



RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Artist Enclave to Living Urban Heritage: Exploring the Unconventional Path of a 1920s Mixed-use Urban Block in Shanghai

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At the end of the 1990s, the Asian financial crisis severely unbalanced real estate development mechanisms in Shanghai's former Luwan district that strongly relied on foreign direct investment. This momentary interruption created a unique opportunity for a long time unconsidered mixed-use urban block at the margins of the former French Concession, nowadays known as Tianzifang, to experiment with regeneration approaches that deviated from conventional "old city renewal" (*jiucheng gaizao* 舊城改造). Partly responding to Shanghai's aspirations to become a "global city", the focus was set on culture and its creative potential that enabled a multifunctional framing of the block as creative industry park, tourist destination, and ultimately a protected scenic block in Shanghai's conservation system. The paper investigates which aspects of cultural heritage have (or have not) been mobilised at which particular stage of Tianzifang's place-making process, thereby shedding light on specific mechanisms in dealing with material culture and memory in a Chinese urban context. What broader implications did this uncommon approach have for the formation of heritage conceptualisations such as industrial and intangible heritage? Proceeding from a constructivist approach that allows for a comprehensive analysis of socially and politically negotiated layers of meaning, the study examines how spatial environments are bound to notions of history and identity. Relevant aspects during these processes of authentication and revalorisation that the paper finds are artist-led spatial interventions, the practice of naming, an emphasis on the use value of industrial heritage, and an expansion of the notion of Shanghai nostalgia to include local-style *shikumen lilong* 石庫門里弄 housing.

20 世紀 90 年代末，亞洲金融危機導致上海原盧灣區重度依賴外資的房地產發展模式遭受衝擊。這給位於前法租界邊緣、一直被忽視的田子坊，帶來獨特的發展空間。與常規的舊城改造不同，田子坊的發展更注重其文化價值和創新潛力的挖掘，逐步成為創意產業高地和旅遊亮點，且被納入上海歷史風貌保護體系。本文旨在深入解析田子坊如何策略性地調動和維護其文化遺產，探討對物質文化與集體記憶、工業遺產與非物質遺產的理解。借助建構主義視角，文章進一步分析空間環境與歷史和身份的交織關係，探析藝術介入城市空間、命名策略，以及石庫門式的“上海懷舊”，對田子坊的認知重塑和價值提升起到的關鍵作用。

Keywords: Tianzifang, urban conservation, living heritage, revitalisation, Shanghai nostalgia

關鍵詞： 田子坊，城市保護，活態遺產，城市振興，上海懷舊

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Introduction

Shanghai's built environment has continued to transform at an enormous pace since the early 1990s, a phenomenon formerly conceptualised as “restless urban landscape” (Shen and Wu 2011). Following the introduction of market-oriented reforms, Chinese municipal governments have drawn on urban land as an important economic resource for large-scale redevelopment. Frequent targets of such redevelopment projects are historical residential areas that have fallen into a state of dilapidation due to a lack of investment and neglect during China's command economy period. Although Shanghai was one of the earliest Chinese cities to engage in conservation, the Municipal Government and urban planners clearly prioritised sites classified as “revolutionary heritage” and selected areas featuring accumulations of Western-style architecture from its former foreign concessions.¹ Official listing of the latter as protected historic and cultural scenic areas (*lishi wenhua fengmao baohu qu* 歷史文化風貌保護區) started as early as 1991 (“Shanghai Urban Planning Gazetteer” Compilation Committee 2003). In contrast, the cultural significance of vernacular housing and everyday spaces of alleyway compounds long remained unrecognised.

In present-day city morphology, two major trajectories on Shanghai's pathway to consolidate its position as a “global city” and international trade centre become visible. Primarily, Shanghai has made the construction of iconic architecture a priority policy goal, with the skyline of its Lujiazui 陸家嘴 Central Business District (CBD) in Shanghai's Pudong district being one of the most prominent manifestations. Simultaneously, the city is striving to regenerate its cosmopolitan character from the Republican era (Wu 2004: 163). Western-style architectural ensembles such as the Bund (*Waitan* 外灘) are exemplars for this period in the 1920s and 30s, abbreviated to “the thirties”, in which Shanghai thrived as China's leading commercial centre. The revalorisation of such architectural ensembles is closely related to the emergence of a specific type of nostalgia. Based on his comprehensive explorations of Shanghai everyday life and material culture, historian Lu Hanchao termed this phenomenon a “nostalgia for the future” which, other than merely mourning the loss of the past, strives to rejuvenate it as a driving force for the future (Lu 2002: 172). It is in this context that cultural heritage and the different social and cultural attributes that constitute it gain importance for the process of urban regeneration.

Taikang Road Block 泰康路街區,² later renamed Tianzifang 田子坊, is particularly suitable for investigating such emerging cultural dynamics, due to its early embrace of this new potential. Located at the southern periphery of the former French Concession,³ this mixed-use urban block combines

¹ Foreign concessions were set up in Shanghai after China's defeat by Great Britain in the First Opium War (1839–1842). These delimited areas guaranteed extraterritorial rights and privileges to foreign imperial powers with which China was forced to sign a number of “unequal treaties”. The first of these agreements, the Treaty of Nanjing, opened the city and its port to foreign trade. Subsequently, the British and American settlements and the French Concession were constructed north of the old Chinese city. In 1863, the British and American quarters were merged into the so-called International Settlement (*gonggong zujic* 公共租界). The International Settlement was governed by a council, the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC). This council mainly consisted of elected “ratepayers” from Shanghai's business community (wealthy citizens paying annual land rents, since the late 1920s not only foreign but also Chinese members). However, unlike the British colony of Hong Kong, the foreign concessions in Shanghai remained under Chinese sovereignty.

² In Shanghai Municipality's official planning documents, this area is designated as “block 56”.

³ The French Concession (*Fa zujic* 法租界) was set up in 1849. It expanded westward several times from its original area, north of the old

characteristic Shanghai *lilong* 里弄 housing⁴ with single-storey *lilong* factories and later constructed multi-storey manufacturing buildings. By the late nineteenth century, *lilong* or alleyway house compounds had become Shanghai's dominant housing form (Arkaraprasertkul 2016: 7). Tianzifang's distinctive *shikumen lilong*⁵ housing and *lilong* factories date from the 1910s to the 1930s and are of rather simple character, given their peripheral location in a transition zone from the French Concession to the Chinese quarter.

Starting from the Socialist era in the 1950s, the block underwent its first spatial transformations. A great number of *lilong* factories and storehouses were demolished and replaced by new manufacturing buildings with a height of up to five stories (Huang and Qi 2015: 67). Together with a few remaining former *lilong* factories, these buildings now flank Tianzifang's main entry lane, Alleyway 210 (see fig. 1). By the end of the 1980s, manufacturing industries were relocated from Shanghai's city centre, and former industrial sites of state-owned enterprises were left unused. *Lilong* houses at the eastern and western margins of the block were replaced with high-rise condominiums, leaving the majority of its original *lilong* concentrated in the block's centre to form Tianzifang's later core area (see fig. 1). At this time, many of the remaining *lilong* houses had become overcrowded as a result of public housing allocation and some even lacked basic sanitation facilities.

Attempts to regenerate Taikang Road Block started in the late 1990s. Following common urban renewal practice at that time, Luwan District⁶ Government had signed a development contract for the area where it is located with a Taiwanese corporation named Riyueguang Development Group 日月光集團. However, political reorganisation and economic stagnation in the course of the 1997 Asian financial crisis shifted authority to an alliance forged between the head of the subdistrict, a local business manager, and a former district-level politician (hereafter "Tianzifang advocates"), who aimed at a "soft transformation" (*ruan gaizao* 軟改造). Such an approach formed a sharp contrast with a neighbouring plot in the south of Taikang Road, where former *lilong* architecture had already been demolished and the entire area redeveloped. Regardless of whether Taikang Road Block would share the same destiny as its neighbouring area or whether it would follow a new path, its formerly intimate neighbourhood was undergoing a profound process of transformation. Its distinct character, generated by residents who extended their living space and daily activities into the small, quiet branch lanes, was fading.

Chinese city and west of Huangpu River, to reach its final size in 1914. Political power and jurisdiction in the French Concession were held by a consul, in contrast to the SMC which ran the International Settlement.

⁴ *Lilong* houses originally were a Western-Chinese architectural hybrid to accommodate large numbers of refugees flocking in from the city's environs in the course of the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864). Comparable to a microcosm, they are built as enclosed compounds surrounded by public streets and with a hierarchically ordered system of inner lanes. Following the principle of "graduated privacy", the degree of private space increases with distance from a compound's main lane and along its smaller branch lanes (Bracken 2013: 4-6, see fig. 1). This distinctive spatial structure nurtured a vibrant community life in the compounds' tranquil branch lanes where residents would chat with neighbours and engage in regular housework, repairs and maintenance, or other daily activities.

⁵ "Shikumen" 石库门 designates a characteristic architectural style of Shanghai alleyway houses. Its frequent translation as "stone gate" remains contested. For a discussion of the term's origin, see Lu 1999: 143-144.

⁶ One of Shanghai's central city districts was named Luwan 卢湾 until it was merged with neighbouring Huangpu district 黄浦区 in 2011. The new administrative district has taken over the name "Huangpu district".

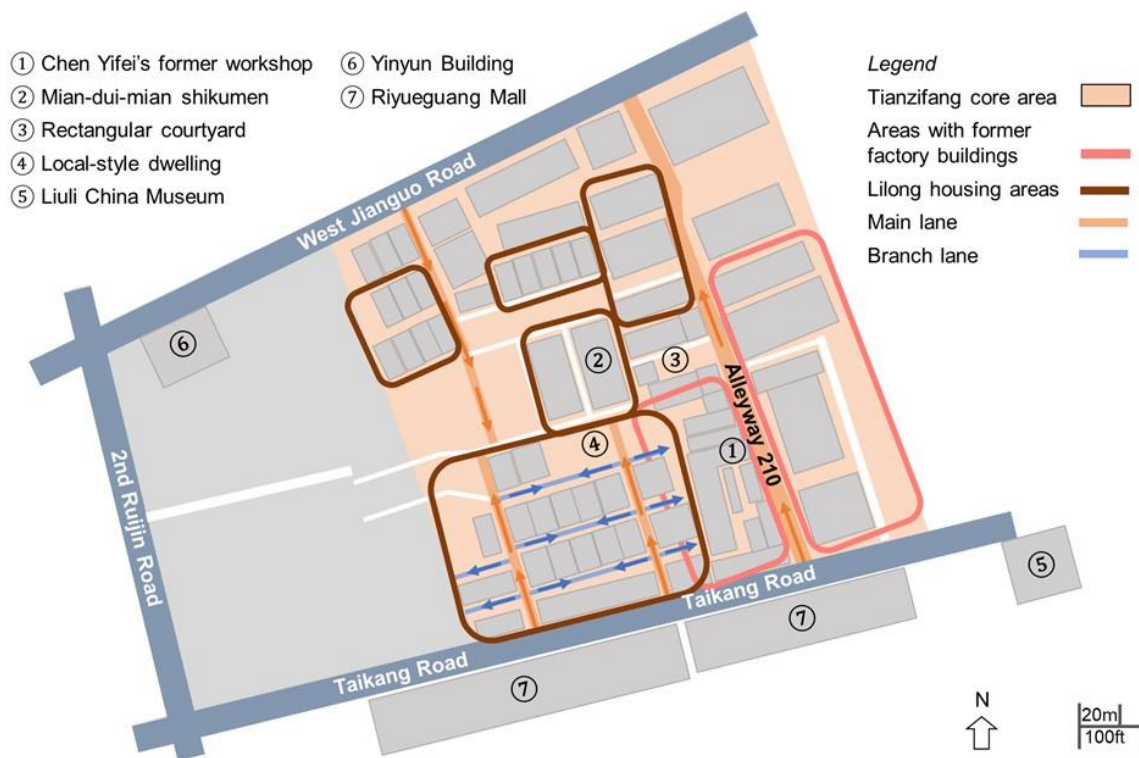


Fig. 1: Taikang Road Block Ground Plan. Source: author's draft. Based on map data from © [OpenStreetMap](#) contributors, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. Supplemented with information from Huang and Qi 2015.

State of research and methodology

Since the 1980s, the People's Republic of China has experienced a strong enthusiasm for cultural heritage on the part of government authorities and the general public (Yan 2018). Heritage-making is primarily undertaken by the state (Zhu and Maags 2020), which has rapidly expanded its legal and administrative system for managing tangible and intangible heritage across different levels of the state hierarchy. Ideological shifts and global aspirations have shaped China's own national authorised heritage discourse (Maags and Svensson 2018: 17–19), a concept credited to Smith (2006) according to which vernacular understandings of heritage are subordinated to international expert evaluations. Such top-down heritage-making initiatives do not remain uncontested. In his study on the Naxi wedding courtyard and romantic consumption in China, Zhu has pointed out the power asymmetries in defining what constitutes “authentic” cultural heritage. Besides international agencies, government authorities, and tourism service providers, he notes the “proactive” role of tourists and the production of authenticity as strategising and re-adaptation processes (Zhu 2018: 30–31).

The case of Tianzifang, as a subject of study, has been investigated and discussed from different disciplinary perspectives. Most prominent are retrospective discussions and evaluations of its developmental process in the context of urban studies and development studies (Yu et al. 2013, Yung et al. 2014, Verdini 2015, Yu et al. 2016). In this area, Tianzifang's unconventional path came to be known primarily as a rare example of a bottom-up urban conservation approach. Indicators for such

“development from below” are seen in local residents’ self-organised establishment of a management committee and opportunities for residents to participate, e.g. through direct negotiations with artists and business owners (Yung et al. 2014, Verdini 2015).

Another characteristic positively appreciated in the existing literature is that residents have not been forcefully evicted during the regeneration process, one of the major factors that distinguishes this case from the by now possibly most well-known regenerated former *shikumen lilong* housing area that has been partly restored and renamed “Xintiandi” 新天地 (literally “New Heaven and Earth”). In this government-led regeneration project carried out by a Hong Kong-based real estate developer, all residents were relocated, and a lack of dialogue initiated by either local authorities or the developer itself, as well as insufficient compensation, were identified as problematic (Wai 2006, Ren 2008).

Due to its nomination as one of the earliest cultural and creative industry parks in China, the case of Tianzifang is often set in comparison to Shanghai’s later creative industry parks, which have emerged from around 2009. Positive evaluations of Tianzifang have highlighted its “organic” development in contrast to later established creative industry parks that were planned in a top-down manner and in selected former manufacturing spaces (O’Connor and Gu 2014). Despite its great significance in raising awareness for the loss of local *shikumen lilong* architecture and its related intangible heritage, Tianzifang was mostly studied with regard to its potential as a model for urban regeneration and adaptive reuse of historic buildings, rather than as a place where active heritage-making was triggered and took place. This paper aims to respond to this deficiency by drawing on a social constructivist perspective in order to trace heritage-making dynamics across different stages of the block’s transformation.

Heritage unconsidered - spatial improvement for a “sanitised” culture

The most significant feature of Taikang Road Block is not its monumental character, but its “ordinariness” and simplicity. By what justification can such an ordinary housing area then be considered “heritage” at all? What added value would its conservation bring to local people and foreign visitors? And which of these social groups should be given preferential consideration in the conservation process? In his seminal work *Der moderne Denkmalkultus (The modern cult of monuments)* of 1903, Austrian monument conservator Alois Riegl (1858–1905) provided an intuitive comparison that might be regarded as a preliminary answer to the first question. In his elaboration on the relationship between historical and artistic monuments, he drew on the example of a common piece of paper with a trivial note. Under usual circumstances, one would not pay much attention to its artistic qualities, as there exist thousands of sources providing similar historical information. However, if this piece of paper were the only surviving testimony to the artistry of its time, we would have to consider it in a very different manner and as an indispensable historic written document (Riegl 1903: 3). In order to understand how such a process of valorisation could unfold in a dilapidated urban housing area that is subject to relentless development pressure, it is necessary to rewind to a decisive turning point in Shanghai’s urban development.

China's adoption of its "open door" policy and the Southern Tour of CCP leader Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 in 1992 kicked off the introduction of market-oriented reforms and the formation of a housing market. At its Sixth Communist Party Congress in the same year, the Shanghai Municipal Government announced its ambitious plan to demolish 365 hectares of housing (known as the "365 Plan") by the year 2000, based on survey results that had classified these areas as being unsafe and in danger of collapse (Ren 2014: 1083). Building on its great influx of foreign direct investment, the former Luwan District seized this opportunity to engage actively in spatial restructuring, thereby responding to global-oriented aspirations of affluent white-collar employees, as in the transformation of Huaihai Road to a bustling shopping area (Wei et al. 2006: 241). Rather than considering sustainability issues or a possible reuse of existing built fabric, the primary mode of development at this time was directed towards urban city renewal, encompassing large-scale demolition and reconstruction.

Experimental urban regeneration approaches in Shanghai

The conservation of urban heritage first became an issue in China at the beginning of the 1980s. Shortly before the adoption of the Cultural Relics Protection Law (*wenwu baohu fa* 文物保護法) in 1982, the State Council promulgated a first batch of 24 National Historically and Culturally Famous Cities (*guojia lishi wenhua mingcheng* 國家歷史文化名城). Shanghai was selected in a second designation round in 1986 on the basis of two main characteristics: (1) its sites related to revolutionary events and activities, such as the former sites of the Chinese Communist Party's first congress and the Chinese Socialist Youth League Central Committee, and (2) its diverse Western-style architecture ("Shanghai Urban Planning Gazetteer" Compilation Committee 2003). Neither of these would justify the preservation of a mixed-use urban space such as Taikang Road Block. It took another twenty years to establish a broader understanding of cultural heritage, to include categories such as industrial heritage and vernacular architecture.

In the 1990s, Shanghai started to experiment with different approaches that aimed at a stronger integration of conservation and development. Among the earliest and best known is the regeneration of a former industrial complex at 50 Moganshan Road (hence its abbreviated name "M50"). Here, the factory management rented out spaces of an old textile factory, first to artists for a low rent and later to cultural and creative businesses willing to pay rents at a commercial level (O'Connor and Gu 2014: 7). While it was the artists' cultural activities that successfully revived the area, their studios long operated in a legal twilight zone due to restricted use of the factory space for industrial purposes.

A second experimental approach was taken for redevelopment of the *shikumen lilong* housing area located at Taipingqiao 太平橋 and later renamed Xintiandi. In this case, the District Government engaged a Hong Kong-based developer to transform the area into a consumption-oriented entertainment quarter. The outer appearance of the *shikumen* houses was preserved, but their interiors were redesigned and all residents relocated. Although these factors render the Xintiandi-approach highly controversial, its development marked a turning point in city renewal, because it primarily demonstrated the economic benefits of historical preservation (Ren 2008: 38). The project further marks a conceptual shift concerning the conservation-development relation, as is very well illustrated in an

often-cited statement by then Mayor of Shanghai and present Vice Premier of the State Council Han Zheng 韓正 (1954-) from August 2004: “opening-up for new construction enables development, transformation through conservation is also a form of development” (開發新建是發展，保護改造也是發展, Shanghai Luwan District People’s Government et al. 2007: 4).

Although these early projects raised a growing awareness of historical preservation as an alternative urban regeneration strategy, the interpretation of what qualified as suitable targets for such an approach remained a privilege of political authorities and experts in architecture and urban design. With regard to Shanghai’s built environment, the focus was mainly set on the two types of historical structures relevant for its designation as Historically and Culturally Famous City: Western-style mansions in the former foreign concession areas and *lilong* houses with clear ideological implications that were either directly related to the history of the CCP or former sites of underground revolutionary activities (Liang 2008: 48). Rather than not being of historical and cultural value, Taikang Road Block did not qualify as a heritage place in this top-down defined and comparatively narrow framework. Or, to express it with Smith’s concept of an “authorised heritage discourse”, the Chinese discourse still excluded “vernacular” heritage from official conservation at this particular stage of development.

A culture-led regeneration strategy for Taikang Road

The unconventional development path of Taikang Road Block has its beginnings in the Tianzifang advocates’ decision to lead the neighbourhood towards culture-led urban regeneration. As a result of his former post in the culture department, the head of the subdistrict had a personal interest in the cultural sector (Zhang 2009). Besides, he had been inspired by visits to Osaka, Japan, and SoHo⁷ in New York. These experiences laid a basis for a different “reading” of Taikang Road Block’s tangible and intangible qualities. Despite the block’s comparatively short history of about 70 years, he envisioned the transformation of Taikang Road into a Culture Street that would function as a magnet for related businesses and cultural tourism.

A first measure in the context of this Culture-Street approach was the relocation of a more than five-decades-old street market (*malu caichang* 馬路菜場). In 20th-century Shanghai, street markets were a common feature and provided non-staple food to residents living in surrounding housing units. Other than simply a place to buy food, scholars have highlighted their significance as public spaces for social encounters, cultural practices, and a vibrant community life (Watson 2009, Marinelli 2018). For older Shanghai residents, the local market evokes associations of a place offering additional supplies, especially at a time of strict food rationing in urban areas starting from the 1950s. By now, their former daily walks to the market are an integral part of Shanghai citizens’ collective memory (Zhong 2016: 110), and nurture emotional attachment.

⁷ The name “SoHo” is an abbreviation, precisely “So”-uth of “Ho”-uston Street, to designate an industrial area in Lower Manhattan, USA. Here, artists invented the new residential form of “loft housing” in the 1960s. Despite the later gentrification of the quarter, this approach is now globally renowned as a success model for urban development.

However, at this initial stage of development, the potential of Taikang Road's street market as an important part of local heritage had not been recognised. Rather, Shanghai followed Hong Kong's approach in transforming street markets into public indoor markets, thereby clearing its streets to pursue a strictly modernisation-oriented development agenda (Marinelli 2018: 230). Similarly, Taikang Road Food Market was transformed into an indoor market (fig. 2). Beside the district-level policy goal of clearing Shanghai's streets to improve traffic flows (Zhang 2009), this measure reflects an ambition to create a sanitised version of historical architecture, as it was realised at Xintiandi. What is valued and promoted are tangible qualities, the outward appearance of the road, which is mainly seen as an economic asset. In April 2018, the market at Taikang Road was closed again for improvement, as stated in a notice at its former entrance (fig. 3).

Urban regeneration of historical streets through a top-down strategy whereby local authorities and planners make use of a street's or a section's outward appearance is widespread, both in Chinese cities and around the world. Such approaches aim at general improvement of a street's built environment, followed by the creation of favourable conditions for businesses with a cultural orientation. At Taikang Road, despite broad efforts to attract cultural businesses, revitalisation did not gain momentum as originally expected and required a strategic reorientation.



Fig. 2: Taikang Indoor Food Market
Source: author's photo. Tianzifang, 2015.



Fig. 3: Closed Market at Taikang Road
Source: author's photo. Tianzifang, 2018.

Heritage operating covertly – cultural enrichment, imagination, and authentication

The process of “heritagising” Taikang Road Block set in with a shift of perspective towards its inner and smaller lanes. In the course of China’s market reforms and Luwan District’s spatial restructuring, industrial production was moved out of Shanghai’s central districts. These measures left the manufacturing buildings concentrated in the east of Taikang Road Block lying idle, a problem faced by many operators of former state-owned production sites located in the central city at the time. For the Tianzifang advocates, these empty spaces constituted one of the few resources they could develop to trigger revitalisation. Thus, the block’s former factory buildings lined up along Alleyway 210 became the first historical layer to be transformed, rather than the adjacent *shikumen lilong* housing that was still inhabited (see fig. 1).

As funding for redevelopment was lacking, the Tianzifang advocates aimed to follow the well-known SoHo example by subletting former factory buildings. Regarding the reuse of such originally industrial spaces, artists and creative professionals are a suitable target group for several reasons. Firstly, their work is space-intensive and often requires room for both creative production and exhibition. Secondly, from an economic perspective, the situation of a majority in this professional group is rather precarious and they are unable to afford high rents. A third and most important aspect in this context relates to the role of the artist as avant-garde practitioner with a specific capacity for approaching and re-interpreting spatial environments (Shkuda 2015, Richardson 2018), thereby actively engaging in the heritage-making process.

Artist-led heritage-making through mobilisation of nostalgic sentiment

Chen Yifei 陳逸飛 (1946–2005), long one of the most successful contemporary painters from the PRC, was among the first artists who moved their workshops to an empty manufacturing building on Alleyway 210 in 1999. Originally trained in oil-painting, he became a leading painter of the Cultural Revolution with representative works such as *Eulogy of the Yellow River*, depicting a soldier in heroic pose in front of a river panorama, or the revolutionary co-created painting *Seizing the Presidential Palace*. In 1980, he emigrated to the United States where he studied Western art and developed his own style of “romantic realism” (Chen and Marlborough 1997). Chen returned to Shanghai at the beginning of the 1990s to open several art-related businesses, venturing into new entrepreneurial areas such as film and fashion.

His change in residence was accompanied by a shift in his artistic work. While his paintings created in the United States mainly show scenes of Western cultural life, he now turned to Chinese water-town landscapes and ethnic lifestyles. Moreover, Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s became one of the leading motifs after his return, in both film and painting. Under the theme *Old Dreams of Shanghai* (*Hai shang jiu meng* 海上舊夢) he produced an entire painting series depicting women in *qipao*, a popular dress worn in Shanghai at that time which combines Manchu and Chinese elements. Chen’s

ethnically charged paintings and his related “conscious self-Orientalisation” not only laid the foundation for his international success, but simultaneously promoted the re-emergence of the *qipao* as (formal) dress (Chew 2007: 152).

In his Tianzifang workshop, he drew on this experience in portraying cultural and ethnic characteristics when he created the sculpture *Shanghai Shaonü* 上海少女 (“Young Girl of Shanghai”). This sculpture is moulded in a distinctive pose of young Shanghai women, albeit as viewed and depicted in the 1930s and 1940s through a male gaze. The sculpture is dressed in a *qipao* and the two attributes it holds, a birdcage in one hand and a fan in the other, are both considered characteristic of this period (fig. 4). On the artist’s website, it is stated that *Shanghai Shaonü* is meant to evoke nostalgic feelings of “old Shanghai” (Shanghai zhongxin n.d.). However, in its relation to heritage, nostalgia must be understood as a nuanced phenomenon, rather than in its classical definition as a sentiment of longing for the past. Therefore, a more precise analysis is required of what kind(s) of nostalgia are relevant for an access to Chen’s artwork and for memories of Tianzifang as a place.



Fig. 4: Former workshop of Chen Yifei with *Shanghai Shaonü* sculpture
Source: author’s photo. Tianzifang, 2018.

A first type that should certainly be considered is the artist’s personal nostalgia. Chen was born in Ningbo, a major port and industrial city on China’s east coast, but grew up in Shanghai where his family had moved soon after his birth (Chen and Marlborough 1997). Owing to his study abroad, the image of Shanghai before its rapid transformation that he kept in his personal memory must have differed quite significantly from a continuously evolving image among his contemporaries who lived in the city. His personal nostalgia might therefore be considered a more strongly backward-oriented nostalgia or nostalgia for the past.

In his study on the heritage of Luang Prabang, Berliner demonstrated that nostalgia for the past is not exclusive to individuals who have personally experienced this past. Rather, he differentiated their sentiments, and what he termed “endo-nostalgia” from an “exo-nostalgia” that is felt by groups of

people with an emotional attachment to a past that they have not necessarily lived through by themselves (Berliner 2012: 781f). For example, such exo-nostalgia can be based on a deep knowledge of the history and culture of a place which is not one's own. In the case of Shanghai's Tianzifang, this concept might be drawn upon to better understand why *Shanghai Shaoniū* first became known abroad. With the strongly imaginative nostalgic feelings the sculpture evokes, it was selected as one of a few Asian works for exhibition in Paris at a modern sculpture retrospective as well as in the Louvre Museum (Shanghai zhongxin n.d.).

Tianzifang's success as a place of interest, despite and because of its vernacular character, is partly related to its ability to cater to these very different nuances of nostalgia. As noted by Lu, Shanghai nostalgia is to be understood not only as reminiscent, but also closely connected to the present (Lu 2002: 170). This resonates well with more recently suggested progressive forms and uses of nostalgia that are creative, imaginative, and can emerge from memorialisations (Smith and Campbell 2017). For example, a visit to present-day Tianzifang was found to evoke different associations and memories depending on one's social and cultural background. While older Shanghai residents connect it to personal experiences of the past, younger generations see it as fashionable modern space with a vibrant bar and coffee culture. Non-Chinese are usually attracted by its essentially "Chinese" character, whereas Chinese visitors enjoy its Western-style atmosphere (Yu 2009: 29).

A differentiation between personal and collective feelings of nostalgia in Shanghai has also been found by Liang (2008). He emphasised the importance of quotidian spaces such as residential neighbourhoods or *longtang* 弄堂 for a genuine personal nostalgia that is gradually disappearing as a consequence of urban renewal. At the same time, a collective form of nostalgia is directed towards Shanghai's foreign concession period associated with a glorious past and a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Liang 2008: 47). By triggering and reawakening such associations, Chen Yifei re-established a connection between tangible urban heritage and possessors of such collective memories. His engagement with local history and culture, and its transmission to a wider audience, facilitated a process of revalorisation which, as this paper argues, forms the basis for a later recognition of traditional *lilong* housing as cultural heritage.

Besides Chen Yifei, the spacious factory buildings of Alleyway 210 soon accommodated studios and workshops of other well-known artists such as photographer Er Dongqiang 爾冬強 (Deke Erh, 1959-) or Shanghai-born and educated artist Wang Jieyin 王劫音 (1941-). By the middle of 2002, a total of 83 art stores and workshops were officially registered and their owners organised in the Taikang Road Art Street Association 泰康路藝術街行業聯誼會 (Shanghai Local Gazetteers Bureau 2004). Some of them engage with historical preservation in their work, among them Er Dongqiang, who uses architectural photography to document urban spaces threatened with disappearance in the course of development.

Authentication via the practice of naming

A significant turning point for the block's development marked the assignment of a name to the main alleyway around which its former factory buildings are clustered. Originally, traditional Shanghai *lilong*

neighbourhoods were given mostly three character-names, often ending on the characters *li* 裡 or *fang* 坊, which indicate the name of a “neighbourhood”. In contrast, the lanes adjacent to the factory buildings in Taikang Road Block were solely numbered and did not carry a distinctive name. These particular spatial conditions allowed some leeway for a first artist-initiated spatial intervention that deviated from the default practice of names in public spaces being assigned by an administrative body.

The selection of a name for Alleyway 210 took place in the course of a visit in 2002 by another highly renowned Chinese artist, Huang Yongyu⁸ 黃永玉 (1924–2023). His visit to Taikang Road Block did not happen by chance but was part of the Tianzifang advocates’ strategy of inviting selected Chinese and international artists to open a studio or a gallery in one of the block’s former factory buildings. Huang was a suitable figure to approach, not only because of his international reputation but also due to his commitment to historical preservation. Among the projects he supported are the restoration of a temple and a guildhall in Fenghuang, his hometown in western Hunan (Hawks 2017: 113). To approach the artist, one of the Tianzifang advocates drew on social capital from his earlier business as manager of a restaurant which had been a popular meeting place in artistic circles, and which functioned as a base to build up broad social connections in the cultural realm (Zhang 2009).

Although Huang Yongyu did not settle in the block, he clearly expressed his support for the cause and suggested assigning a name to Alleyway 210, the actual place where its creative professionals were gathering (Zhong 2016: 137). This initiative would later enable a shift of spatial focus from Taikang Road to the smaller and more secluded lanes, a decisive step for moving cultural heritage to the centre of the subsequent development strategies. Huang Yongyu not only raised the issue of a name, but also made a concrete suggestion: Tianzifang 田子坊. This choice reflects a thorough understanding of local cultural characteristics related to street naming but also an underlying ideological agenda.

His inspiration for the name came from an historical account and alludes to Tian Zifang 田子方, a historical figure from the Warring States period (475–221 BC) documented in Chinese classical texts. Therein, Tian Zifang is depicted as a Confucian scholar and teacher instructed by the well-known direct disciple of Confucius, Bu Zixia 卜子夏. Related accounts in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) and the *Strategies of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策) describe encounters of Tian Zifang with acclaimed scholar patron Marquis Wen of Wei (魏文侯, reigned 424–387 BC) or his son, in which Tian Zifang assumes the role of a counsellor (Liu 1978: 780f, Wang 1997: 1353). However, on an information board formerly hung up at the entrance of Alleyway 210, it was stated that “Tian Zifang was the oldest painter of China’s ancient times.”

⁸ Huang Yongyu, former professor at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, mostly acquired his outstanding artistic and literary skills by self-study, starting with woodblock printing and later moving towards coloured ink painting. Frequent motifs in his paintings are landscapes, birds, and flowers as well as human figures. Moreover, some of his works draw (historical) allusions (for a thorough discussion see Hawks 2017). Perhaps one of his most well-known and now lost paintings is the *Winking Owl* from 1973. It depicts an owl with one open and one closed eye that became a target in the 1974 campaign by Mao Zedong’s 毛泽东 wife Jiang Qing 江青 to discredit her political opponent, the premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来. Whether the owl’s “eye talk” originally had political implications remains a subject of discussion in academic studies (Wang 2000, Hawks 2017). While Huang himself denied that the painting conveyed a political message, Hawks has pointed out that it must be seen in the context of the time period when it emerged. With the owl’s irregular gaze challenging then radical expectations for revolutionary art, it cannot be regarded as completely apolitical (Hawks 2017: 105–106).

This reinterpretation of the figure and its role derives from a passage in another classical text, the outer chapters of the writings of Master Zhuang (Zhuangzi 莊子, 369–286 BC) which are attributed to his followers. The seventh section of chapter 21 in the *Zhuangzi* gives an account of a draughtsman who, unlike his fellows who compete for the favour of their ruler, is fully dedicated to his work and therefore hailed as a “true draughtsman” (Legge et al. 1962: 50f). Huang Yongyu used this motif of a bare-chested draughtsman in a number of paintings at the beginning of the 1980s which he entitled “Tian Zifang”, the name of the *Zhuangzi* chapter in which the section appears. In the homophone “Tianzifang” 田子坊 that he suggested as a name for Alleyway 210, the last character has been replaced with the homophonous *fang* 坊, commonly used in names of *shikumen lilong* neighbourhoods. (For a more detailed discussion of Tianzifang’s naming process, see Wallenwein 2020.)

Having undergone a creative linguistic transformation, the name now evokes an impression of a genuine *shikumen* housing area. Moreover, and probably meant as a reinforcement to claim Taikang Road Block as an artistic space, it carries a profound meaning that alludes to the idealised image of an independent and “true” draughtsman. While this meaning has not been openly communicated, the statement on the information sign sought to legitimise the name by establishing a connection to a historical figure documented in historical records and labelling him as China’s “earliest” painter. However, the name was contested by both government authorities and local residents, who perceived it as “fake” (*jia* 假). Their argument that Alleyway 210 had always been a nameless alley was countered by the head of the subdistrict, saying that if there was no Tianzifang, there would also not be a Xintiandi (Zhong 2016: 137–38). Despite such initial contestations, this first artist-led initiative shows how intangible heritage is reinterpreted, harnessed, and spatially anchored through the practice of naming.

Place-making through reinterpretation of spatial qualities

The case of Tianzifang illustrates a second example of spatial intervention, initiated by the above-mentioned artist Chen Yifei. Interestingly, Chen’s role as cultural producer did not remain limited to the realms of fashion and art. Rather, his work has had a decisive impact on the valorisation of certain localities in China. Perhaps the most prominent example is the Chinese water-town Zhouzhuang 周莊, located between one of China’s largest freshwater lakes, Lake Tai, and Shanghai. Its transformation into a well-known tourist destination demonstrates how strongly artistic production may affect spatial revalorisation. Zhouzhuang primarily features exquisite stone bridges from the Yuan (1279–1368) to Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, giving many of its sites a picturesque appearance. Though far from the only water-town with a traditional built environment in the Jiangnan region, Zhouzhuang was the first to issue a conservation plan. It became known to national and international tourists much earlier than its counterparts in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces.

Although there are several factors which played a role in Zhouzhuang’s early rise, the town’s success story is closely related to Chen Yifei’s creative period in the United States. The painter’s first solo exhibitions in the 1980s were held at the Hammer Galleries, New York. In 1985, during his visit to China, former Chairman of Occidental Petroleum Corporation and art magnate Armand Hammer gave one of Chen’s paintings to the economic-reform-oriented political leader Deng Xiaoping as a gift

(Chen et al. 1996: 171). The painting with the title “Memory of Homeland - Double Bridge” (*Jiaxiang de huiyi - shuang qiao* 家鄉的回憶 — 雙橋) shows a crossing of two canals in the centre of Zhouzhuang town with two bridges offset to one another by 90 degrees, a characteristic configuration that readily stays in mind. The two stone bridges Shide Qiao 世德橋 and Yong’an Qiao 永安橋 from the Wanli period (1572–1620) of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) showcase rare and distinct construction techniques, one running straight and the other one with an arch. This scene as painted by Chen was taken up for the UN’s official First Day Cover in 1985 and greatly increased Zhouzhuang’s reputation outside the PRC (Yu 2006: 405).

In 2002, Chen Yifei actively participated in the spatial production of Tianzifang when he designed a symbolic archway for the block in the shape of a ribbon. This stainless steel sculpture was erected at the entrance to Taikang Road and its intersection with a major thoroughfare, Xujiahui Road 徐家匯路. The sculpture carries the title “Gate of Art” (*Yishu zhi men* 藝術之門) and stands as a symbol of the close ties between artists from all over the world (fig. 5).⁹ This artistic environmental intervention might be regarded as what Richardson has termed “embedded reinterpretation”. According to this concept, artists engage in environmental production, for instance through a phenomenological response to architecture or by providing their view of power (Richardson 2018: 22–23). Against the backdrop of a demolition threat hovering over Taikang Road, the erection of such an archway, laden with symbolic meaning, implicitly claims the block as artistic space. It exemplifies how an artist may inscribe a site with an additional layer of social and cultural meaning.



Fig. 5: Shanghai “Gate of Art”, designed by Chen Yifei
Source: author’s photo. Tianzifang, 2018.

⁹ The meaning of the sculpture is explained on the artist’s website: “Shanghai Taikang Lu ‘Shanghai yishu zhi men’” (“Shanghai Gate of Art”, Taikang Road, Shanghai), CHEN YIFEI Art Studio. Last accessed on August 8, 2022, under the URL: <http://www.yifei.com/works/detail.aspx?id=62>.

After the successful establishment of artistic production in the former factory buildings, a second historical layer came into focus: *shikumen lilong* houses. Again, the reason for extending Tianzifang to the residential area (see fig. 1) was pragmatic. All factory spaces had already been occupied and the Tianzifang advocates hoped to prevent demolition by increasing the houses' commercial value (Yu et al. 2013: 63). Although it was technically illegal to change the form of use of these mostly publicly owned houses, one unit after another was sublet to shop owners from the cultural, creative, and gastronomic sectors.

Through interview research, Yu et al. have found that what primarily attracted shop owners to Tianzifang was its distinct cultural character that could not be reproduced by new construction (Yu et al. 2013: 65). In contrast to officially protected historic urban areas, less restrictive regulations enabled a more direct engagement with historic fabric at Tianzifang and provided more opportunities for creative reuse. Shop owners were granted small-scale adaptations of the buildings and an inclusion of cultural elements such as “tiger windows”¹⁰ (*laohu chuang* 老虎窗) in their individual regeneration schemes (Zhong 2016: 136). Their spatial interventions at a time when Tianzifang was mainly occupied by local residents and art connoisseurs might be regarded as a specific form of “place-making”.

The concept of “place-making” has its roots in the ideas of American urban writer and activist Jane Jacobs¹¹ and urbanist William H. Whyte¹² from the 1960s. Both highlighted the importance of local communities in creating city space and advocated for streets with a vibrant public life. The newly created opportunities to open a business at Tianzifang, albeit directed towards shop owners (more than original residents), brought back all kinds of activities to its alleyways. It is important to note that the great majority of early tenants were non-Chinese or returned overseas Chinese. The distinct styles of their shops compared with local businesses added a cosmopolitan character to the area, thereby not only reviving memories of Shanghai as a global trade hub, but re-anchoring this legacy in its present and contemporary urban space.

At the same time, and rather than contrasting “modern” commercial space with a historic outward appearance, these owners strove to “adapt their décor to the local environment and culture” (Yu et al. 2016: 65). In this process of mutual adaptation, present needs in practical use were balanced with the preservation of a building's unique qualities. What united this mixed group of appropriate tenants was their “way of seeing” Tianzifang as an enclave of 1920s and 1930s material culture in a rapidly developing urban transition zone. It was their educated gaze and imagination of what had remained

¹⁰ “Tiger windows” is a designation for a *lilong* house's dormers constructed to light newly added rooms under the rooftop. The name relates to their appearance resembling a tiger head stuck out from the roof, while the Shanghainese pronunciation of “tiger” 老虎 also sounds like the English word “roof”.

¹¹ Jane Jacobs challenged the domination of post-war American urban renewal and planning by planning experts. Instead, she advocated for citizen engagement in neighborhood development. In her most influential work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* of 1961, she called upon contemporary planners to pay more attention to practices and principles that sustain and foster cities' social and economic vitality. Key issues in her work include the social structure of pavement life, the importance of aged buildings, and city diversity.

¹² William H. Whyte is known as the author of *The Organization Man* (1956) and *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980). In his role as consultant to the New York City Planning Commission, Whyte and his research group studied city plazas in the early 1970s. They found that plazas remained largely unoccupied even at lunchtime on a pleasant day, leaving midtown's open spaces rather sterile and empty. In order to bring back activity and liveliness to the streets, Whyte suggested providing seating arrangements and food facilities, increasing the number of trees and stores on building frontage, as well as maintaining their close relationship to the sidewalk.

hidden in this dilapidated housing area throughout the years of de-industrialisation and how these qualities could be restaged through simple means that revealed the area's long neglected social and cultural values.

Heritage taking centre stage – curating an urban vernacular

The establishment of Tianzifang's name laid the basis for more systematic research into the block's past and for "excavating" historical and cultural resources that could be harnessed for heritagisation and place-making. As the Asian financial markets slowly recovered at the beginning of the 2000s, development projects that had previously been brought to a halt were again put on the table. Suddenly, the planned redevelopment of Taikang Road Block constituted a serious threat. The upcoming 2010 Shanghai Expo further unleashed a wave of urban renewal and construction, particularly in the seven districts hosting event venues, to which Luwan belonged (Lin and Xu 2019: 131). As pointed out by Harrison, such a prospect of imminent loss fosters a tendency to classify the object/site concerned as "heritage" (Harrison 2010: 13).



Fig. 6: Name board of Tianzifang installed at entrance No. 1
Source: author's photo. Tianzifang, 2016.

Cultural enrichment through spatial inscription

First measures undertaken for visualising and revalorising Tianzifang's qualities were closely related to the medium of script and an inscription of space. The contested name suggested by Huang Yongyu was hung up at the entrance to Alleyway 210, the main lane traversing the regenerated former factories (fig. 6). Particularly interesting are the style and format of the name board, as it imitates traditional *lilong* neighbourhood entrance gates. It is written in the calligraphic style of Master Juexing 覺醒, the abbot of Shanghai's well-known Jade Buddha Temple, which increases the cultural meaning of the inscription as well as the urban block it refers to. In the context of *moya* 摩崖 inscriptions from early and medieval China carved in geological formations, Harrist demonstrated how an interaction of words with topography has transformed these formations into landscapes of religious and ideological significance (Harrist 2008). The inscribed name at Alleyway 210 that resulted from a creative encounter with the block's built environment might be regarded as a similar attempt to reinforce its significance for an international culture and arts scene.

Another historic and cultural resource harnessed by means of inscription was a villa on the block's western periphery that, strictly speaking, is situated outside of Tianzifang's core area. It contrasts with the rest of the block as it is built in Western architectural style, while most *shikumen* housing in the core area consists of "old-style" *lilong* buildings (*jiushi lilong* 舊式里弄). According to an information plaque formerly installed at the entrance of the main Alleyway 210, this building carries the name "Yinyun Building" 隱雲樓 and was inhabited by renowned Chinese painter Wang Yachen 汪亞塵 (1894–1983) and his wife in the 1930s (see fig. 1). This was the time when they established the Shanghai Xinhua Professional Art School 上海新華藝術專科學校 and the artists' association "Strength Society" 力社 (Zhong 2016: 138). The historical background of this building, which is now used as a school, had long been forgotten, until it became a missing puzzle piece in establishing a historical connection between Tianzifang's past and its present function as an art centre and creative industry park.

Authentication through expert evaluation

The successful attraction of creative professionals to the block as a result of their own sensory experiences at the initial stage of development reflects a public acknowledgement of Tianzifang's cultural significance. Still, a permanent preservation of its built environment would require official recognition. In the usual state-led process of heritage-making, an authentication of heritage builds on institutionalised knowledge and expert evaluation (Zhu and Maags 2020: 130). At its later development stage, the case of Tianzifang shows some close similarities to such mechanisms in official designation.

In 2004, the Tianzifang advocates invited renowned architectural experts such as Zheng Shiling 鄭時齡 (1941–) and Ruan Yisan 阮儀三 (1934–) from Tongji University into the block to assess its built structures. From an architectural perspective, Ruan emphasised Tianzifang's great variety in architectural styles of local Shanghai dwelling houses that illustrate Shanghai's historical development from the imperial period to the present. Those include traditional dwellings in wood and brick structure,

old-style *shikumen lilong* houses, better-equipped new-style *lilong* houses (*xinshi lilong* 新式里弄) and Western-style houses (*xishi yangfang* 西式洋房; Yu and Zou 2015: 65). His professional judgement primarily credited formerly unnoticed vernacular houses' historical and architectural value, thereby laying the basis for their later recognition as cultural heritage.

Another invited expert was the economist and vice-chairman of the Standing Committee of the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress, Li Wuwei 厲無畏 (1942-). As a strong proponent of the "creative economy", he promoted the introduction to China of cultural and creative industries, a concept that was first defined in the United Kingdom in 1998 and later imported to Shanghai through Hong Kong.¹³ During his visit to the block, Li emphasised the potential of the old factory buildings and storehouses at Tianzifang to evoke memories and foster creative thinking (Yu and Zou 2015: 64). Instead of aiming at preservation of these buildings as testimonies to Shanghai's industrial past, he underlined their use value for creative work and how this potential would ultimately translate into economic value.

The evaluations of both Ruan and Li aimed at a revalorisation of the block's built structures, but did not conform to the Chinese authorised heritage discourse at the time. Beside their personal visits, which signalled strong support for the block's preservation, they published articles in the newspapers *People's Daily* 人民日報 and *Liberation Daily* 解放日報. Their raising of awareness in official newspapers played an important role in including these heritage types into the discourse. In his article in the *People's Daily*, Li Wuwei declared the workshops and studios inside Tianzifang's factory buildings to be creative industries, explicitly highlighting not only the spatial advantages of the block but the former factories' potential to nurture imagination (Yu and Zou 2015: 64). These examples are significant as they may challenge our understanding of heritage-making, according to which expert knowledge primarily serves to maintain an institutionalised heritage discourse. The example of Tianzifang shows how experts may equally take part in contesting and altering this discourse.

By 2006, the demolition order for Taikang Road Block was off the table. Instead, it was designated as one of China's first creative industry parks. Another sign of official recognition was the establishment of a management committee, thereby shifting competencies back from the subdistrict to the district government. In 2008, a new policy with the title *ju gai fei* (居改非 "transform residential to non-residential [use]") was adopted, which legalised the sublease of housing units for commercial use, albeit temporarily and restricted to Taikang Road Block. While this policy enabled a continuation of *lilong* houses' adaptive reuse, it simultaneously exposed them to the market and fostered commercialisation.

Heritage curation in a living urban block

Beside official and public recognition, a major challenge in the heritage-making process at Tianzifang was how to "curate" a vernacular urban block that is still inhabited. Museumification, a process in which cultural objects and buildings become de-contextualised and are showcased for educational and

¹³ In their original definition by the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport, creative industries were characterised as evolving from individual creativity and talent with a potential for wealth creation by drawing on intellectual property (DCMS 2001). Depending on the respective definition of each country or municipality, such industries encompass fashion design, media, arts, architectural design, information and computing services, advertising, and entertainment services.

leisure purposes (Zhu and Maags 2020: 132), is often authority-led. At Tianzifang, this phenomenon appeared to a limited extent. It should further be noted that Tianzifang's museum spaces are all located in former factory buildings. The former workshop of Chen Yifei that had been set up in a closed-down *lilong* factory building was transformed into a commemorative space and exhibition hall after the artist suddenly passed away in 2005 (see figs. 1 and 4). His former workshop is closely entangled with the emergence of Tianzifang and remembered as a place where he created well-known works such as *Shanghai Shaoni*. The preservation of this site and its opening (free of charge) to visitors can therefore be regarded as a classic example of “museumification” in the process of local heritage-making.

In contrast, the Liuli China Museum (“China Museum of Coloured Glass”) occupies the site of the former Shanghai Plastic Component Factory for Clocks and Watches on the southern side of Taikang Road (see fig. 1). Its Taiwanese founders have adapted the building to its current form of use by replacing the walls with *liuli* 琉璃 (“coloured glass”, “ceramic glaze”) bricks and a peony sculpture of 5,025 handmade petals so as to add an element that has great significance in Chinese culture (Liuli China Museum n.d., fig. 7). Although the former factory building is now equally occupied by a museum, its transformation reflects a deep engagement with the craft of *liuli* and its contemporary adaptation.



Fig. 7: Liuli China Museum from the outside
Source: author's photo. Taikang Road, 2018.

To “curate” the residential area, mainly two types of historical and cultural resources were mobilised: *shikumen lilong* houses as local form of architecture, and the block’s most recent history from its establishment as an art centre to the present. To facilitate orientation in the small and winding lanes, a tourist map was drafted and hung up at the entrances and in central locations. In a passageway from Alleyway 210 to Alleyway 248, an information board was installed which introduces Tianzifang’s “Ten Characteristic Landscapes” (*Tianzifang shi da tese jingguan* 田子坊十大特色景观, fig. 8). The selection of places depicted strives to cover its development from the late imperial period to the present and to emphasise architectural structures unique to this block.



Fig. 8: Information board with Tianzifang’s “Ten Characteristic Landscapes”
Source: author’s photo. Tianzifang, 2018.

Three historical layers can be identified in this presentation. The first are “traditional” dwelling houses. Among the limited material fabric that has survived the sharp demographic changes and spatial restructuring over the last century is one local-style dwelling house from the late-Qing period and a traditional rectangular courtyard (*siheyuan* 四合院) on Alleyway 210 (see fig. 1). The second layer contains structures characteristic of *shikumen lilong* architecture. One distinct type of *shikumen* houses listed here are those with an unusual orientation. Typically, *shikumen lilong* are built in rows where all buildings have the same orientation, ideally southern. In the northern part of Tianzifang’s Alleyway 248, the entrances of two rows with an east-west orientation are facing each other, hence they are termed “face-to-face shikumen” (*mian dui mian shikumen* 面对面石庫門; see fig. 1). The third layer entirely refers to Tianzifang’s recent history as an art centre. Relevant places on the information

board are the former workshop of Chen Yifei and selected art studios as well as “Tianzifang Art Centre”, another transformed factory building that was turned into an exhibition space after rising rents forced one of its earliest tenants, Er Dongqiang, to move out.

Moreover, some elements of tangible heritage in the block have been marked with a commemorative plaque. Among them are preserved historical wells which served as distinguishing spatial features as reflected in the name “Lane of the two wells” (*Er jing xiang* 二井巷). The commemorative plaques installed on building walls (fig. 9) have been kept rather discreet and are sometimes easily overlooked due to the quantity of commercial advertisements.



Fig. 9: Information plaque issued by Shanghai Municipal Research Centre on Shikumen Culture
Source: author's photo. Tianzifang, 2016.

They were not issued by a central government body but by the Shanghai Municipal Research Centre on Shikumen Culture (*Shanghai shi shikumen wenhua yanjiu zhongxin* 上海市石库门文化研究中心). The research centre was established in 2009, shortly after the former Luwan District had submitted a successful application to the Municipal Government to register the construction technique for *shikumen lilong* buildings (*shikumen lilong jianzhu yingzao jiyi* 石库门里弄建筑营造技艺) as intangible heritage.

In this context, it is also interesting to see which type of heritage has not been promoted. There is only one building at Tianzifang that carries an official plaque issued by the former Luwan District Tourism Management Bureau: the former residence of Yang Du 楊度 (1874–1931). This historical figure is

significant for Shanghai's Republican past, because he worked as a secret member for the Communist Party when he lived in this residence. Despite revolutionary heritage being one of the earliest categories that were introduced in Shanghai, Yang Du and this residence are not mentioned on the information board.

Heritage integrated?

In 2010, Tianzifang received its final designation as a 3A National Tourist Attraction (國家 AAA 級旅遊景區). While previously it had mostly been visited by art connoisseurs, this official designation led to a tremendous surge in national and international visitors (Yu et al. 2016: 62). How can such a development be made compatible with a densely built inner-city area that is subject to clear spatial constraints? The relation between cultural heritage and tourism has long been discussed as both constitutive and destructive. Harmful effects of tourism development often include the overuse and economic exploitation of sites. Such effects are particularly relevant for an urban block featuring alleyways as narrow as in Tianzifang.

Not surprisingly, residents have reported that they are affected by tourists blocking the alleyways and by the cooking vapours from food stalls (Huang and Qi 2015, Interview TZF-16-7-1-RBC). On the other hand, a resident-turned-shop-owner interviewed in the course of this author's research in 2016 said that she enjoyed the opportunity of getting into contact with people from all over the world through her business (Interview TZF-16-7-1-RA). She must certainly be seen as one of the few beneficiaries who were able to open a business on the ground floor and move their apartment to an upper storey. How far tourism negatively affects Tianzifang residents therefore depends on a variety of factors, such as the exact location of their housing unit, and must be judged by consideration of individual contexts.

Rather than conceiving of the tourist as passive consumer of a particular representation of history and culture, scholars have argued that visitors actively engage with interpretations and narratives presented in museum spaces (Smith 2011) and that tourists themselves have agency when visiting heritage sites. Such active engagement may range from a critical assessment of a certain narrative to emotional processes of remembering and negotiating social and cultural meanings (Zhang 2020: 3). While contacts between residents as well as shop owners and visitors were more intense in the initial stages of Tianzifang's development, this intimacy was impossible to maintain after its official designation. Still, the block's preserved vernacular urban landscape remains a rare place to trigger both melancholic and future-oriented versions of Shanghai nostalgia.

Having endured a critical period of highs and lows, in which the block faced demolition more than once, a remaining challenge for local authorities was how to "nest" Tianzifang within Shanghai's legal and institutional framework. Other than in the process of heritage-making initiated by the state where cultural objects, sites, and practices are selected within existing criteria and categories, Tianzifang underwent a turbulent process of valorisation and meaning-negotiation. It was not until the beginning of 2016 that Tianzifang was officially listed as a "protected scenic block" (*fengmao baohu jiefang* 風

貌保護街坊), a newly introduced expansion to Shanghai's historic and cultural scenic areas. With this registration, the block's built environment is now formally subject to the city's conservation regulations.

The adoption of the *ju gai fei* policy legalised the sublease and adaptive reuse of residential units, but also gave rise to commercialisation and gentrification processes, as negotiations between residents and shop owners were no longer mediated. These processes have forced some pioneering artists to move their studios and diminished the number of residents, one of the main assets distinguishing this case from that of Xintiandi. By 2016, the number of original residents in the block had decreased from formerly 671 households to 60 (Interview TZF-16-7-14-M).

While there is no doubt that community life has been strongly affected by the block's functional diversification, Tianzifang remains a venue where local cultural practice takes place. Beside shifting expositions in the Tianzifang Art Centre, some artists offer workshops to pass on art and craft techniques such as papercutting. The two "traditional" local-style dwelling houses are operated as wine bars and, despite having lost their original residential function, they have gained new significance as spaces for social gathering. Such forms of practical use have been combined with more "curated" practices, as exemplified by an exhibition of common terms in Wu dialect displayed in Tianzifang in 2018 (fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Common Wu dialect terms displayed on red boards
Source: author's photo. Tianzifang, 2018.

Conclusion

By drawing on the example of Shanghai Tianzifang, this paper has investigated how culture and memory are used for revalorisation and heritage-making in a Chinese urban context. It started with the question of temporal and situational preconditions that enabled a culture-led regeneration process against dominant institutionalised and renewal-oriented mechanisms of urban development. Tianzifang's unconventional path was found to have its roots in externally induced disruptions of capital, namely the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and its repercussions on the Shanghai economy. The resulting financial pressure not only opened up a niche in Shanghai's overall planning scheme but required alternative development strategies based on a minimum of public resources.

An initial culture-led strategy by the Tianzifang advocates strongly built on existing Culture-Street approaches. It failed to take off, arguably due to a neglect of local context. At this stage of development, awareness of local heritage resources such as Taikang Road Street Market still needed to be raised, which resulted in its transformation justified as environmental improvement. Artists played an important role at the beginning of Tianzifang's regeneration process when they used their artwork to reveal its "hidden" qualities. Some, especially those with an overseas background, strove to evoke positive memories and nostalgic sentiments related to Shanghai's "golden age", as exemplified by Chen Yifei's *Shanghai Shaonü*. Similar to an earlier revalorisation of Western-style architecture in Shanghai, the increasing awareness of local-style *shikumen lilong* housing and its cultural significance can be related to a positive and future-oriented concept of Shanghai nostalgia.

The paper further aimed to challenge our understanding of heritage-making in China as a linear and mostly state-led process. Instead, it offered a perspective of heritage formation as a more multifaceted endeavour, in which actors mobilise historical and cultural resources to both create and renew a place's significance and meaning. As the paper intended to show, societal actors such as artists and shop owners can play an active role in the revalorisation and authentication of space. The practice of naming Alleyway 210 "Tianzifang" (and later also its adjacent housing area) marked an important step towards authentication at a time of serious threat through a demolition order. This was accompanied by direct spatial intervention, as has been discussed with regard to Chen Yifei's "Shanghai Gate of Art" and spatial inscriptions. Tianzifang further illustrated how spatial reinterpretations may become strongly contested if they are not historically justified.

In Tianzifang's place-making process, artists and shop owners enriched the block's built environment with new cultural meaning, even, or in particular, before it was officially framed as heritage. Their reinterpretation of historic fabric was largely triggered by imagination of how life in traditional *lilong* compounds had been and how it could become. More difficult to assess is the role of original residents in this process. Undoubtedly, most residents were integrated in Tianzifang's transformation in terms of economic participation. This included the subletting of their housing units as well as new business opportunities depending on individual circumstances. Place-making in its original sense, following the ideas of Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, that emphasises the role of citizens and social life in increasing neighbourhood vibrancy and liveability, seems to have been difficult to reconcile with Tianzifang's focus on functional diversification.

Still, as a place, Tianzifang has succeeded in attracting local and foreign visitors whose sensory experiences on site have contributed to a broader understanding of cultural heritage that includes vernacular architecture. In contrast, later constructed “modern” factory buildings remain strongly associated with their use value in the present as part of a creative industry park, rather than a type of industrial heritage. Today, Tianzifang retains a complex layering of sociocultural meanings, combining its residential function with those of creative industry park, tourist destination, and protected scenic block.

Notes

The interviews for this paper were done as part of the author’s fieldwork in 2016. Interlocutors, among them key figures in Tianzifang’s development process as well as original residents, were contacted and asked for consent beforehand. The qualitative interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two hours, depending on interviewee and topic. Conversations were then translated from recordings or personal notes.

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