May Fourth:
A Patriotic Movement of Cosmopolitanism

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ABSTRACT
The May Fourth Movement, which occurred ninety years ago in 1919, has long been characterized as a patriotic event in textbooks and mainstream media, a collective memory to be refreshed and glorified periodically. The author seeks to characterize what kind of patriotism it was and its relationships with the cosmopolitanism, social regeneration, and individualism of the New Culture Movement of the period. The May Fourth Movement, after turning into a social movement, would inevitably become more ideology-driven and more political. Post-1922 fervor for politics, having emerged from the New Cultural Movement, had a distinctive doctrinal commitment and was fueled by specific ideology. But after 1922, in the wake of the upheaval of the May Fourth Movement and the continuous social movements, all social classes became dissatisfied with the warlord rule and the Beiyang government. The catalyzing effects of both ideology and social movement paved the way for the Nationalist Revolution. Like the May Fourth Movement, the Nationalist Revolution had its catalyst, which was nothing other than the consciousness of nationalism, being suppressed by the cosmopolitanism of the May Fourth period. What is stressed here is that social movement was not cultural movement. New Culture Movement could simply import theories and tolerate diversity, but a social movement needed mass mobilization and the propagation of ideas.

Keywords: May Fourth Movement, social movement, patriotism, nationalism, 1919

Introduction
Along with China’s economic rise, nationalism has become a forceful and pervasive ideology. The May Fourth Movement, which occurred ninety years ago in 1919, has long been characterized as a patriotic event in textbooks and mainstream media, a collective memory to be refreshed and glorified periodically. Indeed, the May Fourth Movement contained many features of patriotism. Yet, one still has to ask: What kind of patriotism was it? What were its relationships with the cosmopolitanism, social regeneration, and individualism of the New Culture Movement of the same period? In spite of today’s proliferation of research on the May Fourth, there is space for revisiting these questions.

I would like to start with the interpretations of the May Fourth Movement by two important leaders of the student movement. One of them is the head architect

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of the May Fourth Movement. Fu Sinian; and the other is the drafter of “A Statement of Beijing’s Academia”, Luo Jialun. Both wrote and examined the nature and spirit of the movement soon after the event. Fu Sinian viewed May Fourth as a social movement that expressed a sense of social responsibility.

I would not add a single word to the opinion that the May Fourth Movement is simply a patriotic movement. I attached importance to the May Fourth Movement because it was a movement of direct actions and it awakened the public’s sense of responsibility. While I absolutely oppose statism[guojia zhuyi], the sense of responsibility, (to me) is the foundation of human development.²

Luo Jialun, upon the movement’s anniversary, published an essay titled “The Failure and Success of the Past Year’s Student Movement and Our Future Direction” in Xin chao[New Tide]. He pointed out:

When the May Fourth Movement was at its most intense moment, everyone shouted the names of either “state-lover” or “country-traitor” in unison, but I thought the true spirit of our May Fourth Movement did not lie in here. I at the time composed an essay “the Spirit of the May Fourth Movement” and published it in the 23rd issue of Meizhou pinglun[Weekly Comments] on May 26, 1919. I stated that the value of our movement was not merely to “fight for the nation's rights internationally and rid the nation of traitors domestically.” The real value lay in three genuine spirits.³

Luo Jialun summarized these spirits of the May Fourth Movement as “students' spirit of sacrifice,” “society's spirit of resistance,” “the nation's spirit of self-determination.”⁴ Later, Hu Shi commented that “these three verdicts are fair assessments.”⁵ Through Luo's and Fu's narratives, one can tell that they understood the May Fourth as more than a simple patriotic movement that resisted international hegemony. It was inspired by the spirit of cosmopolitanism, a heroic movement that defended universal

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¹ There are a narrow and a broad definition of the May Fourth Movement. In its narrow definition, the May Fourth Movement refers to the protest provoked by the failure of the peace conference in Paris. Its broad definition includes the New Culture Movement since 1915. This article uses the May Fourth Movement to mean the former. The May Fourth period, on the other hand, refers to the latter. In terms of time, the period lasts from 1915-1925.
² Fu Sinian 1919d.
³ Luo Jialun 1919a.
⁴ Luo Jialun 1919b. This essay was the first to use the term Wusi yundong[May Fourth Movement], which later became widely accepted. One year later, in another essay “Our Student Movement's Success and Failure of the Past Year and the Direction of the Future,” Luo changed the third characterization from “the nation's spirit of self-determination” to “the masses' spirit of self-determination.” The change is noteworthy.
⁵ Hu Shi 1935.

† Translator’s note: Guojia is commonly translated into English as “the state”, hence guojia zhuyi “statism”. However, it should be noted that in modern Chinese, guojia also means “country”, and “the nation-state”. Guojia zhuyi is thus an ambiguous term. It has a strong connotation of patriotism[aiguo zhuyi], and is sometimes used as synonymous to nationalism[minzu zhuyi]. In any case, guojia zhuyi should not be read as the Chinese equivalent of the English word statism, which is often a derogatory term for the ideology of state interventionism.