

Gathering in a Cyber World: Internet Use of Chinese Disabled People and the Emergence of Disability Constituencies

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Abstract: This article examines how Chinese disabled people use the internet to create active constituencies and the potential for this to afford the opportunity for a new form of activism. Based on a content analysis of China's two largest disability online forums, the article documents disabled people's online activities. These include the description of everyday activities, the build-up of social relations, and organisation and mobilisation for changes. The analysis suggests the emergence of new disability constituencies. This, the article argues, is starting to reshape dis-ability politics and develop new disability activism.

Keywords: disability in China (*canji*); disability activism; Internet use; online community

Points of interest

- Very little is known about what life is like for disabled people in China or about disability activism and campaigns for disability rights.
- In this study we have analysed posts on two of China's largest and most active disability online forums, Baidu Disabled People Post-Bar and Self-Strengthen BBS, to look at what sort of issues matter to disabled people in China today and their reflections on their rights and their place in society.
- The article describes how disabled people use the Internet to talk to other disabled people and to describe their everyday activities.
- Disabled people also use the Internet to talk about issues to do with managing their impairment and their rights, and there is some evidence that they are organising and mobilising in digital spaces and that a new form of activism is emerging.

Introduction

Currently little is known about what it is like to be disabled in China, particularly from the perspective of disabled people themselves. We know even less about disability politics and activism. In this article we aim to start to fill that gap through an analysis of data drawn from two of China's largest online disability forums to explore the key issues facing disabled people in China today. The two forums have over 270,000 subscribers between them and the data we draw on give an account of the everyday experiences of Chinese disabled people and suggest the emergence of a new form of disability discourse, a discourse that may point the way towards an emerging form of disability activism. We know that in the Global North the internet is being used by disabled people and their organisations as a site of activism. They are using it for running and organising campaigns, sharing information and challenging their exclusion from the mainstream (Pearson and Trevisan 2015).

In this article we examine how the internet is being used by disabled people in China to create a new constituency. Previous work in this area by Guo, Bricout and Huang (2005) suggests that, for disabled people in China, the internet affords opportunities to communicate with each other and build social networks that they would otherwise be denied. The internet, they argue, has the potential to be 'both a forum for discussion and a vehicle for new social relations unlike that found in the real world where issues of accessibility and discrimination constrain social participation' (2005: 64). In our analysis we have explored the extent to which this is happening.

The article starts with a brief introduction to disability in China to locate internet use by disabled people within what is a rapidly changing society. We then look at the rise of the internet in China and literature on the relationship between activism and the internet. After a discussion of the methods the paper moves on to present the data. The

data sections demonstrate how the internet is being used by disabled people, including how they use the internet to describe their daily activities, the barriers they face, the impact discrimination has on their sense of self and health-related matters, and how they use the internet to build social relations. Finally, we explore the relationship between the internet and disability activism.

There are only limited statistics on disability in China. There are estimated 85 million disabled people in China, accounting for nearly 9% of the disabled population worldwide (China Disabled Persons' Federation 2012). Research on the experiences of disabled people is limited in scope. Previous work has explored the impact of laws and policies (Stone 1996; Fisher and Li 2008; Yang 2009; Liao and Luo 2010; Fjeld and Sagli 2011; Tang and Cao 2018) and the cultural representation of disabled people (Dauncey 2007, 2012). There is also some what are now rather dated studies of disabled people's lives (Zhou 1997; Shang 2000; Stratford and Ng 2000; Kohrman 2005; Huang, Guo, and Bricout 2008). China is a rapidly evolving society as it completes the shift from a planned economy to a market-led economy, which has resulted in transformational changes in political, economic and cultural arenas. These have been further impacted by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation and the role out and wider availability of new technologies. In the next sections we explore this in more detail, starting with a focus on disability in China and the changing cultural and political climate.

Disability in Changing China

Disability and the danwei

The meaning of disability in China has changed over the years and in the Maoist era (1949-1979) this was constructed within the *danwei*-based system (Qu forthcoming).

Literally meaning ‘unit’, *danwei* (单位) refers to all forms of organisations and a range of practices they embody (Bray 2005). The *danwei* was central to the planned economy, setting the agenda for the production and distribution of goods. It allocated jobs and set wage levels, and was responsible for welfare provision, including housing, education, and medical and child care. The *danwei* was the core agency for organising and controlling society. Political participation and socialisation occurred through *danwei* and it acted as a major source of people’s identity (Lu 1989; Li 2002).

The *danwei*-based society saw people as a national asset, all people should seek to be strong and productive to serve their *danwei* and through that the nation (Brownell 1995; Zhang 2005). In this period disabled people were absent from public life, except for the ‘disabled hero’, who had acquired their impairment through service to the country (Stone 1996). Most disabled people were placed in welfare *danweis* (福利单位, Shang 2000). This was initially established for disabled soldiers but later became the means through which ‘deserving’ people could be supported (The 4th National Civil Affairs Conference 1958). For the most part this meant people who could work. Disabled people were accommodated with other marginalised groups such as elderly and people living in poverty. The support they were offered was basic, organised on a charitable basis, and resources were very limited.

Disability in Post-Communist China

Towards the end of the 1970s, China began to implement reform and move towards a post-communist society, what the ruling party describes as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. The core elements of these changes include the adoption of market principles, the removal of the *danwei* system, and de-centralisation of politics (Hsü 2000; Lewis and Xue 2003). In 1990, China passed its first disability act, *The Law of*

the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities (LCPPD).

This defines a disabled person as:

...one who has abnormalities of loss of a certain organ or function, psychologically or physiologically, or in anatomical structure and has lost wholly or in part the ability to perform an activity in the way considered normal (China Disabled Persons' Federation 2016)

While the definition is argued to have a medical focus (Stone 1998; Kohrman 2005), it does mark the first use of the term '*canji*' (残疾) at a legal-linguistic level, which shows the acknowledgment of disabled people as a group with recognised interests. China is moving, albeit slowly, towards the establishment of a legal system that entitles and protects disabled people's rights (Tang and Cao 2018): The country has signed and ratified the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*; in the country's *Constitution* and the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities*, disabled people are guaranteed equal citizenship; and, in addition there are regulations in place to promise social and economic special support. While the discourse that surrounds disability is one of anti-discrimination and social care, the reality is somewhat different. There is no separate administrative agency for disability in the government and most affairs are facilitated by the China's Disabled Person's Federation (CDPF), a 'national umbrella organisation for persons with diverse disabilities' (CDPF homepage). There is limited data released on disabled people or the opportunities they are afforded. No state-level benefit is provided, although some cities have local policies and disabled people are prioritised in general benefits such as the Living Allowance (Liu and Zuo 2011). Disabled people are more likely to live in poverty than their non-disabled peers (Sagli et al. 2012).

Disabled people are marginalized in almost all social aspects, marginalisation that is largely the result of ‘insufficient investment’ and ‘limited resource’ (Deng and Poon-Mcbrayer 2004). They are less involved in political participation, have fewer channels to complain, and face barriers in housing, health and access to social care (Zheng and Wu 2006; Zhou and Liao 2012; Zhou 2013). The priority of productivity in employment means employers simply will not employ those requiring adaptations to the workplace (Liao and Luo 2010). While there are no official statistics on the employment rate for disabled people this can be estimated. According to China Disabled Persons Federation (2018) there were 9.42 million disabled people in employment in 2017. With an estimated population of 35 million ‘working age’ disabled people in China this suggests a disability employment rate of roughly 26%, which is significantly lower compared to an employment rate of 66% in the overall population (World Bank 2018). There have been a number of attempts to promote the employment of disabled people, including the establishment of a quota scheme, the use of tax rebates, and the development of segregated provision (Pierini et al. 2001; Huang 2007). These, however, have had limited impact.

This is perhaps not surprising given that disabled people’s exclusion has been justified. The individualism promoted by post-communist China has urged people to ‘take life into their own hands and face the consequences of their decision on their own’ (Zhang and Ong 2008: 16). Disability has been constructed as a personal issue that can be ‘resolved’ by individual endeavour and disabled people are encouraged to have ‘self-respect, self-confidence, self-strength, and self-reliance’. Also, development, especially economic development, is the ‘first priority’ of the country (Xiaoping Deng, leader of China’s reform, 1979) and ‘everything else shall submit to it and serve for it’ (Zemin Jiang, the third president, 1997; Jintao Hu, the fourth president, 2003). In this context

inequalities are interpreted as a temporary issue to be resolved in subsequent stages of development. Many disabled people buy into the discourse and deny they face discrimination (Lin and Yang 2018).

As a result of these reforms, disabled people are seen as less capable and less productive, they are ignored in politics, excluded from the market, and devalued in culture. Having briefly set the context for disability in China, this article now moves on to explore one other key area, digitalisation and internet use in China.

China's Digitalisation and the Internet Use

Although China did not connect to the internet until the 1990s, relatively late compared to many Western countries, digitalisation is now well established in this country. The latest report from the China Internet Network Information Centre (2018) suggests that, by the end of 2017, China had 772 million internet users, which is 55.8% of the population. People spend on average 27 hours online per week, on communication, information searching, shopping, entertainment, and work (China Internet Network Information Centre 2018). Internet use has become an essential part of Chinese daily life. Use is not confined to the wealthy and the majority of users have not been to higher education (79.5%) and 57.5% have a monthly income of less than ¥3000 (£338, China Internet Network Information Centre 2018). The concerns expressed by Guo, Bricout, and Huang (2005) around inequalities in access to the internet do not appear to have materialised and there is some evidence to suggest that whilst people from lower socio-economic groups may have less access to the internet, almost all are at least able to get some access (Qiu 2009).

The internet has played a key role in the emergence of new China. In 2013 the e-economy made up about 4.4% of China's gross domestic product (McKinsey Global

Institution 2014). In the political arena, the internet is being used to challenge the centralised control of the state (Zheng 2007), with some claiming that it contributed to the collapse of the overall control of Chinese Communist Party (Taubman 1998). Wide use of the internet provides a forum for public debate and is a locus for a newly emerging civil society, providing a space for dissent through which independent groups can mobilise (Harwit and Clark 2001; Chase and Mulvenon 2002). It is providing marginalised groups with the chance to air views in public and give voice to their concerns (Liu and Sun 2011), which has challenged China's homogeneity and allowed subcultures and anti-orthodox values to emerge (Li 2013). Ordinary people have been empowered to participate in rebuilding the discourse, something that was unheard of 20 years ago (Yang 2009).

There are, however, critical observers who argue that the state's surveillance and censorship of the internet, coupled with formal and informal control of its political use, curtails any democratic or deliberative possibilities (Kalathil and Boas 2010; Wacker 2003). For them, the internet has consolidated the authority of the state rather than undermined it.

There is evidence to suggest that these views are pessimistic and that in China online activism is one of the most important forms of citizen activism (Yang 2014). Potentially it is more crucial here than elsewhere. China does not have a strong history of political movements, independent trade unions, or third sector and neither does it have a history of new social movements that seek to challenge the structural exclusion or disempowerment of various constituencies. The potential clearly exists for groups to come together on the internet and create new understandings of their position and knowledge. This is perhaps even truer for disabled people, for whom poor access may even further hinder the possibilities for activism to emerge (Guo, Bricout, and Huang

2005). Our aim in this study was to examine how the internet is used by disabled people and explore whether they are using the technology in their struggle against oppression. In the next section we describe the methods that were employed.

Research Design

We sought to meet our research aims through a content analysis of postings in online forums used by disabled people in China. Content analysis has been used extensively in disability studies, for example to explore the coverage of disability in mainstream media (Haller, Dorries, and Rahn 2006; Haller 2010; Briant, Watson, and Philo 2013). It enables the analysis of large amounts of data presented in various formats and is particularly suited to the analysis of internet forums (Weare and Lin 2000). We open the methods section with a brief description of the forums we studied, followed by a description of our sampling method and analytical approaches.

Data Sources

We analysed data from two disability forums: Baidu Disabled People Post-Bar (Post-Bar) and Self-Strengthen BBS (BBS). The former has the largest amount of posts in Chinese disability online forums and the latter has the most registered users.

Post-Bar is run through *Baidu postbar*, a free platform developed by one of China's largest information technology companies for people to 'find your organisations'.

Established by a disabled person in 2009, Post-Bar claims to be 'a place for disabled people's spiritual interaction' and is one of the largest groups for disabled users. In October 2014, when this study was started, there were over 30,000 members and over three million posts on the site. Most participants described themselves as a disabled person, and the forum is run and controlled by disabled people. Post-Bar is searchable and open: everyone can read the posts and easily join in conversations. All they require is a Baidu account.

Formal rules around what can be said in a post are set by a committee. These rules prohibit posts that discriminate against disabled people, damage disabled people's image, abuse other members, or generally affect the harmony of the forum

BBS is an independent forum that has no obvious links with other organisations, which was established in 2004 by a disabled person. By 2014, it had over 240,000 subscribers who had made over 180,000 posts. BBC describes itself as 'our disabled people's own space'. Like *Post-Bar*, most users are disabled people and the focus of the content is on disability related issues. BBS is the more controlled and formal of the two forums. People must apply to join and access is overseen by a management team. Posts by new members are monitored and reviewed until they have earned enough credits and can be considered trusted members of the community. BBS has a strong group culture, which is closely aligned with the individualist 'four-self' ideology and is more like a disability organisation rather than a loose online group. It has moved beyond the internet and is now a registered organisation, with its own office, funding and full-time staff.

Sampling and Analysing

The study analysed posts published in the two forums between July 2012 and July 2014. Using systematic sampling, it selected three days per month (14th, 15th, and 16th) and three months per year (July, November, and March). In total 2597 posts were made over the 21 days. These posts were carefully read and were analysed through a standard qualitative thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2014). Emerging themes were noted and used to develop a more detailed coding, through which 22 sub-themes were identified. These were later aggregated up into 6 overarching themes.

Ethical Considerations

Privacy and confidentiality are key ethical concerns in Internet studies (Brownlow and

O'Dell 2012). In this work, all of the data were public and we felt there was no need to ask individual posters for their consent. No personal details are given, no direct quotes are used (they were originally in Chinese and translated by one of the authors), and no hyperlinks are released. Where informants are named these are pseudonyms. The materials cannot be traced back to any individuals. Ethical approval from our University for this project was obtained prior to commencement.

Research Findings

In this section we present the findings from our content analysis. The section starts with an overview of the key themes and their meanings. We then move on to unpack and further explore the content. In the final section we reflect on the potential afforded by the internet to act as a social tool and as a political enabler.

Emerging Themes: an Overview

Table 1 presents the 22 themes initially used to analyse the posts on the two forums. These were aggregated up into 6 overarching themes: everyday activities, material barriers, disability identity and culture, impairment and health, social relations, and disability politics. The definitions of these categories were:

- (1) **Everyday activities:** these are posts that described everyday activities, such as what people had for lunch, what their rooms looked like, and other topics such as holidays, travel, and hobbies.
- (2) **Material barriers:** Posts under this heading described the barriers disabled people faced as they went about their day to day activities. People talked about accessibility issues, curtailed opportunities for employment or education, and the impact this had on their personal finance.

- (3) **Disability identity and culture:** people described how discrimination impacted on their emotions and identity in these posts.
- (4) **Impairment:** Topics under this theme discussed impairment-related issues and wider health concerns as well as rehabilitation and care.
- (5) **Social relations:** These posts focused on social relations and included romantic relations, friendships, family, as well as the newly emerging digital relations built up on the forums.
- (6) **Political issues:** Posts analysed under this theme described disability benefit, and the users' experiences and reactions such as online networking and movements.

Figure 1 shows the popular themes in the two forums. In the next section we unpack the specific themes and their content in more detail.

Everyday Activities

Describing everyday life was popular across both forums, comprising 19% of Post- Bar posts and 15% of BBS posts. These were friendly, casual, relatively short posts documenting mostly mundane activities.

Post 1: This is (photo attached) my lunch, I cooked it myself.

Post 2: My room is so, so, so cold. I need a new heater.

Posts under this theme can be further broken down into two levels: what in China are seen as 'basic living needs' and 'higher needs'. Chinese culture defines food, clothing, housing, and transportation (including driving and public transport), phrased as *yishizhuxing* in Chinese, as basic living needs. These were talked about in 6% of Post-bar posts and 4% of BBS posts. More popular were 'higher needs', which are anything beyond the basic needs, with 12% coverage in Post-bar and 11% in BBS. Arguably,

these posts were more common because they were least likely to have been met.

While mundane, these posts picture the everyday life of Chinese disabled people. The users described, and sometimes uploaded photographs or videos to depict, what they ate and wore, where they were living, public transportation, and how they got around. This also enables social connections to form between the users and for a community to emerge. People become aware of the day-to-day activities of other users, their likes and dislikes, how they lived their lives, and what they did.

Material Barriers

There were five themes included in this category: accessibility, employment, education, finance, and e-employment. It was a popular category across both the forums, with 16% coverage in Post-bar and 22% in BBS.

The most prominent issue was employment and there was a high number of conversations about jobs (9% in Post-bar, the third largest theme, and 8% in BBS). Many focused around the users' need to find a job; for example, 'does anyone know any job open for disabled people? I desperately need a job'. People talked about their work experience with comments such as 'my manager yelled at me today, so upset'. People also talked about job opportunities, such as 'there will be a new factory built in [place] and I heard there will be a lot of positions for disabled people'. These posts suggest both the very high demand for work for disabled people in China and the many barriers they face in entering the job market. They used the Internet for help because they had nowhere else to go.

Another strong dimension was e-employment. In an attempt to earn an income, many looked to the Internet as a potential source. People discussed the potential of self-employment and the Internet as a means of working for others. They asked questions

such as ‘I’m considering running an e-shop in Taobao (China’s biggest online business platform), any suggestions?’ They discussed e-employment such as ‘I bet digital working is our future. What do you think?’ People talked about how well they were doing in e-commerce; for example, ‘the 163rd day of my tiny [e-]shop, today I sold 16 cloths, earning ¥ 200. Happy!’ Although the proportions of such posts were not very high (3% in both the forums), they created a great deal of traffic and received more comments than other posts. For example, 54 comments were found on the post asking for advice for how to start up a Taobao shop. These included advice such as ‘clothing is always a good option’ and ‘You need something special’, and debates about whether an e-shop is a realistic way to make money. There was a clear interest in the potential for income generation through the Internet.

There were differences across the two forums over other themes of the category. In BBS, 8% of the posts discussed education and 4% focused on accessibility (access to public buildings, shops, transport, etc.); in Post-Bar, the corresponding figures were 2% and 0.2%. Posts on personal finance were only found in Post-Bar (2%). The content also differed. Education posts in BBS were in general non-personal; for example, ‘Good news! This one-handed boy received an offer from [a top university]’. Similar posts in Post-Bar, although less popular, stemmed mainly from direct experiences, like ‘No! I failed the exam’. The was also the case for accessibility issues. Posts in Post-Bar focused on individual experiences, such as ‘I went to [a shopping mall] today but the lift was out of use. Seriously? For a huge new mall?’ In BBS they were more political; for example, ‘Shanghai has just introduced 5000 new taxis that are accessible for wheelchair users! Wow!’ This also resulted in a debate on the topic ‘is the accessible taxi an achievement or a gimmick’.

Disability Identity and Culture

The most common feature under this category related to how disabled people were treated and the challenges and oppression they faced. The posters sought to document the discrimination they experienced, which was clearly a regular occurrence in their lives. They also documented their response to it. Posts such as ‘I don’t like the way people look at me, like I am dying, I am useless, like I am not a man’ constituted 3% of Post-bar and 5% of BBS. These were accompanied by comments about the emotions these raised, particularly in BBS, where they accounted for 7% of the content. People described how the insults affected their wellbeing, making them feel ‘sad’, ‘lonely’, or ‘angry’. For example ‘I cried when my colleague called me “that short man”’ and “I can’t sleep but keep thinking how people can be so cruel’. These daily denials shape the lives of Chinese disabled people.

Rooted in such experience were a number of posts where people described how they felt about themselves. The majority were negative, such as ‘I am disabled, ugly and not funny, I will never be an attractive man’. These were much more common in Post-Bar than in BBS. In the latter, posts on identity focused more on the image and culture of disabled people (12% of the content), although the focus was centred around the ‘triumph over tragedy’ ideology:

I just read a story above a lovely, brave disabled person. [Link attached, a story about how a man lost his legs work to be ‘a good father and a good husband’]. I am so encouraged! How amazing he is! Shouldn’t we all learn from him? Work hard, guys! (including me!)

‘Successful’ disabled people were seen as those who were able to meet the norms of Chinese society and, crucially, with the ability to work. It is a highly individualist approach and there is little political engagement or call to breakdown and challenge the

practices and structures that disable and exclude people with an impairment.

Impairment and Health

Impairment effects, health, and rehabilitation and care constituted a small part of posts in both forums, 7% of posts in Post-bar and 8% in BBS. It was the smallest of the overarching themes. Direct posts about impairment were rare (2% and 1%), while health issues having no obvious links to impairment were slightly more popular (3% in both the forums). Posts around rehabilitation settings and experience were found mainly in BBS (4%).

The absence of impairment-related issues echoes that found by Lee (1981) and Dauncey (2012): impairment is a private matter in China and people generally feel uncomfortable talking about it in public. Also, poor access to, and low availability of, rehabilitation services means that for many people it is less relevant. This does not, however, mean that they were not important issues or that disabled people do not need rehabilitation services.

Building Social Relations

Building social relations made up the largest category in Post-bar, with 27% coverage, compared to only 9% of the content of BBS. There were four themes: romance, online intragroup relations, friendship, and family and other social ties

Romance was the most popular theme in Post-bar, contributing 13% of the content. The most common posts were people looking for a partner:

I am a 23 years old man, physically disabled, only a bit. I am self-employed in *** [city]. I am looking for a disabled woman to be my wife. You don't have to be beautiful or rich, but you should be kind, willing to take care of me. Message/call me if you don't want to be lonely anymore.

Post-Bar, at one point in 2014, in response to demand from the users, took on the role of a dating agency and tried to link up potential partners from its members. This attracted hundreds of participants and became what one member called ‘a remarkable event in our Post-bar’s history’. Disabled people in China have only limited opportunities for meeting other people outside of the internet because most meeting places are inaccessible, as too is public transport. The need for this service was made apparent by other posts. People talked about the stigma associated with being disabled and the impact this had on their social life. They expected to be rejected as potential partners. For example, one poster commented: ‘I know all women like handsome, rich, and healthy men, can anyone see me?’ Replies to this included: ‘You’re a disabled man, what are you expecting?’ There were discussions around the topic such as ‘I am a disabled girl. Is it possible to find a non-disabled boyfriend?’. It is clear that things have not changed since Kohrman’s anthropological research (2005) about the marriage exclusion of disabled people in China. Our data suggest that there is evidence that people are using the internet to overcome this.

In addition to acting as a potential dating site, the forums have also become a sphere for social interaction. They are thriving communities and many users have developed online friendships with other posters. Posters come online and say things like ‘morning, how are you today?’. They talked about how much they liked other users through comments such as ‘I really like your post, really helpful’. These posts constituted 8% of the content in Post-bar and 4% in BBS. Digital relationships were significant to disabled users, as they help to meet their emotional demands and made them feel included, something Chinese disabled people rarely feel (Guo, Brisout, and Huang 2005). As one post put it ‘Now I have found this place, I don’t need anyone anymore. This is my family. This is where I belong’.

The popularity of social relation issues points to the exclusion of disabled people in offline China. Through internet use, communication barriers were reduced, especially in the more inclusive and easier-to-use Post-bar. Internet use connects disabled people to each other, enabling them to build up virtual relationships, relationships that would not be possible in the real world either because of access issues or geography. It is enabling disabled people to develop a shared identity and through this they are starting to come together to tackle oppression. It is to a discussion of this that we now turn.

Making a Difference

Internet use for politics is starting to emerge in the disability forums, especially in BBS, where at 26% of all posts as the largest category. People discussed and talked about anti-discrimination laws, policies, and welfare provision. Benefits provision was the most popular theme in BBS (14%). People used the internet to discuss entitlement to benefits and to seek information, and, to share experiences of relevant application. They gave each other advice on what benefits are available and how to apply. Importantly, people also complained about the low levels of welfare provision and how this poor level of support they receive excludes them and prevents them from participating in mainstream activities.

In the following post, for example, which was considered so important that it was pinned to the homepage of BBS, a poster not only made the point that the benefit they were trying to promote is available, but also that people needed to apply for it to show how poorly their needs were met:

I hope everyone can apply for it! As far as I know, there have been only a few disability benefits so don't miss this one! Even if you can't get it, applying shows our needs. The more people apply, the more likely the government will issue more benefit in the future!

Posts in Post-Bar on this topic were slightly less political than those in BBS and were more individual. People, for example, talked about how they ‘used up all their money’ and asked for advice about where they could go for help. In contrast to BBS, they tended not to take a rights-based approach.

The internet was also used to set up both online, and in a small number of cases, offline activities. People gave each other advice and set up discussion groups around a range of topics including how to run an internet business or *taobao* shop. Some groups took on a rights-based agenda, such as the group set up to challenge activities by *mucai* (disability devotees).

There is no adequate evidence as to whether an initially disorganised and disconnected internet-based discussion group can become a real organisation, one with the potential to create a political agenda and take actions. It is to a discussion of overtly political activities that we now turn. Although relevant posts were small in number, just over 2% in BBS and less than 0.5% in Post-bar, the fact that they even exist is significant. For example, a user recorded his personal campaign for increasing disability benefits in Post-bar. This received a lot of encouraging comments. BBS was more about collective activism. For instance, its founder posted the following during a campaign organised by him through BBS:

All disabled sisters and brothers, don't remain silent! Don't think it's not your business. Don't be vulnerable anymore! Stand up and give your voice! Let's legally and peacefully claim for our rights! Let disability affairs achieve a big step because of us! One person's voice can only be heard for 10 meters, 1000 meters if 100 people, it will be a shock if we have 10000 people! Trust yourself! Don't think you are useless! We are the new cyber disabled people, we can change history!

Posts like this, which have a specific political aim and clear ties with collective actions, were only a small number, while most sampled posts were simply causal and informal

complaints. However this shows a growing interest in political issues and the possibility of reshaping disability politics.

Conclusion and Discussions

We set out to examine how the internet is used by disabled people in China. It is clear that while many of the posts on the boards were fairly mundane and apolitical, there are signs of activism emerging. Disabled internet users were not just talking about how they were marginalised, lonely, denied access to the job market, subjected to ableism and culturally devalued, they were also, importantly, starting to talk about the unfairness of their experiences, social injustice and the potential for them to challenge their oppression. The internet provided a space where they talk about the issues they want to talk about and be who they wanted to be. They were reclaiming ownership of their life stories and developing new accounts of what it means to be a disabled person in China (Dauncey 2012).

The key question, of course, is whether this amounts to a form of activism. Given the geographical size of the country, the lack of access to both public transport and the built environment, and the extent of dislocation, inequality and polarization experienced by disabled people, it is possible to argue that in China the Internet provides the only practical means through which disabled individuals can coalesce. Disability politics is at a very early stage in China and disability is still largely seen as a personal problem to be resolved at the individual level, rather than a social issue. Shakespeare and Watson (2001), drawing on the ideas of Nancy Fraser (1989), identified three key criteria for disability to emerge as a political issue. First, they argue, disabled people have to be seen as, and see themselves as, a disadvantaged constituency. Second, disabled people have to see themselves as a distinct minority, a

group who themselves can lead and implement social change. Third, disability has to be seen as the outcome of discrimination and prejudice, not physical or mental incapacity (Oliver 1990). In the earlier posts, we are seeing the emergence of at least the first two criteria, and, albeit to a lesser extent, the third.

Through documenting their everyday experiences, their hopes and desires, and how these are being thwarted, not only is a vivid shared description of what life is like for disabled people in China developing so too is a sense of community and belonging. The internet has provided the chance for the emergence of new disability narratives, those owned by disabled people themselves. Lahno and Mutzat (2016) argue that for a community to emerge there has to be reciprocity and exchange, trust, cooperation, common norms, goals and values and affective bonds between participants. All of these have been met on both of these boards. The communities of practice that have grown up allow the space for unmediated and authentic representations of their lives and of the disability experience. This is also the first time many users have been able to share their experiences with others. Access in China is difficult, both in terms of disability and in terms of geography, and the internet provides a means of challenging that. It enables social networks to emerge, through which people can develop shared understandings and build relationships. Whilst of course these may develop more quickly in face-to-face interactions (Rucht 2004), sharing stories about food, family and other daily activities has strengthened the development of these bonds.

Importantly, however, internet use went beyond the everyday and people shared their experiences of exclusion and prejudice. In the same way that disabled people in the United Kingdom have been able to use the Internet to highlight the impact of austerity on their ability to participate (Pearson and Trevisan 2015) so too have disabled people in China been able to talk about their own exclusion. A form of solidarity is emerging

and with it a new identity. The reshaped disability politics seeks to shift the focus from the individual to the structural, with a focus on barriers, prejudice, and discrimination. Disabled people in China are denied social rights and the internet is being used by them to highlight this denial, to point out where and how this is happening and to acknowledge it as a group issue. As Castells (2015, 9) argues, collective actions always start with personal and emotional practices and it is through the process of communication that 'the role of ideational materials in the meaning, evolution, and impact of the social movement' is determined. This is happening in China's cyberspace.

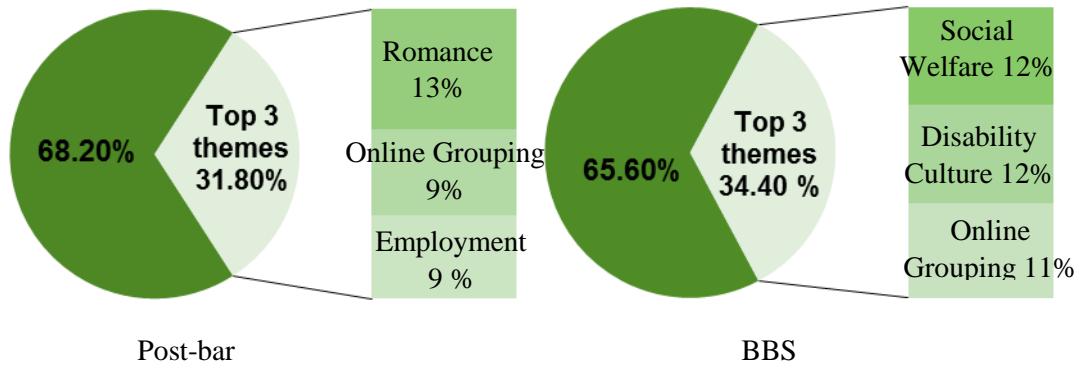
Chinese disabled people are also organising and building solidarity to challenge their exclusion. One major criticism on the impact of the internet use on collection actions is that online bonds, alliances, and communities may not be 'thick enough to support the development of stable long-lasting movements in the future' (Aelst and Wolgrave 2002, 466). In China, however, there appears to be little opportunity for alternatives and the emergence of the disability community itself is needed for political progress. British disabled activists developed the recognition that neither party politics nor charitable and voluntary organisations serve the interests of disabled people appropriately (Oliver 1990). The disability activism therefore has to be created and led by organisations *of* and *for* disabled people, organisations and groupings in which disabled people form the majority. Online communities are one of the few places in China where such organisations can currently be found. New narratives are emerging from and within this space and these seek to challenge the stigma of disability. Through discussions around political issues and identity-based activities disabled users are coalescing around a political desire and are starting to organise and mobilise. This has the potential to contribute to political activation and raise awareness. These activities, as we documented earlier, are spreading to the offline world.

While internet use has shown great potential in creating disability consistencies and even promoting activism, whether or to what extent this can lead to real changes remains uncertain. Disabled people are not the only group benefiting from China's digitalisation. In the era of 'mass self-communication' (Castells 2015), the opportunity to give voice has been given to a variety of groups, but the power to hear or ignore them has remained in the hand of authorities. Will the voices of disabled people be heard? Will online communities be developed as powerful political organisations? Even if yes, can the newly emerging narratives represent the real demands of disabled individuals, and will changes in the cyber world influence the offline material world and challenge the vulnerable position of disabled people? These are open questions that require further examination.

Table 1: Disabled people's posts by themes

Themes	Post-bar	BBS
Everyday activities	19%	15%
Basic needs: cloth, food, accommodation, move	6%	4%
Higher needs: travel, beauty, pet, entertainment etc.	12%	11%
Material barriers	16%	22%
Employment (excluding e-employment)	9%	8%
E-employment	3%	3%
Education	2%	8%
Accessibility	Less than 1%	4%
Finance	2%	/
Disability identity and culture	17 %	20%
Discrimination	3%	5%
Feelings & emotions	7%	1%
Disability identity (personal)	6%	2%
Disability image & culture (collective)	2%	12%
Impairment and health	7%	8%
Impairment	2%	1%
Health (not impairment-related)	3%	3%
Rehabilitation & care	2%	4%
Social relations	27%	9%
Romantic relations	13%	2%
Digital intragroup relations	8%	4%
Friendship	3%	/
Family and other relations	3%	3%
Political	14%	26%
Law & policies (excluding welfare and benefits)	Less than 1%	2%
Welfare & benefits	4%	12%
Online grouping	9%	11%
Disability movement	Less than 1%	2%

Figure 1: Popular themes in the two forums



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