

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Single Sparks” and Legacies: An Eventful Account of the May Fourth Movement

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Abstract

The watershed in modern Chinese politics known as the May Fourth Movement (1919) offers insights into how a single protest event can quickly diffuse to other regions, draw in new participants and produce legacies in contentious politics. This article examines the May Fourth protests from the perspective of “eventful sociology” – an approach that examines how protests, repression and other contingent events link together to bring about landmark political episodes. It traces the sequence of protest and repression events in Beijing and draws on an original database of protest and repression events in Shanghai to emphasize the haphazard sequencing of actions and information flows that led the Chinese government to reverse its stance and concede to protestors’ demands. An eventful account illustrates how past protest sequences can produce a long-term impact on subsequent protest events. It also calls for greater awareness of “single sparks” that initiate protest sequences and unexpected political outcomes.

摘要

作为近代中国政治的分水岭，五四运动（1919）为我们研究为何一个单独的抗议事件可以迅速地散布到其他地区、引入新的参与者、并且对抗争政治产生后续影响提供了深刻洞见。本文从“事件社会学”的角度探究了五四中的抗议活动。“事件社会学”作为一种方法考察了抗议运动、镇压活动以及其它偶然性事件如何能够相互联系，并最终促成了一众具有里程碑意义的政治事件。本文追溯了一系列在北京的抗议与镇压事件，并通过一个独创的上海抗议与镇压事件数据库来说明恰恰是随机无序的一系列行动与信息流促使中国政府逆转其立场，并对抗议者们的需求作出退让。本文旨在阐释已经发生的连续性抗议事件是如何能够对后续的抗议活动产生长期影响。本文也试图引起人们对于那些引发连续抗议事件和意外政治结果的“星星之火”的更多关注。

Keywords: May Fourth Movement; eventful sociology; protest event sequences; contentious politics; Republican China

关键词: 五四运动; 事件社会学; 抗议事件序列; 抗争政治; 中华民国

The popular protest wave that swept Chinese cities in May and June 1919, beginning with the legendary Beijing student protests on 4 May, will always be tied closely to the intellectual ferment of the ongoing New Culture Movement and the lively debates over the future of China, as a nation and as a culture.¹ The centennial of the May Fourth Movement in 2019 produced new reflections on May Fourth as an event and May Fourth as a broader cultural movement, noting the complex legacies for intellectuals and students in Chinese politics.² This emphasis on the cultural and intellectual environment from which the 1919 protests arose in some ways obscures their significance as

1 Rana Mitter argues that the legacy of the May Fourth Movement in its various forms “underpins the whole of twentieth-century China.” Without the May Fourth Movement and the connected New Culture Movement, Mitter states, “twentieth-century Chinese history would be completely different” (Mitter 2004, 4).

2 See, among much else, the articles in the May 2019 special issue of *Twentieth-century China*. See also Veg 2019.

actual protest events – a connected series of actions to confront and win concessions from political authorities. From the perspective of a century later, the May Fourth protests resonate with, and in many ways resemble, a pattern in which a singular protest event such as a march or rally quickly diffuses to other locations and draws new participants, setting off a long-term protest cycle or social movement. Despite their lack of formal organizations and central leadership, such protests expand to challenge the political status quo and produce long-term legacies in politics and public memory.³

This article examines the protests of May and June 1919 using the framework of “eventful sociology,” an approach that emphasizes contingency and agency in large-scale political transformations, as opposed to the more common pursuit of structural causes or explanatory variables, to account for such transformations.⁴ In an eventful analysis, protests are viewed as an “independent variable,” or a *cause* of political transformations, rather than an *effect* or outcome of exogenous factors.⁵ I analyse the May Fourth protests as a “protest event sequence,” a relatively short-duration series of linked events that have long-term transformative effects. Doug McAdam and William Sewell coined the term “transformative event” to refer to “very brief, spatially concentrated and relatively chaotic sequences of action [that] can have durable, spatially extended, and profoundly structural effects.”⁶ Transformative events, with their punctuated temporality, should be distinguished from medium- or long-term “protest cycles”⁷ or “contentious episodes.”⁸ In China, the period between 1919 and 1927 could be regarded as a revolutionary protest cycle ending with the establishment of the Nationalist Party regime. The 4 May 1919 protests and the sequence of protest events that followed, by contrast, can be seen as a transformative event.

Transformative events can generate long-term effects by creating, as McAdam and Sewell note, “templates” of contention that endure over time, as protestors adopt the original repertoires or cultural scripts of protest.⁹ Citing two events that set in motion the longer-term protest cycles of the American Civil Rights Movement and the French Revolution (i.e. the Greensboro Sit-in of 1960 and the storming of the Bastille in 1789), McAdam and Sewell show how these events catalysed social movements, formed new and lasting political coalitions, and gave later protestors a “cultural repertoire” or “recipe” of contentious tactics with which to make their claims. Since 1919, student protests in China criticizing government officials for corruption and failing to stand up to foreign powers have struck a chord with the public and posed a threat to successive regimes, Nationalist and Communist. As will be noted in the conclusion, the May Fourth protests created repertoires that challengers to successive Chinese governments adopted throughout the 20th century, and most famously in 1989.¹⁰

But it is less clear how a singular protest event *becomes* transformative. Participants and observers at the time sense something significant has happened, but the actions taken in the immediate aftermath of the event seem to determine whether it will have long-term transformative effects. Other scholars of popular protest have noted how events sequences are often extended or intensified by “backlash” or public outrage when governments use harsh and visible repression against protestors.¹¹ During the May Fourth protests, repressive acts that were widely diffused through telegrams and newspaper reporting created a sense of public outrage that generated broader mobilization.

3 Bishara 2021; Pearlman 2021; Mekouar 2016; Beissinger 2002.

4 Sewell 1996.

5 Della Porta 2008.

6 McAdam and Sewell 2001, 102.

7 Tarrow 1998.

8 Kriesi, Hutter and Bohar 2019. A protest event sequence is analogous to but shorter in duration than “event sequences” discussed in the comparative-historical analysis literature, which looks at longer-duration sequences that lead to broad institutional outcomes. Mahoney 2000.

9 McAdam and Sewell 2001, 112–13.

10 Esherick and Wasserstrom 1990; Calhoun 1997.

11 Hess and Martin 2006.

How governments first respond to the initial protest event and other early interactions between challengers, authorities and audiences also influence the subsequent trajectory of the event sequence and the likelihood of it producing long-term structural effects.

The very large body of scholarship on the May Fourth protests puts the actions of patriotic students, intellectuals and merchants front and centre as they formed coalitions in cities to halt classes and commerce and assert agency as citizens of the republic.¹² Publications in the last two decades by historians from mainland China have painted a more complicated picture of the heroes and villains of the May Fourth protests found in official histories. These have revealed the patriotism of many “warlords,”¹³ the dilemmas faced by the central government and its three “traitorous officials,”¹⁴ the pecuniary motives of “patriotic merchants,”¹⁵ and a puzzling wave of rumours, panic and mob violence in Shanghai.¹⁶

This article draws attention to the haphazard sequencing of actions and information flows by tracing protest and repression events in Beijing and the shift of the protest epicentre in early June to Shanghai, where a commercial strike quickly persuaded authorities in Beijing to remove three cabinet officials.¹⁷ Weeks later, the Chinese government, under the threat of renewed protests, ordered its delegation in Paris not to sign the Treaty of Versailles that was to conclude the First World War.¹⁸ At the outset of the student marches in Beijing, it was by no means inevitable that the Beijing government would concede to protestors’ demands. The protests could have sputtered out or taken a different direction had challengers and state officials pursued different tactics or chosen alternative courses of action.

The discussion that follows is divided into three parts. The following section discusses the domestic and global context in which the May Fourth protests arose. The next section details the protest event sequence in May and June 1919, emphasizing the highly contingent nature of actions that drove (and, at different points, could have ended) the sequence. A concluding section discusses the legacies of the May Fourth protests with reference to the protest event sequences of 1989 in Beijing and those of 2014 and 2019 in Hong Kong.

The May Fourth Protests as Outcome

An eventful analysis of a protest event sequence (“protests as cause”) does not ignore the context and conditions from which protests emerge. A convergence of four background conditions gave rise to the May Fourth protests: early republican ideology and nationalism; a new constitutional republican regime with a mix of liberal and authoritarian traits; worsening economic conditions in terms of purchasing power and prices; and a lively sector of urban civic associations underpinned by social networks. These conditions (“protests as outcome”) help to explain why a protest wave was likely, but they cannot explain the specifics of the event sequence that transpired beginning on 4 May, let alone predict the choices that participants would make.

China in 1919 was a fledgling republic established only seven years earlier, and the meanings and obligations of citizenship and political participation were widely debated.¹⁹ One of these debates centred on the question of whether students should participate in the political life of the republic

12 Rahav 2015; Lanza 2010; Smith 2002; Yeh 1994; Wasserstrom 1991; Chen, Joseph 1971; Chow 1960.

13 Chen, Zhongping 2011.

14 Tang 2020.

15 Feng 2003.

16 Feng 2005.

17 The three officials were Cao Rulin (minister of communications), Zhang Zongxiang (chief minister to Japan), and Lu Zongyu (director of the Currency Reform Bureau and chair of the Bank of Communications). Short biographies can be found in Chow 1960, 102, note v.

18 The delegation itself came under popular pressure from Chinese students in Paris, who blocked the delegation from leaving their hotel in order to prevent them from going to the signing ceremony.

19 Strand 2011; Harrison 2000; Judge 1996.

or remain on campus devoting energies to their studies and training as future leaders of the republic. From the early years of the 20th century, students had boycotted classes and engaged in protest marches critical of the government's education policies and its foreign policy debacles.²⁰ Debates over the meaning of citizenship converged with anxious concerns over the future of China. The latest episode in the long-term "national humiliation" (*guochi* 国耻) at the hands of foreign powers took place when Japan, after seizing German concessions in Shandong province, issued the infamous "Twenty-one demands" in May 1915. China, many intellectuals asserted, was destined for "state extinction" (*wangguo* 亡国) of the sort that had befallen the civilization-states of Korea and Vietnam. Indeed, scholarship published around the centenary of May Fourth in 2019 has usefully placed the May Fourth protests in China in the context of nationalist, anti-imperialist protests throughout Asia, which were directed against British, French, Dutch and Japanese colonial rule.²¹ The seemingly tepid response by the Chinese government to the "Twenty-one demands" gave rise to the angry student protests on 4 May 1919. These protest marches had originally been planned to mark the anniversaries of 7 May and 9 May 1915 when the Chinese government announced concessions to Japan. Fragments of news from the Paris Peace Conference suggested that Japan would indeed retain the German concessions in Shandong province and, in response, students in Beijing brought forward the date of the protest.

A second facilitating structural condition was the nature of the Chinese government at the time. While it was a constitutional republic in name, with a president, premier, bicameral legislature and provincial assemblies, the government of the Republic of China was divided across multiple axes including factions linked to powerful politicians or to military officials, a southern insurgent grouping based in Guangzhou calling into question the legitimacy of the government in Beijing, reformers who supported educational and social policies derived from the West and Japan, and traditionalists who opposed such reforms. During the protest sequence, those holding formal positions of authority found themselves under pressure from two sources: a vibrant press and civil society on the one hand that opposed the Treaty of Versailles on the Shandong question, and a militarist faction led by Duan Qirui 段祺瑞, who sought to have China join the League of Nations as a founding member and to sign the treaty with the victors of the First World War. When it came to using force to suppress student marches and other protest events, officials and police in Beijing and the provinces had to proceed cautiously. They were permitted to suppress illegal marches and other activities deemed as threats to public order, but they also had to keep in mind the backlash that would occur if they sent in police to arrest patriotic protestors.

Economic conditions also raised the likelihood of protests. The First World War brought a surge in activity for China's manufacturing sector and increasing land values favourable to property owners, but ordinary workers and urban residents suffered extreme declines in purchasing power from rising consumer prices. In Shanghai, workers in many low-paying service trades went on strike frequently from 1914 to 1918 to demand higher wages as their payments in copper currency fell in relation to silver (the currency in which most factory workers were paid).²² In response to new regulations and taxes, street stall vendors and rickshaw pullers in Shanghai launched strikes targeted at the International Settlement's Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC). In 1918, a proposed 50 per cent increase in license fees for street vendors triggered a commercial strike (*bashi* 罢市) on 30 April during which shops, street vendors, wholesalers and produce markets shut down as a form of resistance against local authorities.²³ The SMC quickly retracted the proposal.

20 Wasserstrom 1991, 37.

21 Shin and Moon 2019; Harper 2020, 354–361.

22 Smith 2002, 80–85.

23 "Duzhi xiaofan qiumian jiajuan zhi fengchao" (Part one: the surge of hawker resistance to fee increases). *Shenbao*, 2 May 1918; "Sanzhi xiaofan qiumian jiajuan zhi fengchao" (Part three: the surge of hawker resistance to fee increases). *Shenbao*, 3 May 1918.

Finally, as is thoroughly documented in studies of urban China in the Republican era, social networks based on a common native-place origin, membership in craft guilds or secret society gangs were essential to the subsequent formation of chambers of commerce, student unions, labour unions and other organizations that mobilized members during the May Fourth protests and in subsequent large-scale urban collective action in the Republican era.²⁴ As Bryna Goodman said of the May Fourth protests, “Native-place networks were vital links in the extraordinary merging of student, business and worker concerns and in the formation of the ‘united front’ that characterized this period of the movement”²⁵ – “without these groups, it is difficult to imagine how such effective social mobilization could have occurred.”²⁶

The May Fourth Protests as Cause: Protest Event Sequence

Given the convergence of an imperilled new republic threatened by imperial Japan, the political divisions within the government, the difficult economic conditions in Chinese cities and the activation of social networks to engage in political debates over the sovereignty and future of China, some protests were likely when the terms of the Paris peace treaty were disclosed in late April 1919. But the pathway from protests among students in Beijing on 4 May to a city-wide strike in Shanghai in early June to the Chinese government’s concession to the protestors’ demands on 9 June and the rejection of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June could not have been predicted based on these preconditions. The discussion that follows identifies key moments in the protest event sequence, junctures at which a different outcome could have transpired had another decision been reached or an alternative action taken. One consistent pattern is the way in which repressive acts on the part of the Chinese government quickly backfired by enlarging the geographic scope of the protests as well as the number of participants. Rumours and misinformation also influenced the protest event sequence. As the historian Feng Xiaocai 冯筱才 notes of the protests, “the formation of the May Fourth Movement is closely connected with the spread of rumours.”²⁷ In an atmosphere of uncertainty, with heightened concerns about both sides using violence, any new piece of information, whether confirmed or not, could quickly influence decisions of protestors and police.

Table 1 shows the structure of the narrative that follows. The first column in each row identifies a specific event for which the protest sequence might have ended or taken a different direction. The second column lists the critical decision that altered the course of events by triggering a response (third column) that extended the protest sequence. The following discussion traces each of these critical decision points.

Responses to the May Fourth Incident

The now famous student protest rally and march in Beijing began at the Gate of Heavenly Peace on 4 May. It ended that afternoon with a violent incident in the Foreign Legation, at the residence of the minister of communications, Cao Rulin 曹汝霖. After a few protestors broke through a police cordon and scaled a wall surrounding Cao’s home, they set about smashing its furnishings and rooms. They could not find Cao inside (he had escaped moments before), but they severely beat China’s chief minister to Japan, Zhang Zongxiang 张宗祥. At some point, a fire, the origins of which have never been confirmed, set one wing of the house ablaze. As firefighting crews arrived, the police moved in to arrest any students remaining on the scene. Cao and Zhang had close ties to Japanese diplomatic and commercial interests, and they profited handsomely from these ties by

24 Perry 1993; Wasserstrom 1991; Goodman 1995; Martin 1996.

25 Goodman 1995, 266.

26 Ibid., 270–71.

27 Feng 2005, 137, note 1. Author’s translation.

Table 1. Pivotal Actions in the Protest Sequence, 4 May to 2 July 1919

| Date and event that might have ended the protest sequence: | Action that extended the protest sequence: | Reaction and extension of protest sequence: |
|---|--|--|
| 4 May, student protests in Beijing | 4 May, arrest of 32 students in Beijing and censoring of news | 5 May, students in Beijing begin strike and form Beijing Student Union; activation of social networks in Beijing, other cities |
| 7 May, release of 32 students in Beijing and end of school strike | 8 May, presidential decrees banning student political activity | 9 May, resignation and flight of Cai Yuanpei and minister of education, student protests resume |
| 13 May, Beijing students consider and reject school strike | 14 May, presidential decrees on using military force to suppress students | 19 May, Beijing Student Union resumes school strike; school strikes spread to 200+ cities in 22 provinces, 19–31 May |
| 21–31 May, Ministry of Education negotiations with Beijing students | 1 June, presidential declaration of martial law in Beijing and mass arrests, 3 June | 5 June, commercial strike launched in Shanghai, spreads to other cities, 6–9 June |
| 9 June, president accepts resignation of 3 officials | 9 June, Shanghai protestors reject official announcement of resignations, await independent confirmation | 9 June, Shanghai labour strike begins |
| 12 June, Shanghai commercial and labour strikes end | Mid-June, government affirms decision to sign Treaty of Versailles | 13 June to late June, scattered protests and threat of second commercial strike in Shanghai |
| 28 June, government refusal to sign Treaty of Versailles | Protest sequence ends 2 July | n/a |

taking ownership shares in railways and other infrastructure projects.²⁸ The students' fury was understandable, but the act of violence took the protests in a new direction. Without the assault on Zhang and the apparent arson attempt, police would not have arrested 32 students at Cao's residence.²⁹

As noted in the literature on protest event sequences, early actions in a sequence have a stronger causal influence on the direction of the sequence than do subsequent events in the sequence.³⁰ In the aftermath of the 4 May events, three actions shaped the remainder of the protest sequence. First, the arrests of the students in Beijing became the focal point of nationwide protests: had there been no arrests (and no assaults and alleged arson to trigger the arrests), there surely would have been a patriotic outpouring across Chinese campuses and civic associations, but these would have been directed more against Japan and its supporters in the central government. Instead, the arrests fuelled a confrontation in the ensuing weeks between Chinese officials and students over the question of whether students were authorized to participate in matters of domestic and foreign policy.

A second action that carried a long-term impact on the course of the protest event sequence was the decision by Cao Rulin and finance official Lu Zongyu 陆宗輿 to submit their resignations to President Xu Shichang 徐世昌. Zhang, who survived the near-fatal beating, offered his resignation a few days later. The three cabinet officials were quickly labelled as "national traitors" (*maiguo zui* 卖国罪) in the press, in protest marches and in the thousands of telegrams sent to the president

28 Chow 1960, 102, note v.

29 Chen Pingyuan (2011, 11–66) emphasizes the contingent twists and turns of the protest march on 4 May and the incident at Cao's residence, including a compelling "who done it?" on the origins of the fire.

30 Della Porta 2020.

from around the country and the world. As President Xu faced public pressure to accept the resignations, Duan Qirui and his Anfu 安福 faction urged Xu to hold firm and retain the officials. The officials, and Duan's faction more broadly, benefited financially from Japanese investments in China. The status of the three "national traitors" became the central issue that provoked the Shanghai commercial strike and those arising in dozens of other cities by 9 June.

A third action in the immediate aftermath of the 4 May incident with consequences for the protest event sequence was the decision by the central authorities in Beijing to impose strict censorship on reporting about the 4 May protests and to cut telegram communications between Beijing and foreign countries.³¹ To circumvent this action, students sent telegrams from a foreign news agency in Beijing to foreign concessions in Tianjin, from where information was relayed to Shanghai and other cities on 5 May.³² While Chinese newspapers began reporting on the incident once this work-around was established, throughout the protest event sequence there was a consistent delay between decisions and actions taken by the Beijing government and the arrival of information at crucial protest venues such as Shanghai.

The 4 May protests also catalysed a broad range of student and civic associations. The Beijing Student Union formed on 6 May, out of the student strike that had begun the day before. Numerous civic associations had already made preparations to hold rallies and speeches during public "citizens' assemblies" (*guomin dahui* 国民大会) to mark National Humiliation Day on 7 May. The 4 May protests and the arrests of the 32 students in Beijing gave the speeches and marches that day a much greater degree of intensity, turning what could have been events largely directed against Japan into an occasion to excoriate the foreign policy of the Chinese government and its harsh repression of the students on 4 May. Perhaps as a gesture to appear on the side of the public and to acknowledge National Humiliation Day, President Xu released the 32 students on 7 May, pending their arraignment in court on 10 May. In a presidential directive on 6 May, Xu blamed the police for the harsh treatment of the arrested students and for failing to prevent the violent incident at Cao's residence.³³

8 May and 14 May, presidential decrees

The presidential intervention on 7 May to release the students brought an end to the Beijing student strike. It could have taken the protest sequence in a different direction, focusing public attention on the judicial proceedings to be held on 10 May and re-directing the centre of civic mobilization towards Japan in the form of boycotts of Japanese products and the suspension of economic transactions related to Japan. Instead, President Xu released another decree on 8 May that quickly ignited a new round of protests. The 8 May decree patronizingly described university students as too youthful and immature to engage in national affairs and urged them to focus on their studies so that one day they might assume positions of national leadership. It called for the Ministry of Education to investigate the 4 May incident and to closely supervise students on campus to prevent their involvement in political affairs.³⁴ Amid rumours that Duan's faction would take drastic and possibly lethal action against the popular Peking University chancellor, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, Cai resigned and fled to Tianjin, thence on to Shanghai and Hangzhou for the remainder of the protests that summer. Leaders of several other colleges in Beijing followed suit and resigned.³⁵ The minister of education, whose agency was charged with regulating the political activities of university students under the 8 May decree, also resigned and fled the city. Despite these troubling developments, the Beijing

31 As Chow observes in a footnote (1960, 124, note h), the 4 May protests in Beijing were reported only days later and with little attention by the Western press. *The New York Times* printed only a short State Department dispatch on 9 May.

32 Chow 1960, 124.

33 CASS 1979, 294; Gong Zhenhuang, "Qingdao chao" (Qingdao tide), 1919.

34 *Ibid.*, 295.

35 *Ibid.*, 173; CASS 1979, 463; Cai Xiaozhou and Yang Jingong, "Wusi," (May Fourth), 1919.

Student Union considered and voted down a motion on 13 May to resume their strike. The Shanghai Student Union (SSU), established on 11 May, also refrained from launching a strike at this point.

Over the following week, however, a series of actions by President Xu's government propelled the university students towards the resumption of strikes. First, a hardliner from the Duan faction was appointed as minister of education and a conservative official also with Duan's support was appointed to replace Cai as chancellor of Peking University. Another presidential decree, issued on 14 May, authorized military governors in the provinces to suppress student political activity including marches and street speeches that were becoming a widely used technique of public communication. The decree also reiterated that students should not interfere in affairs of state.

These actions prompted the Beijing Student Union to launch another strike on 19 May. The strike manifesto issued to the public and the demands directed at President Xu set in place the specific points of contention that would shape the remainder of the protest sequence: the government must refuse to sign the Treaty of Versailles, and it must dismiss the three traitor-officials, Cao, Zhang and Lu.³⁶ The student strike also established a protest repertoire that would be adopted in other cities. "Groups of ten" (*shiren tuan* 十人团) students were deployed throughout the streets and public spaces of cities to alert ordinary urban residents to the existential dangers China faced.³⁷ Representatives of the Beijing Student Union travelled to Tianjin, Nanjing and Shanghai to connect with university students. Within ten days, there were student strikes in more than 200 cities across 22 provinces.³⁸ In each case, the suspension of classes put students out on the streets to march, deliver speeches and exhort other sectors, especially merchants, to support their cause. After the 14 May presidential decree authorizing the use of force, it was only a matter of time before the military governors charged with preventing such activities would act against the students.

For a ten-day period between the start of the student strikes and the end of May, there was a possibility, albeit remote, that negotiations between the Ministry of Education and the student organizations could have resulted in the conclusion of the student strike. While officials from the ministry proposed compromise measures to the student leaders, hardliners in the Chinese government manoeuvred to replace the Beijing police chief and other security officials whom they deemed to be too soft on the student protests. At the same time, President Xu came under pressure from Japan, whose ambassador to China filed three protests with the Chinese government urging it to take action against students in Beijing and elsewhere. Japanese troops and warships in Shanghai and in other ports in China staged exercises in a show of military force.³⁹ These pressures resulted in students in Beijing and other cities shifting away from overtly condemning Japan and the Chinese government in public speeches to less confrontational acts such as promoting the purchase of Chinese-made products and fanning out to commercial streets to urge the boycott of Japanese goods.⁴⁰ Taking a more moderate approach may have worked throughout the summer (when a student strike would have been an empty gesture during the summer holiday period); however, the Chinese government rekindled the protests in early June.

1 June, martial law and suppression

President Xu declared martial law in Beijing on 1 June, and the government launched a broad crackdown that quickly terminated any hopes that the strike would end through negotiations. The following day, police arrested seven students in a Beijing market where they were promoting Chinese-made goods. On 3 June, Beijing students formed large columns to resume marches and

36 CASS 1979, 180; Gong Zhenhuang, "Qingdao chao" (Qingdao tide), 1919.

37 *Ibid.*, 182.

38 Chow 1960, 144.

39 *Ibid.*, 146.

40 CASS 1979, 185; Gong Zhenhuang, "Qingdao chao" (Qingdao tide), 1919.

street speeches. Security forces, some of them mounted, intervened and began making mass arrests. By the day's end, some 400 students had been arrested. Since the security forces lacked adequate detention facilities to hold such a large group, the students were locked up, without food or water, in the building that housed the Law School of Peking University. A second building on campus was also converted into a prison as the number of arrests mounted, reaching over 1,000.⁴¹ Reports, again carried via Tianjin's foreign concessions to Shanghai and then to other cities, described shocking scenes. Telegrams reported that two students who had resisted the police had been shackled and tortured.⁴²

As seen in numerous high-profile cases of violent repression, the deployment of police and other security forces against unarmed civilians can sometimes bring a protest sequence to a close, as the risks of continuing to protest become too high for would-be participants. But the attempt to crack down using coercive or lethal measures can at times escalate protests by emboldening participants and injecting a new sense of outrage and betrayal among protestors as well as among the public observing the events.⁴³ The 1 June crackdown in Beijing, and the mass arrests that were soon labelled the "June Third incident," clearly backfired on the Chinese government and hard-line officials pushing for a decisive resolution of the student protests. The "June Third incident" expanded the scope of the protests by shifting the focal point of the nationwide protests to Shanghai, where merchants and then workers launched strikes that finally forced President Xu's government to concede to demands that had been considered unthinkable in May: the resignation of the three officials and China's refusal to sign the Treaty of Versailles.

5 June, commercial strike in Shanghai and its extension

News of the "June Third incident" arrived in Shanghai as the SSU was trying to persuade merchants at the Shanghai County Chamber of Commerce (*Shanghai xian shanghui* 上海县商会, SCCC hereafter) to support student demands that the central government dismiss the three cabinet officials. Just before a meeting on 4 June was about to begin at the SCCC, the police, under orders from local military governor Lu Yongxiang 卢永祥, arrived and prohibited the meeting from taking place. This move pushed an ambivalent SCCC to support the students' call for a commercial strike. Student members of the SSU, seizing on the news from Beijing and the crackdown by Governor Lu, went to Nanshi district 南市区 to urge shopkeepers to close for business the following day.⁴⁴

On the morning of 5 June, shops in Nanshi closed first, followed by those in the French Concession, then in the International Settlement. None of the sources on the commercial strike provides an estimate for how many shops were involved in the strike, but it would have been several thousand.⁴⁵ The rapid spread of the commercial strike in Shanghai was attributed to Shanghai students who persuaded shopkeepers throughout the city to shutter their doors for business. Newspaper accounts describe students kneeling and weeping before shop owners and clerks to persuade them to shut down and sacrifice business revenues for the duration of the strike. But other reports at the time, including those from leading merchant associations, asserted that the action was largely spontaneous and voluntary.⁴⁶ Shopkeepers had grievances with the SMC over a recently

41 Lanza 2010, 137–38.

42 SASS 1980, 287. The telegram was printed in *Minguo ribao*, 5 June 1919; an English translation can be found in Chen 1971, 113.

43 Hess and Martin 2006

44 CASS 1979, 389; Cha An, "Xuejie fengchao ji" (Record of student unrest), 1919.

45 One estimate can be taken from the 1919 SMC's *Municipal Gazette*, which provided periodic reporting on revenue sources from various licenses. During 1919–1920, the SMC reported licensing 3,187 shops in the International Settlement, plus 6,255 market stalls (SMC 1921). The SMC added nearly 1,000 tobacco shops and over 500 money exchange shops to its revenue base in 1920. The number of shops in the Chinese-administered districts was roughly comparable.

46 SASS 1980, 378–79; *Xinwen bao*, 8 June 1919.

announced tax increase, set to go into effect on 1 July, on the rents they paid. Many shopkeepers including shop clerks or apprentices (*shangdian huoyou* 商店伙友, “shop partner”) appear to have taken matters into their hands and shuttered their stores on 5 June. In any event, the commercial strike was surprising to both the students and the authorities. No one knew how long it would last nor who, if anyone, was coordinating it.

The very day that the commercial strike in Shanghai was getting under way, the acting minister of education in Beijing worked out a compromise with the military and police to withdraw from the Peking University campus. However, the 1,150 students detained at that point refused to leave the “campus prisons” until the government had punished the “three traitors” and apologized to the students. They also sought assurances that they could make speeches in public without risk of punishment (a demand that was already accepted in practice, as some 5,000 students were conducting daily rounds in Beijing in small groups at that point). Ministry of Education officials and police met with the students the next day, issued apologies and eventually persuaded the students to leave their “prisons” on 8 June.⁴⁷

In Shanghai, the news of the government’s release of the Peking University students on 5 June was greeted with disbelief.⁴⁸ SSU leaders requested that the US and British consulates confirm the report through their embassies in Beijing. Since the commercial strike in Shanghai had been launched in response to the student arrests in Beijing, presumably it would end upon the release of the students. But on the second day of the strike, the SCCC and the recently formed Shanghai Federation of Commercial Organizations (*Shanghai shangye gongtuan lianhehui* 上海商业公团联合会, SFCO hereafter) issued demands that the Beijing government dismiss the three officials before shops would reopen.

Shanghai authorities (both Chinese and foreign) viewed the commercial strike and isolated cases of violence with such high levels of concern that they launched their own repressive campaign that lengthened the market strike. Their actions also reversed the national direction of influence in the protest event sequence: rather than events in Beijing causing reactions in Shanghai and elsewhere, after 5 June the commercial strike in Shanghai quickly diffused to other cities, including Wuhan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Ningbo and Tianjin, and in so doing influenced calculations by the central government.

The SMC ordered its police force to compel shops to reopen through a display of force in the heart of the International Settlement. This attempt to coerce the shopkeepers led to predictable clashes among those enforcing the commercial strike and the police. Episodes of violence broke out in various locations as roaming crowds of self-appointed enforcers of the strike set upon delivery trucks carrying food supplies and others assaulted stray shopkeepers found selling merchandise. Reports also circulated of assaults on Japanese residents of Shanghai.⁴⁹ By 7 June, the third day of the commercial strike, the number of violent incidents increased as fights broke out between police and unidentified bands of “loafers” (*liumang* 流氓) who, according to the Chinese press, tried to drive away the police and attacked shopkeepers who attempted to reopen their businesses.⁵⁰

In the Chinese districts of Shanghai, the police force was equally unsuccessful in using coercive tactics to force shops to reopen. The police chief Xu Guoliang 徐国梁 arrested students and had them roughed up at a police station.⁵¹ Xu had also been seen assaulting street vendors and shopkeepers. On the first morning of the commercial strike, Xu beat up several street vendors at the East

47 “Yinian zhi huigu—san” (Looking back one year ago—part 3). *Beijing daxue xuesheng zhoukan* 10, 7 March 1920; Chow 1960, 160.

48 Chen, Joseph 1971, 133.

49 SASS 1980, 853; “All Chinese shops in Shanghai close as move in strike.” *China Press*, 6 June 1919, 1.

50 Martin 1996, 67, cites a *Shenbao* article (8 June 1919) to suggest that Green Gang chief Huang Jinrong broke the market strike in the French Concession, but the article notes that shops remained closed even after Huang “politely suggested” that they resume business.

51 “The Japanese boycott and students’ strike: merchants join students.” *North-China Herald*, 14 June 1919, 716.

Gate wholesale market, a key node where produce and foodstuffs were loaded each day for transport to retail markets.⁵² Civic leader Shen Xinqing 沈信卿 of the Jiangsu Provincial Education Association bitterly accused Xu of extending the commercial strike by his actions.⁵³

On 8 June, military governor Lu declared martial law in Shanghai's Chinese districts. In the International Settlement, the SMC issued a notice against wearing "any distinctive dress or badge or headgear signifying membership of any particular organization" and prohibited the display of "any flag or banner" or the wearing of "any sash or other device in the streets or in any public place, bearing any inscription in Chinese or in any foreign language."⁵⁴ After meeting with business leaders and the SSU representatives that day, Lu sent a message to President Xu in which he warned that "a single spark can start a prairie fire" (*xing xing zhi huo keyi liaoyuan* 星星之火可以燎原). He further noted that the "people's hearts" (*minxin* 民心) were turning against the government. With commercial strikes spreading from Shanghai to other cities, and one scheduled to begin shortly in Tianjin, Lu argued that removing the three officials would be a small price to pay to end the commercial strike in Shanghai and other cities.⁵⁵

Figure 1 depicts the frequency of protest and repression events in Shanghai from 5 May to 2 July, when news reports in China confirmed that the government had refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles.⁵⁶ It marks key decisions and events with vertical lines. Protest events in Shanghai remained at a fairly low level throughout May, until the central government launched its crackdown on student marches and street lectures in Beijing on 3 June. Table 2 shows that between 5 May and the beginning of the commercial strike, protest events averaged about five per day. Shanghai authorities, Chinese and foreign, tolerated the holding of citizens' assemblies and meetings of civic associations. The spike in protest events coincides with the commercial strike and the escalation of repression in Shanghai from 5 to 11 June. During this seven-day period, there was a daily average of 31.4 protest events. Repression events (67 in total) averaged 9.6 events per day over the same period.

The commercial and labour strikes in Shanghai could have ended sooner or even been prevented had the Beijing government moved faster to dismiss the three officials. Xu finally did so on 9 June, also offering his own resignation the following day. (It was not accepted by the National Assembly, so he remained in office.) The SCCC received word of the dismissal of the three officials on 10 June, but students and merchants refused to believe it until confirmation could be made through US and British consular channels. The removal of the three officials and delays in confirming the news meant that Shanghai's commercial strike expanded into a labour strike as it was joined by tens of thousands of factory workers – an estimated 20,000 in the International Settlement alone, including 14,000 textile workers. The strike was also joined by broad sectors of urban residents, including beggars and pickpockets, whose activities were controlled by organized crime networks.⁵⁷ Concerned foreign elites in Shanghai were shocked when their own chauffeurs announced that they, too, would be joining the work stoppage to show support for the Chinese nation. This meant the city remained virtually shut down with banks, ports, railways and other critical sectors out of operation, although telegraph workers stayed on the job, as did workers in the water and power utilities.⁵⁸

52 SASS 1980, 383: *Xinwen bao*, 10 June 1919.

53 *Ibid.*, 379–380: *Xinwen bao*, 8 June 1919.

54 "Uncertain outlook." *North-China Herald*, 14 June 1919, 718.

55 SASS 1980, 417–78: *Xinwen bao*, 10 June 1919. An English translation can be found in Chen, Joseph 1971, 143.

56 The events data are drawn from a database of reported protest and repression events in Shanghai from 1900 to 1927. A description of the database can be found in the online [supplementary material](#). The database is available upon request of the author.

57 Shao 2005, 64.

58 Chen, Joseph 1971, 156–57.

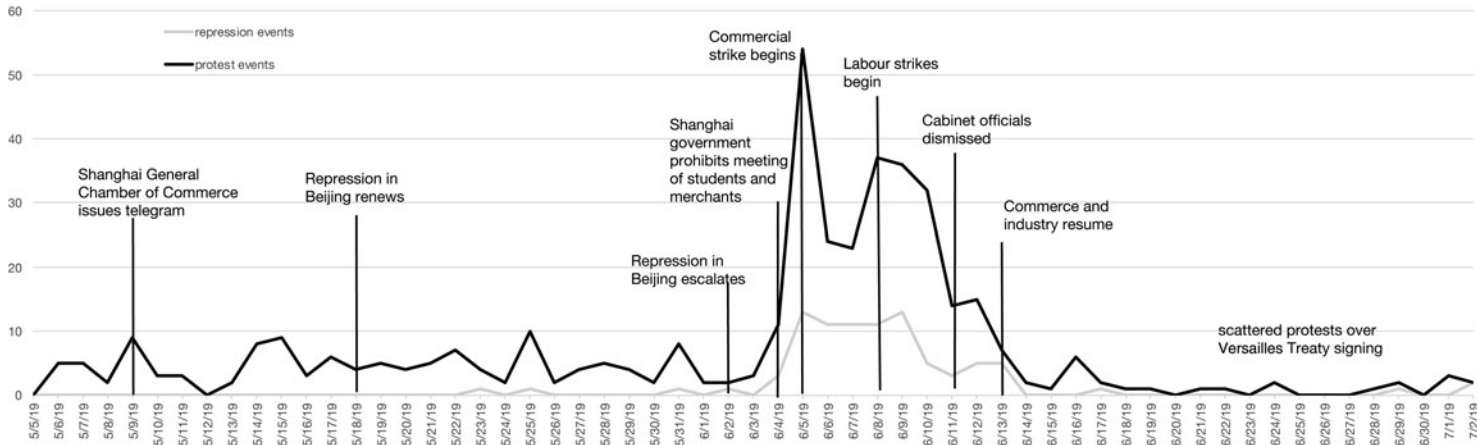


Figure 1. Protest and Repression Events, Shanghai, 5 May to 2 July 1919

Table 2. Shanghai Protest and Repression Events, 1919

| Event | Time span | Shanghai protest events | Average daily protest events | Shanghai repression events | Total events |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| <i>Before 4 May</i> | <i>1 January–4 May</i> | 11 | 0.07 | 2 | 12 |
| Before 26 May student strike | 5 May–25 May | 96 | 4.57 | 2 | 98 |
| During 26 May student strike, prior to commercial strike | 26 May–4 June | 43 | 4.78 | 5 | 48 |
| During commercial and labour strike | 5 June–11 June | 220 | 31.43 | 67 | 287 |
| After commercial and labour strike | 12 June–2 July | 47 | 2.24 | 14 | 61 |
| Total protest sequence | 5 May–2 July | 406 | 7.0 | 88 | 494 |
| Remainder of 1919 | 3 July–31 December | 28 | 0.15 | 0 | 28 |

Source: Shanghai Protest and Repression Events Database, 1900–1927.

On 12 June, Shanghai newspapers published news of the resignations and the city gradually resumed business. A letter published by the SSU acknowledged the students' limited leverage in contrast with the power that the shopkeepers had demonstrated with their commercial strike. The government had rejected students' demands for nearly a month, the letter observed, until the commercial strike started on 5 June. Then, only one day into that strike, the government released the detained students in Beijing. On 9 June, when Shanghai workers went on strike, the government rapidly agreed to remove the three officials.⁵⁹ As noted above, President Xu conceded on the very day that Shanghai's workers went on strike, but the news arrived too late to stop the strike. In a retrospective a year later, a Peking University student also noted the pivotal turning point of the Shanghai commercial strike in changing the momentum of the protests and convincing the Chinese government to concede to protestors' demands.⁶⁰

Illustrating the crucial importance of the timing of particular events in a protest sequence, the first lethal act of repression during the May Fourth protest sequence occurred in Shanghai on the night of 12 June. It could have easily set off a very different protest wave had it happened earlier in the sequence. The outrage in this case would have been directed against the British imperialist presence in China, especially if the shooting victims had been students rather than shopkeepers (as would occur six years later in 1925). A confused detachment of the Shanghai Municipal Police fired on a column of shop clerks and street vendors who were marching – against the pleadings of students who had attended an earlier public rally – to celebrate the victory of the commercial strike. An overzealous commander under orders from the SMC to prohibit marches from entering the International Settlement ordered a detachment of mounted Sikh police to open fire when the crowd began throwing stones and other objects. Three shop clerks and two street vendors were among the nine who suffered gunshot wounds, one of whom died.⁶¹ The next day, business resumed, despite a few shopkeepers who, angered by the shootings, urged an extension of the strike.⁶² Workers also returned to their factories and workplaces on 13 June. The other cities in China that had experienced commercial strikes quickly reopened over the next two days.

59 SASS 1980, 449–450: *Minguo ribao*, 13 June 1919.

60 “Yinian zhi huigu – san” (Looking back one year ago – part 3). *Beijing daxue xuesheng zhouban* 10, 7 March 1920.

61 SASS 1980, 432–33: *Xinwen bao*, 13 June 1919; SASS 1980, 864.

62 SASS, 1980, 443: *Shishi xin bao*, 15 June 1919.

Mid-June, government reversal on treaty signature

After the conclusion of the strikes and the removal of the three officials, the protest sequence centred on pressuring the government to refrain from signing the peace treaty. Duan Qirui remained adamant that China should sign the treaty. Amid the commercial strike and its aftermath, President Xu and the National Assembly had agreed that on balance it was more important for China to sign the treaty than to withdraw over the Shandong issue. On 24 June, the government cabled the Chinese delegation in Paris to sign the treaty, if their efforts to persuade the Western powers on the Shandong issued failed. However, under growing threats of a commercial strike in Shanghai, Xu reversed course the next day and cabled the delegation not to sign the treaty. This caused understandable confusion among the Paris delegation, who had refused to sign the treaty anyway (before the 25 June cable) and had tendered their resignations. At any rate, Xu's government had clearly caved in to public pressure. Before word had reached Shanghai and other cities on 2 July, mass meetings and rallies brought student unions, merchant federations and "citizens' assemblies" together to consider radical measures such as a tax strike and even the idea of secession if the Chinese government signed the treaty.⁶³ Had this occurred, the government would very likely have launched another protest sequence involving student, commercial and labour strikes.

Conclusion

If transformative events of the sort described by McAdam and Sewell have "profoundly structural effects," in what ways were the May Fourth protests transformative?⁶⁴ First, the May Fourth protests quickly expanded the scope of protest participants and generated new organizational capacities for protestors. Student unions became a powerful political force in the 1920s and 1930s. Street federations of shopkeepers and chambers of commerce successfully challenged municipal authorities, including those in the foreign concessions. Political parties made inroads with workers as labour associations formed rapidly in the early 1920s. The protests also produced a "template" or repertoire of contention that challengers would adopt to confront foreign authorities and warlords during the Nationalist revolution in the 1920s. What soon came to be known as "triple strikes" (*san ba* 三罢) – referring to student, commercial and labour strikes – became the dominant mode of political action following the May Fourth protests. When the Shanghai Municipal Police fatally shot students on Nanjing Road on 30 May 1925, a new protest event sequence erupted, this time with the active leadership of labour unions, political parties and street federations which had been formed in the wake of the 1919 protests. These groups carried out a 26-day commercial strike involving some 150,000 to 200,000 shops, and a 119-day labour strike involving 200,000 workers.⁶⁵ These protests were followed by strikes in dozens of other cities in what became known as the May 30th Movement. During the upheavals of 1926–1927, the same organizations coalesced again to oust a warlord government from Shanghai (before the sudden purge of Communist Party cadres and sympathizers in April 1927). The protest event sequences in 1925 and 1926–1927 had a profound impact on the course and fate of the United Front cooperation between the Communist and Nationalist parties. These events are also milestones in scholarly accounts and official histories, but their long-term impact pales in significance to the May Fourth Movement.

The second structural effect of the 1919 protest event sequence was the sensitivity that governments faced in suppressing patriotic protests. Nationalist Party officials during the 1930s (and before the onset of war in 1937) who tried to counter Japanese encroachments against China faced a repeat of May Fourth if students, merchants and the public deemed them to be overly

63 Chen, Joseph 1971, 191.

64 McAdam and Sewell 2001, 102.

65 Smith 2002, 186–89.

compliant with Japanese demands. Repressive measures against peaceful student demonstrators also threatened to trigger a backlash and public outrage of the sort that occurred in early June 1919.⁶⁶

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), beginning with Mao Zedong's 1940 essay "On new democracy," sought to frame the May Fourth protests as an anti-imperialist bourgeois movement which lacked the necessary proletarian leadership that the Party ultimately provided. However, during the protests in Beijing and 300 other cities in the spring of 1989, students and intellectuals drew upon the powerful May Fourth legacy of confronting corrupt officials whose actions betrayed the nation. Like the protests of 1919 from which Peking University students drew inspiration (including the timing of one protest march on the 70th anniversary of 4 May 1919), the protests in Beijing and in other cities in spring 1989 unfolded as a highly contingent sequence of events.

The 1989 protests began amid official commemorations of the death of former Party secretary Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 on 5 April and quickly spiralled into a protest sequence with national and global audiences. One crucial turning point was the *People's Daily* editorial on 26 April that labelled the protests "a conspiracy" to bring "chaos" to China. This invocation of the Cultural Revolution quickly backfired and resulted in a dramatic escalation as outraged students joined the protests in Tiananmen Square. As a recent study by Jeremy Brown illustrates (along with numerous participant accounts), the interactions and communications among protestors, government agencies, security forces and individual leaders could have brought about a significantly different outcome from that which eventually transpired on 4 June 1989.⁶⁷ The use of lethal suppression that ended the protests was far from inevitable and was in its own way a "transformative event" that suddenly altered domestic politics and political participation in China (through mass repression). It also quickly damaged China's standing among Western democracies. As is often the case with transformative events, the date of the event quickly became a lexical marker with its own meaning and implications in subsequent protest sequences. Fears of "a repeat of June Fourth" or "a Tiananmen massacre" loomed in the background of the "Colour Revolutions," the "Arab Spring" and numerous other sites where authoritarian regimes faced challengers. This was also the case with the protests in post-1997 Hong Kong.

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the Anti-Extradition Bill protests in 2019 closely followed a pattern of surprisingly large numbers of protestors mobilizing at crucial junctures in a sequence of protests and repressive actions.⁶⁸ When the Hong Kong police fired teargas on protestors in the early stages of protest sequences in 2014 and on a much larger scale in 2019, they generated a massive backlash as bystanders joined the ranks of protestors. Three coordinated *san ba* or "triple strikes" took place in Hong Kong from August through October 2019, drawing 600,000 participants in the first strike.⁶⁹ The shuttering of shops, the calls for boycotts of mainland Chinese-owned stores and properties, the mobilization of student unions and trade unions and the calls for democracy evoked for many historians of Shanghai the movements in that city a century ago.⁷⁰ Hong Kong residents and global audiences observing the sit-ins in 2014 and the roaming daily protests in 2019 voiced fears of "a repeat of June Fourth."⁷¹ Instead, a transformative event of repression took a different form in July 2020, in keeping with Xi Jinping's 习近平 coercive form of "rule by law." The CCP rushed the National Security Law (NSL) through the National People's Congress and a new wave of legal repression began in Hong Kong in early July. Since the NSL's enactment, authorities have used it to arrest and convict a wide range of opposition figures and

66 Wasserstrom 1991, 171–199, points out that student mobilization in 1931 failed to match the influence of 1919 and 1925 but was influential in setting the stage for the more significant 1935 protests against the Nationalist Party government.

67 Brown 2021; Calhoun 1997.

68 Lee and Sing 2019; Hung 2020.

69 Chan 2020.

70 For reflections on student politics in the aftermath of the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and comparisons with Republican-era Shanghai, see Wasserstrom 2019.

71 Ma and Cheng 2019, 16.

to shutter unions, media and civil society organizations. The NSL quickly brought about what had seemed unthinkable to many observers a few months before: the de facto termination of Hong Kong's autonomy under the 1990 Basic Law.

The transformative event in a protest sequence, as these cases show, can take form as surprising acts of mobilization or repression. Their significance seems obvious to those who witness them at the time, but their structural effects unfold over long periods in the aftermath of the event sequence.⁷² For those observing politics in contemporary China, or anywhere else for that matter, an eventful analysis of popular protests offers two insights. First, the choices of challengers and state authorities in the present are likely to be influenced by memories and lessons of past (recent or distant) protest sequences. Second, eventful analysis calls for greater awareness and sensitivity to the "single spark" that might set off a new protest event sequence in which contingency and agency produce unexpected or even shocking political outcomes.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741022001242>

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72 In this sense, they resemble the causal pattern identified by Paul Pierson in which the effects of a sudden event unfold over a long period of time. Pierson 2004.

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