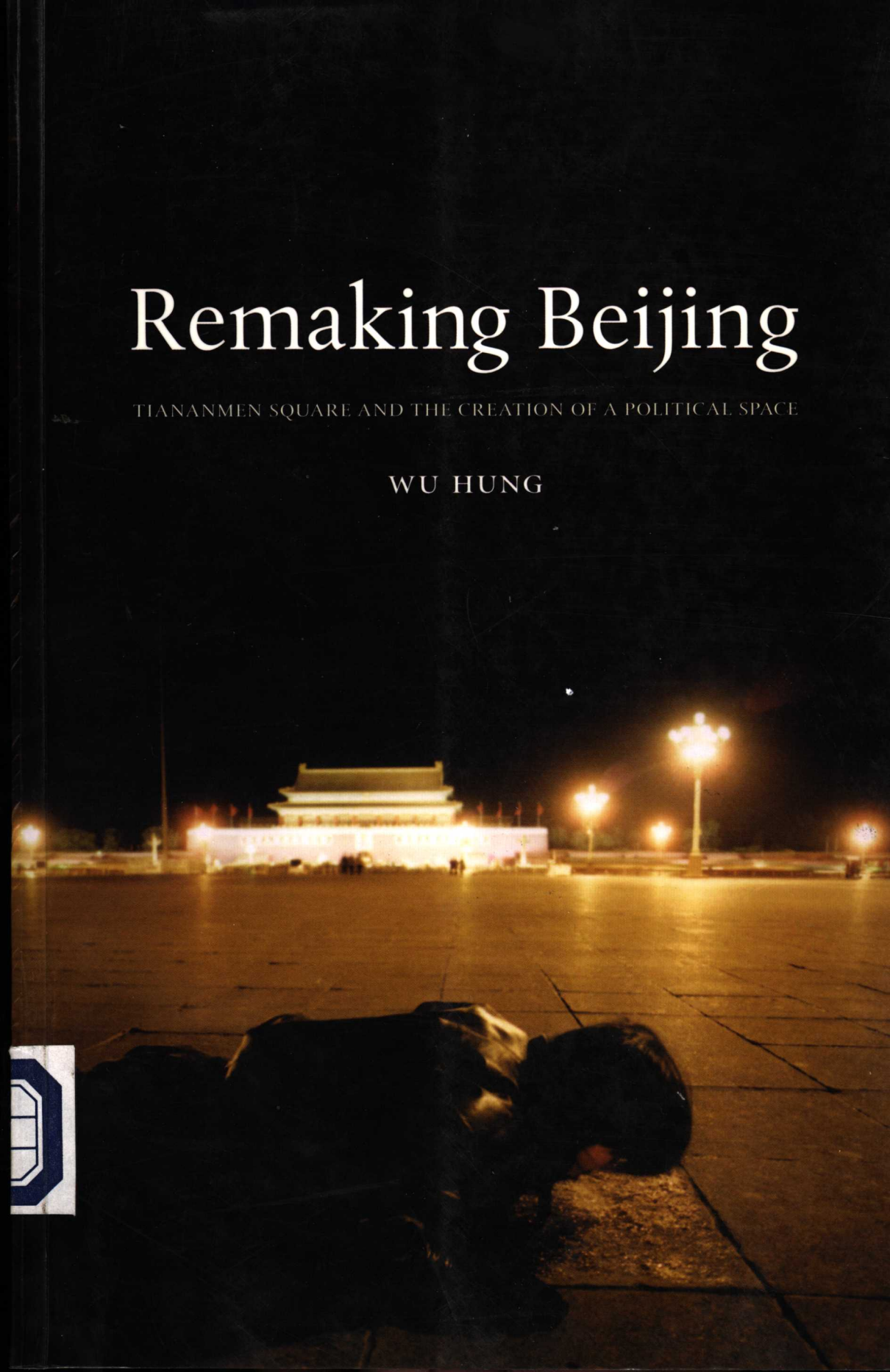


Remaking Beijing

TIANANMEN SQUARE AND THE CREATION OF A POLITICAL SPACE

WU HUNG



In 1949, Beijing still retained nearly all of its time-honored character and magnificence. But when Chairman Mao rejected the proposal to build a new capital for the People's Republic of China and decided to stay in the ancient city, he initiated a long struggle to transform Beijing into a shining beacon of socialism. So began the remaking of the city into a modern metropolis rife with monuments, public squares, exhibition halls, and government offices. But how were these new spaces and monuments created? And how have their meanings changed over the past half century?

Wu Hung grew up in Beijing and experienced much of the city's makeover firsthand. In this lavishly illustrated work, he offers a vivid, often personal account of the struggle over Beijing's reinvention, drawing particular attention to Tiananmen Square—the most sacred space in the People's Republic of China. *Remaking Beijing* considers the square's transformation from a restricted imperial domain into a public arena for political expression, from an epic symbol of socialism into a holy relic of the Maoist regime, and from an official and monumental complex into a site for unofficial and antigovernment demonstrations. Wu Hung also explores how Tiananmen Square has become a touchstone for official art in modern China—as the site for Mao's monumental portrait on Tiananmen's facade, as the location of museums narrating revolutionary history and showcasing masterpieces of socialist art, and as a parade ground for extravagant National Day celebrations representing the revolutionary masses. Ultimately, he shows how in recent years the square has inspired artists working without state sponsorship to create paintings, photographs, and performances that reflect the spirit of the 1989 uprisings and pose a forceful challenge to official artworks and the political system that supports them.

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Tiananmen Square and the Creation
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Contents

Introduction 7

ONE

Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments 15

TWO

Face of Authority: Tiananmen and Mao's
Tiananmen Portrait 51

THREE

Displaying the People: National Day Parades and
Exhibition Architecture 85

FOUR

Monumentality of Time: From Drum Tower to
'Hong Kong Clock' 131

FIVE

Art of the Square: From Subject to Site 165

Coda: Entering the New Millennium 235

References 246

Bibliography 260

Photo Acknowledgements 266

Index 267

Introduction

As soon as Beijing was made the capital of the People's Republic of China, this ancient city reached a fatal moment in its survival. Although Beijing had experienced numerous human and natural calamities during its 500-year history,¹ and although waves of modernization campaigns since the nineteenth century had altered some of its architectural features,² Beijing in 1949 still retained nearly all its traditional character and splendour. Layers of thick brick walls still concealed the yellow-roofed palaces, surrounded by a sea of grey courtyard houses built along narrow lanes. The city was still tranquilly flat. A few taller modern buildings here and there – none of them surpassing the seven-storey Peking Hotel on Chang'an Avenue – were fashionable anomalies. Cars and trams only ran through major streets. The remaining roads and side roads were dusty or muddy depending on the weather, better suited for rickshaws and mule carts to struggle through.³

How could this old city be transformed into the capital and a shining symbol of New China? This question was asked not only by Communist leaders but also by some Western-trained architects, who returned to their country to contribute their professional knowledge to her reconstruction.⁴ The proponents of two different solutions were soon caught up in a heated debate.⁵ Led by Liang Sicheng and Chen Zhanxiang (Charlie Chen), a group of conservation-minded architects envisioned building an administrative centre west of old Beijing, leaving the historical city intact. Other forces, however, including an unlikely coalition of left-wing Chinese architects, Soviet specialists and Western-trained urban planners of a modernist bent, argued that the capital could fully realize its symbolic potential only by locating the government in traditional Beijing. A crucial argument made by this second group was that, because the country's founding ceremony took place in Tiananmen Square, this locale should logically be the centre of new Beijing. Drawing on Moscow's experience, the proponents of this view also sought support from Marxist philosophy. Chen Gan (who later became the chief architect of Beijing's Municipal Institute of Urban Planning) thus went through Friedrich Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* and discovered a *raison d'être* for this argument in the significance of 'zero'. Engels writes:

[In analytical geometry:] Here zero is a definite point from which measurements are taken along a line, in one direction positively, in the other negatively. Here, therefore, the zero point has not only just as much significance as any point denoted by a positive or negative magnitude, but a much greater significance than all of them: it is the point on which they are all dependent, to which they are all related, and by which they are all determined . . . Wherever we come upon zero, it represents something very definite, and its practical application in geometry, mechanics, etc., proves that – *as limit* – it is more important than all the real magnitudes bounded by it.⁶

Applying this theory to Beijing's design, Chen Gan identified the throne hall in the imperial palace as the city's traditional zero point; all other architectural features were subordinate to this absolute centre, while reinforcing it. By relocating 'zero' to Tiananmen Square, the birthplace of the People's Republic, the city would acquire a new identity and a vantage point for its architectural restructuring. Beijing's centre of gravity would automatically shift southward, and the avenue running east–west through the square would become its new axis. 'Everything in the city will have to divorce itself from the old zero and align itself with the new zero. To be sure, at the very moment when the national flag rose in Tiananmen Square for the first time, history had determined that this locale should be the centre of the capital of New China, and had predicted Beijing's subsequent transformation and its rise in Asia.'⁷

The debate did not last long: less than a year after Liang Sicheng and Chen Zhanxiang made their conservation-orientated proposal (known as the Liang-Chen plan), Mao Zedong personally decided to locate the government in the old city.⁸ Looking back at the debate, the failure of the Liang-Chen plan was inevitable because it contradicted the basic tenet of the Chinese Communist Party at that time, which emphasized revolution, not preservation. To Liang and Chen, it was all too plain that great pressure would be placed on the old city unless the administrative centre were set up outside, and that the destruction of historic Beijing was inevitable should it become the site of a growing number of modern buildings. But to Mao such concerns were irrelevant, because revolution meant destruction and transformation; it was only natural that Beijing should be remade when China was reborn.⁹ In addition, as Wu Liangyong has noted, 'The Liang-Chen plan also lacked the grandeur expected at the time. The idea that the new republic should aspire to project an impressive image was repeatedly stated by politicians at all levels. At that point, only Tiananmen possessed the desired grandeur.'¹⁰ Unable to satisfy this political need, the Liang-Chen plan was eventually criticized as 'an attempt to negate Tiananmen, the country's political centre cherished by the revolutionary people.'¹¹

The consequence of Mao's decision cannot be exaggerated: all the subsequent destruction and construction of Beijing were fundamentally determined at this moment. As I will show at the end of this book, even today, when Beijing is developing into a global metropolis, all major urban projects have still to be based on this decision made 54 years ago. Some belated preservation efforts have been made, but they can never bring back traditional Beijing, now vanished

forever. Again, Wu Liangyu, a long-time insider of Beijing's urban planning, looking back at this historical tragedy, remarked on its inevitability:

Once the old city expansion plan was chosen, there was little chance for any alternative . . . Year after year, the old city centre was redeveloped to adapt to the needs of growth, and radial and ring roads were built. The more growth there was, the more expansion was needed. It is not unreasonable to say that most of Beijing's conservation and traffic management problems stem from the choice of this site.¹²

In short, Beijing's fate was sealed by locating the government in the old city, and this decision owed much to the symbolic gravity of Tiananmen Square. Many books have been written on Beijing's urban development and related debates.¹³ This book will focus on the Square.

To become the centre of new Beijing and the People's Republic of China, Tiananmen Square itself had to be transformed from an insulated imperial quarter into an open space for political activity and visual representation.¹⁴ I call this kind of public space a 'political space'. In various scholarly writings a public space is conceived either as a conceptual sphere of public discourse or as a physical place where public events take place.¹⁵ I use the term 'political space' in both senses, as an architectonic embodiment of political ideology and as an architectural site activating political action and expression. Defined as such, an official political space such as Tiananmen Square inevitably lies within the dominant political system and helps to construct this system; but it also stimulates public debate and facilitates opposition. To individual participants in both official and unofficial events that have unfolded here, this space is connected with their personal experiences and aspirations, but it also frames such experiences and aspirations within broad historical movements.¹⁶

As I will recount in this book, Tiananmen Square began to acquire the significance of a public political space in the early twentieth century, when numerous political activities, including some of the most famous anti-government mass demonstrations, were held there. After 1949, however, the place was architecturally transformed into a dominant official space – a monumental complex that embodied the country's political ideology and consolidated its Communist leadership. It also became a major site of visual production and presentation. Some images displayed there – including painting, sculpture and mass parades – helped to articulate the notions of political authority and the people, as well as the relationship between the two. Other images and displays are concerned with time and space. Together with the architectural monuments in the Square, they have provided basic standards and references for constructing a 'revolutionary history of the people' and defining the country's political geography and temporality.

A crucial change occurred toward the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s, since the government could no longer maintain its monopoly on the place. A spontaneous mass movement emerged in the Square in 1976,

and was echoed thirteen years later by an even larger mass movement – the June Fourth pro-democratic demonstrations in 1989. Since then, the Square has remained a highly contested space. On the one hand, its official symbolism and visual culture have undergone subtle changes as new generations of Chinese leaders have tried to modify their images to suit the post-Cold War global environment. On the other hand, the place has continued to generate unofficial political expressions, including numerous experimental art projects, which, through appropriating official presentations and activating historical memories, have also made the Square a ‘space of the avant garde’.

This brief outline of the Square’s history suggests multiple issues and problems. Some of these are related to the Square’s physical and contextual transformation: the destruction of its traditional framing; the construction of its new architectural and pictorial components; and its relationship with Beijing’s changing cityscape. Other problems concern the Square’s role as a primary site of public activity and expression: the various gatherings and demonstrations taking place there; the holiday spectacles created to punctuate a political calendar; the display of the revolutionary masses; the public perception of the leader; and the site-specific performances of unofficial artists. A third set of problems is related to issues of representation: the images of Tiananmen and Mao in official photographs and paintings, and various iconoclastic appropriations of these images by avant-garde artists. Bringing these issues into a single study, this book is not written for a particular academic field, but is located in a network of disciplines including art history, the history of architecture, modern Chinese history, urban studies, cultural studies and autobiography. In fact, one of my purposes in writing this book is to forge this interdisciplinary network.

My plan to discuss these issues in a book-length study emerged in 1991, two years after the June Fourth Movement ended in bloodshed. I did not finish the book until twelve years later, not because it had a lower priority than my other projects, but because it carried a personal significance and also posed a methodological challenge. While the plan was first conceived as a historical study of Tiananmen Square, it inevitably brought back memories connected to the place. By 1991 I had lived in the United States for more than a decade, during which time I received a doctoral degree and had begun to publish books and articles, mostly on ancient Chinese art. It seemed that in this process I had left my past behind: I had not returned to China in nine years, and in 1991 I was writing almost exclusively in English for a non-Chinese, academic readership. Leaving China at a time when historical scholarship there was equated to political statements, I enjoyed the freedom of detaching myself from my research subject: the only link between me and an ancient building or object was my research as an intellectual exercise. Although in theory I never believed that historical scholarship could be totally objective, I wrote in the third person as an uninvolved observer.

Writing on Tiananmen Square and Beijing naturally disrupted the harmony of this type of historical study. I grew up in Beijing and had frequent encounters

with the Square throughout my childhood and into early adulthood. This personal relationship with the place began with a family outing in the early 1950s and deepened when I participated in a National Day celebration in the fourth grade. I marched in front of Tiananmen many times as a high school student, and later as a college student, and my feelings toward that monument changed together with my view of Mao and the Party. For seven years from 1972 I was on the staff of the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City, of which Tiananmen was the former front gate. From late March 1976 to early April I used to pass through this gate daily to join the anguished crowd in the Square mourning Premier Zhou Enlai, who, before his death in January, had become the people's only hope for rationality amidst the madness of the Cultural Revolution. There is no doubt that this experience is related to my research on the Square. But what is this relationship and how can my current research be linked to my past? Must a historian suppress personal memories (which are by definition subjective and trivial) to ensure a more objective, macroscopic historical reconstruction and interpretation? Can a historical narrative gain additional strength by incorporating personal memories? Can an author retain the dual positions of a historian and an autobiographer?

These questions led me to read a wide range of writings on history, memory and autobiography. Recognizing that my research and memories could never be kept completely separate,¹⁷ in this book I have decided to tell a story about Tiananmen Square in two parallel narratives – a historical narrative and an autobiographical narrative: these have different focuses but an overlapping spatio-temporal scheme. The historical narrative investigates the Square as an external entity and observes its changing form and meaning. The construction of this narrative utilizes all sorts of evidence (archives, architectural plans, memoirs, photos, pictures and secondary scholarship) that can help me trace the Square's history. The autobiographical narrative (or 'self-narrative' as some psychologists call it)¹⁸ recounts in the first person my encounters with the Square and reflects on my changing perception of the place. In this second narrative, fragmentary experiences are recalled and retold in a synchronic fashion as if I intended to relive them for a second time.

It is possible to describe the relationship between these two narratives as a simultaneous interpenetration of historical research and memory formation – two processes moving from opposite ends toward a shared mid-ground.¹⁹ Such interpenetration is especially relevant to this book, because my historical reconstruction and personal recollections both focus on important political events and are closely related to collective memories associated with these events.²⁰ Indeed, many scholars, including the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, have questioned the idea that memory resides in the individual.²¹ Halbwachs, in particular, asserts that all personal memories are formed and organized within collective contexts, because society always provides the framework for individual beliefs and behaviours, including their recollections of past events. This is especially true in a country like China, where the concept of privacy virtually did not exist in the years when I was growing up, and public and personal events were consistently



1 Zheng Lianjie, *Family History*, performance in Tiananmen Square, 1999.

intertwined. It is therefore not surprising that many of my memories are associated with a dominant official space such as Tiananmen Square. It also becomes understandable why many Chinese experimental artists have staged performances in the Square, relating their personal experiences with this place. Among these projects, Zheng Lianjie's *Family History* presents close conceptual parallels with this book and can help illuminate some of my goals.

Deceptively simple, this performance in 2000 consisted of little more than staging a tableau: holding up an enlarged black-and-white family photo, the artist and his nine-year-old son took another picture in Tiananmen Square (illus. 1).²² The implications of the performance are rich and complex, however, largely due to Tiananmen's double role as the site of the performance and as the backdrop in the 'photo-within-a-photo'. Taken in 1957, the old family photo shows Zheng's parents and his five older brothers and sisters, posed before a painted Tiananmen backdrop in a photo studio. Born five years later, Zheng was not among them: he developed his own relationship with Tiananmen Square later, including participating in the June Fourth Movement in 1989. In spring 2000 his father had just passed away and his son was as old as his eldest brother in the photo. He dedicated the performance to his father as a tribute to the family's bygone generation: he displayed the photo in Tiananmen Square to indicate the shared political experiences of the family's members, including himself, and he conducted the performance with his son, who would carry the memory into the future.

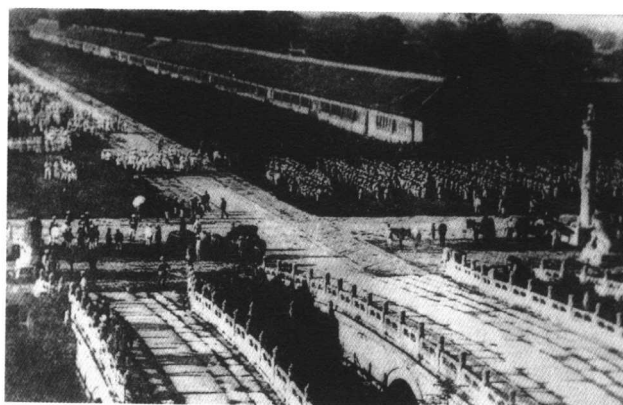
In this performance, Tiananmen exists both as a subject and as the social context of Zheng's remembrance; the Square provides both past and present events with a single location. As indicated by its title, the performance is about the history of a family. But this micro-history is framed by a macro-history, both connected to Tiananmen Square. Similarly, in this book I represent the Square's history and my memories connected to the place in two interacting frames, constantly intersecting the historical account with short 'memory pieces' (which resemble Zheng Lianjie's 'photo-within-a-photo'). These memory pieces or autobiographical narratives have undoubtedly been influenced by my historical research, but they retain a personal perspective and complement the historical account told in the third person.²³ Perhaps most importantly, the juxtaposition of the two narratives generates tension. Refusing to be incorporated into the historical narrative, the autobiographical narratives instead remind readers of my specific experience, which must have influenced and even predetermined my historical reconstruction and interpretation.²⁴ The two narratives finally merge in the book's coda, which observes and analyses the transformation of Tiananmen Square and Beijing into the present millennium.



2 A worker stopping government tanks on Chang'an Avenue on 4 June 1989.



3 May Fourth Movement, 1919.



4 Victory March of the Allied Army in Tiananmen Square, 1900.