

Navigating Urban Spaces: The Intersection of Civil Religion, Social Identity, and Community Inclusion for Blind Individuals in China's Rapidly Urbanizing Cities

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Abstract. Home to 20.71 million disabled individuals living in urban areas, according to the number collected in the Second National Sampling Survey on Disability conducted in 2006, China's total population is 1.3 billion, consisting of 6.34% of people with disabilities. The Chinese government has been working toward the goal of improving the quality life of disabled groups, at the same time attempting to integrate them into society. Although policies and urban programs are put in place, they are still largely impractical. This paper aims to investigate the relationship between civil religion, social identity, and community inclusion with blind individuals during China's rapid urbanization process. It presents a case study for an interview conducted with a blind individual living in Guangzhou, with some findings on the current government work and recommendations for potential improvements.

Keywords: Blind Individuals; Urban Spaces; Civil Religion; Social Identity; Community Inclusion.

1. Introduction

"I couldn't see the world, but I hope the world can see me"

Since the creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese authorities worked on enacting policies and establishing institutions and facilities which help integrate the disabled population into society.

The China Disabled People's Federation (CDPF) was established in 1988, becoming one of the first organizations in China to focus exclusively on the disabled population. With Deng Pufang, son of the leader of the party at the time, Deng Xiaoping, as the chairman, the CDPF inarguably received strong support from the government. Initially, the organization focused on creating services that helped disabled individuals integrate into society, making the China Rehabilitation and Research Centre in Beijing in 1988. Later, CDPF extended its contribution when launching community-based rehabilitation, which can be more accessible to citizens. Although accomplished much over the past almost four decades, CDPF's programs are in most cases urban-centred. According to Fjeld et al, the organization is unable, due to limited funding, to provide substantial assistance to people with disabilities in rural areas (Fjeld et al., 2011, pg. 41).

More recently, the disability policy in China, especially the medical-related ones, changed as the government, although still facing limited resources, decided to cover a certain proportion of medical care costs. The reason behind this change is a set of data collected in 2002: 96% of the rural population lacked health insurance, while 38% never sought medical help during illness. Thus, the Chinese authorities launched the Basic Medical Insurance (BMI - EBMI and RBMI) in 1998, aiming to provide government-issued medical insurance to the general population, including those with disabilities. The government will now cover around 60% of the fee for outpatient care. Designed as a voluntary mutual assistance that covers in-patient service expenses related to "catastrophic illnesses," the BMI effectively relieved households financially about medical services costs while at the same time holding obvious setbacks. Limited subsidies from the central government mean that local authorities bear higher financial pressures and, in turn, are forced into setting strict standards for which illnesses are covered by insurance. Moreover, outpatient treatments and rehabilitation costs are also excluded from NRCMS.



Apart from the policies themselves, one of the essential components of China's effort to integrate the disabled community is the construction of the concept of the "able disabled". "Able disabled" emphasizes the idea that although disabled individuals may be physically impaired, they still have the ability to accomplish great things. With that being said, such a concept is often illustrated in films and nationalist propaganda. In films, in which the Chinese government had control over which ones could be released to the public, disabled characters were portrayed as patriotic heroes. Disabled athletes, particularly those competing in the Paralympic Games, are cherished as part of the Chinese national pride. Through such ways, the government intentionally made the disabled population "visible", since the government intentionally promoted those films that had disabled individuals as main characters, to the general public, moreover constructing them as parts of society that should not be neglected.

In combination with the authority's effort to construct the correct epistemology, which is evidenced in the changing definition of "canji" (disabled), the Chinese government worked on shaping the population's cognition toward the disabled group. Originating as a negative connotation, the first use of the term "canji" can be dated back to as early as the Tang dynasty, used to indicate the status of physical abnormality. However, following the CDPF's work to promote the term, "canji" became more neutralized, and its definition also extended beyond indicating physical impairment to include mental illnesses. While the term is more generally accepted and embraced in the Chinese cultural context, interviews with disabled individuals also pointed out that in most rural regions in the nation, being a "canji ren" (disabled person) is still largely regarded as shameful, and they are excluded from their family and community – a civil religion, a collective belief, that is largely limited to Chinese rural settings.

Despite these efforts, critical questions about the effectiveness and inclusiveness of disability policies remain. This paper seeks to explore how rapid urbanization and government policies impact the daily lives of blind individuals in contemporary China. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research question: How has rapid urbanization impacted the mobility, social identity, and social inclusion of blind individuals in major urban areas in contemporary China?

As a big portion of the total blind population in China, making up 14.86% of the population based on data from 2006, blind individuals are selected as subjects of the primary focus of this research paper. Conducting a case study on a blind individual currently living and working in the city of Guangzhou, China, while also aided with qualitative analysis of past policies and studies, this research paper is determined to find out the "Civil Religion, Social Identity, and Social Inclusion of Blind Individuals in Major Urban Areas in Contemporary China."

The research question is further broken down into 2 major sub-research questions. The first of which is how has rapid urbanization, occurred in China for the past few decades, impacted the mobility and accessibility of urban environments for blind individuals. This section will analyze the infrastructures, facilities, and specific policies introduced by the Chinese authority in 1949 that have impacted the blind population. The next sub-topic is on the perceptions and experiences of blind individuals regarding their social identity and sense of inclusiveness within urban Chinese communities. Once again, this section of the paper will be an analysis of the policies that aim to foster social inclusion of the blind population, as well as of the theories such as what defines and contributes to one's sense of identity. This section will also focus on the specific national symbols, public rituals, and the concept of civil religion which influenced the integration process of blind people. Interviews are conducted to provide answers to the sub-question of this section. Ultimately, the 2 research sub-topics should provide solid reasoning for the research goal of determining whether it is a wise choice for China's blind population to be residing and working in urban areas.

2. Literature Review

Before the actual interview, I conducted a literature review of past studies on some research questions that are closely related to the main topic of this research paper. A total of 5 past studies are examined - 4 qualitative and 1 quantitative.

In the source titled *Civil Religion* by John A. Coleman, the author identified the 3 types of religion, more specifically civil religion – namely undifferentiated, in forms of nationalism, and differentiated. By quoting Robert Bellah, the author defined civil religion as a set of symbolic forms and acts that provide an individual's general identity. The concept of civil religion can be a contributing force in shaping how people view their personal values while being especially influential for the disabled population, as they need to regain value in life after experiencing becoming disabled.

The chapter *Disability, poverty and healthcare: changes in the canji ('disability') policies in the history of the People's Republic of China* from the book *Disability and poverty; Why Am I Not Disabled? Making State Subjects, Making Statistics in Post-Mao China* and *Inclusion of People with Disability in China* - by Heidi Fjeld et al.; Matthew Kohrman and the International Labour Organization (ILO), respectively - highlighted the evolution of disability-related policies in China. As the authors pointed out, the Chinese government worked on helping the nation's blind population integrate into society with policies, institutions and publicity through the media. In terms of policies, there were the biopower-oriented policies - One-Child Population Policy, Eugenic, and Birth Control for the Disabled - to control the growth rate of the disabled population. In terms of institutions, the China Disabled Persons' Federation is a great example. Established in 1988, in post-Mao era China, the CDPF is dedicated to aiding the nation's disabled population both financially and socially. CDPF, the state-funded organization, launched a range of social programs in the past decades. Nonetheless, as Fjeld et al. pointed out, such programs are more often urban-centred, due to restricted funding, meaning the CDPF's influence in rural regions is greatly limited. In terms of public facilities, as the ILO mentioned, the Regulation on Construction of Accessible Environment pushed for the construction of more public facilities for the disabled group. Lastly, in terms of publicity with the media, disabled individuals have been portrayed as patriotic heroes in films. Thus, their in society is linked to nationalism thus, making them more respected and seen.

The Cost of Disability in China, by Prashant Loyalka; Lan Liu; Gong Cheng and Xiaoying Zheng, provided a thorough quantitative analysis of the monetary cost of living as a disabled individual in current Chinese society. As the authors claimed, multiple data sets collected suggest a strong relationship between the annual income, education and employment level, the standard of living, extra cost and social security insurance, and whether the household consists of one or more disabled members. More specifically, for disabled households, annual income is significantly lower, it is less likely they will be educated and employed, and they have lower level of standard of living with a higher cost of living. Such factors are also causing a vast proportion of the disabled population in China to live under the poverty line. Another interesting point that was brought up in the study is the fact that for households that have disabled members, residing in urban areas will add extra financial pressure.

From the analysis of the above past sources, I discovered two major problems with all the studies currently available on the research questions of this research paper: 1) studies are already outdated, with the majority of the sources published in 1970 to 2007, over a decade ago; 2) studies are often evaluating the impact of the disability policies from "bird-eye view". Still, why are these problematic? First of all, we are currently living in a time during which technology is developing at an unbelievable pace, and social circumstances in turn change rapidly, evaluation of policies must be conducted constantly. While the current evaluation on policies related to disability is not updated, there is a need. With new assessments, we will be able to make improvements on policies, therefore contributing to the integration of disabled groups into society. Second, the current sources that employed the "bird-eye view" although seemingly provided a thorough evaluation of every aspect of certain policies, it can be problematic as we can't obtain any specific and personal feelings on the government efforts.

Evaluating the effectiveness of policies requires detailed personal insights from the target group. With all being said, interviewing a disabled individual to craft a case study, as what was done in this research paper, seems essential since it both updated the evaluation of policies and provided more personal experience with disability policies.

3. Methodology

This research paper is a case study that focuses on the interview conducted with a visually disabled individual currently working and living in Guangzhou City, China. The interview, talking about the experience of the blind group and the general disabled population, lasted for about 40 minutes, in which questions regarding the general experience as a disabled individual growing up and living in Guangzhou, what the government takes observable efforts to help disabled groups, and how changing policies and technology have helped them are asked. Selecting a case study to be the main method for this research over others because it can provide some more detailed and personal experience with disability policies and government social programs. Evaluating the effectiveness of government works should not only be from a third-person perspective, in other words, our own perspective, but also from the perspective of the ones that are affected directly by such works. Thus, a case study will be able to provide some direct feedback from the disabled population, the target group of the policies and social programs that this research is investigating.

Beyond the case study itself, this research paper also included some reviews of past and contemporary government policies that both directly and indirectly impacted the disabled population in urban China. This will cover the specifics of how certain policies are designed and implemented, while also mentioning specific statistics, such as standards of living, that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of policies.

However, there is one limitation to the research: this research paper draws its conclusion based on one single case study, thus becoming problematic because generalization needs to be made. Still, the generalization that this paper made is credible as the chosen interviewee is a blind individual who worked in Guangzhou for over a decade now, fulfilling the target group of the policies that the paper is investigating. In addition, the interviewee also participated in government programs for disabled groups. Therefore, his words could account for the disabled population that is affected by government policies and programs. With this being said, there could be more case studies done in the future, focusing on more disabled groups and larger sample sizes, in order to strengthen the recommended resolutions to the problems proposed in this paper.

4. Findings

4.1. Mobility and Accessibility

During the interview, the first question asked was about the efforts by the government and governmental institutions that helped foster the integration of the blind population. According to the interviewee's response, there are indeed government-sponsored rehabilitation services. Held in local community centres, the so-called "life skill training lessons" are aimed at helping disabled individuals learn skills that help them become independent. These lessons are often "targetted", meaning that specific courses are for people with specific types of disability. For instance, the interviewee, who is a blind individual, would enroll in lessons that teach how to use a white cane. As such tools are only used by the blind population, such courses will also be highly exclusive. One important note about the rehabilitation lessons that were offered, which was also mentioned by the interviewee, is that they are only offered indoors. All activities and teaching are conducted in an indoor environment. This detail will lead to problems which will be discussed later in the research paper.

The next interview question is to what extent and in which direction the changing technologies altered disabled individuals' lifestyles. With the fast-developing technologies in China and applications such as Meituan (food delivery service) and WeChat (texting and messaging), the Chinese population's

lifestyle has changed significantly as we rely more on the convenience that such tools have brought us. For example, relying on the fast delivery service, many people now have dramatically cut back the occasions in which they go out to eat and grocery shopping. However, many hold the misconception that blind people can't enjoy the advantages of technology as they mistakenly think that losing vision means applications are unusable as they are often graphical. As the interviewee explained, almost every application on the market right now has an integrated VoiceOver system that will read out the user's commands. In this way, blind individuals can use graphical applications even if they can't see their screen. Alternatively, the fast-developing AI is also helping the blind population to be independent. AI picture identification will identify objects shot on the phone's camera and output real-time audio descriptions. Thus, it will aid blind individual's identification of his or her surroundings.

In addition, the interviewee introduced another surprising technology that was developed recently in aiming to find a way to let blind individuals "see" the world. Developed by the US company Wicab Inc., the product BrainPort Vision Pro is an "oral electronic vision aid that provides electro-tactile stimulation to aid profoundly blind patients." Equipped with video cameras and a tongue array made out of more than 300 electrodes, this device can translate graphical information into "bubble-like patterns" that can be felt by the tongue. Then, such patterns will be received by the brain. Therefore, these signals will help the brain to recognize objects.

4.2. Social Inclusion

Next, the interviewee talked about his experience in the schools for blinds. As someone who acquired blindness during high school, he has no choice but to enroll in a blind school in order to continue his education. Within the first month, he went through a period of what he calls "panicking time." Not understanding how blind people would be able to walk from building to building, do their own laundry, and get their meals from the cafeteria, he also felt confused during that time. Fortunately, as he explained, there are people who are also blind after birth that provided help to him. With their help, the interviewee adjusted to the new lifestyle and felt included in the community for the very first time.

After graduating from the blind school, he got in contact with the world for the first time. When asked about his experience with instances that make him feel excluded from society, he replied "That was rarely the case," explaining that he only once ran into such situations. It was when he used Didi (the Chinese version of Uber). As he was getting into the taxi, the driver warned him with a serious tone: "Be careful of your white cane, don't get my car dirty!" Similar questions, such as "Do blind people know how to go to the bathroom independently?", "Do they know how to use their phone?", and "Can they clean their cane and themselves on their own?", although some sound unbelievable, are noted in the interview as questions that many abled people had for disabled groups.

Moreover, these two experiences are also largely applicable to other disabled groups, such as the visually impaired and hearing impairment individuals. They would also go through a period of confusion and adjustment, and enroll in "special disabled schools."

4.3. Urban Life Vs. Rural Life

When deciding whether to live and work in urban or rural areas, there is a lot to consider: average income, job opportunities, average cost of living, medical care costs, etc. A study, titled *The Cost of Disability in China*, conducted by Prashant Loyalka et al., provided some statistics on quantitative measurements such as income, cost of living, and standard of living (SOL) used to evaluate which choice regarding residential region will be the best. This study shows that from a purely financial perspective, living in rural China outcompetes the choice of residing in urban areas. Surprisingly, the interview suggested the other way around, while considering both financial and psychological perspectives.

Firstly, in terms of annual income, Loyalka's study showed that the income of disabled households is around 9,000 yuan higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Besides, regarding the percentage of income that is the extra cost of living, urban disabled households account for 98% while rural disabled households only 44%. By looking at the two sets of data, it may be hard for us to come to a conclusion about whether it would be a better choice for the disabled population to live in urban or rural areas. However, the interviewee argued that when they are making such choices, financial factors are not the only factor they consider. Granted, the psychological values are also weighted significantly.

In Chinese rural regions, most people are still conservative, as suggested by the interviewee. They hold the view that disability is very shameful. Thus, many parents of disabled individuals will not allow them to go outside their house, not to mention allowing them to work. So, job opportunity for disabled people is strictly limited in villages and towns. In other words, they are completely dependent on their parents. On the other hand, if they choose to work and live in urban areas, not only will they be able to find a job in which they can make their own money – to become financially independent, but will also avoid much discrimination as evidenced in most rural communities. The cause behind this phenomenon of less discrimination against disability in urban cities, explained by the interviewee, is that in cities people view disability differently. In urban settings, the collective perspective constructs a social norm in which discrimination and exclusion are not allowed. In turn, people are automatically pressured into being more inclusive toward the disabled population.

5. Discussion

5.1. Evaluating Government Efforts

As mentioned previously, the government have launched community-based rehabilitation programs. Although its description portrayed it to be programs that can teach disabled individuals a lot of very practical life skills and in turn help them to become independent, there are two major problems with the programs.

First of all, as described by Fjeld et al. in the book *Disability and Poverty*, governmental institutions such as the China Disabled Person's Federation though contributed to the integration of the disabled population by launching many programs, almost every one of them is urban-centred. Unlike Loyalka, Fjeld in his book discovered the financial problems with such government programs. The limited scope of programs, Fjeld et al. claim, is caused by the limited funding that CDPF is receiving.

Secondly, as the interviewee pointed out, the contents of the rehabilitation programs are also problematic. Since the government itself didn't directly offer training because it chose to outsource it to other organizations, there will be constant evaluations. In those cases, as organizations hired by the government focus on their reviews, training will turn into purely formal and not practical. An additional problem is that organizations will try everything to avoid any risks, so, this leads to the decision that all classes would be conducted indoors. Without practicing outside in the real world, many scenarios like broken blind lanes are ignored. Therefore, they will still need to depend on themselves to find out how what they learned in those programs can be applied to real-life situations.

5.2. Evaluating Inclusiveness in Education

Education is important in the sense that not only will it teach people knowledge, but also will it shape a person's view of the world. As illustrated by the experience of the interviewee, schools designed exclusively for disabled individuals can be very advantageous in regards to their ability to find disabled groups an inclusive community. Studying with people who share the same background and experience as you can be comforting and supportive. This is especially important for people who are still in the stage of finding personal identity and trying to adjust to the new lifestyle. If the interviewee never met friends in the blind school who also acquired blindness after birth, he may have struggled for a longer time in the "dark days of confusion and unknown."

Moreover, the interviewee cautioned that establishing “special” schools for the disabled population can be harmful in terms of social inclusion due to the nature of being separated from the rest of society. Claiming to “protect” disabled students, such schools mostly limit their student’s movement to only on campus. In the United States around 10 years ago, local education boards allowed disabled (visually impaired) students to study in public schools. However, in China, students with disabilities must enroll in special schools. A long time of lacking contact with the outside world, especially in a contemporary society where everything changes rapidly due to fast-developing technologies, can be problematic since student’s views will be extremely limited.

5.3. Choosing Where to Live

When making the choice of whether to reside in urban or rural areas, many people may only consider financial factors. However, as the interviewee mentioned, many disabled individuals make such choices while also considering this choice from a psychological perspective. Although numbers show that living in cities does cost more than comparing to living in villages or towns, migrant blind workers in Chinese urban areas still refuse to leave since they feel included by their surroundings. Working in cities means minimal discrimination, judgements, and shame. Disabled people, just like everyone else, wanted to feel valued. Their physical impairment gives them permanent tags of being a shame to their family in rural areas, many of them suffer from huge mental pressure and thus lose hope for life. Therefore, considering psychological satisfaction and well-being, the disabled population will always choose to live in urban areas even if costs are significantly higher.

6. Conclusion

Since its creation in 1949, the new Chinese government greatly contributed to helping the 20.71 million disabled population in its urban areas. No need to say the China Disabled People’s Federation (CDPF), Basic Medical Insurance (BMI), Law on the Protection of Disabled People, Employment Promotion Law (2007), etc. With the fast-developing technology and media industry, movies and TV shows, the Chinese government used these new methods to make the disabled population “visible” to the world.

This research paper explored the current situation of the Chinese urban disabled population with a case study on the interview with a blind individual, including their sense of social and personal identity and feelings toward social inclusion. The case study included three different scopes: 1) mobility and accessibility of the contemporary social environment, shaped by government policies and public facilities; 2) social identity and integration of disabled communities, shaped by the education system; and 3) the mechanism behind why disabled group choose to settle in urban China, closely related to civil religion. In those scopes, different discoveries are made, some even surprising. Through the case study, some of the problems are also discovered with the current government efforts in trying to integrate the disabled population into the general society.

From the perspective of the construction of the urban social environment, while the current government programs are aimed at guiding the disabled in the process of adjustment into society, one major problem is the impracticality of such courses.

From the perspective of social identity, the case study suggested that education plays the most essential role in guiding disabled individuals in finding values in life. Currently, already established “special schools for the disabled” such as blind schools seemingly accomplished their goal of “protecting” the disabled, but they in fact negatively contributed to the government’s ultimate objective of full integration by isolating and forming two societies: the general society and the disabled society.

Finally, from the perspective of how disabled groups make their residency choices, the case study shockingly revealed the determining role that civil religion played. In rural China people collectively believe that disability equals shame, invaluable and useless, making it the civil religion that only existed in rural settings, people in urban regions don’t. This makes disabled population residents in

urban China psychologically satisfied as they are able to feel valued. Avoiding discrimination is the one key determination that made the disabled population largely choose to live and work in metropolitan areas even though it lead to bearing significantly more costs.

In conclusion, although the current social programs and government policy are comprehensive, there are still places to improve and adjust. I recommend that the Chinese government make changes to the government programs, current education system, and enact new disability policies.

6.1. Government Programs

With the current government policies, the disabled groups inarguably received assistance in regards to better adjusting to the new lifestyle after becoming disabled. Compared to the last decade, such programs have become more complete and helpful. However, the problem with impracticality still exists.

As discussed, one of the reasons that made current rehabilitation lessons impractical is that government and organizations are trying to avoid any possible risks. In this case, I suggest that the government set up rehabilitation centres that contain designed sets that simulate real-life situations. For example, the current lesson on the usage of white cane conducted indoors did not allow blind individuals to experience real-life scenarios. Lessons taught in ideal situations don't account for any unexpected incidents, such as broken or disconnected blind lanes. This will lead to possible confusion and even injuries, as resolution to such incidents is not taught. However, when the government adds simulating settings, the disabled population will learn how to deal with real-life situations without risking getting injuries if such courses are taught on the streets. Thus, the government will also not bear any more risks.

6.2. Societal Efforts – Integration in Education

In order to integrate the disabled population into society thoroughly, the government must start with education. Combining the experience of the interviewee in the interview and some of the suggestions made by him, there could be two recommendations.

First of all, there could be study buddies and school counsellors/mentors who will be with recently disabled students to provide assistance and tutoring. Considering that the interviewee emphasized the importance of the fellow blind student who helped him get through the period of adjusting to the new life, it can be very helpful to introduce people who can help newly disabled teenagers get used to new lifestyles.

Secondly, the established so-called “special” schools for the disabled should be removed to achieve full-scale integration. Intended to “protect” disabled students is in turn isolating them from the rest of the world. Thus, I recommend that the Chinese education system should also remove such “schools for the disabled” and allow disabled students to enroll in public schools. In this case, they will be able to keep up with the standard education progress. Including disabled students in classrooms will also help shape the correct epistemology for abled students. They will learn that disabled group is a part of society and should be seen and included in their daily lives and interactions with others. With all being said, in order to ensure the success of such a plan, schools should have frequent check-ups with disabled students to make sure that they are not struggling with their classes. If necessary, extra sessions should be provided to these students during which teachers can help and answer questions. In addition, accommodations such as longer testing times for tests and exams should be provided to disabled students. In doing so, there will be true equal education opportunity exist in the Chinese education system?

6.3. Residency Choices

From the perspective of disabled individuals, as explained by the interviewee, making choices on where to live is more determined by psychological values and overall feelings. Living in urban areas will allow disabled groups to escape from the rural civil religion that shames disability. Thus, I

recommend that the government encourage and help the rural disabled population to migrate and settle in the cities. The Chinese government could enact the following policies to help:

- (1) Job reference institutions that will help find job positions for disabled migrant workers.
- (2) Housing with lower-than-average rents that the disabled population can choose to live in.
- (3) Extra public medical insurance plans can cover a larger proportion of medical care costs.
- (4) For the new disabled migrant workers, there should be free psychological consulting services that will help them find their value and identity. This service will also help the individuals who have been largely influenced by the rural civil religion.

In addition, the government should also consider solving the true cause of this problem, namely changing the epistemology toward disability in rural settings. With the Chinese rural regions almost entirely covered with internet connections and TV cables, the government should take advantage and use media to alter the wrongful civil religion. Such promotions should emphasize that disability should not be shameful and people with disability should be valued equally. In doing so, I believe the government will be able to truly accomplish the goal of integrating the disabled population into rural and urban society.

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