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Dauncey, Sarah (2013) A face in the crowd: imagining individual and collective disabled identities in contemporary China. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 25 (2). pp. 130-165. ISSN 1520-9857

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# A Face in the Crowd: Imagining Individual and Collective Disabled Identities in Contemporary China<sup>†</sup>

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## Introduction

Images of mass action, notions of crowd mentality, and the importance of group identification are extremely familiar to anyone acquainted with recent periods of modern Chinese history, and it is clear that the legacy of events such as the Cultural Revolution have influenced semantic and metaphoric reflections of group behavior to this day.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have even argued that Chinese society has become acclimatized to the simplification of complex issues through the use of particular generalizing terminology such as propaganda slogans (Lu 2004), and that individuals have become attuned to recognizing “themselves” in archetypal representations, visual or otherwise, of functional constituencies—peasant, soldier, worker, cadre, intellectual, ethnic minority, for example—that are simultaneously anonymous and familiar (Saussy 2006: 261). What has yet to be ascertained, however, is whether similarly sweeping labels and archetypal representations apply to disability and disabled people in China today and, if they do indeed exist, where they originate, how they are articulated, and how disabled individuals and groups respond to them.

<sup>†</sup> I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their valuable suggestions. I would also like to thank Tim Wright and Lily Chen for their feedback, which, as always, has helped to bring this work to fruition.

<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that earlier imperial conceptualizations have not had an equally important part to play, as Haun Saussy (2006) shows in his brief but illuminating discussion of crowds, numbers, and the masses in China.

Using the concept of a “disabled crowd” (*canji qunti* or *canji renqun*)—a term that has been used in state, media, and academic discourse on an increasingly regular basis since the late 1980s to suggest the existence of a body of disabled people with consonant goals and aspirations—I explore how dominant narratives of disability have worked to frame personal and collective understandings of what it means to be disabled in China after the Cultural Revolution, particularly following the establishment in 1988 of the state-controlled China Disabled Persons’ Federation (Zhongguo canjiren lianhehui; hereafter CDPF), which has been responsible for developing and disseminating the state’s narrative of disability. I also demonstrate, however, how new and enhanced opportunities for self-representation and self-advocacy have offered up diverging or counter narratives that complicate our picture of how disabled identities are formed, negotiated, and contested.

The Chinese state narrative of disability has never been static, but over the years it has crystallized around certain key features. Founded on notions of “biomedically conceived Otherness and state-managed palliation” (Kohrman 2005: 209), this post-reform narrative has reinforced earlier imperial, colonial, and socialist notions of bodily difference and has tended to emphasize cure or rehabilitation as the initial response to disability. The narrative has also promoted international ideals of equality, pride, and self-worth drawn from United Nations-led human rights initiatives of the 1980s onward. What is more, all of those features have been nuanced more recently by domestically conceived notions of self-reliance, social productivity, and communal responsibility drawn from broader post-reform discourses of neoliberalism (Dauncey 2012). These messages have merged, therefore, into what appears to be a compelling, but contradictory, master discourse that lumps disabled people together into a distinct group defined by and respected for their bodily alterity and simultaneously draws them back into the national whole as fully functioning members of the new society by rescuing them from that same bodily alterity.

This new political discourse of disability and the wider social and economic changes that have occurred since the end of the Cultural Revolution have had a considerable effect on both how disabled people view themselves and how they are viewed in the Chinese cultural and social imagination. The diversification and expansion of the publishing, film, and television industries following economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s and 1980s, plus the varied possibilities offered by new media networks since the 1990s, have combined to vastly increase the visibility and voice of disabled people across the country: where once disabled people made only stereotypical and, more often than not, anonymous appearances in Chinese culture, images of disability and impairment now find multifarious expression in life writing, literature, film, television, and on the Internet and other social media.<sup>2</sup> What is more, many disabled people themselves have become nationally recognized and respected in a wide variety of political, social, vocational, cultural, and sporting roles.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a few relevant studies, see Riep 2005, 2008; Knight 2006; Dauncey 2007, 2012, and 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Deng Pufang (CDPF founder and UN Human Rights Prize winner), Zhang Haidi (model citizen, writer and current CDPF president), Chen Guangcheng (exiled lawyer and civil rights activist), Shi Tiesheng (prize-winning novelist and essayist), Ping Yali (China's first Paralympic champion), Tai Lihua (lead dancer with the China Disabled People's Performing Art Troupe), and Liu Wei (pianist and winner of *China's Got Talent* series 1), to name but a few.

<sup>4</sup> See Putnam (2005) for a more detailed discussion of what Disability Studies scholars understand by the term "disability consciousness."

Although many of these forms of cultural production have been used effectively to disseminate the state narrative of disability, a wide range of people have also taken advantage of these same methods—both as individuals and as groups—to “speak out” about their experiences and understandings of disability, and, just as important, to “be heard.” These newly emergent voices have multiplied to the extent that we are now able to consider the possibility of a disability consciousness emerging in China (Dauncey 2012). This burgeoning consciousness is characterized typically by an enhanced sense of self-worth and pride following personal experiences of discrimination; however, there are also signs that this consciousness is increasingly informed by a growing appreciation of the broader sociopolitical dimension of disability and the possibility of a common cause.<sup>4</sup> The potential collectivity—both real and imagined—of disabled people as an oppressed minority raises questions, therefore, of how these new ways of understanding a “disabled identity” might contest or even complement the state narrative of disability and the notion of a “disabled crowd.” It also

forces us to consider how individuals are responding to these discourses as they navigate their way into or out of a disabled identity, particularly if that identity is perceived to be a group-based one.

Building on a recent trend in Disability Studies that focuses on “situated reading practices”—providing readings of texts that are embedded firmly in the sociohistorical context—to “highlight how particular disability experiences can shape cultural histories and are written into artistic and representational practices” (Barker/Murray 2010: 234), this essay offers close readings of a selection of personal and collective narratives and stories set against the wider sociohistorical context, as revealed by state communications and news articles, with analysis informed by theories of disability developed in foreign contexts, such as those from the United States or the United Kingdom. There are two main reasons for this recourse to theory derived from a non-Chinese experience. First, the paucity of research on disability in China necessitates turning to the established field to frame and guide my approach. Second, as has already been suggested, Western ideas and practices on disability cannot be overlooked because they have contributed greatly to the shaping of Chinese understandings of disability since the reform and opening up. Such a method, I argue, enables me to first identify the terms, analogies, and cultural locations of disability<sup>5</sup>—including networks, institutions, discourses, and cultural products that are seen to shape influential and persuasive ideas about disability—that relate to group identity and collective behavior. On this basis, I can then determine what these might signify to the individuals and communities involved.

My analysis reveals that although some people identify with and appear to derive intense personal and social benefit from being associated with a “disabled crowd,” others have used new opportunities for group or self-representation or have explored new spaces for public and private action to reimagine themselves or distance themselves from that very same crowd. In doing so, I demonstrate the closely interrelated nature of

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of this term is taken from Snyder and Mitchell (2006), who argue that the ideas created by these “cultural locations” are often produced by those outside of the immediate experience of disability.

group and self-empowerment and identity in a country where the state has attempted to act as the guardian and voice of disabled people since the 1980s, but where that influence has been increasingly challenged by voices from across the spectrum of disability. The significance of this study, therefore, is twofold. First, by examining how conceptualizations of a “disabled crowd” and a disabled identity are articulated and lived, adopted, or contested, I uncover further evidence of the interplay between alterity, individuality, and community in shaping Chinese experiences of disability and impairment, an area that has seen little research to date (Stone 1998; Callaway 2000; Kohrman 2005; Dauncey 2012). Second, in so doing, I shed new light on the development of collective and individual identities more broadly in China today, particularly in terms of sections of the community that have experienced long-term neglect and oversight or, worse still, stigmatization and oppression.

### **Understanding Collective Disabled Identities**

Disability Studies scholars in countries such as the US and the UK have already expended much time and effort in attempting to understand how disabled identities are formed and negotiated. What has become clear through their findings is that although governments have undeniably played a significant role in shaping and disseminating ideas about disability, the main impetus for change and development has come very much from the grassroots level. Inspired by the civil rights and feminist movements of the time, disability movements arose—first in the US and soon after in the UK—in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the ideas that took shape then have subsequently informed and transformed global academic, political, and medical dialogues about disability and have coalesced into the conventions and protocols established and promulgated by the UN.<sup>6</sup>

Even in the early stages of those disability movements, however, people with different impairments often faced unique challenges, had dissimilar experiences and, therefore, did not necessarily identify with people who

<sup>6</sup> A brief history of UN disability work can be found at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=121>.

had other impairments (Scotch 1989). As Hughes (2004: 63) explains: “The experience of oppression (say) among wheelchair users on the one hand, and those with sensory impairments on the other, was bound to be different in fairly significant ways.” And yet, despite these differences, a collective “disability consciousness” gradually formed during the following decades, and was sufficiently powerful and long-lasting to support successful cross-disability activism. This led some to conclude that as long as group-based rather than personal-based explanations and solutions were seen to be adequately compelling for people with specific disabilities, they would feel more able to identify with a broader group comprising “people with a disability” (Barnartt/Scotch 2001).

Research has also shown that the fellowship of this larger group might be de-emphasized when each disability subgroup felt secure enough to explore their uniqueness and difference (Davis 2002), or when it was perceived that a homogenous identity could advantage one subgroup over another. As Hughes elaborates, “As the disabled people’s movement began to recognise that the barriers to full participation in social life must be different for a wealthy, middle class, white male heterosexual on the one hand, and a poor, working class, black lesbian on the other, then the issue of impairment as the source of differential experience became difficult to deny” (2004: 63). The celebration of difference as a means of countering discrimination or exclusion could, then, conceivably be applied to both relations between disabled and nondisabled people and relations among disabled people themselves, under given circumstances.

There are occasions, therefore, when the conscious or unconscious adoption of a group identity founded on disability—whether at the level of a specific impairment or at its broadest definition—might be viewed as extremely advantageous for both the individual and the group. However, at a different point in time or under different sociocultural circumstances, disaggregation or dissociation from those very same groups—by either an impairment subgroup or an individual—might offer an equally appealing

sense of security, particularly when association at the real or even imagined level would appear to hold no social or personal reward, or might even have negative consequences. Such conceptualizations of the fluidity of disabled identities informs my examination of the nature of understandings of and responses to the concept of a “disabled crowd” in China.

### Defining Disabled Identities in China

Experiences and understandings of disability from countries such as the US and the UK, or from international bodies such as the UN, have played an important role in transforming Chinese attitudes since the country began the process of reform and opening up in the late 1970s. Increasing international engagement with the UN, for example, saw China introduce a raft of new welfare policies and laws on disability during the 1980s and 1990s, a process that enhanced awareness of disability and rights for disabled people across the country.<sup>7</sup> However, there have inevitably been differences, not just in the way ideas from abroad have been interpreted domestically, but also in the way new ideas informed by China’s own experiences of disability have developed. The very different sociopolitical conditions of post-1976 China, for example, have meant that grassroots activism and civil society—some of the key stimuli for political, legal, and social transformations in Western attitudes and frameworks—have been slow to develop and, once emergent, bound by substantial fetters.<sup>8</sup>

What this has meant is that the main impetus for change has been— with a few notable exceptions to be covered later—predominantly top-down and channeled through the CDPF. This quasi-ministry has arguably been the most significant player in raising awareness and working toward improved rights and social provision. It has its own charter (CDPF 2011), which states that it is both “a community group<sup>9</sup> made up of disabled persons, their family and friends, and disability workers,” and “a unified organization for all people across the country whatever their disability.” Its aims are to “promote humanitarianism, develop work related to disability,

<sup>7</sup> For a list of key milestones, see the CDPF website: <http://www.cdpf.org.cn/zcfg/zcfg.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, alternative spaces do appear to be opening up to allow for action across a range of areas, disability included, and many of these appear to be informed by transnational or transcultural encounters. For comparison, see Ho (2008) for burgeoning environmental activism, and Rofel (2007) for emergent sexual identities.

<sup>9</sup> This is something of a misnomer because “community groups”—or more literally “people’s groups” (*renmin tuanti*)—are actually large-scale organizations under the directive of the Chinese government.

advance equality for disabled people, and promote their integration in society, so they can similarly enjoy the fruits of China's material culture." In addition, it purports to "represent the common interests of disabled people and help to protect their legitimate rights; it brings together and educates disabled people, and provides services for them; it carries out its legal responsibilities, undertakes duties commissioned by the government, and supervises and develops work relating to disabled people." The repeated use here (and in many of its communications) of such terms related to a collective identity and communal action—"community group" (*renmin tuanti*), "unified" (*tongyi*), "common" (*gongtong*), and "brings together" (*tuanjie*)—strongly suggests the intentional articulation of an overarching disabled identity and shared fate, all envisaged and guided by the CDPF.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, a strong biomedical paradigm has informed CDPF discourse since its establishment, and this has become cemented with its incorporation into the 1990 "Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities" (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo canjiren baozhangfa*, 2008). Cure and rehabilitation are an essential part of the state discourse on disability. During the 1990s, however, this biomedical focus began to share the stage with what subsequently became termed the "new view of disability" (*xin canjiren guan*), in which particular attention would be paid to three key concepts: "equality, participation, and sharing" (*pingdeng, canyu, gongxiang*) (Ding 2000; Wang 2001). As both ideals intended to prompt broader social action, as well as responsibilities to be taken on by individuals themselves, the expectation was that these three concepts would support the creation of "responsibilized disabled citizens" (Dauncey 2012) or, in the language of the "new view," disabled people who are as socially and economically productive as "able-bodied people" (*jianquanren*).<sup>11</sup> This move clearly fits the greater discourse on the building of a morality-based "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*), where the notions of "equality," "participation," "justice" (*zhengyi*), "friendship and love" (*you'ai*), and "mutual aid" (*hubang huzhu*) play significant roles,

<sup>10</sup>This use of language is certainly not unique within the broader Chinese political sphere where, for example, efforts at linguistic engineering have resulted in the employment of analogous lexis aimed at legitimating nation-building under CCP leadership (Barabantseva 2008; Sandby-Thomas 2010).

<sup>11</sup>Literally "people who are fully fit," this term is often used interchangeably with *zhengchangren* "normal people" by both disabled and nondisabled people and by organizations, including the CDPF; increasingly, however, following the experiences of European and North American countries, such usage is being called into question (Liu 2008).

<sup>12</sup> See “Zhonggong zhongyang” 2006. For a succinct discussion of the concept of a “harmonious society” and the surrounding debates on “moral culture,” see Wielander 2011: 120–125.

<sup>13</sup> See Stone 1999. Another term, *canzhang*—formerly considered equivalent to “handicapped” (because of the sense of being “blocked or impeded” of *zhang*)—was commonplace in the 1980s but diminished in mainland usage following the promotion of *canji*. It has, however, started to see something of a comeback in grassroots circles informed by new understandings derived from the 2006 UN Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities and greater engagement with Taiwan, where the term is more widely used. See, in particular, its preferential usage by the One Plus One (Beijing) Disabled Persons Cultural Development Center (Yi jia yi [Beijing] canzhangren wenhua fazhan zhongxin) at <http://www.yijiyi.org/>.

and where “advancing disability work” and “protecting the legal rights of disabled people” are mentioned directly alongside it and, therefore, appear practically synonymous with “encouraging a humanitarian spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

A common sense of identity, belonging, and purpose, as formulated by the state, has been made even more concrete through language use as China has grappled with appropriate ways to refer to disabled people and, as Matthew Kohrman has shown, attempted to enumerate and classify them (2005: 57–82). It was only recently, however, that the Chinese word *canji* was mapped on to the English word “disabled” or “disability” and began to be used more frequently and in a positive vein in political, social, and individual discourse (Stone 1999: 145; Kohrman 2005: xi). One of the consequences of this has been that *canji* has been more able to escape the pejorative connotations of its component characters than have its close cognates, *canfei* and *feiji*, which are variously translated “maimed,” “crippled,” “deformed,” “diseased,” and “useless.”<sup>13</sup> Subsequent calls from disabled people that they should be considered “disabled but not useless” (*canji er bu canfei* or *can er bu fei*) evinces the political potential of language for supporting people with disabilities in countering the negative associations of specific labels and in creating a more affirmative identity. To give but one example, Yang Xingdong, a Wuhan-based calligrapher who lost both arms in an industrial accident, is reported as saying: “There are those who call me a *canjiren* and those who call me a *canfeiren*. I always correct them. I say that I am a *canjiren*, not a *canfeiren*. I am *can er bu fei*. Without that spirit I wouldn’t be where I am now” (“Yang Xingdong” 2012). Here we see how the semantic decoupling of a word from its dominant understandings can engender newly perceived feelings of self-worth and the adoption of a new marker or label of identity.

Labels are known to play a significant role in defining groups and the individuals who are seen to belong to those groups. As Paul Longmore (1985) and Dan Goodley (2001) have shown in their reflections on terminology used by disabled and nondisabled people in the US and the UK,

stigmatization is often intensified when people are perceived exclusively or foremost in terms of their disabilities. In English, this has been done through the use of adjectives as abstract nouns—"the handicapped," "the disabled," "the deaf," "the blind," "the mentally retarded," and so on—which serves the purpose of "lumping all of the members of the stigmatized group into a uniform category, robbing them of individuality" (Longmore 1985: 420), and forces us to consider the implications of "life as a reflection of syndrome" (Goodley 2001: 224). The appropriation or reappropriation of terms related to identity, whatever that identity might be, is seen by many Western scholars to be important in several respects—it can both instill a sense of group pride and enhance individual self-esteem (Smith 1992).

In the case of Chinese, one of the key linguistic transformations of recent years has occurred in the substitution of terms that have traditionally also been used as derogatory appellations. *Xiazi* (blinky), *longzi* (deaf), *shazi* (retard), and *quezi* (cripple)—to give just a few examples translated here into their most disparaging equivalents—are gradually being eclipsed by the terms *mangren* (blind person), *longren* (deaf person), *zhili canjiren* (intellectually disabled person), *zhiti canjiren* (physically disabled person), or similar new appellations.<sup>14</sup> Such moves avoid the use of stigmatizing labels as direct replacements for personal names. This is not to suggest, however, that the former words have disappeared—many continue to be used in everyday conversation, particularly when prefixed with the familiar *xiao* (little/young)—but things are certainly changing as exposure to new understandings of disability, often borrowed from abroad, increases.<sup>15</sup> A pertinent example of this in action is revealed in one recent post on a web discussion group, which posed questions about whether, instead of "little retard" (*xiao shazi*), it would be better for locals to refer to a lad in the village with learning difficulties by the (what seemed to the author more appropriate) term "little learning-impaired" (*xiao zhizhang*) or "little simpleton" (*xiao ruozhi*). This prompted a flurry of responses, many of which argued that it would surely be better to call him by his name, as you

<sup>14</sup> Other terms now in circulation include *shizhang renshi* (person with a visual impairment) and *tingzhang renshi* (person with a hearing impairment), which mirror the English use of "impairment" with the addition of the respectful Chinese term for "person."

<sup>15</sup> An online discussion from 2008, for example, makes explicit reference to the American Office of Disability Employment Policy in order to illustrate the most respectful terms for each of the various impairments ("Bu jiao canjiren" 2008).

would anyone else (“Yinggai ruhe chenghu canji renshi?” 2011).

People with hearing impairments have been much more strident in their demands for appropriate forms of identification. An impassioned online debate from 2004 prompted by the post “Jiangsu Educational Television Channel used ‘mute’ again this evening!” (Jintian wanshang de Jiangsu jiaoyu dianshitai you yong le ‘yaba’ ci) highlights the way some deaf people and their supporters react strongly and openly to what they perceive to be “discriminatory or stigmatizing language” (*daiyou qishi huozhe wuru de yuyan*), with calls for the media to “clean up” (*jinghua*) the way they refer to deaf people. As one participant of the discussion, writing under the pseudonym “Get Close to Deaf Kids” (Qinjin longer), explains:

“Deaf-mute” (*longya*) is definitely not the same as “deaf person” and here’s why. One—the former isn’t a term that relates to someone’s physical characteristics, it’s a term that’s based on one negative consequence of a physical defect. It’s just like calling someone whose legs aren’t so agile a “cripple” when they are not actually disabled. Everyone can tell instantly that it is used in a mocking and derogatory way. (“Jintian wanshang” 2004)

In another example, Shanghai-born blogger and activist Xiao Hu (also known as Alice) regularly reveals the importance of distinguishing between “deaf person” and “deaf-mute.” For her, the latter term assumes that all deaf people are unable to speak and overlooks the fact that many such as herself use Chinese sign language as their main or preferred method of communication (Xiao Hu 2007).

One of the reasons for this more active debate stems from the growth of Internet use, which has played a key role since the late 1990s in enhancing awareness of the alternatives and possibilities available to deaf people through online debates among domestic netizens, as well as between Chinese and foreign netizens (Lytle/Johnson/Yang 2005/2006). Through such interactions, many users of sign language (*shouyu*) have

drawn on the positive sense of identity created around Deaf culture<sup>16</sup> in countries such as the US and the UK to create their own Deaf culture (*longren wenhua*)—centered similarly on the use of sign language—as a form of collective and personal empowerment.<sup>17</sup> Lytle, Johnson, and Yang (2005/2006) have identified the ways people have looked specifically to American legal instruments and education practices to make a stronger case for the development of policy alternatives and sign language education in China. This group is frustrated by the CDPF’s continued emphasis on rehabilitation through oral language education, which they blame directly on the lack of representation within the official organization. The one deaf individual in the mid-level leadership at the time of writing is described by Lytle, Johnson, and Yang as “not culturally Deaf,” lacking in “experiences growing up deaf,” and therefore “essentially powerless in the CDPF as a voice for the Deaf community” (2005/2006: 466).

There have been instances, however, when Chinese specialists working in the field have criticized as “extreme” (*jiduan*) those who maintain that deafness is not a disability, particularly because many people experience hearing loss later in life or through illness; such people will not have benefited from long-term specialist education or sign language training and might encounter massive social obstacles that are, in effect, disabling (“Xinlixue” 2008). Differences in lived experience can strongly influence how people with the same impairment perceive their own situation and choose to engage, or not, with a community of people with that impairment. Although Xiao Hu and others actively engage with Deaf culture and regard sign language as a major affirmative expression of their Deaf identity, many more people who have not been exposed to these new responses to deafness continue to view themselves as disabled and, therefore, in need of treatment or cure. For powerful evidence of this, we need only turn to Alison Callaway’s (2000; 2001) extensive fieldwork with deaf children, their parents, and educators in China in the 1990s: she illustrates how parents longing for their “sick” (*bing*) children to be

<sup>16</sup>The use of a capital D here is intentional. Whereas “deaf” may refer simply to the audiological condition, “Deaf” is a cultural label used by a community of people who employ sign language, consider deafness a major and positive part of their identity, and (most significant) do not consider themselves disabled. The Deaf community refers to as “deaf” people who experience hearing loss later in life, who use lip-reading and speech to communicate, and who feel unable to associate with the Deaf world (Bornert 2011).

<sup>17</sup>For an extensive look at a variety of issues on this subject in China, see Zhang Ningsheng 2010. Yang Junhui’s chapter (116–127) on “Deaf Identity” is particularly illuminating.

“normal” (*zhengchang*) would desperately seek rehabilitation or, better still, a cure so that they could be rescued from the isolation of the “silent world” (*wusheng de shijie*) and reintegrated into mainstream schooling and society.

When it comes to identity and empowerment, therefore, labels clearly matter. It is also apparent that many people continue to be confused by the best way to refer to people with physical, sensory, or learning impairments. The generic term *canjiren* (disabled person) appears to be a safe option, although this too has come under attack online for the way the term is used as a collective noun, which in itself is regarded by one particular discussant as potentially “derogatory” (*bianyì*) in its own right (“Bu jiao canjiren” 2008). This might explain why *canji pengyou*, or “disabled friend,” is now also being used by a wide variety of institutions and individuals,<sup>18</sup> not just in a literal way (as in “I have a disabled friend”), but also in a manner that suggests a greater sense of empathy and inclusivity, echoing the sentiments represented by CDPF discourse.<sup>19</sup>

Both of the terms just mentioned are now also being used in combination with two other terms—*qun* and *qunti*, translated variously as “group” or “crowd”—to create the broader labels *canjiren qunti*, *canji renqun*, *canji qunti*, and, on occasion, *canji pengyou qunti*. Although the specific circumstances of their genesis has yet to be ascertained,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that they had already become part of CDPF vocabulary soon after its establishment, appearing regularly in its major publications, *Disability in China* (Zhongguo canjiren) and *Spring Breezes* (Sanyue feng), from the early 1990s on, and increasingly in academic sources and the wider media as the decade progressed. The terms are used to refer to a broad mass of people who are generally seen to be “different” (*butong*) and “weak” (*ruo*) on account of their “impairments” (*quexian*), a group of people who are seen to “need” (*xuyao*) assistance, but are said to “hope” (*xiwang*) for equality.<sup>21</sup> The notion of a “disabled crowd” with consonant objectives and aspirations has come, therefore, to be reflected directly in the Chinese

<sup>18</sup> This use echoes the way the term “friend” is attached to other marginal groups, such as ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu pengyou*) and people who are homosexual (*tongxinglian/tongzhi pengyou*), but research is needed to ascertain whether usage in those contexts mirrors its use here.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the frequent examples on the main CDPF website (<http://www.cdpf.org.cn>) and its portal for information services (<http://www.cdpsn.org.cn>), as well as numerous other examples in the news media and personal webpages, some of which are discussed later.

<sup>20</sup> The earliest appearance of *canjiren qunti* found was in 1987; this predates the official establishment of the CDPF, but the term was used in relation to a conference involving the China Welfare Fund for Disabled People (Zhongguo canjiren fuli jijinhui)—a precursor to and current associate of the CDPF (“Chongqing” 1987).

<sup>21</sup> There are, of course, far too many instances to mention them all here, but one good example of how these messages are brought together in one text is a 1998 *Disability in China* article entitled “The Disabled Crowd and Social Stability” (Canji renqun yu shehui wending), by Sha Dengshen.

language itself. How, then are we to understand the significance of this? Are collective terms and analogies of disability purely the products of society at large and the master discourse that serves it, or are they concepts that are equally appealing on an individual and group basis?

### **Willing Members of the Crowd**

I now examine how some people have either embraced, or at least found positive meaning in being associated with, a collective disabled identity—however that might be interpreted—and the sense of community and purpose it offers. As we have already seen, the Chinese Deaf community provides an excellent example of how a collective subgroup identity has developed from the grassroots level to offer refuge and a sense of pride for many users of sign language. Yet, this has occurred only following a rejection of the state’s biomedical model of deafness—and thus the “disability” label—and the appropriation of an alternative label—“deaf person”—deemed more acceptable under this newfound sense of identity. How typical, then, is this experience of personal self-representation and subgroup advocacy?

Kohrman’s pioneering ethnographic study (2005) of disability experiences in the post-Cultural Revolution period provides a useful point of comparison. In one chapter, he discusses the origins and fate of possibly the first nongovernmental disability-advocacy association—the Beijing-based Disabled Youths Club (Bingcan qingnian julebu)—which was established in July 1982, stimulated by “a confluence of factors, many at the intersection of the bodily and the governmental” (84). On the one hand, the founders of the club, many of whom were paralyzed after contracting polio, had led young lives “marked largely by inactivity, parental cloister, and social exclusion,” all of which prompted them to be more proactive in adulthood in creating meaningful relationships with others and becoming “productive members of social and national life” (84). On the other hand, exposure to new ideas about disability coming into China as a consequence

<sup>22</sup> Guo et al. (1996) provide a useful review of major developments in disability work post-1949. They reveal that the focus in this period was related to visual and hearing impairment subgroups. Although state- and society-sponsored welfare work has a history stretching back centuries (Handlin-Smith 1987), the dominance of these subgroups has roots in the late nineteenth century, when American and European missionary work established charitable institutions for blind and deaf people, many of which have exerted an influence long after ceasing operation (Yang/Wang 1994).

of the UN's 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons had led to their involvement in numerous local initiatives. This group of young men with physical disabilities decided then to agitate for the creation of an assistance agency for people like them, to both counter the inequalities they had experienced vis-à-vis able-bodied people and address the balance of attention given for many years to the deaf and blind subgroups, both of which had numerous state-sponsored welfare associations at the time.<sup>22</sup> Although the Club subsequently grew to comprise around 750 members across the country and supported a wide range of flourishing activities, it was quickly co-opted at the end of the 1980s by an organization that would eventually become part of the newly formed CDPF led by Deng Pufang, one of Deng Xiaoping's sons, who had suffered a spinal cord injury during the Cultural Revolution.

The Disabled Youths Club illustrates the way the environment of the early 1980s allowed some disabled people to be proactive in finding community among other disabled people with similar impairments, experiences of isolation, and feelings of social worthlessness, and with a common goal of eradicating discriminatory practices experienced in relation to both able-bodied people and other impairment subgroups. The Club's adoption of the character *can* for "disability" in their title contrasts markedly with the Chinese Deaf community's rejection of that very same term; this might be explained in part by Club's relatively early establishment at a time when the state retained a firmer hold over public discourse, but also by the lack of an established foreign "model" to help it forge a culture of its own divorced from the concept of disability.

An affirmative, collective, disabled identity might not simply be a result of time or circumstance, however; media reports suggest that this identity continues to have significant appeal today. Coming through many recent articles is a strong sense that disabled people have more of an understanding of what it means to be disabled and are, therefore, in a much better position to forge bonds with or assist their "disabled friends,"

even if their impairments are substantially different. This suggests, then, that identification need not be limited to the subgroup level, although the case of Li Xiaohong (another polio survivor) points to the possibility of other processes of differentiation simultaneously at work. A support worker at a drop-in center—the Rainbow Office (Caihong gongzuoshi)—in her hometown of Qingdao, Li Xiaohong is reported as saying: “Disabled people are so weak; I just happen to be one of the stronger ones, relatively speaking. So, it is my duty to help other disabled people. Even if it just means helping them solve little problems, it makes me feel extremely happy” (“Wo shi canjiren” 2012). She continues:

Able-bodied people find it hard to understand the pain experienced by disabled people. Making them walk too far is one thing, but you might even cause them more pain. Once, a blind friend (*mangren pengyou*) came to the Rainbow Office to talk over some personal issues. On the way, this person tripped and on reaching me, had a face covered in blood. For this reason I always spend a bit more time trying to get more details when I answer the phone. I really don't want disabled friends to walk one more step than is necessary. (“Wo shi canjiren” 2012)

Li Xiaohong portrays herself as being firmly embedded as a disabled person, while at the same time making it obvious that, to her mind, there is a hierarchy of disability, from the strong to the weak, and that it is her social duty as one of the stronger ones to support those she believes need extra support. Such perceived hierarchies of disability are certainly not unique to the Chinese case; research from the UK suggests that not only can nondisabled people reveal perceptions of varying hierarchies of disability, disabled people themselves can hold differing attitudes toward different impairment groups. As Mark Deal (2003) has shown, some people within one particular impairment subgroup can dissociate themselves from other, sometimes very similar, subgroups for reasons that can include culturally specific attitudes toward individual impairments, competition for

resources—one of the rationales behind the creation of the Disabled Youths Club—and the degree to which a person or his or her subgroup voluntarily identifies as a member of either the subgroup or the larger group.

Although Li Xiaohong engages directly with “disabled friends” through support-related disability work in her local area, other disabled people are imagining and enacting that community at much broader levels, extending in some cases to the national level. Disability rights activist (*canzhang weiquan renshi*) Zhu Mingjian, who lives in Guangdong and has cerebral palsy, is one of an emerging group of disabled people who, either as individuals or en masse, have successfully taken to court major service providers, institutions, and businesses for actions perceived to be discriminatory toward—in Zhu’s own words—the “disabled crowd” (*canjiren qunti*). Regularly seen sporting a vivid green polo shirt emblazoned front and back with “Eliminate disability discrimination. We still need to...” (*Xiaochu canji qishi women reng xu nuli*), Zhu Mingjian is often described in the media as “using his position as a disabled person” (*yi canji zhi shen*) to draw attention to his cause (“Zhu Mingjian” 2012). One of his most recent challenges has involved taking the Guangzhou Tower to court for refusing discounted admission to people carrying a valid disabled person card, an action that contradicts, he believes, state regulations on equal access: “Taking the Guangzhou Tower to court is not only a way to ensure that myself and other disabled friends get discounted visits there. I also hope that it will pressure the government to guarantee the implementation of measures to protect disabled people” (“Canzhang weiquan renshi” 2012). In doing so, he hopes that the day will come when China has “a truly harmonious society that is caring and without prejudice” (“Zhu Mingjian” 2012).

Zhu Mingjian’s activism demonstrates that some people are increasingly aware of new spaces opening up for individuals to voice concerns by speaking to, and on behalf of, that larger imagined community of disabled people. As Antonio Cattani (2010) suggests, by articulating rights and issues

that apply to the broader community and not just the individual concerned, people can begin to imagine the possibility of having supporters whom they have not yet met, but are waiting to come out of the shadows to participate once a worthy cause is clearly and persuasively articulated. This resonates strongly with evidence presented by Peter Ho (2008) and Lisa Rofel (2007) in relation to burgeoning environmental activism and emergent sexual identities, respectively, where appeals to “newly perceived” or “desired” identities have been sufficient in some cases to support the development of mechanisms capable of mobilizing resources, and effect social, legal, and political change. Similarly, new spaces for disability-related activism are opening up as people connect, in real and imagined ways, to explore—and exploit—new disabled subjectivities. The fact that Zhu Mingjian uses the term “disabled crowd” and refers directly to the concept of a “harmonious society” provides evidence that personal responses to disability are not made in isolation, but are informed by wider discourses; it also suggests that individuals are just as likely to appropriate terms the state uses to support their own understandings of what a disabled identity might mean and the agenda that follows as a consequence.

What has become clear, therefore, is that the state narrative of disability has not necessarily been considered in opposition to the aspirations of disabled people themselves. Far from it; indeed, we see some individuals responding actively to the positive messages circulating in society as they have taken on a public disabled identity, whether at the level of their impairment subgroup or the larger “disabled crowd” of their imagination. They find community and experience empowerment through individual or joint action, reflecting “aspirations” for equality based on the understanding that disabled people might “need” assistance (from just the examples here, this might be personal, social, or legal support) on account of their “impairments.” However, what is also clear is that the way these disabled identities are imagined might still be some steps removed from those ideas set out in that state master narrative; they are likely to

be reinterpreted and represented in light of personal, social, and political experiences and objectives.

### **Reluctant Members of the Crowd**

The media sources examined here are useful insofar as they can show us what a disabled identity might look like once it has taken shape, or at least has become sufficiently formed to be presented to the public. Only very rarely do we see the potential inner deliberations or dilemmas subjects face as they respond to social factors and personal experiences, which may ultimately combine to encourage, or indeed discourage, association with a disabled identity. Disabled life writing, by contrast, is a potentially more useful source for revealing those very personal voyages of self-exploration. Many of these journeys suggest the possibility of fluid or even multiple identities, and some of them even conclude with the rejection of any form of association with the “disability” label, whether at the broadest or the impairment subgroup level.

As my research (Dauncey 2013) has shown, the beginnings of the decollectivization of subjectivity and the return of humanism post-1976 saw disabled writers and subjects emerging from the shadows of the Cultural Revolution to recount personal stories of trauma, share experiences of reform-era changes, and philosophize on the meaning of life.<sup>23</sup> Many of the biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and novels of disability that appeared during this early period were published through the Huaxia Press and other CDPF-controlled publishing channels, and reflected a “triumph over tragedy” framework in which a disabled person overcomes tremendous difficulties, often with the support of the Party. By the 1990s, however, increasing liberalization of the publishing market saw more works published without the direct (or at least visible) support of the CDPF, and by the 2000s there appeared clear indications of the emancipatory potential of the Internet and other new social media. Although many of the writings from this later period mirrored the framework established

<sup>23</sup> A notable example here is Shi Tiesheng, paralyzed following spinal damage incurred during hard labor in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. His poignant, humanistic writings explore not just the personal consequences of the rustification movement, but also life for disabled people under Communism (Leung 1994: 153–164).

by the earlier narratives, authors found themselves more able to present their own experiences in a process of self-affirmation and self-advocacy.

The young writer and entrepreneur Zhang Yuncheng, for example, uses his memoir, *Three Days to Walk* (*Jiaru wo neng xingzou san tian*),<sup>24</sup> and his personal website to explore what it means to live as a disabled person in China today.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, Zhang has also been able to actively create spaces for engagement and interaction with disabled and nondisabled friends and supporters from around the country. Punctuated throughout with obvious signposting that demonstrates the community-building intent to his writing—including direct addresses to the reader, continual references to the importance of finding friendship, and reprints of the many letters he has received from well-wishers—Zhang uses his memoir to reflect on how his experience living with a life-limiting form of muscular dystrophy (his brother has the same condition) has shaped his personal responses to his condition.

Much of his early life appears to have been framed by experiences of discrimination and what he describes as a “prison-like” existence: “Many people think we’re just ‘good-for-nothings’ (*feiren*) who deserve no respect. They see us as ‘idiots’ (*chizi*) who can’t understand anything or even think at all; all we seem able to do is eat. They always look at us in a way that is so superior and dismissive. Are we really that dreadful?” (Zhang Yuncheng 2008: 127). He frequently rails against his condition and reveals that he had thoughts of suicide during the worst of these times (60–62). Increased engagement with the world beyond his small rural village, following a radio show about his life in the year 2000, began to change his perspective; the show resulted in a flood of pen pals, all of whom wrote of the inspirational effect his life had on them and offered him more positive perceptions of disability. This and other experiences that came his way following the publication of his memoir three years later ultimately provided Zhang with opportunities to openly demonstrate his social “value” as a disabled person, which he has done indirectly through

<sup>24</sup>The memoir was first published in 2003 and then reprinted in 2008. My translation mirrors that of Helen Keller’s influential 1933 essay *Three Days to See*, for which the Chinese translation is *Jiaru gei wo santian guangming*.

<sup>25</sup>I have explored Zhang’s writings in more detail elsewhere. See Dauncey 2012.

his celebrity status as an “Inspirational Young Citizen of 2003” and directly through his own charity work. His affirmative association with disability appeared to develop and intensify as his own views were transformed and molded by the new supportive voices that surround him:

Most people think that once someone has lost their physical strength they are good-for-nothings and there’s no point in living; but the more this is so, the more I refuse to submit. Whether or not someone’s life has value does not depend on whether they have a healthy physique, but whether they have a desire to do better, whether they have a positive attitude to life. (19)

The way some individuals appear to navigate their way into—but also sometimes back out of—a disabled identity is a phenomenon also noted by Kohrman (2005: 174) during his fieldwork in Beijing. Although he came across many people and groups of people who “strongly identified with *canji* and social networks of *canji ren*,” Kohrman also encountered much ambivalence, particularly when it came to issues such as family formation where traditional attitudes toward bodily impairment frequently restrict marriage opportunities:

These were people who would, at one moment, characterize themselves to me and fellow community members as *canji*, and who would display affinity toward others that they called *canji ren*, but who would, at another moment, either spurn any association with *canji ren*, disparage them, or speak of themselves highly gratuitously as being able-bodied (*jianquan*). These were people for whom a commitment to *canji* was far from fixed: how much they affiliated themselves with *canji*, how much they reviled *canji*, was mutable. (Kohrman 2005: 173)

Turning to another contemporary memoir, we see more evidence of the potentially double-sided nature of the “disability” label and the personal implications of associating oneself with it and, by extension, with

other disabled people more broadly. Like Zhang Yuncheng, Shanghai-born Ding Ming, who has motor neuron disease, found the act of getting online and building a community of friends to be a turning point in life. In her autobiography, *Palsied rhythm* (Chandou de yinfu), she describes it as “the thing that got me going after years of silence” (2007: 241), and the place where “I entrusted my hopes; it was my only way of communicating with the outside world” (273). This virtual engagement with the world enables her to feel an intense sense of purpose and value as she becomes the one to whom online friends turn when they need help in the chat rooms; it gives her confidence, and she is able to start to put the years of loneliness behind her (263–264). Yet, this increasing awareness of her own “worth” does not automatically mean “coming out” as a disabled person; quite the opposite in fact, as we see in the latter third of her book, which relates her experiences of taking on the username “Comic Book” (Lianhuanhua) in order to engage in a second life under a completely different identity, one that is free from any association with the limits of describing herself as *canfei* (252). “Comic Book” goes to great pains to hide her condition, and the act of switching between her two personae—“Comic Book” and “Mingming”—enables Ding Ming to deal with the everyday reality of her debilitating physical decline, which at times also causes her to consider suicide (241).

Whereas some writers, such as Zhang Yuncheng, appear happy to finally “come out” as disabled people because of the affirmative direction their lives take once their stories are made public, Ding Ming is incredibly reluctant to do so for fear of others prejudging her social value. It is only when she attends an event organized by the “Sino-Japanese Muscular Disorders Association” (Zhong Ri jibingzhe lianyihui) that she starts to engage more actively with what she prefers to call her “fellow sufferers” (*bingyou*). There she meets Zhu Changqing, founder of MDACHina.org (a website dedicated to providing information and support to people with a range of muscular disorders), who encourages her to engage with this new online community. Even then, however, Ding Ming continues to use

her alias when registering for the site and admits to feeling a sense of antipathy toward the way people clearly—in her own words—“had the label ‘disabled person’ stamped across their forehead,” although this does not prevent her from soon after posting her own piece on the forum under the title “Palsied Rhythm” (269).

Ding Ming’s ambivalence toward this label can be explained in part by this description of herself during one particularly low mood: “I . . . am an ‘impaired person’ (*canque de ren*)” (275). Her lack of physical engagement with other people generally, combined with her virtual relationship through her alter ego with a community of (what we are left to assume are) nondisabled people, means that the measure of her own life can be made only in negative comparison to those “ordinary people” (*putong de ren*) (275). She writes:

Those who must follow the path set out by “progressive whatever” can only have shallow and limited experiences. Their hearts continue to strive upward despite the evidence that they are sinking; they are left to dangle and whirl in empty space. To live such a life in this universe is far less significant than the shooting star that lives and dies in an instant, far less important than the ripple made by a shard of porcelain tossed into a lake. Before encountering fellow sufferers in large numbers, I felt as if I were the unluckiest person in the world. (265)

The sense of loneliness and inferiority, and the urgent need to leave behind a life-affirming legacy, appear to be significant factors prompting Ding Ming to bring together her online writings into one coherent memoir:

Life was like paddling a boat upstream. No one was going to stop for me; no one was going to wait for any length of time to listen attentively to the pleas of a weakling (*ruozhe*); no one could possibly sympathize forever with someone whose body was impaired. But they would remember the name of someone who had shared their thoughts and wisdom, a name that would shine.” (341)

As with Zhang Yuncheng, Ding Ming's sense of self-worth is predicated on her perceived contribution to society; where they differ, however, is the way Ding Ming prefers to adopt an identity that is separate from her physical condition, an identity that—in its virtual and literary incarnations—is grounded in a desire to be “ordinary.” This desire for normalcy is certainly appreciated empathetically by Xia Tongjie (a disabled reader of both of these works), who suggests that *Palsied Rhythm* is “the story of an ordinary disabled person telling us about their normal life (*pingfan rensheng*)” (Xia 2008). “There are no profound circumstances, no amazing deeds,” she continues; “all through Ding Ming's 30 years of life, regardless of whether it is studying, seeking treatment, working, everything is grounded in the everyday, there is no grandstanding. Like the proverbial girl next door, you watch her as she grows up; there is happiness and there is pain” (Xia 2008).

Ding Ming's experience is by no means singular. For Sheng Min, who was born with scoliosis and abandoned shortly after by her parents, association with a disabled identity held no special promise. As she reveals in extracts from her diary, “Dad, Mom, Why Don't You Want Me?” (Baba mama, nimen wei shenme bu yao wo), her sense of belonging is affected by her perception of others' attitudes toward her impairment: “When I started to understand things a bit more and I realized that I was a hunchback (*tuobei*), I never dared raise my head when walking for fear of seeing other people looking at my physical difference (*yiyang*). I yearned for the ground to open up a crack so I might squeeze right in” (in Jiang/Liu 2006: 22). She says that even in class she was reluctant to raise her hand for fear that everyone would stare at her back and see her “disability”: “As I grew up I began to mind what people said about me, how classmates saw me. Their stares made me feel like I was disgusting, unworthy of being one of their friends. At that time I wanted to end my life.”<sup>26</sup> This perceived rejection would lead Sheng Min to hide away in her room and work through her feelings in the diary: “I only dared to attend the activities at our orphanage where there were kids who were disabled like me; we were equal and

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, there is a comment here inserted by the authors of the piece who claim that her classmates were in fact very friendly toward her and actively tried to get her to join in, but that she refused all of their advances.

there was no discrimination" (22).

Sheng Min's experiences of being rejected by her parents for being disabled and perceived as "different" by other schoolchildren meant that there was only one possible solution to distance her from this unwanted label, and this came in the form of an operation conducted under the auspices of the "Tomorrow Plan" (*Mingtian jihua*), a nationwide surgery and rehabilitation program for orphaned and disabled children set up in 2004.<sup>27</sup> After the operation, she reflects: "I no longer felt as if my body was disabled and, even more important, I no longer felt spiritually disabled. Without this spiritual healing, my world would have been eternally gloomy" (in Jiang/Liu 2006: 22). And, in a statement addressed directly to her absent parents, Sheng Min reveals her complete dissociation from a disabled identity:

You probably don't know this, but I'm grown up now and have been healed of my disability thanks to the Tomorrow Plan. I'm the same as the other students; I sit in a bright classroom and study hard. When I'm older I want to be a doctor, so that I can help thousands of other kids like me, kids who have suffered from a disability. I also want to be able to repay both Mrs. Huang, who raised me even though I was not her own, and the Tomorrow Plan, which healed me of my disability. (21)

Life writing reveals, therefore, that understandings of a disabled identity are often fluid and must be negotiated against a backdrop of personal, social, and political tides and currents. Although the term "disabled crowd" does not make a specific appearance in the examples examined here, many of the key attributes associated with the term are recognizable in these writings. The authors frequently refer to physical "difference" and being "weak" on account of their "impairments." They understand that they might "need" assistance on occasion, but more frequently they "aspire" for equality and for evidence that their life is valued by society. It's important to understand that their journeys

<sup>27</sup> For more information on this, see <http://www.tomorrowplan.gov.cn>.

of exploration do not automatically end in the same willingness to be associated with that crowd. For Zhang Yuncheng, affirmative responses to his life story suggest that coming out as a “disabled person” would be immensely preferable to remaining isolated, stigmatized, and unproductive. For Ding Ming and Sheng Min, however, their experiences of discrimination result in ambivalence and rejection, respectively. Ding Ming cloaks her condition in the adoption of a “normal” persona and a preference for the term “fellow sufferer”; Sheng Min completes her dissociation from such a label entirely through surgery and rehabilitation. Although it might be said that it is, in fact, Sheng Min who has responded most immediately to the state’s biomedical narrative on disability by seeking a cure, her own diary complicates our understanding of why an individual might wish to do this. Her story does not reflect a desire to be productive in the new society; it is, rather, a story of self-empowerment in the face of personal rejection by parents and peers.

## Conclusions

Whether to represent oneself to society as an individual with personal aims and desires or as a part of or on behalf of a larger group of people with consonant objectives and aspirations appears to be a strategic choice disabled people are increasingly able to make in China today. The research presented here both consolidates and develops previous work on the ways in which people with impairments experience disability and articulate their identities vis-à-vis state and broader social discourses of disability. As Kohrman (2005: 198) argues, “People subject to *canji* are involved in complex negotiations about who they are, how they should manage their bodilyness and marginalization, and what their futures will look like.” Here, we have seen how disabled writers and subjects weigh—consciously and unconsciously—the advantages and disadvantages of presenting themselves as “disabled people” or part of the “disabled crowd.” For some, the process of sharing their personal experiences of disability and, through

this, building a community of disabled friends, both real and imagined, supports their journey to social acceptance and self-fulfilment. For others, this is just the starting point of a move to become visible contributors to disability-related projects, even activism, where “using one’s position as a disabled person” and speaking for the “disabled crowd”—whether at the impairment subgroup level or for disabled people more generally—is seen as an effective way of advancing issues related to rights and opportunities for all. And for still others, however, the potential rewards of adopting the “disability” label are not at all clear, possibly on account of personal circumstances or as a result of exposure to more compelling discourses. The result is a desire to escape from the “disabled crowd” into which they have been subsumed and to find an identity that is more meaningful to them, at either an individual or a subgroup level.

“Coming out as disabled,” argues Couser (2009: 169), “is far more appealing when there is cultural acceptance and legal protection for the hitherto stigmatized identity.” Yet, even as the Chinese state has paid so much attention to the term “disabled” that, according to Kohrman (2005: 174), it has become “imbued as a social category holding special promise for the Chinese nation and its people,” the personal decision to accept that identity is not necessarily straightforward or automatic.<sup>28</sup> Nowhere do we see a one-way journey of “coming to terms with” an individual or collective disabled identity. The evidence presented here reveals the fluidity of personal identity; changing experiences and understandings of bodily impairment necessitate constant negotiation and renegotiation. It also shows that even where disability becomes a primary identifier on a personal level, that identity might not even extend to the impairment subgroup, never mind the “disabled crowd” at large. What we see is a spectrum of responses, and we can now begin to imagine the possibility of generic or collective identities that in no way prohibit the coexistence of multiple individual identities that might override or supplant those broader identities at any given time or might, equally, be rejected under

<sup>28</sup> One of the final ironies of this is that many people who would have been immediately recognized as “disabled” in certain Western contexts—and, more important here, expressed an urgent desire to be thus classified—were regularly denied access to this identity because they did not fit exactly into the strict criteria laid down by the authorities (Kohrman 2005: 57–58).

certain circumstances.

Individual narratives can challenge and disrupt the state's narrative of disability. However, although these alternative narratives often adopt and employ terminology and analogies reflective of personal and local understandings, this does not automatically exclude the possibility that such writing continues, to greater or lesser extents, to be informed by broader, equally persuasive, discourses. What is clear now in China is that the CDPF can no longer be considered the guardian and voice of disability; the development of new and enhanced ways to "speak" and "be heard"—on both an individual and a collective level—has challenged its influence, opening up spaces for the reimagining of individual identities at one end of the spectrum and the development of a more politically motivated collective disability consciousness at the other. Only time will tell whether this "disabled crowd," newly reinvented, will have the power to drive forward more extensive changes, at both local and national levels, that will improve opportunities for group and self-empowerment for disabled people in China.

## Glossary

bianyi	贬义
Bingcan qingnian julebu	病残青年俱乐部
bing(you)	病(友)
butong	不同
Caihong gongzuoshi	彩虹工作室
can er bu fei	残而不废
canfei	残废
canji	残疾
canji er bu canfei	残疾而不残废
canji pengyou (qunti)	残疾朋友(群体)
canji qunti	残疾群体
canji renqun	残疾人
canjiren (qunti)	残疾人(群体)
canque de ren	残缺的人
canzhang	残障
canzhang weiquan renshi	残障维权人士
<i>Chandou de yinfu</i>	颤抖的音符
Chen Guangcheng	陈光诚
chizi	痴子
daiyou qishi huozhe wuru de yuyan	带有歧视或者侮辱的语言
Deng Pufang	邓朴方
Ding Ming	丁铭
feiji	废疾
feiren	废人
gongtong	共同
Guangzhou ta	广州塔
Huaxia	华夏
"Hexie shehui"	和谐社会
hubang huzhu	互帮互助
jiduan	极端
<i>Jiaru gei wo santian guangming</i>	假如给我三天光明
<i>Jiaru wo neng xingzou santian</i>	假如我能行走三天
jianquanren	健全人
jinghua	净化
Li Xiaohong	李小红
Lianhuanhua	连环画
Liu Wei	刘伟
long(ya)ren	聋(哑)人
longren wenhua	聋人文化
longzi	聋子

mangren (pengyou)	盲人(朋友)
"Mingtian jihua"	明天计划
Ping Yali	平亚丽
pingdeng, canyu, gongxiang	平等, 参与, 共享
pingfan rensheng	平凡人生
putong de ren	普通的人
Qinjin longer	亲近聋儿
quezi	瘸子
qun(ti)	群(体)
renmin tuanti	人民团体
ruo(zhe)	弱(者)
Sanyue feng	三月风
shazi	傻子
shaoshu minzu pengyou	少数民族朋友
Sheng Min	盛敏
Shi Tiesheng	史铁生
shizhang renshi	视障人士
shouyu	手语
Tai Lihua	邵丽华
tingzhang renshi	听障人士
tongyi	统一
tongxinglian/tongzhi pengyou	同性恋/同志朋友
tuanjie	团结
tuobei	驼背
wusheng de shijie	无声的世界
Xia Tongjie	夏童节
xiazi	瞎子
xiao	小
Xiao Hu	小胡
Xiao ruozhi	小弱智
Xiao shazi	小傻子
Xiao zhizhang	小智障
"Xiaochu canji qishi women reng xu nuli"	消除残疾歧视我们仍需努力
"Xin canjiren guan"	新残疾人观
Yang Xingdong	杨兴东
yi canji zhi shen	以残疾之身
yyang	异样
you'ai	友爱
Zhang Haidi	张海迪
Zhang Yuncheng	张云成
zhengchang(ren)	正常(人)
zhengyi	正义

zhili canjiren	智力残疾人
zhiti canjiren	肢体残疾人
<i>Zhongguo canjiren</i>	中国残疾人
Zhongguo canjiren fuli jijinhui	中国残疾人福利基金会
Zhongguo canjiren lianhehui	中国残疾人联合会
Zhong Ri jibingzhe lianyihui	中日肌病者联谊会
Zhu Mingjian	朱明建
Zhu Changqing	朱常青

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