

# AGEING WITH SMARTPHONES IN URBAN CHINA

The background features a stylized city skyline in shades of orange and yellow, including a prominent pagoda and the Oriental Pearl Tower. In the foreground, several people are depicted in a red landscape. On the left, three people are celebrating, holding red flags with a yellow star. On the right, a man in a blue suit and white face mask holds a selfie stick, while a woman in a pink shirt stands beside him. In the bottom right, an elderly woman in a brown jacket and blue skirt holds a smartphone, walking hand-in-hand with a young girl in a yellow dress.

FROM THE  
CULTURAL TO  
THE DIGITAL  
REVOLUTION  
IN SHANGHAI

XINYUAN WANG

UCLPRESS



# Ageing with Smartphones in Urban China



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*From the cultural to the digital revolution  
in Shanghai*

Xinyuan Wang

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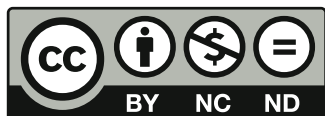
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## Series foreword

This book series is based on a project called ASSA – the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing. It was primarily funded by the European Research Council (ERC) and located at the Department of Anthropology, UCL. The project had three main goals. The first was to study ageing. Our premise was that most studies of ageing focus on those defined by age, that is youth and the elderly. This project would focus upon people who did not regard themselves as either young or elderly. We anticipated that their sense of ageing would also be impacted by the recent spread of smartphone use. Smartphones were thereby transformed from a youth technology to a device used by anyone. This also meant that, for the first time, we could make a general assessment of the use and consequences of smartphones as a global technology, beyond those connotations of youth. The third goal was more practical. We wanted to consider how the smartphone has impacted upon the health of people in this age group and whether we could contribute to this field. More specifically, this would be the arena of mHealth, that is, smartphone apps designed for health purposes.

The project consists of 11 researchers working in 10 fieldsites across nine countries, as follows: Al- Quds (East Jerusalem) studied by Laila Abed Rabho and Maya de Vries; Bento, in São Paulo, Brazil studied by Marília Duque; Cuan in Ireland studied by Daniel Miller; Kampala, Uganda studied by Charlotte Hawkins; Kochi and Kyoto in Japan studied by Laura Haapio-Kirk; NoLo in Milan, Italy studied by Shireen Walton; Santiago in Chile studied by Alfonso Otaegui; Shanghai in China studied by Xinyuan Wang; Thornhill in Ireland studied by Pauline Garvey; and Yaoundé in Cameroon studied by Patrick Awondo. Several of the fieldsite names are pseudonyms.

Most of the researchers are funded by the European Research Council. The exceptions are Alfonso Otaegui, who is funded by the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and Marília Duque, Laila Abed Rabho and Maya de Vries, who are mainly self-funded. Pauline Garvey is

based at Maynooth University. The research was simultaneous except for the research in Al- Quds, which has been extended since the researchers are also working as they research.

The project has published a comparative book about the use and consequences of smartphones called *The Global Smartphone*. In addition, we intend to publish an edited collection presenting our work in the area of mHealth. There will also be nine monographs representing our ethnographic research, the two fieldsites in Ireland being combined in a single volume. These ethnographic monographs will mostly have the same chapter headings. This will enable readers to consider our work comparatively. The project has been highly collaborative and comparative from the beginning. We have been blogging since its inception at <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/assa/>. Further information about the project may be found on our project's main website, at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/>. The core of this website is translated into the languages of our fieldsites and we hope that the comparative book and the monographs will also appear in translation. As far as possible, all our work is available without cost, under a creative commons licence.

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# 1

## Introduction

‘Welcome to the “magic capital” (*modu*)!’ said the message that popped up on my smartphone screen as my plane landed at Shanghai Pudong International airport. The term ‘*modu*’ was coined in a novel<sup>1</sup> of the 1920s, in which Shanghai was depicted as a mixture of brightness and darkness – the dark side cleverly hidden behind the glamorous modern facade. In Chinese, ‘*mo*’ can mean demon, fantasy, magic or mystic; ‘*du*’ means capital. So a decade ago ‘*modu*’, the ‘magic capital’ or the ‘demon capital’, used to be an internet slang term that young people used to refer to Shanghai. It has now become a common nickname for Shanghai. This is probably because people appreciate that no other term can better articulate the character of Shanghai: the largest metropolis in China with its unique exuberance and apparently limitless possibilities.

The current eldest generation in Shanghai was born in a time when the average household could not afford electric lights. Today, however, they can turn lights off via their smartphones in a city that has benefited from full 5G coverage in the downtown area since 2020.<sup>2</sup> Based on 16 months of ethnographic research in Shanghai, this book is about how older people in the ‘magic capital’ live with the possibilities conjured by the ‘magic’ device of the digital age – the smartphone. Everyday life, ageing and digital practice are three of the main avenues of research inquiry.

The central thesis of this book revolves around the older generation in China and the two revolutions they have experienced during their lives – the first being the political revolution during China’s radical communist era and the second being the ‘digital revolution’ constituted by the adoption of the latest digital technologies. We can only understand the latter by appreciating the legacy of the former revolution. Core ideas about how people should commit to constant ‘self-reform’ and become a ‘new person’ during China’s radical communist period in fact only come to be realised during retirement. This offers a time in which people

are able to engage in activities that reflect their real potential in life – something taken away from them when they were young during the earlier political revolution.

Nor is this confined to a singular part of people's lives. The revolutionary nature of the smartphone is founded in the way it now permeates almost everything people are engaged with in their everyday and social lives. All of this then bears on their relationship not only to retirement and the experience of ageing, but also to their neighbours, family, friends, home, locality and the state. So while the title of this book highlights ageing and the smartphone, the ethnography has to engage with everything from the purpose of life to dealing with ill-health or paying for goods.

The volume thereby aims to answer questions such as: How do ordinary Chinese citizens make sense of the social transformations in contemporary China and how do they see themselves in the light of these changes? What does ageing mean for individuals and their families in today's China? How can we understand the consequences of the smartphone in China and what lessons can we learn from digital China?

Many studies of contemporary Chinese society tend to spotlight the younger generation in the country, as young people seem 'naturally' to carry the features of the ever-changing dynamic of modern China. However, readers of this book will come to see why the study of the *older* generation in China may actually work better as a kind of 'shortcut' for gaining a deeper understanding of today's Chinese society. The People's Republic of China (PRC), established in 1949, is roughly the same age as the older generation in China who are the subjects of this book. This generation was present at the start of the development of the PRC. They have witnessed and experienced, in turn, the transition from war to peace, the Cultural Revolution, the implementation of the one-child policy, the socialist 'planned economy' and finally its reversal through market-oriented economic reforms. The social transformations that this older generation has experienced are unprecedented, profound and deep-rooted.

By mapping out the various aspects of older people's daily lives in the context of personal histories as well as daily digital engagement, this book argues that this older generation is not only the first 'new sandwich generation', caught between having to care for the elderly (their parents) and children (their grandchildren), but also the last generation to continue the traditional rites of family duty. It is in addition the unprecedented 'revolutionary generation' in China, indelibly marked by both the political revolutions in communist China and the 'information revolution' in digital China. This ethnography will demonstrate that far from

being merely carried away in the flow of revolutions, this generation has in effect made its own revolution, achieving the revolutionary ideal of 'self-reform' during later life.

Studies of the smartphone also tend to focus on younger people because they are assumed to be the digital-savvy generation that best represents the smartphone age. However, smartphone use globally now extends far beyond a 'youth technology'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the ethnography conducted in Shanghai suggests that the older generation in China, who used to be the 'information have-less',<sup>4</sup> have now embraced the smartphone in the most profound ways. The people in this book collectively tell the story of living their 'unlived' youth only when they became older, a phenomenon directly facilitated by the digital possibilities of the smartphone. In addition, the research will explore the way in which this generation are redefining social relations online while investigating new ways of practising kinship and friendship via the device. All these uses demonstrate how the oft-perceived binary or opposition between the human and the technology is actually here a much more dialectical, dynamic and constitutional process, revealed in the light of the daily life practices of ordinary Chinese older people.

Shanghai, with its prodigious clash of the new and the old, the past and the future, provides the context for this research. The rest of this chapter therefore offers a brief biography of Shanghai, followed by an introduction to the issues related to ageing and the development of digital facilities in contemporary Shanghai. This is followed in turn by an introduction to the research methodology and an overview of the overall structure of this book.

## Shanghai: a brief biography

Shanghai, which literally means 'upon the sea', lies at the mouth of the Yangtze River (*chang jiang*), where the longest waterway in Asia joins the Pacific, completing its 6,300 km journey. The Huangpu River, the largest running through the city centre, is the last significant tributary of the Yangtze. Shanghai is China's most populated city and the third largest financial centre<sup>5</sup> in the world. Yet only a century and a half ago it was merely a fishing town. The modern history of Shanghai starts with the First Opium War (1839–42) between Britain and the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) of China. In 1842 the Qing dynasty was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking, which ceded Hong Kong to the British Empire and opened five treaty ports to British merchants, among them Shanghai.<sup>6</sup>

In 1842 the British established the first concession in Shanghai which was untouchable by Chinese law. The presence of the British Empire in Shanghai was followed by other foreign powers, such as the French, Americans and Japanese.<sup>7</sup> Soon foreign settlement and concessions encroached upon much of what is now central Shanghai, except for the old walled Chinese city.<sup>8</sup> From missionaries to refugees, waves of migrants from all over the world flooded in, contributing to the mixed and cosmopolitan environment of early Shanghai. By the second half of the nineteenth century Shanghai had developed an urban modernity heavily infused with foreign, i.e. Western, influences, including both the development and deprivation associated with global capitalism.<sup>9</sup> In the early twentieth century foreigners accounted for almost one-quarter of the city's total population; the downtown area was said to be three times as crowded as London's East End and as ethnically mixed as New York.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to this dazzling swirl of foreign control, bank buildings, glitzy restaurants, international clubs, dance halls, opium dens,<sup>11</sup> gambling joints and brothels managed by gangs, Shanghai gained its somewhat bipolar reputation; it became known simultaneously as the 'Paris of the East' and the 'Whore of the Orient'.<sup>12</sup> By 1934 Shanghai had grown into the world's fifth-largest city, with more skyscrapers and cars than any other Asian city and more than the rest of China combined.<sup>13</sup> Local shops carried the latest fashions and luxuries; local cinemas played the latest Hollywood films.<sup>14</sup> At that time Shanghai was a world of magnificent modernity, a world apart from the rural regions of the country, still bound in tradition. The neoclassical and Art Deco buildings along the Huangpu riverfront known as 'the Bund' (a word derived from Hindi) were a powerful symbol of Shanghai modernity (Fig. 1.1).

On the other hand, for most ordinary Chinese people Shanghai was simply the setting for their everyday lives, with little connection to the magnificent Bund. As one research participant noted, even today:

the Bund is for tourists, it is the *lilong* that is the authentic Shanghai life in my memory.

*Lilong*, which literally means alleyway, is a unique type of Shanghai residential area which came into being in the late nineteenth century. At that time, hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrants had flooded into Shanghai city, looking for protection and a living within the foreign concessions, especially given the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion<sup>15</sup> and the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>16</sup> Real estate development then increased dramatically, confronted by the lack of space yet economically incentivised to make the most intensive use





**Figure 1.1** The Bund by night. Source: Summer Park. Licence: CC BY 2.0. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ShanghaiBundpic2.jpg>.

of the land required.<sup>17</sup> The Shanghai *lilong*, modelled after Western rows of houses but set within characteristic Chinese ‘lanes and courtyards’,<sup>18</sup> provided a convenient solution thanks to its minimal maintenance.

Within a *lilong* compound, houses are clustered around a ‘fishbone’ layout. The main alleyway runs all or part of the way across the block while smaller alleyways on each side are connected perpendicularly to the main one,<sup>19</sup> allowing many families to live together in the same compound with shared bathrooms and kitchens.<sup>20</sup> ‘Shikumen’, which literally means ‘stone gate’, is a representative type of *lilong* where the entrance to each alley is surmounted by a stylistic stone arch with carvings (Fig. 1.2). *Lilong* had become the most common type of housing in Shanghai up until the late 1940s. At the height of their popularity, *lilong* covered 60 per cent of the city.<sup>21</sup> Although the buildings were already designed to maximise the use of the land through condensed and compact box-shaped rows of houses, *lilong* dwellers creatively turned the lanes themselves into living spaces. In so doing they overcame apparent physical constraints and cultivated a unique Shanghai neighbourhood atmosphere.<sup>22</sup> In particular, the spatial arrangement of *lilong* has impacted upon people’s experience of privacy:<sup>23</sup> a graduation from the public street to the semi-private main alleyway, then to side-alleyways behind a stone gate to the private individual houses, allowed people to experience a gradual change in the



**Figure 1.2** One of the typical *lilong* (alleyways) in Shanghai.

Source: Ismoon. Licence: CC BY-SA 3.0. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:A\\_Lane\\_in\\_Zhenxingli.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:A_Lane_in_Zhenxingli.jpg).

sense of privacy as they leave or return home.<sup>24</sup> Exploiting this gradation, the lanes provide a small open space with shading, ideal for some activities, while the main alleyway is where street vendors would set up stalls and the side alleys are where residents would sit on their stools, chatting with neighbours as they prepared meals.<sup>25</sup> During fieldwork, older people constantly referred to their lives in the *lilong* as an essential part of their personal memories.

*Lilong* made its appearance as the unique urban landscape of modern Shanghai at around the same time as the *Communist Manifesto* was translated into Chinese (1920). The work was swiftly circulated among the secret societies hidden within the Shanghai *lilong*.<sup>26</sup> In 1921, within one of the typical 'stone gate' (*shikumen*) *lilong* in the former French Concession in Shanghai, a group of communists secretly held their first national congress, during which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP hereafter) was established.<sup>27</sup> Home to a vast proletarian and student population – both angered by the stark inequality between the Chinese and foreigners and between the poor and the rich, Shanghai became the Communist Party's first hope for a successful revolution. Subsequently, however, it was in the country's rural areas that the revolution first achieved success.

A dark moment in the history of *lilong* came in 1937, when one of the bloodiest battles of the twentieth century broke out in Shanghai. The Battle of Shanghai (*songhu huizhan*) was the first major engagement between the Chinese National Revolutionary Army and the Imperial Japanese Army. At the height of the war nearly one million Chinese and Japanese soldiers were involved, and three million civilians in Shanghai suffered from the conflict. In his book *Shanghai 1937: Stalingrad on the Yangtze*, author Peter Harmsen argues that the prolonged Battle of Shanghai turned what had been a Japanese adventure in China into a general war between the two countries, ultimately leading to Pearl Harbor and seven decades of tumultuous history in Asia.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Shanghai weathered a period of chaos and conflict, followed by Japanese occupation. Despite this time the Shanghai *lilong* was still regarded as a 'free land' for one particular group of people. In 1938, when the great powers collectively shut their borders to all but a small selection of Jewish refugees, Shanghai was the only place, aside from the Dominican Republic, that remained open to these Jewish refugees.<sup>29</sup> During the Second World War Shanghai protected about 20,000 European Jews from Nazi persecution,<sup>30</sup> more than any other city in the world.<sup>31</sup>

During the Japanese occupation, making use of multi-class patriotism, the CCP forged its most workable alliance with elites from the city's middle and upper classes, a crucial part of its resistance against Japan. This cooperative relationship contributed significantly to the CCP's easy takeover of Shanghai in 1949.<sup>32</sup> The establishment in 1949 of 'New China', the People's Republic of China, put an end to the 'Old Shanghai'.<sup>33</sup> Following their Soviet predecessors, the Communist Party leadership saw urban planning as a spatial structure that played an instrumental role in the 'production of proletarian consciousness and lifestyle'.<sup>34</sup> The 1950s witnessed the wide repurposing and renaming of municipal landmarks associated with Western influence in the 'Old Shanghai', as well as re-allocation of previously private properties on a massive scale. Members of the Party, government, military cadres and the working class moved into the mansions and apartments previously owned by Nationalist officials, foreigners, local capitalists and wealthy merchants.<sup>35</sup> Almost every foreigner left the city, now closed off from the world beyond China, while a good part of the Shanghai that made its name under the auspices of *modu* fell into a deep sleep, given the strict uniformity of communism.

Meanwhile Shanghai's political 'contribution' to the 'New China' had an equal if not more significant impact. The city became the powder keg for the Cultural Revolution<sup>36</sup> (1966–76) and served as a power

base for Maoist ideals: in 1965 the first 'salvo' of the Cultural Revolution was fired by Shanghai's Yao Wenyuan, a member of the infamous 'Gang of Four'.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the political turmoil, Shanghai's radical leadership actively promoted a wide range of political struggles ranging from those impacting the army to education to industrial management. At the height of this turmoil one could see young 'Red Guards'<sup>38</sup> chanting across the city, confiscating individual households and destroying the so-called 'four olds' (old ideas, old culture, old habits and old customs).<sup>39</sup>

Yet in the middle of the turbulent Cultural Revolution, another powerful current emerged in Shanghai. In 1972 Shanghai hosted the historic meeting between then Premier Zhou Enlai and US president Richard Nixon.<sup>40</sup> The outcome of the visit of the very first American president in China was the Shanghai Communique, seen as the start of the normalisation of relations between the two countries and a document that laid the groundwork for China's 'reopening' to the rest of the world. In 1978, a few years after the Shanghai Communique was signed, the 'reform and opening-up' national policy,<sup>41</sup> presented by the then leader Deng Xiaoping after the death of Mao, started to shape contemporary Chinese society and its international relations in a profound way.

In terms of economic development, during the first decades of Communist rule, Shanghai was officially viewed as 'an unwelcome leftover from a humiliating and resented semi-colonial past'.<sup>42</sup> During that time Shanghai's assets, ranging from experts and skilled workers to factory machines, were 'dismantled' and reallocated to aid the development of other areas in the rest of China, while Shanghai's own growth was sharply restricted.<sup>43</sup> It was not until 1990, with the establishment of Pudong as an open area for development,<sup>44</sup> that Shanghai regained some of its socio-economic potential.

The final chapter of this history of Shanghai may be more familiar to readers: the city became the world's busiest container port<sup>45</sup> and a global centre for business and finance, research, education, culture, science and technology.<sup>46</sup> With its own terms in cultural developments, from literature to fashion, contemporary Shanghai also stands at the front of China's push into today's modern world.<sup>47</sup> Shanghai is now the show-piece of a Chinese modernity taken on its own terms. Skyscrapers, many designed by internationally renowned architects,<sup>48</sup> populate Pudong, in the previously low-lying farmlands on the east bank of the Huangpu River, overlooking the European buildings on the Bund across the river (Fig. 1.3). The city saw the building of about 4,000 high-rises, and nearly 1,500 miles of roads have been built in and around the city within the last decade.<sup>49</sup> By 2004 more than 70 per cent of the *lilong* alleyways had



**Figure 1.3** The skyline of the Pudong financial centre at night, as seen from the Bund. Photo by Ge Li (commissioned by Xinyuan Wang).



**Figure 1.4** Typical residential tower blocks in Shanghai. Photo by Rui Zhong.

been wiped out during the massive-scale reconstruction of the old city<sup>50</sup> and most former *lilong* residents had moved into tower blocks (like the one shown in Fig. 1.4).

Some of the historic charm of Shanghai was preserved in the former French Concession in the very centre of Shanghai – an area with very few high-rises, but rather a mix of *lilong* and European-style buildings. Some of the *lilong* buildings that survived were repurposed as commercial

properties.<sup>51</sup> Many villas, adorned with plaques recounting the history of the building, line the streets. Traffic is slow and London plane trees, called ‘French phoenix trees’ (*faguo hutong*) by local people,<sup>52</sup> create a green tunnel on the street, used by pedestrians and cyclists during their daily shopping run or their journeys to local cafés, galleries or restaurants. The area is a world apart from the fast pace of the rest of the city (Fig. 1.5).

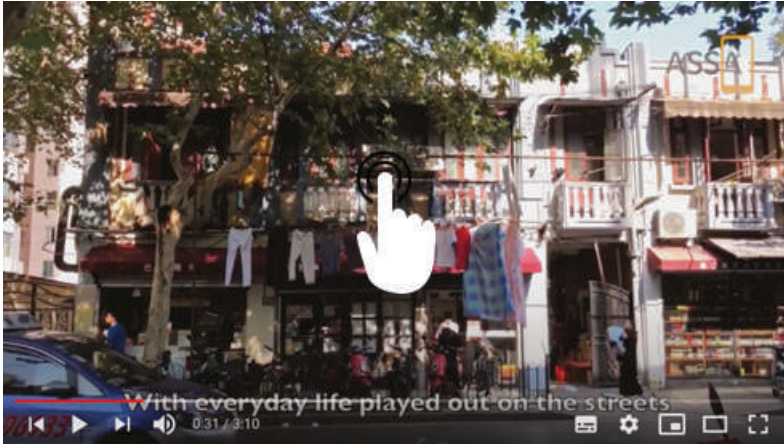
This brief account shows that while it is one of the most recent Chinese cities, Shanghai has experienced some of the most dramatic social transformations in the country’s history – transformations that had long-lasting consequences for China as a whole. A sense of this history is essential to appreciating the lives of the research participants in this book: people who kept referring to their ‘Shanghai’ identity. As articulated by one research participant:

Our Shanghai people would say ‘I love Shanghai’ much more often than ‘I love China’. Our sense of belonging is more about *modu* the city, rather than the country.

Before 1843, when Shanghai was forced to open as a treaty port, it was not likely that any such sense of ‘Shanghai’ identity, standing out from either the national or the local consciousness, would have been felt.<sup>53</sup> It was the history of Shanghai as a treaty port, a city full of migrants with a distinctive cosmopolitan nature, that helped to create a local culture of Shanghai, commonly known as *haipai* (Shanghai style). Such culture, along with its striking features of cosmopolitanism, innovation and commercialism, a powerful meeting point of West and East,<sup>54</sup> is now viewed as an identity that links the city’s past, present and future.



**Figure 1.5** A typical road featuring French phoenix trees and villas in the former French Concession. Photos by Marcus Fedder.



**Figure 1.6** Screenshot of the virtual tour of Shanghai. The video can also be viewed at: <https://bit.ly/shanghaisite>.

To complete this biography of Shanghai, I would like to invite you to join a three-minute virtual tour of Shanghai through the short film above (Fig. 1.6). This short film shows not only the skylines of Shanghai, but also the *lilong* area in the city centre. Unlike the tourist guides, this will allow you to enter ordinary households and gain some visual impressions of people's daily lives. The film also acts as a bridge between understanding the city in context and the primary concern of this volume, that of ageing and smartphones.

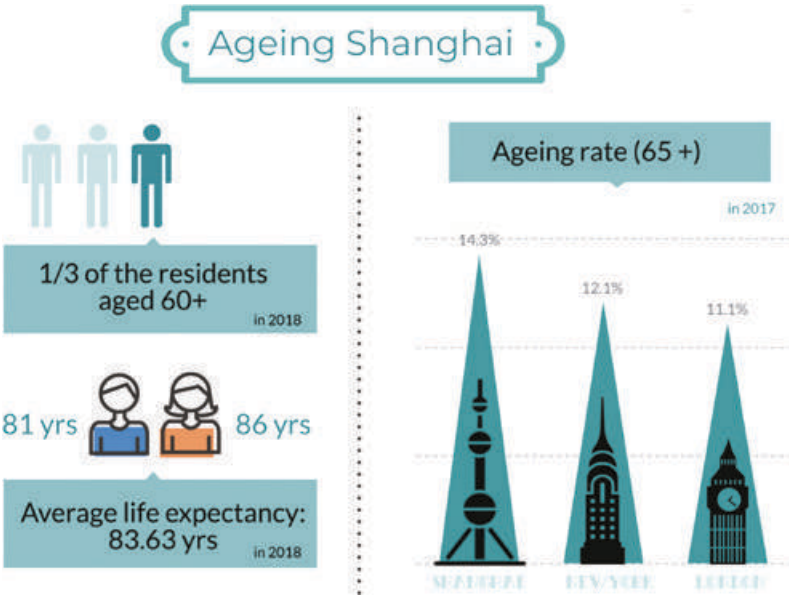
## Ageing Shanghai and digital Shanghai

China has the largest and most rapidly ageing population in the world.<sup>55</sup> Chinese people in their seventies and eighties have double the life expectancy of their parents' generation.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, China has 'leapfrogged' most other countries in its rapid digitalisation over the past two decades. The country now leads the world in fields such as smartphone ownership, mobile internet penetration, mobile payment and mobile app use.<sup>57</sup> The number of internet users on mobile phones is 847 million, accounting for over 99 per cent of internet users in China, with the smartphone being the most popular device for accessing the internet in the country.<sup>58</sup> Shanghai is leading China in both fields, not only in terms of population ageing but also in the use of digital.

Shanghai has been the 'oldest' city in China for more than three decades and was the first to be categorised as a 'super-ageing society'.<sup>59</sup>

One-third of Shanghai residents were aged 60 or over in 2018<sup>60</sup> and the average life expectancy had reached 83.63 years, with 81 years for men and 86 years for women.<sup>61</sup> The ageing rate (the percentage of the population aged 65 and above) of Shanghai residents was 14.3 per cent,<sup>62</sup> higher than New York and London in 2017 – all of which makes Shanghai arguably one of the most rapidly ageing metropolises in the world (Fig. 1.7).

In this book, the term ‘older people’ is associated with a relatively broad age category, referring mainly to retirees in their fifties through to their seventies. Compared to the other major ageing societies in the world, Chinese people in general retire at a relatively young age: 50 for women and 60 for men, with some minor variations allowed for different jobs.<sup>63</sup> Also, compared to previous generations or their peers in many other societies, there is good reason to expect that older people in urban China<sup>64</sup> are likely to enjoy more healthy years following their retirement. The implication is that the ‘older people’ studied in this book are not necessarily the subject of gerontology; most of the research participants in this research are indeed relatively healthy. Furthermore, ‘old’ (*lao*) in traditional Chinese society commonly implied a higher social status. For example, the words for teacher (*lao shi*) and boss (*lao ban*),



**Figure 1.7** Statistics related to ageing in Shanghai. Infographic by Xinyuan Wang.



both occupations associated with higher status, also contain the term 'old'. However, in today's Chinese society, the ethnography will show that being older no longer guarantees a higher social status; various forms of ageism are starting to arise, in addition to certain social stigmas associated with the older generation. During research the term 'older people' was used with caution, depending on the specific context in question.

Often the concern is as much with an 'older generation' as with older people; the word 'older' is often used as a collective term identifying the cohort who experienced roughly the same historical periods, the people who now call themselves 'our older generation' (*lao yibei*). This refers in particular to those born during the first decade of the 'New China' in 1949, and who had experienced the Cultural Revolution (1967–77) during their youth and economic reforms during their middle age. As the rest of this book explains, they are the 'revolutionary generation' or the 'Red Guard generation'.

A further unique facet of this older generation in China is that they are both the first and the last generation who will fully embrace the digital possibilities facilitated by the smartphone at the later stages of their lives. Several chapters in this book, through ethnographic research, convey the way in which older people in Shanghai have applied the smartphone to various aspects of their everyday activities, ranging from self-care, social relations or even redefinition of their life purpose. All of these phenomena are situated in the wider context of the proliferation of the smartphone in digital Shanghai. From 'smart care for the elderly' to 'the Smart City', the term 'smart' was constantly mentioned throughout my research, both by the management of the care homes I visited or by government officers. The term 'smart city'<sup>65</sup> refers to the development of urban infrastructures facilitated by advanced digital technologies, including Big Data and the Internet-of-Things (IoT), as well as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotic processes. It has now become one of the buzzwords in Shanghai's government reports and daily news.<sup>66</sup>

An example of the way in which the digital has become woven into everyday life is the dominance of mobile payment. Throughout my entire fieldwork, which lasted for 16 months throughout 2018 and 2019, I only used cash twice.<sup>67</sup> Shortly afterward the global pandemic that began in late 2019 significantly boosted online shopping around the world, while the post-lockdown reopening of enterprises has also seen significant growth in the use of QR codes in various situations. However, in 2018 the use of QR codes was already ubiquitous in Shanghai. People ordered food, rented bicycles, hailed taxis, booked hotels and more simply by scanning QR codes via their smartphones.

There were several reasons for this pioneering application of online shopping and mobile payment in China. In 2003 the outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), caused by a strain of coronavirus, had caused cities and factories in the country to be shut down for months. As later acknowledged in Chinese academia and media, this provided an unprecedented opportunity for the newly emerging e-commerce companies, such as Alibaba, to grow with breathtaking speed. The ‘internet’ in general then became woven into the fabric of ordinary people’s lives.<sup>68</sup> More than 15 years after the SARS crisis, the fieldwork conducted in Shanghai, as reported in this book, will show just how deeply embedded the mobile internet now is in people’s lives. As an example, consider this street scene taken from my fieldnotes:

On the last day of the seven-day *shuilu fahui* (the water and land rite) at Jing’an temple, the famous temple with more than 780 years of history in the very centre of the most flourishing and buzzing downtown area of Shanghai (Fig. 1.8). Besieged by a proliferation of high-rise shopping centres, Jing’an temple is the only place where people burn ‘money’ not as luxury consumption, but for the benefit of their ancestors. One woman who was busy burning ‘spiritual money’ (*ming bi*) explained that the money made out of tinfoil paper is for the ghosts and deities, so that the souls of the deceased



**Figure 1.8** (left) Jing’an temple in Shanghai city centre. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

**Figure 1.9** (right) A digital prayer board in Shanghai. Here visitors can scan the QR code and post their prayer online; it will then be publicly shown on the screen. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

persons will find some peace during purgatory, called *chao du*. Earnestly she added: 'Today is the last chance of the year for ghosts to receive money!' According to her, in the afterlife ghosts must be 'bribed' to avoid them imparting too much torture and hardship onto passing ancestors.

The air was full of the choking smell of the dense smoke of the burning of 'spiritual money' and incense. The smoke symbolises the transition from the tangible material world to the intangible spirit world. On the other side of the raging flames a big standing electronic screen called 'Prayer merit and credit list' (*qi fu gong de bang*) was visible. Standing in front of the big screen, people are busy reaching the deities in a more 'environmentally friendly' way – by holding their smartphones against the screen to scan the QR code on the top so that they can post a prayer online (Fig. 1.9). The prayers they compose then pop up in the form of vertical red scroll on the big screen immediately after being submitted; many people take a photo of the screen for their own records.

The combination of the golden temple, the shining shopping centre, dense incense smoke, burning spiritual money and the bright red digital screen remained one of the most powerful images in my memory during the 16 months of fieldwork. It is these multiple layers of images that I needed to reveal in telling the story of people's lives in Shanghai.

## **A note on methodology: making out the true face of Mountain Lu**

It was rare that research participants would themselves ask questions about research methodology, since it is hardly a topic of general conversation. The most poetic question about methodology of my study, however, came from a casual afternoon chat with Angu, a retired cook in Shanghai. Angu asked me in our second meeting: 'So ... how can you make out the true face of 'Mountain Lu' (*lushan zhen mianmu*)?'

Mountain Lu, one of the most renowned mountains in China, is known for its grandeur and steepness. However, Angu was not referring to the physical Mountain Lu. The expression the 'true face of Mountain Lu' has its origin in a poem by Su Shi (1037–1101)<sup>69</sup> and is in daily use among Chinese people. The phrase describes an ambiguous and

unpredictable or complex situation. The original four-line poem goes as follows:<sup>70</sup>

It's a range viewed in face and peaks viewed from the side,  
Assuming different shapes viewed from far and wide,  
Of Mountain Lu we cannot make out of the true face,  
For we are lost in the heart of the very place.

Almost a thousand years ago the great poet Su Shi explained that we cannot make out the 'true face of Mountain Lu' because we are within the mountain and therefore 'lost in the heart of the very place'. Looking back, Angu's question is more like a kind warning: is it possible fully to understand people's life in a mega-city such as *modu* Shanghai when I am in Shanghai itself, overwhelmed by its richness and contradictions?

Su Shi and Angu are right: observing *from a distance* has the benefit of not getting lost or distracted. However, this raises a fundamental question of epistemology: how do we define the 'true face'? Shanghai is a mega-city, but this is not just a geographic term. It is also about the numerous life stories and memories of people engraved into its landscape: the personal struggles and efforts that lie behind the stunning skylines in Pudong; the joy and sadness in thousands of households dwelling in the forests of tower blocks; and the gossip and news travelling through the *lilong* alleyways. All are true experiences of people living in Shanghai, but they are very different. So what kind of 'true face' are we looking for? And what kind of 'true face' really matters? What gives us the authority to say that one is truer than another? Or if no authority exists, how do we work with multiple truths and the many different faces of Shanghai?

For these reasons, in response to Su Shi and Angu, I would say that anthropologists are not seeking for the 'true face'. Instead they build their picture by respecting each individual life story, set as it is against cultural values and constraints. Rather than looking to be away from the mountain in order to gain perspective, the anthropologist is trying to come ever nearer, to observe 'from close up and within'<sup>71</sup> as their means of portraying the metropolis through the experiences of each resident. If an anthropologist was to rewrite the last two lines of the poem, it would therefore appear rather differently: 'Of Mountain Lu we can map out the true faces, for we are deep in the heart of the very place'.

Today new paths are emerging for an ethnographer to follow if they wish to find their way 'deep in the heart of the very place'. For example, digital anthropology<sup>72</sup> aims to understand the consequences of digital technology through ethnography. The online landscape does not even appear on the surface of the city, other than in the vista of people

peering at their screens. We have to journey into the screens themselves to observe the private interactions and chats that circulate around this otherwise invisible terrain. In contrast to journalism, where the value of stories lies in their being new, the ethnographer waits until they have become a mundane part of everyday life. Such accounts are no longer of interest to journalists but have become an aid to the ethnographer trying to gauge a sense of 'typicality'. In many cases the stories now appear so mundane that research participants are often confused, wondering what on earth the anthropologists are so excited about.

We are excited because it is precisely by becoming 'invisible' that everyday practices gain their power to structure normative behaviour – without people realising that this is why they act as they do. That is what we call the 'humility of things'.<sup>73</sup> The fact that we do not notice the air we breathe is hardly a sign of its unimportance. We are seeking out certain defining features of society that would be taken for granted by its insiders; the less they are noticed, the more efficient and effective they are in shaping the society.

This explains why researchers need to spend more than a year living within the local community. It also explains the focus upon participant observation rather than research methods such as interviews and surveys, in which people are likely to be fully aware of the presence of the researcher and the fact that they are being studied or watched. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead observed, 'what people say, what they do and what they say they do are entirely different things'.<sup>74</sup> Our method is to go to the roots of the society where we can be immersed in local life as it is experienced by local people. In practice, the core of participant observation is often achieved through making friends, building trust and gradually coming to empathise with their perspective on life.

For example, in this fieldwork, I spent much of my time engaging with activities directly related to neither the use of the smartphone nor the topic of ageing. Rather, they form part of what we term 'holistic contextualisation'<sup>75</sup> because no one lives just through their age or just online, and everything else they do may have a bearing upon the topics of research. The three-minute short film below (Fig. 1.10) captures the key message of doing anthropological fieldwork: it involves getting to know people the way you get to know your close friends.

In writing a book based on ethnography, it is crucial to convey not only the unique character of each individual, but also to address what may be regarded as typical, for example, or characteristic of the Shanghainese. Research participants themselves commonly use the word 'typical' (*dianxing*) as part of daily conversation; they may comment



**Figure 1.10** ‘How I did my fieldwork’. The film can be seen at <https://bit.ly/shanghaifieldwork>.

that ‘it is typical her to forward this kind of news to the family WeChat group’ or ‘my father was a typical “socialist father” during Mao’s time’. Furthermore, when people disagree with one another about what should be regarded as typical, what for them is a problem, then becomes a valuable insight into further nuances for the ethnography.

As the foundation for this ethnography, I lived for 16 months throughout 2018 and 2019 inside a low-rise living compound, referred to in this book by the pseudonym *ForeverGood*. Located in the former French Concession in the heart of Shanghai, *ForeverGood* was built in the late 1940s as collective accommodation, hosting employees of a state-owned institute. It is a ‘new style’ alleyway (*xinshi lilong*) residential compound. These new style alleyways<sup>76</sup> can roughly be understood as an advanced version of *lilong* which, as explained above, were the dominant residential house style in Shanghai throughout the 1930s and 1940s but gradually disappeared during the economic reform. The individual rooms in new style *lilong* are relatively spacious and the alleyways wider. In addition, the ground floor has a front yard and a small back yard garden attached to it in some cases. However, it is still common to see shared kitchens and toilets in these new style *lilong*.

During the ‘class struggle’ of the Cultural Revolution in particular, many households were reallocated, with well-off households forced to relinquish living space to ‘working-class’ households. These property rights still constitute a significant historical legacy from the Cultural Revolution for the older people who live here.<sup>77</sup> For example, in

*ForeverGood*, the flat below mine used to belong to one household before the Revolution. During the political struggle, however, the father of the household was deemed to be ‘a running dog of capitalism’. As a result, they had to give up one room to a ‘working-class’ household who then shared their kitchen and toilet. This situation did not change after the Revolution, leaving the two households still ‘sharing the same roof’, with inevitable daily conflicts. Such situations are common in many *lilong* and European-style villas in the city centre, where dwelling spaces originally designed for one household were divided into separate living spaces shared by multiple households. This means that some older people still live with the same neighbours who used to monitor or even persecute them during revolutionary times.

*ForeverGood* consists of 23 residential buildings, housing more than 3,000 residents and 941 households. The average age of the residents is around 60 (32 per cent were aged over 60, while 6 per cent were over 80). *ForeverGood* was my immediate neighbourhood during my 16-month stay in Shanghai, and the place where I immersed myself in the daily rhythm of ordinary people’s lives. My neighbours were the first group of research participants. I became more accepted in this neighbourhood by volunteering and joining various kinds of community activities. For example, over 15 months I voluntarily held a free English evening class for the children from the neighbourhood once a fortnight. Since the one-child policy was implemented in the late 1970s children have become the focus of the Chinese family, especially in urban areas. Anything to do with their children would usually motivate the entire family, involving two or even three generations. Once the children in the neighbourhood were seen to be greeting me happily, their parents and grandparents did the same.

I also helped the ‘Residents’ Committee’ (*juweihui*) to curate an exhibition based on the oral history and photographs of the residents and the neighbourhood, which was then on display for over a year. Preparation of this exhibition allowed me to visit more than 20 households where people generously showed me their family albums and shared detailed personal stories with me. While at first these stories seemed irrelevant to their current engagement with the digital, it was ultimately through the lens of this earlier revolutionary time that I gained a better understanding of people’s attitudes towards smartphone use. As the rest of this book shows, I came to appreciate how the first political revolution determined a good deal of the second digital revolution.

Alongside the *ForeverGood* compound, I also conducted fieldwork in a suburban area consisting of crowded tower blocks of the type most

Shanghai residents now inhabit. In addition, I worked in both a care home for older residents in a medium-income suburb and a large care centre for the elderly in a town adjacent to Shanghai. The fieldwork conducted in the home for older residents and the ‘centre for the elderly’ near Shanghai brought with it a focus on migrant care workers and the adult children of the elderly, both of whom now tend to be in their fifties and sixties.

I also joined an association set up by a group (with about 200 members) of local Shanghainese people who were interested in the history of old buildings, such as Art Deco buildings and old *lilong* buildings in the city. These participants were also mainly in their fifties and sixties. By joining their activities, such as the weekly walking tours in the city, in which they visited various buildings, I came to know many people. About 20 of them became key research participants, not only regarding me as a personal friend but also introducing me to their close friends and family members. Furthermore, acknowledging these older people’s deep affective attachment to the old Shanghainese buildings helped me to appreciate the relationship between people and space. This in turn provided further important insights that enabled me to understand the role of the smartphone in older people’s everyday experience of ‘dwelling’.

Ethnography was conducted both online and offline. A major benefit of such long-term ethnography was that research participants gradually developed a level of trust that meant they were comfortable sharing not only their personal stories but also ‘opening’ their smartphones up to me so that I could participate in their online lives. I thereby gained first-hand information about what people really do with their smartphones and how they navigate various social relations via WeChat,<sup>78</sup> the dominant social media platform in China used by all these research participants. I was able to observe people’s online interaction and posts, their WeChat groups and conversations on their personal profiles. As a result, WeChat became one of the major ‘places’ I got to know people well, chatting with them on a daily basis. During fieldwork I added more than 300 new WeChat contacts – most of these were my research participants.

The online ethnography continued even after I left Shanghai in June 2019. At the end of my fieldwork Mr Huang, one of my research participants, said a very modern ‘goodbye’ to me:

Even living in the same city, friends meet on WeChat. Live near or afar, it matters much less once you are on WeChat. So, see you on WeChat.



Mr Huang is indeed right. More than three years after leaving Shanghai, I am still very much in the loop when it comes to gossip between neighbours or the troublesome relationship between a mother and her daughter-in-law in Shanghai. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic I still managed to follow the changes in people's daily life via WeChat. At the time of writing, my digital 'neighbours' continue to send me good morning stickers every day and regularly update me about the lockdown situations in April 2022, all of which are 5,700 miles away from my office in London – and all thanks to WeChat.

For more specific topics, I also employed in-depth interviews and surveys. These were mostly carried out at a relatively late stage of the fieldwork, when research participants had developed the trust and friendship required to treat questions seriously and provide thoughtful answers. For example, in order to gain a more comprehensive description of the use of smartphone apps, a systematic app survey was carried out with 30 research participants aged from 45 to 88. All of them had at least six months' experience of smartphone use, with an overall average of two years' usage of the device. For this task each participant showed me every app installed on their smartphone, then discussed their use of all these apps. In addition, interviews focusing on the use of WeChat groups were conducted among 52 key research participants (30 male and 22 female participants, aged between 45 and 75). In these interviews research participants displayed all the WeChat groups they had joined and told me about their experience in each of these groups in more depth.

I also carried out a 40-question survey about people's use of smartphones for the purposes of health and care. This survey was completed by 150 older people. In addition, the research detailed above was complemented by various smaller online and offline surveys in a more spontaneous fashion throughout the fieldwork. These were undertaken as and when needed in order to gain a better sense of a particular phenomenon. Given the constraints of space, only some of these are referred to in this book.

Fieldwork research ethics carefully followed the guidelines of the European Research Council (ERC) which is the funding body of this project, as well as UCL's research ethics committee. Each research participant learned about my role as researcher from our first encounter and signed the project's consent form. In order to preserve the basic maxim of ethical research, which is to ensure that no harm ensues for any research participants, they have been fully anonymised – not just through the use of pseudonyms but also, in some cases, through adjusting basic background information to ensure that they cannot be recognised.

## A final note on how to read the book

In the spirit of holistic contextualisation, this book tackles a much wider brief than simply the use of smartphones and the experience of older people in Shanghai. Throughout the book, a variety of ‘big issues’ within contemporary Chinese society are discussed, including demographic structure, social mobility, family development, individual and collective memories, belief and political participation, as well as the nature and legacy of revolution. Understanding smartphones and appreciating the particularities of each individual is now mutually complementary, given both the proliferation of smartphones and their involvement in practically every aspect of a person’s everyday life.

The first three chapters provide three essential perspectives: the experience of ageing, everyday life and social relations. Ageing may be physical, mental and social. The experience of ageing is both individual and collective. By exploring the consequences of two major policies in China, the modern retirement policy and the family plan policy, at both a social and personal level, [Chapter 2](#) provides some key context for understanding the experience of ageing for this older generation in China. As the post-reform pension policy was only introduced for this older generation, it has significantly changed the nature of retirement as well as people’s expectations and coping strategies in old age. By contrast, the family plan policy, which has existed for more than three decades, has had a long-lasting influence on demographic features in urban China, transforming the social role and social status of old age. Based on the analysis of the impact of retirement and shifts in family structure, [Chapter 2](#) highlights the newly gained social role of grandparents and explains why this older generation is an unprecedented new ‘sandwich generation’.

[Chapter 3](#) attempts to capture the dynamics of everyday life as well as the emerging digital routines of retirement. It reveals more about the daily practice and general discourses among older people, and their wider social connections, in order to explore the smartphone’s role in the fields of self-care, lifelong education, shopping, self-presentation, interpersonal communication, entertainment and the circulation of information. This chapter also provides the social and cultural context required to make sense of these digital practices among older people. For example, this chapter introduces two organisations that play an important role in older people’s everyday activities: the ‘Senior Citizens’ University’ (SCU) and the ‘Residents’ Committee’ (RC). Both organisations reflect the entrenched influence of the Party-state on Chinese society at grassroots

level. The chapter also showcases that the drastic changes this older generation experienced in their daily lives are the key context for us in appreciating the reason why its members embraced the newly formed digital routines with such passion and determination.

Chapter 4 continues the discussion of everyday life, but with a particular focus on the social relations that play a vital role in people's life after retirement. To capture the nuances around the maintenance and development of social relations through the smartphone more effectively, Chapter 4 presents a detailed discussion of the practice of Chinese *guanxi* (social relations), a concept that can be traced back to the ideals of Confucianism. The ethnography shows how these Confucian principles have been internalised to form an essential part of daily interpersonal interaction. This chapter then considers in more detail one specific type of *guanxi* that only came into being thanks to the proliferation of the smartphone and the popularity of WeChat groups (*qun*) among older people: 'the friends from WeChat groups'.

Following the discussion of people's everyday activities in their social and institutional context, Chapter 5, called 'Crafting smartphones', and Chapter 6, called 'Crafting health', examine two specific activities that have become a constant within daily life: the use of smartphones and the practice of self-care. Chapter 5 describes smartphone practices more broadly, as well as exploring public discourses surrounding the use of the devices among older people. Its focus is upon the role of the smartphone in the fields of self-care, self-presentation, visual communication and the distribution of information.

Chapter 6 examines health as a cultural practice and considers how it has been impacted by the digital capacities facilitated by the smartphone. Based on ethnographic insights into the ways in which people manage their own health in everyday life, this chapter explores the social and moral aspect of health, highlighting the profound influence of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in people's engagement with self-care. The accepted dynamic and dialectical relationship between body and mind among Chinese people is found to be the key for making sense of the way in which they appropriate smartphones for health-related practices. The research shows how a gradual decline in physical capabilities is matched by a remarkable increase in social capabilities thanks to the adoption of smartphones.

If we compare this book to a documentary about this older generation in China, the chapters discussed so far should be seen as a series of wide-angle shots of the social landscape complemented by long shots of

various aspects of people's lives. These are punctuated by shots from up close, made up of the elements of the book that present the stories of individuals. By contrast, in [Chapter 7](#), called 'Personhood in revolution(s)', and [Chapter 8](#), called 'Life purpose', the camera focuses down on some extremely close shots to capture the subtle facial expressions of the main characters and look into their eyes. In many ways these two chapters are the 'soul' of the book, touching as they do on the foundations of memory, personhood and the purpose of life. These two chapters also include discussions of a considerable length of history in contemporary Chinese society, which are woven into the narratives of individual life stories.

For example, the key theme of [Chapter 7](#) is 'revolution': the 'trade-mark' of this older generation in China which has lived through not only the radical political revolution of the Cultural Revolution, in the early stages of communist China, but also the 'digital revolution' in the later stages of their lives. The current digital revolution is thus being experienced differently by the older generation, who had been fundamentally shaped by the earlier political revolution. [Chapter 7](#) argues that 'revolution' has become an embodied concept that is manifest in a wide range of people's daily practices. It further explains ordinary Chinese people's understanding of youth and ageing, tradition and modernity, before considering what, ultimately, it takes to 'do personhood' (*zuoren*).

The discussion of the historical relationship between individuals and the Party-state as one of the striking features of this revolutionary generation starts in [Chapter 7](#). It continues in [Chapter 8](#), which examines people's individual struggles during the social transformations of the past seven decades in contemporary China, including the periods of political revolution and economic reform. The chapter reveals the narratives around this older generation's life purpose, in the context of these radical and extraordinary changes in society and values. It also reflects on how people take up the digital capacities presented by smartphones as a means to create and live out new narratives of their lives.

The book's conclusion summarises the social consequences of the smartphone in contemporary China and what the process of ageing now means to ordinary Chinese people. The conclusion connects the dots revealed in the previous chapters and introduces new essential context, required for a thorough understanding of smartphone use among the older generation in China. For example, it discusses how smartphone practice needs to be appreciated in the light of China's all-encompassing quest for digital modernity, a development both sponsored by the Party-state and supported by ordinary people, who see digital engagement as a good citizen's moral duty. Or, to take another example, it explains how

their specific perception of ageing – as well as the related healthcare and digital practices – only make sense in the wider context of an adaptable Chinese cosmology responding to this ever-changing society. Finally, the Conclusion reflects upon what we can learn from the Chinese case, both in terms of the relation between humanity and technology and in that between individuals and society.

## Notes

1. The novel *Mato* (1924) was written by Japanese author Shōfu Muramatsu, who lived in Shanghai in the 1920s.
2. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/06/c\\_138204560.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/06/c_138204560.htm) (accessed 1 November 2021).
3. See the comparative book of the ASSA project: Miller et al. 2021.
4. The concept of 'information have-less' was coined by media scholar Jack Linchuan Qiu to describe people who benefited from inexpensive internet and mobile phone services. The 'information have-less' is between the haves and have nots, including migrants and retirees. See Qiu, J. L. 2009.
5. [https://www.longfinance.net/media/documents/GFCI\\_28\\_Full\\_Report\\_2020.09.25\\_v1.1.pdf](https://www.longfinance.net/media/documents/GFCI_28_Full_Report_2020.09.25_v1.1.pdf) (accessed 1 November 2021).
6. Keller, W., B. Li and C. H. Shiue 2013.
7. Colonialism in China is usually associated with the 'century of humiliation' (*bai nian guochi*) experienced under Western imperialism in the nationalism discourse. In the book *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's global history*, Isabella Jackson insightfully reveals the transnational colonialism that permeates Shanghai and its administration in the International Settlements. Jackson's investigation of the significant role that the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC) – a colonial governance of the International Settlement led by non-state actors – played in the International Settlement in Shanghai reveals the complexity of Western colonialism in China in the context of a 'transnational process'.
8. Johnstone, W. C. 1937.
9. Frazier, M. W. 2019, 133.
10. Of the city's population of 3 million, 70,000 were foreigners. See French, P. 2006, 191.
11. In the eighteenth century the British had become a nation of tea drinkers. To prevent a trade imbalance (e.g. due to the astronomically increasing demand for Chinese tea), the British tried to sell more of their own products to China. However, there was not much demand for wool products in a country accustomed to either cotton or silk. Opium turned out to be the 'best' solution to this trade imbalance. Highly addictive opium, known in China as 'foreign mud', rapidly became the drug of choice for all sectors of Chinese society. In 1890 an estimated 10 per cent of the Chinese population smoked opium. The Opium Wars arose when the Chinese tried to curb the deliberate attempt to create a society addicted to this drug. See Brown, J. B. 1973.
12. Scheen, L. 2012, 121.
13. French, P. 2006, 191.
14. Boasting the best-equipped studios and the best-run heaters, Shanghai cinemas dominated the mass culture and entertainment scene across urban China before 1949. See Fu, P. 1997.
15. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), also known as the Taiping Revolution, was a massive civil war between the Manchu Qing dynasty and the Han, Hakka-led Taiping heavenly Kingdom. With a death toll of between 30 and 50 million, the Taiping Rebellion is one of the bloodiest civil wars in world history. British interests in Shanghai grew rapidly in the Taiping Rebellion period and the British helped the Qing government to draw in intervention against the Taiping armies when they attacked the Shanghai port in 1860 and 1862. In the end the Qing government won the war. See Chappell, J. 2016.
16. The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), also known as the Boxer Uprising, was an armed insurrection in China. It was initiated by ordinary Chinese peasants against increasing foreign intervention in China. The peasants were known as 'boxers' in the West due to their martial arts

- showmanship. The rebellion used the slogan: 'Support the Qing, exterminate the foreigners'. The Boxer Rebellion, although short-lived, played a significant role in the rise of nationalism in modern China; it was later to inspire Chinese nationalists, including a young Mao Zedong, for decades to come. For a vivid portrait of the Boxer Rebellion see Silbey, D. J. 2012.
17. Arkaraprasertkul, N. 2009.
  18. Ibid.
  19. Guan, Q. 1996, 25.
  20. Lü, J., P. G. Rowe and J. Zhang, eds. 2001, 63.
  21. <https://www.chinahighlights.com/shanghai/attraction/lilongs.htm> (accessed on 1 November 2021).
  22. Interested readers could read Li, J. 2014. This book insightfully captures the nuanced social life within *lilong* living under Mao Zedong's communism and later Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening of China.
  23. 'Graduated privacy' was a term originally coined by Nelson Wu to explain the use and sequence of spaces in traditional Chinese courtyard houses. See Wu, N. I. 1968, 32.
  24. Fang, K., X. Wang, L. Chen, Z. Zhang and N. Furuya 2019.
  25. Arkaraprasertkul, N. 2009.
  26. Chen Wangdao, one of the early Marxists in China, was the first translator of *The Communist Manifesto* into Chinese. As Mao Zedong revealed in 1936, Chen's Chinese edition of *The Communist Manifesto* inspired his Marxist convictions. [https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d774e7763444e78457a6333566d54/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d774e7763444e78457a6333566d54/share_p.html) (accessed 1 November 2021).
  27. The first National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was held in Shanghai and Jiaying between 23 July and 2 August 1921. At the time there were 57 members of the Chinese Communist Party, including Mao Zedong. The meeting started in Shanghai, but came to an end due to harassment from the police in the French Concession. It was then moved to a rented tourist boat on the South Lake in Jiaying.
  28. Harmsen, P. 2015.
  29. <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/11/shanghais-forgotten-jewish-past/281713/> (accessed 1 November 2021).
  30. Read the detailed history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai in Meyer, M. J. 2003.
  31. <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/11/shanghais-forgotten-jewish-past/281713/> (accessed 1 November 2021).
  32. Stranahan, P. 1992.
  33. Scheen, L. 2012, 121.
  34. Bray, David. 2005, 151.
  35. Frazier, M. W. 2019, 150.
  36. The Cultural Revolution, formally called the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a political movement launched by Mao Zedong. Its goal was the preservation of Chinese communism by purging the remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society. For details of personal memories of the Cultural Revolution, please see Chapter 7.
  37. The 'Gang of Four' faction refers to members of a radical political elite who were eventually convicted for implementing the harsh policies of the Cultural Revolution. The group included Mao's third wife Jiang Qing, as well as Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan.
  38. Mao insisted that violent class struggle was necessary to protect the Chinese communist revolution. In response to Mao's appeal, millions of young people nationwide formed 'Red Guards'. For details of personal memories of the 'Red Guards' please see Chapter 7.
  39. Yeung, Y. M. and Y. Sung, eds. 1996.
  40. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18006.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18006.shtml) (accessed on 1 November 2021).
  41. Read more about the personal experiences of participants during China's period of economic reform in Chapter 8.
  42. Murphey, R. 1988, 158.
  43. Yeung, Y. M. and Y. Sung, eds. 1996, 3–4.
  44. On 30 April 1990, when Pudong was declared a special development area, 10 preferential policies for the development of Pudong were announced. These included policies related to the income tax of foreign investors, permission for foreign banks to open branches in Pudong and a free trade zone in Pudong. See details at Yeung, Y. M. and Y. Sung, eds. 1996, 277–8.
  45. <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/ports-logistics/shanghai-port-retains-crown-worlds-busiest-container-port-2020> (accessed 1 November 2021).

46. Yeung, Y. M. and Y. Sung, eds. 1996.
47. In terms of the overall introduction to contemporary Shanghai culture, an excellent book to start with is Jenny Lin's *Above Sea: Contemporary art, urban culture and the fashioning of global Shanghai*. See Lin, J. 2018.
48. For example, the world's second-tallest building Shanghai Tower. See <https://factsanddetails.com/china/cat15/sub95/item416.html> (accessed 1 November 2021).
49. Larmer, B. 2010.
50. Lei, P. 2019.
51. Areas such as 'Xintiandi' and 'Tianzifang' are full replicas of *lilong* that were devoted to shopping and entertainment. You can read a report on the current situation of Shanghai *lilong* at <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1342/beloved-by-westerners%2C-shanghai-lilong-fail-to-attract-locals> (accessed 1 November 2021).
52. It is estimated that two out of three trees in Shanghai are London plane trees. The London plane tree is a hybrid between the American sycamore and the Oriental plane. These two kinds of trees were collected as specimens from European voyages in the seventeenth century and planted close together in the Vauxhall Gardens in London. The offspring of these two types of trees, the London plane tree, was discovered by John Tradescant, an aristocratic plant collector; it became widespread after the reconstruction of Paris in the nineteenth century. When the French arrived in Shanghai in the nineteenth century, they planted London plane trees alongside the lanes in the French Concession, leading local Chinese people to associate these trees with France. Sycamore trees (*hutong*) are always associated with the phoenix in China, as in folk tales these birds only rest on sycamore trees. For more background on trees see Grolleman 2018 at: <https://jaapgrolleman.com/trees-of-shanghai/> (accessed 1 November 2021).
53. Xiong, Y. 1996.
54. Gamble, J. 2002.
55. UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 'Long-term care for older persons in China' (working paper). <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Long%20Term%20Care%20for%20older%20persons%20in%20China.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2021).
56. The average life expectancy in China has risen from 34.51 years in 1940 to 76.62 years in 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1041350/life-expectancy-china-all-time/> (accessed 1 November 2021). It is worth noting that the significant reduction in the mortality rate of newborn babies has also contributed to the average life span.
57. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/cn/Documents/technology-media-telecommunications/deloitte-cn-2018-mobile-consumer-survey-en-190121.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2021).
58. <https://techblog.comsoc.org/2020/01/01/china-internet-penetration-reached-61-2-in-1st-half-2019-99-1-access-internet-via-mobile-phones/> (accessed 1 November 2021).
59. Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau 2010. About Shanghai localised 'Regulations of elderly home care in community' explanations. Retrieved from <http://mzj.sh.gov.cn/gb/shmzj/node8/node890/userobject1ai27337.html> (Chinese).
60. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/29/c\\_137074836.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/29/c_137074836.htm) (accessed 1 November 2021).
61. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1138831.shtml> (accessed 1 November 2021).
62. <http://tj.sh.gov.cn/tjfx/20181123/0014-1002033.html> (accessed 1 November 2021).
63. For example, female officials retire at the age of 55. In the case of hard physical jobs men retire at the age of 55 and women at 45.
64. Please note that given the profound rural and urban divide in China in various aspects of social life, all of the discussion of the ageing experience in this chapter – as well as in this book – is primarily about people in urban China.
65. Eremia, M., L. Toma and M. Sanduleac, 2017.
66. For example, see Ali Haidery, S., H. Ullah, N. U. Khan, K. Fatima, S. S. Rizvi and S. J. Kwon. 2020.
67. One of these occasions was when I purchased a Chinese SIM card at the Pudong International Airport upon arrival and was then unable to pay via mobile (the result of not having a valid Chinese phone number). The other occasion was during a trip to Beijing. At the time (2019) I had been so used to tapping in and out of the Shanghai Metro by using my phone that I had not anticipated being unable to purchase a metro ticket via my smartphone in the capital city.
68. Guo, S. 2021, xii.
69. Su Shi is one of most talented and accomplished figures in classical Chinese literature.

70. Su Shi, 'Written on the Wall at West Forest Temple'. The poem is translated by Prof. Yuanchong Yu (1921–2021) – a famous Chinese translator best known for translating ancient Chinese poems into English and French.
71. Magnani, J. G. C. 2005.
72. Horst, H. and D. Miller, eds. 2020.
73. Miller, D. 1987, 107.
74. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/margaret\\_mead\\_130631](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/margaret_mead_130631).
75. Miller, D. et al. 2021, 21.
76. Zhao, C. 2004.
77. Phillips, K. L. and A. L. Sommers. 2009.
78. For a brief introduction to WeChat, a hugely popular Chinese multi-purpose and messaging app, please see the second Appendix of this book.



## 2

# Ageing and retirement: ruptures and continuity

## Introduction

Facts affecting the experience of ageing are multiple and complex. They include personal history, social transformations, the local and social interpretation of age and ageing, social relations, family and social support, family development and health and medical care, among others. A number of chapters in this book discuss the life experience of ageing. As the start of this discussion, [Chapter 2](#) locates the inquiry of ageing experience in the wider context of contemporary urban society, focusing on the practice and perception of retirement on both social and personal levels.

Unlike physical ageing, which occurs ‘naturally’, retirement is a relatively recent social construct in Chinese society. Previously, in Chinese agricultural society, children were regarded as the family’s ‘pension’; an old Chinese saying notes that ‘children are reared to provide support in old age’ (*yang er fang lao*). According to the moral guidance of Confucian ‘filial piety’ (*xiao*), children are obliged to show respect, affection and obedience to their parents and to take good care of them in their old age.<sup>1</sup> However, with the rise of modern society and the market-orientated economy, as well as a significantly increased life expectancy and the demise of the traditional family, pensions have become a necessary form of transferring payment to the elderly through a collective entity for individuals and families.

The national pension scheme in China was first introduced in 1951. This took place within the socialist central-planned economy, which featured public ownership, lifelong employment, restricted labour mobility and non-existent unemployment.<sup>2</sup> Until the late 1980s, as part of the cradle-to-grave welfare and social security system provided by

state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the Chinese pension system was still an enterprise-based system; it only covered urban areas where most people usually had lifelong employment within one workplace (*danwei*).<sup>3</sup> The state, as the owner of the SOEs, was ultimately responsible for funding retirees' pensions, and pension benefits were solely financed from the SOEs' operational expenses rather than through employee contributions.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, changing employment in China meant that people left their previous pension pots behind, thereby losing all previously accumulated benefits. The lack of portability of pensions also understandably meant extremely low work mobility. In the 1990s, the reform of the Chinese pension system went hand-in-hand with the reform of SOEs.<sup>5</sup> During that period a substantial number of employees across China lost their assumed 'lifelong' job and were made redundant, without receiving their promised pension.<sup>6</sup>

In a way, retirement is an unprecedented life experience for the generations who lived in the urban areas of socialist China. That is why, as the first chapter on the experience of ageing, [Chapter 2](#) focuses mainly on the social consequences of retirement. In addition to retirement and the reform of the country's pension policy, another factor has had a significant impact on family reproduction and population planning, especially among the ageing generation: the one-child family plan policy, which allowed couples to have only one child. The one-child policy was in place for more than three decades (1979–2015)<sup>7</sup> and it significantly changed the demographic features of the generations living in urban China.<sup>8</sup> In addition, its impact also manifests in the way the ageing generation is experiencing transformations to their social status and changes within family roles.

Starting with the story of research participant Fangfang and her four-generation family, the chapter provides an ethnographic account of the demographic changes that occurred as a direct result of policy shifts and social transformations. It answers questions such as what do typical life arrangements look like after retirement in terms of family and social support? How are resources transferred within families? Answers to these questions clearly illustrate why this generation can be described as a new 'sandwich generation' in contemporary Chinese society. The rest of the chapter highlights the expectations and experience of being grandparents, a role newly acquired by many of the research participants in this study. Grandparenting represents a major shift in terms of post-retirement family roles; for many, it is also a way of 'returning to the family' after decades of working for the socialist *danwei* (work units). Furthermore, this newly attained family role aligns with the new digital capacities facilitated by

the smartphone. In many cases, grandparenting significantly motivates older people to become more active in their use of smartphones. At the same time, the active use of the device brings new tensions to the inter-generational relationship and the experience of ageing.

## Fangfang and her four-generation family

Fangfang, then aged 69, is an energetic and joyful lady who seems to have a natural talent for making friends with everyone. The first time I met her was at a community art exhibition about historical buildings in Shanghai. Wearing a red wool winter coat with a creamy cashmere scarf, Fangfang was posing in front of a watercolour painting of a Western-style villa for photos. Noticing that I was observing her, she turned to me with a big smile:

You may wonder why this painting ... that is because our family have such a long history with this villa!

Two weeks later, I was having tea with Fangfang and her husband in a one-bedroom flat in the villa on the painting, where the couple live.

The three-floor villa, located in the former French Concession (1849–1943), used to belong to a foreign capitalist whose family fled China before the People's Liberation Army of the Communist Party entered Shanghai in 1949. During the communist period private property such as real estate did not exist: instead, accommodation was allocated to people based on their job ranking in the workplace.

The family of Fangfang's grandfather used to live in a typical *lilong* alleyways area in the old part of Shanghai. As a senior scientist, Fangfang's grandfather was allocated one floor (four bedrooms plus a separate kitchen and toilet) of the villa, one of the benefits of being a high-ranking 'cadre'.<sup>9</sup> Fangfang's grandfather had three children, and each adult children got a room. Fangfang was born in one of them.

However, the luxury of four bedrooms did not last long. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Fangfang's family had to 'return' most of their flat, as at the time her grandfather was labelled as counter-revolutionary (*fan geming*) and was being publicly persecuted. The 'returned' rooms were reallocated to poor working-class families. Almost overnight the two-storey building that used to house three households became host to 10 different households.<sup>10</sup> What had previously been kitchens were turned into bedrooms and people had to cook in the



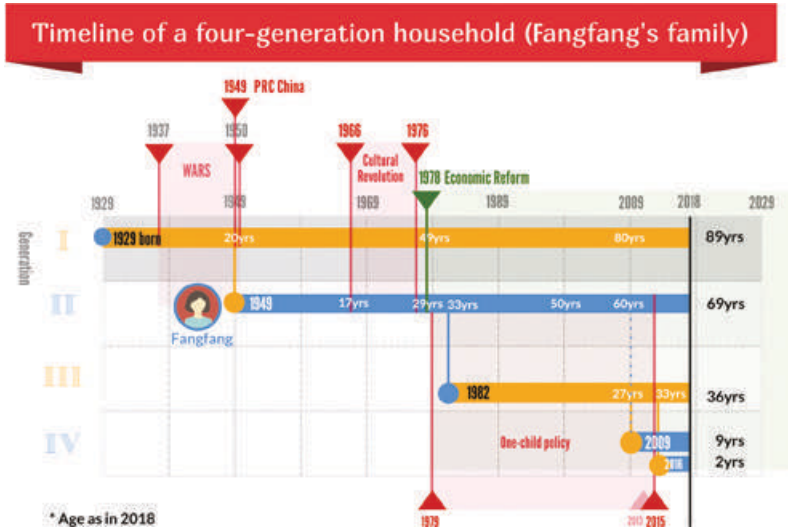
**Figure 2.1** Fangfang's living room (left). Her kitchen is still at the end of the corridor (right). Photos by Xinyuan Wang.

corridors of their flats (Fig. 2.1, right). When 17-year-old Fangfang was sent to the countryside to receive re-education from farmers, her eight family members shared one living room and one bedroom. While Fangfang was labouring in the corn fields in north China, her beloved grandmother passed away in the flat. The grandmother's bed still stands in the corner of the living room; it is now where Fangfang and her husband sleep (Fig. 2.1, left). Photos of her late grandparents and her father were hung on the wall beside the bed.

Fangfang observed, looking thoughtfully at the bed:

My grandma passed away in this bed ... that is life, one generation after another... It would be great if one day I also pass away during my sleep in the same bed ... just like my grandmother ... then at least I won't become a burden for my daughter's family.

The word 'burden' was mentioned frequently in the conversation with Fangfang, especially when she talked about her current struggles in caring for her 89-year-old mother. Fangfang's father passed away six years ago, after which her mother moved in with her younger brother, who has a bigger flat in the suburbs. At the time of the fieldwork Fangfang's mother had completely lost the ability to walk by herself after suffering a fall.<sup>11</sup> Her mother belongs to a generation that suffered long periods of wars and poverty. Born in 1929 (see 'Generation I', as shown in Fig. 2.2), she fled into the French Concession with her family to avoid shelling when Japan invaded Shanghai in 1937. For a brief period of time life seemed to be less constrained as she married into a relatively well-off family. Soon, however, the family started to decline amid the ongoing political turmoil.



**Figure 2.2** Timeline showing the four generations of Fangfang’s family. Created by Xinyuan Wang.

The second daughter in her family, Fangfang was born in 1949 (see ‘Generation II’ as shown in Fig. 2.2), just after the establishment of the New China by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In the 1950s the Party encouraged high fertility rates; the population was regarded as the essential force of revolution and production, so women with many children were officially rewarded as ‘honourable mothers’ (*guangrong mama*). Despite limited life resources Fangfang’s mother gave birth to seven children (from 1948 to 1965), six of whom survived to adulthood. During her childhood Fangfang witnessed how her mother struggled to raise young children during a time of pervasive scarcity and uncertainty; she also recalled how her young brother, who suffered from congenital heart disease, only survived seven days due to the lack of medical treatment in the 1950s. As Fangfang recalls, ‘Our mother really ate a lot of bitterness (*chi ku*) to raise six of us when most of the time my father was away’.

It is common for Chinese people to describe enduring suffering as ‘eating bitterness’. According to the principles of ‘filial piety’ (*xiao*) found in Confucian ethics,<sup>12</sup> the ‘bitterness’ Fangfang’s mother ate in her early life is supposed to be repaid in later life;<sup>13</sup> adult children are then expected to take care of their ageing parents in order to pay back the ‘care debt’ they owe from when they were young. The guidelines of ‘filial piety’ specially require the younger generations’ willingness and behavioural obedience to fulfil the older generations’ needs for care and support.<sup>14</sup>

When Fangfang's mother fell ill and needed intensive care, she made it clear that she did not want to be taken care of by those outside the family. As Fangfang explains,

My mum thinks it is totally unacceptable and 'face-losing' (*diu lian*) to be sent to an old people's care home, as that would suggest she raised unfilial children ... Once our big brother brought up the issue carefully and she replied furiously to him, saying: 'How can you have the heart to dump me onto those who are not related to me, given that I have sacrificed my whole life raising all of you?!' After that none of us dared mention it again.

The solution found by Fangfang's siblings, who are themselves in their sixties and seventies, was to travel to their younger brother's place where their mum, who is almost 90, is currently staying. A typical day would involve being in the same room with her, preparing and feeding her three meals, assisting her with washing and toileting, providing her with a massage and dealing with laundry during the daytime. At night the younger brother and his wife take turns carrying out these tasks. Fangfang's 70-year-old older brother fell ill himself because of the taxing labour of caregiving. He observed with a sigh,

You know, had it been in the old days, I would already have been enjoying 'filial piety' from my children ... but now I am still fulfilling 'filial piety' towards my mother. My mother is very fragile but, given medical treatments nowadays, she can easily live for another five years or longer ... but I don't know how long I can hold on ... I am just emotionally and physically tired.

The older brother's concern was shared by all the siblings and their partners. For example, the 62-year-old wife of the younger brother remarked that she lost her life once her mother-in-law moved to stay with them. According to Fangfang, all her siblings, including herself and her husband, can imagine themselves spending the last stages of their lives in a care home for the elderly, being taken care of by care workers, to free their own children from the 'unbearable burden' of elderly care. In explaining the situation, she ended with a rhetorical question asked by many of her age.

We are struggling to take care of our mum, but at least we have siblings that we can share this burden with ... it is 6 households

with 12 people altogether, all taking care of one old person ... our children are unlucky because they are part of the only-child generation ... that is to say that at some stage, a couple with an only child will need to take care of old parents from both sides, which is four old persons. Can you imagine what kind of burden our generation will become to our children?

Furthermore, Fangfang thinks that her daughter's family could not even take care of their children without her support, never mind being able to support her in the future. During the fieldwork three of Fangfang's siblings, including Fangfang herself, were not only caring for their mother, but also taking care of their grandchildren. Fangfang believes she herself is more devoted and responsible as a grandmother than she was as a mother. Her personal experience of child-rearing changed drastically as she shifted from her role as a daughter in the 1950s and 1960s to being a mother in the 1980s and 1990s, then a grandmother in the new millennium.

When Fangfang was young, her father was almost absent from her family life. This was not unusual, as 'socialist workers' were supposed to devote themselves fully to the country and Party, known as the 'big family', rather than to their 'small families'. Fangfang's mother was overwhelmed by bringing up her children in such difficult times; all she could afford was to make sure that every child was fed and clothed. China has a tradition of valuing education highly, but during that particular historical time the value of education had drastically declined because of the political climate, which was strongly pro-proletariat.<sup>15</sup> Consequently parents paid little attention to their children's performance in school or to their education in general. As Fangfang recalls,

There was no need to study hard as to be a factory worker was honourable during Mao's time and the income gap among different jobs was very small, plus the state allocated things to you.

In Fangfang's memory, her general childhood and school times were quite 'careless' (*wuyou wulv*), as she put it; neither she nor her parents really cared about her school performance and there was little homework. Fangfang's seemingly 'careless' early life stopped abruptly when political turmoil swept across the country. All the schools closed and urban youth from across the country were sent to the countryside.<sup>16</sup> In 1966, when 17-year-old Fangfang said goodbye to her family in Shanghai, she did not expect to be 'stuck' in the countryside for 12 years. In 1978, when she

finally got transferred back to Shanghai, taking a job in the factory where her father used to work, she was already 29 years old. Fangfang was also still single, as she had not wanted to marry a local man and remain in the countryside for the rest of her life. Finally she married one of her former neighbours and their daughter was born in 1982 (see ‘Generation III’, as shown in Fig. 2.2).

Unlike Fangfang’s generation, with multiple siblings, Fangfang’s daughter was the only child in the family, since the one-child policy had been enforced since 1979 in urban areas. Moreover, Fangfang’s daughter was born in a rather different era, when the egalitarianism that characterised the period of the planned economy had started to collapse amid the market-orientated economic reforms, which started in 1978. The economic reform, like the communist revolution, proved to be another significant social transformation that profoundly shaped older people’s life trajectories and experiences. Chapter 8 will further investigate impacts of the period of economic reform on ordinary people’s lives.

One of the striking features of that period was the perceived higher social competition; there were now no guaranteed allocated jobs. Fangfang clearly remembered how things were getting more competitive, both at work and at her daughter’s school. She paid for her daughter to attend extra tutorial classes so that she could get better results in the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*).<sup>17</sup> As the only child in the family, her daughter received much more attention from the family but was also burdened with more expectations. As Fangfang explains,

Both of us [Fangfang and her husband] missed out on higher education because of the Cultural Revolution, therefore we really hoped she could get into a good university and have a better life ... and she is our only hope.

Fangfang described herself as a ‘tiger mother’; like many parents at that time, she would also beat her daughter as punishment when she did not get good exam results. Under the strict discipline of her ‘tiger mother’, Fangfang’s daughter got a job in a good company after graduating from a prestigious university in Shanghai.

When Fangfang’s granddaughter Joy was born in 2009 (see ‘Generation IV’, as shown in Fig. 2.2), Fangfang’s daughter was just about to be promoted to middle manager. In order to keep her position in the company, she took only half of her maternity leave and went back to work straightaway. At that time Fangfang had retired, and she stepped into the



role of caring for little Joy quite ‘naturally’. Despite the trouble and tiredness, Joy brought a lot of joy to Fangfang’s life after retirement. When she was taking care of Joy, she did not even raise her voice, let alone hit her, as she had done her daughter. Through grandparenting, Fangfang also tried to compensate for the regret she felt about the way she had raised her daughter, which, as she recognised on looking back, had been too tough. As she explained,

When I was young, I was impatient with my daughter. Even though my discipline (*guan*) was all for her own good, I feel regret that she felt bitterness about the past and we were not close like a mother and daughter should be.

The bond between Fangfang and Joy was so strong that both felt upset when Joy’s mother ‘took back’ Joy four years ago. The separation did not last long. In 2014 ‘only-child’ couples (meaning both the wife and the husband were only children in their family) were allowed to have a second child in Shanghai, and in 2016 Joy’s mother gave birth to a boy (see ‘Generation IV’, as shown in Fig. 2.2). This time Joy’s paternal grandmother (*nai nai*) came to help with raising the baby. However, it did not take long before Joy felt unhappy about all the attention being given to the new-born baby. According to Fangfang, Joy expressed this to her by declaring ‘I want to stay with Grandma (*wai po*) as she is the person who loves *me* only’. Joy then moved back into Fangfang’s flat, where the spare room was converted into a bedroom and study for her.

Both of Fangfang’s grandchildren are now registered to Fangfang’s flat as their ‘home address’ in the household registration system (*hukou*).<sup>18</sup> The reason is simple: the address offers them a better education. The location of Fangfang’s flat guarantees access to a high-quality state-owned kindergarten, as well as free access to primary school and middle school in the neighbourhood. Because of this educational advantage, Fangfang’s 60-square-metre flat, the so-called ‘*xue qu fang*’ (school district property),<sup>19</sup> is currently worth 20 million RMB (around £2.1 million) on the Shanghai real estate market. Fortunately Fangfang purchased the flat at the beginning of the period of commercialisation of real estate in the 1990s, a time when tenants could purchase their flat at an extremely low price. Fangfang once jokingly remarked, ‘We live in the “golden hill”, even though we don’t have much cash in our pockets’. If Fangfang sells her current flat, she will certainly have more than enough money to buy a much bigger and more convenient one, ‘a flat that at least has a proper kitchen and toilet’, as she has always wanted, in the suburbs. However,

for the sake of her grandchildren's education, she will not move for the moment. As she says,

To stay here is a necessary sacrifice for the whole family ... Sometimes, I feel life is never easy ... but I should not complain ... look, now I don't need to work but every month I still receive money from the state and I have a flat which is worth a fortune. I don't need my daughter to take care of me – on the contrary, I can still contribute to the whole family... Maybe our generation has eaten a lot of bitterness and therefore we can really appreciate the sweetness in our later life.

Fangfang's four-generation family is one of many households in Shanghai that embody the changing times through the trajectories of each generation's development. The unprecedented social transformations that Fangfang's generation experienced form the underlying context for this book, and later chapters will explore the consequences of such collective memory in more depth. Taking the story of Fangfang's family as the starting point, the next section offers a wider perspective presenting a more general pattern of these trajectories. In addition, building on the understanding of the unique social context in the field site, the next sections will look specifically at the older generation – one that now serves as a link between two completely different eras in China.

## The new 'sandwich generation'

The term 'sandwich generation', which originally referred to middle-aged adults who care for both their ageing parents and their own children,<sup>20</sup> can now be used to describe the living situation of many retired older people in their fifties, sixties and sometimes their seventies who find themselves becoming carers for both elderly parents and young grandchildren. In addition, their adult children often depend heavily upon them.

The section above provides a detailed case study of Fangfang's four-generation extended family, a story that is representative of older people in Shanghai in many ways. However, a single household can never account for the entirety of Shanghai's diverse population. The fieldwork collected demographic data from hundreds of research participants. Among them are more than 15 households with four living generations (one household consists of five living generations, including a great-great-grandmother aged 101). [Table 2.1](#) provides a brief

**Table 2.1** Table showing demographic data from Shanghainese households. Created by Xinyuan Wang.

	Household 1			Household 2			Household 3			Household 4			Household 5		
	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings
GI	80/F	1938	4	86/F	1932	5	85/F	1933	4	85/F	1933	3	87/F	1931	4
	81/M	1937	5				86/M	1932	5	87/M	1931	4	88/M	1930	6
GII	57/M	1959	5	64/F	1954	5	65/F	1953	4	66/M	1952	6	65/F	1953	7
GIII	32/M	1986	1	39/M	1979	1	38/F	1980	1	35/F	1983	1	36/F	1982	1
GIV	7/M; 3/F	2011; 2015	2	13/F	2005	1	12/M	2006	1	8/F	2000	1	11/F	2007	1
	Household 6			Household 7			Household 8			Household 9			Household 10 (Fangfang)		
	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings	Age/ sex	born year	No. siblings
GI	88/F	1930	5	84/F	1934	4				90/F	1928	6	89/F	1929	5
							85/M	1933	5						
GII	68/F	1950	5	60/F	1958	3	64/F	1954	4	67/M	1951	4	69/F	1949	6
GIII	39/F	1979	1	35/M	1983	1	39/M	1979	1	41/F	1977	2	36/F	1982	1
GIV	13/M	2005	1	9/M; 2/F	2009; 2016	2	14/M	2004	1	16/F	2002	1	9/F; 2/M	2009; 2016	2

Key years

1949–1953: more children were encouraged; 1954–1977: less children were encouraged  
1966–1976: The Cultural Revolution; 1979–2013: Strict one-child policy; 2014–now: two-children policy

summary of 10 households,<sup>21</sup> featuring data spanning four generations, which is complementary to the material presented in Fangfang’s case. In the table itself the second generation (GII), highlighted in grey, refers to older people in their fifties and sixties, the core age group that is the focus of this book. This is the very first generation to have been parents under the one-child policy (since 1978). The second generation’s elderly parents are the first generation (GI) in urban China to have benefited from the country’s national pension scheme (in place since the 1950s).

Figure 2.3 shows the average age and fertility rate of different generations. Along with the case of Fangfang, mentioned above, the illustration helps us gain a general picture of the trajectory of the reproduction and personal development of the four generations currently living in Shanghai. As shown, the oldest living generation (GI) were born to families in which children were regarded as ‘pension’, which meant the more of them the better. The fertility rate of their parents (G0) was 4.7. Generation I (GI) became parents during the war and China’s communist period, when having several children was highly encouraged by the Party. The fertility rate rose to 4.9 during this time.

When Generation II (GII) became parents, however, the policy of family planning changed abruptly, as the government now regarded

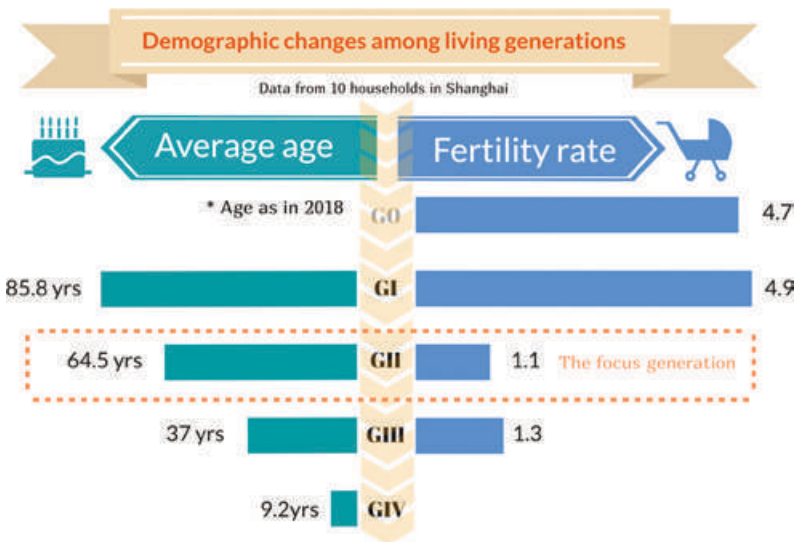


Figure 2.3 Demographic changes among living generations. Infographic created by Xinyuan Wang.

more children as a burden on the Chinese economy. The one-child policy caused the fertility rate of GII to drop drastically from 4.9 to 1.1. GIII became the first generation of parents to have lived under the relatively recent two-child policy. Their two children have relatively large age gaps between them (the largest gap among cases of research participants was 8 years), mainly because it took until 2014<sup>22</sup> for the one-child policy (which had been strictly enforced in the country for 35 years) finally to be replaced by the two-child policy.

According to the medical professionals<sup>23</sup> I spoke to during field-work, people in Shanghai who do not suffer from critical illness can expect to be healthy up to the age of 75 and over, due to today's much-improved living conditions. Even after this age, people can still live for a long period of time thanks to advances in terms of medical support – even if and when they fall ill. Research participant Dr Meng avoids wishing his senior patients to 'have a life of a hundred years' (*chang ming bai sui*), an idiom commonly deployed to bless older people with longevity, simply because more and more of his patients are in their late nineties. As Dr Meng explains,

For these senior people who are that close to being 100 years old, to wish they would have a life of 100 years sounds more like wishing that they would die soon... So nowadays I only wish senior people a life of 120 years and they are very pleased to hear that.

This significantly prolonged life expectancy also means that the stage of life which may require intensive care and support has been significantly deferred. As Fangfang's brother observed, it was merely one generation ago that Chinese people in their late sixties and seventies would be very unlikely still to have living parents; they themselves may have already needed to be cared for by their middle-aged children. Nowadays, however, caring for parents in their eighties or nineties has become commonplace among families in Shanghai. Among the research participants, most of them in their fifties to sixties, more than half still had living parents for whom they were the main care providers,<sup>24</sup> though a few of them also used professional care services from time to time, as and when necessary. A relatively small proportion of the participants' parents live in care homes for the elderly. Of those that do, this is in most cases because the old person's illness (such as dementia) had progressed beyond the family's ability to care for the older person at home, or because the family could not afford to care for their elderly parents around the clock.

Most older people in their fifties, sixties and even in their seventies still make an effort to live up to the social expectation of 'filial piety' with regards to their own parents. However, what they expect from their children with regards to 'filial piety' has clearly changed. As shown in Fangfang's case, when the duties of care needed to fulfil traditional 'filial piety' were shared among 12 family members, the situation was more viable. Now, however, it is unimaginable for a couple in which both halves are only children to be able to care for four elderly people, in this case two parents on both sides. Such a situation is too draining of time and/or of financial resources. Once Fangfang half-jokingly asked her granddaughter Joy,

My little treasure, will you take care of me when I am really old? If your parents do not want to take care of me, will you?

To Fangfang's great satisfaction Joy answered without hesitation 'Of course I will, as you are dearest to me'. However, Fangfang later remarks, 'I am actually not really expecting anyone to take care of me. I am realistic.'

Like Fangfang, very few research participants who were the main carer for their parents and/or their grandchildren said they expect their family (the younger generations) to be their main caregivers or to support them if they need intensive, round-the-clock care in the future.<sup>25</sup> Despite the widespread Confucian notion of 'intergenerational reciprocity',<sup>26</sup> meaning childcare as advance payment and investment for one's elder care, it is noticeable that most grandparents anticipate their elder care 'realistically'. In fieldwork, about three-quarters of research participants spoke of their personal willingness to receive professional care services when it becomes necessary; a growing portion of them also think the notion of care homes is not a bad idea.<sup>27</sup>

'We are the last generation to practise traditional filial piety,' notes Yaping, another research participant in her sixties. The '4-2-1' family structure (meaning 'four older parents/ two middle-aged adults/ one child') is one of the most common patterns of Chinese urban families, even though the one-child policy has recently been abolished. Many studies<sup>28</sup> have pointed out that such an inverted triangle structure is a unique and challenging problem for an ageing Chinese society. The topic of '*yanglao*' (old age support) is very prevalent among older people.

A number of people showed an interest in a new type of support in old age, one that has recently become popular among middle-class households and which is called 'huddle old-age support' (*baotuan yanglao*). In this expression, the term 'huddle' comes from the phrase

'huddle together to keep warm'. This trend, widely reported in the media and popular on social media, is essentially a model for co-housing among older people. It involves a couple of family friends of a similar age moving into a big house and keeping each other company, while also providing each other with mutual support and sharing the cost of care (such as paying for care workers or nurses). It is assumed that older people in such a situation will be both less lonely and more independent. A few older couples claimed that the 'huddle' model of support appeared to be ideal, as they did not want to rely on their children nor to spend the last stages of their lives in a 'cold' nursing home.

Having said that, the fieldwork did not include people already in a 'huddle' living situation. Some participants were concerned that the idea of 'huddling' was overly romantic and in many ways not very practical, at least not from what they had heard. For example, Mrs Zhang, a woman in her late sixties, expresses her concerns with the 'task and chore allocation' aspect of the idea:

We have lived our own lives behind a closed door for many years ...  
the husband would not even put down the toilet seat for his wife.  
Why would he all of a sudden remember to do so for his wife's  
female friend?

Upon hearing this, Mrs Zhang's husband adds: 'Well, if he does remember ... it probably will be even more problematic – the wife will wonder why!' Whether we are talking about a toilet seat or about a possibly complicated relationship within the household, it would no doubt be challenging to arrange a tight-knit communal life without compromises or conflicts – even among former friends and colleagues or neighbours who used to get along well.

All in all, older people may differ in terms of what kind of support they choose to have when thinking about their own very old age. Yet the consensus remains that they should not turn to their own children. The sympathy for their children, a generation of only children, is widely shared among the older generation. For healthy retirees who enjoy decent pensions, life can be satisfying in many ways and their adult children also benefit from it. Thus not only do older people not require support from their adult children, but they also play a vital role in providing all kinds of resources for their children and grandchildren.<sup>29</sup>

One of the findings from this research was that among people in their fifties to sixties who have young grandchildren,<sup>30</sup> 65 per cent engage with grandparenting tasks (such as providing meals or picking up/taking

the child to school) on a daily basis; most of them become ‘live-in’ nannies or have their grandchildren to live with them, creating the so-called ‘skipped-generation households’<sup>31</sup> (*gedai*). If we count the grandparents who engage with such tasks on an at least weekly basis, this goes up to 95 per cent. Among these participants, half also need to take care of their own parents, who are in their eighties or nineties, on at least a weekly basis. In addition, the majority are also supporting their own adult children financially. Some make a substantial contribution to their expenses, for example, making down payments on their flats, contributing to their monthly mortgage, paying for flat renovations, car purchases, live-in babysitter fees or their grandchildren’s education, among other things.

Only five per cent of these participants in their fifties and sixties received substantial support (in the form of care or money) from their adult children. Even though all of them received various kinds of ‘cash gifts’ (such as WeChat red envelopes<sup>32</sup> during the Chinese New Year) or even relatively expensive gifts (such as pre-paid holidays or smartphones) from their adult children, the amount of money spent is not comparable to what they have contributed to their children. In many cases the cash gifts mentioned above were given in return for the participants’ labour in caring for and raising their grandchildren. Such cash gifts are usually worth only a fraction of the fee the young couples would have to pay had they hired professional nannies.

The term ‘parents-eating’ (*kenlao*)<sup>33</sup> is frequently mentioned by people of all ages. It refers to a common phenomenon in which the younger generation rely heavily on their parents on a daily basis, both economically and in terms of labour. In most cases young and middle-aged couples have not yet faced the issue of having to care for their parents in old age, as the significantly higher life expectancy and general improvements in older people’s health have deferred the point at which people need care and support. Meanwhile, high levels of economic and financial competition in a market-orientated economy, as well as the high cost of living in Shanghai, mean that very few young couples can establish a new household without substantial support from their parents, whether in the form of financial aid or support with care. The older generation have retained a sense of duty, meaning they now consider it imperative to give their support to the younger generation.<sup>34</sup>

On the topic of ‘parents-eating’, Lixia, a 36-year-old female respondent who works in an office and has a 6-year-old son, speaks frankly:

The truth is my quality of life really depends a lot on how much our parents can and are willing to support.



Lixia's mother has been helping her with domestic housekeeping and childcare since her son was born. Another research participant, Jack, a company manager in his forties, had his mother-in-law help to raise his son eight years ago. Jack's parents made the initial down payment on Jack's flat and gave his wife 100,000 RMB (£10,000) in cash as a 'reward' for giving birth. Jack's nephew Dahe apparently envies Jack. His parents, now retired factory workers, are less well-off and therefore contributed little to his flat purchase. On top of this, Dahe's mother could not offer full-time help in caring for his baby as she also needed to take care of her 89-year-old mother-in-law.

Dahe's wife found that the situation was a bit unfair, as most of her friends were well supported by their parents and parents-in-law while they raised their babies. One notable finding from the fieldwork was that even though in practice older people support their children in different ways, grandparenting – as older people's contribution to the extended family – is regarded as one of the most common ways to offer support. It is widely believed that in Shanghai young couples will struggle to raise their children without support from their parents on both sides. This is because of both the high cost of living in the city and the underdeveloped public welfare and social insurance system (which would normally provide some help with care, whether for elderly people or children).

The phenomenon of *kenlao* ('parents-eating') is a good illustration of the unique Chinese intergenerational relations in contemporary urban China during the process of modernisation. *Kenlao* is neither in line with the expectation of 'filial piety' in terms of familial support, as in traditional Chinese society, nor with the individualistic cultural norms in which individuals are self-determined and relatively independent, as in many Western societies.<sup>35</sup>

## Grandparenting: what is a family for?

A survey conducted in Shanghai shows that the average amount of time children live with a grandparent ranges from 1 to 16 years, with the average length being 8.16 years.<sup>36</sup> The figure is so high that both academic and popular discussions describe how urban China has entered the 'skipped-generation education' era (*ge dai jiaoyu*). For Fangfang, taking care of the next generation is her duty as a family member. As she herself says: 'When I still have the capability to help my next generations, I will certainly do it; that is what a family is for, isn't it?' With regard to

how long she will take care of her grandchildren for, Fangfang assumes it will be for an exceedingly long time. Her role is more than taking care of them in their daily lives; it also involves supporting their personal development in the long term.

The importance of a high-quality education, once undervalued in Chinese society (during the country's revolutionary period), has now become a principal consideration; it is an essential concern among middle-class parents and grandparents. 'High-quality education' or 'elite education', in the context of the younger generation, implies the accumulation of 'cultural capital'. It is now one of the strongest influences on middle-class families' life strategies, as well as their ideas of social status.<sup>37</sup> The intense 'educational desire' across China, which manifests in the heated race among families to raise outstanding children, usually trumps all other considerations.<sup>38</sup>

Financially, the cost of raising a child, including providing them with a quality education, is massive; it has also increased rapidly during the past decade. In 2004 an academic survey<sup>39</sup> among Shanghai residents showed that the average direct cost of raising children (from birth to university) was about 490,000 RMB (around £50,000); in 2018 Shanghai was listed as the second most expensive city in China (after Beijing) in terms of the cost of raising a child, now estimated at 2,470,000 RMB (around £250,000).<sup>40</sup> Quality education includes multiple types of extra-curricular training. These may range from English tutorial classes to preparing children for entering competitions such as mathematical Olympiads, from ballet to horseback riding, as well as activities to 'expand the children's horizons', such as overseas summer camps or volunteering trips.<sup>41</sup> Research participants agree that in Shanghai, according to today's standards of quality education, it is difficult to raise a child and not spend at least 2,000,000 RMB (around £210,000).

Meanwhile, in 2018, the amount of annual per capita disposable income in Shanghai was around 64,000 RMB (around £6,500).<sup>42</sup> The total disposable income in the average nuclear family was about 190,000 RMB (around £20,000),<sup>43</sup> meaning that the cost of raising one child will easily cost at least a decade of a couple's total disposable income. In practice, it is almost impossible to attain an accurate figure of actual expenses given a variety of 'implicit costs', including purchasing a more expensive flat in neighbourhoods with access to better educational resources. Amid such social pressure, older people usually see it as their duty to contribute as members of the family. As Fangfang says,

Times are different ... in our generation, the priority was surviving. Having kids only meant there was one more mouth to feed. Parents also had limited expectations from any individual child, as it was not uncommon for people to have five or six children ... Now, every family is just making the greatest effort they can and investing all of their money into the upbringing of one or two children in order to produce the best kids.

The youngest generation is regarded as the representation of accumulated social and cultural capital that an extended family of multiple generations could achieve. The aspiration and ambition also produce anxiety relating to being left behind, and such anxiety and pressure is shared within the extended family.

Ling, a retired accountant aged 69, has nothing but good intentions when it comes to bringing up her granddaughter Kiki, a seven-year-old girl. She is also a piano player, a ballet dancer, an intermediate English speaker, a watercolour painter and, most recently, a computer programming learner. Ling believes that exposure to abstract language such as computer programming during the early years can help to develop Kiki's reasoning capability. She explains,

The competition among this new generation is so heated and all-encompassing, all I can do is to prepare her by giving her as good a starting point as I can.

In ordering to ensure Kiki has a good 'starting point', Ling has not only contributed more than half of her pension for various courses and teaching materials for Kiki, but has also spent almost all her free time in retirement accompanying Kiki. In doing so she seeks to ensure that her granddaughter is not just 'wasting time' playing around.

However, Kiki's grandparents on her father's side (*ye ye* and *nai nai*) do not agree with Ling's demanding education; they think Kiki is exhausted. Ling attributes this disagreement to the fact that Kiki's *ye ye* and *nai nai* live in a small city and are therefore unable to understand the competition in Shanghai.

They have no idea how competitive life is here. In a small city a child who is Kiki's age and can speak a tiny bit of English is probably impressive, but here just look at our own residential compound: all the kids can speak some English, and there are Italian and French

learners... They are spoiling Kiki and that is not good for her future ... Kiki will thank me in the future.

Nevertheless, it seems to be too early for Kiki to appreciate Ling's good intentions. For Kiki, the period she most looks forward to during the year is the two-week 'break' during the summer holidays when she normally stays with her grandparents on her father's side (*ye ye* and *nai nai*) in a nearby smaller city. Ling, however, has mixed feelings about that 'happy' two weeks. On the one hand, she is glad finally to have some time to herself and usually takes an annual sightseeing holiday with her friends. On the other hand, she is concerned about the fact that after her two weeks' break Kiki usually fails to get back on track and restart her fast-paced life. She has even developed feelings of resistance and resentment towards the learning plans that Ling has set for her. Every year after Kiki spends two weeks with her *ye ye* and *nai nai*, significant (and inevitable) conflicts arise between Ling and Kiki.

This year, upon her return from the two-week break, Kiki was upset to find out that Ling's gift for her was a four-week course in computer programming for children. She refused to attend the class and shouted at Ling,

I hate classes and I hate you. I way prefer *nai nai* to you! You never let me play, only force me to learn.

That was the first time that Kiki had articulated her preference among the two grandmothers and her protest left Ling feeling upset. Reflecting on the conflict, Ling asked me: 'I think Kiki will thank me in the future ... she will, right?'

As a typical 'lean-in' grandparent who has lofty expectations for her grandchildren and is determined to achieve the family's aspiration through the youngest generation, Ling may be open to criticism. In addition, as noted in her case, it is common in the 'one-child family'<sup>44</sup> to see a competition among grandparents over who can achieve the stronger emotional bond with their only grandchild (or two grandchildren). Disputes over the approach to grandparenting between maternal and paternal grandparents often play a part in such rivalry.

In English, the names for maternal and paternal grandparents are formally the same, although many families use different versions such as 'Granny' and 'Nana'. However, in Mandarin the paternal grandfather is called '*ye ye*' and the paternal grandmother '*nai nai*'. The maternal grandfather is '*wai gong*' and the maternal grandmother '*wai po*'. This linguistic feature points to the significance of lineage in China. Traditionally the

primary caretaker was usually a grandparent from the father's side (*nai nai*) of the family; in urban areas there is now less emphasis on upholding patrilineal traditions in favour of flexibility. In practice, both paternal and maternal grandparents seek to claim rights of access to their only grandchild or two grandchildren.

It also makes sense to appreciate the significance of grandparenting in the post-retirement lives of older people considering their 'life purpose'. As another research participant, Mr Liang, observed, 'Grandparenting is the most fulfilling project after retirement'. Now aged 64, he used to be a journalist. After retirement Mr Liang set up his own blog to keep an online diary for his grandchild, Hao, who had moved to Germany with his parents a few years before. Mr Liang could do no grandparenting in daily life. His grandparenting is thus all about giving timely attention and praise to Hao and being a diligent recorder of the little boy's childhood.

In the most recent blog post at the time of writing (March 2021), Mr Liang posted photos of himself and his wife having a video call with Hao. In it they watch the little boy reading a story in German (Fig. 2.4, left).



**Figure 2.4** Screenshots of Mr Liang's blog posts about his grandson Hao. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang, with permission from Mr Liang.

He also posted a photo of Hao attending an online drawing class held by a Chinese teacher (Fig. 2.4, right). Mr Liang explained that this is because he disagrees with the art education provided by the child's German school.

His school tutors don't teach painting skills, just let kids paint whatever they want ... too much freedom... Sometimes you need to learn some basic rules and skills first and then to be creative.

In order to compensate for what he believes is 'missed teaching' at Hao's school in Germany, Mr Liang paid for a drawing course for Hao, given by an experienced Chinese children's art tutor. During the pandemic many high-quality Chinese courses for young children were made available online. The course was recommended by Mr Liang's former colleague, now a full-time grandfather. According to Mr Liang, Hao's painting improved quickly after a few online classes and impressed his German tutor. He was understandably pleased with the result. He exclaims,

In a way, thanks to COVID, our Hao is now benefiting from the strength of both German and Chinese education!

Thanks to the internet and the smartphone, Mr Liang has managed not only to maintain the 'long-distance intimacy'<sup>45</sup> with his daughter's family, but also to contribute to the education of his grandson. Such passion for investing in education can also be explained by the fact that many older people see investment in their grandchildren's education as compensation for the education they missed during their own childhood and youth.<sup>46</sup> As Fangfang noted, the older generation was denied higher education; now the youngest generation is the hope of the family. Many people belonging to the older generation were not raised by what many would see as 'competent parents' during the revolutionary time, a period when the upbringing of their children was commonly ignored by parents. Others regard themselves as 'unqualified parents' because they brought up their children during the era of market-orientated economic reforms, when they were too busy working to spend more time with their children.<sup>47</sup>

For example, Daming, a retired driver aged 65, embraced the role of grandfather with great enthusiasm in order to compensate for his regret at not having been a responsible father. As Daming says,

I have to give double love, or triple love towards my granddaughter, as I have ignored my family role for too long when I was young, as a father.

Another research participant, Lao Qian, a retired civil servant, also views the role of grandfather as compensation for not having spent much time with his family before. As he reflects,

After living for the country and the Party, the *dajia* (big family) for most of my time when I was younger, I finally have some time for my *xiaojia* (small family) ... but it is too late. I owe my late wife a lot and I have no chance of making it up to her in *zhe beizi* (the current incarnation).

Lao Qian considers that he has missed the chance to be a good father and a good husband. The only role left for him is to be a good grandfather, and it is the duties and tasks associated with this role that motivate him in his daily life after retirement. All in all, the dedication to the grandparenting role can be understood as compensation for people's experience of having been ignored by their own parents, or their dissatisfaction over their own performance as parents.

Furthermore, engagement in raising the youngest generation seems to vary in terms of age and gender. It is mostly women, whether grandmothers or mothers, who tend to be more of a 'lean-in' parent/grandparent than their partners, while younger men, as fathers, are much more likely to be more 'hands-off' than older men are as grandfathers. It is quite common to see 'absentee fathers' rather than 'absentee grandfathers'. The educational and socio-economic backgrounds of the households, as well as the relationship between the in-laws, both play a significant role in determining which grandparenting mode older people tend to settle on.

While the example of Kiki and her 'tiger grandmother' Ling is not unusual in Shanghai, it is also relatively common to see grandparents being much more lenient and relaxed about their grandchildren's education and upbringing, especially when compared to the parents. Such grandparents are often also more relaxed than they used to be when they were parents themselves. In some cases, the parents and grandparents manage to reach a consensus. In others, different approaches to grandparenting can cause conflict, not only between grandparents but also between older people and their adult children.<sup>48</sup>

For example, for the sake of a better family education, Mr Gong's son decided to 'take back' Mr Gong's granddaughter Mimi, who had been staying with her grandparents. This decision was made on the recommendation of Mimi's teachers at school, as it is widely believed that grandparents tend to spoil children and students, neglecting to give them proper after-school discipline and family education. Such a situation may result in the child or children performing poorly at school. Mimi's parents

have also picked up what are fairly popular concerns from content circulated widely on social media.

Mimi's mother's 'favourites' collection on WeChat includes a couple of articles and short videos discussing the consequences of grandparenting on children's education and how to avoid any negative impacts. Such content was also forwarded to the family WeChat group by Mimi's mother so that grandparents from both sides 'get the message', as she put it. For example, as Fig. 2.5 shows, one article (left) concerns the problems of young children who are spoiled by their grandparents and tend to grow into irresponsible and ungrateful adults. Such disagreements over notions of what comprises a good family education are one of main causes of intergenerational conflict at home. The photo in Fig. 2.5 (right) shows an education expert arguing that the relaxed pace of life among retired grandparents can have a potentially negative impact on children's attention span.

Mr Gong and his wife recognise that they treat their granddaughter with much more patience than they used to have for their own son. Mr Gong remarks:

We rarely spent any time with my son when he was Mimi's age. At the time we were both too busy at work ...When the boy was naughty, I would give him a good beating and he learned his lesson



**Figure 2.5** The grandparenting content that Mimi's mother forwarded to the family WeChat group. Screenshots provided by research participants.



... that's the extent to which I got involved in family education ... Raising kids is such sophisticated work ... I have almost zero experience in terms of being a father, but now I am learning to be a good grandfather, hopefully.

Having said this, Mr Gong still feels that it is unfair to be 'kicked out' by his son and daughter-in-law when it comes to the more 'advanced' dimensions of his grandchild's upbringing – those that go beyond providing basic support in daily life. This change had in fact made the old couple very upset, as they had developed a strong emotional attachment to their granddaughter. When asked whether they will help to raise their son's second child if he ends up having one, both shook their heads with a bitter smile. The simple reason is that they do not feel they have enough energy to bring up children any more. Mr Gong's wife adds,

But when it comes to it, you have no choice, do you? As their parents, it's our responsibility. We are supposed to sacrifice for the whole family.

The perceived 'family obligation' is one of the most common reasons for older people to get involved in grandparenting. In some cases, this responsibility may also require older people to move into their adult children's place. *Lao piao*, literally meaning 'older floating population', is a phenomenon in which grandparents leave their home town in their old age and move to where their children now live in order to take care of their grandchildren. The notion of 'floating' derives from the term 'floating population', originally a reference to massive numbers of rural-to-urban migrants in China who have difficulty in settling down in cities as cheap and temporary labour.<sup>49</sup> A survey shows that there are up to 18 million older people (age 60 and above) among demotic migrants in China. Among them, 43 per cent are *'lao piao'*, who migrated only when they were older (usually after retirement).<sup>50</sup> Compared to people who migrated earlier in life and therefore had relatively longer to get used to an unfamiliar environment, or to younger migrants<sup>51</sup> motivated by socio-economic promotion and personal aspirations, most of the *'lao piao'* have a challenging time adapting to their new lives and new role in the city, having left their familiar life and lifelong friends behind.<sup>52</sup>

An example of this among the research participants is Mei who, in her sixties, left her husband, a retired civil servant, behind in Changzhou, a city near Shanghai. She came to stay with her daughter's family in Shanghai after the birth of her granddaughter three years ago. Both her

daughter and son-in-law are professional interpreters who have a busy schedule and could not take care of their young child.

In the beginning I thought it was just helping out for a couple of months or a maximum of a year, but after seeing the daily routine of this young couple, I decided to stay longer to make sure my granddaughter has a good upbringing.

As a kind of compensation, Mei's daughter paid the money to hire an 'ayi'<sup>53</sup> (domestic worker) to care for her father on a daily basis back in Changzhou. She works for two hours a day, bringing in food, cooking lunch and dinner and doing some cleaning. Aged about 55, the *ayi* comes from a village in inland China. According to Mei, the reason she came to Changzhou is because her son, who works as a delivery person in Changzhou, needs her to take care of his new-born baby. In addition to looking after her grandchild, she took a part-time job as a domestic worker to help her son and his wife.

What this *ayi* did for her son is exactly what Mei did for her daughter. Both are representative in terms of older people working as major informal carers for the third generation. In this domestic 'care chain',<sup>54</sup> the rural migrant worker *ayi* moved from the village to a third-tier city and middle-class Mei moved from a third-tier city to Shanghai. Both women did so for the sake of their grandchildren and the hope of the family. Mei sees her migration as a worthwhile investment in her granddaughter's future. As she explains,

If I stay at home, I am just doing domestic work ... here the baby and the new family need me much more. I am not just a live-in babysitter, I educate my granddaughter at a very early stage ... plus, hiring a part-time *ayi* to take care of a '*lao tou zi*' (old man) is much easier than finding a trustworthy one to take care of a baby. Here the monthly salary for a good, live-in babysitter is much more than a white-collar workers' salary. I am actually providing a very valuable thing to them.

Had Mei not helped, the young couple in Shanghai would have had to pay as much as 10,000 RMB a month (around £1,000) for a competent, live-in babysitter. Now the young couple only need to pay 2,000 RMB (around £200) for the rural migrant *ayi* to take care of the left behind '*lao tou zi*' (old man) left behind in Changzhou. In Shanghai Mei did everything a

mother would do, not only taking care of daily life activities for her grandchild but also managing her studies. She sees her current life as fulfilling, claiming that what she misses most are 'my friends in my home town'. Mei talks to her old friends back home on a daily basis via WeChat. During her years as a '*lao piao*' (older migrant), the smartphone has become her most important daily item. 'My phone is my lifeline,' she declares.

From lean-in grandparents to grandparents who spoil the kids; from online grandparenting to '*lao piao*' (older migrants), grandparenting among older Chinese people not only carries unique features given the family aspirations of middle-class Chinese families: it is also a defining stage of life for many older people. Whether they are determined or confused, happy or upset, the experience of grandparenting has woven a variety of emotions and experience into the fabric of older people's daily life after they have retired. It is also through grandparenting that some, especially older men, reconnect with their family or manage to return to family life.

## Conclusion

The word 'retirement' in Chinese is '*tuixiu*', literally meaning 'step down and rest'. This may very well be the ideal lifestyle that older people were supposed to have a few decades ago, when life expectancy was relatively short and *tuixiu* only spanned a few years after retirement. However, as this chapter has shown, older people are now the 'new sandwich generation', taking responsibility for both their parents and grandchildren. The key words over the course of this specific trajectory of ageing are *rupture* and *continuity*: we have seen how people experienced the abrupt rupture of policies and social norms, for example when the one-child policy was introduced or the ways in which the notion of a good education has been completely transformed. We have also seen how people negotiate and re-evaluate their family roles in the discourse of traditional 'filial piety'. Individuals' interpretation of 'filial piety', both as a concept and in practice, continues to change with time and their own trajectory of ageing. As Yaping has noted, it is very much possible that the current older generation will be the last generation to fulfil 'filial piety' in a traditional way. Older people are exploring new ways of ageing and accessing support for themselves in their old age as well as for the next generation, even as they also try to follow the collective norms that regard individuals as being part of the family, whose needs come before the individual's desire.

The experience of ageing is also highly historical, as Fangfang and many others have reiterated:

Our generation has eaten a lot of bitterness, therefore we can really appreciate the sweetness in our later life.

What took place in this older generation's early life profoundly shaped the way they value retirement and how they experience ageing. This older generation holds a special historical place in Chinese history, representing as they do the first generation born in the country under the rule of the Communist Party, the 'Red China'. The same cohort also went through various stages of political turmoil and social transformations during their youth and adulthood. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this generation embodies the radical changes in contemporary Chinese society. The personal experience of members of this generation during the Maoist revolutionary time and its consequences is discussed further in [Chapter 7](#), "Doing personhood" in revolution(s)'.

Overall, what is presented in this chapter provides readers with a bird's-eye view of the ageing landscape in Shanghai, as well as a brief explanation of the reasons why such a landscape emerged at this particular historical time. The issues presented in this chapter are mentioned regularly throughout the book. They are complex and interlocked with some of the topics discussed in the following chapters, such as everyday activities and routines, the development and maintenance of social relations after retirement, healthcare and social support and the wider applications of the smartphone, as well as the far-reaching impact of revolutions experienced by the older generation in China. In real life, the aspects of ageing and retirement that this chapter discusses are deeply embedded in people's daily lives. They experience ageing through their own lens of memories and living experience – that is, in constant comparison with others and with previous generations, younger generations and the experience of being young.

## Notes

1. Canda, E. R. 2013.
2. Cai, Y. and Y. Cheng 2014.
3. Trinh, T. 2006.
4. Cai, Y. and Y. Cheng 2014.
5. For details of the reform of Chinese SOEs, please see Li, W. and L. Putterman 2008.

6. However, the majority of the research participants in this study represent middle-income households; only a relatively small portion had been previously laid off or struggled financially at the later stage of life. The experience of ageing as seen from the perspective of previously 'laid-off' workers is discussed further in [Chapter 8](#).
7. The policy was introduced in 1978 and enforced in 1979. The official abolition of the policy happened in 2015, although the relaxation of the policy had started in urban areas in 2013. For detailed reports on China's one-child policy, please see Scharping, T. 2003.
8. The one-child policy, adhered to strictly in the cities, did allow certain flexibility in rural areas. For example, if the first child was a girl a rural couple were allowed to have a second child.
9. As early as the mid-1950s the government introduced a distinctive employment classification system. Employees in the state sector were divided into 'cadres' and 'workers'. The former category included government and party officials as well as professionals and academics, while the latter category included skilled and unskilled employees in industrial establishments or any other organisations. The work unit played an essential role in the provision of urban housing. Housing was regarded as part of the wage and staffing costs of enterprises. The most important factor influencing housing entitlement was the status ('cadre' or 'worker') of the household head in his or her work unit. The differences between 'cadres' and 'workers' in terms of housing were real and significant; 'workers' were given low priority, which meant smaller and less good quality housing. For more details of the housing policy in contemporary China please see Wang, Y. P. and A. Murie. 2000.
10. Shanghai suffered from a severe housing shortage due to pressure from the population. During the Cultural Revolution, acts of housing reallocation were carried out by 'rebel factions' within work units. In the name of expelling 'counter-revolutionaries', 'capitalist running dogs' and other 'bad' people, workers took possession of the housing that they had coveted for themselves and their families. The historical record shows that between December 1966 and January 1967 all of the housing in Shanghai that had been awaiting allocation was forcibly occupied. For more on the topic please see Perry, E. 2018, 110–11.
11. It is found that the sudden demand for increased care after an accident is a crucial indicator of the family caregiving crises in China. See Chen, L. 2011.
12. A Confucian framework is still associated with the contemporary Chinese sense of identity and public guidelines for caregiving. See Holroyd, E. E. 2003.
13. Sung, K. T. 1998.
14. See Lai, D. W. 2007; Chen, X. and M. Silverstein 2000.
15. Meng, X. and R. G. Gregory 2002.
16. For more discussion and detailed personal experience during the Cultural Revolution please see [Chapter 7](#).
17. The demands of *gaokao*, which is based on meritocratic criteria, have a significant influence on the social and academic profile of Chinese students and affect the way they face school and university. For a more detailed discussion of *gaokao* and its social consequences please see Liu, Y. 2016.
18. A comprehensive household registration (*hukou*) system encompassing cities and rural areas in China was implemented in 1955. Its purpose was to maintain social order, prevent unplanned migration and strengthen formal administrative control over rural and urban households. See Chen, L. 2011.
19. In China the public school is the mainstream, with good public schools widely seen as the route to high-quality education. Public schools enrol pupils from designated areas. In Shanghai pupils need to meet at least one of these three criteria to be enrolled: the child's *hukou* (household registration) needs to have been registered at a property in a school's enrolment area and the property to have been owned by the parents for more than a year; or the child's *hukou* needs to have been registered at a property in a school's enrolment area and the property has been owned by grandparents for more than three years; or, if the family only has the 'use rights' of a property in a school's enrolment area, the child and its parents need to have been registered at this address from the child's birth. *Xue qu fang* refers to property within the enrolment area of good public schools. Because of intense education competition, *xue qu fang* has pushed property prices to extremely high levels in Shanghai. See <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/873188.shtml>.
20. Pierret, C. R. 2006.
21. The 10 households are located in four different districts in Shanghai. Of these, 80 per cent are self-reported mid-income households and the rest are high-income households. Most of the

- main family members in these 10 households work in education, industry, medical, business and government.
22. The relaxation of the one-child policy took place gradually. Nationwide abolition of the policy did not occur until 2015, but in some cities people were allowed to have two children per couple as early as 2013.
  23. This information is based on interviews with four doctors and three nurses in 'AAA' hospitals (the top level awarded to healthcare facilities, according to the Chinese hospital categorisation system), as well as seven care workers in commercial care home type institutes that I visited during fieldwork.
  24. Daily care duties include tasks such as bringing food or accompanying them on hospital visits.
  25. In addition, a study among Shanghai households also reveals that urbanisation may socially and culturally reconstruct the concept of filial piety. It is found that more and more older people propose options to reduce caregiving pressure on their families and to try and alleviate a potential caregiving crisis for their adult children, such as institutionalisation and living alone. Meanwhile, adult children still try to conform to the filial tradition, mostly because of the social desirability of such behaviour in China. See Chen, L. 2011.
  26. A recent study eloquently questioned such widespread notion of 'intergenerational reciprocity' in grandparenting. See Goh, E. and S. Wang 2020.
  27. Sending old parents to nursing homes used to be stigmatised and regarded as being against the ethic of 'filial piety'. See Chen, L. and Wen-Jui Han 2016.
  28. For example, see Agnihotri, S. 2019; Lou, V. W. and Q. Ci 2014.
  29. See also a report on how the older generation in urban China struggled to cope with their extra caring duty once China ended the one-child policy. See 'For China's weary grandparents, two kids mean double the trouble', *Sixth Tone*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006338/for-chinas-weary-grandparents%2C-two-kids-mean-double-the-trouble> (accessed on 20 September 2021).
  30. Among all the research participants in the fieldwork, 49 of them in their fifties and sixties have young grandchildren (0 to 15 years)
  31. The phenomenon of 'skipped-generation households' (households with no parent present) has been discussed for more than a decade in China. Intergenerational solidarity is indicated by a high rate of co-residence between grandchildren and grandparents. See Chen, F., G. Liu and C. A. Mair 2011.
  32. The WeChat red envelope is a form of 'digital money' transferred on WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China. An introduction to the WeChat red envelope can be found in Chapter 5.
  33. See also Liu, W. 2017.
  34. See also Goh, E. and S. Wang 2020.
  35. See Yan, Y. 2020.
  36. Jankowiak, W. 2021.
  37. Ponzini, A. 2020.
  38. Kipnis, A. 2011.
  39. <http://ww2.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/PaperCollection/Details.aspx?id=3937>.
  40. The figure comes from a popular online article about the average cost of raising a child. It was widely reported by various media and found great resonance among the research participants. This article listed the top 10 Chinese cities in terms of child-raising costs. <https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=2cbe27efa794d235747d4d27&fromModule=pcArticleMoreRecommend>.
  41. Very recently, during the time of editing (2021), the Chinese government started to intervene with the demotic education market to reduce household education cost and anxiety. For example, a series of new regulations, known as a 'double reduction' policy, were issued to ban online and offline tutoring. See <https://www.cnb.com/2021/08/05/chinas-harsh-education-crackdown-sends-parents-businesses-scrambling.html>. A major reason for such a robust intervention at the national level lies in the fact that the extremely high education cost, especially in urban areas, has been widely recognised as one of the primary reasons for low fertility intention (see Rui, S. 2020). To boost fertility intention, along with the newly released family plan policy which encourages couples to have more than one child (up to three children per couple are now allowed), supporting measures to regulate education cost are believed to be necessary.

Having said so, my follow-up inquiry among my research participants in Shanghai (in October 2021, via WeChat calls and messaging) reveals that the actual consequences are more complicated. The cancellation of many ‘after-school’ tutoring sessions, for example, designed to reduce the cost of education, actually increased the childcare burden for many ‘full time’ grandparents, as the length of time required from them to take care of their grandchildren increased. Secondly, many for-profit tutoring institutions simply re-fashioned themselves as other services, ostensibly with little relationship with school education, to avoid crackdown. For example, an organisation that previously offered English after-school tutoring is now re-named and re-registered as ‘workshop of theatre-play in English’. Although it is too early to judge the long-term consequences, there are grounds to believe that the education anxiety and high education desire among middle-class households will remain intense. The fundamental causes for fierce competition in Chinese society did not disappear simply because of these administrative measures.

42. <https://pit.ifeng.com/c/7kjowAYtoAa>.
43. <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200704/20200704A00LRY00.html>.
44. ‘One-child’ family refers to families with members born as the only child during the era of the ‘one-child’ family plan policy. As shown earlier in this chapter, the majority of grandparenting is taking place in such ‘one-child’ families where the young couple (the second generation) belong to the one-child generation.
45. A previous study on middle-class transnational families with adult children from the one-child generation also shows that digital communication technologies play a significant role in maintaining ‘long-distance intimacy’. See Tu, M. 2016, 15.
46. The Cultural Revolution affected the formal education of a whole generation of young people. See Meng, X. and R. G. Gregory 2002. For more discussion of the older generation in China and how they missed out on their education, please see Chapter 7.
47. An ethnography about grandmothers in rural China insightfully argues that it is through contributing care to their grandchildren that grandmothers got a second chance to work on their family desire – as well as their self-aspirations, unfulfilled when they were raising their children. In a similar light, a ‘caring claim’ is also noticeable among urban grandparents who, through the process of caring for and educating their grandchildren, received a second chance to play the role of ‘parents’. See Bruckermann, C. 2017.
48. For example, other studies in urban China also unfold the complicated situation of the collaborative child rearing in which both parents and grandparents are involved. See Goh, E. C. L. 2006.
49. Goodkind, D. and L. A. West 2002.
50. Zhang, M. 2020, 102.
51. For example, my previous ethnographic fieldwork among young rural migrants reveals that young migrant workers hoped to be part of Chinese modernity through rural-to-urban migration. See Wang, X. 2016.
52. Increasing numbers of studies have revealed that *lao piao* faced a series of challenges in daily life and their mental health was negatively impacted. See Tang, S., H. F. Lee and J. Feng 2020.
53. ‘Ayi’, literally meaning aunty, is a colloquial way of addressing domestic workers, or maids, who are usually rural migrants in Chinese cities. Becoming a domestic worker, one of most menial and lowly paid jobs, provides opportunities for many rural migrant women to enter the labour market in cities. There are a few inspiring studies on this specific group of people in China. For example, *New Masters, New Servants* (Yan, H. 2008) is a thoughtful piece of ethnographic research about class dynamics and the subject formation of migrant domestic workers in the neoliberal discourses about development, modernity, consumption, self-worth, quality and individual and collective longing and struggle. See also Sun, W. 2005.
54. One of key features of the commodification of care is the outsourcing of care work to migrants. A ‘global care chain’ is a globalised labour market for workers who provide care-intensive labour. The term was coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. See Lutz, H. 2018; Hochschild, A. 2015. Here the concept of a ‘care chain’ is applied to describe some similar phenomenon in China, in which care-intensive labour is outsourced from an urban, younger generation to an older generation (childcare), and then from an urban older generation to rural migrants (elderly care).

### 3

## Everyday life: daily activities and the digital routine

### Introduction

For our ‘ordinary hundreds of surnames’ (*lao bai xing*), to live every day well (*hui guo ri zi*) is always the most important thing. Real Shanghainese are the artists of living daily life.

Zihui, a retired civil servant, aged 61

In Shanghai, there are two common colloquial praises that an adult can hope to receive from their neighbours and friends. One is ‘*hui guo ri zi*’, meaning being capable of living every day; the other is ‘*hui zuo ren*’, meaning being capable of ‘doing personhood’. The latter is the ultimate goal for many Chinese people when it comes to their social lives and will be further discussed in [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#). This chapter will explore how everyday life is lived among older people in Shanghai and what ‘being capable of living every day’ actually means in today’s Shanghai.

Starting with an account of a typical day in the life of Zihui and her husband Jiang, the first section of this chapter depicts some of the common popular daily activities among older people in the city. These activities are part of many family duties, which include grandparenting, self-care, lifelong education, shopping, social networking and entertainment. Based on the ethnographic research, the rest of the chapter is devoted to explaining these phenomena. For example, we will examine the reasons for, and implications of, the daily practice of ‘getting out of the house’ among older people, as well as taking a closer look at two organisations with striking Chinese characteristics: the ‘Senior Citizens’ University’ and the ‘Residents’ Committee’. Both serve to reflect the entrenched influence of the Party-state on Chinese society at grassroots level. The last section of the chapter focuses on the daily use



of smartphones among older people. This section not only illustrates a changing lifestyle among older people and what it means to 'be capable of living every day' (*hui guo ri zi*), but also introduces the booming nature of China's e-commerce sector.

## A typical day in the lives of Zihui and Jiang

Zihui and Jiang moved into a flat on the 16th floor of a residential tower block in the north of Shanghai in 2006, when their flat in the traditional alleyways (*lilong*) part of the city centre was demolished. Previously, in their one-bedroom flat in Shanghai's densely populated alleyways, they had had to share the corridor with five other households and the kitchen with two other households; their upstairs neighbours' toilet constantly caused leaks in their room. Now they live in a four-bedroom flat and can finally enjoy a living situation characterised by a 'solo door and single household' (*du men du hu*). Their flat, like the majority of residential buildings built in the past two decades, is located within a 'gated residential compound'<sup>1</sup> (*xiaoqu*), with the community activity centre, the food market and the local clinic all within 10 minutes walk. Both Zihui and Jiang prefer their new flat as it has access to much better facilities, even though its location is slightly remote. As 63-year-old Jiang says,

For tourists in Shanghai, in the centre there is more to see; but for living everyday life (*guo ri zi*) it is much better and more convenient here.

The term 'convenient' refers not only to the better facilities the flat enjoys as part of the neighbourhood, but also to the increased sense of privacy a household enjoys when more private space is granted. For Zihui, a typical day usually starts at 6 a.m. The first thing she does after opening her eyes is to check her 'sleep quality' on her fitness tracker – a 'team purchase' on the shopping app '*pinduoduo*',<sup>2</sup> recommended by a good friend. Feeling reassured by the quality of her sleep, Zihui moves on to replying and sending a dozen colourful 'good morning' greetings to people on WeChat. Besides wishing them 'Good morning', the embedded text on these early greeting images also includes other good wishes or sayings of wisdom, such as 'May we walk together on the path of forever being young' or 'Life is about savouring the happiness in the process of caring for one another' or 'The most valuable thing in the world is not wealth, but our sincere friendship' (Fig. 3.1).



**Figure 3.1** The visual ‘early greetings’ circulated among Zihui and her friends on WeChat. Screenshot from WeChat by Xinyuan Wang.

Zihui’s WeChat contacts, all of a similar age (sixties), have a wide range of morning greetings or festival greetings to share, which somehow end up putting pressure on Zihui to keep up with the trend and the standards. For Zihui, the solution lies in forwarding the visual greetings that she receives from WeChat group A to WeChat group B in order to avoid repetition. Sometimes she will also urge Jiang to forward her some new images from his network, so that she does not run out of new visual greetings. She finds the friendly exchanges amusing:

Before, I used to greet people on the way to work every day. Now, like everybody else, I greet people when I am still in bed!

Zihui also used to be concerned about the amount of storage space left on her smartphone. However, this concern disappeared once she received a new Huawei smartphone as a birthday present from her daughter the year before. As she exclaims,

One of the best things about the new phone is its huge memory, so that I can save as many images and videos as I like!

While Zihui is busy greeting people, reading and sharing articles on WeChat, her husband Jiang, a retired technician, has already woken up and started his morning exercise: playing ping pong with a few retired neighbours in the activity centre of the Residents’ Committee (Fig. 3.2). Several of the couple’s former neighbours from the demolished alleyways (*lilong*) building have moved into the same residential compound, and Jiang gets on well with some of them. ‘My old neighbour for more than 60 years’ is how he introduces one of his table tennis partners. Jiang has also got to know some of his new neighbours through the quarterly



**Figure 3.2** People playing ping pong in the Residents' Committee's activity centre. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

ping pong competition arranged by the Residents' Committee. After the one hour session neighbours exchange information about the stock market, as well as news about family and relatives, on their way to the food market, conveniently next door.

Around 7:30 a.m. Jiang returns with fresh soybean milk and *xiaolongbao* (a kind of meat-filled bun) for breakfast and some fresh vegetables. Since Zihui learned how to order food on his smartphone two years ago, she no longer prepares a long shopping list for Jiang.<sup>3</sup> From sticky rice to dry *gouqi* berries, Zihui orders all non-vegetable items online via a variety of online shopping apps, sometimes directly from farmers in the rural areas in the deep west of China.

Back at the dining table, Zihui and Jiang listen to news reports via a news app on their iPad during breakfast. Chatting with friends on WeChat punctuates the rest of the morning, when Zihui is running household errands. Meanwhile Jiang, in his study, is kept busy by online lectures and talks about history, art and the stock market. From time to time his eyes move from the big screen of the computer to the small screen of his smartphone, flashing with new messages. Lunch is usually quick, as both Zihui and Jiang have appointments in the afternoon. As she repeatedly says,

After retirement, going out is so important, otherwise I will be disconnected from society.

At least twice a week, Zihui will take the underground metro to the city centre, where she attends social events arranged by various

organisations. Most of the time she gets information about the events via various WeChat groups, such as groups of previous classmates or ‘sent-down youth’ (*xia fang zhi qing*),<sup>4</sup> the group of retired colleagues from her previous work unit (*danwei*), members of the group of fans of old Shanghainese heritage buildings or the group run by the Party branch of the Residents’ Committee. Actively participating in more than eight WeChat groups, Zihui can easily fill every day. Zihui remarks,

The only problem is the time clash: sometimes I have to give up some events, or I have to dash from one event to another in one afternoon... Sometimes I am out for the whole day, from early morning.

Aside from regular social events, Zihui also goes to a baking class and a singing class at the ‘Senior Citizens’ University’ (SCU) twice a week (Fig. 3.3).

Jiang’s outings are mainly associated with his hobby – photography. Once a week he attends a photography and digital editing class at the same SCU as Zihui. On other afternoons he either goes out to a photo-shoot with a group of retired amateur photographers or stays at home, working on his blog posts about his photography. On his blog, Jiang has more than 20 contacts with whom he chats and regularly exchanges views about one another’s experience of photography. During the late



**Figure 3.3** The ground-floor hall of a Senior Citizens’ University in Shanghai. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

afternoon it is his responsibility to pick up their grandson Xiaohu from primary school around 4:30 p.m. Once she receives the WeChat message from Jiang saying they are on their way home, Zihui starts to prepare a pre-dinner snack as well as dinner. Photos of ‘today’s meal’ always pop up on the screen of Xiaohu’s mum’s smartphone during dinner time.

After dinner Xiaohu is allowed to watch cartoons on the iPad for 40 minutes, during which Zihui takes the daily rubbish down to the rubbish site. Supervisors from the Residents’ Committee at the rubbish site will check and confirm that the sorting of the waste has been done correctly<sup>5</sup> by scanning the QR code of the ‘green account’ on Zihui’s smartphone (Fig. 3.4).

After gaining her daily ‘green points’,<sup>6</sup> Zihui walks to the nearby community park where she dances with her neighbours, following a dance instructor on a ‘square dance’ app. Meanwhile, back at home, Jiang opens an education app called ‘zuoyebang’ to check Xiaohu’s homework.<sup>7</sup> The flat becomes quiet again when Xiaohu is picked up by his dad around 7:45 p.m., after which Zihui and Jiang retreat into their own worlds, each with their smartphone in hand. The silence is punctuated by the sounds of short videos, audio messages and livestream shopping. Before going to bed, Zihui and Jiang perform a form of ‘self-care’ (*yang sheng*) Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) massage on each other for half an hour. Before switching off the light, Zihui checks her WeChat step count as well as her ranking among her WeChat friends’ step-counts for one final time before falling asleep.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3.4** The rubbish site at the residential compound. The notification board is there to remind people about different collection times for different types of rubbish (left). The QR code of the ‘green account’ (centre). A screenshot of the banner that appears on the household’s ‘green account’ reads: ‘The green account is to build a beautiful Shanghai. To build a beautiful Shanghai requires each household’s effort, and low-carbon households start by household waste sorting’ (right). Photos and screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

## Getting out every day

As one can clearly see on the ‘daily activity map’ of Zihui and Jiang (Fig. 3.5), most of the time – except for a few weekly trips to the city centre – their regular daily activities take place primarily in the neighbourhood where they live; even the most remote places (the Senior Citizens’ University and the primary school) can be reached within 10 minutes by bus. A reduced daily activity radius is a common feature of everyday life after retirement, when people no longer commute between home and workplace. In Shanghai, commuting can be very tiring and time-consuming<sup>9</sup> given the size of the metropolis. Many retired people are thus happy that they no longer need to go out during rush hour or sit on public transport or in cars for several hours each day. However, at the same time retirement can also mean that ‘there is no reason to get out every day’, as some older people put it.



**Figure 3.5** The daily activity map for Zihui and Jiang. Infographic created by Xinyuan Wang.

Nevertheless, if we take the frequent use of smartphones into account, the daily activity map above is in many aspects incomplete. In practice, activities facilitated by the smartphone have transcended the dimension of physical distance, as well as removing hours of exhausting commuting and connecting the couple with people and goods thousands of miles away. The smartphone also facilitates activities done ‘offline’. For example, most of Zihui’s outings are arranged through various WeChat groups and her daily dancing with friends benefits from the dance teaching app.

Zihui continuously emphasises the importance of ‘getting out’, as it is widely believed that staying at home all day will create health problems for older people, both physical and mental. Therefore, even though the physical distance travelled during daily activities may reduce after retirement, it is common to see older people making an effort to get out and even increase the frequency of their outings on a daily basis. In fieldwork, a general ‘health and self-care’ survey<sup>10</sup> among 159 research participants shows that more than 60 per cent of older people choose to ‘get out’ (*chu men*) on a daily basis.

In general, there are several implications behind this practice. First, getting out indicates some kinds of physical activity. One specific reason – and a common excuse – for ‘getting out’ is in order to do physical exercise. From mass media to new media, reports and discussions of how older people should engage with physical activities on a daily basis are commonplace. Seeing physical activity as an effective way to prevent disease and other ageing-related issues, the development of mass sports is also strongly supported by the government.<sup>11</sup>

In the general ‘health and self-care survey’ mentioned above, 62 per cent of respondents engage in some type of physical activity on a daily basis and 75 per cent on a weekly basis. People tend to choose physical activities that require less specialised equipment, such as outfits, shoes or a special venue – a decision that may partly reflect a relatively limited budget for sports. Among all of the different types of physical exercise, walking and morning exercises (*zao cao*) are the most popular. Square dancing in parks and public squares is another very popular pastime for retired people, especially women (Fig. 3.6). Sports such as badminton, ping pong, swimming and the traditional Chinese martial arts of *Qi gong* and *Tai chi* also have a high participation rate among older people in Shanghai. As observed during fieldwork in public parks and sports venues<sup>12</sup> across Shanghai, there are always more older people doing exercise than any other age group.

The high participation rate in sports and exercise among older people in Shanghai is also supported by other reports and previous research.



**Figure 3.6** Square dancing in a public park after dinner. Photo by Yun Chen.

According to a survey undertaken in Shanghai in 2015,<sup>13</sup> older people in their sixties were the age group most active in terms of pursuing new exercise habits. In addition, according to a WeChat statistics report,<sup>14</sup> older WeChat users nationwide walk an average of 6,700 steps per day. This is significantly higher than the 5,900 step average found among ‘typical’ WeChat step-counting users, as well as higher than the average among young people born after 1995 (whose average was a daily 6,300 steps).

Besides the impact on physical health, it is widely believed that ‘getting out’ has major social implications. In the ‘health and self-care survey’, a large majority of older people (85 per cent) regarded getting out as beneficial for their social lives and daily moods (*xinqing*). During fieldwork, it was common to hear older people encourage each other to get out more often so that they would not feel depressed. Or, as Zihui said before, older people need to get out after retirement to avoid feeling disconnected from society.

In Chinese, ‘getting out’ is translated as ‘*chu men*’, which literally means ‘getting out of the door’. It is believed that inside, the space behind the door, implies a whole set of principles of social connection among insiders, whereas outside of the door is associated with a series of public-facing codes of conduct. The term ‘*men*’ in Chinese is also applied to notions and concepts relating to personhood, the household, school and



academia, social status and more.<sup>15</sup> Chinese society is fascinated with the symbolic meaning of ‘*men*’ (door, gate) in everyday rituals of separation and reunion.<sup>16</sup> In everyday discourse, *chu men* (to get out) also suggests a connection with the wider world; maintaining a regular *chu men* has a positive impact upon older people’s mental welfare. For example, Weijun, in his late seventies, regards *chu men* every day as essential to his daily life. As he observes,

At home, it is too empty, nobody is around; with *chu men* (getting out), you will see people and things moving around, which is good for keeping my mind alert.

Weijun’s wife moved to their son’s house last year to take care of their second grandchild full time, leaving Weijun alone at home. Every morning he practised *Qi gong* in a green area in the nearby public park, and strolled in the late afternoon to the entrance of the living compound where the locksmith’s booth is located. There he would sit on the small folding stool that he brings along for the purpose. Weijun would not be alone: a few male neighbours of his age would usually also appear, bringing their own stools (Fig. 3.7). Sometimes these men would exchange



**Figure 3.7** Weijun and his neighbours sitting at the entrance of the living compound. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

notes on today's news and weather with the person sitting next to them, but their conversation did not go any deeper.

There is no fixed time or arrangement for such a spontaneous gathering of neighbours every afternoon. Nobody is expected or supposed to be there except the locksmith, who would rather be watching short videos on his smartphone than chatting to these neighbours. The reason why Weijun would come and sit at the entrance for at least an hour almost every afternoon seems to lie in the fact that it is probably the only place outside where he feels 'at home'. As an example of feeling 'out of place', Weijun described an occasion when he had sat on a park bench alone. Soon a woman in her sixties approached him, asking him whether he wanted to have some fun with her.<sup>17</sup> Weijun realised that he had become the target of a sex worker and fled as fast as he could. He recalls in embarrassment,

I am an old man and all alone, just sitting there, looking around and doing nothing... People would think that I am weird or even that I am looking for a hooker.

The neighbourhood community park that Weijun visits regularly is typically dominated by groups of older women who practise square dancing, with male participants in a clear minority.<sup>18</sup> The norms of masculinity prevent Weijun from joining this form of collective dancing. From public parks to high streets Weijun, with his self-perception as an elderly male, always has the feeling that he is 'out of place'. The only place that makes him feel at ease is the entrance to his living compound. He has been doing this to some degree for his whole life, as he remarks,

It is just like the old days when I lived in '*lilong*' where all the neighbours would sit outside in the alleyways and chat from time to time.

Like most older people in Shanghai, many of the tower block residents shared the collective memory of living in intensively populated *lilong* areas. Here semi-public alleyways were always occupied by various domestic activities, as discussed in the introduction above (pages 5–6). However, as many older people would agree, like it or not, the social relations among previous *lilong* neighbours were tight given the 'compulsory sharing' of living space on a daily basis. They had not chosen to be living so close to each other. What they shared was the inability to go anywhere else.

The social connections among these tower block residents today, however, mainly remains at a 'head-nodding' level (*diantou zhijiao*). The

scene of neighbours sitting together may seem to bring back the ‘good old days’ in *lilong*, but in reality these neighbours knew very little about one another’s lives – even though they had been sitting next to each other almost every afternoon for a couple of years. Since the interaction between these neighbours is so slight, this is not an image of active community. Rather it is a more minimalist case in which other people’s co-presence allows one to sit peacefully alone.

Weijun has made no friends among these new tower block neighbours. From time to time visitors stop to ask him for directions, which contributes to the very limited set of interpersonal connections in Weijun’s daily life. Most of the time he would simply sit there, busy reading his smartphone. Weijun feels hesitant when it comes to using his mobile data for fear that he would waste money; he only used the smartphone at home with access to Wi-Fi. Here comes the great advantage of the entrance location. Weijun, showing me the Wi-Fi signal on his smartphone, exclaims: ‘Here, it’s great, see – my phone can still connect to my home Wi-Fi. I feel at home’.

For Weijun, home is wherever he remains covered by home Wi-Fi. Situated on the edge of his home Wi-Fi signal, the entrance to Weijun’s living compound provides a ‘mediating space’ in which Weijun feels simultaneously ‘at home’ and ‘outside’. As long as Weijun holds his smartphone, he is behind the ‘door’ (*men*) and can enjoy the feeling of being ‘at home’. On average, Weijun could spend more than four hours on the smartphone every day, mainly watching short videos and sometimes livestream videos. In describing the charm of short videos, Weijun explains,

The short videos are way more interesting than TV. You don’t have such variety, and you won’t see so many real ordinary people on TV ... whereas in short videos, you have all kinds of people talking to you, showing you their lives and their skills.

The short videos that Weijun watched cover a wide range of topics, from firework shows to jade crafting, amateur dancing to chess playing, *yang sheng* (self-care) to words of wisdom (Fig. 3.8).

Weijun’s ‘home-bound’ smartphone use is not unusual among older people in their seventies and above. In comparison, people in their fifties and sixties seem to be much less concerned about the cost of using mobile data on their smartphones ‘outside’, as most of them have purchased a ‘data package’ that usually gives them sufficient data. It follows, then, that this group of younger retirees might choose a different digital boundary when it comes to being ‘at home’.



**Figure 3.8** Screenshots of the short videos Weijun watched on his smartphone. They include (from upper left to bottom right): firework show, jade crafting, amateur dancing, a chess game, *yang sheng* (self-care) and words of wisdom. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 3.9** Retirees on their smartphones in the park. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

The scene of older people entirely focused on their smartphones in public areas was one commonly spotted during fieldwork (Fig. 3.9). On the one hand, older people generally recognised the advantages of the daily routine of ‘getting out’; on the other hand, some struggled

to maintain such a routine after retirement. The smartphone has thus become the place where older people can ‘feel at home’ when they feel lonely or ‘out of place’. For some, the portable smartphone has become the ‘home’, a comfort zone to which they can always retreat to when they are outside.<sup>19</sup> The use of smartphones therefore strikes a subtle balance between the perceived necessity for older people to ‘get out’ and their desire for the comfort of ‘being at home’.

## Grassroots institutes and daily activities

The phenomenon of ‘retreating to the smartphone’ has become a common life scenario among people of all ages. This section takes a closer look at two institution-based social spaces with a greater significance to people after retirement than to other age groups. As seen in the typical everyday activities of Zihui and Jiang, for many older people the Senior Citizens’ University and the Residents’ Committee are both places where they can gain information and establish social connections with others of similar age. In urban China these two institutions at grassroots level play important roles in many older people’s daily lives.

### The Senior Citizens’ University (SCU)

China’s first Senior Citizens’ University (SCU)<sup>20</sup> was opened in Shandong Province in 1983, mainly for veteran Communist Party cadres. Today the majority of the SCUs are open to all retirees. By 2018 there were over 62,000 such universities nationwide, with approximately 13 million students – including those taking online courses, which accounted for half of enrolments of ‘third age’ universities around the world.<sup>21</sup> As most SCUs are government-funded tuition fees are extremely low, with the average cost being 200 to 500 yuan (£22–56) per term, a tiny fraction of the average pension. At the SCU there are no examinations and no academic pressure.

SCUs in Shanghai offer courses not only in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting, singing, dancing, foreign languages, literature and science, but also in the use of smartphones and iPads, photography and filming, digital graphic design and video editing. In Shanghai SCUs have become very popular among older people (the majority aged between 65 and 75), to the extent that only one in every six interested applicants is able to enrol.<sup>22</sup> Some popular classes have to draw lots to select applicants. People used to get up very early to obtain prime spots in order to secure registered places.

Among these eager students is 66-year-old Han, one of the research participants. Starting with the 2018 autumn term, the SCU at which Han studies has adopted an online-only registration system. Han reveals she was worried when she heard about the change in registration rules.

Before, I could come here very early to get myself registered, but now it doesn't work – you need to click the screen very fast to get registered... I need some outside help!

By 'outside help', Han means her entire extended family. She shared the registration link to the family WeChat group, asking everybody simultaneously to register various classes under her name once the official registration period started. Thanks to the help of 'ten hands and five smartphones', as she put it, Han did manage to get registered for six classes out of the eight she was interested in.

Han's daily schedule was packed with classes at the local SCU. Like many retirees in Shanghai, Han came of age at a time when schools and universities were completely disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. She explains the reason for her passion for university:

I always wanted to study at university as our generation missed the chance to receive enough education when we were young.

Han retired when she was 50, hoping that she could enrol into an SCU afterwards. However, she had to postpone her learning project when her mother fell ill in order to take care of her. Five years ago Han's mother passed away, and she at last got the time to start her education and 'finally live for myself', as she put it. At SCU Han also made new friends among her classmates. One of them, 62-year-old Lanyu, is a retired teacher. She has been learning English for four years at the SCU, motivated by an interest in overseas travel after her retirement. Five years ago Lanyu, like many of her peers, did not speak English at all. Laughing, she explained,

When I started, the only English sentence I could utter was 'Long live Chairman Mao', thanks to the Cultural Revolution! But I guess that English line is not very practical if I want to travel around.

Now Lanyu is the 'course representative' (*ke dai biao*) of the English class. This takes place once a week at SCU, while on the WeChat group of the SCU English class Lanyu arranges 'an English sentence a day' activity: each group member posts an English sentence in turn on a daily

basis for the group to practise and everyone records themselves speaking it via WeChat audio message. The passion for learning is remarkable among students with an average age of about 65. As Lanyu says,

Many young people study because they are forced to do so... We study because we love it and we cherish the opportunity to learn.

All her hard work paid off. In the summer of 2018, for the first time, she applied her English knowledge while sightseeing in Thailand with two other families. Her tourist group included young people who had a university education – yet when it came to the actual use of oral English, everybody mainly relied on Lanyu. That made Lanyu feel very proud of herself.

People at SCU frequently refer to a common saying: *'huo dao lao xue dao lao'*. It means 'live to old age and learn to old age'. This widely held idea of lifelong learning has its roots in the teachings of Confucius, which regard learning as a lifelong virtue, but it also resonated with Mao's teaching that every Chinese citizen knows by heart: 'Study hard and improve yourself every day' (*haohao xuexi tiantian xiangshang*). Like Lanyu, many older people – the generation of 'sent-down youth' – believe it is a great shame that their education was completely disrupted during the Cultural Revolution. Some of them, such as the 'lean-in' grandparents in [Chapter 2](#), seek to make up for their regrets through investing in education for the younger generations. Others believe that retirement is the time to catch up on the missed school years, and the SCU provides one possibility of doing so.

### The Residents' Committee (RC)

During the fieldwork, it has become clear that one cannot fully understand the underlying dynamic of many older people's daily activities without considering a specific grassroots social organisation across China. *'Ju wei hui'*, the Residents' Committee (RC hereafter), has existed since the beginning of communist China and is 'a mass organisation for self-government at grassroots level'.<sup>23</sup> In practice the RC works as the most active social network at grassroots level that is sponsored by the Party-state. Fieldwork undertaken during my 16-month stay in the *ForeverGood* residential compound not only allowed me to get to know my neighbours well, but also provided great opportunities for me to discover how Party branches work at grassroots level through the various individuals serving on the RC.

The director of *ForeverGood*'s RC is Du, aged 45. He is a total 'insider' of the community, as his grandmother was formerly the director of the RC and Du was born and grew up in the same community. Many of the older residents, the peers of Du's parents, have known him for many years and address him as Junior Du (*xiao du*). During his grandmother's time the RC consisted of residents who voluntarily worked for the Party for free. According to Du, his grandmother was very 'revolutionary' and devoted herself wholeheartedly to working on the RC. During the Cultural Revolution a major task for the director of the RC was to mobilise and monitor the young people who were 'sent down' to rural areas to receive re-education from farmers. Du still remembers how his grandmother would take him along when visiting families one by one, making each comply with the 'sent-down' policy.

As mentioned above (page 19 and page 61), the neighbours in traditional alleyways (*lilong*) always kept an eye on one another, as well as observing the comings and goings of people across the alleyways. The pre-existing form of self-monitoring and peer-surveillance latent in this residential structure, together with the communist political design of the RC, ensured an effective control of the urban population, as well as the stability of the governance at grassroots level.<sup>24</sup>

Residents' Committees played an even more critical role in governance at this level after the economic reforms in which previous socialist work units, *danwei*, lost their control over the majority of the population.<sup>25</sup> After the 1990s urban organisations ceased to be based on *danwei* and the role of the RC started to change. Since the 2000s the Party further promoted the idea of 'neighbourhood community building' in order to build a 'harmonious society'. Subsequently RCs transformed themselves to provide not only administration (*guan li*), but also services (*fu wu*).<sup>26</sup>

The role of 'general secretary of the Party branch' in the *ForeverGood* RC fully reflects both the 'administration' and 'service' functions of today's RC. Ping, aged 42, is in this position. To put it in a rather simplistic way, at grassroots level Du's position as the 'director of the RC' vis-à-vis Ping's position as the 'general secretary of the Party branch of the RC' is similar to the role of the Chinese government vis-à-vis the Communist Party. In practice, Du supports and assists Ping's work and reports to Ping. Unlike Du, an 'indigenous' resident who lived his whole life within the *ForeverGood* living compound, Ping was much less familiar to the residents; she had in fact taken up the position just three months before the fieldwork started. She had been a nursery tutor for many years before becoming a housewife once her own child was born. Ping recalls,



After 5 years of being a full-time housewife, I felt I'd had enough. I really needed to do something outside of the family, otherwise, I was losing my own life.

Ping therefore applied for the job at the Party branch, and the *ForeverGood* RC is the fourth RC she serves. The ultimate goal of the RC is to maintain stability (*weiwen*) and solidarity at grassroots level, an aim in line with the Party's goal of building a harmonious society. As the grassroots representative of the Party, Ping is in charge of arranging various activities and providing social services for every single resident within *ForeverGood*, including Party members and non-Party members. Her typical daily work includes mediating conflicts between neighbours over issues such as water leakage or the use of public space for street cats, as well as arranging recreational activities and sending 'greeting gifts' (*jieri weiwen*) for residents during festivals, something similar to what the *danwei*, or socialist work units, would do before. As Ping herself put it,

The majority of my work is about the 'small things' that matter a lot to every ordinary person's daily life.

The RC office is located at the entrance of the residential compound: one cannot miss it. During fieldwork, one of the most common scenes was Ping standing outside the office having a chat with people, as neighbours usually do. To some extent, the way in which Ping engaged with residents rather resembles the actions of an ethnographer engaged in fieldwork. Within months, through daily interaction and home visiting, Ping had managed to build up basic personal contact with the majority of the (over 900) households in *ForeverGood*. On top of this, she had established a good connection with a handful of 'opinion leaders' among residents. According to Ping, like the situation in other RCs in Shanghai, retired residents in *ForeverGood* would actively participate in community activities arranged by the RC, while the younger residents were usually fully occupied with work and their own social lives. She remarks,

In a way, work at the RC is quite similar to what I used to do as a tutor in nursery... Sometimes, older people are just like kids. It requires good communication and a lot of patience to have a good relationship with them, and I have experience of '*guan*' (taking care of) kids.

Ping used the word ‘*guan*’ to describe the relationship between herself and residents at *ForeverGood*. Curiously, in daily communication, ‘*guan*’ is the most colloquial expression; it means not only ‘take care’ but also ‘keep an eye on’ or even ‘discipline’. ‘*Guan*’, carrying as it does the implication of targeted, intense attention, suggests that there is no clear boundary between care and surveillance in the Chinese context, both at an interpersonal and a political level. Parents would say to their children, ‘the only reason I “*guan*” you is because I love you’ (*ai ni cai guan ni*). In Confucian discourse, the emperor is regarded as a benevolent parent – caring but allowed to discipline.<sup>27</sup> The recipient of ‘*guan*’ is supposed to be willing to accept the giver’s caring and authority and be grateful for it; the giver of ‘*guan*’ is supposed to ensure the exercise of governance and decision-making, as well as taking care of the general welfare. The long-lasting and valid governance of the Party depended upon its Party branches at grassroots level.<sup>28</sup> Like the numerous tiny blood capillaries of the human body, the RC has the capability to carry out the Party’s policy and ideology,<sup>29</sup> reaching every single household and individual.

RCs are essential to implementing policies in urban China on a variety of issues, from elderly care<sup>30</sup> to family planning, sorting rubbish to supervising compliance with quarantine rules during COVID-19. It is not an exaggeration to describe the RC as ‘the root of the Chinese state’.<sup>31</sup> The deep-rooted Residents’ Committee and the booming senior citizens’ universities reveal a striking feature of older people’s daily activities in urban China – that is, the Party-state is a significant and active presence in people’s daily activities. Below we explore another substantial presence in people’s daily life: the smartphone. In this section we focus on everyday digital routine facilitated by the proliferation of the smartphone, such as the perpetual digital documentation of everyday life via smartphones and shopping via smartphones.

## The digital routine via the smartphone

The smartphone has changed people’s relationship to the surrounding world as it is always around and available in almost all of life’s daily scenarios.<sup>32</sup> For example, smartphone photography has transformed the way in which older people experience and document their everyday lives. In addition, when more and more older people click on their smartphone screens to do daily shopping and make all kinds of payments, consumption – as one of the most regular activities of ordinary people’s lives – assumes a new form in the smartphone age.

The use of the smartphone along with smartphone-based social media (e.g. WeChat) attributes a significant feature to both daily documentation and consumption: being networked. The final section of this chapter considers older people's evolving digital routines with a focus on daily documentation and consumption via the smartphone. In particular, it situates such evolving digital routine within older people's collective memories of communist times and non-digital times. This in turn provides an essential context for us to appreciate the way in which older people apply such digital capabilities in their daily activities.

### Daily documentation via the smartphone

Muguo, a retired company clerk in his late sixties, is a typical example. Even though he has been retired for more than 5 years, he continued to get up at 6 a.m., just as he had done on former working days; when he went out, he would be dressed as if going to work. Once Muguo's daughter called him 'the stubborn old man', upon which Muguo rolled his eyes, and corrected her immediately: 'it is not stubborn; it is treating every day seriously'.

Since he first acquired a smartphone three years ago, Muguo has used up three 1TB hard discs to store all the photos and videos he has taken in that time. He refers to the hard drives as his 'shareable memories' of the life he has lived. Muguo also used the app 'Meipian'<sup>33</sup> to edit the visual contents. Recording, editing and sharing are the three main tasks that occupy his life in retirement. In Muguo's view, the smartphone allows him to record and store every meaningful moment in daily life so that it can be recalled in the future, something very important to Muguo who knows the feeling of loss. During the Cultural Revolution Red Guard students raided his family's house and burned all the family albums. Recalling the past, Muguo sighs,

I always feel it's a huge loss that there are no photos, let alone videos, of my parents and my previous life left... Sometimes I try to remember what my parents looked like, but the vision is always very blurred. I wish I could have a photo of them... Now the situation is so different... I can record any single moment of my life whenever I want to and share it with people I care about.

The meaning of the convenient and accessible digital recording and sharing also goes beyond memorising one's personal life. In order to share the content of various cultural activities he attends, Muguo not only runs his own public-facing blog but has also set up a few hobby-based WeChat



**Figure 3.10** Muguo taking a photo of a history story displayed in a residential compound that he happened to pass by. He later posted the photo in one of his WeChat groups that focuses on the history of Shanghai. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

groups. Such WeChat groups, with more than 360 contacts (including people he does not know offline), have become the place where Muguo and his online friends share knowledge and information on a daily basis. Muguo's smartphone is always ready to take photos of interesting facts and information that he can later share in WeChat groups (Fig. 3.10). As Muguo observes,

...I am so motivated by the thought that I can share great things and information with my friends or even strangers online.

Some of Muguo's friends have not been able to attend some of the events in person. In these cases Muguo would record the whole event, upload the video and then send them a link to it. He used to be a 'content porter' voluntarily in some network before, but without the digital support that he has nowadays. When Muguo was in his early twenties handwritten copies of novels (*shou chao ben*) were secretly circulated among young people. Muguo himself once copied two and a half novels by hand. Muguo recalls,

You can't imagine the thirst for novels at that time. Once I only got a wretched handwritten copy of one-third of a novel. I read it overnight and passed it to the next person. But nobody knew where the other parts of the novel were. In our network, we asked everybody, waited and waited. Finally, I got the news that it might be at somebody's place, so I walked three hours over there just to get the rest of the copy ... I was just half an hour too late, as it had already been taken by another person.

Similar memories of 'handwritten copies of novels' were common among older people in their sixties who had lived most of their lives in a non-digital time when information was scarce in mainland China. Nobody at the time could possibly imagine they would live in a time when not only the text, but visual material too could be quickly and easily recorded, copied and shared any time, anywhere by a hand-sized machine at their fingertips. As another research participant, 65-year-old Caiyuan, remarks,

I appreciate the smartphone so much. Nowadays the number of photos I take on my phone in one day is more than the photos my parents took in their whole lives.

Compared to novels, photography used to be even more of a luxury item in China when this older generation was young. The cost of photography was one of the main reasons why photo-taking was such an extraordinary thing in the former times. As research participant Chang Guan, now in his seventies, recalls, when he became interested in photography about 40 years ago his monthly salary at the farm camp (*nong chang*)<sup>34</sup> was about 22 RMB; a roll of film (enough for about 30 photos) cost nearly 10 RMB, almost half of his monthly income. On top of this, the cameras were so expensive 50 years ago that almost no individual or household could afford one. People had to borrow cameras from their work unit (*danwei*) or rent them from camera shops. Given the opportunity to have a photo taken was so rare, arranging photo-taking became an essential part of the ritual. People share memories of photo-taking being a formal event that required an arrangement in advance. Nor was Caiyuan exaggerating about her own photos, given how many she and her friends would take daily, as witnessed during fieldwork. A typical example comes from a dining out experience with Caiyuan and her friends, as described below.

'All right! Let me feed my smartphone first!', exclaims Caiyuan once the last dish has landed on the table. She quickly stands up with both

arms reaching out, steadily holding her smartphone above the table. Caiyuan also asks me to take a photo of herself and the other guests at the table, behind their feast. After the mini photoshoot everybody returns to their seat and picks up their chopsticks. Two minutes later a string of new notifications breaks out – Caiyuan’s food photos are being received by each person’s smartphone. Three hours later these photos appear on everybody’s WeChat profiles. One post reads, ‘I am still savouring the great feast tonight and our friendship’. Another reads, ‘Great get-together with my girlfriends. Another *wanghong* (internet famous) restaurant *daka* (checked)!’ Sometimes one or two members of the group were unable to make the meal, but the rest always ensured that photos of the meal were uploaded immediately to the WeChat group, so that those unable to attend could still participate in dining together online.

Members of the cheerful, six-person group are now in their mid-sixties. However, their WeChat group is named ‘Forever 16’, as they were aged 16 when they were sent down to toil on a state-owned farm during the Cultural Revolution. The tough life they endured together provided a profound base for friendship. As Caiyuan says,

We ate bitterness (*chi ku*) together in our early days, and now in our later stage of life we meet up to enjoy all the nice tastes of life... WeChat is where we keep these photos; they are memories of our good times and our friendship. I use it as my open diary.

For Caiyuan and her friends, ‘to enjoy all the nice tastes of life’ can literally mean dressing up appropriately and dining out at restaurants every fortnight (Fig. 3.11). The specific term *wanghong* (social media influencer) appeared a few times both in Caiyuan’s WeChat posts and the WeChat group chat of ‘Forever 16’. *Wanghong*, which literally means ‘internet red’, was originally the Chinese term for social influencers.<sup>35</sup> Now it has also become an adjective referring to anything that gains popularity and fame on social media: food, for example, is a *wanghong* sensation too.<sup>36</sup> Only a few years ago *wanghong* was more associated with younger people who were keen on following trends. Now, however, most of the research participants in their sixties and above are familiar with *wanghong* and many of them, just like Caiyuan and her friends, actively participate in a series of activities associated with the term. *Wanghong* restaurants and shops are increasingly present on older people’s social media profiles.

Moreover, sharing lifestyle photos on social media is also one of the main reasons why people go to *wanghong* places in the first place. Once Luwei, a former Peking Opera singer in her late sixties, met up with



**Figure 3.11** An example of the type of meal Caiyuan and her friends would have when dining out at restaurants, something that they aim to do once every fortnight. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

me in a *wanghong* café. She had learned about this café from a popular Chinese social shopping app ‘*xiaohongshu*’<sup>37</sup> (Little Red Book, or RED), where she gained inspiration about trendy cafés and restaurants. When the pudding arrived, Luwei found she had left her smartphone at home. She sighed with real regret,

What a shame: it is as if the cheesecake would be eaten in vain if I couldn’t take photos and share with my friends on WeChat.

As Luwei suggests, having nice food is not just about consuming it, but also about producing ‘social media-worthy’ photos. That day I took about 50 photos for Luwei. In our two-hour meeting in that café we spent at least 40 minutes taking photos, checking photos and trying different filters from the from the app ‘BeautyCam’ (Meitu) on the photos (Fig. 3.12).

As shown in the case of Caiyuan and Luwei, thanks to the smartphone’s perpetual visual capability, visual elements not only play an essential role in people’s documentation of everyday life; they also become a normative way of engaging with daily life. It is through constantly placing the frame of a smartphone camera upon various subjects that older people develop their profiles of everyday lives. The smartphone has been ‘fed’ with all kinds of nice things and meaningful moments, from delicious and appetising-looking food to a variety of social and cultural events. From WeChat groups of hundreds of contacts to personal blogs, the networked



**Figure 3.12** Two of the final results of photo-taking at the *wanghong* café, posted later on Luwei's WeChat profile. Photos by Xinyuan Wang and photoshopped by Luwei.

digital documentation via smartphones plays a significant role in older people's social lives, providing interpersonal communication as well as self-representation. This also suggests how consumption is viewed as a social process rather than an individual one. For just one person to eat is not real consumption; it has to be a shared process. The importance of sharing within one's network is the horizontal reason for the popularity of the smartphone-based digital documentation among older people, while the repudiation of the limits of their past is the vertical one.

When we consider such a digital practice in the context of living memories of times when the method of documenting through photos was extremely limited, it is not difficult to understand why older people celebrate such digital capability and embrace these digital possibilities as much as they can in their daily lives. Another primary collective memory shared by older people in China is the time of minimal life materials (that is, everything needed for life, from food to medicine to books) during the first few decades of Communist New China. Such a situation has again fundamentally changed, and the living standards of ordinary households in Shanghai have improved significantly over the last decade. More recently, as we will see later, the smartphone has become one of the major ways of doing daily shopping, enabling older people to contribute to China's thriving e-commerce sector. As the next section shows, e-commerce is not just about shopping; it is also an essential part of 'living well'.



## Daily consumption via the smartphone

Before the 24-hour ‘double eleven’ (*shuang shiyi*) online shopping festival, the biggest online shopping festival in the world,<sup>38</sup> Yaping, a retired company clerk in her sixties, had spent over 10 days diligently searching for various discount coupons. She kept multiple Taobao.com tabs open to compare prices and read many page-long customer reviews. She also watched hours of livestream videos on her smartphone<sup>39</sup> to see anchors trying on clothes or showing the products live in front of the camera (Fig. 3.13). In the end Yaping placed a long list of products into her online shopping basket so that she could check out swiftly when the discounting started. Yaping sent the display of her basket to me, along with a wry observation:

See ... to be able to live daily life well (*hui guo ri zi*) nowadays, you have to train yourself to be an expert in online shopping!



**Figure 3.13** Screenshots of the shopping livestream videos that Yaping watched prior to the ‘double eleven’ shopping festival. Anchors in these live streams are showing products in front of the camera. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

'To live daily life well' has never been easy in Yaping's memory. As the third daughter of a family with six children, she vividly remembers how everyday life used to be when there was a scarcity of food and other items. In 1953, under the planned economy, free trade in grain was banned and a new system of food distribution, called 'united grain procurement and marketing' (*tonggou tongxiao*), was introduced nationwide.<sup>40</sup> Soon rationing was extended to cover other foods and items of daily life (e.g. meat, sugar, baked goods, sweets, fruit, cloth, bicycles, televisions, etc.).<sup>41</sup> In the system of ration coupons, each household could only receive a fixed and minimum amount of coupons/tickets for basic food and items of daily life.<sup>42</sup> The purchase of goods required both cash and coupons. That is to say, without ration coupons you could not purchase any goods, even if you offered entirely cash. Tightly controlled ration coupons therefore became China's second currency, more important than money itself.<sup>43</sup> During this time each household had to plan its use of ration coupons carefully. Yaping recalls,

When I was a kid, I used to look forward to the New Year so much as that was the only time there would be meat and fish on the dining table, and each kid in my family would receive some tasty Osmanthus sweets (*guihua tang*).

Yaping's memory is typical: in many parts of China people could only afford to eat meat and fish during the Chinese New Year or at a particular family celebration, even in the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> Yaping's mother, a virtuous housewife, knew how to spend every single penny and coupon where it counted most. She never had any new clothes in her childhood, instead only inheriting clothes from her elder sisters. When winter coats became too worn out, Yaping's mother took out the inside layer of cotton, cut the cloth into smaller pieces and turned them into short summer pants.

Yaping did indeed inherit her mother's clever strategies for frugal living. When she started her own family, she carefully saved all kinds of coupons and played her 'cards' right. For example, she regularly exchanged surplus sugar coupons for cloth coupons with her neighbours and colleagues over a six-month period. Eventually she saved enough cloth coupons for a silk scarf,<sup>45</sup> the first luxury in her life. Even though coupon control in Shanghai had been loosened since the 1980s, reflecting the greater supply of goods available, the system of ration coupons was only officially abolished nationwide in 1992. Yaping still keeps the grain coupons of 1990, for example (Fig. 3.14).



**Figure 3.14** Food coupons kept by Yaping as souvenirs of her childhood. The red coupons are grain coupons, issued in 1990. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

About 30 years ago, when Yaping finally put on the beautiful light purple silk scarf that she had dreamed of for ages, she would probably not have expected that, one day, coupons would no longer be small pieces of paper to be kept carefully in a tin sweet box. Nor, more importantly, would she have thought that one day she would gain the freedom of buying whatever she wanted and could afford, free from the control of national ration coupons. Having said this, however, Yaping's expertise in coupon management, gained in the time of ration coupons, remains relevant in the e-commerce era. During the shopping festival, thanks to her skilful use of discount coupons, Yaping saved more than 5,000 RMB (£550) in the purchase of 50 products<sup>46</sup> (around 18,000 RMB, or £2,000, in total). On top of that, all the purchases would be delivered to her door with no delivery fee – Yaping's husband could finally retire from the labour of bringing heavy bags of rice and cooking oil to the third floor. After a week Yaping posted on her WeChat profile nine images of piles of parcels as well as the various products she had bought (Fig. 3.15). Her accompanying comment read,

The happiest thing after 'hands-chopping' [emoji of a knife] on the 'double-eleven' is receiving parcels [emojis of parcels, rackets (meaning fast delivery) and gesture of good wishes].



**Figure 3.15** Screenshot of the WeChat post of Yaping after the ‘double eleven’ shopping festival. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

Like many in Shanghai, Yaping calls herself half-jokingly a member of the ‘hands-chopping’ party (*duoshoudang*). The term derives from an internet joke that is based on people’s feelings of regret after buying too many things online. Often these buyers swear that if they continue buying they will chop their hands off so that they will no longer be able to click the ‘buy’ button. The term ‘*duoshoudang*’ (‘hands-chopping’ party) therefore refers to someone who is, or describes herself as, an internet shopaholic. Gradually ‘*duoshou*’, hands-chopping, has become a colloquial word for online shopping; it is also widely used as a verb, meaning simply ‘to buy’. For example, it is common for people to say, ‘I will “hand-chop” a new set of skin care’. In WeChat conversations and on social media more generally, ‘hands-chopping’ stickers are also widely used by people of all ages (Fig. 3.16).

One of Yaping’s favourite ‘hands-chopping’ memes was an image posted in a WeChat group of her former classmates. In the image a man, wearing a green army uniform, stands on a boat, holding a chopping knife. The text reads ‘The journey in the sea of Taobao [a shopping website]



**Figure 3.16** Popular WeChat stickers of ‘hands-chopping’. Stickers provided by various research participants.



**Figure 3.17** A ‘hands-chopping’ meme from Yaping’s WeChat chat, taken by Xinyuan Wang (left). An original popular propaganda poster dating from the Cultural Revolution (right). It depicts Chairman Mao as the ‘helmsman’ who guides the country in the direction of the revolution. The revolutionary slogan reads ‘The journey in the sea depends on the helmsman: to resist imperialist aggressions we must establish a mighty navy.’ Original poster owned by Yaping. Photo by Yaping.

depends on the hands-chopping’ (Fig. 3.17, left). Anyone of Yaping’s age would recognise the cunning pun. During the Cultural Revolution, one of the most popular propaganda posters celebrating Chairman Mao depicted him as the ‘helmsman’, carefully guiding China in the direction of the revolution. The revolutionary slogan ran as follows: ‘The journey in the sea depends on the helmsman’ (Fig. 3.17, right). As it happens, in Chinese the words ‘hands-chopping’ and ‘helmsman’ are both pronounced as ‘*duoshou*’; only the intonation is slightly different. The great communist leader then has been adapted by ordinary Chinese citizens to become the embodiment of e-commerce capitalism. As observed in fieldwork, most people of Yaping’s age have no problem in applying such

Maoist/communist memes in the context of today's online consumption. Older people frequently talked about today's life of abundance and its sharp contrast with the limited means of their previous lives during Mao's time.

A striking feature of Chinese 'hands-chopping' party members is how deeply shopping is embedded in a person's social network online. As seen in Luwei's case, it is common for people's own consumption to be inspired by their friends' posts of *wanghong* on lifestyle-sharing apps or private social media platforms. Networked daily consumption also provides a common scenario through which people can maintain and develop social relations. On another WeChat group called 'Good taste in Shanghai', it is common to see people posting a link of a *wanghong* restaurant and asking: 'I want to check this one next month – anybody in the group want to come along?'

This WeChat group was in fact set up three years ago by Mr Guo for five of his former colleagues who used to have meals together after work. After retirement, and in receipt of decent pensions, they had more time to explore the 'food map' of Shanghai. Gradually people added their own relatives and friends to the group, ensuring that the members would never run out of ideas of where to eat. The group size grew from the initial six to 292. Many members are active participants who contribute diligently their latest information and knowledge, from home-made dishes to *wanghong* food and restaurants (Fig. 3.18).

Networked consumption via smartphones is also deeply embedded in family relations and has become a common way of showing care and affection.<sup>47</sup> For example, Zihui, mentioned above (page 65), takes the bulk of the responsibility for caring for her grandson Xiaohu during weekdays. In return she would expect to receive parcels a few times per week, ordered by Xiaohu's mother (her daughter). Xiaohu is fussy about meals, so Zihui's daughter regularly shares recipes from the popular cooking app 'Go to kitchen' (*xia chufang*) with her on WeChat. She orders ingredients and cooking utensils or devices on the 'market' (*shiji*) within the app (Fig. 3.19), then gets them sent to Zihui's flat straight away.

Another example is that of Mr Liang, who appeared in the [previous chapter](#) (pages 49–50); he has a young grandson, Hao, who lives in Germany with his parents. In the Chinese New Year of 2020, he posted a photo of a table bearing a feast on his WeChat profile, observing,

This year, my daughter's family couldn't be home for the New Year celebration due to the COVID travel restriction. But, to our delightful surprise, she ordered a whole table of delicious dishes on 'Eleme' [a food delivery app] for us for New Year's Eve. Physically we are far away ... still, we can taste your filial piety and feel you are so close to us!

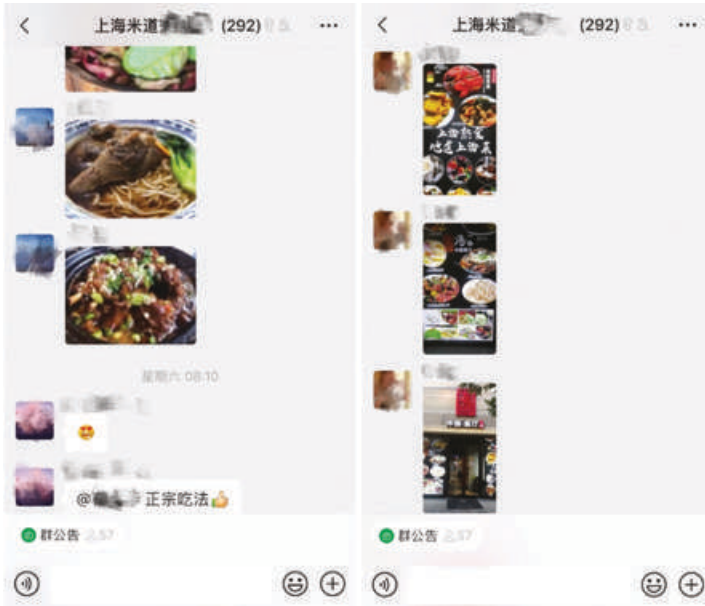


Figure 3.18 Screenshots from the ‘Good taste in Shanghai’ WeChat group. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.



Figure 3.19 Screenshot of the cooking-related market within the ‘Go to kitchen’ (*xia chufang*) app (left). Screenshot of a list of dishes with the label ‘loved by children’ (right). Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 3.20** Screenshots of the ‘support farmers’ section of the ‘Protect the Earth’ WeChat mini-program, through which Zihui purchases agricultural products directly from the farmers. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

Family and friends are not the only social relations who became close, facilitated by smartphone shopping. In other cases the distance between consumers and sellers also becomes much closer, thanks to shopping apps along with convenient logistics in China. Zihui, for example, frequently uses a WeChat mini-program,<sup>48</sup> ‘*shouhu dedi*’ (*Protect the Earth*), to buy agricultural products directly from farmers in the poorest rural areas in deep western China.<sup>49</sup> Unlike other shopping platforms, where the information about a product is focused on the product itself, a common narrative on this platform is that it is all about the people behind the product (Fig. 3.20). For instance, the platform has a section called ‘support farmers’ (*zhunong gongyi*). In addition to photos of products, the platform features specific videos of local farmers introducing the products and explaining why they became unmarketable (e.g. the problem of supply chains, a shrinking market, etc.). These videos end with an appeal for ordering their products online, so that the farmers can survive their financial difficulties. Zihui remarks,

I always feel so touched when I watch these videos. I spent five years labouring in the countryside (during the Cultural Revolution), so I know how tough farming can be... I am more than happy to help out by buying stuff from these farmers ... the logistics are very convenient nowadays. I usually receive my order within five days



no matter how far away the original places are, and the quality is good ... I can smell the fresh earth on these products, it brings me the memory of labouring on a farm.

For Zihui, shopping via the smartphone allows her to not only reach the faraway goods, but also to reconnect with her youth in the countryside. During the fieldwork I witnessed both how people were inspired by posts of consumption on social media and how they connected with others via daily consumption activities, triggered and facilitated via the smartphone. In China, consumption is always a social activity. It is perceived even more so in the age of smartphones, given the significantly increased *visuality*<sup>50</sup> and sharing capability<sup>51</sup> facilitated by the smartphone and social media.

## Conclusion

This chapter began right in the very heart of the intense forest of the 'Mountain Lu'. As mentioned in the book's introduction (pages 15–16), 'Mountain Lu' in Chinese refers to a complicated system in whose myriad details one may easily get lost, therefore losing one's grip on the whole picture. From rubbish dumping to daily shopping, we are indeed surrounded by all kinds of everyday trivia that ordinary older Chinese people have in their lives. However, these are more than trivia. For anthropologists the minutiae of everyday life are essential in helping us to discover what ordinary people's lives look like, bringing us closer to the true face of the 'Mountain Lu'.

The ethnography reveals that despite the social transformation in many aspects of people's lives, the continuity of the power structure from the early days of New China still plays an essential role in people's daily lives. Both the Senior Citizens' University and the Residents' Committee, as introduced in this chapter (pages 73–8), showcase the pervasive '*guan*', representing both the care and surveillance of the Party-state at grassroots level. The ethnography shows that 'living everyday life well' is assuming a new form commensurate with people's emerging digital routines. The smartphone has become a 'teleportation door' in people's daily lives. When people are outside their homes, the smartphone is where they feel 'at home'; when people are physically at home, it allows them to connect with the world beyond and so 'get out' online. Wherever people are, as long as they have their smartphones, they can always gain access to other locales with which they are more comfortable. For older people

who are more likely to face a reduced social circle after retirement, the digital possibilities facilitated by the smartphone play a significant role in their everyday lives. Use of the smartphone serves to transform the daily experience of living space.

The digital opportunities and possibilities experienced via the smartphone are lived out by older people in their everyday lives to its fullest form. Lived life is now restored not only in human memory, but also in smartphone memories, captured spontaneously for convenient sharing and future recall. Those who regret the destruction of precious family albums during the Cultural Revolution can now fill their WeChat profile albums with unlimited images of all kinds of interesting items and significant moments. Smartphone use has thus become an integral part of the way that people shape their memories. It is also evident that older people in China engage actively via the smartphone with a whole variety of daily consumption, such as livestreaming e-commerce or participating in the *wanghong* economy. The changes experienced by this older generation are vast – from the meagre meals in the time of ration coupons to millions of goods available for purchase with discount coupons at the world’s biggest online shopping festival of ‘double eleven’. Such drastic changes provide the key context for us to appreciate the reason why older people in China have brought the newly formed digital routines with such passion and determination into their lives.

It is common to hear people describe the obsession with photo-taking and sharing as a typical phenomenon of narcissism in the age of the smartphone. However, as one can see in this chapter, when older Chinese people intensively apply the visuality of the smartphone, it extends far beyond mere self-love. When Caiyuan ‘fed’ her smartphone before eating, her actions had nothing to do with narcissism. Instead, those who sat around the dining table and others who liked and commented on the food postings on WeChat appreciated that it is probably the best way to visualise the ideal concept of ‘eating and drinking together’. Commensality, which literally means eating at the same table, has its significant social meaning; eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting is a symbol and a confirmation of social community and of the assumption of mutual obligations.<sup>52</sup> As Bourdieu argues, commensality is about creating and reinforcing social relations.<sup>53</sup> In the case of Caiyuan, people who were eating and drinking together would always be assured about their solidarity through the endorsement of the commensality photos on WeChat. Yet digital technology has extended its reach: people who were not sharing the meal offline still have the chance to join in by liking and commenting on the

food photos on WeChat. Here we see how the photos taken and shared by the smartphone actually expand the social capacity of the meal itself as commensality.

In a similar manner, shopping via the smartphone is also more than individuals participating in consumer culture in contemporary China. Smartphone-based e-commerce is constantly associated with collective memories, key social relations, broader sociality and social impact. People's pre-existing desires to record everyday life and to be social are significantly empowered by the smartphone. Today it has become the pre-eminent medium for both sharing and creating sociality.

## Notes

1. In the West, a 'gated residential area' is usually associated with affluent households. In China, however, a 'gated residential compound' is the most common residential model for most ordinary people. The majority of the urban real estate development in Shanghai takes the form of a few residential tower blocks within a gated area known as 'xiaogu' – literally, 'tiny district'.
2. Claimed to be the largest interactive e-commerce platform in China, 'pinduoduo' has pioneered several new online shopping trends. These include social e-commerce, team purchase and consumer-to-manufacturer (C2M).
3. In Shanghai daily grocery and food shopping is typically done by men, unlike the rest of China where women are more likely to perform these domestic tasks. In China the nickname of 'Shanghai little man', meaning 'less-than-manly' men, for Shanghai men is widely known. Such a situation is associated with the fact that Shanghai had the highest female employment rate in China back in the 1960s, when women were encouraged to join the labour market. In addition, the fundamental food distribution and the power structure of the 1950s and the 1960s triggered the shifting of domestic work-sharing among men and women in Shanghai. The nickname 'Shanghai little men' symbolises shifting gender roles at home and the redefining of gender norms in the larger society. See Gao, James Z. 2013.
4. The 'sent-down youth' refers to the entire generation of Chinese urban youth that was sent to the countryside to receive re-education from the farmers during the Cultural Revolution. Read the personal stories of the experience of 'sent-down youth' in [Chapter 7](#).
5. In July 2019 Shanghai started to roll out strict rules regarding the sorting of rubbish. These required residents to sort household waste into four categories. The rules around how to sort waste were regarded as rather complicated; for example, chicken bones need to go into the so-called 'wet waste' (*shi laji*) bin, whereas big pork bones are 'dry waste' (*gan laji*). Also the plastic bags which contain the 'wet waste' are supposed to go separately into the 'dry waste' bin. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-48847062> (accessed 20 August 2021).
6. Residents who do not follow the rules of waste-sorting face a fine, whereas residents who cooperate with the scheme will be rewarded. Each correct waste-sorting will gain an individual a few points on his or her 'green account' via smartphones. These can then be exchanged for a variety of gifts, from rice to washing powder.
7. The app 'zuoyebang' (<https://zyb.zybang.com/>), which literally means 'homework helper', is said to have 800 million registered users in China. The app provides the correct answer to typical homework questions, as well as providing explanations of how to answer correctly. It allows users to search for answers simply by uploading photos of the questions. Users can also search for supplementary textbooks and exercises. In addition to these basic functions, users can also take paid online classes given by well-known teachers. Digital livestreamed teaching was a common practice in China even before COVID-19, as it helped pupils across the country to improve their academic performance (accessed 20 August 2021).
8. WeChat shows the ranking of one's daily step counts among all the WeChat contacts who also use the step count function.

9. In 2019 the average duration of a one-way commute in Shanghai was 51 minutes, compared to 48 minutes in New York. See <https://commuterbenefits.com/2019/09/how-china-cuts-down-on-car-commuting/> (accessed 20 August 2020).
10. Data from a general 'health and self-care' survey among 159 research participants (aged 50 and above, average age 62, M/F: 75/84). This long-term survey includes ethnographic observations among 60 retired research participants, interviews of 35 research participants and an online survey about TCM and self-care among 64 research participants (aged 50 and above). All were conducted during the 16 months of fieldwork between 2018 and 2019 in Shanghai.
11. Since 1996 there has been a sport participation policy in China. In 2011 the central government put together a sport development plan with the aim of increasing the rate of sports participation in China. For details see Fan, H., L. Liu, G. Min and Z. X. Guan 2013.
12. Having said that, in private sport venues such as dancing studios and gyms, especially upmarket gyms, younger people make up the majority of participants.
13. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1980381/sport-all-chinas-plan-cope-ageing-society> (accessed 20 August 2021).
14. <https://cloud.tencent.com/developer/article/1048466> (accessed 20 August 2020). WeChat issues an official statistics report annually with various foci. The latest statistics about age-based WeChat step counting use is the 2016 report.
15. For example, *men dang hu dui*, which means 'families with same door', refers to two families with the same social status; *men xia*, which means 'under the door', refers to belonging to a clan or school; *guang yao men mei*, which means 'to glorify the lintel of the door', means honouring one's family; *zhu men*, which means 'red door', refers specifically to a prominent family.
16. Anthropologist Charles Stafford provides an insightful analysis of the cultural practices surrounding '*men*', evidence of the enduring fascination of this symbol. See Stafford, C. 2000.
17. These women are typically female sex workers, usually rural migrants in their fifties and sixties. Their usual targets are elderly men in their seventies or eighties. Their price is usually extremely low, ranging between £3 and £6.
18. It is noteworthy that in urban China men are rarely seen exercising alone or in groups in their residential neighbourhood; gender distinctions separate the exercise spaces. See Xiong, H. 2019.
19. The ASSA project refers to the smartphone as the 'transportal home', suggesting that we may understand the smartphone better by thinking of it as a place in which people live, rather than a device that people use. See Miller, D. et al. 2021, 219–27.
20. The idea of a university for the elderly is not new. The concept of SCU is based on the notion of the Third-Age University (U3A), which originated in France in the 1970s.
21. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414d346b6a4d33457a6333566d54/index.html> (accessed 20 August 2020).
22. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/08/16/why-universities-for-the-elderly-are-booming-in-china> (accessed 20 August 2021).
23. Organic law of the Urban Residents' Committees of the People's Republic of China, Article 2.
24. Since the establishment of the Communist New China (1949), 'the new regime used the spatial structures of the old Shanghai to establish its own power in the city'. See Chen, Y. 2007, 4.
25. During Mao's time, work units were where social monitoring and organisation took place, as the majority of the residents belonged to a *danwei* and individuals' personal lives were under the surveillance/control of the *danwei*. At that time the RCs were therefore only responsible for supervising individuals who belonged to no *danwei*. However, during the economic reform massive unemployment was caused because of the restructuring of most of the state-owned enterprises (SOE). As a result, *danwei* (work units) ceased to be the centre of the organisation of social lives for a great number of residents and the focus of population control started to shift from work units towards residential spaces. See Audin, J. and K. Throssell 2015.
26. Ibid.
27. Hu, S. 1997.
28. The Party has comprehensive coverage in Shanghai, not only in the public sector, but also in the private sector. By the end of 2017 Party branches had been set up in 67.9 per cent of the country's 2.73 million private enterprises.
29. In many cases the director of the RC and the Secretary of the Party Branch of the RC are the same person. If not, the director is junior to the Party Secretary.

30. Shanghai municipal authorities plan to keep 90 per cent of the elderly in their own homes rather than placing them in, or having them be sent to, care homes for the elderly. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-healthcare-seniors-idUSBRE8900BI20121001> (accessed October 2020).
31. Read B. L. 2012.
32. Miller, D. et al. 2021, 103–34.
33. Meipian is an app that focuses on photo and text editing, sharing and the distribution of content mainly through WeChat.
34. The farm where Chang Guan was sent to receive re-education from peasants in the 1960s.
35. For example, see a feature report on *wanghong* at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36802769> (accessed 20 August 2021).
36. See <https://www.shine.cn/feature/taste/1804153136/> (accessed 20 August 2021).
37. With 100 million monthly active users, the app 'Little Red Book' (*xiaohongshu*) is said to be the Chinese equivalent of Instagram. The 'red' in the name of this app suggests trendy rather than political 'red communism', as red in Chinese has the connotation of popularity. The same goes for the term '*wanghong*', literally meaning 'internet red', which refers to fashionable things circulated online. Little Red Book is a popular platform for people to read about product reviews, learn about fashion tips and discover high-quality brands. The popularity of *xiaohongshu* is mainly in tier 1 and tier 2 cities in China. The majority of its users (90 per cent) are female, and almost half (46 per cent) are under 25. See <https://walkthechat.com/xiaohongshu-little-red-book-fostering-e-commerce-via-word-mouth/> (accessed 20 August 2021).
38. Starting in 2009, 'double eleven', which falls on 11 November, has become the biggest shopping festival in the world – similar to, but several times greater than, Black Friday in the USA and Boxing Day in the UK. The major e-commerce sites in China, such as Taobao, Tmall, JD.com, offer significant discounts and promotions during the shopping festival. <https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/double-eleven.htm> (accessed 20 August 2021).
39. Livestreaming e-commerce is the promotion and sale of goods through influencer streams on their own social media channels, most often housed on China's online shopping malls. In 2019 over 430 million people, about 30 per cent of China's population, viewed livestreams and approximately 37 per cent of China's online shoppers made livestream purchases. See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michellgreenwald/2020/12/10/live-streaming-e-commerce-is-the-rage-in-china-is-the-us-next/> (accessed 20 August 2021).
40. For a detailed discussion of 'united grain procurement and marketing' please see Gao, J. Z. 2010.
41. In 1954 the Shanghai municipal government issued each city resident with food coupons and began the rationing of rice and cooking oil. Rationing in Shanghai went through three stages and took a year to complete. Other coupons were issued to households for purchasing cloth, bicycles, television sets, shampoo, toilet paper, etc. The system was further complicated in some stores where an arbitrary decision was made on the combination of coupons, requiring consumers to buy more popular goods along with less popular items. See details at Gao, J. Z. 2013.
42. Application for food coupons were available at the local security station, where each household registers family members according to age and work division. Once registered, the coupons were distributed by the 'street office' (*jiedao*). See Hawkins, J. N. 1982.
43. See Smil, V. 1978.
44. Meat and fish coupons were issued only for urban residents. In the 1970s Communist Party cadres could receive each month coupons for 1.5 kg of pork; other residents in Beijing enjoyed the best supply in China and got coupons for 1 kg of pork, while the rations in remote provincial centres were only one-half or one-quarter of this amount. Rations were relaxed temporarily for the New Year holiday. In 1977 each Shanghai family could buy 10 preserved eggs, half a kilo of salted jellyfish and shelled peanuts and unrestricted amounts of pork and frozen shrimp. See Smil, V. 1978.
45. According to Yaping, as the categories of various coupons were limited compared to the number of different types of goods, cloth coupons were accepted for the purchase of silk products. The exchange rate among various coupons was negotiable among ordinary households at that time.
46. Including an air filter, a massage chair, a kitchen set, a floor mopping robot, two down jackets, two cashmere pullovers, two pairs of trainers, five summer dresses, three English books for children, a suitcase, an LED night lamp, 96 toilet rolls, two boxes of oranges, five buckets of cooking oil, 50 kg of rice, 20 kg of dog food and so on.

47. *Consumption in China: How China's new consumer ideology is shaping the nation* by Li Anne Yu highlights the emotional and social triggers behind the staggering statistics about consumption in China and discusses its impact on the nation as a whole. See Yu, L. 2014.
48. WeChat mini-programs work as mini-apps within WeChat. For a detailed introduction of the way these mini-programs work see Chapter 5.
49. In China e-commerce is highly promoted in rural areas. By reducing trade and information costs to urban markets, e-commerce is believed to raise rural incomes through higher demand for local production, better access to inputs and stronger incentives for rural entrepreneurship. See Couture, V. et al. 2021.
50. For a detailed discussion of the visibility of social media (Facebook), please see Miller, D. and J. Sinanan 2016, 201–7. For an ethnographic study of the creative management of the visibility on Chinese social media (QQ), please see Wang, X. 2016, 57–96.
51. For a detailed discussion of the 'sharing industry' please see Meikle, G. 2016, 24–46.
52. See Kerner, S., C. Chou and M. Warmind 2015, 1.
53. Bourdieu, P. 1984.

## 4

# Social relations: the *guanxi* practice beyond family ties

## Introduction

This chapter focuses upon the use of the smartphone in the maintenance and development of social relations outside of family ties. Social relations, or '*guanxi*' in Chinese, are the pivotal aspect of people's lives in Chinese society. One can hardly exaggerate the importance of *guanxi* in China, given the absolute emphasis upon dealing with relations among people<sup>1</sup> in Chinese society. Confucianism is fundamentally the code of conduct that is centrally concerned with ideal social relations as a way of maintaining social harmony.<sup>2</sup> You may wonder whether the tradition of Confucianism remains relevant among today's population as China has gone through tremendous social transformations during Mao's time as well as the economic reform. The answer is an unambiguous yes, though the reasons behind it are complicated; different scholars provide different evidence and offer interpretations from different perspectives.

Therefore the first part of this chapter, in explaining 'why Confucianism remains relevant', gives a brief analysis of the revival of Confucianism in today's China. This provides us with a clearer idea of what it means when Chinese people refer to Confucianism to justify and explain their specific ways of handling social relations (*guanxi*) – or, in most cases, simply live the ideas of Confucianism without full awareness. To appreciate exactly how people practise the deep-rooted Confucian idea of pursuing the subtle and delicate harmony between various social relations, we will revisit Zihui and her husband Jiang, whose daily routine was explored in [Chapter 3](#). This time we see how the couple confront a big challenge: they need to find a fulcrum in their *guanxi* network to open the door to a prestigious school for their beloved grandson Xiaohu.

The story of Zihui and Jiang provides us with rich material to look further into various aspects of *guanxi*, from a series of practices and concepts that surround the concept to the performance of *guanxi* on the social media WeChat. The third part of this chapter then moves to consider the impact of the smartphone, especially WeChat, in *guanxi* practice. In particular a novel social category, ‘friends from WeChat group’, will be discussed. Such a specific social category, with its growing significance in social life, provides us with an opportunity to investigate the evolving friendship practice online and to rethink the very concept and practice of friendship in post-reform China. Through the anthropological lens we can appreciate the continuity as well as the changes of *guanxi* practice among various social relations that occur in older people’s daily lives in the age of smartphones.

## Why Confucianism remains relevant

To achieve the ‘harmony’ of a society is the primary concern of Confucianism. According to Confucianism, social roles are fundamentally unequal in terms of social status, yet a harmonious social order may be established and maintained when human actors of different social roles and unequal social status interact with one another according to the Confucian ethical codes of behaviour.<sup>3</sup> Many refer to Confucianism as one of three main religions in China, along with Buddhism and Taoism. However, strictly speaking, Confucianism is not a religion – not at least in the Western sense.<sup>4</sup> A significant difference between Confucianism and other religions worldwide is that the latter is ultimately concerned about the relations between people and a God or other supernatural deities. In contrast, Confucianism focuses on relations between people.<sup>5</sup> Shuming Liang, a renowned Chinese philosopher, notes that in many cases religion is replaced in China by Confucian humanistic ethics.<sup>6</sup> The primary concern of Confucianism is the ‘social life here and now’.<sup>7</sup> Its essential emphasis is not about ontological and epistemological questions, but rather about individuals maintaining and developing social relations through cultivating proper social roles.<sup>8</sup>

From a political perspective, today’s China is witnessing a robust revival of Confucianism. To unify a nation of a vast population and diversity has always been a challenging task for Chinese leaders over centuries. Today such a task has become even more urgent and difficult in the face of an increasing gap between rich and poor, the economic tension between urban and rural and the pervasive concern of ‘moral crisis’ and



'spiritual void'. Despite the radical antipathy previously directed against Confucianism, especially during the Cultural Revolution under Mao, the Communist Party has now become a passionate advocate and sponsor of it, promoting Confucianism in and out of China. On the one hand the Party has realised 'Marxism no longer appeals to people'.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand economic power has brought cultural pride, which has made China turn to affirm its own cultural heritage.<sup>10</sup> Confucianism also fits in the role of parrying Western cultural influence.<sup>11</sup> China consequently looks inward to take stock of its own cultural heritage. Confucian ethics, which emphasise that the ruled should show loyalty to the father-like benevolent ruler, have long served as the source of political legitimacy for emperors in many historical periods; they can also do a favour to the ruling Party of today.

In 2002 the term 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*), which is the core of Confucianism, was introduced by then-President Hu as a political term, indeed the unifying concept of his administration. It provides a new interpretation of what 'harmonious society' means in today's China, suggesting the shift of China's focus 'from a purely economic growth model to a more balanced, Confucian-style approach aimed at maintaining growth while addressing daunting social issues such as the wide gap between rich and poor, widespread environmental degradation, and government and corporate corruption'.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2004, the Chinese government has started to build the Confucius Institute (CI) worldwide.<sup>13</sup> As a public educational partnership between Chinese universities and universities worldwide, the CI's official aim is to promote Chinese culture, support Chinese language teaching and facilitate cultural exchange. Researchers also point out that CI is a constituent part of China's efforts to enhance Chinese 'soft power' and to communicate to the world that its rise to superpower status will be a peaceful, globally responsible process.<sup>14</sup> The Opening Ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games presented China to the world as 'a modern country built on ancient foundations'.<sup>15</sup> It opened with a well-known saying of Confucius, 'What a happy thing to have friends come from afar', and the following performance revealed a matrix of moving blocks in a choreographed display of the Chinese character 'he' (harmony), the core of Confucian ethics.

The revival of Confucianism is not just government sponsored, as there has also been a resurgence of interest among intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> Among them, the best-known is Yu Dan, a professor of media studies. Her series of lectures 'Confucian Analects from the Heart' (*lunyu xinde*), broadcast at the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) in 2006, has become

a major cultural success. The transcript of the lecture was then immediately edited into a self-help style book that sold over ten million copies.<sup>17</sup> Yu's unconventional, even controversial interpretation of Confucianism<sup>18</sup> was packed with inspirational stories and delivered in the language of popular psychology language. In this way it managed to forge 'an emotion-based cultural link between the Confucian tradition as a source of happiness and everyday life in the fast-paced, market-oriented contemporary China'.<sup>19</sup>

Yu's affective interpretation of Confucianism was highly praised by the state media as it is in tune with the Party-state's goal of building 'the harmonious society' – but it is also eagerly embraced by millions upon millions of ordinary Chinese people. Today's China is widely believed to have encountered a historical moment that requires a thorough reflection on its past, present and future. In such a context, the longing for a feasible and convincing belief in life that will bring certainty to the anxious and uncertain world is pervasive.

The Confucian revival has spread to different age groups and social strata, encompassing scholars, officials and the general public. For example, an estimated ten million children attend Confucian kindergartens, classes and schools; cultural heritage has increasingly become a new marker of social distinction among the middle class.<sup>20</sup> For the elderly, the revival of Confucianism seems to carry more pragmatic concerns.<sup>21</sup> Chinese society is rapidly ageing, with a shrinking younger generation, so eldercare has become a 'care crisis' for citizens and the government. In response to the care crisis and the increasing burden for the government of providing eldercare as a public good, the government takes a neoliberal approach and emphasises Confucian ethics, which regards eldercare as the primary duty of individuals and families.<sup>22</sup> In the official nationwide promotion of 'filial piety' campaigns, mass media praises the Confucian norm of filial piety and highlights the social and cultural demands for adult children to provide physical, financial and emotional care for their ageing parents.<sup>23</sup>

The revival of Confucianism reveals the state's pragmatic approach to re-appropriating Confucian morality for solving various political and social problems in contemporary Chinese society. However, the present Confucian revival is not merely the sophisticated discourse of the Party-state and the elites. Rather it reflects an imbrication of state mandate, market ideology and personal choice which has broader popular roots among the common people.<sup>24</sup>

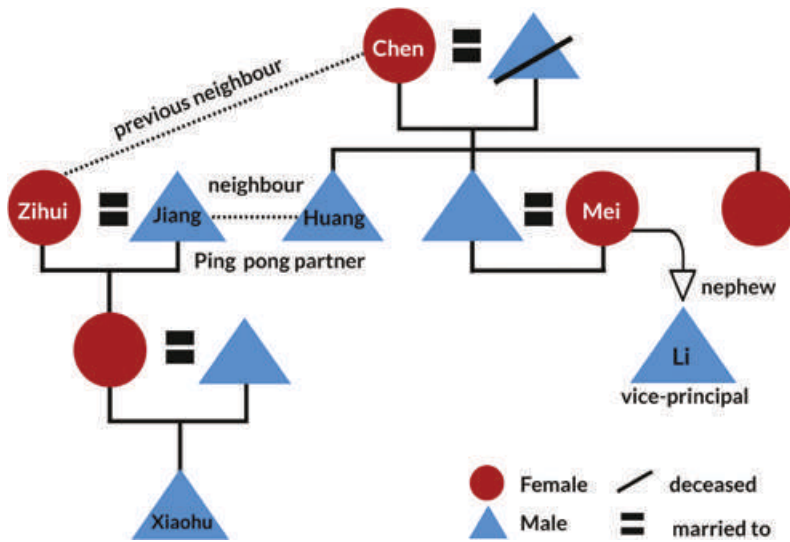
In a way, the wording 'revival of Confucianism' is not totally accurate. The informal and actual practice of Confucian ethics in social

relations has always been at the centre of people's lives, even during Mao's time when Confucianism was officially persecuted.<sup>25</sup> Confucianism has been entrenched in Chinese language and has become the underlying 'cultural personality' of Chinese people. Although in some situations specific, Confucian-prescribed traditional 'value orders' and practices, for example that women should be obedient to their husbands, may have been challenged and transformed, Confucianism remains a principal reference for new ideas and new practices. The rest of the chapter depicts and discusses how ordinary Chinese people practise Confucian ethics in social relations beyond family ties in their daily *guanxi* development and management.

## ***Guanxi* in living scenarios**

As the 'special Chinese form of social capital',<sup>26</sup> *guanxi* is a distinctly fluid concept; no single scholar can provide a concrete definition or adequate translation. It has been observed that 'Chinese *guanxi* is not a term which can adequately be expressed by an English-language equivalent of one word, the concept is too culture specific'.<sup>27</sup> To put it simply, *guanxi* refers to a personalised connection between two individuals.<sup>28</sup> 'Personalised' is the key as biological relationships (such as family), regional relationships (such as neighbours), role relationships (such as classmates and colleagues) do not automatically generate *guanxi* between people unless such connection results in active and intimate interactions in personal worlds.<sup>29</sup> Chapter 3 shows what the daily life of Zihui and Jiang looks like in the pursuit of 'living everyday life well' (*hui guo ri zi*). This chapter continues to follow the same couple to see how they navigate and negotiate *guanxi* in order to achieve a perceived better life for their family members – something that, as we shall see soon, can be particularly delicate and complicated.

For two months Zihui and her husband Jiang were occupied with one big project: to get their grandson Xiaohu enrolled in the best primary school in their neighbourhood. The competition for this school is fierce and candidates are selected according to the rank of their exam results. For students without extraordinary academic performance, a considerable amount of 'sponsor fee' is required to get enrolled. Zihui heard that the one-off 'sponsor fee' for this school last year was already more than 400,000 RMB (45,000 pounds), almost the entire year's income of Xiaohu's mother, a project manager at a marketing company, and more than four times the whole year's pension received by Zihui as a retired



**Figure 4.1** The *guanxi* diagram in Xiaohu’s school enrolment case. Infographic by Xinyuan Wang.

civil servant. However, the couple was still hopeful as they somehow saw a potential *guanxi* to be deployed: the nephew of the previous neighbour’s son’s sister-in-law was the vice-principal of the school (Fig. 4.1).

For the time being the only *guanxi*, the well-established and personalised connection, was between Zihui’s husband Jiang and his old buddy Mr Huang, the former neighbour from the alleyways who also moved into the same residential compound and played ping pong every morning with Jiang. It was while chatting after a daily ping pong session that Jiang gained the information that Mr Huang’s sister-in-law’s nephew had been recently promoted to become vice-principal of the school. In the family meeting Zihui revealed her concern to Jiang.

I don’t think your ‘*guanxi*’ with Huang is strong enough to the degree that he would give us such a huge ‘*mianzi*’ (face), never mind the fact that Huang does not owe us any ‘*renqing*’ (favour).

*Renqing*, literally meaning ‘human feelings’, refers to the ethics of indebtedness in the exchange of favour. It has been observed that ‘reciprocity is in any society a rule of life, and in some societies at least it is *the* rule of life<sup>30</sup> – and China is one of those societies in which reciprocity is indeed a

foundational pillar that supports the harmony of social life. Chinese society is considered to be a '*renqing* society' in which people lay particular emphasis on the principle of reciprocity in social interaction. Simply put, *mianzi*, literally meaning 'face' in Chinese, refers to the perceived individual reputation in others' eyes that can be transformed into a varied resource. Because *mianzi* relies very much on others' judgement in social interactions, it can be given or deprived by others. Zihui was concerned that Jiang's *guanxi* with Mr Huang was not strong enough to the degree that Mr Huang would do a huge favour for Jiang – give a big *mianzi* to Jiang.

The next morning Zihui got up earlier to join Jiang in the ping pong room. During the break she chatted with Mr Huang about the family, mainly enquiring about the health of Huang's mother, 92-year-old Grandma Chen, now staying with Huang's brother after the death of his father. Towards the end of the conversation Zihui recalled that she had not seen Grandma Chen since the funeral of Huang's father two years ago, and proposed that she should come and visit her.

We were good alleyway neighbours for so many years, our '*ganqing*' (affection) is stronger than many relatives. I still remember that Grandma Chen taught me how to cook the Wuxi braised spare ribs ... ah ... I should have visited her earlier!

Hearing that, Mr Huang was delightfully surprised. Under her insistence, Mr Huang suggested that Zihui should join him next week to visit Grandma Chen. For that visit, Zihui prepared home-made 'Wuxi braised spare ribs' and two bottles of imported cod-liver oil as a gift. 'They are just "the reflection of my affection" (*xinyi*) – please take it as if I was fulfilling my "filial piety" (*jin xiao*) to you, Grandma Chen,' Zihui said to Grandma Chen when she presented the gifts. 'Do you remember how you taught me how to cook the spare ribs? Now this dish is still my signature dish and the favourite of my grandson Xiaohu!' Grandma Chen was very pleased to hear that and urged Zihui to stay for dinner.

She did stay and offered to help in the kitchen. In the kitchen, Zihui had an immediate bonding with Huang's sister-in-law Mei. It turned out that Mei used to labour in the neighbouring state farm as the 'sent-down youth' during the Cultural Revolution three years earlier than when Zihui was 'sent down'. Accordingly, as Zihui put it, between herself and Mei the 'revolutionary affection' (*geming qinggan*) immediately emerged. Revolutionary affection, or revolutionary friendship, is a term commonly applied by older Chinese people to the deep emotional bonding and trust that developed between friends during the revolutionary era. Not only

did people share the same sense of ‘revolutionary mission’, but they also relied on one another to survive in tough living conditions.

In *guanxi* practice the sharing (*tong*) of life experience, especially as members of a social group or organisation, will significantly strengthen the connection.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Zihui and Mei share the memories of the tough life in the neighbouring state-farm during the Cultural Revolution reduced the mental distance and enhanced the affection between the two. Before dinner was ready, Zihui had already added Mei to her WeChat.

‘I have Mei on my WeChat!’ Zihui happily exclaims once she returns home; she sees being WeChat friends as the beginning of *guanxi* building. The next day Zihui posted a set of photos of dinner with Grandma Chen and Mei on her WeChat profile, saying:

Yesterday I finally visited my mother-like Grandma Chen since she moved to stay with my elder sister (*jie*) Mei. And guess what! Our karma (*yuanfen*) can be traced back to the ‘sent-down’ time.

A half-hour later Mei liked the post – which, in Zihui’s eyes, meant that Mei approved the way Zihui addressed her as ‘elder sister’. Anthropologist Fei observes that the Chinese ethical relations of sentiments and obligations are egocentric in the pattern of ‘the mode of differential associations’ (*chaxu geju*): the further a person is from an ego’s family, the lower the degree of the ego’s sentiments and obligations to the person.<sup>32</sup> In such a family-centred differential structure, the way to manifest the significance of non-kinship relations is to create ‘pseudo-families’, that is, to address non-family ties by family terms such as brothers and sisters or aunts and uncles.<sup>33</sup> On top of it, the emphasis on sharing a recipe for home-made food as well as the statement of fulfilling filial piety further reinforced Zihui’s image as a pseudo-family member and enhanced the *guanxi* between Zihui and Mei. Over the following month Zihui did not mention the problem of her grandson Xiaohu to Mei at all. She explains,

I am going to ask for a huge favour. If I do so immediately once I know her, she would think I am too pragmatic ... I need to let our ‘*ganqing*’ (affection) grow a bit to warm up our *guanxi*.

Zihui points out another important aspect of *guanxi* practice – *ganqing* (affection), which refers to personal emotional attachment to a person. Chinese *ganqing* always goes hand in hand with material and moral obligation. People are more likely to do a favour when they are driven by *ganqing* rather than by *renqing* (ethic of indebtedness). In the case of Zihui

and Mei, Mei did not owe Zihui any *renqing*, hence the best way of *guanxi* building is to increase the *ganqing*.

For the purpose of increasing *ganqing*, Zihui kept regular interaction with her 'elder sister' Mei on WeChat. From Mei's WeChat profile, Zihui discovered that Mei loves singing. She therefore set up a new WeChat group with Mei and a few of her good friends who also like singing. This group met twice, arranged by Zihui for karaoke (KTV) singing. Zihui also visited Mei's place to see Grandma Chen once again. Soon in people's eyes Zihui has become a good friend of Mei.

Finally, two weeks before the primary school enrolment started, Zihui complained to Mei that she could not sleep well these days as she had a quarrel with her daughter about the choice of primary school for Xiaohu. After hearing Zihui's problem, Mei suggested,

Xiaohu should go for the best one. I know it's very difficult to get in, but I may be able to help as ... you know what ... my nephew is the vice-principal of the school!

Zihui appeared totally surprised and then happily accepted Mei's offer to help. Two days later Mei arranged a visit with Zihui to the place of her nephew (Mr Li). Under the direction of Mei, Zihui prepared 30,000 RMB (£3,500) as well as a piece of paper carrying the details of Xiaohu (name, home address, etc.) in an envelope. She put the envelope in a gift of a box of tea in advance of their visit.

As Mei expected, the wife of Mr Li welcomed them. She explained that Mr Li was working extra hours at school during the enrolment. The hostess asked Zihui and Mei about the health of Grandma Chen<sup>34</sup> and thanked Zihui for taking such care of Grandma Chen, just like a family member. The conversation was warm, 'just like relatives' normal chatting', as Zihui put it. In this meeting nobody mentioned 'the elephant in the room': getting the school place for Xiaohu. Three weeks later Xiaohu received the enrolment letter from the school. To express her gratitude for Mei's help, Zihui purchased a one-year private coach fee at Mei's yoga class for Mei. In retrospect, she remarks:

Everything went like 'floating clouds and flowing water' (*xing yun liu shui*). We all have the tactical knowledge of what is happening. My two-month effort earned this great opportunity for Xiaohu, and we only paid a fraction of the money that we should have paid had we taken the formal process. We both earned *mianzi* (face) and *lizi* (practical benefits).

As Zihui remarks, everyone has tactical knowledge of things. Therefore nobody mentioned the word ‘bribery’ throughout the whole process and everything was handled skilfully, leaving no evidence – just as nothing is left by a floating cloud. During the economic reform, *guanxi* and corruption has becoming increasingly intertwined in Chinese society.<sup>35</sup> In many cases the boundary between bribery and morally validated gift-giving has become blurred in the Chinese way of *guanxi* practice.<sup>36</sup> *Guanxi* should be historically regarded as a ‘repertoire of cultural patterns and resources’ which are continuously transformed in their adaptation to, as well as shaping of, new social institutions and structures.<sup>37</sup> For this older generation in question, during the Maoist planned economy time, *guanxi* could be used to facilitate a strategic use of ration coupons, as mentioned in [Chapter 3](#). Since the economic reform *guanxi* has been playing an inevitable role in people’s negotiation for a better life among much heated social competition.

When Zihui discussed the cash-giving to her family and friends, the only thing people would comment upon was whether the amount of money is reasonable, rather than whether giving cash per se is acceptable – especially as the practice of cash-giving among family and friends had always been routine during festivals. However, people would recognise that giving cash to a vice-principal to gain school places can be problematic in court. That is the reason Mr Li was away on purpose, thus avoiding any possible awkwardness. In addition, because Mr Li was absent, his wife, as a relatively neutral person, could treat Mei and Zihui as relatives, pretending to know nothing about the arrangement. The visit was carefully disguised under the ‘performance’ of family members. Such ‘ritual performance’ is employed to mask the instrumental character of the transaction.<sup>38</sup> Besides the cash gift, other gift-giving took place during the whole process in various forms, such as food and karaoke, as well as frequent interaction on WeChat. By giving Mei all kinds of gifts, Zihui successfully fostered a sense of indebtedness essential for *guanxi* building with Mei: this in turn enhanced *ganqing* (affection) as well as *renqing* (the ethic of indebtedness).

So far, we have viewed the story from Zihui’s side. However, that is not the whole picture. At the end of fieldwork, the last month before I left Shanghai, Mei mentioned to me ‘unconsciously’ that she actually always knew the real reason Zihui came to visit Grandma Chen, as Mr Huang had already discussed with Grandma Chen and Mei before he took Zihui around. After Mei had told me the story from her side, she suggested,

But Xinyuan, don’t tell your Zihui aunty that I knew it ... but she probably also knows that I knew it, or knows that I know that she



knows that I knew it. Anyway, it is a harmonious (*heqi*) situation as long as we all know but don't talk about it for the sake of everyone's face (*mianzi*).

Mei's words reveal the fact that every participant in this delicate building of *guanxi* led by Zihui – from Mr Huang to Mei, from Grandma Chen to the wife of Mr Li – was not as 'innocent' as they appeared to be. Quite the reverse: every participant clearly knew their role in the play and adopted an especially co-operative attitude to deliver a good performance<sup>39</sup> in which they are both actors and audience simultaneously. The consensus upon *guanxi* as a resource mobiliser is paralleled with the mutual caring for one another's 'face' (*mianzi*). 'Face work', as a sophisticated, self-conscious manipulation of the goal to establish a particular favourable image in front of others,<sup>40</sup> is thus crucial, and a harmonious *guanxi* is where everyone's *mianzi* is taken care of.

We now have seen how *guanxi* practice carries its unique social implications with highly elaborated and tightly bound up indigenous ideas such as *renqing* (human feelings, favour), *mianzi* (face) and *ganqing* (affection). The thing we have not yet paid proper attention to is how *guanxi* practice requires an appropriate platform. In Zihui's story, home visiting facilitated the establishment of *guanxi*. In addition, meeting up with Mei for singing at karaoke also provides an opportunity to build affection. Furthermore, besides these physical places, Zihui was spending much of her time cultivating *ganqing* and *renqing* with Mei via WeChat on a daily basis.

Being WeChat friends not only indicates the threshold of the establishment of *guanxi*, but also facilitates further maintenance and cultivation of *guanxi*. In most cases,<sup>41</sup> being WeChat contacts not only allows one-to-one or group messaging, but also grants access to one another's private WeChat profiles. A comparable hypothetical situation in other societies would have been the connection with one's WhatsApp, which automatically and simultaneously grants access to the same contact's Facebook profile and Instagram profile.

It has become common sense that the connection on WeChat is the threshold of *guanxi*. That is to say if two persons have some personal connection, they should at least be WeChat friends. As we have seen, Zihui was excited that she had Mei as a WeChat friend as this was a significant landmark of the development of their *guanxi*. Another research participant once exposed a friend's boasting of having a good *guanxi* with a well-known broadcaster by revealing the person did not even have access to the broadcaster's personal WeChat account. It is fair to say that in most

cases the connection on WeChat means a far wider and deeper exposure of one's private life to one another than does any connection on, for instance, WhatsApp. The interaction on WeChat plays an essential role in *guanxi* management in daily life, from families to even strangers. The following section pays particular attention to depicting the full spectrum of social connections – especially non-kinship connections – that older people manage over the use of WeChat.

## Scalable *guanxi* management on WeChat

After retirement, 62-year-old Dan felt that her life was totally occupied by raising her granddaughter. Dan is one of the 18 million 'older migrants' (*lao piao*) who, as mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), left their home town and moved to a new place at a later stage of life. The first few months in Shanghai were not easy for Dan as she missed all her old friends she left behind, but soon she found a WeChat video call could compensate for such loss. With the smartphone, as she acknowledges, 'I feel my old friends are close to me even when they are far away'.

On top of this, the app 'WeSing', downloaded for Dan by her son, reignited her childhood dream of becoming a singer. The app enables users to record and upload their own recordings of them singing songs onto their singing profiles. Dan would practise singing through the smartphone with an external microphone at home whenever she was free from housework. Gradually her songs attracted a few followers who 'liked' her singing or left encouraging comments. Through the online platform, Dan got to know further a few other lovers of singing based in Shanghai; these 'singing friends' (*ge you*), all of a similar age, now meet once a week at KTV (Karaoke) for singing. Dan even wants her family to burn the smartphone for her if she passes away suddenly one day; as in Chinese folk religion, burning items is believed to be the way to transfer them to the other world. 'The smartphone carries all my love,' she explains ([Fig. 4.2](#)). The smartphone not only carries Dan's love, but it also reveals the caring of Dan's friends. She has her WeChat step counter on constantly, and would regularly check her step count ranking among friends.<sup>42</sup> Once Dan switched off the WeChat step counter by mistake. On the very same day she got messages from two friends asking whether everything was OK. Dan was very touched to learn that her friends immediately noted her absence from the step count ranking, showing that they cared about her dearly. According to Dan, one of her friends said,



**Figure 4.2** Watch the video of Dan’s story ‘It carries all my love’ at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfh2Hds-i2g&list=PLm6rBY2z\\_0\\_i8stNDQkLegHcJJ1ZoU7JU&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfh2Hds-i2g&list=PLm6rBY2z_0_i8stNDQkLegHcJJ1ZoU7JU&index=2).

Every day, it is reassuring to see all my friends are making ‘steps’, you know. Even though I won’t see you in person all the time, I know you are taking care of yourself.

However, not everyone would totally welcome such close attention from friends. For example, 59-year-old Lincheng caught one of his previous classmates telling white lies about her WeChat step count. This friend recently moved abroad to join her son’s family in order to take care of her grandson. In the WeChat group of previous classmates, this friend told others, including Lincheng, that she enjoyed her life abroad and had visited many places. However, he found that her WeChat step counter usually shows less than 300 steps per day. ‘How can you have a happy and active life with so few steps a day?’ Lincheng remarks. In the end he did not expose her white lie. Instead, he taught her how to switch off WeChat step counting so that nobody would know that she moved so little. ‘That is to save her *mianzi* (face),’ Lincheng explained.

It is not unusual to see people concerned about the social consequences of WeChat step counting. Once a person switches on the step counting function on WeChat, all of the person’s WeChat contacts have access to the person’s daily step data. In most cases, it is perceived positively: people regard such transparent and competitive design as motivating others to do more exercise and impress their social contacts

with a high position on the step ranking list. 'Or at least you don't want to lose face by making very few steps,' as one research participant observed. In addition, checking on each other's health is appreciated as a common way of expressing care, especially among older people. WeChat step counting, which also allows people to click 'like' on others' step counting results, provides an easy way to maintain a caring relationship with a great number of social contacts. However, as shown in the case of Lincheng's friend, the open access to personal data may go wrong in various situations. The intense attention from WeChat contacts can be interpreted as affective caring, but in other situations it would be perceived as intrusive monitoring. As mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), the dual implication of the concept '*guan*' alludes to the blurring boundary between 'care' and 'surveillance' among WeChat contacts.

Besides maintaining pre-existing social relations, such as kinship and friendship on WeChat, the other major *guanxi* practice on WeChat involves developing new friends online. Dihua, a retired factory manager aged 65, provides a typical day of WeChat group use. For example, take a normal day in May 2019. After exchanging morning greetings in various WeChat groups, Dihua's WeChat groups traffic reaches its second peak around 9 a.m. when most of her peers, including herself, have dropped their grandchildren at school and have finished housekeeping. Throughout the day, within the WeChat group of classmates of the folk musical instrument course at the local 'Senior Citizen University' that Dihua set up one year ago, she receives more than 50 messages, among them short videos and WeChat stickers. Dihua also constantly praises (by sending various WeChat stickers) photos posted in the WeChat group of amateur photographers, which has 229 members.

From time to time, Dihua checks new messages in another WeChat group about stock market investment, saving some articles as 'WeChat favourites' for later reading and sharing. In the afternoon Dihua's attention is drawn to a rather urgent 'family meeting' in a WeChat group of her four siblings. The meeting is about hiring a live-in care worker for her 90-year-old mother and how much money each household should contribute. Audio messages and multiple screenshots of WeChat conversations about various care workers are exchanged back and forth in the group.

At dinner time Dihua takes a few photos of her cooking and her grandson having dinner, then sends them to the smaller family WeChat group, which contains only her husband and their daughter's nuclear family. In the evening she talks to her good friends in their WeChat group about her problem of getting a care worker for her mother. After that she has a final round of group 'patrolling', especially in two groups where

she is the group founder, so-called ‘*qunzhu*’. Swiping up-and-down her smartphone screen slowly, Dihua carefully reads through hundreds of messages exchanged during the day within the groups to see if there are any interesting or important messages that have escaped her attention or whether there are any problems that might require immediate intervention or mediation. Referring to her ‘friends from WeChat groups’, Dihua says:

I may not know some of them in person, but we are somehow connected... They definitely provide me with a lot of ‘positive energy’ (*zheng nengliang*).

In pursuing harmonious *guanxi* practice among WeChat contacts, a new term, ‘WeChat ethic’ (*wei de*) became commonly known among older people. A few research participants shared articles about WeChat ethics on WeChat (Fig. 4.3), where the social norms of ethical WeChat use were listed. Even though different articles vary a bit there are a few common points that most of the research participants agree on. These include: 1) Don’t post more than 10 times a day, not only on one’s own WeChat profiles but also on WeChat groups; 2) Like others when you get ‘liked’, to ‘like’ reciprocally is important; 3) In posting group photos, one should retouch all the figures on the photo rather than only the image of oneself; 4) If one receives a ‘red envelope’<sup>43</sup> with cash in the WeChat group, then from time to time one should also send a red envelope with cash to others in return; 5) Don’t add people to the WeChat group without consulting the group and the person in advance, or without making introductions



**Figure 4.3** Screenshots of the article about WeChat ethics shared on people’s WeChat profiles. The woman on the video is saying: ‘WeChat ethics are actually very important’. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

afterwards; 6) Don't post a screenshot of a private WeChat conversation without consulting the person involved and post it with personal details blurred; 7) Don't audio or video call people without notice. And so on. It is clear that most of the dos and don'ts are to achieve reciprocity and to take care of each other's *mianzi* (face). In addition, attention has been paid to the issue of privacy as private conversations can be recorded and circulated easily on WeChat.

Here is an example of how people skilfully solve a problem in a WeChat group according to WeChat ethics. In the *ForeverGood* community, a group of neighbours, all in their seventies, held a dinner together to say goodbye to Nana, a community social worker. After the dinner Nana set up a WeChat group to share photos taken during the dinner. On the first day in the new WeChat neighbour group, things went well. People shared photos and said thank you again to Nana. From the third day, however, it has become obvious that some members are more active than others. For example, Mr Shi, aged 72, shared more than 20 photos he took to the group every day plus various funny short videos. In the beginning everybody behaved very politely (*ke qi*) to him, and kept saying: 'Oh, nice photos', 'thanks for sharing', etc., or emoji sticks expressing a similar compliment. By the fifth day there were far fewer responses from the group to the bombardment of photos from Mr Shi.

Finally, a week later, one of the neighbours contacted Nana privately (via one-to-one WeChat messaging), asking her to dissolve the group for the sake of harmony among neighbours. He explained that, before the WeChat group was set up, these neighbours lived in different buildings and always kept a nice distance. For 50 years they said hello to each other and sometimes nodded at one another. Then, all of a sudden, the WeChat group drew everybody too close to each other. People suddenly realised that Mr Shi the quiet person was in fact a passionate person online, and very willing to share his life. As neighbours, people are not supposed to ignore other; therefore for the sake of Mr Shi's face (*mianzi*), everybody felt under moral pressure to respond to his postings in the group. However, Mr Shi's postings were too frequent, to the extent that nobody could afford the time to look at them, resulting in online disturbance of the previous balance between neighbours. The best solution was thus to ask Nana, the leaving 'outsider', to dissolve the group and so avoid anybody losing face. As one neighbour explained,

We will still remain as neighbours the rest of my life ... We will always bump into each other ... and we'd better remain in a good harmony.

The term 'scalable sociality' proposed by 'Why We Post', the anthropological study on the global social media use,<sup>44</sup> provides a useful framework to understand how 'social media has colonised the space of group sociality between the private and the public. In so doing it has created scales, including the size of the group and the degree of privacy'.<sup>45</sup> WeChat holds a full scale of *guanxi* practices in people's lives. The scalable *guanxi* facilitated by WeChat allows people to tailor their social connection without 'losing face'; or to explore new friendships based on the same hobbies.

In particular, WeChat groups foster potential friendships among group members who did not know one another before. In 2014, when WeChat started to gain popularity across all age groups in urban China, the average size of WeChat groups used by people in Shanghai<sup>46</sup> was rather small, mainly covering the family, close friends and essential, work-related ties. However, a few years later, during this fieldwork, the size of WeChat groups in which research participants regularly participate varies greatly. Larger WeChat groups have become much more common in people's daily lives, even though sometimes people themselves have failed to recognise such change.

In daily conversation, older people frequently mentioned 'my friends from WeChat groups' (*qun li de pengyou*) as a common resource for gaining information and social networks. Curiously, 'friends from WeChat groups' are different from 'WeChat friends'. The latter refers to personal social media contacts with whom one can have a one-to-one conversation on WeChat; the former describes those contacts that exist in various WeChat groups, with whom one obtains a certain degree of connection within the groups, but who are not necessarily direct WeChat contacts. Such a specific social category, along with its growing significance in social life, provides us with an opportunity to investigate the evolving friendship practice online, and to rethink the very concept and practice of friendship in post-reform China.

## Friends from WeChat groups

The reason WeChat groups have become one of the major places where older people make new friends derives from a few factors. First, after retirement, people's social life tends to shrink and, as noted in fieldwork, it is common for older people in Shanghai to feel 'out of place' in the busy city life. In this situation, online space plays an even more important role in people's social life. Second, in practice, the WeChat group serves as an 'incubator'; it provides a relatively friendly field in which potential

friendships are allowed to grow. Thirdly, the WeChat group works as a friendship ‘scalable threshold’ where people have the perceived control of friendship development via privacy settings.

Among 52 research participants (30 of whom were female and 22 male) aged between 45 and 75 who self-counted their WeChat groups and received in-depth smartphone interviews in 2019, the average number of WeChat groups that individuals joined was about 11; the total amount of WeChat groups ranged from 4 to 69. In practice, the overlap between ‘friends from WeChat groups’ and ‘WeChat friends’ is even smaller than estimated by some of the research participants themselves. For example, Zihui’s husband Jiang claimed that he knew most people with whom he interacted on WeChat. Yet when he showed me his WeChat groups, it turned out that he had been active in six WeChat groups with about 450 different online contacts (each group has about 60 to 200 group members), but could only recognise less than 10 per cent of them.

WeChat groups have become more and more common among older people. In addition, in larger WeChat groups, it is common that people only know a considerably smaller proportion of contacts within the groups. For example Tang, a retired teacher aged 66, regards WeChat as the place to make new friends after retirement. With reference to making friends, Tang remarked,

Unlike young kids for whom making friends is a common thing, our older people feel reluctant to make friends. We have been used to having only a few old friends for a long time and new friends is somehow strange at the later stage of life – plus, we don’t have many opportunities to make new friends after retirement and we may have lost the capability for making new friends due to the lack of practice... WeChat is the only place nowadays I get to know new people.

As Tang said, it is common to see older people feeling making new friends is a challenge, especially after retirement when ‘the centre of life is supposed to return to home’, as another research participant put it. In practice, WeChat is deployed in many ways to maintain friendships as well as make new friends. Here we will mainly focus on friend making.

The scalable sociality facilitated by the WeChat groups can foster potential friendships among group members previously unknown to one another. It is common that WeChat groups are set up for specific activities and events for the convenience of circulating information. Often these groups are rather short-lived, as all the group participants become silent once the group has served its original purposes. Short-lived as these



groups were, however, they did serve another major function: providing a portal to group members' personal WeChat accounts to which members can send a friend request. In some cases, the main reason for setting up WeChat groups is to avoid the possible embarrassment of asking for connecting as WeChat friends in person.

Occasionally, these groups would remain active for a long time. For example, one research participant once organised a trip to a historical town with a couple of her friends and friends of her former classmate. She set up a WeChat group called 'town group' for sharing details of tickets, hotel bookings, real-time location and photos. During the trip, the group of six got along well; they decided to meet up regularly back in Shanghai and to have more trips together. The WeChat group name was significantly changed from 'town group' to 'More journeys to go'.

Unlike WhatsApp, in WeChat two persons without mutual confirmation of connection cannot have a 'one-to-one' conversation. In addition, to a greater extent than WhatsApp, WeChat also functions as the major social media profile such as Facebook plus Instagram. That is to say, being a WeChat contact grants access not only to private communication but also to a series of private content that people post on social media profiles. In practice, given the extent of the self-exposure on WeChat, becoming personal WeChat friends (contacts) has become widely regarded as the endorsement of meaningful social connection. WeChat users can tailor the privacy setting to block selected WeChat friends from viewing profile content. In practice, however, unless the contacts are clearly instrumental, it is regarded as rude to impose visiting limits on WeChat friends among older people.<sup>47</sup>

In such a context, the 'friends from WeChat group', which lies between strangers and WeChat friends, has a unique advantage in its flexibility when dealing with new contacts. On the one hand, within a WeChat group, the opportunity to send friend requests is in most cases<sup>48</sup> always available; on the other hand, in many cases, there is no explicit social expectation of adding one another's WeChat friends immediately. People can therefore take their time to observe group members' interaction and performance within the group before deciding whether it is worth getting to know the person as a new friend.

Tang made new friends from various WeChat groups. For example, there was once a discussion about a specific piece of Qing dynasty furniture in a group about Chinese history; to Tang's surprise, a few group members shared some interesting posts and made insightful comments. As Tang recalls, 'I immediately sent friend requests to two of them after reading their comments, and they both confirmed my requests very soon'.

Tang later looked through the WeChat profiles of these two new friends, only to discover that one had even worked in the same ‘production team’ during the ‘sent down’ period. He explained,

He [the new friend] joined the same production team the year I left, so we didn’t overlap and missed the opportunity to become friends about 50 years ago. Thanks to the WeChat group, we didn’t miss the second chance!

Like Tang, many research participants made new friends ‘naturally’ out of large WeChat groups. However, not everyone is good at it. Lao Meng, a former laid-off factory worker aged 65, is an example. In summer 2018, as usual, Lao Meng posted his new photographs on the group called ‘Shanghai photographer club’ – a WeChat group of almost 400 amateur photographers, mainly retired men. Some new group members suggested that Lao Meng should not overuse filters. However, a discussion on aesthetics and technique quickly turned into personal attacks, causing both sides to feel they ‘lost face’ – a significant and unusual breaking of the *guanxi* ethics. The reason why Lao Meng was kicked out of the group by the group administrator was because of his short temper, revealed in his reaction to the suggestions. He showed his distress in a phone call to the co-founder of the WeChat group, claiming that ‘It has been 20 days that I haven’t been able to sleep at night – ever since I was kicked out of the group’. His wife agreed, grabbing his smartphone, and exclaimed,

You must do something for my old man – not only him, but our whole family’s life too has been upside down just because of this... If you can do nothing, I will call the police!

On the 24th day after Lao Meng was kicked out of the club WeChat group, following several mediations, he was finally re-admitted to the group. ‘I am so happy to come back to my organisation!’ he exclaimed. For the older Chinese generation, ‘organisation’ (*zuzhi*) is automatically associated with a series of communist ideologies. It is very common to hear people say: ‘I finally found my *zuzhi*’.<sup>49</sup>

People like us have such a strong mental scar of being dumped by the organisation (*bei zu zhi pao qi*). In the old days being dumped by the organisation means you will lose everything, security, social status, a place to live, family members... everything! You will become the enemy of the whole of society – everyone has the right to tread on you.

Mr Hu, the founder of the WeChat group, who was also born in the 1950s, explained why Lao Meng became so anxious when he was kicked out, as he had taken the WeChat group as his *zuzhi* online. Lao Meng immediately put an equation between such action and his painful memory of being laid off from the factory, another experience of ‘being dumped by the organisation’. Regardless of what kind of experience individuals have had about *danwei* in their past, such a socialist collectivism structure has embedded itself deeply in older people’s mindset – to the degree that they can naturally associate a WeChat group with *zuzhi*. For Lao Meng, the WeChat group not only means a platform to maintain and develop social relations, but also a collective place where people gain a sense of security and belonging.

Meanwhile, for Mr Hu, the role of the founder of a couple of WeChat groups (so-called *qunzhu*) means heavy responsibility of ‘*guan*’ (care and surveillance). As Mr Hu observed, ‘In those groups that I set up, I am taking a role similar to the head of the family (*jia zhang*)’. The role of *qunzhu*, literally meaning the ‘head of the group’ or ‘group owner’, not only reflects the WeChat group hierarchy (where *qunzhu* is usually regarded as the ‘opinion leader’ therein) but also has its legal responsibility according to the regulation of cyberspace in mainland China. In 2017, as part of the Party-state’s effort to strengthen cyber governance and expand the legal framework for control over digital networks and information, the national ‘management rules of internet group services’ was issued. It required real identity registration for all the internet users and the establishment of credit ratings for internet chat groups; it also made internet group owners liable for violations.<sup>50</sup>

To put it simply, ‘the person who sets up the group is the person who takes responsibility and deals with consequences’ (*shui jian qun shui fu ze*).<sup>51</sup> Because the WeChat group *qunzhu* needs to take legal responsibility for any illegal speech and misinformation posted and circulated within the WeChat group in question, regardless of whether he or she is directly involved in posting such information or not, the *qunzhu* feels obliged to ensure that no one within the group would cross any red line during the group communication.

In the logic of groups, any individual mistake is regarded as a collective mistake, and therefore harms the reputation and the fortune of the group. Such logic of WeChat group management is in line with the family-orientated governance in traditional Chinese society. Here the head of the family on the one hand has the power to influence other family members, but on the other takes more responsibility than other family members for the collective mistakes and is supposed to take punishment from the higher-level authority, along with the troublemaker within the family.

Among large-scale WeChat groups, it is common to see *qunzhu* initiate certain in-group regulations. Such regulation/agreement is usually in the form of written ‘group notification’ (*qun gonggao*), which requires each member to ‘sign’ (by clicking on the group notification and clicking the bottom ‘complete’ to confirm consensus). For example, during the COVID lockdown, in the WeChat group for foodies in Shanghai, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the founder of the group (*qunzhu*) Mr Guo had posted more than 50 instances of group notifications to regulate members’ postings within the group (Fig. 4. 4).

According to Mr Guo, a new round of group notifications is usually triggered by admitting new members to the group or spotting inappropriate posting behaviour or content. Typical ‘inappropriate’ posts include talking about topics that have nothing to do with food or posting too many photos at one go, behaviour known as ‘occupying others’ screen’ (*shua ping*). Mr Guo remarks,

Theoretically speaking, my group is a safe one as I made it very clear that we are not going to touch politics or anything sensitive. We are just a bunch of local foodies who want to enjoy life.



**Figure 4.4** Screenshot of a round of group notification signing within a WeChat food lovers’ group in Shanghai with 286 members. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

The reason Mr Guo discouraged the group members from further discussing COVID-19 was also that, as he revealed,

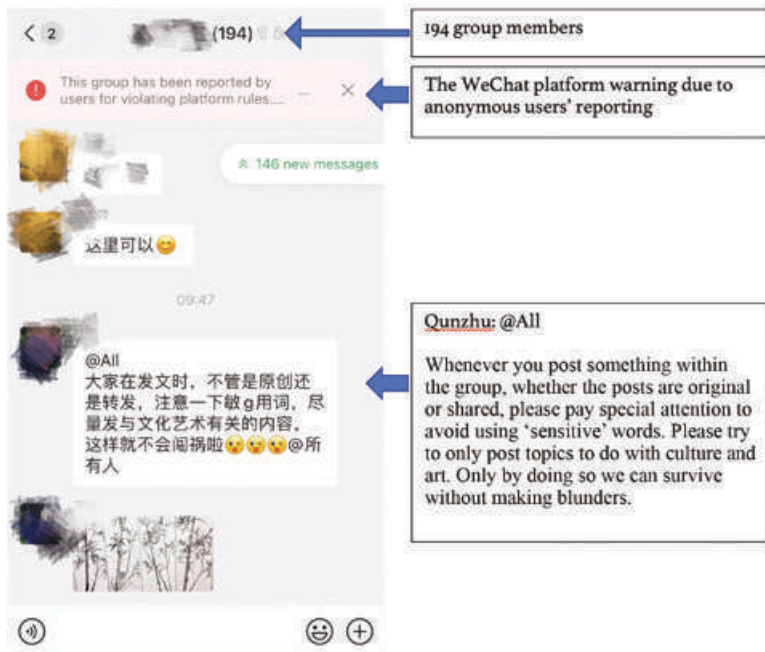
It [the discussion about COVID-19] is too close to politics. People up there are allergic to so-called rumours about COVID-19. One bad post will kill the group.

Mr Guo's concern about group security is typical among people responsible for large-scale WeChat groups. However, for some, such concern is more real than 'theoretically speaking'. Luwei's 'WeChat group warning' is an example. In 2018, as mentioned above, Luwei, the retired Peking Opera singer, set up the WeChat group with the group name 'Luwei and her friends'. To this she added all of her acquaintances from the fields of culture and art. The group snowballed from its original 35 members to nowadays almost 200, as Luwei encouraged group members to add their friends who are interested in art. To her great surprise, an official warning from the WeChat platform appeared one day on the top of the group chatting. It claimed that 'this group has been reported by users for violating platform rules' (Fig. 4.5).

Everyone in the group could see the warning and anxiety spread quickly: on the same day as the official warning was posted, more than 10 members quit the group, while others were fretting about the possible consequences. WeChat users are able to report any articles published by a WeChat public account or in any WeChat groups for reasons such as 'fraud', 'crime and illegal activities', 'spreading rumours', etc. The consensus was there must be someone in the group who had reported it, as recently there had been a brief discussion about China's widening gap between rich and poor and how many Party officials are super-rich. The warning the group received was the first-step reaction from the WeChat platform and is also the lightest 'punishment', mainly issued to remind the founder of the WeChat group (*qunzhu*) to rectify posts in the group. After the panic, Luwei cleaned most of the posts in the group and posted a notification to all members that said,

Whenever you post something within the group, whether the posts are original or shared, please pay special attention to avoid using 'sensitive' words. Please try only to post topics to do with culture and art. Only by doing so, we can survive without making blunders. (Fig. 4.5)

Luwei posted the notification with great caution, to the degree that she mentioned the word 'sensitive' (*min gan*) implicitly with the first Chinese



**Figure 4.5** Screenshot of the WeChat group set up by Luwei where she sent the group notification warning about using sensitive words. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

character *min* plus the starting letter (*g*) of the second character *gan*. This euphemistic way of speaking online is commonly used by the Chinese to avoid robotic ‘key word’ censorship. A few days later, to Luwei’s great relief, the official warning disappeared and her personal WeChat account remained functional, as did the WeChat group. Luwei recalls,

I was very naïve as I trusted my friends’ judgement and I was more than happy to welcome new friends with a common interest in my group... By the look of it, there must be some ‘fake friends’ in the group whose job is to monitor us.

What Luwei experienced illustrates that the all-encompassing control of cyberspace in China can easily reach grassroots level. Like instances offline, the care and surveillance will reach each household via the widespread and deep-rooted Residents’ Committees. It also showcases how ordinary people react to such surveillance. Among older people there is no discussion of whether such surveillance is legal/necessary; all the

effort has been directed towards co-existing with the existing regulations practically, from 'not touching politics' to some regular content 'rectification' in the group.

Self-censorship is more diligently conducted in large-scale WeChat groups, as the perceived chance that group members will report these groups is much higher than in small or medium-scale groups where people know each other personally and have extra social connections. The potential risk that the 'friends from the WeChat group' impose upon people seems to bear some similarities to friendship in general during Mao's time when

Discussions in small groups in the school, neighbourhood or place of work may be used as information... The risks of friendship are thus almost omnipresent... It is the very withholding of information from friends which changes the nature of friendship.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, the discussion of friendship on WeChat groups also needs a reflective discussion of the very concept of 'friendship' per se in the context of Chinese social relations. Kinship-orientated Chinese society traditionally sees non-kinship ties as less significant compared to the three closest relationships (*san gang*): the ties between father and son, emperor and official, and husband and wife.<sup>53</sup> Non-kinship ties were sought as an extension of familial forms of support when kinship support was not sufficient.<sup>54</sup>

The term state (*guo jia*) in Chinese literally means 'state-family'. The term implies that the state is modelled on the principles of kinship organisation and the hierarchical and obligatory bonds of mutual devotion between 'father-son', as well as 'ruler and ministers', form the web of Confucian social relationships.<sup>55</sup> Friendship in Chinese society, being neither a family bond nor a state bond, and with the potential to be non-hierarchical, is viewed by Confucian writers as subversive. Friendship was therefore constructed as the social bond whose function was the service of the other bonds: a good friend should make the person a better son, brother or official.<sup>56</sup>

Meanwhile, anthropological research in China also points out that, even though 'friendship' occupies a rather marginal position in Confucian moral orthodoxy, in practice a specific strategy of fictive/ritual kinship, such as 'same-year siblingship', has been deployed to facilitate the development of friendship between same-sex persons of the same age/generation.<sup>57</sup> That is to say, friendship always takes an important role in people's social lives, even though in many cases it is 'disguised' as kinship.

Furthermore, the concept and practice of friendship among this older generation in China require specific consideration of this cohort's life experience. For them such experience has been charged with significant social transformations, including the redefinition of a variety of social relations, during the communist revolutions in modern China. Since 1949 the Party-state had efficiently replaced the norms of 'friendship' with communist 'comradeship' in people's interpersonal interaction outside of kinship ties.<sup>58</sup> The new morality of communist 'comradeship' requires people not to distinguish between people on the basis of personal preference, but to 'help' each other to fall in line and do what is expected of him/her in the communist regime. The underlying logic of comradeship has also been that one should not have a special bonding with a certain person as that would interfere with the obligations to other comrades. A common sense of friendship (special relationship between two persons) could thus be considered suspect and even illegitimate during the revolutionary time. Furthermore, the risks of friendship are almost omnipresent, varying from serious accusations during the political struggle to leaked personal conversations within small groups.<sup>59</sup>

Besides the weakening of 'friendships' in the communist regime, kinship organisation was also significantly weakened. In traditional Chinese society, the family not only functioned as the unit of production, reproduction, consumption and socialisation, but also represented religious significance through pervasive ancestor worship.<sup>60</sup> In the Confucian view, people did not establish themselves until the age of 30, and there were very few alternative roles that young people could possibly take outside the family.<sup>61</sup> People who passed through their youth after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 have had a radically different relationship with the Party-state – one in which the Party had a direct control over urban youth and much of the family's traditional power and influence had been shifted to the Party.<sup>62</sup>

Older people in China have a considerable experience of life deeply embedded in socialist communities. In these regional relationships ('sent-down youth') and work-related relationships (comrades and colleagues) took up the gap left by the somehow 'forced' absence of kinship during the socialist revolution. Meanwhile, they also have life-long experience of socialist *zuzhi* and experienced cautiousness about general friendship in their early lives. It is therefore understandable that older people tend to view friendship through the lens of its political



implications, even though they embraced the possibilities of making friends and the very experience of friendship via WeChat groups simultaneously. The ‘friends from WeChat groups’ finds its niche in people’s social lives not only because of the novel form of friend-making, which ideally fits into the gap in people’s social lives after retirement, but also the personal longing for a collective body, such as previous ‘*zuzhi*’, has been wired into the habitus of how older people in China experience the relationship between individuals and society. The increasing significance of ‘friends from WeChat groups’ provides a particular perspective for understanding the evolving concept and practice of friendship in a society whose Confucian and communist legacies complement the social possibilities facilitated by the digital.

## Conclusion

Confucianism is not a religion, but it does play a religious role in Chinese life and society.<sup>63</sup> The discussion of the so-called ‘WeChat ethics’ (*weide*) among ordinary Chinese showcases how the latest digital practice married to Confucian ethics in dealing with social relations. Establishing a harmonious secular world is the basic theoretical and practical question that Confucians must address.<sup>64</sup> A Confucian reading of social relations that focuses on social life ‘here and now’ remains popular in China today; it takes a digital form because of the proliferation of the smartphone, especially the use of WeChat, among older people. Use of the smartphone is deeply embedded in older people’s *guanxi* practice, both online and offline. Daily interaction on WeChat messaging and WeChat profiles is one of the most significant parts of social life, or *guanxi* making, among Chinese people.

From constant negotiation of what ‘WeChat friends’ could mean in various living *guanxi* scenarios to the quickly emerging social norms about ‘WeChat ethics’ among people, then to the particular category of ‘friends from WeChat groups’, we see how the smartphone and WeChat have become the social nexus around which ordinary Chinese arrange their daily social relations and cultivate *guanxi* capital in interpersonal interaction. Only by understanding the older generation’s life trajectories and experiences during the communist revolutionary time, as well as the economic reform that followed, can we possibly appreciate why WeChat is perceived and applied in specific, particular ways in social life by the older generation in Shanghai.

## Notes

1. Whether Confucianism is a religion remains a highly debated question in academia. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Emile Durkheim proposes the definition of religion as 'a moral community' – in which sense Confucianism may be considered a religion. Similarly, in *The Religion of China* (1920), Max Weber also regards Confucianism as the major Chinese religion. However, this debate is not the focus of this study. Please see Na, C. 2016; Sun, A. 2013.
2. Tu, W. 1993.
3. The 'five pairs of social roles' (*wu lun*) is essential in Confucianism. The pairs consist of: 1) 'Ruler and ruled' (*jun chen*), 2) 'father and son' (*fu zi*), 3) 'husband and wife' (*fu qi*), 4) 'brother and brother' (*xiong di*) and 5) 'friend and friend' (*peng you*). Hierarchy is the main feature of the first four pairs of relations, as it is emphasised that the ruler should be benevolent to the ruled who in turn will be loyal to the ruler; the loving father/husband should be respected by his faithful son and obedient wife; similarly, the elder brother is supposed to love the younger brother who in turns pay respect to the elder; meanwhile the friend-friend relation is supposed to follow the 'brother-brother' relation, with the younger deferring to show respect to the older. See Bian, Y. 2019, 10–11.
4. The Chinese word 'religion' (*zongjiao*) was imported to China at the turn of the twentieth century from a Japanese neologism crafted by Japan's interaction with the West. *Zongjiao* is used to express Western notions of religion that had not previously existed in Chinese discourse. See Goossaert, V. 2011.
5. In Confucianism, 'tian' (sky, heaven) is an abstract concept referring to the mighty power. However *tian* is not a humanised and supernatural deity like God in Christianity, Buddhas in Buddhism or Allah in Islam. See Bell, D. A. 2009.
6. Shuming, L. 1963.
7. King, A. Y. 2018, 1–18.
8. Bian, Y. 2019.
9. Bell, D. A. 2009.
10. Ibid.
11. Wu, J. 2019.
12. Geis, J. P. and B. Holt 2009.
13. The Confucius Institutes (CI) are sponsored by the Chinese government and overseen by the host institutes. As of 2019, there are 530 CI worldwide.
14. Pan, S. 2013; Hubbert, J. 2014.
15. Richard, W. 2008.
16. Bell, D. A. 2009.
17. Ibid.
18. Yu's interpretation of Confucianism was enthusiastically embraced by the general audience, even though she encountered severe criticism from scholars of Confucianism.
19. Zhang, Y. 2014.
20. Wu, J. 2019.
21. The relationship between the official promotion of filial piety and enhanced eldercare is complicated. However, this is not the focus of this chapter. For further reading please also see Feng, Z. 2017; Cheung, J. C. and A. Y. Kwan 2012.
22. Nie, Jing-Bao. 2016.
23. Wu, J. 2019.
24. Billioud, S. and J. Thoraval 2015.
25. As we will see in Chapter 7, the very logic of justifying the Cultural Revolution as well as the personal cult of Mao echoed with the core virtue of 'self-reform' and 'loyalty to the emperor' in Confucianism.
26. Qi, X. 2013.
27. Parnell, M. 2005.
28. Bian, Y. 2019.
29. Kipnis, A. 1997.
30. Noonan, J. 1984, 3.
31. Lin, N. 2001.
32. See Fei, X. 1992.
33. Lin, N. 2001.

34. Talking about senior family members' health is a common and safe topic in Shanghai.
35. Luo, Y. 2008.
36. Li, L. 2011.
37. Yang, M. 2002.
38. Although bribery occurs in many societies, the deployment of dedicated ritual performance to validate bribery morally seems to be a particular cultural phenomenon in China. The issue of bribery, though not a focus of this chapter, is an important aspect of *guanxi* practice. Interested readers please see Ruan, J. 2019; Ruan, J. 2021; Steidlmeier, P. 1999.
39. The relationship between performance and life lies in the core of the 'dramaturgical analysis' analysed by social anthropologist Erving Goffman. He compares social interaction to theatrical performance and the 'presenting of self' in daily life to individual performance. The social actors, according to Goffman, will assume a role with fixed costume and props, stand on the pre-existing front and play for a specific audience. See Goffman, E. 1956.
40. Hwang, Kwang-kuo 1987.
41. Unless the users block specific contacts in particular, or set the privacy setting to only show a certain period of the WeChat profile's content.
42. WeChat not only counts steps, but also releases a daily ranking of steps among all the WeChat contacts who applied step counting.
43. A WeChat function that allows users to send a small amount of cash to WeChat contacts. See details in [Appendix 2](#).
44. From 2012–17, the author's ethnographic research about the use of social media in industrial China was part of the global comparative project Why We Post. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post/> (accessed 20 August 2021).
45. Miller, D. et al. 2016, x.
46. In addition to the 15-month period of fieldwork in a factory town in southeast China, the author also did fieldwork for one month (July 2014) in Shanghai, focused upon people's use of WeChat. See Wang, X. 2016, 24.
47. Among younger people who have a large, work-related network, sometimes blocking work-related contacts from viewing profiles is acceptable. However, people would still prefer not to post private things on WeChat at all, or to tailor each posting's individual privacy setting, rather than block their WeChat contacts from viewing private content on WeChat. The latter practice is always associated with unwelcoming attitudes and cause loss of face. It can therefore do harm to work/business-related relationships which are also guided by *guanxi* rules.
48. The privacy setting allows users to switch off 'add a friend via WeChat groups', which means that nobody can send a friend request through the WeChat group. However, among older research participants it is very uncommon to see people apply this privacy setting.
49. Such common expressions originally come from scenarios such as an underground Communist Party member who finally got in touch with the Party branch or suffering peasants who got to know the Communist Party and wanted to join it. Nowadays, this expression has adopted some joking element when used among the younger generation. When young people use this, it usually suggests that they feel a strong connection with the group of people they meet, but has no direct association with the Communist Party.
50. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/shrinking-anonymity-chinese-cyberspace> (accessed 20 August 2021).
51. [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-09/07/content\\_5223348.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-09/07/content_5223348.htm) (in Chinese) (accessed 20 August 2021)
52. Vogel, E. F. 1965.
53. Li, Y., J. Du and S. Van de Bunt 2016.
54. Bell, D. 2000.
55. Kutcher, N. 2000.
56. Ibid.
57. Santos, G. D. 2008.
58. Vogel, E. F. 1965.
59. Ibid.
60. Lang, O. 1946.
61. Gold, T. B. 1985.
62. See Yang, C. K. 1965; Levy, M. 1949.
63. Tang, Z. 1995.
64. King, A. 2018, 1–18.

# 5

## Crafting the smartphone

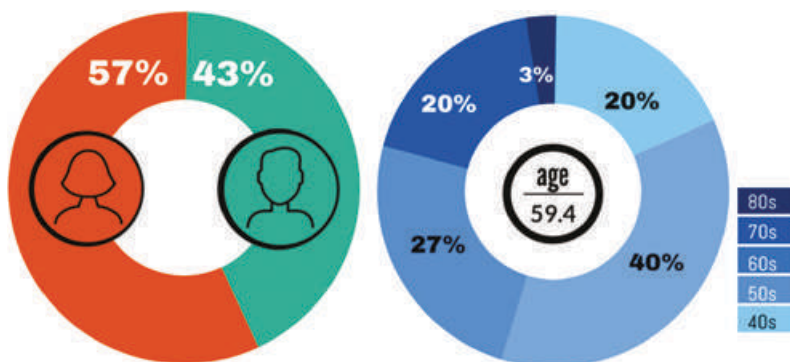
### Introduction

Chapter 3 illustrated how ordinary older people engage with smartphones in daily life and how an emerging digital routine (from perpetual recording to online shopping) has become an essential part of everyday life. Chapter 4 outlined the sophisticated management of social relations (*guanxi*) that occurs in daily life and explored the role the smartphone plays in this. Drawing on real-life scenarios of various smartphone app use, these chapters revealed how the use of apps is deeply embedded in everyday life and various social relations. The focus of this chapter moves to smartphone apps directly, with a systematic analysis of all the apps installed on participants' smartphones.

The first part of this chapter unpacks the smartphone by looking into the most popular smartphone apps. The second part moves on to discuss the 'social life' of apps. The smartphone is 'smart' not only because of the functions designed by its developers, but also through its myriad use in practice, as created by its users. Crafting of the smartphone constantly manifests itself in crafting on the visual material, especially in terms of daily documentation, interpersonal communication and self-presentation. Consequently a whole range of digital rituals have evolved through the smartphone's daily use.

### Unpack the smartphone: the most used apps

To understand real-life app use among older people, a systematic app survey ('app survey' hereafter) was conducted among 30 research participants (Chart 5.1) aged between 45 and 88. The participants had at least six months use of smartphones and the average time of using an individual smartphone was two years.



**Chart 5.1** Age and gender distribution of app analysis research participants. Infographics by Xinyuan Wang.



**Chart 5.2** The top 10 smartphone apps list. Infographics by Xinyuan Wang.

A particular pattern emerged in the app survey. It is relatively easy to see how popular a specific app is based on how frequently it presents (penetration rate). There are 24 apps in the top 10 list (Chart 5.2), as a number of apps have the same penetration rate. A brief introduction to the basic function of these 24 apps, as well as the method of app analysis, can be found in Appendix 1.

As shown on Chart 5.1, 14 of the 24 most used apps<sup>1</sup> belong to the established tech giants ‘BAT’<sup>2</sup> (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent) in China. In addition another major tech company, ByteDance,<sup>3</sup> whose rise has been relatively recently compared to BAT, is the developer of two popular

apps, 'Toutiao' and 'Douyin' (known as TikTok in its overseas version). The mere fact that more than half of the most popular apps belong to giant leading tech companies reflects the high concentration of a few digital companies that dominate people's use of apps, the most highly used modes of accessing the internet.<sup>4</sup>

The results of the app survey are not necessarily a comprehensive reflection of the general use of apps among older people. Besides the relatively small sample, the income and educational background of participants are higher than the average level. Second, the popular genre of apps may not be well reflected by the list. It is mainly based on individual apps because, in some cases, a typical genre consists of three to five similar and equally popular apps. For example, more than 50 per cent of participants have banking apps but, given the number of different banks that exist, none of the banking apps accounts for more than 15 per cent. Also, around 37 per cent of the participants (11 out of 30) have (early) education apps for their grandchildren; however, again because there are many such apps, the whole education genre is not reflected on the top 10 list.

WeChat is the predominant app that appears on every single smartphone screen. A more detailed introduction to the super app WeChat can be found in [Appendix 2](#). WeChat is an all-in-one app: it provides text and audio messaging, audio and video calls, location sharing, multimedia sharing and a payment service, as well as a wide range of functions from taxi-hailing to online shopping and more. The messaging function of WeChat is similar to WhatsApp and the social media profile resembles Facebook. Furthermore, the WeChat mini-program (*xiao cheng xu*),<sup>5</sup> a lightweight app that operates within the WeChat ecosystem, further entrenched the significant role WeChat plays in people's daily lives. The file size of the WeChat mini-program is no more than 2MB, which is only about one-tenth of the standalone apps.<sup>6</sup> The WeChat mini-program can be understood as an app within the super app WeChat: users do not need to install any other extra apps, as they can access these via the lightweight version (mini-program) within WeChat.

China has a total of 800 million internet users, of which 200 million are daily active users of the WeChat mini-program. WeChat has blossomed into a standalone universe with myriad services. As noted above, these span from public transport to hailing a taxi, selling second-hand goods to obtaining loans. With one million mini-programs that launched only two years ago, WeChat has grown into a massive ecology with half the size of the Apple App Store (2.1 million apps in 2018) that launched a decade ago.

Mini-programs are in fact transforming the digital landscape of how brands are marketed in China. Developers of all kinds rush to develop open-resource mini-programs as they covet WeChat's massive userbase.<sup>7</sup> WeChat mini-programs, the slimmer apps, do not always work for everything as the much smaller file size compromises certain features<sup>8</sup> which could undermine user experience. That is the reason why people would still install some necessary apps, even though one can gain access to the essential apps via WeChat. Among older people WeChat mini-programs are very popular. During festivals, it is very common to receive elaborate festival greetings in the form of cards or albums made by various mini-programs. Also among older people, mini-program games are one of the most common digital games. Short videos are often shared in the form of a mini-program.

The popularity of mini-programs among older people is partly due to the fact that they save the trouble of downloading and installing extra apps. According to the tutor of the smartphone course at the Senior Citizens' University (SCU) in Shanghai, installing apps has been one of the major obstacles that older people need to overcome in learning how to use smartphones. Also, unlike standalone apps that consume the smartphone memory once users install them, mini-programs only consume memory during actual use. The 'economic memory' aspect of mini-programs is regarded as one of its most welcomed features. A 2019 survey, based on 8,000 WeChat users and undertaken by Chinese research agency Kueclub and Tencent Research & Development,<sup>9</sup> shows that 'Don't want to download a standalone app' is the top reason (43 per cent) for users to opt to use mini-programs. The second reason is group coupons and the availability of discounts through mini-programs (40 per cent), and the third reason is ease of access (34 per cent): you simply click on the link sent and shared by WeChat contacts.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the use of email, the digital app closely associated with the PC era, is rather limited among the Chinese. Usually WeChat is the first choice, even in formal communication at the workplace. The most frequent use of email is for practical reasons such as online registration rather than interpersonal communication. A recent survey shows that WeChat, initially designed for more private communication, is also taking over workplaces across China. Nearly 90 per cent of 20,000 survey users see WeChat as their top choice for daily work communication. About 57 per cent of the surveyed professionals say their new contacts on WeChat are work-related.<sup>10</sup> Exchanging name cards has also become less and less common in China; instead, scanning each other's QR codes to connect on WeChat has become the norm for

a growing number of Chinese businesspeople. Office workers also share files through WeChat rather than by using emails.

The email app is even more scarce among older people. Most of them only engaged with digital communication long after the popularity of email had given way to the proliferation of smartphone-based apps in mainland China. Among the 'top 10 most used apps', there is not a single email app. The 'app survey' revealed that 17 per cent of participants have email apps on their smartphones, and the majority are aged between 40 and 50. For people aged over 55, they either checked email on a computer when necessary, had the email app as one of the pre-installed apps on their phone or never noticed the existence of such an app at all. In the fieldwork, only less than five per cent of research participants (aged from the fifties to the seventies),<sup>11</sup> had checked email in the past month. In the absence of the email, including email mailing lists, users such as Zihui engaged actively with various WeChat groups daily (see [Chapter 3](#)). WeChat groups play an indispensable role in interpersonal communication and wider social engagement, as well as in the circulation of information.

Overall, there is a fertile ground for media scholars to use the term 'super-sticky' to describe the intense relationship between users and this 'all-in-one' app. That is to say, there is almost no chance that users want (or 'are able') to leave this mega-platform once they are on it. It has been observed that

'Super-sticky' WeChat responds to users' needs and established ways of life in China, and in so doing, it also reshapes Chinese lifestyles on its mobile interface.<sup>12</sup>

It is not only the affordability of the app that glues people to 'super-sticky' WeChat. As the fieldwork witnesses, in many cases people started to use a particular app because of the influence of their social network. Below we investigate the social life of smartphone apps.

## The 'social life' of the smartphone apps

The general survey of the apps seems to conclude that 'age' matters more than 'gender' in terms of app usage. Regarding the number of apps in use, 'age' rather than 'gender' makes more difference. The average age of participants is 59.4, with that of female users being 59.3 and that of males 59.5. People in all age groups use 24.5 apps on average, with females





**Chart 5.3** The average number of apps in different age and gender groups. Infographics by Xinyuan Wang.

using 25 and males 23.7 (Chart 5.3). The older the age group, the fewer apps people use. However, such distribution is more likely only to reflect the experiences of this specific older generation, who have adopted smartphones in the later stage of their lives. The current trend does not suggest that the older people become, the fewer apps people use. For example, when people now in their forties become older, they will not necessarily use fewer apps; indeed, they may use more, having developed a higher dependence upon them. In contrast, people who were already in their seventies had far fewer opportunities and motivations to explore more apps or to see the necessity of many of them.

Within the same age group, the difference between men and women in terms of the average number of apps used is relatively small. In the case of participants aged in either their fifties and sixties, women tend to use slightly more apps than men. However, in the case of participants aged from 40 to 70 and above, men have more apps. Retirement makes some minor gender differences in the activity of app use. Before retirement, men in their forties seemed to have more work-related apps than women. Generally women retired earlier than men and in their fifties, according to the app survey, most of their newly installed apps are social- and lifestyle-related. It appears that after retirement women are more likely to explore more social and entertainment apps. In contrast, men in their last few years at work do not show much enthusiasm for accessing new apps, even work-related ones.

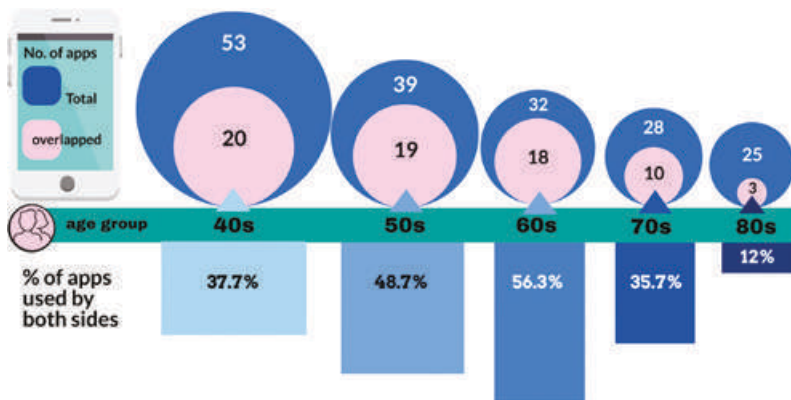
For example, 58-year-old Mr Huang is a chain supermarket middle-level manager due to retire very soon. Most of his subordinates are young people in their thirties and forties. He commented that ‘I don’t need to touch those work apps myself as that’s the job of my subordinates’. He thus sees no need to use some popular or even necessary work-related

apps in the workplace himself as he has already ‘indirectly’ used these apps through younger employees.

Move to age 70 and above, and we see when we compare women to men that the former are more likely to see themselves as ‘too old to be good at digital things’, as one female research participant in her seventies put it. It is important to note that for the generation born before the establishment of ‘New China’ (in 1949) men, in general, had more chances to receive longer and higher education than women did. The education of these men was not interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1967–77) as that of people in their fifties and sixties was. To some degree, the education level positively correlates with ‘digital confidence’ in age groups above 70.

Furthermore, the use of smartphone apps in many cases is not necessarily due to individual patterns of behaviour. There are also 12 couples<sup>13</sup> included in each age group (ranging from the forties to the eighties) in the app survey. The reason to include couples in the different age groups is to see the impact of conjugal relations on the use of apps. Through comparing the apps, it is clearly apparent how many and which apps are used by both sides, which we have called ‘overlapped’ apps. The total number of apps used by both sides will also be recorded.

As shown on [Chart 5.4](#), for couples in their forties the average number of apps both sides use in total is 53. Among them there are 20 apps installed on both sides’ smartphones, making the overlap rate 37.7 per cent. In the fifties age group, the total number of apps goes down to 39, but there are 19 overlapped apps (overlap rate 48.7 per cent). Counting the same way, from the sixties to the eighties, the overlapped



**Chart 5.4** The use of apps between couples. Infographics by Xinyuan Wang.

rate goes down further with the increase of age (56.3 per cent; 35.7 per cent; 12 per cent), as does the number of total and overlapped apps.

Such a data pattern makes more sense in the context of ethnography. Couples in their forties have more diverse app use – not surprising given their more extensive work and social networks which manifest themselves in the largest total number of apps as well as the largest number of overlapped apps. The average 20 overlapped apps speak more to the fact that there are a greater number of apps regarded as ‘necessary apps’ from both sides. For example, ‘Dianping’ app, the popular review and advice app which is not quite as common among people in their sixties and above, is regarded as essential; here are more chances for people in their forties to try out new restaurants or visit unfamiliar areas and they rely on this app to gain the latest local information.

The number of overlapped apps within couples in their fifties and sixties is 19 and 18 respectively. However, compared to the situation of couples in their forties, there are fewer overlapping apps which are functional (such as payments, trip information, tickets, etc.), but more entertainment apps (such as videos and games). In some cases it is because the couple retired (or retire in succession) and then spent more leisure time together, providing more opportunity for them to develop similar hobbies or entertainment styles. Also, in some cases, longer family time made the couples more likely to receive similar information, which will in turn influence their app choice.

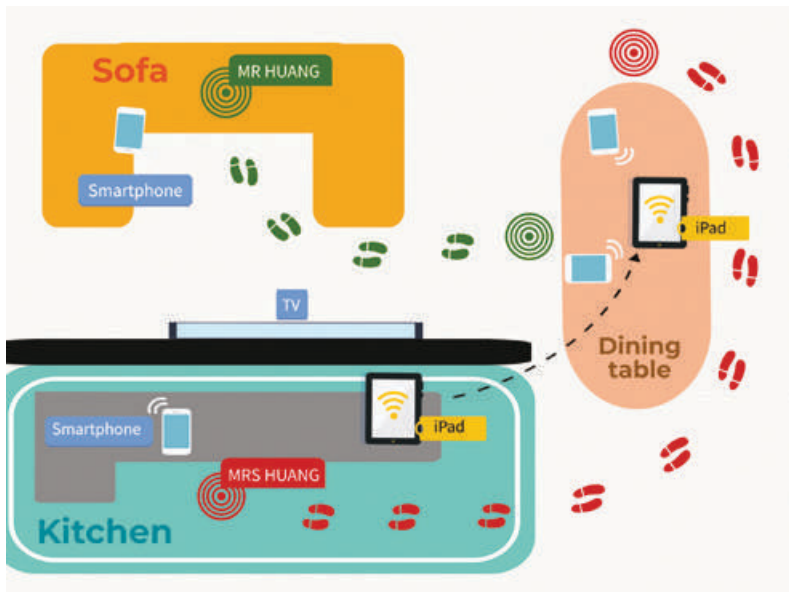
It looks like the rate of overlapped apps among couples in their seventies (35.7 per cent) is very close to the ones among couples in their forties (37.7 per cent). Purely by judging from the data, one may wonder if the relatively limited overlap rate in the seventies age group is also because of the different interests and needs – like couples in their forties. However, ethnography points to quite the opposite reason. The absolute number of overlapped apps (10), as well as total apps (28), are both much smaller than the forties (20; 53) which is because the couples in their seventies do not see the point of many apps.

Moreover, couples in their seventies have become much more dependent on each other. Such interdependency is reflected in a typical pattern of ‘collective’ app use. That is, the couples in their seventies are always together (being at home or outside), therefore once an app is installed on one smartphone device there is no need to have the same app installed on the second smartphone. For example, DiDi, the taxi-hailing app, is usually found on only one smartphone per couple, as one person is in charge of DiDi. ‘Taobao’ or ‘Pinduoduo’, the online shopping app, is usually only on the wife’s smartphone, as traditionally she is keener on shopping (in the

sense of participating in China's consumer culture). Similarly, couples in their eighties show greater interdependence. The inquiry concerning the use of apps among couples led us to an observation of the household 'living experience' of various apps. Let us have a look at a typical scene at dinner time.

Upon Mrs Huang's shouting from the kitchen 'Dinner is ready!', 68-year-old Mr Huang's eyes move away from the screen of his smartphone. He picks up the television remote control and switches to the 7 p.m. news. His eyes move back to the smartphone screen once he moves to his dinner seat (Fig. 5.1). His wife makes another attempt: 'Stop playing on your phone; eat before it gets cold'. He finally puts down the smartphone. The news on television is loud, so most of the time the couple 'listen' to the television. Today the news is about the flower exhibition in a new park in Shanghai. 'If the weather is good next week, we should go and have a look,' Mrs Huang suggests, picking up her smartphone to check the weather. 'You'd better check Gaode (a map app) first, the new park is quite far away,' replies Mr Huang.

Just then the iPad, resting on the kitchen surface, rings. 'It must be Xiaotao!' Mrs Huang exclaims in delight. She fetches the iPad and places



**Figure 5.1** (A view from above): Location of the digital device and the movements of Mrs Huang and Mr Huang at dinner time. Infographics by Xinyuan Wang and Georgiana Murariu.

it on the dining table. It is Xiaotao, their grandson living in Beijing. Six years ago their daughter moved to Beijing, where her husband works and the young couple's son Xiaotao was born. The young couple would visit Shanghai with their son every three months. The rest of the time, the WeChat video call is the primary way to keep connected or 'having meals together', as Mrs Huang once put it. Three years ago Mrs Huang's daughter gave her an iPad for video calls with a portable bigger screen.

Most of the time, during the video call, the iPad screen is directed to Mrs Huang with Mr Huang talking in the background. From time to time Mr Huang takes photos of Mrs Huang happily talking to the screen with Xiaotao and sends the photos to the family WeChat group. Even as they are talking Xiaotao's *nai nai* (the boy's grandmother on his father's side) responds to the photos sent to the WeChat group with WeChat stickers saying 'nice photos'.

By the end of the video call Mrs Huang turns the iPad screen in the direction of Mr Huang so that Xiaotao can show his painting to him. Mr Huang praises the painting while taking a screenshot of the iPad screen and forwarding it to the family group. At the same time Mrs Huang forwards photos from the family WeChat group on her smartphone to another WeChat group with the name 'Sisters', which includes her three close female friends. When the video call finishes Mrs Huang has also sorted out her travel plan for the flower exhibition – two friends in the 'Sisters' group will join them and drive to the new park.

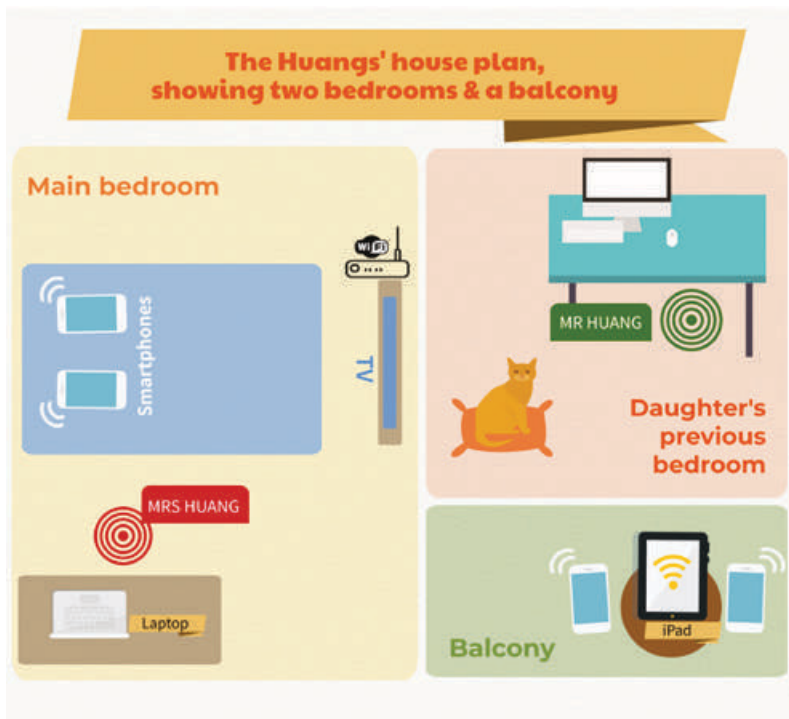
The scenario above is just one typical dinner at the couple's flat on a normal day. However, at least eight screens were involved in this one-hour dinner time, ranging from television and iPad to a handful of smartphones. Mr Huang's smartphone was first used as a reading device, then as a camera recording the moments of intergenerational bonding and finally as an information node to share the visuals of kinship among the network of family members. Mrs Huang's iPad was first standing in the kitchen as a video player; it then served as the meeting hub for the extended family. When these two screens are actively engaged with personal interaction, the ambient sound from the television fills in the silence during dinner and provides news. The television screen also triggered other social events simultaneously.

Scenes like this have become increasingly commonplace in urban Chinese households. Smartphones have been used as the major information resources, providing the main recorder as well as the central social place. In addition, an examination of the positioning of these screens reveals how they simultaneously reinforce the sense of their domestic surroundings as well as various social relations. In the past, placing

photos of family and friends around the rooms would have served a similar purpose;<sup>14</sup> now, thanks to these screens, it feels as if those images have come alive. It is as if Mrs Huang ‘walked’ into a different room to have a separate conversation with her friends on WeChat group while Mr Huang was talking with his grandson on the video call.

Within a household, screen ecology is even more sophisticated. Let us still take Mr and Mrs Huang’s place as an example. In the bedroom area (Fig. 5.2) there are three more different screens: a laptop, another television in the main bedroom and a desktop computer in the bedroom which previously belonged to their daughter but is now used mainly by Mr Huang and their cat. The couple ‘inherited’ both the laptop and the desktop computer from their daughter.

In the early afternoon, if the weather is pleasant, the couple will sit on the balcony for a cup of tea, both of them on their smartphones. The iPad means that Mrs Huang can either watch soap operas there



**Figure 5.2** A plan of the Huangs’ house showing the location of various digital devices. Infographics by Xinyuan Wang and Georgiana Murariu.

(via the app ‘iQIYI’) or take the device into the kitchen to continue watching while she cooks. Cooking from time to time also involves making use of the app ‘Go to kitchen’ (*xia chufang*) for video-illustrated recipes. After dinner Mr Huang usually retreats to the study, playing games on the desk computer for two hours, while Mrs Huang checks the stock market and shops online on the laptop in the main bedroom. Mrs Huang started stock investment 15 years ago, and she used to go to the stock trading hall to check the stock market in the pre-digital time. Four years ago she got her first smartphone from her daughter and the phone had a stock app installed. For a while she felt the urge to track the stock literally every few minutes, simply because it was so convenient at the end of fingertips. In the end she decided to delete the app altogether, explaining,

My mind was controlled by this app; it’s like an addiction and very unhealthy. I felt less happy those days.

While the bedroom does contain a television set, the most active screens are the couple’s two smartphones. The smartphone activity includes the couple’s allocated half-hour of bedtime reading interspersed with viewing friends’ WeChat profiles and various WeChat groups (for Mrs Huang) and listening to history podcasts on the ‘Ximalaya’ FM app (for Mr Huang).

From the gender difference in terms of app use to the sophisticated ‘screen ecology’ within Mr Huang and Mrs Huang’s home, the social life of smartphone apps not only showcases the significant role of social relations in terms of shaping the actual real-life use of smartphone apps, but also reveals how different apps and digital screens work together in people’s daily lives. Below we explore the relationship between apps and social relations further.

## The use of apps shaped by social relationships

A considerable number of older people started to use the smartphone mainly because their social networks ‘pulled’ them in. More than 40 per cent of participants in the app analysis survey used smartphones mainly because of WeChat, which can only be used with smartphones. Even though some of them (about 10 per cent) took the initiative to check out WeChat merely because it was mentioned by others, the majority had experienced moments of ‘awakening’ when they realised that without WeChat they would be seen as the left-behinds or outsiders and become excluded from certain *guanxi* (social relations).

For example, 63-year-old Huangqin got her smartphone because she felt the peer-pressure from her previous classmates. Three years ago, in 2016, Huangqin joined a middle-school alumni event. Usually the organiser sent printed photos to attendants, but on that occasion she was told that photos would be digital-only and would be shared on a WeChat group. There were 6 out of 33 attendants, including Huangqin, who did not have a smartphone nor a WeChat account at that time. Everybody felt that the small group of 'digital-less' people were holding back the desire of the rest of the class to be modern and 'advanced' (*xian jin*). She remarks wryly,

I used to be the top student – how can I be the one who is left behind when most of my previous classmates had started to use smartphones and WeChat?

Another participant, 70-year-old Zhongkun, started to use a smartphone because he wanted to check the recent photos of his granddaughter Jinjin who studies in the United States. At one time his daughter would visit him and show him the WeChat profile of Jinjin on her smartphone screen herself, but when she became busier and could no longer visit him so frequently, Zhongkun felt that it was time to gain his own access to WeChat. After a year of using the smartphone, Zhongkun's exploration of the digital world had gone beyond WeChat. In essence, he now reads news on the app 'Toutiao' (the news app listed as joint no. 4 out of the top 10 apps), listens to the broadcasting of Chinese poetry on the app 'Ximalaya' (the iPod app listed as joint no. 5) and from time to time orders food delivery on *meituan*, the 'mini-program' on WeChat. However, the most exciting thing for Zhongkun is still the use of WeChat. For years he felt that he had lost a direct connection with his granddaughter, but now he can always 'see' her and know something about her life abroad on WeChat. Zhongkun rarely sent WeChat messages to Jinjin as he does not want to interrupt her study, but he always clicks 'like' of Jinjin's posts on WeChat and views the photos she sends many times.

Similarly, Dr Chu adopted an online medical consulting mini-program on WeChat under the influence of his grandson. He is an experienced practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), with 50 years' experience. After retirement Dr Chu was invited to continue working for the same TCM clinic. For him, the biggest problem encountered at the workplace since last year is the need to get used to online consultancy. He was initially reluctant to learn online consultation, believing that his eyesight was not good to look at small screens. However, in the



end he was persuaded indirectly by his grandson. Playing Chinese chess together used to be a 'tradition' between them, but it was becoming difficult to maintain after his grandson had left high school and had less time available. The grandson thus suggested that Dr Chu play Chinese chess with him via smartphone. The urge to keep the tradition with his grandson alive pushed Dr Chu to purchase a smartphone with a big screen. As it happened, the online consultation interface worked just fine for him, leading Dr Chu to claim: 'Had it not been for my grandson, I would never have felt comfortable with online consultation'.

As we can see in the cases of Huangqin, Zhongkun and Dr Chu, people became 'involved' in smartphone engagement through various social relations. The smartphone has been increasingly 'domesticated' and is now the space in which people manage their multiple social roles; here they develop, maintain and negotiate various relationships. A few years ago there were still heated debates<sup>15</sup> about whether 'friends on social media are real friends'. More recently, however, as offline contacts are 'digitised' and the majority of online active interactions take place among family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, this question seems irrelevant. In practice no one appears confused about online social relations just because of the communication tools. Increasingly people articulate the appropriation of the digital affordance to serve their own needs in social relationships.<sup>16</sup> The WeChat kinship card is an example of this.

The 'kinship card' (*qinshu ka*), launched in June 2018, allows people to combine their WeChat Pay account with a maximum of four relatives, including parents and two children (Fig. 5.3). The 'kinship card' payment further includes the 'mobile-pay-less' population such as older people and children who are not included in mobile pay yet for various reasons. Kinship card beneficiaries do not need to combine bank cards with WeChat because those with bank cards will pay for them via WeChat.

Providing financial support for the elderly is widely regarded as an example of filial piety.<sup>17</sup> Like the WeChat red envelope (*hong bao*), the kinship card of WeChat Pay also implanted the very traditional social interaction in China onto the online platform. Limei, in her forties, was pleased by the kinship card for the reason of financial security, as the person who offered the card can always check every expense. Two years ago Limei helped her mother activate WeChat Pay, but it was not successful, as she explains,

My mum was always worried about being swindled online. Even though she knows how to pay, she still always wanted me to check everything.



**Figure 5.3** Screenshots of the WeChat 'kinship card' (*qinshu ka*). Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

Before the kinship card, Limei would transfer 2000 RMB (around £200) to her mother's WeChat Pay account every month. Now she simply set the kinship card link and set up the budget. The upper limit the kinship card allows is 3000 RMB per month (around £300), which is enough for daily expenses while preventing big fraud. For Limei, as noted above, the kinship card simply means financial security. However, for others it can feel more of an 'unwanted' financial burden. Guo, in his late thirties, initially felt somehow reluctant when his mother asked for a kinship card. As he recalls,

My parents enjoy a stable pension. The kinship card would definitely make my pocket money shrink as I am not earning a lot.

To Guo's great relief, his mother only 'symbolically' spent 20 RMB (around £2) in the first month through her kinship card. He explains the reason for this:

Then I realised that it was not about money at all. She just didn't want to 'lose face' (*diu mianzi*) in front of her close friends because some of them had received kinship cards from their children.

In Guo's case, the kinship card has already gained a strong association with 'filial piety'. Having dutiful children, conscious of their filial responsibilities, is something older people feel proud of and would undoubtedly seek to 'show off' among their peers. So it was the ensuing peer pressure, as well as concerns about 'keeping face', that pushed Guo's mother to ask her son for the kinship card, even though she did not need financial support and intended to use it very little. The apparent financial support provided by the WeChat kinship card in fact represents the emotional care they receive from their children – something that most well-off older people value more than financial/practical care.<sup>18</sup>

A closer look into the use of map apps also reveals an entire range of vernacular map use. Most people reported that they use map apps and the app survey shows that both mainstream map apps, the Baidu map (60 per cent, no. 3) and Gaode map (43 per cent, joint no. 8) are both among the top 10 apps. However, in practice the dependence on map apps to find the way among older people is in general less evident than among the younger generation. The main reason is that older people have relatively fewer opportunities to explore new places where a map is required; they are also more confident in finding their own way around the city in which they have spent most of their lives without a map.

For example, Huahua (aged 55) uses the map app extensively to check the opening times of shops and nearby restaurants. Mr Zheng (aged 60) turns to a map for real-time tourist information when sightseeing in tourist groups. As he explains,

Before when we were in a tourist group, we were passively told things and simply followed the tourist guide ... but now we know things even better than the tourist guide does.

Meanwhile, Shuhui, in her late sixties, mainly uses the Baidu map app at home rather than outside. Once every fortnight she uses the Baidu map intensively in her kitchen. The real-time traffic time estimation on the Baidu map allows Shuhui to know when her son's family will arrive and to cook dinner for them accordingly. As she explains,

Once there was a traffic accident on the overhead line and my son's car was stuck in the traffic jam for more than one hour. They called me in the end, saying they would be late, but I explained that I knew they would be late half an hour ago – I saw the whole overhead line on the Baidu map turned from usual green and orange to red.

As shown in the cases above, the actual practice and social meaning of smartphone use lies in a complicated network of social relations and daily scenarios, where different people in different situations use them in different ways. Even for the same person, the different social roles he or she plays would also lead to rather different interpretations and use of certain apps. Below we consider further how ethnography explores the nuance of the crafting of smartphones in interpersonal communication.

## Crafting the facial expression via smartphones<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), Zihui woke up to a dozen WeChat stickers carrying morning greetings in a couple of WeChat groups. Like Zihui, most older people in Shanghai would agree that WeChat stickers have become an essential element of daily interpersonal communication with family and friends, even though only a few years ago some of them had never heard of such stickers, let alone sent them. People refer to all kinds of emojis and stickers as *'biaoqing'* in Chinese, literally meaning 'facial expression'. The most common sticker consists of both an image and an embedded text message. Besides facilitating powerful emotion-expressing via animated images, the WeChat sticker also provides a convenient way of adding contextual clues and nuances to the conversation. It is common to see older people sending a string of WeChat stickers to render multi-layered emotions and feelings. For example Di, a retired clerk in her late fifties, replied to her friend's praise with three WeChat stickers ([Fig. 5.4](#)).

The first WeChat sticker shows a baby winking with a smile. The baby's hand is subconsciously touching his or her ear, a typical cue in body language that indicates slight embarrassment. With the embedded text 'I am so flattered', the meaning of the sticker is clear: I am so flattered and feel even embarrassed. After being further praised, Di sends a second sticker depicting a movie star with his fists held together in the gesture of gratitude. The text reads 'thanks a lot'. This was immediately followed by a third sticker of a baby dancing with joy. As Di explained, the string of stickers is an effort to address others' compliments properly.

Her feelings were expressed in a specific order, progressing in a way that accords with the social norms regarding how individuals should receive praise from others. Firstly, one is supposed to show embarrassment or even decline the compliment, otherwise he or she appears self-conceited (the first sticker); then, when the praise continues, it's time to say 'thank you' and to acknowledge the other person's kindness



**Figure 5.4** Screenshot of Di's WeChat conversation. Her replies have been translated into English. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

(represented by the second sticker). The final stage involves expressing joyfulness, indicating that the other should excuse his or her childishness because, deep inside, he or she is as happy as a child (represented by the third sticker).

People frequently use WeChat stickers to tackle situations that would otherwise be regarded as awkward or embarrassing. For instance Mr Hong, a retired civil servant aged 67, has more than 100 stickers saved on his WeChat. He also keeps a repository of stickers for common emotions or social gestures, such as saying goodbye or apologising (Fig. 5.5). He skilfully appropriates different stickers, depending on specific contexts and recipients. For example, he once used the sticker of a middle-aged man with a painfully sad face, along with the embedded text 'It is my fault' (Fig. 5.5, left, top row), which he sent to an old work colleague. The figure is a character in a popular television series about anti-corruption. In the show the man, a government officer, amassed a huge fortune by abusing his power, although he did not dare to spend it for fear of causing suspicion. The famous scene, as shown on the sticker, was the man expressing penitence when his crime was finally exposed. Mr Hong's old work colleague, a civil servant who retired later than Mr Hong, had complained about the new pension regulations, which were less generous for the cohort of civil servants who retired after Mr Hong did. As the beneficiary of the earlier version of pension regulations, Mr Hong somehow felt that it would be awkward to show any solidarity. He therefore replied by using this sticker to ease the awkwardness of the situation. As Mr Hong explains,

He knows that even though I got slightly more pension than him, in reality I can't spend a penny for myself as all the money goes to my grandson's education... I am probably as pathetic as the guy who sits on piles of cash, but doesn't dare spend them ... ha ha.

Through this 'It is my fault' sticker, Mr Hong managed humorously to convey his sympathy as well as a degree of self-deprecation.

Similarly, on an occasion when Mr Hong had to turn down a friend's request for help, he replied with a crying cartoon figure, saying 'Your majesty, I really can't make it' (Fig. 5.5, right, top row) to balance out the toughness of a rejection. This line comes from a popular television show in which originally it was the queen who wept out her grief to the emperor, asking for forgiveness. In other situations Mr Hong used a multitude of stickers of bursting into tears to show his sincerity. In a similar vein, after having to tell his wife some bad news (this instance



**Figure 5.5** Screenshots of some of Mr Hong’s WeChat stickers expressing that he was sorry. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

being that their pet fish had died because of his negligence), Mr Hong sent his wife the sticker of a distressed cartoon figure (Fig. 5.5 left, bottom row), begging on his knees on a washboard (a typical domestic corporal punishment in common jokes) and lamenting ‘my fault’, as well as a desperate cartoon hamster who was trying to prevent his angry partner from storming out (Fig. 5.5 right, middle row). Other examples include making a gentle apology to friends when he was unable to meet up with them by sending a sticker of a figure with clasped hands, showing manga-style perspiration and the embedded text ‘sorry, sorry’ (Fig. 5.5 right, bottom row), or teasing his grandson by sending a photo of a cat with its head down, staring at the floor, also saying sorry (Fig. 5.5 middle, middle row).

In terms of conveying subtle and complicated feelings, a proper picture is literally worth a thousand words. As in the case of Mr Hong, the

pictorial cue facilitated by WeChat stickers significantly helped him to articulate complicated emotional states, modulate the tone of messages or reinforce the content of a message. No wonder that Mr Hong once observed,

Sometimes I really wish I could also use these *biaoqing* (stickers) in face-to-face conversation – that would make life much easier.

It is understandable that Mr Hong regards the ‘virtual’ facial expression (*biaoqing*) as doing a better job than expressions his physical face can possibly make. In face-to-face conversation Mr Hong preserves the grave and dignified bearing that he has kept for decades as a respectable male adult. On WeChat, however, the repository of *biaoqing* has brought out multiple layers of emotions and social skills apparently non-existent ‘outside’ of the visual communication on WeChat. For example, via a long string of stickers, Mr Hong can enjoy talking with his 15-year-old grandson on WeChat. From cute animals to exaggerated cartoon figures, from well-known celebrities to classic screen actors, WeChat stickers allow people to express themselves vividly through a much larger corpus of facial expressions than the normal repertoire of physical facial expressions. In that sense, visual communication via smartphones not only bridges physical distance but also transcends the social and psychological distance between people – the latter something particularly difficult to overcome in hierarchical societies such as China.

In practice, crafting of one’s facial expression via the smartphone has another benefit: efficient management of the ‘emotion work’<sup>20</sup> required in normative social etiquette. A good example of this is revealed by 59-year-old Guifen. Like many other WeChat groups among old work colleagues, as observed in fieldwork, there were three major topics of discussion in the ‘retired previous work colleagues’ WeChat group that Guifen joined. These are daily greetings, information about health and care, and details of grandchildren. From time to time members share good news and photos of grandchildren among the group. There is usually a long string of WeChat stickers from various group members congratulating people on their nice photos and good news. Guifen usually follows suit, as she explains,

I can understand that grandchildren are the major point of pride in life for many of us ... and everybody wants to be praised. Thanks to WeChat *biaoqing* (stickers), whenever people share photos of their grandchildren or show off their achievements, I just send these



*biaoqing* that say: 'how cute' and 'how wonderful' to boost their performance (*peng chang*).

Guifen is worried about her daughter not being married yet, so has mixed feelings every time one of her peers shares photos of their grandchildren online. However, she is also fully aware of her duty to be a good audience member of the 'performance', and so, just like other good audience members, she turns to the expressive WeChat stickers to live up to social expectations in such a situation. WeChat stickers work like an energy-saving emotion gadget in daily communication. Once Guifen had dinner with a large group of former work colleagues. Over dinner the topics of discussion seemed to remain the same, the only difference being that people took their smartphones out and started passing them around to show each other photos of their grandchildren. Guifen jokingly remarks,

I have to 'wear' (*dai*) a big smile of admiration throughout the dinner. It's so exhausting, my facial muscles became so stiff after that ... Had it not been face-to-face, I would have saved a lot of emotion and energy by simply sending loads of *biaoqing*.

Guifen regarded complimentary facial expression as something she is supposed to perform out of politeness, both online and offline. While online she would simply send various WeChat stickers (thus using digital facial expressions), but in face-to-face situations she needed constantly to apply her facial muscles and other related body movements. In both of the situations, Guifen expressed herself according to perceived social expectation rather than showing her 'authentic feelings'. She described the situation as one in which 'I have to wear a big smile', suggesting her smile is applied as a mask – just like the embodied WeChat stickers that she constantly sent online. In this way, Guifen 'outsources' the emotion work that she is supposed to perform to WeChat stickers online. In the case of Guifen and many others, visual communication facilitated by the smartphone does not reduce the 'authenticity' of interpersonal communication. Rather, it reduces the effort of living up to social expectations which, more often than not, go against individuals' 'authentic feelings'.

By crafting a visualised 'atmosphere' and facial expressions through social media stickers, older people apply the visual element strategically in their daily communication. Interpersonal communication via the smartphone can be as expressive and accessible as face-to-face communication – in some cases even more so. The sheer effort that people invested in crafting the appropriate facial expression via WeChat stickers speaks

to a more general phenomenon of visual crafting via the smartphones observed in the fieldwork, which will be discussed below.

## Visual crafting via the smartphone

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), taking photos via the smartphone has become a significant digital routine in older people's lives. The increased capability of visual documentation allows everyone to savour their everyday life differently.<sup>21</sup> The images posted on WeChat profiles are not only shared with others but also stored on WeChat for users' future access; this enables the moments of the present to be positioned as a potential future past, creating a nostalgia for the here and now.<sup>22</sup> This section further explores the details of how people manage such visual capability facilitated by the smartphone, which is truly a process of crafting.

When people are talking about 'camera', in most cases, they mean both the camera and the digital device of the smartphone,<sup>23</sup> plus various camera apps which enhance the artistic effects of the original photos. In the app survey camera apps with strong retouching functions and heavy filters cover a broad spectrum from selfie apps (such as 'Camera360', 'Pitu', 'Faceu'), to food photo apps (such as 'Foodie') to video apps (such as 'Meipai'). More than 80 per cent of participants have at least one camera/visual app in addition to the built-in smartphone camera. The average number of camera apps on women's phones is 2.4 and on men's 0.8. Among older people, camera or photo editing apps are particularly popular among female research participants in their forties and fifties. Two photo-editing apps on the list of top 10 apps, 'Meitu Xiu Xiu' (joint no.7) and 'BeautyCam' (joint no.10), belong to the same tech company, Meitu.

It may be inadequate to describe 'Meitu Xiu Xiu' as the mobile equivalent of Photoshop, as the former is not an all-purpose photo-editing tool. However, it does deliver a more convenient and practical function in terms of making people look more beautiful in their own eyes, always one of the biggest concerns among female users. The basic function of 'Meitu Xiu Xiu' includes functions such as cropping and exposure correction as well as a vast range of filters. However, the key selling point of this app lies in its powerful 'retouch' (*meiyan*) features. These render immediate enhancements, rather like 'a safe and free plastic surgery without the pain and cost' as Huahua, aged 55, described it.

Huahua is certainly an expert in such free plastic surgery. On her smartphone there are five photo editing apps. Within a few minutes, after a few clicks on her smartphone screen, one can see some



**Figures 5.6a and 5.6b** The subject's natural appearance (left); the subject's appearance after on-screen manipulation, with wrinkles removed, skin smoothed and whitened, nose given higher bridge and corners of mouth adjusted (right). Original photo from 'Washington Chinese Culture Festival 2015' by S. Pakhrin, licensed under CC BY 2.0. Adjusted photo by Huahua, taken by Xinyuan Wang.

immediate enhancements of a portrait photo she retouched (Figs 5.6a and 5.6b). Almost all the aspects of a person's appearance can be easily 'beautified': eyes can be enlarged, the distance between eyes adjusted, the nose given a higher bridge, a broad face narrowed, skin colour whitened and the whole body figure slimmed and curved, with legs stretched longer, etc. On top of such reshaping, the app can also add 'digital make-up' such as adding lip colour, blusher, false eyelashes and eye shadow, as well as adjust the shape of eyebrows or redraw them, etc.

The 'BeautyCam' app on Huahua's smartphone provides some similar beautification functions on the face. Such enhancements take place immediately after the photo is taken, to save making later adjustments to the image. Huahua explains,

Two years ago some of my friends scolded me when I tried to take a selfie with them with the original camera on my smartphone. At that time I did not have any beauty camera app, but now I know and use it every time I take selfies.

However, given the powerful retouching function of camera apps, Huahua tends to keep a relatively 'low key' approach regarding her own photos posted on WeChat. 'I will never overdo it,' she explains. Consequently Huahua used to 'remove' a few of the wrinkles around the eyes but not all of them; she would brighten the lip colour just a tiny bit, so that probably only she can tell the difference. As she explains,

It [retouching] is like putting on make-up. You are supposed to have some to show that you are taking care of yourself and respect for others, but not too much.

Even though women generally install more camera apps, in ethnography the most 'camera-app-heavy' smartphone was found to belong to 88-year-old Mr Hu, whose main hobby is smartphone photography. He has one and a half screens of apps on his latest OPPO smartphone, his third smartphone, and there are only nine apps that were not pre-installed – far below the average of 24.5 apps among research participants in Shanghai. However, it does not prevent Mr Hu from being the participant with the most visual-related apps: six out of his nine apps are camera or photo editing apps.

It is easy to spot parallels between Mr Hu's camera cabinet and his smartphone screen. From the latest Nikon to long infrared lens, he has spent a fortune in collecting an impressive range of photography devices in his camera cabinet, photography being his biggest hobby after retirement. However, those fancy gadgets are now lying there collecting dust because of his new favourite all-in-one machine: the smartphone. In a discussion about the high number of camera apps, Mr Hu explains,

The smartphone is just like the SLR camera without the lens. It would help if you matched it with various lenses. The more lenses you have, the more capable your camera can be... Similarly, different apps serve different effects, just like different lenses.

Mr Hu actively used three visual apps. One has a wide range of filters, one is best for adjusting lens distortion and one is especially suitable for matting images. Other visual apps he installed on his smartphone were tried out once or twice, but proved unsatisfactory. Mr Hu still keeps these no-longer-used apps, however, just as he keeps those no-longer-needed camera lenses on a bookshelf.

Ethnography observes that people generally accept the idea that photos are polished, and are happy that they should be as long as it is not 'overdone'. However, the definition of 'overdone' is relative, depending on the content and context, age and gender. For instance, in younger

people's eyes, one of the striking features of the photos polished by the older generation is the extremely high saturation level of colours. For older people, however, the rich and strong colours are associated with youth. Huahua attributes the collective preference for bright colours among older women to historical reasons.

When we were young, we had no choice but to wear uniforms with black, grey or blue colours. Who would not want to wear a bright colour at that time? But we simply had no chance... Now we can, and bright colours make me feel the return of youth.

The 'authenticity' is not what it is, but what it should be – to be beautiful and young, as their youth was 'taken away' against their will 50 years ago and can now be re-acquired through the use of the smartphone. Regularly people, including Huahua, quoted the saying 'to take a photo is to do photo-cheating' (*zhao pian jiu shi zhao pian*),<sup>24</sup> to illustrate their up-to-date understanding of photography in the age of social media. People said so either to justify their efforts to beautify their photos in order to comply with social norms, or to refer to an etiquette that one should not take offence by a heavily retouched photo.

In practice, it is often the case that men install camera apps because they want to take photos of their wives or grandchildren. Men seemed to show less passion for 'BeautyCam' apps as traditionally women are supposed to care more about their looks. Having said that, men in general also welcome the 'BeautyCam' app as it makes people appear younger. There were even complaints from men that camera apps are too oriented towards women and girls and towards young people in general. For example, Mr Li (59) has two camera apps, one for food and one for selfies. But he is not totally satisfied by the performance. Seeing how women can add digital eyebrows with just a few clicks, Mr Li can see no reason why any camera app could not add some hair to his bald head. He once observed,

The smartphone camera is so advanced now, but still nobody designs an app for older men like us with hair loss problems.

The high demand for phone cameras is also reflected in the essential selling points of most Chinese smartphones, with local brands such as Huawei and OPPO both boasting high-quality phone cameras.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that many Chinese smartphones have original cameras with incorporated 'retouching' default settings. That is to say, it is even impossible to take a photo without retouching features on many smartphones used in China. In 2018 it was reported that the front-facing

camera of the newly released iPhone automatically smooths skin in self-ies; there is no way to turn this ‘beauty filter’ off. That discovery immediately triggered an outcry among iPhone users in the West.

The ‘Beautygate’ of iPhone XS<sup>26</sup> appears even more curious when compared with the remarkable success of those camera smartphones and camera apps in the Chinese market. Such a powerful contrast not only showcases the ongoing transformation of the visual culture in the age of smartphones in different societies, but also shows a significant difference in the appreciation of beauty or authenticity per se between Chinese society and the West. What the Chinese did with their camera apps was to ‘craft’ their own bodies through smartphones. The final section of this chapter further investigates the new ritual performances that emerged during the crafting of the smartphone.

## Digital ritual performances

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), various everyday digital routines have emerged in the daily lives of research participants. Some of those routines have gained so much significance that they work like a ritual performance in people’s social lives. A ritual performance has been defined as ‘a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities’.<sup>27</sup> In many ways, taking photos and sharing them on WeChat has become one of the new ritual performances played out via smartphones. Visual documentation has long been considered as the end (purpose) of a camera, but in the use of the smartphone it is only a means towards many other ends, all with diverse audiences in mind. In practice the very act of ‘taking a photo’ has been granted extra meanings which different people may interpret in different ways. Research participant Macong, aged in her fifties, offers an interesting example of this. After a dinner to which she had treated her son and his fiancée, Macong said to me,

I don’t think she liked the meal tonight as she didn’t even take any photos of the dishes.

Macong’s daughter-in-law-to-be was judged unappreciative for failing to perform a proper ritual at the dinner table – that of taking photographs of the dishes. Many older people would agree with Macong that the absent photo-taking ritual would indicate ‘having no interest’, and therefore also a lack of respect for the people involved. Nor does the moral judgement stop at the stage of photo-taking. People also carefully read into the

actions of sharing photos on WeChat profiles. Luliang, a retired nurse in her sixties, once complained about the lack of support among her previous colleagues. Her evidence was rather strange:

I just checked their WeChat profiles. Two of them still have not posted any photos about our trip.

Three days ago Luliang, as the former head nurse, arranged a day trip for nine of her previous colleagues to visit an ancient town near Shanghai. After the trip she immediately sent the group photos to the WeChat group created for the trip. As she explains,

People are waiting for photos so that they can post them on WeChat. It is like news. News is not news when it is no longer new... People either post them within two or three days or they will never post them.

Given how convenient it has become to take photos and post them on social media, a 'timely post' on WeChat has become a social expectation. In the early stage of fieldwork, after being chased by people for photos a couple of times, I soon learned to prioritise sending pictures after meetings and events. In addition, as Luliang said, there is either 'timely' posting, which usually takes place within two or three days or non-posting, which is regarded as bad news. She further explains,

People with good *guanxi* (social relations) with you will happily post the photos with you on their profiles as they are happy to show that such *guanxi* to others... If they choose not to post the photos, then they either do not value the *guanxi* that much or they even think the *guanxi* with you will make them lose face (*diu lian*).

'*Mianzi*' (face) is one of the most typically 'Chinese' concepts that exists: the word refers to one's reputation or dignity in the eyes of others, which also indicates that *mianzi* is audience-oriented, and so needs to be visible.<sup>28</sup> Hence Luliang would check everyone's WeChat profiles to see whether their *guanxi* is 'visually endorsed' on these. Her interpretation of WeChat photo posting is representative of people in their fifties and sixties. WeChat profiles are already regarded as one of the essential, semi-public-facing places for people to show their overall *guanxi* to a wider audience. It is crucial for the Chinese to maintain *mianzi* (face) and display *guanxi* in front of others within the same social network. 'WeChat profiles are all about the *mianxi* (face),' as Zihui wittily put it.

As we see in [Chapter 4](#), Zihui followed the rule of *mianzi* meticulously when she needed publicly to announce and establish her good

*guanxi* with Mei for the sake of her grandson's schooling. Consequently, social pressure surrounding WeChat postings surged. Again, when faced with various social expectations and pressure on WeChat, different people come up with their own digital strategies.

For example, Luwei, the retired Peking Opera singer mentioned in Chapter 3, needs to balance the social expectation and peer pressure regarding her posting on WeChat. On one occasion she was just about to post a set of photos of an event that she was invited to attend when she realised that there were a few other senior singers among her WeChat contacts who should have been invited but had not received an invitation. On the one hand Luwei felt the 'duty' to post things on her WeChat profile immediately; this was seen as good manners, expressing gratitude to the people who invited her; 'I was sure they would check my WeChat to see whether I had posted things,' she recalled. On the other hand Luwei did not want to let other people down. In the end she selected a dozen contacts and set this particular post's privacy setting as 'only show to selected contacts'.

Gigi, Caiyuan's daughter, can indirectly feel the peer pressure experienced by her mother. Whenever she treats Caiyuan to a nice dinner or gives her a gift, Caiyuan has to ask Gigi for a photo featuring her and the food or the present; Caiyuan then posts the pictures on WeChat with a very nice piece of text to thank Gigi. Previously, Gigi had not found that her mother needed to thank her in public, but gradually she realised that she was not the target audience of such postings. As Gigi explains,

My mum posted those not to thank me but for her friends... She actually wants to impress her friends that she has a great daughter.

On another occasion, Caiyuan herself also remarked,

Many of my old friends only get to know my life through my WeChat profile. I want them to see that I have a wonderful daughter and great friends. We are all doing the same... We judge people from the photos they post, don't we? Of course everybody cares about face (*mianzi*). Nobody would post negative things about themselves to lose face.

For Caiyuan and many others, WeChat profiles have become their 'digital *mianzi*'. Such digital *mianzi* is more than a nicer physical appearance, obtained through retouching filters; it rather embodies one's reputation in front of a variety of social contacts. Given the 'cost' of taking and sharing photos in the smartphone age is almost nothing, the willingness to do so speaks directly to people's attitudes and evaluation of things, and to their imagined audience. The diverse audience<sup>29</sup> promised by



the smartphone was always present. It has become a significant, though invisible, part of visual content production via smartphones.

In the traditional field of ritual performance, the perceived/imagined audience includes both people and deities. So does the digital. The introduction to this book has mentioned that in 2018 scanning QR (Quick Response) codes had already become a common way to pray in temples. Religious concepts are a part of daily colloquial language, and the practice of Chinese popular religions<sup>30</sup> is commonplace among research participants. The fieldwork witnessed how, as people imagined, deities in China also swiftly embraced a variety of novel digital ritual performances.

Because of COVID-19, on Tomb-sweeping Day (4 April) of 2020, most of the research participants in Shanghai could not go out to pay respect to their late relatives. Instead WeChat has become one of the significant places where people post images to show respect. For example, research participant Di selected nine images from the internet and posted them on her WeChat (Fig. 5.7).

Besides posting on WeChat for her relatives, Di also logged onto a tomb-sweeping website (Fig. 5.8) to offer sacrifice (images of an incense burner) to the ‘whistle-blower’ Dr Li Wenliang. He was one of the doctors in Wuhan who tried to warn the public about the danger of the COVID-19 outbreak and later died from the virus himself. As shown on one of the pages for Dr Li Wenliang, people offered not only traditional tomb-sweeping items such as incense and food, but also blue jeans and paintings.



**Figure 5.7** Screenshots of Di’s WeChat posts on Tomb-sweeping Day (4 April). Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 5.8** Screenshot of one of the pages (in the form of an online altar) in memory of Dr Li Wenliang. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 5.9** Screenshot of items (such as medical masks and iPhone chargers) listed in the online shop of a ‘cloud tomb-sweeping’ website. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

On the popular tomb-sweeping website, people can choose sacrifices among thousands of images of different items provided by the online shop. From N95 masks to iPhone chargers (Fig. 5.9), from various dishes (Fig. 5.10) to food supplements (Fig. 5.11), almost everything a person may need in their physical life can be found in the shop: ‘It is very considerate’, as Di remarked. One can also pay for various deity statues (from Jesus to a Buddha to a Taoist deity (Fig. 5.12)) to be presented in the online altar; the image of a kowtowing person (Fig. 5.13) can also be ordered as a permanent gesture of ultimate respect.



**Figure 5.10** Screenshot of items (such as various dishes) listed in the online shop of a ‘cloud tomb-sweeping’ website. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 5.11** Screenshot of items (such as food supplements) listed in the online shop of a ‘cloud tomb-sweeping’ website. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 5.12** Screenshot of items (such as various deity statues) listed in the online shop of a ‘cloud tomb-sweeping’ website. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 5.13** Screenshot of items (such as an image of a kowtowing person) listed in the online shop of a ‘cloud tomb-sweeping’ website. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

The practice of indigenous Chinese religion is more about belonging than it is about belief.<sup>31</sup> Orientation towards the secular is a striking feature of Chinese folk/popular religions, as Valerie Hansen noted,

The gods lived, even vied, for human recognition ... without it, they languished.<sup>32</sup>

In religious practice, an image plays a significant role. It serves as a portal between spirit and mortal realms,<sup>33</sup> and online tomb-sweeping testifies to the endurance of this belief even in digital times.

Image worship can be traced to the dawn of Chinese civilisation, when it was believed that deities were dependent on people to give their spirits materiality through the making of anthropomorphic images; gods could gain power only if their images were worshipped.<sup>34</sup> People continue to believe that images have significant efficacy. Efficacy (*ling*) is frequently applied to describe whether supernatural beings can or would be willing to address the desires and claims of the secular world.<sup>35</sup> Deities are ranked according to efficacy, but such a rank is flexible according to different situations. These in turn reflect a clear correspondence between Chinese folk cosmology and the structure of secular bureaucracy.<sup>36</sup>

In a way, the practice of Chinese folk religion online can confuse us, as it is highly pragmatic and materialistic – quite distinct from a Western perspective which places religion in a transcendent heavenly sphere, contrasting with life in the physical realm below. However, it is only by understanding images as the portal through which visual crafting is practised as a new ritual in everyday life that we may come to appreciate the role that smartphones play. From taking a photo to sharing a photo, from

posting photos to praying, a variety of actions facilitated by the use of smartphones have contributed to emerging new ritual performances in daily life.

## Conclusion

This chapter starts with a systematic analysis of all the apps installed on people's smartphones; it ends with a description of ritual performance via the smartphone. The ethnography in this chapter constantly illustrates how older Chinese people craft authenticity out of the skilful use of their smartphones. Their use of the smartphone has been fundamentally shaped by personal aspirations, social expectations and the practice of various social relations, as well as by a living experience of cosmology.

The smartphone is by no means an industrial product but a profound artwork carefully crafted by people in their daily lives. Using smartphones, older people have skilfully developed a whole set of strategies comprising emotion work in social relations, involving the sophisticated use of stickers and other digital functions such as the WeChat kinship card. People pay equal, if not more, attention to the audience of their photos as to the objects of their photos; sharing photos is at least as significant as taking them. It is also important to note that crafting via the smartphone creates both security and pressure in people's social lives. Interpersonal communication is also subject to both etiquette and constraint, as reflected in the emerging new ritual performance in smartphone use.

## Notes

1. For example, Baidu is the holding company of the 'Baidu' search engine, 'Baidu map' and video platform 'iQIYI'. Alibaba is the holding company of 'Alipay', 'Taobao' (the online shopping app), 'Gaode map', 'Eleme' food delivery, 'UC browser' and the share-holding company of 'DiDi' (the taxi-hailing app with Tencent). In turn Tencent is the holding company of 'WeChat', 'QQ', 'QQ news', 'QQ browser', 'Pinduoduo' (the online shopping app) and the share-holding company of 'DiDi' with Alibaba.
2. BAT is the acronym for Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent, China's three leading digital companies. See Keane, M. and C. Su 2018.
3. Founded in 2012, ByteDance (in May 2022, the company name of ByteDance was changed to Douyin) had over 800 million daily active users across all its content platforms in 2018. See <https://qz.com/1564270/bytedance-video-app-tiktok-rival-to-facebook-reached-1-billion-downloads/> (accessed 20 August 2021). ByteDance's most successful product is Douyin, or TikTok in the global market. Douyin was launched in 2016, followed by the overseas version TikTok in 2017. TikTok has become one of the most popular apps in the world, with total downloads surpassing 1.9 billion in Google Play and the App Store. TikTok benefited from China's IT strength supported by national high-tech policy to an AI-based recommendation

- algorithm as a non-location-bound resource. For further discussion of the business success of ByteDance, please see Ma, Y. and Y. Hu 2021.
4. China has long adopted a 'hands-off' approach to regulatory interventions in the digital platform sphere. However, the situation has started to change. Since 2020 the Chinese government began to issue a series of regulations and guidelines, targeting digital platforms. For example, see Smithurst, T. 2021. In addition, 2021 has seen the Chinese government tighten political controls of internet giants, including Alibaba, Tencent and ByteDance. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/16/china-tells-alibaba-to-divest-media-assets-to-curb-influence-report> (accessed 20 November 2021).
  5. Please read the brief introduction to the WeChat mini-program in Appendix 2.
  6. The average Android app file size is 11.5MB, while the average iOS app file size is 34.3MB. See <https://sweetpricing.com/blog/2017/02/average-app-file-size/> (accessed 20 August 2021).
  7. The cheaper and easier approach to building mini-programs has made it ideal for start-ups or new apps that want to test the market. Even for big-name apps, the WeChat mini-program is still attractive; it gives 'reluctant' users the chance to try their service via WeChat without the bother of downloading an app.
  8. For example, fully-fledged shopping apps have more functions than their mini-program version.
  9. See <https://jingdaily.com/wechat-mini-program-2019/> (accessed 20 November 2021).
  10. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-gaming/article/2090472/wechat-top-workplace-communications-app-90-cent-chinese> (accessed 20 November 2021).
  11. The inquiry into people's general use of various digital apps took place in different stages of the fieldwork in different forms (using observations, interviews and questionnaires). The valid data about the use of email is based on 170 research participants.
  12. Chen, Y., Z. Mao and J. Qiu 2018, 107.
  13. Two couples in their forties, five couples in their fifties, two in their sixties, two couples in their seventies and one couple with the husband in his eighties and the wife in her seventies.
  14. For an excellent ethnographical account of how people manage their social relations via placing photographs strategically in domestic places please see Empson, R. 2011.
  15. Prior research on internet-mediated friendship focuses on discussing the sociality facilitated by the internet and the relationship between online and offline friendships. For example, see Boase, J. and B. Wellman 2006; Tang, L. 2010.
  16. More specifically, with the proliferation of digital communication technology, a growing body of scholarship is now assessing the ways in which social media are being drawn on to sustain personal relationships and to reconfigure ideas and practice of intimacy and friendship. See Chambers, D. 2013.
  17. In traditional Chinese society, financially supporting elderly parents was widely regarded as an essential part of filial piety. Having said this, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the introduction of the pension policy, along with the intense social competition among adults at work and increased living expenses in big cities, it is often older people who in practice provide financial support for their adult children (see the phenomenon of 'parents-eating' or *kenlao*).
  18. It is notable that in well-off families the focus of filial piety has shifted from providing material/practical care to providing emotional care and support. See Tu, M. 2016, 15.
  19. A substantial part of this section has been published as a joint paper by Xinyuan Wang and Laura Haapio-Kirk. See Wang, X. and L. Haapio-Kirk 2021.
  20. 'Emotion work' refers to the effort that individuals intentionally make to induce or inhibit feelings to render them appropriate to a given situation. According to sociologist Arlie Hochschild who pioneered the term, 'emotion work' is different from 'emotional labour'. The former refers to the management of feelings in private contexts dissociated with exchange value; the latter is undertaken in the context of paid work. See Hochschild, A. 1979; Hochschild, A. 2012.
  21. See Bryant, F. B. 2003.
  22. Jurgenson, N. 2019.
  23. The camera per se is not regarded as the app. It is rather viewed as part of the 'hardware' of the smartphone, as there is a camera lens on the back of the smartphone.
  24. In Chinese, the word for 'photo' is '*zhao pian*' while 'to cheat' is '*pian*' – which has exactly the same pronunciation as the second part of '*zhao pian*' (photo).
  25. For a detailed ethnographic analysis of smartphone photography and the camera smartphone market in mainland China see Yang, Y. 2021.

26. <https://petapixel.com/2018/10/01/beautygate-iphone-xs-is-smoothing-skin-in-selfies-owners-complain/> (accessed 20 November 2021).
27. See Bell, C. 1992, 74.
28. See Hwang, K.-K. and K.-H. Han 2010.
29. In the study of media, anthropologists have already taken issue with the ethnocentric view of human action and the invention of a 'unitary audience'. Instead, local perceptions and categories should be used to analyse people's responses to media. See Hughes-Freeland, F. 1992.
30. This is not the place to embark upon a discussion about Chinese popular religions. I refer readers who are interested in the discussion to Yang, C. K. 1970; Freedman, M. 1974; Bell, C. 1989; Stephen F. T. 1995.
31. See Madsen, R. 2014.
32. See Hansen, V. 1990.
33. Ibid.
34. See Chan, M. 2012.
35. See Baity, P. C. 1975; Wolf, A. P. 1974.
36. See Sangren, P. S. 1983.

## 6

# Crafting health: the moral body and the therapeutic smartphone

## Introduction

The [previous chapter](#) showcases how older people craft their appearance through photo retouching apps. It also explains how such efforts only make sense when we acknowledge the way in which people perceive the smartphone to be part of their social body. This understanding leads us to this chapter, which focuses upon how people craft their body in a health sense through a range of healthcare practices and the ubiquitous application of the smartphone.

The discussion about health in this chapter is less about institutional healthcare, such as hospitals and care homes, and more about moral discourse and living experience of ‘crafting’ health as daily activities among ordinary people, as well as the reasons behind that. The first part, based on ethnographic material, reveals what people do with regards to self-care in daily life; it also considers the general attitudes toward health among retirees. The following section reveals the social and moral reasons behind health practices, including the cosmology account for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the relationship between food and medicine and the ‘therapeutic’ role played by the smartphone in daily health practices.

## Self-care: the everyday homework

Ms Qian, a retired train conductor aged 83, sometimes thinks her ground-floor, two-room flat has become too spacious for her to live in alone after the death of her husband and her older daughter. The living room contains a set of beautiful, Ming-style antique rosewood armchairs. Ms Qian’s late husband bought them from an antique furniture market



because they reminded him of the similar armchairs that they had once owned and that had been damaged in house looting during the Cultural Revolution. 'It is about our shared memories,' Ms Qian said, stroking the armchair. The right arm of the chair is extremely polished as the result of constant strokes; that is where Ms Qian sits during the day.

Every morning, after half an hour of stretching in the community park, Ms Qian would sit in her favourite armchair. There she listened to *yang sheng* (self-care) health programs and news via the 'Ximalaya' podcast app on her iPad, accompanied by cups of *pu-erh* black tea. Ms Qian does not have a smartphone as the screen is too small for her. The iPad was bought by her second daughter and her grandson set up everything for her. The distinct and rich aroma of *pu-erh* tea carries her back to the days when her late daughter Jijia drank tea with her. It was Jijia who first recommended her to drink *pu-erh* tea; she bought the compressed tea leaves of *pu-erh* from Yunnan, the inland province in deep southwest China. It is believed by many in China that *pu-erh* tea can prevent various illnesses, from bacteria to toxic entities, from preventing ageing to aiding digestion, and from lowering cholesterol to managing blood sugar levels.<sup>1</sup> The older the *pu-erh* tea is, the stronger flavour it will have.

'These tea leaves are still the same batch that Jijia brought to me six years ago; things remain while the person has gone (*wu shi ren fei*),' Ms Qian sighs. She lowers her head to take a sip and adds, 'I feel she is still around when I am drinking the tea'. Jijia, her beloved daughter, was still very present in this flat, although she had died from breast cancer four years ago. According to Ms Qian, Jijia was a hard-working professional woman; even after retirement she continued to work for the same company. Jijia rarely fell ill and that was the reason she always skipped the annual medical test arranged by her company until it was too late. When Jijia became ill, Ms Qian started to urge everyone to take the annual medical test seriously and to not work too hard. As she would say,

No matter how hard you work, how much money you make, you will achieve nothing and enjoy nothing if you lose your health... Chairman Mao told us 'Health is the capital of the revolution' (*shenti shi geming de benqian*).

In order to keep healthy, every week Ms Qian attends the 'self-health management workshop' (*ziwo jiankang guanli*) organised by the Residents' Committee<sup>2</sup> (*juweihui*). That year the workshop was focusing on mental health (*xinli jiankang*), and the main topic was 'how to put down the past'. From the workshop Ms Qian learned that if one focuses

on 'practical', 'concrete' and 'nice' small things every day then it becomes easier to let go of sadness and resentment from the past. She thus tried not to 'indulge' in the sad past, claiming instead,

The healthy way of living is to look forward, and to focus on three meals a day. My everyday 'homework' is to keep myself healthy and I am a good 'student', I think.

Ms Qian is indeed a good 'student' – and a diligent one. On a daily basis she takes three kinds of food supplement (calcium, Vitamin C+D and cod liver oil) between meals; one bowl of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) soup for her lung nodule; four kinds of pills from Western medicine for her high blood pressure and chronic bronchitis; twice daily eye drops to prevent cataracts. On top of this, three meals are prepared in a sophisticated way, as according to the TCM principle that she quoted, 'the best medicine is food'. A cleaner visits Ms Qian's place every afternoon for one hour to bring in fresh vegetables and to clean the flat. Meanwhile her second daughter and the husband, both in their sixties, visit Ms Qian once or twice a week. They bring some meat and sometimes the three have dinner together.

Ms Qian can tell the specific benefits of each ingredient as well as disparate combinations of food. For example, garlic is good for stomach conditions; it can also reduce cholesterol and lower blood sugar. Ginger can dispel coldness, detoxify the body and cure cold. Asparagus will nourish the body's 'yin' energy while clearing away extra 're' (heat), the 'yang' energy, can strengthen the spleen and benefit 'qi' (the body's vital life energy); it also has an anti-cancer effect.<sup>3</sup> Dishes such as bitter melon (*ku gua*), stir-fried with pork meat balls, can nourish the blood and the liver, clear extra heat and detoxify the body; this is also particularly good for the heart and eyesight. The soup of Chinese wolfberry, the head of bighead carp and tofu helps to prevent osteoporosis, while sesame oil with steamed eggs is a folk remedy to treat cough, and so on.

Ms Qian's industrious efforts to keep healthy are also reflected in the amount of time she spends on health-centered activities. Ms Qian usually sleeps seven hours at night and has a one-hour nap in the afternoon. When she is awake she sets aside two hours for various gentle exercises (including half an hour of morning stretching; half an hour's stroll; half an hour's self-massage on key acupuncture points over the whole body; half an hour's foot bath in warm herb water before going to bed). She also uses four hours for her three meals;<sup>4</sup> one hour for preparing and drinking TCM tonic soup;<sup>5</sup> one hour for *pu-erh* tea drinking; one hour for singing Peking Opera to maintain the 'qi' or vital energy circulating smoothly within the

body; one hour for playing *mahjong*,<sup>6</sup> intended to offset dementia; one hour for listening to health and news podcasts; one hour for reading articles and chatting with friends on WeChat, often covering topics of food and health. In addition she attends a weekly one-hour community health workshop. Ms Qian herself is surprised that in a normal day, around 60 to 80 per cent<sup>7</sup> of her waking hours are centred on healthcare, while plenty of sleep is also considered important in keeping the body working well.

Two years ago, the annual medical test arranged by her workplace showed that Ms Qian had small nodules in her lungs. She was recommended by one of her friends to see a TCM doctor. After six months of TCM treatment (herb soup daily), the medical test in the following year showed the nodules to be much reduced. ‘TCM is magical!’ Ms Qian claimed. Although it is not totally clear whether there is a direct link between the TCM treatment and the reduction of the nodules, given Ms Qian also took pills using Western medicine for lung problems, it is very clear that she has an exceptionally high opinion of TCM.

However, Ms Qian’s strategy for keeping healthy is not only based on TCM. For instance, she has laboratory medical tests annually and takes food supplements along with TCM food remedies and pills that use Western medicine. She consumes TCM medical soup daily and in general seeks to live her life in a way that reflects a typical Chinese interpretation of the body, while also allowing ideas such as mental health to develop. Such a practical attitude towards healthcare and prevention makes her a typical case, giving us helpful insight into how older people in Shanghai take care of their health. Like Ms Qian, many older people – even those 20 years younger – started to pay particular attention to self-care in their daily lives after retirement.

It is natural for people to pay close attention to health when their physical condition declines, whether gradually or suddenly, because of ageing. Meanwhile retirement, as a phase of life, is widely perceived as the time when people are supposed to take particularly good care of their health. Keeping well in the later stages of life is believed to be essential for a flourishing family relationship. As mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), many people are fearful of becoming a burden to their partner or adult children because of health problems. In addition, most people regard self-care as the efficient way to prolong enjoyment of a healthy retired life. As one research participant observed,

[After retirement] now finally I can enjoy the pension, the longer I keep healthy the more I can earn the pension... Keeping healthy in itself is making money!

Another commented,

I had started to plan my travel even before retirement. Now I have time and enough money; as long as I keep healthy, life now is the most carefree and happy.

It is also common to see older people regard enduring health as a personal achievement at a later stage of life – something on which one can compete with peers. Chenlu, a 69-year-old retired civil servant, started to learn to swim and quit smoking two years ago. Now he swims three times a week. The reasons why Chenlu gave more time to exercise were partly because he finally had more time after retirement, but mainly because he received a ‘wake-up call’ from an old friend of his. Chenlu used to see his friend, the same age as him, as a ‘competitor’ in life; their families used to be neighbours in the alleyway (*lilong*) and the boys were classmates in primary and middle school. Both entered the civil service system in the 1990s. Chenlu thinks this friend has no reason to be more successful than him as both their family background and academic performance were similar. Despite this, however, his friend did achieve a top leadership position at the municipal bureau, whereas Chenlu remained as a middle-level cadre. Chenlu had felt rather ‘imbalanced’ (*bu pingheng*) with regards to his friend’s achievement for a long time, until his friend died from lung cancer one year after retirement. Still shocked, Chenlu observes,

It doesn’t count as much whether you are successful or not in your ‘first half of life’ (*rensheng shang banchang*)... Before I envied my friend who got promoted and somehow felt it’s unfair, but now I know that health is the name of the game.

Many seem to feel, as Chenlu does, that retirement is the point at which personal achievement at work is seen in perspective. Health is very much the ‘name of the game’ during the ‘second half of one’s life’ (*rensheng xia banchang*), assuming priority over other goals. In retirement people started to learn the lesson that good health is the premise for all other joys and achievements in life. It is common to hear people make comments on other acquaintances’ situations, for example ‘What a shame that XXX made so much money at the cost of a good health; in the end money is nothing compared to health’ or ‘It’s a shame that XXX has no blessing (*fuqi*) to enjoy life after retirement; the previous achievement came to nothing in the end without health’. People who made these

comments were usually those who had survived their peers or were in a relatively better health condition. Such discourse seems to be in line with the traditional pursuit of longevity in Chinese society; the mere fact of living longer than one's peers is a personal achievement among older people. Longevity itself is believed to be a moral statement or evidence of successfully 'doing personhood' (*zuo ren*), as only moral persons are supposed to be sufficiently blessed to enjoy longevity.

It is important to note that in former times, people who enjoyed longevity usually enjoyed a relatively healthy long life, as those with health problems were previously unable to live for long. However, as mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), significant advances in modern medicine have in many ways challenged the necessary connection between longevity and a healthy later life. Even if people are severely ill, it is still possible to be 'kept alive' for a considerable amount of time with artificial life support. Witnessing how their own elderly parents (now in their eighties and nineties) can live longer although not necessarily more happily with intensive modern medical interventions, some people in their sixties and seventies have realised that longevity of itself is not always good. For example, Fangfang, as mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), now 'sandwiched' between the care of her elderly, bed-bound mother and expected care of her grandchildren, has a very decided opinion on longevity:

Chinese people always wish each other longevity, but it's time to think what is the point of longevity if life quality has dropped so much in the final stages of life and the person has become such a burden for the whole family... I don't want to spend the last moment of my life in hospital.

Similarly Mr Gong, who also appeared in [Chapter 2](#), remarks,

Neither my wife nor I are longing for longevity that much. For us, the quality of life is more important than the length of life. We take self-care (*yang sheng*) seriously so that we may hope to enjoy a good quality of life after retirement.

Echoing the comments of Mr Gong and Fangfang, reflection upon the meaning of longevity among older people is becoming increasingly popular. Despite people's different opinions on longevity, the importance of taking care of health in daily life provides a consensus. The traditional pursuit of longevity and the evolving attitude toward it are examples that illustrate how 'health' is a social and cultural construct. Below we

explore the cultural and social context of daily self-care practice further, taking account of the key concepts and philosophy about health and body widely held in China.

## Traditional Chinese Medicine: more than an 'alternative'

Ms Qian is not alone in her daily engagement with TCM self-care. In fieldwork many older people expressed their confidence in TCM in general: most of them (about 75 per cent) had taken TCM medicine in the past year, and even more (90 per cent)<sup>8</sup> applied the concept of '*yang sheng*' (self-care)<sup>9</sup> frequently in daily life. Concepts of TCM are deeply embedded in health practice. One cannot really understand health-related practices among older people in China without fully acknowledging the significance of TCM in today's China. For people in the West, TCM may be perceived as an alternative therapy to complement orthodox medicine, but in China it is more than an alternative, as the statistics show. According to the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China,<sup>10</sup> in 2019 15.2 per cent of 35,000 hospitals were TCM hospitals; there were also more than 3,000 outpatient departments and over 57,000 TCM clinics in mainland China. The TCM sector provided more than 1.1 billion medical services, accounting for 16.4 per cent of healthcare delivered in China.

In practice, in ordinary people's daily lives, especially those who are relatively healthy, TCM and the whole range of TCM-related self-care practice is perceived and practised as a lifestyle. As research participant Ms Qian explains,

Western medicine is great in operations and dealing with the symptoms, but TCM helps to cultivate the whole system of the body.

TCM is commonly associated with the long-term practice of *yang sheng* (self-care or the nurturing of life), while Western medicine is more associated with operations and short-term treatment. These two can and do co-exist and work together harmoniously. Modern Western-style medicine is a more standard treatment when people fall ill, but instances of people taking both Western medicine and TCM are common.

One of the research participants, Mr Wu (aged 66), has long experience with the 'dual system' (Western + TCM) of healthcare similar to that of Ms Qian described above. He received chemotherapy after an operation for lung cancer four years ago, then continued to receive TCM

treatment over the next three years to ‘regain the vital energy (*yuan qi*) of the body’. The cost of TCM treatment is also covered by national medical insurance for critical illness.

It is also common to see people of different ages take TCM treatment without obvious health problems. For instance, women take TCM to prepare for pregnancy; parents of high-school students give their children TCM tonics when they are preparing for the extremely competitive university entrance examination (*gaokao*). TCM is also widely used to relieve the symptoms of menopause and period pain, both of which are viewed as the body losing its balance of ‘*yin*’ and ‘*yang*’. In *ForeverGood* one of the most popular study groups among older people is about TCM arteries and veins (Figs 6.1a and 6.1b).

Throughout most of Chinese history<sup>11</sup> TCM prevailed, from Chinese herbology, acupuncture, dietary therapy, *Tai chi*, massage (*tuina*) to *Qi gong*.<sup>12</sup> TCM is a complicated belief system which has the striking character of holism; it is told mainly through concepts related to Chinese philosophy and culture which view the world in a constant yet dynamic way.<sup>13</sup> As shown in Ms Qian’s case, common terms such as *yin yang* that originated in TCM or in Chinese cosmology more generally frequently appear in people’s colloquial language. Originally ‘*yin*’ referred to the absence of sunshine, i.e., shadow or darkness, while ‘*yang*’ referred to sunshine or light; to put it in a simplistic way, *yin* can be basically understood as ‘negative’ and *yang* ‘positive’. As two primary cosmic forces in Chinese cosmology and ontology, *yin* and *yang* are regarded as opposite



**Figure 6.1a** The health self-management group studying TCM arteries and veins. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.



**Figure 6.1b** A piece of wood used as a handy gadget for self-care massage to press acupuncture points. The text reads ‘Healthy Shanghai’. The object was a gift for elderly residents from a health promotion event arranged by the local government in 2016. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

but interdependent; they work together to produce all things and phenomena in the world.<sup>14</sup>

An infinite number of *yin yang* pairs exist in the universe; in addition, the same thing can be both *yin* and *yang*, depending on its condition and context.<sup>15</sup> In terms of speed, for example, a car is ‘*yang*’ relative to a bicycle, but *yin* relative to an aeroplane. The car is ‘*yang*’ when it makes travel faster and more convenient, but becomes ‘*yin*’ when it causes an accident and air pollution. As a well-known saying in the classic philosophy *Laozi* goes, ‘misfortune is what fortune depends on, while fortune is where misfortune is hiding’.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Confucianist harmony (*he*),<sup>17</sup> as mentioned in Chapter 4, can only be achieved through a dynamic and complementary balance of *yin* and *yang*. This balance requires people constantly to adjust their actions according to the current situation: to add *yang* when there is an excess of *yin* and vice versa.

Such a dialectic *yin yang* model of thinking is entrenched in daily life. For instance, it is believed that the food with nature of *yang* can be healthy in summer when the wider condition is *yang*, yet do harm to the body in winter when the wider condition is *yin*. Furthermore, in numerous scenarios and activities (such as making an investment, maintaining a relationship or working out in the gym), people make great efforts to keep the *yin yang* balance.<sup>18</sup> It is common to hear people saying ‘too much is as bad as too little’ (*guo you bu ji*), meaning once the harmony is lost (‘too much or too little’), neither *yang* (much) nor *yin* (little) can be rewarding. This entrenched *yin yang* model, or the need for internal harmony, impacts on people’s thinking in daily life. To some extent it accounts for the sustainability and popularity of TCM in practice, providing not only an essential part of daily self-care activities, but also an entrenched life ideology among the Chinese.

Furthermore, another feature of TCM, namely ‘*zhi wei bing*’, contributes to its enduring popularity. ‘*Zhi wei bing*’, which literally means ‘treat not ill’, means ‘treat illness when it is yet to come’. Illness prevention is believed to be one of the key principles of TCM. Practitioners are required to spot unbalanced energy (*qi*) in the body before symptoms appear. *Zhi wei bing* then allows timely remedies to be introduced at the stage before any symptoms appear, which may effectively restore energy balance and ward off the onset of illness.

The prevalence of chronic disease is notably high in China and continues to rise.<sup>19</sup> Given many chronic diseases might be avoided through prevention, the high demand for ‘*zhi wei bing*’ arises not only from ordinary people but also from the government.<sup>20</sup> With the government’s support, the TCM industry in China has witnessed rapid growth in recent years.<sup>21</sup> In 2019 the concept ‘*zhi wei bing*’ frequently appeared on Chinese mainstream



official media in the interpretation of the ‘Health China Action’ plan issued by the State Council.<sup>22</sup> The national public healthcare plan for 2020–30 is particularly focused on public health and disease prevention, promoting the transformation from disease treatment to disease prevention.<sup>23</sup>

In confronting the challenge of the city’s ageing society, Shanghai started to utilise TCM for public health prevention much earlier than other places in China. Since 2013 the Shanghai government has expanded public health services to include TCM.<sup>24</sup> In terms of national healthcare-related laws, as well as the scale of medical institutions nationwide, it is more appropriate to view TCM as a parallel path that complements Western medical practice in China.

The deployment of TCM has never been merely a healthcare issue but also a political or ideological one, and it is often problematic. The debate between TCM and Western medicine always carries some political colour in the process of Chinese industrialisation and modernisation. Both the development and rise of modern Western medicine in China and the decline of the Chinese feudal empire occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, and the similar timeframe is not a coincidence. In the 1840s China was defeated in the Opium War. What had been destroyed in that wretched fiasco was not just the army, but the cultural confidence of the country.<sup>25</sup> Encountering the overwhelming power of Western science and technology, many Chinese started to harbour serious doubts about Chinese civilisation. They believed that the only way to save China was to abandon the ‘old’ Chinese tradition and embrace ‘new’ Western modernity and technology.

Being deeply associated with Chinese traditional culture, TCM also faced similar doubts and challenges; it became regarded by some as feudal and unscientific. Since then, TCM has always been in the position of being investigated, reformed and developed on ‘thin ice’. For example, in the political turbulence of the early twentieth century, some revolutionaries discarded TCM as part of feudal culture; they sought to destroy the tradition and therefore discriminated against and curtailed TCM practice.<sup>26</sup> The recent ‘revival’ in which the government returned to sponsoring and promoting TCM, similar to the ‘rise of Confucianism’ discussed in [Chapter 4](#), does to some extent reflect the political need to regain ‘a sense of national pride’ in China nowadays.

## Food as medicine

People continue to argue which is the greatest cuisine in the world. Whether Chinese cuisine is among the greatest is highly debatable, but it is hard to dispute the statement that few other cultures are as

food-oriented as the Chinese.<sup>27</sup> As Jacques Gernet has remarked, ‘there is no doubt that in this sphere China has shown a greater inventiveness than any other civilisation’.<sup>28</sup> The *Analects of Confucius*, the main book of Confucianism, records abundant details of food-related activities. It notes, for instance, that foods should be eaten in season and not eaten to excess, even during festive celebrations; that one must eat a balanced diet, which requires a mix of rice, meat and vegetables; that one should not overeat as this places a burden on the spleen, stomach and heart; that rice should be the largest portion at every meal and meat should not exceed it; that ginger should be eaten before meals so that the internal heat of the body is not increased; that it is important to know the origin or source of your food; and that the way you cut your food reflects the way in which you live – food should be served in small or chopped pieces. The *Analects* also observes that the taste of any dish depends on the proper mixing of individual elements. A fine blending of ingredients results in great taste and harmony, but without harmony food cannot taste good.

Confucius established the ground rules for Chinese cuisine, and ever since one of the most important qualifications of a Chinese gentleman was his knowledge and skill regarding food and drink. The anthropologist K. C. Chang<sup>29</sup> has stated,

I cannot feel more confident to say that the ancient Chinese were among the peoples of the world who have been particularly preoccupied with food and eating.

Nowadays, food is still one of the major aspects of life in China; passion for and concern about it is seen everywhere. For many, visiting a new place is mainly about trying the local food and local cooking, and people are prepared to queue for more than two hours to try out a popular restaurant or even popular snacks or drinks. Tourist tips, in many cases, would be a long list of recommended food and restaurants. Local people are also especially keen on exploring local restaurants. Food review smartphone apps such as ‘Dianping’<sup>30</sup> are widely used for such purposes. It is also very common to see that events arranged by family and friends are really about trying out a new restaurant or an opportunity to dine in their favourite ones. After the meal, waves of photos of the food are posted on nearly everyone’s social media profiles. The camera app ‘Foodie’, originally designed for food photography, is also popular in China. Food-related activity, such as eating together, is not only a major way of connecting people socially, as mentioned in [Chapter 3](#), but is also the way in which ordinary Chinese engage with their health management. Among

retired people, the amount of time and energy spent on preparing proper food is remarkable, as Ms Qian's case illustrates.

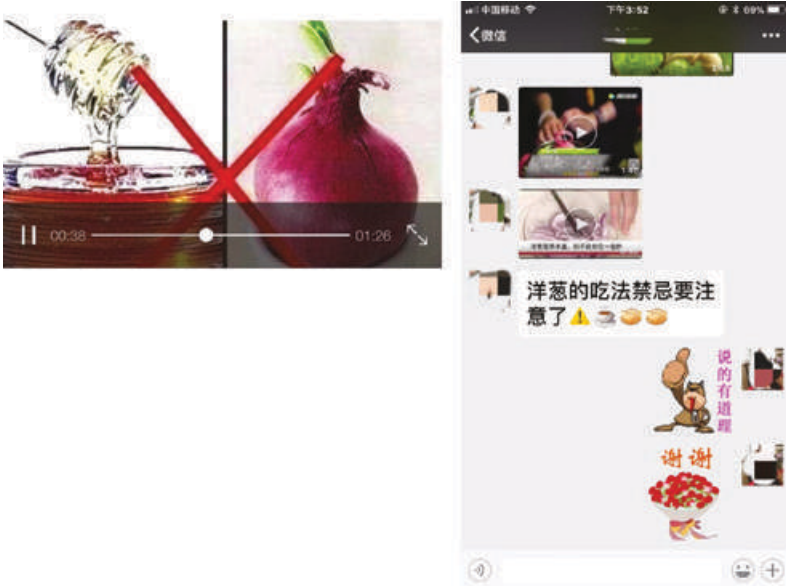
One central tenet of using food for healing is that 'medicine and food share a common origin' (*yao shi tong yuan*); food materials can therefore be used to prevent or treat medical disorders.<sup>31</sup> There is no clear distinction between food and medicine in Chinese culture, and people believe that cooking can bring out the medical value in food. According to modern lab-based standards, the health benefits of foods are evaluated by the proteins, calories, carbohydrates, vitamins and other nutritional elements they contain. However, in a traditional Chinese diet, still widely practised across China, properties of food such as energy and flavour, even its shape, are also taken into account. For example, the walnut is believed to be good for the brain because the nut's shape resembles a brain; the black bean is used to tonify the kidney because its shape is like that of a kidney.

It is also believed that different foods can impact specific internal organs or the meridians. For example, garlic acts on the stomach and asparagus on the spleen. Like herbal remedies, food can be selected and prepared appropriately to tonify, cleanse and regulate the body. Mr Ma, a retired factory worker, frequently shares short videos and articles about food remedies on his various WeChat groups, showing them to family members and former colleagues. He jokingly remarks, quoting a joke about a TCM food remedy that he got from his WeChat group of retired colleagues,

If Li Shizhen [one of best-known TCM doctors in ancient China] was still alive today, he would probably suggest people stew a computer chip in the tonic soup to improve intelligence.

The way in which Mr Zhu and his wife regulate their daily food intake provides another interesting example into using food to heal. Mr Zhu (in his late sixties) has had high blood pressure for more than eight years. His wife monitors his daily food intake closely. She buys onions at least twice every week as they are believed to be effective in lowering blood pressure, as well as having anti-cancer properties. The couple also take honey with hot water in the morning, as it is said that honey every morning can help to prevent constipation and can also combat chronic coughing. However, the couple firmly believe that these two particularly healthy foods, onion and honey, are not supposed to be taken together. Mrs Zhu explains the rationale,

Onion is good for everything, but you can't take onion and honey together; the combination is not good for your eyes!



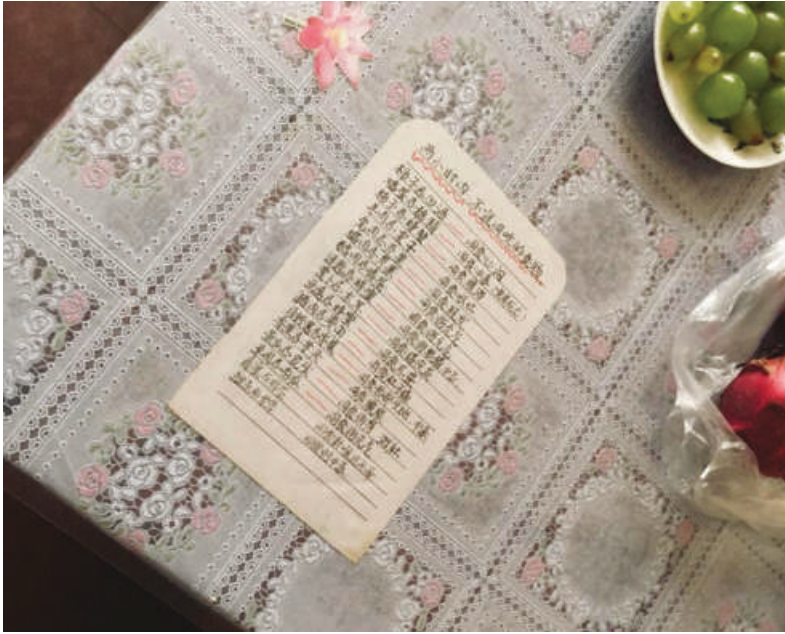
**Figure 6.2a (left)** Screenshot of a video clip, one and half minutes in length, describing the problems of using onion and honey together. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

**Figure 6.2b (right)** Screenshot of the WeChat conversation log between Mrs Zhu and her friend, who sent her the short video concerning the limitations of using onion. The comment instructs her to ‘Pay attention to the restriction of eating onion!’, to which Mrs Zhu replies with two emoji. One, saying ‘It makes a lot of sense’, features a cartoon character giving a thumbs-up gesture; the other, saying simply ‘Thank you’, is accompanied by a bunch of flowers. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

To reinforce her point, she played a short video about the limitations of using onion (Fig. 6.2a) which a good friend sent to her on WeChat a few weeks ago (Fig. 6.2b).

Mrs Zhu used to keep a long list of detrimental food combinations in a cutting from a local newspaper. She kept it sandwiched underneath the transparent mat on her dining table for ease of reference.

I put that newspaper cutting on food restrictions just at the right corner of the table where I sit. From time to time when I was having meals, I could look down and learn it by heart.



**Figure 6.3** The handwritten list of food restrictions compiled by Ms Wang. Photo by Xinyuan Wang.

That yellowed paper cutting disappeared when they changed the dining table. However, Mrs Zhu no longer needs it as she can always check WeChat. It is common to see older people keeping the details of ‘food restrictions’ (*shi wu xiang ke*) in the form of newspaper clippings or handwriting. For example, Ms Wang (aged 71) also keeps a handwritten list of food restrictions underneath the transparent mat of her dining table (Fig. 6.3). The practice and circulation of food restrictions existed, and was embedded in people’s daily lives, long before the advent of the smartphone.

One of the reasons why food takes such a significant role in health-related activity is because it is also regarded as the best daily life practice for preventing illness (*zhi wei bing*). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, TCM home remedies such as tonic food recipes (*yaoshan*) and herb drink (*chayin*) became one of the common tips that people shared among friends and family (Figs 6.4a, 6.4b and 6.4c). Furthermore, TCM emphasises the complementary nature of body and mind, a harmony that enhances people’s self-healing power for curing diseases and keeping fit. This leads us to consider a fundamental belief about the relationship between body and mind among older people.



**Figure 6.4a (left)** Screenshot of a WeChat group in which people share a TCM home remedy during COVID-19. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

**Figure 6.4b (centre)** Screenshot of the tonic food recipe and health tea recipe suggested by TCM to help prevent infection by COVID-19. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

**Figure 6.4c (right)** Screenshot of a short video showing the TCM treatment of COVID-19 which was circulated among research participants. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

## Body-mind togetherness

In the fieldwork numerous examples emerge in people’s daily food habits that suggest the link between body and mind, confirming that ‘body’ in Chinese thinking carries profound cultural and social implications. Parts of the body are indeed embedded in common Chinese phrases. For example, the Chinese word for ‘temper’ is *‘pi qi’*, literally meaning ‘spleen air’. To throw a tantrum is *‘fa pi qi’*, meaning to ‘grow spleen air’; to be careless and thoughtless is *‘cu xin’*, meaning ‘thick heart’, while ‘careful’ is *‘xi xin’*, meaning ‘thin heart’; the word for social status is *‘shen fen’*, literally meaning ‘the boundary of the body’. In describing feelings of extreme fear or alarm, people usually employ the term *‘xin jing dan zhan’*, meaning ‘heart jumping gallbladder shivering’; extremely anger, on the other hand, is *‘gan chan’*, which means ‘liver shivering’. The expression *‘chi ku’* (to eat bitterness) – frequently used by research participants when referring to tough and bleak days in their past – links a somatic with an emotional understanding: a person suffers from ailments of the stomach because he or she eats bitter food or suffers from misfortune.

Confucianism states that a good life requires internal harmony in the person, which thus integrates three dimensions: the moral, mental

and physical dimensions of an individual's existence. These three dimensions are not viewed as separate matter.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, TCM does not regard a person's body as something separate from one's mind. The dichotomy between body and mind, something traditionally almost taken for granted in Western medicine, does not exist in TCM cosmology. Instead TCM theory argues that mind and body work in unison. Numerous examples from TCM illustrate a wealth of bodily symptoms, sensations and their relation to the world of emotions, which challenge the dichotomised view of mind and body, subject and object.<sup>33</sup>

The main difference in perception between TCM and Western medicine is the understanding of the relation between psyche and soma. In TCM terms, physical organs such as 'liver', 'heart' and 'spleen' do not mean the anatomical substrate, but relate to a certain pattern of emotion. For example, liver is the physical metaphor for anger, heart for anxiety and thinking, spleen for melancholia and gallbladder for courage.<sup>34</sup>

Feng, a retired accountant aged 56, provides a typical example of how people perceive the relationship between psyche and soma. Living in a spacious flat in suburban Shanghai with her husband and two dogs, Feng knew that she was enjoying a life that most people would envy; she was supposed to be very happy, but she was not. Feng sensed that her health had started to decline since she turned 50, when she started to experience the symptoms of menopause. Her son had gone to college at that time and they were communicating less and less, with the relationship becoming very tense. To make things worse, Feng suddenly found that she could not lift her arm properly. The problem with her frozen shoulder made Feng think of her late mother, who also had the same problem in her fifties; in her later years she could not comb her hair nor wipe tables. Although Feng felt desperate about her situation during menopause, she felt even more embarrassed to bother her husband about her problem. She did not want to discuss it with him as he was so busy with his business at that time.

Going to yoga regularly was the only way she could find a release, but the yoga studio near her home had closed down. Feng therefore had to turn to her social media to look for alternatives. As it happened, she saw an advertisement on WeChat posted by her former yoga teacher; it said that there was a TCM health workshop held in Guangzhou, a big city in south China. As Feng recalls,

I have never gone anywhere without my husband since I got married. In fact, I think I am a very independent person, I just never had the opportunity to be that way. I had a strong desire at that time that I wanted to go out alone. So I signed up for the workshop.

The workshop was not only about the meridians in TCM, but also about the understanding of one's own body, as well as of social life in general. According to Feng, after the workshop she started to view interpersonal relationships in a different way. While lifting her left arm backward to hold her right hand diagonally over the back, Feng further explains,

In many cases, the body shows the signs from your mind... Before I always judged things from my own perspective ... but now I start to appreciate that there is more than one value system and it's difficult to tell which one is better. My body has also become much more flexible.

Another thing Feng gained from learning about TCM is an awareness that 'attention may cause illness'. It is said that in some cases people only feel the symptoms once they are diagnosed with a certain illness: their attention becomes concentrated on specific problems and the 'negative energy' of the body will also be gathered there. Her training and readings suggest that the body is intelligent, and it will promptly remind people with the symptoms. With knowledge of TCM, people can track down the root of the symptoms. Therefore if the body has no abnormal feelings, then people should not 'over worry' about things just because of a few 'abnormal' figures.

Such a perspective chimes with something in Feng's past experience. She recalls,

No wonder my late father immediately felt dizzy in his head the moment he was told that his blood pressure was too high. If you believe that you are not healthy, your body can totally feel it.

Feng's husband used to wear a tracker which her son gave to him. The wristband is said to be able to monitor his sleep with various figures. However, her husband felt the quality of his sleep begin to decline once he started to use it.

I would check the figures straight away when I woke up. If the figures weren't satisfactory, I could actually sense that my energy was low ... even though I thought I had slept well.

In the end Feng's husband had to 'drop' the wristband. He explains with a laugh,

Without the figures telling me how I slept, my body can actually handle these things just fine.



The cases of Feng and her husband represent a growing healthcare trend among older people in China. This increased awareness could be interpreted as a recent return to the practices of TCM among people who had followed Western medical standards and attitudes religiously for the past three decades, as part of the national pursuit of modernisation. Their doubts about ‘scientific’ figures also reflect a more general concern about – even a mistrust of – hospitals that is shared by many ordinary Chinese. Such concern is related to the issue of ‘overtreatment’, arguably driven by economic interest rather than patient welfare, which has become a common problem.<sup>35</sup> It is common to see that most people believe hospitals and doctors are exploiting patients by routinely overprescribing medicines and treatment. Overtreatment is seen as a way of making money, as doctors in the state system are relatively poorly paid despite the years of study required to qualify. The problem of overtreatment has impacted on the relationship between patients and doctors, as well as creating significant waste of valuable healthcare resources.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, Feng’s case speaks to the deep-rooted TCM belief that true health is about the holistic relationship between mind and body, between individuals and the whole of society and the universe. The Chinese philosopher Kuang-ming Wu has pointed out in the book *Body Thinking*<sup>37</sup> that, along with a formal, abstract mode of thinking, body thinking has been routinely practised in Chinese culture<sup>38</sup> for a long time. In the Cartesian ways of thinking, by contrast, people take for granted that thinking, an exclusively cognitive activity, is entirely different from bodily activity.

Such mind-body dualism is pervasively accepted in many societies. However, in traditional Chinese thinking, the body is where and how people think: it is not an empirical corporeality that is a consequence of mind-body dualism. Acknowledgement of the emphasis in Chinese thinking of the cohesion of body and mind helps us further to understand the daily practice of healthcare in China, as well as the perceived relationship between health and morality.

## Health: a moral and social issue

Huanghui (aged 66) was shocked and even ashamed when she was diagnosed with liver cancer. First of all, as a retired doctor she has always taken great care of her health and has never had any bad habits such as drinking, which can cause liver problems. Secondly, and probably more fundamentally, she regards herself as a reasonably good person, and so

wondered how come she suffers from a disease with a bad name? This is so unfair. People will gossip about her cancer and she can imagine some of them would attribute her cancer to some ‘unfair reason’. Soon, as she expected, certain rumours reached her ears. ‘Too many wrong deeds (*zuo nie*) when she was a gynaecologist; here comes the instant karma (*xian shi bao*).’ Huanghui’s lips quivered with rage when she thinks about those gossips. ‘It is outrageous... total bullshit... my liver is shivering (*gan chan*)<sup>39</sup> because of anger!’ she exclaimed. Her daughter, who also works as a doctor of Western medicine, tried to console her:

Calm down... please don’t be bothered by this stuff. Anger is extremely bad for your liver: just let it go.

Huanghui was right about a few things. It is true that cancer used to have a bad name, especially when it was an incurable disease. Older people in Shanghai still remember the old days when being diagnosed with cancer was regarded as something shameful, secretly suggesting the patient must have done something morally bad in life and therefore deserved the punishment of fatal illness. In the old days the whole family would keep their mouths shut if any of the family members got cancer, as revealing this would immediately cause gossip about the whole family. The memories linger even though nowadays, with the increasing number of cases, cancer patients will not usually face any obvious stigmatisation now – unless there is somehow an ‘obvious’ reason.

The reason that even Huanghui herself was worried about was the fact that she had conducted thousands of abortion operations when she was a gynaecologist. With the titles of ‘pioneer communist party member’ (*xianjin dangyuan*) and ‘moral worker’ (*lao dong mo fan*), Huanghui was always supposed to set the moral role for her colleagues at work, and so she did. When the one-child policy was a national policy, the hospital where she worked regularly received abortion cases, sometimes even the induction of pregnancies in mid- or late term.

It’s a tricky task, many of my colleagues were very hesitant about doing the operation... but that is the duty of the hospital, you know.

Huanghui regarded what she did was actually to share the burden of her colleagues. In effect she was just an executor rather than the decision maker.

Huanghui’s struggle about the narrative of her health problem throws light on a common phenomenon among older people – that in

many cases health is seen as a moral issue. Here moral judgement does not only refer to the situation that keeping one's own health has been regarded as an individual responsibility that a 'moral citizen' should take. It also refers to the common belief that good health is an endorsement of one's having been a moral person.

Talking about issues of morality, people in China often refer to an old saying 'people are doing things, the sky is watching' (*ren zai zuo, tian zai kan*). This reflects a common belief shared by ordinary Chinese that whatever you do on the earth, there is always a record of good or wrong deeds in the 'sky' (*tian*). Unlike the Christian God, the concept of *tian* is much looser and less humanised – more like the abstract laws of nature (especially in the discourse of Taoism). In a way, *tian* is like the sky – distant to the point of indifference to the task of reconciling the human world with itself. But *tian* nevertheless knows about everyone's deeds and thoughts and does not judge randomly, so that people can potentially create a good fate through good deeds or get punishment because of bad deeds. Life itself is viewed as credit.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship between human beings and supernatural powers involves a large amount of standardisation, embodied in a system of 'karma points' that can be earned by good deeds and squandered by bad deeds. Confucius once famously observed that 'a person of virtue lives a long life' (*ren zhe shou*). In Confucianism, from the very beginning, longevity has been an ideal with a close connection to morality.<sup>41</sup>

It is therefore believed that immoral deeds, even if unknown to other human beings, will cause punishment such as fatal disease. The reverse is also true: judging from the onset of bad health, people may guess that the person suffering from such illness has done something immoral. Sometimes, even if nothing has happened yet, such logic is applied in the emergence of public opinion, causing damaging social pressure for the people in question. For instance, an old couple who were believed to have bullied their care worker now face a general public view that they will soon experience a radical decline of health. Neighbours say,

They won't have a good death as they failed to be moral persons (*zuo ren bu hao*).

On one occasion another research participant commented on the illness of a former colleague, remarking,

This man revolted (*zao fan pai*) during the Cultural Revolution. Now his body is revolting against him.

Moreover, the ages 73 and 84 are viewed as difficult ages for older people to survive, a belief summarised in an old saying,

Reaching the age of 73 or 84; you will go to hell without an invitation from the God of Death (*yan wang*).

The concern that surrounds these ages derives from the fate of two Chinese sages: Confucius passed away at the age of 73 and the ‘second sage’, Mencius, died at 84. Even the extremely moral sages such as Confucius and Mencius could not escape from the curse of 73 and 84, the argument runs, let alone ordinary people. These two numbers are thus regarded as the critical junctures of life. If one can live through 73, one can at least survive till 84; if one can live through 84, then one can live as long as 100 years.

In other cases, people perceive suffering from illness and physical problems as a way to pay off moral debt. Wanshu is an apt example of this. For a while she kept falling – and thought she knew the reason why.

Fortunately, the time when I kept falling so easily has gone. In my fifties and sixties I fell a lot, but that was because I owe my mum a deep debt about falling.

Wanshu used to be a very dedicated teacher. On one occasion her mother had to go to the hospital for an examination, but – because she had to teach a class – Wanshu did not pick up her mother herself; instead she let her go to hospital by bus. Sadly, her mother was hit by a car as she got off the bus, an accident which left her bedridden for the rest of her life. For years Wanshu has been blaming herself for her mother’s accident, regarding herself as a unfilial daughter.

Wanshu believes that the reason why she fell frequently in the decade after her mother died was a punishment imposed by some instance of karma for her treatment of her mother. For example, once in crossing the road she was struck by a car, hitting the bonnet of the car and bouncing off. Another time, while visiting her relatives in Australia, she fell into a table corner and broke a rib. Wanshu felt very embarrassed about bothering her relatives, as she explains,

I have already caused a lot of trouble by staying with them. How can I further bother them by asking them to send me to the hospital?

So she claimed that everything was fine, while quietly taking copious amounts of painkillers during her stay. She was not treated for the broken rib until her return to China a week later. Yet she continued to feel this pain was deserved:

I feel so sorry for my mother, so I have to swallow the bitter fruit myself without bothering others.

After she 'had paid the debt' for a decade, however, Wanshu now feels the debt has been signed off.

Like Wanshu, many older people see their health condition as a moral issue, resulting from social relations as well as their minds. Another example, Ms Liu, was diagnosed with breast cancer; she attributes her health problems to the fact that her 35-year-old daughter has not yet married.<sup>42</sup> Even Ms Liu's relatives would agree that the issue of her daughter's marriage – or lack of it – was responsible for Ms Liu's negative feelings, therefore triggering the cancer. So it is that social relations, self-care and the moral concerns are interlocked in everyday narratives of health. Below we explore the role played by the smartphone in the narrative and practices of health.

## The therapeutic smartphone

One of the most common daily greetings in *ForeverGood*, as in many other places in China, is 'Have you eaten?' (*chi guo le ma?*). The question has been widely recorded and analysed in major academic researches and popular writings, reflecting the significance of food in Chinese social life. After this most common greeting, another line to trigger small talk among residents, spotted only recently on a few occasions, seems to suggest the emerging importance of another popular daily activity – short videos watching and sharing via smartphones.

'Have you checked the video I sent to you?' This was how Ms Shi often started her daily greetings with her neighbours when they met for an after-dinner stroll in the neighbourhood (Fig. 6.5a). 'Yes, just watched it, very useful! I have forwarded it to my family group. Have a look!' replies one neighbour, Ms Cai, pulling out her smartphone. Ms Cai opens her WeChat, quickly swipes down the screen, then clicks on the video Ms Shi mentioned and passed the screen to other neighbours loitering around. It is a one-minute video illustrating how to massage



**Figure 6.5a (left)** Video-checking among neighbours. Photo taken and created by Xinyuan Wang.

**Figure 6.5b (right)** Screenshot of a short video about massage and acupuncture. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

the acupuncture point '*kun lun xue*' near the ankle, in order to treat sciatica and arthritis (Fig. 6.5b). Like many contemporaries in their sixties and seventies, both Ms Shi and Ms Cai started to use the smartphone as well as social media around two to three years ago. Soon they became heavy users, estimating that they spend at least three hours per day on the smartphone.

Activities facilitated by short videos account for a remarkable part of the usage time of smartphones. The length of the video is one of the key factors that defines the accessibility and popularity of videos, so the majority of videos on these platforms are very short, ranging from 10 seconds to 2 minutes. For example, the slogan of the short video platform 'Miaopai' (literally meaning 'seconds shooting') is 'Shoot a blockbuster in 10 seconds'. Being so short means that files of the actual video (rather than a link to it) are small enough to be easily sent as messages.<sup>43</sup> Therefore in most cases people received short videos from various contacts on WeChat.

The popularity of short videos also manifests itself among the retired population, usually regarded as less digitally savvy. Despite the fact that fewer than 10 per cent of participants have gone to a cinema in the past six months, all the participants watched short videos on smartphones, with more than 70 per cent of them viewing short videos on a daily basis. Almost one-third of participants watch short videos for more than one hour per day.

Fangfang is also a big fan of short videos. In order to take her smartphone wherever she goes, she sewed a pocket on her apron. From time to time, when she sits down for a short break in the middle of housework, she pulls out the smartphone and clicks all the ‘new-in’ videos that people shared in four different WeChat groups (two alumni groups, one group of former neighbours, one family group), as well as those sent to her directly by a few of her good friends. Many retirees are very keen on short videos, accepting them as a form of daily communication as well as an important information resource. Mr Jiang, in his seventies, explained why he was a fan of short videos:

They [videos] are much better than text; I need a magnifier to read small fonts on this small screen. But I can watch videos without any problem. Video has sound and moving pictures, very effective and engaging... Nowadays the content of short videos is just so rich... I also watch short videos every day to keep myself aware of the ever-changing world.

The majority of short videos that Mr Jiang received are less than one and half minutes in duration; some of them last only 15 seconds. In just one week (16 April 2018–22 April 2018), Mr Jiang clicked through more than 100 short videos, ranging from amusing cat videos to TCM *yang sheng* tips. From the perspective of cinematography, most short clips were made in a rather ‘amateur’ way. The majority of video clips circulated on smartphones were shot by ordinary smartphones without choreographed camera movements or professional lighting. In many cases, the storytelling is as straightforward as one can imagine – either talking directly to the camera or featuring video/slides with background music plus a voice-over. In some cases the videos are short clips of a longer film or television programme. The resolution of most short videos is far below the quality needed for showing on a big screen. However, as Mr Jiang argues, the richness of short videos lies not only in their multimedia nature, but also in the content. Common topics for short videos among retired people include amusing or unusual videos of animals, people and design; entertaining performances such as singing, dancing, acrobatics, magic and so on; tips on *yang sheng*; news; lifestyle guidance and tips.

Short videos have become an essential part of older people’s daily practice of *yang sheng* self-care. Older people gain *yang sheng* knowledge, as well as maintain social relationships, by watching and sharing short videos via the smartphone. The benefit of the smartphone is also

recognised by doctors. Dr Gu, a practitioner of TCM aged 67 and possessing 40 years' experience, sees the use of smartphones as a sign of his patients' health condition. Observation (*wang*), listening (*wen*), inquiry (*wen*) and taking the pulse (*qie*) are the four basic diagnostic methods used in TCM.<sup>44</sup> 'Observation' refers to paying close attention to the patient's appearance, tongue, ears and eyes, as well as noting his or her movement, mannerisms and patterns of speech.

Here in Dr Gu's case, the subjects of 'observation' also include the smartphone. According to Dr Gu, the phone efficiently reflects an individual's life in terms of personality, daily social life and family relations. The perceived 'togetherness' of the physical and social body manifests itself in Dr Gu's treatment of his patients. He once explained the TCM logic of illness,

Many illnesses are caused or triggered by problematic *qi* (energy, vital flow). So in TCM we help people to attune (*tiao*), unblock (*tong*) and harmonise (*he*) the *qi* in a holistic view of the person.

Dr Gu meant it when he referred to a 'holistic' view – he even pays attention to the use of smartphones among his patients as part of a general examination of a person's health condition, especially among those with chronic illness related to old age. An example given by Dr Gu is one of his patients Keli, aged in her seventies. She uses the latest Huawei smartphone, a present from her son-in-law, to book her appointment with Dr Gu via the mHealth app 'WeDoctor' (*weiyi*), and pays her appointment fee via the smartphone. Dr Gu remarks,

Judging from the phone she uses, Keli seems to have a harmonious social life where she enjoys enough support and attention. The fact that she can use the phone so well also shows that she has an open mind and a good '*jingshen*' (spirit). This is very important for improving her health, as it is more likely for narrow-minded people with a low '*jingshen*' to have '*qi*' blocked. Many of my patients' problems lie in the '*xin*' (heart) and they won't feel better unless their '*xin bing*' (heart illness) is removed.

By '*xin bing*' (heart illness), Dr Gu does not refer to any cardiac disease, even though many of his patients suffer from certain chronic cardiac problems. Rather '*xin bing*' means 'troubled mind', or 'anxiety' in colloquial language. Similarly the term '*jingshen*' that Dr Gu used to describe Keli's general life situation is not an equivalent to 'spirit' in English.



The term '*jingshen*' derives from the combination of characters '*jing*' and '*shen*', with the former meaning 'concentrated basis of vitality' and the latter 'vitality as manifested through functional activities of mind and body'.<sup>45</sup>

The use of the smartphone thus reflects the patient's lifestyle as well as his or her willingness and capability of adapting to the surrounding environment, something regarded as a positive sign of vigour in TCM. Dr Gu thus encourages some of his regular patients in their seventies or eighties to use the smartphone, or even to get a better smartphone if they are still using 'second-hand' phones discarded by younger family members. As he explains,

The phone is just like our body: when it gets older, it become slower... I always told my patients that you can't really stop your body function from declining over time, as it is the rules of nature, just like the temperature drops in winter, but you can upgrade your smartphones.

By suggesting that his patients upgrade their smartphones, Dr Gu highlighted the perceived crucial relationship between smartphone use and one's health in general. In the discourse of TCM, a person's overall health, achieved through a harmonious situation, is achieved holistically via the body-mind 'togetherness'.

## Conclusion

As observed in the fieldwork, after retirement most people started to regard health as the 'name of the game' in the 'second half of one's life'. This chapter is about discourse and living experience of 'crafting' health as daily activities among ordinary people, and the reasons behind this. For example, it has considered evolving reflections upon the traditional pursuit of longevity; the practice of TCM principles in the *yang sheng* activities that form an important part of daily self-care; and the use of smartphones in the context of the perceived relationship between social relations and health.

In order to appreciate people's narratives of their health fully, we need to pay more attention to the role played by the body in the creative and constitutive processes that shape people's understanding of their social relations and their daily lives. Health is consequently not just a physical issue, but also a social and moral concern. TCM plays a significant

role in people's understanding of their health and social issues, possessing deep roots in both Taoism and Confucianism and exerting a profound influence on Chinese culture at large.<sup>46</sup>

In this sense, it is arguable that in China TCM is not merely an alternative to orthodox Western medicine, but that it is also more than a medical solution. In many ways TCM represents a life ideology and philosophy that is followed by ordinary Chinese through a variety of activities. The pursuit of harmony – both the harmony within a society, as mentioned in [Chapter 4](#), and the 'internal harmony' within one's body, as emphasised by TCM – serves to provide a fundamental principle in people's lives.

The detailed discussion of TCM in this chapter also offers us a different perspective for appreciating what the smartphone actually means to health. More than merely providing an efficient and effective means for older people to keep healthy, the smartphone has also been perceived as an essential part of a healthy body in the sense of TCM. The traditional Chinese cosmology, as reflected in TCM practices, provides a narrative for people to view smartphones as part of the moral and social body. Along with the perceived decline of physical condition and social capabilities in older age, people may gain a whole new set of capabilities via the use of the smartphone. The 'therapeutic smartphone' is not just a metaphor here; it represents a creative way of crafting health via the smartphone in the Chinese context.

## Notes

1. Lee, L. K. and K.Y. Foo 2013.
2. Please see [Chapter 3](#) for an introduction to the Residents' Committee, which serves as the grassroots Party-state unit across urban China.
3. Briefly speaking, 'yin and yang', literally meaning 'dark and bright', is the key concept of dualism in Chinese cosmology. It is believed that *yin* and *yang*, the seemingly opposite forces, are interconnected and complementary to each other.
4. The four hours includes time for food shopping, cooking and cleaning up.
5. The preparation of Traditional Chinese Medicine soup is a different process from making herb tea, which is as fast as making ordinary tea. Traditional Chinese Medicine usually contains more than 10 tailored ingredients (mainly herbal) and preparing the soup is a time-consuming process that involves slow cooking.
6. *Mahjong* is a tile-based game developed in China and popular throughout East and Southeast Asia. A game of skill, strategy and calculation, it also involves a degree of chance. The Chinese believe that a person's memory is well trained by the playing of *mahjong*.
7. In practice, a few things can take place simultaneously. For example, it is possible to have a foot bath while reading on WeChat, or to drink *pu-erh* tea while listening to a podcast. The total amount of health-centered time is thus not a simple addition.
8. The figures of 75 per cent and 90 per cent are based on ethnographic observation among 60 retired research participants, interviews conducted among 35 research participants and an online survey about TCM among 64 research participants (aged 50 and above). All were conducted in Shanghai during the 16 months of fieldwork between 2018 and 2019.
9. *Yang sheng* derives directly from TCM with a focus on the balance within the body.

10. Statistical bulletin on healthcare development. National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China. 2020. <https://www.nhc.gov.cn/guihuaxxs/s10748/202006/ebfe31f24cc145b198dd730603ec4442.shtml> (accessed 14 August 2021).
11. Western evidence-based medicine made its way into China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, notably through the efforts of missionaries and the Rockefeller Foundation. See Gulick, E. V. 1975.
12. <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/whatiscam/chinesemed.htm> (accessed 20 August 2021).
13. Such as *The Book of Changes* and *Laozi, NeiJing* that lays a foundation of TCM theory.
14. Fung, Yu-lan 1948, 138–40.
15. Jiang, X. 2013.
16. Laozi 1990, 160.
17. Although Taoism and Confucianism are quite different in their specific teachings, they share a cosmological belief that the universe consists of *yin* and *yang*. Taoism views human beings in a more passive manner while Confucianism stresses the active role of humans in the ongoing process of achieving *yin yang* harmony. The Confucians, especially the Neo-Confucians, stress harmonising human action and human society with the changing patterns in nature. For them, *The Book of Changes* is a significant guide to establishing *yin yang* balance with nature and with other people. See Tucker, M. E. 1993.
18. See also Huang, L. L. 2016.
19. It is estimated that the cost of disease-related medical care will grow by nearly 50 per cent in China between 2010 and 2030. The number of patients with chronic disease, whose medical care costs account for 70 per cent of the total disease cost burden in China, is estimated to increase to nearly 300 million. See Zhifang, Z. and G. Qing 2013.
20. National Health and Family Planning Commission of China. National Basic Public Health Service (2017, third edition). Beijing: Government of China.
21. The Chinese government has instituted nearly 100 regulations to support the development of TCM, particularly for chronic disease care and prevention. General hospitals are increasingly utilising TCM strategies for healthcare and prevention. In 2017 the TCM industry saw an annual growth of 20 per cent. In that year there were 482,000 TCM practitioners in China, but by the end of 2018 the number had risen to 715,000. Chinese TCM institutions offered treatment for 1.07 billion patients in 2017. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-11/24/content\\_34927828.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-11/24/content_34927828.htm); [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/26/c\\_138090862.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/26/c_138090862.htm); State Administration of Traditional Chin Med of the People's Republic of China. <https://bgs.satcm.gov.cn/zhengcewenjian/> (accessed 20 August 2021).
22. [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/17/content\\_5410390.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/17/content_5410390.htm) (accessed 20 August 2021).
23. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30160-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30160-4/fulltext) (accessed 20 August 2021).
24. <https://archive.shine.cn/feature/health-and-environment/Plumbing-the-depths-of-our-traditional-medicine/shdaily.shtml> (accessed 20 August 2021).
25. Lovell, J. 2012.
26. Fang, X. 2012.
27. See another publication based on the same ethnographic materials. Wang, X. and V. Lo 2019.
28. Gernet, J. 1962, 135.
29. Chang, K. C. 1977.
30. This app is listed among the top 10 apps in the analysis carried out in Chapter 5.
31. Huang, H. T. 2000.
32. Li, C. 2010.
33. Ots, T. 1990.
34. Yu, N. 2003.
35. More generally, the reflection upon the problem of 'overtreatment' in Western medicine is universal. To learn more about this issue, interested readers are recommended to read McCartney, M. 2013.
36. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1001829/china-fights-overtreatment-with-standardized-insurance-payouts> (accessed 20 August 2021).
37. The concept of body thinking calls attention to the bodily nature of the thinking and the thinking nature of the body in actual thinking – as exemplified in the 'concrete thinking' practised in China. See Wu, K. 1997.
38. Believing in the wholeness that the body, nature and society all originate and have deep roots in *Tao*, the natural law in *Taoism*.

39. 'Shivering liver' is actually a colloquial phrase to express one's extreme anger.
40. Wagner, R. 2014.
41. Li, C. 2010.
42. In China single women are usually under great social pressure to get married. In colloquial language the derogatory label '*sheng nv*' ('leftover women') is used to describe educated, successful, unmarried urban women in their late twenties to forties in China. See Gaetano, A. M. 2017.
43. Having said this, one of the main concerns of the short video among retirees is that it can take up a lot of space of their smartphones.
44. Liao, Y. 2011, 52.
45. Zhang, Y. 2007, 6.
46. See Li, C. 2010.

## 'Doing personhood' in revolution(s)

### Introduction

This chapter explores the issue of personhood within a broader context of complex social relationships, as well as the relationship between individuals and the Party-state. The construction of personhood in various societies has long been an important theme within anthropology. The local notion of personhood in Chinese translates to the two-character term *zuoren*, with the first verb meaning 'to make' or 'to do' and the second noun standing for 'person' or 'human'. The term *zuoren* literally means to make oneself a human being or 'to do personhood'. The Chinese concept of personhood, as anthropologist Yunxiang Yan points out, is inherently dynamic. A more effective way of capturing the complexity, dynamics and nuances of Chinese personhood is thus to examine the lifelong process of 'becoming'.<sup>1</sup>

For the older generation in China, such a process of 'becoming' is closely associated with one word: revolution. We need to pay special attention to 'revolution', not just because it is the historical 'trademark' of the older generation in China but also – and mainly – because it is only through an understanding of revolution that we can possibly appreciate the particular ways in which older people perceive digital technology in today's China. Furthermore, it is through the use of digital communication that we can examine how the revolutionary generation in mainland China makes sense of age and ageing.

### The Tiananmen and loyalty dance

There are two scenarios that illustrate the legacy of Mao's time and the importance of revolution among older people. The first is a story that

takes place in a community of elderly people living in an ‘elderly city’ (*laonian cheng*) in a town near Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> Grandpa Li, aged 84, has lived in a single room in the ‘elderly city’ for more than five years; he came to live there when it had become difficult for him to get around on his own. One of the reasons Grandpa Li likes the ‘elderly city’ is that there is a scaled-down replica of the Tiananmen standing in the community park, built for those unable to go and see the original (Fig. 7.1). As Grandpa Li recalls,

Once I saw the Tiananmen, I immediately felt familiar and close to the ‘elderly city’. To visit Tiananmen in Beijing is one of my dreams in this life. However, now I am too weak to travel... They are so considerate, building a smaller Tiananmen here to make up for it.

Tiananmen, the front gate of the former imperial palace in Beijing known as the Forbidden City, is perhaps the most important symbol of the country’s central socialist power, as well as its long history. On 1 October 1949 it was at the Tiananmen that Mao Zedong, the head of the Chinese Communist Party, announced the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the New China. The gate hosts a huge portrait of Mao. On either side of the portrait are two slogans<sup>3</sup> which read: ‘Long Live the People’s Republic of China’ and ‘Long Live the Unity of the Peoples of the World’. There is without doubt no architecture or public space that better embodies the communist ideology and state apparatus than Tiananmen.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 7.1** Xinyuan and a care centre staff member standing in front of the scaled-down replica of Tiananmen in the ‘elderly city’ (2019). Photo by Xi Jing.

For Grandpa Li, Tiananmen is equated with the communist revolution and the passionate and righteous violence against the old regime and against foreign invasion, all with the ultimate goal of establishing a 'New China'. He was born in the 1930s, when Shanghai was under the control of Western forces. Chinese people were second-class citizens in the city of Shanghai. His father worked as a rickshaw puller and his mother was a laundrywoman. His elder brother died in an air raid during the Sino-Japanese war (1937–45). Thanks to the Communist Party, who ended China's 'century of national humiliation',<sup>5</sup> people like Li's family 'became the masters of the country' (*dangjia zuozhu*). As Grandpa Li recalls,

For our generation, Chairman Mao was even closer to our hearts (*qin*) than our parents. He was everybody's beloved father. In my diary I wrote to Chairman Mao, reporting to him about my improvement in the process of thought-reform (*si xiang gai zao*) during the Cultural Revolution. I suffered in the old China and Chairman Mao made me a new person in the New China.

Most of the residents of the elderly city, whose average age is almost 80, would agree with Grandpa Li that seeing Tiananmen makes them feel proud of their life for having been part of a great revolution. 'I still dream of Chairman Mao these days!' remarks another resident of the care home in the city.

The second scenario to illustrate Chairman Mao's legacy is a special dance performed by Qin, a 62-year-old retired factory worker, and her former colleagues. In the summer of 2018 she went on a river cruise tour of the Yangtze, along with others from the factory she used to work in. Some of the retired workers set up a 'Red Guards' (*hong wei bing*) dancing troupe. They purchased identical costumes online in advance and performed the 'Loyalty Dance' while they were on the boat (Fig. 7.2). The average age of the members of the dance troupe was about 60. Everyone was familiar with the movements of the dance, as they had performed it hundreds of times during the Cultural Revolution. The 'Red Guards' name refers to the Red Guards of Chairman Mao, a massive student-led movement that started in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution. At the time Chairman Mao was the Red-Commander-in-Chief. At the peak of the Revolution,<sup>6</sup> there were Red Guards in every single school in China. Qin explains the powerful feelings that performing the dance recalled,

When we danced the '*zhong zi wu*' together, I felt as if I had travelled back to my youth! But it's better than the old days, now we were dancing the 'loyalty dance' while cruising and taking in the magnificent scenery of the Yangtze River – what a picture!



**Figure 7.2** Old work colleagues performing the ‘loyalty dance’ (originally danced by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution) on the deck of a boat during a cruise on the Yangtze River in 2018. Photo provided by Qin, one of the research participants.

The spirit of the revolution was manifested in the Red Guards marching across China to eradicate the ‘Four Olds’ (*si jiu*), referring to old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. Under the guise of attacking the ‘Four Olds’, temples, statues, old books and old works of art were destroyed. Museums and galleries were ransacked and streets were given new, revolutionary names.<sup>7</sup>

While the Revolution aimed to promote anti-tradition, it continued the political tradition to worship the ‘emperor’. Mao strategically cultivated the student movement to serve the political struggle within the Communist Party.<sup>8</sup> His full support and approval were perceived as an endorsement for the violence taking place across the country. Schools were a major target of the Red Guards, as they represented the authority of the knowledge that idealised the ‘Four Olds’. Intellectuals were denounced by students and suffered physical and psychological attacks.<sup>9</sup>

All of the Red Guard groups pledged their loyalty to Chairman Mao.<sup>10</sup> The cult of Mao soared to unprecedented heights during the Cultural Revolution. Every person was waving the Little Red Book (*hong bao shu*), a small-sized, shortened publication containing a selection of quotes from Mao, and quoting the content on a daily basis.<sup>11</sup> The number of portraits of Mao in existence throughout the country (around 1.2 billion) surpassed



China's population at that time, and a total of 4.8 billion Chairman Mao badges were manufactured during the revolutionary years.<sup>12</sup>

The loyalty dance was one of the most popular ways of demonstrating loyalty to the great leader. In the cult of Mao, everyone was expected to perform the loyalty dance on a daily basis. According to Qin and her fellow dancers, each movement in the loyalty dance has a specific meaning. For example, lifting one's open arms high symbolises worshipping Mao, pointing one arm forward suggests people taking the revolutionary path, guided by Mao, and tightening one's fists illustrated their determination to carry out the revolution.

The Red Guards' generation had experienced the Great Famine (1959–61)<sup>13</sup> in their childhood, only to be plunged into the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) in their teenage years. After 1968 the Red Guards movement was suppressed, with the government taking the view that the situation was out of control. After that, many of the people who had previously been Red Guards were sent to the countryside as 'educated youth' (*zhi qing*). When they married in their twenties and thirties, China's 'one-child policy' was implemented and strictly adhered to throughout China. Many of this generation, now in their thirties and forties, were denied the opportunities for promotion in their careers because they had not received higher education, having been deprived of it in their youth. However, they were also commonly addressed as 'educated youth', especially in comparison to the massive number of uneducated, even illiterate, peasants in China at that time. This was followed by a period of massive lay-offs during the reform of state-owned enterprises in the late 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Being familiar with the history behind Tiananmen and the Red Guards' loyalty dance helps us to avoid the assumption that there is one specific reason for older people's nostalgic view of Mao's time. The reasons for this are complicated, and in order to gain understanding of them, it is necessary to conduct an inquiry into individuals' memories of the Maoist period.

## The emotional topography of Mao's time

With the exception of the Second World War, few events in twentieth-century history engulfed such a large proportion of humanity as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. Millions died and an untold number suffered during this decade of political turmoil (1966–76). There is now a rich literature and body of research about the Cultural

Revolution, most of which is concerned with answering questions such as what happened, why it happened and what impact it had on the political landscape in China from a historical perspective, as well as describing individuals' struggles and suffering during this period.<sup>15</sup>

To examine the Revolution as a historical event, however, is not the intended task here. Instead, this chapter examines how ordinary people live with their memories and the consequences of overwhelming sense of the past in the present. The influence of Mao's era among research participants is so entrenched and profound that it has to be regarded as being lived in the present, rather than as history. This implies that people's personal experiences during Mao's time cannot be treated as history in the past tense, with a fixed narrative and judgement. On the contrary, these individual narratives of the Revolution are plural and dynamic. They are also open to further interpretation in the constant negotiation and struggle between memories and current experience, between nostalgia and regret, between youth and older generations.

## The crouching memories and hidden scar

As the fieldwork developed, an increasing number<sup>16</sup> of people started to feel more comfortable talking about their personal stories of events during the Cultural Revolution – accounts that often, as they said to me, they 'have rarely or never told anybody else'. Many struggled emotionally while recalling the events, even though they had begun them in a composed, even detached manner. Some spoke in a quiet voice, their eyes looking into the distance and their faces expressing a mixture of disappointment and confusion. Others could hardly speak for tears. Huifang, a 70-year-old lady who is a retired factory worker, was one of these.

My father once asked me in private, 'Do you really think I am a bad person?' I didn't know how to answer the question, so I shot him a hateful glare... like this... the way you treat an class enemy.

Huifang demonstrated the 'hateful glare' that revolutionaries would shoot their enemies in the class struggle. She then swiftly relaxed her face, renouncing the angry look, and let out a cackle of dry laughter. Then came a long silence (Fig. 7.3).

Huifang's father, Lao Chu, was an actor in Chinese traditional opera; her mother, Fangqiao, was a factory clerk. Fangqiao divorced Lao Chu when he was denounced as 'counter-revolutionary' during the



**Figure 7.3** The moment Huifang got lost in her memories of the Cultural Revolution. Watercolour painting by Xinyuan Wang.

Cultural Revolution. As a young student Huifang, like all her classmates, completely embraced the great mission of the Revolution. She was desperate to get rid of her unwanted identity as the daughter of a ‘class enemy’. It was common for young people from such ‘problematic’ family backgrounds, the so-called ‘five black categories’ (*hei wulei*),<sup>17</sup> openly to denounce their family members. Huifang therefore published a speech in which she vehemently denounced her father in the local newspaper, exposing his ‘crime’ as an ‘anti-revolutionist’ from a capitalist family. During the Revolution people were encouraged to do such things, following the common idiom that says ‘uphold righteousness even at the sacrifice of blood relations’ (*da yi mie qin*).

Despite such behaviour, Huifang was still turned down when she applied to become a revolutionary ‘Red Guard’ at school. In 1967, aged 17, she volunteered to be ‘sent down’ to Yunnan, an inland province, to receive ‘thought reform’ (*sixiang gaizao*) by labouring alongside local peasants. A few months later she voluntarily married a local peasant. As she explains,

They say marriage is the second birth for women. At that time, I was married to the Revolution.

The marriage crystallised her firm belief in the Revolution. It produced a complete rupture with her 'former self' and represented Huifang's ultimate effort to reform herself into a new person, unquestionably loyal to the Party.

Huifang's determination to be 'firmly rooted in the rural area' (*zhagen nongcun*) for the sake of the Revolution was unshakeable until her first child died of pneumonia because of the lack of medical treatment in the village. Meanwhile Huifang was gradually losing contact with her mother Fangqiao, whose marriage to her colleague was under strain as her husband became more and more violent. After the fall of the 'Gang of Four'<sup>18</sup> (1976), Fangqiao was sent to a psychiatric hospital by her husband who claimed she had mental problems.

Disillusioned by years of living a hard life without family support, all Huifang wanted was to go back to Shanghai. However, at that time, only unmarried young people were allowed to return to their places of origin. In the end, after 17 years of living in a small inland town, she was finally able to return to Shanghai and work in the factory that her step-father worked in when he retired – it was common for children to take over their parents' jobs. In many cases that was the only job opportunity for young people who had been 'sent-down' to the countryside and were returning to an urban area.

Before she left the village, Huifang asked her husband for a divorce, as she knew she would never come back to Yunnan. She then remarried in Shanghai, following an introduction to her future husband arranged by the local Communist Party branch that oversaw her factory. Her second husband, a co-worker, was another 'sent-down' youth (*zhi qing*) who had previously married a local person during his period of re-education in a village in north China. Over a year after Huifang returned to Shanghai, her daughter Manyuan was born. She grew up with little knowledge of what had happened to her family, as nobody was supposed to talk about it, nor did they want to. In 1996 Huifang received a visitor from Yunnan. She asked Manyuan to address him as '*gan die*' (adopted dad), but refused to tell her any more about this middle-aged man. Such behaviour was not unusual. As Manyuan explained,

The generations of my grandparents and parents have suppressed their feelings and hidden facts about the 'scare' for too long... Many of them actually need proper psychotherapy.

Huifang represents a whole generation that was thrown into a turbulent political storm while still in their youth. Many people of this older

generation have since struggled to rebuild both selfhood and social relationships, as well as to construct any sense of order and security for the rest of their lives. The Cultural Revolution was not just a political upheaval, but one that substantially changed the lives of individuals. This was in part because the lived experience of the Revolution was very different from how we view it now in retrospect.

## Children of the New China

More than half of the research participants in Shanghai were born between the late 1940s and early 1950s. Many of them would quote the household phrase ‘born in the New China and grew up under the red flag’ (*shengzai xinzhongguo, zhangzai hongqixia*) to describe their generation, the very first to be born in the ‘New China’ (established in 1949). As noted above, ‘New China’ refers to the People’s Republic of China as established by the Communist Party.

The name ‘New China’ probably became a household term through the renowned propaganda song ‘Without the Communist Party there would be no New China’, in which Mao had added the symbolic word ‘New’ in front of ‘China’. This song is still taught today in schools across the country as part of the curriculum encouraging patriotic education. Any school student can sing the song without necessarily understanding the lyrics, which run as follows:

Without the Communist Party, there would be no New China.  
The Communist Party toiled for the nation. The Communist Party  
of one heart saved China. It pointed to the road of liberation for  
the people. It led China towards the light. It supported the War of  
Resistance for more than eight years. It has improved people’s lives.  
It built a base behind enemy lines. It practised democracy, bringing  
many advantages. Without the Communist Party, there would be  
no New China.

This generation was stamped with the two keywords of the song: ‘Red’ and ‘New’. The word ‘Red’ refers to the communist ideology and the word ‘New’ to the goal of revolution, that is the creation of a New World, a New China and a New Person – a concept influenced by the Soviet Union<sup>19</sup> at the time. Marxism saw the development of the New Person as a product of the social condition of full communism, rather than a goal or a prerequisite for achieving communism.<sup>20</sup> However, in Mao’s China, the political

pursuit of achieving communism was premature, as the country's economic development lagged well behind other nations. The pursuit of being a New Person was therefore regarded as the primary prerequisite for achieving communism, or the evidence of having achieved communism. The Maoist New Person was not supposed to have an individual personality or personal desires. They were supposed to be disciplined and selfless political fighters, devoted to the core to the proletariat and working people while at the same time nurturing hate for bourgeois life.<sup>21</sup>

As Peng Cheng, one of the research participants, recalls, his father was always absent. Even during the Chinese New Year his father would go to his office to work extra hours. There was not much work to do on New Year's Eve, but he insisted that he needed to be in the office because he was the one who was in charge of the stamp of the Party branch. Peng Cheng recalls,

He was so devoted to his duty... In his eyes, the Party's rubber stamp was way more important than his family get-together, and the Party and the country were superior to his family. By the time I was six years old, I had already realised that my father only belonged to the Party.

Peng Cheng's father's actions were regarded as the sacrifice of his 'small family' (*xiaojia*) for the good of the 'big family' (*dajia*). Such voluntary self-sacrifice was considered to be evidence of the person's willingness to be reformed by communist ideology. Another common way to show one's enthusiasm for thought reform in New China was to become a propagandist.

Chang Guan, in his sixties, regards his experience as a volunteer community propagandist (*xuan chuan yuan*) as his most memorable moment of the Revolution. His daily task was to listen to the radio and read the editorial that appeared in the *People's Daily*, then to summarise its main message by updating the letters in 'big character posters' (*da zi bao*) and slogans. These in turn were stuck onto a propaganda column.<sup>22</sup>

Propaganda as a political mobilisation tool was a hallmark of Maoist China,<sup>23</sup> which applied Lenin's model of the media as a tool of mass propaganda, agitation and organisation.<sup>24</sup> Reading newspapers was regarded as an individual's 'political obligation'; work units (*danwei*) and other organisational political study groups nationwide used articles from the newspaper as sources for political study. Chang Guan recalls his teenage dedication with pride,

Before the sky turned bright, I was up and waiting for the *People's Daily*. Every minute counted. All of the different community propaganda teams were very competitive, but I always managed to post the content first on the wall... I was the youngest and shortest among other propagandists, but I was also the most nimble and the cleverest. I taught myself to be good at painting the image of Chairman Mao and I also taught myself how to write the 'supreme instructions' (*zui gao zhi shi*) on the wall in beautiful calligraphy.

Because of Chang Guan's outstanding calligraphy and painting, in 1968 he was selected to work for a municipal propaganda exhibition showcasing the Revolution's achievements, despite his family's 'petit bourgeois' political background. In a spirited voice, his eyes sparkling, Chang Guan describes his delight at the news,

I was extremely happy when I was selected; it was the ultimate honour. As someone with a 'bad' family background, you had to work 10 times harder to be recognised... I think that was still the most exciting moment of my whole life!

For Chang Guan, the Cultural Revolution represents the moment at which his life 'peaked', despite the fact that he and his family underwent a long period of physical and mental suffering. Even today, he still recalls this most exciting period on his WeChat profile. The theme (cover) image of Chang Guan's WeChat profile is a photograph taken when he visited Moscow; in the background one can see the statue of Georgy Zhukov, the Marshal of the Soviet Union, on horseback (Fig. 7.4a). Chang Guan's WeChat profile photo is a black-and-white photo of him taken during the Cultural Revolution. In this picture (Fig. 7.4b), aged 16 and holding a painting brush, Chang Guan stands in front of the colossal propaganda poster of Chairman Mao that he was painting.

On 4 May, National Youth Day<sup>25</sup> in China, Chang Guan posted an image of a cruising vessel on WeChat (Fig. 7.5a). The text embedded in the image reads 'The journey you embarked on was to the stars and the ocean; upon return, you remain in your youth'. Both image and text are full of revolutionary romance. Cruising or embarking upon an ocean journey is imagery quite typical of revolutionary propaganda: riding the wind and the waves, revolutionists were full of pride and restless with the ambition of creating a new world. Remember how Qin Zhou and her fellow dancers regarded the Yangtze cruise as the perfect setting for their Red Guard loyalty dance. Significantly, one of the most famous



**Figure 7.4a** Screenshot of Chang Guan’s WeChat personal profile (left). The theme (cover) photo was taken when he was visiting Moscow in 2014 as a tourist. The statue on horseback is Georgy Zhukov, the Marshal of the Soviet Union. Photo provided by research participant.

**Figure 7.4b** The WeChat profile photo of Chang Guan (right). Photo provided by research participant.



**Figure 7.5a** Photograph from Chang Guan’s WeChat post on Youth National Day, celebrated every year on 4 May (left). Photo provided by research participant.

**Figure 7.5b** Propaganda poster dating from the Cultural Revolution (right). The message reads ‘The journey in the sea depends on the helmsman: to resist imperialist aggressions we must establish a mighty navy.’ Photo by Chang Guan. Private collection.



propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution depicts Chairman Mao on a ship (Fig. 7.5b). In the painting Mao, his arm raised high, is guiding the ship in the right direction. In the background are a few warships riding the waves. The text on the poster reads: ‘The journey in the sea depends on the helmsman: to resist imperialist aggressions we must establish a mighty navy.’

Chang Guan goes on to explain his post in more detail,

I celebrate Youth Day because I am still motivated by the revolutionary spirit, the spirit of youth. As Chairman Mao said to young people, ‘the world belongs to you’.

For him, the legacy of the Revolution is the spirit of youth.

In a famous talk to Chinese students in the Soviet Union, Mao summarised the sense of embarking on a mission present among the youth in his own words,

The world belongs to you. It belongs to us as well, but ultimately it’s yours. You young people are ... just like the morning sun. You embody the hope of the future.

Motivated by such ‘revolutionary romance’, millions of young people during the Revolution were deeply motivated by the idea that their individual lives were associated with something much more significant – a revolution perceived to be the movement that will change the fate of all human beings.

## **Red Guards: the generation longing for their own revolution**

A generational gap is a common phenomenon in every society. It may reflect age differences, but is also exacerbated during specific historical periods that ascribe striking features to one particular generation. In a revolutionary context where history is, in effect, accelerated, a sense of generational difference can emerge even between people whose generations are only a few years apart.

The first generation are those who grew up during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Civil War (lasting intermittently between 1927 and 1949). The co-founders and first leaders of the Chinese Communist Party also belong to this generation, which is said to have undergone the

'baptism of war'. This generation are seen as showcasing the immense untapped power of ordinary people. They are widely respected for their revolutionary achievement and are regarded as 'rebel heroes'. The legacy of this generation is the rebel spirit of breaking with the old world, including tradition, authority, families, education and social class, for the sake of creating a brave new world.

The second generation came of age during the first 17 years (1949–66) of communist China, before the Cultural Revolution. In this society the 'rebel heroes' from the previous generation had already established new structures of authority and loyalty to the new authority was highly valued. In the official discourse there are two kinds of heroism: 'revolutionary heroism' and 'individual heroism'.<sup>26</sup> The former is highly influenced by the Soviet Union's Bolshevik revolutionary spirit; it represented a person's willingness to sacrifice self-interest for the revolution as well as for Party-defined goals. It was contrasted with 'individual heroism', equated with an individual's egotistic quest for fame and influence. For the sake of the great mission of the communist revolution, the supreme value of collectivism was reinforced by the Party, whereas 'individual heroism' was viewed with a critical eye. The second generation therefore generally become the 'loyal soldiers' of the 'rebel heroes'. Grandpa Li, introduced above, is representative of this 'second generation'.

The third generation, born in the late 1940s to early 1950s, were actually born in the New China; most of them were the children of the first generation. This Red Guard generation, like the 'loyal soldiers' who came before them, also accepted the Party's ideology without question. Revolutionary heroism and romance are deeply implanted within them and have affected them throughout their lives. The collectively inherited archetype of the revolutionary 'rebel heroes' inspired and prepared the following generations for their own revolution. As Chang Guan observes,

We grew up immersing ourselves in the stories of the revolutionary heroes of our parents' generation. Just think how nowadays kids dream about the superheroes from Hollywood movies – well, our admiration for the revolutionary heroes at that time was 10 times stronger!

Thomas Jefferson claimed that 'every generation needs a new revolution'. For the generation born under the red flag and schooled in the revolutionary stories of their parents' generation, the very idea of having a new revolution while coming of age and thereby becoming the rebel heroes themselves was tempting. It is understandable that Huifang and

Chang Guan, as well as millions of their peers, became so eager to be part of a revolution in which young people had the chance to create their own history. However, when the Cultural Revolution developed, many found that they had become both the victims and the villains.

## Snowflakes in an avalanche

Among the research participants who shared stories about their experiences during the Cultural Revolution, the majority now regard themselves as the direct victims of the movement, especially those who came from what were designated as 'bad' family backgrounds. A few of them, however, addressed the violence in which they directly participated. Juntao, a 66-year-old research participant who is a retired bus driver, decided to do this because as he gets older, he feels an increasingly pervasive sense of guilt. As he explains,

For years, I have avoided thinking about it, like everybody else, we were busy living lives... Now, however, after retirement, I have more time to think about things... I don't want to carry these to my grave.

Before Juntao was sent to the state farm, he was in secondary school. In the early stages of the Revolution, pupils still went to school but there was no normal teaching anymore – the school was controlled by the 'rebels' (*zao fan pai*) and most of the original teachers were denounced as either 'anti-revolutionists' (*fan ge ming*) or the 'running dogs of imperialism' (*diguozhuyi zougou*) or both. Each class only had a few students who were seen as having 'high consciousness' (*jue wu gao*), in the sense that they were on the side of the Revolution, and everybody followed suit in the class struggle. For example, the mere fact that Juntao's English teacher was teaching English was enough for her to be denounced as the 'running dog of imperialism'. Juntao recalls,

My English was not good, our teacher was strict, and I was very afraid of her... When she was denounced I actually felt delighted, thinking I don't need to learn English anymore.

When the English teacher was publicly persecuted on the campus, Juntao's classmate, a lovely girl from a working-class family who Juntao secretly liked, grabbed the English teacher's hair and quite

brutally cut it off. The crowd of students burst into cheers for the girl's 'brave revolutionary behaviour'. Possibly encouraged by this example, Juntao joined other students in 'punishing' their English teacher, beating her and forcing her to stand in a deep bow position for long amounts of time (most of the day) with a humiliating label around her neck. He recalls,

She [the English teacher] was shivering and weeping. Later she fainted and some students threw cold water on her to wake her up and then forced her to keep standing. I had never seen such a scene before. The teacher is supposed to be respected, I mean, I dared not even have eye contact with her before. But there she was, so lowly and broken – the world was upside down... Now, when I look back, I think that was horrible but when it happened I felt as if I was controlled by some crazy spirit. I was more excited than scared. The excitement was indescribable.

The 'indescribable excitement' Juntao recalls above was expressed as 'feeling so powerful' by another research participant, Caiping, who joined the beating up of a few 'capitalists' in her community. As she observes,

Hitting people is not right... but at that time, you thought you were beating up class enemies, so you had no mercy. I was very skinny at the time, in normal times the adults I was hitting then could easily have hit back and hurt me, but they dared not to do so during the Revolution. They were so scared and obedient. The more I beat them, the more powerful I felt.

According to Caiping, two of the 'class enemies' she contributed to persecuting eventually committed suicide.

The feeling of being a 'powerful' revolutionist further thrilled the young students, who were at the precise age when they were looking for a means to prove their passion, energy and the power of their youth. As Zhu Xueqin,<sup>27</sup> a renowned Chinese historian at the University of Shanghai, said: 'It was an age ruled by both the poet and the executioner. The poet scattered roses everywhere while the executioner cast a long shadow of terror'.

Juntao's elder brother, a primary school teacher, accidentally fell from the temporary stage which had been set up to facilitate an accusatory 'trial' of sorts which was held against him. He died from the fall and Juntao's father did not dare arrange a funeral for him for fear that

it would cause further persecution. All Juntao's mother was able to do was secretly burn 'spirit money'<sup>28</sup> in a washbasin at the end of the back alleyway to memorialise her late son. Juntao was keeping guard at the entrance to the alleyway for his mum so that she wouldn't be discovered and reported by snooping neighbours. He recalls,

I was crying quietly and I looked around to see her. I could only see her back... her whole body was shivering because of grief.

One year after his elder brother's death, Juntao was sent to work on a state farm in northern China. After five years' labour, he managed, not without struggles, to be transferred back to Shanghai, but like most of his peers, he no longer had the chance to continue his education, so ended up working in the community factory workshop for another 10 years.

Many people were tortured, murdered and publicly humiliated during the Cultural Revolution, and many committed suicide. It was not only intellectuals and famous personalities who fell victim to the Revolution: ordinary citizens were also robbed, beaten and their belongings destroyed. Even among the Red Guards, there were numerous infights and significant divisions. In Shanghai 704 suicides and 534 deaths related to the Cultural Revolution were recorded in the month of September 1966 alone.<sup>29</sup>

After the Revolution, it was common for households to have to continue co-living with their next-door neighbours who had persecuted them, and people had to continue working with colleagues who had denounced them during the Cultural Revolution. As one research participant says,

In the end, whether one is guilty or not is not that important any more... Life needs to continue. I forgive those people who persecuted my dad, as at that time they were brainwashed. Just as I was myself – I also persecuted other people's dads.

Most people chose to bury what had happened deep within themselves. In addition, although it is now acceptable to discuss the Cultural Revolution in casual and informal situations, thorough examination of, and reflection on, the Cultural Revolution and its consequences are still highly discouraged by the Party-state. Each snowflake in the avalanche is pleading 'not guilty' and each snowflake has their own reason to keep silent.

Liang Zhu, a retired primary school teacher, puts it this way,

They say ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’. For our generation, the thing is that many cannot afford an examined life.

After all, people like Juntao, who are opening up to share their regrets, remain in the minority. Many, as Liang Zhu observes,

chose to leave the chaos and regrets in the past and only look forward. Among everything in the past, the spirit of revolution is what remains.

## The athlete and the revolutionary computer and smartphone

Liang Zhu calls himself an ‘athlete’ (*yun dong yuan*), which has nothing to do with sports. In Chinese the term ‘*yun dong*’ can refer to exercise or to movement in general. While ‘*yun dong yuan*’ usually refers to sports professionals, Liang Zhu employs this phrase creatively to indicate his rich experience of all kinds of political and social movements (Fig. 7.6). Proudly waving two fingers, he declares,

I have experienced two massive revolutions in my life. During the most difficult time of the Cultural Revolution, when many ceased learning, I continued to teach myself new technologies ... and now I grow further in the information revolution (*xinxi geming*).

The Cultural Revolution casts a long shadow on the older generation; it remains embodied in many aspects of people’s daily lives. All of these add a further twist to people’s expectations of digital technologies as they enter the age of the smartphone. The ‘information revolution’ (*xinxi geming*) is experienced among people who have been fundamentally shaped by the experience of political revolution since their early lives.

Even before the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the affiliation between digital technology and communist ideology was already overt. Due to the Cold War, China had been developing its independent computer industry for more than three decades before the 1980s.<sup>30</sup>



**Figure 7.6** Liang Zhu talking about his two revolutions. Watercolour painting by Xinyuan Wang.

For example, in 1970 the Shanghai municipality decided to produce computers locally. A project group consisting of factory workers, scientists and scholars was established. The Yangtze handle factory, a sub-district community factory that produced handles, was allocated the task of producing the computer. At the time the factory had 300 workers, the majority of whom could not read and had never seen a computer before, let alone know how to produce one. Initially factory managers allowed only a few skilled technicians to work with computer scientists. Soon this arrangement was denounced by the factory workers in a ‘big character poster’ (*da zi bao*) as ‘not following Chairman Mao’s revolutionary path’ (*geming luxian*):

The leadership of the factory made the mistake of only relying upon the scientists and experts, rather than the People. To build a computer, one not only needs to understand the path of the electric wire (*xian lu*) but also the path (*lu xian*) of ideology. (Wang, H. 2014, page 35)

The 'big character poster' caused a heated debate within the factory. In the end the leadership of the factory admitted their mistake, stating that,

The production of the computer should be guided by proletariat political ideology. The production of the machine is simultaneously the production of the New Person. (Wang, H. 2014, page 35)

The revolution is permanent and the most powerful productive power lies in the class of the revolutionary proletariat ('New Person' as the result of the communist revolutions) per se, not the machine or technology. Research participant Mingying, aged 67, recalls that he joined the computer science learning group when he worked as a factory worker in an electronic instruments factory in the 1970s, even though none of the workers had seen a real computer. Mingying explains,

We were reading newspapers together, passionately talking about the development of the technology as well as the Revolution. The learning group illustrated that we 'demand progress' (*yaoqiu jinbu*) with high 'ideological and political consciousness' (*sixiang juewu*).

To showcase the political significance of the computer in socialist China, Wang<sup>31</sup> describes the computer as the 'machine for a Long Revolution'; she argues that the computer has been deeply associated with the transformation brought about by Chinese socialism. Maoist China took a dialectical approach to technology: not only was the development of socialist technology necessary for developing a productive force, but it also had to transform the relations of production and create a socialist subjectivity, that of the 'New Person'.

After the Cultural Revolution, the post-Mao leadership became significantly more market-oriented, implementing serious economic reforms and opening up the economy. This development was led by Deng Xiaoping, the party's de facto leader. It was during Deng's economic reforms that the previously self-reliant Chinese computer industry was gradually replaced by a system more reliant on importing or using imported parts. The relationship between the computer and the emancipation of the people was no longer emphasised in the official discourse.<sup>32</sup> However, for the older generation, who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, the idea that the computer is an integral part of revolutionary subjectivity remained embedded in their consciousness.

Deng's economic reforms were aimed at catching up with Western countries and rode the wave of the 'information revolution'.<sup>33</sup> In 1978 Deng called for the rapid development of electronic computing, cybernetics and



automation technology at the National Conference of Science. Especially after the high-profile introduction of Alvin Toffler's book *The Third Wave*<sup>34</sup> to China in 1983, the idea of a coming 'information society' gained a lot of traction and attention nationwide. As X. Liu has observed,

Information was fantasised as the magic force that would bring post-Mao China into a new era.<sup>35</sup>

Almost every research participant confirmed the overwhelming passion they had felt about the coming 'information society'. Liang Zhu is one of them. He purchased his first PC almost 15 years ago and bought his first smartphone five years ago. The two-finger gesture he made, depicted in Fig. 7.6 above, referred to the two revolutions he had joined; it can also be seen as a sign of victory. As Liang Zhu explains,

I refuse to be dumped by the information age. If others can, I can too. So I conquered the obstacles (in learning how to use the computer and the smartphone) with more effort than young people.

The narrative of overcoming obstacles in the digital age, used as a method of avoiding being 'dumped by the age', is common among older people in Shanghai. For example, another research participant, Jiuhong, aged 69, started to use smartphones when one of her best friends issued her with a stern warning about becoming obsolete:

If you can't use the smartphone, then you will be disconnected from the age and you will become totally old and useless (*mei yong*)!

Nowadays, the official discourse is one that highly encourages helping older people to be included within the digital age. More specifically, this is highly encouraged by the Party-state. For example, an article in the *People's Daily*,<sup>36</sup> the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, published in February 2019, reads as follows:

As the power of the internet is increasingly integrated into the development of the times, society is constantly changing. Finding ways of helping people of all ages to adapt and embrace such changes is a difficult problem to be solved, and it is necessary to work together to solve it. It is necessary to actively face the ageing of the population, helping the elderly to cross the digital divide, not leaving them behind in the internet era, and thus achieving the all-round development of society.

It is a common belief in China that someone who refuses to be reformed by his or her age will be ‘dumped by the age’ and ‘become useless’. Such a view is reflected both in mass media and among older people. The tolerance for individuals to be detached from the era in which they live is minimal. This attitude is in line with the now-familiar revolutionary discourse of ‘self-reform’, that is, people should not conceive of themselves as unchangeable in an ever-progressing society. The need to be reformed is axiomatic and unquestionable, and the willingness to be reformed is key for individuals keen to show their continued loyalty to the great revolutionary cause. In the discourse around the Maoist concept of the ‘New Person’, the emancipation of the people was the arena in which revolution itself was registered. If revolution, as a political form, was about to release the full potential of a person, then that person should, first of all, welcome and embrace the changes from the surrounding revolution.<sup>37</sup> In addition, a deep-rooted belief in self-reform can be traced back to the time of Confucius, when self-perfection was regarded as a lifelong process for a civilised person, manifested in the colloquial term of ‘*zuoren*’ (doing personhood).<sup>38</sup>

Scholars have discussed the development of information and communication technology in China in terms of this ‘techno-economic’ discourse. In addition, social forces within the country also help to modulate the political economy of the digital, which intersects with the globalising logic of digital capitalism.<sup>39</sup> China’s economic reforms in Deng Xiaoping’s time began with the ‘four modernisations’, which underpinned the leadership’s fundamental national policy. Modernisation processes had to be undertaken in the fields of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology. In implementing the ‘four modernisations’, the leadership soon elevated ‘informatisation’ to the level of dominant national policy. Informatisation was seen as having the potential to be fully integrated within the transnational network of technology and the global rhetoric of the ‘information age’.

In 1984 Deng Xiaoping started to popularise the slogan ‘exploring information resources to serve the four modernisations’. In 1998 Party leader Jiang Zeming further emphasised the importance of informatisation, declaring that ‘none of the four modernisations would be possible without informatisation’. As a matter of urgent priority, several supra-ministerial bodies were established in an ad hoc manner to push forward strategic digital development with the explicit goal of ‘leapfrogging’ China into the digital age and maintaining economic growth. This growth has been particularly visible in the years since the global financial crisis.

More recently, the government announced plans for the future of China's technology industry using a grand 'blueprint' called 'Internet plus'. Such a national plan serves to combine 'statist and market imperatives', leading to 'China's network build-up drive, unprecedented in the entire history of world communications'.<sup>40</sup> In 2000 Shanghai, China's traditional industrial heartland, announced that its information technology industry had become its most lucrative industry. It had surpassed the region's motor industry, previously its major industrial sector in terms of revenue and profit.<sup>41</sup> In 2016 the city of Shanghai announced its aim of becoming a globally influential science and technology centre by 2030. The widely held idea that learning new technology is the route to being valued as a 'useful' person among older people today clearly incorporates a fundamental understanding of the relationship between technology and personhood in the ideology of Maoist revolution. By embracing the advanced productive power latent in digital technology, the person achieves the self-reform that accords with the definition of a 'New Person' in the digital era.

## Self-interest and desire among the screws making up the revolutionary machine

In today's China, state control of people's personal lives is certainly less overt and upfront compared to the past. However, older people who have lived the experience of revolutions, from the Cultural Revolution to the information revolution, have internalised a fundamental apparatus, almost as 'natural' as instinct. This is used by individuals to deal with changes in their daily lives through a process of self-reformation that is constant, necessary and essential.

How, then, do people see themselves within this constant process of self-reformation? The anthropologist Yunxiang Yan has proposed a tripartite approach to Chinese personhood in which the individual, the self and the person are three functioning components of the wholeness of personhood.<sup>42</sup> According to Yan, the *individual* appears to be 'biologistic, intuitive and embodied', while the *self* is more 'reflective, psychological and ethical', referring to the evaluation of desires and self-interests, either in real or imagined terms. The third component, the *person*, is 'sociologistic and relational', standing for the socially approved role that can only be realised in social action. In daily life personhood is acted out through the combined work of all three components, though the weight of each of them in a given scenario may vary greatly.

In the discussion of health in the [previous chapter](#), ‘personhood’ was discussed mostly through the lens of the *individual*. So far this chapter has mainly focused on the aspect of the *person* in the context of the Revolution among the older generation. There is much less about self-interest and desire, mainly because these have long been suppressed in people’s lives. However, it is important to note that even during the peak of the Cultural Revolution people managed to preserve some form of self-interest.

Qin Zhou, the retired factory worker mentioned above who was excited about performing the Red Guard loyalty dance on a river cruise, explains why she still loves revolutionary dancing – despite the fact that she regards the Cultural Revolution itself as a tragedy,

It’s not just me ... all my fellow dancers suffered during the Revolution. Nobody wants to be ‘sent down’ to the villages again. But the loyalty dancing was the most joyful thing during that time because no other type of dancing was allowed, you know. When my body moves in this familiar dancing movement, I can feel happiness and youth again.

On first glance, the popularity of revolutionary dancing among older people may appear to indicate significant support for the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. However, if we look closely at Qin Zhou’s memory of the dance, there is good reason to believe that the revival of this dance among older people is deeply associated with preferable personal memories of youth. To some extent, such loyalty dancing was memorised as a little triumph of humanity against a regime that had denounced individual pleasure and enjoyment. In that sense, the ‘loyalty’ in the revolutionary loyalty dance is actually about being loyal to one’s own desires, when it was difficult to express any personal preferences during a time of communist revolution. In addition, a core contradictory seems to lie in the way in which older people have dealt with the legacy of the Revolution, especially as regards their personal aspirations and life purposes. [Chapter 8](#) and the conclusion of this book will investigate this complicated and sometimes contradictory issue further.

In a highlight, Qin Zhou considers herself to have been lucky. She got a job in a local textile factory relatively soon, and it was this job that allowed her to return to Shanghai. Many others were stuck in the rural areas to which they had been ‘sent down’ for a much longer time. As Qin Zhou observes,

It is not about what you want to do but what the party and the society has assigned to you to do. Nobody cares about what you want, and you should not have ideas that differentiate what you want from what is good for the whole of society. As one of the ‘screws of the revolution’ you are part of a big machine, you can do nothing without fitting into the machine.

‘To be a screw of the revolution’ (*geming de luosiding*) was one of the most common sayings at the time, designed to highlight the relationship between individuals and society. Revolutions aim to produce new kinds of personhood – people who would internalise the ultimate goals of revolutionary history and subsume themselves to its collective ends. During this process, self-sacrifice and self-criticism are necessary in order to get rid of selfish and material motives in favour of communist altruism. The value of a screw lies in its functionality and its high level of standardisation. To be ‘unique’ is fatal for a screw, as it needs to be totally replaceable. Consequently to be a screw in the machine describes an extreme and thorough process of de-individuation. Yu Chen, now in her sixties, remarks,

Nowadays young people are encouraged to say what they like and to pursue their dreams. It is such a luxury. I only started to do what young people do after I retired. My whole life, I have never felt my life is under my own control like I do nowadays.

She worked as an accountant for more than 30 years, but never really enjoyed her job.

At the time, you only had very limited choices ... my maths was not bad, so people thought I should take a job as an accountant and that’s it ... When I look back, the memory is so grey. When I was growing up, to utter my personal interests or personal feelings was seen as a shortcoming or even a sin ... We certainly still had personal feelings and preferences, but we learned to suppress them, to hide them.

The personal interest Yu Chen learned to hide was painting, which her father regarded as a bourgeois pursuit. Such an attitude was not uncommon half a century ago in China, where the pursuit of non-essential living needs was regarded as a sign of capitalist decadence.

Yu Chen's father altruistically sacrificed the wellbeing of his 'small family' for the 'big family' of the country (*xi sheng xiaojia wei dajia*). As his daughter recalls,

It is almost that they have no personal desire, everything is for the benefit of the country. The idea was so deep-rooted that even if rationally they knew that something was wrong, they could not admit it.

One of Yu Chen's neighbours, a school teacher, secretly lent her a sketching textbook so that she could teach herself how to sketch. Unfortunately, the book was soon discovered by her father, who also came across examples of naked men in it. Still feeling sorry, Yu Chen recalls what happened next.

My father was totally furious and tore the whole book apart. I was extremely sad and scared and also felt really guilty about the whole thing, as I had begged the teacher to lend his beautiful book to me ... It was so rare to have such a book at that time.

Now Yu Chen has finally picked up a brush and taken up painting; she likes to paint old Shanghai buildings (Fig. 7.7). Her paintings are loved by many, especially locals who have a deep emotional attachment to the old buildings. Yu Chen has held several exhibitions and her paintings are posted on various online platforms. She is very active on social media and even has a VPN so that she can have access to Instagram, which is banned in mainland China. This way she can see paintings from artists worldwide; as she exclaims, 'The smartphone is the window to a new world'.

Chang Guan, the research participant who had been a political propagandist in his youth, started his blog on 'Meipian'<sup>43</sup> four years ago. It has attracted more than 2,600 fans and has accumulated around 1.6 million reads. Although his readership is not big enough to make him an influential blogger, especially given the size of China's population, it has given him enormous encouragement to keep recording the 'beautiful things' he sees in the world through writing and photography (Fig. 7.8). From India to Russia, from the United States to Jordan, after retirement Chang Guan has spent a great portion of his pension on 'seeing the world outside of China'. For him, the greatest gain is being able to appreciate the different cultures and beliefs he comes across on his travels. He reflects on the benefit this has brought him,



**Figure 7.7** Yu Chen's watercolour painting of Shanghai city centre. Photo provided by Yu Chen.



**Figure 7.8** Chang Guan's 'Meipian' blog posts. All photos by Chang Guan. Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

I always envy the fact that nowadays people can travel around to see different societies when they are still so young. Our generation thought that we carried the historical mission to create a new world, but we didn't even know what the world outside of China looked like! However, it is not too late for anything. I am now catching up on what I should have done when I was young, had I had the opportunity.

In a way, what Chang Guan discovered through travelling is not only the world outside China, but also the 'self' who is always curious about the world and desires to see the outside world. This former revolutionary propagandist underwent another type of 'self-reform' after his retirement. This time, the ideological 'big character posters' on the walls that he used to write have turned into the colourful travel posts he writes online. No longer the mouthpiece of the *People's Daily*, he is now an author who writes for his own fans. Both on his WeChat and his blog, however, Chang Guan's profile image remains the black-and-white photo of him painting Chairman Mao. In Chang Guan's mind Mao remains as the symbol of his idealised concept of the revolution. For him, maintaining the spirit of the revolution has always been associated with youth: something full of ambition, hope and possibilities.

To some extent, for both Yu Chen and Chang Guan, the 'revolution' is also about challenging the chronological order of life stages. If the youth of today is about to embark on their journeys and to embrace the possibilities life has to offer them, the older generation have not yet lived out their youth. For them it was 'hijacked' by an ideology that dispensed any form of personal development seen to be based on individual interest and desires. Like an un-germinated seed, this un-lived 'youth' lay dormant. It only started to sprout when the generation became older and grasped the opportunity to be young.

## Conclusion

From an anthropological perspective, it is always important to understand 'revolution' as a 'local category'. This in turn is defined by the people who are involved in it, the ways in which revolutions come to constitute persons and how persons come to shape themselves in and through revolution. This chapter takes particular inspiration from the volume *Anthropology of Revolution*,<sup>44</sup> in which rich ethnographies in



different revolutionary societies are examined to understand the complex relationship between personhood and revolution. From the ways in which people express anxiety and fear, pride and aspiration to how they place themselves within an ever-changing Chinese society, the impact of the Cultural Revolution among older people remains profound.

This chapter continues the discussion of the complex – and at times contradictory – relationship between individuals and the society, with a focus on the lived experience of ‘revolution’. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including historical documents, oral histories and ethnographic research, this chapter unpacks the multifaceted impacts of socialist revolution, memory, trauma and personal struggles around shaping ‘personhood’. As a process *zuoren* (doing personhood) is more important than the state of being in Chinese society.<sup>45</sup> Revolution is about ideology, but also about *zuoren*. The people we have got to know in this chapter reminded us again and again that they strove to ‘do’ personhood according to their ever-changing living environment. This chapter critically opens up the abstract concept of ‘revolution’ by showing the different ways in which the revolution was imagined, constituted and practised in different circumstances by the revolutionary generation in China.

In this chapter, ‘revolution’ exists in a plural form, and there is a good reason for this. First, as research participant Liang Zhu says, this generation has experienced both the Cultural Revolution and the information revolution. Furthermore, the ethnography in the chapter yields a pluralised understating of the revolution – that is, individuals reconstructing the narrative of the revolution in their own ways in later life. The appreciation of plural revolutions is the key to understanding the older generation in China, who lived through the political turmoil in Mao’s time and the significant social transformations of the economic reforms that characterised the Dengist era.

In particular, as we can see throughout the book, the smartphone plays a very significant role in the process of self-reform and *zuoren* in older people’s daily lives – from the circulation of information to the documentation of daily life; from developing and maintaining social relations to a whole new range of facial expressions via visual communication. The term ‘revolution’ seems to have an overwhelmingly political connotation. However, as observed in the fieldwork, ‘revolution’ is in fact an embodied concept that manifests a wide range of people’s daily practices and further explains ordinary Chinese people’s understanding of youth and ageing, tradition and modernity – as well as, ultimately, what it takes to ‘do personhood’.

## Notes

1. Yan, Y. 2017.
2. It has become increasingly common for the elderly in Shanghai to move into 'old people's apartments'. These are living quarters located in a nearby town that provide 24/7 medical support.
3. China has had a long tradition of slogans since a peasant rebellion created a slogan against the cruelty of the Qin dynasty. In the course of modern Chinese history, there are three important events which have commonly used slogans: The May Fourth Movement in 1919, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution in the age of Mao. See Lu, T. 2004.
4. Pye, L. W. 1990.
5. 'The century of national humiliation' is the term widely used in China to describe the period of intervention and subjugation of the Chinese Empire by Western powers, Russia and Japan that occurred between 1839 and 1949. See Cohen, P. A. 2002.
6. In this chapter, 'the Revolution' (with a capital R) refers specifically to 'the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' or 'the Cultural Revolution' for short. During the revolutionary time in modern China, there were a few massive political upheavals that can be addressed as 'revolution'. In addition, when people mention the 'spirit of revolution', the revolution refers to the national and communist revolution in general, rather than to the Cultural Revolution. In today's China it is commonly felt that any public discussion of the Cultural Revolution is not encouraged by the Communist Party as it is regarded as one of the biggest mistakes the Party has made and a thorough discussion and debate would potentially challenge the Party's legitimacy. However, the 'spirit of revolution' is regarded as a positive legacy.
7. MacFarquhar, R. and M. Schoenhals 2006, 515.
8. Teiwes, F. 2010.
9. Meisner, M. 1986.
10. Teiwes, F. 2010.
11. Halliday, J. and J. Chang 2012.
12. Barmé, G. 1996.
13. The Great Famine (1959–61) was a period when the People's Republic of China was swept by famine. It is widely regarded as the deadliest famine in human history, with an estimated death toll running into tens of millions. The reason for the Great Famine is mainly attributed to the mistakes made during the Great Leap Forward, the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Sino-Soviet split, as well as natural disasters. The Great Famine hit rural areas far more than urban areas. During fieldwork, most research participants recalled the extremely difficult time of the Great Famine in terms of restrictions on food, but few actually experienced episodes of starvation like their rural counterparts did. For further reading about the Great Famine, please see Yang, D. L. 1996.
14. Hay, D., D. Morris, G. Liu and S. Yao 1994.
15. Oral histories, autobiographies and fictional accounts of the Red Guard generation and the Cultural Revolution have been appearing in China and the West since the 1970s. For interested readers please see Chang, J. 2012; Ji, X. 2022; Jiang, Y. and D. Ashley 2000; Shen, F. 2006.
16. Altogether there were 29 research participants, aged between 62 and 84, who shared their experiences during the Cultural Revolution in detail with me.
17. During the 'class struggle' of the Cultural Revolution, people were divided into different groups/classes. The five 'black categories' referred to five political identities that were seen as 'bad' during the Revolution. They were as follows: 'landlords', 'rich farmers', 'counter-revolutionaries', 'bad-influences' and 'rightists'. People who were labelled as belonging to one of the 'five black categories' were separated out and made to participate in struggle sessions; they also experienced humiliation, re-education, beating and other types of persecution. The family members of those who belonged to one of the 'five black categories' were regarded as people with 'problematic' family backgrounds, and were therefore also involved in the class struggle.
18. The fall of the 'Gang of Four', which is regarded as the end of the Cultural Revolution.
19. The New Soviet person, a concept promoted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, refers to a specific archetype: a person with specific qualities that were said to be emerging as dominant among all citizens of the Soviet Union.

20. Cheng, Y. 2008.
21. Ibid.
22. The Chinese term '*xuan chuan*', usually translated as 'propaganda' in English in a political context, essentially means 'dissemination' or 'publicity'. It is therefore used in a relatively neutral way in the Chinese language and is nowadays widely applied to all types of communication-related dissemination, including in the fields of commerce and business.
23. Shambaugh, D. 2007.
24. Brady, Anne-Marie 2008.
25. China's National Youth Day (celebrated on 4 May every year) commemorates the patriotic May Fourth Movement in 1919, in which many young intellectuals protested against imperialists.
26. Ip, H. Y. 2004, 131.
27. Zhu Xueqin said this in his interview in the documentary film 'Morning Sun'.
28. The basic ritual in a Chinese funeral.
29. MacFarquhar, R. and M. Schoenhals 2006, 124.
30. Wang, H. 2014.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Liu, X. 2019.
34. The Chinese translation of *The Third Wave* first appeared in Hong Kong in 1981. A full translation of the book in mainland China was published in 1983.
35. Liu, X. 2019, 3.
36. Published in the *People's Daily*, 22 February 2019. <https://tech.sina.cn/i/gn/2019-02-22/detail-ihqfskcp7412236.d.html?from=wap> (accessed 20 August 2020).
37. Cheng, Y. 2008.
38. Yan, Y. 2017.
39. Zhao, Y. and D. Schiller. 2001.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Yan, Y. 2017.
43. For more on 'Meipian', see the introduction to this blogging app in Chapter 3, page 79.
44. Cherstich, I., M. Holbraad and N. Tassi 2020.
45. Yan, Y. 2017.

## 8

# Life purpose: searching for meaning in revolutions and reforms

## Introduction

The last chapter discussed how revolutionary experience has left a long-lasting mark upon the ‘Red Guard’ generation in China. The need to engage with ‘self-reform’ in various aspects of life in order to meet the standards required of the ‘New Person’ in ‘New China’ is an experience widely shared among older people in China.<sup>1</sup> For some, the urge to carry out this ‘self-reform’ was initially perceived as an extrinsic force, a political requirement and source of social pressure, which they gradually internalised over the years, becoming part and parcel of their life philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Individuals who went through these revolutionary times were brought up with the ‘sense of mission’ characteristic of Mao’s time and grew up with the so-called communist ‘thought weapon’ (*sixiang wuqi*). When confronted with the question ‘What is the purpose of life?’, the answer was, or was supposed to be, crystal clear: ‘to fight for the great mission of the Communist Revolution’. Today, however, only a few people would feel completely satisfied by this ‘standard’ correct answer, one imposed by the Party-state, even though many older people are still moved by the rhetoric of revolution and patriotic nationalism. What, then, is the purpose of life for older people in contemporary China?

The ethnography provides a close look at how this older generation developed their life purpose throughout their life course, a timeframe almost perfectly synchronised with the emergence and growth of ‘New China’. In this context, individuals, families and social groups, as well as the Party-state, all play their respective roles in the shaping of life purpose. Following exploration of the Cultural Revolution in [Chapter 7](#), the discussion here first examines the narratives around life purpose during

China's radical communist time, when the national political agenda set the ultimate meaning of life for individuals. The second part of this chapter focuses on the consequences of the post-Mao economic reforms, a time when ordinary people struggled to redefine their life purpose amid a rapidly changing society. The final part of this chapter illustrates how the (re-)construction of life purpose at the later stage of life is woven around people's reflective narratives (which look to the past), as well as to their newly attained digital capabilities, facilitated by the internet and the smartphone in particular.

The perspective of this chapter thereby shifts from considering the fundamental relations between the state and the individual in Mao's time to exploring more personal struggles during the time of reform – especially in terms of the narratives around life purpose as it evolves during this later stage of life.

## Prescribed life purpose during the Revolution

Chaoying, a 61-year-old research participant, describes people's understanding of life purpose during the revolutionary time as follows,

When we were young, we were told exactly what we should believe in and fight for ... Chairman Mao had decided the life purpose for everyone – that is, to build a great communist New China, we had to devote the 'small self' (*xiao wo*) to the greater career of the 'big self' (*da wo*).

During Mao's time, people's personal lives were to a great extent under the control of the Party-state. When this older generation was young, the opportunity to think independently about life purpose, and to practise it according to one's free will, was not just difficult but unacceptable. The Party provided every individual with a standardised life purpose and a discourse through which this could be understood as a willingness to sacrifice the interests of the individual or 'small self' (*xiao wo*) for the sake of the collective welfare of the country or 'big self' (*da wo*).

In Chaoying's case, the subordination of the individual's interest to the collective one, as mandated during Mao's time, is a concept literally 'written' in her name. During a discussion about this, Chaoying<sup>3</sup> sighs,

Had I been born one year earlier, I would never have had to carry the name Chaoying.

She was born in 1958, during the peak of the ‘Great Leap Forward’ movement (1958–60). At this time Mao had decreed that one of the country’s national goals should be for Chinese steel production to ‘surpass England and catch up with America’ (*chaoying ganmei*) in 15 to 20 years. ‘Chaoying’ literally means ‘surpass England’. The whole country was immersed in a collective euphoric dream, thrilled by the imagination of the communist utopia, and many newborns were named ‘Chaoying’ that year. Naming their children after the Party-state’s ambitious project was also a way for their parents to express their passion towards fulfilling it.

During the Great Leap Forward, each household and local community across China was mobilised to contribute to the overall targets in steel production. Countless backyard furnaces and community workshops mushroomed all over the country. However, the many backyard furnaces erected for this purpose ended up burning what at the time was quite scarce fuel, and only managed to produce tonnes of inferior-quality steel which proved completely unusable. During fieldwork, many older people recalled how all the iron railings were removed from apartment buildings overnight and melted down to be used as iron ore in steel production. Many households even handed over their iron kitchen knives and scissors.

As a colossal waste of time, labour and resources, the Great Leap Forward turned out to be catastrophic in many ways.<sup>4</sup> Terrible weather alongside these ill-conceived policies gave the country a final blow, manifested in a severe nationwide famine which started in 1959 and lasted for three years. The famine killed about 15 to 20 million people (the official figure),<sup>5</sup> though this is disputed. Another source puts the number of deaths at 36 million,<sup>6</sup> a number equivalent to the total civilian casualties of the eight-year Sino-Japanese War (1937–45).

Knowing the history behind the term, it is understandable that Chaoying is highly ambivalent about her given name and its association with these manmade calamities. Having said that, the ‘revolutionary generation’ included in this ethnography are still too young to remember the Great Leap Forward, which took place between 1958 and 1960. By contrast, the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) has had a more direct and powerful impact on their life course, as shown in [Chapter 7](#). Being at peace with the past, especially with all the mistakes and regrets this entails, has become a significant obstacle for many older people in this later stage of life.

In 1981 the Party described the Cultural Revolution as an error, but did not completely refute it. Instead, the Party treated Mao’s mistakes

with great caution, placing a great part of the blame on Mao's widow Jiang Qing and three other ultra-Maoist Communist Party members, who came to be known collectively as the 'Gang of Four'.<sup>7</sup> The Party also avoided clear answers to specific questions such as:

Who are the culprits and who are the victims; what was right and what was wrong; as well as the reasons for the decade long catastrophe.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of examining history thoroughly, the then de facto leader Deng Xiaoping urged the Chinese to 'unite and look forward' (*tuanjie yizhi xiang qian kan*).<sup>9</sup> Even today the Cultural Revolution remains a subject that cannot be openly discussed and debated in China, with the archives remaining mostly inaccessible to scholars.<sup>10</sup> Some of the great enigmas of the Cultural Revolution consequently remain unsolved, not least the question of how families, neighbours, colleagues and classmates were able to turn on one another so viciously. What is the legacy of a Cultural Revolution so vast that a whole generation invested their passion, their youth and even their lives in its cause? The Party itself strictly constrains any discussion of the Cultural Revolution to avoid the risk of a full-scale re-examination of Mao's legacy and a questioning of the Party's role in Chinese history.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, for individuals, reviewing their personal past can also carry risks. It is still not common to see people such as Juntao, mentioned in [Chapter 7](#), openly express his feelings of guilt about the acts of unjustified violence he took part in, so that he does not 'carry the guilt to the grave'. It is more common for people to decide to leave the past to the past and only 'look forward', just as the Party recommends. Expressions such as 'no choice' (*mei de xuan*), 'not up to me' (*bu you wo*), 'lose control' (*shen bu you ji*) or 'drift along with the tide' (*sui bo zhu liu*) were frequently mentioned when older people were recalling the troubled past. Liang Zhu, a retired teacher, appeared in [Chapter 7](#) with his remark that many of his peers 'cannot afford an examined life'. He believes that this older generation, as he once eloquently put it,

was once trapped in the grand 'life purpose' imposed by the Party in the revolution and then taken away by the historical flood (*lishi hongliu*) in economic reforms.

Tuqiang, a research participant in his late sixties, agrees that looking forward is the only solution. Back in the 1960s, he spent a few years on a

countryside farm, working as a Party representative. Reflecting on this past, Tuqiang observes,

I feel I let some people down (*duibuqi*) in the past ... but there is no point in dwelling on the past mistakes ... I can't live a life in vain (*bai huo le*).

It is unclear from this comment who Tuqiang feels he let down, and he appeared reluctant to discuss this further. Later on in the fieldwork one of Tuqiang's old neighbours, who had known him for 40 years, revealed his secret: two young 'sent-down' people from 'capitalist families' allegedly committed suicide in the state-run farm he managed because of the constant political conflict and persecution they experienced. The parents of one of these young people tracked down Tuqiang in the 1990s<sup>12</sup> and tried to find out the details of their son's death. However, Tuqiang refused to see them. In my farewell chat with Tuqiang, he finally chose to talk more about what had happened and why he had refused to meet the desperate parents.

They said they just wanted the truth, but I know they want to find someone to take the blame and it should not be me. I suffered during the Cultural Revolution too ... and all I did was my job following the Party ... they should blame it on the Cultural Revolution, not me ... It was out of my control ... I don't understand why they bother with the truth any more. For me, if the truth is painful, I would rather not to know about it.

The underlying logic of Tuqiang's words, as well as many others who are concerned about examining the past, seems to be that if the life purpose they were once prescribed is proven to be illusory or even wrong, then one runs the risk of repudiating one's own life purpose – and therefore losing the meaning of life as it had to be lived. Furthermore, if the individual had to be sacrificed for the collective cause, then responsibility no longer lies with individuals. The majority of the 'Red Guard' generation therefore avoid speaking about their own participation in the Cultural Revolution.

Memories of the past are also reconstructed according to the concerns of the present. People are more open to recalling the general chaos of that era, the suffering on the farms and the interruption of school education, but they tend to keep silent about their own involvement in various radical movements. Not only were they busy getting on with life after the Revolution, but some of them had also been both victims and persecutors in different situations.



In the post-Mao era, individual life purpose was gradually decoupled from its initial identity as a communist ideology.<sup>13</sup> The pursuit of personal and family happiness, as well as of material comfort, started to supersede the previously ideological notions of life purpose as the country opened up during Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. People witnessed the value system of their entire society shifting very rapidly; this led in turn to individual life purpose changing significantly, based on the drastic social transformations taking place. The following section outlines how people redefined their life purpose in this rapidly changing society, in the context of China's movement from being one of the centres of world communist revolution towards becoming one of the epicentres of global capitalism.

## Redefining life purposes in reforms

Mao's portrait still hangs today on the Gate of Heavenly Peace (*tian'an men*), even as China has become the world's largest luxury goods market<sup>14</sup> with the second largest GDP in the world.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1970s China started to reform its highly centralised and inefficient planned market socialist economic system through decentralising the powers of stated-owned enterprises (SOEs) and by permitting non-collectively-owned enterprises, such as private business, to operate.<sup>16</sup> Along with the reform of the centralised resource allocation mechanism, prices for goods were adjusted and partially liberalised. From the 1980s the distribution policy of ration coupons mentioned in [Chapter 3](#) also started to loosen. In addition, the government adopted an open-door policy to attract foreign capital and expand foreign trade.

The economic reforms did achieve a widely recognised 'economic magic' against great difficulties. However, for many in Shanghai it was the struggles and pain associated with this wrenching reform that came first, and which remains with them as the overwhelming memory of this period. Yanli, a former factory worker in her sixties, is one of these people. When she got a job at a radio factory, aged 17, she felt very proud. As she recalls,

Like many of my peers, I entered the factory with great passion. I worked so hard in the factory – working extra hours was very common but with no complaint at all ... No one worked for money. We worked for a greater mission, that is to build the New China.

Despite her passion for her job, Yanli was among the first batch of people to be sacked when the previously state-owned radio factory became a Sino-foreign joint venture in the late 1990s. Even today Yanli, who was previously a Red Guard, still feels upset about the sudden shift in her role. As she puts it, she went from being one of her country's builders to becoming part of her country's burden,

Overnight, all my meaningful efforts appeared meaningless. I entered the factory to build communist China and in the end the factory itself was bought by foreign capital ... We [the laid-off workers] simply became a burden to the country ... the country simply took the 'iron rice bowl' (*tie fanwan*) away from us.

In Chinese, a 'rice bowl' is normally used as a metaphor for employment and livelihood. Unlike the ceramic rice bowl, an object in everyday use, an 'iron rice bowl' is one unlikely to be broken. The colloquial expression 'iron rice bowl' refers to the guaranteed and secure, cradle-to-grave livelihood people were offered in the planned economy, often including a job at a state-owned factory. Between 1949 and 1978, before the economic reforms, China's economy had been highly centralised, with the government maintaining tight controls over production and the allocation of resources. Within this system, the majority of jobs in the city were assigned by the government; job mobility was almost non-existent. Socialist workers were paid subsistence wages; in exchange, they were guaranteed lifetime employment along with near-free housing, education, healthcare and pensions. This egalitarian ethos collapsed as the new, free-market economic reforms transformed social policy in China quite dramatically.<sup>17</sup> The loss of what people had assumed was an inviolate right to their foundational 'iron rice bowl' then accelerated even further as the economic reforms continued into the 1990s, leading to large-scale urban migration and increased competition facing state-owned enterprises (SOEs).<sup>18</sup> As the reform of SOEs continued, significant numbers of workers were laid off nationwide, beginning in 1993.<sup>19</sup>

Yanli, who participated in the pioneering revolution against the 'old forces' and joined the factory to build a 'New China', never imagined that one day she in turn would be 'reformed' and viewed as part of another 'old system' that the new capitalist China sought to get rid of. She was not alone. Jingyun, aged 66, also lost his 'iron rice bowl' in 1995. He had worked as a factory technician within a state-owned textile factory for 15 years, since returning to Shanghai from the farm in northern China that he had worked on during the 'send-down' period of the Cultural

Revolution.<sup>20</sup> The factory is also where Jingyun met his wife, a colleague of his. The couple lost their jobs in the same factory at the same time. Along with the jobs went the all-encompassing welfare (*fu li*) associated with them, from guaranteed accommodation to the payment of medical bills.

In order to make a living and support their only son's education, the couple have tried to develop various small businesses.<sup>21</sup> In the morning they run a breakfast booth. During the day Jingyun sells balloons near an amusement park while his wife does odd jobs at the neighbourhood clinic. At night they run a fruit stall at the evening market. For many years almost the only thing the couple were concerned about was the struggle to survive; it was common for them to work more than 18 hours a day with no break during the year. As Jingyun's wife once remarked,

At that time, we were too busy to think about profound questions such as life purpose. We dared not fall ill, dared not work less. To be able to live everyday life (*guo rizi*) is the biggest life purpose.

The standard of living in Jingyun's household only improved when an 'unexpected' fortune arrived about 15 years ago.<sup>22</sup> Jingyun's late parents' previous residence in an alleyway within a traditional area (*lilong*) of Shanghai was demolished during the government-backed 'old city reconstruction', and they duly received a relatively substantial payment as compensation for the demolition.<sup>23</sup> With this money the couple managed to buy a flat for themselves and to contribute to the down payment for their son's purchase of his own flat.

However, not every household in this ethnography had the luck to receive anything as generous as this demolition compensation payment, although what this couple had suffered previously was quite common among the research participants. During the wave of lay-offs that took place between 1990 and 1996 in Shanghai, more than one million factory workers in the textile, engineering and electronics industries lost their jobs; this in turn impacted more than one-third of Shanghai households.<sup>24</sup> Even though the research participants in this study were generally middle-income urban residents, more than one-third had either experienced being laid off themselves or had direct family members or close friends who had been laid off. Once they found themselves without a job, many research participants made it their main objective and life purpose merely to 'be able to live everyday life' for a considerable length of their life course.

While many lost their 'iron rice bowl', others were born with a silver spoon. *Fuerdai*, literally meaning 'rich second generation', is a popular

term that refers to the children of the nouveau riche from the early years of China's economic reform era. When first coined, *fuerdai* referred specifically to people born in the 1980s, also the very first generation who came of age under China's one-child policy. They received attention and support from the family in ways unknown to any previous generation in China. Their parents were the very first generation to accumulate personal wealth, therefore acquiring new socio-economic positions within a Chinese society that remained quite socialist.

As the class struggle that marked China's revolutionary time gave way to a scramble for upward mobility in what was becoming a free market society, Deng's slogan 'to look forward' (*xiang qian kan*), used in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, gave way to a popular pun:<sup>25</sup> 'look for money' (*xiang qian kan*), which sounds exactly the same as the former. Private businesses did not exist in the pre-Dengist communist China, an era that came to an end in the late 1970s. When Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that 'to get rich is glorious',<sup>26</sup> private enterprises started to pop up across the country. Today China is the world's fastest-growing source of new billionaires. In reference to the contemporary cult of wealth Baozhu, a research participant in her late seventies, remarks,

The situation is so different to when I was young. My parents had to burn all their deeds and US dollars during the Cultural Revolution. Being rich was the original sin. But now money means everything. Had I been born in today's generation, I would be today's '*fuerdai*'.

Baozhu was born into a wealthy family that runs a textile export business in Shanghai. As the youngest daughter, she only has vague memories of the wealthy life she had as a child in the 1940s. What she does remember vividly is the deep guilt and fear she felt with regards to her 'bad' family background, deemed to be the 'running dogs' (*zougou*) of capitalism. Young people like her were called 'class enemies' by classmates; they had to deal not only with attacks on their parents, but also being bullied at school. The 'bad family background' had become so stigmatised that Baozhu fears that she will bear the scars of this 'original sin' for the rest of her life.

Although some of the traits of what is seen as typical *fuerdai* behaviour, such as showing off luxury items, have been frowned upon in mainstream media, people do not hide their envy when it comes to the *fuerdai* lifestyle, especially on social media. In the marriage market, being a *fuerdai* is a strong advantage. People from a family with wealth or power, most of the time both, will find that they are extremely popular in today's China. Having gone from being children known for their 'bad family

background' and suffering from discrimination to being the parents in a family with *fuerdai* rich kids surrounded by admirers constitutes a trajectory of around only 30 years. During this time basic societal values have been completely reversed, at least in terms of general attitudes towards affluence and the political consequences of wealth. The shift in values has been so radical that it is hardly surprising that it has left Baozhu, along with many others, confused.

Jingyun, the former factory worker sacked following Deng's economic reforms, also felt it difficult to understand the changes that have occurred since the economic reform. As he recalls,

In the past, people had much less desire and were much more naive ... there was no competition about who has a bigger house or who makes more money ... The welfare (*fuli*) was good in the planned economy and people were simply more careless ... I lost understanding of today's society. I was certainly much happier and more contented in the past, with my iron rice bowl.

When Jingyun said this, his wife winked at him, indicating that there had been enough complaints during the interview. Having received the hint, Jingyun continues,

Well ... I know, I know, I should sound more positive, as we finally have a good life and no more worries about money. Yes, I should look forward and put down the past.

Jingyun's observation about the planned economy clearly resonates with many older people who have similar memories of the 'stable' life of the past, when everyone was equally poor and the income gap was limited. Today China comes second on the list of countries with the highest gaps between the rich and the poor.<sup>27</sup> The country's long-term economic growth, with its high speed and long-lasting 'efficiency first' policy guidance, has brought China an equally rapid growth in inequality. From 1978 to 2015 the real income of the bottom 50 per cent of Chinese households has increased by about five times on average, while that of the wealthiest 0.001 per cent of the population has gone up by almost 40 times.<sup>28</sup> The huge levels of inequality found in contemporary China obviously do not align with the country's continued official 'socialist country' designation, given that any 'socialist' component is perhaps even less generous than that found within a typical European welfare state, or indeed a typical capitalist country.<sup>29</sup>

While individuals use different strategies to deal with the past, an underlying attitude shared among many seems to be to regard the past as ‘baggage’ that burdens people. As noted above, one should ideally get rid of the past and look forward or, as people constantly urge one another, ‘Don’t live in the past’ (*huo zai guoqu*). One of the most popular themes of the inspirational articles known as ‘chicken soup for the soul’<sup>30</sup> that older people shared on WeChat groups and their personal WeChat profiles is a call for older people to ‘put down’ (*fang xia*) the past, maintain a positive mindset and keep busy.<sup>31</sup> Keeping busy in life is believed to be an effective way of shifting one’s attention from the past to the present. It is said to help repel any regrets about one’s past, as well as avoid the possible loneliness that one might feel after retirement. Reviewing the course of his life, Jingyun remarks, ‘as they say, the only unchanged thing in life is “change” itself’.

However, the widespread discourse around ‘putting down the past’ is easier said than done. For one thing, it was obvious during fieldwork that many older people remain nostalgic for Mao’s time. If anything, it seems that it is those who most stridently emphasise the importance of ‘not living in the past’ and of ‘putting down the past’ who actually dwelt deeply on it, engaged in a constant struggle to free themselves from its ‘baggage’. For example, on the WeChat profile of Jingyun, who privately spoke about how much happier he would be with an ‘iron rice bowl’, more than one-quarter of the articles<sup>32</sup> he shared publicly were about how to adopt a healthy mindset and to be forgiving about misfortunes in the past. Yet also circulating around a few of the WeChat groups in which Jingyun actively participates were articles loaded with nostalgia for Mao’s time – an era when there was much less competition among people and far fewer social expectations regarding personal successes. Privately, Jingyun admits that he found these articles particularly touching. As he explains,

[As those articles say] in Mao’s time, people just did what they were told to do, without any anxiety. But now you don’t know what is right for sure. People are worried about their house and cars, their children and grandchildren ... Things that look right today prove to be wrong tomorrow.

Even though the Cultural Revolution was ‘the most thorough destruction of all forms of religious life in Chinese and, perhaps, human history’,<sup>33</sup> it created the God-like figure of Chairman Mao for people to worship and to draw a sense of security in life. The profound consequences of people

losing their ‘iron rice bowls’ was thus a disillusion with Chairman Mao as the supreme deity of New China, combined with the loss of meanings and values embodied by the ‘iron rice bowl’ of the planned economy. The terms ‘spiritual void’ (*jingshen kongxu*) or ‘moral crisis’ (*daode weiji*) have been widely applied and discussed in contemporary Chinese society. More and more Chinese people struggle to find an underlying purpose in lives no longer driven by the Communist mission nor the struggle to make an everyday living.<sup>34</sup> Material comfort brought by the economic reforms does not necessarily resolve the problems caused by the sense of disillusionment that remains after the grand narrative of ‘life purpose’ in Mao’s time collapsed.

There is, therefore, a collective longing for answers to the meaning of life in contemporary China. What is true and what is false? What is right and what is wrong? What is good and what is bad? People are constantly confronted by these essential questions. From communist revolutions to economic reforms, it seems as if the ‘correct’ answers are always changing; people are thus constantly having to redefine their life purpose. The final discussion in this chapter therefore examines the contemporary situation in which this generation find themselves. Once older people retire, they are faced with yet another disjuncture, and once again have to evaluate in which direction their path lies.

## Life purpose in the later stage of life

Liang Zhu, the ‘movement athlete’ who appeared in [Chapter 7](#), claimed that he had experienced two revolutions in life. He believes that his life has been worthwhile.

Of course, it is a misfortune that I was born in such an unsettled era, and I have eaten a lot of bitterness (*chi ku*), but I think I am doing well in terms of doing personhood (*zuoren*). I always ask for progress (*yaoqiu jinbu*). I have never let down (*duideqi*) my country, my family, my teachers or the people who care about me.

In the Chinese moral discourse of ‘doing personhood’ (*zuoren*), ‘the other’ plays a significant role, as it requires people who ‘measure themselves and others in terms of the ability and actual action to control desires and self-interest for the benefit of the other party in social interactions’.<sup>35</sup> The *zuoren* discourse requires ‘a strong sense of the reflective ethical self’,<sup>36</sup> which is manifested in a colloquial expression when Liang Zhu uses the

term ‘*duideqi*’ (‘do not let down others’). ‘*Duideqi*’ may also be employed in a negative way, as ‘*duibuqi*’ (‘let others down’) can refer to someone who feels guilty for their behaviour and whose life is therefore not worth living.

‘*Duibuqi*’ is the term 61-year-old Chenfang frequently employs when she talks about her family. She started to develop an international business in the 1980s, a time when most people did not dare get involved in such initiatives, when China had first ‘opened up’. According to her own account, Chenfang was typical of those who ‘looked for money’ (*xiang qian kan*) during the economic reform. Her friends have different versions of the story of how she became a well-known rich person, a so-called ‘ten-thousand-yuan person’ (*wan yuan hu*).<sup>37</sup> Chenfang used to feel very proud of her achievement, but has found that wealth carries much less significance for her now:

My life used to be very focused on and motivated by money. I needed to make a lot of money to prove how capable I can be. But later I realised that I had missed out the most important thing in one’s life; I let down (*duibuqi*) my family.

Being the third daughter with two elder sisters in her family, Chenfang has always struggled to attract care and attention from her parents, who did not try to conceal their preference for their son, Chenfang’s younger brother. She left home in 1975 as a young person who was ‘sent-down’. When she returned to Shanghai in the 1980s, she got to know her business partner; he later became her husband. Her relationship with her parents improved gradually in the 1990s, when her parents started to appreciate her as a great contributor to the family, especially when Chenfang bought a flat for them and her young brother. For a while she was a typical workaholic who could work non-stop for 48 hours. Along with the rapid growth of her business, there was an increase in conflicts with her husband and a significant drop in the amount of time she spent with her family.

About 15 years ago Chenfang’s marriage came to an end. Later in the same year her mother was killed in a car accident. Chenfang’s only daughter now lives in Australia, contacting her mother only when she needs financial support. Reflecting upon how much she wanted company and attention from her parents when she was young, and how little time she spent with her own daughter, Chenfang expresses her regret,

I used to think I can give her [the daughter] a better life by making a lot of money, but that is wrong. Now it’s too late to cherish my



family ... no matter how much fortune I own, I could not buy my family back. I am not a good mother, nor a good wife, nor a good daughter. I let down (*duibuqi*) so many people and I am really not successful in doing personhood (*zuoren*).

Like Chenfang, it is common to find older people who feel regret about the *duibuqi* to their families and try to make this up at a later stage of their lives. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), many are devoted to their role as grandparents – in part because they feel that to be a competent grandparent is an opportunity to pay back what they owe to their children in terms of company and financial support, two things they were not able to provide as much as they would have wanted to in their youth. While most people focus on their own families, some aim for a wider impact. For example, Mr Shou, a former taxi driver who is now a renowned freelance photographer and blogger ([Fig. 8.1](#)), has turned his camera to the elderly to take ‘proper portrait photos’ of them in the past few years. He explains the rationale behind his work,

Every human being deserves a good portrait photo so that you can be remembered ... As a person, usually you can be remembered by your children and grandchildren, or great-grandchildren if you are really lucky. But after that, you will be forgotten – people won’t even know what you looked like without a photo. In China, for the generation before me to have a proper portrait photo was very rare.



**Figure 8.1** ‘Forget Me Not’: a short film featuring Mr Shou and his photography project. Watch the film at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LZfX1rjdCM&t=5s>.

In most cases Mr Shou will print out the photos, sign them and send them back to people. This is not only because he believes photos look much better in the print version than they do in the digital, but also because this way his name is 'embedded' in the photos.

I want to take photos for a thousand households ... maybe one-third, so about 300 households, will keep the photos forever as family memories and I've signed the back of these photos. Just think, if 300 such photos are kept in various households, then in the future, after 30–40 years, my grandson can tell the stories of these photos, he can find the descendants of these families, then it will be another story. Don't you think it is meaningful?

In Mr Shou's eyes, the visual is the evidence of the existence of a person. His life purpose is achieved and reinforced by the fact that he, as a mortal person, will be remembered by others for a long time because of this visual documentation. He continues,

In the past, they said it is such an achievement if your photo can be on the wall for 300 years. But I am not Chairman Mao, I am not Marx or Engels who can have their photos always hanging there. But still the photos I took will be displayed in many households for hundreds of years ... I feel a great sense of achievement and pride in my existence.

Muguo, who, as described in [Chapter 3](#), is busier than ever after retirement running his own 'Meipian' blog and managing a few WeChat interest-based groups, spends a considerable time on his smartphone every day – not wanting to 'miss out on the great *yuanfen* (karma) taking place online', as he puts it. He frequently records various activities such as talks and exhibitions, then posts this content online (on blogs and WeChat groups) to share with his online contacts. Muguo's video recordings are received positively among his friends, especially those who are unable to make the events in person.

'A single spark can start a prairie fire,' as they say. I myself may have limited impact, but the internet amplifies what I can do. People I meet online are people I have '*yuanfen*' with. I can be the single spark which transfers the positive energy to many more, thanks to my smartphone.

‘A single spark can start a prairie fire’ (*xingxing zhihuo keyi liaoyuan*), the expression quoted by Muguo, was a popular saying during China’s revolutionary time, but still commonly used nowadays. It was originally the title of a well-known essay by Mao, written in the early stages of the Revolutionary Civil War (1927–37). The essay was critical of pessimistic ideas in the Party.<sup>38</sup> It then became a metaphor for the growth of the Chinese Revolution and, more generally, for any ambitious project that starts out small. Muguo has no problem combining revolutionary rhetoric with the traditional cosmological discourse of *yuanfen* to articulate his life purpose in the smartphone age.

Many people’s life purpose is built upon others’ views and the ways in which one can be seen, accepted, appreciated, needed or remembered by them. The ‘others’ in question can be the next generation or the previous one (as seen in the context of giving care, discussed in [Chapter 2](#)). They can also be followers within online communities, such as those who appreciate Dan’s singing in [Chapter 4](#),<sup>39</sup> or the hundreds of households for whom Mr Shou has taken photos in the hope that some of them will remember him. They can also be friends, with whom Muguo diligently shares videos on WeChat in the hope that he may be appreciated as the ‘single spark which can start a prairie fire’.

Some people have also turned to religion during the later stage of their lives. For example, it is not difficult to tell that Shuli, a 70-year-old doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine, is a devoted follower of Buddhism. One of the most prominent places in her living room (the top shelf of the display cabinet) is devoted to a beautiful statue of Buddha and fresh fruit is always placed in front of it. For Shuli, the Buddha statue means a great deal,

It [the Buddha statue] is the only thing my parents left to me. Most of their stuff, including the family album, has gone or was damaged during the looting of our house in the Cultural Revolution ... The Buddha statue was thrown into the fireplace by the ‘Red Guards’, but somehow it survived with little damage. Isn’t it amazing? It is definitely blessed.

However, such a blessed statue, of profound significance to Shuli’s family memory, became ‘out of place’ when her son converted to Christianity two years ago. Shuli describes his disapproval,

He [her son] would give me a lecture about Christianity and urge me to replace the Buddha with Jesus whenever he saw it.

In the end, Shuli decided to hide the Buddha statue in order to avoid conflict. At the same time that she developed the strategy of hiding the statue, Shuli applied for a new WeChat account via another smartphone. There she feels free to 'post Buddhist content without triggering an argument', as she put it. On the new WeChat account, Shuli has only added contacts who are followers of Buddhism, or who at least support her practice of it. According to Shuli, her two smartphones represent this clear division of labour. She has one device for 'the secular' (*su shi*) world – with all of her social contacts, including family and friends, as well as useful smartphone apps – and another for the Buddha (*wo fo*). Shuli would only take the 'secular' phone with her whenever she went out, while the Buddha phone is only used when she is observing her daily practice (*xiu xi*) of Buddhism. Rather than going to local temples, Shuli follows a master from Taiwan who regularly uploads teaching material onto a specific WeChat group.

Shuli shares selected content from the master's website on her personal WeChat profile every day. The content she shares on WeChat is made up of articles that discuss the Buddhist position on a wide range of domains and topics in daily life, from 'how to deal with family conflict with Buddhist wisdom' to 'whether followers of Buddhism should invest in the stock market' (Fig. 8.2, left). From time to time Shuli would also send Buddhism-related short videos to me via her 'Buddha' WeChat account. For example, in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shuli once forwarded me a video of monks across the world praying together in a Zoom meeting (Fig. 8.2, right).

Every month Shuli changed her WeChat profile photo according to the master's guidance. He had said that the latest photo represents a person's recent state of mind, and therefore asked his followers to update their WeChat profile regularly with an updated portrait photo. This enabled him to have a better overview of everyone's situation. The practice also enables the members of the group to appraise their own current situation better by reflecting on the images they select.

Shuli believes that she can see her life much more clearly in this later stage of life, explaining, 'When I was born, my grandfather sighed that my fate was sealed'. Shuli's birthday is on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month (known as 'Double Seventh'). In the Chinese folk tale of the Cowherd (*niu lang*) and the Weaver Maid (*zhi nv*),<sup>40</sup> this day is the only day in the year when the cursed couple (the protagonists of the story), who were deeply in love, are allowed to meet – the only happy day in a whole year. Even though this day is now celebrated as the Chinese Valentine's Day, in the eyes of older Chinese people those born on the 'Double Seventh' are doomed to being happy only once a year.



**Figure 8.2** Screenshot of Shuli’s ‘Buddha’ WeChat profile (left) and a Buddhist-related short video that she sent via the Buddha WeChat account during the global pandemic (right). Screenshots by Xinyuan Wang.

Now I am over 70. I accept my fate of ‘Double Seventh’. What happened in life follows *yuanfen* ... Thanks to the Buddha, I understand how to put down (*fangxia*) the past and to be content with the present ... This life is empty in the Buddha’s eyes; the purpose of life is perhaps to understand that it is empty.

A notion frequently mentioned by Shuli, *yuanfen* is regarded as the initial condition for the start of any relationship and is a concept that developed from Buddhism and Confucianism.<sup>41</sup> It is believed that forming and maintaining a relationship depend on both a primary and a secondary cause. The primary cause is under the individual’s control, such as how much effort one invests in the relationship, whereas the secondary cause, *yuanfen*, is part of fate: it is the one that determines the context and condition of the relationship. This secondary cause is usually out of individuals’ personal control.

Like Shuli, many people also turn to the concept of ‘*yuanfen*’ to explain their situation, especially when rational reasons fail. During the

fieldwork there was a huge range of scenarios that people attributed to *yuanfen*, from interpersonal relationships to the relationship between people and things, from romantic relationships to career opportunities. One can always use *yuanfen* to explain the reason for the start or end of a relationship, as well as for the missed opportunity to pursue one. In practice, *yuanfen* helps to reduce the individual's anxiety and guilt from any inexplicable failure. People frequently comfort a person who had tried very hard but failed to get a particular position by saying 'there was no *yuanfen* between you and the job'. A salesperson uses the concept to persuade potential customers by saying: 'I think you have *yuanfen* with this bag'. One old saying goes like this:

If there is *yuanfen*, people will meet each other despite being a thousand miles apart; if there is no *yuanfen*, people will miss each other despite being face to face.

Chang Guan, mentioned in [Chapter 7](#) above, runs his own personal travel blog. He has amassed followers from 12 different provinces in China, as well as from five different other countries, including Canada and Indonesia. He also refers to *yuanfen* in accounting for his success,

Without the internet, I would never expect to have a connection with so many people. Isn't that 'online *yuanfen*' amazing? It is true that if there is *yuanfen*, people will meet each other despite being a thousand miles apart.

The discourse around the notion of *yuanfen* throws a different light on online relations and provides a plausible explanation for people who truly appreciate their seemingly random online encounters. Like Chang Guan, it is common for people to view 'unplanned' online encounters as *yuanfen*. This can lead to some people applying the *yuanfen* discourse more actively, as they come to believe that life purpose is achieved through making good use of *yuanfen* online.

## Conclusion

An expression frequently used by the older generation to describe what they have experienced during the past 40 years is '*da lang tao sha*', which literally means 'heavy waves wash off sand'. During the journey of

searching for purpose in their lives, the older generation were buffeted by rough ocean, with one heavy wave after another washing over their lives.

Nothing has caused more upheaval in the past hundred years of Chinese history than the battle over what to believe – in other words, over life purpose.<sup>42</sup> After the death of the deity-like Mao, a ‘belief earthquake’ was inevitable among ordinary Chinese citizens, especially those who grew up and were socialised in a religion-like devotion and commitment to the communist revolutions and Chairman Mao. Like Yanli and Jingyun, many of them got lost, both during the revolution and in the reform that followed.

Mao’s revolution abandoned them, sweeping them out of urban centres; Deng’s reform left them on the sidelines, when China moved to embrace the market.<sup>43</sup>

Chinese people see history as a ‘mirror’ which provides reflection for the present. They value history as ‘a reservoir of metahistorical experience in ethical, political and other aspects of life’<sup>44</sup> which should give meaning and interpretation to the present. Yet from ‘*xiang qian kan*’, meaning ‘look forward’, to ‘*xiang qian kan*’, a vocally identical expression meaning ‘look for money’, their lived history and personal memories seem to this older generation to be a twisted mirror. Intrinsic dilemmas and deep insecurities lie between the once prescribed and seemingly inviolate purpose of life and the subsequent unpredictable turmoil that has rendered fleeting any system of meaning within the turbulent, fast-changing society.

It is therefore common that two seemingly incompatible feelings, regrets and nostalgia, are inextricably intermingled when it comes to people reflecting on the past. Their regrets about the Cultural Revolution co-exist with nostalgia for the youthful passions they experienced at that time. Similarly, older people’s regrets about the reforms co-exist not only with nostalgia for the stability they had experienced during pre-reform times, but also with the material advantages they may subsequently have accrued.

Given this history, we cannot expect that at this later stage of retired life there would be only one ‘correct’ life purpose for this older generation, or that individuals’ purposes would still align with a collective life purpose. The digital opportunities facilitated by the smartphone empower people to be seen and appreciated by others in fulfilling what have finally emerged as various individual life purposes. In some cases the smartphone has also become the place where one feels free to practise what

now really matters in life, as in the examples of Shuli's 'Buddha' WeChat account and Chang Guan's travel blog, with its *yuansen* encounters.

People usually draw on the structures and patterns in their life experiences to find materials for re-interpretation. These may in turn allow them to ascribe meaning and significance to both the past and the present. People learn how to tell stories about themselves (self-narratives), what to emphasise and what to leave out, and what words to use.<sup>45</sup> These stories then become the narrative of 'doing personhood' (*zuoren*). When we talk about individual life purposes, however, it is significant that those individuals can be seen, felt, appreciated, liked or needed by others. Many also try to live up to certain social expectations which they have internalised as personal aspirations. To some extent, then, the relationship to the state has been replaced by a relationship to others, those they know or imagine, so that the construction of such journeys of personhood-doing (*zuoren*) remains relational.<sup>46</sup>

Nations, institutions, families and individuals are all in the business of seeking a coherent narrative that arises from how they came into being, grew and developed.<sup>47</sup> However, that coherence often requires a degree of inconsistency when people live in such a contradictory world. It is not unusual to see people on the one hand showing contempt for ideological slogans found in Party propaganda, claiming that 'it is just politics', while simultaneously applying a similar rhetoric in their private narratives. As in [Chapter 7](#), we have seen how nowadays the very concept of the revolution has also been appropriated to fit within a new context. Many older people remain motivated by the 'revolutionary spirit' which makes them feel young and has now been transformed to provide them with an adaptable attitude towards the ever-changing China.

People live within their own networks of significance, created with reference to their personal histories and lives within changing cultural traditions.<sup>48</sup> The majority of the events Muguo takes part in nowadays, such as his reading group on novels of Zhang Ailing<sup>49</sup> or a talk on Western classical music, would surely have been criticised as 'petit bourgeois taste' during the Cultural Revolution, and would even have attracted persecution. Despite this, Muguo has no problem using the revolutionary expression 'a single spark can start a prairie fire' to express his life purpose.

Similarly, even though Liang Zhu experienced great suffering during the Revolution's radical political movements, he still applies a 'self-reform' style of rhetoric, typical of socialist activism, 'to ask for progress', articulating his life purpose retrospectively. Revolutionary China had such a profound impact on individuals' world-views and value systems that it remains the basic language used to express life purpose, even



when the original mission of the Cultural Revolution has been dissolved. People continue to employ that language and the values they assign to their contemporary narratives of life purpose, incorporating revolutionary concepts of self-reform alongside traditional concepts such as *zuoren* and *yuanfen*.

Similarly, these individuals have entered into a ‘disenchanted’<sup>50</sup> modern world where the meaning of life has become more open, more fluid, more ambiguous and more contradictory. Some celebrate the increased freedom of choice; some inevitably feel nostalgic about the lost ‘iron rice bowl’, even though such certainty came at the cost of social mobility and other kinds of freedoms. Shuli, the participant born on the inauspicious ‘Double Seventh’, was half-joking when she observes,

Having more choices doesn’t mean you can have a better life; you may simply make the wrong choice.

Shuli’s reflection reveals another dimension to the discussion of life purpose. Essentially, making choices in life is always about selection, and so missing out on other potential opportunities that are thereby foreclosed. Popular philosophy urges people to appreciate that the meaning of life lies in those present choices, emphasising that there is no point in feeling regret about options not chosen in the past.<sup>51</sup> Yet when it comes to the question of life purpose or the meaning of life for this older generation in China, there was no such scenario. They are not regretting past choices; their main regret is precisely that, when young, they were given no choices at all.

Yet the reason why their present ambivalence goes so deep is that older people do not simply celebrate their contemporary lives, which offer them the possibility to have more freedom of choice, as a repudiation of that past. They are also trying to acknowledge to themselves the degree to which, in retrospect, they remember that ‘prescribed life purpose’ as something not entirely negative, even as their embrace of the new is laced with a retained nostalgia for the past.

## Notes

1. See also Chen, T. H. 1969.
2. See also Cheng, Y. 2008.
3. Given the special meaning of this given first name, the real name of the research participant is given here with her approval. However, the name ‘Chaoying’ is so commonplace among the older generation in China that it would be almost impossible to identify the person in question based merely on this.

4. Studies reflecting upon the lessons of the Great Leap Forward as well the consequential Great Famine are plentiful. For the interested reader, good places to start are Manning, K. E. and F. Wemheuer 2011; Li, W. and D. T. Yang 2005.
5. It was only in the 1980s, after some of prohibitions on evaluating the Mao period were relaxed, that the severity of the famine become known to China and the world. See Karl, R. E. 2010.
6. Jisheng, Y. 2012.
7. The 'Gang of Four' (*si ren bang*) was a clique of radical cultural revolutionaries who controlled the organs of power of the Communist Party of China through the later stages of the Cultural Revolution and fell from power shortly after Mao's death in 1976. The leading figure was Jiang Qing, Mao's last wife. The other three members were Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen. Interested readers can read a detailed account of the significant trial of the Gang of Four in Cook, A. C. 2016.
8. Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, S. 2006.
9. 'Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi' ('On some question concerning the history of the Party since the founding of the PRC'), *Renmin ribo (People's Daily)*, 1 July 1981, 1–7.
10. However, in a way, the Party's leadership had already lost control over what people knew about the Cultural Revolution; large parts of it remain alive in living memory and young people have the opportunity to hear the life stories of individuals directly rather than in a history textbook. After Mao's death, the situation was as follows. Anyone 'who had actively participated in the Cultural Revolution knew too much to submit to the then prevalent interpretation of post-1949 history, and the Party, in order to adjust history to the needs of the present, had to re-write its own history'. For a detailed discussion of the process of writing and rewriting the Party's history, the 'master narrative', please see Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, S. 2006.
11. More recently (November 2021), rewriting the Party's history has once again become an essential project of the Party. The resolution of the history is expected to celebrate the Party's achievement and to minimise the horrors unleashed in Mao's time. In 1981 Deng's resolution of the history still cautiously pointed out that Mao had made a serious mistake during the Cultural Revolution. However, a newly rewritten official history of the Party in 2021 touched only briefly on the Cultural Revolution, and did not even mention the Great Leap Forward which caused the deaths of tens of millions in mainland China. See *The Economist* (6–12 November 2021). 'The Communist Party: Control the present, control the past', 61–2.
12. This would have been about 20 years after the death of their son.
13. However, this is not to suggest that self-interest and personal aspirations were totally replaced by collective life purpose during Mao's time. Although personal life purpose was heavily influenced by political ideology, even during the peak of Maoist China, with all its radical socialist activism and revolution, there was still some room for personal negotiation and development. An excellent example comes from a substantial analysis of 679 private letters between ordinary Chinese citizens, written between 1961 and 1986. Tensions between personal concerns and an ideologically charged commitment are identifiable in many of the letters, providing a good understanding of the rise and fall of political commitment and socialist personhood over two decades. The authors argue that although self-interest and personal growth were temporarily overshadowed by political activism, the thoughts and behaviour of ordinary Chinese people were not permanently influenced by communist ideology. See Tian, L. and Y. Yan 2019.
14. Guo, W. 2015. 'Chinese consumer behaviour in luxury market: International luxury brands in China'. <http://www.theseus.fi/handle/10024/96990> (accessed 8 July 2020).
15. <https://www.focus-economics.com/blog/the-largest-economies-in-the-world> (accessed 8 July 2020).
16. For a detailed introduction to the economic reform in China that started in the late 1970s and its consequences, please see Lin, J. Y., F. Cai and Z. Li 2003.
17. For a detailed discussion of the increasing demand for welfare in China, please see Leung, J. C. B. 1994.
18. The unemployment issue during the reform of SOEs in China is complicated. For further discussion please see Gold, T. B. et al. 2009; Cai, Y. 2006.
19. Gu, E. X. 1999.
20. Please see the discussion of the 'send-down' period that occurred during the Cultural Revolution in Chapter 7 of this book.

21. Given the space limitations, this chapter is not going to discuss the re-employment of laid-off factory workers and the gender issue in factory redundancies in detail. For further analysis please see: Gold, T. B. et al. 2009; Lee, G. O. M. and M. Warner 2004; Liu, J. 2007.
22. Since 2004 compensation payments in Shanghai have risen dramatically. Read a detailed portrait story and discussion of local residents' ambiguous attitudes toward the massive inner-city reconstruction in Shanghai at <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003537/in-old-shanghai%2C-a-last-spring-festival-before-the-bulldozers> (accessed 8 July 2020).
23. The demolition in urban Shanghai is a significant and complicated issue. Given the space limit we will not explore it further here, but a few figures may provide a brief idea how significant the issue is. By 2004, more than 70 per cent of the alleyway *lilong* houses, which accounted for 80 per cent of Shanghai's residential housing prior to the 1980s, were wiped out during reconstruction of the old city on a massive scale. Along with the impressive speed and scale of urbanisation, problems arose such as unsustainable development, unregulated displacement and unjust compensation. See Ping, L. 2019.
24. <http://sh.sina.cn/news/2018-12-03/detail-ihmutuec5749120.d.html> (accessed 8 July 2020).
25. In Chinese, the word for both 'forward' and 'money' is both pronounced as 'qian'.
26. Collins, N. and D. O'Brien 2020, 64–81.
27. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/05/28/countries-with-the-widest-gaps-between-rich-and-poor/39510157/> (accessed 8 July 2020).
28. <https://zhongguoinstitute.org/the-great-divide-between-chinas-rich-and-poor/#:~:text=China's%20wealthiest%20100%20individuals%20have,of%20the%20country's%20population%20combined.&text=In%20comparison%2C%20the%20bottom%2040,%24637%20billion%20worth%20of%20assets> (accessed 8 July 2020).
29. Han, J., Q. Zhao and M. Zhang 2016.
30. 'Chicken soup for the soul' originally referred to a book series published in the US, which consisted of inspirational true stories about how ordinary people managed to live happy and fulfilling lives. The book was translated into Chinese around a decade ago and became a major bestseller. Nowadays people use the expression 'chicken soup for the soul' (*xin ling ji tang*) to describe articles offering career and lifestyle advice; these are popular and often shared on social media. Also see Wang, X. 2016, 72–5.
31. Also see Li, K. 2021.
32. Other articles frequently shared on Jingyun's WeChat profile include healthcare tips (such as TCM *yang sheng*), national and international news and nationalist articles (such as those discussing the rise of China).
33. Goossaert, V. and D. A. Palmer 2011, 167.
34. He, H. 2015, 119–28.
35. Yan, Y. 2017.
36. Ibid.
37. 'Wan yuan hu' literally means a person who has savings totalling 10,000 RMB (£1,000). This was a popular term to refer to those who became rich in the early stages of the economic reform in the 1980s, when the average monthly salary was about 300 RMB (£30).
38. [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_6.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_6.htm) (accessed 8 July 2020).
39. To review Dan's story in Chapter 4 you can also watch the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU5sTy3lZW0> (accessed 8 July 2020).
40. The love story of the cowherd and the weaver maid is a household folktale. It relates how a long time ago a kind-hearted cowherd (*niu lang*) fell in love with a weaver maid from Heaven (*zhi nv*). Unfortunately the God of Heaven disapproved of the marriage and the couple were forced to separate. However, their love and loyalty to each other made tens of thousands of magpies come to build a bridge for them, enabling them to meet one another once a year. The heavenly Queen Mother was eventually moved by their story and allowed the pair to meet once a year, on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, hence the name of their meeting date: 'Qi Xi' (Double Seventh).
41. Chang, H. C. and G. R. Holt 1991.
42. Osnos, E. 2014.
43. Chen, Y. 1999.
44. Schwartz, B. 1996.
45. Rapid and continual socio-cultural changes worldwide have a significant impact on individuals at a personal level, particularly with regards to questions about one's identity and sense of self.

The forming of self-narratives has increasingly come to be seen as a lifelong learning process. Analyses of self-narratives can be found in the sociological studies of modernisation and late modernity, particularly as articulated by Anthony Giddens. See Giddens, A. 1991.

46. See the discussion of the 'relational personhood' from a Chinese perspective at Yan, Y. 2017; Bruckermann, C. 2017.
47. Brown, K. 2018.
48. Geertz, C. 1973.
49. Also known as Eileen Chang or Chang Ai-ling. She was a famous Shanghai-born American essayist, novelist and screenwriter.
50. Disenchantment is one of the key arguments of Max Weber's theory. Through the concept of 'disenchanted world', Weber argues that the crisis of meaninglessness and futility in the West has its origin in the internal movement of Occidental religion; it is aggravated by the self's existence within the objectifying world of capitalism, bureaucracy and science. See Chowers, E. 1995. Here the use of 'disenchanted' world to describe the situation in post-Mao Chinese society highlights a similar crisis of meaninglessness among people who used to hold a religion-like loyalty to the Communist Party.
51. For easy and joyful philosophic readings about choice-making and the meaning of life please see Gray, J. 2020; Setiya, K. 2017.

## Conclusion

This book sets itself the task of explaining a contemporary revolution based around the smartphone while incorporating the many other extraordinary changes that have occurred to bring this Shanghai population to the lives they lead today. It also shows how ethnographic research into this older generation in China can help us to make sense of much else about contemporary China, as well as the social impact of the smartphone itself. The task of a conclusion is to draw together threads from the previous chapters, and review claims made in the beginning of this volume to see if they were warranted. The central argument of this book contains three propositions. First, that ageing itself is experienced through the ideal of 'self-reform', a concept instilled during a traumatic episode when people were young, but which takes on a new iteration in the age of the smartphone. Second, that this process forms part of a wider smartphone revolution: an aspect of the contemporary revolution in China is constituted in part by the relationship to the earlier communist revolution. Third, that both of these revolutions, one in the experience of ageing and the other relating to the smartphone and its impact, shed light on current developments in both individualism and Confucianism in digital China.

### The duty of ageing

There is an almost unimaginable contrast between the austerity and deprivation this generation experienced in their youth and the unprecedented financial independence and good health with which they are generally favoured at this later stage of life. Such an improvement is largely thanks to the widespread availability of pensions and medical insurance among urban residents, as well as the wider benefits that accrued from recent and rapid economic development (for example, the property market). However, for many such independence does not necessarily lead to any wider freedom

from their sense of duty. Many older people who now enjoy more resources (time, energy, money) than either their parents or children find themselves taking on more responsibilities for a growing family.

Chapter 2 reveals how a ‘new sandwich generation’ has emerged, when after retirement people in their fifties to seventies are typically burdened with heavy care commitments for both elderly parents and grandchildren simultaneously. This is partly a consequence of increased life expectancy, the decades-long one-child policy, relatively early retirement and the significantly improved health situation of older people. It is also an outcome of a multi-generational household strategy to deal with the intense social competition inherent in contemporary China, where even ‘parents-eating’ (*kenlao*) is perceived as a practical solution among both adult children and their parents. Such burdensome family obligations after retirement can weigh heavily on the shoulders of the older generation, as revealed in detail by the cases of Fangfang in Chapter 2 and the couple Zihui and Jiang in Chapters 3 and 4. This is a vastly different situation from the traditional connotations of ‘retirement’, which in Chinese literally means ‘step back and rest’. In practice the experience is closer to the phrase ‘lean-in and be busy’, especially when caring for both elderly parents and young grandchildren.

Some people in Shanghai quoted a common saying ‘the more capable you are, the more responsibilities you assume’ (*neng zhe duo lao*) in reference to taking these considerable responsibilities upon themselves. In doing so they are aware of the various resources they can bring to these family responsibilities, including *guanxi* management via the smartphone. Against any physical decline is set their accumulation of social skills and life experiences, yet wider recognition or appreciation of these is often limited. In reality, the same period has witnessed a steep decline in the traditional veneration of older age, which once automatically accrued higher social status. Modern China’s passionate pursuit of fast economic development, as well as its ambition to become a digital superpower, has fundamentally redefined the value of being old. Today the foregrounding of digital technology inevitably favours the latest and the updated, rather than the long-term accumulation of knowledge that would once have been termed wisdom.

## Life in and with the machine

The metaphor of the human-machine that was introduced during the communist revolution has maintained its position as a key idiom for

considering life purpose in China. The appeal of being ‘the screw of the revolution’ (*geming de luosiding*) had originally motivated the older generation to accept whatever role history had bequeathed them in the fight for the mission of revolution. Yet today, as Dr Gu suggested in [Chapter 6](#), the ageing of the human body feels like a machine getting worn out. To keep functional, a person needs always to be open to being re-tooled by new ideas, for instance, the new capabilities facilitated by the smartphone.

As Zihui noted at the beginning of [Chapter 3](#), ‘to be able to live every day well’ (*hui guo ri zi*) is considered an art of life. Numerous examples occur throughout the book of people who have made their lives into the art of living well, often employing the smartphone in this task. The smartphone has thus become a ‘transportal home’ in people’s daily lives: while they may be outside their physical home, they remain ‘at home’ in their smartphone. When they are within their physical home, in contrast, smartphones serve as a portal to connect with the external world. They thus provide an important facility for older people who are becoming less mobile and could otherwise face a shrinking social circle. From the skilful use of smartphone photography (and photo retouching) to e-commerce and social communication via the smartphone, older people have embraced these new capacities as part of their continued commitment to ‘live every day well’.

‘Going with the changes’ has long been a striking feature of Chinese thinking.<sup>1</sup> This practical and pragmatic attitude, widely held by older people, including these research participants, is fully reflected throughout this book. As Jingyun remarked in [Chapter 8](#): ‘the only unchanged thing in life is change itself’. Within the official account of recent Chinese history, the massive wave of ‘laid-off’ factory workers mentioned in [Chapter 8](#) is described as an inevitable ‘labour pain’ (*zhen tong*) – a difficult transition required to develop the new-born market-orientated economy and justified by the subsequent Chinese ‘economic miracle’. However, when viewed from the perspective of the many individual households who lived through this, no new life seemed to be born out of that ‘labour pain’ – only the feeling of having been ‘sacrificed’ for a collective goal.

Despite these varying and often traumatic personal experiences, the older generation retains some deep understandings of the lessons learned from these radical social changes in China: one either continually catches up with each social transformation or one will be discarded by a changing society. There is very limited in-between space for individuals and households, and no better life is guaranteed after the collapse of the old order. If one looks forward positively, however, some new way of

living may become evident as it emerges from the period of chaos. This 'revolutionary generation' in China have therefore developed an incredible adaptability and courage in the face of change. Ageing for them does not mean holding firm to the familiar; if anything, it adds urgency to the need 'to try something new and different' before it is too late.

These observations are most clearly manifested in the research participants' embrace of the smartphone. Use of this device has enabled the revolutionary generation not only to pursue goals that they may always have had but were denied the opportunity to realise, but also to discover aspirations and possibilities that they had never previously envisaged. Especially in the light of their extensive family duties, older people may welcome the inspiring freedoms and possibilities opened up by this latest revolution. In some ways modern technology has given them a new lease of life, an 'unlived' youth, even in the midst of ageing.

The importance of these observations grows when considered in the context of our larger comparative study of smartphone use around the world.<sup>2</sup> In almost every other fieldsite people assume a relationship between older people and a fundamental conservatism to be entirely natural; as they age, people assert the values of traditional customs as a bulwark against the rapidity of change represented by the smartphone. This phenomenon of older people's conservatism vis-à-vis new technologies is thus assumed to be natural or inevitable. The example from Shanghai is then of considerable importance in demonstrating that there is no such natural set of associations. It is indeed possible to encounter an ageing population with an entirely different perspective on both the contemporary world and the smartphone.

## Smartphones and authentic life

In studies of the internet and new media, a persistent concern arises around the issue of an increasingly technology-mediated humanity.<sup>3</sup> The underlying fear is that the ubiquitous appropriation of digital technologies will result in human beings losing something of their 'real' selves. The use of WeChat stickers among older people, as described in [Chapter 5](#), offers us a perspective from which to investigate this issue of mediated humanity. At first glance, the significant discrepancy between a person's 'authentic feelings' and the 'facial expression' facilitated by WeChat stickers can be taken as evidence to support such concerns about a decline in authenticity associated with digitally mediated communication. However, as the ethnography showed, the root of this discrepancy lies in



much deeper social expectations for individuals to comply with the collective interests or the internalised normative orders that organise social life. That is to say, there has always been an acknowledged discrepancy between one's inner 'real feelings' and one's 'facial expression' displayed in public. Such a division has been seen as an essential contribution to Chinese ideals of social collectivity and harmony.

The clearest example of this emerged in [Chapter 4](#). Here Zihui and Jiang described the process of successfully squeezing their grandson onto the list of accepted students at a top primary school through a sophisticated use of 'guanxi' (social networking) management. In that story, with multiple stakeholders involved, the delicate negotiation displayed a subtle and dynamic balance between 'mianzi' (face) and 'lizi' (pragmatic benefits); between 'renqing' (the sense of social indebtedness) and 'ganqing' (affective feelings). In that prolonged case, any fumbling between one's 'real feelings' and one's expected performance would have endangered the hard-won harmony. The story shows precisely how the use of smartphone can enhance such a deeply-ingrained Chinese way of fostering apparently harmonious sociality.

This in turn reveals the importance of a relativist approach, as the concept of authentic humanity will differ considerably by regional context. In the West, for example, it is common to attribute 'authenticity' to what is viewed as innate and inborn features of people.

Something can be called 'authentic' because it is thought to be true to the essence of something, to a revealed truth, a deeply felt sentiment.<sup>4</sup>

A person is authentic in the sense that his or her being in the world is entirely in accord with the givenness of his or her own nature and of the world.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, things taken to be natural, without artificial aspects or interventions, are usually regarded as 'authentic' within such cosmologies. In contrast, 'authenticity' in the case of older people in China<sup>6</sup> is not derived from some natural state;<sup>7</sup> it is rather the product of genuine and diligent human efforts. Authenticity here is appreciated as a process of dynamic and constant crafting rather than an unchangeable given. This is epitomised by the key word 'crafting' in the titles of [Chapter 5](#) (Crafting the Smartphone) and [Chapter 6](#) (Crafting Health); both emphasise how people re-configure their digital devices and cultivate their given physical bodies. In addition, the very idea of 'zuoren' (doing personhood), an essential concern of social life in China, is all about crafting personhood within sociality.

While the life purpose of the revolutionary generation was fully mediated by communist ideology, there was almost no place for authentic personal aspirations. The recovery of authenticity is therefore associated with the period during which the smartphone's self-crafting capacities exemplified the way people now saw themselves as able to create their 'real' selves. For most older people, the world mediated by the smartphone is therefore anything but a 'virtual' place bereft of 'real identity'. Consider, for example, the way in which an individual is no longer forced to socialise only with the people who happen to inhabit the same alleyway neighbourhood, but may instead create their own closely knit, frequently contacted networks of sociality.

## Continuity and repudiation – the story of two revolutions

This point regarding authenticity clearly reinforces the findings of my previous book *Social Media in Industrial China*. There it was within the contemporary experience of factory workers that the online possibilities of authenticity contrasted with the constraints of their offline working lives. That book, based on an ethnography of the use of social media among Chinese migrant factory workers, showed how workers overcame the constraints of their offline existence by using budget smartphones to develop an alternative world with greater self-respect via social media. 'Life outside the smartphone is unbearable,' remarked Lily, a 19-year-old factory worker who saw 'life within the smartphone' as the only way to bear the tough life offline. *Social Media in Industrial China* also took as its central theme the dual path to modern life in China as experienced by rural migrants to the Chinese factory system. It examined the parallel between the journey of these migrants from rural villages to the urban factory towns of China and their simultaneous transition from offline life to a life online. The book's argument was that the shift to online was at least as effective as the migration to factories in bringing this population of more than 250 million into the sphere of what they regarded as modern China.

In this book, I examine a population that could not be more different as an exemplification of contemporary China. The rural migrants in the factory system were mainly young, whereas here the focus is on an older demographic. The migrants were low income, while people in Shanghai are relatively prosperous. The former, members of the so-called 'floating population' in China, were migrating, while most people in this book were enjoying a more settled life with an invaluable Shanghai *hukou*

(household registration) – that is, an inherited privilege to residents in the metropolis. If one Chinese population could be said to be the diametric opposite of another, this would be an example of it.

Despite this, however, clear parallels exist between the two books. The previous study of young Chinese migrant workers revealed this dual migration, from rural to urban and simultaneously from offline to online, as paths to modern life. This Shanghai ethnography reveals that the older people of Shanghai can best be understood through contrasting the two revolutions through which they have lived. In [Chapter 7](#) Liang Zhu explicitly refers to the two major revolutions in his life, the Cultural Revolution and the information revolution. The smartphone embodies the information revolution among older people in China, often providing their first private access to the internet since many older people missed the era of PCs. While Liang Zhu and his peers started their life journeys completely immersed in the ruptures of the communist revolutionary path, they have now adapted to the path of the smartphone revolution. Moreover, they are doing so in a manner that in some ways reprises and in other ways repudiates the earlier revolution they experienced.

In this book's introduction, it was suggested that older people in the 'magic capital' (*modu*) of China are also now living with smartphones that appear as the 'magical' device of the digital age. People in their eighties and nineties grew up in a time when modern toilets and household electric lamps were regarded as a privilege in foreign concessions in Shanghai. People in their sixties and seventies still shared the collective memory of the excitement caused by black-and-white television sets and landline telephones. Meanwhile in the background there were changes in state family planning policy, pension policy and reforms in almost every aspect of social life over the past four decades. These radically altered the conditions of life in urban China at both the infrastructural and the household level. For the latter this has meant further extensive changes in family life, including the complex negotiations and tensions between generations, all of which have added to this sense of living through constant revolution.

As already noted, the wider observations of the ASSA project have shown how the digital age significantly challenges the traditional idea of older people as the fount of accumulated wisdom, as it foregrounds new skills often associated with the young. In some regions this has created inter-generational conflict.<sup>8</sup> China is exceptional in its generally positive attitude towards new digital technologies. This was the only fieldsite in which one could find examples of older people who appear totally 'addicted' to the smartphone in the eyes of younger people, as in [Chapter 3](#). There are several reasons for this.

The key to this exceptionalism may be precisely the abiding impact of the earlier Cultural Revolution upon the latest digital revolution. As so often when it comes to such a traumatic event in life, there tend to be two longer-term legacies of the revolutionary period. There will always be continuity, represented by the values and perspectives that people learned from that experience and carry with them for the rest of their lives. Yet there will also be the desire to repudiate everything about the Cultural Revolution, and to find lives defined by all that had been denied and rejected by the Cultural Revolution and its approach. The aim of this section is to explain how and why these apparently opposite trajectories have co-existed – and even worked in harmony with one another – when it comes to explaining their relationship to the smartphone.

We start with the arguments provided in [Chapter 7](#), around the initial experience of the Cultural Revolution.

For China, the Cultural Revolution functions as this sort of watershed event, as it influenced not only the life course of Chinese people, including those born after it, but also the very construction of the Chinese life course.<sup>9</sup>

Not every revolution experienced in early life needs to determine the experience of a revolution experienced later in life. However, the Cultural Revolution was never seen simply as a historical event. It was always intended to become embodied within each individual, to make revolution a permanent aspect of who they would always be. This was to be their purpose in life, as discussed in [Chapter 8](#). As Chang Guan, the former propagandist whose WeChat profile photo is of himself in front of a colossal propaganda poster of Chairman Mao during the Cultural Revolution, explains, the one thing that still motivates him in later life is that he retains the revolutionary spirit. Similarly, in [Chapter 7](#), when Qin Zhou and her friends practised the ‘loyalty dance’ of the Cultural Revolution after retirement, her sense of loyalty was actually more about memories of feeling young and celebrating personal enjoyment during an era of tight ideological control. However awful and turbulent it may appear in retrospect, the Cultural Revolution represented for her the moment of ‘peak experience’ in life, giving meaning and energy to her existence. Such an energy is still apparent in the dynamism of older people, who took up the smartphone with an enthusiasm hard to match among their contemporaries anywhere else in the world. These research participants express a genuine zeal and passion for the information revolution in general and for the smartphone revolution in particular.

There are, of course, huge differences between the communist revolution and the smartphone revolution. The communist revolution attempted to detach people from networks of kinship and friendship, converting each person into an identical 'screw of the revolutionary machine'. For the first time in Chinese history, the once all-encompassing kinship organisation was systematically dismantled during a revolutionary time. Individuals were first mobilised by the Party-state to break away from their extended family and then organised to join the newly established urban 'work units' (*danwei*). During Mao's time the Party-state, instead of the family, 'emerged as the strong and ultimate entity for the individual to create a sense of belonging and becoming'.<sup>10</sup> Maoist China was a highly developed collectivist society with limited space for individual freedom.

Curiously, such a highly developed collective social structure facilitated the process of individualisation in its own way. As the anthropologist Yan eloquently argues, exactly because of the strong control from the Party-state, at a deeper level Chinese individuals were 'dis-embedded', forcefully in many cases, from traditional networks of kinship.<sup>11</sup> They thus became pure individuals, precisely because of the communist revolution and under direct control of the state machinery. Meanwhile, despite the claims of this revolutionary mission that it would amount to the 'emancipation of human agency', any actual human agency in terms of personal or household aspirations was effectively eliminated.

The smartphone revolution consists of exactly the opposite process. In every chapter in this book, we have seen how the smartphone facilitates social connections, equally with the family and with non-kin such as friends, neighbours and residential areas. WeChat allows 'scalable sociality' with other people that can be intense and intimate or just mild and based on some particular common interest or hobby. It is the smartphone revolution that has allowed older people to be social beings to a historically unprecedented extent. It is also the smartphone revolution that has empowered older people in China to pursue their personal aspirations at a later stage of life. Yet it was the ideal of self-reform, deriving directly from the communist revolution, that gave older people the drive to engage with the smartphone revolution with passion and to identify with it, rather than seeing it as a youth revolution from which they were excluded.

The 'information revolution' is thus being experienced by a generation fundamentally shaped by a communist revolution which also held the belief that technological development was the way further to emancipate human agency.

Political participation in communist China is closely linked to economic and technological change. Possibly the most important expression of the Chinese participatory style is in the technical sphere.<sup>12</sup>

In this entrenched discourse, people are supposed to always embrace ever-progressing technology. The tolerance for individuals to be detached from the era in which they live is minimal. It is believed that a person who refuses to be reformed by his or her age will be ‘dumped by the age’ and ‘become useless’. Many older people thus feel a personal responsibility as good citizens to support the state’s drive to digital modernity. Here we see that a shift which applies at the level of the individual as a mode of personhood can align with a national drive to surpass the West as the vanguard digital nation. What may be regarded as the rise of individuality is thus not at all the same as becoming more individualistic. It is the very same quality that unites this older generation in relation to the state and ideology and its role in linking the history and the future of China.

Underlying this is the original project of self-reformation, inculcated in these research participants by their experience of the communist revolution. [Chapter 8](#) shows how the primary motivation of later life comes from the repudiation of the very same communist revolution. This is the period of retirement, a time when people find themselves with at least some more free time and sufficient funds to do things that they had never previously been able to do. They are more aware than ever that other generations had an earlier experience of relative freedom. They see around them all that the young people are able to experiment with, enjoy and experience. This brings home to them the profound realisation that they simply never had a youth, as nothing equivalent happened in their lives. Finally, however, they have the possibility of reversing the effects of the communist revolution and using their older age to engage with at least some of what they see being enjoyed by younger people.

As seen in [Chapter 3](#) and [4](#), the research participants in this book have thrown themselves into activities, photography, cooking, culture and the arts. They have also enjoyed the expansion of their social lives, including return to extended families and new networks of friendship. Those who had a higher income prior to the Cultural Revolution can also see this as a period of restitution, of being able to enjoy that which was taken away from them during the radical communist time. They reject this dark history as baggage and prefer to look forward. Yet the paradox revealed in [Chapter 8](#) is that people still employ the same mechanism, once a top-down constraint imposed upon them, to achieve a real sense

of emancipation of human agency at this later stage of life. The constant requirement of self-reform to become a 'new person', as well as the mechanism and perspective, derive directly from the communist revolution. Now, however, it has been applied by this revolutionary generation to repudiate the Cultural Revolution, allowing them finally to become all that was denied to them by it.

It is in this spirit that Muguo was found in [Chapter 8](#) passionately engaged with recording and sharing via his smartphone; he regards himself as a revolutionary 'spark' full of potential in the sense of Maoist belief 'A single spark can start a prairie fire'. Meanwhile Shuli, who hid the Buddha statue that had survived the house looting during the Cultural Revolution, has now registered a new WeChat account on a new smartphone to practise Buddhism online without causing family conflicts. The drive to continual revolution through self-reform encouraged during the radical communist revolutionary time, along with the deep-rooted discourse of *zuoren* (doing personhood) cultivated by Confucianism, allows both Muguo and Shuli to recreate and craft themselves anew in the later period of their lives.

This dual path to modernity is also commonly presented as two different tastes. In fieldwork, one frequently hears terms such as 'recall bitterness and reflect on sweetness' (*yi ku si tian*)<sup>13</sup> applied to the story-telling of their past (bitterness) and the present (sweetness). Regardless of family background,<sup>14</sup> people aged over 60 in China all have personal experiences of the lack of food and poor nutrition, as well as personal suffering during the 'sent-down' and Cultural Revolution period. The suffering in these difficult times is also frequently referred to as 'eating bitterness' (*chi ku*) in Chinese parlance. The term *chi ku* was constantly applied by older people, and most of the research participants believed that eating bitterness was an inevitable and actually a healthy part of life. There seem to be a consensus to this, with people commenting that 'sweetness arrives after the bitterness'. In other words, the bitterness is believed to be a necessary precondition for the subsequent and consequential sweetness.

Bitterness has then a moral aesthetic. 'Speaking bitterness' is the dominant narrative pattern of modern Chinese history, transforming personal suffering into collective narratives of blood and tears.<sup>15</sup> There is a profound connection between the bodily-based physical experience and the corresponding psychological and social meaning.<sup>16</sup> The pervasive practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as discussed in [Chapter 6](#), adds another layer to the evaluation of the bitterness of taste among Chinese. Traditional herbal concoctions are known for being

bitter, and Chinese people believe that the bitterness of the concoction indicates its good effect; 'good medicine tastes bitter' (*liang yao ku kou*), as the idiom goes. People accept the Cultural Revolution as a historical 'bitterness', supposed to be balanced by the sweetness of the information revolution.<sup>17</sup> Accounts of the two revolutions are underpinned throughout by an insistence on order: a 're-establishment' of the balance of life and a re-assertion of order over chaos. The bitterness of the past gains its meaning in the light of the sweetness of the present.

## The Confucian smartphones

The two revolutions that the older generation in China have experienced give us the key to understanding the consequences of the proliferation of the smartphone in China. There is a popular claim regarding the way in which contemporary China is becoming more individualistic.<sup>18</sup> Many of these accounts assume that Chinese people have become increasingly individualistic because of the impact of the country's booming economy, with its characteristics of neoliberalism. Moreover, earlier studies<sup>19</sup> have found positive association between economic affluence and individualism at both the personal and societal level in many countries across the world. However, the ethnography in this volume suggests that things in practice are complicated; one cannot simply draw an equation between increased life affluence and increased individualism.

China is often discussed in the context of 'authoritarian neoliberalism'.<sup>20</sup> Other scholars point out that the understanding of the Chinese situation should move beyond the dichotomy of whether China is neoliberal or not.<sup>21</sup> The situation in China can be regarded as the construction of a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control.<sup>22</sup> From the Residents' Committees (RC) and the Senior Citizens' Universities (SCU) to the strong moral obligation to join a technological modern China felt by older people, the ethnography presented in this book clearly illustrates the pervasive and entrenched influence of the Party-state in ordinary people's lives. It further depicts how people perceive such parent-like forms of structural power. *Guan* (discipline and care), viewed as a means of balancing care and surveillance, is considered perfectly justified both in family situations and in relations between the state and individuals. The development of individualism in China is overwhelmingly concerned with the increased individual responsibility for one's life, compared to which awareness of individual rights



is underdeveloped.<sup>23</sup> For example, in the health sector the state divests itself of the huge cost of a welfare or socialist state by making people feel increasingly responsible for their health and welfare as individuals.

In China the two main structural influences on an individual's life are the 'state' and the 'family'. While people in most societies start from an overwhelming reliance upon the family, this older generation found themselves at the opposite end of the scale, with their lives significantly dominated by the 'state'. However, when the planned economy was replaced by the market economy and the *danwei* (work unit) – effectively the socialist version of 'family' – declined and lost its impact on individuals' lives, the scale tipped to the other side. People came to realise that the degree of life security and welfare the state could provide in the context of this heated social competition was very limited, compared to what the communist ideal had seemed to promise. Loyalty to the revolutionary mission felt once upon a time collapsed in the face of brutal competition, in which responsibility for a better life had landed almost totally on the shoulders of individual households and individuals.

The evidence of this monograph suggests that a simple assumption of increasing individualism as the consequence of – and an aspect of – the new digital age cannot be applied to contemporary Chinese society. This is because the development of a new person to fit into this society appears, as we have just acknowledged, to be the responsibility of the individual, albeit one that bonds them still more closely to the collective. Conceptualising these changes as the rise of 'individuality' rather than increased individualism is a more accurate way to describe the change in China. Individuality in this context implies the cultivation of individual differences while simultaneously accepting obligations in well-defined spheres such as the family, community and the state, all of which exercise considerable control over individuals' behaviour and beliefs.<sup>24</sup> It is not just a question of people sacrificing their individualistic interest for a group, but also about the need of individuals to define themselves through the group. It has little in common with the connotations of the term individualism, which often implies a lack of regard for others. The relative freedom associated with this individuality has been used by this new, more affluent and modern Chinese population of Shanghai actually to increase rather than decrease their social bonding and relationships. The clearest example of this has emerged through this book's focus upon smartphone use and its consequences.

The smartphone is the epitome of Chinese modernity. This is the one country where even older people have taken up the smartphone with alacrity. The reason for this is derived from the desire of each individual

to affirm the Chinese state's own commitment to develop the modern new person of China simultaneously at both national and individual level. China thus leapfrogs other countries in becoming the vanguard of the digital revolution. The individual Chinese older citizen becomes the microcosm of that macrocosm, being themselves in the vanguard as established users of the smartphone. The state can consequently claim to be the aggregate of the desires of its individual citizens as they work together towards digital modernity. This is why older people in China are so different from all the other fieldsites in the ASSA project: they do not just use the latest technology but also identify with it.

The smartphone to some extent represents continuity in the values of the communist revolution, in which the citizen seeks to embody the values of the state. Simultaneously, however, this population is dedicated to the repudiation of their experience of the Cultural Revolution, devoted as they are to becoming everything that they were deprived of during their lost youth. So far from the smartphone leading to more autonomy and separation, as would have occurred if the ultimate goal was individualism, the smartphone appears here, in chapter after chapter, as the key to how a contemporary older population is actually expanding its social relations and bonding.

This may even include as a core group the people who the research participants first bonded with during their shared experience of the Cultural Revolution, but today there are many more examples. In the discussion of everyday life in [Chapter 3](#), we could see that the social world of Weijun did not involve juxtaposition with those who lived in the same tower block, even if they sat close to him at the entrance to the residential compound. His real home was the connection with his domestic Wi-Fi, and through that the 'transportal' ability of the smartphone to connect him with other contacts who might be living anywhere. This example represents the unprecedented nature of the new expansion of social relations through smartphone use.

From this perspective we can also see the smartphone as the epitome of the revival of Confucian ethics in contemporary Chinese society. In [Chapter 5](#) it is made clear how the smartphone is used to strengthen family connections, including connections between generations. In this chapter we saw how the smartphone also became the instrument for reversing that historical shift with a move back from nuclear to more extended kinship connectivity. This is recognised by the technology companies through devices such as the WeChat kinship card.

An example of what is seen as the neoliberal element in contemporary China occurs in [Chapter 6](#), which is concerned with health.

If there is any one sector that certainly looks like an orientation to individualism, it would be health. Ms Qian, for example, could not be more devoted to her own personal wellbeing. This shows a clear dedication to herself as an individual. But the chapter also reveals how much of such self-care is a social process – for example, the courses that she and others may take which are provided by the residential area. The negative moral connotations of ill-health also become part of social relations, as people may become concerned that ill-health can also damage their reputation. In the same way, social problems and concerns are seen as the cause of individual ill-health. Perhaps the clearest example was the sharing of *yang sheng* (self-care) health videos, now such an important component of social life that they form a common greeting between these older people. Once again this illustrates the importance of the smartphone in facilitating this culture of sharing. Something that fits like a glove with the already established association between food and commensality has become integrated into this arena of health. This is why the chapter ends with Dr Gu’s conclusion that smartphones have become part of the treatment for health issues.

The key that opens the door to understanding these developments was already presented in the first story told by this book, that of Fangfang in [Chapter 2](#). This story already provided the trajectory from continuity with the communist revolution and subsequent policies such as the one-child policy, as well as the trajectory that comes from the repudiation of the Cultural Revolution as older people seek to become, and to accomplish, everything denied to them in their actual youth. Woven together within the single story, we can see how these two trajectories serve to balance and reinforce one another. They are the reasons why what has been termed individualism is actually a contemporary world in which people are developing authentic social connections and bonding to an unprecedented degree – thanks to the facility with which smartphones enable social connectivity. Fangfang is part of a generation that is increasing its bonds within the family, as is evident from this generation’s extraordinary involvement in active grandparenting. In addition, it shows the way in which older people’s care and obligations to children and grandchildren, in some cases expanding to the level of ‘parents-eating’, has now become a reflection of the earlier, more asymmetric ideals of filial piety.

Furthermore, there is evidence for an equal expansion of sociality beyond the family in new forms of friendship. In the discussion on social life in [Chapter 4](#), we saw how this applies not only to family, but also to extra-family expansive social relations. In this case, it illustrates a return to traditional ideals of Confucian social models. Today *guanxi* is also

attaching itself to the platform of WeChat. [Chapter 5](#) also indicated how the etiquette that is central to communication to non-kin is facilitated by the expansion of visual elements in smartphone communication, as well as in crafting individual appearance.

Once again evidence provided in [Chapter 3](#) on everyday life, which at first looks like increasing individualism, is actually the opposite. First, the tendency to photograph one's food before eating is not some form of narcissism or trivia, but rather a use of the smartphone to expand the commensality of meals. The smartphones share that experience of commensality beyond those immediately present. The same point then appears later in that chapter, when e-commerce is reconsidered as a social rather than individualising phenomenon. By [Chapter 5](#) it is clear that this is not just the expansion of social as opposed to individual life, but also an adherence to new forms of ritual and community practice. The crafting of the new person depends on new sculptural tools such as the smartphone. Confucianism prizes social ways of life in the real world above all else, with a good life believed to lie in the 'here and now'.<sup>25</sup> It is not an exaggeration to claim that the use of smartphones best represents the rich cultural practices of a living Confucianism among ordinary people in China today.

If we see this new Confucian harmony at the level of individuals in society, they once again appear as the microcosm that complements the macrocosm of the Chinese state. This is because the Chinese state has done exactly the same thing. It has followed the same strategy of taking what had been opposites and rendering them into a single cohesive goal, the blending of the Communist Party with ancient Confucian ideals that the former had historically repudiated. Confucianism has now reappeared in China, fused with the very latest digital technology of the smartphone both at the level of state and individual. Both thus appear as testimony to the way in which contemporary China expands rather than contracts its social relations and collectivism.

If the path to China's future is based on individuals involved in an expansive sociality, then much of the subtlety and nuance consists of finding the right balance between them. Balance and harmony are as important as any other qualities of Chinese tradition. So, for instance, the case of WeChat described in [Chapter 4](#) on social life, where the concern was to ensure that the sociality of WeChat did not become so overwhelming that someone might lose face. This evolves into a new type of social connection, 'Friends from WeChat Groups', that are considered neither too close nor too distant.<sup>26</sup> However, this also affirms the way in which connections between any two individuals are mediated by their co-connection

with others. Yet this is also connected to the model of *danwei* (work unit) proclaimed as the communist ideology of a group organisation. Where once the communist regime had weakened both kinship and friendship, it is now fully behind what is becoming a strengthening of both kinship and friendship.

Many commentators have considered the way in which the Communist Party has shifted to incorporate traditional Chinese values most fully encapsulated in Confucian principles. The general agreement is that this made sense because the Party wants to rejoin the legacy of something that held China together for thousands of years. The new adjustment allows the Party to encompass this within the new form of nationalism that has become its primary way of uniting the Chinese people, becoming the embodiment of this unity and continuity.<sup>27</sup>

The ethnography in this book further highlights a powerful force that can be only appreciated if we consider Confucianism as a living cultural practice rather than an icon of the past. In contemporary China, Confucianism plays a profound and more important role than the ideology of communism does. A key aspect of Confucianism is that it defends the value of partiality, in the sense that ethical obligations are strongest to those with whom people have personal relationships; they diminish in intensity the more distant people are in those relationships.<sup>28</sup> Chinese culture has a particular collective and social nature, based on the underlying belief that individuals from the same in-group are interrelated and that each person's wellbeing depends upon the harmony and prosperity of this group.

The relationship of filial piety and the principles of the family are not opposed to individual linkages with the state but rather constitute a microcosm of the wider macrocosm. They replicate this relationship at a lower level and thereby bring the ideology into the principles and practices of the experiences of everyday life. This is the very meaning of a term such as paternalism, which can be applied equally to states and families. The relationship to the community may be considered along similar lines. People certainly do not simply incorporate Confucianism, but they do devise a whole series of new moralities that are concerned with immediate social relations. When the Chinese state links the Communist Party to Confucianism, it is not simply creating a connection with history and tradition. Rather, it is also acknowledging the way in which the political economy has to be aligned with fundamental shifts in social relations.

In this book, 'revolution' is not a political slogan or a media hype: it is people's lived memories and the transformations they experienced in real time. It is impossible to understand this older generation in China

without acknowledging the significance of their lifelong engagement in constant and various revolutions. The lifelong experiences of this older generation in China also showcase the intriguing relationships between the individual, family and state, all of which can now be mapped more effectively thanks to the smartphone. Chinese society today is experiencing an extraordinary collision of different values on both the micro level of individuals and the macro level of the state – to the degree that ‘anxiety’ is commonly regarded as a powerful indicator for the pulse of today’s Chinese society.<sup>29</sup> Yet it is the older generation in particular that forms the cohort who have embodied such profound struggles and entanglements over more than half a century in the fullest imaginable form. It is thus crucial to understand the ever-changing life experience of this older generation to gain a comprehensive picture of today’s China: it is both revolutionary and Confucian, both old and young.

## Notes

1. Kolstad, A. and N. Gjesvik 2014.
2. Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/> (accessed 20 August 2021). Also see Miller, D. et al. 2021.
3. For example, Davis, T. 2019; Turkle, S. 2011.
4. See Van Leeuwen, T. 2001.
5. For example, see Bugental, J. F. 1981.
6. But also in other regions such as Trinidad. See Miller, D. 1995.
7. Undeniably, under the influence of globalisation, the pursuit of authenticity in the sense of perceived ‘given nature’, as a rising middle-class taste, has become popular in China, especially among the younger generation.
8. Miller, D. et al. 2021.
9. Gold, T. B. 1991.
10. Yan, Y. 2010, 3.
11. Ibid.
12. Lee, R. W. 1973.
13. ‘Yiku sitian’ was also a political movement prevalent in the People’s Republic of China during the 1960s and 1970s. It identified a particular type of social practice commonly enacted publicly and privately for people to recall how ‘bitter’ life was in ‘jiu shehui’ (the old society) and how ‘sweet’ life was in New China. See Wu, G. 2014; Farquhar, M. and C. Berry 2004.
14. Well-off families lost their wealth during the Cultural Revolution.
15. Farquhar, M. and C. Berry 2004.
16. For prior studies see Niedenthal, P. M. 2007; Semin, G. R. and E. R. Smith 2008.
17. Chinese traditional narratives exhibit a ‘non-dialectical dualism’ where events are represented within an overall ‘hypothetical order and balance’ that impose a moral order. In such logic, ‘speaking bitterness’ is balanced by ‘presenting sweetness’. See Plaks, A. 1997.
18. For example, Sima, Y. and P. C. Pugsley 2010; Parker, R. S., D. L. Haytko and C. M. Hermans 2009; Steele, L. G. and S. M. Lynch 2013.
19. For example, Hamamura, T., Q. Xu and Y. Du 2013; Stephens, N. M., H. R. Markus and S. S. M. Townsend 2007.
20. The authoritarian state power is a striking feature in ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’, where a neoliberal regime of accumulation was often encouraged by the state power, state elites and policy-makers to address not only economic woes, but also political crises brought about by intensified class conflict and loss of legitimacy. See Tansel, C. B. 2017, 6.

21. Weber, I. 2018.
22. Also see Harvey, D. 2005, 120.
23. Yan. Y. 2010.
24. Kluckhohn, F. R. and F. L. Strodtbeck 1973.
25. Bell, D. A. 2014.
26. In terms of keeping people at just the right social distance, there is some parallel between the use of WeChat groups among older people in China and the 'Goldilocks' strategy applied by people in rural England in their use of Facebook. See Miller, D. 2016.
27. For example, see Gries, P. H. 2004; Bell, D. A. 2014.
28. Bell, D. A. 2014.
29. For example, a recent book by Li Zhang, *Anxious China: Inner revolution and politics of psychotherapy* (2020), offers an ethnographic account of how an unfolding 'inner revolution' is reconfiguring personhood, psyche, family dynamics, sociality and government in China in post-socialist times.

## Appendix 1

# The brief function of top 24 apps on the top 10 list and app analysis method

### 1. Brief function of top 24 apps

**Table A1.1** Brief function of top 24 apps, created by Xinyuan Wang.

Rank	Penetration rate	App	Function
1	100%	WeChat	All-in-one (social media)
2	87%	Baidu	Search engine
3	60%	Baidu Map	Map
4	57%	Toutiao	News
		QQ	Social media
5	53%	Ximalaya	iPod
		Tencent News	News
		Alipay	Payment
6	50%	360 Total Security	Internet security
		Taobao	Shopping
7	46%	Meitu Xiu Xiu	Photo editing
		Douyin	Short video
		iQIYI	Long video
		QQ Browser	Mobile browser
8	43%	Pinduoduo	Shopping
		DiDi	Taxi hailing
		Gaode Map	Map
9	35%	Meipian	Blog
		Eleme	Food delivery
		Dianping	Review and advice
		JingDong	Shopping
10	15%	UC Browser	Browser
		BeautyCam	Camera
		Tonghuashun	Stock



## 2. Methods of app analysis

Each participant not only showed all the apps installed on their smartphone, but also discussed their use of these apps with researchers for at least 30 minutes (ranging in practice from 45 minutes to 3 hours). Only apps which are actually used by people will be counted and analysed, given in most cases the smartphones also contained pre-installed or/and undeletable apps that research participants never used.

More than half of the participants accepted the pre-installed apps as they were. In some cases people had tried to 'tidy up' the apps, only to find some of the pre-installed apps undeletable. A couple of smartphone salespeople confirmed that there is commercial interest behind those pre-installed apps.<sup>1</sup> In other cases (17 per cent), when the smartphone is second-hand, there are many pre-existing apps from the previous users. Only in very few cases do people choose to try out these unfamiliar apps from the prior users, who are usually younger family members.

Ms Chen (aged 75) gave a typical response,

I only touch things [apps] she [her granddaughter] had taught me, like WeChat, and camera, the QQ video and the weather.

On her iPhone 4 there are more than 35 apps from the time when her granddaughter owned it, from ticket booking to gaming, bike-sharing to second-hand trading. Most of these had been relocated to the second and third pages of the screen by her granddaughter. For Ms Chen there is only one front page of the smartphone, just like her previous feature phone.

In addition, we follow the ordinary users' shared delimitation of the apps that only refer to various software that can be downloaded from the 'app store'. A few essential smartphone functions, such as time, calculator, camera, contact, calendar, torch and weather, are in most cases displayed with app-like icons on the screen; however, these are not usually regarded as apps by people. Meanwhile, in some cases one individual owns more than one digital device which is used daily, or a household may share an iPad. It is common to see WeChat installed on both smartphones and iPads. Or a particular video app may only be installed on an iPad with a bigger screen, to be used as a 'portable television set'. In the survey all the apps that a person uses, regardless of whether they are installed on the same device or not, or on how many devices, will be counted and only counted once.

## Note

1. For example, app developers will pay smartphone producers to install the apps on the new smartphones. Many of those pre-installed apps cannot be deleted without professional skills (through the 'root' of the smartphone programme).

## Appendix 2

# The super app WeChat

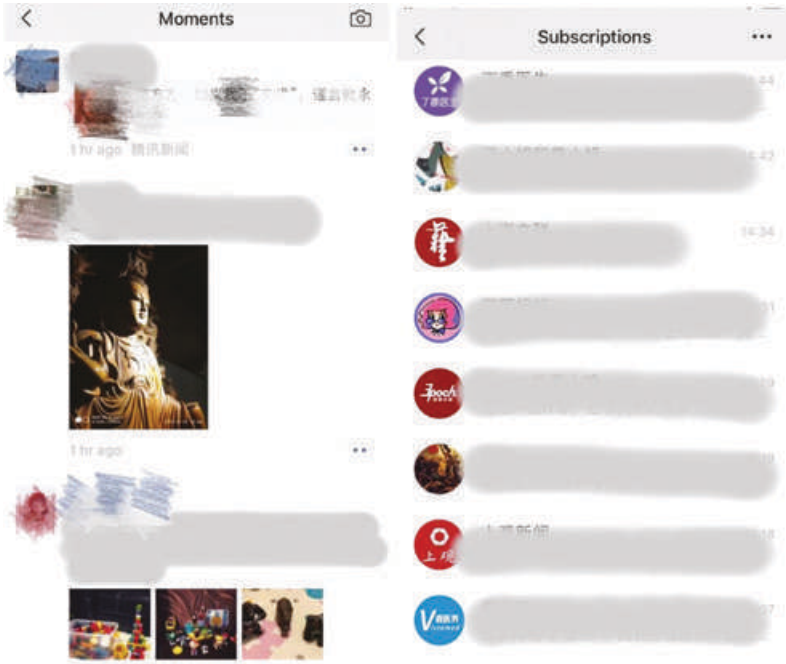
WeChat is the dominant app that appears on every single smartphone screen. It was launched in 2011 by the company Tencent that also owns QQ, the social media app which is listed fourth among the top 10 apps in this survey. WeChat is the most popular messaging app in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup> By 2015 the penetration rate of WeChat in main Chinese cities had reached 93 per cent.<sup>2</sup> By 2017 the total number of daily active WeChat users was 902 million. At the end of March 2018 the total of monthly active WeChat users was 1,040 million.

### General features of WeChat

There are seven distinctive features of WeChat: (1) Smartphone-based; (2) Visual-oriented; (3) All-in-one; (4) Semi-closed community; and (5) High monetisation.

Launched at the same time as the rapid rise of the smartphone in China, WeChat is designed to suit the ‘smartphone lifestyle’ and has become an aggregator of mobile services. WeChat is an all-in-one app: it provides text and audio messaging, audio and video calls, location sharing, multimedia sharing and a payment service, as well as a wide range of functions from taxi-hailing to online shopping and more. The messaging function of WeChat is similar to that of WhatsApp, and the social media profile is similar to Facebook.

Posting on WeChat is designed to be visually orientated. For each post one needs to upload images before the text input area appears. As a result, except for sharing articles, it is effectively impossible to post any original content on WeChat without an image. The ‘moment’ (Fig. A2.1a) of WeChat is the personal profile. The WeChat ‘album’ refers to a user’s personal profile, where images are regarded as the



**Figure A2.1a** WeChat Moment (left). Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

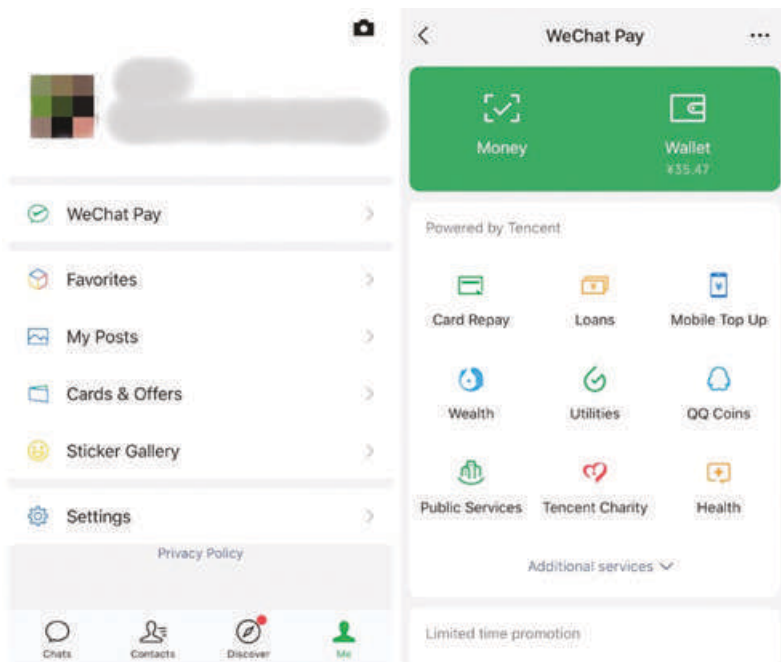
**Figure A2.1b** WeChat subscriptions (public account) (right). Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

main body of the post – something also similar to Instagram. The WeChat public account is where users can subscribe to information from more than 10 million accounts on the platform (Fig. A2.1b), ranging from media outlets and various institutions to personal blogs and more. Information on WeChat is storable and searchable. Users can save postings to their built-in WeChat files or search for postings and conversation logs by keyword.

Generally speaking, WeChat represents a closed community that mainly consists of offline networks (family, friends and colleagues at work). Having said this, WeChat users can still add strangers by functions such as ‘People nearby’ and ‘Shake’.<sup>3</sup> The default privacy setting on WeChat is stricter than on Facebook. WeChat users have no access at all to the list of contacts of their WeChat friends. On Facebook, by contrast, users’ contact lists are visible under the default privacy setting. On top of this, in many cases users have no access to any interaction underneath others’ posts.<sup>4</sup>

‘High monetisation’ is another striking feature of WeChat. On 28 January 2014 WeChat launched ‘WeChat red envelope’, a scheme that allowed users to send ‘digital red envelopes’ of money to WeChat contacts online. Handing out red envelopes of cash as festival or ceremony gifts has long been part of Chinese tradition. WeChat red envelope brings this tradition online and makes it more fun: the sender can either send a ‘fixed amount’ red envelope to certain contacts or inform contacts that they can ‘grab’ red envelopes.<sup>5</sup> The gambling-like red envelope grabbing soon went viral.<sup>6</sup> The popularity of red envelopes significantly fuelled the monetisation of WeChat, as users had to link their bank account(s) to their WeChat accounts before they could hand out or withdraw money from red envelopes. This, in turn, paved the way for a whole range of applications facilitated by WeChat Pay (Figs A2.2a and A2.2b).

Besides business institutions, all the WeChat public accounts can sell products or services on WeChat. Through WeChat Pay, service accounts



**Figure A2.2a** WeChat interface (left). Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

**Figure A2.2b** WeChat Pay (right). Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

can provide a direct in-app payment service to users. Customers are allowed either to pay for items or services on webpages inside the app or to pay in-store by scanning WeChat QR codes. In 2015 WeChat launched the 'City Services' project, further expanding the scope of services to pay utility bills, book a doctor's appointment, send money to friends, obtain geo-targeted coupons, etc. Aside from stores and restaurants, WeChat payments have become the norm even among vegetable markets and other small-scale vendors. Through such practices, WeChat has become an aggregator of the most frequently used and popular services available on mobile devices.

## WeChat mini-program

An important and relatively recent feature<sup>7</sup> of WeChat is the mini-program (*xiao cheng xu*). This can best be understood as a lightweight app that operates within the WeChat ecosystem (Fig. A2.3).

WeChat boasts one million mini-programs and 72 per cent of WeChat users (around 600 million) were using mini-programs at the end of 2018. Of these, 34 per cent were frequent users. Among all the functions that WeChat provides, mini-programs are the fourth most popular, with a penetration rate of 34 per cent. The top three functions of WeChat are 'messaging' (88 per cent), 'moments' (i.e. personal profiles) (76 per cent) and 'public accounts' (66 per cent).

Despite being highly oriented towards features and looks, WeChat mini-programs can mostly be classified into four categories: games, news, utility and e-commerce. For example, the utility bill payment mini-program was introduced in March 2019. In three months this new feature had reached 147 million monthly active users. In June 2019 the WeChat mini-program for utility bill payment topped the charts in the services categories by user count. Public transit is also a part of utility mini-programs. As of 2018, 134 Chinese cities have created WeChat mini-programs for 'Smart Transport', such as The Shanghai Public Transport mini-program. In 2018 WeChat's daily active users for bus services exceeded 200 million, while for metro services it was over 50 million. On average, 250,000 users employ the WeChat QR Code to access bus or metro services every minute during the morning rush hour.<sup>8</sup> Transport is the third-largest category in WeChat Pay (after retail and catering services); it is also the fastest growing, with a 25-fold increase in the number of transactions from 2017.

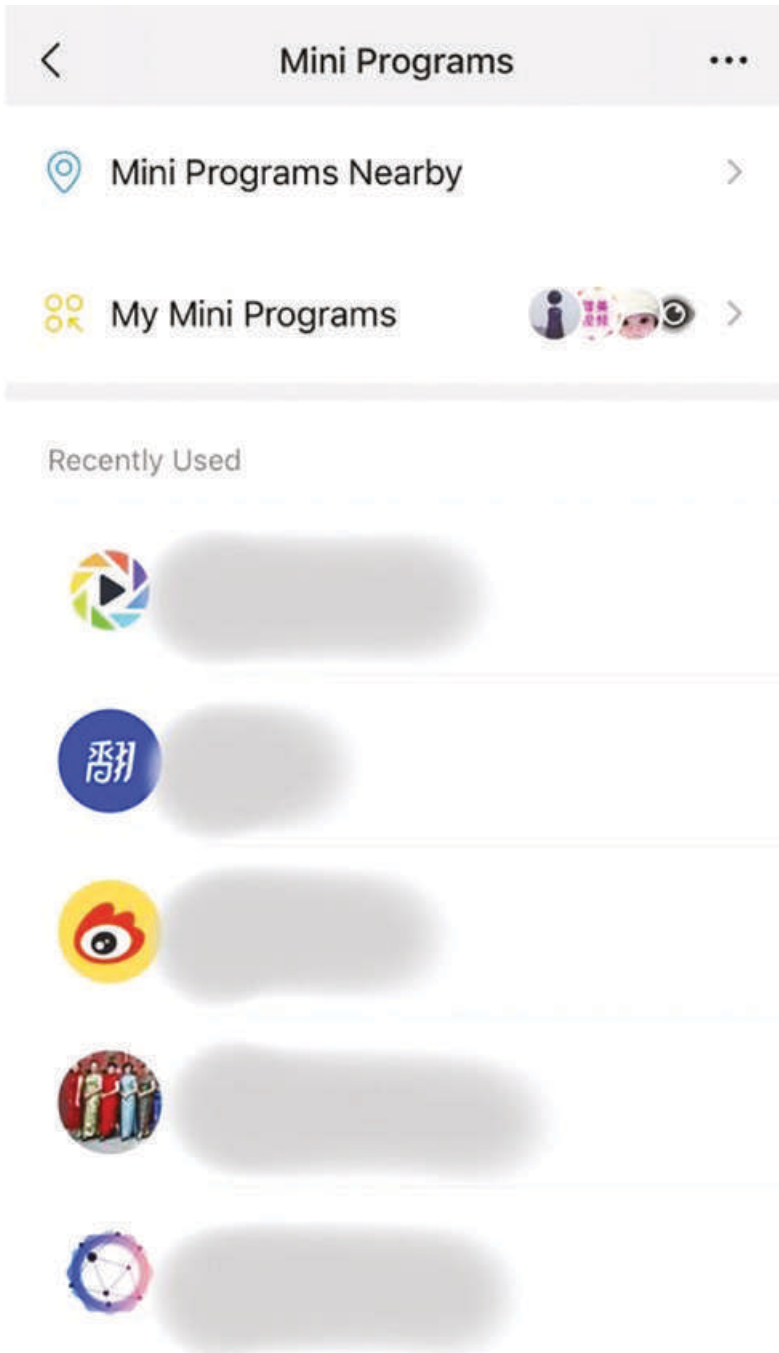


Figure A2.3 WeChat mini-programs. Screenshot by Xinyuan Wang.

## Notes

1. <http://www.chinainternetwork.com/10939/wechat-dominates-apac-mobile-messaging-q3-2014> (accessed 20 August 2021).
2. '2015 WeChat Impact Report'. <http://www.199it.com/archives/398617.html> (accessed 20 August 2021).
3. The 'People nearby' function facilitates users searching for strangers, listed by gender, who are allowed to be located just within one's vicinity. In contrast the 'Shake' function allows the user to shake their device to find any random person who happens to be shaking their smartphone at the same time, all around the world.
4. For example, both A and B are contacts of C, but A and B are not connected on WeChat. Therefore A cannot see B's comments or likes to C's posts. Moreover, one can only share posts from WeChat 'public' accounts, not from private ones.
5. For instance, A can decide to hand out 20 RMB to five of her WeChat contacts. The money could be divided into five digital red envelopes, with a random amount assigned by the system. Once the recipients have been informed, they can 'grab' their envelopes online and find out how much cash they have received.
6. On Chinese New Year Eve 2014, shortly after its introduction, more than 5 million people had already tried out the feature. At New Year 2018, 688 million people used WeChat's red envelope to send money to relatives and friends.
7. Tencent introduced the mini-program feature in 2017 and it completely took off in 2018.
8. <https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/wechat-mini-programs/> (accessed 20 August 2021).



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If we want to understand contemporary China, the key is through understanding the older generation. This is the generation in China whose life courses almost perfectly synchronised with the emergence and growth of the 'New China' under the rule of the Communist Party (1949). People in their 70s and 80s have double the life expectancy of their parents' generation. The current oldest generation in Shanghai was born in a time when the average household could not afford electric lights, but today they can turn their lights off via their smartphone apps.

Based on 16-month ethnographic fieldwork in Shanghai, *Ageing with Smartphones in Urban China* tackles the intersection between the 'two revolutions' experienced by the older generation in Shanghai: the contemporary smartphone-based digital revolution and the earlier communist revolutions. We find that we can only explain the smartphone revolution if we first appreciate the long-term consequences of these people's experiences during the communist revolutions.

The context of this book is a wide range of dramatic social transformations in China, from the Cultural Revolution to the individualism and Confucianism in Digital China. Supported by detailed ethnographic material, the observations and analyses provide a panoramic view of the social landscape of contemporary China, including topics such as the digital and everyday life, ageing and healthcare, intergenerational relations and family development, community building and grassroots organizations, collective memories and political attitudes among ordinary Chinese people.

**Xinyuan Wang** is a digital anthropologist based at UCL's Department of Anthropology. She is the author of *Social Media in Industrial China* (2016), and co-author of *How the World Changed Social Media* (2016) and *The Global Smartphone* (2021).



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