May Fourth at 100 in Singapore and Hong Kong: memorialization, localization, and negotiation

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When the centenary of China's 1919 May Fourth demonstrations drew near, China watchers turned their gaze towards the politics of remembrance in the People's Republic of China. They noted the official emphasis on patriotism and the 'spirit of youth', thus leaving the May Fourth legacy of 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' all but buried. Official interpretations foregrounded what is now known as the May Fourth Incident, or the gathering of thousands of students at Tiananmen in Beijing in response to the transfer of Germany's former rights in Shandong to Japan. Later, however, the term May Fourth also came to denote a range of cultural, political, social, and ideological advances in the years before and after 1919. Seen through this lens, the movement spurred the reorganisation of the Kuomintang, witnessed the rise of 'isms' – individualism, nationalism, liberalism, and feminism among them – and facilitated the adoption of the vernacular. Furthermore, it instigated student and workers' movements and the expansion of the public sphere. Since the movement contained all these facets, it is not surprising that there are as many 'May Fourths' as there have been commemorations of May Fourth.

The shifting meaning of May Fourth in the People's Republic of China has been gaining attention, a less frequently asked question is: What did and does the movement mean for Chinese communities outside of mainland China? To answer this, we first need to revisit Chinese communities outside of mainland China. In recent publications on May Fourth, scholars have studied May Fourth from the angles that Edward Wang describes. Els van Dongen has investigated the re-evaluation of May Fourth 'conservatism' in mainland China and transnational interactions involving debates on 'radicalism' and the meaning of May Fourth after 1989. David Kanley was an early exponent of the transnational perspective on May Fourth and analyzed its meaning in Singapore in his well-known monograph New Culture in a New World (2003). Finally, Huang Jianli has written extensively on questions of commemoration, historiography, and student activism in both China and Singapore.

Why Singapore and Hong Kong? One reason is that both witness a complex dynamic in terms of how they relate to mainland China. In his book, Kanley asked: What did a movement with nationalistic traits come to signify among members of the Chinese diaspora? He has answered this by situating the movement between the oft-dubbed 'transnationalism' and 'nationalism' and by a desire to implement new rule. What's more, in both places ideological divisions have intersected with linguistic divisions, including but not limited to an English-educated versus a Chinese-educated elite. Returning to the May Fourth period, what forms did the movement take in Singapore and Hong Kong? Although it is equally hard to define May Fourth outside China, large-scale protests also occurred in these places in the spring of 1919. Throughout May, Chinese residents of Singapore called for boycotts and strikes, and these calls amounted to violence on the night of 19 June 1919. The Straits Times reported that a mob "made bonfires in the middle of the roads, and with the air filled with piercing screams and shouts, scenes of wild confusion reigned." Eventually the Governor called on the sailors of the docked warship Manchester to help patrol the city. By the early morning, the demonstration died out, but it had caused severe damage, had claimed four lives (two Chinese and two Indians), had seriously injured eight individuals, and had led to the arrest of over 130 participants. Similarly, in Hong Kong, students and journalists led rallies and demonstrations while business leaders called for a boycott of Japanese-made products. Nine students were arrested and fined. Their crime? They marched in the street holding umbrellas with 国货 [national products] written on top.

Nevertheless, as was the case in China, these 1919 protests in Singapore and Hong Kong can be best understood as part of a larger, multi-year movement that transcends temporary nationalist concerns. Community leaders were also motivated by a commitment to greater democracy, and by a desire to implement new intellectual trends and ideas. They sought to destroy the icons of the past and usher in a new era of science and enlightenment. But May Fourth in Singapore and Hong Kong had some
rather distinct elements as well. Intellectuals in Singapore used the movement to call for more local control over Singapore affairs. In some ways, the movement was an internal power struggle over the issue of what it meant to be Chinese in Singapore, and its detractors repudiated some of the literary trends emerging in China, calling instead for greater attention to local themes. Often, the struggles pitted the more recently arrived immigrants against the more long settled Chinese residents within Singapore.

Negotiating the meanings of May Fourth in 2019

While this brief detour to the May Fourth period already reflects the tensions between the Chinese and the local community, there were issues that are not directly connected to the quest for local distinction, commemorations of May Fourth since 1989 also reveal the impact of the legacy of colonialism and the Cold War. With reform and opening up in China, renewed interactions occurred between scholars resident in Singapore and mainland China. Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, used social media to pen an essay on the May Fourth centennial.

The Social Media Debate

Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, used social media to pen an essay on the May Fourth centennial. For example, Guo Hufan discussed the emergence of a unique form of writing, naming New Malay-Chinese Literature. Referring to Fang Xi, she ascribed the emergence of this literature to the “internal demands of local Chinese and the ‘external’ influence of May Fourth’s Literary Revolution.” Other contributors to the discussion and Hong Kong in relation to themes such as education, newspapers and periodicals, Sinophone Literature, translations of May Fourth works of anti-colonial sentiment, across Southeast Asia.

In other words, local intellectuals utilized May Fourth to connect the two cultures and them and their counterparts in China. This “localization” of May Fourth in Singapore had also been present in previous commemorations according to Huang Xianqian and Shi Yan, who studied May Fourth remembrance in Singapore through newspaper articles and social associations. Similarly, writing about May Fourth in Hong Kong, Chan Hak Yin has argued that May Fourth’s legal legacy and the subject to reinterpretations by various actors to achieve shifting goals at critical moments in Hong Kong’s history. The Hong Kongers who defied their respective political positions with the help of May Fourth vocabulary on a century after the events, negotiating the meanings of May Fourth is by no means complete.

Commemorations and coincidences

In Singapore, the May Fourth Movement also witnessed untranslated, coincidental activities that seem strikingly reminiscent of the May Fourth Movement of a century ago. In Singapore, 2019 also happened to be the centennial of the vanishing Raffles statue. While the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum staff wrote in calligraphy, ‘Nation, Power, Traitor’. Power and traitor are always in a close relationship, even now. Still another student created a collage of the May Fourth murals, and, written in Chinese, ‘Fight for sovereignty externally, get rid of the traitors at home’. Power and traitor are always in a close relationship, even now. Still another student created a collage of the May Fourth murals, and, written in Chinese, ‘Fight for sovereignty externally, get rid of the traitors at home’. Power and traitor are always in a close relationship, even now. Still another student created a collage of the May Fourth murals, and, written in Chinese, ‘Fight for sovereignty externally, get rid of the traitors at home’. Power and traitor are always in a close relationship, even now.

One hundred years after the events in Beijing, it is clear that scholars, politicians, and activists are still contending over the legacy of the May Fourth Movement, both in China and Singapore. These communities, in Hong Kong and Singapore, the designated May Fourth themes of ‘nationalism’ and ‘anti-colonialism’ could take on traditional forms in support of China, but they could also be transformed for the advocacy of distinct local identities and contemporary concerns.

Notes


7. Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah, and Naraina Pillai. British. While the vanishing Raffles statue was a question mark. In the caption, the artist wrote, ‘Why Raffles flanked by statues of Sang Nila Utama, Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah, and Naraina Pillai. The newsletter is taken from the exhibition Wusi zai shenzhen, catalog, calligraphy, seal engraving, the caption read, “This set of seals invites visitors to raimage and develop their understanding of how the movement has shaped Singaporean typography.” While the umbrella is more often associated with 21st century Hong Kong protests, these works of art reference the original May Fourth protest to empower the activists of today. While the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum staff plastered the streets of Singapore with May Fourth commemoration before the protests erupted in the streets of Hong Kong, it is impossible not to think of these protests in light of the May Fourth centennial. On 9 June 2019, approximately, 1,000,000 demonstrators took to the streets in Hong Kong in protest of what they termed their compatriots of 1919, they were angry at their government and demanded greater accountability and democracy. Specifically, they asked for the withdrawal of the controversial extradition bill that they claimed was eroding Hong Kong’s civil liberties. Beyond this, the protests were also about aspirations, development and democratic rights relative to the mainland. We cannot ignore the significance of student leadership in both cases. In both cases, the May Fourth Movement was their umbrellas as a sign of resistance. One hundred years after the events in Beijing, it is clear that scholars, politicians, and activists are still contending over the legacy of the May Fourth Movement, both in China and Singapore. These communities, in Hong Kong and Singapore, the designated May Fourth themes of, nationalism and anti-colonialism could take on traditional forms in support of China, but they could also be transformed for the advocacy of distinct local identities and contemporary concerns.


10. George Yeo, Reflection on the Hundredth Anniversary of May Fourth, at the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum in Singapore, 24 April 2009. "We cannot ignore the significance of student leadership in both cases. In both cases, the May Fourth Movement was their umbrellas as a sign of resistance. One hundred years after the events in Beijing, it is clear that scholars, politicians, and activists are still contending over the legacy of the May Fourth Movement, both in China and Singapore. These communities, in Hong Kong and Singapore, the designated May Fourth themes of, nationalism and anti-colonialism could take on traditional forms in support of China, but they could also be transformed for the advocacy of distinct local identities and contemporary concerns.

11. This quote is taken from the exhibition program titled ‘The Awakening of a Generation: The May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement’. The exhibition ran from 26 April through 25 August 2019 at the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum located at 7 Castle Road, Mid-Levels, Central, Hong Kong. All quotes are taken directly from the article with the writer’s permission. The Permanent Collection of Sang Nila Utama, Tan Tock Seng, Munshi Abdullah, and Naraina Pillai. Public lecture and panel discussion, NTU History and Civilisation Library, Singapore, 28 November 2019.