

Xinyuan Wang, **Ageing with Smartphones in Urban China: From the Cultural to the Digital Revolution in Shanghai**, London, UK: UCL Press, 2023, 312 pp., \$98.80 (hardcover), \$50.00 (paperback).

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Smartphones have become one of the most transformative mobile devices of the 21st century, reshaping lifestyles and daily activities. Their ubiquity and impact on the digital quality of life has sparked debates about the digital divide, particularly among older generations who may struggle to adapt to contemporary digital life (Li & Kostka, 2024; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). Much like China's economic reforms since 1978, the country serves as a compelling example of how the older generation has successfully navigated social transformations through the digital revolution.

In ***Ageing with Smartphones in Urban China: From the Cultural to the Digital Revolution in Shanghai***, author Xinyuan Wang, a researcher in the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing project funded by the European Research Council, explores the rapid digital and social transformations among the older Chinese based on her extensive ethnographic study. Drawing from 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork, Wang studies how the ageing population in Shanghai—the *modu* (magic and financial capital)—has integrated smartphones and digital technologies to transform individual and community life in urban China. She argues that the experiences of Chinese seniors in China's political revolution, especially the Cultural Revolution, embody a revolutionary spirit that drives them to constantly "self-reform" and reinvent themselves in the digital era.

According to the China Internet Network Information Center's "55th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development" (2025), over 1.1 billion Chinese are mobile Internet users (99.7%), with individuals aged 50 and above comprising 34.1% of this demographic. This high penetration of the Internet and digital devices, including smartphones, reflects the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) strategic push for a digital revolution. The CCP has sought to revive individualism and filial piety among the older generation to encourage intergenerational support within the "4-2-1" family structure (four grandparents, two parents, one child) common in China's cities, through a pragmatic reinterpretation of Confucianism. Against this background, Wang suggests that China's elderly population has achieved the revolutionary ideals of self-reform, self-care, and social and family support through smartphones and digital communications. However, Wang's discussion of the information revolution among China's elderly lacks criticality, and her data analysis lacks strong theoretical support and conceptualization. Despite these shortcomings, her study offers practical solutions for promoting active and healthy ageing as advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020).



This monograph employs evidence-based storytelling through a combination of online and offline ethnography, enriched with multimedia elements, to illustrate how Shanghai's seniors craft their smartphones and digital activities to navigate social transformations. As highlighted in the WHO baseline report, listening to older individuals in the community to understand what matters most to them in their daily lives and digital activities is essential for achieving active and healthy ageing (WHO, 2020). Wang's ethnography is thus an appropriate methodology to investigate how Chinese seniors adapt to smartphones and digital technologies to foster digitalization and self-transformation.

Wang's ethnography as a methodology incorporates a variety of methods, including participant observation, life history, interviews, and survey questionnaires, to collect multifaceted evidence in order to draw qualitative inferences about human and social phenomena within a holistic context. Her multimodal approach—incorporating videos, photographs, screenshots, and original infographics—vividly illustrates the physical and digital routines of the research participants. While Wang's ethnographic approach is commendable, her reliance on qualitative methods raises questions about the generalizability of her findings. The absence of statistical inference limits the broader applicability of her conclusions, particularly in a country as diverse as China. Nevertheless, her thick descriptions and holistic interpretations provide valuable insights into the specific context of Shanghai's ageing communities (*xinshi lilong*), offering a compelling case study of digital transformation.

Wang's study unfolds the paradox of China's digital revolution: It enables Chinese seniors to achieve self-reform and social integration, but it also reinforces mechanisms of control and conformity. Through institutions such as Senior Citizens' Universities and Residents' Committees operating under the CCP's strategic planning, seniors have acquired digital literacy, enabling them to integrate smartphones into their daily lives. Digital tools facilitate lifelong learning, independence, and social engagement, embracing the WHO's concept of active and healthy ageing. However, this digital transformation process includes the acceptance of self-censorship and surveillance through institutional education as well as self- and peer-monitoring, reflecting the CCP's pragmatic revival of Confucianism. For instance, WeChat, a popular social media platform, issues warnings against sensitive topics in group chats and reinforces mechanisms of control through the self-monitoring practices of WeChat groups, highlighting the tension between digital empowerment and political control. During the COVID-19 lockdown, smartphones became essential for Shanghai's elderly, providing critical information about food and other necessities. However, posts unrelated to food or touching politics were deemed inappropriate and even received warnings from the WeChat platform.

Such in-group regulation and censorship of taboos is prevalent in the daily lives and digital activities of Chinese seniors and is subtly practiced and reinforced through the management of *guanxi*—the Chinese notion of interpersonal relationships rooted in *mianzi* (social prestige), *ganqing* (emotional connection), *renqing* (reciprocity), and *xinren* (trust; Yang, 2019). A central theme of Wang's study explores *guanxi* and its digital manifestations, particularly through platforms like WeChat. Chinese seniors use WeChat to form friendships, exchange photos and stickers, and maintain family connections through WeChat kinship cards. These *guanxi* practices reinforce social bonds and emotional care, extending traditional *guanxi* into the digital sphere. However, the cultural emphasis on preserving *mianzi* (personal reputation) often prevents seniors from disclosing personal difficulties, such as illness. Instead, their

unusual ritual performances or reduced activity on smartphones often prompt concern and support from their digital communities. This subtle interplay between traditional values and digital practices underscores the adaptability of Chinese seniors to embrace modern technology while maintaining cultural traditions. Wang's nuanced treatment of this theme provides valuable insights into the cultural specificities of Chinese *guanxi* and its impact on the daily and digital lives of China's elderly, from physical to digital community solidarity.

As mentioned before, Wang also examines the evolving roles of Chinese seniors within the context of filial piety and intergenerational relationships. Many retirees have become a new "sandwich generation," assuming new postretirement roles such as grandparenting, caring for elderly parents, and supporting children and grandchildren. These roles motivate seniors to become active users of smartphones and digital technologies. By leveraging these tools, they pass on traditions and heritage, stay connected and communicate with children and grandchildren through the Internet, and thereby foster translocal and transnational family solidarity across regions and countries (Lam, 2013). This reflects the pragmatic revival of Confucianism, where digital tools are used to uphold intergenerational reciprocity and promote active and healthy ageing to address social issues. However, these new roles also bring challenges. The pressures of caregiving and adapting to digital technologies can exacerbate stress and social isolation, issues that Wang's study does not fully address.

Wang's ethnography vividly captures the lived experiences of Shanghai's seniors, offering a rich and thought-provoking exploration of how they navigate the digital revolution and lead fulfilling lives. By integrating smartphones into their daily lives, these seniors have achieved self-reform, strengthened family bonds, and fostered community solidarity. Nevertheless, the social and emotional challenges encountered by Chinese seniors, the new "sandwich generation," in adapting digital technologies and managing *guanxi* through smartphones and digital communications have not been fully studied.

While Wang's empirical analysis provides valuable insights into active and healthy ageing in the specific context of Shanghai, more rigorous examination of the challenges, such as the digital divide and caregiving stress, encountered by older adults in China, especially the second- and third-tier cities and rural areas, would enhance the robustness of her conclusions. This monograph makes significant contributions to the fields of anthropology, digital communication, and ageing studies, and provides a compelling case study of cultural and technological transformations in contemporary urban China. However, Wang's thick description of the ageing phenomenon driven by smartphones and digital technologies lacks any convincing theoretical frameworks. The monograph's central thesis and conceptual argument on the transition from cultural revolution to digital revolution lacks relevant literature reviews and has not yet become a strong theoretical perspective to explain the adaptation of Chinese seniors to contemporary life with smartphones and digital culture.

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