

1 Making a revolutionary monument: The First Party Congress Site

Shen Zhiyu was on a political mission. On a September day in 1950, the thirty-four-year-old cadre—vice Party secretary of the Art Workers' Association—was summoned by telephone to the Shanghai Party Committee Propaganda Department. Standing together with official Yang Zhongguang in the office on Huashan Road, Shen received marching orders from Yao Zhen of the Propaganda Department. The Shanghai Party Committee had decided to act on an idea suggested by Mayor Chen Yi. It would locate the site of the first CCP meeting, and there establish a memorial museum. Shen and Yang were tasked with locating the meeting site, if possible in time for the thirtieth anniversary of the Party's founding the following year. In his Subei accent, Yao declared, "As the Shanghai Party Committee, searching for the Party's birthplace is one of our important political responsibilities."¹

For the narrative of New China, the preeminent revolutionary relic was the site where the Party was founded. Just as Shanghai residents collected artifacts of their personal histories, so too did the Party search for the material remains of the First Party Congress Site (*yida huizhi*). Found and restored, the First Party Congress Site would come to play a number of roles in the People's Republic. As the official birthplace of the Communist Party, it was protected as a cultural relic and became a venue for political pilgrimages. Shanghai officials also preserved the surrounding area and planned for a museum of revolutionary history. The buildings adjacent to the restored meeting room held exhibitions that told the story of Party founding. The First Party Congress Site, in

¹ This chapter's account of locating the First Party Congress Site is drawn from three sources. The first is a 1988 account by Shen Zhiyu entitled "Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de" (How the First Party Congress Site was found), in *SZYWBL*, pp. 353–357. The second is a 1991 interview with Shen Zhiyu by Ye Yonglie, entitled "Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun: Fang Shen Zhiyu tongzhi" (Searching for the origins of the Communist Party: An interview with Comrade Shen Zhiyu), in *SZYWBL*, pp. 412–420. The third is a posthumous account that includes memories by Shen's widow. See Chen Zhiqiang, *Wenbo xianqu: Shen Zhiyu zhuan* (Museum pioneer: A biography of Shen Zhiyu) (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 2011), pp. 97–110.

addition to being a monument and an exhibition, was also a collection; in an era of continuous revolution, officials continued to gather contemporary artifacts. More than six decades after the founding of the People's Republic, it still plays these roles: a site of patriotic education, a museum with exhibitions, and a collection that sponsors scholarly research. The First Party Congress Site remains an icon, a *lieu de memoire* persisting among Shanghai's glittering skyscrapers, an architectural silhouette that graces lapel pins marked with July 1, 1921 as the date that Mao claimed for the Party's establishment.²

Today the First Party Congress Site is carefully distinguished by a brown street marker that is standard for Shanghai's historic sites. It directs visitors to a block of five residences located within the high-end entertainment area of Xintiandi. The two-story houses, typical of Shanghai lane housing, are a modest gray-and-red brick, with doorframes crowned by elaborate carving. The site has now been immaculately restored and it is adorned with identical shrubbery; a marble placard identifies it as a National Cultural Relic and the Chinese flag waves from one corner. But in 1950, when Shen Zhiyu set forth on his search under the shade of Shanghai's parasol trees, no one knew for certain where the First Party Congress Site was located. One can imagine his trepidation as he replied to Yao, "The task is indeed glorious, but it will be very difficult . . . the French Concession is so huge, how can we even begin?"³ Yet finding the site, as this chapter will show, was the easiest step. Far more politically fraught was how to use the revolutionary relic to tell Party history.

I begin with the excavation and authentication of the First Party Congress Site as a revolutionary relic. Memoirs by Shen Zhiyu and others, together with archival documents, reveal the role of material culture—here, revolutionary relics—in political legitimacy. I then turn to the problem of curating exhibitions at the First Party Congress Site, using materials from exhibition plans to official scripted answers to illustrate how difficult it was to do history in Mao's China. Even as an exhibition of revolutionary history was portrayed as the definitive textbook, against the backdrop of socialist China's tumultuous political campaigns First Party Congress Site officials struggled to remain in

² It has now been determined that the First Party Congress meeting took place on July 23, 1921. See, for example, Zhongguo gongchandang diyici quanguo daibiao dahui huizhi jinianguan (Memorial hall of the Chinese Communist Party's First Party Congress Site), ed., *Zhongguo gongchandang diyici quanguo daibiao dahui huizhi* (The Chinese Communist Party's First Party Congress Site) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2001), p. 103. Nevertheless, the Party still celebrates the anniversary on July 1.

³ Shen Zhiyu, "Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de," p. 353.

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accord with the Maoist “Red Line.” Their curation of revolution in the early 1960s demonstrates the difficulties of doing history, both in researching Communist Party founding and in portraying it as an exhibition text and a docent script. During the Cultural Revolution the First Party Congress Site exhibition became a political broadside, and although its reform-era restoration called for a return to *wenzhu* and to historical accuracy, it remains bound by the Party whose founding it tells.

Excavating and authenticating revolution

The search for the First Party Congress Site began with a counterrevolutionary document and the wife of a traitor. A member of the Shanghai’s Public Security Bureau (PSB) named Zhou Zhiyou was the son of Zhou Fohai and Yang Shuhui; Zhou Zhiyou’s late father had been one of the original participants at the First Party Congress, but he later joined the Wang Jingwei puppet government.⁴ While the father threw in his lot with the collaborators, the son joined the Communist underground and eventually became a member of New China’s security apparatus. Zhou Zhiyou reminded the Propaganda Department that his father had written memoirs, which included an account of the First Party Congress meeting.⁵ Thus with this confluence of characters and with the Propaganda Department and the PSB working together, Shen Zhiyu began his search based on two leads. He had a letter of introduction that would allow him to read the classified memoirs and the PSB agreed to release from prison Zhou Fohai’s widow, Ms. Yang Shuhui, to assist in Shen’s revolutionary task.⁶ Rushing to the library with his letter, Shen Zhiyu spent an entire day reading Zhou Fohai’s memoirs, gleaning for his efforts one sentence: “Every night, we would meet at the home of Mr. Li Hanjun, on Beile Road.”⁷

⁴ As a delegate to the First Party Congress, Zhou Fohai represented the Chinese students in Japan. He left the Party in 1924 and joined the collaborators in 1938, rising to the positions of vice director of the Administrative Yuan under Wang Jingwei as well as minister of finance and mayor of Shanghai. After World War II, he was sentenced to life and he died in prison in 1948. Ye Yonglie, “Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun,” p. 413; Zhongguo gongchandang diyici quanguo daibiao dahui huizhi, ed., *Zhongguo gongchandang diyici quanguo daibiao dahui huizhi*, p. 98.

⁵ Ye Yonglie, “Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun,” pp. 413–414.

⁶ Shen Zhiyu, “Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de,” p. 353; Ye Yonglie, “Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun,” pp. 413–414; Chen Zhiqiang, *Wenbo xianqu*, pp. 98–99.

⁷ The relevant excerpt is reproduced in *Shanghai geming shi yanjiu ziliao: jinian jiangdang 70 zhou nian* (Research materials on Shanghai’s revolutionary history: Commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Party) (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 1991), pp. 321–324; Chen Zhiqiang, *Wenbo xianqu*, pp. 98–99.

Two days later Shen Zhiyu and his colleague Yang Zhongguang met Yang Shuhui for the first time. Ms. Yang was then forty-nine years old, dressed in blue cotton clothing and wearing her hair short and straight, a world away from former elegant portraits dressed in flowered *qipao*.⁸ Her first idea was to bring them to Chen Duxiu's house on Nanchang Road, which was both the home of the CCP's founder and the offices of *New Youth* magazine. She remembered the house because she and Zhou Fohai had lived in the pavilion room after they were first married. Beyond the main entrance, there was a salon used by Chen Duxiu as a meeting room, where she recalled that a blackboard read, "During meetings, speeches are limited to fifteen minutes," and that Chen's rocking chair had been in the room.⁹ This site established, Shen Zhiyu and Yang Zhongguang decided to split their tasks; Shen would search for Li Hanjun's home, while Yang followed a thread in other materials that suggested that the First Party Congress meeting might have taken place at Bowen Girls' School.

On his own, Yang Zhongguang searched the archives of Shanghai's Bureau of Education and interviewed former residents who confirmed the address of the girls' school; he sent photographs to Mao and Dong Biwu, another original participant. Mao and Dong inspected the photos and reported that the school had provided dormitory space for the participants but—contrary to the information in Zhou Fohai's memoirs—the actual meeting took place at the home of Li Hanjun's brother, Li Shucheng. Yang then went to Beijing to visit Li Shucheng, then minister of agriculture, and was given the following address—Number 78, Wangzhi Road, in the French Concession. Though Bowen Girls' School was rejected as the site of the meeting, it was still deemed a revolutionary site (*geming yizhi*). After the Central Committee dispatched Li Da—yet another participant—to Shanghai for authentication, the Shanghai Municipal Government bought the property and invited the daughter of the former principal, herself a contemporary student, to oversee restoration of Bowen Girls' School.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Shen Zhiyu and Yang Shuhui took walks along Beile Road, which had been renamed Huangpi South Road in 1943. Shen

⁸ Ye Yonglie, "Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun," pp. 412–413. For a photo of Yang, see Chen Zhiqiang, *Wenbo xianqu*, p. 110.

⁹ Shen Zhiyu, "Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de," p. 353; Ye Yonglie, "Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun," pp. 415–416.

¹⁰ Shen Zhiyu, "Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de," pp. 354–355.

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Zhiyu, bespectacled and dressed in his blue cadre suit, followed half a meter behind Yang Shuhui. Over thirty years had passed since Yang Shuhui had delivered letters to the house for her husband. In the much-changed landscape, she would seize upon a house but then determine that it was not the Li residence. Then, on one of their walks she suddenly stopped near the intersection of Huangpi South Road and Xingye Road (formerly Wangzhi Road), arrested by the sight of a two-story white-washed building labeled “Hengfuchang Noodles.” “This,” she said to Shen, “seems a bit like the Li family’s back door!” During subsequent days, Ms. Yang returned on her own to inspect the building, and Shen interviewed the neighbors. From Dong Zhengchang, the proprietor of a sauce-and-pickle shop, they learned that the house had been built in the 1920s by a woman surnamed Chen. The Li brothers had rented two of the units, knocking out the dividing wall to make one residence. In 1924 the woman Chen rented out the house to family members, who became secondary landlords. It later became a pawnshop, and when Shen and Yang Shuhui arrived in 1951, it was a small noodle factory with two families residing on the second floor.¹¹ In Shen Zhiyu’s account, when the occupants learned that their building was the birthplace of the CCP, “everyone clapped their hands and smilingly exclaimed, ‘So it turns out that the place where we live is on precious ground!’” Told that the site would become a memorial museum and that the families would have to relocate, Shen remembered that they gladly assented, stating, “that is as it should be!”¹²

As the next step, the First Party Congress Site had to be authenticated. At the time, it was by no means assured that it would become a monument. When the Shanghai Propaganda Department reported to its superiors in the Central Committee’s Central Propaganda Department, the response was that *if* the sites—the *New Youth* office, Bowen Girls’ School, and the First Party Congress Site—were indeed genuine, they could be preserved and made into monuments.¹³ While still

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 355; Ye Yonglie, “Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun,” pp. 417–418; Chen Zhiqiang, *Wenbo xianqu*, p. 102. For two photos of what the building looked like in 1951, see Zhonggong Shanghai shiwei dangshi yanjiushi and Shanghaishi wenwuju (Research Office of the Shanghai Communist Party Committee and the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Cultural Relics), eds., *Zhongguo gongchandang zaoqi zai Shanghai shiji* (Historical vestiges in Shanghai from the Chinese Communist Party’s early period) (Shanghai: Tongji daxue chubanshe, 2013), p. 12.

¹² Shen Zhiyu, “Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de,” p. 355.

¹³ “Zhongyang guanyu dang de diyici daibiao dahui de dizhi baocun wenti gei Shanghai shiwei de zhishi,” July 3, 1951 (Central directive to the Shanghai Party Committee regarding preservation of the First Party Congress Site), in *Zhongguo gongchandang xuanchuan gongzuo wenxian xuanbian: 1946–1949* (Selected documents on the

verifying the site, the Shanghai Party Committee rented the houses in September 1951, bought the property in May of the following year, and began to submit it to inspection.

The Shanghai Party Committee initially decorated the rooms with paintings of Marx and Lenin and samples of Mao Zedong's calligraphy. In the winter of 1952, when Wang Yeqiu of the Cultural Relics Bureau inspected the site, he ordered that the rooms be restored to their original condition, explaining that "a memorial museum to revolutionary history should be decorated exactly as it was originally; in this way, you will allow visitors to imagine the original scene and will inspire feelings of deep veneration."¹⁴ In 1953, three miniature replicas were sent to the Central Propaganda Department in Beijing. Mao inspected the models and dispatched Bao Huiseng, another participant and then an adviser to the State Council, to Shanghai. In March 1954 Bao Huiseng and Xue Wenchu (Mrs. Li Shucheng) confirmed the location of the meeting. Xue Wenchu provided instructions on how to restore the interior and later donated artifacts, including a tea service and a chair.¹⁵

Still, Shanghai officials were unable to complete the restoration, as researchers debated whether the meeting had taken place upstairs or downstairs. The arrangement of the house was finally settled in 1956, when Dong Biwu—then president of the Supreme People's Court—inspected the site. In those days, Dong explained, the delegates met downstairs because there were women in the family of the household, who remained upstairs. Officials thus placed a rectangular table on the first floor, as the meeting room remains arranged to this day.¹⁶ Throughout the 1950s, Shanghai officials worked to follow Wang Yeqiu's directive on authenticity, which even extended to the neighborhood; the adjacent buildings were preserved in order to maintain

propaganda work of the Chinese Communist Party: 1946–1949) (Beijing: Xuexi chubanshe, 1996), p. 249.

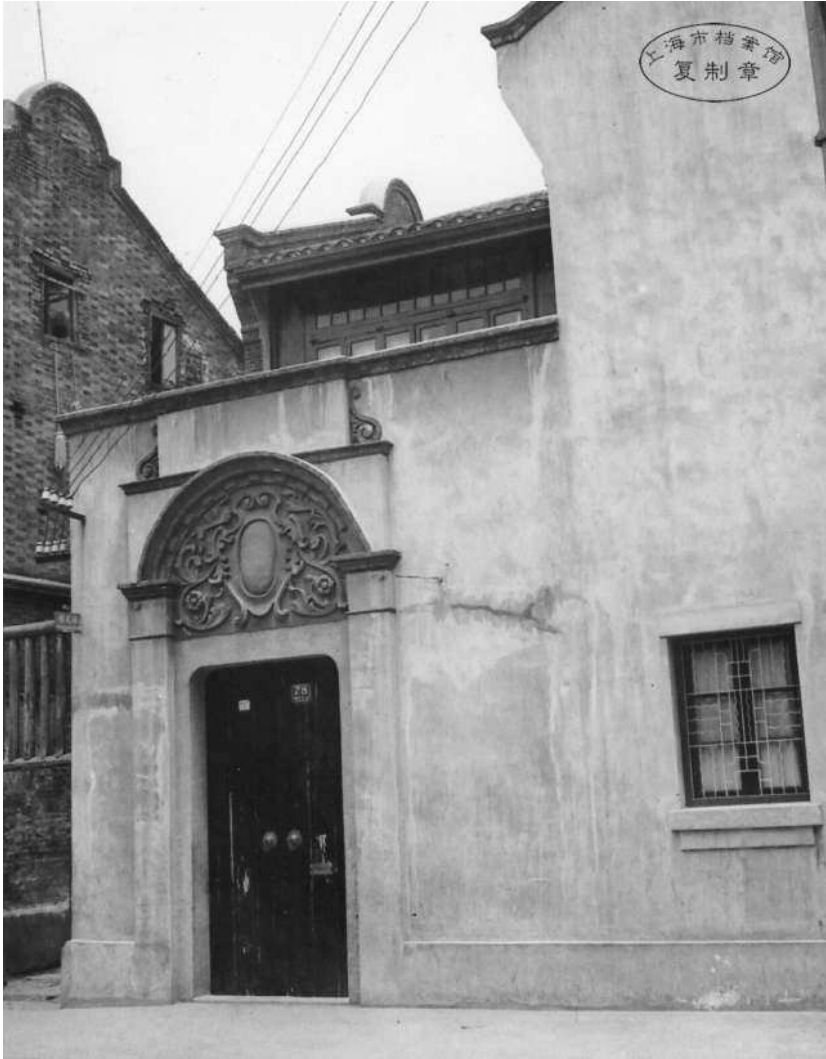
¹⁴ Ye Yonglie, "Zhonggong zhichu de zhuixun," p. 419.

¹⁵ Shen Zhiyu, "Yida huizhi shi zenyang zhaodao de," p. 356. See also SMA B172-4-313, pp. 5–6.

¹⁶ For an institutional account of some of the events here, see Chen Peicun and Ren Rui, "Jianguan sishinian zhi huigu" (Looking back on forty years since the establishment of the museum), *Shanghai geming shiliao yu yanjiu* (Materials and research on Shanghai's revolutionary history) (Beijing: Kaiming chubanshe, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 236–238. The archival record also reveals that careful accounts were made of these visits, the questions asked, and the answers. One such example exists for the visit by Dong Biwu's wife in 1964, which refers back to Dong's earlier comments and includes summaries of telephone conversations. SMA 172-1-477, pp. 95–97.

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Ill.1.1. Exterior of the First Party Congress Site, undated.
SMA H1-22-1-1

the original atmosphere.¹⁷ In his oral history Chen Peicun, who began working at the First Party Congress Site in 1958, remembers the meticulous care that went into restoration: carpenters replicated

¹⁷ SMA B172-1-477, pp. 26–31.



Ill. 1.2. First Party Congress Site meeting room, undated. SMA
H1-22-1-2

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furniture according to Xue Wenchu's memories, the tea service was specially commissioned at Jingdezhen and Yixing, and the state allocated gold to gild the rim of the vase on the table.¹⁸

Both in authenticating the site and restoring the interior, officials of the First Party Congress Site emphasized the paramount importance of accuracy. Memoirs and memories were not entirely reliable: Zhou Fohai's memoirs were off on the name of the street; some accounts claimed that Bowen Girls' School was the site of the congress; and Shen Zhiyu waited for Dong Biwu's visit before placing the meeting table on the first floor. From the beginning, Party history had to be presented in an authoritative and coherent way. After all, the Party's rise to power was attributed to its correct historical understanding.¹⁹ Although the First Party Congress Site opened to limited internal visits in September 1952, in February 1954 the Central Propaganda Department ordered that the site could not be fully open to visitors until the interior had finally been decided upon.²⁰ The First Party Congress Site, as a revolutionary relic, was part of the Party's self-fashioning. Its claims of authenticity undergirded the Party's legitimacy.

The First Party Congress Site topped the list of national revolutionary relics, and also lent Shanghai its political and cultural cachet. In 1961, when the state issued its first list of national "cultural relic protection units" (*wenwu baohu danwei*), four such designations, all of them revolutionary sites, were in Shanghai.²¹ Finding the First Party Congress Site was part of a broader attempt to mark revolutionary places within the city's landscape. Part of Chen Peicun's job was to survey traces of revolutionary sites, and the archival record includes many examples of attempts to find and preserve sites with Mao's revolutionary

¹⁸ Duan Lian, Song Shijuan, and Chen Ling, eds., *Wangshi yu jiyi: Shanghai diqu bowuguan, jianguan koushu fangtanlu* (Past and memory: A record of oral histories and interviews from Shanghai local museums and memorial halls) (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2010), p. 56. Chen Peicun's oral history also includes an account of the discovery, but it is not first-hand.

¹⁹ For the Soviet case, Frederick Corney argues that "Istpart was born of a need for stability and coherence . . . An internally consistent history of the revolution and party would help provide a stable past to anchor the Soviet regime." Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 111–125.

²⁰ Chen Peicun and Ren Rui, "Jianguan sishinian zhi huigu," p. 238.

²¹ *Quanguo gesheng, zizhiq, zhixiashi diyipi wenwu baohu danwei mingdan huibian* (The first group of national cultural relic protection units in each province, autonomous region, and special municipality) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1958), p. 10. The other three were Sun Yat-sen's residence, the headquarters of Socialist Youth, and the tomb of Lu Xun. See Ma Chengyuan, Huang Xuanpei, Li Junjie, eds., *Shanghai wenwu bowuguan zhi* (Gazetteer of Shanghai's cultural relics and museums) (hereafter cited as *SHWWBWGZ*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1997), p. 387.

footprint.²² In the 1960s, for example, officials interviewed old cadres and Mao's associates to determine where Mao had lived in Shanghai.²³ In another case, the Bureau of Culture convened a conference to determine whether or not Mao had ever visited a garden that was slated for destruction.²⁴ By 1964, the First Party Congress Site officials had logged over 4,600 interviews.²⁵ Thus the First Party Congress Site was responsible not only for the history of the meeting it commemorated but also for revolutionary relics in Shanghai writ large. These *geming wenwu* were collected, researched, and restored. Writing the Party's founding narrative would prove to be a task of no less political import.

A founding narrative for the Communist Party

In October 1950, just as Shen Zhiyu was beginning his search, Wang Yequi of the State Cultural Relics Bureau published an account of his visit to the Soviet Museum of the Revolution for the benefit of his colleagues in museum work. Wang illustrated display techniques that would be widely adopted in Chinese museums: large oil paintings, charts comparing past and present, artifacts, and the extensive use of historical documents. The experience of his visit was both didactic and affective. Particularly impressive to Wang was a set of torture instruments, including a leather whip that led him to recall his own imprisonment as a member of the Communist underground. "This was familiar to me, because I also survived the leather whip of China's reactionary rulers." Wang Yequi expressed his admiration for the Soviet Museum of the Revolution as a growing collection that depicted a contemporary narrative.²⁶ In the same way, to exhibit the revolution in China was to write history as it was being made.

Museums as educative, artifacts as triggers of memory, collections as works in progress—these characteristics also had antecedents in the Republican era (1912–1949). In 1928 the Nationalist Government established a committee to create a museum of the revolution in

²² Duan Lian, Song Shijuan, and Chen Ling, eds., *Wangshi yu jiyi*, pp. 58–61.

²³ SMA B172-1-477, pp. 107–115.

²⁴ SMA B172-1-477, pp. 134–139. In this case, the Shanghai Bureau of Culture determined that Mao had never visited the garden, called *Shenjia huayuan*, and therefore the Shanghai Nanshi Power Plant was allowed to raze the grounds to provide an area for storage of oil tanks.

²⁵ SMA B172-1-477, pp. 9–11.

²⁶ Wang Yequi, "Sulian guoli geming bowuguan" (The Soviet Museum of the Revolution), *Wenwu cankao ziliao*, no. 10 (1950), pp. 66–76.