

Research Report

Revolutionary History in Stone: The Making of a Chinese National Monument

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The Monument to the People's Heroes (*Renmin yingxiong jinianbei*) in Beijing's Tiananmen Square was one of the most important new political symbols created in the early days of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The huge granite obelisk, situated along Beijing's most sacred central north-south axis, commands the vast and austere square – the ritual centre of China's capital – not only by its imposing presence but also by its centrality. On the surface, the monument was constructed to commemorate those who had sacrificed their lives for the building of a new communist state, echoing what Philippe Ariès once argued: “Without a monument to the dead, the victory could not be celebrated.”¹ But for the Chinese Communists, the building of a giant memorial in the capital's most sacred space was more than an act of commemoration; it was a cultural production that addressed present political needs: affirming the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), rewriting China's turbulent history according to a carefully scripted Marxist text, and establishing the regime's control over the nation's collective memory. Public art, by implication, embodies the beliefs and aspirations of its patron. As the most notable piece of public art created by the PRC, the monument is essentially a CCP manifesto carved in stone.²

The construction of memorials to commemorate past heroes and those killed in wars is, of course, not unique to China. The French Revolution resulted in a proliferation of temples and monuments in honour of the common soldiers who died for *la patrie*. In April 1918 the new Soviet government likewise announced Lenin's “Plan for Monumental Propaganda” to decorate the streets of Moscow and Petrograd with statues of admired revolutionaries and progressive personalities of the past. But the Monument to the People's Heroes was unique not only because of its centrality in the capital's ceremonial space (and hence in people's psyches) but also because of its intricate interplay between architecture, art and politics, as well as the political message it displays.

The CCP's decision to build a war monument in the nation's capital was not without controversy, for the act of commemoration inevitably raises the question of the nature of remembering. Which past events should be recalled? Should the memorial be celebratory, emphasizing victory, or admonitory, focusing instead on the brutality of war and loss

1. Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 75.

2. For a discussion of the monuments in Tiananmen Square, see Wu Hung, “Tiananmen Square: a political history of monuments,” *Representation*, No. 35 (Summer 1991), pp. 84–117.

of human lives? What type of structure would best represent the exhilarating sense of the rebirth of China after many decades of foreign invasion and civil wars? As it turned out, the building of the Monument to the People's Heroes in 1949–58 was carefully choreographed by the new regime in an attempt to establish the Communists' legitimacy through the rearrangement of space and the rewriting of history.

Architecture

Officially, the decision to build a monument to honour those who sacrificed their lives for the founding of a new republic was made by the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on 30 September 1949, the last day of its ten-day meeting in Beijing. The date was critical, for it was the eve of the historic founding of the PRC. Nominally, then, the idea of building a monument was not initiated by the CCP but by the CPPCC, a group of delegates representing 23 political groups convened by Mao Zedong to represent a broad popular base and, more importantly, to lend much-needed support to the new regime's legitimacy.

In fact, the proposal to construct a new memorial to commemorate the dead was conceived much earlier. Before 1 October the question of an appropriate site for the monument, perhaps the most critical aspect of the entire undertaking, was debated among government officials. Several locations were proposed – for example, Dongdan, Babao Hill, the Yuan Ming Yuan – but the majority recommended Tiananmen Square, for it was here, many Communists argued, where student demonstrations on 4 May 1919 crystallized national grievances against foreign imperialism and triggered calls for a rejuvenated China.³ Mao openly proclaimed himself as a follower of the May Fourth legacy.⁴ The architectural relics and the historical importance of Tiananmen Square also made it an ideal place.

An equally important reason, as it turned out, was that the communist leaders had planned to turn Tiananmen Square into a "People's Square" (*Renmin guangchang*) in order to create a new political space in the capital. According to the Communists, the PRC was established to serve the people. Mao wanted to place the monument where people's celebrations of national events could take place.⁵ The founding of a new regime indeed offered the CCP a golden opportunity to enlarge the square for the purpose of establishing a new symbolic centre. In fact, the plan to expand the square was officially initiated before the founding of the PRC on 1 October. On 31 August 1949, the official *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*)

3. Wu Liangyong, "Renmin yingxiong jinianbei de chuanguo chengjiu" ("The creative achievement of the Monument to the People's Heroes"), *Jianzhu xuebao* (*Architectural Journal*), No. 2 (1978), p. 4; *Guangming ribao* (*Enlightenment Daily*), 20 September 1949.

4. Mao Zedong, "The May Fourth Movement," in Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, 5 vols. (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967–77), Vol. 2, p. 237.

5. Zhao Luo and Shi Shuqing, *Tiananmen (Tiananmen Gate)* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1957), p. 37.

announced a plan to increase the size of the square from a capacity of a few tens of thousands to accommodate 160,000 people.⁶ Subsequent work was carried out to expand the square even further.⁷ It is now an immense field where a million people can assemble.

The Communists' transformation of what was once the seat of monarchical power into a people's square had obvious and intentional political ramifications. The expanded Tiananmen Square symbolically shifted the nation's focal point from the Forbidden City to the new space in front of the antiquated Tiananmen Gate, the main entrance to the imperial palace in the Ming and Qing dynasties. As such, it signifies a break with the detested past and the creation of a novel era. Historian Hou Renzhi and architect Wu Liangyong wrote: "The old architectural complex of the Forbidden City, which settled along the central axial line, had now receded to a place resembling the 'backyard' of the square; it had been relegated to a secondary status."⁸

Although the monument site was officially selected in 1949, the government moved the project along slowly and cautiously because of its unprecedented scale. A state commission, the Construction Commission of the Monument to the People's Heroes (*Renmin yingxiong jinianbei xingjian weiyuanhui*), was created in 1952 and a team of noted architects, historians and sculptors assembled to oversee the design and execution of the entire project. Peng Zhen (1902–97), the mayor of Beijing, headed the commission, with literary historian Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958) and architect Liang Sicheng (1901–72) serving as associate directors. Beneath them, several sections were given specific tasks: Liang Sicheng headed the architectural section, as well as being associate director; sculptor Liu Kaiqu (1904–93) directed the art design; and historian Fan Wenlan (1893–1969) was responsible for placing the project in a proper historical context.⁹ The new state agency was charged with promoting a new political agenda to affirm a society creating itself anew.

The actual construction of the monument did not begin until 1 August 1952. The date was chosen to coincide with the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army during the Nanchang Uprising on 1 August 1927.¹⁰ But how could intangible concepts such as legitimacy and political order be represented by a physical structure? In what way could the promises of a new socialist regime be conveyed through artistic and spatial means? These questions preoccupied the mind of the chief architect, Liang Sicheng.

Liang, the son of Liang Qichao (1873–1929), one of modern China's most influential intellectuals, was a scholar steeped in two cultures. As a

6. *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 31 August 1949.

7. See, for example, *Renmin ribao*, 16 September 1951.

8. Hou Renzhi and Wu Liangyong, "Tiananmen guangchang lizan – cong gongting guangchang dao renmin guangchang de yanbian he gaizao" ("Paean to Tiananmen Square: its transformation from a palace square to a people's square"), *Wenwu* (*Cultural Relics*), No. 9 (September 1977), p. 12.

9. Liang Sicheng, "Renmin yingxiong jinianbei sheji de jingguo" ("The designing of the Monument to the People's Heroes"), *Jianzhu xuebao*, No. 6 (1991), p. 28.

10. *Renmin ribao*, 3 August 1952.

youth he was taught classical Chinese by his father, and later he was trained in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied under the renowned French architect Paul P. Cret (1876–1945), a student of the influential *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Liang later became known as a pioneer in the study of Chinese architectural history and a fervent advocate for preserving the nation's priceless historical buildings and temples.¹¹

Like Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), who was summoned by the new Soviet government in 1919 to design the Monument to the Third International as a symbol of the revolutionary order and technological progress, Liang was called on by China's new regime in the early 1950s to create a monument that would represent the government's political ideals. But unlike Tatlin, who was a visionary artist, Liang wanted a traditional Chinese-style monument. His idea of a nationalist structure no doubt came from the demand of a government-commissioned project, that, in the 1950s, was strongly influenced by Soviet socialist realism, which stipulated that art must not simply reflect reality but must also depict the optimistic aspects of revolutionary movements and contribute to achieving the ideals of socialism, and by Stalin's controversial directive that architecture must be "socialist in content and national in form."¹² I would argue, however, that Liang, in designing the monument, paid scant attention to "socialist in content," focusing instead on "national in form."¹³ As a scholar, Liang valued Chinese architecture greatly. To him, one of the world's greatest architectural marvels was Beijing, a capital he proudly called an "unparalleled masterpiece (*wubi jiezuo*) in city planning."¹⁴ He fervently believed that the future memorial should reflect the capital's architectural grandeur in keeping with its status as the nation's principal monument.

Chinese traditional architecture, according to Liang, observed several fundamental rules of construction (or what he called "grammar" [*wenfa*]) and had a number of unique features different from those of the West, among them the three-tiered structure (a raised platform, the main building and the curved roof), the exact left and right balance, a southern exposure with the building situated along a north-south axis (so as to catch the maximum sunlight), bracket sets (*dougong*), and glazed tiles.¹⁵ These features, he argued, must be carefully examined when designing the new monument. In planning, Liang and his associates sought inspi-

11. See Lin Zhu, *Dajiang de kunhuo (The Puzzlement of a Great Architect)* (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1991); and Wilma Fairbank, *Liang and Lin: Partners in Exploring China's Architectural Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

12. Chen Jiao, "Ping jianzhu de minzu xingshi: jian lun shehui zhuyi jianzhu" ("On national form in architecture and socialist architecture"), *Jianzhu xuebao*, No. 1 (1981), p. 40.

13. See Liang Sicheng's discussion, in Liang, *Liang Sicheng wenji (Collected Essays of Liang Sicheng)*, 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1986), Vol. 4, pp. 32–34.

14. Liang Sicheng, "Beijing – dushi jihua de wubi jiezuo" ("Beijing – the unparalleled masterpiece in city planning"), in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, pp. 51–66.

15. Liang Sicheng, "Zhongguo jianzhu de tezheng" ("The major characteristics of Chinese architecture"), in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, pp. 96–103.

ration from noted Tang dynasty steles (such as Songyang Academy Stele in Henan and Filial Piety Stele in Xi'an, Shaanxi).¹⁶ "There is a long tradition in China of using engraved letters (*beiwén*) as the focal point of the stele," wrote Liang. "It is therefore most appropriate to follow this traditional layout [in designing the memorial]." His admiration of traditional steles notwithstanding, Liang was critical of their size and appearance. In his view, "traditional steles were not only short but were also gloomy and lifeless, lacking heroic spirit."¹⁷ All these elements would have to be changed.

Besides proposing a distinct Chinese style for his project, Liang also wanted height, massive presence, durability and a sense of harmonious balance. He realized that monumentality could best be represented by altitude. Liang argued that a tall and imposing structure, which oversees and commands its immediate surroundings, could be used to represent the high aspirations of a young regime and energetically translate the new government's ideals into visible political symbols.¹⁸

The monument, Liang insisted, should also fall within the Chinese conception of spatial and architectural harmony and balance. In a 1951 letter to Mayor Peng Zhen, Liang contended that the traditional architectural layout of Tiananmen Square could be left intact. The projected monument, in his view, must be introduced into this pre-existing spatial context in the least intrusive way. Instead of becoming a new extension of the square, the monument must be an integral part of it. The most important structure in the square, in the eyes of Liang, was Tiananmen Gate, a magnificent wooden building atop a gigantic horizontal structure. The projected monument should therefore be something quite different in style and structure. It should be a vertical, towering stone construction. A close parallel was the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower on the northern end of the capital's central axis. The Drum Tower, argued Liang, because of its horizontal, wooden form, was in direct proportion to the Bell Tower, which was a vertical, brick building.¹⁹

Of course size and height go hand-in-hand in a great structure. Liang and his associates argued that the monument was to be built from the most sturdy natural material – granite – to ensure its durability and immense presence. Massive blocks of granite were harvested and hauled from the famous quarry in the Fushan region in Qingdao, Shandong province.²⁰ More than 17,000 pieces of granite were eventually used in the project, with a 14.7-metre, 60-ton slab occupying the central position of the monument.²¹ At the base of the shaft were eight gigantic historical reliefs, depicting key moments in China's recent history. To emphasize its importance, the entire monument was supported by two Chinese-style *xumizuo* (a high base with decorated mouldings), embellished with

16. *Renmin ribao*, 13 August 1954.

17. Liang Sicheng, "The designing of the Monument," pp. 27–28.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Liang's letter to Mayor Peng Zhen, in *Collected Essays*, Vol. 4, pp. 42–45.

20. *Renmin ribao*, 29 July 1953.

21. *Ibid.*, 23 April 1958.

traditional symbols of pines, cypresses, chrysanthemum and peony, signs of longevity and distinction. Originally one terrace was proposed, but Liang and other architects recommended two to add strength and weight to the base. This double terrace served both as a solid and wider foundation and as a way to lift the monument off the ground, reinforcing its might and commanding position.²²

Not everything went smoothly, however. The design triggered debates between architects (headed by Liang) and sculptors (headed by Liu Kaiqu). The architects preferred a traditional-style stele; the sculptors, however, felt that a giant human figure as the centre of the monument would best represent the heroic achievements of the Chinese people. After all, they argued, the purpose was to commemorate the war dead.²³ The two camps also differed on how the top of the monument should be designed. The sculptors again suggested an array of human figures, but the architects disagreed. Such an idea, they contended, was unorthodox and in sharp contrast to the traditional Chinese style. Moreover, the high elevation of the monument would render the figures invisible to viewers on the ground. Most problematic of all, such figures would shift the focus away from the engraved letters at the centre, completely reversing the original intention of the design. It was a heated debate that drew the attention of high Party officials, including Premier Zhou Enlai.²⁴ In the end, the architects prevailed: the monument would be a Chinese-style stele with a traditional *luding* roof, that is, a flat top with four sliding slopes (what Liang Sicheng called “an architectural top”).²⁵ This decision was prompted not only by the importance of projecting a nationalistic image in the style of a traditional stele but also to allow ample room for Mao’s eight huge Chinese characters – “Eternal Glory to the People’s Heroes” (*Renmin yingxiong yongchui buxiu*) – to be properly inscribed in the centre of the monument.

Designers and government officials confronted yet another controversial issue during the construction of the obelisk, namely, the monument’s orientation. Should it face south, in line with China’s architectural tradition, which, as noted in the Confucian ritual text *The Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*), stipulated that major buildings (especially palaces) be constructed along a north-south axis,²⁶ or should it face another direction? The issue was ultimately settled not by scholarly discussion but by a political decision. According to Wu Liangyong, Premier Zhou Enlai reasoned that once Tiananmen Square was expanded, people would normally enter the square from East and West Chang’an Avenues, which ran in front of Tiananmen Gate. The crowd would therefore gather not at

22. Wu Liangyong, “The creative achievement of the Monument,” p. 6.

23. Hua Tianyou, “Rang diaosu yishu dao renmin qunzhong zhong qu” (“Let sculpture speak to the people”), *Renmin ribao*, 26 December 1957.

24. See Zhang Bo, *Wo de jianzhu chuanguo daolu* (*My Career as an Architect*) (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1994), p. 187.

25. *Ibid.*; Liang Sicheng, “The designing of the Monument,” p. 28.

26. See Hou Renzhi, “Shilun Beijing chengshi guihua jianshe zhong de sange lichengbei” (“A preliminary discussion of the three major developmental stages in the construction of Beijing”), *Chengshi guihua* (*City Planning Review*), No. 6 (November 1994), pp. 4–9.

the southern part of the square but at the northern part, precisely where people would have a better view of Mao's inscription in the centre of the monument were it facing north. Finally, Mayor Peng Zhen decided, with Mao's approval, to have the monument face north.²⁷ On the surface, that decision may simply have been made for convenience and practicality, for it took into account the anticipated gathering of the masses during major celebrations. Yet, I would argue that it was a careful attempt by the Communists to emphasize the monument's revolutionary and anti-traditional nature. At a height of 37.94 metres, 4.24 metres taller than Tiananmen Gate, the monument, representing the will of the people, overshadowed the Gate and the old Forbidden City (the monarchical past) both in height and symbolic importance. Whereas the old Forbidden City represents the bygone, often tragic past, the monument symbolizes the promise of the future.

To emphasize the importance of this major undertaking, the government chronicled every move of the construction process in major newspapers and magazines, especially in the party-run *Renmin ribao*.²⁸ Located in the people's square, the government would like people to believe that the monument not only was a dedication to the people's heroes but also was constructed by the people. The term *jiti zhuyi* (collectivism) was repeatedly used during the building of the memorial.²⁹ *Renmin ribao* interviewed workers who participated in the project.³⁰ According to government officials, letters poured in from all over the country voicing support for this unprecedented plan.³¹

The entire monument complex was completed and unveiled on Labour Day, 1 May 1958, just in time to mark the tenth anniversary of the nation's founding in October of that year. The memorial's three-tiered structure reflected its distinct nationalistic characteristics. Mao's huge characters, "Eternal Glory to the People's Heroes," following the traditional inscription design, graced the frontal part of the monument, facing north. At the back, facing south, was an epitaph drafted by Mao, issued in the name of the CPPCC and written in Premier Zhou Enlai's elegant calligraphy:

Eternal glory to the people's heroes, who sacrificed their lives in the people's war of liberation and the people's revolution over the past three years!

Eternal glory to the people's heroes, who sacrificed their lives in the people's war of liberation and the people's revolution over the past thirty years!

Eternal glory to the people's heroes, who, from 1840, sacrificed their lives in struggles against domestic and foreign enemies to preserve the nation's independence and the people's freedom and well-being!³²

27. Wu Liangyong, "The creative achievement of the Monument," p. 4.

28. See, for example, *Renmin ribao*, 1 October 1949; 7 September 1953.

29. *Renmin ribao*, 25 October 1952.

30. *Ibid.*, 25 October 1952; 13 August 1954.

31. *Ibid.*, 13 August 1954.

32. For Mao's inscription, see *Selected Works*, Vol. 5, p. 22, with minor changes in translation.

At 37.94 metres, the monument is one of the tallest structures in the square. Its centrality and towering presence announces its dominance and architectural importance, and signals the lofty ideals of a new socialist regime. The Communists fully realized that a new political beginning involved a new definition of space, a space that needed to be carefully defined, reshaped, even invented.

History

The creation of a national monument is, of course, more than merely the construction of a mammoth obelisk in the middle of the capital. It is about something more intangible and powerful: the meaning of history, the correct way to examine the past, and ultimately the proper role of the CCP in a long line of dynastic succession. A decision was made by the Monument Commission to decorate the monument with eight reliefs, each with a different historical theme.

Responsibility for charting the proper course of Chinese history in the project went to Fan Wenlan. Fan, a prominent Marxist historian, was especially noted for his authoritative voice among leftist scholars in interpreting modern Chinese history. He was trained at Beijing University, and, like many of his contemporaries, was appalled by the imperialist aggression in China since the 19th century. Early on he developed an interest in Marxism. Pursuing his socialist dreams, Fan travelled to Yan'an in 1940.³³ There he expressed his zealous devotion to Marxism and vocalized his often emotive stand on a Marxist interpretation of Chinese history, drawing the attention of Mao Zedong. Fan outdid all others in his ability to take a long and comprehensive view in examining Chinese history. Mao was also drawn to Fan's writings on modern Chinese history, especially those on the Taiping Rebellion. In his controversial 1943 pamphlet, *The Life of the Traitor-Butcher Zeng Guofan* (*Hanjian guizhishou Zeng Guofan de yisheng*), Fan vehemently condemned Han general Zeng Guofan for what he called his "bloodstained" (*xuexing*) role in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion. The rebellion, many Communist historians believed, was a righteous uprising and a precursor of the CCP-led peasant revolution in the 20th century.³⁴

Echoing Mao's argument that literary creations cannot be dissociated from a proper class perspective (as expounded in Mao's famous "Yan'an talks" in May 1942), Fan Wenlan went a step further to emphasize the close ties between scholarship and politics. "Scholarship must serve politics," he asserted.³⁵ Not all historical periods were equally important, according to Fan. The proper view of historical study was, first and foremost, to "examine the history under the revolutionary leadership of the proletariat, and only then the old democratic revolutionary history led

33. Fan Wenlan, *Fan Wenlan lishi lunwen xuanji* (*Selected Historical Essays of Fan Wenlan*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1979), p. 360.

34. Fan Wenlan, *Hanjian guizhishou Zeng Guofan de yisheng* (*The Life of the Traitor-Butcher Zeng Guofan*) (Xi'an: Xibei xinhua shudian, 1949), p. 1.

35. Fan Wenlan, *Selected Historical Essays*, p. 225.

by the bourgeoisie.”³⁶ In studying history, therefore, one must “stress the present and slight the past” (*hou jin bo gu*).³⁷

In fact, as a historian, Fan was a faithful voice in reiterating Communist policies. The most authoritative voice in analysing modern Chinese history was, of course, that of Mao Zedong. According to Mao, the essence of modern Chinese history was none other than the history of imperialist aggression in China and of its opposition to China’s independence.³⁸ It was also a history of progress compatible with the idea of revolution. In his influential essay, “On new democracy” (1940), Mao argued, “the historical characteristic of the Chinese revolution lies in its division into two stages: democracy and socialism ... The first step is to change the colonial, semi-colonial, and semi-feudal form of society into an independent, democratic society. The second is to carry the revolution forward and build a socialist society.” He wrote,

The preparatory period for the first step began with the Opium War in 1840, i.e., when China’s feudal society started changing into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal one. Then came the Movement of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the Sino-French War, the Sino-Japanese War, the Reform Movement of 1898, the Revolution of 1911, the May Fourth Movement, the Northern Expedition, the War of Resistance Against Japan. Together these have taken up a whole century, and, in a sense, they represent that first step, being struggles waged by the Chinese people, on different occasions and in varying degrees, against imperialism and the feudal forces in order to build up an independent, democratic society and complete the first revolution.³⁹

Mao named the Revolution of 1911, led by Sun Yat-sen, a “bourgeois-democratic revolution.” It was still unfinished, because, he argued, it was an “old democratic revolution” and “its enemies are still very strong.”⁴⁰ A fundamental change occurred only after the October Revolution in 1917, especially after the founding of the CCP in 1921. “Then, and only then,” he wrote, “did the Chinese enter an entirely new era in their thinking and their life.”⁴¹ The Russian Revolution initiated a new phase of “new democratic revolution” in China, and the CCP emerged as its leading force. The battle against imperialism and feudalism would never have come to a fruitful conclusion, contended Mao, had it not been under the direction of Marxism-Leninism and the correct leadership of the CCP.⁴² It was within this authoritative interpretation of modern Chinese history that Fan Wenlan attempted to place the significance of the Monument to the People’s Heroes.

With limited space available, which episodes in China’s tumultuous modern history should be depicted on the monument? In mid-July 1952 Fan Wenlan and his history team proposed several themes: the Sanyuanli

36. *Ibid.* p. 226.

37. *Ibid.* pp. 222–28.

38. Mao Zedong, “On new democracy,” in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 354.

39. *Ibid.* pp. 342–43, with minor changes in translation.

40. *Ibid.* p. 343.

41. Mao Zedong, “On the people’s democratic dictatorship,” in *Selected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 413.

42. Mao Zedong, “On new democracy,” p. 361.

Incident against the British troops outside Guangzhou in 1841 during the Opium War; the Boxer Uprising of 1900; the Jinggang Mountains (the early rural base of the CCP); the Long March; and the Battle of Pingxing Pass against the Japanese invasion in 1937. On 19 January 1953, Mao sent the following instructions: the Boxer Uprising was to be replaced by the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894; the Jinggang Mountains was to be replaced by the Nanchang Uprising; and the Battle of Pingxing Pass was to be replaced by Yan'an. Mao also suggested that a better theme than the Sanyuanli Incident could be found.⁴³ The debates continued for almost two years. It was not until 6 November 1954 that Mayor Peng Zhen, with the approval of the CCP, made a final decision on the eight historical events to be included: the Opium War; the Taiping Rebellion; the 1911 Revolution; the May Fourth Movement; the May Thirtieth Movement of anti-colonial demonstrations in 1925; the Nanchang Uprising; the War of Resistance Against Japan, with an emphasis on the Communists' guerrilla warfare; and the Yangzi Crossing by the Red Army in the Civil War to defeat the Nationalists in south China.⁴⁴

Why these eight? By choosing the Nanchang Uprising of 1927 over the Jinggang Mountains, the Communists wished to emphasize the paramount importance of the founding of the communist military force, even more so than the first communist rural base. The War of Resistance Against Japan was selected over Yan'an because it stood for a better and far more powerful image of a united China. Such an image carried special weight in the early years of the PRC, when the new regime repeatedly stressed the necessity of national unity in building a new nation. Topics such as the Long March and the Battle of Pingxing Pass were eliminated because they were single events, whereas the War of Resistance was comprehensive in scope. An even simpler rationale might have been the lack of space on the monument, requiring that tough choices be made. This might explain why ultimately the Boxer Uprising was not included.

The eight events on the monument are those the Communists consider the major turning points in modern Chinese history.⁴⁵ They were progressive episodes, moving forward in an irreversible direction and leading eventually to the ultimate triumph of the CCP in 1949. The eight scenes tell the familiar story of Chinese people's determined and persistent struggle against evil forces. They depict stark contrasts in order to convey a clear, uncomplicated message: good (Chinese) against bad (foreign imperialists), peasants (Taipings) against the corrupt regime, the revolutionaries against the reactionary Qing government (the Revolution of 1911), the patriots (the May Fourth students) against international injustice, the workers against foreign capitalists (May Thirtieth Movement), the Chinese defenders against the Japanese invaders (War of Resistance), and the proletarian forces against Chiang Kai-shek's repressive National-

43. Liang Sicheng, "The designing of the Monument," p. 28

44. *Ibid.*

45. Mao Zedong, "Chinese revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, p. 314.

ist government. These simple contrasts immediately strike a chord in the viewer, which is what the Communists and the designers had in mind.

It seems only natural that the eight selected historical themes are overwhelmingly militant in nature, since the monument was originally conceived to honour the war dead. With the exception of the May Fourth Movement and the May Thirtieth Movement, all were armed conflicts against an identifiable enemy or enemies. And both the May Fourth and the May Thirtieth movements were militant in spirit. They were fervent anti-imperialist events with profound repercussions in China. This emphasis on military events largely reflect the Maoist philosophy of war. Mao saw armed conflicts as defining moments in human history, and he viewed these conflicts through a political lens. According to Mao, wars contributed to the progress of history by mobilizing oppressed people at all levels to take justified action. Modern Chinese history, as Mao repeatedly emphasized, advanced through different stages of armed struggles.⁴⁶

The monument clearly emphasizes the present, not the past. Three of the events occurred before 1919 – the Opium War, the Taiping Rebellion and the Revolution of 1911; five – the May Fourth Movement, the May Thirtieth Movement, the Nanchang Uprising, the War of Resistance Against Japan and the Yangzi Crossing by the Red Army – however, took place in the period of the new revolution during which, the CCP claimed, the Communists took a decisive role. The final decision to devote more space (and thus importance) to the present over the past perhaps also explains why themes such as the First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Uprising were excluded at the end. Highlighting the present over the past was obvious and deliberate. Such a view echoed Fan Wenlan's argument that the correct way to study history is to "stress the present and slight the past"; but, more importantly, to emphasize the present is to accentuate the importance of the CCP's correct leadership in guiding the Chinese revolution to its final victory.

Hegemonic manipulation of the past by state, church or Party is common in history. Rulers selected, simplified, rewrote or emphasized a certain period or a past event to meet their own political needs. The emphasis is therefore less on what actually happened than on what should have happened in keeping with a set of prescribed political ideals and goals. History is an infinitely malleable text to be reshaped in the hands of politicians in order to meet their urgent needs at the time.

Sculpture

Public art must connect to its audiences to draw life and staying power. It cannot remain abstract or cerebral if it intends to generate an emotional impact. Similarly, monuments cannot simply be described, studied or discussed; they must be seen, felt and ultimately experienced. State memorials require a human face to inspire and to elicit a visceral response. The task of furnishing the monument with an identifiable

46. Mao Zedong, "On protracted war," in *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, pp. 113–189.

human face was given to the sculptor Liu Kaiqu. Liu and his team of artists came out with eight gigantic reliefs at the base of the monument corresponding to the eight historical themes dictated by the Party.

Liu had a distinguished record as a sculptor, a profession that drew little attention until after 1949. He received his early training in art, especially oil painting and sculpture, in Beijing. In 1928 he went to Paris, the mecca of art in Europe, where he enrolled at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, studying under the noted French sculptor Jean Boucher (1870–1939).⁴⁷ Under Boucher, Liu studied the most outstanding works of French sculpture available, especially the masterpieces of Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and Aristide Maillol (1861–1944). The outbreak in China of the Manchurian Incident in the autumn of 1931 drew his attention. Liu decided to return home in 1933 to respond, in his own words, to “the call of the motherland.”⁴⁸ After his return Liu became a teacher of sculpture at Hangzhou Academy, a renowned centre of Chinese art. With the founding of the PRC, like Liang Sicheng and Fan Wenlan, Liu Kaiqu joined the monument project with enthusiasm. As head of the project’s artistic team, he was aided by a group of young and talented sculptors, including Hua Tianyou, Zeng Zhushao, Wang Bingzhao, Fu Tianchou, Wang Linyi, Xiao Chuanjiu and Zhang Songhe. Of the eight, four were trained in France (the others were Hua, Zeng and Wang Linyi), indicating the dominant influence of the French school in Chinese sculptural circles.

The design and carving of the huge reliefs took four years to complete. In the end, eight big reliefs and two smaller ones were done on white marble, brought from Fangshan, Hebei: *The Opium War* (also known as the *Opium Burning*) by Zeng Zhushao and *The Taiping Uprising* (also known as the *Jintian Uprising*) by Wang Bingzhao occupy the eastern part of the monument, facing the Museums of Chinese History and Revolution; *The Revolution of 1911* (also known as the *Wuchang Uprising*) by Fu Tianchou, *The May Fourth Movement* by Hua Tianyou, and *The May Thirtieth Movement* by Wang Linyi face south toward Zhengyang Gate; *The Nanchang Uprising* by Xiao Chuanjiu and the *War of Resistance Against Japan* by Zhang Songhe are on the western part of the monument, facing the Great Hall of the People; and Liu’s *Yangzi Crossing*, the centre-piece, faces north, directly opposite Tiananmen Gate.

The eight reliefs were designed on a grand scale. Each at a height of two metres and together totalling a length of 40.68 metres, they were not meant to be viewed in aesthetic isolation but as a totality, a continuous flow of events stamped with a clear historical destiny. In terms of development, they run clockwise from the east, and reach a triumphant conclusion on the north. In Fu Tianchou’s words, “the reliefs are united into a coherent whole.” But Fu was also quick to point out that because

47. Liu Kaiqu, *Liu Kaiqu meishu lunwenji (Liu Kaiqu’s Essays on Art)* (Jinan: Shandong meishu chubanshe, 1984), pp. 268–69.

48. *Ibid.* p. 274.

each of the eight reliefs was designed and carved by an individual artist, each retains its artistic individuality.⁴⁹ The notion of artistic individuality was emphasized even more strongly by Liu Kaiqu. Influenced by Boucher, Liu argued in a similar vein that sculpture must be “a creative art, or it will go nowhere.”⁵⁰ But did the reliefs exhibit distinct personal characteristics, as Fu and Liu suggested? In the end, the final result revealed something quite different, namely, conformity over individuality, politics over art, the result of the increasing role played by Soviet socialist realism, which left little room for artistic creation.

In the early 1950s Soviet socialist realism dominated China’s artistic and literary scenes. Works by noted Soviet painters such as Aleksandr Gerasimov (1881–1963) and sculptors such as Vera Mukhina (1889–1953) were greeted with enthusiasm.⁵¹ Chinese artists were instructed to model their work on that of the Soviet masters, as clearly defined in the writings of Zhou Yang (1908–89), the influential vice-minister of cultural affairs.⁵² Now Liu Kaiqu’s models were no longer Rodin and Maillol but Mukhina and Nikolai Tomski (1900–84), especially the former whose immense sculpture *Worker and Collective Farm Girl*, a celebrated work originally placed atop the USSR Pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937, had a strong impact on Chinese sculptors. Mukhina’s sculpture, a work of dynamic, forward movement, depicts a worker and a peasant woman brandishing a hammer and a sickle respectively. It demonstrates an ideal socialist sculpture: the celebration of the achievements of communism. And there were other salient features of socialist realism in art that Chinese artists would have to study faithfully and attentively: the ideals of collectivism, the wise leader (usually an imposing presence, standing tall and pointing the way to a glorious future), the resolute and selfless spirit of the Red Army, the muscular human body, and the spirit of optimism about an assured bright tomorrow. The exhibit in Beijing, in the autumn of 1954, of a smaller replica of Mukhina’s *Worker and Collective Farm Girl* and Tomski’s portrait of Gorki, among others, at a well-publicized, large-scale exhibition of the Soviet Union’s economic and cultural achievements brought the Soviet style even closer to home.⁵³ Liu Kaiqu visited the exhibition and was deeply impressed by Mukhina’s masterpiece. “Soviet sculpture,” lauded Liu, “represents the superiority of the Soviet social system as well as the diligence and courage of the Soviet people.” “Let us learn from Soviet sculpture,” he emphatically concluded.⁵⁴

49. Fu Tianchou, *Yiqing de yishu (Art that can Transform Sentiments)* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), p. 203.

50. Liu Kaiqu, *Essays on Art*, pp. 274–75.

51. Aleksandr Gerasimov, an influential painter and the president of the USSR Academy of Arts (1947–57), visited China in 1954 and was warmly received. See *Renmin ribao*, 24 October 1954.

52. See, for example, Zhou Yang, *Zhou Yang wenji (Collected Works of Zhou Yang)* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985), Vol. 2, pp. 182–191.

53. *Renmin ribao*, 30 September 1954.

54. Liu Kaiqu, “Xiang Sulian diaosu yishu xuexi” (“Let’s learn from Soviet sculpture”), *Renmin ribao*, 15 October 1954.

The remarkable realism and simplicity of these eight reliefs, exactly the government officials' intention, clearly reflects the strong influence exerted by socialist realism. Zeng Zhushao's *The Opium War* retells a famous episode of Commissioner Lin Zexu's destruction of thousands of trunks of confiscated opium from foreign traders in 1839. The incident triggered the notorious Opium War and forever changed the fate of modern China. The relief is a scene of fierce activity, with dozens of Chinese workers opening trunks of raw opium and dumping them into huge trenches to be destroyed. With rolled-up sleeves and bare chest, one worker is holding an axe in his hand, ready to smash open yet another opium trunk; one of his fellow workers is signalling others to bring more trunks forward to be discarded. Flames are billowing from the ditches. The figures, in the style of socialist realism, are realistically drawn configurations of muscle and fury. Their determined look evokes rage as well as struggle against foreign exploitation and immorality.

Hua Tianyou's *The May Fourth Movement* expresses a different kind of action. Against the background of Tiananmen Gate, a group of students are assembled to denounce the imperialist aggression in China. Standing on the bench is a male student, in a Chinese long gown, making an impassioned speech, his audience in rapt attention. Others are distributing leaflets calling for support. In this monumental event, women comrades are equal and enthusiastic participants. Wearing pleated skirts, they are working in unison with their male counterparts to spread a patriotic message to the crowd, exhibiting boundless energy and firm commitment. The artist's careful physiognomic studies and his close attention to details of clothing make this an outstanding piece.

Liu Kaiqu's *Yangzi Crossing* – the final and most important of the eight pieces – brings the pictorial narrative to an exhilarating conclusion: the People's Liberation Army successfully crossing the Yangzi River to liberate south China. With bugles and red flags, the makeshift junks and the help of ordinary fishermen, communist troops make a daring crossing of the river in April 1949 to capture Nanjing, the Nationalists' capital. The soldiers' faces exude a combative spirit and determined will. Weapons in hand, they charge intrepidly ahead towards the enemy camp, fighting not only to vanquish their enemies but, more importantly, to help establish a new nation in China. They are not alone in their noble campaign, for they are enthusiastically supported by the people. The *Yangzi Crossing* is flanked by two smaller reliefs on each side: *Aiding the Front* and *Welcoming the Liberation Army*. These are scenes of ordinary people supporting their beloved troops, ensuring the CCP's eventual triumph.

The eight reliefs clearly demonstrate the highly emotional style of socialist realism: a determined tilt of the head, clenched fists, fixed gaze and militant posture. Together they weave a pictorial, emotional narrative of modern Chinese history from the Opium War to the Communist victory in 1949. But just what do they reveal? "Much of the world's public art – memorials, monuments, triumphal arches, obelisks, columns and statues," observes W. J. T. Mitchell, "has a rather direct reference to

violence in the form of war or conquest.”⁵⁵ These reliefs, however, have a different ring. The images do not dwell on the brutality of war – the dead, the orphans, the maimed, the bereaved or what Otto Dix describes as “the work of the devil.” Nowhere is the horror and inhumanity of organized violence explicitly or implicitly depicted. In fact, scenes of combat are conspicuously absent and enemies are merely implied. There are no villains in the reliefs such as Chiang Kai-shek, nor any scenes of atrocities committed by the invading Japanese soldiers. Battle scenes are depicted not to reveal the brutality of war but to portray the courage, honour and determination of the Chinese people’s struggle for a just cause. Death is not mourned; it is suggested, even celebrated. For it is the noble death and the theme of the nation’s rebirth that underscore the entire project. Unlike most war memorials (such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.), which provide a place where people can grieve, the Monument to the People’s Heroes is where people celebrate.

Although the eight reliefs are populated with human faces, no one is identified. Among the more than 170 figures portrayed, for example, there is no Lin Zexu, China’s hero, in *The Opium War*. The intention of the artists was clear: heroes in the reliefs refer not to the kings and generals who are conventionally described as shapers of history but to the common soldiers and ordinary people who sacrifice their lives for the good of the nation. “Who are the masters of history?” Fan Wenlan asked, and then emphatically answered, “the labouring masses are the masters of history!”⁵⁶

Ironically, the effectiveness of the realistic portrayals of human figures and scenes in the reliefs are undermined by their unrealistic nature. The armed conflicts depicted are too one-dimensional and artificial to have any real emotional impact. By emphasizing only the positive facet of armed conflict, the artists deprive war of its most human and terrifying dimensions: the carnage, loss of lives and enormous emotional toll. As a result, the scenes make war painless and untrue, sanitized and romanticized as they are by the artists and Party officials. The pictorial representations offer the public a chance to be instructed, but not to participate and experience true emotion.

Artistically, the eight reliefs are surprisingly alike and monotonous. One Chinese art critic commented, “all the relief panels look pretty much the same, and it cannot be distinguished who did what.”⁵⁷ The angry but orderly crowd, the neatness of the charging troops and the carefully arranged scenes make the reliefs forced and artificial. The Party’s demand for the strict political rendering of pictorial images severely restricted the artists. Individuality was discouraged, creativity forbidden. Although Liu Kaiqu and many of his colleagues had been inspired earlier by Rodin’s

55. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 378.

56. Fan Wenlan, “Shui shi lishi de zhuren?” (“Who are the masters of history?”), *Jinbu ribao* (*Progressive Daily*), 29 May 1949.

57. Quoted in Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People’s Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 24.

work and had admired Rodin's ability to give body movements in his sculpture, their pieces, falling under the ultimate sway of Mukhina and Tomski, were political in execution and restrained in spirit, showing little of Rodin's love of anatomical exaggeration (as in *The Thinker*) and preoccupation with visions of life tormented by death and agony (as in *The Gates of Hell*). The artists' unvarying portrayal of heroic postures and scenes, following Party rules, makes their reliefs artistically inferior.

Conclusion

The Monument to the People's Heroes was the first of hundreds of its kind to be built all over the country after the founding of the PRC,⁵⁸ and yet it remains the most important national memorial the Chinese Communists ever created. The monument is a tool of what social scientists call "integration propaganda," an attempt to legitimize the new regime and to propagate its socialist gospels.⁵⁹ But did the plan work?

As a political production, the Monument is a structure of contested codes and representations. By naming the memorial the Monument to the People's Heroes and by locating it in Tiananmen Square, the Communist regime has unexpectedly created a dangerous memorial space as well as a gigantic gathering place in the nation's capital. Ironically, the state's best interest is to portray itself as the representative of the people while forcefully disallowing them a voice, to uphold the memorial's literal meaning of honouring the common people's sacrifice while simultaneously denying their autonomous power. But the "People's Square" is by nature public, and a public space can never be dominated by a single, dictatorial rule from above; it can only be contested by multiple voices from below. Herein lies the major contradiction between the Party's design and popular demand. In the name of the people, Communist leaders attempted to monopolize the collective memory through the monument and to orchestrate mass events in the square to promote their own interests, such as the tumultuous Red Guards' gatherings in Tiananmen Square to support Mao's radical causes during the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s. Yet memory is highly elusive. Ordinary citizens often behave differently and unpredictably, not necessarily in line with the Party's will. In April 1976, during the traditional Qingming Festival of homage to ancestors, thousands flocked to the monument to lay wreaths and to write poems commemorating the widely respected, deceased Premier Zhou Enlai in an act of protest against radical leaders, later known as the "Gang of Four." The monument, the only visible structure in Tiananmen Square, served both as a convenient rallying point and a symbol of protest against the Communist officials. Likewise, in April 1989, the passing of Hu Yaobang, the ousted but respected Party

58. For a survey of China's monuments, see Liu Guofu and Wei Jingfu (eds.), *Guohun dian* (*Dictionary of National Souls*) (Changchun: Jinin renmin chubanshe, 1993).

59. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 70–79.

secretary-general, brought thousands of students back to the square. Again wreaths and flowers were laid at the monument to mourn the death of Hu and this time to call for an end to corruption in the Party and to demand economic and democratic reforms. The ensuing brutal suppression of the democratic movement on 4 June is another instance of the continuing contest between the CCP and the common people in their battle to control the square and the monument.

As a physical structure representing the nation's memory, the monument's symbolism is never fixed; it shifts with the ever-changing political wind. The Chinese Communists are well aware that such a complex work of public art will encompass many contested codes and representations (a government-sponsored project versus a memorial in honour of the people, the history of the Communists versus that of the Nationalists; the present versus the past; the glory of war versus the brutality of war; architects versus sculptors; the stele in nationalistic design versus the reliefs patterned on Soviet socialist realism). They also fully understand that a memorial placed in an uncertain ceremonial arena must be subject to constant surveillance. To reaffirm their legitimacy to rule, the Communists cannot allow competing ideas to coexist; they must exercise absolute control. But as long as the monument was built to commemorate the sacrifice of the people and to represent the people's interest, the people will always have a right to reclaim it, despite the government's wish. As a result, Tiananmen Square in general and the Monument to the People's Heroes in particular will remain a perpetual political and cultural battleground between those who rule in the name of the people and the people themselves.