4. Friendship, Connection and Loss: Everyday Digital Kinning and Digital Homing among Chinese Transnational Grandparents in Perth, Australia

Catriona Stevens, Loretta Baldassar and Raelene Wilding

Abstract

This chapter explores how practices of digital kinning and digital homing enacted through smartphones shape the experiences of Chinese older adults in Perth, Australia. Transnational grandparent carers must balance the risks of diminished social networks with the benefits of providing intergenerational care. Some form strong friendships in Perth, but many yearn for a leisured life with their friends in China. Findings illustrate the central role of digital migration practices in transnational families and friendships, not only sustaining distant support networks, but also building new communities in host settings. However, for some, the co-presence afforded through WeChat may intensify feelings of loss and dislocation. Observing these digital practices reveals the emotional geographies that characterize the lives of aged migrants and transnational caregivers.

Keywords: social media; transnational friendship; retirement migration; care circulation; transnational caregiving.

4.1 Introduction

Each morning the “Perthtown Sisters Group” WeChat feed flares into activity from first light. Gifs of bunches of roses, smiling babies or rotating peonies

1 Perthtown here is a pseudonym. The “Perthtown” Sisters Group (Perthtown jiemei qun) live and meet in a Perth suburb. All participants are similarly anonymized in this chapter.
greet the “sisters”2 of this friend group (and the few male members) with a cheery, flashing Zaoshang hao! (Good morning). Festivals and public holidays, whether Chinese or Australian, occasion different messages, from Huan Du Guo Qing (Happy National Day) to “Be my valentine ♡♡♡.” On fine days, fans of plaza dancing3 message each other to confirm their early practice sessions in the local park. During the summer months, the most enthusiastic will be crowded around a tablet propped on a picnic table by 6:30 am, squeezing in time in their busy day to copy the popular routines streamed by dance troupes in China before the temperature rises. An early start means they can return home to their chores of the day, readying their grandchildren for school, waving their adult children off to work.

The women (and men) who make up this group are all members of the rapidly growing cohorts of transnational grandparents who spend time in Australia on both temporary and permanent visas caring for grandchildren to support their adult children’s return to work. The care work they provide is essential to the family’s economic wellbeing and allows these older adults to fulfil important grandparenting roles. Yet for many, being in Australia comes at a cost, since they must leave behind long-established friendships that inform their social identities and wellbeing, as well as forgo retirement plans that promise free time to pursue their interests. Regular plaza dancing, picnics in the park, and similar in-person gatherings highlight the high regard for social connection and physical activity shared by participants, but it also underlines a less obvious but equally important dimension: the important role of digital migration practices as a mechanism for building new friendships to facilitate settlement at point of destination as well as sustaining existing relationships with people back “home.”

This chapter illustrates how Chinese older adults who have followed their children in migrating to Australia incorporate digital practices into their everyday lives. Building on earlier studies, we draw attention to two digital practices that are evident in the data presented below: digital kinning and digital homing. We define these as everyday digital practices because they mimic, mirror and extend the kinds of daily exchanges and activities that are central to sustaining friendships, families and social worlds in offline contexts. Because these practices are quintessentially everyday, they enable the simultaneity and daily mutuality that occurs when people are physically

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2 Women of this generation usually address their friends as “older sister” or “younger sister” and rarely identify each other by given name.

3 “Plaza dancing” or “square dancing” (guangchangwu) is a popular pastime in China, so named for the public plazas where dancers meet to practice and perform.
proximate. These quotidian practices, enacted through smartphones, shape the migration and settlement experiences of transnational grandparents.

By digital kinning we mean “the processes of engagement with new technologies for the purpose of maintaining social support” (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020, p. 319). This includes the ways in which intimate and familial relationships that might otherwise remain dormant can become re-invested with the sense of “mutuality of being” (Sahlins, 2011) that characterizes close kin relations through practices of digital connection. It also includes the facilitation of new support network relationships, which are brought into being through digital kinning practices (Howell, 2007) highlighting the processes of becoming kin, not on the basis of biological ties, but on the basis of what is done, performed and exchanged. These new supports are especially important to ease the isolation often experienced by older migrants who might struggle to meet new people given limitations with language as well as limited ability to be mobile and get out and meet people. Furthermore, these digital kinning practices often require facilitation by others, emphasizing their social relational and intergenerational nature.

“Digital homing” entails the use of digital technologies and social media to maintain national, ethnocultural and community identities in order to actively produce a sense of home and belonging (Wilding et al., 2022; Baldassar et al., 2020). While both digital kinning and digital homing refer to the ways in which digital practices sustain and maintain social and cultural bonds, they help to emphasize different dimensions of those practices. Digital kinning helps to draw attention to the role of digital practices in sustaining familial and kin-like bonds of mutuality of being. Digital homing, on the other hand, emphasizes the ways in which digital practices connect a migrant to familiar spaces and practices of belonging that extend beyond the family, to include community, national and cultural norms and practices. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there are important overlaps between the two, as becomes clear in the case studies below. Digital homing, for example, can sometimes be focused on domestic home practices of the family, while digital kinning can exceed the family to incorporate communities of close friends and peer groups.

The case studies presented in this chapter illustrate how digital practices support familial and cultural identities and protect against the diminished social networks that migration in later life can entail. However, the transnational connectivity afforded by smartphones and the ubiquitous Chinese social media platform of WeChat do not uniformly guard against feelings of loss or isolation. Indeed, some examples suggest that the simultaneity
of connection now available to transnational grandparents can make the sense of distance from old friends seem more painful.

4.2 Chinese Transnational Grandparents in Perth

Perth, the state capital of Western Australia, is a city of nearly two million situated on the eastern shores of the Indian Ocean, as close geographically to Singapore as it is to Sydney. Perth has the important advantage of being on the same time-zone as China but is nonetheless a far less popular destination among migrants from China than the booming metropolitan centres of Sydney and Melbourne on the eastern coast of Australia. However, the number of Chinese people living in Perth has grown dramatically over recent decades. In the 25 years from 1991–2016, the China-born population increased nearly tenfold from 2,959 to 25,724 (Stevens, 2020, p. 56). Migrants from China living in Perth come from a range of class backgrounds and subnational regions of origin, the diversity of which increased following the targeted recruitment of skilled labourers and tradesmen to support the Western Australian resources boom that began in the mid-2000s (Stevens, 2022). Despite this diversity among working-age migrants, the older adults who participated in this study are all the parents of people who first came to Perth as international students, joining their adult migrant children to be closer to grandchildren and provide much-needed family care.

International students from China initially hailed from more affluent or outward-facing parts of the country like Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian or Guangdong (Gao & Liu, 1998), only later diversifying to include people from all over China. This pattern is reflected in the transnational grandparents who participated in this study. Older participants, the parents of earlier student migrants, are all from Beijing, Shanghai or Nanjing, while younger participants include those from other places of origin, such as Dongbei and Sichuan. They are all however from urban backgrounds with a reasonable degree of education and literacy, despite the interruptions to education that they may have faced in their youth, as the example of Mrs Zhang and Mr Xu described below shows. One exception is a single participant who is originally from a village in central China and has lower literacy than the rest of the sample, but her story is featured elsewhere (Baldassar et al., 2022) and does not appear in this chapter.

The case studies presented in this chapter are drawn from interviews that were conducted over a period of 16 months from April 2017 to August 2018 in Perth, Western Australia. Sixteen participants (eleven women and five men,
including four married couples), were interviewed in Mandarin; interview recordings were transcribed, translated and coded using NVivo. This work comprises part of a larger study that explores how older adults in Australia from nine country of birth groups use digital media to maintain relations of care and support (e.g., Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Wilding et al., 2020; Baldassar et al., 2020; Wilding & Baldassar, 2018).

Unlike other chapters in this volume that draw on newer methods to do digital migration studies (e.g., Stavinoha in Chapter 14 who proposes freedom of information requests as a methodological innovation), we instead primarily utilize the more traditional “analogue” methods of in-person interviews and participant observation to shed light on digital worlds. In choosing these “small data approaches” (Leurs & Witteborn, 2021, p. 16), we recognize that digital practices are but one part of our subjects' everyday lives and that the broader circumstances of their family migration and friendship networks affect how they engage with new technologies and attach meaning and emotional value to digital exchanges. This is particularly true for older migrants who are far from digital natives, only coming to learn new digital skills later in life, but nonetheless agentially and innovatively deploy social media to maintain relationships that have been built through other forms of communication and togetherness over the course of many decades.

However, much as the lines between online and offline worlds are blurred in the lives of our participants, similarly our research methods encompassed Chinese grandparents’ digital spaces of communication, connection and togetherness alongside real-life gatherings such as picnics in the park. Although participant recruitment occurred offline, through in-person conversations and telephone calls with personal contacts, one author (Catriona Stevens) regularly engaged in online community groups and spaces mediated through WeChat and smartphones. This online participant observation not only provided insights into the frequency and forms of online exchange used by grandparents living in Perth, but it also helped to normalize her presence in offline worlds. Similar strategies for building connection and community utilized by grandparenting migrants can also work to support researchers doing digital migration studies (Nguyen et al., 2021).

4.3 The Digital Lives of Transnational Grandparents

A growing literature addresses the roles of grandparents within transnational families, including those who care for children “left behind” (Da, 2003; Pantea, 2012; Peng & Wong, 2016), and those who travel to provide care in the
host country (e.g., Zhou, 2013a; Wyss & Nedelcu, 2019). These caregivers play an important role in supporting the workforce participation and economic security of their children, new migrants who in Australia typically arrived under student and skilled migrant visa pathways (Hamilton et al., 2021a; Nguyen et al., in press).

Yet in doing so, these older adults must navigate migration and social policy regimes that condition the options and choices available, particularly as they consider their own increasing needs for care as they age. Seen as a “dangerous” burden to host country welfare states (Braedley, 2019), transnational grandparents must navigate visa restrictions for older adults that affect grandparenting practices, in particular, continuity of care. As temporary visa holders, these ageing visitors must regularly travel between countries (Hamilton et al., 2021b; Merla et al., 2020; Nguyen et al. 2021), often taking turns with other extended family members. This enforced mobility shapes the future plans and ageing aspirations of these older adults in ways that are ameliorated through digital migration practices (Chiu & Ho, 2020; Baldassar et al., 2022).

The experiences of transnational grandparents shed new light on forms of “middling transnationalism in later life” (Ho & Chiu, 2022) as grandparents make choices from positions of relative privilege or disadvantage. On one hand, they compare the emotional and practical benefits of proximity to adult children in host settings versus lifelong social networks at home. On the other, they must weigh up differential access to pensions, medical and care services, and accommodation, material support that may be restricted in the destination setting (Hamilton et al., 2018; Ho & Chiu, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2021b). Transnational grandparents are thus constrained by mobility regimes that impact their access to visas and other necessary resources. At the same time, they are embedded within transnational flows of emotions, friendship, family and care. Their participation in these flows are shaped by their culturally-informed preferences and expectations of intergenerational relationships with grandchildren and adult children (Wilding et al., 2020), as well as personal and familial biographies of support, care and love (Baldassar et al., 2007; Finch & Mason, 1993).

As the experiences of these Chinese grandparents make clear, transnational family life adds new complexity to navigating the cultural logics of appropriate intergenerational care. While cohabiting with children who provide filial care throughout older age was once an unquestioned cultural expectation, these norms of families providing intergenerational care are changing, both within China (Fong, 2006; Du, 2013; Yan, 2016; Qi, 2015; 2018; 2021; Zhao & Huang, 2018) and for people whose adult children have gone
overseas (Zhou, 2013b; Tu, 2016; 2018; Zhang, 2014; Chiu & Ho, 2020). Accessing formal aged care services, including residential care, is increasingly accepted as a legitimate solution to the “grey tsunami” of the ageing baby-boomer cohort within China (Chen, 2016, p. 133; Chiu & Ho, 2020). Chinese older adults with children overseas may now plan to provide for their own care needs as they age (Tu, 2016; Baldassar et al., 2022). Yet, despite these changes, filial piety and the desire to provide intergenerational care still frame the emotional dynamics of many migrant families, resulting in feelings of guilt for those children unable to access family reunion visas for their “left behind” parents (Ran & Liu, 2021) or of shame for parents who must justify their “unfilial” children among their peers (Tu, 2016; 2018).

A key resource for navigating the challenges of transnational ageing is digital technologies, which are now integral to the caregiving practices of transnational families. Where communication technologies were once prohibitively expensive, widespread access to social media and video calling has transformed how transnational care practices are sustained across distance (Madianou, 2016; Baldassar, 2016; Nedelcu, 2017). Furthermore, while digital technologies were once considered the domain of young people, it is now clear that older adults are highly motivated to develop their digital literacy in order to participate in transnational family relationships (Nedelcu, 2017). As mediated emotional care across distance becomes increasingly accepted by both ageing parents and their adult children as an alternative or compensatory form of filial devotion (Tu, 2016), older adults in transnational families are often proactive in learning the skills necessary to connect with loved ones overseas.

Although the case studies presented in this chapter all feature transnational grandparents who are competent WeChat users, not all aged migrants have such high digital literacy. Earlier generations of Chinese grandparents in Australia (Baldassar et al., 2022), or less well-educated transnational caregivers (Nguyen et al., 2021), for example, must develop new digital skills or risk social isolation. To bridge these gaps, digital kinning processes may also be facilitated by third parties, whether through adult children acknowledging their parents’ needs and actively supporting the development of new knowledge and digital literacy (Baldassar et al., 2022), through participation in formal training in digital skills and online communication (Baldassar et al., 2022), or even through online ethnography as researchers may themselves prompt greater demonstration of digital competency because of their interest in older participants’ online worlds (Nguyen et al. 2021).

The use of communication technologies can generate feelings of comfortable everyday co-presence (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) and ambient copresence
(Madianou, 2016), providing the necessary close contact that characterizes a mutuality of being, making it possible to more fully participate in daily family life, including engaging in family conflict (Ivan & Nimrod, 2021), and even bearing witness to feelings of neglect, loneliness and anxiety (Baldassar, 2016). Prior to the advent of polymedia environments, transnational family members were often “protected” from conflicts and “bad news,” in particular serious illness, inadvertently resulting in a sense of dislocation and alienation from family life that challenged their ability to share a mutuality of being (Baldassar, 2017). In contrast, new “care technologies” (Ho & Chiu, 2020) have now become constitutive of transnational family life as they sustain emotional co-presence across distance (Baldassar et al., 2016), permitting ongoing digital participation in affective economies without the need for physical proximity (Wilding et al., 2020). This chapter highlights that for grandparenting migrants such transnational emotional exchanges are central to maintaining relationships not only with the biological family members they have left behind but also, sometimes more importantly, with the friends with whom they have shared the decades of their lives. Moreover, digital migration practices are emerging as an essential dimension of settlement and homing; transnational grandparents actively use social media as a tool to make new friends at point of destination as well as to sustain established homeland relationships.

4.4 Case Studies – Creating Connection and Belonging Through Everyday Digital Practices

Mrs Ma⁴ (58)⁵ is among the most active members in the Perthtown Sisters Group, sharing greetings and trending videos in the group feed several times a day. What is less evident when viewed through the lens of this single WeChat group is the ways that this content is actively circulated through multiple groups, many with overlapping members both in Perth and in China. Mrs Ma is in constant contact with her husband, siblings, friends and workmates back in her hometown with whom she chats and messages every day. She is, she says, a member of over 10 hometown WeChat groups, and she finds it difficult to keep on top of all the content posted because she is so busy with housework and caring for her two grandchildren:

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⁴ The case of “Mrs Ma” is also discussed in Baldassar et al. (2022). All names are pseudonyms.
⁵ Participant ages indicated are at the time of interview in 2017/2018.
I can read news on my phone, now you just need a phone to read news. Sometimes I do not have time, and I can only read news on my phone when I use the toilet!

These snatched moments are essential to Mrs Ma’s wellbeing as a transnational grandparent. She says she could not live without her phone, which is her constant connection with friends and family in China. Her husband has remained in their hometown as he is unable, she thinks, to adapt to the different life in Australia, and so she regularly returns to visit him, “changing shift” with her son-in-law’s parents every few months. Her everyday participation in WeChat groups, copying and posting content between the feeds, commenting on friends’ posts, and sharing news items, scandals and funny videos, sustains her presence and identity in social circles both in China and Australia. These digital practices simultaneously fulfil her need for both home making and for providing and receiving transnational family care (Wilding et al., 2022). She feels her relationships are unaffected by her repeated absences as she seamlessly picks her life back up in each context on return. She is not yet sure where she will live when she moves into older old age, and so her digital practices in the present enable her to plan for alternative ageing futures either in Australia near her daughter or in China with her husband and siblings (Baldassar et al. 2022).

Mrs Liang (72) is another active member of the Perhtown Sisters Group. Despite being over a decade older than Mrs Ma, she and her husband continue to return to China on a regular basis to visit friends and family and to take care of personal administration like their pensions. However, unlike Mrs Ma, they have determined that they will both grow old in Australia near their only child and grandson. This was not an easy decision; they had not originally contemplated life in a foreign country when their son went overseas for postgraduate study. Adapting to Perth and finding new social connection took several years:

Life is more convenient in China and more lively. Here, in the beginning it was rather boring, but now it’s better because I have lots of friends … He [her husband] had great difficulty getting used to life here, it’s only really improved in the last couple of years. Because I’ve made lots of friends more recently, so he has also made friends with my help.

Perth WeChat groups are central to Mrs Liang’s sense of place making. As well as the Perhtown Sisters Group, she has also joined a folk dancing group, an English learning group, and a vegetable-growers group comprising older
migrants from China spread throughout Perth with a common interest in gardening. While these groups are all active online, they are mirrored in real-world activities as members meet to rehearse their dances or to admire each other’s harvests, sharing seeds to propagate the following year. Through her English group, Mrs Liang has also established a circle of friends comprising others hailing exclusively from the northeast of China with whom she and her husband regularly lunch, enjoying foods specific to their home region.

In addition to her greatly expanded social circles in Perth, hometown relationships continue to be very important to Mrs Liang. She is in regular contact with siblings and old friends through WeChat groups and video calls. She feels her established hometown relationships have qualities that have not yet been matched in Perth:

> There is no major change [in the nature of our relationships]. I mean, between [old] friends you can talk more freely, with some friends you can always be sure of sincerity.

What is striking about these case studies is the important role of digital migration practices for social identity and wellbeing in BOTH host and home country. These older migrants have limited command of English and often face considerable caring and housekeeping responsibilities. This combination of factors can restrict their capacity to make new friends in host settings. Their everyday digital practices allow them to establish local networks through shared interests like dancing and gardening—what we call digital homing. At the same time, these digital practices ensure kin and friendship networks are built, sustained and expanded through online co-presence and emotional exchange—what we call digital kinning.

### 4.5 Case Studies – The Limits of Everyday Digital Connectivity

Although many transnational Chinese grandparents in Australia maintain active local friendship groups while simultaneously nurturing their homeland networks through digital kinning and digital homing, not all are so fortunate. In deciding to join their children and grandchildren in Perth and become aged migrants to a strange land, older adults risk diminished social networks and the sense of a lost opportunity to age well among their peers. Even among those with high levels of digital access and digital literacy and dynamic online lives, the physical distance from old friends is felt keenly,
and for some made more intense by the way they can continue to observe through the medium of WeChat the ongoing everyday experiences and real-life connection that they are missing out on as a result of their migrations.

Mrs Zhang (68) and Mr Xu (65) are two such aged migrants who have experienced this sense of disconnection from the close friends and colleagues with whom they shared the decades of their lives. Born in the early 1950s in a large city in central China, they came of age during the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution. The bonds forged during those formative years, when urban middle school students were initially at the forefront of revolutionary agitation and then later sent away from their families to live in rural areas, have stood the test of time. Mrs Zhang recalled the densely networked social lives they enjoyed in China:

In China we met up once a month with friends that have retired. ... Every month there would be an announcement and we'd go somewhere to meet up and talk and eat together. That's one group of friends. Then there are also our classmates from the "lao san jie" generation. It’s been several decades now, fifty years, and we are closer than ever! Hahaha, we’ve all got lots of free time now ... And then there are the “send down youth” friends. We were sent down to the countryside together, so we have strong feelings for each other.

Mrs Zhang retired in 2005 at the age of 55, eight years before her husband could do so at 60. She first came to Perth in 2008, making several lone visits to support her daughter and new grandchild. Once Mr Xu had also retired, they faced a choice. While deciding whether or not to move, Mrs Zhang initially felt reluctant to leave her rich social world behind. However, after talking it through with close friends, she concluded that her circle would shrink as she aged, no matter whether she remained in China or not. In the end, the pull of their only child and grandchildren in Australia proved too great.

WeChat has afforded an ongoing sense of connection that might under other circumstances have been lost. Mrs Zhang video chats regularly with

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6 *Lao san jie* is an expression to describe the Red Guard generation who were in high school during the first three years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1969), and whose education was interrupted when up to 18 million young people were directed to leave the cities and instead live and work in villages for the best part of a decade (Jiang & Ashley, 2013).

7 Under China’s mandatory retirement age policy, most urban residents end their working lives at 50 or 55 for women and 55 or 60 for men, depending on occupation. Within China, older adults typically assume more grandparent caregiving duties after retirement (Feng & Zhang, 2018).
her siblings, cousins and close friends, and takes pleasure in following the lives of old colleagues, classmates and village friends through WeChat groups. Yet this pleasure is also inflected with sadness and loss. Mrs Zhang is regretful that she can no longer meet up with these close circles of friends. She observes that she and Mr Xu see photos posted online of their friends together and feel pained that they have missed out because they are in Australia. At the time of interview Mrs Zhang and Mr Xu were planning a return visit to see their old friends and mark the fiftieth anniversary of their experiences as rusticated youth. Visits home are a feature of transnational lives perhaps best theorized as a dimension, or at least, in relation to digital migration practices (Baldassar, 2022).

Although they have some friends in Perth that they met through attending English classes, Mrs Zhang feels her social life in Australia lacks the richness and emotional depth of what she has left behind in China. Mrs Zhang’s digital migration practices sustain important homeland relationships, the friends with whom her “mutuality of being” has been established over many decades. But despite her high levels of digital literacy, she has not yet found a vibrant local community like the Perth-town Sisters Group, nor made friends through shared interest groups like those enjoyed by Mrs Liang. These experiences suggest that, while digital migration practices may be an effective resource older migrants can use to build new networks, this is not universally the case. Individual circumstances, including family care arrangements, personal dispositions and/or geographic location may affect digital settlement, and further research should explore what kinds of interventions at a community or policy level might be required.

4.6 Discussion and Conclusion

The chapter has presented cases of Chinese transnational grandparents in Australia engaging in practices of digital kinning and digital homing to both maintain relationships and cultural and social identities back “home” and also to build new social networks in Perth. The experiences of these aged migrants illustrate the centrality of everyday digital migration practices, even for older cohorts not normally seen as digitally agentive. Furthermore, the case studies presented foreground friendships, both near and far, as an important dimension of the emotional geographies of care for transnational caregivers, extending digital migration theories that have long acknowledged the importance of digital media within transnational families.
These examples illustrate that digital practices are as important to building co-ethnic communities in host settings as they are to sustaining transnational networks of family and friends. Both digital kinning and digital homing, including acts of sharing online content (alongside real-world exchanges) that create and sustain cultural and social identities at the point of destination, support the wellbeing of older adults who have moved away from their hometowns and familiar social worlds in later life. For the grandparenting migrants in this cohort, WeChat is therefore both an essential “care technology” (Ho & Chiu, 2020) that maintains distant relationships, and also a resource or tool that can be used to effect settlement processes, establishing new friendships and a sense of belonging in Perth.

The digital migration practices of the “sisters” of the Perthtown WeChat group allow them to build important new relationships and social identities in Perth. They share not only the pleasures of leisure activities like plaza dancing, but also the challenges of their new lives in Australia, exchanging information and mutual support to navigate daily issues like schooling, shopping, transport and healthcare. It is precisely the everyday nature and frequency of such regular online exchanges, including the daily joys and challenges, of concern and frustration, advice and care, which engender the “mutuality of being” central to digital kinning, while creating the extra-familial spaces of belonging that are central to digital homing. The circumstances of their migrations risk social isolation as they entail busy days spent as housekeepers and grandparent carers in sprawling, unfamiliar Perth suburbs. Digital co-presence with other transnational grandparents in Perth guards against the loneliness and poor settlement experiences that may otherwise occur and builds co-ethnic digital practices and connections that also translate into real-world activities.

Digital media are here shown to be a resource that older migrants may use to settle and are not necessarily an enjoyable space in and of itself. Rather, the role of digital media in the settlement of transnational migrants is best understood as a mechanism by which people seek to embed themselves in offline relationships, places, groups and activities. Engaging social media as a tool to maintain relationships can be time-consuming, creating challenges for those who are busy caring for grandchildren. As Mrs Ma indicates, sometimes it is even necessary to use her limited private time while sequestered in the bathroom to keep up with online content. Yet, active participation in digital media spaces shapes the everyday life experiences of grandparent carers far from home.

There are limits, however, to the benefits of digital connectivity. For some older migrants, the co-presence afforded through the medium of
WeChat may intensify feelings of loss and dislocation as they observe from afar the lives of homeland friends in which they can no longer fully participate. Grandparent carers like Mrs Zhang actively maintain their valued distant friendships, engaging “care technologies” that through practices of digital kinning sustain relationships across distance. This co-constitution of care with communication technologies (Ho & Chiu, 2020) safeguards membership in friendship groups built over many decades and provides the depth of emotional connection that characterizes a mutuality of being but also includes painful emotions of loss and of longing to be together, a key dimension of transnational relationships (Baldassar, 2008; Marchetti-Mercer, 2017; Sampaio, 2020). The case studies included in this chapter are all from a generation who are independently incorporating WeChat into their social lives, both in China and Australia, part of the widespread adoption of WeChat that has fundamentally transformed group communications, personal messaging and the distribution of news and information among Chinese migrants (Sun & Yu, 2022). Our participants are autonomous digital actors who actively create new techniques to build cultural and social identities and bolster relationships in both places of departure and destination. They are also all from more educated and urban backgrounds. Yet levels of digital access and digital literacy vary among older migrants, affecting their ability to enact digital practices that sustain their relationships and cultural identities. As we have discussed elsewhere (Baldassar et al., 2022), aged migrants with lower literacy, or limited digital access, may not enjoy the same kinds of settlement experiences and typically face diminished social networks both in Australia and at “home.” Transnational ageing comprises a diverse range of types of migration and ageing experiences (cf. Ciobanu et al. 2016; Horn & Schweppe 2016); digital migration studies similarly explores how this diversity is reflected in online practices or lack thereof among older migrants.

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About the Authors

Catriona Stevens is Forrest Prospect Fellow in the School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University. Her research interests include the intersections between social class and migration, transnational ageing, labour migration and aged care workforce issues.

Loretta Baldassar is Vice Chancellor's Professorial Research Fellow in the School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University. She is one of Australia's leading social scientists; in 2020, 2021 and 2022 she was named Australian Research Field Leader in Migration Studies and in 2021 she was named Leader in Ethnic and Cultural Studies.

Raelene Wilding is Associate Professor, Sociology, at La Trobe University. Her qualitative research explores the family practices, emotional worlds and digital lives of young people and older adults from both migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. Her current projects consider the impacts of digital inequalities on belonging, health and wellbeing.