May Fourth Movement: Top Five Readings

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The May Fourth Movement – so famous in China it doesn’t need a year, although 1919 – the year it happened – has become legendary too. On that date, some three thousand students marched through Beijing demonstrating against Japanese imperialism and started a political movement that would become identified with Chinese demands for “science” and “democracy” through the next century. From the Cultural Revolution to Tian’anmen Square, May Fourth echoes through China’s modern history. The Chinese Communist Party still claims the movement as its point of origin. On May 4, 2009, the movement will be ninety years old. In some ways, its significance to China is like that of the Sixties in the West – a celebration of youth and possibility combined with often extremist and hardcore politics.

But what was this event, why did it matter, and how can you find out more about it?

Here are five ways into this fascinating topic – famous in China, little-known in the West.


4. Chen Duxiu, *Call to Youth.* Chen’s call to China’s youth to “save the nation” in 1919 symbolizes the May Fourth Movement’s attempt to overcome Confucian attempts to venerate age and instead celebrate youth.

5. “*Acting Out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China,*” Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, in *Journal of Asian Studies* (November 1990) – classic article on how the 1989 student protesters in China “acted out” their political protests with references to the past.

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