

Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism: China's May Fourth Movement

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China's Year of Commemorations: Introduction

Geremie Barmé

The [China Heritage Quarterly](#) covers recent developments and scholarship in areas related to China's heritage. Founded as an e-journal in 2005, from 2008 it expanded its purview to include more material on intellectual history, literature, culture (in the broadest sense) and translation.

The Chinese calendar of 2009 is one crammed with anniversaries—some of major state moments, others that mark mass violence and ugly repression. The March 2009 issue of 'China Heritage Quarterly' covers both the 'light' and the 'dark' anniversaries of this year.

In early 2009, the Shanghai-based intellectual historian Xu Jilin wrote a major essay to mark the ninetieth anniversary of China's 1919 May Fourth Movement. To appear in the leading Beijing journal 'Reading' (Dushu) on the eve of 4 May 2009, Xu's essay 'Historical Memories of the May Fourth', translated here by Duncan Campbell, appears in the Features section of this issue of China Heritage Quarterly as a 'pre-publication' of the Chinese original.

As an historian of modern China and as an engaged member of the lively, and often rancorous, intellectual community of thinkers and writers living in the People's Republic, Xu Jilin is acutely aware of the clashing histories and legacies of the May Fourth Movement. In his new essay Xu powerfully contrasts the contending traditions of patriotism within China and, in effect, speaks to the new tide of globalised Chinese nationalism that reached a crescendo during the March-April 2008 worldwide protests during the Olympic Torch Relay.

In 2008, some writers who have

carved out an intellectual and market niche for themselves as inheritors of the virulent strain of nationalism that had such baleful effects in China's twentieth century, propounded what they dubbed a 'new worldism' (xin shijiezhuyi). Quite unlike the 'cosmopolitanism' of the 1910s of which Xu Jilin writes, this 'new worldism' is celebrated by polemicists like Gan Yang (a man self-described as an 'independent leftist'). He declared that the 19 April 2008 demonstrations of Chinese patriots against pro-Tibet and pro-human rights demonstrators surpassed the May Fourth as a mass patriotic movement played out on a vast international stage. Intellectual jingoists like Gan Yang celebrated such global agitation as marking a new age of national awakening, one that foreshadows the rise of a confident China. They argue that through a principled and steadfast engagement with the world community China can evince economic, military and cultural strength of a kind that can help it face down its opponents, as well as the distorting 'Western media'. Given the oratorical landscape of Sinophone writings, one in which rhetorical violence, feverish overstatement and the soapbox forge an alluring troika, such blithe braggadocio comes all too easily.

For thinkers like Xu Jilin, the other

tradition of May Fourth has a more pressing relevance and allure. He reminds his readers that that the earlier tide of nationalism eventually inundated the country and drowned out for many decades the measured voices of reason and humanity. The cosmopolitanism of May Fourth patriotism is as vital today as it was in those early post-War years. Ninety years ago socially aware and politically active individuals saw the possible dawning of a 'new century' and a 'new age'. As Xu Jilin points out, the Peking University Student Weekly established in 1920 stated in its editorial announcement that, 'China is but a unit within the world.... Thus we should declare, "We reject those things that benefit but one nation and not the world"'. Such sentiments reflected, and continue to reflect, an idealism all too easily forgotten in the competitive environment of nation states, the marketplace of ideas and the careerism of intellectual-nationalists.



May Fourth Demonstrators at Tiananmen

The *China Heritage Quarterly*, edited by Geremie Barmé, is an online quarterly produced under the aegis of the China Heritage Project of the College of Asia & the Pacific, The Australian National University. The Project provides a focus for university-wide research on traditional China, its modern interpretations and recent scholarship. It also advocates a 'New Sinology' that builds on traditional Sinological strengths while emphasizing a robust engagement

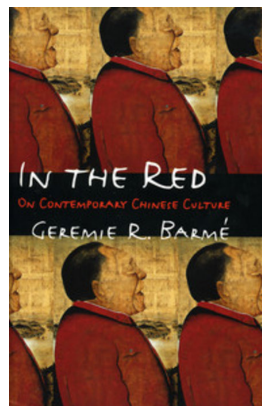
with the complex and shifting realities of contemporary China.

Duncan Campbell is a scholar and translator specialising in Chinese literary prose of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the history of libraries and gardens. He is a lecturer in Chinese Studies at The Australian National University.

See Xu Jilin's: [Historical Memories of May Fourth: Patriotism, but of what kind?](#)

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