

## Life Course Review: A Person's Major Life Events and Media Usage History (1950-2024)

Zhijun Meng<sup>1,2</sup>, Shanyong Jiang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Design, Wenzhou Polytechnic, Zhejiang Wenzhou, People's Republic of China

Correspondence: Shanyong Jiang, Faculty of Design, Wenzhou Polytechnic, Zhejiang Wenzhou, 325035, People's Republic of China.

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### Abstract

In recent decades, tremendous changes have taken place in China. At the same time, media technology is constantly changing. It is of great value and significance to study the individual life experience of this period from the perspective of life course. By selecting a person of the same age in the Republic of China living in rural Hebei Province as a case study, and putting him in the 75-year long river of time for investigation, through observation and semi-structured interview, and narrative research on the interview materials, the complete and fresh life course and rich and specific life details of a person are presented. The 18 major events outline the picture of his life course, while the eight media use tracks reveal the development and evolution of media in contemporary China and the interaction between media and individual life.

**Keywords:** life course, media use, major event, track, turning point

### 1. Introduction: Research on Media and Life Course

Life Course Theory has become an important research paradigm, which focuses on the impact of social changes and social events on human growth and development, with special attention to the social significance of age throughout the life course. A person's life takes "age" as the unit of time, experiences various events in the course of time, and plays various social roles at different stages in a specific order (Zuoyu & Shan, 2018). Glen H. Elder, Jr., a famous contemporary American sociologist and the pioneer of life course theory, summarized four core themes in the paradigm of life course research: 1. lives and historical times; 2. the timing of lives; 3. linked lives; 4. human agency (Elder Jr, 1994).

Although the life course theory has the characteristics of interdisciplinary when it was formed, as an interdisciplinary research theory, it was applied to the field of journalism and communication relatively late. Only in recent years has it attracted the attention of Chinese and foreign scholars in this field, especially Chinese scholars have produced a number of excellent research results. According to scholar Zhang Yuping, "Many life choices are related to the course of life, such as consumption, savings, education, marriage, labor supply, and media use should be no exception as a life decision (Yuping, 2018). Research in this domain has primarily focused on two areas: First, from a life course perspective, scholars have explored how media technology shapes people's lives. Examples include the relationship between smartphone use, interpersonal relationships, and well-being across different generations in Hong Kong (Chan, 2018); the impact of media on the life experiences of Tibetan students during their education (Xin & Qunzong, 2018); the use of digital media technology by "Post-60s" laid-off workers to make a living (Wenjuan, 2020); the role of digital media in the transition of American adolescents to adulthood (Mollborn et al., 2021); the impact of the internet on the social relationships of elderly populations across generations in the United States (Ang, 2022); and the use of media to reconstruct a "home" for elderly residents in nursing homes (Yuqiong et al., 2024). Second, scholars have examined media usage from a life course perspective. Studies include the use of mobile technology for online shopping and entertainment among Finnish seniors (Kuoppamäki et al., 2017); mobile phone usage among female factory workers in the Pearl River Delta (Yuping, 2018); the social media usage of left-behind women in rural areas (Yibin & Li, 2021); mobile phone usage among Dulong women in Yunnan Province (Xinru & Hao, 2022); and the usage trajectories of smart media among elderly populations (Hongyan & Yan, 2023).

These studies have not only expanded the boundaries of life course theory but have also opened new perspectives for

media research, enriching the field of journalism and communication studies. It is evident that "analyzing the use of technology in conjunction with an individual's life course has become a dimension in the study of the relationship between media technology and individuals"(Xinru, 2022). Considering media as a significant factor in an individual's life development, and studying the interaction between individuals and media from a life course perspective, remains a noteworthy emerging field. Currently, the relationship between the life course of "Republic contemporaries" (those born around 1949 who have grown up alongside the People's Republic of China) and media has not received the attention it deserves, particularly in terms of research that adopts a comprehensive life course perspective for this generation. In fact, due to the unique and often complex experiences of the Republic contemporaries, studying their life course across an entire lifespan is crucially important.

Since modern times, China has undergone dramatic and turbulent historical changes, arguably unparalleled by any other nation(Dianxian & Yufeng, 2022). In 1949, the People's Republic of China was established, and at the end of 1978, the historic Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China was held, marking the beginning of the reform and opening-up era. Today, 45 years later, this policy has propelled China to remarkable achievements. By 2020, China had established a moderately prosperous society in all respects, historically eradicating absolute poverty, and advancing from subsistence living to moderate prosperity. In 1952, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately 67.91 billion RMB, ranking 7th in the world, with a per capita GDP of about 119 RMB. By 1978, the GDP had risen to about 367.9 billion RMB, ranking 11th globally, with a per capita GDP of approximately 381 RMB. By 2023, China's GDP exceeded 126 trillion RMB, ranking second in the world, with a per capita GDP of 89,400 RMB<sup>1</sup>. From 1952 to 2023, China's per capita GDP grew 751 times in 70 years. The contemporaries of the People's Republic have been direct witnesses to this dramatic social transformation. On one hand, they have observed major historical events such as the Great Leap Forward, the People's Commune Movement, the Three Years of Difficulty, the Cultural Revolution, and the reform and opening-up, experiencing a vast leap from extreme material scarcity to abundant material wealth. On the other hand, they have also experienced the rapid development of media technology, from the information-scarce era of print and radio, through the information explosion of the mobile internet, to the current era of artificial intelligence. It could be said that this generation has lived through several distinct eras in their lifetime, perhaps more than any other generation in history. The intense historical changes and social transformations in modern China align with the core perspectives of life course theory (Qiang et al., 1999). So the life course of this generation is particularly worthy of attention. Media has been a constant presence throughout a person's life, and it can be considered a technological form that is closely linked to the evolution of individual life courses (Xinru & Hao, 2022). The significance of media technology for individuals and social groups should be examined and analyzed within the context of specific social changes (Xinru & Hao, 2022). This study aims to explore the relationship between the life trajectories of this generation, the changes and turning points in their lives, and historical processes and social events. It focuses particularly on the role of media technology at different stages of their lives, uncovering the process and various states of media use throughout their entire life course, "to gain a profound understanding and insight into social structures, social events, and historical processes (Xinxiang, 2022)."

## 2. Research Methodology: Semi-Structured Interviews and Narrative Research

This study selected a male(referred to as M in this paper) born in 1950 and living in rural Hebei Province, China as the subject for observation and interviews. The basic details of M are provided in Table 1. Through close, longitudinal observation over 15 years and semi-structured interviews, this study employs a narrative research approach to explore M's life course and his interactions with societal historical processes and media. M was chosen as the research subject because he is of the same age as the People's Republic of China and is an ordinary person, making him a representative figure. He has personally experienced the tremendous changes in Chinese society, having "lived a life far better than anything I could have dreamed of in my youth" (as quoted from M). "It can be said that the life course of this generation reads like a gripping novel—grand and tumultuous, full of ups and downs (Hongyan & Yan, 2023)."

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<sup>1</sup> The data comes from the National Bureau of Statistics of China; there are no statistics available for 1950 and 1951, and all figures are measured in RMB.

Table 1. Basic Information of Research Subject M

Aspect	Details
<b>Educational Level</b>	Primary school
<b>Marital Relationship</b>	Harmonious relationship, living with spouse
<b>Siblings</b>	Six siblings
<b>Children</b>	Two sons: the elder son lives away, the younger son lives nearby
<b>Family Status</b>	Holds an authoritative position within the family
<b>Military Service</b>	Served in the military for 5 years
<b>Residence</b>	Has lived in rural Hebei throughout his life, except for 5 years of military service
<b>Personality Traits</b>	Tenacious, warm and outgoing, good at socializing
<b>Career</b>	Started various small-scale, family-run businesses in rural areas after the reform and opening-up, including a welding machine factory, rubber factory, sanitary ware factory, ice cream factory, scaffold factory, and lead screw factory.
<b>Current Occupational Status</b>	Entered retirement in 2015

The life course is inherently temporal, with time and age providing the analytical framework for research. Accordingly, in the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study, questions were posed in chronological order. M's individual life was viewed as a whole, with interviews structured around 10-year intervals, starting from childhood and continuing to the present. These interviews focused on significant events in M's life between 1950 and 2024 and his media usage at different life stages. The aim was to understand and present M's comprehensive life story and the details within it from his perspective. The interview process was divided into three phases:

1. Initiation Phase: This phase emphasized initiating the interviewee's narrative potential with opening questions. The interviewer primarily took on the role of a listener, avoiding interruptions and allowing the interviewee to narrate spontaneously.
2. Follow-up Phase: In this phase, follow-up questions were used to help the interviewee clarify deviations, interruptions, ambiguities, or areas that warranted further exploration within the narrative.
3. Corroboration Phase: The key events and details discussed in the interview were verified by consulting M's wife, sons, and other relevant individuals, as well as by seeking physical evidence for corroboration.

### 3. Personal Life Course: Major Events and Media Usage Trajectory

#### 3.1 Major Life Events: Reform and Opening-Up, Entrepreneurship, and Son's Marriage

Life course theory posits that an individual's life course consists of a sequence of life events that occur over time (Qiang et al., 1999). In other words, an individual's life course can be understood as being composed of a series of life events. During the interviews, M expressed deep satisfaction with his current life, stating:

*"The generation born in the 1950s is much happier than those born in the 1940s and 1930s. Although we endured hunger in childhood and life was sometimes tough, at least we didn't experience war. Born in New China and raised under the red flag, I am content and grateful for this era."*

To date, M believes he has experienced a total of 18 major life events, reflecting the social roles and life events he has encountered at different stages of his life. As shown in Figure 1, nearly half of these major events occurred during his youth and young adulthood, primarily between the ages of 26 and 30. These major events can be categorized into three types: macro events, career-related events, and personal life events.

##### 3.1.1 Reform and Opening-Up: A Turning Point in the Life Course

M identifies three key macro events in his life: the Three Years of Natural Disasters (1959-1961), the catastrophic Haihe River flood (1963), and the implementation of the household responsibility system (1981). The first two events occurred during M's childhood, where the hardships he endured instilled in him a frugal and diligent attitude. The implementation of the household responsibility system, part of the reform and opening-up, came during his youth and greatly stimulated the enthusiasm and drive of the people at that time. M vividly recalls this significant historical moment:

*"In August 1981, the winds of reform and opening-up reached us, announcing the household contract responsibility system. The collective economy was dismantled, and all collective assets were distributed, allowing some people to become wealthy first. Eight jointly funded welding machine factories were established."*

The concept of a "turning point" is central to life course theory. Specifically, a turning point refers to a significant event, moment, or transition in a person's life course that triggers profound changes or reorientation in their developmental trajectory (Junpeng, 2011). At such moments, a person's life trajectory takes a noticeable upward or downward shift,

altering subsequent opportunities and experiences (Bernardi et al., 2019). The reform and opening-up was a disruptive event in M's life course, marking the most crucial turning point in his life. This major event profoundly impacted him, altering his life path and setting the stage for his lifelong entrepreneurial journey. This process exemplifies the intersection of "individual agency" with significant societal events, illustrating the close connection between individual life courses and broader social developments. When the winds of reform reached M's village, he unhesitatingly threw himself into the economic construction movement, actively pursuing entrepreneurship in his village as a response to the changes of the times. Major societal events often change the fate of individuals or groups, and for many Chinese people, the reform and opening-up was undoubtedly such a significant social event, becoming a turning point in their life courses whose impact continues to this day.

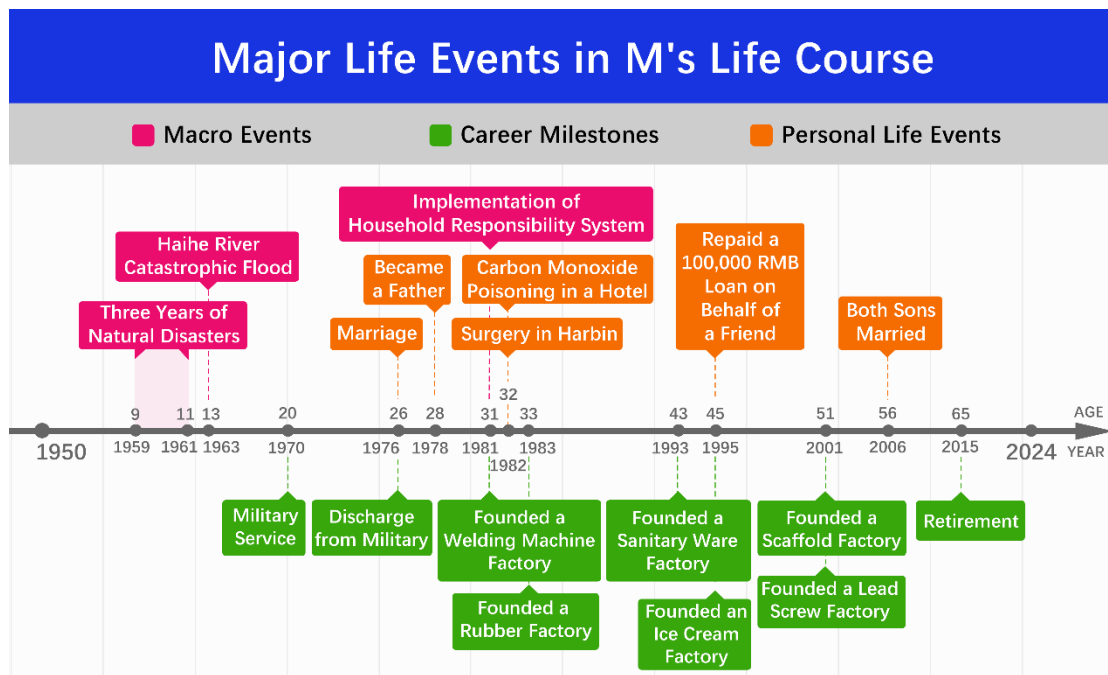


Figure 1. Major Life Events in M's Life Course (Macro Events, Career Milestones, Personal Life Events)

### 3.1.2 Failure and Restart: A 35-Year Entrepreneurial Journey

M's career spanned 45 years, beginning with his enlistment in the military in 1970 and concluding with his retirement in 2015. Throughout this long career, he experienced nine significant events, primarily involving military service and entrepreneurship. M began his entrepreneurial journey at the age of 31 in a rural area, eventually founding six small-scale factories over his lifetime, with the largest—his lead screw factory—employing only about 20 people. Entrepreneurship was the central thread running through M's life course; his career was both a history of entrepreneurship and a testament to his relentless efforts. The path of entrepreneurship is unpredictable, and M's journey was fraught with challenges and setbacks, especially around 1995, during a particularly difficult period in his life. He recalls this darkest chapter vividly:

*"Both of the businesses I started failed, and because I had guaranteed a bank loan for a friend whose business went under, I had to repay the loan myself, losing an additional 100,000 RMB. Nothing seemed to go right during those years—it was an incredibly tough time."*

It is important to note that similar events can have varying impacts on different individuals' life courses. Due to differences in external circumstances or personal agency, individuals may respond to the same event with different choices. These choices are influenced by the social environment as well as the individual's inherent characteristics. In his career, M fully exercised his "personal agency" within his life course. Despite repeated entrepreneurial failures, he never gave in to discouragement but instead restarted his ventures time and again. This resilience and perseverance reflect his tenacious character and enduring determination. The formation of this character is closely tied to M's early years in the military; the five years of service significantly shaped the foundational traits that defined him throughout his life. Even at the age of 51, he embarked on his final entrepreneurial ventures, establishing two more factories. While the scaffold factory failed, the lead screw factory performed reasonably well. At 65, M chose to retire voluntarily, passing the management of the factory on to his younger son.

### 3.1.3 Sons' Marriages: The Most Important Event in the Life Course

In his personal life, M considers himself to have experienced six major events: marriage, becoming a father, carbon monoxide poisoning, undergoing major surgery, guaranteeing a friend's loan and compensating 100,000 RMB, and his sons' marriages. The events of carbon monoxide poisoning and surgery were directly related to his health. However, the most troubling experience for him was guaranteeing a friend's loan. When the friend's business failed, M had to repay the 100,000 RMB loan on his behalf, but the friend has yet to repay him. Even after nearly 30 years, this incident still weighs heavily on M's mind. Life is not a solitary journey. "People always live within a network of social relationships composed of relatives and friends; it is through these relationships that individuals are integrated into broader social groups (Qiang et al., 1999), which is one of the core principles of life course theory: "linked lives." M, being someone with many friends and a strong sense of loyalty, could not refuse to guarantee his friend's loan. Yet, this decision became a source of lasting pain in his life. Subsequent requests for money further strained M's relationships with his friends.

Among all the significant events, the most important for M was his sons' marriages. He expressed:

*"2006 was the happiest year of my life, and the most unforgettable event. Both of my sons got married that year, fulfilling one of my life's most important missions."*

This reveals that M is a typical traditional Chinese father, deeply rooted in strong traditional family values. His WeChat profile picture has always been a photo of his grandchildren, and he has never changed it. He places great importance on continuing the family lineage, which is why he views his sons' marriages as the most significant event in his life course. After their marriages, he felt a sense of relief, a sentiment likely shared by many fathers living in rural areas.

Notably, none of these major events were directly related to media. The role and impact of media in M's individual life course appear to be minimal, reflecting a weak correlation. This is indicative of the life experiences of most ordinary people. "The unique aspect of media is that, while it shapes the way we view and understand the world, its influence often goes unnoticed (Postman, 2004, p. 13)". Indeed, the impact of media on an individual's life course usually manifests as a subtle and soft influence. Compared to major life events, this influence tends to be gradual and less perceptible, almost insignificant. If major events have a direct and overt impact on an individual's life course, then the influence of media is indirect and covert.

### 3.2 Media Usage Trajectory: A Lifetime of Using Eight Types of Media

Although media were not among the major events in M's personal life course, there is no doubt that the development of media technology has become intertwined with the fabric of social life and individual life courses. Individuals experience different media environments throughout their lives. Media not only document changes in lifestyles but also play a significant role in individual life courses. However, M has never recognized the importance of media or reflected on this issue; he has only been a passive user. He perceives the function of media as limited to entertainment, information, and social interaction, overlooking the crucial role media play in shaping people's beliefs, thinking patterns, and lifestyles. The world that media technology presents is one that the public has come to accept as normal.

To date, M has encountered nearly all types of media, except for personal computers. In chronological order, he has interacted with eight types of media: film, radio, tape recorder, television, landline telephone, mobile phone, newspaper, and smartphone, as detailed in Figure 2 and Table 2. From these, it is evident that the reform and opening-up was not only a turning point in M's life course but also a significant shift in his media usage. Since then, the variety of media he has been exposed to has gradually expanded.

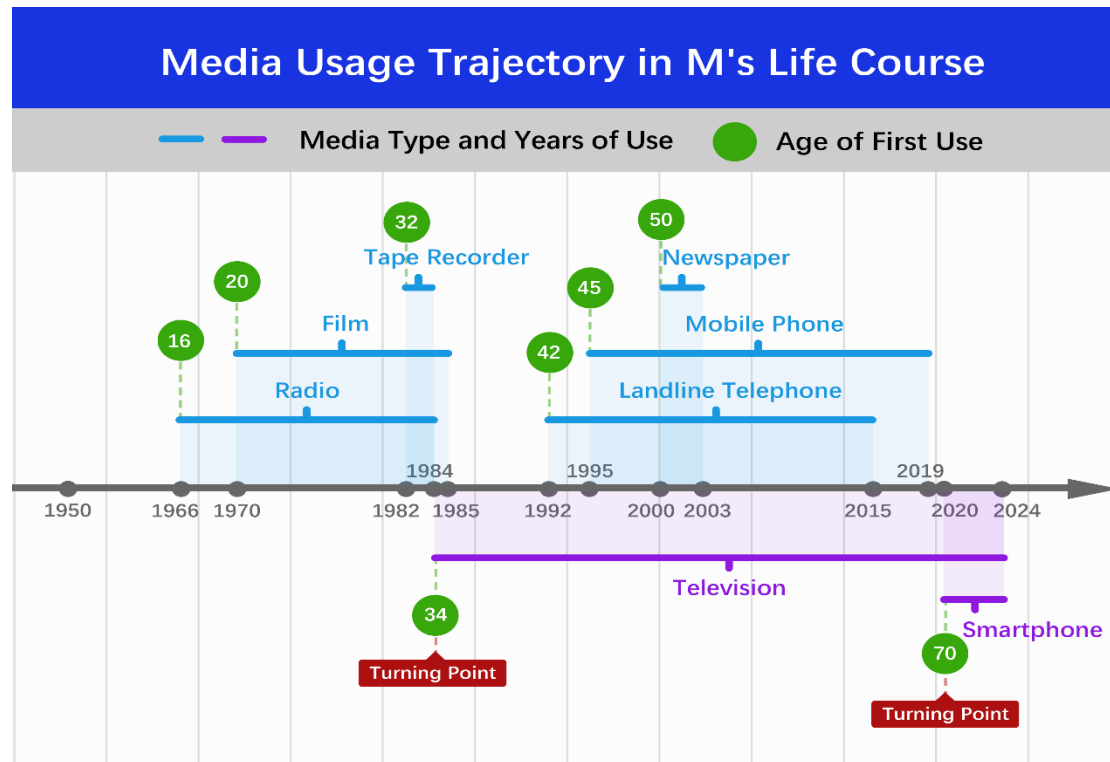


Figure 2. Media Usage Trajectory in M's Life Course (Media Types and Age of First Use)

Table 2. Overview of Media Usage in M's Life Course

Media Type	Usage Overview
<b>Radio</b> (1966-1984)	In 1966, the village established a broadcast room with scheduled broadcasts, mainly featuring Chairman Mao's quotations. After returning from military service in 1976, M's household owned a radio. In 1978, M received a radio as a gift from his father-in-law, which was primarily used for listening to news and radio dramas. M listened occasionally, while his wife was the primary user. Before purchasing a television, radio was the main source of information and entertainment.
<b>Film</b> (1970-1985)	During his time in the military (1970-1976), M watched films frequently, approximately once every three weeks. Initially, he watched model operas, followed by films like Heroic Sons and Daughters, The Red Detachment of Women, and The Shining Red Star. After being discharged, M continued watching free outdoor films in his village or nearby villages (as part of the rural film program). He watched films like Little Flower and The Garland Under the Mountain. In the summer of 1982, M watched Shaolin Temple at the county auditorium for the first time, with a ticket price of 0.2 RMB. After purchasing a television, he almost stopped going to the movies. Nowadays, the village occasionally screens free films, but despite the dwindling audience, the staff continue to screen them until completion.
<b>Tape Recorder</b> (1982-1984)	After the reform and opening-up, M had extra money and purchased a tape recorder, mainly used for listening to songs and novels. M used it occasionally, while his wife was the primary user.
<b>Television</b> (1984-Present)	Since purchasing a color television in 1984, M has maintained the habit of watching TV regularly.
<b>Landline Telephone</b> (1992-2015)	In 1992, M spent over 5,000 RMB to install a landline in his factory. Later, additional lines were installed in both the factory and home. Due to business needs, the landline was used until 2015, after which it was discontinued with the widespread adoption of smartphones.
<b>Mobile Phone</b> (1995-2019)	In 1995, M bought a second-hand mobile phone for over 2,000 RMB but stopped using it after about a year. Around 2002, he resumed mobile phone use due to business needs.
<b>Newspaper</b> (2000-2023)	Around 2000, M subscribed to a newspaper for three years, influenced by a friend's recommendation. Before and after this period, he rarely read newspapers.
<b>Personal Computer</b>	M never personally used a computer. In 2006, when his younger son got married, M bought him a desktop computer.
<b>Smartphone</b> (2020-Present)	Since starting to use a smartphone in 2020, M has become heavily reliant on it, integrating it into his daily life.

During this time, M would often use different media interchangeably. However, he never used a personal computer, thus missing out on the PC-dominated internet era, and instead, transitioned directly from television to smartphones, entering the mobile internet era. The first medium M encountered was radio, during his teenage years, coinciding with the

Cultural Revolution when the village broadcast room primarily played Chairman Mao's quotations. After his military discharge, his family owned a radio, and in 1978, he received a radio from his father-in-law as a gift for his own small family. In the 1970s and 1980s, radios and tape recorders were the main vehicles for cultural and spiritual life.

*"Back then, 'three rounds and one sound' <sup>2</sup>was a popular phrase. A radio was considered an essential item and an important asset in a household. Shortly after the reform and opening-up, I bought a tape recorder, but I was too busy with work to have time to listen to it."*

M primarily watched films during his military service, with an average frequency of about once every three weeks. After his discharge, he watched movies less frequently, but he vividly remembers watching *Shaolin Temple* at the county auditorium.

*"In the summer of 1982, I watched Shaolin Temple for the first time at the county auditorium, with a ticket price of 20 cents RMB. After getting a television, I hardly ever watched movies again."*

Radio accompanied M for 18 years, while films were part of his life for 15 years. These two media dominated his adolescence until television gradually replaced them.

M's media usage trajectory shows that he has always maintained an open and receptive attitude toward emerging media technologies. Especially when economic conditions allowed, M was generally an early adopter of new media. For example, in 1984, he purchased a color television, becoming one of the first in China to own one.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1980s, during the initial phase of reform and opening-up, televisions were indeed rare items. Back then, even a black-and-white television would attract crowds of neighbors, friends, and street folks to watch, creating a unique social scene in China.<sup>3</sup> In 1992, M spent 5,000 RMB to install a landline telephone, a significant expense at the time. In 1995, he bought his first mobile phone, a second-hand Nokia. The phone numbers associated with landlines and mobile phones became a person's identifier, a coordinate used for recognition and confirmation in long-distance interpersonal communication. Even when purchasing second-hand items, M was eager to try new media technologies. He still remembers many details about this phone.

*"I bought the phone from a friend, but the usage fees were too high, and the signal was terrible. I had to go to the rooftop to make calls, which was quite embarrassing. I stopped using it after a while."*

Before the reform and opening-up, newspapers were a scarce information resource in rural areas. This situation persisted for a long time afterward, influenced by factors such as income levels, education, and the development of the newspaper industry itself. "Before 1995, most newspapers were subscribed to administratively, with Party newspapers and industry newspapers primarily being paid for by government funds (Jianxing & Xujun, 2018, p. 192)." It is no surprise that M did not regularly access newspapers until he was 50 years old. The principle of "linked lives," central to life course theory, is evident in his experience of subscribing to a newspaper. M initially had no desire to subscribe, but due to a friend's recommendation and the difficulty of refusing, he subscribed for three years. People live within a network of social relationships, where they are interconnected and mutually influential.

### 3.3 Turning Points in Media Usage Trajectory: Television and Smartphones

#### 3.3.1 Television: The Longest-Lasting Medium

Television and smartphones are the two media that have had the most significant impact on M, marking two critical turning points in his media usage trajectory. To this day, he continues to use both. As one of the greatest inventions of the 20th century, television profoundly influenced the daily lives of billions of people. Once television became the most widespread medium, the cultural phenomenon of people sitting motionless in front of the flickering screen became commonplace (Standage, 2019, p. 167). For M, television is the medium that has accompanied him the longest throughout his life. Since purchasing his first color television in 1984, M has maintained the habit of watching television for 40 years. Even in today's smartphone era, M frequently turns on the TV, sometimes not to watch specific programs but simply to have it on as background noise.

Television represents a turning point in M's media usage because, before owning a television, he was in a state of information scarcity. This was especially true before the reform and opening-up when his access to media like radios and tape recorders was very limited. He recalls:

<sup>2</sup> Three rounds and one sound' was a popular phrase in China during the 1960s-1970s. The 'three rounds' referred to a bicycle, a sewing machine, and a wristwatch, while the 'one sound' referred to a radio.

<sup>3</sup> This was a sentiment expressed by Duan Peng, then Vice President of Communication University of China, in an interview with China Economic Times. See: Wang Songcai, 40 Years of Reform and Opening-Up: The Rapidly Developing Media Industry, China Economic Times, 2018-11-15 (002).

*"Back then, I didn't have the energy to read newspapers or listen to the radio. As the leader of the village production team under the People's Commune system, my only focus was on improving production."*

At that time, not only was there a shortage of material goods, but information was also scarce. However, after purchasing a color television in 1984, M transitioned from information scarcity to information saturation. Television became his primary source of entertainment and news, and he stopped using the radio and tape recorder. He says:

*"I would turn on the TV almost every day, frequently switching channels, watching all kinds of programs, especially TV dramas, particularly those with war themes. As I got older, I often fell asleep while watching TV, to the point where I couldn't sleep without it."*

From then on, television began to play a pivotal role in M's life, becoming a fundamental part of his daily routine.

### 3.3.2 Smartphone: Becoming a "Head-Down Tribe" at Age 70

The second turning point in M's media usage was the adoption of the smartphone. "A smartphone is a mobile device that supports internet connectivity, integrating many features and functions of personal computers and other consumer electronics. The rapid adoption and use of smartphones have fundamentally changed the way people communicate and maintain relationships" (Chan, 2018). Although both television and smartphones are screen-based devices, they belong to entirely different worlds. While television is a medium for one-way communication, the smartphone is a comprehensive media system that enables production, distribution, sharing, and transaction. Unlike traditional mobile phones, smartphones not only offer instant communication but also provide access to internet resources anytime, anywhere. This is a profound and ongoing "intimate" revolution that has fundamentally altered the relationship between users, information, media, and their surrounding society (Xing, 2016).

At the age of 70, M started using a smartphone, becoming a mobile internet user and easily bridging the "digital divide" that often separates the elderly from technology. Initially, his motivation for using a smartphone was driven by practical needs related to payments. He recalls:

*"In the spring of 2020, I wasn't in good health and had to frequently visit private clinics, health centers, and hospitals. Cash payments became inconvenient, so I needed a smartphone for payments. That's how I learned to use WeChat Pay, and now I don't use cash for purchases anymore."*

Although M's initial adoption of the smartphone was somewhat "forced," he did not reject this new technology; instead, he turned this "passive" adoption into an "active" engagement. This indicates that even in his seventies, M retained a strong ability to embrace new things. It is worth noting that as of December 2023, 99.9% of internet users in China accessed the internet via mobile phones, while the number of non-internet users remained at 317 million. Among these, 51.8% were from rural areas, and the elderly aged 60 and above constituted the largest group of non-internet users, accounting for 39.8% of the total (CNNIC, 2023, p. 29). Since acquiring a smartphone, M has become deeply immersed in the virtual world, joining the ranks of the "head-down tribe."

*"I live with my phone every day, as if I can't live without it. The first thing I do when I wake up is to reach for my phone. Only when I have my phone in hand do I feel relaxed and content. I really can't live without it."*

This statement highlights the deep penetration of the smartphone into M's daily life, where it has become an essential tool for alleviating anxiety and enhancing his sense of well-being. When his phone malfunctions or is not within reach, his daily life quickly falls into a state of crisis or disconnection, causing him to feel distressed and isolated (Xing, 2024). The smartphone has become an extension of the body, and its influence on people is unprecedented in the history of media development. Once people start using smartphones, they seem unable to part from them, to the point where they are inseparable from their devices, making it difficult to continue with daily life without them. Some even deliberately avoid using their phones for short periods to challenge their dependence on them, earning the nickname "phone ninjas."

While using the smartphone, M often encounters difficulties with its complex features, many of which he doesn't know how to use. His primary activities include watching short videos, using WeChat, online shopping, and making daily payments. However, he does not shy away from learning new skills:

*"I'm not very familiar with many of the phone's functions and often forget how to use them after learning, so I have to keep relearning!"*

Often, his granddaughter helps him better navigate his smartphone. In M's social media circles, there is no original content—everything he shares consists of forwarded short videos, and occasionally, he even shares sensational and unverified information. This suggests that he lacks some ability to discern rumors.

## 4. Limitations of the Study

While selecting M as a case study allows for the presentation of individual uniqueness, complexity, and richness, and



provides detailed insights into the life course, facilitating fine-grained analysis that compensates for the limitations of the "average person" model in life course research, the generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the lack of a larger sample size and supporting quantitative data.

Additionally, although the interview method is a key qualitative approach in life course research with certain advantages, it also presents challenges. One significant issue is recall bias. Given the limitations of human memory, it is difficult to expect a research participant to accurately recall events from a 75-year life course. Even recollections of major events may be subject to various errors, let alone memories related to media usage. To mitigate these biases, this study corroborated M's memories with accounts from those around him and cross-verified details with physical evidence.

Harvard University researchers Mario L. Small and Jenna M. Cook identified five challenges associated with qualitative interviews: deception, recall error, reasonableness bias, intentionality bias, and single-motive bias (Small, 2023), as detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. The five core challenges associated with qualitative interviews

Core Challenges	Specific Content
<b>Deception</b>	Any interviewer faces the possibility that interviewees may lie about the true motives behind their action, whether due to lack of rapport, social desirability bias, or other factors.
<b>Recall Error</b>	Even honest interviewees may forget or misinterpret their own motives, as information omission, addition, or distortion are all quite common phenomena in the empirical questions researchers investigate.
<b>Reasonableness Bias</b>	People have good reason to both understand themselves and represent themselves to an interviewer as reasonable.
<b>Intentionality Bias</b>	While people have motive to represent themselves as reasonable, they may also be inclined to represent themselves as intentional—as individuals whose actions are willful and deliberate.
<b>Single-motive Bias</b>	Single-motive bias refers to the tendency of people to report a single motive behind motivated actions even where multiple motivations were at play.

## 5. Conclusion

The marks left by individuals are the imprints they leave as they traverse the tunnel of history and time, especially evident in rapidly changing societies (Xinxiang, 2022). From 1950 to 2024, M experienced childhood hunger, middle-aged struggles, and material abundance in his later years. The 18 major events he went through essentially form the landscape of his life course. His 75-year life trajectory reflects the monumental changes that have occurred in China over the past few decades and demonstrates the "personal agency" individuals can exert in the face of historical processes. At the same time, media technology has also undergone tremendous leaps over the past 75 years. It has evolved from the print era to the radio and television era, the internet era, and finally, the mobile internet era, with media continually developing and iterating. M's media usage trajectory mirrors the process of media transformation in contemporary China and its interaction with individual lives, while also presenting rich and specific details. There is no doubt that an individual's life course is shaped by historical processes, but it is also molded by media technology. In summary, M's personal experiences and stories are not just those of an individual, but also reflect the experiences of a group, and even of an entire generation.

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## Authors contributions

Prof. Zhijun Meng was responsible for the study design and manuscript revisions. He also drafted the initial manuscript, which was subsequently revised by Shanyong Jiang. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Obtained.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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