MAY 4TH MOVEMENT - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

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Elisabeth Forster
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And

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Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. On May the fourth, 1919, in China, violent protests broke out over the Versailles Treaty, which had concluded the First World War. China had supported the Allies and sent 100,000 young men to dig trenches on the front line and expected in return to regain the German colonies on its territories. But at Versailles, its leaders and the Allies gave the land to Japan instead. To protest this.... This was a sellout and showed much that was wrong with China - corrupt leaders, weakness before Imperial Europe, outdated ideas, and the movement around May the Fourth became seen as a watershed on China's shift towards modernity. With me to discuss the May Fourth Movement are Elisabeth Forster, Lecturer in Chinese History at the

University of Southampton, Song-Chuan Chen, Associate Professor in History at the University of Warwick and Rana Mitter, Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China and Fellow of St Cross College, University of Oxford.

Rana Mitter, there had been great shifts within China in the early 20th century. Can you give us an outline of that?

[Rana Mitter] The first two decades of the 20th century in China were absolutely turbulent and very, very troubling to many of the people who looked at the state that China was in and worried that it essentially might collapse. A lot of people summarized the problems that China had at that time by saying that it was suffering from imperialism, from outside and war-lordism from inside. What they meant by that was that a lot of foreign countries, Britain, France, United States, Japan had essentially spent most of the late 19th century seizing parts of the territory (Hong Kong as a well known example) but also essentially putting their own laws and their own tariffs onto China, which essentially both reduced its economic freedoms and essentially humiliated its people because they essentially had to obey laws that they themselves hadn't chosen. But the war-lordism idea was also about the fact that China had started to collapse from inside. Different military leaders in different provinces and parts of China. Manchuria, up in the northeast, or Shanxi, and in central China, made up their own armies. They brought together their own armed forces and essentially fought for power at the center. So even though in 1911 there was a revolution which overthrew the last emperor (made famous through Bertolucci's movie) who was only a little boy at the time ... Even though the Emperor was overthrown and at the beginning of 1912, China actually became Asia's first republic and briefly had President, Sun Yat-sen who was a well known revolutionary at the time, in fact the Constitutional Republic, which existed on paper, essentially fell apart because of these military forces tearing it apart from inside. And the fact that the foreign powers were still trying to find ways to gain power within China

[Melvyn Bragg] ...The ... civil service exams, the Confucian system, which had been going on for about a thousand years ... was abolished. Why does that matter so much?

[Rana Mitter] The abolition of the traditional system of examinations for civil servants in China was an absolutely crucial moment in terms of the turn towards modernity in China. For about a thousand years, ever since the Song dynasty, there had been some form of competitive exams, almost always for ...well it was always for men, and it was almost always the more elite people who took part in it. But technically, it was a sort of meritocracy in which would-be civil servants had to study for many years to try and learn the Confucian classics, the philosophical classics and texts that made up the Chinese literary tradition. And if they did well ([a] very small number got through) they would be on the rising ladder to bureaucratic success. And by the 19th century and the early 20th century, the exams that these Confucian scholars had taken had become very inward looking and didn't tell people about the science or the modernity that the outside world was bringing. So, finally, the Qing Dynasty, the last ruling dynasty of China, after a whole variety of disasters, including the so called Boxer War of 1900 (when essentially a rebellion was put down, but only with foreign forces coming in) they decided to go very, very radically for change. And pretty much within a year, the year 1904-5 abolished the 1000 year old examination system. And that meant that thousands and thousands of people who had been training for years to take these

exams, which they saw as a passport to success in the bureaucracy, suddenly found themselves essentially unemployed and, of course, very angry with the existing system, whose success they no longer had a central stake in.

[Melvyn Bragg] Song-Chuan Chen, what was the status of the intellectual, of these intellectuals in China? Did they have a sense of mission?

[5:35]
[Song-Chuan Chen] Yes, they certainly have. That mission is to save the nation, [to] put it simply. What we describe as intellectuals was known by Chinese society around this time as "du shu ren", that is, book reading, people. To these book reading people learning and serving the country are closely linked. The well known Confucius saying goes like this "The official, having discharged all his duties, should devote his leisure to learning. The student, having completed his learning, should apply himself to be an official". Based on this concept, the "book reading people" were well respected as political and social elites, even though the civil service examination, as Rana referred to earlier, is already abolished by this time. Their duty was to serve the country still, and particularly when facing national crisis such as those of the early Republican era.

[Melvyn Bragg] How did Chinese intellectuals respond to the war in Europe we call the First World War?

[Song-Chuan Chen] When the news of this war in Europe arrived in China, the intellectuals were actually shocked. By then, it had been established among the intellectuals that ... Western Europe was an advanced civilization and that China should imitate its culture and political system. Conservative intellectuals spoke out stronger than ever against wholesale adoption of Western ways and were justified in doing so by the horrors of the First World War. Other intellectuals spotted opportunities to take back Chinese territories under the control of imperial powers by joining the winning side. They urged the government to join the Allies, but China did not send soldiers to fight in battle. Rather, they supplied laborers to work in the trenches and in military logistics and the Western Front.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Elizabeth Foster before the 4 May, there was already an overarching movement called the New Culture Movement. How did that get started?

[7:49]
[Elisabeth Forster] May Fourth actually has two aspects to it the political aspects, which is the demonstrations that started on the 4 May 1919, and the cultural aspect, which, as you say, is sometimes also called the "New Culture Movement" - it's also called May Fourth (it's a little bit confusing). Now, this cultural side of May Fourth, the New Culture Movement arguably made Chinese culture "modern". A whole lot of ideas became popular in China that shaped China until the present day. So among those ideas was Communism, so Communism was popularized as part of the cultural aspect of May Fourth. And Communism is, of course, incredibly important in China because China is socialist until the present day, and that goes back to that time period. Then a precursor of the modern Chinese language, of modern Mandarin, was promoted as part of the cultural aspects of May 4. The social ethics completely changed. So people started to say, "well, we need to get away from these Confucian ethical systems". So these ethical systems have had really shaped Chinese society in previous centuries,

and "we want to get more towards things like individualism, emancipation for women", and so on and so forth. So society was completely changed, and science and democracy was advocated as well. So all these incredibly modern ideas became popularized through the cultural aspects of May 4th, through the New Culture Movement. And the most famous one of these groups of reformers, cultural reformers, were people writing for a journal, and that was called "New Youth", in Chinese "Xīn qīngnián". So this journal, New Youth, was founded in 1915, became the most famous one of these journals that were around at the time, and it advocated exactly the set of ideas that I mentioned earlier. So Communism, language reform, emancipation of women, science and democracy.

[Melvyn Bragg] Who was Chen Duxiu and how integral was he to this New Culture Movement?

[9:36]
[Elisabeth Forster] So Chen Duxiu was absolutely important to the New Culture Movement. Chen Duxiu was an intellectual and he was, by contemporaries, seen as one of the "center", as they called it, as one of the "masters", also a word the contemporaries used, of the New Culture Movement, of the cultural aspect.

[Melvyn Bragg] He was at University of Peking, which was at the center of all this, wasn't he?

[Elisabeth Forster] He was Dean of the Humanities Faculty at Beijing University when, in the year 1919, [he] actually got fired just before the May Fourth demonstrations, and then became sort of an independent intellectual. But, yeah, he did have this very prestigious position. He had an interesting career later on as well. He would be among the founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. I mentioned earlier how Communism was popularized through the New Culture Movement, the cultural aspect of May Fourth. So this was an implication of that. And Chen Duxiu would be among the founders of the party, which is the exact same party that is still leading China today, but as part of the New Culture Movement, the cultural aspect of May 4, people called him one of the centers, one of the masters, because he edited this journal, New Youth that I mentioned earlier on. So he launched that in 1915.

[Melvyn Bragg] Rana Mitter, what happened on May 4th, 1919? Was there anything that just specifically sparked the protests which led them to Tiananmen? (Before it became Tiananmen Square, but it was the same place.)

[11:11]
[Rana Mitter] The reason that there was a demonstration on the 4 May 1919 actually originated thousands of miles away, in Paris at the end of April, which is the event that, you know, in the European context we know of as the end of the Paris Peace Conference and the signing of the Versailles Treaty. And essentially China had sent nearly 100,000 workers to the Western Front to work on the Allied side. Many of the Chinese who had essentially supported that decision thought that the German colonies that had existed before World War One in China would be handed over to the Chinese government as a reward for essentially having defeated the Germans and their allies. And instead, because of a series of essentially backhand deals that were done between the Japanese and certain Chinese ministers in secret, in fact, those territories

were handed over to the Japanese instead. And when the news of this came back to China, they were absolutely outraged. And we have reports saying that, first of all, on the university campus, people gathered in huge numbers, threatening in some cases very demonstratively, to kill themselves because of the disgrace that this Versailles treaty had visited upon the Chinese nation. And so there was a gathering of these students and about 3000 of them made their way from the campus of Peking University, which, by the way, in those days was just behind the Forbidden City, the great Ming dynasty palace at the center of Beijing to this day, in fact. So they made their way to Tiananmen, the "gate of heavenly peace", the front gate of the Forbidden City, not the square in those days. (That was only built in the 1950s, much later on.) They started to demonstrate. They were very savvy even then. Some of the signs that they had made were actually in English, which were designed to catch the attention of the foreign press. And then the students started marching because they felt that simply demonstrating wasn't enough. They wanted to actually show actively how disgusted they were. They made their way first to the Legation Quarter, where many of the foreign diplomats in Beijing were based at that stage. And then, when they were moved on, they made their way to a place called [Hataman?] Street, where one of the ministers in the Chinese government, who was assumed or accused of being very close to the Japanese, had his house. And in the words of one foreign journalist who was following them, they'd marched in silence. They weren't screaming or shouting, but they were very quiet. But when they got to this man's house, they broke in and, in his words, "went mad". Essentially, this group of students broke into the house and smashed the whole thing to pieces. They went upstairs to the minister's bedroom and smashed the perfume bottles belonging to his wife. They tore apart the sheets, they smashed the furniture. And the minister himself, who realized what was happening, basically made himself scarce. He got a local policeman to hand over his uniform, disguised himself in a policeman's uniform and jumped over the back wall. But one of his ministerial colleagues was not so lucky. And he basically found himself in front of this mob of students who grabbed the post from one of these iron beds, an iron bed post. And basically they started hitting this minister with the bed post. And a man called Luo Jialun, who later on, much later on, will become China's first ambassador to independent India in the 1940s (but then he was just a student, part of that May Fourth Movement). He wasn't involved in the violence, but he recalled that when he saw the minister's body on the floor, it looked like it was covered in fish scales because the end of the bed post was round and had been hit so many times that there were little round bruises all over his body. They left him for dead. He didn't die, but essentially the last thing the students did before actually fleeing the house was to get some matches and set the whole place on fire.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...Song-Chuan Chen,... how well informed were these protesters? They seemed to have gathered great strength at this time.

[15:08]
[Song-Chuan Chen] The fact that the May Fourth protest would become a nationwide event has very much to do with the development of Western style newspapers and the use of telegraphs for communication. News of what happened in Beijing could now be printed in Shanghai and other cities across China by the next morning. So you created this reading community and then on top of these intellectual connections, personal connections, those [politically] active intellectuals in Beijing became known at that time as "ming liou" [?], which means "famous and fashionable intellectual celebrities". In

other words, while busy saving the nation, the intellectuals did not forget to stay elegant and perform their high social status. They were leaders of opinion and actively used newspapers to shape the nation's mood. One article published in the Morning Post and the eve of the May Fourth protest was particularly incendiary in advocating Chinese nationalism. The author of this particular article was Ling Tan Ming [who] argued in the article that if Shandong were lost, China would no longer be a nation and would soon perish. He vowed to die a martyr, taking Shandong back from the Japanese. Ling and his circle of influence were highly responsible for spreading anger over what they saw as betrayal by Western nations. Regarding this Shandong issue, as described earlier.

[16:54]
[Rana Mitter] That's absolutely right. And one of the things that Song-Chuan has pointed out is that this sense of nationalistic anger really spreads amongst the intellectual elites. I think, you know, this isn't yet a populist movement, but there's also what you might call a positive side, which is that the use of this sort of modern mode of thinking becomes absolutely central to the May Fourth Movement at this point and a phrase (I mean, Elizabeth mentioned it briefly, but it's worth actually really stressing it).. is the two part answer to what the students and other demonstrators said they wanted. And they said they wanted "two people", as they phrased it, "Mr Science and Mr Democracy". ... Now, in Chinese it is actually quite an unnatural way of speaking. It's not a sort of natural formation. So they were deliberately using a form of language that would make this phrasing sound slightly unusual. But by these two terms, they meant something, in a sense, both broad and specific - science, not just in the sense of physics and chemistry, but an Enlightenment-driven idea of inquiry that would ask questions without fear of upsetting old shibboleths and expectations that you would act in a particular way. So really, science that would bring knowledge that broke boundaries, and democracy, not necessarily in the sense of electoral change, that had already happened with the Republic that had been set up in 1912, but rather the idea that there would be some kind of genuine popular participation because in politics at that time, although technically there was a constitutional republic, in fact, it was military force that actually had the most sway.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I bring Elizabeth in here again? Can you develop the idea of anger which, because this movement became extraordinarily powerful, it was the dominating movement, dominated, and as it were resolved, set China on a path for the next hundred years?

[18:39]
[Elisabeth Forster] Anger is an important theme and obviously the goal of May Fourth of its political aspects, of its cultural aspects, is to get rid of Western imperialism ...and Western imperialism is the historical context that Rana has given us just earlier on. Now, the method here is interesting, and we might read it as paradoxical, but we might also read it as something that makes perfect sense. So what had happened in the 19th century is that these "scholar officials", these "book-reading people" that Song-Chuan explained to us about earlier on, they had made an analysis of what had gone wrong in China, so why China had actually suffered under Western imperialism. And the first generation of these scholar officials said, well, the problem was that China simply hadn't sufficiently good weapons, so the West had better weapons and therefore we China lost a number of wars against them. So the way we can deal with this anger that

we have towards the West and the way we can get rid of Western imperialism is to just import Western weapons. But then, a bit later, these scholar officials made a different analysis. So they said, in fact, the secret of Western strength does not only lie in Western weapons, but in Western ideas. And it was from that point onwards that you had a huge import of Western ideas into China. And when I say Western ideas, I mean everything, philosophy, science, which Rana has mentioned just now, political thinking (this is why we got communism in China in the first place), literature, these changes to social ideals, language reform... Song-Chuan just now mentioned the newspapers, telegraphs, so all these things came into China. And this is how we had these reformist groups in the 19-teens that I mentioned earlier. That is where they got their ideas from. Now, I think it's important to note, though, that they didn't just copy and paste Western ideas. Rather they took their inspiration from Western ideas and really reinvented them in China to make them useful for them to make them fit to China. And the mechanics of this import of Western ideas is really quite interesting because you had huge translation projects in which philosophical works, scientific works of literature were translated, and you also had students going abroad to study. So they would go to Europe, to the United States, also to Japan. So Japan was undergoing similar processes as China at that time. And one of the very famous May Fourth intellectuals, a man called Hu Shih, for example, did his PhD with the philosopher John Dewey at Columbia University.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Rana, a writer of that time has become emblematic of the movement, Lu Xun. Can you give us a sketch of him and why he stood out?

[Rana Mitter] Lu Xun, even today, is probably regarded as the single most important modern writer in the Chinese literary canon. And even today, I think pretty much every Chinese school child would read some of his works in high school. Like many modernists, actually, he's not the easiest of people to read. His prose style is in some ways actually looking back to the old Confucian style of classical writing as much as it looks towards the modern. But he's considered essentially a transitional writer who has a huge amount to say in indicting the Chinese society of his time. So the thing that makes him so distinctive is that he basically takes on, and really, in literary terms, smashes to pieces all the norms, all the assumptions of the old Confucian society. To take possibly his single most famous short story, it's called "A diary of a madman". In some ways, it's a riff on the Russian short story of the same name, by Gogol, which was also a satire of 19th century Russian society, but in this Chinese version, the character in the lead, the madman, is, in fact, as often in these metaphorical stories, the only sane man in the entire place. And in his madness, he starts reading the old Confucian classics, the classical works of Chinese tradition, and realizes in his mind that in between all the lines, the words "eat people" come up. In other words, this is a statement that "Confucianism is cannibalism" so as a way of breaking old taboos, this is a really daring sort of statement for Lu Xun to make. And he wrote stories like this and similar ones, including one called ...[?], which is a sort of slightly scathing, slightly mocking account of those old scholars we mentioned before who had been put out of work by the abolition of the examination system. And he published them in that magazine which Elizabeth mentioned earlier, New Youth. So he was one of the sort of star writers, you might say, of that particular publication. But essentially he's become famous and indeed, in that era became a very, very distinguished figure because of his iconoclastic willingness to use this scathing new literary modernist technique to really no-holds-barr destroy all of the assumptions about the old society. And of course, in

terms of the atmosphere, he was teaching for several years at Peaking University, which I think by now we see is very much the kind of hub of this whole intellectual movement. So many of these people knew and talked to each other and were very much part of the same intellectual circles. And Lu Xun was at the head of the literary part of that movement.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you. Song-Chuan Chen, why was it so important to those in the movement to change the written language?

[24:08]
[Song-Chuan Chen] The best way to beat the west is to use, to adopt their weapons. So the intellectuals looked into the Western culture, they find the secret ingredients is in their languages. Now, the common written language of traditional China was Slassical Chinese. The most radical intellectuals, they actually wanted the wholesale Westernization of Chinese language, that is, the written language.

[Melvyn Bragg] They thought that the Europeans, for instance, had got ahead by using what local languages, by breaking away from Latin, as it were, to be rough and ready about it, and taking up their local languages, which gave them more flexibility, more communication and greater dynamism.

[Song-Chuan Chen] Precisely. That's the point. Because they saw classical Chinese as an embodiment of traditional culture that has by now become an obstacle of China's modernization. Also, the intellectuals were inspired by their belief that the Western state had become a strong and coherent nation by abandoning Latin, as Melvyn have just said. If China was to be modernized, the radical intellectuals believe that they needed to get rid of Classical Chinese and make the written language more similar to the spoken language. As the quality of the Chinese people improved through education, the quality of the Chinese nation would also improve. The most extreme one, they actually wanted to abolish the Chinese characters altogether. They wanted ... to adopt the Roman alphabet system as their written language. Less radical intellectuals took it upon themselves to develop and implement the simplified Chinese characters that were already in use among the ordinary people. This simplified form of Chinese character was eventually adopted by Communist China in the 1960s while in Taiwan, the other China, traditional Chinese characters remain in use, as they had been for about 2000 years.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Elizabeth, political and cultural aspects of this were often intertwined. But can you tell us about Hu Shih, what his significance is with regard to this change in culture?

[Elisabeth Forster] Hu Shih was just like Chen Duxiu, an intellectual and he's very much associated with the language reform that Song-Chuan just told us about. So he's especially associated with the idea that Classical Chinese, or this Latin as it were, of China, should be abandoned and that people should write in a form of language that's closer to the vernacular. And Hu Shih was, alongside Chen Duxiu, seen by contemporaries as one of the center or one of the masters of the New Culture Movement of that cultural side of May 4. And Hu Shih was an incredibly educated person. So he had studied in the United States. As I mentioned just earlier, he had done his PhD with John Dewey at Columbia University, a PhD in Philosophy, and he

became Professor for Philosophy at Beijing University (and it's also pronounced Peking University) in 1917. And Peking University or Beijing University is an absolutely prestigious university in China - it's like the Harvard of China. He was a person who was incredibly well educated and he had this incredible social prestige as well through his position. And he contributed to this New Culture Movement by advocating language reform, by advocating to stop writing in Classical Chinese and start writing in a language that was closer to the vernacular that he called "baihua", which could be translated as plain language and he published these ideas in the New Youth journal that was edited by Chen Duxiu. And later on, he actually depicted himself as the founder of this vernacular language or Plain Language Movement. And Hu Shih became an absolute celebrity as part of May Fourth and New Culture. So, for example, this was really good for his teaching, being a celebrity. So there are stories and memoirs of students at Beijing university at the time that students crowded into his lecture rooms because they wanted to hear him speak. And there were so many students who wanted to hear his lecture that there weren't even enough chairs, so they had to sit on the floor in what we probably in 21st century Britain would call a fire safety hazard, and newspapers would gossip about him. When he went on holidays, they would report what he had in his suitcase. So he was a real celebrity, at least within urban circles in China. The really surprising thing is that in 1919, when the New Culture Movement took off and Hu Shih became the celebrity, he was actually really depressed about what people were saying in his name. So people would say things like, "I conduct the vernacular language, the Plain Language Movement, just like Hu Shih". And Hu Shih would go back and say, "well, no, you're not actually doing at all what I'm saying. You're using your own agenda, and you're using a completely different philosophy of language reform. You're just using my name as a sort of a buzzword, a sort of a marketing strategy to add some additional glamour to your old agenda". So, I mean, in reality, personally, I don't see much difference between the actual language forms that were used. But, you know, Hu Shih was an academic, and theory was incredibly important to him. And he said this really slightly depressed thing about the New Culture Movement. He said, "once it has started moving, you cannot stop it from moving".

[Melvyn Bragg] Rana this period is often described as a watershed in China's history. Can you briefly tell us what the watershed was?

[Rana Mitter] I think the best way I can explain the watershed nature of the May Fourth Movement is to compare it to the 60s in the West, which doesn't mean the years 1960 to 69, it means a whole mood. And just as the 60s in the West was about cosmopolitanism, internationalism, sexual liberation (which actually was a big deal in the May Fourth Movement) so it was also for these young Chinese in the 1910s and 1920s. I think I can summarize it briefly and best with a very quick line from one of the great May Fourth poems, a poem, "Heaven hound", by the poet Guo Moruo. And he wrote in that poem, "I am the sun, I am the moon, I am X-ray, I am the energy of the entire universe". And in those two or three lines, you can see this is about proud individualism, almost egotism, you might say, inspired by people like Walt Whitman. Also, that little flavor of science calling himself an X-ray. And the whole thing very much part of that youthful sense of exuberance and possibility. That's what May Fourth was about. That's why it's a bit like the 60s.

[Melvyn Bragg] Song-Chuan Chen, how is Japan tied into this history? Instead of the Chinese getting the German colonies who colonized them, they went to Japan. Can you tell us a bit about that?

[31:16]
[Song-Chuan Chen] Japan's place in this whole business is very central. So the making of this May Fourth watershed moment is everything to do with the outpouring of patriotism, and then this made Japan the number one enemy of China. Anti-Japanese sentiment became central to the development of Chinese national identity. The intellectuals of this period had a good reason to think poorly of Japan. Before 1919, the May Fourth had happened, in 1915, during the First World War, Japan made the infamous 21 demands that, in essence, would make China a protectorate of Japan. To the nation's dismay, the warlord government agreed to some of these demands, causing massive protests on the streets in many parts of China. The people were angry at the fact that the War Lord government gave up part of China's sovereignty in exchange for Japanese financial and military support, which ... the War Lords would then use to fight against each other. The date of the Warlord government agreed to Japanese demands was the 9 May 1915, and the 9 May was named "National Humiliation Day."" This contributed to the building up of nationalistic sentiments that led to the May Fourth protest in 1919. Now, it was in these years that the coupling between anti-Japanese feelings and modern Chinese nationalism were made. This antagonism to Japan was subsequently deepened by Japan's invasion of China during the Second World War, and it lives on today.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Elizabeth, we sometimes, or people I read all the ways, have called this China's Renaissance or its Enlightenment. Are those helpful terms?

[33:20]
[Elisabeth Forster] Both terms, Chinese Renaissance and Chinese Enlightenment, are absolutely useful in describing different aspects of May Fourth. So the Chinese Enlightenment as an expression has been used most prominently by Vera Schwarcz, who is a scholar based in the United States, and she's written one of the most influential books on the May Fourth Movement called The Chinese Enlightenment that was published in the 1980s. And she says the May Fourth Movement was a 20th century Chinese version of this 18th century European Enlightenment. But she says it was also different from the 18th century European Enlightenment in that the Chinese Enlightenment was more a disengagement from Confucian ethics, a form of iconoclasm, she says, and cultural and political awakening. And these are the aspects that she draws attention to when she calls this a Chinese Enlightenment. And the Chinese Renaissance is an expression that I have most often found used by Chinese May Fourth intellectuals, such as Hu Shih, when they explained the Movement to English speaking audiences. So I'm thinking, for example, of Hu Shih, who uses this expression all the time when he speaks to European and American audiences. So, for example, in 1933, Hu Shih travelled to the United States to give a lecture at the University of Chicago, and these were called the Haskell lectures (so it was just the name of that lecture series). And one of the lectures Hu Shih gave was on what he called the Chinese Renaissance. And he essentially talked about the New Culture Movement, the cultural aspect of May Fourth. And Hu Shih, in this lecture actually depicted himself as the leader and very strongly depicted the New Culture Movement

as a language reform movement. And these Haskell Lectures then were incredibly influential within the study of May Fourth in the Western world because they were published as a book. And on every student reading list and in every book published about the May Fourth Movement, you will find that book in the bibliography. So this has been an incredibly influential book. So I think we should use this expression to explain what this movement was about to English speaking audiences.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Rana Mitter, what was the early impact of the Movement? There was the Movement, there was the march, there was the sacking of the officials house, the burning, the looting, and so on. What then? How quickly did this Movement have an impact that seemed to be something that would be lasting?

[35:46]
[Rana Mitter] Well, I'd give two brief examples because there are so many, but these are just two, I think, very indicative ones. The first one is in terms of gendered relations between men and women. You see through the 1920s a whole variety of ways in which the changing social norms that are pushed forward by this unwillingness to obey the old Confucian norms changed everyday life. So this was a time when China was beginning to develop urban culture with professional women actually taking up jobs as school teachers or shopkeepers, this sort of thing. And there were a lot of discussions at that time about what was appropriate in terms of dealing with, say, male bosses. I mean, questions that have some resonance even today, thinking about the fact that men and women could work together, in a way that just would not have been possible in the old Confucian society where it would have been seen as improper, was one of the wider social changes implied by gender that came from the rethinking of social norms because of the May Fourth Movement. But in terms of practical change, something that changed very, very importantly in the early 1920s, which Elizabeth and Song-Chuan have both mentioned in different ways, was that founding in July of 1921 of the Chinese Communist Party. Chen Duxiu, who we've mentioned many times, and Mao Zedong, a young man who would go on to become Chairman Mao, the leader of China, but at that time he was a library assistant at Peking University. These were amongst a small number of people, all of them men, who founded the Chinese Communist Party in secret, essentially, in Shanghai. And as we know, in the next few years it would get Soviet assistance, it would join with other parties in China and eventually would become what it is today - a machine that essentially rules something like a quarter of humanity. So in terms of May Fourth later legacy, that 1921 foundation of the Chinese Communist Party has to be seen as one of the most important elements.

[Melvyn Bragg] Song-Chuan Chen, how has May Fourth been commemorated and why?

[37:47]
[Song-Chuan Chen] The commemoration of May Fourth is very important. The commemoration is important because everybody is talking about this May Fourth in the years between 1920 and 1949. Basically this enshrined May Fourth as the most important event of that period. Every year, university students, civil society and government organizations across the country would organize various commemoration events, university students being the most active. In 1920, for example, the first year of commemoration, students at Peaking University made three colored flags in yellow,

white and blue representing freedom, equality, and brotherhood to decorate their commemoration. They based this on the tricolor flag of the French Revolution, but then they changed the meaning of the colors, replacing red with yellow to mean the so-called yellow race who also uphold
Enlightenment values. The most radical students took the commemoration to another level by forcing shop owners to close their doors on the anniversary of May Fourth making them join the commemoration. Others took action by burning poorly-made Chinese goods and made the force believing that poor quality goods both shame the Chinese national identity. So these commemorations made May Fourth a celebrated and symbolic event in Chinese history May Fourth in Chinese is "wu si" ["5,4"] - just by using these two Chinese characters, wu si, you can evoke an image of May Fourth as the awakening of China. China is making effort to become a modern nation with humanistic values similar to, if not better than, those of the Western world. This meant that anyone in this period who wished to express their opinions and wanted it to be heard could gain public attention by evoking this May Fourth spirit. This is exactly what Chairman Mao did when he spoke of communism in the 1940s. He conjured up this May Fourth spirit at least three occasions and tried to use the image of May Fourth to sell his version of Communist revolution.

[Melvyn Bragg] Elizabeth Forster, what's been the longer term legacy of the Movement in China?

[40:36]
[Elisabeth Forster] Actually, I think there is not the one legacy that we can identify. And I say this because I think May Fourth is so multifaceted. You've got the cultural side of things, you've got the political side of things. You've got these various aspects to both of these sides. And so it's so multifaceted that it has really meant very different things for very different people. And therefore, people take different aspects of it as the legacy of May Fourth. So some people would identify Communism, others individualism, antiimpererialism patriotism, language reform, the list could go on. So I think May Fourth has meant different things to different people and therefore I think May Fourth has different legacies and very many different legacies. But actually I think that's also why May Fourth is important and what actually keeps it alive.

[Melvyn Bragg] Finally, Rana, is it still developing?

[41:35]
[Rana Mitter] I think that May Fourth is currently a set of ideas that you might say is bubbling under the surface in China. If you go to Peking University, which of course is still very much the most prestigious university in China today as Elizabeth said, then you will find there are still plenty of people there who are very interested in May Fourth values. They want to debate science. They want to debate democracy, they want to debate constitutionalism. It is the case that the current Chinese political situation is very restrictive on discussing any of those subjects. But that having been said, it's very clear that that doesn't mean the ideas have been abolished. And many of China's younger scholars in particular, I think, are still very interested in debating exactly these sorts of ideas. Certainly, if you asked them if they understood what that term May Fourth spirit means, in your "wu si" as Song-Chuan put it, they would know exactly what you meant without any more prompting. And that is a sign that that spirit after 100 years is still very much part of the Chinese intellectual trend today.

[Melvyn Bragg] Thank you very much. Thank you, Rana Mitter, Elisabeth Forster and Song-Chuan Chen, and to our studio engineer Jackie Marjoram.

And the in our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvyn and his guests.

W[Melvyn Bragg] hat would you like to have developed that wasn't in the program?

[42:57]
[Song-Chuan Chen] About the connection between 1989 and 1919. So the 70 years apart between the May Fourth protest and then the Tiananmen Square protest ... in 1989. So what happened is not only the location is kind of the same, although the square itself is much more improved in terms of putting in this concrete floor, et cetera. The key thing here is that the students in the protest in 1989, they very much evoked this Mai 4th spirit. And so they talked about this among them. They wrote this in their diaries, in their memoirs. They keep referring back to that 1919 moment. And then they continued to put the word democracy at this center of this. They made this statue of the goddess. And so it's very much kind of they carry on that torch, so to speak, they kind-of want to make China modern nation and nation with united values and then with this kind of humanistic ideas that come from the traditional China. So we probably need to keep in mind that this is not a wholesale Westernization. It's more like kind-of mixing this two knowledge systems together. So by mixing them together and you create a new culture. And ... this new culture is what this new China is about - [it] is neither Westernization, it's neither the traditional China, but it is something else new here.

[44:47]
[Rana Mitter] Could I jump in there actually Song-Chuan, because one of the things I would love to say more about it if ... we had time to talk about the legacy and actually, I think it's worthy of a study in and of itself, is one particular legacy that comes from that memory of May Fourth, just before Tiananmen Square and the demonstrations in 1989, but has ever since been blanked out in China. And that's something called "River Elegy", Heshang in Chinese, which was a six part television series. It was only ever broadcast twice, both times in the summer of 1988 on CCTV-1, you know, the equivalent of BBC-1, the main television channel in China. And I would make a strong case that it may have been the most important television program ever broadcast in the history of the world because it was watched by probably 100 million or more people. And it made a six-part philosophical argument, drawing on the same ideas, actually, as May Fourth, in a sense, science and democracy, but combining them with the idea that China could somehow create, in the 1980s when it was broadcast - post Cultural Revolution of the 60s but prior to what we know as this tragic crackdown and killings in 1989 - a China that would have been more open to the outside world. And the title itself was very indicative because it's called the River Elegy, because it was an elegy, a sort of song of mourning for the Yellow River, regarded as the core of China's cultural heartland, running through that loess soil. And it's saying that China should, in a sense, look away from that inward looking river which had defined much of Chinese culture for thousands of years. And these students ... these intellectuals who made this

television program, they argued instead that China should look to the Blue Ocean, meaning the Pacific, and that connection to the wider outside Western world. But in doing so, they weren't arguing that China should become the West, just as Song-Chuan was saying. They were arguing that China should learn from the West in a very open manner and create a new method of what it meant to be Chinese. And even now, you know, the script of the television program is available in English, and clips of it you can still find online. But it has this tremendous sense of thrill and interest in the outside world and excitement after the Cultural Revolution that, in some sense, brings back that may force spirit 60 years later.

[Melvyn Bragg] Elizabeth?

[Elisabeth Forster] Yeah, I was actually hoping to build on something related to the 19-teens, more specifically, that Song-Chuan said earlier, so specifically, ... how important the press was in the 19-teens, and I think the power of the press really can't be overestimated at that point in time. So Rana gave us a very graphic description of just how violent these May Fourth demonstrations were. I mean, these students beat up a man and they burned down a house, and they tried to attack a minister. So I think if the press had decided to condemn maybe not the spirit of the demonstrations - ... both patriotic and anti-imperialist of course - but the actions of the demonstrators, the story might have ended up very differently. But what the press decided was to [do was to] call these students patriotic and good and the victims of a government that had sold out China. But just imagine if the press had decided to not go with this particular narrative and say, well, these students maybe have a good point, but their actions are completely out of place and they need to be back in the classroom, which was absolutely an interpretation that was around at that point in time. So some of those student demonstrators and some of their teachers actually felt incredibly uncomfortable with the violence that was being committed. So I think we would then end up with a completely different interpretation of May Fourth rather than this sort of glorious moments of student protest - to something a bit more problematic. So I'm not trying to judge the May Fourth protest in any way. I'm just saying I think the press had an enormous amount of power at that point in time to interpret this.

[Rana Mitter] Elizabeth, that's really interesting. Can I use that just briefly to touch on something else which relates to that issue of violence? I'm going to make what might be for some more controversial point about the May Fourth Movement, although I'm not the first one to make it, I think, which is that the most unexpected part of modern Chinese history where ideas of May Fourth turn up is the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, which, of course, has been covered on In Our Time, you know, about a year or so ago. But one of the things that's perhaps less well known is that many of the figures from May Fourth, like Lu Xun the writer, were brought up by Mao and those serving him as if what they had really wanted to put forward was the Cultural Revolution, this incredibly violent near civil war that happened in China in the 1960s. The reason they could make that argument is that some of the key themes of May Fourth the importance of youth, as in that New Youth magazine that Elizabeth Was was talking about and actually the idea of violence as a sort of transformative way of changing society which was, you know, there in the May Fourth Movement but relatively minimal, was made an absolutely central part of the Cultural Revolution message. These things were brought together to basically try and create what you might call a distorted idea of May Fourth, the idea of a sort of youthful revolution that would destroy the Confucian

past. That was something that was very much central to the Cultural Revolution, but without the kind of outward looking cosmopolitanism that really transformed the original May Fourth and was also very much there in the spirit of 1989. So it does show that generation by generation, different parts of Chinese history have found different readings of May Fourth, which can often be literally violently different from each other.

[Song-Chuan Chen] I probably can refer back to what Rana said earlier about the River Elegy. Interestingly, we grew up in Taiwan. I felt my education was very much in that May Fourth tradition. So in the sense that we were educated in traditional Chinese, so we didn't abolish the Classical Chinese. So I learned that from a very young age. So in a way, I had the traditional Chinese education. On the other hand, we learned all the things, science, democracy, of the Western stuff that kind of the May Fourth generation wanted. So in a way, in Taiwan, the education was a mix of this West and East, and then also it's the legacy of this kind of the May Fourth. And then this River Elegy.... interestingly, in Taiwan, for a long while, we kind of imagined Yellow River and then the Yangtze River was still part of our territory. And then we had these songs like it's called "Roar, The Yellow River". And then every time nowadays, when I hear Katy Perry's song "You will hear me roar, you will hear me roar", actually, it reminded me when I was young, and then we were singing those songs, "Roar, the Yellow River. It's kind of very nationalistic mood behind it, but then it's so different from Katy Perry's song "You Will Hear Me Roar".

[Rana Mitter] That's certainly a cultural connection. I didn't speculate it between Katy Perry and the May Fourth Movement. I have to say, Song-Chuan, that's definitely new on me.

[Melvyn Bragg] That's wonderful. Thank you very much indeed.

In our time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.
