The Industrial Zone Brand of Tianzifang:  
Three Stages of Social Naming

Hai YU  
Department of Sociology, Fudan University

Abstract

Tianzifang, the once ordinary alleyways of Taikang Road, is now a well-known renovation project in the inner city of Shanghai. Its evolution witnessed the birth of an urban space brand of world significance. The success can be attributed to three reasons. Firstly, the famous artist CHEN Yifei started its spatial transformation in the way of SOHO and the equally famous artist HUANG Yongyu renamed it after the first painter in Chinese history TIAN Zifang, transforming the ordinary Taikang Road into the holy Tianzifang. Secondly, the culture industry of CHEN Yifei not only attracted lots of artistic entrepreneurs, but also earned Tianzifang the reputation of the birthplace of China’s creative industry. However, the creative industry needed naming by social scientists. Economist LI Wuwei defined it as a creative industrial zone, giving it an irreplaceable identity different from any other renovation projects. Thirdly, to renovate inner city through conserving old alleyways demanded reasons for preservation. Mr. RUAN Yisan, the world-known expert in historical architecture conservation, provided professional argument on the variety of historical architecture on Taikang Road, which further proved the unique symbolic significance and historical value of Tianzifang. Thus, the aforementioned three stages of naming accomplished the “ordination” and “social alchemy” in Pierre Bourdieu’s words.

Located in the historical city center of Shanghai and featuring inward-reaching lanes and alleys as the fabrics of its space, Tianzifang commercial area is built on the basis of abandoned factories and historical Shikumen residential buildings, for mixed purposes of business and residence. The main business here includes arts and cultural industries, high-end restaurants and fashion consumption. An ordinary alleyway in Shanghai fifteen years ago, it has been converted into the most famous brand of cultural and creative industries in
Shanghai, a landmark and business card of Shanghai. In 2000, Tianzifang was awarded the title of "Shanghai famous trademark" (for a region) by Shanghai Municipal Supervision Bureau of Quality and Technique. Four years later, in May 2004, it was selected as one of the first 18 Creative Industry Clusters by Shanghai Municipal Economic Commission, and later, one of the first group of Cultural Industry Model Bases by Shanghai Municipal Publicity Department. Over the years, Tianzifang has received a number of honorary titles granted by both national and local governments, and frequently won honors such as “The Best Creative Industry Park in China”, one of “The Top Ten Fashion Landmarks in Shanghai”, “The Most Influential Brand”, among the others. Moreover, during the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, Tianzifang was selected as both municipal and district showcase to receive guests from all over the world, while in 2012, it was ranked as the most popular park of the Golden Tripod Award by the Yangtze Delta Alliance of Creative Industries.

Most of these honors listed above came after Tianzifang gained its fame, which could be attributed to many reasons. In my three essays published during the past four years, I have given my accounts on the success of Tianzifang from different perspectives, including the production of space, the competition over development concepts, collective entrepreneurship, and others. In the sense of brand building, social naming is the key strategy that has enabled Tianzifang industrial space to achieve its tremendous influence.

This paper will examine the process of social naming from three stages: the naming of an art space by CHEN Yifei and HUANG Yongyu; the naming of an industrial space by LI Wuwei; and finally, the naming of a historical space by RUAN Yisan. The proposal of the three-staged social naming is originated from Bourdieu’s theories of social naming and classification. However, while Bourdieu held a social critical view, this paper tries to take a neutral stand in criticism, or to put in a better way, it does not focus on social criticism in particular, but on seeing social naming as a methodology for theories of social reality construction and social cognition.

1. Bourdieu’s Theories of Social Naming and Classification

Bourdieu's theory of social naming includes the following points. Firstly, the social world not only is what it is, but also is what its actors represent and construct, therefore, social world realism is bound to be social world representationalism at the same time. Secondly, Social representations “do not simply mirror social relations but help constitute them, then one can, within limits, transform the world by transforming its representation”. Thirdly, the social sciences deal with pre-named, pre-classified realities which bear proper nouns and common nouns, titles, signs and acronyms. The social sciences must take as their object of study the
social operations of naming and the rites of institution through which they are
accomplished. But on a deeper level, they must examine the part played by words in the
construction of social reality and the contribution which the struggle over classifications, a
dimension of all class struggles, makes to the constitution of classes – classes defined in
terms of age, sex or social position, but also clans, tribes, ethnic groups or nations.3)

How to understand Bourdieu’s theories of social representation and social naming? I try
to understand them from four levels. The first level is how to understand social reality.
Unlike the self-sufficiency of natural reality (Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue
their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?),
social reality is from the very beginning to be uttered and represented, otherwise there will be
no identifiable reality as it cannot be understood or expressed by people. The reality, to
people living in it, is a world full of meanings which certainly have their objective origins but
must be uttered and defined by people per se. In short, to name the society equals to
construct it and to change the naming will in certain sense change the society.

The second level is related to the representation theory. All the named and classified social
realities rely on words to be classified and named, but not every naming word plays a role in
constructing the reality. In Bourdieu’s view, only the official speech of the authorized
spokesperson expressing himself in a solemn situation bears the authority of the institution 4).
Hence, the task is to look at how language is expressed by whom and in what situation.

By this we move to the third level, ie., to understand the social operations of naming and
the rites of institution through which naming is accomplished. Rite means the authorization
of institution, which gives authority to the language of the person or to a certain word. It is
not the ultimate goal of naming to accomplish it, rather, it is to confirm that the naming of
the character and order of the reality is accepted and followed by people attending the rite,
or more accurately, by people engaging in the social practice.

The final level is about political science. According to Bourdieu, social naming draws our
attention to the social roles of language, not only in the constitution of social reality, but
also in class struggle, as classes are in fact divided by different names. This view on class is
very different from that of Karl Marx. On one hand, it emphasizes the social classification
and classified struggle of class distinction, and on the other hand, class distinction is not
only an economic concept but also covers non-economic scopes. The concept I borrowed in
this paper is not referred to the political science of class struggle in Bourdieu’s perspective,
however, since social naming actually involves arguments over legitimacy and different
models, the political insight in this sense shows the inspiration from Bourdieu’s work to this
article.
2. The Three Stages of Naming for Tianzifang

i) From Taikang Road to Tianzifang: From Secular to Sacred

The first stage of building Tianzifang as an industrial space brand, or the first stage of social naming, started from the two masters of art, Mr. CHEN Yifei and Mr. HUANG Yongyu.

Before CHEN Yifei’s arrival, there was nothing called Tianzifang but only Taikang Road. The initial transformation started from the cultural dream to transform Taikang Road by the local officials. It was in the middle of the Asian Financial Crisis, so the government-led real estate development through large-scale demolition and construction encountered obstacles. Thanks to the fact that Taikang Road is located at the edge of Luwan District, the superior government had no objection towards the plan of the sub-district government to use inactive neighborhood factories for developing cultural industry, on the contrast, the proposal was warmly welcomed. Unfortunately, the developers only had dream but no ideas. Despite of all the efforts, the attempted cultural neighborhood didn’t get popular as expected. It was not until CHEN Yifei’s arrival that Taikang Road, an unknown, ordinary street, was finally turned into Tianzifang, a well-known space for the emerging cultural industry.

Tianzifang was a product of globalization and was developed because artists with cosmopolitan vision and New York SOHO concept - represented by CHEN Yifei - discovered the aesthetic and historical values of the old lane-and-alley space in Taikang Road. When CHEN Yifei was invited to visit Taikang Road for the first time in 1998, he stopped at Lane 210 of Taikang Road and stayed for a long time, acclaiming, “What a great place it is! I have never expected to find such a great place in Shanghai.” At the dinner after the visit, Mr. Chen gave his suggestion on the development of Taikang Road, “it should become a place to cultivate future artists, just like the SOHO area in New York City, which used to be old factories but was transformed into a place for young art beginners to improve their drawing skills and later a world-famous art space. We should do something for China’s future young artists, and one way is to ensure a sound development of this place.” (Interview record 1) In January 2002, CHEN Yifei Studio moved to the entrance of Lane 210 of Taikang Road, with a total space of over 500 square meters which is divided into five sections including oil painting and sculpture studio, club, ceramic studio and others. Since then, sculptor JIE Jianling, photographer Deke Erh and a number of other artists have all followed and settled down here. No one but artists who are familiar with the western SOHO concept can have such a vision to discover values from old factory buildings; no one but accomplished artists with a good knowledge of the world’s latest design schools and styles can turn trash into treasure and transform the worthless, inactive factory buildings in local officials’ eyes into a
widely appreciated art space. Local residents regarded the old factory buildings as an abandoned and useless space. Thanks to the fact that none of the locals had a vision for SOHO, these factory buildings on Taikang Road that were advertised for lease received not a single attention. It was no coincidence that most of the early settlers at Tianzifang were famous artists with overseas living experiences. When modernism characterized with large-scale demolition and construction prevailed in China, SOHO concept aimed at protective reconstruction has grown in maturity in the West. Overseas experience together with professional insight made it possible for CHEN Yifei and other Chinese top artists to discover the possibility to renew the old neighborhood neglected by the whole nation amid the claims to pull everything down. They noticed the catch of these areas that local officials were unable to see nor bothered to care, and consequently created a most cosmopolitan community from a most local space.

CHEN Yifei’s transformation of the Taikang Road space into an SOHO area or naming it SOHO is a functional event, while the naming by HUANG Yongyu, who renamed Taikang Road into Tianzifang 田子坊 after the first documented painter in Chinese history TIAN Zifang 田子坊, is sheerly social or symbolic. From Taikang Road to Tianzifang, it was an extraordinarily significant experience of social naming, social classification and sanctification. Therefore, the naming of Tianzifang accomplished a process from “secular” to “sacred”, successfully distinguishing itself from other urban renewal projects characterized with large-scale demolition and construction, including the ASE project 5) which is located one block away. According to Bourdieu’s theory, this naming did not only indicate a cultural naming, but also the production of symbolic capitals. Note that it was not HUANG Yongyu’s job to give a naming or classification with state authority. A state naming is a kind of symbolic capital allocated by a governmental institution and plays the role of sanctification within the institution. Taking the National Teaching Achievement Award conferred by the Ministry of Education as an example, since the Chinese teaching institutions belong to the system, state naming equals to reputational capital and symbolic power. But the fame of the art market, creative industry and fashion culture, or cultural influence, cultural capital and symbolic capitals, etc., are usually named by socially well-recognized artists. In other words, social naming is more valuable and is much easier to be recognized by the society. As previously discussed, according to Bourdieu, social naming brings the authority of naming while constructing social reality. Therefore, HUANG’s authority derived from the recognition of the artist group, or in other words, he was authorized by the artist group. Never neglect the naming by HUANG Yongyu. Such a social naming would not be acknowledged or tolerated by the opposing side, as to acknowledge the
name of Tianzifang was to acknowledge the cultural and symbolic powers of the naming. Before 2008, all official files concerning Tianzifang used Taikang Road as the official name instead of Tianzifang, therefore, when debating whether to retain the Tianzifang project, leaders who were against the project rebuked Tianzifang for being fake and fictitious, which implied that there was no Tianzifang but only Taikang Road. In return, the leader of the Tianzifang development team retaliated that “if Tianzifang were fake, so is Xintiandi. There has only been Taipingqiao but no Xintiandi at all.” The debate over the authenticity of the name is, in essence, a fight over symbolic power, cultural power, as well as economic power behind it. Xintiandi represents not only a development mode, but also a new and recognized urban cultural space and a new landmark of the city. What it has approved is not only the legitimacy of the developer’s concept, but also the legitimacy of the government’s schemes and policies of urban renewal. Besides a cultural success, Xintiandi is more a business and economic success. Before Tianzifang was legitimized, Luwan District took its utmost pride in Xintiandi. Hence, both sides threw themselves into the fight without any hesitation. Was it just for a name? Certainly not. But it must appear as a battle for names, because the social world is a world formed through naming. It is through the creation of a new name that people create what in their mind is a new social world and social space.

ii) Naming of an Industrial Space: Cultural Creative Industry

While CHEN Yifei’s cultural industry attracted many more art entrepreneurs, it also brought Tianzifang the honor as the birthplace of creative industry. However, this naming of a creative industry demanded to be invented by a social scientist. Hence, when the Chinese economist LI Wuwei defined Tianzifang as a creative industrial park, he endowed an irreplaceable identity to Tianzifang, one that is different from any other urban renewal project.

The concept of creative industry comes from the American scholar of urban studies Richard Florida and his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In the global age, some cities enjoy fast growth, while others are decaying. A good example is that power and wealth in Paris keep growing, but in contrast, Marseille has been declining. So here comes Florida’s question: why some cities are thriving and booming, and others lacks vitality or growth? The key lies in the existence of a creative class. The distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to “create meaningful new forms.” The super-creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the “thought leadership” of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures,
think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion-makers. Members of this super-creative core produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful – such as designing a product that can be widely made, sold and used; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again. What kind of cities can attract the creative class? The first group would be cities with high amenity that can provide a great variety of lifestyles, as they will attract musicians, painters, technical talents and other innovative people in pursuit of certain life style to live here and develop their career. Secondly, the diversity of the city itself is attractive in its nature. A diversified community that features different ethnic groups, ages, sexual orientations and non-mainstream expressions will release a signal that this is a place open to outsiders. Thirdly, originality is an important element to make a city high-quality, pleasant and enjoyable. Originality has its root in many aspects of the community, including historical architectures, aged neighborhood, musical atmosphere or other cultural traits. Contrast to the modernist view that believes the more modern and technological the city is, the more attractive it is in drawing innovative artists or art entrepreneurs, it is the kind of city and neighborhood with a rich history and cultural diversity that makes the best place for the birth of creative industry. In this regard, this is nothing to be surprised that Taikang Road got favored by CHEN Yifei and other artists.

As a matter of fact, the Tianzifang experiment never lacked the most trendy and cutting-edge concept or discourse in the world, as it has been following New York SOHO area as its example from the very beginning, claiming to “build Shanghai’s SOHO at Tianzifang”. Therefore, when Tianzifang was to be replaced by large-scale demolition and construction projects by superior officials and faced its survival crisis, the experimentalists tried to seek for legitimacy from concepts like creative industry that have recently become popular in the west. In 2004, in order to protect Tianzifang, the development team invited the renowned economist LI Wuwei to Tianzifang, who introduced the concept of creative industry to define this industry cluster of art workshops, design studios and art galleries. In LI’s eyes, “the organic combination of cultural creative industry and urban historical area transformation can avoid the interruption of the urban context, protect architectures with historical and cultural values, and finally, by the interplay and fusion of history and future, tradition and modernity, east and west, classic and trend, enrich the cultural landscape of the city with a blend of history and modernity. This will not only tremendously accelerate the urban economic development, but also make the city more attractive, giving a taste of urban prosperity, cultural richness and modern vitality.”

For several times, Tianzifang faced the threats of being demolished, but every time it
managed to head off the danger eventually. Except for the persistence of the experimental team, forces of support from the academic elites should not be overlooked either. However, the struggle for power also has another political and societal side. Though supporting forces for demolition and construction of Tianzifang prevailed within the government, on the social side the voices against demolition and for Tianzifang predominated. These voices did not come from ordinary people, but from leading academic scholars like RUAN Yisan and others, and from party newspapers on both central and local levels including People’s Daily, Jiefang Daily. The government could neither ignore the voices of the cultural and academic elites, nor neglect those of the mainstream media, which better represented the symbolic power of the institution. Since the government has no advantage in knowledge, concept or discourse, this struggle for power, according to Bourdieu, was somewhat equivalent to the conflict between public power represented by the government on one side, vs. cultural power represented by elites and public opinion power represented by the media on the other side. LI’s work has not only rectified the Tianzifang experiment, but also marked an impact on Shanghai government’s policy and blueprint of the industrial development with a brand new industry concept, by including “creative industry” into the government work report of the year. Today, LI Wuwei is regarded as “father of China’s creative industry”, who gained his reputation back to the Tianzifang case.

iii) The Discovery and Naming of a Historical Heritage Space: The Tianzifang Discourse

To renew the inner city space in a protective way, one must demonstrate the reasons for retaining the old alleys. RUAN Yisan, a world-renown expert in protecting historical architectures, provided professional arguments for the richness of the historical architectures in the old neighborhood of Taikang Road, thus supporting the view that Tianzifang bears unique symbolic importance and historical values.

Similarly, Xintiandi is also a successful old alley renewal project that features protective renovation. As described in the Shikumen (stone gate) Open House Museum in Xintiandi, “(here in Xintiandi,) the old find a place for nostalgia while the young spot fashion and trend. Foreigners regard it as genuine Chinese, while Chinese see foreign culture from it.” In reality, this is more accurate for Tianzifang. RUAN Yisan, who emphasizes that urban renewal should aim to extend one’s life rather than to reverse one’s age, speaks very low of Xintiandi mainly because of the lack of “households”. As the famous Chinese poem writes, “a little bridge, a flowing stream, and some households”, therefore, without “households”, even the best scenery would lose its poetic flavor. One cannot find the old Shanghai taste in Xintiandi, simply because there is neither urban dweller nor real life of the dwellers, thus no
The Industrial Zone Brand of Tianzifang: Hai YU

ordinary street life which is most common for shikumen neighborhoods. The old Shanghai locale of Xintiandi is consumerist and gentrified, and has nothing to do with the real local context. It’s a pseudo-Shanghai nostalgia. Prof. CHANG Qing from Tongji University criticized Xintiandi for retaining the spatial layout and exterior walls merely but entirely redesigning the rest, from roof truss, floor to interior space. Most international students taking English-taught courses in Shanghai prefer Tianzifang to Xintiandi, mainly as a result of the excessive commercialism in Xintiandi.

Xintiandi claims old Shanghai as its selling point, although it is not a piece of work presented by a Shanghainese person. Despite of its successful and legendary naming of old Shanghai, the “old Shanghai” of Xintiandi is artificially created on a historical site that had been emptied. It resembles shikumen in appearance, but lacks the sentiment and texture of the original shikumen. Therefore, it is not unjust for the Taiwanese visual artist TENG Kun Yan to call Xintiandi “a fake antique”.

On the other hand, to recognize the value of Tianzifang does not mean that it is a real antique. In RUAN Yisan’s view, the primary value for protecting historical alleys and lanes are the abundant types of Shanghainese residential houses in these areas, from the very rural-styled local dwellings, to the old shikumen lanes and alleys that prevailed in Shanghai, from new lanes and alleys with modern amenities, to western-styled villas. In short, it is a significantly valuable thing to preserve and renew the lanes and alleys of Taikang Road organically, even from the point of residence museology. A national expert in historical city preservation and restoration, RUAN Yisan’s endorsement for the values of the historical neighborhood of Taikang Road was in line with the social naming of Tianzifang by HUANG Yongyu and LI Wuwei, further reinforcing and deepening their work.

Most of the shop owners with entrepreneurship came just for the lane-and-alley houses. Some have a shikumen complex because of their childhood spent in these old houses, some with professional background of architecture and planning are attracted by the irregular architectural layout and abundant residential types in Tianzifang, while the majority just admire the local flavor of a mixture of traditional architectural style and street life atmosphere.

What attracts me greatly here in this place is this corner, and that corner. These two corners are semi-circle, which is very unusual for architectures in Shanghai, especially in shikumen buildings. Since most corners are orthogonal, these two semi-circle corners are very rare, particularly for the old alleys, new alleys and shikumen in Shanghai. Though Tianzifang is small, it accommodates a vast variety of architecture styles, including old factories, western
style villas, single house, and others. This is the very best part of Tianzifang. It gives us a warm and comfortable feeling, which is the most original thing of Shanghai. Therefore, Tianzifang’s rise didn’t happen by coincidence. (Interview of Esther’s Bear)

Different from Xintiandi, Tianzifang was grown from a real lane-and-alley space. Despite of all its exoticism in the air, the sentiment and atmosphere is genuinely local Shanghainese. The warmth that you receive from these narrow and varied alleyways can hardly be found in any other commercial cities. Once you climb up the steep stairs, leaning against the rear window, drinking a glass of wine or a cup of coffee while overlooking the terrace of the shikumen building on the opposite side, very few can resist the softness and touch at the bottom of the heart, no matter whether you are a local or have once lived in a shikumen building. For people with a lane-and-alley life experience such as mid-aged Shanghainese people, the nostalgia they will encounter here can never be offered by Xintiandi, because Xintiandi only resembles old Shanghai in appearance but lacks the feeling and touch of old Shanghai, which cannot be made artificially. In contrast, Tianzifang has successfully created a cosmopolitan locale from a real place.

Of course, Tianzifang in an original Shanghai lane and alley neighborhood was not evolved from its original state naturally. Rather, as reiterated in this paper, it was a product of social naming after a fierce competition over the discourse. The real invention in the experimental team’s story was to have constructed a “Tianzifang discourse” – actually, the team leader himself did not have the ability to construct such a discourse. As early as when Tianzifang was still in its infancy, ZHANG Jianjun who was in charge of the renewal project of Huaihai Road contributed a concept of “neighborhood economy” to the Tianzifang project, and later another one of “soft renewal” when striving for the government’s support to change its plan and give up hard renewal plan (i.e., demolition and construction) of Tianzifang. A really impressive discourse and concept campaign kicked off when the team invited the famous artist CHEN Yifei. It took off after a group of architects, urban planners and economists were further invited to Tianzifang for fieldwork and case study, and finally, was ended by RUAN Yisan and LI Wuwei introducing and promoting Tianzifang to the public in academic language. RUAN Yisan recognized Tianzifang’s renewal plan for its role in preserving old architectures and the historical block, and highly praised the artists for reinventing them and making Tianzifang a place “with rich local features, highlighting the fresh characters of the age and showcasing the genuine life of the Shanghainese people”. RUAN Yisan knew well of Tianzifang’s situation and had his reasons to worry. “As land interests, previous commitments and worldly biases will all hinder the emergence of SOHO
in Shanghai, it’s quite possible for Tianzifang to die on the vine as well.” RUAN used the title of “Protecting SOHO in Shanghai”, which expressed the common wish of all the experts that like and recognize the concept of Tianzifang. This was a crucial step in the efforts to gain support from the society so as to protect Tianzifang. As the team leader wrote in a letter to me, “with suggestions from Academician ZHENG Shiling, Prof. RUAN Yisan and others, I realized the physical space of Tianzifang and the value of urban development mode; while with advices from LI Wuwei, CHEN Yifei and others, I realized the value of cultural industry in Tianzifang.” The art elites have created a legend of Tianzifang, while the discourse of academic elites have constructed a meaningful narrative for Tianzifang, a narrative of its legitimacy: the legitimacy of protecting historical blocks and the advanced nature of cultural industry development. This is exactly the significance of the three stages of social naming of the industrial space of Tianzifang.

1) YU Hai: The Tianzifang Experiment: Transglobal – A Locally Dualistic Model for Urban Renewal, in Famous Towns of China (Zhong Guo Ming Cheng), 2009 Vol. 7; Yu Hai: Narrative of Historic Block Renovation in Power and Concept Dimensions - The Case of Tianzifang in Shanghai, in Nanjing Social Sciences (Nan Jing She Hui Ke Xue), 2011 Vol. 4; YU Hai, ZHONG Xiaohua, CHEN Xiangming: Collective Entrepreneurship Based on Community Networks in Urban Renewal - The Case of Tianzifang in Shanghai, in Nanjing Social Sciences (Nan Jing She Hui Ke Xue), 2013 Vol. 8.


5) In 2003, the plot on which Tianzifang is located was approved to be rent to Taiwan ASE Group for entire business development. In 2007 Tianzifang Cultural Creative Park survived thanks to the multiple efforts from various social forces. Only the shikumen neighborhood on the plot facing the main street was torn town and converted into business and office buildings, represented by the ASE Business Complex which was inaugurated in 2010.

6) The Xintiandi project was located in Taipingqiao Area in Shanghai, with the full name of “the reconstruction plan of Taipingqiao Area”. Xintiandi was a new name for the entertainment, shopping and leisure area after renovation.

7) See interview with the leader of the Tianzifang development team, Mar. 12, 2011.


11) Between 2003 and 2005, famous architects, urban heritage preservation experts and economic
sociologists all wrote articles to dwell on from perspective of heritage preservation, special aesthetics, creative industries and others in support of the Tianzaifang project.