

THE PEOPLE SQUARED!

It is hard to overstate the centrality of the public square to Maoism. Right from its earliest days as a fledgling terrorist organisation, Mao's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was clearing land, setting up stages, and positioning the resultant spaces at the core of its political strategy. "Red Squares", occasionally adorned with Kremlinesque gateways, were popping up in post-imperial China as early as 1928, and when the first "Red State" was declared in Jiangxi Province in 1931, Mao was quick to establish a government headquarters, and to create a large square before it. Official squares would later be stamped onto every city, town and village in China. The Jiangxi square, with a dais at one end, a tower to Red martyrs at the other, and flanking memorials to either side, specifically prefigured what remains the world's largest paved open urban space: Tiananmen Square.

Mao's squares were used for pageants and National Day parades, as well as to disseminate information via Party announcements. However it is the prevalence of the public square political rally under Mao which makes their role so pivotal to the story of modern China. The Maoist era witnessed massive purges — and so too, crucially, did the Chinese people. Far from pursuing a policy of chilling political "disappearances", rallies were used to ensure that the public was directly exposed to grassroots brutality. Compulsory attendance at public arrests and sessions of public humiliations, beatings and torture, at which brains were blown out onto bystanders and corpses trucked openly through the streets, were an inescapable part of everyday life. The political imperative, which included every Chinese citizen witnessing a public execution, preferably in a heightened emotional state, was to forge an irreversible bond of complicity between Party and public. The Party line was to 'prod people into doing things that leave them with no chance to make compromises later.' Everyone participates, and everyone is terrified. By this, the square becomes not only a place to express power, but an actual means to power. In the early years Mao would even don disguise and, like a Shakespearean king, pass through the squares' screaming crowds, verifying the zeal of his subjects.

By 1949, when the CCP won the Civil War and announced the People's Republic of China, Mao's concept of the square had become positively visionary. Plans were immediately drawn up for the creation of a massive space in front of Tiananmen Gate, which Mao initially stipulated should be 'big enough for one billion people' — i.e. every single person in China (550 million at the time) plus a friend each from overseas. The clearances which followed fell short of this, but at 400,000m², Tiananmen Square was still unprecedented.

The square was not only huge, but heart-stoppingly empty. Imagine taking Green Park, doubling it, flattening it, and concreting it over: no benches, no shade, just an immense sheer zero. On one level it fulfilled its practical duty, frequently hosting crowds of hundreds of thousands, and at its peak in the first months of the Cultural Revolution, 11 million over seven rallies. But the scale and absolutism of Tiananmen go beyond mere capacity, and anchor what was a fundamental redesign of Beijing.

In 1949 the CCP was faced with the question of how to convert the ancient imperial city into a new socialist capital. Traditional Beijing was focused entirely on the emperor's throne at the centre of the Forbidden Palace. Spreading outwards from here were a series of boxes enclosed by boxes, all transected by a north-south line, to create the rather odd shape of a labyrinth on a single axis. This north-south approach completely dominated the surrounding urbanism: two-thirds of east-west routes within the inner city were physically blocked, while buildings across the city were universally aligned to face south, and thus conduct the greater flow of *qi*. Taking all this into account, the CCP plan that emerged in 1949 from a team of left-wing Chinese architects, Soviet planners, and foreign-educated modernist Chinese returnees, launched a direct assault upon this traditional and

ultimately cosmological order. Firstly the T-shaped area leading up to Tiananmen Gate, previously a section of the imperial approach, was quadrupled in size to create Tiananmen Square. Secondly, the east-west route at the top of this square, Changan Avenue, which had been opened to a tram in 1924 but remained narrow, was doubled, then tripled, then quintupled in size. By 1959, at 80m wide and 40km long, stretching far beyond the confines of the contemporary city, Changan Avenue had become Beijing's major thoroughfare. Thirdly, a Monument to the People's Heroes — a 38m granite stele — was erected at the south end of the square, bang on the old north-south approach and frankly blocking it. The monument was orientated northwards to look out across the square, and so served not only to interrupt the southward flow of *qi*, but positively to stick its face right into it. In combination, these three elements served to flip the primary axis of the city from north-south to east-west, shift the focal point southward toward the intersection of Changan Avenue and Tiananmen, and recentre the city itself onto the new square.

A theoretical legitimacy for this was actually found in Engels. Crawling through the *Dialectics of Nature*, lead architect (and later Chief of Beijing's Municipal Institute of Urban Planning) Chen Gan unearthed a passage on analytical geometry, in which Engels identifies the preeminence of zero as the point on which all other magnitudes are dependent, 'to which they are all related, and by which they are all determined'. Transposing this logic to the realm of urban planning suggested that the centre of a city should indeed be an immense sheer zero. It was thus an act of architectural erasure (the terrific demolition of historic buildings and houses in the Tiananmen area) that would define the architectural, political and spiritual heart of an entire nation.

But while Tiananmen Square was an architectural void, it drew its symbolic strength from its foregrounding of the people. Girt on three sides by the Great Hall of the People, the Monument to the People's Heroes, and the Museum of Chinese History, which bore the inscription 'The people, and the people alone, are the motive forces of world history' — and standing at the centre of the *People's Republic of China* — the square was able to asseverate a 'dictatorship of the people'.

Imperialist political architecture sought to indicate the presence of a ruler by cutting grandiose statements in stone. Tiananmen Square on the other hand took an empty space (formerly an approach to the emperor — to the presence) and turned it into the core articulation of rulership. The CCP evacuated itself from the scene in order to stand the people in Tiananmen's 400,000m² concrete throne. It is a deft piece of planning rhetoric which, like the rallies themselves, effectively implicated the public in all the political acts and consequences to emanate therefrom. Indeed it is the CCP's formidable skill at dodging — or perhaps sharing — the bullet in this way that has allowed the Party to remain in power for 60 consecutive years, notwithstanding having made a whole string of the absolute worst decisions of the twentieth century.

Accordingly, the Maoist era is striking not only for its overproduction of squares, but also its comparative paucity of monumentalist — or, by CCP logic, imperialist — architecture. Factories were built, as were Communist housing blocks, and a series of matchbox mansions for Mao himself (luxury concrete cuboids hidden among the mountains and before favoured views or swimming spots). Relatively few buildings however were designed to inspire awe or indicate great leadership. The few exceptions to this rule came almost all at once in a single frenetic discharge that took place between 1958 and 1959 at the zenith of the Great Leap Forward.

Enormous importance was placed on the ten year anniversary of the People's Republic of China, coming up in 1959. The Party was keen to evidence the progress China had made as a nation, but even more so, that the Chinese people had indeed, as Mao had declared on Tiananmen Gate ten years earlier, 'stood up!' It was determined that the planned architecture surrounding Tiananmen,

which would complete the square and fill out the redesign of Beijing, would be carried out in one cataclysmic ten month burst. In a profusion of tens, this became the Ten Great Buildings Project.

Preeminent amongst these were the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Chinese History, which would flank the square itself. A further five of diminishing prestige were strung along Changan Avenue, enhancing its primacy, while the last three were located on a parallel east-west route slightly to the north. But while the plan betrays a strong centralist logic, the emphasis of execution was placed firmly on the people. Chief architect of the Great Hall, Zhao Dongri, reports how architects and construction workers ‘threw themselves into a mighty collective campaign of architectural creation’, as though the frenzy were bubbling up from the people, and not orchestrated by the Party. Top-down monumentalism was respun as the spontaneous expression of the revolutionary masses. And inevitably, the masses were integrally involved.

Within five days of the Party’s decision to go ahead with the Project, literally thousands of architects and engineers from across China had been summoned to Beijing for a grand ‘mobilisation meeting’. At this, they were given five days to produce designs for the ten buildings. After a round of reviews and two further five day design windows, followed by a three day window, the plans were rushed to their various sites (i.e. less than a month after the decision to have a Ten Great Buildings Project at all). The ensuing construction furor can only be compared to a zealous army at war. Zhang Bo, the Project’s principal architect, ascribed its success to a strategy previously used by the People’s Liberation Army, known as *jizhong bingli da jianmiezhhan* (‘concentrating one’s military strength to conduct a battle of annihilation’). Applied to architecture, this meant utilising all available means to accomplish a seemingly impossible task. In addition to the tens of thousands of skilled workers pulled in, an estimated 300,000 local “volunteers” — i.e. everyday Beijingers — were mobilised to ferry bricks, dig with shovels etc.. If the rallies had spilt blood onto the hands of the people, the Ten Great Buildings Project then mingled it with dust. Thanks to this mass manpower movement, in the midst of designs changing wildly throughout the construction process, and with minimal access to heavy machinery or lifting equipment, the critical buildings were finished in time, and indeed “stood up” to present their colonnaded frontages to the ten year parades. At 171,800m² the Great Hall of the People was the largest, and included 34 regional halls for each of China’s 34 provinces, a banqueting hall for 5,000 diners, and an assembly hall for 10,000 delegates. This last was described by the design team in cosmic terms of their own: ‘a curved ceiling alludes to the infinite space of the universe. In its centre, an illuminated red star made of plexiglass stands for the leadership of the Party. The star emits rays of golden light.’

Eerily — in its scale, speed, chaotic energy, and raw kitchiness, the Ten Great Buildings Project resembles nothing so much as the China of today. Currently undergoing the greatest wave of urbanisation in history, China continues to be a place where plans are regularly turned over by architectural firms in numbers of days, and construction is hurried on site while details are still being filled in. And today personages as international and august as Mouzhan Majidi (CEO of Fosters and Partners), like Zhang Bo before him, can be caught describing the 50,000 workers mobilised to hammer together Beijing Terminal 3 as, ‘an army’. Indeed why not — they slept in barracks, and moved on as soon as the project was complete.

The real change, half a century on, is less the approach to architecture than the blatant volume of it. The 1990s saw 21 massive new complexes along Changan Avenue — far exceeding the sum of all previous buildings. These included a “Wall Street District” to the west, a CBD to the east, an 880,000m² shopping mall right in the middle, a stand of tall government buildings with Chinese hats and red lacquered pillars (dubbed “skyscrapers in fancy dress”), a “starchitect” titanium “Egg” or National Centre for the Performing Arts, and a number of wholly foreign-owned hotels. Utterly

overwhelmed by the gaudiness and nakedly capitalistic rapacity of these enormous new magnitudes, the original zero point — Tiananmen Square itself — has become a little mute.

While the square's National Day Parade is still maintained, compulsory attendance at pageants, addresses and rallies has fallen off. More recent CCP efforts have pushed in the opposite direction — toward depoliticising the square. Slogans calling for class struggle have been removed, fountains for special occasions installed, a flag ceremony introduced explicitly for tourists (something akin to the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace), and two 4,000m² strips of formerly hard paving have been rendered into lawns. Tiananmen Square as a space has been physically softened, and this has been complemented by a series of “soft monuments” — temporary displays of flowers, lanterns, giant expanded polystyrene pandas giving thumbs up to the crowds etc.. Today it's really a pretty cheery holidayey kind-of-a-place, where visitors set their shopping bags down to take snaps of themselves “On Tiananmen!”

The reason for all this cutesing up is not hard to discern. In 1976 and then again in 1989 (this time with foreign journalists present), the square showed its potential to be exactly what it always purported to be: a place for the people to express their political will. Rather problematically, neither of these occasions of expression were organised by the Party, and both led to bloodshed and the imposition of martial law.

The post-'89 push to declaw the volatile political agency of Tiananmen Square has been astonishingly successful. The general take among young Beijingers today about the protests is, ‘We'll never really know what happened, but the students were probably out of line.’ More tellingly, the nation as a whole would mostly respond, ‘We're richer now, so where's the problem?’ Last June marked the twentieth anniversary of the massacre, and for the most part, it was a normal day on the square. The only slightly remarkable sight was a number of Western tv crews trying to film the absence of political activity, but running into technical problems with not-so-secret Chinese secret police, who kept blocking the shot with their umbrellas.

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