1 Introduction

In early 2020, the Chinese city of Wuhan was the first place to live through unprecedented developments soon to become common across the globe, as tight restrictions were placed on many aspects of life – particularly public-space life – in response to the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). It also became the first centre of another impending worldwide phenomenon, the flurry of expressions of togetherness and solidarity that circulated through traditional media and online in the face of the virus. Musical encouragements for an embattled Wuhan to muster its resilience and ‘hang on in there’ (Wuhan jiayou) were joined by a new impetus for affirmation of local identities. Nostalgic Wuhan-dialect evocations of ordinary city experiences were at the heart of songs such as ‘Hanyangmen huayuan’ (Hanyang Gate Garden) by local singer-songwriter Feng Xiang (Zhang 2020: 14–15). This folk-idiom composition (minyao) for guitar and voice, written a few years earlier but fully taking off during the crisis, holds up the small patch of green space at Hanyang Gate as symbolic of an old Wuhan encroached on by wider modernity; it also makes reference to other places of local significance, especially Minzhu Lu, the road that links the garden with Hubu Xiang, now a partly tourist-orientated street food lane a few minutes’ walk away. The evocation of an exclusive local belonging could hardly be more direct:

现在的民主路每天都人挨人
These days, there are always people everywhere at Minzhu Lu

外地人去了户部巷就来到汉阳门
Outsiders come to Hanyang Gate once they’ve been to Hubu Xiang

车子多 人也多
All those cars, all those people

满街放的流行歌
With pop songs filling the streets

只有汉阳门的花园
It’s only the garden at Hanyang Gate

还属于我们这些人
That still belongs to us

(‘Hanyangmen huayuan’ by Feng Xiang)

If the constants of local life can become so prominent in the music capturing imaginations under exceptional historical circumstances, what of more common periods themselves? In 2014, I spent time in Wuhan investigating precisely the ‘pop songs filling the streets’ that in Feng Xiang’s song align squarely with the
encroaching world of ‘outsiders’ (waidi ren) and represent the antithesis of belonging. Untouched by the heightening effects of the crisis to come, the mood for collectivity I found expressed in this aspect of the city’s musical life was naturally less palpable and more ambiguous. My focus was ‘Passion Square’ (jiqing guangchang) – a recurring kind of street music show embedded in a wider ecosystem of other public-space popular music sounds and practices, including street-side karaoke, recorded music played out from the thresholds of businesses and square dance exercise gatherings. Passion Square had spread as far as Hanyang Gate Garden itself, along with a handful of other spots in the city, in performances held every afternoon and evening. Going beyond representations of Wuhan in musical texts, this research offers a sight of the on-the-ground realities of collective musical experiences in the city, one that majors on more unassuming practices – in this case, primarily dependent on face-to-face modes – that are ubiquitous in mundane urban life (García Quiñones, Kassabian and Boschi 2016).

My main conceptual point of reference is community, a notion widely and consistently employed to summarise how people associate around musical practices and products. It is a term of collective life considered unique in ‘never being used unfavourably’ (Williams, in Day 2006: 14), and the idealisation of ‘communal’ forms of living has been called an era-defining ‘leit motif’ of contemporary thinking (Gusfield 1975: 87). Discourses of community around Chinese-language popular culture – those noted and reinforced in scholarship – clearly resonate with singer Feng Xiang’s nostalgic sentiments; Marc Moskowitz, for instance, finds ‘urbanisation and the break-down of community’ to have left many ‘feeling isolated, lonely, and unsatisfied’ – a central function of Chinese pop is apparently to provide an outlet for these negative feelings (Moskowitz 2010: 53). So, is community a useful term of reference for Passion Square? If so, in which aspects of the practices is it a meaningful construct and where do its limits and boundaries lie? Characteristics of Passion Square that I outline below – to do with embeddedness in public-space life, immediate physical situations, musical materials, modes of performing and audiencing and so on – make this a fitting case for looking beyond the ‘ideal types of musical communities’ represented by common discourse and theory in music studies and elsewhere (Torp 2017: 235). Central to my aim is recognising and countering the risks of overstating and idealising around musical community, complicating the notion in light of less neat realities found in more mundane experiences.

This task rests on growing attention paid to ‘the active participatory role of social agents in the sensory production of sociality’ (Harris 2020: 27). In this

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1 The concerns of this Element are distinct from those of ‘Community Music’, a field of participatory research and therapeutic intervention aimed at producing benefits for participants who are ‘socially or culturally disadvantaged’ (O’Grady and McFerran 2007: 15).
case study, emerging most pertinently from a focus on the sensory is what Adam Krims calls the ‘geographical fact’ of music-related activity and the meanings made through it (Krims 2007: xv). Krims describes, for instance, how the physical separation of a CD retailer’s classical section from its other departments through features of the shop’s design is a material manifestation of that genre’s rarefied status. Accessing this level of meaning involves approaching both humans and non-human things as potential ‘source of action’ as they interrelate (Bates 2012: 372), a way of fleshing out precisely what lies behind the abstraction, ‘the social’ – associations between elements, be they human or not (Latour 1996: 369). A major theme, then, is the geographical facts of Passion Square – in a broad sense: how collectivity plays out on an immediate level in material circumstances, shaped by sonic interactions with wider city life, built on the cooperative construction and sharing of spaces. This focus is the key way in which I bring ideas of musical community into better dialogue with ambiguities of experience here.

A second way involves a subtle change of language. I turn away from the singular countable noun ‘a community’ or the plural ‘communities’. These words are inextricable from the idea of entities or collections of people to which individuals can belong, enduring bodies defined by the duality of insiders and outsiders. Instead, I use the uncountable noun ‘community’, evoking a descriptive quality of a situation or strip of activity. I argue that it is more useful, in line with the complexity of lived experience – and less coloured by what I critique below as a quickness in typical discourses to valorise community – to acknowledge that facets meaningfully talked about with the language of community can come in and out of focus, ebb and flow, as various elements intersect. Ultimately, this reflects an intention to eschew the pursuit of this quality as a vindication and the corresponding implication that where it is diluted is a deficiency. Finding community is not a ‘solution’ in a search for meaning in musical experiences. But versions of the notion, I argue, can be a useful reference point when decoupled from idealising tendencies and when their foundations are scrutinised.

1.1 Passion Square

Filming from high up on the Great Yangtze River Bridge in Wuhan in 2014, I am looking down on Hanyang Gate Garden, the same small area of green space that would capture the imagination through Feng Xiang’s song in virus-hit times six years later. This rather unkempt miniature park would be entirely unassuming were it not for its position beneath the historic bridge, set between the banks of China’s great river and this city’s most famous landmark, the Yellow Crane
Figure 1. A view of Hanyang Gate Garden from the Great Yangtze River Bridge, with one of its patios below and the Yellow Crane Tower in the distance (photo by the author, 15 May 2014).

On the patio directly below, a woman in her thirties with microphone in hand steps towards a few men of more advanced years, all of whom are perched on plastic stools among the loose semi-circle of people gathered around her. As she sings, she stoops to extend a hand to several of these spectators in turn. The first shows no obvious response, staring unmoved at the singer for a second or two before allowing her to grasp his hand. Next, a second spectator provides a similarly unmoving response, and so on. A fourth spectator does seem to pause for an instant, but then, with no further encouragement, allows the singer to finish her song and walk back to join her group.

For a less nostalgic picture of Hanyang Gate Garden’s relatively recent condition, see a news report by Hao, Wang and Yin (2005), which describes it as a ‘blot on the landscape’ (dashu fengjing), being ‘occupied by mah-jong tables, small peddlers, unisex massage, and crowds of people going to the toilet wherever they please.’
fingers for a perfunctory handshake. She tries again with another man and he
instinctively withdraws his hand, first opting to placate her with a wave-cum-
salute before he changes his mind and submits. One more is staring at the
ground as she approaches and seems caught off guard as he returns her greeting.

The woman resumes the centre of her patio ‘stage’ just as a shower of twenty or
thirty small-denomination banknotes is tossed in her direction, a tip from
another audience member designed to flutter to earth around her feet (see
Video Example 1).

3 It is impossible to tell from up here which classic or more recent Chinese-
language pop hit she is singing – not because the music fails to reach us, but because
its details are obscured in a cacophony of five other similar performances going on in
parallel in the park. Some have live backing bands of keyboard, drums and saxophone or trumpet, while others play recorded accompaniment through smartphones connected to the PA. Down below, however, each of the six stages seems to carve out a functioning niche in this challenging sonic environment, against the wider backdrop of the traffic and other sounds of city life all around them.

The hesitancy – perhaps even resistance – with which these men respond to the
singer’s efforts at interaction is characteristic of these Passion Square shows. The
‘passion’ here is not necessarily of a romantic or sexual kind but instead holds
connotations of fervour and excitement – ironic, given the prevalence of moderate
behaviour I witness. The ‘square’ refers to the feature of city design originally

3 Special thanks are due to Petr Nuska for his indispensable video-editing work, skilfully helping to make the very best of the footage I shot in Wuhan.
associated with the mass rallies of more highly politicised times in China’s socialist history, but now it is a more fluid term (Kendall 2019: 119) and it seems to matter little that there is significant variety in the kinds of public space that actually host the activities. Plus, reference to squares links the shows to the much better known phenomenon of *guangchang wu* (square dancing), in which older urban residents all over China exercise to dance beats (Seetoo and Zou 2016).

These singing sessions are held daily in a few clusters in central Wuhan, with crowds of dozens and sometimes over 100 gathering in derelict sites, street-corner locations and green spaces like this one. Most in the audiences are middle-aged and older men; many come especially for these shows and stay for their two- or three-hour duration. Some individuals present singers, who are almost all younger women, with cash tips during the singing – the primary way to express appreciation and solidarity (Video Example 2). This practice is part of a gift economy in which cycles of reciprocity carve out ongoing relationships between singers and a minority in their audiences who become patrons. Values reach impressive heights, many songs attracting several individual tips in multiples of 100 yuan (around 16 US dollars at the time of my visit) and, occasionally, they can go into the thousands (see Horlor 2019a) – these gifts afford Passion Square singers a comfortable living. But, more generally, people watch in an apparently impassive state and usually engage with one another and the musicians undemonstratively. During my initial visits, I am struck that no one around me taps a foot to the beat or is obviously stirred by the music and barely any spectators exchange more than a few words with their fellows. What

![Passion Square singer Sihong receiving a cash tip during a performance in Hanyang Gate Garden](video by the author, 15 May 2014)

Video Example 2. Passion Square singer Sihong receiving a cash tip during a performance in Hanyang Gate Garden (video by the author, 15 May 2014)

Video available in online formats.
Georgina Born calls an ‘aggregation of experience’ certainly occurs (Born 2013: 29); on the most basic level, audience members go to Passion Square prepared to be among people, aware that they all contribute. But first glance points to an ambivalence in the ways many embrace or submit to this aggregation – it is certainly something humbler than, for instance, the ‘deindividuation’ that may be felt by members of sporting crowds when they chant in a state of ‘reduced self-awareness and concern for social evaluation’ (Herrera 2018: 488).

During visits to Hanyang Gate Garden in the early stages of the first of two research trips in 2014 totalling four months in duration, I sometimes come across a regular audience member, a Mr Wang. In his forties and married, he splits his time between the family home back in his native Qingdao, 800 kilometres away on China’s northern coast, and the base for his watch business here in this city of around 10 million people, the capital of Hubei province. When in Wuhan, Wang lives the life of a bachelor and we joke about the freedom of being far from his wife. The first time we meet, he leads me around several of the park stages, where he is clearly well-known; each one has up to fifteen singers who take it in turns with two or three songs on the microphone. Several approach us to offer cigarettes and bottles of iced tea and to exchange a few words. I have already heard Mr Wang talk about how his business has taken him to over forty countries, and today he looks to impress by mentioning that we have been chatting half in Chinese and half in English – in fact, his English barely covers a few words. We walk by close to the emcee of one of the groups; his job is to manage the rotation of singers and to orchestrate thanks to those giving tips, ideally chipping in with animated comments during the singing. Picking me out as an unusual presence at the shows, he greets me on microphone with a comical exclamation, acting as if lighting up with excitement at what my presence may imply: ‘meiyuan!’ (US dollars).

The centrality of money for Passion Square singers is evident – in spite of some efforts to conceal it – as I subsequently get to know a few from each of about a dozen different shows. On stage, Yinzi and Longzi, identical twins in their early twenties, project a seamless persona that plays up a naïve innocence. They always dress in matching outfits and sing breezy tunes with a childlike quality – ‘Yi ge mama de nüer’ (A mother’s daughter) or ‘Nongjia de xiao nühai’ (Little peasant girl) – conspicuous among the normal mix of ballads, rock anthems and up-tempo pop numbers. Unlike in many singers, who exude a genuine quality, I see a more ruthless approach beneath the twins’ persona. Our conversations are dominated by descriptions of difficulties in their life; they talk about the poverty of their family left behind in Jingzhou, another city in Hubei province a few hours away and how shows often leave them in tears when their income does not match the generally enthusiastic reception for their
singing. Indeed, the more vocal of the twins, Yinzi, avoids many of my questions about Passion Square, saying ‘you will have to slowly understand’ or similar – I start to see our conversations largely as bids for my pity. I eventually experiment with ways to make them open up, giving small cash tips a few times when they get together to perform a unison duet. While they ordinarily leave me largely alone as I watch the shows, as soon as I give any tip, they switch to a proactive attitude, coming over to spend time chatting and welcoming my questions. Perhaps my experience parallels those of typical audience members I see them fraternising with, men who may be drip-fed attention in exchange for their gifts. The wariness of many to engage with singers could be for fear of becoming entwined in these reciprocal dynamics.

Yinzi and Longzi’s Passion Square stage is not among those here beneath the Yangtze Bridge, however. It is a couple of kilometres away in a larger riverside park, on the banks where the Yangtze meets its longest tributary, the Han. Instead of organisers setting up from scratch the PA system every day, a mat or box to act as a temporary stage, lighting, audience seating and canopies, here, Passion Square takes place on four semi-permanent stages, each consisting of an open-sided arena with roof, a raised stage with in situ PA, lighting and projector screens (Figure 2). Shows are held in the evening rather than the afternoon, audiences and gifts are larger and there is a more formal feel to the organisation. The stakes feel a lot higher here, too, so it is understandable that the twins take a serious approach to what they do. The same feeling also impinges on my experience as a spectator; the presence of comfortable seats in prime position at the front, one of which I am ushered into whenever I visit – a privilege of the special guest or major gift giver – marks these shows out from the apparently undifferentiated crowds in the more modest settings. I begin to feel the impact of shows’ material circumstances in how I relate with other people present.

I get to know Passion Square singers by spending time with them away from shows. One day, I meet up with a relatively new acquaintance, A-jia, while she is in the chair at a hair salon. We then talk over lunch about her distant home province and the tough economic circumstances that pushed her to leave four or five years ago in search of a living made through singing. Like almost all the singers around Wuhan’s events, her performing career is founded on an enthusiasm for music that originated in childhood, rather than on any formal training in music. Indeed, the humbleness of her education is apparent to me when she struggles to write in my notebook common Chinese characters found in the names of songs she sings – or perhaps this is more a symptom of a recent smartphone-dependent lifestyle. It was only a few months before that she chanced on the opportunity to come to Wuhan, but she has doubts about continuing with this hard and unstable way of life, naturally desiring a return to her husband and three-
year-old son. Indeed, within weeks she is called back home as her husband and mother-in-law – herself unwell – are struggling to cope after the child injures his hand in an accident. Next, we browse a local shopping arcade for outfits she will wear on stage and A-jia talks me through the balance she tries to strike between dressing up (daban) and maintaining her preferred modesty. As we walk, I point her attention towards a political poster that, like hundreds put up all around Wuhan by the authorities, displays the ‘Core Values of Socialism’ (Shehuizhu yi hexin jiazhi guan) (Figure 3). I wonder if she might feel inclined to talk about these values: strength and prosperity (fuqiang), democracy (minzhu), civility (wenming), harmony (hexie), freedom (ziyou), equality (pingdeng), justice (gongzheng), rule of law (fazhi), patriotism (aiguo), dedication to work (jingye), integrity (chengxin) and friendship (youyi).

Figure 2. Yinzi and Longzi’s stage (photo by the author, 11 May 2014)
her performing in light of the wider discourses saturating public space in the city, but she responds blankly: ‘I hardly ever pay attention.’

### 1.2 Musical Community

If, then, my preoccupations when considering Passion Square do not always align with the concerns of the participants, does my interest in community translate at all more generally in this context? How does it fit with any conceptualisations of the activity that prevail around Passion Square, especially considering how these understandings might intersect with wider patterns in Chinese language? Indeed, do broader theorisations of musical community adequately take on board the nuances of vernacular terms and conceptualisations, variable as they may be in their overlaps with the English ‘community’ and in their degrees of pertinence in their individual contexts? She (社) is a ‘hallowed concept in Chinese political thought’, carrying connotations of grassroots communitarianism and community spirit across various ages in China’s history (Rowe 1984: 249; 1989: 95). From this come various related words, not only shehui (society) – which, in turn, gives way to the shehuizhuyi (socialism) that is so prominent a term public life in Wuhan – but also a cluster whose meanings intersect with ‘community’ in English, one close match being shequ (Harris 2020: 24). On the microphone or in conversation, I find Passion Square participants to call on she mainly with reference to a further idea, shequ;