*The following excerpt is taken from a June 2019 Carnegie Council podcast entitled “*[*The Crack-Up: A Hundred Years of Student Protests in China, with Jeffrey Wasserstrom*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20190617-crack-up-hundred-years-student-protests-china-jeffrey-wasserstrom)*.” The podcast is based off* The New York Times *opinion piece “*[*May Fourth, the Day That Changed China*](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/03/opinion/china-may-fourth-movement-protests-1919-wusi.html)*” written by historian* [*Jeffrey Wasserstrom*](https://www.faculty.uci.edu/profile.cfm?faculty_id=5310)*. This transcript has been edited for classroom use.*

**What triggered the May 4th (Wusi) movement in China?**

The May 4th [Wusi] protest is really the most famous student-led protest of the early 20th century. It's important because of what happened in 1919 itself, when a group of patriotic youths felt that China's interests were being sold out by the Treaty of Versailles and also felt that the warlords who were in control of the Chinese government at that point really didn't have the people's best interests at heart; [the warlords] were autocratic and were taking China backward rather than forward.

…[The Wusi] has also been important because ever since then, later generations of protestors have looked back to the May Fourth movement as an inspirational moment. It looms very large in Chinese history the way an event like the Boston Tea Party looms incredibly largely in the American imagination.

China had come into World War I on the side of the Allies. They had come in fairly late. They didn't send soldiers, but they did send [about 140,000] laborers to support the cause.

There was a sense that they were on the winning side in World War I, and there was also a sense because of speeches that Woodrow Wilson had given that the end of World War I was going to mean the start of an era of national self-determination, a kind of end of empires. But what was actually happening in Paris was a deal was being struck to give former German possessions in China to Japan, rather than giving them back to Chinese control, so that really infuriated young Chinese—and Chinese intellectuals in general—who just felt that this was grotesque. Why, when China had been on the winning side, should another country that was on the winning side, Japan, be given control of parts of China? This just didn't make sense to them, and that was one of the reasons why they were so upset.

1. What triggered the May 4th (Wusi) movement in China?

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**How were the May 4th protests organized? Why are the protests so important to Chinese history?**

There are a variety of techniques that they [protesters] use. In some ways they're stepping into a quite traditional role within China of scholars serving as the conscience of the nation, intellectuals speaking truth to power. There's a long tradition of that in China that goes back into the dynastic period. But they're also using some quite modern techniques…Once the May Fourth movement picks up there's a boycott of Japanese goods….At that point, merchants had been some of the leading forces. Strikes are [also] relatively new.

The protests spread through the country. One reason it can spread easily is that there had been a group of students in Japan from different parts of the country [China] who the year before had left Japan as a sign of protest against the brewing of this kind of selling out of China to Japan. They were scattered around the country and had connected with each other from being involved in a 1918 protest in Japan.

So there are very quickly protests in a variety of other Chinese cities. They reach their height in Shanghai, which is the industrial, commercial, and trading hub of China. It's also a center of higher education. There are several schools there that are important. There is a general strike there that paralyzes the city.

…The protests succeed in certain kinds of goals. Three of the officials that they particularly hated are dismissed from office, which was one of the student demands; students who are arrested in Beijing are released, which was another student demand; and the Chinese delegation to the Treaty of Versailles agrees to not sign the Treaty if it has these hated terms in it. They succeed on those fronts.

…[However] it doesn't stop the Treaty of Versailles from going into effect. It doesn't stop those territories from being handed from Germany to Japan, but it's enough of a success that people of later generations can look back to it and say that this is a sign of what collective action can accomplish.

1. How and why did the May 4th protests spread? Why is this noteworthy?
2. Why are the protests considered to be so successful?

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Mao Zedong was one of the youths who was inspired by Peking University intellectuals. He wasn't in Beijing for the actual May Fourth protests, but he was part of this whole milieu [environment]. He was of that generation and involved in the activism.

[T]he fact that the Chinese Communist Party was formed later by a small group that included him as well as some of the other May Fourth activists [is] why the May Fourth movement is celebrated within the People's Republic of China as a founding moment. [T]he story of May Fourth is told as if the main point of it was to lead two years later inevitably to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party and then that set in motion a kind of glorious road to 1949 and the founding of a new People's Republic of China, and so forth…

Of course, it's a tricky kind of event to look back to and celebrate once you're a party in a control and you don't want students to take to the street… and say that that you are unfit to rule in the way that in 1919 people called out the warlords as unfit to rule.

1. Why is the May 4th movement seen as so important in China according to this excerpt?
2. Based upon the excerpt and what you know about modern China, what makes May 4th a complicated event to celebrate?