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The New May Fourth Spirit

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The sun is rising. At Beijing Normal University, red flags flutter and unfurl in the early morning breeze above the sports ground. Thousands of students mill about, excitedly falling into groups and lining up to take to the streets and march to Tiananmen Square.

The great May Fourth demonstration is underway despite stern warnings in the press and strict police orders not to take the protest to the streets. That’s the real May Fourth Spirit! Defiance in the face of danger! Knock down the old, make way for the new! Challenge authority!

The early morning air is refreshingly cool with only the faintest trace of coal dust now that the long winter is over. Animated, nervous, smiling faces bask in the honey-colored glow of a brilliant morning sun. Even the birds, rare as they are in Beijing, add to the defiant chorus!

*Seize the hour! Seize the day! Wake up! China, Wake up!*

The atmosphere is electric; but the movement of rebel forces gentle, cooperative and fluidly choreographed.

Large red banners with bright yellow characters of the kind used in school sports meets announce group affiliations such as History Department, Educational Psychology, Arts Choral Group, but it is the national flag of China that takes the place of honor in the student color guard.

Self-appointed student leaders run around the thickening assembly of students with battery-operated megaphones trying to get others to listen, trying to instill order and decorum.

“Please remember discipline!” one voice shouts. “Find your department, look for the banners!”

“Stay with your group!” another one screeches, as static and feedback from the megaphones start to obscure the message.
“Remember to stay with people you know!”

“Song sheets are available from the Arts Choral Group.”

Cloth headbands are passed around. Student scribes dash off calligraphy calling for dialogue on sheets of plain cloth and cardboard using ink brushes and felt-tip pens.

Already the air is humming with music. In the middle of the gathering, two accordion players are bellowing and bouncing, rehearsing some morale-boosting numbers for the day’s march. There are not enough mimeographed song sheets to go around so marchers scribble down lyrics in their notebooks, copying them off handout sheets and public blackboards. No cribbing is needed for the Internationale, as everyone knows the anthem inside out.

Why sing a song embraced by the establishment? The idea is brilliant in a way. If you sing it enough, you own it. The communist indoctrinated youth of Beijing are waving the red flag to beat the red flag, employing iconic rhetoric of rebellion to remake China in their own image.

"DO WE HAVE TO WAIT ANOTHER 70 YEARS?"

There it is again. The students are willfully making parallels between their situation and the progenitor of all student demonstrations. The social and creative explosion that followed the May Fourth demonstration at Tiananmen Gate in 1919 led to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Once the party took power, it enshrined the 1919 student demonstration as an icon of Chinese communism.

The mood is light, cheerful; the air full of familiar shouts, earthy Beijing greetings and boisterous sing-alongs. There’s a kind of safety in numbers, at least psychological safety. If many people are doing something, and don’t start to panic, the risk that an individual will be singled out for punishment decreases. Non-participation involves a risk too, the risk of being left on the wrong side of history. Conditioned by decades of campaigns and crackdowns, Chinese understandably look to those around them for clues on how to behave. It’s not so much follow the leader as follow other followers.

Standing in the swirling, excited pack of protesters, I am hit with a pang of self-consciousness. Not because I am over six-foot tall, a 190-pound blond man in a sea of black hair and thin physiques; this is a political rally in a country where foreigners live in separate buildings, eat in different restaurants and shop in different stores using different money from local people. Everywhere I go, thousands of curious and sometimes resentful eyes observe my every move. Any lapse of judgment on my part will be magnified many times over because of the stigma of difference.

I am not the only one hit with this sense of not belonging. Beside me stands Lao Ni, who had seen enough excitement for one day. He had seen enough to tell his friends in Taiwan, he was getting ready to leave.

Bright and Jenny find me by the side of the road watching parade ranks being organized by departmental affiliation.

“Jin Peili! Are you going to join us or just watch?” Bright asks provocatively.

“I don’t know,” I answer, trying to imagine myself as others saw me. “I mean, I’m a wai-guo-ren.”

“Are you afraid?” Jenny teases, eyebrows arching in disbelief.

“No, not really.”

“Then take a stand with us!” Bright is insistent, bordering on seductive.

Without another word she takes me by the arm and leads me past a throng of people into the middle of the arts choral group. Just then there is a ripple of excited whispers whipping across the staging
ground. Word has just come in that the student marchers from other colleges have reached Beitaiping Zhuang intersection just north of campus and that it is time to fall into formation behind departmental flags to break out of the gated, guarded campus. “Jin Peili is marching with us,” Bright says, assigning me a cohort to march with.

Somehow being placed in the middle of the music section is reassuring.

“Arise, you enslaved people!” cry out a dozen voices in Arts Choral Group, “Do not say we have nothing. We shall be the masters of the world. This is the final struggle...”

The Internationale is effective in jump-starting the march. It is sung with such repetition that it is soon one of those tunes that you can’t get it out of your head.

Doubts mount as we are forced to take a roundabout path to find a way past the padlocked bars of the southeast campus gate. The student vanguard discovers a passable exit through the narrow doorway adjacent to the vestibule manned by campus security. A row of policemen is visible just outside the bars of the gate, but we outnumber them by the hundreds, if not thousands.

Guards or no guards, there is no stopping the rush off campus once the first few students squeeze through. We break ranks, forcefully propelled forward through the passageway to face the unknown. Like grains of sand slipping down the thin neck of an hourglass, dropping past a point of no return.

As we emerge on the street, two campus security agents plead with some flustered students to immediately return to campus. The narrowness of the makeshift exit had forced everyone to go more or less single file, causing each marcher to step out alone, momentarily isolated from the group and vulnerable. The procession quickly reassembles into departmental groups aided by the waving of banners and shouts of student facilitators. Cars and buses on the wide thoroughfare outside the school gate are slowed and then halted as the road is inundated by wave after wave of protesters pouring off campus. Traffic on the wide avenue comes to a complete halt.

A long line of police watch intently from the far side of the road. They are ridiculously outnumbered and make no serious attempt to stop the onrush. Immobilized automobiles get swallowed up, lapped by bodies on all sides, like listing ships in a turbulent sea. From the north comes a spirited procession of students from other schools, and in no time students fill the road as far as the eye can see.

Bright banners for Beijing University, Qinghua University, and Political Science and Law University are hoisted above the heads of the crowd on bamboo poles, flapping in the wind, cracking like whips. As the assembly of students flows tentatively south towards Tiananmen Square, the police back off and let the human mass proceed towards the city center. Are the police in shock and intimidated by the stupendous size of the crowd or silently supportive, won over by the contagious, ebullient spirit of the young protesters? Either way, they do nothing but watch.

Pedestrians start gawking too, cyclists sit on their bikes, unable to cruise forward, curious about the disturbance. Most of the inconvenienced commuters stare in dumbfounded silence, though a few shout words of support and clap at the ragtag student army marching down the street. Passengers stranded on stalled buses peer out their rectangular windows, surveying the scene.

The police ignore the law-breaking students, but the students do not ignore the police. Instead some fast-thinking students try to win the day with cheerful improvisation and song.

“The people love the People’s Police!”
“The People’s Police love the people!”

Three policemen climb onto the roof of a stalled bus to better survey the unstoppable horde. They exhibit neither amusement nor anger. Some uniformed officers remove their hats, as if off duty, others stand stiffly at attention. Are they mesmerized by the irrepressible optimism of the marchers or just waiting for orders? We stream confidently past several lines of police, as the rhythmic drone of accordions cue a series of crisp rhyming chants. Word quickly reaches us that police blockades erected
a short distance down the road have been penetrated by the vanguard of flag-waving marchers, so spirits mount and the student parade picks up speed. The demonstration flows southward on Xinwai Road, coursing past nondescript walled compounds containing military hospitals, factories and apartment blocks.

As we approach Xiaoxitian, near the China Film building, a few hardy members of the international press corps are in evidence on the side of the road. Ensnconed inside a Chinese crowd in motion I return the gaze of people who look more or less like me as they attempt to capture images of something that might turn out to be a newsworthy event. Caucasian men hastily clamber up ladders and balance heavy cameras on broad shoulders to take aim and record the progress of an unauthorized May Fourth protest that already has a whiff of history about it. Seeing an opportunity, perhaps even protection in the regard of unblinking black lenses, the arts choral group enthusiastically plunges into song.

"Everyone unite! The Internationale shall certainly be realized..."

The marchers around me ham it up, they strut and swing and cry their hearts out, happy to have been observed, at once defiant, but eager for validation.

We surge southwards like a river swollen with rain, seeking Tiananmen. Crossing Second Ring Road, one of Beijing’s key arteries, brings east-west traffic to a halt, leaving taxis and busses stranded and abandoned. Meanwhile, construction workers halt their heavy lifting to line the streets, some of them waving and shouting rowdily. As if on cue, the Arts Choral Group accordion players change tack, “The red sun shall shine all over the globe,” fading out on the line, “The Internationale shall definitely be realized,” to launch a new tune. When I hear the lyrics I know why. It is proletarian agi-prop outreach time.

"Peasants, workers, soldiers, unite together!"

The gaggle explodes in celebration upon hearing the call for solidarity. The rhetoric is not new, but hearing it in this context is.

A strange excitement lifts me. This is the China I have long imagined but never known, the China synonymous with revolution and rebellion that I’ve read about in history and literature. The energy is inclusive and all encompassing. Can a peaceful people’s uprising be in the making?

As the procession moves south along the narrow tree-lined shopping street leading to Xidan, the choral group starts chanting a ditty to the melody to Frere Jacques, slyly co-opting a Young Pioneer anthem.

*Dadao guandao! Fandui fubai!*  
*Women yaoqiu minzhu! Women yaoqiu ziyou!*  
*Xiang qian jin! Xiang qian jin!*  

Down with corruption! Down with nepotism!  
We seek democracy! We seek freedom!  
March forward! March forward!  

The mood of the moment is more fun-loving than militant but political implications of the word *dadao*, that is to say “down with,” are ominous. The mood can’t be forever light-hearted and uplifting but need it be mean and outright destructive?

Somewhere along the road to Tiananmen the illegal rag-tag May Fourth demonstration turns into an unsanctioned but broadly tolerated peace march. The implicit militancy of the demonstration at the outset, understandable given a system of government in which a police action was not only possible but likely, was softened by the non-action of the police and the positive response of bystanders along the way. Had there been serious scuffles, arrests or violence between police and marchers or even just conflict between inconvenienced motorists and marchers, the Tiananmen-bound procession would
have been forced to choose between conflict and surrender. Instead there was virtually no resistance, which permitted marchers to relax and reach out in a way that reflected how others were responding to them.

By the time we reach Chang’an Boulevard, the numbers are swelling beyond count. Everywhere well-wishers come out of their homes, offices and shops to wave and show support. Police blockades at critical junctions are relaxed as the good-natured vanguard of students wearing sun visors, carrying the sweaters and jackets no longer needed in the midday sun, cheerfully beg cooperation.

A jolt of energy surges through the rapidly moving procession, now numbering ten thousand or more as we reach the northern extremity of the Great Hall of the People and our forbidden destination comes into full view. The protesters around me are sweaty and sunburned, some losing their voices, others already limping from walking miles without a break, but even those unsteady of foot have a bounce in their step, the proud young rebels homing in on the legendary destination that is stage center in Chinese politics.

The crowd picks up speed, those of us near the front of the procession feel an exhilaration as the parade pours onto the vast emptiness of Tiananmen Square, finally coming to rest near the Martyr’s Memorial. My group settles in the shadow of Sun Yatsen’s portrait, a wood-framed monolith temporarily erected for the national holiday. As thousands join us in due time from universities situated even further away, the throng thickens, and we are surrounded by student contingents on all sides. Yet even now, the vast breadth of the Square dwarfs the growing congregation.

I was supposed to meet Cui Jian and Liu Yuan for lunch today, now I’m in the middle of a crowd in the middle of Tiananmen Square, participating in a demonstration I had merely planned to take a look at.

The rock singer was a musical rebel and effectively expressed his angst in song, but in conversation I rarely found him to be political. If anything, he was cautious, plodding and methodical in his rebelliousness. He sang songs exactly the way he liked to, which ruffled lots of official feathers the wrong way, but he had no desire to push things to the point that he become a persona non grata or forced into exile. So he paid the dues of living in the People’s Republic, including taxes, payment of which was extracted as a corollary of his fame.

Daily life in the People’s Republic has been excellent preparation for the practical and dramatic demands of staging political theatre at Tiananmen. It was the art of skirting the edge without crossing the line. It was rebelling within the orthodox vocabulary of rebellion. On what grounds could the May Fourth inspired Communist Party object to a May Fourth march of students waving red banners and singing communist anthems?

Already townspeople were swarming towards the protest, and they too knew how to play the ambiguity game. If questioned they could say they were watching out of curiosity, not in solidarity.

Meanwhile, the police are melting away, which lessens the likelihood of conflict and actually enhances the sense of order. The crowd can do without police because it self-polices. Everyone is under pressure to stay with his own group, remaining under the watchful eyes of peers. There are no explicit rules but there is much order — order born of years of communal life in a communal society. One instinctively knows how to take turns using the facilities in the family’s cramped apartment, to share a single desk with six roommates in a dorm room, to fall into order and march and sing in state-sponsored youth fests. Functioning in a crowd, cooperating and putting on a show are nothing new to these young communists. This demonstration, though illegal, is being guided by well-honed instincts, it reflects not so much rebellion as an intense expression of everyday values.

The banners around me were both provocative and orthodox, lifted from slogans uttered in generations past.

FREEDOM
LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE!
Tiananmen Square! As a protest of uncertain duration begins on the monumental chessboard carved out in the heart of the arid, mountain-ring plain of Beijing, no one knows for sure where things are going or what will happen next, but the location is deliberate. Tiananmen is the ceremonial stage for a nation of a billion. Nowhere in Beijing does the sky seem wider and grander than over Tiananmen, the sky gate; the place where the sky meets the ground. Scorching hot in the sun, magical in the moonlight, lyrical lookout on the cosmos, celestial yet grounded. Open to the heavens, a conduit of the elements, Tiananmen is the place, if such a place exists, where the mandate of heaven resides; not just a place to celebrate history, but a place to make it, inspired by precedent.

Tags: 6/4, Cui Jian, May Fourth, Philip J Cunningham, Tiananmen, Tiananmen Moon