The May Fourth Movement is the name given to the collective effort made by intellectuals in China between 1915 and 1923 to cast off traditional Confucian values and undergo a cultural rejuvenation. A milestone of the era occurred on 4 May 1919 when demonstrators protested the treaty that ended World War I. The treaty recognized Japan’s claims to territory taken from China.

China during the 1910s and early 1920s suffered the twin plagues of imperialism and warlordism. Military commanders had seized control of various sections of the country, leading to incessant fighting. Numerous foreign powers, taking advantage of this situation, carved out spheres of influence along China’s coast. Despite this unsettled environment, this time—known either as the “May Fourth era” or the “New Culture era”—was a vibrant time for Chinese intellectuals. People called for cultural rejuvenation and a more modern worldview, arguing that without such changes China could not liberate itself from the oppressive forces of imperialism or warlordism or both. Advocates of “new culture” from various groups criticized many of China’s philosophical, literary, and social traditions between 1915 and 1923.

Genesis of May Fourth Era

Many historians suggest that the May Fourth era began with the publication of the journal Xin Qingnian (New Youth) in 1915. The first issue, edited by Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), called on its readers to be cosmopolitan, progressive, utilitarian, and scientific. Chen, in short, asked China’s youth to cast off the old elements of society and to bring about a national reawakening. A frequent target of the journal was Confucianism, the preferred symbol of Chinese traditionalism. Confucianism, with its emphasis on filial piety, hierarchy, ritualism, and orthodoxy, was condemned as antimodern and regressive. Xin Qingnian within a few months became an influential publication among China’s student population.

Center of Liberalism

After Chen was made dean of the School of Letters at Peking (Beijing) University in 1917 the university quickly became the locus of what was to become the May Fourth Movement. University president Cai Yuanpei (1867–1940) was committed to making the university a center of intellectual liberalism and academic freedom. Peking University by the late 1910s was a hotbed of intellectual debate among students, faculty members, and independent writers.

Cai also brought Hu Shi (1891–1962), a young literature professor, to the university. Hu, educated in the United States, believed that literature was at the heart of China’s cultural problems. China’s classical written language, with its emphasis on specialized norms, obscure vocabulary, and terse diction, was inaccessible to all but the most educated people. Hu suggested that the solution was to write in the vernacular, allowing people with
a more rudimentary education to participate in China’s world of letters. Hu argued in the pages of Xin qingnian that writers should discard stale literary phrases, avoid classical allusions, and stop imitating the ancients. Hu suggested that writers instead be true to their own feelings. Only then, he said, would they produce something with substance and meaning. This focus on vernacular literature (baihua) led to a greater democratization of China’s literary world.

Although Hu was a proponent of baihua, its greatest practitioner was Lu Xun (1881–1936), a frequent contributor to Xin qingnian. Lu Xun wrote short stories designed to jolt readers out of their cultural complacency. In “Kuanggren riji” (“Diary of a Madman”), one of his better-known stories from this period, the protagonist repeatedly sees the words “eat people” written in the margins of classical Confucian texts. The protagonist, convinced that he is living in a cannibalistic society, goes mad with suspicion. Lu Xun satirically demonstrated by the end of the story that the Confucian social order was based, figuratively if not literally, on cannibalism. Lu Xun, by shocking his readers with such imagery, hoped to awaken them to the need for cultural renewal.

Intellectuals of the era also called for democratization in the political arena. Chen argued in Xin qingnian that democracy and science formed the foundation of modern society. He claimed that many of China’s backward practices could be reformed or even eliminated with the assistance of Sai Xiansheng (Mr. Science) and De Xiansheng (Mr. Democracy). By 1919 these and other catchphrases circulated around Peking University and, by way of Xin qingnian, throughout China’s intellectual communities.

**1919 Demonstrations**

Although pinpointing the beginning of the May Fourth era is difficult, pinpointing its chronological focal point is less difficult. The term May Fourth Movement refers to the demonstrations of 4 May 1919. On that day angry students, educators, and urban workers gathered in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square to protest the Paris Peace Conference, which ended World War I. In August 1914 Japan had declared war on Germany and had occupied all German-held territories in China. Because China also had participated in the war against Germany, many people believed that China would regain control over the territories after the war. The Chinese delegates attending the conference, bolstered by their faith in self-determination as championed by U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, were confident that the European powers would recognize the validity of their claims. But Japan’s delegates instead unveiled treaties signed by France, Britain, and Italy recognizing Japan’s demands in China.

In China public reaction to news of the treaties was quick and powerful. Upset citizens from throughout the Beijing area, led by students of Peking University, congregated to denounce Japan’s aggressive and underhanded maneuvering and to demand that China’s representatives reject the resulting treaty. The demonstrators, who eventually numbered in the thousands, marched through the streets until government troops restored order. Although the demonstration on 4 May lasted only a few hours, historians consider this event important in the development of modern Chinese nationalism.

In spite of the demonstration in Beijing, the peace conference ended, and Japan retained control of the Chinese territory (although the Chinese delegates refused to sign the treaty). But the demonstration was far from insignificant. Similar demonstrations erupted throughout China in the days after 4 May. In addition, many intellectuals increased their demands for “national salvation” through cultural reform. The May Fourth demonstrations in many ways symbolized the concerns of the new culture advocates. As a result, the intellectual movement that swept through China between 1915 and 1923 is often referred to as the “May Fourth Movement.”

**Aftermath and the Rise of Communism**

The May Fourth Movement became increasingly ideological in the years after 1919. Advocates of socialism, anarchism, syndicalism (a revolutionary doctrine by which workers seize control of the economy and the government by direct means), and even pragmatism competed in the marketplace of ideas. During this time the Chinese Communist Party was formed in Shanghai in the summer of 1921. The party endorsed the antiestablishment ideals of the May Fourth Movement. Since then official Communist histories have depicted the May Fourth era as an era
of great patriotic fervor, the transition between an old, bourgeois democracy and a new, proletarian democracy. Not surprisingly, 4 May continues to be a national holiday, and May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun are celebrated as patriotic heroes.

China’s intellectual debates had become more political and less cultural by the mid-1920s as the iconoclasm of the earlier years was replaced by new orthodoxies and as political organizations expected their members to toe the party line. For this reason, most historians feel that 1923 was the approximate end of the May Fourth era. Other historians, however, feel that the advocates of the movement continued to be active well after 1923. Regardless, the May Fourth Movement, with its emphasis on science, democracy, and antitraditionalism, has cast a long shadow over modern Chinese history.

David L. KENLEY

Further Reading

Women and the May Fourth Movement

Many years after the May Fourth Movement of 1915–1923, Deng Yingchao recounted her experiences as a young woman and student at Tianjin Women’s Normal College during that unstable time in Chinese history.

What we did know intuitively was that alone we students did not have enough strength to save China from foreign powers. To awaken our compatriots we organized many speakers’ committees to spread propaganda among the people. I became the head of the speakers’ group in the Tianjin Women’s Patriotic Society and in the Tianjin Student Union. Frequently we gave speeches off campus. At first, we women did not dare give speeches on the street due to the feudal attitudes that then existed in China. So the female students went instead to places where people had gathered for an exhibition or a show, while the male students gave speeches in the street to passersby. There were always a lot of listeners. We told them why we should be united to save our country; that traitors in the government must be punished; and that people should have the right to freedom of assembly and association. We talked about the suffering of the Korean people after their country was conquered; and we publicly lodged our protests against the Northern warlord government that persecutes progressive students. Usually tears streamed down our cheeks when we gave our speeches and our listeners were often visibly moved.