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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Beijing, Shanghai, and the May Fourth Generation

‘Youth,’ wrote the radical activist Chen Duxiu in 1915, ‘is like early spring, like the rising sun, like trees and grass in bud, like a newly sharpened blade. It is the most valuable period of life.’¹ To be young and living in the city in China during the early years of the Republic, the period when Chen was writing, was to grow up in a dangerous yet deeply exciting time. For this generation, space opened up. This could be as individual as the opportunity to walk around freely given to young women whose feet were no longer bound; as local as the new places such as public parks, schools, cinemas, department stores, and factories which had not existed a generation before; and as global as the modernizing, imperialist, capitalist world that had forced itself on China but was also open for exploration by the Chinese.

In short, this chapter is about the excitement, the arrogance, and the uncertainty of being young at the dawn of Chinese modernity. To understand the ideas that changed China during this period, it is essential to understand the places and the people associated with those ideas. This chapter examines the atmosphere in Beijing and Shanghai in the interwar period, and then takes a closer look at some of the individuals and groups who lived in those cities. For the cities were essential to China’s development of a modern identity.

It was a very particular type of modernity which the new Chinese Republic encountered. Within a few years of the Republic’s birth in 1912, China had to deal with global powers exhausted by the destruction of World War I. China itself had, of course, been a participant in the war, an event leading to the betrayal and disillusionment that

caused the 1919 May Fourth demonstrations in Beijing. In Europe, though, there was a strong sense that the promise of progress of the Victorian era had been destroyed in the killing fields of the World War. Ideas that undermined rationality and grand, romantic views of the future jostled with the now tarnished idea that scientific, clinical modernity was an unalloyed good that could show the way forward for the world. Science was mustard gas as well as Marconi radios or medicine. The great powers, regardless of which side they had fought on, struggled to recover a lost pre-war idyll.²

Europe's wartime agony and the culture of often forced frivolity that supplanted it was visible every day in China through the continuing imperialist presence. British veterans such as Maurice Tinkler, unable to find work at home in Lancashire after coming home from the Western Front, shipped out to Shanghai in 1919 as new recruits of the Shanghai Municipal Police, which kept law and order in the International Settlement. 'Shanghai is the best city I have seen and will leave any English town 100 years behind', he marvelled on arrival. 'It is the most cosmopolitan city of the world bar none and the finest city of the Far East.'³ In the French Concession, marks of the European war could be seen everywhere, with major boulevards renamed Avenues Joffre and Foch after the victorious generals. Throughout the city, the newest American and European-style culture could be seen: fast cars, jazz bars, and advertisements for exciting new consumer products such as RCA gramophones and Golden Dragon cigarettes (for opium was not the only addictive drug that was mass-marketed in China; so was nicotine). The treaty port cities, and in particular Shanghai, created a particular type of imperial modernity that sometimes seemed to suspend the reality that the cities were squarely in Chinese territory, inhabited mostly by Chinese. Yet outward-looking aspects of that modernity were explored by Chinese too, such as the writer Shi Zhecun, who wandered around the bookstores of the International Settlement and the coffee shops of the French Concession, living a Parisian Left Bank lifestyle at one remove.

The world the Great War had made was part of China's Republican experience, for Chinese as well as foreigners. From the White

Russians in exile in Shanghai from the Soviet government brought to power by the collapse of the Czarist empire to the associations of Chinese labour veterans of the European front, the world of war came to China just as China had gone to the war. The May Fourth era itself was part of that changed world. It was in China's cities where the new thinking developed, and in particular in Beijing and Shanghai.

Beijing: Intellectual Centre of the Movement

If a present-day visitor to Beijing wanted to retrace the path that Luo Jialun and his fellow-students took during the demonstration described at the start of this book, she or he would see little of the city as it was in 1919. But not everything has gone.

Starting in what is now Tian'anmen Square, you can walk through the Forbidden City in Beijing across a string of enclosures where emperors once held court. The yellow roof tiles and deep red buildings are still preserved as a monument to the grandeur of China's imperial past. As you come out of the complex, you may see a Starbucks coffee stand, a symbol of how far global capitalism has reached. Walk across the moat at the back, cross the road, and walk right for about fifteen minutes. The avenue becomes less green and more cluttered with undistinguished buildings, mostly shops. The name of the street changes: it is now Wusi Dajie – 'May Fourth Avenue'. Near a major crossroads, you can see a large gateway giving onto a large, redbrick building three storeys high, fronted by a courtyard. There is a stone canopy with four large pillars protecting the entrance from the elements. The notice at the front describes it as 'The Museum of the New Culture Movement'. If you go in, you can see several large, whitewashed rooms with blackboards set at the front, and in the middle glass cases full of photographs of young, mostly smiling, men and women.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, this building was the main part of Peking University.⁴ Known as the 'old red building', this particular structure was left behind after the Communist victory in 1949, as the University moved in the 1950s to its current, much larger

site, in the far northwest of Beijing. The building was then used as a set of offices, closed to the public, until the turn of the millennium, when it was refurbished, and opened in 2002 as a museum, with the teaching rooms repainted and preserved as they were in the 1910s and 1920s. For those who know modern Chinese history, the figures who spent time at the University are famous ghosts indeed. In particular, those who shaped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), one of the most powerful political organizations in history, were here. Mao Zedong was an assistant in the library, under the head librarian Li Dazhao, one of the co-founders of the Party, along with Chen Duxiu, who became the dean of humanities. It was this university's students who were also at the heart of the demonstrations on 4 May 1919.

Come out of the museum and keep walking along Wusi Dajie until you get to the top of Wangfujing Street. Turn right and walk south. Now Beijing's most prestigious shopping street, lined with Japanese department stores and branches of McDonald's, Wangfujing was known as Morrison Street in the early twentieth century, and was even then famous as a place for luxurious living. At the bottom, turn right, and walk for about fifteen minutes, and you will come right round again to the front of the Forbidden City, which looks onto Tian'anmen Square. The Square is a concrete giant, about a kilometre in each direction, built in the early 1950s. It can hold a million people, and has done so, at Mao Zedong's orders in 1966 during the mass political rallies of the Cultural Revolution, and again in 1989, this time in defiance of the orders of the Communist Party. Like most of Beijing's wide boulevards and grey, boxlike buildings, the square is an expression of architecture as faceless power: designed for mass rallies, not so friendly to individual human beings. Little of this was there in the early twentieth century, with the exception of the Tian'anmen itself, the Gate of Heavenly Peace which fronts the Forbidden City complex and is now located at the north end of the square, conveniently flanked by its new guardians, two metro stations, one to the west, one to the east. It was in front of the gate that the students gathered on 4 May 1919.

Beijing was the first centre of the May Fourth Movement. It had been made the capital during the Ming dynasty, some 500 years

before, and had the walls and towers of a typical Chinese city, although as in most cities, these fell victim to war or city planners in the course of the twentieth century. The government remained under the control of battling warlord factions through much of the period from 1911 to 1928. Liberalism and openness were therefore in short supply.

'Few cities in China in the 1920s', writes the historian David Strand, 'looked so traditional and Chinese and at the same time harboured the essentials of modern and Western urban life'.⁵ Yet it was a city in crisis, lacking the self-confidence that would mark Shanghai during the same era. For most of the period after 1916, Beijing was a capital in name rather than reality, and after 1928 not even that. The death of President Yuan Shikai in 1916 led to over a decade of conflict between rival militarist rulers, and although the seizure of Beijing as a national capital was a goal for many of these rulers, few of them controlled more than a restricted area of China while claiming countrywide authority. Eventually, in 1928, the victory of the Nationalists' Northern Expedition under Chiang Kaishek led to a new government being declared with its capital at Nanjing. Beijing, meaning literally 'Northern Capital', was renamed Beiping (transliterated at the time as Peiping), the name it retained for the period until 1949 when the victorious Communists renamed it Beijing and restored its status as the capital.

But even as it became shabbier and its infrastructure was neglected through the 1910s and 1920s, the city retained much of its imperial splendour. The city had been laid out with the magnificent, if brooding Forbidden City, the former imperial palace, at its centre, accessed through the Tian'anmen gate. The two main parts of the city, the Inner City to the north and the Outer City to the south, were surrounded by high grey walls of earth and brick, torn down in the early Maoist era. (Very few Chinese cities have large parts of their old walls left, Xi'an and Pingyao in Shanxi being among them.) Yet the modernization that arrived in so many Chinese cities – such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou – was to be seen in Beijing as well, in the form of sewage pipes, telephones, and eventually trams. The roads were asphalted, but only in part, because traditional

mule-drawn carts could not cope with hard roads. Unlike Shanghai, the city did not become industrialized in a major way during this period. Therefore, the industrial working class, who would become the basis of a powerful labour movement in Shanghai in the 1920s, particularly after the foundation of the Communist Party, were not so much of a factor in Beijing, although rickshaw pullers and craft guild members provided the basis for protest against militarist politics and exploitative conditions.⁶ Foreigners were not officially involved with Beijing's city administration as they were in Shanghai, but the foreign presence was considerable nonetheless: diplomats were stationed in the capital, naturally, and they were joined by missionaries and traders. Exotic birds could be spotted, such as Bertrand Russell, who wrote his book *The Problem of China* (1922) as a result of a period as visiting professor of politics at Peking University.

The University was a reminder that, even at a time when much of the city appeared to be going to seed as the republican experience soured, there were oases of excellence. Peking University was the geographical and spiritual centre of the new thinking. This institution had been set up in 1898 as part of the reform movement of that year, when it was known as the Imperial University. It had had a very uncertain beginning, as many at the imperial court were unhappy about the institutionalization of western thought in the Chinese curriculum. After the revolution of 1911, the reformer Yan Fu, who had been the first translator of Mill and Spencer into Chinese, was made President of the University, and while he only lasted a few months, he insisted on standards of academic rigour which led to a series of significant faculty hirings. Among those who joined the teaching staff in the next couple of years were Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, later to become the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, and Hu Shi, one of the most prominent literary reformers in modern China. Most notably, in 1916 a new University President, Cai Yuanpei, was appointed, whose period in control was to prove crucial not just for the University's reputation, but for the whole May Fourth era. Cai was a brilliant scholar who had flourished in the late Qing dynasty, then gone to Germany for further study, and returned to China as an advocate of modernized education, or in his own phrase, 'education

for a worldview'.⁷ Cai's most notable policy was the encouragement of genuine academic freedom. This enabled younger scholars such as Li Dazhao, who personally disagreed with Cai Yuanpei's Confucian morality, to publish and advocate alternative ideas.

The University's most famous building was located very centrally, near the back wall of the Forbidden City and near Beihai Park. The 'old red building' was one of the landmarks that would always be recalled by former students of 'Beida' (as the university was known in abbreviated Chinese form), long after the campus had been moved, first during the war against Japan, then as a result of post-1949 expansion.

The somewhat Bohemian air that pervaded the university area was not lost on its students. The writer Zhu Haitao wrote that in 'China's Latin Quarter', countless students lived packed into tiny apartment blocks, with the ground outside studded with tables, chairs, wash-stands, and so on. 'Eating at Beida was casual [*ziyou*]', Zhu noted. 'It was convenient, cheap, and tasty, so everyone just got what he wanted.'

He explained:

You could eat in any way you wanted to. There were some people who were not used to this when they enjoyed it for the first time, especially people who were too used to a regulated, collective life, and they were a bit like people who lived underground and then came out . . . into the light of 500 electric lights, and were a bit startled . . . I myself had gone through ten years of strict missionary school life. Especially in the two years before [coming to] Beida, when we heard the gong, we ate . . . When we came here, there was none of that at all, no gongs, bells, calls . . . the call of your stomach was the only thing that called you to eat . . . In other schools, this was impossible.⁸

This *ziyou* (free, casual, almost licentious) attitude towards eating was unusual in a society in which regular meals were a cultural obsession in the face of the threat of drought, flood, and famine. But the term *ziyou* was also an indicator of the atmosphere that emerged more widely in the reconsideration of Confucian norms that the New Culture Movement unleashed. It was used not only for food, but also

for a new concept of 'free love' (*ziyou ai*). The element *zi* in *ziyou* also implied a new way for the Chinese to think about their conception of the self. Confucian thought had not been enthusiastic about pushing the individual self forward: to do so was to offend against dictates of proper modesty and the need to adhere to a more collective sense of good. Now, as part of the impact of western thought, which included ideas of the modern, autonomous self, the Chinese were encouraged to celebrate individual identity.

A general air of anarchic possibility perhaps flowed from the institution of the University itself:

The nicest thing [about being at Peking University] was searching out teachers. The doors of the university were open to anybody who wanted to come in . . . If you wanted to, you could go and hear any teacher's class, and absolutely nobody would come in and ask you whether you were a Beida student or not, nobody would come . . . and want you to pay money as a listening-in fee for a class, and the most marvellous thing was that all Beida professors had this generous attitude . . . so not only could you listen in, but when you'd listened, you could go up to the professors and ask about difficult or doubtful parts . . . So I've described the most valuable atmosphere of the 'Latin Quarter' – a generous spirit of scholarship that did not calculate profit.⁹

The premodern Confucian tendency to value scholarship over monetary gain is evident in Zhu's comments. But not everyone was quite as reverent towards Peking University, nor was formal enrolment quite as easy as slipping in and out of classes at the 'old red building'. At that time, Zhu reminisced, only some 300 students applying to Beida and its prestigious rival, Qinghua, might get in from some 3,000 applicants. A popular saying had it that when one took entrance examinations, it was *xiong* (ferocious), but when one got in, one could *song* (slack off), and when one graduated, one's belly would be *kong* (empty).¹⁰

Generational collaboration and conflict marked the short years of the May Fourth era, when intellectual debates were largely carried out through journals such as *New Youth* (the most radical in its hatred of Confucianism) and *New Tide* (more moderate, although its key contributors were generally younger than *New Youth's*). Later, we will

examine in more detail some of the ideas about which they enthused. But when doing so, it is important to keep in mind the influence of the close-knit, challenging, hothouse atmosphere of the Peking University campus: students who lived together acted together as well. The same atmosphere at the same institution, although by then in a geographically different spot, would have a similar effect in the demonstrations of 1989 that would lead to the Tian'anmen tragedy.

Shanghai: China's Modern Challenge

Beijing's rival, Shanghai, was a very different sort of place. An outward-looking colonial city, it thinks now, as it did in the early twentieth century, not of the parochial task of upstaging its rival cities in China, but rather of ranking itself with New York, Paris, or Tokyo as one of the great cities of the world. Some of the most central parts of Shanghai's architecture have survived much better than the monuments of the capital. The view that a visitor would see today on Shanghai's famous waterfront, the Bund, is very similar to the vista in 1920, consisting of pompous buildings that housed landmarks such as the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. The major shopping thoroughfare that leads off the Bund, Nanjing Road, has rather different businesses lining it today: Ajinomoto Noodles, the Sofitel Hotel, and McDonald's again. But its mix of bright lights, advertising, and unashamed consumerism would not surprise anyone who knew the street in the 1920s. If you were to cross from the Bund to the other side of the creek, the Pudong area, which was mostly muddy flats covered in warehouses before 1990, you would find it now a science-fiction metropolis of skyscrapers, complete with a twenty-first-century magnetic levitation train to the new airport.

For practical reasons, Shanghai attained greater significance for many of the May Fourth generation from the early 1920s. The vicious competition between military ruling factions in Beijing led to ever greater political instability and the persecution of political radicals. In addition, the more outward-looking and relatively politically tolerant atmosphere of Shanghai appealed to many, along with the

commercial opportunities for publishing and distributing the new thought which poured from their pens.

Shanghai was a legendary city for all classes and nations; the Briton Maurice Tinkler was not alone in his awe. 'Making whoopee' was the crude but not inaccurate way in which a guidebook of the 1930s summed up the nightlife of Shanghai for rich foreign visitors.¹¹ A character in a short story by the writer Ding Ling, a peasant seeking his fortune, says, 'Shanghai's a big place, not like where we come from. Lots of people with plenty of money. It'll be easy making a living there.'¹² For people around the globe, from world travellers to the poorest Chinese, Shanghai had a reputation for trashy verve befitting a polyglot bastard child of imperialism.

The city in its modern form was the product of the Opium Wars, a treaty port in which the western powers and, later, the Japanese provided a more obvious face for the imperialist presence in China than in a city such as Beijing. The city was physically divided into different sectors: most of the city was under Chinese rule, but along the waterfront of the Huangpu River sat the International Settlement, run by a Municipal Council dominated by the British, and to the west, the French Concession. The latter two areas were in effect colonies within Shanghai, with borders and guards to police travel between them, although, as in Cold War Berlin before the Wall went up, people did in fact go back and forth between the areas of the city for work and recreation. Even in the 'foreign' concessions, the Chinese made up more than 90 per cent of the population.

This forced encounter with imperialism was simultaneously galling and seductive for the May Fourth generation. Chinese were frequently on the end of racist attitudes and abuse from the British, French, Americans, and Japanese who made up the bulk of the foreigners whom they encountered. Events such as the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 showed how clashes could spiral. After the shooting of 11 Chinese workers during a demonstration against the owners of a Japanese mill by the Shanghai Municipal Police (many of whose squad were Chinese), there were widespread boycotts of foreign businesses and street demonstrations against imperialist aggression. Both the Nationalists and the CCP received valuable momentum

from public anger at the May Thirtieth killings, which spread far beyond the city itself. Professors at Peking University declared on 9 June 1925 that:

The tragedy which has taken place in the International Settlement of Shanghai has filled the Chinese nation with horror and indignation . . . some Chinese students, who were merely young boys and girls, paraded as a manifestation of protest in the streets of Shanghai on May 30 last . . . Would any right-minded person regard these boys and girls as rioters and treat them with bullets and rounds of machine guns?¹³

Even when confrontation was not as violent as this, everyday reality made it clear that Shanghai was a society deeply divided by hardened European ideas of race, often expressed by the places where Chinese could not go and the roles they could not play. The public gardens on the Bund, the famous waterfront, were not open to the Chinese until 1928, with the exception of 'servants in attendance upon foreigners'.¹⁴ Interracial marriages or even relationships were heavily frowned upon. All this rankled more in Shanghai than in Beijing precisely because of the seeming cosmopolitanism of the 'world city' which Shanghai had become. The British settler community invented the term 'Shanghaiand' to express the idea that the tripartite city was somehow Other, not a part of China, not a colony, but a pseudo-country perhaps best described as a state of mind. And it is clear that this idea, if not the term, was also shared by many Chinese. For many Chinese in Shanghai, their primary identity continued to be derived from their places of native birth, rather than from their newly adopted city.¹⁵ Nonetheless, it is hardly surprising that Chinese nationalism developed so strongly in Shanghai, where the most confrontational aspects of imperialism were visible and rubbed in wherever either foreigners or Chinese walked, worked, or lived.

Yet the cosmopolitanism of the city, though tainted by the hierarchy of race, was not an illusion either. Architecture is one area in which this became apparent. True, the most visible architectural highlight, the Bund, was rooted in a parochial vision of Britishness, a mishmash bringing to mind the buildings of Manchester or other outposts of empire such as Calcutta, with few Chinese elements. Yet

other parts of the cityscape looked to the future and inspired foreigner and Chinese alike with their visions of a young city in a hurry. Skyscrapers appeared in Shanghai earlier than anywhere else in China, along with the neon lights which the novelist Mao Dun incorporated on the first page of his novel *Midnight* to give the flavour of Shanghai in what he called a 'Romance of China in 1930'. Near the start of the novel, one character, an old man being driven through the centre of the city in a '1930-model Citroen' is increasingly startled by what he sees:

A snake-like stream of black monsters, each with a pair of blinding lights for eyes, their horns blaring, bore down upon him, nearer and nearer! . . . He felt as if his head were spinning and his eyes swam before a kaleidoscope of red, yellow, green, black, shiny, square, cylindrical, leaping, dancing shapes, while his ears rang in a pandemonium of honking, hooting and jarring till his heart was in his mouth . . . [Looking out of the window, his eyes] fell straight away upon a half-naked young woman sitting up in a rickshaw, fashionably dressed in a transparent, sleeveless voile blouse, displaying her bare legs and thighs. The old man thought for one horrible moment that she had nothing else on.¹⁶

The impact of all these new sensations is too much for the old man, who has a stroke and dies at the climax of chapter 1. For some, however, the stimulation of the city was what made it unique. The writer Shi Zhecun, one of the most notable modernists of the 1930s, recalled how important the bookstores of Fuzhou Road, full of the latest European and American writing, had been to him as he developed his personal style. This was not just a world of bookstores, but also teahouses, stationery stores, and even brothels which made up a whole literary demi-monde. Literary figures might head to the bookstores of the big Chinese presses in Shanghai, the Commercial Press and the Zhonghua, and then to the import stores, Kelly and Walsh or the Sino-American Bookstore, a wealth that could stand comparison with bookshop paradises such as Charing Cross Road in London. For others, it was the smaller innovations, such as the café culture of (where else?) the French Concession which enabled them to inject an idea of European cosmopolitanism into their lives even

when they had never set foot outside China. The essayist Zhang Ruogu was caught up in the literary world's 'coffeehouse craze' in the 1920s, spending time at favoured haunts such as Sullivan's coffee shop, Constantine's Russian café, and the Balkan Milk Store. He wrote, '... I spent practically all my leisure time in the cafés on Avenue Joffre ... Come late afternoon, all of us would gather ... and as we drank the strong and fragrant coffee to enhance our fun, we would gently talk our hearts out'.¹⁷

Education was also part of the Shanghai experience. Although Peking University had the greatest prestige of any institution in China, Shanghai also had education at all levels and for all classes. St John's University in Shanghai, founded in 1879, educated the children of the local elite, and became the most prominent Chinese Christian university in China in the 1920s. In contrast, Shanghai University, founded in 1922, had a more radical reputation, with Communist luminaries such as Qu Qiubai (a future Party leader) and Deng Zhongxia on the faculty. Learning English became an important skill in college, as textbooks for so many of the new western subjects were only available in that language. Yet as a total proportion of the population, university students were a very small minority. In 1934, there were fewer than 28,000 students registered at universities and colleges across all of China. Throughout this time, most of them attended institutions in three cities: Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing.¹⁸

In general, the Chinese who lived the most 'modern' lives were an elite. The working classes did not spend their time drinking coffee or browsing through English-language books. The poorest might live in shanty-towns of dilapidated reed huts or even boats, or a straw shack. The better-off might aspire to the crowded backstreet alleyway houses known as *shikumen*.¹⁹ But even for those who did not share the life of the educated May Fourth generation, the modernity and internationalism of Shanghai was there every time they passed an advertisement for powdered Momilk or a Hollywood movie in the street, a Sikh policeman brought in by the British in the International Settlement, an elegant villa in the French Concession, or a marble British bank. Shanghai placed its contradictions squarely in the view of all its residents.

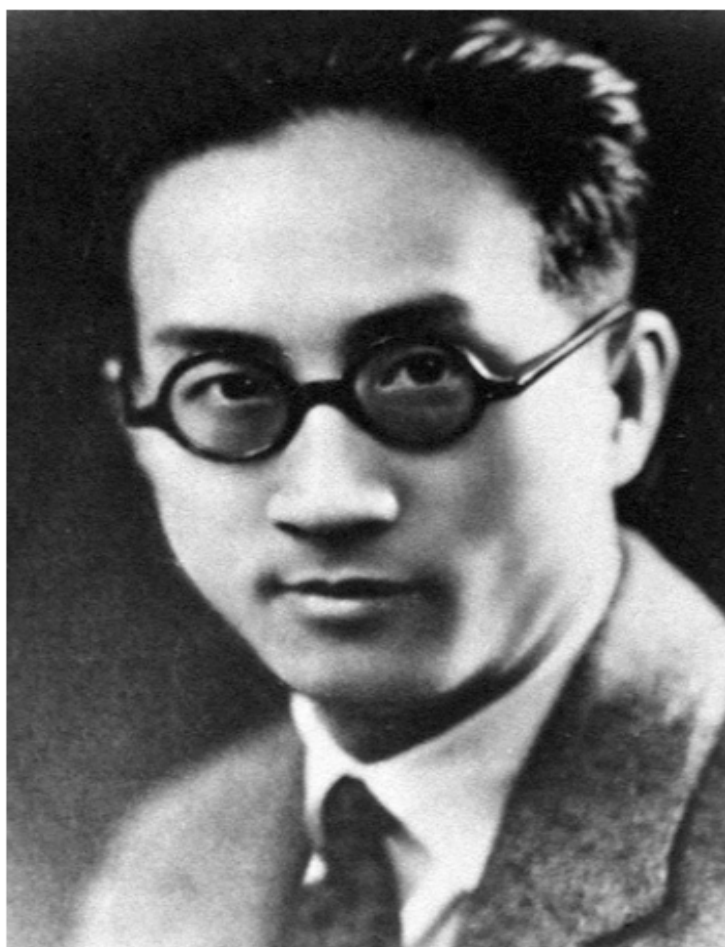
People: The May Fourth Generation

What sort of people lived in the cities and were makers of the New Culture experience? The answer is that the movement was the product of hundreds, if not thousands, of lives and voices. I have highlighted a few figures in particular because each of them expresses something central about the movement: its questioning of Chinese culture and its ability to deal with modernity, its ability to use commercialism and mass media to get its message across, and its struggle to reconcile nationalism with issues of gender and class. These are people with very different careers. Zou Taofen was a journalist and media entrepreneur; Du Zhongyuan a businessman and political activist; and Ding Ling and Lu Xun were among the most prominent literary figures of their day. They were not 'typical' May Fourth figures, because their commitment and their driven energy for their particular causes would have made them unusual in any society. But they give us a clear picture of the many facets of the era, and their writings and legacy will recur throughout the story told here of China's twentieth century.

One factor that does unite these four figures is that they were, or ended up, broadly on the left wing of politics. Yet, with the implicit or explicit understanding of 'progress' that underpinned the New Culture, this is perhaps unsurprising. What is notable is how far that rather vague label of 'left' included such a wide variety of attitudes and ideas. These are lives of contradiction. Another thing that the May Fourth generation had in common was that they knew that there were no easy answers in China's quest to find a modern identity. Here, then, are some of the people who made their lives in May Fourth Beijing and Shanghai.

Zou Taofen

Even now in China, he is often referred to just as 'Taofen'. A little north of the top of Wangfujing, one of the more upmarket shopping streets in central Beijing, there is a branch of the Sanlian Bookstore named after him, and whose parent company he helped to found. His collected essays and selections of his works remain in



3. Zou Taofen.

Zou Taofen was the most prominent example of how writers in the new commercial print culture centred on Shanghai could create a popular media persona. His 'Readers' Mailbox' advice column helped propel *Life* magazine to record sales.

print. In the 1930s, he was a great inspiration to radical Marxist youth.²⁰ Yet, so far, Zou Taofen (1895–1944), originally named Zou Enrun, has not received his full due as a central figure of the New Culture era. This may be because his activities during the 1920s took place in Shanghai, not Beijing. Or perhaps it is because those activities were not much concerned with the development of Marxist thought that occupied his contemporaries Chen Duxiu and Mao Zedong; when Zou did turn to Marxism in the 1930s, his previous activities were viewed (not least by himself) as a dilettante and irrelevant deviation from the really important issue of class struggle.

Yet to ignore Zou Taofen's influence in the 1920s is to ignore a figure who both shaped the New Culture era and who reflected the many changes it made to China. Through Zou's writings, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of men and women read about the changes in society and were given new ways to think about those changes. Through him, the 'new culture' became comprehensible as part of their lives.

Zou Taofen was born to a Fujianese local elite family in decline. His family lived on a mixture of his father's undependable income and charity. Zou remembered that his and his two siblings' 'clothes and shoes were all made by my mother herself. She often received orders from outside the family to make women's clothes for festivals, so she was always very busy'.²¹ When Zou was 12 years old, his mother died. Yet he managed to gain entry to St John's University, one of the most exclusive missionary universities in Shanghai, although he had to do a variety of jobs to pay his tuition and keep. He used his time at college to develop a thirst for reading widely in English, and after graduation in 1921, his education opened a series of white-collar jobs for him. The major change that would shape his life came in 1926, when he was asked to take over the editorship of a small-circulation journal named *Life Weekly* [*Shenghuo zhoukan*; I will refer to it simply as *Life*]. The journal had been founded by the Chinese Society for Vocational Education, which had been set up by local notables in Shanghai and the surrounding Jiangnan area in 1913. The Society's aim was to encourage 'vocational youth', primarily young men who wanted to move up into a lower middle-class professional stratum of society and feared most of all being pushed down into the labouring classes. Zou understood these readers. Although he had managed to obtain a full university education, a rare privilege indeed at the time, he recognized the difficulties of trying to educate oneself at the same time as needing to make a living.²² As we will see in this and the next chapter, Zou turned out to be one of those legendary editors who found out just what made their readerships laugh, cry, and, most importantly, come back the following week for more. In numerical terms, *Life* expanded from a circulation in 1926 of some 2,000, mostly given away free, to some 40,000 just three years later, with a doubling

to perhaps 80,000 on the eve of the outbreak of the Manchurian crisis in 1931, and a record 200,000 by the time the magazine was shut down by Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist government in 1933.²³ At a time when each copy may have been read by between three and ten readers, this suggests a very significant circulation of ideas.

What a factual account of Zou's life and times does not convey, however, is the sheer zest and enthusiasm with which he absorbed the wealth of new ideas about culture and politics which were flooding into China. As we will see, when thinking about how China could rescue itself from its current crisis, he brought up political thinkers as far apart as Gandhi and Kemal (Atatürk), business entrepreneurs such as George Eastman (the founder of Kodak) and Thomas Edison (discussed further in Chapter 3), and scientists and thinkers such as Louis Pasteur, Marie Curie, and Albert Einstein. Nor were these superficial portraits; many of them stretched over weeks as serials, and Zou came back to some particularly significant figures such as Gandhi many times over the years. Yet he did not restrict himself to consideration of abstract politics. His concern for his readers as real, troubled individuals led him to become an advice columnist, giving him a further opportunity to become known simply as 'Taofen' to a generation of young women and men coming of age in a time of opportunity and uncertainty.

Lu Xun

When a Chinese person is asked who was the foremost figure of the May Fourth era, or the greatest writer in modern China, they are as likely as not to mention Lu Xun. Lu Xun (1881–1936), the pen name of the writer Zhou Shuren, has practically become a patron saint in the People's Republic of China. One can visit his old residences in Beijing and Shanghai, which are preserved as shrines, his pens and bed left behind as relics. Lu Xun himself would have been appalled at this: one of his explicit last wishes was that people should 'Do nothing in the way of commemoration' after his death.²⁴ Lu Xun's beatification was engineered in part by the League of Left-Wing Writers, a CCP-oriented literary organization of the 1930s, to portray him as a leftist writer who wrote on behalf of the masses. However, this



4. Lu Xun as a young man.

Lu Xun was one of the most important literary figures in the May Fourth era. His sardonic, uncompromising condemnation of China's Confucian past was inspiring to many of the writers and politicians who emerged in the May Fourth era.

picture hides the reality of a much more complex, sardonic, and even at times nihilistic writer.

Lu Xun was born in Shaoxing in Zhejiang province. He grew up in a low-level elite family, and although he was given the traditional training in the Confucian classics that constituted the path to an official position in the bureaucracy, his father was an invalid and an opium addict, leading to the family's slow impoverishment. Poverty forced Lu Xun to turn to the cheaper but less respectable westernized education which was then available in China, and, when aged 21, he went to Japan to train in medicine. Yet in the years leading up to his departure, Lu Xun had also been deeply impressed by the huge increase in foreign fiction appearing in translation in China. In particular, he became convinced that fiction was a powerful way to alert the country to the political crisis it faced; this idea was influenced by the wave of 'reform fiction' during Japan's Meiji Restoration, which had itself drawn on writers such as Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton. However, Lu Xun's medical training was brought to a halt shortly

after the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, which took place largely on Chinese territory, in 1904. It was not the war that prevented him studying. Rather, in his own account, it was an incident in class:

I have no idea what improved methods are now used to teach microbiology, but in those days we were shown lantern slides of microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructors might show slides of natural scenes or news to fill up the time. Since this was during the Russo-Japanese War, there were many war slides, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a newsreel slide of a number of Chinese, one of them bound . . . They were all sturdy fellows but looked completely apathetic . . . The one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians who was to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because this slide convinced me that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement.²⁵

This passage sums up much of what makes Lu Xun stand out in the largely sentimental, romantic, and sometimes kitsch world of modern Chinese literature: it is unsentimental and self-deprecating, but also filled with a genuine passion for 'saving' the Chinese nation. Yet it also shows the slightly chilling nature of Lu Xun's vision in its throwaway comment that 'it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness'. It is possible that Lu Xun did not mean this literally. Nonetheless, it is unsurprising, perhaps, that he started life as a trainee doctor: throughout his life, the tone he adopted was reminiscent in some way of a grizzled physician who continues to dole out pills and potions while becoming ever more cynical about the inability of his patients to learn from their errors. Throughout his writing career, Lu Xun offered a humanistic vision, but it was a weary, pessimistic one, very different from the brassy optimism or

multicoloured tragedy that informed the literary and political romantics of the left and right.

Lu Xun's first attempts to save the nation through a redemptive literary movement were not an outstanding success. Of his first print run of 1,500 volumes of his short stories, around 40 copies were actually sold. Furthermore, despite his increasing disillusionment with traditional Chinese society, a disillusionment fuelled by the impoverished background from which he had arisen, he took part in a traditional arranged marriage. He continued to think about questions of culture and politics. One of his most suggestive pieces is 'On the Power of Mara Poetry' (1908), which identified the Buddhist god of destruction and rebellion, Mara, with poets who had rebelled against their own societies, such as the Hungarian Sandor Petöfi and the Pole Adam Mickiewicz.²⁶ Lu Xun's 'Mara' piece, inspired by Nietzsche and Ibsen, exalts the individual over the mass, but it is hardly a call for democracy: the mass of the people, he argued, are simply too inclined to conform under pressure to be able to offer any kind of way forward. This attitude was not dissimilar to the late Qing reformers, who despaired of the 'people' whom they were attempting to educate in the ways of constitutional reform; and there are echoes of it in the more elitist arguments used by some of the students in Tian'anmen Square in 1989.

It was only after 1915, when writing for the magazine *New Youth* [*Xin qingnian*], founded by Chen Duxiu, that Lu Xun began to make his mark. His finest short stories, such as 'Kong Yiji', 'Diary of a Madman', and 'My Old Home', appeared in this journal over the next few years. *New Youth* was a particularly significant publication, as it was also the showcase for the emerging Marxist thought of Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and others who would go on to found the Chinese Communist Party.

During the height of the May Fourth Movement, the fact that Lu Xun was already coming up to 40 years old gave him an edge of experience and cynicism that prevented him sharing in the high hopes of the younger generation. Yet the May Fourth Movement and his name remain closely linked in the Chinese imagination to this day.



5. Ding Ling as a young woman.

Ding Ling's writing dealt frankly with female sexuality. Her most famous character, 'Miss Sophie', was a self-tormenting figure who found herself unable fully to express the longings she felt for the man she loved. Later in her life, Ding Ling would be condemned by the Communists for the 'bourgeois' concerns of her heroine.

Ding Ling

Ding Ling (1905–86) is probably the best-known woman writer of twentieth-century China, and, like Lu Xun, she has become a figure in the pantheon of May Fourth. Yet her determination to act on the promise of that era, and particularly the opportunities for freedom for women, meant that she ran into frequent, serious trouble, both with the Nationalist government, which executed her lover Hu

Yepin, and the Communist Party, for which she worked over decades and which both fulfilled and betrayed her.

Ding Ling, the pseudonym of Jiang Bingzhi, was born into a moderately well-off landowning family in Anfu, Hunan province. Her father died when she was still a child, and she was deeply influenced by her mother, who left the family home to seek a modern education and succeeded in becoming a schoolteacher. Ding Ling, as a result of this influence, became precociously radical and enrolled at Shanghai University, an institution with a free-thinking, mostly left-wing faculty. She then moved to Beijing, where she attended Lu Xun's classes, among others, and began to live in *ziyou* style with a young man, Hu Yepin. Both Hu and Ding Ling were aspirant writers, but her career soon far outshone his. In 1927, her first story, 'Meng Ke', the tale of a wide-eyed young rural girl who eventually becomes a Shanghai movie star but loses her innocence along the way, was a major success, leading to the publication the next year of perhaps her best-known piece, 'The Diary of Miss Sophie'. This told the tale of a neurotic 'modern' young woman, who mentally tortures the people closest to her, and who is racked by self-loathing in the midst of a changing society which she embraces and yet dreads. Yet Hu and Ding Ling were still living in genteel poverty: even critically successful fiction did not bring in much cash.

In 1930, the couple's lives changed radically. They had moved to Shanghai, where Hu Yepin joined the Communist Party, and while Ding Ling was kept in the dark about many of his activities, she could see that he was involved in any number of clandestine meetings and attempts to overthrow the Nationalist government, which had savagely purged its Communist allies in 1927. In January 1931, Ding Ling heard that Hu had been arrested at one of his secret meetings. The Shanghai Municipal Police had been tipped off about the gathering, which took place within the International Settlement, and Hu and the others captured that night were handed over to the Nationalist government's police shortly afterwards. Frantic attempts to free him through appeals and bribes came to nothing: on the night of 7 February, Hu was executed by firing squad, along with 22 comrades. Ding Ling later wrote the story 'A Certain Night', a fictionalized account of

Hu's death which portrayed him as a martyr for the Communist cause, and which saw her own entry into the Party in 1932. Her despair is summed up in the story's last line: 'When will it be light?'²⁷

Du Zhongyuan

Du Zhongyuan (1898–1944) made up for the short length of his life by the number of different roles he managed to squeeze into it. Journalist, political activist, businessman, porcelain enthusiast, inveterate traveller: for a brief period in the 1930s, he was one of the best-known journalistic voices in China. His greatest moment of fame came during the National Salvation movement of that era, when nationalist activists (in some cases in association with the Communist Party) lobbied Chiang Kaishek to change his policy of non-resistance to the increasing Japanese encroachment into North China. Between around 1930 and 1937, Du became one of the most prominent anti-Japanese, pro-resistance voices in China. He was given the platform of his mentor Zou Taofen's mass-circulation publications, *Life* and its successors, and benefited from their readerships, which may well have reached 1.5 to 2 million at their peak.

Du's outlook was heavily shaped by growing up in the imperial melting-pot that was Manchuria in the early twentieth century, and he was certainly not born as a sophisticate or cosmopolitan. He grew up in an impoverished village in Huaide county in Fengtian province, and was then sponsored by local elites to attend school and then college in Shenyang. He returned to Huaide to teach English in 1917, but the influence of the New Culture Movement on him had been strong during his college days, and he was inspired by the National Products Movement, which believed in encouraging people to buy Chinese rather than foreign goods, to move from teaching into business.²⁸ He was particularly keen to set up rival business enterprises to those run by the Japanese, particularly the South Manchurian Railway (SMR) Company in the northeast. He later stated that porcelain, one of the products perhaps most archetypally associated with China, must be developed as a native product, regaining market share from the cheap Japanese imports that dominated the market. He scraped together investment to set up his first factory just outside Shenyang,



6. Du Zhongyuan (back row, middle) with friends in Wuhan.

Du Zhongyuan was a successful entrepreneur in his native Manchuria before the Japanese invasion of 1931. Forced into exile in Shanghai, he became a fierce voice of protest against Japanese imperialism. He was imprisoned in 1935 for publishing a newspaper column so controversial that it provoked a diplomatic incident.

and by the late 1920s he was a prominent local businessman and official of the provincial Chamber of Commerce. From 1928 to 1931, the militarist ruler of Manchuria, Zhang Xueliang, included Du in the group of prominent young nationalists around him who were charged both with spreading propaganda against the Japanese presence in the region and with developing locally sponsored modernization projects in areas such as transport, education, and broadcasting. During this time, Du also got to know Zou Taofen, already by then a well-known journalist in Shanghai, and he started writing regularly

for Zou's *Life* magazine. This would stand him in good stead in the 1930s as he tried to use his journalism to rally the nation against what he saw as the greatest threat facing it: the menace of Japanese aggression.

Subcultures

These four people, of course, cannot represent anything like the whole of the May Fourth generation. There were large numbers of subcultures, each with their own set of concerns and cliques. Two particular groups are worth mentioning here, if only to give a flavour of the wide range of thought that May Fourth opened up.

One subculture which would have lasting significance was that of the young leftist radicals, many of whom would go on in 1921 to found the Chinese Communist Party. Yet in the early years of the Republic, many of them were excited thinkers who had not yet come to a decision about how they would 'save China'. It was some time before they even decided that they would be Marxists. One of the most significant was Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), a well-known radical academic who founded the magazine *New Youth*, and in doing so provided the most concrete forum for the New Culture Movement and its rejection of the Confucian past. It was in this journal that Chen put forward the slogan which has been associated ever since with May Fourth: what China needed, he argued, was 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy'. At the time, these terms were still in flux. Chen understood 'science' as a concrete, positivistic concept that could stand in stark opposition to Confucianism, and 'democracy' had the implication of a search for a new morality, rather than just a political system. Chen, like so many other thinkers of the time, was heavily influenced by Social Darwinist ideas, which seemed to him to explain the process through which China had become so fatally weakened.

Peking University was highly significant in crystallizing Chen's thought and his ability to act on it, and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the foundation of the Communist Party is closely linked to developments at the University in this period. Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao (1889–1927), the party's co-founders, were respectively dean

of humanities and head librarian under Cai Yuanpei's presidency, and they used the intellectual freedoms afforded by Cai's pluralist regime to argue the case for a Marxist solution to China's problems. The betrayal at Versailles which had angered their students now pushed Chen and Li towards Marxism, which they explored in *New Youth* and other journals in 1919–20. Other young radicals joined them, dissatisfied with the seeming collapse of stability and moral politics, and they met together in 'study societies' where theories of reform could be discussed. It would take much of the 1920s, the influence of the Soviet Comintern, and a radical change in political circumstances before the organized, disciplined CCP that the world later knew would appear.²⁹

The founder member of the CCP who would go on to global fame was a young man from Hunan named Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Mao would later become the chairman of the Communist Party and the dominant leader in China for over a quarter of a century. Early in his life, he had rebelled against his father, a well-off farmer whom Mao deeply resented, and had moved to the city of Changsha around the time of the 1911 revolution. While there, he read widely in western as well as Chinese politics and philosophy, and became involved in a discussion group, the New Citizen Study Society. Mao became steadily more disillusioned by the breakdown of politics in the early Republic, and in 1920 declared that only a 'Russian-style revolution' could save China. At this time, Mao decided to move to Beijing, and although he was not a student at the university, he became actively involved in the study society convened by Li Dazhao, while working for Li as an assistant librarian.³⁰

Not all the reformers turned to Marxism. Hu Shi (1891–1962), who had studied at Cornell and Columbia universities, joined the Peking University faculty and became a close friend and collaborator of Chen Duxiu's. They agreed in particular about the need for China to adopt a more accessible form of the written language to promote mass literacy. Yet Hu was not enticed by the attractions of Marxism's wide-ranging explanations, and wrote a famous set of articles

instead about socialism; . . . don't study the ways in which women can be emancipated . . . but instead . . . rave about wife-sharing and free love'.³¹ Hu Shi was a liberal who would eventually move to the right politically, but at this time, he was an active member of the close, if sometimes fractious, political world that centred on the University.

Another subculture was formed by the writers of fiction. 'May Fourth literature' has become a recognized, almost clichéd term in the discussion of modern Chinese writing. Lu Xun and Ding Ling are among its best-known figures, despite the major differences in their writing style. But there was also what the critic Leo Lee has called the 'romantic generation'. This included Xu Zhimo, Guo Moruo, and Mao Dun, whose works explode with individualistic energy. Rival literary factions were a constant feature of the era, with groups quarrelling with each other, often in the most bitter terms, in small-circulation journals.³²

The intellectual differences between these groups and people were fiercely argued. But it is important to remember what held them together. All of them gravitated to Beijing or Shanghai, many of them spending time in both cities through the 1920s. All would have been familiar with the very different atmospheres of the two places. They would have wandered through the crowded backstreets near Coal Hill, behind the Forbidden City, or beyond the Qianmen gate in the centre of the city, buying snacks and spending endless hours in teahouses laughing, shouting, and arguing. Or else they would have been spending anxious moments getting in the manuscripts of the articles on the latest political or philosophical wonder – whether a reflection on Romantic poetry or a condemnation of patriarchal oppression of women – to the printers for the next edition of one of the ever-proliferating journals. Many of these people knew each other, and would continue contact throughout the century – those who survived it, anyway.

The spread of discontent during the 1989 Tian'anmen uprising in Beijing has been attributed in part to 'campus ecology' – lots of like-minded young men and women, based at universities in a small area of a major city.³³ The 'ecology' of everyday life also explains a great deal about the New Culture generation. It explains how and why

they reacted to May Fourth, and why its effects stayed with them for so long afterwards, when the cityscapes and atmospheres in Beijing and Shanghai that had produced those effects had long since disappeared under the impact of war and revolution.

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