CHAPTER 4

INTERCULTURAL CONVIVIALITY AND CULTURAL COMMONING: SQUARE DANCING AND THE CREATION OF INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE BY ‘DAMA’ OR ELDERLY FEMALE PERFORMERS IN POST-REFORM URBAN CHINA

Tian Shi & Ching Lin Pang

It would be an interesting exercise to ponder the first impression of Italy’s most reputed traveller and explorer, Marco Polo, if he had the chance to visit Lanzhou City now. Lanzhou, located in the north-western part of China, occupies a strategic location along the Silk Road and has acted as a battlefield throughout ancient history. Cultures created by Sogdians, Persians, Tocharians, Uighurs, Mongolians, Tibetans and other nomads intricately connected and flowed to other regions beyond the Silk Road (see Hansen, 2012). The cultural legacy of the Silk Road involves tangible and intangible resources of cultural reproduction and prosperity.

As anthropologists, we are professionally inclined to investigate vernacular cultural forms in the commons. This heightened attentiveness toward the everyday translates into the following questions. What kind of cultural commons creates the cultural infrastructure in which ordinary people can engage? How do ordinary people navigate various cultures in an urban or rural context? How do they reinscribe and project themselves in the sociocultural environment at the local scale and beyond? How do they perform interculturalism in daily practices?

We decided to begin our research in a square, which allows us not only to measure cultural commoning in an urban space but also to perform sensorial walking and a visual reading and rendering of the space that is in constant change. In this interactional process, we adopt picturing as a process of both capturing and narrating ordinary practices of the city from a sociocultural (artistic), interventional perspective.
We explore how analytic pictures serving as spatiotemporal matrices can reconcile mutualisms such as urban and rural or global and local. In so doing, we seek ways to understand how various forms of social life, condition and shape the city as both a built environment and a social medium, the blending of the “ville” with the “cité” (Sennett, 2019).

This research on the exchange of lived culture along the Silk Road is part of the larger research programme *Interexchange of Aesthetic Culture on the Silk Road* at Lanzhou University. It is conducted on the basis of collaborative research with the authors as the main principal investigators and supported by a junior scholar from Yunnan Agricultural University, Ph.D. candidates, master’s students from Lanzhou and Yunnan Agricultural University, and Hans Roels, a Belgian art photographer. In addition to academic articles, a photo exhibition is part of the programme, constituting the outcome and deliverables of this research project. Several research trips were made to Lanzhou, notably in April and August 2018, April 2019 and October 2019. Hans Roels joined the team in April and October 2019.

In this chapter, we investigate how conviviality can be created, fostered and sustained in a multifunctional and purposed space from above but nonetheless used and appropriated by multiple ordinary “practitioners of the city” for purposes related to work and leisure. The study of *dama* (lit. *big mama* or elderly ladies) and other ordinary practitioners of the city has led us to larger questions of belonging, participation and allegiance in a diverse and convivial urban society. In particular, we explore whether vernacular activities of the *dama* and other groups in the city can be inscribed in the changing urban fabric of the Chinese city at the neighbourhood level. These *damas*, mostly female retirees aged between fifty and sixty, are generally presented as belonging to the lower social strata and lacking cultural capital. They are caricatured as having limited mobility between the kitchen and the TV room. Their public dancing in nearby parks or public squares has elicited a series of conflicts and criticisms over noise pollution (Kirkpatrick, 2019; Seeto & Zou, 2016; Xiao & Hilton, 2019; Yang, 2015) and neglect of their social and gendered responsibilities.

Ethnographic observation and participation allow for a social and cultural reading of how bodies interact with the city in a dynamic reciprocal relation in which users appropriate and project themselves in the urban space, in this case, the square. In turn, this square generates and reflects the interests and aspirations of its users. This mutuality gains even more salience in the context of the reconfiguration of China’s urban landscape as the result of historical intercultural exchange.

This chapter is divided into five parts. The first part introduces the historical and contemporary setting of the city of Lanzhou. The second part elaborates on transcultural conviviality and commoning as valuable conceptual tools. In the third and fourth parts,
INTERCULTURAL CONVIVIALITY AND CULTURAL COMMONING AS ANALYTICAL TOOLS

Residents of cities need to socially acquire a wide range of linguistic, cultural and other repertoires to embed into various spaces of the city. This real-time social overlapping is articulated by Paul Gilroy’s notion of a convivial multi-culture:

Conviviality is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not... add up to discontinuities of experience or insurmountable problems of communication. In these conditions, a degree of differentiation can be combined with large amounts of overlapping

Although Gilroy launched the concept of conviviality, we follow the model of intercultural conviviality developed by Martha Radice (2016), who studied conviviality in multi-ethnic streets through four constituent layers to grasp both the practical and discursive modes of emplaced social activities and exchanges. These four components include microplaces, codes of sociability, perceived intergroup relations and place image. A “microplace” refers to

publicly accessible places that can be explored on foot like streets, parks or plaza....(it) offer(s) resources for convivial social relations when they are accessible, heterogeneous and flexible. This means that different kinds of people can use the place in different ways, enabling social interactions of variable purpose, intensity and duration
(Radice, 2016: 434).

Although closely related to microplaces, codes of sociability are another practice that constitutes the verbal and nonverbal norms of interaction endorsed by the users of a place to generate light social ties and comfort subjects within the immediate confines of time and space. If these embodied practices (Wise & Velayutham, 2014) are sustained, this generates “inconsequential intimacy” (Radice, 2016: 344) among familiar strangers. The third and last layers are situated at the discursive level and imply, respectively, how the members themselves view the place and how the critical infrastructure (Zukin, 1991), such as the media, depicts the place in celebratory or disapproving ways.
While Radice links intercultural conviviality with everyday cosmopolitanism, we argue that it is more meaningful to probe the intersection between conviviality and cultural commoning (Stravides, 2016; Volont, 2019; Yveson, 2013). The foremost feature of cultural commoning is the notion of “openness” and “accessibility” to all users, local inhabitants, visitors and outsiders; it is “the right to be included” and “a space for collective use”. It denotes a space with the “right” atmosphere or ambiance, where imaginations are shared and aspirations are converted in reality. Following Volont (2019), commonism (or, more precisely, DIY-urbanism) is characterised by the notion of a spatial threshold acting as an “open container” for its users, value and legitimacy. Value refers to the repurposing of the city space from the exchange value of a market-driven economy to use value. Legitimacy emphatically endorses the social acceptance of users that may or may not align with local government policy and position.

At the intersection of “intercultural conviviality” and “cultural commoning”, we examine the embodiment of the urban milieu and cultural legacy on a pedestrian scale (Friedman, 2010; Radice, 2016). Performance in public spaces is a bodily form of defining and re(de)fining who we are with respect to the self, others and the immediate environment beyond the neoliberal logic of commodification, prioritising exchange value over intrinsic use value. Therefore, the “East is Red Square” (ERS) provides a promising empirical beginning. As a square located in the urban centre of Lanzhou, it allows for a contextualised lens through which we can observe and understand the local performance of social interaction, encounters, gathering and (potential) conflict in the face of urbanisation. While the name of the square is an overt reference to the emblematic national(istic) song “the East is Red”, it is also the setting of the neoliberal cityscape of high-rise architecture ranging from cultural centres to its west to corporate buildings to its north. Historically, records state that the ERS is a comparatively higher cultural area. While we acknowledge at the outset that conviviality and conflict are part of plural societies, our focus is on the practices of collective gatherings with the aim of scrutinising how diversely situated, punctured and bounded entities (both individual actors and social groups) interact and in so doing, create a sort of “inconsequential intimacy” within the ERS.

**HISTORICAL AND PRESENT-DAY LANZHOU: THE EAST-WEST JUNCTION ALONG THE SILK ROAD AND A PLACE OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS**

The research site, the (ERS), is situated in the centre of Lanzhou City, Gansu Province, China. The fame of Lanzhou City, which is located along the Silk Road, as “the connection point of cultures” should not come as a surprise. The Silk Road refers to multiple historical routes that connect the cities of Xi’an, Lanzhou, Dunhuang, Urumqi, Almaty, Bishkek, Samarkand and Istanbul (Hansen, 2012: 22-24). Various cultures have emerged, flourished and vanished along these roads, which stretch from
the margins of the Eurasian supercontinent to business centres in ancient Asia. As a result of intercultural encounters in Lanzhou, cultural commons encourage residents to navigate numerous activities in identity performance and cultural prosperity.

MAP I the location of Lanzhou and the Silk Road

In the mid-17th century, Lanzhou was appointed the capital city of Gansu Province to manage the vast area of western China. After the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the administration area of Lanzhou City included several counties and districts from 1911 to 1949. Later, the territory of Lanzhou changed several times during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution periods. In 1985, the administrative area annexed another three counties/districts that more or less correspond with the area of present-day Lanzhou city (Lanzhou Chorography, 1999). The straightforward grid system and infrastructure create an intersectional urban space where city dwellers exchange private space for business, public and hectic spaces. The sounds, expressions, and human interactions, such as the track sounds of buses and cars, the hurried footsteps of office workers rushing to their workplaces, the street cries of retailers hawking their wares on the pavement, and the bargaining in open-air markets, mark its strong capacity for “urban intimacy” (Blum, 2001) and “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld, 2005: 3).

Several waves of immigrants have settled in cities for varying reasons. During the Sino-Japanese War, Lanzhou occupied a crucial position to connect the frontier and the settlements of resistance forces (Lanzhou Chorography, 1999: 142). The ambition of the Communists after 1949 converted this ancient city into an industrial giant in the north-western part of the country. Migrant labourers have toiled in oil refineries, fertiliser, synthetic rubber and thermal power plants, and mining and coal mills along the Yellow River (Lanzhou Chorography, 1999: 170–179). Migrants from other regions have found their way to this city, lured by the West Development Program in the first decade of the 21st century. The figures in the Lanzhou Yearbook (2019) indisputably
indicate the velocity of change in terms of urbanisation and diversification. Seventy percent of Lanzhou people have urban resident registration. Among ethnic minorities, 95% comprise five primary groups: Hui, Manchu, Tibetan, Dongxiang, and Mongolian (Lanzhou Chorography, 2007: 9). These figures can be explained by the combined impact of the contemporary and historic national endeavours of pre-1949 China as well as the new period of this city after 1949. Currently, its three million inhabitants have sprawled out in this post-reform city.

Before its transformation into a business space, the ERS was a public square built in 1968. The reconstruction in 1981 added some rockeries, plants, flowers and fountains to the site. In 1993, another construction project enlarged its surface to include an underground business and entertainment area. The last reconstruction project in 1999 turned it into an urban square with a shopping mall and leisure and entertainment areas. In the western part of the ERS, there is an indoor stadium, while an Expo centre is located on the eastern side. Business buildings occupy the northern side, but the surrounding area consists of apartments whose residents have to find space for entertainment activities.

**MAP 2** the location of Lanzhou and the ERS

For newcomers to Lanzhou, the first impression of the ERS is the conflation of time and space and the lively vernacular street theatre animated by different modalities of urban practices and performed by different actors who work, play and/or live in the area. During the daytime, above the entrance of the Guofang Shopping Mall, the logos of global luxury brand names Gucci, LV, and Armani as well as Chinese IT companies such as Huawei testify to the neoliberal reach of the global economy. The hustle and bustle of entrepreneurial activities is abruptly truncated by the monolithic, prefabricated forms of the glitzy shopping mall. On holidays, crowds of customers form a veritable army of shoppers inside the mall, while others stand at the corner to wait for family or friends.
Like most shopping malls, the dense and linear assemblage of small shop spaces inside the building has a clean look, standardised design and depersonalised ambiance. However, when evening falls, aging, elderly women – and a handful of men – start dancing in the ERS. On the other side of this square, some teens practice street dance and break dance, while at yet another part of the square, street artists perform pop/rock songs. All these modalities of urban activities transform the high-end commercial place into a convivial space.

Our time spent in the ERS as both visitors and researchers revealed the social and cultural formations of a highly diverse city within the mutual terrain of the square. As Lidia Errante (2020) noted, accessibility is one of the key factors in assessing urban commons in urban space. The shopping mall on the eastern side of the ERS also functions as the junction of multiple bus routes from South and North Lanzhou into the centre of the city. Residents carry out their quotidian practices, such as business, shopping, cultural performance, leisure activities or just roaming around this public space. The cultural legacy of the Silk Road provides cultural resources for residents to mobilise historical identity, cultural closeness and intercultural conviviality.

EMBODYING AND PERFORMING INTERCULTURALISM IN URBAN MICROSPACE

*Dama*, elderly Chinese women aged between fifty and sixty, are mostly retirees who are generally portrayed as having limited mobility confined to the space between the kitchen and the TV room. However, *dama* have been actively engaged in organising square dancing since the beginning of the 21st century (Martin and Chen, 2020: 16-17). These dance performances have been met with criticism by other citizens as being too noisy and spatially expansive. Some scholars argue that the social mobility of *damas*, exemplified in their breaking away from the stereotype of female retirees, has ignited new ideological conflicts on the usage of “public space” in China (Zhou, 2014).

As elaborated in the previous section, we take a different approach by investigating the different performances on the ERS square through the lens of intercultural conviviality in the cultural commons. Although the ERS has been top-down designated as a residential area, the neighbourhood has also been shaped by interventions of the various inhabitants and users of the space. The shopping mall is part of the development policies pursued in the late 1990s. Tracing the development records from the 1950s to 1980s, north-westerners and ethnic minorities found their way to Lanzhou not only as working migrants but also as owners of shops, both on the street and in the shopping mall. The variegated pattern of migrant occupations in Lanzhou is highly significant for our exploration of cultural adaptation and social diversity. Can we argue that more variegated cultural flows emerge in a heterogeneous and diverse context? How do dwellers with various cultural, linguistic, religious and historical backgrounds create
intercultural conviviality? In other words, what and how are the codes of sociability forged in this microplace? How do the involved actors perceive themselves and, as a consequence, how is the ERS square as physical space and as microplace perceived and represented by outsiders?

According to damas’ classification, there are three main types of ethnic dance that are performed on the square. The first is named for its region (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), abbreviated as Xinjiang dance. The other two are named for their ethnic minority background, Tibetan (bonfire) and Mongolian dances. Xinjiang dance actually includes various ethnic dance genres, of which Uyghur dance constitutes the main source. Tibetan bonfire dance and Mongolian ethnic dance are both performed among the ethnic community and cater to tourists in the post-Mao era (Hillman, 2003).

Every night, damas perform Tibetan dancing in front of the GuoFang Shopping Mall. The neon lights from the shopping mall provide an unintended theatrical background. Ironically, neon lights as hallmarks of hyper-commercialisation are hijacked on the ground by (middle) aged female (and some male) dancers. Young street dancers and singers of pop/rock music are also active in the nearby vicinity. The dama who perform Xinjiang dancing occupy the centre of the square.

![Tibetan Bonfire Dance](image1.jpg)

Dance groups are formed at the grassroots level in a spontaneous way with no intervention from above or encouragement by the government. Anyone can join, without specific qualifications or skills and learn from more experienced dancers by emulation. Because they lack deep ties based on blood, kin or acquaintance, they call each other “square friends” and are united as a temporary community during the dancing moments.
The reasons *damas* take up Xinjiang dancing are manifold.

Dama 1:
*I dance in the morning for two hours and over a period of 20 years. The main reason is to exercise and remain healthy. By staying healthy, I will not be a burden for my family.*

Dama 2:
*I can dance without giving up taking care of my family. In the morning, I first do food shopping in the local market and then I join the morning session. In the afternoon I can dance until 5 PM so that I can go home to cook for the family.*

Some dancers take the performance very seriously. They continue to practice because of their aim of livestreaming their performance on social media in the hope of gaining more visibility and recognition. They also join dance contests.

Dama 3:
*I mostly dance to keep fit. But sometimes our group also participates in dancing competitions. In that case, we would gather on a fixed area to prepare. Beside dancing competitions, we also participate in the marathon.*

Dama 4:
*I just want to enjoy. I don’t have expectations.*

For the Uyghur people, *meshrep* (convening) is an artistic expression of identity and refers to the traditional performance of music, dance, songs and poems (Gilliam, 2016: 107). *Meshrep* gatherings emphasise the lively spirit of people who are joyous and creative in a social context. Regarding their activity, the leader of the Xinjiang dancing group said,

*I’m retired now and living next to this square. We are Uyghur and dancing is very important for us. Every night we are here to dance. We have been organising Xinjiang dance for many years. We also taught our granddaughter how to dance. Most of the dancers are Han, mostly females but there are also some men. They are of different ages and varied educational backgrounds. There is even a famous retired neurology professor in our group. We also provide typical Uyghur dress for our members. They love the dress. By wearing these clothes, they dance better and feel more ‘authentic’.*

Despite their testimony that dancing is primarily a way to remain fit and healthy, most of them see dancing as a way to express and communicate their aspirations and perhaps to imagine a new beginning. In so doing, they want to become visible again as retirees with energy, colour and vitality. We were told that Xinjiang dance always revolves around attraction and romance. Facial and bodily gestures become the language of communication among strangers. Strangers become temporary lovers. Said differently,
the dancers engage in free and fleeting courtship between men and women but also between women and women, between Han and Uyghur and possibly in many other combinations. In so doing, individuality in collectivity is forged and strengthened, affording potentialities and perspectives.

This became all the more apparent when we made preparations for a photo shoot for a group picture with the photographer Hans Roels in 2019. His artistic take on group photos is that everyone in the group matters. To gain trust and cooperation during the frequent visits to the damas, lengthy negotiations were required. The reception by the damas ranged from curiosity, to prudent cooperation, to great enthusiasm. In addition to providing many explanations, some researchers engaged in dancing with the damas. This proved to be highly effective. Additionally, body language, genuine interest and laughter served as universal language. This tactic was successfully adopted by the Belgian photographer, who did not speak Mandarin Chinese. In the end, we managed to gain the trust of most dancers, who were eager to pose for the group picture.

![Image 2-3](image)

**IMAGE 2-3** Interaction between researchers with damas (credits respectively by Ching Lin Pang and Hans Roels)

Some dance genres, repertoires, styles and forms are shared by ethnic groups in the same region (Pegg, 2001: 8) as part of a strategy to communicate their own identity through performance. For ethnic groups such as Mongolians, these dances and songs connect them with their homeland, ancestors and history. Through performances, they search for the “means of identification” (Pegg, 2001: 18). However, for damas, as contemporary informal dancers, their performances align with local social history, personal experience, gender, and urbanisation in China and thus provide alternative ways of cultural cohesion and personal exploration.

State-sponsored minority dance in the early PRC (1949–1954) was established to engage citizens in the newly established multi-ethnic China in order to foster cohesion and unity. Beyond the ambitious objective of solidarity and harmony, the state-sponsored
strategy transformed ethnic minority dance and incorporated it into “Chinese folk dance” (Wilcox, 2016) to demonstrate colourful and multiple cultures in its territory. Square dance has been an unintended outcome of this policy since the late 20th century. However, the damas’ motivation for square dancing is situated at the more personal level: to enjoy, to experience freedom, to express oneself and to communicate with others in playful and at times, romance-driven ways.

Music also plays a prime role in their performance. An elderly man attracts complete attention when dancing. Some audience members told us that “that man is dancing truly well; his moves hit the beat and rhythm of the background music”.

We suggest that square dancing is a type of grassroots-level representation of intercultural conviviality performed by different social groups that have settled in the city for many years and incorporated various historical events, movements and cultures into their performance.

---

**SONIC ASPIRATION OF STREET DANCE AND POP/ROCK SINGERS**

Street dance, which is rooted in the hip-hop culture of the 1970s, is intrinsically intertwined with African American soul and funk music, rapping, breaking, popping, and locking (Gogerly, 2012: 4). Since its introduction in China, street dance, along with other forms of popular culture, has had a great appeal to youth and teens as a way of expressing their self-identity (Qian, 2018).

Although not famed for its hip-hop scene, Lanzhou City has numerous teens who perform street dance, breaking, locking, and popping. Every night, these teens show their skills in front of the shopping mall in the immediate vicinity of the Tibetan dancing group performing the Tibetan bonfire dance. Street dancers sometimes have battles to claim space in front of the GuoFang Shopping Mall. Sometimes they also venture into square dancing. Nearby is a pop/rock band performing shows.

In the contemporary history of rock and roll music in China, Lanzhou City has gained fame because some rappers and rock bands in Lanzhou combine traditional folk music with rock. For example, the Low Wormwood Band is one of the most famous rock bands from Lanzhou. Their song “Lanzhou, Lanzhou” evokes landmarks of Lanzhou and nostalgic emotions.
(Lyrics of “Lanzhou, Lanzhou”)

When you left
Did not take away the portrait of the Monkey King
You said you wanted to leave him on Mount Huaguoshan
Only empty glasses and video games in your bag
The golden sandy sunlight outside the door reflected all over the ground
No longer see the boy leaning down
The hem of his plaid shirt is tilting up
From now on the white tower alone
The rain falls quietly in the back of the mountain tonight
The Yellow River water that has not yet gone eastward
With a momentary ripple
Thousands of miles away from you on the high building
Staying awake all night
Lanzhou
Always go out in the early morning
Lanzhou
The warm drunkenness of the night
Lanzhou
The inexhaustible flow of the Yellow River towards the east
The end of the road is the entrance to the sea

During our observations, the pop rock band performed this nostalgic pop rock song several times. The lyrics of “Lanzhou, Lanzhou” reflect the daily experiences of migrant residents narrating their own life trajectories. Migrants come in and out of the city. People stop and watch these performances in which their personal migrant experience is expressed and enacted through popular music in a state that oscillates between amazement and amusement.

In this microplace, the different processes that create the cultural commons are embodied by actors of different ages, ranging from teens to seniors. This allows for a juxtaposition of encounters and gatherings that easily allow openings for self-expression and personal and group aspirations.

In the field, our sensorial exposure included not only the highly subjective connotations of shared terrains evoked through talking, walking, touch and sight but also the invisible stimulation of nostalgia, homesickness, and similar sentiments. All these sensations in different configurations create a thick atmosphere of colourful, well-lit and sonic togetherness in motion. It is precisely in the local enactment of personal identity in choreographed dances that individual, group and national identities gain contours, materiality and substance set in motion by practice and experience. The
social significance of mutuality evidences how individuals and groups interact and in so doing create cultural commons on the square.

**DISCUSSION: EMBODYING CONVIVIALITY, ENVISIONING CULTURAL COMMONS**

These activities in the ERS have morphed the commercial space into easily accessed microplaces where various cultures interact. Their performances transform the urban space into embodied conviviality.

![Graph 1](image)

**GRAPH 1** Spatial division of various performance groups at the ERS

Our ethnographic undertaking and exploration of the quotidian activities and interactions of different actors in a multi-ethnic intercultural square reveals the processes of urban intimacy and cultural commoning. A question for the current urban space is what kinds of daily activities entailing public encounters are tolerated, supported and communicated in urban transformation. The patterns of the cultural commons within Lanzhou or post-reform China have created openings for convergence. This is not to say that divisions do not exist but that the formations of boundaries that allows for increased social contact merit more analytical scrutiny.

The ERS in Lanzhou is a microplace anchored in the dominant and prestigious landscape of the “industrial” city, deviating from the top-down policy narrative. Contemporary urban spaces are shaped by what Anoop Nayak (2017) has acutely conceptualised as the (in)formative “embodied encounters” of history, cultures and spaces. In this process, intercultural conviviality arises. In the ERS, these embodied encounters are merged by processes of urbanisation and consumption, the West Development Program and large-scale urban development, and deindustrialisation. However, it would be a mistake to...
frame or relegate these terrains simply as urbanisation or conflicts of public space. Rather, the ERS is the microplace where cultures and divisions of class, gender, age and ethnicity are densely (re)inscribed along with the aspirations, imagination and innovations based on (implicit) codes of sociability. As a result, intercultural conviviality in the commons emerges.

The alignment of multi-layered histories with the daily individual process of enculturation is reflected in the mutual spaces of regular human contact. Conformity and intention facilitate self-conscious interactions that are potentially removed by more enjoyable activities. Crucially, we argue that these prosaic public areas are not simply terrains of encounter but of engaging, and they require a level of individual embodied investment to sustain membership. Local worlds in a microplace within the city are spaces where much is at stake since these are the places in which the less mobile, the elderly, teens, the marginalised and newcomers are deeply invested. The embodied encounters in formal public spaces allowing for informal memberships are therefore primary to the formation of the commons.

What the ERS offers is a microplace that not only acts as the beating heart of the city but also extends the past and present, linking places and people. An urban space situates and connects, both focusing and expanding the possibilities for interaction and encounters among various individuals and groups. The ERS is supported by a large number of residents living within a short walking distance of the square as well as a broader group of people who reach the square and the shopping mall by transportation. Some moves are part of the daily or weekly routines of commuting that are common to Lanzhou people. Other movements to the ERS involve a distinctive break from the daily designation, regularity and comfort of a familiar world; these are migratory transgressions from one class to another by many actors and require individuals to traverse great physical, cultural and emotional distances.

Based on the empirical data, this chapter argues that the damas, through their everyday dancing activities, are actively engaged in constructing subjectivity by way of self-entertainment, while negotiating new meanings of (inter)cultural and gender identities, enacting new social relations and transforming the public space from a highly commercialised space with marketed entertainment for a fee to an open and inclusive urban neighbourhood (Chen, 2010; Orum, et al. 2009; Pang, 2019; Qian, 2014) where processes of conviviality and cultural commoning are at play.

In sum, the damas and the other dancers have appropriated the public space and transformed it into a space of porosity between the private and the public realms, albeit on a temporary basis—in short, producing the cultural commons.

Let us return to the opening sentence of this chapter. Do you think Marco Polo would like to join the square dancing if he had the chance to visit present-day Lanzhou?
Our project “Interexchange of Aesthetic Culture on the Silk Road” was granted by The National Social Science Fund of China (No. 17ZDA272).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Errante, L. (2020). Public space: mapping the physical, social and cultural accessibility for the creation of urban commons. In E. Macri, V. Morea & M. Trimarchi (Eds.), Cultural commons and urban dynamics: a multidisciplinary perspective (pp. 113-140). New York, NY: Springer.


Lanzhou City Choreography. 1997.
Lanzhou City Choreography. 2007.
Lanzhou Yearbook 2019.