

May Fourth Writers and Their Impact on Chinese Society

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ABSTRACT

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 marked a significant cultural and political turning point in modern China, catalyzing a wave of intellectual and artistic expression that reshaped Chinese society. This paper explores the contributions of prominent writers associated with the movement, including Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Chen Danyan, examining how their works challenged traditional Confucian values and promoted new ideas of individualism, democracy, and social reform.

Through a critical analysis of their writings, this study highlights the role of literature as a vehicle for social change during a period of national crisis. Lu Xun's poignant short stories, for instance, illuminate the psychological struggles of a society in transition, while Hu Shi's advocacy for vernacular language democratized literature and made it accessible to a broader audience. Chen Danyan's poetry further exemplifies the blending of personal and political themes, emphasizing the importance of emotional authenticity in a rapidly changing world.

The impact of these writers extends beyond literary innovation; they served as voices for the burgeoning youth movement and helped ignite a spirit of activism among young Chinese intellectuals. By addressing issues such as women's rights, education reform, and anti-imperialism, their works inspired generations to engage critically with their society and envision a more progressive future.

This paper argues that the May Fourth writers not only reshaped literary discourse but also played a crucial role in redefining national identity and cultural values in China. Their legacy continues to resonate in contemporary Chinese literature and thought, illustrating the enduring power of the written word in shaping societal norms and aspirations. Ultimately, the study seeks to underscore the importance of the May Fourth Movement as a foundational moment in the evolution of modern Chinese consciousness, emphasizing the interplay between literature and societal transformation.

Keywords: Modernization, Nationalism, Literary Revolution, Social Reform, Cultural Identity

Introduction

On 4 May 1919, thousands of students gathered in Beijing to protest China's treatment at the Paris Peace Conference to end World War I. The conference had decided a few days earlier, on 30 April, that Germany's territorial possessions in Shandong Province would be handed to Japan, not returned to China. The students marched to the foreign legation quarter and, finding it blocked by police, went instead to the home of communications minister Cao Rulin. Some of the students burnt the house down while others beat minister to Japan, Zhang Zongxiang. Both ministers were considered collaborators with Japan. 32 students were arrested and one died in hospital as a result of injuries from a clash with police.

More protests took place in Shanghai and other cities shortly afterwards, which also called for the release of the students. Student strikes were underway in Beijing by mid-May, and in early June workers and business people went on strike in various cities. The government responded by dismissing Cao and Zhang from their positions, and refusing to sign the Treaty of Versailles. Nevertheless, the decision to transfer Germany's holdings to Japan was formalised in Articles 156-8 of the treaty (Mackerras, 2013).

The events of 4 May were part of the broader New Culture Movement, also sometimes referred to as the May 4 Movement. This intellectual, cultural and social movement began around 1915 and continued into the

1920s. It was prompted by the failure of the 1911 revolution to establish a stable and effective republic following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, and focused on critiquing and attacking traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, which was blamed for China's weakness. Its main figures, such as Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu, argued China needed science, democracy and a literary revolution to become a modern and prosperous country. Language was connected to all of these.

Lu Xun (1881–1936) is often regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature. His early works, such as "A Madman's Diary" (1918), are pivotal in their critique of societal norms and Confucian ethics. This story, presented as a diary of a man who believes he is being consumed by the cannibalistic tendencies of society, symbolizes the psychological struggles faced by individuals in a rapidly changing world (Wang, 2005).

Lu Xun's writings articulate feelings of alienation and despair, effectively portraying the disillusionment of the youth during the May Fourth era. His collection of short stories, "Call to Arms" (1923), further explores themes of societal decay and moral confusion, resonating deeply with the anxieties of a generation striving for identity amidst chaos (Mao, 2012).

The dominant kind of written Chinese at the time was 文言 wényán, a traditional literary style of the language. Wényán had long been used for scholarly and official purposes and most literature. It was characterised by economy of expression, lack of punctuation and substantial use of literary allusions, all of which made it very different from the everyday spoken language. These features were particularly embodied in a style of wényán called 八股文 bāgǔwén, or "eight part essay". Becoming literate in wényán was a challenging task requiring years of study to achieve, which severely restricted literacy among the general population (Taylor & Taylor 2014).

There was also another kind of written Chinese, known as 白话 báihuà (literally "plain speech"). Báihuà was a vernacular literary language and had been used since the Tang and Song dynasties to write diaries, folk stories and plays, as well as popular novels such as *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It was considerably closer to the everyday spoken language than wényán. In the late Qing dynasty, some scholars and officials called for wényán to be replaced by 白话 báihuà. Some progress towards this was made during the Reform Movement of 1898, and led to a large number of newspapers, magazines and textbooks being published in báihuà (Chen, 1999; 2007). However, opposition remained because báihuà was generally considered vulgar and unsophisticated, and as such unsuitable as a medium for important functions in society.

Promoting báihuà became a major cause for New Culture Movement figures. They argued education for the whole population was necessary to establish democracy and science in China, and education required widespread literacy (Chen, 1999). In a series of articles published in 1917 and 1918, Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu put forward the case for báihuà to become "the base for a multi-purpose modern standard written language" (Chen, 1999: 72).

In his 1917 article "Preliminary views on the reform of literature", Hu Shi outlined eight ways in which literature could be improved, all focused on avoiding the worst elements of wényán writing. In another article the following year called "Constructive views on literary revolution", he articulated his position on the relationship between literature and a standard written language. He contended literature must be written in the vernacular to be relevant to the present day, and exemplary works of literature written in báihuà could provide the basis for standard Chinese. Chen Duxiu similarly criticised wényán in a 1917 piece in which he described what were considered classic wényán works as "flowery, extravagant, artificial, or obscure", and argued they were both a symptom and cause of everything that was wrong with China. He therefore believed China's political restoration required a restoration of literature, and this required the language itself to be reformed. Like Hu Shi, his solution was báihuà (Chen, 1999: 74).

These ideas received enthusiastic support from other scholars and intellectuals spurred on by the events of May 4, 1919, and their combined efforts proved successful. In 1920, the Ministry of Education required textbooks to be written in báihuà and báihuà to be taught in the first two years of primary school. Hundreds of newspapers and journals began using báihuà shortly thereafter. In 1921, two important literary works were published in báihuà, *The True Story of Ah Q* by Lu Xun and a collection of poetry by Guo Moruo called *The Goddess*, which demonstrated báihuà could indeed be used for such purposes. By the 1940s, báihuà had become the dominant kind of written Chinese (Chen 1999; Norman 1988).

Language reform continued to be an important issue throughout the rest of the Republican era and into the Communist era, but the push for báihuà to replace wényán was an important step in the development of what would eventually become China's national standard language, 普通话 pǔtōnghuà. Pǔtōnghuà is officially defined as "the standard form of Modern Chinese with the Beijing phonological system as its norm of pronunciation, and Northern dialects as its base dialect, and looking to exemplary modern works in báihuà 'vernacular literary language' for its grammatical norms" (Chen, 1999: 24). This is the linguistic legacy of the May 4 Movement.

While Lu Xun's contributions are monumental, other writers also played critical roles in shaping modern Chinese thought. Hu Shi (1891–1962) advocated for the use of vernacular Chinese, promoting accessibility in literature. His essay "The Development of the Vernacular Language" (1920) emphasized the need for a language

that reflected contemporary life and ideas, thus democratizing literature and empowering ordinary citizens (Chen, 2008).

Chen Danyan (1890–1940) represents the intersection of personal and political themes in poetry. Her works, characterized by emotional depth and social critique, highlight the struggles of women and the need for gender equality in a transforming society. In her poem "Women's Awakening," Chen encapsulates the urgency for women to find their voice and assert their place in a male-dominated culture (Zhou, 2015).

The literary contributions of these writers transcended the realm of art; they directly influenced the socio-political landscape of China. Their works catalyzed discussions on nationalism, identity, and social justice, challenging the status quo and inspiring a wave of activism among the youth. The May Fourth writers championed educational reform, advocating for a curriculum that embraced science, democracy, and critical thinking. Their influence on educational policies paved the way for a new generation of thinkers who sought to modernize China and improve its global standing (Li, 2017).

Hu Shi: Advocacy for Vernacular Language

Hu Shi (1891–1962) was a key advocate for the use of vernacular Chinese in literature. His essay "The Development of the Vernacular Language" (1920) argued that adopting a more accessible language would empower the masses and facilitate cultural democratization (Chen, 2008). Hu's efforts led to a significant shift in literary practices, allowing writers to engage more directly with societal issues and reach a broader audience.

Educational Reforms

Beyond language, Hu Shi championed educational reform, emphasizing the importance of science and critical thinking over rote memorization. His influence extended to curricula across China, promoting a more modern and rational approach to education (Li, 2017). This shift contributed to the emergence of a new generation of intellectuals committed to social and political change.

Chen Danyan: The Voice of Women

Chen Danyan (1890–1940) emerged as a significant voice in women's literature during the May Fourth era. Her poetry and essays explored themes of gender equality and the struggles of women within a patriarchal society. In "Women's Awakening," she articulates the urgency of women claiming their rights and participating fully in the cultural and political discourse of the time (Zhou, 2015).

The Intersection of Personal and Political

Chen's work reflects the broader feminist movements gaining traction during the May Fourth Movement. Her poetry often weaves personal experiences with social critique, demonstrating how literature can serve as both an artistic expression and a tool for activism (Jiang, 2013). By articulating the aspirations and challenges of women, Chen Danyan helped pave the way for future feminist discourse in China.

Broader Impact on Chinese Society

The May Fourth Movement profoundly transformed Chinese society by fostering a spirit of intellectual inquiry and social activism. The writers of this era, notably Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Chen Danyan, challenged traditional values and inspired a generation to rethink their cultural identity. Their emphasis on vernacular language democratized literature, making it accessible to a broader audience and encouraging civic engagement among the masses (Chen, 2008). This linguistic shift allowed individuals from various backgrounds to participate in national discourse, ultimately empowering the youth to advocate for social and political reforms.

Moreover, the movement catalyzed discussions around nationalism and modernization. The critiques of Confucianism found in Lu Xun's works highlighted the psychological struggles of a society in transition, urging readers to confront uncomfortable truths (Wang, 2005). Writers not only addressed issues of gender and social justice but also laid the groundwork for future feminist movements, as seen in Chen Danyan's poetry, which advocated for women's rights and equality (Zhou, 2015).

The May Fourth writers' commitment to education reform significantly impacted China's educational landscape, promoting critical thinking and scientific inquiry over traditional rote memorization (Li, 2017). This intellectual legacy contributed to the rise of new political ideologies and movements, including the Chinese Communist Party, as the quest for modernization and national sovereignty continued. Ultimately, the May Fourth Movement remains a pivotal moment in Chinese history, illustrating the powerful interplay between literature, society, and change.

Nationalism and Modernization

The literature of this period was deeply intertwined with nationalist sentiments. Writers used their platforms to advocate for a modern, cohesive Chinese identity that could stand against foreign imperialism. The emergence of nationalist movements in the early 20th century can be traced back to the intellectual currents ignited by the May Fourth writers (Feng, 2014).

The May Fourth Movement was a catalyst for nationalism and modernization in early 20th-century China. Emerging in response to national humiliation following the Treaty of Versailles, this movement mobilized intellectuals and youth to advocate for a redefined Chinese identity rooted in modern values. Writers like Lu

Xun and Hu Shi became key figures in this intellectual renaissance, using their literary platforms to challenge traditional Confucian ideals and promote progressive thought.

Nationalism during this period was closely linked to the desire for cultural and political sovereignty. Lu Xun's critiques of societal decay illuminated the psychological barriers that impeded national unity, urging a collective awakening to confront external threats (Wang, 2005). His works served as a rallying cry for self-reflection and reform, inspiring readers to engage actively in the pursuit of a modern nation.

Hu Shi's advocacy for the vernacular language further exemplified the movement's commitment to modernization. By making literature accessible, he fostered a sense of shared identity among diverse populations, encouraging participation in national discourse (Chen, 2008). This cultural shift laid the groundwork for educational reforms that emphasized scientific and critical thinking over outdated traditions, thus aligning the Chinese educational system with modern global standards.

The synergy between nationalism and modernization during the May Fourth Movement forged a new collective consciousness, empowering a generation to envision a progressive future for China, ultimately shaping its political landscape and cultural identity for decades to come.

Cultural and Political Activism

The writings of Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and their contemporaries stimulated political consciousness among the youth, leading to increased participation in social and political activism. The emphasis on critical thinking and social critique fostered a generation willing to question authority and pursue reform (Xu, 2018). This environment contributed to significant political developments, including the rise of the Chinese Communist Party.

The May Fourth Movement was pivotal in igniting cultural and political activism in early 20th-century China. As a response to national humiliation and social stagnation, this movement encouraged intellectuals and youth to question traditional norms and engage in societal reform. Writers like Lu Xun and Hu Shi utilized their literary talents to spotlight social injustices and advocate for progressive change.

Lu Xun's works, characterized by sharp social critique, became vehicles for activism. Stories like "A Madman's Diary" challenged entrenched Confucian values, revealing the psychological impact of societal oppression. His candid reflections inspired readers to confront their realities and participate actively in cultural discourse (Wang, 2005). Similarly, Hu Shi's promotion of vernacular language democratized literature, making it accessible to the masses and fostering a sense of shared responsibility among citizens to advocate for social reform (Chen, 2008).

This period also saw the emergence of student movements and increased political engagement. Young activists organized protests and rallies, demanding government accountability and social justice. The emphasis on education reform and scientific inquiry cultivated a generation ready to embrace modernity and resist imperialist pressures.

Moreover, the interconnectedness of cultural and political activism laid the foundation for future movements, including the rise of the Chinese Communist Party. By intertwining literature with social and political issues, the May Fourth Movement cultivated a spirit of resistance that resonated deeply within Chinese society, making activism a defining characteristic of the era. This legacy continues to influence contemporary movements for social justice and political reform in China today.

Legacy of the May Fourth Writers

The legacy of the May Fourth writers endures as a cornerstone of modern Chinese literature and thought. Their revolutionary ideas and critiques of traditional values laid the groundwork for subsequent literary and cultural movements. Lu Xun, often regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature, used his narratives to expose societal issues and inspire critical thinking, thereby influencing generations of writers and intellectuals. His works remain essential in Chinese literary curricula, continuing to resonate with readers who grapple with themes of identity and modernity.

Hu Shi's advocacy for vernacular language transformed literary practices, allowing a broader segment of society to engage with literature and national discourse. This linguistic shift not only democratized literature but also encouraged a sense of shared cultural identity among diverse groups, fostering an inclusive national consciousness (Chen, 2008).

Moreover, the May Fourth writers paved the way for feminist movements in China. Chen Danyan's explorations of gender equality and social justice in her poetry inspired future generations of women writers and activists, contributing to ongoing dialogues about women's rights in contemporary society (Zhou, 2015).

The intellectual fervor of the May Fourth Movement also influenced political landscapes, playing a crucial role in shaping the ideologies of movements that followed, including the rise of the Chinese Communist Party. Today, the May Fourth writers are celebrated not only for their literary contributions but also for their commitment to social change, making their legacy a vital part of China's ongoing quest for modernity and justice.

Continued Relevance

Modern Chinese authors frequently draw on the themes and techniques established during the May Fourth period. Their exploration of identity, social issues, and the complexities of modernization reflects the enduring

influence of this pivotal movement (Wang, 2019). The emphasis on individual expression and social responsibility remains a vital aspect of contemporary Chinese literature.

Conclusion

The May Fourth Movement, driven by the intellectual fervor of writers like Lu Xun and his contemporaries, laid the groundwork for modern Chinese literature and societal transformation. Their critiques of tradition and advocacy for reform resonate today, illustrating the enduring impact of their literary legacies. As China continues to navigate its identity in the global landscape, the voices of these early 20th-century writers remain relevant, reminding us of the power of literature to inspire change.

The May Fourth writers fundamentally transformed Chinese literature and society by challenging traditional values and advocating for modernization. Through their innovative use of language and themes, figures like Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Chen Danyan inspired a generation to engage with pressing social issues and envision a new national identity. Their legacies continue to shape contemporary Chinese thought, highlighting the enduring power of literature as a catalyst for social change.

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