



An old man inspects the books at a booth for old, rare and signature editions at the Shanghai Book Fair. — Jiang Xiaowei

Digital deal: Leaving a ‘backdoor’ for the elderly amid changing times

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Many foreign friends who recently returned to visit China, a few years from their last trip, were struck by how digital it has become, to a point that it could be inconvenient for someone not accustomed to this new tech-driven world.

Experiencing the changes day by day, I didn't quite personally catch the shocking difference until some acquainted Shanghai grandpas and grannies told me how difficult it was to get a ticket for the weeklong Shanghai Book Fair, which just wrapped up yesterday, as the ticketing was mostly online.

I finally located an offline ticketing venue at one of the Xinhua bookstores last Friday evening when I heard that the fair organizers were adding special service sites for the elderly at the Shanghai Exhibition Center, the main venue of the fair.

"I found the backdoor for us elderly. How nice!" one grandpa gushed in a voice message to me on Saturday morning.

"Maybe next year I will try getting the tickets online in advance, with your help, dear. But it's always nice to have a

backdoor for us seniors or the disadvantaged," he added.

The grandpa considers himself rather "tech-savvy" and eager to learn everything mobile-related, yet, in his own words, his fingers "simply don't like the touch screens."

"You click, and miracles. I click, and nothing happens."

Well, that made the "backdoor" all the more timely for him and others like him. Leaving such a "backdoor" for the elderly and disadvantaged, or adding one quickly after realizing the mistake, is among the reasons I like my hometown.

It's all a balancing act between going smart, digital and efficient versus caring for those left behind.

From the organizing perspective, it is certainly easier to manage crowds in the world's second-largest population when everything goes digital, but there is always a small group of people who are left behind from that rapid digital world, due to various reasons. Often times, they are the elderly.

According to the 51st Statistical Report on China's Internet Development, China still had around 340 million non-netizens by December 2022, about

one-third of them over the age of 60. That means around one out of two elderly over 60 do not go online.

That "digital gap" first caught wide attention in early 2020, when the pandemic quickly turned everything online. For senior residents, the most challenging part was the necessary hospital visits for chronic diseases that strictly required online reservations.

At the time, I interviewed a retired company president who used to manage 5,000 employees but found himself helpless in front of mobile apps. When he returned a month later, volunteers were added at the hospital to help people like him who are unfamiliar with the new system.

After another few months, he suddenly found new machines at his regular hospital intended to help the elderly get a taxi — in case they don't know how to use car-hailing apps. And his community center started offering free how-to lectures for the elderly.

The changes are incremental, sometimes easy to ignore compared with the shocking development of going digital, but they are there, always leaving a "backdoor" for my favorite Shanghai grandpas and grannies.



An "old pal's pavilion," where people can hail taxis, among other services, is among the new measures to bridge the digital gap for the elderly in Shanghai. — Wang Rongjiang