

January 2016

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Amanda Castro
CSUSB

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Recommended Citation

Castro, Amanda (2016) "Reclaiming Tiananmen: The Politics of Space within Tiananmen Square, 1989," *History in the Making*: Vol. 9 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol9/iss1/7>

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Reclaiming Tiananmen: The Politics of Space within Tiananmen Square, 1989

By Amanda Castro

Abstract: The word Tiananmen in any context now brings to mind the 1989 protests and their goals rather than evoking thought of a center for Chinese Communist Party Power. The 1989 Tiananmen Square activists chose to alter their surroundings in two distinct ways in order to create a space that would serve as a tangible representation of their feelings as a whole. The first way in which they chose to alter the Square came at the start of the protests when students systematically transformed the Monument to the People's Heroes in the middle of the square to memorialize Hu Yaobang's death. The creation of the statue named the "Goddess of Democracy" was the second way in which protestors reclaimed the space in the Square. This paper will analyze the ways in which protestors altered Tiananmen Square and will describe how the use of public space by the protestors represented their emotions, political aims, and a distinctive new generational culture.

Beijing's Tiananmen Square was the center of political and social discontent during the spring months of 1989. The need for social and economic reform in the People's Republic of China (PRC) was at the center of this discontent. The nonviolent attempts by protesters to attain these goals in the face of an unwavering government defined these protests. The political center of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and a symbol of Communist power, Tiananmen Square erupted with demonstrators, political posters, and megaphone speeches.



“Student Protestors Rallying during 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests,” Courtesy of <http://www.wqxr.org/#!/story/how-beethoven-rallied-students-during-tiananmen-square-uprising/>, 1989.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square activists chose to alter their surroundings in two distinct ways, and these alterations became centers of action throughout the span of the movement. This paper analyzes the ways in which protesters altered Tiananmen Square, and how the use of public space by the protesters represented their emotions, political aims, and a distinctive new generational culture. Through these actions, the protesters reclaimed this space within the political center of the Chinese government as their own; through their determination and persistence, they were able to alter the meaning of the word *Tiananmen*. The word Tiananmen in any context now brings to mind the protests and its goals, rather than evoking thoughts of a center for Chinese Communist Party power. This type of reclaiming of space had never been done by way of other protests in PRC history. The square has now become more representative of the people of China than originally intended by its political leaders and city planners. The PRC was originally intended to evoke feelings of patriotism and nationalism, but now it conjures feelings of pride for the protestors that once filled the space. The protestors of Tiananmen Square demanded change, and although it was not granted, they are now a part of Chinese history, much to the despair of the CCP.

The Tiananmen Square protests are a case study in which public history can become a lens in which to analyze its events.

Governments and citizens alike can use public space to grapple with current events and significant events from the past. A public space encourages public interaction with the subject matter and can have shifts in interpretation with the passing of time. “Space is a reality that endures,” writes Maurice Halbwachs. “We recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings.”¹ Government agencies and the common individual can use these types of spaces to create an atmosphere that evokes certain emotions or addresses certain events in various ways. Public spaces have systematically become spaces where public memory of an event is established. The political sphere at the center of a government commonly funds projects that create a national image, usually created exclusively by people who work within or for the government. A political system can use public spaces to manipulate stories told about their collective past. Michael Kammen, Pulitzer prize-winning professor, analyzed government commemoration of national heritage and suggests that, “...societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and that they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present.”² The tendency to reconstruct the past to mold the present becomes problematic because government funded spaces become engrossed with political satire and myth making. Since its creation, the CCP has focused on retaining its power with condemnation and censorship thrust upon their citizenry. Throughout Communist ruled China, public spaces are areas where images, words, and symbols are carefully chosen to glorify the CCP cause, with little attempt at allowing for spaces where the people of China’s voices can be heard.

Tiananmen Square has been a rallying point for many other protests in PRC history. Among the first is the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Similar to the protests of 1989, these protests were spurred by college students from Peking Universities and surrounding schools. One of the major causes of this movement was demonstration against the Versailles Treaty, which set the stage for the Nationalist and Communist Revolutions. The movement’s opponents were “traditionalists whose antimodernist

¹ Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 236.

² Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 3.

took the form of a pedantic and obscurantist attachment to Confucian Orthodoxy.³ The May Fourth Movement follows the same trajectory of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in that it pushed the agenda of political and social change. The protestors, throughout the May Fourth Movement, used the public space within Tiananmen Square in typical ways that are associated with protests, such as hanging banners and marching down main streets. This movement did make a strong political statement, but did not drastically change the politics within the space the way that the 1989 protests had.

The ways in which the Square changed throughout the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, shed light on the protestors feelings of frustration and hope, as well as their goals. The way they collectively viewed the actions of their government is palpable in these transformations of the space. The two transformations of the square illustrate the protestors collective attempts to gain acknowledgement and self-awareness through the alteration of their surroundings. These changes are often engrossed in collectively symbolic meanings and can affect every person, past and present, differently. The first way that they chose to alter the Square came at the start of the protests when students systematically transformed The Monument to the People's Heroes in the middle of the square to memorialize Hu Yaobang's death. The second alteration of space came when the protestors chose to alter The Monument to the People's Heroes on April 16th in order to commemorate his life, adding signs, white cloth ribbons and wreathes to the existing monument; most wreathes were removed overnight by CCP officers.

The transformation of The Monument to the People's Heroes began after Hu Yaobang died on April 15, 1989 due to a heart attack. This transformation was symbolic in memorializing Hu Yaobang, whose death caused the initial march to Tiananmen Square in 1989. This change of setting reflects the emotions that the initial group of university students from around Beijing, who began to march to Tiananmen Square at midnight of that night, felt upon hearing of the death of Hu Yaobang. They had an emotional connection with the ousted political leader and mourned his loss. When they chose to alter The Monument to the People's Heroes on April 16th in order to commemorate his life, and most of the

³ Charlotte Furth, *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement: A Symposium. May Fourth in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 59.

wreathes were removed overnight by CCP officers, these actions by the government prompted thousands of more students to march to Tiananmen Square and begin protesting their government's actions. The slogans shifted from "Long Live Hu Yaobang" to "reject autocratic rule" and "long live democracy" within days of his death.⁴

Hu Yaobang's death caused a similar reaction from the public as the death of the Premier of the PRC, Zhou Enlai, in 1976. The protests, which erupted after the death of Zhou, were similar to that of Hu since the citizens of the PRC felt that Zhou had worked to better their lives, especially while under the leadership of Mao Zedong. During the last years of his life, Zhou worked to stabilize the nation after the effects of the Cultural Revolution became evident. He pushed an agenda of strengthening by modernizing four major sectors within the PRC: agriculture, industry, national defense, and its fields of science and technology. These periods of mourning for PRC leadership show a lack of a public arena for the citizens of the PRC to address their grievances. The protestors in both of these situations used the deaths of leaders, who they felt echoed their needs, as a figure to stand behind in death. It becomes a way in which they can not only further promote the ideals of the leader who is no longer there to fight for them, but also as an avenue for recognizing that the PRC is capable of addressing their needs with political conversation.



"Student Protestors Linking Hands," Courtesy of <http://1989.enrs.eu/>, 1989.

⁴ *June Four: A Chronicle of the Chinese Democratic Uprising* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989), 6.

The protests progressed from a memorial setting for Hu Yaobang to an active zone for political debate only a few days after Hu Yaobang's death in 1989. Protesters began to see the need to use provocative imagery within the space that would reflect the goals they hoped to achieve. The largest of the Student Unions, named the Provisional Students' Federation, developed on April 24, 1989. The united slogans of the Provisional Students' Federation were:

1. Support the Communist Party and socialism! Support reform!
2. Long live democracy!
3. Oppose corruption in government; oppose special privileges!
4. Pledge to defend the Constitution to the death!
5. Patriotism is not a crime!
6. The press must speak the truth – oppose slander!
7. Long live the people!
8. Stabilize prices!
9. Every person is responsible for the fate of the nation!
10. The people's army protects the people!
11. Oppose violence! No persecution!
12. Demand dialogue!
13. Reform, patriotism, enterprise, progress!⁵

Similar slogans took this form and were included in various demands taken to the government by not only students, but also other federations and unions developed by protestors. The need for freedom of speech for the presses and an opened dialogue between the government and the people of China were the most prominently argued demands. As illustrated by this slogan, the student protestors wanted the opportunity to engage with their government, rather than destroy it.

Just days before the end of the protests, the last tangible representation created by the protestors stood within the square. The "Goddess of Democracy" was a statue created by the protestors, and has since become one of the most iconic images of the spirit of the protests. Its creation came during a time within the protest in which both the government and the protestors were

⁵ *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 72.

making crucial decisions, near the final crackdown in early June. The Goddess of Democracy's construction began at a time when the government was debating whether to violently shutdown the protests, and ongoing hunger strikes were causing many of the relentless protestors to be hospitalized. The statue represented the need for acknowledgement of Chinese citizen's political opinions and the outcry of Chinese under CCP rule to gain a more liberally driven political reality. With the help of these two reclaimed public spaces, the feelings of the protesters took center stage.

The lack of attentiveness by the members of China's Communist Party made it all the more obvious when one member showed attentiveness to the masses. Party member Hu Yaobang was popular, both during and after his political run as the Secretary-General because of this attentiveness. Throughout his time in power, Yaobang did not always agree with his fellow party members on official party ideology and behavior. This led other party members to criticize him. On January 16, 1987, Hu Yaobang resigned from his position as Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party. Party members accused him of not being able to deal with the student demonstrations in November of 1986, known as the Democracy Movement. He opposed Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization and Anti-Spiritual Pollution movements. Both of these movements focused on preventing westernization in China due to the fear of liberalization and democracy. The Chinese Government was nervous that if the country proceeded toward westernization in any other way, then economically, their power would be in jeopardy.



“Hu Yaobang (r.) and Deng Xiaoping – Sept 1981,” Courtesy of <https://diogenesii.wordpress.com/2014/04/15/april-15-1989-a/>, 1981.

Bo Yibo transcribed the report of the Politburo, or executive committee, meeting that accepted Hu Yaobang’s resignation from his position as Security-General on January 16, 1987. The report included all of the words spoken and actions taken by party members during the meeting. It also outlined various points of contention between Hu’s actions and the party’s perception of them. Hu’s promotion by Deng Xiaoping, which started his career as a party member, did not shield him from party criticism because he did not live up to his reputation at the start of his career. The meeting designated a portion of the minutes for all party members to take the floor and convey their personal opinions of Hu’s actions while he was a member of the party. This became a forum for blatant criticism. Most members expressed their belief that he was guilty of misguided ideological leadership since he did not fully agree with all CCP decisions. For example, they accused him of wrongly opposing the Anti-Spiritual Pollution and Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Movement. He openly advocated consumption over production, which was a departure from the country’s economic reforms that focused on open door policies driven by production and export. They cited him as making unauthorized statements on political issues and inappropriate speeches on foreign policy and legislative work. The party’s goal

with making these statements available on record was to attempt to gain back control over the party's image.

With many supporters, Hu was a glimpse into a new type of government that the CCP was trying to keep at bay. The Party used his resignation to set an example of what happens to anyone who undermines the party, and to promote the prominence of their power. In essence, the transcript tells the prompted story of Hu realizing the error of his ways and rightfully stepping down, which was the most appropriate action. His resignation and critique only led students and intellectual leaders to feel an even stronger pull towards Hu. He was on the side of the people by veering from the party norm. During the Politburo meeting, Hu Yaobang gave his resignation speech, which altered the public's perception of their system of government even further. In front of his peers, he echoed words similar to those of his comrades about his own actions. He told of his deep regret for veering off the respectful and unattainably rigid Communist path. He stated the reason that men were chosen to be CCP top leaders was "to ensure that [those leaders] would abide by the constitution and party discipline, not engaging in unrestrained autonomous behavior, to put state and party administration basically under the rule of law instead of rule by individual." He abruptly accused himself of not living up to these standards.⁷ The form of his speech, shaped by remnants of previous speakers, gives an insight into how the CCP system works in cases of divergent members. The fact that his statement directly opposes his actions made it clear to the Chinese people that he, in fact, had been on their side and had wanted what he believed was best for China rather than what was best solely for the party. Within the document, Hu recognized the fact that many of the members analyzed his "liberal tendencies" as "bad for his own good."⁸ He acknowledges his actions as detrimental to the people of China throughout his speech, but his actions gained him respect of the majority of the citizenry in China. The official documentation all points to resignation, although the context indicates a purge. Although most people wished that all politicians would adopt Hu's way of thinking, the CCP wanted to uphold their own ideology rather than change drastically.

⁷ E. Tong, "Party Documents on Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization and Hu Yaobang's Resignation, 1987," *Chinese Law and Government* 21, no. 1 (1988): 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The CCP worked to keep their power at the center of their political party. Although this was the norm, there were attempts from local leaders throughout China to push for reform and work toward recognizing the issues of the party. Hu Yaobang was not the only party member to recognize the disparity between what the CCP wanted for its people and what the people felt they needed from their government. Gathered by Zhang Liang and edited by Perry Link and Andrew Nathan, *The Tiananamen Papers* is the first book to compile source documents from the Zhongnanhai, the former Imperial Park at the center of Beijing that housed the Party Central Office, the State Council Office, and the residences of some top leaders during the time of the Tiananmen Square protests. This collection of papers includes an excerpt from the Joint Committee on Women and Youth of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and the Central Office of the Communist Youth Leagues' report titled "Report on a Survey of the Current State of Ideology Among Youth, March 28, Chapter 3, Sec. 1." The report was created in order to put pressure on the CCP's top leaders to listen to the voice of the youth between eighteen to thirty-five years of age. This age group inherently includes those of the university student community who were among the most outspoken of the age group.

From the survey results, it is clear that the two main issues of the Tiananmen Square protest were already showing signs of trepidation in March of 1988. Five major points came from this report, three of which showed signs of the opinions of college students during the Tiananmen Square protests. There was a wide discrepancy between the Party's stance on student protests and those of students themselves. For example, the survey asked the "youth," "are student protests a legitimate way for youth to oppose corrupt practices?" 57 percent answered "yes" to the question. The "youth" also had low confidence in reform during this time—the report concluded that, "young people are sensitive to many aspects of reform and are anxious about the rising cost of living; 63.8 percent of respondents consider the unchecked rise of prices to be their greatest worry."⁹ The topic of public ethics was the most revealing. The document reported:

⁹ Joint Committee on Women and Youth of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and the Central Office of the Communist Youth Leagues' report titled "Report on a Survey of the Current State of Ideology Among Youth, March 28," chapter 3, sec. 1.

Corruption brings serious harm to the environment in which young people grow up, and if our struggle against corruption makes no progress, the young will naturally feel resentful. Our survey finds that young people...believe...job promotions are based not on the fruits of hard work or pursuit of learning but on one's parents' connections and on the favor of leaders.¹⁰

This report not only compiled the opinions of this group, it also shows that there was a real concern within the Party to hear these voices and work to combat these issues. The report did not fulfill the hopes for a lasting impact. This is apparent by the fact that only months later the “youth” surveyed in the report took those same concerns to the public arena of Tiananmen Square.

Although there were other party members who attempted to give a voice to the citizens of China, Hu Yaobang remained the hero of the nation. The death of Hu Yaobang had an emotional effect on the Chinese populace due to his actions as a party member, as well as his treatment by the CCP while leaving his post. The Beijing students along with other community members organized the initial march to Tiananmen Square in 1989 the day after Hu's death; this march would ultimately lead to the massive 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Zhao was able to equally assess the point of view of public mourners, as well as the reaction of Hu's death by party members. He was also less judgmental of Hu's convictions, because both men believed that economic reform was key to progressing communist China into a world dominating economic power, and he had a more relaxed approach to interacting with the public. He, like Hu, believed that too harsh of an action toward the people would cause massive dissent, and would do more damage to the party's rule.

Zhao Ziyang, the party member who succeeded Hu as Party Chief, wrote in his private journals what he believed to be the three main reasons why the people of China backed Hu during his life and mourned his death in April of 1989. Zhao Ziyang concluded in his memoir, *Prisoner of the State*, that Hu's death was so monumental to the majority of the Chinese population, and that it transcended into such a politically-centered world news-worthy

¹⁰ Ibid.

protest because:

1. He had a very good public image. He had always been a proponent of reform; most important, he was incorruptible while in power. There was a lot of dissatisfaction with corruption back then, so commemorating Hu Yaobang provided a chance to express this discontent.
2. People were outraged by his demotion in 1987. Many people found it unacceptable the way in which the leadership was changed. Many people were averse to the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization campaign (Launched in 1987) and continued to be opposed to it. In general, people were expressing a feeling of resentment over how Hu Yaobang had been treated.
3. When the government's reorganization was proposed in 1988, reform programs had been cut back throughout for all government programs. There was no progress for political reform and economic reform had been stopped or even taken off the table altogether. Students were unhappy with the general situation and were expressing their desire for advancing reforms through their commemoration of Hu Yaobang. Since he was such a key figure in the progression of reform, which the public deemed as good for their wellbeing, they began to view Hu as a type of people's politician during his time in office.¹¹

The centrality of Hu's death to the Tiananmen Square protests is very significant to the goals of what the students, and the generations after them, wanted to achieve for themselves. During Hu's time in the party, the public realized that the CCP could be more transparent, and that party members could hold various viewpoints without the whole system toppling down. They felt that more politicians should take Hu's lead and mirror many of his characteristics during his service, such as prompting reform and being incorruptible. Hu's political career outlines the governments focus on ending westernization, and therefore liberalization, that

¹¹ Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Zhao Ziyang*, trans. Bao Pu, Renee Chiang and Adi Ignatius (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 12.

would likely lead to democracy, which was a goal that the people of CCP China were craving to achieve.

As the head of the CCP, Deng Xiaoping advocated the promotion of the nation as the number one priority, and thought that it should take precedence over individual party member agendas. Some party members during this time believed that,

“Deng’s failure to move the country faster toward democracy and to support Hu Yaobang in 1986 was the ultimate cause of the conflagration. Deng did believe that officials are the ‘commanding heights.’ [They] have a responsibility to make decisions and that although they should listen to constructive opinions, in the end they must do what they feel is necessary for the long-term success of the country.”¹²

With such rigid Party goals, Beijing’s citizens seized the opportunity of Hu’s death, which turned from a commemoration to a full protest for democracy, to take a stand against this type of CCP behavior and take example from more liberal and democratic types of government. Hu became a catalyst for the students and other Chinese citizens to attain their goals; he was a spark, which lit the fire for intellectual debates and the protest.



“On a Visit to the Ming Dynasty Tombs near Beijing, Hu Yaobang Has a Chat,”
Courtesy of http://english.caixin.com/2013-04-19/100516743_7.html.

¹² Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 638.

On April 18th, four thousand Beijing and People's University students marched to Tiananmen Square to place a banner calling Hu the "Soul of China" on the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs, also known as the Monument to the People's Heroes. By April 22nd, fifty thousand students defied a government order to vacate the square and stayed overnight in the square for Hu's state funeral, which was set to take place the next day. Throughout the first week, the people within Tiananmen Square transformed from a group of mourning college students to a group of Chinese citizenry questioning their current government and its actions. By April 24th, tens of thousands of students in Beijing began class boycotts in hopes of receiving their demands for talks with the government.

Protestors and the CCP alike assessed the power struggle that was the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests by measuring who had control of the public space within the square. The statement made by protestors to initiate these political interactions in Tiananmen Square directly grapples with the history of the square as well as what the square symbolizes in Chinese culture under the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the CCP. The students and protestors alike chose a space that holds great significance to the political party and drew even more attention to their cause, with hopes that the people would alter party policy to better suit the public's needs. The political history of the square directly corresponds with the development of the unrest present throughout Chinese society. The centrality and influence of the CCP in the populace's everyday lives was having negative effects on their freedoms and actions. The symbolism seen throughout the structures, buildings and monuments within the space all bring to mind the power and authority of the CCP. It is too easy to conclude that they chose this space because this is the center of the Chinese government, and without looking at the initial creation of the space, the political context of the area is lost.

During 1949, Mao and his closest colleagues moved into an area called Zhongnanhai, which eventually became the new government compound within the former Imperial Palace. It transformed into the center of power for the new regime. Tiananmen Square was located close to Zhongnanhai, and in the eyes of the PRC, was a unique place they felt already contained rich symbolic meaning. The government decided to invest money and energy into altering the square in order to project new PRC

symbolism. Mao felt that since the May Fourth student demonstrations began in 1919 at the site, which would eventually lead to the development of the CCP in 1921, the square was now part of PRC history.



“May Fourth Protest,” Courtesy of factsanddetails.com, 1919.

Here Mao had also proclaimed the founding of the new republic, making the square the birthplace of both the PRC and CCP. Thus, Mao felt that this site was a pivotal ideological link between past and present.¹³

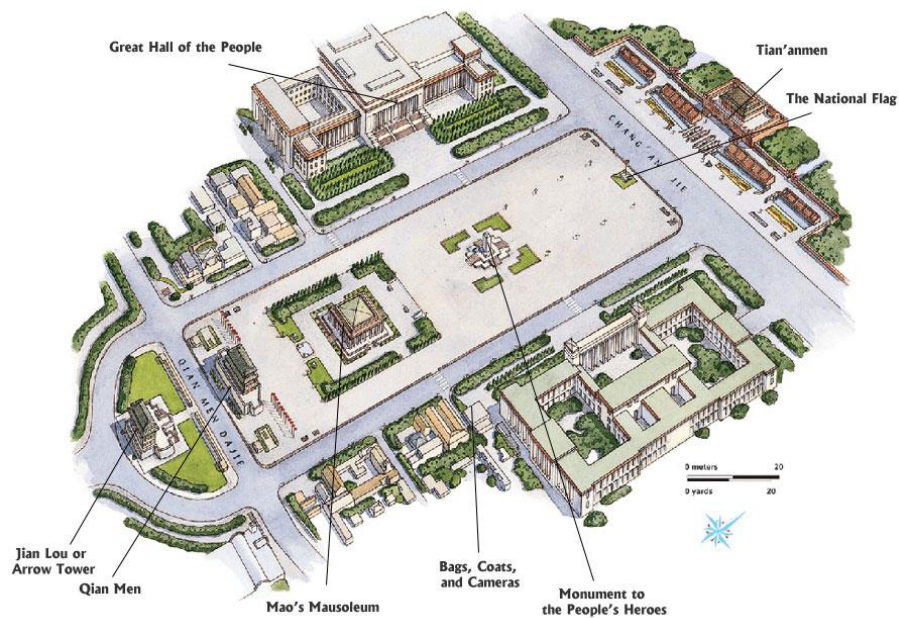
The PRC’s lack of knowledge of urban planning prompted them to ask for Soviet help. The PRC’s ill-preparedness led to a major Soviet influence on both the layout of the square, as well as the architecture surrounding the center of the square. With the help of the Soviets, the PRC was able to expand the space within the square and build ten new buildings, two of which were at the center of the square. These two central buildings were the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of the Chinese Revolution. They included these buildings because they saw the expanded square as a powerful symbol that would affirm their legitimacy to rule. More importantly, this expansion and construction was a way to publicize the doctrines of self-reliance and national

¹³ Hung, *Mao's New World*, 30.

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independence the government wanted the public to feel from learning about or visiting the site.

At the center of these ten buildings at the time of the 1989 protests were the ceremonial flag, Mao's mausoleum, and the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs. The names of these buildings and monuments speak volumes of the goals that their Communist creators were hoping to achieve. They focused on the history of the PRC and CCP's creation and the revolution that took place in order to create the current political system within China. Although there were many downfalls of the PRC, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, these topics are invisible within the space. They focus on the positive aspects of PRC and CCP history in order to perpetuate their power over the people of China. Words such as revolution, martyr, workers, and agriculture are prominent within the names of the buildings surrounding the square and further the communist ideals that shifted radically throughout the twentieth century into a struggle to maintain power. The aspirations of the party presented within the space take over the visitors experience rather than present the realities, which were sometimes undesirable outcomes of the new party system.



Modern "Map of Tiananmen Square," Courtesy of www.travelanguist.com.

The use of public space helped the CCP to promote myth making, and to create places where the government reinforces their political power. The collective memory, which is present in the most prominent city centers, such as Tiananmen Square, have been specifically curated to tell the story of PRC with specific goals from the CCP. One of the most prominent challenges in the representation of public history is the fact that the authority is often one sided when choosing what history to tell within these public spaces. Na Li argues in the article “Preserving Urban Landscapes as Public History: The Chinese Context” that the government in China is the entity with the ability to select an “official” version of the past, which is edited and reinforced.¹⁴ The party is able to focus on what they believe to be most important to the government, and therefore, should be important to the citizens of that government. Throughout Communist ruled China, public spaces are areas where images, words, and symbols are carefully chosen to glorify the CCP cause with little attempt at giving space for the people of China’s voice to be heard. The student’s choice to alter this space throughout the course of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests opened a dialogue where public space was a mouthpiece for the protestors. With so many young people in the crowd from the university, an air of enthusiasm began to take hold. The crowd felt that they would be able to recognize Hu as a people’s politician while starting a conversation with the closed off government. Tiananmen Square was the stage in which protestors demanded recognition. The students were led to this site because it is where the CCP commemorates major political actions and carries out political discussion. The students wanted desperately to be a part of this discourse, so rather than wait for an invitation onto the political stage, they reclaimed the stage as their own.

At the onset of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the first host of college students and professors from Beijing University set out for Tiananmen Square and directed their attention to the Monument to the People’s Heroes at its center. The political and historical significance of the monument attracted the demonstrators, and it became a center of activities during the spring months of 1989. To understand its attraction, an analysis of the monument’s creation and symbolism present throughout the monument is necessary. Construction of the monument began on

¹⁴ “Preserving Urban Landscapes as Public History: The Chinese Context,” *The Public Historian* 32, no. 31 (October 2010): 56.

August 1, 1952, and was completed and revealed to the public on May 1, 1958.¹⁵ In order to build this explicitly nationalistic memorial experience, it took an interdisciplinary team headed by PRC officials, and included historians, architects, and sculptors. The chief architect was Liang Sicheng, with some elements of the monument created by his wife, Lin Huiyin.¹⁶ The Monument to the People's Heroes was a monument created by the PRC to commemorate the martyrs of the revolutionary struggle during the 19th and 20th centuries.

It was Liang Sicheng's job, as chief architect, to oversee all aspects of creation for the state sanctioned monument. He sought to create a massive stele, or stone with an engraved or sculptured surface. A lifted walkway would surround the stele for easy viewing of the inscriptions and sculpted art that would be present on the stele. The planners along with Mao Zedong agreed that the Monument to the People's Heroes was to become the centerpiece of Tiananmen Square since this was "where China's new revolution made its debut."¹⁷ The final product took massive amounts of granite as well as labor to complete.

More than 17,000 pieces of granite were eventually used in the project, with a 14.7-meter, 60-ton slab occupying the central position of the monument. 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* (decorated bases), embellished with the traditional symbols of pines, cypresses, chrysanthemum, and peonies representing longevity and distinction.¹⁸

Liang Schieng attempted to capture the heart of PRC nationalism by using points of pride throughout its short history. He did this with the help of Mao's choice of events to include. The CCP propaganda department also contributed to the project. The

¹⁵ Hung, *Mao's New World*, 238-242.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 235-256.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

eight historical events chosen to be depicted on the Monument to the People's Heroes stele include: the Opium War, the May Thirtieth Movement of anticolonial 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 against the Nationalists in South China.¹⁹ All eight images depict a united China. The types of events depict more recent national history in China. In all scenarios, China is depicted as a powerful army – an army with an enemy to pursue and overcome. Considered major turning points in modern Chinese history, these eight events became the collective story of China's most recent past.



"The Monument to the People's Heroes," Courtesy of courtyard7beijing.com, 2011.

The Peoples Republic of China's goal at the time of the monuments creation was national unity, which would help in building the new nation that they envisioned. All events depicted on the stele are overwhelmingly military in nature, since the monument honors war heroes of the PRC, and all of the chosen events resulted with China as the victor. This imagery perpetuated the idea that soldiers of China were heroes of the people. Rather than depict the horrors of battle, the artists of the sculpted art

¹⁹ Ibid., 245.

present on the stele were steered toward showing the positive side of battle, either showing their heroes going into battle ready to win or leaving the battle as victors. Each image was chosen to, “...display the valor, sacrifice, duty, and honor of the soldiers, in line with Party rhetoric. The underlying themes are celebrations of patriotism, nobility of arms, and sacrifice, and thus they are merely exercises in propaganda and hagiography.”²⁰ Mao made a political statement with the creation of Tiananmen Square itself. The message focused on the power of the party, so the monument was another representation of the struggle between reality and myth present within China’s history. This idea is evident because the heroes that are present throughout the monument all helped to make communism a reality and that meant that communist heroes were the people’s heroes. As author Chang-tai Hung explains in the book *Mao’s New World: Political Culture in the Early People’s Republic*, which delves into the political stronghold and myth-making present throughout the architecture, monument building, and the political arrangement throughout the Mao ruled years of China, explains:

For the Chinese Communist Party, however, the building of a giant memorial in the capital’s most sacred location was more than an act of commemoration; it was a cultural production serving the political need to establish the regime’s control over the nation’s collective memory²¹

This attempt to take control of the nation’s collective memory was successful to a certain degree within China. Enchanted by this imagery, the majority of younger citizenry saw these images as a full depiction of their nation’s past. These images of revolutionary martyrdom are present throughout the monument and the events depicted were not as clear-cut and dreamscape laden in the minds of those who had lived through the events. There was a disconnect between the reality of the past, which included famines and loss, and the one presented on the colossus stele in the center of Tiananmen Square. In the depictions of the past created by the PRC throughout the monument, the loss of life was righteous and led to the ideal end, which was the overarching power of the party.

²⁰ Ibid., 254.

²¹ Ibid., 235.

The Monument to the People's Heroes was the first site that the students chose to alter. It transformed from a national monument to a memorial site for their former disgraced party member, Hu Yaobang. This initial demonstration started at noon on April 17th, when about 600 young teachers and students from the University of Political Science and Law went to Tiananmen Square to lay a wreath for Yaobang.²² After the first wreath lay on the monument, more students and citizenry from surrounding communities began to stream into Tiananmen Square to mourn Hu's death. Under the Monument to the People's Heroes, pieces of white cloth and other wreaths began to accumulate. Mourners also hung signs and banners from various heights on the stele and surrounding walkways of the monument. These signs praised Hu and his political focus on the people of China, and began to question the current CCP government's decisions, like the decision to take Hu from his post. Some of those who paid homage to Hu signed their names with other notes of sorrow onto the wreaths they left behind; others did not. As the crowd of mourners grew larger, the police arrived to keep order.²³ This memorial space changed throughout the duration of the protests but was very important for the students who began to demonstrate in honor of Hu. It became the center of the protest, which expanded and would ultimately take up the whole square as well as the surrounding city streets of Beijing.



“The Monument to the People's Heroes Altered by Protestors to Memorialize Hu Yaobang,” Courtesy of ajw.asahi.com.

²² Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2001), 148.

²³ *June Four*, 9.

By altering this space, the students were changing what the definition of a CCP hero could be. They were questioning whether people in their government were heroes only if they subscribed to current CCP ideology. In turn, they were questioning the government, which led to questioning its authority on society's needs. The significance of this initial march did not end with a few prayers said or speeches given. The students then began altering the Monuments to the People's Heroes to give thanks and recognize Hu as a martyr in their eyes. This reclaiming of the space helped mourner's display the problems they had with the party that were sprinkled throughout Hu's life, which were remembered by many of the students and people throughout China. Students and protestors risked their lives and their livelihoods in order to protest against their government, sparked by the death of their most prominent ally. By engaging with the political nature of the monument, the protestors were having a conversation with the past, which had not happened before, in the heart of China. James Mensch describes this type of engagement with public space in the article *Public Space*. Mensch explains that symbolism within public space:

...must be returned to again and again...Like the individuals that employ it, it exhibits its public presence through this return...The openness to the future of such presence appears most clearly in debates regarding collective action. In the plurality of possible outcomes brought out by the discussion, the goal as well as the objects composing it exhibit the openness to the future that they have as being part of the public space.²⁴

By interacting with a state sanctioned collective memory, these demonstrators were grappling with the actions of their government in a peaceful, yet affective, way. They were able to bring to light their feelings about the current government's actions, as well as the government myth of who was important to the ever-evolving history of the PRC.

Students were not calling to overhaul their whole government system, which makes all the difference in

²⁴ James Mensch, "Public Space," *Continental Philosophy Review* 40, no.1 (2007): 36.

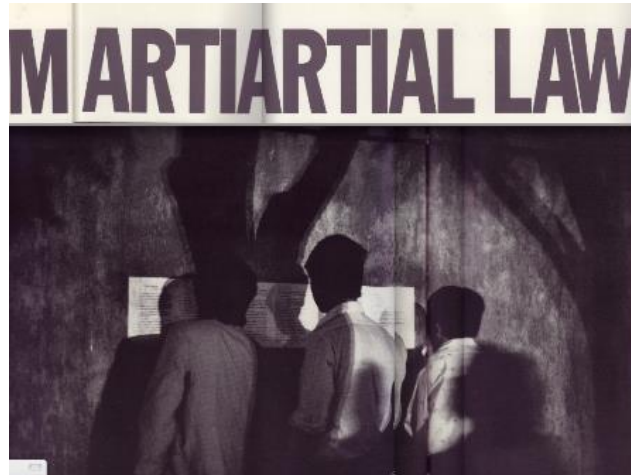
understanding their actions. They instead were attempting to alter the system to work for them. For example, rather than wanting to shut down the whole CCP they were bringing to light their lack of trust in the party. Demonstrators were fighting for actions that are more liberal by the government such as reforms to help the people of China rather than helping the CCP and the economy gain more power. Since Hu Yaobang was one of the first leaders to have these same feelings about the party system and the way it should work, he became a martyr for the people. Demonstrators believed he was a hero and should gain recognition as one by the government. What better way to commemorate a “People’s Hero” than at the Monument to the People’s Hero? The use of white cloths were reminiscent of the pure morals that the students felt Hu had while in power. Mournful yet respectful, banners hung throughout the space echoing the good intentions of the people who left them along with wreaths. The images of Hu became an addition to the monument rather than overtaking the already existing heroes’ space. The political leaders and martyrs of the communist cause were now not the only possible heroes. Activists were recreating a new definition of what a hero in modern Chinese history was.

The “Goddess of Democracy” aided protestors in reclaiming the space that is Tiananmen Square just as effectively as the Monument to the People’s Hero had months earlier. Rather than altering an existing structure, the protestors created one of their own. Instead of engaging with the past, they were now tackling their hopes for their future. The birth and death of the iconic “Goddess of Democracy” statue coincided with the end of the 1989 protests. During the final weeks of May, the CCP was growing tired of the protestors and their so-called antics. On May 20, 1989, Martial Law was issued by Li Peng to be imposed in the main areas of Beijing. The Premier of the State Council Li Peng stated:

In view of the serious turmoil that has taken place in Beijing, which has greatly disturbed social order, security, and the people’s normal life, and in order to extinguish the turmoil, to maintain the city’s peace, to ensure the safety of the citizens and their properties, to protect public properties, and to guarantee that the daily routine of the central and

municipal governments is not disturbed, the State Council hereby announces that, in accordance with the sixteenth regulation under item eighty-nine of the Constitution, martial law will be carried out in certain parts of Beijing beginning at ten o'clock Beijing time on the twentieth of May, nine-teen eighty-nine. The martial law will be imposed by the Beijing People's government, which is entitled to work out the details of these measures as necessary.²⁵

A little more than a week after the state issued martial law for parts of Beijing, which included Tiananmen Square, the figure of the "Goddess of Democracy" took her place in the square. She rose in the square during the night of May 29th, and became a rallying point for the movement in the morning hours of May 30th. During this time in the protest, both the students and the government were making critical decisions. Hunger strikes occurred due to the threat that the government would soon be taking drastic steps to end the protest under the cloak of martial law. These plans did not include opening up a dialogue with the demonstrators, but instead, the government was now willing to take violent action to end the protests.



"Protestors Read Martial Law Edict," Courtesy of underthejacaranda.wordpress.com, 1989.

²⁵ *June Four*, 96.

In order to create the Goddess of Democracy protest organizers furtively recruited students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and other Beijing schools. The students had a budget of 8,000 renminbi to purchase the materials they were going to need to construct the statue. Using foam, Paper-Mache, plaster, and metal framing the students created their goddess. It took three days to create the statue in a workshop located at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. The figure was made of various pieces and taken to the square on six, three-wheeled, cycles all of which had flat beds to transport the enormous pieces.²⁶ During the unveiling, a young woman read out a declaration. This young woman became the mouthpiece for all who helped in creating the “Goddess of Democracy,” they declared:

We dedicate this statue to the students’ cause....We dedicate this to the millions of students in China, to the people of Beijing, China and the world who support our movement....We have won victory after victory because the power of the people cannot be defeated. This government does not have any humanity. They are using obscenities and cheating and lies to cover Beijing in a cloud of darkness. They want to kill the democratic movement in the cradle. But the judgment days are coming for these leaders.²⁷

These powerful words accompanied a powerful figure. The “Goddess of Democracy” stood ten meters tall. The Beijing statue began as a simple figure of a Chinese peasant holding a wooden staff, grasping it above his head. In creating their rendition of this original figure, the students eliminated the bottom half of the rod and fashioned the top half into a “torch of freedom.” They changed the male figure into a woman by giving her collar-length hair that looked as if it was blowing in the wind. She held the torch with both hands as a symbolic gesture for the fear that all hope for the movement was in her grasp and could be taken at any moment.

²⁶ Chris Buckley, “The Rise and Fall of the Goddess of Democracy,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 2014, http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-goddess-of-democracy/?_r=0.

²⁷ Scott Simmie and Bob Nixon, *Tiananmen Square = Tien-an-men* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1989), 159.

She stood on a pedestal in the square and faced Mao's portrait, which seemed to keep a watchful eye on Tiananmen Square.



"The Goddess of Democracy in the Center of Tiananmen Square," Courtesy of poietes.wordpress.com.

Craig Calhoun, an American sociologist who was in Beijing at the time, wrote in his study of the protest movement, *Neither Gods Nor Emperors*, that "[t]he statue gave the protest a focal point and drew a continuous flow of ordinary people and other visitors into the Square."²⁸ Calhoun also clarifies that although the Goddess of Democracy was a figure of a woman holding a torch, the Beijing statue was not an ode to the Statue of Liberty located in the United States. The student artists felt that their changes to the originally planned figure came organically so they followed their instincts. They did not want the public to focus on the likeness to the Statue of Liberty because they were not trying to promote the Americanization of China but rather were encouraging a resonance of traditional folk goddesses of China in order to create the image of the soul of their movement.²⁹

²⁸ Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods Nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 108.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 108-110.



”Student Putting the Final Touches on the ‘Goddess of Democracy,’” Courtesy of www.boston.com.

The Goddess of Democracy was a symbol of the hopes and aspirations of the 1989 movement. The people who participated in the movement were not attempting to oust the Communist system as a whole, but rather to put an end to the corruption that was pertinent throughout the whole party to create a better China in the coming years. It was such an obvious problem that many knew of it and the problems stemming from corruption reached from the urban cities to the countryside. Protestors also wanted to have more say in the government for the citizenry of China. These were drastic demands which the Communist Party in China directly opposed. In wanting these types of rights, the demonstrators were opposing the government. Holding these beliefs made protestors enemies of the state. Thus, creating such an overtly democratic figure and placing it within the Communist party square was a public statement of their hopes for what the future of China could become. The “Goddess of Democracy” was a symbol that encapsulated the feelings of the protestors and their goals. Unlike the Monument to the People’s Heroes, this alteration to the square was a statement to the government of their hopes for a better CCP, rather than a negative critique of it.



“Two Amateur Photographers take Photographs of the ‘Goddess of Democracy,’” Courtesy of www.pekingduck.org.

When soldiers seized the square on June 4th, they toppled the Goddess of Democracy statue as well and violently ended the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. As part of their martial law statute any and all imagery, statements, and loitering by the protestors within and around the square became illegal. The Goddess of Democracy was now an illegal display. The destruction of the figure signaled the end of the protests. The fact that the government decided to target the Goddess of Democracy as one of their first threats, which needed to be decimated, speaks volumes to the figure’s impact on both the government and the people. The sculpture’s presence within the square blatantly questioned the CCP system and its future goals for China. Images of the Goddess of Democracy are one of the most iconic images to come from the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Authors Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites explore iconic imagery of the twentieth century in their book, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Both authors agree that:

The first icon of the demonstration was a thirty-seven-foot tall statue crafted by art students ...Although seemingly a universal symbol of liberty,

it became festooned with flags, banners, flowers, and other signs that defined the monument within a cultural milieu largely illegible to the Western audience.³⁰

They argue that other prominent images, such as the photograph of a man standing before a row of tanks taken by various photographers such as Jeffery Widener, Charles Cole, and Stuart Franklin, do not truthfully embody the spirit of the protests, but rather the unfortunate end. The Goddess of Democracy images however hold more meaning to the goals and aspirations of the protests, and provide a more meaningful definition to what the protests meant to the protestors and those who supported them.



“Remnants of the Goddess of Democracy after Being Destroyed,” Courtesy of beijingdoll.wordpress.com.

³⁰ Robert Hariman, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 210.

Though the Tiananmen Square protests ended violently, the protestors did make their mark on Modern Chinese history as the people who reclaimed the word, Tiananmen. There is a misconception that since the CCP omitted the Tiananmen Square protests from their national narrative that the majority of the nation is not aware of the events that took place in 1989. National amnesia is one way in which the CCP has tried to erase Tiananmen from the memories of their citizens but that has not been possible. As Susan Shirk observes in her book, *China: Fragile Superpower*, although China is one of the fastest growing economies in the world they are a superpower that suffers from insecurities that carried through the past century.³¹ These insecurities are present throughout the nation today, and can be seen in the strict suppression of information pertaining to the Tiananmen Square Protests. Such insecurities were present in the days after the end of the 1989 protests. After the protests, the party committee published a book which contained five of Mao's essays, and booklets, were given to the villagers who inhabited the areas around the square. These booklets were, "an antidote to any reactionary ideas spread by the demonstrators. Thereafter, the village organized frequent mass meetings in which residents were required to study and discuss the book."³² These attempts to flood the public who were witness to the protests were perceived as a threat to the future of China and were seen to need reeducation of CCP core values in order to be less of a liability to the future of CCP power.

The fact that the CCP omits these events from current discussions highlights their awareness of the feeling that can be rekindled by discussing the events. The word Tiananmen in the Chinese context brings to mind the aims of the protestors rather than the display of CCP power it was supposed to evoke. The nation may have been able to rewrite its history, but it has not been able to stop the word Tiananmen from being used in contemporary context. There are citizens of PRC being punished as recently as 2012 for acts of remembrance tied to the Tiananmen Square protests. An activist by the name of Tan Yufu was given a seven-year prison sentence for reciting a poem via skype that included the words,

³¹ Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

³² James Miles, *The Legacy of Tiananmen: China in Disarray* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 268.

It's time, Chinese people!
The square belongs to everyone.
Your feet are your own.
It's time to use your feet and head to the square to
make your choice.³³

The Party's paranoia is a lingering symptom of events throughout CCP history, such as the Tiananmen Square protests and the May Fourth Movement, where their power has been questioned.

Although no official dialogue between the protestors and the government proved beneficial for either side, protestors were able to have open debates with their government from the onset of the protest by using Tiananmen Square as their mouthpiece.

Public spaces are areas where people can collectively cope with events, past or present, and this is exactly what happened in Tiananmen Square. The alteration of the Monument to the People's Heroes, as well as the creation of the Goddess of Democracy, marked the beginning and the end of the protests, and mapped its trajectory. Starting with the alteration of the Monument to the People's Heroes, protestors were able to grapple with their past in order to demand acknowledgement from the government of its wrongdoing. The Goddess of Democracy symbolized the spirit of the movement, which had democracy as its ultimate goal. This figure boosted the hopes and aspirations of the future of the movement, and it gave these dreams a face. These tangible creations helped the majority of the population deal with a topic in meaningful ways. The symbolism within the space during the protests are now more recognizable in modern times than Mao's mausoleum or any of the ten state sponsored buildings surrounding the square. The shrine-like memorial to Hu created around the Monument to the People's Heroes and the face of the Goddess of Democracy staring into the infamous portrait of Mao have become the iconic images of Chinese modern history, and this can only be seen as a victory for the protestors involved in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

³³ Louisa Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (New York: Oxford Press, 2014), 207.

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"Chinese Students Demonstrate after Hu Yaobang's Death, Photo Dated 21-22 April 1989," Courtesy of diogenesii.wordpress.com.



"Goddess of Democracy," Courtesy of www.reddit.com.

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Author Bio

Amanda Castro received her Bachelor's degree from CSUSB in public and oral history. She is currently a graduate student at CSUSB in the social and behavioral sciences program with an emphasis in public history. In the fall of 2015, she became Project Manager at the Patton State Hospital Museum and Archive where she is helping to create an accessible archive for researchers. Amanda has an interest in community-based projects and outreach where her knowledge of public history helps to organize and carry out such projects.

