When the centenary of China’s 1919 May Fourth demonstrations drew near, China watchers turned their gaze towards the politics of remembrance in the People’s Republic of China. They noted the official emphasis on patriotism and the ‘spirit of youth’, thus leaving the May Fourth legacy of ‘Mr Science’ and ‘Mr Democracy’ all but buried. Official interpretations foregrounded what is now known as the May Fourth Incident, or the gathering of thousands of students at Tiananmen in Beijing in response to the transfer of Germany’s former rights in Shandong to Japan. Later, however, the term May Fourth also came to denote a range of cultural, political, social, and ideological advancements in the years before and after 1919. Seen through this lens, the movement spurred the reorganization of the Kuomintang, witnessed the rise of “isms” – individualism, nationalism, liberalism, and feminism among them – and facilitated the adoption of the vernacular. Furthermore, it instigated student and workers’ movements and the expansion of the public sphere. Since the movement contained all these facets, it is not surprising that there are as many ‘May Fourths’ as there have been commemorations of May Fourth.

While the shifting meaning of May Fourth in the People’s Republic of China has been gaining attention, a less frequently asked question is: What did and does the movement mean for Chinese communities outside of mainland China? To answer this, we first need to revisit Chinese communities outside of mainland China? To answer this, we first need to revisit Chinese communities outside of mainland China and students negotiated the meaning of the movement congruent with a variety of agendas, whereas the commemorations also coincided with another anniversary in Singapore and occurred amidst political protests in Hong Kong.

As 2019 marked the centenary of China’s May Fourth demonstrations, in this piece, we reflect on how this event and the broader movement surrounding it were commemorated in Singapore and Hong Kong, with reference to Southeast Asia. We probe the question of how the movement’s ‘memorialization’ and ‘localization’ in these two settings were shaped by both their connection with China and the history of British colonialism. Politicians, intellectuals, and students negotiated the meaning of the movement congruent with a variety of agendas, whereas the commemorations also coincided with another anniversary in Singapore and occurred amidst political protests in Hong Kong.1

May Fourth at 100: Singapore and Hong Kong

Memorialization, localization, and negotiation

There are as many ‘May Fourths’ as there have been commemorations of May Fourth

Els van Dongen and David Kenley


In Singapore and Hong Kong: local identities and connections

To explore how the localization and memorialization of May Fourth intersect in the May Fourth centenaries in Singapore and Hong Kong, the authors of this piece, together with Huang, Jani, held a panel discussion at the National Library in Singapore in November 2019.2 To some extent, we have all studied May Fourth from the angles that Edward Wang describes. Els van Dongen has investigated the re-evaluation of May Fourth ‘conservative’ in mainland China and transnational interactions involving debates on ‘radicalism’ and the meaning of May Fourth after 1989. David Kenley was an early exponent of the transnational perspective on May Fourth and analyzed its meaning in Singapore in his well-known monograph New Culture in a New World (2003). Finally, Huang, Jani has written extensively on questions of commemoration, historiography, and student activism in both China and Singapore.

Why Singapore and Hong Kong? One reason is that both witness a complex dynamic in terms of how they relate to mainland China. In his book, Kenley asked: What did a movement with nationalist traits come to signify among members of the Chinese diaspora? He has answered this by situating the movement between the oft-designated twin themes of the movement, namely ‘nationalism’ and ‘enlightenment’, and that of ‘transnationalism’. However, both cities also manifest a strong sense of local identity shaped by both interactions with China and the history of British rule. Indeed, in May Fourth in Hong Kong (五四在香港) Chan Hak Yin has analyzed interpretations of May Fourth based on three historical perspectives: that of British colonialism, that of nationalism before British rule, and that of local identity.3 In spite of the vastly different trajectories of both cities, local identity has been shaped and discussed through and in response to this double connection of the changing relation with mainland China and the long shadow of British rule. What’s more, in both places ideological divisions have intersected with linguistic divisions, including but not limited to an English-educated versus a Chinese-educated elite. Returning to the May Fourth period, what forms did the movement take in Singapore and Hong Kong? Although it is equally hard to define May Fourth outside China, large-scale protests also occurred in these places in the spring of 1919. Throughout May, Chinese residents of Singapore called for boycotts and strikes, and these calls amounted to violence on the night of 19 June 1919. The Straits Times reported that a mob “made bonfires in the middle of the roads, and with the air filled with piercing screams and shouts, scenes of wild confusion reigned.”4 Eventually the Governor called on the sailors of the docked warship Manchester to help patrol the city. By the early morning, the demonstration died out, but it had caused severe damage, had claimed four lives (two Chinese and two Indians), and had seriously injured eight individuals, and had led to the arrest of over 130 participants. Similarly, in Hong Kong, students and journalists led rallies and demonstrations while business leaders called for a boycott of Japanese-made products. Nine students were arrested and fined. Their crime? They marched in the street holding umbrellas with national products written on top.

Nevertheless, as was the case in China, these 1919 protests in Singapore and Hong Kong can best be understood as part of a larger, multi-year movement that transends temporary nationalist concerns. Community leaders were also motivated by a commitment to greater democracy, and by a desire to implement new intellectual trends and ideas. They sought to destroy the icons of the past and usher in a new era of science and enlightenment. But May Fourth in Singapore and Hong Kong had some
rather distinct elements as well. Intellectuals in Singapore used the movement to call for more local control over Singapore affairs. In some ways, the movement was an internal power struggle over the issue of what it meant to be Chinese in Singapore. Foreign analysts and commentators repudiated some of the literary trends emerging in China, calling instead for greater attention to local themes. Oftan, the struggles fitted the more recently arrived immigrants against the more long settled Chinese residents within Singapore.

Negotiating the meanings of May Fourth in 2019

While this brief detour to the May Fourth period already reflects the tensions between the national and the ascendant Chinese challenges for the quest for local distinction, commemorations of May Fourth since 1989 also reveal the impact of the legacy of colonialism and the Cold War. With reform and opening up in China, renewed interactions occurred between scholars in mainland China and those in Hong Kong and Singapore. In a 2009 article published in Singapore’s Lianhe Zaobao, the art critic Wu Wang Guanzhu and Zhang Yingyian already criticized the ‘idealization’ of May Fourth and its ‘nationalist’ legacy. Post-2009, discussion. They called for a more beyond the simplistic praise of the ‘May Fourth spirit’ in revolutionizing terms and the dramatic denouement of May Fourth as radical in peaceful times. Whether this objective was achieved in 2019 was, however, another matter.

In Singapore, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, used social media to pen an essay on the ‘narrow sins of May Fourth’. The editors of Singapore’s Straits Times, Dakota State University, USA

David Kenley, Dean of Arts and Humanities, Deakin University, Australia


2. ‘Why Raffles flanked by statues of Tsinghua and Peking University’, Public lecture and panel discussion, NTU Humanities Centre, Singapore, 4 May 2019.