the only way for our beloved nation not to be an abstract notion; . . . the new China we are fighting for with flesh and blood . . . must be a free, equal, and happy new China; a new China of all the people.³⁵

At the mass gathering held on May 4, 1939, in Yan’an to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the May Fourth movement, Mao Zedong delivered a talk entitled “The Orientation of the Youth Movement,” which provided an interpretation of the May Fourth movement as the dividing line between old and new democracy, the starting point of the “new democratic” revolution, an interpretation that was put forward for the first time in 1939 and developed further in his “On New Democracy” in January 1940.³⁶

Mao addressed himself to the heirs of May Fourth, first providing an explanation of why May Fourth would from now on be officially commemorated by China’s Youth Day:

Twenty years have elapsed since the May Fourth movement, yet it is only this year that the day has been designated as the national Youth Day, and this is a most significant fact. For it indicates that the Chinese people’s democratic revolution against imperialism and feudalism will soon reach a turning point. . . . The Chinese revolution is now going forward, forward to victory. The repeated failures of the past cannot and must not be allowed to recur, and they must be turned into victory. But has the change already taken place? No. It has not, nor have we yet won victory. But victory can be won. It is precisely in the present War of Resistance against Japan that we are striving to reach the turning point from failure to victory. The May Fourth movement was directed against a government of national betrayal, a government that conspired with imperialism and sold out the interests of the nation, a government that oppressed the people. Was it not necessary to oppose such a government? If it was not, then the May Fourth movement was simply a mistake. . . . Today, when the whole nation has militantly risen to resist Japan, we are determined to defeat Japanese imperialism, and we shall not tolerate any traitors or allow the revolution to fail again for we have taken warning from its failures in the past. With few exceptions, the whole youth of China is awakened and determined to win, and this is reflected in the designation of May 4 as Youth Day.³⁷

35 [Hu] Qiaomu, “Qingnian yao fahui Wusi aiguo jingsheng,” 468.

36 Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 76–84.

37 Mao Zedong, “Qingnian yundong de fangxiang” [Orientation of the youth movement], in *Mao Zedong xuanji*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991), 561–69, quotation from 561. Translation from *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 241–42, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_14.htm.

While unity and patriotism featured as two important meanings that Mao Zedong entrusted to May Fourth, his discourse also stressed the vanguard role that China's youth had played since the May Fourth movement. Yet, at the same time, he asked young intellectuals—many of whom had just arrived in Yan'an to join the CCP in the war against Japan—to place themselves in the service of revolution, by merging with the working class (workers and peasants), defined as the “main force” upon which young intellectuals were expected to rely to “win the fight against imperialism and feudalism.” Mao then argued that what defined whether a youth was a revolutionary was his willingness “to merge with the broad masses of workers and peasants and to do so in practice,” thus making clear that what made a young student a revolutionary was his standing in relation to the masses: this was what he expected for his followers. “I hope,” he said, “that the youth of our country . . . will clearly recognize the workers and peasants as their friends and march forward to a bright future.” As such, youth (a term that here mainly referred to young intellectuals) were now expected to follow instructions from the CCP, which represented the best interests of the “people.” According to Vera Schwarcz, this talk revealed the extent of Mao's ambivalence about the events of 1919 and the role of intellectuals in the revolution: unlike May Fourth intellectuals, Mao Zedong had indeed, even at the time of May Fourth, emphasized the cultivation of the individual character rather than its emancipation. Considering China's national regeneration to be his main goal, he was consequently “quite suspicious of thought movements that might distract the masses from the central task of patriotic action.”³⁸

The call for youth independence and individual emancipation as a value praised in the writings of May Fourth intellectuals thus was replaced with subordination to the directives of the CCP. Not by chance, in Yan'an the CCP began a series of commemorating measures and activities aimed at popularizing the idea of “serving the people” as a core virtue among youth. As Wagner put it, in the process of appropriating the May Fourth heritage, independent thought and action were deemphasized in favor of a new conception of youth activism subject to the authority of the party and aimed at present, adult-defined, political needs. The young were no longer constructed as the avant-garde and the educators but rather as those who “had to be instructed and were valued for their willingness to follow party orders obediently” and sacrifice their lives for what the CCP leadership defined as the nation's priorities.³⁹

To sum up, in an effort to establish a new national culture, in 1939 Communist leaders made May 4 National Youth Day and discussed the meaning of the May Fourth movement from the perspective of patriotism and unity. With the founding of May Fourth National Youth Day, the CCP thus called on youth to join the war effort against Japan by praising the May Fourth “national salvation” spirit. At the same time, it called on youth to unite with the masses of workers and peasants “in the May Fourth Spirit,” albeit through a reconceptualization of youth that placed them in the service of revolution and situated their action under the party's guidance.

38 Schwarcz, *Chinese Enlightenment*, 248.

39 Wagner, “Canonization of May Fourth,” 109–13.

THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH IN *RENMIN RIBAO* EDITORIALS, 1949–1966

In December 1949, May 4 was formally declared National Youth Day by the Administrative Council of the Central People's Government. The CCP thus continued to commemorate May Fourth via Youth Day at a time when Mao Zedong Thought had been confirmed as the nation's ideology and mainland China was reunified under a Communist government.

With the founding of the PRC, the CCP pursued a double objective: that of radically transforming society and that of achieving a rapid economic development so as to realize communism in China. One of the main assumptions was that the transformation of the objective situation could not be achieved independently of the transformation of the subjective reality and individual consciousness. As such, creating a “new communist person” became one of the most ambitious goals of the new regime, according to Mao's idea of cultivating model citizens who embodied a socialist consciousness, showed loyalty to the Communist Party, served the people whole-heartedly, and were hardworking and willing to sacrifice for the country.⁴⁰ It was essentially a matter of forging the thought and behavior of individuals, and especially youth, toward society, nation, and state through a process of ideal education that started at school and extended to extracurricular activities controlled by a pervasive organizational network that included the Communist Youth League (then named New Democratic Youth League) and other official youth groups.⁴¹ Print media played a key role in communicating particular messages to the masses and molding the thought processes of ordinary people. Scholars have highlighted the control over the language of political and social discourse that Communist leaders saw as crucial in giving the Chinese new ways of thinking (“thought engineering”) and, consequently, in changing people's behavior.⁴²

Youth assumed unprecedented significance in the CCP's ideological project. In fact, they featured as a key social group to be trained and educated intellectually, morally, and ideologically from the early days of the PRC. Chen Yingfang argued that in the 1950s “youth worship” (青年崇拜 *qingnian chongbai*) became a prominent social phenomenon. Young people were seen as “pure” and “flawless,” less exposed to the “old thought and society”; they were thus expected to undertake a key role in building a new communist morality and a new social order. As such, propaganda and state organs praised youths who had excelled in serving the people and the motherland and turned them into models

40 Xing Lu, *The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong: Transforming China and Its People* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 115–37.

41 Charles P. Ridley, Paul H. B. Godwin, and Dennis J. Doolin, eds., *The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1971); Anita Chan, *Children of Mao: Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); Stanley Rosen, “Education and Political Socialization of Chinese Youth,” in J. N. Hawkins, ed., *Education and Social Change in the People's Republic of China* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 97–133.

42 Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1992); Ji Fengyuan, *Linguistic Engineering: Language and Politics in Mao's China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004); Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), chap. 3.

for the entire society.⁴³ As Maurice Meisner wrote, Mao inherited a special faith in youth as a member of the May Fourth generation:

If the peasants were revolutionary because they were poor, young people were potentially revolutionary because they were “blank.” Youth, relatively uncorrupted by the influences of the old society, were amenable to the appropriate moral and ideological transformation; they were clean sheets of paper on which the newest revolutionary words could be written.⁴⁴

The CCP’s conceptualization of youth also intertwined with the idea of the future of the Communist cause, whose eventual realization required the active commitment of the younger generation to which would belong China’s future. Youth were represented as agents, protagonists. As Mao Zedong said in a famous speech to Chinese students in Moscow:

The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China’s future belongs to you.⁴⁵

The perpetuation and significance of May Fourth Youth Day after 1949 should be understood against this backdrop. With the end of the Chinese Civil War and the triumph of the CCP, commemorative activities for the May Fourth movement assumed the aim of molding a new ideology and were targeted at youth, the societal group perceived as possessing the greatest vigor. Party-organized celebrations of May Fourth soon reflected the goals of political socialization that the new Chinese government wanted to achieve.

According to Guo Ruoping, the meaning of the first celebration held in Beijing on May 4, 1949, lay in the construction of “new thought” (新思想 *xin sixiang*)—Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought—for New China. Yet, while serving the present need of establishing a political ideology for New China, commemorative activities also expressed the historical inevitability of the Chinese Revolution beginning from the May Fourth movement, thus affirming the correctness of the theory of the “new democracy” and its function as the ideological guide for the Chinese revolution and the forthcoming construction of New China.⁴⁶

43 Chen Yingfang, “*Qingnian*” *yu Zhongguo de shehui bianqian*, 165–68.

44 Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 149.

45 Gongqingtuan zhongyang, Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi [Communist Youth League Central Committee, CCP Central Committee Document Research Office], eds., *Mao Zedong Deng Xiaoping Jiang Zemin lun qingshaonian he qingshaonian gongzuo* [Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin on youth and youth work] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2003), 121.

46 Guo Ruoping, “Suzao xin sixiang: jianguo qianhou Beijing yu Shanghai de ‘Wusi’ jinian huodong” [Remolding a new ideology: commemorative activities for the May Fourth movement in Beijing and Shanghai around the founding of New China], *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 16, no. 3 (2009), 4–11.

After that, leaders' speeches and editorials appealing to youth would appear in the official party newspapers each year to commemorate May Fourth and would become important texts for study by youth cadres, who would then transmit their key messages to the masses. Besides creating a specific version of the past that enhanced CCP claims to legitimacy, propaganda organs broadcast the values and civic virtues that youth were expected to internalize to become loyal and devoted followers in realizing new revolutionary tasks. Recalling the past also served to project images of the country's glorious future, with which youth were expected to fully identify themselves.

People's Daily commemorative editorials clearly appeared as messages to youth. First of all, they provided an interpretation of the history of May Fourth that reaffirmed the idea of the historical inevitability of the Chinese Revolution under the leadership of the CCP, 1919 being thus defined as the beginning of China's new democratic revolution.⁴⁷ Yet in 1957 it was defined as the beginning of a revolution that had culminated in the socialist transformation and now faced the challenges of building an advanced and industrialized socialist country. The importance of commemorating May Fourth was thus framed within a discourse that, with the end of the First Five-Year Plan, emphasized the construction of a socialist China as the natural continuation of the struggle of the Chinese people since 1919.⁴⁸

The main body of the editorials was concerned with youth and their role in the construction of a New China: first, youth were constructed as those without whom the great cause of communism could not be achieved, as "guards" (保卫者 *baoweizhe*) and "outstanding builders" (优秀建设者 *youxiu jianshezhe*) of the country. In this discourse, the historical and political mission of youth was emphasized: "We believe they will develop the glorious tradition of May Fourth, striving for the triumph of the cause of the construction of the motherland"; "youth are the most active part of the society: they have always been at the front line of struggle," "the shock forces in the construction of socialism in every field."⁴⁹ Youth were asked to carry on the revolutionary tradition by placing themselves in the service of socialism and "under the banner of patriotism." Patriotism was a recurring theme. It was defined as the "spiritual essence that had pervaded the May Fourth movement and made possible victory in the revolution in 1949."⁵⁰ May Fourth editorials also stressed the need for young people to study, to grasp "science and technology" (科学技术 *kexue jishu*) and "master professional work" (精通业务 *jingtong yewu*). Young people in every field were thus called to develop knowledge and skills needed to become experts devoted to building the nation and "transforming the old and backward China into a new, democratic, industrialized country."⁵¹ Study and science were recurring terms

47 See "Qingnian yao jingtong yewu zhangwo kexue jishu—ying Wusi qingnianjie" [Youth must master professional work and grasp science and technology: welcoming May Fourth Youth Day], *Renmin ribao*, May 3, 1950, 1; "Fayang geming jingshen he kexue jingshen" [Develop a revolutionary and scientific spirit], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1961, 1.

48 "Weizhe shehuizhuyi er laodong—jinian 'wu si' qingnianjie" [Working for socialism: celebrating May Fourth Youth Day], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1957, 2.

49 See "Zhe shi qingnianmen fachu gengda de guang he re de shihou" [This is the time of youth's greatest glory and heat], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1953, 1; "Weizhe shehuizhuyi er laodong—jinian 'wu si' qingnianjie."

50 "Zhe shi qingnianmen fachu gengda de guang he re de shihou."

51 "Qingnian yao jingtong yewu zhangwo kexue jishu—ying Wusi qingnianjie."

and featured as prominent tasks assigned to China's youth, not for their own individual benefit but within a broader collective effort to build China's glorious socialist future. Thus, editorials conveyed a language of patriotic devotion, calling on youth to strive for a "glorious future" by merging individual aspirations with the country's aspirations, the prosperity of the individual with the prosperity of China.

The importance of acquiring the knowledge and skills needed for China's industrialization program nonetheless went hand in hand with the awareness of the need to ideologically remold youth. As such, political study and thought work appeared as important tasks justified by the need to provide a more comprehensive education that could increase political consciousness, scientific knowledge, and noble ethics simultaneously. This aspect received increased attention in the mid-1950s and was increasingly seen as fundamental to building a socialist society at a time when implementation of the First Five-Year Plan implied a project of profound social and economic transformation. It reached an apex after 1958, when the May Fourth movement was celebrated as part of the Great Leap Forward: youth were then called on to take responsibility for building communism, to be driven by the aspiration of bringing China to the forefront among all the countries in the world and putting "politics in command" (政治是统帅 *zhengzhi shi tongshuai*), because politics was defined as the "soul" (灵魂 *linghun*) of China's modernization effort.⁵²

By then, the student protest and critique against the CCP that erupted in 1957 in the context of the intellectual liberalization known as the Hundred Flowers movement had made Mao increasingly ambivalent about youth, especially students, leading him to fear that those born and raised under socialism might eventually repudiate the revolution.⁵³ At the same time, Mao Zedong's understanding of youth gradually intertwined with the question of age and succession, which became prominent after 1964, when the task of "cultivating revolutionary successors" (培养革命接班人 *peiyang geming jiebanren*) took on unprecedented urgency. A number of problems inherent in both domestic and foreign policy (i.e., the failure of the Great Leap Forward, tensions with the Soviet Union, the influence of his political "opponents" and their economic policies) led Mao to draw pessimistic conclusions about the future of socialism.⁵⁴ Convinced that there was a real prospect that China would eventually change color and abandon revolutionary ideals and faced with a growing obsession with death and succession, he increasingly vested his hope in the young generation. As Lowell Dittmer argued, "As age took on increasingly negative connotations, youth assumed a corresponding exaggerated significance."⁵⁵ Thus, in the early 1960s Mao brought to the forefront the struggle to revolutionize Chinese youth, increasingly seen as a matter of life or death for the very existence of the revolution.⁵⁶

52 "You hong you zhuan, houlai jushang" [Both red and expert, the latecomers surpass the old-timers], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1958, 1.

53 Alan P.L. Liu, *Mass Politics in the People's Republic: State and Society in Contemporary China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 147–59.

54 The fundamental work on Mao's reactions to domestic and international issues and the ideological and political radicalization in China after the late 1950s is Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, 1997), vols. 2, 3.

55 Lowell Dittmer, "Mao and the Politics of Revolutionary Mortality," *Asian Survey* 27, no. 3 (1987): 325.

56 James R. Townsend, *The Revolutionization of Chinese Youth: A Study of Chung-kuo Ch'ing-nien* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1967).

In 1964 “youth revolutionization” (青年革命化 *qingnian geminghua*) became the main orientation of the Communist Youth League’s work.⁵⁷

May Fourth commemorative editorials reflected these changes. After 1963, they stressed the need for young people to strengthen their political consciousness through participation in class struggle—revived by Mao in 1962 at the 10th Plenum of the Seventh CCP Central Committee—through integration with the masses of workers and peasants and through study and application of Mao’s works. As the call to “give prominence to politics” (突出政治 *tuchu zhengzhi*) assumed unprecedented significance, the task of cultivating “Communist successors” (共产主义接班人 *gongchanzhuyi jiebanren*) increasingly intertwined with the call to fully identify with Mao’s vision.⁵⁸ Thus, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the call to youth ended up having an increasingly ideological connotation, and commemorative editorials served to turn youth into Mao’s revolutionary heirs.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how CCP leaders made use of specific understandings of May Fourth to mobilize memory as an instrument of contemporary politics. Official commemoration of May Fourth allowed the CCP not only to create a specific version of the past that justified itself in the present but also to articulate a youth discourse that emphasized desired model values young people were expected to interiorize (distancing itself from the May Fourth core idea of fostering self-assertive and independent-minded youth) and that associated youth with both the idea of national rejuvenation and the spirit of concrete political action originally shown by students in 1919.

Commemoration of May Fourth Youth Day had a prominent mobilization function and also responded to emerging sociohistorical circumstances. In 1939, the Communist leaders designated May 4 “National Youth Day” and discussed the meaning of the May Fourth movement from the perspective of patriotism and unity, for the purpose of mobilizing young people to participate in military action against Japanese encroachment and create an independent new China. After the founding of the PRC, party-organized celebrations and commemorative editorials reflected the goals of political socialization that the new regime wanted to achieve and became an important device to convey the language

57 Hu Yaobang, “Wei wo guo qingnian geminghua er douzheng [For the revolutionization of our youth], repr. in *Zhongguo gongchanzhuyi qingniantuan di jiu ci quanguo daibiaodahui wenxian* [Documents of the Ninth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Youth League] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1964), 13–40. “Jiaoyu qingnian yi dai youyuan dang gemingpai” [To teach a generation of youth to be revolutionary forever], *Renmin ribao*, July, 8 1964, repr. in *Zhongguo gongchanzhuyi qingniantuan*, 109–13.

58 “Yidaiyidai di jicheng he fayang dang de geming chuantong” [Inheriting and developing the revolutionary tradition of the party generation after generation], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1963, 1; “Zhishi qingnian yao he gongnong qunzhong biancheng yi ti” [Educated youth have to merge with the masses of workers and peasants], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1964, 1; “Chongfen fahui qingnian de shehuizhuyi jijixing—jinian ‘Wusi’ Zhongguo qingnian jie” [We should bring into play youth enthusiasm for socialism: celebrating China’s May Fourth Youth Day], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1965, 3; “Ba geming de huoju yidaidai di zhuan xiaqu—jinian ‘Wusi’ qingnian jie” [We must pass the torch of revolution to the next generation], *Renmin ribao*, May 4, 1966, 4.

of patriotic devotion and to mobilize young people to meet future-oriented aspirations of the CCP. Youth was now related to the idea of a new beginning. Young people were praised as the children of the new regime, as the builders of the New China, and as agents of historical change and socialist transformation. Recalling the past also became a means to project visions of the future, in which youth and nation were increasingly intertwined.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Ya-pei Kuo and the anonymous reviewers for *Twentieth-Century China* for their thoughtful suggestions.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Sofia Graziani is assistant professor of Chinese studies in the Department of Humanities at the University of Trento, Italy. She received her PhD in East Asian History and Civilization from the University of Rome “La Sapienza.” She does research on modern and contemporary Chinese history, and she has written on the history of the Communist Youth League, the Cultural Revolution, China-Italy and China-Europe relations during the Cold War, and China’s soft power strategies in Africa. She recently coedited *Roads to Reconciliation: People’s Republic of China, Western Europe and Italy during the Cold War Period, 1949–1971* (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2018).

Correspondence to: Sofia Graziani. Email: sofia.graziani@unitn.it.