



Cardiff Business School

Ysgol Busnes Caerdydd

# The Transition to a State Led Market Economy in China: the Impact of Social Change and the Commodification on Disabled People

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# Preface

Seven years ago, when first I came to the UK to study business management, I did not realise that this journey for pursuing higher education could have such a profound impact on my personal and academic development. As a disabled person from China, I was living in a world where the dominant ableist norms that regard people with impairments (or with different physical appearance) as tragic and vulnerable. It was a society where the medical model of disability was embedded and where disabled people are devalued and marginalised in all aspects of social life. This became a huge contrast to the lived experiences shared by many disabled people I have met in the UK. This difference of lived experience puzzled me and encouraged me to pursue a Masters and PhD in which I have strong personal interests to find out the valuation mechanisms of disabled people in the two different nations.

I have been actively involved in disability activism in Wales and now I am a board member to Disability Wales - a disability rights campaign organisation to the Welsh Government and other policy making entities. This is when I came to know the British social model of disability that has a tremendous ontological impact on me. The distinction between impairment and disability made by the social model was so enlightening that one can never think of in China where traditional mainstream discourse on disability is dominated by individualistic medical approaches.

The British social model of disability has a strong connection with Marxist historical materialism, which serves a great exploratory tool for understanding the social historical context in the UK. It was based on the observation on the British societal transition from agrarian society to industrialist economy, though no disability researcher was able to prove this as there was few records made to document the lived experience of disabled people during this transition.

As a person from a country that is undergoing significant industrial transformation, I have a great historic opportunity to do a PhD project to examine the generic mechanism that shapes the valuation of impaired labour as China transforms from a predominantly agricultural economy to an increasingly industrialised society.

The UK historical materialist scholars argue that it was the changes in the means of production (such as the ownership and mode of production and labour involved with the production) that led to the commodification of impaired labour and subsequently devalued it in the capitalist free labour market. However, the question this thesis would ask, is to what extent has the commodification of the labour market, changes in the means (or mode) of production and ableist norms in various forms in society, contributed to the devaluation of disabled people in the labour market?

The commodification of the Chinese labour market has resulted in it opening to the global trade network, yet the ableist norms can be long rooted in China's social, cultural, and political traditions. A combination of these elements to be considered in theorising disability devaluation is necessary and important.

As a social researcher, I am a messenger.

The author

30.12.2022

# Abstract

This thesis explores the mechanisms behind the devaluation of Chinese disabled people's labour and in doing so develops a lens to study disabled people's experiences during China's transition from a strict state-controlled society towards a hybrid model with the introduction of some market mechanisms. Data, based on 48 semi-structured interviews found that Chinese disabled people have distinctive labour market experiences affected by their social, spatial, cultural, and political status, but the character of economic transformation is also highlighted as significant.

The thesis contributes to knowledge in the field of business, management, and disability studies in three important respects. Firstly, it reveals how deeply rooted ableist practices and norms in traditional social and cultural values interact with contemporary economic processes, leading to the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people in the labour market. Secondly, it contributes to an understanding of the important role that the commodification of labour market relationships in China during its transition from a predominantly collective agricultural economy to a marketized economy, has played in disabled people's lives. Comparisons between different cities/regions and private/public sectors are made to fully reflect the sectoral and spatial effects of commodification of impaired labour. Finally, it addresses how changes in the nature of work and job design have specifically impacted on disabled workers. Drawing on debates developed by UK disability studies scholars who argue that changes in the means of production from feudalist to a capitalist free market economy had a negative impact on people with impairments, this thesis, explores the relevance of these European arguments to the Chinese context. Through disabled participants' experiences in different forms of employment, it evaluates whether impaired labour has come to be devalued in different employment sectors that currently co-exist in the Chinese economy. This contributes to the broader business management literature by highlighting how different kinds of work organisation and production relations affect disabled people's labour market opportunities.

Key words: China, commodification of impaired labour, disability employment, social transition.

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## List of Abbreviations

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CDPF – China Disabled Persons’ Federation

DPO – Disabled People’s Organisations

UNCRPD – The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

UPIAS - Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation

## List of Chinese Context Related Concepts

Bian zhi 编制: a statutory requirement for the Public Civic Service Employee System, to be entitled to state benefits and secured employment packages.

Dan wei 单位: a Small Working Cycle Unit that was established during planned economic era, where workers share professional and personal life with co-workers.

Fu li yuan 福利院: a Welfare Institute, which is (usually) set up by civil society or government fund to look after the socially vulnerable, such as the elderly and disabled people, though the availability of this kind of institution remains less prevalent in rural areas.

Hu kou 户口: a population registration system (residential status) which classifies citizens by two categories: rural and urban. Access to key social resources provided by the local government, such as education, healthcare and pension which are all dependent on the *Hukou* status.

Guan xi 关系: a Close Social Relationship Cycle that one can be utilised to gain advantage(s) in various aspect of social economic life in China. In general, *Guan Xi* is tied with favour exchange, social economic status of the individual and their associated family.

Mian zi 面子: a sense of social reputation that people in China would care about. It usually links with valuation of the person in the community, power hierarchy and avoidance of negative reputation in the *Quan zi* (see below).

Quan zi 圈子: a social circle where members are closely connected with each other. Members in the *Quan Zi* would usually have good personal relationship (i.e. guan xi) with each other.

Shehui fuli qiye 社会福利企业: Social Welfare Enterprises. A legacy form of (sheltered) employment that can be traced back to planned economic era (1949-78) where sheltered workshops were established to accommodate employment for the socially vulnerable groups. Since the economic reform (1978 onwards), this form of employment has been less popular and mostly run by private enterprises.

Shuren shehui 熟人社会: acquaintance society. A concept was initially coined by Fei Xiaotong who suggested that Chinese people are socialised in an individual level and form their guanxi networks. People who are acquaint to each other form a social circle (quanzi). He argues that the whole Chinese society is operationalised based on these social circles.

Wu zhang ai she shi 无障碍设施: Barrier Free infrastructure/facility. A infrastructure that is built to facilitate the accessibility of users, including people with impairment. It is one of the commitments made by the Chinese government when they ratify the UNCRPD.

Zi qiang 自强: Independence.

Zi zu 自足: Self-sufficient.

# Chapter One - Introduction

## 1.1 An Awakening "Sleeping Lion" with Tremendous Social-Economic Inequalities

During his diplomatic visit to France in 2014, then president Xi Jinping made an international speech, quoting Napoleon Bonaparte: “*China is just a sleeping lion. Once it wakes up, it will shock the world. I hope it will sleep forever*”<sup>1</sup>. Since then, the phrase ‘awakening sleeping lion’ has been widely quoted in Chinese state media as a propaganda tool to praise the nation's economic success achieved over the past four decades. Indeed, China has been through significant social-economic changes achieving excellent economic results. In fact, many China-focused economic researchers have explored these changes in their studies, coining it as a ‘Chinese miracle’ (Yang and Zhao 2015; Cao 2020; Zhao 2022). This PhD project is concerned with the social-economic inequalities experienced following four decades state-led reforms (Kerswell and Lin 2017; Zhao and Li 2019).

Since the economic reform, China has seen its national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rise from just 218.5 billion US dollars in 1978 to 17,728 billion US dollars in 2021, while its Gini index<sup>2</sup> figure also rising from 0.3 (1980) to 0.55 (2005) (Xie and Zhao 2014). Researchers have also found a significant rise in gender inequality (Chi and Li 2014; Foster and Ren 2015), regional inequality (Zhang 2021) and ethnic inequality (Xie and Zhao 2014; Gray 2015). This study focuses on the lesser covered but equally important dimension – disabled people's employment inequality in China, which is no better than other social minority groups, if not worse.

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<sup>1</sup>Critics have denied the fact that Napoleon has ever said this: <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/ava-gardner-china-and-napoleon/>

<sup>2</sup>A commonly used index to measure income inequality. The higher the index, the more inequality exist in the economy.

## 1.2 Researching Disability Employment in the Context of China

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over the regime in 1949, the Chinese government introduced numerous policies that aimed to mobilise the whole nation's labour to maximise its national production capacity (Chinese version of Stalinist model). These policies include collectivistic production units (*danwei* system – Li 2002; Chow and Perkins 2014; Xiao et al. 2020; Qu 2020a), household registration system (*hukou* system – Shang 2000; Chan 2010; Wu 2011; Qi et al. 2015), planned fertility and eugenics policies (famous known for one-child policy – Lei and Pals 2011; Xun 2012; Xie and Zhou 2014). They have to some extent impacted on disabled people's experience and the general public's perception of disability until the reform (1978) when the state opened up the domestic market and join in the international trading network.

Similar to other inequality issues identified in other ex-soviet countries which have recently transitioned to a market-based economy (Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2014; Offermann 2019; Masso et al. 2019), households with disabled members are economically disadvantaged in contemporary China. National statistics show the incomes of households without/with disabled members in urban areas were significantly different (24,564.5 vs 14,505.9 Yuan/year); this gap is narrower in rural areas (7,913.1 Yuan/year and 6,971.4 Yuan/year, respectively) (Chen et al. 2013). This can be reflected from the regional inequality since households with disabled members in the eastern coastal regions are more likely to have a higher income (18,060 Yuan/year) than their counterparts from western inland regions (15,347 Yuan/year) (Yang 2010).

Despite the fact that China has been involved with international human right organisations and signed a number of equality and diversity treaties (e.g. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People – UNCRPD), studies have found that disabled people's employment conditions are largely influenced by many cultural and social elements rooted in Chinese society. The role of family and kinship-based social-relational systems have been discussed by previous researchers (Yang 2010; Zhang and Song 2012; Wang and Wang 2015), and it is important to

consider how disabled people's labour market experience are influenced by these social factors. China is also well known for its authoritarian governance model, which enables the state to restrict and control aspects of society (Zhu 2014; Ortmann and Thompson 2018). However, an increasing number of social researchers are concerned with the effectiveness of the State in promoting the social equality and diversity agenda which seems to be relatively weakly implemented (Fisher and Jing 2008; Fisher et al. 2011; Foster and Ren 2015). In this thesis, four main channels/policies that the state has introduced to promote disability employment will be explored, namely social welfare enterprise (Shang 2000; Huang et al. 2009; Cheng 2011), the disability quota scheme (Sargeant et al. 2018), self-employment (Mohapatra et al. 2007; Yan 2010) and employment in the public sector (Brodsgaard et al. 2006; Ang 2012).

Existing research has indeed explored various factors that can affect the employment experience of disabled people in China, but little research has been conducted to provide a comprehensive exploration and explanation in terms of how disabled people's experience in the Chinese labour market is affected by social transition in China. This thesis considers the interaction of social/cultural factors and political and labour market developments/changes that cannot be analysed in isolation.

### 1.3 Debates in the Studying Disability Employment in the UK Context

The theorisation of the social construction of disability in the UK began with a strong participation of disabled people who had experiences of strict social segregations (see Hunt 1965; UPIAS 1976), and the British social model was developed to challenge the long-standing disability discrimination based on the medical model of disability. The key argument made in the social model of disability (the British Disability Rights organisations so-called 'big idea') was that it is the way that modern society is organised that makes people living with impairments, disabled (Oliver 1983, 1984). Studies of the social model of disability became increasingly popular in academia and politics, addressing topics such as physical barriers (Hunt 1965; Oliver



1983; Abberley 1992), institutional barriers (Barnes 2012), attitudinal barriers (Thomas 1999; Reeve 2004), and economic marginalisation (Oliver 1983; Barnes 2011, 2012; Foster and Wass 2013; Foster 2018).

The British social model has a deep connection with Marxist critiques on the development of capitalism and its way of organising production and ownerships (i.e. means of production). It is argued that when British society transformed from a feudalist collective means of production to a capitalist individual means of production, disabled labourers were systematically disadvantaged in the labour market because rules and norms were designed based on the assumptions made by non-disabled labourers (Finkelstein 1980; Abberley 1991; Barnes and Mercer 2005; Thomas 2004a, 2007). The capitalist means of production created a different production relationship to pre-industrial production relations. As summarised in the work of Thomas (2007), the central debate of the Marxist disability scholars, focuses on a critique of capitalism and its subsequent ideologies. Through this theoretical lens, debates around the commodification of labour (Oliver 1991, 2004; Abberley 2002), the notion of the ideal worker (Foster and Wass 2013; Jammaers et al. 2016; Jammaers et al. 2019; Scholz and Ingold 2021) and psycho-emotional dimension of disablism (Thomas 1999, 2004b; Reeve 2004) have been documented over the years.

So far, the British materialist disability scholars have dealt with the issues of how and why disabled people were devalued in the societal shift from feudalism to capitalism, with a significant absence of documentations on what was it like for a disabled person to live/work in a pre-capitalist way of production. What the UK researchers empirically rely on was limited observations made by Marx and Engels on the treatment of (injured) labour in fast moving English capitalist factories (see Abberley 1987). What has been argued is that commodification of labour market and changes in the means of production have systematically disadvantaged people with impairments in employment. Yet, contemporary UK disability researchers are not able to contrast and compare different modes of production and their impact on the disabled people's value position in different ways of production, because the UK economy has now been significantly marketized and liberalised, with a significant absence of non-capitalist mode of

production. Hence, researchers may seek answers beyond the UK context. China makes a good research object for its rapid yet uneven transformation of its economy and society, where different modes of production co-exist.

## 1.4 Rationale for the Study

The main rationale of this study is to explore and explain the ongoing commodification of the Chinese labour market and its collateral impact on the (de)valuation of disabled people in the job market. The British social model and historical materialist understanding of devaluation of disabled labour provide a good theoretical foundation for this study as the UK has gone through a similar process during its days of industrialization and urbanisation (Oliver 1996; Abberley 1999). However, several key differences between the Chinese status quo and the British experience need to be highlighted in this section.

The UK had seen its societal transformation from a largely feudal agrarian society to a manufacturing dominant capitalist economy in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. This brought a systematic shift of mode of production from a mainly community/family based collectivist production to a social scale free labour market industrial production where every labourers had to compete for a price to sell their labour (Abberley 1999; Gleeson 1999a). Discriminations based on labourers' physical capacity and ability to work became the major contributors to the ableist workplace norms that have a legacy impact on today's global labour market practice (Foster and Wass 2013). This has been increasingly challenged by disabled people in western countries through numerous waves of protests and demonstration, in order to fight for equal rights in society, especially in the labour market (UPIAS 1976; Oliver and Barnes 2012).

It would be legitimate to argue that above understandings of disability devaluation are socially and politically specific as they were based on the historical contextual background in the UK. For China, it is a different cultural and social entity for disability research, though some common

grounds can be seen between the two contexts (Qu 2017). Unlike the UK, which initiated the industrial revolution and global trade that brought the capitalist sense of efficiency and ableism rooted in productivity to the rest of the world, China is arguably a passive receiver of so-called western (ableist) economic models (Gallagher 2005). The emphasis on the productivity and economic efficiency brought by international capitalists in the form of foreign investment can shape the Chinese labour market which may become more commodified as a result. In the meantime, there are a much more diverse range of jobs in the contemporary Chinese labour market, in comparison with the UK during industrialisation - it is both a large manufacturer exploiting the availability of cheap and plentiful labour, but also has a substantial knowledge economy and higher skilled employees who have benefitted from an overseas education (which western capitalist countries could not exploit). This is important to note to justify the rationale of the study as the co-existence of various type of jobs can enhance disability scholars' understanding of how the valuation of disabled labour is related to the nature of work in different sectors.

The cultural and social values related to the perception towards disability are also important to study as they are part of the ableist norms in the context of China. This thesis will discuss the role of family and kinship, social relations in the Chinese context, and individual's social status. They all to some extent have contributed to the valuation and devaluation of disabled people in the labour market.

China's commitment to international trades makes it possible for domestic policies and practices to be influenced by global movements, such as international disability rights activism. The ratification of the UNCRPD offers an opportunity for disability researchers to use the international treaty as a benchmark to measure and evaluate the Chinese domestic practices on promoting the rights of disabled people. However, with the absence of freedom of assembly and demonstration, disability rights legislations in China are still largely in the hands of the

(paternalistic) state which equips itself with medical approaches of understanding disability. A significant controversy to the core principles of the UNCRPD.

It is believed that studying disability employment in China can benefit the understanding of labour market transition in terms of filling the knowledge gap that was left by the UK scholars. The UK based researchers did not have the opportunity to observe the pre-capitalist nature of work (i.e. agrarian collectivist work) during the industrial revolution. By studying China's current transition from a largely state controlled collectivist work arrangements to an increasingly diversified national labour market, it is hoped that this knowledge gap can be bridged with regard to the understanding of the construction of commodification on disabled labour.

## 1.5 Research Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives of this thesis are threefold. From an empirical level, this study aims to provide first hand lived experience of disabled people in the Chinese labour market across the country. This will produce a contrasting view on how social-spatial factors affect Chinese disabled people's opportunities to participate in the labour market.

This study will also examine the characteristics of the increasingly commodified labour market and its impact on disabled labourers. As China embrace international trade and treaties, it becomes possible to see how the 'western capitalism' clashes with 'Chinese characteristic'. In other words, the emphasise on efficiency and profit making bought by the international capitalism may have significant impact on the commodification process of the labour market where disabled labourers may be devalued as a result.

Finally, this study aims to contribute to the disability studies scholarship by theorising the Chinese labour market transition with the consideration of broader social economic transformation in China from a largely state controlled production to a more market driven production. Different forms of employment and nature of job will be necessary to be included in this research. As discussed earlier, the advantage of studying Chinese labour market and disabled people's experience in employment, is that a range of different forms of work and job design are co-existed in China as the nation transforms its economy. During this transition, it is one of the aims in this study to uncover the traditional social and cultural values that are part of the modern ableist norms that devalues disabled people in society. Ableism might be universal, as researchers around the world report in various journal entries, studying ableism in China must be combined with the consideration of its legacy values that were influenced by its traditional production methods.

## 1.6 Research Questions

A central research question aims to address the role of commodification of labour market, variation in the nature of work and job design and ableist norms in the valuation of disabled people in contemporary China. However, to answer this, three sub research questions are proposed.

- How do Chinese social, political and cultural factors affect disabled people and their experience in the labour market?
- Do disabled people employment experiences affected by the nature/type of work? if so, how?
- How does the commodified labour market affect Chinese disabled people's employment opportunities?

## 1.7 Structure of the Thesis

There are nine chapters in this thesis, each serving a particular role to systematically address the research questions listed above.

Chapter two, will provide a contextual background to researching disability in chin. Firstly, the economic and social changes will be briefly covered. In this chapter, the author will review the policies that were introduced in the 'old days' and discuss their lasting impact on contemporary Chinese society, especially the implications on disabled people.

Chapter three will discuss the role of the Chinese state based on a review of current literature, in terms of its efforts in promoting disabled people's employment. For the final part of the chapter, the author will critically review the employment policies that the state introduced.

In chapter four, where theory is reviewed, the author will explore the relevant theoretical literature developed in the UK context. A comparison of various models of understanding disability will be made. In this chapter, this thesis will attempt to justify the adoption of the social model of disability as the most appropriate approach to study disabled people's experience in the labour market. Moving on to the discussion of historical materialism, this chapter will review numerous debates from materialist disability researchers who argue that the capitalist mode of production brings with it a commodification of labour, which creates so-called 'ideal worker' which systematically disadvantages and excludes disabled labourers. In this chapter, the author will also review the attitudinal dimension of disablism in capitalist societies where disabled people not only face physical barriers but also psycho-emotional disablement from non-disabled people. At the end of this chapter, the author will try to justify the usefulness of this literature and their applicability to the Chinese context. Three major theoretical areas, namely the commodification of labour market, ableism studies, and analysis of variation of nature of work will be discussed and justified, respectively.

In chapter five, this thesis will justify a critical realist standpoint for guiding the research process because it is so far the most appropriate research philosophy which offers a third way of social enquiry between interpretivism and positivism. In this chapter, a number of methodological choices will be made and justified, in order to conduct the study in the most rigorous and ethical manner.

Chapter six and seven are the findings chapters. Based on the thematic analyses, the author will present the empirical findings based on the thematic analysis. Eight major factors will be analysed across these two chapters, to reflect the lived experience of participants based on their differentiated social spatial status.

In chapter eight, this thesis will theorise the empirical qualitative findings from a critical realist perspective by looking at the social reality (disabled people's experience in the labour market) from three layers. Empirically, based on the findings in this study, disabled people in China seem to be segregated and trapped in the rural sectors, which are substantially worse off than urban sectors. Moving deeper, numerous social actors are identified to form a closer to reality explanation of how disabled people are disadvantaged and marginalised (if not excluded) in the Chinese labour market. Finally, from a theoretical perspective, this study will move on to discuss the causal mechanism that causes the systematic disablement in Chinese society, by linking the existing theories and empirical findings from this research.

In chapter nine, this thesis will outline the main contributions to the field of disability studies. The author will outline recommendations for disabled people in China, the policymakers and civil society, respectively. This chapter will list the conceptual and methodological limitations this project has and explain how future researchers can overcome these issues to achieve stronger outcomes.

# Chapter Two - Studying Disability & Employment in a Transitioning China

## 2.1 Introduction

The introductory chapter explored the contextual and theoretical background of the study, providing a rationale for this research. China is a country in transition: it is a mixture of old and new, traditional and modern ideas. China had been an agrarian society where people lived in relatively isolated communities where social relations tended to be stable, which was strengthened during the planned economy era when the government introduced several restrictive policies on citizen's social mobility. In these communities, disabled people were living with their next of kin as if a feudalist way of living and working. Disabled people were not systematically segregated from mainstream society, but included in the local community.

Since 1978, significant changes political, economic, and social factors have occurred that have affected Chinese disabled people and their employment opportunities. This chapter will begin by discussing the socio-economic transition from a planned to what is claimed as a market economy, and how disabled people have been affected by this process. It will then review the critical literature regarding 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and discuss the compatibility of those factors with market values. Finally, this chapter will analyse the role of the Chinese state in advocating disability rights by exploring some of the key employment related policies and legislation introduced by the Chinese government.

## 2.2 A State-Led Economic Transition

Most China researchers begin their chapters by discussing the “economic miracles” that China has been experiencing for several decades. This study, however, chooses to open the chapter by discussing the economic transition in China and its impact on disabled people's employment. Since 1978, China has undergone a series of social-economic transformations, which are



contrasted to its previous Maoist socialist totalitarian practices. A rapid shift toward urbanisation, industrialisation and marketisation brought about a massive amount of labour mobilisation and migration across the country (Zhao and Li 2019).

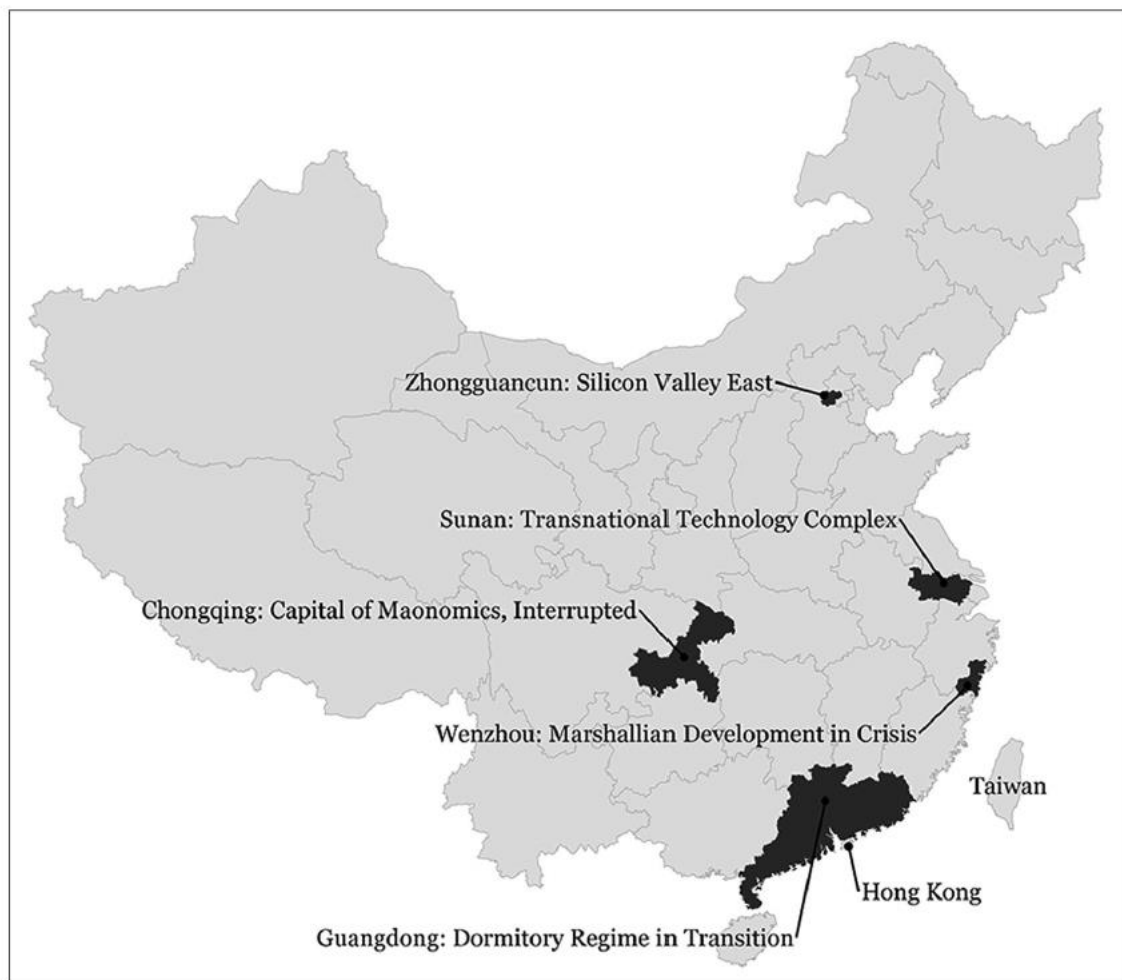
Prior to these reforms, the state had centrally planned the economic and social activities of its own citizens (Kerswell and Lin 2017). The Maoist approach<sup>3</sup> to social-economic development allowed the state to centrally coordinate activities by dividing the whole nation into different parts in order for the nation to utilise its resources (natural and human) based on need (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). The model, however, essentially prioritised urban industrialisation based on the exploitation of the rural agrarian sector, where all the goods produced were taken by the state and were unevenly redistributed/subsidised to the urban population. The urbanisation ratio in China before 1980 was below 20%, meaning the then developmental model was based on the exploitation of the masses who subsidized a privileged minority. To maintain this developmental strategy, a series of population and social mobility control policies were introduced, which have had a lasting impact on Chinese society (see section 2.3.2). This approach has been significantly revised since 1978, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shifted its focus from class confrontation to economic development, which led to liberalisation of the economy and urbanisation, albeit within strict state control (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). There are three major components of this shift – lifting land restrictions and commodification of land in the rural area, which released a large number of free and cheap labour; easing control over the urban sector by allowing citizens to set up their own private businesses; and laying off workers from the over-staffed public sector and replacing permanent employment contracts with precarious short term contracts (Hassard et al. 2000; Hassard et al. 2006; Zhang and Donaldson 2008; Kerswell and Lin 2017).

The classification of the Chinese developmental model as either capitalist or socialist is a complex and contentious issue, with extensive scholarly debate (Gao 2005; Kerswell and Lin

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<sup>3</sup>The Chinese version of the Stalinist model, which focuses mainly on heavy industrial development with strong state participation in steering the economy.

2017). While this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to note that the Chinese economic reform is multifaceted and regionally specific. Zhang and Peck (2016) describe China's industrial relations, education and training, interfirm relations, and corporate financing as constituting a "third pathway" that shares some features of both coordinated market economies (such as Germany) and liberal market economies (such as the US). This is in contrast to the more prevalent models adopted by other countries. Regional differences and industrial clustering are notable features of the Chinese developmental model, as depicted in the figure below.



*Figure 2 -1 Sub model of Chinese economy*

Source: Zhang and Peck 2016

Long and Zhang (2012) have also observed that China exhibits spatial specialization at the county level, accompanied by industrial clustering. Economic activity is concentrated in the more developed coastal regions, which has led to the growth of industrial clusters due to internationalization and integration into the global economy. China's economic development has primarily been export-led and reliant on international trade since it opened its trade borders to the world (Gao 2005). The resulting high demand for cheap labour to work in the newly established export-focused industrial clusters has driven unprecedented labour migration from rural to urban areas, as well as from western to eastern coastal regions (Zhao and Li 2019). However, the surplus of labour supply from rural areas and inadequate state regulation has resulted in the proletarianization of labour in urban areas, leading to increased labour unrest caused by poor working conditions and job precarity (Nee and Matthews 1996; Smith and Pun 2018).

It is worth noting that the Chinese economic system, although utilizing market mechanisms and state intervention, does not conform to the principles of a completely capitalist economy or a liberal democratic nation (which were the basis of modern economic theory in the West). Unlike the UK's industrialization in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where a private ownership-based economy opened up the domestic market to international trade and commodified the labour market, China's economy was built on a collectivist economic tradition with significant state involvement in allocating national resources (Qin 2013). This interventionist approach has persisted in the post-reform era, with the state and local governments maintaining substantial influence over the labour market through direct administrative orders (Huang et al. 2009; Ji et al. 2012; Xiao et al. 2018), population planning, and civil society control (Fisher et al. 2012).

When it comes to the experiences of disabled people in other countries that have made the transition from a planned to a market economy, for example, the Soviet Union and Eastern European nations, evidence suggests that disabled people are often neglected and marginalised (Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2014; Offermann 2019; Masso et al. 2019). Research suggests

that during the process of industrialisation and labour migration, disabled people are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of competing with non-disabled people in the labour market (Gao 2005; Hassard et al. 2006, 2010). Furthermore, the retreat of the state in providing a social security net has left a substantial gap in social support for disadvantaged groups, which the market has failed to fill, hence some groups (e.g. disabled people) have become increasingly marginalised (Stickley et al. 2021; Foster et al. 2021). This is confirmed in the Chinese context, where families have taken up the responsibilities of supporting disabled members (Shang 2000). Statistics suggest that 61.16% of unemployed disabled people over the age of 15 are supported by family members (Liao et al. 2016). This results in households with disabled members earning significantly less than those without disabled members, especially in urban areas. In 2012, the incomes of households with/without disabled members in urban areas were significantly different (24,564.5 to 14,505.9 Yuan/year); though this gap is narrower in rural areas (7,913.1 Yuan and 6,971.4 Yuan, respectively) (Chen et al. 2013). This evidence itself illustrates two important points: firstly, there is a large income gap between households with disabled and non-disabled members, and secondly, there is a substantial gap between urban and rural economic development. Loyalka et al. (2014) thus refer to the "extra cost of disability" or 'disability penalty' for households with disabled members in China, meaning that without integrated social support, households with disabled members are more likely to experience economic difficulties. The latest evidence produced by Qi et al. (2020) found that households with disabled members are more likely to live in poverty in China.

The examination of the employment experiences of disabled workers in different industrial regions of China holds theoretical significance due to the distinct spatial features of the Chinese developmental model. As such, this research aims to compare the nature of employment and work across various regions in China and investigate the impact of job design on disabled individuals in a rapidly evolving China. Through this inquiry, the study seeks to contribute to the current understanding of the interplay between disability, regional industrialisation, and employment opportunities in China.

This section has set out the foundation of this thesis, arguing that the transition to an economy based on the commodification of labour and a relatively strong state interference of the developmental model has made it economically difficult for disabled people. In the meantime, little evidence has suggested the state has fulfilled its role of providing a fair playing field and employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups in the labour market who are unlikely to compete in its newly deregulated labour market. It is therefore important to investigate the clash between traditional/legacy Chinese values that were developed prior its opening up and the so-called international standard of marketized economy with a significant focus of labour productivity and efficiency.

## 2.3 The Tension Between Legacy and ‘Modernisation’

### 2.3.1 Collectivism and Individualism

In the first 30 years of the CCP regime<sup>4</sup>, the nation's industries were under public ownership, and the '*Danwei*' system (unit) was introduced for the state to collect and redistribute resources and wealth (Chow and Dwight 2014). This form of production and reproduction complements the function of the family/household, which has been traditionally regarded as a basic unit of economic and social activities. The *Danwei* system was first set up in cities (work units) and then implemented in rural sectors (production units), where all economic production activities were engaged, but also the grassroots party organisations and political administrations were established (Xiao et al. 2020). It provided 'cradle to grave' welfare provision (Hassard et al. 2010). The *Danwei* system had several impacts on the collectivist culture of the nation as well as the experience and identity of disabled people. Firstly, evidence shows that nearly 98% of the nation's labour force were working in these units (Bian 1994), meaning almost every Chinese citizen was either contributing to the system or receiving care from the system as a collective (Xiao et al. 2020). Secondly, all policies were implemented via the *Danwei* system, which meant that all citizens were mobilised and participating nationwide in politics via this system (Qu

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<sup>4</sup>The communist party of China started its regime in mainland China from 1949. In the first 30 years of its ruling, i.e. 1949 – 1979, it adopted the planned economic policies which strictly forbid the existence of private labour market.

2020). For instance, the planned fertility policies and the *Hukou* system<sup>5</sup> were introduced and enforced through the cooperation of each *Danwei*. Thirdly, the *Danwei* system was responsible for providing social care services to its members (workers and their families), including childcare, housing, medical care, education and pensions (Li 2004). Lastly, as Qu (2020) suggests, the *Danwei* system has a lasting impact on people's identity (or *Danwei* consciousness) as the employment offered by those units was extremely stable and lifelong, in some cases, employment could be passed on to the next-generation – therefore each unit became a familiarity-based community where all social members shared the same identity as co-workers.

Previous studies that have focused on the CCP's policies and their impact on Chinese people's identity suggest that an increase in collectivism among Chinese people was seen during 1949-1979 when the planned economy was dominant (Steele and Lynch 2013). Gries (2004, p9) links the collectivist identity with the notion of national pride (nationalism), defining then Chinese public's identity as: "*aspects of individuals' self-image that is tied to their nation, together with the value and emotional significance they attach to membership in the national community*".

The current trend of privatisation and marketisation of the economy has led to a decrease in such collectivist nationalism in the Chinese population. Evidence from a number of scholars (Koch and Koch 2007; Yan 2010; Steele and Lynch 2013) reveals that Chinese people, especially those that live in coastal/economic active areas, increasingly prioritising their individual needs and gratification over collective interests. It perhaps indicates that private-sector driven economic development in these regions has started undermining the collectivistic values that were fostered by the CCP in its first 30 years of the regime (Mladenov 2017). However, Wang (2002) points out there is a mismatch between the official codes that continue to promote collective values and the growing capitalist economic order, which prioritises individual interest and competition in the market.

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<sup>5</sup>Household register system. See section 2.3.2 for detailed introduction and discussion.

The discussion of the *Danwei* system and collectivism provides valuable contextual information in studying disability in contemporary China. The principles of the *Danwei* system were integrative and inclusive, regardless of a member's ability to work, as the system covered all member's welfare. Therefore, despite a lack of empirical research on disabled people's experience in this system, it is important to note that disabled people were not segregated from mainstream production. In addition, since all social and economic activities were delivered through this system, collective identity is likely to be reinforced while suppressing individual identity. Disability as a diversity element is less likely to be seen as a stigmatised or 'spoiled' identity, where everyone is treated by the 'average and normal standard'. Emerging evidence from the post-planned economic era suggests that Chinese communities are moving towards more individualism, it is therefore important to explore how this has affected the inclusion of disabled people in social networking in mainstream society (Steele and Lynch 2013). Lastly, with the retreat of the state in providing employment opportunities for all societal members, significant social care was transferred to either service organisations or to families (Fisher and Jin 2008), and thus it is vital to investigate how disabled people's quality of life has been affected as a result.

### 2.3.2 The Household Registration System (*Hukou*) and Restrictions on Social Mobility

Besides the emerging tension between traditional collectivism and increasing individualism came with the economic reform, another form of tension in modern China is the legacy of the *Hukou* system, which divides the nation's population into two classes: rural and urban citizens (Mcelroy and Yang 2000; Chan 2010). In the 1950s, the *Hukou* system was implemented in China as a national population control policy with the intention of supporting urban industrialisation, which was a key aspect of the Maoist socialist developmental model. The system ensured that an adequate number of peasants were working in the fields to meet the needs of urban populations by creating two categories of citizenship within the country (Qi et al. 2015). This approach was based on the Stalinist developmental model and was similar to the Soviet model in its emphasis

on urban heavy manufacturing and the role of the state in sorting (human and material) resources. The consequence of this policy was the creation of two distinct categories of citizenship within the same nation. This was a result of the urban-rural divide that was reinforced by the *Hukou* system, which limited the mobility of rural citizens and restricted their access to urban resources such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The urban population, on the other hand, enjoyed greater access to these resources and had greater social and economic mobility. Rural citizens desperately wanted to be granted an urban *Hukou* because urban citizens were entitled to access most national social security benefits whereas rural citizens had zero benefits. During the planned economy era, a dualistic socioeconomic structure was implemented, which still significantly impacts disabled people's employment experience (Shang 2000). For example, disabled workers in urban sectors (work unit - *Danwei*) were entitled to social insurance provisions, such as guaranteed employment and pension schemes, which were all protected by the state. On the other hand, disabled people in rural sectors had to rely on their families' status. In addition, such a dualistic structure also causes unequal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (Wu 2011; Wu and Zheng 2018). With such disadvantages imposed on rural citizens, it is unsurprising that a lot of rural citizens desperately wish to move to cities and gain urban *Hukou* status.

In urban cities, especially in larger metropolises, social support agencies (see table 2.1) are available to senior citizens and young disabled children, called *fuli yuan* (welfare institute), and disabled people's reliance on the family is lower. Unlike other ex-soviet style socialist countries (see the example of Romania described in Walker 2011), which institutionalised many disabled adults, there seems to be no available evidence that suggests that this happened in China. Instead, any form of support for senior and young vulnerable citizens was based on the traditional Chinese philosophy, with family looking after old and young members. Socially organised organisations were only seen as a secondary alternative if family support was not available (Fisher and Jing 2008).



	Child		Adult	
	Family	Non-family	Family	Non-family
Large city	Live with family, attending in special school	Welfare institution, foster family, children village, adoption, homeless	Live with or support by family	Institutions, homeless.
Other (regional, rural)	Live with family, attending in special school	Informal support, homeless.	Live with or support by family	Village housing or homeless.

*Table 2-1 Regional comparison of support sources for disabled people in China*

Adapted from Fisher and Jing 2008.

Since the 1980s and the shift in economic structure towards an increasingly marketized economy with a strong state presence, a private sector has gradually developed. It required labour from rural areas to support the demand from those growing manufacturing businesses in cities. Consequently, the Chinese urbanisation rate increased dramatically, from 17.92% in 1978 to 58.52% in 2017 (see Figure 2.1). Urbanisation is considered to be one of the most significant indications of a nation's transformation to an industrial society, but *Hukou* distinguishes China's feature of this trend as labourer's physical movement does not change their status and entitlements. In other words, despite this great increase in the urban population, the *Hukou* system hindered complete urbanisation since some rural *Hukou* holders living in cities were still counted as rural citizens, and hence their social mobility was restricted (Qi et al. 2015). Being a rural *Hukou* holder in urban cities means that they had issues such as sending their children to public schools or claiming unemployment benefits (Wang and Liu 2018). In addition, studies reveal that those migrant workers and their children are likely to experience discrimination and bullying at school and work, because native urban citizens would regard them as 'dirty and uneducated' due to the long-standing rural/urban dichotomy (Lin and Yang 2018).



## The Four Economic Regions of China



*Figure 2-3 Four major economic zones in China (2018)*

(Data from National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018)

Besides the migration flow from rural to urban regions, Chinese social-economic development is regionally unbalanced. Figure 2.1 and 2.2 indicates that the coastal regions in the east are the most economically developed areas, with the highest percentage of urbanisation. This also reflects the earning gaps between regions; in 2018, the eastern region had the highest household disposable earnings (30,655 Yuan/year), while people from the western region were earning just over half of that of their eastern counterparts (18,407 Yuan/year). One of the biggest reasons for this is that greater employment opportunities in the eastern regions attracted many labour migrants: from rural to urban locations and from smaller to larger cities. The main participants in this national labour flow are generally working-age non-disabled people (Xiao et al. 2018), whereas ‘weak and old’ labourers (including disabled people) are left in their local communities. As for the jobs migrants undertake in the cities, Chan (2010) suggests that most of those migrants work in unwanted / ‘dirty’ jobs with low wages, where job security is low since they are not entitled to local employment protection benefits. Boffy-Ramirez and Moon (2018) found

that urban households earn 30% more than rural households, which can be used as evidence to justify the motives of mass migration flow. As Lee and Regan (2010, p.320) note:

*"one may be tempted to ask whether there are two Chinas – a developed China and a developing China – discernible in the wealthy eastern and coastal v poor western and central regional divide which accentuates the urban/rural gap".*

Plentiful employment opportunities and higher wages in more developed cities can be taken as one factor, while the opportunity to gain a local *Hukou* is another. There are two main methods that migrants can use to gain a local *Hukou*: merit-based selection and policy-based incorporation (Wu and Zheng 2018). Merit-based selection schemes are available for those who go to the city for higher education and aim to settle as higher skilled workers in the city, in turn contributing to local development<sup>6</sup>. Such schemes are usually open to those who have professional jobs in the city and can purchase homes. Critics of this meritocratic scheme argue that while local government is offering local *Hukou* to talented job seekers and granting them housing subsidies, the state has become a major player over employers in their valuation of citizens, and thus distorts the function of the market (Cooke and Wang 2019). This worsens regional inequality as fiscally rich cities are more likely to gain talented employees than poor ones (Goodman 2014).

The second method to obtain local urban *hukou* is through policy-based incorporation. Thanks to the rapid urban economic development, there is an increasing need for cities to expand their administrative territories so that they can expand the size of the city. Those who live in suburban villages may be granted an urban *Hukou* in exchange for their land ownership. Unlike the merit-based scheme, the policy-based incorporation scheme is not tied to individuals' abilities. Wu and Zheng (2018) present evidence showing that migrants who gain an urban *Hukou* through the merit-based scheme tend to earn more than urban natives and have strong upward social

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<sup>6</sup>To simply put it, it is more similar to a visa and naturalisation system for international migration.

mobility, whereas those who gain an urban *Hukou* through urban expansion rarely have economic advantages. This finding may indicate that those disabled people who were born in rural areas are less likely to have upward mobility, since they have less access to high quality mainstream education systems, and therefore less chance to gain an urban *Hukou* through merit-based selection schemes (Xu 2018). Even if they were born in a suburban area and lucky enough to be able to gain an urban *Hukou* thanks to urban expansion, their opportunities in upgrading social mobility are still significantly lower compared to their counterparts who were born with an urban *Hukou* (Qi et al. 2015).

Before the economic reforms, most rural disabled people participated in agrarian activities (Shang 2000). Since the reforms, which began in rural areas, increasing numbers of labourers have been released from the land, and some have migrated to other places seeking employment opportunities or to establish their own businesses. With increasing machinery investment in rural farms, the nature of work has been increasingly standardised, which highlights the importance of individual's physical and intellectual capability (Ji et al. 2012). This transition from group unit work to individualised machinery work is similar to the industrialisation processes of European countries (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century). Hence, it is important to investigate the employment experience of disabled people working in various regions with different developmental status and to examine whether the social-economic transition affects their employment choices and experiences.

Evidence from He et al. (2013) suggests that after hundreds of millions of people migrated from rural to urban areas, there were two important outcomes of this national transition. The first is that migration appears to disadvantage disabled people who live in urban areas, as they are less likely to be able to compete in the labour market with non-disabled migrants from rural areas; and the second suggests many disabled people in rural areas have to contribute to family farming and fishing activities since the primary source of labour-power (non-disabled men) has left to seek employment opportunities in cities.

China has seen, and probably will continue to see, significant urbanisation and a migration of rural labourers to richer regions (such as those richer cities near their villages) for employment opportunities. As a result of urban/rural segregation, disabled people might be left behind in the villages, since they may not be able to bring any income to the family, and plus, the living costs in cities are higher. According to the data from CDPF, 76.7% of disabled people are estimated to live in rural regions (with a rural *hukou*, to be more precise), whereas only just below a quarter of the whole disabled population have *urban hukou* (Ling et al. 2018). In contrast, the urbanisation ratio in contemporary China is estimated to be 64.72% in 2021 (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2022), with 42.35% of the total population having an urban *hukou*. This means the probability of disabled people who move to cities making up a high proportion of those with urban *hukou* is low. Further, rural disabled people often experience extreme poverty and could only perform low skilled repetitive work (He et al. 2013). Although the government has introduced some specific policies targeted at disabled people in extremely poor economic conditions, the level of support they can receive for employment-related issues remains unclear. On the other hand, disabled people with urban *Hukou* may find it difficult to gain employment in cities, but they still have better access to social welfare benefits which, to some extent, protects them from poverty.

The *Hukou* system was a historical product of the planned economy, which aimed to restrict citizens' physical and social mobility, to support the centrally planned development strategy. However, the scheme has become an obstacle to China's labour market development, as it places significant restrictions on people's freedom to migrate. Zhao and Li (2019) point out that there is a large gap between urban and rural areas in terms of income and wealth, even for people in the same social class (see Smith and Pun 2018, their observation of the new class system in contemporary China). First, unless households with disabled members are "lucky" enough to be granted urban *Hukou*, granting them access to urban social resources (education, healthcare, employment support etc.), it is less likely for them to gain urban *Hukou* through the meritocratic system. This is because, until 2015, disabled students were significantly disadvantaged in

education as there were little to no reasonable adjustments made for disabled students. Second, due to the uneven distribution of the disabled population (i.e. rural v urban areas), upward and downward mobility are unequal among rural and urban residents. Rural disabled people are more likely to be downwardly mobile, whereas urban disabled people might be protected by their urban parents' resources (Zhao and Li 2019). This means that disabled people who live in urban areas have more social security than disabled people in rural areas, creating inequality.

### 2.3.3 Eugenics and Second-Class Citizenship

In the late 1970s, the Chinese government proposed a nationwide planned fertility policy to control population growth and "improve" its population quality (Xun 2002). Fundamentally, the planned fertility policy (*Jihua Shengyu*) paralleled the planned economy system (*Jihua Jingji*), which was based on the idea that the state should have the full authority to plan and manage national development (Nie 2014). This included population planning, in which the state treats the population as a national asset. A number of national campaigns were organised in the 1970s and 1980s to propagate the policy with the slogan "fewer, better and later", which refers to fewer children per household, better quality (lower death rate among new-borns) and later childbirth age. Social Darwinism and eugenic ideas, at this time, were adopted by policymakers, with the idea of "racial improvement" (Xu 2012; Chung 2014). Based on this ideology, people with impairments were seen as an unfavourable group in the population, which society wanted to avoid and remove.

An example of planned fertility is the well-known 'One-Child' Policy. This was itself a compromise between the "national interest" and traditional family values. On the one hand, the Chinese government's goal was to control the population while increasing the quality (i.e. fewer and better – "healthy" population). However, on the other hand, traditional agrarian values remained powerful in Chinese society, regarding a 'functioning and producing' son as the main source of labour and family inheritance (continuing the family lineage) (Lei and Pals 2011). This traditional value tended to be more widely accepted by rural citizens because the social security

in rural sectors was so minimal. Hence, rural families tended to have several children in order to have a greater chance of having an adult son who could work in the agricultural fields. This became problematic, as the One-Child Policy restricted the number of babies that each family could have. To meet the traditional family valuation on gender and physical ability, since the 1980s, some rural families were allowed to have more children if they had girls or children with impairments (Mcelroy and Yang 2000; Lei and Pals 2011). It is believed that such an exemption reflects the valuation of the body in rural China, where women and disabled people<sup>7</sup> were likely to be treated as second class citizens. The situation has become worse since the introduction of the Chinese eugenics law – the Maternal and Infant Health Care Law (1995). The law states:

*"for those who "have been diagnosed with certain genetic diseases of a serious nature, which is considered to be inappropriate for child-bearing from a medical point of view, the two may be married only if both sides agree to take long-term contraceptive measures or to take ligation operations for sterility"*

Due to the pre-marital medical checks this law established, it has reinforced the idea of "normal/abnormal" and "high/low-quality bodies" amongst the Chinese public (Zhu and Dong 2018). Social Darwinism and nationalism<sup>8</sup>, as the fundamental ideologies of this policy, have successfully convinced the public that small sacrifices of the minority will achieve "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people in China" (Nie 2014; Qu 2020).

In summary, people with certain bodily characteristics under the eugenics practices, are more likely to be valued lower in society. Therefore, it is important to link this empirical phenomenon with relevant theoretical concepts such as ableism (see next chapter) to theorise public perceptions towards disability in China.

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<sup>7</sup>In China, people with impairments and disabled people refer to the same group of people. In this thesis, it adopts a social model approach which believes people with impairments are disabled by barriers in society. Therefore, the use of disabled people in this sentence has different meaning to the phrase "children with impairments" used in above sentence.

<sup>8</sup>A common slogan under this ideology was: to improve the nation's population quality in order to catch up the West.



## 2.4 Family and Kinship Based Social Relations

### 2.4.1 Family as a Core Social Unit of the Society

The family, as a major form of kin-based relationship, is deep-rooted in Chinese culture. Family is the basic social unit that forms society, takes responsibility of looking after its members, including disabled members, and beyond the family level, such as society and government are regarded as outsiders who should not interfere in domestic life (Yang 2010; Zhang and Song 2012; Zhang and Rosen 2018). This family-based collective culture provides disabled children with some sense of togetherness, despite wider exclusion from society (Trommsdorff 1987). However, misplaced paternalism and over-protection is one of the problematic phenomena within familial interactions (Foster and Hirst 2020). In China, Xu (2012) reveals that many parents do not allow their disabled family members to seek employment opportunities, as they are afraid of potential workplace discrimination and bullying. In contrast, there are also expectations that disabled members can be 'normal', strong and self-reliant, and as a result, disabled people may gain some sort of 'familial recognition' if they can gain an income and contribute to the family (Lin and Yang 2018). In many cases, families do not have the sufficient material resources to even raise their family members, so some children would have to live with their grandparents or other relatives – if extended family support is available (Meng and Kai 2009).

The state in China seems to have little power or perhaps more accurately, any will, to interfere in family issues. Unlike many Western nations, the Chinese state is usually absent from this domain (family affairs) unless there are no family members that can look after disabled people (see previous table 2.1). This marks a major difference from the UK where disabled people have been institutionalised in medical care units for a long period of time under welfare state funding (Oliver 1983; Abberley 1987).

Traditional family values in Chinese society have a profound impact on families with disabled members. One must be reminded that due to the collectivist nature of Chinese culture, family members do not necessarily desire to be independent from their families, rather, they would pursue interdependent relationships (Kinship) through the realisation of common goals for the benefit of the family (Fung et al. 2017). In other words, each family member has a role for achieving collective wellbeing, either being a contributor or care receiver (or both). Chinese culture emphasises the patriarchal order in the family to place every member in the 'right' position (Gold et al. 2002). To be more specific, traditional Chinese values emphasise the exclusiveness and domestic hierarchy of family relations based on ability and gender (Li and Li 2018; Chen 2002). 'Able-bodied' sons were major labourers and contributed to the agrarian work which was considered productive in pre-industrial Chinese society, and they were expected to take responsibilities for looking after their family members in terms of bringing 'wealth' back to the family (Fisher et al. 2011). This inevitably places 'non-productive' family members as 'care receivers' and subsequently in lower power positions. For example, women and children are subordinates to their non-disabled husbands and sons (Shang 2011). This is evident from the fact that most of the migrants in today's China are non-disabled male (64.1% in 2021) who take the jobs in cities and send the money back to their hometowns, hence making them economically more powerful.

The patriarchal order of family relationships continues in contemporary Chinese families, but it has its new forms. Studies in contemporary Chinese families suggest that disabled family members are likely to be powerless and hopeless in their domestic life (Chiu et al. 2012; Yang 2015; Fung et al. 2017). Older household members without their own assets have little freedom to choose their own living arrangements; instead, they have to follow their non-disabled son-centred arrangements, this is the same case vice versa (i.e. disabled child and non-disabled parents) (Fisher et al. 2011). What is intriguing is that evidence generated by many researchers indicates that those 'care receiving' family members would not seek external help but rather choose to accept this arrangement from their family caretakers (Fung et al. 2017). Sometimes those 'unproductive and sick' family members would be treated poorly due to their unproductive material status. Carey (2015) argues that the notion of nonproductivity, irrationality and

dependence eventually deny the rights of disabled members within and outside of the family. This may be due to the exclusiveness and isolation of Chinese families that living under family arrangement is the 'normal' way of life, and it is difficult to think of the alternatives or pursuing independence (Edwards and Imrie 2003).

To understand the role of families when studying disability in China, it is important to understand the concept of face (*Mianzi*), which according to Hu's (1944) interpretation is a person's concern with social image, connections and public norms. It has greatly influenced familial relations when it comes to disabled members. Face is associated with the honour and social image of a family in the local community. Studies from China (Chiu et al. 2012) indicate that disability (especially intellectual disability) is likely to be regarded as bringing shame to a Chinese family. Self-stigma is likely to emerge among families with disabled members as a result of feeling ashamed. Yang (2015) summarises the common subjective feelings of families based on a literature review of past studies which investigate self-stigmatisation of 'disabled families': they are likely to feel embarrassment and guilt, self-worthless and social withdrawal. Chiu et al. (2012) further notes that families with lower socio-economic status are more likely to be the victims of such face related culture. Those disabled family members, meanwhile, may experience domestic discrimination as they may be regarded as 'bad seeds' who cannot fulfil 'normal' familial expectations (Lin and Yamaguchi 2011). In order to avoid such stigma, many disabled people might adopt the approach of 'passing for normal' (Goffman 1963) by concealing their impairments (e.g. using a cosmetic arm prosthesis) in public, so that they can pretend they are non-disabled so as to not bring shame to the family.

#### 2.4.2 Social Stratification / Social-Economic Status of the Family

Family socioeconomic status (SES) has emerged during the literature review regarding the class divide in contemporary China (see Goodman 2014). This perhaps helps disability researchers understand the social context of China when disability studies merge with wider sociological debates regarding wider inequality in China.

In their highly cited article about broader social inequality in China, Cooke and Zhao (2020) explain how family social-economic status can, to some extent, determine a person's whole life. They argue that educational inequality drives broader social inequality as students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to go to technical and vocational training (blue-collar) whereas people from privileged backgrounds (state cadres, entrepreneurs and civil servants – see Goodman 2014) are twice as likely to receive high quality university education, which is threshold to enter higher paid white-collar jobs (Cooke and Zhao 2020). Although other recent studies conducted by other Chinese scholars suggest that the education gap has been reduced in recent years, disabled families are among the most disadvantaged social stratifications (Liu et al. 2020). Loyalka et al.'s (2014) findings suggest that unless the family is 'well-off', the material cost of disability towards families is significant enough to push families into poverty. Evidence from other developing countries also suggests that without a level playing field provided by society, it is much less likely that 'disabled families' would have the same access as their non-disabled counterparts (Grech 2019). In relation to employment, Cooke and Zhao (2020) point out that even if people from disadvantaged SES could find a high-status job, their lack of social connectivity (*Guanxi*) would constrain their opportunity for employment security and promotion because they could not integrate into the social circle (*Quan zi*) (c.f. Barratt 2011).

It is important to move on to evaluate the interaction between the state/community and family, which represent the public and private domains, respectively. Recent research (Jin 2017; Qu 2017; Cooke and Zhao 2020) suggest that the Chinese state tends to employ a utilitarian paradigm in tracking social inequality, meaning that as long as the overall economy is growing, the interest of minority groups can be ignored for the sake of the general good. This developmental model which prioritises economic growth over social inequality has been seen in other developing nations with significant labour market inequalities (Knight 2014).

China's collectivist ideology may have a profound impact on disabled people and their families. For those families with disabled members, the construction of understanding disability and disabled people's self-identity is, to a large extent influenced by their families (Van Der Horst and Hoogsteyns 2014). Evidence from China generally indicates that disabled people tend to be the only disabled member in the family due to the planned fertility policy (CDPF 2015). Together with over-protection and 'face' (*Mianzi*) values, they tend to be isolated and with an attempt to be 'passed for normal'. One must acknowledge that the interactions in the private sphere (i.e. family) are largely different to the public sphere, and it usually depends on each family's SES and parenting strategy in terms of cross-boundary experiences (from private to public). It has become apparent so far that the role of state/social support is missing, regarding providing support to each family for them to facilitate social integration for their disabled members. Research suggests that the state made it even worse for rural disabled people as it prioritises resources for urban households (Janoski 2014). Hence, worse social and economic inequality between rural and urban disabled families in China is expected (Pan and Ye 2014).

### 2.4.3 *Guanxi* and Social Connections

*Guanxi*, or 'relations', 'relationships' and 'corelations' in English, is one of the key cultural elements that has been studied widely in relation to the labour market in China (Bian 2006; Chen and Volker 2016; DiTomaso and Bian 2018). This section connects with the previous section of family status and expands it to the wider social connections that influence disabled people's social mobility which is, however, relatively under-researched. According to Bian (2006, p.312), *guanxi* is: "*a dyadic, particular and sentimental tie that has potential of facilitating favour exchanges between the parties connected by the tie*". DiTomaso and Bian (2018) further explain that this kind of social tie is based on kin and kin-like relationships, which is based on the exchange of favours because members expect that the group interest will be improved or strengthened by connecting different aspects of the social resources processed by each member. Hence, collectivism, interdependence and mutual obligations are the main features of such a

*Guanxi* based social group<sup>9</sup> (Bian and Logan 1996). Fei et al. (1992) conceptualises the Chinese way of social relations as 'Acquaintance Society' (*shuren shehui*) where people (including disabled people) tend to socialise with the people they know in a small circle, usually in a closed community. In such an acquaintance (or *guanxi*) based social relation, who you know is more important and relevant than who you are (Fei et al. 1992).

The concept of social ties, similar to Chinese *guanxi*, can be found in other cultural contexts, such as the 'Arabic Wasta,' 'Brazilian Jeitinho,' and 'English pulling strings.' However, China possesses a unique characteristic of strong connections between *guanxi* and family/clans (Simith et al., 2012; Bizzego et al., 2021). Within Chinese society, a distinct division is made between 'I or we' and 'others,' which is shaped by relationships between individuals, between an individual and a group, and between groups. Yang (2021) explains this phenomenon from the perspective of traditional Chinese Confucianism, emphasizing the close ties individuals have based on kinship and social connections (in a form of schoolmates, village connections or distant family connections). The table below highlights the concept of '*ziji ren*' (translated as 'our people' in English), illustrating the closest type of *guanxi* that an individual can establish within Chinese society.

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<sup>9</sup>These features are similar to family, because kinship-based relationships in China usually involve household centred networks, clans, etc.

		Ascribed	
		High	Low
Achieved	High	<i>Ziji Ren</i> ; faithful pals; sworn followers	Close friends; best friend; relatives from wife's clans
	Low	Distant relatives; wife relation with mother-in-law	Strangers; outsiders

Table 2.2 The dimensions and dynamic process of partitioning 'ziji ren'

Source: Yang (2021)

Comparing the functions of *guanxi* in the pre-reform era (1949-1979) and the post-reform era (1979-present) provides valuable insights into its evolution. Upon the establishment of the communist regime in 1949, Whyte and Parish (1984) assert that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aimed to diminish the influence of *guanxi* in employment distribution (allocation). State-owned agencies were established, wherein party cadres wielded ultimate control over job assignments. Within urban work units and rural collective farms, cadres held authority over various aspects such as housing, education, and welfare provisions for workers (Gold et al., 2002). However, individuals who maintained close relationships with cadres still enjoyed better opportunities for favourable job placements and promotions (Bian and Ang 1997). With the onset of reforms in 1979, China witnessed a significant increase in job opportunities within the private sector, consequently reducing the cadre's control over job assignments. This shift created an environment in which *guanxi* could once again thrive, enabling individuals to gain advantages within the labour market (Chen and Volker 2016).

The application of market transition theory, commonly employed to elucidate the transformation of social relations during economic transitions, appears overly simplistic in capturing the

complexities of China's specific social transition. This inadequacy stems from the country's uneven economic development (Walder 1996). According to Nee (1989; 1992), as the transition to a market economy unfolds, the labour market should become rationalized based on labor utility and value, thereby eliminating irrational factors such as *guanxi* in business decision-making. However, one notable characteristic of the Chinese economic transition is the significant involvement of the state, resulting in incomplete marketization. Bian's (2018) survey covering the period of 1978-2009 indicates a rise in the utilization of *guanxi* in job searches from 46% in 1978 to 80% in 2009. Based on extensive national surveys, Bian (2018) suggests that job seekers can secure better-fitting positions and higher wages through *guanxi*, enhancing their prospects during career transitions. Bian and Logan (1996) propose that *guanxi* holds particular importance in state-owned enterprises, where establishing favourable *guanxi* between workers and line managers outweighs performance indicators in promotion decisions. State cadres and their kinship-based associates enjoy substantial advantages in accessing political resources, subsequently placing them in advantageous market positions, such as obtaining business licenses efficiently and facilitating transactions (Walder 2003; Zhao 2013; Bian 2018; Nee and Opper 2010). Nolan and Rowley (2020) argue that *guanxi* is more influential in contexts characterized by heightened market competition and institutional uncertainty. Researchers have noted regional disparities in the significance of family and *guanxi* within the Chinese labor market. Notably, in economically vibrant areas such as the highlighted industrial clusters depicted in Figure 2.1, scholars have discovered that connections with the government hold less relevance. Instead, familial and clan-based relationships are more frequently employed. Conversely, in certain rural inland regions, possessing connections with government officials appears to carry greater importance for individuals seeking to gain advantages within the labour market (Huang 2008).

*Guanxi* has a substantial influence on disabled people's employment in China. Further to the point made in the previous section, the resources of the *Guanxi* that disabled people have been strongly connected with the family that they belong to. For example, Nolan and Rowley (2020) argue that the Chinese notion of *Guanxi* is based on the paternalistic and male-dominant valuation of social networks which can exclude women (who may also be disabled) as they (women) may bring reputational damage to the group. Put in a social class setting, it may be



difficult for a disabled person who is born and raised in a lower-class family to build up a *Guanxi* network with people from higher social classes as they may have few favours to offer hence, they have little value to be socialised with (Gold et al. 2002). Similarly, there might be a major difference in *Guanxi* opportunities for disabled people who are from urban and rural regions. In summary, family and *Guanxi* can be interrelated with each other, creating a privileged group while excluding those who are outsiders.

## 2.5 The Role of the State and the Influence of the International Community

### 2.5.1 State Funded Agency – Chinese Disabled People’s Federation (CDPF)

Like other social-political campaigns in China, disability advocacy is also directed by the state. In 1988, a national federation was established to 'help' and 'protect' disabled people's interests – the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF), which has been the only recognised organisation representing disabled people's rights to the government (Tang and Cao 2018). The main founder of the CDPF was Deng Pufang<sup>10</sup> who became paralysed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), which became his motivation to set up the CDPF as his way of gaining political power through his father’s influence (Kahrman 2005). The CDPF, acting as a mediating agent between the government and disabled community, legally recognises the existence of disabled people as a disadvantaged group by issuing 'disability certificate' which classifies impairments into seven categories: visual, hearing, speech, physical, intellectual, psychological, multiple and/or other impairments. Each impairment has four degrees regarding the severity, which is determined by a designated doctor who would follow the standard set by the CDPF (Hao and Li 2020). This certificate is so far the only legal document that disabled people receive to claim policy resources.

While the CDPF functions as a "transmission belt" between the disabled constituency and the Party-State, the role of Deng Pufang made the CDPF's case unique and therefore, interesting

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<sup>10</sup>Son of Deng Xiaoping who was the party leader for over 15 years.

(Chen and Xu 2011). Several scholars have researched how the political struggle of disabled people defending their mobility rights has interacted with political campaigns at various governmental levels (Kohrman 2005; Chen and Xu 2011). Deng Pufang, being a privileged political figure in the party, might not have paid attention to disability advocacy if he had not been paralysed himself. Perhaps because of his lived experience of disablement and his experience of working with other disabled workers in local sheltered workshops, he realised the necessity for political rights for disabled people. In the meantime, because of the privileged status that Deng Pufang and his father had in the party, Deng Pufang was able to lobby governmental cadres and meet some highest ranked government officials, turning his 'personal tragedy into a public triumph' (Lee and Regan 2010). It is also necessary to remember that while the nature of the CDPF is to mediate the conflict between the Party-State and disabled citizens, the ultimate mission of the CDPF is to maintain the authority of the Party. As argued by Shi (2018), the CDPF acts as a quasi-governmental department that defines its role as "serving, representing and managing" disabled people, with a minimal focus on political advocacy. Notably, many of the staff in local branches of the CDPF are transferred from other civil service departments, with little experience of working with disabled people. He therefore questions the effectiveness of such a paternalist and authoritarian approach in promoting disabled people's equal access to employment (and other social) rights. Chen and Xu (2011) raise an important point in arguing that such state advocacy has obvious limitations – it might work best on the issues that have clearly-defined policy implications such as economic development targets but is less effective on diffuse issues such as disability rights and equality.

Disabled people are evidently disadvantaged in Chinese society within the domain of employment, which raises the question of what the state and society have done to support them. Existing literature suggests that the government has attempted to position itself as a facilitator to engage in 'official philanthropy', supporting disabled people through the national umbrella agency, the CDPF (Lin et al. 2018). Research suggests that the nature of the CDPF restricts its flexibility and creativity in promoting the employment rights of disabled people, as the economic and social environment is changing so rapidly (Lin et al. 2018). In the meantime, the government has not been able to safeguard the basic economic rights of disabled people who are more likely

to be disadvantaged in the current economic arrangement – in 2000, only 11% of disabled people were on the list of beneficiaries from the government's income relief programme (Shang 2000). Nearly two decades later, the number of disabled people receiving income relief is still only a little more than 10 million (11.76% out of 85 million estimated disabled population), while the CDPF-recognised disabled population has grown significantly. This figure is even more worrying when one considers that the disability employment rate in China remains extremely low at 10.5% (Zhong 2018). The government promotes a so-called "self-responsible, self-enterprising and self-governing" system (Lin et al. 2018), which is perhaps because the shift of the Chinese government's strategy from a planned economy to a largely market-based economy. Based on the findings of Fisher and Jing (2008), the disability employment policy in China now focuses on the family as a unit for allocating policy support and the government would only act as a safety net for disabled people who do not have any family members. A significant proportion of the disabled population are socially excluded from the mainstream society (though not institutionalised), as a result of the lack of social support (Pierini et al. 2001).

### 2.5.2 The Impact of Joining International Treaties

One noticeable contextual phenomenon in China is that important international events and treaties can often trigger policy changes and legislation revision. The common practice of building accessible infrastructure was a direct result of Beijing hosting the 2008 Paralympic Games (Tang and Cao 2011). The Chinese government had to pass legislation to meet international standards as it has joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO). China is also under pressure to implement some of the key principles of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Disabled People (UNCRPD). To join the UNCRPD and meet some of the key principles of the treaty, the Chinese government amended the Law on the Protection of Disabled People (2008), which was first enacted in 1990, shortly after the foundation of the CDPF (1988). Despite the improvements, the domestic law was developed from a medical model of disability, which emphasises medical conditions and impairments as major issues of disabled people, rather than the socio-economic barriers they encounter in equal access to opportunities. Such a contradictory approach to the UNCRPD, which advocates a rights-based approach of understanding disability, will undoubtedly miss the core value of the international convention. Researchers have already

revealed some major deficits of the law due to its medical definition of disability, lack of definition of disability discrimination and ineffective enforcement mechanisms (Hao and Li 2020).

The key concepts written in the UNCRPD are the practice of reasonable adjustments and independent living, which are largely neglected in the Chinese domestic law. Without a concept of reasonable adjustment stated in Chinese law, it is likely to be difficult for judicial courts to judge any cases of disability discrimination, subsequently undermining its effectiveness in enforcement. In addition, Tang and Cao (2018) suggest that due to resource scarcity and regional differences, there is a significant gap between law and practice. Moreover, disabled people's litigation rights are often neglected in the justice system (lack of reasonable adjustment in the legal procedure), which has a negative impact on disabled people's basic rights, including employment rights (Qi et al. 2020).

Independent living, according to the UNCRPD article 19, is defined as *'the equal right to live and be included and participate in the community, with the opportunity to choose where and with whom they live and not to be obliged to live in a particular living arrangement'*. Researchers have found that neither the state nor local government have any policy agenda set to implement this idea as policies are mainly targeting at the family level (Fisher and Jing 2008). Moreover, at the bottom level of the national bureaucratic machine, the experience of disabled people can be contingent as street-level bureaucracy<sup>11</sup> has a high level of discretion that may lead to differences between regions (Foster and Ren 2015). This thus will form a key point of the examination in this research, aiming to explore and explain in terms of the spatial difference when it comes to disability issues.

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<sup>11</sup>In the Chinese political system, a 'street' government is the lowest ranked government department that manage the local communities. Each 'street' is supervised by an upper ranked department called 'district'

Thanks to the ratification of the UNCRPD, Chinese civil society continues to develop, and many disabled people's organisations (DPOs) have emerged to self-advocate disabled people's rights. The UNCRPD does bring some "fresh air" to Chinese civil society and supports the establishment of a number of DPOs. If the CDPF is a national umbrella organisation led by the state, which is an organisation *for* disabled people, DPOs are those organisations run and controlled by disabled people themselves, making them organisations *of* disabled people (Fleischer and Zames 2011). This distinction is important because the nature of the two types of organisations is different. DPOs are self-advocacy groups that take bottom-up approaches to influence policy-making procedures and represent the voices of disabled people from the grassroots level (Oliver 1996, 2009). The CDPF and its local branches may receive directives which come down through the hierarchy, and cadres may have some regular visits to their constituents (disabled people), but constituents' demands and opinions are not likely to travel upwards (Chen and Xu 2011). DPOs, on the other hand, can be more flexible and may find it easier to connect with each other in terms of forming national campaigns on behalf of disabled people, and hence they are arguably more effective in terms of promoting disabled people's interests (Shi 2017; Ennis 2018). However, DPOs in China tend to be restricted to service provision and advocacy rights, due to their accessibility to funding and regulatory approval (Zhou 2015; Huang 2019). Additional research evidence also reveals that the state policy decision making process does not involve disabled people and their representative DPOs (Zhao and Zhang 2018). This indicates that the state only recognises these DPOs as service organisations rather than political advocacy groups, which fundamentally undermines the voice of DPOs in policy decision making procedures. Moreover, research evidence increasingly suggests that President Xi Jinping's administration has been strengthening its control over the civil society and it has cracked down numerous political advocacy groups including DPOs (Wang 2013; Minzner 2015; Womack 2017).

In conclusion, it is important to note that the Chinese model of disability advocacy is based on the pre-condition of maintaining the authority of the Chinese Communist Party, which has little tolerance when it comes to ideological challenges. The ratification of international treaties such as the CRPD has provided an historic opportunity for disabled people in China to form their own

organisations and take bottom-up strategies to influence policies. However, the paradox between the rhetoric legislation and the real experience of disabled people is evident (Fisher and Jing 2008). Whilst on the one hand, disabled citizens have little choice but to heavily rely on their family support on the other, the 'rights' that are indicated by domestic laws are poorly implemented hence little social support can be made available to disabled constituents.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the factors that are off concern for disabled people in the Chinese labour market. The state led transition to the modernisation and industrialisation of the economy while keeping some of the legacy institutions, according to the existing literature, has contributed to the devaluation of disabled people's labour in contemporary China.

The political institutions and associated legacy policies introduced during the planned economy era, according to existing studies, are thought to have restrictive effects on disabled people's social mobility, which is also, for example, then linked with their employment. China is arguably a society which emphasises a person's status and their social relational networks. This can be reflected, for example, in the political institution of *Danwei* (before market reform), family and kinship based *Guanxi* social relations.

# Chapter Three - Disability Employment Policies in China

## 3.1 Introduction

Employment has been viewed as a critical element of disability research – working demonstrates that someone is able to do something. National statistics suggest that 78.4% of employed disabled people in China work in agricultural jobs (including farming, fishing, and husbandry etc.), which are often low-paid and insecure (Liao et al. 2016). This suggests that most disabled people still work in low-paid rural sectors. In urban sectors, where more economic opportunities exist, disabled people are also more likely to be excluded from the mainstream labour market (Wang and Liu 2018).

In urban cities, with the retreat of state-owned agencies, the government has introduced a series of supportive policies to promote disability employment, as the nation is shifting towards a more market-driven economy (Huang et al. 2009). In order to claim the support provided by the government, one needs to be legally recognised as a disabled person with a valid ‘disability certificate’. It is worth clarifying the fact that only around 30 million people are certificated as disabled, while the national survey conducted in 2010 by the CDPF estimates that there were 85 million disabled people in China. Previous research has already included critical evaluations of these employment policies (Shang 2000; Huang et al. 2009; Tang 2013; Lin et al. 2018), yet detailed investigation of the employment experiences of disabled people from various residential locations have not been identified within the existing literature.

## 3.2 Legacy from the Planned Economy - Social Welfare Enterprise

Before the 1990s, disabled people in urban sectors were working in sheltered workshops which were protected by the government, so that it met its minimal responsibility as a caretaker for a "vulnerable" population (Huang et al. 2009). During the planned economy era, the government provided unconditional support for sheltered workshops, including subsidised supplies and sales

through governmental agents. This enabled disabled workers to access guaranteed employment opportunities and secure pension schemes. However, Huang et al. (2009) report that only a small number of those workshops existed at the peak (869 units nationwide employing 48,200 people). The most probable reason for this small proportion is that China at that time did not have a clear classification of disability, so it was not possible to massively institutionalise the disabled population and those workshops were usually not productive, forcing them to rely on state subsidies (Shang 2000; Stone 1998).

Since the 1990s, employment policies for disabled people changed, with the establishment of the CDPF, indicating that the government had started to pay attention to disabled people's employment rights. Market-based competition has replaced the governmental protection paradigm – the state no longer provides supply chains and sales for those sheltered workshops. This complements the CCP's governance strategy that has shifted to marketisation and devolution (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005), releasing governmental "burdens" to civil society. For example, local communities and other enterprises can now apply to be recognised as social welfare enterprises (*shehui fuli qiye*) to access tax breaks. All certificates are granted by local government and employers must recruit at least 25% (varies between regions) disabled employees granted the disability certificate.

There are a number of issues affecting the social welfare enterprise scheme. Due to the relatively long period of government subsidies, workers in those traditional welfare workshops are less likely to be productive and motivated at work (Huang et al. 2009). Furthermore, most of these workshops focus on low-skilled work and are uncompetitive in the open market, even with tax reduction policies (Tang 2013). Tang (2013) also reveals that there are more social welfare enterprises in developed regions than less developed areas, presumably because there are more business opportunities and labour demand in these regions. With more devolution of government control over the employment sector since 2016, all companies can apply for tax breaks if they meet the minimum requirements (25% quota). This policy shift indicates that, given that sheltered employment and quotas are regarded as patronising by some, these policies are aimed



at integrating disabled people into the mainstream labour market. Because of high unemployment and competition for jobs, disabled people may rely on government incentives and tax breaks for employers in order to compete. Without this support, disabled people are likely to experience more difficulties in the labour market. It is also debatable whether this model reduces the social stigma against disabled people, since it is arguably another form of segregation of disabled labour. Such policies regard disabled people as vulnerable and unable to work in mainstream companies. In addition, Cheng (2011) has criticised the scheme, noting that, whilst on the one hand it increases administration responsibilities for local civil servants while there are insufficient staff members to support the scheme, on the other hand there are insufficient funds for employers to accommodate disabled workers' accessibility needs. As a result, disabled people are sometimes marginalised or discriminated against in these workplaces. Evidence suggests that social welfare enterprises have been experiencing a significant downward trend since the 2000s, as they are less able to compete in the market (Cheng 2011).

### 3.3 Stimulate the Market - the Quota Scheme

This section discusses one of the most commonly-practiced policy approaches around the world to promote disabled people's employment: the quota system – a policy which is based on the assumption that disabled people have problems finding jobs by themselves hence the state should solve the 'disability problems' (Hao and Li 2020). Most European countries rely on quota schemes to promote disabled people's employment, with the impact of these policies varying from country to country (Corby et al. 2018). Because the quota scheme allows employers to relinquish their duty by paying a levy to the state, due to the lack of a proper public campaign, many employers would rather treat such legislation as another form of taxation rather than taking it as a social responsibility. The French and German governments set relatively higher quotas than other European nations (6% in France and 5% in Germany, respectively), and the legislation is, to some extent, well-enforced: only 22% of French companies pay the full levy, and the average quota fulfilment in Germany is between 3.7% and 5% (Corby et al. 2018). According to Grammenos (2013), the six EU nations with the smallest employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people have all adopted a quota scheme. Yet, Vornholt et al. (2018) would argue that in Spain where the state has implemented a 2% quota, the proportion of employers who

fulfil their legal responsibility is reported to be under 20%. Hence, it is about the enforcement of the equality laws that matter to the employment of disabled people, especially in countries with quota schemes, as Dickens (2012) would suggest:

*“stronger law will not necessarily lead to improved outcomes for minorities, what is also needed is stronger implementation to give substantive effect to formal rights, reducing the likelihood of adverse treatment and promoting fairer workplaces” (p.47)*

In other words, the law can be seen as a 'paper tiger' – fierce in appearance, but lacking in tooth and claw, if the enforcement mechanism is weak (Hepple 2002). The enforcement mechanism of the law can be shared between three parties: the state, individuals, and trade unions. State agencies should be properly funded so that lawbreakers can be successfully identified. At the same time, trade unions (which, in the Chinese case, are government agencies) should be able to mediate the law by taking cases on behalf of trade union members.

The Chinese government adopted a quota system to better accommodate the disabled population's employment demands and create a more inclusive society. In the law on the Protection of Disabled People (2008), the State sets a 1.5% (minimum one disabled employee) quota for all employers (both public and private sector) that employ more than 20 workers. As with European countries, a levy is collected by the local treasury department, determined by the following formula, if the employer fails to fully comply with the policy:

*Due levy = [number of employees\*1.5% (variance between regions) – number of disabled employees] \* average wage of the company<sup>12</sup>*

It is notable that Chinese companies only need to pay an average wage-based levy to the government, whereas in most European countries, employers have to pay the levy based on the national minimum wage. Therefore, it is more likely for Chinese employers to reduce the due

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<sup>12</sup>See the detailed explanation of the formula at:  
<http://beijing.chinatax.gov.cn/bjswj/c104201/201906/174b8f60d7f24569befbd99da7f8e743.shtml>

levy by reducing their 'on-paper' average wage, so that they can pay less 'tax'. On the other hand, such a rate based on companies and industries might put more pressure on high wage sectors such as emerging high-tech companies.

A further issue with the Chinese quota scheme is, that other than a small levy, there are no other sanctions imposed to penalise employers who fail to comply. Although the levy collecting body is the local treasury department, which has a stronger political influence than the CDPF, the problem of the quota approach is that arguably, rather than being a policy designed to include disabled people in the mainstream workplace, it is fundamentally not inclusive, as it relies on negative sanctions to address exclusivity. As Sargeant et al. (2018) report, many Chinese employers fulfil their legal obligations by paying disabled people a minimum wage to stay at home, undertaking peripheral work. Yet, due to the lack of clear understanding regarding which body is responsible (presumably the CDPF), it is legally unfeasible to force employers to employ disabled people.

There are several critiques claiming that such a policy causes potential problems. Firstly, the quota scheme sends a contradictory message to employers that on the one hand, it is desirable to employ disabled people, yet on the other hand, disabled people are not able to compete with non-disabled people in the job market (Sargeant et al. 2018). Secondly, rather than regarding disabled people as valuable assets for a business, the quota scheme is based on an individualised medical model of disability which regards disabled people as a problem in society and adopts the stance that the State must introduce preferential policies to "address the problem" (Meziani et al. 2014). Finally, it causes discrimination among disabled people because employers favour people with minor or invisible impairments, based on the view that these "less problematic" people will not bring harm to their business (Corby et al. 2018). Evidence by Richards and Hennekam (2020), who studied the impact of the quota scheme on highly educated disabled people in France, suggests that disabled people would feel a lack of belonging and confusion with their legal status in the organisation as they are recruited from a 'special pathway'. Additionally, some disabled people might hide their impairments in the workplace: since they are framed as a minority group

(1.5%). Although having gained their jobs via the quota scheme, they might not want to disclose their impairments due to potential stigmatisation and discrimination (Vornholt et al. 2018).

### 3.4 Self-Employment in China

A third route to employment for disabled people that was identified is self-employment, which is the most popular choice among disabled people. According to Ostrow et al. (2018), self-employment refers to individuals who work for themselves, either as incorporated sole proprietors or through the ownership of a business. There are two types: opportunity and necessary entrepreneurship, a distinction based on the reason for setting up the business (Ostrow et al. 2018).

Economic change in China has brought with it significant business opportunities. Evidence suggests that due to the promotion and modernisation of the rural economy, rural citizens in the eastern regions are more likely to enter high-productivity self-employment since the coastal regions are the most economically developed areas of the country (Mohapatra et al. 2007). Self-employment is also regarded as a development ladder, and as a source of urban entrepreneurship. Cao et al. (2015) suggest that self-employed migrants are the group of people most likely to settle down in cities, since their daily customers are local community members, and as a result, they have more opportunities to integrate with the local community. However, due to the *Hukou* system, self-employed migrants have little chance to apply for urban *Hukou*, either via merit selection or policy incorporation.

Despite this, self-employed disabled people face additional challenges. The approach taken by the Chinese government encourages disabled people to adopt a 'self as enterprise' attitude (Yan 2009). That is, the state encourages disabled individuals to compete in the free market while providing limited support. The impact of this ideological approach on the policy's operation is that the government promotes a heroic narrative of "triumph over tragedy", which mainly

encourages disabled people to overcome their individual "tragedy" and become successful in a 'normal' way – self-strengthening (*Ziqiang*) and self-supporting (*Zizu*) (Lin et al. 2018). In order to help disabled people to achieve success in a 'normal' way, various preferential policies have been introduced to assist self-employed disabled people with establishing businesses, including business license application guidance (Zhang 2007), tax breaks & small start-up funds (Huang et al. 2009) and reserved shop spaces in local markets (Zhou 2015). Due to these preferential policies, self-employment seems to be the most popular method for disabled people in urban areas. However, it appears that due to the strong prejudice against disability in Chinese society, disabled people face significant barriers to becoming successful in business, and the approach is essentially a strategy taken by the state to release its responsibilities to tackle disability related employment issues.

One of the most debatable questions here is whether disabled people become self-employed due to booming business opportunities or because of lack of access to wage-based employment. The existing literature suggests that disabled people are more likely to be self-employed as it provides better flexibility and opportunity for adjustment (Pagan 2009; 2011). Jones and Latreille (2011) further point out that this 'voluntary' alternative to wage employment provides disabled people with greater opportunities to accommodate their needs and experience and better accessibility at work. However, all these findings appear to indicate that disabled people are forced to become self-employed since they would have less accessibility to wage employment due to the myriad of barriers they encounter (Giulietti et al. 2012). This is in line with the findings from Australia and the US, where strong discrimination and personal ambition are the most-identified factors that drive disabled people to be self-employed (Maritz and Laferriere 2016; Ostrow et al. 2018). Importantly, Martin and Honig (2019) find that disabled people who failed to attain organisational employment experience improved self-image via the success of self-employment – accomplishments in small business activities can be critical to the development of self-recognition.

Few academic studies have rigorously investigated the experiences of self-employed disabled people in China. Many existing findings suggest that a lack of institutional support and strong social prejudice are barriers facing disabled entrepreneurs (Mersland 2005). Although there is openly available public policy information explaining the preferential policies, due to limited information access, many disabled people are unaware of the support that they are entitled to apply for (Maritz and Laferriere 2016). In addition, due to a lack of clear policy explanation, the application procedures for these preferential policies often take a long time to process, which can create financial uncertainty for disabled people seeking to establish their own businesses. Self-employed disabled people may interact with numerous customers every day, which might be a good way for them to integrate with mainstream society, but also means that they may experience direct stigma and discrimination from their customers every day. Self-employment among disabled people in China is arguably under-researched, hence it requires attention in this study.

### 3.5 Public Sector Employment and the *Bianzhi* System

In China, there is no explicit policy that promotes disabled people into the public employment system (except for the quota scheme). It is argued that public sector jobs are the most sought-out and secured options for the majority of Chinese job seekers yet ironically, public employment seems to be one of the least possible options for disabled people due to its special characteristic - the *Bianzhi* system. *Bianzhi* refers to the authorised number of personnel in a unit (*Danwei*), which is a legacy of the planned economic system (Brodsgaard 2002). *Bianzhi* system is unique in the public employment sector (civil service and public service sector) in China where it plays a fundamental role in deciding the employment package for staff. According to Ang (2012), *Bianzhi* is a budgetary guideline for the state treasury department to allocate public funds to each public unit based on the assessment of the ideal size of the employment body. It is important to note here, that the actual number of recruited staff in each unit may well exceed the planned size of staff, i.e. public employment bodies are often 'over-staffed'. Detailed discussion on public employment can be found in Zhou's (2013) book on Chinese institutional structure. For those who are 'over employed' contract workers, namely those without a *Bianzhi*, they will be offered a wage from the office budget, which means their salary will not be guaranteed. Instead, those

remaining staff's wage budget will usually be collected from operating revenues (such as traffic tickets for police department and medical bills for hospitals).

The *Bianzhi* system includes three bodies: civil service, public service and state-owned companies. The latter two are significantly different to the first one regarding their employment packages and administrative powers (Brodsgaard et al. 2002). Those jobs with *Bianzhi* are called 'iron rice bowls', and people with *Bianzhi* are known to 'eating the imperial grain' because they are protected by the state funds and will not lose their jobs. The exact number of people who have *Bianzhi* status is debatable as it is difficult to classify the categories. Approximate data can be generated by calculating the ratio between state salaried personnel and the general public. According to Wu and Zheng (2018), this ratio in China is 3.68% which is relatively low compared to developed countries such as the UK (7.26%) and the US (7.47%). Such relatively low ratio may suggest high competition for entry. This figure is important for understanding the public employment system in China, where public employment is viewed as secured employment.

One last important contextual feature of public employment in China is a medical examination upon employment, which is closely related to the application of *Bianzhi* in civil service and public service jobs. Technically, there is no difference between the medical assessment for civil and public services as they are all based on a strict medical check list<sup>13</sup>. The whole process will be carried out in a designated hospital where the doctors and nurses will check the candidate who has successfully passed the written exams and interviews. After the medical checks, if the candidate is found with one of the 21 medical categories, the doctor would write a letter to advise the employment body/department to not recruit this candidate.

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<sup>13</sup>The full checklist can be found at [http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2005-11/03/content\\_90833.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2005-11/03/content_90833.htm)

It is important to consider this Chinese unique employment feature as it has various meanings for understanding disability employment in China. Firstly, the system is a mechanism of control that those staff and officers are directly loyal to the communist regime and hence stabilise the political situation. This means that disabled people with *Bianzhi* status can be regarded as the core privileged group within the CCP. Secondly, according to Brodsgaard (2002), the proportion of people with *Bianzhi* varies from region to region. For example, less economically active regions have a higher proportion of employees with *Bianzhi*, whereas regions with a higher proportion of private businesses have lower than average ratio of employees with *Bianzhi*. Thirdly, the medical examination in the selection process is arguably a reflection of the eugenics practices that have been constantly implemented across the nation – only ‘high quality bodies’ will be accepted in the public sector.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In summary, despite the Chinese state’s outspoken commitments made to promote disabled people’s employment rights, existing literature suggests that the disability employment policies introduced by the Chinese government are not effective, and sometimes they have adverse impacts on the valuation of disabled people in the labour market.

The next chapter will consider theories put forward by UK disability scholars that link the devaluation of disabled people’s labour to capitalist relations of employment and in doing so, consider how relevant these debates are to the Chinese context.



# Chapter Four - A Socio-Economic Historical Juncture in the Theorisation of the Commodification of Disabled Labour? Experiences from the UK

## 4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, based on the critical literature review on the contextual factors of researching disability in China, this thesis argues that disabled people are likely to face new challenges and are potentially disadvantaged in the Chinese social-economic transition. Though little theorisation has been made regarding the social construction of disability in relation to China, lessons can be learnt from the UK which also experienced a similar shift towards commodification of the labour market.

To understand the theories of the social construction of disability in the UK context, it is important to discuss the social model of disability which was developed by British disability activists (Hunt 1965; UPIAS 1976; Finkelstein 1991). By its literal meaning, the social model is an exploratory tool (a model, not a theory) to explore the disadvantages experienced by disabled people (Oliver 1996). The social model advocates that disabled people are ‘disabled’, not because of their illness or impairment (i.e. medical conditions), but the disabling society which creates barriers that make them disabled from equal participation (Oliver 1983; Abberley 1992). Therefore, in line with the core ideas of the social model, this thesis uses the term ‘disabled people/person’ as a standard terminology to describe people who experience disabling barriers.

The social model of disability was conceptualised based on the specific context where disabled people were systematically institutionalised and excluded from mainstream social life (including employment). Disability activists in the UK no longer wanted to be seen as passive ‘victims’ of medical conditions or ‘differences’, and they no longer wanted to be segregated and stigmatized

by the disabling society (Finkelstein 1980; 2001). Thus, they demanded changes to be made and the removal of disabling barriers in society via democratic demonstrations.

Brendan Gleeson, a disability geographer, published a book titled “geography of disability” (1999b), in which he argued that in English speaking countries (such as Australia, the UK and the USA), transitions towards capitalist ways of living and production caused people with impairments to become disabled. Gleeson (1997; 1999a) also documented the modern concept of community care, urban city arrangement and policies and employment are largely part of the disablement and exclusion of disabled people. During this transition, labourers were commodified and valued according to rarity and skills in the capitalist labour market where employers would pay a certain price to the labourers who would try to sell their labour in an economically competitive labour market. Disabled labourers, who had fewer opportunities to receive education and apprenticeships, were less favoured in this socio-economic transition. Therefore, historical materialist disability scholars (Gleeson 1998; Abberley 2002; Thomas 2007) argue that disabled people were historical victims because of industrialisation and commodification.

China’s current ongoing shift towards increased liberalisation and modernisation of the economy has apparently introduced the commodification of the labour market with the involved Chinese cultural, social and political characteristics. As Oliver (1996) and Barnes (2012) argue, all disabled people across the world to some extent experience economic disadvantages or exclusions in the labour market. Though the experience of ableism may be universal, these ableist cultural beliefs and attitudes are arguably rooted in these society’s political and social systems (Campbell 2008a; 2008b). This is particularly relevant to this study that focuses on the realm of employment and independent living of disabled people in China.

## 4.2 Mapping out the Fundamentals – Justifying a Social Perspective of Understanding Disability

### 4.2.1 Paradigm Shift from a Medical Model to a Social Model of Disability

Traditionally, disability has been studied as an individual deviation of the body, and it is believed to be an aggregation of individual tragedy (Oliver 1996; Smart 2004; Goodley 2012; 2020). In this approach, disability is believed to randomly occur to 'selected' individuals, which represents the core ideas in the moral/religious model of disability in the pre-industrial world (Swain et al. 2003; Pardeck and Murphy 2012; Ennis 2018).

With the economic advancement and development of medical knowledge, medical practitioners in the UK gained the power to control disabled people's (their 'patients') life choices and access to social provisions – the medical model of disability (Abberley 2002; Durell 2014). The medical model of disability is an individual model which medicalises an individual's body and impairment (Oliver and Sapey 1999). The medical approach tends to blame disabled individuals in terms of their inability to 'behave like a normal healthy' body (Couser 2011). Hence, from the medical model system, the survival of the social system depends on the management and limitation of illness and restoration of an individual's health as the society requires 'healthy and able' labourers to make wealth (Thomas 2007). Under this paradigm, the dualism of 'sick' and 'healthy' dominates social discourse, which is controlled by medical professionals, and 'patients' are expected to follow the rights and obligations (Thomas 2012). Oliver (1983; 1990) points out that a direct result of the medicalisation of society is that medicine has obtained the right to define and judge a wide range of conditions which were based on moral and social standards. The medical approach has thus received significant criticism from disabled people, for promoting total medicalisation while institutionalising and dehumanising people living with impairments (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1983; Abberley 1987).

In the second half of the 20th century in the UK, a direct critique of the medical model of disability emerged, i.e. the social approach to understanding disability (the social model), which

is opposed to ideas of individualisation and medicalisation of people with impairments (Oliver 1983; Thomas 2004b). The social approaches are more concerned with the properties of the collectives, which can be explained via the analysis of the social-economic structure and cultural-discursive patterns in the British social settings (Shakespeare and Watson 1997; Priestley 1998; Thomas 2004c; Shakespeare 2006).

The most important distinction that the social approaches to understanding disability have made is that 'disability' is no longer regarded as a synonym for 'impairment', as well as deconstructing the notion that disability is an individual pathology (Oliver 1996; Shakespeare and Watson 1997; Freund 2001). This distinction between impairment and disability was originally made through disabled people's activist movement for ending the social segregation and institutionalisation of disabled people in the UK – the UPIAS's activism was a representative case. The UPIAS was formed by a group of disabled people who were institutionalised and victims of the medical model. They felt that their experiences were ignored in mainstream society and demanded a paradigm shift to better reflect their experiences as disabled people:

*"The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. Physical disability is therefore a particular form of social oppression". (UPIAS 1976, p.14).*

Though it was later revised to include the experience of people with other types of impairments (Oliver and Barnes 1998), this manifesto highlighted that disability is caused by socially created barriers (Oliver 2009b). The social model has also been called the 'barrier approach': disability is about environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers which are imposed on people with 'bodies of difference' to restrict their equal progression in society – disabled people will no longer be disabled if those barriers are removed or eliminated (Oliver 1992; 1993; 1996; French and Swain 1997). The important conceptual contribution the social model made to the discipline of disability studies is that it challenged the long-standing discourse of the causal relationship

between impairment and disability - the deviant social paradigm, by focusing instead on the social oppression that is imposed on people with impairments (Swain et al. 2003 Thomas 2012). Putting the social model into the employment context, Randle and Hardy (2017, p.449) give an example of how impairment and disability should be treated separately:

*"if the nature or the physical world is the source of the impairment of the worker, the capitalist labour market and work organisation is the source of their disability".*

As Oliver (1996) argues, the social model of disability is merely an exploratory tool which should be used to explore the barriers (physical, economic, social, attitudinal) in society, and it should not be treated as a social theory. Thus, the social model of disability may not be able to explain disability in its entirety (Oliver 1996; 2003; Shakespeare 2006; Barnes and Mercer 2005; Thomas 2004b), but it may indeed provide a guide for researchers in terms of identifying barriers that disabled people experience across different contexts. This is also the exact reason why the social model can be helpful in terms of understanding the social construction of disability (also a historical perspective) point of view, as it recognises the importance of the lived experience in various social contexts (Swain et al. 2003; Thomas 2007). The next section will therefore justify why and how the social model of disability will be useful in studying disability employment in contemporary China.

#### 4.2.2 The Implication of the Social Model of Disability in Researching China

The British social model of disability has been widely accepted by disability activists through numerous waves of disability rights movements in the UK. Trying to directly ‘copy’ the idea of the British social model of disability to the Chinese context can be problematic because it focuses mainly on the issues in society not the person (which is the exactly opposite to the medical model). The autocratic Chinese state and its desire to control the society may inevitably clash with such a core idea in the social model, and hence the social model of disability may never be legitimised by the state. However, the ratification of the UNCRPD (especially the article 1 of the treaty) provides an opportunity for the disabled community to advocate their

rights in such a legal framework. This section considers the challenges and barriers that may arise in researching China from a social model perspective.

The Chinese traditional values that were built around family and kinship (see chapter two) may serve as a barrier for disabled people to be collectively recognised as a disadvantaged social group. In Chinese society, disabled people were traditionally regarded as suffering and responsibility of the family, and thus non-disabled families and community members should help and raise those 'unfortunate' members (Retief and Letsaso 2018). Though being largely included in the family domain, discrediting languages to describe disabled people is also commonplace in the interactions between disabled and non-disabled people (Smith 2011).

The modernisation and industrialisation of the economy in China has also brought the advancement of healthcare and medical services, which has seen an increasing focus on medicalisation and rehabilitation of disability (Stone 1998; Shi 2018). In Chapter two, this thesis highlighted the role of the state and state funded agencies (e.g. CDPF) in shifting the nation's understanding of disability towards a medical model. For example, the definition of the Chinese Law on the Protection of Disabled People (2008) adopts very medically focused terminologies to define disability, emphasising the dichotomy of medical normalcy and deviance.

*"a disabled person refers to one who suffers from abnormalities or loss of a certain organ or function, psychologically or physiologically, or in anatomical structure and who has lost wholly or in part the ability to engage in activities in a normal way."*

This definition emphasises the sense of 'normalcy' and regards disability as a direct result of biological deviance and medical circumstances. In addition, the contrast between being 'normal' and 'abnormal' highlights how the corporeal body significantly affect a person's social status in China – a distinction between functioning and non-functioning body (Campbell 2008b; 2009).

With the development of the Internet, there are signs that disabled people have started to form collective identities as a group of people who are disadvantaged. According to the research by Qu and Watson (2019), an increasing number of disabled people have started building connections and forming informal groups online where they start seeing themselves collectively as a disadvantaged constituency. Moreover, since China has ratified the UNCRPD, an increasing number of disabled people and disabled people's organisations (DPOs) have started to use the international treaty as a tool for disability rights advocacy (Zhou 2015).

Transforming from the medical model approach to the social model of disability is an ideological shift. It is a shift from a model that portrays disabled individuals as misfortune and troublesome, to a social approach that focus on the structural inequalities that society creates to disadvantage group of people who do not fit into the criteria of normalcy (Oliver and Barnes 1998). As the social approach is strongly linked to the specific contextual backgrounds, disability researchers who adopt the social model should therefore concentrate on the factors (such as economic, political, and cultural) embedded in different societies that are likely to be linked to the historical development and social beliefs (Gleeson 1996; 1999b; Thomas 2007; Campbell 2012; 2019). To use the social model of disability in the context of China will offer researchers an opportunity to theoretically contribute to the field of disability employment research by investigating the barriers that disabled people face in the labour market (or in general social life) based on their status, spatial locations, and affiliations. In addition, due to the special characteristics of the Chinese political and economic system that was discussed in the previous chapter, adopting the social model of disability will enable the researcher to conceptualise the impact of the institutional factors on disabled people's employment in Chinese labour market (see Barnes 2012).

## 4.3 A Historical Materialist Perspective on the De-Valuation of the (Impaired) Labour

### 4.3.1 Disability as a Social Historical Emergence

In the above section, a review of the (British) social model of disability was made to argue that disability is a social-historical phenomenon, rather than an individual medical problem (Finkelstein 1980; 1991; Oliver 1996). It is worth noting that the formation of British social model largely involved with disabled people's protests and rights campaigns in 1960s and 70s (see Hunt 1966 and UPIAS 1976), with a strong connection to and inspiration from classic Marxist theory of critique on capitalist social structure and economic production (Finkelstein 1980; Abberley 1987; Oliver 1996). Despite the economic and political arrangements have changed significant since Marxist theory was developed, the concepts of oppression (Abberley 1987; 1992) and hegemony (Oliver 1990; 1996) have proven useful for members who were involved in UK disability movement. Oppression highlights the systemic discrimination faced by disabled individuals, while hegemony focuses on the dominant group's control over social structures. These concepts help analyse and challenge the societal dimensions of disability. Gleeson's (1997) work re-confirmed some of the main ideas developed by the historical materialist disability scholars, but his contribution was to recognise that the modern- concept of disability is also historically and spatially situated. This section reviews the key intellectual contributions of historical materialists on disability and work based on the UK context.

The term historical materialism and its associated meanings stem from Marx's theory of critiques of the capitalist production system – the way property is owned and the classification of labour (Marx 1976<sup>14</sup>). One of the basic arguments put forward in this approach has been that disability is not universal and transhistorical, but it is closely linked to historical development during the industrialisation and commodification of the labour market (Gleeson 1997, 1999; Abberley 1999; Thomas 2007; Flynn 2017).

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<sup>14</sup>Marx's original work of 'capital'. Re-published by Penguin.



According to classic Marxist theory, disabled individuals are considered historically contingent victims, as exemplified by Engels' observation of 'the condition of the working class in England' (initially written in 1844/5). Engels noted a group of disabled individuals who had acquired their impairments due to prolonged working hours (Engels 1969). From Marxist perspective, disabled people are seen as victims of a socio-economic system that prioritizes capitalist interests, which socialism aims to eradicate (Abberley 1987). However, it is important to note that such a perspective reflects the historical context in which Marx and Engels lived, where disability was often equated with impairment. This view aligns with a preventionist approach to disability, where the focus is on addressing impairments. In contrast, the social model of disability, which emerged in the UK, draws on Marxist ideas to critique capitalist production relations but introduces its own conceptualization of disability as socially constructed (Hunt 1965; Oliver 1987; Abberley 1992). The social model emphasizes that disability is not solely caused by impairments but is shaped by social and environmental factors.

Oliver (1990) argues that disability studies should be grounded in analysing the capitalist mode of production and its associated ideologies. He suggests that it is the capitalist production system that categorizes and discriminates against certain workers based on perceived "undesirable" characteristics. The analysis of the mode of production, as explained by Marx (1976), comprises two elements: the productive forces (labour, raw materials, and instruments) and the relations of production (the social structures that govern human involvement in production). Marx (1976) further asserts that prior to the rise of industrialised social production, workers typically engaged in small-scale labour within family and community settings. As society transformed, the relations of production shifted from familial and communal arrangements to capitalistic mass production relations (Marx 1976). This transition also brought changes in the organisation of production, transitioning from feudal-based family structures to factory-based social production, which introduced the classification and commodification of (impaired) labour (Gleeson 1999a; Imrie and Edwards 2007). However, materialist disability researchers (Oliver 1984; Thomas 2007; Barnes 2012) argue that Marx overlooked the influence of these societal changes on the social perception of bodies and impairments, i.e., the social construction of the concept of disability.

The relations of production changed when the UK shifted from pre-industrialist production to social scale of mass production, which materialist disability scholars argue that has fundamental impact on disabled people's opportunities to work (Oliver 1996; 2009; Abberley 2002). Finkelstein (2001) was one of the first disability scholars to suggest that the social relationships associated with disability, emerged as a social product of certain material conditions at a particular social-historical juncture, i.e. from a feudalist society to an industrialist society. In a feudalist mode of production, which is determined by its agrarian productivity, there had been little distinction between paid (productive) and unpaid (reproductive) works, hence there was little separation between home and work (Oliver 1990; Gleeson 1999a). In this respect domesticity and labour can be seen as in an intimate union together, forming each feudalist productive unit as a collective, where the relations of production would be most likely mean individuals primarily contributed to their family and community (Dorn 1994). Disabled people were able to make a living by doing jobs that fitted their ability, e.g. shoemaking as an example in Abberley's (1999) article. Here it is possible to identify a strong integration between individuals with impairments and kinship (Oliver 1990).

The process of industrialisation and urban expansion that accompanied industrialisation introduced an 'ability' based valuation mechanism. In this mechanism, the whole social arrangements and economic wealth distribution are based on the valuation that favours non-disabled citizens more than disabled citizens (Abberley 2002). Gleeson (1999b) has argued that the social-economic transition to capitalism (industrialist urbanisation) brought significant disadvantages to people with impairments who became 'disabled' by new living arrangements in the inaccessible urban infrastructure. In contrast to the rapid urban life which was designed based on the 'non-disabled' standard of living, people with impairments were better able to adapt to the living environment in those rural areas where environmental changes were not so rapid, despite the availability of few job opportunities (Imrie 1996). Drawing on the experience of visually disabled citizens, for example, Kitchin (1998) describes how disabled people can learn to find their way around in a slow-changing rural cottage but face greater uncertainty and fast-moving

changes in urban cities, reducing their mobility. In the UK, those who could not 'fit' the living and working conditions in cities were sent to medical rehabilitation centres or to institutions where they were excluded from the mainstream society and labour market (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1996). This was introduced to fit into capitalist employers' demand on the classification of labour, so that they could recruit the 'best quality' workers by sending disabled people to medical institutions for rehabilitation (Abberley 1987). Abberley (2002) has also argued that because of the limited sum of social wealth, it became necessary within the capitalist system to identify and discourage certain group of people (e.g. disabled people) to take up the 'privilege' to share the full outcomes of economic development as they tend not to "contribute" as much as the dominant social group – meaning disabled people are perceived as less economically valuable to society (in Marxist term – reserve army of labour). This essentially privileged 'normalcy' and economic productivity (paid work) became the ultimate way of proving personhood (Hosking 2008). According to Abberley (1987; 2002), there are two major parties who benefit from the disablement of people with impairments: capitalist employers (short term), and the current capitalist social order which is based on economic productivism (long term). In this regard, the segregation and institutionalisation of disabled people (as economically unproductive) can be viewed as the most economically efficient way of developing the nation (Abberley 1999). The medicalisation of disability exposes differences and reminds people with impairments that they form an undesirable underclass which is dependent on the productive 'able-bodied' (Barnes and Mercer 2005). With an established welfare state, British disabled people and disadvantaged families are supported by so-called state benefits, without which disadvantaged families' hands are tied and they may have to pay high social care bills, miss work more frequently and choose careers for their flexibility over economic returns (Shattuck and Parish 2008; Stabile and Allin 2012). Relying on state benefits, however, may restrict the economic freedom of disabled people as they must rely on this continuity of funding to live on the poverty line (Vaccaro et al. 2019).

#### 4.3.2 The Commodification of Labour and Proletarianizing of the Impaired Body in a Capitalist Labour Market

The transition from an agrarian model to mass-scale industrial social production and the rise of the capitalist political-economic system, for many disability studies scholars significantly

changed relations of production and led to the commodification of labour (Abberley 1987; Oliver 1990; Goodley 2014). The emergence of wage earners and the concept of labour power represented a key difference between feudalist production and industrialised factory-based production (Oliver 1996).

For Marxism, all human societies must engage in the production of their own material conditions for survival. In the context of exchange-based production, the form that products take is that of commodities. A commodity possesses two fundamental aspects. Firstly, it has the ability to satisfy human wants, giving it a use value. Secondly, it can be exchanged for other commodities, which Marx refers to as its "value." Thus, a commodity embodies both use value and value, and the labour involved in its production exhibits a dual character. Any form of labour, which Marx describes as "productive activity of a definite kind, carried on with a definite aim," is considered useful labour that produces use value (Marx 1976).

During the transition to industrialisation, machine-based social production mechanisms freed a significant number of peasants from farmland but demanded those who did not own the means of production sell their labour-power (Abberley 2002). For those unable to sell their labour power on the basis of 'normal and average' terms, their labour is either devalued or they are excluded from the labour market (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver 1990). Oliver (1987; 1996) argues that the idea of disability as individual pathology only emerges in the capitalist mode of production, when the concept of waged labour classifies workers based on whether they are 'able-bodied'. It is the 'able-bodied' and 'able-minded' that are capable of operating new factory machines and willing to obey factory regulations imposed by factory owners that are favoured (Oliver and Barnes 1998; Oliver 2004). Thomas (2004) thus argues that this represents the systematic exclusion of disabled people, who are unable to sell their 'inferior' labour power to obtain a wage, which is vital to independence for those who do not possess any means of production prior to the establishment of the welfare state.

Capitalist industrialisation also brought with it time-based performance appraisals and the standardisation of work (Rose 1988). This change in the way work was performed became problematic for labourers with impairments as the whole manufacturing system was designed and operated on the body conditions of "average and normal" labourers (i.e. non-disabled people) (Barnes 1990; 1992). In Foster and Wass's (2013) analysis of Rose's (1988) example on Taylor's Schmidt, who he used to establish time and motion criteria, they found 'model workers' were those men who were physically strong but also passive enough not to challenge management authority. This focus on physical capability and obedience to the management would inevitably silence and perhaps exclude people who do not fit into the criteria (such as people with impairments). The social consequences of this were that so-called impaired labour became devalued and often excluded from the mainstream labour market (Oliver 1996).

Industrial work emphasised speed and competition, as such time and working hours became the benchmark of performance, and its subsequent slogans of 'time is money' and 'the quicker the better' have since gradually been imposed in modern-day workplaces (Zola 1989). Abberley (2002), rightly points out that such early industrialised capitalist social production rejected people with impairments, while simultaneously refusing to take responsibility for the 'sick and illness' caused by the lack of health and safety arrangements in the factories.

The shift to industrialised capitalism led to the proletarianization of labour. Industrialisation and urbanisation also brought tremendous social changes that freed (sometimes forced) peasants to leave their farmland and move to cities to seek industrial jobs (Thomas 2007). The compulsory attendance of factory jobs and long hours at work made it difficult for people with impairments to sell their labour. This created the social devaluation and differentiation, which is now called 'being disabled' (Oliver and Barnes 2012). It not only resulted in discrimination in the labour market as every labourer has their own 'value' in the market but also set the classification of an 'ideal worker' (Foster and Wass 2013), which is favoured by capitalist employers seeking to maximise labour utility. Moreover, from a society point of view, 'normalcy' at this time was socially constructed by the non-disabled dominated social class (so-called 'majority') to classify

who were the valuable labourers and who were less valuable. Those who were classified as 'abnormal', were the industrial reserve army (Marx 1976) and less favoured by employers (Thomas 2004). Gleeson (2013) summarises that proletarianization and urbanisation, account for the oppression that is imposed on people with impairments, and therefore, disablement should be seen as rooted in the discursive, institutional, and material dimensions of UK Society.

The debate about the impact of commodification of the labour market on disabled labourers has been well documented specially in the UK context (see contribution in the work of Oliver (1990; 1996; 2009); Barnes and Mercer (2005); Thomas (2007); Foster and Wass (2013); Goodley (2014)). The key argument in this particular theorisation of devaluation of disabled people's labour in capitalist social production seems to be historical and spatial relevant to the UK context. In these contexts, until the establishment of the welfare state after the World War Two, it appears that the State did little to actively promote or advocate disabled people's rights as equal citizens, but instead the State was acting as political agencies for capitalist employers for maximising their utility in the labour market. This is important to note here as it would be an interesting comparison to the context of China where employers are more likely to be in the case of subordinates to the State.

#### 4.3.3 Job Design and the Notion of Ideal Workers

Since the industrial revolution, the nature of work has changed significantly, so has the expectation from employers on their workers (Acker 1990; 2006). The concept of the 'ideal worker' - favoured by employers because of their characteristics to fit a pre-determined job - was a longstanding industrial phenomenon which has only recently been conceptualised by academics in the field of disability and employment relations (Foster and Wass 2013; Foster 2018; Scholz 2017, Scholz and Ingold 2020).

As discussed in the preceding section, the transition from feudal to capitalist relations of production and employment marked a period when impaired bodies were devalued, particularly due to the physically demanding nature of labour and the prominence of heavy machinery (Oliver 1996; Abberley 2002). The establishment of the normative "human being as worker" plays a critical role in shaping the concept of the normal worker. Drawing from Marx's *Capital* (1976), the valuation of a worker relies on abstracting from concrete data regarding wages, prices, profits, and other economic factors. This process of abstraction involves the construction of a norm that represents the ideal worker. Marx and Engels' analysis of capitalism reveals how the system not only produces individuals with impairments but also constructs disability as a negative characteristic in contrast to the normative worker (Abberley 1987). Put differently, capitalism both generates disabled individuals and frames disability as an unfavorable trait in relation to the idealized image of the normal worker. During this historical period, the nature of work was influenced by the utilization of heavy machinery and manual labor, which was predominantly designed by non-disabled managers based on their perception of 'normalcy' (Rose 1988). Foster (2018) contends that when jobs are designed based on a typical "healthy non-disabled standard," individuals with impairments are likely to be disabled within such work environments, as their impairments were not taken into consideration. This 'ideal' job requires an 'ideal worker' (Foster and Wass 2013; Foster 2018), consequently giving rise to an 'ideal job seeker' (Scholz and Ingold 2020). As Foster (2018) suggests, this notion of being ideal can encompass 'lookism,' whereby specific behaviors and appearances are deemed acceptable while others are considered unacceptable.

The notion of the ideal worker can be explained in two ways. In Foster and Wass's (2013) article, they draw on historical examples of how the notion of the ideal worker as a reference point or 'role model for all workers' was established and use examples of both the Soviet Union (Stakhanov) and Western nations (Taylor's Schmidt) (Rose 1988). In modern workplaces, research has also identified practices of seeking and retaining 'ideal workers', through social closure, while discriminating 'not so ideal workers' in various professions (e.g. academia – Foster and Scott 2015; legal profession - Foster and Hirst 2020; 2022). Employers can also use the concept of the ideal worker to classify potential workers for low valued jobs. It is important to

acknowledge the contributions made by critical feminist studies (Acker 2006; Foster and Scott 2015; Scholz 2017; 2020), which suggests that the notion of 'ideal worker' is an intersectional matter that is embedded in the construction of capitalist social production. Some jobs can be 'ideal' for some privileged social groups (Foster and Hirst 2020), while some ("dirty") jobs are perceived as 'ideal' for some social groups who are oppressed in society. For instance, women were historically regarded as "physically and mentally incompetent", and hence they were barred from entering prestigious jobs (Acker 1990). This meant that some low status jobs that were feminised and viewed as 'ideal' based on gender, e.g. nursing (Acker 1990; Reeve 2004). This echoes the situation of disabled people who are also historically devalued and become a 'reserve army of labour' who are more likely to find themselves doing the 'dirty and unwanted' jobs at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy (Scholz 2017).

The nature of work in different employment sectors is likely to be associated with the employment experience of disabled workers. In a multitasking factory working environment, workers are not only expected to perform their individual tasks, but also required to constantly communicate with co-workers. A lack of workplace adjustments for accommodating the needs of disabled workers, has resulted in disabled people being regarded by the managers as potential 'disruption to the entire running system' (Foster and Wass 2013). Abberley (1999) summarised this notion as 'job-shaped jobs' (p.11) that the whole labour market norm is based on the design ideology of 'average worker, 9-5, five days a week', considered the best way of working which has excluded a large number of potential workers without considering their needs or behaviours. When jobs became increasingly complex, as capitalism advanced the need for adjustments to some aspects of a role, according to Foster and Wass (2013) imposed a greater threat to the opportunities for disabled workers to be included in the labour market. The shift to jobs that require multi-tasking, interchangeability and resilience are likely to disable employees with impairments (Foster and Wass 2013), because this process was led by non-disabled managers who had little consideration of the bodily characteristics of employees with impairments (Jackson 2006; Foster 2018; Scholz 2020). However, the assembly line based (Fordist) mode of production in warehouses and factories to an extent found a way of recognising the 'use value' of people with some particular type of impairments, by asking them to do repetitive and simple



tasks. This type of 'simple, repetitive' or boring job was a 'fit' for some people with impairments, enabling them to work on the production line (Foster and Wass 2013). In the switch to office-based (white-collar) work where jobs are increasingly individualised and specialised, some disabled workers find it more inclusive as now their job role has become more focused on specific tasks and goals (*ibid.*). For example, a wheelchair user can perform a call centre-based role as efficiently as a non-disabled worker. Similarly, a worker with a hearing impairment could perform as well as non-disabled workers in terms of typing and online communication. These newly emerged job categories (in post-industrial countries with significant service sectors) offer new opportunities for disabled workers to compete in the labour market and it can potentially reduce stigma towards disabled people in society.

This section has reviewed the key arguments made by disability studies scholars that have utilised the theory of historical materialism in the UK to try to explain how labour became commodified under capitalist relations of production, in which disabled labour was devalued. Disability scholars have investigated the industrial changes in the UK and argue that it is the nature of work and job design based on ableism that disadvantage disabled workers (Abberley 1987; Foster and Wass 2013; Scholz 2020). As modes of production shift from small scale community-based production to multitasking and multi-roles based large scale industrial work, labourers are no longer valued simply based on their actual skills (though disabled workers tend to possess less vocational skills due to access to education, but based on their ability to perform as a sociable worker (Sang et al. 2021). Employers therefore look to acquire the most labour value for the lowest cost as an inevitable consequence of capitalism in its pursuit of economic profits (Foster and Wass 2013; Scholz and Ingold 2021).

The economic structure of the workplace arrangement has an ideological impact on the social perception and attitudes towards disabled people. In the next section, this chapter will review the literature that focuses on the attitudinal barriers that disabled worker face in the workplace and discuss how social stigma can be challenged.

## 4.4 Invisible Barriers: Disablism and Ableism

There has been increasing discussion in the field of disability studies paying attention to the social cultural dimension of disablement (ableism studies – Campbell 2001). Many historical materialist scholars would argue that ableism and attitudinal barriers, as reflection of culture, are relevant to the study of disability employment (Thomas 2004a; Reeve 2004). Ableism might be universal, but how ableism is generated and operationalised should be studied from a cultural point of view. This section draws readers' attention to the study of bodily differences and how ableism works across various settings.

### 4.4.1 The Physical and Emotional Realities of Living with Impairment

Feminist disability activists<sup>15</sup> involved with the disability rights movement claim that bodily differences and the lived experience with impairment matter in the theorisation of impairment. The everyday experiences of pain, fear of dying, and dealing with chronic uncertainties are real, and they should be considered in the effort to tackle disablement (Thomas 2007). Crow (1996 p.59) argues the political necessity of theorising the body:

*What we need is to find a way to integrate impairment into our whole experience and sense of ourselves for the sake of our own physical and emotional wellbeing, and subsequently for our individual and collective capacity to work against disability*

The diversity of impairment visibility highlights that not all individuals with impairments necessarily experience (structural) disablement, which refers to the presence of physical and social barriers hindering social participation (Thomas 1999). Thomas (2007), drawing from her own lived experience with impairment, explains that while impairment can serve as a material basis for disablement, the effects of impairment and disabling barriers should be recognized as

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<sup>15</sup>Many of them are materialist scholars. See the work of Carl Thomas, Donna Reeve, Deborah Foster.

separate aspects of life, both at the individual and social levels. For instance, a person with a single hand (the bodily impairment) may encounter challenges in multitasking due to the absence of a second hand. However, if they face restrictions or exclusion from the labour market based on discrimination against their impairment, it constitutes disablism, a social issue (Thomas 2004b; 2007).

Focusing on the impairment itself aids in understanding the social construction of disablism, which limits the potential of individuals with impairments. Therefore, it is necessary to conceptualize attitudinal barriers as a consequence of the material conditions associated with impairments. In the wider socio-economic context of English-speaking countries, Gleeson (1996; 1999a) argues that specific bodily characteristics can contribute to the devaluation of individuals as legitimate citizens and the social construction of disablism, as they are labelled as 'abnormal.' This construction of 'abnormal' simultaneously implies that individuals without impairments are 'normal,' thereby creating socio-economic disparities in access to key opportunities and resources (Thomas 2004c). Abberley (1987) highlights that this serves as a capitalist justification for wealth gaps, inequalities, and the limitation of certain groups' upward social mobility. Consequently, disability activists advocate for employers to consider impairment effects in job design, challenging the notion of 'normal' ways of working.

A distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' is ingrained and accepted within ableist societies, leading to attitudinal discrimination experienced by individuals with impairments. The concept of psycho-emotional disablism, initially introduced by Thomas (1999), offers a suitable framework for understanding how attitudes, social interactions, and self-esteem of individuals, regardless of disability, can be influenced by attitudinal barriers. It is crucial to differentiate this form of disablism from the effects of impairments discussed earlier. Psycho-emotional disablism encompasses the society-wide internalized prejudice towards disability, limiting the potential achievements and identities of disabled individuals (Thomas 1999; 2007). It centres on attitudinal barriers, including the creation and perpetuation of negative perceptions of people with impairments in public spaces by non-disabled individuals (Thomas 2004c), which may be

rooted in historical images perpetuated by the charity and medical models (Oliver 1996). Consequently, the unintentional or deliberate use of discrediting language or social interactions by non-disabled individuals can leave people with impairments feeling vulnerable and devalued during social engagements (Reeve 2004).

To further explore psycho-emotional dimension of disablism, it is important to acknowledge the visibility of impairments, which is linked to actual experiences of disability according to the social model of disability. In a typical non-disabled dominant context, such as a business enterprise, Kasperova (2021) discovered that business owners with invisible impairments often faced a dilemma regarding disclosure as they feared missing out on essential business opportunities. Generally, due to the aforementioned attitudinal barriers, disabled individuals in the labour market may feel worthless, useless, and burdensome to the organization (Reeve 2004). Furthermore, individuals with visible impairments frequently encounter the frank curiosity of others resulting from long-standing social exclusion (*ibid.*). Conversely, individuals with less visible impairments may be able to avoid stigmatization by "passing for normal" (Goffman 1961); however, they face the risk of considering themselves impostors and the fear of being discovered (Reeve 2004; Foster and Hirst 2020). A noteworthy contribution to understanding the social construction of disablism lies in recognizing that individuals with non-visible impairments (thus able to pass as non-disabled) or impairments that do not restrict physical functionality (e.g., chronic health conditions) can still be affected by attitudinal barriers, such as psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas 1999; 2002; 2007). It is argued that for individuals with invisible impairments or those who can pass, structural disability may manifest at some point in their lives; yet, the experience of psycho-emotional disablism may have a greater impact on their everyday well-being (Thomas 1999; Reeve 2004). Concerningly, both disabled and non-disabled individuals may internalize this form of disablism (social oppression) when conforming to ableist social norms, such as lookism, and behaving as non-disabled citizens (Dauncey 2007).

#### 4.4.2 Study of Ableism and Internalised Ableism

The above section highlights how disability can be social constructed, however, some authors have focused their attention on ableness by introducing ableist studies (Campbell 2001; 2008a; 2009; Goodley 2014). As one of the main contributors and theorists to the concept of ableism, Campbell (2008b) suggests that studying ableism (instead of disablism), gives researchers a different site of study to pay attention to how different cultures and societies produce the sense of ableness and a preferred body. Not having a perfect body is an automatic disability (Campbell 2001; 2019). The ground-breaking definition of ableism is made by Campbell (2001, p.44):

*A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability, then, is cast as a diminished state of being human.*

As such, studying ableism draws attention to the social perceptions and valuation standards that categorise and label people as 'able-bodied' or 'disabled' (Jammaers et al. 2019). Being 'able-bodied', or 'normal', from an ableist perspective, denotes access to the full rights and benefits associated with being a 'legitimate' citizen - that is, ableism promotes differential and unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, or behavioural differences (Wolbring 2007; 2012).

This thesis argues that ableism is primarily concerned with the ideological hegemony that an ableist society imposes on various social groups. This form of discrimination is replicated in other groups as ageism, sexism, racism, which all are based on value and ability judgements from an ableist point of view (Campbell 2008b). For instance, women were previously regarded as biologically fragile, emotional, and incapable of undertaking 'tough and rational' social activities, such as voting and serving in the army, and as a result, they had to be retained in the custody of their own children and husband (Goodley 2014). Such ability-value judgements are used to justify some social groups' superiority and maintain the social order. Similarly, ageist

assumptions can also be explained from an ableist perspective, since treating the elderly badly is based on an ability-value judgement (Wolbring 2007).

Campbell (2009, p.7) refers to internalised ableism: *the ways in which to emulate the norm, disabled individuals are required to embrace and assume an 'identity' other than one's own.* In other words, both disabled and non-disabled people have 'digested' ableist ideology, believing that being 'normal' and 'able' is the only way to pursue legitimate citizenship. This internalised ableism essentially erases disabled people's own values and identities (Campbell 2008a; 2009). This sense of internalised ableism is perhaps more useful than the psycho-emotional disablism, because studying internalised ableism enables researchers to pay attention to various cultures around the world where ableist ideas are produced based on local historical and social values. This is exemplified in the findings reported Lin and Yang (2018), which found many Chinese disabled people tend to deny their experience of disability discrimination as they are afraid to be found out as being 'different' (i.e. disabled) to the mainstream because the Chinese (Confucius<sup>16</sup>) culture tends to silence and discipline those who are different in behaviours and appearances.

In summary, though disablism and ableism are very often used interchangeably, they have distinctive research perspectives (Campbell 2008a; Goodley 2012). Studying disablism focuses on the social construction process of a society which produce and impose disabling barriers (as claimed by original social modelist), whereas studying ableism provides a much wider discipline of study that connects cultural, race, gender studies which all try to deconstruct the valuation of body in society (as advocated by critical disability studies). Hence, it is within the interest of this study to not only look at the structural factors that disable Chinese people with impairments, but also to investigate the valuation mechanism of the body embedded within Chinese culture.

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<sup>16</sup>For better context-based explanation, refer the debates in Chapter 2 and Chapter 8.

## 4.5 From Theory to Practice: Studying Disability Employment in China in Seeking Conceptual Contribution

Having discussed theories and concepts that have been generated in UK context about disability employment, this section aims to address the issues and concerns raised by academics regarding the generalisability of Western theories beyond this context (Grech 2019; Qu 2017).

Empirical contributions on disability and employment from non-English speaking contexts (including China) have been relatively low. With the rise of critical disability studies (Goodley 2012; Campbell 2019), the field now has more social and cultural diversity in terms of theorising disability from different contexts, which are substantially different to the one that the original British social model was built upon (Campbell 2007; Meekosha 2011; Goodley 2012; Thomas 2012). Since China gradually opened its domestic market to the world, only a handful of research studies about disability and employment have been published in English (see Stone 1998; Shang 2000; Kohnman 2005; Qu 2017), with the majority of authors not native Chinese speakers. What this section aims to achieve, is to link the three major theoretical debates reviewed in this chapter with the contemporary Chinese social economic context, to highlight the significance and conceptual potential of this research. These debates are: the commodification of labour market as society transforms to industrialisation and urbanisation; different modes of production and their impact on disabled people's value position in the labour market; and the social construction of ableism in specific cultural settings.

### 4.5.1 Commodification of Labour as a Result of the Market Reform

The adoption of historical materialism as an explanatory framework by UK disability scholars as a way of understanding why disabled people became excluded as society progressed towards industrialisation and commodified labour market has largely been based on the development of the notion of impaired labour being regarded as lower valued labour supply in the British labour market (Finkelstein 1980). Gleeson (1996; 1999b) later expands this theory to other English-speaking nations and suggests that with the rise of such a commodified labour market, disabled

people's labour has been systemically devalued in terms of the price to pay for hiring them. Industrialisation was linked to globalisation and colonisation, at which time British manufacturers set the industrial standards for its goods to be sold globally. The whole process was led by liberal capitalists who were keen to expand their profit margins while exploiting labourers around the world (Marx 1976).

The Chinese way of industrialisation and modernisation of the economy is largely developed and led by the state which has strong political power to intervene in the labour market (Ji et al. 2012; Xiao et al. 2018). Despite the state's relaxation in control over certain economic sectors, it has significant regulatory roles in the process of the labour market commodification. Therefore, studying disability devaluation in China must involve a close examination on the Chinese government. Since China opens its domestic market to international trade, employers in China are required to follow their international suppliers and consumers' demands on labour standards. The Chinese domestic labour market may become more commodified as a result of importing so called international standard of efficient working.

Like the UK had experienced during its industrialisation, China has also seen a large labour surplus in the domestic market with intensive competition amongst disabled and non-disabled labourers. Qu (2017) documents that in 2014, there were only 773 million out of 1,368 million total population (56.47%) active in the economy. Moreover, rapid industrial expansion in urban cities attracts extremely cheap labour from rural sectors who are willing to sell their labour at a very low price, which is still a higher wage than they would receive in agricultural work (Cai et al. 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand that as most jobs are designed by and for non-disabled people, disabled people would face significant barriers in entering urban job markets while competing with other rural migrants (Shang 2000; Huang et al. 2019; Qu 2020b).



#### 4.5.2 An Unbalanced Industrial Transformation

The understandings of devaluation of disabled labour were based on the historical transition in the UK which brought the new ways of capitalist mode of production to modernise the economy (Abberley 1999; 2002). It is argued that agrarian mode of production was more inclusive for labourers with impairments thanks to its collectivist nature of production, whereas they became devalued and excluded from the labour market when the production methods shifted to factory based machinery operation (Oliver 1996; Barnes 1997). This conceptualisation of disability devaluation with a particular focus on mode of production is interesting, though the empirical evidence of such a shift was not available to contemporary researchers as the capitalist industrialisation in the UK has been completed.

What makes studying China relevant to the above debate is that the undergoing industrial transformation provides a historic window for observing different ways of work arrangement and production relations. In rural villages/towns, there are substantial number of labourers, including disabled people, are still working in the fields. According to the CDPF's own annual data in 2019, out of 8.5 million registered disabled people who were classified as employed, 4.3 million of them (50.5%) were working in the agricultural sector. Therefore, it provides an opportunity for researchers to examine the nature of agrarian work arrangements and its impact on disabled people's labour value. Contrast to the economically less developed rural regions, the employment patterns in emerging manufacturing cities are different. In export focused manufacturing regions, the jobs require heavy manual handling tasks which on the one hand could cause significant workplace injuries due to poor safety standards and on the other hand excludes people with physical impairments<sup>17</sup> (Bai et al. 2017). Besides these agricultural and manufacturing sectors which are dominant in the contribution to the Chinese economy, China has seen an increasing number of third sector jobs including knowledge workers. This will provide a more comprehensive comparison between so called physical intensive jobs and

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<sup>17</sup>This poor work condition was seen in the early stage of industrialisation in the context of UK in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is one of the key arguments made by historical materialist regarding the commodification of labour at this historical stage and the emergence of de-devaluation of impaired labour.

intellectual based work, because it is believed the latter provides better chance for disabled workers to be included (Foster and Wass 2013).

#### 4.5.3 Understanding Ableism in the Social and Political Context

To study disability employment in the Chinese context, it is vital to recognise the social and political elements that are part of the ableist norms in Chinese society. The social relations in China mainly function around each family and kinship. Disabled people in China did not experience a social scale institutionalisation, even in the nation's planned economic era, instead they were mostly included in families and local communities (Shang 2000; Zhang and Song 2012). The relative absence of a strong social institutional infrastructure and social welfare in China could also mean disabled people may experience higher cultural inclusion and less likely to have been systemically institutionalised (Stone 1998; Kohnman 2005; Qu 2017). It is also true that informal (instead of formal) institutions, such as social clan-based networks and inter-family relations, are more likely to impact disabled people's lived experiences via the use of *guanxi* (Yang 2010; Wang and Rowley 2017). Therefore, as a traditionally family-based collectivist society, China may produce a unique social image of disability and disabled people. Referring to the debates in chapter two, to what extent the meanings and implications of individual's associations and status shape their value position in society is relevant when it comes to understand the construction of ableism in China.

The autocratic state has a strong role in constructing ableist norms by passing several political initiatives and legislations. Although the Chinese government has ratified the UNCRPD which is based on the core ideas of the social model while recognising disability as a social evolution concept, this is a "symbolic embrace" to the international treaty which has done little to challenge the political environment for disabled people to freely organise their own campaigns. Although Qu and Watson (2019) observe the signs of political consciousness among some Chinese disabled people on the internet, overall disability activism in China is under strict control by the state. It is well documented by activist scholars in China studies that the party-

centred-regime has now become more aware of the 'international influence' on its domestic politics, and hence political rights-based organisations now find it more difficult to operate in China. With regards to disability organisations, the majority are charity organisations, formed by non-disabled people and they are most likely associated with the state-backed institution CDPF, whereas DPOs are reported to be limited regarding disability awareness and rights-based support.

Referring to chapter two and three, the citizenship status of disabled people in China seems to be strictly affected by their *hukou* status and the prejudice reinforced by the medical model rooted disability rights protection law. The Chinese political environment appears to be harsher than the UK due to the strict state control over its citizens in terms of freedom of migration and assembly. Therefore, what is the position of the state in setting the ableist norms in the labour market should be examined in this research.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter began with a short introduction of the social model of disability that was emerged as part of British disabled people's rights movement. Three main theoretical debates were reviewed in this chapter, namely the development of capitalist economy and the commodified labour market, the changes in the mode of production and its impact on the job design, and the study of ableism by considering cultural and social elements in the value position of disabled people.

It is also argued in this chapter that studying disability employment in the context of China can provide meaningful theoretical contributions to existing debates about disability devaluation in the labour market. Firstly, the market reform led by the Chinese state has largely lead to an increasingly commodified labour marker which is now connected with the international trade networks. It is important now to study the process of the commodification and how different interest parties play their roles in the valuation of disabled people's labour during this transition.

Secondly, because the Chinese market reform and industrialisation is not complete, it provides a good opportunity for researchers to closely examine the differences on the mode of production in various employment sectors. This will produce historic evidence which is relevant to the debates made by British historical materialists. Finally, studying ableism in China can be beneficial for scholars to understand the social and political elements that are part of disability devaluation in Chinese context.

In the next chapter, research questions will be outlined to reflect the conceptual contributions that this study aims to offer, followed by detailed explanations of the research methodology.

# Chapter Five - A Critical Realist Approach to Studying Disability Employment in China

## 5.1 Introduction

In previous three chapters, this thesis has reviewed the key contextual and theoretical' debates that are relevant to disabled people's value positions in Chinese society and labour market. A set of research questions start to emerge as a result of these reviews, but a central question should be asked, which is about the key theoretical contribution that this study anticipates generating:

- How has the commodification of the labour market, variations in the nature of work and job design and ableist norms contributed to the (de)valuation of disabled labour in China?

To answer the above question, there are sub-questions needed to be addressed:

- How are disabled people's lived experiences affected by their social and political status?
- How does the commodified labour market affect Chinese disabled people's employment opportunities?
- Do disabled people's employment experiences differ in various employment sectors? if so, how?

While reviewing the literature, especially the empirical studies conducted in the context of China, few researchers have acknowledged their philosophical stance in their research project. Hence, it was difficult to compare their research findings based on their ontological and epistemological foundations. Whilst an increasing number of social science research journal articles spend less word count on the discussion on their philosophical justification of the research, it is still, according to Bryman (2012; 2016), vital for a social researcher to justify their philosophical position, which sets the foundation of the research orientation. This thesis adopts

Saunders et al.'s (2016, p.108) research onion framework (see Figure 5.1 below), which outlines the research structure from the 'outer skin of the onion' (research philosophy) to the 'very core of the onion' (data collection and analysis).

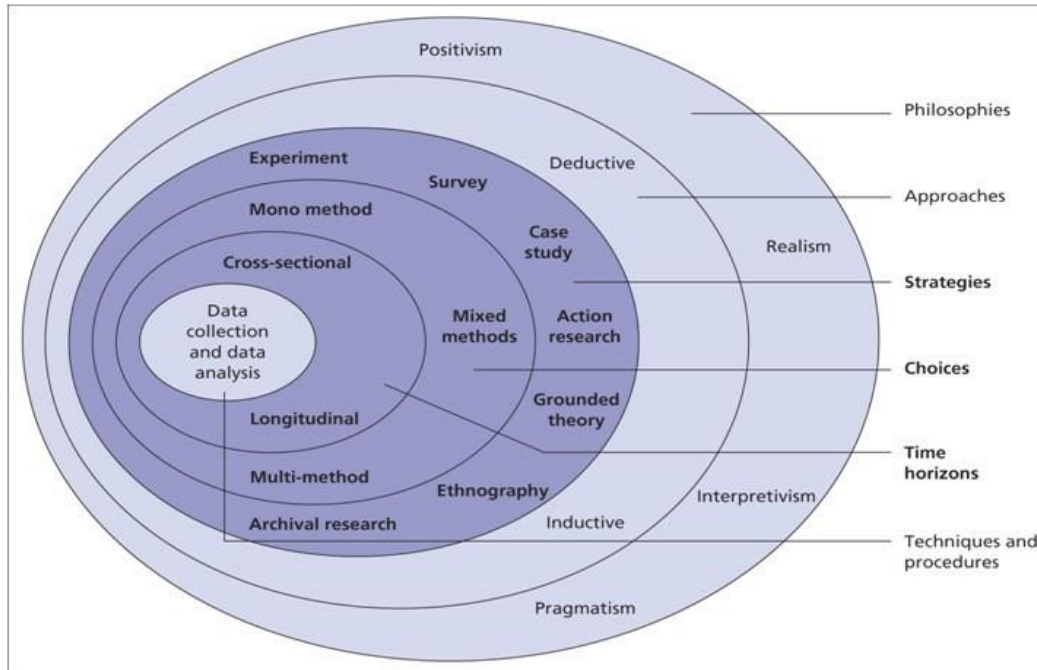


Figure 5-1 Research onion framework

Source: Saunders et al. 2016

## 5.2 A Critical Realist Paradigm

Saunders et al. (2016) propose a clear and simple definition of a research paradigm, which is a system of ideas and beliefs about the development of knowledge. To be more precise, a research philosophy is about the logical process of generating new knowledge through a carefully designed research project (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Research projects in social science studies are based on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, which guide the researcher through the whole process (Maykut and Morehouse 1994).

Conceptualisations of the nature of social reality highlight the distinction between subjectivist and objectivist ontologies. The former holds that social entities are socially constructed via social

actors' perceptions and actions, whereas the latter ideology believes that there is a reality that is independent of social actors (Bryman 2016). Applying this to the context of this PhD project, the ontology here refers to how researchers regard the social material context in which disabled people live in China, as well as the political-economic aspect of the industry and sectors in which disabled people are seeking employment.

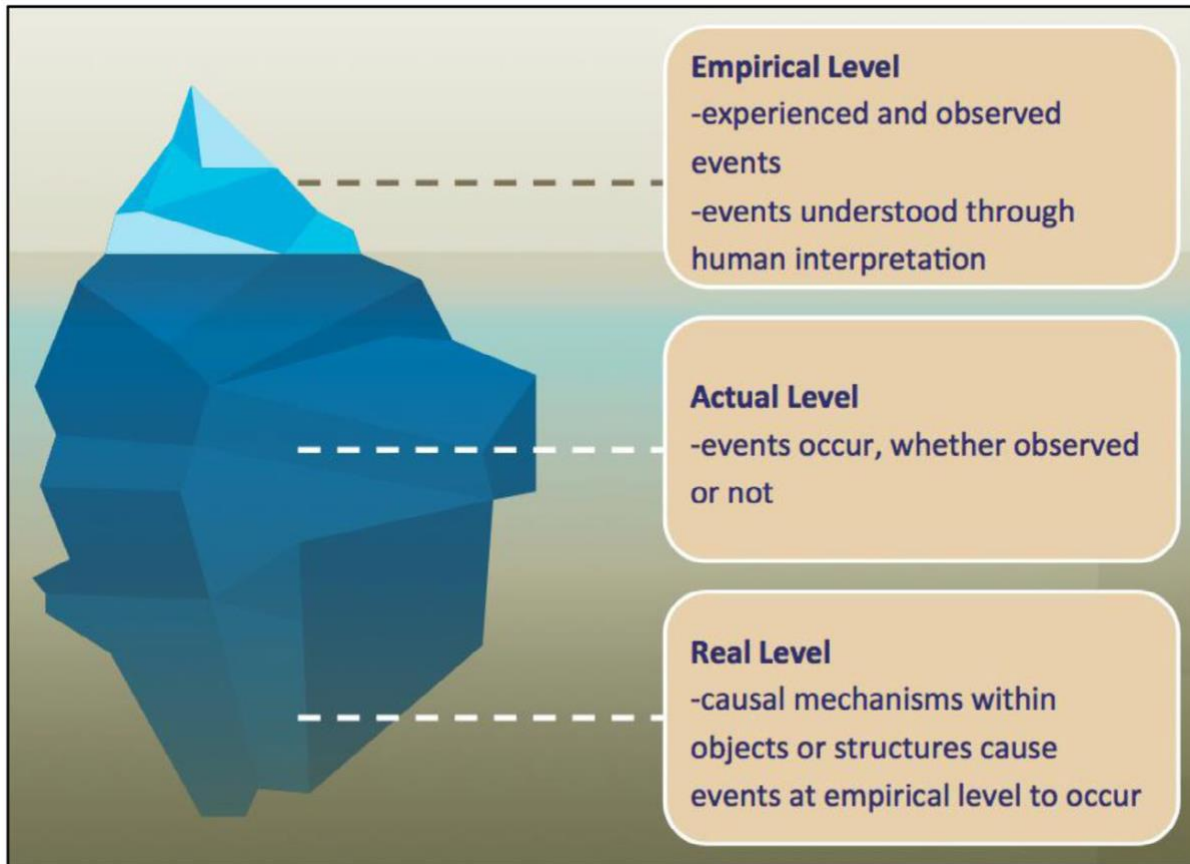
In terms of epistemological stance, there are two main philosophical schools in the field of social science research: positivism and interpretivism/constructionism. Positivist researchers tend to view the social world as solely objective, pursuing law-like generalisations which can be applied universally (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Crotty 1998; Bell et al. 2019). Interpretivism (which some scholars refer to as social constructionism - see detailed debates: Guba and Lincoln 1994; Mkansi and Acheampong 2012), on the other hand, challenges positivism by arguing that the social world is different from natural science because people create meanings in the social environment in which they live (Saunders et al. 2016). Therefore, interpretivism focuses on the language and meaning of social actions, generating rich, detailed understanding and interpretations of social phenomena, which interpretive researchers believe are more relevant to the subjective nature of the social world (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

This thesis chooses to adopt a compromise between the two and selects a flexible stance to approach the study of disabled people's employment in China – a critical realist paradigm (c.f. Hjørland 1998; Dobson 2002). Whilst there are a significant number of debates surrounding critical realism as a recently emerged alternative to the two dominant epistemological stances (i.e. positivism and interpretivism), it is important to note that the social reality that critical realists view is slightly different from the two. Firstly, it is important to make the distinction between critical realism and direct realism, known as naive empirical scientific realism, i.e. positivism (Bryman 2016; Saunders et al. 2012). Though critical realists agree that social phenomenon exists regardless of human knowledge/consciousness of them, i.e. ontologically objectivist, they view the social reality as more dynamic and complicated, and thus it cannot be simply captured and understood quantitatively. Bhaskar (2009) rightly criticised the orthodox

positivist approach for promoting 'epistemic fallacy' – an oversimplified and thus problematic reductionist approach to the limitation of reality which can be empirically researched through mathematics and statistics. Furthermore, critical realism explains the 'lived experience' of social members in terms of the underlying structure of social reality - in other words, people's perceptions of the social world can sometimes deceive them (Galazka and O'Mahoney 2021). Like the critiques of positivism, critical realists also challenge interpretivism, which essentially views social reality as entirely constructed by and within social members' interpretation and discourse (Fletcher 2017). In sum, critical realism diverges from positivism and values the subjectivist views of social members; yet, it also admits that there is an objective reality - it pursues ontological realism and epistemological relativism (Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018).

The key reason for adopting a critical realist approach is the complex contemporary social-economic context in China, and the iceberg metaphor used in the critical realist paradigm seems to fit the research purpose well. In critical realistic ontology, the social reality is viewed in three layers: the empirical, the actual and the real (Fletcher 2017).





*Figure 5-2 Three layers of critical realist view on social reality*

(Fletcher 2017, p.183)

All three levels of the 'iceberg' are part of the same social reality, but the job of a critical realist researcher is to find out the true causal mechanism (the real) via the observation of the observables (the empirical) (Bhaskar 1979; Fletcher 2017). Therefore, only by putting the mechanism into a specific context can critical realist researchers analyse an outcome (Maykut and Morehouse 1994; Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018). For example, according to the social model of disability, disability is not a synonym of impairment, and therefore, not all people with impairments experience disabling barriers. Without analysing individual contexts, it is dangerous to describe all people with impairments as disabled people, as this essentially falls into the trap of the medical model of disability, which regards disability as causally linked to an impairment

(Oliver 1996; Barnes 2012). Furthermore, employment experiences of Chinese disabled people may vary regarding local contexts and social-spatial conditions (Shang 2000).

Critical realists favour ontological discussions (i.e., what is X and how does it work) over epistemological enquiries (i.e., how can we know about X), which offers methodological flexibility and avoids researchers engaging in the long-debated choice of research paradigm and focuses instead on the causal mechanisms of specific social phenomena (Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018). This flexibility is exemplified in the case study by Lin and Yang (2018). In their study, the authors argue that on the surface of it, Chinese disabled people do experience discrimination (empirical), but when they explore the reasons and causes of denial of discrimination by many disabled people, they found five type of causes: institutional, environmental, societal, familial and psychological (the actual) (Lin and Yang 2018). This study is an excellent example of demonstrating how critical realist researchers can go beyond the research data itself, attempting to analyse the data in a broader context (e.g. local economic development, religious and cultural background, family relations, etc.). Shang (2000) also takes a critical realist approach to compare two different cities in China in terms of how local context contributes to the employment experiences of disabled workers in the sheltered workshops. Although the two research are distinctive with each other in terms of research questions and research design, the fact that they both adopt a critical realist to explore the mechanisms of disablement in the context of China proves the flexibility and adaptability of critical realism as a research paradigm.

### 5.3 An Abductive Theoretical Approach

There are two popular theoretical approaches in the field of social research: inductive and deductive research. Inductive research usually relies on the empirical findings of a project, aiming to infer the implications of data to develop a grounded or untested theory whereas deductive researchers have already obtained some tested theories, which are then tested to determine the generalisability of a theory or several theories (Bryman 2012; 2015; Saunders et

al. 2016). The key difference between these two approaches is clear: inductive studies are data-driven, whereas deductive studies are theory-driven (Meyer and Lunnay 2013).

Critical realism, however, rejects both of the aforementioned theoretical approaches but pursues a theoretical abductive orientation. Similar to other social studies, critical realism begins with a set of research questions and enquiries, which are generated from a comprehensive review of existing literature and theory (Bryman 2015). Bhaskar (1979) emphasises the importance of existing theory, which can be a starting point for testing empirically, though not necessarily through quantitative methods. The (only) purpose of existing theory is to set up the research parameters, which ensures the possibility of empirical operation for the research (Pocock and McIntosh 2013). However, initial theories are just and should be treated as initial theories, which can be challenged and amended subject to the empirical results that are collected by the researcher (Bhaskar 1979). These theories, no matter how generalisable they are, are conditional regarding the nature of all their original results. Hence, critical realists focus on theory building rather than pure law-like generalisation (Kirkpatrick et al. 2005).

When it comes to the case when the initial theoretical framework cannot explain the empirical data, especially when the research context is substantially deviant from the initial theory-building context, such as the UK context generated disability studies in the case of China, an abduction is required (Belfrage and Hauf 2017; Bunt 2018). Like deductive research approaches, abductive studies require researcher to move between data and theory, but data in abductive research become significant for discussion and theory building when they are not keeping with (or mentioned in) the original theoretical framework (Meyer and Lunnay 2013). Practically, researchers who adopt this approach will move from a description of some phenomenon to a description of something that produces it or is a pre-condition for it (Bhaskar 2009). Fletcher (2017) highlights that the key contribution of abductive research is "*to modify, support, or reject existing theories to provide the most accurate explanation of reality*", hence the purpose of this empirical study.

This study fits with the abductive theoretical approach for several reasons. The foundation of this empirical research was inspired by the theories that were developed in the UK context which has its unique social historical characteristics. However, regardless the contextual difference between China and the UK, process of commodification of the labour market has been argued as fundamental reason for de-valuation of disabled labour by UK scholars (Abberley 1987; Oliver 1996; Gleeson 1999). Therefore, there is an existing theory that can be tested by the findings from China. In addition, because of the significant differences in political system, social cultural tradition and economic structure, the research findings from this study will inevitably consider new elements that are contextually relevant in explaining the de-valuation of disabled labour in China. Regardless the differences of the empirical level of social reality which is observable by researchers, the underpinning causal mechanism of disability devaluation is explainable. What this study aims to achieve as a result, is to connect the theory generated based on the analysis of empirical findings in China with the theory from the UK, in order to foster a cross-contextual conceptualisation of de-valuation of disabled workers in the labour market.

## 5.4 A Narrative Inquiry Research Design

Research design is one of the core steps of preparation of conducting social research, though the term research design is more frequently used in quantitative studies than in qualitative projects and describes the approach taken to answer the research questions in a rigorous and logical manner (Flick 2018). Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.106) present a clear distinction between the two different choices: a quantitative research design strictly focuses on the applicability and generalisability of the data that the project collects, which can be properly applied to other contextually similar cases, whereas qualitative research projects aim to redress this by providing contextual information. According to the research onion developed by Saunders et al. (2016), the choice of design is determined by a researcher's philosophical underpinning (i.e. critical realist paradigm). As discussed above, critical realism employs a combination of subjectivity and objectivity: subjective sensation + objective context = outcome (Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018).

Thus, within a critical realist paradigm, the choice of design should be decided based on the nature of the research. This present study interests in disabled people's experience in the Chinese labour market, with the consideration of how various factors (such as state policies, spatial location, personal background and labour market characteristics) impact the participants' experience. Therefore, participants' personal stories should be focused, which justifies the applicability of qualitative research design (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Among many qualitative research strategies, a narrative inquiry design is arguably the most appropriate one for addressing the research questions of this study. A narrative inquiry is conducted to a group of individuals who are given the opportunity to share their lived experience (stories) to the researcher, usually in the form of interviews, in order to document their life biography (Bryman 2016; Yin 2018). Narrative inquires are different to case studies, because in narrative inquires, narrators (the research participants) are asked to share a complete story of their lived experience and personal stories, whereas participants in a case study are usually asked to focus on a number of interview questions which were designed to address the research questions (Saunders et al. 2012). In addition, as Yin (2003; 2009) suggests, case studies are usually centred around particular nations, employment sectors, or organisations, yet this research is more interested in disabled individuals who may have very different backgrounds due to their personal circumstances. Therefore, a case study is not applicable to this study. As Chase (2005) argues, a narrative inquiry design is therefore able to generate a 'meaningful whole' by connecting individual events and actions shared by the narrators to seek a holistic picture of the social reality. Coffey (2010) suggests that another feature of a narrative inquiry design is that the lived experiences shared by the participants will be sorted in chronological orders so that the research can trace individual's life development.

The purpose of this study is to compare disabled individuals' experience in the labour market across regions in China. As discussed in chapter two, regional economic and social differences are likely to be linked with disabled citizens' experience of accessing to the labour market. To explore and understand the factors that impact valuation of disabled people's labour in the

Chinese labour market, disabled people's lived experience must be collected and compared. The comparisons focus on the individuals' social status (such as family background, *Hukou* status, *Guanxi* networks), economic positions (such as job sector and career choices), and spatial locations. As a result of the narrative inquires, the researcher is able to identify key events and actions taken by each individual according to the timeline, while linking individuals' lived experiences across various regions to see a bigger picture of how disabled people's labour market experience vary from aforementioned factors. This micro to macro approach not only reflects the critical realist paradigm, but also provides important insights for the researcher to see a holistic picture of the social reality in China.

## 5.5 Participant Selection Strategy and Summary of the Informants' Demographics

According to Flick (2018), qualitative sampling methods, or participant selection strategies, tend to be informal and non-standardised, which provides a certain degree of flexibility for researchers. Due to the nature of the research questions of this project, a diverse range of participants need to be included in order to generate comparable findings within various contexts. Therefore, a mono sampling strategy may not be suitable for recruiting the most representative pool of participants. Instead, a combination of snowball sampling (Zhong 2018) and self-selection sampling (Li and Zhao 2008) is more appropriate for this study. Merely applying a snowball sampling strategy may be problematic since it could easily lead to a group of people who share similar views, as they would be referred by friends or acquaintances. Using a self-selective sampling method may provide a rich set of qualitative findings because prospective participants are more likely to have 'something to say about the research topic', hence an in-depth data is likely to be generated (Yin 2009; Saunders et al. 2016).

Regarding the selection criteria of the research informants, there were some contextual variables considered by the researcher. Firstly, spatial diversity must be ensured. This includes the

consideration of *Hukou* (rural/urban), geographical location (costal/inland), and accessibility of public transportation for the researcher to travel. Secondly, family and personal education backgrounds should be diversified in selecting participants as a disabled person with a higher educational qualification may be able to access different job market, comparing to a person with a lower educational background. In addition, the role of family in support education/vocational training and perhaps providing employment opportunity via *Guanxi* should not be neglected. Finally, the visibility of the impairment was also considered to compare the lived experience of disabled people who may have different labour market experience due to their ‘exposure’ to the disability stigma.

Recruiting disabled participants in China was not easy (c.f. Shi 2017; Qu 2017; Lin and Yang 2021). Although broadband coverage in China has reached 93% in 2021, which makes recruitment via social media more feasible, it is important to acknowledge the research findings from Lin et al. (2018) that Chinese disabled people tend to be left behind in the internet era in terms of their accessibility to online information. Therefore, it is important to admit that one limitation of online recruitment is that some extremely marginalised disabled people were not contactable by the researcher.

The decision to recruit research participants solely from online (informal) channels was informed by the insights gained from Shi's (2018) study, which recruited participants from the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF). While the CDPF may seem like an ideal organization to approach for participant recruitment due to officials' knowledge of relevant policies, the organization's paternalistic approach can create challenges for interviewees. Shi (2018) reported difficulties in obtaining reliable data from participants due to officials' self-censorship and dishonesty. Moreover, since the vast majority of officials are non-disabled, the data obtained may not accurately reflect the experiences of disabled individuals in the labour market. Furthermore, the CDPF's medical approach to disability may not capture the social and political aspects of disabled individuals' experiences in the labour market. Therefore, recruiting participants from online channels was deemed a more appropriate approach to ensure that a

diverse range of perspectives were represented in the study. Therefore, the researcher chose to recruit participants from an online informal social media group (an unregistered DPO) where most of the members have active disability identities. In contrast to the CDPF, the online group used for participant recruitment is primarily composed of disabled individuals who are aware of their disability identity and are willing to share their experiences of being disabled in their respective regions. Notably, the members of this group come from diverse backgrounds, including different geographical locations, visibility of impairments, age groups, genders, and educational qualifications (see table 5.1). As discussed in Chapter Two, these factors are crucial to consider when recruiting participants because they can significantly impact an individual's experiences in the labour market. Therefore, recruiting from this online group ensures that a broad range of perspectives are captured in the study, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of disabled individuals in the Chinese labour market.

In addition to the recruitment messages (see appendix 1) sent in group chats (self-selection strategy), snowball strategy was also used to reach out participants in some underrepresented regions, e.g. to recruit more disabled people from rural areas. The researcher tried to meet all participants face to face, yet due to temporal and financial limitations, the researcher was only able to just under three quarters of the participants in person ( $n = 35$ ). With the outbreak of Covid-19 in China in early 2020, such, there were some safety risks to be considered before making any travel plans for face-to-face interviews. Therefore, some of the interviews were only conducted via audio/video calls ( $n = 13$ ) via Wechat (see ethical consideration section) for reasons relating to safety and logistics.

In the table below, a summary of informants' demographic background is provided. Overall, 48 participants agreed to take part in this research project and to share their experiences in the labour market as a disabled person. The following sub sections briefly summarise the demographics of the informants.



Number	Gender	Age Group	Education Level	Impairment visibility	impairment on birth	Employment Sector	Hukou Type
1	Female	31-35	Postgraduate - master	Visible	No	Private	Urban
2	Male	36-40	Undergraduate	Visible	Yes	Private	Urban
3	Male	26-30	Undergraduate	Visible	Yes	Private	Rural
4	Male	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Student	Rural
5	Female	21-25	Undergraduate	Non-visible	No	Private	Urban
6	Female	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	No	Public	Rural
7	Female	21-25	Undergraduate	Visible	No	Student	Urban
8	Male	18-20	Primary school	Visible	Yes	Private	Rural
9	Male	31-35	Undergraduate	Visible	No	Private	Rural
10	Female	26-30	Vocational college	Visible	No	Private	Urban
11	Male	21-25	Undergraduate	Visible	Yes	Private	Rural
12	Female	26-30	Undergraduate	Visible	No	Private	Urban
13	Female	31-35	Postgraduate - master	Visible	No	Government	Urban
14	Female	26-30	Undergraduate	Visible	Yes	Public	Rural
15	Male	26-30	Vocational college	Non-visible	No	Private	Rural
16	Male	31-35	High school	Non-visible	No	Unemployed	Rural
17	Male	26-30	Middle school	Visible	No	Private	Rural
18	Male	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Private	Rural
19	Male	26-30	illiterate	Visible	No	Private	Rural
20	Male	26-30	Vocational college	Visible	Yes	Public	Urban
21	Male	31-35	Primary school	Visible	No	Unemployed	Urban
22	Male	31-35	Middle school	Visible	No	Private	Rural
23	Male	31-35	High school	Non-visible	Yes	Private	Urban
24	Female	26-30	Undergraduate	Non-visible	No	Private	Rural
25	Male	36-40	Primary school	Visible	No	Private	Urban
26	Female	26-30	Vocational college	Non-visible	Yes	Private	Urban
27	Male	21-25	Undergraduate	Visible	Yes	Private	Rural
28	Male	31-35	Undergraduate	Non-visible	No	Private	Rural
29	Female	21-25	Primary school not finished	Visible	Yes	Unemployed	Rural
30	Male	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Public	Rural
31	Female	26-30	Vocational college	Visible	Yes	Private	Urban

32	Male	26-30	Vocational college	Visible	Yes	Public	Rural
33	Male	26-30	Vocational college	Visible	No	Private	Rural
34	Female	36-40	Vocational college	Visible	No	Public	Urban
35	Female	21-25	Vocational college	Visible	Yes	Unemployed	Urban
36	Male	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Student	Rural
37	Male	26-30	Undergraduate	Non-visible	Yes	Private	Urban
38	Male	21-25	Undergraduate	Visible	No	Student	Urban
39	Female	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Student	Rural
40	Male	21-25	Middle school	Visible	Yes	Private	Urban
41	Male	26-30	Undergraduate	Visible	No	Unemployed	Rural
42	Female	21-25	Vocational college	Non-visible	Yes	Public	Not Available
43	Male	26-30	Undergraduate	Non-visible	Yes	Private	Rural
44	Female	31-35	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Government	Urban
45	Male	26-30	Vocational college	Visible	Yes	Unemployed	Rural
46	Female	21-25	Undergraduate	Visible	Yes	Student	Rural
47	Female	26-30	Postgraduate - master	Visible	Yes	Private	Rural
48	Female	26-30	Undergraduate	Visible	No	Private	Rural

*Table 5-1 Demographic summary of research participants*

### Age & Gender

As shown in Table 4-1, 35 out of 48 interviewees are in their 20s, which makes the research participants relatively young, who tend to have more fresh experience in entering and beginning a career which is the critical stage where disabled people might face barriers. Regarding gender, there are more males (28) who participated in the study than females (20), though the researcher did not intend to control the gender balance as the gender status was unknown to the researcher before the interviews.

## Education Status

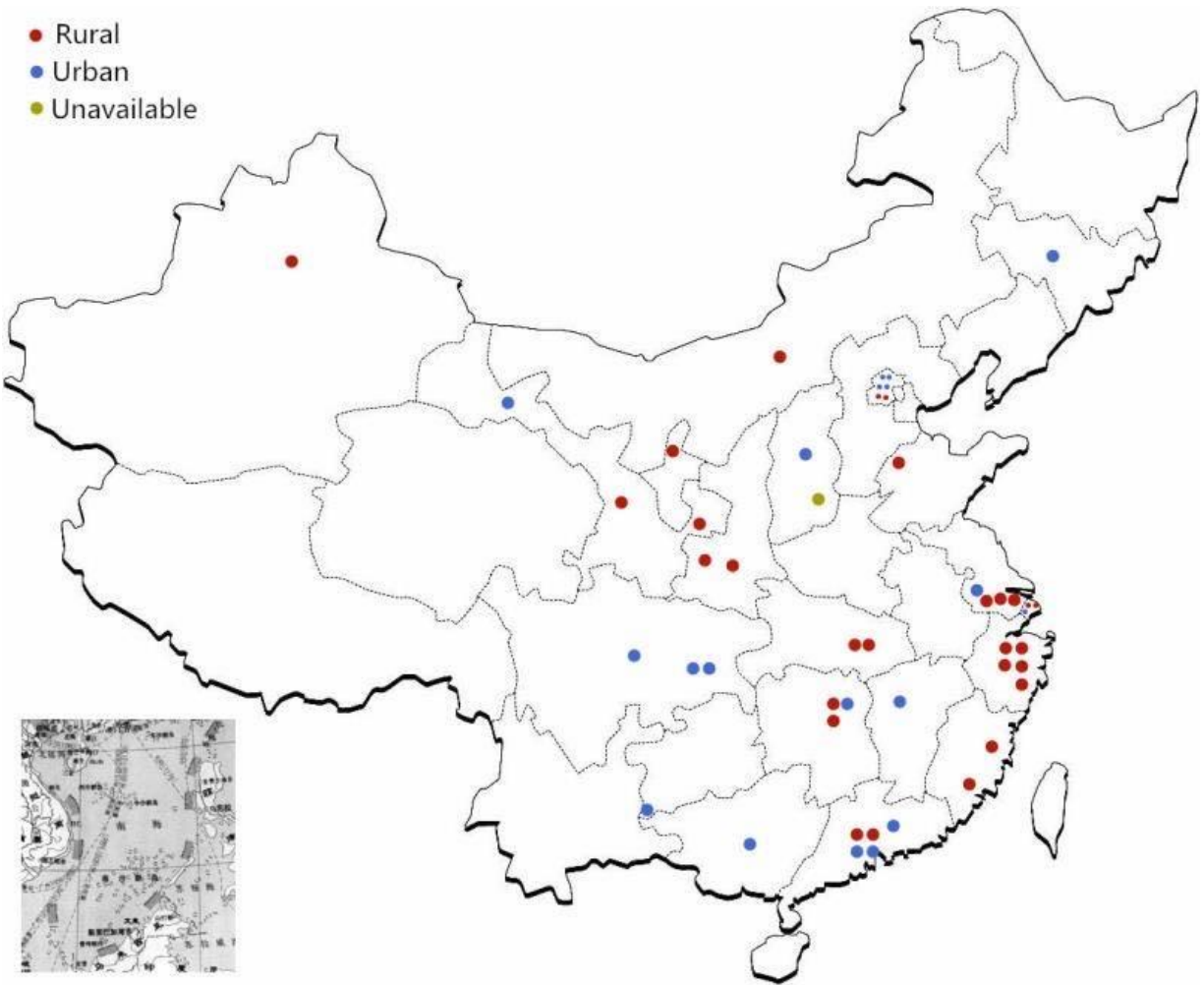
The participants involved in this project are skewed regarding the proportion of highly educated disabled people. 38 out of 48 interviewees had at least a technical college degree which means they are relatively more educated than most disabled people in China. Nonetheless, the research participants did include some disabled people who had spent little time in the education system compared to degree holders, who can perhaps provide a different perspective and describe different life experiences. The informants may have attracted more highly educated disabled people due to the recruitment channel – all participants were members of a disability awareness group where the members (subsequently the participants) are likely to be better educated.

## *Visibility of Impairment*

The table above indicates that most participants were born with their impairments and that most impairments are visible. The visibility of impairment is important in the social model as the lived experience with impairment can vary among disabled people. People with invisible impairment may be able to pass for normal and do not encounter disabling barriers, whereas people with visible impairments are more likely to experience barriers (physical or altitudinal).

## *Hokou & Migration Status*

In Figure 4.3, the spatial locations of the participants are indicated. 23 out of 32 provinces of mainland China were covered. The map shows the current residential locations of each participant, and different colours have been used to distinguish the *Hukou* status of each individual. Although one interviewee declined to reveal her *Hukou* status, this study contained 19 individuals with urban *Hukou* and 28 with rural *Hukou*. The majority of the participants were also either born in an urban area or recently migrated to urban cities. Nevertheless, it is contradictory to the proportion of urban *Hukou* holders – some have already migrated to cities while they still have a rural *Hukou*. From the map below it is clear that the participants are spread widely across China. There are only a few provinces that this study was not able to reach.



*Figure 5-3 Current residential location and Hukou status of the participants*

### 5.6 Semi-Structured Interview Method

One of the most influential disability studies scholars, Mike Oliver, correctly pointed out that disabled people and their lived experiences should be put at the very centre of disability research projects, as it is essential to recognise the expertise they have gained as being disabled in society (Oliver 1992). Therefore, a dialogue needs to be established between the researcher and disabled participants, and the interview method is the most common and useful technique for developing this (Bryman 2016). Saunders et al. (2016) further justify the use of the interview method because it provides more personalised contact and helps to build trust. Furthermore, they note that participants are generally more willing to spend their time discussing the research topic if

there was a person they can talk to (Saunders et al. 2016). Considering the nature of the current study, the questions which need to be addressed in the data collection process are long, complex, and vary between individuals. It is, therefore, most appropriate to use the interview method to obtain a rich, in-depth set of data in order to understand individual employment experiences in various contexts.

Semi-structured interviews enable the generation of interpretations and perceptions of work from the perspectives of disabled people in China (c.f. Shang 2000; Lin et al. 2018; Lin and Yang 2018; Qu 2020a). Armstrong et al. (2006) adopt a semi-structured interview method to explore the employment experiences of Canadian people, finding that this particular method enables the researcher to unearth 'unexpected' data which were not considered in the planning stage. This is one of the biggest advantages compared to structured interviews (Saunders et al. 2016; Flick 2018). On the other hand, compared to unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews form a sense of control which allows researchers to conduct interviews based on pre-listed topics (Bryman 2016). Additionally, many of the interviewees might be unwilling to reveal their stories in detail at the early stages of the interviews, and a pre-set list of topics will give the researchers prompts to 'break the ice at the very beginning of each interview (*Ibid.*).

In addition to semi-structured interviews, a life history method will be employed to assist the data collection process in order to gain a richer and deeper understanding of individual cases. Life history research, according to Merriam (2009), is a social study method used to conduct interviews in a biographical manner and involves asking interviewees to talk about their past experiences in chronological order. This may be useful for conducting disability research because disabled people are believed to be the only experts at discussing the experiences of living with their own impairments (Oliver 1990; 1992). It is often to see that disabled people who have very different experiences before and after acquiring an impairment or start to experience a disabling barrier (Barnes 2003; Reeve 2004). However, as Bryman (2016, p.485) notes, the life history method only generates an understanding of the inner experience of individuals, how they interpret, understand and define the world around them. Merely using the

life history method, therefore, would be contradictory to the ontological stance of this research – critical realism - and may produce self-contradictory research data (Berger 2008). Hence, this study mixes the life history method (which usually relies on unstructured interviews) with semi-structured interviews. Practically, the interviewer asked the interviewees to describe their life experiences being disabled, with the aim of gaining a basic understanding for the interviewer in terms of the general perspective of each interviewee's experiences of disablement. After this, the interviewer continued to ask questions based on the interviewees' lives and the pre-set list of interview questions which focused more on employment. By combining the two interview methods, the researcher managed to generate a rich but theme-based set of interview data, ultimately enabling the researcher to analyse the employment experience of disabled people in the context of China.

All interviews were either conducted face-to-face or via online audio/video chat, with the conversation length ranging from 60-90 minutes depending on the actual circumstances. With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded by the researcher (see the ethics section for more information on this). It is important to acknowledge the differences between face-to-face interviews and online chat, as conducting interviews in person was proven to provide far more in-depth data, including the setting of the interview, physical interactions, and potential casual conversation before and after the interview (Saunders et al. 2016). Bryman (2016) admits that this might not be a critical problem in terms of data quality, but the difference in interview setting should be discussed in the consideration of the reliability of the research data.

## 5.7 Thematic Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is believed to be one of the most popular and useful methods for analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006) and is based on analysing collected qualitative data through a process of coding and searching for patterns and themes. Unlike questionnaires and structured interviews, non-standardised interview data usually involves a significant amount of

information, and thus, the role of the researcher is to identify the key emergent concepts (themes) in order to categorise interview transcripts. The researcher has transcribed the interview data immediately after each interview session, presenting an opportunity to scan the data and identify some key concepts quickly. By exploring the data set and identifying some key themes, the researcher then is able to test and contrast these themes in subsequent interviews (Saunders et al. 2016).

The data was stored and analysed by Nvivo 12 powered by the University. The use of computer software to assist with research provides a 'formal and proper' procedure and technique for approaching the research data. Although there are some concerns in the academic community that using modern software may cause potential risks of quantifying qualitative data (Bryman 2016) and that it might form a new orthodoxy (Coffey 2010), this thesis argues that it is not about what the software can or cannot do; rather, it is about how the researcher approaches the data. As a qualitative researcher, it is vital to acknowledge the diversity of experiences, as well as seek general common themes. Hence, using software is merely for the purpose of managing and analysing data efficiently while not compromising data analysis techniques.

The researcher went through the data and has identified numerous themes that were emerged from the empirical findings. The most significant theme is the role of the state and its agencies. There are political factors, such as the political institutions and legislations, have discriminatory impact on disabled people's rights to participate in the labour market. There are themes emerged from this study that are associated with the social cultural characteristic of the Chinese society, including but not limited to the kinship based social relations, the role of family, etc. These factors can have impact on disabled people's experience in the labour market, either positively or negatively. The author has grouped the experience of disabled people in the labour market into categories based on the nature of work, employment sectors and social relations at work.

## 5.8 Methodological Considerations

Social science research methodology has been long dominated by quantitative studies, and the concepts of assessing research quality are also influenced by positivist terms, such as reliability, validity, and generalisability (Bell et al. 2019; Saunders et al. 2016). Although quantitative researchers have long criticised the quality of qualitative studies - arguing that they are too subjective, difficult to replicate and suffer from problems regarding generalisation - it should be noted that qualitative researchers take a very different ontological and epistemological stance from quantitative researchers (Bell et al. 2019). Therefore, this thesis acknowledges the proposal made by Lincoln and Guba (1985) with regard to creating new terminology for measuring the quality of qualitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose replacing the terms internal validity, reliability, external validity, and objectivity with credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. These are considered to be more relevant to the nature of qualitative research methods. Lincoln and Guba (1994) challenged the view of positivists, which believe there is an absolute truth in the social world: instead, they argued that there could be more than one social perception of reality.

To ensure the creditability of the results, the selection of participants for analysis must be 'acceptable', which within the context of this research project means that the participants' experiences should be genuine and real. In addition, to ensure that the interview data are as credible as possible, a number of pilot studies were conducted prior to the official data collection procedure. This process involved with two disabled people who are the acquaintances of the researcher. The researcher had several trial interview sessions with them in order to test the interview questions (see appendix 2) and adjusted them accordingly to ensure the questions are understood properly by the interviewees. This process was necessary and important as the interview questions were initially generated in English language which became problematic when they are translated into Chinese language. By conducting the pilot studies, several language issues were identified and corrected, to be better understood in Chinese language settings.



The concept of dependability refers to how far the research procedure is and has been followed, which is related to the assessment of the theoretical development of the research (Yin 2009; Bell et al. 2019). To ensure the dependability of this project, the researcher kept a research journal which records every research activity, including problem identification, the selection of research participants, fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, and data analysis decisions. These will enable future researchers to understand and refer to the procedures undertaken in this study, and as a result, they will be able to comment on and critique the theories developed in this research from a methodological perspective.

For confirmability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that instead of trying to eliminate biases and striving for ultimate objectivity, qualitative researchers should be careful about how their personal values and theoretical inclinations may affect the research. This is consistent with the critical realist approach in terms of the judgement of researchers' values – critical realists need to 'look beyond the research data and analyse the findings based on the context (Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018). Although the researcher has previous experiences of living as a disabled person in China, it is dangerous to over-generalise the researcher's own experience within the research outcomes, as the context varies from region to region. Hence, the researcher has made procedures to ensure that academic caution and rigour were practised during all elements of the research process. This includes constant consultation with academic peers and supervisors, presenting the research project at academic conferences throughout the years of the PhD. For the confirmability of the empirical data, the researcher sent the interview transcripts back to the interviewees and ask them to verify the interview transcripts. This was practiced to ensure the research findings are genuine. Disability Studies scholars (e.g. Barnes 2008) suggest that due to time and funding issues, few disability research projects have undertaken this 'validation' process of interview data, although it is vital to ensure the full participation of disabled people in disability research. Thanks to the time allowed in this PhD project, a double-checking process with the interviewees was possible.

## 5.9 Ethical Considerations in Relation to Disability Studies in China

Ethics is not a merely procedural checklist item when it comes to the research impact on the human participants (Bryman 2016). Before submitting the ethics application, it is vital to recognize the potential impact on both researcher and participants as a result of the study (Saunders et al. 2016). When it comes to disability studies, the researcher considers not only the safety of the participants (prevention of any form of harm), but also the broader disability rights movement (Barnes 2003; 2012). Unlike the UK, the disability rights movement in China is still in its early stage. Therefore, during the preparation of ethics application, the researcher considered following questions that are particularly relevant to the study of disability employment in China:

- What is the role of the researcher in this study?
- Will the research have negative/positive impact on disabled people and disability rights movement in China? If so, how?
- What is value that the participants can get as a result of participating this study?
- What can the researcher contribute to the removal social barriers associated with disability and disabled people in China?

The social model of disability serves as the foundation of this study, which means that the research design, procedural, outcome must be emancipating – liberating disabled people from disablement and achieve the rights of disabled people (Oliver 1996; Barnes and Mercer 2005). Disabled people are not, and must be not, treated merely as research objects, rather the researcher should join them (disabled community) as a messenger to pass their lived experience onto the academic community (Foster 2007; 2018). By doing this, more disabled people can be included in the shared disability identity agenda.

The most apparent value that the participants received from this study was that they could have someone who is also disabled (i.e. the researcher) come to listen to their voices which very often is neglected in their social circle. By exchanging the information, the participants were able to learn the researcher's experience as a disabled person who lives in a different context (i.e. the UK), which itself can be liberating for some of the participants.

For the protection of participants safety and the integrity of the researcher, there were several measures were taken to ensure the ethical standard of the fieldwork. The researcher informed all participants about their rights to participant and withdraw from this study. Although using non-end-to-end encrypted social media (WeChat) for recruiting and interviewing participants can be potentially problematic (see ethics application for detailed explanation), the researcher decided to take the risk because there was no other way better to reach out the informants. As far as the researcher was concerned, there was not any form of harm (physical, psychological, and reputational) made to the interviewees as direct result of participating this study. Full consent (including permission to audio record the interviews) were given by all interviewees. The audio recording files were stored in a university drive and were destroyed after the completion of the data transcription. In the findings chapter, all informants' real identities were anonymised and replaced with numbers which are based on the chronological order of the interviews.

An ethics application had been submitted to the Cardiff University's ethics committee (see appendix 4) for approval from the university ethics committee, which assessed the risk and ethical issues that might be involved in this study. The researcher had also undertaken a range of online and offline training workshops on how to conduct social research ethically (see appendix 5 for the certificate).

The ethics committee approved the research project (late 2019) on the condition of pre-covid research environment, which allowed the researcher to do face-to-face interviews, whilst online interviews were allowed if it is impossible to interview in person. When the Covid-19 epidemic outbreak in China in early 2020, the researcher had just finished all agreed face-to-face interviews and was about to start conducting 'Wechat' based online interviews. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that any participants were under exposure to the coronavirus due to the participation of this project.

## 5.10 Conclusion

This chapter functions as a bridge between the previous two literature chapters and next two findings chapters. In the previous literature review chapters, this thesis argues that disabled people's labour value has been downgraded since the UK economies transformed into a capitalist mode of production. The purpose of this empirical research is, therefore, to compare China's current transformation to industrialisation and marketisation with an authoritarian state, with the similar stage that the UK went through – rural to urban, agrarian to industrial jobs. In order to collect a rich set of data that can be utilised to generate a theory from the Chinese context, this chapter has discussed some research methodologies and justify the choices for this research accordingly.

A critical realist paradigm is probably the most appropriate philosophical stance to fit the research aims of this project because of its ontological objectivism and epistemological subjectivism. A retroductive theoretical approach is adopted because this research aims to generate a Chinese context related theory while seeking a comparison between the Chinese commodification and devaluation of disabled labour and what the UK went through during its industrialisation. This is linked to the critical realist stance because context is at the core of theory generation. In terms of research strategy, a qualitative narrative inquiry design is selected because individual experience is the focus of this study, so that the researcher can compare different individual lived experiences based on their spatial and personal circumstances.

There were overall 48 participants were recruited with a mixture of online and face-to-face interviews. The research findings will be presented in the next two chapters, after which the thesis will conceptualise the findings and discuss the theoretical contributions that this study makes.

# Chapter Six - Findings on the Contextual Factors of Disability Research in China

## 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter two and three, several contextual factors were introduced, which according to the literature significantly affect Chinese disabled people's experience of citizenship as well as their participation in the labour market. The social model of disability argues the importance of context because without considering the unique conditions that disabled people face in their everyday life, it would be impossible to remove the barriers that they experience in society.

This section presents the empirical qualitative interview data which represents the lived experience of a collection of 48 self-selecting disabled people in China. This chapter includes four sections which cover the themes that emerged from the data ranging from political and institutional barriers to social cultural elements of ableism in contemporary Chinese society. Differentiated social status and its impact on Chinese disabled people social mobility is of central debate in this chapter.

## 6.2 Differentiated Citizenship Status and the Impact of *Hukou* on Employment

One of the most important factors that the participants reported to the researcher was the *Hukou* system (see chapter two for explanation), which had a substantial impact on their lived experience as disabled people. Overall, there were nineteen interviewees who had an urban *hukou* and twenty-eight with a rural one. The empirical data suggests that the *hukou* system has a significant discriminatory effect on disabled people's access to mobility, social security provisions and job market.

There is a general difference between rural and urban areas in terms of infrastructure and public transport development, which is particularly important for disabled people to commute to work. In most of the cities where the researcher travelled during the fieldwork, disabled people with local *hukou* are entitled to apply for a public transport pass from the local council. The interviews illustrated how urban life with local *hukou* brings additional benefits to disabled people because of access to better infrastructure services such as transportation and built environment. For example, interviewee 1, a person with a Beijing *hukou*, reported positive experiences of using the public transport for commuting to work, without which he might not be able to work for the company which is located in the suburbs. Based on the contrast with interviewee 11, who is migrant worker from a less developed region, it is important to note the accessibility of transport.

*In Beijing, the metro system includes lifts and escalators... but in my hometown, you can only take a bus or walk... and the bus is difficult to get on due to the accessibility issues<sup>18</sup>. (Interviewee 11)*

Usually, the transportation fares in bigger cities (such as Shanghai and Beijing) are more expensive than smaller regions. It appears from the findings that having a local urban *hukou* would greatly reduce the financial costs of using the public transportation which can greatly boost the mobility of disabled people in terms of seeking job opportunities and commuting to work (Interviewee 12, 23, 47). Without one, a migrant worker like interviewee 1, 1 has to allocate a substantial amount of his monthly salary on commuting. In addition, due to unbalanced infrastructure development, disabled job seekers may miss the job opportunities in some remote suburban areas. This was exemplified by the experience of interviewee 38 who has a visual impairment. He reported the accessibility issues in his local (small) city where road condition are not suitable for him to commute without assistance. These problems were shared by many other

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<sup>18</sup>The bus had big steps in the entrance gate. There are more step-free buses in bigger cities than those smaller cities/towns.

interviewees who expressed concerns about the accessibility of infrastructure in Chinese (less developed) cities, not to mention the most remoted rural areas (see interviewee 19). The point to highlight here is that the residential status (location + *hukou*), to a large extent decides the mode and accessibility of transportation that citizens have access to and hence their social mobility is affected by their residential status.

Besides the policies on transportation, social security schemes are also *hukou* related. In an economically developed region with a relatively rich local government, disabled people can receive a significant amount of financial support to help them live independently. According to Interviewee 41, the amount of public benefit disabled people can receive from the government in a rich region like Zhejiang (where he currently lives) can be up to 2,000 yuan a month, which is about ten times the amount of money that disabled people can get in some of the poorest regions. In addition, preferential tax policies can also be found in the more economically developed regions. Interviewee 23, who works in Guangdong province, is entitled to an 80% exemption on personal income tax. In contrast, during the interviews with disabled people from rural areas or less developed cities, few supporting policies were mentioned by the interviewees, as they may be less informed by the local authorities.

In addition to better access to social welfare provisions, disabled people in more economically advanced cities are likely to be able to seek employment opportunities. In the experience of interviewee 6 who recently migrated to Shanghai from a small rural region, though she has not obtained local *hukou*, she has observed some of the key differences in terms of opportunities in the labour market as a disabled person between her hometown and Shanghai.

*Shanghai is very advanced (compared to my original city) ... unlike my hometown, here it is more common to see disabled people on the street and shops, whereas it is rare to see disabled people like me in my home city. (Interviewee 6)*



Acquiring a local *hukou* is fundamental to accessing these support policies and employment opportunities, yet it is proven to be very challenging for disabled migrants from disadvantaged social-economic backgrounds to claim urban *Hukou*, especially in large metropolitan areas where competition (to gain *hukou*) is intense. It tends to vary from city to city regarding the eligibility of obtaining local hukou, but in general it is more competitive to gain a *hukou* in larger cities. For example, Interviewee 23, reported that in Guangzhou which belongs to the first tier in terms of economic development, a 15-year continuous social insurance payment is necessary in order to ensure a pension after retirement.

*In most Chinese cities, a standard requirement for claiming a local Hukou is that you have to pay the social insurance for a consecutive period of time and possess a house... in general, for people like me from the rural area without a good education and with poor income, it is nearly impossible for us to claim the local Hukou. (Interviewee 23)*

According to the interview findings, except for the two interviewees who work for the government organisations (see later section on the difference of job sectors), no disabled migrant worker in this study has obtained local *hukou*, partially due to the ineligibility of the job and income.

While *hukou* is considered to be so important in determining access to welfare resources provided by the state in urban cities, this study found that the state's support to families in rural areas is clearly something missing in the experience of interviewees. Families in rural regions take the primary responsibility for their disabled family members in terms of providing a safety net (Interviewee 29). However, with the absence of the State in providing key social security, to what extent the rural family can support their disabled members largely depends on the social-economic status of each family. For those disabled people who reside in rural regions, their access to the job market is significantly dependent on the family (e.g. interviewee 8).

*Hukou* status, according to the findings so far from this study, seems to be a political symbol of citizenship which has substantial social and economic implications for disabled people. By having an urban *hukou* of a large city which provides good financial support to disabled citizens, it is more likely for a disabled person to secure employment opportunities (interviewee 1, 2). In contrast, many of the interviewees in this study are migrants from rural or less developed areas to more economically advanced cities, they face significant obstacles in commuting to work and access to social security (17, 19). This makes disabled migrants without a local *hukou* disadvantaged in the local urban labour market.

### 6.3 The Role of the State in the Medicalisation of Impairment

The CDPF, as discussed in Chapter two, is the only legal state sponsored political institution to “manage, represent and serve” (Shi 2018) the interest of disabled people in China. The findings from this study suggests that the CDPF has strong responsibility in the medicalisation process of impairment and body, which regards disabled people as secondary class citizens in society. This leads to the devaluation of disabled people from a political perspective. One of the key tasks of the CDPF is to certify disability by cooperating with medical practitioners. Many participants who had been through the certification process described this process as chaotic and shameful.

*According to the rules, I should get the lowest (most serious) degree certificate, <sup>19</sup>but the doctor told me since you are able to come here (hospital) to see me, I cannot give you degree 1... but if the CDPF asks me to visit you at your home, then I can give you a degree 1(Interviewee 25).*

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<sup>19</sup>According to the CDPF grading system, the degree runs from 1 to 4, 1 is the most serious ‘disability’ while 4 represents the ‘minor disability’.

Such unprofessional and shambolic practices is common to find in other interviewees' experiences. One of the key reasons why informants in this study choose to be certified is because a disability certificate is required when they apply to some (quota-based) employment opportunities and social benefits which can be used for independent living. However, due to the absolute medical approach taken by the CDPF, disabled participants in this study felt that they were humiliated. For instance, interviewee 4 who has an impairment on the hand, which does not affect his ability to perform daily tasks, but he was told to take 'disgusting photos' in order to be graded with a lower degree.

*Because my impairment is hard to classify... so the doctor suggested for I to take a photo to show my arms (the impaired part) looking as bad as possible... so I could be qualified for a certificate...I found it insulting to my dignity. (Interviewee 4)*

This study found that the CDPF's role in disability certification does not seem to advocate disabled people's rights as equal citizens in society, but rather, having a disability certificate sometimes can be a source of social stigma. Interviewee 16, who is from a relatively well-off family and who does not need to apply for any disability benefits nor quota-based jobs, he reported that a certificate is rather causing more harm to his reputation than recognising his rights.

*No, no, I do not have a disability certificate... if I applied for the certificate, local community officers would know, so I chose not to apply for one. When I was diagnosed with this disease, my parents told me not to share the news with anyone in the village because it may have a significant impact on our family's reputation. (Interviewee 16).*

Although holding a disability certificate can help disabled people apply for welfares benefits (depends on spatial region, see previous section about *Hukou*), over relying on the benefit may cause long-term economic difficulties for some disabled people. For some interviewees, their

employment choices are likely to be restricted once they are registered with the disability related benefits.

*Once I started a business, the government immediately stripped my financial allowance, which I used to rely on to survive... this put me at great financial risk... later, when I gave up the business and got the benefits again, I felt I could not risk losing this benefit anymore... I feel trapped by this benefit, but I do want to earn money independently!  
(Interviewee 25)*

Besides the responsibility of certifying disabled people, the CDPF is also committed to provide vocational training workshops which are also reported by the participants as problematic. Findings suggest that the workshops organised by the CDPF tend to have commonality regardless of their locality, that these workshops tend to be based on the stereotypical assumptions about impairment groups. For instance, blind massage seems to be a very popular training course designated for people with visual impairments because the typical stereotype of visually disabled people in China is that becoming a blind masseuse is the best way for them to make a living. Similarly, people with mobility impairments would be encouraged to attend IT training courses. Yet, the feedback collected from the research participants in this study suggests that these workshops failed to empower disabled job seekers:

*People believe that it is like a holiday package organised by the CDPF, free food, free drink, and if you are single, a good opportunity to find partners... no one cares about how much you learn, there is no way we can get a job by attending these trainings.  
(Interviewee 24)*

Other respondents who had experienced the vocational training workshop from other regions also said that these workshops seem to have little positive impact on their employability in the labour market (e.g. interviewee 19, now a 'blind masseur').

Other than the vocational training workshops, disability specialised job fairs are also arranged by the CDPF but were not seen as 'fit' for disabled people by participants in this study. Most of the jobs for disabled jobseekers were low-skilled and repetitive work offering the minimal wages. As explained in Chapter three on the quota scheme, employers also attend job fairs to try to take advantage of the scheme while reducing their labour costs. Many participants in this study, due to their educational background, therefore complained that they were over-qualified for these low skilled jobs.

*I contacted one of the local CDPF officials inquiring about job categories in those special job fairs. He gave me the impression that those jobs were not suitable for me, such as customer service, administrative jobs... jobs that do not require much education and skills. (Interviewee 6)*

As a master's graduate in law, interviewee 6, like many other interviewees with higher education qualifications, found it impossible to find jobs in these disability specialised job fairs which usually list low-aspirational jobs.

This study managed to collect some insights about the CDPF from some interviewees who had worked in the umbrella organisation. It was found that the CDPF as a state led political bureaucracy is ineffective and perhaps problematic in advocating disabled people's employment. First of all, as far as the majority of the participants are concerned, the officials in the CDPF do not represent their interests or reflect the lived experience of disabled people. Some informants had connections with their local CDPF branch reported to the researcher that nearly all staff at the organisation are non-disabled civil servants who had little interest in advocating disabled people's rights.

*Working in the CDPF, as a disabled person, it is so humiliating, because everything the organisation does is formalistic... nothing has benefited disabled people... the whole working culture is bureaucratic, and staff spend every day writing reports which do not reflect the reality. (Interviewee 35)*

Further evidence suggesting that the State sponsored organisation does not work to address the key employment issues that disabled people face in the labour market is that there are systematic disconnections between CDPF staff and the constituents they supposedly represent.

*The first day I started my work at the CDPF branch, the manager ask me: I heard disabled people usually have psychological problems, are you ok?... in their eyes, every disabled person is a demon... during my only three days working there (I quit later)... I didn't even see any disabled people come to the branch to use the services. (Interviewee 42)*

According to other participant's experience, ableist stereotypes against disabled people is common to find in local CDPF branches, hence the real effort from the CDPF to tackle disability stigma in society is questionable.

In this section, evidence from the interviews reveal the danger of state led medical approach of disability advocacy and its consequence on disabled people's experience in the labour market. The medical approach of disability certification is shambolic in process, and it is also dangerous as it promotes social stigma against disabled people's equal rights. By having a disability certificate, disabled people may be able to access to disability related welfare benefits and therefore they could be supported by state funds, but in many cases their experience in the labour market may be negatively affected because of the certificate. In addition, the jobs that CDPF try to promote to disabled job seekers tend to be low aspirational, which is not 'fit' to the expectations of many participants with higher educational qualifications. Finally, the organisational culture in the CDPF is patronising and ableist. It is inevitably questionable that to

what extent can an organisation run by non-disabled staff really tackle disabling barriers faced by disabled people in society.

## 6.4 Family and Local Community: Source of Support and Oppression

Unsurprisingly, family status emerged as one of the most influential factors that almost all informants mentioned in the interviews. After the data analysis, this thesis finds that family in many cases provides disabled family members with shelter and financial support, but very often family can be oppressive and damage disabled people's self-esteem.

There are variations of each family regarding their financial and social status. However, this study finds that the support that each family can provide to their disabled family members can be material and spiritual. For a disabled person like interviewee 6 who came from a family with poor economic conditions, she could achieve career success largely because of the selfless support devoted by her families.

*I was born in an extremely poor village in what was listed as one of the poorest counties...having a child like me caused my parents a great deal of financial pain and mental stress... after two failed surgery attempts, they decided to put all their resources and energy into supporting my education. (Interviewee 6)*

The support on education is the most common support identified in the interview findings, though family with poor financial status tended to struggle more, because the State seems to provide little support in this regard. The differing experiences of interviewees 37 and 4, both of whom hail from the same region but possess contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, highlight the intersection of education, disability, and financial support in the pursuit of higher education

in China. While interviewee 37's family belongs to the affluent echelons of the local community by virtue of their employment with a state-owned enterprise, interviewee 4's family works in the agricultural sector and supports a disabled child, sometimes at the cost of their own financial security. Despite their divergent backgrounds, both interviewees had the opportunity to pursue higher education due to the support of their families. However, the support provided by interviewee 4's family was more onerous due to the need to care for a disabled child with limited financial resources, while interviewee 37's family had greater economic and social advantages that made the attainment of a university degree less challenging. In China, educational attainment is a vital criterion for social and economic mobility, particularly in light of Confucian traditions that prioritize education as a measure of merit. Thus, higher education is essential for individuals with disabilities to enhance their employment prospects in the Chinese labor market. Chapter eight provides further insight into the employment opportunities available to disabled individuals with higher education qualifications.

Despite the fact that most of the interviewees received support from their family (either financial or spiritually), some participants reported experience of oppression from family members, which had significantly negative impact on their independent living.

The first immediate barrier within some families is what Foster and Hirst (2020) described "misplaced paternalism" from parents that restricts the opportunities of disabled members. According to the testimony given by some participants, they were not trusted by their parents in terms of their ability to achieve independent living. This patronising attitudinal barrier appeared to disadvantage disabled family members to seek employment opportunities outside the family, but instead they were expected to be cared for by parents. For instance, interviewee 31, who has a visual impairment, grew up in a low expectation environment where her ability was constantly undervalued.



*My parents were very negative about my future... they always said, 'you cannot see anything, you cannot do anything, what can you do in the future?' Those words were always around me, causing me to feel very negative about myself. (Interviewee 31)*

The low expectations of disabled people within some families reflect the wider social stigma in Chinese society. Families may be under such social pressure from their local community, and hence the non-disabled families tried to 'protect' their disabled family members from such psycho-emotional dimension of disablement. The evidence of this form of internalised ableism can be found in the experience of interviewee 12.

*My parents and other acquaintances in the local community gave me the impression that being disabled is shameful. So they never allowed me to go out alone... even at the shopping mall; my mom would not allow me to touch anything because she believes that it would be shameful if someone saw me touching anything. (Interviewee 12)*

Such attitudinal barriers that disabled people experience within the family can lead to segregation from mainstream society. For Interviewee 29, who relies heavily on her parents' daily care, she has also been strictly controlled by her parents and has not been able to reach the outside world. During the text-based interview with the researcher, she said that she was secretly saving money made from an online business and purchased her own electric wheelchair, so that she can escaped from parent's control over her mobility. With the mobility aid, she now can seek employment opportunities outside of the house. Other interviewees (most of them are females) also reported to the researcher with the regard the low expectation and mobility restrictions they experience within the family.

While some were discouraged from living independently due to 'misplaced paternalism', reaching out to disabled communities can empower and enhance disabled people's self-esteem and self-confidence. The core of the social model as an emancipatory approach is reflected in

some interviewees' social experiences. Taking interviewee 4's experience as an example, he shared his impression of attending a disability awareness workshop, which re-shaped his view on himself:

*It was the first time that I felt there was no shame at all in talking about my impairment... there were so many interesting stories shared by others in relation to disablement... actually I felt like it was joyful to share some of my very dark experiences (of disablement) with others... this event made me think that actually admitting being disabled is not a bad thing after all. (Interviewee 4)*

This type of experience was commonly reported by the participants who had chances to reach outside their 'regular social circle (*quanzi*<sup>20</sup>)', some of whom indeed started championing their own disability identity by challenging them to attend independent living training shops, which are organised by civil organisations (such as DPOs). Interaction with those disability advocacy organisations, reported by many participants, is meaningful to develop their identifies as disabled people.

*My entire cognition of disability was changed at a training workshop in Hong Kong. During the time I spent in HK, the tutors shared their experiences as disabled in HK, and I found that the social support system in HK was way beyond my imagination in mainland China. I received unprecedented support in HK. After the trip, I had a new sense of self and much greater acceptance of myself. (Interviewee 12)*

Besides the physical interactions, virtual communities are found in this study to be significantly important for disabled people to escape from misplaced paternalism in the family. As covered in chapter five, the interviewees in this study were all recruited from online social media channels. These virtual communities organised by disabled people function as DPOs where members share

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<sup>20</sup>A social circle that is consist of members who are familiar with each other. See the list of Chinese concepts

lived experience of oppression and empower each other. Accessing to these virtual communities to some extent increase members' career choices, because some members who are already employed by companies would share recruitment information in the community.

In conclusion, family in China can be a source of support to their disabled family members, while in many cases this form of support collateralises with misplaced paternalism (over-protection) which can damage disabled people's independence. Reaching outside of family domain, based on the experiences shared by the informants in this study, can help them develop disability awareness and to some extent achieve independence.

## 6.5 Isolation and Inclusion: the Impact of Education on Disabled People's Employment

Disabled people's experience of education in China, as far as the participants in this study are concerned, is largely determined by their residential location and social status (e.g. family *hukou*), though some interviewees reported the influence of international events as well. There are two types of education systems were identified from the experience of the informants, namely the special education system for disabled people and the mainstream education system. This section analyses the two parallel schooling systems regarding its impact on disabled people's social mobility and employment.

As this study includes various age groups, some interviewees experienced the foundation of the CDPF and China's commitment to promote disabled people's education rights since the country joins international regulatory organisations such as The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and The International Labour Organisation (ILO). Some participants reported their contrasting experience before and after the Chinese government's introduction of inclusive education policies.

*When I was 6-7 years old, all the local schools rejected me... disability NO, disability No...but later there was an international day of disabled people, suddenly I was told that I could go to one of the best local primary schools...but when the hype was over, I was immediately informed that I could not study there anymore... I had to abandon my study. (Interviewee 25)*

The experience shared by interviewee 25 in general reflects the short-lived impact from the international events on Chinese domestic policies. The education policies did not have a particular rights-based approach for disabled students, nor any State financial support was given to families with disabled members, which put a significant financial burden on some of the poorest families that this research has included.

*It used to be 600 or 700 yuan a year (in the 1990s) in order to continue for education, but my family could not afford it... plus the headteacher of the local school also rejected me (because of my impairment), so I had to drop out of middle school. (Interviewee 21)*

The situation for disabled people to receive education has been drastically changed in the new century (2000 onwards). As the economy advances and with more fiscal budget allocated to disability education rights, local councils are directed by the central government to establish special schools for disabled students. These special schools are largely isolated and separated from the mainstream schooling system. Due to the ‘speciality’ of the schooling system, participants who had experienced this form of segregated education reported to the researcher about the negative impact on their mental health because of the special education. For interviewee 8, who was forced to drop out from the mainstream education due to school bullying, he was devastated:

*I would say it was an asylum rather than a school... although there was no bullying (which happens in mainstream schools), you had no freedom at all... other than eating and studying, you could not leave your room, even for the weekend, unless your parents came to pick you up. (Interviewee 8)*

Another feature of the special education system, shared by all interviewees (e.g. interviewee 7, 8, 12, 20, 31, 38, 43) who had experience of it, is the relatively low quality of the education materials. For example, as a blind person since early childhood, interviewee 20 reported a much lower standard of teaching in the special schools.

*The learning content there was much easier (than mainstream school), and the learning materials were very dated – for example, college-level students can only use secondary school materials, as those are the only ones with braille versions (Interviewee 20).*

Without a braille printed textbook, the learning materials that are available to people with visual impairment are naturally restricted, so as their learning outcome. This material restriction was also noted from the experience of other participants who have different impairment types, but the structural barrier all participants face in the special education system, regardless of impairment, remains consistent.

Compared to the special education system, mainstream schooling is found to be more challenging for integration, but it offers a much greater opportunity for boosting self-identity and confidence.

Stigma from non-disabled peers is one of most common barriers that disabled participants report in mainstream schools. This can sometimes result in school bullying which may have long-term psychological consequences on disabled people. For interviewee 8, who lives in a relatively

isolated region, school bullies are also neighbours. At the time of interview, he was forced to drop out of school and remained unemployed, because the locals would not be willing to hire him.

Due to the lack of regulatory practices of reasonable adjustment at schools (one of the key principles of the UNCRPD), participants expressed their experience of being disadvantaged in the education system that was designed based on non-disabled students. Having different body characteristics, Interviewee 18 reported his disadvantage in academic results which were negatively affected by then exam rules.

*I had difficulties controlling my muscles... because the Chinese language exam requires a lot of handwriting, I did not have enough time to finish the exam... I was supposed to write a good long answer, but because of the lack of time and my writing speed, I could not get good marks. (Interviewee 18)*

Except for a small number of 'lucky' cases, such as the interviewee 4 who was able to request change of classrooms for better accessibility, most of the interviewees finished their mainstream schools without any reasonable adjustment made. In an interview with participant 41, he shared the insights about the difficulties going through the mainstream system and obtaining a higher education degree. Therefore, the number of disabled students who can 'survive' and make a success out of the system is rare.

*From 2015-to 2018, only 20,000 disabled students entered higher education (including special education), but the number of total students is 20,000,000. That means only 0.1% of new students are disabled, and only 1% of disabled people can enter higher education. (Interviewee 41)*

Both special and mainstream education systems are supposed to promote the rights of Chinese citizens, though the employment prospects of the two pathways are substantially different. This study finds that disabled students who finish special schools are likely to do impairment related stereotypical jobs. From the interviews, it is understood that there are general stereotypes in special schools: people with visual impairments are best to do massage jobs, people with hearing impairment should do painting or art, and people with mobile impairments should be trained to do computer-based jobs. For example, interviewee 20 was constantly told to focus on massage skills training in the school for the blind because of his visual impairment:

*The teaching style was quite simplistic: keep your body fit and get ready to be a blind masseur... they would tell you to accept your fate, working in blind massage salons will be the best option for us, etc. (Interviewee 20)*

As a result of this stereotype based vocational training approach, most of the participants in this study who had been educated in the special school systems are doing these stereotypical jobs. In contrast, there are more diversity of the jobs among the informants who did not go to special schools. By attending mainstream schools, there are more support from the career office at school which has extensive networks with mainstream companies, and therefore the job prospects for disabled students are significantly abundant than those who attended special school. Having internship experience at mainstream companies, based on the experience shared by the interviewees, is empowering.

*I was offered an opportunity to undertake an internship at a foreign-invested company... before this, I had never been anywhere alone and I was scared... it turns out that all the worries I had were meaningless because I could do everything on my own! (Interviewee 18)*

These internship opportunities to work in mainstream companies are very positively regarded by participants. By having an internship at a company, informants (see interviewee 46) report that

they felt more confidence in their own skills, and they are more likely to be employed by the organisation when they finish the internship.

To conclude the section, the two systems have different career impacts on disabled people. While the state tries to promote special education for disabled people, the experiences shared by the participants suggest that it promotes the stereotypical ideas about disability based on the medical approach. Consequently, a second-class citizenship of disabled people is likely to be formed due to the nature of isolation and stigma surrounding the special education system. On the other hand, this study reveals that while disabled students in mainstream schools face significant challenges (sometimes bullying) regarding accessibility and adjustments, their career opportunities are much greater than their counterparts in special schools.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter summarises the key findings from the interviews that reflect the structural factors that influence Chinese disabled people's access to the general social life and labour market. There are political, social, and cultural barriers that contribute to the devaluation of disabled people in China as second-class citizens with limited social mobility in mainstream society.

The *hukou* system and unbalanced urban development marginalise disabled people. An urban *hukou* has significantly better access to transport infrastructure, welfare benefits and employment opportunities, while disabled people who have urban *hukou* from a larger city tend to report better access to the labour market than their counterparts who reside in smaller cities. This difference not only affects disabled people's social mobility, also restricts rural disabled people's access to job opportunities.



Family and local community, as part of the key element of the social life, indeed provide disabled people with support, but this study finds that very often disabled people experience oppression from families and community members. Family background is part of individual's social status, which this study finds has a particular influence on disabled people's social mobility. Ableism seems to be embedded in families and communities where disabled people are valued less, despite being included in mainstream social life. By reaching out and participating disability identity events and workshops have significant positive impact on disabled people's self-confidence. Virtual communities are channels to tackle physical isolation and foster collective identities among disabled participants.

Finally, this chapter analysed the participants' experience in education systems – special and mainstream schools. Attending special schools tends to have restricted career aspirations for disabled people, whereas mainstream education despite accessibility and adjustment issues, offers much more career options for disabled students.

The next findings chapter will move on and focus on career experience reported by participants who are employed in various job types and sectors.

# Chapter Seven - Findings on the Experience of Disabled Workers in the Labour Market

## 7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, factors that impact Chinese disabled people's social mobility and employability were analysed. These factors, regardless of political, social and cultural origins, appear to have profound impacts on Chinese disabled people's social status, which consequently affect their opportunities in the labour market. This chapter focuses more on the characteristics of the Chinese labour market which is undergoing substantial transformation towards commodification and marketisation. As argued in chapter two, regarding the nature of the marketisation of Chinese economy, there seems to be a complex interaction between the state and the labour market. How disabled labourers are valued in this transition was one of the key research questions of this study, and this section aims to answer this by drawing the findings from the qualitative interviews.

## 7.2 Employment Policies and Ineffective Law Enforcement

In Chapter two and six, the discussion highlighted the importance of urban citizenship and body/medical status in determining career choices of disabled people. If imposing strict rules on differentiated citizenship and entry to certain jobs/sectors is the legacy of the regime (planned economy), then letting the private labour market take control of addressing disability employment issues is a reflection of the state's strategy to devolve its control over the economy and liberate the labour market.

According to the quota scheme, the public sector is under an obligation to recruit disabled workers. Two participants in this study were found to be employed in the Government departments (one in central government and the other in local government). The Government,

being an employer as well as a regulator, is supposed to be a role model to the public by promoting disabled people's rights in employment. It was found in the experience of interviewee 44 that the legal commitment made by the state provides some security for disabled candidates as the government employer may face legal challenges if they fail to follow the policy.

*I applied for the job via 'sanzhi yifu', or 'three support and one help'<sup>21</sup> scheme which was hosted by the department where I am currently working... I passed through all the stages of recruitment... but I still needed to pass the physical examination which was a dilemma for the manager, because if they rejected me, they would face legal consequences. (Interviewee 44)*

There is one factor that emerged from above quote: the physical body examination. According to most interviewees, it has strong connection between the medicalisation of body (see section 6.3) and structural discrimination against disabled people in the public sector (see section 7.3 in later this chapter).

Unlike the public sector where employers experience strong pressures to follow state legislation (i.e. disability quota), the private sector is more loosely regulated. The quota scheme provides private employers with a way of reducing labour costs, while the actual job they offered to the disabled job seeker tends to be peripheral. According to the quota scheme, employers are legally obligated to recruit disabled workers, though the law can be abused as there is no requirement on the minimum wage paid to disabled employees. One of the key findings of how employers abuse the quota law is evident in wage discrimination in offered contracts. During the interview with participant 5, she demonstrated the wage gap that companies offer to disabled candidates via the quota scheme from several recruitment agency websites:

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<sup>21</sup>This is a national policy introduced by the central government to support disadvantaged graduate students in entering the civil service system. The body responsible for implementing this policy is the local human resource and social security department, which is the department that she is working for at that moment.

*You can see those posts offer 3,000-6,000 yuan per month as a salary, but in reality, they would only offer the minimum 3000-yuan wage for disabled candidates... the reason why those companies post jobs here is that they want to be exempt from paying the disability quota levy....so far all of my friends who were recruited via the quota never got high salaries. (Interviewee 5)*

Similar experiences were also found in other interviewees who are based in different regions. Interviewee 17, a salesperson for a company which makes prosthetics, for example, was paid substantially less than his non-disabled colleagues, though he felt that his actual sales performance was much better than them. The quota law, in this case, seems to only ‘force’ employers to recruit disabled workers while it is ineffective in addressing wage discrimination. As a result of the law’s ineffectiveness of addressing fundamental issues of disability discrimination at the workplace, tokenistic practices were reported by many participants, most of whom are working in big (Internet) companies. According to their observations at work, one of the attractive points of employing disabled labour via the quota scheme for companies is tax reduction.

*Those Internet companies pay very high wages to their workers due to the booming competitive market...but for us who were recruited via the disability quota, they would not treat us as equal colleagues...they even did not give me a proper introduction when I came to the office the very first day. (Interviewee 12)*

If the above testimony given by interviewee 12 is about her experience of being marginalised in the company, then Interviewee 26’s experience demonstrates how the tokenistic practices by employers limit the career aspirations of disabled employees

*Although the government encourages inclusion in the workplace, in practice a lot of companies do not want disabled people to show their faces in front of clients because it would involve 'losing face' for the company...without being assigned onto important roles, the career progression is limited for me at this company (Interviewee 26)*

A quota scheme without a strong discrimination law enforcement is also likely to put disabled workers in risk of exploitation by some companies. In this study, it is found that disabled people, compared to their non-disabled counterparts, are more likely to be offered short fixed-term employment contracts, which exposes disabled employees to greater unemployment risk. For interviewee 40, who had got his first employment contact from a foreign invested organisation, explained to the researcher that he felt grateful but also vulnerable due to the conditions of his contact.

*I was offered a year as an IT assistant in this company... other non-disabled colleagues received longer terms or permanent contracts... the contract expires next February, and I am not sure whether they will renew my contract or not. (Interviewee 40)*

Other interviewees on quota schemes also reported few opportunities for them to be promoted once they have joined a company as part of the quota scheme, since they work within special disability posts their performance is also different to evaluate in the company. For example, Interviewee 26 shared her experience of trying to apply for a promotion in an internet company. Despite her popularity among both managers and colleagues, her managers told her that she was not entitled to any promotion within the company because there was no budget set for her as a person who joined in the company via quota. As a result, her wage is capped at a small percentage increase each year, and she is not allowed to transfer to other positions.

Other than the quota route, some disabled interviewees shared their experience of self-employment. The support provided by the state, however, was found to be minor and regionally

variable. This study included a number of disabled people operating as self-employed street vendors. This is a precarious form of work: some have a government license but the majority of the industry is operating at risk of a crackdown by the government.

If one gets permission from the government to work as a street vendor as a disabled entrepreneur, it can be a relatively secure form of employment, exemplified in the experience of Interviewee 10. She shared her experience of operating a small business in her home province Xinjiang<sup>22</sup>, where she was granted a license by her local government.

*Once the officials learned of my situation (registered as a disabled person), they immediately found a space near my house to let me run a small business for free. They exempted me from taxes, land fees, and other utility bills. (Interviewee 10).*

When the researcher continued to interview other informants who had experience in being street vendors, it became clear that the local government had significant political power in interpreting the law. Without permission by the local government, it can be dangerous for disabled people to operate their business as they could face penalties from ‘law enforcement’.

*I was consistently under threat by the cheng guan<sup>23</sup>... they always come to my site and drag my goods away...because I cannot run as quick as other non-disabled people, I was always left being caught by the cheng guan. (Interviewee 21)*

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<sup>22</sup>A region with a relatively strong government presence

<sup>23</sup>In Chinese cities, an informal law enforcement team set up by the local council to ‘clean up’ street vendors. These law enforcement units are not part of the police department, but they have substantial power to issue penalty tickets to the street vendors who have not obtained permission to sell.

Though selling goods on streets without a license is illegal, interviewees reported that due to the barriers of entering mainstream wage work, they were left with limited choices but to try to be street vendors. The fact that local government has the political power to interpret the law which lists the supporting policies for disabled people to set up business, is likely to disadvantage disabled people who do not have a good *guanxi* network within the government.

*The law says that we can get support from the government, but in fact, what we got is trouble...The government tries to regulate the sector in order to maintain a 'good looking' city environment<sup>24</sup>...but I have no other options because those people who are permitted to sell on street usually know someone in the government and they were notified by their friends when the cheng guan is on their way to the street (Interviewee 25)*

As discussed in chapter three, the employment support policies in China are largely rhetorical, yet the law enforcement, according to the experiences shared by the participants of this study, is often ineffective. In addition to tokenistic practices of employers who take advantage of the quota scheme, political interpretation of the law by local authorities appears to be more relevant when disabled people try to set up business.

### 7.3 Variation of Employment Relations

The previous section has drawn on the findings from the interviews and suggests the ineffectiveness of employment law in the context of Chinese labour market. This section will focus on the variation of production relations in different form of employment, namely the public employment sector, marketized private sector and family employment.

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<sup>24</sup>This is an award given to some local governments (city level). The main criteria for the award relate to how civilized the local citizens are. For example, no rubbish on the street, no homeless / beggars, no street vendors, etc.

Public sector jobs were widely regarded among interviewees as the 'ideal' choice of employment. They were seen as fairer in terms of work and wage conditions. However, the *Bianzhi* system (see chapter three) imposes strict restrictions on people with impairments wanting to enter the sector. The only two interviewees that worked in the public sector were participants 13 and 44, both have a disability certificate which categorises them as 'having a minor impairment'. In most cases, people with a more 'serious impairment' are excluded from public sector jobs because they are unable to pass the medical examination<sup>25</sup>. Having *bianzhi* status means better employment benefits and security. Particularly in the civil service sector, interviewees reveal that having a *bianzhi* protects a disabled worker from dismissal.

*There are no performance checks, as long as you do not make any substantial political mistakes, as corruption and bribery are prohibited. Otherwise I can do this job for the rest of my life. (Interview 44)*

This sense of 'fairness and stability' attracts not only disabled jobseekers but also non-disabled people. However, the availability of public sector jobs (especially civil service positions) is more abundant in urban cities. As analysed earlier in Chapter six, there are more disabled people in rural China than urban regions, and their opportunities to migrate to urban cities are restricted due to numerous economic and social barriers. Thus, it is even more disadvantageous for disabled people to work in public employment which is regarded as the 'safest' employment. There are two interviewees (14 and 44) who work for the civil service with *bianzhi*, and they both mentioned how difficult it was for them to be employed by a government department. They both face significant barriers in body examination which is a key restrictive barrier that most disabled candidate cannot pass.

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<sup>25</sup>See section 6.3 for detailed experience shared by participants regarding the process of disability certification issuance, which is fundamentally the same as body examination for obtaining *Bianzhi*.



Not all public sector jobs remain unaffected by the nation's transition towards marketisation. Unlike in the civil service sector which is strictly regulated, in state-owned companies, the transition to market competitiveness has threatened the job security of some of the interviewees who do not hold *bianzhi*. Interviewees 32 and 34 both work in state owned companies. Interviewee 34 has been a long-time employee with *bianzhi*, while interviewee 32 does not have it. They reported very different experiences in their organisations' transition to market competition.

*I worked very hard but because our company needs to be more efficient and the management wants to get rid of some employees...of course they chose people like me to be removed first. (Interviewee 32).*

Although interviewee 34 reported that she had much pressure from the company in terms of being productive, due to her *bianzhi* status, her employment security was less affected.

Compared to public employment sector, participants report worse experiences of employment precarity and vulnerability in marketized job sectors. Rural migrant Interviewee 22 experienced many rejections by employers until he found this current job. His experience of finding a 'suitable' job for him in a fast-moving city seemed to be extremely onerous. As a migrant worker, he had limited choice but chose to work in one of the most competitive type of jobs in which he felt extremely stressed.

*The moment I open my eyes, I need to work... I have to constantly watch the computer in case clients send a message... once I finish work, it is time to sleep. Every day is the same, six days a week... I have decided to quit this job... it is too stressful; I have to achieve at least 10k sales a month... I have been working here for two years now, and over half the time, I have not met the monthly target. (Interviewee 22)*

This kind of intense workload, according to this study, is more prevalent in lower-skilled jobs where few arrangements were made for accommodating disabled workers.

Heavy workload and inflexibility may lead to disabled employee's burnout. In the setting of a call centre, for example, work is considered to be high-intensity and stressful as staff have to answer phone calls continuously. Interviewee 10, a wheelchair user, believed that this type of working environment suits her impairment but is also very exhausting. The nature of call centre jobs is that employees need to sit in their booths throughout their shifts, which is convenient for Interviewee 10 as she can sit in her wheelchair while working. However, she needs to spend a significant amount of time commuting to work in the city of Beijing, where traffic can be frustrating. The work that she does requires punctuality, as the call centre is running 24/7, which means that she needs to be at work on time so she will not be penalised by the manager.

*Generally, we are not supposed to take sick leave because it will cause significant disruption to other team members... if I become sick (which I try to avoid), I essentially force other colleagues to take on more work. (Interviewee 10)*

She later noted that she could not afford to be sick because she may lose a large proportion of her income and also without a local urban *hukou*, the medical bills in a big city like Beijing may ruin her savings.

An emphasis on inflexible measures of productivity and ableism are also found in white collar work. Interviewee 24 was working in a customer service department for an export firm, and the bulk of her work was replying to emails and sending text messages online, which requires a lot of keyboard typing. She was capable and confident to do the job despite her impairment in her left hand. Despite this, she experienced serious doubt of her ability to work from her line manager:

*I can type, just a bit slow... but I did not tell them that my left hand is troublesome because I was afraid that they would not recruit me in the first place... later the manager noticed it while he was standing behind me, at which point he asked me to his office and expressed his concern over my productivity. (Interviewee 24)*

The dilemma of whether to disclose an impairment at work is commonly experienced by most participants (see detailed analysis in section 6.5). Interviewee 24's experience reflects the general lack of confidence and understanding towards disabled workers from managers in the fast-paced private employment sector. The increased pace of work was also identified as disadvantaging disabled employees, however, in the knowledge sector which tends to be more specialised based on individual talents, the quality of the work is not always necessarily linear with the pace of work. In economically developed cities such as Beijing and Shanghai where more white-collar jobs are based, participants with higher educational degrees are more likely to be employed by companies that offer specialised jobs. Foreign invested companies are also more likely to set up their branches in developed urban regions. These companies, according to the six interviewees (1, 2, 9, 11, 40, 43) who had working experience in the sector, are more likely to provide equality and disability inclusion packages as they are regulated by their headquarter policies which tended to follow the equality and diversity initiatives outside China. These experiences, according to them, encouraged them to build up their career confidence while being treated as 'capable' employees.

*We are provided with full training and grants to ensure we can perform the tasks based on our individual abilities. I felt empowered by the job and the colleagues here say that they used to work with disabled people, so they are confident about me too. (Interviewee 9).*

Disabled people in knowledge sector jobs are seen to be more productive as long as they are given the right equipment and flexibility in the workplace. Interviewee 33's case demonstrates a

good example of how talented disabled workers can contribute to the organisation if they were given autonomy and trust.

*I can decide my own working hours, I plan for my own performance checkpoints... this gives me confidence to complete the tasks in my way. So far, the company is very happy with my contribution to the organisation (Interviewee 33)*

There is another form of employment that is different to public and private employment sectors: work for the family. In the setting of family business, family relationships enable a more collectivist employment relationship to be sustained that the open labour market has perhaps eroded. Family members tended to have a better understanding of disabled family members' conditions. Interviewee 15's experience of working in a family-owned car repair shop illustrates this well.

*There are three of us in the shop, my mom cooks and looks after the cash, my dad does purchasing, sales and repairing, and I help my dad... they (parents) know my condition very well, so if I have any difficulties, I tell them, and they just take over and ask me to do something that I am able to... we as a family do not have a clear hierarchy, we share the income evenly because we are a family. (Interviewee 15)*

In this detailed description of the jobs that each family member does for the business, it is clear that the job design was based on the individual's talent and capability, rather than the monetary valuation of labour which is the standard in the open labour market. Further examples from the interview data also suggest that disabled people feel more comfortable and experience a greater sense of inclusion when working for their family businesses. As partners for the family business, interviewees 17 and 46 both help their families with cash handling and bookkeeping, while their non-disabled family members are responsible for other daily operations. The cash handling roles in the family business reflect the trust of other family members while they are able to contribute to the business by what they can do the best. "Do whatever you can" is the general idea of

participating in family businesses. The above examples all point out one important feature of working in the family business – trust between family members. With a sense of trust with each other, it can perhaps become a device for disabled workers to contribute as much as they can without feeling stigmatised

The collective interests of the family in this form of employment, seem to replace the business relations. This makes it substantially different to other wage-based employment relations, since family employment relations do not involve valuation (and de-valuation) and commodification of labour. This will be further discussed in chapter nine.

## 7.4 The Role of Social Status and Social Relations at Work

Social status, determined by a number of factors such as family-based kinship networks, *guanxi* and *hukou* status, has to some extent important impact on disabled people's opportunities in the labour market. A typical usage of social status as a power is to gain an advantage in job recruitment. Interviewee 31 managed to use her family's *guanxi* network to be admitted to a workplace which had rejected her during the recruitment stage.

*I applied for a job in a hospital as a masseuse... The HR manager initially rejected me, with the excuse that 'we do not need people on this job anymore', but later the decision was overturned because I managed to find someone who knew the senior manager in the hospital... then I was told that I could work for the hospital. (Interviewee 31)*

Given the circumstances of her family with extended local network, she could materialise the privileged (ascribed) status, but her experience of being socially excluded at work indicates the critical role of social relations which cannot be achieved via family network.

*Although my family is very supportive and wealthy, but I went to special school and I have never made friends in mainstream society. This makes me feel embarrassed and excluded in conversations with non-disabled colleagues. I feel like I am not welcomed to participate in their social activities and casual conversations. (Interviewee 31)*

Social relations at work are usually established and strengthened by casual conversations. Informants revealed that due to the general exclusion in their social life, they tend to struggle in workplace socials.

*My social circle is very small, so I have limited access to recourses, and I am unable to have fruitful conversations with others... I can have a chat with my clients or colleagues, but I cannot have a deep conversation with them...this made me hugely disadvantaged because I am not popular at work (Interviewee 22)*

If this evidence indicates the struggle of disabled people due to their own social status, then ableism at work is the external factor that further marginalises disabled workers. Patronising attitudes from managers are commonly reported by interviewees as a key attitudinal barrier that they encounter at work. Some interviewees experienced being shouted at work as the managers believe all disabled people have 'hearing problems' (Interviewees 4, 42). In contrast, patronising behaviour can be seen in the form of 'extreme friendliness'. For example, the account below from interviewee 12 who works for a big internet company illustrates experiences of being patronised by line managers as she was recruited as 'quota employees'.

*Because the pace in the Internet company is fast, all of my managers are aggressive towards other colleagues, but to me it is more like they are talking to a child... they spoke very slowly to me as if I am a low intelligence person... (Interviewee 12)*

Being able to participate in organisational social events is crucial for establishing and maintaining social relations at work. Important decisions such as recruitment and promotion, sometimes can be made during these events. The Chinese concept of ‘*mainzi*’ seems to be embedded with ableism and lookism in some organisations where disabled employees are excluded from these social activities. For example, Interviewee 9, who was recruited by the company to fulfil the disability quota, reported that his social experience at his previous pharmaceutical company:

*We (about 4-5 disabled employees) were never invited to business dinners, team building activities, etc. For example, if the company organised a hiking trip to the mountains, they would not allow us to come, even though there were accessible facilities. (Interviewee 9)*

The fact is that a group of disabled employees who are totally excluded from the network opportunities may indicate their second-class position in the social hierarchy within the company. This phenomenon is also found in some other companies, especially in those job positions that involve external clients or stakeholders. Although being a popular colleague to others, interviewee 2’s experience quoted below shows how ableism reflects in the Chinese ‘*mianzi*’ culture which regards having a ‘weird’ looking body is a discrediting to the organisational reputation.

*We were about to take a group photo after the business gathering when suddenly the person in charge asked me to step back (to hide my body), and the reason was that the picture would be shown to senior managers. They did not want the photo (including my body) to make management feel unpleasant. (Interviewee 2)*

Overall, this section has analysed the importance of social status and relations at work. Who you know seems to be more important than who you are, as it reflects the social position of an individual. This appears to be applicable to disabled people as they are part of a family based social system. On the other hand, disabled people are substantially disadvantaged at workplaces

due to their lack of experience in communications as well as the ableist practices by some companies in order to maintain a good ‘social image - *mainzi*’.

## 7.5 Visibility of the Impairment and Workplace Adjustment

In Chapter four, debates in the field of disability studies highlight the importance of visibility of impairment and how people with impairments interact with non-disabled people in the workplace. Interviewees from this study reported different strategies they adopted to ‘pass’ or challenge ableism in the workplace.

Having a disabled worker in the company would itself challenge the existing arrangements that were made based on non-disabled workers. The medicalisation of the body and its ideological dominance in the labour market has made people with invisible impairments silent about their conditions. To avoid being regarded as a troublemaker, some interviewees with ‘minor’ or invisible impairments chose to conceal their body conditions in order to secure their employment contract. For example interviewee 37 had a hidden impairment which could make him pass out anytime without notice. He chose to conceal his conditions as part of his strategy to "not terrify" the employers.

*There are two reasons... first, I would only report my impairment if it would affect my daily work, which it does not at the moment... second, the employer would overthink it if I told him about my condition in the recruitment stage. (Interviewee 37)*

Experiences shared by other interviewees with invisible impairments indicate that concealing their impairment would give them significant short-term benefits in terms of having more successful job applications, but in the long run, they are under constant fear of being found out.



*I have been trying so hard to not tell anyone at work about my impairment. Nobody would recognise that I have problems with my eyesight unless I tell them so... and I want to retain my dignity as I do not want to highlight it to others...but I also worry about being found out and what I should say to them (Interviewee 27)*

In contrast, participants with visible impairments tended to experience more attitudinal barriers from co-workers and managers, such as bullying or patronising (see previous section). It is more difficult or sometimes impossible for them to 'pass'. Instead, the majority of participants with visible impairments would try to challenge ableism at work by using their own body as a device.

*I have never attempted to conceal my impairment since it is readily apparent. Instead, I have always been open and transparent with my managers about my capabilities, reassuring them that despite my impairment, I am fully capable of fulfilling various responsibilities. This approach has proven beneficial, as it allows managers to adjust their expectations from the outset. In reality, I am a diligent worker, committed to delivering results and exceeding expectations (Interviewee 6).*

According to interviewee 6, disclosing impairments at the early stage of the employment would boost mutual understandings between employee and employer. As is reflected in the career journey of interviewee 33, although he was rejected by many employers, disclosing his impairment helped him to find trusted employers to work for. Disclosing impairment to employers also makes it easier for disabled employees to request for workplace adjustments.

*I have encountered numerous instances of negative attitudes from companies... While I cannot alter my physical appearance, I firmly believe that companies have the capacity to change their perceptions of me. Given an opportunity, I am confident in my ability to earn the trust of an employer, and I am prepared to go the extra mile to reciprocate that trust. Establishing this foundation of trust facilitates a more conducive environment for requesting reasonable accommodations, as managers become acquainted with my capabilities and unique circumstances (Interviewee 33).*

By disclosing impairment, and revealing disability identity, workplace adjustment can be negotiated and arranged, though very few interviewees made attempts to request for adjustment. Despite the existence of the employment law that promote disabled people into the mainstream labour market, participants report that there is a significant gap between employers' awareness of disabled workers and the practice of reasonable adjustment (see UNCRPD).

*There were a lot of issues the managers did not recognise, until you, as a disabled person, raised them... but of course there is a risk that you can be disadvantaged if the manager thought you are being difficult... (Interviewee 5)*

As a disabled employee who has needs for adjustment, it is in interviewee 5's own dilemma whether should she request to the manager or not, because the employment law does not protect her on the issues of reasonable adjustment (see section 6.2). This gap between disabled worker's needs and the ineffectiveness of the law can be seen in other participants' experience (e.g. interviewee 41 who works for private education firm), regardless the employment sector they work in – it is rather a common issue in the Chinese labour market.

Without being able to claim reasonable adjustment at work, disabled employees have to work in accordance with the job design that is based on the standard of non-disabled people. For a person who has visual impairment, it is more likely for interviewee 41 to make mistakes when he uses the facilities at work

*During my first day at work, I made mistakes immediately. The manager criticised me and I got a public warning. I do not think this was inevitable, and if they had allowed me to use my own equipment and slow the pace down, I could have avoided it. (Interviewee 27)*

To conclude this section, the visibility of impairment can have significant impact on Chinese disabled people's negotiating power in the labour market. In addition, the findings from this study suggests that lack of protection from the law make disabled workers, regardless of the visibility of the impairment, vulnerable at work because it is risky for them to demand reasonable adjustment to employers.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter began with a critique of the employment law that the State introduced to promote disabled people into the labour market, and it found that the law does not address the key social stigma against disabled people, but rather it reinforces the stereotypes of disabled people in society and discounts disabled labour's value. By analysing and comparing experiences in different employment sectors, this chapter found that disabled workers tended to have more positive experiences in the public employment sector because the employment is stable and secured. However, the strong medical model adopted in this sector (i.e. the medical examination of obtaining a *bianzhi*) systematically disadvantages disabled people who intend to work in the sector. In addition, the shift to marketisation indeed brought significant changes to all employment sectors (except for the civil service) where economic productivity becomes a superior priority to the organisation. Based on the testimonies of the informants, without reasonable adjustment, Chinese disabled employees face disadvantages in competing with non-disabled workers in the labour market, and hence they are devalued by employers. Finally, this chapter analysed the importance of social relations at work. The implication of social relations at work can be found in organisational culture and networking events when many interviewees in this study felt excluded, due to the social stigma towards their physical appearance and impairment.

# Chapter Eight – Segregation and Devaluation of Impaired Labour: Theorisation on the Experience of Disabled People in the Chinese Labour Market

## 8.1 Introduction

In Chapter six and seven, this thesis presented the empirical qualitative findings based on the themes that were identified during data analysis. Chapter six specifically focused on the Chinese contextual factors that shape the general social perceptions towards disability and disabled people. It was found that disabled people's social status and social mobility in society are significantly affected by the state policies, family status and their education experiences. Chapter seven continued the analysis and shifted the focus to disabled worker's experience in the labour market. The findings suggest that disabled labourers are disadvantaged and marginalised in the labour market due to weak law enforcement, social isolation and psycho-emotional disablism. Job sector and the nature of work also seem to impact disabled people's experience at work.

This chapter converts the analyses made in the previous two chapters and attempts to theorise the labour market experience of Chinese disabled people, in accordance with the philosophical stance adopted for this study – a critical realist paradigm. It begins a conceptualisation of disability exclusion which is the empirical experience shared by almost all participants. This is followed by a detailed look at the valuation factors that impact on disabled people's position in the labour market, namely political, social, economic and attitudinal factors. Finally, this chapter combines all previous discussions and extends the debate to the fundamental contributors for the de-valuation of disabled people's labour in contemporary China.

## 8.2 The Physical and Social Segregation of Disabled People - Restrictions on Social Mobility

The qualitative data and the literature suggest that Chinese disabled people appear to experience some level of exclusion by several structural factors that restrict disabled people's social mobility. This has a particularly disadvantageous impact on disabled people from rural areas. This section explores the role of family, social status, and residential status (i.e. *hukou*). A conceptualisation of disability segregation is made by referring to the empirical findings that were analysed in the previous chapter.

### 8.2.1 Family and Misplaced Paternalism: Barriers to Full Social Integration

The enduring importance of family and kinships should not be under-estimated in modern China. Fei et al. (1992) argue that the Chinese (rural) culture of the family has a deep connection with the long dominated agrarian feudalist way of living in pre-industrial China. A strong bond and connection within the community continues to be seen in China (especially rural areas). This contributes to the formation of a sense of belonging and collectivism in the community, where each family is regarded as a social unit (Zhang and Rosen 2018). Studies have also indicated that with mass urbanisation and industrialisation, especially in coastal regions, family and kinship, as part of citizens' social status, continue to impact Chinese people's social and vocational choices (Yang 2010; Cooke and Zhao 2020).

Much research has been conducted on the role of the family in China in facilitating family members with opportunities outside the household through the means of the social-relational network (i.e. *guanxi*) (Donkin et al. 2014; Rhee et al. 2017). Empirical data from this study suggests *guanxi* takes on a similar role in supporting disabled people to secure employment opportunities (see example, interviewee 31). However, this research has revealed a different role for the family, which has received little attention in the Chinese disability literature. The support

received by family members can be oppressive and isolates disabled people, discouraging them from becoming economically independent through a sense of ‘misplaced paternalism’ (Foster and Hirst 2020). The absence of social intervention and state regulation in domestic life means that disabled people are more likely to rely on their family and community support, this can, therefore, sometimes be a form of control (Fisher and Jing 2008). Some interviewees found this problematic in their pre-employment experience. In fact, some (female) interviewees had never had the opportunity to seek employment and achieve economic independence because of parental control, this is contrast to some other female disabled interviewees were strongly financially supported by their family in pursuing education. This study found that some disabled people tend to experience social isolation and economic dependence on parents in rural settings (e.g. interviewee 29 and others). This is often documented by existing Chinese scholars as 'inter-dependence' between family members (Fung et al. 2017; Kwok et al. 2018), yet the empirical evidence from this study suggests that family can function as an invisible barrier that prevents disabled people from full social integration into society. Furthermore, this form of inter-dependence essentially results in what Oliver (1990) termed the social construction of dependence, although in China it is paternalism in families that tend to be the restricting force that prevents disabled people from achieving independence.

### 8.2.2 The Relevance of Social Status and the Use of Social Capital (*Guanxi*)

The importance of social status is found to be important in China, regarding employability and social mobility of disabled people. In chapter two of the literature review, it was shown how family status and *hukou* can influence access to education, welfare, healthcare and employment for people in China (Chen and Chen 2008; Goodman 2014; Wang and Wang 2015). Combined with an analysis of the qualitative data that this research has collected; it became evident that family status has a significant impact on disabled people's differentiated access to employment and other social opportunities through *guanxi* networks and privileged *hukou* status (see section 8.2.4).

With financial security provided by the family, people with impairments can purchase medical or specialist equipment to better intergrade in the workplace. Due to the lack of state funding on purchasing assistive equipment, interviewees with weaker financial status experienced reduced social mobility in education and employment (see example of interviewees 4 and 29). By contrast, a better family economic position provides a safety net for disabled people to integrate in mainstream education systems and later in the labour market (see interviewee 37). As Goodman (2014) argues, a privileged family background<sup>26</sup> in China, especially in less developed regions, enables a person to enjoy a superior position in the local labour market. Yet, the *hukou* based discrimination on access to social security provided by the local authority makes disabled people in urban areas less disadvantaged in the labour market as the education quality they receive is much better than those disabled people in rural regions.

This study supports the argument made by Rhee et al. (2017) that the utilisation of *guanxi* is a way of maximising collective interest (i.e. social circle's "*quanzi*" interest). For Chinese families, a *guanxi* network is an asset that is shared by all family members, including disabled people. This means that a disabled person with access to privileged *guanxi* networks, as this study finds, can have a substantial advantage in securing employment opportunities, though they may still experience social exclusion in the workplace due to psycho-emotional disablism (see section 4.4.1) at work (see Lin and Yang's 2018 findings on the social exclusion and marginalisation of disabled people in the Chinese workplace). For example, interviewee 33 failed in her first job interview due to the discrimination against her visible impairment, however, she could overturn the decision after the job interview by using her family's *guanxi* with the senior management in the organisation. This explains that strong social clusters exist in parts of Chinese society, meaning 'who you know is more important than who you are' (Fei et al. 1992). As far as the findings in this study are concerned, *guanxi* (with influential people) seems to be more relevant than ever in China for a family member or a group of people to gain an advantage in the labour market (Gu and Nolan 2017; Bian 2018). As Whyte and Parish (1984) suggested, the

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<sup>26</sup>In Goodman's (2014) work, he pointed out several social stratifications are considered to be privileged class: those who have close *guanxi* with the party (CCP), state owned company and major private enterprises (which sometimes are also closely linked with the party).

characteristics of the political system in China enable government officers to have a substantial political advantage in terms of interpreting and influencing policy implementations, and hence these powers can be exchanged by members within *guanxi* networks as favours. As it has been seen in this study, some disabled people with good *guanxi* in the CDPF could alter their disability certificate to receive better welfare support from the government. Hence, it is likely that privileged social groups are likely to be more privileged while disadvantaged social groups, such as disabled people with rural origin, are more likely struggle, due to lack of *guanxi* resources.

To conclude, despite extensive research on the concept of *guanxi* in China (Bian and Ang 1997; Gold et al. 2002), this study reveals that *guanxi* appears to hold greater significance in economically less active regions, primarily rural or small urban areas. Notably, this study contributes empirically to the field of *guanxi* research by highlighting the correlation between *guanxi* and family status, which has resulted in a disadvantage for disabled individuals lacking a robust social network compared to those possessing stronger social connectivity indicative of a more privileged social status. This predicament is further compounded as individuals with closer ties to the Chinese state command a greater share of socio-political resources (Hassard et al. 2010; Kerswell and Lin 2017), thereby perpetuating the exclusion of socially disadvantaged groups from key opportunities to enhance their social mobility. Section 8.2.4 will discuss the interconnectedness of family status (economic and social) with the *hukou* system, which largely determines a family's political standing within Chinese society. For disabled individuals and their families, accessing social opportunities becomes more arduous, given that over three-quarters of disabled individuals reside in rural areas where opportunities are scarce. In contrast, non-disabled families, even if they occupy lower social status, can seize the window of opportunities afforded by the current era of economic reform by migrating to urban areas, engaging in manufacturing work, and establishing *guanxi* networks there.



### 8.2.3 Education - A key to Career Choices

As the findings show, the schooling system is mixed with two pathways for disabled students: mainstream (inclusive) and special (exclusive) education. This study found the importance of education and its impact on career choices in China, was influenced by family support, state regulations and the international political environment. Confucianism which has dominated philosophy in Chinese history, places great emphasis on education (Xu et al. 2018). The state puts a significant amount of funding into public education; however, families still need to make a monetary contribution which is greater if a child has additional costs to accommodate their children's needs (Loyalka et al. 2014). Socio-economic situation and being in an urban household provide increased choices in education for disabled children, including special schools. Most rural households by contrast only have one option for their children – achieve a good mark in a mainstream school to be admitted to higher education, which is much more difficult (sometimes impossible) because of limited education resources in rural areas and a lack of reasonable adjustments (Rao and Ye 2016). Despite the majority of interviewees in this study reporting strong support from family to pursue their education, a small number experienced discouragement from their parents. Moreover, some rural informants reported cases of families trying to 'lock up' their disabled family members rather than let them attend school. If the disabled person is the only child (one-child policy), the chances of obtaining parental support from parents for education is increased. Educational opportunities for urban disabled people as Huang et al. (2009) also observed tend to be greater (particularly in larger cities) because the state tends to make more funding available for education. Furthermore, since the Chinese government has committed to international conventions, especially the UNCRPD, it is evident that more financial support has been made in mainstream education to mitigate the barriers that disabled students face in schools. However, findings from this research indicates strong altitudinal barriers experienced by disabled learners in mainstream schools (Cai et al. 2019), though mainstream education seems to be a preferred pathway for disabled people to increase their prospects in career development.

Special education provides an alternative education for disabled people in China (Shieh et al. 2018; Fu et al. 2020). To date, few studies have been published in English to critically investigate the effect on disabled people's careers after attending special schools in China. This study, however, contrary to its original aims, has surprisingly collected some data showing how prejudice against disabled people is reinforced by the special education system. Almost all research participants who were educated through the special education system expressed their disappointment in the quality and philosophy associated with the schools – patronising and stereotyping disabled learners. The findings from this research are by and large in line with the case study conducted by Cai et al. (2019), who found that the curriculum designed for students in the special schools are less ambitious, mostly focusing on technical skills, including independent living skills, basic domestic tasks, and operational skills in industrial settings. In addition, numerous pieces of evidence collected in this research indicate a systematic stereotypical expectation of disabled people based on their impairment type. For example, a person with a visual impairment is viewed as best suited for massage jobs, a person with hearing impairment is ideal for painting, etc. This study argues that disabled people in the special education system tend to be more segregated from the mainstream labour market with fewer career choices, because they were stereotyped by the teaching staff in terms of what they can and should do. Most participants who experienced the special education system lived in urban areas and this gave them the opportunity to receive 'alternative education rights, though few believed this benefitted them.

To conclude, education background as part of one's social status has substantial influence on disabled people's careers in China. Though there are significant barriers faced by disabled learners in mainstream schools, career opportunities after graduating from a mainstream school is much better for disabled people than their counterparts who graduate from a special school. For special schools, although it is physically more accessible for people with additional needs, the stereotypical assumptions that regard disabled people as less capable negatively impacts self-confidence and career prospects for disabled learners.

#### 8.2.4 *Hukou* and Disabled People's Social Mobility

Previous research about the Chinese *hukou* system has largely focused on non-disabled migrant workers (Brown 2006; Gilley 2008). Quantitative studies have highlighted spatial and social disparities among the disabled population (Liao et al., 2016), but there have been few qualitative studies that have documented the lived experiences of disabled migrant workers and tried to understand the generic mechanisms behind the phenomenon of what can only be described as a form of disability segregation. A key argument advanced in this thesis is that the Chinese *hukou* system is not only a household registration system, and a means of evaluating migratory patterns, but it is signifier of social status and identity, as well as a determinant of access to employment opportunities and social mobility. The *hukou* system determines a citizens' access to social benefits, but this legacy policy has also been viewed as a stumbling block to full marketisation of the economy (Liu et al. 2015; Qi et al. 2015). Qualitative data from this study illustrates how the *hukou* system not only creates inequality across the country in terms of division of labour and economic income, but also limits the upward social mobility of citizens with less 'privileged' *hukou*. According to the experiences of interviewees' urban *hukou* is more advantageous than a rural *hukou* and living in a more developed city is even more advantageous. The differences between developed and less developed cities can be found along three dimensions: type of jobs, income disparity and welfare benefits provided by the local council (He et al. 2019). A significant gap between employment opportunities across regions is evident from this study – the more economically active the region is, the more opportunities are available for disabled people. 28 out of 48 participants in this study have migration experience, i.e. either moved to a city from a village or moved to a bigger city from a smaller town. Better pay and abundant job opportunities are reported to be the major reason for migration (Boffy-Ramirez and Moon 2018). However, due to the low status of the jobs that most participants do in the city, no participant was able to claim local *hukou* and settle down due to the strict regulations that prevents migrant workers from being local *hukou* holders (see section 8.2.5).

The findings suggests that in urban job markets migrant workers are more likely to be concentrated in low skilled manual handling work in small and medium sized cities. Such jobs

are often viewed as unsuited to disabled people because they are physically intensive or inflexible and little consideration is given to adapting them. Research participants in big cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing fared better, but were largely concentrated in white-collar jobs in the growing knowledge economy that required educational qualifications. The concentration of disabled people in rural areas where access to quality education is restricted and historical attitudes towards the stigma of many disabled people in the education system in China, were identified as continued barriers. As China's economy transitions to focus more on highly skilled sectors, more potential opportunities for educated disabled people to enter an expanding knowledge economy may be created, but for this to happen the inequalities *hukou* places on access to education and training need to be addressed and the education system that promotes segregation and stereotyping, reformed.

Findings from this research also suggest that family social and economic status connected with *hukou* are relevant to disabled migrant workers' experiences of urban labor markets. For disabled people with urban *hukou* in large cities, access to funding from local councils to support their education, vocational training, and independent living may be available, which contrasts with disabled migrant workers who rely on their family's economic resources. Access to *guanxi* and social capital is also more likely to be influential if already resident in an urban environment (Bian and Ang, 1997). Disabled migrants are particularly disadvantaged in attempts to penetrate urban networks if their experiences have been shaped by rural life and by segregation, which is often the case in Chinese social culture.

Finally, it is suggested that the so-called meritocratic process of awarding *hukou* to migrants, actively excludes disabled people, which is a stumbling block to a fully liberalized labor market (Qi et al., 2015) and free movement of labor. It was found that the income threshold for claiming urban *hukou*, especially in bigger cities tends to be extremely high and beyond the reach of most disabled migrants concentrated in low status jobs because of poor educational qualifications. The meritocratic system of awarding *hukou* could be said, therefore, to have been 'created by the

ableist and for the ableist' (Wu and Zheng, 2018), favoring the 'ideal' (non-disabled) worker who is always ready to work in a standardized job with standard qualifications (Foster and Wass 2013) and able to contribute to local economic development (Zhang 2015). Disabled migrants are more likely to fit within this 'ideal criteria' and their rights to settle in cities are denied as a result.

One promising antecedent to the social-spatial inequality that disabled people experience is the rise of virtual communities among the disabled population. Though no exact statistics about the disabled population's usage of the internet in China is available, research has shown that the internet has had a positive impact on disabled people's employment (Deng 2016; Qu 2020a). This research engaged with disabled people who use the internet as a tool to connect themselves to the outside world, reducing social isolation. Similar to Qu and Watson (2019) who found that the use of the internet has to some extent stimulated the formation of awareness-based online communities where disabled people can share their experience of tackling everyday barriers that they have experienced. Removing barriers, both physical and non-physical, is regarded as a key element of the social model of disability, which is emancipatory and liberates disabled people from systematic exclusion from mainstream society (Barnes and Mercer 2005; Thomas 2007; Oliver and Barnes 2012).

### 8.3 Reserve Army of Labour? Disabled People's Value Position in the Chinese Labour Market

Previously, this thesis highlighted the contextual and theoretical points of how disabled people's employment status can be affected by the interaction of key social players. This section will be broken down in four sub-sections. The first three sub-sections discuss the valuation mechanism that influence the labour value of disabled people in China, namely from political, social/cultural and economic perspectives. A summary sub-section in the end will attempt to conceptualise the notion of ideal worker in the Chinese context, with the consideration of these aspects.

### 8.3.1 Political Valuation of Disabled Labour – the Paternalist State and Institutional Ableism

Even though research in China has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of the policies that the Chinese government introduced to support disabled people in the labour market the CDPF, a major state-controlled institution, is relatively overlooked (Huang et al. 2009). This research, based on the empirical experiences of disabled participants, finds that state institutions are not effective in advocating for disabled constituencies but on the contrary, they are setting up ableist benchmarks to the nation that disabled people should be valued less than non-disabled citizens. This will be explained by reference to two factors: namely the medicalisation of the impaired body and impairment-related stereotypes perpetuated by the CDPF via vocational training<sup>27</sup>.

First and foremost, the CDPF and its local branches are found to set medical prejudices against their own constituents – disabled people. As an organisation that was founded to represent the interests of disabled people to the state, it was hard to find disabled people working for the organisation during the fieldwork trip. Since the foundation of the organisation, it has had strong connections to the regime (Kohnman 2005), and hence it is not surprising to find that the CDPF, at its core, tends to represent the interests of the state more than the interests of disabled people (Tang and Cao 2018). The principal role of the CDPF is to identify disabled constituents via medical examinations in hospitals, a typical medical model approach. The whole process of the medical professionals-controlled disability certification was found to be problematic in this research, which individualises and medicalises an individual's body conditions (Lin and Yang 2018). The classification system causes discrimination amongst disabled people, which can be found in the experience of some interviewees (e.g. 4 & 22) who were effectively banned from entering some employment sectors due to their 'unsatisfactory' level of disability and certified as such. The practice of granting disabled people certificates with different levels of 'seriousness'

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<sup>27</sup>It is consistent with the special education system.

and denying some disabled people's access to certain employment sector is ableist and discriminatory. Moreover, this so-called disability classification sends disabled people to a range of stereotype-related vocational training workshops, where the state decides the career pathway for disabled people based on their impairment types through the CDPF. This phenomenon has not been widely documented by China researchers, though it to some extent reflects the 'Maoist' legacy in the Chinese political system – that the paternalist state allocates each citizen in the labour distribution network to be part of the production machine of the economy (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). Each citizen is expected to be potentially useful for employment including those with impairments (see the *danwei* system in section 2.3.1). Whilst the marketisation and privatisation of the labour market has provided long and deep reforms, this way of providing vocational training to disabled people based on stereotypical assumptions about impairments is inconsistent and largely reflects the 'paternalistic' nature of the disability institution (i.e. CDPF) as per Stone's (1998) research which suggests the ineffectiveness of the State's patronising perceptions towards disabled workers in addressing labour market inequality.

Secondly, the employment opportunities mediated by the CDPF devalue disabled people as a potential talent force. Having already reviewed the employment policies on disability in chapter three, the effect of those policies specifically related to the research participants through the network of CDPF, will now be the focus of debate. There are multiple channels offered by the Chinese state to tackle employment issues surrounding disabled people, which should be differentiated regarding targeted interest groups: employers - the quota scheme (Sargeant et al. 2018; Hao and Li 2020), social welfare enterprise (Shang 2000; Huang et al. 2009); disabled people - self-employment support package (Mohapatra et al. 2007; Yan 2010). Regardless of the role of the CDPF found in this study is to mediate the potential employers and disabled job seekers and provide targeted support to disabled individuals. However, as examples from interviews showed (interviewee 4, 6, 17, and 31) that the jobs that are coordinated by the CDPF tend to be low aspirational in character and have few career upward prospects. This is also based on ableist assumptions rooted in the CDPF, which regards disabled people as vulnerable and less capable and hence less valued in the labour market (Goodley 2012). The evidence of how the CDPF devalues its constituents is found in its organisational structure. Whilst both the original

founder and current chief executive of the organisation are disabled people themselves, this political symbolism fails in practice due to a general lack of disabled workers' presence in its staff throughout the organisation and its local branches (Shi 2018). Without a strong representation of disabled workers, it is likely that the decisions made by the organisation are patronising and paternalistic (see empirical findings in Ge et al.'s (2021) research) – nothing about disabled people without the participation of disabled people (Zhang 2007).

Beyond the CDPF, the overall public sector, including the government, sets an ableist example to the whole nation. Public sector employment is generally more attractive than private sector employment in China as it offers better job security and better pay rates, which makes the public sector more competitive among job seekers during recruitment to obtain a *bianzhi* (Brodsgaard et al. 2006). What this study has found is that the *bianzhi* system fosters an uncompromising barrier for most disabled job seekers due to the vocational medical examination perpetuated by the CDPF. Almost all the participants in this study who failed to meet the standards set by the state were banned from public employment, although two cases were successful in the recruitment due to their 'minor impairment' conditions. The examination criteria of the medical test reflect the 'lookism' (Oliver 1996) ideology adopted by the ableist state which does not evaluate the potential talent that the disabled candidate can bring to the organisation. Instead, disabled people are reduced by the state to a 'political task target' in order to fulfil the quota. Although the two interviewees who achieved a public employment *bianzhi* had a relatively positive experience at work, from a holistic point of view, the *bianzhi* system and medical examination to obtain a *bianzhi*, creates a strong political barrier for the majority of disabled people (Wu and Zheng 2017). The selective approach adopted by the public sector, through the certification of *bianzhi* process, essentially sets a valuation signal to other employers in the private sector that the more 'normal' a disabled person looks, the more value they should be given to them in the labour market.



Notwithstanding the ableist valuation standards set by the state, it appears that those policies are poorly implemented in rural areas where the political power of the state tends to be weaker. Previous research has produced substantial evidence on the Chinese central government regarding how powerful it is in some social-political matters such as the civil unrest protests and labour disputes (Su 2019). What is absent in the current knowledge base is that the centralised regime could not equally distribute its attention to all social matters, and hence it will certainly reduce priorities on some issues which are less important to the stability of the regime, such as disability rights movement (Chen and Xu 2017). As Foster and Ren (2015) note, equality policies in China are very much dependent on the locality of the regional social-cultural characteristics. When it comes to disability employment, according to this study, central and local government tend to devote more resources supporting disabled people into the public employment sector in urban regions (if they could pass the body examination), whereas disabled people in rural sectors appear to receive far less, at least according to this study's findings. In reality, local government in certain remote regions sometimes create barriers for disabled job seekers due to their concerns about social harmony, which aims to strengthen the homogenous entity of the non-disabled people dominated social order (Duan 2013).

To conclude this section, although several policies have been introduced by central government (see chapter three for a detailed review), the state and local government are weak in regulating the labour market and ensuring that the law is enforced of employment policies for disabled people to be fully integrated into the mainstream labour market. Additionally, an ableist valuation standards on the impaired body have been set by the CDPF and other public sector employers who favour candidates with 'minor' impairments in their recruitment and selection processes. Whoever cannot pass the medical and lookism-based selection criteria are essentially banned from entering the most favourable job sector in China – the public employment sector. Despite having a disability certificate entitling disabled people to designated employment support packages (tax reductions, quota route, unemployment benefit, etc.), the state's approach towards employment rights advocacy for disabled people seems to be ineffective and problematic. This study finds that stereotypes are promoted by the state and CDPF in a way that does not happen in the UK where the state is elected and represents the interest of all. In China,

the state acts as a referee as well as a player in the labour market, which results in more obvious and overt discriminatory practices against disabled workers.

### 8.3.2 Social/Cultural Valuation of Disabled Labour - Psycho-Emotional Disablism and Social Relations at Work

Attitudinal assumptions over the body are part of the social dimension of disablement that have an important role to play in the devaluation of disabled labour. Thomas (1999) initially coined the concept of the psycho-emotional dimension of disablism to highlight the social interaction between oppressors and the oppressed as another result of disability oppression in society.

People with visible impairments are more directly exposed to this form of oppression as they are 'easier' to identify and become its target (Reeve 2004; Kasperova 2021).

Most of the participants in this study reported experiencing psycho-emotional disablism, either from the public or their colleagues at work. Besides the physical barriers that disabled people experience in terms of infrastructure and transportation, the experience shared by interviewee 14 indicated a tendency for disabled commuters to experience negative interactions from other commuters including aggressive comments and hate speech. Passing for 'normal' (Goffman 1965) or adopting the way of behaving like a 'normal' person becomes a natural strategy for most interviewees as they try to minimise their potential exposure to public psycho-emotional bullying. Within workplaces, a more direct interaction between non-disabled and disabled workers is likely to be observed. For interviewees (e.g. 1, 2, 9) with visible impairments, their presence at work can break the 'harmony' of an 'impairment-free workforce', and, in some cases, they are likely to be treated differently, in most cases discriminated against and excluded from the social network within the workplace. Adhering to the work standards as a non-disabled employee and fitting themselves to the norms set by non-disabled managers is a 'survival' strategy taken by participants with visible impairments so that they can reduce the risk of being regarded as troublemaker and at risk of dismissal (Goodley et al. 2004; Goodley 2004). This

highlights the vulnerability of people with visible impairments who can be targeted by the psycho-emotional dimension of oppression (Thomas 2004b; Henderson and Bryan 2011).

People with invisible impairments may also experience the so-called 'disclosure dilemma' as they are under constant pressure to hide their impairment and are afraid of being 'found-out' by their non-disabled colleagues (Goffman 1965). The degree of psychological pressure that many of the interviewees' reported experiencing highlights the impact that attitudinal barriers have on disabled people's mental health as the broader literature confirms (Reeve 2004; Campbell 2009; Jammaers et al. 2019).

Psycho-emotional disablism cannot simply be analysed in the context of China without looking at the social relations at work and disabled workers' position in the social perspective of work. Social relations at work in Chinese workplaces are strongly connected with workers' individual *guanxi* network. As much as Fei et al. (1992) emphasise the importance of *guanxi* in Chinese society, it is also not surprising to find that *guanxi* plays a crucial part in the modern Chinese workplace (Bian 2006; Chen and Wolker 2016). Unlike non-disabled workers who have been integrated into mainstream social life, *guanxi* with colleagues at work is more complicated for many participants who reported long-term isolation from mainstream society and hence a lack of social skills (Chen et al. 2014). Participants who attended special education were more likely to experience communication barriers with their colleagues at work compared to those that attended mainstream schools. As well as economic productivity, social relations are another way of evaluating the position of the worker in the organisation. For sectors that are less affected by marketisation such as the civil service (see interviewee 13 and 44), social relations sometimes are more important than economic performance. This may become a barrier for disabled workers in their career advancement due to their exclusion from mainstream social groups (i.e. marginalisation), as people tend to favour people who come from similar social backgrounds and seek cohesion in their social relations (Greenwald and Pettigrew 2014).

Overall, as Reeve (2004) claims, the workplace is a social arena – workers evaluate their co-workers based on their social potential. Researchers from other contexts also confirm the importance of social interactions at work, which should be considered as one potential barrier for disability inclusion in the workplace (Osterud 2021). For Chinese disabled workers, social interactions at work should be also examined in a wider context, which includes the analysis of education inclusion, social status, and most importantly the importance of social interactions within particular employment sectors.

### 8.3.3 Economic Valuation of Disabled Labour in Various Forms of Work

Previous sections have discussed the political and social dimensions of disablement that disabled people face in Chinese workplaces. This section now moves on to discuss how disabled people's talents are valued across different sectors by various types of employers. Working is considered to be the most effective way of demonstrating a disabled person's productive capabilities, which increases their self-confidence and social integration.

The family can be a starting point for employment for many disabled people in China (Fisher and Jing 2008). One common feature of family-run business is that members (workers) do not receive a direct wage from the business. Instead, workers in family businesses take control of production as well as reproduction, though the reproductive process may be directed in a family relational order which is different to wage-based employment (Abberley 2002). Working for the family or the collective interest of the business means individuals could contribute in the way that they are most capable of (Oliver 1996). In a car repair shop, for example, the research participant (15) with a visual impairment could do the sales job and help his family members do repair work, because his body conditions are understood within the family and each worker's 'use value' is explored. A similar practice was also found in the experience of those participants who worked in the agricultural fields for their family's farmland. In urban cities street vendor employment can be another family-based employment relationship based on 'do whatever you can'. The experience of participant 25 illustrates how two disabled people can assist each other

by maximising each other's ability: the wife with intellectual impairment helps her husband who is a wheelchair user transport goods to sell while the husband uses his communication skills to promote the items to customers. In this instance each member of the group contributes to the very same goal while equally sharing the ownership and responsibility of the business. The economic relations within family-run businesses are based on kinship, and thus, workers (regardless being disabled or not) are no longer valued only by their exchange value in the open labour market (Barnes 2012). Under the employment relations in a family run business, disabled workers are valued based on their kinship to the family, rather than their economic capacity, hence their labour value cannot and will not be priced. In this regard, what a disabled labourer 'can do' is more important than what they 'cannot do' (a general ableist perception in the mainstream employment), and hence they are able to contribute economically.

Family support network have their own limitations. Not every family would have the will and resources, and thus most participants in this study looked for jobs in urban sectors where work opportunities are more readily available, and yet challenges are also more likely to be observed. To date, China still plays a significant role in producing cheap labour and products in the global supply chain, meaning that competition in the physical intensive labour market disadvantages people with physical impairments (Chan and Pun 2010). Factory and warehouse owners are reportedly more likely to recruit disabled jobseekers if they can prove themselves a useful for the business (Seargant et al. 2018). This is confirmed in this study, where only a few participants have experience in manual handling jobs, although quota-based job positions were advertised. In those quota-based job adverts, 'disability' was regarded as equivalent to the word "discount," as salaries were lower compared to the same position offered in mainstream recruitment channels. This discriminatory practice of 'disability discount' and the low economic valuation of disabled workers' potential talent reflects the poor enforcement of the quota scheme, which is likely to damage the reputation of disabled people in the labour market (Meziani et al. 2014).

The quota scheme is a common pathway in which disabled people are recruited (see section 2.6.2 for details on the scheme), which this study finds controversial. The law requires that every organisation recruits disabled people however, tokenism is often observed, meaning that disabled people are recruited but only given peripheral work (Hao and Li 2020). It is evident from the findings that many participants in cities are recruited on this basis, and they are treated as second class employees. Disabled employees are de-legitimised at work because they are regarded as 'special' and different from other employees who were recruited via mainstream channels. This became more of an issue in larger companies where competition for entry is intense. Without a critical mass of disabled workers in the organisation, under the current quota scheme (1.5%), experiences reported in this study indicates a high possibility of workplace exclusion to disabled workers. The quota scheme in fact prioritises the recruitment of disabled jobseekers while simultaneously problematising their potential ability to work in the organisation (Corby et al. 2018). Career limitations experienced by the majority of the interviewees recruited via the quota scheme demonstrate the employers' low valuation of disabled workers whom they recruited only for the purpose of meeting the political requirement.

The Chinese economy's participation in internationalisation provides a fresh way of looking at disability and disabled people's talent. The existing literature from previous soviet style socialist countries suggests that disabled people tend to be neglected and disadvantaged during economic transition (Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2014). This study, however, finds that with the increasing presence of foreign-invested organisations which are responsible for complying with their home country's diversity policies, disabled people's talents are more likely to be used by those companies. These knowledge-based specialist worker roles provided by foreign invested companies sets an example of how disabled people can be trained (interviewee 23), recruited (interviewee 40) and retained (interviewee 2), for the economic benefit of the organisation. It is of relevance to highlight that most of the participants that work for international companies have mobility impairments, which again potentially highlights the hierarchy of impairment and Chinese managers' stereotypical image of disabled people. The shift towards a specialised work agenda in the UK can be seen in some sections of the Chinese labour market too, which highlights the debates made by Foster and Wass (2013) that people with impairments are more

likely to be included in white-collar jobs as they have better autonomy and flexibility to decide the way of working.

Lastly, we cannot ignore the importance of internet usage amongst disabled participants. After all, similar to many recent Chinese disability research studies (Qu 2017; Lin and Yang 2018), this study recruited all participants via the internet. It has been well documented that the internet has enabled disabled jobseekers (also non-disabled jobseekers) to secure job opportunities which they would not be able to access without the internet (Qu 2020b). Yet, internet usage in relation to the labour market remains limited from a disabled person's perspective in China – particularly in relation to job searches. In a recent study conducted by Yang and Lin (2022), they found whilst the development of information technology has mitigated barriers, disabled people are still significantly disadvantaged in terms of the accessibility barriers on the internet contents. This study also found that the internet seems to only be effective at the job search stage. Critical physical and attitudinal barriers still remain within workplaces, which has not so far been resolved by technological advancement (see debates on technological determinism in Goodley et al. 2020).

In summary, economic de-valuation of disabled people is one of the fundamental challenges faced by disabled workers in China. Working for a family business may indicate a different employment relation and can be empowering for disabled people, but the cases of family businesses are still relatively rare. In the wage based mainstream labour market, due to the nature of Chinese economic structure and division of labour, disabled workers are substantially devalued in labour-intensive sectors. However, what is promising is that evidence suggests that knowledge based specialised work may provide better opportunities for labourers with physical impairments who can be employed based on their intellectual talents.

### 8.3.4 The ‘Ideal Worker’ in the Context of Contemporary China

The notion of the ‘ideal worker’ in disability studies was developed by scholars who have seen the issues with the capitalist work arrangement and production relations, where the norms and procedures set in economic organisations are based on the assumptions of ableism that ‘ideal’ employees should be ‘able, flexible and adaptable’ to the work arrangement made by the non-disabled employers (Foster 2007; Foster and Wass 2013; Scholz 2020). The fundamental assumption of this concept is that every employee (regardless of their bodily characteristics) is expected to work in a manner that is productive, available, and efficient (Osterud 2021). Yet disabled people in the UK labour markets are historically under-valued as a group who are regarded by capitalist employers as ‘unproductive’ (Foster and Wass 2013; Foster and Williams 2020). This productivity-focused ideology which is decided by the work arrangements of non-disabled employers, eventually makes disabled job seekers appear less favourable in the UK neoliberal labour markets (Goodley and Lawthom 2019).

Given that the conceptual debate regarding the notion of the ‘ideal’ disabled worker was developed in the UK (Foster and Wass 2013; Jammaers and Zanoni 2020; Sholz and Ingold 2021), findings from this study provide a contrast with the Chinese equivalent of an ‘ideal worker’ with consideration of the political, social and economic factors that were discussed in above sections.

A differentiated citizenship created by the state for disabled citizens is purely a political decision. The *hukou* system is a system of recognising one’s social status (urban vs rural, small city vs metropolitan), and it is also a system of fostering the selection criteria which is ableist and elitist (Liu 2004; Stainback and Tang 2019). In this valuation process, the state acts a referee that favours urban, able, elite citizens, because only the most ‘able, rich, and skilful’ can be granted urban *hukou* in the most economic competitive regions such as Shanghai and Beijing (Wang and Liu 2018). In addition to this, as analysed previously, the state also creates its own criteria of what is so called ‘ideal’ candidate for its own employment sector – civil servants and public



service workers, via the *bianzhi* system. This purely medical approach based discriminatory system has a significant impact on disabled people who are systematically and deliberately excluded from working in the ‘iron bowl’ (the most secure) sector. Lastly, the state sponsored CDPF also reinforces the medical based stereotypes towards impairment, and systematically allocates people with certain impairments to specific job categories which are regarded as ‘ideal’ for them (Hang et al. 2009). With the aforementioned policies and practices, Chinese disabled people are institutionally and politically de-valued as second-class citizens.

The Chinese social culture takes a unique approach in valuing disabled people’s position in the labour market because individual social status is a critical factor in the valuation process. As covered in this section, the connection between visibility of the impairment and psycho-emotional disablism has a role to play in China, when it combines with the lookism-based concept of ‘*mianzi*’ (see chapter two). The appearance of disabled workers to a large extent defines their career opportunity and progression (Zhang 2007; Xu 2012). All of the participants in this study with visible impairments were in non-sales related, back-office work. This suggests a general avoidance of the company they work for to promote them to a senior position within the company with more opportunities to meet external clients. Moreover, the social relations in China value social network/capital (*guanxi*) more than an individual’s own talent (Wang and Rowley 2017). This may have a negative impact on the social valuation of disabled workers as this study finds that disabled people (especially those who attended special education) tend to have fewer social skills due to isolation from mainstream society. Family certainly plays a role in determining disabled people’s social value too. As disabled people are members of each family unit, family’s social position in society is likely to have an impact on the valuation of disabled people when they enter the labour market, especially in those less marketized regions (Gold et al. 2002; Nolan and Rowley 2020).

The economic valuation of disabled labour in China to some extent echo the developmental stage of the Chinese economy and division of labour. The Chinese economy relies heavily on its

manufacturing industry which requires heavy loading and manual operation, rather than the service sector and knowledge jobs (Gao 2005; Ji et al. 2012). This overall climate of the Chinese labour market shapes employers' perceptions of disabled workers as less capable, less productive, and troublesome (Lin and Yang 2018). The concept of the 'ideal' worker, as argued by Foster and Wass (2013) is not universally definitive, but rather it depends on the nature of work and the way that the job is designed. As the knowledge employment sector emerges in some parts of the labour market, it is evident from this research that disabled people are more likely to be valued equally as non-disabled workers if the nature of job focuses more on intelligence and specialised knowledge. However, the historically constructed image of the 'ideal' worker remains unchanged as participants who work in white-collar jobs continue to experience ableism and discrimination.

## 8.4 Revisiting the Theoretical Debate on the Devaluation of Impaired Labour

The debate made in the UK argues that the political economic nature of capitalist systems brings the commodification of labour which systematically discriminates impaired labour and makes them disabled in the capitalist society (Oliver 2009; Oliver and Barnes 2012). Within capitalist labour markets, all labourers are labelled with a price tag to sell their labour to employers, and due to the mode of production in industrial jobs that did not fit with disabled people's body conditions, they were valued lower than non-disabled workers by capitalist employers (Oliver 1990, 1996, 1998). This, it was argued by materialist disability scholars in the UK, contributed to the social historical construction of disablement (Abberley 1987; Gleeson 1997; Barnes and Mercer 2005).

In UK (neo)liberal-capitalist labour market economy, society is dominated by capitalist employers whose interests are to 'buy cheap and sell high' in the commodity market (Abberley 2002). When this concept applies to the labour market, it becomes 'natural' for employers to

recruit talents (i.e. workers) at what they see as a 'fair' price. Different methods have been developed to measure the value of workers (see Taylorism and scientific management), however, disabled people have found themselves in the lowest rank of the talent pool in this commodified labour market due to the medical model of disability (Foster and Wass 2013; Goodley 2004; 2014).

Contemporary Chinese labour market's climate is somehow different to the then UK's transition to capitalist industrialisation, but the commodification of the labour market and its discriminatory treatment of disabled workers can still be observed. Now the core question that needs to be answered is whether it is the capitalist mode of production and its related relations of production that create the disablement which oppresses disabled people (Oliver 1996, 2006; Goodley 2012), or is it the commodification of labour that essentially puts a price tag on all labour whilst valuing disabled labour at a discount (Abberley 1999; Gleeson 1999a; Foster and Wass 2013; Foster et al. 2021)? From this study, which has identified a number of commonalities among the participants in terms of the factors that enable or constrain their experience in the labour market, it is increasingly clear that it is society and its social arrangement that disables people with impairments – that is what has been argued by the social model of disability (Oliver 1996; Barnes 2012). What the social model of disability in the UK argues against is a capitalist ableist society, whereas China is ableist in a different fashion. What, is it then, that creates the barriers (social, political, physical, altitudinal, etc.) that disable people with impairment in China remains unclear and unanswered. From the discussions made in this chapter, this thesis argues that it is the combination of commodified labour market, differences in the work arrangements<sup>28</sup>, and ableism in society that significantly undermines disabled people's opportunity to participate in the labour market equally, therefore they are disadvantaged and devalued.

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<sup>28</sup> This differs from the mode of production argument as it is overly simplistic to classify the Chinese mode of production. Therefore, the approach taken is to instead break down the labor market, compare different production sectors, and evaluate their nature of work and subsequent employment relations. This approach allows for a more thorough analysis and understanding of the topic.

The Chinese state, according to the findings in this study, clearly has a role to play in setting up the benchmarks of how labourers should be valued in the domestic labour market. The most obvious political obstacle for disabled people to participate in the labour market equally is the meritocratic elitism adopted by local governments to select 'ideal citizens' by granting them an advantageous residence status (*hukou*) (Zhang and Donaldson 2008). Under this system, which focuses on the economic value and educational qualification of an individual. Disabled people, especially migrants, who are systematically disadvantaged within the current educational system, are more likely to be worse off. Under the *hukou* system, while classifying rural and urban citizens, the state is essentially facilitating the commodification of labour by treating rural and urban *hukou* status differently so that employers would be able to pick up the 'premium' labour while paying less for the 'discounted' (Lin and Nguyen 2021). For disabled workers, having an urban *hukou* would not simply make them more privileged, but without an *urban hukou*, they are less favoured by employers in this commodified labour market.

The medicalisation of body and ableism have significant influences on the state's employment sectors. Whilst the civil service (government department) remains a centrally planned employment sector where disabled people are equally treated regarding wage and a (lifelong) employment contract. This study has found that market reforms in state owned companies have significantly damaged the valuation of disabled workers in the sector. The medical examination of obtaining '*bianzhi*' in order to work within the public sector can be regarded as a reflection of how the state's medicalised approach towards the valuation of its own workers' bodies. As the state sets examples to the labour market, the so-called disability employment promotion laws and legislations reinforce the medical model of disability, which treats disability as an individual pathology (Stone 1998). The establishment of specialist schools and employment schemes by the state and its agencies further segregate disabled people from mainstream society (Xu et al. 2018). The policies that the state introduces to promote employment for disabled people appear to be less ambitious and lower valued in the labour market. The quota employment scheme as an example of the paternalistic approach, sends the message to the employers that disabled people

are second class citizens and potentially can be problematic to business profitability (Sargeant et al. 2018). For disabled workers, they are only included in the peripheral side of employment via the quota scheme, with little prospect of career advancement (Richard and Hennekam 2020). The quota scheme puts a 'discounted' price on disabled workers, signalling to employers that these are cheap but useful' labour that can be used in the workplace. Therefore, it is no surprise to see discriminatory rules that were set to marginalise disabled workers as they are not equally 'priced' from the start. Perhaps the paternalist state is both the problem and the cause. Disabled people can never achieve an equal position in the labour market if the rules are set against them (Qu 2017). The commodification of labour makes disability no different to the production of commercial goods that some 'not so perfect' goods are offered at a discounted price so that bargain-seeking employers can take advantage of them (Oliver 1993).

From a micro individual level, disabled people are largely included in the family (and family-based business), whilst largely excluded from mainstream society. It is more common to see the economic inter-dependence among disabled people and their families in China (Fisher and Jing 2008), which is different to what is usually the case in the UK, where disabled people are supported by and interacted with the civil society. One of the major reasons for this is that disabled people in China's history did not experience national scale systematic institutionalisation (Shang 2000; Qu 2017). Instead, they are always bound with their family members in production. Evidence from this study suggests that production relations in a family setting are more inclusive and accommodating, which tends to value individuals based on family relationship rather than commodified employment relationship (Abberley 1987). This was similar to the mode of production that was observed in the pre-industrialised UK society, where productions were based on small units (usually each household), until it became social scale production with the emergence of industrial revolution (Gleeson 1999b; Abberley 2002).

As China undergoes its industrialisation and urbanisation, this study also observes the struggle of these family-based businesses, which are likely to be replaced by the new industrial mode of

production, with the introduction of waged labour, as well as a distinction of the space between work and home (Quick 2010). In this newly emerged urban industrialist-oriented mode of production, people are more likely to be connected at an individual level, while the traditional collective identities are likely to be reduced (Xiao et al. 2018; Qu 2020a). Once disabled people have to leave families and compete with non-disabled people in the labour market, the use-value that they have (i.e. what can they do) is replaced with their market value which is the price that how much employers are willing to pay for their labour in accordance to the (ableist) job design (Oliver 1990, 1996; Foster 2018). Whilst the overall trend of the society is becoming more individualistic, many of the core cultural values in China are still based on kinships. Therefore, in China, the price put on the value of an individual (including disabled people), or commodified status, is influenced by a number of factors such as individual's education qualification (special education is proven to be more marginalised), social status and social relations (see previous discussions in this chapter), which is independent of the actual use-value that the disabled candidate will bring to the firm (Bian 2006; DiTomaso and Bian 2018). This social valuation of labour goes hand in hand with the deregulated labour market, where privileged status can be materialised through exchange of favour, etc. Disabled people with lower social status, in this commodified labour market, are particularly disadvantaged. For non-disabled workers with low status, they could upgrade their social mobility by migrating and working for cheap wages, whereas disabled people are specially excluded from this low wage competition, due to ableist job design.

## 8.5 Conclusion

To sum up the conceptual arguments made in this chapter, this thesis suggests a revised theorisation of disability de-valuation in the labour market, by highlighting the role of the several factors shown in the graph below:

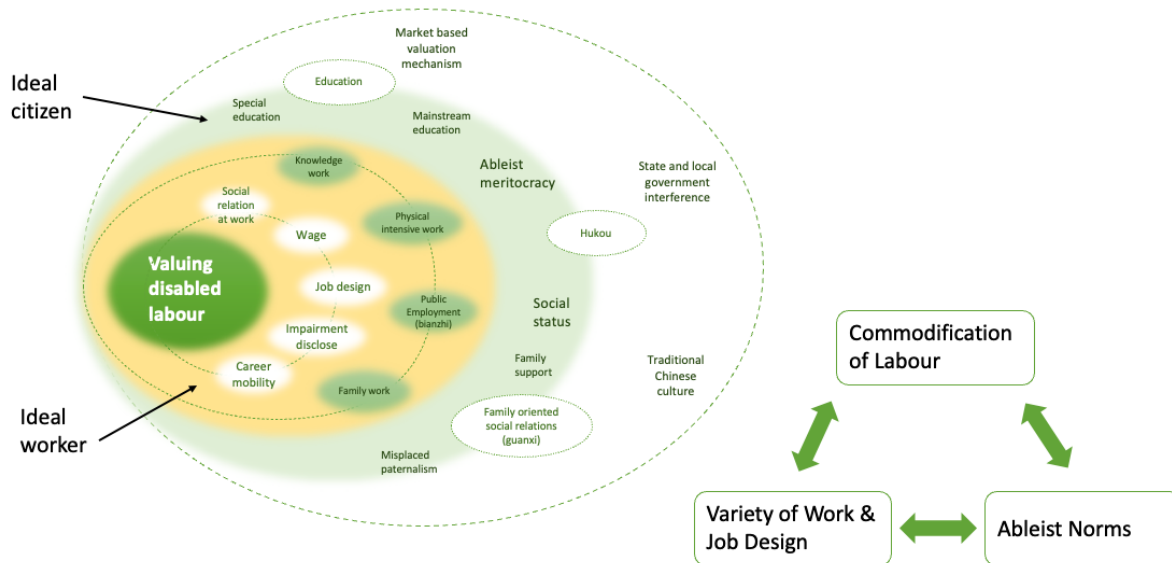


Figure 8-1 A conceptual framework of understanding the valuation mechanism of disabled labour in China

Source: the author. Adapted/inspired from Saunders' et al. (2016) research onion framework.

The conceptual illustration above highlights three main drivers behind the valuation/devaluation of disabled labour in China: commodification of labour, variety of work and job design, and ableism norms.

These drivers are indirectly evident in the left graph, which represents different layers of the social reality. The graph demonstrates how the commodified labour market, the state and its regulating agencies, and traditional Chinese social/cultural values collectively contribute to the valuation mechanism of the 'ideal citizen' and subsequently the 'ideal worker'.

In China, an ‘ideal citizen’ is typically someone who succeeds in the meritocratic/ableist education system, benefits from selective social mobility schemes (*hukou*), and is part of a family-oriented social relational system. This has also impact on the social construction of an ‘ideal worker’.

The value assigned to disabled individuals in the workforce varies depending on the nature of the job and work arrangements. In collective working environments like family businesses, disabled workers can contribute and experience less discrimination. The public employment sector, such as civil service, despite its ableist employment screening process (*bianzhi*), it remains a safer and preferred employment pathway among Chinese disabled people, according to this study. However, the increasing marketization of the economy poses challenges, as disabled individuals must compete with non-disabled workers in a job market that often favours ‘able-bodied’ individuals due to ableist job designs and a lack of workplace accommodations. With the growth of knowledge work and the internationalization of the Chinese economy, educated (qualification) and talented disabled individuals may have more opportunities in the labour market, as job designs focus on knowledge and specialized skills rather than physical strength. Additionally, the use of the Internet can positively impact disabled individuals by providing networking opportunities for information exchange, thus enhancing their social mobility in the job market.

In conclusion, the study of disability employment in China is a complex research topic that involves multiple layers of analysis. It necessitates an understanding of Chinese traditional social and cultural values, the unique political context of the Chinese developmental model, and the impact of the commodified labour market, which introduces monetary valuation mechanisms for labourers. To comprehensively grasp the dynamics of disability employment in China, researchers must consider these interrelated factors and their influence on the valuation and treatment of disabled workers.



# Chapter Nine - Conclusion

## 9.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the key conceptual contributions this thesis makes and highlights the implications for the relevant stakeholders. It will firstly systematically return to the research questions which are proposed to address the key literature debates in the field of business studies with a specific attention to disability and employment. By revisiting the theoretical debates made by disability studies scholars, this chapter highlights the relevance of three contributing ideas of devaluation on disabled people in China. It is believed that a combination of Chinese context based ableism, the impact of the transition towards commodification on disabled people, and changes in the nature of work and job design have led to a systematic devaluation on disabled people's labour in contemporary China. Together with the empirical findings, recommendations are provided in this chapter for the relevant interest parties to consider for promoting the rights of disabled people in China. This is followed by a critical reflection of the limitations of this study.

## 9.2 Conceptual Contribution to Explain the Devaluation of Disabled Labour in China

### 9.2.1 Ableism in the Context of China

The first research question posed by this thesis was concerned with ableist norms in Chinese society:

- How do Chinese social, political, and cultural factors affect disabled people and their experience in the labour market?

Traditional Chinese social relational customs seem to have made disabled people disadvantaged in contemporary labour market. The importance of *guanxi* has made China an acquaintance society where people with more extensive *guanxi* networks are likely to be successful in the

labour market (Chen and Volker 2016). Disabled people, especially for those who are left behind in the rural areas, are mostly disadvantaged due to lack of access to the urban employment opportunities and social networks. This study finds that in the current Chinese labour market, disabled people are systematically marginalised as a result of such social relational traditions due to lack of justice regulations – people with privilege status (more likely to be non-disabled) are more likely to be benefited from this as they have more opportunities to socialise with people in power and exploit their *guanxi* networks, hence gaining career advantages. In addition, traditional values of lookism and ableism seem to significantly decrease the social value of people with visible impairments (Campbell 2009; 2019). This contributed to the differentiated social hierarchy in terms of appearance/visibility of the impairment, social status and *guanxi*, while people with invisible impairments are under constant fear of such psycho-emotional disablism.

The Chinese political system plays a contradictory role in the lives of disabled people seeking employment. This study finds that the elitist *hukou* system has essentially separated the nation's population into two citizenships: privileged urban citizens and deprived rural citizens. This makes disabled people, especially from rural areas, disadvantaged in upgrading their social mobility due to unequal access to the social security benefits and employment opportunities, because over three-quarters of Chinese disabled population live in rural regions. This thesis conceptualises this phenomenon as disability segregation. In addition to this spatial segregation, the Chinese state and local governments paternalistic medical approach to 'promote' disability employment is found to be problematic. According to the empirical findings from this study, the medicalisation of impairment and body via the process of disability certification creates a negative social image of disabled people, which regards them as second-class citizens and a reserved army of labour. The vocational training workshops that are organised by the state agencies (i.e. CDPF) appear to reinforce a medical and ableist assumption of disabled people who are only expected to pursue a career that is stereotyped by the paternalist state. While the state acts as a promotor for disability inclusion in the labour market, the state employment sector is ableist as it has strict medical screening process to prevent workers with impairments from entering the sector.

The final contributor to the Chinese version of ableism in the labour market comes from the cultural legacies of Chinese society. As highlighted in this thesis, the role of family in China is a double edge sword. Disabled people enjoy a sense of inclusion in their families and local communities because family traditionally take a primary role of caring for their members. This is evident in this research that disabled people are able to contribute to their family work. However, despite being included in family life, some disabled people are excluded from public life due to ‘misplaced paternalism’ (Foster and Hirst 2020). Over protection from parents sometimes discourages disabled people to socialise and interact with the mainstream society. As a result, lack of social skills makes disabled people less competitive in the labour market. Moreover, the quality of education that disabled people receive also have impact on their employability. Ableist curriculum design and unmatched quality between mainstream and special education significantly disadvantage disabled students, making them ill-prepared for the unfair competition in the labour market.

### 9.2.2 The Transition to Marketisation and the Commodification of Impaired Labour

This section addresses the second research question that focuses on the economic transition that is witnessed in contemporary China:

- How does the commodified labour market affect Chinese disabled people’s employment opportunities?

The historical experiences learned from the UK demonstrate that labourers with impairments were devalued during the society’s transition towards a marketized industrial economy due to ableist job design. China is undergoing a similar process from a centrally planned economy where labourers are tied to their work units (*danwei*) to an increasingly liberalised social scale production (Shang 2000; Chan 2010). This is arguably a similar transition as that experienced in the UK because during the planned economic production era, labourers in those work units were equivalent to feudal peasants who did not own the means of production. As China now opens its

domestic labour market and liberalises the economy, labourers (including disabled labourers) are free to sell their labour to employers in the so called open labour market where monetary values are attributed based on education/qualification, skills and impairment. It is this process that exposes the ableist characteristics of the labour market which emphasises rationality (inhumanity), economic productivity and the notion of the ideal worker (Foster and Wass 2013; Jammaers et al. 2019).

The process of commodification of the labour market in China has led to a systematic devaluation of disabled people. When ableism marries with economic productivism, Chinese disabled people are likely to be socially marginalised as they may not fit into the ableist job design. This is reflected primarily in lower wages provided by employers for disabled workers in private employment sector. The civil service sector remains unaffected by the commodification where disabled workers can earn the same wage as non-disabled workers, as long as they have *bianzhi* status. State owned companies, according to this study, are more influenced by the market, and disabled people are more likely to be negatively affected due to increasing focus on economic productivity and ableist efficiency.

The commodification of disabled people can be reflected in the exploitation on their labour. The CDPF encourages people with certain type of impairments to receive designated vocational training is an example of how the state exploited disabled people's labour by coordinating with the market. Evidence from this study suggests that disabled people who choose the impairment-based career pathway tend to have limited upward opportunities.

### 9.2.3 Disabled People's Value Position and the Nature of Work

The third research question focuses on the difference of job design in various sectors.

- Do disabled people employment experiences affected by the nature/type of work? if so, how?

The debates on the mode of production and the types of production relations that came with them were well documented by British disability academics (Abberley 2002; Barnes 2012; Goodley et al. 2012; Foster and Wass 2013). This thesis, however, offers a more comprehensive contrast amongst different modes of productions that are co-existing in the current Chinese economy.

Unlike the already industrialised UK, China has a significant proportion of rural production sectors where individual households are the core units of production. In this type of production, kinships and family relations are dominant in determining production relations (Gold et al. 2002). Traditional Chinese rural activities have no specific division of labour (Fei et al. 1992). This study finds that disabled workers are more likely to be fairly valued in this type of production because they are able to contribute to the collective goal of production by offering their labour. Evidence also suggests that this type of collectivist nature of work is increasingly disrupted by the nation's transition to marketisation of the economy. This is exemplified by the urbanisation process where local government takes the land from rural household who then subsequently lose their means of production. Disabled people who have lost their land are, therefore, forced to sell their labour in the urban labour market where jobs are designed based on ableist norms.

Factory based machine operating jobs are becoming a major economic contributor to the Chinese developmental model, which substantially devalues labourers with (physical) impairments. This is because these export-oriented businesses are heavily influenced by the international capitalist notion of efficiency and economic productivity in order to compete with international trade. The jobs that are offered in these sectors are mostly manual operational and repetitive, such as warehouse stocking, construction, and manufacturing. Despite only a small number of participants who are working in this sector, it is found that lack of reasonable adjustments and

poor understanding of the concept of flexible job design in these low skilled/low paid jobs significantly decrease disabled people's economic valuation.

There are emerging white collar job opportunities thanks to the industrial upgrade to the knowledge economy in China, which seems to be more rewarding and valuing disabled people's talent (Qu 2017). Different to traditional agricultural and manufacturing works, knowledge works require less physical ability but demands more intellectual input. Examples of this sector can be found in the jobs of call centre operative, IT and banking, some of which are set up by foreign invested companies who are more committed to diversity in their workforce. It has been found these type of jobs are more accommodating for highly qualified disabled people who can focus on a specific task at work so that they will encounter less barriers.

#### 9.2.4 The Combination of Ableism, Commodification on Disabled People and Variation in the Nature of Work and Job Design

In the beginning of this thesis, a central research question was proposed which concerns three different theoretical aspects of investigating disability devaluation in the Chinese labour market:

- How has the commodification of the labour market, variations in the nature of work and ableist norms contributed to the (de)valuation of disabled labour in China?

The historical lessons from the UK's economic and social transition towards a capitalist labour market suggests the commodification of the labour market contributes to people with impairments being discriminated against (Finkelstein 1980; Oliver and Barnes 2012). After contrasting the empirical findings from this study and existing UK literature, this research proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework of understanding the devaluation of disabled people in China. The coordination of 1) traditional ableism in Chinese society which is rooted in culture, social and political norms, 2) the process of liberalising the labour market and commodification on disabled people, and 3) a shift from a collectivist nature of work to individualistic job design, have all contributed to the devaluation of disabled people's labour in the nation's shift towards modernisation and industrialisation.

## 9.3 Practical Recommendations to Interested Parties

### 9.3.1 For Disabled Individuals and Their Families

As this research project was concerned with disabled people's employment experiences, it is in the interest of all Chinese disabled people to find good practices that can be successfully replicated. Based on the empirical findings of this research, there are some common practices that seem to be working well among the participants to strengthen their position in the labour market.

The use of the Internet has proven to be very effective in connecting disabled people and supporting them to form their disabled identities. As of the end of 2020, internet coverage is estimated to be 70% in China. Many disabled people in China now use the internet as their primary method to connect with the outside world and exchange information with other users. Qu's (2017) research found that disabled people are more likely to access employment information on the internet than traditional channels, and they are more likely to expand their social networks by connecting with other disabled people online. In fact, this research was made possible thanks to the recruitment of the participants via an online social group where members come from different regions across China.

It is also important to make connections with disability advocacy groups, or to form their own formal/informal organisations. Many participants in this study shared their life changing experiences of when they started attending disability awareness workshops which are organised by either DPOs or disability alliance groups. Participants felt empowered from attending these workshops which changed their outlook of disability from a 'individual tragedy' to now being a collective experience of disablement. This is the starting point of raising awareness as an oppressed group and injustices can be challenged collectively.

For families with disabled members, the author urged families to be aware of so called ‘misplaced paternalism’ (Foster and Hirst 2020) in the family domain. Some interviewees in this study could never go out by themselves, because they are under strict control from their parents who regard disabled family members as burdens and shame. In contrast, many participants who are relatively more successful in the labour market tend to have stronger support from their parents in education. In the current climate of the Chinese labour market, a good university degree would be essential for disabled job seekers to find good quality and secure jobs with dignity.

Finally, all interest parties should form a disability alliance, which can include but not limited to disabled individuals, their friends and families, charity organisations, DPOs, and the general public to challenge the injustice that disabled people experience in the labour market, as well as lobby law makers to enhance law enforcement to tackle disability based discrimination in the labour market.

### 9.3.2 For Employers

Alongside the advice to disabled individuals, there are some ideological changes that employers can make to better promote disability employment rights, for the mutual benefit of both employers and disabled employees.

From a legal perspective, employers have a legal responsibility in China to employ at least one disabled employee under the disability quota scheme. Disabled jobseekers are systematically disadvantaged in the current labour market climate, and hence many employers choose to specifically target disabled talent pools to reflect their corporate social responsibility initiative. However, very often, this results in patronising and tokenistic practices once disabled workers are recruited. Therefore, employers are urged to review their recruitment agenda and conduct a



paradigm shift from regarding recruiting disabled workers as a legal obligation to an idea of diversity of talents.

From a business perspective, disabled workers are as talented as non-disabled workers, and in many cases, they can create more value to the business than their non-disabled counterparts. A paradigm shift from focusing on what disabled workers cannot do to focusing on what skills they can bring to the organisation is vital here. In this study, many examples demonstrated that once employers start paying more attention to what disabled employees are good at, these employees are usually likely to create more value to the business. For example, a wheelchair-user employee may not be able to move around as quickly as a non-disabled employee, but they may be good at doing consultation work via the telephone. Treating disabled workers as an asset rather than deficit approach has been proven successful in bring economic value to the employers who have been successful in recognising disabled people's talent.

Finally, employers should commit themselves to creating an inclusive and accessible organisational culture to socially integrate disabled workers with the rest of the workforce. Studies found that more socially integrated workforces tend to have better employee engagement and workplace morale, which is also demonstrated by examples found in this study that diversity of workforce is a strength for the business. A disabled employee is more likely to better serve disabled clients, thanks to their own experience of disabling barriers. In addition, examples found in this study suggest that a better integration between disabled and non-disabled employees is likely to increase happiness at work and job satisfaction amongst all employees. To achieve a good social integration, employers are recommended to establish connections with DPOs who tend to have good knowledge about barriers that disabled workers may face in the company. In the meantime, ensuring all staff attend diversity and inclusion training is crucial to build an organisational culture that is inclusive and respectful.

### 9.3.3 For Policy Makers

Since the 1990s, the Chinese state has committed itself to promote the rights of Chinese disabled people by establishing the CDPF. This process has been significantly accelerated when the Chinese government ratified the UNCRPD which sets international principles of recognising disabled people's human rights. Despite drastic changes have been made by the Chinese government, this study is going to make several suggestions to the policy makers based on the findings from this project.

First and foremost, as far as the experiences shared by the research participants are concerned, the social welfare provided by the local government tends to be largely differentiated across the country. This regional variation tends to unevenly impact the life quality of disabled people based on their residential status (*hukou*). The government is urged to take more actions in providing social security benefits for disabled people directly in less economically active regions. However, it seems the current benefit system only targets at family as a basic unit, is likely to continue the need for disabled people to live with their families. This may work out well for families with significant medical bills associated with their members with chronic medical conditions and care needs, but in most cases, this benefit provided by the state does not directly assist disabled people's ability to be economically independent. Therefore, a direct payment approach should be adopted to support disabled people to achieve economic independence. In addition, legacy policies that were introduced during the planned economy era, such as the *hukou* and *bianzhi* system, seem not to fit with the State Council's manifesto to promote disability rights, instead, these political barriers become the foundation of the disability segregation which pushes disabled people to the bottom of the society.

Secondly, accessibility is one of the key steps for disabled people to participate in mainstream society, without which they are likely to be socially isolated. It is evident that the Chinese central and local government have invested significantly in building accessible infrastructure, especially in urban cities. During the fieldwork trip, the author had witnessed the gap between richer and

poorer cities regarding the accessibility of the local transport system. This difference of infrastructure arguably has an adverse impact on disabled people who live in less developed areas as they may not be able to commute due to inaccessible transportation system. Therefore, the central government is urged to make more dedicated efforts in reallocating funds for building accessible infrastructure in less developed regions.

Thirdly, it is recommended for the state to transform its ideological approach from medical model to the social model. To date, the disability deficit thinking is still part of the government's policy making process. This study demonstrates that disabled people, when given the equal opportunity, can achieve career success by their own talent. As a member state of the UNCRPD, a rights-based approach should now replace the traditional medical model of disability which does not represent the true lived experience of disabled people in their social life. In the UNCRPD's routine review report (2012) to the Chinese government, the UN review committee recommended the Chinese authority to clearly define disability based discrimination in the legal practice and introduce anti-discrimination legislations to regulate the labour market. To achieve full rights of disabled people, it is vital to pass anti-discrimination laws that tackle systematic injustice that disabled people face in their lives, including the labour market.

Finally, the State should allocate more resources to support DPOs as they are the experts in bridging the communication gap between the State and disabled people, which the CDPF has constantly failed to do. As it is claimed by disabled people around the world: nothing about us without us. This thesis urges the state to provide more funding opportunities to DPOs and their advocacy activities, as studies (Fisher and Jing 2008; Fisher et al. 2012) as well as this research find that DPOs are much more efficient than the government run organisation to address key concerns of disabled people.

## 9.4 Limitation of the Study

Above sections have covered the original contributions and recommendations that this research made to the field of disability studies and activism in China, though there are indeed limitations underpinning the study.

The lack of historical records on disabled people's employment experience limits the theory generation. As China had nearly three decades of soviet style planned economy (1949-1978), it is vital to see how disability as a social identity was constructed during that era. By collecting the experiences (perhaps through oral history) of disabled people in this era can help researchers understand the differences of production relations between a 'feudalist' production and a state controlled industrialised production.

There are indeed a number of methodological limitations which could further restrict the transferability (Guba and Lincoln 1994) of the study. These limitations are mainly attributed by the participant recruitment strategy, chosen method and the conduct of the fieldwork. It must be highlighted that the participants included in this study were recruited predominantly from an online disability awareness group where most of the group members have already developed their disability awareness.

Despite the large spread of the educational level of the participants, more than half of the have or are attended higher education in either special or mainstream schools. This means that this sample is more likely to represent the lived experience of 'the elite' side of disabled population in China. In addition, because of the online recruitment method, it inevitably excludes the potential participants who do not have access to the internet, though the exact proportion of this group is hard to determine. This also links to another limitation of the sample – that is the residential location of the participants. Even though this project has covered 18 different

cities/counties across the country, disabled people who reside in rural areas are relatively excluded from the sample due to researcher's own accessibility and safety issues. Without a thorough study on the lived experience of disabled people who work in the most remote employment sectors (if at all), it is hard to generate a full picture of production relations in various spatial and social settings.

From a research method perspective, the use of semi-structured interviews has its own limitations. Though the benefits of conducting semi-structured interviews were well justified in chapter five, the shortcomings of this particular method have emerged later in the data analysis stage. Firstly, the data collected from the interviews are not detailed enough as each interview lasted around one and half hours. A lengthier detailed method such as ethnography can reduce this shortcoming. Secondly, although the interview questions touched a little on the general life experience of being disabled in China, major part of the interviews were focusing on the interviewee's current employment experience. This causes a problem that some interviewees are in their transitional stage, hence employment experience may not be sufficient for the purpose of analysis. Longitudinal research can be done in the future to follow up the career progress of a particular disabled person to see how micro social economic factors that influence a disabled person's career in China.

Finally, there are limitations from the way of how the fieldwork was conducted. As a disabled person himself, the author had to deal with various physical barriers during the fieldwork trip. Therefore, traveling to cities where public transportation system is available is one of the key criteria for selecting the sites to visit. This also means that disabled people who live in extremely remote regions can be not physically reached out. This lack of face-to-face interaction, as this study confirms, substantially reduce the richness of the interview data that can be collected. Whilst the researcher was trying to conduct as many in-person interviews as possible, compromises were made to move some interviews online via WeChat. The data safety issue with WeChat was initially reviewed in the ethics application, which turned out to be problematic from

both the researcher and the interviewees' perspective. For the researcher, it was troublesome to make ice-breaking conversations because of the time difference between the UK and China. It also made it difficult to schedule the face-to-face visit via WeChat due to the researcher's own safety concerns (that the researcher might be physically tracked by the authority due to the sensitive nature of the study). For some interviewees, they were also aware of the potential safety issues of meeting with a member of a foreign research institute. This made the ice-breaking conversation relatively challenging, hence the WeChat based interviews produced far less data than those which were conducted face-to-face.

Conducting online interviews presented several challenges, particularly with regard to collecting valid data. Unlike face-to-face interviews, where the researcher can establish trust with the interviewee by sharing their own identity as a disabled person, it was challenging to encourage online interviewees to speak openly about their experiences over WeChat. The issue of network stability was worse than anticipated, particularly due to the diversity of participant locations in the study. Some participants resided in remote locations, and several disruptions occurred during the interviews, which disrupted the conversation flow. Additionally, the translation from English to Chinese Mandarin posed significant challenges, as the Chinese language has a rich range of dialects that differ significantly from one another. During the field trip, the researcher had to translate phrases from Mandarin into the local dialect to ensure that participants, who were often less proficient in Mandarin, could understand. This posed a challenge for the researcher since most of the interview questions were originally phrased in English, with a strong influence of English-medium literature. Translating English words into Chinese was therefore problematic, further complicating the interview process.

*Guanxi* and social networks were proven to be very important too. Although the researcher was born and raised in China as a disabled person, there was not much connection made with other disabled people. This makes the researcher fully dependent on the participants' commitment to participate the project. Because of the lack of previously established networks, this study was

completely sampled randomly and based on the interests of those who contacted the researcher from the WeChat group. Future researcher may be benefited to have at least a rough group of people to contact for interviews, since it would provide a degree of certainty in terms of interviewee's demographic spread and employment status.

## 9.5 Recommendations on Future Research

There are indeed many empirical and conceptual contributions that this study has made to the knowledge base of disability employment in a changing Chinese political economic context. The above section has highlighted the limitations this study has that inevitably reduce the further implications of the research outcomes. These limitations should be addressed in future research.

Firstly, to address the timeframe related limitation of the study, a project that focuses more on the historical records is needed. China has undergone several decades of market reform and industrial changes, which has attracted a significant number of researchers to study the impact of the 'new' work arrangements on disabled employees (including this current research). Yet, the question raised by this study is that how the employment of disabled people in the planned economy era (1949-78) experienced differently to in contemporary labour market. Since the relations of the production in the planned economy era is fundamentally different (citizen-state employment relations) to the current labour market (hybrid of public and private sectors), a history focused research method (historical records or oral history) is needed to address this knowledge gap.

One of the major limitations this research has encountered was time restriction. This resulted in a lack of deep understanding of disabled individuals' interaction with micro factors that may have more significant impact on their lived experience than macro social and political factors. Therefore, further longitudinal research could usefully explore how micro level social factors

that influence disabled people's experience across the country. Future researchers could use ethnographic research methods (c.f. Karhnman 2005) to choose a small number of Chinese disabled people and analyse their lived experience as the overall society evolves.

Demography of the research participants is also a vital factor that future research needs to consider when it comes to research design. Although this study has a wide coverage of participants with various social economic backgrounds, the sample collected for this study is relatively skewed towards the social segment that is more educated and better socially supported. Hence, to obtain a closer to reality picture, more research is needed to examine the lived experience of disabled people at the 'bottom level' of society, who are most likely residing in rural and remote regions, having little access to social security and healthcare. Moreover, there are many participants in this study who have little or no experience in the labour market due to their age or educational backgrounds. Having too many 'in-school' participants may provide a good understanding of the education system and vocational training that disabled people in China experience, but it may constrain the data focus in terms of employment related experience. Therefore, future research should pay more attention to the age spread and educational background of the participants to have a better view of the employment conditions of disabled workers in the fast-changing Chinese labour market.

Last but not least, future research is recommended to investigate sector related employment relations. There is an increasing number of China studies paying attentions to the emerging tech sector in China. There are a number of studies (Qu 2017; Lin 2018) that have also shown how the 'digital divide' between disabled and non-disabled people further causes inequality in the access to digital information. Disabled people's employment experience in the growing tech-sector is relatively neglected. What this study finds is that some tech-companies in China are more likely to take the advantage of the quota scheme by hiring talented disabled workers via the quota scheme. It would be interesting to assess disabled workers' employment relations in this



sector which has significant requirement on the educational qualification upon entry due to the nature of the work associated with the sector.

In contrast to the emerging tech-sector, future researchers are also advised to explore the employment conditions in non-for-profit sectors such as the CDPF (organisation *for* disabled people) and Chinese DPOs (organisations *of* disabled people). Research results come from these sectors may be interesting regarding their unique nature of involving disabled people as clients. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how these ‘disability advocacy’ groups contribute to the social construction of disability within society.

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# Appendix 1: Research Recruitment Advert

## English Version

Hello everyone,

My name is Cunqiang Shi, a PhD researcher at Cardiff University, UK. I am researching disability employment in the context of China, and I am interested in disabled people's employment experience. If you think you are a disabled person or if you are aware of anyone who might have something to talk about their employment experience as a disabled person, please contact me via wechat. (create a separate wechat account only for the purpose of this research).

However, you have to meet following criteria in order to participate in my interviews:

You are over 18 (include 18)

You are physically residing in China (PRC)

You have or had a job or paid work experience (including working for family business)

All information you provide for this research project will be carefully protected and all data will be anonymised so nobody can be personally identified as an outcome of this research.

Thank you

## Chinese Version

群里的朋友大家好,

我叫施存强,目前在英国卡迪夫大学攻读博士学位. 我的研究兴趣是中国残障就业问题, 现在已经到了实际调研阶段, 需要招募志愿者接受我的采访,, 访谈时间主要在 60-90 分钟, 可以是面聊或者微信语音/视频, 主要采访内容涉及你的生活经历, 就业环境以及对于目前就业情况的看法. 假如你认为你是一名残障人士, 或者你认为身边有残障朋友想要分享他们的工作经历, 请加我微信.

你或者你的朋友需要满足以下条件才能参与我的访谈:

18 及 18 岁以上

目前生活在中国大陆

现在或者曾经有一份有工资的工作(包括为家里人打工)

所有提供的信息以及您分享的经历都会严格保密, 并且所有参与人都会被匿名。这也是为了保护各位参与者的个人隐私和安全。

万分感谢!

## Appendix 2: Interview Schedule

- Introduce myself and inform the participant with the purpose of this research, gain the consent from the participant.
- Inform the participant about their rights, highlight the freedom to withdraw from the project at any time.
- Ask for permission for recording.

Basic demographic information	
Gender	Observation
Age	
Education level	
Visibility of the impairment	Interviewer's own observation (visible or invisible)
Current residence location	
Hukou status	
Employment status	
Job description	

Financial support by the government – money?

General life

- Early life description
  - Probe: Family relations, friendships, other social interactions
- Experience of education
  - Probe: Mainstream/special, learning content, interaction with classmates
- Self-evaluation
  - Probe: self-image, career goal, disability.
- General support
  - Probe: technological equipment (internet, devices, facility), social service (CDPF, DPO?), government financial aid.

Employment experience

Job seeking

- Previous jobs
  - Why did you apply for that job?

- Disclose your disability?
- Work experience – responsibility, salary, why quit
- Current job
  - How/where did you find your current job?
  - Why did you apply for this job?
  - Disclose your disability?
  - How was the experience in job interview?
  - What was the main focus in the job interview?
  - Have you sent applications to other companies which you have failed to be invited for an interview?
- Support
  - How do your families and friend support you to find a job?
  - What agencies supported you to find jobs?
  - How do you evaluate this kind of support?
- Self-perception of employment
  - What are the main obstacles and facilitators dis-motivate/motivate you to be employed?
  - What do you think are the most important factors for disabled people to get a job successfully?

#### Stay in employment

- Training
  - Pre-employment training, what was included in the training
  - First impression from the colleagues
  - What skill-based training you have received at work
- Workload
  - What is your responsibility in the organisation?
  - Can you describe a typical day at work?
  - How long do you work per day/week?
  - How do you evaluate your role in the organisation?
  - What is general working environment in your organisation?
  - How many holidays/leaves do you have? How do you spend on these holidays?
  - Do you ever feel stressed at work? Who helped you?
- Discrimination
  - How is your relationship with your co-workers?
  - How do your colleagues' think of you?
  - Have you heard any negative comments from your colleagues about you? How do you think about these?
  - How much salary do you get every month? Do you find any significant gap between yours and others who do the similar jobs as you do?
  - How is your interaction with customers (if applicable)

- Employer's willingness to accommodate
  - Did you ask / did your employer offer adjustment for your own needs (e.g. the tasks, the work environment, the workload, etc.) to reducing barriers around you?
  - How important do you think you are in the organisation?
  - Have your employer expressed any positive/negative comments on you?
  - Have you ever been promoted since this job? If yes, how was it?

Concluding comments:

- Appreciate for participation;
- Remind the rights to withdraw;
- Check whether interviewees want to see the transcript once it has been done;
- Any other questions from the interviewee.

Researcher's note on local context:

Economic factors – CPI, living condition, commute, infrastructure

Social factors – human interaction, people's attitudes towards the interviewee

## Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

This research project is being conducted as part of a PhD research programme which aims to investigate to what extent the social-economic changes have impacted disabled people's employment experience in China. By sharing your anonymised experiences you will help contribute to a better understanding of disabled people's contemporary employment experiences in a much under-researched area. The intention is to publish research from the PhD in which your contribution will be fully anonymised.

I understand that my participation in this project will involve:

I will share my personal life experience and answer some personalised questions from the researchers, which will take 60-90 minutes

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that the interview will be recorded in an audio format, in order for the researcher to transcribe the data at later time.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. If for any reason I have second thoughts about my participation in this project, I am free to withdraw or discuss my concerns with Prof. Deborah Foster (FosterD1@cardiff.ac.uk)

I understand that the information provided by me will be held confidentially and securely, such that only the researcher can trace this information back to me individually. The information will be retained for up to 1 year and will then be anonymised, deleted or destroyed. I understand that if I withdraw my consent I can ask for the information I have provided to be anonymised/deleted/destroyed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Cunqiang Shi (email: ShiC3@cardiff.ac.uk) of Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, under the supervision of Prof. Deborah Foster (email: fosterd1@cardiff.ac.uk) .

Signed:

Date:

# Appendix 4: Ethics Approval



Cardiff Business School  

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Ysgol Busnes Caerdydd

Felix Shi  
Cardiff Business School  
Cardiff University

10 December 2019

Dear Felix,

Ethics Approval Reference: 1920003

Project Title: Disability Employment in China

I would like to confirm that your project has been granted ethics approval as it has met the review conditions.

Should there be a material change in the methods or circumstances of your project, you would in the first instance need to get in touch with us for re-consideration and further advice on the validity of the approval.

I wish you the best of luck on the completion of your research project.

Yours sincerely,

Electronic signature via email

Dr. Debbie Foster  
Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee  
Email: CARBSResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk

Note: The student is known as Felix Shi in university correspondence.

## Appendix 5: Research Integrity Certificate

# Research and Innovation Services

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*This is to certify that*

**Cunqiang Shi**

*has successfully completed*

**19/20 Research Integrity Training (Student)**

*on*

**25 September 2019**