Written Component

Part 01

- **2 references drawn from the course reading list**

Anderson, B. (2006). Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London: Verso.

Anderson (2006, p. 180) observes how states, through acts like the reconstruction of monuments, sought to "drape ancient prestige around the mappers", embedding political authority within material culture. This perspective sheds light on the historical role of the Zhang Menglong Stele. The monument dates back to the Northern Wei period, a dynasty established by the Xianbei, a non-Han ethnic group. It functioned as a cultural symbol through which political legitimacy was strategically inscribed into material culture. It reflected not only the regime's attempt to consolidate its rule over a Han-majority population but also the complex dynamics of cultural negotiation, assimilation, and mutual influence between different ethnic identities. Today, in its weathered, fragmented form, the stele stands as a living witness to these layered histories. However, any attempt to restore it risks transforming a dynamic site of historical dialogue into a fixed emblem of ideological intent. By acknowledging and preserving the stele's current fragmented state, my project seeks to explore how the recognition of absence and indeterminacy can avoid the closure imposed by restoration and create space for diverse and evolving interpretations of cultural memory.

Foucault, M. (1966). The Order of things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences. London: Routledge.

Inspired by Foucault's suggestion that archaeology seeks to study "the general space of knowledge, its configuration, and the mode of being of things that appear in it" (Foucault, 2001, p. xxv), I structured my investigation as a sequence of inquiry. Extending my previous exploration of weathered traces, I noticed that the meaning of a damaged character could still be partially recovered by considering its contextual position. Beginning with the weathered traces left by erosion, I examined the stele's spatial positioning, its material composition, and finally its textual remains. Using a method analogous to archaeological reasoning, I traced how the Northern Wei regime, a minority power, selected Zhang Menglong and situated his monument within the sacred geography of Confucian culture. Each layer was treated as interconnected evidence, contributing to a broader understanding of how meaning and authority were historically constructed. At the same time, following Foucault's critical approach, I recognize that the traces, locations, and materials themselves are not neutral; they have already been filtered, preserved, and framed by the operations of historical power.

- **1 Reference Related to Project Topic**

Nora, P. (1989) 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', Representations, 26, pp.

7–24. University of California Press.

Nora (1989) conceptualizes sites of memory as consciously constructed markers such as monuments, flags, and rituals, designed to preserve collective national identity. In contrast, my project treats the weathered traces on the Zhang Menglong Stele as a microcosmic, non-monumental form of memory. These traces expose rupture, erosion, and ambiguity rather than offering a unified historical narrative. Unlike Nora's emblematic sites, the stele's damaged surface, left unrestored, opens space for fragmented and parallel reconstructions of meaning. Inspired by this tension, I approach the stele not through physical repair but through an imaginative archaeology: by examining the stele's spatial positioning, material composition, and surviving textual fragments. I attempt to piece together an understanding of Zhang Menglong's identity while acknowledging the impossibility of full recovery. I present the original text and my translations in the publication. In doing so, I aim to create an open field for interpretation. If readers wish, they can engage in their own imaginative repairs based on the surviving fragments. My project seeks to honor the honesty of incomplete memory by creating a space where no single narrative can claim dominance. I remain aware that even this openness is shaped by history, and that any reconstruction inevitably unfolds within the partial structures left by power.

● **1 Reference Related to Project Topic**

Input Party. (2020). Loose Associations by Ryan Gander. [online] Available at: https://inputparty.nl/loose-associations-by-ryan-gander-2/.

Gander's concept of "loose association" — a method of connecting seemingly unrelated ideas through intuitive, often tangential links — has deeply influenced the development of my creative methodology in this project. Rather than adhering to a linear or rational framework, I instead began with the weathered trace on the Zhang Menglong Stele and followed its "growth" through various conceptual pathways, especially in thought. Each inquiry branched outward, forming a network of connections that linked stele to broader cultural, historical, and material discourses.

In this process, I employed graphic design — especially the combination of diagrams and visual maps — not merely as a tool for representation but as a way of thinking, analysing, and structuring knowledge. Like Gander's lectures, which resist centralized narrative authority, my project is guided by intuitive associations that begin with a single trace and gradually link together location, material, and content. These loose connections anchor my speculative investigation into the stele's cultural context and the intentions of those who erected it. Through this process, a relational field emerges—mapped and made visible through diagrammatic thinking.

As Gander's work demonstrates, the act of connecting disparate elements is itself a selective, subjective process shaped by personal intuition, cultural background, and material constraints.Thus, through the influence of Loose Associations, my exploration allows cultural memory to grow and evolve rather than forcing it into a fixed or reconstructed form.

● **1 Reference Demonstrating Critical Position**

Derrida, J. (1995). Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression. University of Chicago Press.

In this project, I position myself as an imaginative re-interpreter of cultural memory. Rather than attempting to recover a fixed historical truth, I use the weathered traces on the Zhang Menglong Stele as an entry point—an initial cue for exploring the broader cultural and political context of the monument. What begins as a physical fragment becomes a catalyst for associative reasoning, guiding my inquiry into who Zhang Menglong might have been, and what meanings this stele was intended to convey. I regard the trace as vital points of entry into the silenced and marginalized aspects of historical narratives.

"There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory." (Derrida, 1995, p.11) I approach the stele not simply as a material relic but as a historical archive —— a selective construction shaped by power, recording only what was deemed worth remembering. The stele's fragmented surface embodies the inevitable loss and decay to which every archive is subject over time. The missing sections open critical space to question: Was Zhang Menglong's image entirely virtuous, or was dissent deliberately erased?

Archives can never be neutral. They are shaped by political, ideological, and cultural forces that determine what is preserved, how it is preserved, and whose memories are marginalized or erased. Starting from traces, which often overlooked and dismissed is itself a subjective act of selection. Recognizing this, I seek not to impose a singular interpretation, but to preserve a space where diverse audiences can engage critically and imagine their own acts of repair and reconstruction.

- **1 wild card reference**

Ingold, T. (2007) 'Materials against materiality', Archaeological Dialogues, 14(1), pp. 1–16. doi:10.1017/S1380203807002127.

Tim Ingold (2007) challenges the static notion of materiality by emphasizing the active, ongoing life of materials themselves. Inspired by that concept, I do not treat the stele as a completed, fixed object, but as a living material, engaged in a continuous process of weathering, erosion, and transformation —— not as decay, but as a slow unfolding of new possibilities. The stone does not merely host cultural inscriptions; it carries its own history, shaped by time, climate, and human interaction.

Inspired by Ingold's call to attend to the generative stories of materials, I explore the stele's changing surface not as a loss to be lamented, but as a site of ongoing interpretive growth. Its weathered state enables fresh meanings and evolving dialogues, rather than signaling the failure of preservation.

Through this lens, the stele becomes a dynamic point of engagement where material memory continues to live, provoke, and regenerate in the minds of those who encounter it —— not as a blank surface awaiting human interpretation, but as an active participant in shaping ongoing cultural dialogues.

Part 02

- **short statement**

This project begins with traces as a point of departure — not as signs of damage, but as elements that evolve across visual, physical, and conceptual layers. In Week 1, I explored the Zhang Menglong Stele through these layers, viewing erosion as a site of intellectual potential. In Week 2, I extended this idea, using traces as a starting point for broader reflections on the stele's context, location, and materiality. Here, the trace served as a prompt for associative thinking rather than a subject of direct analysis.

I draw on a critical archival perspective to critique the inherent non-neutrality of archives, and to explore how fragmented and incomplete traces reveal the selective operations of cultural memory and political power. Through an archaeological methodology that examines the stele's location, materiality, and textual fragments, I seek to reconstruct not a total historical truth, but a network of provisional meanings.

My project embraces intuitive, associative thinking, using graphic design as a method of analysis to trace connections between physical marks and broader historical narratives. I avoid the desire for completeness and instead cultivate an open field where fragmented traces provoke evolving interpretations. Offering multiple entry points for readers, I aim to challenge singular narratives and foster an ongoing, dynamic engagement with the material past.