Chinese students protest the Treaty of Versailles (the May Fourth Incident), 1919

May 4, 1919
to: July 22, 1919

Country: China
Location City/State/Province: Mostly Beijing, but also 200 cities throughout China

Goals:
The nature of goals largely depended on the specific organizations and student societies that pioneered the May Fourth demonstrations. However, prior to the demonstration, student representatives from thirteen local universities met and drew up several overarching collective demands. These were:

1. Opposition to granting Shantung province to the Japanese as provided in the Treaty of Versailles.
2. To draw attention to China’s position and educate the masses.
3. To recommend a large-scale meeting in Beijing.
4. To hold a demonstration on May 4th expressing public opposition to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

The students also called for the removal of three government ministers who they considered responsible for the unacceptable Treaty conditions, Ts’ao, Lu, and Chang.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:
001. Public speeches
002. Letters of opposition or support
047. Assemblies of protest or support
062. Student strike
117. General strike
175. Overloading of facilities

Methods in 4th segment:

• 062. Student strike

Methods in 5th segment:

• 062. Student strike
• 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 6th segment:

• 062. Student strike

Notes on Methods:
The nonviolent interjection tactic was used in Paris to prevent the Chinese delegates from signing the Treaty of Versailles

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Economic Justice
National/Ethnic Identity
Group characterization:

• Chinese students
• Civil Servants
• merchants
• workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Student Union of the Middle Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning in Peking (known as the Student Union of Peking)

Various (mostly youth-formed and led) societies and organizations, including:

New People’s Study Society (founded by Mao Tse-tung)
Young China Association
New Tide Society
Citizens Magazine Society
Work-and-Study Society
Common Voice Society
Cooperative Study Society

**Partners:**
Union of Daily Newspapers in Shanghai

Citizens’ Diplomatic Association
Educational Association of Kiangsu Province
Technical Research Society
Association of European and American Returned Students
Lawyers Association of Shanghai
Chamber of Commerce of Peking
Federation of Commercial Organizations of Shanghai
Chinese merchants and workers

**External allies:**
Corps of Chinese Students in Japan for National Salvation

Chinese students studying abroad

**Involvement of social elites:**
Several intellectual and literary elites supported the student groups at the time, and contributed to the new waves of intellectual thought and criticism.

Chief Representative from the Southern Chinese government to the Paris Peace Talks, Chu Ch’i-ch’ien, expressed support for the student demonstrators.

### Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Beijing Chamber of Commerce
- Nanking students
- Other student societies
- Peking students
- Student Union of Peking
- Students in Tokyo

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Railroad College of Tangshan students
- Student Union of Tientsin
Students in other Chinese provinces
- Wu-Han students

Groups in 3rd Segment:
- Shanghai Chamber of Commerce
- Shanghai workers
- Tientsin Association of Women Patriotic Comrades
- Workers and merchants

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 13 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
- Chinese Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
The government made an attempt to co-opt student leaders by inviting them into government positions, though this never actually materialized. One tactic was also ending classes early on pretenses of summer vacation.

Campaigner violence:
During the May 4th student demonstrations, some students clashed with police.

Repressive Violence:
The government and police forces tried to quell the protests by arresting students on multiple occasions. They intervened in school administration with armed force and posted policemen at the schools where strikes took place, with orders to pressure students into signing an agreement that they would attend classes.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The campaigners succeeded in persuading the Chinese government not to sign the Versailles Treaty, and the campaign brought to a new level the involvement of the masses in nationalist and pro-democratic consciousness. The Versailles Treaty did indeed give Japan the continued occupation of the Shandong Peninsula and Pacific islands Japan acquired during World War I. The refusal of China's government to sign the treaty reduced the legitimacy of Japan’s occupation. Taking all that into account the manager is scoring 4 out of 6 with regard to success in achieving goals.

The cross-class collaboration of the May Fourth campaign survived well past the end of the campaign, and became important groundwork for the political revolutions of the following years.

Participation in the campaign was immense, and stretched across a broad spectrum of social categories.
Post-WWI China was fraught with political turbulence and social unrest. The Qing Dynasty was overthrown in 1911 and the Republic of China was instated in its place, ending thousands of years of imperial rule in the country and generating a host of new streams of intellectual and political thought. However, warlords still ruled strong throughout many of the provinces, fueling a chaotic and backwards politics that an emerging intelligentsia sought to change. Relations with Japan were an important part of this political landscape; in January 1915, Japan presented a list of demands to Chinese President Yuan Shih-k’ai, known as the “Twenty-one Demands,” seeking to assert and expand Japanese control over various regions of China that the country had interest in. Among these regions was Shantung Province, a stipulation that garnered much opposition within China, and that would go on to be included in the May Fourth campaign’s objectives.

Perhaps largely in response to the expansionist aims of Japan within China, a spirit of national unity pervaded the Chinese public. Much of the rhetoric of this period was directly nationalistic and called for the unity of the country, the repossess of the control of the people over the splintered political rule of the warlords, and the adoption of nationalist symbols, in efforts to assert a coherent Chinese national identity. The national-political agenda was coupled with an overwhelming expansion of academic changes, as a flood of Western ideals interacted with Chinese cultural identity. Within this context, Chinese students rose as harbingers of the changing intellectual current. Inspired by Western enlightenment ideals and the vibrant cultural, political, and literary developments unfolding in Europe at the time, these students became the “New Intellectuals,” with a zeal for reformation and restructuring of the old status quo.

Their ferment began to circulate with the student and intellectual revolutionary publications of the time; New Youth magazine was one of the first and most instrumental of these, started in 1915 by veteran revolutionary Ch’en Tu-hsiu. An important actor in the former revolutionary period, Tu-hsiu was an intellectual and reformer who had fled to Japan after a failed 1913 coup. His publication offered an outlet and a mouthpiece for reformist ideals, and also illustrates the inspiration that students found in the older generations of Chinese revolutionaries. From the outset, the May Fourth campaign had a cross-boundary approach to its activism, bringing together different generations and social classes under the umbrella goal of working towards a new China.

In the years leading up to the 1919 campaign, students began to publish and circulate magazines and newspapers out of their various schools and universities; titles like Save-the-Nation Daily, The Citizens’ Magazine, and New Tide are examples of these. From there, student organizations and societies began to form, often as corollaries to the publications (for example, the New Tide Society). These groups were outlets for activism, and venues for students to meet like-minded people and share ideas. Eventually, these organizations would provide the infrastructure for the May Fourth demonstrations and strike activities.

The Versailles Peace Conference began on January 18, 1919. Chief delegate and Foreign Minister Lu Cheng-hsiang, who had signed one of the treaties resulting from the Twenty-one Demands, headed the Chinese delegation. Students and others opposed to Japanese expansionist policies saw him as a worrisome addition to the delegation given that Chinese territoriality was being called into question at the peace talks with the Shantung Province issue. However, public opinion in general seemed to be in accord with the peace talks. Then, in late April, word came that control of Shantung, formerly held by Germany, would be accorded to Japan and not China. Going directly against the sentiment of national unity, this development acted as a catalyst for the student organizations that firmly opposed the move.

The original plan of the student groups that initiated the campaign (including the New Tide Society, the Common Voice Society, the Citizens Magazine Society, the Work-and-Study Society, and the Cooperative Study Society), upon unfavorably observing the progress of the Chinese delegation at the Paris Conference, was to hold a demonstration on May 7th. This was the fourth anniversary of the Twenty-one Demands (the date was known as National Humiliation Day). However, with the news from the conference about Shantung, the organizations convened and decided to hold a public demonstration immediately. On May 4th, student representatives from the various organizations met at the Peking College of Law and Political Science (Beijing) to engage in talks about how to structure and set up the demonstration. They came up with five resolutions: that telegrams be sent to all interested and involved organizations (domestically and abroad) asking them to protest the Shantung resolution; to engage in educating the Chinese masses about what was being deliberated at the conference; that a large, mass meeting be convened in
Beijing; that a united, centralized organization of all student groups be established for organizational and administrative purposes, and; that the route for the intended May 4th demonstration start at Tiananmen Gate and move through the business area of the city.

By around 1:30 on the afternoon of May 4th, more than 3,000 students had gathered at the starting point, Tiananmen Gate. The students drew from thirteen colleges and universities in the city. Police officers and several representatives from the Ministry of Education met the demonstrators, and advised them not to continue with the protest. The students refused and continued with the demonstration. Concurrent with the march, students published statements and pamphlets outlining the campaign’s goals, often using militant language. Nonviolence was not an explicit part of the campaign, but their tactical choices tended more towards nonviolence. The initial demonstration began peacefully. However, as the students continued to face opposition from police forces and officials, and as the fervor of the crowd increased, the situation escalated. At one point, the protesters stormed the house of one of a pro-Japanese ministry official, where they maintained that a secret meeting was taking place. They ransacked the furniture and set fire to the house. After this incident, police arrested many students and imposed martial law around the area. Police and students also clashed, wounding both officers and students.

From this point, the student demonstrations deescalated to more peaceful protests. Student demonstrations continued around Beijing, and also began to spread to other cities in the other Chinese provinces. The demonstrations generally took the form of marches—the students would often convene at a central government office or public square in their city and proceed from there, moving through prominent business centers and neighborhoods, and ending at a university. The student organizations continued to meet in order to plan and strategize. On May 6th, they formed the Student Union of the Middle Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning in Peking, also known as the Student Union of Peking. The aim of this organization was to promote the welfare of the nation, as well as safeguard students’ rights and oversee the campaigners’ responsibilities. It was China’s first united student organization, and represented a significant step in the campaign. It was also co-ed, representing the undercurrents of feminism and changing gender relationships that were part of the New Intellectuals’ movement more largely.

Other student groups formed around the provinces, and joined in the strike. Thousands of students participated in student general strikes and large protest processions. On May 12th, students held a large protest march in Tientsin, and shortly thereafter formed the Tientsin Student Union. On June 3rd in Shanghai students protested by holding a student strike and assembling in the city center where students made anti-Japan and anti-government policy speeches. Police arrested thousands of students, completely overwhelming the prison facilities so that they had to construct a temporary holding cell in a city administrative building. Overall, students and universities in more than 200 cities, large and small, participated in the activity.

While students held strikes and demonstrations, the Chinese government scrambled to reach a compromise with the protesters. However, it refrained from making any moves that might upset relations with Japan and as such, student groups rejected many of the government’s attempts. A critical point in the campaign was the alliance of workers and merchants with the student strikers. As early in the campaign as May 5th, the Chamber of Commerce in Beijing had expressed it’s support of the students’ goals, and issued calls for a boycott of Japanese goods. Merchants sent letters to the government expressing their support, calling for the release of arrested students, and asking that the government listen to their concerns. The chancellors of several large universities supported the student demands, and were suspended from their posts as a result (many of these were later reinstated after the student strikes were called off). Spurred by mass arrests of students in early June, the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce issued press releases and letters to the government expressing solidarity with the students’ actions. On June 5th, Shanghai workers and industrialists, in cooperation with the Student Union of Shanghai, called a general strike. The strike only continued for some three or four days, but managed to effectively shut down an entire city (which had a population of over 1,500,000); the extreme nature of the strike coupled with its rapid spread throughout other provinces, had a huge impact on the Chinese economy.

The government met the activities with various tactics in its efforts to end the protesting. When mass arrests and using repressive violence met with public outcry, government officials attempted to use more implicit tactics. They tried to co-opt some of the student leaders into government positions, hoping to integrate them into the existing institutions and thus diluting the campaign. This never succeeded, however. Government officials engaged in persuasion, as well as attempts to split the student organizations with bribery and threats. But none of these strategies managed to disarm the campaign.
Finally, on June 28th, the date set out for the signing of the Versailles peace treaty, a group of Chinese students, workers, and others gathered around the Lutitia Hotel in Paris, which served as the headquarters for the Chinese delegation to the peace conference, surrounding the delegates in an attempt to keep them from leaving to sign the treaty. China ended up refusing to sign the Peace Treaty with Germany, garnering a major goal of the May Fourth campaign. On July 22nd, the Student Union called an end to all strikes, and the chancellors who had been suspended from their university posts began to return to their jobs.

In the end, the May Fourth campaign did not achieve as many of its goals as it had initially set out to. While China refused to sign the peace treaty, it was a largely symbolic gesture because Japan still retained control of Shantung province. However, the importance of the campaign lies in the groundwork that it laid for future change. In fact, some years later, the Communist Party would draw on the ability for cross-class collaboration of workers, merchants and students as demonstrated in the May Fourth Incident, and strengthened in its aftermath. The May Fourth campaign became part of a larger movement (the May Fourth Movement) that precipitated larger structural social and political change in the country.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influences on the campaign: Many of the Beijing students who catalyzed the campaign had studied abroad in the West. They brought the ideas and inspirations that they found there back to China. Specifically, Western ideals like the Wilsonian principles and exposure to things like the European labor movement and European literary and political thought (like Trotsky and Kropotkin), served as inspiration and motivation for generating social change in their own society.

Another important influence on the campaign was the various periodicals and student publications that were published around this time. One was the New Youth magazine originated by veteran revolutionary Ch’en Tu-hsiu. Exiled to Japan after the failed revolution against president Yuan Shih-k’ai in 1913, he returned to Shanghai in 1915 and started the magazine. It became a critical mouthpiece and outlet for the new intellectual thought emerging around the May Fourth period. Another publication was Hsin ch’ao (New Tide), also known in English as “Renaissance,” a student-published monthly at Peking University. While its membership was very small, many of the students involved with it were instrumental actors in the May Fourth demonstrations and aftermath.

Influences of the campaign: The May Fourth demonstration is commonly referred to under the blanket term of the “May Fourth Movement,” referring to a period of rich and important cultural, political, and social change in China in the lead-up to the Communist Revolution in 1921. The May Fourth events are largely seen as the turning point that spurred these further changes.

Sources:


Additional Notes:
The issue of economic justice was an addendum to the initial, student-led portion of the campaign as the demonstrations expanded to include a general strike of Beijing workers and merchants.
The provinces with the most student activity included: Kinaqsu, Chekinag, Shantung, Hunan, Shansi, Shensi, Honan, Anhwei, Kiangsi, Fukien, Kwangtung, and Kwangsi.

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