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Introduction

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This special issue is dedicated to exploring discourses that contributed to imbuing youth with special significance in political and cultural spheres in twentieth-century China, with a focus on experiences and representations that circulated under the Communist party rule from the Soviet Republic to the demise of Maoism and the beginning of the reform era.

Youth, as a concept, is inherently broad and fluid, lacking a precise definition tied to specific age boundaries. It is commonly understood as a socially constructed category denoting an intermediary (and transitional) phase that stands between childhood and adulthood and whose meanings vary across time and space, being dependent on geographical, political, and historical contexts.

Sociological enquiry has extensively discussed definitions of youth, problematising the idea of youth as a homogeneous social group sharing common age-related interests, and highlighting, instead, the fluidity of the concept and its multi-faceted construction, which differs not only across time and space but also between social groups. Consequently, youth studies, which are rooted in many disciplines, have not always distinguished between childhood and youth as separate categories, and have been mainly concerned with issues of power and privilege, providing insights into issues of structure and agency, while also highlighting factors such as social class, gender, and race as pivotal determinants shaping the identity and structuring the lives of young people. At the same time, generational perspectives, particularly influenced by the theories of

Mannheim, have been adopted in the study of 'youth' in relation to the elders (Furlong 2013, esp. 1–47).

In the realm of historical studies, the generational approach has proven to be important to understand young people's emergence as agents of change and their conscious participation in historical processes shaping the twentieth century or what has been defined as the "long century" of youth, to highlight an epoch stretching from the mid-nineteenth century (Dogliani 2003, 1–4; see also De Nicolò 2011, among others). Youth movements, in their diverse forms (both adult-led and originating from the grassroots), have risen to prominence within modern societies, emerging from the crucible of generational tensions and dynamics rooted in specific socio-historical contexts (Braungart and Braungart 2001; Roberts 2015).

While the concept of 'youth' began to acquire a distinct identity and to be mobilised within political movements as early as the nineteenth century, scholars generally concur that its rise as a politically relevant group and socially constructed category associated with social change occurred in the aftermath of World War I as a result of both demographic shifts and a greater awareness of generational differences (Passerini 1997; Dogliani 2003, 1–18; Krawatzek 2018, 51–82, among others).

Although this phenomenon exhibits a distinctly global dimension, historical research has traditionally approached its examination primarily through national or regional lenses.

During the interwar period in Europe, youth assumed a pivotal role in political discourse, becoming 'almost indispensable for thinking about politics' and absorbing 'competing political expectations' (Krawatzek 2018, 55). The idea of youth was appropriated by various groups and political actors, leading to increased involvement of young people in diverse movements (Fascist, Communist and Christian/Catholic), often with transnational ramifications (e.g. Whitney 2009). By the 1920s, youth had emerged as increasingly emancipated actors; yet, simultaneous efforts by adults to organise them for the pursuit of specific ideological objectives gained prominence, transforming youth movements into instruments for political socialisation and cultural transmission (Selten 1996). This trend is exemplified by the Soviet leadership's appeal to young people through a new discourse positioning youth as a symbol of a new revolutionary order, accompanied by the establishment of distinct youth organisations later imitated by other Communist regimes (Neumann 2011; Fürst 2010, among others). However, such practices were hardly a distinctively Communist feature, as evidenced by the indoctrination of young people within Fascist movements across Europe (Kater 2004; Ponzio 2015, among others). After World War II, while youth's role in connection to political organising

or mobilisation waned until the student movements in the 1960s, notions of youth as agents of societal rejuvenation amidst post-war devastation spread across various countries (Krawatzek 2018, 63–64; Laqua 2021, 162), influencing state and societal involvement in promoting education and ensuring the welfare of youth within the context of the Cold War (Holt 2014).

As recent historiographical trends have extended the analysis of youth beyond the confines of national boundaries to encompass global and transnational dimensions (e.g. Tisdall 2022), scholars have revisited issues of youth's agency across diverse contexts, as well as conventional periodisations of youth activism throughout the twentieth century (Jobs and Pomfret, eds. 2015; Laqua and Papadogiannis 2023). Moreover, transnational perspectives have facilitated the exploration of locally-manifested 'global genealogies of youth cultural practices', illuminating how the emergence of youth as both a cultural construct and an aged-based social group associated with modernity should be understood as the outcome of a transnational process, characterised by their mobility 'as a special and distinct privilege of their age' (Jobs and Pomfret 2015, 2 and 7).

The significance of adopting a multilayered and global informed understanding of the history of youth in the twentieth century is equally highlighted by the scholarship focusing on youth in China. China's twentieth century was very much an epoch of young people when 'youth' (*qingnian*) assumed a prominent role and, as a product of discursive practices, 'functioned as a dominant trope and sustained a symbolic centrality in China's pursuit of modernity' (Song 2015: 15). Historically, a discourse linking youth, nationhood, and modernity featured in the political thought of late Qing reformers, partly influenced by exposure to Western ideas. Notably, the prominent political thinker Liang Qichao integrated a biological dimension into the ideals of 'national salvation' (*jiuguo*) and 'rejuvenation' (*xingguo*) introducing the concept of 'Young China' (*shaonian Zhongguo*), which drew inspiration from Giuseppe Mazzini's 'Giovine Italia' and played a pivotal role in conceptualising China's transition 'from an aging empire into a youthful nation' (Song 2015, 15).

Following the establishment of the Republic in 1912 and amidst the emergence of the 'new culture' (*xin wenhua*) *qingnian* assumed unprecedented significance in China's intellectual discourses and literary representations as a privileged category of modernity (for a discussion on the categorisation of youth in the intellectual discourse, see also Lanza 2012). It became intertwined with notions of progress and science, incorporating ideals of both national rejuvenation and individual self-determination. Chen Duxiu's renowned piece, '*Jinggao qingnian*' ('Call to youth'), published in the inaugural issue of the journal *La Jeunesse—New Youth* (*Qingnian zazhi/Xin qingnian*) in 1915, exhorted young people to be independent and progressive by pursuing personal free-

dom and totally rejecting the traditional Confucian ethos, which prioritised age hierarchy and underscored filial piety and obedience to elders.

By the end of the 1910s, the deployment of the category of youth paralleled the rise of a more radicalised and activist-minded youth, epitomised by the May Fourth Movement, wherein a new generation of youth assumed a central role in patriotic action, paving the way for the emergence of 'students' as an enduring political category in modern China. Discursive and social practices that cemented the centrality of youth as agents of social, cultural, and political transformations were emblematic of broader historical shifts, as shown, for example, in the works of Wasserstrom (1991) and Lanza (2010) on Chinese student activism.

As the idea of youth was swiftly appropriated by revolutionary elites and nascent political parties, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) particularly capitalised on the legacy of the May Fourth Movement, emphasising its linkages with youth also through commemoration of May Fourth as Youth Day (Graziani 2019). Concurrently, young people emerged as a formidable social force that could be effectively mobilised for political action and state-building projects, for example as part of the foreign colonial presence in cities such as Shanghai (e.g. Mulready-Stone 2015; on CCP-linked youth organisations see also Graziani 2014 and Yi 2021). Various radicalisation processes among educated youth also unfolded within a broader context of global interconnections (Nagatomi 2019).

As youth became the target of mass party politics and adult-led movements in the 1920s and 1930s, new ideas about citizenship education were being debated and implemented. The call to active citizenship, aimed at fostering contribution to the nation, was a central tenet promoted both through the Republican-era modern school system (Culp 2007; Tillman 2018) and wartime propaganda efforts (1937–1945), which mobilised children's mass support to resistance for the sake of national salvation (De Giorgi 2014). Studies on Republican China have increasingly shed light not only on the significance of youth within the culture of mass education but also on the agency and empowerment of children and young people during wartime, along with their contributions to the subjective conceptualisation of youth (David 2021; Xu Lanjun 2016; Neubauer 2023; Moore 2016).

The enduring impact of these ideas and practices on Chinese youth after 1949 was profound, as the birth of the Socialist State brought the exaltation of youth to a new height. With youth and children constituting over half of China's population, the political category of youth expanded to encompass a broad and gender-neutral group largely composed of workers and peasants hailed as the builders of the 'new China'. They were praised as the vanguards of socialist construction, heralded as catalysts for social change, and held up as models for

society at large. In the official discourse, the term 'youth' increasingly became imbued with Maoist connotations of revolutionary fervour and vitality. Their perceived purity, untainted by the vestiges of the old society, positioned them as the social group best suited to articulate a complete rejection of the 'feudal' past and to craft a 'most beautiful new picture' on 'a sheet of blank paper' in the forging of a new social order (Wang Z. 2001, 17–18; Yang 1967; Chen 2007).

At the same time, youth were systematically organised into highly disciplined movements through the establishment of new official mass associations, which were (and remain) key in the People's Republic of China (PRC) system (Funnell 1970; Healy 1982; Samarani 2003; Graziani 2013; Tsimonis 2021; Doyon 2023). These associations not only reflected the elevation of the status of youth within early PRC political life, but also served as mechanisms for their socialisation into state-sanctioned values, as part of broader Maoist efforts at cultivating the 'new socialist person' (e.g. Lu 2017, 115–137). These organisations facilitated a mass cultural production on the subject of youth, primarily aimed at shaping youth desires and identities, and mobilising them in support of the State. A prime example is offered by the official journal of the Communist Youth League, 'Chinese Youth' (Townsend 1967).

The centrality of youth as ideal 'socialist subjects' within Maoist discursive practices has long overshadowed the complex and nuanced processes of cultural production and identity formation of Chinese youth under socialism, a topic that has garnered increased attention in more recent historiography.

While earlier sociological research on the political socialisation of youth before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) highlighted dynamics of state-sanctioned youth political activism within the school system (Chan 1985; Unger 1982; Shirk 1982), cultural and historical perspectives have provided new insights. Exploring the politics of cultural production in the 1950s, for instance, has meant investigating how the concept of youth was shaped by incorporating the voices of young people themselves in youth league propaganda materials, ultimately empowering youth as active agents of political socialisation and as a self-mobilising and self-defining collective subject (Culp 2022). Literary studies have also contributed to elucidating the meaning of 'youth' and the values and attitudes associated with this group, as shown by Mingwei Song's insightful analysis of the representation of youth in shaping social norms and the literature's potential to challenge dominant Maoist discourse on youth (Song 2015, chapter 7). Additionally, scholars have illuminated the experiences and interests of children not conforming to State directives (Brzycki 2019), the importance of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution for the 'discursive militarization' of Chinese childhood (Naftali 2014), and the unprecedented experimentation and creativity it engendered, as evidenced, for instance, by the proliferation of

underground cultural production in the 1970s (Henningsen 2021). This period is regarded as a pivotal historical moment for the emergence of new spaces for cultural self-expression and assertion of youth identity, laying the groundwork for the development of a more independent and also globally connected youth culture in the following years (Xu Luo 2002; Clark 2012; Rosen 2009; De Kloet and Fung 2017; Fumian 2012, among others). More recently, historical studies have also started to adopt a transnational framework for rethinking meanings of 'youth' in connection to political activism in post-Mao China, expanding upon previous scholarship (see Lanza 2015 on the 1989 protest movement).

While the centrality of the nexus between youth and politics remains central in CCP discourse, the need for a more sophisticated approach to the diverse meanings that the category of youth embodies in public discourse has led to an expanding interest among historians in youth studies. Interestingly, youth studies have also flourished in post-reform China, especially within the realms of sociological and cultural research (Feng 2012; Lin 2018). Indeed, the enduring legacy of the discursive nexus between youth's role and China's transformation is evident in the prevailing trends within the field. Research has increasingly focused on students more than young workers and peasants, delving into their working conditions, values, and attitudes. As shown by Lin (2018), the study of youth has also been increasingly framed in terms of generational differences, highlighting the cultural and social disparities between successive generations and their parents and elders. These differences are spurred by demographic transition as well as globalisation and socio-economic transformations.

It is noteworthy to observe that one of main outcomes of the development of 'youth studies' in the People's Republic over the past four decades has been a more articulated conceptualisation of 'youth' as a distinct object of enquiry, also from a historical perspective. The category of 'revolutionary youth' from 1949 to 1978, for example, has undergone examination, with scholars such as Chen Yingfang arguing that 'while gaining new social status, they actively identified with the role of the youth and strived to find and demonstrate their significance for the new society and country' (Chen 2002, 65–66). This process involved the emergence of a new subject through the dissolution of 'personal discourse' and other means in the early 1960s, as explored by Huang (2016). A significant concern of Chinese scholars has been the tension between life choices of the young and the imposition of national will by the Socialist State (Shen 2022), particularly focusing on young intellectuals (Niu 2018, 9–35).

As the end of Maoism in the 1980s has marked an identity crisis among Chinese youth, as evidenced by the famous case of Pan Xiao's letter (see Graziani's essay in this issue), Chinese scholars have approached the negation of individual subjectivity experienced by youth under the ultra-leftist ideology in

the 1960s and 1970s in a historical perspective (Fan 1997), suggesting how the reform era represented an epoch of ‘cultural rupture and transition’ (Lü 2019, 176), giving rise to significant intergenerational cultural differences. Chinese studies agree in identified the Pan Xiao case as a turning point in the history of youth under Socialism (He 2010; Cui 2003; Chen 2007; Xu Y. 2012), predominantly analysing it through the lens of a spiritual crisis that had facilitated the emergence of a new subjectivity.

As their efforts produced a new collective image of a generation, Chinese researchers were not confined themselves to a single representation of youth issues in the 1980s. Instead, they have attempted to contextualise youth issues within a broader historical framework, linking the so-called ‘youth problem’ with the entire modernisation process of China. Literary studies were at the forefront in offering various categorisations of youth throughout the twentieth century, ranging from May Fourth youth (*wusi qingnian*) and ‘revolutionary youth’ (*geming qingnian*) to ‘educated youth’ (*zhishi qingnian*) and ‘problematic youth’ (*wenti qingnian*), continuously reflecting the ideal of youth amidst China’s modern enlightenment process (Yang and Chen 2019) and the enduring legacy of socialist attributes in the post-Maoist era. Overall, youth studies in China have served as a privileged domain for understanding the crisis generated by the tension between individual subjectivity and collective values in the Maoist era and its aftermath, including the new socialist construction (Fu 2015; Shi 2007).

Since the 1990s, with the ongoing promotion of marketisation and profound social transformation, the role of youth as political actors has gradually diminished. Youth studies have shifted their focus towards examining youth subcultures (Hu 2016; Wang Y. 2020). However, the prevalent perspective among PRC scholars continues to prioritise viewing youth as a ‘problem’, a symptom of spiritual structural crisis within Chinese society and a mirror reflecting broader social and cultural phenomena (Qin and Dai 2022; Wu and Zhang 2021; Ren and Zhang 2020).

Drawing from the conference ‘Chinese youth under Socialism from Mao to Xi: Experiences, Images and Literary Representations’ held at the University of Trento in October 2019, this special issue endeavours to enrich our understanding of Chinese youth under socialism, particularly through an exploration of the discursive practices that have contributed to imbuing youth with special significance in political and cultural spheres over time. As argued above, this process cannot be solely attributed to top-down directives, but should instead be viewed as the result of complex and ongoing negotiations between the state and society, collective interests, and individual subjectivities. Nor can it be easily contained within chronological and national frameworks.

Through diverse perspectives and case studies, the four articles contained herein delve into the political and cultural dynamics that have delineated and reshaped 'youth' within Chinese socialism, primarily as a cultural construct distinct from social and economic factors.

In her essay dedicated to the significance attributed to youth not merely as a symbolic representation of the future, but as active agents of social change and military endeavors in the Chinese Soviet Republic during the 1930s, Margaret Tillman illustrates how this importance is vividly shown through the adoption of models—both textual and visual—from the Soviet Union in the CCP's propaganda aimed at rustification and militarisation of the revolution. In the propaganda material analysed by Tillman, it becomes evident that the concept of youth in the early discursive practices of the CCP was not abstract; rather, its construction reflected a tension between the inclination to 'adultify' and mobilise the younger generation for the sake of the Soviet military resistance and social revolution, and the necessity to recognise children and young people as a distinct cultural category and social group deserving of specific educational attention and treatment.

In the second paper, Melissa Brzycki delves into another pivotal period of Chinese socialist history, the Great Leap Forward, spanning from 1958 to 1961. Her research illuminates the disparity between the symbolic significance attributed by national CCP propaganda to youth as individual agents catalysing contestation and transformation of family hierarchies and values in rural areas—framed within a revolutionary paradigm—and the practical social and educational realities at the grassroots within CCP and state organisations, where children were still lauded for their adherence to existing hierarchies and values. This study unveils the disjunction between the revolutionary rhetoric and educational practices, contributing to the shaping of youth self-identity under socialism as 'revolutionary youth', and the actual processes of socialisation within family and local communities even in the age of high Maoism. Such findings complicate our understanding of the evolution and transformation of Chinese youth under the CCP regime.

In the third paper, Sofia Graziani delves into the discourse surrounding youth in the early post-Mao era, focusing on the Communist Youth League as a key actor in providing an assessment of the young generation and its inclinations during a period of delicate transition. At this juncture, the CCP leadership grappled with the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and its impact on the youth, while simultaneously advancing a reformist agenda. Graziani illustrates how this period witnessed a re-evaluation of youth and was characterised by debates concerning its definition, portrayal, and societal role, all of which were integral to legitimising the new agenda. Moreover, the discourse on

youth within the CCP/Communist Youth League became multifaceted, reflecting both the diversity of perspectives within the leadership and the intricate process of redefining the socialisation of youth following the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Lastly, Laura De Giorgi's article looks at the representation of Chinese socialist youth in the 1950s from a transnational perspective, looking at the image of youth in the PRC's international propaganda and at its reception and interpretation in the writings of foreign travellers. By tracing the textual representations of children and youth in Italian travelogues and press coverage of Chinese socialism, De Giorgi investigates how the image of Chinese socialist youth became part of a global Cold War narrative long before the Cultural Revolution.

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