



Ageing and the Transportal Home

Pauline Garvey

pauline.a.garvey@mu.ie
Maynooth University
National University of Ireland

Xinyuan Wang

xinyuan.wang.11@ucl.ac.uk
University College London

Abstract

Taking a comparative approach to two field sites – Shanghai in China and Dublin in Ireland – this paper explores the relationship between ageing, home, and the impact of the smartphone on domestic space. Although Shanghai and Dublin are extremely diverse contexts, both have seen rapid social shifts in recent decades, and domestic life seems to reflect these changes. Here, we outline how older people reconfigure their lives through the manipulation of their homes, variously upsizing, downsizing, and rightsizing – but also through sifting through their possessions, decluttering, and adopting or adapting to new domestic spaces in different ways. However, whereas these material practices may be found in cities worldwide, we examine the smartphone in domestic environments and consider how the digital expands, create, blurs, or traverses conventional views of the home in each field site. A central concept here is the ‘transportal home’ (Miller et al. 2021). Weaving perspectives from material and digital approaches in anthropology, we explore and expand the notion of the transportal home, as outlined in the comparative book, *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al., 2021) and reiterated in brief here. We adopt this concept but take it further by asking how the transportal home differs in both fieldwork sites. This leads us to question the role of the transportal home in Shanghai and Dublin in terms of mediating, blurring, or traversing domestic boundaries, or expanding or shrinking social and architectural environments. Through these practices, conventional notions of home itself are challenged.

Keywords: *Ageing; Downsizing; Smartphone; Transportal Home; Ireland; China*

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 44, No 2 (2023), pp. 45 - 58

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2023.420



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Ageing and the Transportal Home

Pauline Garvey

pauline.a.garvey@mu.ie
Maynooth University
National University of Ireland

Xinyuan Wang

xinyuan.wang.11@ucl.ac.uk
University College London

Introduction

The purpose of this comparative paper is to understand ageing in relation to domesticity in two Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) field sites: Shanghai, China, and Dublin, Ireland. Insights from the ASSA project indicate that profound changes are taking place in older people's daily lives, both offline and online. Based on our detailed ethnographies, in this contribution, we re-examine the relationship between ageing, home, and the impact of the use of the digital on domestic space. This paper examines uses of the smartphone in everyday homemaking practices among older people. In both the Irish and Chinese field sites, the target population is people who are retired from work, are relatively healthy, and are generally affluent, usually in their 60s and 70s. The diverse contexts of Ireland and China allow us to place the distinctions of ageing in sharp relief in both places, and thereby to explore how the experience of ageing and domestic practices intersect with the use of the smartphone.

The choice of these two field sites comes from our conviction that we can learn from anthropological comparison, even though both sites may appear incomparable at the first glance. As we discuss later, the examples of domestic life in Dublin and Shanghai are extremely diverse yet carry some notable parallels. For example, both field sites are characterized by remarkable changes in domestic living in the face of rapid social shifts in both countries (Inglis 2007; Wang 2023). In our first example, the older generation have significantly 'upsized' their flats over the past 15 years after decades of living with extreme space restrictions in overcrowded Shanghai. Thus, the size of one's flat is positively associated with one's social status. In Dublin, by contrast, we will see how a familiar term – downsizing – simplifies the myriad reasons and ways that people re-evaluate the size of their homes in retirement, cast off possessions, declutter, update, and modernize interiors as they embrace a growing 'green' movement. For our informants, the term 'downsizing' seems to mask a more complex social and personal experience. Although our research shows it is common for older people in Dublin to valorise 'decluttering' their lives so that they can enjoy a 'lighter' lifestyle later in life, throughout Wang's fieldwork, it is very unusual to see similar 'decluttering' happening in Shanghai. If anything, our research participants seemed to celebrate the increased private space facilitated by bigger flats to finally hoard and display an array of material objects, from various personal collections to new purchases.

This paper is inspired by our recognition that where the home begins and ends can be experienced as blurred. The potential elasticity of domestic boundaries is well established anthropologically. Anthropology has long been involved in the discussion of domestic space (Douglas 1991; Cieraad 2006; Daniels 2015; Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Züniga 2020), with a focus on the material culture, and domestic practice (Miller 2001; Garvey 2001). Home, however, does not merely relate to an architectural unit but is the focus of lived experience and negotiation (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Mallet 2004; Grønseth and Thorshaug 2022). Indeed, some scholars have challenged the very concept of 'home' as implying rigid distinctions between public and private, inside and out (e.g., Vom Bruck 1997; Jackson 2000; Das, Ellen, and Leonard 2008; Empson 2011). However, somewhat neglected in these anthropological approaches is a focus on how the experience of ageing may impact notions of domesticity (although see Marcoux 2001; Ewart and Luck 2013; Thin 2016). In this article, we approach home as referring to physical space as well as social space as it is experienced both on and offline. We will explore the

ways in which the subjective experience of age and its location are mutually constituted but, here, we expand the idea of home to encompass the digital as well as the architectural unit. In the ASSA project, we have explored the experience of ageing in the era of the smartphone, and we are finding that people's experience of home is also evolving along with the process of ageing and the appropriation of digital media. In this way, 'home' has emerged as one of the key concepts of the ASSA project in relation to smartphones as the 'transportal home' (Miller et al 2021). As we discuss later, the transportal home implies that people have an alternative home that they carry in their pockets. This type of home fundamentally enables our participants to expand or reduce connections with family and friends, to explore new interests, and to chat with people unshackled from specific places. Amongst older people in both of our field sites, people are actively expanding or shrinking their social connections via their smartphones.

As our discussion unfolds, we outline the distinctions between 'ageing in place,' meaning older individuals continuing to live independently in their own homes or familiar environments. To start, we focus on practices and understandings of domestic space in both Shanghai and Dublin but follow this in identifying the role of the smartphone in older people's experience of home. These comparative strands then lead us to question the role of the transportal home in mediating, blurring, or traversing domestic boundaries or challenging the notion of home itself. But while contextual differences are the starting point for us to explore how to make a productive comparison, we end by challenging the idea of home and the transportal home as concepts that are independent of specific places. We return to each site to illustrate how they can only be understood with reference to their specific context.

Our research is based on simultaneous 16-month ethnographic fieldwork in locations in Dublin, Ireland, and Shanghai, China. As anthropologists, our research consisted primarily of participant observation in which we participated in the everyday lives, routines, and activities of our research participants. Our approach entailed hands-on assistance, ranging from running errands and caring for pets, to aiding with paperwork, collaborating with the local community to organizing events, and exploring new features on our research participants' smartphones. In addition, we joined clubs and organisations in our field sites, participated in local activities such as craft and walking groups and volunteered in age-focused organisations such as Active Retirement groups. Our approach lies in cultivating reciprocal relationships where people value our presence for our practical assistance, empathetic listening, and companionship. Through these ongoing practices, which took place in private homes and public spaces, we achieved a holistic understanding of the smartphone in the domestic lives of older adults. Finally, we supplemented these activities with interviews and surveys (for more details, see Garvey and Miller 2021; Wang 2023).

Upsizing in Shanghai: From Alley Lane to the Tower Block

With about 27 million residents, one-third of whom are age 60 or over, Shanghai is the 'oldest' city in China.¹ The average life expectancy has currently reached 83.63 years.² While conducting her fieldwork, Xinyuan lived for 16 months inside a low-rise living compound (pseudonymously referred to as '*ForeverGood*') in the city centre of Shanghai. *ForeverGood* is comprised of 23 buildings with about 900 households, and residents' average age is 60. Alongside *ForeverGood*, Xinyuan also conducted fieldwork in a suburban area consisting of crowded tower blocks of the type in which most Shanghai residents now live. For most ordinary Shanghai residents aged 50 and above, alleyway housing (*lilong*) functioned as the domestic dwelling space for a considerable length of their life. Many locals only moved into tower blocks in suburban areas over the last 10 to 15 years when commercial real estate was booming in Shanghai.

Lilong is a unique type of Shanghai residential model that was dominant 50 years ago (Figure 1). Within a *lilong* compound, houses are clustered around a 'fishbone' layout, with the main alleyway running all the way or halfway across the block, and the alleyways on each side connected perpendicularly to the main alleyway

(Guan 1996). This allows many families to live together in the same compound with shared bathrooms and kitchens (Lü, Rowe, and Zhang, 2001, 63).

Although *lilong* was designed to maximise land use, *lilong* dwellers have creatively overcome physical constraints to cultivate a unique Shanghai neighbourhood atmosphere. Meanwhile, people's experience of privacy has evolved around the spatial arrangement of *lilong* (Wu 1968, 32). The transition from the public street to the semi-private main alleyway and side-alleyways behind a stone gate to the private individual houses provides a gradual change in the sense of privacy as people leave or return home (Fang et al. 2019). *Lilong* was the dominant living arrangement in Shanghai until the 1990s when tower blocks started to become mainstream. According to statistics from 1980, the per capita living area in Shanghai was only 4.3 square meters, and the households below four-square meters accounted for 60% of the total number of households in the city.³ In 2019, the per capita living area in Shanghai has increased almost nine times to 37.2 square meters.⁴



Figure 1: (left) A typical *lilong* (alleyway) in Shanghai.⁵ License: CC BY-SA 3.0.

Figure 2: Typical residential tower blocks in Shanghai. Photo by Rui Zhong (used with permission).

Research participants Zhang (age 66) and Fengxian (age 65), a married couple, represent a typical 'upsized' household. The couple moved into a flat on the eighth floor of a 20-floor residential tower block in the north of Shanghai in 2008, when their *lilong* flat was demolished. Privacy in their previous *lilong* was rather limited given the extreme physical constraints where the kitchen and toilet were shared with other residents. When Zhang and Fengxian got married in 1980, they could not have any private space in their two-room *lilong* flat, as Zhang's parents and brother were sharing the room with the young couple at night.

Now, the couple lives in a three-bedroom flat in the suburbs and can finally enjoy a living situation that is usually called 'solo door and single household' (*du men du hu*), even though its location is slightly remote. As Fengxian kept saying: "Compared to *lilong*, it is much better and more convenient (*fangbian*) here." The term 'convenient' does not only refer to the improved facilities, but also to the increased sense of privacy that comes with having more space. In their suburban tower-block flat, the couple keeps a room specifically for displaying hundreds of souvenirs from travelling and award certificates Zhang received during his professional life. They delightfully show first-time guests around their flat as "every corner of the flat was designed and decorated by ourselves," as Fengxian proudly put it.

The only problem with 'solo door and single household' seems to be that it creates a distant relationship between new neighbours. It is very common for people to know nothing about their neighbours in the same tower block, even after living there for a decade. Zhang and Fengxian miss their previous neighbours in *lilong*. In an interview, Zhang said, "As they say, distance creates beauty, which is true among neighbours. Before in *lilong* we were too close, so everyday conflicts were inevitable. But now we are far away, we become nostalgic about the warmth of *lilong* neighbourhood in old days." About three years ago, a few of Zhang and Fengxian's

previous *lilong* neighbours had a reunion and set up an online group on WeChat, the predominant Chinese social media. Almost every day, members of this group send each other morning greetings, and share gossip and short videos of self-care and new recipes – just as they did when they lived together in *lilong*. From this fieldwork, we found that more than 70% of older informants had joined at least one neighbourhood group on WeChat.

To a great extent, the online community facilitated by a variety of WeChat groups seems to address the absence of offline community that arose when *lilong*, the former shared home arrangement, disappeared. Furthermore, without the ‘inevitable’ conflicts among neighbours due to extremely limited physical space and increased physical proximity (e.g., shared kitchen and toilet), the ‘digital proximity’ achieved via the use of smartphone online community allows previous neighbours to appreciate the affective aspect of neighbours. The shrinkage of social life is a common challenge experienced by many older people in contemporary Shanghai (Zhang et al. 2017). However, the use of WeChat groups among previous neighbours allows people to manage such challenges.

Rightsizing in Dublin: From Downsizing to Decluttering

As we move to the Irish context, we find a situation where the size of the population aged 65 and over in Ireland is growing: it is projected to double between 2011 and 2041, with the over-80s increasing by 250%. This rise in older adults is coupled with an acute shortage of housing. Following the economic crisis of 2008, the overall homeownership rate dropped to 67.6%, a level last seen in 1971. In Ireland, as elsewhere, young people being unable to purchase a home is a common concern discussed in the national media and was identified as an urgent issue in both the 2016 and 2020 general elections (McGee 2020). And, while there is particular focus on the plight of young people who cannot afford their own homes, at the time of research, there were several initiatives in Ireland focusing on housing options for older people.⁶

The Irish research was carried out in Thornhill and Cuan (both pseudonyms and both neighbourhoods in Dublin; Garvey and Miller 2021). But in this article, the focus is on Thornhill, which represents one of the closer suburbs to Dublin city. At the time of research, it had a population of about 17,000 people and is best described as middle-class/affluent. Housing is similar to other Dublin suburbs, which are primarily owner-occupied (68%).⁷ While our research participants consider their options, the background hum to their decisions is the housing shortage and the subtle pressure some feel to vacate their 3 or 4-bedroom homes to make space for growing families. Government-led initiatives that have been set up to address this crisis often seem to cast a covetous eye on large houses occupied by single residents or older couples. Such homes are often termed ‘under-occupied.’⁸ The term ‘downsizing,’ however, is something of a fallacy because it masks a more complex reality whereby people increasingly re-evaluate the size of their home according to their own and their family dynamics. In Dublin, we found that in addition to selling homes in favour of smaller dwellings, there was also a trend to build garden cabins or extend houses as adult children moved to their parents’ home with their own children. The umbrella term ‘rightsizing’ is more fitting to capture these diverse practices of expansion and shrinkage as they change through time and circumstance. Also, however much older people might be interested in downsizing, local estate agents pointed out that the provision of suitable retirement accommodation is negligible. As such, the majority of our research participants remain in the family home they have occupied for decades, and they have little inclination to change. Those who do downsize tend to move to low-rise apartment blocks, as we see in the example of Macrina below.

Estate agents in Dublin suggest that the trend to downsize is increasing. Householders are starting earlier, sometimes in their mid-50s, when they find themselves with an empty-nest and want to think about their future “while they still can.” This shift is more possible in the current housing market because prices have largely recovered from the economic crash in 2008, and houses represent a substantial financial asset. Of course, there are many reasons why someone might choose this route, including the warmth and the ease of looking after an

apartment rather than tending to a large house and replacing a large garden with something more manageable. However, in addition to functional and financial considerations, social attitudes have also shifted, according to estate agents, and more older people are rejecting the supposed (social) status of owning a large house.

Case Study: Macrina

We see this in the example of Macrina, a woman in her seventies, who sold her house and moved into a ground-floor apartment in Thornhill. As she explained in our first interview, she wanted to pre-empt a time when navigating stairs and a large home might prove difficult. While looking at apartments, she met a man whose wife had taken a fall and was urgently looking for a property without stairs. Macrina explained, "I didn't want to be in the same position. I wanted to move when I wasn't under pressure and could chose to move – it would be on my terms." Downsizing represented an enhancement of Macrina's life rather than a curtailment of it. She immediately took control and got builders in – she redesigned the galley kitchen, removed the bath and replaced it with a wet-room bathroom, and had a stylish gas fire fitted. It was all redecorated in cool white and lavender colours, matching the new white covers she had made for her living room furniture that had accompanied her throughout her life. She also emphasized the modernness of her new apartment. Having moved from a large house and with some money to spare, she was selling her possessions online but otherwise only keeping valued furniture that had been in her childhood home. Refurbished, but in continuous use, she could have a modern, minimal home, and could declutter the detritus she had collected in her previous home.



*Figure 3: Low-rise apartments are popular for older individuals who wish to downsize in Dublin.
Photo credit: Pauline Garvey.*



Figure 4: Macrina's living room. See the film on downsizing in Dublin, available at <http://bit.ly/downsizing>. Photo credit: Pauline Garvey



Figure 5: Macrina declutters her home. Photo credit: Pauline Garvey

This example reminds us that an issue often neglected in discussions of downsizing in the Irish context is the alliance of this trend with a rising 'green' movement. This trend, of course, is not restricted to older people. During fieldwork and in the local elections of 2019, the Green Party was hailed as the 'big winners' at the expense of other political parties (Leahy, Kelly, and Bray 2019). The difference, however, is that while this movement is supported by a broad base, our research participants had free time to pursue their environmental activities. As participants increasingly identified with the general rise in green values, they seemed to express a growing antipathy to their previous levels of accumulation. Where once possessions might have represented status and a cause of envy, as described above, they are more inclined to look down on neighbours who seem too willing to rip out "perfectly good kitchens" for no reason other than changing fashions. Status, and indeed personal pride, often lies in a valorisation of minimalism, buying organic, minimising waste, and in voting Green (cf. Garvey and Miller 2021). These values seem to be woven into domestic and local activities, such as saving local trees or volunteering in competitions that rank the most clean and tidy towns. One such national competition is called 'The Tidy Towns Competitions' but increasingly the emphasis is moving from placing

flower baskets on highstreets to demonstrating local environmental initiatives. The close connection between Tidy Towns and retirement was seen when Tidy Towns was cancelled during 2020 due to COVID-19, and the national media's response focused on the impact this would have on retirees (Hutton 2020).

The point here is that, although moving to a more 'modern' house may start as a functional imperative and a form of 'future-proofing,' the new domestic environment also materialises a shift towards new values and aspirations. As part of an increasing green movement in Ireland, some of our informants were more likely to espouse the minimalism of decluttering than the trappings of excess. Instead of a valorisation of the steady accumulation of a large house and a life's worth of possessions, the move is going in the opposite direction where older adults are choosing to reject the detritus and actively craft a domestic arrangement based on current values and sensibilities. Similarly, while the opportunities for downsizing are limited due to the housing crisis, other possibilities to streamline and simplify domestic space concern decluttering. This kind of downsizing is less obvious but much more mainstream. It involves not only decluttering domestic interiors but also decluttering digital lives, such as trimming or expanding friend and family groups on smartphones. We discuss this in the next section.

The Transportal Home: Perspectives from Material Culture and Digital Anthropology

When people downsize or declutter, they may also unravel certain aspects of themselves, and here the study of material culture is key. In previous work, Garvey and Wang came from a focus on domestic material culture and digital culture, respectively. In Garvey's work, an overriding perspective was not necessarily on the material constituents of the home or on the brute materiality of the place, but on the practices by which people inhabit these places by appropriating their contents. Through a focus on practice, we learn that banal routines – the most ordinary of activities – can be fundamental in facilitating the ongoing relationship between oneself and the domestic (Garvey 2001; 2018). Instead of manipulating the domestic environment as a means of presenting oneself to the social audience, incidental routines such as moving furniture, decluttering, and invigorating domestic spaces facilitate a more introspective gaze. Transience over permanence; movement, circulation, and reordering allow informants to understand themselves through their domestic material culture, quite apart from self-expression. The objects that are the foci of this process are not subsumed by the home but transcend it so that engaging and reordering them constitutes an activity that departs from the home as a presentational space. This approach enables us to examine processes of downsizing, upsizing, and decluttering from the perspective of a domestic practice that is "both profound but profoundly overlooked" as well as to focus on the objects themselves (Garvey 2018, 104). In specifically highlighting the practice and processes of disposal, the mechanisms by which people curate a new self-narrative come to the forefront.

Meanwhile, Wang's previous study focused on the impact of social media among migrant workers in a small factory town in southeast China (2016). Based on a 15-month ethnography, Wang argues that the use of social media provides a home for the so-called 'floating population' who constantly feels out of place in urban areas, and who suffers from appalling living situations and social discrimination. When an offline dwelling place is far less than what a home is supposed to be, young Chinese migrant workers turned to their social media and other online activities to build a world where they could express their personal aspirations with self-respect and see themselves as part of the modern China. As one female factory worker (age 19) said during an interview, "Life outside of the mobile phone is unbearable." In that sense, people's smartphones have become their virtual home. In more recent work (2021), Wang suggests that it is necessary to consider the degree to which digital media itself is a place where people live and feel at home. The acknowledgement of such homemaking via the digital among migrant workers in China indicates a need to re-think the relationship between materiality and digital possibilities for human existence as well as to further explore fundamental process of objectification through the lens of digital anthropology.

Wang's research echoes other new-media and internet studies that have acknowledged that traditional ideas about the home are being challenged by new patterns of life in the context of digital ubiquity. In the face of such ubiquity, the human existential condition has become even more complicated, as discussions about self-identity and cultural identity need to address the consequences of how digital developments are a constitutive part of people's daily lives around the world (Rainie and Wellman 2012; Miller et al. 2016). In anthropology and other related fields, it has been extensively discussed (e.g., Morley 2000; Spitulnik 1996; Siapera 2014; Trandafoiu 2013) that digital culture plays an important role in the formation and transformation of people's sense of place. Prior anthropological studies (e.g., Costa and Wang, 2019; Baym 2010) indicate that people can simultaneously inhabit and belong to different physical or imagined places. More recently, some scholars have studied the role of the internet and digital media in reshaping the relationship between place, culture, and selfhood in a mobile world (e.g., Kraemer 2017; Witteborn 2014). Meanwhile, ethnographies investigating virtual communities such as *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008) and *Ciberville* (Greschke 2012) have raised a number of questions: Is there a home in cyberspace? Does the virtual world constitute a society in and of itself?

Weaving these material and digital strands together, we can provide new perspectives on the significance of the transportal home. In the comparative book *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al. 2021), the ASSA team argue that the smartphone is less a device we use and more a kind of place where we live. What this means is that rather than simply being the tool that connects two physical locations, smartphones can become places in their own right – a place within which people live, maintain relationships, and engage in activities. The smartphone is now a place where people spend so much time that it challenges the physical home to an unprecedented degree. This can be seen in manifold ways. For example, similar to a home, people divide the transportal home into zones or specialised areas where they spend time or distinguish between work or relaxation. Through all of the activities they pursue while awake – including socialising, learning, and being entertained – the smartphone is the portal in which people gather together or find solitary escape. As well as dividing the transportal home into zones for being entertained or doing business, people may also divide it into public and private areas. The analogy of transport is vital here. Unlike a physical home, the smartphone is mobile, so an individual always carries their transportal home with them (Miller et al. 2021, 92).

As we discussed in *The Global Smartphone* (Miller et al. 2021, 219-227), the person sitting next to you but ignoring you is, for all intents and purposes, absent. They have returned to their transportal home where they are busy socialising with others, organizing their lives, or being entertained. From this position, informants can make the most of the mobility it offers while socialising with friends and family. Because of this blend of qualities, our research suggests that friend and family relationships are changing. We find a kind of 'sweet spot' where people can come together or keep others at a distance through their conversations and meet-ups on the phone, and through the precise scheduling that it allows. People engage in alternative forms of sociality while family dynamics change. In Ireland, for example, we found that, in the past, our participants said they would see their extended family at weddings or funerals once or twice a year. But now, the use of WhatsApp allows the inclusion of wider family relations through daily conversations and interactions. These could be incorporated into daily life but are sufficiently distant to ensure that maintaining kinship ties would not be overly burdensome.

In this case, the domestic analogy is not coincidental. In addition to the above, what makes the smartphone a transportal home is the process of domestication. People make it their own, a place they can dwell for significant periods of time by appropriating it and filling it with their own lives, tastes, priorities, and people. People can meet others, but if they meet on apps, these encounters are tailored to their specific relationships – e.g., family chats that revolve around shared interests or care responsibilities.

Moreover, domestic possessions are part of an ecology. In much the same way that we decorate our physical home, we decorate our phones with favourite images or photos of loved ones. For many of our informants, images of grandchildren beam up at them the moment they engage the phone by picking it up. In a real sense,

these smartphones are *populated* with music, photos, through the specification of particular groups that people want to be part of – and some they do not. The process of personalisation can take time but, through these measures, smartphones become a place where people spend time with others, and they craft their phones into extensions of themselves. In addition to all the ways just outlined, this also happens in the practices of use by which our experiences are inscribed on our belongings. In a domestic context, people are experienced as real and present in homes not only through their decorative practices but through the traces of their presence found in, for example, scuff marks and smudges that animate walls and floors. In anthropologist Diana Young's study of UK estate agents (2004), she charts how they valorise neutral colours and plain surfaces in order to eradicate the animating presence of lives lived. Patina develops on objects through use. Colour and surface texture carry animating presences, ascribing personality in compelling ways. So too can our research participants immediately identify their unique smartphone through the covers they have chosen, the photos on their home page, and the smudges, cracks, and scratches it has acquired through use. With this in mind, let us revisit our field sites.

Ireland and China – Revisited

The contrast between the Irish and Chinese field sites can be regarded as two representative cases of 'homemaking' in the age of the smartphone. Despite being vastly different places, there is a striking feature shared by older people in both field sites: the constant negotiation and redefinition of one's domestic space on a daily basis, particularly at a time when individuals are reassessing their needs and futures. In such a process, the smartphone works as an effective way of adjusting the dynamic relationship between people and their dwelling place. In each site, the smartphone is central, particularly when it is viewed as a transportal home.

As a place, the smartphone allows people to streamline their actual home and shrink or expand their friend and family groups, working in parallel with their other home constructed of bricks and mortar. The smartphone therefore mediates, shapes, or disrupts relationships between self and others; its elasticity stretches or challenges definitions of domesticity, public or private, and seamlessly traverses boundaries between online and off. However, as we have seen in the Chinese and Irish examples, the route this takes intersects with local ideas and experiences in highly specific ways – which means that transportal home differs in each field site.

In Shanghai, the transportal home can be considered as a mobile digital 'door.' This analogy highlights the role of smartphones as a gateway providing access to various life spaces and scenarios. Moving from *lilong* to the tower block means a shift of physical neighbourhood because, in most cases, the tower blocks are located in the suburbs. It is not unusual for people to have to travel hours to meet friends and family. A reduced daily-activity radius is another common feature of daily life after retirement when people no longer commute between their home and their workplace. In practice, activities facilitated by the smartphone have transcended the dimension of physical distance; they also eliminate hours of exhausting commuting, and connect people with others and goods that are thousands of miles away. Moreover, the smartphone facilitates activities done 'offline' – for example, most people's outings were arranged through various WeChat groups.

The 52 research participants (F: 30; M: 22) between age 45 to 75 participated in in-depth interviews about their smartphone use in 2019 and counted their WeChat groups. The average number of WeChat groups individuals joined was 11 with the total amount of WeChat groups ranging from 4 to 69. In general, both women and men told Wang they would welcome joining more WeChat groups to gain more diverse information and be connected with more people. It is common that in a big WeChat group with members of more than 50 people, the majority of the group members do not know each other. For example, one retired schoolteacher, Mr. Jiang, in his 60s, claimed that he knew most people he interacted with on WeChat; however, when he showed Xinyuan his WeChat groups, it turned out that Jiang had been active in six WeChat groups with about 450 different online contacts (each group has about 60 to 200 group members). He could recognize fewer than 10% of them.

In the context of ageing, activities facilitated by the use of the smartphone not only compensate for the lost or reduced experience of neighbourhood and/or workplace community, but also create a new space where people feel at home. For example, research participant Weijun, in his 70s, regards 'going out' every day as essential to his daily life. As observed in fieldwork, there is a prevailing belief that confining oneself to home throughout the day can lead to health issues among older people, affecting both their physical well-being and mental state. Research participants consistently emphasized the importance of 'getting out,' highlighting its positive impact on both health and mood. In Chinese, 'getting out' (*chu men*) literally means 'getting out of the door.' The idea of inside – the space behind the door – implies a whole set of principles of social connection among those who are inside, whereas 'outside of the door' is associated with a series of public-facing codes of conduct. Research suggests that Chinese society is fascinated with the symbolic meaning of *men* (meaning 'door') in everyday rituals of separation and reunion (Stafford 2000). In an everyday discourse, *chu men* ('to get out') also suggests a connection with the wider world, and a regular *chu men* may have a positive impact upon older people's mental well-being.

Case Study: Weijun

Weijun's wife (age 62) moved to their son's place to take care of their grandchild last year, leaving Weijun (age 66) alone at home. Every afternoon, Weijun would stroll to the entrance of the living compound and sit on the small folding stool he brings with him. According to Weijun, that one hour sitting at the entrance is his most comfortable way of 'going out' as he always feels 'out of place' in other places in the city. Weijun explains, "I am an old man and all alone, just sitting there, looking around and doing nothing...people would think I am weird." Weijun does not make any friends among his new tower-block neighbours. Most of the time, Weijun sits outside, busy reading on his smartphone.

With a concern about the potential extra costs related to the use of mobile data, Weijun only uses his smartphone at home with access to Wi-Fi. This is the great advantage of his location at the entrance to his building. Showing Wang the Wi-Fi signal on his smartphone, Weijun 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. Located at the border of his home Wi-Fi signal, the entrance to Weijun's living compound works as the 'mediating space' where Weijun feels simultaneously both 'at home' and 'outside.' As long as Weijun holds his smartphone, he is behind the door (*men*) and enjoys the feeling of 'at home.' Even though situated in a public setting – the entrance to the living compound – Weijun maintains a composed demeanor, in contrast to the earlier mention of 'feeling out of place' in other public settings. His smartphone, connected to the home Wi-Fi, plays a pivotal role in enabling this comfort.

In the move from *lilong* to tower blocks, there is more domestic space and an increased experience of privacy, but the sense of an intimate 'neighbourhood' is significantly declined, or becomes even totally lost when people know nothing about their neighbours. In addition, most tower blocks are located in suburban areas that are far away from the 'life radius' that older people were familiar with before retirement. For some, that situation means a significantly reduced social circle. In this context, the use of the smartphone among older people in Shanghai plays a unique role in reconstructing domestic space and people's social life.

In the Chinese field site, the indications of 'home' can be further represented by the symbolized concept of 'inside/outside of the door' given the profound cultural implications of 'door' (*men*). Thus, a smartphone as the transportal home can be further understood as a mobile digital door. In the previous case of the couple Zhang and Fengxian, their increased experience of privacy was described as 'solo door and single household,' which suggests that behind the private door people gain their personal domestic space and enjoy a feeling of being at home. Weijun's case of 'home is where the home Wi-Fi covers' highlights people's experience of the 'digital door' set up by the smartphone. 'To get out of the door' in Weijun's daily practice is defined both by the physical door of his flat and the digital door. Getting out of the former door seems to provide Weijun with the moral

comfort that at least he is making an effort to connect with society after retirement, whereas remaining behind the digital door reinforces a feeling of at home for Weijun.

Meanwhile, the importance of Wi-Fi connection also suggests that, in some cases, physical proximity still matters, especially for older people who may be sensitive to the cost of mobile internet data. In that sense, the transportal home works together with the physical home to provide an experience of home. We also see in many cases that, facilitated by the mobile digital door, older people seem to gain digital proximity and enjoy thriving online communities that they would not imagine before the use of the smartphone.

In Ireland too, the smartphone is integral to how people negotiate place, sociality, and visions of the future. For our older research participants, smartphones are not only a tool that facilitates these moves but is the scaffold around which they can create a new life in retirement. As they adopt and use these technologies, they have access to new networks and groups, which allows them to feel in-step with those around them. Instead of feeling out-of-date, they are up-to-date, moving forward, modern, and part of the Green vanguard. Decluttering does not merely refer to stuff but can refer to a reappraisal of established practices and routines. Several participants had parallel ambitions with regard to their social connections, some of which they wanted to shed. They had realised that there were some long-term friends and extended family with whom they had felt obliged to meet at intervals and make small talk, but they had nothing in common. At this point in their lives, our informants felt free to divest themselves of such social 'clutter' and concentrate only on the relationships they cared about. One woman removed herself from a family app because she said she "just did not have time for all the thumbs-up and chit chat," which irritated her. On the other hand, people also 'rightsized' their social circle by participating in extended-family discussion groups on WhatsApp. This enabled them to integrate their extended family into their everyday lives and reverse a widespread trend by which the extended family is becoming increasingly distanced from each other.⁹

This enlargement or shrinkage of one's social architecture mirrors a similar process we found in the adoption of the smartphone itself. A process such as the divestment of possessions, which might seem inevitably orientated to the reduction and selection of stuff in order to manage continuities, is actually being used to challenge and repudiate some of these continuities and disrupt a linear trajectory in the face of a new future. The smartphone is integral to this decluttering because it expands or shrinks the borders of the home and allows people to make alternative places where they can congregate. In the Chinese context, however, the smartphone as the transportal home manifests itself in the significantly increased digital capability that empowers older people to have more control of their domestic space so that they can 'feel at home,' regardless of where they are. As shown in our ethnography, the boundary between domestic space and social/public space can become blurred or can be negotiated and transcended when necessary, and different people have developed their own ways of exploring such digital capability.

Conclusion

It may seem a contradiction to consider a device such as the smartphone to be a place, but as we have discussed in this paper, we have moved beyond spatial logics to understand places. The contrast between Shanghai and Dublin reminds us that the various nuances of the transportal home are not homogenous across all ASSA field sites, because people understand both the home and the smartphone differently. Despite the sharp contrast between Dublin and Shanghai in specific home arrangements and experiences – as well as the diverse interpretations of 'home' or 'feeling at home' – we have found that if we focus on the relationship between homemaking and the use of the digital in both field sites, the comparison between these two can be meaningful.

In the examples above, we have argued that the smartphone represents a place where we live that sits side by side with the physical home. In Shanghai, the smartphone as a 'mobile digital door' creates a mediating space between inside and outside that stretches domestic borders. In Dublin, the adoption of the smartphone allows

older adults to craft self-narratives that are in step with future-looking ecological drives and values. As a place, the smartphone enables older people to streamline their physical home and to shrink or expand friend and family groups, working in parallel with their home constructed from bricks and mortar. In this paper, we also examined the concept of the transportal home in specific contexts of both field sites. An acknowledgement of the contextual specifics that have resulted from our long-term ethnography allows us to articulate the appropriation of the transportal home among local residents and in the context of ageing.

Pulling the strands of material and digital culture together, our ethnographic studies in China and Ireland illustrate how digital practices enable our participants to domesticate their smartphones and, in turn, themselves. Stage of life is a pivotal feature in this process. Research participants in both field sites are adjusting domestic life in tandem with a reassessment of their needs and their futures. The results take different forms, but in the same way that ideas of home are thrown into question, the intersection of the transportal home and the actual home works to reconfigure the dynamic relationship between ageing and place. The smartphone feeds into this fluidity through its ability to help people reconfigure their relationships, their meetings, their family responsibilities, and their routines in a way that is unshackled from a physical place. More than this, the use of Wi-Fi and connectivity create alternative ways through which people can create, expand or blur 'home.'

Notes

1. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/29/c_137074836.htm. Accessed November 1, 2021.
2. Ibid.
3. https://www.sohu.com/a/436071084_260616. Accessed November 1, 2021.
4. <http://sh.sina.cn/news/2020-12-04/detail-iiznctke4774268.d.html>. Accessed November 1, 2021.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:A_Lane_in_Zhenxingli.jpg
6. For example, on February 27, 2019, the Joint Policy Statement "Housing Options for our Ageing Population" was launched by Mr. Damien English T.D., Minister for Housing and Urban Renewal, with Mr. Jim Daly T.D., Minister for Mental Health and Older People. The Joint Policy Statement was developed by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) and the Department of Health (DoH) with support from key stakeholders, including the Health Service Executive, the Housing Agency, and Age Friendly Ireland. The Health Service Executive is the publicly funded healthcare system in Ireland. The policy statement was also informed by stakeholder engagement events held in November 2018 and February 2019.
7. See Garvey and Miller 2021 for more detail. See also the Central Statistics Office for population size and housing composition of Dublin city and council. Available online <https://www.cso.ie>.
8. 'The 'Granny-flat grant' was among the proposals for the Irish budget in 2018. Shane Ross, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport proposed it to encourage older people to transform upper floors of their houses and rent them to lodgers. See Collins 2018.
9. See Gray, Geraghty and Ralph (2016) for details of changes in Irish family life.

References

- Baym, Nancy. 2010. *Personal Connection in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Birdwell-Pheasant, Donna, and Denise Lawrence-Züniga, eds. 2020. *House Life: Space, Place and Family in Europe*. Routledge.
- Blunt, Alison, and Robyn Dowling. 2006. *Home*. London: Routledge.
- Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cieraad, Irene. ed. 2006. *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Collins, Liam 2018. "Iron out a few details and Ross's 'granny flat' grant is actually a pretty good idea." *The Irish Independent*, October 3, 2018. Accessed May 25, 2020. www.independent.ie/business/budget/iron-ou-a-few-details-andross-granny-flat-grant-is-actually-a-pretty-good-idea-37379363.html.

- Costa, Elisabetta, and Xinyuan Wang. 2019. "Being at Home on Social Media: Online Place-Making among the Kurds in Turkey and Rural Migrants in China." In *The Sage Handbook of Media and Migration*, edited by Kevin Smets, Koen Leurs, Myria Georgiou, Saskia Witteborn, and Radhika Gajjala. 515-525. London: Sage.
- Daniels, Inge. 2015. "Feeling at Home in Contemporary Japan: Space, Atmosphere and Intimacy." *Emotion, Space and Society* 15: 47-55.
- Das, Veena, Jonathan M. Ellen, and Lori Leonard. 2008. "On the Modalities of the Domestic." *Home Cultures* 5 (9): 349-372.
- Douglas, Mary. 1991. "The Idea of Home: A Kind of Space." *Social Research* 58 (1): 287-307.
- Empson, Rebecca. 2011. *Harnessing Fortune*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ewart, Ian. and Rachel Luck. 2013. "Living from Home: Older People Looking beyond the House." *Home Cultures* 10 (1): 25-42.
- Fang, Kai, Xinpeng Wang, Lin Chen, Zhehan Zhang, and Nobuaki Furuya. 2019. "Research on the Correlation between Pedestrian Density and Street Spatial Characteristics of Commercial Blocks in Downtown Area: A Case Study on Shanghai Tianzifang." *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*. 18 (3): 233-246.
- Garvey, Pauline. 2001. "Organized Disorder: Moving Furniture in Norwegian Homes." In *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, edited by Daniel Miller, 47-68. London: Berg.
- Garvey, Pauline. 2018. *Unpacking Ikea: Swedish Design for the Purchasing Masses*. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Garvey, Pauline, and Daniel Miller. 2021. *Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland: When Life Becomes Craft*. London: UCL Press.
- Government of Ireland. 2019. *Housing Options for Our Ageing Population – Policy Statement*. Last updated June 2, 2022. Accessed March 24, 2023. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/83781d-housing-options-for-our-ageing-population-policy-statement/#>.
- Guan, Qian. 1996. "Lilong Housing: A Traditional Settlement Form." Master's thesis, McGill University.
- Gray, Jane, Ruth Geraghty, and David Ralph. 2016. *Family Rhythms: The Changing Textures of Family Life in Ireland*. Manchester: University Press.
- Greschke, Heike Mónica. 2012. *Is there a Home in Cyberspace?: The Internet in Migrants' Everyday Life and the Emergence of Global Communities*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Grønseth Anne Sigfrid and Ragne Øvre Thorshaug. 2022. "Struggling for Home where Home is not Meant to Be: A Study of Asylum Seekers in Reception Centers in Norway." *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 92: 15-30
- Hutton, Brian 2020. "'Tidy Towns Cancellation: 'The town is the worse for It.'" *The Irish Times*, October 30, 2020. Accessed March 24, 2023. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/tidy-towns-cancellation-the-town-is-the-worse-for-it-1.4395487>.
- Inglis, Tom. 2007. *Global Ireland: Same Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Jackson, Michael. 2000. *At Home in the World*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kraemer, Jordan. 2017. "Locating Emerging Media." In *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, edited by Larissa Hjorth, Heather A. Horst, Anne Galloway, and Genevieve Bell, 179-190. New York: Routledge.
- Leahy, Pat, Fiach Kelly, Jennifer Bray. 2019. "Elections 2019: Greens the Big Winners while Sinn Féin Slumps." *The Irish Times*, May 26, 2019. Accessed March 24, 2023. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/elections-2019-greens-the-big-winners-while-sinn-fein-slumps-1.3905248>.
- Lü, Junhua, Lu Junhua, Peter G. Rowe, and Jie Zhang, eds. 2001. *Modern Urban Housing in China, 1840-2000*. Munich: Prestel Publications.
- Mallet, Shelley. 2004. "Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature." *The Sociological Review* 52: 62-89.
- Marcoux, Jean Sebastian. 2001. "The 'Casser Maison' Ritual: Constructing the Self by Emptying the Home." *Journal of Material Culture* 6 (2): 213-235.

- McGee, Harry. 2020. "Election 2020: Exit Poll Confirms Health, Housing, Homelessness of Most Concern to Voters." *The Irish Times*, September 2, 2020. Accessed August 22, 2023. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/election-2020-exit-poll-confirms-health-housing-homelessness-of-most-concern-to-voters-1.4167030>.
- Miller, Daniel, ed. 2001. *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*. London: Berg.
- Miller, Daniel, Laila Abed Rabho, Patrick Awondo, Maya de Vries, Marília Duque, Pauline Garvey, and Laura Haapio-Kirk. 2021. *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology*. London: UCL Press.
- Morley, David. 2000. *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Rainie, Lee. and Wellman, Barry. 2012. *The New Social Operating System of Networked Individualism*. MIT Press.
- Siapera, Eugenia. 2014. "Diasporas and New Media: Connections, Identities, Politics and Affect." *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 5 (1): 173–178.
- Spitulnik, Debra. 1996. "The Social Circulation of Media Discourses and the Mediation of Communities." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6 (2): 161–187.
- Stafford, Charles. 2000. *Separation and Reunion in Modern China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thin, Neil. 2016. "Home and Away: Place Appreciation and Purposeful Relocation in Later Life." *Anthropology in Action* 23 (3): 6–16.
- Trandafoiu, Ruxandra. 2013. *Diaspora Online: Identity Politics and Romanian Migrants*. Brooklyn, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Vom Bruck, Gabriele. 1997. "A House Turned Inside Out: Inhabiting Space in a Yemeni City." *Journal of Material Culture* 2 (2): 139-172.
- Wang, Xinyuan. 2016. *Social Media in Industrial China*. London: UCL Press.
- Wang, Xinyuan. 2021. "The Digital Dasein of Chinese Rural Migrants." *Sociologia & Antropologia* 10: 807-830.
- Wang, Xinyuan. 2023. *Ageing with Smartphones in Urban China: From the Cultural to the Digital Revolution in Shanghai*. London: UCL Press.
- Wu, Nelson. 1968. *Chinese and Indian Architecture: The City of Man, the Mountain of God, and the realm of the Immortals*. London: Studio Vista London.
- Witteborn, Saskia. 2014. "Forced Migrants, Emotive Practice and Digital Heterotopia." *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 5 (1): 73–85.
- Young, Diana 2004. "The Material Value of Colour: The Estate Agent's Tale." *Home Cultures* 1 (1): 5-22.
- Zhang, Wei, Quishi Feng, Joy Lacanienta, and Zhihong Zhen. 2017. "Leisure Participation and Subjective Well-being: Exploring Gender Differences among Elderly in Shanghai, China." *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 69: 45-54.