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Breaking down the barriers and developing a new mode of citizenship: A sociological analysis of internet use by disabled people in China

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the internet is used by disabled people in China and focusses in particular on whether internet use can improve their lives and by extension advance China towards a more inclusive civil society. Framing this work are three key overriding issues. First is the rapidly changing and evolving Chinese society and economy, as the country moves from a highly centralised regime to 'socialism with Chinese characters'. Second is the near absence of disability and disabled people from this process and third is the expanding internet use by Chinese people. There has been very little research on either disability or disabled people in post-reform China and one of the aims of this thesis was to start to explore and fill the gap. The study attempts to find a contextualised and practical pathway to research disability in China.

There are two key elements to the research. First is a broad overview of the use of the internet and the emergence of disability digital communities, using quantitative data from a content analysis of two popular disability forums in China's cyberspace. This was followed by a series of in-depth interviews with 34 disabled people from across China. The data presented in this qualitative element of the thesis explores the intersection between internet use and economic participation, political engagement and cultural representation of disabled people and disability. The core issues that emerged from the analysis include a discussion on: 1) The internet as a tool for empowerment; 2) The internet as a mechanism for inclusion; 3) The internet as not only a tool but also a sphere; 4) The possibility of establishing a 'netizenship', to help access to, improve, or replace the un-developed citizenship in China. Overall, the study concludes that whilst internet use has significantly improved the lives of disabled people, it cannot change their disadvantaged position or promote the social justice of the reforming, digital China.

Throughout the research there were concerns on the tensions between western-dominated literature and the specialties of the Chinese context. The thesis critically engages with western theories and methodologies to develop its own specific, contextualised framework. This framework takes account of the multiple dimensions of the disabled experience, the agency of disabled people, and social changes in the context of China's reform. Only through this, the thesis argues, can disability in China be fully and properly explored.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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Signature: <u>   </u>

Glossary of Key Chinese Terms

Chinese Pinyin	Chinese Characters	Notions and position in the thesis
Baidu	百度	One of Chinese largest IT companies, specialising in search and web services. One of the research fields of the study, Disabled People Baidu Post-bar, uses its free platform service. The study also used its search engine: *Baidu Search,* throughout the research. See relevant introduction in Chapter 5.
Canji	残疾	The most common used terminology for disability, also the 'official' term. See relevant discussions in Chapter 2 (2.4.3.1) and Chapter 7 (7.3.2.2).
Canji Ren	残疾人	The most common used terminology for people with a disability/impairment, also the 'official' term for this group. See relevant discussions in Chapter 2 (2.4.3.1) and Chapter 7 (7.3.2.2).
Canzhang	残障	An alternative term of disability, advocated by some disabled people/activists, see relevant explanations in Chapter 7 (Section 7.3.2.2).
Danwei	单位	A form of organisation which dominated Socialist China (1949-1979). See its notion, functions, and impacts in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.1).
Gaige Kaifang	改革开放	Open and reform; One of the most key policies in China, which starts the country's post-communalist reform. See a brief review of this in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.1).
Shuijun	水军	Water-army; a special form of digital employment in China's cyberspace. This was the most common job for the participants of the study. See Chapter 6 (Section 6.3.3.1) for the examination.
Wuxian Yijin	五险一金	China's current workfare, including *'Wuxian'* (five insurances) as pension, medical, unemployment, employment injury, and maternity insurance; and *Yijin* (one funding for housing). It is closely bound with paid-employment. See relevant discussions in Chapter 2(Section 2.4.3.3), Chapter 3 (S3.3.3.3), and Chapter 6 (S6.3.3).
Weixin	微信	We-chat; A mobile app for daily communication. This is extremely popular in China and is commonly used for small and handy e-business. See relevant experience of disabled people in Chapter 6 (6.3.2).

Shenxi heyi	身心合一	Body and mind composed as one unit. This is the core principle in Confucian understandings of the body. See Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.2) for discussions.
Sizi	四自精神	Four-self spirit: self-respect, self-confidence, self-strength and self-reliance. This is proposed by the government and has been largely legitimated in China, echoing the emergence of individualism. See examination of this and its impact in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4.3.4) and Chapter 8 (Section 8.4.3).
Taobao	淘宝	China's largest and most popular online shopping platform, largely used for e-business. See relevant experience and practice in Chapter 6 (6.3.2).
Yishizhuxing	衣食住行	Food, clothing, housing and transportation (including driving and public transport). This is announced to be Chinese people's basic living needs and any needs beyond these are seen as 'higher needs'. See relevant discussion of the idea and the reflection of it on disabled people's cyber participation in Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.2.1)
Zhihu	知乎	A popular question-answer website, with slogans of 'sharing your knowledge, experience and through with the world'. This was one of the cyber sphere from where the study recruited the participants. See disabled people's experience of and practice on it in Chapter 7 (Section 7.3.2).
Zhengchang Ren	正常人	Literally means normal people. This discriminative term was largely used by my disabled participants, especially regarding their identity. See Chapter 8.
Ziqiang	自强	One of the 'four-self spirits' which has been largely internationalised. This is the name of one of my research fields (The BBS, see the introduction in Chapter 5); It was announced as a direction for image rebuilding (Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2); It was one of the emerging group consciousness from the digital communities (see Chapter 8, Section 8.3.4).

Abbreviations

BBS	Bulletin board system
CBR	Community-based rehabilitation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDPF	Chinese Disabled Persons' Federation
CDS	Critical Disability Studies
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
MUD	Multiple User Dungeons
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
WHO	World Health Organisation
ICT	Information and communication technologies
IT	Information technology
ILM	Independent Living Movement
MMOG	Massive multiplayer online games
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UPIAS	Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

> Question: why can't we see disabled people in the streets?
>
> Content: I've almost never seen any disabled people, or blind people, apart from the beggars. Why?
>
> Answer (from a disabled person): You can't imagine how hard it is.
>
> From *Zhihu*, a Chinese question-answer site

Disability is now increasingly understood as a human rights issue. In the UK and in other countries in the Global North, new organisations such as the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS, 1976), Rehabilitation International (Driedger, 1991), and others have demanded a reconsideration of the way disability is problematized and how it is best addressed by policy. Academics and activists such as Mike Oliver (1983, 1990) and Harlan Hahn (1985, 1988) have developed new theoretical approaches to the problem. There has been a growth in disability rights movements and many countries have adopted anti-discrimination legislation. There is no doubt that the rights of disabled people have changed significantly in the last quarter of the 20th Century and the early decades of the 21st. This progress has not been matched in China. Its fundamental disability document, *Law of the PRC on the Protection of People with Disabilities (LPPD),* 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' (Official translation). With this overtly medical notion, people with impairments are excluded from almost all aspects of social life and are rarely, if ever, seen in the mainstream. Disability is a neglected theme in China's political, public, and academic agenda.

Disability in China is underrepresented in western writing about the country. With a small number of exceptions (Ming, 1993; Stone, 1996; 1998; Sonnander and Claesson, 1997; Stratford and Ng, 2000; Zhou, 2002; Kohrman, 2005; Guo, Bricout and Huang, 2005; Dauncey, 2007, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) the topic is rarely seen in international journals or conferences and usually covers a small fragment in global reports. This is particularly the case for the lived experiences

of Chinese disabled people. Existing research have mainly focused on political documents and policies, which describe the topic from a general perspective. The actual lives of disabled people, like other issues in non-western contexts, have been neglected and represented by western stories. This approach to universalising disability issues is in danger of overlooking the real problems in the majority world (Baker and Murray, 2010). There is therefore an urgent need to research disability in China in a contextualised manner.

Any study of disability in China today has to take account of two key issues: the country's post-communist reform, and digitalisation. Since the late 1970s, China has launched a market-driven reform, through which its economic system, political regime, and culture have all changed. There have been significant changes in the process; both in the economy, with massive economic growth, and also socially, including rapid urbanisation, explosion of the third sectors, marketisation of public services, and increased inequalities (Goldman and Perry, 2002; Lu, 2004; Dou, 2006; Naughton, 2007; Jacka and Sargeson, 2013). The resulting individualist ideology has seen the emergence of personal responsibility for people's living, which is a completely new concept in China. Although the power of the nation has been greatly improved during the reform, a notable part of the population, including disabled people, have been left behind and are less likely to benefit from the changes. Disabled people are forced to find their own way to join in the progress.

Coupled with these changes, and largely as a result of economic regeneration, has been China's rapid digitalisation. Since 1994, when China achieved full connectivity to the internet, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the digital world have burgeoned in this country in an extraordinary manner. This has caused a shift in China's socio-economic settings, a rise of new social and political agencies, and a boost in unorthodox and 'subversive' cultures (Tai, 2007; Qiu, 2009; Yang, 2009). A digital era has arrived. This digitalisation has interwoven and interacted with China's ongoing industrialisation, producing a special pattern of development that is different from western experiences. Distinctive changes emerged in the process and their impacts on disabled people need to be interpreted on their own terms.

Any study that seeks to explore and fully understand disability in China today has to take account of both the changing role of the market and digitalisation. This project seeks to do this by locating the experience of disability in modern China with internet use.

1.2 This study: stance, research aims, and characters

This study examines the internet use of Chinese disabled people, as a part and a reflection of their daily lived experience; and, as a social behaviour through which their agency and reflectivity are suggested. Throughout the research, disability is understood as a social issue rather than a personal or medical issue; this is the key stance of the study. The focus, however, is not on social and material barriers but on people's experience of them and the way they respond to them. This follows the critical realist approach (Danermark and Gellerstedt, 2004; Watson, 2012) to examine both structure and agency. It aims to capture the experience of Chinese disabled people, which is an issue largely absent in the discipline.

The study concentrates on cyberspace and examines people's experience and practice in a digital environment. There are, as summarised by Dahlberg (2004), three approaches in internet studies, which focus on internet use as an action, or the effects of the internet as a technology, or the social context. The first approach sees the internet as neutral, which has no intentions of its own but extends the users' capacities (Trend, 1997). This is instrumentalist-approached, based on the assumption that all individuals are capable to use the internet to achieve their goals. The second approach, known as technology determinism, regards the internet as a product of scientific development. It argues that the internet creates new realities and brings out social changes, irrespective of how it is used and which social contexts it enters into (Kroker, 1992; Nguyen and Alexander, 1996; Poster, 1997; Buckingham, 2008). From critiques of this approach, that it de-socialises technologies (for example Robins and Webster, 1999), the last approach emerged. Scholars started to locate the development and deployment of technologies within social and cultural contexts (Williams and Edge, 1996; Golding and Murdock, 2000) and explored the ways that technologies are socially shaped as well as the way they are shaping society (Castells, 1999).

Although this new approach potentially avoids the limitations of the other two perspectives, it has been criticised for overlooking people's agency (Dahlberg, 2004).

Realising all these approaches have both strengths and weaknesses, this study employs a multi-determinist framework (Porter and Hellsten, 2014) and explores internet use as an experience and a practice, that has notable effects, in a contextualised way with concerns of China's social and cultural specialties. The internet and cyberspace are understood as products of society rather than of pure technological development. How they are used and what impacts they have are linked to settings and practices in contemporary China. Internet use in this study is also interpreted as a practice to 'exercise agency' (Giddens, 1991) and is believed to have actual impacts on individual and group users. The aim of the study is to explore whether internet use can improve Chinese disabled people's vulnerable position in both the online and offline world.

To achieve this goal, the research involves both quantitative and qualitative data. The former provides a broad overview of internet use amongst Chinese disabled people, which is essential especially when little is known in this area. The latter, the qualitative data, is the main focus of the thesis. The analysis produced detailed accounts of individual experiences, practices, and feelings of living with regular internet use. Combining these two types of data allows the different strengths of each to contribute to the study.

This is a real-time study that attempts to capture an element of an ongoing process. Both disability and the internet are modern concepts in China. The notion of disability and relevant discourses have been constantly re-constructed through the reform. Similarly, internet use in China has only been regularised in the last two decades and cyber phenomena and practices examined in the thesis, such as e-business, e-governance, and online grouping, are in their early age. For instance, *Taobao*, the largest e-business platform in China, was founded in 2003 and how trade on this platform should be taxed remains unresolved. The two digital disability communities analysed in the study were established in 2005 and 2009. This study recognises the changing nature of its research objects, and the social context in which they are located.

1.3 The key terms

1.3.1 The West/Global North and China

One of the aims of the study was to bridge the gap between theories from and for western countries with specific empirical facts in China, and to develop a Chinese, emic perspective on disability. It therefore faces the old predicament of cross-cultural studies: how to define groups and present values shared within and central to them.

The 'West-East', or other similar dichotomies like 'Developed-Undeveloped', 'Global North-South', and 'The Minority world-The Majority world', are artificial notions to represent 'a complex of inequalities and dependencies' (Meekosha, 2011: 669). Broadly speaking, Western or Northern countries are industrialised, rich, and with military power; usually referring to countries in Western European and North America, and a few others like Australia and Japan. Eastern/ Southern countries are those experiencing poverty, exploitation, and a disadvantaged position in the globe. Whilst realising such categorisation is losing its power to explain the changing global power-relations (Therien, 1999), the study uses the terms to refer to a certain range of social contexts where disability has broadly been re-interpreted. As summarised by Meekosha (2011), the key debates in the Global North are around the issue of disability and impairment, independent living, care, and human rights. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability* is a reflection of this, although the document is supported by some southern countries and ideologically embraced by China. While referring and discussing western notions in general, this thesis focuses on British theories in particular for their pioneering and advanced position in the area.

The Chinese issues, which are the 'objects' of the study, refer to ideologies, settings, and practices around *canji* (残疾) and *canji Ren* (残疾人) within the territory of mainland China. These have been constructed in China's combined discourse (Confucianism, Communism, and the growing Social Darwinism and individualism), its reforming party-state regime, and the changing yet 'socialist' economy (these will be discussed in Chapter 2). They are believed to produce a distinct culture and 'location' from the western norms. Disability in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan are not included in the research.

It is crucial to notice that both the conceptualisations, the West/Global North and China, are overly general in that they ignore diversity that exists within the category. Scholars in the Global North found that disability is a heterogeneous experience (Grech, 2008). People with different impairments may experience different levels of disadvantage (Shakespeare, 2012) and this interconnects with other aspects of identity; including class, gender, sexuality, and age (Reeve, 2009). There are significant gaps within China as well, for example between its rural and urban areas, the eastern and western China, and among the classes, gender, and ethnic groups. This research did not expect to find a homogenous experience of being disabled in China, nor did it intend to argue there is a Chinese disability pattern that is completely different to western ones. In the meanwhile, western ideas and theories have of course influenced the ways disability is theorised and the discourse that surrounds disability in China. There are overlaps and interactions between the two categories. The research looks at the relative prevalence within the geographic territory and regime, which are distinctive from those in western countries. It does not emphasise the extreme interpretations of the situation.

1.3.2 Online and Offline

The study focuses on cyberspace. It uses terms, including 'on the internet', 'the digital world/sphere/spaces', and 'the online world' throughout the thesis, without stipulating any particular distinctions among them. The research objects are 'websites/forums', 'groups/communities', and experiences and practices in an internet-based context. The opposite sector is the world that existed before the internet. The study uses terms such as 'the offline world' and 'the material world' when it comes to describe these traditional forms.

The thesis avoids using dichotomist terms like 'virtually/the virtual world' and 'reality/the real world'. There have been debates about whether the internet is simply a medium and a tool, or, a cyberspace where new structures and norms are created outside computer screens (Pool, 1983; Jone, 1998; Castells, 2001; Haddon, 2006). The key issue here is whether structures and phenomena created in cyberspace are real. Scholars favoring the instructional role of the internet believe that cyber creations have no physical reality and are 'nothing new' (see

for example Ravetz, 1998). Conversely, some scholars argued that 'everything that is experienced is real' (Markham, 1998: 152, for example). This study conforms to the latter, viewing cyber phenomena as real existences.

These two sectors/worlds are not separate. Cyber phenomena are created by real people, within certain offline social settings and discourse. They have great potential to affect the users and by doing so affect the offline world. Moreover, with the development of ICTs especially personal digital devices, the boundaries between the online and offline world are blurring (Castell, 2001). Following this logic the study argues that digital experiences and practices are a significant part of the life of disabled internet users. They are emboided in their daily living and have impact on this in turn.

1.4 The structure of the thesis

The second chapter, The Body and Disability in China, maps out how the body and disability have been historically conceptualised in the Chinese contexts. This is subdivided into three periods/ sections: traditional China (pre-1949), socialist China (1949-1979), and reform-era China (post-1979). In each section the thesis examines the basic social structures, the dominant ideologies, and the conceptualisation of the body and disability. The findings include: in traditional China, which was a homogeneous society and in which the body was seen as the basis of personhood, people with a different body were usually de-humanised; in Maoist China, the different bodies were de-valued in a *Danwei*-based society and a collective discourse; and, in China's ongoing post-communist reform, which is reshaping its society and through which a modern notion of disability is being formed, disability has started to emerge as a social issue and a new and vulnerable agency in the political, economic, and cultural fields. The review of these contexts suggests that disabled people have always been marginalised or even excluded in China. In the last section, the thesis defines digitalisation as a new stage and a specific dimension that may change the situation. Disability in this changing context, which represents a gap in the literature, is thus the aim of this study.

The third chapter, Theorising Disability in the Chinese Contexts, reviews disability theories and models developed in the Global North, with the intention

of putting forward a theoretical framework for this study. The first section is a brief literature review, drawing mainly from British theorists. From this the thesis outlines the key approaches/dimensions in disability studies, which are the social stance, the materialist focus, the involvement of personal experience, and concerns about discourse. All these areas are considered significant in fully understanding disability in China; therefore a critical realist framework which focuses on the multiple-dimensional of the disabled life is employed. The second section of this chapter compares the philosophy, social structures and settings, and disability-related practices in western and Chinese contexts. By doing so it argues that, while the key dimensions in studying disability are inspiring, most specific interpretations are 'western' and less relevant to the Chinese contexts. Studying disability in China needs a contextualised approach.

Located in the contexts presented in Chapter 2, and from the theoretical perspectives critically examined in Chapter 3, the following research aims emerged:

1) To explore what life is like for disabled people in China's contemporary digital society, including their experiences in multiple dimensions;

2) To explore how disabled people are using the internet in these contexts, what they are using it for, how and why;

3) To examine the impact of internet use, if any, and to consider the extent to which this improves disabled people's lives and, by extension, intersects with the changing Chinese society and promotes social justice;

4) Based on empirical evidence and theoretical discussions, to propose a new contextualised framework to research disability in China.

Chapter 4 explains the methods used in the study to achieve these aims. The study employs the grounded theory as its methodology to examine an unexplored area and generate theories from its own data. It, more specifically, follows the logics of a critical realism agenda to research both experiences and practices in the multiple dimensions of the disabled experience. This leads to a two-stage framework of content analysis and in-depth interview to involve both qualitative and quantitative data. Chapter 4 then presents the two methods in details, including an outline of the sampling, the recruitment of the participants, the structure of the interviews, and the analytical methods. The final section of the chapter discusses the dilemmas that emerged throughout the research process.

The next four chapters involve exploration and analysis of the. Chapter 5, The Digital Life of Disabled People, illustrates how Chinese disabled people used the internet, based on the analysis of 2597 posts from two disability e-forums: the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar and the Self-strengthen BBS. The analysis of the data indicates the ways disabled people documented their everyday life on the internet, especially the difficulties they experience. This was central in both communities and it has produced a new narrative about what a disabled life is like in China. The chapter then explores the use of the internet in building social relations (more obvious in the Post-bar) and politicalising disability issues (more obvious in the BBS). The meanings and coverage of these themes are outlined and examples are presented. The findings of this content analysis framed the following in-depth interviews. The thesis then has three chapters on economic, political, and cultural use of the internet.

In Chapter 6, Disability Employment in the Cyber Market, participants' experience and practice in using the internet for economic gains are examined. This is subdivided into two sections. The first section explores the instrumental role of the internet in improving disability employment in the material world, which includes efficiency regarding accessing information and obtaining a job, and the danger of producing segregation. What is more effective is the creation of new digital jobs, which is presented in the second part. The analysis of the data suggests that disabled people took entry-level jobs, such as 'Water-army' and 'Game mercenary', or, self-employed in the e-business through running e-shops or providing skill-intensive services. It shows the flexibility of digital employment, and the tension between this and the lack of security. The chapter concludes that internet use has increased disabled people's work opportunities, but this does not necessarily deliver social justice.

Chapter 7, Internet Use and Political Empowerment, looks at disabled people's political actions in a cyber world. Based on analysis of interviews and posts from the two communities that were quantitatively examined in Chapter 5, the thesis identifies four forms of internet use that have explicit or implicit political goals. These include: 1) personal complaining that has no specific, determined political goals, 2) personal campaigning for civil rights or a better representation; 3) online 'aimless' networking, and 4) collective activism with a specific political

goal. The chapter illustrates these practices and examines to what extent they can be effective tools to grant voices. It recognises the linkage between these actions, and by doing so, suggests an ongoing process of politicising disability issues in China.

The last dimension of the study is explored in Chapter 8, (Re) Constructing Disability Identity and Culture. This chapter examines the ways the participants construct a new sense of self on the internet; including 1) developing an identity of ability, 2) downplaying impairment to claim a positive self, and 3) redefining disabled people as the insiders of society. These online identifications are based on negative experiences of being disabled in China and reveal disabled people's resistance against discriminatory social construction. However, there were two respondents whose identification was dominated by the able-bodied orthodoxy. The chapter therefore argues that the internet has increased most participants' agency but this may damage the formation of the disability identity group. This study identifies the emerging 'collective consciousness' in disability online communities. The second part of Chapter 8 presents two examples, which have differentiated directions. They are the early forms of consciousness-raising in China's cyberspace.

The findings of the study are artificially separated into the Economic-Political -Cultural framework to show the scene. However, not all of them fall neatly into the framework. Overlaps are evident. For example, the research witnessed the emergence of digital commercial associations, which is both an economic action and a political practice. These overlaps are located in the thesis based on what their primary theme is and their relevance to other materials in the same chapter. Also, the three dimensions interlink and interplay with each other. For example, identity construction (Chapter 8) is clearly influenced by disabled people's 'ability to work' (Chapter 6), and is a significant part of the disability activism (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 can be moved forward if the study employs a constructionist perspective. The thesis, however, presents the data without implying any distinctions regarding their importance or positions in the process. The three dimensions are believed to contribute equally in the study.

The final chapter discusses the implications of the preceding analysis. After a brief summary of the findings of the study, the chapter examines the role of the internet in improving disabled people's life, and more generally, in promoting social justice. This includes four key issues. First is the role of internet use in empowerment. The thesis demonstrates how internet use has significantly improved the personal power of disabled users, but failed to promote their structural or social power. The second point is the nature of inclusion enabled by internet use, which is an inclusion to an intensive and unfair competition rather than to an equal position in Chinese society. In the third section, the chapter explores the dual role of the internet, as both a tool and a sphere; not only for disabled participants but also for me as a researcher. Lastly, the thesis discusses the possibility of developing 'netizenship', as a route or a booster to citizenship, or as an alternative to this undeveloped notion. Based on these arguments, the thesis proposes a new, contextualised approach to study disability in China.

Chapter 2 The Body and Disability in China

2.1 Introduction

This chapter maps out how the body and disability have been conceptualised in China throughout history. Due to the exigencies of space, it is not possible to present a complete history. Therefore, at the risk of being overly simplified, the thesis picks up key identifiers and defines three historical periods. It introduces the basic social structures and the dominant ideologies for each of the periods, and then examines their conceptualisation of the body and disability.

This starts with the 'society of acquaintance' in China's traditional era (pre-1949), in which the body was seen as the basis for personhood and different bodies were de-humanised. The chapter then moves on to Socialist China (1949-1978), which was structured through the *Danwei* system and dominated by collectivism, and in which the body is seen as a national property. Little has been written about disability in these two periods. The chapter then looks at other relevant areas such as gender.

The third section is the main focus of the chapter, which looks at an ongoing reform for 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in the country. Since the late 1980s, China has enacted a market-oriented reform, which has caused massive social changes including de-centralisation of the state, marketisation of public services, and reconstruction of culture. Disability in this period has been formed as a new social issue and an emerging yet vulnerable agency. These people's situation in the political, social-economic, and cultural fields is briefly explored in the chapter.

Based on the analysis of the three periods, the thesis argues that, throughout history, people with a different/impaired body have always been marginalised in China. It then focuses on digitalisation, which is a key process in the reform but also a new direction of it, as the specific context of the study. The wide use of the internet has shown great potential to reconstruct Chinese society and create a new context. Whether this can improve disabled people's lives is the question that the study attempts to address.

2.2 In the society of acquaintance

China has a long, complex history that is hard to summarise. The conventional view is that prior to 1912 (the time the Qing dynasty collapsed), China was an imperial country; this was followed by 'an age of war' until the foundation of the People's Public of China in 1949 (Jian, 1995). Following this path, the thesis roughly defines Chinese history before 1949 as a traditional era, which is rural-based, Confucianism-dominated, and homogeneously structured. This section gives a glimpse of this period, starting by briefly describing this 'society of acquaintance' (Fei, 1948).

2.2.1 The society of acquaintance

Many descriptors have been used to present arable China but perhaps the most dominant is the theory of 'society of acquaintance'. This was proposed by Xiaotong Fei, one of China's earliest sociologists and anthropologists, in his book *Rural China (xiangtu zhongguo)*. It describes traditional China as:

> ...a society where people live from birth to death in the same place, and where people think that this is the normal way of life. Because everyone in a village lives like that, distinctive patterns of human relationships form. Every child grows up in everyone else's eyes, and in the child's eyes everyone and everything seems ordinary and habitual. This is a society without strangers, a society based totally on the familiar.
>
> Fei, 1948; Translated by Hamilton and Wang, 1992:41

Fei's theory identifies the lack of mobility as the core feature of rural China. At the individual level, most Chinese people worked in agriculture and relied on the soil and natural resources. They were then 'fixed in the space from birth to death' (Fei, 1948: 44). At that time a farmer was unlikely to travel more than a few kilometres from his or her home (Li, 1996). This caused separation on the community level. Villages in rural China were closed and they rarely interacted with each other. The society was structured in a parochial way.

Local norms and knowledge were developed in these closed communities. Fei argued that rural norms rested upon 'rituals and customs produced through frequent and repeated interactions', rather than on written laws (1948:43). Once developed these social norms were employed by almost all community

members and produced trust and social relations. As a result, even if people did not know all the community members, they were familiar with the ways they behave and the logic behind their actions. There were no strangers in traditional communities. This was the same for local knowledge, which was specific, 'not deduced from abstract principles but constructed in certain circumstance' (ibid: 46). From certain local activities knowledge was acquired and it was passed on through these activities. Only within the community can this familiarity-based knowledge be understood.

Living and dying in the parochial community, forming intimate relations, and sharing a certain set of local norms and knowledge, Chinese people formed homogeneous groups, in which they were constructed in a certain way and had 'similar likes and dislikes, even the same vice' (Fei, 1948: 89). Such a structure demarcated people into two groups: 'us', and 'strangers'. Those who fitted the norms and behaved in a regularised way were included. Strangers having notable differences were recognised and treated distinctively even with hostility (Chen, 2006; Chen, 2011). This is widely shown in Chinese slogans, for example 'all those not from our clan must have a different mind' (*feiwo zulei qixin biyi*[1]).

Such a closed and homogenous structure produced not just a community with strong norms but also a normative understanding of what a body should be like. This is 'normalcy' as defined by Davis (1996) and examined by many scholars in disability studies. In China, it was theorised through Confucianism and the result is the idea that the body was the basis of personhood.

2.2.2 The Confucian body

Confucianism has been the dominant ideology in China for centuries and is embedded in almost all aspects of life (Bell, 2010). This philology understands the body based on two principles: 1) it is the basis of personhood; 2) for full personhood it has to be complete; an imperfect body implies moral/social loss.

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1. This quote comes from *Zuozhuan,* a key classic in Confucianism. It has been commonly used in China, particularly to refer to relations between difference ethnic groups. This, with no doubt, is relevant to China's Han-dominant ideology. However, the original text refers to conflict between two Han groups. It implies how differences are understood in the homogeneous society.

The Confucian understandings of the body emphasise its links with the mind and the whole personhood. Yang (1996) summarised four types of the body in Confucian literature: the spiritualised body, the naturalised body, the socialised body, and the materialised body. For all these types, a central feature is that the body carries out not only biological functions but also social ones (Zito and Barlow, 1994). Confucianists believe that the body is the basis of *li* (rituals, the most fundamental social norm in China), the medium to interact with the nature (by allowing *qi* go through), and the sphere for politicisation (Zhou, 2005). It is not personal, but the microcosm of family, society, and state (Unschuld, 1985); and even the microcosm of the nature and the cosmos (Huang, 2002). A fundamental '*shen xi he yi*' (body and mind composed as one unit) principle has therefore been highlighted, which shows the fact that Chinese discourse had no clear distinctions between body and mind; not like the Cartesian divide in the West (Ames and Dissanayake, 1993).

Due to its expected roles, the body needed to be complete and right. In her pioneering study of disability in China, Stone summarised China's normalcy of the body as 1) entire, whole, perfect, and complete; and 2) orderly, proper, and regular (Stone, 1998: 92). [2] The former was related to the thought that the body is the basis, and only a complete form can fully play the roles. This was seen in *Liji (Ritual)*, one of the most essential Confucian documents, as 'rituals are just like our bodies. If a body is not complete, we call it non-human. Improper rituals are like incomplete bodies.'[3] This ideology was largely practised in everyday life, for example the tradition that 'body, hair, and skin are given by my parents and I don't dare to hurt them. This is my start of filial piety'. [4] An entire and whole body was then required for people's responsibility to family and society. The second element was rooted in the homogenous structure, which emphasises the normalcy. Once a 'normal body' was defined, there was no room for excess, extremes, or deviation from it. The different bodies would be de-humanised and segregated. This will be explained in the next section.

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2. Stone actually identified three key notions from Confucianism and the third one is *Ding,* which is 'able-bodied male and aged between sixteen and sixty' (1998:92). I have a different understanding of this so it is not quoted here.
3. From *Rituals: Forms 10 Article 36.* See http://guji.artx.cn/article/567.html for the text. In Chinese.
4. From *Xiao Jing* (The Document for Filial Piety), see http://www.gushiwen.org/GuShiWen_8ae0f5 ae66.aspx. This had been largely adopted, for example people would rarely cut their hair.

2.2.3 Segregation of the different body

This section explores how different bodies were treated in traditional China. As little literature or records about the impaired body have been found, the thesis uses the female body as an example. It then reviews the laws in which disability is involved.

In Rural China, gender was the only permitted difference (Fei, 1948). Still this was seen harmful to people's full understanding of each other, and therefore, to the familiarity-based society. The female body was then separated and silenced in patriarchal settings.

> Rural society does not allow the Faustian spirit. That is the principle 'Between men and women, there is only difference'. [5] There is no need to seek underlying commonality between men and women, [they were segregated in daily life]. [6]
>
> Fei, 1948; Translated by Hamilton and Wang, 1992:91

Gender segregation was the norm[7]. For example, it is stipulated in *Ritual* that 'Boys and girls more than seven years old do not sit or eat together' (*nannü qisui bu tongxi*), and 'men are responsible for out affairs, women for domestic affairs, they shall not care about affairs that are not for them' (*nan buyan nei, nü buyan wai*). [8] Young women would be punished or morally blamed for talking to *wainan* (out-men; all male adults besides her husband, sons, and relatives on her father's side). In some places women got a bad reputation for appearing in public and/or letting men see their face (*nüzi bugai paotou loumian*). [9] Women's bodies were supposed to be fragile, delicate, tottering, and almost immobile. It was tied up with childbirth and chastity (Lee, 1981). All these contributed to the patriarchal system that excluded female bodies from male-dominated affairs. Women's needs were seldom taken into account in policy- or decision-making.

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5. *Nan nü you bie*. Literarily it means men (*nan*) and women (*nü*) have (*you*) differences (*bie*). This is a widely used phrase to argue men and women have different social roles and should be treated differently. Hamlition and Wang translated it as 'there is only difference' to highlight the separation.
6. *zai shenghuo shang yuyi gejue,* Hamliton and Zheng translated this as 'there should be some distance'. But for me, restrictions between men and women in rural China are more than 'distance'; It is segregation, both physically and psychologically, that is practiced in everyday life.
7. The thesis realises the risk of overly generalising gender issues here. However, as argued in Chapter 1, it was necessary to define a category and present an overall picture of it within limited space, to set up a scene for this study. Discussions about this topic can be seen for example in Mann's work *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese history* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
8. *Ritual: Inside Principles.* This is a Confucian classic document that defines norms for women.
9. Represented in arts, fictions, and literature, like The Investiture of the Gods (*Fengshen Yanyi*).

It is assumed that a similar exclusion was placed on those with an impaired body. Stone (1998) examined disability-related terminologies in ancient Chinese and found dehumanising symbols; for example, the character for people with no left arm is 孑 and for those with no right arm is 孓. Here an incomplete body was related to a different identity and this was explicitly shown in Chinese pictorial language. By analysing the writing of *Cai Yi*, an early literato (132-192), Zhou argued that 'people with abnormal physical features' were seen as non-Chinese, outsiders, and were not worthy of attention (Zhou, 2002:105). This approach to de-humanising impaired bodies can be seen in laws and policies which remove these people from having full rights. For example, in the Tang dynasty (618-907) disabled people were exempted from judgement and political election.

> For people aged over 80 or less than 10 and people with serious illness, their lawsuit should not be accepted, unless it's about rebellion, violence against them or their children did not take care of them. Officers who accept their appeal would be demoted.
>
> Article 24, *Tang Laws* (*Tanglü Shuyi*)[10]

This does not mean disabled people were abandoned in traditional China, at least not in the rhetoric. According to Campbell and Uren (2011), Confucianism stresses the need for harmony and the social responsibility of the community. A key principle here is '*ren*' (benevolence), which claims that all Chinese people should be included and cared for in an ideal society. In *Liyun Datong Pian* (*The Great Harmony*), Confucians describes such a society as:

> When the great way prevails, the world community is equally shared by all. The talented and the virtuous are elected. Trust is fostered and brotherhood is cultivated. Therefore, people treat old people as their own parents, all kids as their own children. Therefore, all old men live happily, all adults are employed, all youth grow up and get educated, and, all widows and widowers, orphans, childless and sick and disabled people are well taken care of. That is an 'all same' (*Da tong*) society. [11]

This belief produced benefits and services for disabled people as part of the vulnerable groups. As summarised by Luo (2005) in his review of disability laws, this included policies and settings in three aspects: 1) to exempt disabled people from the compulsory taxation and forced labour; 2) to exempt them from legal

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10. See the whole text at http://www.guoxue123.com/Shibu/0401/01tlsy/056.htm, In Chinese.
11. See the whole text at http://baike.baidu.com/view/769151.htm, In Chinese.

and moral culpability; and 3) to let them enjoy food provision and institutional care when necessary, together with other vulnerable people like the childless, the old, and orphans. However, the benevolence principle and these settings are 'Ought to be' and were never fully practiced (Xiang, 2004; Wang, 2013). Disabled people were, in general, left to be supported by the family or the clan (Bi and Liu, 2014).

This section briefly presented the social structure and the dominant ideology in traditional China and explored how a different body would be understood in the environment. The key idea was the normalcy of a male, complete, and fully-functional body. Whilst broadly speaking this has now changed, some ideas remain in current Chinese society. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

2.3 In socialist China

China launched its socialist revolution after the foundation of the communist party-state in 1949. Changes were first enacted in rural areas, such as agrarian and collectivisation; then in urban areas with the nationalisation of capitalist enterprises (Hsü, 2000). In 1956, The government proclaimed the completeness of the shift and an arrival of socialist China.[12] This Mao-era period, which runs until 1978m, is the focus of this section.

2.3.1 The *Danwei*-based society

Literally meaning 'Unit', *Danwei* is a generic term referring to all forms of social organisations in socialist China and the range of practices they embodied (Bray, 2005). This was first enacted in urban areas, as a work unit to exhibit personal power, communal facilities, independent budgets, and public services (Lu and Perry, 1997). Organisations sharing these characteristics were then founded in rural areas, although under different names like '*da dui*' (big team) and '*shengchan dui*' (production team) (Li, Zhou and Li, 1996). *Danwei* was the basic unit of socialist China (Li and Liu, 2000; Li, 2002).

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12. See CPC's website at http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64164/4416035.html, In Chinese.

First, *Danwei* was the only agency for economic activities. Before its reform in the 1980s, China had a planned economy, in which production and allocation were arranged by the state and for the benefit of the state, with clear input and output targets (Chow and Perkins, 2014). The only workplace in the period was *Danwei,* where people were allocated, paid to work as told, and offered a full complement of material benefits and social welfare. It employed 98% of labour in socialist China (Bian, 1994). Because of this some scholars argue that the notion of unemployment did not exist in Maoist China (for example Wang, 1999)

Secondly, *Danwei* was the most important political agency in organising and controlling Chinese society (Lu, 1989; Lu and Perry, 1997; Li, 2004). *Danwei* was the main source of membership for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It was the primary sphere where people were mobilised for political participation and the only way to do that. It was also the most significant channel through which social policies, like the one-child policy, were operated. *Danwei* was essential in the governance of China's governments.

Last but not least, *Danwei* had significant social-cultural functions. Besides permanent jobs and economic reward, *Danwei* offered a range of welfare service including housing, medical care, education, and child care (Bray, 2005). It regulated, trained, supported, and protected the members. As a result it was the principle source of Chinese people's identity. For example, people needed a certification letter from their *Danwei* to travel on business, to buy a ticket, or to book a hotel. People introduced (identified) themselves usually starting with the *Danwei* they were working for. Moreover, as jobs in *Danwei* were highly stable, usually life-long, and could even be passed on to the next generation, *Danwei* communities were formed. Employees derived their sense belonging to *Danwei,* which produced a '*Danwei* consciousness' (Yu, 1991). This constituted the basis of China's collectivist ideology.

Socialist China was therefore a *Danwei*-based society (Li, 2004), in which the 'individuals belong to collectives, persons obey authorities' norms applied (Li, 1993). Such a structure inherited, or even enhanced, the homogeneity that had dominated the traditional China. People in *Danwei* worked and lived in a closed environment, did a job similar to their colleagues, and were offered a unified

system with the centralisation of wage scales. They enjoyed egalitarian welfare provision and in general shared the Maoist/Communist ideologies (Li, 2014). This produced a collectivist, homogenised notion of the body as a national property.

2.3.2 Collectivism and the socialist body

Collectivism was the dominant ideology in Socialist China (Lu and Gilmour, 2004; Michailova and Hutchings, 2006). It prioritises benefit of state or collectives and silences personal demand. The most significant reflection is the *Danwei* system. *Danwei* was claimed to 'centralise the limited resources for big achievements[13]' and its members were expected to sacrifice to it. The contribution they made was seen as the basis for their value. With this logic, phrases such as 'Contribute my whole life to socialism' (*wei shehuizhuyi shiye fengxian zhongsheng*) and 'Be a useful person to society' (*zuo yige dui shehui youyong deren*) were nationally propagandised. This ideology was internationalised by Chinese people, producing for example a famous quote claiming that individuals shall be a 'little screw in the big revolutionary machine'. [14] It resulted in an 'insider-outsider' judgement under the socialist term *Tongzhi* (Comrade; literally means people having the same ambition) (Scotton and Zhu, 1983). Outsiders would be treated 'as crucial and cold as winter' (*duidai diren yaoxiang yandong yiyang canku wuqing*)[13].

   Such a discourse was rooted in China's history of being colonised by 'powerful western countries' and the resulting desire for national power. For example, the idea that 'falling behind means being bullied' (*luohou jiuyao aida*), which was proposed by Joseph Stalin during Russia's industrialisation, had been commonly quoted in China since Mao's speech in 1956. A strong sovereign claim on personal bodies was produced (Zhang, 2005). Individual bodies were supposed to serve socialism through labour and military services (Brownell, 1995), and because of this, it was a national property and its strength was linked to the whole nation (Fan, 1997; Zhou. 2002). A body-fitness culture was thus developed, requiring fit, cultivated, and regulated bodies, along with political consciousness (Stone,

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13.*Jizhong liliang ban dashi.* It's a popular slogan even today, see an example on the government website advocating the superiority of collectivism at: http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2015/0507/c405 31-26961441.html.

14. These quotes come from a model soldier called Feng Lei. More discussions about his story and how this shows propaganda of the collective body can be seen in Zhang's work: Rethinking sexual repression in Maoist China: Ideology, structure and the ownership of the body. *Body & Society,* 2005, 11(3), pp.1-25.

2001) and physical training was compulsory (Fan, 1997). Every Chinese individual was under moral and political pressure to keep their body fit and functional, to fight against stereotypes such as *dongya bingfu* (The sick man of East Asia), and to 'protect our home'. As suggested in Chen's analysis of films in Maoist China, this was reinforced through heroes stores such as a young solider used his own body to block enemy fire during the Korean War (2004). This was more explicitly reflected in slogans such as 'Exercise the body and protect our family and our country' (*Duanlian shenti, baojia weiguo*).

2.3.3 De-valuation of the less-functional body

Socialist China and its eagerness for national strength assessed people on their body's function and their contribution to society. This devalued the bodies that were less functional. The section illustrates this with examples of gender and impairment, based on a review of literature and policy documents.

First is the de-gendered female body. Socialist China reshaped the image of women as part of its new nation image and the key principle of this, as found by many scholars, was hold women to male standards (Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Yang, 1999; Honig, 2000). This is reflected in the popularity of slogans such as, 'who says women are not as good as men' (*shuishuo nüzi buru nan*) and 'we can do everything men do' (*nanren nengzuo de women dou nengzuo*) (Picture 2-1). In practice, women were 'equally' assigned heavy labour and risky jobs with less

The post says:

Women hold up half the sky;
Try to be No.1 in everything;
Be good at producing;
Be the model in army training

Picture 2-1 A popular post about women in Maoist China.
http://www.zyzw.com/mjmh031.htm

concern for their menstrual cycles and body strength (Lock, 1989); they were supposed to have same or higher level of performance in the jobs. This produced a high-achieving 'Iron Girls' culture, in which a fit and strong body, independent and hard-working consciousness, and work capabilities that met or exceeded male standards, were required (Hershatter, 2007; Otis, 2008). Female 'models' who met these criteria were nationally propagandised (Chen, 2003). Accompanying this was the silence of gendered experience. For example, women in this period claimed that 'We don't love female clothing; we love military apparel' (*buai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang*). The advocated stories included how women did labouring jobs even in their menstruation. The female body was simplified as producers of the socialism.

There have been few studies about disability or disabled people in the period. By reviewing policies and government documents, Stone claimed that disabled people were absent from politics, vision, and nation-building; apart from those 'disabled heroes' whose impairment was acquired through self-sacrifice for the nation (Stone, 2001:57). This is also shown in Dauncey's review of films (2007), where she found that disabled people were largely neglected. Considering the fact that film-making was used as one of the main methods to build an image of socialist nation (Chen, 2004) this has culturally marginalised disabled people. Another key element is the medicalisation of disability. As the body's strength is linked to the nation's, 'the quality of population' is essential. During her review, Stone (1998) identified some early eugenic-approach regulations and policies, which attempts to control the disabled population. This resulted in polices that will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Whilst there are few records about disabled people as a special group, they were seen as part of the disadvantaged people in China's policies and settings. Studies found disabled people in this period were employed in a special form of *Danwei,* called welfare *Danwei* (Shang, 2000; Liao and Luo, 2010). This was first set up for disabled soldiers; it then became the sphere to include all vulnerable people, including the disabled, the old, and those living in poverty. In the 4th National Civil Affairs Conference in 1958, welfare *Danwei* was legitimated as the 'way to support vulnerable people who have working abilities'.[15] It, as claimed

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15. See the government website at http://www.labournet.com.cn/shebao/lsyg13.asp.

by the government, provides people basic access to economic and social life and thus ensures a 'balance multiple social sectors and arrange properly' (*tongchou jiangu shidang anpai*).[16] However, these welfare *Danwei* were not expected to be productive or contributory. As a result, fewer resources were distributed and the employees, including disabled people, had a very basic access to civil rights, as well as a less-valuable social position. The importance of them participating in society was perceived, not from an inclusive approach which is common in western contexts, but rather the idea of 'socialist humanisation' that expects vulnerable people to be socially and economically useful (Liao and Luo, 2012).

To sum up, this section briefly described socialist China (1949 to the late 1970s) by looking at its *Danwei*-based structure and collectivist ideology. At this stage, a socialist normalcy of the body was established, which emphases its belonging and contribution to society and devalues less-functional bodies. Due to the lack of literature, a detailed breakdown of disability in this period was unable to be presented. Disability was not a well-developed notion or issue until the reform.

2.4 In the age of reform

The last two sections explored China's acquaintance society in its traditional era and the creation of the Confucian bodies, and the *Danwei*-based socialist China which treated the body as a national property. A core characteristic of the two periods is a homogeneous structure, in which normalcy was highly legitimated and differences were rarely tolerated. Such traditional values are questioned in China's post-communist reform.

2.4.1 The reform and a 'socialist society with Chinese characteristics'

This section briefly introduces China's ongoing post-communist reform and the massive changes it has caused. It starts with the economic reform through which a 'socialist market' is claimed to be formed. Then the section moves on to the political area and discusses how a new state-society relation has been created.

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16. This was proposed by Mao as a fundamental principle in the development of socialism. In 1958 the principle was linked to disability welfare affairs especially to welfare *Danwei*. See relevant news and discussions at the government website http://www.labournet.com.cn/shebao/lsyg13.asp.

2.4.4.1 The economic reform and a 'socialist market'

China launched its economic reform in the late 1970s with the birth of the *Gaige Kaifang* (open and reform) policy. This was started in agriculture (1979-1983), as de-collectivisation of production and commodification of agricultural products; reform in the industrial sector followed, which increased private and foreign-invested entities (Lin, 2011). The changes established a market, an idea that had been banned in Socialist China. Personal economic activities, such as purchase, sale, and exchange, were allowed; private sectors were encouraged; and supply, demand, and price was decided by the market instead of the state. This market-driven reform has significantly decreased the power of the state in economic activities (Lu and Perry, 1997; Leung, 1994). The *Danwei* system was dismantled and the planned economy was reconstructed. The second stage of the reform was a series of policies to shift the provision of social services away from the state (Lin, 2011). Public services such as housing, education and health care were marketised. Through these China proclaimed a 'socialist market', in which 'China's productivity can be developed, its power can be increased, and people's life quality can be improved'.[17]

These market-orientated changes were claimed not to alter the 'socialist' nature of China's economy. Collective economy is highlighted as the dominant form in the new system.[18] For example, Sun (2004) summarised the engagement of the government in China's economy as: 1) the core areas of the national economy such as electricity, oil, and railways are controlled by the state; 2) local governments have determinative power to control the movements of land, funds, and other important economic resources; 3) the lack of laws and effective constraints to the use of state power. This produced a 'semi-command, semi-market' economy (Sun, 2004). Similar descriptors are a 'state-involved market' (Guthrie, 2012) and a 'privatising yet authoritarian' economy (Zhang and Ong, 2008). The 'socialist market' is a significant character of the transforming China.

The reform has resulted in a tremendous and very rapid economic growth. In the past 30 years, China's gross domestic product (GDP) has rapidly increased at

17. See the CPC's website http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64190/65724/4444948.html. This website is in Chinese but what quoted here is an official translation.
18. See the CPC's website http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/134902/8092314.html. In Chinese.

the rate of 9% per annum on average. In 2008 its national economic capacity was the second largest in the world. Chinese people's life quality has also improved significantly (Lu, 2011). In the meantime, the reform has caused an explosion of social problems. Whilst the collapse of *Danwei* has promoted China's economy, it has exposed Chinese people to a highly competitive market (Li, 2014). The issues of unemployment and social inequality have increasingly emerged. How this has impacted disabled people will be discussed later in the chapter. Before that, the next section examines the reform in the political field.

2.4.4.2 The political reform and a new 'state-society' regime

A similarly astounding transformation has been conducted in China's political field. The changes include the rise of importance of People's Congress at various levels (Manion, 2000), the development of village democracy (Wang, 1998), and a shift towards a civil society (Weller, 2001;Ho, 2001; Goldman and Perry, 2002). A key element in the process is that China's state power has been withdrawn while its social forces have rapidly developed (Lu, 2011). This is argued possible to change China's state-society relations (Liu, 2000), from a 'strong state-weak society' regime (Migdal, 1988) to a 'strong state-strong society' (Zheng, 2014)

First is the withdrawal of the state power. It has been argued in many studies that China's transformation has weakened the control of the party-government (for example Gold, 1990). However, there have been opposite opinions, claiming that the reform has strengthened China's governance rather than eroded it (see for example Saich, 2015). Recently, some scholars moved beyond the western perspectives of politics and assessed China's new regime in its own terms. Zhang and Ong (2008) argued that by 'selectively embracing the capitalistic logic', China has built a new society, where long distance regulation and a broad range of self-interested practices are possible. This is, withdrawing the power of the state in a specific area does not mean downplaying its role. Similar theories include a 'semi-civil society' (He, 1997) and a 'semi-authoritarian' regime (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). The thesis follows this logic, arguing that the power of China's party-state has indeed been withdrawn, which is a significant identifier for post-communist China. The government, however, still plays a key role in the reconstructed society.

The changes in state power have created an opportunity for the development of third sector forces. Since the early 1990s, China has paid attention to 'social intermediary organisations' (Wu and Chen, 1996). This is from the 'Strong State-Strong Society' proposal of the government, which attempts to increase social power without decreasing the power of the state (Li, 2013; Zheng, 2014). Social associations and non-governmental organisations have then sprung up, with a particular focus on the country's sustainable development and its disadvantaged people (Ma, 2006). A report shows that the number of social organisations rose from 100 in 1965 to over 547,000 by the end of 2013,[19] plus at least 3 million grassroots organisations that were not registered, as estimated by scholars (Wang, 2009). Along with the rise of organisations, there has been an upsurge in collective actions, aiming mainly at challenging the socio-political order. These include NGO-led campaigns, petitions, strikes, riots, and other forms of protest (Chen, 2012; Jacka, Kipnis and Sargeson, 2013), and cultural representation to reconstruct a new diverse culture (Wu, 2008). According to data from China's Public Security Ministry, 87,000 collective incidents happened in 2005. This is a dramatic rise compared to 58,000 in 2003 and 10,000 in 1994.

These social forces, however, have been questioned, mainly in terms of their independence. Ho and Edmonds (2007) found that China's organisational culture usually contains 'entwinement', meaning to enmesh with authorities to avoid potential confrontation, and 'embeddedness', that the leaders, staff, and allies of organisations redraw formal/informal rules to obtain valued places within the authorities. For scholars like Saich (2000), this is because in China organisations are understood as an extension of the government or specific niches, taking jobs the government cannot or wish not to do. In this context, government-involved organisations are developed, which usually rely on government funding, use the authority's power, and act to assist the state (Morton, 2005). The other special element is the de-politicisation of social movement (Yang, 2005; Ho, 2007). For example, in his study of environmental activism in China, Ho (2007) identified a 'not against the state, just protecting residents' interests' approach. This and other similar findings suggest a 'volunteering associations' approach as defined

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19. It is not a separate report about social organisations but part of the report *New policies for organisation registration*. This itself shows the fact that although social organisation is encouraged, it is controlled by the state. See the report at http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/15119105.html.

by Eliasoph (2013). At a very general level the political context in current China is 'restrictive yet conductive' (Ho, 2007: 36).

This section has briefly introduced China's post-communist reform and social changes that have emerged in the process. It stated the 'semi-command, semi-market' economy that has replaced the planned economy. It then presented the new political regime; that the power of the state has been decreased and social forces have significantly promoted, but this is 'restrictive yet conductive'. Such a reform shows the possibility to challenge the homogenous structure, produce new norms, and create multiple agencies. The understandings of the body have been altered in the process.

2.4.2 The individualised body in the 'development'

China has been experiencing a transform from a relative cultural homogeneity to a multicultural discourse, one where 'discursive appropriation and reinvention' are to some extent embraced (Wu, 2008). This includes the rise of two key ideas: the development-priority ideology and individualism.

First is the 'development-priority' discourse. Proposed by Xiaoping Deng, the paramount leader of China's reform, this discourse sees 'low national productive ability' as China's main weakness and defines 'developing productive force' as its core task (Deng, 1979[20]). The guiding principles of China's Communist Party are 'represent the development trend of China's advanced productive force, the orientation of China's advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people' (Zemin Jiang, the third Prime Minister of China, 2000[21]). To fasten China's development, two principles are proposed. One is the priority of economic development. The government claims that China is at an early stage of socialism, which means 'economic development is the key' and 'everything else shall submit to it and serve for it' (Jiang,1997[22]), including social development (Hu, the fourth PM of China, 2013[23]). This has caused a capitalist turn in China's economic ideology. Economic capital is highly

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20. See the CPC's website http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/1022/c350604-19347417.html. In Chinese.
21. See the CPC's site at http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/66739/4521344.html.In English.
22. From *The Speech in the 15th Party Congress,* 1997. The full documents can be seen at http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64568/65445/4526285.html. In Chinese
23. See government website at http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/350432/350604/index.html#.

valued at the individual level (Zhang and Ong, 2008). This is reflected in slogans such as 'it does not matter whether the cat is black or white if it catches mice'[24] and 'it is glorious to get rich', which replaced previous slogans stressing the virtues of socialism. Social identity is growingly defined by wealth, occupation, and consumption (Lu, 2004; Li, 2005). At the social level, resources have been put into the economic area, causing an unbalanced development (Naughton, 2007). The other element of the 'development-priority' discourse is the uneven development. In Deng's plan, the reform cannot jump to the ultimate socialist goal to let 'all Chinese enjoy a better life' but has to start in some regional area and 'let some people get rich first' (*rang yibufen ren xianfu qilai*). Rich people or areas are supposed to help others to achieve a state of being 'common rich' (*gongtong fuyu*).[25] This, it is claimed, is a practical pattern of development regarding the over-population of China.[26] Whilst it has worked on economic growth, the consequence is a rise of social inequalities. People who have 'strong work abilities' or those living in advantaged areas are more likely to win the competition; those failed are 'temporarily' left behind.[27]

China's reform, especially the collapse of the *Danwei* system, has caused the fragmentation of the sense of belonging (Benton, 2010). The developing market requires individuals to 'take life into their own hands and face the consequences of their decision' (Zhang and Ong, 2008: 16). An individualist ideology has thus emerged (Bond, 1996; Kleinman and Kleinman, 1999). Some scholars argued that the shift from 'fettering the personality' to 'respecting the personality' (Geng, 2014: 429) has the potential in changing the perceptions of freedom, choice, and happiness (Moore, 2005; Yan, 2010; Steele and Lynch, 2013). It can also advance China's development when all individuals become active agents (see for example Halskoy-Hansen and Svarverud, 2010). However, it has been increasingly noted that individualism has amplified social inequality and depressed life satisfaction (Brockmann et al, 2009). The unequal distribution of resources is interpreted as an 'individual issue' and people shall fully participate in the process, competing

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24. It is a quote from Xiaoping Deng to argue that only social structure that benefits the country and its people should be chosen, no matter it is socialist or capitalist. See relevant discussions at the CPC's website http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/85037/8530953.html.

25. See relevant discussions at http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/34136/2569304.html. In Chinese.

26. See relevant discussions in the mainstream media, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2006-07/21/content_4863377.htm. In Chinese.

27. See relevant discussions in the mainstream media at http://news.xinhuanet.com/comments/2006-07/21/content_4863377.htm. In Chinese.

for limited places of being advantaged. Those who are less capable of this are 'temporarily' left behind. Individualism has shifted the accounts from 'rely on the state' (*kao guojia*) to 'rely on yourself' (*kao ziji*) (Zhang and Ong, 2008).

The development-priority discourse and individualism have resulted in a new understanding of the body. In the reform age, Chinese people are supposed to participate in the country's development, which is economic-oriented and highly competitive, and this can only be done individually. This requires a whole, fully-functional, and strong body. Compared to the socialist body, the body in the era is individualised. People are under less pressure to have a fit and strong body to serve the state, but they need to be responsible for themselves (Shang, 2000). In the meantime, a eugenic discourse is argued be embraced, which has produced a medicalised concept of the body (Dikotter, 1998; Kipnis, 2006). A healthy body his required to compete in this environment and the single offspring policy has intensified this discourse (Hallett, 2015). This and its influence on the impaired bodies will be discussed in the next section (section 2.4.3.4)

2.4.3 The 'emergence' of disability

In what follows the thesis examines how disability is understood and constructed in China's reform. It starts with the new definition of disability which reveals the underpinning ideologies. It then moves to political, social, and economic settings around disability, in which marginalisation is suggested. The last section looks at disability narratives in China's mixed, changing discourse. Through the analysis, the thesis argues that disability has started to emerge as a social issue and a new yet vulnerable agency in the age of reform.

2.4.3.1 *Canji*: the official legal-linguistic construction

Since the 1980s, China's government has used the term '*canji*' (disability) and '*canjiren*' (disabled people) to name people with impairment. *Canji* consists of two characters: *can* (残) denotes incomplete, deficiency, and injury; and *ji* (疾) refers to disease, suffering, and pain (Guo, Bricout and Huang, 2005). This term replaced previous terminologies like *canfei* (incomplete and useless) and *feiji* (useless and disease). The fundamental disability document, *Law of the PRC on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities* (LPPD), defines a disabled person as:

> One who has abnormalities or 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. The term "a person with disabilities" refers to one with visual, or hearing, or speech, or physical, or intellectual, or psychiatric disability, multiple disabilities and/or other disabilities.
>
> *Law of the PRC on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities*
>
> *Official translation*[28]

This notion shows a strong medical focus (Stone, 1998; Kohrman, 2005; Fjeld and Sagli, 2011). It highlights expected functions of the body and justifies what a normal body is. It then, as Dauncey argued (2013a), defines disabled people as a special group by and for their bodily alterity. Under this name, disabled people are considered in China's legal system on three levels. First, this is included in common laws like *Constitution of the People's Republic of China* (2004), not as a separate group but as part of the disadvantaged population. Secondly, disabled people are protected by targeted laws such as the LLPD (1990), which suggests the recognition of them as a social and political category. Lastly, there are about 50 specific regulations on issues around a disabled life, like employment and education. These formal settings, as claimed by the authority, are based on two principles: equal rights, and special support and protections (Ma, 2008).

The first 'equal and anti-discrimination' principle was announced in both the *Constitution* and the fundamental disability law. It promised disabled people to be equal citizens:

> All citizens of the People's Republic of China are equal before the law. The State respects and preserves human rights. Every citizen is entitled to the rights and at the same time must perform the duties prescribed by the Constitution and other laws.
>
> Article 33. *Constitution of the PRC*. Official translation[29]
>
> People with disabilities shall enjoy equal rights with other citizens in political, economic, cultural and social respects and in family life as well…Discrimination against, insult of and infringement upon disabled people shall be prohibited.
>
> Article 3. *Law of the PRC on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities*
>
> Official translation

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28. See the whole text at http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/laws1documents/200804/t20080410 2674 59.html. In English.

29. See the whole text at http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node 2825.htm. English.

This non-discriminatory ideology is new in China. The *LLPD* was published in 1990 and was the first law for disabled people. In the *Constitution,* disabled people had not been explicitly included until the most updated edition in 2004,[30] although previous editions claim 'all Chinese citizens are equal'. These changes suggest a movement to consider disabled people as rights-bearing agencies. This is also reflected in the rise of specific regulations and policies, which attempt to empower disabled people in political participation, employment and education. For example, the *Regulation on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities* claims 'No discrimination against disabled persons in their employment'.[31] These laws and settings, however, are in general not well practiced. The ideology for disabled people's full enjoyment of legal equality is emerging but this has a long way to go to be enacted.

Besides the principle of equality, the principle of special support has been formally achieved. Relevant laws and policies clearly state that: disabled people should be prior-considered in China's poor benefits; they are particularly cared for by local governments; and they are exempted from tax and legal culpability. An example is *The Public Security Administration Punishment Law of the People's Republic of China*:

> A blind or deaf-and-mute person who violates the administration of public security may be given a lighter or mitigated punishment or may be exempted from punishment.
>
>   Article 14. *The Public Security Administration Punishment Law of PRC*[32]

As with the equal principle, extra support is in rhetoric more than in practice. There have been up to date no practical guidance on how to secure the support, or details of the planned budget from which these supports are provided. This principle is interpreted and practiced by local governments based on their own financial situation, and produces policies if any from a 'charity-approached' perspective (Zheng, 2008). Disabled people's ability to participate in social lives is doubted and they are not considered as active citizens.

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30. China's *Constitution* was firstly published in 1954 (see http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/wxzl/2000-12/26/content_4264.htm), which is then revised in 1988 (http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/wxzl/2000-12/05/content_4498.htm), 1993 (http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/wxzl/2000-12/05/content_4585.htm), and 2004 (http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2004/content_62714.htm). All in Chinese.
31. *Regulation on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities*. Officially translated by CDPF at http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/Resources/lawsregulations/201603/t20160303_542878.shtml.
32. See http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=4549&CGid. In English.

In a general way, what is essential in China's ideological and legislative build of disability issues is that disability and disabled people become more visible (Campell and Uren, 2011). This includes its emergence as a political and social category of bodies, and the new rhetoric that these people are accorded equal rights. The commitment has not be fully practiced.

2.4.3.2 Neglected in political practices

Although inclusive rhetoric exists, disability affairs are in general neglected in China's political settings and practices. The first reflection of this is the absence of an administrative body regarding disability issues in the government. According to the law, disability affairs are handled by China's Ministry of Civil Affairs, more specifically by its Social Welfare and Charity Office and/or Social Assistance Office. In practice, disability affairs are handled by China's Disabled Person's Federation (Kohrman, 2005), which hosts the making of disability laws and policies, administers the practice of policies, and organises and facilitates disability events. CDPF is therefore seen as part of the government (Zhou, 2008; Qing and Zeng, 2014; Hallett, 2015), although, legally, it is 'a national umbrella organisation of and for persons with diverse disabilities'.[33] The dual role of CDPF and the risks this entails have been discussed by many scholars (e.g. Yang et al, 2010). Whilst the main account is to get rid of the administrative responsibilities and ensure the independence of CDPF, the lack of disability forces in the government if this were done has not been noted.

The other reflection is the silence of disability affairs in China's governance. Until now there have been no official national statistics about Chinese disabled people. The most recent report was from the CDPF in 2010, which estimated the demographic elements of this population and their living condition based on a sampled survey in 2006.[34] A national registration system was started in 2008 and is not finished yet. Even the 'official identity' of disabled people, the Disabled Person's Card, requires individuals who wish to apply to go to local CDPF offices with self-prepared 'proof'. These factors have contributed to disabled people's

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33. See the CDPF's website at http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/About/overview_1793/. In English.
34. Until now China has two national disability surveys: in 1987 and 2006; both were sampled. The 2010 report is based on the sixth survey of Chinese people (2010) and the disability survey in 2006 to estimate the disabled population, their types of impairment and the 'level' of disability. See this report at http://www.cdpf.org.cn/sjzx/cjrgk/201206/t20120626_387581.shtml. In Chinese.

vulnerable position in the political system. The consequence is more barriers to give voices (Zheng and Wu, 2006) and a significantly lower level of political participation (Zhou and Li, 2009; Zhou and Liao, 2012; Zhou, 2013).

To sum up, the political context for Chinese disabled people is: ideologically, they enjoy the equal position plus additional supports; while in practice, this has not been achieved and disabled people are largely neglected. This 'emerging but marginalised' position is reflected in the social-economic field as well.

2.4.3.3 New and vulnerable: disability in the socio-economic sectors

China's reform has produced both opportunities and challenges for people in the transition and it is predicted that disabled people in the process are more likely to fall into a crisis (Zhou, 1997). This section examines the socio-economic life of disabled people, by looking at their access to public, employment, education, and welfare and care. It argues that disabled people experience a dilemma: only as an independent and self-responsible agency can they participate in social life, while doing so will locate them in a vulnerable position.

Access to the public: the fundamental exclusion

In the northern/global understanding, full access to the built environment is a basic right for all citizens; including disabled people (the UN's *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* in 1993 and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2006; the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*, WHO, 2001). Whilst this is recognised, it has not been well developed in China (Cameron et al., 2003).

Only in recent years has China enacted a number of national codes and local regulations to consider accessibility in urban planning (Hui, 2005). However, as no national laws have been passed, this is seldom put into practice. Accessible facilities are only seen in big developed cities in a very limited way (Liu, 2007; Fan, 2011). In most places, public buildings like libraries and sports centres have no accessible entrance or toilet, the sidewalks have no wheelchair access, and even when built, accessible faculties are usually not in use. For example, China has the policy to build up 'blind lanes' (*Mangdao*, convex lines to use a strick

while walking) for people having visual impairment.[35] This is poorly-practiced (Picture 2-2). A study in Zhangjiakou found that most blind lanes in the city were occupied by car parking (Jiao, Yang and Liu, 2008). A study in Nanjing suggested that only 17% of its blind lines were in use and all lifts in the subway were out of use (Zhu, 2010). Accessibility in China is far away from the announced goals of guaranteeing disabled people's access to public spaces (Yang, 2013).

Accompanying the disabling environment is the lack of assistive devices. CDPF reported that assistive devices, such as wheelchair and hearing devices, is one of the primary needs of Chinese disabled people (CDPF, 2016). This is particularly the case for old disabled people and those living in poorer areas (Peng and Hui, 2008). As summarised by Shu and his colleagues (2010), difficulties in getting assistance devices include limited products, poor design, and high cost. Studies in other contexts have demonstrated how this lack of accessibility may cause exclusion from civic, religious, and economic participation (Imrie and Hall, 2001; Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Wee and Lysght, 2009). Whether and how this would happen in China has not been well demonstrated with empirical evidences.

Picture 2-2 Poorly-designed and blocked blind lanes
These pictures come from a complaining post from the 'withyou' group
(a self-organisation of blind people) http://www.guokr.com/blog/805894/

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35. *The Law of PRC on Public Roads and Transport Security.* First published in 2003, revised in 2007 and then in 2011. See http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/2011-04-23/content_1653570.htm for the most recent edition. In Chinese.

Employment: in the market and in social allocation

In employment, Chinese disabled people have been largely marginalised in the country's 'semi-market, semi-command' economy. This is reflected in both the market and the social sector.

In the market sector, which is the primary workspace in contemporary China, disabled people are ideologically considered as equal participants. It is written into laws, as 'the rights of people with disabilities to work are protected' (*Law of the PRC on the Protection of Disabled Persons*). However, there is no equal opportunity legislation to protect this, and in a competitive environment where a fit and functional body is required, disabled people are usually refused. This is shown in statistics that only 51.79% (21.59 out of 41.54 million) working-age disabled people were employed in 2014;[36] much less than the 96.99% for non-disabled people.[37] What is worse, the market blames disabled people for their exclusion, arguing it is because of their lack of abilities that they lose out.

In order to change the situation, China's government has enacted a range of promoting policies. The one considered most significant is the 'quota scheme'. The *LLPD* asks 'all government agencies, social organisations, enterprises, public institutions and private-run non-enterprises entities arrange job opportunities for disabled people'[38]; at a certain quota (the percentage of disabled employees within all employees). The quota is determined by local governments, usually from 1% to 3%. Employers who cannot reach it will have to pay a high penalty. This compulsory policy is supported by an 'encouraging' policy, which promises tax-reduction for agencies who employ disabled people. The amount is three-times the salaries they pay to disabled employees. 'Outstanding' agencies hiring more disabled people are socially rewarded (see Picture 2-3). These policies are argued to have notably improved disability employment (Shang, 2000). However,

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36. See CDPF report '*Statistical Communiqué on the development of the work on persons with dis abilities in 2014*' (http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/statistics/201507/t20150717_522174.html) for the figure of employment; see its 2006 report of disabled people (http://www.cdpf.org.cn/sjzx/cjrgk/200 711/t20071121_387540_1.shtml (In Chinese) for the estimated disabled population in China.
37. This is the official figure with a special notion of 'economically active' people http://data.stats.go v.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01. More discussions about this notion can be seen in Chapter 3.
38. See the CDPF's website at http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/Resources/lawsregulations/201603/t 20160303_542879_1.shtml. In English.

it has been noted that many companies would buy 'fake' disabled workers[39] or pay the penalty, rather than offering a job. The real impacts of the policies are doubtful.

A similar exclusion is seen in the state sector. There are still welfare *Danwei* running in China, which follow the tradition of 'social allocation' and provide an 'institutional solution' for disability employment (Huang, 2007). More recently a social enterprise pattern has been proposed.[40] The plan is to develop social enterprises, which are promised to enjoy some of the benefits for *Danwei*, such as tax exemption, but not the full support that was provided in the socialist era (like materials provision and product-selling). The aim is to transfer disability employment to social forces and 'ease the burden' of the state (Shi, 2007). Both the welfare *Danwei* and the social enterprise design have not been properly practiced in China: welfare *Danwei* are decreasing as they are less inconsistent with the country's priority aim of (economic) development (Liao and luo, 2010); the social enterprise pattern requires a strong participation of social forces, which have not been well developed in China. Disabled people are excluded both in the capitalist market and in the state sectors.

Picture 2-3 Some companies get awarded for employing disabled people 'more than required' http://www.hy960.com/show.asp?no=10869

39. *GuaKao* (attach). Employers sign a fake contract with disabled people, to avoid penalties and benefit from tax reduction. They provide very little payment and usually no workfare. See relevant reports for example *Rent Disabled People's Card: better than a real job?* On one of China's biggest mainstream forums http://finance.people.com.cn/money/n/2014/0611/c218900-25131858.html.
40. See news at http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-06/06/c_12187679.htm. In Chinese.

Education: the inclusive ideology and exclusive practices

Similarly, in education, disabled people are included in rhetoric but excluded in practice. Since the late 1980s, China has initiated a nationwide reform called 'Learning in Regular Class', of which the core principle is to locate children with special needs in ordinary education.[41] This is argued based on China's Confucian and socialist traditions and the impact of inputting western values (Deng, Poon-McBrayer, and Farnsworth, 2004). The target was to promote the integration of disabled children, and more widely the disabled population (McCabe, 2003). The official data reported more than 73% of school-aged disabled children studying in mainstream schools in 2007, which was seen as a success (Zhao, 2013). However, the figure showed an unexpected fall from 73.0% in 2007 to 59.6% in 2013 (CDPF, 2014[42]). It was also found in interviews that most disabled children do not want to study in mainstream schools (Mao and Lan, 2013). No explanations have been given by the authorities but the data shows a failure of this inclusive education.

The exclusive environment and practices in China's education spaces may be the reason. Besides the inaccessible environment, which with no doubt restricts disabled children physically (Wang, Yang and Zhang, 2006), invisible barriers have been identified. It is found that most teachers in ordinary institutions have no professional knowledge of special education (Hua, 2003). They have lower expectations of disabled students. Even in Shanghai, one of the most developed cities in China, only 40.8% teachers believed that disabled children can 'learn well' (Liu, Du and Yao, 2000). The acceptance of disabled children in the class is also low, as suggested in another piece of research (Peng, 2000). All these reveal a subordinate status of disabled students in ordinary schools. The quality of their education cannot be ensured (Meng, Liu and Liu, 2007).

Some scholars link this to China's competitive context and the resulting Social Darwinism (Deng and McBrayer, 2004). In an environment that only a minority of children can get high-quality education, the competition and 'better than other kids' are necessary and these can only be achieved through long-time study and full participation. All Chinese students are situated in exam-oriented settings

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41. Clearly stated in the *Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities* http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/laws1documents/200804/t20080410_267459.html.
42. Report about disabled people's situation and rehabilitation in China in 2013. See the CDPF's website http://www.cdpf.org.cn/zcwj1/zxwj/201411/t20141126_422110.shtml In Chinese.

and are assessed with exam results. Any personal, special needs are of less concern in the process and the input on special education is thus insufficient (Pang and Yin, 2008). Without necessary support, disabled children can hardly compete with their non-disabled peers and are less likely to 'perform well'. This is why Potts (1998) said that inclusive education is 'a luxury for the first world'.

Welfare and care: an individual pattern

As explored earlier, China's market-driven reform has deconstructed the *Danwei* system and its egalitarian welfare provision. What follows is the marketisation of the welfare system, which moves the state's responsibility for social support to individuals or families (Pierini, Pearson and Wong, 2001). Disabled people in this context have very limited access to welfare or rehabilitation services.

The first key issue is the lack of disability benefit. China now has no national benefit for disabled people, although some developed cities may have their local policies (Dou, 2006; Yu and He, 2010). Disabled people are encouraged to apply for the Living Allowance if they have the need, which is reserved for all Chinese vulnerable people who 'have no family, no relative, no employment, no income, and no housing' (China's government, 2006[43]). Whilst they are 'prior-considered' for this according to the laws, disabled people rarely get it in practice. A CDPF's report in 2014 found only a small proportion of disabled people (13%) got the living allowance.[44] Another 11.65% were supported by medical subsidies or other forms of assistance (the report did not detail the name or the amount). The report did not mention the rest of the population who comprise the majority.

Chinese disabled people have less access to civil welfare services. The reform has produced a national workfare system, called 'w*uxian Yijin*' (five insurances and one funding), which includes medical, unemployment, employment injury, maternity insurance, pension (five insurances), and housing provision (one funding). The system itself has changed constantly[45] and no official report about how disabled people are involved in it has been published. However, as reported

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43. *The Regulation of Social Support for 'Wubao' Families in Rural China.* See the whole text at the government's website at http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2006-01/26/content_172438.htm. In Chinese.
44. T*he Statistical Communique on the Development of the Work on Persons with Disabilities in* http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/Resources/statistics/201603/t20160323_545438.shtml. In English.
45. See a review of the changes and relevant discussions at the CCP's website http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/134502/140710/.

by CDPF, disabled people, broadly speaking, are more likely to be excluded. For example, 74.2% disabled people were covered by China's *New Rural Cooperative Medical System* in 2014*,* while this figure for non-disabled people is 98.8%. Only 64.22% of disabled employees were covered by the *Employment Insurance* and *Medical Insurance,* while for non-disabled people, the figures are 86.78% and 72.06%.[46] This needs to be considered along with the fact that disabled people are significantly less likely to be employed in China's labour market. The lack of studies and data are themselves proof that disability issues are neglected. Even so, they reveal disabled people's marginalised position in the national welfare system, especially in less-developed areas (Solinger and Hu, 2012).

The last aspect is health and rehabilitation. Besides medical services from the '*Wuxianyijin*' system, China has launched community-based rehabilitation (CBR) as its basic rehabilitation mode for disabled people (Peng and Wan, 2003). This, as argued by the government, is based on China's tradition to support each other among neighbourhoods (Chen, 1993) and can effectively integrate rehabilitation services in already existing infrastructures (Loyalka et al., 2014). It is believed to be beneficial for disabled people's physical and psycho-social status (Chung and Packer, 2016). This mode, however, has obvious limitations in practice: it exists in cities only (Wu et al, 2016); it offers basic medical treatment but less social and psychological help (Zhang 2016); professional staff and social workers in this system are in an obvious shortage (2.1million CBR but 3.92 million staff only in 2004). What is more, this pattern is dominated by the medical model, which sees disability as a personal problem (Guo and Liu, 2011). It has not been well-developed. Until 2014, there were only 6914 rehabilitation institutions in China and little personal assistance was provided (CDPF, 2014). Those having no access to these resources are left to their family (Campbell and Uren, 2011).

This section examined the emergence of disabled people as a new social issue and agency during China's reform. It outlined some of the key facts of a disabled

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46. Data for disabled people is from *the Statistical Communique on the Development of the Work on Persons with Disabilities in 2014* http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/Resources/statistics/201603/t20160323_545438.shtml. Non-disabled figures are from National Bureau of Statistics of China http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A0O0J&sj=2014. In Chinese.

life, including the lack of access to the public, the rejection from employment and education, and the absence of welfare and care services. The intention was not to provide details on these topics, but to give a glimpse of disabled people's situation in current China, which is: they are ideologically included in China's socio-economic activities but are excluded in practice. The next section moves on to the new disability discourse that is formed in the age of reform.

2.4.3.4 The new disability discourse

As explained, the reform has produced the 'development-priority' ideology and a rise of individualism, through which the body is understood as a tool for personal competition. This has resulted in a new disability discourse, including three key elements: the medicalisation of disability issues, a 'temporary vulnerable' social position, and a '*sizi* (four self) spirit' narrative.

First is the idea that disability is a personal, medical 'problem'. As examined earlier in this chapter, the *LPPD* 'defines' disabled people in a medicalised way. From the same logic, laws and policies such as the *Law of the PRC on Maternal and Infant Health Care* (1995) and the more recent *Disability Prevention and Rehabilitation* (2017) have been published. These have been criticised by many scholars for their 'eugenics' approach and aim to prevent disabled population (Stone, 1998; Zhou, 2002). However, while it is true that such formal settings have set out a negative discourse around disability and disabled people, how they actually affect this group remain uncertain. For example, medical check-ups as introduced in the 1995's law were proposed as a welfare service rather than a compulsory duty, and was poorly-practiced due to the lack of medical resources. The 2017's document asks the government, CDPF, and heathy offices to monitor the factors that may cause impairment, including inherited disease, medicine and accident, and pay attention to pregnant females regarding their living environment and food safety.[47] These are claimed to be part of the public services, an 'efficient strategy to let every family realise the risk of disability'.[48] Because of these, there is no efficient evidence to say 'regulated and monitored

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47. See the whole text at http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-02/27/content_5171308.htm. In Chinese. This is a general document, pointing out the 'direction of future work' rather than giving specific guidance about how these should be monitored and what shall people do when they find the 'factors'. Therefore, the thesis sees it as a general discourse rather than a eugenics law.
48. Form a media report at http://www.sohu.com/a/141850765_119562. In Chinese.

check-up to prevent the birth of a disabled baby' happened (Stone, 1998: 254). These are more part of an ideology that disability is a personal issue that could, and should, be managed through medical methods.

   Second is the 'temporary vulnerable' account that is rooted in the ideology of 'development-priority'. As economic development is the priority of the nation, and, as this expansion has to be uneven at this stage, social inequalities have been rationalised. Disadvantaged people, such as disabled people, are told that their vulnerable position is temporary and will be changed in the next stage of development. For example, government reports tend to emphasise 'insufficient investment' and 'limited resources' as the main reason for the delay of disability affairs (Deng and Mcbrayer, 2004). A recent official document claimed that the basic principle for disability affairs is to 'Give the limited resources to the most needy, most seriously disabled people' (CDPF and PRC'S Ministry of civil affairs, 2015[49]). This will be changed and 'social justice will be achieved' (Jiabao Wen, the sixth premier of the State Council of China, 2007).[50] Such a narrative has been criticised by scholars like Liu (2015), pointing out that it is the discrimination against disabled people rather than economic limits that matters. However, this 'realistic' account is so far the mainstream narrative in disability discourse.

   The last element is the 'sizi (four-self) spirit' account, which has its roots in individualism. Compared to Confucianism and collectivism, individualism is believed to have the potential to free Chinese disabled people. In their research about people with mental health, Kolstad and Gjesvik (2014) found individualism highlights personal talent and need and releases people from traditional Chinese relationships. It frees disabled people from social evaluations and improves their interpersonal harmony (Tafarodi and Smith, 2001). This ideology, however, has the risk of personalising disability issues. As stated earlier, disabled people in China are now expected to participate in work, education and care on their own. A sizi spirit has been proposed by authorities in the context, which encourages disabled people to 'self-respect (zizun), self- confidence (zixin), self-reliance (zili), and self-strengthen (ziqiang)'. This has been written in laws and been

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49. See the government's website at http://www.jsmz.gov.cn:81/skywcm/webpage/infoopen/infoopen_view.jsp?id=g8h-SWGAfQIziof7EDMxxw.
50. See discussions at http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/49150/49151/10311608.html. In Chinese.

regularly mentioned in policies, government reports, and public speech. It has been internalised by disabled people and has produced slogans such as 'Although physically deficient, I am still strong in mind' (*shencan zhijian*) and 'disabled people have to strive harder' (*canjiren gengyao fengdou*).

The new disability discourse has been constructed and enforced through the propaganda of 'disabled models'. Picture 2-4 shows a public 'award' for a man with lower limb impairment, who is self-educated and ran a successful business by 'using the spirit power and overcoming all difficulties'. Underpinning these activities is the idea that 'Chinese disabled people should be economically and socially useful and productive in the same way expected of people who are fully fit' (Dauncey, 2013b: 313). This maintains and even reinforces the able-bodied orthodoxy and rationalises the exclusion of most disabled people.
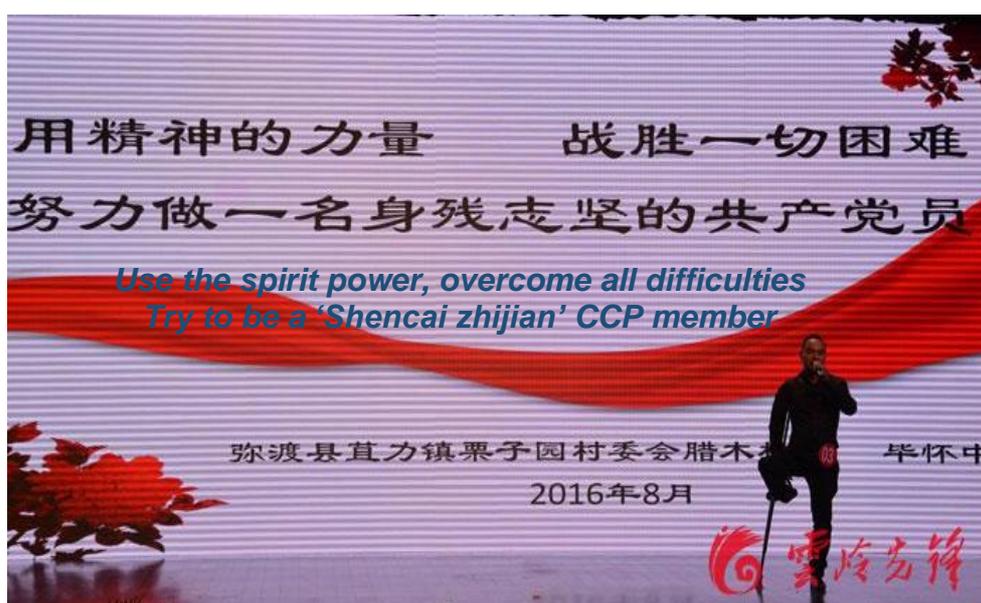
Picture 2-4 A disabled model 'on the stage'
http://ylxf.yn.gov.cn/Html/News/2016/8/25/177403.html

2.4.4 Summary

This section examined the changes in China's social structures and discourses in the reform age and the impact they have on disability. This included three parts. First was a glimpse of the reform. The thesis briefly presented China's 'semi-command, semi-market' economy and 'restrictive yet conductive' regime. The second part was about the new discourse, characterised with the development-priority ideology and individualism, which produces the normalcy of a strong and fully-functional body. In the last part, the chapter explored the notion, living

condition, and cultural image of disabled people. It argued that disabled people have emerged as a new social issue and agency in the ongoing reforms, which is significantly marginalised, disadvantaged, and stigmatised in almost all aspects of social life.

This is the real-time context of the study but it is not isolated. The settings and values of previous periods, which were presented in above sections, remain influential. They interweave and interact to create a complicated context of researching disability in contemporary China.

First is the perseverance, or resurgence, of traditional norms. Whilst massive changes have emerged in China, which significantly altered its familiarity-based structure, Confucian values are not entirely abandoned (Yang and Zhang, 2012). Scholars argued that China has kept some of its traditional values and settings, and is therefore a semi-acquaintance society (He, 2003; 2008) or an 'embedded-less society of acquaintance[51]' (Wu, 2014). This has been enhanced with a recent resurgence of traditional culture. Since the 18th National Congress of CPC, the party-government has started to re-legitimate Chinese values in developing this country in a global age (Xi, the President of China, 2012). The results are a rise of theoretical debates, engagement of traditional values in daily lives, and a burst of traditional festivals, rituals, and activities.[52] Under this circumstance the Confucian ideas of the body, that it is the basis of personhood and should be complete and perfect, continues to de-humanise the impaired body.

The socialist understanding of the body was also remained or even enhanced. Whilst the *Danwei* system has in general collapsed and the rise of personal lives has become a key identifier of post-communist China (Yan, 2003), in some areas socialist settings are retained. As explained in the chapter, China is 'privatising yet authoritarian' (Zhang and Ong, 2008) and 'restrictive yet conductive' (Ho, 2007). Collectivism has been re-constructed under new names. For example, Guo (2004: 2) claimed that cultural nationalism has been legitimated in China to

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51. This means Chinese people may follow the traditional norms and rules, at least on important occasions such as weddings, spring festival, and birthday parties for old people, and/or in some certain groups, such as within the clan. Scholars for example He and Wu had great discussions about this. I, however, do not have the space to demonstrate this here.

52. So far there has been little academic literature about this. But it is commonly, and increasingly, seen in mainstream media, for example http://www.aisixiang.com/data/4908.html. In Chinese.

contest 'the same signifiers that the Party-state wants to hegemonise, such as patriotism, national interest, national tradition, and national spirit'. All these result in heritage of the idea that only being useful can the body be included.

China's post-communist reform, therefore, is a diverse, complex and changing context, in which the notion of disability is not fixed but fluid. Confucianism de-humanises 'imperfect' bodies; the socialist philosophies de-value 'less useful' bodies; and the emerging individualism allows people to control their own body but locates this in competition. These ideas have co-existed and interwoven, creating the normalcy of a fit, strong, and competitive body. Disability in this context is interpreted as a personal and social loss, which should be 'overcome' through individual endeavour. However, this is overall a new social issue, agency and discourse. There is rudimentary knowledge of disability among the general population (Kohrman, 2005) and people with impairment are still invisible to the mainstream under most circumstances (Campbell and Uren, 2011).

Situated in this context, the study concentrates on China's digitalisation as a specific dimension and a new stage. Over the past 20 years, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and a cyber-world have been developed in China at an extraordinary speed. This has constituted a significant part of the reform and contributed to the changes discussed above. However, as it has created, and is continually creating, revolutionary impact, digitalisation has the potential to trigger a new era. The next section depicts this emerging context and engages with the topic of the study, which is how disability is reconstructed in current, digital China.

2.5 In digital China

China did not get a full connection to the Internet until it joined the global internet bandwagon in 1994. Since then there has been an exponential growth. The latest report released by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) suggests that, by the end of 2016, internet users in China reached 731 million, which was 53.2% of its whole population[53] and which has increased rapidly from

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53. The 39th Report of Development of China's internet, CNNIC, 2017. https://www.cnnic.net.cn/hl wfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/P020170123364672657408.pdf. In Chinese

111 million in 2005[54] and 620,000 in 1997[55]. These users spent 26.5 hours online each week; on communication, information seeking, shopping, education, work, and entertainment (CNNIC, 2017). The internet plays an important role in their daily life.

Addition to its size, a special character of internet use in China is the 'have-less' divide (Qiu, 2009). Statistics show that Chinese internet users are mainly people with average or lower income (60. 2%), those less-educated (79.4%), and the young population (73.7% aged 10-39).[56] It is also suggested in Qiu's (2009) empirical research undertaken in 20 Chinese cities that, with the simultaneous industrialisation and digitalisation, China's grassroots class got basic access to the internet. The digital divide in China is not 'have-not' as it is usually found in the West (see for example Nie and Erbring, 2000), but the divide between 'have full access' and 'have less basic access'. This has created the base for a common digitalised society.

With the development of the internet and the growing engagement of people into a cyber-world, there have been changes on China's economic, political, and cultural structures. Firstly, this acted to reinforce China's economic take-off in the new millennium (Tai, 2013). According to a report from the McKinsey Global Institute, China's e-economy stood at 4.4% of its GDP in 2013, 'moving China into the ranks for the global leaders' (McKinsey, 2014:2). Depending on the speed and extent of the industry, the report predicted that the internet will add 0.3 to 1.0% points to China's GDP growth, and will fuel an increase to 22% in 2025. The potential of the internet to promote the economy has been recognised by the government. In March 2016, China's central government proposed its plan for a 'new economy', in which the internet and green resources are the main focus.[57] This is the first time that e-business has been officially set as the new direction.

A wide use of the internet has been expected to contribute to China's political reform. This includes two aspects: the de-centralisation of the state, and the

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54. The 17th Report; https://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/200906/P020120709345358064145.pdf.
55. The 1st Report; https://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/200905/P020120709345374625930.pdf.
56. The 39th Report. Here 'people with average or lower income' refers to people who are paid less than ¥3000 per month. 'Less educated ones' refer to people who do not receive high education.
57. See reports and explanations on China's government website http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/05/content_5049380.htm. In Chinese.

improvement of society. For the former, a variety of internet-related creations and actions are hoped to deconstruct the 'authoritarian' system (Zheng, 2007), or the Chinese Communist Party over its ideational and organisational monopoly (Taubman, 1998). This has been seen in internet use of dissentions both inside and outside China (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002), and in the rise of independent groups via new information technologies (Harwit and Clark, 2001). Internet use is argued to have promoted China's civil soceity. Yang (2009) claimed that the internet has fostered public debates, played a supervisory role in politics, shaped social organisations, and introduced new elements to the dynamics of protest. Either through reducing the state's power or promoting social forces, internet use is believed to have great potential to change China's state-society relations (Yang, 2011).

These optimistic accounts are rejected by critical observers, who argue that digitalisation mainly empowers the state. Lessig claimed that all governments can regulate the internet by controlling the underlying code and shaping the legal environment in which it runs (Lessig, 1999). Similarly, Boyle believed that governments can build digital 'surveillance' techniques for effective censorship (Boyle, 1997). Following this logic, digitalisation has been argued to consolidate China's governance rather than undermine it. Wacke (2003) claimed that the CCP employs both formal and informal measures to control the political effect of internet use. By examining measures from blunt punitive actions to subtle manipulation of private sectors, Kalathil and Boas (2010) argued that China's government has successfully guided the political use of the internet. However, they admitted the realm of public use 'features a growing potential for political impact' (ibid: 40). The great potential of digitalisation has been noticed, even though, for some, it has not been achieved yet.

Last but not least, internet use has played a crucial role in reshaping China's culture. China's reform contains a key shift 'from self-reliance to openness' (Oksenberg and Economy, 1999), which has brought out not only economic cooperation but also the cultural integration. This has caused a cultural reform, interpreted as a 'cultural democratisation' (for example Tu, 1994) or a 'cultural imperialism' (see for example Song, Zhang and Qiao, 1996), which is primarily conducted on the internet. 'Non-elite' people get the opportunity to access to

non- or anti-orthodox ideas, to develop sub-cultures (Chadwick, 2013), and to participate in China's ongoing reconstruction of discourse. They are believed to have been empowered in the process (Yang, 2003).

Whilst massive social and cultural changes have emerged in the digitalisation, how the body and disability have been (re)constructed in the new environment is a missing topic. Relevant studies in the Global North have examined how the use of the internet and ICTs has improved disabled people's social participation (Anderberg, 1999; Anderberg and Jönsson, 2005; Ellis and Kent,2011; Person and Trevisan,2015; 2016), or conversely, reproduced their vulnerability (Goggin and Newell, 2003; Dobransky and Hargittai, 2006; Watling, 2011; Jaeger, 2012). Either positive or not, it appears that there is a general agreement that the use of ICTs has significant impacts on disabled people's life. In China, Guo, Bricout and Huang (2005) did a pioneering study and argued that internet use improved the lives of disabled internet users, especially their social interaction. However, after 12 years, there are still few in-depth studies from the perspective of disability studies. This is the gap the thesis attempts to fill.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has briefly examined China's social structures, dominant ideologies, and its conceptualisation of the body and disability in historical periods. The key findings are summarised in Figure 2-1.

First is China's traditional era (before-1949), where disabled people were de-humanised for their 'incomplete personhood'. The thesis introduced the society of acquaintance and its homogeneous settings and ideologies. The body in this period was understood as the basis for personhood. Female bodies and impaired bodies were de-humanised for being different.

The second stage is Maoist China (1949-1979). The identifiers of this period are the *Danwei*-based structure and collectivism, which defined the body as a national property. These produced the normalcy of a strong, full-functional body, with a political consciousness. Disabled people were considered as part of the vulnerable group that needed to be supported. Even so they were expected to contribute as much as they could.

	The social structure	The ideology	The Body	Disability
Traditional	Society of acquaintance	Confucianism	Basis of the personhood	De-humanised
Maoist China	*Danwei*-based socialist society	Collectivism	National property	De-valued
The Reform	Socialism with Chinese characters	Individualism & 'Development-priority	Personal tool for competition	New & Vulnerable
Digitalisation				

Aim of the study

Figure 2-1: China's contexts, ideologies, and discourses around the body throughout the history

The third period, the ongoing reform from the late 1970s, is the main body of the chapter and the wide context of the study. The thesis briefly outlined social changes that have emerged in China's economic, political, and cultural fields; and how disabled people are constructed in the transition. The key argument is: disabled people have started to emerge as a new social issue and a vulnerable agency. Whilst the rhetoric states that they are accorded equal rights and are included, in reality they are marginalised in almost all social aspects.

The traditional, socialist, and individualised values co-exist and interact with each other in contemporary China, creating disability as a new social issue and a vulnerable agency. People in this group are 'temporarily' disadvantaged because of their 'incomplete personhood', 'less contribution', and 'lack of capability to compete'. They are left behind in China's development. Situated in this context, the study focuses on digitalisation specifically. The last section of the chapter stated the potential of internet use in promoting China's economic, political and cultural reform. It argued that disability in this new era has been a missing topic and this will be explored in this study.

As a new social issue *per se*, disability in China has yet been comprehensively or profoundly researched. There have been studies emerging, which look at the notions of disability and its implications, relevant laws and policies, and disabled people's situation in employment, education and care services. These, however, in general have the following characteristics: 1) the majority of them are from a macro perspective, for example those examining disability laws and policies; 2) a significant number are based on quantitative data, such as analyses of national disability-related statistics; 3) they usually focus on one specific aspect of the disabled life without presenting the wider context first. A deep examination of personal and everyday experience of being disabled in China, supported by rich empirical evidences and drawing on the voices of disabled people themselves, was less found.

A few scholars take a different approach and the two key names are Matthew Kohrman and Sarah Dauncey. Kohrman (2005) is one of the few taking qualitative empirical research on disability in China. Through an ethnographic research in Beijing and Hannan, he critically examined the socio-political formation of the *China's Disabled Person's Federation*[58] and its categorisation of disabled people as alterity. The collection of stories presented in the book suggests the dynamic relations between disabled people and the Federation, that these individuals are influenced by the institution and influence it in return. This is seen in multiple aspects of their life including community participation, identity (re-)build, and marriage. Kohrman, therefore, argued that disablement in China is constructed through the interaction of bio-bureaucracies, lived experiences of disabled people, and the refashioning of self by themselves and their families.

Carrying on this approach, Dauncey conducted a series of studies on disability, identity, and gender in China. She explored how disabled people are depicted in films, through which she argued that disability is largely silenced and presented only when serving as a political tool (Dauncey, 2007; 2013a). Then she examined the formation and articulation of disability identities, through a critical reading of stories of two nationally advocated disabled 'models', *Zhang Haidi* (Dauncey, 2013b) and *Shi Tiesheng* (Dauncey, 2017); and of memoirs of a disabled writer

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58. The semi-official disability organisation in China, briefly discussed earlier in this chapter, under section 2.4.3.2.

(Dauncey, 2012; 2013c). Through these works, Dauncey discussed the changes of cultural representation of disabled people in China's special discourse.

This thesis builds on existing literature on disability in China and attempts to go beyond them and generate its own findings in a new digitalised environment. The general, quantitative, singular research sets the scene that Chinese disabled people are always marginalised, no matter how social structures and discourses change; in almost all social aspects. The pioneering qualitative and in-depth research of Kohrman and Dauncey, on the other hand, points out the changing political, economic and social factors in China and their roles in reconstructing disability issues. Their arguments start to present what a real disabled life is like in post-Maoist China. All these have helped in framing and developing this thesis.

The aim of this thesis is to bring these up to date and examine the changes of the disabled life in a digital era. During the past a couple of decades, China has experienced rapid transformations in many areas, which significantly influence people's daily life. How disability is conceptualised in this environment and how disabled people respond to the changes have then emerged to be a new topic. In this thesis, I will examine this topic by locating it in a wider, historical context. Whilst the targets are both the breadth and the depth of understanding, the thesis follows the same approach of Kohrman and Dauncy and pays a particiular focus on qualitatiave, mudane, lived expereinces of disabled people.

Chapter 3 Theorising Disability in the Chinese Context

3.1 Introduction

After briefly introducing disability in China, the thesis now moves on to review existing theorisations of disability and examine their validity in the Chinese context. Modern disability studies has been developed mainly in the Global North and for the Global North, from which some core ideas such as the social model have been globally embraced. The thesis questions universalisation of northern theories and argues that more empirical data from the real field is needed. It aims to theorise disability in China a contextualised way.

The first section of the chapter briefly reviews the key disability theories that have emerged in the Global North. It starts with an introduction of the disability activism, which is the origin of the discipline. It then examines the social model, the feminist revisions of it, and critical disability studies; through which the key approaches/dimensions, including materialist barriers, personal experience, and the discourse, are identified. The chapter argues that all these dimensions are essential in understanding disability issues, especially in the Chinese context in this study. It therefore follows a multi-dimensional framework inspired by the critical realist agenda.

The second section examines the relationship between the theories and China and Chinese disabled people. It compares Chinese and Northern societies at three levels: the philosophic foundation, the social structures and settings, and the situation of disabled people. China's specialities in all these perspectives are outlined. The thesis then explores the possibility of developing a theory that is more relevant to modern China.

Based on this theoretical gap and the empirical gap that was suggested in Chapter 2, the thesis proposes the research aims of this project. These are listed in the last section of the chapter.

3.2 Disability theories in the Global North

From its political foundations and theoretical formulations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to current upsurge of academic research, organisations, and various forms of campaigns, disability studies has now become a unit of study and a social force. In what follows the thesis reviews the development of the discipline and its core theoretical approaches. It starts with the disability activism in the latter half of the 20th century, which is the origin of the subject.

3.2.1 The origin of the discipline

Modern disability studies did not emerge from the academy but was born from the resistance of disabled activists. The arrival of capitalism and the growth of wealth in the Global North have created inequality within these nations. It is in this process that disabled people found themselves constructed as a special category and being 'left behind'. Political activities by disabled people and their organisations then greatly arose in countries like the UK, the USA, and Nordic Countries in the latter half of the 20th century (Barnes, 2010). Disabled activists rejected the control of 'profession allied to medicine' (Finkelstein, 1999: 1) and established organisations led by disabled people. The most influential institution in this trend is the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS), from which the early thoughts of the social model were generated.

Created in 1974, UPIAS was established by British disabled activists Paul Hunt and later Vic Finkelstein in the UK, with the intention of 'replacing segregated facilities with opportunities for people with impairments to participate fully in society' (UPIAS, 1974). As shown in its early statement, *Aims*, the focus of UPIAS was on social barriers from the very beginning:

> We find ourselves isolated and excluded by such things as flight of steps, inadequate public and personal transport, unsuitable housing, rigid work routines in factories and offices, and a lack of up-to-date aids and equipment.
>
> UPIAS, 1974: 1

These concerns were developed in the *Fundamental Principle of Disability*. In this key document, disabled activists made the claim that disability is not a personal issue but a complex form of social oppression:

> Disability is something imposed on top of our impairment by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group. It follows from this analysis that having low incomes, for example, is only one aspect of our oppression. It is a consequence of our isolation and segregation in every area of social life, such as education, work, mobility, housing etc.
>
> UPIAS, 1976:4

This definition distinguishes the biological aspect (impairment) and the social aspect (disability) of the issue. Impairment in this model refers to 'lacking part or all of a limb, or having defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body'. Disability, however, means:

> The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities
>
> UPIAS, 1976: 14

This pioneering idea was widely adopted by disabled people and organisations and inspired British disability movement. Similar, albeit less materialist, theories emerged in other countries; such as the Independent Living Movement (ILM) in the USA. The politicisation of disability was then conducted on both a local and an international level, which introduced disability legislations such as the UK's *Disabled Person's Act* in 1970, the US's *Rehabilitation Act* in 1973, and the UN's declarations in 1971 and 1975. International organisations, such as Rehabilitation International (RI) and Disabled People's International (DPI), were established. All these contributed to the construction of disability as a global issue.

The rise of disability activism, and the political claims they made, interpreted disability as a social issue. From this logic, modern disability studies has been developed with a particular aim of helping disabled people and struggling for a better world (Barnes, 2010). This became the fundamental stance for most disability theories, of which the most significant example is the social model.

3.2.2 The social model

The development of early theoretical thought and disability activism produced a radical reinterpretation of disability, known as the social model. This phrase was first used by British theorist Mike Oliver in the 1980s to show his position against the individual model of disability. For Oliver, the medical model defines disability as a personal tragedy, which is 'some terrible chance event which occurs at random to unfortunate individuals' (1990:3). This is not true and should be replaced by a model focusing on how 'physical and social environment impose limitations upon certain categories of people' (Oliver 1981: 28). Disability, in his theory, is then understood as:

> Disability is about nothing more complicated than a clear focus on economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who are viewed by others as having some forms of impairment-whether physical, mental or intellectual.

<div align="right">Oliver, 2004: 21</div>

The theory soon became popular in disability studies with the adoption of the following principles: first is the impairment-disability division, which lies at the heart of the model; secondly, the main focus is on the social and environmental barriers, which is opposite to the 'sociological traditions from the individualist, negative, and medicalized perspective' (Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 2010); lastly, the theory is closely associated with Marxism and it emphasises the role of mode of production in constructing the disability category (Finkelstein, 1980; Stone, 1984; Oliver, 1990; Barnes, 1990, 1997; Borsay, 2005). Disability is then considered to be constructed through economic settings and it demands redistribution of goods and wealth (Vehmas and Watson, 2014). Studies about how disabled people are excluded in employment, education, and other aspects of social lives have been conducted across the world (Barnes, 1997; Gleeson, 1999; Borsay, 2005).

The social model has become the 'big idea' (Hasler, 1993) and opened up new lines of enquiry in academia. The wide adoption of it has contributed to political changes in many countries. On a legislative level, anti-discrimination legislation has been globally proclaimed, including the UK's *Disability Discrimination Act* in 1995, the United Nations' *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* in 1993, and the UN's *Convention the Rights of*

Persons with Disability in 2008. In practice, new policies such as direct payment in the UK (1996) and empowering projects, for example the WHO's 'rethinking care from disabled people's perspective' in 2001, were launched and initiatives from disabled activists were developed. Furthermore, it has been argued by some scholars that this model has caused a 'positive we-ness', which empowers disabled people politically and psychologically (for example Shakespeare, 1996). The actual impact of this, however, is debatable (Watson, 2002).[59]

The social model has received critiques from both 'inside and outside of the subject' (Roulstone, Thomas and Watson, 2012), which will be discussed in the following sections. Still, it has been the core approach in the discipline and its theoretical and practical framework has been globally embraced. To ignore its achievements is to 'usher in the demise of disability studies and its relevance to disabled people' (Barnes, 2010: 23).

3.2.3 'Insider' critiques of the social model

Whilst the social model has been commonly believed crucial in (re)understanding disability, the theory has also been constantly contested, with calls for it to be reclaimed, revised, rectified (Allan, 2010), or even abandoned (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001b). This started with critiques from inside the school.

'Inside' critiques concentrate on the absence of personal, impairment-related experience in interpreting disability. Early concerns were proposed by feminist theorists such as Jenny Morris (1991), Liz Crow (1992), and Sally French (1993). A key step was then made in Carol Thomas's book *Female Forms: Experience and Understanding Disability* (1999). This work examined the gendered experience of being disabled in the UK. Based on the analysis of disabled women's narratives, Thomas defined impairment effect, which is 'the restrictions of activity which are associated with being impaired but which are not disabilities in the social relation sense' (ibid: 43). This, as she argued, is different from the structural barriers, but is real and a significant part in the disabled life. The ignorance of it in the social model theories should be changed. From these ideas, Thomas

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59. Some scholars like Watson do not believe in the existence of a collective disability identity and based on this argue that the social model has limited impact on disability consciousness. More discussion of this can be seen in Chapter 8, (Re)constructing disability identity and culture.

proposed her relational revision of the social model. She further developed this in her 2007 work, where she defined disablism, which means:

> A form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being.
>
> Thomas, 2007: 73

For Thomas, disablism is connected to other forms of social oppression such as hetero/sexism, ageism, and racism. Her work then mainly concentrates on the 'psycho-emotional disablism' (Thomas, 2007). This has been further explained in Donna Reeve's study as direct and indirect disablism. Direct disablism refers to discriminative experience in disabled people's interaction with other people and the 'existential insecurity' it causes. Indirect disablism is the result of structural construction (Reeve, 2008). Both these forms are impairment-related and are experienced in everyday life. Reeve then argued that impairment and disablism are interlinked (Reeve, 2010). Following a similar logic, a phenomenological-informed analysis has been developed. This views the body as both a subject and an object, which 'simultaneously experiences and creates the world' (Hughes and Paterson, 1999: 601). Hughes (2007: 682) then argued that the disavowal of disability can be found in 'most mundane everyday words or deeds that exclude or invalidate'.

Personal experience has then been increasingly studied in the disability area; for example, the linkages of disability with ethnicity (Stuart, 1993), sexuality (Shakespeare et al, 1996), and class (Gallagher and Skidmore, 2006). Social model theorists claim that the 'disability dichotomy does not deny impairments or their limitations on people's ability to function independently' (Barnes, 2012: 22). However, they insist that the material environments are the determinative factor and should be emphasised for 'over quality and social justice' (ibid: 23). The insider critiques presented in this section are based on the subsequent acknowledgment of the importance of the social model (Morris, 2002), or even from the same materialist perspective (Thomas, 1999). The next section moves on to more critical accounts, which shows a 'cultural turn' (Borsey, 2012).

3.2.4 Critical Disability Studies

Influenced by the wider post-modernism and post-structuralism trends (Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari), a new theoretical approach, called Critical Disability Studies (CDS), has emerged to question the pre-dominantly materialist accounts in understanding disability. This was firstly seen in Mairian Corker's socio-linguistic research about how terms are used to define disability (Corker, 1998). It was developed in Corker and Shakespeare's collection *Disability/ Postmodernism* (2002), as a description of, and care about, the disabled body. A variety of theories, including feminism and queer theory, critical race theory, and phenomenology of the body, have been engaged in the development (Shildrick, 2010). CDS, therefore, as summarised by Shildrick, (2012: 32), claims the following principles: 'the emphasis on embodiment; the awareness of the cultural imaginary; the deconstruction of binary though in favour of fluidity of all categories; and, the recognition of the importance of emotion and effect.

This is, basically speaking, a cultural turn of the subject (Shakespeare, 2014). Scholars of this school have criticised the materialist approach for overlooking discourse and its role in reconstructing disability. What they want is to move beyond the 'simply social, economic, and political' aspects of disability to the 'psychological, cultural, discursive, and carnal' aspects (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009: 50). As the result, the representation of disability in arts, movies, and literature has been examined (Davis, 1995; Thomson, 1996; Snyder and Mitchell, 2006; Campell, 2009), as well as cultural phenomena such as the freak show in North America (Thomson, 1996). These studies suggest how ideas and discourse surrounding disability are constructed. They have however been criticised for focusing on texts rather than on the actual lives of disabled people (Goodley, 2011). More empirical studies are needed to develop this approach.

Another core element of Critical Disability Studies is its deconstruction of the disability category. This began from the very sensible recognition that disability is extremely diverse (Shildrick, 2010). But soon, not only the binary distinction between disabled and non-disabled was deconstructed, the structure of ableism, normalcy, and the construction of disabled people to be 'others' were all broken down (Davis, 1995, 2006; Chouinard, 2009; Goodley 2010; Shildrick, 2012). For

example, Shakespeare (2012) discussed how disability has been categorised from the creation of impairment. For him, it is through its legitimisation as a medical category that impairment has been given meanings. The engagement of professional knowledge and practices produces the notions of 'normality' and 'deviance', which are not ontologically or materially true for the impairment. These notions then go beyond language or professional power to structure everyday life. This is, differences between disabled and non-disabled people are entirely socially constructed. From this Foucauldian approach, theorists believe that only by challenging the normalcy can disabled people be re-positioned (Davis, 2000; Shidick, 2012; Shakespeare, 2012).

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) has significantly expanded disability studies by adding the cultural dimension. However, it has been criticised for a 'lack of practical value' (Oliver, 2012: 22) and for its ethical and political limitations (Vehmas and Watson, 2014). Vehmas and Wanton pointed out that CDS dismisses personal experience of living with impairment and the differences between disadvantaged groups. Also, whilst reasonably questioning the overly materialist approach of the social model, CDS goes too far and fails to account for the economic basis. A similar account has emerged from inside CDS admitting that it is 'oriented more towards academy than activism' (Shakespeare, 2012).

3.2.5 Summary: the need for a multiple-dimensional framework

Material Barriers

Economic exclusion
Political categorisation
Environmental
Segregation
…

The Stance: Disability is a social issue

Individual Experience

Of the body
Emotional feelings

Discourse

Construction of notions
Cultural Representation
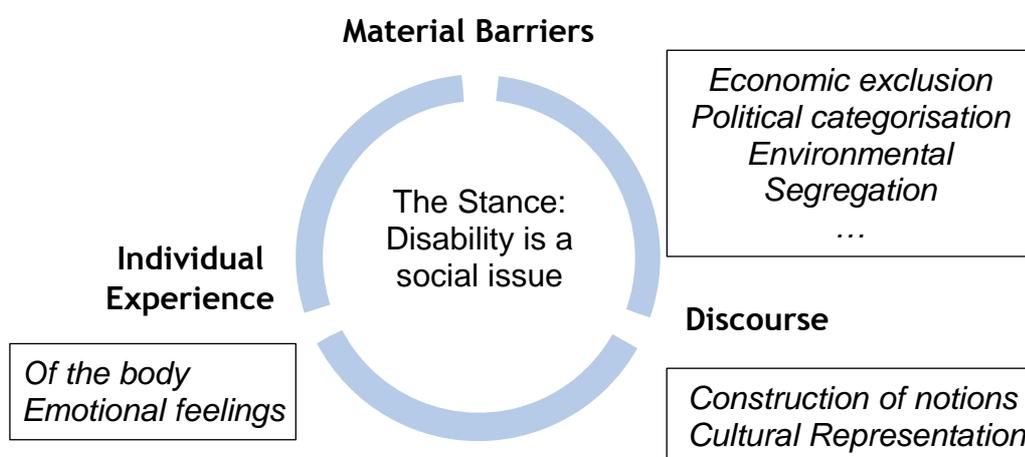
Figure 3-1 Key dimensions in theorising disability

In the above sections, the thesis briefly reviewed disability studies and its core theoretical shifts. These included: the materialist tradition which is key to the social model theories and its revisions, the recognition of personal experience, and the recent focus on discourse (see Figure 3-1). Whilst these theorisations are significant in understanding the disability issue, they all show for a limitation for overlooking other aspects. There is therefore a need to develop a multiple-dimensional framework to research disability.

This is responded to by a critical realist approach that is formed by Williams (1999), Danermark and Gellerstedt (2004), and Watson (2012) and Shakespeare (2014) in their more recent work. Critical realism, in general, argues that 'things exist and act independently of our descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions' (Bhaskar, 1975: 20). This has been adopted in disability studies to produce a comprehensive understanding of the topic:

> ...injustices to disabled people cannot be understood neither as generated by solely cultural mechanisms (cultural reductionism) nor by socio-economic mechanisms (economic reductionism) nor by biological mechanism (biological reductionism). In sum, only by taking different levels, mechanisms and contexts into account, can disability as a phenomenon by analytically approached.
>
> Danermark and Gellerstedt, 2004: 350

Following this path, Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) proposed a multiple-level agenda for disability studies, which included:

- physical;
- biological;
- psychological;
- psychosocial and emotional;
- socio-economic;
- cultural;
- normative.

This agenda argues that all these levels intermesh, interrelate, and interplay and they are all essential in understanding the issue of disability. It also adopts a human emancipation approach, which combines the 'social process of structure and agency that shape and reshape one another over time' (Williams 1999: 809). This means attention to both structure and agency and the

interactions between them, without over-emphasising either of them (Watson, 2012). Only in this way, as argued by these scholars, can disabled experiences be fully incorporated with 'appropriate weight' given to different dimensions (Watson, 2012; Shakespeare, 2014).

This study employs the following multi-dimensional framework to generate an understanding of disabled people's use of the internet in China. First, it draws on the materialist theories of the social model and the ways it relates disability to the socio-economic settings and practices to highlight relevant barriers disabled people face. This is central to this study. As already highlighted, China is experiencing rapid change and these changes are having significant impact on the lives of disabled people. Second, the thesis also draws on some ideas from Critical Disability Studies; discourses play a key role in classifying, defining, and describing impairment and disability. This dimension will be explored in this study and the examination of China's changing discourse will contribute to a new, and perhaps more relevant, understanding of disability in a non-western context. Third, the study has a particular focus on personal experience. This has long been a central part of western exploration of disability and what it is like to live with impairment (see for example Goffmann, 1968) but is still relatively absent in current research about disability in China. The thesis will look at how disabled people use the internet and through that document their lived experience, focussing on various aspects including physical, psychosocial, emotional, social-economic and cultural ones. To avoid individualising the disability experience, care will be taken to ensure that these accounts are read in conjunction with an analysis of the social and cultural structures. Lastly, drawing on a critical realist agenda, this study will pay attention to people's agency and reflective actions. This will be located in the context that multiple social experiences are emerging during China's reform and they are being both shaped by and reshaping society.

Whilst these key dimensions identified in western theories are central to any research exploring disability in China, the relative relevance and importance of specific explanations and models developed in the Global North to this topic need to be examined and contextualised. The next section compares northern and Chinese contexts and questions the (overly) universalisation of western theories in non-western contexts.

3.3 Western theories beyond the West

3.3.1 The universalisation of western theories

The roll out of the UN's *Convention the Rights of Persons with Disability* claims a global embrace of some core principles, such as the social model, independent living, inclusive education, community-based rehabilitation and disability rights which have been mainly, if not all, developed in the Global North (Shakespeare, 2012). However, it has been increasingly realised that this discipline is in general west-dominated. It is rooted in western philosophies. Almost all theories have been developed within capitalist and neo-capitalist structures. Most empirical studies have been conducted in developed wealthy countries and/or by western academics. Disability in the majority world has been silenced and at best, represented (Grech, 2009; Baker and Murray, 2010).

There is a tendency within disability studies to transport western theories and methods to other social contexts (Barker and Murray, 2010). Some scholars used non-western societies as the empirical spaces to substantiate their theories. For example, Oliver (1990) illustrated a series of countries in his book *The Politics of Disablment* to argue that people with impairment are oppressed across the world. The same approach is seen in cross-cultural studies, which underline the empirical differences and apply western models (Stone, 1984; Scheer and Groce, 1988; Albrecht, 1992; Barnes, 1996). Even if this is not their intention, western scholars may produce results based on their own understandings and experiences of the notion (Sherry, 2007). The universalisation of academic findings produces westernised practices. For example, rehabilitation programs in developing countries usually copy the models of Europe or North America countries, rather than being based on their real needs (Meekosha, 2007).

The universalisation approach has been challenged, in particular with the rise of post-colonialist theory (Meekosha, 2010; 2011; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011; Soldatic, 2016). The limitations of western/northern disability theories beyond the West/North have been examined and empirical studies in different contexts have been increasingly conducted. With this approach, disability is understood as contextualised responses to the very different environments and discourses (Shakespeare, 2012). Scholars in this school challenge:

> ...the dominance of Eurocentric disability tenets and readings of history, the ignoring of colonialism and geopolitics, the disembodied readings of disability in contexts of rural poverty, the challenges and limitations of rights in practice, and the colonising of knowledge and its production.
>
> <div align="right">Grech and Soldatic, 2016: 2</div>

With this perspective, the thesis explores the applicability of western theories in the Chinese contexts in the following sections. These include a comparison on three aspects: the underpinning philosophies, the social settings and practices, and the actual disabled life.

3.3.2 Different philosophies

At the ideological level, the risks of universalising western theories are rooted in transnational diverse philosophies; for example, the notion of human rights. As argued by scholars, disability theories, activisms, and legislation in the Global North have been around the human rights realm (Bickenback, 2002; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). The moral appeal of human rights is the fundamental value in the long-overdue reform of understanding disability and disabled people. Non-discrimination and an equal enjoyment of rights are key in activism. Disability as a rights issue has become the language in legislations, such as the UN's *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)*, and of the state and international bodies such as the World Health Organization. This is the idea that disability issues are rights issues, and they interact with other human rights-approached movements. An example is the 'rights approach of development'. The 24th *Special Session of the UN World Summit for Social Development and Beyond* (2000) claimed that 'the ultimate goals of development are to improve living conditions for people and to empower them to participate fully in the economic, political, and social arenas'. Development is thus interpreted as a human rights issue for all people.

This realm, however, is based on western/developed understandings of rights. Scholars have argued that 'human rights' is a by-product of a particular kind of society and a discursive process 'formed in the process of struggle and debates' (Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011: 1387). Thus it has various origins and implications (Brown, 1997; Turner, 1997) and can never be de-contextualised (Donnelly, 1982).

In disability studies, there has been a rise of concerns on the danger of applying western notion in non-western contexts. Stienstra and Nverere pointed out that:

> Yet human rights instruments, including the CRPD, are contested because they are framed primarily around northern ways of understanding human rights and may be 'diversionary' in the struggles of daily living. In addition, they do little to address intersectional experiences including those based in Aboriginality, race and ethnicity, as well as the way in which disability is created through colonial and imperial relationships.
>
> Stienstra and Nyerere, 2016: 265.

In the Chinese context this is reflected in a narrow definition of human rights. Whilst China has achieved dramatic economic growth during the reform, the CCP and the government have continued to insist on defining China as a developing country.[60] Also, as explained in Chapter 2, the dominant ideologies are the 'development-priority' discourse and individualism; plus remnants of Confucian and collectivist ideas. 'Rights' in this context is narrowed down to a basic level 'because of the early stage of development' and is to be obtained through personal competition. Wolf and De-Shalit (2007) argued that any society needs to decide how to allocate resources between various sectors of justice, based on an evaluation of how significant certain functioning are for human well-being in general, and what kind of weight they should have in our societal apparatus. In China, a basic principle of right issues is 'give priority to the right to survival and development' (Sun, 2016). This means basic rights, in freedom, political, economic, religious, and cultural rights, as written in the *Constitution*.

This is not to say the human-rights realm is rejected in China. China was one of the first countries to ratify the CRPD (in 2008), which suggests its 'symbolical embrace' of the rights approach (Hallett, 2015). Such an ideology has become an 'officially sanctioned concept' (Svensson, 2011). Influenced by global dialogue, there has been a closer engagement with international human rights' narratives, a rise of academic debates, and more importantly, an increased familiarity with the term in the public sphere. 'Human rights' has become a language understood and evoked in everyday social and legal practices by various groups (Weber and

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60. This has been repeated in and reinforced through public speech of CCP's leaders (for example the speech from Yuanchao Li, the vice-president of PRC, in 2014; see http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0708/c1001-25254455.html, in Chinese), government statement (for example this one http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0425/c1001-29232908.html, in Chinese), and mainstream media (http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-09/15/c_1121647689.htm, in Chinese).

Fan, 2016). This ideology, however, is reconstructed in a Chinese framework (Svensson, 1996; Weatherley, 2008) , of which the core approach is to reclaim traditional notions of 'human rights' from Confucianism. In 2006, President Hu Jintao proposed the theory of 'harmonious society', which clarified the rights and responsibilities of Chinese citizens. This is criticised by some scholars for emphasising collective rights and the stability of society rather than individual rights and freedom (Pils, 2009). The CCP, however, responded that the West was just seeking to impose its own 'model' or 'criterion' of human rights on China by penalising China over certain features of its human rights policy. [61] The debates are ongoing and China is building its own rights realm. The general approach is, human rights in China are not defined as they are in the Global North.

Alongside the 'human rights' realm, there have been discussions around other western-dominant themes such as civil society (see for example Hann and Dunn, 1996) and development (see Brohman, 1995). The diversity in understanding and implementing these key philosophies in various contexts means different analysis agendas. Therefore, disability theories based on western philosophies and aiming to practise them cannot be used in the Chinese context without a clarification of these differences.

3.3.3 Different social settings

Attempts to use western theories beyond the West can be problematic because of different social structures and settings. This has been suggested by empirical research in non-European-American contexts. For example, it is found that impairment and health usually have different implications in the developing world, which puts medical intervention as a high priority (Wang, 1998; Lollar and Crew, 2003). Another key difference is 'the lack of institutional infrastructure' (Ingstad and Whyte, 1995: 10). Ingstad and Whyte found that while disability in Europe and North America has been created by the framework of the state, legal, economic, and biomedical institutions, institutions in the Global South exist to a very limited degree. Theories about the institutional construction of disability cannot be applied in these contexts. Other specialities in non-western contexts include varied production and employment modes (Roulstone, 2012),

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61. See related news at http://www.humanrights.cn/cn/zt/qita/rqzz/2012/6/t20121225_975942.htm.

different care models (Shakespeare, 2000; Mike, 2003), and a higher cultural inclusion in low-income countries (Shakespeare, 2012). In what follows the thesis attempts to identify and locate such specialities in the Chinese context.

3.3.3.1 Economic exclusion

From the materialist perspective that underpins the social model, scholars in the Global North have sought to explore the origin of the disability 'problem' by focusing on economic exclusion. For example, Finkelstein (1980) located the formation of disability into the historic progression, more specifically into UK's industrialisation. A similar account is suggested in Gleeson's work (1990), which argued that the rise of rural capitalism confronted disabled people and defined them as the others. The approach is still popular in recent studies. Disabled people have been located in a disadvantaged position in the global economy, which restricts them from a full and equal citizenship (see for example Oliver, 1990). There is a general agreement that the economic and social upheavals that accompanied the coming of capitalism produced the systematic removal of disabled people (Borsay, 2012)

Whilst it is generally true that disabled people everywhere are experiencing economic exclusion, and this can significantly affect their social position, what the special economic context is and how it excludes disabled people vary across countries. As stated in Chapter 2, China's reform has brought out massive economic changes. The specialities of this new developing economy include: 1) the size of the working population; 2) the labour-intensive production mode; and 3) the non-western types of work.

China has a massive labour surplus, especially in its rural sectors and state-owned enterprises. A government report in 2014 claimed that only 56.47% of the whole population was employed (National Bureau Statistics of China, 2014).[62] The reason for that, as believed by some scholars, is the magnitude of China's

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62. In China, 'people aged more than 16 years, having working abilities, participating in or willing to participate in economic activities' are defined as 'economically active'. The official unemployment rate then calculates unemployed people within all 'economically active people'. For example, in 2014, China's population was around 1368 million but only 797 million were seen economically active. 773 million were employed, which makes the employment rate as 96.98% (see these official figures from China's National Bureau of Statistics http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01). This definition of 'active citizen' *per se* is problematic as it intentionally excludes some people. However, as a 'reality', it is part of the context for disability employment rete that is argued here.

population especially when industrialisation moves people from agricultural work to industry (Cai, Park and Zhao, 2008). Therefore the priority task is to absorb the surplus labour into jobs (Brooks and Tao, 2003). In this circumstance, access to paid-employment is not a rights issue but one of competition. This means, if (from a very general perspective) disabled people in the west are economically excluded because of machines and barriers, the main barriers in China are non-disabled people who themselves need to battle for a job. Economic participation in China involves a competition of which the rules are designed by, and for, non-disabled people.

The second element is the production mode. Because of China's development stage and its vulnerable position in global economy, labour-intensive, low-skilled industries play the dominant role in its economy. The common mode is to supply original equipment manufacturing (OEM) products for global buyers (Wang and Mei, 2009). This impacts the division of labour force. In 2014, 29.5% of Chinese working force was employed in agriculture, 29.9% in industry, and the rest 40.59% in services. In the same year, Britain had only 1.3% of employees in agriculture, 15.2% in industry, and the majority (83.5%) in services;[63] and the figures in the US were 1.5%, 17.02%, and 81.5%.[64] China's production pattern requires a strong and physically-functional body to offer as much labour work as possible, meaning people with physical or functional impairment are more likely to be excluded. Western experiences and models to promote disability employment need to be adjusted when applying in this context.

Lastly, China has its own understanding of work and non-western types of job, which can hardly be explained with western theories. In his review of disability employment in the majority world, Roulstone found that:

> ...work is a broad spectrum of non-contractual economic activity which can range over (and be a mix of) barter, small commodity production, hawking, provisioning (from waste land and tips), begging and wider exchanges of labour which include goods, services and promissory activity which are not based on contractual arrangements.

Roulstone, 2012: 220

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63. Data from an international report about economics in the global world published by CIA, American: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2048.html
64. From the US Bureau of Labour Statistics: http://www.bls.gov/cps/lfcharacteristics.htm#occind.

This is seen in China as a variety of special forms of work, including budgeted job (Gao, 1998), semi-stable jobs, *linshi* (temporary) jobs (Zhu, 2001), rehired jobs (*Fanpin*) (Yao et.al, 2011); and certain groups of people as a result, such as migrant workers (Li, 2003), laid-off workers (Qiu, Chen and Ren, 1998; Zhao and Feng, 2000), and self-employees in the semi-private sector (Cooke, 2005). These economic forms are created in China's changing distinctive context and may have their own impact on disabled people. They need to be taken into consideration when explaining the economic exclusion of disabled people in China.

3.3.3.2 Medical construction

Another core force in the formation of disability in the Global North's history is institutionalised medicalisation. Scholars argued that disability is constructed through medical diagnose and in medical institutions (Oliver, 1990; Finkelstein, 1999; Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Based on diagnose from non-disabled, medical 'professions', residential care for people with mental health issues, and special education for people with a range of impairment including visual and hearing impairment, were provided (Braddock and Parish, 2001). Disabled people were separated into a certain sphere and deprived of their rights to fully participate in society (Oliver, 2012). Normalcy has been defined through these medicalised process and disabled people have been defined as the others.

Whilst medicalisation is indeed an essential element in constructing disability issues, especially when China adopts a medical approach in defining disability in its laws and policies (demonstrated in Chapter 2), this in China is not through an institutionalised way. In both traditional and Maoist China, institutional care was rare due to the lack of medical resources and the under-development of modern medicine. The establishments which did exist, such as welfare homes in Socialist China, were for all disadvantaged people, including old people, people living in poverty, and orphans, rather than for the disabled group. These welfare houses experienced financial difficulties in the reform and were gradually closed down (Shang, 2001). In recently years, there has been an increase of care institutions for people with some types of impairment, such as education for deaf children in Guangzhou (Callaway, 2001). However, a national-scale, categorical segregation of disabled people was less significant in China.

Even in a non-institutionalised mundane way, China's health and care system is left behind in the economic-driven reform (Liu, Hsiao and Eggleston, 1999), which leads to an insufficient provision of medical services especially for health surveillance and preventive care (Liu and Xu, 2014). In their review of the development of a medical system in China, Gao, Mao, and Yu (2009) identified three stages: first was a free medical system based on the *Danwei* system (1951-1984); this was followed by the 1984-1997 market-oriented reform, during which the state withdrew its power from medical services; then, since 1997, personal medical accounts have been introduced and linked to the workfare system. This is an ongoing transformation and China is at a very early stage. According to an official report in 2004, only 55.2% of urban residents and 20.9% of rural ones had medical insurance (Centre for Health Statistics and Information China, CHSIC, 2005[65]). New policies like the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme (NCMS) have been launched to improve the situation, which has increased the figures to 71.9% in urban and 92.5% in rural areas (CHSIC, 2008).[66] However, these policies are found limited. In this context, disabled people are marginalised in the health system and have less, if any, access to medical services (examined in Chapter 2). This, of course, left them in a vulnerable position. However, such a construction process is personalised and rehabilitation, according to the authorities, is still the primary need of Chinese disabled people (CDPF, 2015). It is different from the northern model, where barriers, segregation and over medical construction are seen by many as the key concerns. These special characters will be considered when interpret the medical construction of disability in China.

3.3.3.3 Political categorisation

Scholars in the Global North have examined how disability has been constructed through policies and political practices. Meekosha and Soldatic summarised this process as 'delineating the so-called deserving poor from the undeserving poor for state poor belief' (2012: 195). Before the mid-20th century, disabled people in the Global North were defined as a vulnerable group for whom social support should be provided. This was seen in legislation and policies such as Britain's 1934 *Poor Law*. A series of policies, including the UK's *Disabled Persons Act* and

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65. *Report of National Health Service Survey in China*, 2004. Centre for Health Statistics and Information. http://www.nhfpc.gov.cn/cmsresources/mohwsbwstjxxzx/cmsrsdocument/doc9908.pdf
66. *Report of National Health Service Survey in China, 2008*, Centre for Health Statistics and Information. http://www.nhfpc.gov.cn/cmsresources/mohwsbwstjxxzx/cmsrsdocument/doc9912.pdf.

the *American Rehabilitation Act* of 1970, and anti-discrimination or human rights laws, then emerged; these being argued to imply negative assumptions of disability and create 'the disability problem' (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Such a 'problem' has been re-constructed and enforced in the context of neo-liberalism (Peck, 2001). A shift from welfare to workfare has been launched to remove disabled people from social welfare, including the welfare-to-work programmes in the UK (Hyde, 2000), the funding cut for organisations in Canada (Chouinard and Crooks, 2008), and the Disability Support Pension in Australia (Galvin, 2004). Through this process disabled people have been connected to poverty and marginalisation in a variety of contexts (Oliver, 1990; Soldatic and Meekosha, 2010; Roulstone, 2012).

Political categorisation of disability suggests a distinctive picture in China. As stated in the Chapter 2, China has withdrawn its *Danwei*-based welfare provision and attempted to form a workfare pattern. This, however, is an ongoing process and at this stage shows obvious gaps. China does not have a national system of statutory services at either central or local levels (Wong, 2005); it has 'residual' policy in some developed cities but to a limited degree (Leung, 1994; Dou, 2006; Yu and He, 2010). More generally, the government claims an 'appropriated universal approach' for welfare provision (Wang, 2009; Dai, 2009), which admits that all Chinese people should be included, but argues that the country can only offer limited benefits 'due to limited resource and finance' (Dan and Cao, 2012). The reflection of this in the area of disability is the lack of special benefits. As explored in Chapter 2, China now has no national disability benefits and those promised (for example the living allowance) are difficult to obtain. Disability in China is neglected rather than constructed through public policy. Again, this is not a better situation. But it suggests that researching disability in China shall focus on more the impact of political absence rather than of policy construction.

3.3.3.4 Self-organisation of disability forces

As explained earlier in this chapter, disability organisations and their movements have played a key role in re-interpreting disability issues in the Global North. It has been a core force in academic and political changes, as well as in personal disabled life (Driedger, 1989; Gilson et al, 1997; Charlton, 1998; Branfield, 1999; Peters et al, 2009). This force is less relevant in the Chinese context.

In Chapter 2 the thesis examined China's 'Strong State-Weak Society' regime and the placement of it in the reform. It is argued that, although social forces have been significantly improved, China still has a 'strong state' structure; and its third sectors are too young to participate in policy-making or change society. This is for all Chinese people. But due to inaccessible environments and disabled people's vulnerable position in society, a disability force is much less likely to be established. Few disability organisations and activism, as understood in a western way, have been organised in China. China's Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF, introduced in Chapter 2) is a semi-government organisation (Kohrman, 2005). There were a number of charitable organisations emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, but all retained strong links with the government and party (Hallett, 2015). Then, since the mid-1980s, grassroots organisations have been gradually developed, especially after 2000.[67] These organisations, however, have been found to have limited internal capacity to increase disability support; and are hampered by external limitations that affect their accountability (Fisher and Fan, 2012). Disability in the Chinese context has not been mobilised or politicised, which means many western theories based on political activities and the shared stance cannot be directly used in this context.

This is even more complicated considering China's position in the changing global power-relations. It has been found that developing countries usually seek help from international NGOs (INGOs) in their development of disability affairs (Ingstad, 2001). In China, however, INGOs are in general in a difficult situation. Whilst there is an obvious rise of international links, idea exchange and activities in China (Ma, 2006), doubts and political surveillance have developed. In 2005, China's government launched an investigation on INGOs working in China and local NGOs in receipt of foreign funding. A moratorium was placed on the registration of INGOs (Young, 2005). For scholars like Morton (2005), this is due to the party-government's fear of social instability. All these have produced barriers for the organisation and mobilisation of a disability force.

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67. See Hallett's work 'Enabling the Disabled': the Growing role of civil society in disability rights advocacy, in Fulda, A. (eds.), *Civil Society Contribution to Policy Innovation in the PR China.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 for a systematic review of Chinese disability organisations.

After all, social structures and settings explored in the section constitute China's special notion of 'civil rights', which applies to all Chinese people. If civil rights are limited and can only be obtained through competition, disabled people are presumably less likely to access them. That is to say, if disability in Global North is denial of citizenship and unequal distribution of civil rights (Stone, 1998), it in China cannot be understood in an exactly same way as the notion of citizenship *per se* has not been well formed. This leads to a distinctive disabled life.

3.3.4 A different disabled life

Because of the diverse philosophies and social structures, the disabled life is framed differently across the world. Scholars have identified more barriers and inequalities in developing countries, including the lack of accessible facilities and devices (Allotey et al, 2003; Coulson, 2006), less access to medical and care (Coleman et al, 2002; Eide and Loeb, 2006; Trani et al, 2010; Chouinard, 2014), and a higher exclusion from education (Banda, 2006; Word Bank, 2009). There have been unexpected findings in employment and poverty, while gaps between the disabled and non-disabled are less pronounced in undeveloped societies (Mitra and Sambamoorthi, 2006, regarding India; Buckup, 2009, regarding China; Eide and loeb, 2006, regarding Zambia). This, according to Shakespeare (2012), is due to the overall under-development of these countries. As unemployment and poverty are ubiquitous, the gaps may be less extreme than in high-income socities (Mitra et al, 2011; Swartz and Schineider, 2006).

Compared to the Global North, the life of disabled people in China shows two special elements: a higher exclusion rate and the struggle for basic access.

As in other developing countries, Chinese disabled people experience more barriers and a higher exclusion in their personal and social lives. With regards to employment, only roughly 1 in 4 (21.59/82.96 million) disabled people in China were employed by the end of 2014;[68] much less than the 56.4% for non-disabled Chinese people.[69] The figure in UK for the same year was 46.3% for working-age

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68. See CDPF's report '*Statistical Communiqué on the development of the work on persons with disabilities*. http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/statistics/201507/t20150717_522174.html. In English.
69. See the National bureau of statistic of PRC's report '*China's economic and social development report 2014*' at http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201502/t20150226_685799.html.

disabled people[70]. In education, 43.29% disabled people were non- or very less-educated in 2006,[71] while this figure for China's whole population is 9.08% in 2000[72] and 4.88% in 2010.[73] In terms of welfare services, most disabled people (65.8%) were not involved in any forms of social insurance, while for the non-disabled in the same year, 87% were covered by state- or collective-run health insurance (Li, Sun and Zhang, 2008).

Addition to the higher exclusion rate and as the result of it is the struggle for basic right. As presented in Chapter 2, Chinese disabled people are experiencing socio-material difficulties such as inaccessible environments and a marginalised position in welfare, education, employment, and care. At the same time as their peers in developed countries are campaigning for a full, equal citizenship, these people are struggling to survive. For example, while the Global North has shifted its focus from medical needs to social support and cultural matters, the former is argued as a priority in China (Kohrman, 2005). Similarly, while institutionalised care has been globally criticised for segregating people from the mainstream and replaced by the independent living model, it is called for in China as a potential way to 'take care of disabled people' (CDPF, 2015). Considering these, specific contextualised western patterns or projects cannot be directly applied in China.

Due to the insufficiency of trustworthy data or empirical research, the actual disabled life in China remains unclear. Still, it is reasonable to argue from a very general perspective that it differs from the picture in the Global North. So far this chapter has examined China's ideological and social settings and a disabled life as a by-product of them. It identified special elements on all these aspects, which need to be taken into account when researching disability in China. The thesis therefore argues: whilst the key theoretical approaches that have emerged in western-dominated disability studies, such as the stance to see disability as a social issue, the materialist, personalised or cultural interpretation of disability, and the critical realist agenda to study multi-dimensional reflective experience, are essential in understanding disability in China, they need to be verified within China's specialist contexts; preferably through empirical research.

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70. Disability facts and Figures, 2014. UK's government. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-facts-and-figures/disability-facts-and-figures.
71. Same as 67. This refers to people who are not educated at all or only in primary school.
72. NBSPRC's national Census report in 2000. http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/5rp/index.htm.
73.NBSPRC's national Census report in 2010http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/indexch.htm.

3.4 Conclusion and research aims

This chapter briefly reviewed disability theories that have been developed in the Global North and then examined their applicability in the Chinese context. The intension was not to give a deep analysis of the theoretical field, but instead, to identify the core dimensions and then build a proper framework for this study.

The review suggested three core dimensions in researching disability, which are material barriers, individual experience, and discourse. Rooted in its origin of social movements, disability studies has claimed its basic stance to consider disability as a social issue. This is particularly reflected in its oncerns on socio-economic barriers that exclude disabled people in their social lives. Individual accounts have then been taken into account to present the real scene. Critical Disability Studies (CDS) has focused on the discourse, which extends the research area and leads to de-construction of categories. Through a critical overview, the thesis argued that a multi-dimensional framework is needed in disability studies, especially in the Chinese context. The study, therefore, follows a critical realist approach to examine the multiple aspects of the disabled experience in China, with attentions on both structure and agency.

Whilst these theories are inspiring, they need to be considered, and adjusted if necessary, within China's specialised context. The chapter demonstrated this by comparing Chinese and western countries on their philosophies, social structures and settings, and the disabled life. It argues that disability in China should be theorised with a multiple-dimensional, reflective framework, but in a contextualised way.

To recap, as examined in Chapter 2, disability in China needs to be studied in the context that: 1) the country is experiencing rapid changes in its economy, regime, and culture, and the notion of disability is being reconstructed by both traditional and modern ideologies; and 2) the rise of internet use is creating a new society, where normalcy in the offline world could potentially be changed.

In the light of the considerations that researching disability in China should combine multiple dimensions of the disable life and locate itself in the changing Chinese context, the project sets out to tackle the following research aims:

1) To explore what life is like for disabled people in China's contemporary digital society, including their experiences in multiple dimensions;

2) To explore how disabled people are using the internet in these contexts, what they are using it for, how and why;

3) To examine the impact of internet use, if any, and to consider the extent to which this improves disabled people's lives and, by extension, intersects with the changing Chinese society and promotes social justice;

4) Based on empirical evidence and theoretical discussions, to propose a new contextualised framework to research disability in China.

With these aims the study sought to fill some important gaps in the limited understanding of disability and the internet in China (see Figure 3-2). The next chapter will clarify how this is operated in the study.
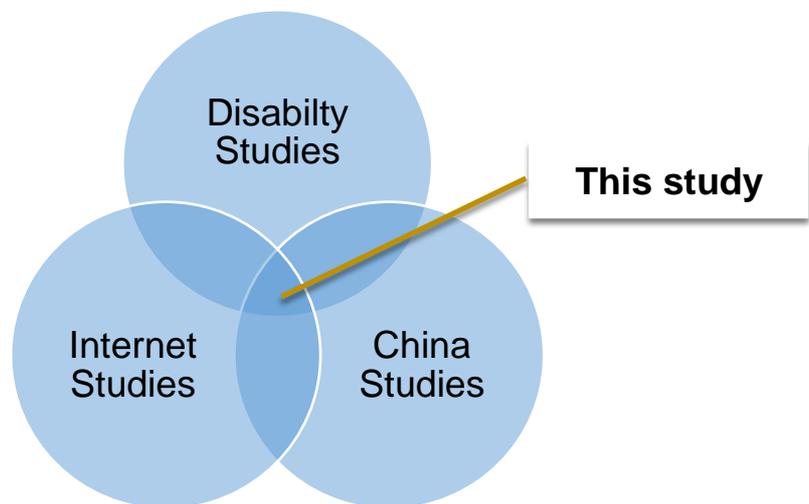
Figure 3-2 The position of this study

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the ontological and epistemological issues in researching disability in China and then outlines and justifies the methods used in the thesis.

Sociology, as it is understood in the Global North, is a young subject in China. Since its rebirth in March 1979 (it was banned in socialist China especially in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976), there have been rapid developments of the discipline, reflected in the increase of high-quality publications, the rise of projects at the local, national and international levels, and building of academic institutions and networks. There have been, however, less concern with research methods. In a review of articles published in *Sociological Studies (shehuixue yanjiu)*, the most advocated sociology journal in China, Feng (2016) found only 4.2% articles about research methods in the past 30 years. In terms of the use, the dominant approach is to employ western developed methods, especially large-scale, quantitative and usually questionnaire-based methods (Zheng, 2008; Wong, 2013, Feng, 2016). This is rooted in China's long-term engagement with American social theories, such as functionalism, and its quantitative preference (Zheng, 2008), and has been critiqued for overlooking 'real problems' in Chinese society (see for example Chen, 2001). Recently, there have been discussions on qualitative or in general new methodological shifts, including feminist methods (Wu, 2003; Zhou, 2001), life course approaches (Li et al, 1999), computational methods (Luo and Luo, 2015), virtual ethnography (Bu, 2012), and mixed methods (Zhu, 2012). Even so, quantitative methods continue to dominate and 'take over' social science research in China (Cheng, 2017).

Located in this context, disability studies in China has not developed its own methodology or a set of methods and practical rules. The topic *per se*, as argued in Chapter 1 and 2, has been neglected to a large extent. Current literature is mainly a review of policies (Stone, 1998; Zheng, 2008), analysis of national data (Lai, Liao and Liu, 2008; Guo, Bricout and Huang, 2005; Stratford and Ng, 2000), or quantitative reports from governments or other agencies (Pierini, Pearson and Wong, 2001; CDPF's reports), while qualitative methods are rarely seen and in

general present in some studies by western scholars (Kohrman, 2005; Dauncey, 2012; 2013). Studying disability in China is an entirely new subject, not only in the topics it attempts to understand but also in the methods utilised.

This study, therefore, needs to find a robust and valid method to generate its theories. The chapter attempts to do so by, firstly, briefly reviewing the changes in the research agenda in disability studies in the Global North. It argues that the critical realism paradigm would be applicable in this study, to meet its aims of exploring **both** people's experience and behaviour in multiple dimensions; this should be carefully employed with some caution of the field being non-western, unexplored and digital. The study embraces the grounded theory approach as its methodology and mixed methods in specific to respond to the situation.

Under these principles, the study designs a two-stage framework: use content analysis and quantitative data to obtain a breadth of understanding; and use in-depth interviews and qualitative data to ensure the depth. The chapter outlines how the two methods were conducted, including the sampling of materials and recruitment of participants, the structure of the interviews, and the analytical methods. The last section discusses ethical issues.

4.2 Researching disability in the Global North: the changing paradigm

In the Global North, the advent of the social model challenged not only the way disability is interpreted, but also the methods to study it. 'Traditional' methods in the area of social science are rooted in positivism, believing that the social world can be investigated with 'scientific' methods and knowledge production should be neutral and objective (Humphries, 1997). This in disability studies can be seen in Parsons' work on medicine as a mechanism of social control (Parson, 1951). Relevant studies and theories include symbolic interactionism (Meller and Gwynee, 1972), social labelling (Goffman, 1968; Scot, 1969), and research on institutional living (Miller and Gwynne, 1972), the role of professionals (Ilich et. al, 1997), and disability and poverty (Townsend, 1979). These were criticised by disability activists and those academics arguing for the social model approach. For these scholars, the sociological, interpretative methods see disabled people

as a 'passive research subject' (Abberley,1987:141). Researchers are more likely to control the research process and benefit from it, while disabled participants have little control (Barnes and Mercer, 1997). This unbalanced relationship has been argued as problematic and caused doubts about the usefulness of research. For example, Oliver (2012) claimed that sociological research failed to document the social oppression disabled people experienced or produce real changes.

An alternative is emancipatory paradigm proposed by social model theorists (Oliver, 1992; Stone and Priestley, 1996). This paradigm claims that disabled people are more than mere participants and should control the research in terms of what questions were asked and who received funding (Zarb, 1992). It proposed a set of rules and techniques, which, as summarised by Stone and Priestly (1996: 706), included 6 core principles:

1. The adoption of the social model of disability as the ontological and epistemological basis for research production;
2. The surrender to falsely premised claims to objectivity through overt political commitment to the struggles of disabled people for self-emancipation;
3. The willingness only to undertake research where it will be of some benefit to the self-empowerment of disabled people and/or the removal of disabling barriers;
4. The devolution of control over research production to ensure full accountability to disabled people and their organisations;
5. The ability to give voice to the personal whilst endeavouring to collectivise the commonalty of disabling experiences and barriers; and
6. The willingness to adopt a plurality of methods for data collection and analysis in response to the changing needs of disabled people.

Since the very beginning, the target of this paradigm is 'the empowerment of disabled people and the translation of the material and social relations of research production' (Barnes, 2003:6). This makes the method itself political (Watson, 2012). The paradigm or at least its approach has been widely used in academic research and relevant programs. It, for some, has become a core idea in the discipline (Oliver, 1992).

Whilst the significance of the emancipatory research paradigm is widely noted, there have been critiques on it as a universal practical method. In their review of the methodology, Danieli and Woodhams (2005) identified three

weaknesses of the method: the failure to alter positivism, the reproduction of power relations and the risk for silencing some voices as a result, and the limited applicability in actual research. Watson (2012) explored the difficulties in transforming political goals into researchable issues. He, then, based on the theoretical shift to critical realism (discussed in Chapter 3), proposed a research agenda that includes the following elements.

First is the wide concern on multiple dimensions of disability, particularly the experience of impairment. The critical realist agenda involves an examination of the body as part of human embodiment (Hughes and Paterson, 1997), which is left to medicine under the emancipatory research paradigm. This is an effective way to bring the body 'back in' and avoid reductionism (William, 1999).

Secondly, the agenda focuses on both structural barriers and individual agency. Critical realism combines the 'social processes of structure and agency that shape and reshape one another over time' (Williams, 1999: 809). In disability studies, people's experience is an integral part and a direct result of a society's power relations and ideologies. Through looking at the 'personal', oppression and emancipation can be more clearly understood (Watson, 2000).

The critical realist agenda engages a variety of research methods, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The emancipatory paradigm has in general been associated with qualitative rather than quantitative data (Barnes, 2003), although there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the latter. The critical realist agenda combine different types of data to benefit from the strengths of them all.

The methodologies developed in the Global North need to be carefully used in southern contexts. Grech and Goodly (2012) argued that the choice of research method is informed by the local concept of disability; various lived experiences; indigenous, customary and traditional knowledge; local policy and practice; and national and international norms of research. Realising this, this study follows the key principles of the critical realist agenda but locate it in the methodology of grounded theory approach, and develops its own research framework.

4.3 Research framework

4.3.1 Researching a new area: The grounded theory approach

Grounded theory is one of the most popular methodologies in the area of social science. Using an inductive logic, this methodology generates theories from data that is systematically gathered and analysed (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; 1998). It, as summarised by Corbin in his most updated book, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (2015), has two features: First is the fundamental principle that theory is not chosen prior to research but derived from data collected in the process. Secondly, data collection and analysis are interrelated, which means research is always a forward, backward and ongoing process. This methodology allows researchers to retain a strong empirical foundation for their work and produce conceptual theories of the empirically studied phenomena (Charmaz, 2008). It has been widely welcomed in academia (Bryman, 2012).

The methodology was adopted for this study for two reasons. Firstly, disability studies is a new subject in China, which means there have been very little work on the state of affairs, patterns of behaviour, or even the basic ideas about what it means to be disabled. In global academia, disabled experiences have been represented by (almost exclusively) dominating western theories and models. This study had fewer local material resources as reference. The grounded theory approach is 'particularly useful when little is known about the area' (Birks and Mills, 2011: 169). It is employed in this study to generate its own theories from specialised empirical evidence.

Secondly, grounded theory has shown its strength in phenomenology, especially in examining daily life experience (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). This is because it produces 'faithful to everyday realities of a substantive area that has been carefully induced from diverse data' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 238). The study therefore adopts the methodology to gain inner experience (Corbin, 2015) of disabled people's life in the digital context. The principle is that all notions and ideas, even the research questions, are to be generated from the data.

Whilst grounded theory has been globally accepted as a strong methodology, there have been different interpretations in terms of its specific strategies and

procedures (Charmaz, 2008). This study employs the approach seeing grounded theory as 'a general indicator of the desirability of making theory from data rather than a guide to a method for handling data' (Richards and Richards, 1994: 149). It then, more specifically, follows the critical realist perspective to study both experiences and practice of disabled people.

4.3.1 Researching experience and practice: A critical realist agenda

This project examines the disable life in contemporary, digital China, including its multiple dimensions; **and** people's reflective accounts of their behaviour in the environment. This involves focusing on both structure and agency, and the interaction between them. In this way the study borrows from the critical realist agenda.

First of all, the study examines disabled people's lived experiences in social, economic, and cultural fields, within the special context of digitalisation. The aim is to present structural settings and practices through personal accounts. Denzin (1997) explained the methodological challenges in studying experience, which are 'crisis of representation' and 'crisis of legitimation'. The former is whether a reality exists to be presented in the text. The latter refers to validity, reality, objectivity, and triangulation of the data (cited in Watson, 2000). To reduce the crisis and present the real scene, the study uses narrative materials, as much, and as originally, as possible. More specifically, it includes both 'intended' and 'unintended' narratives.

As defined by Phelan, narrative is a process of 'someone telling someone else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened' (2005: 18). Narrative materials have been used in social science studies as a primary source of information, especially in qualitative research. It is the main form of data in this study, to present the participants' experiences, feelings, and personal view of the world (Mischel, 1993). The study examines different forms of narratives. It has been increasingly noticed that the narrative approach has various genres but not all of them are adequately explored. For example, Riessman (1990) argued that a narrative approach includes proper stories, habitual narratives, and hypothetical narratives; though only the first form is commonly analysed. In this study, disabled people's experience of digitalisation is daily, trivial, and

inconsequential. Asking them to give a broad narrative, in any form, including interviews or focus groups, contains the implication of letting them choose what is important and the danger of losing some voices. The study therefore analyses both the 'intended' narratives, which are given in arranged conversations like interviews when participants realise they are telling a story, and 'unintended' narratives that are recorded in people's daily internet use (online materials).

The study also examines disabled people's internet use as an active practice. This is to respond to the idea that individuals, including disabled people, are not mere passive receivers of social construction but have the agency to act and to influence the society (Giddens, 1991). It is particularly significant in the Chinese context, which is a reforming arena and within which the structure is challenged rapidly and by multiple agencies. To research social behaviours, observational methods and interpretation of data are usually adopted (Altmann, 1974). This study adopts the 'digital ethnography' approach (Murthy, 2008; Underberg and Zorn, 2013) to observe, record, and analyse what disabled people do on the internet and with the internet. It also focuses on their reflective behaviours and the impact of them in the interview. The practice of the participants is believed to be closely related to their experience, which is a product of the structure. It has influences on the structure in return.

4.3.3 Research design: Mixed method

This study examines both experience (structure) and practice (agency) in a new, changing context. As this is a largely unexplored area, different types of data are needed for the breadth and depth of the topic. The study therefore employs mixed methods.

Traditionally there was a gap between qualitative and quantitative research, derived from their contrary epistemological, ontological, and methodological foundations (Layder, 1988). The division is increasingly de-constructed (Martyn, 1992). Combining the methods are found can expand the scope and breadth of data and offset the limitations of using one method (for example Bryman, 1984). Therefore, scholars ought to have the capability, and be flexible enough, to select a range of methods as long as they are appropriate to the research question (Burgess, 1984). This multiple-method, or mixed-method approach, has

been argued as particularly applicable in internet studies, as data in the digital sphere is extremely variable and boundaries between data sources are blurring (Mann and Stewart, 2000). This study follows the pattern and includes both quantitative and qualitative data.

As summarised by Bryman (1988), there are three ways of combining the two methods: 1) qualitative work as a facilitator of quantitative work; 2) quantitative work as a facilitator of qualitative work; and 3) both approaches to be given equal emphasis. To achieve its goal of a detailed account of being disabled in digital China, the study follows the second path and designs a two-stage work. At stage 1, quantitative methods are employed to explore the context and set the agenda. I conducted a 5-month content analysis (August 2014 to December 2014) of posts from two of the largest disability e-communities. This produced 'sensitising concepts', which are non-definitive ideas to give a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instance (Blumer, 1954). The qualitative element is followed to deepen this understanding. I interviewed 34 disabled internet users to obtain detailed and deeper information about their experience and practice. While the quantitative data introduces concepts of validity, objectivity and generalisation, the qualitative data allows the study to be credible and dependable (Hamberg et al, 1994).

The study follows the grounded theory approach to see data collection and analysis as a revising process. The key themes that emerged from the first stage content analysis helped to form the interviews' topic guide. The interviews were however flexible and the topic guide was used more to direct the conversation rather than to control it. People in the interviews were encouraged to talk about whatever they liked and to give any information that was relevant and important for them. Findings from the interview were verified, and co-examined with, the posts that were sampled in the content analysis phase. It is through the 'forward and back' grounded theory principle that the results were generated.

In what follows the thesis explains the two methods in details. It outlines their design, the sampling and recruitment, the administration process, and the analysis of the data.

4.4 Content analysis of disability forums

4.4.1 Why content analysis

Content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make a systematic examination of communicative materials (Krippendorff, 2004). In the area of disability studies, this has been used to explore the media coverage and representation of disabled people (Haller, Dorries and Rahn, 2006; Haller 2010; Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013). Much of this work focused on how disability has been framed in the mainstream media. For example, by analysing newspaper articles about disability in the UK, scholars found that disabled people are constructed as 'folk devils' in the age of austerity (Briant, Watson and Philo, 2013). This is because disabled people are silenced in mainstream society and their voices in constructing their own image are missing.

Content analysis is one of the very first social science methods to be adapted to Internet studies (Weare and Lin, 2000). The common use of the internet across the globe has created a 'we-media' era (Browman and Wills, 2003), where huge amounts of information are supplied in a variety of forms (Sudulich et al, 2014). In this environment, analysing online content has been found particularly effective in extracting ideas from 'ordinary' people. The studied sphere includes not only the digital forms of traditional media, such as newspapers, but also new social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and BBS (Bulletin Board system). This study draws on materials and content, mainly posts, created by disabled people in China's cyber world. The digital spaces are not only the field but also the aim of the research.

4.4.2 The research fields and samples

With this target, the study chose two popular disability communities, the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar and the Self-strengthen BBS, as its research fields. These were the two largest disability forums/groups on China's internet when the fieldwork was conducted, and the first two results of searching *canji* (残疾, disability) with *Baidu,* China's biggest search engine.[74] More information about

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74. Besides government websites and news, which are not the main target of the study.

these two websites/communities will be given in Chapter 5, The Digital Life of Disabled People.

The analysis was conducted since October 2014, drawing on posts published on the forums from June 2012 to June 2014. There were 82,639 posts during the period from the Post-bar, and 18,126 from the BBS. The study therefore had to employ a systematic sampling process to achieve materials that were within my ability to analyse. It sampled the dates, which were three days per month (14th to 16th) and three months (July, November and March) per year. The reason for this, instead of one day per month which is more commonly used, was to avoid being influenced by sudden 'news'. For example, the Post-bar had hundreds of posts every day but these posts may be about one big news such as 'our football team lost again'. The sampling avoided the beginning and end of the calendar month to present 'normal use'. According to a national report, 95.1% internet usage in China was through mobile phones (CNNIC, 2017). Because data bundles in China are based on the calendar month, it is common to use the internet 'generously' at the start of month but 'carefully' at the end.

This produced 21 days and 2597 posts, which were then hand-analysed with the thematic analysis method.

4.4.3 Analysing the data

The aim of the content analysis was to identify key themes in disabled people's internet use. To achieve this, all sampled posts were analysed manually to code their content. Common themes were identified and their coverage in the forums was then examined.

The first step in content analysis is to define the recording unit (Weber, 2005). The study defined topic(s) of posts, rather than posts themselves, as the unit. This is because these posts were informal and trivial and did not always stick to one topic. Below are three examples: the first has no interpretable topic; the second has an explicit topic, which is clearly reported by the poster himself, and an implicit one, which can be related to some certain topics but was not self-mentioned; the last post has two explicit topics.

Example 1: (Title) Rubbish (*Laji*)

(Content) Rubbish!!!! (*LaJi*!!!!)

(No comments)

Results of analysis: not interpretable

Example 2: (Title) Anyone had AK?

(Content) I got Ankylosing Spondylitis for one and half years. My low back now hurts a lot. I heard it will get worse. Anyone in our family [referring to the community] has AK? Can you tell me your condition?'

(Comment 1) I don't. Good luck.

(Comment 2) I am OK. I guess I am lucky.

(Comment 3) It depends. Mine was bad at first. Had to stay in bed. But it got a bit better.

--- (Poster respond) can I have your QQ number? Want a chat.

Results of analysis:

Explicit topic: impairment effects

Implicit topic: group interaction, to build up digital relations

Example 3:

(Title) Who can understand my sadness?

(Content) I can never find a girlfriend. I understand all girls want someone rich, handsome, strong. Who doesn't want a good life? I am not rich. And I have to spend so much money on my leg. Last time I changed the artificial leg, it is ¥1500! Who wants a husband, cannot make money, and a burden?

(Comment) Marriage is a problem for everyone. That's us.

(Comment) ¥1500 is expensive. Can you find a cheaper one?

Results of analysis:

Explicit topic 1: marriage difficulties

Explicit topic 2: the cost of assistance devices

Due to the size of available data and to minimise the potential risks of over-interpretation, only explicit topics were analysed. This produced 2515 'units', as shown in Table 4-1. The next step was to develop a reliable coding schedule. 500 posts (20% of the sample, to give me a sense of what the key themes are) were carefully read. These themes, or coding rules, were tested by coding a sample of text (another 500 posts) and revised. The result was 23 themes which could be grouped into six categories. All the sampled posts were then coded to examine the coverage of the themes.

Table 4-1: Content analysis: Posts and analysis unit

	Posts	Topics	Explicit Topics	Implicit Topics
Baidu Disabled People Post-bar	2185	2401	2076	325
Self-strengthen BBS	412	595	439	156
In total	2597	2996	2515	481

4.5 In-depth Interviews

4.5.1 Recruiting the participants

The content analysis was followed by in-depth interviews to produce a 'thick description' (Geetz, 1973) of the disabled life. To achieve this, the study needed people who used the internet regularly. The main sphere for its recruitment was the internet, more specifically, the disability e-communities.

Recruiting people from the internet reduced the difficulties and cost of doing so in the offline world. As presented in the context chapter, disabled people in China are usually segregated into private spheres, such as their family, and are silenced in the mainstream. It is hard to contact them personally to send an invitation. Getting in touch with disabled participants through the internet also circumvented the study being interpreted by other agencies such as the China's Disabled Persons' Federation (the 'official' organisation, see Chapter 2 and 3).

My recruitment started with an advertisement post on the two forums. The intention was to include the same group of people to maintain the consistency of the data. In the post, I stated the aims of my research, who I was and how I would organise the interviews. I invited people to contact me for more details or further negotiation. The post received many responses. Some people consented to participate after obtaining clear information. Some responses, however, were of doubts, questions, and even curses. This implies that disability studies is not developed in China, as interviewing disabled people seemed to be an uncommon thing. The doubts were responded to quickly with explanations and evidence of my status for example my identity documents. Some respondents then agreed to be part of the study, giving data from the 'defensive ones'. Interestingly, more

supportive comments come out following the negative comments. Posters called it 'a necessary support to those care about us'. Two things were implied here. First, there are limited interactions between disabled and non-disabled people, at least in these communities. The doubtful replies, for example 'I know you are just making fun of we poor disabled people', suggest such a division. Secondly, some disabled people have recognised their silenced position and are keen to give voice. This is reflected in their response to the doubtful comments like 'this is a valuable chance to let us be heard and I'll not let you ruin it.'

Realising this, I re-posted the advertisement, incorporating the original post through a hyperlink, and including a clearer statement of my aims and more detailed and 'official' information about me as a PhD student; for example, by adding a hyperlink to my university page. I reiterated that I would not charge the participants money in any circumstance, and would organise the interview in public and safe spaces. I also invited people who already had their interviews to give feedback 'in digital public', to show that 'they came back home safely' and 'they were not charged any money'. Some very positive comments were given, which significantly promoted the later recruitment.

An unplanned recruitment was conducted on *Zhihu* (means 'do you know'), a famous questioning-answering website. During my fieldwork, a disabled person posted the question 'How does it feel to be disabled?', which attracted huge attention shown as 206 answers from people with various types of impairment. I 'followed' this question and sent an invitation letter to 19 people whose answers were carefully-written, and 'liked'. 18 of them were happy to help. Although not all of them were interviewed due to time and budget limitations, they gave me permission to use their answers in the study.

All the recruitment strategies were less effective for disabled women, who are viewed as 'less brave' and 'more careful' (from a participant) in internet-based communication. I got 7 female respondents from online recruiting, mainly from *Zhihu,* but none of them met my criteria (see next section). For example, a woman identified herself as 'nearly but not yet disabled'; one girl was younger than 18. I then tried snow-balling recruitment by asking my male respondents to introduce their female friends. Only two women were introduced, from whom I

got the other 10. Most male participants claimed 'I'd like to help but I have no female disabled friends at all'. As they showed a strong interest in the study and gave continuous support even after the filedwork, I tended to believe it was not an excuse but a truth. An implication is that disabled women are more isolated in Chinese cyberspace.

4.5.2 Sampling and the samples

The purpose of the interview was to produce detailed and personalised accounts of disabled people, perhaps on their internet use and how it affacted their lives. With the descriptive data generated from content analysis, I did not need to, and obviously could not, present representative data with a large amount of participants. But since I got more respondents than expected, I 'hand-picked' my participants with specific criteria in mind (Denscombe, 2007), to achieve a wider variety within the limited field. My criteria were:

- Age: over 18 years old, all age ranges
- Gender: both males and females
- Type of impairments: all physical, visible impairments
- Resident place: 7 cities in northern, southern, middle, and eastern China

This was to represent the majority of Chinese disabled people. Age 18 is the dividing line for adults and non-adults. Both males and females were expected to be involved to give gendered experiences. Then, the study focused on people with a physical impairment. As disability studies is still in its infancy in China, people with intellectual impairment and mental health issues are more isolated and almost impossible to reach through a personal way. Lastly, seven cities were chosen from the vast territory of China, which were possible for me to visit. China's geographic restrictions no doubt limited the representative of the study, although it was necessary given the constraints of time and budget. To mitigate this, online interviews were arranged through QQ (a popular chatting software) with people living in rural and less-developed areas to provide different voices.

It was hard to balance all the criteria within the limited sample, because of the constraints of ongoing fieldwork in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012) and also because of China's specialised context. It was difficult to interview people living

in western China. Also, as stated, recruiting women was harder. Employing a cautious approach, the study interviewed 34 disabled internet users; 29 face-to-face and the 5 through the internet. There were:

- 14 participants in their 20s, 8 in 30s, 8 in 40s, 3 in their 50s, and 1 aged over 60. This is in line with the age structure of Chinese internet users (see Figure 4-1);
- 12 women and 22 men;
- 10 people with lower limb impairments, 2 with upper limb impairments, 5 with vision impairments, 3 with hearing impairments, 5 with spinal cord injuries, 5 experiencing cerebral palsy, 2 experiencing achondroplasia, and 2 experiencing both lower limb impairment and hearing impairment.[75]
- people living in 7 cities, who came from 26 cities in the northern, middle, eastern, and southern parts of China (see Figure 4-2). [76]
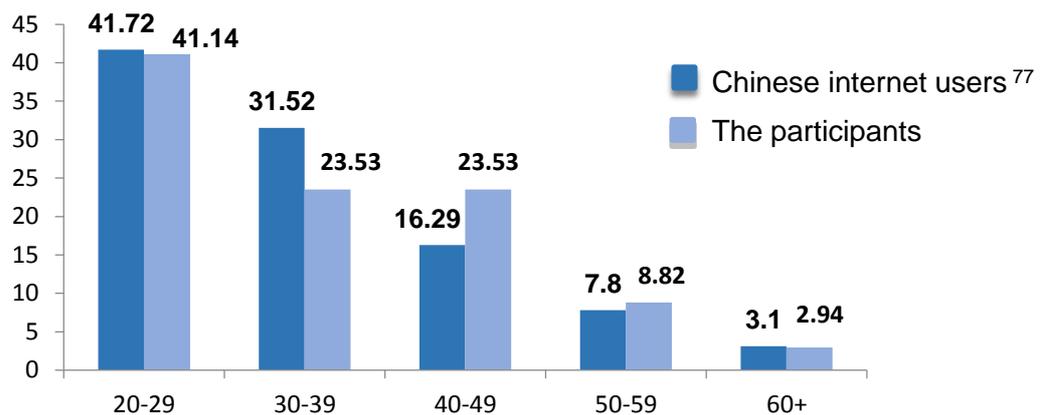
Figure 4-1 The age structure of my participants: compared to if of all Chinese internet users

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75 These 'names' of impairment come from *Law of the PRC on Protection of Disabled Person.* http://www.cdpf.org.cn/english/laws1documents/200804/t20080410 267459.html. Using them here does not mean I agree with the ways they are represented.

76. Due to the high mobility in modern China's, although I visited 7 cities, my participants came from 26 different areas in China. This means their hometown and/or the cities they registered in with the police and the administration system, where they still spend some time every year.

77. Data from CNNIC's 2017 report: *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (39th).* Available online at http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxabg/hlwtjbg/201701/P020170123364672657 408.pdf. In Chinese.
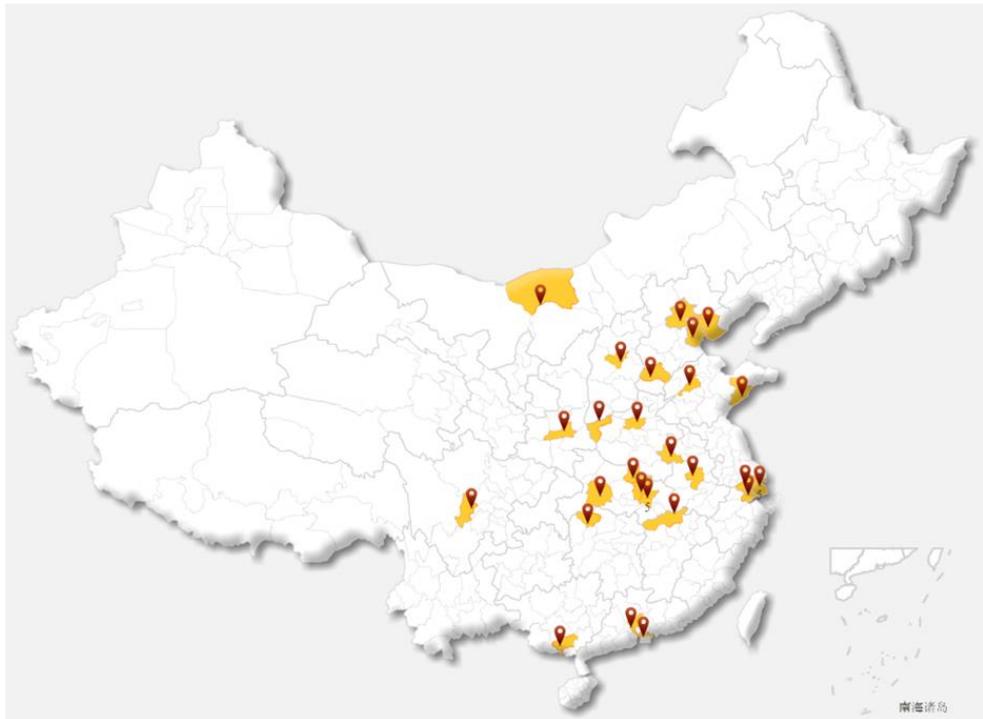
**Figure 4-2: Regional distribution of the participants
(regarding their hometown)**

4.5.3 Administering the interviews

Most face-to-face interviews in the study were conducted in public spaces with a prior appointment with participants. In Shanghai, most interviews were arranged in a café, run by a disability organisation, with which the participants were very familiar. In other cities these were conducted in chain cafés like Starbucks, or cafés and tearooms in the participants' living/working areas, which were public, safe, and accessible. The interviews were negotiated and double-checked with the participants and I went to the places in advance to secure the environment. For a few participants who preferred not to, or could not, go out into public, I visited their flat accompanied by a family member. My companion waited nearby during the interview. It needs to be highlighted that s/he knew nothing personal about the participant except for the address. S/he was asked to contact me if I did not come back in time, and if not reachable, contact the police for further help. That did not happen and all three interviews in private flats went well. The study included five online interviews which were conducted through QQ, a commonly used SMS in China. I arranged a time with participants in advance and used video-chatting to interview them. These online participants also signed the consent form in advance.

Interviews lasted for between 1 and 2 hours. As argued by David and Stutton (2011), the interview situation is itself a social interaction and biases are almost impossible to avoid. To minimise the influence of this bias, the interviews were facilitated without 'overly directing the talk' (Rapley, 2004: 20). The topic guide (Appendices 2), which was generated from the findings of the content analysis, was used flexibly. I started with simple questions such as 'When did you start using the internet', or 'How do you use it'. I then let the participants decide what they wanted to talk about. For participants who were happy to share, the interview followed a narrative format. No interpretations were made as long as it stayed relevant, and the interviewees were encouraged to give as much detail as possible. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify the meanings wherever there was a need. The interviews, however, due to this open format, developed varying themes. All participants were asked to give a general description of their internet use; for instance, when they started to use it, what they used it for and the impact it has had on their lives. This 'basic' information occupied the first few interviews, making them descriptive, while later interviews engaged more discussions on specific perspectives and offered more details. For example, participants who were working online might have focused on the efficiencies and limitations of e-employment, when I was already familiar with information such as how to start a shop on the internet. The interviews went from general to specific and from descriptive to full of ideas, which ensured the depth of the data as well as its breadth.

The interviews, including the online ones, were recorded with permission of the informants. They were transcribed into a script in Chinese of approximately 330,000 characters. Some participants provided additional materials, including blogs, posts/articles, media reports, and even pictures, which were used when relevant. The qualitative data was analysed with a framework approach, using the qualitative analysis package QSR Nvivo.

4.5.4 Analysing the data: Framework analysis with Nvivo

The analysis of the data was based on the grounded theory approach. The study tried to avoid pre-existing hypotheses in its data-collecting, analysing, and idea-raising. This allowed the emergence of notions, ideas, and theories from the original accounts. More specifically, the study used framework analysis, which is

'a systematic process of breaking down data and sorting material according to key themes' (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994: 176). This method focuses on the synthesis of data, involving 'the creation of summaries of verbatim data rather than on data reduction activities through the use of coding' (Silver and Lewins, 2014:27). It kept me from being distracted by interesting ideas and allowed me to establish patterns in the data first (Barbour, 2014).

Framework analysis involves five steps: familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and, mapping and interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). These were conducted with the help of Nvivo in this study. Using software makes data managing, sorting, and coding faster and more efficient (Dey, 1993). It also reduces the risk of 'anecdotalism', which are dangers of the researcher quoting interview transcripts or field notes with little sense of the prevalence of the phenomenon they are supposed to exemplify (Sliverman 1985). This study used Nvivo to break down the data into fragments and regroup them into thematic sets. The key aspects that emerged in the analysis were: economic desires, difficulties, and practices; political activities, events, and networks; and, disability identity, identification, and image. These echoed the findings of the content analysis. The thesis then further probed and interpreted these perspectives with interview materials and public post; the analysis results are presented in three qualitative chapters. Chapter 6 is about the economic use of the internet, Chapter 7 is about political use, and Chapter 8 draws on evidence from a culture perspective.

4.6 Ethics and other reflective thoughts

This section discusses ethical issues and other reflective thoughts that emerged throughout the research. It starts with ethical issues, in which consent, privacy, and ethical challenges in cyber studies are discussed. Then the thesis moves on to my identity as a non-disabled researcher and the potential impact of this. The last issue discussed is the challenges in cross-cultural studies.

4.6.1 The ethics

The study carefully designed and practised its research work to avoid harming the participants. The first essential concern was their consent. In the large-scale

content analysis, the sampled posts were public, searchable, and automatically anonymous. The results are presented in the thesis as a statistical overview that does not contain any personal information. This situation is usually considered as having no necessity for informed consent (Brownlowd and O'Dell, 2002). However, to minimise the potential risks the thesis tends to quote posts from my interview participants, who gave me permission to use their posts, blog articles, and public conversations in the communities.

In interviews in which disabled people were personally and directly involved, the research questions were repeatedly examined to make sure they contained no sensitive topics. The interviews were conducted in public, or digital public, spaces. Each interview and its recording received the participants' formal, clear consent: in face-to-face interviews the participants signed the consent form; in online interviews, the informants clearly expressed their consent in their email response. They were all asked to reconfirm this at the start of the interviews.

Although the study had a topic guide, which was formed by the results of the content analysis, the interviews in practice were mainly controlled by the participants: they were encouraged to talk about any aspects of internet use as they saw fit, in any ways they felt comfortable. The transcripts were sent to the participants to check the accuracy and to reconfirm their permission. All these measures reduced the risks of an unequal relation between the participants and myself as a researcher.

The research paid particular attention to protecting the participants' privacy. Information used in the thesis is anonymous and un-trackable. The posts were published under a cyber-name and I did not personally meet the writers unless they were later interviewed. Whenever quoted, information that might affect the writers' privacy, such as a real name, location, and photos, was anonymised. Hyperlinks were not released. Eysenbach and Till (2011) argued that by quoting the exact words from the internet the researcher may breach the participant's confidentiality even if removing personal information, because power search engines can index them. This risk is avoided in this study because all the quotes were originally in Chinese and were translated by myself, they can hardly be traced back to any individuals.

This was same for the interviews. All participants involved in the thesis used a pseudonym, which was randomly given by an online name machine. Any personal information, including their college, specific location, and place of work, were removed. All materials were translated by me and would be difficult to associate with any particular individuals. However, a few of the participants were famous in China for their distinctive experience and stories. Despite a necessary removal of their personal information, they may remain recognisable for those who are familiar with disability affairs in China. For these two participants, I told them explicitly the potential risks of being identified. They did not mind this, with a clear recognition of my research aims and how I structured their stories.

Finally, the study realised the special ethical dilemmas in cyber studies. First is the confidentiality of the information. The study adopted a range of measures to protect the participants' privacy. However, as argued by Kramarae (1996), although I could promise confidentiality in the way I used the data, I could not promise that the forums and e-conversations would not be accessed by others. This could intrude upon, or even damage, the communities (Eysenbach and Till, 2001). The other issue is the copyright of these online materials. Whether public web materials should be considered as having a copyright in the same way as articles and essays remains debatable (Kitchin, 1998). In terms of this, strategies used in the study like removing the hyperlinks, may affect the posters' copyright while the intention was to protect their privacy.

4.6.2 As an 'outsider' researcher

In the area of social sciences, most research is informed to some degree by the researcher's political, academic and cultural positions (Stanley, 1991). As a non-disabled, female, middle-class researcher, I was clearly an 'outsider' for my participants and had no shared experience with them around this specific topic. This was the reason the study employed the grounded theory as its methodology. All notions and theories were from first-hand accounts and were less likely to be influenced by my own personal position. However, the reality is that my identity undoubtedly affected data collection and my relationship with the participants.

My non-disabled identity affected the development of trust, especially in the context that disability studies is new and people know little about the subject

and its research procedures. As stated, my recruitment post received doubt and suspicion. Some participants checked my documents several times and were very careful when arranging the interview and meeting me in person. One person changed the time at short notice, wishing to meet me late in the night, and withdrew when the proposal was refused (for safety reasons). A typical account emerged here was 'no non-disabled people care about us so you must be a fraud'. The study, therefore, had to employ various methods to build up trust. These included presentation of a harmless identity as a young female student, certification from previous informants, and online follow-ups after face-to-face interviews. These, generally speaking, worked well. The participants were happy to give me clarification or more details even after the interviews. The reliability of the data was secured.

Although as an 'outsider', I got deep 'inside' during the research. The content analysis was emotionally difficult. Reading negative experiences for days and months gave me a valid sense of what a disabled life in China is like, which was necessary. It, however, caused an emotional crisis. In the interviews, there was tension between emotional involvement and a neutral stance. As a researcher, I was required to present rather than interrupt the actual life of my participants. However, as a friend, or even as 'the only non-disabled friend who doesn't make me feel discriminated against', as said by one participant, I struggled with my moral identity (Presser, 2004), especially the pressure to give suggestions when I was asked to. For example, one participant shared his story of 'seeing' a girl from the online community and asked me whether he should develop the digital relationship. I could not give an answer and felt that I failed to live up to his trust. This is an illustration that the researcher is not independent of the phenomena being studied but a part of it (Denzin, 2001).

My subjectivity was also embedded in the subsequent data analysis. The study attempted not only to present the data but also to interpret it. This was based on my own ideological and epistemological position. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I welcome the opportunity to consider the experience of disabled people as a social issue and to examine social barriers. I believe in the agency of individuals and its potential in challenging social structures, especially in Chinese contexts. The objects of the study, people's experience and practice, were therefore

understood as being influenced by social barriers but also as a dynamic activity. The thesis was rooted in my regular internet use and my experiences regarding how significantly it is changing society. As one of the young digital generation, who always uses the internet as the first choice in communicating, information searching, working, or even ordering food, tickets and a taxi, I truly believe the internet has the possibility to produce a new form of life. This does not mean a tech-determinist perspective but I cannot deny the fact that such an assumption generalises the experience of internet use. The study contains the dangers for 'speaking for' others who have a different account.

4.6.3 Cross-cultural research

The last challenge was the tension between two languages/cultures. The study looked at disability and internet use in China. It collected data in Chinese, which was a necessity for my participants to fully express themselves, and analysed it in the same language to respond to Chinese contexts and culture. That is to say, all ideas, themes, and supporting evidence (quotes and posts) presented in the thesis were originally in Chinese. They were then translated into English, and interpreted and structured in the manner common to global academia.

The translation was done by myself to avoid interpretations from another agency. The advantage of this is that I am familiar with the materials and could always call on my memories or use my fieldwork notes to better understand and present them. I am more likely to grasp the accurate meanings and the cultural implications of the materials, as both the researcher and the translator. It is also a practical way to control the budget and avoid information disclosure. I am the only one who can link the materials to a particular person. The participants' privacy was protected.

This contains obvious risks, of which the primary one is the accuracy of my translation. This is limited by my language skills, including my understanding of English and Chinese terms and my ability to express ideas in my mind. It is also influenced by my location within the social world. It has been argued that 'meaning is constructed in rather than expressed by language' (Barrett, 1992: 203; Derrida, 1991) and this is constructed through a discourse between texts (Foucault, 1998). This means my translation, although with the intention to stay

with original meanings, could actually be a process to produce my own ideas (Temple and Young, 2004). This introduces the risk of losing the real voices of my participants.

The study adopted a range of strategies to reduce the dangers. First of all, for materials that have their own English version, for example, laws, policies and government documents, the thesis uses the 'official' translation directly. This does not mean I agree with their terminological choices or I neglect the cultural and political implications of the translations, but I chose to treat these 'cultural realities' (Znaniecki, 1919) as part of the context. These official translations are marked in the thesis. Secondly, the thesis uses, or at least attempts to use, different styles to present different types of information. The quotes and posts from my participants or other disabled users were intended to be informal, oral, and literal. The formal materials, including laws, reports, and academic ideas that have no English versions, were translated with formal and written terms.

Whenever experiencing difficulties in finding the proper terms, the study kept Chinese characters with explanations of the meaning of them and the position of the term in Chinese culture, rather than finding equivalent English expressions. Scholars argue that the real dilemma in translation are the gaps and tensions between the two cultures:

> The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tired to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities. Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carriers, and evaluate the degree to which the two different worlds they inhabit are 'the same'
>
> Simon, 1996: 137

As stated and emphasised in previous chapters, the study did not intend to use western theories to represent or explain Chinese phenomena, which means 'the same' defined by Simon is hard to achieve. The thesis, therefore, uses Chinese terms such as *Danwei* directly, in italics. It will explain these terms in English to give a sense of what they are, or by extension, what the Chinese society is like.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explained the research methods used in the study. To meet its specialities, regarding the context of the under-development of disability studies in China, and to deliver the research aims of both the experience and practice of Chinese disabled people, the study designed its own research framework. This was based on the methodology of the grounded theory, and a combination of the critical realist agenda and the mixed method. It included two-stages research work, which were content analysis and in-depth interviews. The study employed a content analysis of two popular disability communities to give an overview of the 'scene'. It then designed and conducted in-depth interviews to produce detailed accounts. The procedures of the two methods were outlined in this chapter. The ethical and other reflections that emerged in the process were discussed, along with recognition of the limits of the study.

The following four chapters discuss the results obtained through applying this research strategy. Chapter 5 is based on the content analysis and presents what the key issues are in disabled people's digital life. Chapter 6, 7, and 8 are from the in-depth interviews. They display disabled people's internet use, including their experience and practice, in the economic, political, and cultural sectors.

Chapter 5 The Digital Life of Disabled People

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to give a broad overview of how disabled people used the internet and what issues they cared about in their digital life. The findings come from a content analysis of two famous disability online communities. As there are few studies about disabled people and the internet in China, the data presented here established the relevant areas for this research.

   The chapter starts with a brief description of the research fields, which are two Chinese disability online communities, the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar (abbreviated as the Post-bar in the thesis) and the Self-strengthen BBS (The BBS). The basic structure and characters of the communities are outlined. The chapter then presents an overview of the research results. This includes 22 themes that are categorised into 6 overarching concepts. The chapter explains the basis of these themes and their coverage in the disability communities.

   This is followed by an interpretation of those themes. The chapter examines the ways participants documented their everyday life; around the quotidian life, material barriers, disability identity and culture, and impairment. These were related to both communities. The analysis of the data suggests that the internet has produced a new narrative about disabled life in China. This is an emerging common awareness that was shared by some disabled internet users.

   The chapter then focuses on social relations as a popular thematic category, especially in Post-bar. The analysis of the data shows that disabled people used the internet to build relationships and meet their emotional needs. This has contributed to the emergence of identity groups. The last theme explored in the thesis is the politicisation of the communities, which was more obviously seen in the BBS. Policy issues and political practice were popular among some disabled users. Here the data suggests an approach to organisation and mobilisation, and an attempt to make political changes.

5.2 Research fields: Disability Communities

As explained in the methodology chapter, this study chose two of China's largest disability online communities, the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar and the Self-strengthen BBS, as its research fields. This section briefly describes these forums to contextualise the data.

5.2.1 Baidu Disabled People Post-bar

Baidu Disabled People Post-bar is one of the largest disability forums in China and the first result that comes up when search '*canjiRen*' (disabled people) with China's biggest search engine *Baidu*. It was established by a disabled user known as 'Dream of the sky' on 4 January 2009. Since then, the forum has experienced a rapid and significant expansion. In October 2014, when I started my fieldwork, the forum had 30,990 users and 3,342,544 posts. The figures increased to 57,620 and 6,204,616 by November 2016. The forum sees more than 200 posts every day and is popular for disabled people all over the country.

The Post-bar is a digital space *for* and *of* disabled people. It uses the platform services from Baidu, one of China's largest IT companies specializing in search and web services. The free service, which is designed for people to 'go to Post-bar, find your organization' (*shang tieba, zhao zuzhi*),[78] has been widely used in China and has produced more than 20 million post-bars and substantial cultures. It is particularly popular for people who are marginalised in offline China (Zhu, 2015). The Disabled People Post-bar is the largest post-bar under the category of 'health and humanities issues' (j*iankang he renwen yiti*). No statistical data has been found but it is commonly believed that most members are disabled people; a claim that has been substantiated by my long-time observation, and one which is maintained by the users. The vast majority of the posts focus on disability issues. The management team is comprised of disabled people. These meet some of the criteria in Oliver's definition (1991) for disability organisations. The Post-bar makes the assertion on its homepage that it is 'a place for disabled people's spiritual interaction'.

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78. See the homepage of *Baidu Post-bar* at http://tieba.baidu.com/ in Chinese. It needs to be pointed out that *Zuzhi*, translated as 'organization' here, is particularly important for Chinese people due to the collectivist ideology. This is related to *Danwei* as explained in Chapter 2.

This virtual, yet real, disability community is searchable and open for all. All Baidu post-bars are easy to find as the platform is tightly bound with *Baidu,* the most popular search engine provided by the same company. Posts here are free to read for all visitors. People who want to join in a post-bar can easily do so by logging into their *Baidu* account and pressing the 'join' button; there is no examination or verification process. The members of post-bars can publish text, pictures, and audio/video, and comment on others' posts. They can interact with other members by sending a direct message. With these settings, Baidu Disabled People Post-bar is an open forum; although its main focus, and the primary audience, is disabled people. It has no access barriers or requirements and the aim is to be a sphere for all Chinese disabled people who are able and willing to use it. According to Evsenbach and Till's (2001), this is a public space where materials can be used without the granting of informed consent.

Baidu post-bars are self-managed spaces/groups. Besides the ground rules and surveillance of internet use in China, for example the technological blocking of certain 'sensitive words', *Baidu* as a platform has no generic restrictions. Post-bars are established by individual users and managed by them in the ways they prefer. Users can freely post anything they want, unless it contains 'sensitive words'. Each post-bar, however, has its own rules and norms. Baidu Disabled

Picture 5-1 Baidu Disabled People Post-bar: Homepage

People Post-bar has a management team that is elected from the members and by the members. It has written rules proposed and agreed by the members. These are highlighted on its homepage (Picture 5-1) and based on this the management team has the power to delete posts considered 'improper' and can ban users for up to one month. Some of the key rules are:

> **Rule 3**: Posts that discriminate against disabled people, damage disable people's image, abuse other members, or contain practices that affect the harmony of the community like abuse, instigation, provocation, defamation and stigmatisation, are strictly forbidden. These posters will be banned for at least 1 day; serious transgressions can result in ban of 10+ days.
>
> **Rule 7:** Please respect other people's rights (privacy and portraiture right). Any posts talking about other people's name and gossiping without the person's permission will be deleted.
>
> **Rule 8:** Any posts affecting the Post-bar's administration, organisation, and order, will result in the users being banned for 1-10 days.
>
> **Criteria for 'honoured' Post**
>
> Video, pictures (best with text), meaningful, encouraging, etc.
> Discussions about disabled people
> More than 5 articles, or all high quality
>
> **NOTICE: Those who repeatedly break the rules will, after discussions with the members, be banned for a longer time and even forever.**

To sum up, Baidu Disabled People Post-bar is a self-managed forum *of* and *for* disabled internet users. It is open and public, and has its own aims, norms, and targeted audience. If we see the *Baidu* Platform as a cyber-society or at least a significant sphere of it, Baidu Disabled People Post-bar is an emerging disability community in this digital environment.

5.2.2 Self-strengthen BBS

Established in 2004 by an individual user, the Self-strengthen BBS self-claims to be the biggest disability e-community in China, which had 243,570 registered members and 181,838 posts by October 2014. This is an independent forum that shows no obvious links with other social agencies (the Post-bar is using services from *Baidu*) or other disability communities (the Post-bar links to and interacts with other post-bars like Blind People Post-bar and Disability Welfare Post-bar). Its structures and characters are outlined in the section.

Like the Post-bar, the BBS is a space/community *for* and *of* disabled users. It is the second result when the term '*canji ren*' (disabled people) is entered into the search box. The self-description is 'our disabled people's own sphere'. The members are mainly disabled people, and the posts are around disability issues; again this became evident from my long-term observation. This community has stronger boundaries compared to the Post-bar. Whilst most content is open for visitors to read, the forum has exclusive 'senior channels'. Only those who are registered can post and comment. To join in the group, people need to submit an application, through which they are vetted with questions like 'why would you like to join us'. This application is examined manually and approved or rejected by the management team. The community, therefore, is a much less inclusive and open forum. It should be noted that no posts in closed channels are quoted in the thesis, unless the writer was interviewed and gave permission.

The BBS has a set of rules and administrative practices, which have resulted in intragroup hierarchies. Those who are active and post more frequently are afforded higher levels of access and less surveillance in terms of what they post. New members, on the contrary, can only post in 'junior sub-forums' until they get enough credits to 'level up'. They also need an examination to attend group events, especially the offline ones. The community has a clear administration structure: it has six sub-forums, which have their own specific themes and a 'host'. People are required to post in relevant spaces otherwise their posts will be deleted. The host and other management staff are nominated from senior members but the prime leader of this community is assigned by its organiser. All these make the forum more structured but less active. Compared to the Post-bar, where each user posted 100 times on average, members of the BBS have only 0.74 posts per person. Only a certain section of its members are actively engaged in this community.

The other identifier of the community is its 'self-strengthen' culture. Unlike the Post-bar, where posts come mainly from individual and everyday use, the BBS has built up a set of values and norms that has been legitimated within the group. This is shown in its 'mission, slogans, and beliefs', which are 'marked' on the homepage (see Picture 5-2):

Picture 5-2 Self-strengthen BBS: Homepage

Our mission is to make disabled people visible in the public.

Our slogan is Self-respect, Self-confidence, Self-support, Self-strengthen [sizi spirit, the current disability orthodox, explained in Chapter 2]

Our beliefs are:

1) We will be rewarded by other people's gain, we exist because we are useful to the society.

2) Bridge for our disabled people, build friendship, live together.

3) More disabled, more endeavour, and more contribution to society.

This statement shows an individualist ideology, which is influenced by China's '*Sizi* (four self) spirit' narrative (discussed in Chapter 2). This account requires disabled people to fit into able-bodied discourse and make contribution as much as, or even more than, non-disabled people. It was proposed by certain members of the group, mainly the organiser, but has been legitimated as representing the 'core values' of the community and has been largely employed by the members. This factor was recognised and was examined in the subsequent research.

To sum up, the Self-strengthen BBS is an independent disability e-community that has a clear structure and strict management; much more so than Post-bar. It is less open and inclusive. The target, as shown in its 'missions' and 'beliefs', is more political and a group culture is emerging. Compared to Post-bar, the BBS is more like a disability organisation rather than an open identity group.

Table 5-1 summarises and compares the two disability communities for their settings, characters, and basic context when the analysis was conducted. In the following sections, the chapter presents key themes identified from them.

Table 5-1: The research fields (Data accessed on 23/10/2014)

	Baidu Disabled People Post-bar	Self-Strengthen BBS
Members	25,879	242,815
Posts	3,068,871	180,214
Establish time	4 Jan 2009	2004
Openness: Information	Open for all visitors	Open for all visitors
Openness: Participation	Members can post and comment	Members can post and comment in most channels; Senior members can use higher-level channels
Registration	Open for all Baidu Users	Open for application, applications need to be manually approved
Restrictions for non-disabled	No	No for registration, Yes for some events
Management team	Elected from members (bottom to top)	Management staff nominated from members; Leader assigned by the organiser
Organisation	Written rules; Less strict practices	Written rules and values, clear targets, strict practices
Links	Based on general service; Linked with other post-bars	No clear evidence for linking with other social agencies
Nature	The disability group in the cyberspace	An independent sphere of, and for, disabled people

5.3 Research results

In the following sections the thesis presents the results of the content analysis. Posts from the two forums were analysed and themed according to a framework that was built up from the data. 22 key themes were identified and then merged into six over-arching categories. The section starts with a broad overview of the themes, including their meaning and coverage. It then explains the personal use of the internet, which includes four dimensions that were similarly found in both the forums. What follows is social use and then political use. They were found to be slightly different in the two forums, showing two directions in the formation of the respective disability communities.

5.3.1 Overview

As stated in the methodology chapter, the study analysed 2,515 explicit topics from the two communities. This produced 22 key themes as listed in Table 5-2.

These themes were categorised into 6 aspects, which are the quotidian Life, material barriers, disability identity and culture, impairment, social relations, and political issues. The definitions of them are:

1) **The quotidian life:** These topics mostly focus on what life is like for the posters. They range from very mundane and everyday issues, such as what people eat and what their room looks like, to topics around travel, holidays, and hobbies, which are 'higher-need' in China's discourse.

2) **Material barriers:** These topics concentrate on socio-economic barriers the participants experienced in their daily life, including accessibility, employment, education, and finance. These suggest how disabled people are oppressed in China's material settings.

3) **Disability identity and culture**: Topics in this category reflect people's experience and practice in China's current discourse. These include discrimination, its influences on people's emotions, and the participants' personal and group response to the disabling culture.

Table 5-2: Disabled people's internet use by themes categories

Themes	Post-bar	BBS
The quotidian life*	**18.59%**	**14.82%**
Basic needs: clothes, food, home, transportation	6.25%	3.88%
Higher needs: environment, beauty, sex, shopping, exercise, hobbies, entertainment, pet	12.34%	10.93%
Material barriers	**16.14%**	**22.31%**
Employment (excluding e-employment)	9.20%	7.97%
E-employment	3.03%	2.73%
Education	1.64%	7.97%
Accessibility	0.19%	3.64%
Financial	2.07%	/
Disability identity and culture	**17.48 %**	**19.59%**
Discrimination & stereotype	2.70%	4.78%
Feelings & emotions	6.60%	1.14%
Disability identity (personal)	5.93%	2.05%
Disability image & culture (collective)	1.98%	11.62%
Impairment and the body	**6.74%**	**7.75%**
Impairment	1.73%	1.14%
Health (not impairment-related)	3.23%	2.51%
Rehabilitation & care	1.78%	4.10%
Social relations	**27.22%**	**9.11%**
Romantic relations	13.15%	2.05%
Intragroup interaction and relations	8.24%	3.87%
Friendship	3.28%	/
Other: family, professional and employment	2.56%	3.19%
Political	**13.82%**	**26.42%**
Law & Policies (excluding welfare and benefits)	0.39%	1.59%
Welfare & Benefits	3.66%	11.62%
Online grouping	9.45%	11.16%
Disability movement	0.34%	2.05%

* This 'basic-higher need' division is a special notion and will be explained later on.

4) **Impairment issues:** these topics focus on impairment, health issues, and care and rehabilitation. They reflect physical and biological experience of the disabled participants.

5) **Social relations**: these topics record and reflect the participants' social relations including their difficulties and needs. Popular themes include romantic relations and friendship. The category also includes the digital intragroup relations, which emerged as an essential theme.

6) **Political issues:** These topics look at the political settings and practices that construct disability, such as policies and disability welfare, and the users' reflective response, such as online networking and e-movements. Disabled people voiced their views through these posts.

The study used this framework to analyse the posts and document how the internet was used by Chinese disabled people. Three general approaches were found: the personal, the social, and the political use of the internet.

Firstly, disabled users in both communities recorded and presented their personal daily life on the internet. This included four dimensions: the quotidian life (18.59% in the Post-bar and 14.82% in the BBS), material barriers (16.14% & 22.31%), disability identity and culture (17.48% & 19.69%), and impairment-related issues. While the first three themes were popular, the last was less likely to be talked about in both the Post-bar (6.74%) and the BBS (7.75%).

The second type, the social use of the internet, was more obviously shown in the Post-bar. Social relations, including the participants' relations with partner, friends, family, and other people/agencies, was the most popular category in the space, with 27.12% posts. This was noticeable in the BBS as well, with 9.11% coverage, but less popular (the second smallest category). The opposite was evident regarding the political use of the internet. Political issues, regarding policies, practices, and reflective actions around this identity group, were the largest category (26.42%) in the BBS. It was also found in the Post-bar (13.82%) but only as the second smallest sector. The two communities therefore showed different approaches in terms of their non-daily use of the internet.

In the Post-bar

In the BBS
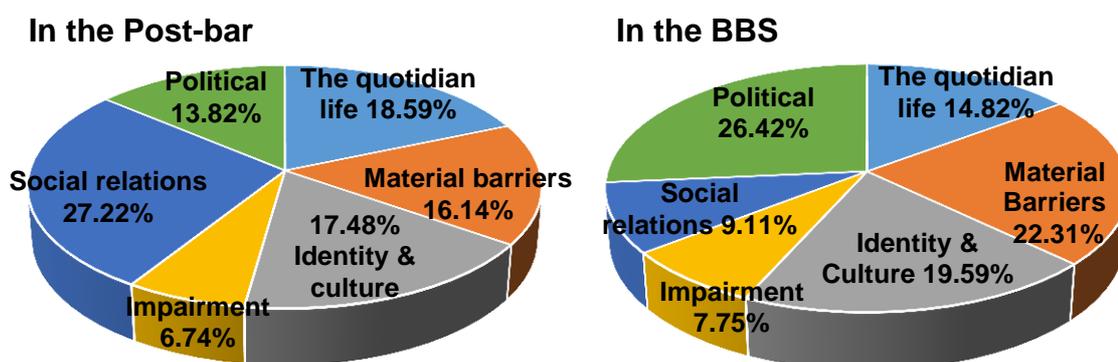
Figure 5-1: Themes categories: proportions

In the Post-bar

In the BBS
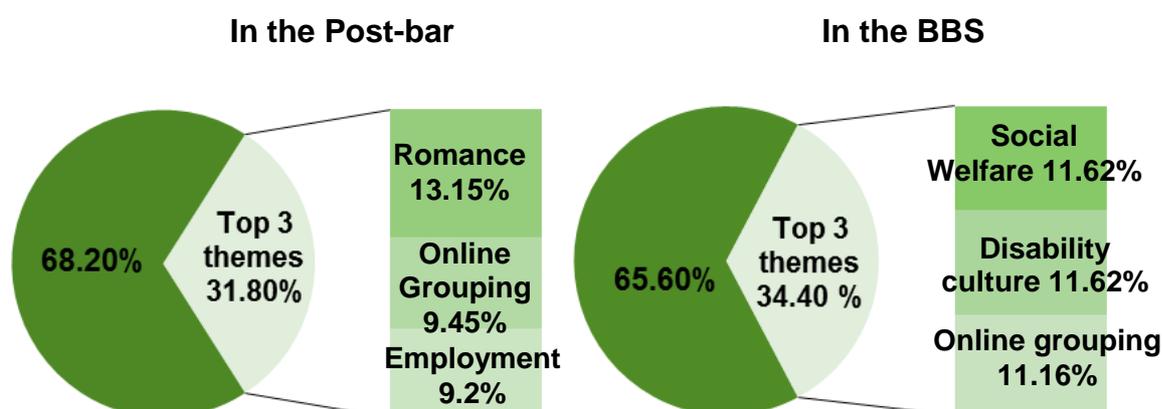
Figure 5-2: Popular themes in the two communities

Figure 5-1 illustrates the coverage of the categories. In terms of the specific themes, the two communities had different focuses (see Figure 5-2). The three most popular themes in the Post-bar were romance (13.15%, social relations), online grouping (9.45%, political), and employment (9.2%, material barriers), which together made up about one-third of the content.[79] The BBS focused more on political issues, including social welfare (11.62%), online grouping (11.16%), and disability culture (11.62%). Between the two communities, the BBS was more likely to give rise to issues from a political and collective perspective.

The following sections explain these themes in detail, with examples from the two communities. This starts with documentation of the disabled life which includes four themed categories.

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79. It is shown in Table 5-2 (pp. 121) that 'Higher needs' under the theme of 'the quotidian life' is high (12.34%). This is sub-theme, a range of specific themes, and is therefore not listed here. It is same for the BBS.

5.3.2 To document everyday activities

In both communities, disabled people recorded and presented their personal life around the quotidian life, socio-economic barriers, and, disability identity and culture. There was a smaller number of posts about the body and impairment. Definitions and examples of these themes are given below.

5.3.2.1 The quotidian life

Table 5-3: The quotidian life: themes and proportions

Living with impairment		On the Post-bar	On The BBS
Basic needs	Clothing	0.43%	/
	Food & Drink	3.66%	/
	Home	0.48%	1.37%
	Driving	0.96%	0.46%
	Public transportation	0.72%	2.05%
'Higher' needs	Weather	1.64%	1.14%
	Beauty	1.45%	/
	Sex*	0.87%	/
	Shopping	0.92%	/
	Hobbies	3.18%	3.42%
	Exercises & Travel	0.63%	3.42%
	Entertainment	2.99%	2.96%
	Pet	0.67%	/
In total		**18.59%**	**14.82%**

* Sex is a basic need in the western/international understandings of human rights. But it is regarded as a higher need in Chinese *Yishizhuxing* discourse as explained below.

Recording and presenting everyday life was popular among disabled users from both communities. These posts consisted of 18.59% of the Post-bar as the second largest category, and an appreciable part of the BBS (14.82%). Most of the posts were casual and fragmented, in short sentence(s) such as:

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

Post 2: It's getting cold, I have already worn my jacket. Can't believe it, it's just November!

Post 3: My room is so so so cold. I need a new heater.

Table 5-3 outlines the themes identified in this sector under two levels: basic needs and the so called 'Higher needs'. This classification is based on China's categorisation of needs, that food, clothing, housing and transportation (driving and public transport), phrased as *yishizhuxing* in Chinese, are the basic living needs[80] and any needs and activities beyond these are understood as 'higher needs'. This is a narrow interpretation of human rights which was explained in Chapter 3. The study identified 6.25% posts in the Post-bar, and 3.88% in the BBS, talking about the basic living needs of disabled life. The users presented what they ate and wore, where they were living and the situation of their home, and how they used public transportation or drove to get around. Themes around 'higher needs' were more popular, with 12.34% coverage in the Post-bar and 10.93% in the BBS.

These posts did not have explicit references to impairment or disability. The posts presented above, 'this is my lunch' and 'my room is so so so cold. I need a heater', can be seen in any digital medium and by any internet users. Although the writers were self-presented as disabled people, posts categorised under this theme did not explicitly centre on disability. For example, the analysis sampled two posts from a wheelchair-using traveller. One is a video presenting how he packed up, went out, and got a taxi to the railway station, and then recorded the scene. The other is a 'diary' about how difficult it is to get a taxi in a less-developed city. Although the posts were from the same user, and environmental barriers were suggested in both, the first one was themed as 'travel' as part of mundane activities, and the other as 'accessibility', which is a key topic in the social barrier theme. This is because, as stated in the methodology chapter, the study examined explicit and self-reported topics. The focus was on the actual experience of disabled people rather than on my over-interpretation, as the aim was to explore the breadth of the internet use rather than depth.

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80. From *Three Principles of The People* by China's pioneer nationalist Sun Yat-sen. The notion is a part of a set of values in the Chinese discourse. It is related to the 'development priority' discourse and the narrow definition of human rights as explained in Chapter 2.

These posts, although less disability-bounded, deliver a general message of what a disabled life is like in China. The mundane activities presented in the digital communities offer a lens for examining disabled people's everyday living and experiences. They constitute the phenomenological basis for a new disability narrative. This assumes that the main members of the two online communities are disabled people.

5.3.2.2 Social barriers

Social barrers was another category that was popular across both communities (16.14% in the Post-bar and 22.31% in the BBS). This refers to socio-economic settings and practices in China's current society and the barriers disabled users were experiencing. More specifically it involves five themes: accessibility, employment, education, finance, and e-employment. Table 5-4 and Figure 5-3 display the coverage of these themes. The section then explains their notions and popular forms.

Table 5-4: Social Barriers themes: numbers

Themes	Post-bar	BBS
Employment	191	35
E-employment	63	12
Education	34	35
Accessibility	4	16
Finance	43	/
In total	335	98

Figure 5-3: Barriers themes: proportions
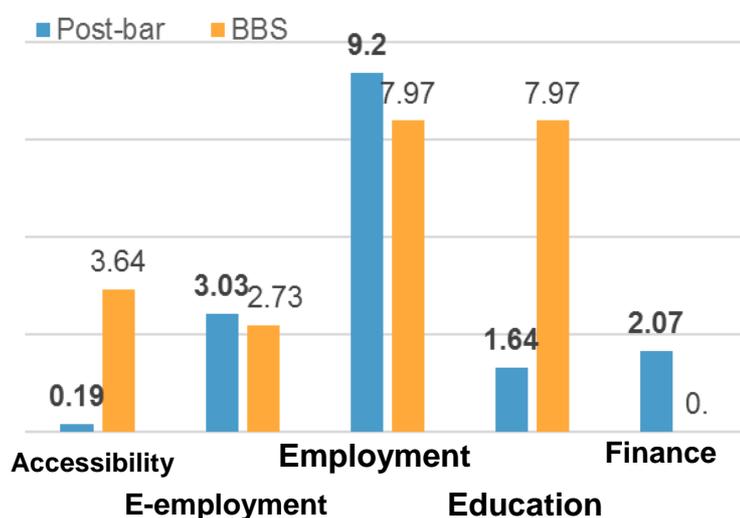
The most significant theme here was employment. Both the forums suggested a high popularity of conversations about jobs (9.20% in the Post-bar as the third largest theme, 7.97% in the BBS as the fourth). These included: 1) these users' need to find a job; for example, 'does anyone know any job open for disabled people? I desperately need one', this was the most popular thread in this theme; 2) the users' experiences in workplace, like 'my manager yelled at me today, I

felt so sad. I am a hard-working employee, why treat me like this'; and 3) news and policies about disability employment,[81] for example, information like 'there will be a new factory built in *** [place] and I heard there will be a lot positions for disabled people' was shared in a post, along with encouragements like 'let's go and apply for one'. In various forms, these posts reveal the fact that disabled users were experiencing barriers and difficulties in the job market. They also point to the paucity of work information. Disabled people used the internet for help because they had nowhere else to go. This is later substantiated in the interviews and will be presented in Chapter 6 about disability employment.

E-employment was also a strong theme. Relevant posts included enquiries like 'I'm considering running an e-shop in *Taobao*, any suggestions my friends?', life-records including 'the 163rd day of my little shop, today I sold 16 cloths, earning ￥ 200. Happy!', and discussions such as 'I bet digital working is the future. What do you think?'. Although the proportions were not very high (3.03% in the Post-bar and 2.73% in the BBS), these posts usually received more comments and sometimes produced public discussions. For example, 54 comments were found on the post asking for advice for a *Taobao* e-shop, varying from direct responses such as 'cloth's always a good option' and 'You need to have something special', to debates about whether an e-shop is a realistic way to make money. This saw both negative accounts, such as 'I don't think it's good for us. You still have to go out to buy products', and optimistic accounts, like 'last comment is stupid. Don't you know we can order online?'. The optimistic account, as suggested in this analysis, dominated both the communities. These posts indicate that many disabled users viewed e-employment as an alternative route to social inclusion. They then started to take the opportunity in individual or collective forms.

For the other three themes, the two disability communities showed a different situation. The BBS contained posts around education (7.97%) and accessibility (3.64%), which were less popular in the Post-bar (1.64% and 0.19%). It had no posts around personal financial situation which was discernible in the Post-bar (2.07%). Besides the statistical difference, the analysis of the posts suggested different accounts. For example, education posts in the BBS were primarily non-

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81. Some posts here were counted twice in both 'employment' and 'policy'. This is the reason my 2597 posts produced 2996 topics.

personal information. The typical form was 'Good news! This one-handed boy received an offer from the *Renmin* University (a top university in China)' or 'Did you read the new report? More than half of disabled kids are not in education'. Relevant posts in the Post-bar, although less popular, stemmed mainly from direct experiences, like 'I failed the exam! Sad!' or 'I can't decide my subject, any suggestions?'. The same situation was found in accessibility. Posts around accessibility in the Post-bar focused on individual experience, such as 'I went to ** [a shopping mall] today but the lift there was out of use. Can't believe it. For a huge new mall?'. These posts in the BBS were more from a social perspective, for examples, news 'Shanghai has just got 5000 new taxis, which are accessible for wheelchair users! Wow!', and public debates such as 'what do you think about the accessible taxi, an achievement or a gimmick'.

The Post-bar, therefore, showed a phenomenological and individual approach, whilst the BBS was more politicised. This is not to say social or political issues were not identified in the Post-bar or personal accounts were missed in the BBS. However, from a general perspective, the Post-bar was more informal, daily and rooted in personal accounts. This was seen in term of financial posts. The theme was only found in the Post-bar, usually describing the users' financial crisis; for example, 'I have ¥50 only for this month. How am I supposed to survive?'. It was not found in the sampled posts from the BBS.

To sum up, disabled people presented their economic life on the internet in various forms, amongst which employment was the key theme. These posts in general delivered the message that disabled people were highly marginalised in China's current socio-economic structure. They used the internet to attempt to find a solution.

5.3.2.3 Disability identity and discourse

The chapter now moves on to explore how people used the internet to document the psycho-cultural dimension of their life. These included discrimination and its impact on these users' feelings and emotions, and how people responded to it, through and on the internet. Table 5-5 outlines the identified themes and their coverage.

Table 5-5: Psycho-cultural themes and their coverage

Themes	In the Post-bar		In the BBS	
Discrimination & stereotypes	56	2.70%	21	4.78%
Feelings and emotions	137	6.60%	5	1.14%
Disability identity (personal)	123	5.93%	9	2.05%
Disability image & culture (collective)	39	1.98%	52	11.62%
In total	**355**	**17.48%**	**87**	**19.59%**

The first theme is discrimination and stereotypes. The last section examined how disabled users presented the difficulties they experienced in offline China. Similar experience in the cultural field were also identified, in posts such as 'I don't like the way people look at me, like I am dying, really useless, like I am not a man'. This constituted 2.70% of the Post-bar and 4.78% of the BBS.

The Post-bar contained a discernible amount of discussions (137 topics, 6.60%) on personal feelings and emotions, which is clearly a result of China's disablism. These posts usually used explicit terms like 'sad', 'lonely', or 'angry' to describe their psychological condition. The central account was pessimistic feelings, such as 'I was really sad when my colleague called me "that short man". Yes, I cried, I can't sleep but keep thinking why people are so cruel'. Posts under this theme showed the psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999) in China.

The third theme in the category, disability identity, refers to posts about the users' sense of self and their understanding of disability identity. Compared to direct and temporary feelings at a specific moment and/or of a specific event, which were themed as 'feelings and emotions', these posts suggested people's long-standing sense of self. This theme was popular in the Post-bar with 123 posts (5.93% of the whole content). Most of them were 'negative'. For example, a poster described himself as, 'I know I'm not an attractive man, I am disabled, ugly and not funny'. He repeated this self-identification in another post as 'I can never be a valuable person'.

Personal emotions and identity were less popular in the BBS, with only 5 and 9 posts respectively. Rather, the BBS focused on the image and culture of disabled

people from the collective perspective. 11.62% of the posts were identified around what disability is and how disabled people should think of themselves. The central account was an 'encouraging' narrative that was suggested in 9.57% posts. For example:

> I just read a story about a lovely, brave disabled person. [link attached]
>
>> [The original post]: I lost my legs because of Poliomyelitis when I was 23. I really felt I had no future any more. But I have a family to feed. So I made myself sticks using waste materials, and started to work like a normal person [*zhengchang ren*]. I farm, I work as a mover using my hands [photos attached here], I even learn how to fix cars. I want to prove that I'm not useless to the society. I want to be a good husband and a good dad. And I did it!
>
> I am so encouraged! How amazing he is! Shouldn't we all learn from him? So I really want you to know this story. Work hard, guys! (including me!).

This was similar to the 'triumph over adversity' narrative, which, according to Berger (2009), refers to the unrealistic expectations about what disabled people can achieve, or what they should achieve, if only they tried hard enough. Such a narrative is in accord with the name of the group and its self-strengthen culture (as stated earlier in this chapter and will be further examined in Chapter 8). It was also sensed in the Post-bar but less popular (1.98% coverage). Although an deep explanation cannot be made without more empirical data, the popularity of this theme echoes individualism and the development-priority ideology as presented in Chapter 2.

5.3.2.4 Impairment related issues
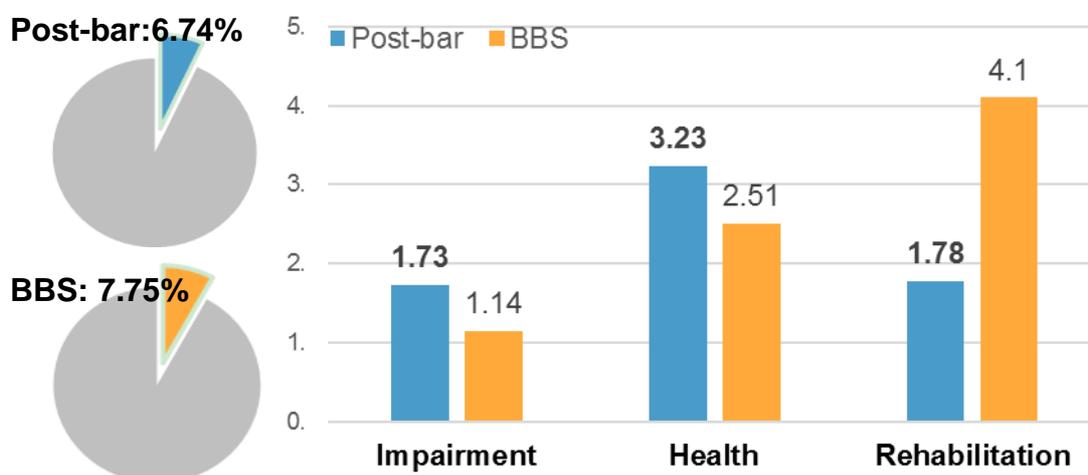
Figure 5-4: Impairment-related themes in disability communities

The last theme identified in this section is impairment-related issues. These included impairment effects, health issues, and rehabilitation and care. The first two were personal issues about the users' body. The last was around the medical and rehabilitation settings and the users' experiences of them.

As shown in Figure 5-4, themes in this category constituted only a small part of the disability communities (6.74% in the Post-bar and 7.75% in the BBS; the smallest category in both). More specifically, direct talk about impairment effects was the least popular theme (1.73% and 1.14%). Health issues, which had no obvious links to impairment and were not recognised as impairment-related by the writer, were slightly more popular (3.23% in the Post-bar and 2.51% in the BBS). For example, the members may simply have said 'I have a cold' in their posts, without saying whether this was related to his/her impairment or not.

The 'individual vs. social' differentiation is also reflected in this theme. The Post-bar had a slightly higher coverage of personal issues regarding impairment effects and health, in posts like 'my body gets worse, so much pain' and 'I have a cold'. What is special is their common use of photos. The body and impairment was not only talked about but was also visibly presented. The BBS, on the contrary, was the space where rehabilitation and care issues were discussed. Similar to other themes in the community, these posts were social and public, focusing on rehabilitation settings and non-personal information for example 'FD hospital now has a free medical test for people with poliomyelitis. Let's go'. Personal issues were less publicised, especially private photos.

The relative absence of impairment-related issues echoes Dauncey's work on disability discourse. By reading biographical books of a disabled writer, Dauncey (2012) found that some disabled people felt uncomfortable for the 'over-egg the illness angle' which may be a main focus of state-sponsored narratives. The data in this study supports this argument by showing that when disabled people have ownership of their own stories, the tropes around the body were significantly cut down. A similar situation has been found in other contexts and may be explained with the following theories: 1) impairment has become the norm for disabled people and only when their body changes will they comment on it (Watson,2002) 2) the internet has provided an opportunity for disabled people to conceal their

impairment and their disability identity, which is a key benefit of internet use (Bowker and Tuffin, 2002); 3) the body is a private issue in Chinese discourse and is not encouraged to appear in the public sphere (Lee, 1981); 4) regarding rehabilitation and assistance, the lack of medical institutions and services in China (see Chapter 2) may cause an absence of relevant experience. While these theories are helpful in providing angles at which such a topic can be understood, a definite explanation for this in this specific context cannot be given until more empirical data is obtained. Here the data just reveals the fact that impairment was absent in online disability forums.

5.3.2.5 Summary

This section examined how disabled people used the internet to document their everyday life in four aspects. In both the communities, the users talked about their mundane activities, material barriers, and disability identity. They were less likely to present impairment-related issues in digital public spaces. Within this statistically-similar pattern, disability communities suggested two different approaches. The Post-bar attracted a phenomenological account which prefers personal, direct experiences. The BBS, although also based on personal stories, suggested a social and collective approach, which produced formal accounts and the politicisation of disability issues.

These posts have contributed to the formation of disability narratives. There have been arguments about how autobiographical narratives can 'give voice to oppositional or counterhegemonic way of knowing' (Perkins, 2000: xii). This was happening in China's cyberspace, albeit at an early stage. Some brief messages were delivered, such as the fact that disabled people were highly marginalised in the socio-economic system, especially in the job market; they were culturally devalued in able-bodied discourse; and they were using the internet as a way to find a job, or to build a new identity, one in which the body and impairment was downplayed or even silenced. This is an ongoing and dis-organised process in which notions and accounts are newly emerging. The findings of this study support Dauncey's (2012, 2013a) argument that there is a new trend for Chinese disabled people to reclaim the ownership of their life story. Their recording and presentation is prevalent and rapidly growing in the digital world.

5.3.3 To socialise on/through the internet

This section examines posts around social relations and presents evidence of how disabled people used the internet, especially the Post-bar, to socialise. Social relations was the largest theme (27.12%) in the Post-bar and a visible category in the BBS (8.8%, but as the second least popular). This included posts on romance, friendship, family relations, relations within the communities, and other social ties; among which romance and intragroup relations were central. Table 5-6 outlines the notions of these themes and their coverage in the communities. This section then explains the two prominent themes in detail.

Table 5-6: Social relations: Notions and proportions

Themes	Notions	Post-bar	BBS
Romance	Issues of love, dating and marriage, including posts seeking a partner, and complaints about their excluded position in intimate relations.	13.15%	2.05%
Disability groups relations	Interactions and relations within the internet-based groups	8.24%	3.87%
Friendship	Posts about their experiences of friendship in online/offline world, apart from friendship built up in the community	3.28%	/
Family Relations	The users' relations with family members, characterised by a sense of guilty	1.30%	0.23%
Other social ties	Other types of social relations such as working relations, neighbourliness, doctor-patient relations, and so on	1.16%	2.73%
In total		**27.12%**	**8.88%**

Romantic relations was the most popular theme in the Post-bar (13.15%) and it was presented usually in three forms. The first, and the most common form, was 'advertisements' seeking partners. For example, a user advertised his personal information to look for a wife:

> I am a 23 years old man, only a bit physically disabled. 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.

This partner-seeking practice was also reflected in group events. The analysis included a blind-date activity in the Post-bar in July 2014, started from a post announcing a match-up event for the group members. The 'host', a senior user of the Post-bar, asked people who wanted to find a partner to give personal information and 'preferences' and claimed that she would arrange private online chatting for those she thought 'suitable'. As shown in the number of comments and following posts, hundreds of people participated in the event, making it a 'remarkable event in our Post-bar's history', as stated in another sampled post. Online partner-seeking, no matter whether through personal advertisement or collective events, shows the emotional needs of these members. It implies that disabled people are experiencing difficulties in obtaining intimate relations in China's offline world.

This was more directly seen in the second form, complaints about disabled peoples' vulnerable position in romantic relations. For example, a post claimed 'I know all women like rich, handsome, and healthy men, can anyone see me?'. It received comments like 'That's us disabled men, what did you expect?'. The last form of this theme was discussions about love and marriage for disabled people. For example, the post 'I am a disabled girl. Is it possible to find a non-disabled boyfriend? I just think at least one person in the family needs to be able to take care of it' caused a hot debate in its comments. These included various topics ranging from whether disabled people can and should find a non-disabled person to the position of men and women in family. Such discussions were seen in the BBS as its most popular form of romantic posts (the BBS had 2.05% posts around romantic posts only).

The high popularity of this theme suggests that disabled people in China were excluded from romantic relations. In his anthropological study, Kohrman (2005) found that Chinese disabled people experience marriage exclusion. This study supports this argument and further argues that, disabled people had to use the internet to cross geographical barriers and build online relations because their needs could not be met anywhere else. Finding a partner was a primary aim, at least for some users in the Post-bar.

The other central theme was relations within the disability communities. This refers to interactions and relations developed in the forums; including daily and informal greetings like 'morning, how are you guys today' and 'Happy birthday to...', direct interpersonal interactions like 'I really like your post about online business, really helpful' and 'I hate you, ***[another user]. Your words [posts] were full of lies and malice. Get out of our Post-bar', and relations between common users and the management team such as 'why did *** [a member in the management team] delete my posts, really unfair'. Relevant posts constituted 8.24% of the Post-bar and 3.87% of the BBS, suggesting the emergence of digital relations. Members of the forums had no previous links. However, based on the same identity and through regular cyber participation they were forming networks that were even stronger than those they had in reality.

These digital relations are significant. From the individual level, they meet disabled people's emotional and communication needs, which is a priority need of Chinese disabled people (Guo, Bricout and Huang, 2005). This was reflected in poetic expressions, which is particular popular in the Post-bar, such as 'since I found you, I don't need anyone anymore. This [the Post-bar] is my family. This is where I belong', and 'So happy to have this group. Every time I feel sad, I come here and talk. Thank you all for listening and accompanying, my forever friends'. It has great potential in connecting Chinese disabled people, who were segregated in the offline world. The regular internet and cyber participation allow people to communicate and interact, through which a shared identity is constructed and a collective force is formed.

In summary, the popularity of social relations shows the excluded position of disabled people in offline China. In response, they used the internet to reduce communication barriers and develop digital relations, especially romantic and intragroup ones. This was popular especially in the more inclusive and easy-to-use Post-bar. The next section examines the last form, the political use of the internet, which was more obviously identified in the BBS.

5.3.4 To make a difference

The last approach identified in the analysis is the political use of the internet, including discussions about policy settings; such as laws, policies, and welfare services, and reflective practices of disabled users such as online grouping and activisms. This was the largest category in the BBS with 26.42% posts. It was noticeable in the Post-bar as well (13.82%), of which the majority was online networking (9.45%). Table 5-7 outlines the notions and coverage of the themes.

Table 5-7: Political conversations: notions and proportions

Themes	Definitions	Post-bar	BBS
Laws & Policies	Information, complaints, and discussions (attack or defence) about disability laws and policies (excluding social welfare).	0.39%	1.59%
Welfare & Benefits	Social welfare policies, their practices and the impact on disabled people's lives, mainly those on 'low-income benefits' and 'special benefits for disabled people'.	3.66%	11.62%
Online Grouping	Organisation and management of the groups, and their collective events in both the online and offline world	9.45%	11.16%
Disability movement	Political and cultural campaigns in which the group users were involved, directly or indirectly.	0.34%	2.05%
In total		**13.82%**	**26.42%**

Disability welfare and benefits was the most popular theme among all in the BBS (11.62%). Relevant posts were information, discussions, and complaints about China's welfare system and benefit policy. They usually stemmed from a political perspective. For example, the BBS had a post encouraging its members to apply for disability benefits, which was 'marked' in its homepage.

> I didn't know there are so many disabled people who don't know about the new benefits, until someone asked in my QQ [a SMS software] group. Here are things you should know. The policy is designed for…
>
> In order to get it, you need to have these documents….
>
> I hope everyone can go to apply! As far as I know we only have a few disability benefits, don't miss this one! Even if you can't get it, applying

shows the demand. The more people apply, the more possible they will increase the opportunities later on.

Similar posts were identified in the Post-bar as well (3.66%), but mainly from the personal perspective. For example, this post described the writer's financial difficulties and need for support:

> My name is *** [looks like a real name] and I am living in *** [looks like a real address]. I'm a 45-year-old man with serious nerve palsy. I used to be a normal man [*zhengchang ren*], having a good job, and a happy family. But 9 years ago, a disease took away everything. I can't work now, neither can my wife, because she has to look after me; we have used up all our money. I have got the disability benefits but ¥200 [£23] does not help. Is there any benefit I can apply for? Please help me!! Many thanks!

Both the posts, clearly, point to the absence of disability benefits in China. The BBS post considered it from a social perspective, by sharing information in the group, offering practical guidance, and, more interestingly, encouraging all users to apply 'even if you can't get it'. Disability benefits was seen as a rights issue and its insufficient provision was directly mentioned. The members were encouraged to take action and speak out in their own way (through applying). The posts in the Post-bar, on the contrary, were individual. It was firmly based on personal situations and the aim was to get direct support for the poster himself. Even so, this theme consisted of only 3.66% of posts. Disability welfare and benefits were less popular in the Post-bar.

Online grouping was a significant theme in both the BBS (11.16%, the third largest theme) and the Post-bar (9.45%, the second largest theme). Posts under this theme were related to intragroup relations (examined in the last section), but were developed and systematised. For example, the post saying 'I hate you. Your posts were full of lies. Get out of our Post-bar' was coded as an interaction between the group users, while a post announcing 'Here are the rules of our Post-bar, anyone against them is not welcome' was themed as online organising. The BBS showed an obvious dominance of this theme. It had more relevant posts, and a better-developed set of norms and practices; for example, very specific guidance for group events and a clearer administration structure. It also showed a developing group culture and legitimation of it. These characteristics suggest the BBS as approaching a formal organisation and a political agenda.

The last form of political usage was disability activism. The proportion was low, only 2.05% in the BBS, and even less in the Post-bar (0.34%). However, in the Chinese context where disability activism has seldom been practiced, the emerging actions, either individual or collective and clearly-targeted or not, are significant. Most these posts identified in the study were personal, implicit, and indirect; especially those from the Post-bar. For example, a member from the Post-bar shared his story about a petition for more disability benefits. This received a lot of encouraging comments but this did not help the activism. There were a few posts from the BBS talking about a formal disability activism. This included a post calling for participants for an e-campaign.

> All disabled sisters and brothers, don't stay 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. It's 1000m for 100 people. It will be a shock if we have 10000 people! Trust yourself! Don't think you are useless, never! We are the new cyber disabled people, and we can change history!!!

This post was part of a digital movement which had a specific political target and a series of collective practices. However, this was rare and most sampled posts were in the early stage of political practices. The statistical result echoes China's 'strong state, weak society' regime (discussed in Chapter 2) and the lack of disability agency (see Chapter 3). Still, it shows a growing interest in political issues and the possibility of constructing disability as a political issue.

To sum up, this section presented the political experiences and practices of disabled internet users, identified from the two disability communities. Online grouping was found to be a key theme and a crucial step in the process in both the forums. Besides this, the BBS showed a stronger preference towards political themes and activities.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented disabled people's internet use in two disability forums, the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar and the Self-strengthen BBS, in three forms. First was life-recording. Disabled internet users documented their daily life on the internet, with focuses on mundane activities, social barriers and disability

identity, and with fewer postings around impairment. Secondly, the analysis identified the social use of the internet that was more obvious in the Post-bar, amongst which romance and intragroup relations were centralised. The last form was politicisation of the internet. Disabled people used public e-communities, especially the BBS, to organise and mobilise. This suggests their agency and the potential to challenge disabling structures.

Presentation of daily life was the primary use of the internet by Chinese disabled people. This is different from previous studies. Guo, Bricout and Huang (2005) found in their research that the main aim of Chinese disabled people's internet use was to communicate and socialise. Whilst this is an expansive topic it has been superseded. Building social relations was indicated as a central theme in the study, especially in the Post-bar. However, the majority of posts was about day-to-day living. The users presented topics that were generated from their own daily experiences. They used narrative accounts like 'I' and 'my' rather than conversational terms. Most of the posts in the two forums were one-sided conversations with only one participant, the poster. The thesis therefore argues that the main influence of the internet for disabled people in 2014 is a digital sphere, where their lives can be reported and their voices can be heard.

Besides the online presentation of lives, two different approaches to internet use were identified in the study. The Post-bar showed an obvious preference for building social relations, through which disabled people's emotional needs were supposed to be met. The BBS, at the same time, claimed a political direction within its discussions and activities. A further examination of this differentiation is presented in Chapter 8, where the thesis discusses the emerging 'community consciousness'. However, it needs to be clarified that disabled people's postings are of course not separated or neatly divided into the two forums. The BBS users did talk about social relations, especially intragroup relations, while political posts were found in the Post-bar. Also, it is possible that the two digital groups overlap. People may be a member of both but participate in them differently.

This chapter did not intend to give a deep explanation of the communities nor did it attempt to define a quantitative pattern for internet use in China. Instead, it gave a brief oversight of disabled people's internet use and their digital life in

their communities. The findings presented in this chapter depict the scope, that internet use is regular for some disabled people; it is based on their daily life; and is embedded in the multiple aspects of this living. They echo the theoretical framework of the study, that researching disability in China needs to examine the multiple levels/dimensions of the disabled experience with attentions both on structure and on agency.

The findings of the content analysis helped to form the topic guide, although the interviews were flexible in practice. The key dimensions/themes identified in this analysis, including material barriers, social relations, disability identity and culture, and the politicisation of the internet, formed the basis of the interview questions; if they were not mentioned by the participants in the first instance. They were explored, not as pre-set hypotheses but as possible themes, to generate the findings to be presented in the following chapters. Of all the socio-economic themes, employment was the most central. This was emphasised as a key aspect of the disabled life in both the posts and the interviews, and produced an examination of people's experiences and practices for economic goals on the internet, which is discussed in Chapter 6. Building social relations and conducting political practices were found to combine and interact; from the quantitative data but more evidently in the interviews. This produced a detailed discussion of the political use of the internet, which is presented in Chapter 7. Lastly, disability identity and culture were explored in the study, not only as the cultural dimension of the disabled life, but also as a reflection of the interaction between structure and agency. This is discussed in Chapter 8.

Chapter 6 Disability Employment in the Cyber Market

6.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the potential offered by information and communication technologies in disability employment. The roles of the Internet for economic developed have been well documented in the academia and an 'e-economy' in China has been proposed (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2007; Tai, 2013). However, although offering changes, the internet is an agent for both inclusion and segregation. This chapter focuses on how participants used the internet for economic gains. It then discusses the impact of this on social inclusion.

The notion of employment has changed in China. It has moved from a patriotic and arranged duty to an individual responsibility (Person, Wong and Pierini, 2002). The collapse of the *Danwei* system and the introduction of a market-oriented economy have caused a previously absent social issue: unemployment. This has significantly altered opportunities for disabled people. According to an official report, Chinese disabled people experience a higher unemployment rate than their non-disabled peers (CDPF, 2015). Policies like the compulsory employment quota (Shang, 2000; Pierini, Person and Wong, 2001), the tax-refund policy, and work allocation in welfare factories (Huang, 2007), have been launched to tackle this problem. However, no equal opportunity legislation has been established so far and these charity-oriented policies have not been properly implemented.

This has had a significant impact on disabled people's lives, especially when welfare provision is absent. The reform has withdrawn China's *Danwei*-based egalitarian benefits and the accompanying safety net that provided, replacing it with a workfare agenda (Yang, 2009). These new settings contain no disability benefits. Disabled people need to participate in paid-employment to access the civic welfare '*wuxian yijin*' ('five insurances' as pension, medical, employment injury, unemployment, and maternity insurance, and 'one funding' as housing provision), or to apply for the living allowance that is for all vulnerable groups. Both options are difficult for them and the majority of the population have no provision (CDPF, 2015). The responsibility is left to disabled people themselves or their families.

In this context (discussed in Chapter 2 and 3), the chapter examines disabled people's economic use of the internet. This starts with an exploration of how people used the internet to find a job in the offline world. The data shows that internet use, for some, reduces material barriers and assists in job seeking. This, however, leads to segregated jobs and reproduces social inequality. The chapter then moves on to digital jobs that use the internet as a source of income. These include labour jobs that are low-skilled and low-paid, which will be introduced with two popular forms, the 'Water Army' and the 'Game mercenary'; and self-employment in the e-economy, presented as freelance work or e-shops in the chapter. By discussing the effectiveness and limitations of these digital jobs, the thesis examines the internet as an 'alternative economic space' (Leyshon, Lee and Williams, 2003). Its impact on social justice will be critically evaluated.

6.2. Seeking for a job through the internet

The first and the most basic use is job-seeking. The roles of ICTs in information dissemination and job-accessing have been well argued (for example Savolainen, 1999). This is particularly important for Chinese disabled people, as they are usually physically excluded by the country's inaccessible environment and highly competitive job market. 5 out of 23 disabled employees (34 interviewees in total in this research) found their job through the internet. This section presents their stories and explores the role of the internet in the process.

6.2.1 Efficacy: access to job information

Haochen was a 26-year-old man with cerebral palsy. The impairment effects were mild and, according to him, did 'not affect my abilities to work at all'. However, before his current job as a programmer, which was found and applied for through the internet, Haochen tried all traditional ways of job-seeking but still failed to find a 'proper' job.

> What I wanted was a job in my hometown, you know, in a welfare factory or somewhere like that. My parents wanted me to be at home. But there were no jobs. No welfare factories at all. They all closed. I tried the CDPF [China Disabled Persons' Federation, here he meant the local office in his hometown]. They had nothing. Maybe because it's a small town. Anyway, I have no other choices but to venture.

> Haochen, 26, male, cerebral palsy

The withdrawal of Welfare *Danwei* has significantly reduced disabled people's chance to participate in economic activities. They have their support removed and are required to participate in competition to find a mainstream job. This is reflected in Haochen's story as he could not get a job in the environment he was familiar with and that he felt safer within. He felt he had no option but to take risks. A similar account is found with Dongjun, who used to be in the *Danwei* system and saw it as the 'good life' that existed no more.

> Nobody can get a job from CDPF now, can we? Not like decades ago, now there is no job allocation. No more good life. Not even for young college graduates. You have to rely on yourself, find a job yourself.
>
> Dongjun, 40, male, lower limb impairments

In post-reform China, market jobs are the primary form of paid employment. But while trying to find a job in the market, disabled people found themselves excluded from the first stage, which is information obtaining. The recruitment market and events like job fairs, which is the common method of job-seeking, are usually inaccessible and crowded, so that even entering into them requires physical strength and corporeal stability (Picture 6-1). Disabled people had no way of discovering the available jobs before their internet use.

Picture 6-1. The crowd in the recruitment market.
http://news.sina.com.cn/c/p/2008-12-05/070516787822.shtml

> Researcher: Have you tried the recruitment market before you go online?
>
> Haochen: No, of course not. How could it [use the recruitment market] be possible? There are crowds of people…I can't move there. There is no space for me or for my wheelchair. It's designed to not have people like me.

As showed here, the environmental barriers in recruitment market/activities restricted Haochen's physical presence and by doing so excluded him from job competition. It was impossible for him to find a job in the mainstream manner. Haochen linked this to oppression by say 'it is designed to not have people like me there'. The internet has become the only way and his 'only chance to access the job market'.

> Researcher: can you please describe how you got your current job?
>
> Hanchen: Yes. I don't remember a lot of details but it wasn't complicated. I searched 'disabled programmer', I remember. I always tried these keywords, disabled, programmer, IT, software, these terms. A lot of jobs came up. But you need to choose, you need to read the description very carefully, to find good ones. This one looked good. So I applied for it.

Haochen accessed job information through internet use and by doing so got basic access to the market. This was easy for him because 'all you need to do is simply click links', job seeking in this way meant that the impairment effects were reduced. It was also more effective compared to traditional methods, with technologies such as keyword searching. Haochen's story shows that a significant value of the internet is access to information. For those who are able to take the advantage, the internet has increased their possibility of finding a job. This is particularly important in China, where access is often limited and few, if any, workplaces are accessible. However, it needs to be noted that this value is enjoyed by all internet users and there are no structural aids for disabled people or challenges to existing disablism. For example, internet use does not change the fact that jobs in the offline recruitment market are still not available for disabled people, which means they have fewer options. It also fails to improve disabled people's position in the competition. Before discussing the limitations and risks of internet use as a tool in job seeking, the next section gives another case to suggest the internet's efficacy in getting a job.

6.2.2 Efficacy: 'An easier way to get a job'

The internet does not only provide job information but also, for some, improves the success of a job application. Linyu had previously worked as a tailor in her hometown. Her business was destroyed by the village's rapid industrialisation, which made her unemployed at the age of 35. Like Haochen, Lingyu found it hard to compete with young and able-bodied people to get a new job. She had to live with her family and rely on them for care and support. After 14 months' unemployment, Lingyu eventually found a proper job in Shanghai. She applied for it through the internet.

> It was my first time doing this online. I mean, a job is such an important thing but people now do it through the internet? That's very interesting for me. Anyway, they asked for my CV. I didn't know what CV was, you know I had never had this kind of job. A friend told me there are templates online. So I read them and wrote my own. I sent it [to the company], and they said it's good. We want you. I was very surprised, to be honest. It was too easy.
>
> Linyu, 44, female, spinal cord injury

New technologies have simplified job-application procedures and recruitment now can be done online, through information sharing, long-distance interview, and digitised signature for a contract. For disabled people like Linyu, this means a possibility of finding a job in a wider field. They are not restricted to a certain space but are able to choose the methods that work better for them. They also benefit from information expansion and knowledge transmission in the digital world, such as learning to write a personal CV. These are key disabling barriers in offline job application, which have now been reduced through internet use.

Linyu then moved thousands of miles to work in Shanghai. She arranged things online before she arrived. As she said, this was 'much easier' and it could never have happened without the internet.

> My parents worried a lot when I decided [to go to Shanghai]. I had never left my hometown. You know, they didn't understand the internet. I told my mom, I said, I get a job there. Don't worry. I searched the company, checked their license, I know their address, I even booked a taxi to pick me up, to bring me directly to my accommodation. I will be alright. And yes it was. I would never have come here without the chance, and this would never have happened without the internet. I am so happy I did it.
>
> Linyu, 44, female, spinal cord injury

By offering information and services, the internet reduced geographic barriers and gave Linyu options for a different life. Lingyu was able to find a job and had a new life that she very much enjoyed. She gave the credit to the internet. Lingyu's story points to the efficacy of internet use in gaining a job, including obtaining the position and physically getting to it. Again the value is enjoyed by all internet users and no evidence of specific support for disabled people was found. This, therefore, fails to challenge structural barriers. For example, whilst Linyu can arrange an accessible taxi online to get to work, she still experienced difficulties in entering her office, and discrimination in her work. However, within the context of very few jobs being available in offline China and the disabling barriers that are commonly set up in obtaining them, internet use has significantly increased disabled people's work opportunities. Its role in disability employment is vital.

6.2.3 Danger: Job segregation

Despite its effectiveness in providing job information and assisting application, the internet has shown negative impacts on job segregation. All five participants who obtained their job through the internet were working in specially-designed, disability-labelled areas. They obtained their job through a 'disability' route and were led to a special position in the workplace.

Weikai was a young man with mobility difficulties. When interviewed, he was working as a designer in Wuhan. This job was from a special channel of a job-seeking website.

> Researcher: How did you find your current job?
>
> Weikai: Do you know that the 58.com [one of China's most popular job-seeking websites]? It now has a 'green channel' for disabled employees, a special platform for disability jobs. That's where I found it.
>
> Researcher: When looking for a job, did you focus on this channel or did you try all suitable jobs?
>
> Weikai: I tried common platforms, jobs I thought suitable for me, those I had experience for. But my emphasis was on jobs marked 'disabled people accepted'. I did receive interview opportunities for mainstream ones, but my current job is for disabled people.
>
> Researcher: From your experience, will jobs having no 'disability accepted' label accept disabled people?

Weikai: I would say, the company will post ads in the disability platform if they want disabled people, when their aim is to find disabled employees, for tax reduction or other benefits, you know. If not, they don't want us… unless you are really outstanding. But we China has so many people.

When searching for jobs Weikai solely focused on disability-labelled ones. This is because disabled people, the interview data suggests, believe that they would be excluded from mainstream employment. Weikai was a highly educated man who had a college degree from a top university in China, as well as high-quality certifications. He was very employable in China's current employment discourse. Weikai received interview notices from mainstream jobs when he did not declare his impairment. However, he was always rejected once identified as a disabled person. No explanations for the job refusals were given, but Weikai tended to think disabled people are not welcomed in mainstream workplaces. He gave the credit for his success to employment policy rather than to his own ability.

Similar experiences were found in other interviews, for example Lingyu's job was 'for people with limb impairments only', and Haochen used the term *canji* (disability) as one of the core criteria when he was searching for work. Disabled people were separated and excluded from mainstream workspace and activities, no matter whether they were capable of working in the mainstream or not. They got jobs 'for them', which usually meant less income and a lower social status. Even these jobs were regarded as a result of political support. The series of policies designed to promote disability employment (presented in Chapter 2) was seen essential by the participants in their employment. Weikai argued that the tax-reduction policy is the employers' main motive, 'their aim', to employ disabled people. A similar account is seen in Lingyu's interview.

The policy is very very good. Without it, they of course won't want us. We have to admit that disabled people are not as good as them [non-disabled people]. Most disabled people are not educated at all. They can have as many college graduates as they want. You know, we are in a big country.

Linyu, 44, female, spinal cord injury

The exclusion experiences led many disabled people to doubt their ability and to internalise their oppression. Weikai and Linyu, for example, did not think they would be employed without the policies. Their accounts suggest a rationalisation of disabled people's vulnerability, that it is 'due to' China's oversized population

that they are excluded and it is a special provision for them to be employed. This is to say, in China's development-priority ideology and compulsory policy, there is a common understanding that disability employment is charitable or commercial issue, rather than a rights issue as it is in the Global North. Disabled people are seen as receivers of care and support and are given fewer options. They can only take whatever jobs they get. This segregation is seen everywhere but has been enhanced through internet use, through new technologies that make knowledge transmission more effective yet targeted (such as keywords searching) and information categorisation (such as special channels for disabled people). Considering this, the use of the internet has arguably reproduced, rather than reduced, social inequalities and oppression towards disabled people.

To sum up, this section has examined how disabled people used the internet to find a job in the material world and how the internet functioned as an effective tool for both inclusion and segregation. The internet has played a vital role in disability employment by offering access to job information, and helping people through the application process. However, while the internet arguably promotes disability employment, it focuses on the existing vacancies, being a very small number of jobs and contains no structural changes. The access given by internet use is not directed at mainstream sectors but to restricted positions, which in turn fails to challenge the experience of marginalisation.

It is necessary to point out that only five participants were employed in these 'traditional' jobs. The majority (16/23), who may once worked in this way, had newly created jobs in the digital sector. A participant described his feeling of a 'traditional to digital' shift as:

> I think there are only very few disabled people are working in welfare factories or conventional places. I know a lot doing internet work, running e-shops in *Taobao,* in 'water-army[82]', that's common. But traditional ones? No, I don't think I know anyone working in that way. Maybe one or two… and I believe there will be less and less. The internet is the future.
>
> <div align="right">Zhufan, 43, male, ankylosing spondylitis</div>

The chapter now moves on to explore digital employment to see whether it can be the 'future' the participants hoped for.

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82. This will be explained later on, in section 6.3.1.1.

6.3. Working in the cyber-world

The internet is creating new forms of jobs, which changes the work structure in material environments and offers disabled people an alternative way into paid employment. This section examines the digital jobs the participants were taking. It starts with entry-level jobs that are labour intensive and less-rewarded. Then it moves on to self-employment, which requires more skills and social capital.

6.3.1 Digital 'Labour' Jobs

Across the globe, disabled people are much more likely to engage in un- or low-skilled, low-paid jobs, which have restricted chances for progression (Burchardt, 2000; Hall and Wilton, 2011; Gustafsson, Peralta and Danermark, 2014). The data in this study suggests a similar pattern is China's cyberspace. The majority of the e-employees were in 'labour' jobs, which offer less financial and social rewards, and fewer chances for promotion. This section introduces two popular forms: the marketing 'water army' job and the 'Game mercenary'. Both were labour-intensive, exploitative and poorly paid.

6.3.1.1 The 'Water Army'

The 'Water army' (s*huijun*) may be one of the most specialist services that have emerged in China's digitisation. This refers to a group of internet users who are paid to leave comments on certain content, usually to promote products, or to participate in e-commerce as 'zombie customers' to establish a fake popularity. Due to the size of China's digital market (731 million users in 2016, CINIC, 2017), hiring a water army (*qing shuiju*) is seen as an effective marketing strategy and has become a huge business. This was a main source of jobs for my participants. For example, Lintian clicked advertisement for a living.

> Lintian: My current job is 'clicking advertisement'.
>
> Researcher: What is 'clicking advertisement'? Can you explain it in details?
>
> Lintian: Yes. It's simple. You get the job from the employers, online. They give you a list of links. You just click a link and go to the advertisement window, stay several seconds, then get the credits. The credits can be exchanged for money. It must be one of the simplest jobs.
>
> Lintian, 22, male, cerebral palsy

Another popular form is post advertisements. As summarised by Pengxu, an experienced water army worker, this included different levels of work.

> There are different types of posting advertisements. The simplest way is they give you a paragraph, or a short article, you just copy and paste it to everywhere. Your QQ group, forum, every website you know. It's called 'viral posting'. Or you can 'take care' of your accounts, make it junior or famous, then your posts are more reliable. Or, you can modify the ads, post different things on the websites to meet their preferences. You can even write your own 'soft ads'. The prices are different.
>
> Pengxu, 36, female, lower limb impairment

The water-army jobs involve simple and repetitive movements like clicking the links, opening webpages, and copying and pasting. Besides that, (except for the higher level ad-writing) they require no specific knowledge, skills, or input of money or resources. Anyone with a computer and connection to the internet can do it. This turns out to be the primary benefit of this type of job: the absence of physical barriers.

> The advantage is no accessing barriers. You have to have something to work in the real world; a degree, some specific skills, or at least a strong body, so that you can be remover, right? But online, you don't. You just work, and you will find a job. Even the water-army, it's a job. The internet gives a much better way. I think every disabled person should know that.
>
> Pengxu, 36, female, lower limb impairment

Whilst there may be certain barriers in using the internet, like devices, skills, and poor design of the webs (Warschauer, 2004; Jaeger, 2012), for those who are able to use the internet, like Pengxu, the water army jobs is an easy and flexible way to participate in economic activities. Clicking links is easier than visiting clients in the offline world, and transforming information from one webpage to another is physically easier than moving things between spaces. This is the re-definition of physicality and workability, at least for some disabled people. They do not need knowledge or capitals to be employed and their work chance have therefore been increased. This has produced a common agreement that digital employment is a 'much better way'.

The second efficacy of water-army jobs is the rewards, especially the psycho-emotional ones. Many participants expressed their happiness of being included in economic activities. Some claimed this changed their life.

> I cried for, I don't know, maybe more than one hour, when I got my payment for the first time. It's just, I always felt I am not a useless man, not a piece of trash, not anymore. I can earn money…It must be ridiculous, as that was just ¥20 [£2] or something. I know it sounds stupid. But that is the first time I felt, you know, it is still meaningful to be alive.
>
> <div align="right">Lintian, 22, male, cerebral palsy</div>

Like Lintian, many disabled participants saw water-army jobs as the chance to prove their abilities and challenge the stigma of being seen as 'useless'. As explained in Chapter 2, work and contribution to society have been central to the Chinese understanding of citizenship, from the Maoist collectivist era to the new age of individualist competition. Work exclusion in this context is a key part of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999), which defines disabled people as passive recipients of care and the outsiders of society. Water-army jobs to some extent de-construct disablism. Disabled users found themselves able to work and make money. No matter how much the income was, this produced a positive sense of being. The psychological impact of being employed and able to work is also suggested in the (re)construction of disability identity, in Chapter 8. Here it clearly demonstrates the usefulness of water-army jobs.

However, the water-army jobs are repetitive, poorly paid, and of low status. The normal price for each post ranges from ¥0.03-0.08 (£0.04-0.09). Lintian, for example, got ¥500 (£55) on average per month, far less than is required for even a very basic living. In the interview, Lintian expressed his dissatisfaction with his income and his need for a better job.

> Researcher: How is the payment?
>
> Lintian: Very very low. Only several cents [9 Chinese cents ≈ 1p] for each post. Very hard-earned money.
>
> Researcher: Do you like it? Have you considered other jobs?
>
> Lintian: I definitely wouldn't do this anymore if I had other options.
>
> <div align="right">Lintian, 22, male, cerebral palsy</div>

Another limitation of water-army jobs is that they do not consider the employees' personality and interests, let alone offer prospects for advancement. People working in this area are objectified as digital accounts and quantified as a tiny part of a huge population. They are insignificant and most of the time neglected. Also, although e-marketing is commonly used in China, the industry

has been largely criticised for 'undermining the consumers' trust' and 'damaging fair competition'.[83] It is a grey area in legislation and people taking these jobs are usually looked down upon. For example, a participant working as a freelance engineer saw water army jobs as 'having no dignity'. Even water-army workers themselves thought 'it sounds not good' (Pengxu). The water-army jobs are economically and culturally devalued.

Water-army jobs presented in this section, whilst common, are not ideal for disabled people. People accepted them because they had no other options. The popularity of this job reveals that, even in a digital market, disabled people are significantly excluded from most economic activities. They are forced into a de-valued position as a stigmatised group. The next section describes a similar but 'better' job, called the 'Game mercenary'.

6.3.1.2 The 'Game mercenary'

'Game mercenary', or called 'power-leveller', is another popular form of digital job found in the study. In recently years, massive multiplayer online games (MMOG) like World of Warcraft have developed into a 'real world', which have their own language, culture, and social norms (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008) and in which people access and progress using a virtual body or avatar. This has created the job of game mercenary, a position to level up game accounts and/or offer virtual products for economic rewards (Picture 6-2 is a screenshot of the service). This study found two participants involved in this business. One of them shared his story in the interview as:

> My current job is playing LOL [League of Legends, a MMOG], levelling up accounts for rich players. You know, level-up is boring, sometimes you have to kill hundreds of monsters for one level. I take this job when they get bored. I have three computers, they are on days and nights, I control the accounts to kill, kill, and skill. Sometimes I got good [virtual] items, they are extra money. Some can be really expensive!
>
> <div align="right">Shuxiao, 27, male, hearing impairment</div>

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83. For example, this post from one of China's biggest mainstream media: 'The invisible hands behind web posting' http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/17/content_9981056.htm . Duan Yan. *China Daily*. 2016-06-17. In English.

Picture 6-2. Power-leveling services in China: prices and sales volume
http://2p.com/497385_1/Unveil-the-Secrets-of-Chinese-Power-Leveling-Studios.htm

Shuxiao provided virtual goods and services for financial rewards. This job, although internet-based, was very 'physical'. The game characters move, jump, fight, and extract metals or stone, to achieve the goal of levelling up. All these actions were completed by Shuxiao by moving/clicking the mouse and/or typing on the keyboard. This form of job can minimise the effects of certain types of impairment and reduce barriers for some disabled people. For example, Shuxiao communicated with his clients in a text-based way and he used a virtual body in the game to get experience and goods. His hearing impairment did not affect his ability to obtain these things, which meant he had the 'workability' and could earn money. Shuxiao was in paid-employment and, just as with the water-army workers, he was proud of himself for being 'useful'.

This has created juxtaposition. Like water-army jobs, 'Game mercenary' is laborious, time-consuming, and poorly-paid. That is why it is commercialised, but this brings a cost for working in this way. Shuxiao's monthly income varied from ¥1500 to ¥4000 (£150-400), depending on items/process he achieved. The highest, as he can remember, was ¥6000 when he luckily found a rare sword and sold it at a 'pretty good price'. This is higher than most water-army jobs. However, it was poorly rewarded given the fact that it was very time-consuming and boring. As Shuxiao said:

> Really boring job, to be honest, but the income is not bad. The work is very laborious, always overnight. My back now is not good. It hurts a lot. And sometimes I want to play a game for myself. Real play. I want to enjoy it too. But you see. I can't even talk to people. I can't understand them. Without the job, I am a useless person, as they said.

<div align="right">Shuxiao, 27, male, hearing impairments</div>

Shuxiao did not enjoy the game mercenary job. The only reason he did it was that there were no available alternatives. This is to say, although the internet has created new forms of paid jobs and helped disabled users to be economically active, these jobs have obvious limitations and, for many, fail to improve their life quality or feeling of inclusion.

Both the 'Water army' and 'Game Mercenary' jobs presented in this section were entry-level and labour-intensive. They provided little or no opportunity for progression. People employed in them will always lie in poverty. That is to say, disabled people have been excluded in China's industrialisation and been left behind for their 'lack of workability'. Now, with the help of the internet, they have access to paid employment and can participate in economic activities with a virtual body, which has significantly changed their life. However, disabled employees were usually less well-paid, exploited, and restricted from further advancement. The efficacy to include them into economic activities does not necessary challenge their disadvantaged position in this 'new' economic system.

6.3.2 Participation in the e-commerce

Not all of the participants were in entry-level jobs and this section focuses on those who were self-employed in the e-economy. These include online business, which is presented with examples of *Taobao* and WeChat shops, and freelance work in the skill-intensive area that had a relatively high income. Through the analysis of the experiences and actions of this minority group of participants, the section examines whether the internet can be a genuine tool of liberation.

6.3.2.1 'My own business'

Huizhen was a 33-year-old woman with a manual dexterity impairment. She once worked in custom services under the 'compulsory employment quota' policy. She then gave up this job and opened a clothes e-shop in *Taobao,* China's biggest

online shopping platform that is very similar to EBay. In the interview, Huizhen talked about how she started her 'own business' and why e-business is suitable for disabled people.

> I started my shop in 2009. I heard it's a good way to make money. So I got maybe ¥1500 for the first month, higher than my previous job of ¥1200. It was just the first month! Now it's a 4-star shop [shops in Taobao level up with the rise of their turnover]. I found it very interesting, very special. It suits our disabled people particularly. Why? It can be done at home! You don't need to rent a store to sell things. Sometimes you need to go outside to stock up, but it can be done online as well. The delivery man will come to collect parcels…I can stay in my bed, using my laptop, and make money!
>
> Huizhen, 33, female, manual dexterity impairment

E-business in China has developed rapidly over the past two decades, with a set of techniques and services that make all procedures of business, including stocking, loading, money transfer, and custom services, possible to be done on the internet. This means people like Huizhen were capable of starting their own career. Some physical work was still required, like typing (to communicate), packaging, and shipping. These were not a problem for Huizhen and she could 'even do it in my own room'. The internet has reduced some of the disabling barriers and allows people like Huizhen to participate in economic activities in an easier way. It offers better rewards. Huizhen earned more money from her business than from her previous job. She was also able to make decisions in the job and to take control. All this made her feel that e-business is a solution for disabled people's employment.

The other form is the WeChat-shop. WeChat is a mobile application designed for daily communication. From one of China's biggest IT companies, it is now extremely popular with 650 million users by the end of 2016, which is 88.92% of China's internet users. [84] The wide use of this app has caused a trend of starting a 'handy business'. People post advertisements, usually a couple of photos and a simple description of the products, on their WeChat page. They get interested customers from their 'friends', have quick conversations, receive money directly through the app, and then dispatch products; usually in the same day. Picture 6-3 shows how a deal is made through WeChat. This is from one participant named Huaqiang, who just started his WeChat-fruit shop.

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84. 'We-chat annual report 2016'. http://tech.qq.com/a/20160321/030364.htm. In Chinese.

It's not even a formal start. I posted a photo of oranges, from a friend's fruit shop. I said, 'Great oranges, very sweet, ¥55 for 5 kgs [cheaper than the original price shown in the photo], free delivery'. Then my [We-chat] friends messaged me, saying 'Looks good. I will have some'. They paid me immediately. I did the delivering the next day. It's done! Why not start my own business if it's that simple? Even if people don't buy, I won't lose anything. I just order the amount they want every night!

Huaqiang, 58, male, hearing impairment and mobility impairment

| Step 1- advertisement posting with photos and information | ⇒ | Step 2- communication and money transfer | ⇒ | Step 3- money transfer and celebration |
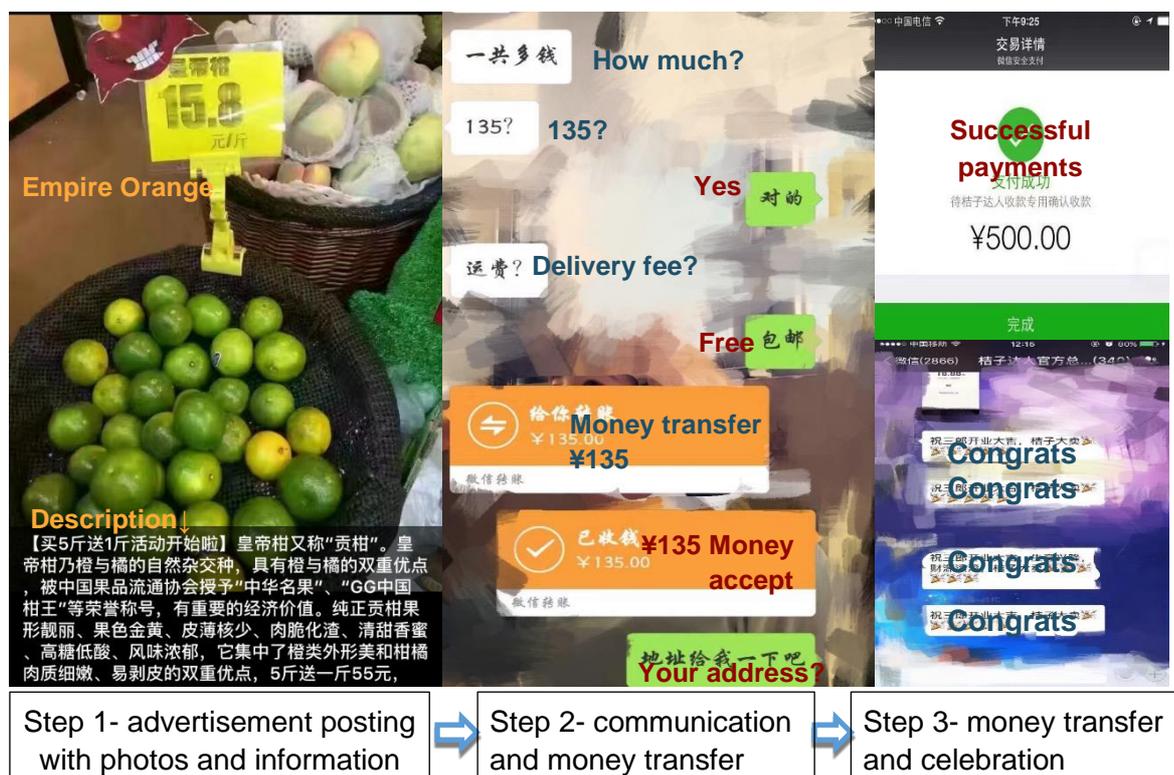
Picture 6-3 How the WeChat shop works

Compared to e-shops in *Taobao*, WeChat shops are more flexible and easier to set up. It is based on a social media that is heavily used. It allows people to 'stay online' and do business whenever they want and wherever they go, as long as they have a smart phone. For example, even in the UK I can see Huaqiang's post every day while opening my WeChat. This reduces the cost of advertising, stock, and customer services. It is then considered as a great way to earn money.

In both the *Taobao* and the WeChat e-shops, the most significant benefit was claimed to be 'a chance to work equally'. Huizhen explained how online business is convenient for her and other disabled people:

I think this is a really good thing, finally a chance to work equally. You see, in the real world, we cannot run a shop. You need a lot of money to do

that. You need to search for months to find a good location, and good locations are expensive. You have to go to the workplace every day. You have to find good products and also customers. It's all too complicated.

Huizhen, 33, female, manual dexterity impairment

What Huizhen talked about here is the removal of barriers and an opportunity for access. Disabled people in China are usually seen as the customer, not the provider, in business. This restricted position is due to not only material barriers such as inaccessible environments, but also disabled people's lack of social and economic capital as a result of oppression and low social status. Online business lowers the access barrier and allows the disabled person to act as a provider. It is a chance for them to be more socially and economically active.

On the other hand, the limitations and risks of e-business are hard to ignore. First is high competition in the area. Haochen, who worked as a programmer, as presented in the first section of the chapter, once had a *Taobao* shop. He closed it when he found himself disadvantaged by the competition.

I know a lot disabled people are running shops on *Taobao*. Well, here there is a myth, if you have the chance, you can earn money. But it's not true. Yes, you can easily start an e-shop, but you need good stuff to sell. You can't just sell what others sell. Search 'mask' in *Taobao* you will find 2000+ shops. How to make yours distinctive? You are just 1/2000, why should they come to you? So I gave up, it's too hard. If you have those abilities, sales and marketing skills, resources, you can do it. But if you have nothing, and you think you can make money if you just do it. You are too naive.

Haochen, 26, male, cerebral palsy

This means an open market does not equate to a fair market. Social capital like finance and resources still play a crucial role in the digital economy and this restricts disabled people exactly as it does in the offline world. Whilst disabled people can be included through internet use, it is an inclusion to untrammelled competition and they are still structured into a disadvantaged position. Social injustice cannot be eliminated through personal use of the internet.

The other risk is the unprotected position of e-business. As a new form, how e-business can be located in China's existing economy, and how it should be taxed and protected, have not been well resolved. *Taobao* uses an independent payment system (*zhifubao,* similar to *PayPal*) to negotiate between the sellers

and buyers. WeChat, however, has no protective services. Purchases and money transfers are seen as personal actions and are not protected. Whilst Huaqiang was happy about his WeChat business for its informality and flexibility, he also admitted that he is not familiar with all the rules.

> I've heard some customers will deny they receive the parcel and ask you to resend it. If you don't, they will keep badgering you. I've never met these bad guys. But this is a bit too easy, you know. I don't know how long will this remain free and I don't know how big I can make my shop be. I don't know if I met those guys, what I can do.
>
> Huaqiang, 58, male, hearing impairment and mobility impairment

E-business is a new industry in China and it has 'both huge opportunities and challenges'. Jumping into this developing industry has given disabled people a chance, but it is risky for them, especially when they have always been excluded and are therefore less capable of handling risks or absorbing shock. It only takes a small jolt to push poor people over the edge; for example, if one customer refuses to pay, the loss could be catastrophic for these participants. Relevant legislation for online business and specific support for vulnerable groups is thus in an urgent need. Until then, internet use cannot protect disabled employees' benefits or fundamentally alter their economic vulnerability.

6.3.2.2 The skilled freelancer

Yuzhi was one of the only two participants that were employed in professional, highly-paid areas on the internet, as a front end engineer.[85] This was a young man with achondroplasia. After college, Yuzhi worked freelance from home to develop software. He sought work from freelance professional forums, bid for any suitable, got temporary contracts, and then completed the works to get payment. All these were conducted on the internet. Yuzhi seldom went out. As one of those who believe that technologies are the final answer, he 'lived on the internet', which means he worked online, ordered things including food through the internet, and developed digital relationships. He lived with his parents but was thinking of moving out, because he 'has the ability'.

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85. Haochen, the programmer who found his job through online-searching, as presented in section 6.2.1, was also working in IT sectors. But that was an offline job and his income was significantly lower than Yuzhi's.

The income for Yuzhi's freelance job was notably higher compared to other disabled e-employees. However, it was low for his field, which is a 'strategy' intentionally adopted by Yuzhi, 'to be attractive'.

> Researcher: How is your income?
>
> Yuzhi: It's OK **and** low. It sounds high, ¥7000, sometimes ¥10000 if I have multiple programs, seems higher than most common work, I know. But it's low in my area. That's why they use me. I want more, I lose. Non-disabled can work in the workplace, I can't. Of course bosses prefer people working under their eyes, in case of some urgent things happen. I can't do that. So being cheap is an essential strategy. To be attractive in the market.

As a front end engineer, the best and most common work is in an IT company offline, where knowledge can be better rewarded and welfare and other support are more likely to be provided. Yuzhi, however, could not work in this way due to inaccessible environment in most workplaces. He had to adopt a price-cutting strategy, which implies an echo of the discrimination that disabled people, even knowledgeable and experienced, are less valuable than the non-disabled. Yuzhi got 'less interesting and valuable' jobs as a freelancer, and he could not get the trust that is usually formed through face-to-face interaction. This was reflected directly in his income. He also experienced the lack of the sense of belonging and exclusion from China's workfare system. In other words, even working at the highest level disabled people experience discrimination. Yuzhi was able to take advantage of the relatively barrier-free environment and earn a comfortable income that afforded him a good lifestyle. However, he was not able to earn the same level of rewards as his non-disabled peers. Inequalities exist at all levels of employment. All these evidences point to an urgent need to reform China's employment laws and equal opportunity legislation.

Even so this kind of job is not available to most disabled people. The majority of participants in the study were taking low-grade, less-paid jobs, as Water-army (8/15) or Game mercenary (2/15). Those owning e-shops (4/15) claimed they 'live a better life', at least better than those doing labour-intensive jobs. Only two participants worked in skill-intensive areas. There is an obvious division. Pengxu, the woman working in Water-army, shared a story about her friend. This is about a man living in real poverty, who tried to get a proper job.

> Smart people make money, but most disabled people are not. My friend, 'Pigsy'. He called himself Pigsy [a fiction character known for his stupidity] because he is silly, he always says that. He needs money, really. But he has no skills, so the only job he can do is water-army. He earns several hundred yuan every month. He works very hard. But that's it. It's not enough for living, he has a child. We don't know how to help. He learns too slowly.
>
> Pengxu, 36, male, lower limb impairment

When she used the term 'smart', Pengxu was referring to knowledge and skills which were unequally distributed. Pigsy reflects a group of people who face the structural barriers in education and are therefore disempowered. His story shows that, whilst the internet has offered basic access to economic activities, it fails to secure a living for all. This is not the case for people having skills, abilities, or social capitals, like Yuzhi. Yuzhi distinguished himself from most disabled people by asserting his capabilities and discovering more possibilities.

> I don't think the advantage of working online is doing 'labour' job. You can get that job offline. In welfare factories, maybe? That's tiring, and you are selling your labour. Once educated, we may feel sad for doing those kinds of job, as our value is wasted. Now we have the internet. We can use our value online. We can find a suitable job, which matches our abilities. So I would say the internet provides better choices, people's life qualities can be improved and our needs can be met.
>
> Yuzhi, 30, male, achondroplasia

It can be seen that a labour job was never Yuzhi's option as he had knowledge and confidence and wanted to make a valued living. For people like Yuzhi, the internet offers more opportunities and improves their life quality. They benefit both financially and developmentally in a much more effective way. This division echoes disability employment in the offline world. Studies found, in the Global North, employment rates varied markedly for different 'types' and 'severity' of impairments (Berthoud, 2006; Hall and Wilton, 2011). In a digital world in China, it is knowledge and learning ability that become the key criteria. More structural support is needed to secure the real benefits and to decrease social injustice.

This section presented the ways disabled people become self-employed on the internet, as running e-business or providing skill-intensive services. Compared to 'labour jobs' introduced earlier, these jobs require more social/cultural sources

and are often better paid. However, even these so-called higher-level jobs have significant limitations, mainly in the lack of structural support and the failure to challenge disabled people's disadvantaged position.

6.3.3 Digital jobs: dilemma and the 'solution'

The data presented in this chapter has shown the efficacies and limitations of digital jobs, including the possibility of paid-employment, the psycho-emotional empowerment, and (fair or not) social and economic rewards. The chapter now moves on the tensions between flexibility and security, which has emerged as a key dilemma in all the forms of e-employment. It then introduces a theory of 'digital sheltered jobs' that was proposed by the participants as a solution.

6.3.3.1 Flexibility as the key efficacy

Although in different forms and on different levels, digital jobs as a whole are characterised by fluency and flexibility, which are seen as key benefits of these jobs. This was highlighted by the participants as a core criterion in their job-search. Mengzhen was a disabled woman who had been working in the Water-army for a few years and who had established her own team. She compared digital jobs with traditional ones, and claimed flexibility was what she wanted:

> We are online migrant workers. We have no stable jobs but do whatever we can. In the reality, migrant workers do delivery, construct, home moving, right? We are just like them. Post ads, data entry, manage websites, we do everything. I don't want stable jobs, those have deadlines. We disabled people can't work too hard, our body can't; especially paraplegic ones. I don't like the idea of earning money at the cost of my health. So I only do flexible jobs. I do as much as I can. If I don't want to work today, I take a day off. I do these jobs, no matter how cheap they are.
>
> Mengzhen, 58, female, lower limb impairment

As shown here, even in an environment where physical engagement has been largely reduced, impairment effects still exist and affect disabled people's ways of working. Mengzhen's body did not allow her to work in the fixed mode that is defined by non-disabled people in China's 'development-priority' discourse. This is part of the exclusion and oppression she and other disabled people experience in the offline world. Mengzhen therefore had to take temporary and flexible jobs newly created in the digital world. Here the internet has shown its potential in

offering disabled people a better option, or the only affordable way, to get into paid employment. It has redefined the notion of work in a more inclusive way.

This echoes academic thought in the west. The tension between the rigidities of industrialised production and the attempt to create a flexible work pattern for disabled people has been a hot issue in disability studies (Roulstone and Barnes, 2005). Scholars try to find new jobs that are flexible and practical. The proposed alternatives include hyphenated jobs, intermediate jobs, short-term contracts, and self-employment (Browns and Scase, 1991; Brown, 1997; Simkiss, 2005). These are believed to be effective in accommodating disabled people's impairments (Pagam, 2009), increasing their employment levels (Rizzo, 2002), and achieving integration into the labour market (Arnold and Seekins, 2002). This study, based on the empirical evidence, points to the success of digital jobs in China with a particular focus on their role in creating inclusion in work. This is located in the context that China has no well-practiced anti-discrimination legislation and disability employment has been largely neglected. The digital, flexible jobs have become the only possible and effective method. However, this method is in general segregating. People work in the private sphere and have no social contact. Digital jobs do not contribute to social integration as it was hoped for but have shown notable dangers in terms of a lack of social security.

6.3.3.2 Lack of security

One primary limitation of digital jobs was their exclusion from China's welfare system. None of the aforementioned jobs offered access to the civil welfare system or to any commercial insurance. This was viewed as the 'real problem' even for those enjoying the flexible jobs.

> But the real problem is, the way we work, on the edges, is not a long-term thing. We don't have welfare. That's tough. We can't work like that forever. I can get money as long as I can work, but what if someday I wake up and find I can't work anymore? I don't know but I have a feeling of precariousness. No one can take care of me. That feeling.
>
> Mengzhen, 58, female, lower limb impairment

Disabled people in China are not supported by any special benefits; they need to participate in paid employment to gain access to social insurance or apply for

the living allowance provided to all vulnerable people (discussed in Chapter 2). Digital jobs, although paid, are not included in this workfare agenda. Most e-jobs were short-term and temporary, providing no formal contract. The employers pay a small amount of money for temporary tasks and would end the relationship as soon they were finished. In other words, there were no formal work relations between disabled people and people who paid them and disabled workers were not considered as real employees. This has forced them into an extremely risky position and has led to an unprotected future. People felt anxiety and unsafe, or 'precariousness' as described by Mengzhen. They did not know what to do to secure their lives. This is, of course, not only an issue for disabled people. But for these people who have always experienced economic exclusion, it was hard to find themselves being denied access to social insurance even though they are now involved in economic activities.

The other risk of digital employment lies in its damage to social relations. The first section of this chapter explored how people were segregated although they can use the internet to find an offline, hidden job. This segregation is found in the digital sector as well. Disabled people worked individually in disconnected environments (often at home). They had no designated work environment, rare face-to-face interactions, and no chance for peer-support, which restricted their participation in mainstream activities and their chance to form formal and long-term social relations. Moreover, base-less work means no access to unions or any forms of organisation. It reduces the chance of developing a disability network. Without organisations people are completely at the behest of the employers and can never come together to demand better jobs. All these limitations reinforce disabled peoples' position of outsider of society. They can hardly obtain a sense of belonging, or a sense of being integrated within society.

The tension between flexibility and security then becomes the core issue. The internet has created flexible jobs, which respond to disabled people's special needs and offer an affordable path to economic participation. However, disabled people's economic vulnerability has not been changed through these poorly- or unfairly-paid jobs; nor has their outsider position. This dilemma is particularly harmful in the context that disability benefits are not sufficiently provided and

paid employment is the only route to citizenship. In response to this, some participants proposed 'sheltered digital jobs' as a replacement.

6.3.3.3 Sheltered jobs as a solution?

The benefits and disadvantages examined in the section above have been sensed by disabled employees and have caused a 'sheltered digital jobs' proposal. Some experienced employees claimed their need for policy or state support in the interview, under the name of 'stable jobs' and 'charity jobs'

> I am hoping the government can do something. Give some special jobs to our disabled people, train us, improve our ability. That's what I am hoping for. Not only bridge the gap between the employers and disabled people. You need to provide stable [online] jobs for us!
>
> <div align="right">Mengzhen, 58, female, lower limb impairments</div>

> There should be more charity jobs for us, you know, we need welfare jobs, non-profitable, just to help disabled people build confidence. Many people have never worked in their whole life. You cannot expect them to be as good as non-disabled, well-educated ones. They need a start, a very simple one. It's not for money, but for these people.
>
> <div align="right">Jiehong, 46, male, mobility impairment</div>

These accounts call for government and policy support. Mengzhen pointed out the government should focus on creating new jobs and opportunities for disabled people, rather than locating them to existing jobs which are a product of social oppression. Jiehong challenged the productivity-priority ideology and claimed that the government and society should protect disabled people's rights to work. They were then expecting digital jobs designed for and distributed directly to disabled people, which would offer better rewards, and more importantly, the chance for self-improvement and a positive identity. Both of them made plans for this, with slightly different approaches.

> I don't think that's unrealistic. A win-win example is website manage. Do you know many local governments' website are years-old? The info is years ago and nobody is managing it. So why not let disabled water army people do it? You give me the info, policies, news, I edit and publish them for you. That sounds good, right? And 'customer services', they can have a person to answer online enquiries. They don't have any but they should have one. We can do that too! We're patient. We have time. All these jobs, we can do it as a program. You offer a contract, we give you a team.
>
> <div align="right">Mengzhen, 58, female, lower limb impairments</div>

Here Mengzhen proposed a 'government buying' possibility. She claimed that disabled people have the ability, even stronger skills and experience, to work for and contribute to the government. Because of this they deserve a position as the service-provider. In this plan, the state is supposed to build employment relations with disabled people and through this offer support. A slightly different model was revealed in Jiehong's plan. Jiehong designed and organised a website called '*Hubang*' (Help each other), a platform offering digital jobs specially and only for disabled people. He was anticipating state-sponsored jobs and training programmers at the time of interview. The aim, as he said, was to improve disabled people's workability.

> I am thinking about a 'government + companies + us' model. That is to say, the government asks companies to offer some digital jobs, on our website. We disabled people take the job and get the payment. The company gets a tax reduction, or some compensation. Not permanent, just a procedure for disabled people to learn. They will get trained through working. Then they can leave and get a better job!
>
> Jiehong, 46, male, mobility impairment

In Jiehong's plan, sheltered jobs should be provided as a training opportunity. Jiehong 'admitted' the account that disabled people, especially those who have no work experience, were less (economically) productive and did not contribute. But for him this is a result of exclusion and social support should be offered to change this. Jiehong did not rate employment workshops and programs run by the governments or disability organisations such as the CDPF, claiming they were 'old and impractical'. He called for it to be run by disabled people, to cooperate with other participatory sectors such as commercial companies. The focus of this plan was the social, rather than economic, rewards of disability employment. Jiehong was negotiating with local governments on the plan when the interview was conducted. Whether this can be the next step for disability e-employment is too early to confirm.

These two plans are proposed in the context that anti-discrimination laws are not well practiced and the only solution is special provision. Besides its potential for increasing work opportunities and improving people's workability, can digital sheltered jobs really promote social inclusion? Sheltered employment, which has been historically delivered in institutional settings in the Global North, has been

argued to have significant risks. It separates people so that they are 'no longer in a place of societal liberation that affords the individual the opportunity to learn vocational skills, but rather an institution that creates its own army of workers that will forever be subjected to a life in the workshop' (Gill, 2005: 613). Even if disabled people can benefit from sheltered workshops, they wound need to experience mainstream jobs to be included (Humber, 2014). Sheltered work is therefore part of the construction of disability rather than a solution for some (Stone, 1984; Hyde, 1998). From the data found in this study, a digital form of sheltered employment challenges none of the limitations, not to mention the barriers in the material world. The approach also contains risks of constructing disabled people as the recipients of care. Within the discourse that contributions to society are highlighted and individual competition is normalised, this might probably lead to a less-valued social position.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined how disabled people participated in paid employment through internet usage in China. It at first presented how a minority (four) of the participants used the internet to access job information or to apply for it, and how this helped them to find a (segregated) offline job. After that, the chapter explored the newly created digital jobs. These included labour-intensive jobs such as the Water-army and Gamer, which offered disabled employees the basic access and rewards, and, self-employment in digital economy as a shop owner or a skilled freelance worker. The analysis of the data suggested that internet use allowed disabled people to participate in economic activities by working in a cyberspace. The participants enjoyed the flexibility of these digital jobs but in the meantime continued to be excluded, especially in the warfare system, which has reproduced their disadvantaged position.

That is to say, internet use, no matter as an information-seeking tool or as a new employment sphere, has increased disabled people's work opportunities and empowered them on an individual level. However, the benefit lies in the entry to the marketplace rather than on the retention and quality of employment. Disabled people in the digital era can hardly obtain an equal job or the usually accompanying workfare and support. Their position in the 'new' system has not been improved.

Chapter 7 Internet Use and Political Empowerment

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores disabled people's political use of the internet. This refers to internet use with explicit or implicit political stances, which aims to improve the social position of disabled people. Through the analysis of these experiences and practices, the chapter discusses the potential for the internet to be an instrument for social change. It also presents a new digital footfall for the disability activism in transforming the lives of disabled people in China.

All of this is contextualised by China's ongoing political reform. As argued in Chapter 2, China is experiencing a shift from a highly centralised 'strong state-weak society' regime to a 'strong state-strong society' future (Li, 2013; Zheng, 2014). The power of the state has been significantly de-centralised during the process. Social forces, such as non-governmental organisations, have developed dramatically. This has advanced China's civil society. Identity politics, groups, and grass-roots movements have begun to emerge (Jacka, Kipnis and Sargeson, 2013). However, this has not gone without issues. The reform has created new social problems, especially in areas where the state power has been withdrawn but third sector forces have not been adequately developed to take over the responsibilities; this is exemplified in the under-development of a civil welfare system.

This has placed disabled people in a vulnerable and precarious position. The mechanisms that previously provided support and security for them have been withdrawn (CDPF, 2015). Disabled people, as a group, are highly marginalised in political administration, welfare services, and civic participation (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.3). At the same time, disabled people, like other identity groups, have obtained the chance to mobilise as a political agency. China's government announced support for the development of NGOs, especially those around and for vulnerable people (Ma, 2006). Disability in this circumstance is increasingly being considered as a social issue and an identity group is forming.

Disabled people's cyber actions as a response to this new political climate are the core theme of this chapter. The analysis of my data identified a variety of practices, including: 1) online complaining that has no specific goal, 2) personal campaigning for political and cultural changes, 3) online aimless networking, and 4) collective formal movements. These suggest the emergence and development of a new disability activism. The thesis then assesses the potential of this use of the internet for delivering political empowerment in China.

7.2 Framework

This chapter employs Snow's (2004) conceptualisation of social movement as its framework. Snow defined social movement as diverse and varying challenges to authorities, on both the individual and collective level. This is a significant shift beyond the centralisation approach found in social movement studies, which focuses on formal and collective movement only. From this wider perspective, Snow (2004) proposed two dimensions of social movement: 1) whether the actors and actions are individual or collective, and 2) whether the challenges are direct or indirect. Here direct challenges refer to straightforward appeals, which are usually seen in targeted protests, for example 'Occupy Wall Street[86]'. Indirect challenges are covert or ambiguous actions seeking to escape from authorities. Snow's theory is applicable to the Chinese context because China is in its early stages of democratisation and most challenges emerging in this period are small-scale, indirect, and less-targeted. Studying social movements in China needs a wide framework to adequately represent the contextual reality. Therefore, what I will be exploring throughout this chapter are individual **and** collective actions that challenge the disabling values, settings, and practices in China, which are argued to be part of disability politics regardless of their goal.

Snow's theorisation (2004) has been modified in the study. The 'collective vs. individual' classification for the level of actors has been maintained. Another 'generic vs. specific' dimension of the nature of the practice has been created to replace his 'direct vs. indirect' division. Specific challenges refer to actions being self-determined and having clear goals such as promoting disability policy

86. Occupy Wall Street is a protest movement that happened in 2011, in New York, U.S.A. The main issues were social and economic inequality. The primary method was the encampment of Zuccotti park. This activism had clear, strong goals; determined, public, and continuous actions to achieve the goals; and a good organisation. It is therefore a typical 'targeted' movement.

or a positive identity. Generic actions, although also closely bound up with the disability identity, do not claim specific goals and are not self-claimed as a political challenge. The study then developed a cross-classification framework shown in Table 7-1. It identified four forms of political actions in the internet use of disabled people.

Table 7-1: Political actions of disabled internet users

	Generic Challenges	Specific Challenges
Individual	Online complaining	Campaigning for rights or a better representation
Collective	Online Grouping	Formal movements

The analysis of the data suggests two forms of practice from the individual level. One is online complaining. This documents the lived experience of disabled people in contemporary China and expresses their emotional responses to everyday oppression. The other is appealing for an improved social position or a better representation of disabled people. The difference between the two forms is that the former refers to direct experiences from disabled people and does not specify a political goal, while the latter includes formal practices and articulates aims for social change.

This study also identifies two forms of action from the collective level, which are online grouping and formal social movements. Disabled internet users have established communities and their own online public sphere. Based on this, and in this self-constructed online sphere, they take action formally and collectively to attempt to challenge the disabling society. Both these actions have significant impact on the development of disability issues in China. But similarly to the differentiation in individual practices, only the formal activism claims a specific and political goal.

In what follows the chapter explains each of these behaviours and the impact they have on both the individual users and the disability affairs. It also examines the relations between them to reveal the dynamics in digital disability activism.

7.3 Political actions in the digital World: Four forms

7.3.1 Complaining in the 'virtual' world

The first form of political practice that was identified by participants was online complaining. As explored in Chapter 5, disabled internet users documented their everyday lives, with a particular focus on discrimination and the difficulties they experienced. The internet, in this form, serves as a tool to record and report. To illustrate this, this section presents two posts from the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar. Both the writers were later interviewed in the research.

> Missed an interview call today. Again! Why always call me for an interview? I wrote in my CV that I'm deaf. Why can't they text me? They know I can't answer. Are there any more obvious ways to say 'we don't want you'?
>
> Junlei, 23, male, hearing impairment

> Disability benefit [in her city] has been reduced to ¥ 200 [around £25]/month!!! I am extremely angry now!!! [poster used lot of angry emoji].
>
> Qixue, 29, female, visual impairment

These posts present how disabled people are treated in their everyday lives. Two types of complaints are suggested. The first is directed against disabling practices. For Junlei, phone interviews were impossible and their use reinforced his sense of otherness. It is the discrimination and disrespect towards people with hearing difficulties that he complained about. This experience made him question not just the employers but the wider values in society and his rights to be included. The other complaint is more structural and focuses on disability (and disabling) policies. The reduction of benefits annoyed Qixue very much so she shared her frustrations with other people that she felt may be on the same side as her. By posting her frustrations, her personal feelings were presented in the digital public. Both the posts were straightforward responses to the disabling settings and constructions of society, in which emotions such as upset and anger were deeply engaged with and clearly expressed. However, these posts did not state explicit challenges or a specific political aim. Junlei did not link his own experience to disability employment issues or seek any changes in policy and/or practice. Nor did Qixue attempt to find a way to increase the benefit. Although vented in a public sphere, the purpose of the posts remained private.

The absence of a specific goal is further shown in the interview with Jinsheng, who self-claimed to be a 'radical man' and posted complaints on a regular, or sometimes daily, basis. He used posting as a means of emotional catharsis:

> I feel as a disabled man I have always been treated differently. I don't like being different. But that's it. Everything, education, work. I have to queue for ages in the hospital. I I am always refused by taxis because I am using a wheelchair. All those things, the negative feelings. They just need to be said out loud. They are just complaints; abreaction. I am just unhappy with my life. And I have no other places to say it.
>
> Jinsheng, 30, male, cerebral palsy

Here Jinsheng claimed that his posting was a personal action and the aim was its therapeutic value. He, as a disabled person, was experiencing discrimination and difficulties almost every day and in almost all aspects of social life. This has continually produced the sense of loss that needed to be released. The personal practices of Jiesheng and other disabled users, however, are by nature political. As discussed in Chapter 2, disability in China has never been on the mainstream agenda and relevant issues have always been silenced. This is why Jinsheng felt 'no place to speak'. In this context, self-reporting on the internet has become a new and, to some, only possible way to give voices. The stories presented by disabled users challenge the mainstream stereotypes and show the public what a disabled life is like. They produce narratives that are different from the non-disabled orthodoxy. Without the internet such conversations would be absent. This is what Papacharissi (2010) argued that the political can be present within the personal, without needing to be framed as explicitly political. The posts where participants expressed complaints have constituted an empirical basis for other political actions of disabled internet users.

These complaints start public conversations and encourage other disabled people's political use of the internet. For example, Jinsheng had a post in the Post-bar about the lack of welfare provision. His experiences and feelings were reinforced by the responses.

> Jinsheng: Here's what I got for ¥50 [around £6] [a picture of some food is attached]. How can I be able to survive with ¥390 [around £45, the local living allowance he got] every month?
>
> Response 1: ¥390 is not bad, OK? I get only ¥310 [around £35].

> Response 2: well, who cares? I bet the officers don't know how much one kg pork is.

Jinsheng said that while posting he didn't expect any answers from others. His posts, however, were not an out-pouring into empty space and it triggered the views of others sharing the situation of living in poverty and the feeling of being ignored. In a cyber-world, private reflection on welfare provision has started to emerge as a group issue. This is hard to achieve in offline China because the environment is inaccessible and disabled people are segregated and are not able to form the feeling that they are not alone. Again, although the government and social policies that fail to meet disabled people's demands were mentioned in the post, they were not strongly challenged. The comment 'the officers don't know how much one kg pork is' did not link the absence of disability benefits to disabled people's vulnerable positon. It, and other similar content, did not make any attempts to change the policy or the ways disabled people are treated.

This section examined online complaining as a basic form of political practice and an initial stage of disability activism. For personal users, posting is an easy and affordable way to give voice, and it contains a significant therapeutic value. It is therefore commonly seen in disability communities (this is reflected in the popularity of material berries themes, discussed in Chapter 5). From a collective level, these posts constitute the foundation of the emerging digital disability movement. They have connected disabled people who share similar experiences and feelings; which has the potential to mobilise them (the reflections of this on online networking will be explored in Form Three). They have also contributed to consciousness-raising around the topics of discrimination. Online complaining is the start of politicisation of disability issues.

7.3.2 Challenging society individually

This section looks at internet-based/ promoted practices that claim a specific political goal. Compared to Form One, actions identified in this form were more overtly political. They targeted disabled people's rights directly and contained a range of practices to achieve a self-determined goal. The internet here has been part of the struggle and these actions have marked a shift to the political, and the emergence of digital activism.

7.3.2.1 Political appeals for civil rights

Some disabled participants appealed for rights with the help of the internet and on the internet. This section presents two examples of this, which are slightly different in terms of their 'independence'. The first is an e-participation case in the government-led event, 'Ask the Prime Minister'. The other is an independent campaign appealing for disabled people's right to drive, which is the start of a collective activism that will be discussed later on in Form Four.

Digital participation

Chenggang was a 32-year old man who had a visual impairment. Using a screen-reader, and the internet, he participated in the government-led event, 'Ask the Prime Minister', and proposed an appeal for more support for disabled people.

'Ask the Prime Minister' is a national event organised by China's central government, usually held before its 'Plenary sessions of the national or local People's Congress' and the 'National or local committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference'.[87] Each year, the party-government opens up a platform and invites people to talk freely and anonymously. The comments

Picture 7-1: 'Ask the PM' 2017 Homepage

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87. These names are officially translated.

they give will, it is promised, be collected and those seen as the most pressing will be submitted to the conferences to discuss. This official-led event usually attracts millions of participants and generates massive attention for key issues (Picture 7-1). It has been claimed to be an effective way to hear from people.[88]

Chenggang viewed the event as an accessible and affordable chance to speak for disabled people. He joined the one held in 2014 and made the statement:

> # Ask Prime Minister # Hi Prime Minister, thank you for giving us the chance to ask questions: 1) Disability medicine: many disabled people can be cured but they can't afford the cost. So they have to stay at home and be taken care of others. Can disabled people get free treatment if they really have no money? 2) Can you let us know where did the government spend the 'Canbao' money [disability protect money, designed to improve disability people's employment]? What's the role of CDPF [China's Disabled Person's Federation]? What did it do for us? 3) Re disability employment, can the government open a forum or give a list of welfare factories so we can find a job where we live? This can help disabled people to find a job and also help factories to find workers. 4) The marriage problem: can the CDPF arrange blind dates for our disabled people?

This suggests how disabled people participate in policy-making using digital technologies. Based on his own experiences, Chenggang made this formal appeal by drawing on disabled people's rights to form social relations, to participate in all aspects of social life, and to be an insider of society. A clear and strong call for structural changes was shown, for inclusive policies and supporting practices. Chenggang's post politicises the oppression and exclusion that disabled people experience in their individual life. It makes counter-comments on the authorities (such as the CDPF) directly to the authorities. This is a method to air their own opinion in political and public affairs.

This type of action is not only characterised by a clear goal, but also by the fact that actors like Chenggang had an understanding of what he was doing. In the interview, Chenggang explained the intention behind his participation:

> Chenggang: I think it just needs to be done. Good policy needs everyone's endeavour. I know some people think it is useless. But how can you know if you don't even give it a try? It's not hard--only took me 20 minutes. Maybe

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88. For example, this report on the government's website http://www.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0315/c32306-28201530.html, 2014. In Chinese.

>they [the government] will see it! Or, if not, they will see it eventually if I keep doing this kind of thing.
>
>Researcher: What do you mean this kind of thing? What kind?
>
>Chenggang: Join in events, just like this one.
>
>Researcher: Do you have any other plans? Other ways?
>
>Chenggang: No, no… You know, I'm just a common, 'bottom' person. I have no other ways.

Chenggang was clear about what he wanted to achieve. He called for the emancipation of disabled people, and, more importantly, made the claim that it is only through involvement of disabled people in the deliberative process that empowerment will be achieved. He also highlighted the potential of the internet for this. In the environment that effective ways to participate are absent, digital participation is an easy, and the only accessible, way for Chenggang and other disabled people to join in. He therefore believed political participation should be through internet use. Chenggang's story reveals a rise of recognition of social movement. Disabled internet users have started to express their opinions and attempt to make real changes. Whilst the practices presented in this section are limited to the individual level, they are a key part of the emergence of real, formal disability activism.

Independent campaigns

The internet has provided disabled people with not only a chance to participate in public events but also the possibility of starting their own campaigns. This is presented in this section with Wenming's story.

Before 2010, people with lower limb impairments were not allowed to drive in China. According to the previous law (The Ministry of Public Security, 1995), a key criterion to drive was 'have normally functioning lower limbs: for automatic cars the leg difference should be no more than 5cms; stick-shift cars require a completed and full-functional right leg.' People with a range of limb impairment were rejected by driving schools and license authorities. In the environment that public transportation is rarely accessible, this law prevented disabled people from accessing public spaces and has added to their isolation.

A disabled activist named Wenming challenged this policy directly in 2008. This was through a series of posts published on his personal blog, which were then published in the Self-strengthen BBS. In these posts, Wenming interpreted the law and explained the damaging influences it had; he introduced devices and technologies that can assist disabled people's driving; he referenced legislations in other countries like the UK and US to legitimise the claim that people with lower limb impairment can safely drive. In the last post of this series (he coded his posts in titles, as 'People with limb impairment applying for driving licences-1a' to '1d'), Wenming clearly pointed out that driving issues are rights issue:

> In order to echo to our party's attitudes in disabled affairs [attached a link of his another article about a disability government conference and the documents], improve disabled people's ability to equally participate in social affairs, and to guarantee their enjoyment of social benefits, it's important to reconsider and give people with lower limb impairments in China driving licenses - this is an issue of the civil rights of disabled people.

This individual campaign shares some similarities with the previous case of digital participation. Both of them were from the activists' personal experiences of being excluded, by the driving school or other aspects of their social lives. Both the cases had a clear target, that being disabled people's right to drive, or an improved position in social life. Both the activists used the internet as their main method and an effective tool. However, Wenming's campaign was stronger than the digital participation. Direct and confident statements such as 'it (the legislation) diminishes disabled people's rights' and 'doesn't this mean disabled people are neglected by the government, although this could be unintentional?' were made. The aim of the statement/campaign was focused on a specific policy. Moreover, compared to the participation case, Wenming's campaign, at this stage, was more independent: the articles were first published in the actor's own blog and were less visible in mainstream channels; no linkages with other institutions or agencies were indicated; and, the majority of the audiences were disabled people, or at least people interested in the topic. These features have limited its influence. While the 'Ask the Prime Minister' post received more than 3,000 'likes', Wenming's posts received about 20 comments only. It seems that an independent campaign has less impact than public participation at this stage.

Wenming's personal campaign, however, was a start and caused a powerful collective movement. In the last post of this series, Wenming started a public debate and invited people to join him.

> I'd love to have a discussion, with anyone, but particularly with people with limb impairment but still want a driving license, about this thing. It'll be a long debate, a long process. I hope you can join me. I will keep you updated here [in this blog]. I will make a forum if possible. I hope the government can hear it when it becomes louder.

This post presents an attempt to unite individuals and raise up issues from a collective perspective. For Wenming this could have more power and was more likely to gain public attention. A series of public debates were then organised by him and later other activists, which politicised the issue and contributed to the formation of activists' networks. The result was a formal disability activism that lasted for two years and successfully changed the law. The ensuing collective actions will be stated in Form Four. Although not interviewed, Wenming's posts in his blog are all public and two of those published in the BBS were sampled in my content analysis. The case is included in the thesis because it is a typical and individual independent campaign, but also because it is the start of a formal movement. It shows digital disability activism as a continuum.

7.3.2.2 Cultural representation in the 'new media ecology'

Also rooted in personal experiences, and traceable back to complaints, was that some participants used the internet to attempt to reshape disability culture. The development of ICTs has caused a 'new media ecology' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010), in which mass self-communication becomes the key form and information is designed, decided, and delivered freely by every participant (Castells, 2015). This has enabled disabled people to gain control over disability information and change their representation. This section gives two examples; about disabled people's image and the terminologies of 'disability' in China.

Guangshi was a young man with a visual impairment. He was an experienced user of *Zhihu*, one of China's most popular question-answer websites. His actions in this forum had a clear aim to 'show what real blind people's life is'.

> Researcher: You've answered a lot of questions about how blind people use the internet, right? What makes you do that?
>
> Guangshi: I joined Zhihu in 2012, using my true identity, a blind person. People doubted it, saying 'How can blind people use the computer?' 'You liar!' So I told them we use screen-reader, we can use the computer well. I answered so many relevant questions. So now, they know it. Yes, blind people can use the internet now. I am happy that I've contributed to the change.
>
> Researcher: So you think it is good, right?
>
> Guangshi: Yep, It's important. I do believe so. You know, disabled people are so isolated in China. No one knows one thing about us. Maybe that's why we are discriminated against. In fact, I want to do more. I am thinking about making a video, to record blind people's life, how we use the internet, how we communicate, blah blah. You know, the whole society knows nothing about our blind people, they just imagine. They need to know more.

Guangshi's 'fight' started from his experiences of discrimination and exclusion on a mainstream website. His identity as a blind internet user was questioned, which shows the isolated position of blind people and the stereotypical beliefs they face - they're blind and so they cannot use the internet, or by extension, participate in social activities. Guangshi attempted to change this with a series of personal actions. He answered questions about what being blind is like in China, such as 'what is your experience of being disabled', 'how do blind people shave', and 'can blind people use touchscreen mobiles'. He started a special column to tell his stories. And, as he said in the interview, he was thinking about presenting his life with videos. All these have contributed to a new narrative to replace the 'useless' and 'valueless' image from the non-disabled mainstream. This was indeed the intention of Guangshi.

This has had some impact on the *Zhihu* community. Guangshi's answers/posts were usually liked thousands of times and some became the 'most liked answer' under the theme of health. They received positive comments, such as 'You're a really brave man. I respect you' and 'Thank you for letting me know this. I am shocked, and moved'. This has re-positioned Guangshi as an expert and a famous representative of disabled people in the community. People would 'invite' him or 'assign' relevant questions to him if they were about blind/ disabled people. The representation he made was viewed as the real situation of these people.

The second case is an article about the terminologies of disability in Chinese and their impact on disabled people's social status. The title is 'Does *canzhang ren* (deficient and impeded people) sound better than *canji ren* (deficient and diseased people*)'*. The author, Zhufan, was the organiser of the Self-strengthen BBS and a famous activist. He wrote the article in 2005 in his personal blog, in which he expressed his recognition of a new social movement and a desire for a revised disability discourse.

> In recent years, disability social movements have emerged. I am so happy that the grassroots have become the main force in the process. One hot issue in the activism is the name of our disabled people. Some people think *'canji Ren'* is full of stigma and should be replaced by *'canzhang ren'*.

At the beginning of the article, Zhufan pointed out the discriminatory nature of *canji ren,* the term that has been largely used to de-value disabled people.[89] He clarified that the target of his article was to challenge the stereotypes and produce an alternative narrative. The article then discussed the linguistic and cultural meanings of the characters used in relevant terms.

> *'Shenxin zhangai zhe'* [literally meaning people with physical and mental barriers] is more natural, so it's more acceptable. Both *'canji'* [deficient and diseased] and *'canzhang'* [deficient and impeded] has *'can'* [deficient], making them bad. How is possible for deficient to be good?

A social approach was suggested in this discussion. Zhufan disagreed with the use of *can* (deficient) in naming disabled people. What underpins his assessment is the idea that impairment (*can*) is not the only identifier for disabled people, and does not affect their entitlement to an insider position in society. It should not be over-emphasised. Following this logic, Zhufan proposed his own notion:

> Our Self-Strengthen BBS has a theory of *'ziqiang ren'* [self-strengthen people]. All people should be self-strengthen, including the non-disabled. But we need to be more self-strengthen. It is a core value of our group.

This notion and the individualist ideology underpins it will be further explored in the cultural use of the internet in Chapter 8. The case suggests that disabled people have started to use the internet to re-interpret and re-shape disability culture in the digital world. This was practiced with a clear recognition of it as

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89. See Chapter 2 for discussions about disability terminologies in Chinese.

part of the disability movement ('one hot issue in the activism', as stated in the article). This, again, is a personal action, which has limited audience. However it has the potential to impact the self-image of those who read the post and their position in society if the post is circulated widely.

In summary, this section presented the second form of political practice, which consists of deliberate and targeted actions taken by disabled individuals. These include political participation and personal campaigning through the internet, and cultural representations on both mainstream and disability websites/spaces. The internet has served as an effective instrumental and symbolical tool here. It has reduced the disabling barriers and created a public sphere, and by doing so, has offered people a chance to be heard.

This practice has limitations, mainly in its visibility in the mainstream and the offline world. Disabled people's voice in mainstream spaces is easily neglected. Chenggang's proposal was not selected for the conferences and there was no evidence that what he said produced or influenced any policy changes. Similar actions in distinct spaces usually have limited audiences and cannot obtain huge public attention. This is revealed by the fact that both Wenming's and Zhufan's blog articles received less than 30 comments, which seemed to be from other disabled users. Political actions presented in this section represent self-advocacy for individual users. They have the potential for personal empowerment but their impact on the greater disability issues is limited.

These personal actions constitute the second step of the emergence of digital disability activism. Personal issues are abstracted from regular and grassroots online complaints, and then, politicised to produce targeted campaigns. This 'personal becomes political' process has then proceeded political practices in collective forms.

7.3.3 Networking as a group

The third form of disabled people's political actions, and an essential element of the activism, is online networking. The role of the internet in disabled people's

communication has been demonstrated in many contexts, including China (Guo, Bricout and Huang, 2005; Halskov-Hansen and Svarverud, 2010; Saltes, 2013). This section examines how this has enabled and advanced the development of activist networks and encouraged individual users towards being political actors.

Online gathering has become a normal thing for many disabled users. Pengxu, a 36-year-old participant, talked about her long-term desire for peer-support and how this was achieved through internet use. Her account reveals the isolated position of Chinese disabled people.

> I always want to make disabled friends. But I can find. I don't know why. Maybe because I was educated in mainstream schools? So when I started to use the internet, I searched *'canji'*, then I found this [the Disability Self-strengthen BBS]. It's great. I mean, we are the same; we have something to talk about. I finally have people to talk about these things.

Pengxu, 36, male, lower limb impairment

As stated in the Chapter 2 and 3, disabled people in China had never achieved a political agency due to the lack of institutionalised accommodation, the under-development of social forces and the socio-economic barriers to the public. Most people are segregated into private spaces, staying in their family and having limited access to social lives. Those educated in ordinary school or employed in mainstream workplaces, thus usually find themselves lonely and can struggle to build alliances. This is evident by the popularity of posts about digital relations in disability e-communities (examined in Chapter 5). It, as Dauncey (2012) found in her review of the biographical narratives of a disabled writer, means a strong desire of forming disabled groups. A wide use of the internet has delivered this chance. It allows users to cross material barriers to 'meet' and assemble in the virtual world. Castells (2015:2) argued that 'by sharing emotion in public space on the internet, connecting to each other and envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals can form networks'. This is happening in China's cyberspace. This pattern contrasts with experiences in the Global North, where disability organisations and movements have emerged from segregation, such as care homes or special schools in the UK and the internet is used by existing forces to broaden their movements (Pearson and Trevisan, 2015). In China the act of organising itself is the main value.

The study identified three types of online grouping: disability communities, commercial associations, and interest groups. The community is the generic form from which the other two have emerged. The business associations and the interest groups are sub-groups that usually have fewer members and a particular focus. None of these groups claim a political goal.

The first type is disability communities shown by examples like BBSs, forums, and chat rooms/groups. Chapter 5 analysed two famous communities, the Baidu Disabled People Post-bar and the Self-strengthen BBS. Here internet users have grouped together and interacted to form digital organisations *for* and *of* disabled people. Communication and relations within the groups were a key theme for the members (see Chapter 5). The users then documented and shared personal experiences in the spaces and formed a group consciousness. The influence of this on disability discourse will be explored in Chapter 8.

From these generic communities, subgroups emerged with specific goals. One popular type is commercial alliances through which people unite and participate collectively in economic activities. Huizhen was running an e-shop in *Taobao*. Her story of how this helped her to access economic activities and improved her life quality was presented in Chapter 6. She also talked about how she and other disabled businessoeioke developed an association.

> [The self-strengthen BBS] has a lot of posts, a lot of useful information about running e-shops in Taobao. Something special for disabled people. What's suitable for us to sell, what tax-reduction policies we can enjoy, where to get support, or even, here are shops run by disabled people, let's hyperlink and advertise each other! So exciting, isn't it? You see, we, step by step, build up a chain. You sell cloth, I sell hats, so why not put your goods in my shop? Not real products, just a photo! People might want to buy a hat for their jacket, right? You see, it's so amazing.
>
> Huizhen, 33, female, manual dexterity impairment

Disabled users like Huizhen have established a virtual but effective supportive network, in which commercial knowledge such as how to run a shop, information like where to buy the cheapest products, even customers and the 'workplaces', were shared. This has improved these people's ability to operate in the market and to earn money. The influences of the networks, however, were restricted to the digital economic field when the interview was conducted. Huizhen and her

associates communicated through the internet and their conversations were mainly about their businesses. It included special benefits for disabled e-self-employees but did not extend to allow them to claim advances from a civil rights perspective. This, and similar groups, were loose, informal, and did not extend to the offline world.

The last type identified in the study is a leisure group interested in traveling, which emerged on the BBS and has extended to the material world. Based on a common interest in traveling and shared experiences of difficulties and barriers to travel in China, the community established a group of 20-30 people who have physical impairments. The members met regularly offline and they traveled as a team. Meifang was a key organiser of this. She talked about it proudly as.

> We travel together every year. We have visited many places in China, and even Thailand last year. We are so happy we can do that together. You know, it is almost impossible for disabled people to travel! But we did it. We contact the travel agency to make travel plans suit us better, we can find accessible hotels and restaurant, and we encourage and help each other. They are things that can never be done in other groups.
>
> Meifang, 65, female, achondroplasia

Picture 7-2: News about discrimination towards disabled tourists
http://society.huanqiu.com/roll/2010-04/791478.html

The leisure group did not claim to have any political goals. It grew from the members' experience of being excluded from mainstream activities, specifically traveling (see Picture 7-2), and was 'just to have some fun'. This, however, has empowered disabled people by allowing them access to public activities on their own terms. Meifang described how coming together enabled them to travel: they had a flexible schedule and booked their own accessible services like hotels and restaurants; thus material barriers were reduced. They emotionally support each other to endure discrimination from the mainstream. These were in fact challenges to the 'normalcy' of what a customer, and more specifically a tourist, should be like. Through rejecting and redefining able-bodied opinions, disabled people have proven that they are a valid part of society and should enjoy the same rights. This was realised through acting as a group.

These online or internet-based groups, as presented above, were not designed for specific political changes. Members of the digital communities were seeking communication, comradeship, and a shared understanding. Shop owners wanted to increase their income, and the travelers were hoping to improve their leisure time. These groups, however, constitute the early stages of organisations *of* and *for* disabled people, which had previously not had a chance to develop in China. They can be equated to groups such as the Disabled Drivers Association in the UK, or similar organisations of disabled people which grew up around specific topics but eventually evolved into campaigning groups. They have huge impact on both disabled individuals and groups of disabled people. Firstly, this gives disabled individuals more chances and empowers them in market and public participation. Secondly, it increases disabled people's visibility in the public eye in both online and offline worlds. The (collective) presence itself is a challenge to disablism and it increases recognition of the power of the group. Finally, coming together and acting as a group has the potential to construct a common or group identity. Social movements in other contexts suggest that collective actions are often based on a wider identity of the group (see for example Shakespeare and Watson, 2001a). Whether this can be possible or not in China's cyberspace will be examined in Chapter 8. Because of these influences, online networking has contributed to formal collective movement, which is the last form of disabled people's political practice and the final stage.

7.3.4 Campaigning for social changes

The last form of online group is collective targeted campaigns which have been a key topic in social movement studies. The data suggests that disabled users have mobilised on the internet, demanding changes in policy-making, and more generally calling for the development of a civil society. Their actions are new in the Chinese context and they represent an innovative pattern for the disability activism. This section presents an instance of this; a movement for the right to drive. It was developed from Wenming's campaign, as discussed previously, and engaged with other forms of political practice like complaining (Form One) and grouping (Form three). Here it will be shown that online political actions act as a continuum.

Following the individual campaign that was conducted in Wenming's blog and the Self-strengthen BBS, public debates about disabled people's rights to drive were organised by Wenming and other activists that networked through reading his posts. This was seen in both disability communities and mainstream spaces such as *Tianya*, one of China's biggest e-communities, under a clear target of rebuilding the public understanding of 'whether disabled people have the ability to drive'. They obtained huge public attention. In the BBS, relevant posts were hot and ranked as the top topics in 2008. The post in *Tianya* received more than 260 comments, including support from non-disabled users such as, 'I didn't know there are assistive technologies but if yes, why not give them the licence'. Through discussion the issue rapidly became public.

The debates also produced an acting network and an increasing consciousness of collective challenges. Zhufan, who later became a key leader of the activism, described this process in interview:

> You are in the (chatting) group. There you have a lot of events; you chat every day. Day by day, you'll find people who just have the same ideas as you. You become closer. You can feel sometimes that he wants to do something too, he has the desire, just like you! And sometimes it's just the right time you feel you can do something together.
>
> Zhufan, 43, male, ankylosing spondylitis

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首页 >> 辩论

Proposals and Suggestions: Put them online and public

辩 论 Debates

离辩论结束还有 17 天

本期辩题发起人：郭建明
本期辩论时间：— 2009年03月24日

正方

Disabled people legally apply for driving licences
残疾人合法申领驾照

类别：法规
建议人：郭建明
政治面貌：

主题词：政治法律
网友所在地：上海
建议承办单位：公安部

Key words: politics and laws
The suggested agency to be
responsible: ministry of public security

Picture 7-3: A shortcut of the proposal: From the media reports
http://lianghui2009.people.com.cn/GB/8925402.html

The politicisation and networking lasted for one year. In March 2009, China's central government, by coincidence, enacted an event to collect 'proposals and suggestions'. Disabled activists like Zhufan saw it as a good chance to present a common face to demand changes. A formal proposal was then submitted under the name of 'all Chinese disabled people', which was soon voted into the 'Hot issue list' and received huge attention from the media (see Picture 7-3). This encouraged the activists and an online-signature-collection followed. In the post calling for signatures, Zhufan emphasised the power of the collectives:.

> From the chair of CDPF to common disabled individuals, from disability-centred sites to common sites, from government sites to grass-root sites, from the cyber world to the real world, we are here to take actions! All disabled sisters and brothers, don't stay silent! Don't think it is not your job. Don't be weak anymore! Stand up and give your voice! Let's legally and peacefully fight for our rights! Let disability affairs take a big step because of us! One person's voice can be heard only within 10 meters. It is 1000m for 100 people. And it will be a shock if we have 10000 people! Trust yourself! Don't think you are useless, never! We are the new cyber disabled people, and we can change the history!!! [90]

The overtly political post asserted disabled people's rights to inclusion and to be heard. It also claimed that only through collective action would these rights be achieved. By using terms like 'disabled sisters and brothers', the post showed an appeal for solidarity that is usually key in identity politics. This is from a

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90. This post was presented in Chapter 5 to show the political approach of the BBS.

specific topic of struggling for the right to drive, but was extended here to mobilise disabled people around demands for an equal and active citizenship. It challenged the 'useless' stereotype of disabled people and demanded a new positive collective identity.

The next step was to take actions beyond the 'virtual' digital world. Disabled activists extended the successful e-petition to the offline world, to 'make our voice louder'. They still used the internet as a tool for broadcast.

> In order to make our voice louder and to realise our dream, we are organising an offline petition. Please write your proposals and send them to me. Here is a template... Please use your real name and please invite all people you know to support us. Driving is one of our basic rights. It's the responsibility of each of us to stand up and use our voices. I believe we can do this. History will remember us! The internet will remember us! For our right to drive, let all disabled people and warm-hearted non-disabled people in! Let's do this together.

The national petition obtained massive public attention. On 9 May 2009, the central government responded to the proposal,[91] saying they recognised disabled people's needs and would work towards delivering inclusion. An online survey about special devices and skills for disabled drivers was released.[92] One month later, the Ministry of Public Security published an update for the legislation of 'Driving license and its use' for public comments, which allowed people with limb impairment to drive with specially-designed cars. It said at the beginning that the adjustments were made to 'make sure disabled people can enjoy their legal rights'. The government informed core activists like Wenming and Zhufan in person and asked for their thoughts. The news and the draft were forwarded to disability communities, including the BBS, and received massive comments. Most replies showed their happiness for this 'achievement', while others noted with concern that the updated law retained a discriminative section and also needed a detailed guidance for implementation. The comments were collected and summarised as four advices and were submitted to the government. Discussions and debates continued until the launch of the new law.

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91. http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1027/9270054.html, In Chinese.
92. http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/9441214.html. In Chinese.

The new law was passed on 21 November, 2009 and came into force on the 1st April 2010. Disabled activists were engaged throughout the process, and what they did and the ways in which they contributed were recorded in the BBS as hundreds of posts. This case illustrated how grassroots voices from everyday internet users were conveyed to authorities and were taken into consideration. Digital activism has empowered at least a certain group of people and promoted civil rights for disabled people across China. It shows a possibility of developing disabled activism in a digital way. Zhufan demonstrated the significance of the event in the interview:

> I don't want to be too arrogant but this must be, so far, one of the biggest achievements in disability affairs. It is an example that rights claims from us can be achieved through internet use. More and more disabled people will see the fact that we can claim our rights in the way! Our voices will be cared about. The focus of disability movement is not the basic living needs. Disabled people are getting rich due to good policies, so we now have higher level needs, and we can meet the needs by ourselves.
>
> Zhufan, 43, male, ankylosing spondylitis

This formal, collective campaign, which marks the maturing of the disability movement, has some distinct characters. First is the fundamental role of the internet. Unlike western disability e-activism, this campaign was entirely digital. It emerged from cyberspace, organised by internet-based groups, and adopted strategies like e-petitions that have never been used in China. The dominant sphere was the digital world while offline events were conducted only as a supplement. Traditional strategies like street demonstrations and offline public speeches were not used. Secondly, the movement adopted soft strategies. It was highlighted in many posts that they were seeking changes in a 'peaceful and legal way'. This is located in the wider Chinese context and is related to the third element of the movement, which is corporation with the authorities. The primary aim of this activism was to let disabled people's rights be considered by the government. It was conducted at the time when the 'top' (the government) was looking for voices from the 'bottom' (everyday disabled internet users). The movement therefore shows a bottom-up pattern and a shortage to challenge the barriers in, and constructed by, the existing authorities; such as the lack of disability potency in China's political system. This means the digital disability movements, so far, have not changed disabled people's political vulnerability.

To sum up, this section examined the last form of political practice of Chinese disabled people which is the formal, collective, and targeted movements. This is a sophisticated practice and it has potential for real social changes. However, the case presented in the above section is the only successful activism identified in the research. The actions previously presented, including online complaining, personal campaigning, and target-less networking, were the main forms of political practice in China's cyberspace so far.

7.4 Politicisation of disability Issues: An ongoing process
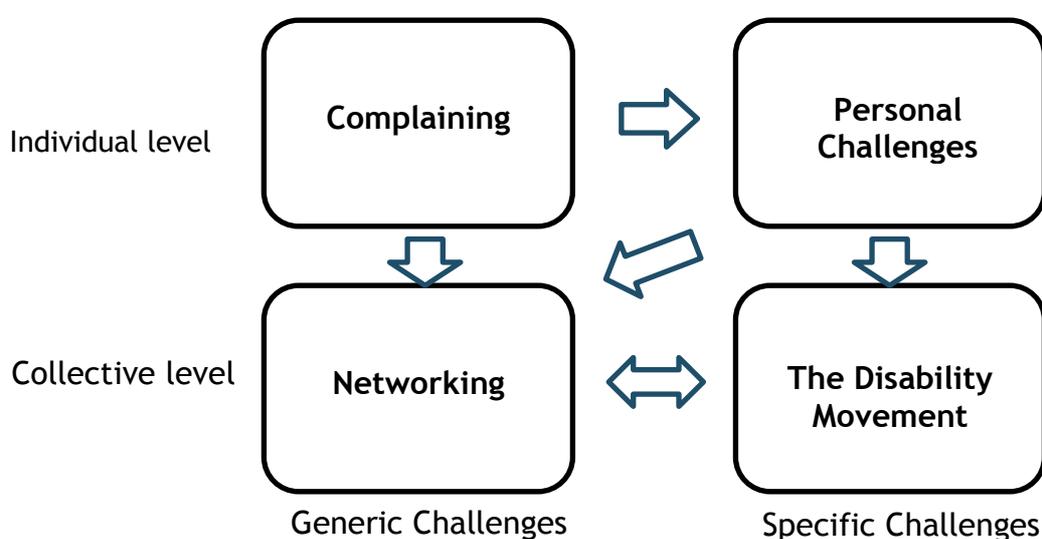
Figure 7-1: Disabled people's political actions as a process

This study identified four forms of political practice in disabled people's internet use, which are generic complaining (Form One) and specific campaigning (Form Two) from the individual level, and, online networking (Form Three) and formal activism (Form Four) from the collective level. These actions were conducted in, or at least emerged from, the digital world. They interweave and interact with each other, and together they have constituted the emerging disability activism in digital China. Figure 7-1 summarises the relationship between these actions. The key process here is the politicisation of disability issues.

Shakespeare and Watson (2001a) demonstrated that for disability to become a political issue three elements have to be addressed: first, disabled people have to stake a claim that they are disadvantaged; recognition that they are a distinct minority; the last element is the assertion that disabling barriers arise as a result

of social process. A similar process is happening in China's cyberspace. Disabled people present and document personal stories in their everyday internet use. Their experiences, although the details differ, are shared in public, which has made users realise that the difficulties and discrimination they experience are not just their own but exist for the whole group. A sense of group has emerged and its vulnerable position in society has been recognised. This recognition is further shared, reinforced, and reproduced, and has produced political practice aiming for change in individual or collective forms.

The crucial step here is the formation of disability communities and networks. According to Castells (2015), social activisms are always made up of individuals. Collective actions 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 (Castells, 2015: 9). Castells (2015) therefore highlighted the role of a public space in social challenges. This has been proven in the disability field with the experiences of movements in the Global North, especially in the UK. From their personal experiences, British disabled activists developed the recognition that neither party politics nor charitable and voluntary organisations serve the interests of disabled people appropriately (Oliver, 1991). Thus the disability activism have to be created and led by organisations *of* and *for* disabled people, in which 'at least 50% of the management committee or controlling body must, themselves, be disabled' (ibid:113). This kind of organisation has been developed through institutionalised segregation in the British history. It has symbolised a collective identity which is critical to the formation of the alliance, and has played a crucial role in the movement's vitality. Even in the digital era, organisations are found continue to serve as the core mechanism. In Person and Trevisan's recent study (2015), they found the primary theme in digital activism is how pre-existing disability organisations use the internet to boost their campaign efforts. The role of organisation is vital in disability activism.

What makes China's disability movement special is that it has no alliance to pre-existing organisations. As explained in Chapter 3, disability in China has no institutional basis. People have been individually segregated into private sphere and self-organisations have been restricted by structural and political barriers.

Under these circumstances, it is only in cyberspace that disability organisations have had the opportunity to emerge. This study has captured the online grouping of disabled users and its extension for some in the offline world. This is not the basis, or the essential mechanism, of disability activism but a part of it. Its role in developing disability activism is not as strong as the ones in the Global North. For example, in the campaign for disabled people's rights to drive, the activists' network emerged only during the one-year debate. Organising, and challenging as a group, were new experiences for them. The activism was not only for social change, but also functioned by developing as a disability agency. As suggested in the case, disability communities are newly emerging in China and so far have limited impact in certain fields only; whether it can generate powerful political agencies remains uncertain.

Whilst not well-developed yet, the approach to politicise disability issues and change the disadvantaged position of disabled people has been clearly revealed in the study. Campaigns with a political target, regardless of being individual or collective, are generated from online complaints and use the extensive evidence presented through complaining. They have significantly promoted the formation of disability communities, in both the online and the offline world. This is an emerging and promising approach as recognised by Zhufan, who said:

> [while talking about the complaining posts on the BBS]
>
> There was a time when I was doing nothing but complaining. But this has changed. You know, it's a process. I am like an old man looking at the young, sometimes. [laughing]. One day, those full of negative energy [people] will know what the right things to do are.
>
> Zhufan, 43, male, ankylosing spondylitis

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented disabled people's political use of the internet in four forms. These included: 1) personal online complaining, which claims no political goals but documents the disabled life; 2) personal campaigning that has a clear target for disabled people's civil rights or an improved representation; 3) online networking, which is less-targeted and which has contributed to the formation of disability groups; and 4) the disability movements which are collective, formal, and political. From personal to political, and from individual to collective, these

practices have intertwined and interacted with each other to form a digital pattern of disability activism. This is an ongoing change to Chinese society which contains great potential.

The analysis of the data suggests that the internet has served as a tool and sphere for the liberation of Chinese disabled people. For individual users, the internet has reduced material barriers and gave them an opportunity to have their voices heard, both formally and informally. This has significantly improved their political participation. For the disabled group, the internet has offered a way to communicate and mobilise and a sphere within which to form an identity group. Disability organisations are more likely to emerge with the help of the internet in the Chinese context. The political use of the internet presented in this chapter, however, represents early stage practices only. Whether this can continually promote disability movements, and whether real political changes can be made, remains uncertain.

Chapter 8 (Re)Constructing Disability Identity and Culture

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined participants' political internet use and the thesis moves on, in this chapter, to explore the ways that Chinese disabled people used the internet to (re)construct their personal identity and, by extension, disability culture. It does so from two perspectives. From the individual level, the chapter examines the participants' sense of self and the role of internet use in their (re)identification. It then, from the collective level, explores the possibility of rebuilding disability culture in digital communities.

A tenet of the chapter is the notion that China is undergoing an ideological transformation, in which Confucianism, communism, and the incoming western values interweave and clash to produce a complicated discourse. The definition of an 'valuable citizen' has been constantly changed in the process (Lu, 2005). However, the essence remains the same: an able-bodied discourse based on the 'normalcy' of the body and its expected functions is legitimised; those who fail to meet this standard are marginalised. In this context, disabled people have been largely de-valued. They are defined as recipients of care rather than active citizens and they usually experience a loss of self (Zhang and Ong, 2008).

The development and wide use of the internet has the capability to alter this situation. It has been argued that identity construction contains two interacting sectors, which are outer construction and individual's self-reflection (Giddens, 1991). The latter one is found to be significantly improved with internet use. In the digital world, people who were silenced in the offline world are more likely to be heard and are then more likely to challenge the orthodoxy. In China this has been reflected in the boom of sub-cultures and counter-narratives in its cyberspace (Luo, 2010; Zhou, 2011). This chapter focuses on disabled people and how they have constructed counter-narratives in this environment.

The chapter begins with a brief review of studies about disability identity and cyber identity, through which the core notions and dimensions are outlined. It then presents four types of identification suggested in this study, which are: 1)

affirmation of an identity of ability; 2) incorporation of the disability identity; 3) adoption of a stereotyped identity, and 4) re-construction of a positive identity. The analysis of the data shows that for most participants internet use increased their potential for reflection and allowed for reconstruction of self. Only a small amount of users adopted the discriminative construction from the society. After this examination of the role of the internet on individuals, the chapter moves on to a collective level and explores whether new disability narratives can emerge in a digital sphere. It presents two group consciousnesses, which are seen as an early reflection of a revised disability culture.

8.2 Disability identity and culture: a literature review

There has to date been little work on what it is like to be a disabled person in China and how they feel about themselves. This section briefly reviews the literature about disability identity and cyber identity in the Global North. The aim is to identify key issues in the area and provide a framework for my work.

8.2.1 Identity and disability

In the past few decades, identity studies has seen an anti-essentialist shift. The traditional approach believing in an essential and intrinsic basis to any identity has been criticised and replaced by the idea that identity is a social construction (McCall and Simmons, 1978; Turner, 1978; Burke, 1980; Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Identity is then understood as a fluid notion that 'intersects with antagonistic, discourse, practices, and position' (Hall, 1996). In disability studies, a significant reflection of this is the shift from the medical model, which focuses on 'true' biological difference, to the constructive social model that emphasises material barriers and the disabling discourse (Barnes, 1990; Finkelstein, 1993; Campbell and Oliver, 1996). Disability identity is argued to be constructed through the presence of impairment, the experience of externally imposed restrictions, and self-identification as a disabled person (Oliver, 1996). Among them, what is key is how people with impairments are constructed as the disabled 'others' (Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Shakespeare, 2013).

This constructionist approach has been criticised for overlooking people's own agency. Many studies have found that identity can be adapted, negotiated, and

resisted (Goffman, 1969;Giroux, 1992; Mishler, 1999; Zappone, 2003). Individuals are not passive in identity formation, but are, in some contexts, able to choose their identity and ignore or reject identities placed on them (Giddens, 1991). Identity is therefore the 'coincidence of placements and announcements' (Stone 1981:188). It contains both constructions from outer forces, and people's actions and agency. The relationship between subjects and discursive practices is crucial in the formation of personal identity (Hall, 1996). This is seen in the disability context where Watson (2002) found that some people refused an identity of disability based on impairment and instead claimed their own sense of self. He criticised the social model for being too 'deterministic', with little space left for reflexivity (Watson, 2002).

Both the constructive turn and the increased attention on agency challenge the notion of identity politics. As identity is constructed through power relations and knowledge, and can be adapted, it is too unstable to be a category (Kundrat and Nussbaum, 2003; Whitney, 2006). This trend to 'dissolve all categories' (Davis, 2002) has been embraced in the area of disability studies. As summarised by Shakespeare (2012:56), it begins from the 'sensible recognition that disability is extremely diverse'. Thomas (1999) argued that there are many 'fragments' in addition to disability and impairment; such as gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality; which also constitute identity. It then problematises the notion of disability identity, and even the minority group approach to disability politics (Corker, 1998; Liggett, 1988). Through his analysis of how some people refuse the disability identity, Watson argued that homogenisation of disabled people into a singular group is not possible (Watson, 2002). This challenges the social model's unified political structure. This post-structuralist theory also questions the existence of the so-called disability culture. According to Barnes and Mercer, disability culture 'presumes a sense of common identity and interests that unite disabled people and separate them from their nondisabled counterparts' (Barnes and Mercer, 2003: 522). However, if the category or a common identity is deconstructed, the culture may not be so rigidly defined.

It can be seen that there are two interacting sectors in disability identity. One is disablism and how it has categorised people with impairments. The other is an identification process in which people's agency is constantly evolving. Any study

of disability identity should take both of these into account. The literature also contains the question of whether a collective identity or a disability culture exists, which is a debate that has not achieved a definite answer thus far.

8.2.2 Identity in the cyber world

With the development of information and communication technologies and the arrival of a digital era, identity on the internet has become a new issue. Early studies focused on identity construction in anonymous environments; such as the MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), chat rooms, and Bulletin Boards (Rheingold, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Surratt, 1998). For example, in the book *Life on the screen*, Turkle (1995) examined online personae in MUDs and argued that the internet offers an opportunity for people to explore alternate identities or other aspects of self. This 'may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves', she argued (pp.268). Turkle in the meantime feared the possibility that 'People can get lost in virtual worlds' (ibid: 268). More recently, the focus has been shifted to less anonymous environments; such as dating sites (Yurchisin et al., 2005; Ellison et al., 2006, Gibbs et al. 2006) and networking sites such as Facebook (Zhao et al, 2008). What is new here is in a disembodied environment people are more likely to re-construct their idenity rather than having identities assigned to them (Barney, 2004). The influences of this on the offline world have been demonstrated (Hardey, 2002).

The interplay between disability, identity, and the internet has not been fully explored. Previous work in disability studies tended to focus on the roles of the internet in communication and relation-building for disabled people (Roulstone, 1998). Recently, the focus has been on the issue of disclosure or concealment of a disabled identity. Cromby and Standon (1999) argued that, since the online environment encourages textual self-presentation, disabled people can interact in a medium where impairment is masked. By interviewing disabled internet users, Bowker and Tuffin (2002) claimed that the impairment became a flexible feature of identity to be revealed or concealed in cyberspace. Contrary to these studies that suggest anonymity promotes self-discourse, Seymour and Lupton (2004) found that, even in a cyber world, the body and the physical practice of it are core elements. Disabled participants sought ways to reinstate the body on

the internet rather than take advantage of anonymity. A similar conclusion is made in Slates' study about disabled people's online dating, where she found that impairment continues to play a key role in how disabled people present themselves (Slate, 2013). These studies focus on how disabled people negotiate and manage their disability identity, with the assumption that they all such an identity and the problem is whether to disclose it or not. The discussions on the disability identity *per se* are rarely seen.

This review suggests the key concerns in cyber identity studies, which are the promotion of internet use on people's agency and the tensions between online identification and the users' offline persona. These have not been well linked with studies about disability identity.

8.2.3 Disability and identity in China

China's move to a post-communist society has changed its conceptualisation of identity. As discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.2), the introduction of capitalist values has resulted a shift in key criteria of what a valuable citizen is meant to be and do. Also, the reform and social changes that have emerged result in an identity confusion, which is influenced by multiple attitudes such as class (see for example Li, 2004), gender (e,g. Yu and Pan, 2008), work (e.g. Ngai, 1999), and the change of living area (e.g. Chen, 2005). Disability identity in this new context is quite a modern concept.

The *Law on the Protection of People with Disabilities* (also examined in Chapter 2) defines disabled people as 'one who has abnormalities or 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'. To be regarded as part of this political unit, people need to apply for an official 'identity', the *Disabled People's Card*, which is diagnostic–based and self-proved (section 2. 4.3.2). This is serving to reinforce the idea that disability is a medical problem, these people are only 'temporary vulnerable', and they should have the '*sizi'* spirit. All these have contributed to a context within which disability is re-interpreted.

However, how disabled people respond to this and what their actual identity is in this circumstance is a relatively new topic. In his pioneering study, Kohrman (1999) identified *nengli* (ability) as a key attribute of the disability identity. He then further examined the relations between it and marriage in his 2005 book. Based on his ethnography research in Beijing, Kohrman argued that the sense of *nengli* is developed through intimate relations and it influences people's identity in this process. He also mentioned people's agency in (re)building their identity, when they 'think themselves as *canji* selectively and strategically' (2005: 175). Another key scholar on this topic is Sarah Dauncey (2012, 2013b). By analysing biographical narratives of a disabled writer, Dauncey (2012) argued that Chinese disabled people were attempting to re-build their identity based on an enhanced sense of self and self-worth. This presentation of personal life is engaged with an approach to socialise with other people and to develop, although at its early stage, a 'disability consciousness' (2013b). Dauncey thus believed that disabled people are able to claim ownership of their own experience (2013b).

These studies have started to examine a *canji* identity within China's special context and they both examine people's response to cultural discrimination and their agency in the process. This is a core element in literature about disability identity. However, these studies focus on cultural interpretation of literature or certain aspects of the disabled life; more empirically-based studies which draw on the multiple dimensions of the disabled experience are needed. Further, the rapid development and roll-out of ICTs in China has created a new, embodied digital sphere, which may have significant impacts on the way disabled people live their lives and see themselves (Chapter 2, section 2.5). How disabled people are constructed in this new era and how they respond to it is just now emerging. This study looked at online identification by Chinese disabled people, with a focus on both their experiences of cultural changes and their dynamic practices. It aimed to see whether and in what ways internet use empowered them. This is explored in this chapter.

8.3 Identification on the internet: types and approaches

Through an analysis of the interview materials, four types of identification are found among disabled people's use of the internet. These are: 1) affirmation of an identity of ability; 2) incorporation of the disability identity; 3) adoption of a

stereotyped identity; and 4) reconstruction of a positive disability. People in the first two types rejected disability to be their dominant identity. Others claimed a disability identity but showed different understandings of it.

8.3.1 The affirmation of an identity of ability

The first type found in the study is the affirmation of an identity of ability. Some participants distanced themselves from the disability identity by affirming their abilities to work or communicate. These abilities were obtained or improved on the internet. Here the thesis gives two cases to show how ability-improvement changes people's sense of being.

Xiaoning was a young man who had a congenital visual impairment. Due to the inaccessible environment in China and the lack of social support, he had been excluded from most social activities and isolated at home for most of his life. He then self-educated through the internet and became a skilled software engineer. When being interviewed, Xiaoning was working from home for one of China's biggest IT companies.[93] He disclosed his impairment on the internet and even in his job application. But he refused to call himself a disabled person, because he had the ability to do 'everything others can do'.

> I did tell them I am blind. They were very nice, they accepted me, because I had done similar things before. They allow me to work from home. But you know what, in fact, why not. It's not like I'm not working. I work as good as, and as hard as, my colleagues. It doesn't matter where I am. My experience and contribution are what they want and this is all.
>
> I think if you saw yourself as just a blind person, you are nothing more than a blind person. Even you think you are deficient; how could you ask for respect from others? I don't think I'm different, except for the fact that I can't see. But I can do everything on the internet, everything others can do. So why should I limit myself to such a small, closed group?
>
> Xiaoning, 22, male, visual impairment

Xiaoning's impairment did not dominate his sense of self: it was there but less relevant. Through self-education in a more barrier-free environment, Xiaoning found himself as capable of social and economic activities as non-disabled people. This sense of 'being able to do' resulted in a positive sense of 'being',

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93. There were two participants working online in the professional, highly-paid IT area. Xiaoning was one of them. The other participant was Yuzhi, who's story was presented in Chapter 6.

he then defined himself as having the status of a 'valuable insider' rather than those in 'the small, closed group'. This rejection of disability identity implies normalisation of the account that blind people are worth less. Xiaoning thought blind people were less capable and competitive, although it is not their fault.

> Blind people are a very small, very closed group. I met a lot of blind people online. I was in some groups but I soon found I have nothing to say to them. Most are not educated. They don't work. They care about nothing. I am not saying it's their fault. Maybe it's just they cannot see the outside world. They are absolutely abandoned, excluded since born, so when they have chances now, they don't know what to do! They could use the internet for many things. I used it to change my life! But they don't know how.
>
> Xiaoning, 22, male, visual impairment

Here Xiaoning was not blaming blind people for their vulnerability but, as far as he was concerned, blind people are less capable than non-disabled people, even in a digital world. He bought into the idea that only through working can Chinese people obtain full citizenship. Xiaoning refused to be categorised into this non-able group. By doing this he was able to form a positive identity, one built on ability not inability or exclusion. This echoes Shakespeare and Watson's argument that self-advocacy can either involve trying to change the perception of the group to which one belongs, or trying to secure change for oneself as an individual (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001a). Participants like Xiaoning used the internet to empower themselves and avoid social oppression. Here the internet shows its efficacy for individual users but this contains no structural assistance. It frees disabled people although only to some extent.

The second case presents a slightly different approach when the focus is on disabling barriers rather than on personal capability. Wuyi was an experienced e-employer who was proud of his ability to 'earn money'. In the interview, he explained how the internet reduced material barriers and enabled him to have a job, and how this changed his sense of self.

> It's my first time earning money. Not money from my parents. From me! Can you imagine how excited I was? It's not a lot, but it's a start, a start to do something. And then you find there are so many things you can do. I can do things only if you give me an opportunity. It was such an encouragement, then I have the confidence for a better life.
>
> Wuyi, 26, male, mobility difficulties

For Wuyi, the internet showed an effective route into paid-employment and by doing so it improved his self-efficacy and self-belief. Social barriers that had restricted him and defined him as 'useless' were reduced in the digital world. He was able to participate in economic and public activities and to be an insider in society. This produced a positive sense of self. Unlike Xiaoning, Wuyi's self-identity questioned the notion of disability.

> So, I don't see myself as disabled. Because I am able to work, I'm able to make money. You know what, my feeling is that physical disability is just a thing that, because our society, China, has not modernized enough to support us, to make us not limited. I think the body will become less and less important, as our society develops. You see, I have a job. People like me can never have a job in the real world, no question. But I have it. So everyone can work online, with a computer… we are not disabled, just didn't find the right place. As technologies are developing, maybe one day, everyone will have a job, everyone can do anything they want. The term, disability, may then disappear.

For Wuyi the problem was not one of personal abilities but of social barriers. He was always 'able to do' but the lack of opportunity and support in the offline world stopped him. It was only in the 'right' digital sphere that his abilities were valued and a better identity was possible. This is not only for him but also for all Chinese disabled people. Based on his own experience, Wuyi started to think that the difficulties they had experienced were not their fault, and the situation should and could be changed in a barrier-free world. He affirmed an identity of ability that challenged the stigma of disability.

Participants in both the examples claimed an identity based on ability. For them, the internet offers a chance to improve their personal abilities or reduces social barriers to make their abilities valuable. In either way, they were able to participate in mainstream activities and develop a positive identity. This echoes pervious research on the topic. In his ethnographic work, Kohrman (2005) argued that mobility ability and the ability to be a 'functional' family member are key criteria in people's sense of self. Dauncey's research (2007, 2013b), similarly, explored how being able to socialise with other disabled people improved their 'value'. However, informants in this study focused on workability, rather than social ability or normalcy, to construct an 'insider' identity. They were able to work and this gave them money and other associated capital. This conforms to the 'development-priority' ideology, in which people are expected to obtain

citizenship through competition and contribution, and those who fail to meet the requirements, no matter whether this is their fault or not, will be excluded (discussed in Chapter 2). It is also contextualised in China's digitalisation which redefines physicality and workability (Chapter 6). All these factors have given disabled people a chance to escape from discrimination and oppression, at least to some extent.

This self-empowerment has limitations; disabled people rebuilt their identity based on the sense of 'be able to do'. This positive sense, however, is limited to the ability to work in certain digital environments. It clashes with a continuous sense of 'not able to do' in the offline world, where disabling barriers and practices are everywhere. Also, this is a self-identification that does not take account of the audience's opinion. Whether the revised identity can be accepted in interpersonal interaction remains uncertain. For example, although self-identified as a capable person, Xiaoning still experienced discrimination in his offline, everyday activities. He said in the interview that he wanted to 'be very strong to reduce my needs for others'. This implies that his capability-building and positive sense of self did not ultimately improve his inclusion.

To sum up, this section described how some participants used the internet to improve or enable their abilities, and by doing so developed a positive identity. People in this approach refused to define themselves as disabled people. Their practices and accounts suggest a personal challenge to the stereotyped position given by the society. The next section moves on to examine a similar approach to incorporating a disability identity as an insignificant attribute.

8.3.2 The incorporation of the disability identity

This section explores how, for some people, multiple identities were adopted, among which disability was incorporated as a non-dominant attribute. Again it presents two cases; one developed different identities across digital spaces, and the other prioritised non-disabled attributes to claim a positive identity. In this approach, the internet has offered an opportunity to increase social capital and resist oppression.

Yecheng was a mature student who used the internet to show and develop his extensive interests. He used a same cyber name to create accounts in a variety of websites, where he presented himself with different focuses. Yecheng argued that his self is complex. Disability, although acknowledged, is 'just a tiny part'.

> I've used this name for years, in different webs and communities. Only in the BBS I say stuff about my disability. My everyday life is in Weibo [similar to Twitter], my poetry-writing, in DB [a hobyy-sharing website], knowledge exchange in GB [an IT community]. You can find me in all these websites by searching this name, but you'll be very surprised to see I'm not the person you know from here [the BBS]. That's me. So many aspects. I can't be simplified with one aspect or one label. That's why I wouldn't use disability to summarise me. It's just a tiny part of me.
>
> Yecheng, 26, male, lower limb impairment

The constructive idea that identity is fluent and multi-dimensional is shown in this case. Yecheng developed and presented multiple identities through regular use of the internet. Disability was a notable element of this: he talked about his body and rehabilitation experiences, especially in the websites where disability is relevant, such as the BBS; he joined in disability networks and was a senior member of some of them; he participated and even started disability-relevant events as a disabled person himself. All these practices were conducted under Yecheng's cyber name/identity and were searchable, which means he did not 'pass as normal' but incorporated disability. However, Yecheng clearly refused a singular and disability-dominant persona. Disability and impairment-related elements were silenced in many spaces, for example in the IT community. They only became important when relevant. This is Yecheng's 'choice':

> Yecheng: Some people tell the disability identity at the beginning. Others do not. They may avoid it and say it later in a proper time. That's just their choice. People say you are not honest, you liar [if not showing disability] But why should we? I have so many aspects, even so many imperfections, why disability? What's the difference between 'you know it' and 'you don't know it'? It's just a normal thing, not something that I 'have to' tell you for a specific reason. Does it make sense?
>
> Researcher: So...it's just a thing, like, for example, a hobby, and you don't need to tell others intentionally or seriously. Is it what you mean?
>
> Yecheng: Exactly! And that's the good thing about the internet. You have options! You can show other identities, not like in the reality, they are always covered by disability.

Impairments, especially visible impairments, usually mean an enforced identity along with stigma and an outsider position. This approach to centralise disability in people's persona is changed in the online world, which is a multi-dimensional sphere and where other attributes and elements are given the chance and space to develop. For example, in GB, the IT community where Yecheng's impairment is invisible, he developed knowledge and by so established and presented an identity of a talent programmer. This was what he wanted and for him was more important than the identity of disability. For people like Yecheng, cyberspace is a chance to manage self-presentation (Goffman, 1969). They therefore downplay disability and disclose it only when relevant. This is to avoid the labels that marginalise and limit them, and to achieve an improved social position.

If Yecheng's case involved elements that could be interpreted as concealment of the disability identity, at least for some people (Yecheng mentioned the risks of being called a liar), the second case was about a diverse and complicated self in which disability was always engaged. Lili was a cosmetic saleswoman who used the internet as her main advertising and communication tool. She always presented multiple identities, including the disabled one, in the process. But she claimed her career identity as the most prominent.

> Researcher: How did you show yourself online?
>
> Lili: Just me. Me in the reality. A make-up saleswoman, disabled, a mom, a person who loves life, who specialises in beauty…
>
> Researcher: So people on the internet know you are disabled?
>
> Lili: Yes, they do. There's no need to hide. If you have my social media accounts, any of them, Weibo, QQ, wechat, you can see my photos. I have a lot of photos, all with my stick. Everyone can see them. People become my customers, and friends, because I am reliable. Because I can make ladies beautiful. It's nothing to do with my disability. They know I am disabled. But who cares? I am a good businesswoman first.

Unlike Yecheng, who divided his identities into multiple fields, Lili presented her multiple-dimensional self as a whole, in which disability was always included but not as the central attribute. She disclosed, even visualised, her impairment on the internet. For example, in her blog, she described her living and working experience as a disabled person and discussed the potential of e-employment for disabled people. She uploaded personal photos where her impairment could be seen. She would 'tell them directly I am disabled when my new friends saw me

using sticks and asked "did you just get hurt". The disability identity, however, did not affect Lili's identity as a professional salesperson or her sense of 'a beautiful woman'. She was 'hardworking, patient and sensitive to beauty'. This sense was based on her work and has been accepted and enforced by her customers. For example, Lili's customers commented on her blog to say she was 'brave, strong and beautiful, just the kind of woman I want to be'. This has reinforced her self-identification and contributed to a positive sense of self.

Cases presented in this section suggest an approach to overshadow disability in identity formation. The participants constructed and presented a diverse and positive persona on the internet, in which disability is incorporated but not as the determinant for a singular persona. This identification is conducted in the cyber world as a result of the classification of information and the fragmentation of knowledge. Turkle identified that 'rapid alterations of identity have become a way of life for people who live in virtual reality as they cycle through different characters and genders, moving from window to window on the computer screen' (Turkle, 1995: 74). What the internet has offered is a multi-dimensional sphere where people can easily cross boundaries, allowing the users to avoid being defined by a certain discourse. The use of the internet also has promoted people's social capital to challenge well-established social norms. Huang and Guo (2005) demonstrated a positive relationship between online activities and the generation of social capital for Chinese disabled people. Here in this study, the key was economic and social capital brought by work. The increase of social capital allows the participants to change the lack of cultural capital associated with disability. They are able to try different attributes and build a 'true' self.

However, how safe and solid this cyber identity is, and how it can impact on disabled people's actual lives, remain uncertain. Through internet use, Yecheng improved his social capital and by doing so claimed a positive identity. He was famous in GB (the IT forum) as a knowledgeable and experienced person, which he was very proud of and which would be a strong point in his CV in his plan. However, how this identity can work in real job market is unknown. Chapter 6 discussed how skilled disabled people were still marginalised in both the online and offline marketplace, which suggested that a 'workable' identity may do not reduce the stigma of the disability identity. Considering this, the hope of using

cyber identity and the social capital it brings to obtain an improved position may be too optimistic.

8.3.3 The adoption of a stereotypical identity

Unlike the above cases, which were in general a resistance to the socially-given disability identity, some participants in the study claimed disability as the main marker of their sense of self. This showed two directions: disability as a negative identity (the result of social construction), and disability as a positive identity (a reflective challenge). This section focuses on the negative approach. It uses two cases to examine how psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999; Reeve, 2008) influences people, even in a digital environment where impairment is invisible.

The first case is about Niran, a middle-aged woman living with cerebral palsy. Niran described herself as an 'addicted' internet user. She communicated with people and participated in activities through the internet, where her impairment was invisible. However, Niran claimed a negative sense of self.

> Niran: I use the internet a lot. I love it. Online I don't need to talk, just type. Nobody can see me, or hear my voice, nobody knows who I am.
>
> Researcher: But you said just now you'd like to go out and meet people?
>
> Niran: Yes, I do hope to. Well, I'm ambivalent. I look forward to going out, making friends, making myself valuable to society. But I also want to stay in the cyber world, to hide myself. Yes, the digital world suits me better.
>
> Researcher: What makes you think like this?
>
> Niran: Because nobody can hear me or see me. How fantastic! You know, people like me, ugly, so ugly. I should never be in the real world.

What Niran's account shows is the extent of psycho-emotional disablism faced by many disabled people. The able-bodied discourse produces a set of values about how a so-called normal and functional body should be, and how people failing to meet the standards are worthless. This was sensed by Niran in her daily life and caused the 'aesthetic anxiety' (Hahn, 1988). She then judged her own body based on non-disabled standards and had negative comments, using strong terms like 'ugly'. She located her exclusion from the mainstream not in society's refusal to welcome her but in what she saw as her own failures.

This means the psycho-emotional disablism that had been influencing Niran's offline life continued in a digital world. The internet provided a sphere where Niran's impairment can be invisible. She was able to refuse visual representation in online interactions or avoid impairment-related conversations. However, the disappearance of impairment did not alter Niran's comments about the body that she saw as 'ugly', neither did it challenge her negative identity. She still defined herself as a 'less-valuable', 'outsider' person. For Niran, the cyber world was a temporary shelter but it failed to produce an ultimate better sense of self.

A similar situation is seen in Handong's story. Handong was a 30-year-old man who lost his right leg in a car accident. He claimed that the internet did not help his identity reconstruction, despite the fact that impairments can be concealed on the internet.

> Handong: [after the accident] What I know about myself, how people see me, how the life is like, all these things changed. Everybody would feel self-abasement in the circumstance, right? I know I shouldn't. But it's just so hard.
>
> Researcher: why do you think you should feel self-abasement?
>
> Handong: Because I am different. I am different with you, with anyone else. And I know nothing about this difference. You know, I used to be a normal person.
>
> Researcher: Will it be better if the differences are not visible, like, on the internet?
>
> Handong: No. Nobody helps. Nothing helps. The internet is a totally new space. I can hide, nobody will know who I am, but I do. I know who I am. I know I am different.

Handong's story reveals another element of psycho-emotional disablism in the Chinese discourse. As explained in Chapter 2, China's history of the society of acquaintance and its attendant homogenous ideology have created a normalcy of the body, which defines different bodies as 'stranger' (Fei, 1948). This happened to Handong when he acquired his impairment. The ways people responded to his impairment and the impairment effects combined to reinforce one another and in doing so created a negative sense of self. Again, although impairment and the difference were invisible on the internet, Handong was not able to leave behind the abuse and denials he experienced by simply stepping out into the internet.

Only these two participants claimed this negative identity in the study. The ideologies of homogeneity and 'development-priority' constitute China's psycho-emotional disablism, which frames people's sense of self. For some disabled people, this outer construction is too powerful to challenge. This echoes Hughes and Paterson's argument that the body is an experiencing agent, a site of meaning, and source of knowledge (Hughes and Paterson, 1997). Even in the environment calling for less physical embodiment, it still plays a crucial role in people's sense of self. This stops disabled people challenging social oppression and forming a new identity.

8.3.4 The construction of a positive identity

The last type of identity construction focuses on a politicised identification that redefines disabled people as an 'insider' in society. Again only a few participants adopted this approach. These participants used the internet to affirm a positive identity and by doing so challenge the overt stereotypes that surround disability. It was a process to reconstruct the disability identity on their own terms. This section gives two examples; in the first case the participant declared an insider identity by questioning the notion of normalcy. The other focused on the discourse of the society of acquaintance.

Huizhen was a middle-aged woman who had mobility difficulties. As presented in Chapter 6, she ran an e-shop on *Taobao*. The fact that she was able to work and participate in mainstream activities online made her question the orthodoxy of excluding disabled people.

> I am just a *zhengchang ren* [normal person], like everybody on the street. I don't see myself as different. I mean, yes, I am disabled. But so what? Everyone has problems, just in different aspects. I can't walk very fast, but I can be a good mother, a good wife, a good seller…And I am!
>
> Huizhen, 33, female, manual dexterity impairment

What Huizhen was trying to say is that having an impairment does not lead to the social position of 'other'. Because 'everyone has problems', having problems itself is the norm. In such a society people with impairments should be included as equal citizens and their impairment should not separate them out. They are not different from anyone else. In contrast to the claim of a capable identity

(Type One, see for example Wuyi's case), which rejects the disability identity by arguing that the internet improves individual ability and makes the users 'able', Huizhen's explanation disrupts the notion of normalcy. She distinguished disability and the outsider, which are usually synonymous in Chinese discourse; and self-identified as disabled but also an insider. This evidences that the participants could also challenge disabling discourses of normalcy.

This identification approach, according to Huizhen, was evolved through her internet contacts, as in this way she learned that difference is 'normal'.

> Researcher: what makes you think that people are the same because they all have difficulties?
>
> Huizhen: Well, I think since I met a lot of different people online, people from all over this country, doing all kinds of jobs, people who have strange ideas. I remember I met a guy saying 'cao' [one of its common-used meanings is 'fuck'] all the time. I thought he is so rude. I really didn't like him. But then I was told 'cao' simply means 'do' in his place. I realized I don't know everything. People are different, and they are so different in all kinds of aspects.
>
> Researcher: How about people offline, are they all same?
>
> Huizhen: Well, maybe they are different too. But you don't know. For me, my hometown is a small village. I've never met any other disabled people there. I am the only one different. Maybe I am not. But I did feel I am the only one. I felt everyone lived in the same way, the way I can't. But on the internet it is different, you can meet all kinds of people, all different things. It's a bigger world, making me realise I am not really different, they are people more different than me.

The internet gives Huizhen a chance to see the differences and to develop the idea that 'normalcy' does not exist in Chinese society. This is similar to Watson's study about how disabled people feel as a normal person because they got used to the impaired body and how they then had an ontological normal identity (Watson, 2002). Yet in this narrative, it is still through comparison with non-disabled social actors, and self-categorisation as a normal person, that an insider position is claimed. Huizhen was 'normal', not because impairment is a normal thing for her, but because being different is normal for all Chinese people. The use of the internet has located Huizhen in a wider, diverse context and allowed her to challenge the construction from a small and fixed discourse.

Another case is from Zhufan, the organiser of the Self-strengthen BBS and an activist. Zhufan led digital movements in both the online and offline worlds, through which disability was shown as his core identity (see Chapter 7 for his story). In the interview, Zhufan proposed a 'disabled insider' identity from a political perspective.

> People always say disabled people should open our minds, communicate more, as that helps us to adapt to the society. But why should we adapt to the society? Some disabled people just want to stay together, in our own BBS, with our own people. We are disabled. You can't ignore that, you can't pretend that we are not. Just let us be our real selves! The key is, our specialties should be cared for; it needs to be considered in policy making, like accessible facilities in the subway. The basic rights of disabled people should be guaranteed.
>
> Zhufan, male, 43, ankylosing spondylitis

Zhufan questioned the able-bodied orthodoxy and the idea that disabled people can only 'negotiate their loss' and develop a less-disabled identity to be included. He did not refuse the disability identity. On the contrary, he spoke for disabled people as a disabled person himself, highlighting their differences and needs, such as impairment effects, and arguing these should be taken into consideration in policy-making. Neither did Zhufan want to accept the definition and stereotypes of disability from the mainstream. He questioned the ideology of the acquaintance society, through which he clearly and strongly proposed new ideas, like 'everyone should be included', and 'disabled people deserve equal rights'. This reveals an emerging human-rights approach which has engaged with disabled people's political practices (examined in Chapter 7). The political and cultural impacts are found within the interlinking and interaction with other in disabled people's internet use.

In summary, this section illustrated the non-orthodox construction of identity, which challenges China's normalcy and acquaintance discourse. This is a political act, echoing Armstrong's argument (2003) that online identification can be a celebration of the self and a show of power. A small amount of participants claimed an insider position, not only for themselves but for all Chinese disabled people. This is new in China and here the internet has shown its potential as a tool and the sphere for deliberation.

8.3.5 Summary

So far this chapter has presented four types of identification. These included a resistance to a disability identity, by affirming an identity of ability (Type One) or incorporating disability as an insignificant attribute (Type Two), and a claim of a disability identity with a negative (Type Three) or positive sense of self (Type Four). Table 8-1 outlines these identifications and their characters.

Table 8-1 Individual identification: types and approaches

Type	Description	Disability	Agency	Ideology
1	An identity of ability	No	Yes	Ability/workability
2	A diverse identity	No	Yes	Multiple identities
3	A stereotyped identity	Yes	No	Disability as a personal issue
4	An insider identity	Yes	Yes	Diverse and inclusion

The internet has played a central role in each of these identifications. In Type One, the internet reduces disabling barriers and allows the users to improve, or use, their personal abilities. In Type Two, a multi-dimensional sphere is created with the use of the internet, where people are able to develop social capital and to avoid a disability label. In these practices disabled people have shown their agency in identity formation. They are able to challenge the social construction through internet use, and on the internet. However, whilst this gives them options and improves their self-determination, it deconstructs the disability community and limits the formation of identity politics. The empowerment is mainly on the individual level.

For participants in Type Three and Four, who self-claimed to be disabled person, the internet has shown different impact. People in Type Three used the internet as a mechanism and a sphere to reduce impairment effects and improve their communication and participation. For them, internet use did not affect the social construction or change their negative identity. On the contrary, a few participants redefined the notion of normalcy or challenged the homogeneous discourse to construct an insider identity. Here internet use served as a tool for deliberation.

The majority of the participants in the study actively engaged in their identity formation, except for the two participants in Type Three, who could not avoid being defined as disabled 'others'. On the individual level, the internet in general empowers the users by offering a chance to reconstruct their sense of self. The next section moves on to the collective level to see how this impacts disability culture, if such a culture exists.

8.4 The emergence of 'disability culture'?

Academia has questioned the possibility of homogenising the disabled group and the representability of the so-called 'collective consciousness' (Shakespeare 1996; Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, 1999; Watson, 2002). This research echoes the argument by finding some participants refused to be pigeonholed by their impairment, which questions the foundation of identity politics. Still, the research witnessed 'group commodities' about the notion, image, and culture of disability. This section presents these shared norms and examines whether they are part of the disability culture.

The section starts by briefly presenting the ongoing process that people with a disabled identity (dominant or not) gather on the internet. It then moves on to explore the 'group consciousness' that have emerged, with evidence from the two disability digital communities. These include a narrative characterised by negative experiences in the Post-bar, and a narrative of personal endeavour in the BBS. Through analysis of these 'commodities', the chapter discusses whether internet use can challenge a stereotypical disability discourse.

8.4.1 Online gathering and the formation of common sense

The process starts from online gathering and the formation of public disability spaces. My content analysis of the two disability forums suggested that online grouping is a central theme for Chinese disabled people (see Chapter 5). It was further examined in Chapter 7 that disabled people networked through internet use and formed online and offline groups (Form Three of their political actions), which is a key step in politicising disability issues. These have produced digital public spaces that are labeled with disability and in which personal issues have

been presented, shared and politicised. For disabled people this is the chance to mobilise and to form a political agency.

A 'group identity' has emerged in the process, which itself is a crucial part of politicisation. Wangqiang, a junior member of the self-strengthen BBS, described his 'sense of belonging' to the group.

> It's a natural thing to have a group. It just happened. We are the same people, we are doing the same thing, suffering, experiencing bad things. It's good to do it together! The same interests, habits, the encouragement from each other...we understand each other! You don't have to say, they just understand you.

> Wangqiang, 33, male, spinal cord injury

Wanggqiang enjoyed being in the group. For him, things presented and shared in the forum were familiar and part of his own experience of being disabled. It is based on the common experiences and feelings that he and other people have developed their own knowledge and norms, including a collective sense that disabled people are always excluded in China, which let them 'understand each other'. These were the bases for trust and close relations. Wangqiang located his emotional needs into the group of people having a certain identity. His claim, that 'we are the same people', has established the boundaries between them and the rest of society. Through this a group identity has been implied.

As explored in Chapter 5, both the two disability communities analysed in the study were young, which means it may be too early for them to have developed a group identity. Even so, a range of knowledge and norms have been established, which encourages or requires the group members to behave in certain ways. These are reflected in the 'hidden rules' or written rules, such as the aims, principles, and slogans of the communities (presented in Chapter 5). They have contributed to culturally homogenising the group and act to form a collective identity of their own, which is very different from the orthodox or mainstream image of disability.

The following sections of the chapter examine this in detail and present two group consciousness. It needs to be clarified that not all community members share the same identity or the 'culture'. Both the Post-bar and the BBS are loose

groupings and their members have their own approach to the construction of self. However, there are some commodities that 'you can feel immediately when you are here', as said by one participant.

8.4.2 'A circulation of negative energy' in the Post-bar

The Disability Baidu Post-bar is one of the disability communities where I did my online fieldwork and from where I recruited my participants. As introduced in Chapter 5, this is a huge forum and an open domain, which has attracted a large amount of users and generated deep disability-related conversations. The study identified a collective sense in this sphere. This, as described by its members, is 'we disabled people are living a poor life and this is normal'.

> I don't like the culture here. It's full of negative energy. So depressed. The climate is awful. If one person is complaining, trying to prove how poor he is, many will join him soon. 'Well it's not a big deal'. 'Well I had something worse'. 'I am poorer'. It's just, you know, ridiculous! Makes me feel, you know, we disabled people are living a poor life and it is normal, this is us!
>
> Liwei, 27, female, visual impairment

Liwei joined the Post-bar because 'it is the first result when I searched *canji*' and used it as the 'only way to meet other disabled people'. She, however, sensed a 'group culture' that she was very bothered by. As Liwei said, it was a common thing, or even a tactic, to centralise cyber participation on sharing experiences about oppression and exclusion. These are of course key themes in the members' everyday life. But what made Liwei unhappy was the fact that it produced a group narrative of 'disabled and vulnerable', which has dominated the community and reminded the participants of how oppressed they are. It has reinforced a negative sense of self. This was also reported in another participant's account.

> It's a process of influencing each other. Like, I am a person having very sad feelings of being disabled, I think it would be better to say it out loud. But people who see the complaints feel terrible. They may think of similar things. Then you have the feelings like, well, that's it for us disabled people. That's what we will get as a disabled person. That's what you deserve. Then it becomes the fact! Do you understand? Maybe it's not a fact, maybe you can have a different, better life. But it becomes the fact when you believe in it, when everyone believes in it.
>
> Yuzhi, 28, male, achondroplasia

Here Yuzhi pointed out how personal story-telling constituted a narrative and how this could impact individual actions in turn. Scholars in other contexts have argued that by creating and sustaining narratives, people can construct or maintain their sense of self (Giddens, 1991; Somers, 1994). This is reflected in the Post-bar when the negative (although true) comments have been shared and have influenced some of the users, like Liwei and Yuzhi, in forming their sense of self. Yuzhi thought this was dangerous because a disadvantaged and outcast position of disabled people has been normalised and 'legitimated' in the group. It becomes a 'fact' or even an essential identifier for these users: they can only be members of the group if they accept that they are vulnerable and oppressed.

The case, although would be clearer with more evidence, implies an emerging disability narrative in the Post-bar, which employs story-sharing as the main form, focuses on discrimination and oppression, and develops a pattern to respond to others with shared negative experiences. This is emerging and it is too early to analyse its impact. However, as asserted by more than one participant, it was recognisable, and was even the cultural identifier of the group.

8.4.3 A 'Self-strengthen' culture in the BBS

Unlike in the Post-bar, a 'positive' consciousness and an encouraging culture are found to emerge in the Self-strengthen BBS, which is 'although our life is hard, we should and could make a change'. Participants used 'positive energy' to mark this collective sense.

> Everyone here is nice. It's a great group, a really pleasant place to stay. We talk, and are encouraged by each other. You see, he suffers intense pain every day but he still works. So why can't I? It's an atmosphere of encouragement, support, all positive energy. It encourages you to use your talents, to do what you can do. He may be good at investing. I might be good at selling cloths. You could be a good designer. So just go and use whatever your talent is.
>
> Baoguo, 47, male, hearing impairment and mobility impairment

Baoguo very much enjoyed the 'atmosphere of encouragement' of the BBS. In this community, experiences about personal endeavour and success, rather than about discrimination, were shared. The basic idea was everyone has capabilities

and, as long as they work hard, their life can be changed. For Baoguo this helped to create a better sense of self. Such a narrative is part of the 'self-strengthen' culture, which was formally proposed as the principle of this forum (see Chapter 5). Zhufan, the organiser and leader, clarified it as the 'core value' of the group.

> We self-strengthen people are different, compared to places, like, you know the Post-bar? Sometimes it is just about the atmosphere. We have the idea at the very beginning. We believe disabled people can and should help ourselves and help each other, you see, that's why we have this name. That's the notion, that's the core value of our community.

> Zhufan, male, 43, ankylosing spondylitis

Using words like 'we self-strengthen people', Zhufan established the margin of this community with others, and announced a collective in which a certain set of cultural norms have been developed. This was consistent with his own approach of re-define disabled people (explained earlier in this Chapter, the last form). It was, for him, a new disability narrative that should be achieved through disability (e-) activism (see Chapter 7 for Zhufan's representation of 'we self-strengthen Ppople'). This 'collective' needed to be maintained through 'management'.

> I have to say there are some really boring people who wanted to cause problems. I just kicked off two people from our chatting group. One said 'Why not fight' while others were having a not very happy conversation. The other repeatedly talked about an argument. It was a thing that happened a long time ago so why say it again and again, making people unhappy? We don't need these people in our group, no matter how active they are. They spread negative energy, even enmity. We have to let them go. So slowly, we build up a stable team where values like contribution and volunteering are accepted.

> Zhufan, male, 43, ankylosing spondylitis

Here the BBS shows a more organised pattern in developing a group identity/ culture. Certain ideas such as contributing to society, which are with no doubt the product of individualism and the 'sizi' spirit (this was examined in Chapter 2), are explicitly suggested. The state's disability narrative is not considered in opposition to disabled people (Dauncey, 2013b) but has been intentionally used to impact the participants and to create a unity. Compared to the Post-bar,

group consciousness is more conceptualised in the BBS. The community had more discussions about the cultural image of disability and disabled people (reflected in the popularity of relevant themes, presented in Chapter 5). It has developed its own journal which the aim to 'present new disability culture'. It has even established and practiced a serious of strategies to manage the group and secure the dominance of the self-strengthen discourse. As a result, the consciousness has been largely internalised within the group. For example, Baoguo mentioned with pride in the interview, that 'the negative energy and boring conflicts will never happen here. We have things to do and we are not so shallow'.

What has been presented in this section is culture-formation at its initial age. As stated in Chapters 2 and 3, disability has not been developed as a political or cultural agency in China due to the lack of institutional basis and the long-term exclusion from the publics. Now, because of the internet, and in digital sphere, there is a finally chance for this to change. This supports Dauncey's work, when she foresaw the emergence of disability consciousness from public presentation of a disabled writer and his communication with readers (Dauncey, 2012; 2013c). However, common ideas and practices found in these communities so far were informal, obscure, and disorganised. They were not shared by all the users. For example, although Yuzhi was a regular user of the Post-bar, he did not like the experience-sharing culture. The norms and practices explored here are far away from a collective identity or a disability culture although they contain potential for reforming disability narratives.

The risk is that when 'commonalities' and 'a shared culture' are defined, the needs and values of a certain group of disabled people may be seen as normal and those of others may be neglected. This is exactly how disabled people have been marginalised in mainstream society (Sprague and Hayes, 2000). This is a danger disabled communities need to be alerted to.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined disabled people's cyber practices in (re)constructing their identity and disability culture. From the individual level, the analysis of the data suggested four types of online identification. These included: 1) the affirmation of an identity of ability; 2) the incorporation of disability identity as

an insignificant attribute; 3) the adoption of a stereotyped identity; and 4) the reconstruction of an insider positive identity. Most disabled people rejected the disability identity or the discriminate characters of it through internet use and in the digital world. Only a few internalised the disabling construction and claimed a negative identity.

The chapter then explored the emergence of group culture in digital disability communities. The data suggested a 'negative' narrative which centralises on the oppression experience of disabled people; from the Post-bar. A different culture is the 'Self-strengthen' consciousness that has emerged and developed in the BBS. Whilst the two consciousnesses are different, they revealed an approach to develop counter-orthodox narratives by disabled people themselves.

At either the individual level or the collective level, what disabled people did is to attempt to control their own image (Couser, 2010). In her pioneering work on disability identity in China, Dauncey explored the growth of disabled people's agency in rebuilding their identity as a valued citizen, through public life-writing and communicating with other disabled people (Dauncey, 2012, 2013c). She then claimed the emergence of a collective sense of disability (Dauncey, 2013c). This thesis supports these arguments and extends them by presenting more directions of self-identification and an updated process of this consciousness-forming. With the development of ICTs, internet use has played a vital role in disabled users' self-identification, by improving their ability and social capital and/or offering a more inclusive sphere where different voices can be heard. It has thus shown great potential for freeing these people and updating disability culture. These impacts, however, are so far limited to specific areas and in the digital sector. In order to improve social inclusion for disabled people more structural support is needed, in this cultural field, as well as in the economic and political fields as they were discussed in previous chapters.

Chapter 9 Conclusion and Discussions

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the thesis brings together the key themes that have emerged from the analysis and by doing so responds to the research aims. Framing this work are three key overriding issues. First is the rapidly changing and evolving Chinese society and economy, as the country moves from a highly centralised system to 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Second is the near absence of disability and disabled people from this process and finally is the expanding internet use by Chinese people. There has been very little research on disability or disabled people in China in these contexts and one of the aims of this thesis was to start to explore and fill that gap. It attempts to find a practical way, or at least a direction, for developing disability affairs in China.

To recap, the research aims of this project were:

1) To explore what life is like for disabled people in China's contemporary digital society, including their experiences in multiple dimensions;

2) To explore how disabled people are using the internet in these contexts, what they are using it for, how and why;

3) To examine the impact of internet use, if any, and to consider the extent to which this improves disabled people's lives and, by extension, intersects with the changing Chinese society and promotes social justice;

4) Based on empirical evidence and theoretical discussions, to propose a new contextualised framework to research disability in China.

This chapter starts with a brief summary of the findings of the study. It then moves on to discuss the key implications of these findings. These include the issues of empowerment and inclusion in digital China and then a methodological discussion about the dual role of the internet in social science studies. Finally, it examines the implications of internet use on political engagement and the potential for developing a 'netizenship' in contemporary China. Based on the findings and discussions, the thesis finishes by proposing a new framework for researching disability in China, arguing that it should move beyond the barriers- or rights-based model to one that includes the changing discourse and reflexivity of disabled people.

9.2 Summary of the findings

This study examined disabled people's use of the internet and the impact of this on their everyday experience and practice. This began with the analysis of the emergence of digital disability communities, which produced quantitative results that were presented in Chapter 5, The Digital Life of Disabled People. By analysing 2597 posts from two popular disability communities, the study argued that Chinese disabled people used the internet to document their everyday life, to build and maintain social relations, and to organise and mobilise for social change. The key themes that emerged in the process included the role of socio-economic barriers in framing the disabled experience, the users' outsider position in social relations, and their need and desire for a powerful political agency. The experiences that were recorded and documented in digital public sphere have reshaped disability narratives. Using the internet has contributed to communication and allowed the organisation of disabled people to become an identity group. These results gave a broad overview of the scene.

The content analysis was used to sensitise the research and the identified key themes informed the subsequent interviews. In total, 34 disabled internet users drawn from across China were interviewed. These are supplemented with other materials, including the interviewees' posts, blog articles, and media reports of them, to gain as complete as a picture of their perspective as possible. All were accessed with their permission.

The key findings from the data were presented in three chapters exploring the intersection between internet use and the economy, political engagement and cultural representation of disabled people and disability. The economic theme explored how Chinese disabled people used the internet to participate in paid-employment. The first section of Chapter 6 examined situations where the internet was used as an instrumental tool to find an offline job. The analysis of the data suggested that, whilst internet use is effective in accessing information and reaching employers for almost all of the informants, it only led to jobs that were segregated, poorly paid, and of low status. In its second section, Chapter 6 focused on digital jobs that were newly created on the internet. It introduced entry-level 'labour' jobs such as 'Water-army' and Game mercenary, and 'high-level' jobs, such as e-shop owner or skilled freelancer. The jobs were in general

unequally and poorly paid. The data suggested that whilst digital employment is barrier-free and more accessible for many disabled people, it fails to protect them from competition or change their outsider position in welfare and other social systems. This implies that, as it currently stands, using the internet is not effective in challenging disabled people's vulnerability in the economic field.

In Chapter 7 Internet Use and Political Empowerment, the thesis explored the participants' cyber experience and practice in the political field. It developed a framework to explore these people's personal and collective actions, which have explicit or implicit stances and which aim for an improved position for disabled people. The four identified forms were: 1) personal complaining, which has no specific goals; 2) personal campaigning for civil right or a better representation; 3) online networking with no explicit political goals; and 4) formal collective activism to challenge the social structure. The ongoing politicisation of disability has been a central element of the process, which involves moves of 'personal to political', and 'individual to collective'. The analysis of the data suggested that internet use has great potential for challenging disability construction in China. However, the future of this remains uncertain as the practices were nascent and there are some predictable barriers in advancing them to real activism.

The last dimension explored in the thesis was the influence of internet use on disability identity and culture. This was presented in Chapter 8, (Re)Constructing Disability Identity and Culture, as two sections. From the individual level, the first section demonstrated how the internet offered the liberating possibility to escape from the label of 'others' and construct a new, alternative identity. This was the case for the majority of the participants, although two respondents were found to be trapped and could not escape the overbearing cultural barriers that many disabled people face in China. The second section of the chapter discussed the emerging 'culture', from the two disability forums that were originally examined in Chapter 5. These included a 'negative' narrative of 'disabled life is full of pains and difficulties' from the Post-bar, and a 'positive' narrative of 'we disabled people should self-strengthen to change our lives' from the BBS. They are, it is argued, evidence of using the internet as a means of consciousness-raising, albeit it is an early stage and they is still a long way from the radical 'disability culture'. At both the individual and collective level, the

internet has offered a possibility and a sphere for counter-narratives. This has shown obvious impact on individuals but the effect on the disabled group is too uncertain to be definitive.

The findings of the study cover the multiple levels of the disabled experience with the use of the internet in China. A simplified schema of this is provided in Table 9-1.

Table 9-1: Schema of internet use of Chinese disabled people

Domain	Example of experience and/or practices
Therapeutic	Sharing information about impairment
Technological	Assistance provision, for example, in job application
Psychological	Sense of being able to do (through employment)
Psycho-social	Experience sharing and peer support
Education	Self-education online
Economic	Digital paid employment, for example, Water-army
Political	Campaigns for civil rights or a better representation
Social	Building social relations and online organising
Cultural	Reshape, for example, the disabled insider identity

This echoes the theoretical perspective of the study that researching disability in China should involve the multiple dimensions of this phenomenon. The findings also suggest that it is important to pay attention both to structural facts (through people's experiences) and to the agency of individuals (through their practices), in the special and changing Chinese context. These multiple dimensions, and the two perspectives, were not separated but inter-related and combined to impact disabled people's lives with the use of the internet. The next section of the thesis discusses the key issues that have emerged in the analysis process.

9.3 Discussions

9.3.1 The internet as a tool for empowerment of individuals

China is increasingly moving towards an individualised society and it is perhaps fitting that the internet is acting primarily at the individual level when it comes to empowerment. Internet use has improved disabled people's 'workability' and work chances; it has offered an opportunity for them to come together and give voice to their concerns and demands. It has also, to a certain extent, allowed them to redefine what life is as a disabled person and provides a channel through which they can resist cultural domination. The impact of the internet is however restricted. Whilst disabled users have obtained more and better access to social and public life, this has not fundamentally changed their position within society or tackled their exclusion. This is because empowerment through the internet focused on enhancing personal power rather than structural or social power.

Feminist theorists claim that there are three forms of power: 'power as a thing', 'power over', and 'power to' (Hartsock, 1983; Neath and Schriner, 1998; Sprague and Hayes, 2000). In the first form, power is 'a thing, a quality, or an attribute that people do or do not have' (Sprague and Hayes, 2000: 679). It is individual, and its main expected role is to change personal environment through interacting with the social sphere (Zimmerman, 1990; Florin and Wandersman, 1990). The second form of power is 'power over', referring to a relationship where one group is dominant over another. The theoretical basis of this is Foucauldian, which argues that power is in a range of networks of social relations, and the exercise of power is accompanied by and through discourse (Foucault, 1982). This in human society, according to Neath and Schriner (1998: 218), is 'characterised by hierarchy and inequality and relations'. The last form of power is discussed under different terms. Some scholars use 'power with' to describe the social form where people come together as equals (Neath and Schriner, 1998; Kreiberg, 1992). Other use 'power to' to propose the direction to construct power to be a capacity (Sprague and Hayes, 2000). With either of the names, this form of power shows a reflective way to challenge the hierarchical structures and to achieve new power relations.

Whilst all the forms of power are crucial in constructing a person's or group's position, the primary influence of the internet in China, as suggested in this study, is on the first individual form. Internet use for most of the participants

was personal. The intention was to change the 'environment-person fit' and improve their own living conditions. This was particularly obvious in their economic and cultural use of the internet.

The internet has shown great potential in changing disabled individuals' work prospects. The analysis of the data suggested that, through internet use people are more likely to find, apply, and maintain a job; in both the online and the offline world. This has produced economic, emotional, and social rewards. People using the internet in this way have been significantly empowered and in many cases their wellbeing has improved. That is to say, their personal power as a necessary attribute to participate in economic activities, has been promoted.

This personal power, however, does not affect disabled people's 'power over' or 'power to' in China's new economic system. The research found that disabled employees were segregated in the offline market with specialised jobs and a label of 'recipient of policy support'. In the e-market, these people were seen as 'less valuable' and exploited. This, coupled with their exclusion from workfare system, meant disabled people had to take jobs that had few if any prospects either for advancement or could provide an adequate income to meet their needs. The hierarchies and inequalities, the dominance of non-disabled people over disabled people, and the broader structural issues that have historically excluded disabled people, have not been changed. Disabled people still experience exclusion from the mainstream workplace. This is even truer for the last form, 'power to'. As a new and vulnerable group, disabled employees of course do not have the power to build an equal and inclusive economic environment. Empowerment on 'power to' is unlikely, especially in the Chinese context where economic development is prioritised and productivity is regarded as the basis for personal value.

A similar situation is seen in the cultural field. The study found that disabled people were more likely to resist cultural dominance in their personal identity or in disability culture; through internet use and in cyberspace. Considering this they have been empowered to challenge the discriminative construction or more generally, the wider society. However, what the participants gained was personal power, as a thing, a possibility, or a tool to control their own image.

Just as in the economic field, their 'power over' and 'power to' in China's discourses have not been improved. The participants' reconstruction of their individual identity and the group culture had limited influences and has been confined, mainly within the disabled population. Their voices were not valued, or even not heard, in the mainstream. The hierarchical view that non-disabled people are more 'normal' and 'useful' than disabled people remains dominant. Again as a marginalised and vulnerable group disabled people are not able to improve their 'power to' and construct a new discourse.

This restrictive situation is, as suggested in this study, open to change through political use of the internet. The data presented in the thesis shows that, through individual and collective cyber practice, Chinese disabled people were politicising disability issues. This has improved their personal power and raised the potential for political participation but, like the economic and cultural use, it has rarely changed their 'power over' and 'power to' in China's political system. Disabled people are still dominated by non-disabled people and this dominance has been practiced and reproduced through social and political institutions. However, if we see these practices as an emerging, nascent movement, there is the potential for this to evolve and for the internet to provide a channel to promote disabled people's 'power over' and 'power to' in the future. The example around the right to drive demonstrated how activism can have an effect. The movement challenged the disabling settings directly and improved disabled people's 'power over' in the specific area of driving, and by extension in their access to the public. It was an early stage of enhancing their 'power to' for a new society, where full participation and equal position are ensured. This and similar internet use can improve the personal, institutional, and social forms of power. The internet then will have the potential to implement a full empowerment for disabled users.

The findings of the study show the limitations of individual empowerment and call for attention to the structural and social forms of power. This echoes Cocks and Corkram's argument (1997) of a multi-dimension empowerment for disabled people,

> Empowerment at a personal level means freedom from the avoidable constraints that come from one's impairment and from the limiting

attitudes of other people. At the systemic level it means freedom from the misguided actions of formal human services and other social institutions; and at the societal level societal values and ideologies that promote vulnerability and disempowerment.

Cocks and Cockram, 1997: 224

Moving beyond personal power and enhancing other forms of power, as called for by disabled activists in the Global North and suggested by empirical evidence in the study, requires identity politics and collective actions. Collins in her work about empowerment for black women in America (1990) argued that, although individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate lasting social transformation of political and economic institutions. In the area of disability studies, scholars and activists have developed a similar approach. For example, Charlton had a strong claim in her book, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*:

The only way to empowerment is through the conscious activity for people themselves. In the end, the only successful way to tear down an ideological system is to systematically attack its political, economic, and socio-cultural foundation.

Charlton, 1998: 117

In achieving this kind of empowerment an 'empowered consciousness', self-organised disability activism is essential (Charlton, 1998). Similarly, Anderson and Siim (2004) argued that the creation and mobilisation of a multiple-actors network are the keys 'to change the power matrix and strengthen the pressure for a new 'social contract', which should include socio-economic interests and the political participation of excluded groups' (pp. 2). This thought has been to some extent proven in the Global North, with the experience of successful movements and the resulting changes in legislations, policies, and discourses (for example Campbell and Oliver, 2013). Empowerment in these contexts is understood as a process of acquiring power through identity politics and self-conscious actions.

How far this can advance in China remains unclear. Whilst Chinese disabled people, as the analysis suggested, are forming a community/agency and are developing collective activities through using the internet, the context in which they and these practices are located needs to be considered. As examined in the

Chapter 2, in China, the government still plays the key role in controlling society and the 'development-priority' ideology dominates. The third sector organisations have not been well developed to participate in policy-making or deliver real social change. In this context, the emerging digital inter-linkages and political practices are presumably unlikely to exert major impact. Hardly can they empower disabled people from a structural or social level.

9.3.2 The internet as a mechanism for inclusion to competition

The other key element that has emerged throughout the study is the role of the internet in social exclusion/inclusion. In the Global North, inclusion has been linked to citizenship and claimed as the basic approach to challenge oppression of disadvantaged people (Kivisto and Faist, 2007; Mohanty and Tandon, 2006). With this logic, finding an effective way to remove social barriers and include disabled people as equal members becomes the key task for disability activists and scholars (Oliver and Barnes, 1998; Jaeger and Bowman, 2005; Norwich, 2007; Singleton and Darcy, 2013). This study examined the exclusion/inclusion of disabled people in China and the changes on this, if any, in a digital context. The analysis of the data suggested a special inclusion pattern, not to civil rights as it in the Global North, but to a competition.

The notion of inclusion varies according to context and discourse. However, in general, inclusion demands full participation and equal position for all advantaged and disadvantaged groups in a society (Kivisto and Faist, 2007). Before the arrival of the internet, Chinese disabled people had a very limited chance to participate. As the evidence presented in the thesis suggested, they were rejected in the job market for 'lack of productivity', silenced in political administration and practice, and represented by stereotypes in mainstream discourse. They were segregated geographically, economically, and culturally and had little access to social lives. This has been to some extent changed, when the internet removes, or at least reduces, many of the barriers.

In the employment field, the internet has reduced the disabling barriers, such as the limited presence of information, the exclusive procedures, and the needs of social capital including skills and money to work or to set up a business. Whilst this has offered disabled users access to economic activities, it has

obvious limits. First is the level of the access. The data presented in the thesis showed that the influence of internet use was primarily on the entrance into the job market. The results were segregated or entry-level jobs, which were usually low-paid, labour-intensive, and of a low social status. Disabled people were included only at the edges, with little or no chances of advancement and no access to higher level jobs or move from the segregated to the mainstream workplace. The other limitation is that the access or convenience is not offered solely to disabled people but to all internet users. Non-disabled people can also access job information or apply for the job in this more effective way, and they are with no doubt more valued in the context that productivity is prioritised. This means what disabled people are included into is competition for a job. The competition is not only intense, due to China's specialised modernisation (discussed in Chapter 3 as one of China's specialities), but also unfair, because the rules and standards are designed by, and for, non-disabled people within the able-bodied discourse. Disabled people therefore found themselves marginalised on grounds of productivity and remain vulnerable within the new settings. even where the internet may act to reduce or remove some of the barriers they face,

This is replicated in the political field. Through internet use, disabled people were more capable of, and had more opportunities for, participating in political events. They were able to give voice in public spheres. They also had the chance to come together and develop their own identity groups and politics. Clearly the internet can act to reduce some of the barriers to and enable inclusion in the political field. But again, this opportunity is available to all Chinese internet users. As discussed in Chapter 2, there have been intense debates about the impact of e-governance on China's regime, where both its liberating roles (for example Young, 2013) and its restricting roles (for example Kalathil and Boas, 2010) have been demonstrated. No matter what the impact is, broadly speaking, Chinese people have so far not obtained the power to change policy-making or challenge the authorities. Moreover, in this promoting yet restrictive trend, through which Chinese people's capability and possibility have been enhanced by internet use, non-disabled people will no doubt gain the most benefit. Political empowerment at this early stage is again a competition and disabled people are new and vulnerable among many identity groups. They are not advantaged in striving for the limited resources and because of this their voice and demands

can hardly be heard above the clamour of other voices who are also seeking attention. This is what Collins (2002) defined as the intersectional nature of oppression, and it, as she demonstrated, can only be eliminated through collaboration across all the different sectors.

Lastly, the internet has offered the chance for disabled people to be included in the construction of their own culture. With internet use, disabled people were more capable of presenting themselves as they wanted and reshaping disability narratives with one that takes account it their actual experiences. Whilst this has significantly questioned the social-given image of disabled people, their practices and creations had limited audience and inadequate impact. This is because in the 'mass self-communication' era (Castells, 2015), the opportunity to give voice has been given to all groups but the power to hear or ignore them has remained in the hand of authorities. There are significant hierarchies and inequalities between agencies that have been newly included in China's cultural re-construction and only a few of them can make their voice heard. The data found in this study suggested that some disabled people were forming a 'self-strengthen' culture on the BBS, in which personal endeavour is highlighted in overcoming barriers and obtaining an insider position. This is an example that Chinese disabled people are vulnerable in the changing discourse and are usually influenced by non-disabled discourses. Internet use has not delivered a multiculturalist inclusion but could reproduce the able-bodied orthodoxy instead.

These findings in the economic, political, and cultural fields reveal the role of the internet in creating a special inclusion pattern in China, which is: remove or reduce barriers to let disabled people in, but the direction is an intense, unfair competition for civil rights.

The first element of this pattern is 'inclusion to competition', which is rooted in the narrow notion of civil rights in the Chinese context. As examined in Chapter 2, civil services in China have not been well developed and are, at this stage, seen as resources to distribute or awards for competition, rather than as born-with rights. All Chinese people are expected to join in the battle, through which some of them who prove to be 'useful' are awarded civil rights. In this

context, although internet use has included disabled people in social lives, what it actually leads to is a wider selection. Only people who meet the certain requirements can become a valuable citizen. To obtain this position disabled people have to compete with their non-disabled peers. They then, as the data presented in the thesis suggest, find themselves in a vulnerable position.

This is related to the second element of the pattern, which is that it is an unfair competition. The competition is designed by and for non-disabled people, in the context that most environments are inaccessible, social resources are unequally distributed, and the 'development-priority' discourse is highly legitimated. The internet and cyberspace is part and results of this structure. Their benefits are mainly enjoyed by non-disabled people and disabled people's special needs are less considered in its design and practice. They are expected to use the internet to overcome their 'personal difficulty' and make contributions in an able-bodied, 'normal' way. For example, whilst a disabled person is more likely to participate in paid-employment, he may be put into an area where his or her impairment effect is particularly influential and then be defined as 'less-useful'. Disabled people can never win the competition if the rules are there to exclude them.

This suggests a notable gap between 'equality of opportunity' and 'equality of outcome' regarding the role of internet use in promoting social justice in China. Whilst internet use as an opportunity has been offered to most Chinese people and has significantly assisted disabled people in their economic, political, and cultural participation, it cannot change these people's disadvantaged position, which is a long-term result of the social structure. Only with targeted support can the 'ultimate concern on equality of outcome' (Segall, 2013) be achieved.

9.3.3 Researching through the Internet: a tool and a sphere

Research work in this study has been completed through the internet (it recruited the participants from the internet) and 'on the internet' (it analysed disability digital communities and interviewed five participants online). In the process, the internet has acted both as a tool and as a sphere. This holds true both for the disabled internet users and for myself as a researcher.

The findings presented in the thesis suggest dual roles of the internet for its users. First is the instrumental role. The internet has been an effective tool for communication, organisation, and participation. Given the fact that Chinese disabled people live very separate lives this is particularly significant for them. The other role of the internet is its transformative effects as a public sphere, which were reflected in all the dimensions of this study. In the economic field, the internet has built an e-economy, where more work opportunities are provided (e-shops), new jobs forms are created (such as the Water-army and Gamer), and the employment relationship are revised (contract-based to task-based). In the political field, the wide use of the internet has created a public sphere that is bigger and more accessible than any of its traditional forms. The users, especially those who were silenced in the offline world, are offered the chance to organise and mobilise to form a political agency. They can develop a political constituency and act to change their situation. Lastly, the internet has allowed or encouraged the emergence of counter-orthodox conversations and sub-cultures. New disability narratives were found to be developing and spreading in China's cyberspace. This part of the new discourse that may influence both disabled and non-disabled Chinese individuals. All these changes are from and in the digital sphere.

The transformative effects are the most important efficiency of the internet. As suggested in the thesis and analysed in the above sections, the instrumental effects of the internet are shared by all Chinese users and cannot challenge the disadvantaged position of disabled people. They have to some extent obtained personal power, but not the structural and social power. They have been given some basic access but this is to an intense and unfair competition. In these circumstances the improved outcomes as promised are hard to achieve. This, as suggested in the research, could be changed if the internet becomes a new sphere to develop identity politics. The study witnessed the formation of disability groups and their collective practices, through which the process of politicising disability is emerging and some social changes have been achieved. This has the potential to enhance the instrumental effects and to fundamentally change the lives of Chinese disabled people.

However, the dangers of using the internet as a digital sphere should not be ignored. In his work about how disability has been constructed, Kitchin (1998) argued that material spaces are organised to keep disabled people 'in their places', and to deliver the message that they are 'out of space' when there is a need or desire for their presence (pp. 345). This was found in the digital world as well. While disabled internet users are happy to find and establish their own sphere, and the impact of this can be significant, they might find themselves trapped in these segregated 'cyber-ghettos' and their marginalisation from the mainstream will be reinforced. An obvious example of this is the new narrative constructed by disabled people in the e-communities. As presented in the thesis, this re-representation had limited audience and did not spread beyond the special, identity-labelled sphere. How far it can challenge the Chinese discourse remains uncertain. This shows that an accessible and comfortable sphere may not be the solution to tackle the exclusion of Chinese disabled people.

The dual roles of the internet in academic research are notable as well. The effectiveness of the internet in assisting social science research has been widely reported: it allows faster communication, wider sources of data, effective data-recording and analysis, and easier writing (for example Bryman, 2012). However, the real potential is its existence as a new public sphere, where 'the core concerns and contours of sociology are being explored, challenged, shaped, and reformed in diverse and imaginative ways' (Orton-Johnson and Prior, 2013:2). Effects of both aspects were suggested in the study, but the latter is argued more important in the Chinese context.

From the instrumental perspective, the internet provided me with the access to potential participants, who are usually highly segregated in current China. As explained in the methodology chapter, this research collected and analysed online materials and recruited most of its participants from the internet. This is easier, more effective, less time-consuming, and arguably the most promising route to find participants in China's disabling context. Above all, however, the most crucial is the avoidance of potential interpretations from other agencies. In social science studies, getting access to participants almost always involves going through gatekeepers (Hood et al., 1996). These in the disability area in the Global North are usually service manager or disability organisation (Carey and

Griffiths, 2017). Whilst gatekeepers broadly play a crucial role in protecting people who will be involved in research, working with them means certain issues. They may impact on research; for example, on the topic selection, the number of participants, and the reliability of data (Broadhead and Rist, 1976; Walker and Read, 2011), and create unequal power relations (Carey, 2010; McDonald and Kidney, 2012). In other areas such as women's studies, issues like activists being the gatekeepers and trying to control information for their own purposes have been found (Cook and Fonow, 1986). In studying disability in China, the greatest and probably the only gatekeeper that can be hardly avoided, is the Chinese Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF) and its local offices. This is a 'self-organisation' that has close linkages with China's party-government, which is seen as part of the government by many people and its potential to block research is large (see discussions in Chapter 2). Using the internet in this context, as in this study, has allowed the by-passing of this gatekeeper; albeit this may cause ethical dilemmas.

This study points to the great potential afforded by the internet as a sphere for social science research. By using the internet as a source of data, especially for my content analysis about the key themes in disabled people's internet use, I was able to access a very diverse and broad range of experiences; efficiently and at a low cost. This sensitized me to the issues faced by disabled people in China today and allowed me to set the research aims based on their actual experiences and practices. The internet, in this study, is also where research work was conducted, including online interviews with five participants. Sudulich and his colleges (2014) summarised the key characters of cyber studies, which are the overwhelming supply of information, heterogeneity of data, and the plasticity or changeability of the context. These were all shown in the study as both benefits and challenges.

First is the overwhelming supply of information. In its grounded research the study analysed two disability communities, which had hundreds of thousands of participants and millions of posts. The massive amount of relevant information made the analysis extremely time-consuming, even after sampling. Scholars in a similar situation argued that automatic coding with a software can do the job effectively to save time (Jungherr and Juigens, 2014). My own experience in the

study, however, suggests that automatic analysis is unlikely to be completely accurate. Not all my sampled posts had an explicitly-expressed theme. Some posts had no recognisable topic, while others had two or more. Some posts did not clearly demonstrate their theme with terms that are 'normally' used but gave detailed explanations that linked to them later in the comments. If software were used, there is the possibility that these may be missed, which would affect the reliability of the findings. This is particularly the case for studies in Chinese, because almost all well-developed or commonly used software packages are designed for the English language and are weak when it comes to analyse Chinese materials. The study therefore argues that, in studying China's internet, technological aids can only be used if adequate manual analysis is followed. In this way, it is more a sampling technique to exclude unrelated information that surrounds the information of interest, than an analysis method.

The second element is the heterogeneity of information, which is an issue for all social science studies but is particularly critical for those researching cyber phenomena. The internet has created an infinite, multiple-dimensional world, where every individual and group can easily develop their own sphere/networks around certain specific issues. This itself is a categorisation/exclusion and it has been enhanced with technological assistances. For example, there may be less interaction between different groups if all internet users are familiar with and favour functions like keyword searching and automatic re-directing. The result of this may be a higher level of specification and a growing heterogeneity. In traditional social science studies, the way round this heterogeneity issue is to sample until saturation is reached. In internet studies this requires a stronger recognition of the diversity and a way to access all the variations.

The last element to consider is the changeability of digital materials. A key reflection of this is changes across time: my data may be out of date by the time the study is finished and the results are published. This is the same for changes across spaces. Lee (2014: 253) argues that 'the malleability of the online world means that their objects of study are always likely to change in response to events'. The fluidity of the data is an advantage in this study, considering the fact that China is undergoing a rapid reform and cyberspace is probably one of the best angel to explore the wider context. The Post-bar had 3 million posts

when it was analysed but now has more than 6 million. Its management team has been through several 'elections' and there are notable changes in its context. All these characters require me as researchers to be 'observers of emerging pattern and regularities, as well as builders of generalised theory and testable hypotheses' (Sudulich et al, 2014). The findings of this study then give a glimpse of not only the disabled life but also contemporary China as a whole.

9.2.4 Netizenship: a route, a booster or an alternative?

By exploring disabled people's cyber experiences and practices, the study has so far demonstrated that the internet is as an effective yet restrictive mechanism to empower disabled users and promote their social inclusion, as well as the sphere where these are conducted. These lead to the discussion about the possibility of developing a digital citizenship, or the 'netizenship', to advance China towards a more civil society.

There have been vehement debates about how citizenship discourses have changed with the development of technologies. As summarised by Sujon (2007: 201), these include at least three aspects: the enablement of more democratic and expanded membership systems, the introduction of new publics and social territories, and the establishment of new de-territorialised citizen rights and obligations'. This study, with its research aim of finding the way to improve the lives of Chinese disabled people, focused on the last aspect, particularly civil rights. Disabled people in China have always been marginalised or even excluded and whilst the new rhetoric states that they are included and accorded equal rights, this has not been practiced especially when civil society itself has not been well developed. The internet, in this circumstance, has affected disabled people's citizenship status in the following ways.

First of all, internet use has provided disabled people access to their legally accorded rights, which is the primary efficiency suggested in the study. This is mainly through digitalising existing settings and practices around citizenship and reducing material barriers to let people who are able to connect to the internet in. An obvious example is digital employment. Through using the internet, some disabled people were included in economic activities and were awarded a more-or-less better position, both economically and culturally. They were more likely

to participate in public affairs and fulfil their political rights. Whilst the internet in these practices served as an effective route, it is far away from guaranteeing disabled people an equal citizenship. In employment, the newly created digital jobs have not been included in China's tax-paying or workfare system, which means these e-employees were not considered as contributors or insider citizens. In the meantime, the access, broadly speaking, is more notable in the economic area but is restricted in other aspects such as the politics. Most governmental websites in China are not updated and information on policies is not always published, which means internet users are less likely to develop political forces. Civic services like tax paying, voting, and benefits application, can be conducted online only in a few developed cities. All these suggest a need to continue this digitalisation of citizenship, in all relevant aspects and to a higher degree.

Secondly, internet use has the potential to improve China's current settings and practices around citizenship. This was less obvious in this study but relevant evidence suggests an emerging trend. For example, in the political field, the study witnessed a disability campaign through which some disabled people gained the rights to drive. This was not distributed to them and the success of the activism proves the possibility to extend given civil rights through collective actions. In the cultural field, the internet has created a digital culture that to some extent promotes the diversity and freedom. A notable amount of counter-accounts and sub-cultures have developed, which may impact the reconstruction of China's citizenship discourse. In these ways, new technologies and people's use of them have played a constructive role, which is that 'they do not simply support predetermined courses of action, but open up new spaces of action, often contrary to original intentions of inventors and sponsors (Coleman and Freelon, 2015:2). They are expected to extend and improve existing citizenship settings and implement in China.

The final expected effect of the internet is its change, reshaping or shift of the pattern of citizenship in China. Sujon (2007) argued the global world is perhaps seeing a shift from an industrial model of citizenship, in which the rights to work, welfare and education are central, to a technological model:

> The responsibility for the development of public resources is individualised and the regulation of the 'public' shifts more towards both technologically mediated networks of individuals and the private sector. This marks a tension from rights being developed from 'below' as implied through the repeated prioritisation of technologically enabled communalities over national or institutionally organised citizenship rights; and the diffusion of citizenship power and control based on the responsibilisation of individuals and pluralisation of guild-like collectivities or technologically based associations.

<div align="right">Sujon, 2007: 212</div>

A similar potential shift revealed in this research is the emergence of civil associations, which may affect the relations between individuals and society in China. The data suggested that, through online economic, political, and cultural participation, disabled people are more capable of coming together to resist or challenge their oppression and exclusion. This process has not only improved their personal agency, but more importantly offered the opportunity to organise and mobilise. These people can participate in society in a collective way.

This does not necessarily lead to organisations *of* and *for* disabled people as proposed by western scholars (Oliver, 1991), or more generally Non-government organisations (NGOs) as they were understood in the Global North. Or at least not yet. Eliasoph (2013:66) argued that there are two common forms of civic associations, volunteering and activism, which means:

> Usually, volunteers do not routinely question the roots of the problems they aim to solve, but just try to get in there, hands on, directly, to solve the problem, not necessarily caring about its source…In contrast, political activists: Treat the problems that they aim to fix as issues of justice and of human decision-making… expand the domain of political, conscious, democratic decision-making…'Connect the dots'… Often operate outside of routine channels…

<div align="right">Eliasoph, 2013: 66</div>

With these notions, what have emerged in China's digital world, at this stage, are mainly volunteering associations. For example, although disabled internet users organised to campaign for the right to drive, which was the most 'political' action identified in the study, the network was issue-targeted, temporary, and it did not connect the specific issue to a picture of whole society. This and similar networks/practice targeted at certain problems 'in a hands-on direct way' (ibid: 66). This finding echoes the approach in offline China that disability NGOs are in

general service-based with only a small number of rights- or advocacy-based exceptions (Hallett, 2015), which, again, suggests the limits of the liberation of internet use. However, this study also witnessed a trend to politicise personal issues and act collectively to challenge existing authorities. The movement case not only improved disabled people's civil rights, but also questioned the pattern that civil rights are distributed on able-bodied standards. If this continues, activist associations have the potential to be developed in China and could act to balance the state and the market, as argued by Eliasoph (2013).

This is part of the wider transformation towards a new internet government system, where netizenship can be an alternative to citizenship. There have been arguments about how new technologies can establish a platform for freedom, democratisation, deliberation and full participation (Hauben, 1996; Mosco, 2000), and whether balance 'between all the interested parties including representatives of Netizen activist groups and other governance agencies, the private sector, international organisations and governments' can be achieved (Paliwala, 2013). Whether this digital 'commonality' is possible in China, of course, is too early to conclude. But if this is achieved, netizenship may be the future to replace the undeveloped citizenship.

A key issue that cannot be ignored is the accessibility of this netizenship if it is developed. This requires two levels of access, or 'doubled access' (Mosco, 2000). First is the basic access to the intent, including digital devices, connection to web services, the ability to cover the cost, and the knowledge to use the internet. For disadvantaged social groups, such as people living in poverty, older people, and disabled people, these factors are particularly essential and should be guaranteed through social support. China's government reported that by the end of 2016, 56.65% of the population were internet users (CNNIC, 2017). Although this figure is increasing rapidly, and China arguably has a 'have-less' digital division that means an inclusive use (Qiu, 2007, presented in Chapter 2), it needs to be realised that a substantial portion of the population is excluded. Without the basic access they cannot obtain the netizenship.

The second level, according to Mosco (2000), is access to the ways knowledge is embedded within technological systems. Scholars defined netizens as people

who use the internet regularly and effectively, which means 'sufficient technical competence and information literacy skills along with regular means of access' (Mossberger, Tolbert and MacNeal, 2007:1). This effective use, in this study and in China's specialised context, means internet use in a range of aspects, rather than solely for individual leisure. The data presented in the thesis suggested that the participants experienced few barriers for individual, economic, and leisure use of the internet, especially in their own disability spaces[94]. They however had less experience in accessing, understanding, and commenting on the government websites, or in participating in formal political activism. These areas should be more open and accessible to them, otherwise disadvantaged people would never obtain these rights, and peripheral and social injustice will be reproduced.

Another core issue is recognition of the netizenship. Fraser (1997) argues that social justice requires both redistribution and recognition. Following this logic, Andersen and Siim (2004) proposed a three-dimensional pattern of social justice; of redistribution, recognition, and participation. This is same for netizenship if it exists, which asks the majority of the (disabled) population to recognise their rights and the ways to approach them, and their participation to complete this. The findings of the study suggested that disabled people have started to use the internet individually and collaboratively to appeal for civil rights. Their cross-place networking leads to consciousness-raising and the emergence of identity politics. If this continues and expands, Chinese internet users can probably form powerful political agencies, and promote the deliberativeness of China's politics. If recognition of rights and the full practice towards this will happen in China, it is more likely to be in the digital world.

9.4 Concluding remarks

So far the chapter has discussed: 1) the roles and limitations of internet use on the empowerment of disabled people, which is a significant rise of their personal power but a failure in respect of their structural and social power; 2) the impact on inclusion, that internet use is an effective mechanism to include Chinese disabled people but the direction is towards an intense and unfair competition;

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94. This does not mean there is no barriers for all disabled people. People may experience difficulties regarding the poor design, exclusion for knowledge, and their impairment effect or certain personal situation. Here the argument is based on a general, simplified perspective and the comparison with the time before the arrival of the internet.

3) the internet in sociology research as both a tool and a public sphere; and 4) the possibility to develop 'netizenship', as a route, a booster, or an alternative, to China's undeveloped citizenship. These, alongside evidence of the participants' experiences and practices that were presented in the thesis, answer my research questions.

To the first question, what the disabled life is like in China's contemporary digital society, the thesis roughly concludes as: disabled people who have access to the internet are more likely to have an improved yet restrictive life, which is, broadly speaking, being more included in economic, political, and cultural activities, as a new and vulnerable agency.

Secondly, the thesis examined disabled people's reflective internet use in the changing context, including e-employment, individual and collective political participation, and reconstruction of identity and group narrative, which constitute the main and sole force to challenge China's structure and which increase disabled people's agency and personal power.

The third question, the impact of internet use on improving disabled people's lives and promoting social justice, is found to have a complicated answer. For Chinese disabled people, who had always been excluded in society, using the internet and living with a cyber-world have indeed significantly improved their personal lives. 'This is a great chance that has never been given to us', as said and deeply believed by most participants. However, as suggested by the analysis of the data, the internet and the developing digital world is reproducing the power relations and social inequalities, and disabled internet users, although more included, are still marginalised and oppressed in this so-called 'new world'. The personal, un-supported and un-organised internet use cannot alone promote social justice in the Chinese society.

On the basis of these findings and discussions, this thesis proposes a new and contextualised framework to study disability in China. First, researching the topic should take the country's changing contexts and mixed discourses, particularly the fact that its settings and practices around civil rights have not been well developed, into account. If in the Global North, disability is about denial of or

social barriers to civil rights, in China this refers to a group of people who have been largely marginalised or excluded and cannot get the necessary support to participate in social lives or fulfil their responsibility to society as all Chinese citizens wish to. They need more than equal access but extra targeted support. Secondly, studying disability in China should take people's agency into account. This is because China is in a special stage that, its social structures and cultures have been rapidly re-shaped by multiple agencies, and the notions and narrative of disability are not fixed. Influenced by global accounts and with the help of new technologies, disabled people are participating in the reconstruction as a significant force. Lastly and because of this, the organising and organisations of disabled people and their relations with other agencies, including the CCP and government, private sectors, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), should be the main focus of further disability studies in China.

This research has its limitations. First is the limited scope of the participants. The majority of the informants were living in urban areas, which are clearly more 'developed', although five people living in rural areas were interviewed online to reduce the imbalance. The geographical areas examined in the study were the central, northern, eastern and southern parts of China, while western and west-southern China were not able to be included. More importantly, the study focused on people with physical impairment and those of them who were able to connect and regularly use the internet, which meant it excluded many disabled people, including those living in poverty, having learning disabilities or mental health issues, and who did not want to use the internet. That is to say, the study missed some voices that could expand our understanding of living with disability in China.

Secondly, this study focused on disabled people's personal accounts, including both their experiences and practices, rather than directly on social and structural constructions. This does not mean it adopted an individual/behaviourist approach and through the study 'personal' was always understood as a product of social construction. However, I do appreciate the fact that the thesis did not engage greatly on the social and policy construction. This is due to limited time and space and further work is needed in the future.

The last element, epitomising both the uniqueness and the weakness of the study, is the ongoing nature of its research objects. The internet and people's cyber experiences and practices are new concepts in China and have been, and still are, undergoing a dramatic transformation. The study had to capture certain aspects of this and therefore contains the risks of narrating a partial story. This, on the other hand, allowed the research to deeply engage in the process and to identify the salient points. The thesis told the actual stories of people living in the age of reform. It gave a glimpse of disability and the internet in China, and more widely, the changing Chinese society *per se*.

The thesis ends with an optimistic quote from one participant, which shows his belief in digital employment and by extension in a digital civil society.

> Some people say it's too little. Several hundred yuan? That's nothing. But I would rather see it as a process, a start. We all start with basic earnings, but it will accumulate. ¥30 this month, 300 next month, maybe 3000 later. For me, if 30 isn't enough, I'm not going to give up. I will improve myself and find a suitable one, a better, more effective one. I might call a team to post ads and myself be the manager. You can definitely get more income for that, right? You see, I always believe that desires motivate people, it changes us, encourages us, makes us more confident and stronger. It will eventually be better, but you need to keep working.

The study has witnessed the emergence of a more inclusive China, where barriers are being dismantled, new politics are being developed, and Chinese individuals are being empowered at least in some aspects. This is a start, as believed by my participants and myself. With future and more sophisticated use of the internet, a new era of inclusion may eventually come.

Appendix 1: Content Analysis: the original results

Categories	Themes	In the *Post-bar*		In the *BBS*	
		N	%	N	%
Social Relations	Romantic relations	273	13.15%	9	2.05%
	Friendship	68	3.28%	/	/
	Family Relations	27	1.30%	1	0.23%
	Disability groups relations	171	8.24%	17	3.87%
	Doctor-patient relations	2	0.10%	1	0.23%
	Other social ties	24	1.16%	12	2.73%
	Total category	*565*	*27.22%*	*40*	*9.11%*
Disabled Daily Life	Cloth & Accessories	9	0.43%	/	/
	Food & Drink	76	3.66%	/	/
	House & Living environment	10	0.48%	6	1.37%
	Self-driving	20	0.96%	2	0.46%
	Public transportation	15	0,72%	9	2.05%
	Weather	34	1.64%	5	1.14%
	Beauty	30	1.45%	/	/
	Sex	18	0,87%	/	/
	Shopping	19	0.92%	/	/
	Hobby	66	3.18%	15	3.42%
	Exercise & Travel	13	0.63%	15	3.42%
	Entertainment	62	2.99%	13	2.96%
	Pet & Animal	14	0.67%	/	/
	Total category	*386*	*18.59%*	*65*	*14.82%*
Social Economic 'Reality'	Employment	191	9.20%	35	7.97%
	Digitality	63	3.03%	12	2.73%
	Education	34	1.64%	35	7.97%
	Accessibility	4	0.19%	16	3.64%
	Money	43	2.07%	/	/
	Total category	*335*	*16.14%*	*98*	*22.31%*
Political issues	Law & Policies	8	0.39%	7	1.59%
	Welfare & Benefits	76	3.66%	51	11.62%
	Online Grouping & Organizing	150	7.23%	4	0.91%

	Group events	44	2.12%	19	4.33%
	Other disability events	2	0.10%	26	5.92%
	Disability movement	7	0.34%	9	2.05%
	Total category	*287*	*13.82%*	*116*	*26.42%*
Psycho-emotional issues	Temporary mood	137	6.6%	5	1.14%
	Identity	123	5.93%	9	2.05%
	Total category	*260*	*12.52%*	*14*	*3.19%*
Cultural issues	Cultural discrimination	56	2.70%	21	4.78%
	New image	18	0.87%	8	1.82%
	'Triumph over adversity' story	18	0.87%	42	9.57%
	Digital disability culture	11	0.53%	1	0.23%
	Total category	*103*	*4.96%*	*72*	*16.4%*
Body & Health	Impairment	36	1.73%	5	1.14%
	Healthy & body	67	3.23%	11	2.51%
	Rehabilitation	12	0.58%	16	3.64%
	Assistance	25	1.20%	2	0.46%
	Total category	*140*	*6.74%*	*45*	*7.75%*
	TOTAL	*2076*	*100%*	*439*	*100%*

Appendix 2: Interview Topic Guide

Internet use: access

- When did you start to use the internet?
- Were there any material difficulties for you to use the internet?
- Were there any other difficulties for you to use the internet? (knowledge, skills)

Internet use: experience and practice

- What do you use the internet for? (possible dimensions include)
  - ➢ for economic gains
  - ➢ for social relations
  - ➢ for political aims
  - ➢ for emotional and/or cultural aims?

- How did you use the internet in these aspects?
- Why did you use, or not use the internet like this?
- Are there any stories in your internet use, that you want to share?

Internet use: impact

- Does the use of the internet have any impact on your life?
- What impacts does it have?
  - ➢ on the material aspects?
  - ➢ on the spirit aspects?
  - ➢ On social relations?
  - ➢ On identity and social position?

- Do you think, in general, internet use has changed the situation of you as a disabled person?
- Do you think, in general, internet use has changed the situation of Chinese disabled people?

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

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Participant Information Sheet 课题介绍

1. Research Topic and the Researcher 研究题目及研究人信息

Living with another world: Internet Use and Cyber Participation for People with Disabilities in China.

Yuanyuan Qu, PhD candidate in Sociology, Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research, College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow.

> 另一个世界中的生活：中国残疾人士的互联网使用和网络参与
> 屈媛媛，博士生在读，格拉斯哥大学社会科学学院社会学系，残疾人研究中心

2. Invitation paragraph 邀请信

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

> 您好，我们诚挚地邀请您参与此项关于残疾人网络使用和网络参与的学术调查。在您做决定之前，您有权了解本调查开展的原因及其包括的内容，所以烦请您花费一点时间，仔细阅读以下说明。您可以针对不明白的地方提问，或者要求我们提供更多的信息。请您不用顾虑时间，认真考虑是否参与。

> 谢谢您的阅读与合作。

3. What is the purpose of the study? 这项研究的目的是？

The aim of this study is to try and fill the gap and to explore the experience of internet use and cyber participation for people with disabilities in China, and thus, to deepen our understandings about this social excluded group in the digital age. This study will require talking with disabled people about how they use the internet. Information uncovered by this study will be helpful both for disabled people and their allies and for policy development, especially in new areas of virtual technologies and proper social welfare in a new era but will could also add to the greater inclusion of disabled people in China.

> 本研究希望了解在当今中国，残疾人士怎样使用互联网及其网络参与的经验故事，并通过于此，加强我们对残疾人这个被歧视和边缘化的群体的认识。我们希望通过与您的交谈，提取残疾人群体的生活经历和需求。我们诚挚地希望——并将尽我们最大的努力促成——这些信息能够致力于使用信息技术的开发、相关福利政策的制定、以及广义上的残疾人弱势地位的改善。

4. Why have I been chosen? 为什么是我？

Internet users with disabilities aged more than 18 years old are hopefully to be our participants in this study. We notice that there are several very popular online communities used by disabled people, like Disability Baidu Post-bar and the Self-strengthen BBS, so that we post advertisements there to recruit people, like you. I am happy to know you are interested in this and you contacted us. I really appreciate this no matter you decide to participate or not.

本研究面向 18 周岁以上、身有不便的网络使用者，并在残疾人大量聚集的"残疾人百度贴吧"和"自强论坛"发帖招募参与。我们很高兴您有兴趣跟我们联系，不管您最后是否参与，我们都非常感激。

5. Do I have to take part? 我一定要参与吗？

Of course not. It's your decision. We will be highly appreciated if you would like to contribute to this study. But if not, we still thank you for your reading and interest. Please note: You can withdraw your participation at anytime without giving a reason.

当然不是，您可以根据自己的意愿自主决定。要提醒您的是，即使您决定参与本次调查，您仍然可以随时中止，我们不需要任何理由，仅仅希望您能及时告知。

6. What will happen to me if I take part? 如果我决定参与，会发生些什么？

We would have a fact-to-face interview with you for no more than two hours. Some questions about your personal background, your internet use experience, your opinions towards it, and anything about your personal life that you would like to let us know, would be asked. Can I just reminder that you can say no to some questions in the interview, or even stop it at anytime.

The interview will be audio-taped and I will take notes during the interview. If you like, I am very glad to give you one copy of the manuscript after the interview. It is possible that I will email you or call you after the interview to double check some information. But again, you can refuse me as you like.

我们会选择您方便的地点，跟您进行一次谈话。谈话不会超过两个小时，涉及的内容主要有：您个人的一些情况，您网络使用的经验，您对于互联网的态度，以及，如果您愿意透漏的话，您在现实生活中的近况。在访谈中如果有您不想回答的问题，请您不要顾忌，直接予以拒绝。您可以选择随时终止访谈。

这场谈话可能会被录音，同时我们也需要做一些笔记来记录。如果您希望的话，我们在将录音整理出来之后可以给您一份文字稿。结束访谈之后，如果有信息存疑，我们有可能会继续通过邮件或电话联系您。当然，如上文所述，您也可以拒绝我们的进一步联系，主动权掌握在您的手中。

7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential? 我的参与是保密的吗？

All information, which is collected about you during the course of the research, will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by a pseudonym and any information that will disclose your identity will be replaced by certain code. Your personal information will be deleted after the whole course of the research with particular procedures. You will not be recognised.

我们对于学术保密有着极其严格的法律规定，所有从您那儿获得的信息都将被匿名使用。您将被随机给予一个笔名，所有跟您身份相关的信息都将被用编码代替。您的个人信息都会被谨慎严密地保管，并在整个研究结束后完全销毁。请您不用担心会被辨认出来。

8. What will happen to the results of the research study? 这个研究结果会用来做什么？

Information generalized by this study will be used as the part of normal academic output, like a dissertation, academic articles and conferences. If you have interest, I am very happy to send you one copy.

研究获得的信息将被用于、且只会被用于、学术领域，如学术论文、期刊论文或者会议。如果您有兴趣阅读，我们很乐意提供给您。

9. Who is organising and funding the research? 该研究是谁组织的？受谁资助？

This research is organised as a PhD program and funded by the China Scholarship Council.

该研究是我（屈媛媛，格拉斯哥大学社会学在读博士生）的博士论文项目，受中国国家留学基金委组织，是公派留学的项目之一。

10. Who has reviewed the study? 这个项目被谁检查过吗？

This study is supervised by Prof. Nicholas Watson and Dr Joanna Ferrie, University of Glasgow and has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

该研究由格拉斯哥大学残疾学教授 *Nicholas Watson* 和高级讲师 *Joanna Ferrie* 指导，并通过格拉斯哥大学社会科学研究伦理委员会的审批。

11. Contact for Further Information

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research project, please feel free to contact Yuanyuan Qu, via email: y.qu.1@research.gla.ac.uk, or call +447459174804 (UK mobile phone number) or 86-0558-2267230 (China mobile phone number).

Or you can contact Dr Muir Houston, College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, via email: Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk and Professor Nicholas Watson, my first PhD supervisor, Nicholas.Watson@glasgow.ac.uk .

如果您对研究还有任何疑问，请通过邮件 *y.qu.1@research.gla.ac.uk*, 电话 *+447459174804*（英国手机）或 *0558-2267230*（国内座机）联系我（屈媛媛）。或者您可以联系英国格拉斯哥大学社会科学学院研究伦理办公室 *Dr Muir Houston: (Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)* 和本博士生项目的第一导师 *Prof. Nicholas Watson (Nicholas.Watson@glasgow.ac.uk).*

Consent Form 参与知情书

Title of Project:

Living with another world: Internet Use and Cyber Participation for Disabled People in China.
另一个世界中的生活：中国残疾人士的互联网使用和网络参与

Name of Researcher: *Yuanyuan Qu* 屈媛媛

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

    我确认我已经阅读并理解项目简介，并曾经有对项目发问的权利。

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

    我明白我的参与是自愿的，也知道我可以在任何时候取消参与，不需要给予任何解释。

3. I consent to interviews being audio-taped, and acknowledge that copies of transcripts will be returned to me for verification if asked. I refer to by pseudonym or identified by code in any publications arising from the research.

    我同意对访谈进行录音，并被告知如果有兴趣，我会收到一份访谈的文字整理稿。我知

    道，当谈话被发表在学术论文中，我会被冠之以笔名或其他编码，我对此表示同意。

4. I agree / do not agree to take part in the above study.

    我同意/不同意参与此项调查

Name of Participant	Date	Signature

Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 4: Basic Information of the Interviewees

Pseudonym	Gen.	Age	Hometown	Job	Impairment
Yecheng	M	26	Hebei	Student	Lower limb impairment
Handong	M	30	Beijing	/	Lower limb impairment
Wuyi	M	26	Qingdao	Water-army	lower limb impairment
Huaqiang	M	58	Jiangsu	E-business/ NGO	Hearing impairment & Lower limb impairment
Zhufan	M	43	Jiangxi	NGO	Ankylosing spondylitis
Jiexue	F	23	Hebei	Gamer	Hearing impairment
Meifang	F	65	Shanghai	/	Achondroplasia
Pingbing	F	43	Shanghai	/	Spinal Cord Injury
Huizhen	F	33	Sichuan	E-business	Manual dexterity
Dongjun	M	40	Shanghai	Water-army	Lower limb impairment
Lingyu	F	44	Shandong	Customer services	Spinal cord Injury
Weikai	M	27	Hubei	Officer	Lower limb impairment
Niran	F	45	Sichuan	/	Cerebral palsy
Baoguo	M	47	Jiangsu	/	Hearing impairment & lower limb impairment
Jinsheng	M	30	Shanghai	/	Cerebral palsy
Chenggang	M	32	Anhui	Self-employed (offline)	Visual impairment
Mengzhen	F	58	Wuhan	Water-army	Lower limb impairment
Fenfeng	F	58	Wuhan	social activist	Lower limb impairment
Xiaoning	M	22	Hubei	Software engineer	Visual impairment
Lili	F	46	Wuhan	E-business	lower limb impairment
Jiehong	M	46	Wuhan	E-business	Upper limb impairment
Guangshi	M	22	Hunan	Operation	Visual impairment
Zaiyou	M	32	Guangzhou	/	lower limb impairment
Liwei	F	27	Henan	Masseuse	Visual impairment
Qixue	F	29	Anhui	Masseuse	Visual impairment

Junlei	M	23	Shanxi	/	Hearing impairment
Yuzhi	M	28	Hubei	Programmer (freelance)	Achondroplasia
Haochen	M	26	Anhui	Programmer (Offline)	Cerebral palsy
Hewei	M	30	Shangxi	Water-army	Visual impairment
Lintian	M	22	Tianjin	Water-army	Cerebral palsy
Wangqiang	M	33	Henan	Officer	Spinal cord injury
Shuxiao	M	27	Neimenggu	Gamer	Hearing impairment
Pengxu	F	36	Wuhan	Water-army	Lower limb impairment
Minghua	M	27	Guangxi	Water-army	Spinal Cord Injury

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