



Artists and Shanghai's culture-led urban regeneration

Sheng Zhong



Department of Urban Planning and Design, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 111 Ren'ai Road, Suzhou Dushu Lake Higher Education Town, Jiangsu Province 215123, China

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Shanghai has seen a surge of culture-led urban regeneration efforts. The paper discusses the differentiated roles of artists in shaping Shanghai's three prominent arts districts. For simplicity of analysis and illustration, visual artists and environmental designers were crudely categorized into elite and non-elite groups depending on their exercised power in decision making in the transformation of the three sites. It was found that arts production and urban regeneration, two tightly state-controlled fields in China, were increasingly linked together in Chinese cities through capital circulation and conversion. Artists were a critical link of the two fields. There was a clear stratification and fragmentation among Shanghai artists. Elite artists possessed huge amounts of all types of capital, whereas non-elite members were disadvantaged on all fronts. In the field of urban regeneration, artists were not simply used unconsciously as "catalysts" by property interest and regeneration officials, but their elite segment also proactively helped reconstruct the physical and the symbolic urban spaces. The active participation in the real estate sector by cultural entrepreneurs aided the conversion of esthetic proposition in the arts field to culturally valorized spaces for sale in the urban regeneration field and this was enabled by the elite's extensive connections with other powerful social agents in the business and the state sectors built over previous experiences. For the non-elite artists, they participated in the transformative process unaware of their auxiliary roles yet they had not acted as a collective critical force against the hegemonic growth regime.

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1. Introduction

In the past two decades, cities around the world have been actively seeking competitiveness in the cultural front (Kong, 2007; Miles & Paddison, 2005). Today, cities try to lure "starving" artists and cultural entrepreneurs as they do to high net-worth bankers and corporate managers because of this collective belief, rightly or wrongly, in the magical power of arts and culture (Strom, 2010).

Although urban changes result from collective actions of multiple agents, artists have been identified as a group who occupy a unique social niche to significantly influence the construction and reconstruction of urban narratives (Bain, 2005). Many scholarships note the "catalytic" role of cultural workers (Ley, 2003; Vivant, 2010; Zukin, 1982). Although the internal diversity of the arts community has been acknowledged (Lloyd, 2006), there are few comparative analyses of differentiated roles of artist segments in shaping urban changes. The present research attempts to shed light on this fuzzy area by examining two segments of the arts community in three regenerated sites in Shanghai and their multifaceted roles within the intricate network of social agents in shaping the city's recent urban transformations.

In 1998, a Taiwanese architect initiated the cultural revalorization of industrial spaces in Shanghai by converting a deserted grain warehouse into an architectural design studio amid much skepticism. Later, other

environmental designers and experimental artists emulated this pioneering practice by occupying other "forgotten" industrial spaces including M50 and Tianzifang. While the former was a desolate textile mill managed by previous socialist cadres, the latter was based on a few disused neighborhood light industry estates under the supervision of the street-level government. After the two sites gained prominence, the municipal and the district governments intervened to promote them as Shanghai's new image and economic engines (Zhong, 2009, 2011). Since the mid-2000s, culture-themed regeneration projects on old industrial sites under the sponsorship of the entrepreneurial local governments and private capital gained popularity¹ (Zheng, 2011). Red Town (RT), sitting on a derelict steel mill built at the peak of the communist "Great Leap Forward Movement", is a prominent example in this regard. The space was owned by a restructuring state-owned enterprise but leased to a private developer under the sponsorship of Shanghai Municipal Government (SMG) for site regeneration (Wang, 2009). In the literature, the local state is often considered as a dominant agent in orchestrating urban changes in contemporary China (Li, Cheng,

¹ Contemporary urban regeneration projects carried out in the Chinese context has a high physical bias, although economic aims are often present. In contrast, the social dimension is frequently missing from the regeneration agenda. Constrained by China's political system, regeneration projects had rarely involved participation of local residents (see Ye, 2011; Wang, 2009; Zhong, 2013). This is also a reason why roles of artist groups as a conventionally non-state force are highlighted here. In this paper, the term "place-making" or "redevelopment" is sometimes used to refer to the dominant physical aspect of the regeneration project in concern.

E-mail address: Sheng.Zhong@xjtlu.edu.cn.

& Wang, 2014; Wu, Xu, & Yeh, 2007; Zheng, 2011). While this paper does not deny this aspect, it nevertheless attempts to use the artistic community as an example to illustrate the presence and the roles of non-state forces in China's recent urban transformations.

The rest of the paper consists of four sections. The first section discusses research methodology and defines the artist group and sub-groups within the local context. The second section reviews literature on the roles of artists in culture-led urban transformations. The third section summarizes empirical data. The last section analyzes findings and calls for a rethinking of the diversity within the arts community and the roles of non-state forces in China's urban changes.

2. Research methods and definition of “artists”

Data used in this paper were primarily obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty-eight artists and twenty-two other professionals (e.g. art gallery managers, space managers, bureaucrats) who interacted with cultural workers in the transformation of three cultural districts in Shanghai: M50, Tianzifang and RT.² The three sites were chosen because all had a large concentration of artists and were acclaimed by SMG as successful regeneration projects but they had different artist profiles. M50 and Tianzifang, two spontaneous cases, welcomed their first wave of artists around the turn of the millennium. In M50, earlier tenants were not well-known. However, some gained prestige later. Tianzifang initially had a few prominent artists, but unknown artists far outnumbered the big names. RT, deliberately planned in the mid-2000s, was largely occupied by elite tenants because of the high rents. Interview questions focused on informants' personal history, social networks, and everyday life that were related to the site regeneration. In addition, survey of ninety-four creative enterprises at the three sites provided additional data about formal and informal networks among firms. Supplementary information about a few high-profile artists, including a deceased Tianzifang master (*dashi*), was also obtained from extensive review of media reports and interview of their acquaintances.

Defining the “artists” group, which is critical for this research, can be a daunting task (Bain, 2005). Becker (1982) sees artists as belonging to a profession rather than a leisure group. Nevertheless, the criterion of “profession” is problematic in the light of the part-time nature of many artistic pursuits (Markusen & Schrock, 2006; Montgomery & Robinson, 1993). At the operational level, Markusen (2006) examines writers, musicians, visual artists, and performing artists, who are the core of the artistic community. Other researchers regard design arts and architecture as legitimate art forms (Filicko & Lafferty, 2002).

In the light of the conceptual difficulty, Karttunen (1998) asserts that the definition of “artists” should be aligned with the purpose and context of studies. This research adopts this embedded approach and focuses on visual artists and environmental designers in the three art districts because their number was large compared with other types of artists, say performing artists (survey results). As the study deals with the relationships between artists and place-based regeneration strategies, spatial anchorage in artist identification is deemed necessary.³

Treating the artist group as a monolithic whole may distort their actual roles in urban regeneration because of their internal diversity. This research is informed by Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo's (1995) classification methodology. Drawing upon Bourdieu (1986); Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo (1995) divide the artist group by status or hierarchy, depending on the overall composition of capital. Hierarchy in this study is conceptualized as a continuum, but this research simplifies

the positioning system into a binary elite/non-elite split in order to highlight the internal difference of the artistic group. The criterion of grouping is the exercised power in the urban regeneration field obtained from interview. The paper compares the elite and non-elite artists (EAs and NAs) in terms of capital possession and the roles in site regeneration.

It is true that the boundary of division is not clear-cut due to the difficulty of quantifying “capital” and “power”. However, given that the current research is done for exploratory and illustrative purposes rather than exact social positioning per se, the fuzzy group boundary need not be treated as a prohibitive obstacle. Nine of the thirty-eight artists included in the study may be regarded as the “elite”, who commanded some sort of formal decision power in site regeneration. The number of EAs is small and hence the research may run the risk of data bias on this subgroup. However, the small sample of “elites” within a larger cohort of arts professionals mirrored the winner-take-all reality in the cultural production fields (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). As the paper will demonstrate, the power exerted by this small group is by no means insignificant.

3. A review of artists' roles in culture-led urban regeneration

Gentrification literature provides the most nuanced analysis of artists' roles in urban regenerations (Ley, 1996, 2003; Zukin, 1982). Bohemian artists are said to have a preference for marginal urban spaces not only because of the practical concern of low rents and space functionality, but also because such spaces represent non-mainstream values critical for sustaining an artistic identity (Bain, 2003). While artworks create appeal to the public, artists' eclectic consumption preference for coffee shops, museums, exotic restaurants and other urban amenities also serve as a magnet to the hedonic new middle class in their relentless search for edgy lifestyles. The outcome is often a dramatic physical makeover of artists' neighborhood by real estate capital that eventually leads to the socioeconomic displacement of the cultural pioneers. Ley (2003) suggests that among different waves of gentrifiers, latecomers tend to be financially rich but culturally poor. Mathews (2008) also notes that the symbolic influence of artists on urban places does not completely fade out after their exodus because historical narratives, artistic ethos, and artworks may endure although such elements are often adapted to different purposes by different social agents participating in urban changes.

The “magic” power of artists to a large extent lies in the glamor around the arts profession. Lloyd (2006) notes that romanticism associated with the profession is forged by the bohemians' incessant search for creative freedom that distances them from the external purposes of production, such as profit or political interest. The heroic rejection of the capitalist economism and voluntary choice of poverty (including occupying marginal spaces), give the artist group a unique social niche. As societies tend to glamorize cultural nonconformance as the “edgy” or the “cool”, marginal cultures are often used as a cachet to repackage an otherwise non-descript real property product for excessive profit-making. In the more recent mode of gentrification as a public policy (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Mathews, 2010; Smith, 2002), the cultural glamor around the arts profession is also purposively availed by regeneration officers to construct a distinctive urban ambiance. However, trenchant criticisms over the shallow and generic “loft and cappuccino glamor” engineered by uncreative policy tools abound (Vivant, 2010: 109; Peck, 2005).

In the Chinese context, the identity of artists has to be conceptualized from a different tradition. Here, the aura surrounding artists comes from both their distance from commerce and their alleged moral superiority. In the Confucian tradition, the artistic scholarly class was expected to assume the social responsibility of moral tutelage to lower classes (including the merchants). This understanding deviates from Bourdieu's (1993) belief that the guiding principle of high art is the internal logic rather than any extrinsic concerns. In the Maoist

² The fieldwork was conducted in two periods between June 2008 and November 2009 and between June and August 2012.

³ Although off-site artists may also exert influence on regeneration, their impact was presumably much smaller than those who spent significant amount of time on site interacting with other stakeholders. In addition, it was methodologically prohibitive to identify those off-site artists for the research purpose.

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