

Impact of the May Fourth Movement (1919)

Topic

The May Fourth Movement was part of the wider New Culture Movement, a defining period in China from 1915-1924. Originally a political response to the humiliating treatment of China in the Treaty of Versailles, the movement sparked massive change in the intellectual, political and cultural landscape of China, which according to Jack Gray precipitated changes which had until then been only potential.

Political

Growth of nationalism and the rise of mass politics

The May Fourth Movement resulted in the awakening of the political consciousness of the urban masses and marked the first real mass movement in China, which would characterize Chinese politics from then onwards.

- Politics up to the 1911 Revolution were exclusively monopolized by the elite who came from the gentry class, and there were certainly no mass demonstrations
- On 4th May 1919, mass movements appeared in cities involving intellectuals, students, and youths, who were anti-imperialistic and patriotic
- Were outraged with the imperialist powers for the humiliating 21 Demands imposed on China by Japan and the inequitable treatment of China in the Treaty of Versailles
- Were especially disillusioned with Yuan Shikai's acceptance of 4 out of the 5 Japanese demands
- A key motivation of the May Fourth Movement was thus to destroy the imperialist presence in China
- Protested the Versailles settlement through anti-imperialist demonstrations against the West and anti-Japanese riots
- Was the first sign of intellectual-led mass nationalism in urban China and the birth of political activism
- Would revive itself during the 1930s in response to Japanese incursion; would be exploited by the CCP during the 1936 Xian incident to form the 2nd United Front and save the CCP from likely destruction

Evaluation

- However, the immediate impact of the May Fourth Movement was limited as it failed to solve China's political problems
- Warlords still existed and China was still subject to foreign imperialism
- Evident by the fact that China failed to alter the Versailles settlement concerning its rights to Shandong, which triggered the riots in the first place
- The unequal treaties were only abolished in 1943, and even then the impetus for change stemmed from the West due to the pressures of WW2 and not by Jiang

Intellectual/Social

Chinese iconoclasm

The May Fourth Movement and New Culture Movement saw remarkable changes in the intellectual consciousness of China.

- In the 1911 Revolution, there was no real desire to undermine traditional Chinese society as those who came to power had benefitted from such a system
- Fundamentally a intellectual revolution and literary revival that sought to redefine China's traditional culture and society
- Saw the popularization of modern, Western ideas such as democracy, liberalism, socialism, pragmatism etc,
- While they had been introduced to China since the late 19th century, these ideas were only popularized and widely accepted among Chinese intellectuals during the Movement
- Intellectuals criticized China's traditional society and Confucian values
- Saw it as a backward and stifling anachronism; inherent reason for modern China's problems
- Instead embraced and promoted Western science and scholarship
- Eg. Intellectuals like Hu Shi strongly advocated the "two gentlemen" – "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy", which became the catchwords of the age
- Flourishing of literary figures such as Lu Xun, 20th Century China's most famous writer, whose works displayed a fierce hostility to Chinese tradition and class injustice stemming from the blind acceptance of Confucian values

Evaluation

- Despite the ferocious attempts to destroy traditional Chinese culture during the movement, it never achieved substantial results in the long-term
- The impact of science did not take deep root under the GMD due to lack of will and resources to develop education, while democracy was never truly achieved under Jiang's rule who ran China as a de facto dictatorship
- During the Nanjing Decade, Jiang sought a restoration of traditional beliefs through the New Life Movement in 1934, which saw the revival of Confucian values

- Under the GMD and CCP, the intellectuals and educated youths never gained any significant power
- During the Nanjing Decade from 1928-37, Jiang repressed political activities by putting educational institutions under repressive control
- Persecuted intellectual opponents using the Blue Shirts, which continued during the Civil War
- Furthermore, the revolutionary sentiment instead shifted to the rural areas rather than the cities as the CCP was forced to seek refuge in Jiangxi and Yanan
- Intellectuals and urban elements also did not play a significant role in the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, as many were purged by Mao during the 1942 Yanan rectification campaign

Birth of Communism

The May Fourth Movement also shifted the intellectual movement towards politics and increased the demand for a new political philosophy to guide China forward. This enabled the birth and rise of Marxism and Socialism in China.

- During the New Culture Movement, many Chinese intellectuals recognized the political usefulness and revolutionary potential of the new politically conscious social forces in China, such as students, businessmen and middle-class workers
- To unite all Chinese people against foreign imperialism, Communism provided the best instrument as it called on a united class struggle to save the country, and break the shackles of oppression by capitalist nations
- Moreover, students and intellectuals became more politically active and were able to organize into political groups
- Led to the formation of the CCP in 1921 by Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, who were disillusioned with Western democracy after the betrayal of China at Versailles
- Li Dazhao's idea of Sinicizing Marxism by changing the urban revolution to one with a rural focus would later be adopted by Mao and be decisive in gaining massive support from the peasants
- Would form the backbone of the CCP's victory in 1949

Revival of the GMD

The GMD's position of anti-imperialism, rise in nationalism and reorganization of the party led to a reversal in Sun's political fortunes after 1919.

- Prior to 1919, the GMD was on the decline, having suffered a brutal crackdown by Yuan Shikai during the 1913 "Second Revolution", and had undergone an internal split in 1918
- Amidst the surge in nationalistic feelings and the desire to defeat the warlords,

- It would take Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations in 1978 before science and technology would be promoted to aid China's economic modernizations
- A similar iconoclastic campaign through the destruction of the 4 Olds (old customs, habits, culture and ideas) under Mao during the Cultural Revolution would once again seek to transform traditional Chinese culture

Linguistic reforms

There was a push to adopt vernacular Chinese to increase literacy rates during the New Culture Movement, as well as a symbol of the abandonment of the past.

- In the 1911 Revolution, there was no such call for vernacular reforms because the elites attained their dominance through the classical Confucianist examinations
- Prior to the New Culture Movement, only the scholar class were able to read and write since classical written Chinese was difficult to learn
- The establishment of the plain language in 1920 led to the rise of new literature in the vernacular style, as aggressively promoted by Hu Shi
- Raised literacy rates while improving accessibility to new thoughts and ideas – writers were now able to reach a much wider, non-elite audience
- Moreover, literature became a vehicle for liberals such as Hu Shi to attack social problems and mobilize the public consciousness
- Hence an unprecedented intellectual and literary revolution emerged out of the New Culture Movement

Evaluation

- During the Nanjing Decade, popular education failed to gain sufficient attention due to the lack of political will and revenue
- Was continued under the CCP in their mass literacy campaigns in Yanan to aid their political indoctrination
- Faced difficulties due to lack of resources and served only to further the CCP's goals

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| <p>people saw the GMD as a potential instrument to unite China once and for all</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Due to its history in the 1911 Revolution and Sun's nationalist credentials, who was considered the "Father of the Chinese Revolution"• Saved the party from a period of decline; the patriotic youth of the May Fourth Movement would become the GMD's new power base <p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intellectual milieu gave rise to the CCP and a revamped GMD, which would dominate the Chinese political scene in the years to follow• Hsu: The contemporary history of China from 1921 onward is primarily a story of the struggle between these two parties and their different approaches• The failure of the 1st United Front between both parties would be the immediate cause for the 1st Chinese Civil War from 1927-37• Moreover, the 1st United Front was vital to the success of the Northern Expedition, which played an important role in undermining the warlords | |
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Conclusion

- The May Fourth Movement was certainly a defining moment in the history of China

Importance of the 1911 Revolution

- Creation of Republic might not have had the immediate effects as hoped, but laid down the foundation of what was to follow
- The collapse of the monarchy had demolished the whole political structure of China, as well as the traditional political principles, laws and customs
- With the destruction of the Qing dynasty, China was able to construct a new identity and nation

- However, while the revolution changed the regime, it did not change China's political culture where an absolute monarchy was replaced by warlord rule over a divided China
- During his term as president of the Republic, Yuan sought to eradicate all opposition to his rule
- Yuan's forces crushed the GMD during the 1913 "second revolution", before proceeding to outlaw the party and evict its members from the Assembly
- Disbanded parliament in 1913 and re-wrote the constitution in 1914 to ensure his absolute control over the Republic
- Culminated in the restoration of the imperial title and his enthronement as emperor in 1916