Chapter 2
Impacts of Mobile Use on Third Agers in China

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ABSTRACT
The chapter explores the role of smart phones and mobile apps in the process of third age formation in Zhengzhou, a second-tier city in China located in central Henan province. The term ‘third age’ refers to a transition period from active work to retirement. Compared with the previous generation, the demographic approaching retirement in China today is more digitally literate, although this varies accordingly in Zhengzhou, a second-tier city. The use of digital technology offers people a different kind of retirement. This study shows that an increasing number of people around retirement age (55-65) in Zhengzhou are using smart phones and apps to reimagine the possibilities of post-work lifestyles. The research asks if the use of mobile apps is changing peoples’ perspectives on traditional responsibilities and peoples’ expectations of retirement.

INTRODUCTION
The aging society is a global phenomenon. Populations are increasing in most countries and people are living—and working longer. But some countries are aging faster than others; this has economic and social ramifications; there is a need for appropriate policies to manage peoples’ expectations as they exit the work force. Nowhere is the aging society ‘problem’ more acute than the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is suffering from a self-inflicted population time bomb, the One Child Policy. Instituted in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping to curb excessive population growth, the One Child Policy determined that each
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Chinese family would have no more than ‘one child’. The repercussions of this policy, including a gender imbalance favouring males, are now being felt, although the policy has now changed to a 2-child policy.

To understand aging, we must first consider life stages. The approach adopted in this paper is ‘ages’. In the literature four ages are noted; the first age is childhood, the second depicts career and mid-life, the third retirement, and the fourth, old age and decline. Our discussion of the ‘third age’ depicts people’s transition from an age of ‘independence, maturity, responsibility and working’—i.e. the ‘second age’—to one of personal achievement and ‘fulfillment after retirement’ (Laslett, 1987). However, the third age, conventionally understood as concurrent with retirement, is far less understood than the other ages. In China this third life (st)age has received little academic attention. This chapter fills that void.

Before the One Child Policy was introduced, and even into the 1980s and 1990s, new retirees were regarded as respected elders of the family; seniors, whether they were uncles or aunts, or grandparents, would often be tasked with looking after young children. Congregating in parks and playing mah-jong, many third agers would exchange stories of their lives, and perhaps share photos or letters. In the 2000s, however, a combination of economic reforms and new technologies, together with the changing shape of families, has seen the advent of a different modality of third age, one in which people have more autonomy. The most significant new technology impacting on peoples’ autonomy is the mobile phone and many studies have looked at youth culture use of mobile phones. However, it is important to note that people in China who are in their third age today are avid mobile phone users; they share videos and stories; they use cameras to record their travels or to make video movies; they search out apps to enrich their lives. Many still go to the parks and play mah-jong of course but in comparison to the past there are many more lifestyle options.

Our goal is to provide a new understanding of the relationship between third-agers and their mobile phones. The first part of the chapter compares the aging society, namely, a problem to be solved, with the digital society, identifying a spectrum of opportunity and potential. We begin with some baseline data on population change in China, then we identify reasons for increased longevity. We briefly discuss the Chinese government’s concerns in regard to managing this changing demographic. With the focus turning to a digital society, the question is: how is this group using technology to be more fulfilled? For instance, does the autonomy gained by access to digital technology take the pressure off the welfare system?

The second section turns to understanding the relationship between the third age and the digital age. This section expands the definition of ‘third age’. The term is now used by a number of social scientists investigating population trends (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002, 2008; Gilleard, Higgs, Hyde, Wiggins, & Blane, 2005; Laslett, 1994). The third age is then linked with the concept of ‘digital capital’ (Park 2017). Digital capital, derived from Bourdieu’s notions of economic and social capital, allows us to evaluate the digital literacy of this demographic and with this the potential of fulfilment. The context of digital capital in this paper is the increasing use of mobile phone and apps in China, and the distinctive phenomenon of ‘mobile use only’ among retirees in China (Deng, Mo, & Liu, 2014; Donner, 2008).

In this section, we ask the following research question: How are third agers using mobile technology to achieve personal fulfilment? The discussion also investigates the role of ‘mobile-use only’ in retirees’ daily life. The next section looks at research findings of mobile use by early retirees in Henan province, located in central China. The final section draws conclusions, including looking at some of the negative aspects of the digital society.
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