

LEE LI MING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Age-friendly Development in China

Designing an inclusive
digital environment for
all¹

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Rapid Ageing in the Face of Socioeconomic Transitions

Potentially confronting an anticipated transition to a new phase of development, China also has one of the fastest-growing ageing populations globally.² According to the National Health Commission, China's population of individuals aged 60 years and above had reached 267 million by the end of 2021, constituting 18.9% of the total population and marking it the largest older population in the world. This number is projected to reach 400 million by 2035, accounting for over 30% of the total population, due to longer life expectancy and rapid decline in fertility rates.³

The demographic ageing trend in China presents tremendous challenges and opportunities for both current and future development. Scholars and practitioners argue that the nation's socioeconomic

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² The World Bank. (2023, April 20). *Overview*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>; Yiu, P., Li, G., Tan, C., & Obe, M. (2023). *China's aging population threatens a Japan-style lost decade*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big->

[Story/China-s-aging-population-threatens-a-Japan-style-lost-decade](https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/China-s-aging-population-threatens-a-Japan-style-lost-decade)

³ National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China. (2022, October 24). *2021 National Bulletin on the Development of Aging Care*. <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/cms-search/xxgk/getManuscriptXxgk.htm?id=e09f046ab8f14967b19c3cb5c1d934b5>

transitions should address the significant trend of demographic ageing, embracing and enabling better ageing.⁴ In particular, enhancing infrastructure, services, and health care, including digitalisation to cater to the ageing population, has become an urgent demand in China.

Globally, scholars have increasingly recognised that overlooking the digitalisation of society is a missed but essential perspective for age-friendly development (van Hoof et al., 2021). This article explores a number of age-friendly policy frameworks and practices in contemporary China, paying attention to designing an inclusive digital environment.

National Policy Framework for Age-friendly Environment

In November 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council jointly issued the *Medium and Long-term Plan for the National Active Response to Population Ageing*. This plan offers a strategic, comprehensive, and guiding document for China to actively tackle population ageing, with a short-term to 2022, a mid-term to 2035, and a long-term outlook to 2050. The plan emphasises that actively responding to the ageing population is an inherent requirement for implementing people-centred development. It is also a necessary guarantee for high-quality economic

development and an important measure to maintain national security, social harmony, and stability. In particular, the plan deploys five strategies:

1. Consolidate social wealth reserves for population ageing.
2. Improve the adequate supply of labour in the context of population ageing.
3. Create a high-quality service and product supply system for older adults.
4. Strengthen the ability of scientific and technological innovation to cope with population ageing.
5. Build a social environment for friendly ageing, filial piety and respect for the older population.⁵

As part of the global and national age-friendly movement, on 9 December 2020, the National Office on Ageing of the National Health Commission published the *Notice on Establishing a National Model for Age-friendly Community* to create a working model and long-term mechanism to build 5,000 urban and rural age-friendly communities across the country by 2025. A nation of age-friendly communities is expected to be achieved by 2035. This entails:

1. Improve the living environment of older adults.
2. Facilitate the daily travel of older adults.
3. Improve the quality of services for older adults.
4. Expand the social participation of older adults.

⁴ The Lancet. (2022). Population ageing in China: Crisis or opportunity? *The Lancet*, 400(10366), 1821. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)02410-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)02410-2)

⁵ 中国政府网. (2019, November 21). 中共中央国务院印发《国家积极应对人口老龄化中长期规划》. https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-11/21/content_5454347.htm

5. Enrich the spiritual and cultural life of older adults.
6. Improve the technological level of serving older adults.⁶

On 7 February 2022, 15 ministries and commissions, including the National Health Commission, jointly issued the *14th Five-Year Healthy Ageing Plan*. The plan indicates that the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025) is critical for actively responding to an ageing population and promoting healthy ageing development. In order to implement the Healthy China strategy, more health service resources will be allocated to older adults. Among others,⁷

- a comprehensive and continuous health service system covering urban and rural areas will be established,
- the health security system for older adults will be more comprehensive,
- the social environment for the healthy life of older adults will be more friendly, and
- the health of older adults will be improved.

These national policy frameworks have guided government agencies and private sectors at various levels, aiming to build a more age-friendly environment collaboratively.

Digital Solutions for Age-friendly Internet

Despite the drastic digital transformation, technological innovation, and product support for age-friendly development through big data, 5G, and artificial intelligence, service effectiveness has yet to be fully developed. To bridge the digital divide among a rapidly ageing population, in November 2020, the State Council, China's Cabinet, initiated a nationwide plan, *Implementation Plans for Effectively Solving the Difficulties of Using Smart Technology for the Elderly*, to promote age-friendly digital inclusion. Specifically, the plan documented the significant challenges faced by older adults and stipulated the tasks of various departments, which include optimising health code management, improving digital access to public transportation services, providing multiple channels for health services, and advancing the digital literacy of older adults.⁸

Thereafter, on 6 April 2021, China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) published guidelines to initiate a first-stage campaign targeting 43 applications and 115 websites to carry out "age-friendliness modifications" before the end of September 2021. These modifications include using bigger text fonts and a ban on pop-up advertisements. With these modifications, compliant sites

⁶国务院部门文件_中国政府网. (2020, December 9). 关于开展示范性全国老年友好型社区创建工作的通知. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-12/14/content_5569385.htm

⁷国务院部门文件_中国政府网. (2022, December 7). 关于印发“十四五”健康老龄化规划的通知.

https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-03/01/content_5676342.htm

⁸中国政府网. (2020, November 24). 国务院办公厅印发关于切实解决老年人运用智能技术困难实施方案的通知.

https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2020-11/24/content_5563804.htm

would receive an official “web accessibility” label, valid for two years.⁹ On 9 December 2021, MIIT announced that 173 websites and mobile applications had been reprogrammed to accommodate the needs of older adults, enabling them to actively participate in the booming digital economy (Box 1).

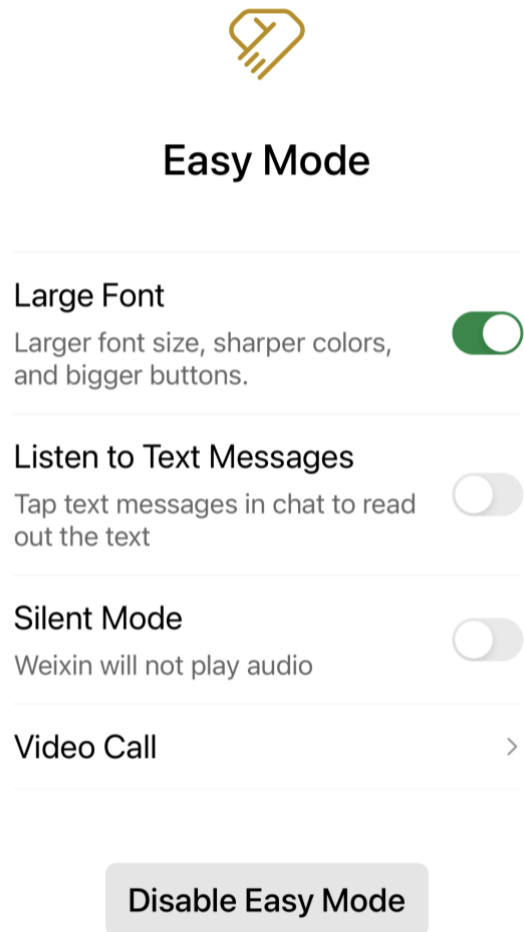
Box 1: WeChat Age-friendly Adaptation

In response to MIIT’s age-friendliness modifications, WeChat (also referred to as Weixin), China’s largest social network operated by Chinese tech giant Tencent Holdings, launched a new “Easy Mode” (see Figure 1). Easy Mode features larger text fonts, sharper colours, bigger buttons, listening to text messages, and other modifications, making the app more friendly to the ageing population. More than four million users have activated Easy Mode by 6 October 2021.

In addition, online courses, including dramatised useful information to help older adults access health services, wealth management, and identify rumours and common online fraud, were rolled out via a WeChat mini programme called Academy for the Aged.¹⁰ The Mini Programme is part of WeChat’s Golden Years Programme, which was jointly launched with charity groups in September 2021. The aim is to help 10 million older adults master digital skills in three years.

⁹国务院部门文件_中国政府网. (2021, April 6). 工业和信息化部办公厅关于进一步抓好互联网应用适老化及无障碍改造专项行动实施工作的通知. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-04/13/content_5599225.htm

Figure 1: Easy Mode of WeChat¹¹



According to a report released on 8 December 2022 by China Consumers Association, China’s top consumer rights watchdog, nearly 40% of the 104 surveyed apps had not rolled out an age-friendly version or a separate, more age-friendly app for older adults, while a majority of the 1,926 older urban respondents showed various unmet demands. More than 58% of respondents over the age of 60 claimed they had not used the features designed for them. Additionally, more than half of the respondents complained of small fonts

¹⁰ Tencent Helps Elderly People Feel Included Online. (2021, October 21). Tencent. <https://www.tencent.com/en-us/articles/2201234.html>

¹¹ Screenshot made by the author.

and excessive advertisements, though various guidelines from the authorities had been promoting age-friendly improvement of the apps.¹²

In a recent survey conducted by Guang Ming Newspaper and Minzu University of China, three major obstacles are identified in the building of age-friendly Internet:

1. Superficial age-friendly design and renovation fails to meet the fundamental needs of older adults.
2. Enterprises lack the profit-oriented driving force to design and generate age-friendly products thoroughly.
3. Existing promotion for age-friendly products through public and private sector channels is relatively limited.

A multi-actor, multi-level partnership, including government entities, enterprises, and social groups, is urgently called for to address good governance, commercialisation, technological advancement, and the cultural consideration of building an age-friendly Internet.¹³

Conclusion

As the ageing population becomes a major driving force shaping this era of global digitalisation, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have to pay urgent attention to planning and governing an older and

digital future, including promoting e-participation to engage with diverse voices and provide critical insights into more effective policymaking and implementation (Chen & Hartt, 2021).

Building an age-friendly community and city calls for designing a more inclusive digital environment, including more effective approaches to enhance the digital literacy of older adults. In particular, adopting an age-friendly design lens to meet the changing needs of older adults encourages the development of a social model of ageing. There is an opportunity to utilise a participatory, empathic and mainstream approach through digital technologies – learning from diverse lived experiences, seeing the positives in older adults and building on strengths rather than deficits (McGinley et al., 2022).

In contemporary China, considering older adults' preference for ageing at home instead of staying in the nursing home,¹⁴ age-friendly design with digital solutions to accommodate the needs of older adults has been and will be deemed a priority for the decades ahead.

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¹⁴ Qin, M., Falkingham, J., Evandrou, M., & Vlachantoni, A. (2020). Attitudes and preferences towards future oldage support amongst tomorrow's elders in China. *Demographic Research*, 43, 285–314.

¹²中国消费者协会. (2022, December 8). *适老化 APP 消费监督评测项目研究报告*.

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