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Removing Monuments Will Not Erase the Memory of Tiananmen

Monuments to the Tiananmen Massacre have been removed from university campuses in Hong Kong. But this is unlikely to erase the memory of the event on June 4, 1989, when large numbers of Chinese student protestors were killed by the People's Liberation Army in Beijing.

“Forgive, but do not forget.”

I still remember seeing that sentence on a sign in the Memorial Hall of the Victims of the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders during my visit there in 2002. This is a museum in Nanjing in memory of the Nanjing Massacre which took place from December 1937 to January 1938. When Japanese troops occupied what was then the Chinese capital at that time, they indulged in a rampage of violence and

were estimated to have killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese people and raped tens of thousands of Chinese women.

In contrast, there appears to be an attempt to erase the memory of the Tiananmen Massacre on June 4, 1989, when the People's Liberation Army crushed a student protest movement by killing many protestors in Beijing. There is no confirmed number of the people killed at that event and there is debate whether anybody was killed in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Estimates of the number killed range from hundreds to thousands.

Since then, gatherings to commemorate the Tiananmen Massacre have been held in Victoria Park in Hong Kong on June 4 every year until 2021. Hong Kong police banned the Tiananmen vigil in 2020 and 2021, citing safety concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic, but thousands turned up for the 2020 commemoration anyway.¹ There was truly no Tiananmen vigil on June 4, 2021 because large numbers of police officers were deployed around Hong Kong to prevent it. When I was walking along the outskirts of Victoria Park on June 4, 2021, I noticed police officers and police vans had cordoned off Victoria Park and there was no demonstration to be seen.

In December 2021, at least four monuments to the Tiananmen massacre were removed from the campuses of four universities in Hong Kong.² These consist of the Pillar of Shame sculpture by Danish artist Jens Galshiot in Hong Kong University, Goddess of Democracy statues

¹ "Hong Kong bans Tiananmen vigil for second year running, citing coronavirus," *Reuters*, May 27, 2021; and Javier C. Hernandez, Austin Ramzy and Tiffany May, "Defying Beijing, thousands in Hong Kong hold Tiananmen vigil," *New York Times*, June 4, 2021.

² Cannix Yau, "Fourth Hong Kong university set to remove artwork marking Tiananmen Square crackdown," *South China Morning Post*, December 25, 2021.



at Chinese University of Hong Kong and City University of Hong Kong, as well as a wall relief commemorating the event at Lingnan University. The bas-relief at Lingnan University was created by Chen Weiming, a China-born New Zealand artist and sculptor.³ The artworks at Chinese University of Hong Kong and City University of Hong Kong drew their inspiration from the Goddess of Democracy statue that was installed by protestors in Tiananmen Square before the tanks crushed the demonstration.



Before their removal, (left) the Pillar of Shame at the University of Hong Kong. (This image is used by the courtesy of its author PSH851. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HKU_Pillar_of_Shame_in_Orange_Color_02a.jpg). And, (right) replica of the statue of the Goddess of Democracy from the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. Photo taken at Victoria Park in Hong Kong during a commemoration event for the twenty-first anniversary of the massacre. (This image is used by the courtesy of its authors MarsmanRom and Isa Ng). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Goddess_of_Democracy_HK_20100604.jpg.

³ “Goddess of Democracy at CUHK, 4th June relief sculpture and wall mural at Lingnan University removed,” *Dimsum Daily Hong Kong*, December 24, 2021.

The removal of monuments is equivalent to attempts to erase memory. The ancient Greeks used for ‘memorial’ the word *μνημείο*, derived from the word *μνήμη*, which means ‘memory,’ wrote Bozidar Jezernik in the book, *After Yugoslavia: Identities and Politics in the Successor States*.⁴ In Latin, the word *monumentum* (hence the Italian and Spanish word *monumento* and the English and French *monument*) is linked to the word *moneo*, ‘I recall’, while the German expression *Denkmalis* associated with *denken*, ‘to think.’⁵ The link between *spomenik* (‘monument’) and *spomin* (‘memory’) is also evident in Slovenian and other Slavic languages.⁶

“A monument to a specific person or event, placed in a public space, serves as a materialisation of the social memory of a particular social community; this is, indeed, a fundamental element of the identity of individuals and society. Without memory, we do not know either who we are or from where we come; and if we do not know this, then we also do not know where we are going,” explained Jezernik, a professor at University of Ljubljana.

Quite Impossible to *Forget Herostratus*

Talking about forgetting, I acted in a play titled *Forget Herostratus* in Hong Kong in November 2011 and in a second run in March 2012. This is a play written in 1972 by the late Russian playwright, Grigori Gorin, based on a real-life character, Herostratus, who lived during the fourth century BCE. This Greek man burned down the Temple of Artemis, an

⁴ Bozidar Jezernik, “No Monuments, No History, No Past: Monuments and Memory,” in *After Yugoslavia: Identities and Politics within the Successor States*, ed. Robert Hudson and Glenn Bowman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.



ancient Greek goddess, in the city of Ephesus in what is today Turkey in order to make his name immortal. The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was an important centre for religion and social life in Ephesus which was then a culturally Greek city. For his act of arson, the Ephesian government executed him and sought to wipe out all memory of him by forbidding mention of his name. I acted as the jailer who guarded Herostratus in prison. In the final scene of the play, Herostratus was not executed in an official manner as in real life, but killed by a judge, Cleon. The play ends with the Temple of Artemis being rebuilt, but Cleon was unable to remember any of the builders. The irony is Herostratus is remembered despite an official order to forget him, while the many people who rebuilt the temple were unknown.

The director of the play, Tom Hope, told *Rising Asia Journal*, “If Herostratus is remembered now, it’s as the etymological touchstone for describing infamous acts motivated purely by a desire for infamy, so Mark David Chapman’s shooting of John Lennon is rightly termed ‘herostratic.’” Hope, who was previously a lawyer in Hong Kong and is now semi-retired in the United Kingdom, added, “*Forget Herostratus* is a bitter-sweet reassurance that organs of state struggle to airbrush inconvenient truths from history and that this desire can deliver so entirely what it seeks to deny. It is a brilliantly subversive irony that the ordering of Herostratus’ name to be erased from history proves so self-defeating.” In the ensuing centuries after Herostratus lived, his name has been evoked in various works of literature and movies as well as speeches by notable people.

Herostratus lives on in literature, as he had desired. The Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes mentioned Herostratus in his seventeenth

century novel, *Don Quixote*. In *Richard III*, a seventeenth century play, the British playwright Colley Cibber painted Herostratus in a positive light with these lines: The aspiring youth that fired the Ephesian dome / Outlives in fame the pious fool that rais'd it.⁷



A production of *Forget Herostratus* by the Not So Loud Theatre Company in Hong Kong in March 2012. On the left with the dagger is Tom Hope, acting as Judge Cleon. On the right, Nick Milnes plays the role of Herostratus. In the middle, Caspian Ashoenaen acts as the Man of the Theatre (a modern narrator). Photo by the courtesy of Not So Loud Theatre Company.

Adolf Hitler mentioned Herostratus in a deplorable anti-Semitic speech on October 6, 1939. In his hateful speech, the German dictator

⁷ J.H. Fawcett, *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696-1801* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).



said, “It is clear to me that there is a certain Jewish international capitalism and journalism that has no feeling at all in common with the people whose interests they pretend to represent, but who, like Herostratus of old, regard incendiarism as the greatest success of their lives.”⁸

In his 1970 novel, *Two Sisters*, the American writer, Gore Vidal, included the real story of Herostratus. A 1979 movie, *Stalker*, by the Russian director, Andrei Tarkovsky, makes reference to Herostratus.

Reversing the Erasure of Memory of Tiananmen Massacre

There are differences between the museum of the Nanjing Massacre, the monuments to the Tiananmen massacre, and Herostratus’ destruction of the Temple of Artemis.

The museum of the Nanjing Massacre represents a state and its people as the victims of aggression by another state, Japan. The Tiananmen Massacre was state violence against its own people. Herostratus was an individual who offended the state, the people, and religious institutions by destroying a place of worship. While the execution of Herostratus was excessive by today’s standards, his destruction of the Temple of Artemis was a serious offence. Imagine if someone desecrated a church, mosque, synagogue, or gurudwara.

But there are points in common between Herostratus and the Tiananmen Massacre. The state tried to blot out the memory of Herostratus and the state is also seeking to delete the memory of the Tiananmen Massacre by removing monuments to this incident. Just as

⁸ Gordon Skene, “Adolf Hitler addresses the Reichstag—October 6, 1939,” *Past Daily*, October 6, 2014.

the Ephesian government's efforts to obliterate the memory of Herostratus proved futile, the removal of monuments will not wipe out the memory of Tiananmen. Just as Herostratus lives on in literature, speeches and movies, memories of Tiananmen can continue in discussion groups, articles, novels, poetry, historical records, and accounts passed from one generation to the next.

While the scale of suffering and atrocity in the Nanjing Massacre far exceeds that of the Tiananmen Massacre, that does not justify upholding the memory of the Nanjing Massacre while suppressing the memory of the Tiananmen Massacre. Why is there this difference in the state's treatment of these two tragedies? Memory in the nation state is very often appropriated by the elite, and elite memory dominates time and space, attempting to render popular memory obsolete and encouraging it to be forgotten.⁹

It is possible, however, for the Chinese government to reverse the erasure of the Tiananmen Massacre. The Chinese Communist Party has made reversals in the past with the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and the late Xi Zhongxun, a former Chinese Deputy Prime Minister and father of the current Chinese President Xi Jinping. During the Cultural Revolution, Deng and Xi Zhongxun were persecuted and forced to wear dunce caps in front of jeering crowds of Red Guards. Deng returned to become leader of China in the late 1970s, when he allowed open criticism of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government rehabilitated Xi Zhongxun in 1978. If the Chinese Communist Party can rehabilitate his father, Xi can permit an official

⁹ Winston Francis Phulgence, "Monument Building, Memory Making and Remembering Slavery in the Contemporary Atlantic World," (PhD diss., University of York, December 2016).



acknowledgement of the Tiananmen Massacre and foster healing over this tragedy, just as the party did with the Cultural Revolution.

Note on the Author

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