Permeable Frames: Intersections of the Performance, the Everyday, and the Ethical in Chinese Street Singing

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Abstract

Amateur performances of pop classics take place daily in various public spots in Wuhan, China. Audience members reward singers with cash tips; these practices are bound up in personal relationships established as the two parties socialise at and away from the events. Building on Goffmanian notions of frame shifting, I explore how performance, everyday, and ethical realms of experience intersect during these occasions. Boundaries between performance and everyday frames are indistinct in a physical sense and in how participants relate to each other. This in turn feeds into the integration of the performances in participants' ethical lives. Rather than a shifting between these three frames, I see mutual permeability as the basis for the sociality here.

Keywords

Frame analysis; street performance; Chinese pop; Wuhan

Introduction

I am with about twenty other people in a mid-range restaurant in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, celebrating the birthday of A-jia,[1] a singer at one of the street music performances that take place in various spots in the city centre. It is the autumn of 2014, and A-jia is among about fifteen performers who sing each evening at the particular stage they belong to. The format is the same at each of the dozen or so stages I am aware of, the singers taking turns to present classic popular songs every evening, choosing between the accompaniment of either live band or recorded backing tracks for each item they perform. A few of the diners tonight are other female singers, friends from among A-jia's fellow performers. The rest are regular audience members at

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[1] Names in this article have been changed.

the shows, all men in middle age from various walks of life; most around the table tell me they do business (*zuo shengyi*) or are manual workers (*dagongzai*), while one says he is a government official (*ganbu*). They have all been invited to the dinner having developed friendships with A-jia over numerous past performances. Initial contact between members of the audience and performers is established with cash tips handed to the latter while on stage, and connections subsequently grow through the company with which singers reward their benefactors as they mingle in the audience during the songs of their colleagues. Dinner this evening is not only a further opportunity for these friendships to play out, but by treating everyone to the meal, A-jia is also feeding a dynamic of reciprocal obligation that is central to these relationships and in turn is key in shaping the sociality around the performances.

One of the men playing a prominent role in the conversation around the dinner table is Liu Zong (or General Manager Liu). He is the owner of a car-related small business and is responsible for the only instance of advertising I encounter at this kind of performance in Wuhan, when a scrolling message in small red characters is projected onto a screen behind the performers at A-jia's stage. 'Liu Zong's Auto Trade Ltd, for years providing you with new car registrations and MOTs,' begins the message, before it encourages potential customers to contact one of the other singers at this performance stage, calling her 'rock queen Deng Lin.' Liu Zong later explains to me the good relationship he has with Deng, and also with the organiser of the event (personal communication, Wuhan, 8 November 2014)—the opportunity at the shows to build business and social connections is clearly valued by some participants.

At tonight's dinner, though, Liu is meeting another one of the young women in attendance for the first time. I overhear as she introduces herself with her full name, but then she quickly reverts to a nickname, Juanjuan, remembering how singers generally refer to themselves around these events. She explains to Liu that she is nervous and unfamiliar in this company as tonight will be her very first public performance. Juanjuan is A-jia's younger sister and she has only arrived in Wuhan today, for the birthday celebrations. Later she tells me she is considering following in the footsteps of her sister by leaving their home town a few provinces away on the plateau of Guizhou to pursue a living through performing (personal communication, Wuhan, 11 November 2014). A-jia has been doing this for several years but has only been in Wuhan for a matter of months, her career characterised by regular moves from city to city and to different performance contexts whenever opportunities dry up. This kind of existence enables her to

indulge a lifelong but untrained interest in singing. She is primarily motivated, though, by the opportunity to make a living she calls 'a little better' than earnings in the jobs she and her sister have left back at home, working in a furniture factory and selling clothes respectively (personal communication, Wuhan, 27 October 2014). Performing at street events in Wuhan is often a way for singers to find a route out of tough financial circumstances. For A-jia, being far from her husband and small son is made bearable by the income that allows her to travel back quite regularly.

With an audience of more than a hundred people expected this evening, however, the newcomer Juanjuan's anxiety is understandable. I hear Liu Zong offer a few understated words of encouragement: 'You will learn'; already a typical pattern in relationships among singers and audience members is starting to emerge between these new acquaintances. Many in this world explain to me that it often resembles a *qinqing*, the affection between relatives such as a father and daughter.

The dinner ends and all around the table get into shared taxis for a short trip over to the riverside park where A-jia's stage is nestled between the trees. When later she takes her turn to sing in the rotation of performers, each of the men repays the unspoken debts established earlier at the meal, and now through the songs she offers, with generous cash tips. There is a constant flow of gifts from these men and others during the singer's first number on the microphone, a version of 'Nufang de shengming' (Life in full bloom) originally by the mainstream rocker, Wang Feng. A-jia tells me that her personality fits well with rock songs like this, those made famous by male singers, and my impression is that her assertive performance contrasts considerably with the more delicate singing of many of her colleagues. In her thirties, she is slightly older than most, and in recent years she has taken to smoking after meals and when feeling unhappy. The accumulation of life experience, she feels, allows her to bring out the 'implied meaning' (*hanyi*) of the lyrics (personal communication, Wuhan, 27 October 2014). Led by Liu Zong, each gift-giver leaves his position in the audience to approach the stage and press cash into A-jia's palm along with an artificial flower picked up from a container at the front, or to throw a handful of notes into the air above her head like confetti. Many of the individual gifts are probably large enough to cover most of her total outlay for the dinner, and by the end of the song the stage is covered with money, ready for assistants to gather up and count.

What A-jia's performance means to those involved is clearly not only a matter of how the singer and audience communicate during the moments she is on the stage. It follows on from social dynamics set up during this evening's dinner, and also from a history of face-to-face interactions shared between the singer and other participants as they mingle at performances over time. The pattern of these developing relationships is asymmetrical along gender and age lines; almost all singers here are younger women and most (but not all) audience members and gift-givers at the performances are older men. The showy presentation of money brings to mind various overtly sexualised forms of entertainment from around China and Taiwan, especially those involving funeral strippers (Moskowitz 2011) and hostesses who offer sexual services to business clientele alongside karaoke singing (Boretz 2004; Zheng 2006, 2013). Nonetheless, the performances in Wuhan have a modest character in almost every other respect, with restrained ways of dressing and behaving entirely the norm, and audiences routinely contain some parents or grandparents with young children.

The most significant effect of these asymmetries, however, is that the money-exchange practices so central to the shows rest on roles inseparable from gender identities (Horlor 2019). Female singers play up subordinate personas in line with their main goal of gaining favour with men, the primary controllers of the resource they covet, money. Personifying benevolence and support is the complementary responsibility of the male audience member. This echoes accounts of the relations between businessmen and hostesses at those sexualised karaoke venues; in both contexts, the men involved are concerned with communicating something about their character to those around them. In the karaoke bars, it is not enough for these men to simply show they can afford to buy sex with a prostitute; instead they take and financially support hostesses as long-term 'second wives' (Zheng 2006). Doing so presents various opportunities to prove their integrity and strength to the potential business collaborators they invite to the singing sessions. On Wuhan's streets too, the performances give men the chance to feel and show themselves to be supporting the struggling singers. These gender dynamics are foundational to what I call below the 'ethical' dimensions of the relationships.

In many ways, Wuhan's street performances are quite typical of what has been called 'presentational performance' (Turino 2008). There is a reliable distinction between the specialist sound producers and the listeners, and a session plays out with a predictable structure, rather than with highly inclusive singing and playing that unfolds along more spontaneous lines. Within this

framework, though, these performances do not constitute a 'bounded sphere of interaction' in the sense that Ruth Stone elaborates in her classic study of the 'music events' of the Kpelle people, an ethnic group in Liberia (1982: 2). In Stone's context, there is a clear distinction between what belongs to the music event and what does not, and the boundaries between the two are infused with significance. Some individuals in physical proximity to the music-making but not taking an active part are considered so peripheral as not even to *exist* within the sphere of the music here (Stone 1982: 83). On Wuhan's streets, on the other hand, there are various ways in which activity and relations from outside the immediacy of the presentational domain are important. Boundaries between performance and non-performance are ambiguous, and these realms respond directly to each other, as activities, relationships, and modes of behaving straddle them or blur distinctions significantly.

This phenomenon is partly a feature of the performance settings: the shows take place in ordinary public spaces, such as street corners, parks, squares, and derelict spots. Wuhan is a provincial capital city with a population of around ten million people, and these performances stand alongside various forms of vending, leisure, and performing activities found filling its streets at many moments of a typical day. Common music events include busking, practising of instruments by individuals and small groups, informal karaoke sessions, and square dancing. Each of these gatherings, not least the street pop performances, take place in openly accessible city territory. Members of the public drift freely around events' outer limits, which are constantly in flux rather than clearly demarcated in a physical or any other sense. This means that actors from outside of the immediate performance sphere—people, sounds, physical bodies—regularly penetrate and influence how events play out.

Furthermore, there is little sense of social division between performers and spectators. For the two parties to relate extensively to each other on a face-to-face basis is not only common practice at and away from the events but could be considered the very raison d'être of the whole endeavour. Although when talking on the microphone between songs, singers tend to highlight enthusiasm for performing as the key reason for their participation, in private they reveal different motivations. During one online conversation I shared with a singer, for example, she tells me that she has been unwell recently but that taking a day off 'would be to lose a chance to get acquainted with the spectators' (online communication, 10 November 2014). Mixing with members of the audience is just as central to what performers do as anything that takes place on

the stage. It is at these moments that singers lay the foundations for gifts they receive later, these relationships certainly outweighing any qualities of the music in singers' perceptions of the important drivers of gift-giving (Horlor 2019). The parties often get to know each other away from the performances, so interactions during the singing itself do not reflect the distance between star and fan roles seen in other popular music performance contexts (Bradby 2017).

How exactly, though, do influences and patterns of behaviour from within and beyond the immediate sphere of the staged performance intersect and contribute to the meaning that the music has for these people? How are boundaries between these spheres crossed, eroded, and transcended? In this article, I examine the grey areas where music performance and other realms of experience meet, highlighting in particular how the *relationships* between them impact upon music-based sociality. The indistinctness and permeability of these divisions are important to understanding how these music events become focal points for interpersonal and financial interactions in the public spaces of Wuhan.

Permeable frames

My discussion of how these different realms intersect has its foundations in dramaturgical understandings of social interaction developed notably by Erving Goffman. The central idea in Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) is that social experience is divided into different spheres of reality, or *frames*. These divisions are based on different ways that someone may take a situation to be *real* or how, when faced with a particular sequence of activity, they answer the question 'What is it that's going on here?' (Goffman 1974: 8). Participants in a conversation, for example, might understand themselves to be in an informal chat, a business meeting, an argument, or something else. How they behave may depend on which of these frames they recognise, and each frame may bring its own conventions, shaping various facets of action and language. Sometimes in social activity, frame definitions are self-evident or unproblematic, but at other times more complexities become apparent. A conversation that appears at face value to be an argument, for example, might sometimes be reframed as a joke, a game, a deception, or even a dream, and a significantly different set of meanings and ways of engaging might now emerge (Goffman 1974: 9).

When applied to street music, Goffman's theory offers a means to consider how the activity occurring on a stage relates to the unfolding of off-stage life around it. Examining the qualities of a 'performance frame' highlights how norms and expectations associated with performance are set up, and how the boundaries of this definition might be significant. Richard Bauman famously approached this through examining differences between verbal communication in performance and in other frames. According to Bauman, a distinguishing feature of performance frames is that verbal utterance here can be understood as a focus for aesthetic evaluation, not only as an instrument conveying straightforward linguistic content; in other words, expression in performance is meant to be judged for the artistic successes it forges, as appropriate to the genres involved (Bauman 1984: 11). As such, the performance frame is not defined just by characteristics of what is said or done on a stage, but by a wider communicative *process*. How people relate to each other, and the behavioural norms for all levels of involvement—including those of performers, audience members, and others—are part of this process, and so it may become useful to think of the performance frame more broadly, in terms of its qualities as a *social realm*.

In street singing, that which occurs on the stage is not isolated from other activities in the same way that it might be in dedicated performance rooms, or when tickets or guest lists clarify who is included in, and who is excluded from, the social realm. As a result, scholarship on how frames are shifted—how an understanding of the situation can be broken, problematised, or overwritten by another—is particularly pertinent. Bauman shows, for example, how spoken language might play a part in frame shifting. He notes that a common strategy for establishing the collective definition of a situation as performance, or for switching to this definition, is the 'disclaimer of performance'. This involves someone signalling the beginning of a period of expression they mean for others to appraise aesthetically by the very act of offering humble warnings about the inexpertness of what is to follow (Bauman 1984: 21–2). More recent scholarship on performance takes up the significances of when frames shift in music experiences. Jooyoung Lee (2009), for example, examines street-corner rap 'battles' in Los Angeles and notes two categories of response to the ritual insults characteristically traded between co-present rappers as part of their raps. The most common is recognition that the insults are part of a 'play' frame and are not to be taken seriously. This is mainly achieved through the nonverbal cues offered by givers to the targets of their insults. When these cues fail to produce the intended

effects, the second category of response is rage and violence. It seems that behaviour meant to sustain shared understandings around the framing of activity is important in holding together normal social dealings.

A way of extending these ideas to the broader street music context, where unpredictable circumstances offer constant challenges to performance frame definitions, is to consider that frames may have different degrees of purity. According to Ken Mullen (1985), a purer performance frame sees participants' attention more exclusively consumed by that which occurs on the stage and less by alternative activities. Mullen's account of music performances in pubs sees bands competing for audience attention with conversation and pub games. The performance frame here is less pure than at, say, the archetypal concert-hall recital, where the attention of all present is supposed to be focused entirely on the stage. Mullen talks of the influence of factors from outside the immediacy of the staged performance as revealing 'inadequacies of the frame' (Mullen 1985: 190), suggesting frame impurity to be a hindrance to the musician or a barrier to the effervescence of the event. Indeed, evidence from similar music occasions suggests that this interpretation is shared by musicians. Those who play in restaurants, for example, have spoken of building strategies for reviving audience attention, strategies that include playing strikingly contrasting pieces in succession or systematically varying their position within the performance space (O'Donnell and Henderson 2017: 61).

But are 'pure' performance frames a criterion of success—or indeed desirable—in all kinds of performance context, especially those further removed from the norms of Western concert music culture? The assumption seems to be based on an understanding put forward by Victor Turner and Edith Turner that '[t]o frame is to discriminate a sector of sociocultural action from the general ongoing process of a community's life' (Turner and Turner 1982: 34). This implies the presence of some kind of default frame (in this case, the 'ongoing process of life'), a baseline from which heightened activity such as performance might deviate through the forging of a distinct frame. Mullen's account actually has this the other way around, with the baseline state in the pub scenario taken to be the 'performance frame'. But the effect is similar, the idea again being that alternative orientations—in this case the pub audience's conversations and games—are *divergences* from the baseline. More recent work in performance studies, though, has questioned the idea that the 'everyday world' frame is an 'anchor' for everything else (Richards 2001: 67), challenging the notion of natural or default frames, and by extension, the

usefulness of taking frames to be arranged hierarchically. Stefan Fiol's analysis of how Himalayan possession ritual videos are received puts forward an alternative, the notion of 'dual framing' (2010). Fiol seeks to interpret how viewers of these videos switch between absorbing them as media or entertainment experiences at certain moments, and as ritual events at others. His analysis draws partly on familiar ideas about the processes of reframing that take place when an unexpected occurrence in a video results in participants switching from one mode of experience to the other. Specifically, though, I take up the invitation to extend this scheme by considering how 'performance contexts draw upon multiple frames simultaneously and blur the boundaries between them' (Fiol 2010: 41).

I call on Georgina Born's discussions of 'nested assemblages', in which she considers how public spaces can be embedded within private ones, and vice versa (2013). Someone listening to music through headphones while in a train carriage, for instance, can enjoy a private mode of music listening that is nested within a wider public experience. In this scenario, both realms continue to shape the experience and neither one is extinguished or made impure by the other's existence. Should a train guard approach to check tickets, the traveller might negotiate this social demand without compromising their personal attention, effectively attending to both the private music-listening frame and the public train-travelling one simultaneously. It seems that *shifting* may not be the only process available to those engaged in framing behaviour.

Victor Turner and Edith Turner have indeed touched on the idea of frames 'nesting' within other frames (1982: 35–39). They describe organising, in the course of a pedagogic exercise, a staged wedding ritual in which anthropology department students and staff members played the roles of participants and guests; through this example they illustrate a model of frames organised in concentric layers (Figure 1). The largest frame, encompassing everything else, is the pedagogic one; all participants are aware that everything they do is part of an exercise in gathering data for learning, and this definition colours the whole activity. Inside this is a frame in which people understand themselves to be play-acting their assigned roles, a further layer in which what they do is 'ritual' (the wedding, taken at face value), and at the centre is a frame where the 'real' relationships between the people (not the characters they are playing) continue to shape the activity.

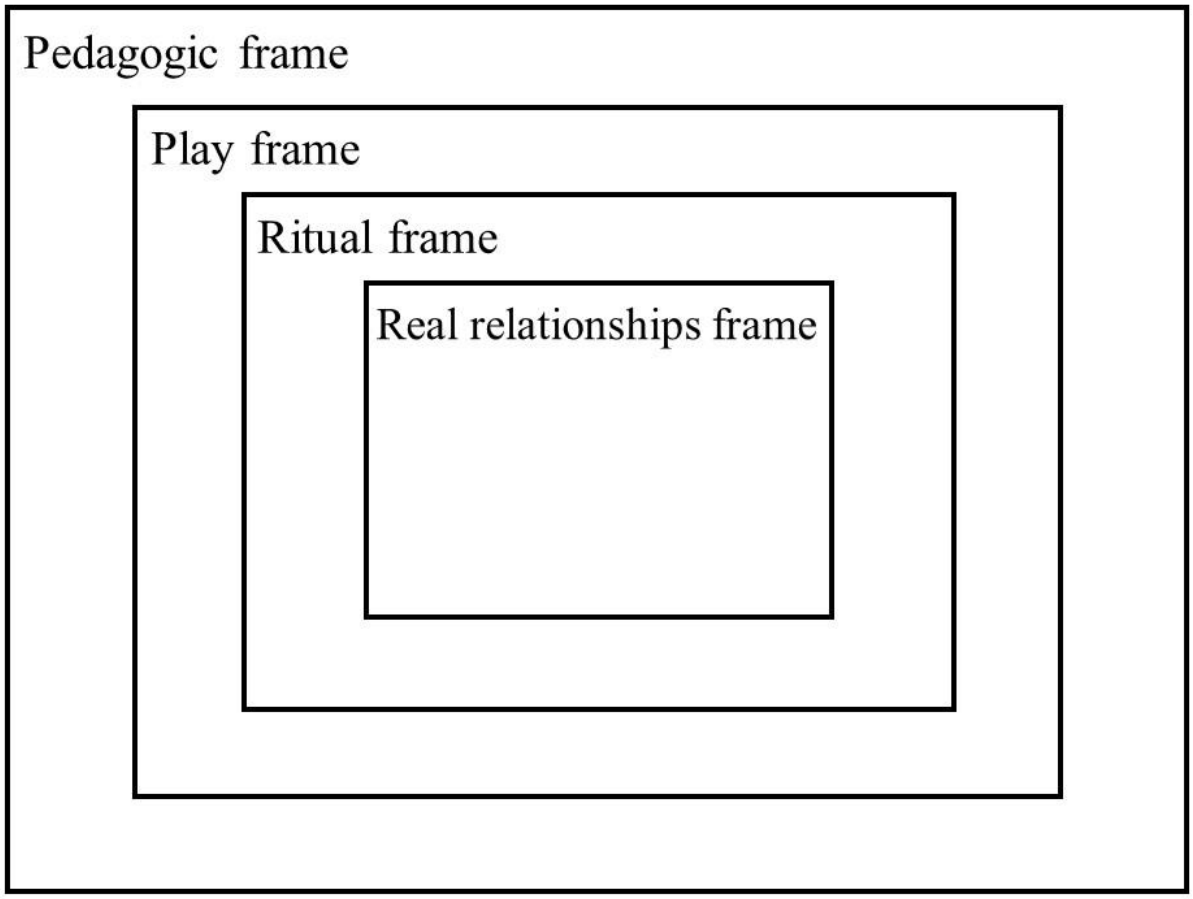

Figure 1: Nested frames for a staged wedding, based on Turner and Turner (1982: 36).

While this model certainly acknowledges that frames can operate simultaneously, does it capture effectively how they intersect? Is it useful, for instance, to imagine the frame at the centre only being *informed* by the outer frames and not *informing* them too? And do the hierarchical implications of this model stand up in scenarios less contrived than the wedding exercise? Street singing in Wuhan is a suitable context in which to explore these issues. Frames do not shift in clear-cut ways, and they interrelate haphazardly rather than hierarchically. Nonetheless, the qualities of these relationships are important in shaping how the events inspire close and recurring contact between people, in ways perhaps rarely seen in other forms of public-space music, such as busking. The multiplicity and interrelatedness of frames is the defining characteristic of the music-making and of the social life surrounding these shows in Wuhan. My intention is to examine the nature of frame boundaries and intersections by highlighting how

concerns and orientations from different realms of experience feed into each other to produce these occasions.

To make the task manageable, I focus on three frames: the performance frame, the everyday frame, and the ethical frame. This means leaving aside various others that could easily feed into the picture, such as frames of finance, work, friendship, and so on. The performance frame is a definition of experience in which those in performance roles are understood as offering strips of heightened expressive behaviour for the aesthetic appraisal of people in audience roles. Activity in this frame aims to maintain a continuous flow of such behaviour. The everyday frame, in my understanding here, encompasses action not principally concerned with the performance frame; it might also include the action of people and things not primarily features of the performance at all. The ethical frame highlights the activity's part in the relations of virtue, mutual support, benevolence, and reciprocity around which the money-giving practices are built. It is a reciprocity a little different from some well-documented cases in anthropology. Steven Feld's famous account of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, for instance, proposes that the reciprocal sharing of food and material wealth is a basic norm of this society. To share is to 'actualize' kinship, and the gifts 'come to stand for what is deeply felt in human relationships' (Shieffelin, quoted Feld 1982: 29). In Wuhan, rather than a symbol of feeling, the exchange of money is itself the main end in the reciprocal dynamics. The ethical dimensions attached to the money gifts can be read simply as a means of motivating members of an audience to pay for a form of entertainment without any formalised system of remuneration. As such, the ethical frame is linked to the 'gift economy', an established mechanism of social life in contemporary China, in which people give gifts to those in positions of influence with the aim of gaining reciprocal favours (Horlor 2019; Yang 1989). In the street music context, performers deliberately evoke the ethical dimensions associated with this kind of reciprocal practice for direct financial gain rather than for leverage in wider social life.

My analysis is based on participation in over fifty of these performances in 2014. I spent time at a dozen or so recurrent stages, probably accounting for most if not all of those operating at the time. I came to these performances as an audience member, and quickly became acquainted with singers who would approach me as part of their hosting role. This led to friendly relations with accompanying musicians, emcees, stage bosses, and audience members. Being embedded in audiences during shows meant an extensive opportunity to participate in and to

observe the constant micro-conversations shared by singers and spectators all around the spaces as the former circulated. I went on to meet the singers during the day for meals on a one-to-one basis, and occasionally joined them in their other daily activities to get a sense of their routines, including shopping for clothes to wear on stage. I got to know them, together with musicians and audience members, away from the shows at dinners such as the one for A-jia's birthday, and I continued conversations on their favoured phone messaging and online chat platforms (all of this communication taking place in Mandarin Chinese). Along with the discursive themes I heard expressed on the microphone at the events, these conversations were the major sources for my understanding of the ethical dimensions linked to the performances. Once or twice, I gave small cash gifts to new singers I met, experiencing first-hand the typical kinds of exchanges they shared with their customers, and gaining an understanding of the tactics they used in order to develop the relationships. My participation also gave me the opportunity to observe repeatedly the ways in which audience members presented money to singers, to record the different levels of gifts given at different times of day and in different places, and to note how the audience and performers interacted with activity going on around them in the city streets.

Permeable performance spaces

In most of Wuhan's street shows, the 'stage' for performance is mainly a notional phenomenon. It is sometimes marked out in a basic material sense with a small rectangle of red mat placed on the ground at the centre of a circle of spectators or, at larger events, with a small temporary raised platform. Audience members have free access to this area, and virtually every song sees numerous gifts delivered to singers through direct contact between the two parties. While this space is defined as the stage in the performance frame, it appears simultaneously to retain much of its everyday-frame definition, part of the public territory open for all to come and go. The permeability of the spatial dimension of the performance frame contributes to the colour of the show at moments of money-giving.

A familiar figure at A-jia's events is an eccentric man of at least 70 years old who always sits at the very front of the stage. His unusually engaged behaviour is remarked on from time to time by the emcee, especially when the latter jokes that despite dancing, clapping, and cheering enthusiastically, the man never gives the singers any tips. Having already rewarded A-jia

handsomely during her birthday performance, the well-connected spectator Liu Zong approaches the stage area again as another singer performs. He orchestrates a spectacle that will amuse the entire audience, handing the eccentric man a 100-*yuan* note to offer the singer on his behalf. The man seems overjoyed; he turns to face the audience showing off the note above his head, and dances around with it before eventually passing it to the singer. The emcee continues the joke by pretending to be shocked and holding the note up to the light (11 November 2014). By involving the eccentric man in his gift-giving ritual, Liu Zong maximises the attention his offering receives from the audience, perhaps aware that it 'constitutes the social gesture par excellence for expressing high status and a position of patronage' (Qureshi 1986: 129).

This kind of showy behaviour is most notable at evening performances, where convention dictates that individual gifts usually be counted in multiples of 100 *yuan*. 100 *yuan* was worth around USD 16 in 2014; a single song normally attracts at least two or three gifts of this magnitude. I witness ostentatious gifting taken to the extreme once or twice, when individual offerings reach into the thousands of *yuan*. All this contrasts with afternoon sessions, when gifts in the hundreds of *yuan* punctuate the almost constant flow of more modest offerings made up of 10- and 20-*yuan* notes. At these daytime shows, the demographic of gift-givers is noticeably older but still predominantly male.

The permeability of the performance frame through the accessibility of the performance space, then, is often a part of the spectacle of a show, and a motivating factor in the sociality around gift-giving. It can also impinge directly upon how the musical performance unfolds. On another night, a singer named Zhu Lan has already received several gifts in quick succession during a song, and with the microphone also in her hand, the notes and flowers that she has been given are threatening to slip out of her grasp. When another gift arrives, she seems distracted from the singing, and has to reach out to take the money with the hand holding the microphone, meaning the audience hears a pause in the singing. Several notes then escape from Zhu Lan's hand and she bends down to gather them up from the ground, extending the pause. When she starts singing again, notes and flower stems are splayed out at all angles in her hands, and she looks flustered (21 October 2014).

The permeability of the performance frame in this literal physical sense is particularly noticeable when, occasionally, individuals break with convention by remaining there longer than is necessary to deliver their gift. At a different event, I note another grey-haired man's unusual

behaviour when giving small tips on several different evenings. The man lingers far longer around the singer than almost any other giver, and the act of handing over the cash is highly drawn out. He dances, grins, and teases the singer by giving 1 *yuan* at a time, sometimes 'accidentally' dropping notes onto the floor, with the singer becoming visibly frustrated. When the song ends and he has not yet handed over all of his notes, the singer has to start the song again. She tries to speed up his act by joining in with the jokes, snatching each note as he takes it in his hand, and this leads to him briefly mock-chasing her around the stage area. As soon as the last of the man's notes is eventually given, the song's backing track is abruptly cut off (19 October 2014).

Indeed, the accessibility of the staged activity to the public occasionally invites eccentric behaviour capable of disrupting the flow of stage action meant to sustain a convincing performance frame. Another night, a woman wearing pyjamas comes to the front of the space and stands next to the singer as she performs. She mimics the singer by pretending to hold a microphone and by dancing exaggeratedly. The emcee tries to make a joke of it and the singer ignores her, determined not to let the intruder undermine her control of the stage. When the song ends, the next performer comes on, and from my position in the audience I sense that the initial humour is turning to anxiety. Attention and uncertainty grow around how the intruder will be encouraged to leave without the singer letting slip the poise expected in this performance frame. Trying and failing to guide the woman away gently, the new singer occasionally smiles and shakes her head as she gets into her song. There is a musical interlude, and the singer decides to nip the incident in the bud in one brief break from her performance-frame persona, forcefully shooing the woman back to a seat (10 October 2014). This momentary but unusually explicit clarification of performer and audience roles is a reminder that the permeability of the space to influences from the everyday frame leaves the performance frame in a state of constant negotiation.

The divide between performers and audience members may also be crossed in the opposite direction. Singers can leave the informal stage and mix within the audience areas while singing, and they sometimes approach spectators with direct requests for cash gifts. One night I watch a performer pick up a flower and sing while moving among the small audience semi-circle. She hands the flower to one man at random. He looks uncomfortable and tries to pass it to a woman nearby, but the singer starts directing her song straight to the man and he becomes the

focus of all attention. He has little choice but to take out his wallet and hand her 10 *yuan*. The singer holds out her hand, demanding the flower back, and then begins circulating among the crowd to repeat the exercise (31 October 2014). This directness is fairly unusual at the shows, and I interpret it as a more upfront extension of the hospitality role that is the main occupation of the singers. Crucial to their success is the ability to step out of the immediacy of the stage performance frame and into one of everyday life where people relate in ways transcending the confines of performer/audience roles. When not on the stage, performers spend most of their time mingling among the audience, picking out individuals to pause and pass a few moments with. At any show, they actually spend far less time singing than they do engaged in this hospitality role, which involves offering cigarettes and non-alcoholic drinks to their customers or giving individuals the chance to choose the next song they sing. These offerings feed the dynamic of reciprocity that, as I explain in detail later, underpins the money exchanges.

At one performance venue, the stage is set up in a derelict spot amid the rubble of semi-demolished buildings (Figure 2). A row of foldable open-sided canopies is placed directly behind the stage in what could be considered an extension to it, since the live backing band is positioned under these shelters and performs from here. Around the band members, however, various other people also gather. It is the main place for organisers, off-duty singers, and a few guests to sit during the performance. In full view of the audience, the people under these canopies chat to each other, prepare for performances, and generally act in a casual way that—in the case of the singers—is outside of a typical stage persona. I observe one performer, Xiao Fang, as she arrives halfway through the night's show and takes a seat under the canopy. She yawns and begins to massage her legs, chats to another singer next to her, then reads from a piece of paper taken from her pocket (perhaps practising the lyrics to her first song). The stage boss is also under the canopy, hunched on the seat of his motor scooter with a cigarette, and the emcee is changing the batteries in one of the microphones, speaking to test it while the current song is in progress (13 October 2014).

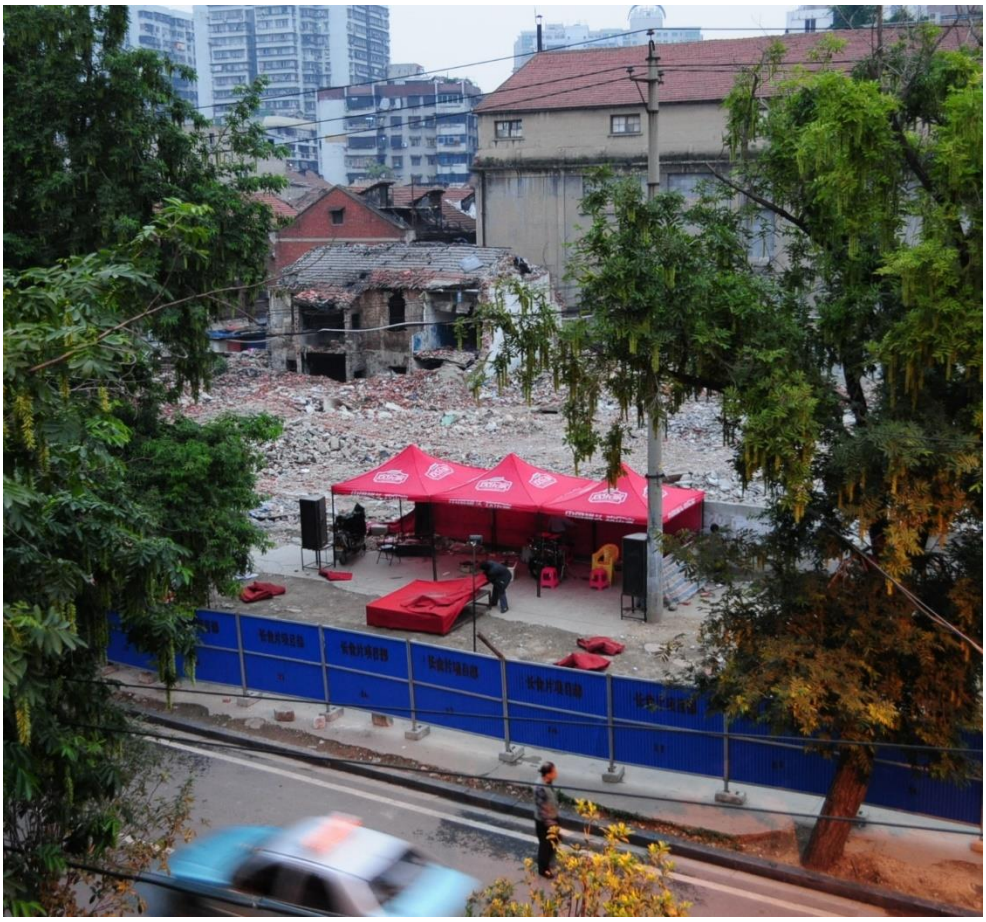

Figure 2: Organisers setting up the stage and backstage areas for a performance in a derelict spot. (Photo by the author, 17 May 2014)

Thus, as well as being part of the space of the performance frame, this area also functions as a kind of 'backstage'. It might be thought of as one of the private spaces that Born sees as nested within a wider public setting (2013: 26). Considering the indistinct boundaries between the performance and everyday frames here, though, the informality and visibility of the behaviour in this space does not undermine performers' personas. The distinctions between front- and backstage zones that preoccupy some followers of Goffman (including Griffin 2012) are neutralised, since performers and spectators are already accustomed to sharing contact in circumstances consistent with everyday street life as much as with formalised performance contexts. The sense of accessibility and relatability activates the interpersonal and financial exchanges between the two parties (see also Bealle 1993: 69; Lange 1997: 521). In this sense, the

everyday frame permeates the performance one through the off-stage behaviour of singers, and it happens in ways that constitute rather than disrupt the ethos of the shows.

The ability to transcend the boundaries of the staged performance frame is, however, not a privilege reserved only for people directly participating, nor indeed for individual human actors. The everyday frame also permeates the performance one in a host of more unpredictable ways, involving a varied cast. Responding to the challenges and opportunities that this brings about is entwined with the social dimensions of the shows, particularly as part of the ethical frame that I elaborate on below. In most locations, the shows share physical circumstances closely with various other elements of city life, so much so that these activities begin to constitute rather than undermine each other. One show's stage is set up on an unlit dirt road between one of Wuhan's two major rivers, the Han, and a tall wall acting as a flood barrier to the main road on its other side (Figure 3). The dirt road is used occasionally by vehicles moving between river port facilities, and every so often, performances are punctuated by the arrival of a small truck or similar commercial vehicle. This is one of the most out-of-the-way performances, and it regularly attracts an audience of only a few handfuls of people. Several times during an evening, the arena is lit up by headlights approaching from behind the audience, and it seems as if every spectator turns to watch as the truck slowly rattles nearer. Eventually it crawls through the performance at touching distance, and several people have to shift their seats as it threads between them and the stage (22 November 2014). At these moments, no one is orientated towards the singer and the music is effectively drowned out. Stray dogs that occasionally pass through here seize the audience's attention in similar ways.

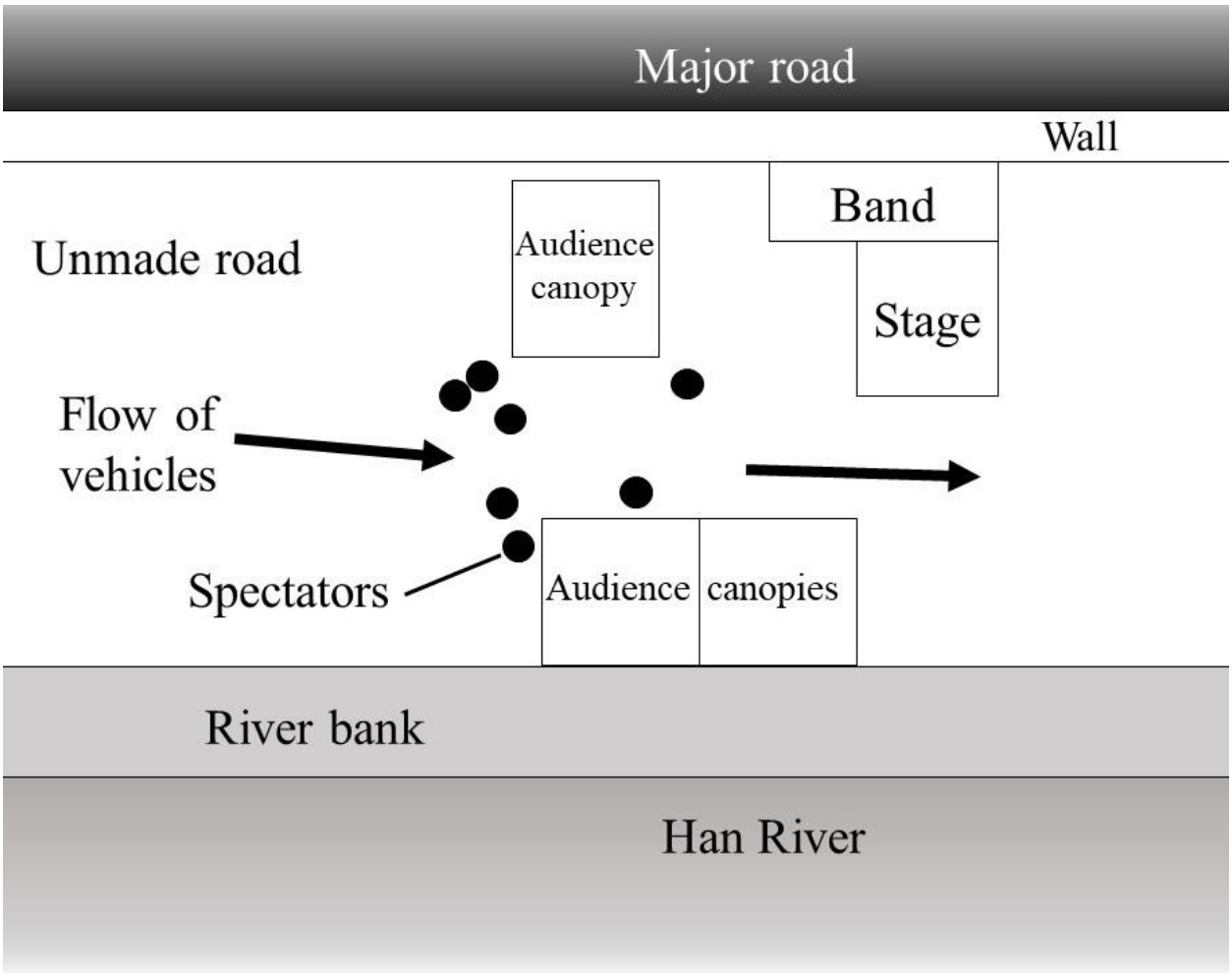

Figure 3: Bird's-eye-view plan of a riverside performance space (not precise scale).

In the Wuhan context, the erosion of borders between performance and everyday behaviour is not undesired or incompatible with meaningful musical engagements. Instead, it contributes to the character and appeal of the performances. Singers bring aspects of unpolished conduct into the performance frame during moments when they are in the visible 'backstage', and spectators (plus those not minded to participate as such, like the stage intruder or the trucks) can also enter the frame. More details on why the overlap of performance and everyday supports rather than hinders the desired sociality emerge when considering the role of the ethical frame.

The ethical frame

The permeability of frame distinctions outlined above contributes to—and converges with—the construction of a set of interpersonal expectations that characterises the social experience here. This is what I call the ethical frame. An indistinctness of frame boundaries is also manifest in the ethical relations that performers and audience members bring into the performance frame; their ways of dealing with each other in the performance frame show continuity with how they might relate when meeting in everyday contexts. Specifically, recurring discourses in their interactions, and ways in which personal relationships develop away from the performance arena, are part of the ethical foundations for the roles that singers and spectators take in the money-exchange practices (Horlor 2019).

On the evening of her birthday, A-jia has just finished her first spell of two songs on the stage; at moments like this, singers are typically joined by the event's emcee to share some words on the microphone. People well known to the performers, such as Liu Zong, are thanked by name for their gifts, then these sentiments are broadened to include the audience as a whole, the performers perhaps attempting a first move to draw more spectators into the dynamic of reciprocity. A-jia offers general thanks to men and women, old and new friends, and since on this occasion I have followed the lead of those around me to give her a gift, she jokingly extends the praise to 'friends from at home and abroad'. After the performance is over, she reinforces these thanks with notes on various communication platforms, including a group text message:

> Thanks to all my friends for spending this lovely evening with me, this was also the most meaningful and unforgettable birthday of A-jia's life. I made everyone break the bank [*pofei*], and if I didn't take care of anything properly then everyone please forgive me, I'll thank you again another time. Thanks, respectfully yours, A-jia. (Text message, 12 November 2014)

Apologising and expressing embarrassment at customers spending a lot of money on them emphasises the sense of indebtedness from which singers hope to benefit as the relationships go on. Indeed, appearing deferential and concerned for others seems to be an important goal in itself. Many times I hear singers thank the band on the microphone for their support, even though they have just rejected its live accompaniment in favour of a recorded backing. In fact, several of these performers tell me privately of their dissatisfaction with their events' instrumentalists, and at some shows, the bands are asked to accompany the main singing

so rarely that their role is limited to playing the interludes of a few bars that mark the transitions from one singer's turn on the stage to the next. This reliance on recorded backings is a reminder that these performances occupy similar cultural territory to karaoke, a phenomenon ubiquitous in contemporary Chinese life (Otake and Hosokawa 2011; Zheng 2013; Zhou and Tarocco 2007). Audiences are certainly primed for listening to amateur renditions of familiar songs, if not from the commercial Karaoke Television entertainment venues all over Wuhan then from the portable stalls set up in the evenings on some of its street corners. In a practical sense, too, the performances depend heavily on the voice-less tracks produced for singing along. Nonetheless, the fact that singers expect to be paid rather than pay to sing is at the heart of many of the key divergences that these street performances show from karaoke, most involving the gift-orientated sociality that I continue to explore.

Back on the stage, the emcee's tone becomes serious. Although A-jia has clearly taken a lot of money, he complains about the reception from the wider audience and then orchestrates a coordinated gesture by counting the crowd in to giving the 'more enthusiastic applause' that he feels she deserves. The emcee is quite right that A-jia's song has faded to virtual silence out of keeping with the extravagance of the gift-giving, and I address the significance of these different forms for expressing appreciation below. Nevertheless, the emcee's intervention reflects sustained efforts encouraging the audience to think of the performances as embedded in their wider ethical lives. It emphasises that the performances are manifestations of singers' generous attitudes and of their commitment to a challenging profession. These laudable personal qualities are presented across various aspects of their activity, and this compels the patrons also to recognise their own place in the ethical frame, one of obligation to support these deserving individuals.

Singers share details of their personal circumstances and backgrounds both on the microphone and face-to-face, cultivating a sense that they are worthy of support through highlighting the children they may have, or the families they may have left behind. Indeed, singers make efforts to connect spectators concretely to their life circumstances, drawing them to imagine a provider-beneficiary relationship. On one occasion, a singer known as Yinzi is busy setting up the audio equipment in preparation for her song, while the emcee fills the time with some introductory comments. Emphasising the toughness of the singer's lot, the emcee mentions that Yinzi is often sick and catches colds regularly. Yinzi immediately takes exception to this and

breaks off what she is doing to put the emcee straight. She picks up a microphone and stresses that although she was often ill in the past, since beginning to perform at this nightly show she has no longer suffered, being now supported by many friends in the audience who look after (*guanxin*) her (16 November 2014). Yinzi seizes this opportunity to claim that the support and protection of friends in the audience has made all the difference to her health, a facet of life significant far beyond the performance frame.

In fact, such sentiments contrast sharply with what this particular singer expresses to me in private. Yinzi is unusually hostile towards her fellow performers, often emphasising to me the 'competition for survival' (*shengcun jingzheng*) that they are all involved in, and undermining her colleagues' musical and moral worth to me in conversation. A similar attitude is extended to the audience, some of whom she describes as 'rogues' (*liumang*), and she makes it clear that she considers her own morals, skill, and performance experience to be far above the event (personal communication, Wuhan, 16 November 2014). Of course, the good will that is apparent between the parties does not always reveal the full truth of these relationships, and the ethos of ethical intimacy is far from unquestioningly absorbed.

The turnover of performers is high, and many shows feature new singers, whom emcees make extra efforts to cast as in need of encouragement and support. They are recruited informally, usually by word of mouth, and they are often personally connected in some way to existing singers. A long-serving accompanying keyboard player, Gao Lianhui, shares with me his experience of seeing young rural women enter the role, initially seduced by the obvious financial rewards of the job, before later realising that the pressures attached make it less ideal. He tells me that eventually these women return to normal professions where they can enjoy a 'peaceful heart and more dignity' (personal communication, Wuhan, 20 November 2014). Some of the shows are surrounded by innuendo and a half-serious perception that relationships between singers and audience members can take on a sexual element (Horlor 2019). Gao perhaps hints at drawbacks that are experienced by women working in sex consumption and entertainment contexts such as strip clubs, including the 'long hours of emotional and physical labor, stigmatization, and disdain from outsiders' (Wood 2000: 28). Reports from these contexts, however, suggest that the women involved risk losing their appeal to customers by revealing they are married or have children (Wood 2000: 16). The opposite is true in Wuhan, where

leverage is achieved through bringing to the surface rather than supressing evidence of an existence beyond the performance frame.

Although singers almost always present themselves as untrained and call what they do amateur (*yeyu*), the shows are their main occupations, and demand time spent not only at both afternoon and evening sessions, but also in socialising away from the performances. When A-jia has finished her last stint on the microphone on her birthday night, she publicly invites her 'fans' (*gemi*) to continue the singing at a karaoke venue and then to go on to eat at a late-night barbecue stall. Part of the ethos of mutual support relies on the role of the singer being painted as labour, adding conscientiousness and integrity to the list of personal qualities presented. The vocabulary of those involved suggests that their activity is conceptualised as conforming to workplace-like schedules and structures. Language circulating at the shows reveals that event organisers consider what they do to be 'petty business' (*xiao shengyi*), while the helpers who set up and run the performances are 'members of staff' (*gongzuo renyuan*). Like office workers throughout Wuhan, members of the backing bands at afternoon sessions watch the clock for their time to 'get off work' (*xiaban*) and move on to their evening job, perhaps accompanying another session, or playing at a local dance hall.[2] On occasions that other commitments prevent them attending, they talk of the formalities of asking bosses for leave (*qingjia*), before finding other members of the circuit to cover for them. Even the singers characterise their activity as *dagong*, a description often applied to migrant, temporary, or manual labour.

In other music contexts, sometimes the practicality, tedium, and hard work that go into preparing a performance may be downplayed, and instead a sense of mystique surrounds the artistry of performing (Small 1998: 64–68). That which is valorised is often the 'spontaneous ease' of a master performer (Qureshi 2002: 98), while the intensity of training and preparation behind it may not be fully recognised (Mason 2013: 441). In still other contexts, the value of labour is more apparent on the surface of a performance. At punk gigs in Mexico, for example, vocalists' physical efforts in producing abrasive sounds are highly valued: through this effort, feelings of rage against social conditions are generated and expressed (Tatro 2014). On Wuhan's

[2] Emcees and backing musicians are paid a flat fee for their participation in a session, usually 90 *yuan* per person in 2014. Each time a singer steps off the stage, they hand event organisers the cash they have earned during that spell of two or three songs. A session usually gives each singer two or three of these stints on the microphone, and when they leave at the end, they collect back their total earnings for the event, minus the organiser's 20- or 30-percent cut.

streets too, attention is drawn to labour rather than it being concealed; singers' diligence is presented as most valuable. Emcees addressing the crowd often associate them with the word *xinku* (toiling), implying that they deserve to be rewarded for this effort. Kaley Mason's work applying the concept of labour to music performance theorises the situation very effectively for this context. Mason emphasises that dignity accrues to someone when others recognise their efforts; the meaning of labour rests on how the importance of an action is understood not only by the performer of that action, but also by other people affected by it (Mason 2013: 444). It is in this sense, then, that the active role of audience members in the ethical frame starts to emerge.

Before taking up this point fully, though, it is also worth noting that the very act of singing a song in Wuhan is framed as a kind of gift by the language that surrounds it. The same verb *song* (to give, to send out, to gift) that applies to the offering of cash or flowers is also used for the giving of a performance. Many singers introduce their turns on stage with phrases such as 'I'm going to *song* you all a classic', or 'Here is the tune 'Xiao pingguo' to *song* new and old friends'. They make efforts to personalise the sentiments of their songs so that they speak directly to their audience, again geared towards blurring lines between performance and ethical frames by emphasising reciprocal obligation. During a performance of 'Jinsheng ai de jiu shi ni', for instance, I see one emcee make a deliberate point of relating the song's lyrics to the ethical frame. When the singer utters the lyrics featured in the song's title—'In this life the one I love is you'—he calls out 'You are all loved ones!' (31 October 2014). On another occasion, a singer turns her attention to an audience member who has just given a gift and carried on walking towards the exit during the song 'Xiexie ni chang jide wo' (Thank you for always remembering me). She repeatedly speaks the line she has just sung, 'We will never part', pleading with him not to go, as if the man meant as much to her as the ex-lover in the song (4 December 2014). The song texts, therefore, can be directly implicated in the interpersonal meanings that these renderings generate, particularly in their integration into the ethical frame of these money-orientated relationships.

The singer's 'gift' reminds the audience that beyond the performance frame, all involved operate as ethical beings. The singers' behaviour is meant to show that their good character flows unobstructed between ordinary life and performance, and spectators are also encouraged to recognise their own moral agency as integral to the very fact of the performance being given; taking away the encouragement and support of audience members would be to remove singers'

reason to perform. They are, thus, cast as active players in the performance, not only in the literal influence that their action can have on the singing when they approach the stage, but also in their obligations to help maintain an activity that has positive impacts in singers' lives (and thus in their own). This reflects the sense, then, in which the performance frame is not rigidly the domain of the singer, but that it owes its very existence and meaning to a permeability allowing any actor from the city streets the possibility of entering in meaningful ways. It feeds and is fed by an ethical frame that transcends the performance occasions, relying on and building a sense of interpersonal obligation that participants set up by highlighting the qualities they live out beyond the performance frame.

Permeable frames and audience roles

So far, I have examined the permeability of the divide between the performance and everyday frames built on physical continuity, and on the performer role being imagined as an extension of singers' wider ethical beings. I turn in more detail now to similar phenomena evident in how audiences straddle and thus emphasise the grey areas between performance, everyday, and ethical frames. Whereas until this point, I have highlighted the spectators who engage actively by giving money, it is worth noting that far more individuals show reluctance or even resistance to engaging with singers. Typical exchanges I hear around the spaces suggest that many people treat performers with cynicism, perhaps wary of being manipulated into losing their money. This is even the case for men who have already established some form of relationship with a singer. On a day with light rain, for example, I see a singer catch the eye of a man standing near me, and she strides directly over to him from the other side of the audience group. She says to him animatedly: 'I saw you! I saw you from all the way over there! Come and stand over here [under the canopy], you won't have to use your umbrella then'. The man simply says 'no need' and she moves on without a further word, apparently in disappointment (14 May 2014).

For some participants, reminders that the performance frame overlaps significantly with the social structures and hierarchies of the everyday frame are all too evident. For several I encounter, it is an unwelcome fact that the street music experience does not transcend or insulate them from wider social concerns. This may relate again to the background of sexual innuendo, and these individuals take steps to guard against unwanted consequences. One man, for example,

asks me to deliver cash to a singer on his behalf, not wanting to be seen associating with the young woman for fear of the news returning to his wife. Likewise, a singer I meet for the first time explains to me why she uses a nickname, telling me of her worry that the nature of her job would put off potential marriage partners. Another says that her family, who live nearby, fear being associated with such a 'shambolic and promiscuous' (*luanqibazao*) place (personal communication, Wuhan, 9 May 2014). The blurring of frame distinctions discussed so far enables spectators, and even to some extent singers, to resist their identities being saturated by their performance-frame roles.

More broadly, though, when I first observed the shows, it struck me as notable that audiences are almost always highly undemonstrative in responding to the music. Spectators rarely show any obvious signs of physical engagement beyond simply orientating their bodies towards the stage. They almost never tap their feet or make any other similar rhythmic movements, nor do they dance or sing along, and songs usually end without significant applause, calling out, or other signs of appreciation. Typically, individuals stay relatively static for long periods and are often fixed in an apparently impassive stance; they are just as likely to be seen trying to nap with their head resting on the table in front of them as obviously enjoying the music. It seems that many do not consider shows of polite attention to be among the responsibilities of a street music listener. In this regard, Wuhan's events are like various other forms of street performance I have observed in China. Indeed, the rarity of applause is a phenomenon remarked upon in other musical contexts, including for instance, silk and bamboo music-making in Shanghai's teahouses (Witzleben 1995: 25). Clapping is not entirely absent from the events in Wuhan, however, but it is usually limited to very brief bursts from one or a few individuals, and it is never prolonged. It rarely involves a large proportion of the audience, apart from when emcees make direct requests to the crowd for applause (*zhangsheng*). Emcees regularly make these calls, either when they sense that the wider audience is ready to respond enthusiastically, or as they admonish the spectators for not showing enough support for the performer. Sometimes these invitations fall flat, but this seems to lead to little embarrassment, and some even thank the audience for their 'encouraging applause' (*zhangsheng guli*) when there has been none.

From time to time, singers, too, attempt to stimulate collective interaction with the crowd, perhaps by clapping above their heads to the beat of the song and asking the audience to join in. Even in the most enthusiastically received performances, however, only a minority of people do

so, and the audience invariably stops clapping as soon as the performer does. More often, however, the singers, like their audience, are highly static. Very few move from a fixed spot on the stage, and most show no obvious bodily engagement with the rhythms of the music. When a singer does dance during instrumental sections, she tends to make slow deliberate movements of a quasi-classical kind. In this sense, singers here take their lead from the modest performance style of Chinese pop stars from the 1980s and 1990s (Baranovitch 2003: 145).

The functions of clapping and physical movement reveal several points useful in understanding the audience's place in the intersection of performance, everyday, and ethical frames. The apparent lack of contagion between people for clapping in particular suggests that, in this context, this response is best thought of as an individual action and an expression of personal rather than communal sentiment. The audience does not seem to recognise itself as a collective subject with the ability or inclination to spontaneously produce a highly active kind of coordinated intervention upon the performance, such as an all-encompassing round of applause or a sustained cooperative rhythmic engagement. Expressions of appreciation take an individual character, the most significant one in this context, of course, being the giving of monetary gifts. A few organisers employ props or proxies to stimulate an audible reaction from the audience, or at least to cover up for the absence of one. One has a small plastic toy in the shape of hands that create a sound when rattled together, and he can sometimes use it to cue a smattering of applause. Another stage plays a short burst of recorded crowd commotion through the PA system with similar effects. Although I never see either inspire the audience into particularly enthusiastic clapping or cheering, it does indicate the usefulness of applause as a device to transition between sections of the performance. The sparseness of collective applause is clearly not construed as rude or ignorant, although the actions of singers and organisers suggest that it *is* appreciated as a facilitator of flow in the performance frame.

The indistinct boundaries of the performance frame, however, help explain why individual forms for expressing appreciation prevail here. The majority of the audience seems to cling most tightly to an identity from the everyday frame; they are more members of the *public* than members of an *audience*. Spectators are less inclined to submit to the behavioural conventions associated with the more formal concerts of various kinds that are routine in a large city like this one, maintaining a distance that keeps them hovering on the verge of that ordinary daily frame. Most audience members show few signs of engagement that would separate them

from a passer-by, while some are prepared to highlight their participation only at the specific times they feel moved to do so. The crowd generally appears to retain the right to keep a distance from the performance frame and from any obligation to show politeness and attention. As a result, none of the participants I speak to considers the lesser role of applause and other similar gestures to be anything but entirely normal and reasonable. Just as the gestures of appreciation flowing from the audience to the performers come primarily in individual and tangible forms—mainly cash gifts—the same is true of the shows of thanks that go in the other direction. Through small offerings and the bestowing of good wishes upon individuals, singers and organisers saturate the events with material and linguistic—rather than symbolic—expressions of gratitude and affinity. All of this leaves spectators, whether regular or passers-by, free to engage with the performance frame on their own terms, choosing either to take an active role in exchanges with singers or simply to absorb this form of local entertainment in an apparently passive way. Perhaps, as Richard Schechner has argued, this 'selective inattention' also contributes a sense of 'release' that adds to the dimensions possible in the experience of spectating (1976).

The phenomenon is epitomised for me on one night when I note an unusually engaging performance by a singer who dances energetically all around the stage area during her song. This more active way of occupying the space draws in people otherwise busy with another form of public-space activity. Several groups of men crowd around in card schools just beyond the normal fringes of the audience, and they rush towards the group when they sense a commotion. These men jostle past other people as they try to get closer to the front, and this itself seems to add to the unusual feeling of excitement. They watch the performance, but then return to their games as soon as the song is over (21 October 2014). These people do not have to submit to the restrictive demands placed on audiences in other less fluid performance frames. Instead they reflect Goffman's suggestion that people might invest multiple levels of attention in a given activity, particularly in freely accessible public space. These levels cover a spectrum from full immersion down to 'orientation gloss', the term Goffman uses to describe a state when individuals merely attach themselves to an activity to present the impression that they are engaged legitimately rather than simply loitering (Goffman 1971: 130). Whereas many of the examples throughout this article show the performance frame expanding to embrace wider activity, the refuge that many around performances take in the everyday frame highlights that the everyday can equally expand to encroach on the performance frame.

Conclusion

Music performance is embedded in wider experience in a variety of ways in different contexts, and intersections between different realms are implicated in the meanings performances have for those involved. Classical music recitals or arena pop concerts might derive potency from the performance being presented as a heightened mode of activity, with various features of the setting and conventional behaviour placing emphasis on the frame's insulation from the concerns of everyday life or from the ways people relate beyond the auditorium. More ubiquitous in everyday experience, however, is music that openly coexists or has a mutually constitutive relationship with other activity: travelling, shopping, performing chores, working, or doing countless other things (DeNora 2000; Kassabian 2013). Existing frame theory has been most effective in highlighting shifts between radically contrasting modes of experience, such as those between ritual and entertainment (Fiol 2010). The notion of permeable frames, however, comes into its own when considering music's place in the more routine unfolding of life, in which ritual and other heightened frames seem far from reality.

In many of my observations about the singing on Wuhan's streets, it becomes less meaningful to think of clear distinctions between agents, activities, sounds, bodies, personal identities, and conventions for interpersonal behaviour that either belong to the performance frame or to outside spheres. Instead, the grey areas, intersections, and permeabilities shape the ethical conditions for personal exchanges between performers and audience. No clear conventions prevail to demand attention be fixed onto the stage, and social spaces are shared closely between singers and spectators. In some senses, the performance frame seems to expand to incorporate different kinds of behaviour from both parties, and in other senses it seems to shrink so that spectators can engage in or avoid the money-exchange practices on their own terms. Examining these phenomena is meant to highlight the fluidity and simultaneity through which frames nest with each other and thus lay the foundations for social experience.

I see the permeability of frames as relevant far beyond niches such as Wuhan's singing shows. Buskers, karaoke singers, and musicians playing alone for enjoyment (Killick 2006) all do so in situations where activity, sounds, relations, and social orientations come and go, fade up and down in the cognitive and interactive mix that constitutes these musical experiences. This is

not to mention the playback of recordings that forms the soundtrack to life in cafes, shops, and homes, or the 'universal phenomenon' of musicians playing 'in the background' to something else (O'Donnell and Henderson 2017: 51). Music constantly happens in situations where different social orientations and competing or complementary focal points for attention shape its unfolding or impact on experience. Even in the idealised bounded sphere of the Kpelle music event (Stone 1982) or the concert-hall recital, various kinds of 'distraction' emanating from the environment or in individual cognition must challenge these boundaries or permeate the performance frame. Musical and other kinds of experience can hardly fail to seep into each other, even when they are not supposed to. So, rather than imagining that performance events can be studied as isolated spheres of action and meaning, the idea of permeable frames is meant as a tool for approaching the multiplicity and haphazardness with which different realms intersect in forming musical experiences.

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