

Ageing on WeChat: The Impact of Social Media on Elders in Urban China

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INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the popularity of the social media application, “WeChat”, among Chinese urban elders¹. The aim is to determine the ways that new technology influences their lives and how loneliness is compensated with technology.

The results were concluded based on information collected through fieldwork on WeChat. I began by observing my parents using WeChat. Following, I interviewed twenty informants including my parents. The interviews were carried out via text, voice message and video chat on WeChat. The interviewees consisted of urban elders between the ages of 60 and 75 and their adult children. All of the elders are retired and no longer live with their children. From a perspective focused on modernisation, I chose three of the interviewees as specific examples to elaborate on three different aspects of how WeChat reshapes their lives.

I will present each individual through “thick description” at the beginning of each section, followed by my own interpretation of their situation. Being that I did not collect a vast amount of data, all of the interviews collected need to be seen as individual experiences. They do not represent all educated elders living in urban China.

¹ Before I came to Germany, I had lived with my parents for two months. I noticed that both of them were obsessed with WeChat. Some of my friends told me that their parents or grandparents were also using WeChat frequently. I decided to research this matter.



Figure 1 Each of these elders is checking their WeChat. Some of them are looking at texts, and some of them are using the Walkie-Talkie.

HOW DID THIS EMERGE?

Due to low mortality and the one-child policy in China, the population has been increasing in age (Yi & Vaupel 1989). Nearly 145 million people are aged above 60 years, and half of them live on their own.² In 2013, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) released a report which forecasted that China would become the oldest society by 2030. More than 30 percent of the population will be aged 60 and over by 2050. In response to the rapid ageing issue, the Chinese government developed a series of policies. For example, that the authority will gradually raise the official retirement age from 60 years for men and 55 years for women to 65 years for both genders. Meanwhile, the mitigation of the “one-child” policy is supposed to raise the birth rate which would enable more young people to support the pension. Yet, the social structure has changed.

Over the last two decades, traditional patterns of co-residency has rapidly shifted due to modernisation and urbanisation. Young adults migrate to metropolitan centres seeking higher education and better jobs, while elderly parents remain at home. The traditional family bond of Chinese agricultural society is being undermined.

Technology can, however, also be seen as providing opportunity for building new patterns of family bonding. Because of cheap smartphones and high speed WLAN, the use of applications for communicating versus using telephones, has become very common in urban China. WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging application that was

² National Bureau of Statistics of the People’s Republic of China. 2010. “The Report of the sixth Census in China”

launched by Tencent Company in 2011, combines the functions of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. The application has become very popular among urban elders. According to official data published by Tencent Company in 2015³, there are 1.8 million users above 60 years old on WeChat.

This article summarises three different aspects as to how WeChat impacts elderly people's lives.

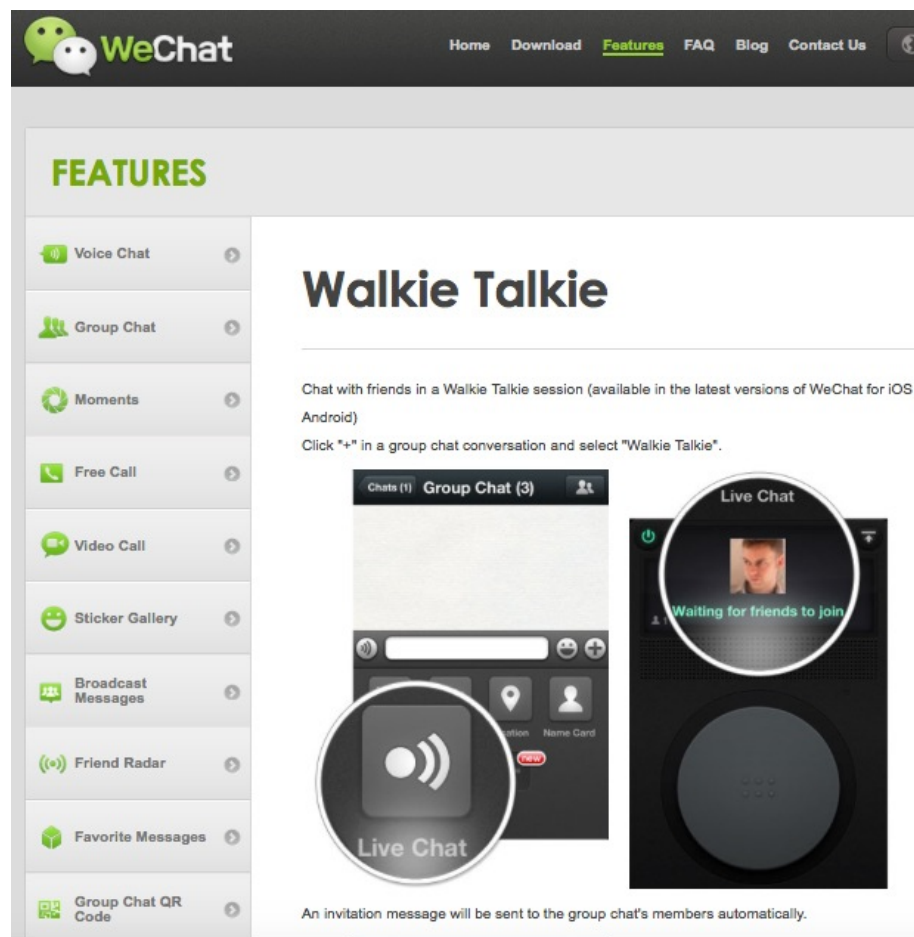


Figure 2 The introduction to different features of WeChat

³ "The Power of WeChat".(《微信的“影响力”》). Last accessed 27th January 2015. <http://tech.qq.com/a/20150127/018482.htm> - p=1

发视频发语音 30位老人课堂学微信

厦门晚报《老年周报》微信培训班昨试听,老人及其子女纷纷赞晚报创新之举



厦门老年大学电脑教室里,老人们对着电脑上的手机操作认真学。



手机看不清,我用放大镜。



老师讲一下,这个怎么弄?

本报记者 吴霞 通讯员 刘东 实习生 蔡嘉超 15年没碰过手机了,80岁的沈阿姨最近忙得不行,上午8点上课,课刚过半她就犯难了。

昨天上午,厦门晚报《老年周报》老人微信培训班在厦门老年大学开班,首期30名学员参加了试听,他们的年龄分布在60至80岁之间。

沈阿姨说,她最近一直想学用微信,但又怕学不会。昨天上午,她早早来到老年大学,在工作人员的指引下,她走进了电脑教室。

教室里,30名老人围坐在长条桌旁,每个人的面前都有一台电脑。工作人员正在给老人们讲解手机的基本操作。

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手机用不到没电 老伴手机发微信 首条信息发给她

今年68岁的沈阿姨之前都不会用手机,前几天在离家较远的亲戚家,她第一次用手机发微信,老伴第一时间回了消息。

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听课新买新手机 还帮家理财占座

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Figure 3 This is a report in a Chinese mainstream newspaper about a training class teaching elderly people how to use WeChat.

RECONSTRUCTING THE FAMILY BOND

Heshi and her husband live in downtown Beijing. Her mother-in-law moved to an eastern suburb forty kilometers away from them. "It would be too crowded to live together and housing rates in the city are too expensive," ("Old educated youth"). "Old educated youth" is the nickname of Heshi's mother-in-law on WeChat. She is 66 years old and retired as the headmaster of an elementary school ten years ago. She was among the "educated youth" that was sent-down to rural areas during the Cultural Revolution. She decided to use this name instead of her real name "Caiping" that her son used when he registered a WeChat account for her.

"My son bought me an IPAD and launched many Apps," she commented, "they worried that I was too bored living alone. They visit me once a month since they are otherwise too busy. Before using WeChat, we talked on the phone everyday. But sometimes, I felt that they were too tired to talk. Now I can leave voice messages without disturbing them and they can reply at any time when they are free."

Heshi mentioned that she felt more relaxed chatting with her mother-in-law on WeChat than on the telephone. “She is not like a senior on WeChat and our relationship became more equal. She used to forward us fake news, and I criticised her. She might have become angry if this conversation had happened on the telephone or face-to-face. Instead, she replied with a very cute emoji.”

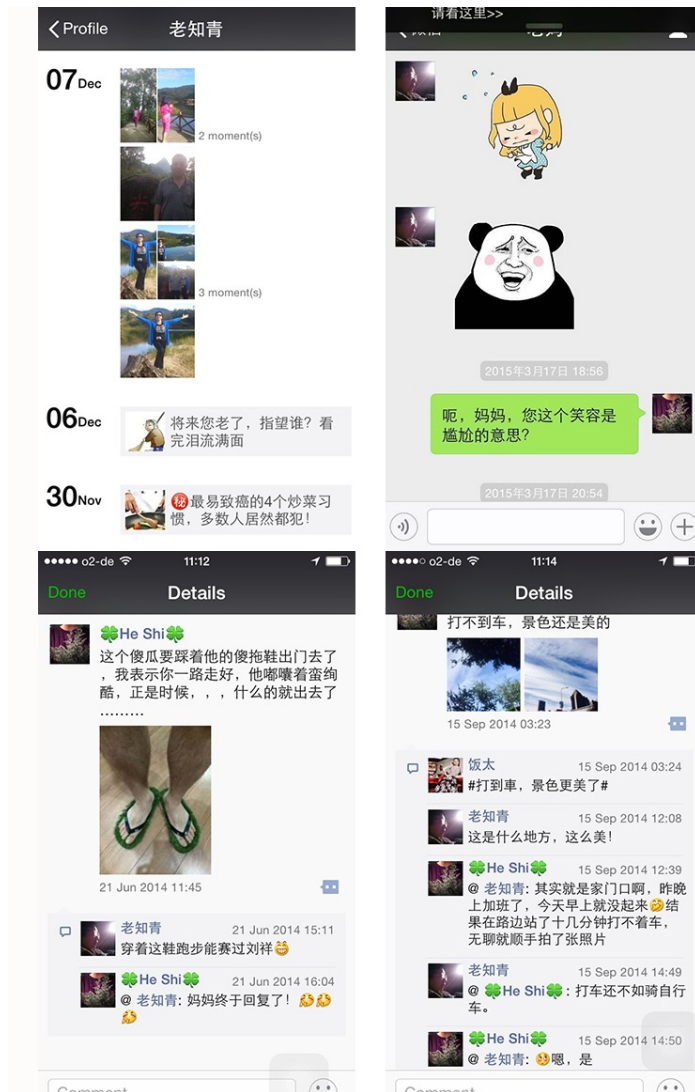


Figure 3 “Old educated youth’s” Moments ; She is using Emoji to chat with Heshi; She comments on Heshi’s Moments.

Yet, a generation gap exists. One time Heshi and her husband were poking fun with one another and acclaimed that their marriage was falling apart on a WeChat post. “Old educated youth” called her son immediately and asked them not to break up. “Though she realised it was a misunderstanding, we have become more cautious about what we post on WeChat,” Heshi explained.

Aizhen and her husband live in a small city in Eastern China. Their daughter and her husband live in Shenzhen nearly 1000km away. Their granddaughter is studying in the United States. They established a family group on WeChat to connect with one another in different places in different time zones. “When I miss them, I just send a video chat request and I can see them immediately. It’s fast and free.” Aizhen remarks.



Figure 4 Aizhen and her husband using WeChat at different occasions.

Based on traditional family values in China, co-residency of three generations or even four is associated with the greatest happiness a person can experience. As industrialisation and urbanisation are increasingly affecting contemporary China, traditional patterns of co-residency are inevitably falling apart (Logan & Bian 1999). Modern family bonds are relying on communication in the virtual world more than in real life.

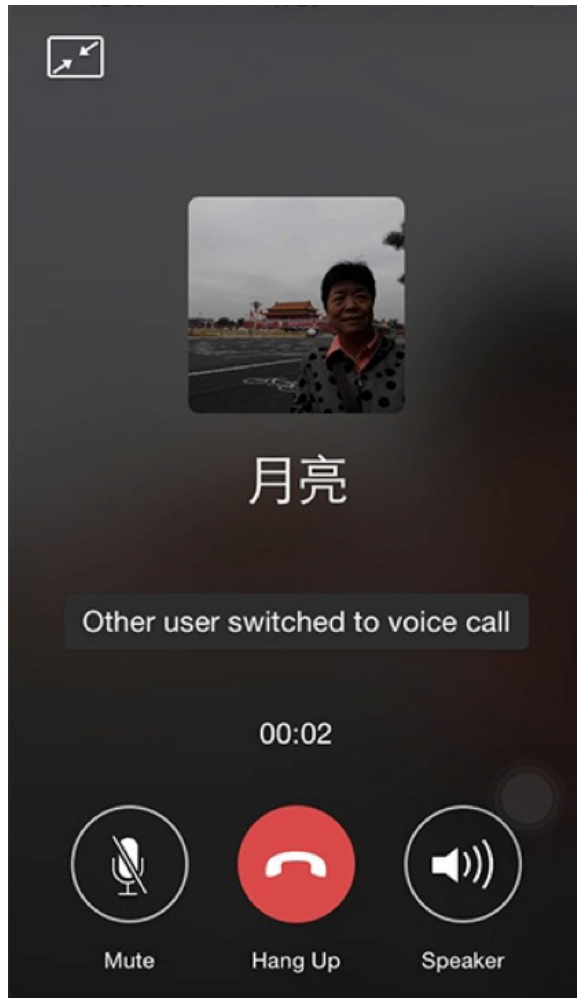


Figure 5 I'm having a Voice call with my mother.

For “Old educated youth” the virtual world is even better than real life. Without interfering in their daily life, she can see what the young couple has eaten for dinner on their Moments. Meanwhile, she always shares her travelling photos on her Moments when she joins the senior group tours. They “like” and comment on each other’s posts. “Sometimes, it doesn’t mean ‘like’. It means I know what you are doing,” explains “Old educated youth”. “But it’s good to know how great the differences are between their generation and mine. Once Heshi posted a photo of herself wearing an inappropriate dress. I didn’t like it, but I didn’t say anything.”



Figure 6 Family dinner. Before the dinner starts, my uncle takes a photo of the food; another uncle and aunt are checking their WeChat account. During the meal, they share the photos in a family group with other family members that could not come.

EXPRESSING THE SELF

Last year, Qing's Aunt Jia reconnected with many old friends that were also relocated to Northeast China during the 1960s. They hadn't met for over forty years until a reunion on WeChat. After that, Jia's life changed entirely. "Lao tou zi" is one of her old friends that had pursued her forty years ago. She refused him and married another "educated youth". Jia chats with "Lao tou zi" on WeChat everyday since they "added" each other. Qing describes her aunt as constantly checking her phone during family gatherings. No one in the family thought anything of it until Jia asked her husband for a divorce after a few months.



Figure 7 Qing is talking with me about how shocked she was when she found out about her aunt's cyber love.

"We are more than shocked. It's a shame," said Jing. "She is 62 years old, not 20. They haven't seen each other for forty years minus the past few months chatting on WeChat. She abandoned her husband and son. Everyone in our family was trying to dissuade her, but we failed."

After the divorce, "Lao tou zi" came to her city, Chongqing, from Beijing. Jia picked him up at the train station at six in the morning and they went to the registry office to get married. For Jia, life became hard. She left the apartment and all the savings to her ex-husband. But she said she felt much happier than before: "It's not easy to express emotions and feelings for me. It's an issue for my whole generation. We became used to accepting our marriage and occupation without questioning anything. My son blamed me for me being too selfish. I'm 62 years old now. I need someone that I can talk to and he is the one."

As Jia mentioned, repressing feelings is quite normal among the generation that was born in the 1950s. During the Mao era, both economically and politically, personal desire was constrained by collectivism. The individual was not important. As Jia puts it: "When I was young, divorce had to be approved by the authorities and you would get a very bad reputation if you did."

Qing is not optimistic about her aunt's new marriage. She mentioned that "Lao tou zi" sent Jia a dress by mail, but it was too small for her. He wrote on a note in the package: "I remember how pretty you were when you were wore dresses". "But he forgot that she was only 20 years old then. Now she is just a fat elderly woman. The gap of forty years could be a very large divergence for them. Their relationship was established in a virtual world. However, they have to face reality."

I only met one case of cyber love among twenty interviewees. This could be a special case. But many of the interviewees mentioned that they felt much more comfortable expressing themselves on WeChat rather than in real life. My father is an introvert and inarticulate. But on WeChat, he is the most active member in the family group. He even quarrelled with my uncle several times. In real life, he has never argued with anyone.

Qing was very confused by her Aunt's contradictory behaviour. On the one hand, she betrayed her husband and fell in love with someone else; on the other hand, she was still very conservative and insisted on registering their marriage before living with "Lao tou zi". The experiences of the Cultural Revolution might limit their self-expression, but they have found new ways to develop their self-awareness on WeChat.

LEADING A NEW LIFE

My parents first began using WeChat when I bought them two smartphones as gifts for their retirement. My intention was to make communication with them more convenient since I lived thousands of miles from them in Beijing. It grew on them very quickly and they were entirely enthusiastic about it. It was not meant to replace the telephone for them, rather to open a new world to explore.

They subscribed to many official newspapers and magazines for getting information. My mother likes writing and my father likes photography. Inspired by those accounts, they decided to build an official family account to publish their own works. They called it "Home of Xin River (the river of my hometown)". Since the establishment of the account, they update it daily. The majority of the contents consist of travelogues written by my mother and photographs taken by my father. They also publish my photographs and articles without asking me for permission. There are more than three hundred subscribers thus far. The amount is not extensive, but they are satisfied with the numbers.

As my father commented: "Most of our subscribers are our family and friends. It's very easy and convenient to share something with them. Every morning when I wake up, the first thing that I'm thinking about is what am I going to update. It's like my job now. Though we won't earn any money from it, it enriches our life. Actually, I get much more important things than money from WeChat— I feel much younger than before."

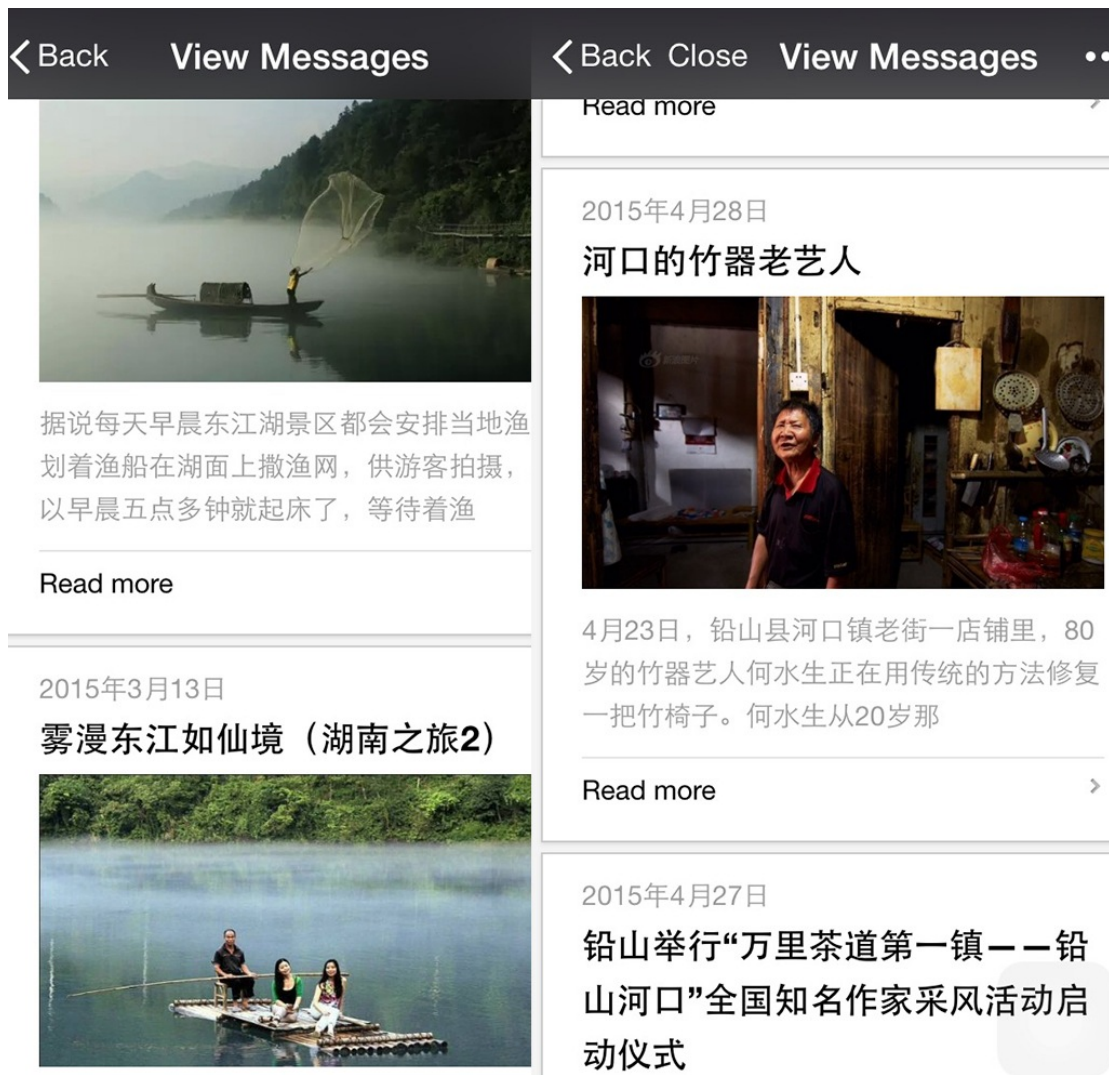


Figure 8 An example of my family's official account and the official account of my hometown.

Having succeeded in the official family account, my father began working on an official account on tourism in my hometown. He publishes his own photographs and articles, and has also invited many local writers and photographers to contribute to the account. After six months, the amount of subscribers reached nearly one thousand and half of them are people he doesn't know. Occasionally he meets some of the subscribers in town who refer to him as "chief editor". My mother considers him to be happier than ever before: "He worked for the government his whole life, even though he wasn't interested in politics at all. He used to be very anxious after retirement. There was nothing else he could do. Now, he has found his own position on the Internet."

RESPONSES FROM THE YOUNGER GENERATION

In my study, most young adults supported their parents using WeChat. On the other hand, many of them worried that it might affect the health of elderly people. For example, staring at the screen too often may damage their eyesight which is already deteriorating; or positioning the head in a downwards position may cause cervical diseases. Some adult children set rules for their elderly parents to limit the time they spend on WeChat. Kunta is a thirty-one-year-old photo editor living in Beijing. His parents, who live in Hunan, became addicted to WeChat since he launched it for

them. Last Chinese New Year he demanded them to spend no more than an hour a day on WeChat. To his surprise, his parents agreed without hesitation. It reminded him of how they limited his screen time when he was a kid.

Though elderly people are using new technologies more and more, their ideology hasn't change too much. As Kunta stated: "They are still very judgmental. My father even judged my profile photo and asked me to change it to a more 'proper' one. Therefore, I blocked him." Half of the young interviewees admitted that they had blocked their parents on WeChat to avoid being judged. The other half of the interviewees added tags in order to censor some of their "Moments" from their parents.

Another reason that young people block their parents is because they are reposting too many annoying articles. The articles are mostly concerning health care, "chicken soup for the soul" and entertainment gossip. Some of the contents are outdated or even false. For instance, some of the articles reposted by Kunta's Mother include: "You shouldn't wash your hair during a shower!", "How to be Happy", or "If you repost this article to a hundred people then you will be blessed". Through our WeChat Moments, I realised the huge epistemological differences between my parents and I. Both of them are over sixty years old now. I won't expect them to change drastically because of new technology," Kunta explained. "Nightclub? No! Bar? No! Junk food? No! Complain to your boss? No! Updating after midnight? No! Talking about political issues? That would be the worst possible post. Because my parents think it is not safe to talk about politics on the Internet."

周老师	< Profile	金似桃
 海拔3700也要玩命约，拉萨艳遇百科全说（你懂...	23Apr	 新人民币即将上市，太漂亮了，你每月能赚几张？
 不会玩的，不要来西藏!!!	21Apr	 【猫游记】上饶灵山美成这样，你造吗？
 昨天发生的事情~!		
 美丽的蝴蝶，惊艳了世界!	18Apr	 * 世界上最健康的作息表，放到你的朋友圈，...
 此生见过最牛的孩子	12Apr	 又一批新版假币来了，快让朋友圈的人都知道!
 92岁的赵朴初先生写一诗，越看越宽心		
 脑血栓前兆，当天6个暗号，为家人，看一眼!		 真好 这个一定要发到朋友圈
 为姚贝娜、傅彪治病的名医终于站出来讲真话了...	05Apr	 19岁年轻尼姑几句话，震撼全国！只看到第一句...
 保证让你抽筋.... 一张一张慢慢看!		 谨记睡觉4戒律：人很难变老!

Figure 9 These are the lists of Moments that two elderly women reposted on their WeChat. Most of these articles are about health care and life philosophy.

Growing up in Mao's era, elderly people are more sensitive to politics than their adult children. When I reposted an article about the Uygur ethnic issue in Xinjiang, my mother asked me to delete it immediately. Not only because it was not "politically correct", but also because she was concerned about surveillance.

They consider criticising the Chinese government a taboo, while simultaneously, some elderly people are nostalgic about Mao and his era. This topic sometimes causes drastic disputes in family groups on WeChat. After reposting an ironic article about Mao, Xiao was criticised by his parents in a family group. He thought it was not a single right or wrong: "They complained that our generation no longer respected Mao. It might even represent that we no longer respect their authority. I think that they miss the past only because they were still young at that time."

CONCLUSION

In modern society, ageing is mostly viewed as a process, in which there is an uncontrollable decline in both physical and mental capabilities (Posner 1995). Ageing can be labelled the same as race. It always relates to "illness", "old-fashionedness" and "uselessness". In contemporary China, the traditional values of respecting elderly people are gradually declining through modernisation⁴. The economy is more reliant on young people who transform their knowledge and technology into productivity, rather than the life experiences of elders.

Nevertheless, as technology evolves, it becomes much easier to access in everyday life. My parents used to communicate via QQ (a Chinese instant messaging software) along with another Chinese blog, but the functions of WeChat are simpler and smartphones or IPADS are more portable than Laptops. They could use different systems — Windows, Android and IOS without any confusion. They taught other family members how to use WeChat to establish groups and official accounts. When I asked my father how to apply an official account, his voice was full of pride.

During my fieldwork, I realised that it is too general a term to label all of the people aged over 60 years old as "elderly". Each of my interviewees had their own individual characteristics, desires and lifestyles. Ageing can be a process of growing up. Many young interviewees mentioned that their parents became more confident after they used WeChat. When the parents are using the same thing as their adult children, they feel more fashionable and closer to the younger generation. New technology is not only a communication tool for dealing with their loneliness, rather a symbol that they are keeping pace with the times.

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