

Dancing under spots:

**Square dancing as the process for Chinese elderly women
reclaiming urban public space**

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Abstract

In open squares, parks and residential neighbourhoods, when the sun sets, groups of Chinese mid-age and elder women are often seen dancing together to music in public space. This activity is called square dance. Square dancing now is the most popular fitness and social activity among elder women in almost every city and town in China, although many people keep expressing discomfort with the dancers. The criticism of Square dance and its core participants—elder women—reflects the social debates over how public space should be used in Chinese urban environment. The paper begins from a historical perspective, constructing a time line of the development urban public space usage and women's behaviour in these spaces, analysing the people and places of square dancing, to argue that square dance is a method for elder women as a vulnerable group to reclaim the discursive power over urban space. Square dancing is not just a fitness/leisure activity, indeed, it is a natural outcome resulting from both the long-term urbanization and women's pursuit of spatial rights in the context of China.

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1. Introduction

Square Dance, as the name suggests, is a widely spread collective dancing activity across China, typically taking place in public spaces, especially squares, in the evening between 6 and 8 pm. It is spontaneously organized by the public and is dominated by mid-aged and elderly women. The movements of Square dance are easy to learn, and performed in rhythm with music played from portable speakers brought by the dancers. Supporters of square dancing, often the dancers and their families, view it as a health-promoting fitness activity and also encourage participants to socialize with other dancers. However, those who oppose square dancing have their concerns, including the noise generated by the music and the overwhelming presence of dancers, which makes other types of activities difficult to share the public space in the night.

In the past 10 years, square dancing has drawn incredible social and academic attentions. The number of researches about Chinese square dancing has burst out at around year 2013 (Sha, 2016). Many studies mentioned that the controversy over square dancing is related to the use of public space and the demographic structure of Chinese cities. Zhang (2015) had claimed that the controversy could be understood as a disagreement between ideology held by the middle class, who pursue individuality, and the older generations shaped by Chinese collectivist era. Similarly, Wang (2018) had argued that the negative social perception of square dancing came from the misalignment between how the elder women used public spaces and the mainstream expectations of these open spaces. These studies inspired me to understand square dance phenomenon from a sociological and architectural aspect.

However, despite the fact that some of these researches have reflected the history behind square dancing in a certain degree, they only trace back to the youth of the current participants in order to find out why these women enjoy dancing together in public. I began question how and why elderly women—a vulnerable group that had held limited discursive power in China, where men have dominated for over two thousand years—have come to occupy public squares across the country. Is it a unique phenomenon throughout history that women have occupied public space so visible? Or is it the result of an interaction between the unique characteristics of China's elderly women and the evolving nature of urban public space?

Starting from square dance, I trace back in history and build up a time line of Chinese female in public space over thousands years, seeking the condition and processes behind the existence of square dancing, as well as the broader significance of public space for women in the context of China's urbanization. Square dancing should not only be read as a contemporary phenomenon as its roots cannot be fully understood by looking into the recent past of Chinese urban life. From the perspective of its participants, square dancing reflects a natural pursuit of social participation by Chinese women. From the perspective of space, characteristics of public space in contemporary Chinese cities shaped in different historical stages of urban development have created favourable conditions for square dancing. Thus, I argue that square dancing could be a brave step for women to reclaim public space, as well as an opportunity for urban planner to reconsider the value, function, and accessibility of public space in contemporary Chinese cities.

This paper examines the square dancing phenomenon by three steps. First, it explores historical records and literature on Chinese women's use of public space, to investigate the relationship between urban development and women's participation in public life. Second, using studies of square dance to gather data on its participants, analysing the value of square dancing to women based on the historical context. Third, mapping four different square dancing sites and analysing how dancers engage with these public spaces. Through history, demographics, and spatial dynamics, I aim to construct a comprehensive process of how square dancing has become a means by which elderly women reclaim urban public space in contemporary China.



fig. 1. CFP, 2013, Old women enjoying square dancing, [Online image]

2. History context

The status of women in Chinese history is deeply influenced by Confucianism. Thus, women are commonly marked as appendages of men, and were constrained by specific gender doctrines. Compared with men, women have been relatively under-represented in historical records. In this chapter, I provide an overview of women's presence in Chinese public spaces over the past thousands of year by constructing two parallel time lines: one tracing the historical development of Chinese public spaces, and the other documenting women's activities that reflect the relationship between them and public space. On one pair of facing pages, texts with a grey background represent the history of public spaces, while those with a yellow background highlight the history of women at the same period.

To avoid ambiguity and respect for ethnic and cultural diversity, I would define the Chinese history mentioned in this article in a narrow sense to the history of Huaxia¹ civilization and the other ethnic groups who were integrated with it later as the territory of China expanded. Also, With the exception of the clan period in Section 2.1, the historical contexts in this chapter are limited to urban spaces and women in cities.

1 Originated from the Yellow River in the Neolithic Age



fig. 2.1 Wang, D. 2025, Square dancing Caidiecheng Xiaoqu, Chongqing

2.1. The clan societies: 6000 BC to 1064 BC

Archaeologists suggest that Chinese civilization may have developed from multiple tribal societies with certain degree of cultural similarity. (Yan, 1987) One of them is the clan in Dadiwan, which is one of the earliest archaeological sites ever found in China, located in Gansu province by Middle Yellow River. The archaeological site illustrates a 4500BC-3900BC matriarchal clan settlement with a communal square or tomb in the centre, surrounded with different sizes houses. (Cao, 2021) All the doors of the larger houses were facing the square or tomb, which might indicate daily life and ritual activities of this clan were organized around a central public space. The Banpo archaeological site, located in Shanxi Province, also proves that matriarchal clan villages in 4000 BC had a large central public square. (See picture) However, in Dadiwan site, tribes from 3500 BC to 2900 BC had replaced open spaces in their settlement centre with large palaces, which are regarded as the early-stage form of a state. (ibid.) Ren (1998) believes those structures were the property of the rulers, symbolizing the emergence of private ownership. Along with the stratification of society, public spaces for leisure and religious functions faded out in early-stage Chinese society.

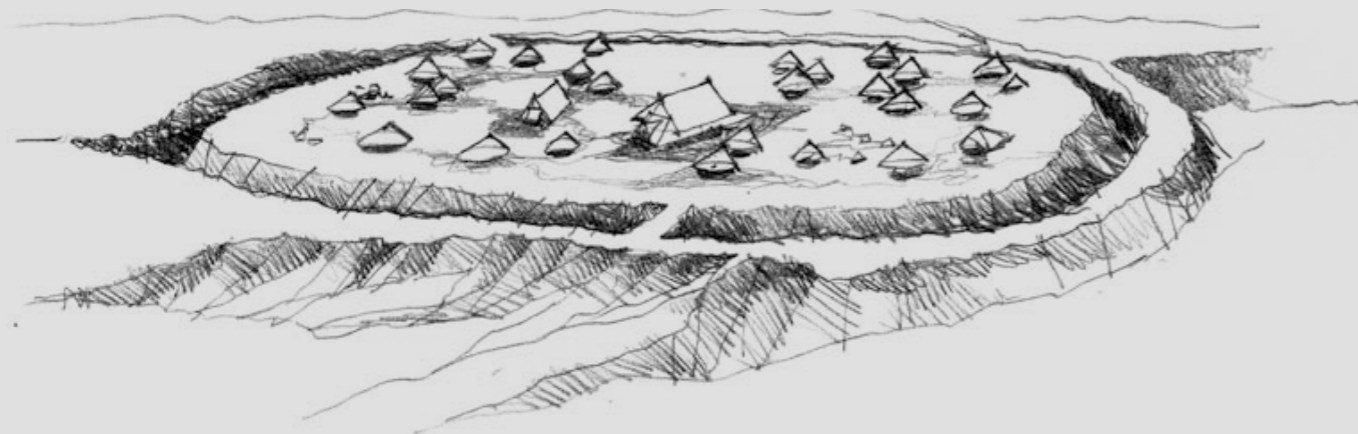


Fig. 2.1.1 AW House, n.d. Layout of Banpo Village [Online image].

2.1. The clan societies: 6000 BC to 1064 BC

Women used to appear widely in public space in the matriarchal society. Dadiwan archaeological site proves that the agriculture and pottery making in early primitive communal society were mainly done by women from 4500 BC to 3900 BC. (Wang, 2002) Except the production, women also engaged in a wide range of non-labour activities in public spaces. Among these, dance was regarded as an important religious activity during matriarchal period. Yan (2017) thinks dancing in early stage could be regarded as a kind of ceremonies dedicated to the worship of the Chinese creation goddess Nü Wa. The archaeological discovery in Huaiyang, Henan province also proves the ancient public dance is used on the worship of Nü Wa and her consort Fu Xi. (Liang, Liu, 2020) It is worth noting that in China, the period of the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal society, coincides with the decline of central public spaces mentioned earlier. Therefore, it can be indicated that activities carried out by women in public spaces such as ritual dancing, gradually disappeared with the privatization of open spaces.



Fig. 2.1.2 Dai, H., Ding, H., Qu, M., & Liu, W. 2021, Model of the geological context of the Banpo Yangshao cultural site [Online image]

2.2. The feudal dynasties: 1064 BC to 1912 AD

When Zhou dynasty was established in 1064 BC, cities had already emerged. While the concept of city began to appear on historical records hundreds of years later. (Ma, 1998) During 3,000 years of feudal dynasties beginning with Zhou, the layout of ancient Chinese cities was mainly designed to reinforce the benefit of the ruler. (Zhou, 2005) The traditional open spaces in Chinese cities were very different from the central squares in Western civilization. Most of the open squares were next to the government of a city, and were required to be respected and silent. There were also small pieces of open corners distributed along the grid street networks, which brought fragmentary social space for surrounding residents. After the Song Dynasty (960-1279), these small public spaces gradually evolved into commercial market which also held social activities in festivals. However, large public spaces for leisure had never emerged. (ibid) On the contrary, traditional Chinese residential dwellings were built in an enclosed courtyard, which possessed a certain degree of publicness for the residents group who lived within. Thus, social activities among small groups were more relied on those communal/intermediate spaces.

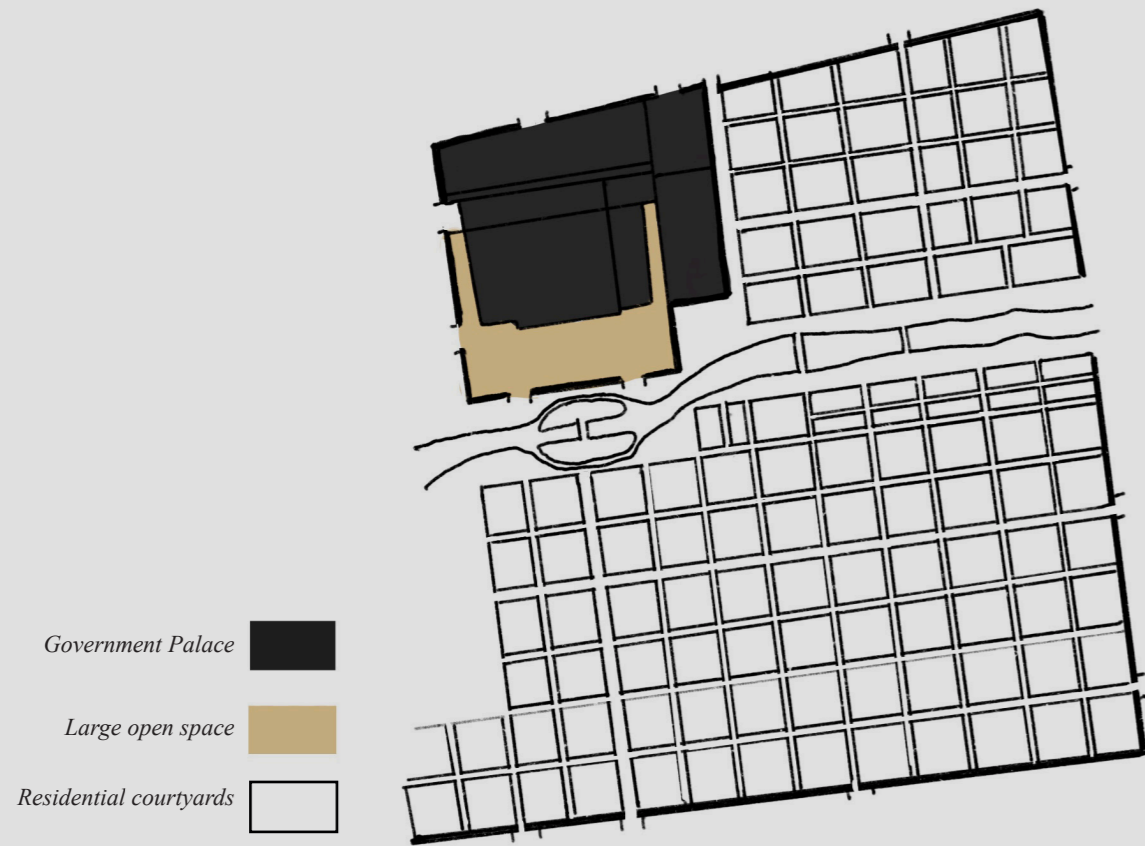


Fig. 2.1.3. Luo, Y. 2025, plan of the capital city Luoyang in Sui dynasty (581-519 AD)

2.2. The feudal dynasties: 1064 BC to 1912 AD

In This period, women in cities were isolated from urban public space. Confucianism, which also emerged in the Zhou Dynasty, educated women to self-identified as the property of man, and restrained them into private sphere in the following 3000 years. The courtyard with residential buildings were further divided into a front yard, which connected to the street, and a more isolated back yard, where women lived. (Xu, 2005) Spatial restrictions of women were often strictly enforced, for instance, the regulation in Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) asked unmarried women not leaving the courtyard of their family. (Mao, 2011) The most common social activity for women was visiting their friend's private garden, Yuanlin (园林)¹, in groups, though only the women from upper-class have the opportunity. (Wu, Du, 2020)

In urban environment, women could participate in very limited types of work. Making embroidery was the most common job for women because the full process could be carried out in their homes. It is worth mentioning that there were also a special occupation designated for women. Qinglou (Chinese courtesan houses) differed from Western brothels in that the women working there provided singing, dancing and instrument performances in most cases, and occasionally, prostitution. Kong (2003) believes that some Chinese folk music and dancing were passed down through generations of women.

¹ Yuanlin (园林) refers to the classical Chinese garden. Strictly speaking, the concept of Yuanlin is not equivalent to a garden in western context as it is combined of a group of architectures and a artificial landscape. In a Yuanlin, buildings are regarded as a extension of nature.



Fig. 2.1.4. Liu, S. Song dynasty, Can zhi tu (Drawing of weaving), part

2.3. The collapse of feudal dynasties and the Republic of China: 1840-1949

At around the middle of 19th century, The introduction of Western philosophy had impacted greatly on the Chinese society. From 1840 to the mid-20th century, the rapid nationalization of private Yuanlins, along with the construction of entirely new public squares significantly increased urban spaces designated for leisure. Various of public spaces and new social activities were introduced. After the fall of the last emperor in 1911, authority of the Republic of China opened a large number of private Yuanlins (Chinese garden) to the public, and called them 'parks'. For example, the first park In Guangzhou was established in 1920, converted from the former property of a Qing Dynasty official. Over the following decade, Guangzhou came to have eight parks in total.(Huang, 2014) The Republican government also built numerous new parks across the country, such as Zhongshan Park in Xiamen.(Xu, 2015) In addition, after the Opium War, Western countries established semi-colonies in Chinese port cities such as Shanghai. As the result, the urban centres in these cities changed from imperial palaces and government institutes to commercial area. Central squares in Western style began to appear in China. (Zhou, 2005) At around the same time, commercial leisure spaces such as cinemas and cafés were also introduced to China by the Westerners.



Fig. 2.1.5. Anonymous (1946) Ping'an Square during the Republic of China era, Shenyang [Online image]

2.3. The collapse of feudal dynasties and the Republic of China: 1840-1949

As a result of the nationalization of Yuanlins, women's recreational activities in private space had extended into public space. At first, public space activities were primarily initiated by upper-class women and female students who had returned from overseas. These women began to host tea gatherings in parks, dance with their partners in public rather than in private homes, attend theatres that had previously been inaccessible to women, and watch films in newly established cinemas. (Shao, 2006) Furthermore, women began to organize reading clubs in public spaces (normally café or parks), collectively engaging with the latest information of the time. Through discussions, speeches, and other forms of Spontaneous social activities, they contributed to the formation of public discourse, thereby further enhancing women's social status. (Qiao, Wang, 2020) The success of these activities mobilized lower-class women in urban areas. In 1930s, working-class women were also seen in groups in the parks, as long as they paid the entrance tickets. (Huang, 2014)



Fig. 2.1.6. Anonymous, n.d. Women visiting the previous Royal garden, Beijing [Online image]



Fig. 2.1.7. Ye, Z. 1934, The front door of Women's Social Event, Shanghai [Online image]

2.4. People's Republic of China: 1949-

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the planning model for urban public spaces completely followed the instruction of the Soviet Union. The traditional social functions of streets were subordinated to traffic circulation, resulting in the widening of roadways. More and more large squares and government buildings were constructed, and were criticized for occupying excessive amounts of urban land. (Zhou, 2005) At the same time, the collective residential community learned from the Soviet Union became the mainstream living style in Chinese cities. These neighbourhoods put residences, workplaces, and social welfare institutions within a walking distance, surrounded by walls to make them isolated from street, to meet the extreme pursuit of work efficiency and usage of crowded urban spaces. (Zhao, et al, 2018) This kind of residential model later developed into the most common living community: Xiaoqu, after the 1980s when the market economy entered China. (ibid) The emergence of Xiaoqu marked a further expansion of residential areas with public characteristics, blurring the boundaries between urban public space and private territory, since the residential area could accommodate more group activities. For instance, due to the general lack of sport venues, residents engage in fitness and leisure activities within Xiaoqu.



Fig. 2.1.8. Anonymous, 1956, The residential neighbourhood in No.1 National cotton factory, Beijing, [Online image]

2.4. People's Republic of China: 1949-

During the Mao's era, China was a radical collectivist society and has a great influence on today's Chinese culture and social structure. However, driven by politics, lower-class women in cities received more job opportunities and started to appear in public spaces in the form of communities. In 1949, 95% of women were illiterates and these lower class women were hardly able to secure employment in a male-dominated urban environment. (Wang, 2010) However, due to the high demand for labour, following the launch of the Great Leap Forward movement in 1958, the lower class women in both urban and rural areas were mobilized to work in factories, oil fields, and other industries. In some fields, the number of female workers even surpassed their male counterparts. Oil extraction teams formed completely by women in some cases performed better than mixed-gender teams, because female workers could receive more attention and respect within women-only teams. (Jin, 2006) Later, during the Cultural Revolution movement (1966-1976), young women, inspired and mobilized by propaganda of the Communist Party, took to the streets in large groups to participate in political struggles. They even engaged in physical violence in public, which had been unthinkable in traditional Chinese society. For the generation of women, participating publicly at that time collectively was a source of pride and supporting the political leader Mao. (Gao, 2006) In terms of the relationship between women and public space, the extent to which women occupied public space during this period was unprecedented in Chinese history.



Fig. 2.1.9. Anonymous, n.d, Women feel pride of their work, [Online image]

3. People of square dancing

Who are exactly the dancers in Chinese public square?

Based on observations by myself, my friends and relatives in Chongqing and other cities, square dancing participants are predominantly middle-aged women. The group participating in square dancing is often referred as Dama (大妈)¹ on Chinese news media, a term that literally denotes middle-aged and elderly women. In an article about the stigmatization of Chinese older women, researcher Yang (2014) found more than one quarter of the mentioning of ‘Dama’ were related to ‘square’ on CCTV² news and Ifeng news³. The author argued that square dancing became one of the main materials for older women being stigmatized in mainstream media. Additionally, in the past decade, a lot of studies have clearly investigating the composition of square dance groups in multiple cities. To identify the common characteristics of this group on a national scale, I examined the data from the selected previous case studies about square dancing groups in cities of varying population. For easily presenting, I have numbered these studies:

Study No.	City	area in China	Population (million)	research arthor	research year
1	Shanghai	East	24.9	Yang, Qin	2023
2	Wuhan	Central	13.7	Dai	2011
3	Suzhou	East	13	Zhu, Li	2021
4	Taiyuan	North	5.5	Qiu	2013
5	Nanping	South	2.6	Huang, Lin Sun	2011

Table 1. Referenced researches

The gender tendencies presented by these studies are:

Study No.	women proportion (%)
1	95
2	76
3	/
4	all research participants are women
5	85

Table 1. The Gender character of Square Dancing

The age tendencies presented by these studies are:

Study No.	middle age and elderly proportion (%)
1	no data but mentioning the main group are 40-60
2	90.56
3	all research participants are over 55
4	all research participants are over 45
5	77.9

Table 1. The Age character of Square Dancing

The studies have confirmed that the core members of square dance are middle-aged and older women. In the following sections, I will analyse why square dance appeals particularly to its typical participants, focusing on the factors of gender and age.

¹ The term is used so generally that even wikipedia of square dancing and Dama refer to each other. It can be said that the image of mid-age and elder Chinese women and square dancing are becoming one.

² The news platform established by China Media Group.

³ One of the most influential news media in Mainland China, Hongkong and Taiwan.

3.1. Why do square dancing appeal to women

Study No.2 has mentioned, some other activities in public squares which also contribute to fitness and social interaction, such as Taichi and martial arts, are preferred by men. So I argue that dance is the activity that has a specific attraction to women. While square dance is difficult to categorize as a specific genre of dance, it is characterized by a very distinctive feature: collective performance in public spaces.

The anthropologists in western countries have operated a lot of research on the relationship between dance and gender. Scholar Reed (1998) claimed in her article 'The Politics and Poetics of Dance' that dancing is a form of performance that supports the gender identity of women. In the history chapter, I have shown that in China, dancing might be originated from a collective activities used for ritual ceremonies in matriarchal society. Later in the feudal dynasties, dancing was also a method for women to amuse men in power. Therefore, In the context of China, under the impact of traditional culture, it is fair to consider that women have greater adaptability and acceptance of dancing than man.

On the other hand, some sociologist have criticized on the 'gender gaze' over dancing activities. (Thomas, 1993) However, outside of theatre, the collective dance in public space might have more positive significance for women dancers. Eğrikavuk (2017) stated a viewpoint in her research about women collectively performing belly dance in public space in Istanbul that:

'I would also like to imagine that this form of collective dancing could re-voice our bodies and our identities in the way it was voiced once and start a new form of communication and existing in public space.'

In the context of China, where women have also been subjected to the constraints of traditional culture for a long time, square dancing has the similar significances for Chinese women. As a women-dominated communal activity, the collective nature may empower dancers to resist external judgment more confidently. Square dancing groups perform in urban public spaces in ways that could resonate with onlookers, allowing them to attract new members and expand their community continuously. Accordingly, it is the essence of square dance as a collective dancing performance that appeals more and more women.

3.2. Why do square dancing appeal to elderly women

Dai (2016) was opposite to many researchers, who thought the core group of the dancers are older women under the influence of the collectivist movement in their early years, and that's why they tend to have strong self-expression in public space. For the studied conducted around 2010, I agree that the core groups, women in their 50s and 60s, might have attended or been affected by those movement and feel more confident to occupy the squares. However, the core group in 2020s and the younger participant were unlikely to have a direct experience in that period. That means the square dancing behaviour has been developed in to an independent collective activity and passed down to the younger generation among dancers. Thus, I think the aging demographic of dancing participants is more related to China's retirement system and the rapid urbanization.

The impact of retirement system is particularly obvious, for example, study No.3 has pointed out the participants in 45-55 attended less frequently than older women because Chinese women retired at the age of 55.

The influence of urbanization on the composition of square dance groups is more subtle. Wang (2018) has argued that the stigmatization and controversy or square dancing resulted from the dislocation between the phenomenon and the expectation of urban public space held by dominant discursive groups in urban environment: the youth and the middle class, who were expecting quiet and organized public spaces¹. Urbanization rate in China increased from 17.9% in 1978 to 65.2% in 2022 (Lv, 2023), which means that many dance participates have, at some point in their lives, undergone a living environment change from open fields to densely built high-rise residential buildings. Based on my own experiences, I assume it is the lack of open space in urban planning, combined with the widespread of digital devices and internet technologies in 21st century, has led to a generational gap on living styles in Chinese cities: younger people who grew up in cities generally don't experience in participating in spontaneous activities in open public spaces. Unlike the youth, older urban residents have not shifted their social interactions into internet, so the limited public spaces around them became vital sites to establish connection with the public world. Participating in highly collective interactive activities such as square dancing indeed provide a good means for older individuals to build and maintain stable interpersonal relationships in urban environments.

¹ Since the Noise Pollution Law is the only rigid regulation that can be applied on square dance, if people feel offended by the way how dancers use public space, most of the time they have no sufficient excuses to accuse them for disturbing the public.

4. Places of square dancing

What kinds of space are occupied by square dancing?

Square dancing can happen everywhere in cities and towns, only if an open public spot is available for the general public, and have no specific management of behaviours. In this chapter I will list some representative types of the dancing places by observing and redrawing the space in an architectural perspective. The four categories of space are public squares, commercial squares, spare land in residential neighbourhoods and the urban negative space, from which I choose by different physical characters, publicness, and ownership. It should be noted, commercial squares and residential neighbourhood is not public spaces in narrow sense. I applied the a non-binary definition approach of public space from Glover and Johnson (2013), which considers the space making its user 'experience leisure in public' as public space for research. In each case study, after giving the description, I will analyse the potential reasons why square dancing could become the primary activity in these places during the post-dinner time period.

Due to the practical limitations, the analysis of dancing spots is working with the data that I collect from my hometown, the city of Chongqing. Although the previous researches support that dancing activities in different cities share a high similarity, the analysis in this chapter has a certain degree of geographical limitations considering the differences in local regulations all over the nation.



fig. 3.1 Anonymous, 2024, "Elderly women dancing in a city square"
[Online image]

To summarise, in terms of participants, square dancing exhibits a clear and reasonable tendency toward female and elderly representation. The demographic composition has finally led them to a cohesive and self-identifying community. From both gender and age perspectives, square dancing challenges the dominant discourse of urban public space. In last century, theories about urban spaces always emphasised the reflection of the usage of public spaces of citizens on their the political right. In 21st century, along with the development of internet, TV and other mass media, physically occupying the public space is no more the only way to announce the discourse over cities. (Amin, 2008) Therefore, in my opinion, square dance is a collective resistance through which the older women are trying to compete with the mainstreams discursive power in Chinese cities and reclaim the urban space.



fig. 4.1 Zhao L. 2025, Day-time activities in People's square, Chongqing

4.1. Public squares

To distinguish public square from other open space, I only put the place with name Guangchang (广场) under this section. State-owned public squares are usually seen in the centre of a city or next to the building of local governments. they always have large expanse of unobstructed open space as they are originated from the layout of ancient palace in front of government offices. On the other hand, They absorbed many features from central squares in Western cities, and open for public activities. Even though these squares were initially constructed with the intention of political display, their spacious open areas have become the preferred locations for urban residents to engage in fitness activities. The following example is the People's Grand Auditorium of Chongqing.

Size and shape:

The square is about 25,000 m² in total, locating between the Auditorium of the government of Chongqing and the Museum of Chongqing in the centre of the old city

Ownership and publicness:

it is state-owned, open to the public.

Activities:

In the day-time of weekdays, hawkers who sells snack and fruits can be seen on the boundary where the greenly and open space meet, while other activities such as playing badminton and playing giant spinning tops take places more in the central area. Same as most of national owned squares in other cities, the People's square is a travel attraction. In the night time, the above mentioned activities are also observed, as well as several square dancing groups.



fig. 4.2 Zhao L. 2025, Square dancing in People's square, Chongqing



fig. 4.3 Zhao, L. 2025, Square dancing in People's square, Chongqing

Square dancing:

In the night, There are several dancing groups in the People's square of Chongqing. Dancing group 1 and 2 (seeing in the sketch) are close to each other and facing the same direction. Dancing group 3 is on the other side of the square. Although the dancers in SOPS have to compete with people doing other activities (ex. Taichi, badminton), we can see all of them success to take the most central position of the square. When the government have meetings in the auditorium next to the square, dancers were temporarily expelled due to the noise they created. However, they quickly returned once the meetings has finished.

Possible Factors for the success of square dancing in public square:

The dominance of square dancing in large public squares can be primarily attributed to the advantage of the number of its participants. Among activities of similar leisure and fitness functions, when there are no spatial restrictions, the one with a larger number of participants are more likely to occupy advantageous spaces. Apparently, activities comparable to square dancing in terms of participant numbers and spatial needs (eg. Ball games) require specialized sports facilities and equipment. In contrast, square dancing requires nothing more than a portable speaker, making it far more accessible. As the result, dancing groups often take most central space, and push participants of other activities (ex. Badminton, which take the centre in day-time) to the edge of the space. They also expand their groups by absorbing onlookers surrounding them.



fig. 4.4 Luo. Y, 2025, Drawing of dancing groups on People's square, Chongqing

4.2. Commercial squares

Commercial squares refer large area of open spaces in a commercial centre, usually next to a shopping hall in Chinese cities. Not just do these squares look different from public squares, they also have distinctive ownership and behaviour control. Although commercial squares are said to fully open to the public, activities other than shopping are often unwelcome by shop owners, and tend to show a certain degree of convergence. (Franck, Paxson, 1989) Square dance is often unwelcomed in commercial areas. For instance, in 2019, Guangxi Province, some guards of a shopping mall have used a fire hose to drive a group of square dancers away from the commercial square. (Xu, 2019) The case study I choose for Commercial square is plaza in front of Ucheng paradise walk mall.

Size and shape:

the Square is a 4000 m² trapezoid, next to the Paradise walk shopping mall and on the opposite of the provincial Fine Art Institute.

Ownership and publicness:

It is owned by Longhu company, open to the public.

Activities:

In the day-time, the majority of people passing by the square aims to go shopping in the mall. There are also fruit hawkers on the square. Most of the customers are residence from nearby neighbourhood and students from the institute. In the night, except above activities, people come for square dancing and other fitness activities.



fig. 4.5 Zhao, L. 2025, Square dancing in front of Ucheng paradise walk mall, Chongqing



fig. 4.6 Zhao, L. 2025, Square dancing in front of Ucheng paradise walk mall, Chongqing

Square dancing:

The main square dancing group here is the largest among all 4 case studies, with 4 leading dancers and approximately 150 people in which the core members wear red-white uniform. Core members tend to stand in the front row, while other members without uniforms move to the side. As for the dancers always facing away from the shops, I assume that it is to prevent neon signs from disturbing the dancers to follow the movements of the four leaders at the front.

Possible Factors for the success of square dancing in public square:

In addition to the collective advantage of square dancing mentioned in the previous case, the group in this square is larger, more organized, and more hierarchically structured than the groups at People's Square, enabling the activities to be carried out more efficiently. Even so, the dancers need to compromise with the owners of the space. Standing too close to the stores may lead to dissatisfaction among shop owners and customers, which explains why the dancers position themselves closer to the roadway and be in a more orderly formation. This distribution seems to vividly depict the blurred boundaries between completely public and private spaces in a commercial area.

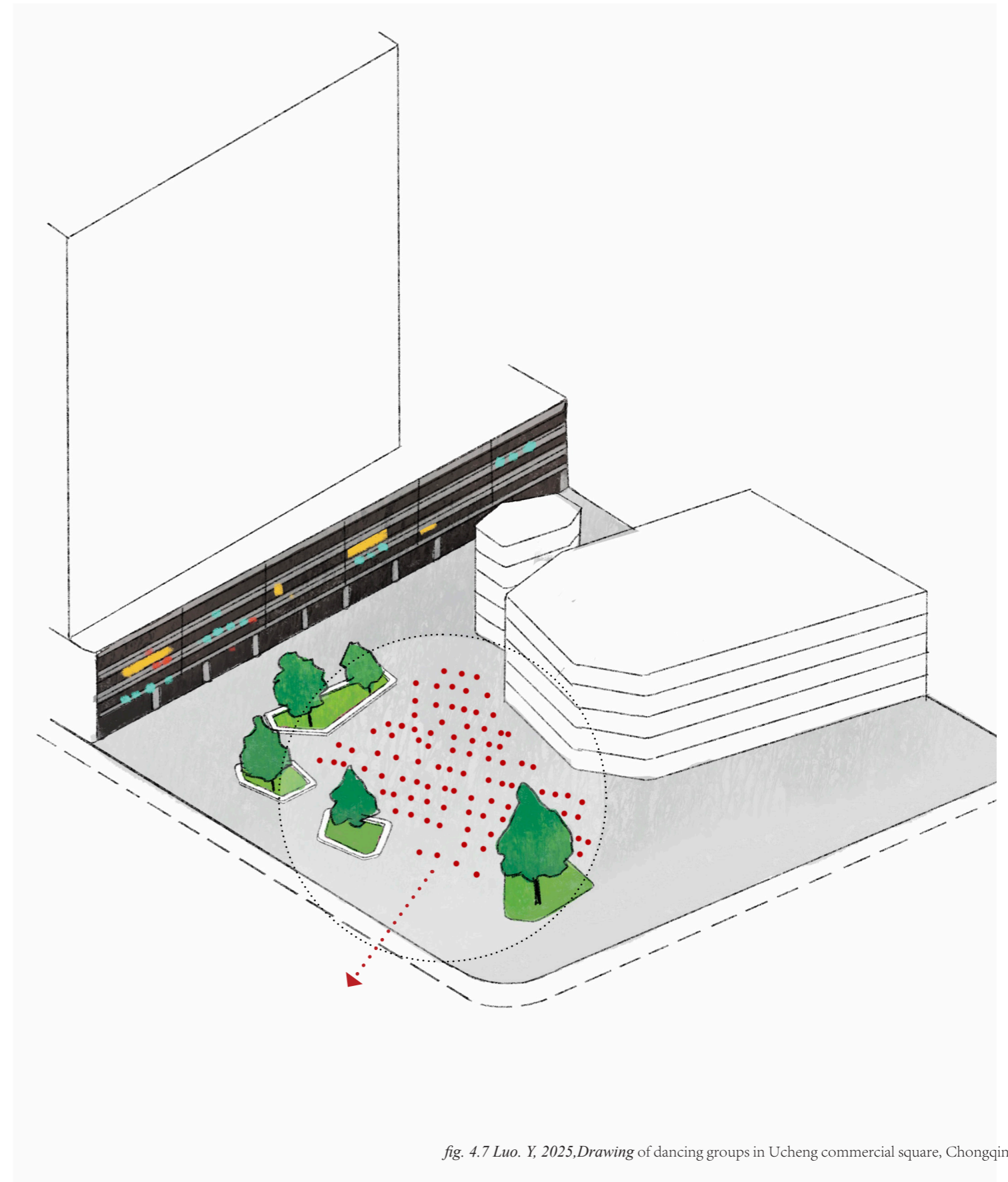


fig. 4.7 Luo. Y, 2025, Drawing of dancing groups in Ucheng commercial square, Chongqing

4.3. Spare lands in residential communities

In Chinese cities, as mentioned in chapter 2, the most common type of neighbourhood unit is called Xiaoqu (小区). The collective living concept of Xiaoqu is born from the Soviet Union, while the landscape within the neighbourhood design learnt much from traditional Chinese philosophy. A typical Xiaoqu is a densely populated residential area consisting of several multi-story or high-rise residential buildings, with fences at the boundaries to separate it from public space. Unlike westerners who see the public space as urban living room, Chinese people prefer to enclose space into courtyards and even move the natural beauty into the courtyards to achieve self-protection. (Zhou, 2005) Therefore, most of the communal ground-level space in Xiaoqu is used for artificial landscapes, including rockeries and man-made lakes, which resulting a shortage of open spaces for activities. In order to attract customers, the real estate or the property management company try provides their residents with small pieces multifunctional open space. Due to its convenient location and relatively stable population, the free space in Xiaoqu becomes the most popular spot for small groups square dancing. The case study I choose is the open space in Caidiecheng Xiaoqu in Chongqing.

Size and shape:

The square is an about 45m*45m square with 25 columns left from after the demolished structure. As it is located in a Xiaoqu, it is surrounded by high-rise residential buildings.

Ownership and publicness:

It is considered to be communal space. Theoretically, the free land in Xiaoqu is owned by all residents of the neighbourhood, so it should be considered as collectively owned private space. However, the gate control of a Xiaoqu is to restrict the entry and exit of vehicles, there is no restriction on people walking in and out. Practically, open space in Xiaoqu can be used by anyone with leisure purpose.

Activities:

In both day-time and night, there are people passing by, and kids playing around the columns. The property company also organise activities such as giving questionnaire to improve their service occasionally. The dancing group here dance either in the afternoon or in the night.



fig. 4.8 Square dancing group in Caidiecheng Xiaoqu, Chongqing, photographed by Dan Wang, 2025



fig. 4.9 Square dancing group in Caidiecheng Xiaoqu, Chongqing, photographed by Dan Wang, 2025

Square dancing:

The majority of dancers are from Caidiecheng Xiaoqu. To avoid bumping into the columns, they move their legs in smaller movements.

Possible Factors for the success of square dancing in public square:

In Xiaoqu, dancing groups tend to have a more stable member structure, and social relationship among participants are often closer. I argue that the flourishing of square dancing in Xiaoqu communal spaces is related to its residential nature. In the historical section, I demonstrate the fact that Chinese women's bodies and interpersonal relationships have been confined to the private sphere for a long time, and in the traditional labour division in families, women are more responsible for daily life matters. This may have indirectly contributed to modern Chinese women's stronger sense of control over spaces associated with daily life. Another phenomenon that also reflects the important role of women in residential communities is the prominent participation of older women in neighbourhood committees. These committee members are also often referred to as Dama in social media and public discourse. (Xinhua news, 2014) Thus, I think the flourishing of square dancing within Xiaoqu is closely related to women's dependence on residential space.

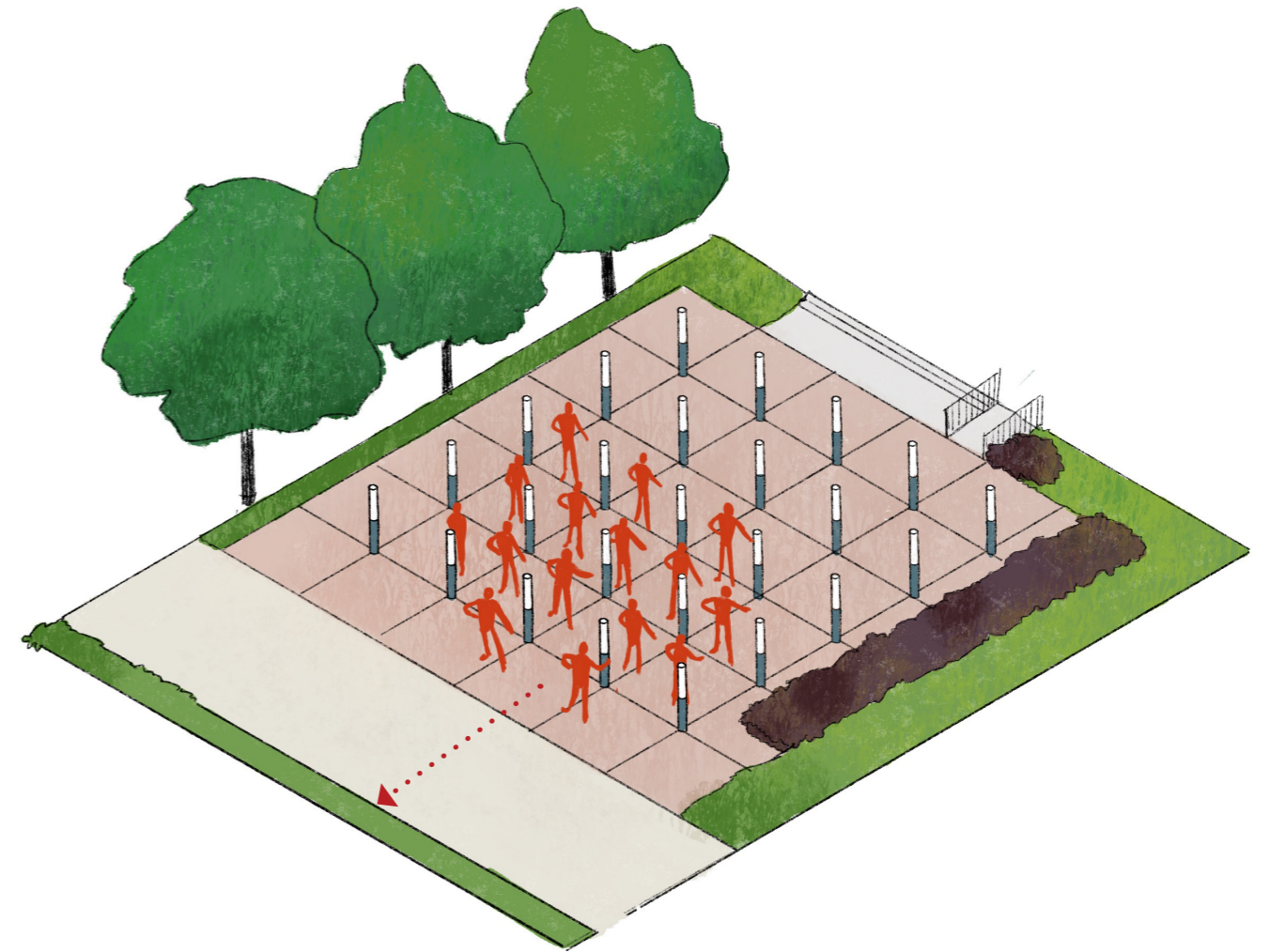


fig. 4.10 Luo. Y, 2025, Drawing of dancing groups on Caidiecheng Xiaoqu, Chongqing

4.4. Urban negative space

Urban negative space is not defined by any unique characteristics, as it is indeed the part of urban planning where functionality is diminished and neglected. Because of the random location and lack of representativeness, reports on square dancing in urban negative space is not as common as the above mentioned places. The functional flexibility of urban negative spaces allows both mainstream and non-mainstream activities to take a place in corners of the city. In other words, this flexibility highlights the social activities which are more intrusive. Here I use the hillside space under the Huanghuayuan Yangtze River bridge as an example.

Size and shape:

the shape of the space is depending on the natural mountainous landscape. It is a platform built on the hillside to connect the main street on the top of the hill and the light rail station.

Ownership and publicness:

It is state-owned, open to the public.

Activities:

Since the space is on the way to the rail station, flow of commuter traffic here is significant. In the day-time, elderly come here to take a rest, have chat with others and play card game and chess. In the night, except square dancing, there are people from different ages doing Taichi, waking dogs and running.



fig. 4.11 Zhao, L. 2025, Dancing group under Huanghuayuan Bridge, Chongqing



fig. 4.12 Zhao, L. 2025, Dancing group under Huanghuayuan Bridge, Chongqing

Square dancing:

The dance groups under the bridge also appear after dinner. The two groups here are taking the relatively side area, leaving sufficient space in the middle for pedestrian passage. They are unable to form the typical square formations because of landscape restriction. Therefore, the dancers are more randomly arranged or in smaller groups.

Possible Factors for the success of square dancing in public square:

The original function of the space was only pedestrian passage. However, because of the unique landscape, the passage was planned as a relatively wide open area, which became a favoured exercise spot for nearby residents. As it is not a typical urban open space, the group of square dancing is comparatively limited. Sometimes, the dancers have to switch space with other activity groups and avoid blocking pedestrians. Instead, they adapt by modifying their formations as well as the size of space they use. To sum up, I think it is the flexibility that enables square dancing to develop even in small-scale urban spaces.

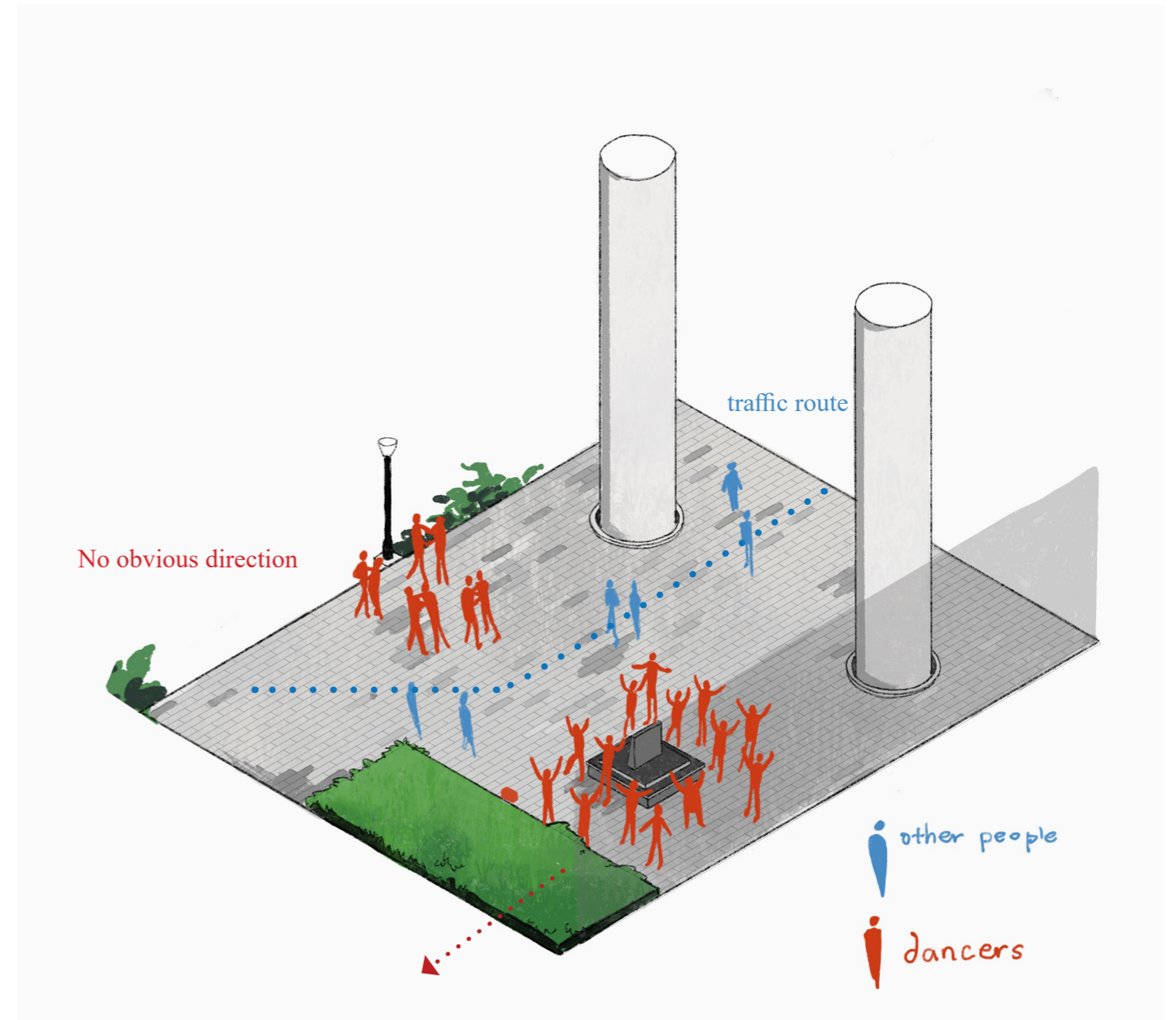


fig. 4.13 Luo. Y, 2025, Drawing of dancing groups under Huanghuayuan Bridge, Chongqing

5. Conclusion

Looking back to the history, the popularity of square dancing may not be a coincidence. Here, I give a brief summary of my understanding of the development of the square dance phenomenon: The core participants of square dancing, middle aged and old women form social communities based on the place where they live. They have chosen collective dance which is an activity favoured by women for a long history, as a means of socialization within the community, as well as a form of leisure and physical exercise in urban public space. Because of the numerical strength and the complex nature of certain urban public spaces, square dancers have managed to extend into and temporarily occupy a variety of public spaces during their activity hours.

On the other hand, contemporary Chinese urban spaces are formed a combination of traditional Eastern residential philosophies and modern spatial planning theories borrowed from the Soviet Union and the West, which provide quite a lot ‘communal’ or ‘intermediate’ space between completely public space and private property. Those different ideologies have led to a debate about how public spaces should be used among different social groups. Unlike some groups who try to control over the city through discourse, older women defend their living style by physically occupying public space. If square dance can be regarded as a means for middle-aged and older women reclaiming the urban space through public performance, it can be argued that they are comparably successful by far.

I admit that whether analysing participants structure or the locations, the number of data and case studies appear insufficient for drawing a nationwide conclusion. Besides, as it is a history research, I have emphasized the impact of historical factors on the locations and participants of square dance, while paid little attention to the dynamic interaction between public space and contemporary culture. In addition, since there are also a small number of men and younger women participate in square dancing, this study inevitably carries the limitation of generalization. Without considering the historical context, it is difficult to fully appreciate the great achievement of elderly women, or other vulnerable groups, in organizing such a widespread leisure activity within Chinese urban public spaces. I believe that this historical perspective on the relationship between square dancers and urban space offers valuable insights that may inspire future research on this topic.



fig. 4.14, 4.15, 4.16 Wu, M, 2025, A popular dancing group in Shapingba park, Chongqing

In Summary, in the perspective of space, the success of square dance in Chinese urban public space is coming from its spatial competitiveness developed from its collective and organizational structure, the agency of its core groups’ (women) over residential neighbourhood, and its flexible spatial requirements. In Chinese cities, it is hard to find another spontaneous leisure activity that could adopt to such distinctive open spaces. In addition, by redrawing the formation of square dance in different space, we can see how the activities adjust itself according to the quality of space.

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