How is a political public space made? – The birth of Tiananmen Square and the May Fourth Movement

Nelson K. Lee*

Department of Government and Public Administration, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong

Keywords:
Politics
Action
Public space
History
Geography
Arendt
Habermas
Tiananmen Square
May Fourth Movement
Beijing
China

Abstract

With the specific case of the birth of Tiananmen Square in Beijing during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, this paper tries to give an answer to the more general question of how a political public space is made. It argues, (1) the transformation of the spatial order of Beijing made possible the formation of new modes of collective political action in republican Beijing. (2) The different kinds of action of the people led to the production of a number of political public spaces. (3) The demonstration staged on May 4, 1919 was vital in converting the empty space in front of Tianan Gate into a public space of political significance, which was then named Tiananmen Square. Borrowing from Arendt's conception of the public space and people's political action, this paper contends that the political action of people was most important in breaking through the control of the government and opening up political public spaces. With the historical geographical case of the Square, this paper assesses the "end of public space" position that has become widely accepted in academic debate.

Introduction

Tiananmen Square (Square of Heavenly Peace), which is located in front of Tianan Gate (Gate of Heavenly Peace) in Beijing and is the foremost national emblem of China, caught the eyes of the world when anti-government activities occurred there in the spring of 1976 and the spring of 1989. Since then there has been an upsurge of academic interest in the Square, but discussion has focused mainly on the events, treating the Square only as a backdrop (see, for example, Calhoun, 1994; Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1990). Although some academics have looked into the space of the Square, the discussion is far from adequate. Zhao (1998) acknowledges that the student movement in 1989 was related to the spatial environment, but his study does not consider the Square. He analyzes the ecology of university campuses in Beijing, which had for a long time helped nurture the close-knit student network and led to the collective action in spring 1989. Adopting the Lefebvrian approach, Hershkovitz (1993) concludes that the politics of the public space of Tiananmen Square is the result of the interplay between the efforts of the state to dominate the monumental space, and the endeavors of oppositional movements that have sought to appropriate the space and make it a "space of the other."

Wu concentrates on the symbolic meaning of the Square. He studies the transformation of the old architectural complex from an imperial symbol to the foremost monument of the socialist regime, and the way in which the spatial order and representation of the monument were challenged by the anti-government activities in 1976 and 1989 (Wu, 2005). Hung deals with the Monument of the People's Hero, and shows how a political message was carefully built into the architecture to shape the nation's collective memory. He concludes that the contested nature of the representations of the Monument has made it a dangerous space (Hung, 2001). Watson suggests that the symbolism of the Square is linked to the legitimation of the socialist state as a successor in Chinese national history (Watson, 1995). Wu, Hou, and Dong trace in detail the construction history of the Square under the socialist regime in the 1950s (Wu, 1979; Hou, 1984; Dong, 1994).

All of the above spatial analyses of the Square by scholars after 1989 emphasize the politics of the Square in the post-1949 era. Wu (2005) and Watson mention the importance of the Square in the republican period, but how and why the Square emerged as a political public space during that time have not been explored. Therefore, this paper attempts to trace back to its very origin the political space of Tiananmen Square and tries to answer the more general question of how a political public space is born. I investigate the history of the space during the May Fourth Movement in 1919 when the space had not yet been named Tiananmen Square, but was referred to, by the local press at that time, as the "empty space" outside Tianan Gate (Strand, 1989, p. 172).

* Postal address. 3/F, T. C. Cheng Building, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong. Tel.: +852 9729 7794; fax: +852 2603 5229.
E-mail addresses: nelsonkklee@hotmail.com, kklee@cuhk.edu.hk

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
The transformation of the “empty space” into a public space of political significance reveals that it is people’s political action and their will to embark upon a “glorious adventure” in the public realm that opens up a public space and confers on people the right to that space. In this sense, public space is not given and guaranteed; rather, it is struggled over and earned by the concerted efforts of people. In other words, public space is politicized space that is created and defended by people’s action. With this perspective of the making of public space, this article assesses the “end of public space” viewpoint that has become widely accepted in contemporary debate (Low and Smith, 2006; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2006; Sorkin, 1992). Coming on the heels of social theories of space that have been articulated over several decades (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 2001), my argument follows Arendt’s concept of public space, which contrasts Habermas’s concept of the public sphere. The Habermasian notion, as I will explain, holds a weak vision of the “public” and takes for granted the existence of the public sphere on the one hand, while holding a negative attitude towards the future of public space on the other hand. Contrarily, the Arendtian concept of the public space is a strong vision because it is made and sustained by people’s action. I return to these concepts in the conclusion.

The May Fourth Movement and the historical geographical case of the origin of Tiananmen Square

The May Fourth Movement was a political and cultural movement in early modern China that came into being on May 4, 1919, with a student demonstration held in the empty space in front of Tianan Gate. The Movement grew out of dissatisfaction over the Treaty of Versailles which officially ended World War I. Two crucial issues, both related to Sino-Japanese relations, sparked off the Movement. In 1919, China and Japan, both of which were on the side of the Triple Entente, were represented in the Paris Peace Conference, among the big powers, in the negotiations of the post-war settlement. Despite the expectations of the Chinese people, the Treaty awarded Qingdao in Shandong Peninsula, formerly under the sphere of influence of Germany, to Japan, instead of giving the city back to China. This diplomatic failure of China, which became known as the “Shandong Problem,” was followed by the accusation by the public that the Beijing government (the Beijing-based warlord government that ruled most of China from 1912–1928) had made a secret deal with Japan for a big loan in 1918, and therefore it did not stand firm in defending the national interests in the face of Japanese ambitions in China. Although it started in Beijing, the Movement involved also intellectuals and students in Shanghai and other parts of China. A series of political activities were staged from early May to late June. The Movement won an initial victory when the Chinese delegates refused to sign the peace settlement on June 28, 1919 (for the history of the Movement, see Chow, 1960).

The May Fourth Movement has been widely regarded as a turning point in modern Chinese history. It was a seminal event that radicalized Chinese intellectual thought and gave birth to the Chinese Communist Party. As a historical case that happened 90 years ago, the Movement is significant in two ways. First, as an “enlightenment” experience, the Movement marked the first time in early modern China that ordinary citizens – mainly Western-minded tertiary students and scholars – mobilized themselves to stage political actions in the public which aimed for the common good. Second, people’s action in the Movement made an empty space into a representational space, on top of which the Chinese socialist regime constructed its own representation of space, Tiananmen Square. This finding challenges the commonly held viewpoint that public space originates as a representation of space, and is then appropriated by people to become representational space (Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, the standard chronology was reversed (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115). I argue that this reversal affirms the importance of people’s action in the making of public space. In this sense, the case of the origin of Tiananmen Square provides us with the “historical geography of the present” that contributes both to theoretical debate and themes in contemporary research on public space (Howell, 1993, p. 303).

Why was the “empty space” chosen?

It is commonly understood that Tiananmen Square was the undisputed choice of the students for the demonstration venue, and this understanding is based on the assumption that the square was already a place of symbolic importance in Beijing in the early 20th century. At the time of the May Fourth Movement, however, the square was not as important a public space in Beijing as Central Park (Zhongyuan gongyuan) or the New China Gate (Xinhuamen) of the Central and South Lakes (Zhongnanhai), the residence of the President. Tianan Gate was a site neither for popular demonstrations nor for official government ceremonies. The empty space was only the intersection of the newly opened up north–south and east–west axial roads in Beijing.

As a political symbol, the importance of Tianan Gate, the main gate of the Forbidden City, was not comparable to the importance of Front Gate, which was located at the hub of Beijing’s transportation network and appeared grand and magnificent to the common people (Bredon, 1982, p. 21). Tianan Gate was located inside the Imperial City and gave onto a secluded palace square that was forbidden to the public. Neither was the gate regarded as the “gate of the nation” in imperial China. The “gate of the nation,” which was situated midway between Tianan Gate and Front Gate, was the main entrance to the Imperial City and was called Great Qing Gate in the Qing dynasty, and Chinese Gate in republican China (Dong, 2003, p. 27). On the eve of the demonstration on May 4, Tianan Gate was a gate of only secondary importance compared to Front Gate or Chinese Gate.

Tianan Gate was the venue at which an edict-issuing ceremony was held when a new emperor was enrowned or a royal heir was named in the Ming (1368–1644 A.D.) and the Qing (1644–1911 A.D.) dynasties, but the ceremony was only a “symbolic communication” between the emperor and his subjects, and neither the ruler nor his subjects were present (Wu, 2005, pp. 59–60). Ordinary citizens had no part to play in the ceremony. Hence, whether Tianan Gate concealed or exhibited imperial power, it was not a space towards which the common people had any attachment. Therefore, saying that the image of Tianan Gate had been deeply imprinted in people’s minds would be false. As the front gate area of the Forbidden City, the space outside Tianan Gate was open to the public only after the 1911 Revolution, in 1913, when Changan Avenue was opened. However, by then the imperial court had fallen and the role of the Gate as a symbolic carrier of imperial power had diminished (Fig. 1).

Based on the above, this paper revolves around two questions to explore the relationship between people’s action and public space: Why was such an empty and ruined space chosen? How was it made a public space of political importance? Drawing from materials that have been collected from various sources, including newspapers, magazines, archival materials (published and unpublished), memoirs of participants of the May Fourth Movement, and histories of the Movement written by contemporary authors, the case study will show the following: (1) the relaxing of the spatial order of Beijing that had been established in the Ming and the Qing dynasties made possible the formation of a new mode of collective political action in republican Beijing. (2) The different kinds of action of the people led to the production of a number of political public spaces, including Tiananmen Square. (3) The demonstration
staged on May 4, 1919, was vital in transforming an empty space into a public space of political significance.

The spatial order in imperial Beijing and its transformation in the republican period

The nested spatial layout in Ming and Qing Beijing

A ruler of imperial China in the Ming dynasty had sought to build Beijing as an orderly and well-fortified imperial capital city. Its spatial layout was built strictly according to the traditional Chinese cosmic view. On its central north–south axis were built, starting from the southernmost point, the Altar of Heaven, the Altar of Agriculture, Front Gate, Great Ming Gate, Tianan Gate, the Forbidden City (the Imperial Palace), Scenic Hill, and, at the northernmost point, the Bell Tower and Drum Tower. A “棋盘”-like shape, the city was divided into an Inner City and an Outer City. Whereas the Inner City had nine gates, the Outer City had seven. The main roads in the city were laid out in chessboard fashion, running either north–south or east–west, and their widths were precisely defined (Steinhardt, 1999; Zhu, 1999) (Fig. 2).

Under a strict spatial divisioning scheme, the core of the Inner City was situated in the Forbidden City, which was surrounded and protected by a wall and moat. Encircling the Forbidden City was the Imperial City, which was also enclosed within a wall, in which government agencies, the residences of the nobility and high-ranking officials, and imperial gardens were located. The passage of people in and out of the gates of the City was strictly controlled. Farther away from the wall of the Imperial City was the common area of the Inner City. However, use of this common area was restricted to the Manchu people or Han government officials. In the Inner City were stationed the regiments of the guarding army of the Qing dynasty. The Han people, who constituted the majority of Beijing’s population, were allowed to dwell only in the Outer City and areas outside and adjacent to the city gates. Because of the difference in importance between the two cities, the flow of people going into the Inner City was more strictly controlled at city gates than the flow of people going into the Outer City (Dray-Novey, 1993, p. 890; Steinhardt, 1999, pp. 9–10).

In the city, 36 neighborhood zones (Fang), 28 in the Inner City and 8 in the Outer City, were set up to keep control of the population. For security considerations, permanent market activity was not allowed in the Inner City. During the Qing dynasty, markets in Beijing were concentrated in the areas of the Three Front Gates in the Outer City (Gao, 1990, p. 45). Within the first line of defense of the city wall and gates there was a second line of defense for internal security. This defense line was constituted by street gates and sentry boxes installed in the neighborhood system. A wooden street gate was built across a lane at its entrance to an avenue. It was usually built together with a sentry box to form a guard post. A rotating shift system for policing was employed to ensure that a gendarme officer was stationed at each guard post day and night. It is estimated that during the Qing dynasty, there were more than 1700 street gates and 1400 sentry boxes in Beijing (Dray-Novey, 1993, pp. 892–895). City walls, gates, and the street-gate system, together with the population registration system, were all critical spatial mechanisms for maintaining social order in Beijing.

However, towards the end of the Qing dynasty, the spatial order had started to deteriorate. Street gates and sentry boxes that were located at important points were still in operation, but those that were in small lanes were in bad repair (Dray-Novey, 1993, p. 894). The degeneration of the street-gate system in Beijing marked the collapse of the neighborhood system. In the late Qing dynasty, neighborhood zones were reorganized into districts, and the new district system no longer controlled people’s movement in the city (Xu, 1998, pp. 81–84). After the downfall of the Qing dynasty, even the walls and gates had lost their importance in preserving the social control system in the city. With the exception of Front Gate, all gates were kept open.

Spatial change in Beijing in the republican era

As Beijing’s role as an imperial capital city ended, the city’s previously well-maintained spatial order went through a radical transformation. After the 1911 Revolution, Beijing, as the capital of the newly established Republic of China (1911–1949 A.D.), needed a spatial layout that was more adaptable to modernization. Hence, the republican administration sought to reconstruct the spatial form of the city (Dong, 2003, p. 38). With respect to the spatial changes in republican Beijing, two aspects deserve special attention.

(1) Opening of roads. The opening of roads greatly improved accessibility to different parts of Beijing and facilitated the mobility of people. Among the road construction projects, three were especially important. Changan Avenue, which opened in Fig. 1. The “empty space” and ruined Tianan Gate in early republican Beijing. Source: Jiu Jin Da Guan (1992), p. 43.
1913, linked the eastern and western parts of the Inner City. It was the only road that ran east–west in the city. The opening of the Avenue fundamentally changed the nested spatial layout that had been established in the imperial period. First, the formerly private palace square beyond Tianan Gate was now open to the public. Second, the Avenue, which intersected the north–south axis of the city, developed into the busiest road in Beijing. Located at the intersection point of the north–south and east–west axes, Tianan Gate’s spatial importance was significantly enhanced (Beijing jindai shizheng jianshe de faren ji qi tedian, 2/2002, p. 202).

The Front Gate reconstruction project, launched in 1915, included a throughway linking the Outer City and Inner City. On the completion of the project, the problem of traffic jams on the north–south axis was ameliorated (Wang and Xu, 2004, pp. 232–235). With the demolition of the wall that surrounded the Imperial City from 1917 to 1927, areas formerly restricted to the public became accessible, and the imperial domain became the intersection point of the important transportation networks of the city.

Opening of public parks. In imperial times, the most scenic and spacious places in the city were either royal gardens or temples. Only a few scenic areas were accessible to the public. However, in the late Qing dynasty and early republican period, Beijing’s municipal administrators paid greater attention to improving the standard of living of city dwellers. Thereafter, spaces for public recreation and leisure were created in the city, and Shi dubs this the “public park movement” (Shi, 1998). The movement started with the opening of the Garden of Ten Thousand Animals (Wanshengyuan) to the public in 1908. Through the republican period, the Municipal Council of Beijing continued the work by converting royal gardens and temples into public parks. Public parks that were opened in the early republican period include Central Park, Altar of Agriculture Park, North Lake Park, and the Summer Palace (Yiheyuan), etc. (Shi, 1998). With the opening of public parks, people’s city life underwent a radical change.

The aims of the Municipal Council in constructing public parks was to transform the lifestyle of city dwellers. Newly opened public parks were to be the place “where people can take a rest, raise their spirits, and exercise their bodies.” (Shi, 1994, pp. 140–141). Gradually, parks developed into spaces in which diverse activities – education, entertainment, commercial, cultural, social, or even political – were held. Even though the entry fee prohibited lower-class people from using the parks, the relaxing environment, special facilities, and the new way of life that the parks represented appealed to the middle- and upper-class people of the city (Shi, 1998) (Fig. 2).

The opening of roads and public parks puts an end to the spatially structured social control machinery, enabling the public to make creative use of the spatial environment to achieve their goals.

Fig. 2. Beijing in early 20th century: City walls, gates, new roads and public parks. Source: Jiu Jin Da Guan (1992), p. 10. Places of importance: A: Tianan Gate; B: Chinese Gate; C: Front Gate; D: Changan Avenue; E: Front Gate Main Street; F: Central Park; G: The Forbidden City; H: Altar of Agriculture Park; I: Scenic Hill; J: North Lake; K: Central and South Lakes; L: New China Gate; M: Lake of Ten Temples; N: Legation Quarter.
Had the spatial changes in the city not already been effected, it is unimaginable that the kinds of popular actions that took place during the May Fourth Movement – demonstrations, rallies, lectures – would have been possible. It is also unlikely that students in different universities could have passed through the streets to communicate with one another, which made possible the large-scale demonstration on May 4 in front of Tianan Gate.

**Four types of political actions and the choice of spaces in the May Fourth Movement**

This and the following sections seek to explain why the empty space outside Tianan Gate was chosen for the May Fourth demonstration. I first distinguish forms of collective political action, and then investigate the connection between the forms of action and the choice of the space for the action. Each of the actions, because of the different goals of protesters, was staged in a different space.

**Demonstrations held by oppositional political elites**

Demonstrations organized by the oppositional political elites were staged chiefly in Central Park. At that time, the Citizens' Diplomatic Association (Guomin waijiao xiehui) was one of the active societal bodies formed by the oppositional elites through which to voice their opinions concerning China's position at the Paris Peace Conference. Citizens' meetings called by the Association in the Park included the failed attempt on May 7, 1919, which was banned by the government (Beijing guomin waijiao xiehui weiqingdao wentidengwuqi zhaojukunguomin dahuidian, 1919/5/3, 1980), and the one held on June 7, which had 2000 people in attendance (Beijing Ribao, June 8, 1919).

Since its opening in 1915, Central Park had become one of the foremost political spaces in Beijing: not only was it the venue at which renowned intellectuals gave public speeches for educational purposes (Xu, 1999, p. 27), it was also chosen as the location at which to build the Triumph of Truth Arch – the monument that marked the victory of China in World War 1 (Beijing Ribao, January 6, 1919; February 23, 1919, March 12, 1919, March 16, 1919).

The Park, like the other public parks in the city, was not a completely open public space at that time. The semi-public character of public parks enabled the government to close them as it deemed necessary. First, the board of directors of each park had to report to Beijing Municipal Council from time to time concerning the running of the park. In addition, the boards of directors were made up of socially established people who enjoyed a good relationship with the government; hence, the government could interfere with the management of the parks, with few obstacles, whenever it liked. Second, social organizations had to seek permission from the police department to hold a public gathering in a public park. The police would notify the park authorities to inform them whether permission had been granted for the assembly. The park authorities would lease out the park only when a permit was issued. If the police denied the application, there were no grounds to challenge that decision in court. Moreover, there were no exceptions to the park entry fee that had to be paid when a person took part in an assembly in the parks. The practice of the Diplomatic Association was to buy tickets in advance and distribute them to people who wanted to participate to ensure that the lower-class people would not be excluded from the meeting (Peng, 1984, p. 265). The practice of the Association to distribute tickets revealed that only wealthy social organizations could afford to hold popular demonstration in public parks. Those organizations that could not pay the entry fee of assembly participants needed to find spaces in the city that were public in the real sense.

**Petitions to the Beiyang Government by students**

This activity took place in the area in front of New China Gate. Earlier, on May 21, 1918, more than 2000 students petitioned to President Feng Guozhang to protest against the signing of the Sino–Japanese Military Mutual Assistance Convention (Eastern Miscellany, June 1918). After that event, numerous political activities were held at the Gate, for example, from June 5 to 10, 1919, 20,000 students from tertiary and secondary institutions gathered at the Gate to beg for an audience with President Xu Shichang (Qu, 1999, pp. 99–100); on June 26, 30 students from Beijing and Tianjin assembled at the Gate; on June 27, 2000 students went to the Gate to express their support for the thirty. That night they slept in the open, outside the Gate (Wang guangyu guanyu jingjinlu dengchu xuesheng jixu laixinhuamen qiangyu baogao, 1919/8/27, 1980). In addition, petition teams from other provinces mainly chose New China Gate as their destination.

It is noteworthy that there was a kind of association between the spaces of New China Gate and Tianan Gate in the politics of public space of the May Fourth Movement. It is obvious that, in comparison to New China Gate, Tianan Gate was a place of only secondary importance in the eyes of the government and the public. This was reflected in two circumstances. First, those that planned to demonstrate outside New China Gate would gather first at Tianan Gate, such as the 700 female college students from twelve universities in Beijing on June 5, 1919. The twelve teams first assembled at Tianan Gate and then marched to New China Gate to submit a petition to President Xu (Beijing Ribao, June 6, 1919). Second, the government detained the demonstrators it had arrested at New China Gate at Tianan Gate. For example, on August 28, 1919, Xu ordered soldiers to arrest the 200 students assembled at New China Gate and send them to Tianan Gate for confinement (Wang guanyu guanyu jingjinlu dengchu xuesheng jixu laixinhuamen qiangyu baogao, 1919/8/27, 1980).

**Public lecturing by students from secondary and tertiary institutions in Beijing**

Public lecturing started with the Peking University Commoners' Education Lecture Society. The establishment of the society was announced on March 26, 1919, as a part of the students' "patriotic nation-saving movement." Initially, the lectures were intended to be “evening classes for school workers” to promote literacy and explain current affairs. Later, the evening classes moved beyond school campuses and became public lectures. The aim was to “enhance the knowledge of the commoners and awaken their self-consciousness” (Schwarcz, 1986, p. 86). Earlier, the lecture society had even received help from the Bureau of Education of Beijing, which had arranged venues and scheduled lecture times (Zhang, 1979, p. 120).

The lecturing activities shook up the spatial order of Beijing. With their guerilla-like actions and by making use of the newly relaxed spatial surveillance system of Beijing, the lecturing troops moved somewhat freely in the cityscape, there was no specific choice of a space. In addition to street-side lecturing, to avoid being blockaded by police, lecturers adopted methods such as family visits, one-on-one talks, and lecturing in bookstores. Later on, the lecturing activities were extended into more remote rural regions outside the city (Wang, F, 1979, pp. 116–117). In addition, there was no fixed schedule for holding the activities, and they continued from early morning to afternoon (Bai guangben dengguanyu baoming da zhongxuesheng jiangyuan huodong baogao, 1919/5/21, 1980).

The activities became a mainstream political action by students after May 19, 1919, when students announced that they would strike, one after another. The activities reached their height on June
August, there were scattered lecturing activities by students (Jingshi the delegation from China at the Paris Peace Conference declined to The students' lecturing activities began to wind down only when June 4, 1919). On June 4, more than 2000 students participated in various venues. It is estimated that on that day there were more than fifty troupes moving around the city, and that thousands of students took part in related propaganda activities (Beijing Ribao, June 4, 1919). On June 4, more than 2000 students participated in the activities. The government began to suppress lecturing activities, and about 800 students were arrested and detained in a temporary jail set up at Peking University (Wang, F, 1979, p. 119). The students' lecturing activities began to wind down only when the delegation from China at the Paris Peace Conference declined to sign the peace treaty on June 28. However, after the Jinan Incident in August, there were scattered lecturing activities by students (Jingshi xianbing silingbu guanyu jing jin deng chu daibiao zai xinhuanmen qingyuan baogao, 1919/8/26, 1980).

There is no doubt that the public lecturing of students was the most inventive and flexible public action in the May Fourth period. When the government was faced with the creative use of the space of the city by the people who were involved in this guerilla-type collective action, it had few means to deal with the people's action. When lecturing activities became intense, the government could only close the city gates to prevent further chaos in the city. Once during this period four regiments of soldiers were deployed to different corners of the city to stop the lectures (Beijing daxue xuesheng zhoukan: beijing xuesheng yundong hou zhi qingxing, 1920/2, 1980).

Large-scale demonstrations and rallies organized by students

The purpose of these activities was to educate the public, encourage patriotic thinking, and mobilize commoners to participate in the demonstrations. These gatherings were held chiefly in open, large, and accessible spaces of the city that were located either at the city's hub or in commercial areas. Tianan Gate, which was located at the juncture of the north–south and east–west axial roads of the city, became the most popular place for holding large-scale demonstrations. However, before May 4, 1919, massive popular demonstrations were seldom held. After May 4, 1919, the number of mass demonstrations increased significantly, especially after the 1920s. Other than Tianan Gate, there was no other public space in the city that was suitable for holding large-scale popular gatherings. Even if there had been another suitable location, the location would not have been as good as the Gate (Wang qinghui deng guanyu Beijing xue xiang gejie kai guomin dahui shengyuan minan dang, 1919/12, 1980; Zhongmei tongxinshi guanyu beijing xue xiang gejie shengyuan minan zai Tiananmen kai guomin dahui qingkuan de baodao, 1919/12/8, 1980).

I want to make two points that proceed from the above analysis. First, the popular movements were tactical in using the newly transformed cityscape: Different political activities were staged in different spaces, which resulted in the opening up of multifarious types of politicized spaces in the city. Second, Tianan Gate was only one of these politicized spaces, and at this time, its significance as a national emblem was not yet established.

The nature of the May Fourth Demonstration and the choice of the space

The nature of the May Fourth demonstration

The demonstration held on May 4, 1919, by the students falls into the fourth type of collective political action (Fig. 3). It has the following characteristics.

(1) The May Fourth demonstration was organized by students to gain the attention of the general public and to mobilize them to take part in political action. In this sense, the demonstration was not different from the lecturing activities of the students – both activities aimed to awaken the public and to urge them into action. The primary organizers of the demonstration were members of the Citizen Society (Guomin she), who then became the core force in the lecturing activities (Xu, 1959, pp. 254–255). Members of the Citizen Society were radicals who advocated “social transformation” and “education of the commoners.” They reasoned that low-profile demonstrations could not attract the attention of the public, and hence, no effective result could be achieved (Zhang, 1979, pp. 119–120; Deng, 1959, p. 86). The Society maintained that intellectuals should “go to the masses” and promote patriotic thinking among the common people. Influenced by the Society, students believed that if pressure was to be exerted on the government, they had first to win the support of the general public, and “organize popular demonstrations for people in Beijing.” (Chow, 1960, pp. 101 and 105).

It should be noted that the students and the Diplomatic Association diverged in their understanding of who should be included in their actions. While the students planned to ally with the lower class city dwellers, the target of the Diplomatic Association was people in the middle and upper echelons of society (Chow, 1960, p. 100). Moreover, in terms of the objective and form of action to take, the difference between the two bodies was also significant. The students urged to “struggle for sovereignty” and “get rid of the traitors.” They wanted to direct the attention of the general public to the issue that China was facing, and gather forces to exert pressure on the government (Qingdao chao, 1959, p. 40). However, the aim of the Diplomatic Association was to “unite the Chinese people to stand up to external humiliation, so as to provide backup to the state's diplomacy, having no intention to blame the government” (Qingdao chao, 1959, p. 137). In fact, before staging their action, members of the Association had been busy communicating with the president's office, and the stance of the Association that the government should instruct the Chinese delegates not to sign the peace settlement if China's interests were not well safeguarded was endorsed by President Xu (Qingdao chao, 1959, p. 137; Beijing guomin dahui xiehui guanyu shandong wenti jueyi si xiang dian, 1919/5/7, 1980).

(2) Even though the theme of the students’ movement was “going to the masses;” the aim of the students' action on May 4 was not the same as the aim of their lecturing activities. The May Fourth demonstration was organized not only to educate the general public and promote patriotic thinking but also to exert prompt and grave pressure on the government. Small-scale actions such as lecturing were no longer adequate by early May. What the students needed was a large-scale protest that would draw people's attention (Chow, 1960, p. 101). Originally the students prepared to hold the demonstration on May 7 “Day of National Humiliation,” but a students' assembly on May 3 resolved to move up the action to May 4. Moving up the date was to avoid the suppression of the demonstration by the government, because the students had heard that the government had a plan to disperse the gathering that was scheduled on May 7 (Hong, 1956, p. 84).

(3) The assembly in front of Tianan Gate on May 4 was in fact not an assembly; it was only a gathering of the forces of 13 tertiary institutions – the May Fourth demonstration was a rally. It is clear that the aim of the students was not to submit a petition to the government (Wang, F, 1979, p. 96). Rather, the rally was to put the government under pressure in two ways: (1) to petition
the embassies of the Western powers (Qingdao chao, 1959, p. 40), and (2) to promote patriotic thinking among the public and inform them that there was a “matter of vital importance” to the country, so that they were mobilized to take part in the movement (Wang, 1959, p. 33). These two aims were mirrored in the design of the route of the rally. On Legation Street of the route, demonstrators could submit their petitions to the foreign embassies. In Chongwen Gate commercial area, there was good exposure to the public (Fig. 4).

The spatial nature of Tianan Gate in the late 1910s and the choice of the location of the May Fourth demonstration

As noted above, the most important public spaces in Beijing in the early republican period were Central Park and New China Gate. However, neither Central Park nor New China Gate was chosen for the May Fourth demonstration. Tianan Gate was apparently the only good location at which demonstrators could assemble. First, with the opening of Changan Avenue, Tianan Gate had become the intersection point of the north–south and east–west axial roads of the city. The reconstruction project of Front Gate further reinforced the Tianan Gate area as the transportation hub of the city. Given this spatial characteristic, the accessibility of Tianan Gate was guaranteed. Moreover, of the 13 participating schools, most were located either in the southern part of the Inner City or in the northern part of the Outer City, and Tianan Gate was the key juncture of the road networks that linked all the schools (Tang, 2003, pp. 96–118).

Second, no permit was needed for holding the assembly outside Tianan Gate, hence the government would not know about the event in advance and be prepared to ban it. Third, no paid ticket was required, and people would not be excluded from the space because of their socio-economic background. These were two advantages the space had over Central Park. Also, the Gate was not yet a politically sensitive space, so it was less closely watched than Central Park or New China Gate.

Fourth, Tianan Gate was located near Legation Street, and was therefore a good starting point for the procession. Legation Street was the central street of the Legation Quarter, a secluded compound for foreign embassies that was off-limits to the Chinese. The Quarter, which covered more than 1000 acres, was surrounded by walls and protected by foreign troops. One of the main entrances to the Quarter was at the western end of Legation Street; to its west was Chinese Gate, which was on the north–south axis (Arlington & Lewisohn, 1935, pp. 5–24). The prime aim of students marching to the Quarter was to submit a petition to the American embassy to...
win the sympathy and assistance of Americans regarding the Shandong Problem, because they believed that the United States was concerned about China's situation and the expansionist policies of Japan (Chow, 1960, pp. 109–110 [footnote b]). Also, the American Embassy was situated next to the west gate of the Quarter, about 500 m from Tianan Gate.

Last but not least, the area outside Tianan Gate was vast and could accommodate a large number of people. There were other public spaces in Beijing, but they were in the remote corners of the city: the lake of Ten Temples (Shishahai), in the northwestern part of the city, was not spacious; Merry Pavilion (Taoranting) was in the southern area of the Outer City; and West Hills was in the western suburb of Beijing (Shi, 1994, p. 136). The lack of a large and truly public space in Beijing was made manifest on May 7 when the Citizens’ Diplomatic Association could find no place to hold its citizen’s meeting after it was barred from using Central Park. On that day, as Central Park was sealed off by the government, the only possible venue left was Altar of Agriculture Park. However, that park was also closed, upon police orders. With no other better choice, the Association retreated to its own venue to hold the meeting (Beijing Ribao, May 6, 8, 9, 14, 16, 1919; Beijing guomin dahui xiehui guanyu shandong wenti jueyi si xiang dian, 1919/5/7, 1980).

The birth of a political public space and the state’s domination of it

For the reasons outlined, it was a matter of course that Tianan Gate was chosen by the students as the assembly point for the May Fourth demonstration. That the municipal police were not determined to shut down the empty space and dispel the demonstration on May 4 should not be ignored. The morning of May 4 the government knew that a demonstration would be held, an officer from the Ministry of Education went to Peking University and tried to persuade students not to join the rally. His request was refused and the procession set out. When the students had gathered at Tianan Gate, the captain-general of the army and Commissioner of Police appeared before the crowd and asked students to dismiss. Their suggestions were not followed (Qingdao chao, 1959, pp. 39–40).

Although a close watch was kept on the procession, the police did not interfere with the demonstrators because the rally started off in good order. When students attacked Zhao’s mansion (the residence of Minister of Transport Cao Rulin, who was regarded by students as one of the “traitors”), many policemen adopted a tolerant and neutral attitude until the Commissioner of Police arrived at the scene. Only then did the suppression of demonstrators begin. The tolerant attitude of the government partly contributed to the success of the rally, a rally that was crucial to the transformation of the area outside Tianan Gate into a political public space.

The May Fourth Incident can be regarded as the first time that the space in front of Tianan Gate was used for a large-scale mass protest. Thereafter, almost all large-scale public gatherings in Beijing were held in the space in front of Tianan Gate. On November 29, 1919, 30,000 students from 34 schools in Beijing gathered at the Gate to protest against Japanese militaristic activity in Fujian Province. A rally was held after the assembly (Zhang and Zhang, 1989, p. 133). On December 7, a citizens’ meeting with more than 100,000 participants was held to demonstrate against the Fujian Incident (Beijing jijie lianshui wei minan zhaokai guomin dahui bugao, 1919/12, 1980). Other similar events held in the republican period include the rally against the May Thirtieth Incident in June 1925 and the demonstration on March 18, 1926 (Strand, 1989, pp. 185–197). The evolution of the area outside Tianan Gate into the foremost political public space in Beijing occurred during this period; previously, it was only an empty space near Tianan Gate.

At roughly the same time, a series of actions was taken by the government to dominate the empty space. In late 1919, a plan was implemented to reconstruct Changan Avenue, which faced Tianan Gate. The same period also saw a garrison stationed in the empty space. On the eve of May 7, 1925, the space in front of Tianan Gate was sealed off by troops for military bombardment maneuvers (Beijing Archive, J17-1-69, 1919; J17-1-37, 1919). From 1925 to 1926, the area between Tianan Gate and Chinese Gate was made into a public park. The ground was paved, and trees were planted to narrow the space. Also, rickshaws and vendors were banned from the park (Beijing Archive, J17-1-217, 1925). In 1928, Beijing’s mayor renamed the road between Tianan Gate and Chinese Gate “Chinese Road,” and the section of Changan Avenue in front of Tianan Gate “Sun Yat-sen Road” (Beijing Archive, J1-1-1, 1928) (Fig. 5).

After 1949, the importance of the space was greatly enhanced. First, the socialist regime regarded the May Fourth Movement as a turning point in China’s “new democratic revolution”; therefore, the space in which the Movement was started became a “sacred place” for the government. Second, the Tianan Gate area was chosen as the venue at which for staging the opening ceremony of the new state. Thereafter, a number of reconstruction projects were carried out to make the space a national emblem of the socialist regime. Thus, the political Tiananmen Square gradually developed through the decades after 1949 (Wu, 2005) (Fig. 6).

From the above, it is evident that Tiananmen Square first appeared as a representational space of people’s action, after which the space was appropriated by the state to be its representation of space.

Conclusion: political action and the making of political public space

Public space and political action – a theoretical perspective

How does the case of the origin of Tiananmen Square bring up to date the discussion on the making of public space? Answering these questions requires that we rethink two visions of the politics of public space: the Habermasian public sphere and the Arendtian public space.

The Habermasian public sphere is a realm “free from all coercion or the intrusion of force” in which unimpeded rational-critical debate can be conducted (Montag, 2000, p. 135). It came about with a historically specific bourgeois society, emerged “between civil society and the state,” and was formed by private peoples coming together as a public. Ideally, pure speech in the public sphere counterbalances the state and binds its activity to a system of norms legitimated by public opinion. However, regardless of this normative ideal, Habermas’s public sphere is vulnerable to pressure from the state.

The state, in Habermas’s idealistic theory, is a self-restrained constitutional state, which, with its “rational” executive and “independent” judiciary, is not willing to interfere with the affairs of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, p. 80). In fact, Habermas’s theory separates the state and the public sphere to ensure theoretical clarity. On the one hand, only public opinion is formed in the public sphere, and its influence cannot be channeled into the formal policy-making processes of the state (Soltze, 2000, p. 154). On the other hand, the law-based state has only delimited jurisdictional areas, and abides by the constitution (Habermas, 1989, p. 80). However, in the modern age, the state has continued to impinge on society. Earlier, as the bearer of public order, the liberal constitutional state “order[ed] not only the state as such and in relation to society but the system of coexistence in society as a whole” (Habermas, 1989, p.
223). Later, the social-welfare state, being charged with social obligation, actively defined the general interest of society and sought to realize it. This led to the state’s encroachment into the realm of society. Because the public sphere rested on a society that was free from the control of the state, intrusion of the state into society meant also the autonomy and communicative freedoms of the public sphere that served as the conditions for exerting criticism and influence being undermined. In other words, state intervention has caused the public sphere to lose its ground of functioning. Habermas terms this “the structural transformation of the public sphere” (Habermas, 1989, pp. 222–235). He also realizes that “a mere guarantee that the state will refrain from intrusion is not longer sufficient for this purpose [of sustaining the public sphere]” (Habermas, 1989, pp. 227–228).

Habermas’s public sphere, a normative arena in which “the public” is organized and represented (Mitchell, 1995, p. 116), is so weak that it cannot withstand pressure from the outside. The Habermasian line of argument supports the “end of public space” discourse, which maintains that public space is doomed to shrink when the powerful institutions in society – the state, big corporations, or the like – believe that public space should be “open space for recreation and entertainment, subject to usage by an appropriate public that is allowed in,” and act to transform real public space into “pseudo public space” that is subject to surveillance and policing (Mitchell, 1995, p. 115).

The “end of public space” argument assumes, as does Habermas, that social spaces are nested within the larger framework of the political economy, and that whether real public space is allowed in a society depends on the will of mainstream institutions. It considers that public space comprises the sites of state politics and market forces, that it is an artifact given by the powerful, which exists prior to people’s participation, and that it has set the ground rules according to which people should behave. People are only passive actors in the public space: they earn certain qualifications in society, enter into the already existing public space, and play by its rules. The public space givers decide what is allowed in the space,
and people cannot use and create a public space according to their own needs. Perhaps the same weakness shared by the “end of public space” literature and Habermas’s theory is their neglect of the role of human agency in enabling the emergence and sustenance of public space.

I now move to the Arendtian concept of public space, which offers a stronger vision of the public by including the concept of collective political action. Arendt defines action as a human being’s exercise of his or her freedom, which is the combination of “I will” and “I can”; the will and the ability “to take an initiative, to begin, to set something into motion” (Arendt, 1998, p. 177; Arendt, 1968, p. 160). In the Arendtian scheme of the private/public dichotomy, action occurs when someone for whom the necessities of life have been satisfied in the private realm enters the public realm. Action develops fully only when it has “created its own worldly space where it can come out of hiding” (Arendt, 1968, p. 169). In this sense, action is the prerequisite for the creation of public space. Whereas Habermas assumes that the public sphere already exists in the “natural order” of the capitalist market, for Arendt, public space results only from people’s action, and is not a given.

Central to people’s action are their “courage” and their willingness to “appear” and to win “glory” in public. Courage means to insert “one’s self into the [common] world and begin a story of one’s own”; it is “already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and… disclosing and exposing one’s self” (Arendt, 1998, p. 186). Because one’s own life and survival can only be secured in the private realm, “whoever enter[s] the political realm [has] first to be ready to risk his life”. Hence, courage is “the political virtue par excellence.” What motivates people to leave the household and bet their lives is their willingness to “appear” in the public and to “embark upon some adventure and glorious enterprise,” that is, adventure for the sake of society (Arendt, 1998, pp. 36–37). Only by doing so can they excel and distinguish themselves from all others (Arendt, 1998, p. 49).

Action is not possible in isolation (Arendt, 1998, p. 188), it goes on between men because, first, through it people reveal to others their unique distinctness, and come into inter-subjective communication with them (Arendt, 1998, p. 176). Second, someone who begins something “can embark upon it only after he has won over others to help him.” In this sense action is action “in concert” (Arendt, 2005, p. 127). Therefore, “each action [is] divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by ‘bearing’ and ‘finishing’ the enterprise” (Arendt, 1998, p. 189). Only by gathering forces in the public can power be generated, and the power then gives rise to and safeguards public space (Arendt, 1998, p. 200; see also Howell, 1993, p. 315).

In the Arendtian concepts of action and public space, action precedes public space. That is, public space is the result of people’s action, but not vice versa. For her, the true public space lies in people acting together, “no matter where they happen to be”: action “create[s] a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere” (Arendt, 1998, p. 198). Although Arendt acknowledges that public space can be threatened by a totalitarian state, the concerted action of people can maintain public spaces as small hidden islands of freedom (Arendt, 2005, p. 147). In this sense, the Arendtian public space is a strong vision because the space is produced by human action, and is not just a given reality that is vulnerable to the force of the state, as in the Habermasian concept of the public sphere.

From Arendt’s theory, and from the case of the making of Tiananmen Square in the May Fourth Movement, we can see the following. (1) The newly transformed cityscape of Beijing in the early 20th century provided the spatial setting in which action was staged. (2) Students’ courage and their urge to win glory pushed them out of their private lives to take concerted political action in the public. (3) The action was not in the private interests of the students, but for the common good. (4) The action was inventive in using the cityscape – different spatial settings were used to stage different kinds of action. (5) A space can constrain actions; at the same time, actions can make good use of space. When students used the space appropriately, their actions were empowered. (6) People’s action was most vital in breaking through the control of the government and opening up public spaces of political significance, among which Tiananmen Square is a classic example.

The exploration of the connection between the making of political public space and people’s action that this paper attempts seeks further to bridge up the disciplines of political geography and political science. Whereas political geography is about “the spatiality of all types of power and their interaction” (Flint, in Ethington and McDaniel, 2007, p. 127), political science studies the state, law, formal institutions, rights, etc. (Curtis, 1981, p. 20). The two discursive communities have for long failed “to take advantage of one another’s perspectives, or even to engage in a conversation” (Ethington and McDaniel, 2007, p. 129). Following Ethington’s and McDaniel’s recent call in Annual Review of Political Science (Ethington and McDaniel, 2007), this paper suggests that the two can be “intersected” to provide a new perspective of studying spatial-political phenomena: On the one hand, by situating people’s political action in space, it shows how and why a political public space is made by human agency. In other words, people’s action (the political) matters in the production of space (the political geographical). On the other hand, by illustrating action as tactical and inventive in using space, it points out that political action is intrinsically spatial. In this sense, space is not abstract and uniform, as mainstream political science assumes. Rather, it is the real geographical context at which politics (people’s action) occurs, and hence it constrains, or empowers politics. As the above case of the making of Tiananmen Square in the May Fourth Movement has indicated, students knew how to act in space, and eventually they succeeded to transform an empty space into a public space of political significance.

Acknowledgements

The visit to Beijing in 2004 that led to the paper was funded by the Graduate School, and the Department of Government and Public Administration of Chinese University of Hong Kong. Special thank goes to Professor Ma Shu-yun, for his guidance, support and encouragement during the writing of this article. I thank also John O’Loughlin and the anonymous reviewers of Political Geography for their helpful comments on the earlier version. None of them, however, is responsible for any mistake in the paper.

References


Beijing Administration of Chinese University of Hong Kong. Special thank goes to Professor Ma Shu-yun, for his guidance, support and encouragement during the writing of this article. I thank also John O’Loughlin and the anonymous reviewers of Political Geography for their helpful comments on the earlier version. None of them, however, is responsible for any mistake in the paper.
of the May Fourth Movement] (pp. 111–139). Taibei: Baijie Chubanshe [Baijie Publishing Co.].


