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Book Review: *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing*

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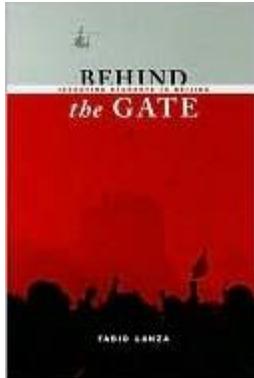
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Lanza, Fabio. [Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing](#). New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xiii, 299 pp. \$50.00 (cloth).

By Ling Shiao

By drawing our attention to the previously unexamined question of space for student activism, Fabio Lanza has successfully remapped the May Fourth Movement, despite the fact that it is perhaps the most well-travelled terrain in historical research of modern China. This is not a revisionist study that seeks to de-center May Fourth in China's passage from tradition to modernity by looking for pre-May Fourth modern experimentations and the continuity between the late Qing and May Fourth periods. In fact, Lanza travels back to the historical site of Beijing University (hereafter Beida) and the canonical moment of the May Fourth years (1917-1923) and locates the radical new beginning of the modern Chinese student. He provocatively claims that "There were no students before 1919" (172). By this, he means that prior to May Fourth, students were little more than a sociological designation. It was during the May Fourth years that students finally emerged as a modern subject and political signifier. Refusing to take the category of students as a given, as previous scholarship on Chinese students and student activism (Israel 1966, Wasserstrom 1991) has done, this study is an intense and fruitful interrogation of the crucial process whereby "students" were transformed from a sociological category into a political category—a category that would be re-appropriated throughout the next seven decades until 1989, when the student pro-democracy movement was crushed and the "students" as a distinctive political subject ceased to be.

Like any new research covering old ground, this book revisits many established notions about Beida, its students, and their role in the May Fourth Movement. Lanza objects to the treatment of culture and politics as separate spheres of activity. Specifically, he departs from the conventional wisdom that saw May Fourth as consisting of two distinctive and incompatible movements—an enlightenment characterized by cultural critique and affirmation of individual subjectivities on the one hand and a patriotic fervor to save China on the other, and that the latter ultimately cut short the former at a time of national crisis (Li 1986, Schwarcz 1990). More significantly, he raises issues with previous scholarship for reducing social and lived experience to a reflection of intellectual and ideological convictions. He contends that previous May Fourth scholarship is too

ready to see laissez-faire and eccentric individualism exhibited on the Beida campus only as manifestations or consequence of Cai Yuanpei's—Beida's chancellor—liberal reform and advocacy of academic freedom (28). Finally, Lanza peels away the well-cultivated myth of Beida as China's most prestigious institute of higher education and of its students as endowed with political sensitivity, enjoying a special relationship with the state due to China's unique scholar-official tradition (Weston 2004). Prior to Cai Yuanpei's arrival in 1917, Beida had a tarnished reputation as a training ground for a corrupt officialdom. During the May Fourth years, Lanza observes, Beida students cultivated an image of an individualistic and eccentric genius, effectively rejecting the idea of being part of a community by steadfastly refusing to respect any external rules or rituals. In so doing, they also rejected all the elements that would typically define a conscious community. So how did Beida students become political, and where did their organizational prowess manifested during the May Fourth demonstrations come from?

Central to Lanza's project is the insight that political activism is neither caused simply by previous exposure to radical ideas nor premised on the existence of a well-defined community with a shared identity (11). Instead, Chinese students became political and communitarian precisely because the proper definition of the "student" and the position of Beida vis-à-vis the state had been intensely and continuously contested during the May Fourth years. Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Alan Badiu, and others, Lanza sees political struggles as struggles to "produce a space in which a new everyday can be experienced, new relationships formed, and alternative lives can be lived" (7). This study focuses on what Lanza refers to as the "transformed everyday" at Beida, of which Cai's reform was only the tip of the iceberg, and reveals the seamless connection between the seemingly unrelated quotidian practices of the Beida students and their political activism during turbulent May and June of 1919.

Lanza expertly navigates the "transformed everydayness" of Beida during the May Fourth years. He begins with the porous institutional and physical boundaries, which allowed little distinction between officially registered students and auditors as well as freedom of its students to move between the campus and the rest of city with ease. This uniquely open space shaped the way in which the refashioning of a "new life" (*xinshenghuo*) at Beida took place. He then takes pains to demonstrate that seemingly small details of life at Beida predisposed the students to be at a distance from, and potentially in opposition to, the state. Beida students' celebrated image of untidy long gowns during the May Fourth years, for example, was in fact "their effort to unsettle the position of students vis-à-vis the disciplining state" that endorsed and promoted modern attire and physical fitness as part of its program to build strong citizens in service of the modern nation-state (61). Other distancing acts in the "lived practices" of Beida students included their resistance to school's curriculum, rules, and rituals to the extent that there were calls for abolishing anything that represented external authority. All these helped each student to "define one's self as an independent political subject" (50). Lanza argues that Cai Yuanpei's reform created the parallel tensions between Beida and the students on the one hand, and between Beida and the state on the other. Cai's advocacy for academic freedom and embracing of universal values vis-à-vis state-defined knowledge and a China-specific curriculum helped to disconnect Beida, academic pursuits, and education from the goals of the state and the nation.

In Lanza's reinterpretation, the student demonstrations of May and June 1919 were the culmination of a struggle over political boundaries. May Fourth Beida witnessed fervent student

organizational activities in the form of study societies devoted to the discussion of politics. The very transformation of the everyday and associational behaviors at Beida served to redefine politics and create a space for politics beyond the sphere of the government. Immediately before and after the 1919 protest movement, Beida students pushed the physical and sociological boundaries of “students” by organizing lectures and teaching programs for the university’s staff and Beijing’s residents on and off campus. In a moment of national crisis caused by news of the Versailles Treaty in 1919, it was only natural that the students extended their action to the broader public space with explosive force. Anticipating the argument for the presence of pre-May Fourth student organizations and protests, Lanza points out the fundamental difference between the late Qing and May Fourth students in their identities and practices. While the former were preoccupied with changing the function of the state, the latter’s organizational activities were removed from state-centered concerns. Furthermore, in their protests, the former tried to appeal only to the government, while the latter not only directly confronted the state but also claimed a new public space and public audience. There were no students as political signifiers before 1919 precisely because the public space for student activism had not yet been appropriated. It was only in stormy 1919 that Chinese students became visible as a category of political activism by remapping the city with their radical footsteps and speeches addressing the people of Beijing and beyond.

At times extremely dense, this book is theoretically sophisticated, prodigiously researched, and eloquently written. In bringing the theory of urban space and the everyday to bear on our understanding of the birth of modern students in China, Lanza makes a major breakthrough in both the scholarship on the May Fourth Movement and the study of political activism. His work further challenges us to move away from causal reasoning and to think about modern political subjectivities and categories in modern China in a brand new way.

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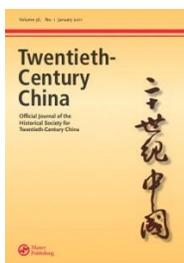
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