

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL

**Chinese Students and Anti-Japanese Protests, Past and Present**

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom

When Chinese students marched against Japan in Beijing this April, their demonstration appeared to be adding yet one more chapter to the ongoing controversy over Japan's reluctance to deal seriously with the atrocities it committed during the Second World War. But to make sense fully of the protests themselves and understand why a regime that seemed to encourage the students so abruptly switched gears and urgently tried to get the protestors off the street, one needs to recall the history of Chinese youth movements. In particular, it is crucial to look backward to what students did during the month of May in various years of the twentieth century.

This history matters to the leaders of the People's Republic of China, who well know the student protests of May 1919 helped pave the way for the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, and that the student protests of May 1989 posed a formidable challenge to the party's post-1949 monopoly on power. May is one of the most symbolically charged months in China's political calendar. This helps explain the intense concern with getting students back into the classrooms before April ended. It also helps explain the acute official nervousness particularly about May 4, a very special day in a very special month. It was on that date in 1919 that the warlords then running China contended with the first of a series of dramatic student-led protests that precipitated the downfall of three high-ranking ministers. And May 4 also marked a turning point in the 1989 student-led struggle that made Tiananmen Square a household word and a familiar sight on television news programs.

These events occupy a place in China's political mythology roughly comparable to that of the Boston Tea Party.

*Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom is professor of history and of East Asian languages and an adjunct in the American Studies Program at Indiana University, where he also serves as director of the East Asian Studies Center. He is the author of Student Protests in Twentieth-Century China: The View from Shanghai (Stanford University Press, 1991), and is the coauthor, editor, or coeditor of five other books, including Human Rights and Revolutions (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), a revised and expanded edition of which will be published next year.*