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**Title:** Chinese Peoples and the Others : Notes on Contemporary Chinese Nationalism and the May Fourth Movement

**Year:** 2019

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Haapanen, J. (2019). Chinese Peoples and the Others : Notes on Contemporary Chinese Nationalism and the May Fourth Movement. *Journal of China and International Relations*, 7(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.5278/jcir.v7i1.3540>

## **Chinese People and the Others: Notes on Contemporary Chinese Nationalism and the May Fourth Movement**

*Jarkko Haapanen\**

### **Abstract**

The May Fourth Movement (1917-1921) has always been an important part of the official historical narrative of the Chinese Communist Party. Today, the Movement is often celebrated as being closely connected with the emergence of modern Chinese patriotism and nationalism in contemporary China. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chinese nationalism has voiced more assertive overtones with a tendency to glorify Chinese imperial history. What is more, contemporary Chinese nationalism often adopts a negative attitude towards foreign ideas and thought trends. This article discusses the differences between contemporary Chinese nationalism and the May Fourth Movement nationalism by examining the argumentation structures wherein the concept of nationalism was used during the May Fourth period. The article shows that the concept was, in fact, given primarily a negative meaning in the May Fourth context. The article shows that, in May Fourth journals, nationalism was associated with imperialism, capitalism, and Darwinism, which were presented as destructive ideas that were responsible for the First World War. Unlike the radical Chinese nationalists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, May Fourth authors supported a cosmopolitan spirit and international cooperation. The desire to strengthen and develop China involved dreams of creating an international operational environment based on equality and cooperation, instead of aggressive power politics.

**Keywords:** Chinese nationalism, May Fourth Movement, Chinese Communist Party

### **Introduction**

Chinese nationalism is currently one of the most popular research topics among scholars studying Chinese politics and Chinese political thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Many scholars have noted that nationalism has been on the rise in China since the 1990s, and previous studies have shown that, with the fading appeal of international socialism since the early 1990s, nationalism has become a central element in the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Carlson, 2009: 20-35, Lam, 1999: 52-5, 161-4, 265-77). As a result of official patriotic education campaigns, patriotism is nowadays closely associated with loyalty to the CCP itself in contemporary China (Link, 2015: 26).

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This article presents a historical perspective to debates on the rise of contemporary Chinese nationalism by examining the usages of the concept of nationalism during a period that was significant in the development of modern Chinese political vocabulary. The article critically examines the contemporary portrayals of the May Fourth Movement<sup>1</sup> as a nationalist and patriotic movement<sup>2</sup> by looking at the usages of the concept of nationalism in the Movement's most well-known journals<sup>3</sup>, especially in the *New Youth*<sup>4</sup> journal, 1919-1921.

The purpose of the article is not to claim that there were no elements of nationalism and patriotism involved in the Movement. However, the article shows that, after the First World War, the concept of nationalism was usually given negative meanings as it was associated with imperialism and other ways of thought that had led to the war. These May Fourth authors did not only want to strengthen China – they were envisioning a new period in international relations that was not to be based on power and aggressive foreign politics, but on equality and cooperation. Negative meanings to nationalism were attached both before and after the class struggle paradigm was introduced and espoused in the Movement's journals in 1920. The May Fourth Movement can be seen as a patriotic movement in a sense that the May Fourth authors wanted to develop and strengthen China so that China would become a nation that could defend herself against foreign aggressors. In her well-known study on the Movement, Vera Schwarcz

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<sup>1</sup> According to Chow Tse-tsung's (1967 [1960]: 1) definition, the May Fourth Movement refers to a period from 1917 to 1921 (in 1921 the CCP was established). However, in this article, I will focus on the period after the First World War (the armistice was signed in November 1918): 1919-1921. The May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement have been studied extensively from the 1930s onwards. The scope of the current article is related to 21<sup>st</sup> century debates on Chinese nationalism, and is thus limited. For a more comprehensive discussion of the May Fourth and New Culture Movements, as well as their political relevance in 20<sup>th</sup> century China, see for example Chow (1967 [1960]), Schwarcz (1986), or Mitter (2004).

<sup>2</sup> When I use the term patriotism instead of nationalism, I am referring to more general level concept, where the idea of 'dedication to one's native country' is the core element. In common usage, of course, these two concepts are often intertwined and the terms nationalism and patriotism are used interchangeably. In the May Fourth context, both "narrow nationalism" and "narrow patriotism" were opposed.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the focus is on the most well-known May Fourth journals. *New Youth*, *New Tide*, *Young China*, and *Citizen* discussed in this article were monthly publications, whereas *Weekly Critic* was a weekly publication. For the purposes of the current article, I have studied articles in these journals that discussed issues such as the development of Chinese society and international relations. Articles dealing with issues such as literature, poetry, and language reform were not included in the research data. My conclusions and reading of the intellectual trends of the time are based on my previous research on the May Fourth Movement (Haapanen, 2013). Due to limitations regarding the length of the article, the number of May Fourth example articles directly discussed here is limited. One should also keep in mind that the Movement was not unified, and it might well be possible that one could end up with different conclusions by studying less well-known journals of the movement.

<sup>4</sup> *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*) was the most well-known reform-minded journal of the period. The journal was established in Shanghai in 1915 by Chen Duxiu. In its early days, the journal was directed against Yuan Shikai's (1859-1916) attempts to reinstate monarchy in China and to establish Confucianism as a state religion. The establishment of *New Youth* is sometimes seen as a starting point for the wider, anti-traditional New Culture Movement. The journal was closed down in 1926.

(1986: 36) writes that the spirit of “saving the nation” brought the May Fourth intellectuals together, although they possessed different ideas on how to develop China and what kind of ideologies Chinese intellectuals should follow.<sup>5</sup>

The May Fourth Movement today is seen by many as a historical symbol of modern Chinese nationalism and patriotic spirit. For example, in April 2005, when large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in China, the May Fourth anniversary became a turning point for the Chinese leaders who had originally allowed the demonstrators to openly voice their concerns. These demonstrations were related to the dispute about Japanese school textbooks used to teach history and about a proposal to give Japan a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Japanese businesses in several cities in China were vandalized during the protests. When the government learned that the protestors were going to arrange even wider mass demonstrations on the anniversary of the May Fourth demonstrations of 1919, the nation went on full alert and officials closed Tiananmen Square to the public (Hughes, 2006: 151; Zhao, 2013: 540-2).

According to Christopher Hughes (2006: 2-4), nationalism is a “fuzzy concept” that is essentially contested and its meaning changes as it is used for different purposes over time. Following this starting point, this article does not aim to define Chinese nationalism; rather, the aim is to show that the meaning of political concepts varies according to the needs of the authors who are creating arguments for specific debates. The context within which these May Fourth authors operated had its own peculiarities: the First World War had just ended, the October Revolution in Russia had taken place in 1917, China was divided by independent warlords, and there was no Chinese Communist Party (the article focuses on a period before the party was established in July 1921) nor a People’s Republic of China (PRC) (established in 1949 after the Chinese Civil War). The challenges and ‘perennial questions’, as they were interpreted then, were related to the development of the Chinese nation, and the Chinese people were different from the ones that Chinese authors writing about China’s future development and international status are dealing with today. Because of these differences, many concepts, including nationalism, were loaded with meanings that might not seem obvious today.

According to a pioneering study on the development of Chinese political concepts by Jin

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<sup>5</sup> The nationalist character of the movement has been underlined, for instance, by Lin Gang (1989), who claims that the fundamental driving force behind the intellectual movement was, in any case, the spirit of nationalism.

Guantao and Liu Qingfeng (2009), the majority of modern political concepts were introduced in China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Usually, these concepts went through three stages: *first*, after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese authors used terms borrowed from Chinese classics to express new concepts adopted from Western sources; *second*, between 1895-1915, Chinese authors used new terms borrowed from Japanese translations of Western texts; and *third*, after 1915 and especially after 1919, certain Chinese versions of originally-Western concepts such as democracy, nationalism, socialism, or liberalism, began to become entrenched. Based on their findings, Jin and Liu (2009: 7-9) conclude that conceptual developments during the period 1915-1925 should be given special attention.

The approach used in this article is based on J.G.A. Pocock's writings on political languages. According to Pocock (1971), when studying history of political thought, the first problem is to identify the language and vocabulary with and within which the author operated. Using political languages means acting, speaking, and thinking in certain ways that are politically biased. Political languages possess their own terminologies, styles, and conventions (Pocock 2009: 69-79). For Pocock, scholars studying the history of political thought should become familiar with political languages and the paradigms which operate within them. The purpose of the chosen approach in the article is to get a better understanding of the dynamics of changing viewpoints related to the intellectual interactions of a period when a great variety of new foreign ideas and ideologies were debated in China. In the following, I will first discuss the origins of the concept of nationalism in China before moving on to an analysis of the usage of the concept of nationalism within the language of mutual aid (esp. 1919-1920) and the language of class struggle (esp. after 1920), which was prevalent during this period.

### **The Concept of Nationalism in China and the May Fourth Movement**

The origins of the Chinese concept of nationalism can be traced back to the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The emergence of the concept was closely related to the question of China's national sovereignty during a time when most of the reform-minded Chinese authors felt that the future survival of China was under constant threat. The emergence of the concept of nationalism was connected to a wider cosmological turn away from a Sinocentric "all under heaven" (天下 *tianxia*) cosmology, to a world (世界 *shijie*) of competing nation states (国家 *guojia*). This paradigmatic change was connected to the increasing presence of foreign powers in East Asia, and to the fact that the Qing dynasty was unable to isolate China from foreign

influences or properly defend its borders. Defeats in the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) were followed by a defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). The latter was a turning point for many Chinese intellectuals who became convinced that the old Sinocentric worldview had become obsolete and, if China was to be rescued, it was necessary to create and develop a modern Chinese nation state with a strong national spirit. These military defeats and the unequal treaties that China was forced to sign with foreign powers are still seen by many in China as a central part of the “century of humiliation” that usually refers to a period of foreign imperialism and internal fragmentation in China from 1839 (when the First Opium War started) to 1949 (when the PRC was established).

According to Jin and Liu (2009: 243), the concept of nationalism first appeared in a Chinese text in 1901. Authors such as Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan), and others became interested in Western nationalism. Besides concrete military defeats and military threats, discussions on the survival of China were closely connected to the social Darwinist scenarios of the so-called struggle for survival. Social Darwinist ideas and slogans were introduced in China in the 1890s. Yan Fu translated Thomas Henry Huxley’s work *Evolution and Ethics* (1893) into Chinese in 1898. James Reeve Pusey (1983) has written that, among reform-minded scholars, evolutionary theory gained huge popularity and soon everyone was writing about the reform of Chinese society using a Darwinist perspective. The Qing dynasty that was despised by many reform-minded scholars and intellectuals eventually collapsed in the revolution of 1911, but the following Republic of China was weak and the central leadership in Beijing could control only a limited area within the Republic’s territory. Independent warlords controlled provincial areas in China with the help of their private armies and private sources of income. In the First World War, the Beiyang government (1912-1928) in China supported the Allied side by sending so-called working battalions to Europe. After the war, in the Paris Peace Conference, the areas in China that were previously controlled by Germany were not given back to China. Instead, they were transferred to Japan. Naturally, many people in China were unhappy about the decision, and large-scale demonstrations took place on May 4<sup>th</sup> in 1919. In the end, China never signed the peace treaty. In a narrow sense, the May Fourth Movement refers to these demonstrations (“the May Fourth Incident”). In a wider sense, this name refers to a loose reform movement by Chinese students and academics. The Movement was neither uniform nor well-organized. There was no established leadership or commonly-shared agenda. These authors wanted to re-evaluate tradition and strengthen China’s development by promoting new learning. According to Chow (1967 [1960]: 215), the

spirit of unity beyond these goals was only superficial.

Already in the late 1920s, and especially in decades which followed, various Chinese authors tried to connect the May Fourth Movement to their own political agendas and to historical narratives that served their own political goals. Many authors have wanted to strengthen the image of this Movement as a nationalist movement. In 1986, Vera Schwarcz (1986: 287) wrote that the “nationalist assault on the legacy of May Fourth has been going on for a number of decades already.” According to Schwarcz (1986: 245), the significance assigned to the Movement by political leaders often runs counter to the experience of the May Fourth participants themselves.

According to Chen Zhongping (2011), many of the provincial warlords in China during the Movement tried to benefit from it, although the power of warlords was one of the issues that was constantly opposed in May Fourth journals. In the 1920s, Sun Yat-sen portrayed the Movement as a part of the Guomindang-led revolutionary project. For Guomindang, it was a nationalist movement that was betrayed by the Marxists. The official CCP historiography, on the other hand, connects the Movement to the CCP’s own historical narrative and, in this context, the Movement is portrayed as a prelude to the CCP. In this narrative, the May Fourth Movement period was the last period in the struggle against feudalism and the CCP itself was the leader of the struggle (Chow, 1967 [1960]: 347, Gu, 1992: 36-7, 76-7, Mitter, 2004: 103-4, Schwarcz, 1986: 236-7, 245-6).

Originally, the May Fourth demonstrations in 1919 were connected to the experience of injustice in the Paris Peace Conference, and certainly the demonstrations were connected to the bilateral relations between China and Japan – as Japan was seen as an imperialist and militarist power which was constantly threatening China. Thus, it is not difficult to understand the logic behind the idea of connecting the events of 1919 to anti-Japanese demonstrations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, seeing the May Fourth Movement as a purely nationalist and patriotic movement can easily be misleading, as the journals of the Movement uphold a strong cosmopolitan spirit.<sup>6</sup> The May Fourth Movement was not a movement that would have glorified the value of Chinese culture or the prowess of the Han Chinese people, as is often the case with

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<sup>6</sup> For the May Fourth cosmopolitan spirit, see also Ip (2005: 27-32). Although in the May Fourth context, the cosmopolitan spirit was closely connected to the criticism of nationalism, concepts of nationalism and cosmopolitanism are not necessarily out of tune with one another. See, for example, Brett and Moran (2011) and Calhoun (2008). What is more, Acharya and Buzan (2010) note that it has not been unusual in Asia that nationalist movements have themselves criticized nationalism as the basis for organizing international relations.

21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese nationalism. Previous studies on 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese nationalism have shown that there are three commonly used elements in nationalist historical argumentation: *first*, it is typical for Chinese nationalists to admire the past greatness of Chinese empires and to underline the exceptionality of China's history and culture; *second*, it is typical for Chinese nationalists to stress the damage inflicted upon China during the so-called century of humiliation which started with the Opium Wars and ended with the establishment of the PRC in 1949; and *third*, the role of the CCP is depicted as being that of the hero who saved China from the hands of foreign imperialists and was able to strengthen and develop China (Carlson, 2009: 22).

It is not difficult to find ways to connect the May Fourth Movement and the second and the third of these historical elements in contemporary Chinese nationalist argumentation. The May Fourth Movement was a movement that opposed imperialism, and thus the Movement is related to the century of national humiliation. It certainly can be seen as an intellectual movement that was trying to find ways to end this humiliation. Naturally, there is a clear connection between the Movement and the Chinese Communist Party, as many of the central figures of this Movement such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao were later important members of the CCP in its early years. A connection between the first key element depicted above with the Movement is, however, not easy to create, as the Movement was extremely critical of Chinese traditional culture, and for May Fourth authors the history of Chinese empires was not a symbol of past glory but a symbol of stagnation and decay. Instead of looking for inspiration for China's future development by glorifying the history of Chinese emperors and dynasties, these intellectuals wanted to reject traditional Chinese culture and education, and to reform China by following modern political ideas from abroad. They believed that the only way to save China was to follow the prevailing international thought trends.

### **Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, Nationalism After the End of WWI, 1919-1920**

After the end of First World War, especially during the year 1919, Russian author Pjotr Kropotkin appeared as one of the leading international authorities in the May Fourth journals. Kropotkin's conceptions on evolution were first introduced to the Chinese readership during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bailey, 1990: 229). Hence, Kropotkin's work was already familiar to those who would form the core writers of the May Fourth journals.

Articles published in May Fourth journals after the war heavily criticized imperialism and



militarism. Social Darwinism was seen as a harmful intellectual construct that had created a favorable atmosphere for imperialist and militarist ideas to appear. Besides Kropotkin, Woodrow Wilson's ideas related to self-determination and peaceful international relations presented in his 'Fourteen Points' speech were applauded by many Chinese intellectuals (see Ma, 2017). In this context, aggressive or "narrow" nationalism was seen as a way of thought that was outmoded and harmful for the peaceful development of international relations.

Kropotkin's work *Mutual Aid* (1902) challenged social Darwinist versions of evolution and directly criticized Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* (1893). Instead of mutual struggle, Kropotkin (1915 [1902]) underlined the importance of mutual aid in evolution. According to Kropotkin, mutual aid and cooperation were much more relevant for the survival of species than the ability to fight against others. Struggle was to be understood mainly as a collective struggle against circumstances, not as a struggle between individuals.

In the post-war China, Kropotkin was applauded as one of the authors whose writings represented "a new era" and a "new tide of thought." In this context, it was Kropotkin – and not Darwin – who could best explain 'the true nature of evolution'. In November 1918, Cai Yuanpei, one of the leading intellectual figures at Beijing University wrote that the Allied side won the World War because they followed Kropotkin's ideas:

At the end, it was the Allied Nations who got the victory. The Allied side followed Kropotkin's principle of mutual aid. The principle of mutual aid is a general rule in evolutionary theory (Cai, 1918)

According to Cai (1918), Germany had followed the ideas of Nietzsche and the idea of the survival of the fittest and that had led to their defeat.<sup>7</sup>

For Cai, as for many others, the war had proved that Kropotkinian mutual aid was the key in evolution. Cai's article was a typical one, and many similar articles where the power of mutual aid and Kropotkinian thought were underlined appeared in May Fourth journals in 1918-1919. It was not only *New Youth*; similar articles appeared in other journals such as *Young China*<sup>8</sup>, which was the journal of the Young China Association – originally established in June

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<sup>7</sup> Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) served as Chancellor of Beijing University and was the first President of the Academia Sinica. See Boorman and Howard (1967: Vol. 3, 295-299).

<sup>8</sup> The journal *Shaonian Zhongguo* was not only a Beijing University journal, as the Young China Association had branches in Nanjing, Chengdu, and Paris. The society remained active until 1925. For more about the Association, see Chow (1960/1967: 80).

1918 by students who had returned to China from Japan. In the first issue of *Young China*, which appeared in July 1919, Wei Shizhen wrote that, before the war, the Darwinist struggle for survival was prevalent, but after the war everyone had started to study Kropotkin's ideas on evolution. Wei argues (1919), that the key to understanding evolution correctly is found in Kropotkin's idea of cooperation. In the same journal, one of the student leaders of the Young China Association, Yun Daiying (1920a)<sup>9</sup>, wrote that supporters of narrow nationalism (狭隘的国家主义 *xia'ai de guojia zhuyi*) had used science for their own purposes and this had led to poisonous effects in the development of societies. In another article, Yun (1920b) stressed that, although it is necessary to resist the "capitalist oppression" of China, nationalism (国家主义 *guojia zhuyi*) was not the solution because it led to grievances and conflicts between nations. Instead of nationalism, it was equality and humanity that was to be supported. According to Yun, the current unstoppable trend of democracy was against the old ways of thought.

In another well-known May Fourth journal, *Weekly Critic*<sup>10</sup>, Gao Yihan<sup>11</sup> wrote that Kropotkin's espousal of mutual aid was not based on the optimistic beliefs of human compassion, but was based on observations in natural sciences. Gao argued that, although Darwin himself did understand the relevance of cooperation, competition and mutual struggle were emphasized in his later writings. These elements were overemphasized, particularly in the discussions that followed. According to Gao (1919), mutual aid was a leading trend in nature and human societies were following this trend. Patriotism (爱国主义 *aiguo zhuyi*) was in contrast with this trend, yet could not change this basic state of affairs.

Following the style of argumentation, in *New Tide*<sup>12</sup> Li Dazhao<sup>13</sup> (1919) wrote that the old nationalistic ethics (国家主义的道德 *guojia zhuyi de daode*) could not survive any more in the contemporary world because they were based on outmoded thinking. New ethics were

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<sup>9</sup> Yun Daiying (1895-1931) was active in the CCP in its early years. See Boorman and Howard (1967: vol. 4, 92-5).

<sup>10</sup> *Weekly Critic (Meizhou Pinglun)*, established in 1918, was a journal that was associated with *New Youth*, but it adopted a more direct style of criticism towards existing power elites in China. The journal was suppressed in 1919.

<sup>11</sup> Gao Yihan (1885-1968) was Professor of Political Science at Beijing University. For more about Gao, see Lin, D. (2005: 169-170).

<sup>12</sup> *New Tide (Xin Chao)* was a journal of the New Tide student society. It was active from 1919 to 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Li Dazhao (1888-1927) was Chief Librarian at Beijing University until September 1920 when he became Professor of History, Economics and Political Science. According to Meisner (1973 [1968]: 190), the "internationalist phase" in Li's writings was strong between 1919 and 1921. Chen Duxiu, on the other hand, was already critical of patriotism in 1915, and called it "blind loyalty to the state" (Schwarcz 1986: 38).

not based on spirituality, religion, classical thought, class divisions, private ownership, or occupations. Instead, new ethics were based on mutual aid, harmony, humanity, practicality, and constructiveness.

Within the ‘language of mutual aid’ in this context, we can recognize some recurring arguments related to the international operational environment within which China was to be developed: 1) mutual aid is more essential an element in evolution than mutual struggle; 2) people should follow the prevailing trends of the spirit of mutual aid and democracy and abandon the spirit of mutual conflict militarism and imperialism; 3) people should oppose structures that protect the privileges of the few; and 4) people should strive for equality, both domestically and internationally.

This type of argumentation was used also on the pages of the *Citizen*<sup>14</sup>, a journal that is often seen as a more nationalistic May Fourth journal compared to the likes of *New Youth*, *New Tide*, and *Weekly Critic*. In November 1919, Yang Yiceng expressed his views on building a better society. Although Yang did not refer to Kropotkin, he used similar argumentation. Yang (1919) explains that the current society was an unequal society without humanity and justice. Warlords were oppressing the people and capitalists were oppressing the workingmen. According to Yang, nationalism (国家主义 *guojia zhuyi*) was harmful because it created international conflicts. Yang argued that people should strive to improve the lives of all the people in the world, and they should not focus only on the limited interests of existing societies based on religion or ethnicity. According to Yang, there was a need for “true democracy” that followed the spirit of liberty, fraternity, and equality.

The mutual aid framework was not only used to interpret the result and meaning of the First World War; the revolutions in Russia and in Germany were treated similarly. In February, Huang Lingshuang (1919), writing for *New Youth*, explained that the prevailing international thought trends were manifested by Kropotkin’s theory of mutual aid, whereas the revolutions in Russia and in Germany were practical manifestations of the trend. This is to say, neither the October Revolution (1918) in Russia nor the November Revolution in Germany (1918-1919) were immediately interpreted through using the language of Revolutionary Marxism. This type

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<sup>14</sup> *Citizen (Guomin)* was a student journal at Beijing University. It was funded by a student society named the Citizen Society. The Society was established by students who had returned from Japan to China, and originally the main theme of their activities was to oppose Japanese imperialism. The journal was active from 1919 to 1921. Many of the students participated in both the New Tide Society and the Citizen Society.

of argumentation entered these journals and the May Fourth Movement only later.

When we look at the concept of nationalism in this context, it seems that nationalism is opposed by these authors when elements of imperialism, militarism, and social Darwinism are included. On the other hand, it seems clear that these authors were willing to support all attempts to develop China, to strengthen China, and to create a positive and active spirit that would help China to defend her national sovereignty. In this sense, it might be somewhat less problematic to associate the concept of patriotism with the Movement than the concept of nationalism, especially if the latter is attached to elements typically associated with Chinese nationalism, such as ethnic-cultural unity or the shared national heritage of the Han Chinese.

The period of optimism, where the arrival of this new positive period in international relations was discussed, took place between the armistice in November 1918 and the conclusion of the Paris Peace Conference in May 1919. The Peace Conference, as it has been mentioned above, was a great disappointment for the Chinese people and for the reform-minded authors writing about the future development of China. The tone of the articles did not, however, change immediately after the conference. The more radical and revolutionary style of argumentation properly entered these journals in 1920.

### **Class Struggle and Nationalism in late 1920**

From the autumn of 1920, the language and style of writing in the May Fourth journals started to change significantly. Instead of a spirit of mutual aid and democracy, many authors started to use a class struggle framework when discussing the future development of China. World trends, as they were interpreted, were – from then on – usually depicted as trends moving towards revolution. Besides class struggle, the necessity for revolution and proletarian dictatorship was repeatedly underlined and were claimed to be necessary elements of China's future development. Many of the central concepts such as democracy and freedom were given new meanings: democracy and freedom in "capitalist societies" were explained as "unreal." Real freedom, real democracy, and equality could be reached only through class struggle. Obviously, this development of political rhetoric in these journals was connected to the fact that many of the central authors writing for these journals started to see Soviet Russia as a model for China's development.

Within the framework of international class struggle, May Fourth authors started to associate the Chinese people with the international proletarian class that was trying to survive

in a battle against international capitalism and imperialism. In this setting, these authors did not call for Chinese nationalism, because nationalism was seen as an element belonging to capitalist countries looking for opportunities to oppress less-developed countries in order to gain material benefits. Within this political language, it was not China or the Chinese people as a whole whose position the authors wanted to improve. The main player was, instead, the Chinese workers – together with workers all over the world.

The events in the Paris Peace Conference after the war were used as a prime example of the moral corruption of capitalist countries. On the other hand, there were events that made it easier to portray Soviet Russia as a friendly companion in international relations. Maybe the most important event in this sense was the so-called Karakhan Declaration. The declaration listed different treaties signed between the Russian Empire and China that the current Soviet Russian Government wanted to cancel. This declaration was originally announced already in July 1919, but news of the declaration did not reach Beijing until March 1920. The declaration was significant because it promised to concede all Russian special privileges in China. Naturally, when the news arrived in Beijing, the Chinese reaction was extremely positive. In May 1920, *New Youth* published a translation of the declaration with a collection of responses from Chinese student unions, labor unions, and trade unions, and commentaries from other Chinese journals. According to this collection, many in China saw this declaration as a sign of the beginning of a “new age in history.” Many hoped that China and Soviet Russia could work together against international suppression and inequality between nations and classes. In September 1920, *New Youth* started a new “Russian Studies” section that dealt with issues such as the Soviet government, economy, labor unions, education, science, and other themes related to the development of Soviet society after the October Revolution in 1917.

The summer of 1920 was a turning point for the *New Youth* journal and for the May Fourth Movement. During this summer, the journal moved from Beijing back to Shanghai, where Chen Duxiu had originally established the journal in 1915. At this point, Chen, Li Dazhao, and others who had become interested in Marxism wanted to start publishing articles about revolutionary ideas and class struggle on the pages of *New Youth*. Authors, such as Hu Shi, who did not agree with this change of policy decided to leave the journal. When *New Youth* restarted its operations in Shanghai in September, the “Russian Studies” section was not the only new element in the journal. In the September issue, Chen (1920a) started to write about class struggle in his article titled “On Politics.” According to this article, the main problem in all modern societies was that the capitalist uses state institutions to oppress the workingman,

and only class struggle could change this state of affairs:

If one does not support the use of force, does not support class struggle ... then the capitalist class will control the state and will take advantage of politics and law. ... If in Russia they would have relied on Kropotkin's free unions instead of Lenin's proletarian dictatorship, not only the capitalist class would have immediately been able to restore its power, but also the imperial system would have inevitably been reinstated. ... if we do not go through a class struggle, if we do not go through a period where the working class holds the power, democracy will inevitably and forever be exclusively a thing of the capitalist class

In another article later during the same autumn, Chen (1920b) wrote that capitalist societies produce the harmful products nationalism (国家主义 *guojia zhuyi*) and imperialism (帝国主义 *diguozhuyi*). State power, law, and politics should be used to protect the status and living conditions of the working class instead.

As in the case of the language of mutual aid and democracy, we can identify the main assertions of the language of class struggle in this specific context: 1) world trends are moving towards revolution; 2) class struggle, social revolution, and proletarian dictatorship are necessary elements of economic development; 3) China should take Soviet Russia as its model; 4) Marxism is the only scientific version of socialism; and 5) real freedom and real democracy cannot be realized without class struggle.

However, the rejection of the idealistic mutual aid spirit did not mean the rejection of cosmopolitanism and internationalism. As was the case with the language of mutual aid, nationalism – especially “narrow nationalism” – was still a concept within the language of class struggle that was given negative meanings. In his article on German socialism, published in *New Youth* in January 1921, Li Da<sup>15</sup> criticized the German socialist movement because, according to Li, the Movement had abandoned ideas of international class struggle and proletarian dictatorship, and turned instead to nationalism (国家主义 *guojia zhuyi*) and parliamentary democracy. Li (1921) wrote that it was nationalism that led Germans to the war. Although it seems that the negative attitude towards nationalism remained, it seems clear that the spirit of internationalism was changed; these authors started to lean towards more revolutionary versions of socialist internationalism. In other words, the type of international

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<sup>15</sup> Li Da (1890-1966) was one of the founding members of the CCP in July 1921. He later became President of Wuhan University. For a more detailed biography, see Boorman and Howard (1967: vol. 2, 328-9).

cooperation that was supported within the language of class struggle was a more limited, one compared to the language of mutual aid.

The concept of nationalism was also discussed by Bertrand Russell, who lectured in China during the May Fourth period, and many of his articles and summaries of his lectures were published in May Fourth journals. Russell was admired by many Chinese authors, and he appeared in many articles after the First World War as an authority who supported the validity of Kropotkin's writings on mutual aid (see for example Russell, 1920; Zhou, 1920). Initially, Russell had been optimistic about the prospects of the October Revolution but, after visiting Soviet Russia in August 1920, he became more skeptical and critical about the future direction of the Bolshevik government. May Fourth authors who had adopted Soviet Russia as a future model for China did not accept Russell's views (see for example, Yuan, 1920). On nationalism however, there seemed to be a common understanding, as Russell (1920b) held that nationalism meant looking after one's country's benefits at the expense of those of other nation states, and was thus one of the main enemies of socialism. Socialism, on the other hand, should maintain its international character.

Within the May Fourth context, various versions of anarchism and socialism were discussed, and there were many authors who were interested in international authors' writings about these ideologies. Typically, the frameworks and argumentation structures that were adopted from these sources depicted nationalism as a negative concept. Outside these journals there were, however, authors such as Sun Yat-sen who strongly supported nationalism<sup>16</sup>. In fact, May Fourth authors were also criticized by their contemporaries for being unpatriotic and for betraying national culture (Schwarcz, 1986: 121, 169-170)<sup>17</sup>.

## Conclusions

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<sup>16</sup> For Sun, nationalism was not a negative concept that was merely associated with imperialist and capitalist nations, unlike for the May Fourth authors discussed in this article. Sun's famous lecture series *Three Principles of the People* (*San Min Zhuyi*) on nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihoods were held in 1924. For Sun's lectures on nationalism, see Sun 2003 [1924]: 1-59.

<sup>17</sup> It is well known that, during the May Fourth Movement period, there were intellectual circles in China who were much less interested in authors such as Kropotkin or Marx, and offered different perspectives and solutions to China's challenges. For example the *National Herigate* (*Guogu*) journal in Beijing and *Critical Review* (*Xueheng*) in Nanjing offered completely different versions of China's challenges, and they were highly critical of the New Culture Movement. For more, see Dolezelova-Velingerova, 2008; Wang, 1978.

In this article, I have tried to explore and explain the usages of the concept of nationalism within a context where the class struggle paradigm was introduced before the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in July 1921. In order to understand meanings given to concepts in specific debates, I believe that it is necessary to try to understand the political languages within which the concepts are used. Although I do believe that the languages of mutual aid and class struggle (after 1920) were the most common “political languages” in this context, this certainly does not mean that it would be impossible to find other contrasting languages (with recurring argumentation structures and usage of concepts) that were used by various authors.

May Fourth Movement authors wanted to make a distinction between acceptable and harmful types of nationalisms. In this context, positive nationalism meant the support of an intellectual atmosphere where China could develop and become stronger, so that it could defend itself against foreign imperialist invasions. The negative concept of nationalism that these authors opposed meant aggressive nationalism that involved beliefs of cultural or racial superiority, and was used to justify aggressive foreign policies and the juxtaposition between nation states. The negative concept of nationalism in this specific context was associated with Darwinism, imperialism, militarism, military invasions, and capitalism.

The May Fourth authors certainly wanted to strengthen and rescue China, but this did not mean loyalty towards the contemporary government. The Beiyang government was a warlord government, and the fact that China was governed by various warlords was an issue that was seen as an obstacle for future development. Militarism and the power of warlords were elements in the contemporary Chinese society that these authors opposed. As it has been noted, anti-imperialism was a central element in Chinese nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>. Anti-imperialism did not, however, mean antiforeignism. Antiforeignism was the very opposite of what the Movement stood for, as Chow (1967 [1960]: 199) has noted. The May Fourth Movement authors held a strong cosmopolitan spirit, where the need for international cooperation and equality in the international operational environment were constantly stressed.

The year 2019 marks the Centenary of the May Fourth demonstrations, and the Movement again receives great attention in China. Recently, some Chinese scholars have connected the Movement to Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream (Li, B., 2014, Li, Y., 2016). Furthermore, the year

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<sup>18</sup> Ip, Hon, and Lee (2003) call May Fourth nationalism “anti-imperialist nationalism.” For more about Chinese “anti-imperialist nationalism”, see Duara (2003: 10-20).



2021 will be the Centenary of the establishment of the CCP, and undoubtedly China will highlight its early 20<sup>th</sup> century political history and history of political thought. Thus, we have reasons to believe that the Movement will be celebrated in a manner that aims to portray it as an inevitable part of the CCP's own history in a way that will probably involve strong nationalist overtones.

According to Carlson (2009: 22-3), “a pervasive collective memory of past national experiences plays a central role in framing the content of modern Chinese national sentiment”, and that the predominant interpretation of Chinese history where the CCP appears as the savior of China is not a natural product of the past, but a carefully crafted one. Mitter (2003: 103-4) states that the official CCP version of Chinese history has tried to downplay the relevance of the possibilities of alternative paths of the May Fourth history. According to Mitter, there was nothing inevitable in the rise of the CCP.

When studying Chinese nationalism, scholars should not only focus on contemporary events and discussions on nationalism but should critically analyze these crafted images of the past events and movements that are used to support nationalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For the May Fourth authors, nationalism was something that belonged to outmoded trends of thought, and their patriotism was certainly not based on glorified images of Chinese history or dreams of more assertive and aggressive foreign politics. Neither was the Movement an anti-foreign movement. The aim of this current article has not been to somehow politicize or mystify the May Fourth period, but to make more explicit the relevance of the interpretations of the period and their usage for political purposes today. One fundamental difference between 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese nationalism and the May Fourth Movement lies in their attitude towards foreign thought trends. Unlike the CCP today that tends to denounce foreign ideas such as the freedom of the press as harmful and dangerous<sup>19</sup>, the May Fourth Movement authors were not afraid of foreign thought trends and foreign influences. Conversely, these authors were afraid that, if China did not adapt herself to prevailing international developments, China would remain backward, unbalanced, and weak.

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<sup>19</sup> For example the “Document 9” that depicts many foreign ideas as attempts to undermine the current leadership (China File 2013).

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