'THE INVISIBLES'…DISABILITY IN CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

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This study explores the effects of traditional beliefs, Confucian ideology, Chinese government policy and western influences on China's inclusion of people with a disability in the Chinese community in the 21st century. Using visual ethnography and an auto-ethnographic approach, the study examines data obtained over a period of five years to analyse the impact of recent initiatives of the Chinese government in disability policy and planning on attitudes towards people with a disability and the accommodation of people with a disability within the community. Findings from the study suggest that a series of positive legislative and administrative policies that guarantee equal rights for people with disabilities in China have had some positive outcomes, and that social attitudes towards the disabled are gradually changing, mainly as a result of the active advocacy of the disability community. However, despite these initiatives and changes in attitude, there is little evidence of the impact of Chinese disability policy on the built environment in China outside the major cities, and the disabled are still largely invisible in public spaces.

Introduction

In the People's Republic of China, people with a disability represent 6.34% of a total population of just over 1.3 billion. Those with disabilities are supported predominantly by their families, many of whom earn as little as $330 US dollars a year (Zhang, 2009). A lack of government financial support and the reliance on each family member to contribute to the income of the family unit means that those families with a disabled member are severely disadvantaged.

According to a national disability survey conducted in 2006, there are approximately 83 million people with disabilities in China, which accounts for 6.34 % of the total population. The following table shows the profile of the disabled population in China.

Table 1.
Disability profile in China, 2006

DISABILITY PROFILE IN CHINA, 2006	
Total number with a disability	82.96 million
As a percentage of population	6.34%
Males as % of the disabled population	51.55% = 42.77 million
Females as a % of the disabled population	48.45% = 40.19 million
Disabled as a % of urban population	24.96% = 20.71 million
Disabled as a % of rural population	75.04% = 62.25 million
Age breakdown of the disabled population	0 – 14 yrs = 4.66% = 3.87 million 15 – 59 yrs = 42.10% = 34.93 million > 60 = 53.24% = 44.16 million

Source: Second National Sampling Survey on Disability, *China Statistical Yearbook, 2008, (*as cited in *Facts on People with Disabilities in China,* International Labour Organisation, 2008, p.1-5*).*

These statistics have broader implications, particularly in contexts where there is inadequate support for

both the disabled and the care givers of the disabled, and in rural areas, where family incomes are likely to be lower than those of families living in urban locations. As (Xijin, Yusi, 2008, p. 1) observes *The status of disabled people is connected with the happiness of nearly one-fifth of China's families and their 200 million relatives*.

According to Chinese Government data, of the 30 million people living in poverty, 80% are disabled. Many of these live in rural areas. The additional burden of having a family member with a disability for those living in rural areas is indicated by a comparison of the per capita income. In 2007 the average per capita income was 13785 yuan (approximately $US 2,300) for those living in urban locations, and 4140 yuan (approximately $US 700) for those living in rural locations (China Daily, 2008. para. 2).

Table 2

Employment/Income 2005-6

EMPLOYMENT/INCOME – 2005-6	
Disabled population distribution	URBAN 24.96% = 20.17 million RURAL 75.04% = 62.25 million
Total disabled population employed	21.29 million urban employment = 4.33 million, rural employment = 16.96 million
Per capita income for families with a disabled family member	URBAN = 4864 yuan RURAL = 2260 yuan • For 12.95% of rural households with disabled member, income was below 683 yuan • For 7.96% of rural households with disabled member, income was between 684 yuan and 944 yuan
Disabled living in poverty	Of the 30 million Chinese living in poverty. 80% are disabled.

Source: Second National Sampling Survey on Disability, China Statistical Yearbook, 2008, (as cited in Facts on People with Disabilities in China, International Labour Organisation, 2008, p.1-5).

As Jia and Zhao (2008, p.3) observe:

> *At present, there are still more than 10 million rural disabled persons without adequate food and clothing, and more than 20 million urban disabled persons with income below the minimum standard of living…and there is a big gap between their living conditions and the average level of social living conditions.*

Wang (4 June, 2008, ABC radio) makes a similar point:

> *But with a yawning gap between rich and poor, more social problems have emerged. For example, rural regions have problems in terms of standard of living and life patterns. In northwest and western regions, basic needs such as running water and accessible transportation are still very much a problem, .so in terms of life in China, there is China A and China B.*

Increased global participation, the influence of Western approaches to disability support, and recent natural disasters have provided incentives for the Chinese government to focus on the welfare of the disabled in China and to develop strategies and policies to improve their quality of life. However, as the tables above demonstrate, families with a disabled member are generally not among the rich and not among those living in urban areas. They are therefore impacted by multiple disadvantages: geographical isolation; lack of adequate infrastructure; lack support and services for the disabled; and lower incomes than those in urban areas. The comment by Chiang and Hadadian (2010, p.113) that *giving birth to a child with disabilities in China can be overwhelming; raising a child with disabilities would be devastating* is likely to be an understatement, especially for those living in rural areas.

Historical Context

To understand the position of disability in Chinese society in the 21st century it is important to understand China's development as a nation and the impact of Confucian ideology in shaping the attitude towards people with a disability. Confucian ideology stresses the need for tolerance and harmony (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Rosemont, 2000) and the social responsibility of the community

in caring for those who need support, including the disabled (Chiang & Hadadian, 2010). However, in Confucian ideology all people although all people were to be treated respect and kindness, there was also recognition of social hierarchy, in which those with disabilities were regarded as having the lowest status. As Yang (2001, p.7) points out:

> *The negative impact of the Confucius culture is obvious, which made people with disability almost invisible in Chinese society.*

According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2003) in some instances children are locked in the house because parents, particularly in rural areas, are ashamed of the child's disability. Whether this is true was difficult to determine, but certainly there were not many disabled children to be seen in public in the cities or rural areas that we visited in the course of this study.

Traditional Chinese culture focuses on the *cause* of disability and as there was an assumed link between disability and previous wrongdoing, having a person with a disability was believed to bring shame and guilt to the family (Chiang & Hadadian, 2010). While older-generation Chinese still maintain some traditional beliefs and practices, Western influences are having an impact on the way in which disability is viewed by the Chinese, particularly among the younger generation.

This study is an analysis of the visible impact of current Chinese government disability policies on day-to-day practices of, and attitudes toward, people with a disability in rural China. It explores the ways in which changes in legislative and administrative disability policies have had an impact on the built environment in China and are gradually changing social attitudes towards children and adults with disabilities, providing them with increased access to education and employment opportunities.

Method

We used an auto-ethnographic approach (Campbell, 2009; Ellis, 2004; McIlveen, 2008) to explore this topic as this enabled us to understand personal experiences within the Chinese socio-cultural context and to interpret relevant literature research through the lived experiences within these contexts. It was important that information gathered was as true to the context as possible and we therefore relied on *experiencing* our perceived reality. In order to avoid the hegemony of the text, particularly in relation to the impact of the built environment on the (in) visibility of people with a disability in China, this approach was supplemented by visual ethnography (OReilly, 2009), in which we took photos of typical locations in China accessible to the general public, such as streets, railway stations, public buildings, markets, shops and schools. These photos were analyzed to identify the ways in which the built environment was indicative of the extent to which Chinese Government policies were embedded in fundamental levels of local planning to create a built environment user-friendly for people with a disability, and to determine the public visibility of the disabled.

The research data was obtained over a five-year period, and included a personal journey through China by one of the researchers, a teacher of the disabled in an Australian secondary college, specifically to engage the public in discussing disability issues in contemporary. She lived short term within the Chinese community, engaging people in conversations about disability. These conversations were informal and formed part of the conversation a tourist might have with the tour guide when wanting to understand more about a country. Such conversations were easily constructed as the topic could be approached from a *naive* understanding of Chinese life. It also provided an opportunity of personally observing the specific environment and assessing how government policies are translated into real accessibility for the disabled within the community

To obtain more detailed information, a formal interview with a Chinese university lecturer – a sole parent – and her daughter with a disability was arranged through professional colleagues in China. Both mother and daughter gave informed consent to use their real names in any publication, as one of their aims is to increase awareness of the challenges facing Chinese families with a disabled member; to make the invisible visible. This interview provided the perspective of a highly educated woman, who had traveled overseas and, through her professional position and personal experience, was familiar with disability research. As such, her perspectives are not representative of the care givers of people with a disability in China as a whole, but are an example of what can and is being done by care givers and the disabled themselves to change attitudes towards the disabled through organizations such as the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF).

An analysis of Chinese government reports, recent disability research, news reports relevant to disability policy and practice in China and articles regarding global events impacting on China's disability policy and planning provided the official and critical context for the ethnographic data.

Findings

An analysis of the data indicated that since the 1980s there have been a series of positive legislative and administrative policies guaranteeing equal rights for people with disabilities. Social attitudes towards the disabled in China are gradually changing, mainly as a result of the active advocacy of the disability community. The disabled in China have also become more visible through events such as the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, the earthquakes in Sichuan Province in the same year, the National Day of Assisting Disabled Persons organized by the State Council Coordination Committee on Disability (CCCD) and the work of organizations such as the CDPF. Despite these changes in Government policy, media visibility and public attitude toward the disabled, they are still largely invisible in public spaces in China and the built environment in China provides little evidence that changes in Government disability policy have made public spaces more accessible to the disabled.

Changes in legislative and administrative policies and the built environment.

The turning point for political support of people with a disability came about with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1980's. There were a small number of welfare institutions, often funded by missionaries, spanning the earlier times in China (Pang & Richey, 2005), but these were not government supported and often failed due to lack of financial support. In the early 20th century the Chinese Government established special schools for the disabled, but by 1948 there were only 48 special schools. These were exclusively for the visual and hearing impaired, and most were funded by religious or charitable organizations (Chiang & Hadadian, 2010).

With the changing political environment came the establishment of two significant bodies with direct responsibility for the support of the disabled, one a government body and the other a non-government organization. The former was the State Council Coordination Committee on Disability (SCCCD), the national coordinating body for disability policy within the Government was established in the 1980s (Li, 2008; Zhang, 2009). The SCCD has responsibility for the development, implementation and monitoring of policy that will protect the rights of those with a disability. Its membership includes key people from numerous other key government departments such as education, social services and health. The SCCCD has the capacity to shape the way people with a disability are received, resourced and recognized within China.

The second was the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF), established in 1988. This was the first national, non-government body, responsible for managing the rights and welfare of people with a disability. The CDPF had an advocacy role and represented and supported people with a disability at all levels of policy-making and community inclusion. The CDPF consisted of the local disabled associations and is still the biggest social organization working for and representing people with a disability in China. In conjunction with non-government organizations, especially the United Nations Development Program, the CDPF seeks to improve general living conditions and the overall social status of people with disabilities. The impetus the establishment of these two bodies generated supported the growth of other groups, many being disability or focus-specific. As a result of these activities:

> *…general social attitudes regarding disability have undergone a gradual but fundamental change since late 1980s, thanks to the active advocacy of the disability community and governmental support for disability initiatives* (Zhang, 2007, p. 2.)

In addition to the above, there was also a plethora of policies, laws and agreements that protected the rights of people with a disability. The most significant of these were the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, The Law on the Protection of Disabled Persons and the Employment Regulation and the Education Regulation for people with disabilities*. This legislation ensured there was a legal system protecting the rights of people with a disability.

China has been recognized for its commitment to the disabled by receiving the United Nations *Messenger of Peace Award* and the *Special Prize of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons'* (2003). This progress has not been without criticism and it has been observed that the legislation is far too general, resulting in a gap between policy and practice:

> … *current provisions establish some general principles on penalties for violation, they do not clearly define what recourse and remedies may be available for a victim of discrimination or rights violation. Moreover, the extent of enforcement of the Law often relies on local initiatives, which vary from place to place* (Zhang, 2007, p 4).

Zhang (2007, p. 8) describes the *Codes for Design on Accessibility of Urban Roads and Buildings* (JGJ 50-2001) as:

> *the most influential national accessibility policy that applies to all urban roads, built environments, and relevant facilities for public usage, residence, office space, business, services, cultural activities, education, sports activities and workplaces, both newly built and renovated*.

These comments were confirmed by personal observation. Especially in rural areas, there was little evidence that the Government's policies were being put into place within the community to improve the basic accessibility for the disabled within the built environment. Streets in villages were unpaved, deeply rutted and eroded and had no footpaths. Streets and footpaths (where they existed) in rural towns and cities had uneven, broken surfaces and in many places were cluttered with street vendors and hawkers' carts. Everyday life flowed onto the footpaths, so that these became an obstacle course created by the extension of shops and building sites. In cities, crossing major roads involved standing among multiple lanes of speeding traffic, waiting for a gap to finish darting across the road. This in itself was a challenge, but it was exacerbated by the fact that obeying road rules was clearly not a priority of either pedestrians or vehicles.

Figure 1. Cities in China still have cluttered footpaths

There were very few overhead pedestrian bridges or underpasses, and walking along a footpath involved navigating around countless vehicles and vendors, elbowing through the sheer volume of people in any one place, and taking care not to trip on the broken, surfaces of the footpath. Occasionally there was profiled tiling on footpaths to assist the visually impaired, but the profiled tiles stopped at the end of the curb and were frequently less *profiled* than the footpaths themselves. Some new or recently renovated commercial buildings had designated disabled lifts, ramps and toilets, however this was not consistent.

For anyone with a disability navigating a footpath or crossing a road in a rural city would be a life-threatening experience. In five years the only people with disabilities visible in public were those begging, or selling small non-perishable items in front of the large covered markets outside the main tourist areas, or on the sheltered areas of overpasses.

Changing social attitudes towards the disabled in China

Under the influence of Confucianism, in China people with disabilities occupied the lowest social status (Chiang & Hadadian, 2010) and were designated as *can fei*, which means the handicapped and useless, a term that was in use until the 1980s (Zhang, 2007). As a result of China's increased participation in global trade and membership of global economic communities, the Chinese government began to address social imbalances within the country, especially for those with a disability. China now has membership of international committees that encourage a change in its approach and treatment for those with a disability and in the last decade has implemented policies aimed at improving the welfare of the disabled (Chen, 2008).This is reflected in the change of the official definition of disability, *can ji ren*, where the term *disabled* refers to a person who has lost all or part of his/her ability to perform normal activities due to loss or impairment of psychological or physiological functions (International Labor Organization, 2009; Worrell & Taber 2009), a definition similar to that used in Western countries.

Two recent events in China had a positive effect on changing the community's perspective on disability: the 2008 earthquakes in Sichuan Province and the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. Both events provided a national and international profile for the disabled within the Chinese community. They also provided an incentive for the establishment of national and international charity organizations focused on providing support for the disabled in China. This support was primarily aimed at improving the lives of those with a disability, but also served to change the community's perceptions on inclusion and break down to some extent the stigma attached to disability (Hallett, 2009).

The Paralympics provided a significant opportunity to focus on inclusion and opportunities for the disabled and to speak more candidly about their place within the Chinese community:

> *Many* (athletes) *say they feel totally rejected by family members and the community. They speak of being labeled a burden, and even of being blamed for their disability. …When the Chinese public sees disabled athletes succeed in the Paralympics that might really change their image of disabled people. …The disabled are at the tail-end of society. They get what's left over. There are literally tens of thousands of people being pushed aside and kept in poverty…they can't go to school, they can't get married and they can't get a job. They're really social outcasts* (McGivering, 2008, p.1).

China is a major signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008 and through this declaration and public display of recognition and support for the disabled, is modeling a positive change in the public agenda for people with a disability:

> *As a result of government efforts and media publicity, the protection of the rights and interests of the disabled is now getting more and more attention from various circles of the society, and a kind of social morality of respecting and helping this special group is gradually taking shape* (Yang, 2008, p. 1).

These changes are indicative of the Chinese government's efforts in creating a more inclusive environment for people with a disability, but changing official definitions of disability does not necessarily change long-standing beliefs.

In practice, however, this change is slow to take effect. From our personal experiences we found that there was a general reluctance among the general public to talk about the disabled, from professional colleagues to tourist guides. In many instances there was an immediate diversion from the topic, possibly due to uneasiness about the issue, or a lack of awareness, or simply not seeing that which you did not want to see. For example, I asked one of my Chinese colleagues *If the Government looks after disabled people in China, why does that disabled man lying on the footpath need to beg?* The response was *What man? I didn't see anyone*, even though we had passed only centimeters from his outstretched hand.

It is also difficult to change entrenched beliefs. While officially China is an atheist state, a great number of Chinese people are still strongly influenced by the philosophical and ideological teachings of Confucianism and Buddhism. Superstition also plays a huge role in people's interpretations of events in their lives:

> *Traditionally many of us see each life as a link in a chain between the past and the future. This chain is about ancestral connections and personal rebirth. Because of these traditional beliefs, disability is often seen as people in the present paying for bad deeds*

> *done in the past by the person in a previous life, or by the person's ancestors.* (Multicultural Disability Advocacy Association, 2008, p.6).

Figure 2: Crossing streets involves evading many lanes of traffic

For many Chinese, a child with a disability is considered bad luck and there can be a huge social stigma attached to having a child with a disability. The belief that disability is somehow linked to wrongdoing in the past, or a bad omen, reflects badly on the parents, particularly the mother. This sense of shame often resulted in the child being kept hidden (Pang & Richey, 2006; Yang, 2001). This was not necessarily the case among all parents. The comments from the woman interviewed for this study indicated that she had more belief in her daughter's potential than in any sense of shame for past wrongdoings:

> *One day my daughter will do something great and bring glory to her family. Good friends and family treat my daughter well and I cannot be bothered with what other people think.*

She identified her greatest needs in raising her daughter as financial support and access to qualified teachers. This woman was, however, a confident, well-educated and well-traveled individual and the Chair of a local committee for disabled people. Her husband had left her because of the strains of bringing up a child with a disability, leaving her as sole care giver and she accepted that he may not have shared her beliefs, or her confidence in her daughter's potential. Although as a single parent with a disabled child her financial situation was not easy, neither was it as challenging as that of many other parents of children with disabilities, particularly those in rural areas.

The impact of superstition and religion on the acceptance of disability in China is compounded by the importance of family structure. Children are seen as a gift from the gods and are the link to the future for the whole family. As they grow in to adults, children take on the role of providing and caring for their elderly parents. China is largely a male-centered society and families, particularly rural families, prefer to have a boy (MDAA, 2008), as he not only carries the father's name forward, but is also the 'worker' for the family. For example, one of the guides explained how each morning he, as the head of the family, would collect the *first* water of the day and offer this to the gods. This was his responsibility, and no water could be used until this ritual had been performed. Where the first born, or

the boy child, is born with a disability the compounding effects for the family are significant. Girls born with a disability face even greater challenges:

> *In societies where girls are valued less than boys, the investment in education, health care or job training that families are willing to make in disabled girls are often substantially less than for disabled boys* (Groce, 2004, p. 4).

There is also a belief that the best place for people with a disability is at home (Yang. 2001), a belief that places a further strain on families of the disabled. The sense of shame, the financial burden, the belief that keeping a disabled child at home is the parent's duty and the opportunity of having *another* normal, child if this one disappears makes abandonment a viable option (Chiang & Hadadian, 2010). This may explain why disabled children account for 90% of all abandoned children in China (Shang, 2002, p. 12). The fact that the current child protection system in China covers abandoned or orphaned children, may also influence parents to regard abandonment as a way of having their disabled child placed in a state-controlled welfare institution.

The exception clause in China's *one child policy* itself implies that the disabled have little value. In order to maintain the typical structure of and roles within the family and to reduce the financial demand on government resources, under this clause, families are permitted to have a second child if the first was born with a disability, thus perpetuating the belief that a child with a disability is of little value and implying that it is the parent's responsibility to provide care for their disabled child.

The fact that the most likely places for disabled children in China are either within the home or within an orphanage may explain their 'invisibility' in public spaces:

> *I traveled from northern to southern China. Regardless of whether it was a remote rural setting or a modern city, disability was nowhere to be seen. I eventually turned to the travel guides for their comments on what happens for, and where are, children with a disability. As I asked each one this question, there was a somewhat surprised look on their face, followed by a rather awkward response of 'they are in a special school', and then quickly they turned to view the road* (Journal entry, 10 May, 2010).

It was not possible to visit these special schools, but it is doubtful that they are adequate in meeting the needs of the 3.87 million children with a disability. As Chiang & Hadadian (2010) observed, there are many challenges facing China in implementing educational programs for children with a disability. These include a shortage of appropriately trained staff, insufficient funding for inclusive education programs and inadequate funding for support services for parents of children with a disability. As Zhang (2009, p.2) points out:

> *There is still a long way to go and much to be done in order to ensure the full enjoyment of the rights enshrined by the laws and promote the realization of the goal of Equality, Participation and Sharing for all people with disabilities.*

Access to Education and Employment

If children with a disability are noticeable by their absence, the same is also the case for adults with a disability in the workforce. China's policy in the *Law on the Protection of Disabled Persons* guarantees a person with a disability the right to work and specifically targets discrimination and equal access. The *National Five-year Work Program for Persons with a Disability* mandates that 1.5% of all employment opportunities in government and private business shall be held for people with a disability:

> *Businesses who fail to meet this quota, or who opt out, pay a designated fee to the Disabled Persons' Employment Security Fund, which in turn supports vocational training and job-placement services for people with disabilities* (Zhang, 2007, p. 6).

According to Zhifei (2007) the general objectives of the National Five-year Work Program for Persons with Disabilities (2006-2010) were achieved, with 4.63 million disabled persons in urban areas and 18 million disabled persons in rural areas employed through the enforcement of the quota scheme and by providing increased opportunities of employment. These figures have been disputed (CHINAGATE, 2007, p. 1), with claims that only 2.97 million disabled people in urban areas are employed while 4.7 million are unemployed.

Whatever the actual figure, the outcomes of the Government objectives were not readily apparent to us during the course of our study. No disabled adults were observed working within the local environment

in a large rural city over a five-year period (2005-20010) and despite some 16 days of journeying throughout China, not one disabled person was observed working in open employment in any location:

> *My journey through China took me from remote rural settings to the capital city of Beijing, a total of three rural towns, two major cities and many airports. During this time I did not see one person with a disability in employment and, being the 'typical tourist', I covered many shopping centres, walked many streets, rode many forms of transport, sat for many hours in airport terminals and gazed from many motel rooms. Those I did see included one beggar with a missing arm, a visually impaired man walking down the street and a young woman with a slight physical disability shopping* (Journal entry, 16 May, 2010).

We acknowledge that these are public spaces and that is possible that in China there are special places of employment for the disabled to which we did not have access. For example, under special policies, and because of their tactile sensitivity, people with a visual impairment tend to be trained for employment in the massage business and those with other physical disabilities are more likely to work in government departments or the education and health care sectors (CDPF, 2008).

It is also possible that there is still a strong belief that specific types of employment are suitable for the disabled:

> *Because of the confinement theory inflicted by the traditional culture, people with disabilities are not yet free to pursue their dreams. Especially in terms of employment and education, they have become inheritors of the trades traditionally held by the disabled* (Yang, 2001, p. 9).

With 24 million disabled people living in poverty (Zhang, 2009) and increasing competition for employment (McGivering, 2008) it seems that even if the disabled do find employment, it is not likely to provide an adequate income. Recent reports indicate that the Chinese government is beginning to address this issue:

> *China will start building a social security and service system for disabled people in 2010…The government will offer support to disabled persons on minimum life insurance and improve poverty alleviation programs for disabled persons living in rural areas* (Source: China Corporate Social Responsibility, 4 January, 2010).

Xinhua for *The China Daily* (8 March, 2010) also reported this news, quoting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who pledged in his government work report to *work harder to build the social security and social services system for people with disabilities.*

Meanwhile Government financial support to families, in terms of a disability pension, is means tested, with an income limit of 400RMB (US$57) per week. Caring for someone with a disability involves a significant cost in time and money, especially as the government does not provide medical insurance. People with a disability do, however, receive concession cards that allow low-cost access to transport, even if apart from airlines, no public transport was observed that could be considered user-friendly for someone with a disability.

Changes in education for the disabled

From early Confucian times education was highly valued and the Confucian ideology of human rights advocated kindness and respect for the disabled (Pang & Richey, 2006). However, the impact of superstition and fatalism and the low priority placed on educating the disabled meant that education for the disabled was almost non-existent until the late 19th century, when missionaries from Western countries established facilities for the blind and deaf:

> *By the end of 1948, only 42 special schools served the more than 2,000 students who were blind and deaf in China, and most of these schools were run by religious and charitable organizations. Education for individuals with mental retardation or other disabilities was nonexistent* (Pang & Richey, 2006, p 80).

It was not until the 1970's that facilities were opened for students with an intellectual disability (Chiang & Hawaiian, 2010). From 1949 to the present, The People's Republic of China passed a number of pieces of legislation, both general and disability-specific such as the *Compulsory Education Law* in 1986*;* the *Law on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities* in 1990, and the *Regulations on Education for Persons with Disabilities*' in 1994, which *encouraged* educational provision for students

with a disability, without *mandating* it. The lack of specificity in the legislation with regard to naming the different types of disability, the lack of reporting requirement for outcomes of students with a disability and the fact that they are not included in any systemic reviews has allowed some institutions to avoid meeting the educational needs of disabled students (Pang and Richey, 2006). In practice, this means that in China educating children with a disability is still largely the responsibility of their families. This was demonstrated in the interview with Mai Wei and her mother, Li Hua.

Mai Wei is a young adult with an intellectual disability and secondary visual and physical disabilities. The recent changes in Government legislation the raft of legislation meant she has had access to a range of forms of education, but during the interview Li Hua said that what she really needed was someone to train and teach Mai Wei. It was clear that Mai Wei's development and the creation of learning opportunities for her were left entirely to her mother, who did not receive any financial support from the government as her income exceeded the threshold for government support.

The role that Li Hua has to assume extends far beyond that of a *regular* parent in that she has to manage every aspect of Mai Wei's life, including ensuring that there will be a pathway for her from school to post-school. There are currently no local community organizations that support the transition of students with a disability to employment or other activities when school is finished and vocational training does not prepare students for industry employment. Mai Wei's dreams are that one day she will work for a charity organization and help other people, and to earn lots of money to establish a school for children with a disability. Whether this dream will be achievable is open to question.

Figure 3: Vendors and traffic make crossing streets difficult

During the interview with Li Hua, she indicated that at the moment Mai Wei was at home receiving therapy, which suggested a very *flexible* approach to school attendance. Mai Wei said that she did not have many friends at her normal school and found it a rather lonely experience. She did not enjoy break times, as she would just often watch other students. The Chinese government established *Suiban jiudu* (China's inclusion), a model for educating students with a disability in mainstream schools, but due to lack of specialist teachers and an alternate curriculum, the special needs of children with disabilities are not adequately addressed and they often *drift* within regular classrooms, unsupported and disengaged from classroom activities (Pang & Richey, 2006). Mai Wei's comments suggest that this is also happening in her classroom.

The lack of adequately trained teachers for the disabled is unlikely to improve in the near future. Teacher education in China is structured on an educational hierarchy with teacher training eligibility, training requirements and ultimate pay scale resulting in a scaling of school sectors with special education on the bottom of all scales. Teacher education is also offered in different facilities, depending on the level of education teachers are being trained for. Often special education training is seen as a stepping stone to the more prestigious, and better paid, normal education:

> *…there are several other reasons that impede the development of special educators in China, such as the worse working situations, higher-intensity working hours and the lower payment (the payment remains almost the same from 1956 till now) in special*

> *schools than the normal schools. This leads to the lower enrollment in special education colleges or secondary vocational schools aimed at training special educators, and what's more, it is not uncommon for special educators to transfer to normal schools rather than stay in special schools* (Pang & Richey 2006, p. 83).

The lack of mandatory inclusion of all students in to schooling has resulted in many disabled students not accessing any formal schooling. The CDPF (2008, p.4) reported that …*227,000 disabled children and youth at schooling age did not have access to education…* while others, such as Mai Wei only attend intermittently. This further limits their potential for finding employment.

Conclusions

China has made great strides in developing a system of legislation that will provide the platforms for greater inclusion of people with a disability in the community and as a signatory to global policies regarding human rights for the disabled, is showing this commitment in the global arena. With many of the major policy developments beginning in the mid to late 19th century, most of these inclusive policies are yet to be fully embedded into the fabric of community practices. The lack of visibility of disabled people suggests that cultural traditions, beliefs attitudes and superstitions still have a considerable impact on the freedom a person with a disability might experience in day to day living and opportunities for disabled workers are limited to those segregated from the main work force.

While China has articulated a number of laws and policies in support of the disabled, the lack of specificity does not provide the disabled person with a legal position on which to challenge the status quo. There is, however, a growing awareness of the disabled and the moral obligations of a country and its people towards this group, the impetus for which is driven largely by international influences and global scrutiny of Chinese policy and practices. China has begun to address the needs of the disabled within its community and it is clear that in a country the size of China, managing any systemic and cultural change will take a considerable amount of time.

As visitors to the country the authors are aware that our perceptions are those of outsiders and that there may well be different perspectives from the inside. However, we were able to observe the extent of the inclusion of people with a disability in the general community in China in the 21st century and by using an auto-ethnographic approach and visual analysis, validate our observations with information gathered from a number of other sources.

Our conclusion on the basis of our findings is that people with a disability in China are not yet enjoying a fully inclusive lifestyle. This is due to a number of factors: entrenched cultural beliefs; non-specific government policies; lack of adequate funding for inclusive education and disability support and a general lack of understanding and acceptance of people with a disability by the population at large. Whether this could also apply to other countries would be an interesting topic for further research.

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