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An Image

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An Image

August 17, 2010 in [Books](#), [Excerpt](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

There were 12 minutes and 28 seconds remaining.

I had never bid on eBay. It takes too much energy, too much attention to follow the vagaries of an online auction. And there never seems to be anything I want that badly. But I wanted that propaganda poster—a reproduction of an oil painting, mid-1970s—depicting, with the imagination and rhetorical power possible only in socialist realism, the May Fourth movement of 1919.



"The May Fourth Movement," propaganda poster, 1976

In the painting, the sky is clearing and clouds are dissipating behind the imposing presence of Tiananmen, which dominates the scene. The students, young men and women, are marching at the center, their facial expressions ranging from outrage to stern determination. They wear either the scholar's long gown or Western-style suits; both kinds of attire identify them as belonging to the social group of "modern" students. And the fact that they indeed embody the forces of modernity, of progress against an essentialized tradition, is made very evident by the painter. One of their signs reads, "Down with the store of Confucius and Co." while the notable presence of female students marching prominently in the forefront epitomizes the stance on gender equality.

11 minutes 15 seconds. I wanted it. I repressed the creeping sense of unease, took out my credit card, and placed a bid.

9 minutes 20 seconds. "You have been outbid." Somebody else wants it? But who? And why? Who could want that? I tried to resist the urge, tried not to get sucked into this perverse poker-like game of raising the stakes. I am an intellectual, a historian; I am above the petty antiquarian lust for ownership, for artifacts. I trace trends, ideas, and lives. Right.

8 minutes 35 seconds. All true. But I am specifically a cultural historian. I work with materiality, I study representation, I analyze images. Why shouldn't I own my subject matter?

I looked at the image again. Around the marching students, people converge toward the demonstration: they are workers, common citizens awakened by the words of students, words they literally clasp in their hands, in the forms of the leaflets students have distributed. The signs the protestors carry—"Give us back Qingdao," "Abolish the unequal treaties"—alert the people of the imminent danger to the territorial integrity of China: the Treaty of Versailles had just assigned to

Japan the German colonies in Shandong Province. It was then the pull of nationalism that drew the students out of their schools and connected them to the people.

7 minutes 22 seconds. "You are now the highest bidder." My opponent seemed to have given up. Reassured, I started fantasizing, imagining the poster in my office, or better, in my living room. I had seen that image before, many times. I reached for a copy of Vera Schwarcz's *The Chinese Enlightenment*, and there it was, on the cover. Schwarcz never talks about that painting, and, for some reason, until this time I had never paid much attention to it either. But now, I was becoming obsessed with owning it.

4 minutes 10 seconds. Still the highest bidder.

It is a powerful image, and it synthesizes perfectly the multiple legacies of the May Fourth movement, a moment that, in different but converging histories, has been made to coincide with the birth of Chinese modernity, the emergence of a national consciousness, the birth cry of an infant class struggle. But the painting clearly suggests a precise historical interpretation; in the official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mythology, the events of May Fourth mark the first encounter between the students and the people. Yet in the picture the students still march alone (and one wonders whether the promises of that encounter will ever be truly and completely fulfilled). They march under their own banners; they bring awareness *to the people*, thus making evident that their new political consciousness has matured apart from the people, inside a closed community, and implicitly because of that very isolation. The political awareness of the students is then almost a natural byproduct of their status. But how can it be that this particular category is always assumed to be "naturally" political?

3 minutes 19 seconds. Still the highest bidder.

The monumental outline of Tiananmen (the Gate of Heavenly Peace) looms in the center of the scene. It marks more than a simple location; it is the central point in the map of student activism throughout the following century. Tiananmen stands as the symbol of continuity of the nation-state, the embodiment of power, authority, and national unity. Through the gate an uneasy suture is achieved between the public space of protest, the modern state, and an ahistorical national past (the cyclical recurring of China's five thousand years). By implicitly linking May Fourth's student nationalism to the imperial officers' concern for the dynasty, the gate suggests a continuous reference to the long history of the relation between the state and intellectuals, for which "students" are the modern embodiment. Students are therefore *always already* political because they inherit a particular place in relationship with the state (imperial or national); they are always already standing in front of Tiananmen, waiting to be heard by (or curry the favor of) who is inside. Differences in time and space are erased in this perspective, and every instance of student activism becomes just the recrafting of an old tradition.

1 minute and 20 seconds. "You have been outbid!"

Damn! Too late to place another bid, too late to recover the lost image. I am left with doubt (who stole it from me?), remorse (why didn't I bid more?), and this digital reproduction.

Now that I had lost the chance of owning it, I looked at it again. Maybe, if we just shift our perspective a bit, the image lends itself to other readings, to completely different interpretations. Maybe Tiananmen is not as central and dominating as it looked at first glance. Rather, it might be seen as emerging among the dissipating clouds, suddenly revealed, its contours becoming more precise. It looks almost like a nascent symbol, summoned into life by what was happening in the streets. But if we can challenge the stability of the gate, then maybe none of the other elements in this picture will be fixed and determined either, including the "students" themselves. What will we find if we look behind the gate?

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Poster image from Stefan Landsberger's collection at [Chinese posters.net](#).

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